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SWINGING

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Marriage is the great step beyond friendship, and family, and nationality, but it does not supersede these. Marriage should only give repose and perfection to the great previous bonds and relationships. A wife or husband who sets about to annul the old, pre-marriage affections and connections ruins the foundations of marriage.--D.H. Lawrence

Prologue

I liked this story's first sentence when I tried to write it the first time—"It was October, the season of dying." And it was their anniversary. Ours, too, I guess. I've retained the first sentence because I think it breathes an inaugural blast of autumn air into the narrative's whisper-and-groan invocation, its forward-facing surge of truly aching for the past. And it's as true as I can get to true.

From there on, however . . .

I'm trying to say that something's gone wrong, and I've been trying to fix it. I feel there's something in this story that needs to be saved. To give up on the story is to indulge in the darkest, most seductive hypocrisy. Write the story. Be the story, I say. It's very Zen.

So here's what I did.

First thing: names.

Her name was Stef, not Jennifer.

Never Jennifer. A big uh-uh on the Jennifer, nix on the Jennifer. No way was she a Jennifer. So since you weren't able to see the first draft of this paper dreamscape before I changed it, I must clue you in on this midstream interlarding of names. In the story that follows, you'll read the girl's name as "Stef," but know you would've read "Jennifer" had I not succumbed to this momentary lapse into a hankering after truth in the process of toggling together this transparent chameleon-skinned daydream I'm calling the story that follows.

This is the problem: I've been faking it. That's why this writing has rung so hollow—so infantile, so "not mine"—for so long.

But not anymore.

Jennifer?

No.

She was one hundred percent Stef.

Well, Stefanie. But she told me I could call her Stef. She had blond hair, short-cropped. Tomboyish, absolutely alluring. I bumped into her at a campus dance hosted by some local church organizations affiliated with the College of Southern Idaho. So, yeah, the setting: Twin Falls, Idaho. On the south rim of the Snake River Canyon. Gun racks and Fords, Wranglers and bolo ties. The whole crap-kickin' corral, amigo. Circa 1988. It was a Friday, late, and I was hanging around outside with three friends. We were freshman, single and all talk. Four of us, counting me: Darren Veenstra, Terp Whitaken, and Toby Bergham. They were all from Gooding, but I hailed from the metropolis of Jerome, home to a Keebler cookie warehouse, several thousand stinking dairy cattle, and one of only two Tupperware plants in the country. Veenstra had driven us to the dance at the assembly hall of Our Lady of Mercy, across from the CSI campus. Veenstra had driven because he'd had a car, a pickup actually. *Had* being entirely different from *owned*. And for some reason, the fact that I didn't own a car (it was only this last year that I was able to drive my wife around town in a car I could say I really owned—but even that's a lie; it took us both to pay it off) seems significant now because when I met Stef at this dance, the first thing I wanted to do was drive, drive, drive. Drive away. Drive away from the dance, from the canyon's rim, away from my three loser campadres over a single airy span of love and first impressions. Drive away and find our own unpopulated corner of the universe where we could tell our secrets to each other. Tell them, loudly. To each other and to the stars.

I remember the music: some old Eagles and John Cougar.

Whitaken, Bergham, Veenstra, and I were loitering around in the half-crowded lobby of Our Lady of Mercy, shooting the breeze, not really *in* the dance, when she strode on rubber heels out of the darkened assembly hall, smiled at me, and grabbed my hand.

And I remember thinking—vaguely, not in any articulate kind of way—that the combined energy it takes to create a universe is charged in the moment that a stranger grabs your hand.

Stef led me awkwardly to the center of the dance floor. Colored, electric pinholes of light orbited the gym inside of Our Lady of Mercy.

"I'm Stefanie," she said, circling her arms around my neck, smiling.

"Niles," I said, returning the half embrace. "You always take your dance partners out of the lobby?"

"Not always," she said, laughing. "Just tonight."

"Good deal," I said. "Glad tonight happened while I was in it."

We circled under the circling lights—red, blue, maroon. Moon, stars, disco ball, strobe light. Slow, deliberate silhouettes swam and coupled on the dark walls inside Our Lady of Mercy, expanded to freakish circus shapes, and then shrank to stick figures that shamefully disengaged and retreated on stiff legs into lonely dejection across the faux chestnut paneling and open windows of frosted glass. Near the rec hall's stage, a long folding table supported a dusty, archaic smorgasbord of stereo equipment. I saw the usual: punchbowl, cheeseballs, crackers, dainty powdered donuts, chairs, and rows of people standing around,

heads bent earthward to scrutinize their multiple predictable histories in the clairvoyant glare of the gym floor's candy wax gloss. Somehow, I wasn't a part of it. As Stef and I circled, I glanced out at Veenstra, Bergham, and Whitaken. They stared back. Later, it was the thing they talked about the most: She'd walked *out* of the dance to get me.

We circled. The lights spun out broken constellations and wayward meteors on the ceiling, weaving and electrifying a ragged-edged universe inhabited by the population of the two of us, for just that pocket of time. Ephemeral, red, blue, blaze and shimmer. I didn't know anyone at Our Lady of Mercy; I barely knew Veenstra, Whitaken, and Bergham—I haven't seen them since. I barely knew the amazing statuette of the supposed virgin in my arms, barely knew myself. But because this strange girl named Stef had taken my hand, in the middle of all that was anonymity and ignorance, I'd stumbled on a vibrant, humming state of oneness. Without leaving the room, I'd stepped to the edge of an airy desert canyon spanned by a sky crammed with stars, summoned to a moment so illuminating I felt I'd either turn to stone on the spot or start to erupt in a volley of prayer to the stone goddess in the circled fire of my arms. I felt like praying and being prayed to in the same instant.

