2000

Traveler's advisory, a novel

Douglas Brian Heckman
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**TRAVELER'S ADVISORY,
A NOVEL**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Douglas Brian Heckman

December 2000

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ABSTRACT

TRAVELER'S ADVISORY

By Doug B. Heckman

Traveler's Advisory concerns roughly nine months in the life of the Gardner family. The novel is told in three sections, all first person, through the voices of son, Jake; mother, Libby; and father, Cole. The novel's plot centers on the forces threatening and binding the family.

We meet Jake at age thirteen, surviving through his final twenty-four hours of summer camp. Jake's overriding concerns include a passion for acceptance, jealousy of his mother's friendship with a neighbor, and rage over his father's emotional and physical absence.

Libby narrates her story while suffering through an early-season snow storm. The storm, Jake's violent behavior, and Cole's absence force Libby to understand the relationship between her past and the present.

Cole faces moral dilemmas in dealing with his family and friends. Adrift in his career, relationships, and family, he questions the potential he might possess. His actions forecast the future health of the family.

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Mom, Dad, Eric and Ryan:
For your boundless support and optimism.

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Introduction to
Traveler's Advisory

A Novel by
Doug Heckman

The American family, with its complex relationships, charged dramatics, and sexual- political undertones, has been central in my short fiction. Here in my first novel, Traveler's Advisory, the impetus of many of my short stories once again surfaces: the evolving complexity and challenges of social and familial relationships. My story concerns the Gardner family: Jake, the son; Libby, the mother and wife; and Cole, the father and husband. Through this small family's story, I study and project my ideas on the importance of the individual within a family unit. I examine a family's strengths and weaknesses. What elements threaten a family's permanence? What forces allow for individual family members introspection and renewal? Ultimately, can individuals find hope in the American family?

The Gardners live in the isolated Ash Creek Valley of Colorado. As the story follows the Gardners from summer to spring, they suffer through events which threaten to break the family apart. The first section of the novel focuses on, and is narrated by, Jake. We follow Jake through a twenty-four hour period at a troubled-youth summer camp. Thirteen years old, Jake is becoming more and more confused with his changing familial role and the approaching stresses of young adult-hood. These stresses erupt in violent behavior.

Libby, the second voice of the novel, internalizes the challenges with which her family struggles in an attempt to find answers. Libby narrates her story while getting through an early-season snowstorm. Much of her story is told while working at the Ash Creek Drug Store. Due to the stresses of the first winter storm, Jake's continuing social outbursts, and Cole's absence, Libby is forced to understand the relationship between her past and present problems.

The final section of the book is devoted to Cole's point of view. Through the three days we spend with Cole, we discover that Cole faces moral dilemmas in dealing with both his family and friends. While he is adrift in his career, relationships, and familial role, he continually questions the potential he might carry within. His actions ultimately forecast the future health of the Gardner family.

In addition to studying a family at risk, I have explored how the western American environment might affect both character and plot. As violence, both physical and emotional, threaten the stability of the Gardner family, the mountains, snowstorms, blue sky, trees, and immense spaces spur further deterioration and/or regeneration.

In all three sections, I attempt to produce movement: each character ultimately creates change not only in the self, but in the family unit. To emphasize movement, I write in first-person narrative. The voice of each character allows the reader to approach the characters' most earnest desires and fears. Though this strategy proved challenging, I believe my three-voiced, three-part, first-person narrative is effective.

Before detailing the creative elements behind Traveler's Advisory, I will first highlight other writers who have influenced my work. Because the western American environment and its specific influences on individuals and families have interested me for some time, many of my "mentor" writers are from the west. Wallace Stegner, Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Rick Bass, and Annie Proulx have all had major influences on my work. Perhaps more than in my short stories, in Traveler's Advisory I steal a bit from each of these writers in the hope of melding their gifts and abilities to create a successful novel.

Wallace Stegner has been my greatest inspiration as a young writer. His stories and novels, rooted in realism, based on Western fact instead of Western myth, and dedicated to human relationships, have remained on the top shelf when I reach for quality fiction. Novels including Angel of Repose and The Big Rock Candy Mountain are stories of dynamic families dealing with environmental, personal, and economic hardships. Stegner's western American environments are both beautiful and harsh. In Traveler's Advisory, I place the Gardner family in harsh environmental conditions; I hope I have mirrored Stegner's method of relating character development to setting.

Raymond Carver is a writer to whom I return to re-discover the beauty of simple, declarative sentences. His stories of the common man and woman, and of their everyday experiences, are powerful. Like Carver, I often write about working-class people; their emotions and personalities seem more visible and their truths more accessible. Raised in a rural town much like Ash Creek in Traveler's Advisory, I too was steeped in colorful,

seemingly-simple characters. Carver makes what the common man and woman experience extraordinary and universal; my goal was to produce a similar response.

Richard Ford's work, particularly Independence Day, superbly develops characters and actions into an invigorating read. Ford's dedication to realism and the family, along with his elegant prose rhythms inspire my writing. But it is Ford's shorter fiction, particularly the stories in Rock Springs, and the short novel, Wildlife, which have proved the most valuable to me. Stories like "Optimists," "Great Falls" and Wildlife are all told by a narrator reminiscing a family story from boyhood. Ford's ability to convey the strong emotions within a family in crisis matches my effort to portray a western American family in my novel.

As I began to understand the dynamics of story writing, I concentrated more on sentences, on the beauty of language. While I continue to struggle with this challenge, I am always amazed and inspired by Rick Bass and Annie Proulx. Both have become fixtures of western American fiction, Bass with his layered, naturalistic, and mythic stories and his novel Where the Sea Used to Be, and Proulx most notably in her latest story collection, Close Range: Wyoming Stories. The sentences of these writers are pure magic: rhythmic, imaginative, and challenging. And in the words of both writers, nature and character are emotionally attached; the effects of nature on people are direct and significant.

Many of the writers who have most influenced me can be classified as realists. Realism is a slippery term, and because of my interest in, and attempt to create, a realist

style, its use, especially in terms of western American realism, needs clarification. Janet McKay, in Narration and Discourse in American Realistic Fiction, pointedly describes American realism as “an elusive and loosely defined category that critics use authoritatively because they assume a commonality of understanding” (25). While many writers and readers will identify realistic literature as truthful, accurate, or objective, these terms seem appropriate to any successful fiction. Others view realistic fiction as traditionally crafted, not experimental. McKay comments on this generalization by referring to Roman Jakobson from his essay, “On Realism in Art.” Jakobson writes that one artist might “deform given artistic norms . . . as an approximation of reality” while another artist might instead “remain within the limits of a given artistic tradition . . . as faithfulness to reality” (26). Needless to say, defining American realism is a difficult task.

Attempting to define a work as western American realism complicates the issue further. While Southern fiction has the most notoriety, others regions, including the Southwest, New England, and western America have nurtured regional realism. In Conversations with Wallace Stegner, Stegner defines western American literature as having a “certain spaciousness . . . a certain innocence” (123). Stegner also notes a difference in manner and attitude in Western writers; even their subject matter differs slightly from other contemporary writers.

The five writers I have mentioned, minus Rick Bass, are all what many would identify as writers of western American realism. What connections can be made between

their realistic stories and novels and my novel? How do I define western American realism? And how does my novel fit into this classification?

I believe the two most central relations involve point of view and subject matter. To make my novel “real,” to create the most intimate relationship between character and reader, I chose to narrate in the first person. To me, and to many of the writers who have most influenced me, telling the story through the “I,” or multiple “Is,” is in itself realistic. By using first person, the writer necessarily distances himself or herself from the story. By “becoming” Jake, Libby and Cole, I am less and less the writer and more and more the character. I allow my reader to see the internal and external realities of how my characters perceive themselves and their world.

My characters are, I believe, distinctly western American. They live in a part of the country where they can trace summer rainstorms as they move across large valleys. They smell, hear and taste an environment different than that in other areas of the country. They rely on the environment for drinking water, jobs, and recreation. The relation between them and place is intimate. With each character, I wanted to show contrasting effects that the environment creates. Jake is a child within his environment: he is just beginning to understand its significance. Even while participating in the “nature-based” ropes course, he is constantly aware of the natural environment surrounding him. Later in the novel, Cole takes Jake into a snowstorm, relaying to Jake the power of working in a harsh environment. Both Cole and Libby understand the contrasting beauty and brutality of the Ash Creek Valley. They comment on their ability to see distances, but each also feels the claustrophobic emotions of isolation and

loneliness. Libby and Cole see with a clarity that a western environment invites. This maturity and understanding of their environment is passed to Jake subconsciously and consciously. It is my intention that through Cole and Libby's observations and conversations, the reader is able to detect a change in Jake's perceptions. While each character's interpretations may be different, each lives in a distinctly western American climate; their actions and decisions reflect this relationship.

Many realistic stories are immersed in the common, the average, and the everyday. Realistic stories deal with the "right here, right now," forcing the characters to understand the immediate reality of their lives and the real consequences of their actions. This was very much the focus of Traveler's Advisory. By putting my characters in situations that demanded action, I force them to face reality. Their relationships within the family, with their community, and with their environment are rooted in the everyday. But it is a dramatic, emotionally charged everyday. Thus the everyday is heightened, given scope and power, all without betraying its "reality."

Because Traveler's Advisory is my first novel, the writing process was an evolving challenge. Perhaps the most efficient manner to describe the challenges I faced, the obstacles I overcame, and the decisions I made while working on this novel is to follow my writing timeline.

My original vision of the book involved telling Cole's story, using his voice through the entire novel. I had used a similar voice in other stories and felt confident that I could maintain an interest in his character through three hundred pages. For some time

I had wanted to write a story about a snowplow driver, although my initial thought was to tell the story of a snowplow driver who plowed highways and interstates. The image of a man keeping the roads open for others, providing safety, even though his own life might be in shambles, attracted me through its combination of the everyday and heroic. After all, this scenario allows for the potential high drama of snowstorms, avalanches, and wrecks.

Many of my stories are set in environments far different from the one in which I was raised. I enjoy the challenge of “getting right” worlds with which I am unfamiliar. But, given Cole’s character and job, I understood early in the composing process that I needed to set the novel in an environment that I knew well. My first thought was to set the novel in Wyoming or Utah, somewhere not-Colorado, but similar in climate. I wanted to avoid Colorado because I feared falling into an autobiographical novel. I want my stories, and now this novel, to be something *created*, not re-hashed or re-worked.

One other important note on my pre-writing stage: I did not have any idea of a plot. I worried over this. I knew that in a short story, if I were patient enough, the plot would eventually show itself. And in some stories, the plot held little significance. With a novel, I knew that a more consistent and detailed plot would be necessary to hold the reader’s interest. Thus, I shied away from telling the entire story through Cole’s point of view. I felt that I could create more compelling plot lines, and a more interesting story, by creating a tension among three different voices.

I wrote Jake’s section as if I were writing a long short story. And the first draft was simply that: a constricted, stand-on-its-own, novella. Although I introduced a few

plot lines and characters that I would use later in the novel, for the most part, Jake's section in first draft form was very primitive. It wasn't until I finished this first draft that I understood the importance of the first chapter of a novel; in fact, the first one hundred pages would be critical in setting up the remainder of the book. And while I was still not convinced that Jake's section would necessarily remain at the beginning of the novel, I began my re-write with the intention of making it a *part* of a novel, rather than a novella. This is probably one of two moments in the writing process during which I learned the most about the novel as a form. During the re-write, I began to envision the family and their actions as a whole, rather than each of them as individual characters. Imagine me looking at three snapshots, each juxtaposed yet separate, before the first draft, and a family portrait, all three characters in the same picture, after the first draft. A subtle difference, but critically important, I believe, in making the novel successful.

Libby's section was by far the most difficult to write. At this point in creating the novel, I had become fully aware of the significance of each character's section. This pressure, added to the difficulty of writing in a woman's voice for over a hundred pages, caused many a frustrating hour in front of the computer. Even more than in Jake's section, I felt the need to prepare the reader for the rest of the novel. Libby's section would ultimately drive Cole's narrative, and more importantly, clarify Jake's section. With apologies for a simple metaphor, Libby was the mortar holding two bricks together. I think it was at this stage that the power of each character's voice became most apparent. In order for the novel to be interesting and readable, I had to ensure that the voices were unique, distinct, and real. This, I soon realized, involved more than Libby using diction

and syntax more complex than Jake's, more than her describing her friends in the intricate cadence of an adult voice. It meant each character's way of looking at the world, each character's sensory perceptions and decision-making processes needed to be different. It also meant that I needed to write in slightly different styles. Quite honestly, I don't know if I succeeded in creating stylistic variety. At times, I feel my three narrative voices are too similar. For this reason, among others, Libby's section proved the most difficult. It took me almost forty pages before I found a voice that felt right for her; I was forced to re-write these pages to make her personality and actions realistic, believable to me and, I hope, to my reader.

After the trouble I had with Libby, Cole's section seemed relatively easy. His voice was the most recognizable, in part because I had envisioned his voice for so long, and also because I had a strong idea of where I wanted the novel to go in his section. Although I began the final section with no knowledge of how I wanted the novel to end, by page thirty of this final narrative, I had a firm grasp of the events leading up to the final scene. I felt confident at this point that armed with the map to the last scene, I would find the "X" and create a strong and believable conclusion. The largest issue I wrestled with in this section was philosophical: what did I want to say with this novel? How did I want the reader to react to the story? Ultimately: what was the "big picture?" And here lies my second greatest "lesson learned" in novel writing: the importance of the message. I recognized a new responsibility: to provide my reader a consistent message by novel's end. I am grateful that I felt comfortable enough with Cole's voice to challenge myself in these terms. If I had dealt with this issue in Libby's section, I believe

the process would have taken longer. Once I determined the slant of my novel, my challenge was to write the section, and re-write the previous sections, in these terms. While I finished a first draft of Cole's narrative within six weeks, the re-write for the two previous sections took just as much time. It is important to note that the re-write I am discussing was intended only to match the emotion I wanted to produce in Cole's section. It took another major re-write to confirm that facts, figures, and descriptions were consistent. And then another re-write to judge, and adjust as necessary, the movements of emotion and tension in the novel.

Writing this novel has been a learning process. I have returned to writers who have influenced me, gleaming tools and expertise from their works. But in many instances, the "experts" could not help, and I was forced to learn on my own. These challenges, the ones I faced one-on-one, were the most satisfying to meet. I firmly believe that the lessons I have learned in writing a novel will help in writing not only another novel, but also more stories and essays. For all these reasons and more, Traveler's Advisory has been a satisfying experience. And besides, my first book-length fiction is finished, and for that, I am extremely grateful.

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**Traveler's Advisory: Accumulations of snow, freezing rain,
freezing drizzle and sleet which will cause significant
inconvenience and moderately dangerous conditions.**

-- National Weather Service

**Catch the weather on the radio
Freezing rain
Continued on through the morning
Traveler's advisory
I'll give a little more warning next time**

-- James McMurtry, "Outskirts"

Jake

1.

Blanket-Cave, Mini-Flashlight, Campfire Questions, *Playboy* Story, Quiet Noises

This blue blanket that I've made into a cave isn't helping much. I have it tucked under my feet, snug under my body, and laid loose over my head. I'm on my stomach and I have everything I need: my pillow, my mini-flashlight, my journal and my pen. I'm trying to keep the noise out but the blanket isn't very heavy; it's scratchy and thin. At least it's dark; my cave keeps the light locked outside.

But here in the dark it seems I hear more than if I sat up in bed and concentrated on one conversation. Like if I pushed back the blanket, sat up and put my feet over the bunk, and listened hard to Quinn telling Gary about the slug he squashed this morning before breakfast, that it'd be better than hearing all the bits and pieces of talk from everyone else in the room. I thought the cave would help, but I'm going crazy listening to everything.

Here I am, my fourth night at Shadow Mountain Challenge Camp. Tomorrow will be my last day. My last day at Shadow Mountain Challenge Camp, forever. Once you hit thirteen, that's it; you're done. You could come back as a camp worker, like food service or lifeguard assistant or junior counselor, but I don't think I will. I like being the oldest camper; if I came back to work, I'd be a worker, not a camper, and that sounds lonely.

Mom gave me the mini-flashlight when she dropped me off three days ago. She said it was a keychain, and she put her little finger through a metal ring dangling at the end. She said it was from both her and Dad.

He picked the color, she said. Red, so it'd be easy to see.

Color's a big deal with Dad. He paints his shovels and hammers and other tools orange so he can find them in the snow.

Mom must have read my mind because she said, You're lucky I didn't let him paint it. It could have been real ugly.

She smiled like she was making a joke. I tried to smile back, but I don't know if I did. Sometimes I can't smile, no matter how much I want to.

Mom would have bought a blue mini-flashlight if it had been her choice: blue's her favorite color. My color is silver, bright silver, like shiny pipes or chrome.

I told Mom thanks and got out of the truck. We pulled my bag from the back of the truck and she took my mini-flashlight and pulled a key from her pocket. She told me

it was the house key. She said I could put my locker key next to it and then both keys would be safe.

I watched her edge her fingernail between the metal rings and slide on the key. They were teaching me a lesson, Mom and Dad. Probably Dad's idea. Last summer, me losing my locker key with the twenty dollar extra fee and Dad really angry. He made me do extra chores to make up the money. So this year he came up with a lesson, a way to make me more responsible. Or maybe it was Mom's idea, something to keep me from getting in trouble.

Still, it's a mini-flashlight and I like that. I could scrape off the red paint with a rock or the metal on the beds or even my teeth. I could make it silver.

Mom held the flashlight by the end of the key; it looked funny, her two fingers holding the key which was connected to the metal ring which was connected to the flashlight. She swayed it my way and I grabbed the flashlight.

Don't cut your finger putting on the locker key, she said. Use something besides your fingernail, okay?

I tested the flashlight and the little light brightened. I put it in my pocket, told her thanks and waited for her to hug and kiss me. She acted like she was going to miss me but I knew she was looking forward to going home and doing fun things with Terry, her friend. They went to Denver last year. By themselves, without Dad or Terry's husband, Ben. Without me. I don't like Terry. Sometimes Mom likes her better than me.

I knew Mom wanted to go, so I let her hug me; she hugged me twice with a kiss on the forehead and a kiss on the cheek, and then I walked towards the bunk house, the top of my red, mini-flashlight poking out of my jeans pocket.

That was four days ago, including today. Today's almost over. Tonight and then tomorrow: tomorrow night I'll be home.

I've made my cave every night. The first night I just lay there until I fell asleep. The nights after that I drew in my journal and listened to everyone talk. Sometimes they try to bug me. Especially Quinn and Chris. But they bug everyone, so I'm no different, I guess. So far I've ignored them, just sat in my blue cave until they leave me alone. Quinn threw something at me one night. It bounced off my cave and fell on the floor. The next morning, I saw that it was a banana peel; the purple and yellow peel was next to my bunk.

We're supposed to write and draw in our journals. The counselor from the Aspen Leaf Activity told us to put our favorite aspen leaf in the journal. He had all these aspen leaves, some on the stems still, and told us to pick a leaf which best resembled our personality.

We go to different activities every day: some of them good, some of them dumb. The aspen leaf deal was definitely in the dumb category.

None of us put our leaf in our journal. Some of us tore our leaf, pretending the leaf was someone we knew, then ripping off its arms or heads or legs. Brett ate his leaf. He's a big eater and everyone laughed about that. I dropped my leaf on the ground.

The journal's good for other things. You can rip out pages and make triangle footballs or paper airplanes or to just chew on during boring activities. They make us take the journals home at the end of the camp to show our parents, but most of the journals go in the big dumpster on the last day.

My flashlight is mini but it lights up my cave. I put the light in my mouth, look at the picture on the front of the journal. It's a mountain climber climbing up a snowy mountain. He has mirror sunglasses, an ice pick in his hand and rope around his shoulders. He's looking at the top of the mountain. I pen in a blue star over the mountain, then ink it in to make a moon. To make my circle perfect, my moon gets bigger and bigger, and soon it's blocking the tip-top of the mountain.

Spit leaks out of my mouth so I take out the light and wipe my mouth. Quinn yells my name and wants to know what I'm doing under the covers.

I yell back, Nothing, but then it seems the whole room starts in about me whacking off and what magazine I have in here and who am I thinking about, Mrs. Jackson or my mom.

Mrs. Jackson is the camp chief. They laugh about that for a while, telling each other how ugly she is and how disgusting it is for me to be dreaming about her that way.

But I'm not thinking about Mrs. Jackson or my mom or anyone. I want to tell them that. I want to tell them I'm just trying to keep them out and be by myself so that I don't say something stupid, get made fun of, and have everyone laugh at me. Laugh, laugh, laugh. That's what they'd do if I lay here without my cave. They do it to Martin;

they make fun of him and he cries. He cries and then they leave him alone; it's too quick. What they want is someone who can be made fun of for a long time. They also make fun of Brett, but he's cool and he just laughs with them. I'm perfect because I don't cry and I don't laugh. When they get going they can laugh, laugh, laugh forever and forever.

They're still going. They're still laughing about me touching myself. They won't stop, I know it, and I can't stand it, so I hide the light, pen and journal under my pillow and push back the cover and tell them to shut up. I say it again, then again, both times in a high shriek, like a monkey. Then I pull the cover back over my head.

I listen hard and there are a few murmurs and I like that I surprised them. I'm not big but I've figured out that if you are really angry, even if for just a second, they'll leave you alone.

Quinn says, Psycho, and whistles a song from a scary movie. But no one else says anything.

Then someone farts and they laugh and then they are making more fart sounds. I want to laugh, but I stay still; I don't draw, I don't move, I hardly breathe, because I know that if they get bored, they'll start on me again.

Chris, who sleeps on the top bunk next to mine, says, I got a Campfire Question: How many girls did you make out with during sixth grade?

We have a Campfire Question every night during Fire Talk. This is the time our group sits around the fire and Mr. Warner, our counselor, talks to us about the day. We eat s'mores or cookies and watch the fire. Eventually, Mr. Warner will ask the Campfire Question.

Tonight's question was: What's your best memory of sixth grade?

These are the types of questions they ask. Every night it's different, but they are always the same. We hate Campfire Questions, but when we complain, Mr. Warner will say right back, This is Challenge Camp, not YMCA or the 4-H.

He says that all the time. It's his favorite saying. Sometimes I want to tell him that most of us have gone to this camp for two years now and that we know what camp we're at, but I'd probably get in trouble and I don't want to get in trouble this year.

Our fire area is next to our sleep area. The whole place is called our den. They call our group, ten of us the same age, a pack. Like wolves. The den is supposed to be our area: safe and protected.

The first night's Campfire Question dealt with naming our pack. It sounds like a choice, but it wasn't. The counselor gave us a list of names, all Colorado mountain ranges, and told us what each name meant, why it was important.

It was a lesson, like everything else at this camp.

Colorado mountain ranges: last year it was Colorado native trees; my first year it was famous mountain men.

Mr. Warner told us about the mountain ranges, where they were in relation to us and what was neat about each one. He told us we were in the Gore Range, but that it wasn't a choice.

I wanted the Elk Range. Ben, Dad's friend and Terry's husband, hunts, and sometimes Dad will go with him for a couple of days. Mom doesn't like hunting and I think that's why Dad doesn't do it by himself. He never says anything about it, but I

think he'd like to hunt by himself, without Ben, and without having to talk to Mom about it before he goes.

Dad would have liked it if my pack had been the Elk Pack. He hates that I go to this camp; maybe if I were in a pack with a cool name, he'd like it better. He and Mom argue about the camp every summer. Mom likes it, Dad hates it. Next summer they won't have to argue.

Elk Pack: he would have liked that name.

But of course, I didn't win. Quinn told everyone that Elk Pack didn't make sense. Elk are herds, he said, not packs.

Mr. Warner said my choice was fine, but in the end it didn't matter. It's like this: Quinn's big and has long blond hair and he's good in all sports.

The counselor asked for another vote and right away, without even thinking it seemed, Quinn said, Zirkel Pack. After Quinn said the word, everyone started saying *Zirkel* over and over. They liked the way the word sounded; they made the *Zzzz* sound long and loud, and that did it: we were the Zirkel Pack.

I might tell Dad we were the Elk Pack anyway. Then, when Dad goes hunting with Ben this fall, he'd tell Ben about me and the Elk Pack. Maybe Dad would even let me go with him and Ben. I've never asked, but maybe he'd let me.

It'd be an easy lie to make true. I could say it. I'd look at him, stare hard at his eyes, and say, I was in the Elk pack. My group was called the Elk Pack. It'd be easy to say. I could do it. Dad would never know the difference. How would he know if I was lying? I could lie and Dad would be impressed and it'd all be perfect.

Everyone seems to be thinking hard about Chris's question, his making-out question. It's quiet, then they start mumbling numbers. Then stupid numbers like fifteen and thirty-two. Chris answers himself, saying girl's names and who was the best. They listen to him but I know he's lying. We've always gone to school together and I know those girls wouldn't kiss him.

I don't want to hear any more so I turn on the mini-flashlight and stick it in my teeth and look at the picture of the mountain climber and my gigantic moon. I slide the light to the side of my mouth so I can suck on my spit. I open the book halfway and draw stars in the shape of the Big Dipper. I make the dipper part, the cup, darkest, penning it so hard that my pen tears the page and starts marking on the next page.

Even Dad, who hates that I go to this camp, knows the biggest deal at this year's camp is the Ropes Course. When I think about it, I start breathing fast and it gets hot in my blanket cave. I don't want to be scared, but I can't help it. I can't mess up. It's the biggest thing at the camp. Everyone knows about it. If I fall or do something wrong, the whole camp will know about it. Mom and Dad will find out and Dad will think I'm more stupid than ever.

Before I left home he told me that he had tried rock climbing after high school. He and his friends. He said they were all stupid, that they didn't know what they were doing, that he was lucky he wasn't paralyzed or dead.

I was handing him tools as he fixed our big lawn mower. That's usually boring, but the story about rock climbing was good and I didn't mind standing there, handing him wrenches, sockets, and screwdrivers. He was excited about it, for sure. Usually when he talks to me, he's kind of boring, like he doesn't care, but the story about rock climbing got him going.

He said he would be anxious to hear how the Ropes Course went and if those Challenge Camp Counselors knew anything about common sense. Standing in the garage, handing Dad tools, I couldn't see him rock climbing. Maybe he was lying or making climbing sound scarier than it really was.

Just thinking about Dad and me in the garage makes my heart go fast. I'm going to screw up, I know it. I make a crack in the blanket and cool air blows in. I put my face next to the hole and breathe the cool air. I twist off my light.

The Ropes Course is only for the oldest kids in the camp. None of the younger guys, even if their parents request it, get to do it. It's only for twelve or thirteen year olds. This whole week, the young kids have been asking us if we're scared. Mr. Warner calls it our Final Challenge.

I wish I could skip tomorrow. That I could go to sleep now and sleep all the way through tomorrow. That this blue blanket, my cave, could put a sleeping spell on me and make me sleep for twenty-four hours. Well, not twenty-four because then I would miss Mom picking me up. Nineteen or twenty hours or maybe the cave would shake me awake when Mom drove into the camp. And I'd wake up, get my stuff from my locker,

and get in the truck. I'd hand Mom the house key and we'd drive home. I could lie to Dad and tell him they cancelled the Ropes Course. First lie to him about my pack's name, and then lie about the Ropes Course. Tell him it rained or maybe that someone got hurt. Something. Anything.

They're still talking about girls. Before Chris finishes his story about him and Dawn last summer in the girl's locker room at the swimming pool, Quinn starts in about a *Playboy* story. Quinn always does this. He likes to tell his own stories and make the jokes and jump the farthest and be the quarterback. I don't think he likes Chris, even though they act like friends.

I'm still laying on my side, my face to the small crack in my cave. My nose is closest to the fresh air.

Quinn's *Playboy* story is about a guy doing it with a girl on the hood of a car. Quinn says it's impossible to do it on the hood the normal way, how the girl would slide down, how the hood might break with both of you on it, how it just wouldn't work. So the way you have to do it, Quinn says, is with the guy standing up. That way the girl can lay down on the hood and the guy can keep her from moving and falling off the car.

I close the hole in my blanket and turn my light back on. I open my journal and draw thick lines through my big dipper stars and make one of the stars a meteor with a long tail. I make the meteor bigger, with jagged edges. I make the tail even longer. I don't understand how people do it. I wish Quinn would keep talking about how you do it on a car's hood so I could understand it better, but because everyone is quiet, Quinn quits

talking about the car hood story and switches to describing *Playboy* pictures. The guys moan, No way, and laugh. He describes more pictures.

Now everyone is into it and they talk about other pictures. It gets loud. The guy underneath me, Brett, the guy who eats paper and aspen leaves, he starts pushing up on my mattress with his feet. I don't know if he's trying to bug me, but he's doing a good job of it.

It's getting too loud and I nearly can't stand it, but then Mr. Warner bangs on the door a couple of times, opens the door, and says his usual, Th-th-th-th-that's all, folks. Lights out. Shut your traps and sweet dreams. He stands there for a few seconds, then shuts off the lights.

I'm glad I have the tiny flashlight with me. I know Mr. Warner is at the door, waiting for everyone to get situated, and I like it that he can't see my light. He has no idea. I'm in my cave and no one knows I'm here.

He finally closes the door and there are a few more noises, but it seems everyone is tired.

Then Chris asks Quinn if he's ready for tomorrow.

Quinn says, It's not a big deal. Then he tells Chris and the rest of us. That's how Quinn is, as long as you aren't afraid of heights, it'll be easy.

No one says anything. My heart's going again. I switch off my light. I open a crack in my cave.

Quinn doesn't know what he's talking about. He's never done the Ropes Course. He's never even seen it. I saw it last year. In the dark. With my friends Gary and Knox.

They're not here this year, but we did it. And it looked scary, the huge wooden structures and way out in the woods. Quinn doesn't know; if he did, he'd be scared.

Then it's quiet except for people moving in their beds. Squeaks and sighs and pillows squishing and coughs and sheets sliding and scratching. I like these noises.

They're small and separated; I can understand them. I keep my light off and listen and think about sleeping at home tomorrow and how quiet it will be in my own room, without everybody else, and I almost wish I had these noises every night.

2.

Dad's Job, Martin the Cry Baby, Top Bunk

I'm glad I have a top bunk. I'm lucky. Probably the only reason I have it is because Mom left me off one and a half hours early. I didn't like that at first; we got in a fight about it before we left home. I didn't want to be the only at the camp for an hour and a half. I'd be bored, then people would think I was excited about camp and I would be an idiot from the beginning. I argued with Mom in the kitchen, but then Dad came in the house and told me to zip my lips. He said it wasn't worth arguing about. And that was that.

Mom told me on the way to camp that we were going early so that she could make a special dinner.

I need the extra time, she said. It's a *very* important dinner. Terry and Ben are coming over.

This was before she gave me my flashlight. Before she hugged and kissed me two times and I walked away without even telling her goodbye.

For Terry and Ben? I said in a not-very-nice voice. We were on our way down the pass, about thirty minutes from the Challenge Camp. Mom didn't say anything, kept her eyes on the windy road.

Terry and Ben are our neighbors but most people wouldn't call them neighbors because they live about a half mile from us. It takes five minutes to walk there. Terry is Mom's really nice friend. Really nice as in too nice. She smiles huge and is always excited, even over something stupid like the time she went to a movie with me and Mom and made loud noises through the whole movie.

I don't understand why Ben married Terry. Ben's cool. He's big and has a ponytail. Once he brought over a pellet gun and taught me how to shoot it. We shot my plastic green army men.

But they're no big deal. Why would Mom make a special dinner for *them*?

Mom kept driving, but she looked at me and said quickly, It's about Dad's job. His new job. He wants to work for Ben. She rolled down the window of the truck and laid her hand on the rear view mirror. Then she said without looking me, Dad wants to quit his job and work for Ben.

I remember staring at the yellow line, getting dizzy because it kept moving close, far away, close, far away, as Mom drove around the curves, and I wondered what had happened to Dad's old job. Did he quit? Had he been fired? And Dad working for Ben: would Ben be Dad's boss?

I remember how I felt. It wasn't a quick heart thing like thinking about the Ropes Course, but a sad feeling, like I might as well not be part of the family.

After we were quiet for a little bit, Mom said, Snowplowing. Dad would help Ben with his snowplowing business. Dad won't travel; he'll be home.

I stuck my hand out the window and made my hand like a wing, moving it up and down. I thought about my dad plowing snow and figured it would be good. He's worked for Snap-On *Tools* for the past three years. He always complains about people who sell more but work less than him.

Dad complains a lot about his job. Mom doesn't. She works at the drug store. Not with the drugs, Anthony does that. She works the money register and walks around the store. I don't like Anthony. Like Mom's other friend, Terry. I don't like either of them. I walk down to the drug store after school and Anthony is always there and he's like a grandpa, always trying to be funny even though he isn't. A lot of the times he's in front of the store, cleaning up or sweeping or shoveling snow. And he makes a big deal of Mom, telling me all the time how lucky I am and how nice she is and how good a worker she is. No wonder she doesn't complain with Anthony in love with her.

I was thinking about Anthony and the drug store and I could hear Mom tapping her wedding ring against the metal of the rear view mirror. That got me back to what we were talking about before, Dad and snowplowing.

Mom clicked her teeth a few times and said, I'm going to make a big dinner. Salmon. She looked at me then, and said, It'll be good, won't it?

I told her, Yeah. We kept driving and we didn't talk about it again even though I knew she was nervous about it and wanted to get home as soon as she could.

She dropped me off, gave me my mini-flashlight, hugged me and I walked away, kind of angry, but when I got to our den and realized I was going to get a top bunk, it was a little better.

I sat up on my bunk, the top bunk at the edge of the room near a window, for almost an hour before people started showing up. The other six top bunks were taken first. Chris showed up and none of the top bunks were open. He looked at me and I knew he wanted my bunk. I kept reading my comic book; I didn't even look at him.

Chris looked around and saw Martin sitting on his bunk, his feet dangling over the edge. Martin is weak; you could tell right from the beginning. He looked like he was going to cry just walking in the room. Chris walked over to Martin and told him that the top bunk was his, that he had signed up for a top bunk last summer, and that Martin should get down.

Martin said okay and started packing his bag. He had already laid his underwear, t-shirts, and towels on the mattress. He had this blanket too, a creamy white, thermal underwear looking, blanket. He put all that in his bag and he was crying the whole time. Not loud crying, but sniffing crying.

Chris didn't care. Martin climbed down and Chris threw his stuff up on the top bunk. He was right next to me, our bunks separated by six inches.

I waited for him to put his pillow at one end, then made my bed so that my head was at his feet.

And now I'm here on my top bunk, deep in my cave, my flashlight bright on the white sheets and blue blanket, listening to people fall asleep. Chris's feet keep moving. It's like he can't sleep. The first night I smelled really deep, thinking I might be able to smell his feet, but I couldn't, thank goodness.

I guess I'm glad Mom had to make her special dinner and that I was an hour and a half early. Maybe I wouldn't have gotten a top bunk if I had been on time. Maybe I would have been below, on the bunks underneath people. You can't see anything from the bottom bunks; they are like living in a valley instead of on a mountain top.

Chris' feet scratching at his blanket and me inside my cave, my mountain-top cave. I wish it could stay like this. This is the only good part of Challenge Camp.

3.

Best Parts of Sixth Grade, Chris the Cry Baby, Plowing for Silver

Maybe it's Chris' feet, him constantly moving them around like he's running in bed; I don't know, but I can't sleep either. Every time I close my eyes I see the Ropes Course and my heart goes crazy and I see Dad and Mom and Mr. Warner and my teachers and my pack all laughing at me. I keep my mini-flashlight on.

I roll onto my stomach, rest on my elbows and look at my journal. It's still open to my Big Dipper and the meteor.

I get my pen and write, *Best Parts of Sixth Grade*. I'm copying the Campfire Question, but I can't think of anything else.

I draw a squiggly line around my title and create a neon sign like the ones in Las Vegas. Underneath I write:

- 1) Heads Up-Seven Up
- 2) Chocolate Chip Squares
- 3) Snowplowing

Then I make a big square around the whole thing, around the title, the squiggly lines and the list. It looks like a house, so I put a roof on it, then a chimney and on the

chimney I put my initials, J.A.G. For chimney smoke, I write the date, 7-8-97, in wavy letters. I make five lines of smoke, five lines for each day of this week's camp.

My name is Jake Allen Gardner in case you're wondering what J.A.G. stands for.

Heads up-Seven up was a game we played when the weather was too bad for recess. Everyone put their heads down on the desk. You could lay it on one of your arms or just rest your forehead on the hard desk. Then you would stretch out one of your arms and stick your thumb in the air. Ms. Hansen, my sixth grade teacher, would pick someone and he or she would walk around and push down a few people's thumbs. If your thumb got touched, you got to guess who the teacher had picked. That was the whole point of the game: to figure out who the thumb-toucher was.

After the thumb-toucher sat down, the teacher would say, Heads up-Seven up and the guessing began. It was a stupid game. But I liked it I guess. It was fun to guess. Guys would push down really hard, almost jam your thumb. But the girls would barely touch you; it was just a little prick from their fingertip.

Chocolate chip squares is something I learned to bake that year. There was a picture of the cookies in the comic section one snowy Sunday and they looked good so Mom showed me how to make them. Dad liked them and I cooked another batch. We ate them all that afternoon. We sat in our living room, watched it snow, and ate my chocolate chip squares. I'm still the best chocolate ship square maker in our family.

I put stars next to number three, *Snowplowing*. That's my best memory of sixth grade. Not memories of sixth grade, but memories from that year.

I trace over each letter in *Snowplowing* and make it dark. I'm putting dashes around the word, imagine it flashing blue, when I hear someone sniff a few times, the runny-nose kind of sniff that means someone's crying.

I switch the flashlight off and listen. I roll onto my back and slide the covers from my head. The cool air feels like I'm outside. This big room gets cold at night, even with all of us in here sleeping. The sniff happens again and it's behind me, on the bunk further up the wall.

I whisper, Hey. No one answers and it's quiet so I stay still and wait.

You'd think the air would stink with everyone breathing and farting, and with all the sweaty clothes and dirty shoes, but I can't smell anything. Maybe it's because this building is log, the logs taking all the bad smells and replacing them with the pine smell.

The person sniffs again. I say, Chris?

There's a tiny pause, then someone says, What?

Is it Chris?

Why?

Nothing, I say.

I stay on my back and listen. You can't even hear the crickets and frogs in here. It's that quiet. Chris moves around on his bed and the bed squeaks a bunch and then he's laying down near me, his head near my head. I don't move; I don't know what's doing.

He says, almost crying, I hate this place.

I don't say anything. Chris goes to school with me; he's the only one in my pack who does. The rest of them live other places in Colorado. I know Chris, and I know that

he doesn't like me. He's made fun of me in school before, in front of everybody. He tackles me hard when we play recess football. After the time I threw the eraser and chalk at my class he started calling me Mad Jake. He got everyone to call me that. So I don't know what to think of him telling me that he hates it here.

I tell him, We're going home tomorrow.

Tomorrow's the Ropes Course, he says.

After the Ropes Course.

Yeah, he says. After the Ropes Course.

Then I know what he's crying about. I whisper, It's not that bad. I saw it last year. It's not that high. I'm lying to him but he doesn't know.

Everyone's seen it, he says. And it's really high.

Now he's lying to me. What he says can't be true. I've never heard anyone talk about it. No one. And I did it last year. With Gary and Knox. It was just us three. This is the sort of thing that Chris would say to make what I did mean nothing. I did something cool, no matter what Chris says.

I saw it and it's high, he says. Really high. He's crying again. He's trying to be quiet, but even quiet crying is loud in this silent room.

I'm glad it's dark. Chris wouldn't be this way in the light. If it were a contest who was the bigger jerk between him and Quinn, Quinn would win. I really hate Quinn. But Chris is pretty close. Chris has a black crewcut, like the guys in old TV shows; his hair is completely opposite to Quinn's.

It's okay if Chris lies to me about everyone already seeing the Ropes Course.

He's scared, that's all.

I think about Chris seeing the Ropes Course, about other people looking at the Ropes Course at night. There's no way. What I did others haven't done.

I don't want to do it, he says. He sniffs really loud.

Here, I say, and I hand him my mini-flashlight. The locker and house key make a little chime as I hold it out. I tell him, Put your blanket over your head, then turn the light on. His hand, slimy and wet from his snot and tears, grabs the flashlight. Then he moves back to the other side of his bed. I hear him pull up his blanket and then he's quiet. I look really hard for the light to come on, but I can't see anything. Now he has his own cave.

I put my mountain climber journal and pen on the window ledge. I look out the window and as usual, there isn't much interesting to look at. The window faces away from the camp; it looks onto a hill with grass and weeds. The big streetlight at the center of camp, behind our sleep area, makes a triangle shadow on the hill. The sleep area shadow line splits two tree trunks in half across the hill. Half the stump is white-ish while the other side is black. I wish it were bright right outside my window so I could watch squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, mice, or whatever else walks around at night. But the shadow area is too dark to see anything. I pull my blanket up and over my head. I wish I had my light back.

I'm here in the dark and I try to imagine my number three memory, snowplowing, but the Ropes Course keeps getting in the way. Dad's going to ask how it went, what I did, how high I was, if I was scared. He'll want to know because he used to rock climb and he thinks the Ropes Course is like rock climbing.

Sometimes I make up stupid things that might happen to me, like getting run over by the school bus or getting stuck in our kitchen oven and Mom turning on the oven to 475 degrees or one of Dad's sharp tools falling and going through my head and coming out my neck. I make those things up and I know they won't happen, but I know I'm going to mess up tomorrow. Chris and Quinn will make fun of me and everyone will laugh and I won't be able to lie to Dad about having a good time on the Ropes Course. I won't be able to lie. I make believe to myself that it'll be easy to lie to Dad and Mom but it's hard and they know when I lie. They've caught me too many times. Dad will figure me out and then what?

Snowplowing instead of the Ropes Course; I want to switch my thinking, but it isn't working.

My stomach hurts near my heart and I think maybe I'm going to have a heart attack. A heart attack inside my dark cave. If I have one, maybe I'll have it out of the Ropes Course.

But what if Mr. Warner comes to my hospital bed and tells me I still have to do the Ropes Course, tells me that doing the Ropes Course with a heart attack is really a challenge and don't I want to challenge myself?

I want my red, mini-flashlight.

Winter and snow, winter and snow. Memory number three. The journal on the window ledge with my three memories. Memory number three penned dark with blinking blue stars around it. Dad teaching me how to snowplow. Late in the winter, when the roads start to show asphalt or dirt through the snow.

Dad coming into my room one afternoon and asking me if I want to plow. And I knew Mom had told him to ask; I knew it. I was in a bad mood and she couldn't help: she hates that. She told Dad to cheer me up.

Something was wrong with me that afternoon. Probably no one liked me, I couldn't catch a football, I wasn't very smart in math, or I wasn't picked for the main part in my play. Things to say to Mom. Most of the time I can't figure the exact reasons why I get sad or mad but I always give Mom a reason. It's better if I make something up; that way she'll leave me alone.

It doesn't matter the reason. Here it is: I had forgotten the lines in my play try-out. This was the reason and now I can get back to Dad in my room, asking me about snowplowing.

This part with Dad is clear. I was playing *Game Boy*. Tetris. He asked if I wanted to plow. Sometimes I shovel or mark ditches or guide him into the garage when he plows our driveway and parking area, but this was going to be different.

What if Dad works for Ben? What if he quits Snap-On? Will I get to help him plow?

No, no, no, no. Nothing about that or anything else.

This was next; this came right after he asked his question, and after I put down *Game Boy*: he told me to get my gear on. My gear. I like that word. My gear is my one piece snow suit in my closet and my boots, gloves, and hat in the mudroom. Dad was wearing his Snap-On baseball hat so I wore my *Jump Rope for Heart* hat and left my stocking hat in the closet. He was sitting in the Landcruiser when I came out of the house.

You ready? he said. He took off his hat, put it back on.

Do I get to plow?

If you're in the mood, he said. I saw tiny red hairs on his cheek. Red hairs on his cheek like the red hairs on his moustache.

I nodded yes.

We backed out and he said, We both know you can drive this truck, but plowing's something different.

I listened and he kept talking about driving and plowing all the way to the mill. The mill, with its big, open parking lot. It was where I learned to drive the Landcruiser two years ago.

We got to the mill and he stopped the truck in the middle of the lot, opened his door, and said, You ready?

I was already schooching over.

Dad walked around to my side. He got back in the truck and said, Hold on. Wait until I get situated.

He showed me the lever that controlled the blade.

He told me how to keep the blade from digging into the ground.

He said to lift the blade as you pushed snow into a pile so that you could pile the snow high.

He described how if you drove fast enough, snow would fly in a big arc through the air.

He told me a lot of things, and the whole time I played with the snowplow, turning it right and left. When I let it rest on the ground, the front of the truck rose. And when I lifted the plow back up, the front shifted back down.

Okay, he said.

I put the truck in drive, dropped the snowplow, let up on the brake.

I asked Dad if I had the snowplow low enough to the ground.

He told me to call it a blade. And he said I was doing fine.

I couldn't feel the snow move. I drove and the snow looked like ice cream scooped with a spoon. Behind the Landcruiser, the clean swatch of snow was smooth like paper with water over it.

Dad told me he learned to snowplow with an old Army jeep. He loved to plow. He said he liked teaching me how to plow.

I plowed and he talked. He said I was doing a good job, told me to move the blade right and left and to keep it centered. I looked at him and he was smiling, and I realize I must almost be dreaming inside my blanket-cave at Shadow Lake Challenge Camp. I like this memory this way.

I want to keep dreaming.

So Dad smiles and laughs and tells me I will soon be an expert snowplower. I look in the rear view mirror and behind me the plowed snow glitters like flashbulbs. Like bright silver flashbulbs. Every time I plow another straight line, more bright silver appears. Me and Dad, plowing for silver.

4.

Chris the Jerk, Martin Cries, Painting the Zirkel Table, The Bet, A Hundred Feet Tall

Even before opening my eyes, I know that my blanket is bunched down at my knees and feet and that everyone can see my body. I get scared suddenly, thinking of my thing sticking out from my underwear hole, maybe even sticking out straight like it sometimes gets. Even if it isn't sticking out, straight or small, it's still in there making a weird shape on my underwear. I grab at my blanket and pull it over me, then feel down there to make sure I'm okay.

Tomorrow is here. My last day. Ropes Course and my heart beats fast..

I want to get up. I'm too nervous to just lay here and wait, but no one gets out of bed before Mr. Warner. It's like arriving at camp early: you don't want it to look like you're excited. I'm not excited; I'm the opposite of excited, but still, everyone would assume I was an idiot.

I tilt my head back and look at Chris. He's laying on his stomach, his pillow over his head. I don't see my flashlight; maybe it's inside his covers, under his stomach, or still in his hand.

Then I wonder if I dreamed all that from last night. My journal's on the widow ledge. I lean over the side of the bed and there's my pen, on the ground; I don't know

how it got there. There's nothing under my pillow. No flashlight anywhere. I gave it to Chris: I didn't dream that. My mini-flashlight with my house key and my camp locker key.

I reach over the bed, lean my chest on the metal, and poke at Chris' feet. His feet move, then he takes the pillow from his head. He whispers angrily, What?

The metal bed frame hurts my chest. With the hand I poked him with, I motion like I have a flashlight in my hand, waving the imaginary beam against the walls. I whisper, My flashlight.

He stares at me, says again, What? A millisecond later he puts his pillow back over his head. He pats his hands on the pillow, squishing it tight against his hair and neck.

I scoot back on my side and lay on my stomach. My house key, the one Mom gave me. And the red mini-flashlight. My camp locker key. The one that cost twenty dollars, and how much will a whole house key cost if a stupid camp locker key costs that much? Mom and Dad will be even more mad than last year.

All that, and I'll mess up on the Ropes Course today. But maybe Dad will be travelling when I get home and then he'll forget and Mom won't tell him about losing the keys.

But what if he isn't gone?

Plus, how will I get my gloves and water bottle from my locker? How will I lock away my journal? People will read it if I leave it up here.

The lights flip on and off two times. I didn't hear Mr. Warner open the door. Before I can get the pillow over my head he says, This is it: my last morning howl for my Zirkel Pack. The longer you stay in bed, the longer I'll howl.

He does this every morning, the howling. We're supposed to howl with him. The first morning he got mad and gave us a lesson about involvement, but by the second day he didn't care; he just howled by himself.

So he howls and we move around a little to let him know we're alive. He keeps howling, high pitches and barks like a coyote, and then the long drawn-out wolf sound, the kind you hear on TV shows. Mr. Warner's howls are loud against the cement floor and ceiling. I wish I could throw my pen at him, make it go through his throat and shut him up, but my pen's down on the floor. I doubt I could aim that well anyway.

All of a sudden, Quinn jumps out of his top bunk, lands on his feet and yells, Ropes Course!

He looks to Mr. Warner, and Mr. Warner, of course, smiles. He whoops one more time, then says, That's the spark I'm looking for.

I sit up, reach my foot for the lower bunk. Brett says, Hang on, and he gets up and out of the way. Then I'm down and I look up at Chris and he still has his head under his pillow.

Let's go Zirkel Pack, says Mr. Warner. Someone get Chris. We're not a pack with one of us missing. He slaps the door twice, says, I'll see you at breakfast.

Now we're supposed to get dressed, go to the bathroom, get our gear, and walk to breakfast. We wear the same thing every day: blue shorts and a white and blue shirt that

has SLCC on the front and Zirkel Pack, in red, on the back. I like the shirts. You can wear them to school and people ask what SLCC means. Zirkel Pack, on the back of the shirt, written in cool cursive letters, looks like the last name on a football jersey.

I stand there under Chris, waiting for him to get up, but he stays there with the pillow over his head. I have to go to the bathroom so I pull on the edge of the pillow, tell him, Let's go.

His head comes up and he looks even more angry than before. He says, Get out of here. Okay?

His head is back under the pillow but I tell him, I need my light and key. I stare at him for a second, then realize I must look stupid, so I leave for the bathroom.

When I get back to the room, my locker key is stuck in my opened locker. Chris isn't around. Inside my locker are my leather gloves, my second pair of shorts, two other t-shirts, sweatshirt and sweat bottoms, and water bottle holder. No mini-flashlight, no house key.

I climb onto my bed, get my journal, jump back down, jump on Chris' bed, look for the flashlight, rummage under the covers and pillow for the key, and make a final leap back to the ground. Nothing.

No one wants to be the last one to breakfast, so lockers slam shut, guys go running out the door. I'm not the last but I'm close to it. I put on my shorts and T-shirt and throw my gloves and water bottle holder on the ground. I stick my journal under my sweatshirt. I wish I could put the sweatshirt on; it's so cold I have goosebumps on my

arms. But if you wear a sweatshirt, you're a wimp. Finally, I close the locker, lock it, put the key under my pillow.

Before I leave, I get on my stomach and look under the bunk beds for my light and key. Maybe Chris dropped it off the side while he slept. I crawl under the beds, the floor cold and gritty, and sweep with my hands all the way to the wall. Nothing.

Martin's the only one with me in the sleeping area. Martin, the guy who cries all the time. I bet he won't even do the Ropes Course. Mr. Warner is always right beside him, wherever we are and whatever we're doing. Martin can't do anything right. Even when we built the teepee, he got a splinter in his hand and had to go to the nurse. No one makes fun of him though, not even Quinn. I guess he's like the retarded kids at school: there's so much wrong with them that not even the meanest guys make fun of them to their faces.

I tell Martin I'll see him at breakfast, but he doesn't say anything. He's messing with his water bottle holder, trying to close the lid or something.

I sling my water bottle holder around like a fan. I spin it as fast as I can, but it doesn't make a noise. These are the coolest thing we get here. The holders are purple foam and there's a belt with a black clip that you put around your waist. Inside the holder goes a bicycle water bottle. The water bottle is white with big red letters spelling CHALLENGE!

The counselors make us drink water all the time. They tell us even though we don't sweat, the dry mountain air sucks the water from our bodies.

Martin's still on the ground, fiddling with his water bottle which is wedged between his legs. I slap my leather gloves against my leg. I tell him, Let's go, but he doesn't even look up. I snap my purple water bottle holder around my waist and start for the meal hall.

Martin reminds me of a droopy, dying flower. A droopy, dying flower with snow all over it.

I wonder if Chris is scared of me coming to breakfast. I wonder if he thinks I'm going to tell people I saw him crying last night.

I wouldn't tell, no matter what. I'd never be his friend if I did that. Every year after this camp, I think that when we get back to school, he'll be my friend. And now, since we're going to junior high and will be around a bunch of new people, I hope he'll want to hang out with me because he doesn't know many other people. He should know I wouldn't tell anybody about him crying.

I don't have many friends. I used to, when I was in the first few grades, but then that thing happened with the chalk and then other things. Mom says if I behaved better, I'd have more friends. I tell her about the guys who do pranks and get in trouble with the teacher but who are still popular. Mom doesn't have a good answer to that. She tells me that there are different kinds of trouble and to worry about the trouble I keep finding.

Dad says that if I join sports I'll make friends. I'm going to try football, basketball and track next year. Dad thinks I'll be a good running back because I'm small

and quick. We played catch earlier this summer; Dad taught me passing routes and how to hold the ball when I ran.

Chris will play football; maybe that will make us friends.

The meal hall is three minutes away if you walk, one minute if you run. But you never run to the meal hall. You don't run anywhere, really. This isn't a camp you get excited about.

I've seen movies and TV programs which show people eating at summer camps. In the movies there are always food fights and if there aren't food fights, then at least the meals are loud with kids shouting, laughing, and doing stupid things.

It's quiet at our meals. And there'll never be a food fight. I guess it's quiet because it's challenge camp and challenge camp isn't fun. If we could go swimming or play soccer or go hiking or have *Game Boy* competitions, it would be different. But they make us answer a lot of questions and we meet in groups and figure out problems.

Even the craft classes have a purpose. Yesterday, we had to cut shapes out of colored paper and put the shapes together to create the most relaxed place we could imagine.

I don't think about relaxing places. Mr. Warner, as usual, said there was a point to the exercise, that it would mean something to us later. He knew it was challenging. That's the point, he said.

That's the point, that's the point: Mr. Warner must have said that a billion times this week.

I looked at my cut out pieces of paper and finally remembered a tree house that I used to have when I was really young. It was up high and I was the only one who could get up the ladder. So I wanted to make that out of my cut pieces of paper, but how are you supposed to make that look real with red triangles, blue circles, and black squares? I ended up making a ocean with red sailboats and black whales.

See what I mean about this camp being nothing like a TV or movie summer camp?

Since I'm next to last for breakfast, I have to sit at the end of the table. Chris is at the other end. I look at him but he's looking down at his food. Quinn's across from him; there's no way I can ask for my light now.

We sit at our table: the Zirkel Pack Table. We painted the wooden picnic table our first afternoon. We drew car wrecks, soccer games, fighter planes shooting down hot air balloons, trees, flowers, mountain lions, a picnic table with all of us as stick figures sitting at it, cows, spacemen, skyscrapers on fire, football helmets, names of bands, and lastly, because Mr. Warner made us, a big drawing of the mountain range we're named for.

In fact, Mr. Warner had us draw the mountains first, right in the middle of the table. He gave us a picture of the mountains and we painted them the best we could. He named the peaks off like they were his children: Byers Peak, Hahns Peak, Mount Evans,

Quandry Peak, Arapaho Peak, Mount Elbert. We drew them all and put snow on some of them. On both sides of the mountains we wrote *Zirkel Pack* in purple paint. Mr. Warner made us put wolf paw prints around the mountains. We used our fingers and palms. He told us that we were marking our territory, just like real wolves did. I didn't understand how painting a table was like peeing on trees, but I didn't say anything.

Mrs. Snead, in black and red paint, is right under my plate. She was a teacher in my elementary school. Since Chris is the only guy from my school, he must have drawn her. Chris hated Mrs. Snead. It's definitely her: the frizzy black hair and fat body, glasses, the big brown mark on her neck. I'm surprised Mr. Warner didn't make him paint over it. I wish he had; I don't want her ugly picture staring at me.

Brett's sitting next to me and Quinn's betting him he can't eat ten pancakes. Every morning Quinn does this. It's a bet, but not really. It's not like the movies. All Quinn says is what he wants Brett to eat. There's no laughing or anything. Quinn just says, Ten pancakes. Or, Thirteen sausages. Five glasses of milk. Your eggs with all the salt dumped on them. Four spoonfuls of ketchup.

And Brett does it. He's never not done what Quinn tells him to do.

He gagged with the salt on the eggs but he got it down. I've never heard what Brett gets if he does the things Quinn wants. I've never heard about money. Maybe Brett is keeping a running count on everything Quinn asks him to do. Maybe he'll ask for a bunch of money at the end of the camp. That's stupid though: as if Quinn would pay Brett anything.

Brett's looking off at the kitchen. Quinn's looking at him, waiting. Finally Brett picks up his fork and says to no one in particular, Okay.

There's a pile of pancakes at our end of the table and Brett piles up five or six. I grab three before he takes them all. I look down at Chris again and he's still eating, looking at his plate. I wish I could yell down to him, tell him I want my mini-flashlight.

Counselors are moving around the dining room. Mr. Warner comes to our table and tells Brett to put back half of his pancakes; he tells Brett he doesn't need anybody throwing up on the Ropes Course.

Brett puts all but three back on the platter, but as soon as Mr. Warner leaves, Brett tells us, Leave those pancakes there; I'll eat them later.

No one says anything. Chris looks up, but he looks at Quinn and when Quinn doesn't look at him, Chris looks out the window. I'm staring at him but he won't look at me.

At another table someone asks what time they get to go home.

I turn around and say, Two o'clock.

The boy who asked turns around, looks at me, and says, Oh. Then he turns back around.

Mad Jake, says Quinn. He's leaning behind the other guys so he can see me. He says, I thought you want everyone to shut up.

We're done at two o'clock, I tell Quinn.

Do you remember last night? Quinn says again.

Yeah.

Shut up, shut up, shut up, Quinn says. He says it in a high voice. Some of the guys laugh.

I try to look through Quinn, try to look out the window at the flag pole across the grass.

Two o'clock what? he says.

When the camp ends, I tell him.

Everyone's still eating. Brett reaches for two more pancakes. This is seven, he tells everyone.

We have the Ropes Course, Quinn says.

And the Group Ceremony, I tell him. Quinn can't remember anything, I guess. He's too stupid to know the Group Ceremony is the last thing we do before we go home.

While I'm looking at Quinn, I notice Chris looking at me, but because he looks away quickly, I can't tell if he's mad or scared.

The Group Ceremony is stupid, says Quinn. It doesn't count. Our parents are there with us. It's not the last thing. The Ropes Course is the last thing. Okay? He turns around to eat. He picks up his fork; on the end is a bite of pancake. He holds it up and makes it seem the pancake bite is a person trying not to fall. He makes a ahhhahahah noise. Then he pushes the pancake bite off and it falls back on the plate.

Eight, says Brett. There's no more pancakes on the platter. He looks at my plate. He says, Can I have yours?

I put my pancakes on his plate, then lick my sticky fingers. I drink some orange juice.

I hear another guy at another table ask how long the Ropes Course takes. We're the only ones doing the Ropes Course today but everyone else knows about it and everyone wants to know everything about it. That's how it was with me last year. And the year before. It's a big deal.

