

1.

Lonnie said he was the worst fisherman he'd ever seen.

"He just had no patience for it. He'd get mad as hell any time he'd tangle or snag up. He'd scream like a banshee and kick at the side of the boat, scarin' off any fish that may be hangin' around in the first place."

He fingered the ring of his whiskey glass and laughed a deep, phlegmy rumble.

"Nope. The man was not cut out to be a guide. One time he got so pissed off that he chucked his pole into the river--reel and all -- prolly three hundred bucks worth of gear. Unbelievable... still, he was a good man. Saved my ass more than once."

I'd called Lonnie as soon as I arrived at my dad's trailer, dazed from the drive and the bowl I'd smoked with Tasha before I left Oly. We met in the cocktail lounge of a restaurant in town -- one of those wood-paneled, logging-themed greasy spoons that take up half a block of every single burg in the Pacific Northwest. It was deep woods dark when I sauntered in. The restaurant had stopped serving at nine o'clock, with only the neon glow from the lounge leading my way, along with Foghat's "Slow Ride" blaring from the jukebox. Inside was a smattering of out-of-work or soon-to-be-out-of-work lumberjacks, sipping bottles of Bud and smoking GPC cigarettes, the harsh generic brand that my buddy Chuck always said stood for "Gives People Cancer." A couple of lonely drunks hunched over at the bar, along with an overweight matron in her late fifties. She sat there like a polyester-clad gnome, slipping menthols out of a custom-made burgundy leather cigarette case, complete with a shiny metal lipped mouth and snap-clasp.

Lonnie had yet to arrive, so I took a stool next to her. She was oblivious to all except her cigarettes, Black Russian, and the two piles of pull tabs on the bar in front of her. The not-yet-played were neatly stacked, while the assorted losers were discarded into a forlorn heap, like the shells left over after a clam feed. She gripped them with slow, arthritic hands and peeled open the thin cardboard tabs, revealing potential jackpots hidden beneath. She sighed as she took in each futile combination

of fruit, bells, numbers, and card suits, chucking the loser to the dead pile and sucking in a lungful of hope on her menthol.

The bartender sported a teased mane of blond hair and a big Bingo butt encased in a pair painted-on Jordache jeans. The stretched denim rode up high into the cleft of her ass, accentuating her holiday ham hocks. She jabbered on the phone and sipped from a can of Pepsi Free, glancing at the Monday Night Football matchup flashing on the TV hanging in the bar's far end. Miami was twenty points up on Cincinnati, and it was only the beginning of the second half. I feigned interest in the game while enduring the dull stares of three men in the corner, who surely had me pegged for an out-of-towner. In a sense I didn't look so out of place in my jeans, work boots, blue flannel shirt, and Supersonics cap. Loggers and grunge kids essentially sported the same uniform, but the similarity ended there. As I shifted on the stool I could feel their antipathy radiate my way. I imagined these guys were blaming me for the scarcity of work. Times were tough and to them my long hair and goatee gave me away as a nature freak, a tree-hugging faggot, an outsider. Even though it was already 1992, the cultural wars of the 60's were still burning hot in towns such as Forks.

In reality, I was no hippy. Sure, I liked to blaze some weed and take a walk in the woods or throw a Frisbee on the beach, but that was the end of it. I never went all-in on the whole Mother Earth thing. I lived in Olympia, Washington, a town surrounded by mountains, water, and real greenery, but I preferred the comforts of home or the local bar to actually roughing it. Nature was nice to take in to take in doses, but nature was also wet. Nature was cold. Nature was, at best, indifferent to your needs, and more than often met them with naked hostility.

I knew this first hand, thanks to my old man. As a kid I was often forced to go on outings with him as he attempted to hunt or fish or just camp, usually too drunk to cook dinner by the time dark rolled around. He always wore camouflage and decked me out in a kid's versions of the same: we were a father-son commando team, escaping the woman after one of their inevitable fights. We'd grab the camping box, jump into his muffler-less Ford Ranger, and off we'd go, straight into the heart of waterlogged misery.

"This is it, Nick. Look around you. This is the only place a man can be himself."

I shivered under an olive green poncho, barely making out his voice over the patter of rain on vinyl.

"Here, catch."

He threw me a full can of beer, which was surprisingly heavy and colder than the saturated air. I couldn't tell where my breath ended and the mist began.

“Go ahead. You’re old enough, now. Just one though. I don’t want you puking in the tent.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Well, I’m giving it to you, Nick. Father to son. I want to you to drink it.”

“No. Thanks.”

“I know your mom wouldn’t hear of it, but she ain’t here, now is she? I won’t tell on you. This is just between us, so go ahead... drink it.”

“No.”

“Drink the fucking beer Nick.”

“I’m cold.”

“Just open the goddamned can. It ain’t every day I give you a beer.”

“Then don’t.”

“Man up, Nick. Show your old man that you got some balls, because if you don’t got balls then you’re not a Leary. That’s something we all got in this family: goddamned balls. We don’t take shit from no one, and we’re not afraid to raise some hell.”

He whooped, then chuckled and spat. He crushed his can with his right hand and hurled it at a tree. I heard it thump off the wet bark as it careened into the black.

The fire hissed and popped, slowly succumbing to the rain, which also ceaselessly slapped the muck around the log I sat on. I closed my eyes, waiting for his inevitable tears, knowing he was now drunk just to fall over that line. I could feel his dull steps thump the dirt as he trudged closer.

He jerked and lurched and then stood still. He then snatched the beer from the puddle forming in the lap of my poncho.

He fumbled through his army coat as he swayed above me, eventually producing a Swiss Army knife. He coaxed out a blade, holding the glistening blue can in his other hand. With the point of the knife he stabbed the base of the can and rotated the blade, boring out a hole.

“Hold this.”

He handed me the knife.

“Careful, monkeydick. It’s sharper than it looks. Now watch.”

The can snapped with a metallic hiss as he popped open the top and placed his mouth over the hole in the bottom. He squeezed the can's aluminum skin, gulping greedily as twelve ounces of watery beer cascaded straight down his throat. Residual foam bubbled up into his ever-present mustache. All the while he kept one burning eye on my poncho-obscured face; for a moment it flashed, and then turned to glass. He belched, dropped the can to the ground, and crushed it beneath the sole of his black leather army boot.

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"Will you look what the cat drug in?" Lonnie wrapped me in a bear hug and then grabbed a fistful of my hair. "You look just like a real Indian... or a goddamn hippy!"

His hair was cropped, covered by a navy blue stocking hat, but his broad features and coffee skin gave him away as a native.

We sat in a big booth the corner upholstered with maroon naugahyde. He ordered a succession of whiskies, insisting I keep up as he related stories about him and my dad.

"I'm sorry Nick. Losing him's gotta be tough. I remember when my dad died. I thought I wouldn't make it. Course that'uz before 'Nam. After living through that, everything else seemed like no big deal."

He gulped his whiskey and his eyes welled up.

"Shit... You know I tried to help him? I did. I just couldn't get off a good shot."

"So, you actually saw what happened?"

"Damn right I saw. The whole goddamn thing. Never seen nothin' like it, even in 'Nam. I mean, I know that elk got some serious power – we have always revered and respected them--but they always run away from hunters. They know why we're there."

"What made this one different?"

Lonnie leaned in over the table top.

"I called him in. The rut was done but still sometimes you get a horny bull who will answer. Your old man got on his good knee, sized up the shot, and pulled the trigger. Bam! But he missed. Easiest shot on Earth! Now the sound from the rifle – an 8 millimeter magnum--must have startled that big boy, 'cause he lowered

its head and charged straight at Larry. Real fast. Your dad tried to reload and get off another shot, but by that time it was too late. That elk just picked him up with them big ol' antlers, threw him back down on the ground, and then stomped his head with his front hooves—just bashin' the poor dude over and over and over:"

Lonnie got up and assumed the posture of an elk, hands held up and splayed out as antlers, stomping the floor with his feet.

"BAM! BAM! BAM!"

"Jesus Lonnie, settle down!" the bartender barked as she emptied ashtrays into an old coffee can. "I don't want none of that shit in here."

"I ain't playin', Charlene. I'm showin' the boy how his father died, how he was murdered."

All chatter stopped as the eyes of the lounge took me in.

"That man..." Lonnie continued, "...that man was my friend and brother and the boy's got the right to know the TRUTH."

"Oh..." Charlene's face melted into a look of pity. "You're Larry's boy?" She clutched the dirty Folgers can and shook her head. "I'm sorry. We're all real sorry."

The three lumberjacks from the table in the corner chimed in.

"A real shame."

"Sorry to hear."

"He was a hell of a guy."

Pull Tab Lady exhaled a blue cloud and croaked, "You have my condolences, young man."

Lonnie gazed down at his boots and gasped. Charlene got back to her ashtrays and the bar returned to its usual Monday night murmur. Lonnie collapsed back into the booth, ripped away his stocking cap, and mopped the sweat from his forehead.

"Jesus... I'm sorry Nick. I just get carried away. I just thought you ought to know what really happened."

He ordered another round of whiskies and then opened up about their time in Vietnam. This drew me in because despite the fact that my old man mentioned Vietnam every day, he never offered up any details. Vietnam was a specter that always lurked in the corner of the room, but I never learned any of the real stories. Combat veterans are almost always tight lipped about their ordeals. All

brotherhoods rely on at least some secrecy and this only goes deeper for those forged in blood. To speak loosely of the details of war is seen as a kind of sacrilege by the men who've fought it. In fact, anyone who blabs about his experience in war is more than often taken for an imposter. My dad kept a heavy mouth with regard to the blood and guts of his service, despite the fact that it came to define his whole life. I hungered for even a morsel, but he gave me nothing.

What I do know is that he did three tours flying a Bell UH-1 Iroquois "Huey" helicopter, which served as the transport backbone for ground troops during the war. Lonnie was a door gunner on the same chopper during his last tour, blasting anything that moved with an M-60 machine gun.

"It was the shittiest job in the Army," he said. "Door gunners in Hueys had an average life expectancy of just five minutes. I was one of the lucky ones. I made it seven months before I got taken out of duty. But it wasn't from a VC bullet."

"What happened?"

"One night on base while walking back to my bunk, I stepped into the bushes to take a piss and got bit on the leg by a cobra. Nearly killed me."

"Shit."

"Yeah shit. Fucked me up somethin' fierce. They almost had to cut my leg off. Was actually good luck though, 'cuz three weeks later your dad's Huey got shot down. Your old man got rescued, just banged up, but the dude who replaced me as door gunner wasn't so lucky. There wasn't enough left of him to take home in a doggy bag. After I heard that I wanted to find that cobra that bit me and give him my Bronze Star!"

He laughed his laugh and took a slug off his whiskey. I followed suit.

"I miss him, Nick. I do. He was a good man. He had his problems... hell, we all do. That war fucked us up good. But he wasn't a bad man. He was my friend. And he loved you... even if he had trouble showing it."

