

GAS BAR

BECAUSE IT'S THE Thanksgiving weekend, Dwight hangs around with the others at the end of the shift. They are a new crew, green and big-limbed, eager to provide for their families. He doesn't trust them, their tall tales and sloppy work, and by the third beer, he's heard enough. He crushes an empty in his fist, tosses it in the slash, flexes his hand, the knuckles ugly as lug nuts, strands of scars across the top, and shakes out the numbness. He slings the rest of his six-pack, eases into his pickup, and drops the beer in the cooler behind his seat.

In his side-mirror, through the dust, one of the guys throws a can at his truck. Another raises a rifle. When the shot booms out, Dwight lowers his head and glances through the rearview. The men laugh and slap each other's backs, rifle pointed in the air, bottom of a beer can at one guy's mouth. It amazes him that these men have families waiting for them at home. He fishtails out of the turn, flashes his brake lights twice to let them know he's in on the joke, straightens the truck and heads for town.

Dwight punches Merle into the tape deck and "The Running Kind" comes on. The beer buzz hits, and he speeds along a gravel road he knows well. Down the valley, the rain comes fast and blurs a blanket of forest; the clear cuts and fresh slash piles he

has helped fell litter the land. Tonight starts another weekend of beer and bourbon and TV, hunkered down in his room, then another five-day shift with the same crew, the same long twelve-hour days—only the trees will change, falling into other cut-blocks and other valleys. Rain smudges the windshield. There's nothing left except for driving and waiting.

Sarah used to love this section. They were going to build a cabin here when the girls got older. Retire. Raise chickens and cultivate vegetables and sip drinks on the porch at the end of the day. The foreman will probably have him cut the valley next spring, and that will be the end of that. He'll take his saw to every one of them and drop them like old friends, the chain chewing their soft bones.

By the time he hits the blacktop, eastward on the Crow, the rain pelts down hard, dimples the dirt shoulder. Others might drive this long stretch with their eyes closed, but not him, not here. He thinks about the holiday weekend feasts Sarah used to put on. The house warm, windows sweating, the girls rushing to meet him at the door in their pink dresses, dragging him to their toy tables with bright plastic cups and saucers. At Twelve Mile he gears down, wipers on high, the rain pounding his rooftop like a sack of thrown marbles. He stops at the big cedar, with the motor idling, gets out, and walks to the tree.

He pulls the black-and-white photo out of his pocket. Sarah's smile is fading, but the girls—Kate, Christine, and little Jody—still have that photo-studio shine as though the picture were just taken. He wipes them with his shirt cuff and stands for a few minutes in front of four small white crosses, a vase of wilted flowers, a brown teddy bear wrapped in plastic. It leaves him feeling useless

to think about dinners and work and the oncoming winter—a washed out year. The rain rakes the asphalt, gurgles in the ruts, and spits on the picture. He curls it close to him and says, “See you Tuesday.”

He drives slow until he hits the industrial strip on the outskirts of town, pulls into the covered gas bar, parks, and tells the kid to fill it up. A group of miners sit on top of their metal lunch boxes. They smoke, stare down at their boots, wait for the valley’s coal corporation bus to pick them up for the graveyard shift. A wet dog lies outside against the garbage can. It cowers when Dwight steps toward it. He bends down and offers the back of his hand. The dog sniffs his fingers cautiously before it, wagging its tail back and forth.

Inside the store, he loads up on pepperoni sticks, a hoagie, and a bottle of Coke, dumps it all on the counter. He reaches for the blue whales. The girls used to squeal over those. He counts out six, two for each, and asks the lady behind the counter for a pack of Export A’s.

Outside, a young woman wanders along the service station wall to keep out of the rain. Filthy jeans cling to her skinny legs, her windbreaker soaked through. He shakes his head. She’s probably making the rounds out back with truckers whacked out on amphetamines, their families far away; only a matter of time before one of them bangs her up in his truck before dumping her in a ditch on their way home. The glass door rattles as she pushes it open.

Her feet are a mess. Broken toenails, stripped back as though someone had taken pliers to them. “What are you looking at?” she says.

Town unhinges him now, more strange faces, seasonal vagrants coming and going, people who don't give a damn about the place. He nods to her and leaves, closing the door behind him. The miners are gone; he drops a pepperoni stick in front of the dog. Its tail thumps against the garbage can; he stoops down and rubs its ears. It turns on its side, licks his hand. "You're a good dog." He asks the kid who the dog belongs to, but the kid shrugs and turns back to filling up an RV. Dwight thinks about how this dog needs a home and how nice it would be to have some company. He knows this game; he's only fooling himself, so he drops another pepperoni stick and leaves the dog snuffling the ground for more.

