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I WAS A TEENAGE SLASHER

»»

STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES



for Nancy

<u>sometimes nothing keeps me together</u> <u>at the seams</u>

--NIKKI SIXX

Friday

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It was the best of times--high school--and it was the suckiest of times: high school.

Would I trade it, though?

If I could unkill six people, not make the whole town of Lamesa, Texas gnash their teeth and tear their clothes and have to go to funeral after funeral that searing-hot July?

Okay, I'm maybe exaggerating a bit about the clothes tearing. Though I'm sure some grieving brother or friend or conscripted cousin split a seam of their borrowed sports jacket, heaving a coffin up into a hearse. And I bet a dentist or two paid their golf fees with money earned spackling the yellowy molars a whole town of restless sleepers had been grinding in their sleep, not sure if it was over. Not sure if I was gone.

And, yeah--"golf fees"?

I don't know.

People who wear plaid pants and hit small balls aren't exactly the crowd I run with.

The crowd I <u>do</u> run with are... well. We're the ones with black hearts and red hands. Masks and machetes.

And until I was seventeen, I never even knew about us.

My name is Tolly Driver. Which isn't just this grimy keyboard messing my typing up. <u>Tolly</u> isn't short for "Tolliver," and <u>Driver</u> was just my dad's random last name, and probably his dad before him, and I don't know where it comes from, and even if I did, even if I had my whole family history back to some fancy-mustached dude reining mules this way and that, it wouldn't change anything.

In 1989, a thing happened in Lamesa, Texas. No, a thing happened <u>to</u> Lamesa, Texas.

And to me.

And to six people of the graduating class, some of whom I'd known since kindergarten.

It also happened to my best friend, Amber.

She's why I'm writing this all down at last.

I don't know where you are anymore, Ambs.

Maybe we weren't meant to ever see each other again, after we were seventeen?

In real life, I mean. Because I still see you every night, the way you were the summer between our junior and senior years. What was Cinderella's big song on the radio, then? "Don't Know What You Got Till It's Gone"? I should have taken Kix's advice, though, and not closed my eyes. Not even once.

I know now that we never should have gone to that party at Deek Masterson's, Amber. What I wouldn't give to let us just make one more round up and down the drag instead. To have sat on your tailgate at the carwash and watched classmates roll in, pile into different front seats and truck beds, and then leave again. We could have eventually eased out to our big oil tank on the east side of town, done the two-straw thing with our thousandth syrupy Dr Pepper from the Town & Country, and watched the meteors scratch light into the sky then fizzle into lonelier and lonelier sparks, each of us holding our breath, not having to say anything.

When I look back, that's how I see us best: in the last moments before we turned right on Bryan Street, to slope out to Deek's on the north side of town, the Richie Rich houses. I'm riding shotgun in your little Rabbit truck, with the bucket seat that slid forward on its rails every time you braked, conking my head on the windshield.

You stopped short a lot that summer.

And me, I laughed until thin blood sheeted down my face. Until it outlined my mouth. Until it was dripping off my chin like I'd been bathing in it.

Don't look at me like that, please.

That's not who I really was. That's just what I ended up doing.

I was a teenage slasher, yeah, okay. I said it.

And it wasn't because my career placement test told me what I was, and it wasn't because I'd been harboring secret resentments since sixth grade, about some traumatic prank.

It was because I had, and still live with, a peanut allergy.

How's that for motivation?

"Tolly Driver's rage built over the years, seeing his classmates eat trail mix with apparent impunity, until it finally simmered over, resulting in a swath of destruction four days long and six bodies deep."

That's the <u>60 Minutes</u> version of me. If the world had cared enough about Lamesa, Texas to even notice.

Or maybe I'm more <u>20/</u> <u>20</u> material? "An unassuming high school junior, slight of build, academically unexceptional, recently deprived of his father, woke one morning to see the world through different eyes, worse eyes, more dangerous eyes, and the people around him paid the price."

That part about the people around me paying the price gets it right anyway, doesn't it?

Don't say anything.

I know you paid for being my friend, Amber Big Plume Dennison.

You stood by me when everyone else would have cut me down. You believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. And then you saved my life.

And now I don't even know where you are. If you're happy. If you're not.

If you also think about that party out at Deek's.

I do wish we'd never gone.

In some ways, though, I guess I'm sort of still there.

* * *

It's July 14th, 1989, and my forehead's just bouncing back from the windshield of a seven-year-old Volkswagen pickup.

You'd think that a sudden conk like that might blot out the previous few seconds, since what's important right after impact is reeling around, dealing with the shock, assessing the damage, trying to decide whether to laugh or cry. Except, first, what I was already saying: this was nothing new for me, that summer. Any brain damage I was to suffer from repetitive whacks to the forehead, I'd probably already suffered it.

Second: in retrospect, I kind of deserved it.

There I was not twenty-four inches from the girl I was too stupid to even consider, and, like the idiot I was, I'd just said another girl's name: Stace Goodkin.

Not just <u>said</u>-said it, either, like talking about someone I'd seen eat a chili dog in one long bite at the drive-in last weekend. No, I'd sort of <u>intoned</u> Stace's name, my voice swooning and swanning, my eyes going all unfocused, my head resting back on my neck because I was slack, delirious, smitten.

Okay, I'm overselling it a bit, sure. But it was all in good fun, at least until Amber couldn't take it anymore, brought me back down to earth by hauling that trusty emergency brake up with her right hand, whipping my head forward into that windshield that hadn't cracked before, didn't crack then, and's still whole and intact nearly eighteen years later, in that Great Junkyard in the Sky foreign cars get retired to.

"Ha, ha, ha," I drolled out, rubbing between my eyebrows with the heel of my hand, even though the point of impact had been dead center of my forehead.

"She used to <u>babysit</u> you," Amber said with that kind of incredulity that's just a shade away from outrage.

She wasn't wrong.

When I was four and Stace Goodkin was five, she'd evidently been so much more mature and responsible and trustworthy than me that her mom and my mom had agreed that she could look after me for an hour or two, when the two of them needed to be somewhere they could smoke cigarettes and drink coffee without either of their husbands listening in. Can you fall in love at four years old?

Probably not. Maybe with a dog, or an ice cream cone, or a cartoon.

What I think I did fall in love with, though, at kind of a pre-thinking level, was being Stace's doll to dress up, to spoon applesauce to, to play <u>Operation</u> with. I'm pretty sure she let me win at hide and seek back then, even.

I would get better with the hiding and the seeking, of course. Like, <u>killer</u> good. And I suppose <u>Operation</u> was a sort of training for me as well, a first look into the endless wonders just under the skin of a human body. And--I should have said this earlier, right up front: this computer doesn't know italics, so... expect some underlines?

But, Deek's party.

Deek had graduated two years before, was just home from college--A&M, if that tells you what you need to know--and his parents were in Vegas for the weekend, on their fourth or fifth honeymoon, because they were always breaking up. Mix a pony keg into this situation, and take into consideration that Deek was his parents' golden boy, could do no wrong, would never get his truck taken away or anything, and: automatic party, right?

"She's probably not even here, Romeo," Amber said, twisting the Rabbit's ignition back. The diesel four-banger clattered and coughed, would take thirty seconds to die all the way down, which was a thing I always respected about it, that it would try to hang on even when it was already a lost cause.

Amber followed up calling me "Romeo" with batting her eyes coquettishly, and the way I got her back for slamming my head into her windshield was to grab the stick shift, tip the transmission up into gear, no clutch, which is a thing you either have to time or be lucky for.

The truck lurched forward a jolt, Amber screeched, and the silver-feather earring she'd had her head tilted over to put in slipped down her palm, vaulted off the heel of her hand, and glimmered down into the floorboard, and the no man's land under her bucket seat. Unlike on my side, her dad had wrapped some bad-idea tangle of baling wire back and forth from rail to rail, locking her seat at exactly the right place for her but also turning the space under her seat into a rat's nest of snaggy metal. "Those are the ones my <u>mom</u> gave me?" Amber shrieked. "That her mom gave <u>her</u>? Are you trying to ruin my whole family, Tol, what?"

"Here," I said, turning sideways to jam the blade of my fingers under her seat, which was when I noticed the forehead blood on my palm, had to stop to inspect it, follow it up to the red starburst on the backside of the windshield.

"Trying to ruin <u>my</u> family?" I said back quieter, holding my hand higher up into the moonlight.

"Trying to save the world from any more of you, more like," Amber said with a devious grin, and leaned against the steering wheel to shove her own hand down under the front of her seat, closing her eyes to let her fingers see better.

Ninety careful seconds later, all she came back with was a nick in her index finger.

"Not saying you didn't deserve that," I told her, and I'd like to say that the reason we didn't press our blood together in the cab right then was that, in 1989, we were scared of AIDS, but... okay, I'll admit it: I'd never even gotten close to first base with anybody but myself. Amber either. Our dance cards weren't exactly stacked with scratched-out names, I mean, and our bedposts didn't have any notches in them, were just as virgin as we were. Not saying our blood was necessarily <u>clean</u>—we'd both grown up on well water that left our teeth cotton-field brown, like everybody else's—but I guess maybe we already felt sort of like brother and sister, no playground ceremonies necessary?

"So now I get lockjaw, great," she said, sucking her finger.

"That's your Indian earring, right?" I asked her, never sure how to say it, exactly.

