

Circle, Montana

I don't know how long he knocked, how many times the noise had to redirect my dream, before I awoke. I grabbed for pants, listened to the thud against carved wood and cut glass.

Joe stood there, hunched from the cold. His eyes met mine but his round, moon face angled down into an upturned collar. Indigo wiggled past me to greet him, propelled by her yellow tail.

"Come in," I said. "It's cold." I looked both ways down Black Street. It was empty. Snow swirled in the street and I knew it was late.

"I shouldn't have come," he said, turning sideways to watch the dog squat in the yard. "I'm sorry."

He didn't walk away but smiled another apology as if to say, Someday we'll laugh about this.

"Joe, come in. It's okay." I put my hand on his navy blue shoulder, but could not feel the line of his body underneath layers of clothing.

"Are you sure?" He squinted his brownish-black eyes that I always imagined he'd gotten from his mother, or his grandmother maybe.

I didn't answer but opened the door wider, feeling snow turn wet the instant it landed on my bare feet.

He left his boots by the door, folded his coat in half and draped it over the back of the couch. It was the middle of the night and I didn't doubt he'd been drinking, but his manners suffered nothing. I leaned in as he passed to see if I could divine the beer, or was it whiskey, but smelled only him. Underneath the circumstances of any given day, or night, Joe smelled like soap and dried sweetgrass. Sometimes there was smoke wrapped around it. Sometimes drink. Tonight he smelled like Joe under a layer of sweat earned somehow in the cold night air.

I followed him in, then offered tea, water; after a pause, beer. But he didn't answer. He sat down in a narrow, wicker rocking chair, never looking at me. The only sound was Indi's nails on the bare wood floor. She turned around and around in wolfish ritual before settling at Joe's feet.

"I don't know what to do," he said, watching his own fingers grip the arms of the chair.

Indigo had already curled herself into a sleeping comma.

"About what?"

"About Nate. The game." Then he looked at me. "All of it."

There were pebbles in the sound of his voice, tattering just the edges of the smoothness.

"What game?" I asked, the only subject I dared.

"They're playing in Circle. Nate's team. He's been playing really well and I promised I'd be there."

Joe stopped and before I could think of anything to say, I realized I felt comfortable with his silence. And that my own might create less space in the room.

"We talked around dinnertime," he said. "And I told him I was leaving soon. I was just gonna drink a beer with Jeff and them." His voice trailed off. "There's a storm coming and my car isn't right. I don't know what to tell him." He put a foot on Indi and she rolled over to give him her white chest and belly, which he leaned down to stroke, first with the front of his fingertips, then with the backs.

"It's too late to call anyway," he said. "Shit." He sat up, put his head back, rocked.

The room seemed to grow in proportion to my distance from him. I sat at the edge of the couch with one leg underneath me, my T-shirt stretched away from my body and tucked around the knee on top. I was self-conscious about not having a bra on. I wanted to be closer to him, but the chair was awkwardly placed in the room, not near anything else. It usually lived on the porch,

like it had in Maine, in the house where I had spent every August of my childhood. But on days when the snow drifted, I brought it inside, as if somehow my care could make it last fifty more summers. Joe liked to sit in that chair on the porch.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It was two o’clock,” he said. “But that was a while ago.”

I stood up on the creaky pine boards of the floor, aware again of my bralessness, and turned to walk into the kitchen. The microwave on the counter read 2:53.

“What time is the game?” I asked, going into the bathroom but leaving the door open and the light off.

“Ten thirty.”

I sat down and peed.

When I walked back into the living room, Joe was up, watching the snow. The flakes were bigger than they had been just a few minutes earlier. His arms were folded across his chest and, from behind, I could see how tight his fingers held on.

“I have an idea,” I said. “And it’s a good one.”

He turned and smiled. I think we both knew I was going to try something, and he was going to let me. But nothing was ever going to change.

“I’ll drive you to Circle,” I said, with all the brightness of a lonely girl awakened for an adventure in the middle of the night. “I’ll get dressed and we’ll leave now. My car can handle the snow.”

“Your car can handle the fuckin’ apocalypse,” he said, and we laughed. Several years earlier, a New Age cult leader in Paradise Valley, just a county away, had predicted the only thing that

would survive the end of the world in March 1990, was the ignition switch of the Isuzu Trooper. Joe grinned, but he didn't move, so I tried to be even more convincing.

“Honestly, I went to bed at, like, eight. I don't know why, but I did. And now it's three. I'm awake. If we go now, we'll be there by game time. You can see Nate.”

My voice made the words come out more plea than offer.

“Let me do this, Joe. I want to.”

The lines at the sides of his mouth told me I could be quiet and wait. He moved closer, but not near enough to touch.

I stopped waiting.

“Okay. Let's go,” I told him as I grabbed his coat and tossed it to him. In that moment, in my tossing and his catching, I had him.

I ran up the stairs, two at a time, babbling about my affection for eastern Montana and how much I loved long drives, and that Indi was going to be thrilled for the ride, and Joe's company, and he could make us some tea or coffee if he wanted. I rattled on as I dressed in the most pajama-like clothes I could find, trusting that even though the first fuck of the night had flown off his lips a few minutes earlier, somehow his manners wouldn't let him walk out on me when I was talking. I thought about brushing my teeth but didn't want to take time to go back downstairs through the kitchen. And since it was Joe, and a long drive, I figured we'd run into some cigarettes along the way. My breath didn't matter.

