

BACK TO THE LAND

by

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Abstract:

Opening excerpt of a novel.

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My sincerest gratitude to Alice McDermott

Micah DeMann found strange hearts. A trail of them, heart-shaped paw prints, had been pressed into the silty clay up by the waterline. He crouched down and lightly ran his finger along the contour of one of these hearts. It was slightly misshapen and blurred at the edges. Some other marks outlined the base. Claws maybe; though not sharp; or they'd faded. It was hard to tell. The most prominent part was the heart-shape. He couldn't help but see it that way. He stood up, shivering in the cool morning, shoving hands in his jeans pockets and with his eyes, followed the trail of prints to where it disappeared into a draw of ripe skunk cabbage. Hard to imagine what kind of animal left prints like that. Heartprints. He laughed through his nose. It was ironic, the timing, but not auspicious. Not to him. He wasn't about to start reading in to the meaning of the things out here—the Morse code signal of a woodpecker in pines behind him, the blackened spirals on the bark of the apple trees in the little orchard, the coils of mist lifting off the lake that he could just make out, its metallic light gleaming at the base of

the mountains. A raven in the trees behind him was balking at something in disbelief. Its call, almost human, was answered by the titter of other unseen birds. If you got into it there'd be no end to the signs and signals you could read out here on this land. Micah knew he'd have to watch for that. Little by little a person might start to forget human languages, as his father, Francis almost had.

It was Micah's first morning back on the land. He'd woken early on a futon in the living room of the old house with its strange angles and light all around him. From the murk of his deep sleep he hadn't remembered where he was. But memory reassembled. He'd flown west yesterday, from O'Hare to Spokane. Then north across the border. Up in a tiny prop plane he looked down on an endless sea of jagged mountaintops. His final landing was in the little regional airport where he rented a Hertz car, then took the winding mountain highway along the edge of the vast lake for almost two hours. It was dark when he finally reached this house, but the power was hooked up. He'd thought ahead. A week before he'd called the local electricity company. He'd also thought to pick up a bag of coffee on his way through the little town and when he climbed out of the futon bed he boiled a pot and drank it while staring through the sliding glass doors at the overgrown land; and it amazed him that it was his land; and then he went out to walk it.

His tattered black and white Adidas shoes squelched in the newly thawed earth as he climbed away from the boggy waterline, up a rise to where the view of the lake was unobstructed. The shining band of water stretched below a shoulder of dark spruce, a hill of forest that may or may not have belonged to him. When he and his sister, Quintana had first inherited the property, they'd tried to sell it and he had never looked closely at a survey. All he knew was that there was more of it than he could see. Eleven acres more.

The other acre which his parents had cleared lay sloping around him now with the old apple trees, almost twenty of them, and some plums in there too if he remembered right. Below that orchard was the area he had always thought of as the potato field—all knotted up now with ragged, winter-bleached weeds. When he'd had the idea of coming back, of taking the place back, he'd pictured that field turned in rows of dark earth. Of course it wasn't that way now. It needed work.

A lot of things needed work: the house, with ruffling shingles on its south facing side and the meandering drainage of its various slanting roofs, had been sitting unlived in for the three years since Francis had died. The patio off the kitchen had been stripped of its stain and was starting to rot. The gutters, he'd noticed, were clogged with leaves and winter debris. But it wasn't as though Francis hadn't worked on the place. It was more like he'd never stopped. He'd opened up walls, put in new glass doors, changed what had been the side entrance into the front entrance one year, then changed that again so that there were now doors on three sides of the house, opening onto different vistas of forest, garden or lake. In many ways, the house was beautiful, with its open loft and vaulted ceilings and mahogany flooring throughout. But its interior organization had changed many times and now Micah found it hard to get a handle on the place. A recent set of stairs cut through the master bedroom on the ground floor, leading up to the loft that his father had built after punching through the roof and constructing a south-facing dormer.

Micah's parents, both Americans, had moved up here and started building the place together thirty-five years ago, nine years before breaking, and it was as though their fundamental differences had been draw into its original design. Micah's mother Nancy was a New Yorker with a saying about that city being the only medium she knew how to

breathe in. After a nine-year, earnest effort on the land she came to accept that neither the long winters, the goat milking, the wool spinning, nor the meditative man she'd married, were for her. She took Micah, eight years old at the time, and his little sister Quintana back to the city to raise them in a rent-controlled two-story apartment—four railroad units turned into one big one—in the East Village of Manhattan. Micah and Quintana rode the subway to school. They played outdoors in parks and swam in public swimming pools. They only came back to Birch Creek in the summers to stay with their dad.

As a teenager here, Micah had felt claustrophobic. Despite his love for reading and for adventuring this wild place where his dad lived, he'd gotten antsy here in his later adolescence. With no driver's licenses between them, he and Quintana had no way of coming and going from the land. They'd lost touch with most of the kids they'd known when they were little. Micah had had a good friend, Joel St. Pierre who he used to run around with in the woods, playing thrilling games. But St. Pierre moved Appleton, the town a half-hour drive away. Francis had had no sense of what to do with two teenagers. He owned nothing like a television. He spent his days in the sweet dust of his carpentry shop, chiseling, planing, meditating so it seemed, on walnut and cherry wood grains and on the perfection of sanded curves. After three long weeks with their dad one summer, Micah and Quintana went back to New York complaining about Birch Creek.

"The silent retreat," Nancy had called it and they all laughed. "That man's gonna levitate one of these days," she said. "Just bring some heavy metal or rap music next time." But it wasn't long before she let them choose whether or not they wanted to go. By the mid-nineties the East Village had been transformed from a low rent neighborhood of boarded up buildings and open drug deals, to a place where the idea of getting mugged

seemed laughable, a place of boutiques and wine bars and bodegas selling organic milk and Tom's of Maine toothpaste. Nancy no longer needed to worry about what her kids got up to in the summertime. They stopped making the annual trip to the mountains of western Canada where their father lived entirely alone and where he never stopped amending their home.

The one part of the house that hadn't changed was the open concept living room with two-story ceilings and bay windows just as high. Too high for easy cleaning. Those windows were clouding over. Micah had seen them when he'd opened his eyes that morning. Hulls of dead cedar bugs and moth wings lined the sills. The glass still let in good light though. A similar light to that which had first ever struck Micah's eyes. Literally.

Micah had been born beneath the high ceilings by the big stone fireplace and a table with bloody rags and a mucked up copy of the NYPD manual for emergency births. He knew the story of his mother pushing for hours, well into the morning and of Francis, his cabinet-maker father, playing midwife, receiving him. Micah also knew that he'd taken his first steps on this land and it was here that all his earliest memories derived. He hadn't forgotten the place. He just hadn't been back for a long time.

Walking through the fruit trees, Micah tried to take stock of the work he would need to do. After three years with no attention, Francis's garden was now entirely overgrown. The lumpy area of knapweed and thistle stretched in a wide bench below the orchard. As he traversed it he found old sticks with chicken wire attached. They must've been dragged down by winter and were woven into the earth. He tugged on a sheath of this wire. It stretched and broke, tore up sod with it. He tugged more, gathering these

scraps of feeble fencing. He carried the stuff over to the side of wood shop, leaving it in a pile there. A start. A wimpy one, but you had to start somewhere.

He'd known before coming here that he'd have to get a move on quickly. It was almost June. He was at a high altitude and summers came late up here, but he'd have to start planting right away. As he eyed the vast bench, he realized that wouldn't plant that whole field. Not yet. He didn't want to bite off more than he could chew. He wasn't going to be unreasonable. The work had to be manageable. There were things he needed to guard himself against out here: don't overreach. That was one. And don't read into all the sounds and signals of the land.

He imagined eventually selling the things he grew; and that seemed plausible, reasonable. There was a growing market everywhere for local, organic food. He was thinking tomatoes, which always seemed so expensive, at least in Chicago where he'd been living; and he was thinking berries. Organic blueberries. Also expensive. There was enough land around here for that. But it would take a while, he knew, to grow enough. The first thing he wanted to do, needed to do, the thing he'd left everything for, was something very simple. Of all pursuits in the world—definitely compared to everything he'd been working on up until now—it ought to be the simplest. Not at all far-fetched. And yet so far from what he knew how to do. He wanted to learn to feed himself.

The man at the Hertz counter in the airport had given Micah a ridiculous, white PT Cruiser, a useless car for the backroads of Birch Creek; and when he'd driven up the lake, through the little town of Appleton and deeper into the valley, over the line where the pavement ended and rocks pinged the car's underside and the only people who passed him were driving 4X4 trucks, he had felt like an idiot. Then on his second night it rained and in the morning he tried to go to Appleton but the bottom of the driveway was butter. There was no turning radius on that car and he needed to reverse to get around the final switchback. But the soft earth near the ditch split and gave way. He pushed the gas and the wheels spun and rained clumps of mud down onto the roof and windshield. He revved and dug the car in deeper. He got out tentatively then mucked up his shoes as he hiked back up to the house. He rummaged through the shed where there were still some tools. He found shovel and returned to the car and started digging. But the mud was dense and stony and the car was high-centered. The tires were slick and glossy and appeared to have no treads at all. He revved the engine high. Smoke rose from the hood.

The closest neighbors he knew were Ezra Silver and Yvette Coutlee, a couple who lived at least fifteen minutes further up the hill. Micah had known them since childhood more or less, though he'd never had much of an adult relationship with them. He thought of Ezra as his dad's only friend—though Ezra surely had other friends. Unlike Francis, Ezra was an outgoing guy. Micah remembered big lively potlucks at their house when he was a kid. He'd seen them less and less as he grew up. Ezra was the one who'd gotten in touch when Francis had died. Then Ezra had been around when Micah and Quintana and Nancy came back to clean up, sell off the saws and tools in his

woodshop, sell Francis's truck, regrettably now. Ezra had been there when they'd decided to put the house on the market. He understood.

Micah had been planning to let Ezra know that he was back—back for good—but this wasn't how he'd pictured going about it. Rain soaked and stuck. But there was no one else to call. He couldn't imagine any of the kids he'd played with thirty years earlier being around or even remembering him. He dug out his cell phone and tried to dial directory assistance to find a number for Ezra Silver. Of course there was no signal at the bottom of the driveway. He had to hike up the hill until he got a single bar on his phone. He got the number from the operator. Then he swallowed his embarrassment and dialed Ezra's landline. Twenty minutes later Ezra's turquoise Toyota truck came bouncing down the road and lurched to a stop by the lopsided car.

Ezra jumped out of his truck and laughed. Micah started apologizing and noticed a drop in his voice as he did so. He said, "No turning radius on this thing," as though he knew what he was talking about.

Ezra opened his arms and grabbed Micah, pulling him close in a strong hug. "How ya doin'?" Ezra had an east coast accent and the familiarity should've put Micah at ease, but Micah's voice still came out low.

"I'm alright," he said. "Coming back here. Moving back. We'll see what happens." He cleared his throat, trying to shake off the self-consciousness. He said, "But I can't drive this."

"No you can't." Ezra laughed. He had thick white curls and glittering black eyes. He was a compact and agile man. He ran around to the back of his truck and pulled out a cable. Then, as Micah crouched uselessly beside him, he got down and dug around in the

mud under the front grill of the PT Cruiser. He found some part of the frame to hook on to then he dragged the cable back to his truck and hooked it up there. He knew what he was doing and explained to Micah what to do next.

Micah climbed into the car and started it up. When Ezra gave the thumbs up and began to reverse Micah was supposed to give gas. This happened as planned. Micah felt a tug. The wheels of the Cruiser slithered and the car popped out of its rut, skidding onto solid road. Lightweight.

“You’re going to need to take my other truck,” Ezra said. “That low rider isn’t going to get you anywhere around her.”

