GLORY DAYS

When Dirk was little, like six swear to god, there was an old guy down the road used to call him a chickenfucker.

"How you doin' lil chickenfucker?" the man would shout from the porch of his house, which looked like the last tobacco-stained tooth jutting from his lower gum.Dirk didn't know quite what a chickenfucker was, but he knew he felt shame and fear when he heard it.

One day he told his dad. Mr. Lux squinted into the bowels of a John Deere, as if awaiting divine translation from the machine. "What in the fuck" he said.

Next morning Dirk followed his dad's bootprints up the mud-logged road to the neighbor's incisor. The man tapped the bill of his bleached Rockies cap, smiling vaguely at Mr. Lux.

"You call my son a chickenfucker?"

"What?"

The smile didn't drop.

"You call my son a chickenfucker?"

"Why the hell would I do that?"

"I don't know, but you did it."

"Boy's a liar."

The old man's smile slurped back into his face the moment Mr. Lux vaulted the fence. Soon he found himself tilted back over his own floorboards, a boot holding his chair on the diagonal while Mr. Lux's red fist clutched a bundle of shirt and no small amount of ash-white chest hair under the ball of his ancient chin.

Dirk didn't hear what was said. And when he grew up he didn't believe what he thought he saw, which was his dad cracking his fist twice into the old man's puckered face.

The memory he did trust happened a few days later, when he was walking home past the tooth. The old creep waved, and before Dirk could run, he hobbled down to the fence.

"I'm sorry about calling you a chickenfucker."

I'll bet you are, thought Dirk, neither answering nor making eye contact.

"I didn't mean nothing by it. It's just when I was your age we all used to fuck chickens."

Well, I never fucked a chicken, Dirk thought, even if I fucked about everything else in my life. He was 23 years old, had two kids he saw once a week with their mother, the stripper (which title he put first told a lot about his present attitude towards her) who was, he was 99% certain, now sleeping with his former best friend; he had blinding migraines and bouts of unbelievable goddamn depression he blamed on the six concussions of his teen years; he had a smoking problem definitely, a drinking problem probably, and to top it all he was basically working at a summer camp for faggoty wannabe cowboys -- sorry nothing against gay people.

Plus he actually had fucked livestock once, now he thought about it. During a summer in the processing plant saving up to buy a ring, he'd jerked himself with the rubbery meat of a butchered cow's vagina. Was it a dare? Was he trying to make someone laugh? Or hazing that one little virgin who came on for a week? He couldn't remember that either. But God he wished he was the kind of person who never had to remember doing it at all.

Boots in the hall. 5:15 on the clock. Jingling time. He was at the door before Glen could knock. No delicacy. She'd wake up half the bunkhouse. Scanning Dirk's bedhead and nude torso, her face pulled a sarcastic "Mornin', Sunshine." She clomped towards the front door.

They saddled in silence and rode into the North Pasture. The first horses were lingering by the gate. They knew what time it was. The better part of the herd the riders found in willow-lined depressions up above the first rise. "Hey boys!" Glen shouted, her German Shepherd darting in and out of the potentilla. The horses snorted and trotted down to the gate shaking off sleep.

Dirk and Glen pulled up at the same time. "Five?" she asked.

"I was gonna ask you."

"Darn it. I was looking forward to a nap before breakfast."

Nature suggested the missing horses were together and that they were either close to water or close to a regular trail. French Creek checked both boxes, so Dirk followed Glen into the marsh below Fan Rock. Beaver dams had backed the creek up into a series of ponds with a tendency to spill and spread. About halfway down the chain was a fence, and the fence was halfway to the ground.

"I thought you said you fixed this."

Glen was off her horse and dragging barbed wire out of the wet grass.

"I did," she said. "I fixed all that over there." She pointed at the wire running across the dams and into the aspen on the far side of the ponds. "This," she continued, "was supposed to be Ryan."

Dirk dismounted and helped clear the nodding posts off the trail. They'd have

to right the thing later, but for now better to keep it from killing someone.

"There's a metaphor for your relationship right there." Dirk's voice got high when he was joking and higher still when he thought he was actually funny.

"Who taught you metaphor?" Glen wondered, her cheeks reddening.

"Hey, I almost went to college."

"Me, too!" said Glen.

"And look where we are now."

Glen let out one of her barking laughs and smiled on as she slung her way back into the saddle. It hadn't occurred to Dirk until that moment that other peoples' lives contained happy ironies.

He really had almost been to college. He swore to every one who would listen. Dual-scholarship: baseball and football. He was a quarterback and a second-baseman. But senior year his dad moved the family out of state, and that was that.

You had to wonder what his life would be like. With a degree. With fraternity brothers. With a Colorado college girl. If he'd stayed healthy and kept his grades up he might've not even needed to work a job those four years. God what a dream. Instead he'd been in a saddle or under a hood every day since he set foot in Wyoming.

If his sons got a scholarship he sure as shit wouldn't move them an inch until those little chickenfuckers had their diplomas. He couldn't really see it coming to that. The boys weren't much for sports so far, and even though their mom had been pretty smart in school and beloved by several teachers who still kept in touch, they got their classroom discipline from their father. Since Callie had gone back to work Dirk wasn't too sure who was checking the boys' homework. Maybe Carlos. They'd get Fs for sure.

Callie's red Honda rounded the causeway into crew parking. Dirk could see Tate and Mikey fighting in the back. Before the car even stopped they were in his arms.

"Hey, bubs!"

"Dad!"

He felt warmer, their bellies pressed against his torso, their cheeks against his cheeks. He breathed.

"Where am I taking this?" Callie held a large brown sack of Chinese food inside a larger plastic bag. Her eyes passed over Dirk as if he were a distant relative she visited out of obligation, bringing take-out and DVDs from town. They used to

fuck in the bed of his truck during free periods. They used to fall asleep on the phone.

"I figured we'd eat on the porch. It's nice out."

Callie looked with deep but unsurprised concern at the front of the Bunkhouse, where broken chairs with water-stained cushions, Coors cans, dip cups, twine, dog kennels, mud-crusted boots, and a few weapons competed for scant evening sunlight.

"Is this your house?" Mikey asked.

"Sure is. You wanna see it?"

"Yeah!" the boys yelled.

Dirk turned and led them inside, knowing Callie would stay out to see to the dinner table issue. A part of him wanted her to see his living arrangement. The squalor he'd accepted. A part of him had got used to the shame and proud of it. But that wasn't why they were eating Chinese at the Bunkhouse. Guest dinners cost $20 a plate in the dining hall.

Tate and Mikey scrambled over Dirk's bed. Leaped up to touch their dad's rifle. Stole a Snickers each from his candy bag on the dresser. They took things in stride. He often wondered whether any of this would seem remarkable to them when they were older and guessed it depended on whether anything normal came into their lives against which their dad's idiotic circumstances might appear as they really were.

On the porch Callie had laid out the boxes on a Yeti cooler and arranged a mix of possible furniture. "You have silverware?"

Her tone annoyed Dirk, so he took one back with her.

"Didn't they give you some?"

"That's chopsticks, and the boys don't use em."

"I know how," Tate claimed.

"No, you don't," said Mikey. Nonsense broke out between them as Dirk nudged on with Callie, the possibility of a fight too tempting to back off now.

"They give plastic forks, too."

"Not this time."

"Always."

"You wanna look?"

"Yeah, I wanna look."

"Anyway, I don't want the boys eating with plastic. It poisons you. And it depletes the sperm count."

"What the hell do they need a sperm count for?"

"Not for now jackass. But maybe one day."

"You're making that up."

"Am not. I read about it online."

"Where, your crystal group?"

"It was on a news site. Are you getting silverware or are we eating with our hands?"

"Shit I wished I'd known," said Dirk, his voice climbing, "I'd have been eating off plastic every day of high school. Get us out of this whole situation."

"Don't I know it."

But if there's one thing he never could quite bring himself to regret, it was the boys. Callie felt the same way. And they both had to sit there eating their Chinese and knowing it.

After dinner he walked Tate and Mikey down to the barn to meet the miniature donkeys. Callie changed and snuck into the hot tub, exciting a few young guests who'd had the same idea. Dirk was glad she was gone because it made it less awkward accepting the oohs and aahs of his co-workers whenever they bumped into the kids. Hell yes he was proud of them. Why shouldn't he be? He didn't need Callie there reminding everybody the kids were on a rare visit and wouldn't be spending the night. Or, on the other hand smiling sweetly and touching his arm as they glowed over the snotmonsters. Sometimes remembering they'd made something beautiful got her sentimental. And sometimes her getting sentimental got Dirk sentimental. And from sentimental he could get so sad he'd punch a hole in the bathroom door. The boys had found that hole and the flattened Coors box he'd used to cover it hilarious during their brief visit to the Bunkhouse.

"Which one's this, dad?"

"Whatever you want. He doesn't know the difference."

Mini-donkeys were supposed to be affectionate. Like big dogs, basically. Dirk had never seen any sign of it out of these two jerks. They seemed bored and depressed. Always waiting for someone to come along and lead them to their real lives even if they'd be too stubborn to follow.

Which made him think about his plans for the fall. Callie had asked him at dinner. Was he going back to his cousins' ranch? God he hoped not. Moving cattle as the weather turned. What about that auto-shop in Sheridan? Wrong direction from the kids. But fuck at least there'd be something to do at night.

Tate was crying. Maybe one of the donkeys bit him. Whatshisname. Dirk carried him back to the car in one arm while holding Mikey's hand with the other. Tate stopped crying when he got into his seat. He looked half-asleep

before Callie even started pulling out. Mikey stared hard out the opposite window while Dirk and Callie said a terse goodbye, concluding with "at least you've got a place to stay for a while."

All in all not a bad visit.

He was putting back a couple of beers with Ryan at the corner of the bar when Glen walked in.

"Fuck, I'm out," Ryan said, standing.

"Don't they make you work tonight?"

"After six years they can't make me do anything."

"But where are you gonna drink?"

"Shit, this is a National Forest, isn't it?"

Ryan and Glen slid silently past one another. Glen tossed her duster over the jackalope and leaned on the bar beside Dirk. She was wearing a cotton shirt the color of the local granite, ribbed like his tanktops and somehow both clingy and loose. When her body levered forward to shout a drink order at Morgan, he could see the back of the shirt swooped so low it basically wasn't there. Instead a long view of bra strap and some kind of Japanese-looking wild animal tattoo. She levered back and turned towards him. Her face was made up. Her hair was put up. She smiled, and he could see the perfect triangle daggers of her canines.

"Wanna dance?"

Wrangler hands are always rough, but Glen's were a whole other level. Swollen, red, and a texture not far from un-sanded wood. Dirk liked how they felt in his. He wasn't a dancer. There was a lot he never learned to do for fear of being called gay. But he could hold her hand and shuffle something like the house two-step while Emmylou Harris sang

I've been around a time or two
Well I don't know baby maybe you've been around too

What he couldn't figure was why Glen was smiling at him. It almost felt like something was happening, like ground was moving beneath his two left feet, but he knew the evidence of his senses couldn't be right. The ride he was on didn't go anywhere but down.

