

Out of the Woods: A Short Collection of Short Stories

Honors Project

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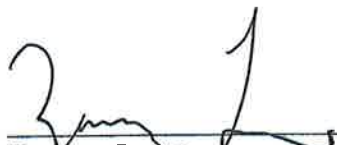
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

By

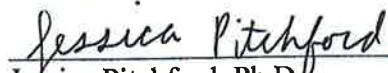
Zachary Lunn

Biology

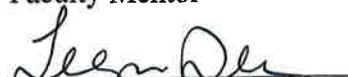
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Zachary Lunn
Honors College Scholar

5/4/16
Date


Jessica Pitchford, Ph.D.
Faculty Mentor

5/5/16
Date


Teagan Decker, Ph.D.
Senior Project Coordinator

5/5/16
Date

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	1
Trophy Buck.....	2
Walking with Jesus.....	7
Out of the Woods.....	9

ABSTRACT

OUT OF THE WOODS: A SHORT COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by,
Zachary Lunn
Bachelor of Science
The University of North Carolina at Pembroke
May 7, 2016

Short stories are considered by many writers to be the most challenging form of fiction to write. A good short story captures many things a novel might but in less words. In this collection, three loosely interlocking stories feature working-class men and women living in the American South. These stories attempt to give readers new perspective on what it is like to be human. They speak on moments.

Trophy Buck

The last evening of deer season brought with it anxious reports of rifles from the woods as men and their sons tried to bag one last prize. The sun dipped behind the pines and sent oranges and purples stretching to the stars. Ray, sitting in a camping chair at the top of the ramp that led to his trailer's front door, tipped the cold Budweiser back and killed the can. He could see his breath when he hollered for his wife to bring him another.

Most years, Ray would be out in the woods with his regular hunting partner, Cody. He and Cody met during Ray's brief stint in AA 12 years earlier. Cody said he liked being around an alcoholic, said it reminded him of why he quit in the first place. Ray would say he ain't no alcoholic and give Cody shit for being a quitter.

Heather brought out a new beer and went back inside. She was on the cordless with their daughter Allie, talking her through a boy problem. Allie had always been crazy about the boys and Ray was surprised she made it through high school without getting knocked up.

He cracked the beer and started in. He had to make it count—he was getting his stomach stapled in two days and he promised Heather he would quit drinking afterward. A good start for once, she said. And Ray agreed with her out loud. In the pre-op appointment, the doc asked him if he drank. Like I breathe, Ray had said. But he looked forward to a new body and wanted to keep it that way once he got himself there. He was tired of carrying the extra weight, and it showed in his posture and gait. And in his eyes. They carried their own heaviness.

Nervousness crept in the closer the surgery got. Ray had never been cut on, and the docs warned him of the list of things that could go wrong with the operation. Liability and all.

Four beers later and he called it a night. He had a little buzz going and loved the feeling of drifting into sleep slightly drunk. It was cold out and Ray was actually glad that he wasn't sitting in a deer stand somewhere wishing that Cody would take a drink with him. Heather was

already warm and in bed when he climbed naked under the covers. The bed creaked under his weight and she turned on her side, facing away from him.

In the morning, Heather made bacon, eggs, and grits and went to work cleaning the doctor's office next to the post office. Ray ate slowly, enjoying the grease and butter. Post-op would have him on a liquid diet for a couple weeks. Clear liquids.

He was staying home today—the apartment complex he worked for had recently hired a part-time guy to help out Ray with his maintenance work. That gave Ray two days off a week for the first time in five years. He liked fixing washing machines and air conditioning units and the other odd-jobs, but the higher his weight climbed the tougher it got to bend over or get to hard to reach places.

After hopping in the shower, Ray dressed and turned on the morning news. A local hunter had been shot by accident and was in critical condition at Southeastern Regional. His name wasn't released. Funny that he was out there looking to kill something himself, Ray thought.

No sooner had he sat down in his La-Z-Boy than the phone rang. He reached over to the TV tray where the cordless lay and answered. Cody sounded excited on the other end.

"Bring your truck down to Chicken Road," he said. "Where the tracks cross. I got something for us."