Micah said that it was a rental, temporary, and that he’d been planning to find a truck right away. Ezra said he had one that Micah could use. He said, “It’s either you take it, or it gets eaten by rust. I’ll throw some insurance on it for you today if you want. I need to pop into town anyway. Probably seventy bucks or something for the three months. It’s worth nothing. You’ll see. It’s a great truck!” He grinned.

Micah was grateful. But the trouble was that once he returned the rental, he’d need someone to give him a lift all the way from the Valhalla airport back to Birch Creek, almost a two-hour-drive each way. It seemed a lot to ask Ezra, and so he didn’t ask Ezra, thinking instead of his mother’s good friend Janet who was in Valhalla and who Micah needed to see anyway. He’d planned to visit Janet as soon as he landed, but with his rental car, he’d felt a surge of independence and had wanted to just get here.

Clearly the independence, the momentary manliness, had been an illusion. It was a hard thing to call Janet up, to tell her that he was already back though he hadn’t let her

know, and then to ask for a favor. Dialing her number, he felt idiotic once again. He felt in over his head. Not ready for any of what he was taking on.

But Janet was full of joy. She called him honey and said not to worry. She was happy to hear from him and happy, it seemed, to help him as though he was a child like one of her own. He wasn't sure how that dynamic boded, but he accepted her mothering generosity and drove the rental car back down to Valhalla and met her at the airport.

On the long drive back up the lake, Micah talked all about Nancy. Nancy was engaged in legal battles with the landlords who were trying to get her out the apartment. She'd been to court. She'd written to senators. She was part of a group that was taking on New York City's rent crisis. She was ready to get out of public school administration work. They drove past the small ferry landing and an area of forest that had recently been logged and was being turned into a lot filled with storage lockers and Micah talked about Quintana and how she was thriving, at least financially, writing copy for a private ad agency whose main client was Chase Bank. Saver Savior was her line. They laughed about this form of creativity. He talked about his grandparents in New Jersey and how they were getting too old to look after themselves. He talked about Obama's second term and about Vladimir Putin's hubris and then Janet said shifted gears, descending the steep hill that led into Appleton and said, "And what about you, Micah? What about this big move?"

He laughed. *This big move.*

She helped him along. "How is your work."

"My work?" He laughed again and this time the anxiety was audible, at least to him. But as they drove up the hill, away from Appleton, toward the land, he started to

talk about his work, his dissertation work, as though it was still an active part of his life and not the abyss of swarming problems that he'd ultimately fled. He'd stopped writing almost a year ago now but he started to speak of it as though it was all still in the works. He said, "There's trouble in it."

"Sounds like par for the course." Janet was a small-boned woman with a thick grey bob and big straining eyes. She kept two hands on the wheel and glanced at him. "It was about freedom, right? Theories of freedom? The literature of freedom?"

"Wow," he said, remembering the ideas he'd started with. "That was a long time ago. Funny how dissertation topics change. What started with freedom turned into its opposite, I guess. Enslavement."

She looked horrified.

"Slaver consciousness."

"*Slaver* consciousness?" she slowly repeated his words back to him.

He laughed again, loudly. "Yes," he said. "A dark field of study. To say the least." He began to explain the project's first chapter that dealt with mindset of the slave-trader and the cost of all subsequent ideas of freedom, of liberty, liberation, liberalism.

He said, "There has never been a greater hypocrisy than American liberalism. And never a more irresistible ideology. What we got from chattel slavery was something much more powerful than the entire economic infrastructure of the Americas. We got an image of un-freedom."

"Un-freedom?"

"The archetype of the slave, the shackled and broken down and owned African human, became a coordinate point of western liberal consciousness. The limit of un-

freedom. The magnetic opposite pole of liberty. We don't get to imagine liberty without that example deep in our consciousness."

"Surely we can rebuild the idea."

"Our liberalism is founded on the reference."

"And you think the individual slave-traders were also aware of this?"

He sucked in a breath. "Intoxicated by it," he said. "Fuelled. As is the entire political and literary tradition of the post-Enlightenment Western world. My latest chapter," he said, "is about literary and academic work that wouldn't have been possible without slavery."

She said, "So then do you lose all that literature?"

"I'm not trying to assess literature's value," he said, aware of the tense he was using. *Not trying. Actively not trying any of this. Getting away from all of it.* "My idea," he said, "has been to unthread the connection between literary traditions and exploitation. I've been writing about the anxiety of exploitation in certain literary and philosophical traditions." He stopped, hearing only the opaqueness of his own words, wanting not to talk about ideas that were in fact no longer part of his life. He was not trying to get to the bottom of these bottomless problems. Not anymore. That was part of his reason for being here. *The big move.*

"Well wouldn't that anxiety be a part of everything we do in the world?"

"Yes," he said, and there was the gaping abyss of it; and there was the window beside him with a view of lake flashing through the trees. He pressed his fingertips to the glass.

“What I mean,” Janet said, “Is that you’re no slave master, Micah. This stuff sounds important.”

“To other academics? It’s solipsistic and obvious. That’s the point,” he said, “of this big move here.”

But this wasn’t really the point. He wasn’t just fleeing the ivory tower. He wasn’t telling Janet about the other reasons that he was here—not the bad ones, or the good ones. Yes he’d been writing about the violence of slavery from the point of view of its perpetrators; and yes, in doing that, he’d gotten disturbingly close to that point of view; and yes, he’d followed that chapter with an examination of the exploitative conditions of the academic tradition that his own work was a part of and then inevitably there was an existential crisis of sorts, that came with that. But his decision to leave it all, to quit his PhD, was precipitated by another more banal, more familiar series of events.

First he’d lost his ability to write, at least on that project, no matter how much people told him it was good. Important, is what they said. Then his inability to write led to an inability to lead any other part of his life with any sincerity. And so he had, piece by piece, starting with the love, dismantled it all.

“You’re getting away for a while.”

“A big while.”

“Micah,” she said, turning her eyes from the road, “you’re not giving up.” A declaration of stunning clarity.

He laughed heartily and leaned forward, pressing thumbs into eye sockets and slowly shaking his head in what might have been a signal of agreement—*not giving up*—

or resignation. “Giving up.” He sighed and repeated her words back to her as the tires of the car crossed from pavement to dirt.

He sat up and leaned back and soon found himself talking in a self-deprecating way about what he’d been trying hard not to speak of, about his decision to move back as the result of a crisis, a cliché as he put it. He said, “This is me doing a one-eighty on everything in my life. Me realizing that I was on the ‘*wrong path*.’” He twitched his fingers in scare quotes. Did he not believe his own words? Not quite. They were abstract, generalized and not doing justice to the whole picture. He offered Janet no details of mess he’d made of his writing or of his relationship—though considering she hadn’t asked about Ellie, he suspected that Nancy had already said something. He opted out of mentioning his adulterousness and the other forms of denial he’d engaged in. He did not speak about his months of nausea and insomnia and regret. He said nothing of the frightening spontaneous bouts of tears, triggered by nothing. Nor did he speak of the terrifying feeling he’d had when he closed his eyes, a feeling of objects, flesh, slabs of the physical world slipping through his fingers. Into an abyss?

He said, “For a long time, the idea of coming back here was too obvious for me to see.”

Janet said, “You’re young.”

“Actually I’m not. Thirty-five this year.”

“You can do both.”

“Both?”

“Your ideas. That PhD. It’s important.” There is was. The remarkable importance.

He said, “My parents had two kids and they’d built a house by the time they were my age.”

“Oh the model citizens.” Her eyebrows went up. “Consider yourself lucky not to have what they had while you’re doing this little twirl. You’re just putting that stuff on hold.”

“Okay.” He didn’t tell her how long it had already been on hold, how he’d been treading the waters of denial by taking on adjunct work from his department in Chicago, pretending to himself that he was still a part of the institution, pretending that the PhD was still underway. But nor did he say anything about the flicker of light that he’d glimpsed when he’d first imagined coming back here. That thread of wavering light had stretched. It expanded, became sharper and brighter, taking the form of an articulated vision like a strip across his horizon, a vision of the simplest and most obvious life a person could choose: he saw himself growing his own food. The calm feeling that the vision brought him was the most telling part of it. Then as he made his plans, the calm turned to eagerness, even excitement.

But he was hesitant to speak of his optimism. It hadn’t gone over well when he’d tried it on Nancy—reminding her too much, he understood, of the ambitions of her ex-husband. It seemed easier, *safer*, to narrate his story as one of collapse and small hope.

“You need a break.”

“I actually want to live here.”

“I want to hear the conclusion of these ideas.”

“I’m going to grow things. Vegetables.”

“What was it you said? The anxiety of the slave master?”

“Seems to me that if anything’s important in the world now, it’s growing food.”

She said, “I don’t care if all your ideas are on hold. You’re going to have to tell me about them more clearly one of these days.”

When they pulled into Ezra and Yvette’s driveway at the base of a terraced clearing with a big house near the top and flowering bushes and greenhouses on the various tiers, Ezra came down the stone steps and called out to them. He and Janet hugged and they all stood on the wet gravel and chatted for a while. Then Yvette appeared from up behind the house somewhere.

“Ah!” Janet called. “Yvette!”

Yvette exuded regal calm as she came down the steps to greet them. Her strawberry hair was loose and it flowed down to her waist.

“Yvette, you remember Janet,” Ezra said. “And Micah DeMann.”

“Of course.” Yvette smiled graciously, ceremoniously. She hugged Janet then looked closely at Micah for a moment before hugging him too. She felt thin and strong. She said to him, “You plan to live here?” Her words struck him curiously. This plan, this living, she seemed to point out, had not yet begun. Maybe it was her accuracy that was surprising. All was still only a plan. Only just underway.

He said, “Big plans. Big move.” He thumbed the trees behind him. “We’ll see what happens.”

Yvette’s expression was unmoving as she studied him candidly. She said, “Your intentions for the place?” Her French accent was almost undetectable and maybe it was

the clarity with which she pronounced her English words that gave a subtle seriousness to her voice. It seemed to him then that she was like the secretary of this mountain, or maybe its gatekeeper.

“I want to grow some things,” he said.

“Some things?”

“Tomatoes. You know. Potatoes. See how it goes.”

She stared steadily and he sensed a mistranslation. She didn’t relate, it seemed, to his haphazard approach. He felt uncomfortably central to the conversation, everyone looking at him, waiting for him to explain himself. His *intentions*. He laughed and turned to Ezra and Janet and said that soon, hopefully today, now that he’d gotten rid of that PT Cruiser, he wasn’t going to be so handicapped. But he wasn’t just joking. He wanted this independence. He felt uncomfortably like the child amidst these people of his parents’ generation, the unwitting cause of this spontaneous reunion beneath the hill of gardens and the elaborate pine and glass structure of this couples’ private enclave.

Soon enough, after Janet had hugged and kissed him goodbye, it began. Micah drove himself home, bouncing on the spring loaded bench seat of a blue and beige 1976 GMC Sierra with rusted out wheel wells, a manual choke and a sweet smell of gas and upholstery dust filling the cab. He couldn’t stop grinning.

The Red Creek Forest Service road was a washboard and Maggie's hands vibrated on the steering wheel as she entered the wide mouth of the valley. It was still dark ahead, though the eastern sky in her rearview mirrors was salmon colored with steel blue shadows mottling a skirt of low-hanging clouds. It looked like it would be a beautiful morning. No reason to feel troubled. And Maggie felt noticeably untroubled as she drove and drank her coffee and thought about Lucy. She thought about how being shorthaired at the fourteen was probably good sign for a girl of Lucy's age. Lucy was shorthaired and Maggie calculated that this meant that Lucy didn't need to rely on long hair for confidence.

