

TOWANDA

by
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Abstract

A collection of stories.

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The Morning Q Crew, with Guest Caller Brittney Shuff

Act I:

Brittney Shuff's at her kitchen table with the phone to her ear and the radio playing.

She sits at the two-person table between the stove and silverware drawer. She thinks about hanging up.

She feels nervous. She liked performing in high school, but that was two years ago. She's never been on the radio before. Plus, the stuff in high school was mostly plays, and they weren't about her real life.

An advertisement for the Berman Brothers Truck Depot fades away. The commercial break is over. A slap bass glides over a reggae beat. Brittney sits up and looks at the refrigerator. *Don't say anything dumb*, she thinks. She looks at the magnets: *Fairchild's Hardware Open Since 1850. The Weigh Station Café. Coffee & Espresso, Salads, & Café Sandwiches. I should have used a fake name.*

“Welcome to Thhhursday,” Donny says. “Good to have you along with us. I’m Donny from the Morning Q Crew, here with Nacho and Candace.”

There’s a delay between the phone and the radio. It’s hard to concentrate. Why did she do this? She’s crazy, that’s why. She thinks again about hanging up.

Donny says, “Last week we asked listeners to write to us if they wanted to use our cheat detector. We heard back from a few folks, and right now we’ve got Brittney on the line. Brittney, are you there?”

Brittney freezes. Donny said her name. She’s on the air; she’s on the air. They didn’t even warn her.

“Hi, this is Brittney,” she says. She hears her voice following a step behind her on the radio.

Donny says, “Brittney, where you calling from?”

Brittney stands up. She jostles the table and knocks a spoon to the tile floor. “Sorry,” she says. Her voice circles back behind her and comes out of the radio like an echo.

“You still there, Brittney?” Candace says.

Brittney reaches up to the top of the refrigerator and hits the power button on the stereo. “I live in Towanda,” she says.

“Alright, all the way from Towanda,” Donny says.

She can do this. They talked about this stuff in their emails. It’s just like they’re reading lines. She played Miss Dorothy Brown in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. That was back when she was 15.

“What do you do in Towanda?” Candace asks.

She can think a little better now that the radio’s off. She can do this.

She sits back down. “My husband works for Chesapeake Energy,” she says.

She looks at her knees. Somebody’s going to recognize her. Maybe somebody from her Zumba class at the community center.

“The husband –” Nacho says. “Which brings you here today.”

“Brittney,” Donny says, “You wrote to us: I’m probably not exactly right for what you’re looking for, but –” Donny pauses and slowly reads, “I’m just looking for some reassurance.” He stops.

“Hmm,” Nacho says.

Brittney had spent hours on that email. She’s only nineteen, and she needed a peek at the rest of her life.

Donny reads, “My husband has been working really long hours. I just want to make sure he’s not doing anything *else*.”

He wasn’t installing the shelves in the kitchen. He wasn’t changing the drywall in the bathroom. Each morning, he left early. He came back late.

She has days on her hands. She has a computer, a TV, and a house that keeps the light out. She gets more excited than she likes to think about just going out to grab a cappuccino from the Weigh Station. She wrote that email, and maybe she wishes that she didn’t, but oh well, here she is. It’s happening. There’s the feeling now of *something is about to be different*.

“Brittney,” Donny says, “tell us more about your husband.”

Brittney tells them about how she and Paul met when she was just fifteen. Paul was a little bit older. When she was graduating from high school, Paul was finishing his

engineering degree at Utica College. They got married right after that and they moved from Watertown to Towanda.

She thinks – but doesn't tell them – about that party a few years ago where Paul made out with Megan Nelson. She doesn't tell them how anxious she used to get whenever she saw Paul spending time with big-boobs Lisa. She doesn't want to give them the wrong idea about who he might be. He married *her* after all – not those other girls. That says something.

She pulls at the neckline of her shirt. "I don't want to be paranoid," she says. "I don't want to be that girl. But – " She stops. She looks at the refrigerator: *Fairchild's Hardware. Tulpehocken Mountain Spring Water. Nature's Finest Spring Water Delivered Right To Your Door*. "I don't know – I think I'm crazy."

"What's going on, Brittney?" Candace asks.

She should have used a fake name. They keep calling her Brittney. She didn't think about how they'd be using her name so much. "He works these twelve hour shifts," Brittney says. "But then it's like – he doesn't come home. I mean, he does come home, but he'll be drunk, and I don't know. I don't know."

Donny says, "You think he might be seeing someone?"

Her stomach tightens. She doesn't *know* what Paul's doing – it might be nothing at all. What if Heather from her Zumba class hears this?

"No," Brittney says quickly. "I don't know. I don't want to be that annoying, suspicious girl – but – it's like, we only got married six months ago and we moved here, and now I hardly ever see him."

Paul had said she could do whatever she wanted in Towanda, as if the possibilities were endless. She took up painting again for a little while. She tried to learn how to play her acoustic guitar. She goes to Zumba three nights a week.

“OK, Brittney, here’s what we’re gonna do,” Donny says. “You ready?”

They’re going to play a trick on Paul. She knows this. “OK,” Brittney says.

“Candace is going to call your husband and pretend to be his insurance provider,” Donny says. “What kind of car insurance does he have?”

Brittney hesitates for a second. “Can I say it on air?” she asks.

“We’ll bleep it out on our end,” Donny says.

“Um, we have GEICO,” Brittney says.

“Candace is going to say she’s calling from GEICO and she’s going to ask him to take a survey. When he’s finished with the survey, she’s going to have him send a dozen red roses to anybody he wants.”

“Do you see where we’re going with this, Brittney?” Nacho asks. He talks in a squeaky alto. He’s more excited than she likes.

“I think so,” Brittney says.

They talked about this in their email. They were going to play a little game with Paul.

She looks at the magnets: *The Weigh Station Café. Fairchild’s Hardware Open Since 1850. Tulpehocken Mountain Spring Water.*

“If he sends the flowers to you, then you’re his girl,” Donny says.

“But if he sends the flowers to somebody else – ” Nacho says.

“OK,” Brittney says. *Coffee & Espresso, Salads, & Café Sandwiches.*

“You ready to do this?” Donny asks. “We’re going to call Paul right now.”

“OK,” Brittney says. She sits up a little and grips the fabric of her sweatpants in her fist.

Act II:

Brittney thinks, *What am I doing? That girl at the Weigh Station Café might hear me.*

Everyone’s going to know. She thinks, *There’s nothing to know.*

The phone rings two times, and then Brittney hears the sound of a moaning drill. She hears Paul’s voice: “Paul here.”

The sound sends a shot through her gut. She remembers back when Kim said Paul wasn’t *serious* boyfriend material. It was fine if Brittney wanted to make out with him – Kim liked his red hair and his body – but could Brittney imagine Paul ever *staying* with a girl?

She didn’t know. She thought he’d stay with her. He came to all her plays, and sat with her in the bleachers during basketball games.

“Hi, Mr. Shuff, this is Candace calling from GEICO. I was just wondering if you had time to complete a short survey?”

Brittney listens to this all through the phone. She tries to be quiet so no one hears her.

“Uhh, sure,” Paul says.

“OK, and for your time, we’ll send a dozen roses to anybody you want,”

Candace says.

“OK,” Paul says. There’s a lift in his voice. It’s his found-a-good-deal voice.

“On a scale of one to ten,” Candace says, “how satisfied are you with your car insurance service?”

“Uhhh,” Paul says, “Eight.”

“Great,” Candace says.

Brittney sits rigid in her seat with her sweatpants bunched in her hand. When Paul sends her the flowers it will be a chance to be sweet on each other again. Then she can tell him she wants to go back to Watertown. She’s sorry, but she just wants to work at her mom’s daycare and go to the movies with Kim on Friday nights. She wants to have people to talk to.

“And how likely will you be to renew your service with us?” Candace asks.

“Uhhh, eight,” Paul says.

“OK, great,” Candace says. “And then lastly we’ll just need to know where to send those flowers.”

“Uhhh,” Paul says. There’s silence on the line.

Brittney digs her fingers into her thigh. She remembers looking across the lawn of that high school party and seeing Paul touch lips with Megan Nelson. She remembers the steam from a nearby hot tub billowing past her and into the dark night. She remembers feeling ashamed and betrayed, and she remembers how, later, Paul promised her he would never look at another girl again. He said he was an idiot, and then he started punching the siding of Tabitha Thornton’s garage until Brittney said she forgave him.

There’s a rhythmic clanging sound, echoing over the phone.

“Yeah,” Paul says, then he stops for a moment. “Send them to Elnora.”

Brittney feels like frigid water has been poured down her throat and into her stomach.

“OK,” Candace says.

*Coffee & Espresso, Salads, & Café Sandwiches. Nature’s Finest Spring Water
Delivered Right To Your Door.*

“Elnora Coop,” Paul says.

Who? Brittney thinks.

How do I know that name?

“OK, and would you like to include a note?” Candace says.

This isn't real, Brittney thinks. *Fairchild's Hardware Open Since 1850. Not what's happening right now. This isn't real life.*

The drill moans in the background and they wait for Paul to think.

“Had a lot of fun,” Paul says. “Uhhh, hope we can see each other soon. Um. And then write, Love, Paul.”

No one says anything for a moment.

A small gasp, falls from Brittney's mouth and she starts to breathe again. *Be quiet.* She thinks. *Shh. Shhhh.*

“Hey Paul,” Donny says.

“Uhh,” Paul says. He sounds confused.

“Paul, this is Donny.”

“Hello. Who are you?” Paul says.

“Paul, I'm Donny here with Candace and Nacho from the Morning Q Crew.”

“Hm,” Paul says. “Uhhh.”

“Paul we have your wife, Brittney on the other line,” Donny says. “Brittney are you there?”

They're saying her name again. Time to say something.

She can play this role, just like she played Miss Dorothy Brown: *Oh, darling, wake up, dear. Wake up!*

Brittney says. “What the fuck, Paul? Who the fuck is Elnora?” The words fall into her head and she says them. She’s seen this sort of thing on the shows she watches on *E!*. It’s not a role she’s prepared for, but she’s at least seen it.