He climbs into his truck, slips it into gear, and within minutes the Lamplighter sign comes into view. Good TV and close enough to the house to feel like home, far enough that he won't walk over there when he gets drunk. Cold beer and wine, tavern next door. At the front desk, Alice hands him a fistful of messages. "That realtor isn't one to give up, is he?"

He stuffs the paper in his pocket. "Sorry for the bother."

"Keep pre-paying in advance, and he can call as much as he wants." She returns to her crochet.

He drives around back, buys a fifth of rye and case of beer, slips into his room, peels off his wet clothes, tears the paper wrapper off a stubby glass in the bathroom, pours three thick fingers of rye and splash of Coke. The candy sits in a small white paper bag on the rim of the sink. Goddamn blue whales. He shakes them out onto his palm and squeezes them, but his fingers ache. White knuckle. All the fallers get it. Blue gelatin bleeds on his hand, and he whips them at the bathroom mirror. They bounce off, scatter

across the counter, and tumble onto the floor. The inside of the door is scraped in long vertical claw marks, many of them deep, desperate. He touches them, decides someone must have locked up their dog when they went out or something, and slaps the door hard with the flat of his palm. A man who mistreats his dog mistreats his wife. He's seen it time and again with the men he has worked with over the years.

He gets into bed, pulls up the covers, and leans against the headboard, sips slowly. His arms ache like something dead hangs from his shoulders. He lights a cigarette, flicks on the TV. Baseball. Canned laugh tracks. A documentary on elephants. Families move around in herds, led by the oldest female. They swim, run fast, and tear leaves off branches with their trunks. One of the elephants has lost its trunk to a crocodile at the edge of a murky lake and can no longer hunt for food. It makes a rumbling sound in its throat as it wanders the barren country. When the rumbles turn to low-pitched moans, Dwight hits mute. The girls loved every animal they ever met.

He flicks to the adult channel and turns on the volume. Bored sweaty faces, camera angles for circus freaks, a guitar soundtrack that doesn't match the bewildering action. He turns back to the elephant. Every whimper seems to ridicule Dwight until the elephant drops to the ground and lies there, no longer moving. A small procession of elephants gathers around it and stroke the corpse with their trunks. He takes a deep drink, butts out his cigarette, glances at the alarm clock. 6:29 p.m. Already a long night. He pours another, drinks it in a gulp, and thinks of how this room is all the home he has now. The elephant still whines; he hits mute and no longer feels like getting wasted.

He studies the ceiling and waits. 8:03 p.m. TV flashes in the dark room. He gets up and goes to the bathroom. The whales lie on the floor twisted and upside down, and that makes him miserable. He arranges them on the counter side-by-side and feels better after a hot shower and shaving his five-day beard. He dresses, pulls on his ostrich-skin boots, a last Christmas gift from Sarah, and crosses the highway to the Old Elevator.

The restaurant is busy and warm. The young hostess hugs two menus as she greets him. She is too perky when she asks if he needs a table for two. He holds up one finger and remembers that she, too, is someone's daughter. Her neatly plucked eyebrows scrunch as she studies her seating map, drops a menu, and leads him to a table at the back near the salad bar where high chairs line the hallway toward the toilets. She waits until he is seated before handing him a menu and walks away without a word.

He splurges and orders a porterhouse. Couples sit leaning in close across their tables, some with children who maul paper placemats with crayons, others flushed with wine in the candlelight, and he knows what they are thinking—that poor pathetic man, dining alone. He wants to shout how they got it all wrong; he did the best with the time he was given. Now he waits on god knows what. Eating by himself makes him feel mean, gutted, like his chest has been split open and all that's inside is rotting wood. He eats quickly, pays the bill, leaves a generous tip, and walks out.

It's still raining when he crosses the highway and heads toward the Northerner. Beneath the awning, the young woman from the gas bar slouches against the wall, smoking. Her eyes are narrow, and she flashes a grin that unnerves him, one that says, "You

can't fool me with those ridiculous boots." He enters the tavern, glad to be amongst the living. Orders a shot of bourbon and a can of Old Style Pilsner. Knocks back the shot, takes a deep sip of beer, motions for another. He turns the can in his hand. The girls used to count the little white bunnies out loud, but he'd turn the can so they'd lose track and have to start all over again. They never tired of that game. He never bought any other beer.

On the small square of parquet floor, a Kootenai woman dances by herself. Eyes bright, her body moves to a beat all its own. He used to watch Sarah dance, guard her from afar. He couldn't believe his good fortune. Fire and gin. Sarah knew how to light him up.

Dwight catches his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Passes his hand over his eyes and feels too old to be drinking in bars alone. Finishes his beer. The gas bar girl leans against a pillar in the shadows at the back, stares at him. He's had just about all that he can take. He digs in his pockets, pulls out a twenty, and clenches it in his fist. His hands are looser now, thanks to the bourbon, as he makes his way toward the exit.

