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Going Home

Glen Davis

Eastern Illinois University

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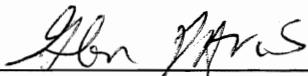
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Going Home

(TITLE)

BY

Glen Davis

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English: Literary Studies with Creative Writing Emphasis

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

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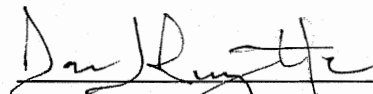
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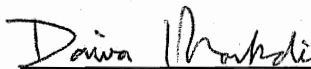
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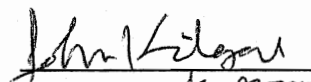
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to all of the people who helped me believe that I could actually write this story. I have great friends, and all of them constantly reminded me that I was a writer, and that this was a project that I could complete.

Mostly I think that I should dedicate this to my wife. While everyone else had to put up with me for a just a few hours a day, she was stuck with me throughout the whole process. I can't remember a single time when she wasn't supportive. She always believed in me, and never questioned my choice to pursue writing. Stacey was always the first reader, and never complained about reading draft after draft of this project. She listened when I rambled on about what I wanted to do in this story, and asked all the right questions when I had clearly missed my goal. I could not have completed this project without her support or confidence in my abilities.

Acknowledgements

I have many people to thank for helping me to finish this project. The creative writing classes I took as an undergraduate student have helped shape me into the writer I am today. As my committee chair Dr. Moffitt took the time to read and comment on every draft I sent her, even though we both knew I would end up deleting the bulk of it in the future drafts. Her patience and support made this project much easier to accomplish than it would have been without her. Dr. Moffitt's fiction classes changed the way I write, and she always pushed me to look at my writing in new ways. Dr. Kilgore never hesitated to remind me that the stories I wrote were not marketable works. This realization allowed me to learn to tell my story, but tell it in a way that will be more acceptable to an audience. I respect his opinion on my writing, and knew that he would not hesitate to give me honest feedback. This project comes from some of my own experiences, and because I learned to turn those experiences into fiction mostly from Dr. Markelis' class, I wanted her to be one of my readers. Any good fiction has to have at least a grain of truth in it, it is this truth that she helped me find. Some of the stories I tell in this project come from my own personal experiences, and while they have been greatly fictionalized, learning that my own life stories have value and can be written in an interesting manner has led me to use them as seeds for my fictional writing. I owe a great amount of my ability to these creative writing teachers.

Introduction

I started this project with the idea that I wanted to write a story about a group of friends that experience death together, and as a result of this death come to a better understanding of life. However, as I continued to work on it I discovered that the real question these characters face is their understanding of home. The death seemed to serve primarily as a motivator for an exploration of the concept of 'home.' It is what brings the characters back to Birkeyville, and it is what makes them realize what they miss about this small town they grew up in.

The original plan for this project was to include a frame narrative. The frame was to provide a through line that would help keep the reader oriented in the story. I was concerned that if I jumped around in time in this story that the reader would get lost. I found that this was not as much of a problem as I anticipated. In the same way that readers have to put Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* together when reading, I think that my readers will be able to place the flashbacks into a sequence that makes sense to them. Making these shifts in time apparent to the reader was important for me when writing the story, and I have spent a lot of time editing the flashbacks so that it is clear to the reader when and where the characters are in the story.

The original frame that was intended to separate the flashbacks from the present moment in these characters' lives ended up having a lot more importance to the story, and grew into part of the story itself. The flashbacks began to serve a different purpose as well. I intended the flashbacks to provide the bulk of the story, as I was primarily

interested in the lives of these characters as children. As the story sits now, the primary purpose of the flashbacks is to present Matt to the reader. Since Matt is already dead when this story occurs, I needed a way to make him seem like a real character in this story. The flashbacks now serve to show the reader who Matt was when all of the characters were children.

I planned for all of this to result in a novella length work. I added the frame narration so that I could remain in my comfort zone and simply write short stories that could fill in the space as needed. This story quickly grew away from that plan and I now know that what I really have here is the beginnings of a much larger story. I believe that this story will continue to grow into a novel. This is an interesting turn for me because I would never have dreamed of writing a novel. I have always been a short story writer and this story left the realm of short story almost instantly. It quickly grew out of my frame narrative idea, and the pages started filling up. I found that by the end of this project my focus was on how much time I had left in which to write this story rather than on what I had to say. It was clear to me that this story needed to be longer.

I think that part of what makes this story easy for me to write is that it is in some ways autobiographical. While none of the characters in this story are representative of myself or any of my childhood friends, there are certainly parts of us in each of the characters. The events in this story were formed in a similar manner. The things I wrote in this story sort of happened in real life. I have taken great liberties, both with the characters and the incidents that occur in the flashbacks, so much so that were one of my childhood friends to read this, they would likely remember the event and immediately try to correct me. While using my own real memories helped me fill out this story, my own memories also made it difficult to edit. I am attached to these stories. They are important

to me, and to who I have grown into.

There are always things I would like to change in my writing, and every time I read my work I do so while thinking about making these changes. This story is no different. It currently has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but there are many more things I want to add to this story. I believe that Matt can be developed more as a character. In order for the readers to really understand Matt, I would like to show them the person he was as a child and the person he was grown up. I believe that I could write more on the other characters as well. They all have lives outside of Birkeyville, and those lives will end up being important to their decision to leave Birkeyville once again. I will be continuing work on this story and expect that it will become novel length. I have always shied away from longer writing. I didn't understand how a longer story would work with my own writing style. I have now discovered that my writing style adapts fairly well to longer work. I realize that in writing short stories in the past, my method has been to write a longish story and then delete everything that seems unessential to the story. In writing this story, I took a different approach. I didn't delete large portions of my text, and instead wrote those seemingly unessential parts back into my story. I think that this has allowed me to write a story that has more depth and meaning than the shorter stories I have focused on in the past.

I was influenced by several writers when working on this project. Much of the original idea came from a reading of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*. I liked that Anderson's story revolved around this one small town, and set out to create this same connection in my own story. My original plan was for the story to center on Birkeyville, much the same way that Anderson's stories revolve around Winesburg. I think that this has happened to some extent, but as the story grew the setting did as well. Since my

characters are faced with the idea of finding home, I found it necessary to move away from this small town at times, and out into the towns that each of the characters may call home.

I was faced with a similar problem as Anderson when it came to the language of the story. Anderson asks, "Should I use in my writing words that are not a part of my own everyday speech, of my own everyday thought? I don't think so" (Anderson 13). Like Anderson, I found that this story would really only work if I told it in my own words. Much of it is in my own voice, and at times I got carried away by my own voice in this. There are places where I forget myself, and the narration slips into my own view of things rather than staying in the view of the characters. I will have to learn to control this better when I begin turning this story into a longer work.

Along with writing this story in my own voice, using my own words, I tried to write it as something that I would want to read. This is perhaps not the best approach to writing a story, but if I don't like the story I have trouble expecting that anyone else will either. This was the most difficult aspect of writing this story. I wanted the readers to get what I was trying to show them, but I felt that spelling it all out for them would ruin the story. I have always been a fan of Raymond Carver, and the way that he never tells you in the end what it is that he wants you to see. I tried to allow for this in my story and I feel that this adds interest to the work. It certainly added interest for me while writing the story.

I wanted to ensure that the story came across as vividly as possible to the reader. The first thing I noticed when reading *Julius Winsome* by Gerard Donovan was the clarity with which I could see the story. I really wanted this aspect in my story, but this clarity has always been a struggle for me. In writing short stories, I have primarily focused on

the story, and focused less on whether the readers can see and feel the story. Adding detail was a tremendous challenge for me in writing this story. While I certainly haven't reached the skill level of Donovan, trying to achieve this goal has greatly affected the way I look at writing stories. Writing while keeping the reader in my mind has made me focus on my descriptions and how I present information.

All in all, this has been a much more enjoyable experience than I anticipated. Writing this story has reminded me how much I enjoy telling stories. While this story has been challenging to write, it has reinvigorated me as a writer. I now know that there are longer stories in me. I am happy with this story in the end, and more importantly I find that I have much more to say about Birkeyville and these characters. I have no doubt that this story will continue to grow, and I am looking forward to working on it further.

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Going Home

Brad pushed the key into the unused and sticky lock that sealed his father's home from the rest of the world. The key stuck and for just a moment he thought that it wouldn't actually work. The door would remain locked and he could just go back downstairs to the store with an excuse as to why he couldn't call the other guys. He pushed just a little harder and the key turned causing the door to squeak open in a way that almost sent him back down stairs.

Brad placed first one foot into the apartment and then the second as he stepped inside his childhood home for the first time in several years. It was clear that the place had been locked up since his father died. There was a thick layer of dust on everything and Brad noticed that the roof had leaked, leaving an angry brown stain above the window that looked out upon Birkeyville.

The apartment above the sporting goods store, the one one brad had grown up in, loomed above him when he worked in the store below. He'd considered selling it. He could sell the store, the apartment, and just leave Birkeyville once and for all. What slowed him down, kept him from actually going through the process of sale, is only partially the lack of buyers. The larger threat is the one of having to empty this apartment out before the sale could take place. Brad didn't want any of the things from his father's house, he had no need for them, but he didn't want to touch them either. For the last two years he simply ignored the fact that these things were still up there, and that he should do something with them.

He saw the box he came for and walked quickly towards it, trying not to focus on

the rest of the room and the things it contained. There was a picture of his parents, both dead now, on the wall closest to the door, and he tried not to see it. He saw the dingy puke green carpet that was always part of the living room, and noticed the whitened edge where it touched the linoleum of the kitchen. His mom was very conscious of the color and condition of that puke green carpet, and of their inability to afford a replacement. She cleaned the linoleum religiously and the edge of the carpet that touched the linoleum had lost almost all of its color from chemicals that never really made the floor look nice. Brad turned his eyes away and accidentally rested them on the counter top that divided the kitchen area from the living area of the apartment. His mother's things still lined the edge of that counter top where it touched the wall. A ceramic, cow-shaped coffee creamer looked back at him as if asking him where he'd been.

Brad found the box of calendars on the kitchen table. His dad bought the calendars every year. He had them printed with the Alexander's Sporting Goods logo on the front, and whatever cute animal collection the printing company offered that year. He sent them out to a long list of people every year in place of Christmas cards. It was this mailing list that Brad was after. He blew the dust from the top of the box and opened it to find the list. There were two baby red foxes looking over a log on the cover of each of the calendars. Directly beneath the two baby foxes, the year, 2007, was printed in yellow ink that nearly blended into the grass beneath the foxes. His father died in October, two years before, and the box of outdated calendars hammered the fact of those two years into Brad's head. He grabbed the list from the box, turned and exited the apartment. He closed the door on the ceramic cow that watched his every move, re-locked the door and realized that he wasn't breathing. He had been holding his breath, as if the stale air in there might have some

terrible effect on him. Brad sat down at the top of the stairs that led back down into Alexander's Sporting Goods clutching the list of phone numbers. He hoped that all the numbers he needed were on that list. He wouldn't go back inside if they weren't.

An hour later, the phone rang in Clive Parker's kitchen. Clive heard it, but didn't answer. He didn't even bother to listen to the message as it was recorded. He had turned the volume all the way down long time ago. When the little red light started blinking, indicating that someone had tried to reach him and had left a message, he opened the refrigerator and poured himself a glass of orange juice. He'd have to check the message sooner or later, but he was a little afraid that it was work. He left work today without warning, and sometimes his boss checked up on him. The building was closed up and locked, he knew this, but he was still afraid the call was from work. Clive closed the fridge and walked back into his living room of his tiny apartment. He sat in the only chair, a beat-up recliner he bought at Goodwill, and continued looking at the television he bought at the same place. Clive never actually watched the television; he sometimes turned the channels, sometimes just left it on one of the fuzzy gray channels he didn't get with his basic cable package, but he never turned it off. This day was no different. He didn't know what he was watching, and was mildly aware of this fact. He did this often. Sometimes he changed the channel and tuned out a completely different show, but he never turned it off. He needed the noise. The noise made his little apartment seem less quiet, less lonely. He even left it on when he wasn't home.

Several states over, another phone rang. This one was answered immediately.

“What?” Terry Freeman answered expecting it to be his ex-wife. His visitation hours are over in fifteen minutes, and he was on his way to drop off his seven year old daughter, Megan, at home. He stopped to answer the phone only because he was certain his ex-wife was on the other end.

“Terry? Is this Terry Freeman from Birkeyville?”

“Yeah, but I moved out of Birkeyville a long time ago, so what can I help you with?” Terry looked over to his patiently waiting daughter. She wanted to stay, didn't like her new step dad, and was trying to not cry about leaving this house where she had a room of her own. Megan had to share a room with her step sisters at her mom's house. Her step sisters were older, bigger, and didn't appreciate the novelty of having a younger sister.

“Terry, it's Brad. Brad Alexander. We went to school together.”

Terry placed the name immediately.

“Wow, Brad. It's been like fifteen years or something, right?” It was obvious that Terry was in a hurry. He has been late in returning his daughter for two months in a row. His ex-wife was trying to find a way to reduce his visitation opportunities, and he knew that failing to be on time will look bad in front of the judge that he expected to meet in the very near future. He could tell that his urgency carried through to the other end of the line, and was sorry for it.

“Yeah, something like that. Look, I can call you back, or maybe when you have time you can call me. I have some bad news and I'm not sure if I can just get it out quick.

If you have some place to be, maybe I should call back.”

“Sorry, yeah, I'm late taking my daughter back to her mom's, but I'm late all the time. It's no big deal. What's up?”

Megan, who was listening all along, carried her backpack into her room. It took Terry several minutes to talk her out of that room before he got this phone call, and he knew he'd have to talk her out of it again when he hung up. He pictured her unpacking as he spoke. He smiled just a little. It annoyed him to fight Megan out of that room, but he also secretly liked the idea that she never wanted to go home, that she wanted to stay with him.

“It's about Matt. He passed away yesterday.”

“Matt Douglas? Jeez he was our age. What happened?” Terry tried to look around the corner. Tried to make eye contact with his daughter.

“It's complicated, I was kind of hoping we could get together to talk about it, all of us.”

“When were you thinking?” Terry turned to the calendar that was always tacked to the wall by the door. He looked at the bright red X's that crossed out the days of last week, and flipped over to see that one week next month had been circled roughly. These were the weeks when he got Megan, and she made sure to mark them for him in case he might ever forget. It bothered him that she felt the need to do that, that she really believed that he might forget.

“Well, the visitation is Thursday, but I realize that you might not be able to come in for that, so I was thinking about the weekend. Could you make it back to Birkeyville this weekend?”

"I can make it for Thursday. It's summer break and I'm all clear until next semester starts."

"That's right, you went into teaching. I thought they were going to switch to an all year round thing?"

"God I hope not. Summer is the only sleep I get. Can I call you back later on tonight."

"You have my number?"

"Yeah, it's in the caller ID. I'll call you back around seven."

"I'll look forward to it, It's been too long."

"Yeah, we got a lot to catch up on."

"Yeah, I'm going to call the other guys too, maybe we can all get together this weekend or something."

"That sounds great."

"Well, I'll talk to you at seven then?"

"Yeah. Bye." Terry hung up the phone. It seemed abrupt to him, but he didn't mean for it to be. He made a point to remember to apologize to Brad later when he called him. He went into his daughter's room. The paint was horrifyingly bright, and the walls were covered with cartoon characters that he didn't really recognize. Megan chose the colors herself, and even though Terry thought about arguing for something less head splitting, he let her do whatever she wanted with the room. He wanted her to feel like it was her room. He would have let her tear it down to the studs if she wanted it that way.

"You ready to go?"

"I want to go with you."

"Okay, well, I'm going to your mom's."

"No, I want to go with you, to wherever you're going after you drop me off."

The phone rang in the other room, and Terry didn't have to answer it to know that it really was his ex-wife this time.

"You know who that is?"

"Yeah." Megan kicked her backpack, making it swing slightly away from its place resting against her legs.

"Hey, don't look so sad about it. I would think that you would be happy to go back. There you have two other girls to share your chores. Here you have to do them all by yourself."

"Two more girls to share everything with."

"Sharing can be fun."

"It's not fun. They mess up everything." Megan didn't look at him, as the bag lightly swung next to her leg.

"Aw, come on. You used to tell me all the time how much you wanted a sister when you were little, and now you have two."

"I take it back."

"Can't do that. You said, 'I want a little sister daddy.' I remember it quite clearly."

"I wanted a real sister."

Terry remembered the real brother or sister, the one Megan never found out about. His ex-wife miscarried early into the pregnancy. Megan was two.

"Well, how about you give the half ones a chance for awhile?"

"Why can't I just stay here?" She looked up at him and his heart broke just a little.

He wanted to say yes. He wanted to believe that she really could just stay here.

The phone was still ringing in the other room, and Terry simply looked in that direction. He wished he hadn't. Megan saw him do it, and he was afraid that she might have misread that look.

"She doesn't even want me."

"Hey, that's not true." He sat on the tiny bed next to Megan. "I remember when your mom was just about fat enough to burst with you. She couldn't wait to meet you. You were all she ever talked about. You can't imagine how much your mom wanted you."

"She doesn't want me now."

"Sure she does. Things have gotten complicated, and your mom has lots of things to think about now, but I know that you are right at the top of the list of stuff she's thinking about. If she didn't want you, why would my phone be ringing in the other room right now." Terry raised his voice a little bit, as if the phone in the other room might hear and stop for a minute.

"The half sisters are going away anyway."

"No they're not, I think you're going to have to work something out with them. They're family now. Family is forever right?"

"I don't think daddy Bill is forever, and Nancy, and Mary aren't forever either."

Terry was pretty sure that he wasn't following the conversation, but knew that he had to say something.

"Of course they are."

"I think that uncle Joe is going to replace daddy Bill."

Terry had met uncle Joe, and wondered the same thing. He wasn't aware that

Megan had figured it out. He'd have to have a very uncomfortable talk with Kathy about her love life and how it affected their daughter. He pretended not to understand, now, while he is in front of his daughter. "What?"

"I'm going to get another daddy, mommy's been spending a lot of time with uncle Joe, and he doesn't have any daughters."

"Sweetie, we have to go. Your mom's probably called the sheriff already."

"We still have five minutes to get there."

"Yeah, but it takes ten."

"I marked the calendar."

"I saw. You know, I'd remember even if you didn't mark that calendar."

"I'm going to ask mom if I can come back. So I can go with you."

"You don't even know where I'm going. What if it's a boring teacher conference or something?"

"It's not, and I'm going to ask."

Terry knew that Megan would ask her mother, and he knew that her mother would positively say no.

"Well, you'll never get to ask her if we don't get on the road."

Megan tossed her backpack over her shoulder and Terry followed her out the door, not failing to notice the angry blinking red light from answering machine as they passed by.

Clive watched the angry red flashing light and tried to determine if he wanted to

listen to the message or not. It was eight thirty now, and he'd been watching that blinking light for very long time, trying to figure out if it mattered. Things were different for Clive now. He understood things differently. He was leaving this place. Leaving his job and his tiny apartment forever. He was going home.

Clive already knew about Matt. He'd been getting the Birkeyville paper since he moved away. It was all available on the Internet now, and he read it at work while running lab tests. He read about people that he should know, and places that he should remember, and pretended that he never left. It took him away from his job, even if just for a moment. Clive's job allowed him the free time to think about Birkeyville. He didn't even know how the testing programs and equipment really worked. His job was to put soil samples in tiny little tubes, organize them on a tray, push a button and wait for the computer to create a graph. He then printed that graph, put it in the box the samples arrived in and returned it to sender. He did this six days a week for thirteen years.

This morning, Clive read the Birkeyville news, as he did everyday, while testing his third or fourth group of dirt samples. It was right there on the front page, 'Local man dies in house fire.' At the time the paper was printed, they hadn't found a body. Clive assumed that Matt hadn't been home at the time, or that he might have even moved out of the house before the fire. He could have been at his cabin in the woods, their woods. Clive missed Birkeyville. He missed the friends that he had there, friends that he didn't have in Bloomington. They hadn't really talked for years, but there was always a Christmas card. Clive never forgot the Christmas card. It was hard sometimes because the card list was so short, just the four. He bought the packaged cards every year, the kind that come with ten or fifteen cards all matching. He'd send one of those cards to each of the

guys, and recycle the rest at work the next day.

Clive left work immediately after seeing that front page. He left his dirt samples in the machine, turned off the computer that controlled it, and went home. He called Matt several times during the day, but was pretty certain that the number he still had belonged to the now burned house. He got a busy signal every time. He'd tried to call several more times before he pushed the button on the answering machine, and heard Brad's voice. Brad was careful to not say anything specific in the message, but Clive knew.

John answered on the fourth ring; there was a good deal of noise in the background and Brad couldn't catch everything he was saying. Brad heard a loud rumbling in the other end of the line that overran whatever it was that John was trying to say. There was a long blast of what Brad immediately recognized as a train horn and a pause as John waited for it to stop before talking again.

"Yeah, I'll be there."

It was the shortest phone conversation Brad would have this day. Even the message he left for Clive was longer. The background noise on John's end of the line was loud enough that he actually wondered if John had heard him correctly. John made it clear that he had, said goodbye and hung up. Brad looked at the phone for awhile after he'd hung up. There was no one else to call. He wanted there to be one more call to make. There were five of them originally, and he'd only made three calls. Brad considered calling his own house and leaving a message on his own answering machine like the one he'd left for Clive, just to see how it sounded from the other end. Matt didn't need a call,

Matt was dead.

Birkeyville

Birkeyville was a small town, in Warren County, Indiana. In the center of Birkeyville were two roads that made up the business district. These two roads ran along side of each other and connected to an alley, making a business loop, of sorts. There was little need for that business loop now. Times had changed and the citizens of Birkeyville drove over to Landsbury, the next town over, to do their shopping at the Walmart. There were restaurants and a movie theater there as well. The residents of Birkeyville made it a regular weekend function, taking their money to Landsbury. Several of the older buildings that still stood in Birkeyville were now vacant and in disrepair. The few businesses that remained kept odd hours. The Downtown Diner was one of the remaining businesses. It opened early to catch the farmers who came in for breakfast and coffee. The farmers stayed and talked shop at the back two tables until eight or nine, and then the diner closed. Margaret, the owner of the Downtown Diner, locked the door after the farmers left. She went home everyday to let her dog out. She used this down time to check her mail and watch her soap opera. She reopened the diner at eleven in order to catch the lunch crowd, which consisted of the few people who still actually worked in Birkeyville. Margaret closed the diner again at two.

Birkeyville didn't directly connect to the main highway and got few visitors. When people did visit they rarely went unnoticed. The light green Prius that Clive drove into

town that Friday caught everybody's attention. It caught Margaret's attention as she was closing the diner up for the morning. She knew all the cars that frequented the two streets that made up the old business district, and even knew some of the rusty trucks and beaters that rarely made it into town. This was not one of the cars that belonged in Birkeyville, and she made a note of it.

Clive saw Margaret as he pulled up in front of the Alexander Sporting Goods building, and failed to realize that she was the same Margaret who played piano in what Birkeyville called the school orchestra when he went to school there. She graduated one year ahead of him but would know him by name.

Alexander's Sporting goods was part of a group of buildings that butted up against each other when Clive was last here. It now stood alone. The parking lots on either side were new additions. Clive parked his car in one of those lots and stood outside of his car trying to remember what used to be in the building that once stood there. The other side was a shoe store, he was certain. He couldn't remember what had been on this side of Alexander's.

Brad saw the light green Prius at about the same time as Margaret, and was surprised to see it pull into the lot next to the sporting goods store. He was watching the car when he saw Clive step out. Brad stepped out of the front door of the store as soon as he recognized him.

"Clive? Holy cow, it is you. Man, I've been trying to reach you for days."

"Yeah, I got your message."

"You didn't call back?" Brad reached to shake Clive's hand, and Clive missed it, looking instead at the parking lot.

“No, I thought I would just take a little road trip and see how the old town was doing. What used to be here?”

“Fabric store. Joe Beck's Fabrics and Crafts was there when we were kids.”

“Yeah, that's right. I couldn't remember.”

“Well, it's been gone for nearly twenty years.”

“Fifteen, it's only been fifteen since I was last here.”

“Yeah, but the store was vacant even then. The roof caved in and they had to tear the building down. It nearly took our building with it. The damn things shared that wall. We had to install I beams in the store to shore it up. Otherwise Alexander's would've just fallen apart.” Brad looked up as if he could still see the building that used to stand in front of them. “Well, come in to the store. Let me get my jacket so we can take a proper tour of the town.”

“No, I...I don't want to take you from your work.” Clive was still looking at the parking lot trying to see the building that used to stand there.

“What work? It's dead here.”

Clive stopped immediately upon entering the store. He stared at the open floor in front of him—a floor that was never there before.

“Where's the stairs?”

“Had to take them out.”

The large stairs that used to greet customers when they entered the store led into the lower level of the building. The handrails were painted like candy canes, and all of the plastic car models, camping gear, and games were sold down there at a separate register.

“So how do you get down there now?”

"It's strictly a single floor store now. I just use the lower floor for storage."

"I remember those stairs. That's all I really remember about this place."

