

THE BRICKLAYER'S CLUB



Molly Bonovsky Anderson

JASON BLINKED TO CLEAR the floaters, and was sure then that he was seeing Dale Barbeau, in a sleeveless shirt the color of raw meat, standing in the bedroom doorway. Jason hadn't been asleep, just trying to remember with his eyes closed, sitting up in bed for the better part of an hour, vaguely aware of his surroundings—Dale's buck heads and Hamm's signs on the wall, snowshoes hanging from the rafters, and guns—so many guns. In Jason's dreams he'd been tracked through the woods, leaving a pink trail in the snow. Dale's voice came through the dim.

“Sleep okay?”

Jason nodded with his whole body, shaking himself to life. Dale's rickety bed creaked beneath him.

Dale brought a hand up and combed through his chest hair with fingernails too long for a man. Jason had noticed them last night while Dale had written up the rental agreement on the cardboard back of an empty legal pad. “First month is half off, then it gets real. I'll give you a few

days grace but by the fifth I'll come knocking."

Jason had nodded then too. He wasn't much for talking.

"I'll show you the place in the morning," Dale had said. "Tonight you stay here. Couch is no good—I'll take that lumpy bastard. My gift to you."

Dale Barbeau, raking through the gray fluff at the base of his throat. A man Jason's mother had once been married to for four-and-a-half years—some twenty years ago. He'd called Jason "J-Dog." This slight, near-sighted middle schooler with tangled hair in his face and baggy corduroys, carrying paintbrushes in his hammer loops, had come home for four and a half years to this man, this permanent fixture of gray sweatpants and mullet pooled in his mother's vinyl recliner with a can of Grain Belt in the hand that wasn't holding the remote. "What's shakin', J-Dog?"

Dale Barbeau was the only man Jason ever knew who wore bangs.

"Got breakfast on," Dale said. "Past lunchtime, though. Bathroom's across the hall—where you puked last night."

Jason's eyeballs ached.

"Towels under the sink. When you're ready, we'll go down the road and check it out."

He nodded again. His mouth was dry and his skin clammy. He'd sweated vodka and red pop through the night on Dale's sheets and was sure he'd stained them pink.

"One more thing," Dale said. "Whose truck is that?" He jerked a thumb toward the back of the house where Jason

hadn't remembered parking a pickup.

"If it's red it's Melinda's," Jason said.

"It is," Dale said. "I don't imagine she's your girlfriend anymore."

"Yeah, probably not."

"Need it off my property quick," Dale said.

"Don't worry," Jason said. "She'll come looking for it."

Dale seemed satisfied and left Jason's doorframe.

JASON DRIZZLED TABASCO ON his eggs and tried to see something on the refrigerator. Dale turned in his chair to look at it.

"Christmas letter," he said, reaching out to pull it from under an apple-shaped magnet. He gave it to Jason.

"Nineteen ninety-six," he read.

"Says you're studying to be an architect," Dale said.

Jason opened it, scanned over pictures of his mother in a Santa hat, his mother in felt reindeer antlers, his mother in a poinsettia-print sweater, Jason at twenty-one in a Counting Crows T-shirt, smiling in front of a fake fir.

"I never did read these things," he said.

"That was the last one she sent," Dale said. "So, you an architect?"

Jason managed a small laugh through his breakfast links.

"I guess that was a million years ago," Dale said.

"I switched to art," Jason said. "Then philosophy."

"Philosophy? Huh." Dale picked his teeth with his

thumbnail, and licked his lips. "You know Kierkegaard?"

Jason closed his eyes. "I kind of pushed all those guys out of my brain," he said.

"Really?" Dale said. "Søren Kierkegaard?"

Jason shrugged.

"Well anyway, I've got some books around here, I think," Dale said. "You finish school?"

"Long time ago."

"You didn't go back for a—what's it called?—PhD?"

"Master's," Jason said. He nodded. "In English."

"Well, how about that? That's great. So, you teaching then? Making the big bucks?"

Jason helped some eggs onto his fork with his thumb at the edge of his plate. "Not at the moment."

Dale moved his chair backwards and looked at Jason as if seeing him for the first time.

"You ever hitch up? Got any kids?"

Jason shook his head.

Dale was quiet for a long time. Jason continued to eat, feeling Dale's eyes on him.

"How'd you come to be out here, Jay?"

Jason laid his fork down, finished chewing, and said, "I heard you were drying out. Heard you had to come out to the middle of nowhere to do it. I guess this is the place I thought of last night when I couldn't stand to go home. Not to Melinda's." He drained the dark coffee from his cup and swallowed hard. "Not to Mom's."