Lucy had a friend who she relied on. Simone. Simone had long hair, a dirty-blond sheaf floating lightly down her back. Simone also had a long, thin waist and a way of holding herself as though she already knew about the powers and vulnerabilities of her own body. But mostly the powers, Maggie assessed. Yes. Simone too seemed self-

assured in her way, not needing to look at who was watching her as she languidly crossed the street or chewed on her hair while she studied the DVD selection at the Gulf station store. All of Simone's actions were innocent, Maggie was quite sure. Anything else was Maggie's projection, Maggie's own secret fear, as she watched the two girls from afar—afar being the operative word. Maggie did not approach them. She was not a stalker, not a spy. Maggie had no intention of hovering or ogling.

It was possible that on some unconscious level she'd been motivated to move back to Appleton to be closer to Lucy. But then what wasn't possible on *that* level? It was possible that without knowing it, she had in fact moved back to get closer to own mother, Christine, before liver cirrhosis and toxicity of blood did Christine in. On the conscious level though, Maggie avoided Christine actively, which wasn't hard. It entailed never going near Christine's rotten old house in upper Appleton. The conscious level was the only level she could attest to in respect to her own motives. Consciously, the reason she'd moved back was because she'd finally gotten herself a decent, fulltime professional job. She'd been hired by a man named Marvin Gray, as assistant on a contract from the Forest Service for a long-term water and fire monitoring project, driving up and down roads like this one, hiking through the woods and tracking trends in runoff, assessing the effect of fires on water supplies, obtaining data from the environment. The job was better than any she'd had in the city. She wouldn't have been able to move back here without it. And she wouldn't have moved back without it. Despite what it might've looked like to people in Appleton who used to know her and gossip about her, she was not here to try to establish some connection with Lucy. She didn't care what anyone thought.

Until recently Lucy didn't even want to have anything to do with Maggie and Maggie respected that. She felt that she understood it. She would've been the same. They'd had a couple of awkward dinners together at Lucy's parents' house, in which Lucy had said little, but Maggie had not felt disappointed. Maggie did not expect anything from Lucy. She did not wait for Lucy to happen to walk passed the grocery store and did not drive by the girl's school with an eye out. She saw her when she saw her and it was a small town so she saw her sometimes, though sometimes not for weeks.

But yesterday, Lucy and Simone had come into the Bistro while Maggie was in there having coffee with Kiara, the new museum director. As the girls moved through the tables of the crowded café, Lucy caught Maggie's eye and made a tiny wave and smiled a tight, quick smile. Maggie smiled and waved back. Then the two girls sat down at a small table under the blue and yellow stained-glass window and Kiara said, "Oh!" in a low, breathy voice. "That's her? Your daughter?"

Kiara was new to town, newer than Maggie who'd been back two years now but still felt like an outsider. Kiara had come after Maggie, hired to run the Appleton Museum and Cultural Center. She'd come from Montreal and was funny and cynical in a way that was refreshing to Maggie. She reminded Maggie of friends from the city that Maggie had left behind. Kiara had a sensibility and sense of humor that Maggie had been missing in Appleton and when she met Kiara, she had opened up to her in a way that usually took her much longer.

Kiara had a way of asking intimate questions candidly as though there was no reason not to speak about sensitive, personal things. It was odd, almost as though nothing bad had ever happened to Kiara. Her casual questions had caught Maggie off guard the

first night they sat up late at Kiara's house, drinking wine at the kitchen table together. Maggie had ended up telling Kiara more than she usually talked about to anyone. Not that people asked. Conspicuously, nobody in Appleton ever mentioned Lucy in Maggie's presence at all—nobody but Ezra and Yvette, Maggie's unofficial foster parents—the people who knew her better than anyone.

But Kiara started asking frank questions about Maggie's life and Maggie suddenly found herself explaining that she had a daughter in town. A daughter she had not raised. A daughter who had not wanted to have anything to do with Maggie until quite recently. And fair enough, as Maggie said to Kiara.

"Did you move back here because of her?" Kiara had asked.

Maggie said, "No in fact. I moved back because of the job."

Kiara said, "But of course it's not only a coincidence."

"Sure," Maggie said. "Not only. My mother lives here too."

Then Kiara had said, "Do you think unconsciously you were trying to get close to her?"

"Unconsciously?" For a moment Maggie had stared at the word in her head. Then said, "How can I know anything about that?" She said, "I had Lucy when I was fifteen. Too young to grasp what was happening to my body. And definitely too young to raise the child."

Lucy had been legally adopted by Maggie's older cousin, Beth, and Beth's husband Roger, under the agreement that Maggie would not have a say in how Lucy was raised. This deal had sounded fine to Maggie at the age of fifteen. Beth and Roger ran the town's only computer store. They lived in a solid, prefab house with a manicured front

yard in a subdivision in upper Appleton. They had cable television, a double-door refrigerator and Maggie did not want a child. Not then. She wanted to try to continue to be a child herself—at least in theory, at least in the reports her social worker wrote in her file. In practice, by the age of sixteen, her life had little resemblance to a child's life.

“It was rough,” she'd said to Kiara. “Really rough.” She attributed her survival to Ezra and Yvette. If it wasn't for them she was pretty sure she would've been dead or close to it by now.

“What happened?” Kiara had asked, her eyes squinted, studying Maggie intensely.

But Maggie chose to hear the question as *what happened next*, rather than, *before*, and so she told Kiara how she'd been saved, “healed” was actually how she put it, on Ezra and Yvette's farm. The farm was surrounded by old growth forest. The creek that ran through the land was more of river and she told Kiara how during her first few months she'd spent hours sitting on its edge imagining it washing her away.

“But what was this all about?” Kiara probed and Maggie repeated what one therapist had told her once, about how memory repression is a survival function and that some childhoods are best forgotten. Hers, she said, was one such childhood.

When she used to sit by Birch Creek she gradually learned that it wasn't her that needed to be washed away, it was the images in her head, the fear, the memories. She said to Kiara, “Stuff that's better not recalled.”

She helped garden and harvest vegetables and tend to four long greenhouses of herbs. She learned how to trim basil plants to get them to grow outward, exponentially. It was magic, if you did it right. The more you cut, the more that grew. She drove around

with Ezra and they scavenged firewood from clearcuts. The loggers left so much good wood behind. Once, on an abandoned cut-block, Maggie and Ezra found a felled two-hundred-foot, old growth yellow cedar. The tree was perfectly solid. Prime furniture-making wood. You could've built a small house with that one tree. She and Ezra bucked it and brought it home. They built a new dining room table with that good wood and Ezra gave the rest to a wood worker down the road. Other abandoned wood, larch and birch and pine, they burned all winter, every winter. Ezra also brought it into town and sold it by the cord.

Yvette hardly ever went to town and for Maggie's first year out there, she didn't go back either. Not once. Nor did she get to know any of the neighbors. She only saw other people when they came to visit Ezra and Yvette. Visitors came off and on and sometimes she was busy with something outside and didn't talk to them. Sometimes they stayed for days and she talked a little. Ezra's fragile nephew, Lucas occasionally came and stayed. Maggie loved Lucas. He had a way of making her laugh, though often he was too agitated and confused to do that.

Maggie fished. She caught many rainbow trout and once, with Yvette, a sixty pound lake sturgeon. They had to use extra twine and then Yvette's bootlaces to haul it in, which they managed to do without tipping the boat, though they came close. Maggie watched as Yvette calmly but willfully bludgeoned the huge slippery, brown thrashing body to death. They froze that fish and ate it for a whole year.

Maggie hunted deer. She milked the goats and talked to goats and lay on her back on thousand year old moss beds listening to the murmured agreements of the old growth trees. She listened to Yvette's words about who you are being the result of how you live,

not who you think you are. Yvette told her that she didn't need to think. All she needed to do was feel.

Yvette was tall and lean and her strength emanated from some private place of calm determination. Yvette woke early every morning. Sometimes she vanished into the forest, whose layout she knew, as Ezra said, like a Hackney cab driver knows London's laneways and streets. Yvette would return from these vanishing acts quiet. She needed little conversation, though Ezra teased her and though she had strong opinions about the damage of the world that she imagined existing beyond their land. Yvette seemed never to doubt her next move, and she moved all day, working steadily on an ever-unfurling agenda of tasks. The land she lived on was the same land that they all lived on, but somehow hers seemed to Maggie like richest place in the world.

Don't think. Feel.

It was two years after giving birth and after almost killing herself, that Maggie left the land and went in with Ezra to get her learner's permit. But she didn't go to Appleton. They passed through Appleton on their way down the lake to Valhalla, the metropolis of over ten thousand people. After she got the permit, they walked around town. The fish and chips they ate Milly's Diner were a revelation and so too were Maggie's emotions that day. She felt strong and calm and she felt curious. That big town, with its cafés and clothing stores and newsstands compelled her. While she was finishing her high-school diploma through correspondence, she started going to Valhalla regularly with Ezra when he went to sell basil or to pick up supplies. She liked Valhalla. She and Ezra would go to the CD store and the second hand bookstore. They'd buy artisanal chocolate and go to the movie theatre and then talk on the drive home about what they'd seen. They watched

Fight Club together and *Dancer in the Dark* and *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Then when she was twenty she moved to Valhalla and lived with a friend of Ezra's. She worked at a plant nursery and took college classes. Sciences. When she was twenty-two she moved to Toronto to get her degree in Biology and Ecology.

When Maggie was sitting with Kiara in the Bistro and the girls came in and Kiara put two and two together, Maggie watched Kiara straighten up in her chair and look around at the bustling room. For a while her eyes roamed from table to table. A group of men in greasy Carhartts, with suspenders over their tee-shirts and finger-smudged ball caps were dipping wings into blue cheese. Kiara's eyes rested on them for a while, then went to a pair of middle aged women and then to some people sitting up at the bar. She said, "Is it hard for you? Living back here? People knowing things?"

But Maggie had seen the question coming. Smiling, she shook her head.

The sun blinked over the eastern mountains, splashing the tips of the trees on the other side of the valley. But the road in front of her was shady and the gaps between the trees in the woods were black. Maggie bit into a peach, breakfast on the road, and thought about Kiara's question about the unconscious. It seemed like a paradoxical attempt, to think actively, consciously, about those things that might've been motivating you inactively, unconsciously. The attempt to pin yourself down, to face your own face, it

seemed as impossible as trying to come up with some definitive explanation of your own dreams.

Recently she'd been dreaming about bears. More than twice they'd made an appearance. This could've been because recently she'd been seeing a lot of them, up and down the back roads that she drove every day. It was that time of year. A small cinnamon bear came down to a creek where she was taking samples of sediments. The pockets of her beige and orange Forest Service issue vest had come with bear bangers and pepper spray, but she didn't feel any fear when she saw that little guy. He was on the other side of the creek and oblivious to her. For a long time she watched him drink and dip his paws. Then couple of weeks later, as she was coming home, driving fast on the rutted Crystal Creek road, a fully grown black bear came crashing out of the woods, startled by her truck and galloped at full speed right out in front of her, merged into her lane so to speak. She braked, but hardly needed to. She'd never seen an animal gallop so fast. But later when she replayed it in her mind, she could only picture it in slow motion. The bear's shimmering black pelt shook and rolled in waves. Its huge shoulder joints buckled open and hinged closed fluidly. The bear ran in front of her for what had seemed miles before leaping in two easy bounds up the mucky bank and vanishing, swallowed by the trees.

So she'd been dreaming bears, but the bears in her dreams were not threatening. Or not yet, in time of the dreams. These recurring dark forms moved sleepily. Though in the logic and predetermined knowledge of the dreams, there was the potential for the bears to become threatening. The sleeping Maggie was aware of this: that if some set of dream-circumstances configured in such a way it could bring this violence out of the

otherwise peaceful creatures. And in her dreams, Maggie had a conscious awareness of that possibility. Conscious in her dreams. Unconsciously conscious.