Joe had his boots and coat on and was sitting on the second to bottom step, petting Indi's velvety ears, when I bounded down the top few stairs, then slowed in a clumsy motion to sit beside him. I reached an arm across his back, bent my fingers around his shoulder and leaned my

body into the side of his. Only his face turned. He looked at me, then smiled. My eyes were a question.

“Let’s go,” he said and patted my hand, the one that was still holding on to his shoulder. His skin was warm and dry. His hand covered mine completely.

Joe grew up on the rez in northeast Montana, in a town called Wolf Point. He told me it was named for the piles of wolf carcasses stacked like cordwood along the Missouri River. He is Assiniboine-Sioux on his mother’s side, Sokaogon Chippewa on his father’s, and the second to last of nine kids. I don’t know if any of them are dead now; we don’t talk about that. But I wonder.

I grew up in the suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri, a posh little enclave called Ladue that was bursting with Frenchy-sounding names on tree-lined streets. I am white: English and Scottish mostly, a little bit Irish and Scandinavian. Like Joe, I was born eighth, but only if you put together separate batches by three mothers and two fathers: one whole brother, three half sisters, two stepsisters and a stepbrother. Everyone is alive; but we don’t talk about them either.

Joe and I both moved to this mountain town a handful of years earlier. He left the rez, an ex-wife, two young kids, all those brothers and sisters in a town where everyone knew everyone and a life outside the county line was beyond imagining for most. But Joe was offered a teaching job at the university and took it. He’d left before, for college, grad school and a PhD in history. He’d done a stint or two in Billings, but he’d always gone back.

I’d moved to Bozeman in the middle of my senior year at Colgate, and the middle of another snowstorm, from upstate New York. I’d been diagnosed with lupus as a junior and had gotten

sick at the beginning of my senior fall. One day it was my ankle. Another, my knee. Then for weeks I couldn't zip a bag or hoist myself out of the pool using my hands.

My doctor in St. Louis was a soft-spoken man with small round glasses and black wavy hair. He brought his lunch to work in a wrinkled, brown paper bag and after the exam, he invited me to sit with him in his tiny, windowless office while he ate. He explained the disease to me, again, in the simplest possible terms.

"Think of your immune system as an army," he said. "Only, because of lupus, yours has gone rogue. We don't understand why yet, but any number of things—sunlight, injury, perhaps certain foods and stress, *always* stress—will cause your body to attack itself. From the inside."

I didn't like to think about that.

I changed the subject, told him about the job interviews I had lined up in San Francisco and Washington, D.C. I told him I had already gotten one offer from a public relations firm.

"Carter, you can't see the forest for the trees," he said. "This job doesn't matter. You think it's important. You think it's worth the stress. But I'm telling you, it's not. Your health matters. Your body."

He offered me half a roast beef sandwich then, thick with horseradish and soft cheese, and I wondered how often, or if, he packed extras.

"Find a place where you can be happy," he said as I bit into the sandwich. "And do something you want to do. Otherwise, you will get sick, and you may not get better."

So, with as much wisdom as it takes to stick a pin on a map, I picked Bozeman for the mountains and the sky, the distance from St. Louis and, if I'm being honest, the cowboys. My brother had broken it down for me this way when I'd had a hard time narrowing my destination

any further than Montana. “Cowboys or hippies?” he’d asked, stacking Bozeman and Montana State University against Missoula and the University of Montana.

But this isn’t a story about cowboys.

Joe and I were neighbors on Black Street; he lived thirteen houses down on the same side of the street. That’s not how we knew each other, however. We knew each other because he wrote stories and, in listening, I found ways to crawl into them, a silent witness.

Joe had come to the open mic night I hosted at the Emerson Cultural Center once a month for the local arts journal I started publishing a year out of college. I dressed up in city girl clothes, bought coffee in rented thermoses from the Leaf & Bean, and waited for people to come. There was a crazy poet from Livingston: Daniel the Dancer, he called himself. He was old but still had silky, strawberry-blonde hair and as he read, he moved around the room with the overdone movements of a nine-year-old girl playing charades.

There were young scruffy-faced men who read stories about skiing and young, athletic-looking women in beanies and clogs who read stories about young men who skied. There were older women too with hand-knit sweaters and long scarves who read about their gardens and the changing of seasons and walking their dogs on the crunch of fallen leaves.

And then there was Joe.

He was late the first time I saw him. He tried to slip in, unnoticed, at the front of the room. He failed at that. He was not tall, not short, not big or small. He looked like he’d just showered and probably smelled good.

The woman who followed him into the room was small and dark-skinned and delicate, weighted down with jewelry that would make noise if she tripped. He was the first Native American who had ever come to open mic night, and I was excited. Joe had neatly cropped black

hair and a canvas-colored button-down shirt buttoned almost all the way up. I could tell he was Indian by his skin color and the shape of his eyes. I guessed he was in his mid thirties, maybe older. I couldn't tell the ethnicity of the woman he came with, but he would eventually refer to her as Silver.

When Joe read, I stood at the back of the room, transfixed. I didn't care if people were having a good time or drinking too little coffee, or too much for that matter. I didn't care that there was no money in this job for me. I didn't even care about Daniel the fucking Dancer, or the middle-aged guy who read stories about South America in a monotone voice that came out of his nose, and who talked to me in the grocery store like we had a shared past. The only sound was the room filling up with Joe.

