

HELLO, STRANGER

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"Not so much that, it feels more like a dry frog," I say and trail off just as quickly as I started. I'm losing my knack for coherency. I have trouble joining the zipper teeth on the left side of my jacket to the zipper teeth on the right. I feel strangely in tune with the flex of my muscles and the beat of my breath, but my feet don't step exactly where I want them to as we hike higher up this mountain, closer to Table Top. My knees ache, like their losing moisture. Like a frog must feel as it dehydrates on the bank of a dry creek.

"I feel it in my throat," Wagger says. "A combination of something I can't swallow and something else I can't throw up."

"Yeah, me too," Frank says. "Let's wash it down with some of this."

Frank pulls out a 32 oz. bottle of Bear Republic IPA from his military green backpack and cracks it open with the butt end of a lighter. He pulls back a long chug then lights another cigarette in between his swollen-fat alpine fingers. Wagger swallows some beer after him.

"The elevation does that," Wagger says. He's been here before. He grew up taking summer trips to this part of the Sierras.

"Does what?"

"The elevation makes your fingers swell up."

The three of us stand on top of a 400 foot ridgetop looking over Silver Lake. And it truly is silver today, below roiling gray clouds.

"I hope it comes down," Wagger adds. "I mean like it actually pours."

"I want to feel drenched," I say. "I'm getting warmer, from the inside. I want to be completely drenched."

"We all know the lake could use it," Frank says, looking down at the exposed rock and shoreline of Silver Lake. It's down about four more feet than it should be.

"Hey Frank, pass that cigarette over here. I like the red." I don't even smoke but the red tip of the cigarette is beautiful in the cold gray sky.

"Let's throw rocks down this gulch," I say. I pick up a few uneven rocks within reach from where I sit as I pretend to inhale. Then I say gulch a few more times to myself because I like the sound of it off my tongue, especially as smoke slips out while I say it. "Gulch... Gulch... Gulch."

We're sitting on the ledge above a wide face of granite descending at an angle. A gentle tumble of rocks laugh down the stone wash as I lob them one at a time.

"Okay, you go Frank."

Frank tosses a couple big ones, then a small angular one. It sounds like wooden clogs pitter-pattering down a steep concrete ramp. I hear every molecular collision, rock colliding with rock. It's granitic and loud each time a big stone careens down the rock face, but it's not violent. It sounds like a warm brook over my bare feet. Or a hot pee running down my leg, over my bare toes enjoying the gentle coddling of a warm brook.

"No!" I yell.

"What?" Frank asks, genuinely worried.

"I just had to stop myself from peeing my pants. I'll be right back."

"Do you still feel it in your throat?" Wagger asks Frank as I walk away.

"Yeah, I do." Frank says. "Don't worry, though, it goes away."

I watch my urine articulate a gouache stain on the lower side of a boulder then I lay back down on the granite ledge with Wagger and Frank. Wagger has a childish demeanor to him. Ruddy cheeks. Maybe I see the youth in him because I've known him my whole life. Since middle school anyway. Frank is taller than both of us. When he's not talking he has a quiet arrogance among his face. I think it's an East Coast thing.

The three of us hunker like pals under a leaning sarsen. A low awning of stone covers our heads. Storm clouds above the mountains seem to broil across the lake. Wagger passes me the tall bottle of brown beer. I take a big slug. Then a small sip.

"Now that is a good beer," Wagger says. Frank nods a smile of approval.

"I don't know," I say. "It's too dry." As I say it, I can't understand how something wet can leave my mouth so thirsty. I write that down in my Moleskin notebook. I register the static white on the page between parallel black lines, but blue ink crawls out of my pen like it's alive. It moves around the page like it's wet.

"Hey guys, I think I'm seeing shit."

"Me too," Wagger confirms.

"Good!" Frank laughs. "You're supposed to! I've been watching that mountain over there open and close its mouth like a fucking toad for five minutes!"

Frank and Wagger laugh out loud while I try to take comfort in their ability to shrug it off, their willing reception of the unreal. Wagger pulls out the spliff he rolled before we left the cabin.

Tomorrow when I read my notes the page will be static, I tell myself. It will. I close the notebook, pull over the elastic strap that binds it, and stuff it with my blue pen into the inside chest pocket of my big red goosedown jacket. I very slowly and carefully zip up the fleece-lined Gore-Tex shell over my goosedown. It's in the low forties and it's supposed to rain. But right now it looks like the storm might actually pass by without bursting open on us.