But to make meaning of those dream-bears, that was a feat she didn't feel equipped for. And the same went for any of her other motives—such as her motive to move back to Appleton. Did anyone ever know, she wondered, the forces that may or may not have been driving them to go after the things that they did in their lives? And for her, now, what were those things? A down payment for a home not unlike the cabin she was renting on the riverside of lower Appleton? More time spent with Ezra and Yvette? Maybe the unconscious motive of her return was to be closer to them. That was also a conscious one. Could your conscious and unconscious motives be the same? She'd come back a number of times in her twenties. At times when she'd found herself weakened, or feeling unbalanced in some way, she'd gone to Birch Creek remind herself of who she was. But now, with her sweet cabin and her good job, she felt strong. So what was she pursuing? More time in her own garden, maybe. A dog. She wanted a dog. She often wanted glass of wine after she got home and got the woodstove going and showered and made dinner in her warm home. She loved that time and at the end of every day, she was always in some way in pursuit of it. She wanted to watch movies. Good ones. She was always in pursuit of good movies. And how about a canoe? Why not a canoe?

But a close, personal relationship with her biological daughter? She could not say that that was something she was actually seeking. It was not for her to want. Of course it would be nice, but it felt so out of her hands that she could not pursue it. Not actively. That needed to be Lucy's choice. Maggie felt this deeply and, she believed, sincerely. She was not in any manipulative way attempting to draw Lucy into a friendship with her.

Of course she wanted to see that Lucy was doing alright, that she was well adjusted, that she was strong in herself. The fact that Lucy was shorthaired seemed evidence of this and of course this was important, because of course Maggie wanted to know that Lucy was not in any of the same dangers that Maggie had been in at the her age—all the typical dangers: alcohol; drugs; older men. There were things like that, in relation to Lucy, that Maggie was better off not thinking about too hard. Maggie rolled down her window, blasted by fresh morning and hurled her peach pit into the passing leaves.

She had moved back, she reminded herself, for this job that she was now doing with her hands on the wheel of a white Forest Service Dodge Ram and a pixilated back-road map rolled out on the seat beside her. Passing between two walls of dark spruce, keeping an eye out for branch B-6, a spur road that was supposed to lead up and to the left, somewhere after kilometer sixty-four on the Red Creek Road, she thought, I am pursuing data.

Most of the job entailed driving and hiking through the forest, taking readings of turbidity and temperature levels of Red Creek and Giveout Creek and Whiting River among others. Consciously, when she took her data back to the trailer office that she shared with her grey, bearded boss, Marvin, and when she uploaded it into the software and played around with graph structures, she imagined being able to identify from her numbers, an elaborate graph of environmental conditions that would eventually be established from the readings that she was taking. But she was at the earliest stage of data collecting. The project, which had a seventy-five-year trajectory, was in year-two of the thing it was aiming to achieve: a baseline. She could imagine outcomes; she could project

her own ideas of past conditions and future changes onto her minute records; she could believe that she already foresaw drastic shifts in entire structure of the Appleton watershed due to a recent rash of unprecedented spring rains—Biblical, destabilizing. She could picture mountainsides sliding off. She could also picture blazes. Scorching summer conditions and annual fire suppression was leaving tinder dry layers dangerously covering the forest floors and she could imagine tsunamis of flames—a conflagration—and the charred consequences: all these mountains scalped of their trees. Nonetheless, it remained statistically impossible at the stage that she was at to know what the bigger picture, what a baseline of conditions would turn out to be.

The sun was high by the time she reached the river and hiked up to Marvin's site almost a whole kilometer upstream from the road. She was sweating when she saw the yellow plastic standpipe in the river where he'd set up a water level monitor and turbidity reader. The idea was to log the readings at the same time, five times a year so as to eventually establish a graph of fluctuations. The water was high then, surging up onto the banks and she soaked her knees, crouching in the moss, leaning over the churning stream to unhook the monitors. She took the samples, recorded the data. Then, with a long glass thermometer she packed with her, she took the river's temperature, as though the earth was a child and the stream was its tongue. Holding the glass gauge into the icy water, she waited for a reading.

3

Micah traveled through Eastern Europe and Turkey after high school then went to CUNY to study English and Political Science. For three solid years during college, he didn't come back to Birch Creek or see his father at all. In his last year he met Ellie James, a girl with unruly hair and a fearless sense of humor, a gap tooth and freckles and he fell in love with her and moved in with her. It was Ellie who dragged him back to Birch Creek. She thought it was insane that he hadn't seen his father in so long and she wanted to meet him. So they came one summer and stayed for five days.

Maybe it was being in the presence of Ellie's high spirits—her teasing Francis, getting him to bellow with laughter, getting him to drink beer—maybe it was seeing the area through her eyes—the blue mountains surrounding the wide and deep, fresh water lake, the old growth on the sides of the highway, the laid back atmosphere of the little town—maybe it was just being a bit older himself, but when he came back with Ellie, Micah found the area unexpectedly compelling. He also had a diver's license then and

they borrowed Francis's truck every day to drive to town to go to the café and organic food co-op. They drove it up and down the lake and explored the beaches.

He and Ellie moved to Brooklyn together while she followed her curatorial ambitions and he took on an editing job with left-wing press who called themselves the largest radical independent publishing house in the English-speaking world. For two summers straight they came to Birch Creek. Ellie preferred it to visiting her own parents in Tallahassee, an air-conditioned, suburban hellhole, Micah had to agree with her.

One of those summers they were loaned a double kayak from some Birch Creek neighbors and every day they set it in the water at Birch Creek beach and paddled for hours down the east side of the lake. There were no roads accessing that side of the lake and everything seemed wild. They found pebbled coves and broad creeks surging glacial water into the lake. They found a bay of gold sand with a creek at its edge. Not a soul there. They took off their clothes and dove under the water and lay in the sun reading, dozing. They went back to that bay every day.

One day in Appleton, while sitting on a bench waiting for Ellie to come out of the health food store, Micah recognized his childhood friend, Joel St. Pierre.

“Joel!” he called. Joel reacted slowly, but when he saw Micah his face brightened.

“Hey” he cried. He had smiling eyes, a soft, high-pitched giggle and now a couple of inches of shadowy chin growth. “I didn’t know who you were. Nobody calls me Joel. Only St. Pierre.”

St. Pierre hugged Micah tightly and Micah grinned. As St. Pierre asked him all about New York City and what it was like, it occurred to Micah that he might know where to buy a little pot for him and Ellie. He knew from Francis that people in the area

grew it and sold it. Francis had told them that if it weren't for the marijuana economy, no one would be buying his designer cabinets and doors.

St. Pierre laughed when Micah asked. "Do I?" he said. "C'mon." His truck was parked across the street. He opened the passenger door. On the floor was a big yellow seal-line scuba diving bag. St. Pierre clicked it open and Micah caught a glimpse of the contents. It was full of ziplock baggies, each one stuffed with clumpy greenish, purplish mustard colored buds. Micah had never seen so much weed in the same place. The bag must've weighed at least thirty pounds if not more.

"Holy shit," he said. "You know how much you could get for that in New York?"

"I do, actually." St. Pierre laughed. "It's all about getting it there."

A pungent odor wafted out and Micah glanced down the street. St. Pierre handed Micah an entire ziplock, packed full. Micah looked around again. A woman was stepping out of the post office.

St. Pierre laughed at him. "You're not going to get busted here, man. If you want, you can sit on that bench over there and light one up."

Micah looked at the contents of the baggie. "I don't need all this," he said.

"Take it."

"How much do you want for it?"

St. Pierre laughed again. "Take it!" he said. "It's pennies."

Micah felt hot in the face as he shoved the ziplock into his leather book bag alongside a manuscript he was editing about police power.

As Micah and Ellie drove back up the lake, laughing about the heftiness of the bag, Ellie studying it closely, pointing out the tiny crystals, she said, “You think he grows it?”

“He definitely grows it,” Micah said, settling into this obvious fact. He liked the feeling of knowing someone who grew pot for a living. He liked having seen some part of an actual yield with his own eyes. It made him feel like less of a person who merely read and theorized about things that happened in the world. He felt he’d gained access to some part of it. The world. The lived world.

That night after dinner they took two beers and the baggie of pot out to the fruit trees. Neither of them were good at rolling, and their joint kept going out. They kept relighting it, puffing hard to keep it burning. It took them hours to finish it and for Micah to realize that they had not needed to finish it. Not at all. His face had opened up and his mind was pouring out and down over the treetops toward the lake. It merged with the lake. He wasn’t sure where his body began or ended. He wasn’t sure if Ellie was near him or very far away. Once her voice came to him from a great distance. “No name for this,” she said.

It must’ve been hours later, after the forest started whispering, then laughing at them, then falling into a secretive hush, that Micah heard Ellie’s last words and managed to reply, “Was there one?”

The next day they took the kayak further south on the lake than they’d gone. As they were paddling alongside steep bluffs, Micah noticed odd coloring on a cliff wall, streaks of deep red and blackish brown. He stopped paddling and pointed. Paintings.

Stick figures, holding bows and spears. Light waves lapped the kayak rocking them gently as they stared at the strange streaks of pigment.

“They’re real?” Ellie murmured, squinting. “Jesus,” she said. “They’re real.”

Micah didn’t know what they were. He turned around, peering out at the gleaming lake, suddenly aware of his ignorance of the area and of the people who’d first inhabited it. Off in the distance a motorboat was bouncing over the plane of the water, too far for its engine whine to be heard. On the mountain-face across the lake there were some light green patches delineating grown-in clear-cuts. One was shaped a little like a letter z, another kind of like a butterfly. Subtle marks like this signaled modernity and industrialization. But there weren’t many. And if you looked in the right area, you could see no signs. The mountain ranges seemed to sweep out endlessly, away from the lake. Mountains like a petrified ocean. It was easy to imagine them going on forever and easy to imagine this place as it had always been. Not much had been altered.

Micah did some googling at night and learned that the First Nations people who fished and hunted these valleys, had never lived in them permanently. Kootenay. Ktunaxa. One theory on someone’s self-published history site, held that the energy of the mountains was too powerful for the people to handle. Micah laughed at that. A different scholarly PDF on the history of the region stated that it was the smoke from the summer forest fires that made the place uninhabitable, that was before fires were suppressed. Somehow this seemed more likely. The article went on to describe fire suppression as a detriment to the natural cycles of the forest as fires killed off diseases, insect blight and brought a regeneration of resilient new life. Fires also burned off layers of dead forest debris. *Regular fire-suppression, the article warned, turns a forest into a tinderbox.*

The next morning when he woke and opened the glass doors of the bedroom and peed off the edge of the deck, he looked around at the trees and thought about them as a tinderbox. He thought about the way the place had been changing, despite all appearances. That day he and Ellie kayaked back to the gold beach and lay naked beside each other. They swam in the brightly cold water. They lay back down. Swam again. Everything seemed so intensely peaceful, but Micah felt something happening, some idea intruding. The hot sun and the crumple of waves lulled him into a waking dream of awareness that this was not all there was. This peace was limited. It was surrounded by a different world, the world where he spent most of his days, his east coast, city days, unable to be unaware of violence. Bad news fed in from unseen sources. A constant feed. With friends, with Ellie, he partook in a regular analysis of corruptions and hypocrisies and exploitations. The layers of exploitation seemed bottomless. Was freedom even possible? Was it real?

“Doesn’t it seem strange,” he said to Ellie, “that we’re on the same planet right now as the one where human beings are held in prisons for no crimes? Guantanamo without trial?”

“Mmm?” Her eyes were closed. Her mint green tank-top was draped over her face.