Dale eyed him. "You wanted out."

“I can’t go back there.”

Dale’s mouth disappeared behind his mustache.

“Everything back there,” Jason said, “makes me crazy.”

Dale nodded. “This place—you remember what I told you about it last night?”

“Sort of,” Jason said, closing his eyes. He tried to remember. “Needs fixing up, you said.”

“Some. But it’s quiet and—”

“Isolated,” Jason said.

“Very. You can get some writing done out there, if that’s what you want. Hell, I don’t care what you do out there, long as you come up with the money.”

Jason wiped his hands on a napkin. “I’ll do the best I can,” he said.

“I don’t expect any different,” Dale said. “You about done with that coffee?”

Jason nodded. He couldn’t swallow another ounce.

“Let’s head out, then.”

THERE WERE HOLES IN the walls and some in the floor. Insulation showed in some of them, just air through others.

“I didn’t know,” Dale said.

“When’s the last time you were out here?” Jason said.

“Six months or more. I didn’t expect somebody this time of year. I’ll have to patch it up.” Jason sighed through his nose and Dale said, “Well hell, Jay, what’d you expect? I said I got a cabin. This isn’t the Radisson.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason said.

Dale fitted the toe of his boot into a hole near the baseboard in the cabin’s bedroom. “We’ll have to go back to the house,” he said. “Get some plywood. You can help me.”

The two men rode the dirt road back through the woods in Dale’s pickup. Jason rode high in the passenger seat. He’d never driven a truck in his life until last night. He didn’t remember getting into Melinda’s pickup, turning the key—he didn’t know where he’d got the key. He thought of Melinda, her white face a blur, her mouth and hair, both red and out of control. Dale hit a rut and they bounced in the truck. Jason looked out the window. Ice still lay in cool shady pockets in the earth.

“You don’t look like I thought you would,” he said to Jason.

Jason watched the firs go by, black in the waning light. “What do I look like?”

Dale said, “Older.”

“I am older,” said Jason.

“If someone had told me,” Dale said, “that Jay Manikowski—”

“Malinowski.”

“—Would come pounding on my door at three in the morning, I would have said, oh, that skinny kid with all that hair in his eyes, and those big boots and black T-shirts and all of that—” Dale cupped his chin and cheeks in his big hand.

“Acne,” Jason said.

“I would have expected that kid. You’re still skinny, though.”

Jason nodded.

“How’s your mom?” Dale asked.

“Not skinny,” Jason said.

“I mean in general.”

Jason looked at himself in Dale’s side-view mirror. He hadn’t enough hair left to fall in his face. His skin and eyes were clear. He wore a yellow pullover.

“Married again,” he said. “Divorced again.”

“Must be sixty by now,” Dale said.

“Sixty-four,” Jason said.

Dale whistled through his teeth. “I’m nearing fifty-nine myself. Do me a favor, kid. Open up that glove box.”

Jason leaned forward in the truck. No one had called him *kid* in decades. He popped the latch and a bottle of Jack rolled into his lap, sloshing half empty in the bumpy cab.

“Dale,” he said. He turned the bottle upright on his thigh. “I thought you were drying out up here.”

“How long ago was it you heard that, Jay?”

He counted in his mind. “Maybe fifteen years.”

Dale took the bottle from Jason’s hand, unscrewed it, and took a swig. “A lot can happen in fifteen years, son.” He handed the bottle to Jason.

Jason hadn’t been called *son*—ever. Though his head still ached, he tilted the bottle back and took a drink.



IT WAS LONG DARK by the time the two men had dragged the wood from Dale's shed into the flatbed, driven it back to the cabin, nailed it into place, driven to the hardware store, purchased plastic sheeting and staples and caulk, driven it back to the cabin, fixed the windows and sealed the cracks. Jason looked at the wood piled by the stove and noticed it was rotten, full of webs. In the time they'd been there, either five mice had scurried by once, or one mouse five times. Cold still seeped into the cabin and Jason began to notice a fetid smell.

"I don't advise you to sleep here tonight," Dale said. "Let's give it another day. Tomorrow we'll buy up some good wood until we can chop our own, and come down here and finish up."

"Something's dead in here," said Jason.

Dale nodded. "Sorry about that. Been maybe a year since I've been out here."

"I thought you said six months," Jason said, opening cupboards full of rodent turds.