I slowly transfer the burning spliff from Frank's fingers to my fingers. I fumble it, nearly drop it down the rock cliff. All dexterity is wayside at this point. I see the spliff in

my hand. I can feel the thin cigarette paper on the padded flesh of the tips of my index finger and thumb, but I can't connect the nerve endings from finger to hand, from wrist to elbow. My elbow doesn't communicate to my bicep or shoulder. My neck is mute to the spine. My brain is deaf. Someone else is grasping the spliff for me yet I can feel in my fingers what their fingers are preciously holding. As I inhale, I watch the entire globe, the whole ashy globular red end of the spliff burn at a crawl and then crumble, join the air and trees and space. Tobacco and marijuana are cremated in between my fingers, in between the brown crescent ends of my fingernails.

"Onward," Frank declares, his body restless after sitting in one place too long.

"Onward!" Wagger agrees.

"Hold on," I tell them. "Let me write something down first."

I unzip my jacket and take out my Moleskin again. I no longer conceptualize time or temperature or hunger, or most any other abiotic factor as I'm accustomed to. Not since the spliff, however long ago that was. And I have a selfish yet soulful urge to write it all down. I want to record the transition, my corporeal transgressions. I want to write down what the lake looks like below us. The lake water being played with by the wind. The sheen of the lake water. The deep cobalt, the silver, the light-black opaqueness. Water moves to the center of the lake from the north and south ends with no regard for the authority of wind or the rightful direction of downstream. I laugh out loud at the tricky lake and my inability to write down anything intelligible. The tricky lake so shiny and brilliant in black and metallic blue. I have no choice but to laugh at Wagger and Frank as they try to pull me away from my scribbling.

A rainbow bursts open over the lake. The storm slowly inches its way across the sky from the opposite direction we expected. From behind us. I watch the cumulus masses unfold, respire and exhale a sprinkling rain and it's magnificent. The rainbow down below is a colorful philanthropist.

"What is color?" I write down in confused lettering: does the raven see the rainbow in it's six variant shades the same as I? The same as Wagger? The same as Frank?

"Let's go, Eli!"

"Come on, Eli. Let's go." Wagger echoes.

"Okay, okay. Okay. I'm almost done."

I completely ignore Frank and Wagger and continue trying to write as they wait impatiently. I get caught up staring at the spider cracks in the craggy, rocky world of my sarsen shelter. I try to recover the word on the tip of my tongue, but I'm very easily distracted by anything. Then I swallow it, the word on the tip of my tongue, or it blows away with the wind when I open my mouth to laugh out loud at the madness of myself trying to write down each and every flash and speck. My outrageous attempt to record every ant leg crawling. Wagger and Frank finally yank me up off the rock and we hike on.

"Off the granite into the pines!" Frank shouts.

"Onward!" agrees Wagger.

We hike through conifers higher and higher into the mountains. Verdant, rocky clearings strewn with ferns and scrub oak. Errant Steller's jays squawk in the trees. All other wildlife has hunkered in somewhere. They all know there's an incoming storm, but I could care less. More cigarettes. More spliffs. Joints. I ask myself how much is not enough? And then ask myself if I can measure a quantity not yet known?

Five hours? By now who knows how long. The three of us hike along merrily in the drizzle up to Granite Lake. Then to the dell and following shallow glen and smaller lake beyond that. The first real rain falls at the third lake we stop to admire. Frank's fingers are blue with cold. It has to be freezing by all rational and climatological thought, but by the thermometers on the ends of my fingers, by the radiating heat from my belly to my blood brain barrier, by and by, I am as warm as a pig at a Hawaiian cook out. It has to be two o'clock, doesn't it?

"We need to head back to the cabin," Frank says with confident clarity.

"Hey, there are holes in my pants," I reply in all seriousness.

"Where?" asks Wagger.

"Those are pockets," Frank says, unamused, blowing hot air into his blue hands.

"This is when the speed of light and the speed of sound slow down to now," I say back. "Why do we need to go anywhere but where we are? Look how beautiful that body of water is. Just look at it!"

Frank's blue fingers get colder with the building rainstorm. The temperature drops quickly but I'm frying. All contextual awareness of myself in relation to the outside world is somewhere at the bottom of the mountain.

"Wagger, let's start to hike back," Frank says. "Eli will follow you. Come on, let's go."

"Okay, let's go."

Frank is adamant about getting back to the cabin because he didn't prepare well enough. He's not wearing enough layers. No gloves. I'm hot blooded and cooking in four layers and long underwear. I recognize his frigid discomfort, his grave blue fingers, and offer him my gloves. We both look up at the thousands of pine needles shivering in the rain. He doesn't say thank you, and doesn't need to.

Wagger revolves in a phantasmagoric batter of fiction and fact. He's merry with a circular mirth. Trees are trees and boulders are big rocks and Frank is right that we should head back to the cabin, he tells me. But the peanut butter and jelly sandwich in Wagger's left hand is an anvil of weight. Each swath of peanut butter in his mouth is a crime against moisture. Peanut butter drought. But the mixed berry jelly, the cold, moist raspberry is childhood on his tongue. He is altogether, utterly and completely consumed by his senses.

