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Waving at Shepherds

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Waving at Shepherds

by

Robb Flynn
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Waving at Shepherds

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Before I Begin

When I was four years old, my father took me fishing on Barnegat Bay off the Jersey shore. We left early in the morning, before first light, and pushed our twelve-foot rowboat off the trailer just as the sun came up over the horizon. I wore a winter parka underneath a blaze orange life preserver and shivered as Dad rowed us out onto the Bay. There wasn’t much wind to speak of, and, thankfully, as the sun rose, so did the temperature. We fished all morning as we drifted south, not catching much of anything. Dad had a Folgers coffee tin filled with worms and his blue metal tackle box down at his end of the boat. I sat on the wooden bench in the bow with a little Styrofoam cooler filled with bologna sandwiches and soda at my feet. After lunch the wind picked up and Dad started rowing us back. It was slow going against the drift and wind, and as the size and frequency of the swells increased, Dad made me get off the bench and sit on the floor of the boat.

I never saw the garbage scow until it loomed over us, this great big green hull with the numbers 6744 painted near the top in white. And then it was crashing through us, splitting our little boat in half and pushing me down under the water. Things get fuzzy after that. I remember the hospital. The bottom half of the room was green, the top half was white. I remember being told I needed a spinal tap but not knowing what that was. I remember being scared. After that, nothing. That’s where the memory ends.
Flash forward about thirty-five years or so. It’s Thanksgiving. Friends and family are sitting around the dining room table at my sister’s house. During normal conversation, I am somehow reminded of this garbage scow incident, and I begin to relate the memory. No one, not even Dad, has a clue as to what I am talking about.

“Oh c’mon! You remember, Dad... when the garbage scow hit us out on the bay?”

Nothing. Just blank faces all around the table.

“You remember... The boat sank... I went to the hospital... I got a spinal tap.”

“You’ve never had a spinal tap,” Mom says.

My sister snickers, and the conversation slowly devolves to the state of my sanity.

That vivid memory – the garbage scow, the hospital, the spinal tap – it never happened. None of it. The rowboat wasn’t even purchased until after we moved to upstate New York. We took it to Canada every year until 1985, but it never occurred to me that it was the same little rowboat that sank in my garbage scow memory. The numbers I can so clearly remember painted on the hull of the green garbage scow, 6744, were the last four digits of our phone number back then. Fishing was a family pastime growing up, so I’m sure the Folgers can of worms, Dad’s blue tackle box, and the Styrofoam cooler are based in reality somewhere in my memories, as is, I am
also sure, that early morning sunrise. But the green garbage scow itself, the waves, the cold, the spinal tap... none of those are real memories.

Psychologists call this kind of distorted recollection a false memory, but that's not what I find most interesting about the whole thing. Somewhere along the road of my youth, I seem to have taken different events, a few facts, combined them with several complete fabrications, and generated a “memory” that still, some thirty-five years later, resonates as truth. This moment that never happened, and probably others like it, moments that rattle around in my head as “memories,” are, in many ways, emblematic of how my writing process begins.

I start with something known, a particular truth or fact, and then I build upon it, sometimes with other facts, sometimes with invention. In her essay “And Eyes to See: The Art of Third Person,” Lynna Williams says this is a common technique that many writers employ:

We’ve all had it: the small flash that signals the beginnings of fiction. It’s a snatch of dialogue overheard in a Chinese restaurant... It’s an old memory, a just-seen image... something about it makes us say “That’s a story,” and in that wonderful moment of declaration – of naming as a story what is still only a moment, a circumstance, a single image – we’re opening ourselves to the rest of the process, to making a story, whole and complete. But how do we get from story “trigger” to story draft, from impulse to understanding, from beginning to end? (115)
In answer, I say... I don’t know. For while most of my writing begins with that factual element nestled somewhere within what Debra Spark calls a “trigger” (13), there is no telling what will remain of that trigger by the time the final revision is finished. Sometimes the rowboat sinks, sometimes it winds up in Canada, and sometimes it gets left at home altogether and the story ends up being about the Folgers can of worms.

This first stage, finding the trigger and giving myself to it, is, for me, the hardest part of writing fiction. That all-important first burst of narrative is what my entire process hinges upon. When I trust that trigger and follow my instincts, that’s when I am able to surrender myself to my most interesting ideas. There are times, though, that this tends to lead... well... nowhere. “Your muse may fool you and tease you sometimes, lead you on merry chases,” writes George Garrett, “but you must nevertheless learn to trust the muse and take the risks. Without that trust and risk – nothing. Nothing new or worthy or admirable or... true” (2). The ideas behind my fiction are all around me, everywhere I go. The trigger can be, quite literally, anything at all. The trick is in trusting myself, trusting my imagination, and letting the story come to me rather than forcing one to appear out of the void.

I know of writers who outline everything from start to finish in great detail before they write a single line of prose. If they don’t, they can’t even begin to put a narrative together. They know major and minor characters and plot points, they know what the conflict is, where and when the climax is going to occur, and how the final
resolution is going to effect the growth of the protagonist. They know it all, and they let it stew in their heads for days or weeks, and they construct a proper outline with Roman numerals and indented sub, sub-sub, and sub-sub-sub-items. It's a very aggressive style of creation. They mold and shape the idea when it is in its earliest stages, dictating its direction every step of the way. When they finally do begin their narrative, it's like a game of connect the dots as they follow the map they have so painstakingly created for themselves.

I am not one of those writers. I've tried to be, as it certainly sounds much more efficient than the way I do it. John Irving once wrote:

If you don't know the story before you begin the story, what kind of storyteller are you? Just an ordinary kind, just a mediocre kind – making it up as you go along, no better than a common liar. (qtd. in Gerard 149)

Full well do I see the sense behind Irving's words. And, considering the great preoccupation I have with truth and its multitude of definitions, you'd think that I would take Irving's advice to heart. To be fair to myself, I've tried it his way. Not just once, but several times. With one particular project, a genre novel with multiple, overlapping story arcs and a host of characters, I tried a formal outline and index cards, linking the cards on a huge corkboard with different colors of yarn to try to get a visual idea of how the storylines twined about each other. It was, I have come to learn, something I unconsciously took away from Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five:
As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations, I had outlined the Dresden story many times. The best outline I ever made, or anyway the prettiest one, was on the back of a roll of wallpaper.

I used my daughter’s crayons, a different color for each main character. One end of the wallpaper was the beginning, and the other end was the end, and then there was all that middle part, which was the middle. And the blue line met the red line and then the yellow line, and the yellow line stopped because the character represented by the yellow line was dead. And so on. (5)

I went so far as to outline each individual storyline, and then each scene, trying to focus on the detail of each while at the same time trying to maintain the “big picture” formal outline of the project as a whole. I even tried complicated mind-mapping software, but I walked away from that particular experiment more confused than ever.

Worse yet, I discovered that because I had planned out so many details of the story, there was very little fun left for me when I sat down and started actually telling that story. I knew where I needed to go, and getting there in that first creative draft actually seemed like a bit of a chore. I caught myself second-guessing my storylines and plot points, or reining myself in when I started to write tangentially to what I had already outlined in great detail. I felt restricted, limited by the outline, and it got to a point that I actually started to dread sitting down at the keyboard because it felt as though I was unable to write what I really wanted to write. I haven’t looked at that
project in almost two years, and it's a shame. I'm sure there's a good story to be discovered in there somewhere. Someday, I'll sit back down and be able to pull that trigger again, and, with any luck, I'll find the fun in the world I have already built through the outline, without actually feeling obligated to pay attention to the outline.

Because whether we're talking about the physical act of writing, a single choice, or the process of creating a story, a series of choices, writing boils down to asking questions and choosing answers. In many ways, it's not unlike the day trips and weekend getaways I take on my motorcycle. For well over a decade now I have referred to these outings as simply following my front tire.

"Where are you headed this weekend, Robb?"

"Oh, nowhere special. Just following my front tire."

Both story and road trip begin the same: I make a choice. East or west? North or south? I let instinct choose, and the journey rolls out behind me. I look for the back roads, those usually un-traveled places that I don't even know are there when I first start out. I never have a specific destination, and typically only a very general idea of where I am at any given moment along the way. I'm somewhere between the Thruway and Pennsylvania, east of Buffalo and west of Syracuse. The ending comes some time later, not when I return home, but rather when instinct tells me it's time to turn around and head back for home.

In other words, by the time I know the ending of my story, I've already written it. John Gregory Brown calls this "writing blind": 
Usually, when I am preparing to read to an audience an excerpt from one of my books, I say a few words about what I was trying to accomplish, what themes the book addresses, why I set about telling such a story in a particular way. What I don’t say is that I was two-thirds of the way through writing these books before I had a clue what was going on, before I figured out this information that I so confidently and wisely declare has been my grand aim all along. Prior to my discovery of what the hell I’m up to, I write the way one walks through a dark and unfamiliar hallway or alley—blindly, hesitantly, fearfully. (30)

From the sound of it, my own process is even more opaque than Brown’s. When I look back on that initial draft a few days later, I invariably see the same thing each and every time. Oh, the story is different, to be sure, just as my day trips are always different. But, also like my day trips, it wanders all over the place. With no destination in mind, the story moves forward by slanting sideways and drifting off center. Sometimes it even stops entirely, loops back on itself, and then lunges forward again. I look at it, this convoluted mess of a first draft, and I smile. I smile because though writing that first draft is fun, and though the revision process is difficult, it’s the fine-tuning and honing and polishing that are my favorite parts of my writing process. Where Brown may get two-thirds of the way through a story before knowing what it’s about, I am often on a second, third, or even later revision before I start getting comfortable about what I am really putting down on paper.
If that first draft is one of a journey, a vision that is uncovered gradually with few (if any) rules or parameters, then this stage must be a re-vision in the truest sense of the word. This is the stage where I uncover the truths of the story and characters, where form and style must meet substance and work together to tell a story not the way I want to tell it, but the way the story wants to be told. Lan Samantha Chang sums it up nicely:

Occasionally, the sense of a story may naturally come to you. You may instinctively sense that it can be told in a simple, linear fashion...But more often, you won’t be able to see a structure even after you finish a draft. You will finish writing with the vague sense that its shape is not quite right, that you have completed not a story, but a vague, amorphous blob....A writer often does not find order in her work until well into the revision.

The most important and crucial way to find your story’s pattern in time is to become familiar with the material, to learn how it is trying to tell itself. (144-5)

It’s tough work, this re-visioning, but it’s this stage that brings me the most enjoyment.

Many writers, especially, it seems, the outliners, hate this stage. They want to believe that their first draft has everything it needs, and expect to make only minor changes from there on out. And for them, that may well be the case. After all, they were very aggressive in pursuing the details of their outlines before they ever wrote a
word of prose. But for me, the re-visioning of a story is when I do the serious writing. In the first draft, I let the story take control of me; the tire led the way, and I followed happily along. Here, however, I take the story and I learn from it. I let it teach me the form it wants to take, the style it needs to have in order to be effective. It’s an almost submissive process as I let what I have written dictate what is needed. Jane Smiley has a similar opinion on the revision process:

The art of revision lies not in pressing your self upon the story. The story has now made the first step in separating itself from you. It will not live unless it separates itself from you entirely, and it can’t do that unless you are receptive to what it is trying to be. (249)

The revision is where I discover the voice of the narrator and, through that voice, take over the telling of the story. I meet the characters and expand them, fleshing them out so they are people I know and care about rather than just representational caricatures I met along the roadside of the first draft. I look for images and try to figure out what the story is trying to tell me by their repetition or abandonment. These are all things I have no way of knowing when I first pull out of the garage. I don’t know them until I sit down and start letting that first draft tell me what it wants to be when it grows up. I examine not only what I wrote, but also how I wrote it as I followed that front tire.

I’ve already mentioned the “merry chases” George Garrett’s muse sometimes leads him on in his early drafts, and with the submissive nature of my initial revisions, that danger lurks during this stage of my process, as well. “Long Gone Cold” is an excellent example of finding the heart of a story awash in pages of
needless narrative. The trigger was an image: a man sitting at a table with mud puddles spreading out under his boots. My first draft started with that image, and then went through a series of quick flashbacks to tell of how the man got to that particular table with those particular muddy boots. It was four pages long and didn’t work at all. The second revision shifted the image to the middle of the piece and led up to it chronologically. The third book-ended the piece with the image, and the narrative bloated to fourteen pages. And that’s when I had my “ah-ha!” moment. I realized that the story I was writing around wasn’t the story of the man at the table. The story was about a child’s perception of the man and his muddy boots. With that realization, the fourth revision shrunk to less than 600 words and stayed there. The story does exactly what I want it to, and exactly what it needs to do in order to be effective… to be true.

Truth has always been a sticky subject for me, especially as it applies to fact and fiction. Not a year goes by, it seems, that someone somewhere gets raked over the coals for fabrication of events in a memoir. James Frey is likely the best known example with his memoir Million Little Pieces. Regardless of what the outcome of the whole thing was, what is it about the memoir form that inspires such a vehement clutch on factual evidence? More intriguing to me, however, is what if the situation was reversed? What if the authorial intent is to use the memoir simply as a stylistic form? I began exploring the style and crafting fictional pieces with this in mind.

At first, I thought that what I was trying to duplicate was contained within the first-person point of view in which most memoirs are written. There is a
preconception that the reader has when they pick up a book marked as “Memoir” or “Autobiography” and I wanted to, in a way, hijack the intimacy that I associated with the first-person:

This point of view implies intimacy and makes a dramatic story even more immediate. A first-person protagonist narrator often heightens readers’ sympathy with certain characters because the story-telling appears more personal. (Miner 97)

As I became more familiar with the genre, I discovered that what I was after wasn’t just the established immediacy or intimacy, but also a kind of trust that goes beyond the first person point of view. The relationship that is developed between the author and the reader is the key to the truth of the memoir form, and I began looking for specific techniques authors use to build that relationship. I experimented, for example, with what Laurie Rachkus Uttich refers to as the “present moment preface” (53) as used by Jeanette Walls in her memoir *The Glass Castle*, and other memoiristic techniques espoused by authors and critics such as Annie Dillard, Paul John Eakin, and Vivian Gornick. And though the details of their techniques and processes differed, each of their discussions tapped into a single question: “Is the narrator trustworthy? Can I believe what he or she is telling me?” (Gornick 14). So that’s where I started... with my narrator.

