Nighttime in the experimental forest | Short stories

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The University of Montana

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Nighttime in the Experimental Forest

short stories by

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B. A., University of Pennsylvania, 1992

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
University of Montana
1995

Approved by
Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

May 12, 1995
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With thanks to my thesis committee: William Kittredge, Kate Gadbow and Timothy Bradstock.

Special thanks to Rhian Ellis.
How to Live. What to Do

Last evening the moon rose above this rock
Impure upon a world unpurged.
The man and his companion stopped
To rest before the heroic height.

Coldly the wind fell upon them
In many majesties of sound:
They that had left the flame-freaked sun
To seek a sun of fuller fire.

Instead there was this tufted rock
Massively rising high and bare
Beyond all trees, the ridges thrown
Like giant arms among the clouds.

There was neither voice nor crested image,
No chorister, nor priest. There was
Only the great height of the rock
And the two of them standing still to rest.

There was the cold wind and the sound
It made, away from the muck of the land
That they had left, heroic sound
Joyous and jubilant and sure.

- Wallace Stevens
from Ideas of Order
In the Experimental Forest

My wife, Lisa, had a great-aunt with a penis. This aunt never married, and lived her entire life alone. She was the family embarrassment - everyone knew, and though they invited her to every picnic and holiday party, she always sat alone and rarely spoke or was spoken to. Some of the meaner cousins told their children to stay away from her. As Lisa tells it, though, the aunt (her name was Sylvia) never complained and was kind to those few who approached her. When Sylvia died, the family held a small service and everyone, even the cousins, cried. Lisa was only a girl then, and she recalls her great surprise at the tears shed over this woman nobody knew or liked. But it makes perfect sense to me. Those people weren't crying for Sylvia but for themselves, for their fear and cruelty that was never justified, right up to the end.

Now that my situation is what it is, and Lisa has stopped, for the most part, speaking to me, I think of Sylvia often. I have never seen her - nobody included
her in family photos but I know enough to imagine. It is July, a holiday picnic, and she sits in a wooden folding chair in her yellow dress and her faux pearls. She holds a glass of lemonade, and a plate of barbecued chicken is balanced on her lap. Beneath the chicken lies, shriveled and hard, the offending member. Occasionally a ball rolls by in the grass, and the children give her chair a wide berth as they run past to retrieve it. She can feel the repellent force-field around her, and she closes her eyes and concentrates on not moving. If she stays perfectly still, no one will notice. After awhile, someone is volunteered to drive her home.

What I'm finding, indulging these fantasies, is that a person becomes his abnormality. He is no longer, once afflicted, a human being; he is an aberration, a freak. How can I make this clear enough? Even those closest - family, friends, lovers - cannot help but make the intuitive leap from afflicted to affliction. In Lisa's eyes, I have betrayed her. I have become something I was not supposed to be.

In bed at night I try to draw her out. I read to her from library books I have found on the subject. "Look here," I say. "It happened to this man in rural Texas. He was abducted and examined. All the paint was burned off his car. They proved it couldn't have been done by a blowtorch. The chemicals were all wrong."
I point to blurry photographs, dramatic testimonials, and highlight the similarities between their experiences and mine. Surely something is going on here, I insist. Certainly this is no coincidence.

She sighs, closes her book, rolls over. She switches off her bedside lamp. "I need to sleep," she says.

I'll be honest: I would be content with a lie. I know she doesn't believe me, but it would be enough just to hear her say she does.

We live in a rural area, the north end of the Marshall Valley, in western Montana. Our house is small and sits on a plot of grassy land backed by woods. The woods climb the face of a hill and continue into the mountains, and they have a specific name: The Leebogen Experimental Forest. The University owns the land, and forestry students take frequent field trips there to study habitats and plant growth patterns and the like. It isn't unusual to see bears and elk wandering around in the yard at night. We are far enough from town so that its lights don't interfere with our fantastic view of the night sky, and often I'll spend hours on the deck, my eye glued to the telescope, scanning the stars.

Montana has produced few UFO sightings. Some might reason that the aliens simply aren't interested in our state, but cooler heads will consider the practical,
no-nonsense nature of its inhabitants and conclude otherwise. Montanans have no time for aliens from outer space. Though the majority of sightings, I'm convinced, are hoaxes or mad ravings, the few I have uncovered in Montana smack, somehow, of truth. In 1934, a factory worker in Great Falls claims to have seen a bright white light silently circling that city's great smokestack (then the tallest in the country) at high speed. It landed in a cloud of dust at the base of that stack, lingered briefly, then whizzed up into the sky in a clap of thunder. The *Tribune* even reported the incident the next day; evidently others had seen and heard the light. Twenty years later in Cut Bank, a woman and her daughter were surrounded by small, darting figures in the dark of a woods near their home. Later the woman's husband found a clearing there that he had never seen: the trees were sawed off clean at ground level and the grass was tamped in a giant circle.

So far I've attended one meeting of a focus group for abductees. Lisa was furious when I told her I was going.

"Don't do this, Andrew," she said.

"Why shouldn't I?" I asked. "I've gotten no support from you. You don't even believe me."

"Andrew," she said. She had that look - eyes squeezed shut, her hand gripping the edge of the table - that meant she thought she was being reasonable and I was not. "I
know you believe you're telling me the truth. I know that. I think... I think you should seek counseling. I think we should, together."

"This _is_ counseling," I said.

She groaned. "Real counseling. These people are only going to push you down further. They'll only make it worse."

"I'm going," I told her.

She nodded, licking her lips. "All right, go then."

They weren't freaks. I must admit that I thought Lisa might be right about the group, wrong as she was about my experience. But they were real people. "This is not therapy for the delusional," Dr. Leavitt promised me at the interview. "It's a gathering of rational adults who wish to discuss their inexplicable experiences."

Dr. Leavitt, a licensed group therapist, was abducted himself. He founded the group, placing ads, screening the responses. "We believe one another. You can trust and be trusted."

Annette, a librarian, was injected with substances that made her nervous for weeks. The marks are still there, on her left arm, and she says they still hurt some days. She worries they'll come back for her, that the experiment isn't over yet. "I haven't told anyone," she said. "No one at all. My husband thinks I have a bridge
"My wife knows all about it," Alan told me. He is an unemployed logger. "She doesn't mind. She thinks it's exciting."

I told Lisa all about it. "Do you see?" I said. "The same things happened to us. The lights, the tiny hands. The rising and falling. The thin, angular faces."

"Well, that's great," she said. "You say you got prodded with a stick, some guy says, 'Hell, yes, I got prodded with a stick.' You say you flew through the air and all of the sudden so did somebody else." She punctuated her speech with quick, violent motions, jabbing with an invisible stick, flapping her hands in the air over her head.

"It's not like that," I said.

She shook her head. "Did they all disappear for days? Did they?"

"Some. A few."

"I bet."

That's what really upsets her, the four days I was gone. I don't remember coming back. She says she found me naked, shivering under a blanket, drunk. All I recall is waking up on the couch to terror, abject terror of the light in the sky, pouring through the windows.

It was the sun. I kept looking at myself in the bathroom
mirror that day, touching my face, making sure I was all there, and at one point I found myself clutching the back of a kitchen chair, shaking. Lisa had already left for her mother's. Her note said, "Had police, friends out looking. Though you were dead, bastard. Will call when I'm good and ready."

It would not have been completely out of the question for me to go off on a drinking binge. I must confess that. In fact, for most of that day I almost believed her. But then I felt the two bumps on the side of my head - they stung when I touched them, a weird sting that went deep - and I tried to recall how they had gotten there. Not a blow, a pricking sensation. And then it came back: my walk, the light, the table, the faces. I screamed there, in my own home in broad daylight, I screamed with fear and curled myself in the sheets and whispered to my wife to come home. When she did, weeks later, I told her all of it.

Dr. Leavitt says that I was fortunate to recover so much of my memory so quickly without suffering a serious nervous breakdown. Most abductees, he explains, are confused and disoriented when they return; they cannot account for the time they missed. Memories come back slowly or not at all. Those who never remember often spend their lives baffled by strange visions, shaken awake in the
night by disturbing dreams. They feel incomplete, like unanswered letters, and fill the gaps with false memories: the unearthly lights replaced by the headlights of oncoming cars, the aliens themselves with animals they have never seen.

"I was at Murphy's," Alan told us. "I was sitting at the bar. On my first beer." He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "The glass was cool and it felt like... like that table. Did they have you on that metal table?"

"It wasn't really metal," Annette said. "No, not metal. But it wasn't wood or plastic either, I don't think. It was white. It was ceramic or something, and cold."

"Yeah, it was. It was real cold. So I got my hand on the glass there, and I remember that table all of a sudden, and I'm like, 'Was I in the hospital or something? When was that?' And then I remembered those faces, and blammo! I fell right off my stool."

I remember the table, too. It felt like smooth concrete except that I thought I could pick it up if I tried.

David, a lawyer, took a vacation from practice after it happened to him. He still isn't sure he's sane. He said: "For me it was being in the air. The way they brought me up there." His hands were shaking as he spoke,
his forehead bright with sweat. "I was at a picnic, a pool party. My friends have this in-ground pool. They have a diving board." He stuffed his hands under his legs to stop the shaking, but his arms trembled. "Oh..."

"Go on, David," Dr. Leavitt told him. "We're your friends here."

"I got on... I got on the board and bounced, once or twice... I felt a little sick then, but I jumped anyway, and I was in the air... and that feeling in your gut, the ball in your gut... it felt like that... I remembered... and I hit the water yelling and screaming and... I came up and my girlfriend was there, and... I thought... I thought she..." He shook his head, slipped his hands out from under his legs, and covered his face.

Lisa invited people over for drinks tonight. Though neither of us has said so, it's sort of a coming-out party for me. She has been keeping our friends at bay all summer, telling them I have been depressed. True enough, I suppose. I'm stretched across the chaise lounge on the deck, drinking an iced tea and waiting for it to get dark so that I can look at the stars. I haven't moved for an hour and it makes Lisa nervous, and every couple minutes I look through the sliding glass doors and catch her inside, scrutinizing me. She turns away quickly.

We've been trying to make love. It has not gone
well. God knows I'm still attracted to her, but she touches me and all I can think of is their hands, those tiny, long, thin fingers and the cool, inhuman way they moved and pressed. Their clinical, terrifying exploration, the way I was paralyzed and helpless. And when my erection vanishes and my face goes hot with embarrassment, she knows exactly what it is: it's them again, and for that moment it doesn't matter to her if it's real or not, if I have gone mad or not, only that they have come between us.

If it were another woman, it would be easier. There would be someone for her to blame, to hate, and actions for me to take to put an end to it. But to her they're as shapeless and fleeting as passing clouds, and to me they are perfectly real but infinitely inaccessible. It is like we are haunted, and the blows we aim at the ghosts pass through the air and land on one another.

I don't remember all of it. It came back to me out of sequence, a series of rapid, staggering images that sent me reeling out of my seat and onto the floor. I collected myself and rushed to the kitchen, where I found some note cards and a pencil. "Light," I wrote on one. "Eyes," on another. Then I went back to fill in the details: hot, sweet light that seemed to come more from inside me than anywhere else; round eyes and huge,
translucent lids crisscrossed with faint blue veins.

I had gone out for a walk. Lisa remembers that; I told her I was going. Where had I planned to walk? I don't know this. I do remember stopping at the corner of the house, struck with a sudden impulse to enter the Leebogen Forest, a place I rarely walked to at night, instead of down the road as I usually did. I remember the trees, and how I could barely see under the crescent moon, and wondering why I was there but walking faster and faster nonetheless. Then the campfire in the forest. The students have a rustic dormitory out there, and I assumed I had stumbled onto them, but then the fire was too white and did not move, and figures moved between the trees much too swiftly. And then I felt a tug, like a thousand strings tied to my bones, all pulling at once, lifting me from my feet, and the lightness that followed, a moment of blissful inertness as if nothing, the trees, the air, could affect me in any way. I was immune to physics. And then the warm light and the faces, and the table, and the paralysis. Was I carried, spoken to? I don't recall understanding any sound or gesture. And that's where it ends. Everything after that, up to my reappearance in the living room, is gone.

I can't find the clothes I wore that night. I've been to all the bars, and nobody remembers me. What went on for four days? What did they do to me? Where did
I go? Dr. Leavitt has recommended that I stop trying to get it all back. He says it could be damaging.

She was gone for two weeks. I called her every day; sometimes she talked to me, sometimes she didn't. Sometimes her mother answered and told me to try again tomorrow. "I'm sorry, Andrew," she said. "She just doesn't want to talk to you right now." Her voice leaked a curious mixture of sympathy and disapproval.

When we talked, it was about what we had been eating or what we did all day. I talked about getting a new job, since I had lost mine. Finally I begged her to come home.

"Tell me where you were."

"Come home and I'll tell you," I said.

"I'm not coming back to that house just so you can tell me where you got drunk and who you fucked. I'm not coming back for a confession."

"It's not that."

She considered awhile, and finally said she would come back, not to stay but just to talk. "We can sit in the kitchen," she said.

I cleaned myself up. I shaved and showered. I turned the light on over the table and waited there with my note cards. It was almost an hour before I heard the door. When she walked in my heart broke: she had gotten
a haircut, as people do when they want to forget things, and she was wearing a dress, a new one I had not seen before.

She sat down across from me at the table. "Hi."

"You look beautiful," I said.

"Not now," she said, and I could see in the way that she stole glances around the room and at me that she missed being here, missed her own home and her own things and her own life. "Tell me."

I nodded, then began to set out the note cards before her, one by one. I had numbered them. There were forty-four. Before I was halfway finished, she said, "What is this?"

"Just wait," I said. When I finished, I sat back and folded my hands together on the table. "Please read them all. This is what I remember. You aren't going to like it but it's the truth."

She read them. As she did her face grew more and more tired, and finally she began to cry. There was a box of tissues on the counter, so I reached out and grabbed it, then set it next to the cards. She took a tissue and blew her nose.

"Do you think I'm going to believe this?" she said. "Do you know how terrible an insult this is?"

"I'm sorry. It's what I remember. I don't remember drinking. How would I have got to town? All the bars
would have been..."

"You don't understand, do you?" She took another tissue but didn't use it, only wadded it up. "How you've betrayed me? This is barely a lie. It's a joke, an awful joke."

And then I realized how it all must look to her, and I felt ashamed for even trying. The note cards, in their neat rows, were a mockery, and I reached out in a giant bear hug and gathered them all up, without concern for their order. I shuffled them together and tapped the edges of the pile on the table, straightening them. I set the pile at my side, then picked it up again and put it on the floor.

"You must be crazy," she said. "You must be crazy to do this."

"Lisa, it isn't a story. It's true. It happened."

"What's her name?" she said. "Is it somebody I know? Did she put you up to this?"