"Here, take this," he says, handing her the money. She looks at him, and he knows she's sizing him up to see if he's playing her. "Take it."

She's prettier close up, maybe older than he thought, although he can't tell with women.

She doesn't glance at the bill. "You want some company tonight, huh?"

"Nope."

"Nice boots."

He's not sure if she's being sarcastic, asks her name.

“I don’t need a drink.” Her eyes are glazed and soft, and he thinks she must be high.

“Where’s your shoes?”

“Listen, I just need a place for the night.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“I just need a room.”

“You don’t understand. I’m not into it. No offence.” He places the money in her palm, but she yanks her hand away.

“I don’t need money.”

“Everyone needs money.”

“That’s not true. That’s not true at all.”

“Suit yourself.” He sets the money down on the counter and turns to leave.

“I’m only taking this so someone else don’t come along and grab it.”

She follows him across the parking lot; her bare feet slap against the wet asphalt. It’s nice to have someone next to him, walking. He’s wary of her and has nothing to say, but he likes the idea that he could say something and have someone talk back to him.

“Nice weather, if you’re a duck,” she says.

He can feel her looking at him.

“We might have to build an ark. Though I don’t know if we could find two of everything in this hell hole.”

“This hell hole happens to be my home.”

She smiles and laughs for the first time, and he thinks of how she should be studying at home or helping her mother cook dinner. She slaps his arm. “Ah, yes, of course it is.”

He’s not sure what she means by that, but she cracks him up.

He holds open the door to his motel room and bows. "Welcome to my hell hole."

Her hair ends are wet and cling to her face and cover her eyes. He hands her a towel, but she ignores it. Offers her a glass of rye. She shakes her head.

"I don't drink."

She opens the night table drawer, pulls out a Gideon Bible, places it on the night stand, flattens her palm on it, closes her eyes, and whispers to herself.

"What's that for?"

Startled, she opens her eyes. "You never know when your card is drawn." She stuffs the Bible in the front pouch of her windbreaker and takes it off, folds it over a chair. "You don't mind if I take this with me, do you?"

She's right, you never know. "Isn't that breaking a commandment?"

The girl hooks the underside of her T-shirt with her fingers, peels it over her head, and tosses it aside. A small gold crucifix hangs from a thin piece of twine against her sternum. "Kill the light."

When it's dark, she finishes undressing silently and climbs into bed. "I've seen it all. C'mon, neither of us are getting any younger."

He kicks off his boots and takes off his clothes, lies on his back next to her with the covers pulled to his chin, and shudders uncontrollably, convinces himself that he's cold. She curls into his side and wraps her thin arms around him. There's no face to stare at, just warm flesh pressing against his. She wriggles against him, pulls him on top of her, and in that brief instant,

when he eases into the girl, her small hands gripping his arms tight like she's afraid to let go, he feels something strange like relief. But the girl is nothing like Sarah. His eyes adjust to the darkness. Her silence unnerves him; she's efficient and moves with a bloodless sigh. Her eyes bore into him, but he avoids her gaze. The crucifix winks in the weak light leaking in from the window. He moves in and out of her slow and hard, feels ugly with each lift of his hips and turns his face away, leans into the pillow, hopes the disgust in himself will fade. He holds his breath but is unable to finish, rolls off, and turns away from her. She lays on her back for a long time. He wants to apologize, to help her understand, to make himself feel better. He lights a cigarette. "It's been a long time."

She grabs his cigarette, inhales deeply, pauses, and exhales long toward the ceiling. Car lights flash across the window. In the parking lot, a man shouts, bottles break, more shouting. She sits up, flicks on the lamp on the nightstand, examines his face. "You look chock full of it." Her ribs poke out like slats. A large welt curls around her side. He touches it.

"Don't." She slaps his hand away; the nerves tremble on the dorsal part of his hand, prickling along the tops of his fingers. He holds out his hand, turns it over. He makes a fist; pain shoots through his wrist up his arm. The booze has worn off.

"Jesus Christ, you're all the same."

"I didn't mean to—" He touches her shoulder.

She slaps his hand away again. The pain tears into him like searing metal. By reflex, he reaches to hit her but stops himself, his open hand poised in front of her. He shakes out the heat until it thins, and his fingers go numb.

“Go ahead. Punch me.” Her eyes blaze. “Go on, punch me.” Her quickness surprises him when her fist smacks his face. He rubs his cheek. She punches him again, harder. “Hit me. Get it out of you.”