Stef had short blond hair, and she was no taller than five foot something. She had this great smile and straight white teeth, like a model from a toothpaste ad. Her skin was light tan. She had slate blue eyes that wavered in and out of silver under the trick of the lights, and she wore her hair moussed up into a tight nest of soft spikes, all wrapped up in a white headband knotted on top. Black skirt, dimpled right cheek, white socks rolled down like some anachronistic bobbysoxer. A black suede vest with fringes. She sported a casual string of black beads, like an afterthought, around her throat.

"Call me," she said, releasing my hand at the end of the song.

I reached out for her hand, pulled it back.

"What should I call you?" I said, outrun already by my own maverick wit.

"Anything—Stefanie. But you can call me Stef. Everybody does. My friends do."

"So I'm your friend?"

"Sure, only if you call me."

"You—are a trip. You know it, right? Take me away from those three jokers, just for one dance? *You're* our lady of mercy."

She smiled and laughed.

Back in Vestal's Ford pickup, the talk went shallow.

"See her *body*?" Whitaken kept saying, rolling a JB's Restaurant toothpick along his bottom lip with his tongue. The toothpick end was festooned in cheap yellow plastic, the same stained color of Whitaken's teeth. Whitaken's breath reeked of Wendy's chili. The lights along Blue Lakes Boulevard cast a harsh artificial glow of dust and moths against the deep evening sky, like dance lights without limits.

"Seriously," Whitaken kept whining. "Her *body*! You see it?"

"Niles," Veenstra said, turning left at Mr. Gas. "Thing you gotta remember is, there's four of us, one of her. That, uh, ain't the right odds, I don't think."

“I love the odds,” I said.

“Odds,” Bergham said. “Not right. Ratio’s off.”

“Whoa!” Whitaken rocked back, as we rumbled past the Blue Lakes Mall and headed for the bridge. Strands of hay flew from the bed of Veenstra’s pickup, vanishing into the black night behind us. In a movement both cocksure and flabbergasted, Whitaken knocked his John Deere cap back on his head. He flicked the toothpick, thoughtfully, up and down between his lips. In the glare of the oncoming headlights, his shaved head glistened. One dusty boot clomped up on the dash. His eyes glowed as yellow and lonely as the moon.

“You believe that *body*?” he said.

Eventually, I called Stef, asked her out, and got the story. We were driving in my mother’s Volkswagen Rabbit convertible down Blue Lakes Boulevard that summer. We cradled some drive-in food—Arby’s, I think—in our laps, and we were heading out toward the CSI baseball fields to eat and talk.

“I have a son,” she said, smiling over at me, her short blond hair buffeted back by the wind. “Nicholas. He’s eighteen months, and he’s beautiful.”

“Great,” I said.

“My boyfriend—well, husband—we’re separated. Richie, he’s in California. Cupertino. He’s trying to get his band going. But we’re separated. Separated for good.”

“Great,” I said, oblivious. “This okay?”

“Yeah,” Stef said. “Fine.”

We pulled into the CSI baseball parking area, sat on the picnic benches under the limitless July sky, ate, and watched the team practice.

“I *love* curly fries,” Stef kept saying.

That summer I was working the drive-in window at the Dairy Queen on Lincoln Avenue in Jerome. I remember driving my mother downtown on Main Street, waiting to turn left at Rose’s Photography Studio, when the story slipped out.

“A married woman?” my mother said, turning rigid, then crimson.

“Separated,” I said, annoyed. “Listen, Mom. I can handle this. We’re not dating.”

“You’re calling her—”

“Yeah, but she’s got a kid. She’s by herself, lives at home—”

“Well, when you call someone you’re dating them. A married woman!”

But somehow, *married woman* just didn’t fit Stef, not in my mind. Wonder, miracle, real maybe. But not *married woman*. As I sat there stewing in my mother’s convertible, I watched the traffic light changed to green, Then, I turned left and drove slowly down Lincoln past Gano & Dehlin Insurance, the Sinclair station. We were heading south toward the Dairy Queen, but I had no idea where I was really going. And for the most part, I’ve lost what the rest of the conversation entailed. We passed Washington Elementary, the old Tupperware

plant, out eight miles to the country club, and then floated like Evel Knievel from canyon rim to rim for all I can remember. Plummeting too, perhaps.

“We’re not dating,” I said. “She’s separated.”

“Separated is still married,” my mom said, pointing to the Food King parking lot. “Take a left here. I need some film.”

One last episode, *the* last episode: Last time I saw Stef, I was working the drive-in window. That day, someone came through, ordered a chicken sandwich, fries, and Coke, and pulled up to the window.

“Two dollars, seventy-three cents,” I said, reaching out of the window.

“Hey!” she said, smiling.

“Hey!” I said, brightening. “It’s you. I didn’t know it was you.”

“Yeah, well, you couldn’t have. Intercom’s don’t show your face.”

“Too bad in your case,” I said. “Yeah, so, what are you doing here? You know, this is the north. Not your side of the canyon. People might see you, get the wrong impression. That cool reputation, you know.”

“Yeah, well—”

“I’ll keep it down, though. Won’t let it out.”

“You know, anytime I do anything cool, it’s always on accident.”

“You’re lucky. I never do anything cool at all—just accidents.”

“You have nice teeth,” she said, laughing.

That’s the thing I still remember. It’s one of the things that’s the merciful prologue to some of my worst mornings, now that life’s gone on, now that my wife and I own a car and now that life’s wonderful and difficult all at once because we’ve got children and responsibility. I have a bad day, and I think: I have nice teeth. Our daughter gets the croup, and I think: I have nice teeth. It snows for a week, and I think: I have nice teeth. My wife thinks I should stop grinning at myself in the mirror so much. But hey, what do you do when you have nice teeth? Stef—not Jennifer—said it to my face once. So it’s got to be true.

“Yeah,” Stef said, looking up at me through the drive-in window. “You’ve got great teeth.”