Amber held up the one she still had, said, "My granddad made it?" and the question mark in her tone wasn't because she wasn't sure who hammered that silver into a feather all those generations back, it was because, like she was always telling me, anything she had--her backpack, her truck, her basketball--if it was hers, then it was Indian, got it?

"Tomorrow," I told her. "I'll dig it out tomorrow."

"Another Tolly promise?"

"How do you even know you're going to have a daughter to give those earrings to?"

"Boys can't wear earrings?"

"Boy <u>George</u>," I offered, pretty weakly. I only knew him from music videos. "Yeah, we need more of you," Amber said, standing.

* * *

I stood into the night, breathed its cleanness in.

If you think I don't miss Texas--well.

The moment we were in, it was... it was like we were standing in the bottom of a giant hollow pin cushion, and somebody had the lights on bright in whatever room we were in. And I guess there were coyotes yapping outside that room's window, I don't know. There were around Deek's house on the north side of town, anyway.

"She's probably not even <u>here</u>?" I quoted back to Amber, about all the cars and trucks parked up and down the road—even one old Farmall tractor. "Everybody's here, Ambs."

"DUIs waiting to happen..." Amber muttered, and hip-checked her door shut.

"Not her," I said back, getting all dreamy and wistful again.

Which Amber couldn't say anything about, because it was true. No way would Stace Goodkin be one of the inebriated, weaving home. No way would she be <u>riding</u> with someone like that, either. I would say she was one of the good ones, the straight and narrow seniors, but it's more like she was the only one. She hadn't ever been seen in the back two rows of the Sky-Vue, or pulled up to Spurlock's with a beau—as my mom would have said it—and any time Future Farmers of America and Future Homemakers of America took a bus trip together, she always stayed in the hotel room she'd been assigned, running flashcards by herself, politely declining all the guys leaning in her doorway like a movie poster, tipping their heads out to the parking lot, where all the rites of adulthood were waiting.

Those guys were football stars and tractor dealership inheritors and youth group lifers--the kings of Lamesa High--but they never had a chance. Not with Stace Goodkin.

I figured the kid she used to babysit might, though.

You think big thoughts when you're seventeen. Big, stupid thoughts.

* * *

Don't let me tell you that Deek's party had a moment of silence when Tolly Driver and Amber Dennison walked through its batwing doors, either. First, it was just a normal front door, nothing dramatic and Old West about it. Second... and I should say this about myself, not about Amber. No need to pull her down with me. I mean. Any more than I already have.

But, second, I wasn't that big of a deal yet, I guess you could say? There was no reason for everybody to stop what they were doing, clock my entrance. Everybody knew who I was, of course, but that's just because we'd all been together since elementary, pretty much. By high school, now, everybody had my number. I was the reason snack time in second grade always involved gummy treats and round crackers and cheese, never almonds or walnuts or peanuts or anything sesame seed–adjacent. "Tolly might have a <u>reaction</u>," Nurse Lampkin would be there special on day one to say in her hushed voice, somehow making eye contact with every kid in class so they got the life-or-deathness of this.

Translation: Tolly might spasm and foam at the mouth and pee his pants, and then suffocate—and you'd all have to watch, and remember it forever.

I don't mean to define myself by my allergy, everybody's got something, plenty have worse, I'm not complaining, but when that's the first time you become aware of me, I have to figure it's kind of like the lens you always see me through?

Anyway, I'd been busy trying to shake that "handle with care" thing by always slamming cup after red cup of whatever the spiked punch was at the party, by always jumping off the hayride at its fastest, never caring where or how I landed, and everybody knew it was me who had dragged the sharp teeth of a wide-open stapler—the staples were all bunched up in the mouth—down the wall of lockers on the way to the gym, gouging the metal deeper than the janitor's paint could fill in.

My big plan to not be so fragile had been working, too. Until my dad, close enough to town to sneak home for a surprise lunch, tried to pass a knifing rig just north of Stanton and met another tractor head-on, which was the joke I wasn't supposed to know about: he met the John Deere head-on, and it took his head right <u>off</u>.

Now, so far as Lamesa was concerned, I had so many "fragile" stickers on me I was pretty much a mummy. People were "sorry," "was there anything they could do," "their uncle died three years ago," "that road should be wider," and on and on.

As for Amber, I'd heard the upperclassmen say she "had potential" if she wasn't so dark, and then maybe take a second look anyway when she passed in the hall, but she was also the girl who'd dipped freshman year, and she was kind of having kind of a hard time living that down. It hadn't been because she was especially kicker or anything, though. The reason she'd started dipping was to guilt her Army brother into quitting Copenhagen, because she didn't want him dying from mouth cancer, and it worked, he's probably out there saving the world right now, but still, as far as high school was concerned, she still had those wet black flecks on her teeth, was still and forever going to be carrying a clawedopen Dr Pepper can around to string teal-colored lines of spit down into.

We were sort of outcasts together, you could say. On the outside looking in. But? Stand at that tall chain link fence long enough, peering through those metal diamonds, and the hand you have hooked up higher than your head might nudge into someone else's, and then the two of you can maybe nod, don't even have to say anything.

I miss you, Ambs.

And I'm so sorry for everything that's about to happen, here.

What I wouldn't give to ride in your little joke of a truck just one more time.

These steps we're taking through Deek's front door, though, they're in slow motion, I'm thinking. And they're so fucking heavy, aren't they? All of West Texas is shaking each time one of our feet comes down on the tiles of Deek's entryway. Owls are fluttering down from circle systems, their wings cupping the air. Prairie dogs are looking up to their crumbling ceilings. Porch lights are trembling, dogs are barking, an old grandma is looking at the water her teeth are in, because it's shaking. "Shut the damn door!" Lance O'Bryan yelled over the music to us, remember?

At least I think it was Lance. His dad was an auction caller on the weekends, so always brought his loud voice home, or his bullhorn-deafened ears. Either way, Lance could boom it out, was always the one to call plays on the football field, Friday nights.

I swallowed hard, stopped in my tracks, shut that damn door.

"There she is, loverboy," Amber said to me about fifty times louder than I wanted her to.

She was right: Stace Goodkin was leaned back against the breakfast counter dividing the kitchen from the dining room, and she was earnestly--of course earnestly--listening to some fascinating story Kim Jones was pretty much acting out for her, because words couldn't contain whatever this was.

"Hey, Stace!" Amber called across the living room, coming up onto her toes and waving, so that not only Stace had to look over, but the whole party did.

"Amber?" Stace said, holding her hand up to put Kim Jones on pause, politely.

"Look who's here," Amber said, and did that magician thing where she flourished around, presenting me, in all my skinny awkwardness.

"Tolly Tolly <u>Driver</u>," Deek said from the kitchen, and stepped in. "Didn't even know you knew about this little shindig, hoss."

<u>Hoss</u> was from the new football coach. All his players and former players were using it, now.

"We can--" I sputtered back to Deek, making to step back out, into my proper place.

"He's cool," Stace said though, and after what seemed to me like the longest held breath, Deek shrugged about me, said, "Let the libations flow, then," and Amber and me stepped down into the party proper, Kim Jones picked her can'tbelieve-it story up again, and—

And if the next part's going to make sense, I need to explain about Deek and his crew, I guess.

And Justin Joss.

* * *

I say "Deek," and he was maybe the ringleader, I suppose, but it was really him and Mandy Lonegan and Trey Meeks and Grandlin Chalmers and Abel Martinez and Abel's twin sister Ezzy--short for <u>Esmeralda</u>, her grandmother's name evidently, but using it would get her all up in your face, so: <u>Ezzy</u>.

In <u>their</u> freshman year, when Amber and me had still been in junior high, Deek and them had signed up for the Future Farmers of America's Leadership team. Not because they were all cuckoo for parliamentary procedure and Robert's Rules of Order, but because they were freshmen, and if they wanted to go on any of the out of town trips, then they had to compete in the only category the upperclassmen hadn't already called. Grass judging was already gone and only the seniors got to compete about what to call this or that cut of meat.

That left Leadership. Meaning, if Deek and them wanted to get on that yellow dog and slope out of town, their freshman year was going to be all about seconding this and tabling that. And, because they didn't have enough Future Farmers to mock up an actual meeting, a couple of the Future Homemakers of America had come across to fill those empty seats: Mandy and Ezzy. It meant their team couldn't <u>compete</u>-compete, that every meet they went to would officially be just for practice, but it's not like they were in it to win, either. It was all about a night out of town, with a motel door that opened out onto Lubbock or San Angelo or Abilene or Midland––everywhere's a big city when you're Lamesa born and bred.

And then Stace Goodkin came across from FHA as well. While she wouldn't have been in it to crush the competition, I expect she came at Leadership team the same way she came at her homework, at homecoming committee, at bake sales for the church: all business.

Of course, this freshman for-practice-only team lost their first two meets, which netted them a talking-to from Mr. Thompson, who taught Ag. Their road privileges were threatened, the team might get dissolved until they could take it seriously, all the usual threats.

Deek and crew shrugged, didn't say anything, couldn't have cared less, I would guess--in their defense, I wouldn't have either--but this reprimand cut

deep for Stace. It could be the first sort of negative mark on her permanent record, couldn't it?

She went locker to locker, trying to get everyone to meet after school to run through some mock problems she'd worked up, but it was Friday in late spring, meaning no football game that night, just a track meet in the morning. Nobody showed for her meeting, I mean, and Robert's Rules of Order are hard to implement solo. You sound kind of like a crazy person, just spewing your madeup problems all over the table.

