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Four stories

Maria Healey

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FOUR STORIES

by

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B.A., University of Washington, 1986

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SLOW WORK

One Saturday morning last June, I hooked a finger through a belt loop and lifted a pair of my little brother's jeans out of the garbage can in the kitchen. Limp as a banana peel, they hung, milk-bottle blue, diluted in the crotch and along the thighs, with both knees busted out. I was surprised at how little they weighed, things that buttoned up a twenty two year old boy.

I held them up to the light of the window above the sink and looked for holes in the butt or rips beyond repair in the legs. There were none. The cuffs were badly frayed and a little gray, but Will's almost six feet tall, at least three inches taller than me, so the cuffs I rolled up to my ankles. I have always had a thing for feet. I go barefoot any chance I get. My feet are narrow and compliment my toes which are skinny and tough with calluses. They were a smooth light chocolate color from the sun and
I felt like Tom Sawyer.

I'm a twenty-nine inch waist on a good day. Will had just outgrown thirty-two's, so I borrowed one of my father's belts and cinched the waist tight. On top, I wore tee shirts: black, green and sunset orange. That summer days burst past ninety and the evenings wore long and cool as baths. What I wore was the easiest thing in the world.

I let my hair go too, something I had not done since I was eighteen. My freshman year in college, I bought a six-pack and a pair of shears and Ursula, my roommate, chopped off thirteen inches in one thick slice. I wrapped the ponytail in a plastic shopping bag and kept it under my bed for months. Friends told me I could sell it to a doll maker, but I never did and when I held the bag, it felt like a kind of snake so finally, I tossed it into the Dumpster behind my dorm.

I'm twenty-six now and by last July, my hair had grown grandly down to the middle of my back. I touched it often, washed it less and on the days Will and I painted, I wore pigtails, French braids or pulled an old baseball cap of his on backwards.

Will and I lived together in our parents' house in Missoula from May until the middle of August. We spent a little of June and most of July painting it. Our folks, The Good Mary and Sweet Lou, as we call them, were on a dream trip, having caught a ferry in Seattle bound for
Alaska, where they spent months in Sitka, Juneau and Kudiak.

We got seven postcards, seventeen lovely looping sentences of my mother's. The mountains were "majestic," "heartbreaking," "awe-inspiring;" dad was "speechless." In the corners she drew hasty smiling faces and reminded us to feed our cat Tucker, to save all the cards she sent us to us and to have a good time. I taped the postcards to the refrigerator as we got them but Will came home a little lit up night and turned them upside down.

"I de-chronologized them," he said. "The box isn't the place for a travel piece."

I hadn't been in Missoula for eight years, save for seven two week stints at Christmastime. I'd been in Pasadena, where I stayed after college and existed relatively peacefully, although it's hard to pinpoint "markers" during those years, road signs where something specific happened and led to something else. I think that way only about the time since.

For the last seven months, I lived with a lover named Patrick, my little man Pat, who had smiling blue eyes and was shorter than me and had a thing for frozen beer and Patsy Cline after sex. He was trying to get into a law school and I was working as a telephone cosmetic consultant.

Most of the time, I just wrote down numbers: page
numbers, item numbers, credit card numbers, addresses, telephone numbers, said, "Thank you for calling Farrell's and Bowman's" and hung up. But sometimes the customers would talk to you.

Our number was 1-800-THE-FACE and there were always some callers who had no idea what they needed and you'd have to talk to them about their faces.

I didn't learn any of the secrets of beautifying with makeup selling the stuff over the phone. The telemarketers were told to listen for skin texture, colors and age and plug the codes into equations for beauty. I guess we got close enough. One woman told me her eyes were champagne and I thought that was magnificent.

When Patrick finally did get into school, and at U.C. L.A., he proposed. I freaked out. He said that with the money I was making and the loans he would get, we could make it. My "I don't know if I'm ready for this" eventually got defensive and guilty and finally settled into an indignant "No. And I need to leave town."

The morning I left, we split a zucchini, olive and cream cheese omelet at the Hi-Spot. Patrick's hair was licorice.

"Patrick, I'll always remember that I was happy with you," I said.

He kept time with his fork. "I wish I had something like that to say to you."
My favorite part of the painting was the preparation, the slow work. The house wasn’t in the best shape and Will and I stood ten feet from each other for five and a half days just scraping the old paint off. We covered the exterior of two stories, taking time at doors and windows of which there are three and seventeen.

I was proud, growing up of how many windows my house had. I remembered pointing from the street at the shapes of yellow light when I was dropped off after high school parties. The series of second story squares were mine; simple, but if you came at the house from the left, you could see the half-moon that was my bathroom window. It’s Tucker’s favorite hangout — where I exhaled all my smoke when I was sixteen and brooding with Marlboro’s over a boring sweetheart named Dominic Driano and later when I snuck hits of pot on Christmases.

The windows’ intricacies annoyed Will who said he’d do everything but. Tucker lounged in them occasionally, blinking when I looked at him and swishing his tail like this was all a bunch of bullshit and just what exactly did I think I was doing on that ladder anyway. I held my hand up for him to see. Smeared with white paint, the flesh of all ten knuckles was torn and dotted red. We’d taken to carrying band-aids with us at all times. I stashed them in sixes in my back pocket. Will always had one tucked behind an ear.
It was a hangnail nightmare, but we got into it and the worse the house looked, the more accomplished we felt. We worked with silver hand trowels that felt smooth and sure in my hand. On my own, I went through two boxes of blades. I scraped like a mad woman. Especially on the second story, I peeled away paint with my fingers, exposing wood haphazardly whenever I hit a sick spot.

"Katy, what the hell are you doing?" Will stood on the grass below, re-wrapping a band-aid.

"I can’t stop myself."

"You’re possessed. You’re giving the house mange."

"It’s therapeutic."

"It’s anal and it’s making more work. Now stop." He layered the band-aid with a strip of duct tape.

"Just call me Iron Mike," he said. "I’m ecstatic. I wanna destruct this house!" He bounced on his toes and held his arms above his head. I laughed. Tucker snapped his eyes shut.

"So what do you need therapy for?"

"I’m twenty six, lonely, horny, unemployed and back at home."

"Katy, stop scraping; it’s done. Twenty six? C’mon. There’s no way you’re hornier than me, and if you’re unemployed, I’m the King of Siam because we have to finish this house so we can get paid and I can buy my bike and you can do whatever."
"Whatever."

"You’re lonely? Thanks a lot. And yeah. Home’s weird."

He held his scraper close to his mouth and made noise like static. "Beer break." More static. "Over."

Will hadn’t left Missoula yet. After Sentinel High, he rode a skiing scholarship through the University, majored in English and I hope he becomes a writer, because he is so kind. Almost a year ago, his buddy Zilly sold a contest winning amount of savings bonds at the bank where he works and won two plane tickets and ten all-expense days in Mauna Kea. Zilly’s girlfriend had just dumped him because all he did was work, so Zilly took Will.

When they got there, they each pierced one ear and smeared a paste in their hair, a lightener, so their "manes would bleach." Will’s backfired, leaving his normally dirt brown hair oddly orange.

"Burnt orange," is how my mother described it to me over the phone. "Don’t tell him I said this," she said, "but he looks like a horse’s ass."

Will wears one thin, barely visible gold loop in his left ear, which I like because I like thinking of my brother as a pirate. His hair’s still strange, but he’s growing it out. When you notice him, you don’t linger so much on the color as you envy the laziness with which it hints at curls and dangles just above his shoulders.

Will was painting towards a road trip. He and another
buddy Plunkett planned to ride bikes up Highway 12, the Lewis and Clark Trail Route, clear up to the Washington coast. "I just want to stand in front of a big body of water," Will said.

Plunkett ended up inheriting a sweet tan and black soft tail, a gorgeous bike, from a rich cousin and Will had all but the five hundred he needed to pay off a low riding Honda, a 700 Shadow. "A four stroke water-cooled V-twin," he told me, which still means nothing to me except that my little brother has one and when he says those words, they melt in your mouth. Will has a birthday in July. I bought him a saddle bag and a copy of Blue Highways.

My father paid us twelve bucks an hour for three full weeks of work. We never worked weekends, but usually put in the full five days, seven hours or more. After we’d finished the scraping, we lounged around the last four days of June and let our knuckles heal.

"We can’t paint with ripped up knuckles."

"No way."

There is a man in my past who Will refers to as Monobrow. He wasn’t so much a man as he was a Yellow Cab driver named Jerry who I snuck in and out of the house one New Year’s Eve. I was twenty. Home for the holidays. I’d recently lost my virginity along with the company of the guy who’d taken it and was aggressively curious about what else was out there. I had a flawless fake i.d. and had
taken to carrying small amounts, - "fun sizes" - of cocaine.

I remember Jerry because Will does, but there was a stretch of sloppy holidays — nauseous hangovers, my Santa stocking full of underwear and socks and miniature Reese peanut butter cups, conversations with my mother that always began with: "Katy, how are you?" the parties, the parties and the parties that have all blurred into one uneasy sensation the smell of roasted turkey and wrapping paper.

We laugh about Jerry now. He did have the bushiest eyebrows of anybody Will and I had ever seen. They were horribly overgrown, colliding drastically above his nose. I with my father could've seen him — at the hardware store maybe; he would've roared.

But Jerry was very gentle and grateful. I felt safe and comfortably out of time during the seven or so hours we spent together, from the moment he shut me into the warm cab he'd dubbed Ella, until I shooshed him out the back door New Year's morning. He thanked me profusely, said he hadn't come in three and a half years and he'd just had four in a row. He left me his home phone number, the dispatcher's number and his cabbie code. He even thanked Will when the three of us bumped on the back stairs.

If a man thanks me after sex now, I get precisely angry fast because I'm falling in love with people now, but when
I was twenty, twenty one, twenty two, I was far too inter­ested in what felt like what to realize I was giving some­thing away, let alone know what it was. Mine was a vivid whim, cheerfully sloshing around. Oh, yes.

"Oh, yeah, Monobrow. I remember him. Why don’t you give him a call? You’re back in town. Eager to see old friends and lovers."

"Shut up and chop this onion."

My family has perfected home-made pizzas. My mother taught us all, my father included, how to make pizza dough because it was one of the few things her mother taught her. We’re not Italian (Irish with a speck of German) but my mother fancied her recipe. She recklessly kneaded the dough - one of the survival techniques she passed onto us. Will and I ate pizza day in, day out.

Will smeared handfuls of basil tomato sauce on the crust. I sprinkled bits of baked chicken, sliced pepper­oni, carrots, olives and chunks of onions. He followed with a layer of mozzarella, a layer of sharp cheddar.