“Thanks,” I said. “So do you. Aaaand, ah, everything else as well, I believe. Yeah, sure, everything else.”

“Hey,” I said, as she prepared to drive off. “I didn’t know where you’d, uh, disappeared to. I’ll see you around, right?”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “For sure.”

And I can’t get it down in words. I can’t accurately describe how Stef looked up at me, really meaning what she said. But I have to tell you that right there—in my maroon Dairy Queen T-shirt, hanging out the drive-in window, all sunlight and hopefulness—I believed she would see me again. I believed we would drive out

toward the canyon rim someday soon, our hair tossed by the summer wind, the highway open and free, and our stories, like tumbling trash across the highway, tossed freely back and forth to each other. So, I'd ask: Can you have the story without the prologue? Can you have the two canyon rims without the impossible but necessary gap between? And now that I own a car (it's my wife's too, yes, I know), now that we own our love and borrow from each other every day, shelling out little bits to our children, sharing, borrowing back, taking and giving, counting spare change and bits of things we forgot we had tucked away in our pockets, the linty corners of our hearts—now that all that's happened, can I really say that my story, our story, exists without its prologue? I'm tempted to say no. No, I *am* saying no. I'm hesitant only because I'm not sure that it's "right" thing to do. But is the "right" thing always the "true" thing? For instance, right now, I'm thinking I shouldn't write this story. That's what the prologue in my head says. The voice of the story insists with a kind of riotous clamor that Stef, my nice teeth, and the love revealed inside Our Lady of Mercy during that late July in 1988 should be severed from the story of my life now, now that I'm a car owner, now that I'm really in love, and now that my mother is still calling me, telling me what married women need, like, want, dream about, despise. If we were honest with ourselves, we'd say we don't really know where the prologue and the story come together. We'd admit we don't understand that windy canyon, that sometimes dangerous fault line and precipice. So, you see what I'm saying? Prologue: Stef. Story: my life, wife, children, car, and mother. I guess it all comes down to this: Could I have the story of my love and wife without the prologue of Stef, the saintly and devilish "married woman"? And when we get to the main story—after the kissing, the handholding, the blind confessionals and feigned innocence, the surrender and sacrifice of hearts—why do we think we can go back and snip the prologue out of our lives, forever, like some discarded receipt?

Okay, so no more pretense. See, I see now I was afraid that if I wrote this story the way it was intended to be written, my wife and mother would think I was a swinger of sorts. I suppose I'm writing this largely to testify that what I felt at that time wasn't evil. And I don't think what Stef felt was evil either. Story, prologue—it's all the same. You can't cut up the story, parcel it out into little sections like a game of solitaire on a coffee table. At the juncture between prologue and story, where love vanishes and flourishes, where the cliff jumpers dwell, where hands find each other in the dark and fantastic bouquets of colored light and dance music bloom in the small universe between the bodies of dance partners, strangers change their bodies for light. It's a marriage in a way, like marriage is—leaving almost everything behind for the sake of what lies ahead. Because, well, what if we do forget? What if we make the mistake of editing too much from the story's heart, of revising out what we know we felt, what we know we should let influence our present and future loves, regardless of the risks?

Story

It was October, the season of dying. And it was their anniversary.

It was also a Friday night.

The lumbering Oldsmobile—the car Stef referred to as "the boat"—ground to a stop at the gravel parking turnout. "The boat" wore a battered armor of venomous orange side paneling and chrome piping. It was a two-ton hunk of junk. Gutted by rust, unvacuumed. The turnout overlooked the canyon, where the rutted tarmac broke off into battered sagebrush. Stef snapped off the ignition and heaved open the driver's side door. She slammed the damaged door, which threatened to drop from its hinges, and then jumped over the dented guardrail and scrambled toward the dark canyon edge. The headlights remained on. The car's weak beams cast two hazy bridges of dwindled light into the black void. Beyond the guardrail, she ran a zigzag pattern through the light beams, paralleling them and then intersecting them, like a rock star loping drunkenly toward the edge of the stage. At the edge, she skidded and stopped. Looking across from south to

north rim, she listened—the crickets, the falls, the dull silvery drone of the river flowing west underneath the damaged spotlight of the October moon, the shattered glow and hushed current five hundred feet below. She breathed deeply through her nostrils. She exhaled, slowly. It was her place. His, too, she realized, shrugging her shoulders. It was their place. It would always be their place, no matter what had happened or would happen. It was their cliff—the place she referred to as “The Pulpit.” Their tree—the ancient tangled willow overhanging the half-mile wide expanse of rocky canyon rim, the one she’d named “The Preacher.” “The Pulpit” for her stepdad, Warren. “The Preacher” for her mother, who’d never been able to come to terms with her life. Over a year ago, when she’d first come here—with him—she’d named the tree and cliff. They’d named them together.

Instinctively, she lowered herself to a sitting position.

She crossed and uncrossed her legs.

The cliff’s brown stone warmed her skin. All around her, the stone was marked with the scrawled green and mustard signatures of lichens and flimsy weeds. She wore favorite black denim skirt, white socks, black leather shoes, and her black tank top. She also wore her denim jacket, cut short up above her waist—the one he’d given her. She’d worn it last October. That night, they’d driven in his Ford Pinto out to “The Pulpit” and “The Preacher” after a gig. She sat on the warm stone, thinking, remembering, looking around. It’d been a long time since she’d seen him. But it was their anniversary nonetheless, and so she felt glad she’d decided to come back, even though everything inside her—her own internal voice of self-mockery—had tried to force her to stay home, had tried to make her forget everything, forget him, forget what he’d said, what they’d done together. *No, she’d eventually prodded herself. No, it’s our anniversary.* So even though it was October, the season of dying yellow leaves and crusty lichens and living rock, and even though it was getting colder, she’d come to celebrate. Even if she’d come as a celebration of one.

She thought about the gig that night across the canyon in Jerome.

