

Covenant Spring

Christopher Watson

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Lyrics by Robert Lowry ca. 1864

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"It'll Shine When It Shines"

Lyrics by Steve Cash & John Dillon

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Recorded by The Ozark Mountain Daredevils

From the album *It'll Shine When It Shines*

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Foreword

All of the places in this story are real but I've changed their names and where they are, so if you try to follow the directions I give to Covenant Spring you'll wind up someplace else entirely, past the New Covenant Presbyterian Church and Miz Dori's neat white house, past the dirt road into the woods by the swamp where Mister Silas lives, over and beyond the little cement bridge, where I held Aaron's hand and faced down Pastor Lamm, with the storm black and howling over our heads and the world a tick from ruin.

Some of the events I have changed for certain reasons that ought to be clear by the end. I've also changed the names of everyone involved, except my own, for the same reasons. So if you think you see yourself in here it's not intentional but you can't say it's all that surprising, the world being what it is.

. . . .

Chapter One

My name is Daniel Ivy and I live in New Jersey. I've lived in Jersey all my life. I was born and raised in a typical Jersey town, which I know won't mean a thing to you if you haven't been here. There are worse places to grow up, and any place is fine when you're a kid and don't know any better.

My hometown is small. You might find it on a good state map. It's about an hour west of New York City, identical to the towns that surround it, like interlocking amoebas in a petri dish. Millions of squirming souls captured in a drop of dirty water, fighting over parking spaces. It's home because it's where I was born and grew up, and that's the end of it. It's difficult to get sentimental about asphalt and strip malls.

When I was younger I liked to search maps for my hometown. Big paper maps, atlases, the kind that showed the entire world. My town was never more than the smallest dot if it was listed at all, but I was always glad to find it. It meant we were real.

Our existence, officially confirmed.

. . .

There's a place one town over from where I was raised. It's called Washington's Rock. During the Revolutionary War, General Washington is said to have stood there on the high ridge and observed troop movements in the valley below. It's also said he often went there to meditate, whether he would win or be hanged, I suppose. People drink there now and get stoned, and scrawl obscenities and the names of who they're hooking up with at the moment on the tall granite marker erected where a ghost once stood and contemplated death, hope and honor. The limbs of the trees at the bottom of the ridge drip with sun-faded trash and used condoms, like tinsel.

I spent a lot of time on Washington's Rock as a kid. The road to the top is long and narrow, and it plunges at the shoulder into trees and rock. Trucks are banned from it. It's alpine steep, and laid in serpentine turns around which it's impossible to see a chubby kid on a bicycle until the last moment.

It is a dangerous road, my parents warned me, back when I was the age when *dangerous* was intoxicating. The feel of a dangerous thing, a forbidden thing, was sexual in its allure. To brave the slender bending limbs at the crest of a tall tree, or to dash across the teeming interstate with my friends. These are the trials of early manhood for suburban boys. We would dance nervous on the highway shoulder and then dive into the diesel avalanche, through doppler-shifting horn blasts, knowing even then, even that young with our legs shaking and gulping breaths coming precious and hard on the other side, that we'd done something. You weren't quite the same person you had been moments before. You had done a dangerous thing, a stupid thing, and had been changed.

But it wasn't stupid. It built me by small degrees like daubs of clay pressed on a frame. It gave me weight in the world, an earned power that was mine alone, and was important.

It took everything I had to pump the pedals and make it to the top of Washington's Rock. The passing cars kicked their grit in my face, their horns blasted hurled curses. But I dared not stop. The road was so steep that if I stopped, I knew my legs wouldn't find the power to push the pedals anew, and I would think about giving up. And if I gave up, I would be that much smaller, diminished by it forever, and I might never try again.

So I did not allow myself to quit. The trial made me real. There was nothing else I had then that possessed the power and magic to make me much of anything.

. . . .

I knew a girl in middle school named Shelly. I saw her one day in class pressing the point of a nail file into her arm under her desk until she bled. Her face was as composed as a cameo the whole time. She saw me watching her and she put the file back in her purse and returned her attention to the blackboard like nothing at all had happened.

I read years later that a lot of young women hurt themselves like that, mostly women, but nothing I ever read explained why. It was a *disease*. It was a *disorder*, a *warning sign*. A warning of what, no one seemed to know. But if you saw it, you were supposed to tell someone. You were supposed to *take action*.

Shelly was beautiful. She was pale and doe-eyed and slender. She wore nice clothes and got excellent grades. She waited every day after school out front, her books embraced against her chest like body armor, waiting for her mother to come in their giant SUV and pick her up.

They found Shelly that summer in her bedroom. She had found some pills and washed them down with liquor from her parents' wet bar. The local paper wrote about it on the front page, how Shelly might never wake up and how it was such a senseless tragedy, as if there was such a thing as sensible tragedy. How it was such a shame that it had happened to so beautiful a young woman, as if good skin should have been enough for her.

"She was so beautiful," everyone said. As if that was all they could see.

Kids visited Shelly for a while in the hospital. They took turns caring for her, talking to her, playing her favorite music for her, brushing her hair. The nurses showed them how to turn Shelly every few hours and position pillows under her so she wouldn't get bedsores, and how to clean the site where her feeding tube punched a hole into her stomach, and how to empty her urine and colostomy bags. Shelly's friends at school set up an online crowdfunding site for her and held fundraisers for the family to offset medical bills when insurance ran out, "We Heart Shelly" dances and 10K walks and bake sales. A local car dealership held a raffle for a new vehicle. Save Shelly, win a Toyota.

Then after a while, no one talked about it anymore. Everyone forgot about Shelly until she died two years later, a wax doll skeleton in pink sweat clothes, resembling her former beautiful self as much as a paper sack resembles a tree.

It would have been better if Shelly had been shot in the head, or had died in a car crash. I've heard others say it, families and friends of people injured like Shelly, the ones who have to live with the unromanticized pain, who can't go home and leave it behind. The ones who have to

wear the rubber gloves and clean the fluids and feces, and exhausted wrestle tormented with their love against the slow expiration of hope, and the guilt of wishing more each day for death's blessed mercy.

If the crease from living Shelly to dead Shelly had been sharper, it might have cut us more than it did. A knife to awaken us. Useful pain, instructive pain, stopping our lives, making us ponder more than it did.

Remember Shelly? What a shame. Her poor family. Gee, how long ago was that?

The newspaper ran a story: *Local Girl Dies After Two-Year Battle*.

It wasn't a battle. It was decomposition. The battle ended when Shelly said so.

Two years for the edge to dull, until it drew no blood at all. Maybe if it had, we wouldn't have so easily forgotten her. But Shelly Christ did not give her life with the intention of making us see. It was about us, but it was never for us.

. . .

I've never told anyone about what I'd seen Shelly do, until now. Maybe if I had said something, I sometimes think, she might be alive now. But I think that's arrogant. I don't have that power. I don't know what I would have said or done. I didn't know her.