"What about these?" I held up a mound of diced jalapeno.

"In half," he said. "Too hot for me."

Tucker had decided we were cool enough to be around, and joined Will and me on the front steps where we brought the pizza, two cool beers each and a string of paper towels. The light around us fell to a silver blue. I stuck
a pepperoni slice between two toes and Tucker gave it a nibble.

"This is so good."

"Let's imagine Mom and Monobrow eating pizza together," Will said.

"Shut up.

"Ya know, Mrs. Sheppard, not only is this the best pizza I've ever tasted, but your daughter was the best lay of my life. If you or any member of your family ever needs a ride anywhere . . ."

"Asshole."

When I was nine years old, I sat alone in the pantry off the kitchen and tried to color a still life. I had a box of sixty four Crayolas, thick white drawing paper and across the room from me, on the windowsill, was a paper bouquet of purple, orange and red flowers. I remember color everywhere and panicking because I had forgotten to outline each flower in black, to draw first and then color in. I tried scratching at where the colors blurred together, but all that did was smudge things and I got a mixture of wax the color of root beer on my fingertip and under my nail.

And next, I don't remember being angry, but what I did was I pulled from a drawer of miscellaneous junk a box of matches and I lit the bouquet on fire. Flame devoured it quickly curling the paper, then dissolving it. And then
the curtains in the window caught from that and in a minute or maybe less, my father rushed in and swatted the fire dead. He stood with his hands on his hips and asked me just what had happened.

"It just caught on fire," I said.

The next thing I remember is sitting in my closet, on top of my chest of drawers, where I had to bend my knees to fit, eating a peanut butter sandwich, contemplating the reality of no soda pop for a week.

The night with the pizza, Will told me he knew about that.

"I'm who told Dad."

"No way."

"Yeah. I was after some juice and I walked into the kitchen and saw this blaze. I didn't see you; I just saw the fire."

"And you told on me."

"No. I told Dad that the curtains in the pantry were burning up." He pulled from his beer. "I've just now decided I'm a hero for that."

"Why are you remembering this now?"

"Well, with all this waxing nostalgic over Monobrow, I thought we were just re-hashing your wild days."

"My wild days."

"I knew you were the wild one way back then."

"Dick Tracy Knows Best. I was nine. That means you were
a meager five. You knew something?"

"Well, I didn’t know I knew; but I knew."

There is a ghost in the shower in my bathroom. At least I think it’s still there. My father has talked of needing a project, something to lay his hands on when summer breaks for good and the inevitable wind, cold and even rain will hit Missoula. But it was still there when I was back home and I was quite thankful.

I’ve always been a shower freak. Water pressure is the first thing I test when I’m looking at new apartments. In high school, I took three showers a day and stayed in for no less than twenty minutes at a time. There is something about being surrounded by a steady pulse of water and steam hearing your name reaching for you from somewhere below; the phone is for you or it’s suppertime, and not budging. I can remember sly smiles on my lips as I leaned against the shower’s wall and held my hands like a howl at my belly button, relishing a perfect alibi.

The ghost is that imprint, an indistinct shape where my body protected the tile behind it from the water’s wear, the steady blast. It’s cream colored distinguishable from the graying white around it, what my father wants to clean. It’s headless, armless, but here are the shoulders, the trunk and lower, the wide oval where the cheeks of my bottom flattened and spread. Will has helped too. I know he took showers there after I moved out. It is the best in
the house.

The last night of our lazy days, I stood in the shower for forty minutes and imagined Will’s funeral. I didn’t make up a cause of death. I pictured a coffin and yellow roses and my parents and a congregation full of distant relatives and friends, high school teachers and ski instructors standing in the back. I saw myself giving the eulogy.

I told about how the last time I had seen Will; he’d told me a joke - something about Bucwheat changing his name to Kareem of Wheat. I told how we used to get in trouble for laughing so hard at the dinner table that milk spit from our noses. I raised my hands and held them as fists, but close together as if there was a chain between them, a motion of strength. Later I told an imaginary friend that I didn’t know if I would ever see past this, that it was like a hand, five fingers spread wide before my eyes the moment I woke each morning.

The water went from hot to warm and I shut it off immediately. My eyes felt heavy and swollen, my arms and legs limp. It struck me as embarrassing and sick that I had constructed my brother’s funeral as a stage. But I had cried myself to a wonderfully exhausted place and I counted on that to mean something.

Monday morning Will and I washed the entire house. We found three hoses and two spray guns and Will suddenly
transformed himself into a latex cowboy, standing five feet from the house with a hose and nozzle in each hand. I held my finger into the spray of my hose and streamed water into the corners of windows, freeing paint chips where they had clogged or stuck to spots of wood. We rubbed after mildew with scrub brushes.

We spent the second half of the day applying primer to the spots where we’d scraped through to the wood— or where I had scraped through to the wood. Will said we each had to "prime our own spots." I climbed back up the ladder and smeared over the blotches of old wood, deciding that it wasn’t my fault that the upper part of the house was in worse shape than the lower. I had simply done my job.

We craved grease for dinner so I drove to the Mo. Club for take-out. When I got back, Will was standing under, yelling up into one of the three ponderosa pines that lined our block.

"Tucker’s got himself stuck," he said.

"On, no. I thought he’d quit doing that."

"Well, dogs haven’t quit chasing him."

My mother has never let us call Tucker a fat cat. She demands that he’s "hearty"; she also loves to feed him. Tucker’s mostly white with gray and light black stripes running down his back. We could see him easily, two-thirds of the way up the tree, his back legs on one branch, his
front paws on one slightly lower. He meowed at us anxiously, exposing the pink of his mouth.

"Should we call the fire department?" I said.

"You’ve seen too many movies. He got up there. He knows how to get down."

"It’s getting dark though."

"I know. Get a flashlight. We’ll spot the way."

I found two flashlights and brought them both outside even though we didn’t really need them. Dusk lingered for nearly half an hour but we were high on this rescue, a rescue we needed tools for.

I flashed my light into Tucker’s chest. Will lit up a branch below. Tucker didn’t budge.

"Tucker! Come. On."

"He’s enjoying this, the shit."

"He misses Mom."

"Yeah."

Finally, we flicked our flashlights off, walked into the house, munched a few fries, sipped on our shakes and went back out. Tucker meowed like crazy.

"That got him."

His first steps were timid, testing each branch with his paw but soon we had a rhythm going: my spot, Tucker’s paw and face, Will’s spot, Tucker’s paw and face, my spot . . . There were fewer branches as Tucker got closer. I aimed my spot to directly beneath Will’s.
"Will, I’m so sorry."

"For what?"

"For being gone. For bringing Monobrow home. For calling you a spaz when you were seven. For being uneven."

Will stared at Tucker or at the branches of the Pine but not at me.

"You called me a spaz? Tucker’s the spaz. Tucker, you spaz! Get down here right now."

He flashed his light onto my face. "I don’t really understand. But it doesn’t mean I don’t love you."

We re-heated our Mo. burgers and threw the fries that would never be edible again at Tucker until he left the room. We slipped off our shoes and carried our plates into the living room where we sat on the floor and spread in front of us the paint samples my father had left behind. He’d narrowed it down to five but said that we could choose the final color. The possibility of a practical joke had been discussed and ruled out before he and my mother had even left town.

Will put on a Jerry Garcia record and we kept time to an acoustic version of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." We sipped on our shakes from straws. Will patted one thigh with the palm of his hand while I strummed my fingers along the squares of color as if over piano keys, lightly touching each particular shade of blue.
The night before my father had surgery for lung cancer, my mother set up an ironing board and pressed every one of his shirts. She looked up in slow surprise as I let myself into the condominium and stood in the kitchen. In her lavender bathrobe and slippers, she gripped an iron with one hand, the other primped a flattened shirt, fingertips fluttering along the collar. She'd been at it for some time. White, blue, yellow and pinstripe button-downs, neat as a dry cleaner’s, echoed along the mantel of the condo’s small fireplace.

It was three in the morning, September in Seattle, the Indian days warm and blue. Nights stayed cool, levelling off into soft blackness. The air smelled of oranges and bar-b-ques and felt good on my back. My mother looked weightless in the dark. I left the door open and walked into the living room, switching on the kitchen lights as I
passed through.

"Leave those off," my mother said.

The only light came from a small lamp on a telephone stand behind her. The drapes were open, though. My mother rarely closed them, thinking them too heavy and drab to veil only a patio deck. She was right. With the glass bared, a big rectangle of moonlight flushed the room.

"You want it this way?" I said.

"I do."

That living room was so much smaller than in the house. My parents' jade plants and ferns huddled together in a corner. Knee-high stacks of books and boxes formed small castles. Picture frames lay flat, stacked on top of each other. Throw rugs overlapped on the carpet my mother hated. And she was tall, ironing with elbows pointed, belongings silhouetted around her. Although, sometimes I think she liked that about the condominium, that once in a while, things could be within reach. The red-handled spray bottle and a hamper full of tangled shirts were at her feet. A cigarette burned near the telephone.

My father was set to go under at seven thirty the next morning. I imagined that we'd go to the hospital and sit and wait, but I didn't know for sure. It's not what I wanted to do. I wanted to sit and wait in the dark by myself, go to the hospital at the last minute and hear what was going to happen. I thought my mother has something in
mind, though, a way were going to do this. 
sat on the couch with a Budweiser and gripped a bunch of hangers like one thick boomerang, nodding them in the air, rapping them against my thigh.

"Leave those alone," my mother said.

I shoved them upright between the cushions and balanced the beer can on the triangle they made.

"That’ll spill," she said.

"I won’t let it."

"You drink too much beer for a girl."

"I’m a big girl."

"Twenty three," she nodded, smiling as if she knew things I didn’t, like she’d tasted the trouble I’d have.

"I love beer," I said.

My mother tugged a shirt from the hamper, undoing a knot a yellow sleeve had made with a white one. She pulled the yellow shirt free, held it by the shoulders and snapped it hard like my brothers had done to each other with bath towels.

"You know," she said. "I never forgave him for gaining all that weight." She spread half of the shirt flat and sprayed water at it, squeezing the red handle three quick times. "How’d you like to be married to someone who looked like that?"

"He’s pretty thin these days," I said.

"Of course." She threw me a glare. "I’m trying to tell
you something about me."

She’d banded her hair away from her face with a blue scarf. Fatigue had grayed circles around her eyes, but the rush of thick silver hair was lovely and kept drawing my gaze from the iron to her face.

She said, "when I’m riding the bus, walking downtown or at Safeway, I think constantly of going up to people and asking them: 'What is it you wanted?'

