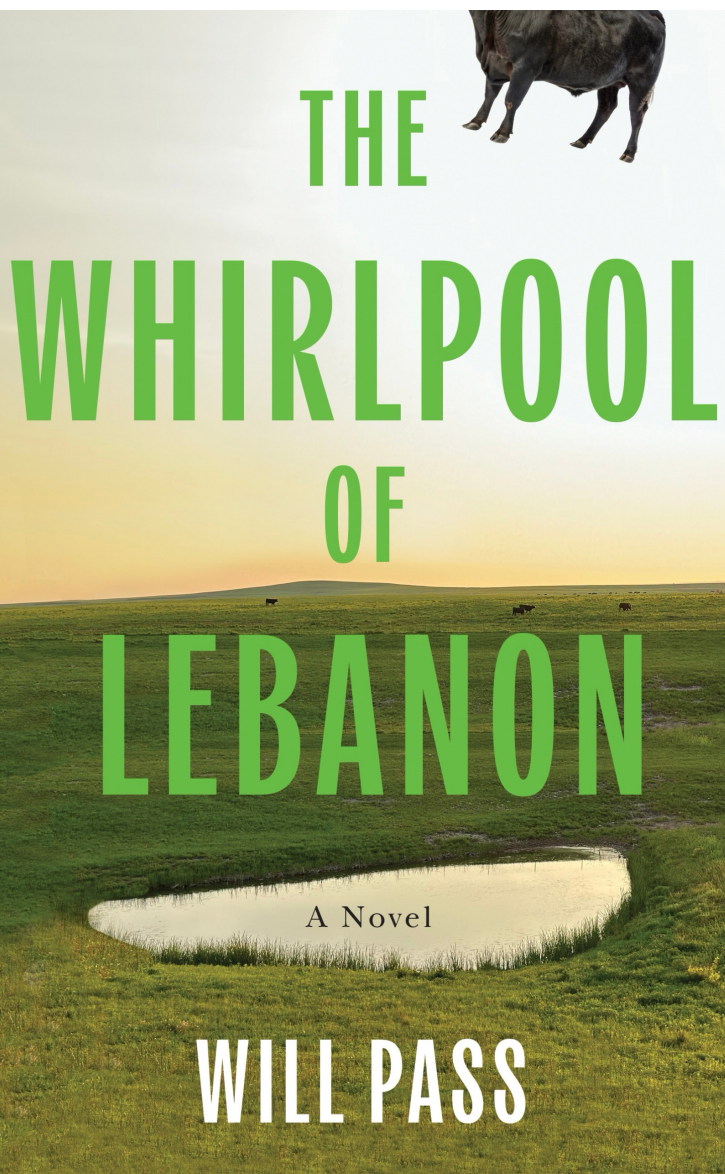




THE

WHIRLPOOL

OF

LEBANON

A Novel

WILL PASS

THE WHIRLPOOL OF LEBANON

WILL PASS

THIESSEN PRESS

MONDAY

THE CATTLE WERE ASLEEP.

All of them.

Now of course cattle sleep. Sure. But not all of them. Not all at once. Especially not with a man on a horse upwind.

Yet there they were.

One hundred and forty-nine Black Angus lay around that shallow bowl of prairie in a great big slumber party. Most lay normal, with their legs tucked under, but more than a few lay on their sides, like cows that are dead. Like this one.

Zeb dismounted.

He poked her with his boot.

No response.

Breathing though.

So.

Not dead.

Still no self-respecting cow kept on sleeping when you poked her with your boot.

Zeb walked over to the next. He gave her a good hard shake. She grunted, curled tighter, slept on.

It was like trying to wake up a drunk.

But they weren't drunk.

They were cattle.

It was a strange sight and Zeb had nobody to share it with.

Well, except Dan, that old American Paint, who stood there against the orange dawn and stared at the scene like he too was perplexed.

Zeb considered calling Nancy on the walkie. But she was probably sleeping too. Besides, the walkie was for emergencies. Her emergencies. Not his. Whatever this was, it did not appear to be that.

Sleeping is the opposite of an emergency, Zeb thought. Even if they were dead that wouldn't be an emergency. Because things that are dead stay dead for a long time. As in forever.

So.

Relax.

Still Zeb was concerned. They calved late at Stout Ranch according to Nancy's natural philosophies and it was almost that time. Even after sixty-eight years he continued to be amazed by a newborn ducking low for milk. But he expected that. Not this. He had never seen anything like this nor heard of anyone else who had.

And now he saw something else.

He saw it.

Yes.

It.

Maybe the sun had gained enough height over the horizon. Or maybe the reflecting surface had grown. Either way it was now calling attention to itself. Down there, about seventy yards off, at the bottom of that shallow bowl of prairie, was a glimmer of light. It made Zeb stop and really look.

He pushed up his Stetson to reveal a pair of silver Stout eyes that others had called stunning or strange or even unsettling depending on their relation. And that mustache. What a mustache. Over that great white cloud he looked. He looked and looked and looked. But still he did not understand.

That glimmer of light.

It looked like water.

Water?

After a big storm, sure, water could log in the hollows and draws for a day or two until it seeped into the earth. But it hadn't

rained in two weeks and only a shower at that. In fact they were calling it a drought. May would only get hotter, the weatherman said. And windier. On account of La Niña, he said. She was the reason the dirt cracked with black veins. Some girl.

Now this.

This water.

Because it was definitely water. Right there in the bullseye of all those sleeping cattle. Bigger than a puddle. Not quite a pond. Stranger still, the grass around it was green. Bright green. Lush.

Zeb smoothed his mustache under his finger and thumb. He smoothed it again. And again. He kept on smoothing it.

Hadn't he been here yesterday? He had.

He was born on this ranch. Back there in that old limestone house. Upstairs room. Now storage. So he knew every tree. Every divot.

He'd ridden straight through this bowl of prairie yesterday afternoon. And it was dry. Even if a spring had come up overnight, which itself was unheard of, if not impossible, then it wouldn't have turned the grass so green so fast.

And yet.

Plus the cattle.

So.

Zeb's hand stopped smoothing. His face relaxed. His eyes lost focus.

He never could recall walking down there. Or even deciding to walk down there. It was like the space between waking and dreaming.

That gap in his memory.

Anyhow.

Here's what happened.

As far as Zeb could recall.

He was a ways off.

Then he was standing in that lush green grass.

Just standing there.

Looking in.

The water was clear and shallow then. No more than four feet wide. Two feet deep. The outer surface was smooth before

creasing in gentle curves toward a dimpled center, where, below, a tornado turned, a thread of bubbles drawing air into a hole in the earth no bigger than a pinky. And the grasses all around swayed like hair in the morning light.

It was a whirlpool.

But Zeb was not surprised.

He was no longer capable of surprise.

He was crouching. His left hand, as though it belonged to another, was reaching, then breaking the surface. The water was warm. And this warmth soon erased the boundary of skin, so his hand seemed to grow larger and lighter, dissolving, blurring the line between him and it, this and that.

In other words it felt good.

Real good.

He wanted to climb right in.