Joe read a story about the slop bucket that lived on the porch of the one-bedroom house where he grew up. In that bucket, he read, a mother dumped grease, children poured soggy cornflakes, a father pissed out a night's drinking. Where else could it go? His voice barely louder than a whisper, Joe read to us about nights that were too cold and days when thirty yards was too far to get to the outhouse at the end of Fairweather Street. I listened as old women spread wrinkled legs and young girls mixed tears with the splatter of piss on their bodies, embarrassed to lift their skirts and have nothing better to go in than a bucket on the porch. I listened as little boys who spilled the slop were beaten by a drunk father.

My stomach sank. I might have vomited in that slop bucket had it not been for Joe's voice bringing me back to the room with the way his tone would get just barely higher at the end of the sentence, like a question, no matter how much blood and shit and sadness was trapped in those words.

The audience of fifteen or twenty would-be writers didn't clap immediately. His story ended before anyone was ready but Joe left as he had entered, out the door at the front of the room, with Silver jangling to keep up.

I wrote him a note on my *Tributary* letterhead later the same night from a darkened office a couple of blocks from the room where he had read. I wrote that I would publish anything he wrote and mailed it to the department of Native American Studies at Montana State University where, in his ten-second introduction to the slop bucket story, he had said he taught.

When I finally met him a couple months later, this time after he read about the cold weather bus that would take him and his brothers to school when skin would have frozen too hard before a kid could make it on foot, I asked him if he'd gotten my letter. He said he had, but thought it was a joke. He laughed. I stood there, an idiotic and polite smile on my face, and tried to laugh with him.

But Joe and I became friends. And then we figured out we were neighbors. And on this night, we became traveling companions, driving east, toward home for both of us, but away from anything either of us thought we wanted.

We weren't five miles out of town before I got scared and wondered if I'd made a mistake. The snow came at us from every direction as we crept through Bear Canyon. The reflection of my headlights off the swirling white and suffocating blackness beyond stripped me of any sense of direction. There was no glow from the city behind us. No outline of the rocky crags that push up against the highway on either side of the road. No oncoming lights. Nothing but flakes that stretched in the lighted blur of their motion, then bounced off the pavement to come at us again.

Joe was silent as we drove. I thought maybe he was tired and wondered if the night was catching up. I couldn't afford a glance over to see if he was sleeping. My eyes worked hard; my hands gripped the steering wheel.

As we came down the other side of the pass, barely outpacing the freight train that snaked along beside us, Joe started to laugh. It wasn't a belly laugh. The only time I'd heard him laugh like that was with friends, Shane or Jeff or maybe Soup. But it wasn't nervous either.

"What the fuck are we doing?" he asked when he stopped laughing. I could tell the night had caught up.

"We're driving through a fucking snowstorm on our way to a fucking basketball game," I told him. And he laughed. Harder this time.

Whenever Joe laughed, I was happy.

"So we are," he said and patted my leg the way someone might if they were going to stand up from a bleacher bench and walk away. "So we are."

It was close to four by the time we crossed the Yellowstone River in Livingston, a blip of streetlights and flickering fluorescent signs. The snow was still coming down too thick to see the Absarokas at the mouth of Paradise Valley to the south, or the Crazyes that rise out of the plains to the north, a pile of rocks in the middle of nothing.

We drove east, with the wind and against it, feeling it press up against our sides and have its way with us, the way wind will on this stretch of road. It's a road where campers and eighteen-wheelers, even plastic-wrapped cut-in-half-houses can end up in the ditch, blown over and helpless, like bloated road kill. But tonight, we saw nothing. No cars. No trucks. No animals. No lights. No nothing. Just snow—blowing angry, then tranquil, delirious, then angry again.

“Now’s as good a time as any to talk origin stories,” Joe said. “So why don’t you give me yours, Carter G.” The way Joe added my middle initial, G for Gedge, my mother’s maiden name, made me think sometimes he knew me more than he let on, and I could let myself imagine that he loved me a little, too.

He resettled himself and I could hear the squeak of his jeans on leather. Way in the back, I could hear the tags on Indi’s collar clinking.

“Well, I’m not sure there’s much to tell,” I said. “What do you want to know?”

“Your story,” he said. “We’ve got, what, five, maybe six more hours? Dig in.”

Joe knew plenty about me. We’d gone on hikes and drunk beers together. We’d sat on my front porch or his front steps, sometimes late into the night, not telling origin stories—Jesus—but talking. He’d told me about his women.

“Remember Silver?” he’d asked once.

I did.

“Did you know she’s a psychic?”

I didn’t.

“And she put a voodoo curse on you.” He thought it was fucking hilarious. At the time, I didn’t know whether to be worried about the voodoo or flattered that I was enough of a threat—the unkissed friend—to stick pins into.

Joe sometimes called me when he needed a ride from the airport, and just a couple months earlier, Indi had stayed with him when I went to Chicago for Christmas to see the Gedges, my mom’s family. He called me once during that trip, on Christmas night, to say that he had bought frozen Hungry Man TV dinners for the two of them and that they’d eaten them, side by side on

the couch, watching “Jeremiah Johnson.” He didn’t say there was room for me. And I didn’t say it was the only place I wanted to be.

“Tell me about that fuckin’ rabbit’s foot then,” he said, laughing an answer to my silence. “Feet. Rabbits’ feet, I mean.” He reached to grab them out of my hand by the blue grosgrain ribbon, knotted in four different places, a foot at each end, and I let them go.