Micah sat up and leaned on his knees, squinting across at the seeming stillness of the mountains. One of them, the highest, glinted whitely at its tip. “Where do we get the concept of freedom?” he said. “From the human world? Or is it some natural condition?”

She murmured something that sounded like, “same-same.”

“Is it an experience,” he said. “Or a concept?”

“Mm-hm.”

“It’s crazy,” he said, “to think of those shackled people in Guantanamo, there right now, being tortured. Why do people want to take control of other peoples’ bodies? What’s with possessing their bodies?”

“Crime?”

He looked around at Ellie, stretched long, her legs and belly brown, breasts a little red.

He said, “Here, right now, I couldn’t feel more free.”

She nodded and said, “Mm-mm.”

“Is this feeling real?”

The waves gulped the shore. The creek nearby rushed into the lake, steadily and he noticed, noisily. He hadn’t noticed that noise until he paid attention.

Something he didn’t yet have words for was swarming him. Thoughts about a concept that people fought for—the concept of freedom—something that seemed so rare, so hard to experience. He felt that he was experiencing it for the first time in his life, here now; but if it was so rare, how did everyone in the mad world seem to know about it?

He wanted to pin this feeling down. To look it in the face. To name it. But how to do that? “What is freedom?” he asked, and he heard only the emptiness of his question. The rush of the creek and the sun were conspiring to blur his thoughts. He said, “That’s not the right question.” There was something else he was trying to ask, something just out of his mind’s reach. He said, “I need to get to the bottom of this.”

“Yeah?”

“Freedom,” he whispered. He looked around at the shadowy mountains and the moving water, the earthly manifestation of what seemed like freedom—and yet that wasn’t the word for it. Freedom wasn’t a place. It wasn’t physical. And so what was freedom? Did the word represent anything at all? Or was it merely a collective fantasy? But something was real. Something he was feeling now. And in a rush, he wanted to preserve the feeling, to capture it, to make sense of it and he said, “I know what I have to do.”

“Mm-hm.”

“I have to get my PhD.”

Refreshed from the summer, they went east, back to Ellie’s curatorial ambitions and Micah’s new academic ones and to their mutually accruing workaholism. Micah applied for PhD’s and got a six-year fellowship offer from University of Chicago based on a proposal to examine the concept of freedom in modernist literature. Ellie got an internship at the Art Institute and moved to Hyde Park with him. The South Chicago neighborhood was unlike anywhere he’d spent any time. They were warned of its violence, the university being planted in the heart of a vast neighborhood of nearly exclusively African American poverty. That neighborhood, in 2009, the year he started his PhD, went down in the census annals as the place with the most gun crimes in all of America. But as a white people living within a fifteen-block radius of the campus, Micah and Ellie had nothing to worry about. A private security vehicle sat at the end of every corner enforcing an island of peace, within the biggest ghetto in America. The university,

it turned out, had the second strongest private police force in the world, next to that of the Vatican. Every day Ellie took a train north and Micah walked freely along quiet, tree-lined avenues and wide streets where there was an unsettling absence of life. Micah felt constantly and uncomfortably aware of the presence of his protectors. Police were there for him. Pushing back against a great wall of need. Keeping peace. Protecting his body, his freedom.

Dissertation topics, Micah knew, typically evolved out of the abstract and hopeful, glimmering and visionary moment that first inspired them. They forgot that moment. And his topic did just that. By his fourth year, his questions around the concept of freedom transformed into literary genealogies of enslavement. In his formal prospectus, delivered to his advisors at the end of that year, he outlined a thesis on the literature of slavery from the point of view of its perpetrators.

Surprising himself with his age, Micah turned thirty that year. That spring Ellie got a visiting curatorship at a print gallery in Philadelphia and Micah came back to Birch Creek alone with the intention of writing his first chapter. But the Kootenay summer was sweltering, and the chapter was about legacies of chattel slavery and theories of the social scarring that happens when one group of people takes another group of people and attempts to make them less than human. He read first-hand slave accounts, alongside Thomas Hobbes, who described the violence in the making of social contracts, as coming from men's fundamental *equality* to one another. It wasn't difference, racial or otherwise, that caused order to be founded on violence. It was the fact that humans recognized

themselves to be fundamentally equally matched. Though he failed to credit Hobbes for the idea, Michel Foucault put it well when he described the process as the “the anarchy of minor differences.” The violence that founded all law, the violence that any system of power sprang from, was founded in the fear of sameness. The idea of this knowledge simmering in the consciousness of the chattel slave trader, in the plantation owner and in the language of antebellum literature, inspired Micah. But when he tried to seek it out in lines of Herman Melville and Thomas Higginson, he became overwhelmed by infinite interpretation.

The July heat in the house seemed to get trapped in the high peaks of the ceilings. From the desk he’d set up in the living room, Micah could sense the heat building up through the day, and for the first time since he’d read about bloodbath that had followed Nat Turner’s insurrection with the feeling that the material was his, Micah found it too hard to stomach thinking about white retribution.

He tried to write outdoors on a new veranda Francis had built, but that was no better. Something about the apparent stillness of the land and the surrounding forest—a stillness that was not truly still, seeming to contain, in fact some deep constant movement—and something about his father’s sustained silence, so stark without Ellie there, it all began to close in on Micah.

Francis built beautiful fixtures for people with expendable wealth. Francis was tall and broad shouldered though thin. His hair was silver. He wore it tied back in a low ponytail. He moved quietly between house and carpentry shop and garden where he tended to raspberries and cucumbers and tall stalks of beans. Once Micah saw him standing motionless under the apple trees in bare feet. He stood there for almost an hour

and Micah wondered if he was asleep. If Micah said nothing to Francis, Micah noticed, nothing would be said all day. Yet sometimes dishes would clatter noisily in the sink in the kitchen, and Micah wondered if Francis was bothered by his presence. He took to borrowing his father's truck and going to the beach to cool off, or into Appleton to see some other human beings. One day in cold beer store, as he stood staring at the selection, St. Pierre came up behind him and slapped his back.

“Buddy!” he said, grinning and cackling in his soft way. “What’s going on?”

As they stood by the fridge Micah tried to tell St. Pierre about the things he’d been trying to get his head around: the mentality of the slaver. The idea that the entire enterprise of the United States was based on a violent racism.

St. Pierre said, “What else is new?”

Micah laughed.

“Heavy shit.”

“I know.” He shook his head, as though to wake himself. He said, “What about you? What’s going on around here?”

St. Pierre cracked some jokes about a festival of “healing” happening in the Loki Valley that summer. He cackled and said that a world famous didgeridoo healer was coming. “Not kidding,” he said. “Didgeridon’t is what I call that thing.” He got Micah laughing, told Micah some story about a Birch Creek lady who claimed to have heard the trees singing in a piece of forest slated for logging. People were protesting to save the singing trees.

As they smacked hands to say goodbye, St. Pierre said, “You going to Devolve?”

“What?” Micah asked.

“It’s happening up on the flats this weekend. Should be sweet. Drive up with me if you want.”

Devolve, it turned out, was an all-night party under the stars on an overgrown airstrip with DJs and a big sound system and a couple of strobe lights bleaching, in rapid intervals, the looming trees.

A good hundred people at least were out, pounding their feet, eyes wide, dancing and hooting at the night. Micah and St. Pierre swallowed MDMA caplets. Micah stood at the edge of the crowd for a while, not sure how to move. A small, shorthaired girl came up to him, smiling brightly, bobbing her head from side to side. He felt embarrassed as she took his hands and pulled on him. But as he started dancing, he found it easy. A warm endorphin rush coursed through him and he relaxed, moving his body with a feeling of great relief, a feeling that he’d been missing something, something that was happening there that night, something everyone seemed to know about, as they trilled with their voices and caught each others’ eyes, nodding and smiling knowingly. The warm rushes kept coming and danced with abandon, letting his voice out.

“Holy fuck,” he shouted. “I am so high!” Saying this made him even higher, euphoric. The little elf-girl smiled and stayed near him then led him to a van, where she emptied the contents of other capsules onto a book and they snorted it through a bill. He let her hold his hand and lead him back to the crowd. He saw St. Pierre a couple of times through the night in the crowd. St. Pierre’s eyes were bulging like a madman’s. They nodded to each other knowingly. Everybody seemed to do this, as though they all knew the same thing, their faces all glowing in the light. Grinning, knowing. And that thing was that this was good, this movement of bodies all together, this night with its cool,

starry open sky, this feeling of having your heartbeat migrate to your brain, flap like wings there, cause your eyes to close, cause you to lose track of time. It felt like an answer. It felt like true freedom.

Light began to muddy the sky and the girl called, “Relax your jaw,” and she squeezed Micah’s jaw with her thumb and finger. The crowd loosened and broke up as though synced to the failing darkness, until it was light and there were only a few limp bodies left. When he couldn’t move much, the girl led him back to the panel van and there, in a bed in the back, they got close as the sun rose. Most of their clothes came off, which felt only natural. She must’ve been about twenty. Maybe younger. But she had this van which made her seem older. After dozing with his face so close to hers, he kissed her in a way that felt accidental. Ellie moved across his mind. The girl kissed him back, raising her face and smiling at him. He tried to sleep again. The day grew bright and hot. It felt late. Outside people were passed out in the dusty grass. Some were sitting in circles. Tents were up. He stepped out of the van and a pang of panic surged through him.

He couldn’t quite shake that feeling for the rest of the day as he made his way back to Birch Creek, red eyed and grimy. And for the following days he paced around anxiously, unable to work, with a feeling of things slipping irretrievably through his fingers, a distinct feeling that everything was falling apart.

He didn’t get any work done that summer, nothing he felt was worth keeping. He didn’t come back the following year, or for two years after that, just after he turned thirty-three, after Francis had an accident and everything began, in its way, to fall apart.

Francis had been running a table-saw through a 220 volt range outlet which, according to Ezra, was something Francis probably always did. But a metal ladder tipped and fell onto the exposed wires of the saw. When Francis went to grab the ladder, the 220 volts sent a fatal shock to his heart. It was some time, quite some time, before anyone found him. Ezra found him.

Micah and Quintana inherited a little more than just the land. Francis also had some savings. This wasn't too surprising considering his minimalist lifestyle. He'd inherited a little from him his own parents when they'd passed away, his dad in a retirement home in New Hampshire. Micah and Quintana inherited a little over twenty grand each. Micah hadn't needed to touch that money until now. He had no income now.

Francis had been more or less self-reliant. That was possible with a piece of land like this where you could grow everything. Vegetables. Beans. Sometimes he'd kept rabbits. Sometimes chickens.

In Appleton, at a silent auction at the Auxiliary Hospital Thrift Store, Micah put a bid on a Rototiller. He was in the cramped, overheated shop to look for hiking boots when he saw the big green machine in a back room where, unfortunately, everything was for sale by silent auction. There were some other tools, kitchenware, lamps and a case of tarnished jewelry. The rototiller was an odd-looking thing with long green spidery arms and some rust on the blades and he wasn't exactly sure how you worked it, but he felt he could figure it out—or that this was the kind of thing he had to learn—and it seemed like exactly the thing he needed for that potato field, the area he intended to plant with more than just potatoes. The rototiller was only up to sixteen dollars—one dollar above its starting price, bid on by someone with the initials ET.

“You can give yourself a nickname if prefer that,” said the short lady with long white braids at the cash register. She looked up the number for the Rototiller in a large, crackling ledger that seemed to have been used for many silent auctions.

“No chance of paying for it outright, I guess.” Micah felt he had to ask. There were a couple of other people in the store, quietly shuffling through clothing.

The tiny lady stopped searching for the number and peered at Micah's face. “This is a charity fundraiser.”

“Just checking,” he said. Someone coughed roughly behind the wool curtain of the change room. A man was digging through winter-coats.