As I wrote my stories, however, further deepening the character of my narrator, I discovered stumbling blocks for writing fiction in this form. The most significant I faced was keeping the “I” of the author separate and distinct from “I” of
the narrator. Having spent over ten years as an actor, I assumed that I would be able
to approach the narrator of my stories in a similar manner as I once approached, for
example, a role in Shakespeare or Mamet. To a certain extent, I was correct, and
many of the same character building techniques worked quite well. There was,
however, one very troubling difference: the focus of my narrator was turned almost
completely in upon himself in the initial stages of vision and re-vision. In the acting
world, when I thought about a character I was playing on stage or screen, I became
adept at thinking of him (or her, as the case may be) in the third person. Only when I
performed, when I adopted the character’s persona as my own, did it become a first­
person endeavor. My narrative voice, however, went far beyond the solipsism that
Miner discusses in her essay, and bordered on a kind of confessional, nostalgic
psychoanalysis. Roland Barthes indicated that this is a very common problem for
authors who write in the first person, regardless of genre, when he said “The one who
speaks (in the narrative) is not the one who writes (in real life) and the one who writes
is not the one who is” (qtd in Eakin 25). To break this pattern, I heeded the advice of
Vivian Gornick and got my narrator out of his head and doing things:

The subject of autobiography is always self-definition, but it cannot be
self-definition in the void. The memoirist, like the poet and the
novelist, must engage with the world, because engagement makes
experience, experience makes wisdom, and finally it’s the wisdom – or
rather the movement toward it – that counts. (14)
The movement toward something is the crucial part. Experiences move, deliberation halts. By putting my narrator into the action, I found motivations not only for the narrator, but for myself as writer that went beyond just the narrative voice. And that was what had been lacking in many of my stories, the separation, the detachment, for “without detachment there can be no story; description and response, yes, but no story” (Gornick 12). Once I did that, once I found and focused on “that crucial distinction between authorial identity and narrative persona” (Miner 98), I developed a much deeper relationship not only with my narrator, but with the text as a whole. And while there remain moments where the narrator is both retro- and introspective, those moments are now intentionally done, and for very specific reasons.

Process evolves. It has to. What worked for the last project will need to be altered for the next or the output will become predictable, stale. I discovered changes in my process with each of the five pieces in this collection. Little changes – sometimes conscious, sometimes not – altered not only how I worked once I sat down in front of a computer screen, but also how I thought about the stories away from the keyboard. Because the stories are linked, I was forced to implement parameters each time I sat down to follow my front tire. These parameters generated new questions, whose answers sometimes generated new questions for new stories. Sometimes they even changed answers to different questions in other stories! But towards the end, as the stories began to subtly play off one another, I realized that I had inadvertently stumbled upon a very important discovery. There must be a way to blend the two
extremes I talked about here – the aggressive and the submissive – and find a common ground that benefits the story. How that merger needs to take shape is, not surprisingly, a question to which I don’t yet have an answer. But regardless of how it all happens, in the end, I think I discovered a new process for my writing. What matters most to me is how I work best, not how John Irving works best, or Jane Smiley, or Vivian Gornick. The evolution of the process, of the How, is designed to not only make the whole thing more efficient, but also more fun.

Recently, I found myself sitting alone in a bar. Meeting some friends, I, through my typical mismanagement of time, arrived a full hour early. Making the best of it, I ordered a nice little cabernet, pulled out my notebook, and started writing; nothing terribly intensive, just a few basic notes and thoughts – notes and thoughts on this very paper, as a matter of fact.

“Scholarship or fiction?”

I looked up and saw the bartender’s head cocked sideways in an attempt to get a glimpse of my notes.

“Hmmm?”

“What are you writing?” she asked, “scholarship of fiction?”

“Scholarship,” I said, and she nodded.

“I write fiction,” she said then. “Well, I try to write fiction.”

She tries to write fiction? How exactly does one try to write fiction? She meant, of course, that she tries to write good fiction. I told her I preferred to write fiction as well (as opposed to scholarship), but then another customer entered, and she
wandered off to help him. I stuck my nose back in my notes. A few minutes later she came back, and she asked me a question I’d never before been asked. Not by another person, anyway, for I’ve certainly asked it of myself. I think every writer probably has.

“Why do you write?”

It caught me off guard. My answer to myself has always been the same, but as the phrase started to form in my mouth, it didn’t seem like enough. It seemed too simple, too easy.

“It’s fun,” I said.

The look on the bartender’s face let me know that she didn’t think it was enough either, and a moment of silence passed between us.

“Why?” I asked. “Isn’t writing fun for you?”

“Yeah, but, it’s also frustrating as hell!”

“So why do you write, then?” I asked her.

“I have to,” she said, “if I don’t, my head will explode!”

Looking back on it now, I think I probably insulted her when I laughed, because she walked away and only came back when I flagged her down for another glass of wine. I’d heard that sentiment from writers before, but have never really understood it. I don’t know if I’ve ever felt a “do or die” kind of need in regards to anything, and certainly not about writing, or anything else I have been passionate about in the past.
Passion for something isn’t about any kind of internal obligation. It’s about want and desire. What’s the old saying? The only things I have to do are pay taxes and die? That’s not passion, that’s need. I don’t need to write. I don’t have to write. Writing is too difficult to wade into with that kind of obligation. I have to want to sit down and write; otherwise I’ll find any excuse to get out of it. Because it has to be fun, doesn’t it? It’s work, too, of course, but still and all, it has to be fun. I want to write, love to write, in fact. That initial act of creation, of the story in place; that feeling of not knowing what’s around the corner until I actually get there; that discovery is the primary reason why I choose to write. And as long as I am able to get satisfaction from writing, get that enjoyment of discovery and creation, it’s a choice I will continue to make.
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Waving at Shepherds

by

Robb Flynn
Tiyo Point

When we finally made it out to Tiyo Point, Patty and I flopped down on our bellies, crawled to the edge, and poked our heads out over the lip of the canyon while Dad held on to our ankles. That’s when Mom stopped talking. She let out a little gasp as Dad let us inchworm out over the rim, and when he laughed at her, she walked off down the trail. And just like that they were fighting again. Dad called after her, but she didn’t stop. He yanked back on our ankles, dragging us a few feet away from the edge of the canyon. Patty’s chin bounced through the reddish dirt, so while Dad took off after Mom, I dug through his backpack and got out the Handi-wipes to clean it off. Patty’s eyes brimmed with tears as I wiped at her chin, but she never flinched.

“Sorry, Pats,” I said. “It’s just a scratch, though. Hardly even bleeding.” Patty shook her head and let her eyes flit back to the lip of the canyon. She was the whole reason we were here. Mom and Dad fought a lot that summer, and twice Patty had run off into the woods behind the house during the worst of it. This trip was supposed to put an end to all that, both the fighting and the running away.

When Dad came back I told him about Patty’s chin. He apologized, hugged her tight, and was helping me put some cream and a Band-Aid on it when Mom walked back up the trail. Without a word, she knelt in the dirt and emptied her pack, lining up sandwiches on a long, flat rock. I grabbed mine and sat back near the rim of the canyon. Patty followed me. Mom’s eyes trailed her the whole way as Patty shuffled her feet through the dirt, kicking up little red clouds of dust. It looked like
Mom was going to say something, but she never did.

The silence was just the beginning. On the way back, Dad forged ahead and disappeared for a while, then suddenly reappeared behind us and charged forward again, the faint smell of cigarettes trailing after him. He only smoked when they fought, but usually he hid it better than that. I looked all over the house for his smokes one day and never found them. Then, one morning, after spending another night on the couch, Dad went off into the woods behind the house. I followed and watched him reach into a hollow tree and pull out a plastic baggie. Later, when I looked inside that tree, there were about a hundred butts at the bottom of the hole.

Whenever Dad passed us on the trail, Mom wrinkled up her nose and I was sure she was going to let him have it, but he never gave her the chance, so she pursed her lips a little tighter, furrowed her brow a little deeper, and just kept marching silently on. Patty and I walked together. We whispered back and forth, both of us a little scared that the trip had come to an early end. We took the short route back and cut almost a full mile off the hike we had done in the morning. It seemed much longer.

Back at the campsite, the silence drove us in different directions. Mom disappeared into the tent while Dad busied himself with the camp stove, taking apart the burner and gas lines even though it had worked fine on the pancakes he made for breakfast. I took Patty down to the creek to get away from the silence. It was cooler there anyway, and we could wade out up to our waists. Two years younger than me, Patty had been on the verge of tears all day, and I spent the rest of the afternoon
trying to make her laugh. Most of my efforts fell short, but once I got her frog hunting she forgot about what happened out on the Point. She collected frogs back home, and kept them in a basement window well, feeding them, playing with them, even swapping them out so it wouldn’t get too crowded.

All through dinner the silence continued. I offered to help Dad gather firewood, but he just shrugged and walked off into the woods alone. Patty sat in a camp chair with her pad and crayons, drawing. Mom busied herself over the fire making cocoa, but, really, she was waiting for Dad to get back. She’d try to pull him aside, but Dad would resist. Then, after a while, he’d give in, and the two of them would go off and lay into each other.

The wide swath of the Milky Way stretched across the cloudless July sky. In my head I had already mapped out the few constellations I knew and busied myself connecting the dots of my own creations. I closed one eye, pointed, and traced the outline of a skateboard, a car, a boat. On the other side of the fire, Mom sat back and broke apart graham crackers and chocolate bars, a bag of marshmallows between her feet. Dad emerged from the shadows and dumped an armful of wood near the edge of the fire ring. He set to building up the fire and stoked it up nice and tall before settling back into his own camp chair. Embers drifted up into the dark, losing themselves against the Great Bear and Hercules. The snap of graham crackers and the crackling fire echoed off each other. I looked across the fire at Patty. She stared back at me, once again on the verge of tears.

That’s when Dad surprised me and finally broke the silence.
"You remember that hill?" he asked, eyes never leaving the fire. "The one I took you sleddin' on last winter?" I nodded. Dad had called it The Crown, but all the kids at school called it Suicide Hill.

"Well, back when I was your age, your Grampa told me a story about that hill," he said. "Seems as though there were these two brothers, Tommy and Kevin Baldwin..."

* * *

He was in the way again, but this time Little Tommy Baldwin didn't care. He loved his big brother, Kevin, and tried to stay out of his way whenever Mother made him baby-sit, but this time was different. This time, Mother told Kevin not only to watch over Little Tommy, but also to teach him how to sled. It had taken some well-timed tears on Tommy's part and promises from them both to only go a little ways up the hill, but his mother relented. Tommy was going to get out of the green cabin and finally go sledding. Sledding!

All the way there, as Kevin trudged through the snow and Tommy bounced along beside him, their Flexible Flyers gliding along behind with their lunch pails tied atop with twine, Kevin lectured and Tommy listened, mouthing the more familiar parts in silent defiance.

"Don't bug me when we get there, LT. I'll be with Tank and I'll keep an eye on you, but just don't bug me," he said. "And for God's sake if you get cold, get to the cabin. If you get sick Ma will blister us both for sure."

Eventually the lecture turned to sledding, and steering, and the best way to sit,
and other things of equally tremendous value. Tommy asked all the right questions and, more importantly, when Kevin quizzed him at the end, had all the right answers.

"You're gonna be a natural, LT," Kevin said with a smile.

They walked side by side along the old cinder trail that wound through the woods. The going was easy, and Tommy and Kevin laughed and joked along the way.

“There it is, LT,” Kevin said, a smile spreading across his face.

Even though he knew better, Tommy thought how tiny it looked. The dark pine trees that crowned the hill looked like little hairy matchsticks, but as they got closer the crown of pines grew higher and higher. They were a long way up, those pines.

"Have you ever gone from the top, Kev?"

Tommy took another five or six steps before he noticed that Kevin was no longer beside him. He turned and saw his big brother stopped in mid-stride, squinting down at the path in front of him.

"Kev?"

Kevin was slow to respond. His breath hitched at first, and his skin paled a little. His eyes glazed over with a kind of faraway look, and when he spoke, he was hushed, whispering.

"I went up there once," he said. "Last year. Me and Tank. Didn't sled down, though."

Tommy watched a fog settle in. It dulled the air between them and turned Kevin's bright blue eyes to a slushy grey. Tommy waited, but Kevin didn’t offer
anything more. He just stood there, staring at the ground ahead of him.

"Kev? What's up there?"

And then, just like that, the fog lifted and the usual sparkle in Kevin's eyes was back.

"Nothin', LT. It's just a hill," he said with a grin. "Just a big ol' hill, and this year, by God, I am gonna push off from the top. Maybe even today."

"If you go up there, I'm going with you."

Kevin burst out laughing. "Not a chance, kid. You'd never make it all the way up." He looked sideways at his little brother and his laughter faded. "Look, LT. The top is... well it's spooky up there. Besides, remember what we promised Ma?"

Of course he did. "That I'd stay on the bottom of the hill."

Kevin nodded. "I'll take you up there someday," he said, "I promise. But not today, k? Today you're gonna stay on the bottom, like we promised Ma."

Tommy didn't have a choice. "Ok," he said. "But if you go from the top, will you tell me so I can watch?"

"You betcha, LT. I'll make sure you get a front row seat."

The snow started just as they arrived at the hill. Kevin spent the first hour or so with Tommy, showing him the path up through the woods, and teaching him how to push off using the trees for leverage. They raced up the path, and then raced down the hill, Kevin always giving Tommy a bit of a head start so he could keep an eye on him.
Just as Kevin had said on the cinder trail, Little Tommy Baldwin was a natural. On his second run, he lay down on his Flyer and went head first. On his third run, he figured out how to steer with his feet. And on his fourth he started begging Kevin to let him climb higher up the hill. But then Tank and his little brother Jake arrived and that was that.

Tank was Kevin's best friend. They met playing Pop Warner football, when Kevin was the quarterback and Tank was the fullback. His real name was Sidney, but his little brother Jake was the only one who could get away with calling him that. If anyone at school tried it, they were bound to get a beating.

Jake, on the other hand, was about as different from Tank as he could be. Already small for his age, Jake had skipped a grade because he was so smart, and he looked downright fragile compared to the other kids in the class. All the same, he and Tommy hit it off right away, partly because they were thrust together so often by their big brothers. But there was more to it than that. Tommy was the leader of the two, and it had to do with him being a little older than Jake. He liked the feeling of being responsible.

After a couple hours of racing each other while Tank and Kevin pushed off from higher up the hill, Tommy and Jake went to the cabin to warm up and eat some lunch. As they sat in the warmth of the cast iron stove, Tommy told Jake what Kevin said on the way to the hill.

"He'll never push off from up there," Jake said. "Sid won't even talk about it. He says it's haunted."
"Haunted? You're crazy," said Tommy as he put his orange thermos back into his lunch pail. "Kev didn't say anything about it being haunted. Besides... he said maybe today. Maybe."