Maybe if I'd tried, maybe she would have let me be her friend. I don't know if it would have made a difference. Maybe I only would've gotten in her way.

I think I should have tried, though. I still feel that I missed something big by not trying. And I didn't understand power, not then.

. . .

I wondered why I was drawn to Washington's Rock. Sometimes I would just find myself there, having set out on my bike with no conscious intention of going. I'd find myself at the bottom of the hill, waiting for the silent something that moved me from stillness — some hunger shown food, some decision I never was conscious of making, an impetus like a whisper, the only evidence of which is the echo I hear after I've begun.

Washington's Rock was my trial, my very own. Making it to the top gave me power, and freedom.

I walk around the trees, hot and panting and sweat-soaked and then, there is the entire world, spread out below me.

I stand on the marker and extend my arms, I outstretch my hands over it all. I can feel the press of the tiny houses and the billows of green against my palms. I spread my will over them and hold it suspended, like the sky. How lucky they all are to be ignorant of me, those tiny, stupid people. So ignorant of my power, for all I have to do is lower my hands and crush them all. And in their last moments, only then would they finally understand. Then they would know how stupid they were, how they had until that last terrible moment, when it was utterly too late, understood absolutely nothing.

But other times, I would fly. I would raise my hands with my palms upward and feel myself becoming light and I would rise like a flock of birds set loose from my heart, so high above the

dull world and the stupid people in it. Soaring through the clean, cold air, my blood and breath transformed to joy, knowing at last that I was free.

I didn't think of it then as prayer.

Maybe that's what Shelly felt. Maybe that's why I can't forget her. Maybe I could have taken her with me and shown her another way, given her a trial that she could weather. Maybe she would have come out on the other side born anew, even if only for a little while, with a defining something other than pain that was completely hers, that was earned. And maybe she would have kissed me in thanks, the one person who understood, and we would both have had another thing to make us real.

But then always, I would feel my weight again, and I would open my eyes and be standing on the rock. But maybe just before, just moments before, I truly had been free. Maybe the world returned only because I opened my eyes expecting to see it.

The world is strong, but one day I would be strong enough to remove myself from it completely, I vowed. One day, I would ascend into the real and become my true self, forever, with no hope or desire of returning. I would be awesome and terrible to behold, and everyone then would know how deadly stupid had been their decision to dismiss me.

I carried this with me as a comfort. It is the closest thing I had to religion then. That, and searching for myself on maps.

. . . .

My mother and I argued. I screamed at her but my voice was never strong enough. If only it had been, I could have blasted her with my power and then she, too, would know. That she had better stop and ponder, and wonder if what she was doing would one day prove dangerous.

I did not like my mother. I felt no obligation to. Any animal can give birth. Ten seconds after that's done, you have to earn the rest.

My mother didn't understand. She would tell me to stop shouting. It didn't matter what we were shouting about or whether she had shouted first. "Stop shouting!" she would hiss, as if we were creating a scene in a restaurant. She would repeat it over and over, never looking at me until I went away, and she would make another drink.

I learned to give my mother my silence. I made myself easy for her to ignore. I gave her nothing, other than what was necessary to pass through her space. I learned to turn my mind from the wet crawl of her eyes on me, the slurp of her taking a drink. Sometimes she would say things but they were just rocks. I was too far away, and she didn't have the reach. I think she was grateful.

That silence was all we had in common. Except for blood, which can't be denied but is easy to ignore, once you make up your mind to do it.

. . . .

There was a time when Dad tried to play peacemaker. I would stop arguing when he did, for him.

I love my dad. When I was still at home, I would hear my mother shouting at him downstairs, sometimes in fury, other times with words that cut but held no truth. She only wanted to hurt him. Usually dad would speak so low I couldn't hear him, so it sounded as if my mother was cursing a ghost.

Many times the front door would slam hard enough to rattle the windows in my bedroom. Then I would hear the fridge door open, and the cabinet where she kept the bottle, which was right beneath my room. And sometimes I would hear her cry, and I would turn up my music, just enough so I couldn't hear her but not so loud that she could hear me do it. It made me feel something that I had enough left to give her that, at least.

"Your mother is having a tough time," Dad would explain, though he never said with what. I don't think he knew. If he had, I don't know how he could have explained it to me then so I would understand. I was in their world, and what bound them together was to me like a monster swimming in a dark swamp, a great merciless shape obscured in the murk whose silent approach I felt like a wave as it neared.

I would make myself small then, I would press myself against the walls in fear and pray it did not crush me as it passed because whatever it was, it did not see me at all.

It terrified me worse than dying.

Dad rescued me. His familiar footsteps on the carpeted stairs, the squat shadows of his feet against the crack of hallway light below my closed bedroom door. Three light taps. I never played my music so loud that I wouldn't be able to hear them.

Sometimes we talked for hours in the dark, with long silences between clumps of sentences like the highway between towns. Sometimes he drove and sometimes I did. And then, there would come a stretch of highway and I would feel his weight rise from the end of the bed, and his warm hand would squeeze my arm, and the door would close softly behind him, leaving the faint odor of after shave and cigarettes.

Dad always goes outside when he smokes. I would hear the screen door creak and close, and I would rise from my bed and go to the window and see him on the back patio. Sometimes he would just stand there, and sometimes he would walk slowly around the little yard that I mowed every weekend. He would move in and out of the next-door neighbor's yellow porchlight spill, in and out of the shadows cast by the high forsythia bushes along the fence. His hand would come up to his mouth, and I would see the little orange dot flare bright in the dark as he inhaled. His hand would swing down by his side and I knew he was exhaling but I would watch the cigarette cherry as it faded, seeing how long I could make it out before it went away completely, counting the seconds.

Sometimes he would be like that for an hour, smoking one cigarette after another, like he knew he had to smoke them all right then before he went back inside for the last time that night. Back on duty, back to my mother who with her vodka breath had ordered him and his cigarettes out of his house.

I always made sure there were no lights on in my room when I watched him. I didn't want him to look up and see my silhouette in the window. I wasn't afraid he would be angry. I didn't want to rob him of his religion.

Dad amazes me, what he tolerates. I don't know what my mother once was that made him fall in love with her, but it's gone now. Maybe there's just enough of it left that only he can see that keeps him there.

I think it's more that he feels sorry for her. If she can't love him, then he will protect her. That at least he can still do. He will be dutiful. It is the only way he has left to show her his love. The only way she will accept, even as she curses him for it.

If I think about it too long, the sadness of it breaks my heart.

Chapter Two

I graduated with my class. My yearbook photo shows me standing in front of a pine tree with my arms crossed, staring off into the distance.

Before he snapped the photo, the photographer said the same thing to me that he'd said to everyone else. Smile, and think of your future.

I am not smiling in my photo.