What could I do, but shrug? I hadn't seen him since my high school graduation, an event that even he wouldn't miss out on. After that he disappeared back into the misty expanse of the Olympic Peninsula, sending me cards on my birthday and Christmas with twenty dollar bills slipped into the middle, accompanied by the tersest of greetings. He had been fired from his job of flying helicopters for logging outfits after showing up too drunk too many times. After that he tried working on the ground as a rigger, but that career was cut short when a big cedar rolled over his left leg, snapping his femur and putting him out of commission for good. This was just as well, it seemed, since the whole business of logging was on its way out. Most all the old growth had been cut down, and now the industry's

death throes were hastened by the designation of the spotted owl as an endangered species, making pretty much anywhere the bird called home protected ground. This meant that a lot of previously available logging land was now off-limits, further restricting the precious working days for whole communities of proud men who were already on the ropes. Could you blame them for being so pissed off?

"Listen Nick," Lonnie slurred. "There's one more thing I gotta tell you."

"Shoot away."

Lonnie drummed at his glass and took a breath while the Billy Ray Cyrus's "Achy-Breaky Heart" pumped its two-step pop beat from the jukebox.

"That elk... that elk that killed your dad... it wasn't just no ordinary elk."

"What do you mean?"

"It had a... mark."

"A mark?"

"Yeah, man. A mark. Coloring. On its fur. I'll never forget it."

Lonnie finished off his glass of whiskey, clunked it onto the table and stared me down.

"On its right side, Nick." His dark brow furrowed. "That elk had a brown splotch." His eyes went black. "A splotch in the exact shape of a map of 'Nam."

"Vietnam?"

"Yeah, Vietnam, man. Viet-fucking-nam. North *and* South. Right there on its fur."

I tried to suppress a laugh, but it was too late.

"Don't laugh at me, Nick. You don't think I know what a map of Vietnam looks like? I was *there*, motherfucker. I know it when I see it. Two tours, Nick." He thrust his thumb into his ample belly for effect. "Two. Tours."

Achy-Breaky Heart faded out, only to start up once again.

"I hate this fucking song," I muttered.

"An elk killed your dad, Nick. He killed the man who saved my life more than once. I saw it with my own two eyes. Listen. I can identify this beast. I know where to find him. I know what he looks like. I *know* it. The only question is... What the fuck are you going to do about it?"

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I awoke to a hissing in my ears and a burning in my throat. My guts were sour and sick and my brain felt like a cat had pissed on it. My tongue was a desiccated mass lying in a mouth sapped of every molecule of moisture. Whiskey dry gulch had set it, and I needed water.

I rolled off of my father's bed, fully clothed, including boots. My hair hung in matted strands over my hot flushed face. I made my way to the kitchen sink where I turned on the tap and drank deeply. The water was clean and glacially cold, as pure as it gets. It cooled and healed as it filled my body, a kind of natural cure-all that dulled the edges off of a weapons-grade hangover. The water in all of Western Washington State was quality stuff, coming from natural underground springs or the mountains themselves. We had all grown up drinking it and used to be proud of the fact that we had what was considered the best water in the country. Now my mother had taken to buying plastic bottled drinking water – and she wasn't the only one. It seemed that everyone was now making the shift, as if this perfect water we had been drinking for generations was suddenly sullied, and here comes the Crystal Geyser bottling company to the rescue, with Coca Cola, Pepsi and Nestle riding in right behind. I took it for what it was, a giant con, and wore my tap water consumption as a badge of honor.

My dad's mobile home was humble – just a single wide, thank you – and in a state. As a kid I remember him as a stickler for tidiness – a holdover from his military days, I suppose – but he had since let things go. The place had two bedrooms, one containing a bed, and the other used as a storage space for his fishing and hunting gear – rods, reels, nets, tackle boxes, waders, along with three shotguns and four rifles, all zipped up in carrying cases. The only other gun I saw in the house was the loaded .357 magnum pistol that he kept in the drawer of the nightstand next to his bed. You could say the old man was ready for any surprises, but compared to some Vietnam vets, his personal arsenal was a tiny one.

The trailer sat on an acre of wooded property set about a quarter of a mile from the main road. There were a few other places nearby, but my dad had his privacy here, and I'm sure that's how he liked it. An American flag hung above the front door, and next to the trailer and its gravel driveway was a shed containing an assortment of tools, some boxes, an outboard motor, and even more fishing gear. Next to the shed was an aluminum drift boat on a trailer, the most vital piece of equipment for the success of the old man's nascent guide service. His truck was nowhere to be seen, though Lonnie had mentioned that it, along with some of his possessions from the day of the hunt, was still back at his place.

Back in the trailer I continued sniffing around. The closet by the front door contained a few of his camouflage jackets, shoes, boots, as well as what must have been more than twenty baseball caps advertising logging outfits, diners, towing

companies, and a few mystery sports teams. I grabbed one the read, "Special Forces. Kill 'Em All and Let God Sort 'Em Out," and slapped in on my head.

The living room was a mess, with a half-eaten Godfather's pizza still in the box on top of this coffee table next to a full ashtray in the shape of the state of Idaho. Newspapers and old copies of Fishing and Hunting News lay stacked all around. In addition to this, there was also with worn brown couch, a leather recliner, a bookcase, as well as a TV and VCR. The few movies that he had were mainly war flicks, with such titles as *The Longest Day*, *To Hell and Back*, *Patton*, and of course, *Platoon*. A few pornos were also thrown in for good measure. The book case was sparse, containing a some military histories, along with works by Tom Clancy, Louis L'Amour, James Michener, and a very tattered paperback copy of his absolute favorite, Larry McMurry's "Lonesome Dove." He must have read it at least five times and had also recorded the entirety of the miniseries onto video.

A couple of photos sat on the table next to the couch, including one of me when I was maybe six years old, standing on a dock, struggling to hold a stringer of trout almost as tall as I was. I'm wearing a red jacket with brown Toughskin jeans and beam a proud smile, despite the weight of my burden. The wind off of the lake musses my dirty blond hair and I'm sure my dad drove us home thinking that it was a very good day.

On the wall was another framed photograph, this one blown up. It was a color shot from Vietnam, featuring my dad and three other guys standing in front of a helicopter parked on deep red dirt. One of them is a much thinner Lonnie. As I took it off the wall and studied it, I couldn't help but wonder how young they both looked.

Just then the phone rang in the kitchen.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Nick, this is Rose. We were thinking maybe you might want to come over for lunch and even dinner. What do you say?"

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I rattled down the 101 in my '74 Volvo. A rare November sun hung low, slicing in diagonal angles, highlighting the greens, greys, and browns of the surrounding forests and fields. The birches and alders had by now lost most of their leaves; those that remained were dead yellow or rust, and held on with a firm, fatalistic determination. The sun was indeed a treat, as this was one of the wettest places in the whole of America – one of the world's few true temperate rain forests. It rained all the time here. This was especially true October through March, when the

drizzling sky seemed to always be hanging just feet above your head, where weeks can pass without even a glimpse of direct light. I took a deep breath and tried to savor this solar morale-booster for all it was worth, even though it did little to warm up the frigid fall air. I turned up the heat to the knob's limit, which barely worked for shit anyway, and slipped a Screaming Trees cassette into the stereo, cranking the volume as high as it could go. Somehow, the distortion from the taxed speakers served to enhance to fuzzed-out guitars swirling under Mark Lanegan's earthy baritone. The music made absolute sense to me and the surroundings, perfectly blending the elements, resulting in a kind of on-the-road verisimilitude.

If the logging industry was facing tough times, you couldn't tell from the number of clear cuts I passed through on my way down to the Hoh Reservation. It seemed that every five minutes I was driving into yet another bombed out wasteland of stumps and scrub, acres upon acres of sheer destruction. Timber was indeed King in this part of the country, and the country itself never wasted an opportunity remind you of that fact. Still, the local population had adopted a siege mentality. As far as they were concerned, their entire way of life was under threat. A popular yellow sign gracing front yards of homes and trailers on the side of the highway drove this point home: SAVE A LOGGER. KILL A SPOTTED OWL.

After crossing the Hoh River and following the 101 towards the coast, I left the highway and entered the Hoh Indian Reservation, which took up a few hundred acres of land on the southern side of the river's mouth. I had spent my childhood next to an Indian reservation – the Nisqually – between Tacoma and Olympia, so the scene was nothing new. But that still didn't prepare me for the scenes of sheer poverty that most any reservation in the country will shamefully lay bare. The land which the Hoh were pushed onto offered no exception, with dilapidated houses and broken down trailers, so battered by the wind and rain that streaks of rust ran down their sides like tears. Old cars and refrigerators littered front yards, and kids rode around on second hand bikes, unknowingly consigned to a future of pretty much zero opportunities and a life expectancy one third less than that of whites. The crimes committed against the native people in America are grave and unforgivable; they can never be expunged, and no amount of tribal casinos can ever make up for that fact. It's enough to give a white man pause to even set foot on the reservation, but Lonnie was my dad's best friend, and his whole family had always embraced me, despite the manifest sins of my race.

Not every residence on the Hoh's land reeked of poverty. While there was a decided lack of mansions, some homes displayed the trappings of prosperity more than others, if only for the fact that they were well-ordered and clean. Lonnie and Rose's place definitely fell into this category. Sure they had three vehicles in front of the blue rambler – two trucks and a Ford Taurus--but all of them ran, and one of them was my dad's.

I was greeted by a barking black lab as I pulled in front of the place. Rose immediately emerged from the front door and shouted to the dog.

“Shutup Sergeant! Shutup!”

She was joined by Benji, their teenage son.

“Yeah Sergeant. Be Quiet!”

The dog whimpered and licked his outstretched hand.

“Well you sure grew up. Last time I saw you, you must have been about... yay big.” She cocked her head and placed her hand in front of my chest.”

“Hi Rose.”

“What was it? Seven years ago?”

She took me in with her sparkling black eyes.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Unfortunately, I’m still short. Well you can’t win ‘em all. Come on now, give me a hug.”

She wrapped me tightly, surprisingly strong for her short, plump frame.

“Benji? You remember Nick?”

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“He’s not supposed to be drinking,” she said, as I dug into a turkey sandwich. Benji sat across from me, munching away. “He was sober for three years, Nick. Three years. AA, the whole thing. It was working.”

I glanced at a piece of paper tacked to their refrigerator with a magnet. It read: ONE DAY AT A TIME.

“And then Larry – your dad---uh, passed away, and Lonnie went into a kind of spiral. Fell off the wagon. He’s been drinking daily since. It’s only been a week, but I’m at my wits end. We all are.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I don’t, however, need to remind you that alcohol plus Indians is rarely a winning combination.”

“Well I certainly didn’t mean to encourage him last night.”

“You’re grieving, it’s okay. And he would’ve just gotten drunk without you.”

Don't worry about it. How did you get back your dad's, anyway? Did you drive?"

I raised up my arms. "Mea culpa."

"Goddamnit. You gotta be careful. DUI's aren't a joke. Not these days. Lonnie's got two from his drinking days and couldn't drive for a whole year, not to mention all the fines and other legal bullshit. One more and it's prison time."

I took another bite of the sandwich and chewed in silence.

"Anyway, he's still sleeping it off. Let's just hope we can get him back to a meeting. I'm praying that this is just a relapse, because I know he doesn't really want to go down this road."

"Hey dude," Benji said, between bites. "You wanna hike down to the beach after lunch?"