But he was struck down by a heavy blow. And the ground struck him again. And his head rang with light. And he curled into a ball. And through his elbows he looked, and saw, up close, a hoof, a leg, a horse, whale-eyed, head down, lips curled, gulping water.

Gulping it.

His own horse!

Zeb, after fifty years of what Nancy called self-improvement, had lengthened his fuse, but this cut it clean. He jumped up and pulled the reins, hard. Dan came out of the water screaming sideways. Before any biting or kicking could follow Zeb was up and in the saddle.

"Get!"

Well Dan got alright.

That old horse shot out of that shallow bowl of prairie in a mad gallop and went on for a couple hundred yards more with Zeb clinging on and bouncing up and down and hollering curses and yanking the bit.

At last Dan slowed down.

A less experienced rider would have mistaken this for submission. But Zeb knew better. He tightened his grip and centered his balance and lowered his chin. The saddle sank so fast that his guts

fell out. Then his guts were back inside and he weighed a thousand pounds. Then he weighed nothing at all.

Yep.

Zeb got bucked.

And there he was.

Up there in the air, ten feet off the flat land, all by his lonesome.

Now a funny thing happened to Zeb.

Time slowed way down.

It came almost to a halt.

Like the world was an old photograph.

And Zeb, high above the earth, noticed his hat floating beside him. Nice hat, he thought. Which it was. A Stetson El Patron. In white. A gift from Nancy on their fortieth wedding anniversary. You would expect a nice hat to float nicely through the air and that's exactly what it did.

It had a balance to it.

It was such a fine hat, in fact, that when he'd opened the giftbox and taken out all that tissue and held it for the first time, he told Nancy that he would save it for fancy occasions. Well she put that hat right on his head and said, "Life is a fancy occasion, Zeb. You'll wear it every single day."

So he did.

And there it was now.

Floating.

Fascinating.

Then *wham*.

And *badum badum badum*, as Dan, that old American Paint, galloped off.

Time carried on.

Leaving Zeb flat on his back.

Breathing though.

So.

He sat up.

And groaned.

His back hurt. Because he'd been bucked off a horse. And there was Dan, speak of the devil, far off, leaping the low brown

thing and vanishing around the big red thing down yonder from the square yellow thing.

So.

That was odd.

It was odd because Zeb never imagined that Dan still had it in him. Even odder, Zeb could not name any of those things.

Then he remembered.

Fence. Barn. House.

Of course.

He was fine.

Really.

He stood up and did a systems check. All systems were as good as they ever got these days. His right knee was a sack of stones. His hands were rough and age-spotted with knobby joints. His shoulders and elbows were stiff. And his back still hurt. Because he'd been bucked off a damned horse. Of course it still hurt. But it wasn't broke.

So.

Zeb looked around.

He was looking for something.

What was it?

Right.

His hat.

"Where are you."

He limped around, searching at random, even though it was all bluestem and brome, only four or five sad inches this year. Nowhere for a hat to hide. Especially not an El Patron. In white. It would have floated on this grass like a ship at sea. Still he kept searching.

"C'mon. Nancy's gonna kill me."

Now, to be clear, Nancy was not going to kill Zeb, even in the figurative sense, for losing his hat. She'd never cared a jot for stuff, as she would have put it. Especially not now. But it helped to think that she did care, so Zeb kept on thinking it.

It would be hard to explain at the very least. He recognized that much. It was hard to explain. All those sleeping cattle. That

turning water. But he couldn't think about that now. He had to find his hat.

Finally, fearfully, he looked straight up. Like maybe it was in the sky, since that was the last place he'd seen it. But it wasn't up there either.

His hat, which had been a gift on his fortieth wedding anniversary, that he had cherished so deeply and worn every single day, and only moments before, had been floating in the air right beside him, was gone.

Like poof.

So.

Zebedee Stout limped home.

ZEB PASSED some of his sculptures along the way, including *Little Girl With Corn Snakes for Arms* and *Jesus Christ Superstar Giving Birth to a French Megaton Atom Bomb* and *Egg Number Seventeen* and *Egg Number Fifty-Five* and *Manhattan Millionaire Muttonbusting an Art Critic* and *Mister Bug*. But he did not stop to talk to them. Not even *Mister Bug*. Not even a nod. Zeb kept limping along. He touched his baldspot occasionally and checked over his shoulder a couple times like he was being watched.

If he couldn't find his hat, he could at least locate his horse. He wasn't going to yell at him or beat on him or anything like that. Dan got spooked. That wasn't personal. Still Zeb did wish to exchange certain words with him. And, yeah, make sure he was okay.

Inside the barn something was not okay. Something was off. It was like a schoolhouse secret and it was about Zeb. All the animals were in their pens and stalls. They were all facing away from him.

Yep.

He was looking at a bunch of rears.

Even Dan's.

Zeb had opened the pens and west door that morning so the animals could come and go as they pleased. Presently it was

sunny and already in the fifties. They should have been out. Yet here they were. Inside. All of them. Showing their rears.

Of course Giovanna the Llama maintained a near permanent cold shoulder. But that's a llama for you. And King George, being a pig, was prone to moods. But even Spark, Nancy's sweet sorrel, remained in her stall, turned away. Frida, as kind as any Holstein, was giving him big square hips. Even Musashi. He was the friendliest donkey you'd ever meet, and Zeb's favorite among Nancy's rescues. But him too. The ass's ass. Like that. Whip scars like shooting stars.

"What is this," Zeb said.

No answer.

He went to check on Dan, and wouldn't you know it, Dan kicked the wall so hard that dust rained from the rafters.

"Fine," Zeb said. "You wear that sweaty saddle. See if I care."

He looked around at the others. It really felt like when he'd been a kid.

"Suit yourself," Zeb said.

Giovanna the Llama spat.

Zeb refused to give her the satisfaction.

He walked out.

For a moment he looked southward.

Nope.

He went back into the barn through a different door. A man-sized door. He closed it behind him. In here it was cool from the night before and dark between slats of light. He felt immediately better. Maybe because it was cool and dark. But also because the shotgun was in here. He turned on the light. He rubbed his hands together.

Okay.

Now then.

In here the floor was concrete and the walls were hung with hand tools and farming implements and spare parts like the walls of any workshop on any working property. But mixed among these items were seemingly random pieces of scrap metal of no use to any ordinary rancher. There was a spoked wheel from a locomotive, for instance, that had nearly become a

teleportation machine. The stop sign could be cut up into anything flat, like dragon scales, say. And those three transformer bushings? Appendages, especially if you were in the mood for a three-legged can-can dancer, or something along those lines.

Nancy had the gall to call it his studio.

Of course he hadn't made anything since her decline.

But never mind that.

Back to the shotgun.

Nancy had taken away his grandfather's revolver but she didn't know about this. Nobody did. Nobody but him. He'd sawed it off himself. It was hidden in the false bottom of the big black Craftsman tool chest underneath about fifty pounds of industrial nuts and bolts that he had pulled directly from a decommissioned roller coaster.

He knew it was right here.

Only him.

Alone.

Zeb kneeled and opened the drawer and started unpacking nuts and bolts. Pretty soon his bum knee hurt too much. He sat on the concrete. He kept on unpacking.

Then he was looking at another bare bottom. The false bottom. It was plain black metal.