Ray thought to argue but realized he might not get out again before the surgery. He threw his fleece-lined Carhartt on, grabbed a can of beer, and stepped outside. It had been a mild start to the winter, but today's cold wind watered his eyes. Rubbing his hands together, he climbed into the cab of his pickup and cranked the engine. The truck struggled and he pumped the gas pedal to get it going. The engine turned over and he took the back road to Chicken Road, past St. Anna Church and the used tire shop.

He stopped when he hit the railroad tracks and looked both ways before crossing slowly. Cody's car was parked just ahead. The front of the vehicle was on the narrow shoulder with the back half jutting onto the asphalt, blocking the lane. Ray pulled behind him in the grass, stepped out of the truck, and called for his friend.

"Come on around," Cody said. His voice came from the front of his car.

Ray walked forward in the strip of narrow grass between the road and a drainage ditch. Beer bottles and cigarette butts littered the ditch where there was a few inches of standing water along the bottom. When he reached the front of the car he saw what Cody was on about.

The body of an 8-point buck was blocking most of the lane. Its hind legs rested in the grass and its large head lay on the road, eyes closed. Both front legs were bloodied and drool ran from its mouth to the asphalt. Cody was bent at the knees, resting on his haunches. Ray noticed Cody's car was undamaged and whistled in admiration at the big animal. Cody turned to him, still crouched down.

"Must of got hit this morning," he said. "Let's get him in the truck and he's ours. Only one problem." He spit through his teeth.

Ray looked at the deer and narrowed his eyes. "Aw shit, he ain't dead, is he?"

"I reckon that's a problem."

Ray shook his head. "You could have told me that, I got my guns at home."

"I tried to call back once I realized he was still kicking, but you'd left already. We can do this quick, it'll just take two of us. Take the antlers."

Ray cursed under his breath. He got winded too easily so they hadn't hunted together at all this year. His freezer could use the meat. Making his way around the animal, he noticed its back legs slightly twitching. He got down on his knees and firmly grabbed the antlers low on the

buck's head. Its eyes stayed closed and Cody crept forward. Cody straddled the torso, lowered his body against the deer, and made a move to hug its neck.

"Are we killing this thing or making love to it?" Ray asked.

Cody sat up and made a strangling motion with his hands. "I'm fixing to choke him."

Ray laughed. "That ain't gonna work, son. Give me your knife."

"I ain't got no knife on me."

"You ain't got no knife?"

"Do you?"

They looked at each other and Ray shook his head. "Here's what we're gonna do: he's gonna kick like a sonofabitch so I need you laying on top of him. Just try to keep him from moving too much and I'll twist these here antlers. Break his neck."

One of the deer's hind legs kicked straight out as if he heard Ray and knew what was about to happen. Cody pressed himself back onto the animal.

"Why don't we trade spots?" he asked. "You're twice my size."

"Don't be an asshole," Ray said.

The buck breathed heavily through its nostrils and Ray held his own breath as he started to twist. Cody moved down the deer's body to hold down its hind legs. The buck had lost a lot of its strength but was still dangerous. I ain't drunk enough for this shit, Ray thought. He planted one foot on the ground, lifted himself to one knee for better leverage, and kept twisting slowly. The buck's body resisted with motion—Cody swore and held on.

Ray had rotated the deer's head almost 180 degrees and now its front legs were frantically pumping as it tried to escape. Hooves scraped the asphalt. Ray hadn't realized how quiet the buck had been until it let out a loud and urgent grunt, spit flying from its mouth. This startled Ray and he almost let go of the antlers. Its nose was pointed directly behind itself and

Ray held what he had. The buck's powerful neck muscles worked against Ray's grip. Its body shuddered. Cody was clinging to the hind legs and looked at Ray as if to say do it, do it now.

Struggle from the deer faded away. Its legs were still. Ray didn't feel its neck break—there was no great sign of death. But he no longer felt resistance. He lowered the head to the ground and stood straight up. Cody slowly did the same and took deep breaths, straddling the deer's body.

"What I tell ya? Quick," he said. "Pull your truck up."