"No, no. This is it," I said.

We talked for hours like this, and in the end I convinced her that I believed my own story, or at least wasn't going to give it up. She decided to stay. It was almost morning anyway, she said. She slept in her dress, her back to me, and I watched her there until dawn, desperate to move close and take her in my arms. But I didn't dare.
When darkness falls, my iced tea is gone and I begin to grow cold. I want to go in for a sweater, but if I do I must pass Lisa and will be obliged not go back out. So I stay on the deck, hugging myself against the air, and follow the tracks of distant stars through the telescope. Lisa doesn't like this; she thinks I have become obsessed with the sky because of my abduction. She's wrong, though. Astronomy is a solitary endeavor - only one person can look through at once - and in the past weeks Lisa and I have had to look for more and more things to do alone.

Of course I am curious where they came from, but what would it mean if I knew? How would that help me return to my life? The truth is that one life has left me and another has taken its place, and I'm trying to live the new one as if it is the old, following the same old worn paths that no longer lead anywhere, making the same old gestures and apologies and explanations that no longer have any meaning.

I wonder what Lisa's aunt did at home, alone. Did she knit or bake? Did she play the piano? Perhaps she was a voracious reader, and spent her days filling herself with knowledge she would never be asked to share. Or maybe, secretly, she had a kind lover, someone who didn't mind her strangeness, even loved her all the more
for it, the way one might love a manner of speaking, or a bad habit.

I move into the yard and walk slow circles in the grass. Headlights approach on the road out front, and I hear the chime of the doorbell and voices. People move inside. Soon I see Lisa in the back doorway, her face blank. But at the dark edge of our property I am invisible, and soon she withdraws and attends to the guests.

Now I retreat into the trees. I'm looking for a familiar sign, a rotting stump or a boulder, but there is nothing, only pine needles and spruce bark and the sticky, turpentine odor of sap. I walk with my eyes shut, feeling my way with my hands and nose and the sound of my own breath. Finally I come to a stop. Ahead there is a light, and I think I can hear the students' voices in the distance. Somewhere a branch snaps.

Behind me, in the fading light of our home, I think I see my wife standing in shadow at the edge of the woods. I think I hear her call my name. But it is nighttime in the experimental forest, and she will not cross over to find me.
He did a couple of things to her.
"Wow," she told him. "Thanks."

"No problem." He did a few more things then.

"Man."

"Yeah," he said.

They were in the kitchen. She kissed him: hello there. He kissed back, and they got down on the floor and got on with it.

Later on they were driving around, and Ethel said, "You know, Jack."

"What?" he said. It was nearly dark now, but not quite, and there was one of those summer sunsets hanging around. It had been that way for hours. He was driving into it, figuring he'd turn back when it finally disappeared. They were only about twenty miles from home. One cloud above them was bright orange.

"Well," she said. There was something funny in
her voice.

"What is it?" Jack said. He took his right hand from the wheel and rested it on her left thigh. She covered it with one of her hands.

"Nothing," she said. "It's nothing."

"Okay." He left his hand there, on her thigh. She squeezed it gently but then took her own hand away, and after a couple of minutes he took his away and wrapped it around the wheel. Jack was not sure it was nothing, but he didn't want to ask, in case it was. The cloud wasn't orange anymore but pinkish-grey. That orange color, he had seen it before. It was a fleeting phenomenon.

Jack and Ethel had met on television. Or rather, they had met refusing to be on television. A schoolteacher from Marshall had killed another schoolteacher from Marshall with a handgun in the middle of a board meeting, and the local television news crew was out on the streets, asking people what they thought of this. Jack had been walking by when the reporter, a man wearing a precise hairdo and a suit, asked Ethel, who had been walking in the opposite direction.

"What difference does it make what I think?" she said without stopping.

"Sir, what do you think?" he asked Jack.

"I don't want to be on television," he said, looking back at Ethel. Ethel looked over her shoulder and saw
him looking. They ate lunch together.

Now, in the car, Ethel said, "Jack."

"What is it?"

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"Sure I do. I love you."

"I have to tell you. I just have to tell you," she said. It sounded to Jack like she was talking to herself, not to him. This gave him pause, made him concerned, but not unduly so. He was sure she loved him. This wasn't the problem, he didn't think, but he asked anyway.

She pressed her fingers into his arm. "Of course I do. I love you." He could tell from her voice that she meant it. Four years is not a terribly long time but it's long enough to learn a few things about someone's voice. Still, Jack was worried now. There was something hard beneath it, as if with her words she was building armor.

"So what is it?" he said.

Ethel shifted in the seat and straightened her back. Then she slumped again and held her forehead with the balls of her hands. Then she straightened and looked out the windshield at the receding colors.

"Well," she said, "for a little while there, there was somebody else."

Jack's hands tightened on the wheel some, but he
didn't say anything at all. His mind raced with possibilities.

"It wasn't lately. I mean, it was a while ago."

"Well, okay," Jack said finally, determined to remain calm. "Exactly how long ago?"

"Last year."

Jack thought about last year. Last year? "When last year?" he asked.

"When you didn't have a job. In there somewhere."

Jack had been unemployed for three months. Jobs were scarce in Marshall and they had agreed that Jack would hold out for something he liked, rather than take the first dreary job that came along. "That was a long while. That was three months."

"It wasn't that long," she said. Her voice had lost its grim confidence and now sounded very strained and small.

"Well, all right," he said. He wanted to turn around and go back to town, but the sun wasn't quite gone yet, so he drove on for a few miles.

"Jack," she said finally, "please say something. Please talk to me."

"I'm not sure what I ought to say."

"Jack," she said in a whisper. Her voice was muffled gently behind her hands.

"I don't think I want to say anything just yet."
Then he slowed, made a U-turn, and brought them home.

Ethel would recall with pride that she had kept from crying on the way home. It's a difficult thing to do, not cry - there's that pressure between the heart and throat that clamors for release, and the muscles in the face tighten, and reassuring images are banished from the thoughts, so there's very little else to do but cry. How did Ethel do it? She pressed her fingers to her face and concentrated on them. She felt each fingertip separately. She played a tactile game with the fingers. In it, she would decide to press harder with a finger, but before she did it, she would imagine what the pressure of that particular finger would feel like in that particular part of her face. Once she had pressed a finger, she would see if it matched up with her imagination. She played this game until they parked and got out of the car at home.

In bed that night Jack asked her a few questions. "Who was it?" he said. He was lying on his back. He could not get comfortable and shifted every ten seconds or so.

"It was the guy at Worden's." Worden's was a local deli and gourmet grocery. She lay curled on her side, away from Jack.

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"The red-haired guy with the glasses? The one who makes sandwiches?" Jack got this picture in his head of Ethel kissing the red-haired guy. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"No," Ethel said. "The other guy. The thin guy with black hair."

"The wine guy?"

"Yes. The wine guy."

Jack nodded, though in the dark, facing away from him, Ethel couldn't see this. "Okay," he said, "it was the wine guy."

Jack chewed over that for a minute. "Well," he said finally, "for how long?"

She inhaled sharply and through the bedclothes Jack could feel her body jerking with tears. "Six weeks, maybe."

"Maybe?" He was glad it was dark and his face invisible.

"Six weeks," she said, very quietly.

He breathed deeply, alarmed at his ability to extract information he really didn't want. "How many times did you... meet?"

"Oh, Jack," she said. Jack didn't say a thing.

"More than five," she said finally. "Less than ten. I swear, Jack, I don't know. It was such a long time ago and it was nothing memorable, nothing -"
"Not here," Jack said. "At our place."


"Okay."

She cried for a little while longer before stopping.

"Will you make love to me?" she asked him.

"Not yet."

"Okay."

Back when it happened, Ethel had considered leaving Jack. For a little while, his unemployment had been okay. When she came home from the gallery he was cheerful and greeted her at the door. But he had gotten more and more sullen and uncommunicative the longer he had no job, and she liked living with him less and less. After work one day she went to Worden's for wine, intending to use it to cheer Jack. She ended up drinking it with the wine guy in the wine guy's apartment. He looked skinny and unhealthy to Ethel, but his eyes had been alive with passion, and at the time that was what she needed. It wasn't even that great, it was just what she needed. She was ashamed because if she had been more patient she would have gotten that from Jack.

Jack worked at the Steak Shack. They served steaks, but they also did breakfast, and Jack worked the breakfast and lunch shifts, six to three. Today he scrambled eggs
and thought about last year, trying to figure out when exactly the affair happened.

He had gotten fired from DeVitto's for stealing petty cash from the cash register, a crime he had not committed. For the first week he was unemployed, he had spent the entire work day, eight to four, looking for jobs. The second week, he started coming home early. By the third he was taking half days, and after a month he sometimes didn't go out at all. Ethel gave him pep talks when she got home from her job at the art gallery. Ethel wasn't an artist, but she worked the reception desk.

Jack had painted some. It was his major in college. After his first month of unemployment, he got out his old supplies: tubes of oil paints, canvas, stretcher strips, turpentine, medium, brushes. He stretched a dozen canvases, tearing up a few old paintings that hadn't worked out so he would have enough stretchers. He primed the canvases with rabbit skin glue and titanium white. He leaned the white panels against the baseboards in their living room, all but one, which he placed on his easel. He looked at this canvas every day, sometimes for as much as an hour, but never painted anything on it. He stared through it, watched things move behind it, watched colors jump and shimmer, but none of it was accessible to him. He knew that the painting would be ruined the second his brush touched the canvas. So he drank a lot of beer and
read World War Two paperbacks that he found at a used book shop.

During this time Ethel started working late often, cataloguing things. She would usually go right to bed on those nights, occasionally not even bothering to greet Jack. Jack was fairly certain now that at least some of these late nights were actually spent with the wine guy from Worden's.

Jack finally got the job at the Steak Shack by responding to a "Help Wanted" sign in the window. He liked making food. When Ethel came home that night, late, Jack had put away the art supplies and prepared dinner for the two of them. It was her last late night of cataloguing.

Now Jack scooped spatulas full of fried egg into sandwich rolls for the morning crowd. He put the sandwiches on plates and the plates on the little shelf between the grill and the counter. Then he rang the bell and called the order up. At around eleven, he switched to burgers and did the same.

After work that day, Jack went to Worden's. He walked past the deli counter and the cash register to the wine section. He examined the selection of wines, noticing a few he had bought with Ethel. He wondered if she and the wine guy had drunk wine together. He touched
a bottle of merlot, wondering if this was the one they drank.

He saw the wine guy bent over a crate of wines and glared at him with a mixture of anger and despair. Soon the wine guy looked up and, misinterpreting Jack's glare as a request for help, came over to him.

"You need anything?" he asked. He was gaunt and bony and pale.

Jack found that he had picked up the merlot. He hefted it, considering the terrific crash it would make if thrown. "Is this any good?"

The wine guy reached to the rack and pulled out a different merlot. "I'd go with this," he said. "Same price, but it's slightly fruitier, slightly less acidic. A little more mature."

Jack nodded. This guy had undressed Ethel, touched her body. Ethel had touched this guy's body.

"Thanks," Jack said. He replaced the bottle, turned and walked out.

He came home at twenty minutes after three. He and Ethel lived in a good-sized one-bedroom apartment with hardwood floors. He wandered around, unsure of his next move. He stopped in the living room, hands on his hips, surveying the floor, walls, ceiling. The room was about eighteen by twenty feet and filled with furniture: a comfortable chair, which he and Ethel occasionally made
love in, a couch, an oak coffee table they had found together at a yard sale, a desk, a standing lamp. A bookshelf stood against the right-hand wall: just this spring, Jack and Ethel had combined their book collections and alphabetized the result. Behind him stood a painted buffet and china cabinet, where they kept their dishes.

After a moment, Jack slid the coffee table into the foyer and pulled back the curtains. These windows were large, and the room was flooded with light. He opened the door to the corner closet, and removed his easel, art supplies, and several of the canvases. He propped the canvases on the couch, under the windows, and stood back to study them. Presently he picked one about twenty inches square and fastened it to his easel.

Of several empty cardboard boxes he made a stand for his palette, which was simply a piece of translucent white glass he had gotten from a hardware store. He spent several minutes selecting tubes of paint and unscrewing their caps. He twisted off the lid of the spaghetti sauce jar where he kept his turpentine, and placed the jar on a corner of the palette. It gave off a faintly toxic odor. Onto the palette he squeezed dollops of paint: cadmium orange and cadmium red light, titanium yellow and white, Mars black, cobalt blue and green. Using a palette knife, he mixed some of the yellow and green with a generous gob of the white. He removed the lid from
his jar of medium, dunked in the tip of a wide sable, and swirled the medium into the mixture.

Jack surveyed the room, rolling the paintbrush between his fingers. He knew every crack and corner in it. They had lived in this place for the past three years. One year Ethel had made him a cake for his birthday, and they sat on the floor here and ate it with their hands. They played cards together here, read together on the couch. They were mostly happy, which Jack thought was about all you could ask for. What happened last year happened to different people who were more like close relatives than different versions of themselves. Still, it had happened, and everything they did would be colored with this thing forever. He would wonder about things. What did the guy's apartment look like? It was probably Spartan, monkish. Probably he had a lot of wine. He probably slept on a futon tossed on the floor. He made love to Ethel on the futon. Had they gone out, had dinner, watched movies? Or was it just sex?

He turned to the blank canvas, and found that the colors were no longer out of reach, were, in fact, right there before him, and he started painting.

Ethel got home at six-fifteen and barked her shin on the coffee table, which was still in the foyer.

"Ow! Jack?"
She peeked around the doorway to the living room, where she found Jack working at his canvas. This gave her a start. She knew he had painted in college, and had imagined what he looked like with a brush in his hand. It was strange to see it in real life. The canvas bothered her - she hadn't seen one in the apartment since her affair - but there he was, actually painting.

"Jack! You're painting!" She walked in, depositing her purse on the buffet, and stood behind him as he painted.

"You're painting," she said again.

"Yeah," Jack said.

"Hey," Ethel said. "It's this room, isn't it? Without any of the furniture?"

"Yep." He hadn't filled in the details. So far, the room was sketched in wide blocks of color, but it was easy to recognize the painting as their living room.

"That's great," she told him. "Are you going to put anything in it?"

"I don't know."

She watched his brushstrokes for awhile, her arms crossed, head tilted to one side. His brusqueness and absorption made her heart sink, but she put on a cheerful tone. "I'm going to change. Want me to cook tonight?"

"Sure." He had not turned around.

"What do you want?"

"Anything's okay," he said.

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She stood still for a moment, about to move. Then she wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed the back of his neck before heading for the bedroom.

By the time she had made dinner - beans and rice - he had added the detail: each floorboard was clear and discrete; cracks showed in the walls and the curtains were lifted by a breeze.