Because Quinn's on me this morning, I don't say anything to the boy, but I've heard the course takes four hours. Four hours. Half a day.

Three of the guys at my table are talking about football, about who's better, the Broncos or the Cowboys. About who's a better quarterback, Elway or Aikman. I almost tell them my opinion, that Dad loves Elway and that I agree with him, but before I do, I hear Quinn ask Chris if he's psyched for the course. I look down there secretly.

Chris wipes his mouth and says, No, I'm so scared I'm going to pee my pants. Me and Martin already wet our pants. Mr. Warner told us that we couldn't do the course because we might drip pee when we're climbing on the ropes. He laughs loud.

Chris takes a bite from a banana and pushes the stuff out through his teeth with his tongue.

Quinn keeps laughing, especially about the dripping pee, but now he takes his banana and copies Chris, squishing out even more banana before it falls to his plate. Then he says, Martin. Exactly.

Martin doesn't hear them; he's busy cutting his pancakes into tiny bites.

The football guys are talking about running backs.

The guys at the other table are talking about what happens to the camp when we leave: does it shut down, do they take everything down, does someone else come and start a different camp? What happens to it? one kid keeps asking over and over.

Some cook is banging on a pan at the serving line. Another cook picks up a big silver pan and steam comes pouring from underneath. Mr. Warner is talking to someone at another table about something drawn on their table. I want to show Mr. Warner the picture of Mrs. Snead and tell him Chris drew it and that he cried last night and that he stole my mini-flashlight and house key and to make sure and tell my mom that I didn't lose either one of them.

There's too much noise. Too much big noise. Usually it's quiet at breakfast, but now it's too noisy.

Brett burps real loud and says, That's it. That's ten.

But no one really cares, because this happens every morning; it's not a big deal anymore.

Ten, Brett says. I ate all ten. Did someone count?

No one says anything; they're just sitting there, making noises or flipping their forks, waiting to go.

I did it, says Brett.

You can't throw it up on the Ropes Course, says Quinn. If you throw up, it doesn't count.

It counts.

I wonder what counts and what Brett gets if it does count.

Not if you throw up, says Quinn. Not if you throw up from way up on some rope obstacle.

All this makes me feel like I'm going to throw up. My stomach feels bad, not like an ache, but like there's some bad smell in there. I can almost smell it coming up my throat. The pancakes, the steam from that pan, the orange juice, the paint on this table.

I'm tired of listening to everything. It's like last night when I could hear everybody talking no matter how tight I made my blanket cave. All these noises and it's all jumbled.

Maybe if I made my own noise it would help. I try to think of words to say but I can't get my words out. I want to say things but there's too much to say. I could talk about the Group Ceremony, when the camp ends, two o'clock or one o'clock or five o'clock, that Elway is a better quarterback, that Chris is really afraid of the Ropes Course, that Brett ate all ten pancakes.

But people wouldn't care. I don't know how to say the other things that matter.

I want to talk with everybody. Everybody. This whole room. Make my voice like a loud speaker and hurt people's ears. Make it so loud that Mom would hear me at home. I'd say that I hope Brett throws up all ten pancakes: Brett up high on a rope and his throw-up falling right on Quinn's open mouth. All ten pancakes and the orange juice and everything.

I hate Quinn. I hate everybody else for liking him.

I don't want Dad to teach me how to throw and catch a football; I want to know how to tackle, tackle real hard so I can tackle Quinn so hard that his helmet will fly off and he'll be left on the field with blood coming out his eyes and ears and nose.

I don't want to be small and quick; I want to big and strong.

Mr. Warner tells us to file outside, that breakfast is over. I walk behind everybody else but I feel like I'm fifty feet above them. It's happening again. I'm getting big and the world is too small.

It happens sometimes and I don't like it. Nothing looks or feels right.

I'm a hundred feet above everybody and I'm huge, so huge I can't walk right, and I keep bumping into things, walking on people's heels, putting my hands on their backs so I don't scrunch them. I can't help it.

People are pushing at me and telling me to stop it and to shut up.

I run for the doors before I get too big to get through them. Anything to get away from this dining room. It stinks and it's loud and the lights are dim like dusk time. I can't see anything clearly; everything's far away.

I push through the doors and get to the air and sun. I start to shrink. The sunlight is warm and it makes people easy to see. I put my hands in the air to capture more sunlight. The more sun I collect, the faster I shrink.

I want to feel normal again.

I go to our tree where we always meet. I stand next to the tree, feel for a spot on the tree where it isn't sticky with sap and lean against it, my forehead on a spot where a

branch used to be, the circle smooth and white. I rub against it with my head, making my forehead wrinkle and twist.

I'll be regular size before everyone gets here. And even then, we'll have to wait for Mr. Warner. He's always last out of the dining room.

I'll use this tall tree to collect more sun; it'll come through my forehead and into my body. By the time Mr. Warner comes out of the meal hall I'll be fine. The noises will be quiet and small again. All the big ones will have disappeared.

I have time. I won't think about the Ropes Course. I won't get nervous for another ten minutes. I'll wrinkle my forehead against the smooth knot, smell for the sap inside the tree, and not think about what I have to do next.

5.

Top Secret Ropes Course, In-between Cool and Scared, What Friends Do

It's top secret, the Ropes Course. They keep it hidden so we won't go there and get hurt or killed. And to make it a surprise, like finding out your teacher on the first day of school. But because there's only one trail in this camp that we're forbidden to walk on, it's pretty easy to figure out where they've hidden it.

Last summer I snuck out there with my friends, Gary and Knox. They're not my friends any more.

It was Gary's idea. He and Knox were friends and they had it figured out: where to go, when to sneak away, when they'd have to be back. They told me about their plan one morning before we went to breakfast. I was the Martin that year, always last, but Gary and Knox stayed behind to tell me the plan. I was so excited I hardly ate breakfast.

Me, Gary and Knox. If I was the Martin, they were the Chris and Quinn. And they picked me to go with them. We were best friends that night; they would still be except their Dads wanted to work somewhere else. Now I'm back to zero friends.

We left after everyone fell asleep. I don't know how I stayed awake; it's hard not to fall asleep when everyone else is snoring and sleeping. To tell the truth, I think I did fall asleep; I can't remember exactly, but I think Gary woke me up and said, Let's go.

I went to bed that night in my shorts, T-shirt and shoes, so when Gary said, Let's go, I was ready. I didn't wear socks. And none of us wore our sweatshirts; not even in the pitch dark cold.

We were either spies or prisoners escaping from prison. We went from building to building, hiding from the light. Once, while we were standing next to the equipment shed, Gary told me to quit shaking. I told him my shoes were wet from the wet grass. I explained how the cold hit my feet, and then went from my feet to my head and teeth.

He wasn't listening; he was busy carving something into the tin shed with a knife from the meal hall. Which was fine, because I couldn't say what I wanted to say: that I was more than cold. I was everything: I was cold, excited, and scared all at the same time.

Gary acted cool, but Knox was scared. He kept asking about getting caught and lost.

I was between them, in-between cool and scared.

We finally made it to the craft center. The secret trail to the Ropes Course starts behind the center, next to a blue natural gas tank.

Through the craft center's windows I saw bits and pieces of the inside. The only light in the camp is from an old streetlight near the nurse's office and it doesn't reach the craft center. Since the only light was from the moon and stars, I couldn't see much.

I remember seeing shapes, and because I had been inside the craft center about a million times, I knew the shapes were cans of paint and wooden mallets and strips of

leather. Still, I didn't like looking in the windows. It felt like something could come leaping out of them.

Knox was really scared. It made me more nervous, watching him look around so much and asking Gary all sorts of questions. Knox was almost too scared, like he was an actor playing a scared boy. I said something about the trail being private property.

Gary wanted to know if I was scared. I wanted to tell him Knox was the scared one, not me. But Knox was looking at me and he didn't seem scared anymore. Since they were standing together, staring at me, I figured they'd team up and wouldn't let me come with them.

So I said I was cold, not scared. It didn't make any sense, telling them I was cold right after asking them about private property, but they didn't seem to care. They said, Whatever, and kept walking.

I was cold. I didn't lie to them about that. My feet were freezing.

We left the craft center and started down the trail. Walking on a trail in the dark is hard: most of the time you can't see the trail, so you keep walking until you start walking on pine cones or rocks, and then you know you're off the trail. You're always going on, then off, on, then off. I walked between Gary and Knox and prayed the Ropes Course wasn't far away.

Sometimes at home, Dad sends me to the garage and it's the same scary feeling. Our garage is separate from the house and the further you get from the house, the darker

it gets. There's a stone walkway, and the shadows, like when the moon barely comes through the trees, makes it scary.

Dad makes me go out when it's dark, even though he knows I hate it. Sometimes I'll be in my room, playing games or looking at a comic and he'll come in and tell me to go get something in the garage. I think he thinks by making me do stuff I hate that I'll become tougher.

Maybe that's why I go to this camp. Maybe it's Dad sending me and not Mom. I always thought it was her, that she wanted a weeks vacation with Terry without me around. But maybe this Challenge Camp is kind of like the garage and Dad sends me every summer with the same hope: that I'll come back tougher, not scared about stupid things.

This is it, said Gary.

We were in an open area and it took a little bit to understand that some of the tall, tree-looking shapes around us weren't trees but were tall structures with wires and ladders and ropes hanging from them.

We stood there and it got too quiet so I asked, Is this it?

No, it's a circus, Knox said. He and Gary started walking again, towards the middle of the open area.

They weren't saying anything again and it seemed there were things in the woods watching us. Not things like mountain lions or bears, but things I didn't know existed.

There weren't any shadows in the field. All the shadows were in the woods. Some of the grass was high and it scratched at my shins. Each time the sharp grass pricked my skin, it sent shivers up my neck. I was ready to turn around.

But then we were at some bleachers, bleachers like at the junior high football field. Two sets of gray bleachers. The closer we got to them, the brighter they became.

I walked fast and got to the bleachers first and walked onto the first level and squatted down, sat on my heels, and put my arms around my legs. I made like a little ball, a tight, safe ball.

You're scared, huh? said Gary. He and Knox were stepping up and down on the bottom level of the bleachers. The sound of their feet on the metal was loud in this open area. I wanted them to stop.

But they kept doing it, up and down, the sound like drums. Knox went up another level and jumped off, landed heavily on the ground. Knox said, No, he's just cold.

I'm tired, I said.

They didn't seem to care; they stopped stepping up and down on the bleachers and began walking away. Come on, said Gary.

Knox went running towards a tall obstacle. Gary followed him, sprinting away from me. I watched them for a second or two, then they disappeared into the black area near the trees.

I didn't know what to do. They were my friends but they had left me. If they got lost they'd be two people lost, but if I got lost I'd be alone. They'd be back. I didn't care about playing on the obstacles. And I could see enough from there on the bleachers.

I didn't move from my squat position until my knees started hurting. Then I stood up and cold air hit my chest and leg and arms. In a second my legs quit hurting, so I scrunched back down.

My butt got cold and wet. I sat further up on my heels.

I wondered what would happen if Gary or Knox died. If they just never returned. And I thought about how much trouble I'd be in. First for being at the Ropes Course and then for Gary or Knox, or both of them, dying. I had already been in trouble that year for throwing an eraser and chalk at my class and I figured if I was part of someone dying, I'd really be in trouble.

The open space seemed to get bigger. I tried to make myself more invisible.

Then something hit the bleachers. A rock or a piece of wood. It banged on the metal and I felt the vibration on my feet. I said out loud, Nice throw, Gary.

He didn't say anything back.

Gary, I said. I looked in the direction they had walked off in but couldn't see anything. Knox, I yelled. I didn't like my voice so loud. I listened so hard I heard my heart beat.

Something else hit the ground and the grass made a whishing sound. Then something hit the bleacher. Hey, I said, but this time I said it quiet.

The bleachers pinged again and I lay down on the metal. It was cold and wet, but I got down low beneath the two levels of bleacher. I was safe in that tight area. I put my arms around my head and looked at the bleachers. I imagined the bleachers in the daytime, how they'd turn bright silver in the sun.

Things kept hitting the bleachers and ground. Knox and Gary started making crazy, scary laughs and devil voices. I tucked up in a ball and waited for them to stop. But the whole time I knew this was how real friends acted: scaring each other and doing practical jokes and then making fun of each other afterwards.

It got real quiet again, but I lay there and I concentrated on the fifteen lines etched in the metal. They were straight and ran all along the bleacher.

Then there were crazy screams. I raised my head and Gary and Knox were running towards me, yelling, and waving their arms.

Go Jake! one of them yelled.

They're after us! said the other one.

They kept screaming. I got up fast and it felt like all my blood was in my brain at once. I put a hand on the bleacher. They ran past me, sprinting. I tried to run but my knees couldn't move right.

They kept running and I got further behind. We were on the trail, the shadowy trail, and my legs quit hurting, but they were still way out in front. I couldn't see them; I only heard their feet clopping on the ground. Every once in a while one of them would scream out like he was crazy.

I tripped once but got up fast and kept running.

I ran and ran. I wanted to catch up to them, but it didn't matter now; we were running towards the craft center, and once we got to the craft center we'd run to the dorm room. We were running together, all three of us, and that was better than sitting on the bleachers waiting by myself. And it was way better than laying in my bunk by myself.

I was with my friends, doing something crazy.

They waited for me at the craft center. They were sitting on the steps. I ran up, stopped, and sat down on the lowest step.

Quit breathing so hard, Gary said.

Yeah, they'll hear us, said Knox.

He was breathing hard too, but I didn't say anything. I tried to stop breathing.

Why are you wet? said Gary.

You pee on yourself? said Knox.

I said something about the bleachers and laughed and showed them I liked them and this night; I wasn't scared or angry or anything. Everything was fun. They were my friends.

Don't say anything to anybody, okay? Gary said.

I nodded. It was a secret. Friends keep secrets and now I had friends. We were three Challenge Camp friends who had snuck out to the Ropes Course in the middle of the night.

Then they started trotting towards the dorm. I followed.

It was the best time, running behind them that night.

We snuck back like we snuck away, from building to building, until we were in our room and back in our bunks. I kept all my clothes on, even though they were wet and dirty. I stayed quiet. I wanted to keep our secret. I lay in bed, looking up at the

crisscrossed wire of the bunk above me and I wanted to shout and scream, I was so excited.

6.

Quinn's the Toughest, When it Rains, A Dead Dog, Course Rules, Rescue

Me and the rest of the pack are halfway to the craft center and we're walking in the same formation we do all week: one person in front (the alpha) and the rest of the group in pairs, two behind two behind two. We trade the alpha position. Mr. Warner makes all of us do it at some point. It's no big deal, really, but Chris or Quinn always volunteer. Right now we're following Quinn's long, blond hair.

I'm walking beside Martin. We're last in line. Martin's the one who pulled me away from the tree. I'd been resting my head on the bark, my eyes closed, wishing myself to stay small and unworried.

Martin poked my shoulder and told me everyone was leaving. I leaned back from the tree and saw my pack walking away.

Martin said something stupid about my forehead having tree bark marks across it and I rubbed at my skin, felt the hard, crooked crevices. I ran ahead to catch up and Martin followed.

Quinn's walking with a bounce, his blond hair going up and down like a ball; he usually doesn't walk this way.

• Sometimes I like Quinn. But only because he's tougher than Chris. I go to school with Chris and he thinks he's the best. He got into a fight on the school bus last year. The bus driver dragged him out of the bus by his neck. I saw it happen. After that, everyone thought he was the toughest guy in our school.

It's probably because of Quinn that Chris is scared of the Ropes Course and that he cried in front of me last night. Chris still has my mini-flashlight. I hope he's scared to death.

The one pancake I did eat this morning is making my stomach gurgle. I'm glad I'm not Brett, with ten of them inside me. He's right in front of me, but he doesn't seem any different. He's walking like the rest of us, his arms dangling, his head bent down, staring at the ground.

Mr. Warner is walking beside us. He tells us that it's good we've started early, that the weather looks like thunderstorms. He says rain, wind, and of course, lightning, would cancel the Ropes Course.

Up above, there are big puffy clouds. Some of them are dark underneath, but they don't look like thunderstorms. I guess Mr. Warner knows what he's talking about, but I think he's saying it more to get us scared.

It usually rains in the afternoon, so what's the big deal with today? Dad says it rains in the summer because of the mountains. He doesn't know what the mountains do to create rain; he just says they're the reason. In the summer, it pretty much rains every

day somewhere close to home. Like today, if it doesn't rain here, it may rain at my house, only two hours away.

So Mr. Warner telling us that it may thunderstorm is stupid. Of course it might. And if it does lightning while we're out here and one of us gets struck and dies, than it will be his fault. And the Challenge Camp's fault. And they will all be in huge trouble.

I look up again and watch the dark clouds move. They're moving from left to right, towards where I think my house is. I imagine Mom running out to the car to roll up the windows before it rains. If I were there, she'd send me out to do it because I can run faster than her. And I *can* run fast. I like to run to the car and roll up the windows and sit in there with the drops hitting all around me but not on me. It's like my blanket-cave, except bigger.

I wish I were there to help Mom. She likes my help. She likes to say how she couldn't live in the middle of nowhere without me.

I'm still looking at the clouds, dreaming about home, when I run into the back of Brett. His shoe comes halfway off and he skips a few times, trying to get it on. You'd figure he'd go crazy on me, stepping on his heel like that, but Brett's weird. He doesn't get mad; he never screams or says bad words or anything.

Mr. Warner keeps pointing up to the sky and talking about thunderstorms like he knows what he's talking about. I bet he doesn't know that it rains because of the mountains. Mr. Warner pretends that he's smart, but really he's just a counselor, worried about one of us getting zapped by a big bolt of lightning. If Dad were here walking with

me, he'd make fun of Mr. Warner, his skinny arms, his shiny black belt, his Mickey Mouse watch.

It's funny thinking of Dad walking beside me. Dad, instead of Martin, with his hat over his half-bald head, me and him following Quinn. On our way to the craft center. On our way to the Ropes Course.

Mr. Warner takes over the alpha position and leads us inside. All of us sit at one long, wooden picnic table, just like the tables in the meal hall. It's stained with old paint, lines of dried glue. Mr. Warner watches us sit down; he's standing next to a stand-up chart. We're squished together around this table and my knees touch the guy's next to me. I don't look at him, but scoot over and keep my knees together.

Underneath my elbows on the table is the imprint from a leather stamp; someone pounded the stamp into the table. It seems like all the tables at this camp have some picture on them, as if the counselors want us looking at something no matter what we're doing.

The figures in this table are deep, have been pounded deep into the wood. Someone inked the one under me, making the dog and mountain man imprint bright blue. The mountain man is shooting a long gun. The gun is pointed at the dog. Lewis or Clark ready to kill their trusty St. Bernard.

That's what kind of dog I want: a St. Bernard, but Dad says it's too big a dog and Mom says it would shed too much. I don't know if this dog in the table is a St. Bernard

and I don't know why someone at this camp would want to shoot a dog. I would have picked a cat or a deer or a bear. Not a dog.

Mr. Warner stomps his foot a few times on the ground, then turns over the first page of the stand up chart. There are five rules written in red. Mr. Warner says, This is serious stuff. Serous as in you could get hurt or killed. Then he says, Listen. He looks at us, at each one of us it seems, and waits for it to go real quiet. And it does go quiet. What are you supposed to do when your counselor just stands there, saying nothing, staring at you?

He tells us this is our last challenge, our last challenge ever at Shadow Lake Challenge Camp.

Mr. Warner's eyes go teary. We stare at him, but he's looking at other things, like the fans overhead, out the windows, to the back of the craft center, towards the big sinks. Then he stops and everything's quiet for a couple of seconds and he looks at us real hard.

Rule One, he says, pointing to the chart. Safety. He talks about water. He tells us we'll leave our water bottle holders here in the craft center, that there will be orange water coolers at every station. He tells us to get a drink every fifteen minutes. Then he describes the harness we will wear. Most importantly, he says, Listen to the coaches. You listen and you follow.

We start to get bored and Mr. Warner can tell, so he goes quicker with the other rules.

Rule Two is what to say if you need serious help – *Rescue*; any other word and they'll keep challenging you.

Rule three: no gum or candy or food. Only water – and drink lots of it or we'll be sticking IVs in you by the end of the morning.

I'm thinking about needles in my arm and look at my arm and see the blue streaks under my white skin and wonder when my veins will poke out like Dad's and Ben's. Mom sometimes touches Dad's arms after dinner and I watch her roll her fingers over those puffed out veins and I wish my arms were like that.

Then Mr. Warner is pulling up the first piece of paper and the second piece of paper has a map of the course. I missed rules four and five. One of them probably said the course was secret, to not tell anyone where it was located and what goes on. Top secret stuff. That's why what Gary and Knox and I did was cool: we were like spies.

The map behind Mr. Warner is bright with color. He moves his fingers along the different shapes and lines, showing us the trail we just walked in from (black dotted line), the Ropes Course base area (blue square), and the obstacles (red circles). I bet the blue square is the silver bleachers. The silver bleachers where I hid, the silver bleachers where Knox and Gary played their joke on me.

Mr. Warner says we'll be at the course for three hours and to use the bathroom before we go. He folds back the pages and starts talking about the significance of this course. He starts getting emotional again. I really have to go to the bathroom. And my stomach hurts.

Mr. Warner goes on about tradition. I look at the dog below, the St. Bernard getting shot. The dog is looking away from the mountain man. The dog will never know what hit him. Someday that rifle will fire and the dog will be dead. I don't want a dog

anymore. Before I wanted a St. Bernard, but it'll die and there's no way it wouldn't die. Sometimes I think that if I did well at this camp Mom or Dad would buy me a dog. A surprise. A reward. Like when they gave me stuffed animals when I did well in first grade. But I don't want a dog. I'd always see it like this dog below me, waiting to get shot.

Okay, says Mr. Warner. Is the Zirkel Pack ready? We nod, say, Yeah.

Then he says, This is the final chapter. The final chapter of your Challenge Camp book. The way he looks at us, you'd think this was the biggest deal of his life. Finally, he says, Okay, and we get up and file off to the back of the craft center. I hurry to the front, needing to get to the bathroom. I say the word, *Rescue*, over and over again to myself.

7.

Bleachers, Coach Toby and Coach Adam, My Name is Mad Jake

The blue square on Mr. Warner's map is exactly what I thought it would be: it's the bleachers in the middle of the field. The field is smaller than I remember, with short yellow grass and dirt. Behind the bleachers are three little aspen trees. The trees come up to my chest and have tiny, green leaves the color of lime Jell-O. The tall wooden structures with ropes and wires hanging off them are in front of us. That's where Knox and Gary were when they threw their play-grenades. It seemed further away.

I'm sitting on the second bleacher from the top. Mr. Warner is talking to two younger counselors. They look strong compared to Mr. Warner. Mr. Warner says something to the two guys and they laugh. Mr. Warner keeps his eyes on us and smiles.

The only ones talking in our pack are Chris and Quinn. They're talking about the big structures, trying to figure out how it works, how cool it will be. If Knox and Gary were here, it'd be us three talking. We'd brag about how we'd already been here. Maybe we'd make up how we did some of the rope obstacles that night in the pitch dark. No one would believe me, but they would believe Knox or Gary. They were tougher than Quinn or Chris.

I put my hands under my legs to keep them off the hot benches. My hands get hot, so I move my leather gloves under them. The leather is soft and cool; I smooth out one of the glove's thumbs to make it even smoother.

Standing at each side of the bleachers are two orange water coolers. They look like the big Gatorade coolers you see at football games. One of the Ropes Course counselors goes to a cooler, fills his plastic cup with water, then pitches the water in a big arc towards us.

You guys ready? he says. None of us moves. There are two big, cold drops of water on my arm. It's like an itch: I want to rub the water away but I'm afraid to move, thinking if I do, the counselor will throw more water. It's driving me crazy. One of the itches starts to run down my arm.

The counselor laughs and says, That's a wake up. None of you is allergic to water, right? He's smiling, hands on his hips. He says, This isn't like your other challenges. This is the Ropes Course.

He turns around, shows us the back of his red shirt. In large black letters is the word, Coach. He gives us a good look, then turns back around and says, We're coaches, not counselors. He points to the front of his shirt, to his name, Toby, in small, blue letters. You guys call me Toby or Coach. No *Mr.* stuff. Got it? He smiles, looks over at the other coach and Mr. Warner.

No one says anything.

Got it? Toby yells. Come on, do you got it?

Some of us mumble, but Chris says, Yeah, real loud. Then Quinn says, Yeah, Toby, and Toby smiles and says, Okay; all right.

I rub at my arm, spread the water. Then I rub at other drops on my neck.

This is the real deal, says Toby. You're in for the ride of your life. Over there is Adam. It's just us two. You don't have to love us, but you better listen. We're not your friends, we're your coaches.

I look at Chris and he's looking at Adam. Chris's middle name is Adam. During our first Campfire Question fire, everyone had to say their full names. I remember Mr. Warner asking Chris what he went by, Christopher or Adam. That's like calling me Allen.

Chris likes Coach Adam; he's looking at him likes he's someone famous. I think Adam looks stupid, though. His hair is really short, opposite of Coach Toby's hair. Toby's hair is like Ben's: long and in a ponytail. I wonder if Adam and Toby planned it that way: one long hair, the other short.

I wish Toby was named Jake. Chris is lucky. I've never met another Jake. There was a Jake on a TV show, but he was stupid. Mom says I have a unique name, that it's special.

Toby drums on the orange cooler, says, Mr. Warner told you the rules. Number one rule is...

All I can remember is the word *Rescue*. Which was rule two or three. I don't remember rule one. But Brett remembers and he says, Listen.

Exactly, says Toby. Rule number one is safety. And that means listening to Adam and me. We don't want your Moms or Dads to see you in a cast. Band aids are okay, not casts. Got it?

The pine trees across the field make a low whistle because of the wind and I can see the tops of them sway. The wind hits us then and Toby turns around and looks at the wind as if someone has yelled his name. His ponytailed, black hair looks like a snake. He looks at the clouds. The clouds are about the same as before, some of them dark, some of them white, all of them puffy.

Toby turns back around, And what's the magic word out here?

I know this one.

What's the only word that will get our attention one hundred percent of the time?

What's the word when you're in serious trouble?

Rescue, I say quietly. Brett copies me, but says it louder.

What is it? Toby says again. He crosses his arms and waits.

So I say it loud, Rescue, and everyone looks at me.

Okay, says Toby. That's the word and that's how loud I want you to say it.

What's your name?

He's looking right at me, waiting. I don't want to tell him my dumb name.

Everyone's looking at me. I'm ready to say it, ready to say my name out loud, but then

Chris says, His name is Mad Jake.

What he means is Mad Jake who threw the chalk and eraser and who no one likes or wants to be around and whose Dad sells tools and whose Mom works at the drugstore.

Mad Jake is my name to Chris but not to Toby. Chris has my keys and mini-flashlight and if everyone knew he cried last night and is scared of doing this Ropes Course, no one would like him either. But now he says Mad Jake and people laugh and remember me and Chris is all of a sudden as tough and cool as he ever was.

Toby puts his hands on his hips and says, Mad Jake: that's a good name. A good name for this course. Or a WWF wrestler. He smiles, says, Right?

I try to smile back at him but I doubt it looks like a smile. Sometimes I can't make my face do what I want it to.

Toby starts drumming on the cooler again. He says, Rescue and safety. Those are the big ones. And fun. We're going to have fun out here. He drums one last time and stands still. Okay, he says. Let's do it.

He tells us to walk to the first station, behind Adam. Okay, he says again, louder this time. Get a move on, Zirkel Pack.

We get up but no one is moving very fast.

I have more of this if you need motivation, says Toby, and he starts filling his cup with water. He throws the water in the air and people make fun noises and move faster toward Adam. Chris, weaving through people like a running back, gets to Adam first.

We're all moving in a crazy line, not at all like our usual formation, and I glance at Toby who's walking with us. He smiles real quick, says, Ready, Mad Jake?

I nod.

Someone throws something against my back; I forgot my gloves. I pick them up and put them on. The leather feels cool. I jam the in-betweens of my thumbs together, making the gloves fit tight.

Toby tosses the final bit of water my way and he's still smiling. I smile back, don't even worry about the specks of water on my neck and face. I look back to the obstacle and I think maybe I was wrong about the Ropes Course. Maybe it will be all right.

8.

First up the Spider's Web, The Fall, First Down the Spider's Web

This looks easy, Quinn says. He's standing beside me. He doesn't say it loud enough for the coaches to hear.

And he's right: this obstacle doesn't look hard. It's just a tall, wide ladder of rope. There are ropes going up and down and other ropes going across, making a wall of rope squares. When you step on the rope, it bends and it's hard to climb. Pro football players have to climb these on TV sometimes. It's part of an obstacle course they race through. The rope ladder is their first obstacle and some of them try to do it too fast and get caught up in the ropes.

I hope Quinn tries to do it fast and gets caught up and ends up hanging by one ankle. Toby would have to rescue him. Toby would make Quinn say the magic word. Quinn would be hanging like some chicken and he probably wouldn't remember the word *rescue*, so Toby would let him hang there until he remembered it. Quinn screaming with big eyes, and me on the ground, knowing the right word, but letting him understand how it feels to hang.

Toby grabs a ski pole that's leaning against the obstacle. The ski pole is faded blue and is missing its basket. He taps the sharp end against a sign next to the wooden

frame and says, The Spider Web. No problem, huh? He pauses and I wish Quinn would say what he said earlier. Toby goes on, That's what the fly thinks when he first gets caught. It's about perception; it's about taking nothing for granted. Don't rush, stay calm, and everything will be fine.

Toby stops talking and points the ski pole at us; he moves it from right to left, as if he were watering flowers, pointing the old ski pole at each one of us. When the pole reaches the edge of our group, he starts talking again: Get in a hurry and you'll get more than you bargained for. You'll be in trouble and you know what happens to the fly that gets in trouble. He looks to the top of the obstacle, then he leans on the ski pole and says to us, Got it?

We nod. The obstacle looks harder now.

Toby walks to the middle of the station, right in front of the ropes. He's standing in a thick layer of sawdust. Toby steps up and down and now I can smell the sawdust, the same smell when Dad and I cut wood in the fall. When you cut wood, the sawdust gets everywhere; it even piles up in the pockets of your jeans.

We didn't cut wood last fall because he was gone too much, but he told me earlier this summer that this fall he'd have time. He told me we couldn't afford to buy our wood and to be ready to work. He said he'd need my help.

Toby's there underneath the obstacle and the rope ladder is about three Tobys high. He grabs onto the ropes with one hand and shakes it. The ladder makes a groaning sound. Toby says, We got to wake up this monster. He turns around, points to the top, and says, Once you get up there, you'll pull yourself up onto a twelve inch wide piece of

lumber. That's plenty wide. Adam's pogo-sticked on that thing before, so you should have no problem standing.

I look over at Adam. He's sitting on a stump at the side of the obstacle. I know what a pogo stick is, but I don't see Adam doing that kind of thing. He's kind of big. But Adam smiles and I guess he and Toby are friends.

Once you're up there, I want you to look down on your pack and tell us your favorite football team. Say it loud: I want everyone to hear, even those young punks making tee-pees and leather belts. Then you'll turn around and jump into the sea of sawdust. Got it?

Adam slings a water bottle over his shoulder like it's a gun and climbs up the ropes. The ropes creak like wood and the whole station shifts.

Toby's definitely cooler than Adam. His hiking boots are all black with red laces. He's not very big, but his arms are strong. Toby's watching Adam climb, but I keep my eyes on Toby and try to memorize the ways to be cool.

When Toby finally turns around, he says to us, Who's first?

My breath catches in my throat. I don't know how I thought it was going to happen, but I didn't think it was going to happen like this. I don't want to be first, no way. I know I'll screw up, and because this is the first obstacle, it would be a story people would remember. The first guy up on the first obstacle: falling, breaking his neck, dying.

I've been first at other things. The first to do a math problem on the chalkboard, the first batter up in little league, the first to dive on the diving board at the pool: every time I was first and every time I messed up. Even at this camp, two years ago, when we learned how to chop wood and they gave me the axe first because I told everyone that my family used a woodstove to heat our house, and I took the axe like I knew how to do it and ended up hitting the wood on the side of the axe blade and it twisted my wrists, the axe fell to the ground, and I cried about how I thought it broke my wrists. My packmates trying not to laugh, and I heard them holding it in, the laughs coming out like a cough. And I heard them laughing the other times too. And I know they'd for sure laugh today. Toby and Adam would even laugh.

Who's the brave one? Toby says, looking at us, tapping the ski pole into the sawdust.

People are nervous. Toby climbs out of the sawdust area and stands near us. He brushes the sawdust from his lower legs and ankles. Still looking at his legs, he says, Who's it going to be? Huh?

I pick at my gloves and I can see Chris looking straight at Toby, hoping he'll get picked so he can show off for Adam. And just as I see Chris begin raising his hand, Toby says, Where's my mad guy?

There's no way out. I look at Toby and wait for him to lock onto my eyes, but before I can do that, someone behind me pushes me forward, but I'm not ready to move yet, and then this other guy pushes me at the same time, so now two people are pushing me, and I skip forward.

Perfect, Toby says. You're the alpha for the Spider Web.

I push at my gloves, make them tight on my hands. I look at the wall. I'm going to mess up. I know it.

From up top, Adam says down to me, Mad Jake. I look up, and just as I do, one of those big puffy white clouds moves from under the sun and the sun makes me nearly go blind. Maybe that's what I should do: stare at the sun as if I were staring at Adam and then I couldn't see and wouldn't have to do the obstacle. So I stare up there and because I'm trying to go blind I can't tell whether Adam is smiling or laughing.

Toby's beside me now. He throws the ski pole to the side of the obstacle and I wish I were that ski pole: blue metal, missing a basket, thrown to the side, laying there in the dirt, ready for the next time Toby needs me to point, tap, and lean on. Resting there in the dirt watching my pack climb a rope ladder.

Toby puts his hands on my shoulders and turns me around. I look at my shoes. Toby says, This is your support. Your pack's going to make the rope tight. The tighter it is, the easier it is to climb.

I glance up at Toby, and see Chris staring at me. He's mad, but I'm sure Quinn is more mad than Chris. They'll be mad at me the rest of the time. But Chris has my mini-flashlight and key and I can get him in trouble for that.

Plus, Toby picked me. The coolest coach picked me to go first.

They'll keep the ropes tight and it won't be that hard. I've seen how to do it on TV. And once I get near the top, Adam will help me, and then I get to jump into the sawdust. It'll be like water, but better. I know what sawdust tastes like. I've had it in

my ears and mouth and I like how it tastes. And I'll be the first one on top. The first one on top on the first obstacle of the Ropes Course. Even if I go back to school next year and get in more trouble, I will still be the first one up the Spider Web.

Toby picked me. Mad Jake. Jake Allen Gardner. JAG. Mad JAG.

Toby must have said something because all the guys are moving to the ropes to find a place to hold onto. Toby tells me I don't need my gloves, to put them where he told me to put them.

Listen to him, someone says. Some other guy says, He said no gloves.

I don't know where to put them. This isn't a big screw up. Sometimes I don't pay attention. Mom and Dad both tell me that. So do my teachers. Even Mom's friend, Terry, got mad at me once. We were driving to her house to pick up my mom after I got out of school. Terry got mad because I kept asking where Mom was. I didn't understand why Mom was at Terry's house. Terry wasn't making sense, so I kept asking. She got mad and Terry never gets mad; she's always over-happy.

What if I made Toby angry?

I hand the gloves to Toby and he says, Okay; I'll take them, and he throws them to the side of the obstacle. They land near the ski pole. He turns to me and asks if I'm ready and I look up again. The sun's still bright. There are more white clouds on their way, even one gray one, maybe rain, but it's a long ways off.

Toby's pushing on my back, telling me it'll be no big deal and that this one is easy. I want to tell him, I know it's easy, and I want to tell him that I've seen football players do this on TV and that I'll have no problem.

Now he has me right next to the ropes and I have no choice. My packmates are all around me, hanging onto the ropes, kicking at the sawdust, acting like rowdy pirates ready to climb a sail.

I start climbing.

The first step sinks the rope back to the ground and I've gone nowhere. I look down and the rope is half-in, half-out of the cream-colored sawdust. Both of my shoes have a pile of sawdust on them. I shake the sawdust free.

The next step is also bouncy but I'm off the ground now. I take another and I'm on my way.

I hear Toby telling my packmates to pull tighter. When they pull tight, I can feel it: the rope feels like wood and it's easier to climb. But every time they pull tight, they can't keep it that way, and the ropes goes soft and I droop closer to the ground.

When Toby says up to me, You're doing great, Mad Jake, I feel the opposite of when Chris first called me that this afternoon. I like Toby calling me Mad Jake. And I'm glad he picked me to go first. Instead of falling or doing something stupid, everyone will remember that I did a good job and that I wasn't scared.

Mad Jake-Mad Jake, the climbing snake.

I hold onto the ropes and rest.

Because I'm up high and nobody can see me, I smile. I like this obstacle, the Spider Web. I start thinking of what football team to say. Probably the Denver Broncos, but maybe I should try a joke, like say out loud the New Orleans Saints, the Dallas Cowboys, or the Oakland Raiders.

I'm happy now and I was sad then, but people wouldn't know I felt any different. I'm good at hiding. People don't know what I am.

It's like the day I threw chalk at my classmates. They didn't know I was that mad. So when I broke the chalk against the board and threw it across the room at them, they didn't know it was coming. They were surprised. The teacher didn't know what to do. I probably started crying and doing other stupid things; I don't remember. The teacher told my parents later that she had no idea I was so upset.

Having fun down there? Adam says from above. I've forgotten he's up there. I guess he caught me smiling at my joke.

I look up at him and he's only a few feet away; I'm almost there. That means I'm up pretty high. I'm not scared of heights but I don't want to get that way now.

Almost there, he says. He's talking softly. Either he's bored or trying to keep me calm. What kind of spider are you? he says, and I start to climb again.

I reach for the next line of rope, trying to remember any spider but a daddy longlegs, when the ropes go super loose, as if everyone in my pack suddenly let go of the rope ladder. My legs dip down with the sudden slack. The line of rope I'm reaching for is now further away and I make a jump for it and then everything is a blur because I don't reach the rope and now I'm reaching for any rope. But there's nothing close and when I

come down from my weak leap my feet aren't landing on the rope the right way and the rope is so loose. There are noises, like the entire Spider Web obstacle is alive, jumping and moving like an out of control water hose. I'm trying to balance with my feet because I can't find a rope to hold with my hands. I hear Adam say something soft, calm, as if this is no big deal, and then it is a big deal because my feet slip and I'm falling. I wonder who I'm going to fall on and if I'm going to get in trouble for this, when all of a sudden I'm hanging onto a rope with the insides of my elbows. I'm hugging the rope and it's burning my arms. I'm moving my feet like some dead bug on its back, trying to find a rope. My arms are on fire. I stop thrashing and just hang. I want to yell, Rescue, but my arms hurt too bad and I'm afraid if I say anything I'll start falling again.

Below, I can hear the nervous sounds of my group. Toby yells, Get your feet under you. Then he yells at Adam.

Adam tells me, Wait. Don't move, and Toby is still yelling at Adam to get down on the web.

My elbows hurt bad, but I look up at Adam and he's sprawled on his stomach, feet towards me, reaching with his foot for the top rope.

I'm still as I can be, but someone yells from below, He spit on me! Toby tells him to shut up.

I think I'm crying.

Adam is closer and in the sky above Adam is a black bird. It's easy to see against the white clouds. It's a raven. My dad calls ravens *garbage birds*; he likes to shoot

them. All of a sudden I see the bloody, twisted raven he shot. It had fallen on the garage roof; Dad had me pick it up and we drove to the river and threw the dead bird away.

I won't be able to say my joke now, about the Dallas Cowboys.

I'm no spider. Not even a daddy longlegs.

Then Adam's beside me, and now he's behind me, his big body around mine. He tells me I won't fall and I believe him. He squishes me against the ropes and I can feel his chest and legs. He pulls tight on the ropes and says, I got you. Get a good grip.

His body is warm. His bony knees are against my calves. I don't want to let go. I want to stay like this. It's like when I used to sleep with my parents when I got scared. I slept between them and I knew I was safe, no matter what. And now here I am twenty feet off the ground and I know I won't fall.

Get a hold, he says. Use your hands and feet. His breath feels wet on my neck. He says softly, Quit crying and let go; you're not going to fall.

I do it: I let go and I don't go anywhere. I'm not a spider; I'm a fly, a fly pinned in a spider's web. I grab with my hands and find the rope with my feet.

I got it, I tell Adam. Almost immediately he relaxes and backs away from my body. Cool air hits my back and legs.

You sure?

I'm sure, I tell him.

Adam yells down to Toby and Toby tells Adam to stay with me.

Toby yells at someone to pay attention, that this could happen again. He tells them to hold the rope tight; he says that this is as much their fault as mine.

We climb. Adam climbs behind and just below me, like a tarp over a garbage truck.

When my hands finally reach the top board, Adam climbs around to my side and is all of a sudden on top of the obstacle, helping me. He tells me to sit down and I do it. I'm facing my pack but I don't look down. Adam's talking to me and looking at my arms but I don't listen. From here I can see the whole ropes course, with the bleachers and tall wooden structures. There are three shovels with blue handles behind the bleachers; there is the orange water cooler that Toby drummed on when we first arrived.

I saw all this last summer with my friends, Gary and Knox. They liked me; they asked me to come with them, and we snuck out here in the pitch dark, just the three of us. We were a pack: a pack of three.

I don't belong to the Zirkel Pack. They let go of the rope. They meant to hurt me. To embarrass me in front of Toby and Adam.

Adam touches my arms and I want to bite his hands or spit in his face. Chris let go of the rope because I saw him cry last night. And Brett because I stepped on his heel. Quinn because he just hates me. And even Martin; Martin because he's too stupid to understand and he wants anyone to like him.

Instead of yelling out my favorite football team, I'm going to yell, Chris cries, Chris is scared, Chris stole my flashlight.

What's my nickname now? Crying Jake? Scared Jake? Falling Jake? Weak Jake?

I know what I have to do and before Adam can stop me, I stand up. He starts to get up too, telling me to hang on, but I ignore him. I look at my pack fifteen feet below, their tiny faces staring at me.

Adam is on his knees now, facing the same way I am. He's says quietly, Wait.

But I turn around and jump. I don't say, Broncos; I don't say Cowboys; I don't say anything about Chris. I hit the sawdust and my legs bend and I fall face first into the sawdust.

It's over. I'm done with the Spider Web.

9.

Water Needles, Copy Cats, Another Jake, Another Lesson

I'm spitting the sawdust from my mouth and Toby is trying to help me stand up.

Dumbass, he says, You're really a dumbass.

My arms feel like they're going to split apart.

You should have waited, Toby says. He turns to the pack, That's not the way to do it. You wait for Adam to say, Clear. Got it? He's back to me now. He says quietly, but angrily, Get out of this sawdust pit.

It's hard to move. It's like hiking in deep snow. There are still bits of sawdust in my mouth.

Toby's mad at me, but I'm mad at him too. He's over there talking to my pack. They keep looking at me. I hate them all. I won't hold the rope tight for anybody. Not even if Toby makes me. I'll pretend, but when someone's on it, I'll let go. I want everyone to fall; I want everyone's arms to hurt.

Get over here, says Toby, waving his arm at me. He's standing on the stump that Adam sat on earlier.

I get to Toby and he looks at my arms. My forearms are red, and near my elbows, there are bright red streaks. They're trying to look and I'm trying to show them, but Toby hustles me off to the water cooler. He tells the pack to sit and stay.

Toby grabs both my hands in one of his hands, pulls my arms under the spigot, and pushes the white button. Water pours out and I try to back off, but Toby holds me, tells me to quit crying. He says it again, as if I were bawling or something. Then he stops the water and tells me, It's okay; that's enough. I'm not angry about you falling; I'm angry about you jumping. Okay?

He drops my arms and waits for me to look at him. What's the first rule? he says. He answers himself, though: Safety is rule one. You have to listen. Then he tells me to keep watering my arms.

He's back to my pack. My stupid pack that made me fall and get these red sores. I hope one of them falls and breaks his neck.

I pour more water and try and make the red disappear, but it's no use. I make the stream of water from the cooler smaller and smaller until it's almost a drip. The water falls on my forearms and it feels like a needle falling through the air and sticking into my skin. I move my arms and let the needles fall one by one. From wrist to elbow, needles. Needles sticking up at weird angles, my arm one giant pin cushion. Like Mom's pin cushion, the one she uses when she hems my too-long pants. I wonder how many needles I can get in my arm? How many can I get in the other arm? In my legs?

I slow the drips even more. I watch the needle get bigger and bigger, longer and longer. I make it sharper. The needle looks orange, the water cooler magnified behind it.

It's ready to drip; the needle's going to fall and hit my foot. A big needle dripping through my shoe, through my sock, through my foot, and into the ground.

Forty-niners, someone yells and I look over and Quinn is at the top of the Spider Web. He looks at Adam, Adam nods, and Quinn jumps into the pit.

Since they don't need my help, I sit down next to the water cooler. But my shorts start getting wet so I go and sit against a tree. It's an aspen tree; the white trunk feels smooth compared to the pine tree I leaned against earlier. Still, I can feel the aspen's dark-lined ridges on my back.

Forty-niners, copies Chris. Chris has copied Quinn all week. In my school, everyone copies Chris. He'll say a cool quote from a movie and by the end of the day, everyone's saying it. When he buzzed his hair but kept the back long, three other guys did it.

Even I do it; I stick my tongue between my teeth just like Chris when we play dodgeball in gym. He bites his tongue with his teeth when he comes up to throw a ball, or when he's waiting be thrown at; I think it helps, because he can catch any ball, no matter how fast its thrown.

But here at this camp, Quinn never copies Chris. It's the other way around. If Quinn had said Minnesota Vikings, Chris would have said Minnesota Vikings. Even if Quinn had said Cleveland Browns, Chris would have copied. That's how it is.

Chris jumps into the sawdust pit. He doesn't fall like I did. He just lands and stands. The sawdust is up to his waist and Adam tells him good job; Chris looks up at

Adam and tells him his middle name is Adam. Adam smiles, rubs his shaved head, and the two of them smile at each other like long lost brothers.

Dad knows a guy named Jake who drives a Snap-On truck. We were talking about how they came up with my name. Mom said she didn't know, she just liked the name.

Some old boyfriend of hers, said Dad. He smiled, but Mom didn't say anything.

Later in the meal, I asked her if she had another boyfriend before Dad; I was kidding her, but I really wanted to know, and that's when Dad said the thing about Jake who drove a Snap-On truck.

Dad sells tools all over Colorado from his Snap-On tool truck. The truck is big and white with a huge sign for Snap-On on both sides. Dad parks it in our driveway.

Dad told me all about Jake the truck driver, how he was irresponsible and late and never sold enough tools. Dad said the only reason he keeps his job is because of his looks. The boss thinks good looking sells more tools. Dad said that good looking women might sell tools, but not good looking men. He said, Homos don't buy tools.

Then all of a sudden Mom said, No, I haven't had another boyfriend.

And Dad yelled back, We weren't talking about boyfriends. We were talking about Jake.

We talked about Jake the truck driver, but Mom wasn't happy and Dad felt bad, so it wasn't that fun.

Still, I'm glad Jake was good looking.

Mom says she and Dad would never get divorced, but I'd go with her if they did. I've decided that, just in case.

Chris and Adam are still talking, Chris on the edge of the pit and Adam at the top of the ladder. They're talking about football when another boy comes flying into the sawdust. I pretend my spit is a bullet and I spit at Chris, my ex-friend. The spit lands near my foot.

My arms are throbbing. Maybe I'll get blisters. Maybe my arms will have to be cut off. Mom will have to feed me and dress me in the mornings. Everyone at school will look at me and feel sorry for me and will open and close my locker for me. My teacher will help me with my homework. Everyone will want to help Jake Gardner, the boy who lost his arms on the Spider Web obstacle.

The green aspen leaves twinkle above me. I lean my head back, watch the white clouds drift by. When they go through the sun, it's cold and when the sun shines it's hot. There's a bird up there. It doesn't make any sound. Maybe it's sleeping, maybe it doesn't like all of us climbing around and pretending to fly off the Spider Web.

Are you coming? says Toby. You can sleep tonight. He's standing over me, massaging his forearms. I look over at my pack and they're all standing near the sawdust pit.

They're going over what they learned, Toby says. He cracks his knuckles on one hand, says, Did you learn anything?

I know this is some kind of test and I know that I have to answer it right. Toby won't let me finish the Ropes Course with a wrong answer. And I want to finish.

My arms are still red, but they're aren't any blisters. Toby and I look at them while he waits for me to answer. Then I think of something good to tell him. I say, I have to listen. I have to trust my pack. And I can't quit.

Toby crosses his arms and says, Don't underestimate the problem, Jake. Understand the problem, then find a solution. Understand?

I don't, but I nod.

It wasn't wrong that you fell, that you stumbled along the way. Remember, it's a long way to the top. And trust your pack; they're there for you.

They weren't there, I want to tell him. They were there, but they were against me. See my arms; this is what my pack did to me. But instead of all that, I say, Okay. I look him in the eyes. Dad likes it when I do that.

Okay, Toby says. You can stay. But if you quit listening, you'll be sitting on the bleachers the rest of the morning. Got it?

Got it, I say. Toby will never like me, but I don't want him mad at me. There's a difference.

We walk to the sawdust pit and join the group. Everyone looks at me. Toby says, He's back. You're a pack again. Mad Jake got burned, but he's okay.

I don't look at anybody; I look through them. When I do this with Mom, she says, Look at me. When I do it with Dad he says, Quit dazing. Sometimes I don't know

when I'm doing it, but I know I'm doing it now. All the guys are smudges. My pack,
Adam, and Chris: one big, colorful smudge.

10.

Dad's Visit, Hiding, Other Obstacles, Hissing, Flies

We're on our way to the fourth and last obstacle. I made it through two more obstacles but now I'm in trouble. Big trouble. I hissed at Quinn after the Pine Tree Traverse. The Pine Tree Traverse was before Spool Mountain. The last obstacle is the Look and Leap. We've done three, one to go, but I doubt I'll finish. I'm in trouble. That's why Toby is walking right beside me, like I'm a prisoner and he's a guard.

We walk over a dried-up creek. Adam, who's up in front, tells us to watch our step. Guys are talking about Spool Mountain, someone saying how they wished it were higher. Someone else asks what we'll have for our last lunch. I know that answer: hotdogs and hamburgers.

Every so often it feels like Dad is walking beside me, on the other side of Toby. I swear I see his flannel shirt and his puffy stomach. But every time I look, he's not there. If he were, I'd tell him about the BBQ coming up. The BBQ with the hotdogs and hamburgers.

I look around. Behind me: Martin looking scared; in front of me: my pack and Adam; on one side: Toby; on the other: willows and thick trees with green leaves. I look everywhere and Toby tells me to look where I'm going. I think about saying out

loud the menu for the BBQ but I remember that I'm hiding, and that if I say anything, they'll know I'm here.

There's a small hole of water next to a big rock, and I step into the water, make the little bit of water splash.

There's Dad again, this time in his purple long underwear, but I don't look; instead, I think about Mom. She should be on her way. We live two hours from here and if she wants to be early, she should be driving right now.

From the driveway to the highway, through town, past the 7-11, past the junior high school, past the mill, through the flat ranches and farms, and then up the short hill with the big aspen forest. On more flat roads then, the section where we once saw a deer get smashed by a big rig, and then she'll stop and get a Dr. Pepper, the same drink in the same town like always. Then over the pass.

It's summer, so the pass isn't scary. Not like in winter.

Mom has a favorite story, the story she tells me every time we go over a mountain pass. She and Dad, she never remembers how old, were going to Denver. An avalanche blocked the road and when they turned around to go back home, there was another avalanche, on the other side of the pass. They knew they were trapped. They parked on top, in an overlook parking lot. All night they waited for the highway crews to clear the roads. Thirteen hours. She says it was lonely watching it snow with nowhere to go. Sometimes I ask if she was scared of another avalanche hitting them. But she says she

wasn't scared, just lonely. Alone, just her and Dad on top of everything with nowhere to go.

Alone, like me in my room at night when Dad is gone and Mom is talking on the phone with Terry. Terry, Mom's best friend. Terry, who might be with Mom right now, the two of them driving to pick me up. Mom's company for the two hour ride or company so that if there is an rock slide on the pass she'll have someone next to her. Terry with her questions and laugh, wondering how the camp was, did you have fun, did you meet new boys, would you like to work here next summer, did you miss girls, do you have a girlfriend yet, are you scared for next year, do you know how to use a hall locker, do you know they make you take showers after gym, will you get good grades, what classes will you take, aren't you excited, excited for everything that will happen, how was the camp, how was the Ropes Course, how was the Ropes Course, how was the Ropes Course? Terry will ask everything and Mom and I won't talk. Then all of a sudden Terry will quit asking me questions and talk to Mom. And me, in the back seat of the truck, and them, in the front seat, for two hours, until we get home and then I'll have to tell Mom I lost the mini-flashlight and house key.

The uneven rocks in this dead stream bed hurt my ankles. I bend down, pick up a round, brown and white rock. Toby comes closer to me, tells me to drop the rock and get walking. But I throw the rock at a tree, and instead of it thudding against the trunk, I wish it would go straight through the tree trunk and begin to fly. I wish it would fly above the forest, over the mountain pass, then down past the ranches and farms, and

through my town, the rock sailing above the cars and trucks, falling now, falling, and falling through Terry and Ben's house and into Terry's head. Into her head so that she stays home, bleeding and crying. All that so Mom would forget about her and drive over here by herself.

I'm trying to hide. I am.

Toby doesn't think so. He told me earlier to quit looking for trouble, but the only thing I'm looking for is the end of all this.

Dad keeps popping up beside me and I don't know if I want him there or not. He's in my imagination, I know that, but maybe if he was here it would be easier. Or it might not be; maybe he'd yell at me for getting in trouble, for falling, for jumping, for hissing. But still, it could be he'd show me how to Look and Leap.

Look and Leap, the last obstacle. It's up high and the pack has to figure out how to get to the top. Then each person walks across a thin bridge and jumps to a trapeze type of thing five feet away. Jump five feet through mid-air, thirty feet above the ground. Adam says some people will say *Rescue*.

Dad might help me. He won't let me say *Rescue*. Dad used to climb and he'll tell me what to do.

But I'm in trouble right now, and that's why I want to be invisible. I want to be that rock or bush or piece of long grass or that bug which just landed on that leaf. A nothing. Something no one pays attention to.

I smudged everyone after the Spider Web, then I erased myself after the Pine Tree Traverse.

Toby wanted me to go first on the Traverse, saying the thing about getting back on the horse, but I gave him a blank look. The other guys were pointing at me and waving their hands in front of my face as if I were some zombie, but I didn't budge. I stared at a small tree on the other side of the obstacle, this skinny little pine tree, like the one on Charlie Brown.

Toby said, Fine, then you'll go last.

And that was that and he was getting the first kid up on the log.

Brett walked up to me and asked if I was okay. I quit staring out at nothing and asked him if he was going to throw up all his pancakes. He said, On you if I do, and walked away.

No one was excited about the Ropes Course by then. It was because of me. I made the coaches mad or sad or something, and definitely not happy or excited, and that made everyone miserable. I didn't care.

So there we were, all of us not having fun.

All you had to do on the Pine Tree Traverse was walk across a big tree. The tree was higher at the end than at the beginning, and as you walked further along the tree, you got higher off the ground. There was a thick rope you held onto as you walked. We had to wear a harness with a rope hooked up to another rope overhead. Toby said if we slipped, we'd only fall five feet before the rope caught.

Somebody was walking up the log when Toby got mad at me again. He told me to stand up and support my pack. I was sitting on a wide stump; I was counting rings. I got to thirteen, barely an inch from the center, and I knew from there on, I wasn't alive.

Then Adam was all of a sudden standing over me. First Toby, then Adam. I kept counting rings. Adam said Toby was sorry he called me a dumbass. And would I please, pretty please with sugar on it, come over and participate?

I didn't believe him. Toby should have said something. Not Adam. And even if it was okay for Adam to say sorry for Toby, why did Adam have to say the word again?

Dumbass.

Adam was reminding me. Adam with Army man hair. His middle name Chris, and he and Chris good buddies, talking about everything and laughing.

Then Brett caused some excitement. He went scared three-fourths of the way up the tree. He laid down on the log and hugged it like a baby. There he was, eyes wide open, arms trying to reach around the big log. I was waiting for him to throw up. It would have been funny, seeing his throw-up falling through the fifteen feet of air between him and the ground.

Even though Brett never said *Rescue*, Toby went out on the log and saved him. Then two other guys crawled up the log on their hands and knees.

I compared them and me: they were crawling and I fell. They eventually made it to the top, got a high-five from Adam and got off the obstacle smiling. I wished one of

them would fall off the log and dangle five feet below like he was hung. That would make them equal with me.

It was my turn and Adam helped me put on the harness. It fit tight like underwear and its straps cut into my skin. It made my private stuff stick out in a tight ball and there's no way I could hide it. A harness makes it look like you have a huge thing.

Adam was down there yanking on straps, his fingers close to me, tucking in my shirt and shorts, and he kept saying, Don't worry. He said it loud enough so everyone could hear.

I wasn't crying. I cried before, but not then. Or maybe I was crying, but it wasn't because I was scared. It was because of the harness. And because I was going last. Everyone watching and thinking I was crying about some stupid log pitched up at an angle.

I didn't want Adam to touch me anymore. First hugging me on the Spider Web and now even closer. I wanted to pop my knee up and hit him in the jaw. It would have been easy. Maybe his tongue would be between his teeth.

Adam finished and then Toby walked over to me and said, You keep hold of the rope overhead. Got it? No letting go.

I said, Got it, and starting walking. I held the rope; I didn't look down; I ignored the stupid cheers from my pack. The tree kept getting steeper, and I had to walk with my knees bent. Soon, I was walking on the tips of my feet. The only time I went scared was

when I stepped on a raised knot. I could feel it pinch the ball of my foot and it threw my balance. I pulled on the rope and kept going.

I thought of two things: me kneeling Adam, and Brett throwing up his pancakes.

It worked, because I got to the top and Toby unhooked my harness from one line and hooked it to another; then he lowered me to the ground.

I heard Quinn say, Way to go, Baby Jake.

I ignored him, but when I walked away to take off my harness, he said, Jake, the baby snake.

I looked back at him, stared at his buggy eyes and thick, black eyebrows, and he was smiling. I hissed at him. I wanted to be a scary snake.

Quinn laughed. So I came at him, hissing and spitting, right up to his face. He held up his arms like he was a blocker on the front line in football, and I kept hissing and spitting until Adam came running up and grabbed my neck and yanked me away.

That's when I learned Quinn was a fake.

Adam still had me by the neck, walking me away from the group. Toby came down a ladder from the top of the Traverse and walked towards me, really mad. Adam let go of my neck, and Toby grabbed me by my arm and said, You're done.

Toby took me over near a big gray trashcan. It was empty except for a Mounds candy bar wrapper and a Sprite can. I spit into the can, heard my spit hit the plastic bag.

Adam and Toby talked by themselves. Then Adam came to me and said, Are you trying to have a bad time? He put a hand on the trashcan, flexed his muscles in his arm

just so I'd know he was strong, and told me the thing about the last obstacle, how scary it was and that only the really tough got through it. Too bad you'll be watching, he said.