“It's for grandmothers in Africa,” the tiny woman said, “whose children have died of Aids and now they must raise their grandchildren.”

“I’ll raise the bid,” he said.

“And would you like to go by a nickname?” She hovered a pen above her ledger.

“That’s for fun?” he asked.

“Oh,” she said. “Privacy I suppose. I guess that’s why some people like to use a nickname. Some items get quite hot,” she said. “If you know what I mean. Especially those good farming tools. But now, that one you want, that ro-to-tiller, well that one has been here for some time if I’m not mistaken. It didn’t sell in the last auction we had. No bidders.”

“Someone’s bidding on it now.”

“You might have a good chance on that one. And you can always come back and raise your bid.”

“I guess that’s how it works. The silent auction.” He smiled. He didn’t mean to sound condescending—but maybe he was that—inherently, or by default. Years of critique and skepticism. Scales, he felt, had grown to his tongue. Cynicism came easy. Too easy. He didn’t want to be that way in this place. He wanted to apologize.

But the lady was oblivious, transcribing numbers from one column to another. There was a clattering noise of coat hangers. Micah marked seventeen dollars alongside his full name, and he wrote down his cell number.

“Oh,” the lady said gravely. “Long distance. Well you don’t have to live here to be eligible.”

“I do live here,” he said.

“The auction is open to everyone,” she went on. “But we might have to call you collect. We can’t exactly be expected to make long distant calls.”

“I’m up near Birch Creek. Francis De Mann’s land. I’m his son. Was. He was my dad.”

“Poor Birch Creek,” she said.

“Oh,” he said, for a moment thinking about his dad’s accident. Then he thought of the mudslide. It had happened two years earlier, not long after his dad had passed. There were heavy rains and a whole channel of the mountain slid off, buried two Birch Creek homes as well as the highway that accessed the small hamlet. When Micah and Quintana had inherited the land, they’d agreed to sell it. At the time, they hadn’t known what else to do with it. Quintana had a career in the city, an active online dating profile, and no plans to leave the city. Micah was at the high point of his crisis by then, trying hard to get Ellie back. He couldn’t fit the land into any picture of his life.

But it was only on the market for three months when the mudslide came ripping through, snapping up trees like toothpicks, dumping a swath of forest into the lake. The land was cut off from the highway then for four months. People like Ezra and Yvette relied on boats to get to town. Bad timing. The property sat for two years. They reduced their asking price three times. The realtor told them that nothing in the area was selling. It wasn’t just the slide. The local economy, she said, was crashing. She suggested they take it off the market for a while. They did. When they tried again, there were still no takers.

“Birch Creek seems stable now,” Micah said, putting the pen down on the auction ledger. “I don’t think there’s anything else up there that could slide. It all came down already.”

“That big development or whatever it is that’s being built,” the lady said.

“What’s that?” he said.

“The compound. A gated community.”

“In Birch Creek?”

“That’s right,” she said. “Gated from who? The pacifists?”

“Maybe me,” Micah said.

“That’s right. And the conscientious objectors. Too important, I say. We’ll just have to go up there and protest.”

“They’re angels,” said a quavering voice from the rows of clothes. A tall, skinny man, more of a boy, with brown curls and huge brown eyes came around the rack of jackets. “Angels,” he repeated.

“Lucas,” the lady said. “What are you talking about?”

This boy, Lucas, stood with stiff arms, smiling oddly. “They’re angels,” he said. The sleeves of his tattered, navy blue pea coat were too short and his thin pale wrists jutted out.

Micah smiled and nodded and Lucas’s eyes widened. His lips were chapped red.

The lady carried on. “It worked the last time people protested something up there. When they tried to log the singing forest.”

Lucas laughed in a pained way.

“Those trees,” the lady said, “may not have wanted to be logged. Most likely not. Anyhow a woman heard them singing. Though I never heard them myself. But I did hear the story from the lady who did. Yvette Coutlee.”

“Yvette?” Micah said.

“Angels,” Lucas said again.

The lady said, “We did what the trees asked of Yvette. And it worked. It’s still there, the singing forest. They didn’t cut it down.”

“Angels,” Lucas insisted once more as he slipped passed Micah, pulling open the jangling door and left the store.

“I wouldn’t say they were angels,” said the lady, looking through the window after the boy. “But I wouldn’t know what to say about it. Yvette is a reliable woman.” The flesh around her hazel eyes was wrinkled. She wore colorful clothing of a Guatemalan weave. Her lips were pursed, not unlike like a chipmunk, Micah thought, and her silver braids, which draped over the front of her shoulder, now looked to him like long ears. This reminded him of the heartprints.

“I guess so,” he said, though he’d lost the thread of the conversation. He said, “I’m wondering if you might know of someone. A guy named Joel. Joel St. Pierre.”

The lady nodded and said, “Oh I know the St. Pierre’s. I certainly know his mother, Renata.”

“Yeah, Renata,” Micah said. “I remember her.”

“She sold me my loom. I still have Renata’s loom. Though she’s not around here anymore. Neither is Daniel. They split up years ago. But their youngest son is still here.”

“Any idea where I might find him?”

“Well maybe he’s in the houseboat. Someone’s in the houseboat.”

“Houseboat?”

“The one that Renata and Daniel built when their boys were small. It’s in the bay. Someone’s living there now. If it’s not him, I don’t know who it is. But I’m sure I’ve seen smoke this winter.”

“Which houseboat is it?”

“There’s only one out there.”

Hot air was blowing down on him from a vent somewhere and he no longer felt like looking for the hiking boots. He paid for a cheese grater and soup ladle and some cutlery and the lady gave him a photocopied flier for a meeting about community greenhouses.

“We’re planning to build them at the old mill site,” she said, “You might be interested in helping out. Well we’re planning to fundraise to get it started.”

He looked at the flyer and she explained that the plan was to have vegetables grown and sold at a very affordable rate, all year round. “Hopefully,” she said, “we would also be able to provide vegetables to those who can’t afford it, and to the elderly seniors.”

“Nice idea,” he said.

“I am on town council,” she said. “Helen Green. Anyway this was one of my proposals along with some of the other councilors.”

“Nice to meet you Helen.”

“If you’re interested, then come to our meeting next week in the United Church hall.”

“Thank you. I might.”

“And come back and check your bid on your rototiller,” she said.

“Will do.” He jangled the door and stepped into the fresh damp air. Red-lipped Lucas was gone. A light rain was sprinkling. He raised his face and took in a sharp, long breath. A jacked-up red and black Bronco rolled past him up the main street of Appleton,

a charming street of colorful signage and restored century-old buildings, constructed when the town had been a booming little mining site. There were a few people out, milling around the entrances of the grocery and hardware stores and the old Appleton Hotel. The Bronco slowed to a stop at the hotel, where some people stood smoking on the steps. One of these smokers went over to the window of the truck and leaned in.

Everyone, he presumed, knew each other. He didn't know many. His father had been a recluse and Micah had not properly lived in the area since the age of eight. He knew a couple of folks though, and St. Pierre, the grower, was one he wanted to find. Since arriving in town, and thinking about how he was going to make a living, Micah had been remembering the scuba diving bag. He remembered one bud the size of his fist. There must've been at least fifty pounds in the bag. He remembered St. Pierre telling him that he grew a lot more. Micah wanted to ask St. Pierre about how to get his hands on some starter plants. Just a few.

There was no other traffic on the street and Micah walked through the center of the empty intersection toward the Blue Thistle Bistro, in a crooked antique building painted orange with green trim. He remembered them making decent coffee. Their food hadn't been too bad either. Before picking up groceries and heading back up the lake, he decided to step in.

When he pulled open the door he found the place surprisingly packed and loud. A waitress, a bony girl wearing a black dress and red cowgirl boots, stomped past him with two heavy-looking plates of nachos. She had something like panic in her eyes as she glanced at Micah. "Wait right there!" she called. "I'll get to you!" Tango music played over top of the voices. Pockets of laughter broke open. Every table seemed full.

Micah's reflex was to turn around and step straight back out into the rain, to get the supplies he needed, drive back home and start setting the place up, as had been his plan. But something caused him to hesitate. Something in his mood. An unusual mood that day. Optimistic. Even friendly. Looking around he felt that he wanted to stay. It was funny, this small town café where you walked in, relatively new to town, and no one seemed to notice or care. Though Micah had come and gone from the town many times before, he didn't easily recognize anyone. A group of men in dirty work shirts, sleeves rolled up, eating their lunches. Maybe, he thought, he recognized some of the older women in boisterous conversation, hooting with laughter at the other side of the room. They were of his parents' generation. And maybe he recognized a woman at a corner table in intense conversation with someone. She was blonde and light eyed and looking at him. He smiled tightly and nodded. She smiled back. She wore some kind of long dangling, feather earrings that somehow made her look native despite the blondness. It occurred to him that she was just very attractive and that was reason he'd noticed her. He glanced away, up at the tin-plated ceiling and three amber lamp fixtures hanging over the bar. He didn't actually recognize her. He felt her eyes still on him and was conscious of this until the hurried waitress came back and said, "For one?"

"Just for coffee."

"It's the lunch rush," she said, backing away, seemingly terrified. "You can sit at the bar."

"I can eat," he said. "At the bar." He took a seat at the end of bar, beside a large, longhaired man with huge calloused hands. The man was hunched over a coffee. On the other side a young girl with a high ponytail, childish short bangs and Jean Paul Sartre

glasses was emptying mugs from a dish bin. She looked at Micah with a blank expression, then said, "Oh. D'you want something?"

"I'll have an Americano," Micah gestured to the machine.

The girl frowned. "I don't know how to do that."

"It's cool," he said. "I'll wait." He grabbed a menu from a stack at the end of the bar.

"Ok," the girl said and walked away with her bus bin.

The waitress in the slip came back and asked for his order.

"An Americano," he said. "And the ah, the Buddha burger."

"Fries, yam fries, or salad?"

"Fries," he said. "French fries." His phone buzzed. A text from Nancy. *I talked to Janet last night. I hope you're not lonely. Call tonight.*

By the time his food arrived, the place had emptied a little. The kid behind the bar stood polishing cutlery, dumping the pieces into a tray. "That was bad," she muttered. "We got slammed."

"Not usually so busy?" Micah asked, stuffing his mouth with fries.

The girl blew noisily through her lips, but said nothing. She pushed her Sartre glasses up her nose, placed a fork on top of a knife, folded in the corner of a napkin and rolled.

The blonde woman with the feather earrings came over to Micah, catching him with a mouth full of Buddha burger.

“Hello,” she said, smiling, holding out both of her hands face up. He was holding his burger, twisting sideways in his stool, trying to swallow and did know what to do with her hands. She spoke in a light voice. “We know each other?”

“Mmm.” He shook his head, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth, getting the burger back onto the plate. “I don’t think so,” he managed to say. He wiped his fingers with a napkin and said and held out his hand as you do to shake in the classic way.

She took his hand in both of hers and said, “Ashanti.”

“Micah,” he said. Her fingers were cool.

She repeated his name, adding a long breathy sound to the end. Her voice was extremely light, like her eyes, blue, lined with charcoal, bearing into him. Her lips were tightly pursed and smiling. She said, “Passing through?”

“Living,” he said. “Up at Birch Creek.” He slipped his hand from her grasp.

“Birch Creek!” she said this reverentially. “Beautiful.”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s nice.”

“I’m having a full moon gathering later this month. Please come,” she said.

“You’re very familiar to me. Do you feel that too?”

“Like from another lifetime?” He flickered his fingers in the sign of something eerie and laughed. So did the bus girl, a low Bela Lugosi rumble.

But Ashanti seemed to take him seriously. She squinted, studying him, as though jogging a previous life memory, “Micaah,” she said, again with the breathy end.