Weeks prior, she remembered, his band had played another gig in Twin Falls at The Ritz on Blue Lakes Boulevard. That night, three bands had played: The Oatmeal Snakes, Shades of Gray, and the headliner band, Brixton 19 (who’d changed their name that same night from “The Bleü” to “Brixton 19” in their VW van on the drive up from Boise). But even with all the lights, banners, and exotic spectacle, it’d been nothing compared to what had felt so simple and concentrated for her, that single-lightbulb love that had burned away the dust and darkness at her gig, *their gig.*

She sat back, remembering the gig, remembering how it had all started. She shifted on the cliff’s edge and re-crossed her legs, imitating Buddha, trying to summon a peaceful groove of wind and water from somewhere. She eased back, listened to the river below, the soothing night music of the falls, the crickets that boomed in stereophonics all around her in the sagebrush and desert floor. The sky, toward the west, smoldered—a cool, limber purple. The eastern sky had deepened to a soaring indigo, peppered with star drops. She rolled her head back, taking it all in—the sky, the sounds, the breezy desert silence. She thought about him, what he was doing now, where he was living, and, most of all, what songs he was playing. Somewhere out there, in this place he’d called Cupertino, she realized, he was probably gazing at the night sky, as she was. At this moment, she realized, they were most likely mapping the same swatches of sky with their eyes. Her eyes concentrated on a star above the north rim. *That star,* she told herself. *He’s looking at that star right now.* For a second, she their anniversary star burn like a drop of ice water in her mind. Then she let her thoughts swerve back to the gig on the night they’d met on Main Street in the

Jerome Moose Lodge.

That night, the Jerome Moose Lodge had been packed with a raving crowd of kids. Outside the door, in the broken glare of an overhead light, someone had tacked up a sign with a slab of duct tape: a torn scrap of white posterboard scribbled over in red magic marker. *Tonite from Twin Falls, Swinging Baseball Bats, 8 PM. 2\$. No weapons or illegal substances. Two cops—one fat and red-haired and the other in a straw cowboy hat, both with mustaches—had been stationed outside on the street. Both cops had raked the kids with critical looks once the crowd had started filing in and the music had wound up and rocketed loose like a living coil of electric light and power.*

Her friend, Tiffany, had agreed to go with her. Together, they'd dressed in Stef's bathroom in front of the mirror. They'd acted giddy, she remembered. Too giddy—competing, sparring, showing off. Stupidly giddy—laughing, shellacking on too much blue eye-shadow, comparing bust sizes in the mirror, shifting skirts and black and pink tank tops. But eventually, when they'd realized it was almost eight o'clock, they'd screamed and jumped inside "the boat" and rumbled downtown like two hijackers in a smoking tank, past the North and South Parks, past Circle K and Mauldin's Furniture & Dance. At the stoplight, they turned right, gunned the engine, and then screeched to a clanking stop on Main Street, right across from Central Elementary and kittycorner to the armory where all the army reserve tanks and transport units waited for action that would never arrive behind high fences and concertina wire. Main Street had been littered with cars of all kinds, she remembered. A parked junkyard, plus two police cars.

Inside, the Moose Lodge had been a zoo. Just perfect, she remembered, smiling to herself. And the band! Swinging Baseball Bats! She smiled wide, laughing out loud, thinking about how she and Tiffany had reacted when they'd read the name on the posterboard outside the Moose Lodge.

"Swinging Baseball Bats," Tiffany had said. "Sounds stupid."

"I think it sounds cool," Stef had countered, defending a band she'd never even heard of before. "Come on."

Arm in arm, they'd catapulted themselves into the crowd that, like a series of hard waves, had heaved back and forth and threatened to splinter the Moose Lodge's failing walls. A single naked light bulb had burned in the room. At the front of the lodge, on a small elevated stage, the band, Swinging Baseball Bats, had raged. A trio, she remembered. Simply a trio: guitar, bass, and drums. The drummer had hammered away at his set, bucking his head back and forth like an incensed stallion. He'd worn a white T-shirt with red rings around the neck and short sleeves, and his pants had been baggy jeans. He'd rigged up a microphone for backing vocals, but it had kept getting knocked over as the gig surged and wailed on. Stef had whirled and floundered, bouncing off the sweaty gyrating bodies. The music had ground into her eardrums, pounding her inside out. *Hm*, she'd thought to herself. *A band with a drummer who sings. Very cool.* At first, she hadn't paid much attention to the band, just the music. The lead guitarist—a squatty kid in baggy cutoff jeans, chain, bright red tube socks, and an old orange Jerome Recreation District soccer jersey—had terrorized the right wing of the stag, trying to play and sing at the same time. "The Wright Guys," his jersey had read, with a black decal "8" peeling off the front like the pierced black tongue of a jungle warrior. Stef remembered how she'd criticized him in her mind, as the crowd of kids had swarmed and receded in a mob of seething energy that rose and ebbed with the music. *Just have fun*, she'd told him in her mind. *Just have fun and don't try to be so cool, so musical.* Still, the guitarist had tried to rock off the performance of his life, the thing that would get him discovered. For the first hour and a half, they'd pounded the floor and walls, never slowing to rest, never seeing any reason for slowing down because slowing down would have meant

stopping the crunching rasp of the guitar, the thumping of the drums, and the soul-satisfying hammer of the bass that socked everything into a euphoric vortex of night, lights, noise, bodies, and floorboards about to break. She sat on the cliff's stone parapet, remembering and tapping out the rhythm of the music on the rock surface with her fingers, recalling how she had tripped in sync with a groove of beautiful chaos, how it had only been a year ago during October, the season of dying, and how she'd had no idea that night in the Moose Lodge would one day serve as the day of her anniversary.

A cool gust of desert wind stirred her.

She sat up. Her palms went flat against the stone.

She looked again for their anniversary star, but she couldn't find it.