Dale scratched his chest. "You know how time goes."

BACK AT THE HOUSE, Dale put his feet up on the steamer trunk that served as a coffee table and told Jason it was okay for him to do the same. Jason's sock had a hole at the big toe.

"Ought to go back for some things," Dale said, nodding at the sock. "Change of clothes, toothbrush."

“I’ll do it in town tomorrow,” Jason said. “I won’t go back to Melinda’s. She can have what I left.”

“Probably worried about you,” Dale said, sipping coffee spiked with Johnnie Walker.

“She never was before.”

Dale flipped channels on his TV. “Got a dish,” he said. “Can’t get cable out here. One hundred and seventy-three channels. No porn, though.”

On the screen, Jason watched a kitten knead a baby’s soft head. The studio audience laughed uproariously. The picture changed to a toddler dancing in a diaper.

“Your mom ever talk about me?” Dale said suddenly. Jason thought for a moment, reached for his own spiked mug.

“No,” Jason said. “I asked her once why she left you, though.”

“What’d she say?”

Jason smiled. “Whiskey dick.”

Dale sputtered his coffee a little.

“I thought it was funny, because she never talked like that. You know my mom.”

Dale shrugged. “Used to.”

“She never said that sort of thing. But she said it, and went back to folding laundry like it was nothing. Two words.” He laughed and drained his mug.

“Probably didn’t add much to my credit,” Dale said. “Always got the feeling you hated me long before that.”

Jason nodded. “Later on, though, I changed my mind. I

guess I envied you.”

Dale laughed. “Nothing to envy.”

“You came out here,” Jason said, spreading his arms out to the living room. He was feeling it now. “Did pretty good for yourself.”

“Independent contractor,” Dale said. “Thirty years. Saved every penny I could.”

“Lived on your own. Did what you wanted. I couldn’t do it.”

“Son,” Dale said, “you can’t handle your liquor if you start talking like that.”

“I don’t care,” Jason said. “I’m drunk again. I should probably go to bed.”

Dale said, “Then this couch is mine again.”

“No,” Jason said. “I don’t mind.”

“Nah,” Dale said. “I’ve slept on this lumpy bastard for years. Never really did like that bed—it squeaks. Tomorrow night you’ll be sleeping in your own bed in the cabin.”

He shoved Jason’s feet off the trunk and told him to get some sleep.

MORNING CAME AND WENT and Jason slept. Dale fiddled around out back with a drill and saw, and tossed several cords of wood into the flatbed of Melinda’s red pickup, never waking his guest. Jason hadn’t thought of it that way until Dale had said it himself, around two o’clock, when Jason finally shuffled out of bed and found himself standing

in Dale's kitchen in his underwear. He apologized.

"No need," Dale said. "You're my guest."

Jason scratched his belly hair. In lieu of apologizing again, he said, "I'm your renter."

"Will be," Dale said. He looked at his watch. "Couple of hours from now we should have it habitable." He looked at Jason, narrowed his eyes. "Inhabitable?"

Jason blinked.

"Which one," Dale said.

"Which what?"

"Word," Dale said. "You're the writer."

"Oh, uh—I—dunno."

"Forget it." Dale waved it away. "Do what you need to get ready and meet me in the garage."

Jason threw on his crusty three-day-old outfit and clomped down the dirt floor to where Dale was stationed in a corner, huddled over his workbench. He looked over Dale's broad denim-clad shoulder.

"Three oughtta do her," said Dale.

"Traps?" Jason shuddered. Dale turned around, his hands full of old-fashioned mouse guillotines.

"Things are old," he said, "but they'll do the trick."

"Jesus, Dale," said Jason. "I don't want—just let—"

"Let the mice run over your face when you're sleeping?" He shook his head. "Hell, Jay. Not only will they eat everything in your cupboards but they'll shit in your dishes too. Damn, these are dirty. Years-old mouse guts on this one. Check it out." He shoved a blood-smeared Victor

under Jason's nose.

Jason cringed and backed away. "Keep them. I'll get humane traps when I go into town," he said.

Dale wrinkled his nose. "Humane?"

"Don't make me explain it."

"Don't need to," Dale said. He dumped the traps into a rusted Folgers can. "You go ahead and set up a tea party for your mouse friends. They want scones too? I got some real nice—"

"Damn it, Dale," Jason said. "I'll take care of the mice when I get settled. I'm not worried about it right now. I just want a bed and some quiet." He shivered, jacket-less in the pre-spring air. "Let's get going."