Clive stared at the floor where there should have been stairs, and Brad began to become concerned. He'd liked Clive when they were younger, but never really felt comfortable around him. Brad found Clive to be awkward, and the awkwardness made him uncomfortable. He'd actually avoided Clive when they were kids, unless the other guys were around.

"Come on, I'll show you something funny."

Brad led Clive to the back of the store where there was a much smaller set of stairs that still led into the lower level.

"These back stairs were always here, even with the big ones, we just kept this door locked back then. It's kind of funny. I always knew these stairs were here, but I never used them. Even when helping to stock the place for my dad. I always used the big ones."

Brad turned on the lights in what now looked like a very cluttered basement rather than a lower level of a store. Several of the display cabinets were still in place and Clive put his hand on the one closest to him.

"Models were right here. Airplanes above, and cars down here."

"Yep, I still have some around here somewhere. I haven't sold them in years. Kids don't glue little pieces of plastic together anymore, I guess."

"There used to be a giant display of military models just there. You guys even had the little men in proper scale."

"Yeah, those sold for a while longer than the cars, but only to old men. I just stopped buying them." Brad pointed past the empty display shelves and around a stack of

boxes. "Look over there."

"Oh, the stairs. They're still here."

"Yeah, I had to cover up the hole for safety reasons. You gotta be handicapped accessible now, and those stairs just weren't. Kind of stupid having stairs that go up to a ceiling, huh?"

"They're still painted the same." Clive was smiling now and walking towards the stairs.

"You know, I remember when they got painted that way. They used to be green. You can see the original paint in a couple of places where they've been chipped. My mom was decorating the store for Christmas, her last Christmas. She didn't know that of course. She must have wasted four gallons of paint, and god only knows how much masking tape to put that candy cane stripe on those handrails. Dad just never painted them back. After a few years he even started touching them up when they got chipped or scratched."

"I thought they were always candy caned."

"Almost always. You know, you're not the only one that asks about them? Every once in a while I bring someone down here to see them. People that moved away from town come back, to see what's happened to the place. They walk into this store and I can see them looking for those stairs. Seems kind of funny, but I just couldn't tear them out. Makes for a really crappy storage area, those big ass stairs right there smack in the middle of the place, but I just couldn't tear them out.

You know what's even funnier, no one that still lives here ever asks to see them. That just seems weird to me. People that haven't seen these stairs in years can't believe their gone, but people that have been here all along barely remember they were ever here.

”

“You shouldn't, ever.”

“Huh?”

“The stairs, you shouldn't ever get rid of them.”

Brad smiled at Clive. “I'm not planning on it. I sometimes like to come down here and sit on 'em. Just sit there and hide from the world of Birkeyville for a little while. Hey, the town's really changed. You want to take a walk, see the place? No one's been in the store all week, I might as well take the day off.”

“You aren't going to go out of business, are you?” There was real concern in Clive's voice, and just a little desperation.

“Nah, not for the next few years anyway.”

The complete tour of Birkeyville took about two hours, and this included a stop at the diner for lunch where Clive was re-introduced to people who remembered him as a child. Margaret recognized him immediately after hearing his name.

After the diner they walked around what was left of the town. Brad found that he had gotten used to a lot of changes over the years and only remembered some things when Clive brought them up. He'd forgotten that there was ever a narrow sidewalk that went between the music store and the hardware store, both closed now. Terry and John had gotten caught smoking cigarettes back there by Brad's father. The sidewalk was now part of a parking lot which would provide little hiding space for the boys now. Brad remembered the movie theater that used to sit on the corner, but Clive could point out where the actual entrance to it used to be. There was still evidence of the building in the uneven lines in the sidewalk, and Clive stood at the crack that would have marked the

ticket booth window as if waiting for his turn to buy a ticket for the next movie.

“You want to drive over to my old house with me?” Clive asked trying to sound excited about seeing the place again.

“Nah, I think I better get back to the store. A lot of businesses in town don't keep regular hours, but I try to. Dad always opened the store from nine to five. I try do the same thing.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, you go on. I think you should go out there yourself, you know, to see it. I been watching it change for years now. I'm not even sure what it used to look like anymore.”

“I don't know, I'm not sure if I really want to see it. Has it changed like the rest of the town?”

“Yeah, it's all changed. All of Birkeyville. You can still tell it's the old house though. You'll still recognize it.”

Clive wasn't sure that he would. He remembered the house he and his mother lived in. He thought about it all the time. He even thought about coming back to see it a few times in the past, but was afraid to find that the house wasn't the same. The house was green when Clive lived in Birkeyville. It had asphalt siding and windows that had white frames. Clive really wanted the house to look exactly the same now, but knew that it wouldn't.

It took Clive ten hours to drive to Birkeyville. It took him twenty minutes to drive around the town and to find his old house. It was gray now, and the siding was vinyl. The windows were still white, but were new. He didn't get out of the car, he just slowed down

as he passed in front of his old house and turned out of town towards the woods they camped in as children. One hour later he was back in town again, trying to find someone he knew. He found Matt's mother, still living in the same house Matt grew up in as a child.

Visitation

When Brad showed up early at the funeral home the next day, he found Clive already there. He'd expected to see him again after he closed the store, even expected that Clive might need a place to stay. Brad waited around until well after the normal closing time, and when Clive didn't show up again, he went home. He was slightly surprised to see Clive at the visitation. He'd figured that Clive just went back home. Brad had never fully understood Clive. He was weird, unpredictable. Brad never knew what to do with him. It was Matt that seemed to keep Clive on the normal side of things.

Matt had very little remaining family, and that made the visitation uncomfortably quiet. Matt's Mother was still alive, but his father passed away six years ago. Brad saw Clive sitting with Matt's mother and they were both surprisingly jovial considering the setting. There were several cousins, aunts and uncles, and family friends in attendance, but it was far from a packed house.

There had always been a funeral home in Birkeyville. Standard Funeral Home remained in the same location, owned and operated by the same family, the Kullys, for as long as Brad could remember. The Kully family lived upstairs of the funeral home, a living arrangement that Brad always found to be a bit creepy. There were two Kully boys,

both several years older than he was, and he avoided them when in school. He found that he continued to avoid them now that he was older. They did the embalming on site, in the basement. Brad discovered this when he was in high school, and never got the horror movie image of an embalming room out of his head.

Brad nodded at Clive when he saw him and walked up the aisle to pay his respects. He didn't need to introduce himself, Matt's mother, Shirley, knew him from town, and insisted that he sit with her and Clive in the front row, misplacing the few members of the actual family who should have rightly been in those seats.

"No, that's okay, I'll just find a seat back a bit. I don't want to get in the way."

"You'll sit here with me and Clive, and when Terry and John arrive they'll sit here too. Matt didn't have a lot of family, and you all were as close as the rest." Shirley grabbed his arm and pulled him into the seat next to her. "Besides, I haven't seen you in a very long time."

"I'll be in town, we can catch up later. I think I should sit back a bit, leave room for family."

"You sit here. The family can sit back there. I don't have anything to say to them anyway." Shirley said it nicely, but there was an undertone of forcefulness in the way she said it that made Brad stop arguing.

Brad wasn't going to argue with her, especially not here. Shirley Douglas was a stubborn old woman, even when they were kids, and even the few family members present who knew that they should be sitting in the front row failed to argue about the seating arrangements.

Terry arrived about one hour into the visitation, tried to avoid the front row seats

just as Brad had, but settled in anyway. John arrived near the end of the visitation, attempted to wait patiently outside in the hall, but was quickly led to the seat that Shirley saved for him by one of the Kully boys. They all sat there in silence as family and friends walked by and gave their condolences to Shirley, and tried to figure out who the strangers sitting with her were. She introduced them by name, but not by association, forcing the rest of the attendees to struggle to place them. When there were no people giving Shirley their condolences, she asked questions of the guys, as if this were a perfectly normal thing to do at the visitation of her only son.

“So what is it that you all do now?”

They looked at each other, not sure if they should answer.

Brad answered first. “I still have the store.”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to come in. I don’t have much use for sporting goods, but I’d like to see the place. I remember that Matt loved going into that store. Nearly broke me every time. Always wanted a new bike, or a new baseball bat. There was always something he needed from that store.”

“It’s changed quite a bit, but you’d still recognize the place.” Brad wasn’t sure if she would recognize the place, and didn’t have a clear recollection of ever seeing her in the store, even when he was a kid. Matt came into the store alone, and he bought whatever he needed, or whatever he could talk his mom into, while she shopped next door at the fabric store.

“What about you Terry? What do you do now?”

“I teach middle school.”

“Really?” She sounded convincingly surprised. “What subject?”

"I teach English."

"So reading and writing?"

"Mostly the reading part."

"You like it?"

Terry looked around in the hopes that someone would come by and take her attention away from him. There were few people left in the funeral home, and most of them had congregated near the free coffee and cookies in the other room.

"Yeah, I do."

"What about you John? What is that you do?"

"I'm a mechanic. I have my own shop in Rockville Illinois."

"You used to do that here."

"Yeah, for Mr. Weather's, at the station."

"That station's gone now. It closed up pretty soon after you left town, and never reopened it. I think that old Weathers was just too old to do the work himself."

John felt the guilt of this statement. He knew that when he left Birkeyville he'd be leaving Mr. Weathers in a rough position. There weren't a lot of people willing to work in Birkeyville, and even fewer that wanted to work in a gas station that often failed to actually pay its employees.

"Yeah, he was going to retire when I left. Probably would have laid me off anyway."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I think Weathers wanted to keep that old place open. He just couldn't do it alone."

Terry jumped in to save John. "What about you? You still do the sewing? I

remember that you used to take in sewing jobs. You must have had five sewing machines in that house when we were growing up.”

“Oh, it was only three. And only one of them ever worked at a time. James kept trying to fix them, and when he couldn't get them to work he'd bring home a different one that he picked up somewhere. Matt's dad was pretty handy when it came to fixing sewing machines. He couldn't fix much else, but he could usually get one of those machines to work when I needed it.”

“You still do the sewing?” Terry asked again.

“No, I stopped doing that a long time ago. I bought a new machine when James died. I used it for a couple of years, but it just didn't work like the old ones and I got rid of it. Not much need for sewing now anyway. Everybody just buys new clothes. The kids just wear pants with holes in 'em. They buy 'em like that on purpose, if you can believe it.”

Terry smiled at her. He saw the clothes his students wore to school, and knew what she was talking about. “So what do you do now?”

“Nothing, I suppose. I watch the television, and work in my garden a little, but I'm getting too old to do much else.”

A new visitor walked up and introduced himself to Shirley, and she turned her attention to him. The guys listened to her as she tried to place this new visitor as one of the hunters that Matt rented his cabin to every year. He seemed to be more interested in whether or not he would be able to rent the cabin next year, than in talking about Matt, but Shirley politely told him that she didn't know yet.

Brad, John, Terry, and Clive had all been in this funeral home together in the past,

and they quickly blocked out this new conversation.

Clive's Father

They were twelve when Clive's dad died. It was 1991, and he was killed in a peacetime training drill. The Army was his career, his life. He signed up when Clive was a baby. He moved Clive and his mother around a lot, and eventually settled in Birkeyville. Clive's dad came home less and less often. He lived on whatever base he was stationed at, and Clive lived in Birkeyville. Clive's mom got child support checks in the mail that ensured they weren't starving, and Clive's father showed up, on average, once a year. Some years he showed up a couple of times, others not at all. Clive often didn't recognize his father when he showed up for these visits. He'd stay for a couple of days, always slept in the same bed as Clive's mother, and then disappeared again. She was always happy to see him, but Clive was indifferent. He was just as indifferent at the funeral.

They'd been sitting quietly in the second row of the visitation. None of them had ever seen a dead person before. Clive's dad was in his dress uniform. He looked mean even as a corpse. Clive was in the front row, and they had positioned themselves directly behind him so that they could talk to him when his mother wasn't paying attention. When she was paying attention they sat deathly still, and quiet. Clive's mom left the front row frequently to cry in the back room. One of the aunts that Clive didn't remember followed her in an attempt to comfort her, and the boys were left alone. They whispered to each other when she was away.

"It's like it isn't real," Brad said looking at the casket in front of them. Brad was trying not to stare, but he was sure that the eyes would open and he wanted to know just as soon as that happened.

"You okay, man? You need anything? Just let us know, we'll get whatever you need." Matt had his hand on Clive's shoulder while he talked to him.

Clive leaned back and whispered something to Matt. Matt nodded, and leaned back in his chair.

"Yeah, man, anything." John agreed, not sure what Clive whispered to Matt.

"He doesn't look real." Brad whispered trying to avoid Clive's ears. Clive heard though. "He looks fake."

"He was fake. He looks exactly like he should," Clive said quietly.

"Hey, I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that all the makeup and stuff makes him look a little weird is all."

"No, you're right. He looks fake." Clive got up and stood next to the casket.

The blue haired ladies a few rows behind the boys sighed loudly at the spectacle of the young boy looking at his dead father. Clive looked into the casket for a few moments, burst into tears and leaned heavily on the casket, threatening to tip it over. The blue haired ladies quickly got up to try to help Clive by leading him into the back room where his mother was currently bawling her eyes out. The boys overheard them talking to Clive as they led him away from the casket.

"Poor thing. You shouldn't even be here, and without a strong mother to help you understand."

"I'll be okay, I just think I need to get some fresh air. Perhaps I'll sit outside for a

while.” Clive said sneaking a wink to the other boys under the arm of one of the ladies.

Matt winked back at Clive and then turned to the others. “He wants to leave.”

They looked at Matt as if they didn't understand the statement.

“We're supposed to follow him,” Matt clarified.

They watched the old ladies lead their friend away from the casket.

“What do you mean leave?” Brad asked still staring at the corpse in front of him.

“Leave, he's going home. We're supposed to meet him outside.”

They waited a few minutes and the ladies came back in. The two ladies stood directly in front of the boys.

“Your friend asked that you come outside and sit with him. He's taking this really badly, the poor thing. Just try to help him as best as you can, it's all you can do. He'll be better in a few days.”

Matt was the first to get up. The others sat still, confused and looking at the two old ladies, for what seemed like minutes.

“Well, I think we should keep him company at least,” Matt said when the others failed to get up. “Maybe we can at least help him get his mind off of things for a while.” Matt turned to the old ladies. “You will tell his mother what happened and where we went, won't you?” Matt said holding the hand of the lady nearest him.

“Sure, we will. You go out now, and help your friend.”

The other boys followed Matt out of the funeral home listening all the time to the two old ladies talk about how sweet they were at that age.

They walked quietly to the door and gently pushed it open, not knowing where to find Clive.

Clive jumped out at them as they stepped beyond the door of the funeral home.

"Jesus, what the hell took you guys so long?"

Brad jumped noticeably. He calmed down almost instantly, when he realized it was Clive and not the corpse of Clive's father coming to drag him back inside. "What are you doing, Clive?"

"Let's get out of here."

"I don't think you can just leave." Terry said smiling. He noticed Brad's jump. He was creeped out by the corpse inside as well, but hadn't considered that it might actually be scary until he saw Brad jump. "It's your dad. You kind of have to be here."

"I'm not gonna stay. Let's take off."

"Your mom's gonna be lookin' for you," John said looking back at the doors of the funeral home.

"The old ladies will tell her what happened. I just couldn't stand it anymore. I broke down and cried. You guys saw that. You guys took me home since I wasn't ready to deal with this yet. It's exactly what she would want."

"I don't know, man. I don't think you can just leave your dad's visitation," Terry said.

"I don't know. I think he's right," Matt said. "His mom's going to wanna know that he was upset about his father. He's a shitty actor. If he stays she'll know that he's faking it. It's gonna be worse if she finds out he's fakin' it. I think this best. It's what she wants."

"Screw you, I'm a great actor."

"No, you're not. I didn't buy that crying at the casket thing for a second," Matt said punching Clive lightly in the arm.

"The old ladies bought it."

"Yeah, but they don't know you. I think Clive's right, guys. If he stays, his mom's gonna know he's faking it. That's gotta be worse than leaving because he was just too upset to stay."

"Listen to yourself, Matt. He can't leave. It's his dad's funeral," Terry said.

"It's not the funeral, it's the visitation. Clive will gather himself up again for the funeral tomorrow. He'll play the good kid at the funeral and his mom will think he's just tore up about all of this."

"I'm with Terry. You can't just leave your dad's visitation, man. It's just wrong," John said as Matt and Clive walked down the steps.

"Trust me guys, this is what she wants," Clive said as he and Matt stepped off of the final step and onto the sidewalk. "You saw the scene she was making in there. She wants the show. I'm giving her the show she wants."

John, Terry and Brad watched as Matt and Clive turned onto the sidewalk and started walking away. Terry and John looked at each other for a moment and started down the steps.

"Well at least wait up. My mom's gonna be pissed if she finds out I left early," Terry said jogging to catch up.

"No she won't. You were walking me home. It was the right thing to do."

"Your mom might buy that shit, but mine won't."

"Where we going anyway?" John asked.

"We're going to take Clive home," Matt said without turning around. He now had his arm around his friend as if consoling him. Several people on their way to the visitation

saw this as they passed. Clive ducked his head and leaned into Matt for the benefit of the passersby.

Brad hesitated on the steps for a moment longer as his friends walked away. He looked back at the doors that separated him from the corpse inside and ran down the stairs to catch up with his friends. "Just so you know, we're going to hell."

"We're not going to hell," Clive whispered back.

"We are going to hell. Your dad's gonna haunt us for leaving early and I'm gonna get grounded."

Brad didn't get grounded, none of them did. Terry was right, his mom didn't buy the story for a second, but she knew how often Clive's dad visited and figured if Clive wanted to leave, he should have that privilege. John's mother would likely have never found out that he left if it weren't for those two nice old ladies that told her how sweet and caring it was of her boy to help out his friend like that. Brad just came right out and told his dad. He was hoping his father could explain it to him, but he never tried. Brad's father just sighed a little, nodded his head, and asked if Brad was hungry. Matt's mom didn't buy it either. Matt took a similar approach as Brad and just told her. She needed no convincing. Like Terry's mom, she figured Clive's dad got what he deserved. She trusted Matt and knew that his decisions were made in the best interest of his friends.

They went directly to Clive's house. They spent their time consoling him while drinking soda and watching the Dukes of Hazzard. They left when Clive's mom came home. She was so upset with herself for getting caught up in her own grief and forgetting about him that she swore to make it up to him. Those two blue haired old ladies put quite a guilt trip on her as they were leaving the visitation. Clive's mom was pretty sure that she

didn't even know the old ladies, but felt guilty for not being there for her son anyway. She thanked all of the boys for helping Clive out in his time of need, and asked if they would stick by him at the funeral as well.

They all went to the funeral the next day, and Clive talked about doing it again. Matt convinced Clive that it wouldn't work a second time, but mostly he thought Clive should stay. They stayed for the whole thing, and sat quietly and reverently as the preacher said the prayers. They all bowed their heads at the appropriate times, even Clive. They listened as people Clive didn't know gave him their condolences, and when it was over they changed clothes and went out to the woods.

Clive, Terry, John and Brad listened as a few other people they didn't know gave their condolences to Shirley. None of the attendees at Matt's visitation had met them before. Brad was briefly recognized as the sporting goods store owner by a few of the closer members of the family, but the other three men remained a mystery to the visitors, and it seemed that Shirley intended to keep them that way. When pressed by one of the more distant relatives as to how they each knew Matt, Shirley interrupted by simply saying that they were close family friends, and was deeply indebted to them for their support in this trying moment.

As far as Brad knew, none of the four had talked to Shirley before the visitation or funeral. He was unaware that Clive had stayed at Shirley's house the night before. Clive slept in Matt's old room, which was by now a genuine guest room anyway. He'd stayed in the room before, as a child, and tried to remember all the things that used to decorate that

room.

They each took turns bringing her coffee from the back room, cookies that she didn't eat, and tissues that she didn't seem to need, until the visitation ended. The real family left, and only the five of them remained. Shirley asked that they remain a bit longer while the funeral director locked the doors for the evening. Terry and John gave Brad a questioning look, but all he could do was shrug his shoulders at them. Shirley pretended to not notice this gesture when she spoke to them.

"I appreciate you all coming. I wasn't sure if you would all make it, but it's really good that you did."

They all said the usual things, "Wouldn't have missed it," "Should have come back sooner in better times than these" and similar empty statements. Shirley smiled at each of them.

"I'm going to need you all to stay for a few days. There's some things that need to be settled out and I'm going to need your help with them."

John was always the one that said the wrong thing at the wrong time and today was no different. "Don't you have family to help you with that stuff?...I mean...Shouldn't someone other than us be helping you?"

When John said stupid things as a kid, Terry would quickly step in to clarify what John had probably actually meant and just couldn't say correctly. They fell back into the pattern immediately. "What he means to say, is that we'd be glad to help, but we don't want to cause any trouble with the rest of your family."

Shirley smiled again. "There probably are more appropriate people, but this concerns you specifically. I don't drive anymore so someone is going to have to take me

home.”

She rode home with Brad and the rest of them followed in their own cars, at her insistence. Her house was filled with food and desserts that normally accumulate at a house that has recently lost a member, and she immediately pushed these towards them.

“Eat this stuff before you leave. I don't know what they think I'm going to do with all of it. I can't even eat most of this stuff anymore. I've had diabetes for years, and damned if just about everyone brought me a cake.”

They all sat down around the table of food. They'd all sat here before as children while waiting for Matt. There was food then too, there was always food. Each of them began to remember this table as they waited for her to speak again.

“There's a matter of a piece of land that we need to discuss.” She looked around the table to see that they were listening. “That place you all used to camp when you were little. Well, Matt bought it. Bought some other land around it as well.” She paused to pick at a piece of chocolate cake, but pushed the cake away from her, clearly not interested in it. “Matt had an offer to buy it last year. It was fair price.” She waited to see their reactions.

“We knew he'd bought the place. How much land is it?” Brad asked. “I thought it was all cornfields out there now.”

“It would have been. Matt started buying up whatever land hadn't already been leveled for corn. There's forty acres now, and the offer was well within the normal price range. Matt said no.” She picked up a nearby cookie. “He wouldn't sell it.”

“Is the buyer still interested? Is the offer still out there?” John asked.

“I don't know. I wasn't involved with Matt's land. I just know that there was an

offer.” She took a bite out of the cookie she was holding and didn't want it either. She set the cookie down on a nearby napkin. “Matt never intended to sell it. I don't think it mattered how much they offered.” Shirley smiled. “He'd never sell that property. He loved it. Built a cabin out there, spent the majority of his time there. Just him and those woods. They could have offered him a million and he wouldn't have sold it. I suppose he felt like he was protecting it. I don't guess any of you've been out there in awhile.” They hadn't. “It's changed a lot over the years. The woods are nearly the same, but almost everything around it has been bulldozed in favor of farmland. That piece of land is just about the only real woods out there. I think Matt meant to keep it that way. He'd even bought up the neighboring ravine and river bottom from the local farmers over the years to add to it.”

“So, the woods leading up to the railroad tracks are gone?” Clive asked, trying to create a map of the remaining property in his head.

When they were kids they always had someone bring them out to the woods, but when that just wasn't possible they could still get there if they walked down the tracks. It was a long walk, but they could make the trip in an hour if Matt didn't slow them down. Matt didn't like walking out to the woods, and often suggested that they just camp out in his back yard instead when they couldn't find a ride. The woods were always too far away for Matt. He often suggested that they find some place closer to camp.

“Oh, I don't know where all Matt bought land. The tracks are still out there.”

Shirley pointed at the window in the direction of the railroad tracks that were visible from her kitchen. “I think you all should go out there, look around a bit before tomorrow. You know, to see what it's worth. There's a cabin out there. Matt put it in a couple of years

ago, wood fireplace only, no electricity, but I think it's stocked up. Matt usually rents it out to hunters, but I've canceled all of the rentals this season."

"I don't know, Mrs. Douglas, maybe you should have it appraised professionally. None of us know what land like that would be worth," John said.

"Don't matter what it's worth, Matt wouldn't sell it. I'm thinking that I wouldn't sell it either. I want you to just go out and look around. It's a small cabin, but nice. What I'm asking is that you all stay there for the next few days, rather than wherever you're staying now. Other than Brad, none of you are going home right away, and I believe it's a closer drive to the woods than it is to Landsbury. That is where you moved to isn't it, Brad?" There was a hint of insult in the way she said Landsbury, as if Brad had become traitor to the smaller dying town of Birkeyville.

"Yes ma'am, Landsbury."

"Well, the place is stocked up for the hunting season." She tossed the single key onto the table. "It unlocks everything as far as I know, although I'm not sure it's even locked in the first place. Probably be dry goods only, so you might want to stop at the store on your way out." Shirley immediately stood up as if everything was settled and they had already agreed. "Probably should get going though, it's getting dark earlier every day it seems."

Brad picked up the key and put it in his pocket as she ushered them out the door.

"It's really good to see you all again. I'll need a ride tomorrow. The funeral is at four, but I need to get there about an hour early, so if you can pick me up about three thirty, Brad, that would be fine."