Well there's another dance
All you gotta do is say yes

Other couples swayed and spun around them. Ranch couples. Guest couples.

Crew with guests. How did Dirk get here in the middle of this fruity saloon overlooked by a be-spectacled moose trying to count time, trying to remember something he wasn't sure he wanted to remember, trying to forget all of that and feel Glen's beaten hands...

And if you're rough and ready for love
Honey I'm tougher than the rest

The song ended, and Glen leaned into Dirk's chest to be dipped when the air cracked and Dirk's knees hit the pine-wood floor. A high chuckle sloshed behind him.

"Slapass Saturday, baby!" Ryan wheezed. "You watch yourself!" Dirk kept his eyes on the ground -- not on Glen's icy expression, not on the uncertain smiles of nearby guests -- he felt his ass had been lifted into his chest and forced out all the air. He was seething.

"It's Friday, you dumb hick."

"Oh shit," Ryan laughed. "Call it a warning then."

Dirk knew exactly what the warning was. He'd been caught dancing with Ryan's old girl. If anyone here had an eye for deserved pain...

The fuse sputtered and went out. Dirk laughed.

"I knew you'd come back."

"You didn't know."

"I did know. Because you owe me a drink."

He threw an arm around Ryan and walked him to the bar right past Glen.

Around midnight Morgan had closed down, Bailee had walked the last of the fishing guides home, and Dirk was on the back porch of the saloon staring at his phone while Ryan smoked.

"Says 'call me.'"

"So call her," Ryan said, now peeing off the balcony with his penis held in the same hand as his lit cigarette.

"I don't have an iPhone. Everyone knows I don't have an iPhone."

"Not this hottie."

"Wifi's fucked, so I can't call her anyway. What are we talking about?"

"Cowboy Phone?"

"I'm not paying money to call. I don't even know who it is."

"If you're not paying money, why are you calling?"

"Could be an emergency."

"Could be a booty call."

"I'm not against paying money for that."

"And it could be an emergency."

"From a number I don't know?"

Ryan shrugged and shoved his dick back in his jeans.

"Only one way to find out."

As a matter of fact there were at least two ways to find out, and Dirk, his head lightened by Jack Daniels, decided to try the second one. He jumped the porch rails and started walking up the driveway.

"Where the hell are you going?" Ryan shouted after him. Dirk didn't bother answering. "You're not gonna walk to the mesa!" And he wasn't. Like all wranglers, Dirk hated walking.

A minute later the two were at the FUN Gate, watching shadows ripple across the road.

"Nah-uh," Ryan shook his head. "Tanner'll fucking kill you. He might even fire you, too."

"Tanner isn't gonna find out shit." Dirk slipped through the gate and approached the first horse he could see clearly, which just happened to be Butch, a mini whose chief job was ferrying four-year-olds on pony rides. Perfect, Dirk, thought: I'm too drunk to climb a tall one anyway.

He eased up and stroked the little guy's neck. "Hey, Butchie Boy. Ready to do me a favor?" The horse's expression could not be seen to change. Taking silence as consent, Dirk threw his right leg over Butch's back, and grabbed a fistful of mane.

"Now I seen it," Ryan laughed from the dark beyond the gate. "I don't believe it. But I seen it." Dirk's heels dragged the dirt as he gave Butch's sides a squeeze and pointed him up the hill. The ride was bumpy. One buck and the ride might've left Dirk in a ditch til morning. But Butch was a professional who'd carried more poorly behaved customers, and in time he carried Dirk to the crest of the drive, where a sign pointed the way to Hunter Mesa. Here, at this very point, a mysterious phenomenon persisted, beaming out of the sky in a circle no wider than the throw of a spotlight. Due to some obscure confluence of satellites, antennae relays, wave-physics, the peculiar glacial carving of the mountain, who the fuck knows, was a bubble of cell service.

Dirk dug out his phone and called the unknown number.

"Oh, thank God," said a voice he knew. A hundred times it had lied to him he would always be loved.

"Whose phone are you using?" he asked Callie.

"It's a friend's. Mine's out of battery."

Carlos. Motherfucker.

"What do you want?"

"Whoa."

"I'm on the mesa, Cal. You know I don't get service. What do you want?"

"Are you drunk?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"I'm worried about you, Dirk. I don't like the boys seeing you living like that." She was drunk.

"Made me real proud, too."

"I mean, gol, I'm glad you got a job and a place to piss, but --"

"Is your friend there?"

"What friend? Oh. No. I'm outside."

He pictured her on the weed-brushed concrete step into their old back yard. She'd kept the bottom half of a Garfield piggy bank in the grass on the left for an ashtray they'd each neglect to empty until rain would come and make the sight unbearable. Probably it was gone now. Probably she was scratching mosquito bites on her bare legs and sucking from a Juul like everyone else this summer.

"So what's up, you miss me?"

His anger at being summoned for nothing was giving way to a lazy longing, the dopey, sinful pleasure of falling into old patterns.

"I see you every week."

"Not as much as I see you." That got a little breath, the outline of a laugh.

"Who did you think was texting?"

"Shit I thought it might be the kids. I was worried."

"You were drunk. You thought it was a booty call."

"A man can dream can't he?"

"Who did you think it was?"

God just hearing that playful tone in her voice. Dirk shifted atop Butch, noticing he'd started to get hard.

"I don't know her name, but she's got bigass titties."

"Probably told you you could fuck her in the ass, too."

"I was thinking of going for a high-speed lane change."

Callie's voice cooled. "Nobody likes that joke."

"It's not a joke when I do it."

"Dirk."

She was wrong, too. Randall had laughed his ass off when Dirk told him about it in the showers. That was his first week on the ranch. Before Randall went

crazy. Before Dirk had really known what kind of hell he'd earned for himself.

"That's gross, and I don't like it," Callie said.

"You don't have to like it. I'm not fucking you." How was it all souring so quickly?

"Hey."

"Hey, yourself. You called me to flirt. I'm drunk and straddling a horse shorter than my dick. I'm gonna flirt how I want to."

"I didn't call you to flirt."

"Alright then go back inside to Carlos. He's probably lonely."

"I'm not with Carlos."

"You think I don't know when you're lying? Whose phone is it?"

"I'm not with Carlos. I wouldn't do that to you."

"You don't know what you'd do to me. Tell that Slenderman-looking beaner motherfucker that I know what he's up to, and I'll stomp the taste out of his mouth next time I see him."

"You're being a brat. That's your best friend."

"He always wanted you."

"He was polite. Unlike some people."

"I don't know how polite jerking it to someone else's girl is."

"Leave Carlos outta this, we're not talking about him."

"We're not talking about anything else are we? Unless you're still thinking about coming up here and sucking my dick."

"Fuck you, Dirk."

"That's what I'm saying."

Callie hanging up on him was no longer much of a disturbance. Most of their talks ended that way. Butch munched on a tall lupine. Dirk leaned back and stared at the moon without noticing it.

"Dirk, you've got Davis, Devon, and Berkeley. Riding a New Buff."

Dirk lifted his head so Tanner would know he'd heard the ride list. He'd actually missed the names, not that it mattered. Other wranglers were stirring up dust around him. In a second he'd have to drag himself upright and start saddling. Maybe two seconds.

"Fun night?" Glen brushed by him, leading a sorrel and pursued by her German Shepherd, Cochise.

"Never heard of one." Dirk said, squinting into the sun rising behind her.

The thing is Dirk never should've been a wrangler. He had the expertise; he

had more time in the saddle than almost anyone at the ranch. But the bulk of the job, the really important part, when it came down to it, was talking to wealthy guests who'd come from all over the world to play cowboy. And Dirk had as much patience for them as his skull did for last night's whisky.

"Where you from, Dirk?"

This was Davis, the kindly blue-eyed father's third attempt at least at making conversation. The other two had both been based on humorous observations regarding the similarity of the wrangler's name to that of Davis's older daughter.

"Oh around here." Dirk cranked his head around to observe Devon the 10-year-old's struggle with her horse, Ouray.

"Really? I didn't know anyone was from around here."

"Squeeze him harder," Dirk ordered. "Don't let him eat." He turned to face forward. There was chatter over the radio, and it was affecting his headache, so he reached back and shut it off. If only guests had a dial like that.

"Beautiful area," Davis marveled. They were actually in a dense growth of 30-year-old pines, the new generation born from the Lost Fire of '88. After three decades the trees were just barely tall enough to block out the horizon in all directions. God knows what the hell Dad saw that was so beautiful.

They clomped on at a walk, Dirk thinking about Callie's voice when she first picked up last night and whether or not he could sneak a cigarette at some point during the ride.

"Isn't this supposed to be a loping ride?" The trail was narrow and full of blind turns. Only an idiot would want to run here.

"Y'all wanna lope?" Dirk shouted without looking back. He felt Frito perk up beneath him and knew the other horses had done the same at the familiar melody of the question. With a light heel-tap, Frito rocked forward and the new pines began to whizz by on either side.

There were shouts from behind. There was a thunder of hooves. There was the rasp of needles ripping along his purple uniform shirt. "The car wash" they called this section, for the way branches leaned out over the trail like industrial scrubbers.

Frito burst into a short meadow, and Dirk remembered to hold up his hand in signal for the line behind him to stop. Only no one was behind him. He waited another moment in total silence, torn between an awakening sense of panicked responsibility and his craving for that cigarette. Finally, he made a kissy noise at Frito and trotted back into the car wash.

There were at least two horses without riders. Not good. They were blocking

the trail, but Dirk could see behind them that Davis and Berkeley were both on the ground. Dad was on his feet, at least. The teenage girl was crying. And for some reason her shirt was off.

Dirk looped his lead rope around his belt and leapt off Frito, shoving through the riderless duo to get to the scene.

"What are you doing?" Davis was asking Berkeley, "put your shirt back on." The girl jerked at his touch and then jerked again for good measure, like a dog shaking off water.

"It's got needles in it!" she cried. She was scratching at herself in a desperate war against phantom pine leaves.

"What happened?" Dirk asked.

"I don't know, she got tossed. What are you doing loping in here?"

"You wanted to lope."

Dirk noticed the yellow sweatshirt on the ground and put the rest together. The girl had been scraped by a few branches, decided to put an extra layer on, and spooked her horse. From there it was a short trip to introduce her ass and the ground.

"You hurt?" he asked Berkeley. She shook her tear-streaked face and continued to scratch all the bare skin above her belly.

"All right, let's get back on then."

"There's needles!" Berkeley cried.

"She has a thing," the younger sister explained.

"Well, she can take the rest off if she wants, but she's still gotta ride home."

"Hey, that's uncalled for," said Dad.

"Put your shirt on while you're on the ground. Don't spook the horse again." Dirk squeezed back through the other horses and lit a cigarette while he waited for his instructions to be enacted.

"Jesus Christ," little Devon muttered from the back.