"Here we go," he said, and he lifted it out.

And now he was looking at yet another bare bottom.

It was empty.

"What in the goddamn," he whispered.

The sawed-off was gone.

Plain gone.

But it had to be here.

He felt into the darkest corners, desperation rising, pawing at the emptiness.

"Whatcha doin'," a voice said.

Zeb turned so fast that he fell over.

How Earl Lavelle, a man six and a half feet tall weighing at least three hundred pounds, could appear so silently was a mystery. He was like a big barn cat. He stood there blocking the

sunlight about as well as the door had. Grinning. The Cheshire Barn Cat.

"Got any butter?" he asked.

"What in the hell do you mean do I got any butter? Sneakin' up on someone like that."

"I mean do you have any butter," Earl said. "To lend. Please. Although, to be forthright, we will not be returning it. So it's more like giving than lending. Beth's bakin' a couple cakes. Carrot cakes. But with lots of icing. She's gonna give you one. So I guess you will get some of that butter back. Half, to be exact. But transformed. Transmogrified. Or whatnot. Anywho. Whatcha doin'?"

"Well I was gonna shoot myself, Earl. But I can't find my damn shotgun. And people keep interrupting me."

"Good one. How's Nance?"

"Fine," Zeb said, standing up.

"But how is she?"

"Fine. The same."

"What's up your butt?"

"What do you think, Earl?"

Well Earl seemed to give that some thought. Then he said, "Hey did I ever tell you about the guy over in Esbon? With the corn cobs?"

"Goddammit. About ten times."

Earl stepped aside so Zeb could really storm out.

"Where's your hat?" Earl asked.

Zeb kept on.

"Where you goin'?" Earl asked.

"To get your damn butter!"

Zeb crunched up the gravel driveway and around Earl's police truck. Even after two decades it was frankly unbelievable that Earl Lavelle was the sheriff for all of Smith County.

"Two sticks!" Earl called. "Please and thank you!"

Zeb went up the wooden steps, pulled off his boots, went inside. He shut the door so softly that even he could barely hear the click.

Still she heard him. She always heard him.

"Zeb?" Nancy's voice descended from the darkness above.
"That you?"

He paused in the entryway. He could imagine her in bed. Up on her elbows. Head turned to listen. She had bat ears. She could hear his thoughts.

"It's me," he said. "Just getting Earl some butter."

"Butter? What for?"

"Beth's gonna nuke us another cake."

"Oh, that's sweet."

"Yep. Can't wait."

"You be nice."

"I am nice."

"I'll write them a thank you card."

"She hasn't even baked it yet."

Zeb regretted saying that. Nancy had trouble doing much of anything with the headaches and blurred vision and all. She mostly slept and listened to podcasts. Doing anything useful brought her satisfaction.

So yet again Zebedee Stout was an idiot. But he tried. He did. He tried.

"Actually," he said, "I think a card would be good."

Silence.

"Nance?"

She couldn't watch TV anymore or even do Facebook. She was that sensitive to light.

Zeb waited a moment longer.

"Dumbass," he whispered.

Then he crept through the living room.

The house was naturally dark, built by Zeb's great-grandfather with limestone walls two-feet thick, and small, square windows. Zeb and Nancy had once burned all manner of lights and lamps to keep it feeling warm. A cozy cave, Nancy used to say. But now even lamps gave her headaches. So they had grown accustomed to a nocturnal existence. Zeb had even unscrewed the lightbulb from inside the fridge. He felt around in that cold darkness for the butter. He crept back to the front door.

Again he paused.

"Nance?"

Nothing.

"I could come back and make you lunch," he tried.

"Not hungry."

"Okay."

Zeb headed out the door and put on his boots and went down the steps. He was visibly shorter now. He looked sad and old. Like a walrus. He handed the butter to Earl, looking through him, through everything, with sad walrus eyes.

"Thanks, bud," Earl said.

They stood there for a while. Zeb looking at nothing. Earl looking concerned.

"You're not gonna shoot yourself," Earl said, more command than question.

"Course not," Zeb said.

Earl reached into his vest. He rattled that little asthma can of his, took a hit. Then another. He exhaled, put it back.

Zeb waited. He didn't know why but he waited.

"You know," Earl began. Then he paused. He tried again. "Here's the thing," he said. "The thing is." He cleared his throat. "Beth and I were talking. About certain arrangements."

"Goodbye, Earl."

Zeb went back into the workshop.

He shut the door and turned the deadbolt.

"Alright, buddy," Earl said. "I'm gonna go. Don't hesitate to call if you need anything. Alright? Anything at all. I'll be back tomorrow. For more butter or batteries or some other made-up bullshit. I'm gonna keep coming back. Every day. You know that, right? Zeb? You hear me? I'm gonna be a real bastard about this. You're my Punxsutawney Phil. But every day of the year. Whether you like it or not."

Fuck off already, Zeb thought.

Really he was touched by these visits, and how Earl even admitted what he was doing, since that made it somehow less pathetic, even funny. So he kept his mouth shut. When Earl drove off, Zeb felt, as he so often felt after interactions with other people,

frustration, and remorse, and a chain of other regrets that ran along an awkward line all the way back to his boyhood.

"See ya tomorrow," Zeb said to the empty room.

Which meant he was talking to himself again. Quickly he put the false bottom back in the drawer and reloaded all the nuts and bolts. Then he stepped out into the sunshine and drew some fresh air. He was fine. It was a beautiful day.

Really.

He returned to the other side of the barn and was relieved to find that whatever spell had come over the ranch was now broken. The animals were either gawking at him or ignoring him like usual. Musashi let out a goofy donkey yawp. Spark nickered kindly. Even Dan, that old American Paint, was normal. He leaned in when Zeb scratched his cheek.

"No hard feelings, huh?"

Zeb untacked him and brushed him out. He looked around to make sure nobody was watching. Then he kissed his horse. It was something he did every day. Lately two or three times a day. It was a normal thing to do, for Zeb, anyway. Which meant everything was back to normal. And that's the way it needed to be. For now at least. No sleeping cows. No strange water. No vanishing hats.

No no no.

Not yet.

Nancy needed a normal man now.

Not a nut.

So Zeb did the first normal thing that came to mind. He checked the inventory for the calving season ahead. They were low on sleeves and syringes and Pen G. Plus they needed ear tags. Also he could get Nancy some cookie dough ice cream, as a kind of apology, and because those small acts of love still meant something.

Even now.

Especially now.

So.

Zebedee Stout went to town.

LEBANON, Kansas, as far back as any of the regulars could remember, had two primary institutions: Lebanon Methodist Church and McGillicuddy's Do-All. Way back in 1945, after returning from the Pacific Theater, Robert McGillicuddy Senior, AKA Old Mac, had named the latter of the two quite appropriately, apart from the fact that nobody since could recall how to spell it or bother saying it, and so referred to it as Mac's Do-All instead, or more often, plainly, the Do-All.

It was named appropriately because the Do-All did do pretty much all that needed doing, at least concerning the basic material and culinary needs of the Lebanese, who numbered exactly two hundred and two, if you could believe the government, which none of them did. It sure was a nice round number, wasn't it? Maybe a little too nice. The regulars doubted that the Census folks even knew where Lebanon was.

