ONE

Empedocles: *Having seen a small part of life, swift to die, a man rises and drifts like smoke, persuaded only of what he has happened upon as he is borne away.*

On a friday evening in September, some time ago, a friend of mine spilled a bottle of lager across her lap and slurred her curiosity about how it all began, that summer I spent in a scour across the Kootenays. She doodled her finger through the caramel froth yeasting on the surface of her thighs. I thought about getting her a paper towel, but I thought about a lot of things. We were taking pot shots at empty beer cans with my grandfather's .22 calibre, and I'd lost my aim to nerves and thoughts and the restlessness that endures when adventures come to an uncertain close. I touched a scar on my cheek, about as long as a pocket knife, and wondered a moment after the Dead and the Gone.

How it all began – that's a good question. That's a philosophical question. It's like asking when a bullet starts toward the beer can. Is it at the moment slug exits muzzle? When I lean on the trigger? Somewhere among those hours spent checking and re-checking the chamber? It could be the munitions line, or the semi-trailer hauling shells down Highway One, or the clerk at the hardware store who

retrieves the carton from the glass. It could be strictly mechanical – hammer strikes casing, spark, ignition, *trajectory* – but over seventy parts make up the firing mechanism of a bolt-action rifle, even more if you count the bones of the human hand, the arm, the muscles and nerves and the synapses each themselves firing. And then, getting *really* philosophical, there's the Gunsmith's Paradox: to reach its target, a bullet must first travel half-way, and to travel half-way it must first travel a quarter, an eighth, a sixteenth, smaller and smaller, such that it will never reach its destination, such that it won't even start to move. This means nobody can ever be shot. This means no journey can ever end.

How it all began? Well, I can trace Gramps' defects all the way to his childhood: shrapnel he blocked with his sternum when he was seven, the result of a dud artillery round on a beach not slingshot range from home; a welding arc that dashed across his chest while he tempted his body's conductivity in the rain; smoke inhalation, steam scalds, stress levels, and a consistent blood-alcohol for all those years strapped inside a Nomex jacket with *Volunteer Fire* stencilled across the shoulders. That's his history, but if I were to pinpoint the moment when everything Began, capital *B*, the summer my family's past came a-knocking, I say this: at eighty-two years old, Gramps had his heart attack.

#

It was a poorly ventilated evening in May, the kind that encourages a man to splay himself along a loveseat and wear musked-up muscle shirts from his childhood. Gramps' house offered little in the way of air flow, so we'd wedged the stormdoor with a Gore-Tex boot and unshuttered the windows, and something like a breeze tickled my pits and the skin on my topmost ribs. Earlier, Gramps had salvaged a blastworn industrial fan from his storeroom, but I lacked the technical

suavé to revive a guttered servo, and Gramps lacked the sobriety. We'd settled onto the furniture in his den to suffer through UFC exhibition matches as we waited for the approaching dark.

I'd only been in the valley a few days, having fled from an impending thesis and some girlfriend drama that for many months has been only few bubbles shy of boil-over. It was to be the last visit before my indoctrination: a PhD in philosophy. Back east, my *significant other*, Darby – who I'd dated and not married for the better part of a decade – had taken to long nights at the university's gym, training for handball, of all things; each night, calling her, I listened to the unanswered telephone rings and marvelled at the gap between us. There are a number of things a handball player can do late into the night, but only one of them involves the sport so named.

Gramps went to the kitchen and banged open his fridge and I heard him grab a pair of bottled beer. Outside, the dusk light glanced off neighbouring roofs. Years ago, Gramps strung a mosquito net abreast the exterior window because brown birds tended to get drunk on the gemstone berries that grow on a nearby tree, and they'd kamikaze into the glass. One day he found a family of those birds piled at the house's foundation, and when he lifted them in his palm their necks lolled like tongues.

Pillow clouds swirled above the Rockies and I smelled the pinprick sensation of lightning on the horizon. The sky had turned the colour of Moroccan clay. Wood smoke loitered in the air like breath – it clung to clothes and furniture, a scent like chimney filth, or hiking trips along riverbeds, or the charcoal that remains on a campground after the campers have moved on. The province was in flames. Folks in the Interior had fled their homes and each morning I woke expecting to see the town ablaze. Earlier in the month, the Parks had declared Fire Warning Red and everybody – locals and tourists, bluecollars and rednecks, cops' sons, preachers' boys, parlour philosophers, even the

old, haggard men who huddle under the pinstripe tarp that sags off the bakery – doused their camping pits and boiled their hotdogs and darted amid traffic to stamp out cigarettes left to smoulder in the heat.

Gramps set the two open beer on the coffee table and his maimed dog, Puck – an eleven year-old, butter-coloured English mastiff – lumbered from behind a pony wall. On the television, two long-limbed Muai Tai fighters lilted in half-moons around each other, gloved hands at temples, knees drawing like longbows. Then one of those stick-men split-kicked forward, sailfish-fast, and Gramps made this noise like *ununghf* and when I looked over the old bastard'd gone scarecrow. He lurched sideways and one hand clawed for the end table but fanned it, hauled a circa 1970 lamp down atop him, shade like a hot air balloon. I knew a thing or two about Emergency First Aid, so I launched into CPR and dialled 911 and, from the driveway, watched the paramedics green-light him for de-fib in the ambulance.