"Well, all I know is what Sid said, and he said there's woods up there, and they're haunted."

"Haunted how?"

"Like with ghosts and stuff," said Jake. "There's these trees up there, and Sid swears he saw all these yellow eyes shining in between the trees. Lots of them."

Tommy turned toward the window and looked up at the top of the hill. He could just make out the tops of pine trees up there, silhouetted against the afternoon clouds.

"What kind of eyes?"

Jake shrugged. "I dunno. Just eyes, I guess. He said he's never seen 'em down here. Just up top." Jake took another bite and didn't say anything more.

"Well, Father says there's no such thing as ghosts," Tommy said.

Jake shrugged once more and continued chewing. "No way I'd go up there," he said around the bologna and cheese. "Sid isn't scared of anything, and he won't go up there. And if he won't go, no way am I goin'."

Outside it was still snowing, but the breeze had died down and the big fluffy flakes drifted and spun and danced together as they fell. Out on the hill, a dozen or so of the older kids were having races from a little more than half-way up. No one had been any higher than that all day.
When the cabin door banged open, Tommy jumped a little. It was the creepy old Ranger with an armload of wood. He dumped it in the tinderbox and then re-stoked the stove. The smell of pine pitch and birch bark filled the little cabin when he swung open the stove door. After clanging the door home again, the old Ranger straightened and arched his back, and Tommy heard it pop and crack. He joined the boys at the table and eased himself onto the other end of Tommy’s bench, all hunched over with his elbows resting on his knees. He was breathing hard. Jake eyed the old man and slid a little further down the bench.

The older kids all said the Ranger lived out in the woods somewhere, but no one knew where, exactly. And no one knew what his name was, either. They all just called him The Ranger. Some kids even said that he wasn’t a real Ranger. Kevin said he heard that the Ranger was really a murderer who had eaten his own family and that he was doing good deeds like keeping the stove going so he could get into heaven when he dies. All anyone knew for sure was that he just sort of appeared and disappeared without any warning. That, and he was old. Too old to be carrying armloads of firewood all day, that’s for sure.

Tommy watched out of the corner of his eye as the Ranger pulled off his gloves and gave them a shake. Bits of bark scattered across the floor and landed in the puddle of melting snow spreading between his big black boots. When he pulled off his fur cap, a thick shock of grey hair fell into his eyes. The Ranger swiped it back with a pale, spotted hand and let out a bit of a groan.

"They gonna close 'er down soon," the old Ranger said.
He seemed to be talking to himself, his voice gruff and tired. Not tired from carrying wood, though, Tommy thought. It was different than that. A deeper kind of tired. Tommy didn’t know if he was supposed to respond or not, so he looked over to Jake who just shrugged and stuffed the last of his sandwich into his mouth. Turning back to the Ranger, Tommy cocked his head sideways as a dozen questions came to mind. Settling on what he figured was the most important, he slid a few inches closer to the Ranger.

"Close what?" Tommy asked. "The hill?"

The Ranger nodded to himself. "Ayep... hafta... them trees up there... way up top... they's hongry."

Tommy looked over to Jake, whose last half-chewed bite of bologna sandwich lay helplessly on his tongue just inside his open mouth. When he looked back to the Ranger, he forgot every question that had floated through his mind only moments before. That same cloudy look that overcame Kevin on the trail had enveloped the Ranger. His eyes had gone a little glassy, his pale skin seemed to sag on his bones, and when he finally spoke, his mouth hardly moved at all.

"Won't do no good... them pines... they lookin' again. Lookin' at the hill." His head dropped forward and he stared at the puddle between his feet. "Ayep... Gotta close her down before they find the one they want."

A log popped in the stove and Jake let out a little squeak, followed by a series of violent retches as he choked on his half-chewed sandwich. The sudden noise scattered the cloud from around the Ranger and he jumped up and gave Jake a good
swat on the back. Tears streaming down his face, Jake sucked in mouthfuls of air between coughs as he stared at the soggy lump of bologna and cheese on the table in front of him.

"Human bites, son," the Ranger said with a wink and a crooked smile, "Take human bites."

Afternoons got cold on the hill. The shadows stretched out from the crown of pines and covered everything, even the cabin. The tinderbox was still full, though, and since the Ranger was nowhere to be seen, Tommy threw a couple more logs into the stove. He was a little cold and wet, but not like Jake was. Their coats and snow pants hung on pegs, melting snow and ice dripping down the log walls of the little cabin and disappearing into cracks in the cement floor. Jake had already stripped down to his long-johns and sat shivering in front of the stove, his pants and sweater soaked and stretched out on one of the other tables. Tommy sat down next to him in his jeans and stared out the window.

Jake hadn’t wanted to go back out after the Ranger left. He was scared and kept saying that Tank was right, the hill was haunted. In the end he gave in, but he made Tommy promise they would only go about a quarter of the way up – not even as far up as they climbed before lunch. They raced again and again. Most of the time, Jake wiped out, laughing and sliding down the hill on his back. But sometimes Tommy dragged his feet and let Jake win. Tommy even pretended to crash a few times. All the while, between the moments of laughing and tumbling head over heels,
the Ranger's words popped back into Tommy's head, pulling his eyes to the top of the hill.

_Them trees up there... they's hongry._

"I ain't g-g-goin' back out there, Tommy," Jake said, teeth chattering behind purple lips.

Before Tommy had a chance to say anything, the door to the cabin banged open and Tank was standing in the doorway.

"Hey runts, get on out here... Kev's gonna push off from the top."

Kevin was just starting up the hill when Tommy ran out of the cabin, his unzipped coat flapping out behind him. Pausing only to grab his sled, Tommy took off across the field, pulling the Flyer in furious jerks with every stride and screaming for Kevin to wait.

"Well, come on then, LT!" Kevin called back with a wave.

Kevin turned and kept climbing, but went a little slower. It didn't take Tommy long to cross the field and catch him, and when he did he was completely out of breath.

"You started," Tommy said between gasps, "without me."

Kevin smiled. "Aww, LT. I knew you'd catch me," he said. "Besides, I promised you a front row seat, remember?" Tommy nodded and scooped up a mouthful of snow. "Let's get a move on. I got a spot all picked out for you."

Kevin started up the hill again, his Flexible Flyer playing out behind him. The
snow cover was light between the trees, but Tommy still struggled and lagged behind. He tried to step in his big brother's footprints, but sometimes he couldn't stretch his legs far enough and had to double up his steps. It wasn't long until he had to use tree trunks to pull himself up the hill, and holding onto the Flyer became difficult. And on top of it all, Tommy knew that with each step he took, each time he grabbed the trunk of a tree and pulled himself further up the hill, he was that much closer to the pines.

*Sid swears he saw all these yellow eyes in there.*

Tommy stopped on hands and knees, panting. When he raised his head, he saw Kevin leaning against a shaggy birch tree and tying his sled around his waist. The pines hadn't started yet.

Kevin smiled down at him as he finished the knot. "You're about done, LT. Gonna show you a little trick, then I'll take off for the top."

When Tommy made it to the birch tree, Kevin took his sled from him. "You see that first hemlock up there behind me?"

Tommy looked over his brother's shoulder.

"That's where you'll wait. On the other side of that tree."

"The pine tree?" Tommy asked. "The one that leans a little?"

"Yup... It leans right out over the slope. Best place on the hill to watch."

*Them pines... they lookin' again.*

Looking hard at his brother, Tommy noticed for the first time that there were dark circles under Kevin's eyes. The Ranger had been tired, too; a kind of tired that went all the way to his guts.
"Why isn't Tank coming up with us, Kev?"

Kevin laughed a little and looped the rope around Tommy's waist. "He says his feet are cold, but I think he's scared to push off from up there."

*Sid ain't scared of anything, and he won't go up there.*

"Don't leave me here, Kevin. I want to come with you."

"You can't, LT. Hell, if Ma knew I took you this far up we'd be in for it."

Kevin knotted off the loop around Tommy's waist and stood up. "Now, the only time you untie that is right before you push off, got it?"

Tommy barely heard him, but nodded anyway.

*Them trees up there...they's hongry.*

Tommy wondered if Mother knew about the trees.

"Kev, can trees get hungry?"

Kevin's head jerked up. For a moment, Tommy thought there was real fear there, a kind of fear he had never seen in his big brother. In that split second, all of Tommy's worries, the hill, the eyes, the pines, the Ranger, his promises to Mother, they all became a single frightening truth. And Kevin knew all about it. He knew and he was going to push off from the top anyway.

But then Kevin's face lit up with a tremendous grin and he laughed loud and long, and Tommy couldn't be sure he had seen anything there at all. Kevin laughed so hard he had to sit down in the snow. Tommy bowed his head and stared at his feet as the first tears brimmed in his eyes. Kevin laughing at him was worse than everything the Ranger said.
"So that's what this is about," Kevin said when he finally stopped laughing.

"You were talkin' with that old Ranger, weren't you?" Tommy nodded as a snot balloon pulsed twice and popped under his nose.

Kevin scooped up a small handful of snow. "Listen, LT," he said, wiping his brother's nose with a snowy glove. "That ol' man has been scaring kids with that story for about a hundred years. Here... lemme guess..."

Kevin, still sitting, rubbed his glove in the snow at his feet, then put his elbows on his knees and let his head fall forward and swing back and forth like a pendulum. "Dey goan close 'er down, yanno."

Tommy's mouth fell open.

"Dem trees up dere... dem pahns... deys haawwngry!"

Tommy started giggling as Kevin lolled his head from side to side, his tongue hanging out of his mouth like a dead deer and his eyes crossing and looking down at the tip of his nose. "Dey lookin' dahm de hill... an' dey fahnd wut dey bin lookin' fer!"

Tommy laughed hard, then. The exaggerated talk was eerily similar, but so extreme that it was just plain funny.

"An' wut dey bin lookin' fer," Kevin said as he raised his head, "is you!"

Kevin grabbed Tommy by the arms and pulled him into a bear hug. Tommy squirmed and laughed and squeaked in surprise. Kevin laughed, too, and rocked Tommy from side to side, swinging his little legs out almost parallel to the hill.

Setting Tommy back down, Kevin said, "He told the same thing to Tank and me last year, LT. And the year before that he said it to Larry and Bobby Baxter. And
the year before that he probably told it to someone else, and the year before that, and
the year before that. It's all just ghost stories, LT, to keep kids from pushing off from
too high up."

And with that, Tommy understood. It was the kind of weird stuff grownups always said to get kids to do what they wanted them to do. To Tommy, who had figured out all on his own that his face would never really freeze like that, it made perfect sense.

"You okay now?" Kevin asked as he picked himself back up.

"Yes," said Tommy with a big grin.

"C'mon, then. Let's get you all set up."

Tommy sat on the Flyer, his left foot on the ground, his right foot dangling about three inches off it. Kevin was right; this was a neat trick. He had wedged Tommy's sled against the trunk, the front digging into the bark, the back jammed into the snow. Basically, he sat on a bench, about two-thirds up the hill, looking straight out at where Kevin would go sailing by.

A stillness fell over the hill, and Tommy found himself listening for the sounds of Kevin's climb. Occasionally, he thought he heard a stick break and what he thought was probably a muttered curse. *That has to be Kevin,* he told himself. But just as often, there was another sound. Not a snap, but a rustle. Softer. Closer.

It reminded him of when Kevin took him deer hunting one morning. They set off in the dark for Kevin's stand, the air crisp and clean. Not a breath of wind stirred
the trees, and every step crashed and echoed in Tommy's ears. They hadn't gone more
than fifty feet when Kevin put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. Leaning in
close to Tommy's ear he breathed, "Step with your heartbeat."

Four months later, sitting on his Flexible Flyer, Tommy remembered how much quieter he walked after that. He remembered sitting in the tree stand listening to the sound of the dawn: birds waking up, squirrels scampering from their leafy homes, and the breeze beginning to blow, chasing the darkness further and further west. Dusk, Tommy decided, was the opposite. The wind died away to let the darkness creep back in.

More rustling on the hill above him, and Tommy was no longer sure it was Kevin. He spun around on the Flyer and put his back to the pine. It wasn't dark yet, but it was close. The shadows had disappeared, and there was a kind of grayness that made it difficult to see where the tree trunks stopped and the air started. When he caught a flicker of something out of the corner of his eye, he jerked his head to the left. Another flicker, pale and yellow, brought his head back around to the right.

"Kevin?" Tommy called. "Is that you?"

A rustle from above was the only reply. Tommy squinted up the hill and saw it. The tiniest flicker of yellow light. A dim, sleepy pulse that seemed to drift in the deep grey spaces between the trees. Another flicker to the left and further up the hill. And another.

"Kev?"

But even as Tommy said it, he knew. Kevin had been gone too long. He
should have pushed off by now and sailed past with a huge grin, waving at Tommy and hollering all the way down.

“Kevin!”

Tommy hopped off his sled. Looking up the hill, the lights seemed stronger. They moved with a certain confidence, pulsed with an air of pride. It took every ounce of courage he had, but slowly, steadily, Tommy began to climb. With every step the lights drew back and Tommy pulled himself up through the trees. He called for his big brother again and again, chanting with each step, gaining courage and confidence just from the sound of his brother’s name.

“Kevin... Kevin... Kevin...”

He slid backwards, arms flailing for purchase, finally thunking to a stop against the last of the birch trees. He resumed both his mantra and his climb up the hill.

“Kevin... Kevin... Kevin...”

He was so focused on his climb that Tommy never even thought to look back down the hill. If he had, he might have seen Jake and Tank far below, tiny dark figures against the snow, jumping up and down and waving their arms. Or perhaps he would have seen the little yellow lights behind him, surrounding him, urging him onward, upward. And he most certainly would have seen Kevin sail past on his Flyer, three feet off the ground, face pale, tears streaming from his wide, white eyes.

Tommy clutched the trunk of the last pine tree, his sled tugging on the rope as
it dangled down the hill behind him. Above his head, a branch stretched out to the top of the hill. Tommy threw his arms around it and used it to pull himself up the last few feet of the climb. It was a struggle, sliding the crooks of his arms along the branch and fighting for what little traction he could get with his big rubber boots, but at last he made it to the top of the hill. Sap coated his mittens, and somewhere along the climb he had lost his hat, but he made it.

Sitting down in the snow, Tommy pulled the dangling Flyer up over the lip of the hill, then fell onto his back. The grey sky surprised him. It would be full dark soon.

Tommy got to his feet and untied the rope from his waist. Holding tight to the sled, he inched forward and looked down the hill. He could just barely make out the outline of the cabin, and the tiny square of light that was the cabin's only window. When the door was thrown open, light spilled out onto the snow.