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The sun had now disappeared, hidden by the gauze of clouds which smother the northern Pacific coast for much of the year, lending the landscape a morose, dreamy quality. A crisp wind blew inland from the nearby ocean; I could taste the kelp in the air. Benji had given me a stocking hat along with a pair of knit gloves to dull the effects of the cold, but still the air bit, especially when that saltwater breeze kicked up. It felt good to be so near the Pacific though. Its pull on me was undeniable, so despite the chilly conditions, we happily pressed on.

"Sorry to hear about your dad, dude. He was always nice to me."

"Thanks, Benji."

"I heard you play in a band in Olympia. That's cool dude."

"Yeah, it's a lot of fun."

"You know Kurt Cobain?"

"Not... personally... but he's a friend of a friend... of a friend... if that counts."

"No way man. That's sick bro. I love Nirvana."

"Who doesn't? What about you? What do you plan to do after high school?"

"I dunno dude. My dad wants me to join the military. But fuck that shit. I don't want to go die in Iraq for George Bush and some fuckin' oil company. You know that the Gulf War was just the beginning... they're gonna be all up in that shit for years to come."

“You think so?”

“My mom wants me to go to college. She’s a teacher and she went to college...I got decent grades, so I’m thinking about that. Maybe go to law school and become a lawyer and fight for Indian rights. That’d be rad.”

As soon as we were out of eyeshot of the village, Benji turned to me.

“You like to smoke?”

We stepped off the trail and walked about a hundred feet back under a grove of alder trees. Benji produced a copper pipe from the pocket of his jacket with a cover over the bowl. He slid open the cover, revealing a packed bowl of luminescent green bud, complete with thin red hairs and a frosty coating of crystals. The smell hit me right away and I knew that this was dank, potent stuff.

“You take green hit, dude. Indian hospitality.” He pronounced the latter with an exaggerated, lilting tribal accent.

He formed a wind break with his body and another with his hands. I placed the stem of the pipe to my lips, flicked the lighter, and inhaled. I could hear the fibers of the cannabis crackle under the flame.

My lungs filled with the familiar smoke. Holding it all in, I handed the pipe and lighter back to Benji, attempting the same human wind barrier that he had done for me. As he burned into his hit I released a white cloud and felt my senses immediately shift. We repeated this ritual two more times until there was nothing left.

“It’s cash,” he said, banging out the ash over the knee of his black jeans, which he then brushed away.

This weed was strong as hell and sharpened me. I breathed deeply and immediately took stock of where I was: I listened to the wind rattle the trees above us and blow the dead leaves between the branches and over the ground. I sensed the shifting, clammy air on the skin of my cheek, and could feel the chewed-up turkey sandwich begin to wind its way through the tubes of my guts. I looked to Benji, who grinned and shifted in an uneasy silence. Then, just a few feet from where he was standing, I noticed something, something that I had recently trained my eyes to catch: a bloom of warped disks, orbs, and stalks. Mushrooms.

“Are those what I think they are?” I asked.

They were: *psilocybin cyanesens*--some of the most potent psychedelic mushrooms on the North American continent. I had learned how to identify them from some Evergreen State College hippies a couple of years back, though my old patches in Oly had since been raped by other trip-happy raiders unschooled in the

ethics of mushroom picking (Cut them at the base--never rip them up from their roots, known as *mycelia*. And always, always leave some behind.). Now I'd hit a honey hole, a colony of at least a hundred. A full harvest would come later. For now, just nine or ten would do.

After choking down a handful each, we emerged from the thick cover of trees onto an empty beach--a desolate, wind-swept expanse of grey sand-- with masses of dead logs snarled and stacked along the edge. The wind blew off the ocean in slicing gusts, with a few brave seagulls soaring on the currents above, punctuating the boom of the surf with their plaintive squawks. We sat down on one of the logs, gazing out onto the flats and waves booming in the distance. Benji lit a cigarette. I just sat there, shifting my boots in the cold sand, waiting for it all to kick in.

My hands were the first to feel the effect. They began to lighten, as if they'd been pumped full of helium. I raised them high up above my head and slowly let them float back down to my sides, where they draped over the side of the knotty log, sanded smooth by the elements. I closed my eyes and repeated this several times. A shiver worked its way up and down my spine, and then my stomach turned queasy. I looked to Benji, who met my gaze with big black eyes and a dopey grin.

"Yup," he said. I heard a giggle rise up. "Oh yeah. Hehehe."

I was now breathing deeply, drinking the air into my lungs. It tasted of copper and fish. It was cold and deeply satisfying. With each breath I felt my tension ease and release. Each exhalation seemed to disintegrate a kind of sticky black pitch that had a hold on my muscles and joints, dissolving it away until the whole of my body felt like it was made of rubber, pliable, overcome with the urge to run. I rocketed up from the log and shot straight out toward the edge of the sea.

The sand thumped underneath as I beat my way forward, impeding my progress as it collapsed around my feet in messy little foxholes. The harder I ran the more difficult it got; it was like trying to sprint in a dream. My heart beat in my ears and it felt as if my lungs had expanded into my legs, all the way down to the balls of my feet. I let out a yell as I pressed on, consumed with electricity, pulled to the ocean by what seemed to be the force of gravity itself.

I stopped at the high water mark. The tide was on its way out, and the Pacific loomed in front of me, impossibly massive, immovable-- a boiling Leviathan with a will all its own. I watched as the waves exploded in salty bursts, racing up the shore in foamy tendrils, only to retreat just inches from my feet. They left an exposed plane of slickened, glassy sand. This was the Pacific unleashed, too huge to comprehend, yet here I was, feebly attempting to make sense of it all. I was staring permanence in the face and understood just then that I was absolutely powerless to influence such an immense force, that I would forever be subject to its whims. Suddenly, the guitars

and wails of Jane's Addiction's "Ocean Size" blasted into my head.

*Wish I was ocean size
They cannot move you
And no one tries*

As I silently rocked to my private barrage, Benji sauntered up and stops, until we were taking it all in in tandem.

"Big isn't it?"

It ain't easy living.

I watched the water expand, contract, and fold back in on itself. The suffused, refracted light exposed geometrical patterns on the silver surface – hexagons, octagons, dodecagons, snowflakes, and fractals. It was all so beautiful. I wanted to wade right out into the surging mass and swim all the way to Japan.

*I want to be more like the ocean.
No talking, man
All action.*

"You wanna check out the mouth of the river?"

We made our way up towards the north end of the beach, where the glacial flow of the Hoh emptied into the sea. As we approached the mouth, the drift logs became more numerous, until they were stacked up in huge, twisting piles. I stopped and stared and couldn't help notice that the pale, bark-less wood looked like human skin. I no longer saw dead trees, but dead humans – stiffened corpses piled up by the thousands--victims of a death camp, dumped and discarded. A chill overtook me, and I dropped onto the sand.

"Dude, you okay?"

I felt the black closing in.

In an attempt to banish the creeping horror, I closed my eyes and attempted a kind of horizontal jumping jack by thrashing my limbs up and down and back and forth in through the sand.

Benji loomed above, laughing under his breath.

"You're a sand angel, dude."

“I am the Angel of Death.”

“The Angel of Debt?”

The sinkhole forming inside me suddenly went warm. I was no longer afraid.

“Yes, yes. I’m the Angel of Debt! I owe. I owe. It’s off to work I go.”

It started as a faint crack – almost undetectable – then bloomed into a tiny tremor, which itself became an earthquake, shaking and amplifying exponentially until my whole body was consumed by laughter. It bubbled out of me like a geyser and then jumped like chain lightning to Benji. He started to tremble and jerk as huge guffaws took control, until he was on the ground next to me--cackling, gasping, and howling wildly.

It didn’t stop. It consumed us completely, like wildfire. This was laughter beyond our control--mysterious, unstoppable, demonic. I was wracked with convulsions. The muscles in my abdomen flexed and twitched spasmodically. I kicked the air and grasped huge handfuls of molten sand. My jaw muscles stretched to what seems to be the snapping point and tears raced down my face. I could barely breathe. I was on the verge of pissing myself--or perhaps worse-- yet completely helpless to contain the gleeful chaos erupting from the core of my being.

Suddenly we were both silent, save the sound of our breathing. The laughter evaporated, just as fast as it came.

A gust of wind blasted us with a shower of sand, and then died down.

“Whoa...” whispered Benji.

“Fuck it,” I muttered. “Fuck it fuck it fuck it fuck it.”

“Fuck it,” he answered.

We continued our call and response:

“Fuck it.”

“Fuck it.”

“Fuuck it.”

“Fuuck it.”

And then in unison:

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUCK IIIIIIIIIIT!!!!!!!”

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK IIIIIIIIIIT!!!!!!!”

The ocean, sand, trees and clouds swallowed up our primal exhortations. There was not even a hint of an echo. Sound is simply eaten here, with the wind and sea filling in the vacuum.

We wobbled to our feet and did our best to swat the sand from our clothes, but it was a losing battle: The sand was everywhere – in my ears and in my mouth, grinding on the enamel of my molars. I was covered in gritty granules of sand, but I didn't care. It was time to walk.

I looked once again to the driftwood piles up near the tree line, which were now infused with life. They danced and writhed as countless tentacles, then a cluster of worms, and then as lovers entwined in the ecstatic throes of union. I was suddenly aware of my own flesh, of sex, and felt my cock stiffen accordingly. In the jam of logs I could make out a woman on her back, legs splayed, bent knees, sinewy thighs leading to the protruding knot of her clit. I thought of my girlfriend Tasha's willowy form, her ashen skin, taugth stomach and endless arms and wished she were here for me to take, but it was cold on the beach, and any thoughts of fucking quickly abated as the next push of wind punished me through the layers of my clothes. My hard-on softened and the logs momentarily settled back into place, while the branches of the Douglas firs behind continued to undulate in the wind.

We pressed on until we came to the Hoh River, which begins on a glacier on Mt. Olympus before cutting its way through hills and rock and moss draped old growth, clear cut dead zones, muddy cow pastures, before finally releasing itself into the dark waters of the Pacific. The river pushes slowly in the end--out to sea when the tide's going out and reversing its course as the tide moves back in. It's not a mighty river, but one of the largest to flow out of the national park, and its name is synonymous with the Indians living at its mouth and the rain forest blanketing its banks.

A sand spit stretched out into the center of the mouth. I was having a hard time walking in a straight line. My limbs wee now made of saltwater taffy, stretching to impossible lengths with each stride. It was now officially mushroom funhouse time. We followed this narrow strip of sand it until we couldn't go any further. I collapsed onto ground and sighed. On one side was the river, the other the ocean.

“You're gonna want to get out of here when the tide starts to come back in,” Benji said. “This whole jetty disappears. Unless you like swimming in November, which I sure as fuck don't.”

He sounded just like his dad.

Dad, dad, dad. I lie down on the sand and looked up at the seething clouds. Was it going to rain? Probably. Rain rain go away. Dad. Dad was dead. That's why I was there. I could have been in Oly with my hot tattooed girl, naked in my bed, but instead I was lying dazed on a sandbar in the mouth of the Hoh freezing my ass off, skying on mushrooms. Because dad died.

Goddamnit dad.

He wasn't such a bad dad, was he? When I was in Cub Scouts he helped me win the Pinewood Derby. He showed me how to use the carving blade and I whittled down the block of wood to a smooth, Porsche-like frame. He drilled the holes where I put in the lead weights and showed me where to nail in the wheels. We had a mean machine that won first place. He held me up on his shoulders that day and said he was proud and I'm sure he meant it, just as he was the day I caught six rainbow trout at Offut Lake, the day he snapped the picture that sat next to his worn out sofa. After I won the Pinewood Derby trophy we went out for pizza at Pietro's where I ate myself sick.