She seemed to assume that Brad would be willing to drive her to the funeral, and

he didn't argue. They said their goodbyes and she managed to push some cookies and cakes into their hands as they left. The four were rushed out of her house, and got into their cars confused, but unwilling to argue with her about the sleeping arrangement. They waved to her as they drove away, and Brad led them to the only grocery store in Birkeyville.

The parking lot outside of The Red Chicken Market held approximately twelve cars. There was one car parked there that didn't come along with the four, and Brad knew it belonged to Rich Peterson, the owner of The Red Chicken. Rich would be closing up the store right now, but would likely let them in for last minute shopping anyway. Rich was likely to open the store for nearly any occasion, and often made the walk from the house next door to open the store for someone who just needed a gallon of milk and couldn't wait until he opened again in the morning.

"Wait, we're not actually going to go out there tonight are we?" John asked as he pulled his car in next to Brad's.

"Well, yeah. Why not?" Clive said already heading towards the store.

"Because we don't have any of the stuff we're going to need." John slammed his car into park and opened the door.

"That's why we're at the grocery store, John," Brad said trying to catch up with Clive.

"No, I mean stuff like blankets, fire wood and stuff." John stood in the open door of his car, not willing to follow them into the store.

"She said there was probably fire wood already," Brad said.

"Wait, just wait a minute." Brad and Clive stopped and turned back towards John.

"This doesn't make any sense."

"We used to actually like staying out there," Terry said leaning over the side of his truck. "I remember we used to go through all of our parents until we found one of them that would drop us off so that we could go camping out there. It was almost always Brad's dad that ended up doing it. And if he couldn't, we'd walk down the tracks carrying all of our gear just to get out there."

"Yeah, but are we really going to stay out there because some old lady told us to?"

John was still standing half inside his car leaning on the door.

"I'm not sure we have a choice in it. She already assumes that we will." Brad said walking back towards John.

"Even when we were kids we planned before going out there. It was never a spur of the moment thing. We aren't prepared to go out there even for one night, and it sounds like she expects us to stay for awhile. I have to get home." John rested his shoulders against the roof of his car.

"So what do you suggest?" Brad asked. "You want to go back and tell her we decided against it? Here's your key back, we'd rather not stay in Matt's cabin. You go right ahead, I'm not going back to that lady's house until the morning"

"We're going though, right?" Clive now walked back towards the cars and was concerned that they might not actually go. "I'm going."

"I'm going too." Brad said. "What about you Terry?"

"Well, seein' as I never managed to get a hotel room yet, I guess I'm going."

John pushed his shoulders off of his car roof and stepped out of the open door. "Great, so we're going. We have no idea what the place looks like, what we will need while we're there, or even if the damn roof leaks. Hell, it might not even have a roof." John finally began walking towards the rest of the guys. "Well, you better at least get some sleeping bags or something, Brad. There's probably no blankets, and it's going to be cold as hell out there."

Brad smiled at John. "You and Terry get the food. Me and Clive will get some stuff from the store. We'll meet out at the woods."

"A camping trip in October. Does anyone know how cold it's supposed to get?"

"John, get the groceries. We'll see you out there." Brad laughed as he walked towards his car. "Might as well leave your car here, Clive. The road might not be kept up."

Clive swung into Brad's rusty old Ford pickup, and waved at John and Terry. "See you guys in an hour or so."

Brad and Clive drove out of the parking lot while Terry and John watched.

"Shit, you believe this?" John asked Terry

"What?"

"Staying in the woods, just like that, because some old broad said so." John looked at Terry expecting to win him over to reason.

"It'll be fun." Terry started walking towards the grocery store. "We can catch up with the guys."

"I need a drink. We're buying beer too." John followed Terry to the locked door of the Red Chicken, where Terry had already started knocking.

Rich let them in and helped them find the things they would need. He recognized both of them from the visitation and got the first opportunity to find out who they actually were and how they knew Shirley and Matt. By eight the next morning he would be sharing this information with the other visitors at the Downtown Diner, and by the time Margaret opened the diner again for lunch nearly everyone in town knew who the boys were. Some of them remembered them, and some of them simply pretended to. Rich talked them into buying eggs, pancake batter, and a frying pan, just in case. He didn't sell beer. They'd have to get that at the only bar within driving distance of Birkeyville, about half way to Landsbury, and in the wrong direction to get to the woods. They had several drinks at this bar before they headed out to the woods, and a Birkeyville farmer named Otis would tell this part of the story at the diner the next morning.

On the way to the woods, and with the help of beer, John had loosened up about the unplanned camping trip.

"Do you believe we used to do this without the aid of beer?" John asked.

Terry laughed, "You're going to have fun, watch. You used to do this same damn thing when we were kids. You'd whine about cold, and rain, and heat, and in the end you always ended up having a great time."

"It's different now."

"We're older, but I think we can still manage to have a little fun." Terry punched John lightly in the arm.

"We're different. It's not like the old days."

"That's why they call it catching up. We'll sit around a fire or something, and talk about our lives. I mean, I don't even know what you do for a living."

"Mechanic." John fished around in his jacket for the cigarettes he paid far too much for at the bar.

"Since when do you smoke?"

"Since we're going out to the woods. Why?"

"I just didn't think you smoked."

"I do occasionally"

Terry laughed. "Occasionally. Like, how often."

"I was thinking about starting."

"Wait, so you don't actually smoke, but you're planning on starting?"

"Yeah?"

"You're an idiot." Terry laughed.

"It's the woods, you have to smoke. We used to smoke all the time when we were kids. Remember that pipe that Brad found?"

"Ugh! You guys put leaves in it and we all puked our guts up."

"Well, it's not like you can buy tobacco when you're thirteen."

"No smoking in my truck."

John put the cigarettes back in his pocket and looked out the window, silently watching the corn fields roll by.

Terry interrupted his silence. "Cars?"

"Yeah, and diesel trucks. I remodel antiques in my spare time for extra cash."

"Antiques, or hot rods?"

"Antiques. I'm working on my fourth Model T Ford."

"Fourth? You must really like those Model Ts."

John laughed out loud, buzzed from their visit to the bar. "I hate Model Ts, but old men like Model T's, and old men have retirement money to spend on a car they can't build themselves."

"See, we're learning stuff already. You're some kind of wrench turning pirate that takes money from old people."

"Pirate?" John pretended to be insulted.

"Well, maybe not a pirate."

"No, I like pirate." John started rubbing his chin with his index finger and thumb as if in deep thought. "Perhaps I should create a logo for the shop. It could be a pirate standing in front of a Model T, holding a wrench in one hand and money in the other."

"I like it."

They drove in silence for awhile. John contemplated that new logo, and Terry thought about the conversation he would have to have with his ex wife regarding the uncle Joe that his daughter mentioned before he dropped her off.

John broke the silence, "What do you think about Clive?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, he's not right. I like him and all, don't get me wrong, but he's not right."

"You mean like retarded?" Terry laughed as if he didn't understand the question, but he did.

"No, I think he's probably actually brilliant or something. He's just, unstable I think."

Terry turned onto a gravel road outside of town. "Nah, he's okay. He's a bit weird, but who isn't?"

"No, he's more than weird. You know, he broke two of my ribs when we were kids?"

"No shit, when was this?"

John hesitated for a moment. "It was after his dad died. I went over to hang out with him. I think you Matt and Brad were at summer camp or something. Anyway, you weren't around and Clive just disappeared for awhile."

"I remember that year, you two didn't go to camp with us, but I never figured out why you didn't want to go."

"Didn't want to go? Me and Clive both wanted to go. We couldn't afford to. It cost money to go to summer camp. Clive's mom just flat out said no, and my parents, well, they tried. They just couldn't come up with the money. So, me and Clive stayed home that summer. I never liked Clive all that much, but after a week or so, I got bored and went over to find him. He was holed up in his room. His mom told me that he hadn't been out once since you guys left. I think she was exaggerating, but I don't know man. I really think he might have stayed inside the whole time."

"Well, Clive had those weird hobbies back then. Remember the model rockets, and the planes and stuff. He was probably building models and stuff."

"Yeah, except there wasn't any of that stuff in his room. There was just a bed and a dresser, noting else. It looked like a hotel room, nothing personal anywhere. It creeped me out. I couldn't get out of there fast enough, man. I talked him into coming over to my house to play that board game he liked."

"Monopoly. Oh my god, that has to be the suckiest game of all time."

"Yeah, but Clive loved it. He'd play that damn game all day if you let him. So, I

asked if he wanted to come over and play. We played for a while and I started getting bored, so I started messing with stuff. I'd move one of the little houses, or change his money wrong when he bought something. I'd move his little top hat instead of my car, like I just forgot which one I was."

"Jeez he was always the top hat, wasn't he?"

John paused for a minute in his story before continuing. "He freaked."

"Well, he was always the top hat. You had to know he was gonna notice."

"Yeah, but if I'd done that to you or Matt or Brad, it would have been funny. We'd argue, one of us would get pissed off, and we'd end up fighting instead of playing that boring ass game."

"So you got in a fight over Monopoly. That doesn't make Clive weird. I'm pretty sure it makes him normal."

"Well, I wanted to fight, you know, instead of playing the game. I figured I'd get him wrestling around, he'd forget about the damn game and we could go outside and play ball or something instead. But he freaked...I mean, he just snapped. He pushed. I pushed back. We stood up and he swung at me. I started laughing at him, right. Dodging and weaving while he was swinging at me. But then all of the sudden he stops swinging, bends his knees and hits me with his shoulder. He hits me square in my chest picking me clean off my feet and throws me backwards."

"I wouldn't have thought he had it in him."

"Yeah, I was just floating there looking at him. And he was looking at me, no emotion in his face. I hit the corner of that weird counter top my mom had in the kitchen. It got me right in the back and cracked two of my ribs. Probably bruised a kidney."

“So, I once broke Brad's finger with a baseball bat.”

“Yeah, but that was an accident. He meant to do it. He kept swinging, always allowing me enough time to dodge, but turning me the whole time. When I got near that corner, he changed his attack and threw me into it. He meant to do it. I knew that just as soon as I'd looked in his face. ”

There was a brief pause as Terry stopped at what he thought was the drive to the woods. “Maybe it was an accident.”

“No, it wasn't. He did that. He did it on purpose.”

Terry made the turn into the woods but didn't see anyone. The road was well maintained, and he could see a fire burning out in front of what looked to be a very nice cabin further down the road.

“Well, you guys were still hanging out when we got back, so it couldn't have been that big a deal.”

“That's just it. The next day, he came over to play ball like it never happened.”

“Did you ask him about it?”

“No, I played ball with him. It hurt like hell to breath but I played ball just the same, and we had fun. Like it never happened. Except, I had to sleep on my side for three weeks and wear an ace bandage around my chest.”

Terry shrugged his shoulders as he pulled the truck up next to Brad's. “I'm sure he didn't mean it, and you couldn't have been that hurt by it, you played ball with him the next day.”

“Yeah, but it was because I felt sorry for him, you know. All that rage. What the hell did they do to him?”

"Look, you were kids. Kids don't know how to control their feelings, they do stupid things. He probably felt bad about it and just didn't know what to do. He came over to play ball the next day, right."

"Yeah?"

"He never liked baseball, but he came over to play anyway. I think that was your apology."

"It was a sucky apology."

"And he was twelve. Let it go. He's weird, but he's alright." Terry stopped the car a short distance from the cabin.

"Yeah. I guess. No harm, no foul, right?"

"No harm, no foul." Terry said smiling and pointing his index finger at John as if settling things once and for all.

No Harm, No Foul

'No harm, no foul' was a saying that Matt had picked up during their last year in middle school. He used to say it all the time. He'd say it most often when separating two or three of the guys when they started fighting. For a group of guys that were supposed to actually like each other, they fought all the time. They'd fight over television shows, or over where they should go when they were old enough to move away from Birkeyville. They'd fight over which girls would actually talk to them at school. No girls actually talked to them in school, but they'd lie about it anyway, and sooner or later they'd end up

fighting.

Clive was nearly opposed to fighting. He'd argue, but would eventually back down or give in, in order to end the confrontation.

John was the worst. He actually liked fighting. He'd start fights when he was bored. He'd push one of the guys down with no warning, and run like hell. They'd chase him, and it would end up in a wrestling match.

Every once in a while things would get out of hand. Terry would swing for real. He had a great right arm, and ended up pitching on the high school baseball team for a couple of seasons. When he let loose of that arm, someone got a bloody nose. It was usually John. Matt took it upon himself to break up these little fights when they got out of hand. Even on the rare occasions when he was the one with the bloody nose. He'd stop everything and demand that the two boys fighting make up. He'd say:

"Hey, com'on guys. No harm, no foul, right?"

The thing is, there was usually harm. Punches would have been thrown by the time Matt jumped in to stop things. He seemed to actually judge whether things needed to be broken up by whether or not someone was bleeding. The ridiculous nature of this statement was not lost on the guys. Matt would say, "No harm, no foul", but there was harm, someone was likely bleeding, and things had certainly gone afoul, but it all just stopped when he said the words.

Before they really thought about it too much, one of the guys in the fight would say the words. The other guy in the fight would repeat them.

"Yeah, no harm no foul."

It wasn't a declaration of forgiveness. It was a way to quit fighting when you'd

been beaten. You could say no harm no foul, as if you were forgiving the guy that just bloodied your nose, and he'd have to stop swinging, but somehow wasn't allowed to call you a pussy for dropping out of the fight. It worked just as well the other way. Sometimes John simply wouldn't drop out of a fight. Terry could swing all day, but John wouldn't give. He'd just take it, and try to give back for as long as he could still stand. Terry would get a couple of good blows in, look John right in the eye and say, "no harm, no foul" and John would have to stop fighting. Those were the rules. No one wins, no one loses.

It was like a magic talisman that instantly stopped fights, and they all used it. They'd have many fights over the years growing up together, but all of them stopped just as soon as someone said, "no harm, no foul." It was ridiculous. It was nonsense, but it worked.

It kept working all through high school, by which time it had actually become funny to them. Terry liked to sneak up on one of the guys, slap him as hard as he could in the back of the neck, leaving a red welt, and run away screaming, "no harm, no foul." It worked for Charlie horses, and it worked for wet willies. It became a game, and you couldn't stay mad about it. Those were the rules.

"See, it's not all bad," Terry said pointing at the cabin that was nicer than either of them expected.

"Roof probably still leaks."

"That's lookin' on the bright side, John."

"Well, it probably does...Hey?"

“What?”

“Don't mention the fight to Clive and the Brad, okay?”

“Why, your ego still bruised about it?”

“No, I just don't want to start anything, you know. Maybe Clive forgot. I don't want to remind him, you know?”

“Yeah, don't worry about it. I'm sure he's forgotten all about it. It doesn't sound like it was that big a deal anyway.”

“It happened.” John said “It happened just like I said. He meant to do it.”

“Yeah, maybe he did, but he doesn't remember it now.”

Dark

While Terry and John were doing the shopping, drinking at the bar, and making their slow drive to the woods, Brad and Clive made a very brief stop at Alexander's Sporting Goods, and quickly arrived at Matt's cabin. They had been waiting quietly for John and Terry to arrive when Brad broke the silence.

“What the hell is taking John and Terry so long?” Brad said trying to look down the drive from Matt's cabin for oncoming headlights. The main road was too far away for him to actually see anything. The trees surrounding the cabin made it seem like there was never a road out there to begin with.

“Did you see any lanterns when you were in the cabin?”

"No, too dark to really see, and it seemed like we should wait for the others before poking around."

"Yeah, it does seem a little weird. It's a nice place though." Brad looked around a little using the light from the moon and stars, but what they needed was a flashlight. They were waiting to see if Terry had one in his car.

"Makes you wonder why Matt didn't move out here full time." Clive said looking back at the cabin, now barely visible in the dark.

"Well, it isn't like there's electricity or anything. No cable television. It's nice, but it ain't the Hilton. No running water and no electric lights. I think I'd stay in town too." Brad fidgeted with some sticks he had gathered to build a fire with. "It's too damn dark out here to see anything."

"There aren't many places on Earth's surface where you can truly experience darkness."

Brad looked over in Clive's direction. "What?"

"Darkness. You can't really see darkness anymore. Even before electricity and light pollution, there were always the moon and stars that made complete darkness impossible."

"What the hell are you talkin' about, Clive?"

"Think about it. When have you ever really been in complete darkness?"

"It's pretty damn dark now."

"Yeah, but it isn't total."

Brad looked around for a minute. "There's a little bit of moon light, a few bright stars, but there aren't any lights for at least ten miles. I'd call that pretty damn dark."

“Yeah it's dark, but it isn't total. No lights for at least ten miles, but they're there. You can see them, like a glowing infection in the horizon.”

Brad tried to light the sticks he was organizing in the little fire ring outside the cabin with a book of slightly damp matches he found in his glove compartment. Unable to keep one match lit at a time he started to use them in small bundles. When these lit, the flame to burned down and weakened before he could get it to the waiting fire ring. Regardless of what he might say to Clive, Brad was now considering the idea that he might be, at least a little bit, afraid of the dark.

“Who would want it any darker than this?” Brad asked.

“I would. All that artificial light kind of pisses me off.”

“The light pisses you off?”

“Yeah, do you know that you can see every major city on earth from space at night?”

“Who can see it?” Brad asked while feeling around for something smaller to start the fire with.

“I don't know, aliens and stuff,” Clive said as he listened to Brad feel around for kindling.

“Aliens?”

“Well, I don't know. Does it really matter if anyone can see it? It still sucks.” Clive picked up a small pine twig that was under his shoe and tossed it into the fire ring, as if this would help Brad with the fire starting.

“Wow, most people are afraid of the dark and you gotta be stubborn enough to be afraid of the light.”

"I'm not afraid of it, I just think it's wrong."

"What the hell would we do without all of those lights. The world as we know it would stop as soon as it got dark. No one would be able to see anything and we'd get nothing done."

"And?"

"And what?" Brad tried to organize the small amount of kindling so it might light the next time he held a bundle of matches to it.

"And what would be the problem with that?"

"You want the world to stop. Just cut off all business and travel just as soon as it gets dark, and put everything on hold until daybreak?"

"What do we do that is so important that it needs to go on twenty four hours a day?"

"Jesus, you think too much. Are you on drugs or something?"

"Huh?"

"This is totally a conversation a couple of pot heads would have."

"It's been my experience that potheads are afraid of the dark."

Brad laughed out loud, and kicked the small pile of kindling out of the fire ring.

"Scared of the dark?"

"Yeah, most humans are."

Brad sat up in an attempt to better converse with Clive. "Okay, take me for instance. Would you think that I am afraid of the dark?"

"Aren't you?"

"No."

"One question then. We've been sitting here for almost a half hour. You have been facing east the whole time."

"So."

"You're waiting."

"Waiting for what?" Brad asked gathering the sticks he just kicked out of the fire ring again.

"The sun."

"I'm waiting for John and Terry, is what I'm waiting for."

"It's also the direction that currently has the most light. You can see the light pollution from Landsbury."

"So, I subconsciously decided to sit facing this direction because I am afraid of the dark?"

"Yeah."

"And you didn't, because you aren't afraid of the dark?"

"Yes."

"Jesus, Where the hell are they?" Brad got up and walked over to his truck in the hopes of finding some paper in the glove compartment. "You know, I thought that this was going to be awkward. I figured what the hell do I possibly have in common with all you guys now. You ain't changed a bit. I'm a little pissed off to admit it, but I might have actually missed these asinine discussions. I think I might have actually missed you, Clive."

When Matt first brought Clive to meet the rest of the guys he was quiet. He didn't really speak to them for a few days, just kind of nodded his head for yes and shook it for

no. The very first time they brought him out to the campsite, that changed. John commented on the frogs they always heard near the river, but never managed to catch, and Clive began naming them from their calls. He knew all of them and the rest of the gang was dumbfounded, not just that he had spoken, but that he actually knew something. The conversations weren't always intelligent; more often than not they leaned toward the ridiculous. They had talked about all kinds of ridiculous things as kids, but this was the first time Clive brought up the dark.

Brad fumbled for the glove box door in the cab of his truck and started pulling out scraps of paper trying to identify his registration from scrap paper in the dim light. "I hope they bought beer. I could use a drink."

"I don't drink."

"No kidding? Still?"

"Yeah. It dulls your senses."

"That, my friend, is often a good thing." Brad dug around in the bed of the truck for another minute. "You think we should turn the headlights on or something? Maybe they can't find us."

"We used to come here all the time, I think they know how to get here."

"Yeah but that was a long time ago, and I'm not sure we are in exactly the same spot. Seems like we used to camp over that way a little." Brad pointed with a hand barely visible to a spot closer to the road.

"We're close enough. Besides, they'll have the headlights on, we'll see them. They'll probably have a spot light or a whole bunch of flashlights as well."

"Right, cause they are afraid of the dark too." Brad laughed bringing over his

newly acquired pile of paper.

“Yeah.”

“It's just practical, Clive. I'm fumbling around over here. Could be a snake, a giant hole, or even a big damn bear around here. How am I going to see any of them without a light?”

“There are no bears. You're afraid of the dark.” Clive chuckled.

“No, I'm afraid of all the little nasties that live in the dark.” Brad said as he placed the paper under his little pile of wood in the fire ring. “What if you are afraid of the light?”

“Maybe I am.”

Brad looked up in the dark, as if he could determine whether Clive was serious or not by looking at his face. “New topic, okay?”

“Okay.”

“So what do you do now? I mean, you went to college and everything. Gotta be making money now. So what is it that you do?”

“I'm a lab technician.”

“Like beakers and Bunsen burners and stuff.”

“Well, I process soil samples, but yeah, beakers and Bunsen burners and stuff, I guess.”

“You like it?” Brad managed to get a small piece of the paper to burn but it didn't light the larger wood that was above it.

“No one really likes it. It's boring and monotonous.”

“I thought you were going to be a writer. You were going to write down all of

these crazy ideas you have and publish them.”

“I never really wanted to do that.”

“But we talked about it all the time.” Brad tried another piece of paper, placing smaller sticks and pine needles over the paper.

“Matt talked about it.”

An uncomfortable silence settled in around them. Brad remembered Matt telling Clive to write the stories. He was convinced that Clive could use his weird ideas to write fiction and sell a million books. Matt called it Clive's ticket out of Birkeyville.

They all had some way to get out of Birkeyville. Clive had the writing. Matt had a plan that involved selling off the farmland he would inherit and opening a bar in Florida. John was going to open his own gas station and garage some place far away from Birkeyville, and Terry was going to manage one of the tractor dealerships his family owned. Brad couldn't remember what his ticket out of Birkeyville had been. He was sure that he had one. Matt figured one out for all of them, but he couldn't remember his.

Brad never left Birkeyville. He moved over to Landsbury, but never further away than that. The rest of them had moved away shortly after high school. Clive went off to college, Terry went into the military and ended up in Missouri, and eventually to college where he became a grade school teacher. John ran off with his girlfriend Mary before he even graduated high school. Matt and Brad were the only two that stayed in Birkeyville. Brad moved into a rental house in Landsbury, but came back to Birkeyville nearly every day. Matt never opened that bar in Florida. He never left Birkeyville.

Brad broke the silence. “How about lighting this fire for me? I know it's light and all, but it's also warmth. Besides what's camping without fire?”

It was too dark for Brad to see, but Clive was smiling, and he knew it.

"Yeah, whatever. I'm afraid of the dark. Light the damn fire."

Brad got up and handed Clive the remaining matches. A few minutes later Clive had a small, bright fire going. Brad didn't see what Clive did to the little pile of sticks and paper to get it to light, but he assumed it was some kind of Clive magic. He knew Clive was the one that should be starting the fire all along, but felt the need to try himself anyway.

By the time Brad needed to go for some more wood, the lights from Terry's car flashed across the campsite. Clive and Brad watched the head lights go out, and they waited for John and Terry to get out of the car. It took longer than it should have, but eventually Terry stepped out of the car.

"What the hell, started without us?" Terry said.

Brad looked up from his place next to the fire. "It's been two hours."

"Traffic," Terry said giggling.

"Get held up by some deer or something?" Brad asked.

"Yeah, like I said traffic. All the little critters kept getting' in our way."

"Smashed the shit out of a possum a few miles back," John chimed in.

"So what did we miss?" Terry asks, breathing the smell of stale beer into the small campfire ring.

"Oh, all kinds of stuff. I'm afraid of the dark, and Clive is afraid of light."

Terry cocked his head a little as he tried to figure out what Brad just said.

"Wait...Oh, let me guess, Clive came up with that? Remember that day we got into a discussion about aliens watching us from up there?" Terry pointed up at the sky.

"It's not that weird." Clive corrected.

"Oh, it was weird," Terry nodded as if somehow making it certain with the motion.

"That was the stupidest of our conversations. I forgot about the aliens." Brad added.

"Not as stupid as the bear-sized raccoon thing." John laughed.

Bear-Sized Raccoons

About midway through the summer in which they met Clive, Matt decided to bring him out to the campsite. He didn't ask the other guys if it was alright, he just brought Clive along. They would have said no, had he asked for their opinions. He kept bringing Clive, and they adapted to having him along. There was no cabin back then, just a group of trees a short distance from the road that they could camp on. The land was owned by a friend of Matt's family, but it was Brad's father that usually brought them out. Even then, Birkeyville was probably one of the few places that twelve year old boys could camp out by themselves with little worry about them getting into trouble. And the boys did, every chance they could get. They'd set their two tents up with the doors facing the campfire and talk for most of the night about things that only twelve year old boys really care about.