“I got my first one in first grade,” I said. “At the zoo. My mom was a chaperone on the field trip and she bought me one from a bucket in the gift shop.”

“It’s fuckin’ bony now, this one,” he said, brushing the orange one up against his cheek and then against mine.

I told him how I’d started with a satin ribbon not long after my parents’ divorce. It was small enough, unnoticeable enough maybe, that no one bothered to take it away. I rubbed it between my fingers at first, then along the ridge of my upper lip.

“When I lost the ribbon, I learned that my hair was silky where it came out of my barrette. I would flip it up and rub my finger right here.” I showed him. “By first grade, my mom was over my hair fetish so she got me the rabbit’s foot,” I said. “I’ve had one ever since.”

“Well, I guess a rabbit is as good a species as any if you have to collect feet,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, taking the feet by the ribbon and putting them back in my lap, finding the sweet spot of bone and fur on the orange foot. I looped my pinkie through the silver chain and rolled the foot between my thumb and first two fingers. It was the alchemy of textures, different degrees of soft and smooth — bone, metal, fur — and it soothed every part of me like it had since I was six.

He brushed the backs of his fingers, still warm and dry, at the edge of my face, from my forehead, all the way down my neck, stopping before he reached my collarbone.

“I think your hair is soft.”

“Thanks,” I said, and let my eyes stay off the road longer than I should have.

There was more silence then and in that black stillness as we hurtled down the white highway, I thought of all the things Joe didn’t know, the things I never told him. That I came from a tribe too, of old, white people, wrinkly but still beautiful, and smelling of lilacs and Bay Rum, tennis sweat and salty Maine air.

“Do you mind if I close my eyes?” Joe asked.

“Pleeease,” I said, a stupid habit of overemphasizing the vowels in an attempt to be gracious and believable. “I’m wide awake.”

The truth is, I was. Few things made me feel more awake than a road trip. I’d crisscrossed Montana and Wyoming dozens of times in the five years since I’d finished college. Plenty of times I’d made it farther west, to Idaho, Washington, Oregon. Once I even made it up to Canada, just Indi and me, without a single plan. I’d met some people at a trailhead outside Bozeman on a Sunday afternoon. I was coming back and they were headed out. I noticed the Canadian plates on their camper.

“Where in Canada are you from?” I asked.

“Alberta,” they said. “Banff.”

“Oooh, I’ve always wanted to go to Banff,” I said, just barely choking over the Ps and Hs I always stuck on to the end of Banff.

“You should,” the woman said.

“It’s like this place,” the man said, pointing to the craggy Spanish Peaks behind me. “But hopped up on steroids.”

Good enough for me. I went home, packed the car, loaded Indi into her back-end nest, and, as an afterthought, ran back inside to call my boss. It was maybe four o'clock on a Sunday. I asked him if I could have the week off from the magazine where I was interning fresh out of college. He hesitated, then inquired about my plan, sounding more curious than concerned. I admitted I didn't have one.

“Are you asking me for the week off, Carter, or are you telling me you're taking it?”

“The car's running,” I told him.

What I love about road trips is seeing the landscape shift and shudder and break between mountains and plains. I love watching the clouds move through the sky, feathered wisps one day, a cough of water and wind like promises that won't last. Then ferocious, rolling waves the next, the color of gunmetal, like words that can't be unsaid. I love passing by fallen-down houses set in groves of cottonwood at the edge of nothing but dirt, and thinking that someone was happy there once.

As we drove through Billings, the now gentle falling snow looked like it made sound, just the faintest tinkle we could have heard if only we would roll down our windows. Out Joe's window, there were red lights, blinking slowly up and down a vertical plane. On my side, there was a whole tiny city of white lights, glowing dim but constant, on the miniature towers of an oil refinery.

Joe had been dead still in his sleep, maybe from having spent childhood sleeping four to a bed. He never moved when he woke, just started talking.

“You ever been to the ice caves?”

“No,” I said.

“Oh man, you should go,” he said. “I’ll take you sometime if you want. You can see the wild horses.”

“I’d like that,” I said.

“I was there once, a few years ago, but I had to leave,” Joe told me. “I was with Lisa. Do you know her? Long, dark hair. Works for GYC. Pretty girl. Nice too.”

“No,” I said.

He started into the story and told me what they were on but I forgot instantly because I’ve never been on anything, really, so the difference between acid and X and mushrooms for me is as good as the difference between whiskey, scotch and bourbon. Not my poisons.

“She was doing yoga, which is great, you know. We were in a beautiful place. Yoga. Whatever. And I just sat there on a big rock, looking at things. And then, here comes this chickadee. I’m not fucking kidding you. A fuckin’ chickadee.” He was laughing now.

I knew just enough to know that chickadees are messenger birds for the Crow people—and also that Joe is not Crow. I knew it was a chickadee that was left in its nest when the windstorm in Plentycoups’ vision blew down every tree but one. The one with the chickadee.

This chickadee, Joe’s chickadee, had a mouth on it.

“He told me I had to leave. That I didn’t deserve to be in such a beautiful place as this. He got madder and madder. He was swearin’ up and down, that chickadee. ‘You fucked everything up,’ he said. ‘You cheated on your fuckin’ wife. You left your fuckin’ kids. Get the fuck out of here. You don’t deserve this place.’ When the next chickadee came out and started yelling at me too, man, I had to leave. I told Lisa we had to go. She didn’t understand. She was in the middle of a sun salutation or some shit like that. But we left anyway.”