I gave my dazed look to Adam and he left, but then Toby came over to me. He told me to take off the harness. He watched me dance around, trying to get it off. He didn't help; he didn't say anything. He just stood there. He picked the harness off the ground and said, I don't know.

He looked at me forever, waiting for me to answer, but what's the answer to, *I don't know?*

Then he said, Everyone messes up on this course. That's part of it.

I didn't need a lesson. Toby was acting like a counselor now, not a coach, and I didn't want a counselor. He said at the beginning that he wasn't going to be like Mr. Warner.

When I sat on the bleachers in the pitch dark last summer with Knox and Gary, I was scared. But I was excited to; I wanted to do the course. But now, nothing was like it was supposed to be. Everything was wrong.

Toby was still looking at me, and I wished I could tell him that I wanted to have a good time, I wanted friends, I wanted to be cool.

You shouldn't miss the Look and Leap, Toby said.

I looked at him, tried to figure out what he was saying. I couldn't un-smudge him. His voice was getting to me like a dream, like he was a robot, like sound was coming from him but his lips weren't moving. That's when I think I first saw Dad. He was standing on the other side of the trashcan and then he wasn't.

I guess my face changed, because Toby said, Okay. Just be a kid and enjoy this.

I looked at him real hard and I could tell he was trying to smile. I didn't understand him. How could I not be a kid?

A kid now, but not for long. Junior high, then high school, then whatever. Be a kid today on the Ropes Course, but then it will be over.

Toby was no longer a smudge. He was Toby and I wanted to knee his chin, just like I wanted to do with Adam. I wanted to knee both coaches. Both coaches, blood in their mouths. And all of us, the Zirkel pack, watching their tongues flap on the ground like dazed flies.

11.

I'm Fine

Flies, flies, flies and I swat at one on my arm. It dive bombs into the creekbed. I stop, try to see it dead on a rock so I can squish it into paste.

Go, says the kid behind me. I hiss at him.

On our way to the last obstacle. Look and Leap. Leap and Look.

I'm not a kid, Coach Toby. I was once, but not now.

From rock to rock to rock in this old creekbed, in the middle of the Zirkel Pack. I'm trying to remember Spool Mountain, the last obstacle. Memorization, like *Go Fish*, the card game Mom used to let me win.

No, Coach, I'm not a kid. I'm thirteen and I'll never be thirteen again.

Thirteen and fourteen and fifteen and junior high and Dad not talking to me and Mom scared I'll get in trouble.

And I'm in trouble now. Coach Toby will tell Mr. Warner and Mr. Warner will tell Mom and Mom will tell Dad and it will start over again.

Dad's over there, but he's at the edge and I can't really see him. So, I don't look. I keep walking and I let him come and go.

I can remember Spool Mountain if I want to. I can do it. That's what it was with *Go Fish*: remembering the cards, not memorizing them. I remember things. I can remember throwing the chalk across the room and the teacher yelling out at the intercom, Come help me, Come help me, Come help me to the front office and then wrapping me up in her arms. Hugging me like Adam did on the Spider Web.

Adam and Toby: my two coaches. Toby, who called me a dumbass.

Chris, I yell. Toby looks at me, tells me to walk, not talk.

Christopher. *Chris to pher.*

Jake, says Toby.

What? Chris says. He's at the front of the pack, near Quinn.

Christopher.

Quinn says to Chris, He's going, going, gone.

Yes, I guess I am freaking. But Chris is quiet. He knows what I want to say. He knows. I'll get my mini-flashlight back. I know I will. Chris is like Quinn and Quinn puts his hands up when you come at him. That's how it is with surprise.

Toby. I'm not a kid. I remember though. I remembered Heads Up-Seven Up and snowplowing with Dad. But what was my second memory? What was two? I remember one and three but not two. It's like I remember second grade and fourth grade but not third. Who was my friend in third grade? What day did I have gym?

I'm not a kid. Or I won't be one soon. I'll have to be smart. I'll have to eat different foods. I'll have to like a girl and go out with her and kiss her. I'll not be able to

mess up and get away with it. I'll have to stay home alone without Mom because she'll start work when I get in junior high. One and a half months away and I'll have to remember a locker combination and class schedules. I'll have to take a shower with other boys in gym. I'll have to show them that I have hair down there, lots of it, but I have a tiny thing.

Toby. Listen to me, Toby.

I'll have to have a hair style, like you with long hair or like Adam with short, Army hair. I'll have to say no when someone asks me to take drugs and beer. I'll get in more trouble. I'll have to get a job and do it right or I'll get in more trouble and Dad won't take me in his truck, just like now the punishment is no *gamely* or no staying up with them to watch TV. I'll get in trouble and when I do that, Dad won't let me go to town with him to buy groceries or get the mail or buy nails or caulk or rivets for our roof or to get the weekly newspaper. None of those things. He'll leave me at home. That's what will happen.

I want to be calm. I want to be invisible. I want to be nothing. I want no one to see me. I want to be calm. Calm so that Toby will let me do Look and Leap: the last obstacle on the last day of my last year.

Mom's on her way, over the pass. Over the pass and through the woods. That's what we sing.

Spider Web, Pine Tree Traverse, Spool Mountain, Look and Leap.

Chocolate Chip Squares. That's it, that's my second memory. I knew I could remember: Heads Up-Seven Up, Chocolate Chip Squares, Snowplowing.

And Spool Mountain was the climbing obstacle. Big spools from the electrical company, stacked up on each other. The guys climbing to the top, like mountain climbers. Like the mountain climber on my journal. My journal, back in my locker, locked, so no one can see. My locker key under my pillow, but my house key attached to my mini-flashlight which Chris has hidden.

Spool Mountain looked fun but Toby didn't let me do it. I was in trouble for hissing at Quinn.

Quinn who put up his hands when I came at him. Quinn the fake.

I was in trouble then and I'm in trouble now. But back then, at Spool Mountain, Toby made me watch. Everyone was climbing, like my mountain climber with reflective sunglasses and a rope over his shoulder, except me. I was on the ground, in trouble, watching.

No sun now, all clouds up there, and maybe Mr. Warner will be right: maybe it will rain and we won't be able to do Look and Leap. But I want to do Look and Leap. I want to finish.

So I have to disappear. I have to fade away so Toby forgets about me. So Toby forgets that I'm in trouble. So that Toby thinks I'm fine. Then I can do the last obstacle. Obstacle number four. Dad will appear then; he won't stay on my side where I can't see him. He'll come to my front and tell me he watched me do Look and Leap and that I did a good job.

I'm fine. Fine, fine, fine. We're the other side of the creek and onto another trail and there's the last obstacle. Look and Leap. It's tall and scary. I slump and walk. I get calm.

There you are Toby. See? I'm calm, Toby. Hey, Quinn and Chris: I'm calm; I'm not going, going, gone. Zirkel Pack, it's just me, Jake Allen Gardner.

Okay everybody? I'm fine.

12.

Look and Leap, Grounded, Ants, Black Stars, Mom's Boyfriends, Camp Dogs

Your last obstacle: The Look and Leap. This is going to take everybody doing everything they can. Got it? Finish this and you'll have something to talk about.

Guess who that is? Toby's standing there with his fisted hands on his hips. He looks proud. He looks strong. He looks like he could throw every one of us to the top of the Look and Leap, one by one.

He's all that to most, some kind of coach-hero, but to me, he's nothing.

When we got to this obstacle, Toby and Adam had us stand around them in a semicircle at the base of the tall obstacle. We were standing in a sawdust pit the size of a big swimming pool. The Look and Leap is our tallest obstacle here, Adam said. Thirty feet. 32.8 feet to be exact.

Three huge pine trees hold the obstacle. Connecting the three trees are walkways, ladders and ropes. The way everything spirals up the tree makes it look like Christmas lights or a popcorn string on a Christmas tree. All the ropes hanging down could be ornaments or candy canes.

Toby said the obstacle was a puzzle. It's something you guys have to put together. He crossed his arms and looked at Adam.

Adam took over talking and starting telling us the whats and hows. Adam got about two sentences into his lecture when Toby came up behind me and tapped me on the head. It was like Duck-Duck-Goose. Except Toby didn't run away. He told me to follow him and we walked outside the sawdust.

Toby stomped his boots on the ground and told me the hissing wasn't stopping and that for everyone's safety he was keeping me on the ground.

On the ground? I said.

I tried to act smart. I tried to act dumb. I tried all the usual stuff, but Toby kept saying the thing about hissing and fighting. He said it was too dangerous. He said I could watch and he motioned to a red bench next to another Gatorade-orange water cooler.

I looked Toby in the eye, like Dad taught me, but Toby kept his arm straight out, pointing at the bench, as if he were a policeman statue. I thought I saw Dad over my shoulder, rolling up one of his shirtsleeves, and more than anything at anytime, I wanted him there for real.

I walked to the bench and Toby walked back to the obstacle. I stood behind the bench and watched Toby join Adam in the sawdust pit. They were long hair and short hair. They went on and on about safety, then Toby pointed over at a pile of something in the middle of the tree triangle. Adam said, Those are your tools.

I couldn't see because everyone was in-between me and the thing Toby was pointing at, but I didn't care. I quit trying to see between the guys' bodies and instead watched these two, then three, then five ants jerking around a piece of old orange peel right in front of the red bench. The peel was almost white. The ants wanted to take it away. They kept poking at it and trying to move it, but they weren't strong enough.

I sat on the bench and watched them. They were big, black ants. Not the tiny ones that you sometimes see in winter. These ants looked like two big staples joined together. They were the kind in horror movies. The kind that eat a kid to death.

They looked fake, the more I watched them. They were more like machines, the way their bodies stopped and changed directions so fast.

The red bench was high off the ground and the only way my feet touched the ground was if I used my tiptoes. I didn't want to step on the ants, so I brought my feet up on the bench and put my arms around my legs. The ants sure wanted that orange peel.

I wanted to see them move it, but then Adam said, Hey, real loud. I looked up and someone was in trouble.

We mean it, said Adam. I couldn't tell who, but he was staring at one of them real hard.

He didn't say anything more and it was quiet. Then Toby got up real close to the pack and said his thing about the Look and Leap taking everything from everybody and how we'd have something to talk about when we finished.

He'd said all that a few seconds ago.

Now he's looking at every single person in the pack and saying, Got it?, and waiting for them to answer. He's five *Got Its* down, six more to go. He won't get to twelve, though. The twelfth *Got It* is right here watching black ants with his arms around his legs. I'm glad I'm here and they're there. I'd rather watch ants swarm around an old orange peel than be a part of that mess.

I think I'm the only one who just heard the thunder. It was far away, but it was thunder, for sure. Now I'm hoping, really hoping, that a storm will come and cancel the Look and Leap. I'll be saved and I won't have to tell anybody that I didn't finish the Ropes Course because no one will have finished the Ropes Course. We'll all be the same.

Cancelled because of rain. Lightning. Luck of the draw. Can't change the weather. Sorry, and, No, there's no refund. Mom won't be happy; Dad won't be happy; all those parents, and especially Adam, Toby, and Mr. Warner, won't be happy.

Up above, there are more clouds. More of them are gray. When I'm home, driving to town, we can see where it will rain. Near Ash Creek there are big valleys, with no trees, and out there you can see the thunderstorms; you can even see the rain coming out of them, like a black curtains.

Even from far away, you can almost draw a line to where it will rain and where it won't. Perfect lines. It'll rain at the 7-11, but not at the post office. I bet if I tried hard, I could stand under the rain line and be cut in half, wet on one side, dry on the other.

But here, there's nothing but trees. You can't see the black curtains, you can't draw lines. I look to the top of the trees and they are swaying from the wind.

It's coming: the rain is definitely coming.

Adam, Toby and the pack didn't hear the thunder because they were howling. Toby finished his *Got Its* and wanted to get them psyched up for the obstacle, so he started howling, and when counselors howl, you're supposed to howl with them. So there they went, Quinn with his hoots, and Brett with his high pitched scream-howl. They went on and on, but I kept quiet. I listened for more thunder.

I thought about someone getting caught up high when it started raining and lightning. I imagined the tree triangle swaying like a piece of grass.

The ants are still down there, flicking around the orange peel. I'm tired of my legs up here near my chest so I put them down, put a tiptoe on each side of the peel. One of the ants comes at my foot, so I shift my foot to the right. It's hard to do, though, because I'm already on my tiptoes.

Then I wonder what I'm doing. Why am I trying to save these stupid ants? So I step on the ant that came towards my foot. But it takes a few tries, and he's quick, and then I get him, but not really. He's circling around on the ground like a penny spinning, hurt but not dead. I get on the edge of the bench and step on him with my whole foot. I scrape at him, and now he's gone, on the bottom of my foot.

Now that I've killed him, I go for the other ants and instead of sitting on the bench and reaching for them, I stand up and stomp. My first thump is on the orange peel, and

that takes out two of them right away. The other ants are going crazy, moving in every direction, as if angel ants above are yelling down to the living ants, This way; no, this way; not that way; over here. And the ants don't know where to go: they just go crazy.

I finally squish all of them. The white orange peel is still there, flattened a little bit; around it are black dots of dead ant.

I sit back on the bench and stare at them. The black spots remind me of the stars I drew in my journal. Black dots, like black stars. I'm good at making stars.

More thunder, and this time I think Toby heard it. He doesn't say anything about the thunder, but he starts to talk fast and hurry through the instructions. I don't understand why no one else can hear it. Are they deaf?

Toby holds up a piece of bright climbing rope. He throws that down and picks up two long pieces of wood. He drops those and now he hoists up an old tire.

He's like the street performer with bright red hair I saw in Denver two summers ago. The guy who balanced weird things on his head, his arms, his legs, even on his chest. Before he started his act, he showed us all the props. It was me, Dad and Mom. He showed us almost twenty props. When he picked up a chainsaw Dad said, This I gotta see.

We watched until he balanced the chain saw. Dad was happy; he even laughed, telling us he was going to practice balancing his chainsaw on his nose. For extra, he said, I'll balance it while its running. He laughed hard about that.

Toby has his own props, but he's not going to balance anything. He drops the tire and picks up a ladder made of thin logs; the rings attach to the sides with white rope.

Toby's hurrying because he doesn't want to get caught in the rain. But he better go faster because I can smell the rain now. It smells like a spring morning, when the house roof starts dripping melted snow early in the morning, and Dad says, It'll be a good melt today.

I guess it's the melt that smells like rain.

There's rain coming, Toby. Rain like snow melt. It's coming, Toby. You're not going to make it, and then you'll be the one in trouble, not me.

Toby's talking quiet to them now. I can't hear anything. I want to be with my pack, not over here by myself sitting on this red bench. When it's loud, I want to be by myself. But I'm opposite when everything's too quiet.

Mom's told me I'm a good listener. When we drove over here four days ago, she told me about her old boyfriends. We were over the pass, I had just heard her avalanche story for the two thousandth time, and we were on the rolly part of the road. She said she wanted to tell me something, something that I asked about a long time ago. It was about her old boyfriends. Dad made a big deal of it and wouldn't let her talk about it. It started out as a joke but ended up a fight.

But Dad wasn't with us driving; he was at home working on his Snap-On truck.

I had two boyfriends before Dad, Mom said. I want you to know their names.

I didn't say anything. I didn't move a muscle. I listened.

This was in Denver, Mom said, in college. Before Dad; before we moved to Ash Creek. She kept looking over at me. She wasn't happy or sad; it was like she was teaching me a lesson. She had the same sort of face that Mr. Warner gets when he wants to tell us something important. I don't like the expression on Mr. Warner, but I liked it on Mom.

Wilson Lee and Larsen Hendricks. Two of them. I liked them, but I loved your Dad. She put on the brake a little, and said, Okay?

I said, Okay.

Two boys from a long time ago. I don't think about them. I don't care about them. Wilson and Larsen: that's it.

Mom kept quiet for two seconds more and I waited. I wanted to know more. Dad hates when Mom talks about college. Or about Denver. Or about her sister. But he wasn't there and I wanted Mom to tell me everything.

But the only thing she said before turning up the radio and saying, I love this song, was, You're a good listener.

Mom was happy then, and she sang along with the song she had turned up. It was old; Dad would have called it a hippie song. It was the song about riding on a magic carpet.

If I were magic, I'd make myself invisible and walk over to my pack and listen to what Toby is saying. I'm still on this red bench, but wouldn't it be okay if I was leaning against that tree? Or that tree?

I walk slow and quiet to the first tree. There are sentences about picking two people, one who goes first, one who goes last. I hear the words, *important, critical, crucial*.

Toby doesn't see me at first. Finally, he looks at the red bench and sees that I'm not there. He quits talking and his eyes go everywhere, like the ants earlier when I tried to step on them. Then he sees me by this tree and his eyes stop and his face changes. But he leaves me alone.

Two of you, he says to the pack. I need one to go first and one to go last.

Now that I'm closer to the obstacle, I smell sawdust. Sawdust instead of rain.

You've got three minutes to come up with your plan, Toby says.

Adam starts talking with Toby, but Toby ignores him and walks my way.

I put my hand on the tree to re-balance. Now my hand is sticky; there's a smudge of yellow sap on my thumb.

You don't like my bench? Toby says. You like this tree better?

Yeah, I say. I concentrate on his eyes, hoping.

That's fine. You can listen. You can stand here and listen and learn. But no closer. Got it?

I nod. I make my index finger stick against my thumb. It feels good, pulling them apart, my skin tearing.

They're coming up with a plan, Toby says. A team plan. You saw the tools, right? The ladders, the rope, the two by twelve's, the tire? It takes that stuff, too. Which

tool for which section. All that, and who goes first and last. Toby runs his hand through his bushy hair, then says, All this is important stuff, okay?

There's something Toby wants me to understand, but if he wants me to do that, he should let me climb the Look and Leap. But I'm not doing the Look and Leap and now I remember all the trouble I'm going to get into, and then everything else comes back. It feels like I'm getting hit with a thousand pine cones at once.

Working together on the same plan for a common goal, Toby says. That's what Look and Leap is about. That's why you're here and they're there. Got it?

It's going to rain, I tell him.

What?

I point up at the sky and say, What if it rains? I know the answer to that, though. Toby will be in trouble. Adam also, but Toby more. Adam would get yelled at, but Toby would be fired.

It's not going to rain, Toby says. He's looking at the clouds. Then he points at the red bench, says, Get back over there. You're not listening, and these guys need to concentrate.

Toby doesn't think I'm listening, but I am. I'm a good listener. Mom said so. And I heard the thunder.

I'm walking to the red bench and I can feel him watching me. I kick at a pine cone. I swat at a pine tree branch. I keep sticking and un-sticking my finger and thumb.

I thought he'd watch me all the way to the bench, but when I finally get there and turn around, Toby isn't watching: he's over with the pack, talking to Quinn and Chris.

They're standing in front of him like two dogs. I wish I were that old hunter with the long gun I saw on the craft center table. The Davie Crockett hunter with the big gun shooting the dog.

If I had that gun I'd point it at Quinn and Chris, the two camp dogs.

Toby doesn't think I listen, but I heard the thunder. And I heard that whoever goes first or last is critical, crucial, and important.

I heard everything.

So Quinn and Chris are first and last. Like that's a surprise. The two stupid camp dogs. But which dog will be first and which dog will be last? And which dog should I shoot first?

13.

The Hero, Big Feeling, Waiting

They're going to town, shouting, handing ladders up, dropping tires down, arguing, and telling each other what should and shouldn't happen. It's like night time in the sleep area, before we go to sleep, with someone telling a story, then someone else trying to beat that story and somebody else making weird noises and others laughing, moaning, and screeching.

The noises are back. Loud noises. I have nowhere to hide. There's no blue blanket. Not even the silver bleachers.

This red bench can't do anything. Everything's hitting me here.

More ants are coming to the flattened orange peel. Along the way they come across their dead ant brothers and sisters and sniff at them, maybe take a chunk of their dead, squished meat, and move onto the orange peel.

Every time one of the ants makes it to the peel, I step on them. They reach their prize, then I put my foot down and put an end to their tiny lives.

I know what Gary and Knox were doing that night. I should have run away. Run away from the silver bleachers and the obstacle course. I should have run away from Gary and Knox, my stupid friends.

Here I am: me, the red bench, the orange water cooler, and the dead ants. I step on another. I should keep a tally and show Toby what I've accomplished. Toby could write on his report that eleven of the Zirkel Pack completed the Ropes Course and one of the Zirkel Pack killed forty-seven ants and saved a chunk of old orange peel.

Me, the hero.

I can hear them all, in separate voices, but like a choir chanting, each of them praising me and what I've accomplished. Their voices are better than my pack's.

Challenge Camp Leader: Very proud of you, Jake Gardner. You earn the Top Challenger of the camp.

Mr. Warner: I thought Chris or Quinn would win, but you're tops. A+. You're an inspiration to each and every Challenge Camper. By the way, we know what Chris did, how he stole your mini-flashlight and house key. He's in big trouble now, don't you worry.

Chris: I never wanted to steal your mini-flashlight. I was jealous; I knew you weren't scared and I didn't like it that you were better than me. And you are: you're cooler than I'll ever be.

Toby: You're no dumbass, that's for sure.

Mom: We knew how special you were. Dad and I sent you to Challenge Camp to become a better person and look what's happened. Top Challenger. Somehow I knew it was coming. That's why I didn't bring Terry. I left her home. It's just me and you driving home. I would rather spend time with you anyway. Terry's my friend, sure, but you're my son and you are who I want to be around. Not Terry. Terry's too happy, too

positive, too needy, too old. What can I say: she's just too Terry-ish. I'll never forgive myself for sending her to pick you up at school that afternoon. It should have been me. You didn't understand and you had your fit, but that's okay. Fits, schmits. We got over all that, didn't we? No, I'll never do that again. Me and you, Jake. Me and you.

Dad: Top Challenger. Of course you are. But really, you never should have been a part of that camp in the first place. My opinion, of course. I think it was crazy Terry that got the notion in your mom's mind. But not me. Challenge Camp. Who needs that? I could have used your help here. We could have cut wood, fixed the lawnmower, prepped the snowblower, painted the handles of my new tools, or traveled together on my sales route. Yes, you. Why wouldn't I take you? You're my son and a son deserves to go with his father on business trips. I'll teach you how to drive the Snap-On truck next time. You'll learn quickly. Look at you and driving the truck. How about snowplowing? You plowed like a pro. Doesn't surprise me at all you were Top Challenger. Not one bit.

I'm hearing those voices in my mind and they collide with my pack's noises. It's too much. I'm too high on this bench and too much is hitting me.

I'm starting to feel big again. Like earlier, when I walked out of breakfast. I don't want to get big now. The bigger I am, the more of me there is to hit.

I try to shrink; I look at the clouds overhead and there's more blue sky now than before. I look beyond the blue sky, out at the nothing far away.

The blue sky isn't working and I'm getting big and the world is too large and I can see it all. I hear the voices of my pack and it sounds like all the voices are inside a concrete gym, the echoing noises bouncing and bouncing again. I look at the Look and Leap and it seems far, far away, but I can see the details still. And that's the problem: everything's too far away to be in focus.

I put my feet down on the squished ants and walk away from the red bench and orange water cooler. I go to the closest tree and squat down as close to the ground as possible. I keep my eyes on the Look and Leap and see the ladders, ropes, lumber and tires connecting the different levels of the obstacle.

Chris, my friend for one hour last night, goes up and down between levels, making sure everything's right. He's the only one on the obstacle. Everyone else, including Quinn, is down in the sawdust pit, shouting directions and motioning where to go, what to place where. Their shouts are loud and the words seem to cut into my brain.

Clouds and blue sky and birds and tree limbs cracking and tree branches swishing and Chris banging on a ladder and a gunshot from the rifle range and a small airplane racing overhead and my pack, some of them starting to climb up the Look and Leap, squealing and telling each other it's okay.

It's like before, when I threw chalk in school. It's the same overstuffed feeling. It's coming again. I can't help it; it's going to happen.

I lay down flat on the ground, put my hands over my ears, close my eyes. But then there's Dad over on the red bench. He looks at the dead ants, then he watches the Look and Leap; he shakes his head, wants to know when I get to climb.

My eyes are closed but Dad is there and even he's far away, but close. His voice is loud and I can't keep him shut out of my head.

I can't close my eyes or Dad will show up; I can't keep them open because then everything will get bigger. Open or shut, it's all the same. So I lie here, my hands over my eyes like cages and I wait for something to happen.

14.

Trapeze Down to Earth, Everybody Down, Martin's Fall, No Ropes, Dead Air

Chris and Quinn are arguing at the top of the Look and Leap. They're on the last ledge, the ledge leading to the jump off point, the point where you leap into space and grab onto the trapeze. The rest of the pack is somewhere between the bottom and the top. Chris and Quinn are waiting for everyone to get to the top. They're trying to be as cool as possible, but really, they hate each other.

I was picked to go first and that means I get to go last, says Chris.

I was last and that means I go last, Quinn says.

It's the first guy who's goes last. First picks up everything, then he jumps. So he's last.

No, says Quinn. That's wrong. I'll tell Toby.

But when Quinn calls to Toby, Toby isn't listening. Toby's with Brett, who's waiting to jump. Brett's the first to jump. Waiting for him in the sawdust pit is Adam.

Toby, says Quinn again, but Toby ignores him.

So I stand up from my tree and walk over there and I yell up at Toby. I yell his name three times. I yell it loud. Toby doesn't ignore me. He yells to Adam to get me. Toby's trying to pay attention to Brett.

Adam quickly looks at me and tells me to sit.

Like I'm a dog. The dogs are Chris and Quinn. The dogs are arguing about who gets to go last. Who gets to collect the tools and jump to glory. The one who will be the coolest.

I'm not a dog: dogs get shot.

But I sit anyway to get Adam and Toby off my case. I sit cross-legged and watch Brett. I think he's finally going to throw up. He's thirty feet above the ground. 32.8 feet above the ground. His face is white and he keeps wiping his hand across his forehead. Toby's holding onto Brett's shirt collar and he asks Adam about me and Adam yells back that I'm fine.

Exactly. I'm fine.

Brett jumps. He looks like a squirrel jumping from one branch to another. He grabs onto the trapeze and before he swings back and forth even twice, Toby is letting him down towards Adam.

Brett hangs by his hands and he's hooting and hollering, saying, That was so cool.

He gets to Adam and Adam releases the rope from Brett's harness.

Adam says loudly, Okay, and Toby pulls the trapeze back up to his level.

All right, Toby says to everyone. All right; that's the way it's done. Toby howls a big, drawn out howl. Everyone starts howling except me. I can't do it. The howls scream in my head.

I lay back in the dirt and watch for dark clouds. I tell the clouds to start raining. They don't have long. It has to be soon. If they don't do it, I will. I'll rain; I'll storm. Please rain, clouds.

Brett's looking at me. The head of his shadow is over my stomach. He's staring at me, I know it. If his shadow-head were real, it'd be squishing my stomach. I keep talking to the clouds, telling them if they want to help me out, now's a good time.

Brett's shadow-head jerks away and I hear him stomp towards the sawdust pit. He howls and Adam howls back.

Boy, are they excited.

More of the pack jumps. There are three on the ground now, worming around in the sawdust pit, high-fiving, pointing up at the trapeze.

Now there are eight. They're around Adam, asking him how they did, telling him how they were scared to jump into nothing but air.

Adam keeps saying, Right on, and, You got it, and other stupid things. All of them are acting like Mr. Warner when he started crying in the crafts center, talking about the Ropes Course, big-eyed and sniffing.

I'm still on my back. Every so often an ant or a bug walks across my hand. I wonder if the ants understand that I've already killed twenty-seven other ants. I try to feel the legs of the tiny bugs. It's hard to do, though. It tickles. Some of the bugs walk across my hand and then off in one swoop. Others move, then stop to smell or taste, then

walk some more. Those are the ones that tickle. When I can't stand it, when the tickling gets too much, I slam my hand on the dirt and they fall off. Sometimes, I have to slam my hand two or three times.

If I look straight up, I see the sky and two or three trees. If I look forward a little bit, I can watch the Look and Leap. The clouds aren't coming. There's no thunder. No nothing.

One, two, three, four. Seven down, four to go.

Chris standing at the far edge of the ledge, near the tree.

Quinn sitting down, his legs dangling over the edge, also near the tree.

Martin standing near Toby, getting strapped in to jump.

Toby standing near Martin, talking quietly, glancing sometimes at Quinn and Chris.

They're all hooked to ropes. Chris, Quinn, and Toby on short ropes, hooked to overhead beams. Martin now strapped to the long rope which will let him jump to the trapeze. Ropes coming out of their backs like electrical cords, keeping them alive. If they jumped at the same time, I bet the support wouldn't hold and they'd all come crashing.

Martin's ready, then he's not. He goes to the edge, then backs away. Toby gets close to him and talks quietly.

Chris and Quinn are still arguing. Toby tells them to quiet down.

Martin's at the edge again. He bends his knees, stretches his hands out like he's ready to dive into a pool. Chris tells Quinn to shut up and Martin goes rigid and backs away.

Toby tells Martin to stay. He yells down to Adam to hold up. Then he switches Martin's long rope with his short one, and walks across the plank to Quinn and Chris. He tells Quinn to stand up.

I forget about the clouds and try to hear what they're saying.

Quinn and Chris are in trouble. Quinn tries to say something, but Toby says, Quiet down; this is the way we're doing it. Quinn and Toby stare at each other. Then Toby says, Got it? They both walk over to where Martin is standing.

Back to Chris and Chris is smiling. Smiling because he's the coolest now. He will jump last. But he still has my flashlight and key, and now that he's the coolest, he won't ever give them back. Chris isn't the coolest, though. He cried last night. He took my flashlight, made a cave and went to sleep holding my flashlight. He's pretending up there but I'm the only who knows it.

Quinn's mad, but he jumps anyway, ahead of Martin. He doesn't make any yipping noises; he doesn't look excited. He hangs on the trapeze like he could stay there all day. He looks straight ahead and waits to be let down. Adam releases him and Quinn walks off without high-fiving anyone.

Now Martin. I sit up, cross my legs, Indian-style.

Toby yells down to Quinn to buck up, to give up a howl for the pack. Quinn ignores him. Now Toby's mad and tells him to go take a seat near me.

Quinn next to me? No, no, no. Don't do that, Quinn. Don't sit next to me. Sit anywhere but here. Now my pack is looking at me and they're staring. Someone laughs and says, Nice war paint.

I don't know what that means but they're not paying attention to Martin who's up there and who wants to jump. Jump into nothing. Jump into dead air.

I'm not sitting next to him, says Quinn. No way. Look at him. He's got mud on his face.

Adam says, Fine; sit over there. Adam's pointing to the other side of the sawdust pit and he's not looking up at Martin and Martin wants to jump. He wants to jump even though he's standing next to Toby on the back edge of the plank.

He's going to jump, but no one's looking. Not even Adam, who's holding Martin's safety rope.

I don't look away from Martin even though I can feel my pack looking at me. Adam says, Wipe your face, Jake, and I do it, but I don't look away from Martin. Martin, the wimp, the one who's last to breakfast every morning, the one with greasy, blond hair, the one who put flowers on his leather key chain holder, the one who once cried during lunch. The same Martin, and now he's going to jump.

Adam tells me again to wipe my face and I know he's looking at me and not Martin. I wipe at my face and feel the slimy feel of mud under and on the sides of my eyes. War paint.

There goes Martin. He makes a little jump towards the edge, like he's trying to get a running start, and then he makes a big jump with one foot off the edge. He's no flying squirrel. He's spastic.

Toby grunts something like, Hey, or Whoa, but Martin's in the air and he falls towards the trapeze, but he grabs it with just one hand. I see Adam turn around, but it's too late: Martin is falling again; he can't hold onto the trapeze with one hand.

There's no time between it. Martin falls and the rope doesn't go taut until three-quarter of the way down. Down to earth. Martin jerks like a doll and he screams right way. He's upside now, now back up right, now facing straight down. He's still screaming. Toby says, Down. Get him down. Adam lets him down, but then Martin jerks to a stop. A little more, then another jerk-stop. Adam isn't smooth. Martin's still screaming.

The rope coming out of Martin's lower back gets longer and longer. When he hits the sawdust pit, Adam lets go of the rope and shuffles out to Martin who's curled up in a ball.

Everyone's staring. I'm staring too. Staring at screaming Martin. Toby's coming down the long ladder now.

Adam, Toby and Martin in the sawdust pit. Martin won't stop screaming.

Now he's crying, and now he's standing up, still crying. Adam and Toby talk as all three of them stumble out of the sawdust.

Martin's crying, crying, crying and everyone's staring, but they've forgotten about Chris up there. Chris, alone, up thirty feet by himself.

They're out of the pit now, Adam walking Martin away from the obstacle, towards the base area. Martin's crying, but he always cries

I want more. I want to jump and be cool. I want to be better than Martin. We're the same right now: we both fell and we both cried. And Chris has my flashlight and he thinks he's the coolest because he's last. I could be coolest if I climbed up and jumped without a rope. Everyone would remember me. I'd be the brave one.

Adam's gone with Martin so now there's just Toby. Toby's talking to Chris, telling him to forget the tools, just walk over and hook himself into the spare rope. Toby's voice is scared, saying to Chris, Hook the red carbine to your belt. I picked you last for a reason. I'll belay you down with the rope I was going to use. No problem.

Chris says, Okay; no problem, like he's not scared. But he is. He and Toby are both scared.

Half the pack is looking at Adam taking crying Martin away and half are looking at Chris. Chris shuffles out to the jump off point. Toby yells to unhook his carabineer and hook in the red one. Chris doesn't move. He's holding onto a pole by the long ladder. Toby yells, The red one. Then, What's wrong? And now, Sit down, Chris. Sit down.

Chris sits down and Toby gives him more directions. He says, First, and he says some things, and then, Second, and more words. Words about safety and to hook up both carabineer before unhooking himself from the first. Toby says he has to stay in the sawdust pit; it's the only way to get Chris down safely.

All these first, seconds, thirds, fourths, and I remember last night in my blanket cave. How safe I was; nothing could get me, not even the light and noises. But now I'll get in trouble for all this and Mom and Dad won't ever be happy with me. School a month away and Chris telling everyone about me.

Okay, says Toby. You're all set. He looks to the pack. Toby tells them, He's all set. Your pack is almost done. Your last man is up there, ready to come down. Let's give a howl, okay? And Toby tries to howl, but it's not very good and the pack tries to howl but it's pretty weak too.

While they try to howl, I look up and tell the clouds I waited long enough.

Thanks, but no thanks.

I get to the top of the first ladder before anyone knows I'm heading up the Look and Leap.

Toby yells.

Someone says I don't have a rope.

That's right, no rope. The bravest and coolest doesn't need a rope.

Toby yells some more.

Chris stands up, holds onto the pole.

I keep climbing. I bet Dad's over on the red bench, watching me. He's going to tell me later how he used to climb without ropes. Back in high school, with his friends. No ropes, and we were better for it, he'll say. He'll be proud I did it without rope. Mom

will be happy I got my flashlight and house key back. Chris has it. She wouldn't have believed me before, but now she will.

I don't have it, Chris yells at me.

Toby wants to know what flashlight and key.

I'm on the third level now. I'm saying *Chris* over and over in my head, and I guess I'm saying it out loud, because Chris is really starting to cry.

I'm way up in this tree and it smells like pine sap. Like the sap on my thumb. There aren't any clouds now: perfect blue sky.

I'm at the last ladder now and its rings are smooth, like Aspen tree branches. It's slippery and for a second I think about falling and I remember the raven that Dad shot and that fell on the garage roof. I saw the raven fall, it's body a dark spot tumbling. A black star falling from the blue sky.

Then I'm on top, at the same level of Chris. Chris screams, It's in my locker.

I tell him I want to jump.

Toby's yelling at me to sit down. Be calm, he says.

I stare at Chris. He wants to jump. He's at the edge, ready to jump to the trapeze. He's like Quinn. They're fakes.

I hiss at him. I hiss some more.

Chris is really going at it now.

Toby's not yelling any more. He says quietly, so quietly I can barely hear him, Sit down. It's okay. Sit down and it will be fine.

I *am* fine, Toby. I *am* fine.

I quit hissing and walk towards Chris. Across the boards. I look down.

Everyone's small now. No one's big anymore. Everything's back to normal. I see the red bench and orange cooler; Dad's not there. The boards under my feet bend every time I step down. I get to Chris but he doesn't look at me. He's staring at the trapeze.

We're close together. Like last night.

Last night our heads were close together and I felt his slimy hand when I handed him my light. Now, our whole bodies are next to each other and I look at Chris and his hands are clenched. His face is white, like Brett's earlier. He keeps saying, No, and he moans every once in awhile.

I hiss again, just to make a joke, and Chris almost jumps, and then he is going to jump so I jump first.

We're both in the dead air at the same time.

Both my hands hit the trapeze at the same time. I swing forward. Chris is below me, hanging in mid air. He's screaming about his thing. He yells that his thing is pinched in the harness. Toby is letting him down.

I've quit swinging. I lift myself up and hold onto the trapeze with my armpits. It burns like my elbows.

It's quiet.

I can't hear Chris anymore. Toby's saying something, but I can't hear him. I look down and everything is so small. There's nothing around me. Only the air. I'm like a bird but I'm not flying or falling. I'm not alive and I'm not dead.

The trapeze starts moving and I'm coming down. I don't want to come down. I want to stay here. But I don't have wings; I'm the raven, shot, coming down, coming down to smash onto the garage roof. I'm going down to the noise. Down to the sawdust and my pack and Toby and Mr. Warner and Mom and Dad and school. Falling down into everything.

Libby

1.

I used to love winter. My sister and I loved to sled and throw snowballs and make snow angels. During some snows, we would have snowflake eating contests. We'd lean our necks back, our faces to the falling flakes, eyes closed, tongues stretched out. We'd count them out as they hit. We'd do it until our necks hurt.

But I also remember just watching the flakes fall. Sneaking into Dad's office, after everyone was asleep and following the flakes as they slipped past the streetlight. Lauren asleep in our shared bedroom, Mom and Dad sleeping in their room downstairs. Sometimes I'd take my pillow and Lauren would find me there in the morning, wanting to know why I didn't like sleeping with her. And me, too much of an older sister to tell her that it was about falling snow; instead, I'd make up lies about her snoring and fidgeting, and how I couldn't stand to sleep in the same room as her.

It would snow six or seven times in Denver over a winter. The snow would usually melt within a couple of weeks. So when the snow came, it was a treat: a refreshing, satisfying change.

The snow this morning is anything but lovely. This isn't Denver and the snow won't melt until spring. It's November 8th and it's been snowing off and on for three days. Lightly the first two days, a few inches maybe, but now we're in a real snowstorm. We had eight inches overnight, and I'm up early to shovel. We can make do without plowing the driveway this morning, but if it keeps snowing at this rate, I'll either have to start up our plow or ask someone for help.

The storm's supposed to end late tonight or early tomorrow morning, but what I want the weatherman to admit is that it won't end until May. Maybe June. That from now until then, I won't see or smell dirt.

I walk away from our front porch, stop, and kick at the snow until I reach the brown earth underneath. I think how strange it is to miss the smell of dirt. When we smell mud in late spring, the unfrozen dirt, smells finer than any flower.

Cole's gone. He'll be back tomorrow night. If he were here, we'd be working together. We'd wake up and he would turn on the deck light and see how much snow we'd received. Then he'd go outside and start the plow or begin shoveling. I'd start a fire in the wood stove, make breakfast. Cole would come in later, stomp his boots and report on the new snow, how wet or dry it was, the depth, how the roads were holding up. We'd take this early snowstorm in stride – nothing new, nothing different.

But he's down south this week, doing his run along I-70: Minturn, Avon, Eagle, Glenwood, Rifle. From Vail to Grand Junction. It's his best route; he says his I-70

clients are rich and smart enough to buy good tools. He says that's a hard combination to find.

You'd think he was selling computers or medical equipment, but he sells tools. Snap-On Tools.

The storm wasn't a surprise. But he left anyway, two days ago, backing the big white van out of the driveway and lurching down the highway. Jake wanted to go with him, but Cole said no, that with the storm I would need his help around the house. Jake pushed, saying he didn't have anything to do in school and he could miss three days. I agreed, said I'd be fine without either of them, that I could handle the shoveling, and even the plow if it came to that. I tried to catch Cole's eye, shout at him with my expression that Jake needed a break from school, three days off being just right. But Cole was busy inside the van, making sure the tool packages were stored neatly and securely. He kept his attention in the truck and said back to Jake and me, "That's ridiculous. Jake, you're old enough to pitch in. We're a team, and you're my back-up."

And that's how we left it.

But we're not a team. Not anymore. Something has happened these last few years which has shifted us, altered us.

It's tough living in Ash Creek, especially in winter.

I understand Cole's reasoning. He's taken on new sales routes, researched and found new clients, all in the hope of saving enough money so we can afford his parent's

ranch. His parents want to sell, move to St. George or Phoenix, and wash their hands of fifty years on the land.

They want to give us the ranch, home, garage, sheds, and equipment. All that and the 160 acres. But even them handing over the keys, giving us all of it at no charge, would cost us in inheritance taxes more than we have. When they found this out, Cole's parents told us to forget it, that it'd be better if we sold it, that the land and buildings would take more work than they were worth. Yet through all this, Cole has been fervent about taking back his childhood home.

That's all well and good; I respect Cole for wanting to keep their ranch. But it's the tired equation: how much are we willing to sacrifice?

I'm tired and it's dark and my husband isn't home. It's early November. Jake's asleep and there's a lot to do before we leave for school and work. It's not always like this, but right now, right here at six in the morning, the snow shovel in my hands, it feels like too much.

I've cleared the front porch and am onto the path to the garage when I hear the front door open.

"It's dark, Mom," Jake says.

I don't stop; I want to get to the garage's side door. "It's got to be done, Jake. What about the fire?"

"Is there wood?"

My shoulder blades hurt; my knuckles ache. November 8th. It's too early to hate winter. I stop, stand as straight as I can, say, "Did you get it yesterday when I asked? I told you to bring it in. It'll be wet now."

"Okay," he says in a whiny, angry voice.

"I'm sorry," I say. "This is how it is. Now get the wood."

I turn around to watch him go inside. He slams the door behind him and a small drift of snow falls from the edge of the roof onto the front porch. Snowflakes prick my cheeks and nose while I wait for Jake's room light to come on. It finally does and I go back to shoveling.

I can't do without Jake, but at times it seems I can't stand to live with him either. He's found trouble or trouble's found him: Cole and I can't decide which. Jake's our only child and everyone seems to have an opinion about that. People seem able to find countless excuses for bad behavior; the only-child theory the most popular.

Jake doesn't talk much anymore. He likes to sit in his room and read comic books or play with his Game Boy. Cole doesn't like this attitude. At first he was strict on how long Jake could stay in his room, would limit his video gaming; he tried often and regularly to get Jake outside playing or working. But it seems the older Jake gets, the less Cole tries.

Sometimes I wish I had a male friend who had children. I want some clarity, a twin with a different set of eyes, to offer an honest take on what is happening in my life. Ben and Terry, our neighbors and sometime-friends, don't have children. Terry says a lot, but it often seems off-base; Ben is still a boy himself. My boss at the drug store,

Anthony, is divorced, has older children who live in Florida, and has a slew of brothers and sisters around the country. I want a match to my situation, a friend who can understand why and how I feel. I need help in mending what I see as an opening wound.

The river rock around the side door is uneven and the shovel scrapes to a halt, jams my wrists. I lean the shovel against the door, massage and wring my hands and wrists, and look up to the sky. The light by the garage is still lit, although it is dull against the soft light of dawn.

There's at least a foot of snow standing. The garden is flat white except for the thin wooden bean stakes poking through. The tire swing Cole put up for Jake years ago has a hat of snow eight inches thick.

Our house looks bleak in this light. The only windows lit are in Jake's room and the mudroom. My plants hanging in the master bedroom window look ghostly.

I wish there were other houses near us. Other people shoveling, plowing, making fires, waddling through the snow with coffee cups in hand. Other houses with bright paint or houses simply with lights lit, people moving indoors. But the closest house is Terry and Ben's. They live a few minutes down the highway, a half mile through the woods.

This is something else I used to love: isolation – just Cole, Jake and me.

I use the shovel like a broom, scrape at the snow to finish the pathway. I push harder, make the shovel bounce and clink against the rock underneath.

I hate this attitude, this longing for the past, this loneliness for things I don't have. I'm a lucky woman, living in the mountains, with husband and son. I have a job. We're hoping to buy a house that sits in the middle of 160 acres. A homestead. My husband's family's homestead. This is my reality. This is what I have to work with.

I start back to the house and Jake walks out, jacket-less. At least he has his boots on. "Trying to catch a cold?" I say.

I mean it as a joke, and I try to smile, but Jake walks past me, eyes on the ground. "No," he says, halfway to the woodpile. He's only a couple of inches shorter than me, but he's destined to catch his Dad, another three inches higher.

We used to gauge Jake's height on the side of the refrigerator, marks in blue, red, purple and black marker. The age beside the mark. Our tradition was to mark the fridge after blowing out the candles. But this year, his first year as a teenager, Jake blew out his candles, then said he was too old for the refrigerator mark. Cole went along with him, but I argued. I wanted to help him feel special, to assure him that he was still my baby boy. He said no again, shook his head that he was too old, then his eyes filled up and he said he didn't want to be thirteen.

I went on, told him that his thirteenth year would be a good one. Then I laughed and said it was going to be his fourteenth birthday. We talked about that for a little while and I remember Cole and I arguing about it; not arguing, discussing: talking: just the two of us, leaving Jake, the birthday boy, out of the conversation.

At some point, I realized Jake was still upset. Cole and I traded turns asking him what was the matter. We wanted him to be happy. We asked him what was wrong; we asked him what scared him; we asked him if we could help; and then one of us, I don't remember who, asked with a little more hope, a little more energy, "What is it, Jake?" and Jake's eyes went wet and he said that he was scared of junior high and sports and girls. We tried to ease him, but then it came out in a flurry of tears and accusations. He told us we didn't understand and we argued that we did. He ended up going to his room, Cole and me left sitting at the table, the lemon cake with vanilla icing, candles smoking.

There may be no line of ink on the fridge, but I've marked him as he's walked by the refrigerator and he's grown at least three inches since last year. He'll have me by year fourteen.

I watch him as he loads wood in his arms. He grabs three bigger logs first, then snags a group of kindling. His back is narrow, his shoulders close to his neck. He had it tough with seventh grade football this fall. Cole talked it up during the summer. He thought the sport might lift Jake from his doldrums, but if anything, it set us all back a few steps.

He played wide receiver and was somebody who did nothing, play after play. It did nothing for his confidence. And he needed something so badly. Junior high, the Challenge Camp fiasco, his lack of friends: it was all coming down on him.

Halfway through the football season, he got in a fight with a boy from Castledale. I was working and couldn't make it to the game, but Cole told me it was violent. He told me this in private; around Jake, Cole downplayed the fight, telling him it was part of the

game, it was nothing to be ashamed of. Still, the coach kicked Jake off the team, and to Jake, now that he couldn't play, it was as if he loved football and everything that went with it. Cole took it bad: he didn't want to attend any school functions and he told me more than once that the whole town knew about our troubled son.

I hope Jake doesn't play again. Or if he does, that he'll grow thicker by then. He's still a boy, fragile even with his tough exterior.

"Okay, Mom," he says. I hold the front door open; he walks under my arm, his arms cradling the wood.

"That's a big load," I say.

"Not really."

"Big enough for a warm fire," I say, following him. I tip the door closed, then stomp my boots, take them off. As I walk into the kitchen, I'm careful to miss Jake's snowy trail across the linoleum and carpet.

I start water for oatmeal, reach for the bread from the top of the fridge. Jake's snapping kindling, crushing newspaper. "Did you have homework for today?" I say.

"I don't know," he says.

"It's a yes or no question, Jake."

"Can I stay home?"

"No."

"I can't go today. I can't go to school. Not today, okay?"

I pour hot water into Jake's bowl of oatmeal, sprinkle brown sugar over the goo.

"Here you go."

“Okay, Mom?” he says. His face is frantic, the crackles of the fire behind him starting to quicken.

“Jake.”

“I can’t go.”

“Come eat your breakfast. Let’s get to that step, okay?”

He walks to the table, his face as gray as the light outside our home. His mouth is set like he’s clenching his teeth. He sits down, begins to eat. I keep making sandwiches, ask him where he thinks Dad is right now. He mumbles, “Rifle,” then I go on about the snow, how it’s not even Thanksgiving yet. It’s not working, though. Something has happened.

I know there’s no use, but I say it anyway, “Did something happen?”

“I can’t,” he says.

“You can’t what?”

“I can’t go to school.”

“Jake.” I sit next to him, stuff Pringles into a plastic baggie. “Are you sick?” I say.

“I don’t know,” he says.

I put the chips, his ham sandwich, a packet of Oreos and a Coke in a brown bag. I crunch the top edge, place it next to Jake. “Jake: yes or no.” He puts his spoon down, wipes his mouth with his hands, stares at the half-emptied bowl. “Does it need more brown sugar?”

“I’m full.”

"It's Thursday," I say. "Today and tomorrow. That's it. We'll do something fun this weekend."

"Like what?" he says. "Work? Shovel snow or cut wood?"

"I doubt it," I say. "Dad'll be home then; he won't want to work."

I walk over to the woodstove, close the doors, adjust the dampers. "Did you put enough big logs in?"

But Jake's gone to his room. I open the stove, wriggle in a last thick log and force the doors closed. The stove is just starting to warm; I have to nearly touch the black iron to feel the warmth. We'll have to start another fire when we get home. The winter cycle: a fire in the morning, a fire in the evening. It's already begun.

I stop at the stereo and put in an old tape labeled *My Rolling Stones '72*: a tape Cole made before we married. The music holds good memories. Jake and Cole used to imitate Mick Jagger, pumping out their lips and swaying their hips. I turn the stereo up loud, sure that the noise will reach the back of the house, where I hope Jake is brushing his teeth, packing his backpack.

I start again for the kitchen but this time the phone stops me. I hope it's Cole. But no, it's Terry. She wants to know if we need plowed out. I tell her, no, we're fine. She says it's supposed to snow all day. I tell her we're fine. She complains that Ben woke her up at 4:30 to start plowing. Then she complains that he came back at 6:30 for some breakfast and littered snow in the house and wanted to know why she hadn't started a fire. "A fire at 6:30," she says. "I don't need a fire at 6:30."

She goes on, telling me she'll have Ben come by this afternoon just to check. I tell her again, "We're fine."

There's a pause, then she asks me if I'm okay, and I lie, tell her I'm good, just late to get out the door. There's another pause and I know she's processing my response, curious as to why I don't want to accept her snowplowing offer, upset that I can't talk at seven in the morning, confused as to how life with a child is so different than life without, and if she had the choice, would she ever want a child and the responsibilities that come with it.

Terry's friendly and I get along with her, mainly because we're neighbors, but also because she's a woman and I have few women friends. But she's a thinker, a skeptic about everything. She likes rumors, she likes drama; she relishes depression as much as happiness.

She finishes the phone call with a promise that she'll stop in at the drugstore later. "I'll bring coffee and a treat."

I tell her thanks, that I'll see her then, and hang up. Immediately, I yell to Jake, "Come on. We're late."

He comes down the hall, his backpack scraping the walls. "Ready?" I say.

"Why's the music going?" he says.

"Thought we could use a boost. A little Mick in the morning." I smile, wishing that he would go into his funny routine.

“Oh,” he says, and I turn him around, unzip his backpack, put his sack lunch in with the loose pieces of paper, his Game Boy, a couple of thin folders, and some bright stickers at the bottom. I zip it back up.

“What are the stickers of?” I say.

“Someone gave them to me,” he says. He walks to the stereo. He says something, his voice mixed with the music. He turns off the stereo. He starts back to me, stops, and says, “What?”

His backpack hangs low on his back, the straps too long. He’s wearing his Denver Broncos baseball cap, the one we gave him for Christmas last year. His blue fleece vest over his green sweatshirt is not enough for this snowy day, but vests are what all the kids are wearing and I can’t tell him to put on a warmer coat.

“What?” he says again. The vents in the woodstove make an airplane noise as the wind gusts, the air from our house sucked through the flames and out the chimney. Jake grimaces, “They’re stupid snowboard stickers,” he says. “Someone gave them to me.”

I send him out to the car. He asks if he can start it, and I say, “Yes. Open the garage first. Put it in neutral. Wag it and make sure.”

He smiles and I think how easy it is to make him happy, how I need to remember that his life can be made better by such odd and simple things. “Start the heater,” I yell to him. He’s in the mudroom, putting on his boots.

“Hot?” he says.

“As hot as it’ll go.”

He slams the front door and I hear our owl-shaped key holder in the mudroom jingle. I think about making some toast. 7:20, and we're already five minutes late. I'll get something at the bakery. I'll surprise Anthony with a muffin. I'll make his morning a good one, something I know everyone could use on this snowy November day.

I drink down my vitamins and look out the window onto our small deck. The picnic table is layered in snow; the flakes disappear into its bed of white. I'll have to shovel back there this afternoon, careful shoveling so that I miss nicking the table. The back deck and the front deck, the front walkway, the walkway to the garage, the area in front of the garage: they'll all need cleared. I'll have to knock off the icicles that form near the spare bedroom's windows; it's happened twice before, the icicles falling at an angle and shattering the glass. Of course the fire will need stoked, re-started if necessary.

We had birdfeeders on our back patio when I was a girl. My sister and I would put our fingers up to the wood ledges, hoping the birds wouldn't notice our fidgety hands and land on them while they ate seed. A few times the birds would become brave and land on our fingers, but we got so excited when this happened that the birds flew away. Still, I can remember thinking how light a bird felt, how scratchy its claws felt on my finger.

Cole doesn't like the idea of birdfeeders next to the deck. He says they shit too much and the seed gets everywhere and the squirrels will get to the seed more than the birds. It's not a big deal: we have plenty of birds. I just wish Jake had had the chance to put his finger out and feel a bird drop down, its grasp, its body unnaturally light. It's another thing that might have made a difference.

I touch the white curtains which frame the window and think again: it's something that would probably would have made no difference whatsoever.

I need to think less and keep moving forward.

I get my bag off the couch and go the mudroom. Jake, Jake, Jake. I wonder at what age it will improve? Or if we've missed the chance already.

My tennis shoes go in my bag and I pull on my boots, snatch my jacket from its peg. Cole's tan working jacket hangs next to it, stinky and stained. I zip up, switch off the outdoor lights.

Exhaust smokes out of the front of the garage. The river rock pathway is hidden underneath by a thin layer of snow. Flakes hit my cheekbones. I put my head down, cover my ears with my hands, and shuffle quickly to the garage.

2.

Jake and I are quiet as we drive to town. The highway has been plowed, but there is a film of snow on top of the black. It's not horribly slick, but it'll take us at least thirty minutes today. We're going to be late.

We pass Ben and Terry's driveway. Their road has been plowed flat. Soft mounds of snow surround their mailbox. I can't see their house, but I imagine Terry in her pajamas, sipping coffee, maybe talking to Ben on the CB radio. She may complain about him tromping in snow at 6:30 in the morning, but she can talk to him whenever, wherever he is.

We pass the north entrance to Ash Valley Pine Estates, a subdivision which went in last year. Ben runs a snowplow operation. I think of him working deep within the subdivision, plowing driveways and parking lots for people who are most likely in Denver or California or Texas. But he's plowing snow here in our valley instead of working along I-70 which lies mountain ranges away.

It disgusts Cole, seeing these subdivisions going in around the valley. Cole was born here, as were his parents and grandparents. Every time we pass Ash Valley Pines, the Estates he calls it, he comments on the name. "The whole thing makes no sense," he likes to say. I think every time he says it, he's more and more impressed that he found

irony in the title. He'll put his hand up and shake it, protesting, and say how appropriate that absentee homeowners come up with such a ridiculous name.

But I know that the people living in these expensive log homes are simply a richer version of my family. My parents owned part of a cabin on the other side of town. We shared it with three other families. We would take turns coming up from Denver on weekends, summer and winter. Sometimes we'd all come together, the kids sleeping on the deck and in the yard, the three sets of parents inside. My favorite times were Christmas: every third year, we'd get the cabin to ourselves and we knew we were guaranteed a white holiday. The people in these log homes are most likely after the same thing my parents were looking for.

There are two ranches on the outskirts of town: Henderson's and Chase's. It's the best part of the drive. Out in the open you can see the high mountains, watch the motionless cows, and hope to see the horses run or roll on their backs. In the summer, the afternoon thunderstorms are easy to predict, their swatches of dark rain bending under the high clouds.

I think of Cole's ranch. Of his parent's ranch. They don't have the best relationship and we rarely visit, maybe dinner once a month. Cole won't say, but I think the fact that he left the ranch when he graduated from high school upset the balance between them all.

But the truth is Cole didn't want to stay on the ranch. After graduation, he moved. He had worked hard growing up and he wanted something different. He didn't

move far: only three and half hours away to Boulder. When Cole and I met, he was on his second year in the city, a house painter in the summer, a waiter in a pizza place in the winter. This is how I justify it: he was faced in the direction he was moving before we met.

And I don't want to change where he's going now, the direction he's moving. The direction we're moving. I could be happy on the ranch.

Out of the trees and into the open spaces. The Henderson ranch on the right, the Chase's on the left. Jake still hasn't spoken. He's wiped his eyes a few times, opened and closed the glovebox twice, but not a word. I leave him alone. The older he gets, the less I push.

Today the mountains are invisible; today you can't even see across the pastureland. The scene becomes all white just beyond the Henderson's red and white house. Near the brown barn, the cows are in a line, paralleling the hay that was dropped this morning. Snow splotches their rust fur. A few horses break up the line of cows, their backs also white.

A car passes going the other direction and we go into a quick white out. It used to scare me, this drive into town in the winter, but I've become used to driving without vision. It lasts just a second or two. The only time I slow down is when a snowplow or semi passes: these beasts create a snowstorm of their own.

We drive on in silence.

At the 7-11, I break down and ask Jake if today is going to be a hard one. Store owners are out shoveling the sidewalks. Plows on pickup trucks go back and forth in the grocery store parking lot.

"It's always hard, Mom," says Jake. He opens the glovebox again.

"That's not true. You don't have a test today, right?"

"No. Other things."

"Like what? What are the hard things in seventh grade. I've forgotten." Jake thinks and we pass the pharmacy and Anthony is out front, his overstuffed red parka, fur around the head, zipped up tight. I honk and wave, but by the time he looks up, we're past him. I watch the side mirror and he bends back to shoveling.

"I don't like him," Jake says.

"Anthony?"

"He's too serious."

"And who are you, the Ash Creek comedian?"

"Would you have him for a boyfriend?"

"I have your Dad for that."

"You had other boyfriends." Jake's talking now, interested, but his voice is on the edge of anger.

"We were talking about seventh grade," I say. I make the turn for his school. The credit union thermometer reads twenty-three degrees.

"If you didn't like Dad, would you like Anthony?"

"I love your Dad and no."

“What if I get in trouble again?” He’s facing the window. His voice resonates deep, bouncing off the cold glass.

I slow down, shift the car into second. “That wouldn’t make a difference between Dad and me,” I say. “And what trouble?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I’m just wondering.”

“Well, wonder about something else. Wonder about anything but me and Dad. And don’t think about trouble. Okay?”