Clive quickly became one of them, but it was almost at the insistence of Matt that this was happening. The others would likely have forgotten to invite him if it weren't for

Matt. The talks they had were far more interesting when Clive was present, and Matt asked this question out of boredom in the hopes that it would spark something interesting from Clive.

“What is the scariest animal you can think of?”

“Wolf.” Terry nodded his head as if there simply couldn't be anything scarier than a wolf.

“No, a mountain lion is scarier than a wolf,” John added, nodding with the same certainty that Terry had.

“Change my answer; mountain lion. Mountain lion is absolutely the scariest.”

“We don't have mountain lions do we?” Brad asked trying to look serious rather than scared at the idea of mountain lions walking into camp.

“I think a bear is the scariest animal. They're big, they're strong, and they're usually pissed off about something,” Matt said tossing a stick he was scratching the ground with into the fire.

“A bear sized raccoon.” Clive added, as if he'd actually seen one, and that it was a perfectly normal animal to include in this conversation.

Matt smiled when Clive answered. He knew that Clive would answer, and he knew that it would be good when he did. It always was.

“A bear-sized raccoon?” John asked in amazement. “What the hell is a bear sized raccoon.”

Clive looked up from the fire. “A regular raccoon, except the size of a bear.”

“Why the hell would a bear-sized raccoon be any more scary than a bear-sized bear?” John asked.

"They have hands," Clive offered, with seemingly little thought.

"Hands?" Brad asked

"Yeah, bears have claws. They can swat at you, maybe push you down, but they don't have hands."

Terry was still certain that mountain lion was the best answer. "So what, the bear-sized raccoon could walk up to you and pinch your little head like a zit?"

"They don't have real hands. It's not like they have thumbs or anything, but they'd certainly have more options than a mountain lion that only has clunky old claws." Clive was completely serious and nearly unaware that the others were joking at his expense.

"Yeah, but none of those things live around here. We don't have mountain lions and bears right?" Brad asked still trying not to sound scared.

"Plus them little bastards are smart." John had just recently begun to use the word bastard a lot. His parents were the easiest to get along with, but they still wouldn't tolerate cussing. Bastard was as close as he was comfortable using out loud.

Terry on the other hand seemed comfortable using all of the words he had heard from his father and mother during their many arguments. They had all begun to discover the finer points of the English language. John seemed to be satisfied with the word bastard, while the rest of the guys tried to look completely comfortable using language they wouldn't dream of using in front of their parents.

"You're fucked up man. I mean, seriously. You need help. It ain't right to be thinking about bear-sized raccoons." Terry said.

"No, I think he's right. A bear-sized raccoon would be really scary." John was coming around to the idea. "They're really smart. We had one once that could open all of

our garbage cans. My dad made me tie the lids down on all of them with some rope. I used real knots and everything, those ones from the boyscout book. Those little bastards untied the knots and spilled that garbage everywhere. They're smart. That's why they're scarier than bear-sized bears, right Clive?"

"You had a bear-sized raccoon in your yard?" Terry said in mock confusion.

"No, it was a regular-sized raccoon," John said throwing a stick at Terry.

"Yeah, but bear sized raccoons aren't real. We don't have mountain lions or bears, so what's the scariest thing we have around here? That's the question." Brad asked.

It was quiet for a moment as John got up to get some more firewood, but just as soon as he returned Brad started in again. "I don't see why bear-sized raccoons are even an option. They're not real."

"I never said it had to be a real animal," Matt said as he poked at the fire. "My question, my rules. Bear sized raccoon wins." He tapped Clive on the shoulder for coming up with the idea.

"Bear-sized raccoons are stupid and shouldn't count," Brad said under his breath.

"Bear-sized raccoons aren't stupid. Clive's right, they'd be scary as hell," Matt said.

Matt always defended Clive's arguments. He thought they were just as weird as the rest, but none of them ever came up with any good ideas, and they had to talk about something. If it were up to John, Terry or Brad, they'd all be talking about stuff they watched on television the night before. Clive ensured that they would find something different to talk about, and somehow bear-sized raccoons were still more real than whatever happened on the Dukes of Hazzard, or in the G.I. Joe cartoons they watched on

television. It was the reason he brought Clive along. Matt thought that Clive was just as weird and awkward as the rest of them did, but Clive was good for conversation. He kept things interesting.

“They wash their food you know?” Clive said out of nowhere.

“Does that make them more, or less scary?” Brad said trying to look around for the mountain lions and bears that might be walking up to their camp even now, but trying not to be obvious about it.

“More scary. They use their hands to rip out your spleen, and then take it down to the river so they can wash all the blood and guts off of it before they eat it.” John smiled.

“Oh, yeah. That definitely makes them the scariest. Mountain lions and bears could never rip out your spleen while you were still breathing,” Matt added giggling.

“What the hell is a spleen anyway?” John asked, and they all laughed out loud.

They all laughed at how stupid the bear sized raccoon discussion was when they were kids, but soon quieted down. They went from being awkwardly loud for the quiet setting of these woods to complete silence. They all felt that silence.

“Weird ain't it? I mean, here we are talking about old times, and then suddenly, silence. Like a part of the conversation is just missing. Kind of like we're all waiting for Matt to say something,” Brad said. “Like he's going to kick start the conversation like he did when we were kids.”

“You know what's really weird? It felt exactly like that at the funeral home. I kept waiting for him to jump out of that coffin, and start laughing hysterically at how badly

he'd burned us all," Terry said. "Like he was going to sit up and smile that damn grin he had, and just start raggin' on us for falling for it."

Clive tossed the stick he had been scratching at the ground with into the fire. "I think it's always that way. Every time you look into a casket you kind of expect the person in there to sit up. They never really look dead."

"That's true. It's all the damn makeup. I remember my dad looked better in that casket than he had in almost three months," Brad added.

"I remember when my dad died. I waited for weeks. I just kind of expected that he would show up, you know. Just walk in the kitchen and kick his shoes off like nothin' had happened," Clive said looking at Brad. "Did that happen to you when your dad died, Brad?"

"No, it's different when you expect it. When you see them suffering you start to look forward to it a little bit. It sounds mean, but you just kind of hope that today he'll die, and he won't suffer anymore."

"Jeez, you think Matt suffered?" John asked.

"Nah, smoke inhalation, it's quick," Terry said.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I almost bought it one day out in the shop. Carbon monoxide gets you quick. You get dizzy and light headed, and then, bam, you're out." John added.

Brad reached over and fished around in the cooler. "I think he knew."

"Knew what?" John asked.

"I ran into him in town a few months ago and the diner. We got to talking about this place. He invited me out, like he did every time I saw him. We talked for a long time

just sitting there at the diner but eventually he got around to asking me if I would do him a favor. I don't think he knew exactly what was going to happen. He just had a premonition or something."

"Bullshit, He didn't call you and tell you he was going to die," Terry said.

"No, he called and asked me if I would get you guys together if he did die," Brad said. "I said sure. I never thought he'd actually die."

"Seriously?" John asked.

"Yeah, seriously," Brad said twisting the cap off of a new bottle of beer.

Clive got up and started pacing around a bit. "He knew?"

"No, I don't think he knew. Not really. I mean he was just covering the bases, you know just in case. I've done the same thing. I got a will and everything. You just start thinking about these things. I think he was just concerned that if something happened, you guys wouldn't find out. He just made me promise that if he wasn't around I'd try to get you guys all together again. You know, like we used to."

"He was always trying," Terry said, looking at the rest of them in the fire light.

"At least once a year, he'd ask if I would come up see the new place, go hunting or something. I was always too busy."

"Yeah," Brad said. "Me too. I came into Birkeyville every day, and every time I saw Matt he'd try to get me to come out here. I came out a few times a couple of years ago. We went fishing in the river. Didn't catch a damn thing."

"He called me last year sometime. His car had broken down or something and he wanted to know if the mechanic he was talking to was screwing him on a new transmission." John laughed. "I bet the damn car wasn't even broke. He spent all of his

time asking me if I wanted to come up and go hunting with him for deer season. By the end of the call he'd forgotten all about the car. I had to remind him about it before he hung up."

"You think he knew?" Clive asked again.

"Relax, Clive. He didn't know. You can't know things like that. It was a freak accident."

"I hope he did know. I think I'd want to know," John said. "At least then you can plan. It's like you said Brad. You could get your shit in order. Make sure that everything is settled. I think I'd want to know."

"But he didn't get things in order. You heard his mom. He didn't plan stuff out. He didn't even figure out what to do with this damn place, except he didn't seem to want to sell it," Brad said.

"I wouldn't want to know," Clive said.

"Anyway, what the hell are we supposed to tell his mom tomorrow?" John asked.

"What do you mean?" Brad asked.

"She sent us out here, for God knows why. We're supposed to look the place over, but it's too damn dark to see anything. Are we supposed to talk to the guy that wants to buy it from her? She already said that she doesn't want to sell it. What exactly is the point of all this?"

"Yeah, it's weird isn't it?" Terry said.

"Well, she's upset. She's probably not thinking things through. I think we should try to be there for her. Matt would want that. Maybe we can help or something. Maybe just being there, you know." Brad said before taking a drink of his beer.

"But she isn't upset. Don't tell me you didn't notice that. She might have been sad, definitely pissed about something, but not like out of her head upset," John said.

"Yeah, not normal upset. There's something there, but it didn't seem right," Terry added.

"Grief is weird, you just kind of hide under other emotions sometimes. I remember that I couldn't cry when my dad died. Not really. And I tried, because it seemed like the right thing. I felt like I was failing somehow because I couldn't do it. It's weird, and you realize that you aren't always in control of your emotions." Brad looked up to see if they could understand him.

"Yeah, I get that," Terry said, "but it didn't seem like that to me. It didn't seem like she was struggling with her emotions. I don't doubt that just as soon as we left she broke down and just bawled her eyes out. I think that's why she pushed us out of the house so damn fast. But when we were in the funeral home, she was different."

"Yeah, I saw it too. She was angry," John said. "And all the people in that room knew it, and I think they knew why she was angry."

"They want the land," Clive said out of nowhere.

"She told you that?" Brad asked.

"No. But I could tell. Think about it. Matt had all this land? You saw his family. They don't really have anything. They want the land." Clive sat back down in front of the fire.

"Yeah, but if she sells it they get nothing. The land is gone, and the money goes to her. It doesn't make sense. It didn't look to me like she was planning on sharing it with them," Brad said.

"Yeah, they get nothing, and they're mad about it," Clive said scratching his head.

"That doesn't make sense Clive." John tossed his beer bottle towards the small growing pile of empties near a tree. "I think she is thinking about selling the place. She wants us to look at it, because she can't look at it herself. She expects us to come back tomorrow with some kind of report on things here, and probably an opinion on whether or not she should sell it."

"So what are we going to tell her?" Clive asked.

"Hell if I know. It isn't like she can use the place. She can probably use the money more. Maybe she should sell it," John said.

"She can't sell it. Matt wouldn't let her," Clive said.

"Yeah, well, he hardly gets a say in it now." John regretted saying this just as soon as the words left his mouth.

As always Terry stepped in to try to smooth the awkward comment out. "Well, he can't speak in person, sure, but he obviously has a say in it. I don't think she wants to sell it. I don't think this is about selling this property at all. She sat right there in her kitchen and told us that she wouldn't sell it. So what the hell are we here for?"

The woods grew quiet except for the light popping and sizzling of a wet branch that Brad tossed on the fire a few minutes ago. They all watched the branch that noise was coming from in silence.

"Okay, so let's start right here." Brad said. "Matt wouldn't sell this place. His mom doesn't want to sell this place. So, what is it about this place? Why the hell are we out here?"

"You guys been inside?" John asked.

"Yeah, but it was too dark to see anything," Brad answered.

"Well, let's take a look," Terry said.

Matt's cabin

The cabin consisted of two rooms. The main room framed a very large stone fireplace at one end. There was a small kitchen area that contained a propane stove and a sink. The sink had no faucet, but the drain appeared to go outside somewhere. The smaller room held six bunk beds and provided little room for anything other than sleeping. The cabinets were well stocked. There was little use for the stuff John and Terry bought except for the eggs and milk, and the cabin even had those in dried form. All of the food was stored in plastic containers that seemed too organized and well planned to be of Matt's own design. There were three windows in the cabin. One on each side of the main room, and one located on the back wall of the sleeping room. The beds were made with what looked like new blankets and pillows in colors that didn't match the rustic cabin.

"Okay, so she lied. We can pretty much agree on that, right?" Terry asked.

"Yeah, she's been here. When I was up here a couple of years ago with Matt. It was relatively unfurnished. It looks like the food and bedding are all new." Brad said.

"So what does that mean?" John asked.

"It means she didn't need us to come up and look at the place for her. She was up here herself just a day or two ago." Brad ran his finger down the island counter that

separated the small kitchen from the main room. "I think she even dusted."

"Alright, so what is she up to?" Terry asked.

"Maybe she just wanted us to come up here. Stay here, you know, like we used to," Clive said while looking through the small cabinets in the kitchen area.

"Yeah, maybe. But I think she's up to something. It doesn't make sense. She could have just called us when it first happened and invited us to stay here. She didn't. She waited for us to show up."

"Maybe she didn't know how to find us," Clive said.

Brad shook his head as he opened the door that separated the sleeping room from the rest of the cabin. "I would have given her your numbers, she knows that. Besides, I bet she has them herself. She never did ask any of us where we'd moved to. She obviously knew I had moved out of Birkeyville and into Landsbury. Most people assume that I still live above the store. None of us are that hard to find."

Terry peeked past Brad into the sleeping rooms. "I'm just glad that there aren't five beds in that room. I got this weird image of five beds each with our names carefully carved into the headboards or something right before you opened the door. That would have been it. I would have left you guys here and went right back home. I know that Matt always wanted us all to come back here and do our thing again, but that would be too much."

"Yeah but only four of the beds are made and that's pretty weird," Brad added.

"Yeah, but she did that," Terry said. "It wasn't Matt. She made four beds because there are four of us. That's not creepy, that's just crazy old lady."

"No, it is a little creepy," Brad said. "She has to know that we'd figure out she was

the one that came up here cleaned the place up and made those beds. She isn't even trying to hide it, and that's a little creepy."

"I think it's nice. She's trying to make the place nice for us," Clive said, still looking through cupboards in the kitchenette.

"Yeah, but why?" Terry asked.

"It's just what old ladies do."

Brad looked around the place a bit more as if he had lost something and couldn't find it. "It's completely cleaned out."

"Yeah, we've established that," Terry said.

"No, there used to be stuff here. It was never a lot of stuff, but Matt always kept stuff here. There used to be a tackle box on that shelf, and the rod and reel used to hang from that little hook there. He always left it there, in case he wanted to come up and go fishing. He told me that himself, just in case I ever wanted to come up and go fishing when he wasn't around." Brad walked across to the big stone fireplace. "And there were pictures on the walls. Pictures of us as kids, and some pictures of this cabin being built. There was a giant aerial photo of the whole property right here on this wall. Why isn't all that stuff here?"

"Maybe she wanted to take it home with her," John said.

"No, I don't think so. Look," Brad ran his fingers over the wall above the counter. "There are holes in the wall where the pictures were hung. But the hangers themselves are gone. She wouldn't have taken the time to remove the screws that held all those pictures up, would she? That big aerial photo was framed. It was screwed to this wall right through the frame. He laughed about it. Matt said the damn thing always looked crooked

when he came in so he leveled it once and for all, and just screwed it right into the wall so it couldn't ever move again. She didn't take that down."

"So Matt did before he died, I don't understand why you're making such a big deal out of it," John said.

Terry turned toward the kitchen where John and Clive were leaning on the counter. "It's creepy, that's why it's a big deal. It's like coming home to your house and finding that someone has turned out all of your drawers, and rummaged through all of your stuff looking for something."

"Personal experience?" Clive asked.

"Yeah, don't ask. The point is, Brad's right, this place is empty. She may have made the beds, and she may have stocked the cabinets, but it's still empty. There's nothing here."

"Okay, so Matt cleaned it out," John said.

"Right, and why would Matt do that?" Terry asked John directly.

"How the hell should I know."

"He was getting ready to sell it."

"But she said he wouldn't sell it?" Clive asked.

"Right, and she also said that she couldn't come up here on her own," Brad said.

"If you guys are through with your Scooby Doo moment, do you mind if I start a fire in here and bring all the chairs in. It's a lot warmer in here than it is out there," Clive said while moving towards the door. "It isn't for sale. Matt wouldn't have sold it."

"Wait." Brad grabbed Clive by the shoulder before he could make it out the door.

"What do you know about this? You were closer to Matt than any of us. What do you

know?"

"He wouldn't have sold it, she was right about that. He called me and talked about it a couple of times, but he wouldn't sell it."

"It looks very much like he was going to sell it to someone, Clive. I know I'd sell to the highest bidder if it were mine," John said.

"Don't say that. Matt wouldn't sell it, neither would you."

"I sure as hell would." John said storming outside.

Clive followed him out and stopped him from coming back into the cabin. "You wouldn't sell it, John. None of you would. You don't get it." Clive pushed his index finger into John's chest causing John to smile just a little out of surprise. "It isn't about money. It's about what is right. This is the last woods. Maybe the last in the whole county. That's important. Matt was protecting this, all of it. You can't just say you'd sell it to the highest bidder without thinking."

"Okay Clive, calm down." John gently pushed Clive away from him. "Maybe I would, and maybe I wouldn't. You're right, I'd have to think about it."

"And you wouldn't sell." Clive walked out.

They silently watched Clive while he brought his chair in and started building a fire in the big fireplace. When he got the fire going well enough that it didn't need constant watching, he sat down in his chair and watched it. The rest of the guys watched him do this, looking back and forth to each other. Clive was not aggressive. John was the only one that had ever managed to see him mad, and it was only the one time. Clive was mad this time, and someone would have to smooth things out again, so that they could have a peaceful night. Matt was the one who always smoothed things out. It was his job.

He was good at it. Someone else would have to do it now.

“Okay, you say that Matt wouldn't sell.” Brad set his chair down next to Clive's and the others followed. “He didn't clean this place up so that he could sell out. But that doesn't make sense, Clive. You know something about this.” Brad pointed his finger at Clive and Clive raised his head to look at it. “So, if you want us to believe that Matt wouldn't sell, you're gonna have to prove it.”

Terry smiled a great big smile, pointed his own finger at Clive and said, “Yeah, prove it.”

“Prove it,” John added.

Prove it

By the time they reached high school, John and Terry had made a competition out of lying. John had lost his virginity the summer of his freshman year in high school to a girl from the next town over, or at least that was his story. Sometimes her name was Jennifer, sometimes it was just Jenny. She was older of course, seventeen, and it happened in a tree house. It was her idea of course, she had seduced him, and talked him into going up into the tree house. The story was nearly believable when John first told it. Except John never left Birkeyville that summer, not to visit his distant family, and certainly not for the three weeks that this relationship took place. It was bullshit, a lie. Terry had one too. At times the two stories corroborated each other. Terry knew that Jennifer was real because she knew his girlfriend Alice. While Jennifer and John were no longer seeing

each other, Terry and Alice had a very successful long distance relationship. They'd tell these stories to the rest of the guys around the campfire.

They all knew it was a lie, but they listened just the same. If they didn't want to believe these stories they would have asked either John or Terry to prove it. It was another one of Matt's rules. If you knew someone was lying, you could ask them to prove it. They had to. If they couldn't prove it they had to admit to the lie. No one wanted to admit to lying.

"Prove it," Matt said with a smile.

The other guys smiled a little as well. The talks around the campfire often degraded into nonsense, and at any time anyone of them could have said the words that demanded evidence. 'Prove it'. It was Matt that started it, and it was Matt that usually demanded the proof. But Matt never asked Clive to prove anything. It was as if Clive was off limits.

"What?" Clive asked.

"You heard me. Prove it."

"Oh, no. You have to prove it now, Clive. You have to give us proof. Ha ha." John danced around the campfire singing "Clive has to prove it."

No one had ever asked Clive to prove anything. He was the smartest of the group, and just about everything he said had at least the illusion of truth in it. Even in the bear-sized raccoon discussion, Clive had never suggested that there might actually be bear-sized raccoons, just that they would be damn scary if they did exist. Only Matt would have even thought of asking Clive to prove anything. Clive knew stuff, and it was risky to ask him to prove anything, because he probably could, and there were penalties involved.

Penalties could be anything from helping one of the guys out with chores, to doing something really horrible like eating bugs. If you lost, if you couldn't prove it, you were at the mercy of the rest of the guys.

"You can't prove God doesn't exist," Clive said sitting back down.

"Then he exists," John said smiling.

"Prove it," Clive said under his breath.

They all looked to John, who looked just on the cusp of saying something brilliant.

"You can't prove God exists."

"Yeah, but you can't prove he doesn't."

"Stalemate." Matt said. "Penalties for both of you."

"No fair, you have to prove that I'm wrong before you can give out penalties," Clive said.

"Yeah, no penalties unless we're wrong," John added.

"We'll vote," Matt said. "Everyone that thinks Clive and John should go get more firewood as their penalty say aye."

Everyone but John and Clive said aye.

"You suck," John said.

"Aw, don't be mad, John. It's a democracy. We voted. Now go on get that fire wood. Bring enough to last the rest of the night." Matt laughed. "You too, Clive. Bring back a whole bunch."

"I'm not actually wrong. The fact of the matter is that you can neither prove God exists or doesn't exist. I was simply stating that fact. Therefore I'm not wrong."

"You still can't prove it, and those are the rules of the game," Matt said pointing towards the dark woods. "Now, go get that firewood, loser."

"Prove that I'm wrong. You prove it."

"Don't have to, I never said you were wrong. Just that you couldn't prove you were right. You lose. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars." Matt's smile radiated up at Clive in the faint flickering light of the campfire.

"You have to, Clive. He's right. You couldn't prove it," Brad said beginning to laugh.

"Yep, couldn't prove it," Terry said, trying to console Clive a little. "Get the fire wood."

Clive followed after John still defending himself against the faulty penalty. The rest of the guys could hear him still arguing the point to John as they looked for fire wood.

"Prove to us that Matt wasn't looking to sell. What do you know about all of this?" Brad asked

Clive tried not to look at any of them and didn't answer.

"Come on, speak up, Clive." Terry prodded with his finger again.

Clive hesitated, placed his hands on his knees and sighed loudly. "Matt wasn't going to sell. He'd never sell."

"So why is all the stuff gone then?" Terry asked.

"I don't know. He never told me about cleaning the place out, just that he would never sell it. He promised."

"Promised who?" John asked.

"He promised me. I asked him not to sell it and he said he wouldn't. He never really wanted to sell it anyway. He just thought that he could use the money to set his mom up better. He was going to buy her a new house, and find some land somewhere else." Clive paused. "But he didn't sell it, he never found anyplace else, and he decided that he had to keep it. He wanted to keep it. It was important."

"So Matt was going to sell?" John said.

"No, he wasn't. We talked about it on the phone. He decided to keep it. He said it was the last real part of Birkeyville. The last untouched part. The rest of the town was dying, but this place is still alive. It's perfect. No crumbling buildings, no competition from Landsbury, nothing. It's perfect, and Matt decided to keep it that way. You heard his mom, he even bought up more land along the river."

"So why the hell did she send us out here?" Terry asked.

"It isn't her land," Clive said looking at the floor.

"So she can't sell it anyway. That still doesn't explain what we're doing here," Brad said.

"It's our land. Matt left it to us. She wanted you guys to see the place, understand what is at stake here, before telling you."

"Our land?" John asked.

"Matt left it to us. But we can't sell it either. Matt wouldn't want that. Were supposed to protect it, just like Matt would."

"Why didn't you just tell us this in the first place?" Brad asked.

"I didn't know until yesterday. Shirley told me yesterday. She asked what I thought she should do. I thought if you guys saw the place, well, you wouldn't want to sell it."

"You're serious?" John looked at Clive. "He left it to us? So we own land. How much land each, and what is it worth?"

"It doesn't matter what it's worth, we can't sell it."

"Wait, legally can't sell it, or morally can't sell it?" John asked.

"Does it matter?"

"It matters, Clive. Did Matt lock us into this place in some kind of a trust or something, or can we do what we want with it, because I don't need land," John said.

"We're not selling," Clive yelled.

"Calm down, Clive." Terry said trying to coax Clive back into his chair. "We're just talking here. We're thinking this through. We aren't deciding anything. Wills change at the last minute. This might not even be our problem. We won't know for certain that it's our problem until the lawyer makes us sign for it."

"Matt didn't change the will. If he did, his mom would have gotten the land, and we wouldn't be out here right now," Clive said, reluctantly sitting back down.

"Alright, look," Brad said. "It doesn't make sense for us to get all excited about this. It isn't our problem until the lawyers say so, just like Terry said. We're just talking hypotheticals here. If the land was left to us, what would we do with it?"

"We'd sell it," John said.

"No, we wouldn't, John. We'd talk about it. Maybe even vote on it, but we'd have to work through it first. Matt might not have even left it to all of us. We don't even know

any of the details about this yet, and we don't need to start fighting over it.”