From behind her, a thin mosquito whine divided the darkness and was lost on the breeze. She glanced back at "the boat," as if someone had wrenched open one of the unoled doors. Its rusted bulk behind the guardrail made her sick, made her remember how embarrassed she'd felt for years of having to drive such a beast around town. She thought of Warren and her mother and their shiny red Bronco.

She shook her head.

They make me sick, she thought. Absolutely.

The sound reached her ears again. She tried to block it out, seal it off behind glass in its own muted sphere. It was a cry, high and thin and grating. She looked back at the Oldsmobile, bleary-eyed in the dim headlights still shining out over the canyon. The car's bald tires had crushed and pinned a fan of sagebrush to the asphalt. She strained to hear the buzzing cry through the concert of breeze, crickets, and river.

"Baby James," she said out loud. She felt the string of her body grow taut.

Just once, she thought, gritting her teeth. I wish it wouldn't happen this way. And all on our anniversary.

She clamped her eyes shut, shaking her head from side to side, waiting for the whining to subside, waiting for the whining yellow flame in her head to cool down.

"Baby James," she said out loud again, scavenging her soul for serenity.

She waited. For a moment longer, she sat there, not looking back, tensed up in her shoulders, hugging her knees to her chest, still trying to draw what warmth stored in the cliff's brown stone, trying to ward off the descending desert chill for a little longer. She waited, listened. She listened until she didn't hear anything except the wind and the scissor music of the crickets. *Good, she thought.* To exorcise the annoyance threatening to shatter their anniversary ceremony, Stef returned to panoramic thoughts of the gig. It had been absolutely the best, she told herself as objectively as possible. Especially at the climax. She smiled to herself. Again, she remembered that Friday night. *The Friday.* At the climax of the gig, Stef remembered, Swinging Baseball Bats had suddenly stopped playing, and the bass player, who'd also been the lead singer, had stepped forward and announced that they were going to play the only song they played that had a title: "Heads or Tails." At that moment, Stef had really looked the bass player over. She'd been so struck by his looks that she had stopped dancing. The waves of bodies had parted. In the middle of the flailing crowd, she'd stopped and looked at him up on the stage, the lone objector in a rampaging riot. He'd worn no shirt, and his bass had been a black fretless, nicked and worn. He'd carried it like a golf bag, slung over his shoulder with a brown leather strap, and he'd worn old green

corduroys, which had only been accented by the red and white elastic band of his boxer underwear that had kept peeking up over the top whenever he'd executed a jump or stage dive to accent his playing.

With little effort, the song was back in her head. A night encore. The chorus played over in her mind, and she drummed her hands on the cliff's surface, imitating the driving roll of the snare drum, ranting along with the lyrics in her mind:

Can't, can't, can't make heads or tails!

Can't, can't, can't make heads or tails!

At the climax of the number, the bass player had launched himself into the crowd, bass and all. Tiffany and Stef had toppled over into a shrieking heap. The crowd had divided into two halves, revealing a psychedelic confetti of Coke cans and vending machine bags, and he'd landed on the dirty floor. Then he'd gone absolutely berserk. He'd spun out on the fulcrum of his shoulder blades. He'd played his fretless like it was an M-16, rolling over on one shoulder and running around and around in a circle, his shock-white blond hair on fire. Then he'd rolled over on his back and pumped his pelvis—bang, bang, bang—up toward the ceiling, wagging his fretless around like a war sword, kicking his piston legs and banging his feet against the floor. At this moment, bedlam had ensued. Immediately, the circle around him had closed up, and for a second, it appeared as if he would be trampled by his own fans, consumed by a swarming amoeba of kids. Spurred on by the maniacal bravura of the band, Stef had abandoned Tiffany and, lowering her shoulder, bulldozed her way through the pumping carnival of bodies. Having tunneled her way to the bassist, she'd seen something else: a girl. From somewhere in the crowd, a girl in jeans and a leather jacket, a girl with long black hair, had jumped from the crowd and straddled him—the bass player—and had started riding him like a cowgirl on a bucking bronco. Immediately, Stef had felt incensed with rage and jealousy. At once, she'd pushed through the crowd, grabbed the black-haired girl by the shoulder, and pulled her back, looking into her face as if to say what she felt: *Easy—he's not yours yet*. But then, she'd seen how Swinging Baseball Bats' bass player had reacted: like it was all a joke. His cool reaction alone had calmed her. As Stef had reached through the crowd to yank the girl off him, he'd immediately smiled and surrendered his tormented, anguished howl. Then he'd jumped back up on stage to finish the set. Stef and the black-haired girl had never crossed paths again during the remainder of the concert. Later, Stef had learned his name. She'd heard it being tossed around in the dance. She'd caught it and held it on her tongue like a hard candy jawbreaker—Richie. She'd said it to herself, while dancing: Richie. Outside, watching the traffic pass in front of Central Elementary and the courthouse, she'd warbled it to Tiffany, who'd ignored her: Richie. She'd chanted it to the rural night as, out on Main Street, the sweat cooled and evaporated off her upper lip and neck: Richie.

Stef said it to herself again, remembering. She said it to the night, to "The Pulpit" and its brown rock-solid warmth, to "The Preacher" and its swaying willow body.

"Richie," she said.

The canyon nocturne heard her, accepted her pronouncement without judgment, carried the wind of her voice around the curve of the earth, west, down to the faraway city of Cupertino where all names, including his, wrote the lyrics of the wind.