Dale shrugged, clapped the decay off his hands, and headed to the pickup.

"YOUR WOOD'S HERE," he said, dropping the last bundle beside the stove. "More at the side of the house."

"I appreciate that," Jason said. "I'll take care of the rest when I run out."

"Won't be needing more for a while," Dale said. "Hot summer coming, not too far off."

"Best to be prepared," Jason said.

"Outhouse is sound. You can come up to the house any time you need a real shower," Dale said. "Pump's all right—ice cold, though."

"I'll make do," Jason said.

“Jay,” Dale said. He stood in the middle of the small cabin, arms crossed over his barrel chest. He was as big as Jason ever remembered him, maybe bigger. Most people seemed to shrink as Jason aged, but Dale seemed to grow. “You sure you can handle this? You know you won’t get internet out here.”

Jason laughed and shook his head.

Dale scratched under his chin, then squeezed his Adam’s apple, a once-familiar gesture Jason had forgotten. “You don’t know how used you are to running water until you lose it. And when it gets dark, it’s lights out. Hey—I got an idea.” He snapped his meaty fingers. “Coleman lantern. You know how to use one?”

Jason nodded and tried not to roll his eyes. He would manage without Dale’s help—he knew that much. But he hadn’t used a lantern since he camped with his father as a kid. He never operated it himself. He could see his father’s face, orange against the black of the trees, fading as he dialed down the flame, and the open, airy hiss.

“I’ll get one,” Jason said. “I’ll get everything I need in due time. Right now,” he said, looking around, “a bed and toilet paper. That’s all I need.”

“You going into Brainerd tomorrow?”

Jason nodded.

“How you plan on getting there?”

He blinked. “Red truck.”

“Uh-huh,” Dale said. “Son, don’t you think you oughtta call that girlfriend of yours and get her vehicle back to her?”

“Well,” Jason said. He pulled his phone from his pocket. “No messages,” he said. “If she wanted it back, she’d have called.”

“No reception out here,” Dale said. “You know, I’m starting to notice a pattern with you.”

Jason’s brow furrowed.

“No plan whatsoever,” Dale said. “You don’t have a clue in the world. Been wearing the same clothes for three days, you got no running water, no electricity, no phone, no car, and far as I can tell, no job, because I don’t see you busting out the door to get to work on time—so how you’re going to pay rent is a mystery. Look at you. Thirty-eight years old and not a single shred to show—”

“Just time,” Jason said. He hated the desperation in his own voice. “That’s all I need right now. Time and quiet. Just let me have those things, and I’ll figure out the rest. I swear, Dale. I’ve got money saved up and if I run out I’ll deal with that when it comes. But I promise you I won’t spend a minute of time somewhere I can’t pay to be.”

“Suit yourself,” Dale said abruptly. “Sorry I said anything.” He backed up and stuck his hands in his armpits.

Jason stood, exasperated. If it was no big deal, then Dale needn’t go off like that. Still, he exhaled slowly, dropped his eyes, and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Disorganized,” Jason said. “I know.”

Dale coughed and changed the subject. “I’ll be off then.”

“There is one more thing—if you don’t mind. I was wondering if you still did any fishing.”

Dale nodded. “Here and there. You haven’t gone and changed your mind about the needless torture of fish, now have you?”

“It’s more the tranquility I’m looking for,” Jason said. He didn’t feel like acknowledging that no, he hadn’t changed, he’d thought fishing was cruel as a kid and he thought it was cruel now, but someone like Dale hadn’t understood that and still wouldn’t understand, and now, just by looking at Dale, he could see that he didn’t want to go there either, and what he said next confirmed that thought.

“You need to borrow my gear, you’re welcome to it. Come by whenever.”

“I appreciate it,” Jason said, and before Jason had finished thanking him, Dale turned and headed out the door. Jason listened to the truck’s engine rev down the dirt road through the pines and out of earshot.

JASON CAST THE EMPTY hook into a shady spot under a low-hanging willow branch. He’d first plopped it into a sunny slat, just to watch the bobber in the sparkle, but the brightness hurt his eyes first, then his whole face. When he complained of a headache, Dale handed him a bottle.

“Two things,” Jason said. “That ain’t gonna help.” He realized with equal parts disgust and humor that he’d adopted Dale’s speech patterns. “And I came out here to get away from that stuff.”

He took and set the bottle between them on the thawed-

out shore, screwing the bottom into the mud.