Had you entered the Do-All when it opened at seven in the morning and sat on one of five red vinyl stools along the diner counter till noon, as the three regulars did, then in that whole time you might have seen another two Lebanese come and go, and as many trucks rumble by on Main. It certainly seemed like there were fewer than two hundred and two Lebanese left, which is why, among the regulars, the population count was a common topic of debate; that is, when they weren't forecasting entire seasons, glorifying the past, or their favorite, belittling younger generations while bemoaning their disappearance; particularly, "Them Millennials."

This phrase was so common among the Do-All regulars that it had become a kind of Do-All curse. Kids don't visit? Them Millennials. Nobody calls you "sir"? Them Millennials. Blown your head gasket? Lost your keys? Got a bad rash down south? Them. Damn. Millennials.

Fortunately the Do-All provided all manner of remedies for this sort of pain. Breakfast was paramount, still presided over by the man himself, at least in body. Old Mac, who was more than a

century old—his exact age being another topic of debate—moved along the counter like a rolling library ladder in need of oil. For minutes at a time, boat-shaped hat docked in his eyebrows, he would stop and stare into the void of Main Street. Then he'd be back. Sort of.

"What'll it be?" he'd ask, leaning on the counter with pen and pad.

"Bacon and eggs, Mac," Janice Fink would say. "Sunnyside."

And Old Mac would smile his bright white dentures and ask, "That all?"

And Janice Fink would say, "That's all, Mac. Just bacon and eggs. Sunnyside. Please and thank you."

And Old Mac would nod once, and never writing anything, turn to the kitchen and shout, "Coffee and a flapjack!"

While Old Mac shuffled over to the next customer, Janice Fink would look through the serving window to ensure that May McGillicuddy had heard the actual order over the sound of sizzling oil. May would clack her spatula twice to signify that she had, allowing Janice to relax, as much as possible with her, shall we say, disposition.

By then Old Mac would have shuffled over to Stuart Pendergrass to ask, "What'll it be?"

And Stu would sniff and say, "Oatmeal with blueberries, Mac. And a jack on the side."

And as always, Old Mac would turn and yell, "Coffee and a flapjack!"

Lastly, Peggy Doolittle would blush, like it was her first time ordering, and fumble her words, which didn't matter anyway, since all were equally translated: "Coffee and a flapjack!"

The system worked and the regulars were glad that Old Mac was "staying active," a euphemism for being not dead that they personally loathed. With all three orders accounted for, Old Mac would shuffle over to the far end of the counter across from the broken jukebox, where he would decommission and absorb himself in the abyss of Main Street while May got to work.

And boy could she work. It was loudly agreed among the

regulars, even Janice Fink, that May McGillicuddy, AKA Lil Mac, AKA May Mac, was the pride and joy of Lebanon. She was the exception to the rule. And the regulars wanted her to know this, although they did not wish to embarrass her with it, so they raised their voices to discuss her many virtues.

Unlike Them Millennials, of which May was legally one, she put in an honest day's work. Unlike her own parents and grandparents, who had abandoned Lebanon for Kansas City like so many other defectors, once May had gotten her degree from Stanford (being a girl genius of some kind), and quit her job at that fancy space place, she had come to Lebanon to look after Old Mac, as the youth should do, and to work the Do-All like it had never been worked before.

May McGillicuddy was a storm of elbow grease and ingenuity. She did breakfast, of course, as it had always been done at the Do-All, with the goldenest hash browns and the sunniest sunnyside eggs anyone had ever seen. But she'd also introduced the first new menu item since the 1963 Spam and Eggs Disaster. She called it "avocado toast," which the regulars had learned from the news to distrust, until Peggy Doolittle took the risk after eight straight years of eggs Benedict.

"It's got the good fats," Peggy would say, should anyone look at her while she ate.

The coffee was good, too. No, that's an understatement. The coffee was phenomenal now. Gone were the days of Old Mac's burnt Folgers that needed drowning in cream. These days it was all single-origin, fair-trade, organic. While these absurd words would have caused the regulars to scoff at any other human being who dared utter them, May was so cute and brunette and pony-tailed, so rosy-cheeked and green-eyed, tough and spunky, barely five feet tall but all of it raw energy, that they looked upon her through the lenses of proud grandparents, which anyone will tell you are so rose-tinted they may as well be painted red.

"Now watch this," Stu would say. "Watch how she flips my jack."

And the regulars would lean together to see through the

serving window, and May, ever-listening while pretending not to listen, would hear the cue and flip that jack, not one hundred and eighty degrees but five hundred and forty, giving it that extra three-sixty just for show. By the time it landed she would already be rolling sausages.

"See that?" Stu would say. "Astrophysics."

And the other two would smile in agreement with sparkles in their eyes. These burned still brighter when, minutes later, at the exact same time, three plates of steaming food materialized beneath the heat lamps, and May banged that silver bell to reanimate Old Mac, who turned back and forth mechanically, sliding the plates across, in order, ever correct, by some reliable mechanism of memory that still remained.

To finish the show, May would hang her apron and appear from the kitchen to come along squeezing shoulders and refilling mugs with today's coffee selection, regaling the regulars with the characteristics of the exotic origin plantations and even the names of the chief growers. Kenya. Ethiopia. Costa Rica. Alamini Wambugu. Zera Abera. Julio Madrigal. The regulars would travel from their stools to distant cloud rainforests, taking long treks down muddy paths into the heart of the jungle, where coffee beans grew like dark gems beneath an equatorial sky. After painting these pictures May would be gone, onto other tasks, and they would let her go, falling into what would have been a silent reverie if not for the amplified mastication of loose bridges and jowls, or, in Stu's case, allergic sinusitis that made him a mouth breather through and through.

While the regulars chewed onward, May would enter the adjoining general store, which began where the tile of the diner shifted from white to off-white underfoot. Just a year ago the store had been a sad and dusty place which dealt only in items of death such as antifreeze and rat poison and expired ham. Now it was clean and fully stocked with nearly everything any reasonable Lebanese could desire, and even a few things for those most unreasonable. Did the Do-All still carry antifreeze and rat poison and ham, you ask? Yes, of course. May had not come to change

the Do-All; she had come to make it better. Which meant the antifreeze now went down to negative thirty instead of zero, the rat poison was strong enough to kill a Clydesdale, and the ham was always fresh and local.

And she hadn't stopped there. May had tuned into the wishes of the Lebanese and then turned around to grant those wishes. When Dana Herring was overheard in the park, wishing for watermelon in the summertime, she got it. When Bill Wyatt talked about the Topps trading cards he'd collected as a boy, he got them. And when Melissa Byers, who had not eight grandchildren but nine, complained about their constant lack of socks, these appeared the following week in bulk variety packs ranging in size from itty-bitty to big and hairy.

Yes, it was widely agreed among the Lebanese that May had taken the Do-All from breakfast dive and convenience shack to something beyond, some miracle of inventory out of Arabian Nights, a genie's lamp that absorbed the spirits of defunct local establishments and allowed them to live on in miniature. The Do-All, due to May, was a grocery-hardware-auto-ranch-apparel-pet-electronics-pharmacy-souvenir curio with shelves that reached the ceiling, all illuminated by beamish, fluorescent light.