“Brad's right,” Terry said. “We don't know anything yet. We know that the old lady sent us out here, but we don't know why, not really. Clive says that Matt left the land to us. I don't know why Matt would do that, but I can picture him doing it. Let's wait until we have more facts, before we get at each other's throats.”

“Whatever, if my name's on the land, I'm selling. I can't choose a dying town over my family.”

“John, let's just wait for the facts.”

“No, let's look at the facts we have. Clive says the land was left to us, the old lady seems to think the same thing. We're going to meet her again tomorrow and she is going to want to know what we intend to do with it. There's already a buyer out there that offered money to Matt, and it's just a matter of time before he offers us money as well. What do we tell that buyer when he asks us to sell it?”

“We tell him no,” Clive said without looking up.

“Clive's right. At least until we know more, the answer has to be no.”

“What? You can't be serious, Terry. You think you're going to move back to Birkeyville so that you can take advantage of this cabin on the weekends?”

“No, I won't move back to Birkeyville. But I don't know if I can sell this place either. Matt kept it for all of these years. How many times did he invite you back, John?”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything?”

“He invited me at least once a year, in a Christmas card. He even sent pictures of us guys as kids a couple of years back, sitting around a campfire. I'm guessing he sent you the same pictures. He knew damn well that I wouldn't show up here. It didn't matter how

many summers I got off at school, or how many times he asked. I wasn't coming back. But in every one of those letters he asked. All he wanted was for us to come back and see the place once a year. None of us did. I could of, but I didn't." Terry ran his fingers through his early graying hair. "All he ever wanted was for us to get back together, maybe once a year. Maybe once every five years. We didn't. We were shitty friends. We screwed up. Now you're ready to jump in here and screw this up the rest of the way, just sell the place that Matt kept for all these years?"

"We can't sell it, because it isn't ours," Clive said poking at the fire that didn't appear to need tending.

"You just said that it was." John said.

"It isn't really ours. It's still Matt's. We have to do what Matt would have wanted."

"Clive, we don't know what Matt would have wanted."

"I think we do, John," Terry said. "We do know what Matt would have wanted. If he wanted to sell it, he would have."

"Whatever, I'm going to get some fire wood."

John walked out of the conversation, and was quickly followed by Terry. John made it to the bottom step before he turned back around to confront Terry again.

"Look, just leave me alone for a bit, okay?"

"No. It doesn't work like that, John. We need to discuss this issue. You can't just run away from things all the time. You've run away from everything, and where does it get you?"

Running Away

"I'm doing it. I'm running away."

John said this at least once a month, and no one really believed he would ever actually go through with it, but they humored him just the same. It was their sophomore year in high school, and John had been threatening to run away for three years.

"The Himalayas? Man I can't wait. I'm gonna climb right up to the top of that mountain and spit on the whole world." Matt always got John talking about the Himalayas.

John wanted to run away from his parents. They were drinkers, and while not physically abusive, they seemed to have more time for the bar just outside of Birkeyville than they did for John. They rarely knew where he was, probably only had a vague idea of what grade he was in, and didn't seem to care about his grades.

John's grades were excellent. Any of the other boys would have been proud to come home with the A's that John received. John might not have been all that smart, but he could remember things. Memorization counted for more than learning when it came to school, and that meant that John did exceptionally well.

"Nah, I ain't got enough money saved to go to the Himalayas yet. I think I'll start with the Smokey Mountains. If I catch the train out tonight, I can be there in just a few days." John pulled out a train schedule and a map and unfolded it for the guys to see.

John wasn't kidding about running away. He planned the trips, knew how to get the tickets, and where to change trains. He had maps of at least seven states, along with all the travel information that state visitors bureaus sent him. John learned that you could

write for this information in a history class two years ago, and he had started mailing away for the maps and info immediately. The class project was to research one of the states. John got Texas. He sent away for all the stuff just like he was supposed to and wrote the paper on Texas, but he also sent away for Tennessee, Maine, and Alaska. Lots of kids talk about running away, but John meant it, and he was planning the trips in detail.

"I don't know man, you start settling for the little mountains and maybe you'll never get to the Himalayas. What if you see those Smoky Mountains, and that's enough. Then I'll have to go to the Himalayas all by myself." Matt was never going to the Himalayas, he knew this for a fact. He hated the cold, and he hated hiking. He didn't even like making the hike out to the woods when they couldn't find a ride.

The trip to the Himalayas was a distraction. Matt found John one weekend on the verge of running away. Matt asked him where he was going to go, and at this point John really didn't know. It took a while, but Matt convinced him that they should all go. He convinced John to plan the trip and start gathering gear for it. Matt, of course, suggested they not mess around with any lame short trips, and that they should plan a really big one. He suggested the Himalayas, not because he ever wanted to see them, but because it sounded like it required a great deal of planning, and research. He convinced John to wait, do some research, collect the necessary gear, and they would all go with him. John agreed, and postponed his departure for awhile. He kept postponing it, sometimes Brad couldn't make the trip and they would decide to not leave without him. Terry convinced John that they would need money for gear and Sherpas when they arrived at the base. They would have to wait a little longer. Matt's goal was to continue postponing the trip so that John would never actually run away at all, and it worked for a very long time.

“Shut up, Matt, we're not going to the Himalayas. You know that. You've always known.”

“That's not true, man. We're going, but you can't just start out on a trip like that. It's a serious commitment. People die on that mountain. We need to make sure we got all our shit in order before we can leave.”

“I can't wait any longer. I'm going to the Smokies. I'll send a post card back, and you guys can meet up with me there when you get all the stuff figured out.”

“It won't work, John. Look at these knuckle heads.” Matt pointed at Terry, Clive and Brad. “They can't do it without you. Look how long it's taken them already to get all the stuff together and everything. You're the planner, man. If you go, we'll never make it to the Himalayas.”

“He's right. I got a couple of packs from the store already, but they're not the right kind. Maybe big enough to hold a couple of days worth of gear, but they won't work for the Himalayas.” Brad tossed a stick into the fire as if the argument was already over.

“I can't wait any longer. I have to leave this weekend.”

“What's the rush this time? What's up now?” Matt walked John away from the fire into the relatively private darkness that surrounded their campfire. The other guys could still hear them, but not well enough to catch more than a few words at a time.

The rush this time was that John had been saving money for the Himalaya trip for nearly two years. None of them knew how much money he had saved up, but they all knew that he had acquired enough to actually make running away possible. He hid that money in an envelope taped behind a picture in his room. The rest of the guys always imagined this picture hanging several inches away from the wall, because of the huge

wad of money that John had tried to hide behind it. In actuality, it was a pretty good hiding place. John went to the bank occasionally and changed in the smaller bills for twenties. There was even a fifty or two in that envelope. Except when John went to count it, that envelope was forty dollars lighter. John's parents had found the money and "borrowed" some of it.

"There you go. You have to at least wait until they pay you back. Otherwise, it's like giving them forty bucks for nothin'." Matt understood how money worked at the Pearcy house, but made the argument anyway.

At the Pearcy house, money was communal. The very act of hiding it away from the rest of the family was practically a sin. The forty dollars would never be paid back, and John's parents now knew that there was more where that forty bucks came from. It would take them less than a few weeks at the bar to burn through the money that John had been saving for almost two years. They'd offer to pay him back, of course, but they never would. Even hiding the money in a new location wouldn't solve the problem, they knew he had it, and they would eventually ask for it. From John's perspective the money was already gone.

"I can't wait for you guys. I'll go up to Tennessee, get a job in a coal mine, or something. We'll get the money faster that way. I'll start gathering gear there too. They got mountains in Tennessee. That means they'll have the right gear for climbing mountains too. We can't get that stuff around here. This is the best plan."

"Man, I don't think so. You'll get a job at the coal mine, sure, but then you'll have to find a place to live. You'll have taxes, and utilities, and food expenses. There's no way you're gonna save any money out there. It's twice as expensive to live in Tennessee,

maybe even three times.” Matt didn't know much about utilities, food or taxes, but he'd heard his father complaining about them all the time, and knew that they could keep a person from saving any money.

“Why would it be more expensive?” John wasn't yet convinced to not run away, but he was curious about this new dilemma that wasn't in his plan.

“It's more expensive because it's by the mountains, everybody knows that.” Matt was quite sure that not everyone knew that, but it sounded as good as anything. “You think we're the only ones that want to go to the mountains? Lots of people want to go, and that means they can raise the prices on damn near anything they want. It's gonna cost a lot more to live in Tennessee than it does to stay here.”

“Well, maybe I'll just get close to the mountains, stop somewhere not that close. Then I can save up some money, and you guys can all come up and we'll see the mountains all at the same time.”

“I don't know. That seems like settling. I already told you, it's the Himalayas or nothing for me. You start settling for the lesser mountains, and then you never get around to actually seein' the big one. You have to do it right. Start with the big one and then see the little ones. That way you have something to compare the other mountains to.” Matt was pretty sure he had talked John out of running away again, and was getting a little loose with his arguments.

“You're never going to go at all, Matt.”

“The hell I ain't. I'm just saying, wait a little longer. Hell we all want to go to the Himalayas. If you go wasting money and materials moving half way across the country, then it's likely that none of us is gonna get to go. We're doing this thing together, right?”

"But the money, it's already gone. All I have left is the money they didn't take."

"You're forty bucks short, that's all. Let 'em have it. You should be thinking about getting a bank account for the money anyway. You knew they'd find it in your room eventually. Get a bank account man. That way we can all start putting money in." Matt didn't know how bank accounts worked. This was more of the stuff he'd heard from his dad.

"They won't give me a bank account."

"I got one." Brad said as if he had been part of the conversation the whole time. Brad was not aware that minors needed a signature from a parent to open a bank account. He assumed that John could just open one up on Monday. "We'll go into town and set one up. We can get it in all of our names, that way we can all start putting money into it. Hell, I'll even take the sixteen bucks I got in mine and transfer it over."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, man." Matt jumped in. "I got seven bucks left from workin' the rifle range. I'll put that in there. I'd just spend it on candy and soda anyway."

They all looked at Terry, who was trying to pretend that he wasn't listening in on the conversation. They expected him to add to the money as well, even though Matt and Brad were pretty sure it wouldn't really come to that.

"Terry?" Matt asked.

"What? I got, like, fifty cents. You can have that if you want, but it's hardly worth puttin' in the bank."

"Fifty cents? What the hell man? You worked at the same rifle range I did, huffed the same damn targets and picked up the same brass. How do you only have fifty cents?"

"I had to fix my bike. You know the tire was gone. I'd patched the thing a hundred times. I bought a new tire and tube for it."

"Shit man, you're supposed to be savin' for the trip," John yelled, pissed off that Terry wasn't taking this seriously.

"Well, hell, that's gonna put us back at least a couple of more weeks." Matt was smiling now. He'd won, he was certain of it. "You can come with me this week to the rifle range again, but you're getting all the brass. I'm only doing the targets. You can add the money you make to the bank account when we get paid."

Matt made it clear that none of this would actually happen in a look he gave to Terry. Terry agreed, and the emergency had been averted.

"What about you, Clive. You got any money to add?" Matt asked giving Clive the same look he gave Terry.

"Uh, yeah. I got like twelve bucks. I'll bring it with me next time. We can put it in the bank too."

The discussions about running away worked in a similar fashion every time it came up. It wasn't always about money, but it always ended up being about the trip they would be taking to the Himalayas and how they weren't quite ready to go. Each time they talked John into waiting a little longer, or sometimes out of running away altogether. It didn't always work well, but it worked.

It kept working until John's senior year. John met Mary. Mary got pregnant. John disappeared with Mary. Mary lost the baby, and every baby after that one, for the next fifteen years. They never came back to Birkeyville, not until John came back for Matt's funeral.

"I'm not running away. I'm just done talking about it."

Terry followed John away from the cabin and towards the original fire that had nearly burned itself out. John started picking up what wood he could find, and Terry stopped him. Clive was still muttering something about not selling the land inside and Brad was doing his best to calm him down.

"What the hell does it matter? Why does this even matter?" Terry asked John.

"Because I need the money."

"Just wait awhile. Clive can't keep this, none of us can. We'll have to sell it eventually, man. Just wait. Stop starting fights about it right now when it doesn't even matter."

"It does matter. I'm losing my business, going bankrupt."

Terry paused a moment. "Man, I'm sorry about that. How's Mary taking it?"

"She's pregnant. She doesn't care about the business."

"That's not true. I'm sure Mary wants the business to work out."

"No, man. Mary wants the kid. The business is mine. She's always wanted the kid. We've been trying for years, and she always loses it early in the pregnancy. She's seven months now, and it's a sure thing at this point. We're having the kid."

"I'm not trying to be insensitive here, man, but I don't follow."

"Fertility treatments are expensive. My insurance didn't cover them. We took a loan out against the business and now we can't pay that loan back. If this land is ours, I can sell my share and keep my business."

"You like owning your own business enough to sell out Matt's land?"

"I hate owning my own business, but that doesn't mean I can avoid paying back the debt."

"Wait, if you don't like the business, just let it go."

"It doesn't work that way. I default on the loan, I lose my credit. If I file for bankruptcy I lose my credit. I lose no matter what I do. Kids cost money."

"Have you considered just selling out the business?"

"And do what? I still have bills to pay you know?"

"Build those old cars. Become that wrench turning pirate."

"You can't make real money doing that. I'd sell one of those cars maybe every three or four months. That's not a living."

"Okay, get a part time job working for someone else and spend the rest of your time building those cars. Unless you hate building those cars too."

"I do hate building those cars."

"Maybe you should think about a new career choice." Terry laughed. "It doesn't sound like this mechanic thing is working out for you."

John laughed a little as well. "Yeah, maybe I'll go into teaching like you."

"I don't know, it kind of sucks. You're home by five every day, and you have to decide if you want to work summers really early in the year."

"Sounds brutal."

"Oh, murderous."

"It doesn't matter." John said picking up a few more sticks. "I'm probably going to lose the business anyway. Maybe I should just sell it out. I could probably dig myself out

a little if I just sold some of the equipment, and stopped paying the lease on the building.”

“See, you don't need to sell this place after all. Sell the shop, become a teacher and spend your summers screwing around on this chunk of woods that you own.”

“That's what you're going to do?”

“Me, no. I'm never coming back to this place.”

“Then why not sell it?”

“It's important to Clive. It was important to Matt. And somehow it's important to me too. Although, I don't really know why.”

“The money could matter to me, you know? I can't pay for this kid.”

“Fertility treatments and all...Sounds like you've been trying for a long time.”

“Yeah, she really wants a kid.”

“What about you?”

“Yeah, of course, I like kids. Besides, without the kid, she's just not okay. She really wants that kid.”

“You don't?”

“Yeah, it's just expensive, that's all. It's gonna have to be the baby or the business.”

“And you hate the business?”

“You make this all sound so easy.”

“And you make it sound awfully complicated. You have a business that you hate, that you are probably going to lose anyway. So, sell the business. Work for someone else and focus on being a dad instead of a business man for awhile. Doesn't sound that complicated.”

“It's a little more complicated than that.”

"You want the kid?"

"Yeah."

"So, there you go. Seems like you should focus on the kid. They're great, everyone should have one." Terry pulls out his wallet and thumbs through the pictures of his daughter he keeps there. "Look, she's six years old here. Just learned how to ride that bike she's standing in front of. Scuffed knees, and bruises everywhere. I didn't think she'd ever get it, but she was absolutely opposed to those training wheels. The little girl down the street doesn't have training wheels, and she wasn't going to have them either."

"Stubborn, just like you."

"Yeah, let's hope that's all she got from me."

"She's bound to be smarter than you."

"She's smarter than me already. You'll love having kids. It's not always fun, but it's pretty cool most of the time."

John looked at the picture, and got quiet. Terry gave him a few moments before talking again.

"It's not really fair is it? I mean, we got pregnant almost instantly. It took no effort at all. Megan was an accident." Terry looked at the picture before closing his wallet and returning it to his pocket. "Sounds like you guys have been trying for a very long time, and we just go and make one accidentally. And then to find out Kathy never even wanted a kid. It's the reason we got divorced. Kids always think they're the reason for divorce, but in our case, Megan really was. Kathy just couldn't do it. She was okay throughout the pregnancy, but once Megan got old enough to move around, once you had to keep an eye on her, Kathy just gave up." Terry looked out into the night. "We got pregnant again, but

she miscarried.”

“Apparently that happens a lot.”

“Yeah, but I think she did it on purpose. I think she did something, you know, to end it.” Terry looked at John to see if he understood. “Probably wouldn't have worked out anyway. She wouldn't have wanted that one either.”

“So you got custody?”

“It doesn't work like that.” Terry let out a sigh that only partially sounded like a chuckle. “Kathy doesn't want her, but she doesn't want me to have her either. I get visitation rights, one week a month.”

“So get a lawyer.”

“Yeah, but it's easier for the mom to get custody than the father. That's just how it works.”

“Bullshit, man. I know at least two guys that got custody of their kids. Get a lawyer.”

“It's complicated. I don't want to take Megan away from her mom. She needs a mom.”

“Well, if you're okay with things, then I guess it's alright, but you have to know that things have changed. Fathers get kids in custody battles all the time, especially if the mom is a fuckup.”

“Yeah, I thought about that. I'm thinking about trying for more time. Megan is growing up so fast and I think that I've missed too much of it.”

“Get a lawyer. You have rights, man.”

“You're a legal advisor now?”

"No, but I've recently been talking to one. He does more than bankruptcy cases. You should give him a call."

"Well, I'd really like for it to all just work out, you know."

"I'm not really up to date on your life right now, but the phone call you made at the bar made it seem like things weren't working out."

Terry laughed a little. "Yeah, I guess it isn't going all that smoothly. Megan told Kathy's boyfriend about Uncle Joe." Terry makes air quotes when he says Uncle Joe. "It doesn't sound like she is going to be living in that particular house much longer."

"And Uncle Joe," John made the same air quotes, "isn't really her uncle?"

"Yeah, I'm guessing Bill, Kathy's boyfriend, knew all along but just needed to hear it. Anyway, Kathy is moving back in with her mom for awhile, and Megan has threatened to run away."

"You want me to talk to her? I'm apparently an expert on running away." John smiled at Terry.

"It's gonna turn into a mess."

"Sounds like you have enough problems already. Do you really need to deal with this land thing right now? You know that selling is the only option, right?"

"Yeah, maybe. But it's not something we have to talk about tonight. That's the point I was trying to make."

"I have to, man. If this land really is ours, then I need the money more than the land. Maybe you guys can buy me out or something, but I need the money. I need to call my lawyer just as soon as we find out if this is all true, so he can start trying to save my ass from bankruptcy."

"Dammit, John. That's not going to make things better."

"They're going to take it anyway, at least my share of it. You guys can keep your share of it, but I can't. It will end up in the bankruptcy regardless."

"You mean we have to sell it?"

"No, I mean you guys need to get my name off of it."

"And to do that, we have to sell it?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's some way. That's why I need to talk to the lawyer. I'd just lose it in the end anyway. I'll be able to keep the house, but they'd take my share of this place in a heart beat."

"You're all heart."

"Fuck off. It sucks, okay. That money could make a real difference for me."

"No, man. You're looking at it all wrong. This matters. You saw Clive in there. It matters to him. It matters to Brad. I'm not sure how I feel about it, but it might even matter to me. I've never owned anything like this. I probably never will again. Hell, is there even another place like this out there. Did you see any woods like these in all your travels?"

"My travels?"

"Yeah, all the places you were going to go. You had maps and everything. You had to go to some of those places."

"I went to Rockville, Illinois. Mary's Aunt and Uncle lived there. We stayed with them, after high school. I eventually got a job, and an apartment, and we just never came back. I didn't run away, man. Mary's parents set it up. My parents could have cared less, they just didn't want people talking about how I got a girl pregnant before marriage. We

never ran away, and I never went anywhere else. Rockville, Illinois, home sweet home.”

“Nowhere?”

“Nope, we never even stopped on the way up. Drove straight through in one day, and never went anywhere else.”

“That really sucks.”

“Life sucks sometimes. What are you going to do?”

“But you never had the baby. Why didn't you just come back?”

“Why? All I ever wanted was to get out of Birkeyville, and I was out. Why come back? Mary and I got married, and we just set out to start a family. Except, the family part never came, until now.”

“So come back now. You already said you're in bankruptcy. Come back to Birkeyville. Bring Mary back to her home town, and set up shop somewhere around here. A fresh start.”

“Sounds like a great idea, but it won't work. I need money, man. The business is failing, my marriage is failing. This money could have fixed that.”

“I'm no accountant, but I don't think money fixes marriages. It didn't fix mine.”

“Yeah, but you're no Rockefeller.”

“Yeah, but I own my house, no mortgage. I own the car, no payment. I got a bank account. None of those things convinced Kathy to stay.”

“Yeah, probably wouldn't convince Mary to stay either.”

“You want to know what I think?”

“You're going to tell me anyway, aren't you?”

“Yeah. I don't think Mary needs money. I think she needs you.”

"And I'm always at work, trying to save the business. Vicious cycle."

"So, stop."

"Now, you're making sense. I'll just stop working and see how that ends up."

"Don't stop working, just stop working on the stuff at the shop. You already said you're probably going to lose the shop, right?"

"So, what's your point?"

"Become that Model T pirate. Even you said that's what is keeping you afloat right now. Drop the business, and just do that. Just build the cars you want to build."

"There's no steady income in that. I still have bills to pay. Who's going to pay for the baby?"

"Babies don't cost that much. They don't have a lot of use for money until they get older. You have plenty of time. Sell the business, get a part time job, and use the free time to be a dad."

"You make this sound so easy. Let me recap. You, who failed math in high school..."

"Twice."

"Twice, are telling me to forgo the inconvenience of owning my own business so that I can work part time for someone else's. And this is going to allow me enough time to be a dad. All while strategically avoiding bankruptcy?"

"It could work."

"You really are bad at math."

"Yeah, but I was pretty good at relationships."

"Aren't you divorced?"

"Completely not my fault."

John laughed at the joke. "You know, it's not out of the question. I've thought about it. If I sell everything out of the shop, I can probably pay off most of the debt. I could stop paying rent, heat and utilities on that shitty old building. Just let someone else worry about that stuff, and collect a paycheck every week."

"There you go, and you'd have to work less hours to do it, leaving you more time to focus on being a Model T pirate and on being a dad."

"You sure do have a lot of advice for someone who always ignored mine."

"What advice have I ignored?"

"Lawyer up, man. Get your kid."

"I'll make you a deal. You fix your marriage, and I'll talk to a lawyer."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"I knew you would."

They both walked back into the cabin, with very little of the firewood they went out for. Clive and Brad pretended to not notice.

Clive assaulted them with the same question just as soon as they entered the cabin.

"So, we're not selling right?"

"Clive, leave it alone. We don't even know any of the details yet." Terry quickly intervened in what was sure to become another heated argument.

"No, it's alright, Terry. They might as well find out now." John flopped back down into the chair that he left near the fireplace, causing it to creak under the impact. "I can't own any part of this."

"Well, we don't even know that Matt left it to us yet, John." Terry argued again.

"Yes we do. It's exactly what he would have done, and that damn old lady knows it. I know it, and Clive here knows it. You know it too...He left it to us, but I can't be a part of it."

"Hey, we're all in this together. If Matt left it to us, then we all have to agree on what to do with it."

"No, Brad. You don't get it. I'm bankrupt. If my name is on this, they'll just come looking for my share of it."

"So you want to sell it?" Clive asked.

"No, I don't want to sell it, not really. I don't have a lot of options here. I could use the money. I won't lie about that, but you're right. This is important."

"What if we bought you out, just for awhile? You could sell your share to us and when things are better, you could buy back in."

"Clive, I'll never be able to buy back in. I'm on the track to stay broke for the rest of my life."

"I think we're forgetting the important details here." Brad interrupted. "What the hell are we going to do with it? Do you really think we're all going to show up here and hang out like old times? You guys left, and you haven't been back in all those years. If we keep this place, who's going to take care of it. I might be the closest one to the property, but I don't want to drive out here every month to make sure the roof is still holding on this place, or to see if someone is tearing up the place with four wheelers, or trucks or something. We can't just decide to keep this place. It isn't that easy."

"I'll take care of it," Clive said.

"How? You live a hundred miles away, Clive."

"I'm moving back."

"How are you going to do that? Where are you going to work? There are no jobs in Birkeyville."

"I'll work at the store with you."

"There are no jobs at the store either. I'm losing my ass on the place. I'm closing up next year. I'm just trying to sell out the inventory I have."

"Shit, man." John said. "I thought you were doing alright there."

"Well, I'm not. I can't afford to keep the place. Sporting goods aren't really that big to kids now days. Maybe if I got into video games or something I could make it, but sporting goods just aren't doing it. I'm moving out of Birkeyville. I can take a job over in Landsbury, it's closer to home, and I don't have to worry about running a failing business. Hell I'm losing money just in gas to drive in every damn day."

"I thought you were doing okay," Clive said.

"Come on, Clive. It's Birkeyville."

"So move back in above the store," Terry said.

"No, that place isn't fit to live in anymore. The roof leaks, and it's always cold."