The ambulance veered behind a panelboard house and out of sight. Neighbours from yards abroad lurked in my peripherals: a pear-shaped man hiked his crotch on his verandah; two kids, young enough to be my sons (I was twenty-eight), leaned on their bikes. Through the living-room window, beyond the mosquito net, Puck stood a vigil, his big head swooping as he looked from me to the empty road and back again as if to say, *What are you waiting for?*

I rushed inside, grabbed Gramps' keys from his hunting vest, and commandeered his Ranger. It was a three-minute drive to the hospital, up a hill with a sixteen percent gradient and past a rundown hostel ripe with the stink of dope and gamey thrill-seekers. As I crested that hill, driving straight west, I was struck by a clear view of the Purcell mountains. For a moment, under the sunset, they looked to be on fire, the treetops glowing red and orange, and it seemed I could see past them, through that shield of rock and carbon, to the very flames that ravaged the province's interior. I felt a gust of warmth in my eyes,

like the dry heat from a wood stove, like a welding torch, as if from the blazes burning on the mountains' far side.

When I arrived at the hospital, a receptionist with curly hair sat behind a desk built into the wall.

My grandfather had a heart attack, I said.

Cecil West?

That's him.

She directed me to a lobby with a window overlooking the courtyard of an old folks' home. There, a double-bent man, out for an evening stroll, passed half a sandwich to a dalmatian at his side. In the room with me, a toddler drooled on a Tonka dump truck he'd filled with alphabetized blocks. He wore a spaghetti-stained sweatshirt, and he mimicked an engine's hum as the Tonka trundled left to right, where he dumped its cache in a heap against his knee. On those frequent trips to the hospital when I was a kid, Gramps never let me handle the scarce toys laid out in waiting rooms – germ laden and smeared by hands too long unwashed, I suppose.

Then a tall woman my age, with blonde hair tied in a bun and a thin, square jaw like a boy's, stomped into the waiting room and glared down at the toddler. She wore blue jeans faded in scruffs at the thighs and a grey t-shirt cut above her triceps. I recognized her as a fling from my highschool years. Missy, she used to be called.

Where's your brother, she said to the toddler.

Went to get a Coke.

And left you here, she said, and looked right at me when she did. Alan?

Hey, Missy, I said.

She curled an arm to her hip. Nobody calls me that anymore, she said, but didn't seem upset. You alright?

Gramps had a heart attack.

Jesus.

Yeah.

Don't worry, if I remember your Gramps, he's too stubborn to die.

Thanks, I said.

She pressed the back of her wrist to her nose, and I thought I recalled her doing that in highschool.

You gonna be around long?

Just the summer. Or what's left.

She bent to scoop the toddler under her arm, pried a stray block from his pudgy hand.

Danny's a cop, she said. That's my husband.

I don't remember him.

You either, she said – a retort, but I'm not sure what she meant by it. She made a *gotta go* motion with her head and disappeared through the door, and I sensed that I would not see her again. Outside, in the courtyard, the double-bent man raised himself to height, dalmatian by his side, and together they scuttled toward the care home's rear door. Gramps had told me, time and again, that he'd rather die than spend his final days locked up with a bunch of bluehairs. If he got that bad, I was to drive him to his cabin in Dunbar and there'd be a hunting accident involving his prized twenty-gauge – a weapon that reminded him of his days across the pond. Couldn't do it himself, he told me, else he'd get eternal damnation. At least once per visit he and I swung into his truck – an old four-by Dodge reeking of hides and the rusty scent of bled animals – and drove down Westside Road, past the ostrich farm, to the gravel pits where highschool kids built bonfires big as campers, and there we'd waste the day and a carton of rimfires on emptied tuna cans and paperback books Gramps had deemed uninteresting at best.

When I was finally admitted to Gramps' room, I found him in an aquamarine hospital gown, upright but bedridden, spotted with sticky discs and wires that relayed iridescent spikes to a CRT. Gramps' heart,

I would discover later, hadn't stopped due to cholesterol or disease or blood pressure: like breathing, I guess, the heart is on a cyclical firing sequence, and Gramps' had simply misfired – it amounted to a biological mishap, a fault in his ignition protocol, too much gunpowder down the musket. Gramps shifted in bed. Deep lines drew along his cheekbones and wrinkles bundled like metal shavings in the corners of his eyes. He peeled his lips over his gums in what could have been a smile.

No flowers? he said.

I only bring flowers for good looking girls.

I'm in a gown.

And it brings out your eyes, I said, and sat on the edge of his bed. He seemed very small beneath that sheet.

You doing okay? he said.

What kind of question is that.

I'd hate to ruin months of self-pity just by having a heart attack.

You are such a dick, I said.

He grinned, downward. But seriously, he said. You okay?

I'm okay, Gramps, I told him, with as much conviction as I could muster.

He cast his eyes to his hands, fiddled with them in his lap. I chewed a hangnail on my thumb. He looked old, too, all of a sudden – moisture filmed his irises and his cheeks sagged at an angle off his jaws, bespeckled and age-worn, and what little hair remained seemed wilted and thin, like the strands you find gummied to the tiles of a public shower. He looked, I guess, like a grandfather on his deathbed.