“Brittney,” Paul says. He stops and then he says slowly, like he’s in control of the this, “Brittney, this isn’t what you think.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to think? *Elnora*?” She’s heard this done before. The jilted wife. “You always tell me you’re *working*.” *Coffee & Espresso, Salads, & Café Sandwiches*.

“Brittney,” Paul says. “I am.”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Nacho says. He snorts.

Paul laughs. “I’m sorry, who are you?” he says.

“I’m Nacho Cheese from the Morning Q Crew,” Nacho says. He says it cheerfully, like he’s glad to get a plug in for his own brand.

“What the fuck, Paul?” Brittney says. She feels cramped. She can barely turn around in this kitchen.

They can’t even use the toaster and the coffee maker at the same time because there’s not enough room on the counters.

How does she know that name?

“Brittney,” Donny says. “We’re doing what we can on our end, but careful with those f-bombs.”

“Brittney,” Paul says. “Brit, I don’t think we should talk about this *here*.” He’s talking like he’s one step ahead of everybody else. He’s pathetic.

“Why don’t you just go *love* Elnora?” He’s a monster. He deserves Elnora, and she deserves him. “Just go be with *her*.”

The lines just come to her. It’s easy; it doesn’t even feel real. *The Weigh Station Café. The Weigh Station Café. The Weigh Station Café.*

“Brittney, I’m coming home,” Paul says.

“Don’t you dare,” Brittney says. “I don’t even want to look at you.”

Act III:

Then she remembers.

She knows Elnora.

Elnora who gets her her cappuccino.

“I know who that is,” Brittney breathes into the phone. “She works at the coffee shop.”

Paul gives a short laugh like she’s being ridiculous. He’s acting like she’s the one who’s embarrassing herself. He probably did fuck Megan Nelson, just like people said he did. “Brit,” he says. “I’m not gonna do this *here*. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Hey, Paul,” Donny says, but then Paul’s phone clicks off and the sound of the drilling stops. “Brittney, I think he hung up,” Donny says. He pauses, then says, “How you doing, Brit?”

How did this happen to me?

“I’m so sorry,” Candace says.

“I didn’t think that would actually work,” Nacho says.

Candace says, “Shhh.”

What do they want from me now?

“Brittney, you still there?”

She doesn’t know what to say. The words have stopped coming. *Fairchild’s Hardware Open Since 1850. Nature’s Finest Spring Water Delivered Right To Your Door.*

It feels like it’s all happening very slowly. Everything hangs in front of her like a cheap gimmick.

She puts the phone back on the hook.

Elnora at The Weigh Station. Paul is coming home.

She walks out of the kitchen like she’s going somewhere. She walks through the living room. She walks into the bathroom then turns around and walks back out.

On a scale of one to ten, how satisfied are you with your service?

Elnora. Elnora. Elnora.

It’s all new furniture in the living room. Two new couches and an entertainment center from Sturtzen’s on Main Street. But it’s too big for the small room, and Brittney hates it, hates it, she’ll never get used to it.

She doesn’t know what to do.

That bitch, she thinks.

Paul’s coming home.

Elnora, she thinks. Elnora.

She thinks about all the promises he made. That he’d love her even when she was an old lady. That he’d *provide* for her. That’s why they moved to Towanda. So they could get some money and start a family.

She was just nineteen years old when she said yes to him. Why did she think she needed to get married at *nineteen*?

He fooled her. He comes home from work drunk and half-asleep and he doesn't hold her.

She bangs her knee on one of the couches as she walks to the staircase.

I didn't think that would actually work.

She wants her mom or her little sister, or Kim, but they're all back in Watertown. She walks up the staircase to the bedroom. She thinks, *this is real. This is like, real, real-life. Elnora. Elnora.* She's just a girl who serves coffee. She's nothing. She's nobody.

He can't do this to me, Brittney thinks. Treat me like this. How can you fall in love with a girl at a coffee shop? Embarrass me.

Is this it? Is this over? What the hell comes after this?

That time he made out with Megan Nelson, Brittney wasn't married to him. He was just some horny high school boy.

I didn't think that would actually work.

Then he pretended to grow up; he came back around to humiliate her for good.

She walks up the narrow stairs and she decides what to do. She's going to confront Elnora. She's going to humiliate that washed up bitch. She's seen this before. She walks past the upstairs half-bathroom and turns into the bedroom. She drops to her knees on the bristly carpet and crawls to look beneath the bed. It's just like being Miss Dorothy Brown in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

She reaches under the bed and feels a tube of wrapping paper, the edge of a Rubbermaid container, and then the hammer. *That's not far from the truth, Millie.* She thinks. *Their fortune was founded in steel.*

Elnora and her stupid gaunt cheeks. Her cheap highlighted hair. She'll tell her to back the fuck off. Elnora's just a slut-nobody. The tool feels heavy and certain in her hand. *How satisfied are you with your service?* *Elnora. Elnora. Mrs. Elnora Shuff.* She would float right up to the ceiling if she let go of the hammer.

Paul's going to be home soon. Any minute. *He's not sorry. He'll say he's sorry but he's not sorry.* She stands up. Light streams in along the cracked edges of the nylon window shades. A pile of unfolded laundry sits on top of the dresser. Brittney looks at herself in the wall mirror. A line of sunlight falls diagonally across her waist. So what if she's decided she's a size ten? That's what she basically always was. She still has her body. She still has her grace. There's an advent calendar hanging beside the mirror that's been left there since Christmas.

She runs the heels of her hands along the narrow walls as she comes back down the stairs. The arm of the hammer slides against the plaster and the sound reverberates through the drywall. *How likely will you be to renew your service with us? Eight. Eight. Eight.*

She hates Towanda and the couches, but most of all she hates Paul. She wrapped her body around him in less dreamy places. A dusty garage, a soggy hayfield, a t-ball dugout.

She puts her feet into her boots and grabs her puffy red jacket from the floor. She takes her keys from the hook. She goes through the door and the day opens up on her like a flash bang in a dark tunnel.

Act IV:

She lowers her head and stomps across the muddy lawn toward her car. She tries to blink away the brightness. She opens the driver-side door, drops into the car seat, and shoves her key into the ignition.

She pushes her hair from her eyes, turns the wheel, and looks out the rear windshield. She backs out of the driveway. She puts the car into drive and begins her flight down 220.

It's cloudless, and the sun hangs low in the air like a gash in the sky. Alongside the road, water drips from the banks into the brown churn of the Susquehanna River.

Brittney knows exactly what she needs to do. She's seen it on TV – on *The Bachelor* and *16 and Pregnant*. She needs to tell Elnora to fuck off and die. She needs to put her in her place.

Elnora. Elnora's fucking her husband. Brittney thinks of all the times she *tipped* Elnora just to be nice. She's got a long neck and she's ugly skinny. She looks like a goose. The thought of it makes her crazy.

Lines of houses roll by like sets on wheels. The scene will start again soon; she feels ready. The hammer sits beside her in the passenger seat.

Homebreaker. How could she? Slut.

Brittney drives the five-minute route to The Weigh Station Café, and pulls into the stone lot. She looks at the renovated railroad station, beams stretching out to hold the roof up. It's painted a shade of light brown – mute, but newly done.

She steps outs of the car and feels the stones roll beneath her boots. She feels the hammer hanging from her hand.

All her Miss Dorothy Brown lines just keep flooding back to her: *Well, I'm looking for life raw and real. I'm going to be an actress on the stage.*

An actress? How exciting!

Yes, but I've got to live a lot first.

She swings open the door.

The café is empty except for a gasman in the corner who drags his eyes across her body like he's rubbing the steam from a bathroom mirror.

She walks across the hardwood floor toward the counter.

Another set of beams stretch along the tall ceiling. There's a mural along one wall – a bearded man with a guitar sings to groundhogs, rabbits, and a cross-eyed bear.

The gasman sees the hammer and sits up.

I didn't think that would actually work.

She sees Elnora sitting behind the glass baked-goods case, behind shelves of oversized muffins and croissants.

She's not that pretty. Her hipbones poke out from the edge of her jeans. She's wearing a skinny shirt and a pushup bra. She's probably a couple years older than Brittney, but looks much older – as old as thirty.

“Hi,” says Elnora, and she smiles and gives a half-wave. Then she sees the hammer in Brittney's hand. Elnora's thin eyebrows rise up in fear, and she steps back behind the baked-goods case.

Brittney lifts the hammer and it feels good in her hand.

How likely will you be to renew your service with us?

“Don’t!” Elnora shouts. She looks freaked out – like she didn’t do anything wrong.
“Stop!” Like Brittney is going to hurt her or something, instead of just tell her to eat shit.

Brittney prepares to bring the hammer crashing down through the glass and carrot cake.

“Please!” shouts Elnora.

Act V:

And for a moment Brittney stops.

Well, I am terribly upset about my career... The world of the stage just doesn’t seem to want me.

“I need this job,” Elnora says. She puts her palms up high, in surrender. “What is it?”

Brittney leaves the hammer hanging in the air like it still means something, like she didn’t already give up on her smash rampage the moment she saw the girl who’d made her cappuccinos for three months. She feels as scared as anyone. She doesn’t know what she’s supposed to do.

The gasman behind her in the restaurant says, “Everything OK with you ladies?”

Brittney says, “Why’d you steal my husband? He was supposed to be mine.”

Elnora steps to the side of the counter, over by the register. Her hands hang in the air, trying to calm Brittney. She doesn’t look like she understands. She looks like she’s thinking about it.

“Why would he send flowers to *you*,” Brittney says. She drops her arm and the hammer swings by her side. “You. *You*, and not me.”

Elnora puts her fingers on the counter and says, “I had no idea, I swear.” She leans forward and looks around the restaurant. “I didn’t know he was with anybody.”

“How could you not know?” Brittney says. She drops the hammer on the ground. It lands like a brick in a tin barrel.

“Thank you,” Elnora says. “My little boy thanks you.”

She has a son? thinks Brittney, and she doesn’t know whether it makes her hate Elnora more or less – she just knows it’s more knowledge that sits heavy in her gut.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t know anything,” Elnora says. She pauses, hesitates, and then asks, “Which one’s your husband?”

