

THE SLAM of the front door; the sound of Father's pickup revving; tires churning through the dirt. Only recently had Thurman stopped running down to the bunker when his parents went on like this. Nineteen now, too old for hidey-holes.

He walked through the house towards Mom's bedroom, wading through the quiet Father's absence shaped.

She was lying in the dark. He stepped towards the bed.
'Mom?'

'For mercy sake, Thurman.'

And so he echoed Father's flight, slamming the screen door behind him, stomping down the veranda steps and revving the old, oil-guzzling jalopy.

As the track bent due north he could see the wink of Father's brake lights in the distance, two red squares burning then departing beyond the high ridge of the mesa. He rubbed his eyes. The evening heat made him unctuous and snarky. He peeled his shirt from his back and cranked down the window. Forty minutes later he was driving through the town along the length of the main thoroughfare, out past the bars and down by the railroad tracks.

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It was here that he slowed to a crawl, one finger on the steering wheel. Father's Dodge pickup with its repair spots and creased fender, the tarp and orange ropes rolled up on the bed, was parked behind a station wagon. The jalopy engine pattered through Thurman's thighs as he watched the light flicker above the doorway. Everyone knew it was the brothel. Father's weekly toot. Thurman imagined an ageing woman, ugly and painted. Father's rawboned shoulders sloping above her.

The grooves of the steering wheel bit into his palm.

Often Father would return home drunk and incensed from these weekly trips, and Thurman would run to his room and crouch on the floor, thighs pressed against his chest, praying in his dread-filled way for them to stop, for it to stop, trying to remember a time when things were different, but there never was such a time. He would hear the sound of Mom's blouse buttons hitting the wooden floor and knew that soon he would have to go to her room and hold her. Sometimes she appeared to be hallucinating with pain but never once did she cuss Father. Never hid. Never argued. Never fought back. She must have learned way before Thurman was born that life was easier if she remained mute. Slut. Whore. Thurman would lie in the dark picturing her biting her lips, moaning the moan of a good wife because she knew that if she uttered a wrong word Father would drop his fist onto her face. Cunt.

When he thought about Father it was always the old man's hands he saw in his mind, whopping great shovels, always active, either out on the ranch or at home, nothing Father could not make nor fix. Long-fingered and gnarled, his hands were so expressive that he tended to talk with them and at

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times he appeared conscious of this and would tuck them into his pockets or sit on them. Father's hands even moved, Mom said, when he was asleep. But to Thurman the hands only ever spoke one word and that word was hurt. They contained bones that had fractured many times and reset, broken against walls and furniture, the skulls of cattle, Mom, Thurman. Hands so masterful at gripping axes and shovels and carpentry tools and soldering irons, the stock of his rifle and shotgun. So useful for overturning a table with a single, effortless flick, for giving backhand so fast it was heard before it was felt, for grabbing a fistful of hair and smashing heads into walls.

In comparison Thurman's hands were clumsy, with square-tipped sausage fingers. He was the exact opposite of a punk kid and Father would often take him angrily to task for having failed to fight back, for being mouse-like, meek. He didn't understand what was going on inside Thurman's skull. Didn't sense the nest of neuroses being knitted into more and more complex patterns each and every day.

As a form of punishment Father would press one of his hands down on top of Thurman's head so forcefully that Thurman's legs would buckle, and then he would dig his bone-hard nails into Thurman's scalp, drag them back and forth so deep that blood would trickle down his forehead and swim in his eyes and God help him if he flinched. I've more strength in my little finger, Father would say.

Thurman put the pickup into gear and drove towards the highway.

He stopped to buy some cigarettes. The place looked deserted. He walked across the gravel lot, puddles of oil

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reflecting the red neon sign of the Southern Skies Motor Hotel. The man behind reception was a deaf-mute who gasped and blinked while serving him. Behind the man a steer's head was mounted on the wall, watching them both with dusty eyes.

Thurman nodded, 'Thank you, sir,' and the man made an oblique gesture with his fingers.

Outside, a young woman was leaning against a trashcan. 'Mind if I mooch a cigarette, mister?'