He answers Frank again, unaware he responded the first time, "Okay, let's go."

Frank tromps off in his big work boots and Wagger follows him away from the small lake back the way we came. Like an anxious, poorly trained yellow lab I'm torn between roaming freedom and obediently following Frank and Wagger back to the cabin. I pick up a fallen branch and split it into wet splinters against a waist high boulder. Then I pitch a few stone fastballs into a tree trunk. Just before the two of them disappear out of sight I sprint to catch up, hopping on rocks and balancing across fallen trees along the way. My tail wags as we hike in single file along a trail, or not along a trail, back the way we came, or back a completely different way than the way we came. I can't tell, but I have faith in the stern compass inside Frank.

I pause to catch my breath among a stand of aspens, a yellow breast in the larger body of dark green cedar and pines. Each aspen is breathtaking. The white bark, the gold leaves in fluttering display in the rain. I forget I left a lake behind and consider only the gorgeous gold leaves as I keep pace with Wagger, who's in step with Frank and his cold, blue fingers inside my gloves.

Half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich suddenly arcs through the air and I smile at it. Wagger tripped over a triangular jutting rock in the dead leaves and his whole being is now front flipping, his sandwich following the trajectory of whatever distracting thought prevented him from looking down. Wagger lands on his ass and the three of us laugh like schoolboys at recess. We're consumed by a childhood laughter locked up and let out. Belly laughter unearthed from a hidden well in all of us. Whooping when Wagger front flips over the stone, his sandwich a loose meteor. Crying when Frank can't unroll and peel away the wrapper stubbornly sealed around his fruit roll-up. A roaring laughter completely unbridled and childlike, but with a sound much older. A deeper throatiness to it that only comes from growing a beard and Adam's apple. Wagger gets up with leaves in his lap and a puppy smile across his face. His PB&J is lost somewhere in the scruboak bushes.

"I wasn't even hungry!" he screams. I double over still laughing. Frank is cold and his face is terse despite the gloves, but he giggles too.

We continue hiking back to Cabin 37 along Silver Lake. I slip further away with the slippery nature of rain and wetness and the opening of clouds. I want to stop and examine every rocky outcrop. I want to run across every fallen tree and lift every large stone and throw it through the sky for no reason other than to feel my muscles torsion and flex, to hear the crash and thunder of rock and splintering wood. I want to stop and worship the crayon-red rock along the footpath, but Frank is dead set on keeping pace with the devil. He is a marching man and I want to gallop around the forest. I know Wagger wouldn't follow him if it wasn't the right course of action so I follow Wagger, and, consequently, follow Frank and his military march.

Frank accelerates his pace. A wave of motion sickness stops me as I march along in jerky strides. I slow down to the speed of a slowpoke. Frank tells me to catch up once he looks back and notices. I'm a bad soldier. I tell Frank to calm down for a minute, it's not that cold out. I lean over with my hands on my knees and my eyes closed. I breathe deeply to try and quell the nausea. The buoyant blackness inside my eyelids, the lack of a solid, tangible object to focus on, gives me the spins. I immediately open my eyes and lift my hands above my head to open my stomach, elongate my lungs. I interlock my hands behind my head and slowly inhale and exhale my way back to homeostasis.

"You almost ready, Eli?" Frank asks.

"I feel better. Ten more breaths." I count the breaths in my head but quickly lose track. "Okay, I'm ready. Let's go."

Frank hits the trail with intention. I'm more adjusted to the fast pace this time. I sing to myself to help keep up: "Foot, foot, slog, slog, sloggin' over Africa. There's no discharge in the war! There's no discharge in the war!"

Just when I find myself in a marching rhythm, I completely lose focus. It's unavoidable. There's a goldmine directly in front of me. There's only gold. Effulgent, honest gold placed on the patch of earth in front of me by some god, some golden deity. And god damn it it's the brightest, most pure gold anyone has ever set eyes on. I scream some sort of exultation of the color gold. Amber, yellow and gold. Fallen trees in the middle of the forest are split in half. Some cleanly split like logs of firewood, others splintered away like a cannon ball did it. The gold inside the naked trunks of these fallen trees is a hidden secret on beautiful, brilliant display. The tree bark outside is gray and brown and weatherworn. The sky is gray, exuding a dull glare. The goldmine inside each tree shines out for me. For my selfish soul alone. Now more than ever, with the gray rain a cloak encapsulating the brightness, this is my personal goldmine.

Frank yanks me away. After another half hour of marching, maybe 45 minutes, I see it again. On the shore of Silver Lake. The aspens are just as loud and gold as the exposed tree trunks. The multitudes of golden leaves flapping in the wet wind in the crown of each tree and the naked, yellow leaves fallen on the silty, rocky shore. But loud isn't the right word. The aspens and their leaves are silent in their golden grandeur. The rest of the world is loud in responsive golden glee, in joyous riotous applause. I let it out.