Brittney’s head spins for a moment. *Which one?* “Paul!” she says. “My husband’s Paul!”

Elnora looks uncertain. “Paul?” she says. “With the red hair?”

“Yes!” Brittney says. “Paul.”

“Paul’s the one who won’t leave *me* alone,” Brittney says.

The pieces are falling apart. She thought she knew this role, but it’s something else entirely.

Elnora’s acting like she doesn’t even like Paul very much.

“You haven’t been sleeping with my husband?” Brittney asks. Her breath feels tight in her chest.

“Once!” Elnora says, like sleeping with someone else’s husband once is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. She says, “Like, two months ago. In a truck.”

Once.

In a truck.

Brittney remembers how with his finger, he had traced the scar along her calf muscle and said, “This. I love this.”

“Barbed wire and roller skates,” she had said.

He ran his finger gently back and forth across the raised skin. He leaned across the bed and kissed it.

She must have only been 16. She didn’t know anything.

Brittney hears truck tires rolling fast against the gravel. She turns to look at the restaurant doors.

“Is that him?” Elnora says. She comes from behind the counter, walks past Brittney, and onto the restaurant floor of the renovated rail station.

“I don’t want to even look at him,” Brittney says. She steps behind the wire rack of potato chips.

Elnora says, “I don’t either.”

Elnora goes to the door and twists the metal lock. It bolts into place and the sound echoes through the room. Brittney sees Paul rush up the stairs. Then he slows down and looks at Elnora through the glass.

The gasman sitting in the restaurant says, “I’ll have to go here pretty soon.” He looks part interested in the action and part frustrated that he got caught up in it. He leans back in his chair and looks at Paul through the door.

“Just hold on a sec, Rodge” Elnora says. “Wait for this to blow over.”

Paul tries the door and finds it stuck. He doesn’t bang on it. He takes off his sunglasses and props them on top of his head. He watches what he can through the glass. He puts his hands in his pockets, and watches Elnora.

Elnora walks back past the square tables and to the counter. She looks at Brittney. Brittney grips the wire rim of the chip rack.

Elnora takes off her apron and drops it on the counter. Elnora shakes her head at Brittney slowly.

She pulls a stool out from behind the register, and slides it across the floor toward Brittney. “Sit down,” she says. She says, “I’m sorry. Please sit down.”

Brittney looks at Paul standing outside the glass doors. He has a red beard. He’s holding his hands up to the glass to try to see in.

Elnora clears a space for Brittney at the register. She pushes away a stack of brochures for Lowland’s Chip-N-Putt. Brittney sits down at the stool.

“I’m sorry,” Elnora says, and she puts her hand on Brittney’s forearm. Her fingers are cool but certain. “I got a little drunk one night and then next thing I knew I was in that truck.” Elnora slides her fingers off of Brittney’s arm and onto the counter. “I didn’t mean anything by it. He’s been a pain in my ass since – showing up at my house and work.”

Paul starts pounding on the glass door with his palm, and shouting Brittney’s name. Brittney looks up at him. It doesn’t seem like he can see her.

The gasman at the table asks, “Should I let him in?” like no one else has considered it yet.

“Jesus, Rodge,” Elnora says. “No, don’t let him in.”

“Come on!” Paul shouts. “Talk to me!”

Then he starts hitting the metal portion of the door with his fist. He hits it four times, hard, and the sound rattles through the big room.

“Is he gonna break those doors?” Elnora says.

Brittney stands up and walks across the wooden floor. She watches Paul bring her into focus through the glass door. His fist hangs in the air and she can see blood gathering in the shredded skin along his knuckles.

He points his finger past Brittney and says, “*She* came on to me.” The glass muffles the sound of his voice.

“I don’t care,” Brittney says. “Leave me alone, Paul.”

She watches him put his damaged fist in his other hand. It won’t work this time. She won’t come nurse and forgive him.

Brittney turns and walks back toward the counter.

“What the fuck, Brittney?” Paul says. He starts punching the metal again.

Rodge stands up from his table and goes to the door. He’s a tall man with a big stomach hanging over his belt.

“The girl doesn’t want to talk to you right now,” he says.

“Who the *fuck* is this guy?” Paul says. “Come on, Brittney, I really hurt my hand.”

Rodge says, “Maybe you better leave.”

Brittney sits down at the counter and says, “What am I gonna do? I married him.”

She turns and looks back at the door. Paul is glaring at Rodge through the glass. Paul says, “Hey, fuck you, buddy.”

Then he turns and goes down the stairs.

Brittney watches him walk slowly across the parking lot. He looks back and forth – across Merrill Parkway and at the brown Susquehanna River. He drags his boots through the stones. Brittney feels her stomach turn in her body. He opens the door to his truck and says loud enough for them all to hear, “I don’t need this shit.”

Just like that, he's leaving. Kim was right.

Brittney looks down at the laminated menu on the counter: she looks at the lists of coffee and espresso, salads, and café sandwiches. She doesn't know what to feel. There's a glass jar of oatmeal cookies on the counter, plugged shut with a metal stopper.

Elnora says to Brittney, "I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just a mom." She says, "I used to chase after guys, but now I'm just a mom."

Brittney looks down at the hammer on the floor.

"I'll make you a drink," Elnora says, and she pushes herself away from the counter and stands up straight. "Let me."

"No," Brittney says, quickly. "No, no, thank you."

Elnora slides a white coffee cup beneath the nozzle. She turns on the espresso machine and it begins to grind. "I'm getting you a cappuccino and a warm croissant. It'll make you feel better."

Brittney watches Elnora move confidently between the espresso machine and the baked goods. With grace she slides a chocolate croissant out of the baked good case and into the warm oven. She moves assertively.

Rodge turns away from the door and looks at them. "You all right?" he asks.

"She'll be OK," Elnora says, and Brittney's grateful someone feels that way.

Elnora scoops the croissant out of the oven with a metal spatula, and slides it on to a ceramic plate. The plate clanks gently against the counter. Elnora slides it toward her.

Brittney puts the croissant to her tongue, and it melts. She tastes salt and chocolate and breathes the warmth of the buttery bread.

“I’ll read the paper for five minutes,” says Rodge. “In case he comes back. Then I need to get out of here.”

“How is it?” Elnora asks, standing on the other side of the counter.

“Really good,” Brittney says.

The two of them sit like that across the counter from each other, not talking much, but some. No questions, just an occasional volunteering of information: Elnora is going to see her son this weekend; Brittney’s friend Kim is having a birthday next month and she still needs to get her something; the best place to eat Italian food around here is Serpico’s on Route 6.

The sun falls through the windows and lights the thin layer of dust on the floor. A refrigerator moans quietly back in the kitchen. Brittney rolls the arches of her feet back and forth on the metal rung of the stool.

They sit like this for another twenty minutes. Then Rodge says he really better get back to work.

A Little Wicked Goes Away

A hundred people stand on a stretch of trampled grass along a dirt track. A few teenage kids have walked further into the woods, where there's a catapult jump.

It's already six, and it's starting to get dark. The clouds are thick, and a cold haze hangs in the air.

Eight men are sitting on dirt bikes, shifting back and forth from foot to foot: left then right, left then right, scratching their toes through the dirt.

They'll ride twenty laps, weaving through sharp-bended forest paths.

The night smells of diesel and pine. A canopy of branches stretches across the sky. Peepers chirp from every direction, lending a cushion to the growling of the idling bikes.

Caleb stands at the trackside, watching his best friend, Derek. Derek is balanced by the starting line on his Yamaha 450 cc four-stroke.

Madness has been trickling into Derek's mind for months. Medication patched it up for a little while, but now the roof's caved in.

Derek believes he has an army of dead Indians chasing after his soul; he's very confident that he has this accurate.

Caleb knows that this is real to Derek, just as it would be insane to anybody else.

A week ago, Derek turned up an old Indian graveyard when he was digging a frack pond for work. His boss had him rebury the bones on the edge of the property. Now Derek believes he's unleashed a squadron of demons.

Leaning his helmeted head from side to side, as if he was trying to see behind every tree, Derek explained to Caleb that if he didn't win this race, an Indian army would rampage through the state.

"They're trying to catch me so they can get to you," Derek said. "So they can get to everybody." Derek stared off into the crook of a nearby birch tree. He said, "I have to race."

Caleb doesn't know how he *could* stop Derek. Derek should probably be in a psych ward, but is he actually a danger to himself? Is he a danger to others? That's the sort of thing that's hard to determine until something bad's already happened.

Derek's one of the best riders in northern Pennsylvania; he finds the right lines, and he doesn't hesitate. He can win this thing. Maybe that will put his troubles to rest for a little while.

"I can't keep you from getting on this bike," Caleb said. He looked at the dirt embedded in the tread of Derek's rear tire. "Just be smart out there."

When he was twenty-two years old, Derek moved to West Virginia for a two-year stint on a series of natural gas pads.

Sometimes Caleb wouldn't hear from him for months. Other times, he'd be fielding calls from Derek three or four times a day. Derek went through stretches where he was afraid for no reason at all.

He would ask Caleb about childhood memories to make sure they had, in fact, happened. Their childhoods were filled with shared experiences. Caleb's mom was a drunk, and Caleb had spent plenty of evenings and weekends with Derek and his family.

Caleb told Derek, that, yes, they had helped Mr. Shelton resurface his driveway.

Yes, they had accidentally driven the rider mower into the pond.

Yes, Derek's dad was super pissed.

Caleb remembered.

Though Derek was off in West Virginia, Caleb still spent a lot of time with Derek's family.

He would often sit with them at the dinner table, and he would eat with Derek's parents, Rachel and Wyatt, and Derek's younger sister, Brielle. They would talk about easy things – sports, TV shows, and the condition of the backyard garden. They talked a lot about things that had already happened: the time Caleb accidentally clocked Derek in the teeth with a yo-yo; the time Derek's grandma had let the three of them watch *Children of the Corn* and *Full Metal Jacket*; the time a hot air balloon landed in the backyard.

Caleb didn't tell them that Derek's mind was crumbling away.

They didn't seem to know and he didn't want to scare them.