And, no, no need to say it: Where were you for that crazy-person meeting, <u>Tol?</u>

Truth told, I don't know. That Friday would go down in town history, kind of become a marker, a cautionary tale, but... maybe I was hanging around the Town & Country, waiting to steal something? Maybe I was throwing rocks at a flock of cowbirds, just to see them rise up so white and flappy? I could have even been hanging out at Amber's barn, so long as her dad wasn't around.

Or? If my dad was close enough to Lamesa, he'd swing by school in his work truck, take me with him. He was a pumper. What that meant was he'd go down every caliche road for counties in each direction, to oil tank pads he could find in a sandstorm, and sometimes had to, wearing scuba goggles. Once to that pad, we'd put a hardhat on—company rules, even though there was nothing but blue sky yawning open above us—climb the metal stairs, and unwind a plumb bob down into the tank, then reel it up until the gauge line showed raw crude. After that, Dad would let me crib that measurement into the spiral notebook in the mailbox at the foot of the stairs, so long as I promised to write neat and clear, and then we'd clean the tape and be off to the next one, and the next one, until dark.

Nowadays, I'd guess it's all automated somehow. Built-in gauges, radio reporting, I don't know. Back then, it was all about pumpers grinding from tank to tank all the livelong day, and my dad and me singing with the radio between stops, me trying to keep up with the lyrics he'd make up, both of us finally collapsing into laughter.

I know, I know--what if he'd never caught that tractor's toolbar at sixty miles per hour, right? Do six people in Lamesa, Texas then get a free pass, keep

their insides on the inside?

What if, what if.

Maybe it's better it all worked out like it did, though.

Dad wouldn't have been proud of what I'm soon to become, I mean. What I guess I still, technically, am.

I don't have grandchildren for you to spoil, Dad, no. I do have web pages documenting my murder spree, though. That count for anything? What about that TV movie they did, "loosely based on"?

Yeah, it was pretty stupid.

They didn't even get my mask right.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I was talking about Deek.

Well, really, about Justin Joss.

* * *

Justin Joss was a hanger-on. I guess that's the best way to say it. He was that kind of hopeful-to-be-included that he'd pretty much do anything. Like, on the social ladder? I say that me and Amber would maybe be pretty low. But Justin Joss would be even a rung or two down from us.

Example: in elementary, when there were still glass salt and pepper shakers on the cafeteria tables at school and everybody was always pouring a mound of salt into their hand just to get everybody chanting for them to <u>eat it</u>, <u>eat it</u>, Justin Joss had been so desperate for approval that he'd actually eaten it. He was a year ahead of me, but still, I felt sorry for... for the hopeful way he held his eyes, when he clapped that handful of salt in? What his eyes were asking was, "So, this is good enough? Now I'm in?"

No, Justin.

Sorry.

Though he did get to go home from school early that day. And there would nearly always be crunchy salt underfoot around his locker, which I guess is classmates thinking about you, anyway.

High school's not the place to try to ever live anything down, no.

Justin Joss deserved better than Lamesa gave him.

But? He probably did save a lot of lives, too. The same way that wrecked Corvette on the flatbed trailer does when it gets parked in front of the school for the lead-up to prom every year.

Anyway, where I'm going with this is that Friday nobody came to Stace's afterschool Leadership run-through.

I picture her sitting there for the scheduled two hours all the same, running flashcards by herself, and then she's walking back to her house, her books hugged to her chest like always.

Is she pissed?

Maybe in a Stace-way, which is to say she probably regretted her teammates' poor decisions, and was concerned about the roads they were unwittingly stepping down, that would lead them, in ten years' time, to destinations neither they nor their parents ever planned on.

Like I said: Stace <u>cared</u>. She would have babysat all of us, given the chance.

So, she goes home, eats Friday night dinner with her parents, and then, because she'd made the case for a hardship license, she asked if she could maybe have the car keys for a half hour?

It was so she could find her Leadership team, schedule the next meeting.

If Stace Goodkin ever listened to my favorite radio station, KBAT, out of Midland? Then she might have heard "Bang Your Head" at some point. And it might have resonated with her, in trying to deal with Deek and them.

I never found out what she listened to, though. Probably, to make her a safer driver, nothing, right? Or, this night, maybe <u>Robert's Rules of Order</u> on cassette, which who knows if that's really a thing.

So, <u>while</u> she was eating dinner with her parents, recounting her week to them, previewing the upcoming one, Deek and crew had spirited Justin Joss out into the cotton fields south of town—"south" because Deek lived north, and you don't shit where you eat.

What they were doing, they told him——the teachers and parents never heard this, but all the kids did——was inducting him to be part of their gang. Or maybe "initiating"? I guess I don't even know exactly what the difference is there. But it doesn't matter. They piled into Deek's shiny shortbed with the flashy chrome rollbar, turned all his spotlights on, loaded up on beer, and headed out into the nothing. Which is what you do when you grow up in Lamesa. All kids want to get away, don't they? Just, in a big city, that means sneaking into clubs, I guess. Or taking a train across town, where you can be anonymous.

In West Texas, nobody's anonymous, and the only place to go is away from prying eyes. Which means: out into the nothing. Stock tanks you can skinnydip in, if you don't mind how grody they are. Radio towers you can climb, if you know which ones are hot, which ones aren't. Junkyards you can sneak into after dark, turnrows you can drink beer in, so long as you don't leave bottles behind. And... pump roads. The kind my dad knew from biggest artery to smallest capillary, down to which pastures you had to rabbit across, because that's where this or that rancher keeps his bulls.

And, the thing about pump roads is that they all lead either to oil tanks, like Amber and me liked to climb and lie back on, or pumpjacks. If you don't know a pumpjack... they're these monstrous metal dinosaurs with huge counterweights and pretty strong motors to keep them going. Like--there's windmills that use the wind to push those rods deep into the ground, to get water back up? That's a pumpjack. Just, without the wind. Pumpjacks aren't as tall as a windmill, but they're about three hundred times more solid. A tornado will twist a windmill up, leave it three pastures over. But a pumpjack doesn't even look over its shoulder if the sky goes green.

Another way to picture a pumpjack: a big metal horse, bucking slow, pulling barrel after barrel of crude up from the ground.

Meaning, yeah, it's kind of inevitable that kids are going to climb up top, ride it. Especially kids like us, raised on rodeo. Kids who probably rode horses in the parade every year while their granddad was still alive.

That was to be Justin Joss's rite of passage: ride a pumpjack. Specifically, ignore all the warning signs about loss of limb and life, step over the short metal fence, and find your way up there while someone holds their hand on the power lever, keeping this killer horse still for the moment.

You can guess where this is going, can't you? It's every parent's nightmare. And of course very important to Justin Joss's initiation ceremony here is that he drink beer after beer, for courage. And--according to legend--when he was still too nervous, Ezzy scrambled up there, straddled the pumpjack's back, then scooched all the way out to the head of the hammer, nodding to Deek to flip the switch. At which point she's supposed to have gone full-on Debra Winger from <u>Urban Cowboy</u>, which pretty much owned the eighties in West Texas.

How could Justin Joss resist now, right? Even a girl could do it.

Deek slowed the big beast, Ezzy stayed out there, and, awkwardly, hesitantly, looking back over and over probably, Justin Joss ascended, Deek assuring him the whole way, but urging him faster, too.

Right before Justin Joss had his seat, Deek of course turned the power back on, so that horse's metal back could rise up to him, take his breath away.

Ezzy was already holding on--she was a barrel racer, knew to clamp her thighs--but Justin Joss slid back and forth on that rocking beam, screaming for all he was worth, grasping for any handle, or edge, or bolt.

Deek and Mandy and Trey and Grandlin and Abel held their foaming beers up and toasted the entertainment Justin Joss was providing. Ezzy leaned back, peeled out of her straw hat, and swung it around behind and above her like a steer wrestler, and I imagine this was pretty much the definition of a perfect Friday night for all involved.

At least until headlights swept across the pad the pumpjack was on.

I imagine Deek and the rest of them shielding their eyes and wincing, sure this was one of their dads.

When the caliche dust settled, it was Stace Goodkin.

She'd heard in town where her Leadership team was.

She stood up from the running board, her headlights still on.

"Justin, <u>no</u>!" she was already screaming, running for the pumpjack's ladder to save him.

And she probably could have.

She was Stace Goodkin, after all.

It was too late, though. What was happening had too much momentum, had been happening since right after school let out, when Mandy sauntered over to Justin Joss, asked if he'd maybe like to hang with them tonight? Justin Joss looked to Deek, to Ezzy, to Stace, and in that moment of split attention, he slid forward a bit, and tried to grab on tighter like you do, like you would, but... he overbalanced, and fell down into the spinning counterweights. They don't go all that fast, are pretty much five-ton clock pendulums, but they do definitely <u>go</u>. And they don't stop, not for hell or high water.

The first one snipped Justin Joss's right leg off at mid-thigh, and made him sit up enough that the weight on the other side just missed cutting him in half.

He did have to put his left hand back to brace himself, though.

Next rotation, he lost that hand halfway up the forearm.

From the hammer two stories up, Ezzy was screaming for Deek to turn the power off, turn the power off!

Deek did, but those weights still had one revolution to get through. Ponderously, they took a few more inches of Justin Joss's left arm off, and the only reason Lamesa didn't lose Stace Goodkin that night was that Abel Martinez, all-district linebacker, did a flying tackle into her midsection.

But as soon as she hit the caliche, Stace was climbing back up, fighting to save Justin Joss, whose various stumps were burbling and gouting slower and slower.