My parents had only been living in the condominium since June. After losing months to chemotherapy that did no good, my father committed himself to the operation and he and my mother made the move from the three story house we’d lived in for twenty five years to the refined four and a half rooms at the top of Queen Anne Hill.

My mother still hadn’t found space for lots of things, let alone the graceful placement of others. The painting my father’d given her when she turned sixty was half obscured behind bookshelves. It was of a nameless city at night, tiny bits of yellow, white and red gave windows and dimension to blocks of dark blue. Sleeping community life, inhabited and starry.

When my mother tore the wrapping from the painting, she’d said: "Oh, Joe!" and put her hands to her cheeks. "Where should we put it?" He suggested their bedroom. "No. No. No." She shook her head. Not once did she touch him
and she wouldn’t look at either of my brothers or me. She picked up her champagne and surveyed the living room like a realtor. "How ’bout here?" She chose a corner spot, above books and the Irish figurines my grandfather had given my father each Christmas. "It should be where everyone can see it," she said.

I was sure she’d hung the painting early in the move, the gesture of some emotion for my father and then defeated when it seemed there was no end to what the Bekins vans held. Twenty five years of stuff suddenly demanded layers and practicality.

Essentially all their artwork is of my father’s choosing. But I did come across something in my mother’s wallet once, lifting a five when I was a broke teenager. She’d folded a postcard in half and stashed it behind her credit cards, where she hid everything but singles from my brothers and me.

A reduction of something I imagined was famous, the picture was of a woman’s bedroom, exquisite disarray on the bureau, flowered scarves and necklaces hung from the stand of a mirrored oval. A single white chair, its back curved like a paper clip, sat beside a window. Transparent curtains blew over the seat.

"You left the door open," my mother said.

"I like the air."
She moved the iron in tight circles, buffing a shirt, shifting the collar just so. She draped half the shirt over the edge of the board and pulled taut what work was left, weaving above and beneath button holes.

"It is nice," she said.

I lifted my nose into a breeze passing through the room.

That summer I'd left home for six weeks of June and July to fish King and sockeye salmon in Alaska. I'd left Washington state once before, for college, to see what California was all about, but I'd come right back. I'd never fished. I didn't know the dictatorial elements, how to actually understand the wind and the ocean, to get to know fish. I'd never felt so pleasantly exhausted at ten at night with the sun still in charge and a bow full of glistening sockeye which meant I had at least two more months of unquestioned living paid for.

I'd never followed a lover. But I'd fallen in love with the way Malcolm walked and he made the summer sound adventurous. It was.

We fished out of Egegik, a tiny village in Bristol Bay that shoulders the Aleutian Islands and Alaskan Peninsula. Tens of millions of fish run through the Egegik River each season. The River ladles into the Bay's fatter water and then, somewhere along the furthest misting edge, enters the Bering Sea.
Malcolm lured me with the money and the sunsets and the promise of a trailer with a window facing the Bay. Nights we didn’t fish, we warmed ourselves with food and Jack Daniels. We sat at the tiny table and counted our money. Our hands were swollen from picking but we held magic markers tight and drew black lines through debt after debt. I broke even before he did, but the first night we were both in the clear, we swore off salmon and bought hamburger and cheese, fresh lettuce, tomatoes, one big onion and got fat on tacos. I bought Kahlua. He Vodka. We bummed ice from the cannery’s mess hall and mixed Slippery Nipples. We tied on a sweet, giddy drunk and sat by the window. Near midnight, we noticed that the sun had finally dipped. It left pink and orange tracers, wide and long across the sky.

When I told my parents I was going to Alaska, I told them I was going to wash dishes in the cannery’s mess hall. My father sipped wine, his eyebrows bobbing over the glass’ rim.

"Aaah, those Alaskan dishes," he said.

"I want to go," I said.

He reached over and palmed my scalp with his hand.

"Your brothers made lots of money up there."

Seven and eight years older than me, both my brothers had gone to Alaska for stretches of years and entered independence with the money. Tim moved to Vancouver where
he bought a house and went in on a tavern with two friends. Matthew put himself through law school in San Diego and stayed there.

"Gotta have money," my father said. He shoved the wine glass gently from one hand to the other.

I nodded.

My father'd spent his childhood in a crowded Bronx apartment, perfecting the strength of mind and drive I've always known in him. The quietest of three boys and one girl, he holed up in a corner Saturday afternoons "studying to be a whiz kid." He went straight from Fordham University to Colombia medical school. He married my mother, got her pregnant with Tim and then a year later, Matthew. My father laid the newborn into a dresser drawer, rested it on my mother's lap and drove the four of them across the country. An internship turned into a practice at the Mason Clinic in Seattle.

My father was suspicious of an adventure without heroics.

I said: "the money." And he recited: "Alaska, dishes, money, back to school, Alaska, dishes, money, back to school," until I said it along with him.

My mother saw no ready connection. "Dishes," she said. "Eventually, what they'll ask you to do is dance for them."

All this over my last dinner in town. My father'd
grilled curried shrimp and made a pineapple salsa. He'd
dusted off a ten year old French Bordeaux which made my
mother roll her eyes. Three Swiss chocolate cream puffs
from Julia’s for dessert.

At my father’s insistence, we’d dressed for this
dinner. He wore black tie from the waist up, Levis and
the blue Mariners cap that never left his head. My mother
wore a tangerine gown. I wore a paisley skirt, the pattern
of which we decided matched the shrimp and a midnight silk
blouse they’d bought me for my twenty first birthday. It
was a lovely time. No discussion of lice and the seduction
of drinking, depressive isolation and all those men. We
didn’t talk about my father’s illness. Until my mother
brought it up.

"You’re sick, Joe. Liz should stay."

"I’d feel more sick if she stayed."

He pulled a shrimp’s tail from his mouth. "It’s two
months. We can do anything for two months. Of course,
Liz, you might want to put bibs on the sweaters of mine
you like."

"Jesus, Joe." My mother covered her eyes.

"Dad," I said. "Should I stay?"

"No. Nothing happens that fast."

"Plenty happens that fast," my mother said. She tossed
her fork onto her plate. "She’s going off to the last
frontier like it’s a new part of town. She doesn’t know
what she’s doing."

"Neither do you," I said. "That’s what’s pissing you off."

"Don’t say ‘pissing,’" my father said. "She’s going to wash dishes."

"Dishes," my mother said and then she made the comment about the dancing and asked if we should put on a little Bosa Nova so I could practice some moves.

"How ’bout ’Samba De Uma Nota So’?" she said. "That’s a real titillating one."

"I can’t believe you," I said.

"Eat first, dance later." My father swam a shrimp to my mother’s lips. "C’mon, Wispy."

She swatted it away and pulled the pins from her hair, yanking down the streamers after a spoiled party.

"I’m twenty three. I want an adventure and I’m a slut for it," I said.

"Jesus, ‘pissing,’ ’titillating,’ and ’slut.’ What’s happening to the language in my house?" My father tossed his napkin. "We can all do anything for two months. Can’t we?"

My mother left the room.

My mother lit herself another cigarette and followed the drag with some wine. The lamp behind her tinged the room yellow. The night pushed black and still against the
windows. Lounge furniture glowed white on the deck.

She settled her cigarette in the ashtray, gripped the iron and hovered it above a flattened shirt, punching steam. Tiny clouds of fog settled and she went after remaining wrinkles, planing along the collar, inside the hollows of cuffs.

"What'd you really do up there?" she asked.

"I washed dishes, Mom."

"My, a girl can make an awful lot of money on dishes these days." She took a slow drag off the cigarette. "You don't have to live in this box because of all the money you made washing dishes. I had no idea Alaskans thought so highly of their dishes."

"I fished," I said. I went for another beer.

"Bring what's left of the wine," she said.

She emptied it into her glass. She handed the bottle back to me but kept the cork, holding it like it was a clear capsule with something inside it she wanted to identify. She rolled it between her palms, then held it against her nostrils. Like she was tasting a delicacy, she placed it between her teeth, bit down gently and held it there, leaving marks on the stained end.

She took the cork from her mouth and held it high.

My father began collecting corks when I was in high school. He covered an entire wall of his study with a huge peg board he made himself, plotting just the right space
between each one and routing holes chubby enough for thumbs. Occasionally, he’d come across holes he’d made too small and he brought the corks to my mother. She altered them to size.

"I wonder if that room still stinks," she said. "Do you want the corks? They’re there." She pointed to a cardboard television box that sat beneath a rubber plant.

I lifted the plant by its trunk and set it atop a stack of books.

"Not there," she said.

"Mom, it doesn’t matter where anything goes. There’s no room here. You’ve got to get rid of some of this stuff."

"Well, maybe you could take the corks for us. That would help." She looked away from me and pressed her fingers along the shirt’s button line, pushing the iron in long hard swipes.

The box reeked of wine. I saw my father at his desk, framed degrees and awards around him, an intricate poster of the body’s anatomy, pictures of my mother, brothers and me. The stethoscope his father had used, displayed as if in a museum along side tiny blue and green bottles.

I undid the flaps my father had fitted precisely under and over each other. He’d lined the box in tissue, enough so that the loose corks were covered in a veil of paper. I pulled it aside and dug into them. They bubbled up, stubs of brown, faint patches of red. My fingernails tore bits
from some. Several overflowed onto the carpet. They felt moist in my hands.

"I'll take them," I said.

When I came back from Alaska, I had eight thousand dollars and no lover. A fisherman who raced a team in the Iditirod had turned Malcolm onto the idea of dog handling. Malcolm started dreaming, reading and talking about Huskies, breeding, owning and racing them. He wanted me to come along. "Let's go to the dogs," he said. He offered to outfit me, to buy all the gear we'd need, snowsuits and boots, furred gloves and hoods. When the money ran out, he'd pick up work guiding hunters. I could find something cooking, waiting tables. He talked up the Northern Lights and Christmas in Fairbanks, all those hours of darkness. We'd leave the lower forty eight behind for good. But my wallet was as fat as his and breathed something else.

I flew back to Seattle and bought a four year old VW van. With a foot sawed off the end, the bunk bed Matthew'd slept in fit just fine. There was room for one small dresser. I installed a four by four refrigerator. I cooked on a hot plate and ate off a t.v. table I secured to the van's insides with a bungee cord. A tiny chandelier hung from the ceiling.

I spent days early on curling the pages of a manual,
touching parts of the engine and losing myself, lying underneath the van with a new set of tools. After two weeks, I could change the oil no problem, knew which socket wrench to use to change the sparkplugs. I even bought a feeler gauge and set the ignition timing.