Ray was sweating despite the cold. He looked down at the buck and saw its large eyes were open. He hadn't noticed when that had happened. Regret swelled momentarily in his gut, and he put his hands in his coat pockets. Ray remembered being eleven years old and shooting his first buck. He felt his pulse quicken and thought about the hunter on the morning news. He thought about the man's family, waiting by the hospital bed. Last day of the season.

When Ray got to his truck he started it up and pulled around Cody's car. He backed up to the deer, put it in park, and heard Cody lower the tailgate. His stomach felt funny and he figured it must be over the surgery tomorrow. It was quiet and warm in the cab. Ray opened the beer in his cup holder and lifted it to his lips. Cody banged on the side of the truck.

"Let's go, Ray."

Ray got out and tossed the full can into the ditch before helping lift the buck into his truck bed.

Walking with Jesus

Pastor Bob leads the Tuesday night meetings in the green-roofed shed behind his chapel.

Welcome to the *Walking With Jesus* group of Alcoholics Anonymous, he says. My name is Pastor Bob and I'm an alcoholic.

But Pastor Bob is not an alcoholic. Truth is, Pastor Bob has never had a sip in his life.

When Ray Andrews drank himself into the hospital and his wife told Pastor Bob about the congregation's great community spirit in the form of nightly chicken pot pie and ambrosia delivered to her doorstep for five contiguous weeks, Pastor Bob decided that alcoholics get all the respect. That somehow being slave to something makes you credible.

So Pastor Bob delivered a confessional sermon detailing his (false) descent into alcoholism and triumphant (bogus) recovery through Jesus and AA. He even threw in a subplot involving solicitation of prostitution.

Most nights, Pastor Bob opens the meeting to the group and just listens. Rock-bottom stories. Booze and sex. Bare truths. (Also coffee and donuts.)

Jared is an alcoholic: he passed out drunk at his office desk in the middle of the day and Linda from human resources woke him up with a security escort. Turns out he had shit himself and taken his pants off in his sleep.

Cody is an alcoholic: he came to in a Virginia motel room with his wife and two kids and had no idea how he got there. His wife told him he had driven the Nissan all night.

Some nights, Pastor Bob shares his story. It never happened, but it's not any less real to him. It's just as real as the pulpit is lonely. It used to be he drank a case of Bud Light every night. Now he hunches over the *New International Version*. It used to be Wild Turkey made him lose 48-hour blocks of memory. Now his congregation forgets his sermon 48 minutes after leaving the chapel. It used to be he was sleeping with a new woman every week. Now he doesn't even

masturbate. Drinking and preaching. They're really the same thing, he tells himself. When he's done talking, people say thanks for sharing, and it's better than any amen he's ever heard.

Out of the Woods

Often I think that falling in love with Allie was the absolute worst thing that has ever happened to me. But right now I feel the opposite, which is one of those odd facts about life. That sometimes the only thing that separates love and hate are those moments when she bites her lower lip after answering a tough question, or chews her thumbnails after finishing her dinner. That the only reason I love her with everything I have right now is because I can feel her heart through my foot and it feels just like it should. It isn't too fast or too slow. It's both mine and hers at the same time.

We lie in bed together with our heads at opposite ends. Allie is clutching my bare foot to her chest and she's suddenly warm and inviting even though her hands are cold. She just told me we're having a baby, that she's pregnant after eight solid months of trying. I only wonder about the hospital bill for an instant.

"It's a boy, I know it," she had said.

"How do you know that?"

"Moms know these things."

Now we're lying down and I'm thinking about buying baby-sized Braves apparel and a yellow Tonka truck. I wonder if my mother knew I was a boy. We fall asleep like this and don't move for hours. My foot stays pressed against her, but when I wake up her heart doesn't feel like it's ours any longer.

She's six-weeks.

#

Allie and I decide to go away over the next long weekend, and in three weeks we're in our bedroom packing for a Memorial Day at her father's cabin in the Smokies. He earns a modest living as a handyman for an apartment complex, but he bought the cabin with some settlement

money from a surgery mix-up—the doctors left a stainless steel instrument in his gut during his gastric bypass. Now he's back up to his pre-surgical weight, and the one time Allie mentioned this in front of him he punched three holes in the drywall of our living room. He brought some stuff from work the next day and patched them up. We never told Allie's mom what had happened.