He was a hardass, but the war fucked him up, didn't it? It fucked them all up – Lonnie, and all the rest of his buddies in the VVA – the Vietnam Veterans of America, a group started in the 1980's to give some support for these sad, wayward vets. Sure there was the VFW and the American Legion, but these organizations were dominated by the old dudes who fought in World War Two. They'd sit around in the bar and trade stories of liberating wine cellars and banging endless streams of French pussy as they liberated Europe. They came home to victory parades and an economy so red hot that it was nearly impossible to fail. The Korea vets didn't have it as good, but at least they succeeded in their original mission and were still considered winners. But the Vietnam vets? They were a load of losers, and the old timers never let them forget it. They felt the stamp of defeat branded into their flesh, and as a result were often too ashamed to set foot into the hallowed veteran halls where their victorious fathers reigned supreme. Instead they formed their own ragtag organization. After all, who could really understand what they had gone through? "You don't know, you weren't there." It only makes sense that they banded together separately.

My dad would drag me around to some of their events, and even at a young age I couldn't help but feel the deflating sense of sadness that always managed to weigh down the surroundings. These were not a joyous bunch, but instead a pack of traumatized, nerve-shattered men wearing bush fatigue jackets and jungle hats. Whenever a new member joined their ranks, he was greeted with a hug and their mantra of "Welcome home, brother."

When I was ten, a few VVA families took a winter day trip to Mt. Rainer to

go sledding. There were four carloads of us. My friend Daniel had slept over the night before and came along and came along for the ride. As we cruised through the foothills that lead up to the great mountain, the truck in front of us came to a sudden, screeching halt. Rusty, the sinewy, red-bearded driver, jumped out and disappeared in front of the truck. My dad put our in truck park, ordered us to stay inside, and jumped out. I waited for a minute or two before taking matters into my own hands and slipping out the back of the canopied bed where we rode, with Daniel right behind me, ignoring my mother's useless protests. As we rounded the right side of Rusty's truck, we both took in the scene: Rusty sat on the cold asphalt and clutched a black lab in his arms. The dog was immobile and blood seeped from its mouth and snout. Rusty held it for all it was worth, rocking back and forth, moaning, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." The other vets, including my dad, stood around and shifted helplessly, crushed to a man.

My old man picked up a sports pack of Schmidts (a 30 can case) in the next town and threw them in an ice chest that sat in the bed of the truck with Daniel and me. He continued toward the mountain, calling out for a re-up every ten minutes or so. He'd crush his empties and hand them to me; it was my job to chuck them far in the back. He said that the bed of a pickup was considered 'outside the vehicle' in the eyes of the law, inoculating him from any open container ticket in case of a run-in with the cops, ignoring the fact that they could just nail him for driving drunk.

We rode our little plastic red disc sleds that day, down the official sled run. It was early February and warmish, so the snow was more of a slushy muck than hard, slick ice. My mother watched from the sidelines, waving and smoking one Benson and Hedges after the other, while the other kids and few of the dads joined us for a few runs. My dad stayed back with Rusty near the trucks. They drank and smoked and steeped in the overwhelming sadness of the day, while the rest of us got wretchedly cold and wet. We were all simply soaked, and the sledding mission was aborted after just one hour.

Dad was properly hammered for the ride home. My mother suffered in grim, smoky silence as he weaved around the two-lane road that lead back to our home in Nisqually Valley. As we came off the slopes of the mountain, the terrain leveled out and the driving got a bit less treacherous, which was good since the old man was still demanding me hand him cans from what seemed to be an endless supply of Schmidt's. Daniel was visibly horrified, as the day had been one endless string of traumas for him. His father was a high school math teacher, a Bible-thumper who never touched a drop of booze. He was now officially on a white trash safari whether he liked it or not. I had to reassure him that even though my dad drank too much, he knew what he was doing. "Do you know he used to fly helicopters in Vietnam?"

At one point the old mad suddenly lurched off the pavement, turning onto a

dirt road to the right. The truck rocked and jerked as we made our way over the uneven track.

“Where the hell are you going?” asked my mom.

“Don’t you worry.”

Soon we crossed a narrow bridge spanning the milky torrent of the upper Nisqually River, which ran high and fat. The blue pickup trundled down the dirt track for five more minutes before he came to a stop. Mom gave him the death stare as he emptied a can in what had to be the late teens, count-wise.

“Hey Numbnuts.” That was his pet name for Daniel, assigned randomly during last night’s meatloaf dinner. “You ever shot a gun?”

“No, sir.” Daniel’s parents were from Alabama. As a proper child of the south, he had been raised to address all adults as “sir” or “ma’am.” I’d always thought it weird and overly-formal, but my dad ate it the fuck up.

“I like your manners, Numbnuts.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Well, I suppose it’s time we broke your firearm cherry. Darlin’, can you pop the open the glove box?”

“Do you really think this is a good idea, Larry?”

“Just open the god damned glove box. Please.”

Mom let out a hiss and then poked the glove box button as if it was covered in cholera. Dad reached over and pulled out a small pistol – a Ruger Mark II .22--, along with a couple of boxes of ammunition.

“Get out of the car, boys. And grab a few bottles out of the back, Nick. You too, Numby. And bring me a beer while you’re at it.”

The crushed Schmidts cans weren’t the only fallen soldiers in the bed of dad’s truck. There must have been thirty or so different bottles as well. We each grabbed four or five and climbed out of the back. It felt good to be in open space once again.

“Take those bottles and set ‘em up on top of that old refrigerator over there.”

We were in a clearing of sorts. Several fire pits littered the open ground, evidence of camping, or parties, or both. Some trash was strewn about as well, including a white sneaker, a rotting pair of jeans, a pair of blue panties and a pink brassier. A rusted motorcycle frame lie discarded next to a tree, and an old fridge sat

on its side about fifty feet away, right out in the open.

We lined the bottles up on the top and then marched back to dad, who was just finishing up loading the pistol's magazine.

"Who's first? Shit. I nominate Numby."

Dad showed him the proper technique – right hand on the grip, left hand under, for stabilization – before chambering a round. Daniel took the gun and did his best to ape dad's form.

"Go ahead, pull the trigger."

Daniel closed his eyes and pulled. The .22 snapped away and Daniel flinched so hard that he took a step back. The bottles stood untouched.

"Well you're gonna have to do better than that, Numbnuts. Don't be afraid. The gun won't bite you."

Daniel took a breath and popped off another shot. Again he jerked up in nervous anticipation, sending the round reeling into the background of trees.

"Just relax."

He pulled twice more, this time with slightly more confidence. Both shots burrowed into the dirt in front of the fridge, kicking up a spit of soil.

"Keep at it."

He snapped off three more rounds, two of which bored into the fridge underneath.

"There you go, Daniel."

Another pop. Another miss.

"Let 'em have it this time. Empty that bitch."

Daniel leaned in just a touch and plunked four rounds in a row. One of the bottles exploded in a flurry of glass.

My dad smiled for the first time that day.

"You hit that motherfucker! Good shooting, Numbnuts!"

Dad staggered over and gave Daniel a high-five and an awkward half-hug. He then clacked a new magazine into the Ruger, chambered a round, and handed it my way.

"Your turn... son."

*

A pulsing red orb floated above me, zigging and zagging.

"You alive, dude?"

It was Benji, plus cigarette.

"The tide's coming in. We gotta get out of here."

I sat up and swallowed a lungful of sea air.

"It's getting late. My mom's gonna be pissed."

He tossed away the cigarette, which left a glowing tracer in the sky. I raised myself up from the sand spit and faced the darkening world on uneasy legs. Daylight had faded and I felt the opening salvo of raindrops spatter my face.

"These 'shrooms are intense," he said, delivering the point with a slight nod that hammered home the truth. "I've been up in the trees for the last couple of hours and got into some real medicine. You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay."

"Good."

As we began the slog back to his house, Benji stopped and then turned. His eyes pulsed as he studied the something beyond.

"Check it out." He pointed to the opposite bank of the Hoh.

I did a 180, swaying and staggering in my stupor. And then I saw them. Animals. Big ones. Moving. Through the pouring darkness I could just make out a good twenty elk cows pressing forth through the trees onto the embankment. I could hear the rocks and soil buckle, clunk and crunch under their weight. They moved as one, a single huffing and grunting mass.

In their midst, a shape rose up, a hulking creature with an imposing crown of antlers. The bull. Majestic. Arrogant. Untouchable. He stood motionless while his harem streamed around him.

I knew what I had to do.

2.

"Rise and shine, princess!"

A blinding white burned my eyes.

"Wakey-wakey, sunshine. It's time to go kill us an elk."

Lonnie stood over me, blasting my face with some kind of industrial-strength flashlight.

"What time is it?" I groaned.

"Five thirty in the morning. Time to get moving. We're gonna wanna be in the woods right after sunrise to get an edge on things. Or have you changed your mind?"

"Huh?"

"You came back from your little vision quest last night rearin' to go. Remember? You said you wanted revenge."

He was right. I had found him sitting in his underwear in front of the wood burning stove with a bottle of Wild Turkey by his side. The cast-iron door was open as he silently stared into flames, taking periodic tugs from the bottle and steeping in a kind of whiskey-induced meditation. I took my place next to him and he handed me the bottle without a word. The hot gulp of liquor seared my throat and warmed my belly, helping to bring me back into the fold of the material world. I took another slug, grimaced through the burn, and then told him I was ready.

"Get up, I got some coffee brewing."

"Sounds good."

"What were you on last night, anyway? You weren't just stoned, I know that."

"Mushrooms."

"And you gave that shit to Benji? He's just a kid. He ain't even finished high school yet."

"Sorry. He seemed... ready."

"Well he ain't. And you better hope that Rose doesn't catch wind. She'll nail

your nuts to the wall.”

“Did she say anything?”

“Not to me. But she ain’t saying anything to me these days, not while I’m drinking, anyways.”

We took my dad’s truck. I drove and Lonnie acted as navigator, spiking his coffee with a generous dash of whiskey as soon as we pulled out of the reservation and onto the 101. It had been years since I had been behind the wheels of a proper rig, and it took some getting used to. This was a Ford F-350, not a taped together little vintage Volvo. This was a man’s ride and I felt the pure power rumbling under the hood. It was impressive and seductive. I soon understood a bit better why this sort of vehicle was so popular among the late 20th century American white male. Justified or not, he now often felt himself under assault by shifting forces outside of his control. The changing tide of demographics had put the working class white man on the defensive. These new dynamics were inevitable and unstoppable and he knew it. This resulted in a feeling of emasculation, so it’s no surprise that so many compensated for this perceived loss of power through the acquisition of huge, powerful, fuck-off trucks.