So that's how Dirk got busted back to assistant maintenance man. The position came minus $200 a month and all the prestige these Dude Ranch fuckers attached to the title of wrangler. It came with fewer free drinks (zero free drinks, in fact) and with hours of listening to the head maintenance man -- who looked like a retired lesbian -- drone on about...something. It came with a blow to the admiration in the eyes of his boys, who held a precious sense of romance about people who worked on horseback. It came with an increase in the "didn't I tell you?" in Callie's voice and a corresponding decrease in the "don't you sometimes pictures us rolling around one more time?"

With all that Dirk was satisfied. Not happy. Fuck happy. He hadn't been really happy, like kid-happy, since he was on the football field. Or even grown-up-happy without the aid of alcohol since Mikey was born. He was satisfied because it was exactly what he deserved. And he didn't have to talk to any guests or pretend he was the kind of person worth talking to. Who hadn't fucked up everything in his life. Back at the shop, he could sit among the fucked things, unseen, unknown, completely unaccounted for.

That's what he was doing when Glen came in through the garage carrying a 12-pack of Coors Banquets.

"Miss you at the barn." She stood there. No dog. No duster. Her black hat shaded her eyes from the overhead.

"No you don't."

"No, we don't, but don't contradict me." She brushed past him close enough he could smell the corrals on her as she plopped the Banquets on the work bench.

"Don't I owe you a 12-pack for my fuck-up?"

She tapped the box like the head of a good dog. "I paid it for you. And since you don't work for us anymore I forfeited the payment back to me. Want one?"

"One?"

Glen laughed and pried open the case. She handed him a cold bottle then pulled another for herself.

"Cheers," she said, clinking against his.

"To the bottom."

"This ain't the bottom. I've been around a time or two. You're only about halfway down I'd say." Suddenly his skin blushed just above his knee. He looked down and saw Glen's rough, red hand resting on his jeans. "And I think maybe if you didn't have such a horseshit attitude, you'd see things are looking up."

Dirk swallowed. He stared into the flash of her green eyes beneath the broad brim of her hat.

"I was talking about the bottle," he said, in a voice just like a little boy's.

INTERLUDE: PORCH MAN

Nah, the dumbest guy I know worked here was Porch Man. Neal. He was from California. Near San Francisco I think. Dude was like six three, smelled like fried butt, grew the rattiest, skinny-ass beard, you know that thing that hangs off a moose's neck?

We called him Porch Man because he spent all his free time on the porch of the Bunkhouse. Just chillin there listening to Pantera or some shit. You'd ask him what's up, and he'd say "Porchin'." He even slept out there. He had the front room, but his ass would get so drunk he'd fall asleep right on the boards.

Rachel hired him as a wrangler, but it turned out he'd never been on a horse before, so Tanner made him Barn Bitch. He didn't give a fuck. He was there to party. He'd drink half a handle, then wander down to the saloon and do this stanky-leg dance. I swear to God that's how he got Jordan. That dance cracked her up, and next thing they're fucking on Table 1 in the Dining Hall. Maybe the two grossest people on the ranch. Top five. Nah, I didn't see it, but someone else did. You can ask around.

He got to be best friends with Paris, the fishing guide, big dude from South Africa. Porch Man pulled his ass out of the creek when Paris was drunk one night trying to get to the Hen House. Busted his whole fucking face open. Porch Man saw it happen from his roost. Saved Paris's life. Maybe he knew something after all, sittin out there all the time.

There was a Sunday Paris was supposed to help flip cabins, and Porch Man got him to come back to the trailer and hit golf balls into North Pasture. The housekeepers found them off their asses smashing vodka bottles in the road. Since they're outta booze, Porch Man gets the bright idea they oughtta go to introductions. It's dollar sangrias to kill off the leftovers from Square Dance.

He shows up walking like a crackhead, he's got a open buttoned-down shirt and nothing under it, so you could see his bony chest, and lord you could smell him to Montana. Rachel calls on him to introduce himself to all the new guests. Porch Man jumps up on a table and does this whole like jazz scat hip hop routine about the freedom of the west. I didn't understand a goddamn word and neither did anyone else but Paris, who was crying it was so fucking inspiring.

After that they weren't allowed in the saloon, so he and Paris did all their drinking in the trailer. Saddest thing was when Paris left. Back to school or his green card ran out or whatever. I been in Sheridan for a late movie, and I'm getting back 1, 2 o'clock. Trailer's just slapping. Fucking Michael Jackson playing. "Didn't Paris leave?" I'm thinkin. "Swear I saw Silas drive his ass to the airport."

Well I knock on the door, and who is it but the Porch Man himself, all by himself, tying one on, mourning his departed friend. He's wearing a cape made from a bedsheet. No shirt. "Fuck You" written on his chest in Sharpie, but it's all backwards cause he did it in the mirror. Has no idea who I am. *Billie Jean is not my lover...*

"Porch Man, turn that shit down," I says to him. "People gotta fucking sleep." He looks at me for a second, like it's taking a while for the words to get all the way upstairs, then he nods and starts yelling "yeah yeah yeah yeah!"

I watch him, I swear to God I watch him turn around like he's going to the speaker, and he's gonna turn it down, and he pauses, and you can just see in his body he completely forgets what he's doing, in the time it took him to turn around, no idea. He starts dancing again. *But the kid is not my son...*

That's the last I saw him. But Morgan said she was closing the saloon, and there goes Neal butt-ass naked on his way to the hot tub. She tried to turn him around, but he started scattin again and scared her off.

Next thing anyone knows, he's got Randall's car, and they're doing donuts at dawn in North Pasture. This was right after Jess got her abortion, which, let's not talk about that right now, and Randall's going fucking ape. They tear up the whole cow pasture. Then one of them, it's probably Neal if I'm being honest, comes up with the genius idea to go shoot coyotes. So off they're driving to the top of Crazy Woman Canyon. Randall's got his rifle in the back seat and the window down, and they're just popping at anything that moves. Turkeys. Rockchucks. Whatever.

That's how Randall ended up in jail the first time. It was all Porch Man. Bet you didn't know that. They didn't neither of em get fired. Randall cried like a fucking bitch and got to serve out the last week of his contract. Came back next year and you know what happened.

Porch Man didn't do none a that. Cort and Rachel asked him to explain what happened. He goes all jazzman on em, flapping his shirt, and stanky-legging around, and before they can fucking translate what he's saying he disappears. Nobody knows where. Some bigger porch in some freer country, I guess.

CHOKED UP

Wall. Wall. OK. Still standing. Safe. Soft. Girl? Mmm. *Hello*.

"No no no."

Who was that? Such a slim waist. Pretty hair. Wall again. But over there if he just reached out --

"Ryan."

"Mm?"

"You're going home."

"Comin with me?"

"Just to the door."

Stars. So many stars. Was the air cold? It seemed like it might be cold. The kind of cold he didn't mind until he woke up at 3am. There was that hand again, on his shirt.

"s'a lot more fun inside," Ryan tried.

"Perfect because that's where you're going."

"Lead the way."

It'd all be better once she started. He knew that. This wall had a pretty good grip on him. His back felt kind of stuck to tell the truth. But whoever it was if she started walking he was pretty sure he could follow that waist, that hair. That ass. In fact --

"No, Ryan."

He felt his hands placed back at his sides. Now her breath was close enough he could taste it. He leaned in.

"I said no."

"You smell nice."

"Do you even know who I am?"

Hair. Breath. Ass. Waist. Wall. Wall.

"Courtney?" Silence. "Just fucking with you. I know you're Liz." Silence. "OK, gimme a hint."

"I'm nineteen."

Nineteen. Nineteen.

Ryan rested his head against the wall with the rest of him. He thought about that. Nineteen. He had to remember something. Something about nineteen. And an old man: Him. 37. But he was still nineteen; he knew it. He was drunk. What something felt like. Something something slim waist. Cold stars. Pretty girl. Old man.

"Ryan. Stand up."

It was gone. He'd never remember. Time to walk. But first...

"Oh Jesus, Ryan."

"Yep, yep, yep." He laughed, a high wheezing laugh over the hiss coming from his jeans.

"I'm not taking your pants off for you, so you're just gonna have to sleep in that."

"I can take em off myself. Just watch."

"Come on."

"Bailee!"

That was her name.

The next morning Ryan packed away a plate of eggs, sausage, peanut butter toast, and a couple slices of cantaloupe, then shrugged on his coat and headed for the barn. One nice thing about being so tall is if he kept to his own business he could easily fail to notice others trying to make eye contact with him or to appraise the state of his hangover by the color of his face.

He drew a Middle Fork Ride. Half day. Fantastic. One of the most beautiful trails they had, and he'd get to do it with the O'Briens, one of the sweetest families and the most loaded.

He braced himself for a look from G while saddling, then she reminded him she wasn't looking at him at all these days. In fact, she was looking quite a bit at Dirk. Aha. That's why he drank so much last night. Aside from the usual reasons.

"Got something in your mustache," Kim O'Brien said, smiling.

"Oh, I know. I'm saving it for later." Ryan shot her one of his widest. When Case, Connor, and Johnny were comfortable with their stirrups, they nodded the horses up the driveway.

Ryan began to feel a little worse during cinch checks. Since he turned thirty, hangovers came as an evil purple aura blooming around his head and shoulders. Plus sweat. Kim paused her story about a healing seminar in the Sierras to quietly ask him if he was okay. *Soon enoug*h, he ought to have said. At the top of the driveway he leaned way out over the saddle and let go his breakfast.

Kim offered some of her water while he apologized and made vague reference to a bug running through crew housing. She nodded, a warm smile still gathered on her sun-kissed California face. She knew exactly what diseases ran through the crew. Ryan rinsed and spat. Handed the bottle back to her. The wrinkles at the corners of her eyes were so inviting he found himself bending towards her,

like a flower. What he thought was how he wanted a woman with a face like that. Later he'd realize it reminded him of his mother's.

"Purge and rally, ain't that it?" he grinned and threw a look back towards the kids. "You guys are in college. You know what I'm talking about." He tapped Starbuck and trotted down the south side of the mesa.

The rest of the ride was gorgeous. God, they're always gorgeous. Ryan didn't care how many times he led them. To be on top of a horse on top of a mountain, that's as close to the center of things as a man can get. Unless he's on a snowboard.

The O'Brien kids were avid skiers, especially Johnny, so they talked a lot of Tahoe between lopes. Was Ryan headed back this winter? He sure was. Still working as an instructor? Yes, ma'am. You've really got the life, Kim told him, and he agreed, though maybe there was something else he couldn't quite hear in her voice.

"How long do you think you'll keep it?" she finally added.

"You got something better?" Ryan shook his head and laughed. He patted Starbuck's rump then and picked up into a trot or he might have seen the warm expression on Mrs. O'Brien's face falter, revealing something he was uniquely unable to recognize as maternal concern.

Down past Clear Creek. Back through the Linkin Logs. Around the School House. Up the Roller Coaster. The O'Briens were longtime guests, so Ryan let the kids race in the open pasture. New folks tip for safety, good photos, and decent chatter. With the old hands, it was speed and the privilege of breaking rules. At the end of the week, Kim would leave Ryan a tender letter signed by the whole family, including her husband Sam who never went near a horse. Folded in the fancy card would be a hundred dollars.