I'm dying, he said.

No you're not.

It's like approaching a wall.

I nudged his thigh with a fist. He flashed his teeth.

I'm not just traumatized. A guy knows when the time is up.

What'd the doctor say?

It's coming, Alan. I can feel it.

No. You can't.

I need you to do something for me, Gramps said in a drawl I didn't like. And I need you to do it without asking any of your ridiculous philosophy questions.

Then I was outside under the florescent lights that lit the asphalt parking lot like an ice rink, and then I was in the Ranger with its smell of Old Spice and sloshed beer and everything else my grandfather. From the radio, a monotone voice droned factoids about the burning interior. I drove the long way around Invermere's lake, like I used to do when I was sixteen and desperate to ogle the girls whose folks had come from Calgary to spend their summer in the great, untamed wild of the Kootenay Valley. At the beach, kids half my age gathered under a streetlight. They dabbled toes in the water and sloshed vodka on their gums and I cringed at the idea that kids were now half my age. Home, I went to Gramps' bedroom, like he instructed, and inched a shoe box from beneath his bed. It was maroon and covered in dust and dog hair and inside I found a trove of sentimental items: a tarnished cap revolver with a sulphur-scorched hammer stained as though by ochre; a dehydrated poplar leaf big as my hand; at least two mouths worth of baby teeth, some my own; a wedding band too large for any of my fingers; a silver zippo lighter adorned with the American Eagle. And there, at the bottom, I found an address with the name *Jack West* scrawled in my grandfather's blocky script. I ran my fingers along those letters and, lifting the paper from the box, felt the passing of a burden. What goes around comes around, they say, but I'm not so sure. Never really leaves, maybe.

I need you to find your dad, Gramps said to me from that hospital bed. Because I don't know how much time I've got left, and there are some things I need to say to him before I go.

Here's a story about Jack West: in '69, when he was a stupid kid, he shot me in the leg with a .22 calibre air rifle – our very first introduction. Him and his old bastard Cecil had lodged the night in a copse of trees a short distance from the cabin they owned out at Dunbar. Cecil'd caught wind of a series of break-ins, and upon inspection found stuff missing: a couple old plates, fistfuls of cured elk, one or two sixers of beer. The cabins that lined the Sevenhead River were easy prey for scavenging, and though I could've foraged to keep myself alive, I had my daughter, Linnea, with me. Maybe I got cocky, too: the night Jack shot me was the first night I didn't do a full search of the bushes that ringed the cabin and its field. Same carelessness could get a man killed in war, I'll tell you that.

The moon shone full force that night and the cabin's front door was clear for thirty yards in all directions. I intended to camp just inside the entry because it was March, and chilly, and I could smell rain on the horizon – that scent like gravel that is universal across the world. I'd also whiffed the sourness rising through the collar of my shirt, and hoped to snag a bar of soap. My daughter didn't seem to care, but a guy needs to have his own standards – we can't all be bush men, regardless what Cecil West has to say. As Linnea and I skulked through the forest I grunted warnings to watch for the tree branches and their pine needles, because I'd seen a guy lose an eye in Vietnam after he got whipped in the face by a bamboo stalk.

I crouched at the border of the treeline and did a slow, one-eighty scan, though in hindsight I can't guarantee thoroughness. If I'd really been searching I might have noticed the mud marks at the base of the cabin's door, or the foot prints in the mushy earth where Cecil and Jack had earlier done an inspection. I sniffed the air, tilted my ear to the quiet, for Linnea's benefit, mostly. She was fourteen back then and unimpressed with anything I had to say. Partly, I hated myself for hauling her along, for putting her through that. I squeezed her shoulder for

reassurance then exited the tree cover and bolted for the cabin's door.

Jack was fifty yards upwind. He tells me he can't remember the events that led to the gunshot – they're obscured to him, a mishmash of adrenaline and instinct, and I believe him. He was pubescent and he had a rifle in his hands, felt empowered, bigger than fourteen years old. He was no stranger to the outdoors: at school, during games of manhunt, Jack hid among the thick bushes outside the schoolyard's ringwire fence. Protocol forbid him from romping through those wilds, but Jack West was never really a kid to bend to any rules besides his father's. He liked the wilderness, and he liked to hunt, and he was not unaccustomed to firearms. He knew how to handle a gun: never maintenance a rifle with the action shut; a firearm's safety is true in name only; to avoid eyepiece gouges on your cheek, nestle the stock on the muscley part of your shoulder, right where the deltoid curls like a rope to your pectoral.

Here's what I think went down: Jack got scared. I darted from the treeline like a burglar and Jack traced me with his irons. I know the sensation of having a person in your sights, that flutter where your throat meets breastbone. Jack would never admit it, but he struggled in the shadow of his old man, so maybe he saw a chance to chin up in Cecil's eyes, a chance to have the old bastard give a father's approval. And in Jack's defence, I didn't exactly look like a guy who didn't need to be shot. My clothes were bushworn and sedimented with God-knows-how-much mud and I was stalking toward his cabin, hunched like a guerrilla. I reached the door and jimmied a kinked nail in the lock and jostled it around, and the whole time Jack had me trained in that thumbnail space between the sights.