Joe's voice sounded almost like he was surprised by the story, even now.

"Fuckin' chickadees," he laughed.

If Joe had regrets, I imagined the only time he sat with them was when the chickadees pelted him with words, like stones, or when he was writing. Poems, mostly. Sometimes letters. Maybe too when he was ice fishing. The rest of the time he just lived with what is, the good and bad of it. I admired this because sometimes I worried that regrets are things that could smother you in your sleep.

"Don't we need gas or anything," he asked. "I'll buy you some American Spirits."

I laughed out loud.

"Not yet. I was gonna wait until Indi has to pee, then stop."

"Okay," he said and we drove on through the dark, our headlights shining out into nothing.

By seven, the sky was lightening. For several minutes, when the sky was between black and gray, everything that was white or brown in this place—which is to say, everything—turned blue. It was an icy blue that wasn't quite magical, but not sterile either. It was somewhere in between.

The snow looked more like it was blowing around instead of falling. But there were no tree branches for snow to balance on here; it could only have come from the ground or the sky and both looked empty to me. The only snow I saw on the ground was in the furrows of the fields plowed last fall. As we drove past, the white next to brown next to white made it look like the fields were moving. I remembered a book from childhood whose flipped pages brought a running horse to life.

We pulled off the highway in Custer. There was a gas station next to a junkyard filled with old cars that were once filled themselves with people and lives and now nothing but memories. And trash, it looked like. Joe pointed to a white car.

“She looks like she could have been mine,” he said. The windows were rolled down or gone. Snow could have taken refuge on what was left of the merlot-colored vinyl seats. It could have swirled over missing floorboards.

We stopped at the gas station and I let Indi out of the back. She stretched, first front legs, together, then backs, one at a time, before shaking and trotting off.

I filled the car with gas and Joe followed Indi away from the pumps where the grass from last summer, dead and trampled now, had forced its way through the cracks of old blacktop. Indi sniffed it and peed. If her shoulders could have shrugged, I think I would have seen it.

An old pickup pulled in and a man climbed out—a giant walking limestone hoodoo of a man—dressed head to toe in faded Carhartts that could have covered the entire bench seat of his rusty, red rig. Under his tan hat brim were sunglasses so big and dark they looked like blinders on a racehorse. As the man crossed the gulf between us, Joe looked back at me and, like kids, our eyes opened wide to each other and our mouths stretched sideways and down, more felt than seen. A ding announced the man’s entrance into the brightly lit but dingy station and we each looked away.

It’s too simple to say that I loved Joe or to say that he didn’t love me. There were moments that neither of us wanted to let go of.

We got back into the car to leave Custer which, when I looked at it from the rearview mirror, seemed like the only thing to do there.

As we drove, the sun was up but hiding behind layers of gray. When we saw it, it glowed instead of shone, like a round, full moon in broad daylight. The barbed wire fence followed the curve of road as far as I could see, but only on one side, as if half the world could be contained. There were ghosts on the fence. From a distance, I wondered if they were animals, left hanging too long in the sun and wind, only skin and fur now. But when we got closer, I saw they were garbage and grocery bags, big pieces of plastic and cardboard, caught on their way somewhere. Stuck.

I asked Joe who would be at the game.

“Everyone. Diana. Glen, that asshole,” he said, quieter on the asshole than on the names.

“Madison’ll probably be there. My in-laws. Ex in-laws, I mean. You’ll get to meet ’em all, Carter G.” Joe seemed as unconcerned by this as I was suddenly panicked.

I imagined myself having to talk to any one of the people he had just named. If I’d had the guts to change my mind right then, to pull a U-turn on the empty two-lane highway, I would have.

Instead, I wrapped the ribbon around my blue rabbit’s foot and rubbed it across the top of my lip as my head barely turned from side to side.

“Better?” Joe asked. He reached out and touched my arm the way he did Indi’s ears.

“Mmm hmmm.”

“I’m not worried,” he said. “You know me. I don’t do shit that makes me uncomfortable.”

I thought about what he said. And decided to believe him.

We drove along the Yellowstone River still, past Miles City and Terry, both named for U.S. generals who Joe said kicked a lot of Indian ass in their day. Both are the kind of town where if

we stopped for coffee and I ordered decaf, the waitress might bring me a teabag. Which is what I would deserve for ordering decaf in a place like Terry or Miles City. They are dying places where one old man built everything in the museum and even though the bus still comes for people to climb aboard, no one ever gets off.

There are old hotels in both towns, The Olive and The Kempton, built around the turn of the twentieth century to harbor hungry homesteaders with big dreams, their last night in a bed without the weight of 160 acres pressing them down. A hundred years later, it was the ghosts who brought guests.

It wasn't hard for me to imagine that both these towns could grow back up out of the sandy earth and become something between what they were and what they can never be. I could have talked for hours to the old man in the museum. I could have made a picnic under the cottonwoods on a hot summer day outside the water treatment plant that now housed art, much of it modern. I could have ordered strawberry rhubarb pie at the Dizzy Diner and told you flat out that it was the best piece of pie I'd had in five years. I could have done all those things and promised to come back. And maybe I did. But someday I would know better. Nothing dying that hard ever comes back.