Lonnie tuned into a modern country station as we made our way south. I despised this new subgenre--“Young Country”--as it was billed by the bean counters out of Nashville. It really was the worst. As a kid my dad had exposed me to a lot of the old legends—George Jones, Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, Patsy Cline, Marty Robbins—proper artists who walked the walk and played with grit and soul and a dangerous edge. Honky-tonk. Hard country. Despite my obvious dedication to the Church of Grunge, I still had tons of time for all those great whiskey drinking, two-fisted, tear-in-your-beer tunes. Good music is good music, after all. This “Young Country” was nothing more than slick, overproduced, disposable radio pop with a bit of twang and pedal slide sprinkled in to give it some token authenticity. The music was, without exception, focus group-tested nonsense aimed for the lowest common denominator. Even worse was its flag draped faux-patriotism, whooping and yahooing away as the USA bombed the shit out of brown people on the other side of the globe. It was the music of bullies, the soundtrack to mullet sporting-rednecks putting the beat down to any ‘faggot’ who wasn’t wearing a yellow ‘I Support the Troops’ ribbon. When “Achy Breaky Heart” came blaring over the truck’s stock speakers, I had to suppress an overwhelming urge to smash in the console with my fist.

“Can we please change the station?”

“Nah. I kinda like this song. Besides, you won’t get nothin’ else out here.”

The weather was miserable, cold, and marrow-soakingly wet, the kind of

relentless moisture particular to the Pacific Northwest that there's just no getting away from. You can't beat it. You can don a thousand bucks worth of rain gear and you're still getting wet. Fat drops detonated on the windshield as fast as the wipers could clear them out, and a treacherous liquid sheen covered the blacktop of the two-lane highway.

Before long the road skirted the coast. To our right, in the pre-dawn darkness, were sand dunes and beach and sea. Wind slammed the truck in weighty gusts, pushing us towards the middle of the road. The whole scene was drowned in sheets of rain, and I was already regretting my decision to go forward with this hunt. It was a ridiculous idea put forth by a drunk and embraced by a fake hippy tripping balls on a sand bar. Would my dad have even wanted this? He'd probably dig the idea of Lonnie and I bonding and hunting together, but not in weather fit only for slugs. It was nasty out there.

Eventually, after crossing the swollen Queets River, the highway made its way inland, back through clear cuts, forests and farms. The smother of clouds began to brighten as sunrise approached. Soon Lonnie instructed me to turn off of the highway and onto a much more primitive road, which re-crossed the Queets and then followed the Clearwater – a tributary--was also flowing fast and fat from the endless drive of rain. We then turned onto a muddy track that headed into National Forest land. At once the going got dicier, so I switched into four wheel drive and ground along the potholed, puddle-filled way, passing just a couple of other rigs parked to the side.

"Not too many other hunters out today. This rain is keeping 'em away. Consider it a blessing."

Lonnie spiked his coffee again. We hit a bump, causing half of the contents of his cup to splash over onto his lap.

"Ah shit.... Good thing I'm wearin' wool pants. Guess that calls for refill."

The track got smaller as we drove on. Tree limbs reached out into the middle of the road, slapping and scraping the roof and side of the big Ford.

Lonnie continued his sipping and then spoke up.

"You don't got a hunting license, do you?"

"Nope."

"Well if we come across the game warden, don't say shit. Let me do the talking. He probably won't screw with an Indian, but if he does, I'll use my indigenous powers of persuasion to get out of it. Works every time."

He laughed lowly and took another sip.

“I don’t expect even he’ll be out in this weather. Good day to call in sick.”

Just ahead, in the splash of headlights, the road widened.

“Okay, yeah, this is it. Pull off up there.”

I pulled over, parked the truck and killed the engine, which mercifully put an end to the Young Country as well. We sat there as Lonnie finished his cup of Irish coffee, listening to the patter of the rain on the roof and windshield. Steam wafted up from under the truck’s hood, and daylight began to creep through the shadows of the surrounding trees, bathing the forest road in subdued shades of blue.

We got out and unloaded the gear out of the back. Lonnie was dressed head to toe in the full hunter’s getup – rain-resistant camouflage jacket, pants, hat, and boots. Hunting binoculars hung around his neck, along with a couple of elk calls. On his hip was a massive Rambo knife. He threw on a backpack containing a couple of sandwiches, water, his coffee thermos, and half a bottle of Wild Turkey. You could say he was ready for action.

I was more humbly outfitted. I wore my jeans and boots, blue flannel shirt and army jacket. Lonnie loaned me a thick olive poncho to throw over the whole getup, which didn’t have a chance of actually keeping me dry for the day, but sometimes it’s the thought that counts. I topped it off with the “Kill ‘em All and Let God Sort ‘em Out” hat I had snatched from my dad’s closet the day before, which, said God willing, would bring us a bit of luck.

“Aren’t we supposed to wear some kind of hunter’s orange? For safety?”

“Yeah, we’re ‘supposed to,’ but we ain’t gonna.”

“Why not?”

“I wish your dad were here to hear that. He’d probably slap that hat off your head. Some people say elk can’t see orange but I call bullshit on that. They see. Besides, pretty much ain’t no one but us crazy enough to come out in this weather. I wouldn’t worry about it. Here.”

Lonnie slid a long camouflage case onto the open gate of the pickup.

“Go ahead. Open it.”

I bent down, carefully unzipped it along the seams, and then flipped it open, revealing a rifle with a gleaming black barrel and attached scope. It was in immaculate condition.

“This was your dad’s. Remington 8mm Magnum. Should be more than

enough to take our boy down. "

I lifted the gun out of the case.

"I trust you know your way around a rifle."

I nodded as I slid my hand over the smooth wooden stock.

"You are Larry's boy after all. Even if you are a goddamn hippy."

We both laughed forced a laugh at the now-old joke, which served to warm my belly a bit, and I was glad for it.

"Where's yours?"

"Left it at home. I got no for need for it. This is your kill, Nick. I'll help you along all the way, but in the end, it's you gotta pull that trigger and take that elk down."

I nodded, slung the rifle over my shoulder and followed Lonnie's lead into the relative cover of the trees. The woods were so thick in this part of the state that at times they acted as a kind of shield from the rain. We tromped through the underbrush, following a loose game trail winding its way through thick growths of Oregon grape and salal. Everything was covered in condensation. The whole forest was saturated and within ten minutes my lower legs were soaked. We kept on, through a seeming city of Sitka spruce, western hemlock and Douglas fir, punctuated by moss-smothered stands of deciduous alder and bigleaf maple. Ferns sprouted from the bases of the trees in profusion, their branches arcing up and out like emerald blades.

After a half an hour we arrived at a stream, where we sat atop a log to sip some water and rest for spell. Like much of the surroundings, the log was covered in thick, draping moss. Saplings sprouted from the decaying wood, which acted as a nutrient base for the nascent timbers. Nurse logs, they're called. My stoner head didn't forget everything from high school biology. After a minute Lonnie slid the whiskey bottle from his pack, unscrewed the cap and took a pull before handing it to me. I followed suit and immediately felt a welcome burn blossom in my chest.

After our rest we followed the stream up the valley, stopping where a fallen tree spanned the runoff.

"We cross here," Lonnie said. "You go first."

I put one foot in front of the other, channeling my inner high wire walker as I teetered above the swelling stream. To fall wouldn't risk drowning; it's hypothermia that I'd have to worry about. Getting to-the-bone wet in such environs is a shortcut to death. I'd resigned myself to a certain amount of soaking, but a dunk in the

stream would simply be a game ender.

Lonnie followed, less sure-footed than my twenty-three year old self. He was a big dude, probably weighing in around 240, and was surely rocking a morning buzz. I watched as he climbed atop the log – pack and all – and poked his way across. At one point his left foot slipped on the slimy wood and he lurched to right. I shuddered, thinking he'd go in then and there, but he managed to correct himself and finish the rest of the cross without a blink. He had grown up in these woods. He had survived Vietnam. He had done this countless times before, and I felt like a dick for underestimating him.

We moved away from the stream and worked our way up the left side of the valley. The wind was now beginning to pick up pretty good, blowing dead leaves from the trees, which groaned and creaked with each pressing gust. Every once in a while I'd hear a limb snap and fall, making me once again question the wisdom of our outing. Lonnie, however, seemed unperturbed, so I took my cues from him. I'd question nothing until he looked nervous.

We reached the ridge and followed the spine until we were at the top of the rise. Normally this particular summit would offer a panorama of the surrounding landscape, but the morning's weather did us no favors as far as vistas were concerned. Lonnie put the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the valley on the other side. A grey fog shrouded the forest below, though I could hear the rush of a creek cut through below.

He pointed down the hillside.

"That's the place."

Lonnie seized the elk call hanging from his neck, licked his lips, placed them around the mouthpiece and blew. It emitted a high pitched squeak of sorts, not what you'd expect from an eight hundred pound animal. After a minute he blew again, this time a bit longer. He froze, listening intently, but the only sound was the wind blowing through the trees, along with the hiss of the stream in the valley below.

"The rut finished up last month," he whispered, releasing the elk call, which dropped and dangled from his chest. "There's not a lot of bugling going on in November, since most of the breeding is done... but here and there you can attract a bull. Old 'Nam must have been one of those randy ones, because I called him in for Larry that day. Called him in good and close. Too close."

We left the top of the rise and descended down the slope, which was slick from the morning's drizzle. I did my best to tread quietly, but the underbrush was unrelenting, so my way down was punctuated by the whoosh of moving shrubbery and the crackling of sticks and branches.

"You move like a white man," Lonnie remarked, though he was no better, barreling through the brush like half-drunk bear. I was sure that we were doing our best to scare off any elk that happened to be in the vicinity, advertising our arrival with each clumsy step. And things got even clumsier when a rock I stepped on gave way in the loose dirt, sending me tumbling down the hillside. I released the rifle just as I was going down, hit the ground with a painful thud and rolled into a thicket of wet brush that scratched up my hands and face. I felt a hot stab in my right leg where a broken branch had ripped through my jeans and punctured the skin beneath. It hurt like hell, but luckily it wasn't too deep. I'd be okay.

"Shit." Lonnie put his hands on his hips and gazed down at me. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think so."

"Good. I don't want you getting hurt out here." He held out a meaty paw.

"I'm fine." I grasped Lonnie's outstretched hand and, with his help, rose to my feet. My right ankle had suffered a slight twist and was burning, but I could tell it would pass. I licked my upper lip and tasted blood.

Lonnie looked me over.

"You're scratched up a bit but you'll live. You gotta be careful out here, Nick. This country will eat you up."

I wiped the dirt and blood from my face, picked up the rifle out of the brush, and pressed on.

We reached the valley floor and came to the stream, which gurgled violently over a bed of mossy stones. The rain was coming down harder now, accompanied by a menacing wind. A storm was blowing in and there was nothing we could do about it. Tough titty . We'd just have to deal with it.

After about twenty minutes we came to small clearing of sorts, with the creek running right down the middle.

"This is it," Lonnie whispered. "The scene of the crime."

He looked me in the eyes to see if I grasped the gravity of the situation.

"See that log?" He pointed to a downed log at the edge of a stand of alder, about twenty feet from the stream. "That's where it happened. I hid in the trees behind, calling in the elk. We were downwind of him. Larry knelt behind that log, ready to go. The elk was responding to my calls, getting closer, until it came out of those trees on the other side. Larry sighted the elk and let him get all the way to the other bank before he took the shot. I think he grazed the antlers, and the elk charged across the stream, straight into Larry and... well... that was that. I'm sorry you gotta

do this, Nick.”