"Wagger! Are you seeing this? This gold?"

"The leaves. I see it!" he calls back.

"Fuck, it's 1849, Wagger! It must be 1849!"

"It's 1849!"

Once Wagger and I quiet down I realize my hands are cold like Frank's. We stand in front of Silver Lake and the short-lived mist has thickened into rain again. The temperature has dropped, but we're close. I can see the path to the cabin on the opposite side of the lake. The receding shoreline looks like it's declining into

prehistoria. The slouching waterline exposes long forgotten fossils, or white rocks and sticks that jut out like bones. They look like sharp teeth you see when you pull back the lips of an old grey wolf.

Back in the cabin I strip. I have to. My skin asked politely for me to remove my clothing. I struggle at the ankles with my long underwear, my bare ass on the kitchen floor. Wagger and Frank unfold the tin foil away from the remaining pile of sugar cubes, sugar crumbs. They suck down what's left, letting each grain of sugar scratch against their teeth, heat up and melt down the back of their tongues in a syrup.

I leave them to their extra doses and sprint for the frost in the air and the icy lake back down the hill. My skin demands that it touches every raindrop, each wisp and whip and loud whisper of the wind. Now that we are safe at the cabin I no longer deny my warm body what it wants. I accept it's wolf-like howling. I accept the cold. It's pouring rain as I run down the crude path to the lakeshore. I welcome the imminent icy suffering in a sudden self-declaration of piety. I am no better than any other man or woman. I too must suffer. I dive head first into the lake and it is life-stopping cold. Frozen swords pierce my organs. There is no stopping the screaming as I jump out of the water faster than I dove in. I am in love with the pain, the wave of frostbite pulsing in my veins. Icy mud slides beneath my numb feet and I smile at the brown ribbons oozing out between my toes. My thighs are spotted in mud and muscular like brook trout. I lean back and let the beading rain hail me. It is madness that keeps me out in the cold and it is madness that releases laughter from my cold body. I am naked and shivering on the frozen edge of Silver Lake. I am naked and roaring at seventy-three hundred feet above sea level. I absolutely revel in every ounce of rain and cold on my skin. I settle into it.

I take note of my isolation on the edge of Silver Lake. I notice the silence. The silence of my nudeness in the belly of the Sierras. Woven into the silence is the sound of alpine rain whispering rumors of snowflakes to the trees. I pick up three smooth stones. I throw the smallest stone into the air. It sails upwards through the falling raindrops then pauses at the apex of its flight. It chases the rain back down in a swan dive for Silver Lake. The sound of the stone entering the lake is more precise than any sound I have ever heard. More alive. The stone must have fallen from another planet, accompanied by another set of physical principles. The stone slices through water like an Olympic diver plunging from the moon. A beautiful, blithe, yet lonely plunge. The resulting drop, splash, and plop resounds through the near-freezing air as if amplified from an open-air theater. As if the sound is augmented, mastered, then broadcasted personally to my greedy coveting ears.

Each subsequent stone I lob into the lake is larger and smoother and more miraculous to my ears. The silence afterwards is more beautiful and remarkable than before. The silence of the last stone settled on the bottom of Silver Lake. "Thank you," I say, and turn away from the frigid lake for the cabin.

Frank and Wagger swirl in cigarette smoke and indie electro music while I drip dry by the furnace. Frank brought a little sound system from the city.

"How was it?" asks Wagger.

"Stop looking at my ass," I immediately respond with a smirk.

"Shut up. How was it?"

"It was fucking cold. I was throwing stones into the water. I've never felt so good." I hesitate, unable to think of an adequate description of the sounds I heard. "It was like only three things existed: the rock, the lake, and my ears. I've never heard anything real until now."

Frank juts in, "You're fucking naked in the middle of the cabin, Eli. Put some clothes on." I laugh hysterically and so does Wagger as I try to better cover up my lower assets with cupped hands. I walk across the cabin and read the thermostat.

"It's too hot to put on clothes."

I compromise with Frank and put on my long underwear, but nothing else.

Just as I pull up the long underwear, I see the first snow fall over the lake outside the window. And just like that, white blankets. The snow falls in legions.

"Good thing Admiral Frank led us back to the cabin with such discipline," I say as I give Frank a friendly two-finger salute. Frank returns the gesture with a mocking middle finger.

"Oh my god, this is nuts," Wagger says as he marvels at the snowstorm swirling over Silver Lake. We all have our noses pressed against the window. "This is fucking nuts! I've never been up here for snow before. It's like watching the Discovery Channel in HD."

"I fucking told you guys," Frank says. "Aren't you glad we came back?"

"I'd still be out there building sand castles out of snow," I admit.

Snow continues to descend in thick, white curtains outside the cabin window. Now that I'm warm and comfortable in the cabin I can't fathom being so tortuously cold again. The snow is marvelous to admire from a distance, but the gas heater is our sun now. It's now seventy-two degrees and my skin is completely dry.