And in the middle of it all, like a chrome axis on which the whole thing turned, was a rotating metal tree of patriotic t-shirts. On each, "I saw the center of the USA" was stamped beneath a target-striped map of America with Lebanon for the bullseye. Because, frankly, being the geographic center of the contiguous country was Lebanon's sole claim to fame. It was just enough to detour the occasional road-tripping Joneses from their cross-country odyssey. After taking a selfie at the center, commemorated by a faded Old Glory and a tiny white chapel at a desolate intersection outside of town, the most intrepid tourists would cruise Main Street to observe the local wildlife, with some bold enough to stop.

None today. On this particular morning, after hauling in a stack of dog chow bags from the back shed and reorganizing a wall of wood screws, May McGillicuddy was on her tiptoes upon a stepstool, sprinkling fish flakes into an aquarium of neon tetras,

when the door opened, ringing the bell. The regulars, fully caffeinated, spun on their stools like three of Pavlov's own, salivating for the feast to come.

BY THE TIME May McGillicuddy hurried back into the diner, it was too late. Zebedee Stout had managed only a couple steps inside before the regulars pinned him with questions. He stood there while they salted and peppered him properly.

Some Lebanese liked this treatment. But Zebedee Stout was not among them, which is why, like most Lebanese, he only shopped in the afternoon, when the regulars were gone, unless he absolutely had to. Come to think of it, Zeb was an extreme case. He typically came into the Do-All minutes before close, politely made his purchases, and left, as though he wished to avoid everyone as much as possible.

May noticed these things. She had a mind for it. From the regulars' gossip, but also her own observations, she had constructed a complex network of familial and social connections that allowed her to navigate the Lebanese like a river guide, down to the ticks and quirks of each individual, like so many rocks and eddies.

Zeb, for example, fell neatly into the category weirdo. He was a sculptor, which made him the only artist of the entire population, unless you counted Peggy's yarnwork or Barbara Golding's bedazzled cat earrings. Zeb was not, May knew, like them. He was therefore of particular interest to her. And so she was pleased to see him, and stood there, smiling, then not smiling, as she listened to the regulars pecking away.

"How are the headaches?" Janice asked.

"When will her hair grow back?" Stu asked. "I heard it can grow back curly."

"Don't be insensitive," Janice said. "I'm sorry, Zeb, he doesn't know anything."

"I am so sorry," Peggy said, peering out from behind her mug.

Zeb looked like he'd come up from underground. His shirt was dirty and his hair was awry.

"Any neuropathy?" Janice asked.

"Maybe we could come see her," Stu said.

"That would be nice," Peggy said.

Zeb studied his boots.

"Is Dr. Rawlins still her primary?" Janice asked. "He was a colleague of my Howard, you know, and not to be trusted."

"Now what did Rawlins do again?" Stu asked.

"Misdiagnosed a trichobezoar," Janice said.

"A what?" Stu asked.

"A hairball," Janice said. "In Ted Wilson's gut. The late Ted Wilson."

"I still can't believe humans get hairballs," Stu said.

"It's more common than you'd think," Janice said. "It killed him you know."

"I thought Ted died of a heart attack," Stu said.

"After a long and painful gastrointestinal obstruction," Janice said. "Rawlins thought it was heartburn."

May needed to intervene. She looked for an opening. But they left no room between comments.

"Dr. Rawlins could have saved Ted?" Stu asked.

"Of course," Janice said. "If only my Howard was still alive, Ted might be sitting here with us today. Howard knew a trichobezoar when he saw one. Diagnosed plenty."

"So they happen a lot?" Stu asked.

"Howard practiced for thirty-seven years," Janice said.

"I miss Ted," Peggy said.

"Coffee and a flapjack!" Old Mac shouted.

The regulars flinched, then fell silent and seemed ashamed, as though they'd been bopped by a newspaper.

May took Zeb's elbow, gently. Still he tensed. And she felt this tension like a charge running between them. She had met him before, of course, but now, so close, when she really looked into his eyes, she was surprised. His irises were like polished steel, wild in their brightness and depth.

She let go.

She tried a gesture instead.

Finally he understood, and she guided him, limping, down aisle one.

"C'mon, Zeb," she said, like they were familiar, "let me help you."

When they got around the corner, she stopped.

"You okay?" she asked.

He took a step back, then nodded.

"They don't have a lot going on," she said.

He replied to some wiper fluid on the shelf: "I'm used to it. But thanks."

He was sad. Anyone could see that. And of course he was sad. But there was something else going on with him. May could sense it. But it was harder to name. A void of some kind, like he was here, but he wasn't. He was distracted, maybe. And of course he was distracted. That was it. He was distracted.

"What brings you in?" she asked.

He named his few items. None was urgent, making May wonder why he'd broken his usual end-of-day routine. Maybe he needed to get out for a while. That made sense too. She loaded his basket for him, up aisle one, down aisle two. Before they emerged back into the open, she said, "You're in a hurry."

"I'm what?"

"Zeb's in a hurry to get back," May announced, leading him toward the register. "Bad case of foot rot."

Zeb scratched his neck. May checked him out.

"Pretty dry for foot rot," Janice said.

"Yeah, well, it happens," May said.

"That so," Janice said.

"Yes," May said.

Janice sipped her coffee, having gotten the hint.

Zeb paid in cash, seemed confused by the coins he got back.

"Okay, here you go," May said, offering the grocery bag.

He took hold of it. But then he just held it there.

"Goodbye then," May said, still trying to save him.

Zeb put the bag on the counter. He turned to the regulars.

"Stu," he said, "I need a gun."

"You bet," Stu said, and he tapped his own sidearm as an example. "These Glocks are fresh in."

"Shotgun," Zeb said.

"Ten or twelve gauge?"

"Either."

"Well the M3000 is excellent for the price point," Stu said. "Of course I've got Berettas too. Can't argue with a classic. Oh, and a break-action Ithaca just came in. Heirloom. Ten gauge. Side-by-side. Nice piece. Rick Newsome brought it in last Wednesday. Or was it Tuesday? Anywho, he traded it toward an AR and some body armor. Real piece, well maintained..."

May did not like where this was going. She did not, for that matter, like guns. But Stu owned Stu's Armory a few doors down. Guns were his business. And his religion. He loudly testified, on many occasions, that a gun had never killed anyone. And while that would lead one to logically conclude that people should therefore be psychologically screened before being given a gun, May knew better than to share such radical politics. She might as well remind Minister Wichmann that Jesus was a dark-skinned, Middle Eastern, left-leaning Jew. Even if he was, he wasn't. See?

"...course the M3000 will put a hole in a bad guy as good as anything. So if you're looking for home defense on a budget, then—"

"Stu," Janice said. "Quit."

He looked at her, puzzled, then got it. "Oh."

"What do you mean oh?" Zeb asked.

Silence.

Naturally Janice broke it.

"Stu is not allowed to sell you a firearm," she said, and you could tell she was happy to deliver this news. She folded her arms and lifted her chin.

"I've got no felonies," Zeb said.