We approached the death log and sat. We warmed up with some coffee and half a turkey sandwich each. I declined Lonnie’s offer of a whiskey spike, wanting to maintain my alertness. That didn’t stop him from glugging several fingers into his, though. It was sure to be a long, wet day. I just hoped I wouldn’t have to carry him out, because, terrain notwithstanding, I wasn’t sure if I even knew how to get back.

Lonnie took his position behind me. I knelt behind the log, right where my dad had been. I unslung the rifle and took hold of the stock, pointing the barrel up and out. My lower legs were soaked and despite a valiant defense by my boots, the water had long since permeated the leather barrier and saturated my socks. I could see my own breath leave my lips in fat misty clouds and a real chill was setting in.

Lonnie blew into the elk call, which echoed up the valley in a haunting cry. We listened for a call back, but the only answer we got was the rush of the creek, along with the wind and the rain. Lonnie waited another couple of minutes and blew once more. Again, nothing.

We carried on like this for what must have been an hour. I sat shivering under the poncho, clutching the old man’s Remington while periodically warming my hands with my own hot breath. The rain continued to pelt the surface of my poncho as it plummeted through the trees, and at times the wind threatened to snap the limbs looming overhead. Things were taking a turn for the miserable, and it didn’t take long for the whole situation to suck. As I sat there, suffering, I visualized myself soaring above the forest, breaking through the sodden layer of clouds and drying in the sun-splashed sky, only to descend back down and slip through the second-story window of my room in Oly, where a naked Tasha awaited under a mound of blankets with a loaded bong sitting on the bed stand next to her. This was my present vision of paradise, but it was far out of reach.

I heard Lonnie unscrew the cap to the whiskey bottle, take a healthy belt, and then put it back into his pack. He blew one last feeble call, waited, then cleared his throat and spat.

“It don’t look like we’re gonna get any action here, Nick. Let’s head up the valley. I sense he’s moved up a bit since last time. Besides, we both could benefit from getting our blood pumpin’. It ain’t exactly tropical out here today.”

Lonnie was right. After five minutes of hiking I was once again warmed, and momentarily forgot about how cold and shitty I felt. We followed the little creek for another thirty minutes before coming to an even bigger clearing. We stopped right before the edge and knelt into the squishy ground. Lonnie took the cap off his binoculars and scanned the clearing for any signs of life. The fog was breaking up slightly, but visibility was still at a minimum.

“I can’t see shit,” Lonnie mumbled. “These ain’t exactly ideal conditions, Nick, as I’m sure you’ve figured out. But we’re not giving up. I’ve taken elk in worse weather. It is possible.”

Lonnie put the call to his lips and blew out another sad squeak. Nothing.

“This looks like a perfect grazing area... elk-y as hell. He’s gotta be nearby.”

He blew again. And again. No response.

“No dice.” Lonnie let go of the elk call. “Let’s try a new tactic.”

After finishing off the coffee and sandwiches, we climbed back up out of the right side of the valley in the direction we’d come until we were back on top of the rise. On the opposite slope the country opened up into a massive, ugly meadow, punctuated by hundreds of old stumps. Smaller trees—just three or four feet high—grew up in between, along with clumps of thick brush.

“Clearcut,” Lonnie said. “I don’t see no road so it was probably a helicopter operation. Hell, your dad may have even worked this cut, back when he was flying. Keep your eyes open. Elk love to graze in these.”

Lonnie once again scanned the landscape with his binoculars, and then froze.

“Holy shit...”

“You see something?”

“There we go. There we go.”

“What is it?”

“You take a look and tell me what you see.”

A gust of wind blew the hood of the poncho from my face while Lonnie handed me the binoculars. He pointed down the hill. I put the field glasses to my face and looked intently. The first movement I picked up was the little trees blowing and bending in the wind scouring the hillside, but soon I noticed something else: animals, large, and four-legged. Elk. Feeding. Scores of them. We had come across a herd.

Lonnie motioned for me to get ready. I took position behind a tree and readied the rifle. Lonnie tiptoed into the nearby brush and blew on the call. Within seconds it was answered by a bull somewhere downhill amongst the heard.

I looked over to Lonnie who pointed in the direction of the response, beaming a huge grin. After another minute he called once more. The bull again responded, this time closer. Lonnie pointed once again and gave a thumbs-up. He

waited a bit more before giving another blow. This was met with silence. I looked over to Lonnie, who now was peering into the mist through his binoculars.

“He’s coming,” he whispered. “Get ready.”

I shouldered the gun, pointing the barrel down the hill, anticipating any sudden movement by anything large. My heartbeat throbbed in the tissue of my throat, and any sense of cold or wet vanished from my being. I was warm, vital, and focused. I took in a deep breath and waited, welcoming the rain that now pelted my face.

I spotted the antlers first. A huge rack rose above the dwarf trees and brush, supported by the girth of the bull underneath. He moved fluidly as he sauntered up the hill, eager to check out just what was calling him in. He was a big boy, a knot of powerful muscle bulging and tightening under a thick carpet of fur. Now that I had him, I closed my left eye and peered through the scope, quickly putting him in the crosshairs. He faced me head on, his head slightly bobbing as he made his way up the slope. I clearly heard the crunch of brush under his hooves and could make out clouds of breath blow forth from his impressive nostrils. His chest was draped in a shroud of dark fur, and his eyes deep black pits – both terrifying and wary. I clicked off the safety and fingered the trigger, ready to let loose into the core of his chest. He was mine.

Suddenly Lonnie shifted, snapping a few twigs underfoot. The elk froze and gave the air a few deep sniffs. He knew something was up. I kept him in the sights, ready to shoot, but not until I had confirmation that he was the one. I wasn’t interested in just any elk. I was on a mission for particular bull and wasn’t willing to waste bullets on any others.

Our cover was now blown. The bull had heard us and probably caught our scent. He began to turn. I had less than a second or two to get the shot off before he fled, but I needed to be sure. He continued turning away, exposing the right side of his body, which is where Lonnie said I would find the mark, that mark that set him apart from all the others. As I took it all in, I began to squeeze the trigger ever-so-slightly. My whole body went rigid in anticipation of the shot, only to slacken as soon as I realized the truth: there was no mark. His massive right flank was an immaculate flow of tan fur. There was no spot, no blemish, nothing. He was not our bull, and in the time it took me to release the pressure from the trigger, he was gone, disappearing into the trees and mist.

“I’m sorry, Nick. I thought maybe he was the one. Godamnit.”

“There are a lot of elk out here, Lonnie. We’d have to get really lucky to come across *him*.”

We made our way down through the clear cut which, having spooked the

herd, was now clear of elk. The rain was now hitting us in semi-vertical sheets, and the wind – once limited to gusts – was now a constant.

“Well it ain’t too late. We still got all afternoon.”

At this point I didn’t care. I just wanted to get out of there. We had spent the whole morning trudging through thick, unforgiving terrain in nasty conditions. We had worked several areas and finally came into elk, but I was done. This whole quest was absurd from the get go and I just wanted to be warm and dry. I articulated this to Lonnie as gently as I could, thanking him for everything, while firmly insisting that we go the fuck home. Reluctantly, he agreed.

We came upon another stream, one that looked exactly like the others we been to earlier in the day.

“This is the first stream. If we follow it down a ways, we’ll come across the log where we crossed this morning, and then it’s only about a half hour to the truck.”

“Great. Let’s get a move on.”

“Hold on. One small taste before we go.”

Lonnie produced the bottle from his pack and took a bit swig before offering it my way. Again I declined. He shrugged and followed it up with another. There were only a couple of inches left at this point. I was amazed at his ability to stand, yet alone bushwhack, but soon we were following the creek downstream, scurrying around boulders and pressing through the brush. The water flowed faster and wider than it had in the morning, an icy tumult rumbling its way down the valley. I wondered to myself whether the crossing log even was standing at this point.

Whatever the case, we didn’t find it. We walked an hour along the inflamed stream before stopping for water and regrouping. At no point did I recognize any of the surroundings from before, as if that would have mattered: these hills and valleys display such a numbing uniformity as to make any such recognition nearly impossible for the uninitiated. I was relying on Lonnie to guide the way. I’d assumed that he was one of the initiated, that he knew his way well around these parts. Even if he didn’t, I harbored the very racist suspicion that he had to possess some kind of Indian superpower that prevented him from ever getting lost in the woods. Surely he could just “feel” his way back to the truck, or, worst case scenario, summon a raven to lead the way?

After doubling back for another thirty minutes, we both realized that we’d never find our log-bridge. Either it was washed out, or we had somehow managed to miss it entirely.

“We gotta cross somewhere,” Lonnie said. He sat on a mossy log, holding his

head in his hands. "The road is on the other side."

"Are you sure this is the right valley?"

"OF COURSE I'M SURE... I think."

"Do we have any water left?"

"Just a swallow or two. If you get thirsty just open your mouth and aim up. It ain't like there ain't gallons fallin' from the sky."

We slogged upstream another ten minutes before we decided to cross the now-raging creek.

"Give me the backpack," I said. "I think I'm in better shape to ford right now."

"You sayin' I'm drunk??"

"Uh, yeah. Kind of."

Lonnie surrendered the pack. I slipped it on, shouldered the rifle next to it, and made my way into the icy waters of the creek. Like any fast-moving stream, it was more treacherous than it looked from the bank. It rocketed over snot-slick rocks and rose up well over my knees. Remembering what my dad had taught me years back, I didn't fight the current, but walked with it at a diagonal downstream, one careful step at a time. Soon I was through the worst of it, and stood, teeth chattering, on the opposite bank.

Now it was Lonnie's turn. He plunged in clumsily, partially falling and then recovering himself, the waters swirling around his thick knees in little eddies.

"Woohoo!!!" he shouted. "My balls are clingin' to my taint!!!"

He lurched forward, and then stabilized before beginning his walk--one foot in front of the other--with his arms outstretched for balance. I suddenly imagined that he was taking a DUI field test administered by a particularly sadistic cop. I cracked a smile, which stopped halfway when Lonnie visibly slipped on a rock and went plunging, full body, into the rushing stream.

The water wasn't deep enough to drown in, but it was enough to submerge you and take you away. The boiling current carried him about ten feet down before he once again found his footing, crawled over the rocks, stood up, and stumbled onto the bank.

"Looks like I took a lil' tumble," he said, panting on all fours. Water dribbled off him in dozens of streams. His hat was lost to the current, revealing a spiky buzz cut of greying black hair.

“We gotta get you moving, Lonnie.”

“Whiskey!”

I dug out the bottle and handed it to him. I knew from experience that alcohol seems to heat you up in the cold; though I had read somewhere that drinking will actually lower your body temperature. At this point I wasn't about to argue with him. He took a couple of pulls, nearly finishing it off.

“Oooooh-weeeee... that's better.”

He handed the bottle back to me. This time I took a sip, leaving a swallow or two at the bottom.

“Let's go, Lonnie. You're going to want to keep walking.”

We ascended the hillside, propelled by a kind of desperation to get out. According to Lonnie's calculation, the road should be up top, but after cresting and trudging on for another thirty minutes, we came up empty handed. There was no road, anywhere, just endless acres of oppressive green. On top of it all, the storm was now hitting us hard. The wind and rain slammed into us at every opportunity, and the once-stable ground was turning to muck beneath our feet.

“Where's the road Lonnie? Where's the fucking road???”