After enough snow gazing, I open my backpack and pull out *A Choice of Whitman's Verse*. At first I thumb through the pages in silence, letting the first line of each poem play like poetic soundbytes in my head. The rhythm rolls over my tongue like edamame beans. Perhaps my nude exposure to the elements and frigid purge in the lake increased the blood flow to my brain because the poetry envelops me with a renewed sense of concentration that was impossible earlier. I might have been illiterate on top of the ridge, but now I am Walt Whitman.

I read out loud to the cabin, to Wagger and Frank. I lower my voice and slow my drawl as if it's the late 1800s and I have a thick white beard:

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

*And what I assume you shall assume,
 For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
 I loafe and invite my soul,
 I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.
 My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
 Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
 I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
 Hoping to cease not till death."*

"Dude, that was pretty good," Wagger says. "Read some more."

"I lost myself there," I say and fan through the book until I find another poem. "All right, here goes another one:

*Stranger, if you passing meet me
 and desire to speak to me,
 why should you not speak to me?
 And why should I not speak to you?"*

There's a brief moment of silence when Wagger and Frank expect the poem to continue. Then Wagger bellows out, "Stranger!"

"Stranger!" I scream right back at him, the book of poems closed shut on the table. "If you passing meet me!"

"And desire to speak with me!"

"Why should you not speak to me?"

"Stranger!"

"Stranger," Frank chimes in.

"Why should I not speak to you?"

"Not speak to me?"

"Stranger!"

"You guys are ridiculous," Frank laughs.

I pick up the book of poems again with rhythmic blood coursing through me. "Okay, okay. I found another one."

"Go ahead," Wagger responds.

"Ahem." I clear my throat. "Frank, shut up. Here it goes:

*I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,
 All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the branches,
 Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green,
 And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself,
 But I wonder'd how it could utter joyous leaves standing alone
 there without its friend near, for I knew I could not,
 And I broke off a twig with a certain number of leaves upon it,
 and twined around it a little moss,*

*And brought it away, and I have placed it in sight in my room,
It is not needed to remind me as of my own dear friends,
(For I believe lately I think of little else than of them,)
Yet it remains to me a curious token, it makes me think of manly love;
For all that, and though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana solitary in a wide flat
space,
Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend or a lover near,
I know very well I could not."*

"It makes me think of manly love," Frank gabs like a mocking parrot. "Was Whitman gay?"

"I think he actually was," I reply. "I was a Louisiana oak out by the lake earlier. Standing alone in my manly love." I laugh at Frank.

"That's enough with the poetry," Frank says and turns up the music again. As thoroughly as I lost myself in Whitman's verse, I lose myself in the music. I have no idea what song it is but I'm enjoying the drum beat and electronic synthesizer. We listen to a few songs and then somewhere in the noise an intelligent bolt of foresight.

"What if it snows all night," Frank proposes.

"I guess it could," Wagger says.

"I don't think your Civic will stand a chance in the morning if it keeps up."

"Fuck."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"We'd be stuck here," Frank replies matter-of-factly. "Wagger's Civic wouldn't have a chance. The dirt road is pretty shitty as it is. Covered in ice, there's no way we would get out of here."

"What do we do?" I ask.

"We move the car down to the lake now, where the road is paved," Frank says. "I think we'd be fine to get it out in the morning."

"Yeah, that's a good point," Wagger says.

"But what if it stops snowing?" I ask.

"It will still be easier to leave in the morning, even it stops. What do you think, Wagger?"

"Let's do it. Let's move it now," Wagger responds.

"Okay, but I can't drive and I know Walt Whitman over here isn't getting behind the wheel."

"It's my car. I can do it," Wagger assures us.

The three of us put our layers and jackets back on and head out. Frank and I clear the car windows of snow as Wagger gets in the driver seat and starts the engine. The dirt road is slushy and muddy and Wagger's Civic doesn't have four-wheel drive.

"At least the snow is coming down a lot lighter now," I say.

"At least I'm not driving," Frank says back as he assesses the messy road.

The car ignites and gives off a dead heat like dying embers in a brick fireplace. Wagger puts the car in reverse and begins backing out before Frank and I have a chance to remove all the ice from the rear window.

Somehow Wagger navigates the icy slush and slick using only his side rear-view mirrors. The radio blares mariachi music and Wagger doesn't have the wherewithal to drive in reverse and turn it down at the same time. His hands are pasted to the steering wheel. His knuckles slowly lose color to his tightening grip.