Marcel Marceau said in a speech once something to the effect that the reason lying isn't one of the seven deadly sins is because it's necessary. You can't tell someone you love that they're ugly.

It rocked me when I read that. I wished I had read it earlier. It would have been a great comfort to me. A man who made art out of silence. It would have been nice to think myself an artist, rather than a hypocrite.

You have to be careful when you tell the truth. The truth and honesty aren't the same thing. Honesty is not lying. The truth is an atom bomb that can blow the world apart.

I knew this back then, years before I could articulate it. Most kids do. You can tell when they learn it because like I did, they stop talking.

Adults always say they want kids to talk, but kids know that's a lie. Most adults want kids to agree. They only want talk like a sonar ping, to satisfy them of existence and proximity. They don't want to listen, they only wish to avoid surprise. They want honesty like they want a pistol pulled from a pocket and laid on a table, where it can be seen.

There's a moment in every life when something happens to inform you that the truth isn't holy. It comes like a shotgun blast, and you're left holding your guts in your hands, with what you thought was true red and slick and squirming between your fingers as you try to shove it back into where it will no longer fit. All you're left with is the pain of the greater truth you've learned. That your faith can be so blithely betrayed, that nothing is so sacred, no trust so inviolate, that it can't be profaned.

The pain of this learning becomes your new truth. The pain is the only proof that you're real, that you are not yet a part of the obscene conspiracy. It is precious. It is the only absolutely real and honest thing you have that's truly and completely yours.

And so, you don't talk. You will not contribute to the grand lie. You will tolerate the mocking, the beatings, the loneliness. You tolerate it because your pain bears you though it, the righteous mirror in which everyone and everything else is reflected and shown to be shit.

Except for you. You are a poet. You are a pure and noble warrior. You will be the last and only true, and you will not falter nor surrender. You will not relinquish your truth, even if it means your own death. If you must, you will sharpen it to keep you strong. Sitting at your desk, pale and proper and beautiful as your blood drips freckles on the dirty classroom floor.

Listen to me. You must not steal this and make it into nothing. You must respect it. If you don't, the death poets will do something to make you understand.

Click-click boom! Are you listening now?

. . . .

I wish I could take all those kids who blew their friends' brains out in school and give them bicycles.

We would ride to the top of Washington's Rock together. All of your pain and your anger, put it into your pumping legs and hard breath. Spit the lies like grit from your mouth.

At the top we will stand together on trembling legs with the breeze cool on our sweaty faces. We don't have to talk. We will look out over the world now below us and take our yearbook photos and SAT scores and talks with the guidance counselor and all the adult bullshit, we will crumple it all in our plump young fists and throw it as far as we can into the dusk.

When you're ready, we will return. We will coast together down the hill like free sailors on the wind. When we reach the flat road we will pump the pedals again, we will watch the car headlights blink open to the dusk and breathe the cool exhaust-scented air, and be strong.

I'm so sorry for you if you can't remember. How like a sin that we ever forget it.

. . . .

The night I told Dad I wanted to go to college we were sitting in the dining room, sharing dinner. It was my mother's canasta night with her friends up the street so we were by ourselves. We had ordered pizza and fried calamari from our favorite Italian delivery place. Even their mild sauce is too hot for most people, but Dad and I loved it.

Dad was still in his white short-sleeved golf shirt from the department store where he works as the lawn and garden department manager. He's worked there for as long as I can remember, selling lawn mowers and string trimmers and tillers and mulch. All the people in the neighborhood go to Dad to buy their lawn things.

Dad had spilled some sauce on his shirt the very second I had asked him if he could help me go to college. He dipped his paper napkin in his water with lemon, which is what he almost always drinks, and he dabbed at the stain so that he wasn't even looking at me when he told me that he didn't have to money to send me to college, not a four-year college. But maybe if I wanted to go to a two-year college or tech school, maybe we could swing that, if I got a job to help pay.

I watched him dabbing at the stain on his shirt until he stopped. He lowered his hands into his lap. His head was still down, looking at the stain. All he had done was smear it.

I could tell it was killing him, having to tell me he couldn't afford to send me to college, and then having to look so ridiculous wiping that stain because if he'd just left it alone while he spoke it would have been like pretending he wasn't wearing a clown nose.

I'd wanted to strangle whatever god there might be for having done that to him. It makes me angry to remember it, even now as I'm writing this. But what I told Dad was that it sounded like a fair deal, I wasn't even completely sure I wanted to go but I would get a job and save money

and live at home and think about it, and when I had enough I'd maybe go to a two-year college, if I still wanted to, and if I did I would appreciate all the help he could give me with that.

He nodded then and looked up. I saw his eyes and said I was full and he said he was, too. He said he had to go change his shirt.

The boards in his bedroom creaked over my head as I folded the pizza box and put it with the rest of the cardboard for recycling. I heard him walk to the bed and I guess he sat down. The boards didn't creak for a long while.

. . . .

That's when I knew I wouldn't be going to college. I really didn't want to go, I don't think. Dad gave me the excuse I needed. I was grateful.

It almost killed me, what I saw when Dad looked up. I was telling him I wanted to go away and leave him alone, alone with my mother and his evening back yard smokes and an empty bedroom down the hall with no music behind the door. I got a peek into the deep and murky water and saw a middle-aged guy in a white short-sleeved shirt who sold lawn mowers at a department store and lived with an alcoholic wife and couldn't afford to send his only child to college.

I'm sorry, Dad. If I'd known I swear I never would have said anything.

Chapter Three

Years went by. I worked a handful of jobs. Most aren't worth talking about.

I moved out of the house as soon as I could afford it. I found a little apartment I could manage on my own. It had putty-colored walls and thin brown carpeting. The air conditioning carried the damp smell of everyone who had ever lived there, like a dirty refrigerator.

The day I moved out of the house, Dad presented me with a laminated wallet-sized card on which he'd carefully printed all the names and phone numbers he could think of, in case I was ever in an accident or needed help. He made me put the card into my wallet right then, even though I had most of the numbers in my phone contacts already. He kept talking as we loaded my stuff into the apartment, checking the smoke detectors and reminding me to lock the doors and windows when I was away, and to call him if I needed anything, even if he was at work. We made a date to go shopping for used furniture at the Goodwill store.

I walked him out to the car. He hugged me before he got in. I smelled his after shave, felt his soft middle-aged muscles beneath his store shirt. I was taller than he was now. It was the first time I had been close enough to him to really notice.

I sat on a box in my new apartment and cried. I wasn't sure why.

. . . .

I bought a used car, a crappy little oil-burning Toyota. I spent most of my spare cash on books, and read most of them. I hardly ever invited anyone over because I'm a dick.

I'm not trying to be funny. I know how I am around people. I'm not easy to get along with. I don't try to be a dick but there's just not that much that anyone has to say that interests me, most people anyway. Most of it is obvious or ignorant, or tedious social prattle, or just plain bullshit.