He'd intended to come alone, and not to cast at all but to sit, a pole laid out beside him on the ground, listening for lily-pad splashes and watching the tall-grassed shore across the lake for stirrings of heron. He'd aimed to watch the clouds drag across the hue-shifting sky, spy for green buds on the ends of winter-bitten branches like jewels on finger bones.

He didn't know jack shit about this spinner or that reel, just wanted a stick and a string, but when Dale had started showing him fancy lures adorned with what looked like Muppet hair, and long sleek rods that Dale had given women's names, Jason, instead of saying, "It doesn't matter," had whistled through his teeth and said things like, "That's fine—just fine. Look at that." Dale had given him Marie, his favorite rod, and Jason had bitten the proverbial bullet and against his own nature said, "Why don't you come with me, Dale," and Dale had expressed a lack of anything better to do that morning and said, "Might as well," and they'd trundled their gear into what they'd begun calling Jason's red truck.

Jason ignored the sun's glint on the amber bottle between their feet and reeled his line in for the fourth time in twenty minutes. He'd always loved the clicking *zip* of reeling and hushed *fving* of casting. His father had taught him how. And Dale had taught him, at the age of fourteen—freshly irritated by his mother's hasty remarriage to a clown in a stone-washed jean jacket and Prince Valiant haircut—that

catch-and-release was for wussies, and that if you didn't hold the thrashing fish just right with your thumb and forefinger over the pectoral fins, not only would you get poked and stung but you also might as well throw your pole in the lake and let it sink to the bottom because you were a worthless crap of a fisherman. And Jason, who had never claimed to be a fisherman at all, had said so, and taken Dale's advice and dumped his pole along with Dale's whole tackle box into the green lake, and watched Dale's red face over his shoulder in the reflection of the water as the gear sank into oblivion along with any hope of a relationship between them. Jason's mother had laughed. That's the way she was, and neither Jason nor Dale had ever understood if her laughter was cruel or affectionate, and that may have been why she'd failed four attempts at marriage.

Dale drained the bottle and was wiping his lips with the back of his hand when Jason's bobber plunged. Jason, who'd been daydreaming, jerked alert and swore.

"You said they wouldn't bite an empty hook," he said.

Dale shrugged. "They shouldn't. Fish are smarter than that."

"Well hell, what do I do?"

"Reel it in, asshole," Dale sputtered through his whiskey-wet mustache. "Tug it first," he added. "Up and sideways. No—give me that."

He took the rod from Jason's nervous grip and brought in a shining pike as long as his forearm. Jason stood gaping.

“Look at that,” Dale said.

“Jesus,” Jason said.

“Beauty.”

Jason shook his head and swallowed. “Let it go.”

“Hell no,” Dale said. “This is your dinner. Swallowed the hook, though.” He motioned to his gear. Take out that hook remover.”

“Oh, Christ, no,” Jason said. He’d watched his father cram that tool down the throat of a walleye, scrape around and rip its innards out trying to remove the hook. He’d emerged with enough pink slime to fill his son’s small palm, and Jason had wretched over the side of the boat.

“Well, what do you want me to do?”

“Just cut the line and throw it back.”

“With a hook in its guts? It’ll die anyway, Jay, and slower.”

Jason fished the grimy tongs out of Dale’s box and tossed it to him. He looked away.

“Sucker’s in there deep,” Dale said.

A sound like a spoon boring into watermelon followed, and Jason thrust his hands in his pockets, brought his shoulders up to his ears, and scrunched his chin down into his sternum. He turned and walked up from the water, toward the truck, with Dale’s voice behind him, calling, “There we go. There we go. Jay? Where you going? Got us some dinner here.”



THE FISH WAS GOOD and white but full of bones. With thick-buttered bread beside his plate, Jason felt again like his mother's son. "One bite for every bite of fish," she'd say. Though he knew he should trust her method, he still feared choking on those translucent spines—imagined them poking into his stomach lining and everything he ate thereafter pouring through, poisoning his organs. Back then, expressing that fear aloud had earned him a look from Dale that may as well have been a smack across the face. Now, he buttered his own bread, asked Dale for it, as he hadn't thought to put it on the table. Said, "You want some?" and buttered a slice for him. As a teenager he'd sooner butter Dale's face.

Dale drank Grain Belt from a can and pushed one across the table.

"No thanks," Jason said.

"Put hair on your chest," Dale said.

Jason moved the zipper on his pullover down and showed Dale his own formidable cloud of graying chest hair.

Dale gulped and laughed. "Damn, son."

"I'll take milk," Jason said.