“Okay,” he says. He opens his backpack, checks his lunch, then zips the pack closed.

At the junior high, students are milling around the flag pole. I look at the car’s clock, check it against my watch. We’re late, for sure. I ask Jake why people aren’t in school. He doesn’t say anything, hugs his backpack.

I slow down, then stop. I guess it’s the snowstorm: our first one of the year and people are moving slower, buses late, teachers still on the road. Everyone looks so big compared to Jake. I see Timothy, the grocery store owner’s boy. I wave and he waves back. “How’s Timothy?”

“He doesn’t like me,” he says. He’s looking at his backpack, studying the zipper pattern.

“I doubt that,” I say. I bend to his head, give him a loud kiss. His dark brown hair has the smell of strawberries: he used my shampoo this morning. “Schooch on out; I’m late for work.”

He opens his door, looks at me, and says, "Anthony or Terry: which one?"

"What?"

"Nothing," he says.

"Quit thinking about garbage and think about school," I say. I've gotten to the point where I ignore these types of questions, these threats coming out of demented day dreams. Some of this I blame on Cole; Jake needs to know what's right and wrong and obviously I'm not doing everything right. "Walk down after school. I'll be ready to go. And be ready to work when we get home."

"Bye," he says. He hops out of the car, closes the door behind him. I wish he would turn and wave, but I know he won't. In sixth grade it was allowed; in seventh grade, forget it.

I watch for a few seconds, then I put the car in gear. On the way back to main street, I search through my bag, hoping for a few dollars for coffee and muffins. Two sheriff Broncos pass going the other way, towards school, and I go nervous, thinking what if something happened in the three minutes since I last saw Jake.

I make myself stop worrying. I think about work. I go over the checklist to open the store. Which tasks I'll do first, which ones I'll save for later. I try to remember what I started yesterday and need to finish today. Nothing is critical, nothing will shut the store down. But boredom requires this, this rationing of constructive tasks. It keeps my brain occupied.

"Be good, Jake," I say out loud.

In the bottom of my bag I find a five dollar bill. I keep my foot off the brake and downshift on my way down the short hill to Lincoln. Main Street. The roads are slicker here in town than they were on the highway. I get to the stop sign and think that I've made it to here in one piece. Now the day can begin.

3.

I've worked at the Ash Creek Drug Store for a year and a half. Anthony hired me, told me I was plenty qualified. It was my first job in six years. I spent the years in-between with Jake, giving him what Cole and I believed was a strong parental presence.

My first job in Ash Creek was at the ski area. I was an accountant. But after Jake's chalk throwing incident in first grade, Cole and I knew that one of us needed to be around Jake more. Plus I was tired of the ski area: the seasonal workers, the friends made, then lost every season.

Here at the drug store I see the same people week after week. And even though I miss accounting, I'm out of the house. Six years as a stay-at-home-mother was almost too much.

I was three semesters from graduating with an accounting degree when I met Cole. I had planned on taking my Public Accountant tests, maybe followed by an MBA. But I quit school, moved to Ash Creek and married Cole. I've never regretted this decision, but still, it feels awkward walking into the Ash Creek Drug Store to work a cash register, to stock shelves, and to answer questions regarding detergent, watch batteries, and light bulbs.

Anthony's still out front, shoveling the side entrance: the fire door entrance: the door that is never used. Anthony's that way. He's meticulous, hard working, a perfectionist. He grew up back east, Pennsylvania, and people here had a hard time getting used to him. He's not friendly up front, but I tell everyone that he's a different person once you break through his thin shell.

He tells the truth, no matter if you'd rather hear something softer, and that's built a trust people rely on. That, and he's talkative: to some of the regulars, this is an important trait. Anthony has an answer for everybody about everything.

Anthony lets fly a big load of snow, then bends down for another. I drive by but don't honk or wave; instead, drive on to the bakery.

I park along Lincoln, leave the car running, grab the folded five dollar bill from the passenger seat, and run inside. I stomp my boots at the entrance, flip back my hood, and smell the bread and coffee. A scraggly man in a one piece Carhart suit with a reflective orange vest says, "Hey ya," snatches a copy of the daily newspaper from the stack near the door and walks out. A clear tone sounds when the door closes.

"Morning, Libby," says Denise. She's at the register, fiddling with one of the bill levers, the one that snaps down on the five dollar bills. Denise subs for me at the drug store when I can't work. She's replaced me maybe five times. Anthony complains that she isn't forgiving enough and that the older customers don't agree with her personality.

He could refuse her help, demand I find someone else. But it's two things. First, he likes her blond hair, blue eyes, and hippie clothes, but doesn't want to admit it. And

second, it's his way of complimenting me, his sly, but endearing ability to make you feel better than you know you are.

Denise taps at the register lever with the top of a screwdriver. "Thing won't stay down," she says.

"What's the date?" I say, taking off my gloves.

"Too early for this big a snow. Right?"

"Bingo."

She slams the register closed, slides the screwdriver into a cup filled with pens, pencils, scissors, and old knives, and says, "Screw it." Then she looks at me, smiles a weak smile, says, "Wish my weekend started tomorrow. Coffee?"

"Two cups," I say. "One for Anthony, so lots of cream."

"I bet Anthony's happy," she says, walking back to the coffee mugs. "It's supposed to do this all day."

"Probably so. Him and his shoveling."

"The Chamber should give him an award," she says. "Is this it?"

"Two muffins," I say. "Any kind. Surprise me."

A plow goes by out front; the scrape of metal on road loud, like a train. I look out the window; snow shifts like smoke in the wind created by the big snowplow, then dies away, revealing again the single flakes coming down.

"Taking care of him this morning, huh?"

"Anthony?" I say. "I guess."

“You’ve always liked him, huh?” Denise says. Denise grew up here, two classes behind Cole.

“He hired me,” I say. “It’s pretty easy to like someone who gives you a job.”

“I guess,” she says. “He’s put-offish.” She looks at me, then smiles, and I hand her the five dollar bill. She unfolds it, stretches it tight, then puts it under the lever which is broken. She flips it down hard, but it comes up. “This damn thing,” she says.

She gives me my change. I fold my arms around the bag and coffee, say, “Think sun,” and walk to the door. I kick it open and go back to the snow. I wish people in this small town would, for once, not pay attention to who you like and who you don’t like, and instead focus on themselves and their own problems.

I park in the back lot. Anthony’s shoveled a path through the ridge of snow the snowplow created earlier. Anthony’s kindness is an educated kindness, not simple thump-on-the-back, keep-your-chin-up, hey-how-are-you kindness, but considerate and thoughtful; he seems able to anticipate your mood and needs.

After exchanging my boots for my running shoes, I walk up front to the register counter. The lights are off and the light is a vague gray. I set down the bag and coffees on the glass counter, turn on the register. It hums, then makes ratching noises.

“Hello, hello,” says Anthony from the pharmacy cage. He’s sitting at his counter, doing paperwork. He keeps writing, says, “Smells like you got us something.”

“Extra cream,” I say.

“Denise knows what I like,” Anthony says. Then, “Is there a month it doesn’t snow up here?”

“Tell me about it.” I get a pair of scissors and walk to the front entrance. Anthony’s brought in the bundle of papers and I snip the plastic strand, load the newspaper stand.

The cover headline reads: *Trees Are a Go!* The town has decided to plant trees along Lincoln next spring. Aspen trees. Cole has said more than once that this is the stupidest idea going, that Aspen trees are no good for decoration, that they are too quick to find disease. He says they’ll be dead in five years.

I put our muffins next to the coffees, stuff my bag under the counter. Then I walk to the watch displays and turn on their display lights. Finally, I turn on the store lights and everything turns the white-yellow of fluorescent.

“Cole call?” says Anthony. “The roads are a mess.”

I say, “What?” but I heard him the first time. I haven’t even thought of Cole’s safety. Him driving that mammoth of a van up and down I-70, in and around the small towns, down primitive ranch roads. I always assume he will be fine, but what if this causes something horrible to happen?

“Has Cole called?” Anthony repeats. “Your husband, Cole: the one who drives a big truck and sells tiny tools.”

“No.” I pick up the coffees and muffins. I start down aisle five, the middle aisle. I used to think about Cole travelling. But not about Cole getting in accidents or coming home maimed. I thought about him with other women, about him having women in other

towns, about him fucking them in the white van, in the front seat, or more likely in the back, where he keeps a foam pad and a sleeping bag in case of emergency.

I kick a red plastic bat out of the middle of the aisle. I remember when I quit thinking about Cole and other women. It was during a one hour TV special on the Vietnam War. The show was about the prisoners of war and their families who waited for them back home.

There was one woman who spoke quietly and with no emotion from her living room couch. She said that she pretended her husband was dead; she convinced herself that he was never coming home. And I smiled about that, I even got Cole thinking about the analogy between their situation and ours. He wanted to know how I could possibly equate him working for Snap-On and this woman's husband who was being tortured in another country. But secretly I knew that I wasn't equating Cole and the POW, but instead the POW's wife and myself. I knew I had to ease my imagination. When he was travelling, I had to put Cole out of my mind.

So now I don't think about him smashing into other cars or sailing off cliffs; I don't see him selling tools to a gray-headed rancher or to a tattooed mechanic. And I don't see him undressing women.

God, what is it that creates such messes? It worries me sometimes to think that this crazed way of looking at things comes from loneliness and that the loneliness will get worse if we move to Cole's ranch.

"Coffee *and* a muffin?" says Anthony. He puts down his pen, pushes his paperwork to the other edge of the counter. The pharmacy cage stands slightly higher

than the store; it gives Anthony a better view. He says it gives him an “authoritative edge.” He leans over the counter, examines the two muffins.

“Denise’s choice, so be careful.”

“You granted her such power? On a snowy, November 8th? I didn’t know you had such grace.”

“You’d be surprised.”

He picks a muffin, takes his milky, tan coffee, says, “Thanks.” He sips a quiet, clean sip. “Perfect,” he says. He’s wearing his gray wool sweater with big, blue snowflakes running across his chest. His hair is perfect, even with shoveling this morning. I’ve seen him combing his hair at odd times during the day. I doubt another male in this county does such a thing.

Anthony’s forty-eight. He moved here four years ago after a divorce. Like many people living here, it was an escape, a last ditch effort to salvage something out of life.

His hair is dark; he dyes out the gray when it begins to show. I joked one day that a gray-haired pharmacist would earn more respect than a dashing brunette. I think that’s the only time I might have hurt his feelings.

“Want a paper towel?” he says, reaching to the side. I hold the roll, clamp a finger on the serrated edge. He pulls away a piece, tears away another.

“He hasn’t called,” I say. “But that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Where is he?” Anthony dissects his muffin, proclaims, “Banana nut.”

“South on I-70. Vail to Grand Junction.”

He eats and nods. “What about Ben? Any news on the snowplowing job?”

I shake my head, say, "Not yet."

"I think it's safe to say winter's started, huh?"

"Yeah, they could tell us anytime. If Terry comes in, be extra nice."

"It's hard to do," he says. "Like you say, 'Our personalities conflict.'"

I smile, say, "Do your best."

He brings his paperwork back in front of him, pinches another piece of muffin. I walk back to the front, on the way picking up the red bat and tossing it into the metal cage with the other bats, Frisbees, plastic swords, giant whistles, and balls.

I pick up my coffee and see that it has formed a wet circle on the glass counter. The coffee is warm. It looks like I have a lemon poppyseed muffin. I wish one of the eight microwaves that we have stacked along the wall was out of its box and ready for use. I'd stick in both my coffee and muffin and treat myself to a warm meal. A warm meal on a cold, snowy day. I blame my mood on the weather and find the Windex and cloth towel. It's time to clean glass.

4.

Cole's official interview for the snowplowing job occurred last fall, the day I took Jake to Challenge Camp. I invited Terry and Ben over for dinner: grilled salmon, red potato salad, biscuits, asparagus, and two bottles of wine.

Ben had thrown around the idea of hiring Cole as one of his snowplowers. It was a gamble for us: with a big winter, Cole could make two or three times the money that he made working for Snap-On, but if the winter ended dry, then Cole would have forfeited his job with Snap-On for nothing more than a break from parking the white van in our driveway. It was a gamble, but we had already decided that if the job was offered, we wouldn't think twice about accepting.

Terry and Ben have always lived in Ash Creek, finding odd jobs to keep them going. We're all the same that way. Terry's been a pre-school teacher for two years now. Ben plows enough snow in the winter to work part time at the hardware store during summer. May to October he fishes nearly every day; in the fall, he's gone for three weeks hunting.

Ben and Cole are friends, have been since junior high school, but something between them isn't right. I asked Cole a few years ago why they weren't better friends, how maybe it would be good for us both if Cole had a friend to do guy things with, and

Cole told me that there was something that had happened in high school. “Anyway,” Cole said, “We’ve hunted together: that’s friendly enough, right?”

The next hunting season was their last. Cole had time to go out for one day, he was busy with Snap-On then and decided to meet Ben at the hunting camp. Ben had been at his camp for two weeks already, and the day Cole hunted, Ben nearly walked Cole to death. Cole came home with blisters and muscles so tired that he couldn’t sleep, more sure than ever of his old age, his changed priorities.

Terry and I are better friends than our husbands. We go to lunch every so often. If I’m going to town, I’ll call her and ask if she needs anything. She’s picked up Jake at school, shuttled him between our house and town. We even did a trip to Denver one summer.

She was bored and I was bored and lonely. Jake was at camp, Cole on a Snap-On trip. Terry told me she needed a break from Ben and I told her we needed a girl’s weekend trip. We spent the night in a fancy hotel downtown. We complained about our husbands and we complained about Ash Creek, pointing out the things in Denver that Ash Creek would never have in a hundred years. We sat on the green grass at the capital and ate hotdogs and pretzels. It felt like I was cheating: it was that much fun.

She wanted to see where I grew up and I took her by my childhood home. We talked about high school, the differences between my school and Ash Creek’s. I told her my family used to visit Ash Creek, and we wondered together if we had ever seen each other, maybe at the grocery store, or at the ski area, or at the very least, maybe our cars passed on the highway.

But this was as far as it got. Terry doesn't dig deep into people's past lives. At least not mine. This trip was where our friendship quit developing.

I need someone who will ask the questions that they don't want to ask. Someone who will listen to horrible stories and be supportive. Terry's the sort of friend who is good only to a certain level.

I remember thinking, hoping, that the snowplow job interview dinner might be the event which would allow all of us to break through. That Ben and Cole would renew their friendship, that Terry would somehow want more of me, and that through these relationships, our family, Jake, Cole and I, would become tighter, more complete.

We went through our first bottle of wine and the mini-pretzel cheese appetizers, and we still hadn't discussed Cole's new snowplowing job. We started dinner and Ben and Cole got going on something bigger than snowplowing.

Ben had a summer business idea. He wanted to use his plow trucks to truck tourists up and around the ancient, four wheel drive, mountain roads. Or, he said, he could slip them through the big meadows where elk and deer frequented, throw the fly rods in the back, let them splash in the creek. Or maybe even transport the tourists to remote camping spots. He didn't have the plan worked out completely.

"In the Blazers?" said Cole. He had grilled the salmon perfectly. I was happy for him. He was excited about snowplowing, a change that could land him more money, a change that could allow us to move into his ranch sooner.

“We’ll take off the tops, put in Plexiglas, or rig a frame and put big side widows all around,” said Ben. He ate his potatoes by stabbing the fork into the whole potato, then eating around the fork. “It’ll be perfect.”

“I’m all for it,” said Terry. “I’d do the booking. The advertising. You guys would drive, help them set up camp. Cole, you’d be the cook.” She scraped her knife against her fork, pretending to sharpen it.

“I don’t think I want that title,” Cole said. He smiled though, and I knew that he’d take any title if the price was right. He pointed his finger at Terry, said, “Okay, I’ll be your cook.”

He laughed; Terry laughed.

I tried to get them back on snowplowing, on Cole’s possible winter job, but the three of them kept jabbering and laughing about this new business. We drank the second bottle of wine and Cole got beers from the cooler.

Terry laughed more and more: she thought Cole was hilarious. Cole is funny, I’m not arguing that, but Terry has a way of making everything and everybody funnier and more exciting than they really are. Jake doesn’t like Terry and I thought of him sitting with us, at the end of the table, upset that we were eating fish. Then, having to endure Terry’s obnoxious laughter.

Jake and I had said goodbye earlier that day on a sour note. I had to take him an hour and a half early and he kept going on and on about how everyone would make fun of him. How everyone hated him at Challenge Camp. And he was mad that I was dropping him off early because of Terry and Ben. Because of Terry.

Jake likes Ben, but Terry is something different. I've tried explaining how I need friends and that Terry is nothing compared to him, but he can't see it.

I gave him a mini-flashlight. I told him how I wanted him to take care of it; I even put our housekey on the keychain that was attached to the bottom of the flashlight. I had found the flashlight in my bag on our drive over, during one of our bathroom stops. Anthony had given it to me earlier that week; it had been damaged in delivery. The flashlight perked Jake up enough for him to walk away without a big ordeal.

Thinking back now, though, after the mess at the end of Challenge Camp, and the trouble he got in later during football season, I think it might have been better for him to have been with us during that dinner, for him to have endured Terry's laugh, the salmon and red potatoes. He could have skipped camp. He could have been with us, hearing his dad excited and vocal. He should have been there when his dad slapped his hand on the table and said, "Let's do it. Those tourists need us. We got to do it, Ben."

We eventually got to the snowplowing job just before they left. We were still on the deck, sitting at the wooden picnic table, Cole and Ben taking turns shooting Jake's pellet gun. One of them would set up a can or a water sprinkler, a pine cone, whatever they could find, and the other would take aim. We would all go quiet, listen for a strike on metal or wood.

We had been talking about the ski area and the new Argentinean owner, the development he was planning, when Cole came out of nowhere with the idea of putting trailers on the back of the Blazers so they could haul "more tourist ass."

Those were his exact words: 'tourist ass.' It was a comment that I wouldn't have thought possible from Cole. Not the foul word, but the combination of the words. The sound or the emphasis. It wasn't Cole.

I can't say exactly why it surprised me so much, but it didn't matter: Terry and Ben laughed, and I think they too were surprised with Cole and his humor, his timing. They joked about obscene looking trailers, painted camouflage or maybe they could do wedding rides, the couple behind the Blazer, coughing as they tried to look romantic. I wanted to laugh with them.

Terry thought it was possible, that it might just work; she was impressed with Cole's entrepreneurial attitude.

She had trouble with that long word, and Ben said, "Okay, Terry, sign Cole up. Our slogan:" and he held up his hands imitating flashing lights, "We haul the most tourist ass in the Ash Creek Valley."

Then they laughed at Ben's slurring, all of them repeating 'Ass Creek' a few times more.

Ben pumped the pellet gun and stared at Cole. "I think you're hired."

"For snowplowing?" I said. They looked at me, surprised that I had finally entered the conversation.

"Not until the snow falls," said Terry, laughing, and right then and there, I figured I would never laugh with her again.

"We'll talk when it gets closer to winter," said Cole. "It's no problem."

Ben quit pumping the pellet gun. He looked at us in an evil way, then pointed the gun straight in the air. He shot the gun and we looked up. He laughed, "Who's the lucky one?"

Terry jerked herself from the table, went laughing and running inside, her hands over her head. I put the metal cookie tray, still holding a few biscuits, over my head and followed. Cole and Ben sat at the table, grinning. I watched them for a few seconds, sure that at any time, one of them would flinch and blood would stream down his face. But it never happened. They sat and grinned at the other, then got up and walked inside.

They left five minutes later and Cole wasn't any closer to quitting Snap-On. My dreams of something significant were lost. Nothing had changed. We were drunk. We had talked about some silly idea. It was like high school, and I guess for the three of them, it was. They were back fifteen years, sitting around a different table.

What I knew then was that Cole would continue to work more and more routes in his Snap-On truck to make extra money, and Jake and I would continue to see him less and less. That our home, to him, would become more a hotel than the hotels he stayed in while on the road. I was furious with him, furious with Terry for laughing and touching my husband, and furious at Ben for planting the seed of hope in my head.

And I was furious with myself, for leaving my son at a camp for troubled boys an hour a half early to make a dinner for nothing. When I learned of Jake's last day episode, I became convinced that I was to blame, that I had started his week off poorly, and that he would never be able to right himself again.

Even now, wiping away hand smudges from the Pick-a-Gift toy-dispensing game, I wonder if there are certain decisions that caused more than they should have, if the decisions themselves took on a life of their own, wrapping themselves around our family, like hands around a balloon squeezing, contorting our lives to their constrictions.

Me taking Jake an hour and a half earlier to Challenge Camp. Allowing Terry to pick up Jake after school one day. Cole teaching Jake how to drive the old, now parked behind the garage, Landcruiser. And further back: my adamant decision to have only one child. Our decision to return to Cole's hometown. My sister and I arguing with our parents to let us get pizza that spring evening. My parents allowing us to go. I start to spin with all the moments which could have been the instigator, the catalyst.

"What would you pick?" says Anthony behind me. "Pink bunny or purple spaceship?"

I rub at the glass, look in at the bright toys. "The white horse," I say. "I want the white horse with the red mane."

"A bad morning, huh?"

"It's too early for this snow," I say. I put the Windex and towel under the counter, unlock the register and begin counting change.

"I guess I'm still a tourist: I love it." He lays a newspaper on the counter next to mine, starts flipping pages. "Besides, the grass was too brown; even the trees were getting that dull green. We needed the moisture."

“We’re both tourists,” I say. “And we need moisture, just not in the form of snow.” This reading of the newspaper, this talking to me at the front of the store: these are things Anthony rarely does. How he reads me correctly, I have no idea.

He unbuttons the cuffs of his blue Oxford shirt, rolls up the sleeves onto his sweater, says, “I like this better than cold rain.” He closes the newspaper, looks out the front doors, says, “Keeps this up, and I’ll be shoveling again before lunch.”

“Hot soup would be good today, huh?” I say, scraping the quarters into my hand and then back into the register.

“From Denise’s?”

“Thursday’s chicken noodle.”

“Perfect. I think it’s my turn.” He taps the newspaper a couple of times on the counter, then walks back to the pharmacy. “How much do you think we’ll get?” he says back to me.

“Enough to make you happy,” I yell through the empty store. “Ready to open?”

“Let the games begin,” he yells back.

I let fifty pennies drop into their slot and push the register closed with my elbow. I flip the fake neon OPEN sign to the on position and walk around the counter to unlock the doors, glad the work day has begun. I’m ready for customers, ready for someone or something to take away these early morning blahs.

5.

The usual customers arrive first. They have schedules: their days for refills, their days for bath supplies, their days for housewares. They are the older people of Ash Creek: retired, or soon to be. They shop and have Anthony fill their prescriptions, but really, they come more to socialize, to talk with Anthony and me, to pick up a paper, to see what is happening in their town.

For many of them, the grocery store is too busy, too loud, too big. The drug store is more their speed, more their size.

They arrive early; usually they are waiting for me to unlock the doors. A few of these older people still work, but they start their jobs later in the morning, content to let the day warm a few more degrees.

That's the case with Lawrence and Phillip Wheeler. They're two of my favorites. One of them usually has a joke and from there they spin off on another with stories, opinions, gossip and more jokes.

They've run an excavation and road building company for forty years. They're into ponds now, small lakes for the rich. Phillip says that fake lakes keep them busy, with all the new blood in town, and Lawrence says the work is safer, that they're usually on level ground.

They once asked me, smiles on both their faces, how hard I thought it was to dig a big hole. I smiled back and shrugged my shoulders. "Exactly," one of them said. "Beats the hell from digging a road against a 40 degree hill," the other said.

They're too old to work but too poor to quit. They both have arthritis. They live in town and drive a loud, blue, four wheel drive station wagon, an old AMC car.

But today is not Lawrence and Phillips's day: they'll be in at the end of the week. They like Fridays, when the *Denver Post* issues the real estate section. They usually stay in the store for an hour or more, sitting on two of the beach chairs we keep as permanent store displays. They keep me company and read me crazy ads from the *Post*.

Jacob and Lovelle are the first customers today. They slip through the doors. Jacob uses a faded blue ski pole for a cane and he has Lovelle raise each of her feet so that he can gently tap her boots free of snow. Small bits of snow fall to the floor. He does the same to his boots, then they walk my way. But before reaching me, they stop at the stack of local newspapers. Jacob picks one up, holds it low so that Lovelle can see.

Their families homesteaded the Ash Creek Valley when they were children and they've never left. They schooled together in the two room schoolhouse in town and married at seventeen. They're both in their 80s and they're the oldest living couple in Ash Creek. This distinction is crowned each Fourth of July; Jacob and Lovelle took the title three years ago.

They remember everything. Anthony would talk to them all morning if he could. And I'll give Anthony that: he tries to learn this valley and town. It's important to

people around here to know things: where people live, who lived in the house prior, who's moving away, what winters were especially bad, what summers were especially dry, who started the ski area and in what year, what creeks run in which drainage, and which ridge divides which valleys.

Today Jacob needs a new watch. He tells me he took his old one apart but couldn't find the problem, then lost two of the tiny screws and couldn't put it back together. He says he threw the whole thing in the kitchen garbage.

I listen and glance at Lovelle who's paying strict attention to Jacob's story, nodding. Jacob finishes the story and says again that he just threw the whole thing in the garbage.

Lovelle says that the watch cost fifteen dollars when they bought it, then asks if we have watches close in price.

Anthony shouts from the back. Jacob turns around, raises his arm, tells Anthony he'll be back in a while. "I'm buying a watch," he says.

Anthony says, "Libby's my watch woman."

"Good thing," Jacob says as I lead them to the watch display.

I turn the display dial, showing Jacob and Lovelle the rows and rows of watches. They bend closer and I turn on the light switch and the watches brighten. "It's a gloomy day, huh?" I say.

"It'll be a long winter for sure," says Lovelle. Jacob keeps his eyes on the watches.

"I don't want a computer one," he says.

“Most of them are digital,” I say, turning the display. “But, we’ll look.”

Lovelle asks about Cole and Jake.

I tell Lovelle that Cole is travelling and that Jake’s in school.

“You should keep him home,” says Lovelle.

I’m confused for a moment as to which one she’s talking about. It must be Cole, so I say, “He’s trying to get a job plowing. Ben and Terry Sinton might get him to plow this winter.”

“Sinton?” says Jacob, putting his old hand on the dial. He twists the watch display a quarter turn. He looks at more watches.

“They live out near us,” I say.

“You all planning on Cole’s ranch?” says Jacob. He looks at me now. I want to tell them that Cole is, but that I’m not sure I want to live further from town, further away from everybody.

“Maybe by spring,” I say. “Or summer.”

“Summer would be better,” says Jacob.

Lovelle smiles, says, “It’d be prettier for sure.”

“Where are the normal ones?” says Jacob.

I point out three watches that aren’t digital. Lovelle edges closer to Jacob and they pick one with big black numbers and a gray, leather band.

Jacob says, “Okay.”

Lovelle says, “That’ll do fine.”

“I’ll set it to the right time,” I tell them.

They tell me thanks, then step back away from the display. Jacob leans with both hands on the ski pole. Lovelle reaches in her purse, takes out a list, tells me what she has to pick up today, then shows me her prescription forms.

I watch her and I watch Jacob watch her. This is how it should be, I think. Together, even after sixty-something years of marriage. Together in the drug store on a snowy morning. I wonder if my life will come to this or if it's destined to erode. We're going in the wrong direction, Cole and I. And if Jake continues to find trouble, the distance between us could become too great. I don't want that; I'll do nearly anything to keep that from happening, but Cole needs to want it, too. I will talk to him when he gets home about the snowplowing job. He needs to call Ben.

Jacob, one hand off the ski pole, takes Lovelle's hand and turns her around as if he were leading a horse. Lovelle smiles at me as she is turned around. They begin down the aisle towards Anthony and the pharmacy. I tell them to yell if they need help. Lovelle waves her hand, tells me, "Thank you."

They're not even halfway down the aisle when the doors jar open and Jared, from the T-shirt shop three stores down the street, rushes in. He gives a big whoop, stomps his boots and shakes snow from his shoulders all at the same time. "This is huge," he says.

"I don't want to hear about it," I say. He's still stomping his boots, looking around the store. Jared isn't Anthony's favorite, so when Jared sees Jacob, Lovelle, and Anthony talking in the back of the pharmacy, he relaxes.

I make it easier for him and walk towards the sunglass stand. On the way I stop at the stuffed animal pile and re-arrange the scene I created yesterday: a zebra, fox, and

Dalmatian sitting in a semi-circle, watching a whale balance a fox atop his wide, gray body. Now I put them all together in a tight group, all of them facing to the center, as if they were whispering secrets.

“This is all I need,” says Jared. “I’ll be on the pass this weekend for sure.”

“You’re not working?” I say. I’m still at the stuffed animals. The snakes are all gone; I guess the toothy smiles and blue eyes got people’s attention.

“No tourists yet,” he says. “The area opens in two weeks, then I’ll be stuck.” He beats me to the sunglass stand. He puts on a pair of kid’s heart-shaped sunglasses. “Who buys these things?” he says.

“The same tourists who buy your T-shirts,” I say. I look on the floor behind the stand, searching for sunglasses which have fallen. Jared tries on other glasses, stares at himself in the tiny, rectangle mirror.

Jared has brown hair; his bangs nearly reach his eyebrows. His face is roundish and sometimes when I look at Jared, I see Jake. Jake as a young man. A young man who has outgrown every stage possible. A talkative, steady, successful young man.

I stare at Jared as he tries on another pair of glasses. This is his favorite thing to do in the store; Anthony thinks he should stay in the T-shirt shop more. Anthony says that Jared is loitering and stalking at the same time. As if Jared, a nineteen year old, could have any interest in me, a forty-two year old with teenager and husband, a job worth nothing.

Jared's ears, which are lobeless, have the hints of soft hairs on the top. The back of Jared's neck, which needs shaved, his neck hair dark, will someday be the neck of Jake. All the features of Jared's will someday be my son's.

Jared tries a pair of glacier sunglasses, the ones which have leather shields on the sides. The glass is a mirrored silver. "These'd keep the wind out," he says.

"The sun, too," I say. He takes them off and gives them to me. I feed the moldable, looped earpieces back into the display slots.

Jared walks to the newspaper stand. I look for more problem sunglasses and I hear Jared rustling the newspaper, opening the pages quickly, looking for nothing, bored, not wanting to go sit by himself in his family's T-shirt shop.

Jared took Jake snowmobiling last winter. I hinted to Jared one day that Jake had never been snowmobiling. Jared went crazy and said that that was un-American. Then he told me that he would take Jake the next weekend. He said that Jake just had to do it. I asked Jared about safety, about where they would go, about how cold and wet it would be, but I had made up my mind before I even began the conversation. I thought Jared would be a good role model: someone in-between Jake and us. I had hoped for a Big Brother type of event.

What I got instead was Jake crying and complaining. I heard how Jared had gone too fast and how Jared thought Jake was scared and how he made fun of him. Jake told me he wasn't scared, only that they were going so fast that his eyes cried, but that he wasn't really crying. But Jared didn't believe him and made fun of him and wouldn't let him come home until they were done with the trip.

I wasn't mad at Jared; I was mad with myself for believing in something that I should have known was doomed to fail.

After the snowmobile trip with Jake, Jared asked about Jake often and I understood that the problem that day was Jake's. Jared had tried; he didn't know my motive, but he had tried to be Jake's friend.

I guess in a way, he still is Jake's friend. Simply asking about someone, checking in on them, is good enough for a friendship. Not the best kind of friendship, but a friendship still.

Jared knows about the trouble Jake's been into. I tell him every time, usually the morning after. Jared doesn't flinch when I tell him about the fights and the screaming fits and the obstacle course mishaps and the antics on the football field. It seems like old news to Jared, as if he's seen it all before.

"It's not in here." Jared folds the newspaper, the same newspaper Jacob and Lovelle scanned earlier, and puts it back on the pile.

There's a pair of sunglasses wedged between the small mirror and the top of the stand. They're red, white, and blue, part of the Retro Collection. The salesman told us that kids were into the '70's.

I pull the glasses out carefully. I think of Cole selling tools, and I wonder if he uses white lies to sell more. Does he draw a line as to how far he will go? Does he get in such a habit that he carries his half lies home to Jake and me?

"Who's going to buy those?" Jared says.

"Evil Kenevil," I say, smiling.

Jared doesn't understand, but he smiles anyway. "Right on," he says. His eyes focus on the main part of the store, and he says, "Howdy," to Jacob and Lovelle as they walk towards us, halfway down aisle four.

I start toward the register and hear Jacob ask Jared how his folks are. Jared says fine.

They walk my way and Lovelle asks about Jared's brother and when he's going to come back home. Jared says that his brother hasn't been home in seven months, that Denver's pretty much home to him now. Lovelle makes a noise, and puts their purchases on the counter.

"All right," says Jared. "I'm going."

I wave with one hand, say, "Okay," and punch the price of Q-Tips into the register.

"Tell Anthony that I'll shovel at lunch. I owe him for yesterday."

"You'll have to beat him to it," I say.

"Hey," says Jared, opening the doors. "Did Jake have school today?" He keeps the door wide open, waiting for my response.

I look over, see the snow blowing halfway to horizontal down the street, away from the open door. "As always," I say to Jared. Jacob and Lovelle are looking at him also, Jacob probably not pleased that Jared's talking with the door wide open.

"Someone messed up the high school last night," Jared says. "I thought maybe they cancelled school."

I stare at him and wonder what he is trying to say, as if he were speaking a code, trying to tell me something without coming right out and saying it. "Jake's in junior high," I finally say.

Jacob taps his knuckles on the counter.

"Okay," says Jared. "I'll stop in after I shovel."

And he's gone. The doors eases shut. I watch Jared step through the half-boot high snow and then he's out of sight. The wind takes a quick blow and stacks of snowflakes rush after him.

Jake had practice last night. Play practice. *West Side Story*. Or is it *Annie*? His character is a poor person. He made a joke at dinner one night how it was an easy character to play. Cole didn't think he was kidding, but he was, and we ended up telling each other how poor we were, of the chickens we killed for dinner, of the newspaper we put on the walls to keep warm, of how we lit candles for light and warmth. We laughed at Jake and his character in the play.

He was there and then he was home.

"When are you going to get the scanning computers?" says Jacob. "Like the grocery store?"

I don't know what I was looking at, but when I concentrate on Jacob's question, he's already in my focus.

"They're expensive," says Lovelle. She's scratching at something on Jacob's jacket, a white, gummy spot. Jacob looks at the spot now, grabs his coat sleeve with one hand. He rests his ski pole against the counter and rubs at the spot.

“We don’t need them, do you think?” I say. Neither of them is looking at me; they’re concentrating on the white gunk. “They’re too impersonal. You’d rather have me. Am I right?” I smile.

“Exactly,” says Lovelle, leaving the spot for Jacob.

“Quicker, though,” Jacob says, releasing his coat sleeve. He puts his hands on the counter, pushes their other purchases my way. He accidentally pushes their box of saltine crackers into his ski pole and it falls to the ground. Jacob grunts and bends down to pick it up.

“Sorry I’m so slow,” I say. “I was lost somewhere.”

“You’d think he was in a hurry,” says Lovelle. She picks up a bottle of aspirin, says, “What was he saying about the high school?”

“Jared?”

“His family used to own the dairy, you know,” says Jacob. “Bad choice, that T-shirt shop.”

“Jared says they’re making more money,” I say. I tap the *total* button and tell them the price.

Jacob says, “Okay,” and Lovelle gets her checkbook from her purse. Jacob and I watch her. I’m surprised Anthony hasn’t heard what happened. Maybe he does know and maybe that’s why he’s been so nice this morning. Maybe he knows what’s going to happen.

“The date.” says Jacob. “You know the date?”

“The eighth,” I say. “November eighth.”

Jacob echoes me, "November eighth," and Lovelle writes.

I look out the front doors. A truck sneaks by on the road, its fog lights a dull yellow. "November eighth and look at this snow."

"We need the water," says Jacob.

Lovelle tears the check and pushes it across the counter. Then I wait. We're in our routine: I tell them the price, she retrieves her checkbook, writes the check, pushes it my way, records the amount, finds her driver's license, pushes it across, and I finish the deal by writing down her information on the front of her check, to the right of their names, his name above hers: Jacob Tye West, Lovelle Murphy West.

"Kids making trouble at the school?" says Jacob. He's looking at me, his blue eyes the same dull shade as the fog lights on the truck. I think of his eyes as a younger man and of how electric they must have been to Lovelle. I feel like I might cry and I rub at my eyes.

"Libby?" says Lovelle.

"I'm fine," I say. "I didn't get much sleep last night."

Jacob hooks their paper bag of drugs, Q-tips, replacement soles, and other supplies, and says, "Kids grow up and pretty soon you forget they were kids."

"It's not your boy, right?" says Lovelle. "He's in junior high."

"Junior high," I say. "Exactly; he's not the one in trouble." I turn around and reach for Jacob's new watch. "We almost forgot this."

"Look at us," says Lovelle. "We'll wind it up at home. No need to do it now."

"No, no," I say. "I'll do it."

“She’s the watch pro,” Jacob says. “Remember?” He watches me closely as I unhook the band from the circular plastic frame.

“Exactly,” I say. “I’m a professional.” I smile and they laugh their soft, quick laughs.

I pull out the knob and look at my watch, then move the hands around and around. 9:35. We’ve been open an hour. A short hour and now I have the rest of the day to worry about what happened at the high school last night.

I set the watch, push the nob in. I rub at the face, polishing the glass or plastic, and Jacob tells a story of when he and a friend set a barn on fire. The fire spread to the field and burned four acres of good wheat. He says that unless the high school is burned down to its cinder blocks, it’s not much to talk about. He thumps his fingers on the counter, smiles, looks at his wife, looks back at me, and I smile too. “Right?” he says.

“Right,” I say and I hold out his new watch.

Lovelle reaches for it first. With her other hand, she tries to push up Jacob’s sleeve. I reach over the counter and hold the sleeve up. Jacob’s wrists are hairless and have splotches of dark skin. I hold onto his hand so I can separate the coat cuff from his wrist. His hands are rough and misshapen.

Lovelle carefully puts the watch over his wrist. I hear the front door’s bells jingle and I watch a middle aged couple walk in and look around. They start for the pharmacy. Lovelle is fiddling with the tiny metal hook, trying to pierce the hook into a hole. The couple tracks snow down the red carpeted aisle.

“There,” says Lovelle. Her hands back away from Jacob’s wrist. I look down and the new watch is closed tight around his wrist, hiding a few of the dark splotches.

“Looks good,” Jacob says. “Just hope it keeps the right time.”

Jacob wiggles his fingers, but I keep my grip on the coat sleeve and his hand, letting us all get a good view of his new watch.

“Well, it looks real nice,” Lovelle says.

“Okay,” he says. “It’ll do.” He closes his hand and his fingers close on my fingers. I slip my hand away quickly, but I wish I could leave it in his for a second or two more.

“Libby,” says Anthony from the back. “Can you show them where we keep ice scrapers? They want one with a brush on one end.”

The couple comes my way. I put a hand on Lovelle’s shoulder, tell them to have a good day. They tell me to do the same. Jacob says he’ll be back if the watch loses time. I tell him I’ll make him buy a computer watch if he’s not careful, and he grunts back something, waves a quick goodbye.

I watch them ease out of the door and into the snow. Jacob tests the snow and ice by tapping the ski pole on the ground. The black basket disappears into the fluff, then comes back up, bringing with it bits of snow.

I wonder how they can stand it, the blast of cold, the stinging of snow. I’m glad it was their day and not Lawrence and Phillip Wheeler’s.

Their truck is parked at the curb. It’s a beat-up orange truck. Bronco orange, Jacob says. In the back their black and white ranch dog, Tommy, looks at them with his

ears cocked. He barks once, whines. Jacob says something to Tommy. He taps at the snow once more, and then he and Lovelle walk away arm linked in arm, as if both were supporting the other.

6.

The couple wanting the ice scraper is waiting for me, the woman holding a pack of hand warmers, the orange packages on top of a pair of gray, fake wool mittens. The husband, tall and lanky, wears what looks like a homemade stocking hat. The hat is colored with uneven lines of red and purple and there are strings hanging down from the sides, wool strings to tie under the chin in case of a big wind or maybe just for fashion.

“Let me show you where they are,” I say. They follow me to the far side, aisle one, near the magazines and books.

“Is this normal?” the woman says.

I turn and she’s pointing at the ceiling, then behind her at the front doors. I walk backwards for a few steps, say to her, “The snow? Sure. It can do this any month of the year.”

The woman looks at the man and he smiles a weak smile.

“We’re going hiking,” the woman says. She switches her load from one hand to the other.

We get to the box of scrapers. There are all colors: blue, gold, black, orange. We have flat scrapers, both long and short handled. We have scrapers with the brush on one end; we even have a group of scrapers which sport a see-through reservoir holding

some kind of antifreeze to help remove ice and snow. Jared would laugh about the antifreeze scrapers, call them scrapers for tourists, and he's right: no local would buy one.

The man comes around in front of the woman and picks through the scrapers. I straighten a few magazines, say, "You're hiking today?"

"Supposed to," she says. "I don't see how, though."

"It'll be fine in the woods," the man says. He's holding a long-handled scraper in one hand, a brush-handled scraper in the other.

The woman looks at me, but I go back to the magazines. She wants me to reassure them that it will be okay, but I can't say that it will. I don't understand men's optimism. Even with the snow a foot deep in and out of the woods, this man truly believes he and his wife will enjoy a pleasant walk through the forest. Cole is this way sometimes and it irritates me to no end.

"Where are you from?" I say.

"Which one would you buy?" the man says to me. He's hold out both scrapers, one in each hand, as if proposing with flowers.

"Arvada," the woman says. "We moved there this summer. We're from North Carolina, near the coast. If we were home, we'd be enjoying our best weather."

"It's not usually this bad," I say. "This is early for snow. For this much snow, at least." I take a step towards the man. I point to the brush-handled model and tell him that'll do the trick.

"Get a red one," the woman says. I look at the mittens she's going to buy and I know she won't last long on their walk. Even with the handwarmers.

“Black would show in the snow,” the man says, and I look at him closely, wonder where he heard about color and finding things in the snow. Cole paints all of his tools orange for the same reason. The tools in the garage, including the shovel I used this morning, have orange handles or orange heads. Cole’s a fanatic about losing tools; he says you lose one in the snow and not only will it be gone for five months, but when you finally find it, the wood will be rotted, the tool wasted.

Oh, Cole. I want him to be home. I want the driveway plowed, the stove going, the house warm, the pathways, deck and porch shoveled with straight lines, the piles bordering them high and neat. I don’t want him driving over mountain passes and through white-out valleys. I want him home.

“Blue,” the man says. He holds it above his head, a knight of winter driving. “This will be our weapon.”

“That’s fine,” the woman says. She smiles at her husband. She looks at me and her smile fades.

We start for the register. The woman reads a price tag for the portable heaters. The man and I pass her. I tell him Arvada isn’t bad, that they don’t get much snow there.

He smiles, says his wife is ready to move back to North Carolina. He looks her way, and she’s coming over to us, her mittens, hand warmers, and now a stick of lip balm in her hands.

“Do whatever it takes to keep her happy,” I say to him. I smile, act like I’m being funny.

“That’s right,” the woman says. “Speak up,” she says to me, and she smiles and nods her head. But when I look at her and she looks at me, I know that we understand each other. And we both know we’ll cave in, have already let our guards down. We’ll let him get the blue scraper, we’ll move to Ash Creek and work in a drug store, we’ll go for a walk in a snowstorm.

I collect their items, pointing the brush end of the scraper towards me. I begin punching the prices into the register. I ask them if they have boots. They say they do.

The woman holds up a pack of handwarmers. “These work, right?” she says.

“Rub them like beanbags, then wait ten minutes,” I say. “Put them in your boots and your feet will sweat.”

“They’re that good?” she says.

“I’ve used them before,” the man says.

He’s looking at her, but she ignores him, keeps her eyes on me. I tell her they’ll do the job. “Guaranteed,” I say.

The woman puts on her new mittens. The man ties his hat under his chin, the tiny strands cutting into his jawline. The top of his hat fits tight against his head.

The woman grabs the bag of handwarmers; the man holds the icescraper. They say goodbye and I tell them to keep warm. The woman scoffs and says, “Yeah, right.”

I get them heading for the doors and I’m glad for the first time today that I’m staying inside this store, warm and dry.

They walk out. I hear the woman shriek and I watch her put her hands over her face and run for the parking lot. The man walks behind her, his icescraper at the ready.

I sit down on my stool, look for my coffee under the counter, and take a sip. It's cool. I look around the store, look for Anthony in the back. He must be filling bottles, hidden behind the window.

It's quiet.

I think again of Cole driving and then I think of Jake. I remember Jake's attitude this morning and I hope to God that he wasn't part of the trouble at the high school. Not now, not today. Not on this snowy day without Cole. Please no.

7.

There are reasons for why we have come to where we are now. Reasons for Jake's problems, reasons for my unhappiness, reasons for Cole choosing to deliver tools during our first snowstorm.

There must be.

Anthony tells me to look forward, to believe in the future. He tells me he was raised Christian and that things happen for a reason and that for every bad event there's a good one waiting to happen and that if I'm patient and willing, life will eventually swing positive. He's not fervent when he tells me these things. He's not a fanatic. He never even uses the word *God*. It's none of that, but it's also more than simple optimism.

He says he never would have moved to Ash Creek if it hadn't been for his wife's decision to travel to South America, and then her decision to stay there, her interest in Brazil's culture more than her interest in him. He says he had two choices: wallow in the present or keep his eyes caged on the future.

His children, young women now, pay more attention to him than when they all lived under the same roof in Philadelphia.

He's healthier, thinner, stronger. He shovels snow all winter.

He wants to remarry and he expects to find her here in this valley. He's positive that it will happen and I believe him.

I believe him and I know that he's right to see potential and opportunity in his decisions, instead of mistakes and regret. I want to see life the way he sees it, and I do sometimes, but it's becoming harder and harder. I feel like an aspen tree caught too close to a fast running creek, my roots more exposed after each storm.

Today it's difficult to see a future.

The newspaper's spread open on the counter. I had started to look for news on the high school, but I'm near the back of the paper and I don't remember reading any of the previous pages.

I stare at the page below me. Here are the weather observations for the past week. It was 65 degrees on Sunday, 45 degrees on Monday. 2.25" of snow fell on Tuesday. Yesterday's report is missing.

From then to now: a simple chart showing what has happened weather-wise.

I feel sick to my stomach and sweat comes to my forehead. It doesn't seem I have a determinable past. I can't seem to be able to put any of it together into a line or grid or chart. It's scattered and random.

I hear Anthony's pharmacy door click open and a moment later he yells from halfway down aisle five, "I'll be back in fifteen." I look up from the newspaper and he's wrapped up in his winter gear: red parka, plastic black pants, shin-high, black snowboots, gray Ash Creek High School Booster Club stocking cap. And goggles. Snow goggles: the kind you wear downhill skiing or snowmobiling.

"Going skiing?" I say. I wipe my forehead, wipe the sweat on my jeans.

He smiles, but his smile only goes partway, the goggles stopping his cheeks from moving. "It's windy," he says.

"You're trying to put me in a good mood, right?"

He starts back towards his door, says, "Our sidewalks are the highways to our store."

I get up and follow him to the back. He reappears at his pharmacy window, looking like a Halloween trick-or-treater or bank robber.

I tell him, "Jared said he'd do it, told me to tell you he owes you one."

"I want to keep it that way." He takes off one glove, holds up a stack of envelopes, says, "Could you make sure Arthur gets these?"

"How about talking to me without those goggles?" I hold out my hand; he reaches over the counter and hands down the mail. His eyes are bronze under the goggles, his nose short and stubby.

"They come off when I'm finished," he says, and he pulls out the goggles and lets them snap back onto his face. "If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, call Search and Rescue." He turns and walks back through the pharmacy's white metal shelves, then yells back, "On second thought, don't call them; I'm better off on my own." He turns around and gives me a thumbs up, then disappears.

The back door opens and closes and before I go back to the front I feel a short breeze of cold air. I flip through the envelopes, make sure Anthony remembered our return address and postage. All except one is addressed to drug companies. The exception is a letter to his daughter living in Tallahassee.

The mail rests on the corner of the glass-topped counter closest to the doors, waiting for Arthur, one of two town mailmen, who will come by around eleven.

Across the street, the hardware store's business seems unaffected by the storm. Trucks, more than half of them with dogs in the back, come and go.

The men driving these trucks look like Cole: thick, stout, slow-moving men with jeans and ballcaps and sunglasses and worn, tan, canvas jackets. I dream of Cole pulling up, the snowplow he's driving needing hydraulic fluid or a bolt of some kind, and me watching him walk inside. And then later, him walking over here to say hi before he leaves to plow more snow. Or maybe us getting a sandwich from Denise's and us eating our food across from each other. We'd catch up, plan dinner, talk of our upcoming days off, argue over what piece of furniture to buy next. Maybe decide on how best to deal with our son.

Our son, Jake, who I pray was no part of what happened last night at the high school.

Anthony's snow shovel peaks around the corner, resting for a moment with its head under the snow, the handle angling upward towards Anthony who is still behind the brick building. Then, in a quick movement, Anthony's shovel lurches forward and I see Anthony's arms and bent upper body rush into vision. Then he tosses his collected snow upward and outward. The snow mists in the wind, drifting away from the store, the wind travelling down Lincoln the same direction as home.

Anthony's around the corner and he's on the front sidewalk. His stocking cap is plated with snow; his mouth is closed tight; his black, plastic snowpants ripple in the wind.

He's anything but the normal man in Ash Creek; I'm sure someone across the street is commenting right now on his goggles, telling everyone to check out the pharmacist shoveling snow. Anthony will never fit completely into a rhythm here in Ash Creek; he'll forever be a foreigner.

Like me. Like anyone not born and raised in these mountains. We're foreigners, tourists, outsiders. We can never find a spot to feel comfortable.

I keep my station near the front doors and watch Anthony pass. We make eye contact once, but he doesn't stop. It seems that he throws the snow even higher now that he knows I'm watching.

I lean against the glass counter and bump the envelopes with my hip. I re-adjust the mail, straightening it one direction, then the other.

Anthony's outside and I'm alone.

There's something to do in the store, I'm sure, but I'll save it for later.

Sons and mothers; daughters and fathers. I cross my arms and my heart races and as soon as Anthony moves to the other side of the doors, as soon as I see only his bent back, I find the envelope addressed to his daughter and take it with me to the register.

I find my scissors and slide the blade under the flap. I cut slowly but my hand is shaking. When it's open, I remember to breathe.

I look at the open envelope and I wonder what I'm doing. This intrusion on Anthony's life. But I want to know him. I want to know him and his daughter and how they talk. How they think. How it is to have love and simple attention and caring. I want to know all this without us and this place involved.

I look to the doors as I pull out the letter. A talking clock on the display case says in a womanish computer voice, "Ten a.m." A car suddenly appearing from the direction where Anthony is shoveling startles me and I drop the letter on the counter. Then I know it's a car and not Anthony and I open the hand-written letter, read quickly what Anthony has written in blue ink: *November and Dear Harlan and the scanned words and sentences, Its our first snow, wish you were here to see it. I hope you can come in November. You know how much I miss you and Bridget. I'm at work now. Me, myself and I in the store. It opens at nine. Don't listen to your mom; I'm not lonely. But thanks for the call and the concern. It's not loneliness, though. This is where I belong. Please don't think of what's happened as a mistake. Please don't think of me as a mistake. There is a future to all this. It's coming down here today. Snow!! It's so white and pretty. I'm going to shovel the sidewalks now before we open. Can you believe it? Shoveling snow in November!! I hope you feel better. Listen to your sister and go to the doctor.*

A glance out the window: nothing but the snow and wind and the blurry buildings across the street. The last paragraph, darker, bluer than the rest of the letter, *Please call if you need anything. I'm always here. And finally, All of my love, Dad.*

I'm immediately ashamed. I refold the letter, now a different hurt in my chest, and I put the letter back in the envelope. I can't stop breathing now and I wipe my eyes from my guilt.

One of my closest friends and look what I've done.

The scissors go underneath the counter and I take a piece of scotch tape. But the first piece is wet from my tears and won't stick, so I wipe my hand against my shirt and this time I close the envelope.

Evil. Evil to my friends. I'm making crying noises and I have to stop. I have to quit thinking and calm down.

I put the letter under the counter next to my bag. I grab a Kleenex and wipe my eyes and nose. I look back up and Anthony's still gone. I look out at the empty store and I wonder what I've done and why I did it, and I see my sister, my only sister and I, receiving this letter from Anthony. As if I were Harlan and my sister were Bridget. But my father was never gone. He wasn't the one missing. It was my sister who left. If I got this letter and I was Harlan, there wouldn't be a Bridget. I couldn't be Harlan because there would be no Bridget in my family. Anthony couldn't write me a letter telling me *I'm here for you both*. It would be impossible.

Then Anthony is in the back of the store, behind the pharmacy window, yelling out, "I need salt for the ice."

I wipe my eyes again. I hit my fists against my thighs. I pretend to be busy with the register.

Inside my head, I hear Anthony's sad voice saying, *I'm not lonely*. But he is. Maybe this is why we talk so freely with each other, understand each other's moods and expectations. He's lonely and sad and I never knew this, not this way, and I start hurting inside again.

The store is quiet, the lights overhead humming and the coolers in back making a clicking noise. I'm paralyzed looking through this empty store.

Muffled voices from outside, then the doors open, and Jared comes through, smiling, waving one arm, saying, "I owed him. You told him, right?"

I look over and here's my future Jake, my only son, Jake. Only one of him so that he can't miss a brother or sister. But he doesn't have Bridget and he doesn't have a Lauren. This, maybe, is why Jake is in such a bad state. This could be all because of what I've done, how I've reacted. My fear of hurt and loss.

"You told him, right?"

I rub my eyes, make a smile, then say, "You can't stop Anthony. He's a moose."

"Moose?"

"You can't stop him."

Jared grunts a giggle and says, "Okay."

I reach for my water bottle, take a giant drink as Jared comes to the counter. I turn around and fiddle with the cigarettes and chewing tobacco.

Jared turns the paper around. He says, "Looking for the high school thing, huh?"

I turn back and kneel down to open the locked box of tobacco. I get a roll of Skoal Bandits. I tell Jared, "No, not really. Just reading whatever was in there." I come back up, face away from Jared and load the cans into the display.

"I heard they set a fire in the biology room. Turned on the gas. Cops said if they did it right it would have blown up half the school. Of course, if they had done it right, they would been blown up along with it." Jared's quiet then, waiting for a reaction. Usually I'd exclaim something, make Jared feel as if he'd told a wonderful story, but I can't do that right now.

I think of Jacob telling me that it wasn't news unless the high school was burnt to cinders and think that he's probably right. I say to Jared, "I think this thing you're talking about would've made the newspaper. There's nothing in there."

"It happened last night," he says. "That's why." Then he punches the paper and says, "You know they caught one of them. A guy three years ahead of me in school. He used to work for the city. He had a key to the school."

I hold a can of Bandits in-between the roll and the display and say, "What are you talking about?"

A salve of relief comes over me. It's not Jake. It's not him; it can't be. They caught someone and Jared didn't say they caught Jake. He said it was someone older. Older even than Jared. It's over now, these worries. Jake will come down this afternoon after school and we'll go home and we'll shovel and plow and go on with life. This day will end with nothing changed.

“This guy and whoever wrecked normal stuff. They tried to blow the school up, trust me. That’s the truth. They would’ve got an F for that, huh?” He snorts a forced laugh and I give him a laugh back.

I finish loading the Bandit display. When I turn around, Jared has walked to the front doors. He says, “It’s so dead today.”

“It’s the snow.”

Jared flips through the mail which is still on the counter near the doors. He taps the pile against the counter. He sets them flush with the counter edge, slides his finger along the chrome metal. “The TV said a traveler’s advisory. But there’s already more than six inches. And look at it now.” He points outside to the falling snow.

“Traveler’s advisory is bad enough this early. It’ll be good for your snowmobiling, right?” I’m full of energy now. Jake’s fine. He’s not in trouble.

Then I remember Anthony’s letter and a heat hits my cheeks.

Jake again: it’s not him; it’s some kid older than Jared, not even a young man, but an adult, and I think of Cole coming home tomorrow and both of these take the place of me reading Anthony’s letter.

I come around the corner, tell Jared, “I need to inventory our cards.” I’m nauseous, emotions fighting one another, and I can’t stand to be at this counter.

He looks at me, pauses, then says, “Do you want Jake to go out with me again?”

“Snowmobiling?” Jared nods. “I’ll ask him,” I say, walking to aisle two. This young man thinks he understands what I need, offering simple remedies. At least he notices unrest.

“I’ll do it, if you want. It seems like you do.”

“I’ll ask him tonight.”

“Not this weekend. Later, though. You know? Not this first time.” Then he’s quiet. He fidgets.

“I know.” I stand in front of the cards, trying to remember where I stopped on Monday. I feel Jared staring, but I keep focused on the cards, wanting him gone.

I start and a few minutes later I hear the doors open, the little bells jingling, and then it closes.

I concentrate on the cards. The monotony of envelopes and glossy cards. The messages, all of them with thoughtfulness. I move back into the present.

It’s been longer than fifteen minutes and I think of retrieving Anthony from the snowstorm. His comment about Search and Rescue is one of his favorites. He’s forever laughing at the group’s bravado, their hyper-enthusiasm. Cole was once a part of the team, when he was younger and when he was home more often, but I haven’t told Anthony. I let him laugh about our town’s volunteer rescue unit. It’s jealousy, and I forgive Anthony for that. There isn’t much else to forgive.

I re-stack a section of greeting cards, hear Anthony in the back, jostling around, taking off his snowsuit and boots.

I imagine him in front of the mirror, near the bathroom, combing his hair, washing his face with warm water. I imagine his two daughters watching him from a hallway and I feel the kind of love they would have felt.

Then he's back at the pharmacy window, a white lab coat on now, his face red.
His dark hair darker from water. He breathes out a large breath, says, "All done."

"Feel nice outside?"

"Cold, that's for sure."

"Did you see Jared?"

"I told him I was waiting for something bigger. Said I'd take his offer then."

"We'll get one one of these days," I say.

"I'd say there's eight or ten inches right now. Maybe a foot."

"Huh."

"Greeting cards?" he says.

"My favorite chore." I find another mismatch, look for its mate.

"I'll get lunch about noon. I'm already hungry."

I want to hold him. To hold Anthony for missing his daughters and for offering all his love. I want to feed him and tell him people misunderstand him and that if they knew him, they would love him simply, just as he loves his daughters. The love he has for his daughters and the love I have for my son and a love I wish I could have for Anthony.

I want all this but I look at the cards harder. I stare at the colors and I lose the image and thoughts of Anthony hungry.

"I'll leave you alone," he says from his window and I don't say anything back.

8.

I've picked the special occasion section, the *thank-yous*, *happy anniversaries*, *thinking of yous*, *condolences*, *get wells*, etc. It's a tedious, never-ending chore. People put cards where they don't belong, take cards without the envelopes, take a envelope minus the card. It's always a mess. It takes time. The worst section is current holiday. I worked on Thanksgiving cards for two days last week.

These are the facts, but what's true is that this is mindless work. When I need to, I can come to these cards.

It's working. My brain's going somewhere else and I move to another row.