At midnight, the concert had ended with the drummer kicking a combat boot through his bass drum and the lead guitarist jamming his guitar down the front of his cutoff jeans. The cops had come in at that point, hands on guns and

nightsticks, waiting for a fight. But nothing had happened. The lights had glimmered on, and the guitarist and the drummer had hopped down from the stage and walked down to Sheppard's Drive-in for Rancho Burgers, fries, and lime rickeys. Some of the kids had gone with them, shuffling off, hands in pockets, chains jingling in back. Something else, too, Stef remembered, patting the surface of the cliff with her palms: Tiffany had disappeared. She'd driven off in the "the boat," leaving Stef stranded. Stef remembered how at first she'd felt angry with Tiffany. But after a while, she'd decided it was no big deal, and so she'd resolved to walk home. In less than two minutes, the Moose Lodge had emptied out between the two cops that had flanked the door like stone sentries. As the October midnight had blossomed and settled in, there had remained no evidence that a concert had just taken place. Stef had walked home alone, past the armory, past the park.

Only she hadn't gotten far.

"Hey," he'd said, perched on top of one of the armory tanks.

She'd stopped, like a bird caught in a flashlight beam. She'd stared. He'd looked like he'd looked on stage. Only more approachable, more real. His hair had shone in the moonlight, bright platinum spiky blond. His thin torso had looked muscular—like a carved statue's—from where he'd perched himself on one of the tank's turrets, eating nachos and cheese dip and a drinking a Cherry Coke Thirst Buster from the Circle K.

"Hi," she'd said back. "How'd you get up there?"

"Easy," he'd said, through a mouthful of nachos and cheese dip. "I'll show you. Drink?" He'd tipped his soft drink straw toward her, a kind of toast.

"Yeah," Stef had said, passing a hand over her short-cropped blond hair, thinking of her makeup, her clothes, her legs, her eyes, thinking over everything at once. "Yeah. How'd you get up there?"

"Easy," he'd repeated, nonchalant. "Come on."

So he'd showed her. The trick was, Stef had learned, to carry a blanket with you at all times. From somewhere on the other side of the chain-link fence, he'd produced a woolly blue blanket, and he'd draped it over the top of the fence and helped her over. A prince and his princess. Hero to stranded maiden. On the other side, they'd fallen down, bellylaughing. A gob of nacho cheese had streaked a moon-colored smear across his forehead; she'd laughed through her nose, snorting. Together, under that unforgettable October sky, they'd scrambled up on the turret of the tank to catch the view, to see out along Main Street over the roof of the Moose Lodge. They'd talked: about his music, about the name of the band—Swinging Baseball Bats ("An amazing choice!" Stef had said)—and anything else that came to mind. Stef had asked about the black-haired girl who'd straddled him, and he'd said he had no idea who she was, nor had he wanted to know. Stef had smiled openly at this, relieved, feeling small coils of exhilaration spring open inside her ribcage. They'd shared nachos, shared his Cherry Coke. They'd looked up at the stars—as she doing now—and had instantly traded hearts and promises, right there up on top of that tank turret, while down below them—down below in the mundane world of cops and parents, school and assignments, and laws and rules—the world had gone on without them. For the most part, they'd been happy to let it go. Up close, he'd looked even better to her: blond hair, smooth skin, rippling thin torso, red and white boxer band peeking up above his green corduroys. And the glittering chrome chain she'd asked him about: a gift from a friend in Cupertino, the place where his band was headed if things worked out.

Then things had gotten silly. Both of them—completely deprived of sleep—had suddenly succumbed to a twin boost of nervous energy, and had started capering on the top of the turret, dancing, spinning, doing Irish jigs, launching mock stage leaps and dives. She'd said the pledge of allegiance, her hand above her heart. He'd saluted, manning the tank and shouting out directives to his gunnery crew. Then, with Stef howling and hoarse with laughter, he'd shimmied out onto the tank's gun barrel, dangling upside down from his knees and raking his armpits like a circus chimp, his mouth filled with nachos and cheese, his red and white boxers showing a full four inches above the beltline of his corduroys. In a heap, they'd collapsed under the tank, him guffawing and choking on nacho fragments, Stef weeping with laughter. Somehow, they'd landed on the blue woolly blanket, and somehow her fingertips had flickered once up and down his torso, up and down the lacquered frets and fingerboard, the tricky strings. In the blanket of night she'd tasted nachos, cheese, and Cherry Coke introduced into her mouth, warm and comfortable and welcome and new. His hands, her knees. The beat of the band, in her belly and in his thighs. He'd led, and she'd followed. Again, again, and one more time. The rhythm had soared through her soul at a frenzied pitch and then let out a world of wind like an immense cool sigh, after which through the reverberations of crickets and distant traffic and the silent thrum of worms and leaf mold she had strained to hear a whining sound coming from somewhere, which she'd mistaken for the amplified diapason of love, for the thrilling action of tank wheels, for divebombing aircraft, or for an electric guitar reverberating through the cliffside breezes in her mind and settling deep in her loins.

She listened. It was the whining again. Louder, more persistent.

Stef stood.

Ruined, she thought. It was all too much. It always happened this way. Things always got ruined.

Her forehead knitted with anger. Now that it was ruined, she realized, she'd never be alone. All she'd wanted with him was to never be alone again. That was the whole reason they'd gotten together. And now, now that he'd gone, she'd never be alone, ever. That was the problem. That's what had ruined it all for all of them.

Another gust, blue and sagebrush-light, startled her senses. She saw the past year condensed into a few seconds: hiding the baby in her one-bedroom basement apartment on Blue Lakes Boulevard, around the corner from McDonald's; a dirty, mullioned window letting in greasy yellow light; diapers, piles of them, in Hefty sacks; Warren not coming to the birth; her mom saying something matter-of-factly—"Has his own kids, you know"; her mom, nodding in the back hallway, drying a dinner plate trimmed with purple and blue cyclamen; her mom saying, "It's for the best," initially buying the whole story about Richie's mom taking care of the baby; thinking how they were perfect strangers, never talked, wouldn't ever talk; a television screen tuned to a static channel, 3 a.m.; a screaming kid with red candy smeared on his face in the grocery line at the Food King; food stamps; W.I.C. checks; the public eye and humiliation as bright as a tin can of daylight; hoping Richie wouldn't ever talk to his mom; Cupertino, Cupertino, and more Cupertino.