NIGHT FELL AND HE remained at Dale's, feet up on a plastic lawn chair, palm wrapped around a can of cream soda that had warmed along with his skin near Dale's fire pit. When Dale fell short of stories, Jason caught Dale

looking at him across the leaping flames. Dale cast his eyes down and he shoved a crackling log deeper in with his iron poker.

“It wasn’t all bad,” Jason said, though he wasn’t sure of what he spoke. He waited.

“Had us some good times, too,” Dale said. He might mean with Jason, or Jason’s mother, or both, or neither. He might mean in the war. He might mean as a kid, with his own folks. Those were places his stories went, had always gone.

“It’s a tough time,” Jason said.

“We all go through it,” Dale said. Jason agreed.

And they could have been talking about anything. But because Jason had caught Dale looking at him through the fire first, just for a moment, he believed they were talking about one thing—the same thing.

“Loose ends tied up?” Dale asked.

Jason took a swig of his A&W. “Not really,” he said. He didn’t feel like going into detail about the money he owed Melinda, the Teacup Poodle he’d bought her that he wanted back even though he thought it was a poor excuse for a dog, the copy-editing job he’d been fired from, the things he’d said to his boss, to his mother, to Melinda. The kids he felt guilty for not wanting, the house and the car and the something—the Something to Show for It All. He held his hand out, palm down, and dangled his fingers. They felt alive and warm.

Dale chuckled and sipped Bushmills. A long while

passed before he asked Jason why he stopped wanting to be an architect. “Thought that was your dream.”

Jason nestled his back into the chair. He’d gone into town while Dale cooked dinner and bought himself a thick gray sweatshirt jacket and a pair of hollandaise-colored Carhartts.

“I got to thinking,” he said, “about how important a guy like that is. The guy who designs the house, or the office building, or the church, or whatever.” He slurped his soda. “And all the stuff he has to do—boss people around, I mean, you had to do that, right? And you have to be an artist—which means you have to join the artists’ club.”

Dale frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It’s like anything else—if it’s important, it’s a network. You can’t just float around on your own.”

“That bad?” Dale asked.

Jason scratched dirty fingernails through a five-day beard. “It was for me. I started thinking that I’d rather be one of the guys who lays bricks for the building than the one who designs it.”

Dale snorted.

“Even if the bricks never amounted to anything—if they just kept going up and up in an endless wall. Even if I never saw the finished product and was just laying them down without even knowing what it was going to be—a daycare, a rest stop, whatever. I wouldn’t care. I would just lay them and then go home at night and be me again, and there wouldn’t be any identity to live up to.”

Dale belched. "You don't think bricklayers have a club?"

"I think this is it."

"This?"

Jason nodded.

"So you wanted to lay bricks," Dale said. "Why didn't you?"

"Because there's this stupid thing inside me that makes me want to write about laying the bricks, instead of just doing it. I wish I could kill that thing." He opened his palms once, looked into them, and closed them. "I should get going," he said.

"Jay," Dale said. "It's late. Just stay on here again."

Jason shook his head. "It's five minutes down the road." He got off his chair and set his soda can on the white plastic seat. It tipped and a pale liquid ran into the grooves.

"You're night blind and you left your glasses at the cabin," Dale said. Jason blinked. He wouldn't have guessed Dale would remember that.

"Well—"

Dale chopped a hand through the air like a tomahawk. "Just chill out, J-Dog."

Jason looked at his chair. He couldn't sit down; it was sticky and wet. He lifted his own hand in a gesture he didn't understand himself. A salute, a wave, an empty hand showing its lack. He turned and went into the house.



JASON'S FRIENDS HAD BABIES and started disappearing. When he invited them over they said they couldn't come—their wives would be angry. Jason said to bring the wives with. They said they wouldn't come. If they wanted to, they needed a babysitter. Jason said never mind, we'll do it another time. When they finally came over they only talked about their kids. They talked about how amazing they were and how happy. Later into the night they would drink too much and not want to go home. They would cry, some of them. Some of them begged Jason to get them out. Jason dabbed up spilled beer, salvaged bent and ruined playing cards, and sat at the table in the empty kitchen, his chin on his fist, not knowing how to feel.