He turns the car around in the first little shoulder. He drives from the dregs of the crude, muddy driveway along the winding goatpath of a road to the better stretch up ahead. A pine tree nearly jumps out to teach him a lesson, but Wagger slips past like a dart. Frank and I follow behind on foot like disciples. We should have got in the car with Wagger but now it's too late. Wagger continues around the neighboring cabins and woods. There's a roller coaster of a dip in the road ahead. Frank and I point at it but we're too far back now to yell. Especially with Mexican trumpets and hurried guitar riffs screaming in his ears.

Like a madman, Wagger accelerates down the snow-hardened dirt grade. The Civic fish tails. His back left tire, no chains on it, nearly slides off the road. Frank and I pick up our pace into a fast walk. The road is too dodgy for us to move much faster in worn out tennis shoes.

In the trough of the road's sine curve we lose sight of Wagger. We try to jog to catch up but it's too damn slippery. Then, like a thunderclap, we hear the chassis of his Civic crack against the frozen arm of an exposed tree root. I stop dead. A dumb deer. Frank slips on a frozen-over pothole. I hold my breath in the cold air. When I finally exhale the Civic miraculously breaches the next camel hump in the road. There's no visible damage. Frank points to the left and takes off through the pine trees. I follow. As the Civic chugs along out of sight we cut through the rough, across a nearby cabin's sideyard, through more trees and then out onto the bend of road bordering the lake, where the dirt path becomes a one-lane paved road. This is where Wagger will end up once he gets off the dirt. This is where we agreed earlier to park the car.

Frank and I wait impatiently. Wagger should have rolled up by now, but we're only mildly worried. It's difficult for Frank and I to get anxious or frantic while we wait next to the peaceful lake. The snow delicately feathers its way onto the mirror-paned surface. There isn't a creaking branch or owl hoot. Just snow silently descending on Silver Lake, soundlessly see-sawing into the palms of my fingerless gloves.

"He only had one more curve before he reached the paved part," Frank says pragmatically. "Then only a short straightaway before getting here."

"I don't know. Should we go check on him?" I ask.

"I guess we could look around the bend."

Just as we start up, I hear the faint, high-pitched singing of a horn. Not a car horn but a brass horn. Frank keeps walking but I swivel around. Before I see Wagger's Civic I hear the mariachi music booming. "Frank," I say. He turns around. A lone trumpet slowly croons like the arrival of a Oaxacan donkey crossing a desert. I chuckle as Wagger's front bumper comes into view, the driver side window down. The fast paced strumming of a twelve-string guitar serenades the snowy scene. As he drives closer the lower tones of a guitarrón lays down a perfect baseline. The trumpets don't stop.

Wagger sticks his red cheeks out of the car window and lets loose a high-pitched Mexican, "Aye ay ay ay!"

Frank and I help him park. He grinds up the emergency brake. When Wagger gets out of the car he is invincible. We're all unstoppable. No snowstorm clouds or any mass of snowflakes will outsmart us. "Aye ay ay ay!" we all scream. We head back to the cabin like victorious matadors.

Back in the cabin, we each crack open a Coors Original from the fridge and relax on the couch by the gas heater. Like a full moon rising, a great big spider climbs up the wall behind the furnace. I saw two of its kind in the kitchen sink before I jumped in the lake. I couldn't tell if they were grass spiders or wolf spiders, but I was in no mood for close identification of arachnids. This big one crawling patiently up the wall near the gas furnace looks more like a wolf spider than a grass spider. It has thicker legs, more menacing fangs. Wagger sneaks over from behind me and captures all eight legs, two body segments, and mess of fur and fangs in an empty glass cup. The spider's furry existence changes states as quickly as a shooting star ignites and fizzles out. The spider looks spiteful at the bottom of the glass. I rush to look in the kitchen sink. Sure enough, the other spiders are still there, listless and unaware.

"There's two in the sink, Wagger, throw him in," I say.

"Cock fight!" Wagger screams without hesitation, adrenaline still coursing through his veins after outsmarting the snowstorm in his Civic.

"Toss him in!" I egg on.

Wagger pours the fuming wolf spider into the sink like the dregs of an old cocktail. The spider tucks in and coils up for impact, the other two spiders oblivious in the bottom of the sink to the puppet strings tightening above them. The tough wolf spider lands in the white sink and puffs out its chest. Pissed off. Without taking a breath it sprints in a circle around the sink like a bull with hot, vengeful bullhorns. It takes out the first unsuspecting spider. The poor thing gets jackknifed and folds in half. The second one is bigger though, a catcher's mitt to the first one's bare hand. And it's prepared. The wolf spider and the bigger one summersault in a hairy sixteen-legged vice. Audible screams emanate from the sink. If these two spiders were men they'd be the burliest men in the bar, elbows hard on the table, right hands locked in competitive grip, arm wrestling for eight hours straight, accepting free shots of whisky from awestruck

onlookers. The two spiders finally separate, apparently in a stalemate. They agree to spend the rest of their days in opposite corners of the sink.

"Frank, you missed the battle royale," I tell him.

"Huh?"