Thurman scanned her: russet-colored Naugahyde jacket, unzipped; clingy white blouse; no hose; maybe four-foot-eight in her bare feet. He removed the plastic wrapper from the Lucky Strike pack and passed her one.

She winked. 'Light my fire?'

As she leaned towards the flame he noted the smudges under her eyes and scabs around her mouth and the split in her lower lip.

She stared towards the road blowing out smoke as if Thurman wasn't there.

Distant sound of traffic laying rubber along the highway. Insects whirring like maracas in the dark.

'You staying here?'

She took a long time to look at him. Blinked once.

He asked, 'You need a ride?'

He drove due north. He was a steady, tenacious driver who disliked changing lanes or passing because driving made him minutely conscious of himself. It was a Sunday night, near midnight, and the highway was quiet. He noticed her smell, a cheap-smelling perfume more animal than floral. Headlights reflecting off the blacktop illuminated them both.

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He sneaked looks at her. The girl was a train wreck but almost pretty. She sat sucking and blowing blue-white smoke, clacking her mouth, bare feet up on the dashboard showing her badly painted, cherry-colored toenails.

She mashed a butt and then reached for the Lucky Strikes.

'Help yourself,' he said, trying to be funny.

She asked, 'Got any gum?'

'No.'

'Beer?'

'Nope.'

'Weed?'

'Sorry.'

She made a face. 'Don't be.'

He'd told her he was driving to the next town, a clear twenty miles through the desert, nothing but tumbleweed and darkness between. He wondered did the man on the motel reception see her climb into the jalopy. Deaf-mute, Thurman thought. Man ain't blind.

'So where you from, sounds Midwestern?'

When she didn't answer he looked over at her and she shrugged.

'And how old are you?'

'How old I look?'

He watched the speedometer. 'Same age as me, I guess. Nineteen?'

She laughed briefly. 'Yeah. That's right, mister. I'm nineteen.'

A girl with no suitcase, no possessions, no shoes. She placed her big toe against the dial on the radio and twisted. He looked at her and smiled and she smiled back, putting pictures in his head he knew weren't right.

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‘Won’t get reception out here,’ he said. ‘There’s cassettes under yon seat.’

‘Anyone ever told you ya talk funny?’

He didn’t trust his voice to respond. His old-timer mannerisms and way of speaking. You get raised by old folk and this is how you act.

She bent down, causing her blouse to open a little. He looked. Breast buds. Bulge of nipples like swollen-shut eyes, peeping out at him. He leaned towards the wheel.

‘Johnny Cash. Townes Van Zandt. Willie Nelson. You for real?’

She slid a cassette in, then reached for the lighter on the dashboard.

He wondered could she sense it.

A road sign full of bullet holes said the town was three miles.

He cleared his throat and told her how he’d wanted to study electrical engineering after high school but Father wouldn’t let him. ‘I wish Mom would tell me we were leaving. To drive away and never return.’

The girl rubbed her feet. ‘Mm-hmm,’ she said.

He wondered what it would be like to spend a night with her, the girl in her panties in a cigarette-stale motel room, passing trucks striping their bodies with headlights through the curtains.

He couldn’t see anything in his rearview mirror; not the red neon jewel of the Motor Hotel; no hint, even, of the dividing line between land and sky; just the dim smolder of his tail lights. Maybe this could be a new beginning. Leave the ranch behind and just keep on driving. He stared at her, daring her to interpret the look in his eyes. He took his

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foot off the accelerator and steered onto the gravel berm but she didn't appear to notice. He dropped the pickup down a gear and she looked at him curiously, defiantly. He steered back into the road, thinking about the gun hidden under the back seat.

He pulled up outside the old town jail. The atmosphere felt taut.

'Well, thanks for the ride,' she said.

He opened his mouth, gripping the steering wheel as the door slammed shut and her silhouette snaked along an alleyway to Johnny Cash singing 'Streets of Laredo'.

He exhaled. He'd wanted to ask, You got some money? A place to stay? I'll look after you, he'd wanted to say.

He placed his hand over the warm vinyl where she'd been sitting and brought his sweaty palm to his nose. Their mingled smells.

He put the jalopy into gear and cruised the deserted streets.