Ryan knew all that from the moment he saw them on the guest list. What he didn't expect was the last line of Karen's note:

We hope good things are coming for you.

Didn't he tell them he was going back to Tahoe? Didn't he tell them he'd be at the ranch again next summer? Or was this just her sneaky way of saying she knew about the breakup with G? Who hopes good things for people who don't need them?

At the mirror Saturday morning Ryan remembered smacking a lot of asses. One of them was Dirk's. Ryan had seen him two-stepping with G. And then the little bastard hopped baby Butch up the mesa. Shit, Ryan thought, staring at the water pouring from the tap, forgetting whether he was brushing or bathing.

Who am I gonna drink with now?

Randall was gone. The sour taste of that memory reminded Ryan to uncap his toothpaste. Randall had been his running buddy for three years. Started when the kid was just twenty. Ryan snuck him drinks in the saloon. In return, Randall started imitating Ryan. At first people laughed -- Ryan, included -- because Randall was half Ryan's age and not a greater percentage of his height. But after a while the act stuck and people forgot what Randall had been like before he fell in with Ryan.

By year two Randall was permitted to run a tab at the saloon, a consequence of which was it became apparent just what scale of drinking problem he had. Most of his paycheck went back into the ranch via Morgan, the bartender. Ryan was there to watch. They were regulars at the corner of the bar on Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Mondays and Fridays they drank Rainier's best beer-water from the cook-out coolers.

Year three the kid had developed a belly and a tendency to turn an unappealing shade of red as a prelude to crying or trying to start a fight. Ryan chalked it up to short-man syndrome, a diagnosis he applied to much of the human world. Randall had also embarked on a volatile wrangler-on-wrangler relationship (aren't they all) with Jess. After an initial hope that regular sex would straighten the kid out, Ryan soon found himself in a rare case of agreement with the rest of his co-workers: the couple needed to break up.

When it finally happened, following Jess's abortion, Ryan heard the whole damn soap at the tack shed. He did what years of experience had taught him and passed beer after beer to his protege while encouraging him to look around. There are all kinds of new girls on crew, some of them are even shorter than you. Ryan had laughed so hard at that he honestly couldn't remember whether Randall did or not.

He did remember the two of them stumbling apart near the creek as Ryan climbed the hill to his room in Shady Acres and Randall humped towards the Bunkhouse.

A few hours later the sheriff appeared on the ranch. Randall left in handcuffs.

Ryan felt guilty for months and kept his guilt to himself. He also felt something else. A kind of vindicated loneliness. Only he could do what he did without going crazy.

And that meant he'd have to do it alone. As far as other drinking buddies, there was Chef, who'd sobered up mostly since his daughter was born. There was Tanner, the Foreman, so fuck that. And there were a bunch of college kids new to the barn. Ryan wasn't excited to start that again.

He was nearly forty. By any reasonable estimate his life was probably half over. And he was as alone as ever. By God he better fuck somebody.

He decided to spend the afternoon clearing trails.

He had Pancho saddled and a chainsaw tied behind the cantle when his radio blurted.

"*crsshhwwsh* R--al to Ryan."

It sounded for a moment like he was calling himself.

"This is Ryan."

"Ryan can you come to the office, please?"

Fucker. "Be right there."

The inside of the office was cool and dark and, because the new guests had yet to arrive, quiet. Rachel, the owner of the ranch, sat in a black Aeron chair with her dog Dolly tucked behind her feet. Normally possessed of a kind of northern Midwest expressionlessness, Rachel's face was now grave. Most anyone else, having walked in to find this face on their boss, would fear for their job. Ryan assumed someone had died.

"There's a phone call for you." Rachel handed him the cordless and took a large notebook with her out onto the porch. That confirmed it. Whatever was coming, Ryan's stomach was already halfway there.

"Hello?"

"Ryan, it's Trinie." His mom's sister. She cooked and helped out on the ranch back in Nevada. Her voice was deep, and she had unmistakably been crying. "Your mama's dead." Now she was crying again. "I'm so sorry."

"What happened?"

"Chief reared up on her, and she came down on a rock. It all happened fast."

Fell off a horse? His mom who had ridden every day the last forty years. Who had taught him to ski, to climb rocks, to shoot, and drive heavy machinery. Who had been an old woman rancher for longer than Ryan's co-workers had been alive. She fell off a horse, and now she was gone forever? What the fuck?

Trinie talked some more. Ryan heard it he was pretty sure, but later could never remember what it was she said. He told her he'd be back soon. He asked if his dad knew or his little brother. She said she'd call Leo next.

When he hung up the phone he wasn't sure where to put it. The office was a very confusing space it seemed to him, with papers and electronics on every horizontal surface. He didn't want to leave the phone just anywhere, so he was still holding it, looking around wildly when Rachel returned. She put a hand on his shoulder.

"Take as much time as you need," Rachel said. "We'll help you any way we can." Ryan nodded. "Do you need help getting home?" He shook his face, and drops flew from his mustache. "It's the worst thing."

He wanted to leave that day, but Young Jake was still working on his truck, and Cort, Rachel's husband, wouldn't let Ryan drive alone unless he waited for morning. Won't it be worse? Ryan asked. Probably, Cort said. But you'll be able to see.

Ryan hid in his room and waited for dawn. He alternated between screaming sobs and long spells of staring at the ceiling. He didn't notice the knock on the door. Then G was above him.

She still had her knife hooked to her belt. The softness in her eyes, which he hadn't seen in over a year, brought the shouting sobs back on. G crawled beside him and wrapped her arms around his middle.

They didn't speak. At one point Cochise nosed her way into the room and curled up next to a mound of aluminum cans at the foot of the bed. Ryan breathed and shook, and G matched his breath.

At last he seemed to go silent. His back ceased to spasm.

"Do you want me to go with you?" G whispered.

Ryan rolled onto his left side. The old springs groaned, and Cochise leaped up, setting loose a cascade of cans.

He missed seeing G's face like this. So close he could find the flaws in her green eyes. He felt home. His nose touched hers. He put his arms around her waist.

"Ryan, no."

"Please. I miss you so much."

"No."

"I need you."

"You just need."

He kissed her. Her lips thinned.

"So what?" he said.

"Don't do that again."

She didn't move. He could still feel the tickle of her nose grazing his with each breath. He did it again.

Now her head drew back. She grabbed his right hand from her lower back and pulled it towards her lips. Ryan saw a flash of those familiar canines.

"OW!"

G was on her feet, Cochise alert beside her.

"Find me in the morning if you want a driver."

Alone again. He held his hand to the moonlight. On the webbing between his thumb and index finger rose two black circles of blood.

He should've just started driving. It's not like he had a chance of sleeping. Every ten minutes he flopped over and prayed for unconsciousness, feeling his stubborn desperation for oblivion mounting in inverse proportion to his faith it would ever come. Around 1AM he pounded his last two beers and burned down a joint while staring vacantly at the record player, afraid music might ask more of his heart than it had to give.

At six, with the skies already light, he eased his truck past the dining hall, around the bend at the office and over the creek.

He hoped to escape without notice. Without a word.

Unfortunately, a clutch of wranglers was already milling about the corrals for feeding time. One young guy -- Caleb? -- held up a hand, like the benediction of a cowboy Pope. That was fine. He could ignore that. But then Jess and Will practically jumped onto his hood. Soon he was Snow White, surrounded by the grieving dwarves, utterly mute in his glass case while they performed their sympathy upon him.

They were nineteen years old, half of them. They'd never seen death. Their parents would live another hundred years.

Ryan rolled his window down and allowed them to hug, to kiss him, to squeeze every part of his arm, according to intimacy. Finally, his well-meaning co-workers grew still, as if awaiting pronouncement from a traveler to distant lands -- a man who had wandered into the underworld, into the darkest night of our miraculous lives, and could now report.

He nodded and flexed his foot on the accelerator. The dwarves slid one at a time from view.

Ryan had been close to his mom. At least that's what he told guests when they asked. There was a certain order to questions.

Where are you from?

How did you end up here?

What do your parents do?

Are you close?

Ryan said yes because that was what the guests wanted to hear. They liked that he was a sensitive mother's son, especially as he got older. He also assumed it was the truth, having never really stopped to examine the question.

Well, his mom raised him, and he loved her for it. She took him in at holidays,

and he was happy to see her. She spoke to him frankly about the three great pleasures (in ascending order): sex, drugs, and the outdoors. She called him often enough to remind him she cared but seldom enough he never felt spied upon. He called her every month during the summer, and twice as often in the winter. The last time they spoke had been two Sundays ago. He called. They discussed G (as usual), trail conditions, the appearance and disappearance of various flowers, and an overambitious dessert Trinie had attempted for paying company.

"Well, I guess that's it," his mom said following a brief lull only five minutes into the conversation. "I love you. Try not to do the same old thing." She hung up first.

She kept him company all fourteen hours it took to get home. If you asked him he couldn't tell you what they discussed. "I tell her not to get on that horse," he might say. Probably most of the conversation consisted of replays of that last phone call and a hundred ways to say "I'm hurt, Mom" and "please don't die."

What did she say? "I guess that's it," and "watch the road," and "stop treating that Glendora like one of your girls, and maybe she'll start treating you like future material." She was diplomatic enough not to mention how she would have liked to see G holding Ryan's hand at the funeral, but he knew it anyway.

Twice he pulled onto the shoulder to cry. He mouthed "no, Mom, no." He lay his head on the wheel and imagined the weight, dimension, temperature, and texture of the pistol in the glove box. Now that his mom was gone, one of the largest barriers to suicide had been lifted. He really would have to think about it. But not now. Now he had to get home. To see her.

Ryan's mom married his dad for the ranch. She said so openly, and they laughed about it until the divorce, when she still said so but it was no longer funny. The 6,000 acres outside of Reno had been in his father's family for three generations. She proposed to him the day he took her there to meet his parents. In a more typical arrangement, the visit would have been designed to reveal something of himself: the soil from which he grew. But Ryan's father felt no connection to the land, and it was his mother instead whose deep self was suddenly exposed, like a string that could not help but vibrate when put in range of its sibling tones.

His father inherited the ranch upon Ryan's grandmother's death, and within a year had transferred the property to Ryan's mom as part of their separation. The last time Ryan and his mom saw the man, in fact, was when his ocean blue Cadillac briefly pierced a dust squall of its own making, reversing so that the driver could reach out the window and yank the metal number plates off the

mailbox before disappearing into the cloud forever.

Since that time, Ryan's mom's primary occupation -- well above the rearing of her children -- had been the operation of the ranch with an aim towards solvency. She had tried just about everything, employing her two boys in any number of bizarre improvement schemes based often on little more than rumors overheard at Bruno's deli counter. Memorably, she had once sent the boys over the property line into the wildlife refuge that abutted their ranch, tasking them with the retrieval of any exotic skulls or other bones of aesthetic interest that they could paint and sell at the farmer's market.

Those early years, when Ryan was not yet a teenager, were fervent, rock-hopping years: he recalled them wearing an electric halo of infinite hope and imminent disaster. But at last his mom had hit upon a scheme that worked, and life had grown into itself.