"Dinner," she said.

"Okay."

"That looks really good."

"Thanks," he said.

They ate in silence. She wondered how long it would take for things to return to normal, or if they ever would. Their dinners were usually bright with jokes and talk. Jack finished his food quickly, then returned to the living room, where he stared at the empty room in the painting. Ethel watched him for a few moments, then gave up. She washed the dishes and went into the bedroom to read.

It was midnight before she came back to the living room. Very little had changed in the painting, though now the ghostly outline of two chairs had been superimposed onto the center of the canvas. One chair lay on its side in the center; the other stood on its legs but faced the left-hand corner. Both were empty.

She rested a hand on his shoulder. "Come to bed?"
Jack nodded, eyes on the canvas. "I'll be in soon."
"Okay, Jack."

Ethel stayed awake. When Jack came in just after two, she feigned sleep. Around three, she got up, walked to the living room and turned on the light. The painting was finished: the chairs, in slightly concocted disarray, looked like the discarded toys of a children's game.

All the next day, Ethel was sick with guilt and worry and lack of sleep. She had imagined the guilt would vanish after she told Jack about the affair, but she had been wrong. At work everything but the chair she sat in seemed very far away, so that if she were to begin walking she would never reach any of it. Jack's silence had made her body feel stale and ill-treated and awkward with nervous, useless energy that she wished would disappear. His indulgence in his painting left her feeling jealous, and she tried to get angry with him for it, but this did not work. She was afraid she had wrecked everything. They were almost thirty now and she wanted to marry Jack, and in her agitation she twirled pencils in her hand and folded pieces of scrap paper into tiny squares.

Meanwhile, at home, Jack could begin to paint almost right away. He had left out the art supplies and covered his palette with a piece of plastic wrap, to prevent the paints from drying out. He removed the completed painting
gingerly from the easel and leaned it against the baseboard in a corner, where it could dry undisturbed. He selected a second canvas and placed it on the easel.

Today he took less time painting the room. He mixed more of the appropriate colors so that they matched the ones on the palette. He remembered the brush strokes of the previous day. The first painting had been a morning scene; this one would be in the afternoon. He added the appropriate shadows. When Ethel came in, he felt her behind him, watching. She watched him work for a long time before she said anything.

"Hi, Jack."
"Hi."
"What's up with this one?" she asked. The sound of her voice made him thirsty for more of it.
"Don't know."

He added cracks. The windows in this one were half-closed, one just higher than the other.
"Do you mind me watching?" she said finally.
"No, it's okay," he said.
"Do you want me to make dinner again?"
"Yeah," he said, "that would be great."
"All right."

Over dinner, they spoke civilly about unimportant things. Jack told Ethel about the grizzled maniac who tried to order a hundred egg sandwiches that morning at
the Steak Shack. Ethel told Jack about the children who would not stop touching the paintings and sculptures at the gallery. Their mother, a thin, caustic woman clad in black, refused to stop them. Art, the woman insisted, was interactive. Ethel was forced to call security. They laughed politely at one another's stories.

This time, Jack didn't finish until three the next morning. In the painting, late afternoon light cast long shadows across the hardwood, shadows cut off by the edge of the canvas. The shadows were thrown by the wooden chairs from the last painting, which now stood on opposite sides of a simple round table, facing away. On the table were two plates and two sets of utensils, but no food. Instead, an unopened bottle of wine stood between the place settings.

Jack's next painting depicted the living room again, this time at night. Blues and reds dominated; most of the canvas was purple-black. Corners were barely visible, and only looking very closely could one discern where the floor met the wall or where the wall met the ceiling. The only source of light was the moon, and the only indication there was a moon was its light. Only two things stood in the path of the moonlight. One was a pattern of broken glass on the floor. The other was the corner of something huge, something unidentifiable that took
up much of the right side of the room. It looked upholstered, or maybe not. It might have been wood, or metal. But its corner was orange, kind of, though it also looked sort of red.

At work the next day, Ethel gave up on restraint and began crying. Georgia, the gallery owner, found her hunched over the reception desk, weeping into the price book.

"Honey, what is it?" Georgia asked. Georgia was a motherly woman in her fifties whom Ethel loved. Ethel lifted her head and began to gesture with her hands, but she couldn't speak yet and kept crying.

"Look, Honey, take a break. Let's both take a break. What do you say? Les can run the shop for fifteen, okay?" Les was the security guard.

There was a park between Front Street and the river, and they walked there in the heat. A banner strung between light posts rippled loudly in the breeze. It read "Don't Miss It... Fireworks! July 4." It was cooler down by the river, and they sat on a bench and talked. Ethel told Georgia about the affair, about Jack's stony silence. She tried to explain the paintings Jack had been working on.

"He just paints and paints," Ethel said. "They're paintings of our place, with different furniture. The
furniture isn't ours. And it doesn't make sense."

"How do you mean, it doesn't make sense?" Georgia asked.

"I mean, the way the stuff is placed. It's strewn around the room. Or it doesn't look like furniture at all." She thought about the huge ghostly thing in the last painting. She had noticed it that morning, long after Jack had left for work, and stared at it for as much as ten minutes. She still didn't know what it was, but it filled her with dread and shock.

"It sounds intriguing," Georgia said.

"It's scary. I think he's painting at me. I think it's his way of getting at me. He's painting them at me."

"I didn't know Jack painted."

Ethel shrugged. "He hasn't since college. Eight years."

Georgia ran a hand over Ethel's back, which improved her mood considerably. For a moment she was embarrassed at this - a grown woman having to be comforted like a child in the park. But the feeling passed and she let Georgia rub at the tense places. "Well," Georgia said, "are they good?"

"Are what good?" Ethel said.

"Why, the paintings."

"I guess they're pretty good."

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Georgia sat up straight and sighed loudly. "Look, Honey, give him some time," she said. "You did a rotten thing to that boy."

"I know, I know."

They watched the river flow.

"Maybe we could sell them," Georgia said, "if they're good."

Ethel, in mock anger, said, "Georgia!"

"All right, all right," Georgia said.

Jack flipped burgers. Shep kept looking at him funny.

"Jackie," he said, "Ain't I paying you enough?"

"You're paying me fine," Jack said.

"Then why you moonlighting on me?"

Jack slipped bubbling pucks of meat into buns, and placed them on plates. Shep added handfuls of french fries.

"I'm not moonlighting," Jack told him. "This is my only job."

"You ain't painting houses?"

"What?" Jack said. Shep pointed at Jack's head, and Jack felt his hair. He didn't understand for a minute. Then it came to him. "Oh. The paint in my hair, you mean. No, no, I'm not painting for money. I'm painting at home."
"Green?" Shep's bare hand rested on a meaty hip. The one in the plastic glove, the french fry grabbing one, jutted a finger at Jack. "You're painting your place green?"

Jack added a few more patties to the grill. "I'm painting paintings. Like art paintings."

Shep pulled back in mock humility. "Well!" he called out. "An artist!"

"I'm not, really."

"What are you painting?" Shep said now. "Naked ladies?"

Jack straightened and twirled the spatula in his hand. "No." He stroked his chin absently, like a caricature of a professor. "I guess I'm painting portraits."

Shep's eyebrows lifted appreciatively. "How about one of me?"

"I'll think about that," Jack said.

Jack knew about the value of forgiveness, having made a lot of mistakes himself. He had broken a friend's wrist, by accident, in high school. The friend had been placing a can of beer behind a rear tire of Jack's car, so that Jack would back over it. Jack knew this but, as a joke, backed up anyway. Crack!, the wrist was broken in several places. The friend wore a cast for months, and the wrist always rested at an unusual angle. Also
the friend could never bend the broken wrist as well as he could the unbroken one. They were never good friends again, and this hurt Jack greatly, both because of the loss of friendship and the guilt which he was never able to get rid of.

But the incident mellowed Jack. Mostly he has forgotten about it. Ethel doesn't know. Really, it's not a big deal, just something Jack learned from without even realizing he was learning, like most things.

The paintings began to fill the living room. They looked like tiny doorways to a series of strange little adjacent rooms: ten so far, with two canvases unpainted. One, at thirty-six by twelve inches, depicted a chair hung upside down by a rope from a chandelier. In another, broken furniture lay in a heap in the center of the floor. The destruction was such - splinters of wood, springs, fabric, stuffing - that it was nearly impossible to tell what the furniture had looked like unbroken. One room was completely empty, but the outlines of furniture were visible in the dust on the floor. One room was on fire, the furniture dim shapes in the flames. In one room, a giant hole gaped in the far wall. The windows were shattered and the two chairs from the first painting were crushed beneath the enormous grey boulder that had made the hole. Through the hole, clouds were visible scudding
by. The view of another room was almost completely obscured by a brick wall that stretched from floor to ceiling - only one high corner was left unbricked, and through it weird shadows were visible, cast by an unidentifiable object and an unseen light source. One room was partly filled with brackish-looking green water, and only the tops of chairs and lamps could be seen.

The entire apartment - the foyer and kitchen, bedroom and bathroom - smelled like paint and turpentine now. Ethel waited. Georgia inquired about the paintings and about the relationship, and Ethel reported. "Something has to happen soon," she said. "He's almost out of canvas."

It was Friday, and Jack was well into the eleventh painting when Ethel arrived. This one was different. It was the first in the series with somebody in it. It was morning in the room - the same quality of light as in the first painting - and a stocky man bent over their upholstered chair. The chair was in the same place that it was in the actual room, the far right-hand corner. The man had his back to the frame, and he had about him the aura of work: he was a mover.

"Is he putting that chair down?" Ethel said.
"Or is he picking it up?"
"He's putting it down," Jack said.
Saturday was the Fourth of July. When they woke
together, as they often did on weekends, Jack said to Ethel, "I'd like to be alone here today."

"All day?" she said.

"Yes, all day."

Ethel spent the day in the park, reading. Picnickers ate from paper plates, played frisbee, swam in the river. She paid little attention to what she was reading. She watched couples nap beneath trees. On the far bank of the river a fly-fisherman cast, his line snaking through the air above his head.

She remembered that she and Jack had come here to kiss after their second date. They had eaten dinner, then found a bench and kissed and talked. It was memorable for its romance, a romance of a certain quality, neither cloying nor sentimental. It was honest, guileless. When they finally pulled apart, Jack's eyes were glazed with a mixture of frank desire and restraint. His feelings were so obvious that Ethel laughed out loud. That was what she loved about Jack even now, his willing transparency. These silent weeks, in its absence, Ethel had gained a new appreciation of it. She closed her eyes and let the sun warm the lids and fill her vision with pink light.

It was almost dark before Ethel decided to go home. She walked the long way, by the river, backtracking along the train tracks and into downtown.

Jack had finished the final painting and was washing
his brushes in the kitchen sink.

"Hi," Jack said when she walked in.

"Hi."

Ethel tossed her book onto the coffee table in the foyer and walked into the living room. On the easel sat the living room: the couch and chair, the lamp, the desk, the coffee table she had just thrown her book on. It was just past sunset in the painting. The lamp threw yellow light across the furniture. Behind the easel, the real lamp did the same. When she came back into the foyer, Jack said, "Do you like it?"

"I like it," Ethel said.

"Let's go," Jack said, wiping his hands on a dishtowel.

"Go?"

"The fireworks."

They walked along the riverfront path, away from the crowd. They passed some kids necking, a family, a man and two dogs. Jack spread their blanket in some weeds beneath a tree near the Weir Street bridge and they sat down, Jack flat on his back, Ethel upright with her hands folded over her knees.

"Are you finished painting?"

Jack rubbed his eyes. "I'm out of canvas."

"So you're finished."
Jack looked up at her face, and she held it still for him while he looked at it in the fading light. She felt her cheeks growing warm.

"I'm finished," he said. Across the river, the beams of flashlights bounced as children searched for a good spot to sit.

"How do you feel?" she said.

"I'm sleepy. I feel kind of emptied out." He shifted, rustling the weeds. "Clean, though. I feel pretty clean."

"Well that's good, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said, "it's good."

She wanted to say something perfect, something that rung gently of apology. She wanted to say something hopeful and simple and content. She wanted to say just the right thing. But nothing came to her, and she kept quiet.

The fireworks began, launched from a boat moored in the middle of the river, and filled the sky. The howl of rockets echoed on the water and under the bridge, and Ethel smelled the sharp odor of gunpowder on the breeze. In the flashing light, Jack took Ethel's hand and ran his fingers across her palm.

"What are you doing?" Ethel said. "Are you reading my life line or something?"

"No, just touching," Jack said.
Explosions shook their feet and guts and embers slid glowing into the water. Soon they stopped, and Jack and Ethel heard people cheering in the park. When the cheers subsided, everybody sat still, waiting, their eyes on the sky.

"Is it over?" she said.
When Meredith was ready to leave the clinic, an attendant led her down a carpeted corridor, through a busy clerical office, down a flight of stairs, and around a corner into an unlighted length of hall, where, barely visible by the cracks of day that surrounded it, stood a thick metal door. The attendant - the same woman who had talked to her while the entire thing was going on - leaned out first and turned her head left and right, looking. "You're clear," she said, and patted Meredith's shoulder. Meredith managed a polite smile and stepped out.

She was in an alley. It was long and empty and reeked of restaurant waste. She tried to remember where she parked the car, failed, and picked a direction to walk in. It was summer and she was sweating.

Coming onto the street, she stepped on a wad of hot gum, and it trailed behind her in long, rubbery strips as she walked. She found the car around the block, unlocked
it, and dug around under the seat for a pen or something. She found a pencil, and sat in the driver's seat, her legs out in the sun, scraping the gum off her shoe.

She imagined a tiny point, a sensor, moving through her body. Head, okay. Chest, fine. Stomach, okay. There was no nausea, nothing. There had been a cramp in the clinic, just a brief, nervous, involuntary thing, but nothing since then. She shoved the pencil back under the seat and pulled out.

It was a two and a half hour drive home. The car was low on gas and she was thirsty, and she looked for a gas station with a convenience store. Traffic was heavy here, and loud, and she rubbed her eyes at lights, wanting only to undress and lie on her bed, in the windowless dark of her apartment, a fan trained on her body. She wanted to wait until night fell and sit by the river and toss rocks.

She found an Exxon. "Montana's Finest Corn Dogs!" read a sign. She pumped gas.

In the store, she stood before the cold drink case, watching her reflection in the glass. She was wearing a white t-shirt and a wrinkly patterned Indian skirt, and sandals. Her hair was tied back into a ponytail. Pimples had appeared along her hairline, and she ran her fingers over them. The drink case made a quiet, mechanical sound, and she leaned against the door and let the sound
envelop her head. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She was twenty years old.

"Just this," she told the clerk. She placed a bottle of flavored iced tea on the counter. "And the gas."