*So far away*, he thought.

A rustle behind him pulled his attention to the pines.

*Sid swears he saw all these yellow eyes in there just shining in between the trees.*

Tommy walked with his heartbeat to the edge of the trees and jammed his Flyer upright into a little drift. As he looked into the pines, the tiny lights danced and pulsed, and even seemed to hum a little. Nothing with words, just an odd melody of vibration he felt more than heard. Stirred by this soundless song, Tommy stared into the pines and swayed.
Tank was wrong. And so was Kevin. They weren't eyes, and it wasn't spooky at all. It was peaceful up here. Safe.

"So pretty," Tommy said to no one. The lights illuminated the snow with dim, flickering yellow puddles, and as Tommy stood and watched, they danced closer, coming out of the trees and surrounding him, welcoming him. They flitted in and out, and brushed at Tommy's dark hair. And as they grew in strength and number, the shadow of a headstone stretched further and further back from Tommy's upright Flyer. And Little Tommy Baldwin smiled.

* * *

The campfire had burned down to a low, crackling glow. Tiny flames licked the remains of the charred logs, fighting to stay lit. Dad leaned forward, elbows on his knees, fingers steepled under his chin, and squinted into the fire, as if he could build it back up just by thinking about it. Mom hadn't moved. In the flickering shadows of the fire, her eyes looked red and puffy. She didn’t look at the fire, though. She looked over the top of it at Dad, a small, sad smile teasing the corners of her mouth.

At some point during the story, Patty had come over and sat down with me. Her hand was in mine, and the two of us looked at each other. When the silence stretched out, Patty began to fidget, trying to wait for the rest like she was supposed to. When she squeezed my hand hard enough to crack my knuckles, I almost asked the one question I wasn't sure I wanted answered.

Mom beat me to it.

"What happened to Little Tommy?"
Both Patty and I jumped at the sound of her voice, but Dad didn't even blink. He just kept staring at the fire. I wasn't even sure he had heard her. Patty's grip on my hand tightened again as we waited. Mom waited too, her eyes soft and somehow understanding. She looked over at Patty and me and smiled, and when Patty's hand loosened in mine, I knew everything was going to be alright.

Slowly, Dad peeled his eyes from the fire and looked up. It was late, and I could see it on his face. He was tired, worn out.

"Accordin' to Grampa," he whispered, "They never found him."

And with that he fell quiet again.

We all sat in silence after that, staring into the dying embers of the fire. But it was a good silence, a contented silence, and Mom eventually ushered us off to the creek to brush our teeth. Later, zipped up in our tent, Patty and I whispered in the dark about what may have happened to Little Tommy Baldwin atop our sledding hill. In the other tent, Mom and Dad were whispering, too.
Long Gone Cold

All day long I sat on the stairs and watched. Down in the kitchen the state police huddled around Dad. I could see him sitting at the kitchen table, the untouched cup of coffee in front of him long gone cold. He was tired. I saw it in the purple bags under his eyes. I heard it in his voice when he answered the questions from the police. The same questions they asked this afternoon. And this morning. And last night. He had been up for two days. At first he didn’t sleep because he was out looking for Patty. But then the cops wouldn’t let him go back out into the woods, so he just sat at the table, answering their questions and listening to the searchers on their radios. They didn’t even let him change his clothes. His shoes were covered in dried mud, and there was a brown stain under the chair from the melted snow and ice.

Upstairs, in her bedroom at the end of the hall, Mom cried behind a locked door. Even sitting halfway down the stairs I heard her. I think Dad heard her too, because every now and then he’d turn his head and look at the stairs. At me. We’d stare at each other for a moment, and then he’d drop his eyes back to the cold cup of coffee in front of him. I remember thinking that I should go down and make him a fresh cup, but I never did.

I nearly toppled head-first down the stairs when I stood up. I couldn’t feel my feet. I clutched at the railing and climbed the stairs like a rag doll, or a marionette, pulling myself up the stairs more than climbing them. At the top of the stairs I shook the pins out of my calves and thighs while Mom cried behind her locked door.
Outside Patty’s room, I looked through the window on the opposite wall. It should have been dark out. I went over to the window and got there just in time to see the big spotlights in the yard blink out one by one. There were seven of them, all pointed into the woods. The last one in line, the one at the corner of the garage, stayed on, just like the night before. Just in case Patty wanted to come home. Or was able to come home. The last of the April snow storms still covered the back yard, but it felt like snow all over again. On May third.

I sat down on Patty’s bed and looked at the pictures on the walls. Patty had been drawing all winter long – pictures of snow-covered hills underneath cloudless, starry nights; pictures of sunshine and snowflakes; of fancy winter hats and snowmen and campfires and pine trees and picnics – a hundred different pictures of a hundred different things all taped to the walls. I got up, closed the door, and found more drawings hiding back there - motorcycles and airplanes; water towers; bicycles; an old blue pickup truck; a bright yellow hat hanging upside down in a birch tree, its pompom hovering just inches above the snow.

I turned off the light and lay down in Patty’s bed, her old Pooh-bear on the pillow next to me. I grabbed him and hugged him tight as the muffled crackle of a walkie-talkie floated up from the kitchen.
The Queen of the Hill

I grabbed the latest *Sgt Fury* and moved quickly, tiptoeing from my room, down the stairs into the family room, and then down more stairs into the basement. In the far corner, snug between the washer and the sump pump, I turned on the water to the utility sink and waited.

David Childes was my best friend back in those days; the best I’ve ever had, really. On Saturdays, when our parents went golfing, he came over and we spent the whole day together. We read comics. We rode our bikes out on the trails in the park behind my house. We played catch and tag and kick-the-can. We listened to music. David’s big sister Susan, who took her big silver boom-box everywhere she went, was our babysitter. She was also the reason my Saturdays all began hunched over the utility sink in the basement. I never puked in front of her, but just the thought of her coming over was enough to get the butterflies flapping like crazy.

Susan Childes was eight and a half years older than me. She had long, perfectly straight red hair, loved to dance and sing and laugh, and, even though she never let on, knew that I was in love with her. I could tell by the way she looked at me. When David and I sat on the couch reading, and Susan was on the phone with her friends, I’d peek over the top of my comic just to watch her talk and laugh and flip her hair. Most of the time I got away with it, but every now and then she caught me and smiled, or tossed me a quick wink. And even though I would immediately bury my face in whatever comic I was reading – even though I would pray that the blood
would drain from my cheeks and ears before David noticed – even though I would
never, ever actually tell Susan how I felt about her – still I longed to see that smile,
or, better yet, that wink.

Mom and Dad had just left, and David and I sat out at the picnic table
listening to Susan’s boom-box. She brought out sandwiches stacked on a paper plate,
and the three of us dug in. We ate our lunch, and talked, and laughed, and sang along
to Journey and The Eagles and Styx, and after we finished, while Susan collected the
plates and cups, and David and I were all alone at the table, I told him I was in love
with his sister.

“Well, duh,” he said. “What do you think I am, stupid?”

“No... but...”

When he punched me in the shoulder, I wrestled him off the bench.

We lived on County Road 17, just down the street and around the corner from
the middle of nowhere. The house had a long dirt driveway, and Susan always pulled
in a little too fast and fishtailed her dad’s blue pickup truck through the dirt because
David liked it. Sometimes, after lunch, Susan took us driving on the dirt roads in the
park behind the house just so we could slide around the corners and kick up dust.

We tore down the old logging roads, shaded from the summer sun by towering
oaks and poplars and hemlocks and elms, me sitting in the middle, bouncing into
Susan, fighting to linger there – her hair always smelled like flowers and honey – but
the next bump, the next turn would send me sliding across the bench seat into David, crunching him against the door, and he would grunt and pretend that it hurt, and I would laugh, and he would laugh, and Susan would laugh.

One day, Susan threw the sandwiches into a cardboard box and we all piled into the pickup.

"Where we goin'?" David asked as Susan spun the tires in the dirt driveway.

"Picnic in the park!" she yelled as she swung out onto CR-17.

Susan cranked up the radio and we sang along with Aerosmith at the top of our lungs. David and I danced on the seat, sliding back and forth as Susan wound through the park and pulled into the gravel lot next to the old fish hatchery. The long concrete ponds had been drained and filled with dirt for years, but there were still a pavilion and an old volleyball court, its sand long since turned to mud.

Susan backed right up to the pavilion and we dropped the tailgate and unloaded the box of sandwiches. Her big boom-box was strapped in to the bed of the truck. She turned it on – it sounded much better than the truck’s tinny little speakers – and we kicked off our shoes and socks and ate lunch and chair-danced in the shade of the pavilion.

When the opening guitar of Three Dog Night’s “Shambala” sounded, Susan squeaked a little. She dropped her sandwich, jumped up into the bed of the pickup truck, and started dancing for real. I watched her dance in that truck for the entire song, and when The Beatles came on next, she pulled me up with her. David climbed up, too, and that’s how we spent the rest of the afternoon. We danced in the bed of the
pickup truck. We jumped down and danced on the picnic tables. We ran out in the sun and danced barefoot in the long green grass. And towards the end of the day we even danced in the volleyball court, slipping and sliding and falling and rolling around in the mud.

With the county park in our back yard, cars parked up and down the road in front of our house all year long. Dad graveled a little path that ran up the edge of our yard and hooked up with The Esker just beyond the old rail fence. The Esker was the main cinder trail and ran all around the perimeter of the park’s 2,500 acres. Hikers, bikers, even folks on horseback used it as a shortcut into the park. We even left an old rusty shovel leaning up against the back fence for the horses – just in case.

David and I used to spy on people cutting through the yard. We followed them, pretending we were the police tailing suspects, or Indian scouts tracking deer and bear. The families in swimsuits and flip-flops turned left on The Esker for Johnson’s Pond. There was a little beach there, and a bunch of ropes and tire swings in the oak trees that lined the banks. Hikers and teenagers with coolers turned right and headed deeper into the park. The hikers walked in circles, and the teenagers always went to Lost Lake. They hurried down Dad’s gravel path, as if it were a secret where the entire senior class met every Saturday and Sunday. Dad once said that they met at Lost Lake when he and Mom were seniors, and probably back when Grampa was a senior, too. But that’s just a guess, I think, because Grampa never did like talking about the park. And after my sister Patty disappeared, he wouldn’t talk about
the park at all. He wouldn't even come visit us after that.

Things weren't all that different during the winter months. Folks carrying ice skates turned left and went past Johnson's Pond over to Round Pond, the only one shallow enough to stay frozen all winter long. Snowshoers and cross-country skiers turned right, just like the hikers in the summer. Anyone with a sled turned right, as well, and followed The Esker as it wound around Lost Lake and climbed Wadham's Ridge before dropping down into a thick stand of evergreens. There it crossed an old logging track, too rutted and cratered to be called a road, that drove deep into the heart of the park – straight to Suicide Hill. It actually crossed one of the park's access roads before emptying out in the clearing at the foot of the hill, but all the ruts and holes made the track impossible to plow. So even though our house was a little over a mile away, it was still closer than any plowed lot inside the park. Anyone who wanted to sled crossed through our yard at some point every winter.

Dad took Patty and me sledding there once. He promised to take me again, but never did. And when Susan wanted to take David and me to the hill on Saturdays, he made me promise Mom I wouldn't go sledding there without him. There were stories about Suicide Hill that scared her, and it was either that or sit at home and not go at all. So I made a promise to sit at the bottom of the hill where there were always lots of people around, and that's what I did. Sledding wasn't the real reason I wanted to go to Suicide Hill, anyway, but I couldn't tell Mom and Dad that. They'd think I was nuts. So I kept my promise, walked a mile though the woods, sat at the bottom of the biggest hill in the county, watched other people sled, and built a giant snow castle.
“Wait a minute,” David said on our first day at the hill, “You walked all the way here and you aren’t going to sled?”

David laughed when I told him about the promise.

“But they’re just stories!”

I shrugged. “I know it.”

We were in the warming shack in the clearing at the bottom of the hill. No one had fired up the little iron stove yet, and we could see our breath.

“They aren’t just stories,” Susan said as we stacked our lunches in the corner.

“Everyone knows Suicide Hill is haunted.”

“Haunted how?” I asked.

Susan looked over at me, then, and forced a smile. “It just is,” she said with a little shrug. “You can feel it sometimes.”

“Feel it? What do you mean, feel it?” David asked. “Feel what?”

But I knew what Susan meant. I felt it on the day Dad brought Patty and me here. I felt it again the night Patty walked off into the woods and never came back, a warm tingly feeling that started in the center of my chest and radiated out through my whole body. It tickled, in a way. One time, on a trip out to see Grampa Sam, we stayed at a motel that had vibrating beds. Patty and I got under the covers, and dad dropped in a quarter. It felt like that, only not all over. Just in the chest. I liked that warm feeling. It reminded me of Patty.

I sat down and fiddled with my lunch pail, pretending not to pay attention to either of them. Maybe Susan picked up on it, or maybe she didn’t want to talk about it.

"Doesn’t matter," she said. "Besides, even if it is haunted... that doesn’t stop folks from coming here, does it?"

"Nope!" David said and bounced out the door.

Susan lagged behind a little and looked back at me.

I didn’t know it then, but what she said wasn’t exactly true. People didn’t sled in spite of Suicide Hill being haunted. They trudged a mile through the woods because it was haunted.

Susan was one of the few people who pushed off from the top of the hill. She climbed up through the woods with Little Joe Baxter, Nate Sullivan, and Cathy Johnson’s twin brother Steve, and, one by one, they all pushed off. Everyone on the hill stopped and watched, even the jumpers. When she wasn’t sledding, Susan hung out in the warming shed or came out and sat with me and watched David on the jumps. Sometimes I got the feeling that some of the older kids were watching me, too, like Little Joe and Nate, or even Cathy. I caught them staring out the window of the warming shack, and sometimes Cathy came out to help me with the snow castle when the others were making a run from the top.

I built the castle because David and his jumper friends ambushed me one day. Susan was done sledding, and we were waiting for David to finish up his jumping before heading home. I didn’t think anything of it when David and his friends huddled up, and when they all pushed off together, shouting all the way down and
over the jumps, I laughed. There were six of them, and they slid to a stop about ten feet from me.

I never saw the first snowball, so it wasn’t David that threw it. It caught me right in the ear, and was followed by two more to the chest. The war was on, and I got hammered – until Susan and her friends jumped in. Little Joe and Nate let go from long range, bombing David and his friends while Susan ran up close with me. We threw as fast as we could, focusing on David, and we nailed him, one snowball after another. And then he rushed us. I tried to duck out of the way, but he tackled me and shoved snow down my coat. Laughing, we wrestled until Susan peeled him off me and he ran back up the hill. Susan and I sat in the snow out of breath while David and his friends went back to jumping.