Finally, the big weights came to a stop.

I imagine a bullbat diving down into Stace's headlights, to snatch a bug up. Or maybe Justin Joss's soul.

* * *

So, that's Deek and his crew. And that's Stace Goodkin as well.

And, yeah, by the time me and Amber were freshmen, there was a young tree in front of the high school with a "Justin Joss" plaque on it. If it lived, that tree's probably throwing some good shade, by now. And the story of a Lamesa high schooler with promise falling into that industrial-sized meatgrinder is what kept so many up-and-comers off the pumpjacks, so: thanks, Justin. You're part of the gang now, man.

And, to Mr. and Mrs. Joss? I understand why you had to move away to Georgia. Completely. The only eyewitnesses to this tragedy were the perpetrators, right? That's not whose college exploits and weddings and births

you want to read about in the <u>Press-Reporter</u> for the next decade. That's not who you want to stand in line behind, to pay for your gas.

The funny thing too was that, headed into the living room of Deek's party, I was already kind of low-key thinking about Justin Joss. Not because I was him in this situation—the wannabe—but because part of me was always still at my dad's funeral.

Like you do for a town tragedy, everybody had been there for it. A Saturday morning. All the stores closed except the Town & Country and grocery store, pretty much.

I won't bore you with all the speeches and crying. With all the oilfield workers there in their best clothes. With the feeling in my chest that day. With how Amber stood right there beside me, her hair pulled back and braided down her back, which had to have taken her mom a half hour to get right. Amber even had lipstick on, which doesn't exactly fit with someone still known for dipping. It wasn't red, but darker purple, I guess like fits for a funeral. I don't know if she picked her outfit, if her mom told her what to wear, if they spent the whole night before trying stuff on, what. But I know that when I looked up that day, to her wending her way to me through the headstones, all I wanted to do was walk over to meet her, turn the two of us around, and run and run and keep running.

And Amber, she would have done it, too. I could see it in her eyes. In the hesitant way she was holding her mouth, unsure what exactly her lips looked like, all dark purple.

We would have run until her braid came loose, until my stupid new loafers fell behind us, until the mesquite had scratched our arms and faces so much that our outsides could sort of match our torn-up insides. And she wouldn't have told anybody how she held my head to her chest when I started crying, couldn't stop.

But instead, I nodded once to her, she nodded once back, and we walked to my dad's grave together, made it through the hymns, the handshakes and hugs, and my dad's coffin, cranking down into that hole in the ground.

After, when everyone was shrugging their way back through the headstones to their trucks, this could <u>also</u> be where <u>all this</u> starts?

It's like, when historians are trying to go back and say what started World War I? There's the trigger, I guess you could call it--that archduke getting got--but there's a lot of precipitating little things as well.

This is one of those little things. And it's why I associate Justin Joss with my dad's funeral.

In that mass exodus, all the well-wishers had managed to get my mom and me separated, and Amber's parents had guided her to their truck, I guess, to get good seats at the reception. But that was fine. I could get to my mom's truck by myself. And, really, walking alone felt like a good metaphor for all the steps I still had ahead of me in life, now. It's dramatic, I know, but... this I won't write off to being seventeen, I don't think. When your dad dies, whenever in life you are, you realize that you've either got to hold yourself up, now, or just start falling and falling.

Anyway, Grandlin Chalmers was ahead of me but going slow. It was because he was walking and trying to open one of those little suckers that had been in the bowl at the church. These are the cheap-o ones like the bank has. Like, their handles or sticks are loops, sort of, that meet in the sucker?

Grandlin got the cellophane off, shook it from his fingers, and the wind took it, sucked it two or three graves over. At which point Grandlin looked back like to see who might have seen this, so he could know if he needed to chase that trash down or not.

"Hey," I said, just there, grieving.

If it had been anybody else, I don't think Grandlin would have gone after his litter like he did. I was the special person of the day, though. The grounds Grandlin were trashing up, my dad was part of them now.

Grandlin pivoted, light on his feet as ever, and jogged over for that invisible wrapper.

I watched him not because I was interested, and not because that trash <u>needed</u> to get collected, but because, the whole funeral, I hadn't known what to do with my eyes. This, watching Grandlin? It was something.

The wrapper had snagged on some dried roses some survivor had left.

Grandlin didn't even break stride, just reached down to snatch it up. Jogging back to the gravel path, though, he was slinging his right hand, had evidently caught a thorn.

"Every rose," I may have said or sort of sung in my mouth, under my breath. It was nice to have something familiar.

Grandlin pursed his lips in a sort of grin, seeing me see him, and then slung his right hand again like it was stinging, and it was only when I walked past where he'd just been that I saw he'd flicked some bright red blood down.

There was a drop on the grass—I don't know how I zeroed in on it, just believe me that I did—and there were two drops up on the headstone.

Justin Joss's.

How I knew it was his without even reading the name was that, on the pale granite base of the headstone, leaking dry tendrils of rust down, was a rusty oilfield drillbit Justin's father had famously hauled out there in a little kid's wagon, and then left, like an indictment of who and what had taken his only son away from him.

The groundskeeper back then--now too, I figure--would come through and pick up old vases and dead flowers and popped balloons and dried-out wreaths, keep the place from trashing up too much. But nobody had ever touched this drillbit. Probably because we all agreed with Mr. Joss's indictment. And maybe because it weighed eighty or a hundred pounds: three toothy heads spiraling together to chew down and down, to where the oil is.

I want to ask how could Grandlin have missed where he was flicking his blood—how he could have missed something so out-of-place as that <u>drillbit</u>—but... I'm pretty sure part of being Grandlin Chalmers is being blissfully unaware of the china shop you're crashing through.

Not so for the Tolly Drivers of the world.

I stopped on the gravel path, watched those two drops of blood until Dick, the assistant manager at my mom's hardware store, clapped his two-fingered hand on my shoulder and pulled me to him so we could three-leg walk it to the cars, and he didn't even say anything to me, just held me to his side, and, all these years later, I don't know if that was the best thing that could have happened after my father's funeral, or the worst.

I do know that, in my dreamiest of dreams, I imagine clapping my hand onto some fatherless kid's shoulder like that, and knowing not to say anything.

But my kind don't exactly go to the funerals, I know.

We're the <u>reason</u> for the funerals.

Later that week, when I came back to talk to my dad like you do, tell him I was going to do a bottle rocket for him way out farther than anybody else was doing fireworks, I did cruise Justin Joss's plot, of course.

The blood on the grass was gone like you'd expect, but one of the drops on the headstone was still there.

The week after that, it was gone as well, and the week after that, it was still gone, but that drillbit's weight had finally sent a crack zig-zagging up through the headstone.

Putting us right about Deek's party.

* * *

Since speaking actual mouth words to Stace Goodkin was turning out to be so much more complicated than I'd imagined——Kim Jones still had her captured, anyway——I was flitting from group to group, and kind of standing around like I was involved in this or that conversation... until I noticed my plastic cup was somehow already empty, leaving me no choice but to retreat to the kitchen yet again, for a refill that was supposed to give me the courage to actually say things to people, instead of just hover and grin like I belonged.

Somewhere in there, Amber asked, "You good?"

She was leaning on the back of the couch, still nursing the same bottle of beer she'd been handed on our trek across the living room. She was having a discussion with Janice Dickerson, one of Lamesa High's two lookalike baton twirlers, and I admit I was jealous of Amber's... I don't know: comfort level? How she didn't feel weird?

But I was feeling weird enough for both of us.

"Getting better..." I told her, waggling my empty cup and kind of pivoting around her in what was supposed to be a dance move but ended up with me having to catch the floor lamp, which sent shadows smearing all around the living room.

"Party foul..." someone called out in their most bored voice, and I left the lamp rocking, swept away as gracefully as I could, even pulling a deep, gracious bow that I held for two or three long seconds.

Did Stace cock an eye over at her old babysitting charge here?

I don't know, could only see my shoes. But I think she had to at least clock me a little, didn't she? Make enough of an ass of yourself, you get noticed, right?

What I really wonder now, though, is if Amber looked over to me acting the fool, then, without skipping a beat, replied to whatever Janice was asking her. Not like she was dismissing me, or pretending not to have walked in with me. More like "Oh, yeah, well. Here's Tolly being Tolly. In two hours, I'll be pulling my truck over so he can puke into the ditch, and the next morning he'll be grandly telling me the legendary tale of this party, and his central role in it, and how his old babysitter was watching his every move, and it'll be easier for me just to nod and go along with it again."

That was going to be later, though.

Now was the kitchen.

Since the pony keg was already empty, selections from Deek's parents' liquor cabinet were set out on the breakfast bar, along with various mixers: a two-liter of Cherry RC, orange juice from a paper carton, milk in a gallon jug, which seemed like a bad idea waiting to happen, an empty bottle of margarita mix along with one of those blue cartons of salt, and a tube of pineapple juice concentrate that had been broken into from the side, it looked like.

No thank you.

Being an underclassman, I of course couldn't be picky, had to drink whatever came my way, but still, while RC and milk <u>could</u> taste like a melted coke float it worked for Laverne, of <u>Laverne & Shirley</u>—I wanted to be throwing up later, not right now.

Trey was standing unsteadily behind the counter of the kitchen, just finishing pouring Cherry RC into what I guessed was rum.

But then he just stared at it there on the fancy countertop.

"Hey, remember?" Deek said then, walking past to the garage, and the way he pinched his thumb and index finger to his lips, it was obvious what they were needing some privacy for.