Melinda had a daughter from before. Jason inched away from the child as if she'd never gotten over chickenpox that first summer. Chickenpox, not leprosy, he reminded himself, and offered small allowances—a piggy back ride (only after she was sufficiently potty-trained), or a hand held crossing the street. Her name was Lottie—a name Jason couldn't make any sense of—and he called her Lottie-Dah, and she reciprocated with squeals to wake the dead and an aching, skin-peeling love for Jason. "She thinks you hung the moon," Melinda would say, but Jason would rather Lottie thought he'd hung the Christmas wreath on the front door or the Monet reprint in the living room instead. She begged him to read bedtime stories in his low husky mumble, thinking he did it on purpose to soothe her when in reality he'd never learned

to assert himself vocally—he'd always spoken as if he were talking to himself.

JASON'S BOOT HUNG OVER the edge of the lumpy couch, and Dale bopped it with his shoe. Jason woke and looked at Dale Barbeau again that morning, in the same meat-colored shirt, and thought he'd never woke up the first time—that he'd been dreaming since Friday and it was time to go back to Melinda's apartment and start doing something. Something. What was it?

He blinked and rubbed his chest. He'd taken his jacket and shirt off during the night, but never his boots. "I'm up," he said.

"You've got a visitor," Dale said.

"What?" Jason yawned and stood up, blurry eyed. Before he could ask if he needed to put a shirt on, his mother came through the kitchen door. Dale cleared his throat and left the room.

"Hi, Pookie," his mother said.

Jason flinched and sat back down as if pushed.

"Jesus, Mom—what—"

"Nobody's seen you in four days, Jason," she said. "Melinda called me, asking if I'd seen you. Do you know what that does to a mother?" She laid a hand at her throat as if to protect it from the strangulation of grief.

Jason frowned. "Why'd you come looking for me out here?"

“She said you mentioned something about finding your father. ‘I’ve got to set things right with my Dad,’ or something.”

Jason didn’t remember any such thing.

“But I figured you weren’t going to Tucumcari, so you must be here.”

“Tucumcari,” Jason breathed. He tried to remember if he’d ever received and threw away any postcards of painted desert bluffs, dino fossils, Navajo architecture. *Wish you were here.* Of course he hadn’t. He’d stopped receiving anything years ago. His father may as well have been on the moon.

“Melinda wants her truck back,” his mother said.

“Right,” Jason said. “The jig is up.”

“The what? Honey, I don’t know what you’ve been doing out here, but I’m sure it’s nothing you can’t do at home.”

“Writing,” Jason said absently. He hadn’t picked up a pen since he’d come. His typewriter had no ribbon.

“Lottie’s worried herself sick,” she said.

“Lottie is ten goddamned years old,” he said. “She doesn’t worry herself sick about anything.” He wondered if that was true. When he was ten he worried himself sick about five thirty, the time his father came home from work. Puking sick.

“Here,” Jason said. He looked at his boots.

“What, honey?” His mother moved closer as if to hear him better, to understand.

Jason lifted his head and spoke clearly. "I'm here," he said, and laughed, as if finally getting the joke. In the home of Dale Barbeau, who had tolerated him, at best, for four-and-a-half years, twenty-some years ago. "So you know where I am—you can go now. Take Melinda's truck—"

"I can't take it, Jason. I drove here."

"Tell her to come get it then. Bring her out. Just get the truck and tell Lottie everything's fine and go on home."

"Honey, you can't mean that."

"I do, though," Jason said.

"It's not fair to them," she said, and before she could finish speaking, Jason did his best to tell her, with his eyes, that no, it wasn't.

"I'm going," he told her. "To my place. It's mine, now. Down the road." He heard his voice coming out cold, so much like his father's, and could do nothing to stop it. He picked his T-shirt up off the steamer trunk and pulled it over his head. His mother moved to pat down his static-panicked hair. He dodged, draped his sweatshirt over his arm, turned, unable to look at either of them, and left the house.

"TUCUMCARI," HE SAID to himself as he walked. The road was still and rutted, no breeze bent the birches he passed, his boot steps didn't stir the birds.

"Bastard's in Tucumcari."

March had settled in like a lamb at the start. Now it

padded in on frosty white lion's feet, quiet but cold. It began to snow.

"St. Louis, Tulsa, El Paso—he can't get far enough away from me."

He shoved his chill-sore hands in his Carhartt pockets.

"Where next?"

A soft rumble accosted his back.

"Aruba," he said, and shook his head. He didn't know where Aruba was.

Dale's pickup rolled up to his right shoulder and slowed to match his speed. Dale wound the window down.

"Wanna lift?"

Jason tossed his hand backwards without looking at Dale.

"It's getting cold again. You got enough wood? You know how to maintain the stove?"