I didn’t see the van as my home forever, but right then, it felt sufficient and luxurious, the way solo living can. I figured I had ten months until I’d have to work again. My hours were lazy and weird. I ate whatever and whenever I wanted. I saw movies, took in entire James Dean and John Huston series at the Neptune. I slept and read and daydreamed the afternoons away. Late at night, I sipped beer and sped around the quiet city, cruising the freeways. When stoplights were unavoidable, I kept the beer low and coasted silently through them.

"I saw you once," my mother said.

I fitted one flap of the cork box underneath the other and laid my head on top of it. I rubbed my beer against my cheek and watched her.

She stood the iron upright and dragged from her cigarette. Her fingers played with a shirt tail. She stared back at me.

"Dancing," I said finally. "I remember."

It’d been during my last stretch at home before Alaska. I drank often with friends at the Comet and would slip in
buzzed and late. I loved to dance in my room before going to bed and this one night, I had my headphones on, Tom Petty's live "Breakdown" cranked. Spinning with my arms above my head, fingers tingling upward, I turned and saw my mother watching me. My windows had no shades and the moonlight settled like boxes onto the carpet. I saw the tiny glare of her glasses, the arcs her arms made on either side of her body, a statue frozen in the wake of something. Yanking the headphones off, I heard the music blaring around me. I punched the power button.

"It can't be good for your ears to listen to music that loud," she said. Then she stepped into the room and stood near me. Her eyes were wet, lit pebbles under water. She touched my thumb.

"No," my mother said. "You don't remember this. You were somewhere else." She drank the last of her wine. I felt my face widen and pale. I was guilty of some things but nothing she could know.

"One morning. In between the hinges of your door. Your foot's what caught my eye, lagging off the bed that way, making circles of its own. I watched it. I knew not to move. I couldn't see your face. I saw your hand holding down the sheet and all of a sudden, you let out breath and I wanted to know what you thought you were."

She whispered the last part and tipped the wine glass back for any last drops. She stared at me over the rim.
"You couldn’t have seen that, Mom. The only time I brought friends home was when you and Dad were out of town."

She shook her head. "There was no friend," she said. She set the glass down and held up the finished shirt by its shoulders, letting it fall into shape. We dodged each other’s eyes. I handed her a hangar. She fitted the shirt onto it, took it between her teeth and buttoned the buttons, collar and all. She hung it on the mantel, her hand lingering above the curve of wire, willing it to settle.

"You know," she said. "I’ve never done that."

"I think I do lots of things you’ve never done."

"I do too," she said. She traced a finger along the rim of the wine glass. "What was it like up there?"

"It’s hard to explain," I said.

"I won’t understand."

"No one does who hasn’t been there."

"I see. Well why don’t I just disappear?"

"That’s not what I mean."

My mother once told me the best evidence for a life after this one is the yearning for it. I know what went on between us is typical stuff for mothers and daughters, her giving so much, needing to be needed in return and knowing better. Me excelling at selfishness, refusing any one
definition, provoking her imagination beyond ordinary worry. But there's something in ritually tripping back through the calendar of an imperfect relationship, the details. I check them off regularly, like they're a list of safety measures I take to secure the van.

"I loved Amelia Earhart," my mother said. She blocked three new shirts onto the ironing board, fidgeting with the shoulder's, the button lines, the cuffs, as I'd seen her do to my father every once in a while. She'd dote with an edge, not meeting his eyes, tsk, tsk-ing, her fingers grazing his cheeks as they went about mending. He'd stand obediently, his eyes soft, a thin smile and sideways glance his lame attempts at impatience.

"When I was sixteen," she said. "I taped a photograph of her under a propeller to the bathroom mirror and butchered my hair to look like hers. She had wonderful brown hair. Cowlicks, like she'd just woken up. She looked like the strongest willow next to those airplanes. My mother said I looked like a scarecrow and told my father to whip me which he did. But after some of the hair grew back, I looked almost the way I'd hoped and I got on a bus."

She stopped and eyed me, squirted the shirts with water.

"I'm telling you," she said. "I remember the evening, a
rosy dusk, late September in Connecticut, which, by the way, is the most beautiful time of the year to be there. A real fall. All the colors, all the leaves, wood in the air. I needed a coat. I needed a leather jacket. If I’d had a leather jacket . . ." She waved a finger at me. "I’d have made it."

We both laughed.

"I had money. I stole a little from my father, but I did have some of my own. And I got to Kansas. Nearly one . . ."

"No way."

"I’m telling you, I got there. It’s possible. One thousand miles and I got there. To Atchison."

"Atchison?"

"Where she grew up."

She tossed two of the shirts back into the hamper and spread her hands across the one left. She fitted one shoulder onto an edge of the board and started in on a sleeve.

"It was damn hot," she said.

"Did you see her?"

"No. She left there when she was still a girl. I walked the streets. I bought Cokes. I sat in the library and at monuments."

"Did you talk to people?"

"No, I wish I had. I wish I’d asked about her. Just one
word, you know?"

"Uh huh."

"One word." She raised a finger in the air.

"What’d you do?"

"Went back to Danbury. Atchison was just too hot. I couldn’t have lived there."

"Maybe you could’ve."

"No. No. No." She brushed her forehead and patted her scarf. "My hair’s never done anything on its own. Once the hollows and chunks grew out, I was the same. Amelia disappeared the next year, just plumb vanished somewhere over the South Pacific." She spoke the word "plumb" like it was the sound of something falling.

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One thing I believe because I’ve heard it so often is that my mother fell for my father’s blue eyes. I wondered if Amelia Earhart had blue eyes or if the color of my father’s somehow reminded my mother of the sky, of airplanes, of her. People can come together that way.

"Hand me a hangar," my mother said.

I was lying on the rug, my beer atop the cork box. I walked on my knees to the couch, grabbed a hangar and handed it to her. She fumbled it, letting it fall. I picked it up and handed it to her again. Our fingers grazed and she pinched mine between hers and a thumb.
"How' bout a drive?" I said.

The morning was coal colored, dusty with hints of light. The air had turned sweeter with dew. I led my mother into the street and slid the door of the van wide. She stepped inside as if onto a boat, moving with her hands on things, my little sink, the dresser. Her head tipped the chandelier. She finally settled onto my bed and pressed her hands flat against the mattress.

A handful of favorite photographs kept company in the space above the bed. My mother pulled her legs underneath her and twisted around, taking the pictures in like a child does an aquarium. There was one of Malcolm and me on the Undine, a shot of a bicycle a friend took in Amsterdam, a Sports Illustrated close-up of Dr. J hovering near the rim with an old red, white and blue ABA ball, a pyramid of beaten Heineken bottles, my family around the dinner table on my father's sixty-fifth birthday, two pictures layered one on top of the other, stretching out a streaked Alaskan sunset.

"Where to?" my mother asked.

The house we'd lived in in Washington Park had six bedrooms, five bathrooms, a kitchen with three flower box windows, a living room with a view of Lake Washington. When we moved in, a skeleton of a kayak was in the basement's workroom. My father tinkered with it some.
Then my brothers as they got older, sensing the novelty and freedom of a boat. They actually were the ones who finally pieced it together, stretching the canvas from one wooden rib to the next. They painted it green. I can remember a day, my mother guiding with her hands like ground crew on an airstrip, directing them up the basement stairs, out the back door and into fresh air where my father stood grinning. I had a picture of the kayak above my bed too.

I coasted down Queen Anne Hill, my foot just above the brake, the headlights calmly probing the darkness. Downtown Seattle sprawled out from underneath us, the Space Needle familiar, cuddled into the skyline. Windows lit up on the buildings like checkerboard squares.

I went through two red lights before my mother took residence in the passenger seat. I did a double take, seeing her there, still in bathrobe and slippers, knees up close, her body bent like pipe fittings. She held a can of Budweiser.

"I found it in the fridge," she said. "Hope you don't mind." She offered me some.

"Thanks." The carbonation's cold sting woke me up. I took a big swallow, then another. One beer was enough.

"Do you think we would have been friends?" my mother said. "If we weren't who we are, if we'd been girls together, do you think we would've liked each other?"
"I drink too much beer for you," I said.
She took the Bud from my lap and sipped it. "I could like this," she said. "It's a little sour. I like that."
"I've never thought of it as 'sour.'"
"Bitter," she said.
"I can see 'bitter,'" I said.
"So you don't think we would've been friends," she said.
"I didn't say that."
"You didn't say anything."
"It's hard for me to imagine you as anyone but my mother," I said.
"You won't even try."
"C'mon, Mom."
"You would've scared me," she said.
"'Scared you'?"
"Intimidated. Your ease," she said. "There's no anxiety. To go places, drink too much, be something other than what's expected."

Leaving my eyes on the road, I held my hand out for the beer. She gave it to me, folding my fingers around the can.
"Well, maybe I'm those things because of you," I said.
"That's something," she said.

We drove along Lake Union, both of us turning our heads to watch the water. Houseboats glowed pink like tail
lights. Above them, on the University Bridge, we were alone and I drove slowly, though there was nothing to see, the wrong time for pleasure boats and windsurfers. We could only know that off in the south distance, the water edged into pine and blurred onto the base of Mt. Rainier.

In the van I cruised through our old neighborhood often and was always happy to see that it was staying essentially the same. The corner store was still abandoned, the "Enjoy Coca Cola" sign my brothers had tried so often to rip off, still hung fast, the red painting fading. The Dion’s blue pickup jutting out of their driveway as it always had. The Livezy’s lawn trim and glamorous. I’d always envied the Schuster’s porch, a wrap-around with a hammock and odd chairs that were left out all night.

I pulled in front of our house and cut the motor, falling back into my seat. My mother leaned forward, looking past me. She held the beer can in both hands, slowly molding it into a bruised hourglass, caressing the rim with a thumb.

I pulled the keys from the ignition, singled out the one that may or may not have still opened the door to the house and held it up between us. "I saved a key."

"We’re not going in," she said.

What I will always love about that house are the windows, wide ones that gave us the Lake, two shingled
dormers, one pushing out from my bedroom, another above it, like a view finder where my brother Tim slept. Rhododendrens border the front steps under the tangled limbs of crab apple and cherry trees, and the rain gutter sags just beneath Matthew’s bedroom. My parents’ room is on a windowed corner, two large shaded squares and one smaller one, where my mother’s reading lamp glowed.

I had my hands draped over the lower curve of the steering wheel. I felt her finger on mine and I turned to her.

"When you’re out there," she said. "Do you miss me?"

And when I didn’t answer, she placed a hand on my shoulder and lifted herself out of the seat, stepped behind me and laid down on my bed. "He goes in at seven-thirty," she said. "Don’t fall asleep."