They gave up the active management of the cattle and much of the ranch property, leasing it instead at a comfortable rate to a neighbor looking to expand his operation. With a loan against their land and steady income, Ryan's mom purchased six horses to go with their existing four. She advertised online and in local bulletins that these horses and the 6,000 acres of the ranch (not inclusive of whatever ground her neighbor's cattle happened to be farting upon) would be made available for real western trail rides, enjoyable to all from the beginning rider to the experienced cowboy.

In time these rides, which tended to go out once or twice a day, came to include a "real ranch lunch" prepared by Ryan's aunt Trinie, who delivered exactly that, under strict interpretation of all three words.

Both Ryan and his brother started out caring for the horses and tack and graduated in time to lead rides of their own on weekends or summer when school was out. Both left for college at 18. Both dropped out before 20. Both returned to the ranch for a time to lean upon the free rent and guaranteed work. And both abandoned mom a second time, leaving the state entirely, like their father had, in search of greener pastures.

And now, Ryan thought, they were back where mom had been at the start of it all. Owners of Nevada, burdened with the terrible freedom and possibility of their own land.

"So I figure you'll wanna sell." Leo took a long drag but did not pass the cigarette to Ryan. They were in Leo's blue Honda Fit, their long legs bent halfway to their chests, Ryan idly watching the traffic of birds and unleashed dogs on the broken stretch of sidewalk in front of Kellers' Funeral Home.

Trinie had gone in to take care of this one. There was a lot to do and between the three of them no one with a head for this stuff, so naturally they'd decided to combine their time and transportation while leaving the actual work utterly divided. No doubt she was taking on as much water in there as Ryan had with the hospital.

Leo was in charge of Estate Bullshit. He thumbed items onto the list in his Notes app while the cigarette nodded between his chapped lips.

"Can you roll the windows down, man, that's fuckin awful." Leo blinked. Typed in another debt of unresolved status. Leaned forward and turned the key for battery. While the windows were hushing down, he seemed to notice that his brother hadn't answered the question.

"Yeah?" They hadn't seen each other for more than a few weeks over the past five years, but they still had the brotherly gift of navigating semi-simultaneous lines of conversation via subtle shifts of tone. Ryan knew what Leo's yeah was. What he didn't know was how to answer.

Leo assuming Ryan wanted to sell was not the same as Leo saying he himself hoped to sell. For all Ryan knew Leo would be crushed to abandon Mom's legacy, and his insinuation that Ryan was already halfway to doing so was a deep comment on the void where his older brother's loyalty should be. Leo assuming Ryan wanted to sell was also not the same as Leo suggesting a sale was even possible over the wishes of Trinie, whose position on keeping her home and job was easier to predict.

Once at Christmas Mom had asked Ryan to begin preparing a will for himself. "You're in your thirties, and accidents happen all the time in your work." He'd laughed and agreed to humor her then forgot about it as soon as he got back to the mountain. The possible imminence of his own death seemed as remote to him then as hers did yesterday. If she ever spoke about her hopes for the disposition of the ranch in her absence, Ryan had tuned it out.

It would have been a lot easier the other way around. Ryan figured they could sort through his property in about the time it took to finish a couple beers. But Mom's ranch. Goddamn.

Was Leo right? Did he want to sell? The neighbor leasing right now would probably put down cash on it. How much would it go for? And what would Ryan do with his share?

When they were kids he and Leo imagined running the place, but Ryan hadn't thought about that as more than a fallback option since the second time he'd left.

"Maybe," Ryan said, drawing the word out and lifting it up. He was buying time and opening a door at once.

"Really?" At last Leo held the cigarette towards his brother.
"Gonna have to think about that one."

Ryan had once been the world's most sunburnt surfer. It was the summer after his first year as a snowboard instructor in Tahoe. His buds on the mountain were parting ways: some back to school, some south of the equator in pursuit of the endless winter, and a few of the older guys to San Diego for the swells. Ryan ought to have given sophomore year a try, but after a certain number of days with the wind on your face the reality of the straight life, the entire logic of conventional society begins to fray and fly off in the bluebird sky.

"You're used to going sideways. You'll pick it up easy," they told him. Horseshit. He'd eat surf. He'd eat the end of his board. He'd eat regurgitated burrito swept back into his choking throat by the pitiless salt water. He was a six foot five Irish ranch boy from nowhere Nevada, with a mustache, and a baby's immunity to the sun. By the time he caught his first ride, he was the color of raw steak. The heat radiating off his skin raised the air temperature a foot in all directions. There he was, though, for that glorious month in board shorts: the world's most sunburnt surfer.

Likely now that title had passed on to someone else, someone younger, someone hungrier and dumber. Over the years it all passed on from Ryan, surrendered without protest, leaving so little mark a future biographer (or an interested woman, say) would be perpetually bewildered by the experiences that supposedly composed the present man.

Nonetheless a part of the ocean remained with him. Tracking his own feelings in the days after his mom's head hit the rock, he began to imagine the pain as a fearsome, beautiful tide, the kind that called mystically to the surf-rat within, offering the dual temptation of sublimation and destruction. Here it came to destroy him now.

And then some minutes, some hours, the seas were calm. The bone-crushers were way out beyond sight.

The day of the funeral turned out to be such a day. Maybe it was the sheer amount of shit he had to shovel or the distraction of trying to get his suit pants to sit right on his thighs. Probably the joint he, Leo, and Trinie had smoked in the parking lot helped. But he floated through the service without once talking to his mom. He talked about her. He'd had to stand up and remember her as the dearly bereft wanted to remember her -- riding, fixing machines, partying into the late hours then getting kids up for school. Somehow that remembering rose up and connected him to the faces in the pews instead of driving him face-first

into the dark, pounding him again and again against the scouring sand. He felt the strangeness of it as it was happening, waiting for the waves to come in, a mixture of relief and guilt simmering in his chest. And then it was over. He sobbed at her interment with thrilling, living sobs. He loved her and he was hurt and he was alive he was alive.

Beer and cheese poured past his teeth and he cried with strangers and family alike, trading stories between honking gulps of air. God, the Irish, he heard the banker say, dimly recognizing, maybe, that this was the happiest Ryan would be for years to come.

At the end of the night, stretched out on the floor among bottle caps and the bent tin lids of endless casserole dishes, Ryan lifted his cheek from his brother's shoulder (trailing a dark dab of saliva) and announced they were keeping the ranch.

It didn't last long.

The following night Ryan's mom came to him. She told him to put on his boots, there was something he needed to see. Her breath was real and a button in the center of her blue shirt was open, exposing her white upper belly when she turned.

Ryan dressed in darkness. His brother's bed was not in the room but piles of empty cans were, along with Grizzmas the tattered teddy bear, and a Ferruginous hawk feather that made him think somehow of G. He wondered if he should clean up the beer cans before his mom came back and saw them, but something told him to hurry on.

Outside, the stars were purring, and the air was warm. His mom sat on Chief. In her right hand she held the reins to Ryan's favorite pony, Joker, who snorted and stamped at the baked dirt of their lawn. Ryan paused before them, sensing for a moment that the three had some knowledge they were about to communicate. With each nod of Joker's head, he believed the little paint was just on the verge of speaking.

But no.

They rode north towards the wildlife refuge, cutting off the known trail into a dried stream-bed forming a cut that terminated at a stand of cottonwood. Ryan was sure he had seen this part of the ranch before. He'd often thought of riding down to the trees to see what was there but always decided to remain on the high road.

In the moonshadow beneath the leaves, a horse was in labor. It was a red mare Ryan didn't recognize. Glen sat behind her, shirtless, with her hair in braids.

There was food to eat, and Ryan's mom, after petting G's head, offered her son a plate.

For the strange horse, things seemed to be coming to a climax. Ryan's gaze flew between her glistening flanks and his mom's shining eyes. He felt his mom's hand on his, rough and soft at once, full of home. "Now watch," she said.

When he woke the tide was all the way in. He twisted in the sheets, calling for her. It was 4am. Finally with no better ideas, he went out and grabbed Olga, a mare with a backside shaped like James's Giant Peach. At every step he spoke to his mom. Rewinding, fast-forwarding, rewinding. What was the tone? Where were her hands? How did her lips smile?

Walking past Chief, a wave fell hard over his head, and for an instant he thought he might beat the old gelding until one of them was broken.

He climbed on Olga's bare back and turned her north.

Everything, everything on the ranch was his mother's. The pre-dawn sky. The shadowed stones of the rock wall. Field mice. Sage. Steaming clods of shit. This trail, any trail, the idea of a trail. All hers. Salt flooded Ryan's mouth as he realized the soft halter rope in his hands had been a birthday gift from her. He squinted at it. Maybe he could burn it. Bury it. His attention fell to his hands and from there to his thighs clinging to Olga's bellowsing sides. His own body was hers. Fingers and toes. Scars. Penis. Ribs.

He swam into the next wave and begged it to drive him down into the breathless dark, to digest him entirely, so the last shore became memory and he could float beside his mother in the night. On his right hand he passed the place where she was thrown, and for some time it felt his wish would come true. The air left his lungs, the desert blinked out, and silence hovered like a drawn bow at the soft skin of the fiddle string. He was with her. Maybe he was her. Stay. Stay. Stay.

Cricket-song irised open. Olga coughed. Ryan looked upon the new world and saw that he had come only a dozen yards. The turnoff lay ahead. Down to the streambed. The cottonwoods, unmoved by his grief.

When he found nothing in their shade, he knew he had expected it all along.

The following Saturday he crested Hunter Road and looked down on the valley where Fan Rock Ranch lay. The roof of the new pavilion was blinding.

Tanner tilted his head in moose-like rumination as Ryan's truck passed the barn. G waved unseen. Ryan stopped only at the mailboxes to pick up his paycheck, then back to crew housing for the last of the beer and a long nap.

$680 on the two-week, plus a couple hundred in tips. Plenty to hold him over

until the sale went through. He could pay down his share of the funeral, coffin, cemetery plot, and burial fees. Probably safe not saving any for the saloon, since it was a good bet no one would let him pay this week anyway.

Yep, it was good to be back in the groove. He'd finish here with a couple thousand extra in the bank. Head down to Tahoe for the winter and start it all again. Trinie had cried maybe more than anyone could comfortably stomach and Leo had sat there trying to manifest judgment on a face that betrayed his relief at Ryan's reversal, but in the end it was done, and he was where he belonged, for now.

At nine o'clock, already wine-drunk from dinner at the owners' table, Ryan shuffled into Square Dance. Co-workers and guests alike clapped him on the shoulders, spewing notes of sympathy. A stiff wind of meaningless words. He felt like a dog non-fluent in their vocabulary but capable of tracking the tone of voice.

"Hangin' in there," he'd say. And "good to be back." Because it was faster than repeating "My mom is dead. My mom is dead." "I wake up every morning in a world where my mom is dead. There are other worlds, close by, where Chief didn't spook, and where Mom's head struck a foot to the left. But I'm in this one and can never get to those except by thinking." *Mom is dead*.

Dollar sangrias materialized and dematerialized from his hand. Living in conversation with his mom across those forking worlds, Ryan was getting accustomed to a certain indeterminacy to his physical reality. Plus as a seasoned drunk this kind of thing happened.