As we drove on, we crossed the Yellowstone more times than I bothered to count. It twisted and turned like it couldn't make up its mind which way to go. We covered miles without seeing any structure other than fence line.

At one point, two horses made a still life surrounded by old, rusted tractors. The horses were motionless except for their tails, the ends of which blew in the wind beneath their bellies. I couldn't tell if their eyes were open or closed, but I read indifference on their faces and in the

way they held their bodies, even though they had been standing in that spot next to the equipment for maybe a hundred years.

As we got closer to Glendive, the flat land broke violently, like skin, bones sticking out, insides showing. Makoshika was not far; we could go there if we were lovers, I thought to myself, out for a Sunday drive in spring. We would know that the Lakota word for the park means “pitiful earth”—and it is, all battered and blown—but we would only pay attention to the good secrets hiding beneath rock and soil.

We would look for dinosaur bones and we would see them everywhere: the crown of a Triceratops jutting out like a handhold, the spine of a T. Rex lifting the ground where water and wind could carve it all away in one angry storm. We would find elephants too, their thick, wrinkled flesh draping over the hills. We would try to climb them and laugh as we sunk in and slid further down with every step, unaware that we were razing the animal the wind had spent a thousand years sculpting.

I would envy the shades of rust and red and orange and peach that bleed into each other here and tell Joe that I always wanted to be a redhead. He would pull me close, take my whole head in both hands and tell me that my yellow hair is like a field of wheat underneath a heavy autumn sun and that nothing makes a man feel richer than that. And then he would kiss me and I would know in my body what I was worth.

But Joe would never say that, and I hit the gas to get away from the embarrassment of the thought. We were heading for Circle.

“Have you ever thought about going home?” Joe asked. The question surprised me.

“You mean back to St. Louis?”

“Home,” he said.

“I’m not sure I know where that is,” I told him. “But there’s nothing for me in St. Louis.”

Joe was silent.

“I think about Maine sometimes though,” I said.

“There’s only two questions we ever ask in this life,” he said. “Where did I come from and where am I going. Just try to think about anything else.”

How could I be twenty-six without any good answers, I wondered. I wanted to stay in that car, traveling seventy miles per hour, for as long as I could.

It was 10:40 by the car clock and we were just a few minutes from Circle, traveling north and west on Highway 200 South. Driving into town wasn’t much of a show. A few farms gave way to a few more houses, then a few streets of them lined up along somebody’s idea of a grid. There was a gas station, a John Deere retailer and a mini storage place. And, as is true of most towns in this part of the state, there were twice as many bars as churches, six to three. A line of grain silos broke the horizon.

Circle was named for the brand of a cattle company that set up shop here in 1884 and when the Northern Pacific came through in 1928, ten thousand people showed up to celebrate. No one noticed when the train stopped coming. No one even remembered when it happened for sure. On the day when Joe and I were driving into town, there were maybe seven hundred people living here and most of them were parked as close as they could get to Circle High School.

We were late by fifteen minutes but Joe was sure that Indi needed to stretch and pee again so we parked and he let her out under a tree that had been blown east for seventy years or more. She was not quick to do her business and stayed close to Joe in hopes of a pat. He obliged, she went,

and we loaded her back into the car without cracking the window. It was cold but the wind was gone.

We walked through the double doors into the high school and made our way down the windowless, unlit hallway toward the screech of sneakers and whistles, and the echo of cheers.

The few minutes it took to get from the car, down the hallway and into the gym required a fast constriction of my senses. The gym was bright and humming with metallic light; the sound was constant at every octave. Motion and color filled the space. Joe was in a hurry now. His eyes landed immediately on Nate who, in spite of the maroon and white blur around him, knew instantly his dad was in the gym. The two locked eyes and gave each other an identical smile, which I knew in a blink was the reason we had come.

Nate looked like Joe but with brown eyes and brown hair, instead of black, and with arms and legs that stretched further. I knew when I saw him that Diana would be white, something I'm not sure I knew before. We stood motionless until Nate got the ball and weaved through bodies, untouched, down the court to score. Joe scanned the crowd for his family. Other side. Twelve rows up. Madison waved.

We walked around the court and climbed the bleachers. I felt a thousand eyes on me and made contact with none. Joe gave hugs to everyone and I stood in the aisle, a little hunched so as not to block anyone's view. I kept my eye on the ball until I heard my name. Joe put his arm around me and pulled me close.

“Hey, this is my friend Carter. Carter G Walker. She owns a magazine in Bozeman and has published some of my stories.” There were nods as he introduced me to everyone and no one in particular. I waved stupidly and followed Joe to the end of the row, then sat on the other side of him and watched the game.

Nate was unstoppable and Joe was up on his feet one minute, clapping like it hurt, then throwing his head back in joy the next. Not a part of him stayed still. He wouldn't be around Wolf Point to hear the stories about Nate in this game, in every game, but he would know they were all true.

After the game I left Joe surrounded by family and friends to get Indi out of the car and walk her around the block. It was still cold—we could both see our breath—and the wind had picked up, but the fresh air and room to move felt good. There was a symphony of horns as the parking lot emptied behind me and I couldn't help but smile like I was part of the winning team.

Joe found us a block from the school. He was still beaming and threw his arms around me because there was nowhere else for him to go with that energy. Indi nudged her way between us, wagging.

“That was so fuckin' great!”