"Sorry, Zeb," Stu said. "I really am."

"You're joking me," Zeb said.

Stu winced and held it. Here was a man who wanted a gun, being deprived of a gun. It was un-American. That's what Stu wanted to say.

"I could drive over to Smith," Zeb said. "Why not save me the trip? Hell, sell me that Ithaca. What is it, two grand? Fine."

Stu shut his eyes against the pain. "I'm sorry. I promised Nancy."

Zeb's face broke with frustration. He rubbed his forehead, hard, with his palm. He was in terrible condition.

"Oh, Zeb," Janice said, arms unfolding, momentarily soft.

Zeb took his bag and headed for the door.

"Wait," Janice said. "Zeb. Stop."

Zeb spun on his heel and pointed a finger straight at her. His whole arm was trembling. May was sure this was going to end in a big fuck you, or maybe a milder Kansan buzz off, but it didn't. Zeb's hand turned into a fist, then opened wide, then dropped. He walked out, bell ringing behind him.

He got into his old teal truck and slammed the door. He reversed quickly and jammed the brakes. Bed still bouncing, he sped off.

"What if he goes to Smith?" May asked.

"He hates leaving Lebanon," Janice said.

Stu was heavy on his elbows, wearing a faraway, forlorn expression.

Peggy rubbed his back. "You did good, Stu."

"It's a tragedy is what it is," Stu said. "I mean, we got an amendment for this."

"Do you really think he's going to hurt himself?" May asked.

"He's not going to hurt himself," Janice said. "He's going to kill himself."

The others nodded slowly, sadly.

May waited for a more appropriate reaction. "And you're okay with that?"

"Course not," Janice said, curtly, returning to her usual, upright form. "But what we're okay with has nothing to do with it. That man, like all Stout men, is going to commit suicide. I'm sorry to say it so plainly. It makes me sick. I promise you that. But it's his choice, not ours."

"How have I not heard about this?" May asked.

"Lebanon's got lots of people," Peggy said, in her wistful way.

"More than two hundred and two," Stu said. "I'd put it closer to three hundred. Maybe even four."

The Census always sidetracked them. "Wait," May said. "Go back. All Stout men?"

"Four generations," Janice said. "Howard thought it was biological. Lewy body, maybe."

"Lewy who?" Stu asked.

"Dementia," Janice said.

"Old timer's?" Stu asked. "Like Mac?"

"No," Janice said patiently, always ready to play teacher. "There are a variety of dementia subtypes."

"So, like, Zeb's dad?" May asked.

"Yep," Janice said. "Maybe the most tragic example."

"Zeb was in the back seat," Stu said. "That's why he limps so bad."

"Nobody wore seat belts back then," Peggy said.

"Officially it was an accident," Janice said. "But when a sober lunatic drives into the biggest oak tree around with his wife in the front seat and his son in the back? It makes you wonder. No signs of brake failure or a blowout or anything like that. Sunny day. Straight road. This is Kansas. He picked that tree."

"So sad," Peggy said.

"Zeb's father thought God was talking to him," Janice said. "Personally."

"He did look like Moses," Stu said. "Big old beard. Pretty hard to imagine a prophet called Dale, though."

"Don't kid," Janice said.

"I'm not," Stu said. "I can't imagine it."

"How have I not heard about any of this?" May asked.

"Figured you knew," Janice said. "I guess you still don't know everything."

May was annoyed at the jab, but even more unsettled by the former implication. After one year in Lebanon, was she already indistinguishable from the Lebanese? Of course this made her feel guilty. She admired them in certain lights. But they were so settled in their ways.

"Should we call social services or something?" May asked.

"You're not in California anymore," Stu said.

May would not get into that one again. "What about the police?"

"You mean Earl?" Janice asked. "As in Zeb's best buddy?"

"I guess."

"Earl is well aware," Janice said. "It's hopeless though. Once a Stout man has it in his head, there's only one way to get it out. I am sorry. But it's true. And Zeb is under a lot of stress right now. What with Nancy and all. I can't imagine. Although I suppose I can. With my Howard."

For a few long and respectful seconds, nobody spoke. They all sat there like an oil painting.

"Coffee and a flapjack!" Old Mac shouted, and they nearly fell off their stools.

"Mac," Janice said. "For heaven's sake."

The mood was beyond recovery. And so Janice and Stu started counting dollar bills while Peggy wrote a check. Their melancholy reassured May that they were good, after all, their love of gossip explained by extroversion and loneliness, not malice.

May held open the door and the regulars filed out. She stood there for some time after they were gone. Main Street was empty now, without a car or person in sight. She looked up and down the road, feeling glad to be alone but also at a loss, until across the street, behind stained glass, a figure stirred. May stood there, in defiance of her own discomfort, staring back at the church. He remained. Finally she turned away and let the door ding shut.

By the afternoon May could no longer ignore the fact that she was being watched. This was not her imagination. The Do-All was monitored, on and off, all day long, by Minister Wichmann. His white robe was there again, in the window. May rearranged some cereal boxes. Still there. She restocked the air fresheners. Still there. Emptied the trash. Gone.

Or had he stepped into the shadows?

May went into the kitchen. She tried scrubbing the grill,

polishing the fridge. But still she could feel his eyes boring through the walls. Maybe it was a benign curiosity. Simple small-town nosiness. Or maybe—and this was May’s leading hypothesis—the church leader was a common creep. Sure, at his eighty-one years of age, and May’s thirty-one, with a history of CrossFit, she could have taken him in a physical confrontation, but still, it was unsettling. Annoying, at least. Some days she could shrug it off. Other days, like today, she could not.

She picked up the wall phone and called Peggy Doolittle, who answered on the first ring. Peggy, like the other regulars, lived alone, not counting her five Brussels Griffons. She bred them. They sounded like a tribe of Ewoks yapping and skittering in the background. After some small talk May explained her trip to Smith Center. Fortunately Peggy was available. She was always available.

May hung up and used her own phone to send a text: *Now?*

The reply came seconds later: *Eggplant emoji*.

Oh please.

But May was smiling, wasn’t she?

She tapped the peach emoji, then chickened out, instead going with something more subtle: *Coming*.

Peggy arrived in five. As always, she placed her enormous faux designer purse upon the counter and straightened Old Mac’s bowtie, even if it was already straight. Then, like a grand speckled hen preparing to lay, she settled her heft upon the stool behind the counter, and with short, heavy fingers, raised the glistening male torso of a classic romance novel. For two hours she would reliably sit behind the counter reading and eating Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. May never found any wrappers but an inventory check suggested a rate of four cups per hour. Far below minimum wage.

“Just going to Smith and back,” May reminded her.

“We’ll be fine,” Peggy said, referring to Old Mac, who appeared unaware of the shift change.

“Thanks again,” May said, and she headed out the back door.

But not to Smith.

MAY DROVE SOUTH ON MAIN, past the American Legion Hall and the tiny post office and the empty Hageman's Pharmacy, between a pair of grain silos like agricultural gates, from pavement to gravel. She bounced along on the worn struts of Old Mac's old truck down a poorly maintained road that most Lebanese took only out of necessity. Three miles later May lifted her feet to cross the railroad tracks. She drove another mile, to Carruthers Farm.