Anticipating the cool mountain air, I toss a light jacket into my suitcase. The trip should be good for us, and I'm hoping I can catch something of that feeling I had a few weeks ago. I want to be in love with her. I want to. Every night since she told me about the baby we've had sex, and every night during I've told her I love her.

I reach to pack a couple pairs of underwear when my fingers touch the envelope I've stashed in my drawer. Pulling out the letter, I take another look at the numbers with the dollar sign in front: Allie's school loans from her three semesters at UNC. I got behind about a year ago and can't bring myself to tell her we're starting to drown in late fees and final notices. I slide the envelope back into my drawer.

Allie steps out from the bathroom where she is gathering makeup into a travel bag and smiles at me. Walking up to me, she puts one hand on my chest and with the other she brushes some of my hair behind my ear. She leans in for a kiss. "We love you," she says. We. This is what she's been saying.

I bring her close to me. Her breath is warm on my neck and I feel for her heart against my chest. We kiss again. Her heart seems absent. She hooks her thumbs on the top of my pants but I stop her. "Let's keep packing," I say. "We're leaving early tomorrow."

With a light skip, Allie turns and hops back into the bathroom and I hear more makeup going into the bag. "I hope Daddy cleaned the place. Last time we went up it was trashed."

"Yeah, but he was a mess after your mom kicked him out for those couple weeks."

Allie appears again and leans against the door frame. "Don't start that shit. We're having a baby and I don't want him hearing about my parents' goddamn problems. We're not like them."

I know the baby doesn't have ears yet, but saying so will make things worse. Instead I look Allie in the eyes and walk up to her. I get on my knees, lift up her shirt, and kiss her belly. "I love you, my boy." Allie smiles and rests her hands on my head. This is how it is.

#

The two-lane road up the mountain is long and winding with little traffic. We pass the small general store on the left and soon turn onto the gravelly access that leads to several cabins farther up. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Allie, hands on her naked knees, peering out the window and over the drop-off down the mountain. Towering pines and large red oaks pepper the side of the incline and I picture our car tumbling over and rolling, rolling down, only to be violently halted by an ancient hemlock, standing tall far longer than either of us has been alive. These kinds of images have always come to me. Even in childhood I had brief flashes of my own death in all varieties of situations, but they never made me worry until recently—until Allie told me about the baby. The visions don't come any more frequently now, but they still happen, and I find myself white-knuckling the steering wheel, blinking hard and deliberately, trying to clear my head.

What shakes me up isn't the fear of losing my wife or unborn child. What shakes me up is the opposite, that I *don't* have this fear. That these flashes of potential futures do nothing to stir some internal protective instinct in me, whether spousal or paternal or otherwise. I am so sure something is wrong with me. To cope with this, I've been smoking pot on my lunchbreaks at work.

Before the pregnancy news, Allie and I would share a joint in the evenings before bed. This started after the first couple months of unsuccessfully trying for a baby; she wanted to relax and

destress, to “let sex be fun again”: her words. It did all of those things for both of us but we stopped after she missed her period and confirmed her pregnancy with two take-home tests from the Dollar Tree. Only I *didn't* stop, I was getting stoned in a piss-covered Porta-John and then hopping back on the asphalt paver that I ran along the rural North Carolina highways my road crew worked on. I'd gotten to really like the general haziness and the tingling feeling in my toes that I can sense even through my steel-toed work boots. It makes me feel like I care that she's pregnant, that I love her strongly still, that it's a boy growing inside of her, that I will be devastated if I am without them.

“Careful, baby,” she says. I look over and Allie is eyeing the sloping mountainside.

My pet name doesn't mean much of anything to me—I've heard it everyday for so long, and not just from Allie. From the lady at Bojangles who hands me my morning chicken biscuit. From the blonde teller at First Citizens where I deposit my \$916 paycheck every other Friday. From the waitress at Bill's BBQ that gives me free lemonade in place of water. From every Southern woman who's ever so much as said more than one word to me. So it's lost on me, and worse, it's been driving me crazy ever since the pregnancy. *Baby*. A swell of hate and contempt rises in my belly, like the feeling on an elevator.