Caleb remembered the time when he and Derek were ten years old, and they were screwing around past their bedtime.

They had been crashing through Derek's bedroom in the dark, pretending to be Derek's crazy uncle, Chase.

They were imitating the voices of demons. They were rasping and snarling. They were waving their flashlight beams around the dark room.

Chase had tried to burn his house down with his family inside. He had locked his wife and two daughters in the cellar. They just barely managed to escape out a basement window.

Caleb and Derek knew about this and didn't understand it.

Laughing about Chase felt daring, and that seemed better than being scared.

Then the bedroom door flew open. It slammed against the wall. The light went on. Caleb dropped to his sleeping bag and Derek ran to his bed.

Wyatt stood there in just his underpants. He was hairy, and a little past the point where a man decides to let his body go.

He stomped over to the bed, and pointed his finger between Derek's eyes.

"Don't you ever talk about my brother," he said. He didn't yell. He was too mad and focused to yell. "You don't know anything about Chase."

"I'm sorry," whimpered Derek. "I'm sorry."

He said, "It could happen to anybody, what happened to him." Wyatt turned his head and looked at Caleb and said, "You two don't know anything about it."

He turned and left the room.

Wyatt was a loving man. He typically greeted his kids with hugs or high-fives when he got home from work. He kissed Rachel whenever he sat down at the dinner table.

So Caleb and Derek sat in the bedroom feeling ashamed and confused and scared. Derek got up from the bed and closed the door and turned off the light.

It wasn't until Derek moved out to West Virginia that his mind started shifting. For a while it was hard for Caleb to know it was happening. It's a hard thing to sense over the phone.

Then Chesapeake Energy gave Derek his transfer back to Towanda.

When Derek came home, maybe things got better for him. It was hard to say. Sometimes he could hold a real conversation, even if he seemed a bit distracted. Then sometimes he would start throwing curve balls.

At the first dinner when they were all back together, Derek reached out to his mom and Caleb for their hands. Caleb knew that this was weird. Derek's family only said grace at Christmas and Easter dinner.

Caleb looked around the table, then bowed his head.

Derek said:

“We thank you, Lord, for this beautiful dinner. We pray that you will bless us with hearing and seeing. We pray that you forgive us for our interest in swimming as a

recreational activity. Please forgive the members of the electricians' guild for their corruption of this state. Thank you, Lord. Amen.”

They were all looking up at this point.

Derek reached for the serving bowl on the table and started scooping pasta on to his plate. He took a sip from his water. He asked his dad to pass him the salt and pepper.

Caleb feels the evening chill breathe down the neck of his jacket. He looks down the track and appreciates the seriousness of the first horseshoe bend. He doesn't like this course; there are too many moguls, too many switchbacks, too many places where the birch trees hug alongside the trail like ribs.

Caleb puts his hands in his pockets and turns around when he hears the electric hum of the speakers. There's an overweight man in a denim jacket with a buzzcut, a beard, and a microphone.

“Hello,” he says into the mic. “Hello, and welcome to the 1st annual Barnhart Brothers Truck Depot Motocross Madness. I'm Bobbie Barnhart, and I'll be your host this evening. Boy, this weather is dreadful, huh? But we're sure gonna have a beautiful time out here.”

There's shouting from the starting line. People turn to look. It's Derek. He's shouting into the air. Most of the noise is muffled by his helmet and the trees above him. He's shouting something about a curse and the end of the world.

The men on the other bikes shift their heads nervously.

The crowd leans forward, intrigued.

Through the summer, Derek was pretty stable. Then in September he started talking about all the people who were watching him. Derek thought the Towanda Senior High School was tracking him through his student ID number, even though he graduated six years ago.

He was convinced he had a very important secret in his mind that he had to protect. He didn't yet know what it was, but he couldn't let anybody else get it.

Derek's mom knew something was wrong.

"Have you noticed him acting like a crazy-person?" she asked Caleb before one of their dinners.

But how could he tell her? How could he say that Derek thought – what seemed to be maybe about a third of the time – that she was trying to kill him? The other two thirds of the time he agreed with Caleb that that was a crazy idea.

"Let's give him a little time," said Caleb. "He'll snap out of it."

Derek showed up half an hour late, and they finally all sat down at the table. Derek reached for Caleb and his mother's hands. He bowed his head. Caleb reached across the table and took Brielle's hand in his.

Derek said:

"We thank you, Lord, for giving us the sight of what we've seen. We hope for no violence. Today, we wore socks even though we don't like them. Please relieve us of our sins in the manner of exercise."

Caleb felt Brielle's damp hand squeeze his in confusion, like, *Jesus, what's happening? What's my brother doing?*

Caleb looked across the table at his friend and said, “Derek, you doing alright?”

It looked like Brielle was about to cry.

Wyatt was rubbing his forehead with the fingers of his right hand.

“Yeah,” said Derek, looking up from scooping mashed potatoes. “Why, what’s up?”

“What’s going on, Derek?” asked Wyatt. “What’s making you say those things?”

“What things?” said Derek.

Bobbie Barnhart fires his pistol into the air. For a moment the riders disappear inside a veil of exhaust. Then Derek launches out ahead of the cloud and barrels toward that horseshoe bend.

He accelerates even as he approaches the curve. He yanks the handlebars and tries to channel his momentum into something useful. Instead, the bike fishtails. He slides dangerously off the track and the rear wheel of the bike knocks against a tree.

There’s a gasp from the crowd.

People squint to try to see down the dark track.

Derek is shouting. He turns the wheel, kicks off, and guns his bike back onto the trail.

A couple of guys swerve to avoid hitting him.

Derek’s riding like he’s got demons after him.

Most nights Derek biked with Caleb and some other guys on the trails by Carbon Run. But last week, Derek didn’t show up two nights in a row, and he didn’t answer his phone.

Caleb went to Derek’s apartment.

Derek opened the door and Caleb walked into the living room and sat down on the couch. The apartment looked fine. There was a magazine, a water glass, and a remote on the coffee table. The shelves were organized. It looked like he had cleaned recently.

Everything looked fine, except there was a raw pork chop taped to front of the flat screen TV.

Caleb looked at the pork chop then back at Derek and then back at the pork chop. Caleb looked at the dried trail of blood running down into the plastic frame of the TV.

Derek just stared off at the doorway to the kitchen, like he was watching something happening. But there was nothing there.

“TV-cooking that pork chop?” said Caleb. He laughed. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“Huh?” said Derek. He looked at Caleb and then back at the doorway to the kitchen. “That’s to neutralize their receptors.”

Caleb sat up on the couch.

“What’s going on, Derek?” Caleb said. “Haven’t seen you in a few days.”

“Can I tell you something?” Derek asked. He shifted his attention back to Caleb. He looked at Caleb with the same terrifying intensity he had been watching the doorway. He was clean-shaven and bug-eyed.

“Yeah, tell me, man. What’s going on?”

“We dug a flowback pond this week,” said Derek. “By the Neo pads.” Derek looked back at the doorway and then leaned forward and whispered to Caleb, “We dug up some evil shit.”

“There are bad spirits after me,” said Derek. “*Real* bad stuff. You can probably feel it in here.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Caleb. “Remember the Indians we learned about in school. Remember what Towanda means?”

“I don’t know,” said Derek. He rubbed his chin with the palm of his hand. He watched the kitchen doorway. “The Russians control all the money in the world.”

Caleb said, “No, man. It’s an Indian word. It means ‘graveyard.’ Tons of Indians were buried around here.”

Derek sat up straight and said, “Ah, but buried by who?” But he asked the question in a weird way, like they were talking about a word puzzle or something.

“Derek,” said Caleb. “Have you talked to your mom about this?”

“Rachel?” said Derek, like it was an absurd question. He looked at Caleb in disbelief. “Oh, no. I haven’t spoken to Rachel in two years, at least. At *least*.”

When Caleb gets on his bike, it’s just like everything is coming at him as fast as he can respond. If he can’t *see* it any faster, he can’t respond any faster.

But when Derek’s on a bike, it’s as if he anticipates every grain of dirt beneath his tire. He knows how the bike will fly off each hill, and how it will settle on each landing.

Derek rides without regard for the other men on the track. He takes dangerous lines. He rides without fear of crashing. He’s riding like he’s part miracle and whatever’s left is monster.

Caleb stands there terrified of what he's watching. Derek's tearing around trees. Hitting jumps hard. Riding faster than anyone with half a brain would dare.

But Derek doesn't seem happy with how fast he's going. He seems like he wants to be going much faster.

"Honey," said Rachel. "Let's not say grace tonight. Let's just enjoy our dinner."

Derek stared at his mother. He said, "You expect me to trade you a year of bliss for lasagna?"

Rachel looked down at her plate.

"Derek, leave your mom alone," said Caleb. "You're not yourself." He reached over and put his hand on Derek's shoulder. "Derek, stay with us. Just look at this beautiful dinner."

"Did you take your medicine?" asked Wyatt.

Derek searched out Caleb's hand and took it in his own. He also searched out Rachel's hand and took it in his own.

Caleb looked at Brielle and she looked back at him as if to say, *Help. What happened to him? Please just help.*

"Derek, how about you let me take a shot at it?" asked Caleb. And he looked back at Brielle like, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying.*

And Derek said:

"We come to you as soldiers of peace and violence. We pray that you let us go east, and don't make us sacrifice those we love. Save us and deliver us to this lasagna dinner. Thank you, Lord. Amen."

Then Derek opened his eyes and looked at them.

“Jesus, son,” said Wyatt. He reached forward and took his water glass in his hand, but he didn’t move it; it was just as though he needed to hold onto something.

Brielle and Rachel were crying. Caleb still had Brielle’s hand in his and he squeezed it quickly like – *It’ll be all right* – before he tried to let it go. But she didn’t let go of him, so he held her hand back, and wanted her to be OK.

Rachel stood up quickly and walked out of the room.

“You’re scaring us pretty good, Derek,” said Caleb.

“I have sixteen hundred dollars in American Express travelers checks,” said Derek.

“We’re not talking about that,” said Caleb.

Something clicked a little bit behind Derek’s eyes. He looked confused with himself. He looked up at Caleb and said, “Don’t pay attention to me. I think I’m a little off tonight.”