“He was incredible, Joe. So good. Way to go, Dad,” I said and punched him softly in the shoulder.

“I'm glad you're here,” he said.

“Me too,” I told him.

“Let's go to the Tastee-Freez for lunch. Everyone'll be there. Okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, of course,” I said.

I started to think about greasy burgers and fries and milkshakes. We'd probably both been hungry the whole way but had never thought to eat.

We parked across the street from the Tastee-Freez; the six spaces along the building were already full. Joe held the door open for me and I saw his people, crowded around a table with Nate at the head.

Glen waved us over and pointed to an empty seat next to him. Joe saw the move and put his lips close enough to my ear that I felt his heat.

“Careful there, girl, he’s a goddamned womanizer.” Then he laughed, patted my back like he was sending me into the game, and went to Nate with arms open wide.

I sat down beside Glen and Diana, Joe’s ex-wife and her boyfriend. She didn’t exactly smile at me but why would she? Glen, on the other hand, smiled plenty.

“How long have you and Joe been together,” Glen asked, his eyes way too earnest for the question. His too-white teeth were just slightly purple from the huckleberry milkshake.

“We met maybe three years ago,” I said, delighting myself internally with the yarn I could have spun faster than Glen could choke down a basket of fries. When I looked over and saw that Joe was watching me, our eyes held for a moment, then he winked and I laughed.

For a second I thought about Diana and the chickadee. I wondered if Joe had winked at her too, on the other side of the boyfriend. I wondered if she missed him and wished things had turned out another way. Or if wanting Joe for herself was more than one woman could bear.

We ate our burgers with messy fingers and sucked down our milkshakes and relived some of Nate’s game highlights. He didn’t play along when Joe jumped up and mocked a one-handed three-pointer, but Nate smiled and I saw his cheeks flush.

We all finished our food but the Circle Tastee-Freez might as well have been the Wolf Point post office on a Saturday morning. Indians don’t get mail at home, Joe had told me. There was

constant traffic and the clapping of an aluminum door; everyone came over to congratulate Nate and to greet Joe. I imagined it was the closest I would ever come to seeing him at home.

When he said it was time to leave, that we had a long drive ahead, Joe hugged his kids, but not as long or as tight as I expected, or wanted. It was the every-other-weekend goodbye that I recognized from childhood. I looked away, said my thank yous and goodbyes to Diana and Glen.

I slipped my arm through Joe's as soon as the hollow metal door slammed behind us. We didn't say anything as we crossed the street but the cold wind urged us closer together. There were a hundred reasons Joe could have loved me if he had wanted to, but holding on to him in that moment was probably all it took.

I don't remember much about the drive home. Joe told me stories about the kids when they were small. I told him about my family, all those cousins and aunts and uncles in Maine. I made him laugh with tales of my great uncle; Screwy Louie was what everyone called him when he left the room to refill his Canadian Club or to retrieve Angel, his Jack Russell, from an imminent attack on a floor lamp or an unsuspecting foot.

I told him too that I'd had an offer on *The Tributary* from a young photographer and that I was thinking maybe I needed a real job. Joe didn't ask any questions. Instead, he pointed at the sun that was setting the sky in front of us on fire and turning the rest of the world the pink and purple of pale bruises that fade almost before you even know they're there.

We pulled onto Black Street a little after eight and I parked in front of his house.

"Wanna come in and drink a beer, Carter G?" he asked.

"Yeah, I do," I said. Indi led the way and was first through the door.

Joe lived in a small apartment on the first floor of a big, old house that was once a funeral parlor. It belonged to one of his best friends. The two of them used to tell each other that every Indian needs a Jewish friend and every Jew needs an Indian one. It made them laugh every time. Jeff lived upstairs in a much bigger apartment with real furniture, lacquered in the scent of pot, and piles of books everywhere.

I walked in and sidestepped the mattress in the middle of Joe's living room between the couch and the TV. It was covered by a pale blue sheet with a neatly folded quilt at one end and a pillow at the other. Joe slept there because the bedroom in his apartment was where the bodies had been laid on the table for dressing. He had described the laboratory it must have been—bottles, tubes and puddles everywhere. I was sure I could still smell the formaldehyde. He didn't mind walking through it to get to the bathroom and kept his clothes and books in the room, but Joe refused to sleep there.

"I can sleep with a lot," he told me once. "But no fuckin' ghosts. No way." He had a thing about ghosts and told me they kept him awake at night with sounds he couldn't translate.

Joe opened his old icebox and bent over to look inside as if it might not be empty.

"I'm out of beer," he said. "Sorry."

"It's fine. I didn't really want one," I told him. "I should get home and climb back into bed."

"Stay," was all he said.

Then, as if the last three years had been reimaged by the last eighteen hours, as if there is such thing as a fresh start in an old funeral parlor, we kissed.

It was gentle at first, a tentative kiss between soft, uncertain lips. But before long, the effort made me think of the out-of-season huckleberry milkshake I'd had at the Tastee-Freez and how

hard I'd worked to suck ice cream through a straw. It was purposeful and satisfying. There was simply no reason to stop.

When he started unbuttoning my shirt, I unbuttoned his. We were still kissing. My eyes were closed. I was in a hurry to get too far for either one of us to re-write the night, but I wanted everything to play out the way I had let myself imagine it would. The scene on the backs of my eyelids was perfect.