I find it all exceptionally difficult to tolerate. I suppose I could try, or try harder, but it's not worth the effort to me. Inevitably, I'll find myself having to say something meaningless just to be social or having to pretend that someone didn't just say something stupendously asinine, just to be polite.

People think I'm arrogant because I don't say much. It's easier to let them think that than it is to pretend to be friendly. When I attempt the required contortions, I wind up castrating my point, stumbling over my own attempted courtesy to the degree that I end up sounding like a moron.

The trouble with being nice for its own sake, with being courteous in the face of imbecility, is that the very people who require you to make the effort will mistake you for a pussy. Speak plain, and you're a dick.

So I'm a dick. I don't see that it's my responsibility to coddle your delicate sensibilities or make you comfortable in your ignorance. I can't help it if you jump when I slap my coins on the counter. Grow the fuck up.

There. I'm done.

It would've been nice to have had some company, though.

. . . .

Dad I can talk to. We made it a point to have dinner together once a month. It's nice to buy dinner for your dad. He always offered to pay and sometimes I let him, when I saw he needed to. I would get the tip then.

"How is she?" I would ask. I didn't have to say who.

"The same," he would say. And we would move on, careful not to open that door too wide, easing it closed.

I felt I had to ask, to at least recognize that she was a part of things, if for no other reason than that she still took up space in our world, and so must be acknowledged.

. . . .

Most of the time, though, I fantasized about women. I thought about them constantly. I imagined the feel of their smooth shoulders beneath my hands, the softness of them pressed against me, their warm scent. I ached for it.

I loved to watch women in bookstores, beautiful smart women opening book covers to feed their souls. Their slim fingers pulling their hair back, tucking it behind their ear, that perfect smooth curve of neck revealed.

You women, you moved through the world like goddesses to me. Do you know the power you had, cool and perfect so that it split my heart to see you. I never dared approach, because I would not have been able to bear had you turned away. But you being there gave me what hope I had. Like a dream of a kiss, better left sweet in sleep than spoiled by waking.

. . . .

I'd had two girlfriends my whole life. The first was Leslie, in high school. She was plain, with clean, straight blonde hair and button-down blouses with khaki skirts and a little small mouth already trained in that smile some girls have, studied sweetness and insurmountable distance all projected with a twitch of dimple. We studied in the library, and sometimes we went to movies together. Leslie always called her parents right after we got there and just before we left to go home.

Hanging with Leslie was like eating vanilla ice cream. It wasn't as good as chocolate or strawberry but it was better than no ice cream at all.

She sent me a happy graduation card, signed "Love, Leslie." She might as well have written any word in the language, for all the meaning it had. Love was just a word, something girls like her dispensed like heart-shaped candies, to be nice.

Leslie went to Rutgers on a scholarship, to study psychology. I saw her at the mall a few years later, on the other side of the promenade. She looked precisely the same, as if she'd been in storage since we last saw one another. I thought about going over to say hi, but I didn't. I'd still be precisely what I'd been to her when we'd shared time together. A stranger.

Dear Leslie. I hope you're doing well. Love, Danny.

. . .

The other woman was Cheryl. She was twelve years older than me and sold advertising for a local newspaper. I met her at the pet store where I worked for a while.

Working at the pet store taught me why so many women rescue strays and work in animal shelters. I saw them at the store all the time. They were either fat and wearing sweat clothes or heroin thin, with old faces, like books abandoned open to the elements.

Nadine was a bus driver, she came in every week and bought forty pounds of kibble and a big box of biscuits. She had seven dogs. When she told me, I said how it must be a handful to have so many. Nadine said better dog shit on the rug than a drunk asshole with no job on the couch.

Pow. I don't laugh at dog and cat people now like I used to. Just the obviously crazy ones.

Cheryl had an orange tomcat tabby named Rusty, neutered. I learned to remember the difference between neutered and spayed because neuter and nuts begin with the same letter. You use whatever works.

Cheryl wasn't a fat cat person. She dressed in business suits and had auburn hair. She wore lots of makeup that looked like she'd spent an hour on it, like the porn star anchors on cable TV news.

Cheryl made it easy to flirt. Cheryl taught me that I could say certain things to certain women in a certain way without fear that I'd be taken seriously. I said things to Cheryl that would have had Leslie calling her dad in a panic.

One afternoon, Cheryl asked if I'd ever thought about having sex with her. She said it was okay if I had.

I was twenty-two when I lost my virginity. Maybe you think that's late. I don't think it matters. Once you do it, you're doing it. The rest is just practice.

All Cheryl and I did was have sex. It was all she wanted, and I couldn't find reason to object. She showed me what to do and let me know when I got it right. She didn't have a headboard on her bed, so sometimes the top of her head would thump against the wall, bump-bump-bump. Whenever I was on top I put a pillow between her head and the wall. I was a considerate lover. It's funny as hell now, to think about it.

Sometimes Rusty would jump up on the bed while we were at it. "Rusty, go!" Cheryl would say, her head thumping against the wall. And Rusty would obediently jump off of the bed. He'd curl around Cheryl's bare ankles when she showed me to the door. "Isn't he a good kitty?" Cheryl would say, and then tell me good-bye, and close the door in my face.

Cheryl would never come to my apartment. She let me buy her dinner, once. We'd been doing whatever we were doing for six weeks. At the restaurant she was nervous. She didn't say much and hardly ate. She tried to pay when we were done and became angry when I insisted on paying instead.

We didn't have sex that night. She said she was tired and I left her at the curb in front of her apartment and watched her click-clack up the paved walk and disappear inside without a glance behind her.

I called Cheryl the next day and left a message, but she never called back. She never came back to the pet store. At least not while I was there.

I drove by her apartment a while later. Her car was there, the light was on. I didn't stop. I didn't know what I would say.

Maybe if I'd been more like Rusty.

. . . .

Here is the most remarkable thing I remember from those years. The one single most memorable thing.

I was standing beneath a shop awning one afternoon in the summer, on the little main street in our town. It had begun pouring rain, out of nowhere.

I'm deciding whether to wait or make a run for my car, when I see her. She's approaching from my right, walking like there's no rain. She doesn't have an umbrella and she doesn't care.

She's soaked to the skin, her blouse is sticking to her, her wet hair is pulled back from her forehead.

She stops by a car parked at the curb and applies lipstick in the side-view mirror, in the rain. The tops of her breasts glisten, the dark space between them opens as she bends over.

I see her as I write this. I can smell the wet asphalt, and the rain. There she is, in her astonishing glory.

I have constructed entire conversations we might have had, entire lives.

She looks up, and there I am before her. I say what I say, just the perfect thing to make her fresh-painted lips smile, to make her wonder if I might be worth some of her time.

From that moment, that space in the heartbeat slowing of the world around you as you await the next, the rest proceeds.

That's all you need, if you can get it. That alone can make up for everything else. You won't need a map to make yourself real.