There was Bailee again. She seemed mature for nineteen, right? Maybe he'd ask her to dance. Maybe if she walked him home again, he'd take another shot. God he'd like to see what those legs looked like out of their jeans.

SMACK. He gave her a good one on the rump. She fell to the floor laughing, faux-shock on her mouth. Flirty. Nice. He offered his own end for revenge but someone was tugging him towards the bathroom asking if he wanted a break.

Shrugged that someone off. Just when he looked down there was another beer. Rich and bitter. The more he drank the more Mom's voice receded. He could still hear her. But she seemed to be a few rooms away, in a quiet corner of his heart.

Shit, he listened too long. Now he was in that room. Tide coming in. Another hand on his shoulder. Another beer in his hand. Who was that on the floor? Bailee again. Was she still there? Not laughing this time. Courtney was yelling at him, yanking him by the elbow from the dance floor. Lean in. A few soft words. Now Courtney was walking away. Morgan pouring shots. One must be for him. Two must be for him. Who was he cheersing? Where were the girls? Where

was G?

SMACK. Jess raced for the corner. Tanner looked pissed. Did he want to fight? That was a quick ticket to the enfolding dark. Empty dance floor. Who can dance like me? Put down drink. Oh. No drink. Piano. Wall. Bar.

Ooh.

There was a tasty ass smiling his way. Guest. Middle-aged woman? Reminded him of Kim O'Brien somehow. Mid 50s. Judging based on... Comparing against...Shuffle, shuffle, slide. Big ol' booty. Smiling at him. All right. Bring on the night.

SMACK. Ryan started to laugh, but his breath was cut off. A firm hand caressed his throat. Squeezed. Sun-browned face. Dark curls, dyed. Yes. He was floating back. Boots tilted on their heels. Wall. Words and words and words in a tone that said she didn't give a fuck about his mom. Yes. Squeezing. Choking. White foam skipping on the summit. Here she comes. At last.

INTERLUDE: TREVOR

He played harmonica. Two notes, going up. A half-step to the sharp. Is that playing, or was he just breathing? He freaked me out. He freaked everybody out. First thing I heard when Dave picked me up in Casper was we had a serial killer in the dish-pit. Now he's gone, and I hear he was schizophrenic. He had a sister in Tulsa who wanted him home. No other family to speak of.

That harmonica was everywhere, man. I'd be working in the flower beds, and I'd hear it from the red table out front of the dining hall, under the hanging bird feeders. I'd be on the basketball court, and I'd hear it from the deck of the office. Come home and there he is on the broken chair in the corner of the Condo, breathing.

He was there during a pre-season party. Trap music, dancing, beer-pong, and there's Trevor in the corner looking through the scene, huffing his two notes. In and out. That's the night Bobby got him drunk on Jäger. I told him you're putting our lives in danger, bub. You know Bobby, he just smiled and shrugged, went off to find some girl who'd suck the dip out of his mouth.

So Trevor's fucked up, he wanders out to play some more harmonica in case the coyotes hadn't heard it. I'm there having a cigarette, and he asks me about my backpack. I say what backpack. He says oh I thought you had a backpack. I saw you with a real nice backpack. I say I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, man. I got a Jansport stuffed full a tax stuff I gotta shred. Is that what you're talking about? He goes back inside. Two minutes later he's got this big gray pack, I don't think it even had a logo on it or none of the chest straps, hip belt, you know. Tells me he got it at Salvation Army. Says it's a good backpack. Holds it up for me to look at. I mean for a long time. I say yeah, that looks like a good backpack. He nods and lowers it. That's the end of that.

I mean later we figured he was living outta that thing. Which isn't too hard when you only got one pair of jeans and two shirts. And a harmonica.

He found me again when I was trying to go to bed. Wes passed out on the toilet, so I was going to piss out the door, and there he is fucking sitting in the dark. Same place as before. I didn't want my back to him with my dick in my hands, to be honest. He says if you're ever looking for some opium, I can sell it to you. For real. I say opium, man, I'm good. He says he's gotta be careful, he's wanted for escaping arrest in Dallas. I say what's that for? He says oh no. Uh uh. Better not say nothing about that. He waits til I finish then we both go to bed.

But that was about it for me, bub. I told Rachel bout the whole thing the next day. Cort came and did a room check and found like a dimebag of weed in his

drawer. So he got fired. It was kinda messed up cause you could've found that in anyone's room. Honestly I never believed he had opium in there. But he was freaking everyone out. You know, nobody wanted to live with him. That simple.

Cort asked me to drive him to the police station. "Oh Jay, you're a big guy, you can take him." I said I don't know about that, Cort, I'ma be driving, and he's gonna be stabbing me open with a knife. Playing over my corpse with that harmonica. That must've worked all right cause next thing the Sheriff pulls into the ranch and yanks Trevor right outta the dish-pit, has him spreading his legs and holding onto the wall of the kitchen.

I mean maybe it seems excessive, looking back. The nice thing was Cort talked the Sheriff into keeping him outta jail. He had Ellen buy him a bus ticket, so he could go wherever he wanted and give the whole thing another shot. I guess he went to Boston cause that's where the ticket was for.

DOG TEETH

The dog:

The girl with dog teeth knows the call of the road. "I been on the move most of my life," she tells me, shoveling horseshit into a wheelbarrow.

"Summers Daddy put us in the truck, hitched the trailer, and off we went wherever. Two nights, three nights same place. Then off again. First back in Texas, then worming up through New Mexico, Colorado. He kept our camp gear in the bed. My books rode in a cast-iron skillet so they wouldn't fall around and get smushed. They were stained always and smelled like supper."

She stops to squint at the sun. Another hot day. Maybe she'll take me to swim. Clears her forehead of sweat. Other dogs get to lick it, but we have strict rules.

"That's how I ended up here. One day John Wayne and me come up on a trail ride, and all the saddles had matching yellow slickers. I couldn't follow them exactly, but I went snooping. Next day I peek over the top of Hunter Road and see the valley below. I ride right in, past the corrals, 150 horses. I was sixteen years old. Hitched John Wayne at the office and told Miss Rachel she oughtta hire me."

I've heard this story before, with the guests. When she starts, I usually circle wide to look for rockchucks.

"That's how I met you."

She deposits another shovelful of shit in the wheelbarrow and looks at me. I look at her. I sense her agitation, and I try to control my own. I know where this is going.

"So maybe change is a good thing."

The rooster:

"Fuck Tanner. Fuck Ms. Rachel. Fuck Dirk."

The girl with dog teeth shoots a half-hand of feed across the dirt behind the Schoolhouse. It falls into the tire-tracks of the yellow-haired girl's car who parks here sometimes, without my permission.

"Late every day. Doesn't give a fuck. Does he wanna run the place or doesn't he? Cause I'll run it. I'm the one's doing it. I don't need to own it, Porkchop, just let me run that barn."

I raise up for a moment at my name then return to the grains. So many. The sky is getting dark early. Maybe we'll go to the show soon. Tonight I perform. I

can tell because of the feed. The girl takes up the whole stoop with her long blue legs in a figure-four, and her torso twisted partway to her right, propped up on one elbow, with a brown bottle and more seed shaded between trunk and branch.

"Do I miss a morning feed? Do I come in drunk? High? Do I fuck up the ride lists? Do I fight with my girlfriend and make her run away crying in the middle of a shift?"

She checks her wrist.

"Shit he may have grown up here, but I've worked longer. Summers, winters. Longest I've ever been in one place. That's a fact."

She tips back the bottle and spots something on her hand. Unsheathes the knife. Eight inches of steel. I dance away from the stoop. Can't help it. She brings the blade edge to the tip of her finger.

"Porkchop, do you know what forever means?"

I don't. She checks her wrist.

"Cochise!" The dog, a big German Shepherd, trots around the corner. She stretches back to the porch behind her, grasping for a coil of rope. She gets it but knocks over her bottle and scatters more seed in the process. I strut over to help with that. Meanwhile, she loops the rope several times around the sitting dog, secures it under her belly. My saddle.

"Porkchop," she says, and I leave my grains to find her feet. She scoops me up and sets me atop the dog. Together we march towards the saloon, a few early stars appearing in the east. Show-time.

The horse:

"C'mon, partner, take this," the girl with dog teeth grunts as she shoves a wet packet behind my lips. Ick. I want to blow it out, but she holds it in place, my tongue roiling around until I feel the packet tumble down my throat.

"Lord, Lefty, it's for your own good. Hey, look at me." One hand gently holds my shoulder, while the other strokes my neck. The girl stares into my right eye, her face so near.

"Now I know you wanna go back in the pen with Zeta -- whoa, whoa." My body spins and shakes at the name. "I know you want to go back in the pen, but you're on quarantine a little longer. Let's get you home for the night."

She unloops the lead rope and steps down out of the shoeing barn. My heart flickers as we take two paces towards the corrals, but she turns us left and down the alley. Another lonesome night.

"I get it. I'm right there with you. Shit, I'm sleeping alone, too. I saw Dirk sucking Coors at four in the afternoon, before his shift even finished. You can guess how exciting he'll be for conversation."

She pauses and watches a dark blotch on the ski slope melt into the lodgepoles. She thinks it might be a moose. I know it's a moose. On we walk. My breath is ragged. Why so much trouble? Days and days now. Want to rest. Want Zeta on my side.

"Not that I need him to talk to. Hell a back rub and a fucking cuddle'll get me through the night. It's not like I'm asking him to read me the news, read me *War and Peace*, eat my pussy, tuck me in. Solve my life while you're at it." She's heating up, and I'm fading.

"Ah, come on, Lefty. I know you got it. Here, darlin." She slides a carrot under my lip. Crunch. Yum. Wheeze. Wheeze. "Wait here a second. We're almost there." Hand on my shoulder. Hand on my chest. The thing with Zeta is I feel safe. She believes in me, and that keeps my four feet on the ground.

"But you know he's gonna get those sloppy hands over me and try to fuck me in the ass. And if it idn't that, it's because he's lying in bed bitching about Silas, bitching about his ex-wife, bitching about his dad moving him out of Colorado and stepping on his damn scholarships six years ago. Bitch bitch bitch, reach me another beer."

I'm stepping again. I can see the small pens attempting to camouflage themselves in the dusky blue blur.

"Trouble with the men around here is they all think they can drink cause they think all drinking is is putting em back and pissing em out. Makes no difference what you do after they're in you. Lie down and cry. Get up and try to fuck a teenager..."

She must've forgotten I've seen her drunk, too. I've seen her do both those things without ever leaving the barn. Boy, she's on a tear. And I need another breath.

"OK, yeah, Ryan's mom died. I'd be depressed as shit, too. But what are you gonna take it out on the guests? You gonna hide in your room? Nothing's getting better inside. You know what I'm talking about. You want things to get better you gotta make em better."

A rough pat. Then a scratch under my chin. On we go.

"That's why I'm talking to Ms. Rachel tomorrow. And that's why I'm going for a long ride on Sunday."