Then it's happening again. I'm flashing between Jake and what I did to Anthony. Then to Cole. They are like three random and continuously flashing lights. One after another, taking their turn, then switching off to wait the next turn.

I quit this and I go through events. There's a logic to what has happened. The good and the bad. The accident is the beginning. It must be. It can't go further back than that. Lauren's death is where it begins. I've always known that. And where I am today is the end.

The end is today. The end is Anthony and what I did earlier and why I did it.

I don't want Anthony sexually, but maybe it would be easier if I did.

There are other parts of today which aren't the end, but are close to it: The early snow, Cole gone, the men across the street at the hardware store, Anthony different than all of them, my loneliness, my need to feel the same in Anthony, his compassion for me day after day, his promise of lunch later. Jared, Jake, Lovelle and Jacob, Denise cursing her register, the snow still falling.

These are part of the pattern, and there are patterns for Jake's problems and there are patterns for Cole. Then there are patterns for Cole and Jake of which I don't yet know the consequences. Secrets and surprises.

All of our patterns on top of one another so that the logic dissolves.

I stand up, begin scanning the upper regions of the card section. I don't know what I'm looking at: colors and letters and pictures and words. My lower back is stiff from shoveling. I'll do it all over this afternoon. My back and knuckles will ache more sharply. It will be dark before I get started on dinner. Jake will shovel; Jake will start the fire.

This is the future. I understand there may be a snow bank too deep to drive through. We'll park on the highway, walk in. The snow will come over our boots. Our bones under the thin skins of our shins will first feel the wet cold. I'll plow: there's no way around it. And if the plow doesn't start, I'll have to call Terry and Ben.

Now backwards, like someone pulling back a slingshot. Lauren and I driving to pick up pizza. Pizza and coke. Me, a freshman at CU-Boulder, her, a junior in high school. Our parents at home. Both parents: never divorced, no drinking problems, no mid-life crises, no violence, no loud arguments. Everything fine.

Sixth avenue, March. Snow had melted during the day, then begun to freeze early that evening. Lauren driving, me switching radio stations or looking at people driving beside us.

Whatever I was doing, it didn't matter.

Then a spot of black ice. Invisible ice. Clear, but black.

We slid into the other lane and the ice disappeared and we skidded on dry pavement. We hit another icy spot on the shoulder, the car turning slowly. We ran into a tire shop sign. We bumped into it. That's all it was: a sudden bump.

My forearm hurt where I had shielded myself against the dashboard. Lauren was slumped down in her seat, as if trying to hide from someone.

I looked up at the sign and thought of it falling down on us. I looked at Lauren and she said, "What happened?"

I didn't answer her question because people's faces came to our windows. They asked the same question Lauren had asked: What happened? We didn't answer and we got out of the car.

Then Lauren fell down and she lay there. Someone said something about shock and got a sleeping bag and put a big box under her feet. I sat next to her and told her that Dad wouldn't be that angry. It was a freak accident.

Those were my last words to my dying sister.

The ambulance and police came. They put Lauren in the ambulance and me in the police car. She died of internal bleeding later that night.

From there it branches and branches again.

Next is me back in college, everyone saying that college was the place for me to be.

Then Cole, six months after that.

A year later and he still hadn't met my parents. I never took him home because I hadn't been there in eight months. It was different between my parents and me. It was all different.

A big jump now: our move to Ash Creek. There were other events, but I want to get to now. Ash Creek, a town three hours and two mountain passes from my parents. My parents who couldn't understand why I quit college and moved away from Denver, away from them, when they needed me most. I called them from Evergreen, Cole's truck packed, and my parents and I hung up with the past all around and the future non-existent.

To Ash Creek, my family's vacation town: how could I cope with being in the same area where as a young family we had spent so much time together? Time as a complete family, skiing and swimming and eating in the small cafes?

And now I'm pregnant, us in a neighborhood in town. So, we marry and we have two weddings, one in Denver, one in Ash Creek, neither of them what I had dreamed of. Both my parents cried.

Yes, yes, but there's a good part next, a miracle outcome: Jake. My Jake Allen Gardner. Our boy. My son.

And I want to concentrate on good things because I'm sure there are more, good things happen in equal amounts as bad; I should count them as well, but there's a noise at

the front of the store. I stand to look. Anthony says through his window, "Get Arthur the mail."

Arthur says loudly, "This it?"

I walk quickly to the front, my knees cracking and stiff from squatting too long. I say, "Hey" to Arthur.

"Howdy. This it?" He's pointing to the neat stack on the counter.

"Is it already eleven?" I say. I look to the pharmacy; Anthony's in the back, hidden. I reach under the counter, retrieve the mended envelope, the letter addressed to Harlan.

"After eleven," Arthur says. "Eleven-eighteen, my watch says." He uses one boot to wipe snow off the top edge of his other boot.

"How's the snow?" I say, coming to him with the letter. I look again to the pharmacy.

"White and frozen."

"Good," I say. I hand him the letter. A sliver of Scotch tape hangs off one edge.

"Day going okay?" He looks at the letter, slaps it against his forearm, then stacks it under the other envelopes.

"Sure," I say.

He stands there, our mail in his right hand, the tops of his pink fingers showing from his gloves which end at his finger's knuckles. Over his left shoulder is a black canvas bag.

“You don’t look okay.” He takes off his glasses with the hand not holding the mail, wipes the large circle lens against the top of his mail-holding glove, looks through the streaked glasses at me, then slides them back on, careful that the earpieces go underneath his hat.

I watch him, look at the once-opened letter in his hand, and then say, “It’s snowing. Is that enough?”

“Good enough, I guess.” He slings the bag to the front of his body, un-velcros the top flap and puts our envelopes at the bottom of the pile. He flips through another stack and pulls out a small group of catalogs and bills. He hands it to me. “It’s awfully warm in here,” he says.

“You’re right there, Arthur.” I take the mail and don’t bother with the guilt he wants me to feel for working inside on a snowy day.

He gives me his quick smile, the kind you hardly ever see on Arthur, the kind of smile that hardly seems a smile at all, more just an expression, and this gets me for a moment. He says, “No, no. Rather be out there than in this stuffy place.” He scrunches his nose, then says, “Stinks like a hospital, too.” He fans his hand on the side of his nose, says, “Peee-U” He makes a move and the black mail bag goes to his side again. “Adios, amigo.”

“See you tomorrow, Arthur.”

He says back to me, his hands on the door, “If you’re lucky.”

He's out the door; snow blows into the store, the wind blustery and no longer moving down Lincoln. It's blowing backwards from this morning. The door closes slowly, ebbing with the gusts of wind.

The letter's gone. Arthur didn't ask and Anthony never knew. A sense of satisfaction goes through me and this satisfaction brings back the shame.

Arthur shuffles side to side on the sidewalk, as if trying to avoid someone, then around the corner, from the direction of the parking lot, comes Terry, running, her hand over her eyes. I wish she would pass over our store and go to the next one. I don't want to talk with her. Not now. She'll be happy and I can't feel that way now.

But she jerks open the door, stands inside, looks at me, and says, "That guy..."

"Arthur?" I put my hands on the glass, scrape at a piece of glue which once held a sale sign.

Terry says slowly, "He barked at me." She stomps her boots, shakes her short brown hair free of snow. "Barked."

"He's having fun," I say. I pull the glue from under my fingernail, roll it and let it fall to the floor.

Terry makes a noise and I look at her and she holds out a small brown bag. Then she drops her arm, the bag going to her side. She says, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I look at my finger, think of Harlan getting a letter which has been taped shut. I wonder about the tape and wonder about Harlan wondering over her father and their family and why he's here and they're there and why he had to open, then tape,

the letter he mailed her. I wonder if she'll ask and whether I'll be found out, a week or two down the line.

I look back at Terry and smile.

"No. There's something wrong." She runs her hand through her hair, stopping her sweep so that her hair sticks straight up. She releases it and her hair falls down, tangled.

"Hey, Terry," says Anthony from the back.

"Hey." She keeps her eyes on me. "Well?"

"Well what?" I say. I smile. I reach for the bag at her side.

"Nope," she says, leaning backwards.

"Terry."

"A woman knows," she says. She likes this saying. It irritates me usually; right now it strikes me as true, that we are somehow, through all of our differences, the same.

Her face goes sour and she hunches her shoulders deeply. She whispers, "Jake?"

"No, no," I say. "It's not him. It was someone else."

"Someone else, what?" she says.

Anthony comes towards us, walks behind the counter, says, "What happened?"

"This is girl talk," Terry says, waving her hand as if shooing a mosquito.

I look at Anthony. He's looks at me real quick, smiles, says, "Fine. Okay."

He takes a pad of business paper, our name and address at top, the phrase, *Better than Mom's pantry*, bold, cursive, and underneath the address. Anthony has used this

notepad as an excuse: he's got three or four of them back in the pharmacy. His protectiveness for me is so obvious, so endearing.

Terry watches him walk away, then she looks back at me. "Okay," she says.

I walk around the counter as I tell her about the high school vandalism, the possible gas explosion, describing how if the vandals had been better, half the school would be gone. I use details which Terry enjoys, her facial expressions changing with every highlight.

"We could've been the next Columbine," she says.

I put on some banana-flavored lip balm, rub my lips together, say, "If it had happened during school and if the vandals were more than just vandals."

"Can you imagine?" she says. She thinks for a moment, then says, "Cole? Is he okay?"

"It's just the day," I say, throwing the lip balm back under the counter. The balm skips and finally rests somewhere in the large compartment. "It's everything and nothing. You know?"

"Is Anthony treating you okay?" She edges closer, takes a Snickers bar from the candy selection, and pointing it at me, says, "I can see him doing something inappropriate. There's something there."

"Terry." I take the candy bar, put it back in its box. "This has nothing to do with Anthony." I want to ask her what she means by *something*, and why she thinks it, and if it's general town gossip, but I don't. To ask would agitate the situation.

“Well,” she says. “The everything and nothing dilemma I can do nothing about. When it’s that way, there’s nothing anybody can do.” She smiles.

“Exactly,” I say. I don’t act it out, but she has already made me feel better.

She stares at me and smiles a huge smile. “What?” I say.

“I lied. I have something that might help.” She drumrolls the glass counter with her pointer fingers.

I don’t understand what she’s doing, then it comes to me, and I feel it in my face and I say, “Snowplowing?” It comes suddenly that this might be the one thing to turn us around.

She quits the drumroll, puts her hands on my cheeks, squeezes them together, and says, “Bingo.” I smell something like Elmers glue on her hands, my lips like a fish mouth, and I’m smiling and loving that Terry’s hands are on me, her pressured touch a wonderful feeling.

I put my hands over hers and hold our hands together for a moment before pulling her hands away.

Then I’m crying. I try to laugh to stop the crying, and I’m a mix of laughing snorts and falling tears.

“I should quit pre-school and become a therapist,” she says.

I nod, say, “I’m sorry.”

“Forget it,” she says. “I’m glad you’re happy. If that’s what it is.”

“You have no idea,” I say. “It’s been that kind of day.”

“It’s nearly half over.” She looks at her watch. “Cole gets back when?”

“Is this serious?” I say. “You guys need his help? Now?”

“Ben’s swamped. Exhausted, and a grumpy shit.” Then she says, “He needs the help. We need the help. So, when’s the tool man coming home?”

I pause, then say, “Tomorrow night, hopefully.” I look out the window.

“Tomorrow night?” she says. “That’s what he promised?”

“Depends on the storm, I guess. But it can snow all winter.” I think of money and Cole’s happiness. “I hope it never quits.”

“Yeah, right. Since when does a snowstorm brighten your day? Right?” She puts the small brown bag from the grocery store on the counter. “Now you can have your treat.”

There’s a movement in the back and I look as I pick up the package. Anthony’s at the first aid display, stacking packages of Band-Aids on the metal shelf. I look in the package: a giant cookie. I poke around, say, “Peanut butter?”

“What’s going on with Anthony?” Terry says. She turns around, then turns back to me.

“Nothing.” I fold up the package, tell her thanks, and that I’ll save it for after lunch.

She grins, crosses her arms, uncrosses them. “I knew something was up. Lunch, right? You and Anthony?”

“There’s no *something*,” I say. “It’s lunch.” I’m smiling and there’s no way to stop it. I feel better than good. I feel light.

“It’s okay,” she says. “You can smile all you want.”

I make myself stop, make a smirk, and say, "This isn't the first time."

"Whoaaa," she says loudly and she puts her hands up in the air. We both laugh. I put my hands out and put them on her shoulders. I tell her to shhhh in-between laughs.

This is how we are: up or down. If I could stand the downs, we would be better friends. But right now she's my best friend. We're like two high-schoolers talking about boys.

"Whoa yourself," I say. I shake her lightly, then walk around the counter and motion with my eyes for her to follow. I walk us towards the beach chairs, dusting the coolers along the way. No matter how juvenile this is, I don't want Anthony to hear.

Halfway there, Jared comes storming into the store. "Hey!" he says to me, then he sees Terry and stops. He freezes, the snow on his hair and gray sweatshirt and eyelashes tiny white spots. "Hey, Terry."

"I guess you know Jared from the T-shirt shop," I say. "Three stores down."

"Of course," she says, smiling at Jared. She looks down Jared's body; I follow her gaze and notice his snowmobiling gloves, the bright gloves whose cuffs come nearly to his elbows.

Jared looks at me, then says loudly, "Does Anthony want anything shoveled?" He's nervous and I guess it's over Terry, although I never took her to be drop-dead gorgeous. Maybe a pre-school teacher is something sexy to a newly graduated T-shirt worker.

“He just did it,” I say to him. “Thirty minutes ago.” Jared’s attention is focused sharply on me, his eyes not even blinking. I wait, then say, “He said he’d take your offer later.”

Jared looks confused, staring in my direction. His eyes are wide. Then he says, “That’s cool.” He looks back to the back of the store.

I turn and look, say, “He’s in back doing inventory.”

“Oh.”

“Selling lots of T-shirts?” says Terry. She leans against one of the coolers, says, “It’s not the weather, though, is it?”

He smiles at her and starts telling her about long-sleeved T-shirts and fleece sweatshirts and the newest trend: hooded sweatshirts. He tells her more than she wanted to know; he puts more sentences together than he usually does in a whole conversation with me. I swish the duster against a shelf, but watch Jared talk to Terry.

He’s a different person right now; I’ve always thought of him as an older boy, but right now he’s a man. He’s not Jake, that’s for sure. There are tiny wrinkles on his forehead, near his eyebrows. His eyes have a dark, ink-like smudge under them. He uses his hands and arms to describe things easily understood.

And Terry seems to accept him naturally, almost prying an adult-ness from him.

Terry talks about her pre-school class and Jared is nodding, wiping lines of snow melt from his nose, from the sides of his face. His hair still shows traces of snow.

“Most of them are snots,” she says. Then she looks at me, “That’s why I’ll never have any.”

I smile at her, "You're a model pre-school teacher."

"I'm perfect," she says.

"Perfect as snow in November," I say. We smile at each other, as if we were keeping a secret. Then we both look at Jared and he fidgets.

He takes off a glove, wipes his forehead, says, "Well." He hasn't moved from his original spot. "I'll check later, I guess."

"Okay," I say.

Terry says, "See you."

Jared nods and smiles and backs out of the door using his bent leg and boot. He waves and smiles and turns around. We watch him put his head down against the snow and wind. The door closes, but not before snow has blown in. It's snowing less, but the wind is strong.

I walk over to wipe the water from the entrance tile. Next to the newspaper stand I keep an old blue towel. I step down on it and bring it across. I move the towel in circles, say to Terry, "That was something."

"What?" she says. She opens the cooler, reaches in and gets a Dr. Pepper. "Can I pay later?"

I wipe a moment longer, tell her to write it down on a piece of paper so I can put it in the register.

"Fuck it," she says and starts to put it back.

“No, no. Keep it,” I say, worried that I’ve upset her, more worried that I’ve upset what we had going. “I’ll write it down. Drink your drink.” I push the towel back to the side of the stand.

She asks if I’m sure. I bend to push the towel to the corner. I tell her to drink up.

She closes the cooler door, opens her soda. Then she laughs, says, “Jared, the T-shirt boy.”

I laugh back and I wish we could go to lunch. My girlfriend and I eating soup and bread inside Denise’s with the snow and wind outside. The two of us in sync, talking easily because we are two women. Anthony is something different. It’s good, but forced sometimes. Right now, I want everything natural.

Then Cole’s new job comes back in a rush and I start laughing again, wondering how long it’s been since I’ve been this happy. Terry imitates Jared, the loving zombie, but I start thinking about lunch. I’ll eat lunch, but then I’ll have all afternoon to plan a way to tell Cole. I’ll have all afternoon to think and plan on how life will be, how life will change, how it will be with him home every night and every day. All winter long, and on the slow days, when the sun shines so bright against the snow, Cole will be able to wake late and come home early. He’ll be there to start fires and hold conversations on sports and hunting and construction and chainsaws and animals he saw and the snowpack around the county and what homes are going in and who’s got a new truck: things which I never talk about and topics which hold no emotion, conversations which I know are good for me and essential for Jake. And how will Jake react to having his dad home

nightly? All this to think about and Cole coming home tomorrow night. I wish he'd call, but it will be better to plan a surprise, a special dinner, a special menu, a special night.

"Speaking of men, and I use that word lightly," Terry says, still smiling, "you and Anthony have a lunch date."

I sit on one of the lawn chairs, cross my legs, wave my blue duster and say, "We're getting around Ash Creek, aren't we?"

"Not bad for a couple of near-forties." She takes the seat next to mine, crosses her legs the same direction as mine.

I lean back, look at Terry who's drinking her soda, a silver-type ring on three of her short thin fingers. Her neck is beautiful. Thin and muscular, if these are the right words to describe a perfect neck. Everything my neck isn't.

Terry. Expressive Terry. Jake says she's too happy, too smiley, too nice. Cole doesn't like her fruity perfume. Anthony is irritated by her aggressive, husky, loud voice. I guess she's all that, but she's also other things, and today she's beautiful, funny, and sisterly.

The front doors jingle and a woman who works in the video store walks in, sees us sitting in the lawn chairs, and says, "Morning. Where's the beach?"

I stand and ask her if she needs help. Terry reads the Dr. Pepper can.

The woman wants to know where we keep shampoo. I tell her, "Aisle six. Follow me." I lead, then let the woman come even with me. I twist back to Terry and lip synch, "Just a minute." Terry waves her hand.

Anthony pokes his head out through the pharmacy window, says, "Ten minutes?"

“Sounds good,” I say. Can you bring it in?” The video store worker and I walk on.

“I can wait.”

“No, no. Let’s eat here.”

He pauses, says, “Sure? I thought we were going out, take a twenty minute break.”

With a little emphasis, I say, “I want to eat here.”

“Fine,” he says. “Fine.”

I know I was a little strong, but I feel strong. That, and I know Terry’s watching and listening.

“Soup’s fine?” he asks.

“Perfect. Bring some bread.” Anthony looks to the front, sees Terry, and sits back down on his chair.

I lead the woman down the aisle and she says, holding her hair down in front of her eyes, “I want this brown hair blond.”

“Oh,” I say. “That’s the next aisle,” and we continue around the corner, around the teal green display of *Natural Hair Remedies*, shampoos and conditioners which no one buys, and into aisle seven.

“Too dreary for brown hair?” I say.

“For this color of brown,” and she runs two fingers through her hair, holding it out for me to see.

“Any hair looks bad under these flourescences,” I say. “Or under those gray clouds.” I smile, feeling a little proud of my auburn color.

“Well,” she says, “platinum blond will brighten things up.” She bends to look closely at her options. She tells me thanks.

I walk back up to the front, kick a large, multi-colored, plastic ball back into the toy section. Terry’s putting a fleece headband on her head, bringing her hair up and over the dark green band. “Time for my nap,” she says.

“Lucky you.”

“Need your driveway plowed?” she says. “You’re part of the business now.”

I smile, say, “Are we business partners?”

“Practically. Maybe we should have business cards made.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say, “but if not, I’ll call.”

“Promise?” Terry says, leaning with her back against the doors.

“Promise,” and I walk close to her and put out my arms. I hug her and tell her thanks for stopping. I tell her thanks for the cookie. I hug her tightly. She feels thin and warm. I tell her thanks for everything. I squeeze harder.

“Of course,” she says. We break apart, but she still has her hands on my shoulders. “Stay tough on Anthony. I think he likes his power over you.”

“Terry.”

“And you be careful on your lunch date; make him mind.”

I laugh, say, "Go home," and she drops her hands from my shoulder. I follow her out, the snow coming into my face. My ankles feel the cold air, then the wind presses my pants onto my thighs. I cross my arms, put my hands in my armpits.

She yells, "Bye," and runs towards the parking lot.

I narrow my eyes against the snow, but the cold feels good. Arthur was right: the store is stuffy. It feels like I've been breathing dust all morning.

The day is brighter, the snow coming in smaller flakes. Still, a lot has already fallen. Terry jumps through the snow in the parking lot like a deer highstepping. She gets to her car, a bright blue, two door sports car, and the snow comes up to her shins. "Be careful!" I yell. She waves one last time, then closes the car door behind her.

Her windshield wipers come to life and then she's driving away, her tire marks clear lines in the snow. She pulls up next to me, lowers the passenger window and says, "Get inside, you crazy!"

"It's nice out here."

She shakes her head, pulls up to Lincoln, then drives off towards our homes. I look across the street and off the edge of the hardware store's flat roof; the snow comes streaming off in the wind like a big white streamer.

The mountains do this, too, the tall ones above timberline. The snow blowing off in great sheets, they must be the size of football fields, and from here in the valley floor, the blown snow looks like clouds: stationary, yet fluid clouds of snow. Jared tells me that he's snowmobiled up near the giant snowdrifts that the wind and snow produce. He says they're forty or fifty feet high.

I turn around, the snow now against my back. I release my crossed arms and my ring finger goes cold from my wedding ring. The cold hits my fingertips, my fingernails. I push on the store door's metal handle. Down Lincoln I see a sheriff's Bronco, the white vehicle nearly camouflaged by the weather. His front lights are on, but no flashers, and he seems to be crawling, checking out our peaceful town.

Back inside and my eyes tear from the warm dry air. I rub my eyes, kick my shoes against the frame of the doors, and massage my hands, relieving them of the warming itch. I sneeze, and Anthony and the soon-to-be-blond woman both say, "Bless you."

Anthony's at the register, ringing up the woman's purchases. He has his coat on. His stocking cap and gloves lie on the counter. The woman's watching him closely. Anthony has his hands over the register's buttons, his finger spread, looking for the right button to push.

"Sorry, Anthony," I say. "Let me do it."

"I got it," he says. He looks up at the video store woman, says, "I need the practice."

I pass them and go to the make-up counter, look in the tiny, rectangle mirror at my hair. Maybe I should cut the bangs. Maybe just over my eyebrows. Nothing real noticeable.

"Can I cry 'uncle'?"

I turn and Anthony's holding up a credit card. "It's a check card and she wants cash back. Can we do that?"

"Of course." I walk their way.

Anthony spreads open a plastic bag, puts her purchases inside. "Even if it can't be done, Libby can make it happen." He hands over the package, picks up his hat and gloves. "I'm off. Soup and bread, right?"

"And a coffee," I say.

"How about me?" says the woman, smiling.

"Next time," Anthony says, and he walks away, pulling his hat on first, then his gloves. He turns around once more, says, "See you."

We both say, "Bye," and I wonder if Anthony has an eye for this woman. Was his bye for me or for this woman who in three hours will no longer be dull brown, but Monroe-blond?

I hand back her cash and card and tell her to stay warm. I tell her I want to see the results and nod towards her hair.

Another happy customer. She walks away, her bag swaying in rhythm to her walk.

Me, a drug store cashier: what would my college friends think? My feminist, education-minded, dream-orientated friends who are probably now CEOs, lawyers, doctors, and professors. What would they think?

I'm off to the restroom, and I pass through the aisles of everything and I stop thinking of what everyone else would think. I've done that already. It nearly drove me

crazy. I like what I'm doing. I like my usual customers, I like this video-store worker, I like Jared and Terry and Anthony. It's quiet in this store and the work is easy.

I pass by the pharmacy, Anthony's *Back in whenever I want to be* sign over his closed window. I take a quick look towards the front to make sure no one snuck in behind me, then walk down the hall. The warm soup will taste good. I hope Anthony gets the four-nut bread; I'm up for something hearty.

9.

A draft of air moves around my shins and calves as I walk from the bathroom and into the hall. The bells on the front doors jingle twice, then stop. I sniff the air, waiting for fresh bread or soup.

“Come and get it?” I yell out into the store. I’m at the back shelves, retrieving two cases of baby formula that need to go up front. Anthony’s usual, “Hey, Hey,” doesn’t echo through the store and I listen harder for his footsteps.

The cases are heavy and I walk towards the main part of the store like a monster, my feet wide, my shoulders hunched and low from the heavy load. “Anthony?” I say. Again, he doesn’t answer.

Maybe someone came in, but then left. What if it was a shoplifter? But it would have taken someone watching and waiting for me to go in back, stealing while I used the restroom. I slow my walk, rearrange my load, listen carefully.

This is ridiculous: it was probably someone wanting a paper or a Coke and they left their money on the front counter. Maybe it was someone I know. They saw I wasn’t here and decided to come back later. Maybe there’s a Post-it Note on the register.

Down aisle two and I drop off the forty-eight cans of formula, pick a packaged pacifier off the carpet, and thread it back onto its display.

I come around the corner and a policeman is standing near the front doors, next to the coolers. One of his hands rests on a beach chair's arm. A sheriff or a deputy or a state trooper: I don't know which. I look past him, through the front windows and I see the front of his white Bronco. The sheriff's department.

He crosses his arms. Then he picks up his hat which had been in the chair. He lets the hat hang from one of his hands. His focus goes to the *Thrifty Nickels* on the bench. Then back to me. He has blue eyes.

"Hello," he says, standing up straighter, his leather belt crinkling. He wipes his hands across the front of his tan pants, erasing wrinkles.

"Hello" I say back. My voice is weak; I'm weak. I walk to the register so that I can lean against the counter. My ankles feel like mush.

"Libby Gardner, right?" His voice is scratchy, high-pitched.

"Yes." I've never seen this deputy; he's young, maybe a few years out of high school. I wish I could do something, but there seems nothing to do, nothing to say.

"There's been some trouble with your boy, Jake." He pokes at a sore on his chin.

"Okay." I go around to my stool, sit down. I lean against the counter with my elbows, put my head in my hands.

The deputy's stands in front of me. He clears his throat.

I raise my head, say, "Well?"

"He's in the back of the truck; you'll have to take custody."

"Custody?" I say, looking up at the young man in a sheriff's costume. My Jake is in the back of a police car. In trouble again. In trouble and alone in a police car.

“You’ll need to take him home or keep him here. He’s your responsibility. We’re not taking him in, but he can’t return to school.”

The deputy takes a small notepad from the breast pocket of his tan shirt. He readjusts his belt, holds the notepad at his side. “There was trouble at the junior high last night,” he says, looking back at me. “Know anything about it?”

“I thought it was the high school.” I push against my cheeks with my hands.

He opens his pad, reads, “Jake and two others, Chris Lenhart and Wilson Gantry vandalized the lunchroom, gym, teacher’s lounge, the girl’s locker room and eight classrooms. There was monetary damage.” He looks up from his pad, “That’s why we’re involved.”

“Where are Chris and Wilson?” I know Chris: he and Jake have gone to Challenge Camp together. I don’t know Wilson Gantry. I’ve heard of him but don’t know him. Have never talked to him, never seen his face. “Is it Gantry or Wilson?” I say as he mumbles an answer to my first question.

“Wilson Gantry, first name Wilson.” He wets his thumb, goes back a page in his notepad.

“And where are they?”

“Like I said, they were escorted by another officer.”

“You never said that.”

He looks at me, but stays quiet.

“Are you deputies or officers?” I say. He looks irritated, but I don’t care.

“We’re both,” he says. He pauses, then he starts in again about the vandalism. He reads, “Broken chairs and desks. Snowboard and skateboard stickers, some of them pornographic, plastered to chalkboards, lockers, windows, and the teacher’s refrigerator. Bicycle skid marks across the gym floor, a small fire set on the carpet in the teacher’s lounge.”

The deputy’s and/or officer’s high-pitched voice becomes higher and thinner as he describes the damage. By the time he gets to the end of the list, his voice is nearly a whisper. I don’t see how he could stop a murderer, rapist, or car thief: some real criminal.

Jake. Is he wearing handcuffs? Did they read him his rights? Have they taken a picture? Will it be in the paper?

“Ms. Gardner. We need to get through this. I need to move on.”

“Through what?” I say. “What do we need to get through?”

He pauses, his face changing to a solid look and I’m through acting tough or mad or whatever I am at this young man. I start crying and I have a thought of Cole’s new job, but it’s useless.

I’m trying to be calm, but it’s too quiet in here and my sniffs and quiet gasps of air come out loudly.

He finally says, “I’m sorry, Ms. Gardner.” He puts his hand on my shoulder and I look up and he takes it back, says, “You need to understand what’s happened and what’s going to happen.”

“I know,” I say, kneading my eyes dry. “Tell me.”

“He’s suspended for a week. That’s the start. Then we’ll finish a report and assign a dollar value for damages. A court date will be set. The judge will take it from there. Or the school can take care of it themselves. It depends.”

I stare at him. The front doors open, then close quickly. The bells beat against the door’s glass like teeth against metal. I don’t look, but I know that whoever it was saw the trouble and ran. It was a smart thing to do.

“It’ll be a misdemeanor, most likely. Of course, I can’t say for sure. Maybe less. I doubt it’ll be a felony. It depends on the school.”

“Do you know Jared Anderson?” I say, standing up. I pull back my hair, wedge it behind my ears.

“From the dairy?”

“Yes.”

“He was a freshman when I was a senior.” He smiles at some memory; then he quits the smile as he folds his notebook, puts it back in his shirt pocket. “How’s he part of this?”

“He’s Jake’s friend,” I say.

“An older friend, I guess.”

“Right.”

Then we both stand there, facing one another, not sure of what to do. I’ve never picked up my child from the back of a sheriff’s Bronco. I’ve never had a son with a criminal record. I’ve never been part of a small community where everyone will soon

know what has happened. An outsider who has borne a trouble-making boy. Cole will not be able to stand it: this I'm sure of. And now we will pay for our boy's mistakes.

Cole's new job. Will it still be offered? My job. Anthony. Terry and Ben. Our home. Our family. The school. Moving away from here but to where? Violence and vandalism and silence and secrecy and how did this all start? And will this event end it all so that we have to move on, onto something not better or worse, but simply something foreign?

"I need a second," I say, and the deputy nods.

Anthony's not here and I can't leave the store empty. "No, wait," I say to the deputy. He was on his way out the door. "Don't go to the truck. Will you sit and wait?" I don't want Jake waiting alone with this man. I don't want him to know that I didn't come right away.

The deputy says, "That's fine." He glances out the front doors, then backs away and stands to the side of the doors, as if he were a security guard in a bank.

I mess with my bag, then stop. I collect my sunglasses, my wallet, my comb, my bottle of water, then don't know if I should put them in a plastic bag or straight into my bag. I decide to put them in my bag and I have to unzip it again and I push it all in there. But then I realize I may need my sunglasses and I begin to take them out, but my eyes are blurry and it feels like I'm in a dream and I look back up and the deputy is still there, his young, tall body by the doors, and the store is like it always is after lunch, the clicks of the clocks like chickens feeding and the lights humming off-key. I go back under the counter and hit myself with both fists on the sides of my head, as if I were ramming

batteries through my temples. I grip the tops and bottoms of my eyes and hold tight. I come back up.

“My boss needs to know I’m gone,” I say.

He looks at me, pauses, then says, “I’ll be in the truck,” and I know I can’t argue with him.

“Tell him I’m right behind you,” and I walk through the store.

I’m not even halfway down aisle five when Anthony comes from the dark hallway, a worried look on his face. I’m crying again.

“Libby.” He still has on his snowboots; his shirt is ruffled and untucked. He gives me a quick hug, then he steps me away, his hands on the sides of my shoulders.

“Cole?”

“Jake’s in trouble,” I say. Then I hear what he said and say, “What do you mean, ‘Cole?’”

Anthony’s eyes wander and he says, “I saw the sheriff.”

“No.”

“I thought there was an accident.”

“God, no. It’s Jake.”

He drops his arms and we look at each other. He gives me a short and quick smile, and says, “We should’ve never opened.”

I despise his lightness, his smile, the way he’s standing in front of me, and I push past him, tell him I’ve got to take Jake home and that I won’t be back today. Maybe tomorrow too.

He follows me. I go to the back office. I pick up the phone.

“Denise is coming over,” Anthony says. He’s taking off his boots, sliding his feet into brown loafers.

I look at him with the phone in my hand. “What’s happening here?” I look around the room; on the desk is the bag of lunch. Next to the white bag are two white Styrofoam cups. From the thin lids comes steam.

“I got you plenty of bread.”

The word makes me sick to my stomach. I put the receiver back in its cradle and hold onto the phone as I lean my body against the table. “What is this?”

“I saw the sheriff and I thought something was wrong. So I went back in and asked her.” He pauses, then says, “She said she’d come over at 2:00, when she’s done. It’s all fine.”

I turn part way to sit against the edge of the table. I breathe into my hands and try to put this together. I close my eyes and try to forgive Anthony for saying ‘It’s all fine.’ It’s no part of fine and I feel this may be the first day where nothing will be fine again.

But Anthony does the right thing and I breathe until I think of what I need to say. Then through my hands, “Cole got the job, the snowplowing job with Ben.” I look up. “Terry’s Ben.”

“That’s good,” he says. He tries a smile, then quits it. His eyes stay on me.

“And now this.”

He doesn’t say anything.

Then I say, “Thank Denise for me. Will you?”

He nods.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. There is a suspension and a court date and a fine.” I start to cry, but I make myself stop before the tears come. I stand up. “Cole won’t be home until tomorrow night, so I don’t know when I can work again.”

“I’ll work it out,” he says. “Get it together first.” He picks up the bag of food and offers it. “Here’s lunch and dinner.”

“If you don’t put that down, I may throw up all over this office.”

He drops it on the table and I can’t help smiling for just a moment. Then he comes to me and gives me a hug. I hug him back.

“Get it figured out,” he says. “Don’t let it go with Jake.”

His hands are on my back; he moves one hand to my bare neck, and I think of the letter I read today and of his daughters in Florida.

“Okay,” I say. We let go of each other and I start to the door. “There’s a first for everything, right?”

“Call me when you can,” Anthony says.

I walk to the front, get my bag, put on my snowboots, and walk to the front doors.

10.

The Bronco is running, exhaust seeping out the tailpipe; black spots color the snow underneath. Its front lights on, the yellow fog lights underneath a piercing yellow. Inside sits the young deputy and my son. Jake's head is down, as if praying, his hands in his lap. He's not wearing handcuffs.

The deputy's attention is across the street where men surrounding a red pick-up are loading green pieces of flat tin, roofing for a new home. The men work in twos, lifting the tin from the snowy ground, then transporting them up and over the sides of the truck. The only sounds they make are soft grunts; someone whistles.

The snow has stopped. Now there is only a wind. It feels colder, the inside of my nose constricting. The deputy is still intent on the action at the hardware store and I wish Jake were the same way. That by watching men work, he would gain something, something worth keeping.

I tap on the glass. The deputy jerks his head around and opens the door at nearly the same time. Jake looks up, then looks back down.

"Sorry," the deputy. "Hard to believe someone's going to put up a roof on a day like this."

He talks to me as if he has just come into the drugstore to buy Tylenol or grab the newest issue of *Sports Illustrated*. A deputy shouldn't be allowed to talk this way while on the job. Especially while granting custody to the mother of a delinquent child.

He gets out, bends the front seat forward. Next to Jake, sticking out from the center console is the butt of a rifle or a shotgun. Jake doesn't move.

"Let's go, Jake," I say. Cars pass and I know what they've seen will be circulating through the town by late afternoon. I'm surprised Jared hasn't come down to visit.

"Come on," I say again. Jake's face contorts and he starts crying.

"Time to go, boy," the deputy says.

I want to tear at this police officer, this deputy of the sheriff's. Whatever he is. How dare he call my son, 'boy?'

"Jake," I say louder. I edge pass the deputy, reach my arm in and touch Jake's knee. He flinches. Then he looks at me and quits crying.

"I told you," he says.

"What?" I say.

"This morning; I told you."

"We'll talk about it in the car. I'm cold; come on." I reach further in, grab hold of his arm, pull him slightly forward.

He moves and then he comes out of the truck. He's not wearing his fleece vest; his tennis shoes disappear under the snow. His backpack's gone. "Where are your boots?" I say. "And your coat? Where are your things?"

“School,” he says. We’re all three standing there: one woman, one young man, and one boy. We’re all within a three foot diameter, all close to the Bronco’s blowing heat, its sporadic, mumbling radio.

I look at the deputy, wonder how they could have taken my boy from school without winter clothes. But the deputy just looks at me, a stern face telling me his job is finished, that he has more important things to do.

“You’ll be cold shoveling,” I offer, though I don’t mean it. I doubt Jake will be shoveling. I’ll do the minimum, then figure this out. I don’t know what I’ll do. I almost wish I could work until bedtime, then quit, take a hot shower and go to bed. Deal with it all tomorrow. But we’ll have to talk this out; I’ll need to understand something of how Jake came to this. The chores will have to wait. Maybe I’ll call Terry and Ben to come plow. But then they’ll know and they don’t need to know now; they’ll know later anyway. Now is too soon.

We’ll wait for Cole. We’ll talk tonight and work tomorrow. And this will be worse for Cole: coming home to Jake and the house a mess and the snow unplowed and deep. It will start off badly and it won’t get better for some time.

I can’t do this.

The deputy pushes back the front seat, says to us, “Expect a call tomorrow, either from the school district or our department.”

Then he watches us and it’s time to go, so I lead Jake away from the truck’s door. Jake’s head barely reaches above the Bronco’s black and white hood.

The deputy climbs in, closes his door, rolls down his window, tells us, “Drive safely; the roads are nasty.”

I nod, not wanting this man to drive away. I say, “People forget how to drive in it, huh?”

He nods, tells Jake to stay out of trouble, then rolls up his window. He puts the Bronco in gear, picks up his radio, begins talking into it, turns his head towards the rear to check for traffic, then eases away. The snow under the tires crunches like plastic.

We both stand there, watching the Bronco drive away. My hands are cold. Near the ground, the wind coughs at the snow.

“Ready?” I say, still looking down Lincoln. But I know he’s not. He’d rather stand here in the cold than get in the car with me and drive home.

“Mom,” he says, and I feel him look up.

Across the street someone yells, “Two more.” We both look over and the truck’s bed is nearly full of green tin. Out the end of the truck bed, long pieces of wood help support the load.

“Someone’s new roof,” I say, but Jake has started to the car. I turn and see him, his neck bent, hands in his pockets. His ankles must be cold, the snow packing in on them as he walks.

The snow has reached the middle of the tires. We’ve had at least six inches.

On the hood, the snow has drifted into dunes. On one side, the wind has created a brim of snow extending over the hood. In several places, the snow has shattered, the cracks like a broken plate.

We get in and I start the car. The front vents immediately blow out cold air into our faces and I turn the knob to off. Our breaths vapor in the cold air. Jake has his hands under his legs, his chin tucked into his chest. I turn on the wipers; they move the snow in large chunks from the windshield. I think about getting out to wipe off the remaining snow, but decide to just sit still. I leave the wipers moving.

The snow comes off; the wipers move against a thin layer of ice.

I switch the air to defroster and put the car in gear and the car jerks and pops free of its frozen icicles. I look at the car's clock: 1:47. We'll be home by 2:30. I dread nighttime; I wish it would never come.

The roads in town have been sanded throughout the day, the grit held firmly in the thin layer of hard snow, but once we hit the outskirts of town, past the 7-11 and stereo repair shop, where the speedlimit goes from 35 to 55, the road begins to sheen, a silver sheen which reflects the gray clouds still covering the valley. The sheen is like a skating pond.

"Is your belt on?" I say. I wish the car had studded tires; Cole argues that with four wheel drive we don't need them, but on roads like this, how could they not help? Cole's always been proud of this car. The four wheel drive Ford. He says they're rare, as if they were an endangered species and he a top-notch field biologist. He knows his cars and his tools, but here he is now, oblivious to what Jake and I are going through.

"I'm sorry, Mom."

“I didn’t ask you if you were sorry; I asked about your belt.” His feet are lodged up against the dashboard, his body in a tight U. “Put your feet down, Jake.”

“They’re freezing,” he says.

“I don’t care. Put them down.”

He sighs and puts them down and I see that his belt is on, though loose.

“Tighten it up.”

We pass a car that has slid off the side of the road. The back and side of the car are plastered with snow; the snowplows have made the car look like it has been attacked with spitwads. An orange flag waves from its antennae.

“I don’t understand, Jake.” I look at him, but he’s looking out the window. The back of his hair is messed up, the hair spiking up in a rough ball-shape. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to do.”

I don’t expect an answer, but I wish something would happen. He continues to look out his window, his eyes not really watching anything, as if focused only on the white and gray colors, the occasional flash of red or blue from a house or some other building.

I drive on. Jake stares out the window, not moving, not talking, hardly even breathing.

We start up the gradual hill which will take us to the open ranchland. Halfway up there is a small billboard advertising bait, hunting gear, and maps. The sign is black with red lettering. There is a picture of a fish bending in midair; next to it, a large elk with

huge antlers, stands regal. Under the picture the sign reads, *33 Miles Straight Ahead*. I look at the slogan again and think that nothing is straight in this valley. Absolutely nothing.

The store sits between the ski area and the lake. It's been there forever; my dad used to stop there for bait or advice during our summer trips to our cabin. The guy who runs the shop now, a former friend of Cole's, is the son of the man my father used for local advice. Lauren and I would come into the store with Dad and pick out bait. We'd choose the colorful eggs, the fuzzy flies.

There was colorful bait, but there were also dead animals. In the back of the store they kept trophies, heads and whole bodies, of animals and fish. I was petrified the first time I walked in. I ran to Dad, crying, and told him of the animal ghosts in the back of the store. I was five or six. The episode became a family story; we laughed often about the animal ghosts.

It was a story with family rhythm, a rehearsed play. And my lines were cute, childish ones that had me saying that I wasn't afraid of the mounted animals, but that I was only looking out for my little sister. I was scared for her sake.

But there is another story. The story of Lauren catching me on a ladder, as I made my way to a deer head, intent on pushing it to the ground. I wanted to break the deer's antlers. I wanted to break the head in two. If I had been strong enough, I would have used a baseball bat to swing at the fish, deer, bobcats, bear, and elk; I would have wrecked the dead animals, wrecked the back room of the small fishing store. I can still

feel the rage. Lauren caught me on the ladder and asked what I was doing. She stopped me. Stopped me from the violence I wanted to inflict.

And this story is a story only for myself. Of all the times where my sister and I helped each other, I remember this one the most clearly. Maybe it has to do with the large animal heads and the shiny, scaly fish. Or maybe it was the time when I was most angry, most crazy with juvenile fury.

Ten years later, I had a chance to ask Lauren what she was doing. I had a chance to check her speed, to check her disregard for the icy road conditions. But I didn't ask the question. She sped down Sixth Avenue and I stayed quiet. I failed to save her.

I look over to Jake and I see him like Lauren crumpled in the seat. Bloody and confused, and I almost pull over, stop the car. I'm sweaty and I turn off the air, crack the window.

Jake looks at me and asks what I'm doing. He says that it's freezing.

But I ignore him and look at the road. I concentrate on the wheel and feel for slippage. I breathe the cold air filtering from outside and I am frantic that Jake has no one to save him. No brothers. No sisters.

What if there had been a brother or sister when Jake pulled the girl's hair on the bus? He or she might have stopped him before he pulled the hair with such strength that the little girl came out of her seat. It could have been Jake's first story of his sibling saving him: his ghost animal story.

And then the same year in the classroom. Maybe a sibling wouldn't have caught Jake before he threw the chalk and went into hysterics that day, but maybe it wouldn't

have come to that. Maybe the tauntings from the other children, which Jake blamed it on, wouldn't have attacked his spirit with such ferocity. I see Jake crying at the chalkboard, the stunned students in their chairs, some of them probably crying as well. The teacher said Jake moaned *I don't want it* over and over as she held him and moved him into the hallway. Could a sibling have understood what Jake didn't want?

I open the window further. I lean my head out, collecting as much cold air as possible.

"Mom," Jake says. He tightens up in a ball.

If there had been another, we could have sent both of them to a real summer camp. Jake wasn't a *troubled* boy the first summer he attended Challenge Camp. He was scared and had done some things, but to classify him as *troubled* was not right.

I never wanted him to go; it was Cole who wanted it. He said the physical challenges would do him good, said camping would be perfect for Jake, that Jake was getting too soft. I mentioned that he had taken Jake hunting only once, and Cole agreed graciously, said he would do his part to make Jake tougher. But then Cole quit hunting after his experience with Ben and he and Jake didn't go camping or hunting again.

It's a web strangling our family.

And Challenge Camp. The Rope Course counselor said there could have been two dead boys: my son and Chris. The same Chris, who with Jake and Wilson Gantry, ruined the school. Dead, the counselor said, his voice shaking with anger or fear as he told me what had happened. Jake in the chair on the side of the room looking at his ankles, mud on his face and arms. Jake later, on our way home, telling me he wished he

hadn't of caught the trapeze, wished he had fallen to the ground. Telling me with words that scared me into silence that he wished his pack could have seen his brains ooze and his blood spurt. My boy, Jake.

How did it come to me letting my horrors and memories ruin my son's? Where was Jake's brother or sister during all this?

But then Cole dismissed the story, saying even if Jake had fallen, the sawdust pit would have prevented any injuries. Cole proud that Jake had finished the Ropes Course. Jake saying yes, he finished, and that his pack was called Elk Pack, and that he was first on the Spider Web, and that the counselors liked him the best, and that his friend Chris was a wimp, and that he, Jake with his high voice and thin back, wanted to play football in the fall so that he could show everyone in school how tough he was. Cole took it all in. Later that evening, when I told him what had happened, Cole told me not to worry and turned off the bedside lamp.

Less than two months ago, Jake attacked the boy on the football field. Cole finally saw what was happening to our son. What had happened. Jake kicking at the boy's helmet, then standing on top of the facemask, trying, it seemed to Cole, to gouge the boy's eyes with his cleats.

My breath catches and I worry I might break down here with Jake next to me. What is going to happen? How long will they let us keep a child who continues to find ever-more serious trouble? What will people in our town think and do to us? The line is spiking, Jake's problems more serious each time, the time in-between less and less.

Jake groans about something, but I keep my eyes away from him. I'm scared if I look over I will lose it all and that can't happen now.

I put my hand out the window and the air hurts my fingers. I hold it out further, let the wind push it up high, and the air streams down my sleeve and onto my left breast. I let my hand move up and down. Then I hear Jake crying and he wants to know what's wrong.

I make the turn near the top of the hill and I feel through the steering wheel the slip of the tires. It's automatic for me: I slow, then accelerate again, and although the car still feels loose, it holds the line.

Coming down the hill, cars and trucks move slowly, some of them with their hazard lights blinking. The upper valley must have low visibility. I look at Jake and he's stopped crying. His eyes are closed, his head leaning against the seat belt and the window. His hands are balled together in his lap, his fingers crawling and scratching.

"Watch out, Mom," Jake says. I look over and he's staring at the side mirror.

We're in the flats, surrounded by pasture. I don't see anything. The wind is strong, the snow drifting. Jake's sudden voice wakes me and I suck in a large breath, my hands tight on the wheel.

"The police," says Jake, and in my mirror the flashing lights of a police car flicker and strobe.

“What now?” I say. I hope to God they haven’t found something else Jake has done. “Jake?” I say. I slow, edge to the shoulder which is half its normal width, one half of it thick with plowed snow.

As I move the car closer to the edge, the state trooper passes, red lights in the back window pulsing, the tail lights and hazards flashing.

“It wasn’t us,” I say.

Jake’s quiet, his eyes wide, staring out the window at his rear view mirror.

“Here’s another one,” he says.

I stop the car, two of our wheels in the snow bank. A metal post, an orange reflector on its top, sits twenty feet ahead. A small, black flag, attached just below the orange reflector, flaps in the wind. The black flag is supposed to help in white-outs.

This time it’s an ambulance. The fluorescent orange and pink van stands out oddly in the flat light. Right behind it is a sheriff’s Bronco. Their sirens are off; they pass silently, one after another.

“It’s an accident,” Jake says. He twists in his seat, turns around so that he can look out the back. He starts to take off his seatbelt, but I tell him to leave it.

I stare straight ahead, occasionally look in my mirror. Far behind us, I see more emergency lights approaching. The wind blows and snowsnakes whip across the highway. Out in the fields, the cows face the same way, their back ends to the wind. Some of them are lying down, but most stand, staring at the other side of the valley. Or maybe they are staring at us, the traffic on the highway. Maybe they’re staring at nothing.

We wait for the next emergency vehicle.

Jake says, "Here he comes."

I lean forward, look at the sky. It's getting brighter. Scattered flakes land on the windshield, but break-ups in the clouds are starting to appear. Across the valley, the low cloud bank makes waves against the backdropped forest. The taller mountains remain invisible. The sun pokes through and its spotlight moves like a drop of water across the trees, the snow on their branches a fuzzy white.

Another state trooper.

Then a volunteer fireman, his truck with a single, red flashing light.

We sit in the car, the warmth on the windshield causing snow to slide slowly down the glass. I switch on the wipers, let them go two cycles, then switch them off.

"What are we waiting for?" says Jake. He's looking at me now, his eyes and face fully awake.

"Waiting for them to go by," I say, but what's true is that I can't go on. I fear seeing the accident further ahead. I won't be able to handle further pain.

"What happened do you think?" He sits up straighter, looks behind us again.

"Something bad. Something I'm glad we're not part of."

Jake's eyes squint as they track something else coming down the highway.

"Snowplows," he says.

"What?"

Jake points down the highway and says again, "Snowplows."

In front of the snowplows is another sheriff's Bronco. I wonder if it's the high-voiced young man, the boy-deputy. Then there are two large, orange snowplows, their blades raised, the orange, curved blades high above the Bronco, as if chasing with open jaws.

"It's an avalanche," I say.

"How do you know?"

"The plows aren't plowing."

Jake stays quiet and the plows come toward us, the large machines making a low, grating noise. I keep my eyes straight ahead and the Bronco passes us, then the plows.

A rush of white engulfs us. The snowdust swirls like a flood over the car. The sound of it on the metal and glass is like tinsel. Water beads on the front windshield, streams downward. The mini-snowstorm seems to last for minutes while Jake and I sit quietly.

As the outside world begins to appear, I think of Cole driving through all this. He has chains, but rarely uses them. He will drive over multiple mountain passes; he will drive on an even more treacherous Interstate 70.

"Are you thinking about avalanches?" Jake says. He's staring at the dashboard, the vents shooting out hot air into his face and hair.

"I guess so. Avalanches and you. One right after the other."

"Where's Dad?" Jake keeps his eyes on the dashboard.

"He's safe. In Minturn or Glenwood. Somewhere far away."

"That's good," he says.

“It is.”

“It was scary, wasn’t it, the avalanche you and Dad were in?”

It’s his favorite story of mine: the night Cole and I had to stay on top of the pass as the highway crews cleared avalanches from both sides of the pass. We had been driving to Denver to see my parents. It had been a bad day of snow, and we’d waited until evening for the snow to taper. The storm passed, the temperature warmed slightly, and as we drove up, two major slides released. We were caught between two of them. We tried going down both sides but ended up staying on top of the pass, sitting upright in the truck for ten hours.

“We weren’t in an avalanche,” I say. “We were lucky.”

“But you were scared, right?”

“Some,” I say. “Scared more of what might have happened. If we hadn’t stopped for coffee, or hadn’t shoveled one last time. If Dad hadn’t made me pee before leaving.”

“I thought you were scared because you were alone up there.”

“Dad was with me,” I say. “We sat up and watched the plow’s orange lights work on the road below us. It was like a dream.”

Jake sits quiet for a few moments and I realize that I’m telling a different story than he’s heard before. He’s confused. So am I. “Good or bad?” he says.

I think of Cole, and I remember he and I sitting in the cold truck, waiting for morning on top of an eleven thousand foot mountain pass. “A good one,” I say.

I feel Jake looking at me, but I stare at the open fields. There hasn’t been an emergency vehicle since the snowplows.

“Am I in big trouble?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to tell Dad?”

I look at Jake and wonder at his innocence, his violent, innocent self. I wish for Cole to call. I pray for Cole to call. If anything can happen, please let it be Cole calling. Even with his inattention and insecurity. We can talk about his new job, what has happened to Jake, what might happen tomorrow and the next day and the days after that. I don't want Anthony. No. Cole. I need Cole.

Jake moves his body, says, “Oh man,” and puts his head in his hands. He moans.

“I'm sorry, Jake.” I turn on the wipers, turn the heat down a notch, then turn the wipers off. I check behind me: nothing. I put the car in gear, edge the tires out of the snow bank. “I'm also angry. You did a horrible thing and I don't understand.”

He grabs at his hair as we pull onto the highway.

11.

The bottom strand of the barbed wire fence is hidden under snow. All this week, people had said that we'd have another warm spell, one more batch of Indian summer, before real winter began. They said this was an early snow and that it would melt soon. But I don't know: I'd say it's here to stay.

In a big snow year, four out of five barbed wires will disappear. Jake and I like to gauge it on our drives to town. By mid-March, the snow is at its deepest.

The storm has lifted enough to see the Henderson farm house clearly. Their red and white house and brown barn lay in the open of the huge meadow.

A four-wheeler comes out of the barn. A dog, then two dogs, trot after it. Someone closes the barn door, walks to the waiting four-wheeler, and lumbers on. I wonder how they feel about this early winter. They work in the snow, feeding cattle, fixing fence, mending machines. And their house in the middle of nothing.

Cole's ranch is surrounded by trees. But we won't buy the homestead now or anytime in the future.

I remember destroyed classrooms, lockers, and gym floors, and I wonder if we'll be able to keep our car and truck. Our home.

At the Chase Ranch, no one is about. Just the quiet houses and the horses. They board the animals all year long and the twenty or thirty head stand haphazardly in a closed-in pasture. All around them, hay lays mixed with snow.

“Look,” says Jake, and he points to where I was just looking. A horse is on its back, its legs, like Popsicle sticks, flailing in the air.

“Funny, huh?”

“Yeah.”

I turn back to the road and I catch Jake looking at me. His eyes hold onto mine for a moment, then he looks back out his window.

“Jake,” I say.

“What?”

“I’m mad and you’re dad’s going to be furious, but we’re going to get through this. It’s a big deal, but it’s not the end of the world.” I tap his shoulder, say, “Okay?”

He looks back at me and his eyes are watering and he nods weakly.

We drive on towards home. Past the mill, past Ash Valley Pines. A car behind me passes. Then another car passes. I look at the speedometer and I’m going slow. Slower, I know, than I need to.

I’d like to find an excuse to turn around. I’ve done it before: left something unclaimed at the grocery store, forgotten to pick up the mail, or realized three miles from home that I need to deposit a check at the bank. Reasons to return to town.

This afternoon, I could find a reason easy enough. But to do so would lessen the significance of Jake's trouble. It'd put him behind me: his problems ahead of my loneliness, my fears.

So I drive slowly. I look at houses, see whose truck or car is in whose driveway, note the snow banks which grow taller with each mile.

Cole will be home tomorrow. Before dark, he told me before rolling up his window and driving away.

"What do you want me to do?" says Jake.

We're five minutes from home. "When?"

"Now."

"When we get home?"

"Yeah." He sounds put-out, frustrated with my ignorance. Maybe I've been too easy on him. Easy when I should be everything but easy.

"You'll go to your room and wait," I say.

"Don't you want me to start a fire or something?"

"No. I'll do it. You can go to your room and find some answers to what happened." I want to sound confident. But what is a worse punishment? And does it matter; does any of this matter? These punishments, these answers, these talks?

"There's enough wood to start a fire," he says. "I brought in enough."

I pause, brake before we get to the final corner before home. We pass Terry and Ben's driveway; there are knee high snow banks on each side of the thin road. Neat, tidy,

and recently created snow banks. There aren't any recent tire tracks, though: Terry must be running more errands.

"Okay?" Jake says.

"That's fine, Jake. Make sure it's a good one. If you need more wood, go get it. I don't want to have to start it again later."

"I know," he says.

"Then to your room. And no Game Boy. No comics. I hope you brought your books home." I look at him. "No, of course not. Your backpack is at school." I pause, then say, "I won't let you get behind in school."

"Is Chris in trouble?"

"Did you hear one word I just said?"

"Okay."

"Then that's it," I say.

I see the three blue, reflective stripes that Cole put on a pine tree to mark the entrance to our driveway. I slow, careful not to brake too hard. I put on my blinker. A truck behind me gives me some distance.

"Home again, home again," I say.

Then there is the white Snap-On van in the driveway, and I think for a moment that it's one of Cole's co-workers, stopping by to talk with him, but then I see the driveway, and there's no snow bank blocking our way, and there are neat, tidy snow banks bordering the driveway. I try to swallow.

Jake moans and says, "Tomorrow night, you said."

"I guess he's early," I say.

The truck honks behind me and I accelerate a little, edge around the corner. The driveway is cut close to the ground. Spots of dirt show through the packed white surface.

Then I see Terry's car, her blue sports car, parked near the garage side door, her car sitting on top of the path I cleared this morning.

"Terry's here, too?" Jake says. "I don't want Terry here. I don't want her here at all. Okay? I don't want to see her." Jake's voice rises as he says again, "Okay, Mom?"

"It's fine," I say. I park beside the van, turn the engine off. The van is a shield between us and the house, the colorful advertising on the side of the van like a billboard. "She won't be here long."

I turn off the engine and put the car in gear. I take my foot off the brake. Jake takes off his belt and asks again why Terry is here. Then he starts to open his door.

"Wait," I say. "Just wait."

We sit still.

Cole said tomorrow night and I told Terry tomorrow night, so how is it she's here now? She asked me when he was getting home; we were laughing about something; we were acting like sisters. I believe her. I believe Cole.

It can't be happening. I can only handle Jake, can barely handle Jake, and something like this couldn't happen at the same time.

And why am I even thinking something like this? We're neighbors. Business partners now. Friends from long ago. Married. And there's been nothing else to make me believe what I don't want to believe.

Jake is staying quiet and I wonder if he wonders what Terry and his dad are doing in our house.

The car clicks. The inside of the windshield, the top edge, is fogging. I look down to the console and breathe out a tube of my warm breath and the speedometer blurs.

I close my eyes, put my hands in front of my mouth and think of our last dinner, think of Terry laughing at Cole's jokes, touching him on the arms and shoulders, laughing about his comment on tourist ass.

I'm tourist ass. Tourist ass as a girl visiting Ash Creek Valley with my family and tourist ass living here but not from here. I see Cole and women in the back of his white van. I see Terry on top of Cole, moving against him in our bedroom. Terry laughing and telling him she always wanted him, even in high school.

"Mom?" His breath vapors. His side window is fogged. The windshield's fog now comes half way down.

"Is Dad going to be mad at you?"