A .22 has about as much kick as an impatient cat. As I twitched the nail around the tumblers, the woods were quiet. I vaguely recall the sound of my own breath. Then there was a small *whump* across the valley, and the bullet snagged me in the calf.

It's a little blurry after that. I hit the wooden wall of the cabin and scrambled around the side for cover. The adrenaline was in me. Cecil came tear-assing around the cabin in pursuit and his gumboots left skid trails in the mud and he slid enough to touch his knuckles to the dirt. The whole time, I'm nowhere near to finding cover and I'm hearing gunfire like popcorn in my skull, as though I'm back in the jungle, so I plant my feet and kick a rock aside in case it trips me up. Fight or flight, and all that. I test the turf, the give, how much slick I have and how well my boots bite into the mud and bloodweed and parched knotgrass. And there's Cecil bearing down on me, the first goddam Canadian I'd met since crossing the border, this maniac with a cadet's hair and a menacing way of moving forward, as if he knows how to handle himself, as if he's going to rip me a new asshole.

Get away! I barked to Linnea, and drew my hunting knife from its sheathe on my thigh.

The gap closed. Cecil ditched the rifle – no time for him to reload it – and I lashed the knife. He twisted mid-lunge, deflected the blade along his ribs and cinched his elbow down on my arm it in a text-book trap, a trick the British Army taught him during his years in London for the air raids. I rammed my forehead into his nose and he dug his knee into my gut. We meshed together, held each other like wounded men. But flawless victories are for the Bruce Lee movies: people don't go unscathed; people don't stay calm. We're desperate and cowardly and we scramble like beasts – a man would betray his own son if it meant one more shaky breath. Cecil cracked me with his elbow and I gouged his eye with my thumb and the whole time my knife flapped useless, pinned.

We stumbled apart. I smeared blood and snot on my palm and Cecil squeezed juice from his eye.

I think you've got the wrong idea! Cecil hollered. He lifted the rifle from the ground.

You shot me.

My boy shot you.

Yeah?

Cecil levelled the rifle. I tightened my grip on the knife.

You ain't gonna shoot me with that, I told him.

That so?

You didn't reload.

Cecil ran his tongue along his teeth. He gave a nod and planted the gun's butt in the dirt. You're right, he said.

Get outta here.

This is my cabin.

Hell if I care.

Put the knife down.

Gimme the gun.

Cecil didn't move, leaned on the rifle as if breathless. You're bleeding, he said. I can help. Where'd it get you?

Calf.

Lucky. Hollowpoints. Shrapnel in the meat?

I nodded, couldn't feel the exact injuries except the warmth blooming, sticky, against my leg.

I have beer, and some fishing line, Cecil said. It won't be fun, or pretty, but you can strike it off your list of things to do before you die.

For a moment I didn't respond, sensed my daughter's eyes on me, knew, whether I liked it or not, that I was at this man's mercy.

I'm Cecil, he said.

Archer, I told him.

You here from the States?

I showed him my gums, had no idea if he was a sympathizer or even where I could find one. Cecil waved a hand. Forget it. Anyone else out here with you?

I sheathed the knife. I've never been good at reading expressions,

but Cecil seemed genuine, and he had the face of a guy who had seen enough bullshit. Then his son rounded the cabin and I looked upon Jack West for the first time. It's been a long road. His fingers kneaded the fabric at the hem of a bulky coat and he shuffled to Cecil's side. If I had it my way, that's how I'd remember Jack West – just some stupid, awkward kid on a chill evening in spring, when the future and all its shit were still distant, impossible things.

#

I was on the run from the US Army. Weeks before, home in Montana, I'd received letter from Uncle Sam saying they needed me for another tour. It came with a stack of bills and a hardware flyer, and the mailman who handed it over – an old guy with watery eyes – bit down on his lip as if he had advice to give. At the top of the letter, in red, block typeface, it said FINAL WARNING – so if I didn't want the military police on me like a herd of turtles then I had to skip town or re-enlist. One of the toughest calls I've ever had to make: I'm a decorated soldier, I've got a purple heart, a long service award, a combat action medal – even back then I wasn't some dreamy college kid crafting posters to save the world.

The day that letter arrived I grabbed a bottle of my homebrewed wine and got in my Toyota pickup and drove out to the acreage where I grew up. That property was someone else's legacy by then, but my family had made the land fertile, had stripped their palms raw tearing up bloodweed, planted and cultivated the trees along the riverbanks to give the soil strength. If any ghosts haunt it, they are ghosts I would know by name. The new owner – a good enough guy – had flattened our old house, but the landscape was unchanged. Landscapes take longer to move on; they're ponderous, they remember, and shaping them takes a birdwatcher's patience. You can't bulldoze a river. You

can't wrecking ball a forest. Generations of my family went into the sculpting of that land: our sweat flavours the waters that feed the wellspring; acres of poplar trees have heard us fight and bleed and carry on. Us Coles are in the soil, and not just metaphorically.

My part of Montana is all prairie fields, but if you find yourself a vantage point and look west you can see the Bitterroot Mountains across the wheat and birch and horsehead pumps. When I got to the acreage I hiked to a land bridge above a small stream where I first put my hand on a girl's knee and where we scattered my dad's ashes in '59. He was a county deputy who spent the whole of his career without a promotion, and I don't think I ever saw him as happy as the day I made Sergeant First Class. I was twenty-seven; first thing he did was salute. So that stream was a good enough place to think things over. Neither me nor my dad had ever been men to shirk responsibility, but fleeing to the Great White North was an exercise in just that. Tough tradition to break.