After the niceties of undoing each other's buttons, we each did our own awkward high-stepping, bending-down, pants-pulling motion until we stumbled onto the mattress. I opened my eyes again without meaning to and saw our once road-stiff legs entangled like the braid of a river.

Our feet were still covered by socks. Our chests still hidden beneath T-shirts. It was cold in the apartment, and neither the socks nor the T-shirts seemed too much of an impediment to bother with, so we didn't. The lights were on. There were no shades in the living room to roll down. Indi hadn't even had time to get comfy on the couch; she was watching us, head cocked and ears up, standing just a few feet away.

My thoughts crowded with the imagined grief of spouses who had sat in the room, but none of it derailed my longing. I whispered to Joe how much I wanted him in a voice I didn't recognize at all. With his body and not a single word, he made me believe that he wanted me too.

If I had dared to keep my eyes open, I might have seen how sadness looks before it gives up its energy, races down the hill and emerges from the crash as regret.

But I didn't.

What I ignored with my eyes, I explored instead with fingers and flesh. I remember the softness of his skin. His arms and belly and face were as smooth as sun-warmed river stones. The muscles I knew he'd earned as the son of a bricklayer, and himself no stranger to hard work, were resting beneath his skin where I could feel them. My lips wanted to discover shifts in the landscape of his body. But my mouth never left his face, too afraid that if I moved he might vanish.

He wasn't inside me for long because I never let myself be still. Instead my body took everything it wanted. Whether it was three years or three days or three minutes, I knew that somewhere in the map of my body, he was carving his name like a river.

When it was over, Joe exploded with a loud "Fuck!" and rolled off of me. It didn't matter that he recovered seconds later by curling up next to me and stroking my face. I felt shattered.

I got up and walked pantless—with Joe still dripping down the inside of my leg—through the darkened ghost room to the lighted bathroom. I closed the door and sat on the toilet. I knew Indi was on the other side, just outside the door, but I spent a long time looking in the mirror before I found a way back to the mattress. Joe had pulled the quilt up and was on his side watching TV. When he rolled over to look at me, I saw the sadness that I had been pretending was something else. He apologized and told me he loved me. I told him it was okay because I knew it would be. I kissed his mouth again, with my eyes open. Then I got dressed, whistled for Indi and walked out the door, leaving Joe and the ghosts on the other side of it.

A few days later, I was in my kitchen when I heard the flap on the old brass mail slot hit the door. I walked through the living room to find a folded, white sheet of paper, lying on the floor at

the bottom of the stairs. I picked it up and read Joe's diagonal handwriting across the lower right corner of the page.

"This poem is for you," he wrote. "Thanks for being such a close and dear friend."

He signed it without love, just "Joe," then added a P.S. "Tell Indy hi." I smiled at the way he used y instead of i. Of course there's no right way to spell a dog's nickname.

I read the poem. He called it "Eastern Montana."

Circle, Montana is a frozen place
and high school graduation photos
tell stories of those who married and left

But those who remain know
you were here at one time
A time when fifty-six miles was
the end of the world

How could she have known that?
When the woman you once loved and
slept with moved further away
And her man followed, unsure if
the last ten years were real

We crossed the same Redwater River
Sitting Bull followed to Canada
But that was a hundred and
twenty years ago

And today is cold

Maybe we were snowblind
just like the fat man at the
Custer gas station

We were an odd couple but
your dog made us more
human than our bodies

It was cold that brought us
together and cold that
gave us safe distance

Carter, Montana is a warm place
where purple and pink
are more than just soft
colors in the evening sky

Not long after, I sold *The Tributary* to the photographer and left Montana for Maine. I took a job doing communications for the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School. Indi loved to swim and my office was not even as far as I could hurl a tennis ball from the Penobscot Bay.

I learned later that Joe moved back to the reservation and grew his hair into a long black braid. I sent him a Christmas card from Indi and me. He wrote back on yellow legal paper, folded so that I could never find where he wrote my name without flipping and turning the paper at least twice. There was no G. He told me he missed me and thought about Indi and me and where we might be hiking.

He wrote me again after I'd moved back to Montana and had let him know that Indi died on the day she turned thirteen-and-a-half. I had told him how afraid I was that all those years and all those dreams would disappear with her. He told me how much he loved her. And that he knew she was in heaven and that he hoped I was okay.

Joe and I lost touch and then found each other again, almost twenty years after I'd learned that loving and longing aren't the same thing, that they aren't even related sometimes. We talked about stories and kids, his and mine, and he told me that he had left the reservation again when his mother died.

He'd cut off his braid, laid it beside her in the open coffin and walked away. "Why would I stay?" he asked me, as if this time, at forty-three, I might have had an answer.

When our third round of drinks arrived at a fancy bar in Billings, the place I had suggested we meet, I asked if he remembered the night we drove to Circle. He took a long enough sip that I

could hear the ice clink in his glass. Long enough too that somewhere inside him, a memory broke loose. Joe set his glass on the table, smiled at me, then told me I stopped for gas in the worst place in Montana.

“Custer, fucking, Montana.” He laughed so hard I thought a V.O. Ditch might come out his nose. I laughed too because his joy jumps its banks without warning, in the middle of a sunny day, and because in it, I feel connected to him in a way that I never really was and never really will be. I don’t know if there is something wrong with Custer. Some oil spill. Some terrible history. Or if it’s just the fact that there is a real place in Montana named after Custer. And that I took him there one morning after the snow quit falling.