"We just hosted a spider cock fight. You missed it."

"Damn. Who won?"

"No one really, but the small one lost."

"No, I mean between you and Wagger. Who won the money?"

"We didn't bet."

"I thought you said it was a cock fight."

"I did."

"It's not a cock fight if you don't wager a week's pay or at least a pack of cigarettes."

"I guess it wasn't a cock fight then."

Frank changes the subject. "Here's one for you: what's the ratio of beers left in the fridge to hours that we're still here?"

"Depends what time we leave, I guess," I reply, not too concerned.

Daft Punk thuds from the iron cooking pot on the coffee table. Frank put his Android in the pot a little bit ago. His speaker batteries died while we were moving the car.

"I think it's a deficit no matter how you spin it," Frank says as he opens the fridge. "I'm looking right now and there's only five beers left."

"How those spiders holding up over there?" Wagger asks, purposefully changing the subject.

"Hey guys, I want to play a song for you," I say, avoiding Wagger's question.

I turn off Frank's Android and navigate the screen on my iPhone. I tap Three Dog Night.

"Okay, now imagine I'm stepping up to the batter's box at AT&T Park, on deck after Sandoval. He hits a double and now it's my turn to bat." I pretend to unstrap and re-strap a batting glove on each hand then continue, "Stepping up after Pablo and this is the song blasting in the stadium over the loud speakers. This is my song. Get ready."

I tap play and a sultry, smoky, 1969 a capella intro slowly undresses: *Eliiii's Cooooming*. It picks up wind with the lash of an electric guitar and ten full fingers coming down hard on a keyboard. *Elii's coming*. More keyboard. A falsetto back up singer chimes in. *Eliiiii's comiiiiing*. *Eliiiii's commmiiiiing*. It speeds up. *Eli's coming and the cards say*. The tempo quickens again and the whole band bangs in: *Eli's coming, hide your heart girl. Eli's coming, hide your heart girl*. I cock back in a batter's stance inside an invisible batter's box and swing an invisible slugger. I hit an imaginary homerun.

"Wait a second," Wagger says, thoroughly awestruck, raising his voice over the rock 'n' roll jam in full fledge. "You have your own theme song? You gotta be kidding me."

"How do you not use that on every girl?" Frank asks.

"That's just unfair," adds Wagger. "I want a fucking theme song."

"I never thought about it before," I say with a crooked grin. "Maybe I'll use it next time."

"You're a joke," Frank says.

"I guess I never really needed it," I say back with a bigger grin.

"This is actually a good song," Wagger says, leaning back on the couch.

"I know, that's why I like it," I say innocently.

"Fuck you. I like it too," Frank says. "You're a joke."

Bored of discussing my new theme song, I change it to *Grandma's Hands* by mister melted butter himself, Bill Withers. Frank and Wagger haven't heard this classic either, but I don't give an introduction this time. I let Bill steal the show all by himself, with the help of slow, persistent hi hat cymbals. A quiet electric guitar riff murmurs in the background. Withers starts off humming: *Mmmm. Hmmm. Mmmmm. Grandma's hands clapped in church on Sunday morning. Grandma's hands played a tambourine so well. Withers's voice is thick liquid butter. Grandma's hands used to issue out a warning. She'd say, "Billy don't you run so fast. Might fall on a piece of glass. Might be snaked there in that grass." Grandmaaaa's Haaands...*

I get up and dance a little something. I try to sing along: *Grandma's hands used to hand me piece of candy. Grandma's hands picked me up each time I fell. Grandma's hands, boy, they really came in handy. She'd say, "Mattie, don't you whip that boy. What you want to spank him for? He didn't drop no apple core." But I don't have grandma anymore. If I get to heaven I'll look for... grandma's hands. Grandma's hands. Mmmm. Hmmm.*

Before the song ends, Wagger says, "I mean, that one's good too, but I like Eli's Coming more."

"More than Bill Withers?" I ask.

"Yeah."

After countless cigarettes and a few more spliffs, the snow slows to a flicker. I layer up in Carhartt pants over my long underwear, a thick wool button shirt over my t-shirt and thermal, my goosedown over that. I seal in the heat like greenhouse gases with a fleece-lined Gore-Tex, a beanie, and fingerless gloves. Frank and Wagger layer up too, but not as thick.

Frank starts a bonfire in front of the cabin and then disappears in the kitchen while Wagger and I pass a bottle of Basil Hayden in a two-person circle. The fire quickly becomes an oven hungry for fuel. We throw on more wood. The sodden branches are stubborn with sizzle at first but ultimately succumb to the greedy flames. There's about half the bottle of bourbon left.

"Pass that over here," Frank says as he steps back outside through the screen door. I slide in some fresh snow with the bourbon before handing it off to Frank and head back inside to grab the cashews. My hunger is slowly returning.