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Summers in Egegik, Alaska, the grass turns from khaki to a lush green in a matter of weeks. Mud and forest colored tundra, speckled with lavender rolls on and on. One long dirt and gravel road curves and stretches from the bar to the beach, out to the dump and back. Malcolm and I rode that road in a friend’s pickup, packing a gun and a six-pack, maybe a tape deck. We’d leave the trailer at ten at night and drive out to the dump. We’d drink, make out, fashion dreams when the buzz hit.
The cannery dumped its fish guts at the dump and some of the villagers had seen bear: big Goldens, sows with cubs. Malcolm and I had ideas about seeing bear, but we never did. One night, we strolled away from the truck, just for a walk. We headed back towards the village, the Bay out ahead of us. The huge sky spread in patches of blue and tangerine. We walked to the crest of a small hill and came upon a red fox at the remains of a flattened squirrel. I saw the fox before Malcolm did and I pulled him back by the hand.

The fox stared at us. He looked just as I had imagined from fairy tales and wildlife stories: bright black eyes, sharp nose, sleek, his coat trim, a deep rust color. He darted away, racing across the tundra. Malcolm and I stood on tiptoe, trying to follow with our eyes, but lost him where he disappeared behind or below mounds of tundra silhouetted against the horizon. We were left to stare out at the tundra spreading out in plenty, running, tree-less land, speckled with lavender, meeting the edge of the silver water.

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The light had come up. Things were still in shades of gray, but I could make out where the grass and cement walk met, the unevenness of the five steps leading to the front door. I studied the face of my parents’ room, the two dark
rectangles and a smaller one, where my mother’s reading lamp glowed.

I imagined my parents curled in their bed, my father’s arm around my mother, his hand snug between her breasts. He breathed beside her ear; it kept her awake. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, seeing easily where the shade separated from the window’s frame. She stared at the slit of space it made, the thin slab of glass, watching it melt from black to gray, tinting with the blue of morning.

And I saw an Egegik skyline, miraculously there in the room, the blaze of yellow, peach and rose, all glorious and impossible along those walls.
Sunday morning, Sean told Marley he was gone for good. Marley woke in darkness, having to pee. He walked straight into the bathroom, too tired to notice or care that the shower was running. Sean sat on the toilet, fully dressed, his face dimpled with steam and sweat. He wore his leather jacket and his feet sat on either side of a duffel bag. Marley’s sister Rena had her hand out from behind the shower curtain and Sean held her fingers, rubbing them with his thumb. He looked straight at Marley when Marley walked in and shook his head.

“You gotta use the downstairs, Marley,” Rena said, her voice garbled, as if water were streaming in and out of her mouth.

Marley stepped back and shut the door. He stood in the hallway and stared at his feet. "I’ve loved this," he heard Sean say.
Three days later, when Sean came back, Marley was upstairs, in Sean and Rena’s bedroom. Or what was left of it. He’d started in that morning, filling trash bags with Sean’s books and clothes. He tore down posters and took apart the bed, heaving the mattress into the hallway, turning the bedframe on its side and dragging it across the carpet. It left behind nicks like cat scratches as Marley pulled it through the doorway. He shoved the rug against a wall. Sean had left behind a music stand. Marley folded it up and used it to prop open a window.

The August day was white with sun. It’d been a long, dry summer. Missoula had seen highs of near a hundred and for weeks at a time. Marley heard the saxophone and saw Sean in a black suit jacket and gym shorts, zig-zagging across the yellow lawn. Sean hunched over a little. A strip of white collar rode up the back of his neck. He’d slicked his hair back with oil. The bangs, too short to fit behind his ears, dangled in dark curls along his forehead. He lifted the sax, golden like a Christmas ornament, to his mouth.

Sean blew stretches of hard sounds, clowny notes that dented the air. He’d parked his beat-up white Ford on the grass. A bar-b-que puffed in the bed, sending smoke into the blue afternoon. Along with it were grocery bags, skinny bottles of wine, a spatula and platter, butcher paper, Rena’s tall wooden salt and pepper shakers and a
twelve-pack, one cardboard corner ripped open.

Rena sat on the hood of the truck. She sipped from a beer, bobbing her shoulders to the music, tapping bare feet on the front tire. Her face was brown from three months of sun and she'd banded her hair back with a maroon handanna. She wore Sean's sunglasses, two severe dark squares, an old tank top of Marley's and Levis cut off at the knees.

Marley turned to face the room, running both hands along his balding head, locking fingers at the back of his neck. Scraps of paper stirred on the floor. Shoestrings of dust hung from the ceiling, the torn down wall a bit of coral reef.

It looked better this way, Marley thought, like something had happened there. The best thing Sean could do was stay away. Get sensible somewhere else. Visit in a few years. He told Rena that he'd "loved this." Jesus, Marley thought, tossed her a bone and now he's back for it.

The last woman Marley'd been with flew him to Europe to tell him that she was carrying a child she wasn't sure was his and she was dropping Marley because of it. What was it with people suddenly fancying themselves loners at the hint of a bigger life? Sean wasn't gonna touch any stars. Marley counted on three fingers what Sean could do: drink, cook and play mediocre saxophone.

Marley squatted to his knees and picked up plaster
chunks, bits of two by fours and lath. He crab-walked around the room, shooing clusters of dust, collecting as much junk as he could to his chest. In a corner, he dumped all of it, throwing a clear piece of plastic over the pile.

Marley owned the house; he did whatever he wanted to the place. Rena visited, but she didn’t want an address. Marley’s name was on all the mortgage and bank statements, the gas, water and phone bills. They knew him at UBC lumber and the Food Farm. The paper boy asked for Marley when he came to collect.

Marley held the sledgehammer low, rolling his wrist like a batter, lolling the hammerhead up and down. He stepped back, swung upwards as hard as he could and brought plaster falling. The wall cracked, veins spreading in a spider web. Marley punched his hand into the center and yanked loose bits and chunks of the wall, kicking the pieces aside as they hit the floor.

Marley could say that he loved Rena because they were related. It was a given. They fell in front of cameras easily, wore each other’s clothes. When Rena was in Missoula, she and Marley lived together in a house they’d inherited from a grandmother. No money. But a house.

Marley moved in. He’d never left Missoula, went to Vo. Tech right out of high school, spent two years with goggles, flames and steel, learning how to weld. He got
his certification and was going on eight years at Empire Steel. A house was right for him.

Rena stored her collectibles: an armoire she’d bought in Seattle, high-backed chairs, an oak table for ten, tall and bedside lights with lampshades like a moll’s haircut. Marley didn’t mind but he thought it was stupid to have a dining room’s worth of furniture and not use it. Rena told him to go ahead, eat off the table, put soft bulbs in the lights.

Marley caught slivers, helping the wall down. White flecks swirled around him. He used his dust mask to wipe sweat from his forehead, hits of plaster off his upper lip. A patch of lath showed behind the wall.

When Rena showed up in Missoula with Sean, she’d brought a coat tree with a green bowl on top and plugged it in along with others. At night, the house looked like an intersection, blue-green glowing upstairs, yellow flooding the front door. She bought a wine colored bulb for the kitchen. All this light on account of Rena and Sean having met over too many drinks in a Seattle bar, Sean dedicating a solo to her and the two of them driving out of town that night. “Ripping out the rear-view,” Sean had said. Apparently, they fell in love, a product of cheap adventure.

Marley liked the lamps. They layered the house with stories like photographs and paintings. That rooms were a
different color gave Marley a headache, but he welcomed
the noise and the three of them had lived together since,
until Sean felt a fire under him.

Marley banged at two by fours with the sledgehammer. He
worked a crowbar, yanking boards loose, going after
trickier nails with a cat’s paw. White rocks tumbled in
slides, falling onto the floor and scattering. The room
filled with dust and wood. He wished for a fan, its steady
hum and breeze. He thought about stopping and setting one
up but changed his mind when a two by four fell on its
own. It hung by a nail, then dropped, taking with it
patches of lath and plaster and leaving behind a jagged
toaster-sized window into the room next door. He saw his
own unmade bed, the wrinkled pillow and balled up blanket.

Sean had flipped Marley some business about his
bedroom. It was no place to bring women. Not that Marley
should make it a pleasure palace, just show a little of
himself off. What you’re into, Sean said, his hands
making a big gesture — hang it on the walls.

Sean’s music sheets, his collage of musicians cut from
magazines, the collection of saxophone photographs were
all folded and boxed, waiting for an address. What would
Sean think of Marley’s artwork? The wall bruised. A
window into a bedroom.

Marley let the screen door slam behind him. The day’s
heat was thick. He smelled steaks, onions and garlic,
something sweet like tangerines.

"Hey, Marley," Rena called. She teetered on the hood, rocking a hello, squinting or smiling. "Where you been all day?" she said.

"Asleep," Marley said. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked in the shady part of the porch, back and forth along the gray wood. He tipped his head at Sean. "What the hell you doin' here?" Marley said.

"He bought lunch," Rena said. "Can you believe it?" She stuck her hand out, displaying the bar-b-que.

"No," Marley said, stepping off the porch. Dry grass prickled his feet. He felt his scalp instantly turn pink.

Sean took off his jacket, letting it fall to a black patch on the grass. Kneeling onto it, he pulled the neck of his tee shirt over his face and wiped the sweat. He turned to Marley. Strands of hair hung above his eyes. "I did buy lunch," he said. "That is one way of looking at it."

Marley shrugged his shoulders, offered his hands to the air. "I didn’t say anything," he said. Marley knew Sean had it in him to go for style when he suspected himself of being an asshole. Fancy greased hair, playing sax on his knees. Marley had to laugh. Watch him just stroll back in.

Scan smiled when Marley walked past him. He nodded and tipped the sax.
"Go easy on me," Sean said.

"I'm no judge," Marley said, as he walked into the shade of the only tree in the yard, an old apple tree nobody'd pruned in years. He leaned against the trunk.

Sean started playing Cole Porter's "You Do Something" in full, bluesy notes. He walked on his knees towards Rena, jerking the jacket along with him. He stopped a few feet from the truck, bobbing and weaving the sax just below Rena's feet.

"Jesus," Marley said. "You lose your pride on the road or what?"

"I like him without pride," Rena said.

Sean played beginnings and endings of stuff, summer tunes with bits of scale running in between. His skinny fingers worked sounds from the horn, the middle ones rambling, a pinky standing straight. He held the sax against his chest and dipped his body back and forth, peeping light notes at Rena.

She smiled, leaning backwards like the music was elbowing her. Her arms out for balance, she touched the truck's hood with the back of her head. Her legs rose in the air, calves tense, toes pointed like a synchronized swimmer's.