"For you, kind sir," Trey said, holding this rum and coke up to me.

It was pretty much the first time I'd had an actual interaction with any of Deek's crew.

I took the drink, nodded thanks, and... things started getting blurry at the edges. And then in the middle too.

I have a clear memory of throwing up in Deek's dad's fancy barbecue grill, and then quietly easing it shut. I remember seeing Amber in the living room and pointing to her like telling my feet where to take me, then smacking almost instantly into the sliding glass door—apparently I was still on the back patio.

When I'd nearly toppled that floor lamp earlier, people had sort of cheered in that way you do when you're in a restaurant and hear a rack of glasses hit the floor. When I walked into the sliding glass door, though, everybody looked, sure, but then they just turned away like disappointed with me. Or, maybe it was like they were no longer surprised by my antics.

Still? I'd just lost my dad a year ago, hadn't I? This--me being an idiot--was probably some stage of grief, wasn't it?

Just let the kid do what he needs to, and be sure to turn his head to the side if he passes out, so we don't have to bury him as well.

Or, that's what I tell myself they were thinking, whispering. I pretend like they cared about me and my welfare, yeah. Really, though, I kind of suspect they were somewhere between regretting having let me in and just generally being embarrassed for me. Amber too. But you couldn't have stopped me, either. Not without kicking me out. I was some version of the preacher's kid, the sheriff's kid, who has to make a spectacle of themself to prove they're not a narc, if that makes sense.

It did to me, back then.

And I'm not even sure anymore if what I was trying to live down was all the pity they had for me, about my dad, or my thing with peanuts. But I was definitely doing this to myself to prove something to them. Just, I can't say exactly what that was.

Maybe I was more like Justin Joss than I let myself remember, I don't know. Another kid eating salt in hopes that was the golden ticket to being included, finally.

And then eating more salt, when that first spoonful didn't work.

Just, sub in "rum and coke" for "salt," I guess? I went back to the breakfast bar of alcohol again and again, I mean, proudly proclaiming I'd mastered the precise mix of Cherry RC to Captain Morgan's. Stumbling around, I tried toasting the grandness of the evening by crashing my plastic cup into beers, into other plastic cups, into Amber's mostly full bottle.

She pulled me aside, said, "Listen, they're watching you, and not in a good way."

I turned dramatically from her news flash and cased the living room, trying to see who was watching me in this "not-good" way.

"I'll just——" I said to Amber, and pointed with my cup hand to the backyard, where, I presumed, there would be less judging going on. In the open air, I wouldn't have to worry about breaking anything but myself.

On the back patio, I undulated in place by the barbecue, and kept grinning, imagining Deek's dad opening it up to cook some sausage.

Across the pool, Mel Boanerges, our <u>other</u> baton twirler--who I mistook for Janice Dickerson at first, like always--was sitting on one of those long patio chairs, talking with a cowboy type I couldn't place. It was summer, though. In summer, all the little communities around West Texas kind of remix, people from Colorado City showing up in Monahans for a couple weeks-grandparents--people from Big Lake working for a week at their aunt's flower shop in Odessa. This cowboy Mel was talking to could even be someone up from Howard College or down from Tech, right? It was kind of getting to be a problem, really, college dudes hitting the weekend get-togethers, for easy pickings.

Mel and him were drinking from glass tumblers, too, not plastic cups. And the color in those glass tumblers looked like rum and coke to me.

I staggered forward to elucidate them about this wonderful coincidence, us both drinking the same thing on the same night in the same backyard, and thunked my knee immediately into a low planter with a brick edge like a chisel. I still have the scar, even. My last one, I guess. Evidently I yelped—anybody would have—and Mel and this alien cowboy both looked up, then away just as fast.

Standing there trying to swallow my pain, I zeroed in on them across the pool. The cowboy was upping his chin at Mel's drink, which didn't need

refilling, then curling his fingers into the front pocket of his brushpopper, sliding whatever he got into his own tumbler, which I guess counts as gentlemanly at college? Mel tasted it when he offered—a canteen kiss—then shrugged, giving him permission, it looked like, so he repeated the process with her drink, dribbling something from his pocket into her tumbler.

"Aspirin," I said to myself, hopefully just in my head.

Supposedly, by 1989 high school science, or just late eighties urban legend, a single aspirin in your coke erased all inhibition. Meaning, a whole handful of aspirin in a <u>rum</u> and coke? There was no telling.

I toasted them from across the way, they didn't see, and, because somebody's always got to be first at these kinds of parties, I took a couple running steps to get my spacing down, double- and triple-checked for traitorous brick planters, then launched up and out over the pool, tucking my knees up to my chest so I could really cannonball.

It was glorious.

I mean, in my head? It was glorious. I hung and hung in the air, and everyone turned to track my arc up, up, and then my even slower descent.

When I surfaced, though, it wasn't all me doing it: Mel's date--I guess that's what he was--had me by the hair I'd let grow for summer, was hauling me up onto the tile.

Behind him, shocked, thoroughly splashed, was Mel. She was aghast, had not been expecting a soaking this night.

"No, no!" Deek was saying from somewhere, running in, just stopping Brushpopper's fist from smacking me in the mouth.

"Why not?" Brushpopper growled.

"Just--just don't <u>hit</u> him?" Deek said, like a question.

"Yeah, that," I slurred, and Brushpopper elbowed me in the gut for my contribution, folding me over.

My puke came unbidden, splashed the tile with its chunky brightness, everybody jumping back.

In Brushpopper's defense, I admit I was being a complete and total ass. And, it wasn't just Mel who'd been splashed. Brushpoppper's fancy felt hat was

dripping too, I guess. Not that there's any reason to wear a 10X beaver hat in July, but that's his hairline receding ten years later, not mine.

Anyway, if you can't tell, what I'm trying to do here is document each small little step of this night, this party. Just, I have to be careful. I mean, I can try to blame it all on Grandlin at the funeral, for flicking that blood onto Justin Joss's headstone, I can try to say it was that farmer taking up both lanes on the backside of that slight rise my dad was cresting, I can say it was Brushpopper veering my future one way and not the other, I can even say Trey shouldn't have given me that first rum and coke, but it starts with me, I know. I'm the archduke, standing up from his car in the parade, and then falling right back down.

"Let me... I'll just," I said, dropping to my knees to scoop pool water over my puke.

"No, no!" Deek was still staying, desperately trying to keep me from pukeifying his pool.

Other hands grabbed me, dragged me onto the grass, away from the pool and its clean water.

"Thanks a lot, Tolly," Mel said, producing a baton from somewhere on her person, which erased about three of my rum and cokes.

She slapped its white head into her palm once, held it there.

"Sorry?" I managed to say, and then I was being manhandled onto the lounge chair she and Brushpopper had been on.

"I'll just sit here," I said, or something like that, and then, behind Mel and Brushpopper, a wall of other forms coalesced, pretty much from nothing.

Well, I say "nothing," but, they were marching-band members, so... they'd probably been at the party the whole while, but, after the initial shock of seeing someone in their marching-band getup, fresh from summer practice, big ridiculous hat and all, you kind of just erase them from consideration, and go about having your good time.

They were stepping forward now, though. Because I'd splashed one of their own: Mel.

"You're causing a ruckus again, <u>Tolly</u>," one of them said.

"We can't have you ruining another party," another said.

"Were you even invited?" a third asked.

<u>Get Amber</u>, I wanted to say, but Mel had her baton extended to just a fingerwidth from my nose. Slowly, using it like a hotshot, she guided me to lie back onto the long patio chair.

"I'll just, I can——" I said, clamping my hands onto the arms to show how this was my new place, I would just stay here, do my time, lesson learned.

"He trustworthy?" Brushpopper asked the marching band.

As one, they all shook their heads no. The tall white feathers on their hats exaggerated it.

I winced, closed my eyes, felt like I was passing a tractor on a farm-to-market road, sure the coming lane was going to be clear.

"I'll go get something to... you know," Brushpopper said, swishing his starched-thin Wranglers away, probably to his truck, where he had all manner of reins and latigo to strap me down, keep me and my antics in place.

Mel tracked his exit, then came back to me.

Her eyeliner was smeared and running from pool water, so she looked like an evil clown, a nightmare mime.

"He's got the right idea," she said about Brushpopper, and, like being in marching bands gifts you with groupthought or something, all these trumpet blowers and drum bashers and high steppers--never breaking eye contact with me--worked their golden cummerbunds up and removed the wide belts they used to keep their black marching pants up.

"Wait, no, I can--" I tried, but the prisoner's objections aren't often taken into consideration.

First they strapped my forearms to the armrests, having to wrap those belts around four or five times, so my arms were completely sleeved up to the elbows.

"Put the buckles on the bottom," Mel instructed.

Buckles on the bottom of the armrests because I might could use my mouth to undo them if they were on top.

"Now his legs," she instructed, and they wrapped me to the chair frame at the knees, and then used the last belt around my waist, really cinched it down, then cinched it down even tighter when Mel kneed me in the side.

I wasn't going anywhere.

"Throw him in <u>now</u>," one of the marchers said with an evil chuckle, and my adrenaline spiked, but Mel was just watching me.

"Tolly Tolly," she was saying, like <u>tsk tsk tsk</u>.

"I'm so sorry——I didn't mean to..." I was trying to get out, but now she was stepping forward, a knee to either side of my hips. Straddling me, yeah.

My heart skidded to a stop.

"Um," I managed to get out.