"That's pretty good," Frank says as he sips from the Basil Hayden. He reaches down and scoops up a little more fresh snow and funnels it into the bourbon bottle between his fingers. "Want some, Wagger?"

"Give her here, partner," Wagger says, taking the bottle from Frank, the fire throwing funny shadows on his face as he lifts the bottle to his lips.

"There's five of them now!" I yell from inside the cabin.

"What?" Wagger and Frank say at the same time.

"Fangs and whiskers and dirty she-spiders! Come in here!"

Wagger runs inside. Frank's slow to follow. "Holy shit, there's five of 'em! Frank, look at this!"

"There were only three in the sink after the cock fight," I tell Wagger with conviction. "They're living down the drain, in the plumbing. They have to be."

"Let's just let 'em be," Wagger says.

"What? You want them crawling on our faces all night?"

"Let 'em be," he repeats. "When we leave tomorrow I'm locking this place up for the winter. It's their sink now."

"It's their sink now," Frank echoes sarcastically.

"Yeah, but what about tonight when we're asleep?" I insist.

"We'll be asleep. Look, if you want to you can kill the plotting spiders. I'm going back to the fire."

"Fire in the hole!" Frank screams. He's been boiling penne pasta the last fifteen minutes and cooking sausages in a frying pan. We all got pretty hungry all the sudden after realizing we haven't had much more than peanut butter and jelly since breakfast. "The pasta's ready, boys! Someone grab a strainer."

I reach below the sink and pull out a metal strainer and hand it to Frank. He places it at the bottom of the sink without blinking and pours the scalding water and steaming pasta into it. Boiling water floods the sink. The Noah's ark of a strainer survives the scorching deluge, but the five spiders wash away in a boiling tidal wave. There's no remorse or dirge. Frank mixes the pasta with two distracting jars of Paul Newman's marinara sauce and adds the sausage in chunks.

Before Frank even sets the pot out on the table Wagger and I dive in like seagulls with forks. I said from the beginning, damn those spiders, but now Wagger says the same. He says the damned spiders can go to hell and thank the gods of plentiful, delicious pasta marinara with juicy Italian sausage. "Thank you, Paul Newman!" he yells.

"There's one beer left," I say as I close the fridge, half disappointed, half impressed we finished off the twenty-four pack.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, man, I'm sure."

"Well," Wagger adds with a tone of resignation, "I guess we have to split it."

"There's still half a bottle of Basil Hayden," I remind them, trying to raise their spirits. I find three small glasses in the cupboard and pour out three drams of Coors Original.

"Watch the foam, Eli."

"Ssshhh."

I hand one small glass of beer to Wagger and one small glass to Frank. I make deliberate eye contact with each of them, as if to say with my eyes, it's an honor to share the last beer on earth with you.

"I propose a toast," I say.

"A toast," Wagger encourages with a toothy grin.

"I propose a toast to today and to you two." I gesture presidentially with my little beer glass. "I propose a toast to you, Frank, for leading us back here like some sort of drill sergeant prophesy. I'd still be out there searching for goddamn snow leopards if you weren't such a dick about it. Thanks, Frankie." Frank gives one of his laconic smirks of agreement. "And to you, Wagger, a toast for providing us with this amazing fucking cabin. I'm going to sleep like a dog with that furnace purring next to me. Thanks for having us." I pause a moment and contemplate the perceived absence of gravity inside my beer glass. "Welp, I guess that's all I got. Cheers, assholes."

"Cheers!" Wagger rings out. Clanging glasses with Frank.

"Cheers," I say and clink cups with Frank, clink with Wagger.

"Wait! Wait!" Wagger blurts out in a hurry, catching us just before we slam down our four ounces of banquet beer. He says, "I want to add something."

"All right," I say gladly.

"What you got, Wagger?" Frank asks.

Wagger hesitates. He looks down at the table like he's trying to remember a padlock combination. Then he looks up again and shouts from the bottom of his belly, "Stranger!"

"Stranger!" I ricochet back at him. "If you passing meet..." I stop short on purpose and look intently at Frank pointing at my chest, pointing at myself. I repeat again, "Stranger! If you passing meet..."

"Me!" Frank shouts, catching on.

"And desire to speak with..."

"Me!" Frank shouts again, more gut this time.

"Why should you not speak to..."

"Me!" Frank shouts a third time.

"Stranger!" Wagger bellows.

"Stranger!"

"Stranger!"

"Why should I not speak to you?" I ask wildly, with a look reminiscent of the Mad Hatter on my face.

"Not speak to who?" Frank asks loudly.

"Not speak to me?"

"Stranger!"

"Stranger!"

"Stranger!"

We're too preoccupied to notice the snow stop falling outside. We're damn drunk chanting stranger below a yellow moon we can't see. We go on like that for the rest of the night or for just a few minutes. We finish the bourbon and smoke the last cigarette.