I hadn't met CeeCee then.

. . . .

The pet store closed, driven out of business by a big-box discount chain that opened a half-mile away. I had thirty days to find a new job.

Chapter Four

No car salesman I have ever met ever planned on being one. If you have any kind of personality at all and can do basic math, you're pretty much qualified. Of course, it doesn't mean you'll be any good at it.

One of the guys who works at the dealership had been a dancer in a C-grade traveling male stripper revue. Another salesman had spent time in a minimum-security prison for forging his mother's signature on her checks. She's the one who'd turned him in. He had turned his life around since, he said.

I spent a week watching training videos and reading pamphlets before my first day on the floor. The new car manager gave me some advice, which was this: "Buyers are liars."

Buyers think anything you say is a lie, which is why they will always lie to you. You can give them a car for free and they'll think the guy before them got two. But they'll swear their credit is perfect and their trade cherry even if you helped them push it in off the street and they can't get approved to rent furniture. I once watched a repo man tow a trade right off the lot while the owner was in another salesman's office arguing over how much it was worth. We swap the stories on the floor like pictures of our pets.

It all came together for me when I started selling cars. Never mind our popular reputation. A car dealership is one of the most honest places there is. You can't be brazen and make it work but that unspoken acknowledgement that neither of you expects the other to be completely honest, that tacit agreement, it makes everything so much easier.

Not all of us are like that but it doesn't make any real difference. If you're convinced I'm going to screw you, I feel no obligation to persuade you otherwise. You wouldn't believe me anyway. But the least I can do in exchange is make it as comfortable as possible for you when I bend you over.

That's my job, you see. I can make you feel you fought the good fight. I know just what to do to make it all feel fine, even as your heart screams that it's a lie.

If I'd been a car salesman when I met Cheryl we might still be together. I might be married to my lipstick goddess. Not that either relationship would have lasted.

. . . .

My third month at the dealership, I sold a truck to a man for seven hundred dollars over full sticker price.

He was my first up of the day. You wait your turn on the floor during your shift there and whoever walks up when you're first in line is your up. That's how it works, that's showroom democracy. The guy had his little buyers' guides and internet print-outs and his rock-bottom cash prices from other dealers scribbled on his notepad and photos of cars and window stickers on his phone. He was an Informed Buyer. He was a Tough Negotiator. He was not going to Get Screwed, no sir.

Two minutes in, I knew he was a tool. The other dealerships had let him walk on lowballs they'd never honor and no one else could beat, to get him to come back. When he did, they'd come up with some reason why they couldn't sell it to him for that price anymore, jack up the cost and then beat him down with bullshit until he bought. He couldn't go back to the other dealers who wouldn't match the price because he'd called them all liars. Also, going back to them would mean admitting he was a moron. So he'd bend over and buy.

That's what we do. You're welcome.

And I told him so. I told him he'd been lowballed. I gave him his chance. He rapped his knuckles on my desk and demanded my Best Cash Price on the truck.

So I gave it to him. I quoted him invoice down to the penny because I knew he wouldn't believe me, and he didn't. He showed me his notepad with the prices the other lowballing pricks had given him and said to my face that I was a liar and a thief.

I felt something lift from me then, like the oppressive heat of the day suddenly removed. I felt calm, clear as a mathematician to whom the long-sought answer to a clot of numbers was at last revealed.

I took him to the used line and showed him a sweet full-size Toyota 4x4. It had just come out from the back that morning, the price wasn't on it yet but I knew what the used manager wanted for it, and what he would take.

I jacked the sticker up by two grand. I made the guy want it. I told him he had my Best Cash Price and if he didn't like it, he could go buy from someone else. He tough negotiated me down eight hundred dollars and I fought him over every fucking penny. He made me sweat and squirm. I cursed him. I cried murder, I begged for mercy.

At the end of the day he shook my hand, climbed into his new truck and drove off with my dick up his ass, happy as a clam.

Seven hundred dollars over sticker. The dealership made over eighteen hundred bucks off the deal. I made my week's draw off of that one sale.

The used car manager couldn't stop talking about it. The other salesmen couldn't get enough of the story, they laughed and slapped me on the back and congratulated me. I was fresh legend. I had made my bones.

. . . .

I'd told the buyer the truth. After that, it was on him to believe me or not. I'd given him what he'd wanted. He would brag to his friends about how hard he'd worked me, how he'd beaten me down until I broke. He'd tell that story for the rest of his life.

It's not my responsibility. And so on.

I hadn't known I could be so good at it. Or that I could live with it so easily.

After that, I stopped fighting it. I had learned what I was. Easy as slipping on shoes.

I've never told Dad about that sale.

. . . .

Month six was my worst. I exhumed dead leads from dusty files, I courted every up like a desperate lover. Only two bought, and for next to nothing. Everyone was having a bad month, which made it easier to tolerate. A little.

The new car manager was talking to someone in his office. You could see them through the wall glass. You could tell from the body language that it wasn't a sale.

All car salesmen are paranoid, at least the ones I know are. We're like farmers, dependent on the weather to make the rent. A dry spell sends us from cocky to desperate in a blink. It's no way to live but the money's good, for as long as the weather holds.

It filled the showroom like stink. No one talked. We found things to do to look busy. We wanted to look busy when the axe fell, as if whoever wasn't would determine who went home that night with the contents of their desk in a cardboard box under their arm.

The stranger left on a handshake we all saw. It was Friday. There was a new guy starting Monday, and his name was Cai.

The new car manager sat back down at his desk and studied a piece of paper.

. . .

The piece of paper was a contract, which none of us had. That was the reason Cai had been hired. He had offered to work for free.

This is what Cai told the new car manager, which we all learned later. He would work for two months with no draw, no base salary. By the end of his second month, if Cai hadn't made for the dealership what he would have made in draw for both months, he would walk away clean. If he made his nut, they'd pay him his draw for both months plus whatever commission he'd made, and he'd be regular staff.

Cai had two conditions. The first is he would sell his way. Dress how he wanted, say what he wanted, work when he wanted. The only power any manager had was to approve his deals, or not. Condition two is that Cai would be paid in cash.

The new car manager wanted the deal in writing so that Cai wouldn't sue for wages if he tanked.

. . .

Cai arrived early Monday, driving a Ford Ranger extended cab four-by-four, forest green, good condition. North Carolina plates, blue and red and white with the Wright Brothers plane faint behind the tag number and the words *First in Flight* along the bottom.

The only space we had was a cubicle in the corner of the showroom floor, looking out over the used car line. It was rookie turf, one gray prefab wall butted against the showroom glass, making a space behind it in the corner. There was a battered desk and two chairs and a telephone and a gunmetal gray filing cabinet and office supplies. Cai made it all as homey as the corner cubicle of a car dealership showroom can be, with a lamp and a cloth draped on the filing cabinet and cushions for the metal folding chairs.