Marley raised his eyes into the tree. Small apples clustered with brittle leaves. The sun broke through in bars. Long limbs hung low, curving in warped triangles.
Marley slung an arm around one, kicked a foot onto another and hoisted himself into a squat. He crouched on a fat bough, feet side by side, his head parting leaves. Marley saw Rena's toes and the saxophone, bobbing flesh and gold in the air.

Sean played louder. Marley wondered about neighbors. What if someone investigated and discovered Sean and Rena like this, oblivious, lost in music? Marley imagined the Dions standing in the yard: Mr. with a hand shading his eyes, Mrs. smoothing her skirt. They'd make big bewildered waves to passersby and bicyclists. A crowd would form. Not being able to control themselves, the people would begin to sway back and forth, throwing up their hands, smiling at Sean and Rena. They'd remark on those two, how people just didn't cut loose enough anymore.

Marley smelled garlic, cooked and sweet. He wanted a beer. He slipped out of the tree, sliding his feet down the trunk, hanging from the branch with both hands. Maybe Sean did love this, he thought. Maybe he'd come back to mean it. Sean would swear that he loved Rena if she asked him about it. What else did he have to do? After lunch, while Marley and Rena were laughing at his jokes, Marley imagined Sean would muster it up and say it again, not knowing what he meant, but hoping, loving the sound of the words. Marley saw Rena covering Sean's hand with her own
and himself feeling like an asshole for not believing the whole thing.

Sean stopped playing. He hooked the sax onto Rena’s ankle. Her leg lowered with the weight, but Sean steadied it until she got control. He cradled it for an instant, then let go, both he and Rena freezing, their hands high, like they’d just finished a house of cards. Sean smoothed his hair along the sides of his head, above and behind his ears. He wiped his hands on his tee shirt and looked at Marley.

"How’s that?" he said.

Marley dropped to the ground. "What’dy a bring for lunch?"

"Lots," Sean said.

"Steaks," Rena said.

"Steaks?" Marley said. "That predator thing."

"That’s it," Sean said.


"Jesus," Marley said. He rolled a fallen apple with his toe. "What’dy a do? Drive for a few days, knock off a Super America and drive back?"

"Super America’s don’t have shrimp and steaks," Rena said.

"Okay," Marley said. "How ’bout a Safeway."

"You should’ve been there," Sean said, smiling.
"Get a bundle?" Marley said.

"Lots," Sean said. He spread his arms wide.

"A big, big, big bag full of money, Marley," Rena said.

"Did you want a steak?"

"Sure." Marley walked to the truck and got himself a beer.

"Should I put on steaks for the cops?" Rena said.

"No. It was a clean getaway," Sean said. "They'll never look here."

"It's always easy to come home to eat," Marley said. He held the wet can to his forehead.

"I'm not calling this home," Sean said. "Toss me a beer, will you?"

Marley underhanded a can to Sean.

"Well, then I guess it's easy to come to my house and eat," Marley said.

"It sure is," Sean said.

Marley stared at Rena, but with the sunglasses on, he couldn't tell where she was looking. She took a long pull from her beer and swung the sax gently back and forth in front of Sean. Sean followed it with exaggerated turns of his head.

"So, what are you calling it?" Marley said.

"Don't know," Sean said.

"Let's just have a good meal," Rena said. She let the sax slip from her foot and drop into Sean's hands.
Marley couldn’t know how Rena felt. She’d always had an ease about her when it came to going along with things. Marley hadn’t even thought about where Rena would sleep when he tore the room down. She shared the bed with Sean, but her stuff was all over the house. Vines and ferns, rugs, red, blue and lavender fabric hung from the walls, billowed beneath ceiling lights and covered the kitchen table. Marley found Rena’s jewelry in the bathroom, on the porch, on top of the refrigerator. Silver bracelets, enough to decorate a tree, beaded earrings and headbands. Marley held the stones and chips of jade Rena left on windowsills up to the light.

Twenty six years old, four years of college, and no specialty. Rena was a great reader, reminding Marley of a cat, perched for days in an overstuffed porch chair, plowing through history books and Dickens’ novels. She told Marley she liked thick books, ones she could mark with a rubber band, binding the pages she’d read that day in a strong, red elastic. "It’s my thing," she said.

She read at least twenty while Sean was gone. Marley passed her on the porch six times a day. Sometimes she looked up, sometimes she didn’t. She belted a pillow onto an orange crate and used it as a foot stool. With long legs, feet crossed at the ankles and resting, Rena held
the books open with one hand and ran fingers along her lips. A big glass of water sat next to the chair. When she left the porch, Marley looked at the titles, an Agatha Christie binge: *Death On The Nile*, *Who Murdered Roger Ackroyd?* *Evil Under The Sun*.

Evenings, they met in the kitchen, hungry for supper. It was Marley’s favorite time of the day, still warm outside, but bluish gray and the house felt good, the kitchen and stairs lit like flat stones under water. While a pot of rice cooked, Rena got a jar of sunflower seeds down from the cupboard and shook handfuls in her palm, tossing them into her mouth. On the cutting board, she sliced chunks of cucumber and cheddar cheese, cabbage and red pepper. She talked to Marley while he ate with a knife and fork, a plate of macaroni and cheese in front of him.

"I know I’m being completely stupid," she said one night.

"I should do something. I should leave."

"Has he called?" Marley said.

"Sean? No."

"Then why leave?"

"Why stay?"

"Thanks a lot."

"I’m sorry," Rena said.

Marley used his fork to mold the macaroni into a big square. "You’ve got a mile of furniture, Rena. You’ve got
"No." Rena held a carrot in the air. "You've got the house, Marley."

She opened the refrigerator, dipped the carrot into a jar of salsa and took an apple and onion to the cutting board. She made tiny sandwiches, slices of apple, cheese and onion.

"The house is ours," Marley said.

"I'm never here," Rena said.

"What do you mean, you're never here?" Marley gestured with his fork, flinging a tiny orange elbow of pasta onto the table. "You've been here for over a year."

"But, you do everything," she said. "And I don't want to. I don't want to do things to this place."

"I'll handle all that," Marley said. "I like it. Just settle in."

"How can you say that?" Rena said. She took the cutting board to the stove, tilting it on the sauce pan's edge, sweeping all the vegetables into the rice with the back of her hand.

"I don't want to settle in anywhere," she said, scooping forkfuls into her mouth, catching what spilled with her fingers.

"Sit down and eat, for Christ's sake," Marley said.

"No, thanks," Rena said, her fingers in her mouth.  

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Marley lifted Sean’s sunglasses gently from Rena’s face.

"Hey." Rena reached after them but her hand stopped mid-air when Marley got the glasses on.

"Pretty cool," she said.

Marley smiled at her, the green vision making her grainy and still. They sat together near the truck with their beers, elbows planted in the grass, a cuffed paper sack of cashews between them. Sean’s sax hung in the cab, the belt slung around the rear-view.

"Are those nuts pretty cool?" Sean asked. "You’re jaws haven’t stopped since you sat down."

He stood at the tailgate, cooking, a fork at the ready, one hand on the bar-b-que’s lid. He lifted it off and smoked rushed by him. Strands of hair fell into his face.

Marley thought Sean looked like a dulled superhero, a wrecked game show host. He liked seeing him that way, the oil in his hair losing its stick, concentration on his face, all over steaks and how far along the coals were.

Rena sat quietly an arm’s length a way.

Marley rolled an unopened beer along his brow and over the top of his head. "The nuts are just fine," he said.

"Don’t burn the steaks."

"We need to heat the nuts up," Rena said.

"No we don’t," Marley said.

"Yes, we do," she said. "And we need to eat them out of
little white paper cups. Remember, Sean?"

"Of course, I do," Sean said.

"What's this?" Marley asked.

"We met that way," Rena said, touching her beer to Marley's ankle.

"Rena and I met over warm cashews at the Comet Tavern in Seattle, Washington," Sean said. "I don't remember the exact date."

"Neither do I," Rena said. "It was raining though. It wasn't summertime."

"I sat in on a set with Duffy Bishop. I was a Rhythm Dog for a night. I was good," Sean said. "Duffy danced on the bar."

"Yeah, she did," Rena said. "She stepped on our cashews."

"That's right," Sean laughed. "She said she'd use me when she cut her record, but she never called. I should've known then." He held his face from the smoke, stabbing and flipping the steaks with a fork. "Bitch," he said.

"That's what you get for trusting a gal named Duffy," Marley said.

"She was cool," Rena said.

"But you were cooler," Sean said. "A pearl in the musty ambiance, bright eyes."

Marley looked around him as if he was alone. "What?" he said. "Who?"
Rena laughed. "Right," she said. "Glowing in the
dinginess of the Comet. Cherry red drunk in the face.
Stinking of the road."

"Had you been on the road, Rena?" Marley lowered the
sunglasses enough to peek his eyes at her.

"That's what got me," Sean said, "the sophisticated,
travelled air, a slightly dishevelled look."

"I was tired and fat," Rena said. "I still am."

"You're not fat," Marley said.

"The aroma of French bread and gummy bears. The beret,"
Sean said. "Absolutely the beret."

"God, that beret," Rena said. "I finally threw it out."

"Good," Marley said. "I hated that thing."

"I loved it," Sean said. "She looked like Lauren
Bacall."

"Jesus," Marley said.

"Lauren Bacall?" Rena said. She put her face in her
hands.

Sean stepped back from the bar-b-que and set the lid on
the ground. "Take a look at this grill," he said.

"We can see it from here," Rena said.

"No, you can't. Look at this grill." Sean tipped his
beer empty and shot the can like a basketball over the
bar-b-que, into the truckbed.

Marley stepped up to the tailgate. He reached into the
twelve pack for a beer and eyed the bar-b-que. Three fat
steaks sizzled brown, black lines burned across their middles in carefully constructed "x's." Six shishkebabs — jumbo shrimp, cherry tomatoes, chunks of onion and bell pepper — lay beside them.

Marley cracked a beer. "Looks fine," he said.

"Smells great," Rena said. She hadn't moved from the grass. "Throw me a beer, Marley."

Marley underhanded her one. She caught it and lay back flat, then closed her eyes, standing the can on her chest.

"It's more than fine," Sean said. He wiped his face with a dish towel. "Toss me one. Will you, Marley?"

Marley did. "It is more than fine," he said. "You gonna do this every night?"

"What's that?"

"Cook."

"I could do that."

"Are you back?" Marley said.

"Take a look at this grill, Marley." Sean pointed the fork at the bar-b-que. "Just look at that grill."

"Your room's a little different," Marley said.

"I knew that's what you were up to," Rena said.

Marley turned to look at her. She hadn't moved, still had her eyes closed.

"No, you didn't," he said.

"Yes, I did," she said. "What'dya do to it?"