Jason knew he'd figure it out but he didn't feel like giving Dale the pleasure of thinking he hadn't already done it in his mind.

"Got a space heater in the bed," he said. "Runs on batteries. It'll help for a while."

"Thanks," Jason said. He kept his head down until he heard the unmistakable sound of liquid sloshing inside of glass. Dale replaced the cap on the whiskey bottle in his hand, steering with his thigh. He hung it out the cab toward Jason.

"Goddamn it, Dale," he said. "That's all you've done since I got here."

Dale brought his arm in and tossed the bottle in the

passenger seat.

“Get in the truck, son,” he said.

Jason ran a hand through his hair, grabbed a chunk of the thinning stuff and pulled just hard enough to raise his scalp.

“I don’t need your help,” he said. “All I wanted was the place. You said I could have it and that you would leave me alone.”

“I never said I wouldn’t give a good goddamn about you,” Dale said.

“Well you don’t have to,” Jason said. “You don’t owe me anything. Just go on home and drink yourself to death. You haven’t changed.”

Dale laid on the brakes and put the truck in park. He leapt down from the cab and placed himself in front of Jason.

“Listen,” Dale said. “I can see that once again I didn’t live up to your expectations. But I’m here and ain’t that good enough?”

Jason pushed through him and continued down the road.

“Still a scrawny punk-ass kid,” Dale said. “Look at you. Big writer—you haven’t written a word since you came here. Can’t even think of the right ones. Studied philosophy but you don’t know Kierkegaard—what’s that degree good for if you don’t know what the hell you learned?”

Jason kept walking. Dale followed.

“Still can’t bait a hook, don’t know how to catch a damned fish. Still more worried about mice than your own—”

“My own what?”

“Mom,” Dale said. “Bernie’s a good woman and you let her worry about you. Melinda too. You want to talk about not changing? You still prance around like a—faggoty whatsit.”

“*Prance* isn’t the word you’re looking for, Dale.”

“No?”

“No. The word you want is *traipse*.”

“Traipse?”

“Yes—weary, reluctant movement.”

“Okay, then that’s what you do. You traipse around like—”

“I get it, Dale. I fail.”

“You only fail because you want to—you and your profound bricklayer stories. I know a place right now that’ll take you on five days a week.”

“You don’t get it,” Jason said.

“Why’d you come out here, then, Jay?”

Jason stopped in the road and turned around to face Dale, flushed.

“Because I can’t go to Tucumcari,” he said. “It’s not like it was with you. We never sent him any Christmas newsletters. He wouldn’t read them if we did. And what he did to us—it’s not like whiskey dick, Dale. I wish it was.”

“All right, then, let it go. You couldn’t go there, so you came out here, looking for something, and you didn’t find it. So what?”

Jason lost his words again. He hated to resort to a cliché, but that might be the only way Dale would understand.

“You don’t know what I’ve—”

“Been through,” Dale finished. “Right. I don’t. I don’t know what you’ve been through and you don’t know what I’ve been through.” He put a hand on Jason’s shoulder, and though Jason’s first instinct was to shrug it off, he didn’t. He pulled all of his muscles still and fixed his stare on the empty birch behind Dale’s ear, listening for a sound denoting spring—a change, a seed pushing through the earth, a warm shift in the air, the smell of worms—anything to break the cold spell.

“Get in the truck,” Dale said. “I’ll make sure the cabin is warm, the cooler is stocked, the holes are all boarded up. Maybe we missed some.”

Jason chewed his lip.

“Maybe you want to leave ‘em open so the mice have a place to come in,” he said. “Get warm.”

“Don’t they hibernate?” Jason asked.

“Oh hell, I don’t know what mice do,” Dale said. “Come on in the truck. I’ll take you out there, make sure you have some paper, and you can write about what the mice do. Or about Tucumcari—wherever the hell that is.”

“New Mexico,” said Jason.

“Great,” Dale said. “And if you don’t feel like writing,

that's okay too. We can hang out for a while, if you want. Tell each other what we've been through. Don't have to do that either. I can just head out. Once you're settled. I'll just head back."

Jason breathed out and relaxed, and Dale took his hand away.

"I kind of just want to walk," he said.

Dale nodded. "All right, I'll drive, you walk. See you there."

He got back into the idling pickup, took a long swig of whiskey, and threw the truck into drive. He went slowly, never getting too far ahead of Jason, and when he did, he pushed gently on the brake and waited, watching him come closer in the rear-view mirror. ☺☺



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