But I broke it, and then I got shot in the calf, and then I was bleeding and wounded and madder than the Bible. Cecil put his shoulder under my arm and Jack tried to help but he just got in the way, so Cecil waved him to the sidelines. My adrenaline had flushed. The cold got me shivering. When Linnea tells this story she says I forgot about her, went hyper-masculine, all big chests and tough words and facial hair. She's only half right at best. Cecil hobbled me forward and the whole time I was trying to think up a sane way to call my daughter from the bushes. Jack picked at the hem of his coat and Cecil barked for him to open the door, for the love of God.

Wait, I said, and then I whistled for Linnea to come out of the trees. She did so with more than a little reluctance, and then, out in the open, she fixed me with her devil's glare. It's a glare that promises retaliation at a later time, a glare of the very-unimpressed. She often looked at Jack West like that, almost by habit. I've come to miss its intensity.

Upon seeing my daughter, Cecil's forehead bunched up like a man in thought. Then he nodded to himself and pushed me through the door and into his cabin. There, he boiled water on a propane stove and I hiked my pant leg and cringed at the stupidity of my wound. Jack and Linnea stayed outside. When asked, Linnea says Jack was more terrified of her than of me, that he kept his distance just tugging sprigs from his coat. That's the one sure-as-shit trait he inherited from his dad – complete lockdown around the better sex. Things might've turned out different if he'd inherited Cecil's backwater sense of duty, but that's neither here nor there.

At Cecil's behest, I propped my wounded leg on a chair and he rolled the pants above my knee. The hollowpoint had splintered barely after piercing the fabric, and I doubt any shards cut into muscle – not that it didn't hurt like a bastard. The skin had gone seven different shades of yellow and I could see the purple blotches where a fragment went in, but I've taken worse injuries. The worst – my burned arm – flared up by the mere proximity of heat. Cecil set his saucepan of hot water nearby, dipped a rag into it and, in a gentle, circular motion like a guy brushes his teeth, cleaned away the weeks of dirt and sod and soil.

Jack, he called, and the boy poked his head through the door. Get the whiskey.

Jack shuffled to the cupboards and opened them and I watched him search, hesitate, and search again. He craned his neck around but Cecil had his head bowed near my calf. I caught the boy's eye though, knew from the way he winced that there wasn't any whiskey in the cupboard. He said as much, real timid.

What is there? Cecil said.

Jack produced a bottle of sherry and Cecil blinked twice and pulled his lips into a cringe. In a comically gruff voice, he said, What's that doing in there?

Jack brought two ceramic mugs, filled mine up, avoiding my eyes the whole time, and scuttled outside. Cecil lifted his eyebrows and indicated the needle with dangling its trail of gut, and I raised my mug of sherry. Fucking ridiculous, but that's how it went down, that first evening: Cecil worked with a pool player's concentration, plucking metal from my hairy leg and closing the wounds that needed closing, and I drank sherry as if it were juice and wondered if I might just be luckier than the blessed. Occasionally, Cecil splashed sherry in his own mug and winced it down. I think we both pretended the sherry was whiskey, because, hell, it should have been. I've heard Cecil tell the story a couple times, and he always makes that change. Of course he makes that change.

So, where's home, Cecil said after a time.

Grew up in Montana, but we crossed the border from Washington.

Cecil's cheek twitched toward a smile. Woman drag you there?

Shit yes. Been there since Linnea was a girl. What are the kids doing out there, anyway?

Jack doesn't want to be in here.

Thinks I'll wring his neck?

Probably thinks *I* will.

I'll repay you for the stuff we took. I'm good for it.

Jack and Linnea came inside and sat across from each other at the table, Linnea beside me and Jack beside his bastard father. In the dull light of the oil lamp Linnea looked tired enough to die. Her dark hair was stuck to her forehead and heavy on her ears. I offered a dirty hand that could cup her entire cheek. She closed her eyes and put some weight in my palm, and though one day I'd switch seats with Jack West, right then I'm sure he watched that tenderness with more than a little jealousy.

Cecil removed a last piece of metal and pulled the last stitch tight. Then he hazarded a look under his arm, across his ribs where my knife

had scraped and been pinned. He eased off his hunting vest. I didn't have the best angle, but his checkered shirt was lanced open, damp and oil-black in the lamp light.

Jack, he said, and his son perked forward. How bad am I bleeding?

Jack tugged the flaps that wreathed the cut and I saw a gash there, curved like a smile. Not too bad, Jack said.

I pushed my mug aside and leaned in and waved for the needle.

Lord knows I've been drunker for more delicate things than a few stitches, I said.

Keep sipping your girly drink, Cecil told me. Then he passed his son a fresh ski needle and a string of gut and for a second Jack just stared at it like it was a thing of great worth. Cecil tugged his shirt over his head, revealed his battered, wiry torso, his pale skin and farmer's tan. He titled sideways so Jack could access the cut. It didn't go very deep and stretched only as long as a thumb, but it ran at an angle along his ribs, and Jack's forehead bunched as he tried to find a way to work. Cecil's skin gleamed sweaty and bruised and scratched along his upper arms and collar where my fingernails had grooved his flesh. I could feel myself similarly beaten; in the morning, both of us would be stiffer than a two-pecker goat. Jack worked silently and Cecil adopted what might be the gruffest expression I have ever seen. I slid the sherry across.