"What pump?" The clerk was a teenage girl. Straight as an arrow, Meredith thought. All B's on the report card. A giant yellow clip gripped the girl's hair.

"I'm the only car," Meredith said. The girl turned and looked out the window. Then she pressed the buttons of the register slowly. "Six-oh-five," she said.

Meredith had six dollars. She smoothed the bills on the counter and took three pennies from the change cup, its entire contents. She set the pennies on the bills.

The girl didn't touch the money. "Do you have two pennies?" she said.

"No."

The girl looked over her shoulder, mouth open, though nobody else was in the store. When she turned back she glanced at Meredith, then at the cash register.

"My purse is in the car," Meredith said.

The girl looked up, and in a moment smiled. "That's okay," she said. "No biggie."

Back at the car, the purse was gone. She was sure
she had left it on the passenger side floor. She looked under the seats and checked the back. She opened the hatch and pushed items aside. Nothing.

She went back inside and, under the girl's eye, retraced her steps through the store. The purse wasn't there.

She tried to remember the waiting room back at the clinic. Did she have it then? No. She had locked it in the car. She went outside and searched the car a second time. It wasn't there.

She took a walk around the block. The hand that held the drink felt cool, and she wiped the other, nervously, on her dress. The buildings on this block were low and unmarked, and covered with painted wood siding. She poked around in trash cans and peered into the gutter. Finally she found it in a bush. Everything was there but her money, about forty dollars. The thief had been fussy: the snap on the wallet had been refastened and the purse zipped shut.

She lifted her head and scanned the street. Only a child on a bicycle wobbled past.

In her car, she uncapped the drink and guzzled it down. The cold made her head throb. She leaned back in her seat and swallowed the last sip, then waited, eyes shut, for the pain to retreat. In time it did, and she started the car.
If there were no road and Meredith had to find her own way the hundred and thirty miles back to town, it would not have been a problem. The valley she drove through was bordered by two spectacular mountain ranges, each long and jagged, that would shunt her south along rivers' paths all the way home. The driving was automatic. She steered with her knees. The car had no air conditioning, and her shirt stuck to the seat and her back to the shirt. She passed through Flathead Reservation towns along the lake. At scenic overlooks and historic points, white people stood outside their cars, reading wooden placards.

About halfway down the valley, she began to grow hungry. Once this struck her, the desire for food, the emptiness in her stomach leaked outward, into the rest of her body. The bones in her thighs seemed to hollow themselves out and the muscles shrink. Her kidneys felt small and hard, and her mouth became dry. A bilious taste rose to her lips. For a moment, she considered pulling over, but how could that help? Her hands found the wheel and she pulled herself forward, and she drove hunched, like an old woman, for several miles.

A low post-and-wire fence along the side of the road reminded her that she was passing the National Bison Range. A steep hill rose behind the fence. Meredith could see no bison. But a white sign was attached to one of the posts that read: BISON CAFÉ, 2 MI. Bison burgers,
After a mile, the road narrowed to one lane, bordered by orange traffic cones. Behind them men in trucks poured pavement. The smell of hot tar reached her nose and she rolled up the window in spite of the heat.

The parking lot of the Bison Café was a wide fan of gravel, behind which stood a long, flat building covered with painted signs. "The Famous Bison Café," read the largest. "Bison meat is much leaner than regular beef. The HEALTHY CHOICE." A cushioned banquette made of logs sat on a squeaky wood porch, and off to the right Meredith saw similar tables and chairs, apparently for sale. She got out of the car and crossed the lot, where a few cars baked in the sun. The noise of construction machines growled behind her. She pushed open the door and walked in, and an air-conditioned breeze fell upon her arms and face. She shuddered.

To her left, a life-size painted wooden Indian sat alone at a table, behind a huge plate. On the plate lay a giant hot dog bun into which a supine plastic bison had been wedged. One of the Indian's arms was half-raised, his palm open in a gesture of peace, and somebody had attached a fork to the hand with tape. The expression on his face was very serious, but unthreatening.

Nobody seemed to pay attention to her, so Meredith seated herself at an empty booth. She opened a menu.
Next to the selection of bison burgers, there was a xeroxed photo of a shaggy bison, its nose in the grass. She studied the photo, then the burger descriptions. **The Café Burger. 100% Montana bison meat, flame-broiled to your specifications, grilled onions and mushrooms, lettuce and tomato. $4.95.** Then the photo again. The two seemed to have nothing to do with one another.

"What can I get for you?" came a voice. It was a waitress, a very tall woman with long black hair.

"I don't know," Meredith said.

"Prawns're real good," she said. "How about that?"

"Mmm..." Meredith said. From the corner of her eye she saw the waitress's pencil and notebook. "What's this like?" She pointed on the menu to something called the Montana Platter Deluxe. There was a photo of it, too, but it was very blurry. The waitress said nothing at all.

"This here?" Meredith said, then looked up, for the first time, at the woman's eyes. They were milky white and drifted in their sockets. Meredith sucked in breath.

The woman's face grew stiff. "Maybe I'll come back."

"No, no," Meredith said. "I'm really sorry."

The waitress nodded.

"I didn't notice," Meredith said, then, quickly:
"Why don't I have one of these shakes?"

"One huck shake," the waitress said, and made a mark on her pad. She turned around and walked off.

Meredith looked out the window, embarrassed at her error. Cars passed in the heat, slowly. It seemed like wherever they were going, it would take them forever to get there. Beyond the highway, a two-lane paved road snaked off west around a hill. A sign read, "Bison Range 2, Dixon 7, Perma 21."

A radio played somewhere. The song was familiar, and it took Meredith a moment to place it: it was popular years before at high school dances. Once she had kissed somebody to it. For some reason she remembered the skirt she had worn, a green pleated one. Where was it now? Probably in the closet of an old dormitory room, forgotten in a hasty move. She thought about the boy's hands on her hips and the damp strip of skin just under her belt, and the way the seat of his car felt on the backs of her legs later. She remembered his hands on her shoulders and breasts, and how he wrung them when she dumped him in a city park because he told his buddies about it.

The waitress came back and set a gigantic aluminum tumbler in front of Meredith. It was rimed with frost and held a sea of whitish-purple goop. Meredith couldn't believe her eyes. She stared at the milkshake and didn't
move.

"What?" the waitress asked. "Something wrong with it?"

"No," Meredith said. "It's just so big."

"You're getting your money's worth."

"I guess so," Meredith said. She patted her knees. "Um, I'm really sorry about all that. I wasn't paying attention."

The waitress shrugged. "That's okay. I shouldn't've got upset about it. It's just I'm having one of those days, you know?"

"Tell me about it," Meredith said. "Somebody stole my purse today."

"They'll do that to you," the waitress said. "I have this cane I use on the street. Somebody stole that off me once."

They both nodded. The waitress didn't go anywhere. Meredith peeled the paper off her straw and dunked it into the milkshake. "Want to sit down?" she said.

The waitress seemed to consider this. "Yeah, okay," she said. She dragged her hand along the table's edge until she found the corner, then slid in across from Meredith. She sat there, still nodding.

"So it's cataracts," she said. "Can't see shit except light and dark."

"But you're so young," Meredith said.
"Uh-huh, right."

Except for her eyes, Meredith thought, she was beautiful. Her cheekbones were high and her skin the color of finished wood. She might have been part Native American, or maybe part Asian, Meredith couldn't tell. She sipped the milkshake. It was cold and sweet. But as soon as she swallowed, she remembered: her money was gone.

"Uh-oh," she said.

"What?"

"My money. They took it."

There was silence then, and an awful weight fell across Meredith, like an animal that had crawled into her lap. How had she forgotten? She was reminded, suddenly, of something she hadn't thought about in years. When she was a kid - she must have been four or five - her mother's friend had come over one afternoon with her new baby, and Meredith had been given that baby to hold. She remembered her excitement: the baby was so cute, so curious, and when she took it into her arms it reached up and touched her face, and bubbles formed on its lips. For a moment, Meredith was happier than she'd ever been, until she noticed the baby's surprising weight and its tiny legs that weren't even strong enough to hold it up, and she felt terror clutch at her and she began to cry. She held the baby tighter, too tight, and its faint smears
of eyebrows furrowed in annoyance, just like an adult's. Quickly her mother plucked it from her arms, and Meredith ran and hid in her bedroom until the friend and baby had left. There, in the corner of her closet, her shoes clustered lumpily beneath her, Meredith felt herself lighten, felt the fear evaporate from her slowly.

So when the waitress shrugged, Meredith felt that lightness again, and she rose, like an empty sack, into the particular weightlessness of another's mercy. The waitress made a noncommittal sound, a sort of grunt, then tilted her face into the light from the window. Meredith watched her eyes swivel forward, into some instinctive false focus.

"Did you see that? I can feel them," the waitress said. She lifted her arms and draped them over the back of the seat, the way a boy might who wanted his arm around you. "Every time I look out the window like that. They move around, looking for something to see. It's freaky." She turned back to Meredith. "I can tell you what's out there, you know."

"Really?"

She nodded. "I used to be able to see, when I was a kid. There's a couple of hills, one on each side of the intersection. The one on the left is wider, but flatter. It used to have a little house up on top. Does it?"
"No," Meredith said.

"Well, it did." She let her arms fall down to the seat. "But I guess that's not the point, is it."

Meredith pushed the milkshake away. "I can't pay for this."

"Well I guess you'll have to give me some, then," the waitress said. She reached across the table and found the drink easily. She sucked on the straw, staining it with lipstick, then leaned back in her seat and smiled. "I got so sick of these when I started working here."

"I bet," Meredith said, and she took back the drink, and put her mouth on the straw. The lipstick rubbed off on her. It was greasy, and she worked it between her lips for a second, tasting it, before she wiped it away with a napkin.

Meredith idled at the edge of the gravel lot. She and the waitress had finished off the milkshake, even though Meredith was no longer hungry after only a third of it was gone. Now the construction had moved to the intersection, and the noise and the smell turned her stomach. She imagined driving for another hour with the milkshake gurgling inside her. She thought she could use a break, in good air. When she finally pulled out, she steered around the machines and headed west, toward the Bison Range.
She had never been on this road before. Behind fences, the Range's hills stood bare except of grass. Ruined shacks leaned in ravines. She dodged potholes. After a few miles, the fence on the right gave way to a gate, and a sign led her north, up a hill, to a paved parking lot, empty save for a white truck with an insignia on the door. There was a building here, its walls made of concrete studded with round stones. Inside, Meredith was stunned to see a tremendous stuffed bison, encased in glass. It was the size of a small elephant.

"Can I help you?" said an attendant. He sat behind a long desk on which a lot of pamphlets had been spread, and had a strangely shaped head, thin and tall as if clamped by a vise.

"Are they really this big?" she said.

"No so much anymore. That one got shot in 1883."

Meredith turned and approached the desk. "So they're out there? I can go see them?"

The man nodded and spoke quickly. "We close in 45 minutes. Ought to give you time to make the loop."

He picked several pamphlets from the pile and thrust them at Meredith. "Drive slow or they'll get spooked. Don't get out of your car. You got AM radio?"

"Sure."

"Put it on 1460. Start driving when the voice gets going."
Meredith sat in the car a moment before starting it up. She skimmed one of the pamphlets. The bison were killed systematically, to starve the Indians. The government paid white hunters to kill them. People shot them from trains. They were stacked in mountains a hundred feet high and nearly went extinct.

She set the pamphlets on the passenger seat, then got the car running and messed with the radio. There was no static at 1460, but no voice, either. She turned it up but heard only a low hum, and the beating of her own heart. She looked down at where the sunlight arced over her t-shirt, and she could see the shirt moving with the pumping of blood. It reminded her of the boy who made her pregnant, the way he had lain his head on her bare chest, listening and tapping his finger on her arm in time with the beats. When he pulled away, he did so suddenly, so that she felt exposed and covered her breasts with her hands. What is it? she asked him. It's too scary, he told her. It just keeps going, he said, it never gets a break. If it stops, you die. For long minutes after he fell to sleep, she lay awake, her fingers over her heart.

When she looked up, the blood drained from her head and she went dizzy for a second. She gave up on the radio, put the car in gear, and pulled onto the dirt road that ran through the Range.
For awhile there were no bison at all. The hills bulged all around and kept her from seeing very far, and everything she thought might be a bison in the distance turned out to be a tree or shrub. She kept the window rolled down and hung her arm outside. When ten minutes had passed, she considered turning around and going back, and started to look for a wide place in the road. Then she crested a hill and saw them.

They were far down below, in a shallow valley, huddled around a small pond. From where she idled, they looked no different from a bunch of cows. She squinted. The sun had dipped behind a high hill, and it was hard to see. After a moment of consideration, she turned off the car and got out, then began to walk down, toward the bison.

She had gone about fifty feet when she began to have second thoughts. Didn't the bison in the visitors' center have horns? She remembered seeing a western movie in which a herd of bison stampeded across the plains. Their hooves kicked up giant clouds of dust, and the earth shook. In the movie, you knew this because the camera jittered and the actors wobbled and fell to the ground. Someone's teenage son was gored, and the settlers mourned. In Meredith's stomach, the milkshake stirred, and she began to feel nauseated. She turned around.

In the slanting light, it took her a moment to
recognize that a bison had appeared, probably from over
the hill, and now stood before her car, staring at it.
As she watched, it shook its head and snorted. Meredith
jumped. It was easily as large as the car.

She wasn't sure what was called for here. She
could move far off to the right, away from the bison,
and hope it passed on, into the valley. Or she could
try to scare it off. But when it shook its head again
and moved toward her in a lethargic, shambling stroll,
she backed off straight down the hill, her arms out,
balancing. The bison watched its footing, careful to
avoid stepping on the rocks, but did not slow down. They
were in a gully of sorts, she and the bison, and the further
they moved the less room Meredith had to maneuver to one
side or the other. It became a simple game between them,
the only rule to stay in motion. She could hear the contents
of her stomach sloshing, and the bison's grunts, and in
time they became one and it was only that, the constant
movement and the sounds of their bodies.

And then the gully simply opened up behind her,
and the bison quit the game. It wandered off to the left,
as if it hadn't noticed her at all. She watched it for
a moment, relieved. Then she turned and found herself
less than thirty feet from the water, where no fewer than
twenty bison drank, adults and calves, each one with its
glassy black eyes trained on her.

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Without a moment of warning, Meredith became sick. The driving and the milkshake and the backwards trip down the hill had all caught up to her, and she doubled over and threw up in a gasping torrent. As it happened she remembered that the worst thing about being sick wasn't the throwing up but the interminable expectation of it, the trying to prevent it, the dread. This was different. There was something silky and gentle about it, like being patted with a soft cloth, and when it was done she coughed and spat into the rough grass and gulped air. Her eyes watered. And when she righted herself, the bison began to move.