I glance at her and she turns to me, smiling that white smile, fingering her long dark hair behind her ears. She winks and I'm in love again.

“How about Joshua?” she asks. □

“Too biblical.”

“Hmm. Daddy would like it.” She looks back out the window.

“Have you talked to him this week? How's your mama?” My eyes are back on the road, but I can just see her rub her palms over her thighs. She's biting her lower lip and there's that quick pang of love again. It disappears just as quickly.

“Happy. Like us. Like the three of us.”

I bring the car around the next bend, and ahead I see a pickup truck slowly making its way toward us. Attempting to make room on the narrow road, I veer slightly to the right, bringing the passenger-side tires off the gravel and onto the dirt of the mountain. Allie reaches over and squeezes my arm.

The drive up here has always made her nervous. She’s told me stories of her dad picking up beer at the general store and downing multiple cans before reaching the cabin with Allie in the backseat. I creep forward, waiting for the truck to get closer. Slowing down seems to relax Allie, and when I come to a complete stop she lets go of me. Two years ago, when we were newlyweds, I would have hated that she stopped touching me, but right now it’s a relief.

As the truck approaches for its pass, I see the driver hang an arm out the window in a wave. There’s still not quite enough room for the width of the truck so I pull a little bit more to the right, toward the edge of the road. I hear the crunch of the gravel and feel Allie’s hand again, this time tighter.

Instead of passing us and heading down the mountain, the driver stops next to us. His face is bearded, tanned, and weathered. He looks to be in his fifties. The hand he was waving with holds a cigarette that he brings to his lips for a deep drag. He blows out the smoke through his nose and lets the cigarette hang from his lips.

“Headed up for the weekend?” he asks. His truck is old and rumbling, red paint peeling from the hood, and I can almost taste the poisoning carbon monoxide spewing from the exhaust.

I’m hesitant to answer. Allie has moved as far away from the edge of the mountain drop-off as she can. She’s hugging my arm now and sitting on the shifter in between the seats.

“Yes, we are,” I say. “The Andrews place.” This gets an elbow in my ribs.

My eyes meet with the man’s. They’re normal, brown eyes. He squints and takes another

drag.

"Yeah, I know it," he says. "Watch yourselves up there." The truck lurches forward and in my side mirror I see him flick his cigarette into the woods as he drives away, a rising cloud of brown dust forming slowly in his wake.

I quickly get our car fully onto the road and rolling up the mountain. From here we're only a few minutes away from the cabin. Allie returns to her seat and is shaking her head. "What the fuck was that about?"

"Don't know," I say. "But he's harmless. He probably just knows your dad."

The next minute is spent in silence before my wife reaches over to hold my hand.

#

Before we were married, Allie and I were scrounging for money (she cut hair at the only beauty salon in town) to have the wedding reception catered by her aunt. "We're getting a deal," Allie had said. I worked some overtime and she would rub my feet when I got home. Nights were spent on the porch drinking Budweiser and listening to Steve Earle and Merle Haggard. We were outside when her dad pulled up to the house and stumbled out of the cab with the truck still running.

Allie made a move to stand up from her seat, but I got up quicker and stepped forward, hands shielding my eyes from the shine of the headlights. "Wasn't expecting you," I said. Ray had moved to the front of the truck and all I could see of him was his tall silhouette outlined against the light.

"I cheated on your mama," he said to Allie.

She moved behind me before saying, "You're drunk, Daddy. Go home."

"Ain't drunk. And ain't welcome there." He spit into the dirt and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. I could almost smell the whiskey between the thirty feet that separated us.

I turned to Allie and motioned with my head for her to go inside. Waiting until I heard the door shut, I said, "You can't stay here if you're drinking, Ray."

"I ain't quittin', son. Ain't quit nothing in my life before."

"Did you hit her?"

"I said I cheated on her. Who do you think hit who?"

I almost laughed. This is what it took to get him out of the house. Sex with another woman, not the bruises and cuts and holes in the drywall. "Get some sleep somewhere," I said. "But not here."

He spit again and got back in the truck, sloppily turning it around and heading back the way he came, onto the dirt path that led past the woodline and to the road.