Marley faced Sean. "I thought you were gone," he said.
Sean salted the steaks, ground pepper onto them like it was his job.

"It's my house," Marley said.

Sean looked Marley in the eye. "I know this, Marley," he said.

"I mean, I’ll fix it," Marley said. "But not tonight."

"What’dya do, Marley?" Rena said.

"I tore it down," Marley said.

"You tore it down," Sean said, his eyes wide and staring right at Marley. He looked to the grill, pursing his lips, nodding his head, a businessman considering an offer. "You got more guts than I do," he said.

Rena sat up. "You really tore it down?" she said.

"Yeah."

"That’s amazing," she said.

"Marley, this isn’t some campaign to get us into bed together, is it?" Sean said, turning the shishkebabs like Foosball levers.

"Well, you know, Sean," Marley struck a pose of sincerity. "It is what I’ve always wanted."

Rena laughed. "Is that what you've always wanted, Sean?"

"No. It isn’t," Sean said.

Rena sat up and drank from her beer. "What then?"

Sean put the lid on the bar-b-que. "I want to play music. I want people to love my music."
"And?" Rena said.

"I want people to pay lots of money to listen to me play the music that I love."

"I knew it," Marley said.

"It hasn’t exactly been a mystery," Rena said.

"What’s so wrong with that?" Sean said.

"You’re not going to get it," Rena said.

"You told me once you always wanted to hear me play," Sean said.

"Yeah, I said that." Rena drank from her beer.

"She just doesn’t always want you in the same town when she’s hearing you play," Marley said. "I think you’d better cut a record deal as soon as you can."

"I think you’d better get a fuckin’ life, Marley," Sean said. He poked at the bar-b-que’s vents with the fork, jerking the lid. "What’s with you? Don’t you ever want to leave Missoula? Just to have been gone and come back from somewhere? Don’t you want somebody to get old with?"

"I’m getting old just fine," Marley said. "And I’ve got a straight job, my friend."

"Ooh. Glory."

"I pay bills," Marley said. "I’ve got a house. And plans for it. I trashed your room, didn’t I? I’ve always wanted that room bigger."

"You’ve always wanted that room."

"Bigger," Marley said. "I’m gonna fix the place up."
"Sell it?" Rena said.

Marley turned to her. "Maybe. You want your name on paper now?"

"Maybe."

"Fine." Marley hit his can against his thigh. Beer sloshed onto his jeans. He wiped at it, then licked his palm.

"Don't be that way, Marley," she said.

"Be what way?" Sean said. "A little pissed that you want a way in only when you can see a way out? You're greedy, Rena."

Rena stared at Sean, then got up from the grass and walked towards the house.

"Let's just eat," Marley said. "Rena."

"Forget her," Sean said.

Rena crossed the yard. She stepped onto the porch and disappeared behind the screen door.

"I think she's just scared," Marley said.

"I've been scared my whole life," Sean said.

He tilted his beer back, gulping hard. Marley joined him, trying to catch Sean's eye over the aluminum.

What he saw was Rena at the window, the maroon bandanna, her body gray, moving in and out of focus. Finally she stuck her head and shoulders out into the air.

"This is amazing," she said.
Sean tossed the empty beer into the truck and headed for the porch.

"I can fix it," Marley said.

"Forget about it," Sean said. He smoothed his hair back and stepped into the house, one hand stalling the screen door from banging shut.

Marley wanted to follow Sean, to beat Sean to the room, to be standing there with Rena, the two of them holding brushes, dashes of paint on their cheeks and arms, when Sean walked in, carrying three cold beers. Marley felt the sun on his back. He stood and stared up at the house, something white floating either in or out of the window or maybe nothing at all. Marley imagined himself standing behind the pane, wearing a heavy sweater, his fingers around a tall whiskey, a hard driving rain beating like fists on the roof. The outside world poured gray nickels of water onto the house. They blotted the windows, rushed in streams through the gutters, dropping and falling from the eaves.
My little toyota died, humping a speed bump in the Village Inn’s parking lot. While I pumped at the clutch, Beezer checked the wallet I’d lifted earlier, dubbing us Mr. and Mrs. Robert Farrell.

"Like the ice cream parlors," she said.

Beezer wrapped all the coke we had in a Glad ziploc sandwich bag, the thinness of a toothbrush, and stashed it in a plastic container she used to carry tampons. I pictured the calm blue cylinder lying inside the Super Sonics duffle bag, between jeans and underwear.

We coasted into a spot, left the doors of the Toyota unlocked, the windows down, and strolled arm and arm and duffle bag through the hotel’s revolving doors.

In the pale yellow hotel room, suite 10, on a king-sized bed, beneath a burgundy comforter, I ground Beezer into the sheets until she felt transparent. She came in a
wave, describing it later as curling back into herself, spilling out like honey over the lip of its jar. I was simpler. Just one big gasp and then I laughed.

Without leaving the bed, I drew neat, long lines I was proud of on the nightstand. I held the powdered baggie up, shaking the coke into one corner. Flecks fell into a small, glistening triangle.

"Not enough to save," I said. "Might as well just do it up."

For seventy hours, we ate room service and made sweaty love in between breaks at the nightstand. We sat in the big tub like royalty, up to our shoulders in bubbles. What I wished for was a time clock, the bells in a boxing match, something to let Beezer and me know when to get away from each other.

Frayed by the coke, our buzzes got suspicious. Beezer suggested valium like she always did, but that just made us talk and then we got mean. I remember feeling like there was a lot I just didn’t know how to say and then kicking Beezer hard, right above her butt, sending her halfway out of bed.

She caught her jaw on the nightstand. The last of the coke floated down to the carpet. I saw blood on Beezer’s face and as she pulled and yanked a sheet from the bed, her red mouth drooped. She tied and knotted the sheet above her breasts, picked up the lamp and hurled it onto
the pillow beside me, the shade scratching my face.

I hurried into my jeans, room service plates flying by me, then at me, hitting my arm, bouncing off my cheek. I got out of that room, took the stairs and bounced off the lobby’s walls on my way to the street, too fucked up to mess with, wild-eyed, buttoning my shirt, limping on the heel of my sneaker.

The day was gray. I stood in the parking lot, staring into it, crying, sucking blood off a finger, piecing together where I was. There was the Toyota, but I walked for a bus, catching the first downtown one I saw.

My head felt like the inside of a boxing glove and I got nauseous when I moved my eyes. I leaned against the window and watched things pass by: downtown Seattle, lunch on a Tuesday afternoon, suits carrying sacks and cups of coffee, checking watches, walk and stop signals.

I got off the bus at 1st and Virginia and walked six alley blocks to the Vine’s back door. When I stepped inside, Douglas said, "Morning or evening, Elliot," and put a beer down in front of me. The bar was quiet, draped in maroon. Overhead lights hit the bottles, casting onto the red vinyl stools. I sat down next to Vince who was already bleary-eyed and out of cigarettes.

"Let me have one," Vince said, reaching over with two fingers.

I put a smoke between them, took one for myself. Vince
puckered his lips around the cigarette but couldn’t steady a match to it.

"What are you doin’ today?" Vince asked as I held his hand long enough for him to light.

"Might go nod off in the corner," I said.

"I got tickets to Seattle and the Yankees."

I drank from my beer, the cold bitter bubbles waking me up. I took another mouthful.

"Why don’t we just watch it here?" I said. "We got beers, the john. Plus we can smoke."

"No. I want to take my kid. I got a ticket for you if you want it, but you gotta drive. I can’t drive."

"I’m walking. The Toyota died."

"I got the Impala," Vince said.

Vince had a red Impala he parked out front. Douglas came to the door with us just to see it.

"Vince, you know I love that car," Douglas said. "You ever want to sell it, you let me know."

"Not yet," Vince said.

Douglas wore white tee shirts and his black hair buzzed. He was all right, holding the door open for us. We all got quiet, staring at the car, a dulled red and white convertible stretching two places, the front end swooping out from the curb.

I drove seven blocks to the High Spot, a bar and restaurant where Vince bought us breakfast. Ham, bacon and
eggs, hash browns, milk and coffee. We didn’t stay for a drink but bought a pint of Jack Daniels I crammed into my coat pocket, flattening my hand against it as we walked outside. The fog had burned off, leaving pale sunshine, the air not too cold to take in.

"Not a bad day," I said.

"We gotta move," Vince said. "I’m not sure where we’re going."

We drove north, out of the city, along and above Puget Sound, veering off, leaving I-5 for neighborhoods and fields, long stretches of yellowing grass, dirt mounds, back drops and plates, white bags for bases. There were kids, lots of them, but in uniforms.

"Here?" I said.

"No," Vince shook his head as if I should’ve known.

"This is the school’s team. He don’t play with them."

Vince pulled the game tickets from inside his jacket, bending back the edges with his thumb.

We passed the high school and drove towards the woods. The houses looked the same: white with gray roof, white with gray roof. Chained dogs laid in small yards, their big heads on folded paws, eyes twitching back and forth. Windblown toys and bicycles were scattered around them.

"Where do these kids play?"

"That’s what we’re lookin’ for," Vince said. He broke the seal on the whiskey, drank some and handed the bottle
"Well, where to?" I said, taking a swig.

"I don't know," Vince said. He took the whiskey back, had a little more for himself, then screwed the cap on tight and shoved the bottle under the seat.

"Just drive," he said.

"Are you gonna recognize this kid when you see him?"

Vince looked at me, genuinely surprised, I think, that I was that stupid.

"Of course I will," he said. "What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know where we are," I said. "I don't like the looks of these dogs and I'd feel better knowing you know what we're lookin' for."

"He's around here playing ball somewhere. That's what he does. I know that much," Vince said. "Just drive."

We took gravel roads, the Impala spitting rocks, dirt dusting the windshield. Vince and I looked for kids, games, balls in the air. We finally stopped at a small park where two boys were playing catch, their caps—blue and green—the first bits of color in the gray brown afternoon.

Vince and I hitched up our pants as we walked, following the sound of ball hitting leather until we saw that these boys were more like young men. A tall one with a kick, pitched to another squatting behind the plate, his
cap on backwards and tight, black hair pinched in sweat above his eyes. The tall one launched pitch after pitch into the fat mitt.

Close enough to see a few of those, Vince and I stopped and leaned against the bleachers. I folded my arms and tried to look like I'd seen balls going by that fast all my life.

Vince took a step forward. "You guys it?" he said. "No one else here?" Vince asked.

"Just us," the pitcher said, not stepping out of motion. He zinged one hard and fast, just above the plate.

"You know Jeremy?" Vince called out. "Jeremy Ross."