It wasn't a stampede. They did not run. They moved like a group of sedate, unhurried adults stepping out of an elevator. They jostled one another, gently, and walked toward her, parting when they reached her, forming a ring around her. She could sense, in great detail, the motion of their huge bodies: the rustle of their thick fur and the hollow clop of their hooves in the dirt, the rich odor of their skin and breath and the swarms of gnats that swirled over them like electrons around a nucleus. They were radiant, and as Meredith felt them pass her terror consumed itself and snuffed out, and she moved with them back up the gully, a safe, magnetic point that kept them close, but not so close as to touch.
When they reached her car they surrounded it and swallowed it, and Meredith crushed her body up against the driver's side door. The metal was hot, and she pressed her face into the roof and closed her eyes and listened to the last few bison shuffle behind her, then around and past, and off over the next hill. She stood there, her arms out, hugging the car until everything was silent again. When she opened her eyes the sky had turned color and she realized that the air was cooler now, and her dress moved around her legs in the breeze.

She sat inside the car, smelling them on her clothes. There was no sound at all but the wind. And when she turned her key in the ignition, a voice exploded in her head: "IF YOU SHOULD HAVE CAR TROUBLE" it said "DO NOT WAIT OUTSIDE FOR HELP," and she screamed and turned the radio knob with such violence that it snapped off in her hand. She folded her fingers around it, and looked up to find her own face in the rear-view mirror, stupefied and strange, and watched it for a long time, until it took on a shape she could recognize.
When the hailstorm began, I was driving around town in my car. One of the windows is smashed out: some kids had broken in to steal a bag of chips. I had taped a translucent plastic bag over the opening, and it rippled under the hail like a windblown flag.

The stones were small at first, but before long they got to be big as marbles and made an awful racket on the roof. I started to fear for my windshield and looked around for somewhere to park, somewhere out of the way. It was nearly two o'clock on an August morning.

I pulled into a gas station. It was an all-night place, with a convenience store. The tanks were protected from the elements by a huge illuminated pavilion. I parked there, and got out and leaned against the car door. In the light cast by the station, hailstones shattered all over the ground, and I watched as they melted on the pavement. Up on the highway, cars raced by in the dark.

I hadn't slept for six consecutive nights, under
a crushing sulkiness and paranoia brought about by someone I had lost, and I could only stand still, blinking, and wonder when it was all going to stop. A clerk in the store saw me standing, so I waved. He didn't wave back.

A light-blue pickup was parked beside the building, and the hailstones clattered against it. A teenage girl sat in the passenger seat, her skin white and puffed under a jaundiced plume of hair. I could tell by the way her arms and shoulders were moving that she was looking through the glovebox. Her boyfriend stood outside, against the wall. When he saw me, he pulled his jacket over his head to form an umbrella and made a run for the light.

"That was some sprint," I said. He shook his jacket and hailstones fell to the ground. They looked like they were made of milk.

"No shit," he said. His skinny neck was covered with hickeys. "Hey." He dug into his pocket and came up with a twenty. "Could you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Could you get me a twelve-pack? I don't have ID." He looked back at the front window for the clerk, but he had gone off somewhere.

"Yeah, why not," I said.

"Cool." He told me what kind of beer he wanted. Meanwhile the hailstones fell and fell. They were bigger now, big as robin's eggs. I thought a minute,
then poked around in the car until I came up with a small box made of thick cardboard. I had gotten a new alternator at some point and this was what it came in. I took the old alternator out of it and put the box on my head. It was a slightly tight fit.

"Dude," the kid said. "Helmet."

"Anything else?" I asked. "Burrito? Popsicle?"

"Just the brew."

I made my break. Stones chunked off the box and stung my arms and shoulders. When I reached the door I paused to catch my breath.

The clerk had returned. "Hey," I said to him. His mouth was tight and angry and his chin bore a curious ringlet of pimples. He didn't speak to me. I could understand, though. In a storm, wherever you are feels like the middle of a desert. In a storm there is only you and the place you're in, and anyone you do not love or even know is a threat. I found a cold twelve for the kid and brought it back to the counter, along with a box of Fig Newtons.

"Just these, please," I said to the clerk.

"I got no money," the clerk said. He punched a key on the register and the drawer came open with a bang.

It was true. The drawer was empty. "What's up with that?" I said.

"Robbed," he said. "I just got fucking robbed.
Do you believe that shit?" His face was reddening, lighting up like a sunset. "I had to call the fucking manager, and he's going to come down here and fill up the till, and then he's going to fire my ass."

"He can't fire you for that."

"Make a bet? Make a fucking bet?" The clerk looked off toward the chip rack. His hands began to beat a rhythm on the open drawer. "He's been begging for an excuse. Begging."

The kid drove off with his money and girlfriend. No relief from the hail. The stones rumbled against his truck, which slid through the water and ice like a slow cloud. Nobody else was on the road, and even the highway noise had stopped. People were still out there, stuck in their cars.

Then a dog came sprinting out of the darkness, a ratty lab cross with big eyes. He whined as he ran, hailstones bouncing off his back and head. His paws scrabbled on the ice. When he arrived he shook himself, then turned and barked out at the hail. Or maybe through the hail. It was hard to say. Did he think someone specific was hurting him?

"Hey, dog," I said. "Dog."

He turned to me but did not wag his tail. He panted. Soon he lay down on the ground, but he kept his head up
and wearily scanned the night. I sat on my hood.

The hailstones got to be as big as golf balls, and then suddenly the storm stopped. The dog and I knew it was going to happen the instant before it did. It made a sound: a quiet inhalation, then the sky held its breath and the last stones hit the ground. The dog lurched to his feet and barked. I watched the hail-line recede down the street, bringing back to life buildings, cars, traffic lights. Everything was white.

I slid off the hood and opened my door. The dog spun and wagged his tail. His face was full of alarm.

"You can go home," I said. The dog lowered its head and turned around, toward the moon-bright ice. His tail fell to the concrete. He barked. Then he turned back to me.

"Go on." I opened the door and got into the car, then started it up. I heard another bark and the plastic over my window tented in. A claw ripped through. "Christ!" I said, then got out. "Knock it off," I said over the roof, and the dog backed up and barked again.

I watched him for awhile, then called to him, and he ran around and jumped in on my side.

The dog and I drove slow. He sat on the passenger side, blinking, staring out the windshield. I scratched his head and my fingers came away darkened.
"Dog," I said, and he turned his head.

"Dog, you're bleeding." I presented my fingers and he licked off the blood. He turned back to the road.

The ice parted beneath the tires, and behind us our tracks thinned to points, filled in by the melting hail. All around, parked cars were scratched and dented and windows were broken. I wasn't worried about my apartment because it didn't have windows. At a stop light a girl jumped into the road, waving her arms. The dog looked at me.

"Okay, boy." I rolled down the window.

"Can I get a ride?" the girl said.

"Sure," I said. "Get in behind me. The other door doesn't work." I leaned over the steering wheel and pulled up the seat, and the girl got in. She was tall and her nose was pinched, as if by an invisible pair of eyeglasses. The dog sniffed at her between the seats.

"Your dog is cute," she said. "What's his name?"

"Fred," I said.

"Hi Fred." The dog's tail wagged weakly and thudded against the dash.

"Where are you going?" I said.

"Not far. Just go straight." I glanced at her in the rearview. She was looking out the window, one hand on the glass. I passed another car and the driver honked and waved. I did the same. That's the way it
was, out in the mess together.

"Why do you have a box on your head?" she said.

"I don't have a box on my head," I told her. She didn't say anything, and when I looked back at her she was looking at the floor.

"Sorry," I said.

"It's okay."

When we got to her place I suddenly regretted making the crack about the box. I wanted to apologize again, but understood that would only make things worse. At first I didn't open the door. I said, "Do you want to get a beer or something? You know, and talk."

"No thanks," she said. She was leaning forward, waiting for me to let her out.

"Come on. I'm sorry about the box thing. Look." I took the box off my head and set it between me and Fred. "I didn't mean to be a prick."

"Really, no. Let me out."

"The night is young."

"Let me out." Her voice was flat with fear, and for some reason this pissed me off. I opened the door and stepped out. I waved my arm in an expansive way.

"By all means," I said. "Out, out, out." She jumped out and backed away from the car. "Goodnight!" I said loudly. "Sweet dreams!"

"Asshole," she said. I got back behind the wheel.

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Fred's eyes followed her to her porch and he whined when I pulled away.

I had not been going anywhere in particular, so we drove home. In some places the ice had melted together and formed a sheet, and the car fishtailed. I had a fantasy. All of town was a city on Mars, an ancient, dead city, and I was an archaeologist, piloting my surface car around, searching for signs of life. But there were none, nothing but the buildings and streets the Martians left behind. Other cars passed and I waved to the drivers, my astronaut buddies. Find anything? Nope. Back at HQ I had a busty redhead physicist waiting for me. Later we would put on soft classical music and make love in the low Gs. Higher and higher we would bounce until, spent, we drifted to the ultralight synthetic silk sheets and slept until breakfast.

I lived in a single room in someone's basement. Fred and I walked through the yard to my door. The landlady's azaleas had been totalled by ice. Some big hailstones that had landed in a bush were still intact, and I collected five or six and brought them inside.

In the kitchen I dumped the stones on the table and rummaged in the fridge for something Fred could eat. I put some cold cuts in a bowl and filled another with
water, then set them on the floor. He sniffed at one, then the other. Finally he took a few tonguefuls of water and lay down.

I noticed then that Fred was very old. The fur on his face and paws was white. And he was still bleeding, from several places. There was a long cut across his side, and his head was cut, above the eye and behind an ear. And there was one cut on his back. Were these from the hail? It didn't matter. He made no move to lick them. I knelt on the floor and looked at his tag. It read: "I am ARAMAS. 214 West 5th St, 565-1157."

"Aramas," I said. He raised his head at me and his tail wagged exactly twice on the floor, then stopped.

"Fred," I said. He licked my hand.

I sat down at the table, where the hailstones had begun to melt. They revealed ghostly dark shapes inside that flashed grey and brown and green, then disappeared.

I picked up the phone and dialed. It rang.

"This is 565-1157," the answering machine said. "The Steves aren't home. If you want to leave a message, please specify which Steve you want. Thank you."

"I have your dog," I said. Then I hung up.

"Fred," I said. "Fred, old boy." I pulled some paper towels off the roll and dabbed at his wounds with them. He whined and barked when I touched the one on his side. I wet some more towels and cleaned him up a
little. His mouth was open and he panted, though it wasn't hot.

"What is it, boy? What's up?"

His claws scraped on the linoleum and he stood shakily, then flopped over onto his good side. His breath was raspy.

I lay down on the floor and scratched his belly. "Fred," I said. "Pre-ed." Quietly, like a lullaby. We watched each other. A little spit escaped his jowls and pooled on the floor. "You're okay," I said. From upstairs came the sound of a television.

There under the fluorescent light, I took Fred into my arms. I lifted his front legs and slid one arm beneath them and around his neck, and with my other arm I pulled his body against mine and held it there. It was warm and damp with sweat, and I breathed his musty dog-smell. His breath was rotten. He wasn't whining now, only breathing. I felt a wet warmth at my hip and knew that his bladder had let go, but I kept him there. His eyes were black and doggy and he could easily have been playing frisbee or digging, for all I could see in them. It was a long time, maybe fifteen minutes, before he stopped breathing. Then I released his body and stood in the kitchen over him with tears and sweat stinging in my eyes. There was blood and fur on my shirt and dog piss on my jeans, so I undressed and laid the clothes
down over the dog. It was a funny sight, a dog covered with clothes, and I snorted and wiped my nose with my arm. Then I sat down at the kitchen table.

And there was an amazing thing - the hailstones, half-melted in a puddle of dirty water, five with pebbles jutting from the surface like great black pimples, and one with something bright green and slick sticking out on both sides. A frog. Its snout protruded at one end, its tapered butt at the other.

I walked to the bedroom and unplugged the desk lamp, then set it up on the table. I turned it on, right over the hailstone with the frog in it.

I watched the ice melt. Bits of leaves and dirt surfaced and washed onto the table. A puddle spread before me. The frog's legs were curled under it, stuck to its body. Once the ice was gone they came unstuck and stretched, and the wide mouth parted and water trickled out. Then I watched as the back legs kicked in slow motion, like the frog had been swimming in its dreams, and its toes twitched, and the lids of its eyes retracted slowly, revealing bulging black balls the size of nail-heads. It was still tilted on its side, so I righted it with my thumb. It stood for five minutes, blinking and trembling, and it leaped.
Turner had asked his students to write about a personal experience, and Lloyd titled his essay "A Hunting Trip." It was about pheasants. Turner knew nothing about pheasants and didn't care to, but Lloyd went on and on and on about how they fly and what they look like, and how you clean them and why they're better to eat than chicken, until Turner could barely flip the pages, he was so bored. And then, on the last page, he read this:

"I wasn't going to get any pheasants that day anyway so I headed for the truck. Then there were these bushes and I looked over there and I thought they were moving. So I looked again and they were moving. Well I shot one barrel into the bushes and I heard this noise like maybe it was an animal I hit. Then I went over and see what it was I hit. It was this old man. And he was taking a dump when I shot him too. He was dead and there was blood on his chest. Well I went to the truck and I got the shovel and there was these trees and I dug a hole
up under these trees and I drug the old man over and put him in. It was getting dark so I went home. My mom asked me how was hunting and I said okay. We had dinner and I didnt say anything about it. I never told anybody about it and I hope God will forgive me."

Turner was sitting in his office, correcting as quickly as he could from a stack of forty-odd essays, and Lloyd's was only halfway through the stack. He chuckled when he finished reading. "fragments?" he wrote at the bottom of the last page. "punctuation?" A lame joke on the teacher: C-minus.

But that night he couldn't sleep. The details kept coming back to him. The part about taking a dump. About going home for dinner afterward, and begging God for forgiveness. Finally Turner got out of bed and walked ten blocks through the snow to the office and brought the essay home. He turned on the lamp over the bed, wrapped himself in blankets, and read it again. He tried to picture Lloyd, but had trouble remembering. Tall, short? Freckled? He sat in the back of the room, Turner was sure of that.

He didn't know whether to call the dean, or the police, or what. Finally he decided to wait, afraid of making an embarrassing mistake. All he could think about as he fell to sleep was a couple of FBI agents in suits and sunglasses, waiting outside the classroom door to take Lloyd away.
Turner woke early, before his alarm had a chance to go off, and made coffee. While it brewed he sat at his desk and opened a book. He didn't read it, but only stared at its open pages for several minutes, until the words became an unassuming grey haze and he could close it again. It was a book of post-structuralist literary criticism, which he hoped to apply to post-colonial fiction and poetry for his master's thesis. He was having a poor time of it. Nothing seemed to make sense, and his ideas all strayed into abstraction, far from the real experiences that his source materials described. He tried to write some himself, but he always found himself paraphrasing a critic's discussion of a writer's description of a colonist's life, and ultimately felt only exhaustion and despair.