"You're a big drinker, aren't you?" she leaned down to whisper into my ear, her right hand reaching out beside her.

What she came back with was Brushpopper's glass tumbler.

"This one's on me," she said, and tilted the lip of the glass to my mouth, tilted it so I either had to drink or let it run down my chin.

I drank.

At this point in the night, I didn't need even one drop more, but I could still swallow, still gulp.

Maybe it would help me forget, right? Maybe it would blot the whole summer out.

But no--sorry, Ambs.

That would mean losing you as well. And I wouldn't trade you, or us that summer, for anything. Seriously.

And, please don't feel bad that you didn't know what was happening in the backyard. Nobody inside knew, I don't think, and, since Deek's parties famously went topless a couple hours after midnight, I know you were positioning yourself far from the pool, so as not to be in any way involved in that.

You and Stace both, right? While all the lookyloo freshmen and sophomores were already stationing themselves in the backyard for the eventual show.

After I'd drained the glass, some of it even coating my chin—–I was worried it would make me break out—–Mel leaned back to drain the dregs from it as well, taking the ice between her teeth and crunching it so violently.

Baton twirlers, right? They're made of different stuff than the rest of us.

Behind her, Brushpopper grinned, nodded, then held his hand out for his lady, to get her up off me, spirit her off into the wide-open night. He was carrying a rope, I distantly registered, and was thankful for the belts, because I knew how those ropes felt on skin. Anybody who'd ever been a freshman in Lamesa knew how ropes felt on skin, from getting bulldogged in the high school parking lot while everyone laughed and laughed.

In the moment before Mel was all the way up, though?

Brushpopper's other hand, his non-Mel hand, was idly fingering into his chest pocket again, like sorting dice, or dimes, or-no, no no no: sunflower seeds?

I wasn't sure if I was allergic to them or not, had never risked it.

And it didn't matter.

What he came up with were three or four actual <u>peanuts</u>. Which you can get away with in a Brushpopper from back then—those shirts were waxy, wouldn't grease up from the salt.

I bucked in my restraints, but, of course, that was what the kid who just got tied down for his own good was <u>supposed</u> to be doing.

Mel grinned, saluted me bye, and her and her marching-band thugs walked away, their feet falling right in step with each other.

* * *

Since 1989 in Lamesa, Texas, is gone, never to come back except in accounts like these, I should probably explain it, at least as pertains to peanuts in your coke. Trick was, FFA and FHA and Ag Sciences was <u>cool</u>. The more country you were, the more respect you got, if that tracks. Not for me, all my heroes wore spandex and bandannas, eyeliner and hairspray, but I didn't really count, either.

For the people who did count, school was a continual game of who can be the most country. So the high school halls were all Wranglers and boots and hats and dip, and the dances in the cafeteria were all two-steps and waltzes, with the occasional cotton-eyed-joe, but you could have expected that. It's the same in every small town that depends on what tractors can scratch up from the dirt, I imagine. But what you probably couldn't have guessed would be high schoolers dragging horse trailers to school and parking longways in the parking lot, to show that whoever drove that truck was fresh from the pasture, and going back there right soon, here, after all this inconsequential stuff. And the tighter your Wranglers or Silver Lakes were, the cooler you were. And, after somebody's dad explained to them that walking heels on boots didn't nestle into a stirrup so well, then riding heels were all the rage, and all the FFA lifers were suddenly two inches taller, and walking kind of carefully, too, having to <u>balance</u> into Geography, when they were already dizzy and greying out from having to swallow their Copenhagen spit.

It was ridiculous, yeah.

And, yes, I say that as an outsider looking in. But, believe me, I was an outsider who didn't want in to this fashion show even a little. I was a clown, sure, but I had no intentions of ever being a <u>rodeo</u> clown.

Anyway, part of wearing your membership card on every sleeve you had was using all the songs on 92.3 as a rulebook. No, I didn't know all the lessons there were to be had on the kicker stations, but even way out of this like I was, there was one song that still made it out to me: Barbara Mandrell's, about being country when country wasn't cool. Somewhere in there—I only clearly remember hearing it once lilting across all the cars at the drive-in—there's a line about how she, Barbara Mandrell, the holdout with unassailable country roots, was putting peanuts in her coke. Seriously. Go look it up, it's the stupidest thing. But, for all the would-be cowboys and cowgirls, it was a rulebook.

All of which is to say: I should have had my peanut radar up, at least when there were cowboy hats in the area.

But you're going to slip, too. It's what my mom was always telling me: no matter how vigilant I was, still, some sneaky peanut was going to find me one day or another. So I had to be ready, didn't I?

By "ready" I have to assume she didn't mean drunk, alone, strapped to a patio chair with costume belts from the marching band.

My first thought, after swallowing what I'd just swallowed, was about her, too--Mom. How she was going to have to go sit in those crappy metal folding chairs by a grave <u>again</u>. How Lamesa resident after Lamesa resident was going to be filing into the hardware store for the rest of the year, buying hammers and saws they didn't need, like putting coins in the offering plate.

My second thought was how it must have felt for Mel, drinking the dregs of that rum and coke--how it must feel to crush soggy peanuts, not ice, between your molars, and then just flit onto the next thing, and the next, not have to be thinking life and death thoughts.

I still wonder what that must be like.

Not that the vending machine here has any peanut snacks in it. I know Lenbo, who stocks it, and he's good about keeping me alive, says he prefers a world with me in it.

Unlike Lamesa, Texas.

In 1989, in Deek's backyard, at an otherwise happening party, I was dying.

First to swell—this was almost instant—was my throat. Like my tonsils were balloons. Both sides. I sucked in as much air as I could, knowing full well there was no way it could be enough.

If I'd had my arms, I could have waved, drawn attention, maybe gotten somebody to carve a desperate tracheotomy into me. If I'd had my legs I could have run around, made a spectacle of myself until someone saved my life.

If if if, I know.

It would have been nice to have some of that marching-band telepathy, though. Or even a throat I could have screamed with.

After the throat-swelling came the full-body convulsions--part anaphylaxis, mostly panic.

But, to anyone seeing this?

"Tolly's bucking against his restraints some more, ha."

Next it was the... I call it the full-body flush, but I'm not sure what it is, in a medical sense. Maybe lack of oxygen? My organs thinking they're rats that need to escape a sinking ship? It was my skin heating up, like all the blood was rushing to the surface, getting primed up to seep through my pores.

I was crying, I was suffocating, I was spasming. All Nurse Lampkin's predictions were coming true: Tolly Driver had ingested The Dreaded Peanut, and now his life could be measured in seconds.

Then, with my throat clenched shut with what I knew was inflammation but felt like two fists pressing on either side of my neck, my body revved up even higher, trying to forcibly eject this vile contaminant I'd let in.

Only, with my throat clenched, throwing up was... complicated.

It came out my nose at first, yeah. Hot and thick like chili, but twice as spicy. When the fists on the side of my throat backed off for a moment, instead of me getting to finally gasp air in, the rest of the puke started spewing out that way as well, some of it even going past my shoes. I was like one of those black and orange fuzzy caterpillars you can step on from back to front, smooshing all their insides out their face, onto some girl you like's unsuspecting shins.

I fully expected to see my veiny stomach flop out like frogs can do with theirs, when they suck in a poisonous fly. I never have understood how that helps, since their stomach's inside out, that vile fly still in there, but, bucking and dying on that chair, I one hundred percent got the necessity of having that bad stuff on the outside instead of the inside.

Never mind that this wasn't the first time I'd thrown up that night. All I was supposed to have in me at this point was rum and coke. But these spasms were digging deeper, into my intestines. Which is to say, yes, after the chunky stuff and the thin stuff, all coating my shirt and pants, came some more sludgy stuff, that I had to think had been compacted for its long muscular grind through my plumbing.

It was caking up through my throat now, though, more and more of it, breaking up as it came through, my body more desperate not to die a peanut death than it was concerned with ever letting me draw a breath again.

All I could move, strapped down like this, was my head, too. It could have been enough, except my neck was locked in puke convulsions, which only wanted my chin lower, lower, maybe to keep me from aspirating all this back in.

And, I suppose there was a peanut or two in all that mess, coated in bile and nearly-through-me refried beans and a kernel of corn I had no memory of and some heat-lamped shredded brisket that John-o, the clerk at Town & Country, had said he stayed away from <u>personally</u>, as he preferred his food to look different going in than coming out.

A grand total of maybe two peanuts, swimming in all that?

I don't doubt that they were evil enough that wings unfolded from their salty backs, so they could lift heavily from the muck, look around in their dim way for the next allergic reaction, for the next family to wreck. What I'm saying is I was dying, strapped to that chair. And not a single person at that party was clocking it. No one except for--God bless her--Stace Goodkin.

Through the plate glass window of the dining room of the house, I could see her, still captured by Kim Jones's novel of a story she just <u>had</u> to keep on telling. Which must have been boring enough that Stace's eyes took a moment to case her surroundings, skate from face to face, window to window, make sure no one was being taken advantage of, that no one was getting alcohol poisoning, that no family portraits were being vandalized.

When she saw what was happening to me, her mouth opened by degrees, and... I guess the best way to say it is that she became my babysitter again. The one my mom and dad had sat down and lectured about what to do if cute little Tolly somehow ingested a peanut.

Instead of running to me like any other person would probably have done, Stace turned, vaulted over the dining table—she'd been taking gymnastic lessons at some place in Lubbock since kindergarten—and... she ran away?