“I don't know... I don't know...”

After a brief powwow, we decided to double back into the basin we had just come from, where we'd hike downstream some more before climbing back up in search of the road. The problem was that the rain was erasing our tracks, so the idea of doubling back became more of a theory than a practical reality.

In any case, the drainage eluded use. We wandered on what seemed to be an endless plateau of trees, ferns, and brush. We couldn't find the valley that we had just climbed out of. The canopy and foliage was so thick as to afford almost no points of reference. We were thrashing our way through a cold weather jungle so overgrown that every turn looked identical to the previous one. We were hopelessly lost, with precious daylight left, as the sun set in the late afternoon this time of the year. We were facing the very real possibility of spending the night in this forest, during a November storm. Our morale was sinking faster than the barometer.

We carried on for another hour, resting intermittently, cursing the fact that we didn't bring more than a couple sandwiches each to see us through the day. Lonnie was out of words at this point. Each time we sat down he'd just gaze at the mud below and utter, “I'm sorry, Nick. I'm sorry.” He was visibly shivering. Hypothermia was most definitely setting in and he knew it. Moving was the only thing that was going to keep him alive, so we kept the breaks to a minimum, despite

the fact that we were both officially spent.

The wind punched through in violent gusts; at times we could hear whole trees giving way. At this point it wouldn't be unreasonable for one of the mighty timbers to fall down on us and put us out of our water-logged misery, but so far we had managed to avoid such a fate. Eventually the land began slope downwards, and once again we heard the thundering of a creek in the valley below.

We practically fell down the gooey hillside down towards the bursting stream. It was our only hope of getting out at this point. An adrenaline rush of survival propelled us. If we didn't make it out before dark fell we were goners and we knew it. The wetness that had first attacked my lower legs had now crept all the way up my torso, just as I had predicted. The poncho had been good for a while, but it was hardly proper raingear, and I was chilled to the center of my existence. I was once again reminded of why I hated the woods: this was exactly how I felt during many of the outings with my father. In my absurd hunt for closure, he was having one final laugh.

We got down to the creek bed and began to follow it downstream, hoping for a glimpse of something familiar. But it was just more of the same, the repetition of firs, spruce, alder, cedar, hemlock, and cotton wood, all choked underneath with unimaginable clumps of thicket.

Lonnie had enough and collapsed into the mud.

"Gimme the whiskey, Nick."

I fished the bottle out of the pack. He squeaked off the cap, drained the dregs, and sent the empty sailing over the creek. It shattered over rocks on the opposite bank.

"Fuck it," he said. "I don't think we're gettin' outta here. I did my best, Nick. I'm sorry. Go ahead and shoot me. Get it over with."

"I'm not going to shoot you, Lonnie."

"Nah. It's okay. Put me outta my misery. Shoot me."

It was then that I saw it. Something red and artificial – flicking in the wind-- caught up in the thin branches of a salmonberry bush. I stepped over, plucked it away, and held it close to my face. It was a plastic candy wrapper from a Kit Kat bar. Not only that, it was fresh. It was glossy and smooth, not weathered or aged in the least. It looked brand new to me, which meant it was probably deposited just this day, by another human being.

"Check it out, Lonnie. There were people through here, recently."

I handed him the wrapper. He studied it with a deep, wrinkled brow.

"I sure as hell wish that I had a Kit Kat right now," he said.

"You're not the only one."

"And a cheeseburger. With onion rings."

"Get up. This means there are people nearby."

He grunted and attempted to rise. I gave him my hand, which he grasped, and putting my all into it, helped the poor fucker to his feet.

We scanned the area, looking for any more clues. The storm continued its assault, blasting wind and rain up the valley while hastening the fading of daylight. The fact that we were in a depression only served to make this matter worse. The sky was darkening, and there was nothing we could do about it. We had to get out.

"Nick!"

Lonnie motioned my way. As I approached, I saw that he was clutching a low tree branch, on the end of which was tied a piece of fluorescent-pink grid tape. He then pointed up away from the stream. A visible path cut its way through the forest, with strands of bright tape tied up to mark the way.

We'd found our way out.

We followed the trail away from the stream back up the rise, confident that it would lead us to the road, which, at least eventually, would then lead us to civilization. There were no guarantees, but these clear signs of habitation were our best shot, and breathed a kind of optimism into us that had been absent for hours beforehand. We were drenched, freezing and spent, but still alive, and now we had a solid lead out of this mess. We were in the midst of a turnaround of fortunes, and it didn't take long for our hope to be confirmed.

"You smell that?" I said, stopping to take in a full whiff.

Lonnie paused and did the same.

"Someone's cooking something. Smells like grilled meat."

I followed Lonnie as we ascended the mucky trail, heading from one piece of grid tape to the other. The smell got stronger the higher we climbed, causing the inside of my mouth to gush. I was ready for a feed. The brush thickened up as well, with Lonnie crushing through in his bullish fashion. We were close and we knew it. Just ahead I could see the brush open up into a clearing. Lonnie burst through, only to be met with the crackling report of a rifle.

He fell to the mud as the sound reverberated over the hillside.

And then he screamed.

*

The kid was just twelve years old but looked even younger. He was short and chubby, with speckled ham cheeks and reddish hair, strands of which poked out from underneath his camouflage baseball cap. His voice was high and quavering, which, combined with his doughy looks, suggested that actual adolescence was a long way off. Though armed with a lethal firearm and hoping to bring down a half ton animal, this youngster was still very solidly on the boy side of the tracks.

It was his first hunt. He had just completed his hunter's safety course which made him a legal shooter in the eyes of the law. He was out for the week with his father and a couple of the old man's friends. They had set up a camp of three RV-style campers and set out into the bush daily, hoping to kill a bull or two and fill their freezers full of that lean, wild meat. But now things had taken a turn for the terrible: instead of the front flank of an elk, the kid's bullet had torn straight through Lonnie Smith's left thigh.

"Two tours getting shot at by Charlie and I get popped by some dumb kid," Lonnie moaned, as we laid him atop a spread-out sleeping bag in the back of one of the trucks.

The kid was beside himself, a cascade of apologies. "I'm sorry, mister. I'm so sorry. I messed up. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I thought you were that elk we seen the last couple of days."

Walt, his father, interjected. "Jeff's right. Last two days we spotted a huge bull on the hillside right before sundown. By the time we went to the camper to grab a gun he was gone. This time we were going to be ready, weather be damned. I don't know, maybe he's still too young to hunt. This is all a terrible mix up."

"You bet the fuck it is..." Lonnie moaned.

"I hate to ask," Walt continued. "But why aren't you fellas wearing your safety orange? It IS the law." He grasped the lapel of his blaze-orange vest and pulled it out for effect.

"Whadayou care?" Lonnie spat. "You some kind of game warden or somethin'?"

"No, sir. But I do work in law enforcement. Washington State Patrol, sixteen years and running. So does Dennis here." Walt nodded to the dark-haired man applying pressure to Lonnie's wound with a towel. "But never mind that--let's get you out of here and to a hospital. We can radio emergency services to come meet us

up along the way. That'll be the quickest. Let's go."

I jumped in the passenger's seat as Walk fired up the truck and lurched out of the camp and into the treacherous cocktail of rain and wind. The whole of the windshield was now a river, with the wipers doing their best to play catch up, but visibility was low and it was very clear that the going would be muddy, slow, and tough.

Lonnie lay writhing in the truck's bed, underneath the fiberglass canopy. Dennis tended to his injuries, along with Jeff, who had since ceased his "I'm sorry's." Dennis quietly instructed the boy at every turn with a kind of quiet, calm professionalism. The man clearly knew how to conduct himself in a crisis; his training was shining through.

Still, there was little we could do to ameliorate Lonnie's suffering. He screamed with each bump and jostle as the truck ground down the road. Like any shot man, he was in serious pain, but fortunately, his agony would be the worst of it.

"Your buddy lucked out," shouted Dennis through the open window between the bed and the cab. "The bullet missed the femoral artery. There'd be a hell of a lot more blood otherwise."

Lonnie replied with a groan.

"As far as I can tell it went in one side and out the other. His femur seems to be intact as well. That said, the muscle is pretty well tore up. But it could be a LOT worse. He should be fine."

"I SHOULD BE FINE," Lonnie echoed,

Walt grabbed the microphone on the CB radio and instructed me to tune into channel 9, which was strictly reserved for emergencies. I twisted the knob until a number 9 glowed red.

"All the agencies monitor 9," Walt said. "We just put out the word, and they'll respond. Let's just hope our signal is decent enough up here." He pulled the microphone to his mouth, pressed in the button on the side, and began his transmission. "Breaker 9, Breaker 9..."

The call was picked up right away and the paramedics agreed to meet up with us where the national forest road met up with the Hoh Mainline, the closest paved route. From there we would transfer Lonnie into the care of trained professionals and follow them all the way down the 101 into Aberdeen, the town with the nearest proper hospital.

Walt handed me the mic and I hung it up on the coupling attached the CB. The adrenaline that had flooded my body now began to ebb. My joints throbbed

and the puncture wound in my leg began to burn. It had been a bear of a day where at times I questioned my very survival, but now help was on the way. The worst was now over, I told myself.

Suddenly, up ahead on the left, we came upon a vehicle pulled over to the side of the road. A blue Ford pickup truck.

“Stop stop stop!” I yelled. “This is where we came in this morning. That’s my dad’s—I mean --that’s my truck.”

“You got your keys?” Walt asked, grinding to a stop.

“Yeah.”

“Well why don’t you go ahead and lead the way down this road? We’ll follow. Just stop when you hit pavement.”

I nodded and opened the passenger door.

“And be careful. It’s nasty out there.”

The truck started no problem and I was off, guiding a four ton beast down a gravel and mud road which was putrefying and crumbling under the merciless barrage of rain. It was now dark and the truck’s headlights did their best to blast through the deluge, illuminating the narrow track. The lights of Walt’s rig blazed in the expanse of the rear-view mirror, which, like everything else in the truck, was massive. The whole affair was an exercise in vehicular steroids. I pressed down on the gas and felt the full power of the V-8 surge under the hood. This was some serious machinery, and I would use its potency to lead Lonnie to safety. Dennis assured us that he wasn’t going to die, but what did he really know? He could have just been offering up reassuring bromides while Lonnie bled out. After all, the first order of business in a crisis situation is to keep calm. People will lie to achieve this effect. And even if Dennis was right—even if he wasn’t diminishing the gravity of the situation--the fact remained that Lonnie had been leg shot by a high caliber rifle and was now squirming, screaming and sweating in the back of a pickup during the worst storm of the year. However you wanted to cut it, it was now up to me to blaze the course out of the woods.

Just five minutes into the rally I had to stop to clear a fallen limb out of the way. A minute later were stopped again, this time by a smallish tree which required both Walt and Dennis’s assistance to drag to the side of the road.

“How’s he doing?” I asked.

“He’s going through hell,” replied Dennis. “The sooner we get him out of here, the better.”

The wind rushed down through the canopy, pelting us with bloated raindrops and dead leaves. The surrounding trees screeched and groaned under the constant press of air.

“Go ahead and step on it,” Walt said, licking the water from his blond mustache. “The clock’s ticking, and I imagine they’re waiting for us down the junction.”