Turner's year here in Montana hadn't been what he'd hoped. He'd had to settle for a basement apartment, and was almost always cold. It was a one-room studio with a shabby kitchenette and dark wood paneling. The carpet was a brown and purple molded shag, and it served as a breeding ground for a colony of millipedes, which burrowed in and out of the weave like moles. The shower head was too low and the water pressure weak.

Worse still, Turner was cursed with a chronic inability to make friends. He had always done all right
when forced—his college roommate, for instance, classmates, the people he worked with. But here he was a graduate student, an Easterner—an outsider. Many students were already well-established in their intellectual cliques. Others were farmy and conversant about such things as horses and cattle, and found nothing in common with him. There were loners, but most were fiercely opinionated and self-aggrandizing and spoke only in arguments. These students most often were either the first to leave a classroom, red-faced and outraged, or the last, hanging back to ask their professors gratuitous questions. Turner couldn't stand them.

He had tried going on dates. One was an undergraduate on the volleyball team he met in line at the bookstore. He didn't think she was pretty, or very interesting, but they ate dinner together. She talked about her ex-boyfriend and didn't eat most of her food. When they left the restaurant, she bumped into a friend, who gave her a ride home. She gave Turner a little wave from the car. He usually felt relieved when these dates were over, but he kept going on them out of a sense of duty. The truth was that he dreaded the long process of getting to know somebody, especially when there was no guarantee that they'd be the right person after all.

Turner dumped out his coffee into the sink. He dallied, straightening books and putting away dishes.
Finally he left and walked to campus, the knot in his gut tightening with every step. This was the worst problem: the University made him teach. He didn't like to face a classroom, and the problems with his thesis only made him further doubt his ability to tell them anything they could use. He arrived in class several minutes late, placed his briefcase on the table, removed the stack of corrected essays, and set them next to the briefcase.

His students were looking neither at him nor each other, but at various points in the air throughout the room, as if following dust motes with their eyes. A few read the school paper.

"Hello," Turner said. Three or four heads turned sleepily.

"I have your papers," he said. "Do you want them now or at the end of class?"

"Now," said a girl with fluffy hair.

"End of class," a boy said. He was one of a group of bulky male students who wore baseball caps. They all sat in one corner of the classroom, and all their names began with J. This particular student had not, to Turner's recollection, handed in a paper.

"Well, we'll do it now, I guess," Turner said. "Bainbridge."

One by one, they came to life as their names were called, and accepted their papers. When Turner called
Lloyd's name, a tall boy with long, bony fingers looked up in the back. "What?"

Oh, Turner thought, him. "Your paper."

Lloyd shut his mouth. He ducked his head so that the brim of his cap covered his eyes, then got out of the chair. He had to be six-five, at least. Turner remembered him now, from back in September. He had wondered if Lloyd was on the basketball team, or something. The boy felt his way to the front of the room, and the other students leaned away from him as he bumped by. Finally he stood before Turner with his face to the floor. The words "Red Bow Feed" were printed on his hat.

"Here you go," Turner said.

"Uh huh." He spun and made his way back to his chair.

As Turner gave the day's lesson, he kept an eye on Lloyd. The paper remained face-down on the desktop for the entire period. In the final minutes of class, Lloyd rolled it tightly, wrapped the fingers of one hand around it, and began to tap it on the desk. When Turner finally gave up, frustrated, on the class and dismissed them, Lloyd hunkered down and lumbered for the door. Students buzzed around him.

"Lloyd," Turner called.

Lloyd stopped, and Turner, watching, felt a sickening chill drool down his back. It was Lloyd's body: with
both his hands around the rolled-up essay and his head
dipped, he had taken on the posture, menacing and pathetic
all at once, of a handcuffed criminal being led up the
steps of a courtroom. For a moment, Turner felt himself
unravel into a queer, claustrophobic panic - the room,
he realized suddenly, was filled with people, people who
did things, people with guilt. His students, who before
had seemed passive, inefficient processors of information,
were suddenly sentient and dangerous. And as quickly
as the feeling rose, it passed, leaving him feeling slightly
light-headed. One of the big-haired girls bumped Lloyd
from behind, and he jumped, arms flailing out like branches
tossing in the wind.

Eyes still on the floor, Lloyd shuffled to the
table.

"I wanted to ask you about your essay," Turner
said. He said it quietly, almost at a whisper, and a
few of the hat boys looked over.

"Um," Lloyd said. His voice was gravelly and deep
as a quarry, and sounded odd coming from a person so thin.

"I'm interested in the ending."

Lloyd's eyes rose to meet Turner's. The corners
of his mouth were turned down, and his chin twitched.
He was flat, Turner thought, and realized that if it were
not for his height, nobody would ever notice him at all.

"Oh."

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"I was wondering if it was true. The ending."

Now all the other students had left the room, and voices and footsteps echoed in the hall. Lloyd smacked his hand with the rolled-up essay.

"Well, I mean, if it is, then... what?"

"Is it?" Turner said.

Lloyd looked past Turner, out the window, then slid his hand over the table.

"Naw," he said. "I made it up."

"Are you sure?" Turner said.

"Uh huh, yeah. I figured, it was the last paper, you know, and I'd make a joke."

Turner nodded. "Okay. Well, that's all right. It was a good paper. Better."

"Yeah, good."

"Okay then," Turner said.

Lloyd lifted his hand from the table, and it made a quiet sound like a wet leaf. "So."

"So you can go."

"Okay," he said, and turned and went. Turner watched him open the door just wide enough to let himself through, and then he was gone. On the table, beside Turner's open briefcase, was a long damp handprint, already fading in the room's dry heat.

It was Monday, and Turner was on the Monday-
Wednesday–Friday schedule. This meant it was time for his office hour.

His office was square, dark, and hollow. He always left the light off and the door closed, to deter students. Occasionally they knocked, in which case he called them in, but usually they shuffled around just beyond the door, sighed, then clomped off to the stairs. Ostensibly, he avoided them to free his time for thesis work, but today Turner propped his feet up on the desk and listened to the gurgle of the radiator. He thought about the class he taught, pleased with the resolution of the Lloyd thing. Still, there was something unsatisfying about it. He felt like nothing had been learned.

He finished his last class at two, a literature seminar taught by a dry, seedy-looking man with a huge head. From there Turner walked to Banana Karenina, an eclectic coffee shop and deli near campus. Here, he ate, as he always did, a turkey club on a rye roll and a chocolate chip cookie, and listened to other people's conversations. From a table behind him, he heard a woman say, "It's lefty-loosey, righty-tightey."

"No shit," a man answered.

"Well you don't have to be such a dick about it."

While Turner chewed, he listened. They talked about someone they both knew, somebody named Nina, and how Nina's landlord found out about her cat. They talked
about a television show they had both seen.

They left at the same time as Turner, and he trailed them by about half a block. For awhile, they walked in the direction he was going, but at the corner of Weir and Ninth they veered off. Turner paused when he reached the corner. He thought about home and the mail that might be waiting for him, and a hot cup of tea. But his legs took him after the couple.

They walked down Weir for three blocks, then turned into an alley Turner had never noticed before. The man began to kick a rock, and darted back and forth across the alley to keep it going as he walked. Once the woman laughed loudly at something the man said. Finally they entered a backyard, climbed a flight of wooden steps, and disappeared inside a house.

Turner stopped, then cracked his toes inside his shoes. He smelled the air. Somebody had a fire going nearby, and a dumpster wafted odors over the alley. Soon he turned and walked back to his apartment.

When he got home he found a message on his answering machine. The cassette mechanism warbled and hissed, but the voice on the tape was unmistakably Lloyd's.

"Mr. Turner. Uh, hi. It's... this is Lloyd, from English. Um, I just wanted to, talk to you. If you can. If you could call me back I'll be in my room all night,
if that's okay." Lloyd paused, and behind his breathing a television program played. "My number is 858-5818."
There was a scrabbling sound, and another pause, then Lloyd came back on. "Hello? Mr. Turner? Um, you don't have to call me back if you don't want to. That's okay, I mean. Okay, bye."

Turner reached for the phone, picked it up, then replaced it. He turned the heat on and looked through his mail. Then he threw it out. He boiled water, poured it into a mug, and added a tea bag. For several minutes, he walked around, drinking tea.

It was possible, of course, that Lloyd was only calling about his grade, or the upcoming exam, or what he was supposed to do for class on Wednesday. Maybe he was sick, and was calling to excuse himself for the week.

Turner crossed the room. If he stood on tiptoe, he could just see out his single window. It was a bug's-eye view of the snow, parked cars, houses. His neighbor across the street, a sneaky-looking middle-aged woman with a gigantic dog, was dragging a long, flat cardboard box up her front steps. She struggled to keep the screen door open, and the dog hopped about, smelling the box. After several minutes, the box disappeared into the darkness and the door shut.

Turner picked up the phone.

"Hullo?" came Lloyd's voice.
"Lloyd, it's Henry, your teacher."

There was a long pause on the other end. "Oh, Mr. Turner?"

"Right."

"Oh."

"You called me? You wanted to ask me something?"

"Yeah."

Turner waited. "Well, what is it? Is it about your paper? I'm sorry about the C, but there were a lot of grammatical mistakes. You're going to have to -"

"Oh, no," Lloyd said, "it's not the grade. I mean, the C is pretty okay. It's the ending."

Turner's hand had begun to sweat, so switched the telephone to his other ear. He wanted to sip his tea, but all that was left was a cold puddle with a tea bag in it. "What about it?" he asked.

"I was lying about that."

Turner let out a long breath. "Sure. You told me that in class."

"No, I mean I was lying in class."

Turner sat down on the bed. The mattress creaked beneath him. "What exactly are you saying, Lloyd?"

"It was true. That story."

"I see."

"You believe me, don't you?"

Turner lay back and covered his eyes with his hand.
"I believe you."

"It was an accident."

"I know."

"I mean, it was really an accident. I just shot, I figured, you know, the ranch was old and falling apart and there couldn't be anybody living out there. I mean, I didn't think that right away, I thought that later on. But, I mean, it was like instinct, that it was okay to shoot, because there wasn't anybody there. You know?"

"I know."

"So, I dunno, the guy was real old and he kind of looked like an old bum or something anyway, and I got real scared and figured I could go to jail, because before that I got nailed driving drunk and also I torched some guy's barn once, that was an accident too, we were just smoking and all, but I have a record and everything. So I had a shovel in the truck and nobody was out there, and I just buried him."

He coughed. "Mr. Turner, man," he said, "you gotta believe me."

"I believe you."

They waited through a long silence. Then Turner sat up.

"Lloyd?"

"You can't rat, Mr. Turner."

"Rat?"
"You're gonna rat, no, no, you can't rat on me. You can't." He sounded near tears.

"I won't, Lloyd."

"'Cause I can't go to jail."

"You're not going anywhere," Turner said.

"My mom would just die."

When he hung up, Turner was weary and sore, and stank with sticky, anxious sweat. When he lived back East, in the city, he would talk on the phone late at night with friends who lived only blocks away, wary of venturing out on foot. Those talks were strangely deep and exhausting, and more intimate, often, than they would have been face-to-face. It was the distance - knowing that the other person was nearby, almost near enough to see, but without the thorny physical politics. Floodgates were opened, secrets disclosed.

This conversation had felt like that. Turner had long intellectualized the closeness in ages between himself and his students - they were eighteen, mostly, and Turner twenty-five - but for the first time he felt himself welded to a student in a personal way. He wouldn't have gone so far as to say he liked Lloyd, not that, but he did feel like he had done somebody a service, had been useful in some way to someone besides himself.

But the more he considered this, his personal
connection to Lloyd, the more he wondered why Lloyd would take this kind of risk. If he would tell anyone, Turner thought, it would be a friend, wouldn't it? Why me? It was so odd that Turner had a half a notion to call somebody up, tell them the entire story. Not anyone here, of course; that would be a breach of trust. So he opened his address book and skimmed it, thinking of which college buddies or ex-girlfriends would be interested. He hadn't heard from most of these people in years, and eliminated them one by one, all the way up to the L's. Then he began to grow depressed and lonely, and he gave up on the idea altogether.

Lloyd didn't show up to Wednesday's class. All Monday night and Tuesday, Turner's mind had edged around what Lloyd had done, and by Wednesday morning he was almost eager to see the boy, so curious was he, so thirsty for more information. Would Lloyd's face betray the truth? Something in the motion of his thin fingers? Those two days, Turner had tried to work on his thesis. It was a dismal failure - he couldn't concentrate, distracted by the itchiness and aches of his own body. He found his mind wandering to that abandoned ranch, and Lloyd, gun cocked, set to shoot. The kick as he fired, jerking his shoulder. The sharp angles of his body and the white wisps of breath in the air. He pictured Lloyd digging,
a booted foot stomping the shovel's blade through stiff earth.

After class he asked the other students if they had seen Lloyd. Was he sick? They didn't know who Turner was talking about. When he described Lloyd, a few students nodded, but none of them had seen him.

That night Turner left a message on Lloyd's answering machine. "Lloyd," he said, "you weren't in class. You're going to have too many unexcused absences." Pressured by the hum of the machine, then, he blurted, "I'm a little worried about you, Lloyd. Are you all right?" Then, regretting it, "Get me a doctor's note." But Lloyd didn't call back that night, and Turner lay awake wondering where he had gone.

At six o'clock on Thursday morning there was a frenzied banging on Turner's screen door. It was still dark, and at first Turner didn't get up, figuring it was the wind blowing down his trash can. But the sound persisted, and Turner switched on the light. He walked to the door in his pajamas and opened it. It was Lloyd. "Hey," Lloyd said. "It's six o'clock." "Yeah. Can I come in?" Turner opened the door. "How'd you get my address?" "Phone book," Lloyd said. He looked around the
place, pupils tiny in the sudden light. "So you live
here. Didn't expect this."

"What did you expect?"

"Not this," he said. His skin was a little pallid, and his fingers jittered. His face had a grizzled look, and he probably hadn't shaved since Turner saw him last.

"Lloyd. Please tell me what you're doing here."

"I have to show you something," he said.

"I'm sleeping."

"It's important."

Turner looked at the clock. "I have class at nine," he said. "What do you need to show me?"

"You can skip class," Lloyd said. "It'll take awhile. Come on, Mr. Turner."

He thought about the lecture he was supposed to attend - the fluorescent lights, the creaking desks - and it filled him with dread.

"Why weren't you in class?"

"I was sick."

"You need to call me to be excused."

Lloyd raised his arms, scarecrow-style, and gestured around the room. "Here I am. I was sick."