Allie's mom told us the next day that she was done with him, that he'd never set foot inside her house again. I'd never heard her talk so calmly and we found out a few days later that he had gone up to the cabin to stay. Ten days after that, he was back home, in her house, swearing off drinking and sleeping around and promising to be a better husband. One that loves her.

#

Now I pull the car onto the long driveway leading to the cabin. On the slow crawl up, the languid twists and turns give me the chance to admire the tall trees and their emerging wildlife: squirrels and birds squeaking and chirping and playfully chasing each other. Ray owns the large lot the house stands on—the closest neighbor is ten minutes up or down the mountain trail we're leaving. That's what I like about the place. Quiet seclusion away from fathers and overdue payments.

My own dad never drank. He and Mama raised me Mormon in a congregation that never quite hit sixty members. Most were converts from local Southern Baptist churches and some of the women still wore large hats to sacrament meeting, something you don't see in most Mormon

churches. I heard that the bishop wanted to say something about it but was afraid they would stop showing up altogether if he did. Even then I knew that some of the members, especially the men, didn't strictly adhere to the practices of the faith. They went fishing on Sundays after church and drank cold beers after long days working outside. My own first drink came in high school—I got hammered in Frank Hector's basement and remember thinking the next morning that God was onto something when he came up with his rules. But my dad, he never drank.

Because of this, Allie says I am unsympathetic about her dad's drinking. And I am, really. My dad wanted to drink plenty, I'm sure of it. We were poor. And it seemed to me that Mama never showed him that she loved him all that often. Some men need that. But still he kept away, living proof that it's all in your head. Most of our fights, before marriage and after, have centered around this. You're too critical, she says. Or: he couldn't quit if he wanted to. Sometimes: it's not his fault. Once: fuck you.

She's gone to Al-Anon meetings weekly since she was seventeen, but I stopped going with her soon after we got married and she started talking about trying for a baby. I stay home and drink a few beers—not enough to get drunk but enough for her to smell them on me when she gets back.

The front porch of the cabin is visible as I turn the next bend and Allie leans forward anxiously. She's staring ahead sharply, concentrating, and I wonder aloud what she's looking at. "Stop the car," she says with urgency. I quickly scan the porch for a sign of what she's got her eye on and depress the brake pedal with my foot.

"What is it? I can't see anything," I say. There's no movement, no sound.

Allie's face scrunches into a grimace and she drums her fingers on the dash. Her door flings open and she throws herself a few feet from the car, stopping to bend over with her hands on her knees. Vomit hits the ground in front of her and I get out of the car to stand next to her.

Patting her back, I hold her hair from her face with my free hand. It's still coming. Allie has always been a quiet puker, with only the sound of vomit rushing into the toilet water warning me that she is ill. But now she is violently retching, so loud and forceful it makes me afraid and a little sick myself. I look away.

She seems to be finished but keeps her head down, taking in deep breaths of air. I feel her body weight shift toward the ground and I more securely put my arm around her. She asks me to carry her so I pick her up and move toward the cabin. As I climb the steps leading to the porch, I'm reminded of the only other times, twice exactly, that I've carried her in this intimate manner, with one arm under her knees and the other cradling her upper body close to me, head pitifully buried in my chest.

The first I recall easily because it was at this very cabin on the night of our wedding. The preacher of Allie's church performed the ceremony and we left for the mountains from the reception with spray-painted Budweiser cans tied to our bumper. We never did save enough to have it catered and we couldn't afford to be away from work longer than the weekend, but we were full of love and newness and each other.

The second I remember only as I make my way inside and into the bedroom. We had been married for only a few months when she miscarried. We hadn't been trying then, and Allie ended up staying in the hospital overnight after waiting for the blood test results. She'd reported dizziness and this was enough for the doctor to book her a room. I hated her for losing the baby then and looked for reasons to blame her, but I hated myself worse for feeling that way. When I drove her home from the hospital the next day and carried her inside she looked just as she does in this moment—nearly asleep, her face marked with the tracks of tears. I gently lay her on the bed now, sliding off her shoes, then her pants, and pulling the comforter over her.