I worked in the hangars, in Britain, he said. Never saw any combat.

Marine Corps. Never been shot before. Hit with napalm, but never shot.

Don't worry about paying me back.

I'll find a way.

After Jack finished and Cecil had eased his shirt on, he said he had wireframe cots in the loft, but needed to know if I'd be able to pull myself up the ladder. I told him it'd take more than a pellet in the leg to keep me down, and he grunted like I expected him to. He glanced

under his shirt, to inspect Jack's work.

It's passable, he said, and ruffled the boy's hair. Then he climbed to the loft to set things up, and I spun the sherry between my fingers and looked over at Jack.

Sorry, he said.

It's alright.

I don't even remember firing.

When the adrenaline's in you, I said.

You ever shot a person?

Then Cecil came down the ladder and jerked a thumb toward the loft. Two beds up there, he said.

You're hit too. Make the kids sleep on the wood.

Jack and me can sleep in the truck, he said. I'll visit the doctor in the morning, in case you need antibiotics. Then we'll think of something.

You a sympathizer?

Cecil put his hand on Jack's shoulder. He ran his tongue along his teeth, tested the point of a canine. I'm not a war supporter, if that's what you mean.

I'm AWOL, I said, sounding suddenly sober, even to myself. It's more serious.

You're too grey to be a draft dodger.

They'll court martial me.

Like I said, we'll think of something.

I owe you, I told him, and Cecil made a motion with his shoulders I have come to understand as the only way can accept a thanks.

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Linnea and I spent the remaining hours on one of the foldout cots in Cecil's loft. He'd given us one of his only two sleeping bags – good to minus ten, he promised – and we'd unzipped it to share like a blanket.

Cecil and Jack suffered through the night in the rear of his pickup, where he kept two foamies. Even with Linnea's body heat the chill dried my nose and breathing prickled my throat. Cold, for a March night. Linnea went right to sleep but I've never been able to just shut down, so I listened to the rhythm of her heart and watched her shoulders rise and fall. I like to think I made a pretty good dad. You won't hear me say that about my other talents, and Lord knows there aren't a lot of them, but I gave it my all. A guy has to do that, far as I figure. That's how we're judged, in the end.

Despite my best efforts, my daughter has born the weight of my missteps. I didn't expect another war and by the time I got shipped out her mother had other things going on, so Linnea had to board with my sister and her preacher-thin husband. They put her to work at their raspberry farm, demanded she sort the fruit to earn her keep, even though I was paying them. By the end of each day Linnea's fingers were stained pink and freezing from the unheated water they spritzed over the berries – full time on the weekends, a few hours every day. If I ever get back there, I've got a couple things to say. Linnea, bless her, never complained about it, and I'm not sure I deserve to be spared carrying that blame. The world can be so kind and so cruel all at once, and I tend to land on the receiving end of the its kindness – or I'm a closet optimist – but the same can not be said for the people close to me. Cecil's a good example, for more than a few reasons: even that first night, too much of a man to sleep under the same sleeping bag as his son. While Jack tugged the vinyl to his chin, Cecil crossed his arms and tilted his ballcap over his eyes and shivered in the darkness.

That'd become something like a custom for Jack and Cecil – the two of them camping in the bed of his truck, Cecil freezing his ass so Jack might have a second blanket, a second sleeping bag, and God forbid Jack decline that offer. Those trips would culminate in a cougar-hunting trip in July 1972, right before the start of Jack's grade

twelve year. They'd piled a two man tent and a food cooler under the canopy, stocked their hiking for one helluva trek. Their destination was somewhere southeast of town, because word spread about high cougar concentration in the woods there, and there was an open call on the beasts. Cecil's buddies had downed one earlier in the summer, skinned it and lynched it in a garage above a drainage pipe so the dripping blood wouldn't make more than an oil-spill splatter on the floor. Guys in the valley built their houses with those kind of specifications in mind. As long as I've known him, Cecil has never been a great hunter, but after his buddies showed him that massive swaying carcass, he'd gotten it in his head that he needed to measure up.

They didn't get a kill. By the end of the third day whatever cats had prowled those Kootenay wilds was beyond the limits of their supplies and endurance. They headed home. In the truck, Cecil banged his shotgun behind the bench and tore a beer from the yoke he kept under passenger – he still keeps a sixer there, far as I know – and Jack expected him to offer one over, but the old bastard did no such thing. They drove without talk. Sometimes he fiddled with the radio but otherwise he just slurped from his single aluminum can. They stopped at the cabin on the way home and Cecil took Jack's shitty rifle to the water's edge, stepped off the rocks so the lake lapped the soles of his army surplus boots. Jack asked him what the hell was going on, but Cecil just checked the safety and chambered a round and cushioned the stock in the nook of his shoulder. *Mind your own business,* he told Jack, who told me, and neither of us knew what to make of it. Cecil fired a bullet at a low angle into the glass surface of Dunbar lake. The bullet skipped once and broke the surface and disappeared with a *ploop*. And Jack did what any good son would do: he sat on a piece of driftwood and waited it out, afraid more than anything that he'd somehow let his dad down.