"So fix the roof and insulate," Terry said. "I remember that place was pretty nice once."

"I can't afford to fix the roof. Aren't you listening. The only real reason I haven't closed up and tried to sell the place already is because I'd have to fix that roof and clean Dad's apartment out."

"Wait. It's still your dad's apartment? You never cleaned it out?" John asked.

"Haven't had time."

"I'll clean it out. I can live up there. I'll pay rent and then you will have enough money to fix the roof and keep the business open."

"For how long, Clive? It's just a matter of time. The place was losing money even when Dad was still alive. He just kept trying to survive on what little income the store brought in. He never bought anything he didn't need. The damn place still has all the same furniture it had when I was a kid. He couldn't even afford to buy a new couch. Just propped the broken leg of the old one up on a chunk of wood. It's pathetic. I can't live that way."

"But I can pay you rent. It will be income. You should have been renting the place out anyway. You should have been staying there yourself instead of living in Landsbury. You just said that the gas to drive in was killing you. So, stop paying for gas, and move into the store. We could be roommates."

"I can't live there, Clive. It's...It's not right. I can't even go up there. I don't even like thinking about that place hovering up there above the store. It's like I can feel all that stuff up there, the furniture, the damn refrigerator that hasn't worked in five years, all of it, just pushing down through that floor waiting to come down on me. I moved the whole damn sales counter a couple of years ago because it seemed like the kitchen was going to come crashing down on me."

"The floors that bad?" Terry asked.

"The floors aren't good, but that's not it. Hell that building will probably be standing long after I'm dead and gone. It's not the floor, it's the stuff on the floor. It's still Dad's house. It's exactly like he left it. I don't like going up there. It's his house."

"It's your house," Terry said. "You own it now. You lived there when we were kids

and it wasn't weird or anything. Jesus, man. Grow a pair and clean the place up. Clive is right. You could at least rent the place out."

"To who? There aren't a lot of people waiting to move into Birkeyville. I'm pretty sure everybody is working their way out of Birkeyville."

"I'll rent it, I told you."

"Clive, how the hell are you going to do that? You might have money saved up now, but how long can that last? You'll run out of money eventually and you aren't going to make more in Birkeyville. No, I have to close the store, and we should be thinking about selling this place while there is a buyer for it."

"We can't sell it. Matt would never have sold it." Clive stormed outside.

"Well, this is fun," Terry said.

"Shut up, Terry," Brad said.

"No, I mean it. This is just like old times. Sitting around a campfire shootin' the shit. Tellin' our war stories. This is a blast."

"So, what, you're for keeping it too?" Brad asked.

"I don't know. I don't like the idea of selling, but you're right, Brad. I'm not going to come back here once a month to mow the lawn, or clean the gutters."

"I don't think the place has gutters, and there is no lawn," John said.

"Yeah, but it does still need maintenance," Brad said. "If we keep it, it's likely to just rot down. The trees and river will still be here, but this cabin won't make it more than a few years."

Clive kicked open the door, carrying the firewood that John and Terry never got around to bringing in. "So we let the cabin go. That doesn't mean we have to let the

woods go. We always stayed in tents anyway.”

“Clive, we can't go back. We've all changed. We're not going to come back here and all camp out like old times. It just isn't going to happen.” Brad watched Clive dump the firewood near the fireplace. “We all have lives, and those lives are going to keep us away from this place just like they have for the last fifteen years.”

“I'll buy you out then. All of you. I'll buy all of it, and you don't ever have to come back. I'll just stay here.”

“Clive, it isn't about the money. It's about common sense,” Brad said.

“Matt managed to keep this place. He kept it all that time, and I was the only one that ever wanted to come back to it. Well, I made it back, and I'm staying. I'm not going back. I'm staying here, and if I can't rent the apartment above the store, then I'll just live out here.”

“Clive, listen to yourself,” John said. “You're not making sense. You can't just quit your life at home and move down here. What about your real life?”

“I don't have a real life. I already canceled the lease on my apartment. I quit my job. Everything I own is in the back of my car. That is my real life. I work all day at a job that I hate, for people that hate me, and I come home to a television. I don't want that life anymore. I'm not going back.”

“Let's calm down and try to be rational here,” Terry said. “We still don't know anything for sure. It seems like Matt might have left the place to us, but he could have just as easily left it to his mom at the last minute. You said yourself, Clive, that he was thinking about selling the place so that he could set his mom up better. He might have left it to her. We're getting all worked up about something that isn't even factual yet. Let's just

forget about the whole thing for the night, and try to have fun for a change.”

“I’m staying in Birkeyville. If I can’t live here, or at the store, I’ll live in the back of my car. I’m not leaving Birkeyville again.”

“Wow, Clive.” Brad said, purposefully trying to be mean. “I’m surprised you ever managed to leave in the first place. Why didn’t you just stay here to begin with. If Birkeyville is such a great place to live, why did you ever leave?”

They all knew the answer, and it was a low blow for Brad to make. Clive never wanted to leave Birkeyville, he was forced to leave Birkeyville.

College

Clive left Birkeyville right after high school. It was his mother’s doing, and he never really forgave her for it. They all graduated, except for John who disappeared during his senior year, but only Clive got accepted to college right out of high school. None of them even bothered to apply to college. There were no colleges within driving distance of Birkeyville, and Clive wasn’t willing to move, even then.

None of them thought about college. John had a real chance due to his ability to remember and regurgitate information, but college simply wasn’t one of the things that graduating students from Birkeyville thought about. Most had family in Birkeyville. They were connected to farms. A few were connected to successful businesses in Birkeyville. The town might have been failing, even then, but Birkey’s, the local farm equipment and implement dealer, was doing just fine. Terry, although he didn’t like to admit it to people,

was a distant relative of the same Birkey that started the town and owned that implement store. He already had a future as an implement salesman before he graduated high school. Brad would work at his father's store, of course, and John would land in the garage of Birkeyville's one and only gas station. Matt's father owned hundreds of acres of farmland near Birkeyville. They leased this land to the local farmers, rather than farming it themselves, and Matt's father ran an antique store in the business district during the day. Matt would work in this store when he graduated, but his real income would come from the land he would inherit someday.

They all had options outside of college and none of them planned to stay in Birkeyville forever, none of them except Clive.

Clive was accepted to three colleges. He was smart and did well in school. His mom was so proud of him. She sent the applications in for him, even wrote the letters for him. She made him take the exams, but he never thought it would matter. If Clive knew that the exam scores would cause him to leave Birkeyville and his friends, he would have failed them.

Clive never told them about the tests. He was embarrassed about having to take them, and was afraid that they might make fun of him, the only boy in his graduating class taking college entrance exams. He had to tell them when he was accepted though. He told Matt first. Matt lived the farthest away, but Clive walked past the houses of his other friends to tell Matt first.

"So, that sounds like a good thing," Matt said, a bit confused because Clive was nearly in tears over his acceptance letters.

"It's not a good thing. I don't want to go."

"You should. How the hell else you going to get out of this crappy town? That's your ticket, man. One way out of Birkeyville."

"I like it here."

"Yeah, but you liked it when you lived in Bujold too."

"I never liked that town. No one liked me in that town."

"How do you know that going to college won't be a blast? I hear they have parties, and girls. There aren't any girls in this pisshole of a town. I wish I could go. You think I want to work in a dusty ass antique mall?"

"You could go with me?"

"I'd never get in. I barely graduated from Birkeyville high, and I think anyone who shows up gets to graduate here. I'd never make it, man. This is your chance. You should go."

The other guys found out about Clive getting into college when Matt brought it up in the woods the next weekend. They had been out of high school for several weeks, and were all starting to adjust to their respective jobs. It was only Clive that didn't have work. Terry offered to get him a job at the implement dealers, but really hoped he wouldn't have to ask his uncle for the favor. Clive would surely be bad at the job, and it would only end up making Terry look bad. Brad asked if Clive could come in and help out at the store, and his father said yes, of course, but Brad later found out that there wasn't money to actually pay Clive, and never mentioned it again. The antique store that Matt spent his days in required exactly one employee, and that seemed like too many most days. They all ignored the fact that Clive was jobless. They paid his way when they met up for lunch at the diner, and they took turns paying his way when they went to the movies. They

never mentioned his lack of job, and he never mentioned the college exams he took, until Matt brought it up.

“Clive got into college, three of them.”

“Matt!” Clive still wanted to keep this a secret.

“What? It's pretty cool, man. Getting into college, that's big.”

“So you choose one yet, or you gonna go to all three?” Brad asked smiling. He never knew anyone that went to college, but knew that it usually resulted in larger paychecks and bigger towns. He would have liked to go himself, if he could.

“He'll go to all three of course. That's what I'd do. Just show up a couple of days at each and collect a diploma from each one,” Terry said.

“I don't think it works that way. So, which one have you decided on, Clive?” Matt asked.

“I'm not going to any of them.”

“You have to,” Brad said. “You have to go, man. It's not like everybody from Birkeyville gets to go to college.”

“I'm not going. I'm going to stay here.”

“He's going to Purdue. His aunt lives up there, and he's going to stay with them for awhile.” Matt already knew which college Clive was going to, because his mother had told him a few days earlier.

“I am not, I'm staying here.”

“Come on man. Your mom set it all up. It's paid for and everything. Why the hell wouldn't you go?” Matt looked directly at Clive as if waiting for a really good answer to his question. “You got something better to do?”

"I'm going to stay here. Maybe look around for a job."

"There are no jobs in Birkeyville. No jobs that are going to amount to anything."

"Maybe I'll drive into Landsbury or something. I can apply there. There's lots of stuff to do over there."

"As long as you're moving away, why not try out the college thing?" Brad asked.

"I'm not moving away. I'll drive back every day after work."

"That's stupid, man. No one would ever do that for very long. That has to be the most boring drive in the world. You might as well just move," Brad said.

"Yeah, and as long as you're moving, why not just go to Purdue," Matt added.

"I don't want to leave Birkeyville."

"Why the hell not? Any of us would, if we had the chance," Terry said.

"I like it here."

"So go to college for a few years, and then come back. Maybe that college education would do Birkeyville some good. Too many uneducated hicks around here anyway," Matt said punching Brad in the arm.

"Hey, I'm not a hick," Brad said smiling.

"We all happen to be uneducated hicks. That's the point. Clive can get out, he can really do something. You can't screw that up just to keep hangin' around with us knuckleheads," Matt said.

"I can't leave Birkeyville for four years."

"It's not like it's the whole four years, or anything. They get summer and winter break at college just like we did in high school. They get Spring Break too. You'll be gone for a couple of months at a time. Hell it's not even that far away. You could come back for

weekends if you wanted. We'll all be working through the week anyway. It ain't like we can just hang out all the time anymore." Matt knew that it would be difficult for Clive to come back on the weekends. He didn't own a car for one thing, and his mother might have been able to cover tuition, but she certainly wouldn't be able to cover gas money for him to come back every weekend.

"Yeah, and we could come up and visit you. I ain't never been anywhere but here before. Maybe you could show us around the town. There has to be loads of stuff to do in a college town." Brad was honestly excited about seeing this college town.

"Yeah, we'll come up there and visit, at least until they kick us out. They probably have a low tolerance for back country hicks in college towns. It could be our thing. Show up Friday night, and get kicked out by Sunday morning." Terry was fairly certain that he would never actually visit Clive in this college town, but he could see that Brad really wanted to.

"I'll probably fail out anyway and be back in a month."

"Don't you dare." Matt slid into his serious voice. He rarely did this anymore. They'd gotten older, and stopped getting into real trouble, allowing him to stop trying to be the mature one for awhile. "You go to that damn college, Clive. You go, and you graduate. If you come back to Birkeyville without that damn degree, I won't ever talk to you again."

"That's not fair."

"Life's not fair, Clive. It isn't fair that all of us will be in this damn town forever, have no choice in it. You come along with this big damn future and all you can think is that you don't want to leave Birkeyville. I'll let you in on a secret, Clive. Birkeyville will

be here when you get back. It will look exactly the same, and all the people will be exactly the same. You could leave for twenty years and everything would be exactly the same when you came back. We have to live with that. We have to wake up and go to our shitty jobs, in this shitty town, every day for the rest of our lives. You can go do something else. Don't fuck this up, Clive." Matt didn't usually cuss. The language shocked Clive a little, and it made it clear that Matt was serious. They all cussed when they were younger, but since John ran away, they found themselves cussing less. They had jobs now. They were older.

"But, I like Birkeyville."

"And you'll like Purdue. Hell, if you like Birkeyville so much, go out get that education, then come back and buy the whole damn town. This isn't a choice, Clive. Your mom already set it up. She isn't going to let you stay at home if you don't go."

"She would so."

"No, Clive, she won't. You have to go. If you don't go... I...I don't know if I want to hang out with you anymore. That's some kind of stupid, passing up a chance like that. I don't hang out with stupid people."

Clive looked up at Matt in order judge whether he was serious or not. He was.

"Yeah, I'm with Matt. Passing up a chance like that. I don't know. I don't think I'd be comfortable with someone who could do that," Terry added.

"Just go, Clive. Hell, I would. Any of us would. Go. We'll all still be here when you come back on the weekends." Brad added, not wanting to make the same bold claim of ending their friendship over this decision.

Clive did go. He came back every weekend for the first semester, and for the

winter break. He hitchhiked back and forth and walked when he couldn't get a ride. This often made him late getting back and it hurt his grades. The guys had a similar talk about him failing out, and not being friends with someone who failed out of college. Clive tried harder, studied more, and came back less often. During Clive's second year in college, Terry moved to Springfield, Missouri. His uncle opened a new dealership there, and Terry was in charge of it. He bought a house and never came back to Birkeyville. By Clive's senior year, Brad had moved out of his father's apartment. He rented a rundown little house at the edge of town and eventually moved to Landsbury. Only Matt stayed in Birkeyville. When Clive came back to visit over the breaks, he came back to visit Matt. Clive's mother moved out of Birkeyville almost as soon as he went to college. She paid his tuition from whatever town she was currently living in, but never came back to Birkeyville.

When Clive did come back to Birkeyville, during breaks, he stayed in the woods. Matt picked up an old camper and had it set out near the river. It was always full of bugs, and the floor was nearly rotted through, but Clive stayed in this camper for the breaks between semesters.

One year during a flood the river washed the camper away. Clive stayed at college and took summer classes instead, thinking that he would finish sooner if he took the extra classes. He did the same for the next winter break, and the following summer. He took classes and stopped coming to Birkeyville altogether. When he graduated he took the job that one of his professors got for him, and it was this job that he quit when Brad called him about Matt's funeral.

"I never wanted to leave Birkeyville. This is home for me. I'm staying," Clive assured them and walked into the small kitchenette. "Any one else hungry?"

"Yeah, I'm starving. What did you guys buy? Tell me you got something good for supper," Brad said.

"Oh, crap I forgot about the food. I'll go and get it," John said. He ran outside to get the stuff they bought.

"So what did you guys buy?" Clive asked.

"I'll let John tell you."

"You didn't happen to get steak did you? I could go for steak and potatoes," Brad said.

"Ask John what he bought." Terry was smiling again. The argument now over, he was looking forward to having fun again.

John came back inside carrying a single bag of groceries that was obviously far from full.

"So what did you get, John?" Brad got up to look as John set the bag on the small counter.

"We got a skillet."

"We have plenty of those already." Clive pointed over his shoulder at a closed cabinet that did in fact contain plenty of cooking ware.

"I got eggs."

"That's gonna be better than those powdered ones in the cabinet." Brad set the eggs on the counter.

"I got milk."

"Also better than the powdered stuff. We should probably leave both of these outside where they will stay cool."

"And I got hot dogs."

Brad cocked his head towards John and raised his eyebrows in question. "Hot dogs?"

"Yeah, we used to always cook hot dogs out here. We'd put them on sticks, and roast them over the fire."

"Gee, John, did you get the marshmallows too?" Brad asked

"Oh, shit. I forgot about the marshmallows. We should go back and get some."

"Don't bother. What were you thinking?" Brad asked Terry.

"What was I thinking? John bought the hot dogs. I was gonna get steak and potatoes and he talked me out of it."

"I did not. You said hot dogs would be fine. You never said anything about steak and potatoes. I would have bought steak and potatoes. I thought we'd want to roast hot dogs, like the old days."

"Did you buy anything else?" Brad asked looking in the empty bag.

"We bought beer." Terry raised his bottle as an example.

"Great, beer and hot dogs." Brad carefully folded the paper bag and laid it on the table where it immediately unfolded itself. "No one likes hot dogs."

"Bullshit. We used to eat them every time we came out here. John's right, we used to roast them over the fire. It was the only thing we ever brought out here." Terry said.

"So where are the buns? Ketchup? Mustard? Tell me there's another bag in the

truck.”

“Nope. We got eggs, milk and hot dogs.” Terry was now laughing. “And beer.”

“You didn't think that maybe you should have helped with the shopping, Terry?

Perhaps pitched in and made sure that John here came back with something other than hot dogs?”

“He had his mind set on hot dogs.”

“I did not. You never said anything about buying something else. You forgot to get the buns and everything else.”

“John, we all know that the hot dogs were your idea. You love the damn things. You don't have to hide that from us. We're all friends here.”

Brad tapped his fingers on the counter. “Well, we can't go back into town. Everything is closed.”

“I like hot dogs,” Clive said.

“Hot dogs it is. You want yours well done or medium rare, Brad?” Terry asked.

“Are you drunk?” Brad asked.

“Nope, just super excited about hot dogs,” Terry said.

Brad started looking through the cabinets. “Wait a minute. We have can goods here, and some dry goods. I bet we could make something better than hot dogs.” Brad pulled stuff out of the cabinet and set it on the counter.

“Canned chili? Really? That's better than hot dogs?” Clive asked.

“No, not canned chili, chili mac.” Brad set a box of macaroni and cheese on the counter next to the chili. “You make the macaroni and cheese and then you pour the chili in. Stir it all together and it's awesome.”

"The hot dogs sound better," Clive said examining the cans of chili.

"Trust me, you'll love it."

They didn't talk anymore about the land. It was clear that Clive still wanted to keep it, and it was clear that they weren't going to agree on what to do. They all focused on other things. They talked about their lives and remembered old times, but none of them brought up the land again.

Matt's Funeral

The funeral was far less populated than the visitation, a fact that Shirley seemed to ignore. The majority of the family, cousins, aunts and uncles found other places they had to be. There were a few of Shirley's friends, and one woman that Shirley identified as Matt's long lost ex. Shirley was civil to the ex, but it required effort. The guys would later learn that Denise, the ex, left Matt when he refused to move away from Birkeyville. Denise got a job that required her to move away, and Shirley seemed to find the majority of Denise's faults in this fact. She moved sixty miles away, and came back to visit on the weekends for a year or so. Matt never made the drive the other direction, and Denise started missing weekends. She eventually stopped visiting altogether.

Shirley sat calmly, and unemotionally, in the front row with the guys on either side of her, making it difficult for the few family members who did show up to get close to her. The funeral sermon lasted nearly an hour and was more religious than Matt would probably have wanted, but none of the guys knew for sure if that was true. Clive rode in

the limo with Shirley out to the grave site, and the others followed closely behind. It was a short five mile drive from the funeral parlor in Birkeyville to the one and only cemetery just outside of town, and the drive took considerably less time than the sermon the preacher provided at the grave site. All told, the event took less than three hours. After the funeral they met back at Shirley's house, where there appeared to be even more food than the day before.

"It was a nice funeral, wasn't it?" Shirley asked.

There was no answer.

"The preacher went on a bit too long. Matt would have hated all that Jesus crap. He wasn't really the church going type, but there aren't a lot of options around here, and Mike's known the family for as long as I can remember. He grew up with James."

Mike was the preacher's name. James was Matt's father's name, but it took several seconds for each of them to make the connection. Only Clive ever knew Matt's father's name. It was always Mr. Douglas for the rest of them.

"I'll have to remember to send out all the thank you cards. Can't forget Mike when I do that...It was a nice sermon wasn't it?"

They nodded in agreement again. Terry was the first to speak, and it surprised even him a little.

"I've been thinking. You don't need the stress of this today. Why don't we just take off, we'll come back later."

"Nonsense. You all have homes to go to. You've stayed long enough. It's time you got back to your lives. Matt's gone, you're all still alive and there are people waiting for you to come home."

"There's no one waiting for me, I can stay. I can get in touch with the others later. Brad's just a short drive away." Clive was trying hard to seem caring, but it was clear that he was trying to postpone any further talk about the land.

"No. That's just silly. Time won't change things. The land is yours, you should get paper work to sign soon enough."

None of them tried to look surprised.

"It looks like you already knew that, though."

"Yeah, Clive let us in on it," John said.

"Well, I'm not going to tell you what to do with it."

"We're not going to sell it, Matt wouldn't have sold it, and neither are we." Clive spoke for all of them, and it was very clear from Brad and John's reaction that they might not completely agree with this statement.

"Clive, I know you want to keep it," Shirley said. "He left it to all of you. You all have to decide, together, what you're going to do with it."

"I know, but we're going to keep it."

"Clive, you have to know something. I don't like telling you this, but Matt was going to sell it. If he'd had just a couple more months, he would have sold the land. The problem was with buyers. There just aren't that many buyers around Birkeyville, and Matt wanted it to go to someone who would keep it the way it is. He turned down at least two farmers who wanted to till up the scrub land in front of the woods, but I'm not sure that he would have held out forever."

"That's not true. Matt said he wouldn't sell it. He told me so."

"Clive, things change. Matt was lonely here. After Denise left, he started thinking

about moving more and more. I think that if she would have just waited a little longer, he'd have moved with her. She just didn't wait long enough."

"Is that why the place was cleaned out?" Brad asked.

"Yes, he had it most of the way cleaned out before... Well, he left enough stuff there so that he could rent it out to hunters during deer season, but he didn't rent it out this year."

"You're wrong, Matt wasn't going to sell it." Clive was trying to control his emotions. He didn't want to get into a shouting match, especially with an old lady. "He would have told me."

"Clive, when did you actually speak to Matt last?"

"He called me over the holidays, he always called over the holidays."

Brad put his hand on Clive's shoulder. "That was last year, Clive. Ten months ago. That's a lot of time. You haven't talked to him since then?"

"Neither have any of you."

"Hey, we're not pointing fingers here, Clive," John said "None of us were very good friends to him."

"Now, that's not true." Shirley sat down in the chair at the head of the table.

"People get separated. It's how life works. You all grew up, got families of your own, and moved away. Matt stayed, probably because of me. I didn't really have anyone other than him. He should have moved on too. I kept him in Birkeyville."

They watched her as she nearly broke down. She rested her elbows on the table and shifted her shoulders forward placing her weight on the table. Terry sat down in the chair closest to her.

"That's not true. Matt stayed because he wanted to. You didn't keep him here."

"No, I did. I kept him here. He has no family, even Denise moved away from him. She's not all bad, you know. She's really smart, and tough. That girl is tough. I didn't think she'd actually leave him. I should have made him go with her."

The others sat down in the chairs that surrounded the table.

"He was going to leave, Clive. He was going to go find Denise. Hell, he should have done it a long time ago. I should have made him. I was stupid, and now he's gone."

"I'm sure Matt made the right choices for himself," Terry said calmly.

"He didn't, he made the choices I wanted him to make. He was going to sell the place. He was going to sell the woods, and he was going to sell the house he got burned up in. He was fixing it up for that very reason when the fire started. It was an electrical fire that burned that house down. Matt was putting in a new fuse box the day before the accident. He'd lost power to over half the house over the summer when lightning struck it. He was trying to fix it so he could sell it."

Clive got up from the table. He walked calmly across the kitchen and out the back door. The door clicked softly behind him as he disappeared behind it. None of them followed. Shirley looked at them as if expecting them to.

"He'll be alright," Brad said. "He just needs some time."

"You have to know that Matt stayed because he wanted to, Mrs. Douglas," Terry said. "He could have left whenever he wanted to. He stayed because he wanted to. None of this is your fault."

"I know that Matt could have left any time he wanted to, but I also know that he stayed because of me. Things would have been different if he would have just left

Birkeyville." Shirley wiped her eyes with a handkerchief that seemed to magically appear. She hadn't cried. It was as if she was just checking to be sure. "Anyway, I know he was selling the land. I wanted to believe that he wasn't, but he was. Matt was leaving Birkeyville. Matt was getting things ready so that he could leave."

John got up, tried to peek through the window. He tried to see where Clive had gone. "I'm gonna go look for Clive."

"Yeah, sure. We'll be out soon. Let us know if you need help with Clive," Brad said.

John left through the same door, but it closed much more loudly when he didn't carefully cushion it into its latch.

"You think that's a good idea?" Terry asked.

"What?" Brad asked

"You think John is the right one to go and find Clive?"

"Why not?"

"They don't exactly get along."

"Sure they do. They've been getting along fine. Besides, we'll catch up soon.

Shirley needs to rest anyway." Brad said.

Shirley watched the exchange. "I'm plenty rested. I think Terry's right, you should catch up to them."

"In a little bit."

"You know, Matt stayed in this town too long. That was his flaw. I have to wonder if you're making the same mistake, Brad."

"I like Birkeyville. I've thought about leaving. I've thought about selling the store

and just moving on, but... I like Birkeyville."