I don’t think Susan ever looked prettier than she did at that moment. Her cheeks were flushed, her blue eyes sparkled, and with the sun just beginning to dip behind the top of Suicide Hill, her bright yellow hat seemed to glow in the growing shadows.

“So, Bobby, you really just like sitting here all day?” she said. “I won’t tell, you know... if you want to sled a little. You can even use my sled.”

I looked down at my lap. “I made a promise,” I said, “And if I keep mine, maybe Dad’ll keep his.”

Susan nodded and looked up the hill at David. By then, everyone knew about my promise to Mom. Susan must have even known about Dad’s promise to me, to take me sledding again, because she never asked me about it. But we weren’t really
talking about sledding. Even at ten I knew that.

In the two years since Patty disappeared, Susan had never once asked about her. No one talked about her at all anymore, actually. Not even Mom and Dad. I couldn’t even remember the last time I said her name out loud. I wanted to talk about it, about her, Patty. I wanted to talk about her very much, especially with Susan. But not there. Not at the bottom of Suicide Hill.

Susan dropped her eyes to her lap. She looked as scared as I was.

“You miss her a lot, huh?” she asked.

The shrieks and peals of laughter coming from the hill seemed muffled and far away. I looked up at Susan – she had cut her hair over the summer and it barely peeked out from under her hat. I didn’t answer.

“She’s here, isn’t she, Bobby? Patty’s here.”

I nodded, and the two of us sat in silence for a while. She knew. It felt good knowing that she could feel it too. She threw her arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze.

“You know why your Mom doesn’t want you to sled, don’t you?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah,” I said.

The stories Grampa used to tell were true. Suicide Hill was haunted, just as Susan said it was.

Susan nodded. “You know, Bobby... Haunted doesn’t have to be a bad thing. It’s just another way of remembering, really. Especially if what you remember is all
the good stuff.”

I thought she was going to say something else then, something about the hill, maybe, or Patty. She looked like she was going to. Instead, she leaned in and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and then turned back to watch David on the jumps.

“It’s sweet, you know, keeping your promise to your Mom,” she said. “You should always keep your promises.” We sat like that, her arm around my shoulders and me leaning into her just a little bit, until it was too dark for David to sled anymore.

By early March, the warm, tingly feeling was getting stronger. David had worked his way up to about the middle of the hill, but Susan and her friends had stopped sledding altogether. They stayed at the bottom, sitting on their sleds and just hanging out, sometimes with me, sometimes off by themselves. They said they didn’t feel like sledding anymore, but every now and then I’d catch them whispering to each other and looking up the hill. As the days slipped by, and the temperatures steadily rose, their whispers grew louder. Susan was antsy. With the snow melting away, the year fell into a kind of semi-season – not warm enough to do spring or summer stuff, but not cold enough to continue on with winter. I heard Susan complain about not taking one last run when she had the chance, and the other big kids agreed. David still went over the jumps, and we still watched, but his landing area was slowly turning to slush. Winter was all but over.

But on the twenty-fifth of April, the big kids got their wish. A late-season
storm rolled down out of Canada and dropped twenty-seven inches of snow in thirty-four hours. The whole town lost power, and school closed for three days. Just after lunch on the second snow-day, Susan slid the big blue pickup truck to a stop in the driveway with David laughing on the bench seat next to her.

The hill was packed by the time we got there. David stuck to the jumps, while Susan and the others climbed to the top and sailed down the left side where it was smooth and steep. Even though I watched her sled down from the top all winter long, I never really thought about doing it myself. I always liked the jumps better for some reason. But that day, watching Susan climb up through the trees, seeing her tiny figure standing so high above us, her bright yellow hat shining against the dark green of the pine trees behind her, watching everyone stop what they were doing and move out of the way, that was the day I first started thinking about heading up to the top myself. Each time she pushed off, I held my breath, and there was a kind of spark in my guts – a warm, glowy feeling that spread all through me as she sailed down the hill.

It was graceful, the way it built itself up. The slow, steady climb, disappearing in the trees only to reappear standing at the very top of the hill. The four of them, looking down, waving, Susan’s bright yellow hat shining like a tiny sun. One by one, they’d drop out of sight as they lay down and inched forward. And then their heads would break the lip of the hill. I noticed they didn’t so much push off as they did release, slide forward just enough and give themselves to gravity when it finally
grabbed hold and tipped them over the edge. They sped up quickly, dragging their feet to steer. Most of the time they made it, but every now and then a bump or a rut would wipe them out, sending them tumbling head over feet. Even the wipeouts were graceful in their own way. What started as a vicious tumble gradually slowed and smoothed into a slide as they tried to roll onto their backs after being bumped off their sleds.

All afternoon the four of them sailed down the hill. As the shadows began to creep down the hill there were still a few folks left, but most had either packed up or were making their last runs. I sat with Susan and her friends when David came over after wiping out on the biggest of the jumps.

"Time for one more?" he asked.

Susan looked up the hill and nodded. "Yep," she said. "One last run."

David smiled. If Susan was going to take one more run from the top, he'd get in at least three while she climbed up through the trees.

"David," I said, "Lemme borrow your sled."

David blinked.

"Bobby..." said Little Joe and Susan at the same time.

"You said you wouldn't tell on me if I wanted to sled."

"Not today, Bobby," she said.

"But you said..."

"No buts, kiddo," said Little Joe.

I got mad then. At Susan. She had promised not to tell if I wanted to sled. She
even said that I could use her sled if I wanted to.

“David, take your sled and go jump,” Little Joe said.

Susan dropped down on her knees next to me. David didn’t go anywhere.

“Do you feel it, Bobby?” she asked. She put one hand on my shoulder and the other on my chest and said, “It starts here, and just kinda spreads all over, right?”

I nodded. It was the whole reason I wanted to sled.

“You have to make me a promise, Bobby. Never go sledding when you feel that, ok? Never when it’s warm.”

“But it feels good,” I said. “It feels like Patty.”

“It’s a trick, kiddo,” said Little Joe, and Susan nodded.

It didn’t make any sense.

“Then how come you and David can go?”

The three of them looked at each other, and I knew they had the answer. Even David had it. They knew and they wouldn’t tell me what it was.

“Promise me, Bobby. Please. Even if you’re here with your Dad… Never sled when it’s warm.”

I nodded and made another promise not to go sledding. She hugged me then, tight, and kissed me on the cheek.

“Thank you, Bobby,” she whispered in my ear. “Thank you.”

I didn’t hug her back.

David made four jumps in the time it took Susan, Little Joe, and Nate to climb
to the top of Suicide Hill. It was getting a little dark, but even with the shadows stretching almost all the way to the warming shack there was still plenty of light to see them standing at the top of the hill. When Little Joe and Nate released, they were careful, measured, each lying down in their sled, head first, and easing themselves past the point of no return. I sat in the snow and watched, angry and anxious.

Little Joe finished his run and waved up the hill. Susan’s bright yellow hat moved across the top of the hill, pacing.

“Something’s wrong,” Nate said, staring up the hill.

A moment later, Susan didn’t ease herself over the lip of the hill – she threw herself over it.

Susan was never in control. When she landed, she bounced and started drifting towards the trees. Snow flew up from her feet as she dug in her toes. She let go with her hands and dragged them, too, fighting with both the sled and the hill. For a moment it worked. She gathered it in and seemed to get things together. But as she got closer we heard her screams.

When the sled veered to the left, it was as if someone reached out and jerked it across the face of the hill. Instead of just drifting sideways, the whole sled turned and pointed straight into the trees.

She hit a hemlock first. And even though it was a glancing hit, we heard the impact. She ricocheted and pinballed deeper into the trees, then, arms and legs flailing. We heard the second impact, too, and saw that Susan no longer flailed. I sat, frozen, and watched as she caromed from tree to tree to tree, finally sliding to a stop
beneath an old, shaggy birch.

David climbed onto the back of the second snowmobile. The one pulling the stretcher-sled was already moving at a snail’s pace down the old logging track, weaving to avoid the ruts and craters. It was full dark, and the lights from the ambulance waiting at the access road spun through the trees and pulsed down the long, straight track to Suicide Hill. We stood in a semi-circle in the little clearing, arced around where the two snowmobiles used to be, watching in silence until the sirens came to life and the pulsing, spinning lights disappeared. Nobody moved, nobody spoke, and all was still. Only the fading wail of the ambulance spoiled the silence.

Slowly, the arc broke apart. Someone took my hand and led me into the warming shack. We sat on the benches and tables, but no one talked. A few cried soft tears, a few leaned heavily on boyfriends or girlfriends. I sat in the corner, away from most everyone. I should have gone home, but I didn’t. For some reason I wanted to be there, with the big kids. I needed to be there. The warm, tingly feeling tickled my chest. It felt like Patty all over again.

All of Susan’s friends were still there, huddled on the benches. Nate’s girlfriend, Erica, cried into his shoulder, her eyes peeking out at me in between sobs. Little Joe and the Johnson twins, Cathy and Steve, leaned their heads together close enough for their foreheads to touch. They whispered, and every now and then, their eyes flicked in my direction. Everyone looked at some point. Most of the eyes were
sad, confused, but some, I thought, were angry. Johnny Miller, a couple years older than Susan, didn’t even bother to hide it.

Erica spoke first, her voice quiet, muffled by Nate’s shoulder.

“Is it done now?” she asked. “Is it over?”

Little Joe shook his head, more at the question than in answer to it.

“Course it ain’t over,” Johnny said. He still hadn’t taken his eyes off me. I dropped my head and watched the puddles growing on the floor from all the melting snow. “There’s only one way this’ll ever be over. We all know that,” he said.

“Shut up, Johnny,” said Little Joe, “this ain’t the time for that kinda shit.”

Everyone knew Johnny had a temper. It’s what got him thrown out of community college, and after a four month stay in county, Johnny was out of school for good and working at the same strip mine that killed his dad years earlier.

“Why don’t you come on over here and shut me up, Baxter?”

“Sit down, Johnny,” said Nate. “No one’s fightin’. Not tonight.”

The cabin murmured in agreement, and things got quiet again. Johnny climbed onto a picnic table and put his back against the wall. He was still angry, but at Little Joe, and when Johnny’s eyes came off his boots, they went to Joe first before landing on me.

No one spoke again for a long time, but as the silence dragged on, Johnny got nearer and nearer to bursting. He hunched against the wall, muttering to himself. Not knowing where to focus his anger, he shifted his eyes in a circle, from Little Joe, to me, to Nate, and then back to Little Joe. There’d be trouble before the night closed
out, and Johnny would be at the center of it. The only question was where the circle would break first.

“We need to figure out who’s takin’ over for Suse,” Nate said, finally breaking the silence.

No one replied, and, after a few seconds of silence, Johnny burst out laughing and every head swung in his direction. It was an eerie, maniacal laugh that cut deep and froze that moment in time. It was like walking across a frozen pond and hearing that first crack of the ice. You know you need to take another step, you know you need to get off the ice, and you know a single step in the wrong direction may well be your last.

“I’ll do it,” Little Joe said. “I’ll watch over Stillson.”

“You will, Baxter?” said Johnny. “And who’s gonna watch him when you’re ankle deep in spilled beer and puke?”

“Gramps’ll switch me to nights for this. Hell, he’d close down the bar to make it happen.”

Johnny laughed again.

“There ain’t no way he’d close down Thirsty’s for that runt. He’s too busy drinkin’ his way through his storeroom to give a rat’s ass about what happens out here on The Ol’ Bastard.”

Little Joe leaped to his feet, but Nate and Steve grabbed him before he got across the room.

“Aww, fellas,” said Johnny, “oughtta let him go. Get this whole thing done
and over with."

Nate and Steve sat Little Joe back down as Johnny returned to his spot on the
table and laughed.

"As much as I hate to say it," Nate said when things were all settled again,
"Johnny’s right. Can’t have you watchin’ over Bobby with as much as you work at
the bar."

"I told you, Gramps’ll switch me to nights."

"If he wants to do it, let him do it," said Steve. "It’s not like Suse was with
him 24-7. At some point his old man needs to step up."

"Yeah," said Steve’s sister, Cathy. "I mean, it’s been almost three years
since... you know..."

She didn’t finish, and silence once again fell over the little shack. Some of the
kids shifted in their seats, fidgeted. Erica slowly peeled off her coat. That seemed to
be the cue for everyone to follow suit, and I realized that it wasn’t just me that felt
hot. It all happened in silence. Even Johnny, still fuming against the wall, didn’t dare
finish Cathy’s sentence.

"Since Patty," I whispered when everyone was all settled in again.

Some of the kids nodded, some looked at me and then dropped their eyes to
their laps.

"She’s here, you know," I said. "Susan knew it. We talked about it."

Little Joe came and sat down on the bench beside me.

"We know, kiddo," he said.
“It’s the only time anyone ever talked to me about Patty.”

We sat there for a long time. No one spoke, no one even whispered, not even the Johnson twins. The silence stretched beyond the walls of the warming shack and out into the night. It was almost a relief when Erica started crying again. But her sobs were different, harder than when her tears fell for Susan, harsher. It took her a while, but when she finally spoke, as we all knew she would, she sounded almost ashamed.

“What if we don’t watch anymore?” she said. “What if we just let happen whatever’s going to happen and be done with it?”

“Cause that won’t end it,” said Johnny. “There’s only one way to be done with it once and for all. My old man knew it. And everyone here knows it, too.”

No one looked at him. He had their attention, but they all stared at their feet.

“You’re all cowards,” said Johnny at last, “You sit, and you watch, and you pretend to protect him, but you’re really just afraid to do what needs to get done.”

Little Joe’s face turned bright red, and he got to his feet.

“That so, Johnny?” he said. “And who’s gonna end it? You?”

Johnny stepped off the table and squared off with Little Joe.

“Step out of the shack for two minutes,” he almost whispered, “I’ll take care of him first, and then his old man. And when we all wake up tomorrow, this’ll be nothin’ but the night sweats.”

They were nose to nose when the door to the little green warming shack banged open. Johnny and Joe backed away from each other as my father stepped inside, snow covering his logger’s cap and the shoulders of his thick, baggy coat. He
looked at the two boys for a moment and then just shook his head.

“You’re a Baxter, aintcha? Not so little anymore, are ya, son?”

“No, sir,” said Little Joe. He was, in fact, bigger than Big Joe, his grandfather.