Once I'm past the gate, she unties my halter and eases it over my ears. Night, night Glendora.

"Sleep tight, bud."
Oh, I won't. I heard everything she said, but sometimes the breath comes hard, and there's nothing to do but stand here and pine.

To the girl with dog teeth:

"Glendora, when are you gonna own this place?"
"The left one feels longer. Maybe a half step up?"
"How do I trot without feeling like a Raggedy Anne doll?"
"Can we get a walk ride for the kids and a lope ride for us?"
"Glendora, when do I get to ride with you?"
"Hey, what's that trail you took me on last year?"
"Here, this is for you."
"Thanks for a great week."
"Put it towards school or something."
"Do something fun with it."
"Thank you."
"Thanks."
"Here's my card. Any time you need something."
"Why don't you run this place?"
"I know it's not you, but things around here..."
"What happened to all the trails?"
"Barn seems a little different this year."
"How's working for Tanner?"
"Sorry to hear about you and Ryan."
"So you and Dirk, eh?"
"How old are you now?"
"Glendora, I hope my girls grow up just like you."
"I bet nobody messes with you."
"Probably our last year, so I just want to say..."
"Can I have a faster horse?"
"We did New Buff yesterday."
"Seems like he's struggling on the uphills."
"I've sat on some hard things before, and my saddle is gonna split me in two."
"When do you get to ride?"
"One time I want to dance with you."
"I'd be nervous watching you use that thing."
"They ain't paying you enough."

"You are this ranch."
"Can I pet your dog?"

The snake:

The girl with dog teeth tells me all her friends are animals. She tells me it's always been that way. When she was three she found snakes like me sunning in the bare patch between her mom's house and the storm cellar. When she was five she trained a squirrel to come to her voice and pick crushed nuts from her hair. When she was nine she caught a coyote in a cage she made from willow branches and rawhide scrap. Esteban lived with her for two years, haunting the dust of her footfalls until he was murdered by ignorance.

"So you see," she says, whispering into the pocket of her duster, "you couldn't've found a nicer gal."

Right she may be, but that leaves other mysteries. What are we doing inside, for instance? And if we're such good friends, how come she won't let me poke my head out where I can meet the folks she came in with?

She taps the toes of her right foot against the heel of her left, crossed beneath the chair. I feel the vibrations as if my belly were in her boots.

All at once other chairs around the table leap out, and five humans sit. The same from before. The girl laughs and hums but otherwise remains quiet for most of the next hour, occasionally pinching bits of ground deer into my cave just to see if I'll try. I do not.

When space opens up to either side, she leans down and tells me things.

"Ms. Rachel said she'll talk to Tanner about making me co-Foreman. She said she really wants to make it work. That's why I'm doing a little celebrating." She tips a tall glass of earth-colored liquid for me to see and accidentally sloshes some into my hole. "All on Mr. Jerry," she giggles. "Drink up."

Her heart is beating slower now.

It takes forever to get the others back into their saddles. They seem unsteady on their feet. And in their seats, for that matter.

"First thing I'm gonna do is bring back the Red Canyon ride. No. First thing I'm gonna do is fix it so everyone feeds and jingles on time or they pay a six-pack. Then we're gonna open trails Sundays as a team. Everyone together."

The girl starts a song. I try soothing myself by hissing along. It's not easy swinging around in a dark pocket in the sky. Some of us weren't born to have the earth lost from under us.

The song breaks apart into laughter. We're back in the trees now, by the smell

of things. A stream running to our left.

"Hot damn, it's date night, and everything! Gonna shave my armpits and get that lazybones to dress up and smile at me for a change." Her hand reaches in to caress my scales. "Just think about it, Eli." "Here we are in just about the prettiest mountains. We got em all to ourselves. Without having to worry about food or shelter or nothing. We got horses. We got beer. We got you and me and Cochise makes three. You'd have to be stupid to want anything else than this right now."

The rooster:

The girl with dog teeth doesn't want to be here, but the show must go on. She's chewing her nails. Squat in the back corner of the saloon, rocking against the logs. Heads of goats, pronghorn, elk above her. One day maybe my head? Don't see any like me yet. Hard to say if that's a good sign or bad.

An old man with a mustache is telling a long joke about a frog. I'm in the girl's arms, tight tight. She strokes me, but feeling her agitation makes mine worse. The dog's, too. I can tell. She wants to pace. Again she lifts her head.

"Down," the girl orders. Where is the boy with the dark arms? All summer he's stood in the corner and held me or the dog. She sneaks me a bit of feed from her pocket.

"Just two more, Porkchop. Then it's adult weeks." Two more shows. I can do it. I don't do much. Feed, feed. Sleep, sleep. Ride the dog. The tall man stops by. His boots near my face. Passes drink to the girl.

"You know there are other evening activities," he tells her from a million feet in the air. "You could just come to swing dance and smoke by the pool like the rest of us."

"You go right on and shut the fuck up," she says.

"Does the chicken get stage fright, too?"

"Yeah, and it makes him ornery, so I'd back away while you got both your feet."

"Hell of a bind being a validation junkie who hates attention."

"Not half as bad as being a whiskey-dicked Don Juan."

"Hey, only half a that's true."

She snorts so loud a few people turn. But most are busy fake-laughing at the old man's frog joke.

"It's my heart that's gone soft."

"Aw, your heart never had an erection in its life."

"I'm glad we're talking again."

"Is that a pass?"

"Depends if it would work."

"Go smoke by the pool. And try not to dip your dick in any college kids while you're out there."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, you're back on the older ladies?"

"They call em mature."

"So it's an opposites attract thing."

"Wanna guess which one?"

"Get outta my way. I gotta perform. And remember you gotta jingle in the morning."

"It's never stopped me before."

She plops me back on the rope saddle. The lights dim. Humans in seats ooh and aah as I dog-ride down the aisle. She takes a quick bow. She does not speak to the audience. She never speaks to them.

There is a table with a blue sheet. She sets me on it. "You got this." My feet are pulled so that I lie directly on the table. Her hand falls on my back, pinning me down and holding me up at once. I am trapped. The panic begins to set in. I am used to it but, like with the knife, familiarity doesn't dissolve the fear. My heart is going going. Gotta get out. Out out. Get me out of here. I hate it here. I hate it here. Get me out of here. Heart heart run run.

Stop.

If I am very quiet, very still the rope will loosen, and I will slide right through. If I am not here no one will hold me. My heart slows. Breath. Invisible. She is waving a finger or she was. I think. I don't pay attention. Attention says I am awake. I am not awake. I am not here. Do I smell feed? The dead don't eat. The forgotten don't peck.

CLAP CLAP CLAP

It's over! I leap up to an enormous round of applause. They really like me! The girl with dog teeth bows. She spins and scoops me up. Bows again. We're a hit. They all love us. They always do.

Two more.

The horse:

The girl with dog teeth is crying. Water shines her red cheeks, flashing each time she circles to face the tack shed, where the last light on the ranch makes an

impassive sentry. That's how I think of it, anyway, while I circle with her. Round and round the round pen.

"Get up. C'mon, Lefty. Get up."

Colicking. I knew it, and now they know it. The others gave me up at feeding time. But not the girl. She's still here. Her, the shed light, and the whole Milky Way. And Zeta. I can feel her watching from the corral. She'll watch me to the end. If I could only get the girl to give up, too. Let me spend my last hours under Zeta's breath.

"I know it's kicking you when you're down. That's how it is sometimes. We just gotta keep walking. Keep walking." We do. Miles we've done, already, it feels like. So slow. So tired. My chest is slick and reflective like her face. "No you don't," she says and tugs at me when I stop.

Tell me a story. So she does. The others have gone to bed, so she talks and talks. Talks the most I've ever heard her. The girl's voice, and the cat in the barn, and the creek searching through the night, and the wind reminding the trees, and the coyotes calling each other home.

She tells me how she went and saw Tanner about ride lists. Went right up to his door, to the Foreman's House, and found him stoned, drunk, his memory a field of snow. He invited her in and offered her what he was smoking. His girlfriend was on the couch face-down, her blue cotton t-shirt riding up to her hips so her whole bare ass watched the girl when she accepted Travis's invitation. Asleep? No. Silently crying.

What is it? Are you ok?

No. Get out.

After I've gone over these ride lists with your shitheel boyfriend.

Come back another time.

Now's the time because three hours ago was the time.

We're kind of in the middle of something.

Hey, I get it, but me and Tan are kinda in the middle a something, too, and that thing's called work.

She'd been afraid, she tells me, that she'd have to hear what it was they were in the middle of, the happy couple, and her mind slipped back to Morgan the bartender telling her how last winter Tanner had suddenly gone celibate, overwhelmed with guilt over all the pre-marital sex he'd been having and fearing for his immortal soul. Yeah, see how that would work with Jess.

"I think I never all the way understood what it meant that he's the owners' son, not really, until I told him we were co-Foremen now, and he looked at me with those sleepy red eyes of his and growled, 'yeah, we'll see about that.'"

"That's when it hit me that unless Tanner wants, I'll never run a thing. Whatever I control now it's only what he's too lazy to do or what he forgets about. Doesn't matter how many years I'm on. This ranch is his in a way it'll never be mine. There's no making partner. There's no stake in seasons. There's his mom and dad and him and his goofy brother. I'm just another season's hand. Here today gone tomorrow. My best shot is him getting another DUI."

Not the worst odds, but I take her point.

"Up we go, Lefty!" Oh, man, was I trying to roll again? I thought I was doing good. Circle circle circle. But now that I think of it...

"Unh unh, Lefty!"

"And then we gotta go back to work," she tells me. "I gotta get things moving at the barn, with a whole crew of new wranglers and seventy new guests who don't know what the fuck just happened, they just know we're late. Tanner and Jess waltz in at quarter past. She's saying she's too sick to lead rides. Tanner is thanking me and yanking the clipboard out of a hand I didn't notice was clenching it. 'Thanks for taking Jess's ride.'"

She marched through the Mule Parlor to the outhouse and screamed. Cochise tried to harmonize. So that's what that sound was.

There's a word she can't remember for the longing for a place you haven't left but that's left you. Mucus bungees from her right nostril. I'm in the dirt. Oh. I'm in the dirt. She's not telling anymore. That story must be over. Are there any others left?

Zeta, I think she's leaving me. If I can get through the gate I'll be at your side in less than a heartbeat. If I can get through the gate. But I'm having trouble getting off the dirt. Oh, Zeta. I can hear you looking, but I can't see you back.

The girl with dog teeth is here again, and she's barking. I feel the dirt on my side, so gentle where the moonlight cooled it. I lift my head and look and look for your ears.

Her hand on my shoulder. Her hand on my neck.

Something pinches.

The stars are a road.

And I dream of you.

The dog:

"Where are we going?" I ask the girl with dog teeth, but she doesn't answer. Her face is still wet as she saddles John Wayne. Sound of bass and fiddle from the saloon. Tanner calling steps in a monotone.

"Cochise," she says, and I rush to the horse's shadow. We're off. Up the ski slope at a lope. Into the trees. Heavy dark. Birds quiet. Deer, maybe, in the secret meadows.