Later I would find out that, once she saw what was happening, she knew exactly what I needed, and so beelined the one person who might know where it was: Amber.

Amber would tell me that Stace grabbed her by both shoulders, stared lasers into her skull, and asked where my EpiPen was. According to Amber--and this must have been so glorious to hear, but it's the only way Stace could have gotten across the desperation of this moment--she even asked where my <u>fucking</u> EpiPen was, and shook Amber hard enough that her head slung back and forth, that her bottle of beer fell to the carpet, foamed up through the neck.

Which quieted the party right down.

"Glove compartment?" Amber would tell me she got out, and that's all Stace needed. She was already running outside, for Amber's distinctive little truck. As far as we knew, in the land of big trucks—West Texas—Amber's was the only VW pickup there was, and when you might be going to have to run from cops busting the party up, you don't slow yourself down by locking your doors.

But, all the way in the backyard, I didn't know what Stace was doing, of course.

And I wasn't bucking so much anymore, either.

It was kind of nice.

I'd come into glancing contact with peanuts before--it's part of having this allergy--but my mom or dad had always been around to jab me safe before it got this far, and then race me to whatever doctor or nurse there was, hold my shivering self to their chests for the whole ride, whispering things down to me I could never remember.

I was on the other side of that now, though. Of "life," I mean.

And, from my new vantage point? No breath in me, my eyes blurry with tears, my skin going cold now?

I saw Death skulking behind the back fence.

It was rotting, its head a skull trailing wisps of hair, its face covered with a... with a white mask?

No, no, of course: with a popped balloon. From the cemetery. There were always balloons left out there, bobbing from headstones.

Death had snagged one of them, ripped a couple of eyeholes, and somehow got it to stick to its face.

It didn't matter.

Death's death, right?

I was kind of calm about it, I guess.

And things were becoming clearer now. My oxygenless brain knew with a clarity I'd never known before that an angel had come to my dad last year, told him I was going to die at seventeen, and given my dad a choice: go on without me, tend my grave, tell stories about me to anyone he could corner, or... or drive into that tractor on <u>purpose</u>, and be there waiting for me, so I wouldn't be alone in the afterlife. So I wouldn't be scared.

It's the kind of thing he would have done, I mean.

Thanks, Dad.

Of all my memories, this is one I treasure, the one I'll never let go of.

<u>Okay, okay then</u>, I said to Death, coming around to the gate.

But then it stopped in its tracks, seeing something itself.

I turned to track where it was looking, and there was Stace Goodkin, one hand planted on the wide top of Deek's six-foot cinderblock fence, her feet

tucked together beside her, my big plastic EpiPen from Amber's glove compartment clamped between her teeth, her hair floating gloriously all around her.

You only get a few posters in your life, I'm pretty sure.

This is one of mine.

I tried to open my mouth, I'm not sure why, but my throat was still too swelled or clogged up to even creak a sound out.

And now Stace was running hell for leather across the backyard, launching up over the pool, which I knew was disaster, since no human could make it all the way across, not even her, but--of course: she hit the diving board with her right foot, let it take her weight and shoot her up and up, the rest of the way across to me.

She didn't even worry about landing, either. If you want to know what a hero is—what Amber would call a "final girl"—then it's this, I think. It's Stace coming down from the sky, plucking that EpiPen from her mouth on the way, and landing on the tile around the pool on her <u>knees</u>, damn the consequences.

She slid to me hard enough that the lounge chair lurched back, its rear feet clawing into the grass, tilting me up, and then her left hand, stronger than I would have ever guessed, was jamming that EpiPen into the side of my thigh and holding it there so my dying body could suck it dry.

My vision tunneled down to a point, to just one star up there in the West Texas sky, and then that blotted out too, and it was quiet inside myself at last. Quiet and calm.

I was riding in Amber's little truck, my arm out the window.

I was climbing the metal stairs of a great oil tank with my dad, walking up to the sun.

My mom was calling down the hall of our house on a Saturday, asking where I was.

<u>I'm here</u>, I croaked back, and Amber looked over to me from the driver's seat, my dad looked up to me from the numbers I'd just written down perfectly in that little spiral, and my mom smiled at me like she could see all the versions of me waiting to happen, all the versions she knew she could never tell me about, since that would ruin the surprise. And then my eyeball froze solid.

I lifted my hand to swipe this pain away, and some part of my head registered that my arm wasn't tied down anymore.

It was Amber, rubbing my face with an ice cube.

I sat up as far as I could, and--the party was over? Which tracked: if somebody's dying in the backyard, then that means the cops are going to be here soon, and nobody wants a minor-in-possession. Or to be associated with a classmate's death.

There'd been a mass exodus when word percolated through the house that Tolly Driver had finally done it, was finally and for real killing himself.

It was for the best they were all gone, though.

I was still wet all over, but the pool water was cold. Unlike my crotch. Not from Stace touching me, not from the body-temperature Tolly-salsa heaved up from my stomach, but from my bladder having let go.

The less witnesses to that, the better.

That's what I was thinking about, yeah. Nobody wants to be the kid who peed their pants.

And, I say the party was over, and it was, but that didn't mean everyone was gone, either. Standing in a clump over on the patio were Deek and Ezzy and Grandlin and Abel and Trey and Mandy.

And in the kitchen, the phone's cord spiraling to her, was Stace. Now it was <u>her</u> hands that were alive with explanation.

Did I mention that her dad was a doctor? He was, maybe still is. The goodof-heart probably just get to live and live, don't they?

"Tol, Tol, you there?" Amber was saying to me.

I tried to muster a response, couldn't exactly make words yet. But she could see where I was looking: Deek and crew.

"Oh, them," Amber said, turning her back to them so what she said could just be for me. "They've got experience with covering this kind of stuff up, don't they?"

I nodded, got it: they were getting their story straight, probably for when Dr. Goodkin showed up, Sheriff Burke in tow. The EpiPen had saved my life for the

moment, yeah, but EpiPens don't get you all the way out of the woods, can cause their own set of problems.

"I can't lose you, Tol," Amber said then, her eyes brimming over, both her hands holding my right one, and all I could do was purse my lips tight, angle my head to try to redirect the tear tumbling down my face, like doing that could hide it.

Amber lowered her head so she could pretend not to have seen me crying.

Some people are just good, aren't they?

I wonder what that must be like.

* * *

The next time I looked up, Ezzy was standing over me, Deek and the rest behind her, their eyes penitent and hopeful. I realized from all their postures—watching without watching, waiting without waiting—that Ezzy had been elected the speaker, here, even though it was Deek's house. Probably because she'd worked the nursery at church since forever, so had that soft talking-to-kids thing down.

That's what I was to them: an idiot kid. One who hadn't even been invited. One who could ruin this whole summer for them.

"Are you okay, Tolly?" Ezzy asked so softly, with so much manufactured care. Amber rolled her eyes, had to look away, say, "He's--"

"We're asking <u>him</u>?" Deek clarified from across the pool.

"What's with his face?" Grandlin said, doing his fingers over his own to show what he meant, about mine.

"Shut the fuck up?" Amber said across to him.

"It's just capillaries," I managed to creak out, doing my fingers at my face like Grandlin had. They burst when you do the kind of puking that's supposed to save your life.

"Eww..." Mandy Lonegan said, holding the side of her hand over her mouth and taking a step back.

"Like we don't all hear <u>you</u> throwing up in the last stall after lunch?" Amber said across the pool. "But you've got make-up to cover your burst capillaries up, don't you?" Mandy guffawed like affronted about this baldfaced <u>lie</u>, then took a challenging step forward, into this, Amber standing as well, accepting this challenge, her hands balling into fists by her legs, and Trey and Deek did that cathiss girl-fight thing, dancing away in that stupid thrilled way.

"It just capillaries," I said again, quieter and kind of halfway checked out, the congealed puke on my chin and around my mouth heavy and cracking. Not really meaning to then, just moving, adjusting, not wanting to be in this moment anymore, I pulled my arms up and... and they actually came up? The wide belt that had been holding my right arm started to slide away, and I lurched to the side after it, like keeping it from hitting the ground could keep the marching band from being even <u>more</u> pissed at me.

"You?" I said up to Amber, about the loosened belts.

"They never should have done it," she said back, her lips still thin, eyes still flaring.

I reached farther to the side for the belt that <u>had</u> hit the ground and realized that the belt at my waist was still buckled, keeping me there.

"Here," Amber said, giving one last glare across the pool before snaking alongside the lounge chair to undo me. I was trying to sit up, though, so it was too tight for her to work the buckle.

"We just... we want to be sure--" Ezzy started, reciting from a script in her head, trying to get things back on track, but before she could finish, Abel barked out, "What the <u>hell</u>?"

We all looked across the pool, through the steam or fog or whatever rising off the water.

It was Death.

"Oh yeah," I think I said, head swimming.

Of course, right? I'd drawn him in, and... and he wasn't going home emptyhanded, was he?

I can't say for sure that the song still pumping from Deek's window ledge on the second floor was Tesla, but that's the way I remember it. Something that starts off epic, like "Modern Day Cowboy," and then just climbs and climbs.

I've never heard it since without looking across that pool.

And--I could see now--this wasn't <u>exactly</u> Death, standing there heaving his chest, either.

For one, there was no scythe. Instead? For a left hand, this Death had something blunt and toothy and seriously heavy. I recognized it in a dim way, but things were moving too fast for me to place it yet. And it already had a place anyway: on Death's arm, big and bulky like Fisto's metal gauntlet from <u>He-Man</u>, or Lion-O's claw-glove from <u>ThunderCats</u>.