"Nope." The boy jumped to catch a high throw, snagging it from the air, curling the mitted ball to his chest. He pawed the mound with his foot, brought the ball from his mitt and threw another one.

Vince and I stared at the pitcher as we walked slowly behind him, over to a clump of bushes where we took a piss.

"Your kid that old?" I asked.

"Hell no."

What finally led us to the right place was a pack of dogs. Vince saw them kicking up dirt ahead of us, trailing off the road, widening out in a small formation, tearing across a brown field whose grass got better in the
I pulled over and Vince got out of the car, shading his eyes, squinting like what he saw confused him. I saw something I thought was a bunch of birds, white flutters, swallows taking off.

"This is it," Vince said. He moved fast, hunching back into the car, slamming his door, pulling the whiskey from under the seat.

A mile down, we parked in a small gravel lot, next to a couple of sani-cans. There was a sand pit, monkey bars and tires hanging from chains, a warped merry-go-round. I barely got the rusty thing going, spinning a bar with my hand as Vince and I walked by.

The dogs met us, a Golden Retriever, two Labradors and a German Shepard. They leapt at us, their snouts wetting our hands. I raised my arms, feeling as though I was leading them. Vince strolled ahead of us, hands in his jacket pockets, head up, his mouth open in concentration.

There were nine boys all together, five covering bases and the outfield while four took turns hitting. Vince and I walked to a set of bleachers behind the plate.

A kid with a Johnny Bench jersey stole third, kicking up dust. The Labs ran out to him with congratulations.

The next batter up was a bully, smiling as he took practice swings, waving to his friends in the outfield.

"Comin' to ya!" he shouted.
Two guys in the outfield, both tall and lean jogged in place, bobbing from one spot to another, punching their fists into mitts.

I knew we'd found Vince's kid. I climbed to the last row of the bleachers and sat down, lighting a cigarette. The wood sagged beneath my butt. Vince stood below on the grass, shading his eyes.

"You see him?" I asked.

Vince turned and actually smiled. Just for a second. He took the bleachers in easy steps and sat down next to me.

"The blonde. Shortstop," He pointed quickly, letting his hand drop. His kid was stocky, low to the ground, serious. He swiped his forehead with his sleeve and crouched down, glove on his knee, ready for the hit, staring at the batter. He hadn't noticed Vince.

"What's his name?" I said.

"Jeremy."

The punk at bat shouted more jive to the outfielders. They spun their caps and flipped him the bird. "Just hit the ball," they said. Jeremy said nothing, bounced on his knees, touching his mitt with the fingertips of his free hand.

The pitcher stepped up, a skinny kid with a hell of an arm and threw two fast balls right down the middle. The punk got nervous, trying the smile one more time, waving back the outfielders, stepping up, then shying away from
Skinny wound up one more, but the punk wasn't all talk and connected hard and low, sending the ball skidding through the infield. He threw his bat and started running. Jeremy moved quick and smart, staying low to the ground, getting in the ball's way. He snatched it on a bounce and let it rip for first, beating the punk by a stride.

Jeremy's outfielders roared. The punk slipped in the mud just past first base. I turned to Vince. There were tears in his eyes.

"Fuckin' glorious," Vince said.

"You bring the bottle?"

"No."

Jeremy's play made three outs and his team took back the bench. The boy tossed his mitt on the grass. Vince caught his eye with a wave.

"Hi," Vince said. "That was a nice play, boy."

Jeremy smiled, looked away. He rested his foot on the bleacher two below us, squinting up at Vince. I looked for something I recognized. We'd searched and found him. But the kid didn't look a thing like Vince.

"This is Elliot," Vince said.

"Hi."

"Hi."

Vince cleared his throat. "We got tickets to the M's game tonight. They're playin' the Yankees."
"I can't," Jeremy said. "It's Aunt Susie's birthday. Mom's having a party. I have to be there."

"Oh." Vince pulled the tickets from his jacket. He held them up for Jeremy to see.

"I got them right here," he said, smiling, holding the three tickets up in a fist.

"I know. I know," Jeremy said, smiling, looking back at the field. "But there's no way."

Vince tipped his head for us to go. He put the tickets away and we stepped down the bleachers.

"All right," Vince said. He put his hand on Jeremy's shoulder. "Well, I'm glad I saw ya, anyway. Say Happy Birthday to Susie. She liked me to the end."

Jeremy laughed. "I will," he said.

Then this kid of Vince's did a most amazing thing. He asked us to play.

"What?" Vince said.

"Be more like a game," Jeremy said.

"What?" Vince said.

"With two more guys," Jeremy said.

"Been a long time since I played ball," I said. "You know?" I looked at Vince.

"Barehanded too," Vince said.

"It doesn't matter," Jeremy said.

"Huh," said Vince. "Okay."

"Vince." I flicked my cigarette to the dirt and stepped
up beside him.

"Just do this with me," he said, looking at me, daring me to consider the world the way he did right then. Vince could be like that. "This could be it" kind of thing, a big, lucky card game, a memorable long drive with beers.

Jeremy sent me running out to right field and took Vince to the bench.

The punk and the rest of my team swallowed laughs that showed as grins. I said, "Hi," as I ran by them, pumping my fists, thumbs up, running like I could've run all day.

"We're losing," the first baseman called out to me.

"Three to zip."

"Okay." I clapped my hands together, trying to get warm. The punk shook his head at me from where he roamed in between second and third. The big kid in the Johnny Bench jersey turned out to be my pitcher. He eyed me before tugging down on his orange cap, winding up and throwing.

He struck the first batter out. I stretched, picking at clumps of grass near my toes, rubbing my hands together. I did a few jumping jacks.

Jeremy got a double, a low hit over the pitcher's head, bouncing shallow in center field. A chubby in an Oakland Raiders tee shirt stepped up next, cracking one for a single. My team started talking, hooting at the base runners, urging the Johnny Bench jersey to throw strikes.
Vince walked up to the plate. The "Hey batta batta" shit stopped. The punk punched his mitt. The outfielders said something to each other, taking steps towards the infield.

"C'mon, Vince," I shouted. "Send one out here. I haven't seen a ball yet."

The pitcher smirked but wouldn't look at me. He struck Vince out. One. Two. Three.

Skinny stepped up to the plate, fitting on a red cap he hadn't worn to pitch. Jeremy took a lead off second, crouching, inching his feet through the dirt.

Skinny whizzed through a strike, his body twirling with the bat. Next pitch, he smacked one high and right.

I didn't budge. Just watched the ball fly through the air until the first baseman ran towards me. "Yours," he said. Back-pedalling, I cupped my hands above my belt huckle. My tennis shoes squished in the wet grass, toes slipping off the heels. The air made my eyes wet, but I had the ball. I slowed and came to meet it. The thing landed in my hands with a slap and stayed there, stinging.

I whistled through my teeth, keeping my face as normal as I could, holding the ball up high, getting silence. Finally my team clapped and hooted, laughed and pulled hard on their caps. I threw the ball in, bouncing it into the infield.

My right hand felt like bees had attacked it. Rubbing
it on my jeans, I walked off to the side of the field and made like I'd lost something in the grass, quietly puking a little.

By the end of it, Vince had his hand on Jeremy's shoulder, the arms of his jacket tied around his waist and I'd found a hat to wear, a gray one that said "Avid Angler." Someone'd left it hanging on the fence along the first baseline. I pulled the bill to just above my eyes, nodding to the kids as they said goodbye.

"You ever need any tips," I said.

Vince flipped his hand against my shoulder. "We're giving Jeremy a ride home," he said.

We stopped for Cokes and peanuts on the way. Jeremy sat in the back, cracking shells faster than I'd ever seen, tossing nuts into this mouth, reaching into the bag for more.

"How 'bout some for the front?" I said.

He slid the bag over the seat. It dropped next to me, spilling peanuts into my lap.

"Presto," I said.

Vince stared straight ahead and drank his Coke. Without looking, he snaked his hand into the bag, grabbed a handful, cracking the shells with his teeth, spitting everything but the nuts to the floor.

None of us said anything until we were back in the neighborhood of look-alike houses. Dogs ran behind their
fences, barking at my car. The sky had darkened to lavender. Porches were lit. Television sets glowed behind curtains.

"Right here," Jeremy said in front of a house, gray and pale like the others, but without a dog. A cluster of purple balloons fluttered above the front door. A woman I guessed to be Vince's ex stepped outside.

Vince let Jeremy out of the Impala, scrunching up to the dash as the kid slid from the back seat and onto the street. Vince shut the door and rolled down the window. Jeremy stood by the car, holding his mitt up in a wave.

"Bye," Vince said.

"Bye," Jeremy said. He ducked his head and looked in at me: dirty blonde bangs above solid brown eyes shining in the center. Vince looked from Jeremy to me.

"Bye," I said.

I pulled away from the curb, my eyes in the rear view. Vince stared at the mirror outside his window.

"Roll down your window," Vince said.

"Why?"

"Stick your arm out."

I watched Jeremy waving in the street and held my arm out the window. Vince did the same. I cut through the air with the edge of my hand, trying to make my arm look anything like a wing.

We mixed whiskey with the rest of our Cokes. I rolled
up my window but Vince wouldn't his. While I tried to find something on the radio, Vince swam his hand through the air, slapping an occasional rhythm against the door.

We drove to the Vine.

I parallel parked the Impala only two doors down, killed the engine and held the keys up to Vince.

"Nice day, hombre."

"I'm buyin'," he said.

We'd thrown and ran. My arm and the back of my legs were sore. The sting in my hand throbbed. Toes curled for heat inside my wet shoes. Vince winced just raising his beer glass. We sat and drank with the confidence of workers deserving of an after-shifter, men who'd played a ball game in dirt and dried sweat, earning a thirst.

Vince even hit on a woman, a red head who came walking like a movie star into the Vine. She strolled as if under lights right past us and stood a minute, staring at chairs, her purse hanging from her wrist on thin gold chains. She finally sat down next to Vince.

I couldn't see Vince's face but I watched the red head's lashes stop fluttering as she sharpened her eyes and stared at him.

"If you had the choice," Vince said, covering her hand with his, "between a holiday in Paris and a week alone with me on a deserted island, which island would you choose?"
"The biggest one I could find," she said. And the red head actually blew her drag in Vince’s face.

Vince waved to Douglas, ordering drinks for all of us. He leaned down, catching the red head off guard as she stabbed out her cigarette, and kissed her. Cold beers appeared in front of us. She took hers and walked away. Vince and I drank from ours, laughing into the foam.

Vince pulled out the peanuts he’d stashed in his jacket pocket, sliding some my away along the bar. We ate, swiping the shells onto the floor.

"Nice boy," I said.

Vince nodded.