His face isn't scared; it's almost calm. Right now, sitting side by side in this cooling car, it's us against what's outside. I don't think he knows why, though he might, and I don't want him to think the way I am, so I say to him, "Maybe."

"I'll be better," he says.

"It's too late. At least right now, it's too late." I gently squeeze his cheeks with my hand. Baby fat still protects his cheek bones. I imagine the fat gone and the sharp

bones that Cole has given him. "I know you'll be better. You don't have a choice." I give his cheek a tight squeeze and let go.

I breathe out loudly; the vapor hits the windshield and connects the bottom edge to the fog reaching down. "I guess it's time we go in."

Jake says okay. He opens his door. I watch him. He slams the door shut, but the seatbelt's in the way and he opens the door again, moves the belt. He says to me, "Okay?" He doesn't wait for my response, though. The door closes.

I open my door, yell to Jake, "Wait a second." He comes back to the car. "Can you get my bag?" I turn around in the car and accidentally hit the horn with my elbow.

The horn startles Jake. "Mom," he says.

I beep-beep the horn again. "Sorry. Here," I say, handing him my bag.

He starts to leave, then stops, says, "Are you coming?"

I sit in my seat, my seatbelt still on, my door open. "One more thing." I get out, open the back door and reach under the seat, search for my water bottle. I fumble around with other things, picking and choosing, then I come back up, give the bottle to Jake. He re-adjusts his load, then I let him go. He starts walking, his arms full of my stuff.

"Wait for me," I say, and he stops just before the end of the van. I get out, start to close the door.

"I'm cold," he says.

"That's something else you should have thought of," I say, trying to sound bitter and angry. I re-open the door, fiddle with something in the center console, I don't know

what, and I'm thinking of what might happen now. I fiddle more, half of my body in, half out. I don't know what else to do. What can I do but walk with my son to our home?

"Can I go?"

"I'm coming." I slam shut both doors and walk to Jake and then we walk together. The air is cold, the snow beneath us hollow feeling, as if we're walking on ice, not snow. The Snap-On van is dirty, the flares of mud around the back tires a contrast to the shiny, white paint.

Then a flash of movement and Cole is in front of us, then he's coming to me, his arms out, a big smile on his face.

"We got it," he says. He hugs me and I smell his jacket: sweet like hydraulic fluid, sour like sweat, dull like oil. This is Cole, in his wet work clothes. He's been working. He's dirty and I smell the sweat on his neck. Outside working, not inside with our neighbor. Not with Terry. I push it away and make myself smile, my neck tight against his shoulder.

Cole squeezes and then I put my arms around him. Jake is behind Cole and I look at him and he's looking at our bodies, not our faces. He won't look at me, although I wish he would. One of the garage doors is open, the old Toyota Landcruiser with plow inside, the plow's corners packed with snow.

"Snowplow man," I say into Cole's ear. He rocks me, as if we were going to start dancing. Jake wanders towards the garage.

"Jake," I say. I let go of Cole. "Dad has some good news." Jake stops, turns around, but doesn't come closer.

"I'm home early," Cole says, looking at me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Tell him."

"I'm here. Right here, right now."

"I know." I look at Cole, smile as huge as I can. He grins back, confused.

"Tell him," I say, looking at Jake, wishing Cole would look that way too. "I know, but tell Jake your news."

"You already know?" says Cole. He puts his hands in his jacket's pockets.

"Terry told me. Earlier."

Jake has started to wander again. "Tell Jake."

"Terry's here," Cole says, taking his hands back out of his pockets. "She told me." He points my way, "She told you too?"

We look at each other and I try my best to look satisfied and happy and content, but I know it's not working because Cole is hurt and frustrated. It's in his face. I put my hands on his neck, lean forward and kiss his nose. I kiss his cheek. I lean back and he smiles.

Then he steps towards his van. He says loudly, "You see this van? Well, get your looks in. Then say your good-byes to the white whale." He thumps the side of the van with the back of his fist. A deep thump comes from inside.

Jake looks at his dad, not listening, afraid of what will happen later, when Cole learns of his trouble.

"Dad's going to work here. With Ben, snowplowing." I smile extra big, walk towards Jake. I look to the house. "Where's Terry?"

“Using this?” Jake points behind him at our current snowplow, the rusted, blue Landcruiser.

“This is a business, Jake. Ben uses real plows. Blazers.” He glances at me, says, “Inside doing the paperwork.” He looks back to the house. “She wanted to finish up first.” Then he claps his hands once, says, “I just knew something was up. Plus the roads were pure hell.”

“Can I learn on the Blazer?” Jake says. My black bag hangs off one shoulder, my water bottle swings from his thumb. His other hand is in his pocket. I look through our front window, but there aren’t any lights on.

“Learn it?”

“Like I did the Landcruiser.”

Cole’s pause is short, but enough to change the expression on Jake’s face.

“If Ben says okay,” I say, and I pitch my voice to get Cole’s, but not Jake’s, attention.

“Of course,” says Cole. “It’s his truck, so we’ll have to ask.”

“And Ben likes Jake,” I say. This isn’t a lie, and Jake knows it. It brightens his eyes.

“Exactly. You’ll be checked out on two vehicles, right?” Cole goes past Jake, turns off the garage light. Jake and I look at each other.

Cole comes back, says, “Perfect timing, huh?” He smiles, puts his hand on Jake’s head, as if palming a basketball. “I can’t believe it, can you?”

"I'll pray for snow now," I say. I look to the house again and Terry is at the door, her boots on, papers in her hand.

"You're done early," she says to me, and then she sees Jake. She understands. She says, "I was just going to drop these off, let you look at them, but then look who was here?"

"Eerie, huh?" says Cole. "I just got done plowing when she showed up. How weird is that?" He's taken his hand off Jake. He takes my bag off Jake's shoulder, swings it to the side, back and forth. "Where are your boots?" he asks Jake.

"It's too weird," says Terry from the front porch. She do-do-do-dos the song from *The Twilight Zone*.

"It's freezing out here," I say and start for the front door. I stop, wait for Jake and Cole to follow.

Cole starts, and he brings Jake along, his hand back on his head. "Where are your boots?"

I say, "An accident. He has another pair in the attic."

Then I put my arm around Cole's neck, lean into him, say, "I'm so glad you're home." I believe him; he wasn't with Terry and Terry wasn't with him. It didn't happen. It couldn't happen. Cole came home early and he's done his work and the house is warm. He came home early. I feel the swell in my eyes, so I stop Cole and lead him towards me. I hug him, put my face against his soiled jacket.

"Hold on," I hear him say. I feel him let go of Jake, then he puts his arms around me and it's immediately warm, my head and shoulders nestled in the tan canvas of his

jacket. He lets go, puts a hand on each side of my face and holds me away from him.

“Worried?” he says. I look at his dark brown eyes and I feel he must see mine, because he says, “It snowed more than I thought, more than anyone thought.”

I put my hands on his hands, edge close to his face, and whisper, “No shit. Guess who was up at five?” I smile and pull his hands away.

“Good day at school?” Terry asks Jake.

She’s standing in front of the door, but Jake sneaks past her, says behind him, “Fine.” He closes the door; Terry watches for a moment, then turns back to us.

She looks at me with absolutely no expression and I say to her, looking at the papers in her hand, “You could have left those with me earlier.”

Cole grabs the broom leaning against the house, brooms away the dusting of snow near the door.

“It slipped my mind,” she says.

“Too busy talking to boys,” I say. My face feels like it’s twitching.

“What’s that?” Cole asks, his broom not stopping.

“Girl talk,” I say. I look at Terry.

“Exactly. Mind your own business.”

“Okay, okay,” he says.

“You need to look these over,” she says, waving the papers.

I stare at her, not understanding how she can act so indifferent to what is happening. She must sense my anger, my furious eyes.

“When do I start?” Cole says.

“When you can. With the next snow.”

“I have to give Snap-On three weeks,” he says. “Depends, but I can probably do both. Tell Ben I’m ready to go. Next storm and he’s got another driver.”

“Okay,” she says. Cole nods at her, goes back to sweeping.

“We’ll look at them, I say, snatching the papers. Then I say, as cheerful as possible, “No signing bonus, no negotiations.”

Terry laughs too loud, still oblivious or maybe feeling she has a step up on me, says, “We aren’t the Denver Broncos.”

“We talked about a dinner party,” Cole says. “Right? Is that still on?”

I look at Cole, say, “What?”

He keeps brooming, but I watch him, remember out last dinner and want nothing to do with another dinner. Then Jake’s problem comes back. And Terry gave my husband the news before I ever had a chance. I stare at Cole.

“A celebration dinner,” Terry says.

I keep my eyes on Cole who’s at the edge of the porch, a pile of swept snow at his feet. I want us to have our own celebratory dinner.

“Next week sometime, if it works for you,” Terry says. “Whenever is good.”

“We’ll see,” I say. “I’ll look into it.”

“Okay,” Terry says. We look at each other again and I want her gone. I want her far away.

I want Cole and Jake and I to be alone in our home. I think I might ask Cole to take a walk. We'll drive to the county road and take a walk before dinner. I'll tell him how proud I am of him, tell him of Jake's trouble.

"Okay," Terry says again. She flips up her hood on her jacket, finds her keys, jingles them, and starts towards her car.

Cole sets the broom back against the house. "Terry."

She turns around, but keeps stepping backwards.

"Thanks," Cole says. He nods, "Tell Ben hi."

"Will do," she says, waving a big goodbye. "I'll stop in tomorrow, Libby."

I don't answer. She skips around and walks forwards again. She gets to her car, flips her hood back onto her upper back, gets in. She revs the engine, a rattle coming from below.

We watch her leave. I breathe out.

"Whew is right."

Cole's sitting on the bench near the front door. I tell him, "I can't do this without you."

"You could have, but you don't need to now."

"No," I say.

He taps the top of his thighs, says, "No more driving, no more trips."

I look at my husband. He's like Jake this morning, when I told him he could start the car. The happiness and satisfaction on Cole's face is addictive.

"But we got it," he says.

"You got it."

He smiles, stands, says he's going to go in through the back door; he wants to shovel around the sliding doors in case we get a thaw. "Don't need the carpet ruined with an early melt." He takes the shovel which sat next to the broom, holds it as if holding a spear.

"I need to get something from the car," I say. "I'll be right in."

Cole starts off. I stop him, say, "I'm glad you're home."

"Me too." He goes off into the snow, the white stuff near the top of his snowboots. He kicks at it and the snow flies up in front of him in a big arc. He kicks again: another arc. Right now, he's more boy than man.

I stand still. Then sit on the bench. Above, there are spaces in-between the clouds. The sun has set, but the breaks in the clouds allow for a hazy light on the trees and on the hill across the highway. Jake's light is on; he's in his room, worrying and waiting.

I think of what I have in the fridge: I'll open a can of crescent rolls, maybe thaw the BBQ chicken thighs. The red wine left over from our last party with Ben and Terry. I'll put sugar and cinnamon in two of the rolls and give them to Jake as a treat. He'll need something.

I don't know what to feel, which emotion to put first. That's why the walk will be good. Cole will walk with me, I know: he's in that sort of mood. We'll walk on the plowed, hard road and watch the purple spaces between the white, fast moving clouds. We'll look for avalanches of snow coming down off the trees. We'll comment on how

the first strands of wire are already gone and what this means for our future winter. The temperature will drop as we walk, the breeze cold on our faces one way, non-existent going the other. Then we'll get back in our car and come home and get on with what comes next.

Cole

1.

The snow's coming down furious again and I have to slow down. I have a million other places I need to get tonight and putting the brakes on every fifteen minutes won't get me anywhere fast. I blare the horn, pissed at these 'scattered snow showers.' It's been like this all night: speed up, slow down, speed up, slow down. If I had an hour of good weather, I could finish the main road, sweep the side roads and get to the parking lots. Then I'd get some sleep and figure out what to do next. I'm on a roll: things are happening and changing and it's due mostly to what I'm doing. I'm taking charge. I've got too much energy right now to be shackled with weather.

Jake calls this 'Warp Speed Snow.' The lights of the Blazer spotlighting every single big flake coming at forty or fifty or sixty miles an hour, the snow falling, but most of them never hitting the windshield, instead getting sucked into the streamline, thrown clear of the vehicle into the space and wind currents behind. Jake says he got the name from Star Wars, but I'd argue he swapped the term from Star Trek, Sulu taking the Enterprise to Warp Factor Eight. Jake watched the show with Libby and me when he

was young. We lived in town then, in the two bedroom with the TV next to the kitchen table. We're no Trekkies, mind you, but it'd come on at the right time, usually while eating dinner or during dessert. To think we had time to watch TV during dessert. And to eat dessert leisurely, after dinner, before bed. We watched Spock and company nearly every night, and you know what they say about kids absorbing everything they see and hear.

If I were to name this snow, this snow which, because I'm going so damn slow, is now hitting the windshield and gunking up the wipers, the wipers spreading a film of spotted water over three-quarters of the windshield, I'd call it 'Anxiety Snow.' From the Hitchcock movie, where the main guy goes into the trance and the never ending rings open and open and open, dizzying him into free-falling sickness. I'm not saying these billions of snowflakes coming at me are making me sick, but the fact is, they seem to reach forever, starting their decent into my view from somewhere undetectable. I suppose if I watched the flakes instead of the orange reflectors along the road, I might go sick, but I've been doing this forever. Snowplowing forever and driving in snow even longer. I grew up in the snow and I'm used to it. I wouldn't go crazy watching snow come at me at fifty miles an hour. I'm better than that. So maybe calling it 'Anxiety Snow' isn't the perfect name, because I don't get sick, but then again, the title, 'Warp Speed Snow' isn't the best title going either. Not that I'd be critical of what Jake calls snow. I'm critical of other things. I'm his dad for Christ's sake. I have the obligation. But as to what we call this snow falling down on me right now, we can call it 'Warp Speed Snow' or 'Anxiety Snow' or 'Dandruff in a Fan Snow.' I don't care.

Yeah, I'm bored. And I'm getting on towards exhausted.

It's eight in the p.m. and I was up at four in the a.m. I won't finish until ten or eleven tonight. That's how it's been all winter. I thought I'd be into something else, work-wise, by this time of year. What, I don't quite know, but something will pop up. One doesn't move up the Snap-On corporate ladder without stepping off onto something grander.

We usually get snow in April, but this year's been colder than most, so the late snow is sticking and piling up, and that keeps us working. Me and Ben and Randy are all exhausted. Ben hired Randy in February when it really started snowing. We had twenty-six days of snow. That's a record. We've already broken the record for yearly snowfall. We nearly broke a twenty-four hour snowfall record on March eight through nine when it snowed fifty-eight inches. Of course, these are all Colorado records. But still. And one other thing: it's not over. The last big winter we had was twelve years ago, when Jake was still shittin' in his britches, and that was nothing compared to this.

The windshield's getting worse, so I roll down the window and reach my hand around to the windshield. Snow's flying and hitting my shoulder, caking the side of the seat. It's not bitter cold, but I can feel it in-between my fingers. I make a lunge for the wiper when it slides my way, but my reach is short. I let up on the gas and pull myself forward, gaining another four inches. I wait, then grab the clogged wiper, pull it out, let it crash back against the windshield, all while the wiper is moving. The wiper flaps against the glass, slushy snow splattering, and then the wiper snaps back to the right and

downwards. I wait for its return but it's clear enough. I roll up and wipe my hand against my pants. I stick my hand between my legs; the warmth prickles the skin.

I start adding hours together, figuring what my take-home for the day will be. I click the fan up a notch, wipe off water from the blue vinyl on the window frame.

Four to ten with two hours off: sixteen hours. If I finish at ten. It could be later.

I swear Terry is a mind reader, because just when I start figuring out miles to go and driveways to finish and looking at the Blazer's clock versus my wristwatch and adding hours and half of hours and quarter of hours to what time it is now and trying to come up with an approximate quitting time, Terry calls in on the CB, wanting to know my location.

I reach to the visor, slide off the mike, tell her, "About three miles on Granite Loop."

"From start or finish?" Ben must be in the room; Terry's talking awfully official.

"The start. It's snowing like hell." I slow for a high seam in the road. The truck bounces; the plow comes back down on the ground hard and loud.

"It's quiet here," she says. "Absolutely nothing."

"Well, it's absolutely dumping here." Then the shower is over. The snow quits as if the fan in the air suddenly ran out of snow. I look out the top edge of the windshield: stars, and lower to the horizon, the next thick snow cloud.

"Ben was gracious enough to tell me you're in a shower and that it will be over soon. Isn't that great? Quite the fucking weather-man isn't he?"

"I'm his eye in the sky," I say.

“Just what I need,” Terry says, “Weather and traffic.”

In the background I hear a muffled noise, then Ben gets on, yells, “Plow, mother-fucker, plow!”

I smile. “You bet, boss.” I quit the wipers, speed up, let the truck scoot back to a speed it needs to throw the snow over the tall snow banks. The wave of snow lifts; I look out the side window, satisfied that its getting thrown far enough.

“It’s Miller time,” yells Ben. “Fucking Miller time!” He starts to say something else, but the CB goes quiet and the speaker spits out static. I keep the mike in my hand, wait for one of them to come back. But it stays quiet, so I set the mike on top of my gloves. They’re either fighting or taking off their clothes. I guess I hope they’re fighting. I shouldn’t think of the other, especially not at this stage in my plan, but what am I supposed to do way out here with nothing else to think about?

Okay. There’s plenty else to think about. Lots of things. Plenty of things.

Behind me, the red rear lights reflect off the snow swirling around the back of the truck. I tap my brakes: the red becomes brighter. I tap them again, liking that I can see what my rear lights are doing without being behind the truck. I look forward, reach for the Pringles can on the floorboard. It’s the red tube-box. Personally, I’m a fan of the green tube-box, the onion kind, but Jake only likes the normal ones and Libby won’t buy anything else. I guess I could make a special stop and buy a green tube-box. Still, how hard would it be to buy one for the each of us? She’s desperate, my wife. Desperate for anything to help our son stay out of trouble. That’s fine with me. I think we could stand to try something more impressive than Pringles, but I don’t know what at this point. If

buying the boy normal Pringles instead of onion Pringles will help, then by God, let us buy him cases of red tube-boxes.

“He’s gone,” the CB warbles.

I push the button, “So am I.”

“Cole.”

“What?”

“I’m being serious.”

“Serious? About what?” I put another chip in my mouth, crunch while I wait for her to reply.

“Ben’s gone.”

“I heard you,” I say. Silence, and I eat another chip.

I click the button, “Terry.”

Static. I slow the truck, come to a stop. “Hey. Are you there?”

- “I’m here,” she says.

“Well?”

“Well, I’m going to sign off.” Then, I didn’t say anything like that. Never mentioned it. You’re a...”

The signal warbles. A wind comes at me and the truck, and the trees shake in the headlights, throwing their snow to the ground. Large chunks fly like Frisbees, some like bricks, and they all fall into the roadway, exploding softly onto the five inches already standing. “I lost you,” I say.

“Bastard. I said you’re a bastard.”

I wait, but I guess she's done. I tell her, "That's fine. But it doesn't change anything."

I take four chips, take them in one shot. There's no response, but I know she's there. I reach into the drug store plastic bag that Libby packed for me this morning. I find the big Snickers. I look in the rear view; I look forward. Nothing but black night and white snow. I turn off the lights, keep the parking lights lit. An orange hum surrounds the truck. I slip the window down three or four inches, let the sporadic wind mix with the CB's static. She'll come back. If Ben's been drinking, she has too, and she's got the temper tonight to prove it. She's there, in the small room under the stairs. In her PJs, white with floral print. Flannel. Her hair out, hanging near the bottom of her neck. Her neck: angular, but soft. Hand on the button of the mike, fingers naked, rings off and on her dresser, pissed off but not knowing what to say. I see her all and it hurts because I've been here before and I'm not going there again. "Terry. If you're done, I'll go back to plowing."

"You're a bastard," her voice comes back. Then a more confident voice: "You need a swat on the ass is what you need."

Another gust and a tree creaks, a slow creak like a door, like the tree may fall at any time. "Really?"

"In front of everybody. Libby..."

I click the mike, ending her transmission. Isn't she cute: bringing my wife into it? I look at the dashboard. I see the secrets, the lying, but then I make myself remember what I haven't done. And of what I'm doing now and will do to make the turn to what's

right. I shouldn't know another woman besides my wife this well, shouldn't feel her embarrassment when she called me a bastard, shouldn't anticipate her wants when she tells me I need a swat on the ass. It shouldn't effect me to know that if I decide to turn off the CB and continue plowing that she might cry, confused and angry with herself. But she shouldn't feel hurt; she should feel disgusted to be talking with someone so damned confused and scared of his own life. It shouldn't God damn be this way.

I grunt into the mike, "Hold on." I get out of the truck, slam the door. I look up and the shower that was off in the distance is closer, the filmy white cloud a fuzzy white mixed with stars on the outside, dark in the middle. It looks like a black hole moving my way. Beneath the truck, a six inch wide line of mud and gravel runs back from the way I drove. The road must be high-centered, although I didn't feel it while plowing. I throw one of the bigger rocks off the road. There's no satisfying splash or clunk; it hits the snow with no sound. I take off my jacket, toss it back inside.

Up at the plow, I scrape at the plow's top edge, scraping out the ice-hard snow which has packed itself between plow and the plow's hood. The rubber hood, its job to create the wind tunnel which shoots the snow high and long, is loose and soft, unlike during the winter when the cold makes it hard as metal. I smell hydraulic fluid burning. Oil. The Blazer hesitates a moment, then catches, idles.

It needs to end with Terry. I know that. I do: I know that it has to end. It started last fall and now it's early spring and over the winter it grew into something which could have made everything burn. But it didn't get there and I'm not going to let it now. Especially not now. I know what I want and I've worked hard to get the ranch and now

I'll work hard on Libby and Jake and it will all come together. Whatever it was with Terry needs to be killed and buried.

The wind picks up. I rub my hands, my left hand gritty and cold from clearing the plow's packed snow. I start back to the truck, then decide to take a piss while I'm here. I walk a few steps away, piss into the dark. The snow melts and I hear myself landing on dirt. Soon, this road will dry and become dusty. But until it does, until the snow quits falling, I'll collect pay and be happy doing it. I zip up, walk back to the truck.

"I'm back," I say into the mike. I re-adjust, pull my jeans to get the tightness off my thighs.

"About time," she says. "We need to talk business later." Her voice warbles again.

I hear a distinct scratch on the radio: lightning or some other atmospheric blip. I can't remember when I last saw lightning and snow together. I look towards the approaching shower. I turn on the lights, the beams so bright on the snow that I have to scrunch my eyes. It's starting to snow. I'm not doing this. I'm not.

"Ben's off to Coyote's. But business is business. I'll fill you in when you get here." She laughs.

"I have a school meeting at eight."

"For?"

"I've got to be there at eight."

"I forgot."

“Well then, that’s what I got to do. And right now it’s snowing to beat the band and you’re paying me to plow.” I honk the horn again, angry that this conversation has gone this far. I put the truck in drive. I slide it down another notch, to second, and move forward. “Okay? We’ll talk tomorrow.”

I brake to a stop, wait for her sign-off. Static. The snow is coming hard. Big flakes and they hit the windshield like bugs. I switch on the defrost, crack open my window. Still no response. I can’t wait; I need to get plowing. I need to finish. “Okay, Terry.” I wait five seconds, take a sip of coffee from the thermos, then say, “Over and out.” I step down on the pedal and I’m off, the truck vibrating as I push away the snow, scraping and plowing against the un-even road.

This afternoon at lunch, I told Libby I’d be home by ten. But it’s 10:20 and I still have another parking lot. And I’m forty-five minutes from home, on the other side of town, at the dinky Baptist church they put up two years ago. Some preacher from Arkansas who vacationed here for years decided it was God’s will to start a new church in Ash Creek Valley. I wonder if in his vision, he saw me plowing his parking lot. A heathen keeping the parking lot open for church-going types.

It’s a small lot: twenty minutes max. I start my swaths near the front door, angling the plow to the left, pushing the snow away from the planted trees and entry. I go slow, careful not to dislodge the rock bordering the walkway. Ben has told me the story more than once of how he plowed the stones out of the ground. Ben said the Baptist preacher was very un-Christian like, cussing and storming about and threatening lawsuits

if Ben didn't come out and place the stones where they belonged. You can't trust much of what Ben says, but still, I'm careful: the last thing I want is to be forced to plant river rock in the entryway of the One Truth Baptist Church.

So I edge close and slow down, following the hump in the snow which is a long, thin dead tree separating parking lot from entryway. Snowplowing can be a delicate business: it isn't just a balls to the wall, snow flying, radio blasting, throw it as it comes business. You have to know the breadth of your plow, both when its straight and when its angled. You have to know the slope of the land and be able to judge how low to set the plow. Too low, and you scoop up mud; too high, and you leave two or three inches of unplowed snow. Do I dare call it an art? Hell, no; it's no art, but it isn't tiddlywinks either.

I sit up straight, keep a focus on the straight line hump running in front of the church. The dead tree is like a barrier, a moat, separating the evil world from the righteous holy. I get a little close and stop, back up a notch and resume. Close again; I'm too tired for this craftsman work. I stop, put the truck in reverse. My passenger window, the front doors of the church stand bordered with small, white Christmas lights. They're lit every night of the year. You can see the lights from the highway. Libby doesn't agree with me, but I say it's got Las Vegas written all over it. The church is log and through the front windows, I can see a faint light from inside. A coat-rack and bench lay just inside. I look more closely and there's a trashcan and a plush easy chair. I back up, re-adjust my line and start again. Perfect: the snow creams away, the log hump less than six inches from my cut.

Even without the soft indoor lights showing the homey furniture, the church itself resembles a home. I suppose that's part of the plan. It looks nice in there. I'm sure they've got electrical or gas heat: no woodstove for this congregation. Cozy and comfortable.

While in reverse, angling away from the church, I straighten the plow and get ready to start my straight swaths. This is the easy part. A groove, again and again: down with the plow; forward; pull up on the plow when I hit the bank to push the snow as high as possible; full-up with the plow; reverse to the next slot; plow down; forward. Ben put extra reverse lights on the Blazers so we'd have an easier time seeing behind us. I told him it was too gimmicky for our operation, but they're good to have in parking lots this small.

If Ben and I were better friends, we'd probably be worse business partners. As it stands now, we don't get along perfectly. Maybe we're not business partners. But Libby's got me using the term. Ben owns the trucks and plows and clientele. I drive a plow, nothing more. Ben and I stay out of each other's way. Which is a good thing because I've learned some things about him which I can't respect. Not that it came as a surprise. He treated girls like shit in high school, and according to Terry, that hasn't changed. Like him going to Slim Coyote's tonight: already drunk and on his way to get more drunk. He has his group of old friends. I quit that when I married Libby. Way I saw it, I owed that to her. She came before my friends and she still does. Even when she tells me that friends would be the best thing for us, I understand that she's a little off kilter and pay even more attention to her. I suggested she work again; I made her apply

for her job at the drug store. She wasn't going to wait at home for Jake every day, hoping that somehow it would change his ways. He wasn't a bad kid, just a little rambunctious, and I knew it wasn't doing any good, her staying at home, at his beck and call. Sure, we agreed that her being home might help, but I figured right away it wouldn't. So I respected her and got her out of the house and into a job. And I've listened to her about moving back to the ranch. We've talked about it. It wasn't just my decision. And I didn't make her work extra hours to help pay the fine for Jake's junior high school prank. She did that on her own. I never demanded anything. We're going to move to the ranch and it's going to be better than our house. We're going to have land and a bigger house and we won't see the God-damned tourist cars on their way to the ski area. I don't treat Libby like Ben treats Terry. I'm better than him in that category.

Three more swaths and I'll be on clean-up mode, moving the left-over sections of un-plowed snow. Another ten minutes max. Then I'm on my way home. Late, but close enough.

I should have called. I should have let Libby know I'd be late. She told me as we walked back to the drugstore after lunch that she'd have dinner when I came home. I'm sure the front porch and garage lights are lit, the door unlocked, Jake asleep, Libby in her robe, watching TV or reading a magazine. Ready for me to come home. Ready to talk about the snow or Jake or me coming home late or her boredom at the store or maybe she'll get into how she might want to move into town instead of further away into the country. All these things while I'm still in my dirty tired clothes. I'll try to listen, but

right now all I want to do is sleep. But we'll try, and I might have an answer or two to make her feel better. I just might have something right to say.

Libby's home watching TV or reading a magazine, just like Terry. But Terry is probably on her fifth or sixth drink. Soft and easy and caring about little else than what she wants. No problems except her drunk husband in town. And her, expecting little from anyone else.

My last swath. I'm on the far end of the parking lot. I look across the plowed lot, the small left-over ridges of snow lit up on one side by the church's Vegas-like white lights. Straight, uniformly distanced snowlines. Like raked sand. It sounds ridiculous, but it's a pretty sight.

The warm light from the church's insides shows no shapes: now it's just a God damn spiritual light coming from within, a spiritual light meant to lure in the un-holy. It looks too churchly, too friendly, too nice. And those lights around the door as if every day were Christmas.

I make my final swath. I back out onto Granite Loop, drop the plow and put on the brights, look for missed spots. My lights drown out any hope of holiness the church's lights were meant to create. There's a triangle of unplowed snow near the back corner. Another thin triangle in the middle. I swept wide of the entryway on the left. It doesn't look so pretty anymore, the raked sand effect gone.

I stare at the parking lot and at the lit log church. Don't let anyone tell you differently: I'm a class-A fuck-up. I've nearly fucked someone other than my wife. I hardly talk to my son anymore. I'm making my family move to my boyhood home and

I'll go broke doing it. All this and I don't care: I'm going to do it. I gave up my job with Snap-On and have no plans for a summer job. Ben's already told me the summer tourist business plan he had set up is dead on arrival. That's what the son of a bitch told me four days ago over beers at Coyote's: "DOA, Cole. Know what that stands for?" So cocky, as if just because he served in the Navy for two years, he has the only keys to military lingo. I knew what it meant. Or at least I knew what the first letter stood for. And that was all I needed to know. Dead. And that I no longer had a job for the summer. He said the business would have to wait because it lacked a client base, but I believe it had more to do with him not wanting to give up fishing and hunting. As if we don't have other things to be doing with our time. But then he caught me on that one, telling me while I was thinking it inside my head, "That's the bitch about kids and wives: no time for the fun stuff."

I back up further onto Granite Loop. I lift up the plow. Then I floor it. Into the parking lot, towards the quaint Baptist church. I'm moving quick and the small ridges of snow come up through the tires and into my seat, like seams on a bridge. On the fly I force the Blazer out of four wheel drive. I wait a moment longer, waiting, waiting, then I crank the wheel and push hard on the parking brake. It starts slow, but then she comes around. I pop the parking brake and slam on the foot brake. The loaded down Blazer spins ninety degrees, then towards one hundred-eighty. The truck shudders on exposed mud and comes to a stop, facing Granite Loop at a slight angle. I drop the blade, turn off the lights and get out. I two-arm the door and slam it home. I yell out differing sorts of "Fucks" and walk away from the still-running truck.

I want nothing more than to move, to leave all this and move into something finer. I've wanted this before, but this time it's going to happen. Everything is staged for the move forward, but then something like this cracks the dam. Whatever *this* is.

The skies are clear. I look all around but don't see any other showers. Another winter storm is now over. It's warm, the snow slimy with its late-spring feel. Twenty feet away, the Blazer looks like a monster in front of the church. I hear the chug-chug from the exhaust. I wait for the exhaust smell, but it doesn't come, the air instead smelling like a heavy dewed morning.

Terry's CB call earlier in the evening. Her desire to meet me and to make complete what we've started.

My goal of moving back to the ranch so close. I can feel it. I've been waiting so long, the move always another day, another week, another month away. Now its almost here.

This church, its pointed steeple like a knife.

Snow in April, the showers coming, then going. slowing me down, but giving me work. Work is good, it gives me space to think and sort it all out. But showers slow me down; I need somewhere and something where I can move at a constant rate.

Parking lots. Disjointed, stop and go. What I want is open road with open air above and snow to move. That's all. I'm not mad at Jake. I'm not disgusted with Libby. It just takes figuring out and I'm almost there.

I pick up a stone mashed in with other stones and mud and wrap my hands around it. I massage it clean. Bits of rock cram under my fingernails. I wipe the stone against

my pant leg. I wedge it between my knees and wipe my hands against the back of my pants, then on my sweatshirt's soft sleeves. The stone drops into the snow and when I pick it up, I bring some snow with it. I rub until the snow melts, then I bend down and scoop up more. The stone is slick and I see the slick snowman that started me off on the path I'm on now. Two days ago. The snowman on the corner of Lincoln and 3rd, in-between the credit union and flower shop. Some random kid building it up, using the whole yard of the flower shop to roll up his balls of snow. The wet snow we had three days ago, seven inches of it, just enough lying on the top of the still-brown grass for this boy to build his snowman. Maybe it was the flower shop owner's boy or just some kid who was walking down the street, bored. The snowman was two-thirds complete, slimy, and as tall as the boy. Something must have popped inside of me, because I'd be the last guy to think anything of a snowman. But I looked at the kid bent over, pushing his last snowball, the head of his snowman, and I thought all of a sudden how ridiculous it seemed to build a snowman in a valley which sees eight months of winter. I looked at the kid again; he was at work on the body, smoothing out the joint between lower ball and middle ball. I slowed down and things went racing through my mind, alternating between what a perfect thing to do on a late spring day to what an asinine thing to do on any day. Things went zigzagging in my mind and I tried to remember Jake ever making a snowman. I tried to understand if plowing snow was like building a snowman and even though I knew this was maybe the most dumb ass thought of my life, it seemed possible. I stopped the truck right there on Lincoln and looked back every once in a while at the

kid building the snowman. Libby said she saw me from the drug store and she asked me that night what I was doing and I lied to her, told her I was waiting for Ben.

I didn't stay long watching the kid and snowman. But what came out of it was that I needed to get my act together. Some kid building a snowman to me wanting to change my life. How does that happen? And how the hell did I think it would be that easy? How could a snowman and kid ever make me change? Who did I think I was, some visionary? As if everything could be fixed. Maybe where I will end up is already cored into my inner roots. Maybe I'm stuck with what I deserve. Maybe that can't be changed.

I turn around and throw the clean rock against the Blazer, the rock binging the rear quarter panel and deflecting to the rear of the truck, towards the church.

The Blazer chugs on.

There's a small dent in the blue paint. I stand there and know that I will come up with an excuse later. A tree branch, or maybe I'll use the kid who was building the snowman: he flipped me off, then threw a rock hidden in a snowball. The devil-kid posing as a maker of snowmen.

I'm going to skip the parking lot clean up, let the preacher deal with it in the morning, let him wrestle with a little disorder on Friday morning.

On my way to the truck, I stop at the dent, rub my fingers into the indentation, scrape with my fingernail the tiny flakes of blue paint. I'm glad I missed the window.

It's warm and sticky inside. I roll down the window, breathe out. It's time to go home.

Out Granite Loop, out the road I plowed earlier. One side is plowed clean, the other has a eighth or quarter inch of snow from the last shower. The new snow sparkles in my headlights. Last winter I taught Jake how to operate our snowplow, the busted-up Landcruiser. Although me and him haven't spoken of it since, I heard Jake tell Libby sometime later that it was like plowing for flashbulbs. That when he plowed behind the wheel, operating both jeep and plow, he felt like he was surrounded by millions of tiny flashbulbs. Like he was a sports hero or movie star. I guess I'm the celebrity tonight.

At the highway I should make a right and go home. But I don't. It's 10:45 and the ranch is closer from here. I've done it before, slept at the ranch instead of home, and I doubt Libby will be too surprised if I do it again tonight. I'll see her and Jake tomorrow morning. It's a long drive back home, through the canyon, through town, and up through the upper valley. I'd have to drive by Terry and Ben's and I want to stay clear of Terry.

So I make a left and accelerate on the smooth, black highway. The recent snow was too warm to stick on the asphalt. I roll up the window half way and try to concentrate on what's in front of me: black asphalt, double yellow solid lines off my left tire and a solid white line on my right. Glittering snow surrounding us all.

From the asphalted highway, the left turn onto County Road Six reveals the mess of a spring snowstorm. The gravel road is covered with about four inches of wet snow. Here and there small potholes of muddy water make things interesting. Tire tracks weave all over the road, like messy river channels, the drivers trying their best to miss the biggest of potholes. But it's impossible to miss them all, and around the smaller holes,

mud is splattered onto the white snow, the potholes like bomb craters. The shallowest of these holes reflect dull ice, the temperature barely freezing.

The road curves, contouring with the small hills and ravines. Trees are thick on both sides until we hit the creek drainage, then the road bridges a few times to either side of the Ladore, clumps of trees becoming more scattered. Once away from the creek, the trees come back, but now the ranch land opens up, the cleared land where homesteaders cut the trees to make space for cattle or farming. They cut down the trees to make their homes and the fences. Cut down the trees to make space. The county road ends another six miles from our turnoff and along the eleven miles of this road, there are at most twenty homes, and most of these are down driveways like ours, off the road, hidden and isolated.

I cross the final bridge, taking me to the east side of the creek, and I smell the running water. Even with this cool weather, the water has risen a little bit the last two weeks. I roll my window down all the way and I can hear the water falling around the rocks. Then the smell goes back to the new snow and as I drive by the pasture, I smell the snow mixed with the still-dead hay. The smells wake me up. I look at the clock: 11:20. Mom and Dad will be asleep, so I'll sleep in Dad's workroom. The couch and a sleeping bag will be perfect.

The air seems heavy. Maybe it's the left over humidity from the storm. Or maybe it's just the wet snow, how it looks on the trees, and how in the fields the snow looks more like a heavy quilt than a soft down comforter. The earth seems to be pulling everything towards it a little stronger.

It's time for bed; I think this way only when my brain needs to be put down for six or seven hours. It's nights like this when I dream the craziest and most colorful dreams.

I think about work tomorrow. Ben will have me on clean-up or maybe some maintenance on one of the Blazers. Maybe some spring plowing: pushing snow banks and plowing random driveways and roads in the attempt to keep the soon-to-come mud at bay. I won't work until after the meeting at Jake's school. I think of that and what might happen, but I don't have any idea, so I throw thoughts of that away, content to wait and deal with the problems when they come.

And then on the right side of the road is the bent shape of the corner shed: the landmark just before the left turn into our driveway. The corner shed has always been here, an old, double outhouse looking shed that used to be a shelter for herders and ranchers when they were working this section of land. In the summer, there's a mess of large rusted cans laying scattered out on one side. An old stove, along with its stovepipe, lays twenty yards further, out in the field six inch long springs which used to be a bed. I used to bring friends down here when I was young and we'd use it as a fort. As a teenager, I dreamed about taking girls in there, maybe sneaking in an old mattress. Once I found an old pair of pliers in the dirt and I gave them to Dad and he put them up on our barn wall, next to other old tools. The slope of the building is probably forty-five degrees, another few years and it will come down.

Fifty yards after the shed is our road. The gray mailbox: the green numbers on its post reading 15375. The cattleguard filled with dirt, useless, but not needed until we run

cattle again. On the other side of the cattleguard, the dirty and pitted snow banks nearly cover the sign Mom put up announcing our last name, *Gardner*, wood-burned onto a slab of sheared pine, fixed to a treated railroad tie, sunk into the ground thirty-six inches by my measurement when I dug the hole my senior year. The curses I probably let loose while pounding the post hole digger into the rocky ground, the curses Dad used to make me finish.

I thump over the cattle guard and drop the plow, drive down the center of the thin road. Unless Dad really wants something to do, this should take care of the plowing; the rest will melt off in a few days. The truck lurches every time I hit a warm spot on the road. I lift the plow slightly, just a twitch from my finger, and the truck rides more smoothly.

I angle the snow towards the side without snow banks. I watch the plowed snow move across the road and stop on top of the matted grass and gravel which has been left behind. This side of the road will be green first. The other side of the road is more shaded and the grass and flowers and mushrooms and weeds won't come for another month.

The driveway winds around. I pass the main culvert which takes the run-off to another ditch which eventually takes it to the Ladore. I wonder if Dad has cleaned it out this spring. There's the still-standing pile of logs which I cut and stacked three years ago. Dad wanted a spot to park the boat he bought. A flat bottom fishing boat. He talked constantly of fishing Lake Mead, Lake Powell and any other lake or reservoir which

never froze and held a few fish. The boat stays here in the summer, in the garage for winter.

And then into the large, square parking lot in front of the house. I keep to the right, plowing around the edge, past the two-track road to the corrals, past the oldest shed, past the stack of PVC pipe and large metal pipe, past the two-track to the newer shed and equipment garage. I turn off the lights as I come around towards the house. Then I stop in front of the car garage.

I drop the plow, glance at the truck's clock, put it in park and cut the engine. The quiet is immediate; my ears hum. When I crack open the door, the interior light comes on and I collect my stuff: jacket, bag of snacks, gloves, flashlight. I yawn, ready for the couch and some uninterrupted sleep. That's the thing: if I had gone home, I'd have been up all night, waking every time Libby got up, her with her insomnia, going to the kitchen or just wanting to talk. Then I'd have waken to stress, questions as to why I'm still working late in the night, lunches needing made, hustle and bustle. We'll fix things, but right now I need some sleep. I'm doing the smart thing here.

I step over the slough of snow from where I stopped and walk to the side door. The path hasn't been shoveled, but there's only a few inches. I sniff the air and smell manure and water and hay. My left leg is stiffer than my right, then I feel it in my butt. I plowed for five hours. To lay down and stretch my legs out straight: it'll feel like heaven.

The door is hard to open. I step in, close the door with my hip, put a finger through the plastic bag handles, and hug my jacket closer to my chest. I start for the

stairs in the back, careful to stay right and avoid Dad's truck's trailer-wide rear view mirrors, those son of a bitch extensions which have clothes-lined me more than once on my dark trip to the stairs.

I'm on the stairs when I notice that Dad's left the light on upstairs, the cracks of light showing on three sides of the door. I'll bug him tomorrow about it: he hates to waste electricity. He hates to waste anything.

Up the stairs and I think of when I have to get up tomorrow. Seven or seven-fifteen: I have to get to town by eight. It won't snow tonight, so I'm safe from early call.

The garage smells of oil and tires. Dad's Ford 350, Mom's Caprice wagon, the boat.

I lean close to the door, get my hand around the knob and push in. I waddle myself and my load through the door and a warm, newspaper-smelling air comes at me. I kick the door closed and turn around and Dad is sitting on the couch, his feet up on the small white fridge.

"Don't kick a hole in it." He doesn't take his eyes off the TV which is sitting on the metal bookshelf in front of him. The sound is off, but he's watching something intently.

"You can't yell out something?" I say.

As I reach down to take off my boots, he says, "Figured you'd scare on the stairs and fall in a heap at the bottom. Then I'd have had a mess to clean up."

I put my jacket on the desk, drop the plastic bag to the floor. I open my jacket, take the flashlight and gloves and lay them on top. The desk light is on: a made to look

like old-time lantern. Libby got it for him a few years after we married. I bend down to the bag, ruffle through it, find only a granola bar and a soft, spoiled banana.

“Want a granola bar?”

“Not now,” he says. He doesn’t look at me.

I go to the small fridge under his feet, open the door, then close it after not finding beer. I look on the floor for Bud cans, but he’s not drinking. I stand at his side, say,

“What’s on?”

“Anything. Have problems with the truck?” He’s staring at my jeans.

I look down: muddy stripes from wiping my hand against them. I hold my sweat shirt away: same thing. I go outside onto the landing, the wood cold on my socked feet, and brush off my jeans until the mud spots become mud smudges. Then I take off my sweat shirt, flap it against the stair rails, fold it up a few times, and go back inside. I lay the sweat shirt on top of my jacket.

“Thanks,” he says.

“Sure.” I walk back over. “Well?” I sit on the opposite end of the couch. It’s soft and I wish I could lay down and go to sleep.

“Some Gladiator show,” he says. “Check out these girls.”

I watch the small screen and two women are slugging at each other with padded sticks atop a wide balance beam. They swat and lunge at each other, both of them wearing tight, colorful spandex outfits. One of the women has bright blond hair. Both of them have huge legs, legs the size of both mine put together.

“You see them? You like girls, right? Well how about these?” Dad says.

He asks all three questions quickly and I don't know where he's going with it. Maybe he's angry I'm here; maybe he's like me; maybe he just wants some quiet without anybody else to mess it up. But I'm too tired to get back in the truck and drive the forty-five minutes home. I'm staying; he'll have to have his quiet time later. I say to him with a smile, "Pretty beefy, aren't they?"

"I knew you'd like them. But you wouldn't want to mess with a woman like that." He leans back on the couch, crosses his arms. "No sir."

I feel something else coming, something I don't want to hear, so I ask him right away, "Can't sleep?" I hold out the granola bar, but he shakes his head without looking.

"What about you?" he says. "Why aren't you sleeping?" He looks at me then, finally. His eyes look tired, the skin below them wrinkling and dark. His light brown bangs lay down on his forehead. He's not close to sleep; he's agitated and awake.

"It was late." I start to say something about me already being on this side of town or maybe something about wanting to sleep here because I'm getting excited about sleeping here every night, but his eyes go back to the TV, where a tire cleaner detergent ad plays. "It was late and I was out this way."

He nods. I wait; he waits. Then his show comes back on. Two men, both of them with harnesses and ropes attached, shake hands under a fake rock wall. Then the referee standing between them drops his arm and the men race up the wall. The man on the left is winning, sometimes lunging for the next hold, then the race becomes closer, the man on the right making quick, jerky moves. The man on the left lunges for a hold far

too far away and misses. He falls and is caught by the rope violently. He hangs, watches the man on the right climb to the top and hold up his arms triumphantly.

“Whew,” I say. I want to remind him how I used to rock climb, when I was still a kid living here after high school. I think about it, but I know it would bring up the next thing that happened, me leaving the ranch, so I stay quiet.

“Quite a show, huh?” Dad says. “But those girls are something else.”

“Jake did something like that last summer,” I say. I’ve told him the story before, but I want to remind him; I want Jake to be more than the troubled grandson.

“Is that so?”

“Not exactly, but something close. At Challenge Camp.”

“Yeah.”

“It wasn’t rock. It was rope, but he was the first one to do it. I told you already, right?”

“Maybe not. Heard about the trapeze deal, but not this.”

“He did good on this one.”

“That’s good,” Dad says.

We watch another set of commercials.

Then the Gladiator show’s hosts come on, speaking silently, although quickly and with energy. I wish I could hear what they were saying. “Maybe I could get Jake on the show,” I say. I smile and look at Dad.

“Where is he?”

“Who?”

“Jake.”

I open the granola bar, bite half of it away.

“Well?” Dad says. I feel him look at me, but I don’t look back.

“Asleep, Dad. At the house.”

“How about your wife?”

I take another bite of granola bar, open the banana. But the stem of the banana rips off without peeling a strip, so I have to peel back the slimy peel edge with my fingernail. I finish peeling and get up and throw the wrapper, peel and stem into the trashcan. I walk back and sit down and Dad is looking at me.

“When you move out, are you planning on bringing them with you?”

I’m not getting into this tonight. I’m not. I stare at the TV. When he looks back at the TV, I look at the calendars on the wall; I look at the cowboy hats hanging off the aspen tree coat rack Jake made when he was young; I look at the Denver Bronco windbreaker hanging off a hook on the back of the door; I look at the roll of bailing wire sitting on Dad’s desk. I wait, then I look at him and say slowly, “I’m staying the night. We have a meeting tomorrow morning at school and I’ll see them there. Libby understands.”

He looks at me hard when I say Libby’s name. He starts to say something, his mouth moving like it does when he’s too furious to talk, then he wipes his mouth, points at me and says, “This is becoming a habit, that’s all I’m saying.” He looks at the TV, crosses his arms, says, “Habits are hard to break.”

“That’s fine,” I say. I thought things would change with their up-coming his move and me taking over. The thing to cancel his anger over me leaving him on his own after high school. I thought we’d be even. But I guess not. Tonight I don’t care. I ask him, “Aren’t you tired?”

“I bet you are.” He’s still mad. He crosses one leg over the other, says, “Let’s finish this show.”

And so we watch his show. I rest my head on the sofa, finish my last bite of banana. I get up for some water from the sink, using my cupped hand for a glass. I take five handfuls, go back to the couch, sit down and put my head back. I wipe my still-wet hands over my face.

He uncrosses his legs, leans forward, holds up his chin with his hand, his elbow resting on his knee. He’s tired, but is stubborn and won’t leave until his show is finished. We listen in silence. I wish he’d turn on the volume; the action on the screen needs sound to go with it.

He used to do this when I lived here, coming out to this room in the evenings to work on plans or call people or fix some bit of machinery. We’d sometimes find him in the morning sleeping on the army cot he used to keep out here.

I start to fall asleep, then he says something and I wake and ask him what he said.

“Said, I guess you woke Mom up.” He nods towards the door and I hear her make the final step and knock quietly on the door. She steps in, her eyes even more tired than Dad’s, her nightgown showing underneath a barn coat. She’s wearing her light blue, satin-looking slippers.

“I heard you come in,” she says. Then she looks at Dad, “And when are you coming to bed?”

“We’re watching a crazy show,” I say, my head still against the couch. Dad’s focus is on the TV. Mom sits at the desk, wedges her hands between her knees. Then she gets up, closes the door, goes back to her seat.

“Do you need to call Libby?” she says, yawning.

“In the morning,” I say. “It’s too late.”

“It’s his business,” Dad says. He stretches out his legs, brings them back in.

“I’d be worried, that’s the truth,” she says. “Especially since you’re on this side of the canyon.”

I just wish they’d go to bed, wish even more that they’d get up tomorrow morning, pack the truck and trailer and leave for St. George, their new home. The sooner the better.

“It’s his business,” Dad says again. He looks at Mom. “Let him figure it out.”

I rub my eyes.

“That avalanche was only a month ago,” Mom says. She crosses her arms, her hands close to her chest.

I know what I’m doing. They don’t understand I have a plan and that no matter how bad they think this is, that it will get better. I don’t want to get into it all tonight, but Mom’s getting me there. And Dad over there watching a Gladiator show in silence, pissed about something and not wanting to leave until he transfers some or all of it to me. “I’ll call her,” I say. “As soon as you guys get to bed, I’ll call.”

“Why don’t you use that CB of yours?” Dad says.

“What?”

“Let’s go to bed,” Mom says to Dad.

“Your CB.”

We look at each other and I wonder what he knows and I can see in his eyes that he doesn’t want to tell me what he knows but instead wants me to guess. My heart races and I think maybe I’m too tired to understand what he’s saying, that maybe he isn’t saying anything about what happened with Terry, but referring to something else, something innocent and stupid I did, or maybe this has nothing to do with anything but a grumpy old man who is getting ready to leave his ranch for a retirement center in southern Utah. I can’t tell.

“I’m tired,” Mom says. She stands up and walks towards us, putting out her hand to Dad.

I look at her, keep my voice low and slow, say, “What’s he talking about?”

“Gibberish,” she says. “Come on.” She waves her hand.

“This isn’t gibberish,” Dad says. His eyes are watering, his mouth trembling. On the TV, the show spurts with action.

I look at Mom again, expecting her to take Dad by a hand and lead him away. That’s what she should do, like she’s done before. But she doesn’t; instead, she’s looking at me, crying. “He’s talking gibberish,” she says. “I don’t understand what you’re doing.” She wipes her eyes with a Kleenex, but her eyes tear again and she keeps her Kleenex up to them. She sniffs and goes back to the desk chair.

I look at the space between them, at nothing except the wall, and wait. They know about it. Or something about it. But this is my problem, my problem, not theirs, and they have no right to get involved with what is happening in my family's life.

Mom's right: she doesn't understand and she can't and won't ever.

"Do you hear?" Dad says. "What's going to happen? Are you moving out here?"

I stand up, walk to the desk. I stand beside Mom, but don't look at her. I say to the other wall, "You're over-reacting, that's all I can figure." I pick up the empty Ash Creek Drug Store plastic bag and stuff it into the trash can, on top of the banana peel and granola bar package. I stand up straight and Mom's on her way to the couch. I cross my arms, think if there's anything to say which would make this better. I'm sweating and I feel like throwing up. I want to ask Dad what he's heard, but there's no way I can do that. Not in this tiny room, not with Mom here. I want to shout, because that's the only way I could figure out what he knows. I look at them quickly and Mom's sitting on the couch next to Dad, her elbows on her knees, her hands on the sides of her head. They're looking at me. "What you've heard probably isn't true."

"I hope not," Dad says. "But if it's half true, you're a son of a bitch."

I walk to my jacket.

"No, you're staying and we're leaving," Dad says. "You're God damn staying and figuring this out. You ought to know what people know, though." He stands up, his one knee popping. He turns off the TV, pushes the metal bookshelf off to the edge of the room.

Mom stands up then, comes at me, says, "Please, Cole." She wipes her eyes again. "Call her and tell her you're here."

"I'll say this," Dad says. "I don't believe all of it. You got that?"

They walk past me, open the door. Dad puts a hand on Mom's back, edges her out onto the stairs. The cool, smelly air of the garage comes in and feels good against my face.

Dad stops, let's the door close somewhat, talks quieter, "But you better God damn get this fixed. I won't get your mom into this, I won't. You sleep here and get this figured out if that's what you have to do. But this won't be a hide out no longer. Not this way."

He waits for me but I have nothing to say. I want to hit him. Or I want to drag he and mom back in here and tell them everything. From the beginning and to the future. I look at Dad and think that I'm going to stay on the path I was on before: all future, no past. I screwed up and now I'm going to fix it. It would take too much telling of the past to make them understand. And they don't deserve to understand. Not at this point.

"Night," I tell him. He shakes his head, turns around. "I'll be gone early," I say. "I'm meeting Libby and Jake at school, if you care to know."

"I'm not asking," he says.

"Cole," Mom says, coming back into the doorway.

"Let's go to bed," Dad says, interrupting what she was about to say. I look at her swollen eyes and flushed cheeks before Dad gets in the way. Then he closes the door.

I look at the sporadic dark squares filling up this side of the door. I lick my dry lips, then lick where my moustache used to be and taste salty sweat. I put my hands against the door and wish to God I didn't live in such a small town. If they know, others know, and if others know, Ben might know. And Libby. I wipe my forehead, rub my eyes, try to see where this might lead and see if I can fix it before it goes there. I listen a bit longer and neither of them comes back up the stairs. I go to the sink, turn on the cold water and bring up handfuls against my face and neck. My T-shirt gets wet around the neck. I pull my cold fingers through my hair. I lean against the sink and feel like I might vomit. I don't want to know what they know, but if they know anything, it's too much. God, one night of fucked-up stupidity and all hell is ready to let loose. One fucked-up thing that Terry just had to do and me too much a fuck-up to stop it. I deserve what's coming for doing something so God damn stupid.

But still, the worst of it is in the past. Tomorrow and the days after that: that's what I'm doing now. I put my mouth to the side of the faucet and suck on the water. I spit it out, suck again, swallow it down.

I take off my shirt, take down my pants. I go to the closet, bring down the sleeping bag, lay it across the couch. I lie down, see my chest and chest hair and stomach and get up to put my shirt back on. I wet my hands again and run them over my face. Then I lie down. I light my watch, 11:45, and check my alarm for 6:45. I put my hands over my face.

I close my eyes, but the first thing I see is me doing what I did with Terry in the truck that night and the next thing I see is my house with the garage and front door lights

on and Libby sleeping by herself with the hall light lit and I get up from the couch again and go to the phone and dial.

She answers on the second ring.

"It's me," I say.

"Okay." She's confused, her voice soft and gentle.

"I'm at the ranch. It was too late."

There's a pause. I hear her rolling over on her side, looking at the clock. "Okay, Cole." Now her voice is different.

"It was late."

"You'll be at school, I guess?"

"At eight. I have work before, but I'll be there."

"Okay."

"How's Jake?"

"Cole."

"Okay," I say. "I know it's late. I'll wait for you guys out front."

"This won't go on like this. You know that."

"I have a surprise for you tomorrow. You'll see. I'm onto something."

"This meeting's a big deal."

I think of something else I should say, but before I can, she hangs up. There's the click but I keep the receiver on my ear. I hang up using my finger, then dial again.

"It's late, Cole. Too late."

"I'll pick you up at the house before-hand."

"You said you had work."

I pause. I pause way too long to fix it, and so I tell her she's right and that I wish I could but that I'll meet her at the school.

We hang up.

I go back to the couch. I lean back, then I sit back up. I rest against the back of the couch. I lean my head back so that I'm staring straight up. I smell banana and get up and put the trashcan outside. I come back in, sit down on the couch, put my head back like it was before. I think that maybe these plans I have are dead in the water. I think that the kid building the snowman wasn't anything more than a kid building a snowman. I thought it did something to me, that kid with two-thirds of his snowman built, but maybe not. Maybe it's too late.

How much does Dad know? How did he hear about it? Is Ben finding out right now at Coyote's? Will he go home and tell Terry what he heard? Will he call my house and tell Libby? Or does she know already? Does she know and is she sick with it already? Is she ready to leave her disgusting husband who came in the front seat of a Blazer snowplowing truck while a woman on the other end of a CB told him things about her body? Came onto his grimy leather gloves while he sat in the truck parked at the Bailey's private driveway, darkness all around. There had been plenty of teasing all night on channel 37, the business channel. And maybe that's all Dad heard about, the teasing on channel 37. Maybe someone was listening on channel 37, but it was nothing more than we usually do. It can be explained and forgotten. But what if someone heard after we switched to channel 58. The channel she told me about when I was at their house

earlier in the evening; the channel she described as the fun channel, our secret channel, even giving me the secret code word so that only she and I would know. And later that night I knew what was coming and I was already doing it, so that when we switched to channel 58 and she started talking it was quick. We knew we had to be quick and we knew I couldn't say anything and that we would have to turn back to channel 37 right away. And it was quick. I didn't say a word and we turned back to channel 37 and began talking like we always do. And that's why Dad must only have heard about us flirting on channel 37. He couldn't know the other stuff. I can talk to Dad and tell him what happens on channel 37 because it happens with me, it happens with Ben, it happens with Randy. It's just business talk.

I open my eyes and the refrigerator clicks off and the room's quiet, more quiet than I remember it being before the fridge turned on earlier. I still smell banana. It's too hot and I go and crack open the window and try to smell in some air from outside.

I know what Dad knows and it's no big deal. I can explain it. I can explain it to Libby if she wants to know. But now I have a good idea of what people know. Because they can't know the other: it was too quick and I never said a thing.

I open the window further, fiddle with the screen and take it out, lean it against the wall next to me. I stick my head out the window and breathe in the warm, wet spring air. The roof is dripping, even now in the middle of the night. The drops of melt fall onto the rocks below. Some of them drop into puddles. The first rain of spring isn't far off. Maybe it will rain next storm. Then it will really be spring. And then summer and

Mom and Dad will be gone and we'll be here. This will be my office and we'll have the car and the truck parked inside, and inside the house, Libby and Jake will be asleep.