His skin burns along his jaw, races up the side of his face, and for an instant he is tempted to slug her, to strike out and destroy what remains. He grabs her wrist and forces her to slap him again and again with the heel of her hand, and the sharp sting feels better than anything he’s felt for a long while. He shouts out, “There, it’s gone. Now what?”

“Sweet Jesus. You are all the same.” She pulls her hand away and sits on the edge of the bed, facing the window. “I’ve got nowhere to go.” She keeps her back to him, her voice a whisper.

The girl isn’t going to last long at this. She’ll be dredged up from the river come spring thaw, unrecognizable, bloated. His skin crawls to think what could happen to her. What did he think he’d do, save her? Talk to her about Sarah and his girls? He reaches for his jeans in a clump on the floor. Ruffles through the pockets and pulls out the remaining bills, sets them on the night table on top of the phone messages. “This should get you through the next couple of days.”

“And then what?” She wipes her eyes and nose on the sheet.

“You do what anyone else does. You carry on.”

“Carry on?” She shakes her head sadly, steps across the room, her blanched skin stained black and red with bruises and welts on her back, thighs, calves. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to take a bath to warm up before I carry on.” As she passes the mirror, he notices the front of her body is scarred by more welts and bruises. The girl turns on the light and closes the door. She sets

the toilet seat down. Moments later, the toilet flushes and the bath starts. He is surprised that the sounds comfort him.

He flicks on the TV. Polar bears lumber along the impossible white of the landscape. There's enough iron in their livers to kill any person who ate one. He doesn't know how folks figure these things out, but the part that gets him is one of the ways the polar bear hunts. It swims in the water alongside thick chunks of ice, covers its nose with its paw to camouflage itself, floating until it reaches an ice floe where seals and their pups lay. Some pups scatter into the water, some are unable to move quick enough. The attack is sudden and messy.

He lets go of the remote and stares at his hand, empty, older, tells himself there is no remote, there is no daughter's or wife's hand touching him, holding him. He counts out all five fingers with the other hand, picks up the remote, and clicks the TV to mute.

A few months before the car accident, he had walked along the river at the back of their property with the girls. The river had been frozen over. Five deer emerged from the timber. They stepped across the ice, lifting their black hooves high, setting each hoof down delicately, one after another in single file, hooves clicking on the surface. The girls heard the ice crack behind the deer.

"Daddy, they're talking!" Jody said.

But when the lead deer dropped through and thrashed around, breaking up the ice around it, she started to cry. He lifted her up and turned her away.

"Look," Christine said.

The other four deer paused and twisted around on the spot,

followed their tracks back to the river's edge, trotted a few hundred yards upstream, and crossed there. Christine and Kate grinned. Jody stopped crying.

"It must have been her time," Kate said. "Nothing she could do about it."

"Are they safe now, Daddy?" Jody said.

The deer jerked against the ice. He nodded.

"Promise?"

He nodded again. The deer flailed in the river, trying to get its hooves onto the ice to prop itself up; steam rose off its neck, its nostrils shrill.

"Yes." He set her down. "I promise."

She stared hard at him, her little brows wrinkled in disappointment. "I don't believe you."

They can never really be safe, no matter what we do to protect them. He knows that now.

Dwight rubs his eyes hard, knuckles digging into his sockets. He glances at the realtor's messages and considers a visit to the house; the girl can have this room for the long weekend. Maybe if he went back, stepped onto the porch where his girls played with their dolls, where Sarah and he sat late into the summer evenings watching the stars whirl in the vast charcoal sky, he wouldn't need to know what to do next, and he wouldn't be like some animal looking for something half dead to drag in.

The sound of the faucet rumbles in the bathroom; the girl coughs. He runs through the options. Drive to a neighbouring town, go shopping, get her some shoes and new clothes, pick up a bucket of chicken for the drive back, or let her sleep late, bring her coffee, watch TV together.

The taps shut off, and her body stutters as she slides in against the tub. A car horn honks outside, another bottle smashes. Then there's silence all around and he feels uneasy again. He peeks out through the curtains. The sky murky, fog hanging like cold blue smoke, low to the ground, the neon of the Northerner's sign faint. She could come to the house, sit in the truck while he checks things out.

"You're welcome to stay. Just don't expect me to hit you. Not till we get to know each other better." He chuckles to show that it's a joke. "So, what do you think?" He flips through the phone messages, crumples them, and tosses them to the carpet. He knocks on the bathroom door. Water splashes. His fingertips numb against the doorknob. "So, what do you think?"

"What's that?" she says.

He listens to the waves ripple, the drip of the tap, the supple pulse of her voice rising from the water. He holds onto the doorknob. On the back of his hand, the veins bulge next to the scars from when he punched through the ice to haul out the deer.

"Tomorrow," he says. "I was just wondering about tomorrow."