To call it a farm at all was a lie—the first of many, the regulars would have warned, that you could expect from a Carruthers of any kind. The plastic trash began half a mile out, littering the ditch along the road. Then small engine parts appeared in the trees, followed by piles of brick and rebar and what may have been a pizza oven. The land opened upon rows of crashed and corroded vehicles. Everywhere tires rotted on their sides, sprouting weeds from within—the tenements of snakes and raccoons—some splatted with paintballs. Then came the electromagnetic crane. The hydraulic compactor. The dumpster overfull. And the Bobcat. At the center of this mess was the farmhouse, a two-story clapboard place, originally white, now gray and brown like moldy bread, with a soggy porch and one ragged corner where a downspout had been exploded by a dry ice bomb made from a two-liter of Mountain Dew.

May parked behind a rusty tow truck, an even rustier box truck, and a brand new, fire engine red Ram, worth at least sixty grand, purchased on credit, May assumed, though she hadn't, and wouldn't, ask. These were the vehicles of the Brothers Carruthers.

Presently, Jax, the elder of the two, emerged from the house. He leaned against the porch, shirtless and wrapped in a Chiefs towel, skin damp, hair dripping, like some kind of white trash cologne commercial. He was defined by lean muscles and what the regulars called a mean grin, although May never saw this meanness. To her, Jax would always be that country boy, a grade below, who enjoyed limitless freedom—the wild one who raced a dirt bike after the McGillicuddy station wagon until it took to the highway, back to the suburbs. He'd since grown into a remarkably androgynously handsome man. The regulars never mentioned that. Between his brow and jaw balanced a small nose and a wide

mouth. He smiled now, as he smiled often, without teeth, since they were as jumbled as the junkyard.

Jax Carruthers, unlike May McGillicuddy, never had braces.

She climbed the porch and stopped.

They appraised one another.

He bowed and gestured.

She went inside.

The interior of the Carruthers' house, which few non-Carruthers had ever seen, was not a dump as the regulars suspected. It was neat and clean and in fair condition, decorated by a lover of machines. Polished retro hubcaps adorned the wall up the stairs where family photos might have hung, while two antique bumpers crisscrossed overhead, suspended from the ceiling by wires, with four headlights illuminating the foyer below. Perhaps most unexpected, aglow, upon a refurbished school desk, white bloodroots bloomed from a mason jar.

"Picked 'em just for you," Jax said.

This, like most things Jax said, was likely a half-truth. May gave him a playful but skeptical look. She believed that he had picked the flowers. But he had probably said the same thing to another woman already, possibly earlier that morning, before he got in the shower. May was not bothered by this. Or so she told herself. This—what she was doing here—was nothing. So Jax could do as he pleased. He was fun. That was the main thing. And flattering. And secretive. And more sensitive than his reputation suggested.

Jax was full of contradictions, and these, over the past year, had drawn May closer than she liked to believe. When he wasn't chopping vehicles of unknown origin or running "errands" in Kansas City, he was restoring an antique bureau or baking a quiche or embroidering a cushion. Okay, so the cushion did say SHITHOLE, but still, he embellished it with chrysanthemums. And he kept the house clean. Even the toilets. In fact, all the household chores, including dinner every night, were Jax's domain. His younger brother, Slade, had only one job: raise the crops.

May could smell those stringent green odors squeezing

through the floorboards below. Beneath their feet, in the basement, rows of cannabis grew under bright white lights, their leaves and buds rustling in an artificial breeze of oscillating fans, while Slade, hairy and heavy-armed, stalked between them, thick lenses and magnifying glass quadrupling THC crystals for inspection. He was like an endangered bear—strange and misunderstood and rarely seen—preferring plants over people.

Jax was staring. “Look at you, McGill,” he said. “You are so fuckin’ hot. All smart and shit. What’s goin’ on in that big brain of yours? Math? Hey, what’s sixty-eight plus one?”

“Don’t talk.”

He replied with a toothless smile, opening his palm to the stairs. She climbed and he followed. She always relished this feeling—like the moment before getting high—this premonitory bliss touched by anxiety, knowing what was about to happen, yet worrying that it might not, or, more distantly, should not.

But it always did.

“NANCE?”

Zeb stood in the doorway with a bowl of soup in one hand and tub of ice cream in the other. Nancy was in bed as usual. But she was not sleeping. At least he didn’t think so. She was doing that odd thing again.

What was this?

She sat upright with her back to the headboard and that yellow knit hat pulled down over her eyes. Her lips were moving like she was praying. Sonny James snored at her feet. Her bedside lamp, covered with a sheet, cast a copper glow. Curtains sealed out the sunset. It smelled like heavy coats out of summer storage. It was always the same.

“Nance?” Zeb said again.

Quilts and blankets swelled around her. She was a white mushroom of worn pajamas, canary capped, muttering silences. She used to read in bed. Now it was like she was somebody else. That’s the best he could put it. She was somebody else.

The doctor in Kansas City had warned them that personality changes could occur. He explained this without emotion. Like somebody forecasting a light rain. He never told them how slowly and unevenly the clouds would come to cover their land.

"Nance," Zeb said, afraid to disturb whatever she was doing.

Despite the prognosis, he was falling deeper in love with her, and could do nothing to stop this. He loved her desperately now. He loved her like a mass of people loves a prophet. He hoped she would speak some sense today. He would melt if she smiled. These were the flashes of life. He wished he could catch them in jars and keep them for lights.

Because in between the flashes was darkness. There were increasing periods of distant looks and bodily functions and bleach. Zeb wondered how anyone had ever survived this before him. He knew this was selfish but maybe he was a selfish man. He could not remain here after she was gone.

Finally Nancy's mouth stopped moving.

She raised the hat and squared it upon her bald head.

He felt small under her gaze.

The weight loss made her cheekbones stand prouder than ever. She was the only one of the Lebanese who actually looked Lebanese. Without eyelashes or eyebrows her eyes were even more foreign. Like knots in hardwood. Like her face was returning to its most fundamental form. Through this face Zeb could see all the Nancies of the past, of all ages, looking back at him, like she was becoming all of her selves, all at once, even as she disappeared.

Zeb lifted his offerings.

"Nope," she said to the soup, and, "Yes please," to the ice cream. She smiled at him, and winked. She winked!

Zeb felt like he might cry. He had always been a crier. Usually in the workshop though.

She took the tub. "Don't fret. You get soup."

He really might cry.

"Come on, cowpoke," she said, patting the bed. "Tell me about your day."

She was having a very good night. Maybe...no. Not that. She

was not getting better. But still. Tonight she was clear. She was the moon.

"Pretty standard," he said, sitting beside her.

"Well I want to hear every standard detail."

He smiled like a boy. It was her. She was really here tonight. Nancy. The real Nancy.

She sniffed him. "You smell like a horse."

"Well I—"

"Hush. I like the horse part." She snuffled up his shirt and around his neck. "That's some nice horse smell." She went back for more then pulled back. "Yuck. You also smell like a sweaty man. Which I do not like. Go wash up. Then you're allowed in. Go on. Hurry if you want some ice cream. I will eat it all."