But now it was ruined.

From where she stood, she looked across the ragged black expanse of the canyon, gauging the distance to the north rim, to the river below.

Hands on hips, she turned once completely around. The peace of the moment had been absolutely wrecked. The cool October night had sapped all the warmth out of her meditative cliffside perch. She shivered, with cold anger. *Why did it always have to happen this way?* The rush of static and anger rose inside her

and plugged her ears. She gritted her teeth. It was hours past midnight now, for all she knew. Somewhere in Cupertino, it was night, too. Furious, she snapped off one last look at the canyon's beautiful nighttime panorama and turned back to "the boat."

The Oldsmobile still sat like a slab of junk behind the dented guardrail. The guardrail was marked with yellow and black warning stripes, which reminded Stef of a yellowjacket. Fists to the earth, she tromped back through the sagebrush to the passenger's side of the car. The old hunk of a car wasn't running, but the headlights still glared out into the airy nothingness over the canyon. She yanked open the passenger's side door.

"What!" she yelled. "What do you want? Why always now? What!"

The infant baby boy sat in his car seat and screamed. His sparky blond hair shone like lightning. He'd been dressed by his mother in some old pajamas she'd found at a second-hand charity shop called Lamplight Ministries on Blue Lakes Boulevard. The worn-out pajamas clung to the baby boy's plump, writhing body like a worn-out membrane filled with holes. His pajamas were splattered with grinning cartoon animals: bears, lions, birds, ducks. He howled. His face burned a deep crimson. His mouth gleamed, wide open and wet. His protracted, agonized wailing stopped only briefly when he paused to suck in more air to feed his lungs. The tiny balls of his fists quavered and flailed about at unseen demons. A silver waterfall trickled out of each eye. Stef fumed above him.

"What!" she demanded again. "What do you want?"

Then, dazzled by the constellations of her own fury, she uttered a cry of exasperation and slammed the door. Off in the brush, a killdeer was spooked from its nesting place and sailed on the fluted, frightened arc of its own cry out over the canyon. She listened to it go, imagining herself instantly soaring away from things like worry and Warren and her mother, sprouting magnificent wings and sacrificing herself in flight for her young.

Baby James howled. Stef jammed her hands under her armpits and folded her arms across her chest. She stomped around to the front of "the boat." She sat down on the front hood with such force that the whole car rocked for a second, making Baby James's howling bounce up and down as well. *Good*, she thought. She looked off into the canyon, off into the embrace of the darkness where its promises of soothing oblivion were intercepted by two rays of light. >From inside the Oldsmobile, Baby James's crying had reached the level of a piercing, terrified shriek. Stef put her hands to her ears, blocking it out, blocking everything out. Why wouldn't it just go away! Frantically, she searched the cliff's edge for an answer: the headlights, the precipice of brown slate and shale, the clinging lichens, the sagebrush, and the old scraggly willow hanging over the edge. Then she thought of it: the swinging. Why hadn't she thought of it before? She recalled how they had dared each other to do the swinging before—the first time they'd come here. From the willow's branches, out over the canyon. A full five hundred feet to the bottom! Now, that had felt like freedom! Full-on, mind-blowing freedom! They'd done it together, she recalled, just like they'd wanted to do everything—together. Richie'd had gone first, running out and grappling for the willow branches, grasping them desperately to his face, swinging out and kicking his heels to the stars. Then she had gone—but only because he'd made her. At first, she'd been scared, but then she'd let her mind go as blank as the night sky and had run and jumped out for the willow branches, swinging out over the canyon, and then back into his arms. It had felt like true life-or-death happiness. She was sure it had been nothing like Warren and her mother had done. Or ever would do.

She laughed out loud as the thought and decision struck her at once. It was

nothing like smashing a bottle of champagne across the bow of a ship, but it would have to do. After all, it was their anniversary. Suddenly, she was smiling. She scanned the ground, picked up an old half-empty Miller Light bottle, and, saying a quick dedicatory prayer, hurled the bottle in a long, looping arc at “the boat,” cracking its windshield. The bottle, unbroken somehow, plinked off into the sagebrush.

Her christening complete, she turned to face “The Preacher.”

A wild wind had suffused her heart. She churned inwardly with rage, daring, peace, and disorder. She let out a yell and stepped forward. In the light of the headlights, she struck a pose. She arched her back, rocking her pelvis back and propping one hand on her hip. In the darkness, she grabbed an imaginary microphone—an old model from the radio days like *Swinging Baseball Bats* had used—and she jerked toward her open mouth, singing into it. She could’ve been the lead singer, she reasoned to herself, rolling her head back, rocking her body to rhythm of the earth, its quiet raging. All around her, the bass and guitar and drums and pounding ecstasy of a thousand kids hammering the floor of the Moose Lodge rushed on stage with the crickets and whispering sagebrush. She cradled the microphone to her mouth, cupped it in her hands. She wailed her mournful confessional to the night, cupping his head to her face, singing into his listening mouth, her lips inches from his, their breaths mingled in one warm canyon breeze scented with starlight. She kicked up gravel and tossed her head, ramming her head and shoulders forward with every word: *Can’t, can’t, can’t make heads or tails! Can’t, can’t, can’t make heads or tails!*

With a dramatic flick of her wrist, the imaginary microphone sailed from her grip. She yanked open her denim jacket and dropped it to her hips, thrust her head back. Her jacket landed behind her in the sagebrush. Spinning, stumbling, she faced the canyon edge. Her audience was waiting—she had only to perform the climax, the stage dive. With the fully resurrected music of *Swinging Baseball Bats* whizzing around like mad birds of starlight in her head, she pushed off. With electrified agility, she leaped over the guardrail and ran unsteadily, but with long strides, toward the canyon rim. Above the dark echo of her own panting, she heard the green-silver thread of the river below, her home. The crippled willow tree swayed at the cliff’s edge, blurred, and swayed again. At the edge, the sole of her shoe clapped off the surface of the stone parapet and rang like a tank shot from the Snake River all the way down to the all-night party lights of Cupertino, her arms and legs cycling out to catch the willow branches and swinging stars beyond.