Turner nodded, and sighed heavily to let Lloyd know he was annoyed. But already he knew what he was going to do. He was tired of being the sit-at-home type. He was tired of being bored.
"I'll get dressed," he said.

Lloyd was a skillful driver, to Turner's surprise. He steered his pickup through tow, and then offered another surprise - he took a right on Cherry Street and pulled onto the interstate. Leaving town hadn't occurred to Turner. He wasn't sure he'd left town since he came here. He watched Lloyd shift gears as they merged with traffic.

"Uh... where are we going?" Turner said.

"To the ranch."

"Your family's?"

Lloyd squinted, as if he wasn't quite sure who Turner was. "No. Where it happened."

The road hummed under them. Turner thought about asking him to turn back. "How far is that?"

"'Bout an hour and a half."

Turner closed his eyes and felt a pressure building in his chest. He sat on his hands and leaned against the door.

They eased in silence through the mountains, whose faces were shaven and pocked from logging and mining. A freight train lost ground alongside the highway, then angled off into a canyon. After awhile, the mountains began to round off and shrink, giving way to grass. They were in a wide valley now that Turner had never seen, and now and then he saw the log arch of a ranch or a series
of dark fence posts sticking out of the snow.

"So where're you from?" Lloyd asked.

"What?" Turner unstuck his forehead from the window.

"Where do you come from? Not out here."

"No. Baltimore."

Lloyd nodded. "Colts fan."

"Bills," Turner said. In fact, he didn't care for football. It was his father's and brother's passion. Their family had lived in Buffalo awhile, when Turner was young, and the Bills games were always on. During them, Turner used to take naps. Even today, hearing a sports announcer's voice made him sleepy.

"Right," Lloyd said, nodding. The skies had begun to lighten and his face glowed ghostly. "I'm from out by Red Bow. My dad's in cattle." He turned to Turner. "What do your folks do?"

Turner started. What did his folks do? His mother didn't do anything. His father sold things, mostly log furniture, to the Japanese. But he didn't know exactly what his father did when he went to work. Did he talk on the phone? Look at photographs of benches? All Turner could come up with was the image of his father reading the newspaper. He cleared his throat. The conversation, its queer formality, was making him edgy.

"My dad sells things," he said.

"Like a store?"

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"Sells furniture."

They passed another pickup truck. Turner glanced at the speedometer: 85.

"This is kind of weird," Lloyd said. "I mean, you being my teacher and all."

"Yeah." He was wondering what Lloyd intended to do once they arrived at the ranch. He looked out the window again, at a landscape that now had turned stark and hilly. He craned his neck to see the mountains behind him, and noticed that a shovel lay in the truck's bed. He also noticed, for the first time, a gun rack attached to the back window, and the shotgun on it. Immediately, he thought about when he could jump out. They'd have to slow down to get off the highway, maybe then. Or he could signal to a passing car. But what good would that do? Who pays attention to that kind of thing?

"So, is this gonna affect my grade?"

"What?" Turner said, alarmed. He felt caught at something, and Lloyd squinted at him again.

"I missed class and all that. Do I get a bad grade now?"

"It's okay."

"So I'm excused?"

"You're excused."

They left the interstate via a beaten-up offramp, then sped down a two-lane paved road. Lloyd barely slowed,
and Turner didn't even unbuckle his seat belt. From here Lloyd turned left, bringing the truck to a stop before a dilapidated wire gate. Turner looked around. No houses, only snow. Lloyd got out, unhooked the gate, and pulled it aside. Once the truck was through, he closed the gate behind them. "Don't want anybody wondering," he said.

The road took them five miles into snowed-over prairie cut by frozen creeks. After a time, Lloyd killed the engine. They got out. He grabbed the shotgun from the rack, and Turner flinched, but Lloyd didn't point it anywhere. "Get that shovel, wouldya?" he said.

"Me?" Turner said.

Lloyd laughed, a hoarse, rasping laugh. "Who else?"

Turner felt safer with the shovel, walking behind Lloyd. They crossed the snow to a sparse windbreak near a creek. Beyond the windbreak a greying ranch house was falling to pieces. Turner had seen land like this before, but only from the rental car he drove here. There was a hugeness to the landscape, a consuming emptiness that made him feel hopeless, and the wind, though gentle, was cold and found its way easily through his heavy clothes. There was nothing and no one here, and he sensed that there was a capacity for solitude in the world that he had never considered, the possibility of weeks, months, without human contact.

Lloyd looked around, hands on his hips, the shotgun
balanced in the crook of his arm. He walked through the snow about ten feet to his left and stopped, equidistant from two scrubby aspens. He kicked the ground.

"C'mere. Gimme the shovel," he said, and Turner understood for the first time what Lloyd intended to do out here. Turner had only thought of the shovel as a weapon. Now its weight, which a moment ago had given him strength, was making him feel slightly sick.

"Lloyd, you're not going to dig."

Lloyd's face fell. "Well we came this far," he said. Turner did not reply. "Gimme the shovel."

"Lloyd -"

Lloyd's brow furrowed. "Come on, Mr. Turner," he said. "Just give it here!" He lunged for the shovel, and Turner flinched.

"Take this," Lloyd said. He held out the gun. "You're the lookout, okay?"

Turner took it. It was heavy, far heavier than he had imagined. "I don't know how to use this," he said. "I don't know the first thing about it."

"Safety's on," Lloyd said. "See it there? You take that off and you point and you shoot."

The gun was cold, even through Turner's gloves. He watched as Lloyd leaned into the shovel, bringing up a thin load of dirt and snow. "Gonna take awhile," he said. "The ground's still loose but it froze up."
Lloyd labored over the gravesite now, an entirely different person, Turner thought, from the one in class. He grunted, chipping away clods of dirt. Turner grew colder and began to walk in wide circles, clutching the shotgun, dimly afraid it might go off spontaneously. This new, efficient Lloyd was making him nervous, and suddenly Turner thought, I could be out of here right now. I could take the keys from him, and the truck. He stopped, breathing fast from walking, and held the gun tighter. Don't be ridiculous, he thought, and even said it, whispered it, and it died on the wind. He looked around and his eyes fell on the ranch house.

"I'm going to go check out that building," he found himself saying. Good, he thought, good. I need to get away from here.

Lloyd didn't even look up. "Just keep an eye out."

Turner walked across the windbreak, his boots crunching in the snow. The sun had come up behind the ranch house, but it looked distant and frail, like it could never warm anything. Lloyd's shovel clanked behind him.

The house leaned crazily, its boards washed nearly white by light and weather. A doorless, pitched opening framed the interior. Turner paused outside, certain a push could knock the entire thing down, but when he knocked on the wood it sounded solid. He ducked his head and
stepped inside.

Here the darkness was sliced by streaks of light shining through the gaps between boards. Turner stood a moment while his eyes adjusted. Vague shapes clarified and sharpened. A pile of straw and weeds. In a corner, cans stacked in a rough pyramid. Some sort of bunched cloth - a blanket? These things lay on a surprisingly flat dirt floor. The old man had lived here.

Turner's hands hurt, and he looked down to find them wrapped around the shotgun in a crushing grip, one hand on the barrels, the other on the stock. He loosened his fingers, and they throbbed and tingled.

He walked across the room to the blanket, and set the gun on the ground at his feet. Held up to the light, the blanket proved to be olive green, army-issue, rough and heavy. Holes were worn through in places. Turner bunched it up and brought it to his face. It didn't smell like anything but this house: dirt, weeds, sage, dust, indistinguishable from the outdoors.

Turner pulled the blanket around himself and sat down on the straw. It crunched beneath him. The only other sound was the steady complaint of wind. "Hello," he said, but his voice died in the air, and he wondered whether he had spoken at all.

He prodded the straw with his foot and felt something hard there. It was a small wooden box with a crude mountain
scene carved on the lid. Inside, Turner found a deck of cards, and on each card was a photograph of a nude pinup girl. She was perched on a stool, her hands behind her back and her legs crossed at the ankles. The girl was pretty. Her hair was dark and fell across her shoulders in wide curls, and she wore an expression of shock and delight that made Turner feel he was in some way responsible for her nakedness. For a moment he felt watched. But there was nothing but the clammy air and the dead man's few possessions.

He fanned the deck. The pinup girl smiled gamely at him fifty-two times over. Did the old man ever spread her out in the dirt and talk to her? Did he tuck the cards away in the straw and imagine her in the flesh as he slept? Turner cleared a space in the straw and shuffled. Before he laid out the cards, he reached out and moved the gun a little closer.

He was losing his seventh game of solitaire when he heard Lloyd calling his name. He stood fast, his arms and legs waking with a chorus of cracks, then gathered the cards quickly and put them in their box. He shoved the box into his pocket and picked up the shotgun.

"Mr. Turner!"

Outside, the sky had changed. The sun was now covered with clouds, a solid sheet of clouds that had
no edge. The air thickened in every direction and the distant mountains were now indistinct lumps. Snow. None had fallen here yet. Between the trees, Lloyd stood over a mound of dark earth, waving his arm. Turner trotted toward the windbreak.

Lloyd's hands were covered with dirt and blood. The blood was fresh, his own; Turner understood that he had been scraping at the frozen ground with his hands. His face was grim. Turner followed his eyes into the hole.

The hole was about two feet deep, and at the bottom of it lay an old man's face. His forehead was split by a deep, bloodless gash, obviously inflicted with the shovel. The man's skin was grey. It could have been a puddle, reflecting clouds. The eyes were open and opaque, frozen solid. The lips were grey and pulled back to reveal white teeth and an open mouth, filled in with dirt. The hair, the rough beard, grey. His nose was flat from the weight of the dirt and his nostrils were slits, and pulled away from his face was a ratty pink baby's blanket, crusted black with dried blood.

"Jesus," Turner said. "Lloyd." There was no reply. "Lloyd?"

He looked up. Lloyd was looking back the way they had come, his mouth wide open. Footprints led from the truck to the grave, and tire marks over the road.
"Tracks," Lloyd whispered. "Oh, God. Oh, God, Mr. Turner. We left tracks, we're dead, oh I'm so stupid!" He kicked the shovel and it spun across the snow. "We're dead! We're dead!"

Only now did Turner consider the "we," and he felt the beginning of panic itching in his fingers and toes. "Lloyd! Stop it!"

"Oh shit oh shit," Lloyd said.

"Lloyd, it's going to snow! It's going to snow." Lloyd looked into the sky. "You think?"

"Sure. And who's going to come out here?" Right, he thought, who is? He looked around at his bootprints in the snow, and rubbed the bulge the cards made in the pocket of his jeans.

"Maybe nobody."

"Nobody's coming out. There's the wind, too. The snow and the wind."

"Okay," Lloyd said. He nodded, gulping air. "Okay. Okay."

"Nobody's going to know. We're all right here."

The old man gaped out at them from his hole.

"Okay," Lloyd said.

"Now cover him up and let's go."

Lloyd nodded. He stooped over, and Turner suddenly saw a piece of the kid's short life, his embarrassment about being so tall and skinny, years of ducking in school
to try to make himself invisible. This is what he'd look like old, of course. Lloyd turned and walked after the shovel.

They were halfway home when Lloyd finally said something.

"Mr. Turner, he was alive." It was a whisper, and Turner could barely hear it over the noise of the engine.

"What do you mean, he was alive? He definitely looked dead."

"No, when I shot him," Lloyd said. "When I shot him and I went over there, he was alive."

"I don't understand."

"He didn't die right off, he just laid there breathing."

Turner didn't respond. The truck slowed down, and he heard a high, quiet moan escape Lloyd's throat. They began to drift into the right lane.

"Lloyd, steer," Turner said. Lloyd nodded, tears in his eyes. He pulled the truck to a halt on the shoulder and turned off the ignition.

"It was terrible. Oh Mr. Turner, it was so terrible."

"Did he talk to you?"

"No, he didn't say nothing, he just breathed. Oh, God, I'm so sorry Mr. Turner."

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Lloyd hooked his fingers around the wheel and his head slid onto his wrists. "I'm so sorry, it was an accident. Please forgive me, Mr. Turner, I'm so sorry."

Turner reached across the cab and laid his hand on Lloyd's shoulder, and the boy leaned into it, slightly, until Turner was supporting his weight. They stayed like that until the truck grew cold, then Lloyd sat up, started the engine, and pulled onto the highway.

Lloyd didn't show up for the next class, and he didn't call. The snow did come, and it fell for days, and alone in his apartment Turner imagined a cold more bitter than any he had felt, a cold that pierced clothes and skin, that flayed away muscle until all that was left was air on the bones. He cleared his desk of papers and books, unboxed the cards and lined them up, seven across. He added a row of six, then five. When he was finished, he began to flip them over, and one by one the girls disappeared.
It's evening, and I sit at my desk, the window open before me, watching Mrs. Veerenboher shuffle around in her kitchen. The old lady gets up at eight every morning, dresses like she's getting ready for the cotillion, then makes her long loop around town: onto the bus, all the way up Weir and over the bridge, then onto the sidewalk to wander around in her grim way for three hours, stopping in front of each shop and café and taking a contemplative stroll along the tracks. After that she comes home and makes her tea. I know all this because I follow her sometimes. She does the same thing every day.

But tonight things are weird. Mrs. Veerenboher brews the tea and drinks it at the table as usual, but this time she has some trouble. She seems to be walking with a limp. When she sets her teacup down on the table, the tea's got an odd slant to it, and it occurs to me that her window is no longer aligned with mine. This alarms me. I stand up so that I can see the place where
the house meets the ground. One basement window near the front, long boarded up, is half-buried in sod.

I go outside and take a quick walk around the property. From the back, everything looks fine. She's got a clothesline out there that sags like the strings of a broken guitar, and a half-assed flower garden, where the Indian paintbrush and lupins have more or less evicted her perennials. The birdbath is cracked almost in half and it holds no water.

From the side, however, the lean is obvious. The aluminum siding, which is usually parallel to the ground, now veers sharply towards it and almost touches it at the front corner. And in the front, the porch boards have begun to curl and buckle. I take a gentle step onto the porch. Above me, the porch roof has nearly pulled free of the house itself, and is only connected by the long shafts of nails.

I ring the bell. It's a summer evening, very dry, and though it's after nine the sun hasn't yet gone down. I watch it fall while I wait for Mrs. Veerenboher to answer.

"Hello?" she asks when she opens the door. She doesn't appear to recognize me.

"Mrs. Veerenboher," I tell her loudly, "it's me, Greta, the landlord."

"Well aren't you a sweet girl to come by," she says flatly, though I am thirty-six and look at least
that. Her voice is brittle and salty as a pretzel, and her glasses magnify her eyes so that they look vaguely alien. Tonight she's wearing an understated black cotton gown textured with tiny stitched knobs. She also wears black gloves lined at the wrist with white lace.