“Did you take your medicine today?” asked Wyatt.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe I forgot this morning.”

They could all hear Rachel sobbing in the living room.

Derek leaned back in his chair and said, “Hey, Mom.” He listened for a second and then said, “Mom, come on.”

Derek looked at them all like, *Can you believe this?*

He pushed back his chair and stood up. He walked out of the room.

Derek escorted his Mom back to the table. He held her chair for her while she sat down.

“Looks delicious, Mom,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

They ate.

Derek asked Wyatt if they were still going to re-shingle the garage in the Spring.

He asked Brielle if Mr. Marsh was still giving her a hard time about her writing. Then he told the story about the time he and Caleb had filled Mr. Marsh's desk drawers with Corn Flakes.

He asked if Mr. Marsh still had those sweaty armpits.

He laughed, and then while he was laughing he suddenly looked like he had lost track of his own punchline. Caleb could see the look on his face that he was trying to keep track of it.

Then he asked if Mr. Marsh still kept Indian scalps in the classroom refrigerator.

No.

No, Mr. Marsh had never done that.

After dinner, Caleb sat in the living room with Rachel and Wyatt. Derek was out in the garage, working on his bike.

"He thinks he's going to race tomorrow," said Rachel.

No one said anything. Caleb sat alone on the loveseat, chewing his bottom lip. Wyatt stared down at his hands, clasped in front of him.

"We have to take him to the hospital," said Rachel. She looked at Wyatt. "Think about your brother."

After Chase had tried to burn down the house with his family inside, he went to prison. At the end of his sentence, when Caleb and Derek were just starting high school, he was released back into the world. Derek told Caleb that he wasn't supposed to be nuts-o anymore. But over the next six months, it became clear he still was.

Caleb remembers overhearing Wyatt argue about Chase over the phone with his sister-in-law. She wasn't going to have him around their children. Well, if he was still dangerous, Wyatt wasn't going to have him around his family either. As Caleb understands it, they admitted him to an institution for a few years, but the cost was too great. Chase lived by himself for a while and had a job at a department store. Then he just kind of wandered off.

They thought he was camping somewhere in the northwest. But they don't talk about it. They don't know how.

"I think he just didn't take his medicine this morning," said Wyatt. He looked up at his wife.

"He said so at dinner."

They sat there for a minute, not saying anything.

It's like if they said, *He's got what Chase got*, then it would be like saying, *He might do what Chase tried to do*.

And in acknowledging that possibility, in a small but irreversible way, it would be like Derek had already done it.

"He's had a stressful week," said Caleb.

Rachel turned to him quickly. “Have they had him doing double-shifts? It’s not good for him.”

“No, he’ll be OK,” said Caleb. “He just needs to take his medicine.”

Caleb said he would stay with Derek overnight. He’d make sure he took his medicine in the morning. They would reevaluate the next day.

Bobbie Barnhart has a floodlight hooked up to his truck. A wall of white light washes over the starting line. Two bikers fly past; the heat from their bikes mixes with the cold air, and leaves a thick trail of steam in their wake. The effect would be exciting if this race wasn’t so entirely out of hand.

Derek flashes past. There’s a dense cloud chasing after him, like something wicked trying to swallow him whole.

Caleb knows something has been chasing Derek for a long time. He’s known it was there, but he’s never seen it.

Now he sees it.

And he stands there wishing that seeing it would help him know what to do for his friend, but it doesn’t.

Derek’s possessed and unrecognizable. He’s something else entirely.

Caleb watches him disappear again around the bend. He turns and looks at the sea of ghostly faces alongside the floodlight.

He sees Brielle. She looks back at him

She looks old. She looks like a forty-year old woman, though she’s barely eighteen.

And she looks at him like, *How'd you let him race?*

And he looks at her.

I didn't. I didn't.

I tried.

The night before, Caleb stayed over with Derek the night before. He had promised Rachel and Wyatt that he would keep an eye on him.

So he lay on the bony futon in the living room, and couldn't sleep. He heard Derek get up several times over the course of the night to use the bathroom. At least twice, he knew Derek was standing in the darkness of the kitchen doorway and watching him. And he pretended that he didn't know it.

And he thought of all the times he slept over at Derek's place when they were kids, and they made up monsters just because it used to be fun and safe to be scared.

Now it's dangerous.

And he wished he knew how to follow Derek into this new set of nightmares, so maybe he could try to bring him back.

In the morning, Caleb stood beside Derek at the kitchen sink and watched him swallow his pills.

He seemed better.

He sat beside Caleb on the futon and they watched *Dog The Bounty Hunter*.

Derek explained why he was going to race later that day.

"It keeps me focused," said Derek. "It's one thing I can still do right."

“Not this one,” said Caleb. “Your mom and dad want you to sit this one out.”

“It’s not like I need your permission,” said Derek.

Caleb looked at his friend, but Derek was just staring at the TV.

His face was gaunt. He’d lost weight.

“They’ll put you in the hospital,” said Caleb. “It’s not your fault, but you’re scaring people.”

They watched the TV.

“I guess I’ve got what my Uncle Chase got,” said Derek.

Caleb looked at Derek and he wished he could disagree with him.

But instead he didn’t say anything.

And after a while he finally said, “You’ll be OK. People live with this thing.”

Derek looked like he wasn’t listening to Caleb or the TV. He looked like he was listening to something else.

Caleb said, “Hey, I’m gonna jump in the shower real quick, OK? Then we’ll go eat.”

But when he got out of the shower Derek wasn’t there anymore.

Every ten minutes he had tried to call Derek on his cellphone.

Derek’s truck was still in the driveway, but the bike was gone.

Caleb got in his car and went searching. He chain-smoked cigarettes and weaved through the valleys of Bradford County. He drove too fast, weaving and weaving and breathing in the smoke from his cigarettes and the pine scent from the air freshener and making himself feel sick.

No luck.

Finally he called Brielle.

“Derek hasn’t come by the house, has he?”

No, she hadn’t seen him all day.

Caleb stared out the windshield of his car, at the rainwater trickling down and dropping from the boulders on the hillside. He thought of the hundreds of miles of dirt paths running through Bradford County, and he knew that Derek could be anywhere.

But he’d be in one place exactly very soon.

Caleb watches the shadow of Derek appear on the tabletop on the far side, then dip and disappear again back into the trees.

He watches the rear hallway – two hundred feet further down the track – and waits for Derek to escape back out from the forest.

And he thinks of Derek’s Uncle Chase who tried to burn down his house with his family inside it.

And he thinks of how even if Chase did go back to his old self, nobody would ever forget the evil thing that lived inside him.

And he thinks of how bad it feels to not know what to do about something like this, and how sometimes it feels a little bit better to just try to ignore it.

Rain starts to fall again.

Caleb watches and waits.

Back in the deep woods, the motors on the bikes cut out, one at a time. Derek doesn't reappear.

Derek is crumpled on top of a web of gnarled roots on the edge of the track. Steam billows from his body. The bike sits twenty feet further back on the trail.

Derek's head is crooked against his shoulder; his arms are splayed out behind him. And Caleb sits down on his haunches, on a ground layered with dead pine needles, and cries.

Caleb knows that there was nothing he could have done differently to save him.

Because if Derek didn't dig up the old bodies of fifty dead Indians, then it was just a matter of time before someone gave him a funny look in the grocery store. And if he didn't die today, then he would have died slowly on medication that would have ceased to make real life feel like anything at all.

There was something small and sinister that had decided to come alive in Derek's brain, and Caleb cries for all the moments when the real Derek still came back alive and felt more confused than anybody.

Later on in the night, they walk through the front door of Brielle's home and Rachel is standing in the living room looking at them.

They all stand there looking at each other, then Wyatt comes into the room and Caleb looks down at his shoes and says, "Derek crashed his bike. He's dead."

"You're lying!" Rachel yells at Caleb. "Why would you say that?"

“No, he’s gone, Mom,” says Brielle. Her face is white. Her eyes shine red. “He’s dead.”

Rachel searches the living room for her purse, then finds it on the couch. She takes out her cell phone and tries calling Derek.

“Derek, call me back when you get this,” she says. Her voice is trembling. “Call me right away.”

Wyatt takes the phone from her hand and puts it on the coffee table. He hugs her and says, “It’s OK, sweetie. It’s OK.”

The phone vibrates on the coffee table. “It’s him!” Rachel shouts. “It’s him!” And she struggles in Wyatts’s arms.

Wyatt says, “No, it’s not. It’s not him.”

She slaps her hands at his face and shakes free and picks up the phone.

“Who is this?” she says.

Caleb can’t hear the words, but the voice sounds somber and steady.

She drops the phone to the floor. She looks at Caleb, and says, “You were supposed to protect him.”

Caleb looks back at her and at first he’s feeling, *I’m sorry. I’m sorry.*

But then he’s feeling, *No, you were. Where were you?*

Wyatt picks the phone up from the floor and puts it to one ear, and covers the other ear with his hand. He walks into the dining room.

“Yes, this is his father,” he says.

They listen to Wyatt's voice echo in the dining room.

"Yes."

Rachel sits on the couch with her palm over her mouth, not looking at anybody.

"Yes," says Wyatt.

Brielle stands beside Derek, shaking then stopping to listen, shaking then stopping to listen.

"I understand," says Wyatt.

Caleb puts his hand on Brielle shoulder, and then rubs her upper back.

"Thank you for calling," says Wyatt.

Rachel pushes herself up from the couch quickly, and walks to the door of the dining room.

"Let's sit here for a minute," says Wyatt. "Come sit beside me."

Brielle follows her mom, leaving Caleb's hand hanging in the air. Caleb stands there thinking, *It's too late. You're too late. There's nothing to do.*

Caleb walks into the dining room. Rachel's sitting at her usual spot at the head of the table.

Wyatt and Brielle are on the far side. It's as if they're all sitting down for dinner, and Derek's back out in West Virginia.

Rachel looks at him and then puts her hand on the chair beside her. "Come sit with us," she says. "I'm sorry."

Caleb stands in the doorway thinking, *I tried. What do you want from me now?*

"Please just sit down," says Wyatt.