Zeb showered quickly, wrapped a towel around his waist, brushed his teeth. It was nearly black in the bathroom but he didn't need to see. He was glowing. He came out in white shorts and a white vest. He peeled back layer after layer of blankets. He settled under a single sheet. He folded his hands on his slight belly. Now he felt nervous again. And guilty maybe. Yes. Guilty. He stared at the ceiling. She ate ice cream.

"So, Mr. Stout," she said, "tell me about your day. Any calves?"

Zeb's nerves took an even harder edge. Because the real Nancy was back. Which meant he could get himself into trouble here. She could spot a lie on the other side of the world. He tried to think but she was staring at him so intently. There was no room for his own thoughts. He could hear the chocolate chips crumbling between her teeth. She swallowed. "Something wrong?"

"No," he said. But he could hear the defensiveness in his own voice. So he launched into it: "Like I said. Pretty standard. Got up at the usual hour, did breakfast, headed out. Checked the herd. All good. No calves yet."

The sleeping cows appeared in his mind. He pushed past them, right past the water, past his own trance or whatever that was, past Dan's crazed behavior, their wild gallop, losing his hat, past the animals in the barn, his hunt for the shotgun, to Earl.

"Earl dropped by," Zeb said.

"Oh?"

So that was news to her.

"He needed a couple sticks of butter," Zeb reminded her. "I guess Bethany Rose is baking us another cake."

"That's sweet. I'll write a thank you card."

"That'd be nice."

He told her about his trip to the Do-All, leaving out the part, of course, about the gun. He really had been in a state. It felt like he was hearing about his own day too. Like it had all happened to someone else.

"Then I spent the rest of the day restocking, cleaning, moving heavy stuff from one place to another. You know, the usual. So. Yeah. That's about it. That's my day."

She was no longer eating ice cream. She was looking right at him. Was she doubting him or remembering something? Her expression had changed completely. Her lips were tight. Sometimes she had outbursts. She screamed at him. Lashed out. Then he slept on the couch. Sometimes she apologized. Sometimes not.

"Is there something else you wanted to share?" she asked.

So she'd remembered something.

"Like what?"

"You tell me."

She was giving him a chance to come clean. If he came clean she would reduce his punishment. But he could not confess. Would not. For her own good. She could explode if she wanted to. He had survived it before.

"No," he said. "Not that I can think of."

Her reply was preloaded: "Janice Fink called this afternoon."

So that was it. That rat. She'd told Nancy about the scene at the Do-All. Zeb tried to act natural. "Oh really?"

Whatever anger had been coursing through Nancy now gave way to something worse: disappointment. Her frown faded. She became melancholy. Still the distant flame of aggression made her words sharp and formal. "You are a terrible liar."

Zeb looked at Sonny James. Sleeping through this whole thing.

That lucky dog had never dealt with anything like this in his whole charmed life.

"Janice said she had to tell me something about you," Nancy went on. "So I told her to go ahead. Then she got quiet. Unnatural for Janice, to say the least. So I told her again to tell me. And she said you came by the Do-All today. Said you left your credit card behind. Then she got flustered, and pretended to be in a hurry, and hung up."

"Huh."

"Didn't make much sense to me either."

"I use cash."

"Indeed you do."

Zeb cautioned a look at Nancy. Sometimes she cried. He could hear it coming. A weakness in her tone.

"What?" he asked.

"Zebedee."

Oh no. She was using his full name.

"Are you spending time with Janice Fink?"

After double-checking his own memory to ensure that he'd heard correctly, he laughed.

"This is not funny," Nancy said.

"Course I'm not *spending time* with Janice Fink. Christ."

"Zebedee."

"I'd rather put my pecker in a porcupine."

This only deepened Nancy's sadness. Her voice was quiet now. "You did lose your virginity to her."

"Yeah, well, so did John Cooper. And Phil Howes. And Doug Anderson. And—"

"Stop. I'm being serious."

"Sorry."

For a full minute they both looked at the dog.

When Nancy spoke again her voice was barely audible. "You can if you want to," she said. "If that's what you need."

"No. What? No no no."

He searched under the layers of blankets to find her hands like burrowed mice. He took her cool fingers tightly and looked at her. "I do not want that. With anyone." He considered telling her that

he had decided to follow her after she passed. But of course that would not be a comfort.

"You can if you want to," she said again.

"Nance," Zeb said. "I do not want to. Ever. I've never met anyone better than you in my entire life. I will love you until I die. Maybe even after." He smiled. "I really don't like most people. You know that. Mostly mutual. It's pretty much just you and Earl, and he's fat, and taken."

"Don't joke."

"Sorry."

Nancy pursed her lips to the side like when they'd been teenagers and had this conversation for the first time. Despite her intelligence and beauty and charm there was always some part of Nancy that could never believe how remarkable she was. There would always be a girl in there who never grew up. For that matter there was a boy inside of him too. He never could believe how lucky he had been to find a girl who actually wanted him. The real him.

They held hands and listened to the wind building against the house.

"Unseasonably warm out there," Zeb said. "Rain soon, I bet."

One of her hands had come free and was traveling under the blankets. It slipped past his waistband.

"What are you—oh. Uh. No. Nance. You don't have to do that."

Except she was already doing that. Her hand warmed as it moved.

"Nance."

"Oh shut up and let me do this."

So she did. And pretty soon he said, "Oop," and that was that.

He got up and cleaned up and got back into bed. Again he rested his hands on his belly, now far more relaxed, he had to admit.

Nancy kissed his cheek. "You're welcome."

"Thank you. Uh. You want me to—"

"Definitely not."

And they both smiled sheepishly like they had smiled sheep-

ishly about a thousand times before. Then they rested their heads on their pillows and looked up at the ceiling with an empty but full feeling.

Up there, Zeb saw the stippled paint turning, then settling, then turning again, like he was drunk. He blinked several times. It stopped.

Maybe he would tell Nancy about the water after all. The sleeping cows, the water, his missing hat. Maybe he was safe to think about it. Maybe it really had happened and he wasn't losing his mind. Or maybe he was. Either way he could tell Nancy. He could tell her anything. Even now. Especially now.

"Kiss," she said.

He turned automatically and kissed her lips. They were oily with petroleum jelly. It was the only way to keep them from drying out and falling off, she said, after all the meds. She turned off the lamp. The room was pitch black.

Soon Nancy was snoring with Sonny James on harmony.

Zeb listened for a while.

"Nance," he whispered.

She snored on.

"I lost my hat."

So at least he'd told her. Technically anyway. Now he could sleep.

But sleep did not come easily for Zebedee Stout. In contrast to the drowsiness that had persisted throughout the day, he now felt alert, like he'd already slept the night through.

Meanwhile the windows rattled. Out there the windmill was whirring into a blur, spinning to meet gusts with squeaks of alarm.

Yep, he thought to himself. Pretty soon we'll have ourselves some rain.

AT SOME UNKNOWN point in the night Zeb jolted awake to the sound of someone gulping water. He sat up, heart pounding, lost

in the void of the bedroom. Then the spoon clinked in the bowl and he remembered where he was.

It was just the dog drinking the soup.

Outside the wind had stopped.

No rain.

Nothing.

Zeb drifted off.

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