Thinking about the car and our luggage, I move toward the door. Really I already have

plans to light the single joint I brought up the mountain.

“Don’t leave me,” she says. Her eyes are still closed.

I sit on the floor with my back against her side of the bed. Allie slowly slips her hand from the covers and lets her fingertips brush my shoulder. “Tell me something beautiful. Tell me you love me.”

“We’re having a baby,” is all I can manage.

#

It’s warm in the cabin, so I open a few windows after Allie falls asleep. I thought it was morning sickness kicking in but she’s running a low fever to boot. Parking the car, I bring our suitcases inside, checking on my joint and hiding it in a drawer in the kitchen. A feeling of sneakiness and shame creeps in. Allie doesn’t know I’m still smoking, and on top of that, we can’t afford it—especially with the bills piling up. Sometimes I get lightheaded thinking about pissing hot at work and what that would mean for us. In my head I hear her say, “We love you.”

From outside I hear a loud snap and I take a glance out the window above the sink and into the space behind the house. The small grass lot gives way to forest and I focus on the woodline, looking for something, looking for anything. Red and gray squirrels scamper up trees and across the forest floor. Sounds of a woodpecker reach me, but it’s not the same noise. The snap sounded man-made, and I’m reminded of the bearded man on the road up here. What did he say? *Watch yourselves?* I can feel the muscles in my neck and shoulders tense up. My toes curl, gripping the insoles of my boots.

The snap sounds again, and out of the woods I see the shape of a man materialize from between the tree trunks. As he continues toward me, I keep my eyes on him while drawing my pocket knife, preparing to defend myself. His big frame swaggers left and right and out of the shadows I see that it isn’t the man in the red pickup. I curse under my breath.

Allie's father, Ray, crosses the patch of grass and stops, seeing me through the window.

Our eyes meet.

Signifying with my head that he meet me in front of the house, I put my knife away and make for the porch. Outside, I take a seat in an oak chair and when Ray comes around the corner he sits next to me. Neither of us look at the other for a minute or two.

"Look, I know it's your house, but you can't stay here. We're here on vacation for Christ's sake. Besides, Allie's in bed sick."

"Stayin' at Nate's, next place over. Said he passed you on his beer run." There's the red pickup.

"Heather kick you out? Again?"

To this he says nothing. His fat spills over his chair's armrests. His gaze is fixed ahead and I train my own eyes in the direction he is looking, into the deep of the woods.

After another minute of quiet, he says, "I do believe that woman loves me. Always has. I done fucked things up over and over, come up to this cabin must be ten, eleven times. But I get back home after all. Yes, I do believe she loves me."

"And that's enough for her? That she loves you?"

"You'd have to ask her, son. I never did and probably never will."

Ray and I stare ahead together. Warblers sing their songs from the forest. As Ray rubs his hands together in his lap, I notice for the first time that he and I share the same hairy knuckles.

"Is it enough for you?" I ask.

"Well if that ain't enough, I don't know what is." He stands up and pockets his hands. "I'm off. Take care of them two in there."

Ray steps off the porch and I watch him disappear into the shadowed woods.

#

It was the threat of her parents' divorce that got Allie started on all the baby talk. She'd called me on a Saturday, her busy day at the salon, sobbing and unintelligible. I drove out there and buried my annoyance at being interrupted on my day off. She folded into me when I showed up, and the body contact told me there was something different.

Ray had been kicked out of the house plenty of times, but that day he'd put Heather in the hospital. She was getting a CT scan when Allie and I arrived. We sat together in Heather's curtained-off room of the emergency department, listening to the labored breathing of the patients on either side of us. With her face in her hands, my wife wept. Not for her mama's health. Not for the fear of an epidural hematoma or lost vision. I can't handle a divorce, she said. It would be too much. And what would that mean for marriages everywhere if that happened? What would that mean for *our* marriage, she asked.

A short nurse in blue scrubs wheeled Heather into the room, and my stomach churned when I looked at her face. One eye was swollen completely shut and there was a deep gash underneath the same eye. I'd seen men beaten this badly, but there is something inherently worse when it's a woman. Allie held her mother's hand without moving for three and a half hours. Heather was sutured and bandaged; I was handed instructions and prescriptions. We spent the night at her house, and the next day Allie told me she was quitting the salon to help out her mama over the next few weeks. Monday's mail brought the gas bill.