"But you can't leave your father." Shirley pretended to pick at the baked goods on the table, but it was clear that she wasn't going to eat any of them.

"That's not... That isn't true. Dad's dead. I just don't think there will be any buyers for the place. I can't sell it if there aren't any buyers."

"There are buyers, Brad. You haven't tried to sell it. I want you to think really hard, about why you stayed in Birkeyville."

"I didn't stay in Birkeyville. I moved out long time ago."

"To Landsbury. Brad, that's not a move. You drive in here every day to open the store, and you're here every day to close it up. You still live in Birkeyville, you just sleep somewhere else."

Brad didn't reply, and Terry looked down at his hands, uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had turned.

"You're doing the same damn thing that Matt did, Brad. Except, I'm still alive. Maybe that justifies what Matt did a little, but it was still damn stupid of him."

"But you wanted him to stay." Brad raised his voice just a little. "You just said that you wanted him to stay."

"Of course I wanted him to stay. I wanted everything to stay the same as it always was. I guess I'm stupider than the both of you. Things aren't the same. One drive through Birkeyville will tell you that. There's barely a town left at all. I wanted things to stay the same, and I never noticed that everything changed anyway."

"Birkeyville is coming back. They're going to put a gas station out by the highway next year. That's gonna bring lots of people in."

"Brad, that's going to bring lots of people into the gas station, but not into Birkeyville. Birkeyville's dead. It's time you realized that. You can't stick around pretending that it's not dead."

Terry raised his eyebrows and looked over at Brad. He wondered if Brad understood what Shirley was telling him. He wondered if Brad translated Birkeyville into his father. Brad needed to let go of both. He needed to move away from both.

"It's gonna get better. Birkeyville isn't dead. It's getting better."

"No Brad, it isn't. You can sit here and watch the town waste away, and if that's what you really want to do that's fine, but you have to admit to yourself that it isn't going to make it. It's going to die. It doesn't matter if you're here or not. It's going to die."

Brad didn't reply.

"You bury the things that are dead, and you move on. If you got nothing else from today, you should have gotten that. I'm going to miss Matt terribly, but he's not coming back. I have to carry on. It took me a long time to come to that realization when James died, too long. Matt stayed because he thought I needed him, and I did. But it wasn't fair. He had a life. He should have lived that life. You need to live yours. Paul's dead. Keeping the store isn't going to change that. Staying in this town, and watching it slowly die, isn't going to change it either."

Brad stood up. "Well, we probably should go find Clive and John, they'll be at each other's throats."

"Yeah, go and find your friends. Remember what I said, Brad. It's important."

"Come on Terry, let's go save John from Clive."

Terry remembered the story that John told him on the way to the woods, and

wondered if Brad knew about Clive's sudden violent outburst in the past.

"Yeah, only I think we might be saving Clive from John. Clive's not the fighting type."

Brad turned back to look at Terry and raised his eyebrows slightly with a tiny smile. "I think you're wrong about that."

Terry laughed slightly as they stood up from the table. "What makes you think so?"

"Tell you later."

They said goodbye to Shirley, and she pushed food into their hands as they left. She didn't mention the death of the town or the death of Brad's father again, but she did whisper into each of their ears as they hugged her. She whispered, "Sell it."

Tracks

John stepped outside of Shirley's house and began to look for Clive. He peeked around the corner into the back yard but when he didn't see Clive, he walked out to the road and looked towards the tracks. He saw Clive walking towards the railroad tracks. As John started jogging to catch up with Clive he began to wonder what he'd say.

"Hey." John tried to catch his breath. He wasn't in horrible shape, but the short run was more exercise than he was used to.

"Hey."

"You comin' back?"

"I don't know... Yeah, I just needed some air, you know?"

"Yeah, it's kind of weird, isn't it...I mean, Matt's dead, we're talking to his mom, and she seems less upset by it than we do."

"She'll break down later. It's not healthy for her to hide her emotions. It's not okay. I think maybe we should leave her alone for awhile. Let her grieve, you know?"

"Yeah. To tell you the truth, it's kind of creepy being in that house anyway. You know, I remember being in that house."

"Me too."

"Yeah, but you and Matt were close. I was never that close to Matt."

"I wasn't that close to him either."

"Yeah you were, Clive. Matt was closest to you."

"That's not true. You guys were hanging out a long time before I even moved into town."

"Yeah, but we had to. It's a small town. You make friends with whoever you can when there's only a handful of kids to choose from. You and Matt were really friends. The rest of us were, convenient."

"We always hung out together." Clive stopped walking when he reached the railroad tracks.

"Yeah, but it was different with you guys."

"I think we just understood each other. That's why I know he wasn't going to sell the place, John. He wouldn't."

"Well, I don't know one way or the other. But, why does it matter?"

"What?"

"Why does it matter if Matt was going to sell it? He didn't sell it, and now he's gone. It's our land now. Why does whether Matt was going to sell it or not even matter?"

"Because it does."

"Why?"

"Because Matt wouldn't sell it."

"And he didn't sell it."

"Right, 'cause he wouldn't."

"Look, Clive, he didn't sell it. That's the thing. We can't know what he was thinking. We only have facts, and the fact is he didn't sell it." John was really trying to fix things with Clive, but he wasn't willing to lie to do it.

"Because he wouldn't."

"See, I don't get why that matters."

"It matters."

"Why?"

"Because it was ours. We grew up out there. The best times of my life are out there in those woods. Matt wouldn't sell it. He couldn't sell it."

"Well, I'm just saying that he didn't sell it. That's where we're at right now, and that's why we're even here in the first place."

"We're here for the funeral."

"Yeah, but it's more than that. I didn't come back just for the funeral, Clive. I came back to see Birkeyville."

"And?"

"Well, it's just as crappy as I remember," John laughed.

"It's not crappy. It's home."

"It isn't my home, Clive. I have a home. I have a wife. I'm going to have a kid. My home isn't in Birkeyville anymore."

"Yeah, but Birkeyville will always be home."

"I don't think so. I don't remember Birkeyville as fondly as you. I remember being poor. I remember my parents never being home. I remember always trying to run away. I hated this town."

"Why were you always running away?"

"Why were you guys always trying to stop me? That's what I want to know."

"We had to stop you. Where would you go?"

"Anywhere...The Himalayas." John smiled at Clive.

Clive smiled back. "You ever seen a mountain, John."

"Nope. Not even the Smokies."

"Why not?"

"Still waiting for you guys, I guess. Why, you wanna go?"

"We don't have any of the gear. Maybe we should wait awhile so we can plan better. You know, get all the guys in on it."

"Yeah, maybe next year, right?"

"Why the mountains?"

"Huh?"

"Why was it always the mountains?"

"Matt started it." John looked down the long rails that disappeared around a bend. He knew where the tracks left Birkeyville and knew they passed through Landsbury on

their way out west, and he knew they came very close to the woods on their way out East.

"It was going to be west, you know?"

"The Rockies?"

"No, no mountains. I was just going to go west. I was going to hop one of the trains that came through during harvest season and just ride it as far west as it would take me."

"It stops in Landsbury, you know?"

"Yeah, but then it goes again. It goes all the way to California. I was going to just jump on and get off when I got tired of seeing the land roll by. I had my old backpack, and it was loaded up with food and all the money I'd saved. Matt talked me out of it. He always talked me out of it." John looked down the tracks toward the pond that wasn't actually visible. "It was at that pond down there. I was packed and ready to go. I wasn't even going to say goodbye to you guys. I was just going to go."

"You always told us."

"Not at first. I was really going to do it that first time. I was walking down these tracks towards the pond. The trains always slowed down when they got to town. I figured I could jump on it when it slowed down. I was just looking for a place to wait. Matt must have seen me. He walked down and asked if he could wait with me."

Train Hopping

Matt startled John a little when he popped out of the trees and sat down next to him.

"Where you going with all this stuff?" Matt started admiring all the gear that John had carefully tied into and around the old worn out backpack. "You got enough stuff here to cross the country."

"I'm going to do just that."

"Yeah? Can I go too?"

"No, you have stuff here in Birkeyville. Stuff that you can't leave behind."

"Like what?"

"Like your mom, and your dad."

"Seems like you have a couple of parents too."

"Yeah, but they're not real. Not like yours."

"We'll come back."

"No, I'm not coming back."

"Ever?"

"Not ever."

"Huh. Well, you mind if I wait with you?"

"Sure, but when the train comes don't get in my way."

"You gonna hop the train, huh? That's probably the way to go." Matt continued admiring the pack and all the stuff that was nearly bursting out of it. "What if it's going the wrong way?"

"It'll be going west this time of year, carrying grain."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"West, huh. To the mountains?"

"Nope, just west."

"You gotta see the mountains. You can't go west without seeing the mountains."

"I'll probably see them on my way by."

"You're gonna stop though, right. You gotta stop for the mountains."

"I might."

"Sure, you'll stop. I always wanted to see the mountains. Maybe, I should get my stuff. We could go together."

"Yeah? You'd really go?"

"Yeah, why not? I could always come back later, and check up on the folks."

"You'd have to hurry. I think the train will be coming soon."

"You wouldn't wait?"

"Can't."

"There's at least three trains a day. You don't think we could catch a later one? I mean, it's gonna take me a while to get my stuff together and all. Plus, I'd like to leave a note, so my folks don't worry. We could still catch the train later tonight."

"I don't know, I'd really like to get moving."

"Yeah, but it makes more sense to wait. It will be dark. Much easier to sneak onto the train in the dark. Plus, we could sleep right away for the first few hours after jumping the train. We already know what's up there anyway. We'd be awake just about in time to see all the stuff we've never seen before."

"It's not hard to sneak onto trains in the daylight."

"Yeah, but it's gonna stop in Landsbury, and they're gonna check the train there, right?"

"Maybe."

"No maybe about it. They'll check. They'd miss us if it was dark. If they saw us in the daytime, they'd just call our parents and we'd be right back here in no time."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, man. You got to plan these kinds of things. You can't just go off without planning. You'd get sent back almost right away." Matt picked up John's bag. "Jesus, what do you have in this thing"

"Food mostly."

"We'll we're going to need more stuff if it's the two of us. Let's go get my stuff and catch the train later on tonight."

John looked down the tracks, still not completely convinced.

"You got dry goods in here right? It seems like it's only cans." Matt felt at the bulging hard circular shapes that were jutting out of the bag.

"Cans are easier."

"Yeah, but you can carry twice as much if you bring dry goods instead. You just have to find water, and you have a meal."

"What kinds of dry goods?"

"Oh, I don't know, oatmeal, rice, flour. That kind of stuff. Stuff you can cook with."

"You don't have to cook the stuff in the cans."

"Yeah, but are you gonna want to eat the same can of beans every day for a month?" Matt pulled out one of the cans from the top of the bag, and it was in fact beans.

"What time does the later train come by?"

“Seems like it shows up just after dark. We'd have at least three hours to get my stuff together.”

“I don't know, I could already be past Landsbury by then.”

“Yeah, but you'd be alone, with nothing but beans to eat. I'm a great cook. I can even make hard tack. Do you know how to make hard tack?”

“What's hard tack?”

“It's a kind of bread. I saw it on T.V. The soldiers used to carry it because it lasts forever, and doesn't weigh anything. You're gonna need more than beans, man.”

“Well, alright, but I decide where we go.”

“No problem, I'm only going to the mountains anyway, and then I'm coming back.”

“You can't tell anyone where I went.”

“I won't. I wouldn't do that man. Come on, let's see what kind of gear we can find at my place. I think we have an old tarp we could use for a tent.”

Clive smiled as John looked down the tracks to the West. “You guys never got on that train, huh?”

“Nope. We found that tarp, and another pack, and Matt started stuffing junk in it. We had all the stuff we needed, and then Matt would ask about blankets. He said it would be cold in the mountains, and that we would need blankets. He set out to find some blankets that his mom wouldn't miss. Then he said we'd need extra shoes and socks

because we'd have to walk some too, but I didn't have any extra shoes, and I couldn't fit any of his. He said we could get some the next day, and it would only put the trip off for 24 hours. I stayed the night at Matt's house and we planned for nearly the whole night. I slept through most of the day. My parents eventually found me and I got grounded for running away."

"He was a good friend."

"I don't know that he was. I mean, he tried, but staying just made everything worse. I was never really happy until I left Birkeyville with Mary."

"Yeah, but there was no Mary back when you were trying to run away."

"Yeah, but there was still life out there. Life that wasn't here in Birkeyville."

"So why'd you stay?"

"You know why."

"No, if Birkeyville was so awful, why did you stay. Why didn't you just run away without us. You never really believed we were all going to the Himalayas."

"I did believe it for awhile. I really did. Stupid, I guess. I wanted to make that trip with you guys. I knew that if I ran away, I'd be leaving you guys behind. You were my only real family, and I didn't want to leave that."

"But you did." Clive kicked a rock over the rail in front of him. You did leave us."

"Yeah, but it was different. We weren't the same anymore. We were in high school. You and Matt were close, but Terry, Brad and me were already starting to go our separate ways. Terry had the job at the implement dealers, Brad was working at his dad's store. And there I was, working at the garage after school, pumping gas, and turning wrenches. There just wasn't a future for me in Birkeyville. When Mary got pregnant, and her parents

made us leave town to live with her aunt, I was happy. I wanted to go. Any place but Birkeyville."

"It wasn't that bad. I miss the place."

"Really? Do you miss Birkeyville, or do you miss the time we had here as kids? Because they're not the same thing, Clive. You can have Birkeyville. You can move right back into town if it's Birkeyville you want. But we don't live here anymore. Matt doesn't live here. Terry doesn't live here. I don't live here. Brad lives here, but he doesn't want to. It's different now. You understand that, right?"

"But it isn't different. We are all right back here. We were all together in the woods for the first time in forever, and it was great."

"Great? I'm fairly certain we argued the whole time."

"Yeah, but we're friends again, and we're together. We should try to keep that. We have to keep the land."

"Clive, you know that we'll never be back again." John looked at his shoes. "Not like this. It's gone. We all came back because of the funeral, but we never came back for any other reason. Matt invited us all back at least once a year. We never came back, and we never will again."

"That's not true. We had fun. We could schedule a time every year to come back. People do that. Once a year they just make a trip to see old friends and catch up."

"Who's going to make us, Clive? Matt tried. He tried every damn year. I was always too busy. Brad made it out once or twice, but he was only ten minutes away to begin with. None of us ever made it back. Even you, Clive. Even you failed to come back."

"I wanted to. I just couldn't get away from work. It's different now. I don't work anymore. I quit."

"Come on, Clive. You know you can't stay. You have to go back. Somewhere out there, there's a Mrs. Clive Parker. You have to go back to real life."

"I don't have a real life. This is my life. Birkeyville is my real life. It's the only time I was ever happy."

"That can't really be true, Clive."

Clive kicked at another rock, causing it to clang against the rail, but he didn't look up.

"Everybody has something. I've got Mary, Terry has his daughter, Brad has...I don't know, Brad has something. There's got to be some reason he lives in Landsbury. You have something, Clive. And if you don't, you should go out and get something. You can't live life in the past."

"I'm not trying to live in the past." Clive looked up with watery eyes. "I'm trying to live in the present. The here and now. And right here and now, we're friends again. The woods are out there, and we can go back anytime we want. We can come back anytime we want."

John looked down at the rocks and kicked one of his own into the rail. "I'm just not sure that we want to come back, Clive. That's the problem."

"If we sell the land we won't be able to. Don't you see that? We can't come back if we sell it. It won't be there anymore. It's final, we can't take it back. No more land, no more us."

"We'll still be us, Clive...The same people we've always been." John bent down to

pick up a rock and threw it as far as he could. It landed much closer than he expected and he refrained from trying it again. "I've got an idea about the land."

"I know, sell it."

"No, I'm thinking we should just leave it alone. We don't need it, but I don't really want to see it go away either."

"I thought you wanted to sell it. I thought you needed the money?"

"I do need money, but I'll get by. I didn't have the money a week ago, and I was getting by. I think maybe we should just leave it alone. Let the woods alone and just let it sit out there. Birkeyville's going to hell, maybe the woods will eventually just grow back over the town and it will be like none of this ever happened."

"That's a terrible reason to keep it."

"It's the only reason I have, Clive. Take it or leave it."

"You won't ever come back?"

"Maybe, but probably not. Birkeyville isn't my home, Clive. It never was. I think I knew that even as a kid. I always knew that my home was someplace else."

Neither Clive nor John heard Terry and Brad walking up behind them.

When Terry got within twenty feet of them he yelled, "Well hell, they're not even fighting. Let's go back. I expected blood and teeth. This is just girl talk."

"You guys okay, out here?" Brad asked.

"Yeah, we're fine. Just talking about old times," John said. "Remember when we used to walk down these railroad tracks."

Terry walked up and stopped next to John. "Yeah, we used to use them as a short cut to get across town."

"Except it was always a long cut. Because we always got side tracked by that little farm pond down there. Can you believe we used to try to catch fish in that pond?"

"There could have been fish in it," Clive said as he dried his eyes.

"There were never fish in it. Just a bunch of bull frogs, and snakes. Every damn time we came down here we'd end up covered in mud and with no fish. My poor mom and the laundry she had to deal with when I was a kid," Terry said.

"I hated that pond," Brad said.

"No you didn't. You were always the first one in the water."

"Yeah, but when I fell through the ice that time. I just never liked it again."

"I'd forgotten all about that," John said smiling at Brad.

Brad noticed John's smile "It wasn't funny, I almost drowned. I could have froze to death."

"Nah, it wasn't even that cold."

"My clothes were frozen solid by the time Clive got the fire started to warm me up."

"Yeah, but we we're only a mile or so away from Matt's house. You wouldn't have froze to death," Terry said.

"I still almost drowned."

"You shouldn't have jumped on the ice," John said.

"I didn't. You know I didn't. Matt jumped and the ice broke under me. He waited until I got on the thin ice and then jumped on the ice causing it to break. He thought it was hilarious."

"It was funny." Terry laughed.

"I could have drowned."

"That pond can't be more than three feet deep. I remember you were thrashing around trying to climb back onto the ice."

"Yeah, it just kept breaking off, as you put your weight on it," John added.

"It was funny as hell," Terry said. "And then Clive here said the funniest damn thing to you while you were trying to swim up onto the ice."

"Yeah, he said, 'stand up dumbass'. That was classic," John said laughing.

"I didn't say it like that."

"Yeah, you did, Clive. You said, 'stand up dumbass' as if Brad here was a moron and never even considered that the water was only two feet deep."

"And then you stood up, and the water came up to your chest. You just stood there in the water with all that ice floating around you. That was funny as hell." Terry slapped Brad on the back.

"I still could have froze to death," Brad said, trying not to join in the laughter.

They all looked down toward the pond that was too far down the tracks to be visible.

"You guys ready to go back?" Brad asked quietly.

"You done talking to Shirley?" John asked.

"Yeah, I think she needs to be alone for awhile."

"We going back to the woods?" Clive asked hopefully.

"Well, that's where our stuff is. I guess we should," John said, turning away from the tracks and walking back towards the car slowly. "I'm going home in the morning."

"Yeah, me too," Terry said. "I have to deal with some legal stuff on Monday."

John smiled at Terry. "Really?"

"Yeah, you're right. I should quit screwing around. I want Megan, and I'm going to see if I can get her. At least get more visitation time."

"That's great man."

"Deals a deal, John." Terry punched John lightly in the shoulder. "You gonna look into the pirate gig?"

"What the hell are you guys talking about?" Brad asked catching up with them.

"Nothing." Terry smiled. "We're talking about nothing."

"And everything," John added.

"Yeah, and everything."

"Whatever, we still have to decide what to do about the woods."

Clive looked at John as if pleading for help.

"Yeah, I guess we should talk about that, but let's do it back at the woods. I'm starving and all the food's out there."

"No, all the food is here. We still need to pick some up, unless you want to eat those hot dogs," Brad said.

"What?" Terry asked. "I like hot dogs. We all used to like hot dogs. I don't know why you guys are so set against them."

"Well, let's at least get buns and stuff," Brad said.

They stopped at the store on their way out. The Red Chicken market was still open, and Rich Peterson helped them find everything they needed as if they were the only customers in town. They bought steak, and the hot dogs would end up going to the perfectly ordinary-sized raccoons who were much less picky about eating meat by

products.

Heavy

Clive and Brad made the drive back to the cabin in silence. They had lots to talk about but nowhere to begin. Terry and John made a similar silent drive back. They all arrived at approximately the same time and quietly went inside. Clive started to build the fire, and they watched him as he worked.

John broke the silence. "It was heavy wasn't it? I mean, I didn't expect it to be so heavy."

"They're always heavy. It's a coffin, it's supposed to be heavy. It'd be weird if it wasn't heavy." Terry answered.

"Yeah but, he was burned up right? How much of that weight was Matt?"

"All of it was Matt," Brad said "They don't throw bricks in there to make it seem heavier for effect."

"I didn't mean it that way. Matt wasn't that big a guy right? I mean, unless he gained a shit load of weight since I last saw him."

"He didn't," Clive said as he struck a single match and lit the fire. "He was still in pretty good shape."

"So why the hell did it seem so heavy?"

"They always are. I used to think that maybe I was the only one lifting. You know, like all the other pall bearers were just faking it and allowing me to do all the work. But I don't think that's true. They're heavy because they should be heavy," Terry said. "It should

require effort.”

“I’ve never had to carry one before. It’s kind of creepy. Why don’t they just hire someone to do it? Why not just have the funeral home do it?” John dug around in his pocket for his lighter. The accompanying cigarette was already hanging from his lip.

“You gonna smoke inside?” Clive asked.

“Sorry, I forgot that you don’t smoke, Clive. I should probably quit anyway. The damn things keep getting more expensive, and I should be spending my money on something more useful right?”

“You don’t smoke, moron. You bought those damn things yesterday at the bar,” Terry said.

“It’s a Roman tradition,” Clive said as if the cigarette incident hadn’t happened. “When a Roman died he was covered with his cloak. His friends would carry the body, cloak and all, home.”

“But we’re not Roman.” John cocked his head and put his cigarette gently back into the still full pack, and then put the pack back into his shirt pocket.

“It’s tradition.” Clive, having successfully started the fire, now walked over to his own chair.

“I think my new life goal is to avoid going to funerals,” John said.

“It’s an honor, you know? Carrying the casket. Only close friends of the family were selected. For the Romans, it was the man’s fellow soldiers. That’s us. You should feel honored.”

“So who were those other two guys?” John asked.

“Cousins, I guess.” Clive said. “I guess they ran out of close friends.”

"I'm not doing it again. I'm not going to funerals, and I'm not carrying the damn casket."

"Good luck with that, I've done it more times than I can remember," Terry said. "It's always heavy, and you always find your self thinking about not dropping the damn thing."

"Hey Clive, what happened if the Romans dropped the body on the way home?" Brad asked.

"I'm not sure, but I'm guessing that they picked him back up at some point."

They all looked at Clive who was staring at the newly started fire. When Clive noticed the silence he looked up at them.

"What?"

"Was that a joke, Clive?" Terry asked.

Brad started laughing and pointed his finger accusingly at Clive. "Not funny man. That's completely inappropriate."

They all caught on and started laughing.

"It wasn't that funny," Clive said.

"Oh, the joke sucked," John reassured him. "The fact that you made the joke is hilarious."

"I didn't mean for it to be funny. It just seems like they would have to pick the guy up eventually, you know."

They laughed harder at Clive's further explanation.

"It's not that funny. They're gonna be really sad about it and all, but they would have to pick the guy back up." Clive started to laugh as well, although it was clear that he

still didn't find that much humor in it.

"You should have told me that before, Clive. I was really worried about dropping Matt. If I'd have known that we could just pick him back up, that would have taken a load off," John said.

"Well, now you know. So you don't have to avoid all those funerals in the future after all," Terry said.

"Oh, I'm still doing that. No more funerals for me. I'm gonna stick to hanging out with the living."

"Matt would have found this funny as hell, even if we did drop him," Brad said.

"He would have found it funny, wouldn't he?" Terry said.

"Yeah, I think Matt would have found all of this funny."

They got quiet for a moment. John found his lighter and began to flip the lid back and forth on it. The rest watched the lid of the zippo lighter flip open and then closed. There was a dragon engraved into the lighter, with the lid hinging roughly at the dragon's jaw line, so that it kind of looked like the dragon was closing and opening his mouth.

John noticed them staring at his lighter as he flipped the lid back and forth. "Sorry, it's a habit."

"It's alright. That's a pretty cool lighter. Where did you get it? It's not like you smoke or anything," Terry asked.

"I smoke sometimes. I got it at a bar I used to work at for extra money. This guy came in every weekend and flipped this lighter around, just like I was doing. He never drank a drop. He just came in because we had pool tables. He'd play anyone that was stupid enough. If you were really stupid he'd play you for money. Went home with fifty or

sixty extra bucks a couple of times. One day, I decided to play him, only I didn't want his money. I wanted this lighter, so I asked him to play for it. I had ten bucks, and he had this lighter."

"So you're a pool shark as well as a Model T pirate?"

"No, I got lucky. He scratched on the eight ball. He never came back. I've kind of felt bad about it. I'd give the lighter back to him, If I ever saw him again. Losing like that must have sucked."