"Mrs. Veerenboher, would you come outside for a moment?" I ask her, and a mask of suspicion falls across her face. I try to smile in a benevolent way. "I'm afraid there might be something wrong with your house, and I'd like to show it to you."

She shakes her head. "I'm drinking tea right now," she says, and slams the door shut. I hear a rattle as she fastens the latch.

So I wait. For a little while I sit on the porch steps, but it makes me nervous, being there in the lee of the house. I move out into the yard, and watch cars pass. It's Friday night, and the cabs of pickup trucks are stuffed with teenagers smoking cigarettes. They're doing that now, smoking cigarettes. It's cool again. Sometimes they honk at each other as they pass, then execute precarious U-turns in the street, and the girls scream.

I'm beginning to think she's forgotten me when I hear the screen door bang open against the siding. "Well!" she says. She stands on the porch and taps her foot on the boards. "Where did you go, then?"

"I'm here," I tell her, and go to the porch. I
take her arm. Her muscles are stringy and taut under her dress.

I lead her out into the yard and point to the sloping siding. I point back at the porch, where the nails have been exposed. "You see?" I ask her. "Don't things feel a little off in there?"

She squints at the house, and since it's nearly dark now I suspect she can't see anything at all. But she nods, scowling. "God damn!" she says.

"I'm afraid it might be dangerous. I'd like it if you came and stayed at my house tonight."

But she won't do it. She shakes off my hand and climbs the steps. "It's going to do that one of these days," she says bitterly. "You can't expect it isn't going to do that to you."

Back at my place I sit in the tub and look at the newspaper clipping I've got hanging, framed, on the wall. I got it out of a small-town newspaper seven years ago. The small town is Dixmoor, Illinois. I lived there. The clipping is a grainy photograph of a woman standing on the high crossbeam of an electrical tower. Power lines are laced above her in a thick web. The caption reads: "Threatening to Jump: A woman stands atop an electrical tower, contemplating suicide in Dixmoor Friday. The woman was rescued by police and fire authorities minutes after
this photo was taken."

I find that caption funny for several reasons. One is the word "atop," so arch and silly, the kind of word you'd find in a sentimental romantic-era poem. Also, by the time the photo was taken, the woman was no longer "contemplating suicide," and the police and fire departments, therefore, did not "rescue" her. I know this because the woman is me, and if you look closely at the photo you'll see that I'm hanging on tightly with my fingers, and that my eyes are closed and my face is pointed out and up, not down, as it probably would have been had I wanted to jump.

All the same, I had to leave Dixmoor. I lost my job teaching elementary school, and also my husband. The job was the far greater loss, I'm afraid. I took what I could get and came out here, to Montana. Property was cheap then. I bought and sold. Now I'm in a holding pattern, as they say at the airport. I take long walks and look out the window. I think. When the mailman comes, I don't run to the door, or even look up from my book. It isn't a bad life but there's not much to look forward to except baths and meals, and Mrs. Veerenboher, who doesn't realize she's being watched.

First thing the next morning I get on the phone to the water company, figuring something's collapsed under there. It takes me several transfers, and I have to explain
everything half a dozen times, but finally I get to talk to Mr. Edgar Deernose, the guy in charge of one thing or another. I give him the dirt once more.

"That's 918 Weir," I tell him. "I'll be waiting on the porch."

"Okey-dokey," he says. "I'll be there in an hour or so."

I've got some time to explain the visit to Mrs. Veerenboher. I sit at her kitchen table with her and tell her that the man is going to have to come inside and go down to the basement, and that we could go there with him if we liked. "If we must," she says with a fatalistic sigh.

Edgar Deernose is a very handsome man. His skin is dark and unblemished and he wears his hair in a braid. When he comes in, he tells me, "Looks like it's sinking, all right." I nod and show him the basement door.

Mrs. Veerenboher leans close to me, cups her hand around her mouth, and says, quietly, "That man is an Indian!" I look at Mr. Deernose to see if he's offended by this, but if he is he doesn't show it. I'm sure he's been insulted before. He unclips a flashlight from his belt, smiles at Mrs. Veerenboher and me, and opens the door.

The basement is a monochromatic jumble of junk. It looks like everything has been here for a hundred years,
though I only rented this house to her a few years ago, and it was empty then. There are mountains of cardboard boxes, an entire rack of lingerie looking very grey and unsexy on bent metal hangers, a pile of old tires, several primitive-looking lawnmowers, a bowling bag. Mr. Deernose shines the light over everything. The floor glints and I realize with a start that I'm standing in about half an inch of water.

"What's this!" says Mrs. Veerenboher. The hem of her dress trails in the water.

"Yeah, looks like you've got some seepage here," Mr. Deernose says. He walks to a wall and runs the light along the floor, then does the same to an adjacent wall. Finally he stops, sets the light on a box, and moves several others. Mrs. Veerenboher frowns, suspicious, I imagine, of his motives.

With the boxes moved, it's clear there's a giant crack in the foundation. It runs the length of the wall at chest level, from one corner to the other, and is three or four inches wide. My heart sinks.

"Yep," Mr. Deernose says. "Your foundation's not looking too good here." He shines the light into the crack and everything around us goes dark. Mrs. Veerenboher grabs my arm and I'm shocked at her strength.

"The light's gone," she says.

"It's all right," I tell her.
"C'mere," Mr. Deernose tells us, and shines the flashlight in our direction. Mrs. Veerenboher has not let go. We shuffle together, sack-race-style, to the crack in the wall. When we get there he points the flashlight back into the crack and we bend over to look.

"Good Lord," Mrs. Veerenboher says.

It's a tunnel, dug out of the earth. Its walls are uneven and carved, it seems, out of some pale rock. The tunnel's floor is six or so feet below the crack, and it's easily that wide. Just at the edge of the flashlight's beam, the tunnel curves lower and out of sight. There is an earthy, slightly alkaline odor, carried through the crack on a gentle push of cool air.

"See," Mr. Deernose tells us, "what you have here isn't any kind of water company project, for sure. Might want to call sewer. Can't say it looks like that, either, though."

"So why's the place sinking?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Probably more holes under here. House got built on bad ground."

I look back into the crack. Maybe there was an underground stream here once, eating away at the earth. I wonder if the ground under my house looks like this. It seems likely. "I want to go upstairs now," Mrs. Veerenboher says, her hands tighter around my arm. But I linger until Mr. Deernose pulls the light from the crack.
Whenever Mrs. Veerenboher goes out, she carries a strange handbag you can see into. It's made of lucite. I've never seen anything else like it, and I can't get her to tell me where she got it. It's like a small suitcase, but it tapers toward the top, and its handle is a stiff transparent arc affixed with brass screws. It also has a brass clasp. When Mr. Deernose leaves, she picks it up and puts on a hat. Today her dress is yellow and puffed at the sleeves. She looks like Shirley Jones in Oklahoma, except for the dark water stain along the dress's hem.

"You may stay if you like," she says, "but it's time for me to go out." She clutches the bag with both hands. I can see everything in it. There are a lot of snacks; chocolate bars, mints, Smarties. Many of the Smarties have slipped from their packages, and the bottom of the bag is lined with their dust. There are several tubes of lipstick. One is buried in a corner and has no cap, and a bloody pool of lipstick has crusted around it. There are scarves, matches, cigarettes, though I've never seen her smoke. There are a lot of tiny pieces of paper with things written on them. I can only read one from this angle: Dear Steven, it says, and then nothing afterward. It's in that fastidious, slanting hand that old people write in. Mrs. Veerenboher's face is regally pale and her shoes are white.
"I think I'll just go home," I tell her.

"Very well," she says, and I follow her out the door.

I call everybody, the sewer company, the zoning board, the gas people, the electric people. Nobody knows anything. I don't like to explain things to bureaucrats. In Dixmoor, they asked me, Are you aware that it's illegal to trespass on land owned by a public utility? Of course I did, I told them. How could they have thought that would matter to me?

When I was a kid, my parents took me on a road trip. It wasn't very memorable, a lot of car sickness and argument, but I remember distinctly the Grand Canyon. We pulled off at a scenic overlook, and there, beyond the iron railing, was a deep and meandering stretch of gorge, the Colorado River a mere busted shoelace curled at the bottom. And the railing - so flimsy, so small, so easily breached. Don't get me wrong, I was not a morbid child, but this thrilled me, the great power the canyon afforded, and what a poor deterrent was the railing. Jumping would be easy, and final, like nothing else I had ever imagined. I was terrified and delighted, though it would be twenty years before I would understand why.

I got married to a man who was willing to put himself into the world's hands. He bought things on credit, borrowed
money, paid for the car by the month. For awhile I thought I liked it. Then I started driving myself crazy with household tasks, scrubbing for hours because I knew that things would get clean, cooking things in gigantic quantities and freezing them so I'd know they were there. In school one day I refused to let a third grader go to the lavatory and she peed in her seat. I burst into tears, to the astonishment of my class, and apologized profusely to the girl, humiliating her even further.

The next morning I hopped in the car, drove out to the country, and walked across a field to where the tower stood, surrounded by chain-link fence. I climbed the fence. I shimmied up a steel beam until I got to where the ladder began, then climbed through the cold air to the top.

Did I want to die? I don't think so. I only wanted that life to end, and a new one to take its place. And that's what happened. I decided to jump, and then I stood there. I stood there until I changed my mind.

I take a long nap until the grade school across the street lets out, and the children's voices wake me. I stretch and move to the front window, and watch the buses pull up, and the children hop on. Sometimes I actually miss teaching. It wasn't a job without rewards. Sometimes they got it, they understood, and that was good. Sometimes
you could figure them out, if only a little. Even now, though, as I watch these kids climb onto the bus, I worry about them going home, which is where all the real learning takes place. Parents get so bent out of shape about what their kids are taught in school, how the other kids treat them, who touches them. Believe me, that isn't the problem. They're safe at school, safer than they'll ever be.

When they've all gone, I hear a rattling sound outside, as if the wind were blowing cans down the street. But there's no wind. I step onto my porch, and see an amazing sight. Mrs. Veerenboher's house has sunk further, several feet, both the front and back now. The porch has buckled and come apart like a wave-whipped dinghy, and Mrs. Veerenboher, in her yellow dress, is perched on a broken board, tearing the screen off her screen door. The door is stuck. It usually opens out, but there's too much wood in the way. She's straining, her legs spread for support, and I hear little grunts escaping her throat.

"Mrs. Veerenboher!" I call out. "Get away from there!"

She's got the screen off now and is working the inside doorknob with one of her thin hands. With the other she holds the lucite handbag, and it jiggles in the air. The door opens for her. She crouches, her dress tenting between her knees, and duck-walks through the screen door frame, the handbag clunking along behind her.
The screen catches on her dress and her hat falls off. She struggles for a moment with the dress, then frees it, but she forgets the hat. The door shuts behind her.

I run in and call the police. "There's an old woman in danger," I tell them. "She's in a collapsing building." I give them the address, then run outside and crawl in the door. I bring her hat with me.

She's already got the water on for tea, but she has to keep her hand on the handle of the kettle to keep it from sliding. I'm finding it hard to balance.

"Oh," she says. She points, squinting, to her hat, which is in my hand. "Where did you get that?"

"Mrs. Veerenboher," I tell her. "We've got to leave now. The house is sinking. We'll be trapped."

"Time for tea," she says, and turns back to the stove.

"We can have tea at my house. Just come out with me. Let's not get stuck in here."

"Better stuck in than out," she says. "You can leave the hat on the table."

Just then the house dips, a foot maybe, and I fall over and bang my knee. I cry out. There's a sound of boards snapping somewhere, and glass breaking, and a very loud rumble from below. Mrs. Veerenboher is still standing, though, her hand on the kettle. Beneath it the electric coil glows like magma. She doesn't look scared, only
surprised. After a moment, she reaches up with her free hand and opens a cupboard. A shower of cups and glasses tumbles out, shattering on the counter and stove and floor. She yelps. Then she picks a mug, still intact, from the mess and pours water into it.

"Dammit," she says. "Where's that bag?" She pokes through the debris and pulls out a teabag. Then she dunks it into the water.

"Mrs. Veerenboher," I plead. I'm near tears now. "Come with me." I look out the window and see my own house sliding slowly up, out of sight. There are sirens. "We can make it out a window." I get up and scramble for her, thinking I'll pick her up and shove her out, but she rears back with the teacup. I stop. I don't know how hot the water is. Then the ground comes into view in the window, and the electric lights go out.

I hear a scraping sound behind me and turn. It's the handbag, creeping across the table. It falls with a clatter and its contents fan out onto the floor. Mrs. Veerenboher flinches, startled, but then seems to decide something. She nods gently, once. All around us, things grind and creak, and I think I hear voices outside.

"I'd like to stay here," Mrs. Veerenboher tells me. The light grows dimmer. "Now if you please." Her face is beautiful and calm, and it takes me a moment before I see that her glasses are gone. The windows are nearly
covered now. We face each other, silent, the darkness filling the room.

I turn around and grab a packet of matches from the floor near the handbag. "May I have these?" I ask her.

She leans toward me a little, as if just now noticing I am there. "Well, all right," she says quietly, though certainly she can't see what I've got. She lets go of the kettle and it falls to the floor with a clang. For a second, she looks lost there, bent over. Then she straightens, a faintly luminous object in her frilly dress. "Careful," she says now, and her voice is strong.

"Thank you," I tell her. I still don't move.
"I think I'll just stand and wait now," she says.
"Yes."
"Well, then," she says. I can see only outlines, and I know there's not much hope of getting myself or Mrs. Veerenboher out through a window now. The only way to go is down. She stands there, defiantly sipping from the teacup, and panic begins to sing in my feet and ankles.

"Goodbye," I tell her.

I feel for the basement door and pull it open, then start down. When I hit bottom I light a match. Things look different from before. Boxes are overturned, their contents spilled out. The concrete floor is cracked, and chunks of it jut up at oblique angles. Through the
cracks is darkness. My fingers burn and I drop the match. I light another. Ahead, the broken wall is nearly gone, a giant hole in its place. Beyond it the tunnel is wide and open. The floor joists are bowed above like the hull of a wooden ship. I hurry to the hole. The earth moves around me.

The match goes out when I step through, but I keep going, faster now, my hands out, feeling. I fumble and drop the matches, then recover them in the dark. They're wet, but perhaps not all of them. Far behind me, the house goes down shuddering and screaming, and I'm wondering where I am - under the street? The school? It smells good and strong here, and there's air coming from somewhere, and I'm reminded of standing on that tower, looking out over everything, the giant flat expanse of earth, and the cornfields upon cornfields and the thin lines of trees that separated them, the town and its streets and the cars and people moving below. And it was all working. It was like a smooth stone whose perfection masked the muddle of atoms inside; the chaos was invisible, clouds moved slow across the sky, and I decided I could live with it.