The front of Cai's desk was flush up against the prefab wall. Hanging over the desk was an oval mirror in a polished wood frame, hung horizontally. It looked old. The glass was rippled,

like shallow swells in water. It made it appear almost as if you were peering through the glass, into some other place you could only glimpse through a thin layer of reflected reality. The feeling was you'd be able to see better if only the water would calm.

There were three snapshots tucked between the frame and the glass. Two of the snapshots were black-and-white. One showed a man of maybe thirty standing in front of a tractor, his arm draped over the big back tire. He was dressed in overalls and he was grinning. You could tell the tractor was new, the photo had probably been taken on the day the man brought it home.

The second black-and-white photo was of a young woman in a sundress, sitting in a wooden chair on a porch with two fat babies on her lap, a boy and a girl. The woman was plain and beautiful. Her hair was dark and long, down to her waist. She was smiling, caught in a perfect moment that rose from the photo like the scent of a flower.

The third photo was color. It was of a woman. She stood in one-quarter profile. Her face was tilted slightly down and away, partially obscured by thick curls of dark hair cascading over her shoulders. All you could see of her face was a glimpse of her smooth jaw, a sense of the curve of her neck. She wore a white blouse and tight faded jeans. Her left arm was bent, the forearm held across her belly, her right hand raised and resting between her breasts. She was standing on a riverbank, her ankles disappeared into the tall grass and weeds. She stared into the dark water.

I cannot tell you the sense of this photo. I don't have the words. I often stared at it when Cai wasn't there, careful that he wouldn't catch me doing it. I memorized every part of it. I imagined the woman raising her head and turning to look at me, just as I dreamt of my lipstick goddess. I so wanted to see her face, to get her to turn and look at me, to reveal herself, and to ask her what it was that she was searching for in the water.

This was my first encounter with Sarabeth Dare. I didn't know then that soon I would meet her in the flesh, that I would know her to call her by name, and that when she did first raise her head to look at me she would scare me to death. I didn't know then that she was Cai's woman, and that he had taken that photo of his one true love just days before he had told her good-bye.

. . .

The new car manager introduced Cai to us first thing Monday, which is when we all learned that he would be working for free.

We stared at him like he was from outer space. He stood next to the new car manager in the showroom. He was just shy of six feet and solid, like he had muscles built from work. He could have been a construction worker cleaned up for a job interview. He wore a white dress shirt and a tie, denim jeans and scuffed black cowboy boots. He wore a black leather belt with a pewter buckle. He had wavy brown hair worn down to his shoulders.

Cai's eyes were dark as dirt, and when he turned them to you it was just all black, even though they must have been brown, and when the light was just right something in them glinted like sparks of mica in wet soil. Like a flicker of movement in the dark where only a moment before, you were certain you were alone.

The women in the back office never said Cai was handsome. They said he was dangerous. But they always smiled when they said it.

. . .

What I remember most about first meeting Cai was how he didn't seem nervous, he didn't try to be chummy or funny or self-deprecating to win us over. He nodded to us when he was introduced but didn't say much other than hello, nice to meet you. He didn't seem concerned about us at all, like he'd already sized us up and determined he had no reason to be, and did it just that fast.

I read something once, that some people know how to occupy their space. They're not on their way from somewhere or on their way to someplace, even if they are. Where they stop is where they are, even if it's for a moment it might as well be for forever. It's not about motion, or time. It's about presence in space and time, the quality of being present. That's what presence means. To occupy the now.

That was Cai, best as I can explain it. I had never encountered it before. I never expected I would meet it in a long-haired country boy car salesman.

Cai took us in like we were scenery. Everyone smiled and shook his hand but I could tell it wasn't going to last.

. . .

Once we knew we weren't going to be fired, the bitching began. How come Cai could leave early or come in late, how come he could wear jeans and we couldn't, how come he could miss sales meetings, how come how come.

"Work for free" is what the new car manager always said. He was enjoying his experiment immensely.

It was obvious Cai had sold before. He knew the lingo, knew the showroom drills, the politics of selling. Everyone said he was crazy, must be. It made them feel better. He was an unknown and it scared them. They said he was a dick because he kept to himself, he didn't shoot the shit on the floor between ups. He helped when he was needed and was civil when he had to talk but mainly he came in and did his job and left. You could go all day and never say a word to him, or he to you.

Cai thought he was too good for them, the others said. If he was such hot shit, how come he was selling cars?

I asked them how come they were. They asked me how come I was. I said it was because I couldn't cut it selling dog food.

After that they didn't bother pretending anymore that they liked me. They never really had. I was the youngest one there, and I'd made everyone look bad with my used truck sale, never mind the back-slapping. I didn't have a family to support like they did so what the hell did I know about anything?

The charade dropped and shattered like a coffee mug on the showroom tile. Jesus, I was glad to be done with it.

It's probably why I didn't avoid Cai like the others did. It's not every day I meet someone like me. At least, that's what I told myself. I listened to the others whine about Cai, wondering if people said the same things about me behind my back. I suppose it's my own fault if they do.

I tried to feel upset about it, but I couldn't. I felt better that I wasn't alone anymore. I humored myself, thinking Cai and I had that much in common, that I was like him. Feeling superior makes being a dick easier to stomach. It's pretty much a requisite, really.

. . .

Here's what happened the first month.

Cai showed up every morning and worked the floor. He didn't seem to treat his ups any differently than we did, except that most of them wound up sitting in his cubicle and chatting, sometimes for so long he'd only get one or two ups that day. Time off the floor he'd make a few calls and read, the news or a book. End of the day he'd pull locks, checking to ensure all the cars were locked and the keys not in them. Low man on the sales totem gets the privilege. And then he'd climb in his truck and leave.

By the end of the first month, Cai had only sold three vehicles. The others joked about how by the end of the next month, he might make enough to pay for the gas it took him to drive to work.

Everyone had sold more that month than Cai, including me. I wondered if he maybe he really was crazy. Maybe this is what he did, going from dealership to dealership, drinking coffee and chatting with strangers until he was kicked to the curb.

I looked in his truck but it didn't appear as if he lived in it. He didn't smell as if he did.

. . .

The first week of the second month, the dam burst.

People came into the dealership, asking for Cai. Most were ups Cai had had the first month, who'd left without buying. They would ask for Cai, or Cai Bass, or Mister Bass.

They always remembered his name. When's the last time you remembered a car salesman's name?

If Cai was busy they would wait. He always knew their names on sight and thanked them for coming back and asked if they were ready. He always asked if they were ready, and they always said yes. Some brought their families, like they were going to the movies. We had kids running around the showroom, worrying the crap out of the managers, turning us all into baby sitters.

By week two it officially became ridiculous. All day long out on the lot, you would hear the loudspeaker: "Cai Bass, you have a customer in the showroom." "Cai Bass, you have a call on line two." "Cai Bass, please come to the finance office."