“And you. You’re Frank Miller’s boy, yeah?” he said.

Johnny worked his jaw soundlessly.

My father nodded, and, if only for an instant, a smile played at the corners of his lips.

“You all get on home now,” he said. “Ain’t no need to be out here at this hour.”

No one moved. All eyes were on the big man in the doorway, gloved hands hanging loose at his sides. The cold air flowed in through the door, beating back the warmth in my chest. My father stared at Johnny and Joe, breath pluming from his nose and mouth slow and steady, until they finally dropped their eyes and stepped even further apart. Then he turned his head to me.

“Let’s go, Bobby.”

Before I could scramble to my feet, my father turned and walked back out into the darkness.

He didn’t wait for me to put on my coat and gloves, and I ran to catch up to the flashlight that splayed across the cinder trail, swinging up and down with each long step my father took. The snow was packed firm and the going was easy, and I hurried along close behind as best I could.
He started to say something once, I think. Without warning he stopped short, and I planted my nose square in the small of his back. Then he turned, startled, and his elbow caught me in the ear and sent me sprawling off the edge of the trail. The elbow was an accident, I knew, and it didn’t so much hurt as it did surprise me, but still my eyes swelled up with tears. I rolled onto my back and looked up at him just as he brought the flashlight around. Looking through blurred eyes at the bright light and his silhouette, I realized for the first time that my father was a stranger to me.

He stared at me for a moment, looming over me, arguing with himself, I think, about what to say. He was nothing but a black shape, his loggers cap making his head look swollen in the darkness. His lips moved. They tightened, released, frowned, pursed, relaxed again. The flashlight trembled in his hand. In the end he said nothing; he just snorted through his nose, turned, and resumed his fast-paced walk. There was a discussion coming, or a lecture more likely, but not there along The Esker.

Dad’s pace slowed a bit towards the end, but it certainly didn’t relax. If anything, it seemed forced, determined, and I was out of breath long before the lights of our back porch flickered through the trees. Again he stopped without warning, and I managed to pull up short of his backside. He didn’t turn around. Silence hung between us – a silence I had no desire to break. He stared ahead at the lights of the house, I stared up at his broad shoulders, and the two of us stood like statues in the middle of The Esker Trail.

Dad stepped off the trail and into the woods, and I followed. We ducked under branches and clambered over logs, keeping the porch light more or less on our left
shoulder, and though we weaved between trees and around thick undergrowth, it was clear that Dad knew exactly where he was going.

The clearing was small and dominated by two camp chairs. One of the chairs was old, rusted, its nylon mesh tattered and frayed. The other, though, still had tags hanging from the canvas backing. It was smaller, lighter than the other chair, with cup holders sewn into the end of each arm.

I should have known he would go there first. It was his spot. I had been there once before, back when he was fighting with Mom all the time. Back before Patty left. One day, when Dad stalked out of the house after one of their fights, I followed him to this tiny clearing. There weren’t any chairs back then, just an old log he sat on.

At the edge of the clearing stood a big oak tree. It was old, I knew from my previous trip here, and its bark was grey and hoary. A knot the size of a basketball had rotted out and left a hole in the trunk. Dad tucked the flashlight into a pocket, and an incomplete darkness engulfed the tiny clearing. Neither of us moved as our eyes adjusted, and soon the light from the porch fought its way through leafless winter underbrush and left visible the faintest outline of the camp chairs.

Dad reached inside the old oak and pulled out a plastic zip lock baggie. Turning, he pointed at the newer of the two camp chairs.

“Sit.”

He slid a pack of cigarettes and lighter out of the baggie as he sat in the old nylon chair. It creaked, and for a moment I was sure he would spill over, or maybe bust right through the weathered old meshing. Neither happened.
With a simple twitch of the wrist, a cigarette jumped out of the pack into his hand and, a moment later, rested between his lips. When the orange glow of the lighter sparked to life inches from his face, I jumped. The tiny flame reflected in his eyes, and there seemed to be a certain kind of madness there, dancing just above the big black bags that sagged beneath. When they lifted from the cigarette to me, the lighter snapped off and still I could see the tiny flames dancing there between us.

He exhaled then, and sweet, minty smoke flowed all around me. He stretched his arm across the dim clearing, holding the cigarette out to me.

"Take it."

Slowly, the fire in his eyes faded. I scooted forward in the camp chair and reached for the cigarette.

"You tryin’ to burst into flames?” he asked, pulling back the cigarette. “Take your mitten off first.”

My face went hot in the darkness and I heard Dad chuckle as I slipped off one mitten and took the cigarette from him. He lit himself one, inhaled, and sank back into the camp chair. I couldn’t see his face, just the dim outline of his head in the soft, faint glow of the cigarette, but knew his eyes were closed all the same. I raised the cigarette to my lips and let the smoke fill my mouth. It tasted awful, like medicine and dirt, and I winced and blew the smoke out in a rush.

"Good,” Dad said, “Remember that taste when you think of pickin’ up a pack without me knowin’ about it.”

“I don’t want it,” I said.
“I know it. But you’re gonna smoke it, all the same. Every last bit of it. And then you ain’t never gonna smoke again. That clear?”

I nodded.

Dad sat and puffed away. He stared at me through the darkness, the silhouette of his logger’s cap never once moving in the shadows.

I held the cigarette as far away from my face as possible.

“Your Grampa called this his Smokin’ Tree,” he said after a time. “Brought me here when I was a little younger than you.”

Dad raised his foot and nudged my hand with the toe of his boot. He waited, I smoked, and together we sat in the dark quiet of Grampa’s Smoking Tree.

“You kept that promise to your mother, didn’t you? All those trips to the hill and you never once went sledding.”

I nodded in the dark, and I could see Dad’s silhouette nodding in reply.

“I made that same promise to your grandmother. Didn’t stick, though. I wasn’t much older than you the first time I pushed off the top of the Ol’ Bastard.”

My eyes stung from the smoke, and a tear slipped down my cheek. Shifting in the camp chair, I held the cigarette out over the arm. “That’s what Johnny called it,” I said.

“Did he, now?” Dad said. “Prob’ly got it from his old man before he died. It’s what we called it growin’ up. Grampa said he called it that one day, and it just stuck. Said that hill had a mind of its own, that it was alive. I always thought he was fulla crap.”
I smiled at that. Before Grampa moved away, he was always saying stuff like that. I can still remember sitting on the front porch, him in his rocking chair and me on the steps, while he talked about seeing the ghosts of his father and mother walking through the woods holding hands.

“I’ll tell you what...”

He inhaled then, long and deep, and blew it out through his nose.

“There’s somethin’ about that damn hill,” he said. “Somethin’ that don’t like us Stillsons. Somethin’ that don’t like us at all.”

Dad slipped out another cigarette and lit it off the ember of the first one. After crushing his old butt beneath a boot, he leaned forward, took mine from me, snuffed it out the same way, and with one deft motion threw them both over his shoulder and into hollow tree.

“Is that why Little Joe said he’s gonna take Susan’s place and watch over me?”

“He say that?”

“Yeah. That’s what they were fighting about when you walked in.”

“Baxter’s is good folks,” he said. “Dependable. You remember that.”

“Dad,” I asked. “What did they mean when they asked if it was over? Is what over?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he finished his cigarette. Then he lit another and smoked that one. I could feel him looking at me in the darkness, measuring both me and his words.
“That promise you made your mother... you ‘bout broke it today, didn’t you?”

He wasn’t looking at me, anymore. He looked through me. He looked through me, and through the trees and the bushes, looked all the way to Suicide Hill.

“Yeah,” he said. “You ‘bout broke it, and Susan’s the one that stopped you.”

The ice cracked underfoot again, and another moment fused itself in time and memory. Somehow, it was my fault. Our fault. Mine and the stranger sitting across from me.

I barely heard him. Echoes flooded my head, ghosts of memories and moments, stringing themselves together, hunting for answers the stranger wouldn’t give.

Haunted doesn’t have to be a bad thing. It’s just another way of remembering, really.

“Ain’t no matter, though. One of these days you’re gonna break that promise. Just like I did,” he continued. “Your mother and me... we knew it when you made it. Some promises are made to be broken.”

I’ll take care of him first, and then his old man. And when we wake up tomorrow mornin’, this ‘ll all be nothin’ but the night sweats.

We sat in silence after that while Dad had three more smokes and I thought about Suicide Hill. The Ol’ Bastard.

There’s somethin’ about that damn hill.

And I thought about Patty.
Patty's here, isn't she?

And David.

But they're just stories!

And Susan.

You 'bout broke it, and she's the one that stopped you.

I cried a little then, and, I think, at one point, Dad did, too.
Waving at Shepherds

The day I left home, I stopped sleeping, and, all things considered, it was a fair trade. At night I went through the motions of sleep. I dozed. I drifted. I put up my tent, I crawled inside, and I stared at the stars through a dirty window screen. I stared, and I dozed, drifting. But I didn’t sleep. I had teeth stained brown from too much coffee and fingers stained brown from too many cigarettes. I thought I had an ulcer because, occasionally, at a rest stop, or just off the side of the road, I took off my helmet and I puked up blood. I didn’t dream.

I fantasized. Friends and family reunited, reborn. We met, we laughed, we cried, and we apologized. We changed. I talked out loud to the people in my head, which sometimes chased them away and brought me back to reality with sad relief.

I hallucinated, too. Not often, but I did. The first time was in a Baja cantina, although that time may have been because of the tequila. My Grampa Sam, dead just two years, crawled out of a mirror and started throwing darts at me. After the bartender pulled me out from under the table, he asked me to leave.

Once, camping in the desert, my six year old sister Patty walked out of the sandy darkness and sat on the opposite side of the fire ring. Her eyes were puffy with tears. Patty, who trudged into the woods behind our house in the middle of a snowstorm and disappeared forever, never said a word. She pulled a marshmallow out of her pocket and roasted it in the fire. She didn’t use a stick. And when it was good and burned, she popped the blackened and fiery thing into her mouth, closed her eyes,
and chewed. When she opened her eyes again, she smiled like she never smiled when we were kids, and I promised her I would make my way back to Clayton’s Corners and try to set things right.

The Clayton of Clayton’s Corners was a Stillson – Clayton Stillson; Grampa Samuel’s uncle and stepfather.

Clayton and Grover Stillson were hired sight unseen by the Allegany Mining Corporation out of Buck Springs, Pennsylvania. There was no town back then, just a housing tract owned by the company and a general store inside the gates of the mining operation. It was Grover’s idea to open a store of their own, and he named it after his big brother – Clayton’s Corner.

They did well for themselves. Even though they built almost ten miles northwest of the housing tract – the mining company owned everything between the two – they managed to pull most of the business away from the store run by Allegany, and, within two years, AMC closed down the company store.

In the beginning the brothers lived over their store together. But when Grover married, he built a new house for his new family, and Clayton was left behind, alone in the three small rooms above the store. Two years and two children later, in the middle of an April snowstorm, Grover Stillson went missing for three weeks before his body was found deep in the woods behind his house. Less than a week after the funeral, Clayton moved in with his brother’s family. He took his brother’s wife as his own a year after that. Folks from the tract suspected Clayton of killing his little
brother. None of them wanted to know for sure. They went to his store, purchased his goods, laughed at his jokes, and invited him and his new family to supper. But at night, behind locked doors, burning candles and drinking whisky they purchased from Clayton’s Corner, they scowled and they accused and they prayed that one day justice would come.

Clayton Stillson outlived his wife by a decade and died in his sleep twenty-two years after murdering his brother. He left the house Grover built to Samuel, Grover’s oldest, and to Grover Jr. went the store. When Junior stopped showing up at the store, Samuel told people that, like so many others, he had struck west for the Klondike.

Samuel married and had two sons of his own, Fraser, the youngest, and Edgar, my father. And when Fraser disappeared into the same woods in which Grover was killed, Samuel ran, and the house passed on to my father. But just as the house was passed from Stillson to Stillson to Stillson, so was the stigma attached to it.

Six hundred miles after riding out of Utah’s Sevier desert I was sidelined by an early August snowstorm in Winter Park, Colorado. Three hundred miles after that, just after rolling through Dodge City, Kansas – one time home of the Earps, the Mastersons, and Eddie Foy (no little Foys, at that point) – three hundred miles later it started to rain. It was still raining when my front tire found its way out of the Mark Twain National Forest and chased the Meramec River towards the Mississippi along narrow, mostly deserted, sometimes unpaved roads. When I came across a covered
bridge – a dilapidated, single-lane, grey-wooded thing that was missing only nightfall
and a headless horseman to scare the crap out of me – I parked inside and shook out
my rain gear.

I lit a cigarette, leaned back against the Indian and blew smoke rings. They
hung in the air, drifting listlessly, one by one breaking each other apart until there was
nothing left but a formless cloud. When the rain stopped, I left Icabod’s bridge
behind, my initials and the date carved in its rough grey wall.

I nearly missed the little brown sign to the park. Braking hard, I skated the
rear tire across wet gravel and slid into the lot. It was a small park, with just two
pavilions set between the lot and the river. A dull green minivan sat nose out in front
of the first pavilion, its hatchback open. A woman with long brown hair flapped a
blue tablecloth over a picnic table.

The pavilion towards the back of the lot was empty, and I rode up on the
sidewalk and parked the bike underneath and out of the rain. The woman stood next
to her table, hands on her hips, looking at me. I slipped off my helmet, smiled, and
waved. Her return wave was quick, automatic, polite – more acknowledgement of my
existence than any kind of greeting. She held there a moment, then ducked back into
her minivan.

The image of the first motorcycle I ever saw is etched on my brain in dirty
tattoo ink. We were in the car, the Ambassador. Mom and Dad were in the front,
Patty and I in the back. I heard the bike long before I saw it, and the window vibrated under my fingertips.

The bike was black, and dirty, and loud, and the rider had bare arms covered in tattoos, and big, brown leather gloves, and round, dark goggles, and long hair tied in a pony tail that stretched out behind him like Superman’s cape. If the window hadn’t been rolled up I could have reached out and touched him. I pressed my face up against the glass and let the vibration move through me.

And when the biker looked at me, I waved.

And he smiled.

And he flashed me the peace sign and roared off.

Five months after that peace sign, there was only one thing on my Christmas list. Year after year, that list stayed the same. And year after year I got the same story from my father.

At least it started out the same.

“They’re too dangerous,” he’d say. “I knew a guy who rode. Named Red.”

But from there the story wavered. Sometimes “Red” was an old mining buddy, sometimes a high school basketball coach. Once he was the best man at Dad’s wedding. Whoever he was, he was killed in a motorcycle accident.