The next night, a Ford Pinto drove to the south rim. It wore a distinctly shoddy and anachronistic look—orange with faux wood side paneling, tattooed with sun and apathy. At the turnout, it grumbled to a stop, and the headlights clicked off. Before the headlights dimmed, the driver—a young man who had recently cut his own platinum blond hair with a steak knife—jumped out and ran to the cliffside. In his mind, he was thinking “preacher, pulpit” but wasn’t sure why, wasn’t sure he cared why. He’d written a song, a good song that had caused him all kinds of trouble back in Cupertino, and so he’d had to come back here—their spot—to sing it, to sing it to the canyon, to the world, just to try it out. It was, he realized, as he slung the acoustic guitar strap over his naked shoulder, their anniversary anyway. So it seemed appropriate. He fished for the pick in his pocket, a rainbow-toned one he’d bought in Cupertino. He found it; he gripped it between his thumb and forefinger, ready to call down shafts of light from heaven with the first chord. He wore baggy jeans, a chain and stainless steel Swiss Army pocketwatch hanging of his back pocket. His tan, sinewy torso shone like the surface of a river in the moonlight. He looked like a sculpted statue on the stone overhang, the way he held his guitar, the way he stood, calling on the canyon scene to inspire him, to listen to his song. There’d been something wrong in Cupertino, they’d told him—

his band, Swinging Baseball Bats. There'd been something wrong, something that hadn't been there before. After searching for it and struggling to find the answer, the drummer and guitarist had simultaneously identified the problem: love. It had been love. Love had come creeping into his songs, and so together they'd stomached enough and kicked him out, even though he'd had no idea what they were talking about, even though he'd used the same songwriting techniques he'd used back during the Moose Lodge days.

So he'd formed a solo act—Swinging Hatchets—and he'd come back to where he'd begun, to claim a fresh start and a better outlook.

At the edge of the cliff, in the face of the canyon night, he drew in a breath and sang out the first chorus of the song—simply called “Stef,” a song about getting back together—that he'd written on the drive back from Cupertino. But the words and music clashed; the song was formless; it was a waste. Halfway through, he stopped and, swinging his guitar around his head like a baseball bat, heaved it into the five-hundred foot gorge. He listened for the satisfying sound of its destruction, but heard nothing.

Then he turned back to his Ford Pinto, slashing his Vans sneakers through the sagebrush. *Maybe I'll look her up*, he thought, walking back to his Pinto.

Then he saw something that made him stop.

It was a car.

An old rusty orange Oldsmobile was parked at the turnout not far from his Pinto.

Before he knew it, he was running—not sure why exactly, in a plodding jog at first like small child, but then faster in a dead sprint across the gravel—toward this strange car that, as he ran, became more familiar with every stride. His shoes skidded and slapped on the gravel and asphalt. His chain jingled with the titanium stars in the sky. The cricket chirps roared like river rapids in his ears, and he could barely hear the faraway noise of the falls and the wind through the brush over his own rushed breathing. He banged into the passenger's side, yanked open the door, and saw, for a moment, his own reflection in the glass—a sweaty grin, a tan face, a blond shock of hair, a trim suntanned torso—replaced instantly by a smaller version of himself. He saw the small smiling face looking up at him—the authentic blond hair, the face weak but still smiling after a full day of sitting there and watching the canyon, there in what seemed the very center of the frayed fabric of the cosmos, all happy cartoon bears and birds and ducks and unwritten songs.

Then something pushed him back. The earth beneath wavered, rose up, and slammed into his backside. He rocked back on the ground, reeling. The cliffside chorus transformed into wheeling bats and hatchets all around him, a suffocating blanket of blue night, a missed boat.

Eventually, he was found, still sitting there, by a curious deputy from the sheriff's department, who took the two blond boys—one in cuffs and the other cradled in his arm—back to the station on Addison Avenue.

The deputy was over forty, paunchy, red-faced, balding. He wore a stiff brown mustache cut straight across his upper lip. He wore a straw cowboy hat with a crumpled front brim. At the station, he stood at the booking area desk, sweating in his tight gray deputy's uniform, even though he wasn't doing anything more strenuous than leaning against the counter. For the moment, he'd put the teenage boy in a holding cell. A red-headed, middle-aged woman from social services had come and taken the baby. The deputy removed his hat, wiped his forehead with a forearm. He stared down at the unwaxed oxblood tile, as if

searching for the answer in some magic crossword puzzle or television listing located there.

The deputy's supervisor sat at a desk covered with manila folders, cardboard file boxes, paper, and pens. On the supervisor's desk sat a creme-colored phone on which five red lights flashed in silence.

"Gonna set that kid right, Warren?" the supervisor called, snapping his fingers at the deputy and pointing over his desk. "Or just set around here all night, wasting time?"

"Wish I could," the deputy replied, scratching his head, staring into the holding cell at the blond teenager. Then he corrected himself. "Set him right, I mean. Not set around here all night."

After an hour of bewildering silence at the station, the bleach-blond shirtless boy still couldn't talk, wouldn't talk. Eventually the deputy told his supervisor that he'd love to spend more time trying to figure out the case, but it was October, his favorite time of the year, the time of year when everything seemed to take on new life, and that he didn't want to sound like a preacher pounding no pulpit or nothing, but it was his anniversary, and he'd be damned if he was going to disappoint his wife on the most important night of their life because he'd had to hang around at work, monkeying around with some case out of which he couldn't make heads or tails.

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