And Caleb puts his hand on the chair, but he stops.

“Sit, sweetie,” says Rachel. “Sit here with us.”

So he pulls out the chair and he sits. Rachel reaches out to him and he puts his hand in hers. And Brielle reaches across the table and he takes her hand, too.

“I’m sorry,” Rachel says. “You’re one of us. I don’t say that enough. You’re our family.”

They sit there together, holding each other’s hands.

“Maybe I’ll try saying a little something,” says Wyatt.

Don’t, thinks Caleb. *Please don’t*.

“What is it, honey?” says Rachel. “Go ahead.”

“I don’t think anyone’s to blame,” says Wyatt. “That’s what I want to say.”

Wyatt looks up at Rachel, like he’s asking her permission to go on. She nods her head.

“My brother had it, and no one could help him.” Wyatt takes his hand out of Rachel’s grip and rubs his eyes. He puts his hand back and looks at Caleb. He asks him, “Do you think Derek felt loved?”

Caleb clears his throat and says, “I think so,” but he knows that he didn’t. He was only afraid, most of the time.

“I hope so,” says Wyatt. “That’s the most important thing to me.”

Wyatt looks down at the table and thinks for a moment. “Part of me’s just grateful Derek didn’t hurt anybody else.” He looks back up at Caleb, like he’s asking him to understand.

Caleb feels Brielle's hand grip his own. And he feels Rachel's hand grip his own.

"Do you know what I mean?" Wyatt asks. "Is it OK for me to say that?"

Crossing Swarthwood Hill at Night

Earlier in the night, Benny had been sitting with his head dropped back against the futon, feeling misery stir through his gut. Then Jared called and said they were going to build a big-ass fire out in the woods and he should come along. Benny looked around his attic apartment – at the Rubbermaid container full of his shirts and jeans, at the curtain across the bathroom doorframe, at the hole in the ceiling above the stove. He had been planning to fix this place up.

But he didn't see the point now.

Benny told Jared that he would come. Jared said he'd pick him up at nine.

It's late September. The night hangs around them like a windbreaker taken from a cold car trunk. The logs in the fire pit are just beginning to dry out and crackle.

Benny's with Jared, Kyle, and Lewis. He sits on a big cold rock with the soles of his sneakers pointed toward the flames.

He asks if Caleb – a guy they know – is still looking for a housemate.

Kyle tucks his chin into his jacket and laughs. “Yeah, but he’s on parole. He’s got a no-booze-in-the-house rule.” Kyle digs the heels of his sneakers into the dirt.

Benny thinks that he could get over the no alcohol thing if he liked Caleb. But he doesn’t.

Jared takes a long swig of bourbon. He says, “You can crash on my couch again for a little while.”

“I’m not crashing on anybody’s couch,” Benny says. He puts his hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt. He adjusts himself on the rock. He says, “I’m done doing that.”

Benny thinks that after a while he’ll catch a ride back to Homets Ferry with Jared. But somewhere along the way, Jared gets drunk.

Kyle and Lewis drag sleeping bags and blankets out from the back of Kyle’s car. Jared has a big blue tarp.

Benny asks, “You guys planned to sleep here the whole time?”

“What –” Jared says, “I’m tired.” He hangs his blanket over his head like a hooded cape. He says, “Plus I’m a little drunk. Not drunk, but buzzed.”

Benny thinks he might try to walk home, but he got a little disoriented on the ride through those woods. The road had coiled through the trees.

“Why don’t you just knock out for a few hours?” Jared says. “I’ll get you home by, like, six.”

“No one told me to bring stuff,” Benny says.

They’re on a random ten acres of forest belonging to Kyle’s dad; he’s another guy who’s been buying up properties.

“Here, you can have my tarp,” Jared says. The tarp has aluminum ringlets running along the top.

“That’s not gonna keep me warm,” Benny says.

“It’ll keep you dry,” Kyle says. Kyle’s wearing an orange winter hat and layers of flannel and fleece. Everybody seems prepared for this occasion, except for Benny. Benny’s wearing a sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers.

“Plus I’m starving,” Benny says. “Jared told me you guys were bringing hotdogs.”

Kyle grunts and says, “If you wanted hotdogs, you should have brought hotdogs.”

Lewis walks toward the fire, gripping the end of a split log in each hand. He drops them on and embers spit up and fly through the air.

“Why didn’t you?” says Lewis. “I’d go to town on some hotdogs.”

Benny is the Assistant General Manager at The Electric Cowboy. His uncle, Darryl, owns the place. In 2005, Darryl started buying up stray land in Bradford County.

Then, just like Darryl said they would, the gas companies really did come.

Darryl rented all his properties and moved to the Midwest.

Towanda used to be Benny’s home. Now it’s more of a Monopoly board.

Lewis and Kyle are lying near the fire. Lewis has his sleeping bag zipped all the way up to his neck. Kyle is wrapped like a burrito inside a large fleece blanket.

The fire is glowing; the embers are putting off heat.

Jared tells Benny that if he wants to walk home all he would have to do is get over this hill. He'd go right past the Shoemaker Pad. After that, he'd hit Norway Ridge Road. Then he'd be about a mile from his house.

Benny wants to go back home, eat a can of soup, and sleep on his futon.

Jared says, "I don't think you should do it, though. You might get all turned around in those woods."

Benny says. "It's not like I've never gone through the woods before."

"It's not far," says Jared. "But it's dark as shit."

Benny looks at the wall of night and feels he has something to gain by diving through it. He knows these woods. He knows this place.

He knows he should leave Towanda, just like his uncle did. But where would he go and what would he do? He tried school; it didn't take. He did two semesters at Corning Community for a degree in nursing. He went through a bad patch with some guys from Elmira who had an over-fondness for opiates. The drugs made him tired. The classes made him depressed. He gave them both up, and looked for work.

Benny floated around Towanda: for a while he lived in the basement of his parents' house. Then he stayed in Jared's living room. Then for about eight months, he lived with George Briggs, an old man he helped to the toilet a dozen times a day for a free place to stay.

He worked at Dunkin Donuts. The energy men came to town and ordered poppyseed muffins and egg and bacon sandwiches. Benny felt something big coming. These guys wore nice boots, spoke in heavy drawls, and put money in the tip cup. Benny wanted in.

Darryl was trying to maintain his new properties. Benny started working for him a few times a week. He cleared brush and chopped wood. He painted exteriors. Benny told Darryl he'd quit his other job if there was enough work. Darryl kept telling him to be patient.

Then Darryl renovated that garage and turned it into the bar. He asked Benny if he would take a sabbatical from his breakfast sandwiches.

Benny smiled and said he'd goddamn retire.

For almost a year, Darryl's been paying him fourteen an hour at The Electric Cowboy and giving him free rent. Darryl's got him in that efficiency in the attic of one of his properties.

"It's a starter home," he told Benny. "Just watch: they get nicer."

There's benzene and methane in the aquifer. It started leaking in before Benny moved into the place. Darryl told Benny the treatment system makes it safe to drink. But then Jared told Benny he saw people on the news who were losing their hair and getting nasty rashes because of these methane leaks; some of them wouldn't even use their water to shower. Benny figured there were two sides to every story.

But he did stop drinking out of the tap.

For the first few months, Benny lugged cases of water up the rickety exterior stairs to his attic. Then he decided there's water in coffee. There's water in orange juice. There's even water in beer. Sometimes on his way to work he grabs a vitamin water at the Sunoco. It seems to be working out OK.

Benny turns from the fire, turns from his friends, and walks down the forest path toward the darkness. There's a wall of trees on either side. It's completely black.

It's scary doing this – going through the woods at night.

He tells himself that his eyes will adjust. He walks slowly up the path listening to the sound of his sneakers on the gravel. He looks up and blinks. The sky's soaked through with stars. It's bright above the tall walls of forest. The black silhouettes of the trees are vivid against the night sky.

The sound of gravel beneath his shoes softens for a moment, and he turns to find the path again. He looks down and can't see a thing.

He traces the tree line with his hands. He feels birch bark beneath his palms. He feels the teeth of a holly bush run across his skin.

He's afraid. Part of the fear is for the very natural ways he might hurt himself stomping through a forest at night; the other part is for monsters.

All the things he has ever imagined killing him now have a thousand places to hide. Animals, psychopaths, the Blair Witch.

He tenses up at the sound of every snapping twig – every rustling leaf. He feels like every flicker in the darkness might be something that's coming to kill him.

He stops for a moment and tries to collect himself. He thinks about how he's twenty-eight years old. He should know how to make sure to eat dinner each night. He should know to dress warm enough. He shouldn't be afraid.

He steps to the side and tries again.

He pushes deeper through the brush on the edge of the forest. Thorns bite into his jeans and scratch across his skin. He feels blood trickling down his ankle and collecting at the cuff of his sock.

He hasn't eaten anything since that Pop-Tart this morning. He's starving. He's bargaining with the distance between himself and his home. He will be the designated driver from now on if he can just get to Norway Ridge. He will bring the hotdogs to all future bonfires if he can just get something to eat. He will help Kyle's dad clean up this brush if he can just get untangled from these prickles.

He lifts up the sleeve of his sweatshirt, wondering what he's tangled up in now. Burdock. He's covered in burdock. Patches of it stick to him like Velcro.

Benny and Darryl had been sitting in the back office of The Electric Cowboy. Darryl was back in town taking care of some things. The office was crowded with boxes of plastic cups and coasters. It smelled like fruit punch and bleach.

Benny had asked Darryl why he left. Everything he did in Ohio was the same as what he did in Towanda. He grew spinach and tomatoes. He refinished old furniture. He hunted for cheap real estate.

"I bought that place you're living in when I was your age," Darryl said. "I lived in the efficiency and I rented out the bottom floor to this couple."

Darryl leaned back. The gears on the desk chair groaned.

"So every time this young couple burns out a light bulb or stuffs the drain up, they're knocking on my door, telling me to come fix it. I didn't know shit, so I'm jumping every time they clap, wondering how the hell this is worth it. They're only paying two-fifty in rent.