I was working an up and we heard Cai paged three times in ten minutes. She asked if Cai owned the dealership. Not yet, I said.

. . .

Something else happened that second month. Two things, actually.

The first is that sales picked up for the rest of us. It was going to be a record month. Maybe it simply was time for it to happen. Maybe Cai was putting out some kind of vibe. Whatever it was we all breathed it like electricity. The blood of sales and cash was pumping hot and hard through the dealership. We hit the lot to our ups with steps cracking smart on the blacktop. We were excellent lovers picking fruit ripe on the vine. You could not tell us no.

The other thing, the main thing for me that happened, is that I made coffee for Cai.

I was between customers and he had two waiting, and I heard him apologize for not having any fresh coffee. We kept a pot each of regular and decaf going for customers on the showroom floor even though we usually drank most of it ourselves, which is why the new car manager refused to buy one of those coffee pods machines. The day had been so busy we'd already gone through four carafes of regular coffee before lunchtime. I was passing by his cubicle when Cai said what he did, and I heard myself say that I would make some fresh and let him know when it was done.

You won't think there's much to this. I've spent a lot of time remembering it, I've turned it over and over enough to wear the edges smooth. It is the pebble dropped into the water, from which the ripples swelled and spread, like Cai's mirror.

For the first time since I'd known him, Cai gave me his full attention. I can see his face now in memory. It is angled downward, not quite fully turned to me.

Now he straightens, his long brown hair falls back and his eyes are fixed on mine, dirt dark and flecked with those sparks of mica, like hammer sparks called from stone. They peer at me from under his brow like some creature at night, watchful beneath a fallen log.

It is like an ocean swell against me, like a great magnet seizing and vibrating my every particle. My lungs arrest between inhale and exhale. I cannot move, if I was on fire I would burn where I stood. The din of the world recedes from perception and rises spinning into the sky like the edges of a hurricane and I am spread molecule thin through time and place such that a puff of breath will part me into swirls of dispersed smoke, without substance enough even to muster a scream.

And then I'm back, the world is back, the assault of weight and senses returns in a great clanging slap.

Cai smiles and thanks me. He says he'll make the coffee himself. He says he'll bring me a cup when it's done, if I like.

I find myself in my little office, sitting at my desk. My heart will not stop pounding. It bangs in my ears like fists on a wall, drowning all other sound.

The new car manager lets me go home early.

. . .

I was terrified to sleep that night. I felt as if I were made of smoke, that the blankets would settle down through me onto the mattress as if I weren't there. My beating heart was an engine on loan. I couldn't trust the knots that tied it into my chest.

My rational mind tells me I'm being foolish. I make arguments, I build them like careful mathematical equations but when I reach for them, they collapse. I am a ghost in the world, a

projection upon a breath of fog. My weight upon the mattress is no comfort, there is no logic nor science convincing enough to satisfy me that I can sleep and be sure of waking in the morning.

I stand upon Washington's Rock. Face lifted to the sky, the world releases me and I rise, I sail free, molecules separating until I passing through the sky or the sky passing through me is no difference. The clouds mix with my particles and I become rain, tears of myself spread in an ocean, and what I was like a sigh is released in joy, and joins with heaven.

. . . .

My bladder awakened me. I got up and used the bathroom. The tiles were cold against my bare feet. I did not turn on the light. I finished and flushed and crawled back into bed.

The covers were warm. I broke wind beneath them. Thus comforted, I slept.

Chapter Five

We moved one hundred five vehicles the second month Cai was with us. One hundred fucking five.

That was more than double the dealership's best month, ever. And forty-two of those, Cai sold. Better than a car a day if he'd had the whole month to do it, and he did it nineteen days, Sundays off. You can't do any better and not go to jail.

I need to tell you the numbers, so you'll truly understand.

Draw is base salary, like I said. At the end of the month, you add up the profit you made for the dealership on all the vehicles you sold. If you've made your draw, you get to keep your job. Whatever you've made over that is your commission to keep, at whatever percentage is policy.

Not counting dealer holdback and the other fine print, Cai alone made the dealership just shy of seventeen thousand dollars that second month. Ba-boom.

We were tri-state dealership of the month. The owner threw us a cookout and handed us each two hundred bucks cash as a thank-you bonus. It was better than Christmas.

The new car manager told Cai he could stay.

. . . .

I don't know how much money Cai made during that record month and I've never asked him. But nobody on the planet selling domestic metal makes seventeen grand a month in draw so his commission had to be a damn good chunk of change. And don't forget, the new car manager had agreed to pay Cai in cash those first two months. It was in the contract. The manager had probably thought the dealership would part with a couple grand, at the most.

It was quite a bit more than that. A substantial cash payout, untaxed and on the books.

When the dealership owner found out he called the new car manager into his office and made him less pleased than he had been with his clever new hire.

Buyers are liars, and so are we. Except when we tell the truth.

Oops.

. . . .

The new car manager hadn't seen the truth. Neither had I, not then. And the truth was this.

The only power the manager had had over Cai was to tell him to get lost. He'd otherwise agreed in writing to pay a stranger to come into his house whenever he wanted and put his feet on the furniture, and had gone to bed thinking Cai was the fool.

You've got to love that. And it gets better.

. . . .

Here is how Cai sold forty-two vehicles in nineteen days.

Cai told his customers that his job was to make as much money for the dealership and himself as he could.

Cai told his customers what the invoice price of any new vehicle was, to the penny, and then said there was no way they were going to buy it for that and if they thought they could, there's the door.

Cai told his customers what the wholesale value was of any used vehicle we sold, and that there was also no way they were going to buy it for that and if they didn't believe it, there's the door.

Cai told his customers what the wholesale value of their trade was. He didn't take markup from the vehicle they were looking at and slap it onto their trade's wholesale and say that's what it was really worth, which is how that works. If their trade was a five-hundred-dollar piece of crap, what the used car manager liked to call an "El Rusto Grande," he told them so. But politely.

Cai told his customers absolutely, the dealership would be happy to pay off what they owed on their trade, but then we would have to add it to the cost of the vehicle they were buying, minus any equity, which is also how that works.

And Cai told his customers yes, he really did have to get their deal approved by the manager. If car salesmen were left to approve their own deals, the dealership would go belly-up in a pool of red ink inside a month.

But Cai only told them any of it if they asked. I can't blame him for that. He had to make a living.

. . . .

That's how Cai sold cars. Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain. Cai tore down the curtain and took questions from the audience.

A lot of Cai's customers left without buying. They talked to family and friends, I imagine. Some of them said so. They couldn't believe they weren't being lied to. They couldn't believe they'd met an honest car salesman.

And when they did believe it, they came back. And some of their friends and family came with them, and their friends and family. Enough to make forty-two.

Cai treated people decently. He dealt with them honestly. That's all we want, and the permission that comes with that to be honest and decent people in return. That's more important than being able to brag about how you once made some car salesman sweat.