Over the next month, Allie and I didn't talk much. She spent nights at her mama's and I picked up some evening work stocking shelves at Wal-Mart, trying to stave off telling Allie about the money problems. The sun was especially hot the day I came home from laying asphalt to find her sitting on the stairs of the porch, waiting for me. Let's have a baby, she'd said. Ray had come back that morning and Heather took him back. Her bruises were mostly healed.

I knew this was my chance to come clean, to tell her everything I was thinking. That I

wasn't making enough, that she needed to go back to work, that we couldn't afford a baby. These things made me feel guilty and at fault and I resented her for that. I said yes, let's have a baby. I swallowed hard.

Remembering these things, I check in on Allie with my palm to her forehead. Still warm, still sleeping. Her mouth is open in a sweet way and both her hands are touching her belly. I decide not to wait and take my joint from the kitchen drawer, heading back outside to enjoy it alone. It's maybe two o'clock. I light the end and hold the smoke inside my lungs, releasing it slowly with my eyes closed.

The fog enters my head and I embrace it, deliberately turning my thoughts to Allie. The pot transforms her into the woman I loved before we were married: before the compounding difficulties of trying to combine two separate lives into one. But this time I can't find that woman. I only find the hate that has taken her place. I hate her for the baby she never had, for the baby she is having, for accruing debt, for quitting her job. And I hate myself for seeing her father in me but never admitting it.

I kill the joint too quickly and regret it. It didn't do its job, that whole reason I came up here—to love my wife. At the edge of the woods I can see the late blooming of mountain laurel and the whiteness of the petals is startling.

Inside I hear a sob come from the bedroom. My reactions are slowed from the pot, but I remember that Allie is sick so I manage to get up and make my way there. I call for her and when I enter the doorway I see her face in a panic. Her bare feet are on the hardwood floor in a wide stance with knees slightly bent. The white panties she wears are stained with blood and her lovely mouth is large and open. She looks at me as if she was caught doing something she wasn't supposed to. A grimace takes over her face and she hugs her abdomen in pain. There is blood on the bed sheets.

I pick up Allie and race to the car, getting her in the backseat, lying down. Her body is so hot I nearly break a sweat from holding her for those forty seconds.

"Please hurry," she says. "It hurts. Not like before."

Gravel spits from under the tires as I get us moving toward the mountain road. I think I've left the cabin's front door open. Allie is quiet now, which worries me.

"You there?" I ask. I see her nod her head in the rear-view mirror.

My mind races ahead as one of my brief visions overcomes me. In it, it's not me dying. Instead I see my life after Allie and the baby are gone. I see the solemn face I wear at the funeral and hear the generic condolences. Fast forward and I witness my hand running through my hair with no wedding ring, observe myself taking out a week's worth of trash that is mine alone.

The pot has worn off but I don't feel much of anything. I just drive as urgently as I can down the mountain and to the nearest medical facility while my wife bleeds in the backseat.

#

Allie's yellow bracelet has her personal information on it. Name, date of birth. Blood type. She lost a lot of blood.

Plastic tubing is connected to her arm while she sleeps. IV fluid and antibiotics flow into her. She will probably be discharged the day after tomorrow, the nurse had told me. Day after that at the latest. I bought underwear and a set of sweats from the Walmart down the road for her to wear home. From the carpeted delicates section I had looked across the tile walkway and into the baby sector. A towering display of Pampers took up the back wall next to the Returns desk.

For now I sit and wait next to her bed. I'm expecting her mama to show up within the hour. I'll repeat calmly what the doctor told me: 1 in 5, infection, lucky, life-threatening, very lucky.

Three days, two nights. The bill will be crushing.

And yet I see a twitch at the corner of her mouth. She does this in her sleep sometimes. I

originally noticed it the first night we slept together, years ago. I knew in that moment that I would love her. Moving to the end of the bed, I unbutton the top of my shirt. I find her foot from under the cheap white blankets and slip off her sock. Then I bring the sole of her warm foot to my bare chest, hoping she can feel my heart.