These two were disgusting. They had dirty dishes and clothes everywhere. The place was a pigsty – didn't faze them at all, but they wouldn't even go two seconds with a burned out light. Next thing I know the whole building's swarming with roaches. They're banging on my door like it's my fault we all have roaches now. What I'd like to do is call in the bug-squad and have 'em bomb the place." Darryl cleared his throat and said, "But I've got this buddy Boomer who worked as a bug-man for twenty years and now he's got tumors spreading through his body just as quickly as I've got roaches spreading through my house."

Darryl said, "So, what do I do? What I do is I take out a loan and invest everything I have into a second property. I move out. I call my buddy Boomer and I bomb the shit out of that first house. Let 'em reap what they've sown."

Benny wonders how he might die in these woods. Starvation. Eating poison berries. Hypothermia. Stab wound. Bear attack.

The only way he survives is if he makes it over that hill.

He breaks through the brush and his heart beats faster. He puts his hands in front of him to feel for trees. He crawls up the hillside, feeling the burdock along his sleeves stick to his sweatshirt.

It's slow going. He would like to believe he's gone very far, but it's likely not far at all. He keeps looking up at the treetops and wishing that he were out in the clear, where those stars would light up everything.

He kicks something with one foot and then the other. He slowly reaches forward and feels dirt and a cool firmness beneath his fingers.

If this is a cave or an old rusted trailer someone might come out and kill him. He steps to the side and steps to the side, running his hands along what seems to be a rock wall.

He's freaking out a little bit. He takes his phone out of his pocket. He shines the light on whatever's in front of him.

The light whimpers against the darkness. Benny runs the phone back and forth and can just barely see the crumbled and half-buried remains of a stone archway. It's the foundation of an old building. It's covered in moss and dirt.

He traces his hand along the wall with the meek light in front of him. He wants to get away. His sneakers hit something and he falls and catches the spongy ground with his chin. He scrambles up and grabs his phone out of the mud and leaves. He shines the light along the ground. It's the foundation of another old building. He shuffles slowly along, trying not to kill himself.

He keeps kicking the outlines of old buildings, then tracing a route past them.

His frozen fingers land on something cold and rusted. He draws the light from his cell phone along the edge of the object. It's round and broad. It's dug deep down into the mud, and propped up against one of the foundations. Along the perimeter, the object has evenly spaced teeth like daggers. It's an old saw blade, tall as a mobile home.

Laquin, Benny realizes. Kyle's dad bought up Laquin. This place is definitely haunted.

He learned about Laquin in school. Laquin was one of those lumber towns that sprang up a hundred years ago. Thousands of Polish men converged on northern Pennsylvania.

Some of them got rich. All of them could eat. They built schools, churches, and saloons. They cut through the hills and sent the lumber across their railroads.

They shaved the hills straight across until there was nothing left.

Then they abandoned everything. They left town, looking for work.

There one day, gone the next.

Benny knows he is going to die in Laquin. There are ghosts here for sure. They're pissed off because they lost arms and fingers in the sawmill. They got crushed beneath toppling trees. They drank too much in the saloon and cut each other's bellies open on the bank of Schrader Creek. They will get their revenge on Benny; they're dead and mad about it.

Benny keeps running and falling, running and falling. The sleeves of his sweatshirt are soaked through and he's shivering. He loses his phone and keeps going. The ghosts of Laquin can have it. Please, just let him live.

When The Electric Cowboy first opened, Darryl had the place running eighteen hours a day. They had men from the gas pads finishing up day shifts and drinking through the night, and other men finishing up night shifts and drinking through the morning.

Jared was shocked when Benny told him Darryl wasn't paying him overtime – he was working sixty-hour weeks – but Benny was trying to strategize just like his uncle. Darryl had taught Benny the occasional need to waylay money here and there to make more of it further down the road.

Darryl came back from Ohio, squeezed Benny's shoulders and laughed.

He joked that Benny ought to call him John D. Rockefeller

Even his properties with fucked up methane wells were renting for four times the rate anybody got five years ago.

“I’m thinking about laying hands on that apartment complex along 220,” Darryl had said. “Throw on a new coat of paint and wa-la. The Ritz. I can rent those units at two grand a piece. I’ll throw a bone your way if you keep impressing me.”

But Benny didn’t know what he could do to make the drillers stay. At first they came in droves. The trucks used to run like a parade up and down 220. Then sometimes for a little while they would disappear. The drillers would go poke around by the Bakken Formation in Montana or the Barnett Formation in Texas.

For the past three months, Benny’s been driving down The Golden Mile, looking at the near-finished facades of the new Ramada Inn. The Holiday Inn Comfort Suites. The renovation on the Towanda Hotel. Sometimes it gets a little too quiet, and he starts to wonder.

Darryl says they’ll come back. That they’ll always come back.

Benny’s shivering badly. The wet woods have soaked him through. His sweatshirt sticks to his back, and his hands are coated in grime. He’s worried about hypothermia. He’s also worrying about his hunger – it feels like he’s got a rodent scraping through his stomach. He’s back to bargaining in his head. He would donate his next two paychecks to the food cupboard for a bag of Goldfish. He would become a volunteer firefighter for a dry set of clothes.

Then he sees headlights through the trees. At first, he thinks he’s imagining it. He’s delusional. He’s probably dying. Then he decides, no, those are definitely headlights.

He’s near a road. He doesn’t know how, but somehow he’s near a road.

He crashes through the trees. If he could just catch that car, maybe they would give him a ride. Maybe he can get out of here. But he's still a hundred feet from the tree line when it disappears around the bend.

That's bad, but still, things just improved considerably. He at least found a road.

He scrambles down the hillside and into the drainage ditch. He climbs back up onto the pavement. He knows this place; this is Swarthwood Hill Road.

He knows exactly where he is. He's right by Maddy Baker's house.

Benny learned in school that not all of those lumber men left when the trees were gone. Some of them carved into Barclay Mountain and found coal there. They rearranged their homes and townships so they could get at that coal. They built more churches and schools. They put up power plants and extended the railroads. They built more mills. They blasted the hills with dynamite. Within ten years, they got all that coal. They made some good money at it.

Then there wasn't any more coal. There wasn't any more lumber either. They picked up and moved out. They couldn't have homes where they didn't have jobs.

They left another set of ghost towns.

No car in the driveway. Doesn't look like anyone's home.

He's been to Maddy Baker's house exactly one time before, back when he was in high school and he still lived on the north edge of Towanda with his parents. He had driven out here to Homets Ferry to pick her up for a dance. That relationship never took off. Nothing went wrong. They danced together a couple times that night, and then proceeded to avoid each other in the hallways until they graduated.

It's easier to see outside of that forest. Benny walks around the single-story house and peeks in the windows.

All the lights are off.

The handle of the front door turns.

Benny inspects the shelves of the refrigerator. He'll write a note and apologize. He'll get Maddy's cell phone number from Jared and call her in the morning. They'll laugh about it, and maybe he'll see if she wants to go out for a drink some time.

He's grateful to still be alive. He came very close to biting it out there.

The shelves are mostly lined with condiments and juice cartons, but he finds a Tupperware with a chicken breast inside. While he wolfs it down he notices in the glow of the refrigerator how filthy he is. His clothes are layered in mud. He tastes earth between his teeth. He got the chicken dirty. He quietly turns on the kitchen sink to rinse it off. He chews the rest of it down and searches the refrigerator for more. He spins the top off a carton of pineapple juice and drinks.

He walks around the kitchen and finds a pantry in the corner. Until now, he's avoided turning on any lights – just to be absolutely safe – but he wants to see what's in that pantry. He turns on the light in the small closet: triscuits, fruit snacks, cans of ravioli and spaghetti. He feels saved. He grabs a jar of peanut butter from the shelf and knocks down a pile of granola bars. He opens the jar and wonders how to get at it with his dirty hands. He picks up a packaged granola bar and uses it like a spatula to scoop peanut butter into his mouth. He will write a note and explain this whole thing. It will be funny on the other side of it. It's even kind of funny right now.

Benny had helped Darryl move to Ohio with his new wife, Carol. Carol had family somewhere outside Cleveland. It was about a year ago. It was around the time Darryl hired Benny to manage The Electric Cowboy.

Benny was thinking that the whole thing might turn out to be kind of a bummer. It seemed kind of scary to move away forever. But Darryl seemed thrilled. He didn't care if anyone nicked the doorframes or wasn't careful with the fragile boxes. He joked that they should just burn everything in the backyard. They'd get new stuff when they got to Canton.

"I play a long game," Darryl had said to Benny when they sat down for pizza and beer. "I see all these guys who are worried about a dollar here and a dollar there. They're too hungry and desperate for what's right in front of 'em, then they're left scrambling when the fire runs out."

Darryl took a big bite out of his pizza. "Those are the people that can make a guy like me rich," he said.

Someone turns on the hallway light. Jared's heart sinks. Oh no. Oh no, no. This isn't good. This is bad. He flips off the light in the pantry.

"Hello?" someone says down the hallway. The voice sounds tired and confused. It also sounds like Maddy Baker. "Who's there?"

Can Benny explain his way out of this one? This is playing out very differently than he expected. This seems like breaking and entering all of a sudden. Except he's standing in his high school crush's pantry, bleeding and covered in burdock, eating out of a jar of peanut butter with a granola bar. So actually it's a bit worse.

“Is someone there?” Maddy says down the hallway. Her voice rides through the kitchen and past him.

Should he show himself?

No.

Stay hidden.

Stay silent.

If he can just escape this, he will write Maddy Baker a letter and apologize for not talking to her any more after that dance. He wanted to but he was nervous. He will also write a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Baker and apologize for the many, many times he masturbated to impure thoughts of their daughter.

“Hello?”

He hears her bare feet padding across the tile floor. She turns on the light above the stove, and he stops breathing. He doesn’t hear anything for a second, and then he listens to the Tupperware container slide against the counter.

“Fucking Vince,” she says.

Vince! Vince is Maddy’s younger brother. Once Vince got suspended from school for six months because he had forgotten to take his crossbow out of the backseat of his car when he came to school during deer season. Great guy, though. Total accident. If Benny gets out of this unscathed, he will take Vince to the gun show and tell him to take his pick. He’ll build him a trebuchet. He’ll order him a grenade launcher.