When a cop tells you to speed, you speed, even on a shitty foothill road during a rainstorm. After all, it’s not often you get a *carte blanche* to crush it. I gripped the steering wheel at a solid two and ten and threw gas at it, ripping over the mud and rocks at murderous velocity. The big rig was designed for this type of action. It charged, digging its wheels into the muck and propelling me forth. I wasn’t sliding out or hydroplaning. Everything was under control. Everything was solid and good and I could feel embrace the earth below me. This came as no surprise, since my dad was all about vehicles – whether it was his Huey in Vietnam, his steelhead drift boat, or this particular Ford F350. For better or for worse, the old man’s life’s pride was embodied in his truck, and as a result, the big ol’ bitch performed with complete aplomb.

Still, there are things that even the best-maintained vehicles cannot prepare you for. Sure, I was slaying the road without a hiccup, bursting through with absolute confidence. I had thrown all my energy into the track before me and conquered it accordingly. This, along with the incredible machine carrying me forth, caused me to neglect the idea of the random element – that X variable that’ll do you in every time. If I had been driving more slowly I may have been able to avoid the collision. I may, out of the corner of my eye, have caught a glimpse of brown and grey and reacted in time. I may have swerved out of the way, or stopped just short of impact. I may have avoided a collision. I just may have.

But I didn’t. As I raced down the road, just minutes from our destination, I hit something. Something big. It was just a flash in the headlights and then a shock wave blasting through my bones; a sickening crunch rolling over the hood; a crackling and collapse of the windshield in an inverted, devastating spider web; the helpless recognition of wheels giving way to gravity, until the rig careened to the left, off the National Forest road, and straight into the unforgiving trunk of a Sitka spruce.

I awoke to the dirge of a car horn. My whole face stung – that midpoint between numbness and screaming pain--as if I had been slapped by a massive open hand. I gasped for breath as I unhooked my seat belt and fought my way out from under the nylon stretch of the deployed airbag. I slipped out of the vehicle and immediately wretched. Only water came up.

I ripped the hat from my head and ran my fingers through my hair, trying to get good with my breath. I craned my neck up, exposing my face to the pummel of rain,

and took each, deep, gratifying lungful of air. I was alive.

Soon Walt's truck rumbled up from behind and stopped. His headlights splashed out in front, illuminating a shape rising up from the middle of the road. Steam rose from the mass out of the rain, and through the hiss of drops I could make out the sound of a labored wheeze.

It was alive.

I staggered toward the creature, drawn in by each pained breath it took in. As I got closer it began take form — long legs, thick trunk, and a deadly rack of antlers. It was an elk — a big one at that.

"Jesus Christ, you okay?" Walt's voice shot through the rain as I made my way closer to the crippled animal. "What'd you hit?"

The semi-numbness of my face now burned as hot pain. My whole body pounded, and my shaky legs threatened to give way. I felt the weight of the sky collapsing onto the whole of my being, but not before I was able to teeter over the downed ruminant and take it all in.

He was a big boy all right, and his wounds mortal. He struggled to breathe — rasping through crushed ribs and punctured lungs. Blood seeped from his nostrils, which hissed hot plumes into the air. His eyes were deadening pits and his tongue hung sadly from a broken mouth. His breathing soon slowed to a bubbling death rattle, and it was then that I saw it, splattered among his fur, dark on light, as clear as a Hollywood movie. Lonnie was right. There, splayed out in bold geographic glory, was a big brown splotch in the exact shape of a map of Vietnam.

I'd got the son of a bitch.

3

"I knew it was a bad idea," Rose said, shaking her head she drove through the dark up the 101. "I just knew that it would come to no good. I should have tried to stop you two fools."

"Probably wouldn't have done no good," said Benji, from the passenger's seat. "You know you can't change his mind once he's decided to do something."

"He is stubborn as hell, but still... Not only did he get you guys lost, he got his ass shot off."

"At least he'll be okay," Benji added.

"Yeah, there is that, I suppose." Rose continued to grip the wheel and focus on the wet road in front of her.

I called her as soon as we arrived at the hospital in Aberdeen filled her in on the day's adventures. Within two hours Benji and her were there, where the attending doctor reassured both of them that Lonnie's wound was non-life-threatening, that he'd be back home in a matter of days.

"In the meantime he needs rest," the doctor went on to say. "He's out right now and will be for the night. You're welcome to go see him, but I'd recommend you to get a good night's sleep yourself and come back in the morning. I can assure you that he's out of danger."

I was examined in the emergency room after arriving, and after a few alcohol swabs and bandages, released. I had luckily escaped any serious injury, just a few scratches and bruises, though I had nearly gone hypothermic in the woods. My dad's truck didn't get off so easily however, and was destined for the junk yard. I didn't mind so much, since the Volvo was a much better fit for me. Still, I could have sold the rig for a few much-needed bucks. My gig at the coffee shop didn't pay so well.

"One thing I do know," said Rose. "As soon as he gets home I'm taking his ass to a meeting. He'll get sober again if it kills me."

We drove on in silence, the only sound being the car's engine and the thunk-thunk of the windshield wipers. At one point Benji clicked on the radio and began to scan for stations. Soon a familiar song came ringing over the airwaves, clear as the water from the Hoh River: "Achy-Breaky Heart."

"Oh, turn it up," Rose said. "I love this song." She tapped out the rhythm on the steering wheel and began to sing along.

I awoke early the next morning on the couch at Lonnie and Rose's. Despite my exhausted state, I was wide awake. I tried to shift positions and get back to sleep, but it just wouldn't come. So, I rolled off the couch, pulled on a pair of jeans and a

sweater, slipped into my still-damp boots, and headed out towards the beach.

The rain had stopped for the time being, though the clouds hung in their usual spot just overhead. My body was stiff and sore and the clammy weather wasn't doing anything to help, but it felt good to move and breathe in the clean, salty air. I had survived a proper ordeal and knew deep down that I was better for it. My senses were now sharpened and I somehow felt extra-alive. Walking in the cold of the morning made a hell of a lot more sense than wasting away on a couch. There was a day to be lived, so why not be awake to enjoy it?

I kept my eyes open for the spot where Benji and I had gone off the path just two days before, and soon I found it. I retraced our steps to the tree where we blazed our bowl and looked down in search of the mushroom colony. They were still there. In fact, the rain had brought up even more than before. I bent down and picked several handfuls, which I then stuffed into the cavernous pockets of my army coat. I'd be taking them back to Oly where Tasha and I would steep them in a tea and enjoy a few psychedelic journeys together. We'd light candles in my room in the old wooden house, put on some Cocteau Twins, and proceed to burrow deep into the center of our minds' eyes. We'd stretch, sigh and melt into the bed, where I'd run my fingers through her auburn hair and gaze into the soothing safety of those soft brown eyes. Is there any better gift than one that nature gives us for free? I took a moment to give thanks to this place. I'd be heading home with a pocketful of guaranteed good times.

The beach was empty and grey, just as it had been two days before. The tide was heading out, revealing a field of slickened sand. I walked to the water's edge and once again took it all in, this time feeling no dread. For whatever reason, that morning, none of it bugged me. Maybe our lives don't mean anything. Maybe the sum of our tiny hopes and struggles don't even add up to a grain of sand on the frigid, indifferent beach of the universe. I suppose, for a moment at least, I was okay with that.

When I got back to the house Rose was up, sitting at the kitchen table, enjoying her first coffee.

"You're up early," she said.

"Couldn't sleep any more."

"You go down to the beach?"

"Yup."

"Beautiful in the morning, isn't it? I never get sick of it. Don't suppose I ever will."

After a breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast, Rose and Benji got ready to head back down to Aberdeen to visit Lonnie.

"You sure you don't want to come?"

"Thanks, but I'll stop in tonight on my way back to Oly. First I need to go out to my dad's and do a few things."

"You gonna sell the place?"

"I don't know yet. Gotta talk with my mom. Who knows, maybe I'll move in."

"We'd like that. Wouldn't we Benji?"

"Hell yeah."

"Well take your time, Nick. There's no rush. Which reminds me. Hold on a sec."

Rose disappeared from the kitchen and came back holding a small cardboard box.

"You should have this."

She handed the box to me. On the front was a paper label, which read, *Leary, Lawrence Scott*.

"He was cremated right after the accident, as per his wishes."

I gave the box a shake and could feel the ashes shift inside.

"They put him in a plastic bag, which is in the box. I don't know if your family wants to bury him, or inter him... or what... but... there he is."

I stared down at the box and gave it another small shake.

"Maybe you wanna buy an urn or something... keep him above the fireplace... Do you have a fireplace?"

I handed the box back to her.

"Give this to Lonnie."

"Huh?"

"Give this to Lonnie."

"That wouldn't be right, Nick. That's *your* father. You're family. Lonnie was just his friend."

“Just give it Lonnie, please. It’s okay, really. He’ll know what to do.”

*

Getting back into the taped-together rattrap of my Volvo was a step down from my dad’s mean machine, but it was home. I pulled out of the Hoh Reservation and headed north on the 101 back towards Forks, toward my dad’s place once again. I really had no idea what to do with the property. I was lying when I told Rose that I may move in. Perhaps it was a moment of wishful thinking, I don’t know. To think about it, there was no way I could be happy in such a rain-sodden, redneck-infested backwoods environment. There was also no way Tasha would move anywhere as shitty as Forks, where I doubted there was even a single band venue, let alone tattoo shop. Could you even get an espresso, or an IPA? What about a good bag of weed? Nope. I imagined I’d sell it all off and use the proceeds to finish school. Or maybe I’d bum around Europe for some months. I heard that Prague was a happening place. Hell, I could even travel to Asia. Vietnam. I’d recently read that tourism was now possible there, that Americans were welcomed, even. The world was indeed a crazy place.

The sun was tucked back behind the clouds by the time I pulled in front of my dad’s trailer. I felt the first drops of rain plop onto my “Kill ‘Em All and Let God Sort ‘Em Out” hat as I forced open the ill-fitting door of the Volvo (it was from another model), and walked up the steps. As I fished in my pocket for the key, I glanced to the American flag hanging next to the front door. It rustled in the growing breeze, the only sign of vibrancy on the whole property. I found the key, opened the door, and stepped inside. The dark little place still stank of beer and mildew. As far as spaces go, it did little to entice me in.

But in I went anyway. I crossed the threshold and stepped into the crowded living room, where I threw my coat onto the stained brown couch. The half-eaten Godfather’s pepperoni pizza still sat on the coffee table, along with the overflowing Idaho-shaped ashtray. I picked up the photo of me with the fish from the end table and took it in one more time. Then I scanned the framed Vietnam picture on the wall, where for the first time, I noticed that my dad was smiling. There, in the midst of violence and death, he is beaming a million-dollar grin. I never remember him smiling like that as a kid. Not once.

I shook my head and walked into the biohazard of a kitchen, where I began the long, thankless task of cleaning up.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Originally hailing from Olympia, Washington, Chris Tharp has called Korea home for a long time now. He is the author of *Dispatches from the Peninsula* and *The Worst Motorcycle in Laos*, as well as the co-author of *Jeff Monson: My Road as a Fighter*. His award-winning pieces have appeared in *National Geographic Traveller*, *Green Mountains Review*, *enRoute*, *The San Diego Reader*, and many others. He lives in Busan with his wife and a shifting number of animals.

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