For that rare and sweet deal, Cai's customers were willing to pay, never mind where they found it or what it cost.

You work like that, people remember you. In this business, you stand out like a priest in a whorehouse.

. . . .

When the new car manager found out what Cai had been up to, you would have thought from his reaction that Cai had given his customers the combination to the dealership safe.

But damn, the boy sold cars.

Chapter Six

I never forgot that day when Cai stripped the world from me.

I won't say it was easy, to convince myself it was just some strange thing. Some temporary weakness of flesh, coincidence that Cai happened to look at me then. But it was enough to dig the memory a shallow grave, until the next time it arose.

It didn't always work. Sometimes nothing I did would make the memory go away. It would come as I drifted into sleep, it would seize me so that it took everything I had to tear myself free, like struggling to awaken from a terrifying dream.

I don't know if it was death I feared. I don't know enough about death to be afraid of it. But I am afraid of dying, afraid of the very end of life, that moment when you know your death has arrived, you're out of time and you've missed the point and now it's too late to go back and get it right. Knowing that I have failed, imagining that infinite, categorical moment of recognition, and how it will feel. That's what terrifies me.

I will feel that moment like the space between ticks of a clock, the metronome marking of existence that I have taken for granted, subsumed into the existential din until the one moment when there is no next tick. There is only that defined space struck by that last hammer blow, the echoes of it reverberating forever like a fabric stretching me upon its back, incorporeal and sifted and absorbed into it as if I never mattered at all, as if I never was.

And now the very last that I am is pierced by what I didn't know only a tick before, which is that the last one was the last one, and now I am beyond mercy.

I hope that I will have substance enough remaining to make a final sound. Listen for me.

. . .

The other salesman hated us, Cai and I. Being with them on the floor was a test of self-control, every goddamn moment of it. I fantasized about beating them, pulping their faces with my fists, blasting them through the glass showroom walls onto the lot and seeing the fear in their faces as they crabbed backward on the hot, oil-soaked asphalt, palms blistering, shitting their cheap slacks, choking on their ignorance with every sticky swallow.

I knew that thinking like that wasn't healthy. But I wondered if it was normal. I imagined I couldn't be the only one who thought those kinds of things, who endured the infection of that constant anger. I couldn't be the only person who found circumstance such a fucking trial.

But the difference between normal and otherwise, I supposed, is the boundary separating what you think and feel, and what you do. I contented myself with thinking myself dangerous, better than the others. I walked among them secure in my superiority, my rage tucked into my pocket, hidden from their perception but my finger caressing the trigger like a treat saved for later, when the moment was right.

That was my power. That, and imagining the moment of release, which only I could choose. But then I would lose my job and go to prison, and dad would be heartbroken. Even justice has its victims.

I thought about getting a job at a different dealership, but I didn't want to leave Cai. If the assholes didn't bother him, I wasn't going to let them chase me off. And he was the only friend I had. Which is to say, he tolerated my company.

So maybe I wasn't so much a dick after all, I thought. I suppose it all comes down to the company you keep. And how low you set the bar.

. . .

Cai had been there five months, me almost a year. It was late summer. We were in his cubicle drinking coffee before our turn on the floor. We weren't talking much, but we never did.

Cai was staring at the mirror over his desk, into the waves of glass. I couldn't see his face reflected in it from where I was sitting. I don't think I was there for him at all right then. He had been quiet all day, even by his standards.

The big car carrier pulled onto the lot. I got up and went out onto the floor to watch the offload. One of the vehicles was a special order of mine for a customer. There was another that I knew one of Cai's prospects had been waiting for.

I went back to tell Cai. The photos that had been tucked between the mirror glass and the frame were laying on his desk before him, side by side. His fingertips rested below them, on the edge of the desk as he regarded them.

I walked over and stood next to him. His fingers brushed the closest photo.

"First tractor daddy ever bought new," Cai said. "Red Farmall. Older than I am. First thing I ever drove. Had a mouse in the seat one time ran up inside Daddy's pant leg while he was discing. He was jumping around like you wouldn't believe, out there in the middle of the field by himself. Had his overalls off, slinging 'em around. We thought a snake had bit him."

Cai laughed. "Daddy like to never lived that down."

I laughed with him. Cai had never spoken about his family. This was the most he'd ever said about anything personal. I pointed at the second photo, asked him who it was.

"That's mama. Me and CeeCee on her lap. CeeCee's my twin. Born seventeen minutes before I was. Miz Dori says she popped right out like the flowers in May. Laughed before she ever cried."

I asked Cai if he cried. He shook his head. "I didn't say anything."

He glanced up at me, smirking, confirmation that he got the joke. It was turning into quite a morning.

He looked at the third photo, of the woman gazing into the water. I held still, waiting.

But he didn't speak. He looked up, into the mirror, where we two were reflected in the rippled glass. His dark eyes found mine, in the deep swells.

There was a whine in my ears as I felt myself coming apart again, far worse than the first time, fed as it was by remembered dread.

I fought it as if I were drowning. I found breath like the heaviest weight I had ever lifted and gave it voice, felt it vibrating in my throat and chest until the roar filled me, and I was real once again.

I stumbled back against the showroom glass. My coffee cup fell from my hand and shattered against the floor.

Cai was standing now, looking at me, his face expressionless. I glared at him, my heart full of murder.

It was dead quiet in the showroom, faces turned toward Cai and I. One of the other salesman came over. He regarded us, stuffed full of macho, as if expecting an apology for the fuss.

I turned my back on him. Cai offered not even that acknowledgement.

After a moment, the salesman told us to go fuck ourselves and stalked away.

. . . .

I looked through the showroom glass at the vehicles on the lot, factory paint glinting in the hot sun. The air conditioning was cold on my damp skin. My knees were spongy. It was all I could do to stand.

The box in which I'd put my fear of Cai opened and spilled out like marbles bouncing on the floor, because I knew for a certainty now that it had been his doing that first time. That it had been real. Not logic nor science nor self-delusion had strength enough to rationalize away what I felt down into my bowels. And I had no power to stop Cai if he chose to do it again.

Cai appeared at my side, hands in pockets, his gaze paralleling mine. I didn't trust myself to move, or to look at him, or to speak. But neither did he say a word to me. With everything that I had just done he only stood there, allowing me to become acclimated to his presence as if I were a skittish animal.

Which meant he knew. Whatever the fuck he was.

It was absurd. But the only other explanation was that I was going mad. I couldn't distinguish which possibility frightened me the most.

Cai said he was taking a trip that weekend. He said he was going to Covenant Spring, North Carolina, which is where he was born. It was the annual family reunion, the Bass family reunion. He would drive down, he said. He asked me if I would like to come and meet his family. He said he would appreciate the company, and that I'd be welcome there, because I was his friend.

That's where we went, so I must have said yes.

-End Sample-