If I had to pick one thing, I'd say this is where Cecil and I differ: I

wouldn't have left Jack without explanation. For weeks the poor kid lived in anxiety, wondering about all the ways he might have messed up. It's too good-ol'-boy, I think, and borderline cruel. Maybe it's different if you're raising a son: is the urge to lessen your kid's doubt reserved for parenting of the opposite sex? Maybe, or maybe Cecil just got some things wrong. For all his dogged insistence that men be judged by their actions, he won't acknowledge that a man can be measured by how well he has reared his offspring. It's one of the few times I've known Cecil to be inconsistent, but given how it all panned out, given it all, I'm not about to begrudge him one or two acts of self-delusion.

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I woke early and roused Linnea with a hand on her ankle. She blinked sleep from her eyes and I got her up and folded the cots into storage shape. Then I climbed downstairs for a drink of water and so I could dump a wad of American bills on Cecil's half-varnished table. My leg ached like nothing in the world and it took a while for my body to grind itself to motion. It felt like being an old man. Linnea gave me a look but I just shrugged and she shrugged right back.

When Cecil came through the door he pointed at the bills on the table.

What are those?

Payment, I said.

The leg alright?

A little bruised, I told him, and rolled up my pant leg to reveal the calf blued and blood-run like a cabbage head. Not my worst injury by far.

What's the worst?

Lit my arm on fire once, I said, and patted my bicep.

Cecil grunted, seemed to consider. Truck seats three, he said. So if you want to come into town we can say you're my cousin or something.

And the kids'll stay here?

Jack and your girl can fish off the dock.

He's not gonna shoot her, right? I said.

I'll take the gun with us.

What's the town?

Invermere. You can use my shower when we get there.

What're you getting at?

You smell like a dogshit, Cecil said, and laughed.

Linnea came over to me and I wrapped my arm around her torso. She tried to push away but I held on. Cecil sniffled and looked anywhere but at the two of us. I let her go.

I hear about guys who settle up here, I said. Don't ever go back.

I dunno about it. My fiancee might.

He scratched his neck, then shook his head at the bills on the table, so I scooped them up and shoved them into a zippered pocket above my knee.

You got skills? he said, winced. I mean, if you need work.

I'm a painter.

Good, that's good. I know a few painters.

I stood up and swung my leg forward, tested my full weight on it. Well, she won't buckle, I said, and loped through the door behind Cecil. We passed Jack, who stared at the ground. I climbed into Cecil's truck and he rolled down this window.

See if you can get a fish or two, he told Jack as the engine sputtered. And for God's sake don't shoot anyone.

Then he put the truck in gear and we hobbled over a fallen log, up a dirt road that led to the highway. It's all forest and bedrock and pine trees, the valley, snug between the Purcells to the west and the Rockies to the east, and in '69 you wouldn't have seen any clear cuts on

those mountain faces. You could climb most of the peaks too – spend a gruesome eight hours testing yourself against physics, and then relax with a vantage overlooking the whole valley. I've done that once or twice; the view is not easily challenged. Up there I could pitch a tent and live happily in the wee hours of the morning with the valley and its towns below me in a well of darkness. I'd pack my sketchbook and a handful of charcoal pencils and I'd sit and draw. Sometimes I'd holler off a cliff and wait for the echo to swoop back to me. I can't explain why – simply felt compelled. Cecil'd blame it on the artist in me, but landscapes have a certain solidity, a certain, unquestionable reliability, and the echo is their earmark: an echo won't happen in a closed space or in any man made structures save the behemoths of the past. It takes distance for the sound to splinter and scatter, to slow down enough for rocks to gather shards of voice and put them back together. It takes *scope*. An echo hints at a great wisdom – bluecollar wisdom. It departs and returns, departs, returns. A wisdom of reliability, I guess.

As we drove, Cecil bent his elbow out the window, gripped the wheel at its twelve o'clock with one loose hand. He wore a blue ballcap with a bunch of burrs along the rim, a checkered t-shirt beneath his grey vest. He had his share of wrinkles around his eyes and a mouth that bent easy into a scowl but did so less often than you'd expect. No real scars to note besides a few spark burns on his chin. He looked like a highschool gym teacher.

I like the landscape here, I said.

Nice to be able to go outside. I was in London for a while – it felt like always being indoors. I don't know how city guys do it.

Different values. My wife was one.

And she isn't here.

Thank God for that.

Cecil slid one eye my way and his cheek twitched to a smile. You won't find city guys here, he said. We run them out of town.

Make a game of it, I bet.

We keep score, too.

The road wound through a gap in a canyon wall where the rock face was the colour of clay and high enough to block the morning sun. On the other side, we rolled through a tourist town called Radium that was built around natural hot springs. Its main drag had a liquor store and half a dozen hotels, each with their vacancy sign lit. Beyond that, the highway curled along the lip of a gully that stretched to the horizon. From our view I could see a lake and small crops of houses dotting the water's rim and, in the distance, the sulphury glow of lights – lanterns, houseboats, truckers grinding miles in the first hours of the day.

I could draw that, I said.

Draw it?