Part of me suspected that good ol’ Red wasn’t even real, just another one of Dad’s faked-up memories. That didn’t stop me from hating him, though. I hated Red for a long, long time.
The rain stopped, and I drifted beneath the rafters of the pavilion, floating in laughter and carnival music. An old fashioned carousel, tucked away in a little clearing on the far side of the park, spun beneath a pavilion all its own. Tiny lights hung from the rafters. Each rough wooden beam blinked in sequence as four horses—one gold, one blue, one red, and one green—dangled from thick rope, rocking and swaying and winding around the center station. Smiling, laughing children rode the horses, and every time a child moved, the horses rocked and swayed some more. In the center station, three re-tooled bicycles powered the whole thing, a child on each one pedaling for all he was worth.

It was then that I first saw the little tow-head. He rode the gold horse, and as he went around in circles, each time he passed, he looked at me. When he saw me looking back, he waved, and the adults at the picnic table took a break from their wine and cheese and all spun in my direction.

I smiled, flashed the boy the peace sign, and turned my back on the lot of them.

“Mister?”

The little voice startled me. It was tiny, shy. The rubber band from the tow-head’s American flag party hat creased his cheeks and chin, the dark blue of the hat making the light blue of his eyes that much brighter.

“Mister?” he asked again.

I looked over at the table of parents. This would end badly if one of them
spied the empty golden horse. As if in confirmation, the little tow-head looked back over his shoulder then dropped his eyes to his feet and kicked at the dry dirt under the pavilion.

“What’s up, little man?” I asked him.

His head jerked up and a smile spread across his face revealing a gaping hole where his two front teeth should be. I couldn’t help but smile back.

“What’s up, little man?” I asked him.

His head jerked up and a smile spread across his face revealing a gaping hole where his two front teeth should be. I couldn’t help but smile back.

“Can I see your motorcycle?”

Go ask your mother, kid, I thought

“Sure, kiddo,” I said. “C’mon over.”

I led him to the bike and he started asking the questions all boys ask.

Where do you put the gas? What does that do? Why is that there? How does it go?

I could see the spark in his blue eyes with each and every question. It started right there for him. The fascination. It started with me and my big old Indian.

When I was fifteen, I met up with a friend and traded him my 1980 Ford Mustang for his 1982 Kawasaki GPZ 550. I rode back and forth through Clayton’s Corners a dozen times that day before finally pointing the bike north and winding through the hills far outside of town. I wanted, in equal parts, to ride and to be seen riding.

Late in the afternoon, when I finally returned home, I killed the engine, propped up the bike on its center stand, and took off my helmet. When I opened my
eyes, my old man was looking out at me from the shadows of the garage. All day long I prepared myself for the argument I knew would come. I was ready for it. I was even sort of ready for one of our no-longer-uncommon knock-down-drag-outs that usually ended with me breaking into the high school and sleeping in the auditorium for a few nights. I wasn’t at all ready for that silent stare.

I didn’t move, and as the silence stretched out, I expected him to break first, to start in on one of his tirades that would, in less than three years, drive me from his house for good. But that tirade never came. He stared out from the shadows, jaw squared, eyes tight and stern, and when he turned his back on me and disappeared into the house, I knew that whatever link had been between us, whatever it was that held us together, was gone.

“Scooter! No!”

The woman from the dull green minivan closed the distance between the pavilions in ten big steps. Grabbing the little wrist that stretched out toward the Indian, she gave it a yank, spinning Scooter – Scott, maybe? – spinning him away from the bike and into her arms. Scooter was shocked. Tears of surprise spilled from his eyes, and his repeated “whys” rang out in an entirely different pitch and volume than they did just moments before.

Her apologies came as she focused on Scooter – apologies for bothering me and for her little boy getting too close to the big bike; apologies for interrupting my lunch.
“No worries,” I said, hoping to deflate the whole thing before she looked up. I put on my biggest smile and leaned back against the bike. She delayed looking at me as long as she could and focused her attention on the crying boy – she fussied with his collar, flipped it up, then back down; she plucked off the party hat and smoothed out his tussled mop of blonde hair; she brushed invisible specks of dirt from his shoulders; she held him at arm’s length, examining him from head to toe, and when she was satisfied, only then did she look at me. She had to see who the stranger was, the stranger who stood so close to her son. She looked knowing what she was going to see, her best I’m-so-sorry-sometimes-I-just-don’t-know-what-to-do-with-him smile on her face. She had already seen me, after all, even waved to me. She looked, and she struggled, and her smile slipped away.

Her brow was the first to go, pulling together and narrowing her eyes. Then her head tipped slightly forward. Finally, as her smile disappeared completely – as her lips pressed and pursed – as the thin white line tugged down at the corners of her mouth – as she stared, eyes accusing, condemning, blaming me for little tow-head’s curious nature – as her apologies turned hollow and meaningless – as all this happened, all I could do was smile.

It was a look I knew all too well.

As the woman dragged Scooter back to the other pavilion, he cast one last look over his shoulder at the Indian. I’d like to think he still has the fascination that he discovered that day, that spark that danced in his bright blue eyes. I’d like to think that his Christmas and birthday lists are only one item long. I’d like to think
much.

I stuck to the small roads, the two-lanes that wound around and took more time than the big interstates. Each town blurred into the next, and the bars were Jack's Place and The Ale House and The Salty Dawg Saloon. But I knew they were all Thirsty's; that Joey still swabbed the long mahogany bar and David was still propped up on a stool watching golf and drinking drafts of Genny Cream. The fantasies and hallucinations increased as I made my way closer to the Corners, and I found myself on the verge of turning around with the visit of each new ghost.

Nine hundred miles after leaving Scooter in that Missouri park, I rode through the mountains of Pennsylvania wondering why I ever listened to the advice of my dead sister.

The big bike rolled easily through the grass as I weaved around the rusty chain. At some point someone decided to block off access to the old sledding hill, but not before paving the old logging road that ran to its base. Gone were the wheel ruts and potholes that proved better barriers than a flimsy chain stretched between two wood posts. The narrow, quarter-mile road was a straight shot to the hill and emptied out into a graveled parking lot right next to the old warming shack. I cut the engine and rolled to a stop at the lot’s edge as the throaty echo of the Indian bounced back at me from the wrinkled old hill across the field. A stillness settled in as the echo faded, threatening to overcome even the ticking of the bike’s cooling engine.
A sign read “The Crown,” but I remembered our names. Suicide Hill we called it, or sometimes just The Hill. Or the name we inherited from an even earlier generation who, when they spoke of it at all, whispered, *The Ol' Bastard*.

It looked smaller than I remembered, shrunken, and a scar carved by rain and winter runoff wandered down the middle of The Ol' Bastard’s face. High on the right, a patch of bare ground marked the flattened push-off area for the jumps below. Worn and eroded to nothing but small nubs, the ramps were nearly invisible, nestled between rows of faded orange fencing that angled and crisscrossed the sledding area.

In the woods, the old path still wound its way to the top. It disappeared in spots beneath maple and birch, but the well-worn route was still there, leading up through the trees to where the hemlocks stood straight and tall. I slipped back in time, then, and saw those same hemlocks capped with snow and shining in the sun, sparkling as though they were dressed in fairy-tale jewels. But though the pines stand tall and proud atop The Ol’ Bastard, they also cascade down his back; more like rich, green hair than any kind of crown.

The laughter of those days returned – the laughter of children. We laughed as we trudged up through the woods; we laughed as we crashed and tumbled and slid down the hill; we laughed at friends, at parents, at brothers and sisters; we mounted our sleds, we pushed off, and we laughed as we sailed down the glistening face of Suicide Hill. And if we pushed off from high enough, our laughter turned to screams – screams of delightful fear.
As I stared up at the hill, the shadow of The Crown began to slip down from the hemlocks high above. There was a time when that shadow meant nothing more than the end of another day sledding. We climbed as high as we dared, for as long as we dared, and we thrust ourselves over the edge time and time again, giving our bodies to gravity and fate. We were the daredevils, the risk-takers, sailing over the snow and through the air with reckless, indestructible abandon; the very wanton fools our parents so often and so fruitlessly warned us about. But their warnings weren’t about sledding. Not really. They were about The Ol’ Bastard himself. They were about legends – legends that drew us in, and held us at bay.

Legends like the one of Little Tommy Baldwin, who, long before I came along, climbed the steep path through the trees to the very top of Suicide Hill and disappeared forever into the thick stand of hemlocks. And just as Tommy is the reason so many avoided the top of The Ol’ Bastard, so was he also the reason I was drawn there. For me, the thrill wasn’t in the sledding; it was in the defiance. Because even though I laughed, I knew something called to me from the crown of hemlocks atop Suicide Hill. Something called, and I answered, scrambling up through the woods, my laughter chasing away my fear. I believed in the legend. I believed in Tommy Baldwin.

On Christmas Day I broke the promise I made to my mother and climbed to the top of Suicide Hill. The day’s gentle breeze died away; the air cold, brittle. Behind me, the deep shadows of the pines creaked and whispered. I turned and
watched them, listening, waiting. Not for the first time, I thought of Little Tommy Baldwin.

I shuddered and turned my back on the pines. Shivering and sweating, I tried to focus on the steep slope as the scent of pine and birch swirled thick around me. With images of Little Tommy Baldwin stepping into the pines dancing in my head, I pointed my sled down the hill, gave a half-strangled shout, and let gravity do the rest.

I was never in control. The red plastic sled jerked left towards the icy runways of the jumps and I leaned hard, digging in my toes and fighting to get back to the right. By the time I realized I was in the icy chute, I was already at the ramp.

Everything stopped. The rush of the wind, the feel of the ice through the red plastic sled, it all disappeared and left me suspended, floating, drifting. I saw people far below me. A little girl, mouth covered with her hands, eyes wide and staring. A boy, frozen in mid-stride, lunging towards the spot where I would eventually come crashing down.

The doctor at the hospital said I should have died that day. Most of Clayton’s Corners would probably have agreed with him.

At the edge of the parking lot, the warming shack, much like The Crown itself, looked smaller than it should have, compressed, as if it, too, had shrunk and settled in upon itself. Even the flagstones leading to the only door were smaller, reduced to little more than flat rocks, and with every step I couldn’t help but tear
away the grass and moss that clung to a thin layer of loose dirt. More moss, or maybe
mold, covered the thick, grey boards nailed across the old door.

I worked my way through a tangle of underbrush around the outside of the
cabin. Beneath the single small window was a tiny clearing where nothing grew. An
old board, four rusty nails poking through each end, leaned neatly against the
blackberry bushes. The window itself, just inches below the roof’s shallow overhang,
was gone. I hoisted myself up for a look inside.

Glass lay shattered and scattered across the concrete floor. Two sets of tiny
footprints led from the window to the small cast iron stove still bolted down in the
middle of the shack. Food wrappers, baggies, and an old orange thermos littered the
corner where I used to store my lunchbox. The four picnic tables, however, were
gone. My last time here I was laid out on one of those missing tables, fading in and
out of consciousness and waiting for the old Ranger to come cart me away on his
snowmobile.

I tried to pull myself up and through the window, but I couldn’t squeeze
through. I hung there, head floating inside the old shack.

It smelled of wood and dust and dirt. I looked at the blackened iron stove and
followed the pipe until it disappeared into the shadows of the open-beam ceiling, and
I smelled the old heat, the mixture of birch and pine that so often filled the tinderbox
by the door. The shack smelled old, worn. There were no mouse droppings, though,
no scrapings or scratchings of raccoon or squirrel. There was no graffiti.

Whose boot prints were those? Whose food and thermos?
I dropped down and moved back through the brush. The wind picked up, blowing in from the south, and on it returned the sounds of laughter. Clouds rolled in, and the late afternoon sky turned grey with only the barest hints of color coming in from the west. The faces of my past mingled and blurred in the clouds as the memories I ran from so many years before howled for recognition. Through it all laughed The Ol’ Bastard. At that moment, his crown fit him well, and his shadow was dark and thick.

As the first tears fell I closed my eyes. The faces remained. Patty. Susan. A young boy I knew but never met named Tommy Baldwin. The face of my old man. For two decades I ran from those faces until I couldn’t run any further. Then they called, and I came, and at the foot of The Ol’ Bastard they welcomed me home.

Joey leaned over the bar. He smelled of peanuts, beer, and dish soap.

“You shouldn’t have come back here, Bobby,” he said. “You know that, right? You shouldn’t have come back. No one ever comes back.”

We called him “Little Joe” growing up, but he was never all that little. A few years older than me, after graduating high school Joey went straight to work in the family business. He pulled me my first beer on my fifteenth birthday. His dad had a massive coronary and died behind the mahogany bar that same summer. Not even a year later, Big Joe, his Grampa, keeled over in almost the exact same spot. Joey lost his nickname after that.

When he stepped back against the rail, all Joey could do was look at me and
shake his head. I finished the beer, he poured me another one, and I drank in silence
while he went about his business.

Not many folks ever made it out of the Corners. And if they did, Joey was
right – they didn’t come back. Down at the other end of the bar, David moved his
eyes from the beer in front of him to the TV high on the wall across the bar. He was
big now. Bigger than me. Bigger than Joey, even. His canvas jacket hung on the back
of his barstool, heavy welding gloves sticking out of the deep pockets. He finished off
his beer and slid the empty mason jar across the bar. Joey refilled it without saying a
word.

There’s my best friend, I thought. My best friend; whose sister Susan I loved;
who was beaten to a bloody pulp by his drunk father eight days after Susan’s funeral
because he came to see me; who I left behind when I rode off to California.

Joey clapped me on the shoulder and spun me around on the barstool.

“You say you weren’t much of a friend to him in the end?” Joey asked. “Then
be one to him now.”

Joey never took his eyes off me.

“You just leave him be, Bobby. Leave us all be. Get back on that big ol’ bike
and ride on outta here. Don’t stop. Don’t go see your old man. Just head on out and
get back to whatever life you had yesterday.”

We stared at each other while David watched golf highlights on the TV above
the bar.

“Will you tell him I came by to see him?” I asked.
“No,” Joey answered, “I won’t.”

I nodded and lowered my eyes a little.

When I got to the door, I turned and looked back at Joey.

“Thanks for everything you did, Joey. You take care of yourself,” I said. “And take care of him, too. Do what I couldn’t.”

A soft, steady rain cooled the air.

I strapped on my helmet, fired up the Indian, and swung the bike around, intending to do just what Joey said, ride out the same way I rode in. Joey leaned against the doorframe, propping open the screen with a big brown boot. I went slow, and gave him a final nod as I passed.