“Micaah.”

He caught the eye of the bus girl who was making a face, her eyebrows pinched in an expression of teenage suffering as she rolled cutlery into napkins.

Ashanti said, "I'd like to welcome you."

"Thanks!" he said. "That's nice of you."

"Do you know Charles William's house?"

"Don't know too much."

"I'll be summering there. Giving workshops. Some medicinal sessions. I have gatherings every month. We'll be dancing."

"Cool."

"Please join. It's the big octagonal log house at the top of Zwicky Road."

"Zwicky?"

"An octagon. Beautiful energy," she said. "Beautiful. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," he said.

"Glad to know you." Then she put her hands in a loose prayer shape, gently bowed her head and left. A faint waft of something like sandalwood hung behind her.

Micah returned to his burger, catching eyes again with the bus girl who was making a face of terror.

"What?" he said.

"Don't look at me," she said. "I'm just rolling cutlery." But then she said, "*Ashaaanti*," and she giggled wildly.

Micah laughed. He couldn't guess at the politics between the people in this town, but he sensed there was some. Ashanti seemed on the airy side, but he wasn't ready to dismiss her. She'd approached him directly. She'd been friendly.

“Good energy,” the girl said. “*Beautiful.*”

“And what’s your name?”

She winced and as though it hurt her to pronounce it. “Jane.”

“Micah,” he said and held out his hand.

“Oh yes,” she said. “I caught that.” She shook his hand with immense strength.

He went back to his burger, whose caramelized onions, the part that made it Buddha, were falling out. When he was finished he pushed his plate aside and said, “Jane. Can you do me a favor? Just try to make me an Americano.”

She looked around. The frazzled waitress was nowhere in sight. “Ok,” she said. “But I warn you now. If you drink it you will die.”

The village of Appleton had two main parts—the lower town with the stores and restaurants; and the part that people called the bench, a plateau up the hill from the lower town, mostly residential, though it also had hospital and school. Dark spruce mountains rose up behind the town. There were about a thousand people in the town, but more in the surrounding area. Log homes and prefab homes and mobile homes were hidden away in unincorporated communities with names like, Crystal Creek, and Giveout Creek and Birch Creek. Highway 3B which twisted along the edge of the lake, entered Appleton from the south through the low town and left from the upper part, edging steep bluffs around a bay, with a good view of the village, before heading north toward Birch Creek where the pavement ended and logging roads continued. There were no public maps for

those roads that branched out into the steep valleys of the Purcell mountain range.

Though the community of Birch Creek was considered to be the end of the road, people lived beyond it. There were a couple of trailers up the logging roads and Micah had heard of a recent immigration of Americans, people who moved up after 9/11 and bought land deep in the valleys and worked on building self-sustaining farms. As a kid, he'd also heard of a community of people out there, living together in some unknown part of the mountains that could only be reached by foot. He remembered hearing of how they hunted and fished and farmed in a valley that no one exactly knew how to find. In later years he realized that this was probably just a children's fantasy; the idea never went away and now, alone on the land, he had the vague sense of these people living in the mountains somewhere above him.

The houses of lower Appleton were mostly of antique, Victorian design, some in disrepair and sinking into wide yards of overgrown wildflowers, others well kept and painted prettily, recalling the time of the town's founding. Appleton had started as a mining town, situated near deposits of nickel ore. Before there was any highway, paddle-wheelers took the ore and the people down the lake to the bigger town of Valhalla or further, to the towns of Crawford and Grey Bay then down to the American border. A parallel valley on the western side of the mountains had a similar series of communities dotting the shores of its lake. When Appleton's nickel was depleted, a sawmill was opened and the town shipped its pine and cedar and spruce boards across the border. But in the 1980's high American import taxes on lumber and a nationwide recession forced the Appleton mill and others in neighboring towns to shut down. Though logging still

happened, the raw lumber now had to be shipped long distances. It was around then that marijuana industry began to boom in the region.

He went to the Buy Low supermarket and pushed a cart a cart up and down the aisles. He picked up eggs and coffee cream and butter and bacon. Ground beef. Sourdough bread. In the produce section he grabbed tomatoes, potatoes, a big bag of onions. He looked at green and yellow peppers and wondered if you could grow peppers in this climate. He bought Carr's table crackers and salami and Roquefort cheese. He compared prices on olive oil. He went up and down the aisles. Paper towel, toilet paper, toilet bowl cleanser and garbage bags. He loaded his bags into the back of the truck and went liquor store and got a six-pack of Amstel. He stared at the bourbon for a while and was astounded by the prices and thought the unaffordability of booze could work for the better. He remembered the bulk section of the health food co-op and he filled bags with rice and beans. The end of the world could come.

He slowly drove along the beach road that lined the circumference of lower Appleton in search of a houseboat. Cottonwoods and cedars grew like great weeds in the wetlands between the road and the beach. The water out there was steel grey and with white caps that made it look like the ocean. The lake was so wide at that point that you could dip your eyes and block out the mountains on the other side, imagine that you were standing on the Pacific shore. This vastness added to its sense of cleanness. Nothing stagnant about that water with all its glacial rivers feeding in. It was no polluted ocean either. Micah liked thinking of this cleanness. It was part of what he'd come back to feel.

He found St. Pierre's houseboat, a robust cabin of reddish wood floating about fifteen feet off steep rock face on the north side of the bay. The road ended at the mouth of the bay. He parked by a small dock where a few tin can fishing boats were knocking around. He walked along damp sand to a path that led to the bluffs. The houseboat was all wood, covered in shingles with a big deck stretching around it and domed skylights on the roof that had a supported overhang, like a deck. A ladder led up to the roof. A series of precarious gangways connected the house to a ledge of rocky shore. The gangway wobbled in the rough water. Micah stepped out on them and carefully made his way across to the more stable deck. "Hello!" he called. Waves sucked and lapped at the boards beneath him. The deck ran all the way around the house. A diamond shaped window on the side. He took a peek in as he passed. He saw shapes of furniture. The kitchen sink was just below him and there were dishes and two bananas on the counter. Someone was living there. He called out again and continued around to the front, which faced away from the bay, toward the lake. The deck there was broad, with a small picnic table and some upturned chairs. Fishing tackle was leaning against the wall, a pair of soggy felt boot liners against the sliding glass doors that led into the house. Micah knocked on the glass, pressing his face to it. "Anybody home?" The place looked cozy, with a woodstove in the center of a living room. Colorful wool blankets were draped over furniture. Renata's loom. A set of wooden stairs with no railings led up to what must've been a loft. He stepped back and looked up. There were glass doors up there as well, leading onto a rooftop balcony. Plant pots lined the edge of that. He looked around at the view of the lake, the mountains on the other side thrusting out a big bellies or arching back to the sharp white peaks at their tops. Fresh snow up there. On the other side of the

bay was the town. He heard the belch of a logging truck and looked up. He glimpsed it through the trees, passing on the highway above the bay. That was the highway that led to Birch Creek. “Nice place, St. Pierre,” Micah said as he walked back around to the jetty. No one was home.

A series of incidents had accumulated in such a way so as to cause Ezra to feel unsettled. And the truck that he had unofficially gifted to Micah De Mann was now a part of that unsettling. Ezra didn't mind giving the truck away. He was happy to get the thing off his land and happy to help out the son of Francis, an old friend—though a friend who, in a way that Ezra respected, didn't have much of a need for friends. But a problem was dawning on Ezra. If Micah had some plan of getting himself involved in the local quick-cash industry, if he planned to use the truck for activities deemed illegal, Ezra could not risk the association. A series of unsettling events had accumulated in such a way so as to make Ezra concerned about ever having any contact with the law.

Ezra and Yvette's home was on public land. They lived in the last house at the end of Birch Creek road, twenty-five-minutes up the hill from the De Mann land on a side of mountain that they had cleared and worked, but had never purchased from the so-called "Crown." Their house was partially dug into the hill. Its rear-end had a sod roof.

The Shire, as visitors called it. Garlic grew above the nook where they kept their bed, not that the roots dangled over them. The curved walls were sealed off with a vapor barrier, gyp-rocked, dry-walled and painted a bright sunset gold. The house was not all subterranean, but sometimes Ezra thought it should've been. Earth mass was a better insulator than the fiberglass used behind the walls of the rest of the house, which opened out into a light filled kitchen and living room. Two-stories of glass dropped down from that upper dugout loft, with doors downstairs that led to a broad fir patio. Stone steps curved down to an outdoor shower under a cedar tree, girdled in the same river rocks used for all the mason work around the place. There was also an indoor shower, but Ezra preferred to soap himself in the fresh, with a view through old growth firs of the north end of the lake, cradled by the steep Purcell mountain range. Until more recent, warming years, the tops of those peaks had gleamed whitely all the way through the heat of the summer. But it was almost June and you could see that they were already on the melt.

Ezra and Yvette grew basil. They also grew garlic, but basil was the staple. It sold for almost as much as its weight in gold, and almost as much as “enlightenment gold,” the local marijuana strain that so many people went through such pains and drama to cultivate and export around here. Ezra didn't understand the need for risk in gardening. Of all things. At any given time he and Yvette had at least three hundred stems of perfectly legal green plants growing in year-round greenhouses. The garlic grew on the wide bench above their house. With a careful crop-rotation system, they harvested more than enough for healthy living, supplying four restaurants in the area directly, and selling their products at the Green Mountain Food Co-Op in Valhalla, the “big city” down the lake. They powered their home with energy from a water turbine secured into Birch creek

that ran around the eastern border of the clearing, and though they paid no property tax, being what the government derogatorily called “squatters,” they had their expenses. Ezra had a taste for Belgian chocolate and Spanish wine and triple malt scotch. They had a library of VHS cassettes, evolving from the bottom rows up into some hundred DVD’s and a more recent collection of Blu-ray discs that they’d taken to projecting onto their whitewashed twelve-foot living room wall. Crime thrillers mostly. Yvette called them junk, but she was always happy to sit up late, cradling her long legs, eyes wide, dipping a cookie into her mint tea. They also liked foreign movies. And they liked to read, though Ezra was more into non-fiction than novels. *Three Cups of Tea* was a recent one he’s finished, about a mountaineer’s attempt to give back to an area of Afghanistan that Ezra had himself travelled through in his twenties. He collected books on carpentry and had a workshop that at its height had been fitted with a masonry saw and a welder, but with the house finished, he’d started to sell off his tools. They’d sold their tractor and Yvette left the property less and less by vehicle.

They were fine with one truck, a ’99 aquamarine Tacoma. Initially, Ezra had felt that so long as the Sierra started up, he was happy to give it to Francis’s son. But the other day as he was driving out of town, he looked down at the bay and saw Micah’s truck parked there, outside the houseboat of Joel St. Pierre, someone whose business and whose trouble with the law Ezra knew something about. Ezra was now thinking about the kind of trouble that could come from having his own name on the title of a vehicle that was possibly being used as what the government liked to call, “a tool of crime.” If Micah had it in his head, as it was now occurring to Ezra he might, to move back here and start

growing marijuana on his dad's land, Ezra would need to legally disassociate himself from that.

It was not a good time to have any connection to the business. The year before, the government had seized the house of a young Birch Creek family, Jack and Tammy Candy, after busting a grow-op in their basement. Starter plants is apparently all they had. Some of the plants were less than an inch high, in bedding trays. But when they made their busts, the RCMP counted the number of stems, not buds. The Candy's had hundreds of stems in those—though many of them weren't going to amount to anything. Then by some legal loophole, a government body called the Civil Forfeiture Office, managed to successfully seize the Candy's home without ever actually charging the couple with a crime.