We reach the mesa and meet the moon rising through the last trees. She clicks JW into a trot, hungry for the light, but when she gets there, all silver on the open grass, she falls over the pommel as if shot. "I'm 24, Cochise. I don't want to start again. I don't want to be alone. This is what I want. Right here. I know it. I never been so sure of anything."

When I was a puppy she would scoop me up in the saddle with her. I'd ride around at her lap. I wish I were that small now, so I could nuzzle her and lick those tears away. I could tell her she won't be alone. I'll always be with her. JW, too. But I know what she means.

We walk in the silver dark. On and on without direction. Birds are bedded down in the grass. I ignore them and watch her. She has no joy in her seat. Held to the horse like a sleeprider. We come down the south face and on across the bridge into Old Buff. Ruined castles of granite keep watch above the firs.

"Smells like fall," she says. Her head lolls. I am in her shadow again, in case. "Time to settle in." Well. She looks at the stars. "Home home home. See, they know where to find me."

We turn and enter a long clearing, bordered by flowers all tucked up for the night. She stops. Her back is straight. Ahead I see a truck and trailer. A shelter stretched over the pick-up bed.

"Dad?" she whispers. I don't smell anyone. Without another word she spurs JW to a gallop. We're at the campsite. She circles on foot swearing to me she don't believe in ghosts. The truck windows are half-down, and she verifies the cab's emptiness several times over. Then the trailer's, too.

I'm getting tired and would like bed. Especially since we jingle in the morning. How do I tell her the truck belongs to a female human cigarette smoker and not to her recently-converted health-nut father? Is there any point since she knows perfectly well he doesn't drive the Chevy anymore.

Maybe it's not him she decides to wait for. Maybe she hopes to meet the little girl who sleeps in the bed with glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to the ceiling of her little camp-cover. Her books tucked snug into the dutch oven at her feet.

We wait. She hardly says a word. Her tears are all gone, but I can feel the weight in her chest. Her eyes are fixed in the direction we rode from. Any second, she feels, something will appear in the moonlight. Something will become clear.

The stars have changed when she stands with a groan, shakes her stiff legs, and

climbs back onto John Wayne.

How long has the truck been empty? she wants to ask me but is afraid to know the answer.

Too tired to think, too heavy to lift her arms, she gives the horse his head. Take us home. Please.

It gets worse.

"You just rode off," Tanner says. "Without telling anyone, without permission -- "

"I don't need permission to ride my damn horse."

"Without a radio."

"I had my radio."

"Was it on?"

She tries to busy herself roping, but the boss's son wants a conversation, and he's going to have it...

"I come back, and we've got a dead horse, unreported, just lying there in the dirt. And my Barn Boss is nowhere to be found -- "

...because she's going to give it to him.

"Co-Foreman."

"Not anymore you're not."

"Who says?"

"I do." It's his confidence that lights her fuse.

"You're not my manager. And you'll probably forget this talk anyway, so fuck you, Tanner."

"Who the fuck do you think you're talking to?"

"Who the fuck do you think you're talking to? I'll tell you: I'm the one does all the work around here. I'm the one makes sure we even have a horse program. I'm the one the guests come to, and I'm the one this place can't do without."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah. That's right."

I was lost once, as a child.

First I was born. Then they took me from my mom. I don't remember those parts. Then I lived with the shaky man. Him, I remember.

He put me in a yard crowded with children's toys and another dog's poop. But I never saw kids or another dog. When it was time to eat, he invited me up on the porch and gave me a plate from the broken speaker box he used as a side-table. The plate had whatever he'd been eating: turkey, tuna, potatoes. Bananas

and oatmeal when the fat lady stayed.

Whenever he saw me, the shaky man smiled and said "hey, Brother Josephus." I don't know who Brother Josephus was. It wasn't my name. He told the fat lady I was Otto. Otto is what he called when he wanted me to come back from the woods.

I stayed with the shaky man a long time, and I was Otto. I was almost full-grown.

Then one day he took me to town in his truck. That makes it sound like it was a special day, but it wasn't. We'd been to town before. We'd even stopped where we stopped that day, at the red liquor store with the window in the back. The shaky man usually pulled up to the window, and sometimes whoever was there would hand me a biscuit. But that day we were already getting groceries next door. I watched the truck from the pavement, with my rope tied around the tow-cleat.

The shaky man came out of the store carrying three paper bags. It must have been hard for him because he was rattling like a bit rabbit and not moving too fast. It took him a minute to look up and see me. "Hey, Brother Josephus," he mumbled, with a shaky smile. He put the bags in the back of the truck, but instead of unhooking me, he walked right past and into the red liquor store. I saw lots of cars come and go while he was in there. I wasn't worried. I was busy watching those cars and the people in them and smelling their bags when they came out.

The air got hotter, though, and I had to lay down under the truck. Maybe he didn't see me, and that's why I got lost. When he came out of the red liquor store, he got straight into his driving seat, and the engine grunted, and a puff of black smoke came out of the end. I shouted at him, but somehow he couldn't hear me, and soon the truck was moving. I had to run to avoid the wheels. Then I had to run to keep up. It wasn't hard in the parking lot, but once he turned onto the street, everything got much faster. I knew I was in trouble, so I yelled and yelled.

I'll never know why he didn't hear me.

Or the other cars screaming at him.

When it came down to it, I wanted to live. At the last light in town, I chewed my rope off. I watched the shaky man's truck disappear. Then someone came and got me.

For many nights I lived with other lost dogs in a big inside room and a little outside room. Some of them were sick. Some were very angry. All of us were sad.

What I remember was that I kind of could figure out where I was, but now I couldn't figure out who I was. Once I'd been a puppy with a mom, but I didn't remember that. All I remembered was being Otto or Brother Josephus and eating potatoes from a plate. And I didn't do that anymore. Maybe I never would again. So if other dogs asked who I was, what was I supposed to tell them?

When I slept sometimes the fat lady came by and explained to the other dogs all about me. How I was loved and had a porch and was turned loose daily to explore the woods.

What was the point of me if I wasn't all those things she talked about when I was asleep? Was I still Otto? That's what I felt when I was lost.

Then the girl with dog teeth came through the door.

I told you that because it was hard changing from Otto to Cochise. And it was hardest when I didn't know I could be Cochise. I'd never even thought of it.

And now the girl with dog teeth, who found me when I was lost, is lost herself. She's in the office talking to Rachel, asking if she can be Foreman instead of Tanner. I know the answer before she does because I hear the no even in the way she asks.

She is looking at where she is -- she's looked for most of the summer -- and she is saying that is Glendora. The one people look up to. With the big knife. The one who adjusts stirrups. The one who takes teenagers for rides where they race their horses into the pond. The one everyone asks for. The one everyone remembers. The one Dirk loves and Ryan loves still. Who will she be if she is not on the ranch?

She can't imagine another name.

She sits among her things in the center of the floor. Like a nesting hen. Porkchop clucking around her. She crushes another can and flings it at the bin. Ping. Clink.

Some of her things made it into the bag before she sat down: bras, underpants, socks. Maybe she doesn't need shirts where she's going. Maybe the thought of wearing certain shirts where she's going makes her not want to go there. Or maybe she still doesn't know, and there's no use until she does.

I lean against her, and she digs her fingers into my fur.

"What if we wait until morning?"

She rocks back and then forward and then falls back again, failing the momentum needed to carry her to her knees.

"In the morning we'll know better. And if...if we don't want to go...we can...no harm done. He won't even remember."

She tilts onto her side and curls in the bed of shirts. "I could sleep right here." And she can. Her eyes are drooping. "I'll wake up, and it won't be now." Less true. But there's no point stopping her. I snug myself in, and she accepts.

"What the hell is all this?" the boy with the dark arms and the high voice is in the doorway. "Where're you going, girl?" The girl grunts and pushes herself up.

"Nowhere."

"Shit, I can see that. You're drunker than me."

"Go away, Dirk."

"No, really. What happened." He sits on the floor beside us. His voice is lower, almost quiet.

"Got in another fight with Tanner. Can't do it anymore. I told Miss Rachel it was him or me."

"You or her son?" He almost laughs but catches it in time. "Well you gave it a shot."

"Then I got back here, all set to go, and I thought what the hell am I doing? It still isn't nothing can't be fixed tomorrow, right?"

"Maybe."

All at once her face is red, her nose is leaking snot. She falls onto him. "I love it so much, and it's killing me!"

"Hey, hey," he says. "What do you want to do? Do you want to leave, or do you want to stay?" She sobs into his shoulder. "Because I'll be with you either way."

The girl raises her chin.

"Seriously," the boy says. "You weren't gonna leave without me, were you?"

Her eyes fall onto her shirts. He breathes. He understands. Slowly, uncertainly he picks up her hand. They sit there in that breath.

"Don't we need a plan?"

"I can fix cars, and I can weld, and I can push cows. That's all the plan I need. You better have something though."

She sniffs. Words come out as if they had been formed and waiting all this time. "I wanna raise colts. We can break em and sell em. I know everything it takes, and once we get started..."

"Colts and bulls," he squeezes her hand.

"Bulls?" she wrinkles her nose and laughs.

"Yeah, they're expensive as fuck you get a good one. You live off them sumbitches." Another breath. "I've got a cousin in Cody." She squeezes his hand

back.

"Colts and bulls," she says.

A few minutes later they're lying naked with their heads propped up on the suitcase.

"It's not insane, is it?" she asks.

"I don't know," he says. "Not as insane as staying somewhere that's killing you."

Three taps at the door. They scramble into their shirts, which had been added to the nest lining.

The tall one leans in the door, mustache first.

"Hope I'm not interrupting something."

"Nah, you missed it."

He lingers there, unsure whether to come in. The floor becomes very interesting to him.

"I...uh...I heard you fought with Tanner."

"You heard right."

Oh yes, very interesting. All kinds of things down there in the carpet.

"You want me to try and fix it?"

"Can you?" I can hear the wish-note in her voice. And I'm surprised to see the dark-armed boy can, too. He shifts beside her.

The tall man looks up. He sees the clothes now and the suitcase.

"Sure. I've fixed worse." They look at each other and away again. Surprised by their sudden shyness. "And they need you here," he mumbles so low she probably hears what he really means.

"Who needs me here?"

"I don't wanna be at that barn without you." He avoids looking at the boy with the dark arms. The silence is long this time. But then the boy is the one who speaks.

"Then you should come with us."

"Where're you going?"

"We're going to Cody," the girl answers, tugging her shirt over her knees. "We're gonna raise colts and bulls."

"I can't...I mean I got a job here, and...this place..."

"I know," she says. And there's a long pause while she thinks about how much she knows. "But maybe that's over now."

The dumb rooster understands more than he lets on. Hearing that, he struts a crooked circle around the nest and nudges past the tall man's legs and out the open door.

"You really want me to come?" the man asks.

The other two look at each other. Two hands still clasped between them.

"Of course we do."

The tall man laughs and shakes his head.

"That's the fucking weirdest thing I've ever heard."

"I've lived weirder," the girl says and flashes her pointy teeth. The others nod, remembering that they have, too.

We all have.