When I saw David standing in the big picture window, I squeezed in the clutch and slowed to a stop. Rivulets of water ran down the window, and he shimmered in the glow and reflection of the streetlight. He pressed his right hand against the window, leaning into it. I looked at him, my old friend, through the rain soaked window.

I revved the engine hard. It startled him. He jumped and wavered from the window for a moment, but he found his balance and steadied himself, right hand pressed against the window, just as before. And he grinned.

The screen door banged behind him as the old man stepped onto his porch. He looked older than I thought he would, worn out, his slouch coming from somewhere
inside, pulling him down, trying to root him in place. From his left hand dangled the remains of a six-pack. He eased himself into his rocking chair and set the beer down beside him. How many times had I seen him there, waiting for me to come home? Enough to make it seem as though he waited for me still.

Perched across the street on the Indian, I caught myself holding my breath as my father rocked and drank and smoked, dropping spent cigarettes into spent beer cans. He blew smoke rings in the light of a single, naked bulb. The bulb’s fixture, a cube of amber glass and black iron, fell and shattered the day I slammed the door behind me and lit out for California. When I heard it shatter, I almost stopped, almost cleaned up the mess as I would have done even an hour earlier. But I didn’t. I climbed onto the Kawasaki, pulled out onto CR-17, and left the shattered glass lying on the porch.

The old man stopped rocking and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. Even though his face was shrouded in shadow, I knew he was squinting.

I lit a cigarette of my own then, and the two of us sat there, smoking, embers glowing on opposite sides of CR-17. He dropped another butt into an empty beer can and pushed himself to his feet. A small fire burned in my guts, a burning I hadn’t felt since the night in the desert with Patty. I leaned over and spit blood onto the shoulder of the road. Then the old man on the porch, little more than a stranger to me after so many years, then the old man sagged and collapsed even further, almost folding in on himself. He stayed a moment longer, then turned and disappeared into the shadows of the house.
I left the faces behind. The laughter was still there, but only the duldest of echoes, more a feeling that lived just underneath the rumble of the big Indian as I twisted south through the Pennsylvania mountains. Patty sent me home not to set things right, but to let things go. She knew I carried with me the very things I ran from, knew I had to go back if I was to move on. We came to an understanding, her and I, a kind of agreement. She needed acknowledgement, recognition, while I, on the other hand, needed peace.

And so I rode, leaving Clayton’s Corners behind me once again. My front tire leading the way, I followed along, not steering so much as guiding the big bike down the road. I waved to passing cars and pedestrians. I waved to a big German Shepard sitting in a dirt driveway. I cut the engine and coasted around a convoy of Amish wagons. And I waved, and they waved, and, underneath my helmet, invisible to the world, I smiled.
Coming Home

I watched them through the tinted glass of the limousine, ghostly silhouettes drifting among the tombstones of Hemlock Hill Presbyterian Cemetery. They floated, gliding among the markers. They stopped in groups of three and four, whispered among themselves and shook their heads. They stole glances at the long black car parked at the bottom of the hill. And as their little clumps broke apart and the drifting resumed, there were no soft sobs, no pretenses of sadness or regret. They all had known my father, Edgar Stillson. The older ones had even known his father, my grandfather, Samuel. Depending upon which old-timer was telling it, Grampa Sam, after the disappearance of his youngest son Fraser, either fled Clayton’s Corners, or was driven from it. He was dead some fifteen years, buried next to the Illinois cornfield where he finally stopped running and took his own life. His wife, my grandmother, stayed behind when he left and raised their oldest boy, their only remaining child, my father, alone. Edgar Stillson was raised in the same house in which his father was raised, and the same house in which he, in turn, raised me.

The plain plywood casket waited in the shelter of a blaze orange tarpaulin. No one waited with it. Instead, the people of the Corners drifted and clumped and drifted again, breath pluming in the late-winter air. None had gone to the church where the priest mumbled a few passages to empty pews, blessed the body, and committed the soul to the Lord for judgment. They had, after all, passed their own judgment long ago. All they wanted was to see the planting.
Halfway up the hill, David Childes, the best friend I ever had, sat on his sister’s headstone. I loved his sister once, and I was there the day she died on our old sledding hill. Memories are long in the Corners, and more than a home is passed from father to son, from generation to generation. Most folks lay the blame for Susan’s death with the man in the plywood box, just as they had blamed him when Patty, my sister, disappeared. Just as they had blamed his father before him for the missing son. They wrote off all the Stillson men, spoke of curses and ghosts, and found ways to damn the sons for the sins of the fathers.

Only my father knew the whole truth. He finally told me all of it, what he knew and what the town thought they knew, on the day I rode out of Clayton’s Corners.

We sat in the kitchen that day, flipping through the pictures my sister Patty drew in the months before she disappeared.

And when he finished telling me the truth, we fought. It was the only time my father ever raised a hand to me, and he did it in self-defense. I left him bloody and beaten and rode out of Clayton’s Corners praying to a God I no longer believed in that everything he told me was just another lie.

Up in the cemetery, the town waited.

“It’s time, son.”
He was a good man, this priest. The church sent him out as a temporary replacement when the old priest died, the one who buried David’s sister. Thirty-six years later, Father Hurley looked as though the church would soon need to send out another temporary replacement.

“You go on ahead, Father,” I said. “I think I’ll just stay here.”

“He was your father, Robert,” he said. “Through it all, good and bad, he was your father.”

Something flickered in Hurley’s eyes, something that said he almost believed what he was saying.

“We both know what happens if I go up there, Father,” I said. “They’ll plant me right next to him by nightfall.”

Father Hurley let his head fall a little and looked at his knees. He knew it wasn’t much of an exaggeration. When I lit out of town three days after graduating high school, Clayton’s Corners was happy to see me go. With the death of my old man they were hoping to forever turn the pages of the Stillson chapters of local history.

“Go ahead, Father,” I said. “I’ll come back and say my goodbyes tonight. Alone.”

The old man nodded and patted me on the knee before stepping out of the limo.

Father Hurley walked first to David. The two exchanged words briefly, and David crushed out his cigarette on the heel of his boot before following Hurley to the
gravesite. It wasn’t a long service, barely ten minutes, and even with the dark window cracked I couldn’t hear any of it. When all was said and done, Hurley made his way back to the limousine as the townsfolk drifted and clumped once again, no doubt discussing who didn’t walk up the hill with Father Hurley. Only Joey hurried off, wanting to get Thirsty’s open for the post-planting rush.

“We’ll drop you off at the motel,” Hurley said as he closed the door.

“We’re stayin’ out at the house, Father,” I said.

The driver’s eyes snapped up into the mirror.

“OK,” Hurley said. “If you’re sure, son.”

The driver, probably one of the Johnson kids judging by his blonde hair and flat nose, spun the tires in the gravel as he wheeled the car around in the opposite direction. And as the cemetery disappeared behind us, as we neared the house I grew up in, the priest turned to me a final time.

“You know, Robert,” he said. “I think the town needed that burial more than you did. You were right to stay in the car. Just like you were right to leave... how many years ago?”

“Twenty-seven,” I said.

“Really? That long. Doesn’t seem possible.”

I came back to the Corners once. I wanted to see if things had changed in the fifteen years I had been gone. I should have known better. For years I did nothing but ride around the country, working odd jobs for gas and food, never staying in one
place long enough to get comfortable. I thought that if I went back, and things had changed, maybe I could come home. But things were the same. And when I realized that, I realized that I was the same, too. I may have left Clayton’s Corners behind me, but for fifteen years I carried it everywhere I went. And when I turned my back on the Corners that time, I left it right where it was. I got a job. I got a wife. I even got a couple of kids. Sons.

The cemetery stretched out into darkness. It had started snowing again, light, and the air smelled of more to come. After nearly three decades I still knew the way by heart, and I walked straight as an arrow up the hill. I didn’t need the flashlight, but I pulled it out my pocket, anyway. I’d want it to read the headstone.

I stopped in front of the simple stone marker, took a deep breath and flicked on the flashlight. “Susan Childes” it read, and, underneath, “Shambala.” The week after they buried Susan I came here alone, in the dark, and every week after that until the day I left. And on that last day, on my way out of town for what I thought was forever, I stopped, I knelt, I cried, I said thank you, and I said I’m sorry.

“Didn’t come to see your old man, didja?”

I clicked off the flashlight and shook my head in the dark. “No need,” I said, “gave him my goodbyes a long time ago.” I swiped at my tears with a gloved hand before I turned around.
Joey Baxter took over babysitting me when Susan died. Not that I needed much watching; Clayton’s Corners all but gave up on the Stillsons after that. It was enough to keep us at arms’ reach.

“Mind a piece of advice?” Joey asked.

I said nothing. The advice would come either way.

“There were times when your old man was a lyin’ sonofabitch, it’s true,” he said. “And there’s some would swear he done more harm than good in the Corners. But he brought you into this world, Bobby. And he done by you what he thought was right. You go show him some respect, and send him on his way.”

I never hated my father. Not really. There were times that I was scared of him, but mostly I just never really knew him. He kept things hidden away, big things, some of them bottled up inside his head, others bolted behind a padlocked door in the basement.

He caught me one day trying to open that door. I had stolen a hairpin from Mother and thought I could pick the padlock just like they did in the movies. I don’t know how long he sat on the stairs behind me, but he never made a sound until the hairpin broke.

“Goddammit,” I muttered under my breath.

“Why damn a door when you’ve already damned the man that opens it?” he said. He sat there a moment longer, and then he smiled, stood, and climbed the stairs into the kitchen.
Mother was the only one to ever stand up to him. When I was little, they fought all the time, about everything, and she never once backed down. They yelled and screamed and swore at each other until my father turned away and walked off into the woods alone. He’d come back hours later, and things would be all right for a little while, sometimes a few hours, sometimes a few days. But eventually they’d go at it again, and the whole thing would start all over.

The day my sister Patty disappeared, the fighting stopped for good. I used to think that losing Patty finally brought them closer together, gave them a reason to lean on and support each other. I was wrong. It wasn’t until after I left that I figured out they argued because they cared.

Joey and I sat on the porch under a naked light bulb sipping beer. The snow had picked up and the big flakes floated and drifted and danced all the way to the ground. By morning there’d be four, maybe even six inches.

“We didn’t know who was in the rev’rands limo ‘til after,” he said. “Thought it might be your mother. Hoped.”

Mom left the old man right after I did. Within days, I guess. She found me a few years after I landed out in California and sent me a letter saying I was the only reason she stuck as long as she did, and, once I was gone, so was she. She asked me not to look for her, so I didn’t.

“You ever hear from her?” Joey asked.

I shook my head. “Nope. She got lost and didn’t want to be found.”
“Funny how folks do that sometimes.”

“Yeah,” I said, thinking just the opposite. “Funny.”

The snow continued to fall. I went inside and got the rest of the six-pack and a bottle of Dewar’s and set them on the porch between us. We drank and talked, a little about the Corners, but mostly about where I had been. We both agreed that, in the end, it didn’t really matter where I was, just so long as I wasn’t there in the Corners.

When the beer was gone, Joey stood up and stretched. “Well,” he said. “I should head on out.”

As I walked him to his truck the question he was sent to ask finally worked its way to the surface.

“So…” he said, “how long you figure on stayin’?”

I shrugged. “Haven’t decided. Lots to do, yet.”

Joey nodded. “Lemme know if you need some help.”

“Will do,” I said.

I followed him as he backed out of the drive. He rolled down his window and waved goodbye.

“I’m glad it was you that came out, Joey.”

“Me too, Bobby,” he said. “But, all the same, don’t feel obligated to say g’bye when you get your business handled.”

The scotch was almost gone, but the snow kept on coming. It angled down fast and hard, blowing straight down CR-17 towards the Corners. I flipped up the
collar of my coat and pulled the tattered yellow stocking cap down as far as it would go. It didn’t cover my ears, but the old hat was the only thing I had left from when I took off all those years ago. It wasn’t even much of a hat anymore, but wearing it still felt good.

I pulled the cork out of the bottle, took a long drink, and felt my eyes swim a little when the warmth spread through my guts. That’s what got the old man in the end. That warmth. It’s all he had left to feel, and he let it pull him back further and further into the past.

Out on the road, the snow whipped into funnels that lifted off the pavement even as the wind gusted and tore the tiny twisters apart. And on the other side of the swirling snow, a familiar shadow stood, watching me in the light of the naked bulb. It was curious, that shadow, afraid. I stood, wobbled just a little, and squinted into the snow-streaked darkness.

*One of the ghosts from the cemetery,* I thought. *David probably, or Johnny Miller.*

The silhouette moved again behind the screen of blowing snow. It paced, anxious and hesitant.

*Maybe it’s Patty,* I thought at last. *Wouldn’t that be nice.*

The night Patty disappeared is a blur – muddy boots; searchlights that turned the night into day; my father staring at me on the stairs, scowling; hundreds of pictures taped to the walls of Patty’s room. After the old man’s funeral, I found all
those pictures in a box in his bedroom. They were frayed at the edges, wrinkled, as if handled often and with little care. One by one, I looked at them all. They told a story of their own, Patty’s pictures, drawn in the months before I killed my sister at the bottom of Suicide Hill.

He said he found her lying in a patch of bare ground behind the warming shack in almost the exact same place they found the body of Grover Stillson, my old man’s grandfather, over a hundred years earlier. At the bottom of Suicide Hill. The Ol’ Bastard. From Susan’s death to my own broken ribs and punctured lung, our sledding hill had more than its fair share of accidents. Grover’s death sparked the stories and legends of a haunted forest, and the disappearances every generation never failed to feed the flames. The shadow The Ol’ Bastard cast was as much a part of Clayton’s Corners as Thirsty’s was. It held the town together in some ways, giving folks something at which to squint and point their fingers.

“I took care of it for you,” my old man said. “Just like your Grampa Sam took care of it for me.”

I didn’t believe him, couldn’t. Can’t. Grover Jr., Fraser, Patty – all killed by their older brothers, not their fathers. I was gone before he told me anything more.

Behind me, the front door opened.

“Honey,” my wife said through the screen. “It’s really cold. You coming to bed?”

“I’ll be up in a minute, hun.”
“Want me to wait?” she asked.

“No, darlin’,” I said. “I’ll be there before you fall asleep.”

“Don’t forget,” she said, “you promised to take the boys sledding in the morning if there’s enough snow.”

The shadow across the road stopped pacing. I sighed and dropped my chin to my chest, wishing the visitor would have come up the drive.

The wind picked up again, and the silhouette disappeared in the snow.

Tomorrow would be a good day for sledding.

I turned and stepped inside my father’s house. My house.

My home.