Keeps me out of trouble.

Better than my hobbies, Cecil said.

Used to draw people. That got me into trouble once or twice.

Used to?

After my last tour, just couldn't keep at it.

Cecil looked over at me. I don't know what to think about this war, he said.

None of us do, I told him, and stared out across the gully. I'll tell you this, though: it's our kids getting shot.

Was the same with the Nazis.

They deserved it, at least.

Were you at Normandy?

Ten years too young I said, and patted my arm, the scar hidden there. We got bombed, our own goddamned guys.

Friendly fire: isn't.

You gotta watch for it. Guys'll shoot you in the back, on purpose or not.

Probably doesn't even know he's doing it.

Tunnel vision, I said. That's human nature.

#

Cecil lived in a heavily-treed segment of town, down a steep hill, and close enough to the beach for him to claim he could see the water from his bathroom on the second floor. The road was gravel and dirt and Cecil, for years, would bitch about street taxes he never saw a cent of. *Not even new gravel*, he'd often say. The truck's tires churned rocks and pinged pebbles against the undercarriage. Boys ran amok on the street and the shoulder and the yards that lined it, cap guns in hand, yelling *bang* and *gotch your arm*, and sometimes crouching behind tree stumps or old cars or among the knotgrass that grew unchallenged in the ditches. As we drove by, Cecil gave short, blurting honks to clear them from his path. They waved and stood on the roadside as if at attention, and Cecil bobbed his head, winked, and more than once saluted.

His house was a small one with army-green siding that Cecil, colour-blind, called grey. He parked beside a cinderblock retaining wall with a dangerous lean. At the far end of the carport a stack of chopped lumber was dark with moisture. The lawn was green save a few patches of piss puddle brown, which he blamed on neighbourhood dogs. We climbed a short flight of concrete steps to his front door, where he banged his boots together over a welcome mat, tried the doorknob and found it open, and went inside.

Nora, he called as we entered. You here?

In the kitchen.

Can you put on some coffee? he said, and turned back to me with shrug, as though to ask if he should have added anything else. I got someone with me.

There was a pause, and then footsteps on linoleum and then his fiancee – Nora Miller – popped around the corner. She had dark red hair that framed her face and hung to her chin, a small nose with an upward turn at the tip, big eyes with eyebrows that seemed always on the verge of lifting incredulously. She glanced to me and then to Cecil and her nose scrunched up – hopefully not because I smelled *that* bad, but I may never know – and she reached for Cecil's face. Her small hand touched his chin and she pushed his head sideways and examined the scratches lining his jaw.

I take it something's going on, she said.

This is Archer, Cecil said. Archer, my fiancee, Nora.

Hello, I said.

Nice to meet you.

Archer needs to use our shower, Cecil said.

He certainly does.

I'll explain.

Nora grinned: a wide, authentic, lovely grin that showed her molars. I've always thought the prettiest smiles are the ones that show the most teeth.

Yes, you will. But let's get Archer into the shower, she said, and turned to me. We'll get you a set of Cecil's old clothes, too. Those ones… likely beyond saving.

They set me up with a pair of faded jeans and a plain navy t-shirt with a cartoon picture of two bears gnawing human bones. The caption said: *Tourist Attraction*. Cecil gave me a disposable razor and a bar of soap, and that was that. I stepped under the hot water and inhaled the steam and felt as if I could scrape the dirt off my arms with a pallet knife. The heat throbbed through my scarred arm, through the wrinkled skin on the bicep, but it always does that – muscle memory, or something. It seemed unfair that I'd get to wash first and not my daughter, stuck at that cabin with Jack. The soap stung the cut and

I prodded the wounds, inspected the pucker and Cecil's handiwork. I'd be lying if I said it was a flawless execution, but I'd be lying if I said I cared.

I came out of that shower almost a different man. My leg even felt alright, but that was probably in my head – I always feel better after I've had a shower, something to do with water, osmosis. I carried my ruined clothes with me in a bundle under my arm, into the kitchen, where I found Nora with her back to me at the sink. She fiddled with a disassembled water tap. I cleared my throat and she whipped her head sideways, enough to see me in her peripherals. Just toss 'em, she said, and, with a rubber-gloved hand, gestured at a garbage can in the corner.

I did so, sat down at the table.

Thanks for the clothes.

She unstoppered the sink and the water gurgled down the drain. Cecil went into town, to see the doctor, she said, and pulled the rubber gloves off. There were a few bubbles of dishwater near her ear, but I didn't say anything. She crossed her arms under her breasts, leaned into the corner where the counters met. You're in a predicament.

I figured so.

Draft dodgers are one thing. Government gives them amnesty.

I'm not a draft dodger.

That's what I'm talking about, Nora said. With her pinky, she hooked a string of hair out of her eyes and it tucked behind her ears. She had nice ears. And your daughter, too. We can say you're Cecil's army friend and your wife left you without any money.

Not that far from the truth.

That last bit was Cecil's idea.

I had a hunch.

You army guys, she said, and brushed past me out of the kitchen,

and I smelled the air that breezed by in her wake – a scent of grapefruit detergent, of warm bread like someone who'd been baking all day, and something else, too: a tougher smell, like the outdoors, like axe heads and chopped wood and chimney smoke and big changes not so far around the bend.