I breathe in again, then step back, but leave my hands against the frame, as if I were stretching my legs. I close my eyes. But when I do that, I see Libby and the sheriff talking in the drug store, the day Terry called me in Rifle and told me to come home early. The day that she met me with a cupcake and a kiss on the cheek and more kisses in the mudroom before I broke away and finished shoveling. I broke away quickly because I knew Libby and Jake were coming home. I knew because I had seen Libby and the sheriff talking in the drugstore and I knew something was up and I walked out of the store before she saw me. I about-faced my wife for the first time, and then I found out later that I walked by Jake who must have been lying on the back seat of the Sheriff's Bronco. I walked away from both of them. I know now that both of them were probably crying or were about to start crying or had been crying before. And I walked in, the bells ringing, and I walked out. I left them crying. I walked out and down the alley to my truck and drove home. Drove home and there was Terry with her God damn cupcake and kisses.

I sit down on the floor and rest my head on the bottom frame of the window. It's too scratchy, so I rest my head on my arm. I listen for the drops. I try to listen for their release from the icicles hanging off the roof. I try to imagine what kind of sound that is.

Spring. I've made it. We've made it. We're going to make it to summer.

I hear the drops. I wish it would rain and the rain would melt the snow quickly. I wonder if that kid making the snowman wishes the snow would melt? Maybe he was a

tourist kid and was glad there was still snow. Maybe it was a local kid and he was glad it was a wet snow, unlike the dry, cold snows we usually get. When I was young, I would get a bucket of water from the horse trough so I could make slush and ice balls. And there this kid had a wet snow falling from the sky naturally.

I'm glad Dad told me to get my shit together. Because my shit is getting together and when it comes all the way together, he'll be happy. Tomorrow I'll tell Libby my plan and that will be the first step.

More drops and I think maybe it's raining. My forearm and the top of my head are cool. Water and creeks and lakes and Libby smiling and Jake swimming. It's a scene that could happen. It could happen and that's what's so pretty about it and I let myself keep seeing it in my brain. I don't stop. I just let it go and go and go and the rain keeps falling to the ground below and the cool air smells like water and wet grass and mud and manure. A flash of Terry and Dad hearing her say those things to me, but I stop it right away and now I'm back to Libby and me driving the ranch roads in the summer time, the two-track roads with the flattened tan grass and the bumpy gopher holes. Warm sun and dry ground. Her hair loose and bouncing with the truck. One hand holding to the door handle, the other near the center console, her silver wedding ring clicking against the hard plastic. We point out things to see. We talk and we smile. The warm, dry air breezes through the open truck windows.

2.

I wake before the alarm, on the floor in a fetal position, cold, with a crick in my neck. The window is still open. I lie there for a moment. I remember last night and imagine Dad knowing what I've done. My stomach cramps.

Only because I know it's 5:45 in the morning can I see a change from pitch dark in the eastern sky. It's quiet, no water dripping, so the temperature must have fallen below freezing. I close the window, look out and up: the sky is clear, no clouds. The tops of the pines are barely visible.

My thighs and arms have goosebumps on them. I hug myself, stand next to the window, and think about getting dressed and going for breakfast in town. But when I turn around, I see the sleeping bag on the couch. My joints hurt, my neck especially, and I walk to the couch and put myself inside the bag. It smells like cardboard, but it goes warm fast. I stretch out, my feet jamming against the end. The slick material feels good against my legs. Flexing, then relaxing my muscles, I force myself not to think of Dad. I can get another hour of sleep. I close my eyes but my heart races. Outside, the light comes on stronger. I flex all my muscles at once, my legs, my arms, my chest, my stomach, my back: I hold my breath and stiffen everything for five seconds. Then I breathe out and relax. I feel my body go towards the couch, its soft cushions. The pillow cradling my head, not a sound, absolutely nothing.

Muffled beeps of my watch come from inside the sleeping bag. I open my eyes and it's bright in the room. I think that I've slept too long and there's Jake's meeting this morning and I need to call Ben and what if Dad looks out of the house and sees the Blazer still here? I can't get my arm out quick enough, the thin sleeping bag cramping my elbow.

My T-shirt is still wet at the collar, my jeans still dirty, lying on the seat. All my clothes have a soft, dirty feeling. I put away the sleeping bag, find the toothbrush I've been using when I stay over, and brush my teeth and wash my face. Then I fix my hair and put the screen back onto the window. As I try to thread the screen into the slots, I realize that my hands are shaking like some old man and my breathing is heavy. I make myself calm down, go slower; I'm too anxious to get away from what happened last night.

Finally I put on my boots, still muddy, still wet inside and grab my jacket which has the flashlight, gloves, sweat shirt and wallet inside. I zip-close the jacket, with all the goods rattling, fold over the sleeves, and carry it out like a bag. Using my bare elbow, I close the door.

Out to the truck and the air is cold, especially near my neck and on my arms. Inside the Blazer and then I remember that I need to call Ben. I think about going back up, but when I look across the lot to the house, I decide to call Ben from town. Mom and Dad will be up soon. There might be more questions and if there aren't questions, there will be strange behaviors and silent accusations. Both of which I'd rather not deal with

this morning. The Blazer warms up, the throttle stuck at a high RPM. I press on the accelerator, then let up, but it's still cold and the throttle stays high.

It's going to be a warm day. Lots of melt, lots of mud. I scope out the large area next to the house where Libby wants to garden. The space, her future garden, is one of the few things Libby gets excited about when we talk about the ranch.

The truck's warm enough. I pick up the plow, put it in drive and go out the way I came in. Once out of the lot, I reverse the angle of the plow and drop it to the ground. I'll widen the drive a tad more.

The sun lights up the far ridges to the west. The new snow must have been blown around, the differing shades of snow showing drifts. At the cattleguard I raise the plow. I wonder if it'd be good to have Jake around cattle. We could run ten or twenty head for shits and grins. It'd get him outside and working tough. A more honest Challenge Camp. Scooping out this cattleguard could be the first thing on his list.

The potholes are frozen, although it doesn't take much to pop the thin ice. I turn on the CB, make sure it's on channel 37. Jake's principal is going to say something this morning about Jake's behavior over the winter, his progress since his suspension from the sticker deal. My guess is he'll say Jake's on the mend. And the principal will want to know what we plan on doing with him this summer and next year. I'll have answers for him. I've been thinking it over and I'll have something to say, that's for sure. And if he tries to tell us to do something different with Jake, like send him to some other camp, away from home, then I'll have something else to say. Something along the lines of *You*

can go to hell. Because that isn't happening again. Look at the results of that great idea. I don't care who's idea it was before, it isn't happening again. I'm taking control.

About two miles from the highway, I meet Jack Emry in the county plow. He's in the maintainer, plowing low, scraping a layer of mud along with the snow. We stop and I yell up at him and he wants to know how I am, the parents, the kid, the wife. He wants to know when I'm going to quit the amateur shit, pointing his thumb at my plow, and move on to something a little tougher. He smiles and takes a drink of coffee from a huge, Bronco mug.

I yell something back, then I'm off. It'd take some training to get qualified on the big plows, the maintainers. Don't think I haven't thought about it: it'd be good money, good steady money. But, I'm not there yet. Besides, working for the government would be a ways down the list.

At the highway, I put down the visor to block the sun. I turn on the radio, then turn it off when I hear oldies. I drive and think of how to tell Libby of my plan. I turn up the heat a notch. I want Lawrence and Phillip Wheeler to build us a pond out on the ranch. A lake is more like it.

I smile, thinking of how Libby will take the idea. She'll like it; she'll like it a lot. I'll get them to build it near the creek; we could see it from the house. It'd cost us some money, but I can talk to the Wheelers and I know they'd cut me a deal, let me pay it over time. It'd get Libby thinking about summer instead of these lingering snowstorms. Something else besides whether Jake will find himself in trouble again. She hates this

time of year. She's always complaining how in Denver there'd be green grass and flowers by April.

The snow banks along the highway are pushed way back, Jack Emry and the rest of the county crew using their machines to keep the melt far off the road. The old snow banks are dirty and frayed.

Libby's Dad used to fish at the lake when they took their family vacations. Libby's told me stories, her good memories. I wonder if we could stock our lake. Put up a dock. A rope swing. A picnic table.

I can't tell her this morning. Not before Jake's meeting. Not just after, either. It will have to be lunch, I guess. Or tonight at dinner. I could tell her and Jake at the same time.

This is what I'm talking about. This is how all the crap that happened over the winter is going to drift away into something bright and good.

Near the town limits sign, I hit the washer fluid to clean the gunk off the windshield. It's already above freezing, the fluid streaming off the windshield in wet spurts instead of icing up. I check the time, a little more than half past seven, and decide to stop in at the bakery, get us all a treat.

I pass the drug store. Anthony's not there; he's not shoveling or brooming or cleaning windows or trimming trees. Which is amazing, because the guy is a fanatic about his store's appearance. He's a fanatic about a lot of things. I check the side lot, but Libby must have gone straight to school.

The town's quiet. The ski area closed more than two weeks ago. A lot of people go when that happens, the rich college kids off to someplace warm: Mexico or Hawaii, or of all places, the desert. Rich kids who ski and party the winter away. Then they leave, *escaping mud season*, they like to say, as if they'd ever spent a mud season, or any season other than winter, up here in Ash Valley. But it's fine. It's a good thing, really: the less people, the better.

I stop at the bakery, get out, reach back in and get my sweatshirt. I stop at the pay phone in the entryway, make my call to Terry and Ben. It's 7:35: plenty of time to make it to school by eight. The call goes through, the phone ringing. Inside the bakery, I see Denise crouching in front of the display glass, writing item names and prices on the thin chalkboards in front. She's wearing shorts, her Achilles tendons protruding sharply near her ankles. She's wearing a Rockie's hat, and with it on backwards and her leaning on one arm while writing, she looks like a catcher. The phone rings: they're either asleep or out working. Or something God damn else.

Terry answers. She wants to know what happened to me last night. She tells me she's in the office. Ben's still asleep.

I ask her what's going on.

She wants to know why I never picked up the CB.

I try to get her to tell me if Ben's going to work today, but she keeps asking about the CB and wants to know if I have a death wish. And then she goes into how the truck is their property and if they want the CB on at all times, then I best do what they want.

I ask what time Ben came in. I tell her I was at the ranch, sleeping. I ask her if she got any sleep.

She gets real mopey then, sad-faced I imagine, and saying sorry for getting bitchy, but that she was lonely last night and she was worried more than anything else and would I please tell her what's going on.

Inside the bakery, Denise is at the drink cooler which is only fifteen feet from where I'm standing. I'm sure she's getting an earful. While Terry goes on about not wanting summer to come, what with Ben gone fishing and me and Randy no longer around, Denise continues to pull out orange juices and small containers of milk. She looks out the door, sees me, gives me an upward nod. I wave a little wave.

Terry pauses for a second, and I tell her in a sort of official way that I'm in town for Jake's meeting and does Ben want me to do any work in town while I'm here?

There's a long pause. I look again at my watch. I don't have time for this. I can't be late. Terry's still on the other end, quiet. Finally, she says in her official voice that Ben is still asleep, but that she expects him up at nine or so, and that it would be prudent if I came to the house after Jake's meeting. She says she needs to get on the road for an on-time arrival at day care, and then finally, before hanging up, she asks me to go fuck a tree.

I hang up, breathe out loudly, step inside, and with a hurried voice say to Denise, "I need some treats and I need them in a hurry."

She's behind the counter, pouring one coffee pot into another. She continues to pour, says, "In a second."

"It's for Libby and Jake."

She puts both coffee pots on burners, turns and says, "Well?"

"Any advice?" I look at the pastries and donuts and rolls. I rack my brain, try to think of what Jake got last time we were in here. But I can't place anything; I only see him in his room with his Walkman or comics. The only sweet thing I see him liking is birthday cake.

Denise looks at me, waiting. "Are they on their way?" She looks toward the pay phone.

"I'm meeting them at school. Five minutes from now."

"Oh." She wants an explanation about the phone call but she's not going to get one.

"So?"

She opens the display case, "You sure you want me to pick?" She looks at me one quick moment; I nod, and she looks back into the case.

"Whatever you think," I say. I get out my wallet, take out a five.

"How about you?"

"Chocolate donut, if you have one."

She comes back with a white paper bag, puts it on the counter. "Already been working?" she says, ringing up the total.

"Not yet." I put the five on the counter, look in the bag: a donut, sweet roll, and muffin.

"You got mud on your shirt."

I look down; my sweatshirt is filthy from where I cleaned the rock last night.

She makes change, hands it over, says, "Good luck at school."

I look at her. "Did Libby say something about it?"

"Just worried." She takes off her ball cap, puts it back on front side forward.

I don't know what to say to that; I don't know what she means by *nervous*.

There's a pause, then she says loudly, "It's a real-deal spring day today. I think it's here to stay."

I walk backwards a few steps, say, "You got the shorts for it." I tap my watch with my fingers, "I can't be late."

"No, you can't. Tell Libby hi."

I turn around, walk quickly to the door. Denise yells out, "She gets the muffin."

I raise my arm as if I knew that already and walk out with my bag of treats.

The roads facing the sun are already wet. The roll, donut and muffin smell good and I wonder if they're still warm. At the next stop sign I take off the dirty sweatshirt and roll down the window, rest my arm on the frame. The cool air and warm sun make me feel like today will be a good one.

As I pull into the school parking lot, the truck clock reads 7:58. I look for them as I pull into a spot. I get out, tuck my shirt in, check it over for dirt or mud, grab the treats, and walk towards the flag pole and doors. I look around. It's the same as twenty years ago. The same mountains. The same view of the highway taking off to the west. The fields which used to be open around my school are gone, and there are two buildings

downtown that you can now see: three story jobs that the city should demolish. There's the new high school, two blocks away, its gym a giant brick cube.

Libby comes out the front doors, frowning. She's wearing dark brown pants, a blue sweater. Her hair is pulled back. She's says loudly to hurry up.

I speed up, look at my watch.

"You're late," she says when I get close. She's wearing make-up. Her eyes are open wide.

"Eight o'clock, right?" I hand out the white bag.

She takes it. "It *starts* at eight."

"And I'm here," I say. "I got us breakfast."

She tries to open the door, but it's a double door, the kind that lock on each other. "Here," I say, and I take a good grip. The door opens with a loud noise, the other door opening too. I follow her in.

"How can you think about eating right now?"

"Yeah," I say, although I wish I could down the donut real quick. "Where's Jake?"

"In the office, waiting." She walks faster as we pass through the open area. Lunch tables are stacked on the sides.

"By himself?"

"Not in the principal's office, but outside."

I think of the lake and say, "Hey," slowing down.

She stops, looks at me, "What?"

I smile, but she doesn't smile back. "Can we meet for lunch?"

"Cole, can we get through this first?" She walks away, looks back at me. "Do you know what could happen here?"

"I just want to know about lunch."

"This might be it for Jake at this school. Does that wake you up?" She stops outside the office. I stop too. Some short kid with a big canvas bag walks by. He looks at us like we're aliens. I watch him, the scrawny kid, and when his eyes catch mine, he looks back forward, but his walk veers further away from us. No wonder Jake gets in trouble around here.

"Does it?" Libby says again. She's undone her hair, and it looks so soft that I wish we were somewhere other than here. Then she pulls back her hair, grabbing it with one hand, then with the other, pulling back the stray hairs. She makes a quick motion with her hands and the ponytail is back in place, as if by magic.

"You look nice," I say.

"At least one of us is trying."

"Look," I say. I start thinking of why I have on old, dirty clothes, why I didn't sleep at home last night, why I can't see the severity in this meeting.

"I know," she says. "I just want this meeting over with." Using both her hands, she pushes down my hair on both sides, flattening down my mess. "Not even a shower?" She finishes without once looking at my eyes, then she says, "Ready?" and opens the door to the office without waiting for my reply. I pick up the white bag and follow her in.

The office is cool and smells like a Xerox machine and toothpaste. Jake's sitting in a chair which is next to three empty chairs. He looks up. Libby's put a button-down shirt and a red sweater on him. His hair is combed straight down and it looks like Libby cut it some last night, his hair in front shorter than I remember it.

The secretary says, "Ready?" and gets up and walks to a door which has small red letters reading *Principal*. She knocks. Things are going a bit too quick for me. I just wish everyone would slow down for a second.

I walk past Libby and go to Jake, tell him I was working late last night. He says, "Oh," and looks towards the secretary. The secretary says, "Okay," and Jake's eyes go smaller and he seems to shrink and I tell him that I'm off today and that I can probably pick him up after school. He stands up and Libby comes to my side and I ask him, "Okay?" but he stays quiet and I say again, "Hear me, Jake?"

He's in-between Libby and me, but then Libby takes his hand and puts him in front, and we all walk through the waist-high, bar-room type swinging door that separates the waiting area from the secretary's office.

Jake still hasn't responded so I let my idea go.

On the way to the principal's office, I take Libby's hand, hold onto it. Her hand is cold, too cold for a warm spring day. I grip it and she grips back. She grips tighter and doesn't let go.

Mr. Dennis Laszlo is sitting at his desk. Unfortunately, we all know each other pretty well. In a situation like this, it'd be easy to hate the man, but really, he's been fair.

He likes that he's fair: he's told us a number of times that this is his trademark. He's said before that if he weren't so fair, Jake would've been a goner long ago.

He stands and gives a smile-smirk which tells me he's a busy man and that this won't take long. Jake takes a seat in the chair furthest away. Mr. Laszlo reaches out his hand and shakes Libby's hand, then mine. I have to switch the bakery bag to my other hand. I remember that he's always had a good grip, which is a unique thing for a teacher. On his desk, there's a picture of him and two old-time Bronco players. There's some story behind it but I can't remember what. On the wall is a poster of a man crossing a rope bridge above a raging river; motivating words are written underneath. His coat rack is full of baseball caps. Nothing outrageous, nothing weird or school-teachery about him. He's solid.

We sit; I drop the bag of treats to the floor. Libby keeps hold of my hand. Mr. Laszlo comes around with a folder and a pen and sits down behind us at a small table. We all rotate around and I offer Libby my other hand. She takes it, holds on tight. Jake, on the other side of Libby, stares at his hands.

"How are we?" Mr. Laszlo says. He writes something down, then looks up.

We say fine and good. He looks at Jake, asks again how we are. Jake looks up, says, "Good." He and Mr. Laszlo look at each other and Libby squeezes my hand as if we were watching a horror movie. Jake is the first to break. He looks back at his hands and begins twisting them around as if he trying to remove stubborn paint.

Mr. Laszlo tells us that with the end of the year coming up, we need to make some decisions. He puts his hands together, clapping them lightly, says, "Truth is, I need to make some decisions."

He looks between Libby and me, maybe at his desk, maybe at a clock on the wall, maybe at the picture of him and the old-school Broncos. Or maybe he's trying to look at us both at the same time. Whatever he's doing, he's not stopping. So I say, "That's good." Libby lets go of my hand. Mr. Laszlo looks right at me.

While I'm wondering what I said wrong and thinking to myself that at least I got the ball rolling, Mr. Laszlo goes over his options. He puts a thumb in the air, says, "One: Jake moves on to eighth grade with no delay." He looks to Jake. I follow his gaze; Libby does the same. Jake doesn't look up. He's still at it with his hands.

"Two," Laszlo says, again putting up a thumb, "Jake repeats seventh grade." This time he looks at Libby, who gives him quick, small nods.

"Or three," again, his thumb goes up, "You find Jake another school." Now he looks at me and I although this option surprises the hell out of me, I figure he's already made his decision so I don't give him anything but a blank look.

"Jake and I have talked about this," he continues. He leans toward the small table, grabs a staple remover, squeezes it a few times. "Right?"

Jake looks up, says, "Right-o."

I could smack him. Does he want to move on to eighth grade? Does he want to be a fourteen year old seventh grader? Does he want that haunting him in high school? How is it with this kind of attitude he hasn't found more trouble?

“And...” says Laszlo. His face hasn’t missed a beat; I guess he’s used to attitudes. Or maybe that wasn’t as smart-ass a reply as they come. Maybe it’s normal.

Jake coughs a fake cough, says, “And eighth grade.”

Libby looks back to Laszlo and smiles the smallest of smiles.

Mr. Laszlo pauses, then talks to Libby and me in adult terms of how he has come up with his decision to graduate Jake to eighth grade. There hasn’t been any trouble since last fall. If trouble happens between now and the fall, the same deal applies: Jake will re-do seventh grade. Jake will be expected to work over the summer. He looks again at Jake, “How many hours did you receive?” Libby says three hundred, and Laszlo nods, goes on about Chris, Jake’s partner-in-crime, and how he will be staying back another year. I look at Jake for a reaction, but he’s back at his hands. The other kid, Wilson, will be joining Jake, as long as he too stays clear of trouble.

Laszlo then puts his hands together, as if about to pray, and says, “These kind of things can either break people up or bring them together. I’m glad you’re all here.”

He looks at each one of us. I can only imagine what Libby is thinking, shouting out in her mind that although she and I are sitting by each other this morning, we were miles apart last night. I know that’s what’s going on inside her and I want to interrupt Mr. Laszlo and tell Libby right here and now how that’s all over and that from now on, we’ll be together. And next to Libby, Jake is yelling out at me also. Complaining inside his brain that I was never home, I never took him snowplowing, I never met him for lunch, never let him play video games, never took him skiing. Well, that’s fine, Jake. You screwed up and I wasn’t happy about that, but that’s over too, just like with your

mom. I'm going to figure you out better. I haven't tried, that's right, but no time like the present, so be ready. Be ready, I want to tell him, I'm going to take an interest in you.

Mr. Laszlo leans back, runs a smooth hand over his smooth hair, and says, "We all agree?"

I speak up first, "We appreciate it."

Libby's next; she puts her hand back in mine, says, "Yes."

We all look at Jake, and he finally looks up and says, "Is that it?"

Laszlo claps his hands again, stands up, says, "You're still in Home Room, right?" He looks at the clock on the wall, the digital red numbers. "Have Ms. Williams sign you a pass. You understand this, right? You know what you have to do?"

I watch them talking and it's like I've never seen my son talk to another adult before. There's a relationship between Laszlo and Jake. Maybe it's a crazy thing to think about while sitting in your son's principal's office, but there's something eerie in the way they talk to each other.

"Exactly," says Jake. He's already standing, though I never saw him actually make the move from his seat. He looks at his mom; Libby reaches up to him, pinches his arm, says to walk down after school.

"I got him," I say. They both look at me. Laszlo is walking to his desk. "I'm off today, or some of it. I can pick him up."

"Okay," says Libby.

Jake looks at Libby.

"What time?" I say.

“When school ends.”

“I’ll be here,” I say.

Libby nods and touches Jake in a way that gets him on his way out the door.

He walks by me, his red sweater looking too hot for a day like today. “See you then,” I say and he says, “See ya.” He’s out the door, his small body looking even smaller next to the big door and I wonder what he’ll be like when his body grows and his voice deepens and he becomes more and more like me.

When I turn back, Libby is standing; she picks up her bag, turns to face Laszlo.

“Thanks again,” she says. “I was scared this would turn out differently.”

I stand beside her. Her feet are close together and she looks awkward. Laszlo smirks, says, “He’s going to be all right. My thing is that I want to be fair. Fair to him and you. That’s it.”

“It’s fair, for sure,” I say.

“Keep him busy this summer,” Laszlo says. “That’s key. And away from Chris.” He frowns then, his face looking sad like a kicked dog, a little exaggerated, I think. Then he says, “I meet with him and his mom tomorrow. He’s heading the wrong direction.”

“That’s what you’re here for,” I say. Libby lets go of my hand, backs away, ready to go.

“More and more, it seems,” he says. “But don’t get me going.” He walks toward us, and we turn and start for the door. He stretches out his arms as if he were about to touch us both, lead us or push us out the door, but the touch never comes. He just leaves his arms outstretched. “I’ll see you in a month for graduation. Not until then, right?”

I look back, waiting for Libby to go through the door, and his arms are still outstretched. He's got a big smile and his eyebrows are raised high. He pauses in the doorway while we make our way through the bar-room office door. He says, "Is spring staying this time?"

"This is it," I say. "The real deal."

"You're the snowman," Laszlo says.

I want to correct him, tell him I'm the snow*plow* man, but I let it go.

We say our see-yous to Mr. Laszlo and Ms. Williams and go out the door into the open area. Two kids, a girl and a boy, lurk near the tables. They look like raccoons: doing nothing, but guilty as all get-out. Libby slings her bag over her shoulder, takes out her sunglasses. I have to walk quickly to stay with her. We're almost to the double-doors when I say, "Hold on."

"I'm late," she says. "Or isn't that obvious enough?"

"What are you talking about?" I say. We go outside. "It went fine, I'd say."

She walks to the flagpole, then stops, turns on me. "If it's as obvious to him as it is to me that you have no clue what's going on with Jake, then..." She shakes her head.

I look at her, unsure of what she's saying and mad at myself that I'm unsure, because that just proves her point further. I look up at the flag: it's drooping, the blue with white dots square nearly invisible. I look back at her. "He's on to eighth grade. That's what I heard, and that's what I thought we wanted to happen." Then I put my arms up for effect, "Am I right?"

"Of course."

“Well?”

“Yes, Cole. You’re right. You take home the prize for that. But it’s a wonder, I tell you.” She rolls up the sleeves of her sweater. “What about last night?” she says quietly.

“That’s what’s this is?” I smile a big smile, the most honest, supportive, oh-shucks grin I can make. “I know. Shitty timing. I was exhausted, and did I mention I was on the other side of the canyon? I didn’t mention that, I don’t think. But I was, and I figured that’s all we needed was me stuck in some slide. I’m sorry, Libby. I am.”

“You don’t think.”

“I know. I know. And that’s why I have a surprise. Okay?” I want to tell her now, but she’s in a hurry and I want her to have time to be excited.

She looks at her watch, her eyebrows still clinched together. I think she’ll look back up with forgiveness or a smile, but what I get instead is more stress, an accusatory grimace. It’s as if she hasn’t heard a word I’ve said. “Now I’m later. Are you coming home tonight?”

“Lunch?”

“I can’t.” She starts walking.

“Why?”

“You can’t say for sure, can you?” She won’t look at me.

I walk behind her. I smell her strawberry shampoo. “Yes, I’m coming home. Of course I’m coming home. And what’s wrong with lunch?”

“I promised Anthony lunch.”

"Cancel. I want to talk with you." I'm trying not to, but my voice is getting the edgy tone that Libby hates. I catch up with her. We get to the car. In the back seat are the bags of recycles.

She opens the door and says, "Get in line."

She sits in her seat and tries to close the door; I hold it open. "Cole."

"I'll take the recycle stuff."

"Hurry up, then."

I open up the back while she starts the car. She puts it in gear and the car hunches forward, stops. I take out the bag of cans, the smaller bag of tin and plastic.

"I mean it, Libby," I say sweetly through the car.

"So do I," she says, her eyes in the rear-view.

I close the back door, walk to her side. Then we wait, her with a foot on the brake, and me with a bag of garbage in each hand.

"We'll talk tonight," she says. "Is that possible?"

"I guess. I'll stop by the store later."

"Do whatever you need to." She looks at me, using her hand to shield her eyes from the sun. "What happened to the truck?" She points with her sun-shielding hand.

I turn around, see the baseball size divot in the rear of my Blazer. "Rock got it," I say, staring at the mark and chipped paint.

"Funny place for that to happen."

I turn back, drop a bag, put a hand against the window frame, and lean a little towards her. "Jake's going to finish junior high."

“Thank God,” she says. She wants to say something else, but she stops and says, “Bye.”

I give the Ford a soft thump, and watch her drive away. Anthony. The week after Jake’s high school vandalism, I looked in the windows and saw them hugging. I slowed, watched them for a second or two; they held each other motion-less and close together. A block down Lincoln, I did a U-turn, but when I passed again, they were gone. I never asked her about it.

Then I started noticing things this winter. I’d come by the drug store early afternoon, on my way to another job, and I’d see the cute, corny-as-hell *Be Back in a Bit* sign, the clock next to it, pointing to 1:30 or 2:00, and I’d know they were out having lunch. It happened more than a few times.

What is she supposed to do? Right? She and Terry used to eat lunch together and I sure as hell didn’t want that happening. But what am I supposed to think when she puts Anthony in front of me? What is that? Flagrant, I’d say. I don’t do that kind of out-in-the-open stuff. I wouldn’t put Terry in front of Libby for a lunch date. I know good and well what would happen if I did that.

I start for the truck. The aluminum can bag is heavier than the plastic and tin and I stop and switch my load. Are they? I think of Anthony, with his tight, ironed shirts, his gray wool slacks, his loafers, his black hair neatly parted, meticulously parted, hair that takes probably thirty minutes to comb and re-comb so that every hair is in a perfect spot in relation to the others.

He’s a pharmacist, for Christ’s sake.

I open the back, throw in the tin and plastic. Then I use both hands and throw the aluminum stuff in hard. And what was it I said after Laszlo said something about making decisions? I don't even remember what I said, but it wasn't *that* stupid, and how the hell did it say something about how well I know Jake? And where do they like to eat lunch? What do they order?

I close the back and think of them in the pharmacy, that God damn, sterile-smelling place. Here I am, about to tell her about the lake, something that I've been thinking about and something that could get us going, and there goes Anthony ahead of me in the line. What am I supposed to think?

I wish it would snow. I don't want the day off. I want to be far away when they're *doing* their lunch. Maybe I'll crash the date. I'm her husband. I can do that. What good is the surprise going to be now? To hell with it.

I put it in gear. I turn on the CB. There, Terry: the CB is fully-functional. I turn on the radio. Oldies, of course. They can't seem to play anything else.

The sun's high and it's not even nine. I roll down the window; I roll down the other window. As I watch the passenger side window go down, I see my leather gloves on top of my jacket and I throw them back through the truck and into the rear window. They fall onto the aluminum can bag.

I start out, then remember my white bag of rolls and try to remember where I left it. I stop the truck. By my chair in the principal's office. There's the proof, Libby. I'm the public jackass. I sit there a moment and think about going back for them, but there's no way. Let Mr. Dennis Laszlo get fat and happy. He deserves it. Then I realize I

haven't once thought about Jake since I started thinking about Anthony. And that's wrong. Dead wrong. I turn around and look at the brick school. I can see the double doors and the flagpole. There are windows on the sides, but I can't see in. I wonder if one of them is Jake's Home Room. Jake's in there and he'll be there next year, his last year before high school. I hope he knows he escaped a monster of a bullet. My boy. It's not too late. I have an idea for him too. After Libby's surprise. Fuck Anthony; I'll tell her no matter what. I'll tell her tonight and it will be so good that if she's screwing around with that pharmacist she'll feel it, because then she'll know what I'm trying to do. And then when that's fixed, I'll go to Jake. I'm going to do it all. Libby, then Jake.

Some man comes out of the double doors. He looks like a janitor, flabby and hair sticking out in all directions. He looks up at the sun, then out to the parking lot. I turn around and face forward, but find him in the rear-view. He takes out a cigarette, lights it, says something out loud and throws it on the ground, crushes it a few times with his foot. He crosses his arms, then tries to put a hand through his hair. He quits that and turns and goes back inside.

I think for a moment, about a lot of things at once, then release the brake and decide that I'll figure it all out in time. Recycling is first on the list. I pull down the visor, reach for my sunglasses which are wedged in the other visor, then rest my naked forearm on the open window. The snow is melting, the melt spraying against the underside of the truck like weeds.

It's getting worse. And here I was, banking on this day as a good one. There's no way they're *together* together. She's doing it to get back at me; she's doing it to make a point. I've watched them before and there's nothing there. But isn't that what Libby thinks of Terry and me? That we're nothing? We *are* nothing, but we're more than Anthony and Libby.

I'm going home. I have to stop by Terry and Ben's to check in, to see what Ben is up to, but then I'm going home. I'm sure the roof slid, just the four or five inches from yesterday, but it'll need shoveled from the decks. With this warmth, the front of the garage will need irrigated; I'd bet money there will be standing water by early afternoon. That'll take care of the morning. Ben might have something for the afternoon. I've got to keep busy. I don't want to be upset with Libby. I'm the one in the wrong here and I need to let what she's doing go by the wayside. I need to keep it together, first of all. Maybe I'll go through the shed and see what needs to be thrown out; no sense in moving to the ranch what isn't worth keeping. Hell, I don't have time for lunch anyway. I can talk to her tonight.

Down Lincoln and I can see the son of a bitch three blocks away, shoveling or sweeping the sidewalk. Anthony's in his white lab coat. As if he's a doctor. As if he needs to show everyone, even while working, that he's important. Well, I don't think too many people would want to be wearing a lab coat outside while working, thank you very much.

I consider making a left and driving to a street parallel to Lincoln and avoid seeing him up close, but screw it, what's the big deal?

I drive by the credit union, clock reading 9:20, temperature 37 degrees, and then I'm passing the pharmacy. I don't want to look, but I figure Libby might be looking, so I glance over and there he goes, waving like some freak. I give him a wave from the steering wheel. He stops waving and stands there breathing hard. He's paunchy and some of his slicked-back hairs are hanging forward. His white lab coat and loafers: what a sight. I look for Libby, but she's deep inside.

On my right, the hardware store's crowded. I think about stopping for a new pry bar; I think it was Ben who borrowed it last and never returned it. I'll need one for breaking up ice when we get into the melt and thaw cycle. But I don't want to stop. If I stop, Anthony will chime in from across the street and that's the last thing I want to happen. So I keep going, past the BLM office, past the liquor store, past the flower store where there is now a complete snowman. The boy put a thick stick for a nose and he must have finagled some sunflowers from the flower shop, because there are two sunflower heads drooping halfway down the head, former bright eyes for the pale snowman.

When I see the Wheeler's beat-up AMC Eagle outside the Sage Hill Café, I figure it's fate: I'm hungry as hell and I need to talk to them about my idea. I pull in, find a spot on the side, and shut the truck down.

Before I get out, I give Ben and Terry a call on the CB. I give it a few tries, but no one answers. Ben must be sleeping off his rough night. Or maybe they're making amends, getting to know each other personal-like. I call again and one more time, thinking one of them might get up, then I go ahead and say into the mike that I'm at the

Sage Hill and will be out in an hour. If they're in their bedroom, even half-conscious, they'll have heard my message. It doesn't matter anyway.

The Wheelers are at the counter, a newspaper section in front of each. Lawrence has a sweet roll to his right; Phillip a side of hashbrowns. "Hey," I say as I walk by.

They look up and Phillip turns around, sees me, says, "Hey there, Cole."

Lawrence turns around a moment later, says, "Hey."

"Too cold for work?" I ask them. "Too cold for pond-building?" I smile, push up the sleeves of my sweatshirt. The woman behind the counter points at her coffee pot and I nod yes. I go and stand near Phillip, sip my coffee. It's good and bitter.

"You don't need to say anything," says Phillip. "What'd you do with Libby?"

Lawrence goes back to the paper.

"She's working," I say.

"Not this morning, she wasn't," Lawrence says, taking a forkful of cinnamon roll.

"You look like you been puking all night."

I look at Phillip; I look at Lawrence. They both look at me. They're not themselves this morning and the last thing I want to do is get them started. I'm sure they've heard something. I take a couple swallows of coffee and think about just laying it on the line with them and asking them what they've heard, but that'd get a conversation going I don't want to have. They love Libby, even though they've known me all their lives. Besides, they could just be ornery this morning, nothing more. It's not worth it, so I start walking toward the table area and say to them, "Come on."

They get up, reluctantly, and by the time I'm sitting at a table near the window, they're still fumbling with their papers, coffees, and side dishes. The counter waitress wants to know if I need a menu. I tell her a Denver omelet and she writes it down, walks back to the kitchen.

"Well?" Phillip says. He sets his coffee and hashbrowns down, takes a seat.

"Well what?"

"Where was she?" Lawrence is still standing.

I look up at him, tell them both that we were at school with Jake.

"I figured," Phillip says. "She didn't look right yesterday and I knew something was brewing. I knew she wasn't right."

"I figured it was you," Lawrence says. "I'm not too prideful to say that." He sits down, pushes the paper over to the side, next to the jellies and ketchup.

"The principal called us in," I say. "I had nothing to do with it." I look behind me, towards the counter and kitchen, and catch the waitress's eyes.

"Hold your horses," she says.

"Not your first time, was it, in the principal's office?" Phillip says. He's smiling.

"I guess not," I say, looking at him, then to Lawrence. I give them a grin.

"Did he bend you all over?" Lawrence says.

Phillip puts his fist to the table, rattling our cups and laughs. "That's quite a thing to ask. You're talking about a swatting, right?"

"God damn, Phil," Lawrence says, smiling, laughing quietly. "Of course I am."

I let them go for a while, back and forth, in their usual manner. They each tell me two or three stories of their days of trouble. Of daring the other to walk into the girl's bathroom. Of firecrackers set up underneath a teacher's car.

My omelet arrives and I smother it in ketchup, start eating. They go on. They tell how their principal had a horse whip next to his desk and he threatened more than once to use it. And there's no doubt he would have, too, one of them says. Their principal ran cattle in the summer: they want to know what the current principal does. I tell them he's just a principal. They agree that that isn't right, that educators need to be doing something else than just teaching. Especially these days. That's why they're weak, the kids running over them like a five-day-a-week-stampede. I eat my omelet and start in on my hashbrowns and finish the toast.

They start in about the weather, and how there's another storm coming tomorrow, and how spring's going to be late this year, and summer even later. Phillip says you wouldn't know it today; he points to the window, to the sun coming straight at us, the water running in the streets and the mud glistening in the parking lot. They want to know if I'm sick of plowing.

"How about building us a pond?" I answer.

This gets them. They look at me for a second or two, suddenly thrown from the rhythm they've been in for ten minutes.

"What kind of pond?" Phillip says. He takes off his flannel overshirt, hangs it behind his chair.

“Lake, pond, reservoir: whatever you want to call it. Dig us a hole so we can fill it with water.” I smile, seeing this lake at the ranch. A lake and not the holding pond I grew up with: the piece of shit excuse for a pond in the outer pasture which wasn’t useful for anything but shitting cows and horses. A lake. A lake Jake can fish in. A lake that will bring in birds and frogs.

“Out at your place past the Pines?”

“Hell, no,” I say, disgusted even with the mention of living near the cesspool of newcomers and fancy houses. “The ranch.”

“You all still moving out there?”

“Of course.”

“You got the money?”

“It’s none of your business, Phillip, but, yeah. We’ll be out there this summer.”

“What’s Libby think of this?” Lawrence says. He looks at his brother.

“I’m telling her tonight. I thought of it last night.”

“With that silly-ass grin of yours, I guess you’re saying you thought of the lake last night, right?” Phillip says. He shifts in his seat, looks at Lawrence.

Lawrence has to squint against the sunlight, but he looks at Phillip, then says, “What kind of pond you thinking about?” He takes the ketchup bottle, slides it back and forth on the table.

I look at my plate, the streaks of ketchup, the pieces of leftover green pepper, the few pieces of gnarled, fatty ham. “I don’t want any part of a hobby-pond, if that’s what

you're asking." I pick up the plate, put it on the table behind me. "I want the whole enchilada."

"That'd be a summer job," Phillip says.

I nod, say, "I figured so." The waitress picks up my plate, leans near me, her clothes smelling like lemon, and asks if I need anything else. I tell her, "That'll do it."

There's a pause and the two of them look at each other again, having a thorough conversation through eye twitches, mouth movements, eyebrow raises.

"You understand what you're asking for?" says Phillip, looking at me, his face dead-set.

"Look, I can afford it," I say. I stare at him for a moment, then at Lawrence. "I can. Like you say, it's been a good winter for a snowplower. And I'm aiming for something bigger for the summer."

Lawrence lets go of the ketchup, takes a napkin and wipes his mouth. He says, "You say it's a surprise for Libby?"

I lean back, my stomach full, and say, "Figured it out driving to the ranch last night. I had a vision, you might say."

They smile a quick second, then look at each other again. Phillip takes a last bite of his hashbrowns, and says, chewing, "I reckon we can do it at a local's rate."

"When are you going to tell her?" Lawrence says. He teases his ear.

"Tonight, I guess." I think of Anthony and Libby having lunch and my stomach does a flip. "I told you already. Tonight."

“We already have some orders,” Phillip says, taking his overshirt back off the chair, “but I figure we can fit you in. Sometime in late July, early August. Won’t be a pond until next spring, but I guess you can wait until then.”

“Perfect.” I smile, say, “I don’t feel like waiting, but I guess we can’t bring on a melt in the fall.”

“I guess not.” Phillip gets his section of the paper, swats it against the table, and says, “We’ll meet you out there next week sometime and figure the layout. We’ll get a rough guess on the price then.”

They both look serious.

Lawrence stands, looks down at me, “Guess you heard we got another one coming in tomorrow?”

“Big?” I say, standing up.

“They’re saying maybe a foot when it’s all over.”

Phillip puts on his overshirt. I look at the ticket, put a five on the table. We walk to the door. I say to them, “Didn’t mean to upset your brunch.”

They smile a bit and Phillip says, “We needed to get on the road, no matter.”

We walk out. I stop when they veer towards their car. Their car’s side windows are so dirty that it’s impossible to look straight through.

Lawrence goes to the other side. Phillip opens the passenger door, the buzzer inside the car going off, and says, “You say you thought of this lake idea last night at the ranch?”

“It was a vision, I tell you. Like the burning bush,” I say, smiling.

Phillip doesn't smile back, though. He pauses, gets in the car, rolls down his window and says, "Let's get in touch next week."

I say okay and tell them to have a good one.

Lawrence yells through the passenger window for me to do the same. Then he says, "Good luck tonight."

I wave and walk back to the Blazer, excited that the plan is started and afraid about next week when I find out how much it will cost. I get in, raise the plow. I think of waiting to tell Libby, see what it costs first. But then I figure Phillip and Lawrence may let it out of the bag when they see her in the morning. That, and I want to turn the tables. I need something good to happen tonight and the lake is the ticket.

I turn on the radio. Someone flaps on and on about magnets being the newest non-traditional medical wonder. I turn onto Lincoln, head east, toward the ski area, the lake, and home. There's not a cloud in the sky and I wonder if the forecast for snow is a wash. There's not even a breeze. Even with my sunglasses on, I have to squint: the water on the roads, the new and melting snow, and the reflective blue of the sky, all of them bright. It can still be a good day. It's not over yet.

I want a lake with a dock. The kind you see on commercials where the dad and son run down the wooden ramp and then jump into the clear blue, smiles of expectation on both their faces. Libby wants a garden, so we'll commit one side of the lake to a setback garden. We'll put a pump nearby and she can walk down to her garden in the evenings, wearing her floppy, white hat and a sweater if it's cool, and water her garden

with lake water. I'll make a river rock path from the house to the lake and the garden. I'll keep the walkway mowed in summer and shoveled in winter. The way I see it, the lake will have to be near the creek. I want to be able to see the lake from the house, but far enough away for the spring bugs. Then again, I want to hear the birds and frogs. I want to be able to sit on our porch swing in the front of the house and see fish rising, expanding circles across the pond like big rain drops splashing down. We'll keep it clean of lake weed; I want Jake swimming in it if he wants. That brings me back to the father and son jumping into the water from the dock, so I guess that about does it. That's what I want. That's what I want out of our lake.

Ben's next on my agenda. Terry will be at her preschool by now. The lake image disappears and I'm nervous about Ben. I remember what Dad told me last night. If I'm wrong in thinking that he's only heard about Terry and me flirting on channel 37, and instead he's heard about what has happened otherwise, then it won't be pretty. The straight-up skinny is that I'll be royally fucked. I figure real quick that if it went down that way, I'd move. I'd stop the ranch loan and move. With or without Libby and Jake. I'm ashamed in thinking this, but what else could I do? You can't get away with something like I did in a small town. The only saving grace in all this is that Terry and I haven't gone flesh to flesh.

Exactly. I'm fine; it'll turn out all right. Ben knows Terry flirts; but hell, she flirts with that kid at the T-shirt shop more than she flirts with me. It's going to be okay.

The Blazer downshifts as we go up Fuller Hill. I rap against the steering wheel with the bottom of my fist and wish there was some way to erase what's happened the last four months. What was my first mistake? Where did I first go wrong?

Okay, okay, I tell myself. This is probably how I went wrong in the first place. I'm never in the present. I'm always in the past or future.

Here's the present: I'm on my way to work on a sunny day.

But then I think of how to tell Libby about our future lake. Then I think of what time I have to pick up Jake this afternoon.

I'm going up Fuller Hill. At this second, I'm passing mile marker 232 and there's the sign for Bill's fishing store. On my right, the snow banks are moderate, four feet or so. On my left, the snow banks are non-existent. Here comes a tow truck down the hill with a semi-rig hooked up. Phillip and Lawrence and I are going to meet next week to spot our lake at the ranch. It won't matter what Mom and Dad think because it's soon going to be ours and their opinion won't count on what I do to the place. They want, and I quote my father, 'to wash their hands of the place.' Here I go, up and over Fuller Hill and into the flats of Two Ranch Park.

I'm looking at the horses lying on their sides, soaking up the sun, when out the corner of my eye, I see lights flashing. I turn my head quick and it's Terry's blue Celica. She's waving to beat the band with one hand; with the other, she's trying to roll down her window. We pass like two airplanes on a near miss, and I look in the rear view and her brake lights are lit, her car edging to the side.

What I want to do is drive on. To take the wrath later. I want to start a precedent. This is truly what I want to do.

She does a U-turn and parks behind me in the shoulder. She's out the door and up to my window before I hardly put the truck in park. She yells through the window, "Get out here and let's have a talk, you and me."

I get out, follow her to the space between our cars. There's a slight breeze, warm, tropical if there's such a thing at eight thousand feet. She stands facing the highway; I look toward the mountains, say, "You're late for your kiddies." My words come out a weird way and I realize I'm panting, unable to get in enough air to match my crazy-beating heart.

"What else?" she says. Her arms are crossed. Her hair is still wet. She let it grow all winter and it's nearly down to her shoulders. She's fervent about it; we've had whole conversations on just this topic.

So, I say, "You're going to catch cold," touching my own hair for effect. I start to say something about how she should have listened to her mother more closely, but she cuts me off.

"Cole. We're adults here, right? Can we act like it? Is that okay with you?" Her arms are still crossed, but now she uncrosses them, waving them about as she speaks.

"What is this with the CB? Ben tried to find you when he got home last night. Of course it was two-thirty in the morning and he was drunk and of course you were asleep, but he asked and I told him. What was I supposed to do? Lie? And then your crazy call this

morning, going from mushy to mopey in one minute? You're acting crazy. I don't know what you're doing, but it's time you fix it. As in pronto."

"You told him what?" I say.

"That you turned off the CB." She keeps her arms raised a second, then drops them.

"What do you mean, 'crazy call?' I couldn't be crazy if I tried," I say. That's the truth: I used to try and imitate cartoon characters for Jake and he would just look at me like I was an idiot.

Terry pauses, watches a car pass. Spittles of mist from the car's wake hit my neck. "There's no sense in arguing," she says. "You're still in it and now you're not listening." She crosses her arms again. "Are you trying to position yourself here? Is that what's going on?"

I walk the two steps to the back of the Blazer, lean against it. Terry stays put. "Over the mountains, disc clouds, like UFOs, hang suspended. These are the clouds before storms. "Jake's going to be an eighth grader," I say. There's shade behind the truck and it feels good on my eyes.

"Here we go again." She turns to face me. She pushes down the sleeves of her turtleneck. I can't help but look at her breasts. I've looked at a hundred other things until now, but I just do it and get it over with. I look at them, see them, then I look at her.

She's staring over me, at something in the distance, maybe a car coming down the highway, maybe at the horses over in the pasture. "I'm trying to see a logic in this

somewhere. Our little fun, Jake, and your crazy change in attitude. I'm trying Cole."

She looks back down at me. "Is it the CB stuff?"

I look right at her and I think maybe I *am* going crazy. "My dad heard about it, how's that?"

"About what?" she says loudly. She waits and I try to think of what to say next, but then she says even more loudly, "About what? What's the *it* you're talking about?"

She crosses her arms again, seems to take a step my way. "What is it you think we've done? Flirting on the CB?"

"Is that flirting on channel 58?"

"He didn't hear that," she says.

"I don't know what he heard."

"Even if he did, you didn't say anything and I can say anything I God damn want. That's a me issue, not us." She steps back, wrings her hair with both hands, breathes out loudly, says, "I was afraid of this. I knew it went too fucking far. I was drunk for Christ's sake. It was a lark, a crazy lark." She shakes her head and looks out at the mountains, says, "At least I'm in control."

"I *am* in control," I say, but for the first time I realize how confused I am about everything involving Terry. "Has Ben said anything?"

Her face goes angry again. "No. Of course not. There's nothing to say; there's nothing to talk about. Look. What we did was flirt. I'm at fault there; I'm a sucker for a weak man. But that's over and we're back to how it used to be. At least I am."

“Flirting?” I think about what I did, her words in the background that night, her words making me do what I did. I think of her this morning, worrying over me not being around. And last night, wanting to meet me somewhere.

“We’re done.” She claps her hands two times. “See? Show’s over. Time to go home.” She pushes away something invisible in the air. “Whatever *it* was is over. It’s a new season, Cole. Sun’s out, the dirt and grass are poking through, birds are chirping, et cetera, et cetera.”

I look at her, her wet hair and wide eyes and strong arms and it’s obvious that we could never talk about this. I may be out of control, but I can’t tell her that. It’d be pointless. Those kinds of talks need practice and Terry and I have never approached such a tone before. Maybe *it* is over. Maybe I can forget about it. Every time it comes up in my brain, I need to remember that it’s nothing and it will never be anything again. And if I ignore it, then Dad and Mom will eventually ignore it, and if Libby or Ben hear anything about it, it will die a quick death because it was over before it ever really started. It was a winter thing and now it’s spring.

“You’re off somewhere,” Terry says. Her hands are in her hair again. She says in a mock radio voice, “Hello, Cole. You’re fading. Come back, Cole.”

I let her finish, then I say, “You’re right. Okay? You’re right and I agree.” I let this sink in, then I say, “See? We can talk like adults.”

“Oh, I know we’re good at that,” she says, smiling. Then she comes up to me and pushes me slightly against the truck. “Oh come on, Cole. Get that beat-dog look off your face.”

“Terry.”

“Thinking-man pose? Looking to the hills for the answers?” She makes a face, her fisted hand under her chin, and looks out to the mountains. Libby says she’s glad Jake didn’t have Terry for preschool, but I bet she’s good at it. Her face is so animated, so child-like. “What’s the space-ship cloud telling you? Hmmm?”

“It’s telling me spring’s not over,” I say. “It’s going to snow tomorrow.”

“Bullshit,” she says, dropping her hand. “Spring’s here.”

I hope I’m right. I hope what Lawrence and Phillip predicted comes true. I want to be right about something. “I told you about Jake.”

“I’ll get the scoop from Libby,” she says. “She’ll know better, anyway.” She walks back to her car. “Think it’s warm enough to put the top down?” She races her arm in big circles, I guess testing the temperature with her hand. “I think so.”

“Libby’s got lunch with Anthony.”

“Uh-oh,” she says, getting in the car. “Are you sure it’s lunch?” Her car starts, the rattle of something loose underneath, toward the rear, maybe in the muffler.

I stand at the corner of the Blazer and watch her as she pushes the button and her car roof edges back. Terry with her convertible sports car in the mountains of Colorado.

“Oh no, I see another beat-up dog.” I don’t even try to change my face. “Come on, Cole. You needed some sense knocked into you.” She puts the car in drive, edges towards me, then waves and goes forward. Her tires squeal and she does a U-turn, comes back at me and stops across the highway, in the opposite shoulder. “Go see Ben. He’s got something for you. Work-wise, that is.” She beeps her horn and her car accelerates.

I watch until I can't hear her car, then I wait until I can't see her car, then I wait a little longer until I see another car coming my way. I push against the truck and stand up straight. The car, a FedEx van, passes. I nod to the driver; he gives me a wave.

The snow in the pasture is starting to melt, the gullies forming on top where underneath the melt water flows. The snow's dirty; last night's snow has already melted with the older snow. There's a breeze picking up. I look back to the UFO clouds and they seem thicker, their layers like sandstone.

Back in the truck and the sun has warmed things up. I think that in another hour, Libby and Anthony will be having lunch. Three hours after that, I'll pick up Jake. In five hours, Libby will be home from work. In six hours, I'll have told her my plan about the lake. And by that time, tomorrow's storm may be threatening and I'll be on the phone with Ben, planning tomorrow's duties, just like I've done with each storm before.

Maybe for the first time all winter, I don't want it snow. It could be that Phillip and Lawrence have it wrong. It could be that the stars will come out tonight and the sun tomorrow will be even warmer than today. It could and might happen.

"Hell of winter, don't you think?" Ben's chopping wood near the wood pile. Around him are cut pieces, waiting to be split. Wood chips cover his boots. Speckles of sawdust are in his hair and on his forearms. "Figured I'd have plenty of wood when I did this last fall. It's a bit embarrassing." He takes another cut log, sets it on the chopping block and drops the maul into it. Two pieces of log fall.

"I had Jake work the splitter two weeks ago," I say. My hands are in my pockets. I remember forcing Jake outside, making him work the control while I held the logs.

I watch Ben take another whack. If it was only flirting, why do I feel like such shit in front of Ben? I wonder what he heard at Coyote's last night. I wait until he takes another cut, then say, "Heard more snow is on the way."

"Where'd you hear that?" He stops and looks at me.

"Saw Lawrence and Phillip Wheeler at breakfast. That's what they said."

"Was that before or after you shut off the CB?"

I wish he'd split another log and forget about the CB. I wish he'd then throw one of the split logs at me, telling me while the log is in the air to 'think fast.' Then tell me to get my head out of my ass and to wake up for fuck's sake. I want him to tell me to quit acting like a deranged and depressed female and get on with life. But he doesn't do any of that. He just balances another log on the chopping block and lets fly.

When I realize he's waiting for me to say something, I say, "Did you miss me last night? Needed your dose of Cole in the evening?" I force out the words, hoping that they sound right. I keep my eyes off him, look instead to his deck where his dog is scratching furiously at an old, ratted sock.

"Exactly," he says. A moment later he says, "I own the truck. Leave the damn thing on. End of discussion."

Now I really wish he would do something different. But his face doesn't change and he goes back to his pile of logs. He pries another one from the snow and sawdust. I look behind me at the Blazer sitting on the far side of his driveway. I parked far away,

hoping that he wouldn't see the dent. But now I realize I parked the wrong way, with the dented side towards us. "What's on the agenda?" I finally say.

"I called Randy two days ago," he says. He stops, looks at me. "I told him winter was over for him. I figured that was fair since he started after you." He rolls the maul handle in his hands, the axe-sledge head spinning on the ground.

"Just us two now?"

"As of two days ago."

"Guess it was good I didn't show up at Coyote's last night. I might have found myself in a fight." I say this, but I know what Ben did was fair. Randy was here for the season only. He was a college kid looking for work. His money had run out, so he took the job plowing. Every time he went out, he complained about missing a powder skiing day.

Ben drops the maul, picks up another log. "We had ourselves a time. I bought drinks for him. I figured I owed the kid that."

"I would have been there, but somebody's got to keep the roads open."

"Yeah, right. It's up to you, our Ash Creek Valley hero."

"Was that the thing about work you needed to tell me?"

"Hey," he shouts at the dog. The dog quits scratching, looks at Ben. Ben tells it to go lie down and the dog acts like he's going to run to us, then he relaxes and goes to the other side of the deck. "What're you talking about?"

I think about making something up, but there's no time; Ben is looking at me, waiting for an answer. He wipes his hair, the sawdust floating down, and he says, "Huh?"

"Libby said you had news about the job. I guess that was it." I bend and pick up a log, put it on the block.

"Libby told you something? On the CB?"

"This morning on the phone. I called in while you were still having drink-dreams."

He looks at the logs and I'm mad that I just didn't tell him the truth, that I met her on the highway. He waves me away with his hand, takes a chop and I pick up the larger of the split pieces, set it up. He chops again, then says, while I find another log, "Something might be happening with the summer deal. Don't know for sure, but maybe."

"Something good?" I say right away. I shouldn't have asked; I should have let him come to me. Especially with what I did with the CB last night. And he hasn't seen his truck yet. My timing is so fucking off. Dad or Libby or Jake or Terry: somebody has me off my rocker.

"Like I said, don't know for sure." He smacks at the log. The maul sinks in, but stops, leaving the log cracked, but not split. He pulls up, twisting the log while I try to keep it still. The maul comes loose and he says, "I'll let you know."

"That'll do," I say. He gives a chop and the log splits. I stay to the side, say, "What do we got today?"

“How’s the truck running?”

“Good.”

“No need to, but if you want something to do, you can try and get into those three summer cabins off Wild Hare.”

“In the Estates?”

“It didn’t do much last night, and it might be warm enough to break through. You can see, at least. Or you could do like me and go fishing.”

“You know me,” I say. I throw the split logs from the outer reaches towards the depleted woodpile. He’s down to a single stack of wood. It stands only two or three rows high.

He goes over, starts a new row with the just-split logs. “I figured you want something to do. Keep you out of the house, huh?” He kicks at a lower stack, trying to get the row straight. “Should have married you a local girl who can’t have kids.”

It’s the first time I’ve heard this, but I don’t say anything back. Libby’s never mentioned this about Terry. Terry’s certainly not told me. All I know is that Libby has told me more than once that Terry has made her feel bad about Jake, how she and Ben are better without kids. I can’t say for sure, but I doubt this is a hundred percent true. I look for something on Ben’s face, but he’s at work stacking logs.

“I’ll let you know how it goes,” I say. I back away a little.

“I’d sure appreciate that, Cole,” he says sarcastically.

“Whatever you say, boss-man. Good luck fishing.”

“If I ever get there.” He doesn’t look up, grabs another log, stacks it.

I wave a goodbye, but he doesn't see me and I go back to the Blazer, glad that we stayed at the woodpile.

Another day of work. Off to open up driveways for the rich who spend only weekends during the summer months. It's enough to make you sick. And what they call their subdivision: Ash Valley Pine Estates. The whole point of a valley is that there aren't any pines. It only figures, the stupid bastards.

Before I get in the truck, I look back to Ben. He's at the woodpile, kicking at the spot he kicked at before. He's tired of winter like the rest of us. It was flirting, that's all it was. What I did wasn't flirting, but what she did was. That makes what we did flirting. And it's over. I'm off to clear driveways for summer residents. They can't get to their homes until I do my job and it's late enough in the spring to make it happen.

The snow bank blocking the entrance to Wild Hare Drive is waist high and can't be moved with the plow. It's been setting up all winter, the snow compressing like concrete, melting then freezing, the weight of a hundred or two hundred snowplow passes on Ash Valley Pine Road, layers upon layers until the snow bank becomes a rock-hard barrier. The sun and warmth have helped, but it'd still take a bigger truck than the Blazer to get through.

I could wait. I could CB Ben and tell him it's too tough, that they'll have to wait another couple of weeks. And that would be fine. But then I'd be done for the day and be left with the thoughts of Libby and Anthony and Terry. Empty time is not what I need.

If I can break through the snow bank, the rest of the driveway and the cabin's individual driveways will be a piece of cake. These three families have cut the trees wide off the road and around their homes. They wanted, and created, views. They moved to Ash Valley Pines and took away the pines. The good part of this is that the sun has already done much of the work for me.

From the back of the Blazer, I grab the shovel. If I had stopped at the hardware store and bought the pry bar, my job would be much easier. The shovel will take some abuse, using its now sharp edge as an ice-breaker. I see my gloves and take them too. There's no need for blisters.

The sun is high. In another three months, it will be at its highest and will start south again. I think of taking off my shirt, but figure the sweat will drip to my pants if I do that and I'd rather have a wet shirt than wet pants.