Ezra spent a lot of time on the computer, looking into the legality of what the government had done, and from what he could understand it was legal insofar as no one had ever challenged the law as being unconstitutional. For as long as no one challenged it, this new Civil Forfeiture Office could take houses, vehicles, anything they deemed to have been purchased with the proceeds of a crime, or used as tool for crime. In a matter of three months the Candy's were gone from their land and their home was up for sale.

Ezra dug up the six plants he grew for occasional personal use, and transplanted them in a moist sunny clearing near the mouth of Birch Creek, free for anyone to stumble upon and pick from if they desired, but far from his and Yvette's home, their "squatted" home. The government had already tried twice, through courts, to remove them from from this home. Ezra couldn't afford to give them any other reason to scoot them off. The last time they'd gone to court, the government had given them a thirty-year eviction

notice, putting himself at ninety-three years old and Yvette at eighty-eight when the notice came due. He and Yvette figured they'd simply refuse to move and they'd appeal again if they were still around to do so.

There seemed no reason that Yvette wouldn't be around in thirty years time, strong and agile as she was. With her daily hours of yoga and strength training and meditation she seemed only to get younger. She hardly had any silver in her waist-length blonde hair. Ezra also did some stretching and felt that he had a handle on his strength, but he never doubted that Yvette was the more resilient one. In the meantime though, they had to be realistic about the government's new elusive powers to seize. Ezra could picture a for sale sign being posted at the end of their driveway. He could not afford to be associated with black-market business that almost everyone else had some part of around here. He was going to have to make a trip into town with Micah, to wash his hands of that "tool of crime," by officially gifting the kid the Sierra.

Even though Micah was fully grown, Ezra couldn't help thinking of him as a kid. He'd hardly seen him since Micah was a teenager, summering reluctantly at his dad's middle of nowhere retreat at least a decade if not twenty years earlier. Ezra remembered Micah and his sister Quintana having a close one with a grizzly and her two cubs one afternoon on Birch Creek Road. Ezra had been driving down and came across Francis's deflated looking kids, dragging their feet and slapping mosquitos near the shady junction where their driveway met the Birch Creek mainline. Bored to death on their dad's land, the city kids were either trying to walk the thirty Km, or hitch a ride into town as though there was such a thing as traffic out there. They'd been lucky when Ezra came along. An eight hundred pound mamma griz and her cubs were hanging out, doing some trout

fishing around the next corner from where the De Mann kids were walking down the road. As they drove slowly by the big bears, the kids stared in awe of what they'd just about walked into. Damn lucky.

There was not a lot of traffic on Birch Creek Road. Ezra only made the trip into Appleton a few times a week in the summer. The other people who lived around Birch Creek didn't leave Birch Creek and as the community marked the end of highway there was not a lot of thru-traffic to and from the logging roads. A logging truck, if they happened to be hauling, might rip through. Otherwise there was the occasional forester and the weed growers who went up there. But the growers were usually in and out early in the morning, unless there was some kind of trouble with the police, which had not happened in the outdoor growing world for some time now, but it seemed to be starting up again.

Indoor growing made you liable. Outdoor growing had seemed relatively peaceful since the famous slash and burn summer of ten years ago. That was the summer the Americans came up north of the border and pretty much napalmed some ten-million-dollars worth of bud. At least that was the rumored estimate. But it wasn't the loss of the weed that enraged Ezra; it was the American invasion. How they could come and police this side of the border was a mystery to everyone; but it had happened. It had been confirmed by different sources. And under whatever bullshit jurisdiction permitted them to do so, one crew of these American's flew their chopper low enough over Ezra and Yvette's clearing to whip up garden soil and rip the tops off a line of garlic bulbs. As the chopper swooped low, Ezra came out of his woodworking shop wondering what the hell was going on. The chopper dipped to the side and he could see the face of the pilot and

the vested man beside him in ear-protection and dark wrap around shades, looking at him, blank faced. Ezra didn't know who the hell they were, but he pumped a hard middle finger at them. Whoever they were, they were rude and they were tearing up the garden and ogling his home with these blank expressions and ridiculous dark shades. He couldn't get the image of those faces out of his mind. He felt violated. Slimed. It had been perverse.

That was the first time that Ezra had ever felt territorial. While Yvette had a belief that by putting your work into land, you made it yours, Ezra had always felt differently. He felt that it was by never having a possessive relationship with the earth and some space you cleared on it, but instead by respecting it all as a realm of ever-fluctuating elements, that you might find some kind of harmony in the anomalous experience of being a human. He saw so much of the suffering and violence of the modern world as a result of a relatively recent obsession with private property. That people spoke of it as a *right*, incensed him. The right to selfishness and greed is what it was. That was one part of what he had intended to leave behind when he'd left New Jersey forty-four years earlier at the age of eighteen. He'd hitchhiked all over the United States, then all over Canada. He'd worked on fishing boats and in tree planting camps before meeting Yvette and finding the Kootenay region. He believed that rent and mortgage was paid by ball-busting labor. He'd been taxed on this land by sweat and physical exhaustion and most of the cartilage of his left knee. These days he walked and worked with bone on bone yet felt that pain not as suffering, but as the result of certain honesty. Honest living. His pain, his sweat did not mean, he insisted to Yvette, that the creek that rushed by their house, or the stand of larch that gave them shade, in some way now belonged to him. You didn't

pay for possession; you paid for connection, for use. In this way, he felt that he and Yvette had to welcome anyone who came their way, looking to also connect with earth, with life, and with this land that had no owners. They had to give them the space and show them the work that needed always to be done.

Slash and burn summer the rumor went around that it was American's doing the policing. Ezra tried to avoid conspiracy theories and that sounded very much like one of those. He'd argued against its likelihood until his good friend Sam Cook, a chopper pilot who flew for the Forest Service confirmed the truth behind the rumor. As one of the local pilots who knew the region, Sam had been offered a contract by an entity called the Integrated Border Security Agency, IBSA. From what Sam learned, they were a joint American-Canadian policing body that included Homeland Security, FBI and DEA. They offered big money so Sam met with them; and the people he met with were American agents who explained their technology. Sam took a pass on the contract that would've entailed locating marijuana plantations by using infrared heat-seeking technology. "That was not a job I needed," Sam said. "Nope. Didn't need that one." He never knew which pilots did get take contracts, but said they weren't from this end of the lake.

When Ezra learned that it had in fact been American police who'd come flying low, checking out his home, he'd felt disturbed in a way he still couldn't properly shake. However it was that they were permitted to come up here and police this side of the border, Ezra did not know, but he was angered by the whole thing. By the kids who were growing the pot in hopes of making easy money and by the government gangsters who probably planned to legalize it soon and wanted to control all markets.

During slash and burn summer, huge piles of some of the most potent strains of outdoor weed in the world went up in smoke. With their heat-seeking technology, they'd spot the young, vibrant plantations amidst the static old growth. They'd identify the location, then send a team out to rip the plants down and light them up. The whole thing was absurd. The growing of the stuff and the war against it.

But slash and burn only lasted for the one season, seven years ago now, and until very recently, things seemed back to normal. It must've been too expensive for them to keep up that kind of policing. Or maybe there was some tag team thing, with the Americans showing the Canadians how to police themselves properly and the Canadians taking the reigns. They probably realized that they could not realistically napalm a network of plantations spread out through the three complex mountain valleys, some 500 square kilometers wide. Birch Creek was one speck in vast area of mountain plantations. Around all the little hippie towns up and down these valleys, people were growing. Maybe the authorities started to understand that the industry was also tucked into peoples' basements and greenhouses and they started salivating too much over that. And maybe that was why they started confiscating peoples' homes and vehicles, by way of this unconstitutional-sounding civil forfeiture.

That had been the second unsettling incident: the Candy's land. The couple lost everything to a government office, without any criminal court hearing—all on the basis of “probable” but never “proven” guilt. From Ezra's reading, he'd gathered that this was how the law functioned. An administrative decision was made behind closed doors and then a forfeiture notice was served to the couple. But the couple were never arrested or charged with a crime. Ezra was still trying to get his head around this law when he started

hearing rumors of other people who'd gone through the same thing.-The thought of civil forfeiture seizures did not help Ezra settle his nerves. And neither did the latest event that had again involved his home.

Two days back in the middle of the afternoon, a man suddenly came crashing down out of the woods, flailing as he ran at top speed with two dogs galloping alongside him. Ezra and Yvette were both outside in the garden. They stood up, wondering what was happening. "Hey!" Ezra shouted.

The guy looked around, and Ezra realized then that it was Joel St. Pierre, the redhead son of Daniel, an old draft dodger friend who used to live up here. St. Pierre looked around, eyes wide with something worse than forest fear. They called to him, Ezra asking if it was a cougar or bear. But that was no way to react to a mere animal. St. Pierre had seen something else up there and he couldn't even stop to speak he was so scared. He kept on running through the clearing, over the ledges of the terraced ground, down the hill and into thick of the trees.

It was like trying to run in a dream. Plowing through the thick brush, St. Pierre felt as though his legs didn't work. He felt like he was getting nowhere. He felt the men chasing him getting closer, though of course they must've been having as hard of a time as he was. It was dark at the base of the forest where the spruce trees grew so close together. In places their branches were woven into a mesh, gunked up with black winter mold. Clawed in the face, he batted at branches. Cobwebs and spores got into the mouth and up the nose. He spat and swore. The dogs, Kisha and Buddha, had as much trouble as he did. Adrenaline shots were released into his blood so constantly that he became aware of it—adrenaline—a burning charge coursing through him steadily, pushing him wildly through the dense forest alongside Birch Creek.

It was run-off season and the water was high, rushing over boulders, far too fast to wade through. He would've gladly gotten soaked and frozen to avoid this net of forest. He didn't know if he was still being followed. He wasn't going to stop to find out.

Then the woods opened up and he found himself exposed, lurching out into a clearing. He was on someone's land. People were in a garden. He freaked. He bolted. Ran

as fast as he could, stumbling over a sod bank. He saw the people. It was Ezra Silver and Yvette. Of course that's where he was. But it didn't matter. He wasn't about to ask them for cover, tell them what he was up to. Not with armed men chasing him. They had handguns. He'd never seen a handgun before let alone have one pointed at him. The needling feeling of that was still with him, between his eyebrows. The man had raised the gun and pointed it at his forehead and St. Pierre could still feel that spot, burning. Like a bee sting that wasn't fading.

He'd been watering his plants, dragging the water pipe over from the natural feed of the rushing stream when two men in plainclothes came charging from the bushes with guns pointed at him, yelling for him to get on the ground. One of them pointed his gun right at St. Pierre's head, at the point between his eyebrows. That was a new feeling altogether for St. Pierre. He'd hardly even seen a handgun before, let alone had one aimed at his frontal lobe.

Who had guns around here? Cops did. But the local RCMP constables didn't behave this way. Not at all. Constable Tom Howard probably didn't even carry his gun anymore. The men had to be part of the federal drug squad that had set up shop in Valhalla and were trying to bust growers in the broader area.

But how they had found his Birch Creek patch, St. Pierre could not think. Not yet. All he knew now was how he reacted to the sight of a gun. He fucking ran. Bolted. Without a single thought, his legs sprang and his body went, as fast as he could, abandoning his patch—two hundred beautiful, robust stems of an unadulterated strain of enlightenment gold, the last of their kind.

The men didn't fire at him. At least he never heard a shot, but everything around him was cracking and breaking as he tore through the woods, yelling for the dogs. The dogs came and he was sure the men came too. He could feel them behind him and so he kept going. Down the mountain.

He bushwhacked for hours until he understood that he was not being followed. His heart quieted. The adrenaline stopped surging in. It started getting dark, but he didn't stop moving until he reached the lake. By that time the moon was high and its light was stretched in shimmering bands across the swaying water.

CV

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