“Hello?” Maddy says one last time, and she sounds a bit unconvinced. They both stand there – Maddy by the stove, Benny hidden in the pantry – for a long moment. They are maybe eight feet from each other.

Then she turns off the stove light and her feet go padding back down the hallway.

No way he can leave that note now.

It'd just be weird at this point.

Swarthwood Hill Road glows in the starlight. Benny stands on the pavement, facing the woods. He could make it back to the campsite. He wouldn't like going back through Laquin, but he could do it. Ghosts don't actually exist. He could grab a ride back to his house with Jared when the sun comes up.

Then he turns and faces the forest on the opposite side of the road. It should just be a quick shot across this hill. He should run right into Norway Ridge, just like Jared said, and then another mile and he's home.

He scoops some more peanut butter into his mouth. He can think a little more clearly now that he's gotten some food in his stomach. But he's still cold. He's still wet. He wishes he grabbed some dry clothes out of Maddy's house.

He twists the lid back on the peanut butter and pitches it into the woods. The jar shakes through the limbs and leaves. He drops the granola bar spatula on the pavement and walks.

He approaches the edge of the road, and then climbs carefully down the drainage ditch.

He's not going back to the campsite.

He's going home.

He tries to be brave. He really does. But the harder he tries to believe that forest cannibals don't exist, the more he believes they probably do. He remembers a story he saw about a guy who ate another guy's face. He can't imagine how unstoppable a maniac like that would be in the woods at night.

He's beneath those trees again and the cloak has descended back over the world. He traces the air with his fingers. Twigs snap and leaves rustle beneath his feet. Each time he's wondering if *he* made that noise, or if it was someone else.

He's feeling confident again that those Laquin ghosts do exist; he doesn't know enough about the undead to be sure if Swarthwood Hill Road would be a breachable or unbreachable barrier to their kingdom. He's not sure how their rules work.

In some ways the hunger wasn't so bad, because it helped distract him a little bit from the likely possibility that he is going to die.

He tries to go fast. It's more likely that he'll stab himself through with a sharp branch, but he's too scared to be careful.

Then he stops.

Something's glowing through the trees.

Aliens?

The warm light rolls like waves through the forest.

No, not aliens.

That's the Shoemaker Pad.

Oh, thank God.

Benny stands on the dirt track around the perimeter of the Shoemaker Pad. Men in hardhats and reflective vests travel between the trailers. Cable wires stretch like spider webs through the air. The drill tower in the center of things is lit up like a skyscraper. A broad, tall pipe on the perimeter breathes fire into the air. The Shoemaker Pad looks like a half-imagined fortress from the industrial revolution.

Benny walks away from the damp dark woods. He's wet and exhausted. The cloud of fire in the air warms his mind. He feels like he's about to be saved, even though he doesn't know what saved will exactly feel like.

A chain-link fence surrounds the pad. Hay bails of barbed wire loop around the top. They're not drilling. There's just the sound of a generator humming like a distant tractor. Just the sound of those flames slurping and climbing through the sky.

Benny comes toward the fence, toward a man on the other side who's walking in his direction and looking down. The brim of his hardhat obscures his eyes. Benny tries not to scare him; he tries to wave his hands in a friendly manner, just to let him know he's a person, not a forest cannibal.

The man looks up toward him and squints his eyes. He has a beard. He's heavyset and redheaded. It's Paul from The Electric Cowboy. Paul comes in three or four mornings a week. A jagerbomb and a jack and coke. From there, he moves to Yuenglings.

"Hey!" Benny says. He puts his hands up to the chain-link fence and tries to show it's just him.

"What the hell?" Paul says. It's hard to hear. The hum of that generator rests like a quilt over his words. Paul looks startled. He turns and walks quickly in the opposite direction.

"Terry!" Paul shouts. "Terry, it's those fucking kids again."

“Paul, it’s me!” Benny shouts. “I got lost in the woods.”

Two other men lift their heads and look back and forth.

Paul turns and points back in Benny’s direction. “Those fucking kids,” he says. He walks quickly in the direction of a doublewide trailer. The trailer is half a football field away.

“Paul, help!” shouts Benny. “I need help.”

They think he’s somebody who’s trying to bring trouble, but it’s just the opposite; he’s trying to escape it.

Paul bangs on the aluminum door and it immediately pops open.

A man steps out of the trailer with a rifle in his hands. He looks hell-bent and determined. He turns on a flashlight. It shines like a lighthouse beacon.

Benny realizes they’re coming after him. Somehow they don’t understand. Somehow he’s in trouble.

“Stay right there!” shouts the man with the flashlight. “Stay right where you are.”

“It’s just me!” Benny shouts. “It’s Benny!” He’s starting to panic. He walks along the fence to try to help them get a better look. He’s the guy who gets them drinks and sandwiches. They love him.

“Don’t you fucking dare move!” the man says. He aims the rifle into the air and fires. The sound cracks the night open.

Everything freezes for a moment. Benny feels the sound of the gunshot reverberate through his body and mind. He thought these guys would look out for him. Instead they want to kill him.

He turns and starts running.

He runs for the forest, barrels through a prickly bush, and then trips and rolls down the hill. He lands hard against a tree trunk. He sees the flashlight waving back and forth in the limbs above him.

Somehow they think he's a criminal. That makes him feel like he is one.

He doesn't want to die. He gets up and keeps going.

After hustling through the woods for ten minutes, Benny sees Maddy Baker's garage light through the trees. It makes him feel a little depressed about how far he'd thought he had gone, but saving his own skin is what's most important. He's mostly grateful for his former inefficiency. Plus he knows the route back now. Maybe it's shorter than he thought. It might be the thing that saves his life.

He walks right back out by Maddy Baker's house and he wants to just sneak under the garage door, and nod off until morning. But he can't possibly chance it.

He's worried that cannibals, ghosts, and men with guns are all looking for him.

Better just get back safe.

He ventures back into Laquin.

He's realizing how close each landmark is to the next. He thought he had made incredible progress on this journey, but now that he's able to piece the route together more quickly, it doesn't stand for much. Maybe a half mile.

He doesn't want to go too fast and wake up a ghost. But he doesn't want to go too slow and get some guy with a rifle bearing down on him, either.

He stops for a moment to gasp for air. He looks up and sees the teeth of the large saw blade. He feels like an exhausted and scared creature born from the mud. He tries to calm his breathing.

Then he senses something crawling through the leaves beside him.

A shadow weaves slowly past his legs. Fear floods his body and he stands completely still. He tries to see the monster. Tears roll down his cheek and he prays he'll just die in one quick instant instead of being captured and held as a prisoner and harvested for blood.

If he can escape this demon, he will ring the bell for the Salvation Army at K-Mart through the winter. He'll do it in the spring and summer, too.

He hears a clinking. The shadow reemerges and brushes against his leg. He shrieks.

It turns right back around and rubs against his legs again.

It's a cat. Its collar jingles.

He puts his hand over his heart and breathes. Thank, God. He'll ring the Salvation Army bell at least once.

He scoops up the cat and rubs his face through its fur. The cat meows and begins purring. The sensation rolls past his eyes and soothes his brain.

Earlier that day, Benny had walked past the real estate billboard on Main Street. He glanced up and saw 32 Norway Ridge. *That's where I live*, he thought.

He looked at the picture of his home. Three bedroom + efficiency apartment, it said. Natural gas furnace. Public water, public sewer. Price reduced to sell: \$140,000, or best offer.

He had a strange feeling in his stomach.

It said: The large backyard makes it a plus for growing a family.

He looked away from the billboard and down the street toward the Susquehanna River. It was a panicked feeling in his belly. It was the feeling of the known world sliding out from beneath him.

He looked back at the billboard. Darryl owned a bunch of these properties. Two of those big Victorians on York Avenue. A couple of ranch houses out toward Wyalusing. Then there was the unmistakable picture of his house.

32 Norway Ridge.

Price reduced to sell, or best offer.

Vinyl replacement windows and newer roof.

Price reduced to sell.

Benny thought Darryl was helping him climb up through this world. But this – this changed everything.

The embers glow in the near-distance, casting a flickering light on the edges of two blankets and one big tarp. It must be close to morning. Benny feels near death and grateful. He walks to the opposite edge of the dying fire, and puts his hand on the body beneath the tarp.

“Hm,” Jared says.

“J, it’s me. I need a blanket.”

“*Whatsanow*,” Jared murmurs.

“I’m cold,” Benny says. “I need to warm up.”

Jared blinks his eyes open, looks at Benny for a moment, and then closes them again. He grunts, and then starts maneuvering beneath the tarp. He pulls a blanket out from within the blue burrito, and holds it in the air.

“I knew you’d come back,” Jared says.

“I almost made it,” Benny says. Benny doesn’t want his friends to think he couldn’t do it. He doesn’t want them to think he’s a wuss. “I got lost.”

“It’s the fucking woods in the middle of the night,” grumbles Jared. “There’s nowhere else to go.”

Jared rolls onto his other side. The tarp sounds like a giant grocery bag. It reflects the ember light.

“You told me it wasn’t far,” Benny says.

“It’s not,” Jared says. “But you have to know how to get there.”

Benny moves closer to the fire, a little ways away from Jared. He arranges the blanket on the ground.

“Put some more wood on that fire,” Jared says from inside his tarp.

“Where is it?” Benny asks.

“It’s right there,” Jared says.

Benny searches the perimeter of the fire and finds two thin slices of wood.

“Is this all that’s left?” he says.

Jared turns his head and says, “I don’t know. Maybe.” Then he drops his head again.

Benny drapes the wood over the burning embers, then climbs inside the blanket.

The ground is hard beneath him. He feels a rock digging into his side and he rearranges himself. He feels warmer, but not warm.

He stares into the fire and watches it lick at the new wood. He concentrates on the flickering heat.

He doesn't know how he'll ever leave Towanda. He doesn't know where else he'd go.

Biographical Statement

Nathan McNamara was raised in Spencer, NY. He studied English and Psychology at Vassar College, where he also received the 2010 Anne E. Imbrie Prize for Excellence in Fiction Writing.