"Cool lighter though," Terry said.

"Yeah, it's too cool for me. Maybe I'll sell it or something. Maybe it's solid gold or something, could be the eyes are real rubies and worth a fortune."

Clive reached over and took the lighter out of John's hand. He inspected it for a moment and handed it back. "It's brass, not gold."

"Well, thanks Clive. That makes me just a little poorer than I was a second ago."

"Sorry. If it makes you feel any better the dragon is a happy one."

John raised his eyebrow a little when he looked at Clive. "A happy one? Aren't all dragons happy? I mean, they pretty much just sneeze on anything they're not fond of and it goes away."

"No, lots of dragons are unhappy. You have a happy one. That's something, right?"

John opened his mouth and Terry interrupted him. "Wait, let me ask. I'm just dying to know." He looked directly at Clive. "How do you know the dragon is a happy one?"

Brad picked the lighter out of John's hand and started to look it over. "Look here. It's smiling. That's how you can tell, right?"

"No. All dragons smile. Even the unhappy ones. You can tell it's happy because it

has a toy. See that little ball in front of it that its whiskers are playing with. It has a toy, and therefore is a happy dragon.”

“You're shittin' me, right.” John took his lighter back from Brad.

“No, it's true. A dragon without a toy is unhappy. Yours has a toy.”

“Great, now I can sell the lighter for ten or twelve bucks and tell the lucky buyer that the dragon is most assuredly happy.”

“You should keep it,” Clive said as he got up to place another log on the fire.

“Happy dragons are good luck.”

“I think this one might be flawed, Clive. It wasn't very lucky for the guy that lost it.” John carefully put the lighter back in his pocket.

“Happy dragons bring good luck. Perhaps losing the lighter was good luck for the guy. You did say he never came back to the bar.”

“Well, I'd still give it back to him, if he showed up. It hasn't brought much luck to me.”

“Maybe it has and you just didn't notice.”

Terry rolled forward in his chair so that he could get a better view of Clive.

“You're tryin' to tell me that you believe in luck?”

“Yeah, everybody believes in luck.”

“I don't,” John said quickly.

“Of course you do.”

“Nope. You forget, Clive. I'm going bankrupt. That's pretty bad luck, if you ask me.”

“That's pretty bad planning, luck is a different thing altogether.”

"Ouch!" John pretended to be hurt.

"Whoa, Clive. You don't know the story here," Terry interrupts.

"No, it's alright. Let him talk. He's entitled to his opinion."

"You don't know the story, Clive. Just let it alone," Terry said leaning back in his chair.

"But it's true, bankruptcy is almost always caused by mismanagement. If you live within your means, you rarely have to worry about bankruptcy."

"Clive, I'm bankrupt because of medical bills."

"Well, I said almost always caused by mismanagement. You don't have insurance?"

"Oh, yeah. I have insurance. But it doesn't pay for everything, Clive."

"Hey lets, talk about something else," Brad said.

"It's not your fault if it's medical bills. You can probably even get help with those, or re-finance them or something."

"Clive, drop it," Terry said.

The cabin got quiet again as they all waited for someone to say something.

"Hey, not to cause more trouble or anything, but what are we going to do?" Brad asked.

"About this place?" Terry asked.

"Yeah, I know that John is going back home in the morning. I imagine you will be too. That leaves me and Clive here to take care of all this. I don't want to have to deal with it on my own. We need to figure out what we're going to do, and I'm not taking care of the place. I know I'm the closest and all, but I just can't do that. We need to figure out

what to do about this place.”

“You mean sell?”

“Yeah, Clive. I think we need to sell.”

“I don't know, I think we should keep it,” John said.

“You? You think we should keep it? Aren't you the one who needs the money the most? You wanted to sell it just yesterday.”

“Yeah, but it's not like the place is worth millions or anything. It's not gonna keep me out of bankruptcy if we sell the place. And it's not like I'll be able to buy anything like this ever again. I think we should keep it. Why the hell not?”

“I vote we should keep it too,” Clive added.

“It's not a vote, Clive. I'm not going to stick around in this little town, and I'm not going to be here to take care of this place. I don't want it,” Brad said, frustrated.

“I don't know, Brad. Maybe we should keep it,” Terry said. “You keep talking about maintenance and stuff, but what if we just didn't maintain it? Let this cabin fall into the dirt and let the woods just grow back over it. You heard Shirley, and you saw the maps. This is it. The only real woods for miles. You know I saw three woodpeckers yesterday. Where are they gonna live if we sell out and this place gets bulldozed?”

“Woodpeckers? You're not serious?”

“Well, it's not just the wood peckers, Brad. There's all kinds of wildlife here. If we let this place go, all those animals die.”

“They won't die, they'll go back down to the river where there are plenty of trees for the little woodpeckers.”

“What about Matt?” Clive asked.

"What about him?"

"It's still his land, Brad," John said.

"We can't keep this place. There are taxes, there are legal issues. We can't just leave the place here, and pretend that it doesn't exist."

"I'll pay the taxes."

"Dammit, Clive. You can't just do that. You can't just make things go away by saying 'I'll pay for it'. That won't work. What if something happens to you? We'll be right back in the same place having this conversation all over again. We have to decide, right now, what we're going to do. Are any of you willing to move here. Just pick up all your stuff and live here in Birkeyville, full time?"

Terry answered. "That'd be cool, but I'd lose my daughter over it. No, I can't move here, but that doesn't change anything, Brad. We have to keep it. I don't know what we're going to do with it, or why it's so damn important, but it is. We have to keep it. Clive's been saying it all along, and he's right."

"What about you, John? You think we should keep it too. Selling your share would help pay off your debt. You can't really think that keeping it is the best choice?"

"I think it is, Brad. I think we have to keep it. The money wouldn't make that much difference anyway. I'd just lose it all in the end. I think I'm going to sell the business, go to work for someone else for awhile. The business isn't making any money, putting more money into it isn't going to change that."

"I can't believe this. So, I'm the only one that wants to sell?"

"Why do you want to sell so badly?" Clive asked.

"I have my reasons."

"It's not about the money. You could have been renting out your dad's apartment for the last few years and making money. Or you could have just stayed there yourself, and avoided paying rent in Landsbury. You've been turning down money for years," Clive said.

"I have not been turning down money. The apartment needs a lot of work before it can be rented out."

"But you haven't been working on it."

"It's not going to bring enough money to be worth it, Clive."

"I'll rent it. I already told you that. I'll even fix it up for you."

"I'll still lose money. I'd have to store all of dad's stuff, and the storage building won't be free."

They got quiet again, and Terry asked the obvious question. "You never cleaned out your dad's stuff? It's all still up there? Tell me it's in boxes or something."

"I just haven't got around to boxing it all up."

"I'll help."

"No, Clive. I don't want help. I don't want anything. I don't want this land. I don't want the store. I don't want Birkeyville. Can't you see that? I just want to go away. All of you went away. I stayed, and now I just want to go away too."

"Why did you stay in the first place?" Terry asked.

Brad looked at him, but didn't answer. They both knew the answer anyway. Brad stayed because of his dad. His dad wanted the store to stay open, and he wanted to stay in Birkeyville where everyone knew everybody else. It was the idea of the small town that brought Brad's father here in the first place. Brad stayed around to help his father. He'd

thought about leaving, but when his father got sick, he was needed even more. When his father died, someone had to run the store. Someone had to make sure the store opened on time and his father wasn't around to do it.

“Fine, keep it. You're right. I don't need the money, and we can just let it rot out here. The trees can creep in and just cover it all back up, like it never existed. I won't be here to see it happen anyway. I am leaving Birkeyville. I'm selling the store, and I'm leaving.”

It was clear that Clive was upset about the store closing, and about Brad leaving Birkeyville, but he tried to pretend that it didn't bother him. “Well, I'll still help you clean the apartment out and fix it up. You'll have to clean it out before you can sell it.”

“Yeah, I can stay a couple more days. I'll help out too. We'll get that place all cleaned out, so the next owner won't even know your father ever lived there,” Terry said.

“Yeah. I'm selling out my auto business anyway. I can just leave the doors locked for another day or two. With all of us helping out, it should only take a couple of days to clean the place out,” John added.

“Yeah, it will be like your dad never lived there,” Terry said looking at John.

“Yeah, like he never even lived there,” John added.

“Like he never lived,” Clive said looking directly at Brad.

They sat quietly for a moment, allowing what Clive said to sink in. Brad was near tears, but fighting. Clive got up to move the logs on the fire around, even though they seemed to be burning just fine. John flipped the lid of his lighter a couple of times and admired the dragon engraved into it as if he'd never really looked at it before. Terry leaned back in his chair, causing it to creak under his weight, and watched Clive poke

uselessly at the fire.

"You guys suck," Brad choked.

"Just trying to help," Terry said.

"I wish none of this had happened. I wish Matt was still alive and none of us ever bothered to come back here." Brad walked out of the cabin and Terry followed.

"I don't know, Brad. It's been fun."

"No it hasn't. I just look around and see that Matt isn't here. It's the same as the store. I look around and think my dad should be standing behind that counter, only it's Matt instead. I keep thinking that Matt should be standing behind that awkward kitchen counter thing."

"That does kind of suck doesn't it?..What was he thinking when he put that stupid counter thing in there?"

Brad looked at Terry for a minute and saw that Terry was looking up at the stars.

"That's not funny."

"It's a little but funny."

Brad laughed a little. "It's not even a little bit funny. I'm having a serious breakdown here, and you're making jokes about crappy green countertops."

"Is it green? Uggh! Who the hell would install a green countertop?"

"You're not funny."

"Sorry. You want me to go get Clive? He's the serious one you know."

"No! I've talked to Clive enough this week."

"He's alright. I think he just needs to find out where he belongs."

"You could say that about all of us I guess."

"No, not all of us. John knows. Mary is waiting for him to come back. She's going to watch him sell that damn business. She's going to pretend to understand, and she's going to watch him give up his dreams, so that she can have hers. John knows where he belongs."

"What about you? You know where you belong?"

"I belong wherever my daughter is."

"Great. What if I don't know where I belong?"

"Find it. Find where you belong"

"Oh, that sounds easy enough."

"Why are you still in Birkeyville? You can go anywhere else in the world, but you live in Birkeyville."

John stepped outside and lit a cigarette with the dragon lighter. He took a drag off of it but didn't inhale. He wandered over to Brad and Terry slowly trying to determine if he wanted to take part in their conversation.

"Clive chase you out?" Terry asked.

"He does creep me out a bit. I'll admit it. You guys mind if I hang around out here with you?"

"Oh, no problem. Terry was just telling me how I should leave Birkeyville."

"Yeah? Where you going?"

"I can't leave. There's the store, there's the apartment. I'm stuck here."

"Well, at least it's quiet out here. You know, I don't think I remember what quiet sounds like." John paused for a second as if listening to the silence. "I kind of miss it."

"No quiet left where you're from?" Brad asked.

"Are you kidding? I live about twenty feet from a very busy set of railroad tracks, and just a couple of blocks from a major highway. There is no quiet where I'm from. I think we should hang onto this place for awhile? Just so I can come back every now and again, and listen to the silence."

"Listen to the silence? How poetic of you."

"Well, you know. I'm a poet at heart."

"A poet?"

"At heart... It ain't like I'm going around writing no pussy ass poetry or anything."

John tried to take another drag off of the cigarette and fought back a coughing fit.

Brad laughed out loud at John. "It's not as easy as that. I can't just up and leave. I have responsibilities."

"Had," Terry said. "Had responsibilities. I don't think you have them now. No one's going to miss the store, and it ain't like you're leaving a family behind or anything."

"Yeah, but I'll still stay."

"Matt stayed."

"Yeah, and look what it got him," John added.

"What did it get him, Brad?" Terry said snatching the cigarette out of John's mouth and stomping on it.

"What'd you do that for?"

"You're quitting today. Give 'em."

"What you're my dad now?"

"Give 'em."

John handed the cigarettes to Terry. "I hereby ban you from ever buying cigarettes

again.” Terry turns back to Brad. “So what did it get him, Brad? Matt stayed here all these years and waited for us guys to come back. We never did. Pretty sad story, right. So what did he end up with?”

“Brad, make him give my cigarettes back.”

Brad looked at John and shook his head. “I don't know what Matt got for staying in Birkeyville. I suppose you're gonna tell me though, right?”

“Nope, I'm not sure myself. Look around. He built this place. He bought all of this land. Not just the little piece we used to camp on, that would have been easy. He bought land all the way down to the river. When everybody else was cutting down trees, and putting in corn, Matt bought more trees. He bought more and more of Birkeyville.”

“He should have bought the store too.”

“He didn't have to buy the store, Brad. Don't you get it? Matt wanted to save this, because it was important. He didn't have to buy the store. You saved the store.”

“That's the moral? I saved the store, just like Matt saved this land?”

“Don't know,” Terry said crushing John's almost full pack of cigarettes in his hand.

“You're completely full of shit.”

“Maybe so, but I still think we should keep this. It's important.”

“And I have to keep the store?”

“I don't know, Brad. Is it important?” Terry looked at Brad as he waited for an answer.

Clive stepped out of the cabin and quietly slipped in next to Brad. “Hey, I could just stay out here, guys. I mean it. I could look after the place. You wouldn't have to come back if you don't want to, Brad. I want to take care of it. You guys can still come out and

visit whenever you want.

Brad ignored Clive's comment. "It's not like I can just leave Birkeyville."

"Why not?" John asked.

"Because it's my home."

"Then why do you live in Landsbury?" Terry asked.

"Birkeyville is where I grew up."

"It's where we all grew up," Terry said. "That doesn't mean you can't move away.

Even Clive moved away, and he's in love with the damn place."

They all looked at Clive, expecting a response but he just shrugged his shoulders.

"So, I should go? That's what you're all saying?"

"No, you should figure out whether you want to stay," Terry sat down on the small set of steps that led up to the porch of the cabin. "If you want to stay, then stay. But if you're staying because you think you have to, then maybe you should make sure that you really have to. Matt stayed because he had to. I'm not convinced that it was ever because he wanted to." Terry looked at Clive. "Why do you think Matt stayed, Clive?"

Clive hesitated. "He stayed because of his mom. He stayed because he had to. He wanted to move away. That's what he talked about when he called. He wanted to move away. I talked him out of it. I kept telling him that it would kill his mom if he moved away."

"He talked about moving away?" Brad asked.

Clive didn't answer.

"It's what people do, Brad," John said. "They grow up and move away from home."

"Yeah, but what else would I do?"

"What do you want to do?" Terry asked.

"I'm good at selling sporting goods you know?"

"So, do it someplace else," John said. "They need sporting goods in other towns."

"I could probably find a building in Landsbury?"

"Or, you could find a building anywhere. Do you really want to stay in Landsbury?" Terry asked.

"I have to live somewhere."

"Yeah, but it could be anywhere," Terry said. "It doesn't have to be Birkeyville, or Landsbury or even in this damn state."

"Who's gonna look after Clive if he stays out here?"

Clive looked up when he heard his name.

"Clive can take care of himself. I think he's going home too. He's gonna stay for awhile, and then he's going home too," Terry said looking at Clive.

"I'm not going back."

"Fine, Clive, but you can still go anywhere else you want to."

"I want to stay here."

"Okay, so Clive is staying, but it isn't your job to take care of him."

"I don't need anyone to take care of me."

"See?" Terry said. "Clive doesn't need you to look after him. So, you got nothing to stay here for. You can move away, just like the rest of us and start a life of your own somewhere."

"You make it sound like I don't have a life at all."

"Do you? Is there a Mrs. Alexander out there that you've been hiding from us? You got a bunch of illegitimate kids you're hiding? Do you even have a damn dog, Brad?"

"I can't have dogs in my apartment."

Terry shook his head. "You want a dog?"

"I don't understand how a dog even matters." Brad said

"It matters, because it's something. It's someone who is waiting for you to come home. Who's waiting for you to come home here?"

Brad didn't answer.

"Look, it's none of my business. I'm going home tomorrow regardless. John's going home. We're all going back to our lives. I'm happy about that. I think John's happy about that. Hell, even Clive seems happy about tomorrow, even though he isn't going home at all. Are you going to be happy tomorrow, Brad? Are you going to be happy next week? Next year?"

"I've been happy here."

"Sure you have. We all have, but there's more out there than Birkeyville. You should at least see some of it before you die."

"Jesus, do you think Matt ever left Birkeyville?" John asked. "I mean, he went on vacations and stuff, right?"

They all looked at Clive, assuming that he would know the answer. Clive shrugged his shoulders.

Brad walked back inside the cabin, and they waited quietly until the door closed behind him.

"Maybe he should stay in Birkeyville," Clive said.

“Why?”

“Maybe he likes it here.”

“Does he, Clive?”

Clive didn't answer.

“Well, I'm leaving early, so I'm going to turn in. I'll see you guys in the morning.

Let me know how it all turns out,” John said walking past them.

“It's not a bad town,” Clive said.

“Nope, it's not. Just isn't home anymore.”

“It could be home again.”

“No, it couldn't.” Terry walked into the cabin leaving Clive alone outside.

Home

Morning came with silence. John was up first and had already moved his stuff into his car. He was sitting on the small porch of the cabin drinking yesterday's coffee that he managed to warm up on the tiny propane stove when Clive found him.

“You're going home already?” Clive asked.

“Yeah, I have to go back to work,” John replied.

“You could quit. It's not that hard.”

“I think I might just do that. What about you, Clive? What are you going to do?”

“I'm gonna stay. At least for awhile.”

“By yourself?”

“Yeah, I'm not going back. When I get tired of staying here, or just run out of

money, I'll pack up and move on, maybe. But I'm not going back to that job or that apartment. I hate it there. I'm staying here."

"People are going to miss you. Your job, your friends?"

"No, no one will miss me. They'll hire someone else at work. The apartment is mostly cleaned out already. It'll be like I was never there."

"Well, when you get tired of sitting out here in the woods, come up my way. Bigger town, more jobs. There's a hospital. They're bound to need someone like you."

"So, quit looking at dirt samples and start looking at urine samples?"

"Well, it could be blood or something."

"That's not really better."

"I guess it's not. You could go back to school. You already have the one degree, maybe turn it into two. You could teach or something, like Terry."

"Never get hired. They ask about past mental health."

"You have a past mental health?"

Clive looked at John as if he might be joking with him. "Yeah... You know, you guys tried to ignore that I was a little messed up. You tried when we were kids, and you tried in the last couple of days. That's really cool of you guys, you know."

"Ah, Clive. You're no more screwed up than the rest of us. We just hide it better."

"Well, I still have the record. So, no teaching."

"Know anything about cars?"

Clive laughed. "You offering me a job?"

"Well, I'm selling the business, so if you wanted a shop of your own, I could hook you up."

"I thought the place was going under."

"Well, yeah, but you didn't think I'd sell you a successful business did you? I mean, we're friends and all Clive, but if the place was making money I'd keep it myself."

"Don't do it, Clive." Terry stepped around them carrying his one small bag out to his car. "Don't let him stick you with that failing business."

"You leaving too?" Clive asked.

"Yeah, I got stuff to do. Maybe, I'll come back in a couple of months when things are settled at home." Terry smiled at Clive as if to ensure him that they would all come back eventually.

"Brad up?" John asked.

"Yeah, he's complaining about the coffee." Having tossed his bag into the car, Terry came back to the porch and stood looking at Clive and John. "We should come back, you know?"

"Yeah, we should," John agreed.

"I guess I'll take over Matt's job of sending out the invitations, then," Clive said looking at them hopefully.

"Yeah, except we really should. We should do it every year. You really should send out the invitations, Clive. We could do it every year."

"Yeah, we could," John said, sounding uncommitted.

"I'll send the invitations. I really will. You guys will come back, right?"

Brad stepped out of the cabin coffee cup in hand.

Clive looked up at him, and then to the others. "You'll all come back if I set up the date and stuff right?"

Brad sipped his coffee, which is too hot. "Yeah, we should come back."

"Yeah," Terry said. "This was fun."

John didn't answer.

"You guys leaving early?" Brad asked John and Terry.

"Yeah, it's a long drive," John answered.

"What about you, Brad?" Terry asked. "What are you going to do?"

Brad looked out at the trees. "I'm going to take a vacation. I think I'm going to just drive south for awhile."

"I hear the Smokies are nice this time of year, Fall colors and all," John said.

"Yeah, but I'm really going to do it. I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm going to lock up the store, and just go for a drive."

"You're coming back though?" Clive asked.

"Yeah, I need to clean up my dad's place. Maybe rent it out, if I can find anyone that wants it. Maybe with the additional income I can keep the store open for a few more years."

"I could help out. I'm gonna stay in town for awhile."

"Thanks, Clive, but I think I'm gonna take the trip first, and do the cleaning later."

"I'll probably still be around when you get back."

"Yeah? You're staying?"

"Yeah. I'm going to stay out here for a while. I got nothing to go back to anyway."

"You sure Clive? It's kind of lonely out here, and I don't just mean the woods. The town is lonely. There's less people every year, and the ones that are left aren't looking for new friends."

"I'm not really looking for new friends either. I think I just want to be out here for awhile."

"Well, it's been fun, but I gotta get on the road," Terry said. "I'd like to be home in time to find my ex-wife and warn her about the custody battle she'll be involved in."

"Wasting no time?" John asked.

"Wasted enough already. It's been great, and send me that invitation, Clive. I will come back, just let me know when. You guys keep in touch, and I mean more than those damn Christmas cards every year."

They watched as Terry got in his car and drove off waving. Brad left next, John and Clive watched him load his stuff into his truck.

"You opening the store today?" Clive asked.

"Why you need some sporting goods?"

"No, but I could come and help out or something if you want."

"I don't think I'm gonna open the store today, Clive. I'm gonna go home, make some phone calls, and see about taking that vacation."

Clive nodded his head, and looked at the ground. "I'll still be here when you get back... Let me know when you get back. I'll help you clean the place up."

"You could go on a vacation yourself, Clive."

"I think I'm going to stay here."

John leaned against the door of the cabin. "You going anywhere near mountains?"

"Maybe."

"Send me a post card. I always wanted to see the mountains, you know?"

"If I see any mountains, I'll send you a post card."

"I'd like one too, but I don't have an address yet."

"I'll send it to the store, Clive. You can pick it up there. In fact, why don't you check the mail there while I'm gone."

"I could open the store while you're away too."

"Nah, I think it needs to stay closed for awhile. Maybe the town will miss it if it's closed."

"I don't mind."

"Yeah, I know you don't, Clive, but it just wouldn't feel right. As long as that store has been here, either dad or I have unlocked that door. I think that if someone else were to unlock it. It would seem like selling it, you know?"

"So, you're not going to sell it?" John asked.

"No, I'm going on a very long vacation. When I get back, I'm going to open the store again. Maybe I'll change it some. Maybe carry something other than sporting goods. Something that people in Birkeyville actually need."

"Like what?" Clive asked.

"I don't know yet. Maybe I'll figure it out when I'm on vacation. Maybe I'll just stop in at every small store I see and try to figure out how they stay in business." Brad stepped into his truck and closed the door. "You guys take care. And work out when we should all come back, Clive. Make it sometime nice. Not too cold, and not too hot. The mosquitoes out here are awful in the summer. Maybe next fall."

"I was thinking about spring." Clive said.

"Fall's better. Much prettier out here when the leaves are changing. Let me know, Clive. I'll see you guys around."

John and Clive watched Brad drive away. He made it into town in time to open the store, but didn't. He drove past the store and on to Landsbury to pack his things. He really did leave on that vacation and he really did see the Smoky mountains. He even sent pictures to John.

"You sure you want to stay out here all alone, Clive?"

"Yeah, I think I just need to be alone for awhile. You know, to figure some stuff out."

"Well, if I can help, or you just want someone to talk to, give me a call."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, man. I don't have good advice, but I like to share it anyway."

"I think you have great advice?"

"But you don't listen to it anyway."

"Yeah, I know, I'm going to stay here for awhile."

"You know, there's nothing here anymore, Clive. We've all moved away."

"Brad's coming back."

"Yeah, but he's coming back to the store, not to these woods. He's lived right next to them for all of these years, and never made it back."

"I know."

"So, why stay?"

"Because I made it back. I can't leave again."

"You'll have to eventually."

"I don't know, I think I might just stay forever."

"And do what?"

"Nothing. I'm going to do nothing."

"Sounds like a real shitty life, Clive."

"No, I think it's what I've always wanted."

"Well, keep in touch anyway, okay?"

"You're not coming back are you?" Clive asked looking at the ground.

"I'll try, Clive. I really will, but I don't think I'm coming back."

"I'll invite you anyway."

"I know. And I really will try."

John helped Clive clean the place up a little, and asked again if he was sure about staying. Clive was. John drove away looking at Clive in the rear view mirror. They didn't wave. Clive just stood there, as John turned out of the drive and drove away.

They all said they'd come back, John tried not to say it, knowing it would be a lie, but it eventually came out anyway. None of them meant it. Only Clive knew they would be back next year. They came home for Matt's funeral, and they'd come back for his. Clive put the land into a trust so the land would never be for sale. It took him months to do the planning. They all pitched in, sending money when they could. As soon as the land was secure, Clive began the planning that would bring them back.