I think of turning on the radio, but the spring noises are nice: the camp robbers, blue jays and ravens, the ever-increasing wind through the trees. I want to hear spring noises, not oldies and college-through-the-mail-in-less-than-one-year commercials.

I'll start in the center and work one way, then the other. I'll whack loose blocks, then plow the garbage-snow later. I come down with a test swing and the shovel blade only goes in two or three inches. I take off my watch and put it in my jeans pocket. I put on my gloves and start in.

I use the shovel like a straight hoe, coming down hard and sharp, and the chunks come off and every time I think of what I did and of Terry's words on the CB, I focus on the next chunk of snow I want to release. My daydreams go to Dad and me talking last

night in his workroom above the garage and then go from there to what I could have said and what I should have said and how I should have acted and what Dad and Mom might be thinking right now and whether I'll ever be able to right what has happened between us. I quit shoveling and stand up. The breeze hits my chest and stomach and the wet shirt acts like an air conditioner and I think about my sweaty shirt and hot skin, my strengthening muscles and stiff knuckles. I pay attention to what I'm doing. I let go and dream about living at the ranch, but when I figure that I'm going too far, letting my optimism run too far ahead of reality, I take stock of what I've accomplished on the snow bank. I use the shovel how you're supposed to use a shovel and make semi-piles of chunks, moving pieces around, neatening up my mess as I go. At times, Libby and Anthony come into focus and my stomach flies and my guts feel like they might let loose, the worry so great that Libby has fallen in love with Anthony and that the lake might be wasted effort. Because if this is so, if Anthony has convinced Libby of a future, a future far different than what I want to offer, then I'm in for a bad time. And these thoughts of Libby are the hardest to let go of. I work faster, try to make large chunks, but somehow the worries grow into larger and more complex worries. Finally, what works best is not only to work so hard that my breathing becomes loud, but to think of Jake this morning and of him moving on to eighth grade. The sweat blinks off my nose and runs down the sides of my eyes and I think that maybe this morning was the gate that has let us pass. If Mr. Laszlo had decided that Jake needed to attend a different school, maybe Libby and I would have ultimately failed. But now that Jake is moving on, is moving forward, Libby and I can too.

By the time I open up a slot in the snow bank five feet wide, my leather gloves are wet halfway down my palms. I stand up, pick my wet shirt away from my chest, and think that maybe I could use the plow to move the rest. I could scrape away at the snow bank, using only a quarter or a half a blade at a time. I take out my watch, then look at what I've done so far. I estimate the time to finish the job if I shovel or if I use the plow. I listen to the sounds around me and think of being done with this chore and what I would do with the time between now and when I pick up Jake. I bend down and start chopping.

In the end, the chunks of snow bank look like a frozen lake up-heaved. On my gloves, the line between sweat and dry has gone white with my body's sweat and minerals. I stand near the hood of the Blazer and take them off, then strip my shirt and lay the now-heavy thing flat. I rub my chest, my hair tickling from the wind. I flatten the sweat near my bellybutton. I wipe my arms and reach behind and rub my neck. Thin clouds have started to ease the sun and I cool down quickly, my arms goose-bumping. Around the snow chunks, loose snow, like laundry detergent, shifts slightly when hit by a gust. There's a moisture in the air.

And then while I'm looking at the job I just completed and thinking of how nice it will be to sit down and move snow from behind a seven foot wide plow, I think that maybe I should take Jake with me tomorrow.

Tomorrow is Saturday and he won't have school. Even if he had school, I'd take him. I didn't take him all winter. And tomorrow's storm will probably be like

yesterday's, small and insignificant. I'll take him to the mill parking lot, where I taught him to drive and where I taught him to use the Landcruiser plow.

It'll work alongside my idea for the lake. Libby will know that I mean what I say. She'll know I'm thinking about them both. And for her, what could be better than that?

I pull out my watch and guess that Libby and Anthony are done with lunch. Their lunch date. It's over and now I can concentrate on my surprise. I put my watch on, pick up the gloves and shirt. All three leave a dark impression on the hood. The breeze goes by and the impressions evaporate.

I go back to the broken down snow bank and grab the shovel. It's bent at the edges; the orange-painted handle is scratched worn from the sharp snow. Now I have two tools to buy.

Everything goes in the back. Up front, and I get my sweatshirt from the passenger seat. It's warm and dry. I start up and move the truck around so that I can plow the chunks to the edge of Wild Hare. I drop the plow and move forward slowly. The chunks pile up and I push them beyond the roadway and reverse for another swath. Then I re-position and push the other way.

When I'm finished the two piles bordering the entrance to Wild Hare Drive look like broken-stone pillars. White stone pillars. It looks grand; it looks prestigious.

Beyond where the snow bank used to sit lies the driveway. The snow on it is only six to twelve inches deep. It'll be a cakewalk. This is my kind of work. I back up into Ash Valley Pine Road so that I'm faced straight down the middle of Wild Hare.

I pick up the CB and make a call to Ben. He picks up on his remote.

I punch the mike and say, "Mission impossible is mission completed." He doesn't get my joke, but I don't skip a beat: I report that Wild Hare is open for business.

He tells me to open a window and quit smelling the fumes. "You're done for the day."

"I'm not done by a long shot," I say.

"Ta-ta, Cole. Over and out."

I click the mike back home and drop the plow.

Jake is sitting at the base of the flag pole, looking straight up, the top of his head against the silver metal, when I pull into the junior high parking lot. I move to the drop-off area and he hears my truck. He stays seated until I stop, then he stands, grabs his backpack from the other side of the flagpole, shoulders it, and walks my way.

I lean over, flip the handle, and with my fingertips tip open the door a few inches. He reaches and pulls it open. After taking off his backpack, he two hands it, as if passing a basketball, into the back seat. It bounces, falls to the floor.

"Nothing breakable, I guess?"

"Nope." I hear the lines on the flagpole beating against each other and against the metal pole. Occasionally the metal hooks which hold the flag rap against the hollow metal and a longer, lower sound echoes.

"Where's the flag?" I say. I look up through the top of the windshield and wonder what Jake was looking at when I drove in.

"They take them down when school's over."

“Them?”

“There’s three flags. The real one, Colorado’s and something else.

”Well, when was that?”

“Thirty minutes ago,” he says. He reaches out his thin arm and pulls hard on the door. It comes his way, then swings back open. He waits for it to bounce, then pulls again, this time bringing it all the way closed. Without looking, he pushes the lock button, locking both our doors.

“I’m on time, right?”

“Not really,” he says. He clicks his seatbelt home. He adjusts it, pulling on the chest section to ease out the waist part. He does all these things without me asking. I wonder if somehow I taught him these habits or if Libby taught him or if he simply learned them on his own.

“Ready?”

“Okay,” he says, in a chant-like voice.

“What?”

“It’s a cheerleading thing. *Ready...Okay*. You know, before they start a cheer?”

I put the truck in drive and start forward, almost asking Jake if cheerleading’s going to be his next sport. But I want to stay away from anything that might get us in a rut. I was with him when he went after the kid on the football field. Since then, I’ve taken sports off the conversation list. It’s a no-brainer that cheerleading should probably be avoided too.

“Did you see Mom at lunch?” he says. He’s staring out his side window.

"I was working."

"Did she eat with Anthony?"

I don't stop, but I can't help slowing down. I try to remember if we talked about this before. Maybe he heard Libby and me talking this morning. I don't think so, but how else could he ask such a question. "Why does that matter?" I look at him, but he won't look at me.

"They work with each other," he says. Then a few seconds later, he says, "I don't like him. You don't either, right?"

We go over to Seventh Street. At the intersection we roll through a large drainage dip; a thin line of melt water splashes against the truck. "I don't know," I say.

Before I have time to give him a better answer, he says, "Are we going home?"

"I thought we might." We get to Lincoln and I make the left and start towards the other side of town. I see a friend at the Phillips 66 and wave.

"Why'd you pick me up?"

"What is this, twenty questions?" I look at him again. He's pulling the chest section of his belt away from him. "What's wrong with your belt?"

"It's pinching my neck."

"Well, let it be."

He lets go of the belt, stares back out the window.

"Was school okay?"

"Yeah."

"It went well this morning, huh?"

"I guess." He rubs his knees, scratches at one of his shins.

"You guess?" I say. I put my arm out the window. The air is cooler. I look up and the clouds have become thicker.

"Are you working tonight?" he says.

"Probably not."

"Oh."

"What kind of 'oh' is that?" I say. "Maybe I should go to work, huh?" I look over and smile, thinking he'll see me. He doesn't, though. He keeps his eyes toward his window. We move through town, and as we pass the drugstore, I say to Jake, "Wave to Mom."

He looks over and waves with both hands, like a comedian or a clown. I try to catch his eyes, but he won't give them to me; like Terry this morning on the road, he looks through me, at the drug store and at his invisible mom inside.

"See her?"

"You saw her?" he says.

"I wasn't looking," I say. "I asked if you did."

He says, "Oh," and looks down the road. He wants to know if we can stop at the 7-11 for a Coke and I wish I had thought of this first.

We pull in and I give him the three dollars I find in my wallet. I leave the truck running. The wind comes in strong and cold through my window and I close it three-quarters of the way.

Inside, Jake weaves around taller and bigger people, a bottle of Cherry Coke in one hand, my bottle of 7-Up in the other. He pays the cashier but doesn't say thanks when he's given change.

He pushes against the front door with his forearms and comes to my side first. I roll down the window, take my drink, and roll the window back up. When Jake gets to his side, he opens his drink and takes two or three sips. Then he closes the bottle back up, and climbs in.

"Okay?" I say.

"Ready to rumble," he says.

I don't ask, but I don't know where this phrase comes from. Or where he heard it. I wonder if Libby knows the phrase. I wonder if Jake knows how bad I've been to him. And if he does, will he let it be fixed?

We start home. For me, the second time today.

Before we reach the base of Fuller Hill, I ask him about Chris, his friend who will remain a seventh grader. I remember that Chris has gone with him to the Challenge Camp and I try that approach, asking Jake whether Chris was good at the climbing obstacles. But, I go nowhere with that, so I ask him whether Chris is still his friend and Jake says 'No' and nothing more. I ask him if he's looking forward to being the oldest in junior high, and he says he's not the oldest. The oldest grade, I explain, and he says, 'Of course,' and takes three sips in a row.

He finishes his Cherry Coke before we're halfway up Fuller Hill. He reaches the bottle above his head and drops it behind his seat. The bottle bounces on the backseat floorboard.

By the time we get to where Terry and I met earlier, in Two Ranch Park, I realize that Jake and I have talked about absolutely nothing. I shouldn't have ridden him for all his questions when I first picked him up. Now in the open space, I point towards the mountains and say that the clouds are coming down and that we might get snow.

He looks out his window, but I can't tell if he's looking at the mountains or at the cattle. His head seems pointed to nothing in particular.

"Were you lying?" he says.

"That's the forecast. But they might be lying. We'll find out."

"Not that," he says. He suddenly turns and looks straight at me.

I look at him, not sure of where he's going.

"About working tonight."

He looks like he might cry, and I don't want that, so I say right away, "No. I meant that. I'm not working. Ben told me two hours ago that I was done for the day."

Jake looks at me strongly, fiercely, like he wants to hit me.

"That's what he said," I say, looking back and forth between the road and him.

"He told me to go fishing. You can hear him say that, huh? I told him I was no fisherman, and that's right, huh? No. He said I was off tonight. Even if it snows, I won't go until tomorrow."

He turns his head back to the window.

I start to ask him if he wants to go with me tomorrow, but right when I start my question, he starts to say something and I shut up.

“If the cows have calves now, will they die?”

I look out his window, look for calves. I don’t see any. “Maybe. If it snows or if it goes cold and rainy.”

“I saw two babies back there.”

“Did you? I don’t see any.”

“Not here; back there.” He nods his head backwards.

I glance backwards. I wait.

“So, they’ll die?”

“If it looks like bad weather, the ranchers will bring them in.” Ahead, near the orange snow fences, the corniced snow drifts that formed over the winter have collapsed; huge chunks of snow lie scattered at the base of the ten foot drifts. I tell Jake, “I had to shovel through a rock-hard, three foot snow bank today. My arms are killing me. You should see the shovel.” I point over my shoulder with my thumb.

“You said it was going to snow, so why aren’t the ranchers getting them?”

“They’ll get them, Jake. Don’t worry. Those ranchers don’t want to lose any cattle, especially the calves. Trust me on that one. Those are expensive babies.”

He nods.

I look at him and point again with my thumb. “You should see the shovel.”

“Did you break it?”

“The snow did. It was like rock.”

“The orange one?”

“Exactly.”

There’s a pause and we’re into the trees now. Around the base of most of the trees, the snow has melted, showing brown grass or dirt. In between the trees, the old snow has the old shine of a forming crust. The temperature must be near freezing. I make the next corner, then say, “How about helping me tomorrow?” I look over.

His face goes sour and he says, “Shoveling?”

“Plowing,” I say. “If I work.”

After a moment, he says, “What did Ben say?”

“About what?”

“About me helping.” He rolls his window down half way, sticks his hand out, pulls it back in, says, “Huh?”

“He’s not part of this.” I think of the Blazer we’re riding in. I should have picked Jake up in my truck. I don’t need to be driving this Blazer around. I have my own truck. I have my own plow. It’s just that this is the company truck and Ben wants us to use this. Insurance reasons.

“Oh.” Then, “So I can plow? In this truck, right?”

“We’ll see. Let’s not push it.” Maybe it will snow too much. Maybe it won’t be safe. Maybe the timing just won’t be right. I don’t want him to get excited about nothing.

“I guess so,” he says. “What time?”

“We’ll see if it snows first.”

“That’s the forecast, right?”

“Exactly.”

We’re quiet then. I take the curves slow. With the melt this afternoon, and the now-freezing temps, the roads are icing up.

Jake brings his knees up to his chest, wedging his shoes into the seat. I think of scolding him, but don’t. He puts his feet down twenty seconds later. He pulls the seatbelt away from his neck, lets it come back down, but keeps his hand between the belt and his neck. “There weren’t any calves,” he says. “I didn’t see any. I was kidding.”

I don’t look over. I don’t know what to say. I wait, then I say, “Good for the calves, I guess.”

He nods yes and we leave it at that.

It’s getting late. Libby should have been home an hour ago. Jake and I have been home for two hours and I’m running out of things to do, things to keep my mind off of where it wants to go, of where it can’t help but going.

Except for bringing in two loads of firewood, Jake’s been in his room the whole afternoon. Or at least I think that’s where he’s been. I’ve been outside, so I can’t say for sure. I started to replace some trim over the laundry room door, but got to thinking about everything and went hot and sweaty and knew I needed to find something outside to keep me busy. I thought about bringing Jake outside to help, but figured that might be pushing things. The way I saw it, Jake and I had made some progress this afternoon and the last thing I wanted to do was to bring that to a halt.

First thing was to rut out a deeper channel by the garage. The water was already standing, like I thought. Another warm day and the melt would have started flowing into the garage. Then I split a few logs that needed splitting. Jake had taken in two big armloads and we were down to maybe twenty or thirty more pieces. As I split logs, I could see my breath and smell the moisture. Standing there in just a sweatshirt and smelling the incoming storm made me think of fall and I was able to stay on that thought and those feelings for a good while. But then I looked at my watch and the fading daylight and Libby came back to me and what she might be doing, and more importantly, what she might do in the future. I remembered the previous fall and those days when I had everything to gain, with my new job and Libby happy and making plans and smiling more than she had in years. Last fall there wasn't a chance Libby would have considered someone else; she trusted me and what we were doing. Fall was a beginning and she was with me and I was with her.

I re-focused on the cracks in the logs and split heavily, clumsily, remembering how I had slept away from home last night. And on other nights, too many other nights. I remembered Libby's disappointment with me at school. And I looked at my watch and imagined awful things that might soon happen.

I tried doing something in the garage, cleaning up the workbench, putting bolts and nails in their proper coffee cans or butter containers, but I couldn't hack it. I was losing it. It seemed my daydreams were ricocheting like bullets inside the garage, slugging into my head over and over. When Jake and I had gotten home, I was riding high, sure of Jake's excitement in plowing with me tomorrow. And I was anxious to tell

Libby of the lake plans. But then she wasn't coming home and she wasn't calling and it got worse.

I don't remember how long I was in the garage. Besides the fumbling around at the workbench, I don't recall what else I did.

I opened the garage door. It clanked up, the ice that had formed during the last hour cracking and moaning. I went out to the Blazer and retrieved the bent shovel. Its blade was fried. I took it to the garage and figured I could probably salvage the handle. I threw it in the corner with the other wasted tools. I found an older shovel in the back and brought it out. It was a square-face, the kind I don't like to use because it shovels less and is heavier than the grain shovel. But there was no way I was going out tomorrow without some sort of shovel.

And now I'm leaning against the hood of the Blazer, trying to come up with something else to do. I can't go inside. Jake's room is lit. So is the bathroom light from our bedroom. The right side of our house, the living room and kitchen area, is dark.

The garage light flicks off and now it's really dark. I look to the west and there's only a shade of light, not really even a shade, more like a remembrance of light, and I think that maybe I'm trying to imagine it so hard that I'm seeing something that isn't really there. I look straight up and the clouds are low. I nestle my hands under my armpits and wonder if this will be a big storm. We've had other big spring storms. I think that I should try to remember the big ones. That would work fine. That would keep my mind busy.

I list memories: pets or girlfriends or trucks or teachers or wars or television shows or whatever else might link the big spring storms to years. I come up with 1973 and 1978 and then I hear the door open and Jake yells out, "Hey, Dad?"

I push against the Blazer and stand up and start walking to the garage. I say, "I'm picking up things."

"Do you know its dark?"

I start to go angry, because his voice has the snotty sound I hate. But then I think that he's kidding but doesn't know how, and so I say, "Is it? I thought maybe I was going blind. I figured I'd have to yell out and have you come rescue me." I get to the garage side door and reach in and find the button. The garage door creaks back down, the light above flashing on.

When the racket of the door ends, Jake says, "Mom called."

I close the side door, stand still. "When?"

"A while ago. I didn't know where you were. She's on her way."

"What'd she say?"

"That's it."

I was hoping for something more. I tell him I'll be in in a second and ask if he'll make sure the wood stove is warm and to turn on a light in the living room.

He stays quiet, waiting. Behind him, the faint light from his bedroom makes a fuzzy silhouette of his body. It's like he has a body but no face. It's like a horror picture and I tell him to turn on the porch light. I walk to the Blazer.

"Are you working on the truck?" he says.

I don't turn around, but keep walking. "Can you turn on the light?"

"Okay," he says angrily. The light comes on and the front door closes loudly.

I quickly turn around, hoping that maybe he's shut the door behind him, but he's gone.

Halfway to the truck, I stop and look up. I breathe out a long breath. Maybe none of this is going to work. I wonder if I should come clean with Libby. If instead of telling her about the lake, I should tell her about Terry. Of the teasing and the flirting. Of what she may hear from others soon enough and of what Terry and I never did. Of what never happened. Then she could tell me about her and Anthony and hopefully what they never did. Then everything would be out on the table. Maybe that's where we need to start.

I stand in the driveway and look around the place, at the Blazer and the house and the garage and the woodpile and understand that this will all be gone soon, home probably to some family that will only live here a few weeks a year, here to enjoy skiing or the lake. Like Libby's family used to do.

Libby could be gone. Or I could be gone. Because if Libby goes to Anthony, there's no way I could stay. I'd have to leave.

It's like some sad country song and I realize I haven't put myself in one of those songs since high school. What a sad son of a bitch I've become.

I mutter, "Fuck this." Then I say it louder a few times and start walking to the house. I'll tell her about the lake and if she doesn't like that idea, then I'll go to something else. And if she's fucking around with Anthony, then I'll deal with that then.

And if I need to talk about Terry then I'll do that. But right now I need to go in and make sure the house is warm and call Ben and figure what the hell I'm doing tomorrow.

As I'm closing the house door behind me, I see the lights of Libby's car swing into the driveway. The mudroom lights up, the jackets and shoes and the owl key holder. It's all bright. Then I close the door behind me.

I'm at the wood stove when I hear her struggling with the front door. I hear plastic bags rustling and her footsteps, the hard clops of her clogs on the linoleum, and I open the wood stove doors, pretend to fool with the burning logs inside.

"Sorry," she says in a flat voice. The bags go on the table. Then her keys.

I poke at the logs with the metal prong. The edges of the logs breathe, the glow pulsating in changing shades of orange, red and white. The bottom log crumbles when I poke it again, the two or three on top of it settling. Flames come from the crack I created. I put the poker back and close the doors.

"You and Jake doing okay?" She's putting things away, going from the table to the fridge, back to the table and over to the pantry. She's not wearing the sweater she wore earlier. Her sleeves are rolled up to her elbows. Her silver necklace shines around her bare neck. The purple flowers stitched on her white blouse's collar are bright under the kitchen lights.

She stops walking around, puts her hands on the breakfast table and says, "Hello?"

The back of my legs are hot from the stove behind me. I look at my wife and she looks at me. I want to say something or ask something but I can't. She watches me a moment longer, then goes back to the fridge, says something about dinner.

"How about a walk?" I say.

"Now?" She looks at me, a package of tortillas in her hand. "Now?" she says again.

"I guess so. Yeah." I walk towards her, put my hands on a chair and lean into it.

"It's dark. And it's cold and late," she says. "And what about dinner? Where's Jake?"

I point back to his room. Libby looks back and says, "Jake?"

Jake yells out, "Yeah."

She looks at me, but yells out, "Hey."

"Hey."

I fiddle with the cloth on the chair and try to see through Libby's face, down into something that would tell me what's going on. Her eyes look swollen, her cheeks too. Her hair is held back in a tight ponytail.

"What, Cole?" she whispers.

"You don't need to whisper."

"Then why don't you tell me why you're acting so strange." She's still whispering. "Why don't you tell me why you closed the door when you knew good and well it was me driving in. And why don't you tell me why you can't even turn around when I walk in the door?" She looks at me, but she's not finished. She breathes a couple

of times, then goes on, "I won't even go to the fact that I come in with grocery bags and you sit there fiddling with the fire as if it were the last fire on earth. I won't go there. You should thank me for that." She gets done whispering and she stares at me, the veins in her neck showing for a moment, then going away.

I don't know what to say. This isn't the way I want this to go. I cross my arms.

"Well, that figures," she says.

We look at each other a moment longer, then I see a flash of movement from the hall and Jake comes to the edge of the kitchen. Libby sees my eyes move and she turns around. She puts the tortillas on the counter behind her and begins toward him.

"I'm going plowing tomorrow," he says.

Libby stops and looks back at me. "Is that right?"

"I'm going to learn on the Blazer," he says.

Libby turns back and walks to Jake and kisses him on the head. "You did a good job this morning," she says. Then she hugs him, her body close and her arms all the way around.

"Remember what I said about plowing, Jake," I say. "It's not a sure thing, remember?"

He doesn't say anything, his body stiff from Libby's hug. Libby hasn't let up.

"Mom?"

She lets go and turns around, rubbing her eyes.

"Mom?"

"I'm just happy about this morning," she says. She rubs her eyes and nose. She picks up the tortillas, but keeps her eyes away from me.

"I'll call you for dinner," I say to Jake. I look at him strongly and he walks back down the hall.

I wait, then I say, "Libby."

She's at the sink, washing her hands. She pulls out the white cutting board and begins slicing tomatoes. She asks me to grate cheese. She asks me if burritos are okay.

"What happened?" I try again.

She doesn't turn, but says, "Anthony's leaving." She sniffs, goes quiet, then says, "One of his daughters, Harlan, his oldest, is sick and she's scared and no one's sure what it is. But he's going down there next week." She starts in on another tomato.

I watch her and I feel a rush of heat in my chest. I want to ask her about the illness, but more than that I want to ask her about Anthony, what they've done, what he's told her, what she's told him. I want to make sure. I say something, but it comes out warbled, so I start over, "What about the store?"

"He already has a replacement. This wasn't all of a sudden. He kept quiet, though. That's what our lunch was about." She turns around and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand which holds the knife.

The heat in my chest disappears. I know it's wrong, but knowing that their lunch was probably filled with tears and shock frees the tension in me.

I stand in front of her, tell her I'm sorry. And I am. I don't like to see her cry. But I'm glad it's not me making her this way. Her tears are tears that should be tears. "When next week? When's Anthony leaving?" I say.

"This isn't about Anthony," she says, pointing to her eyes which have started tearing again. "I love him enough, right?" She glances behind me, towards the hall.

I turn around, expecting to see Jake, but there's no one there. I turn back around.

"Right?" she says. "Do you know?"

"Of course you do," I say. "Of course."

"You understand?"

I nod, then say, "It's both of us. I'm the same way."

"I guess so," she says. She takes in a breath and holds it. Then she lets it out slowly. "Can you get the cheese?"

I turn for the fridge and she walks around me and out of the kitchen. I open the fridge and look in. It's not about Anthony. If it's not about Anthony, then it's not about Anthony. Which means it won't be about Anthony any longer. For her or me.

I hear the faucet in the bathroom turn off. I'm still at the fridge, the door still open. I get the block of cheese. I move food and look in the back for wine or a beer. Nothing. I close the door and hear Libby and Jake's mumbled talk from his bedroom. I stand quiet, try to hear. A wind comes against the house and the house creaks. I can almost feel it shift. The wood stove whooshes from the gust and the logs inside crack and pop from the sudden heat released.

I flip on the deck light, look for snow. Nothing yet. Another gust and pine needles float down in front of the deck light. Out beyond the side of the deck, I watch the big pine sway. I hear Jake's door close. I turn off the light and go back to the cheese.

"Jake says you were late." Libby comes into the kitchen, opens up the cabinet and brings out a glass cake pan.

"I didn't think so."

"Thirty minutes, he said." She goes back to the fridge, picks out a bag of chicken we cooked on Tuesday night.

"I was opening up a summer drive; I guess I got caught up."

"Then you worked outside all afternoon." She says quietly, "He wants to help, you know." She stands near me, opens up the baggie of chicken and lets the pieces fall onto the cutting board. She begins cutting them up. "I don't want to lose him."

I stop grating cheese and turn to her. She won't look at me though. "I'm sorry, Libby. I'm trying, I promise."

"Where are you taking him tomorrow?" She starts rolling the burritos, assembly line style: chicken, tomatoes, cheese. She's on her third burrito when she says, "If it snows like it's supposed to, I don't want him going."

"What's that mean?" I walk out of the kitchen and stand near the telephone table.

"It means I don't want him going through the canyon if it snows."

"I don't even know where I'm plowing," I say. I pick up the receiver, say, "I haven't even called Ben."

"Well."

"It'll be fine," I say. I put the phone back on its cradle.

"Can't you understand?" she says. She puts another burrito in the cake pan. She wipes her eyes.

I don't say anything, thinking of what she's thinking about most: Anthony, Jake, her dead sister, or our family. I can't tell and figure it's a bit of everything. But I don't want to stay quiet so I ask her, "What about me? What about what I'm trying to do?"

I stare at her making the last of the burritos. She puts them into the microwave, punches buttons, and the burritos start cooking. She watches the machine at work, the light, the hum.

I stay near the phone and say, "Did you see the snowman outside the flower shop?"

She stops and turns around.

"The one off Third."

She shakes her head no.

I tell her, "It was built three days ago by a kid in a red snowsuit. I watched him build it."

Libby watches me.

I scratch at my head and eyes and cheeks. "It was a good day to build a snowman, remember? That new snow was wet."

"I remember," Libby says.

"I don't know how, but that got me going and I know what I have to do."

"What's that?"

“First thing is a lake at the ranch.”

“What?” The microwave buzzes and she walks over, turns the pan around and re-starts the microwave. She comes back to me with a strange look on her face, “A lake?”

“I talked with the Wheelers at lunch.”

“And?” she says.

“And then I figured I’d take Jake plowing.”

“From there to there?” she says.

“I’m trying to tell you,” I say. I tell her again about the boy and the snowman, try to explain what I mean. I get going and I can’t keep up with what I’m saying or in what order I’m saying it. Libby comes near me and puts her hand on my elbow as I babble. I don’t want to stop. I tell her that I keep seeing that boy smoothing out the wet, shiny snow. I see the top part of the snowman lying next to the boy, ready to go on top, the final part. I want Libby to know everything about that day and what happened afterward and what I want to happen today and what I want to happen tomorrow. I ask her if she understands.

She wipes my face from the tears that came without me knowing it. “Cole. What are we doing?” We look at each other. “Huh?” she says. “What in the world happened?”

I wipe my eyes once, re-cross my arms. I shrug.

She squeezes one of her hands into my twisted arms. “We’ll figure this out. We will.”

I un-cross my arms, keep one hand held onto hers. Then I nod. "I hope so." I let go of her hand and put my hands in my pockets and stand still.

Libby looks at me another moment, then asks if I'm hungry. I nod, and she walks to the microwave, looks in, then opens the door, pulls out the steaming pan. She puts it on the stove-top, turns and says, "Ready?"

I rub my face and say, "Ready."

Libby yells out, "Jake. Dinner."

It's quiet except for the wind outside and the noises from the wood stove. I watch Libby. I watch her open a can of peaches and scoop them into a bowl. She goes to the fridge and brings out a jar of salsa. She opens it, puts it on the table. She goes to the sink and washes her hands. She dries them completely with the towel hanging off the fridge handle. I watch her and then she turns around. She wipes her face with her clean hands, then says to me, "Go get your son."

3.

I open the front door and find Jake in the mudroom. With both hands, I shake my head free of snow, water droplets and snow specks fluttering and falling. I stomp my boots.

“Where you headed?”

“To see if you need help,” he says. He’s sitting on the blue milk crate under the key-holder. One boot is on, but he’s fumbling with the other; the lace has come loose and he’s concentrating on threading it through the metal loop.

“I was on my way to see if you were up,” I say. “We got snow.” I stomp my boots again, bend to unlace them. “We’ll finish out here when we get back. I did enough for now. Breakfast and we’ll get on the road. Did Ben call?”

“I just got up,” he says. He drops the boot he’s working on and unlaces the other.

My coat goes on the hook; I leave my boots where I took them off. My socks are bunched up at the ankle and I pull them up before walking inside. I glance at the hall clock, wondering why Ben hasn’t called. On snow days he usually calls by six.

Jake comes up behind me, then turns and goes off to his room. I don’t think Libby put him up to helping me, because if she did, he’d be sporting an awful attitude.

Instead of going into the kitchen, I go back to the bedroom, glancing into Jake’s room as I walk by. He’s at his chest of drawers, pulling out his snowpants. A clump of

his hair rises vertical on the back of his head. It looks like an Indian head dress, the feathers sticking straight up.

“Ready?” I say, walking toward our bedroom, not wanting to give any impression that I care whether or not he’s ready. 6:15 in the morning is not a time to screw it all up.

Libby’s not in the bedroom or bathroom. She must be getting breakfast ready. I don’t think she slept more than three hours. I woke once and found her crying. I held her as best I could, but she got up and went to the bathroom. When we woke this morning, she looked at me with swollen eyes. But she smiled and said the worst was over. She told me she was sorry and I told her I was too. She asked me if I was serious about the lake and I told her I was. She smiled again and shook her head. She didn’t say anything and her silence seemed like a good start. Then she asked me if it had snowed and I got up and told her I hadn’t looked yet. When I got to the window, I turned back around and told her she better go back into hibernation. Her smile went away and she closed her eyes and put her hands over them. I figured the tears were flowing, but then she put stretched out her arms, clapped her hands softly and said, “Here we go again.”

After brushing my teeth and putting on a dry shirt, I go back to the kitchen. Jake is sitting at the table, staring off into nothing. Libby’s near the wood stove, sweeping wood shavings and twigs into a small dustpan. She opens the stove and tosses the debris into the flames. She sits down then, her legs tucked up and off to her side as if she’s posing for a picture. Her baby-blue, velvet-like robe is open slightly at the neck, revealing her white, checkered, long underwear PJs. She leans closer to the stove, her eyes closed, her face close to the stove.

I don't want to break the silence, but I say to Jake, "Ready?"

He doesn't even bat an eyelash, his eyes still focused on something between the end of his nose and the Timbuktu, his head as still as a spotlighted deer, but he says, "I said the first time."

Libby gets up slowly, putting her hands on the floor, then putting one on the coffee table to help herself up. She groans softly.

"At least a foot," I say. "It came in heavy, but it got cold. It's easy to move. Light as a December storm on top." I go to the pantry, bring out the oatmeal. I rummage a bit and find the raisins and the box of brown sugar.

"Roads aren't bad," I say.

Neither of them says a word.

Libby fills the tea kettle, puts it on a burner.

"Is Ben going to call?" Jake says. He's wearing a flannel shirt and a gray turtleneck. He puts his arms on the table, rests his chin in the cradle he makes with his hands.

"I suppose," I say.

"If he doesn't call, do we still work?"

"He's the boss," Libby says. "If he doesn't call, you can plow our driveway, how's that?"

"I want to go out," Jake says, looking at her.

"We'll go," I say. "He'll call. Remember what I said about calves being rancher's money? Well, this snow is Ben's money. He'll call, I guarantee it."

Libby fiddles with the oatmeal box and looks at me sadly or angrily, I can't tell which. I don't know what she wants me to say. Does she want to kill Jake's enthusiasm? My enthusiasm? She can't help but understand what I'm trying to do here.

She turns to get the bowls and I start for the fridge. The phone rings just when I reach in to grab some Cokes. I turn quickly, but by the time I place the drinks on the table near Jake, Libby has picked up the phone. Instantly, a hit of fear drains my chest. I don't know what Ben knows and if that's him on the phone, I don't want him saying anything to Libby. Or if it's Terry, I don't want Terry telling Libby how we met yesterday on the highway. Until it's all on the table, I don't want anybody saying anything to my wife. I want to tell her and I have a plan on how to do it, but it needs to be between us, not between her and Terry or Ben or my parents.

"Oh," she says. Then, "Yeah," and "Okay." She hands me the phone.

I take it, expecting Ben, but when I say, "Hello," there's a silence.

Then my dad says, "You up?"

I walk to the door which opens onto the deck. I go out into the small utility room, the smell of laundry detergent and lint strong, and say, "I'm getting ready to go out."

"Sleep okay?" he says. He clears his throat.

"When?" I crack open the door. A sliver of snow falls through the crack. Flakes fly into the room, the winds strong. I close the door, kick at the small pile of snow on the carpet with my foot.

"Forget it," he says.

“Well?” I say. I wonder if he’s checking up on me. That maybe he’s surprised I’m here this morning. Curious as to whether I just showed up. Maybe he would have spilled his guts to Libby if I hadn’t of been here. I start to go furious. “Anything else?”

“I’ve lived here all my life,” he says. There’s a pause, then he says, “God damn, do you see what I’m saying? I know this is a small town and I know how it is with rumors. This isn’t the first time I’ve heard something crazy. Okay?”

I don’t say anything. In the kitchen, the tea kettle whistles. Libby slides it off the burner and the whistle stops.

“You there?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“That’s all, I guess. I’m in here watching the news, Mom’s still asleep, and I thought of that and wanted to tell you.”

“Okay,” I say. There’s silence again and in the background, I hear his news program. “Quite a snow, huh?”

“You coming out this way?” he says.

“Haven’t heard.” I walk back to the living room and kitchen. Then I say, “Jake’s working with me today.” Jake looks up. Libby turns around, a packet of raisins in her hand.

Dad waits a moment, then says, “That’s good. Why don’t you bring him by and let him plow the road?”

“If we get out there.”

He says, “All right,” and I say the same and we hang up without saying good-bye.

“What he’d want?” Libby says. She puts two bowls of oatmeal on the table, then turns and brings the brown sugar.

“He wants us to plow their road,” I say. I sit kitty-corner to Jake. “He wants Jake to plow it.”

Jake doesn’t want to, but he smiles for just a moment, then says, “If I can.”

“What’s wrong with his plow?” Libby says. She sits down with a plate of darkly-browned toast. She spreads butter, then looks at me.

“Nothing, I guess,” I say. “That’s what he said, though.” I reach for more brown sugar.

“You want lunch?” Her voice is low, upset.

“We’ll get some in town later,” I say. “We’ll have time.”

The phone rings and I get up.

“No,” Libby says. “I’ll make you something.”

Jake complains with a loud sigh.

I get to the phone and it’s Ben. His voice is nothing out of the ordinary. His tone is the same tone it’s been all winter. He wants to know if I’m up. He wants to know when winter’s going to end. He tells me I’ve got Granite Loop and the usual parking lots and driveways and to keep the CB on because he’ll have something for me after that. He wishes he hadn’t let Randy go so early. I can tell he’s tired and probably hung-over.

I tell him Jake’s coming with me, and he’s not happy about that, but I don’t say anything back, and then he says that’s fine but to get going, people are already calling, complaining, bitching, trying their best to ruin his Saturday morning.

I look over and give Jake a thumbs-up and he goes back to eating with another skewed grin on his face. I glance at Libby, but she's staring off towards the wood stove.

Ben asks if Terry talked to me about the summer business and I say no. Hearing her name prickles my skin on my lower spine. I listen to Ben and try to hear in his voice if he's heard anything. He tells me he's got to talk to me; there's been an update.

"Coyote's, some night," he says. "After it quits fucking snowing."

He tells me we're in a God-damned traveler's advisory. He wants to know if I can believe that. I tell him I measured thirteen inches. He says it's still dumping and wants to know if the weathermen have their heads up their asses. "God damn," he says.

We hang up and I go back to the table.

"Anything else?" Libby says to Jake.

Jake takes his bowl to the sink, says, "I'm full."

"There's Pop Tarts in the pantry," she says. He starts to walk away and she says after him, "Full enough to keep your dad out of trouble?" She smiles after him and I hope he'll turn around and acknowledge her.

He makes the turn toward his room, then stops near the fridge. "Can I put some Pop Tarts in our lunch?"

"Of course," she says.

I keep eating. I get halfway through my oatmeal, then bunch some raisins and brown sugar onto the rest. Libby sips her coffee, then gets up and goes to the pantry. She puts a box of Pop Tarts into the plastic lunch bag. I see the red tube-box of Pringles. I ask her if we have any green ones.

“What?”

“The onion kind. The green box of Pringles.”

“Not today,” she says. “What’d Ben say?”

“Granite Loop,” I say. “After that, I don’t know.”

She puts the Cokes into the plastic bag, picks up the bag so that everything settles.

“I put in the left-over burritos. And that piece of pizza.” She ties the handles together, lets the bag back down onto the table.

I get up and put my bowl on top of Jake’s. Libby passes by and I feel the stray ties of her robe brush the back of my legs, my lower back. I’m still hungry so I put two slices of bread into the toaster. I turn around, lean back against the counter. Libby’s standing near the wood stove, her coffee cup in her hands and held close under her chin. I look at her and she looks at me. I know she’s thinking about the canyon. Of the accident a month ago. The three men from Oklahoma. On their way to their rental house after skiing and in the canyon a small avalanche came down on them. Their car was pushed down into the creek where two lived and one died. Drowned or hypothermia, I can’t remember.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey, back.” She drinks her coffee.

“We’re going to be fine,” I say.

“Anthony leaves in three days to go see his two daughters whom he hasn’t seen in five months. And now one of them might die.”

“Libby.”

“I’m glad you’re taking Jake,” she says. She takes a sip. “It’s a perfect thing to do.”

My toast pops up. But I leave it and go to Libby. As I get closer, the room warms, the wood stove already radiating its dry heat.

Libby watches me with her arms at her side. I get close to her and reach on each side of her, to her robe’s loose ties. She holds her coffee higher as I tuck one edge of her robe under the over and gently knot the ties in front of her. I rub my hands on her hips, smooth the material. “There,” I say. “Nice and cozy.”

“I’m glad you were here this morning.”

“Me too.” I kiss her forehead. On my way to the kitchen, I say, “These snowy mornings have to end sometime. It’s getting ridiculous.”

I butter my toast, look to her, and say, “You’ll be home normal time?”

She nods, “The new pharmacist comes in today. Anthony will be working with him late, but I’ll get home like normal.”

“Maybe we’ll stop and get Chinese.” I fold my last piece of toast in half, bite half of it away.

“No cooking tonight?” she says. She turns ninety degrees, warming the right side of her body. She keeps her eyes on me. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Suppose so,” I say. “And I’ll tell you about our new lake.” I wipe my hands over the sink, bits of toast scattering on the sink and dirty bowls.

“Is this for real?” she says. She turns back, her backside to the stove, the front of her body facing me. One side of her face is flushed from the heat. Her eyes look

brighter. Steam rises from her coffee cup and she takes another sip, her eyes rolled high so that she can see me.

I watch her neck move as she drinks. "As real as it can get," I say.

"Good," she says.

I wait a second longer, smile, wait for her to smile, then pick up our lunch bag and yell to Jake, "Let's get plowing."

Just outside town I ask Jake if he wants a Coke for the road. Except for asking where we were headed, he hasn't said a thing. Nothing. For thirty minutes we sat in the Blazer and listened to the wipers flip-flop and the defroster fan hum.

The road was even quiet. Saturday morning spring snowstorms tend to keep people inside. Two Ranch Park was a virtual white-out. The horses and cows must have been further out in the pasture or behind the barns. Even the farm houses were hard to see. It's a different world when snow comes down this hard. It's a quieter world, that's for sure and I suppose I didn't want to interrupt that quiet. So I let Jake sit. I drove and we both stared ahead.

He takes me up my offer. We stop at the 7-11. I leave the truck running. He gets a Dr. Pepper and I re-fill my coffee thermos. We get back in and he says, "This parking lot needs plowed."

"Not by us," I say, knocking my boots together outside the truck. I swing them back in, get situated. "We're on the move."

He opens his drink and it fizzes. I take a few sips of the hot coffee. We both put our belts on.

The county and city plows are working the city streets. I reach down and turn on the CB, check it for channel 37, bring the mike up and clip it to the sun visor. We pass the grocery store and watch a Ford make a swath, his plow creating a wake of snow beside him, the smoky mist of snow all around. Two blocks from the drug store and I see the shape of Anthony out front, shoveling. "There he is," I say.

Jake pushes against the seat with his hands and sits up straighter. I glance at his hand closest to me, the area around his knuckles white, small hairs on the backside. His fingers are skinny, but long, and I think that he has more growing to do.

"Do you know Jared?" Jake says. He sits back down and points over to the T-shirt shop.

"He took you snowmobiling?" I slow as we approach the drug store.

"Yeah," Jake says. "He's pretty cool. He's doesn't act old."

"He isn't."

"Kind of, he is."

I honk two loud honks at Anthony and he looks up. He's wearing his goggles; they're already caked with snow. I slow down more and Jake and I both wave. Anthony looks for a moment, then gives us a salute.

"Why doesn't he pay someone?"

I speed up and we pass the credit union where, at its entry way, a man behind a snowblower makes a racket of noise and a plume of snow. "He likes to do it himself," I say.

"Why?"

I think of Anthony's daughter. I look over at Jake. He's holding his warm jacket in his lap. On top of his gray turtleneck and flannel shirt, he's wearing his blue fleece vest. I don't think Libby has told him about Anthony leaving. I decide to let her tell him. It's her friend. It's her close friend and he's leaving. I look back to the road and something makes what Terry and I did this winter even more shameful. It had nothing to do with friendship. There wasn't an ounce of goodness in it anywhere. The guilt makes me turn down the defroster air.

I pretend to fool with the button controlling the rear-view mirror on Jake's side. I look at the mirror, but concentrate on Jake. And I can imagine how much Anthony needs to be outside in the cold weather, moving snow. How, like me, he hates to be inside. Thoughts attacking, ricocheting, and attacking again. I think that Anthony is thankful for this spring storm.

Jake looks at me and says, "What're you doing?"

"Fixing the mirror."

"You never said how come."

I look at the road. We're out of town. Another twenty minutes and we'll be on Granite Loop and I can put the plow down and do something productive. "What?" I say.

"About Anthony."

“About that? I guess he likes shoveling like I like plowing.”

“You like to work?”

“Most of the time. You’ll see.”

“I still don’t like him,” he says. He’s stares out the side window.

“There’s worse people not to like.” I reach for the thermos, take a sip.

A few cars pass us going toward town. I check the volume on the CB. Jake keeps his eyes out the side window and I hope I haven’t ruined the day. I’m not sure I like Anthony any more than Jake, but he’s leaving, and he’s leaving for a good reason.

The snow is still coming down, although it seems wetter, the flakes smashing onto the windshield and sticking. The roads have become worse. It’s a lower altitude on this side of town, so maybe it’s not a change in the storm.

We’re soaked in, for sure. I turn on the radio, wanting to know if the weathermen have figured out their mistake yet. I wish to God the station would switch their music. Jake doesn’t say anything, but I know for a fact he hates oldies even more than I do.

We pass the entrance to the landfill and Jake says, “I almost did something yesterday.”

I don’t speed up or slow down. I keep my mouth shut even though I want to ask him what or to who. I don’t know what he wants to say and I’m sure he doesn’t either. It could be he’s saying this in revenge of what I said about Anthony. Or it could be he’s telling the truth.

We go another mile in silence. I roll my window down halfway to clear it of snow. I roll it back up and the snow that wasn't cleared drops downward, leaving streaks of water and stretched snow. It feels better inside now, the air cold and fresh.

"I did," he says. He tries to tear the tag off the jacket in his lap. "I almost did something so that Mr. Laszlo would get me in trouble." A few seconds later, he says, "Do you want to know what?"

"Sure," I say. Up ahead I see the thirty-five per hour speed limit sign that marks the beginning of the canyon and I use it as an excuse to slow down.

"I found a can of black paint in the wood shop and I was going to sneak into the gym at lunch and pour it over the red and black letters. I was going to make a big black spot." He says it all in a spurt. He leans forward and slants the side vent upwards, taking the air away from the window and pointing it towards the roof.

"The AVJH letters?"

"Yeah."

He didn't do it so I can't be mad. If he had, I would have been furious and I wonder what I would have done, because yesterday I was on a roll and I wanted so bad for things to go right and they didn't, no matter how hard I tried. If Jake had poured that paint, everything would have been worse and I don't see how Libby could have taken it along with what else she was already taking. It would have put her down. And I wonder if it would have put us all down.

"Was it a big can?"

He looks at me, "It was full."

“That wouldn’t have been good.”

We pass the speed limit sign, then the yellow sign with the curvy black line, then the blinking yellow light with the sign underneath reading, *ICY*, then the sign that reads, *Slide Area*, and finally, the sign that says, *No Stopping or Standing Next Four Miles*.

“Where’s the car now?” I say.

“Back in the wood shop.”

I slow down for a red car in front. It has chains on and its flashers are going. A late-season tourist. I want to ask Jake why he didn’t do it, but I think maybe he doesn’t know and to ask would be the wrong question. “Well,” I say. “I’m glad you didn’t. That would have been a hell of a mess.” I look over and make myself smile.

It’s not any shit-grinning, ear-to-ear grin, but it’s enough, because he gives me a crooked smile back and says, “Yeah.” Then he looks forward and says, “Why’s he going so slow?”

“It’s icy, I guess. He’s got chains on.”

“When do I get to plow?” He starts drinking his Dr. Pepper again. He takes a three or four gulp drink that makes my eyes sting thinking about it going down my throat. “Huh?”

“You’ll get your chance. It might be this afternoon. At the ranch, probably.” On the sides of the road, the snow banks are a couple of feet high with the new snow. Every now and then the snow banks hillside rise higher from the small avalanches that have come down.

He says, "Man..." and exhales angrily. He burps, then says, "Can't we go out there first?"

"Let's get paid first. Remember? Besides, Ben would have our hide." I slow down even more, the red car in front slowing way down for the next turn.

"What am I going to do until then?" He bangs on his window a couple of times, trying to make the snow fall away; it's thick on his side.

I turn and tell him in a serious tone, "You're going to watch how I do it so you'll know how when it's your turn." I turn back and wait a few seconds. Then I turn up the radio and say, "And you get to listen to the radio all day."

"I hate oldies," he says, then he sees that I'm smiling and he says, "Oh."

The music stops and the announcer comes on and gives the same forecast that he gave earlier. Nothing different, although we've already received more overnight than we were supposed to receive from the whole storm. I switch off the radio and settle back, anxious for the canyon to end and for us to get plowing. Away from this slow red car. Nothing but deep snow. And when we're done, everything will look prettier behind us.

The windshield goes worse and I spurt some blue fluid on it, put the wipers on high. The blue mixes with the snow and the windshield clears somewhat. Once we get on Granite Loop, I'll stop and clear it off completely.

I switch the wipers back to intermittent. During their pause, the windshield goes blurry, but still, I see the wisps of snow come down from the right, as if a big gust of wind from the hill was bringing down an extra dose of snow. Just as the wipers start back up, a wall of snow comes down. I hit the brakes and say something to Jake. We

start to skid, and in front of us, the red car is being taken by the slide. It's like TV, where the car is taken by a flood. The slide hits the car at window-level and the car picks up and yaws so that the front of it is now perpendicular to the road. Then the blast hits us and it's a total white-out. There's a thud and I feel the Blazer's front end start to move to the left. I hear Jake yell out, "Dad," but there's nothing I can do; I keep my hands on the steering wheel and wait.

I can't see anything, but I know we've stopped rotating and I know we've stopped moving. Snow comes up onto the hood and I see it moving across slowly. Then the snow stops moving and it's quiet. Jake says my name again and I tell him it's okay.

The snow shifting around is like mist and slowly it clears and I put the wipers on full. I ask Jake if he's okay. He wants to know if that was an avalanche. I tell him to wait a second. It clears enough to see and we're in the other lane, pointed forty-five degrees towards the creek. Chunks and balls and wafers of snow come level to the hood of the Blazer. I can't see the plow. I look behind and the snow is shallower. We got hit by the slide's edge. In front of us, the snow is slightly higher. Twenty-five yards further, the road is visible.

"Was it?" says Jake. He's taken his seatbelt off and his hands are on the dash.

I start to tell him to sit back and wait a second when I remember the red car. I keep the wipers on full. Nothing. The mist has disappeared and now it's just snowflakes coming down. "Do you see it?" I say to Jake.

"What?"

“The red car.” I try and open the door, but it sticks and so I roll down the window and stick my head out, look again.

“It didn’t get hit,” Jake says from inside. “It missed.”

“No,” I say and roll down the window all the way. I look down and see that the packed snow is piled up just above the door frame. I push hard against the door, but it’s not budging.

“Dad,” says Jake.

“Hang on.” I reach for the mike. “Ben or Terry. You there?” Nothing. I try again. I look at Jake and he’s looking at me, his face worried.

“It missed it,” he says.

“Ben and Terry, come on,” I try again. Nothing. “Keep trying them,” I tell Jake. “You know how, right? Tell them we’re in the canyon and that a car went off in a slide. Okay? And stay in the truck. Something else could release. Okay?”

“Where are you going?” He takes the mike, looks at it, looks at me.

“I’m going to go look for him.” The wipers are still going crazy and I stop them. The snow falls down and melts against the windshield and I realize the truck is still running. I turn it off and the fan goes silent.

Out my open window, the wind blows against the trees. The snowflakes hitting the windshield sound like mice feet. My mind’s going everywhere, then I remember the emergency CB channel and I curse myself for not thinking straighter and I turn the channel. I take the mike from Jake’s hands and say, “This is an emergency call, over.” I look at Jake and wait. I touch his hand: it’s cold. He watches me, then puts his hand

under his leg. We wait and there's only silence and I try and think of how much time has passed between when the slide happened and now. The red car's gone and there's at least one person inside. I give the mike to Jake, tell him to switch back and forth between the channels. I tell him to wait twenty seconds each time before switching.

"Why doesn't it work?" he says.

"The canyon, I guess." I get my gloves and a hat from the back seat. Then I remember the shovel. I climb back through the Blazer and find it in the way back. I hand it forward and Jake takes it. He's kneeling on his seat and when I come back up, crawling like some dog through the cab, he's holding the shovel in one hand. In his other hand is the mike. I put on my gloves and hat. "And stay in here. I don't want you out of the truck."

I open the window all the way and toss out the shovel. Then I climb out and drop into the snow. It's firm and I only sink to my shins. I zip up my coat all the way and start for the left edge of the road. If the car was still on the road, I'd be able to see it; the slide wasn't that big. It must have dropped over.

I sink deeper and the going is slow. I look back to the Blazer and it's buried good. It'll take some digging to get it out. I look to the other side of the slide, at the vacant highway, and I wonder why other cars haven't shown. A fear goes through me that there might be other slides further down and that vehicles can't get through. I don't want to see this red car. I don't want to see a car half submerged in the creek, a man drowned or near-drowned or smashed up and bleeding. I don't.

Just as I get to where the guardrail should be, I remember Libby and me stuck on top of the pass one night, years ago, unable to go up or down, slides on both sides of the pass. I think of how warm and safe we were up there on top of the pass and how completely different this is.

I slam the shovel down and find the guardrail. Snow hits my face and a few flakes come into my mouth. I'm breathing hard. I make a lunge and stand on top of the hard metal. I use the shovel as a cane and look over.

There it is. Not in the creek, but close to it. Nose heading straight down. Sitting on top of the snow. The back window is blown out. Snow, like mud, is splattered all over the vehicle. It must have rolled.

"I got it," I yell back to Jake. He's in the driver's seat, his arms on the window frame. He waves the CB mike in his hand. "Got anyone yet?"

"No," he says, his voice tiny and high.

"I'll be back."

"Dad," he yells.

I turn around. He pauses, then says, "Should I keep trying?"

I yell, "Yes," and start down and across the hillside. I have twenty yards, max. I waddle through the snow. Every third or fourth step, I hit a hollow pocket and go through to my waist. My skin just above my boots is freezing. Every time I put a hand into the snow to check my balance, a fresh batch of snow goes inside my glove. I can feel snow packed near my fingers. I wish I had brought my snowmobiling gloves and not these leather work gloves.

I get closer and then I stop. I heard something. I wait, then hear it again: a man's voice, saying something or moaning. I yell out, "I'm coming," and move quicker.

I hold the shovel out like a soldier assaulting a beach. My leg goes through the snow and jams under a large rock. It takes me a second or two to release. I have to use my shovel, digging around it to loosen the packed snow. The snow is becoming like concrete, like ice. The voice moans again, then says, "Who is it?"

I tell him I'm coming. I struggle more with my foot and glance back up the hill. The snow from the avalanche looks like the snow after I plow. Like the waves of snow I push away from the road or off a parking lot. Messy, blocks of all shapes and sizes, fluffy looking, every kind of snow and all of it hard as rock. I re-trace the path I took coming down. Then I see the top of the Blazer's blue roof. On top of the roof is Jake. He sees me see him and he waves his arms. I choke, try to breathe, but I'm almost crying and my throat is tight. I want Jake inside the Blazer and out of this weather, away from danger.

Jake's tiny voice yells down that he got Terry. He waves with one arm. "I got her. Hear me?" He's wearing his thick jacket. His hands are bare and white. I wonder how long he's been watching.

I wave back and start again for the car. I move through the snow and wipe my face with my glove. I'm falling apart, I think. What am I going to do when I get to the car? I think of how many miles we are from town and how long it will take for help to get here. If there aren't any other avalanches, twenty minutes. If there are, they'll have

to use snowmobiles. I don't even have a blanket. I yell out and try to get my breath. I'm crying or hyperventilating and I can't get air.

"Hey," I say when I get close enough. I get to the back of the car. A piece of red reflector lays near the bumper and on the other side, poking up through the snow is a piece of chain.

I move around the vehicle and look down to the creek. It's thirty feet away and I can suddenly hear the water rushing.

"Hold on," I say. I get up to his window and it too is blown out. The man is pinned against the steering wheel, one arm folded up near his face, the other arm somewhere else. Snow is packed in different places around him. His face is pointed out towards me and there's blood coming from his nose and from a cut on his forehead. Snow is packed under his neck. "Here I am?"

He watches me, but doesn't say anything. I scrape the remaining window glass out onto the snow. I talk to him and tell him he got it worse than we did, but that it got us too. He moans like he hears what I'm saying. I get the snow away from his neck and from behind his back. I get all the snow that was touching him off his body. "Are you cold?" I say.

He closes and opens his eyes, as if he suddenly realizes I'm here. He starts crying and says, "Get me out."

Now what? I think. I don't know what to do. I don't know whether to wait or to do something else. I kneel beside the boy and look back up the hill. Jake's still on top of

the truck and he doesn't make a move. His arms are at his sides and he's watching. He makes a quick wave and then I decide to try and get this boy warm.

I start talking again and tell him help is coming. He's young, college age. His red coat is unzipped and underneath the coat, he's wearing a button-down denim shirt. I look in the car and on the floorboard is more snow and a road atlas, pages fluttered open. His hair is short, brown, and on the edges, blood has frozen, making the hair a reddish color.

I get the shovel and clear a space around the door frame. The snow comes away in square chunks. The boy moans a bit more. I tell him what I'm doing.

The snow's cleared and I kneel again near the boy. I put one hand against him, and with the other, reach in and pop the handle. The door opens slightly. The boy is wedged tightly so I let go of him and step to the side. I let the door open all the way.

I go to my knees and get close. There's snow packed in near his legs and I push it away, scooping it towards me and then behind. One of his feet is still on the brake. The other leg is bent upwards, as if the boy tried to shield himself by curling up into a ball.

I move in close and try to shield him from the snow falling. "Get me out," he says softly. I look at his face and his eyes are rolled my way. His eyes are brown.

I wipe the blood from under his nose. Then I look back up the hill, hoping to see the police or an ambulance or the single light of a search and rescue vehicle. Jake's still on the roof. He's kneeling now, on his knees or sitting back on his calves. His arms are around his body. I can't imagine if this had happened to us. If this was Jake trapped. If he were bloody and confused. My breathing goes to hell again and I look back to where I am. Then I look back up to Jake and wave. The snow coming down between us goes

heavier, then lightens. Jake waits, then waves back. He stands up, then kneels back down. I wish he'd go back inside.

I look at the boy. I take my jacket off and lay it open in my lap. I hold him with one hand and feel for the seat release knob. I find it and pull up. I use my elbow and push the seat back. I feel the boy come loose. I hold him there and then bring my jacket up. Using my chest now, I hold the boy still. I tell him to hold on, to not move, that it might hurt him more if he does. He doesn't struggle. I tell him I'm going to put a warm jacket on him and that I'm not going to leave until help comes.

I position my jacket around him. I stay close, my chest against one shoulder, my arm wrapped around and holding his other shoulder. My face is near his neck, up against his hair. I try and get comfortable, but my knees are in the snow and they're going cold. I get one knee out and wedge it against the door. I re-adjust again and figure that this is the best I can do.

The boy says, "Hurry." I feel his cheek muscles flex. His neck moves slightly.

"Jake's up there and he got us help. I'm right here and you're going to be fine. We just have to be patient."

The boy is quiet and he seems to relax, although I can feel him shivering underneath the coat.

I tell him about Jake. That he's thirteen and will be in eighth grade next year. "He's on top of the Blazer," I say. "Standing there watching, probably as cold as we are." I tell the boy I don't want him cold. If it were up to me, I'd take him home and put him in front of the wood stove. I'd let my wife, Libby, get him some hot chocolate and

the down comforter from our bed. I'd wrap them up, tucking the comforter under their feet and around their bodies. I'd find some food in the pantry and heat it up in the microwave. I tell the boy that if it's up to me, I won't let either of them ever feel cold again.