"J-J-Justin?" Grandlin said then, his voice hitching up a nervous octave, into the fear registers.

The name washed across us all, and I could see now that, instead of a robe, this Death was wearing a rotted suit, the last one Mr. and Mrs. Joss ever bought for their son. And—of course: the left sleeve <u>had</u> been empty at the funeral, hadn't it? Because the pumpjack cut it off up near the elbow. But... <u>both</u> legs were there?

When Justin Joss lurched forward, I got it: the funeral home had sewn or screwed what was left of that chewed-up right leg back on, but it was imperfect. He had a serious limp, now.

It didn't detract from the fact that he was <u>walking</u>. That he wasn't in his <u>grave</u>.

Mandy screamed a scream that probably burst all <u>her</u> face capillaries, fell back into the grass.

Under that stretched-tight balloon mask, Justin Joss smiled wide and kind of vacant—after four years, he didn't have much meat left to him anymore.

Just seething resentment.

"Fuck you," Deek said to him, not giving any ground. "You're <u>dead</u>, man!" Justin Joss was dragging his bad leg around the pool just the same.

At my lower back, under the patio chair, I could feel Amber desperately working the buckle, but I was still pulling too hard for her to get it.

"Tol, Tol!" she was loud-whispering.

"It's... it's Justin," I said back, in pure wonder.

Because?

If he could come back, then... what about my dad, right? But not like this, please. I was the only one lost in his thoughts, though.

Deek's crew, they instantly knew the score.

Trey ran in, leading with a pitchfork and a scream. I don't have the barest clue where he got it. The pitchfork, I mean. My guess is it was some rustic yard decoration Deek's mom had leaned up against a tree, maybe? The pitchfork's three prongs thunked into Justin's rotted chest, bottoming out against his sternum, and Justin looked down to it, then up to Trey.

"Kill the fucker!" Abel screamed. He was holding a plastic pool chair, either as shield or weapon.

"No, no, no..." Ezzy was saying, like if she objected enough then she could table this for a later meeting.

Grandlin seconded her motion with fast nods, but--

"It's happening," Amber said.

"What?" I said. "<u>What's</u> happening?"

"Him," she said, and she was right: Justin Joss drew his blunt left hand back and drove it up into Trey's gut, lifting him up and up.

Maybe three seconds later, the churning oilfield drillbit his left hand was splashed up through Trey's back, hungry for more, strings of meat and guts and spinal cord slinging all around. It wasn't just a prosthetic, either. That oilfield drillbit was alive, it was hungry, it was twisting like a meatgrinder, not powered by electricity or butane or hydraulics anymore, but <u>rage</u>.

"Um," Deek said, still standing exactly where he'd been, but lighter on his feet now.

When Abel ran past, trying to distract Justin Joss with a plastic chair to the chest, Justin came around the other way, brained Abel with a fast backhand—that heavy, clotted-up drillbit.

Abel slid into the pool, the water blooming red around him, and then Justin looked up, his eyes intense in that white mask.

"No!" Mandy was screaming from the darkness behind me, and Justin Joss walked right past Amber and me and towards her, his stench thick and oily.

He only had eyes for Deek and his crew, who had pranked him up onto that pumpjack.

Maybe ten seconds later, probably at the fence she was trying to climb, Mandy did half a scream.

"Just lie back, I can––" Amber said, about the belt at my waist.

I couldn't calm down, though.

Through the mist above the water, another vision was forming: Stace Goodkin.

She was standing by that brick planter, trying to make all this make sense.

"It's--it's Justin!" Grandlin yelled across to her, like that was any kind of explanation.

Grandlin was holding the bowl part of the concrete birdbath before him like a shield. He was trying to watch all the darkness at once.

"Just run!" Stace said to him, and Grandlin nodded, dropped the birdbath, turned to go, and... splatted on the grass.

His left foot was anchored behind him. He'd dropped the birdbath, which was standing on its edge, onto his shoelace.

He jerked, jerked harder, trying to just leave this stupid shoe behind, which... was when Justin Joss stepped in from the darkness, loomed over him.

"No, we didn't mean for you to—–it was an accident!" Grandlin said, begging for all he was worth.

It didn't matter.

Justin Joss held his spinning drillbit hand up, like studying those whirring teeth, then he drove it down into Grandlin's chest.

He stopped when he cued in to a sound: Ezzy at the wooden gate, making her big escape.

Justin reached back with his heavy hand, took what looked like a reading, and slapped that birdbath hard enough with his drillbit to shatter it into concrete chunks. One of them caught Ezzy right between the shoulders with a pretty sickening crunch, slammed her face into the cinderblock wall.

She left a dark red smear down that dry greyness, and it took a while. I couldn't tell what was crumbles of cinderblock and what was chunks from her head.

Now it was only Deek and Stace.

"We need something to fight with!" Stace said to Deek.

"<u>What?</u>" Deek said back. "It's--he's dead! How do we kill him if he's already <u>dead</u>?"

Stace glared at him for a moment, disappointed, then strode off into the darkness.

Leaving Deek and Justin Joss.

Justin Joss cocked his head over to see Deek better through his bloodspattered mask.

"You're not invited, Justin," Deek said. "You never were. You still can't get that through your head, can you. Want me to go inside, get some salt for you to get sick on again? That what you're here for?

Justin Joss, seething even more if that was possible, took a step ahead, to Deek, and... a glass shattered against his shoulder? It was from Amber. She screamed after it, like claiming it, giving it power.

Justin looked down to where that thick little tumbler had hit him, and... and it was sizzling? Just lightly, like the fizz at the top of a coke you just filled from the fountain. My first thought was because that's what it <u>is</u>, coke. Except then I clocked Mel and Brushpopper's tumblers right there in the grass beside me. Meaning Amber had reached back, found a leftover margarita. One with salt still on the rim.

"What the hell?" I was close enough to hear her mutter.

There was no time to figure it out, though. Justin was looking up from his shoulder to whoever had thrown this bullshit at him.

Justin considered Amber, dismissed her just as fast, and turned back to Deek, who... wasn't a threat either: he was scrambling back into that same darkness Mandy thought would be good enough for her.

What I one hundred percent expected to happen, now? Raised on action figures, I knew Justin was going to aim his arm across the yard and that drillbit was going to shoot off on an unwinding line of bloody string spooled in his hollow arm. From the darkness, I'd only hear the <u>thunk</u> of it finding its target.

This wasn't Eternia, though. It wasn't Thundera. It wasn't Homeworld. It was Lamesa, Texas. Just, one where the dead could walk, and get revenge.

And Deek knew his own backyard in the darkness like Mandy hadn't.

As soon as he slipped out of the light, he was simply gone, either through a gate or over the rounded top of the cinderblock, or maybe up into the tree, then down on the other side of the fence.

Justin Joss just stared after him, like he was able to peer into that darkness in a different way, then he breathed in like preparing for this next kill, and took a step ahead to get it done.

He hadn't taken Stace Goodkin into account, though.

This time she didn't crash onto the tile draped around the pool. She just stepped up onto it, waited for Justin to see her.

In one hand she had a big shiny axe, probably from Deek's dad's toolshed, and in her other hand a... a canvas tarp?

More important, though, she wasn't coming at him.

Yet.

"Justin," she said, her delivery not as kiddie as Ezzy's had been, but apologetic. Kind, even-for real, not for fake.

Justin Joss gave her his undivided attention.

"I'm sorry for--for what happened," Stace said, and it activated English class for me, the only class I ever passed. Miss Filmore was teaching us how passive constructions can be useful because they erase agency. <u>The milk got spilled</u>, not <u>I</u> <u>spilled the milk</u>. Passive constructions can be a way of hiding, of not accepting fault.

I listened very closely, that class, as this was something I could see myself having need of on a daily basis.

Here in this poolside massacre, though... why would Stace be hiding behind <u>verb</u> choices?

And then I got it: she wasn't. Because there's another use for passive. You're indicting the tragedy, the act, and not even bringing up any idea of fault, at least for the moment.

Stace was saying she was on Justin's side. What happened to him on that pumpjack should never have happened. And? She was probably even trusting his thinking to be sophisticated enough to understand, or remember, that it was her who'd <u>tried</u> to save him.

Except?

Without her headlights messing up his first ride in the sky? Does he even ever fall into those unstoppable counterweights?

Justin Joss shifted his feet, like getting ready for Stace.

"Look," Stace said, and didn't just drop the axe, but tossed it far enough into the grass that getting it back was going to be complicated.

Justin Joss seemed to understand this at some level. But the wrong one, I think. He surged forward toward Stace, evidently thinking she was giving up, she was taking all the fault onto herself, damn any sentence construction. She was on his list anyway. Deek could wait, couldn't he?

"I'm sorry," Stace said, not moving.

Yet.

"<u>Run!</u>" Amber said, slinging a beer bottle at Justin this time.

He didn't even feel it.

I was bucking in the patio chair again, trying to slither up and out of this stupid belt, since the buckle was proving impossible.

Amber registered what I was doing, and was caught herself, between helping me and helping Stace.

I stopped my wriggling when Justin got to Stace.

Instead of running like she should have, Stace... she billowed that big canvas tarp up at the drillbit Justin was punching ahead with.

The three meshed heads with their staggered rows of knobby teeth sucked it right up like some reverse magician-trick.

But she's smarter than that, I knew.

I wanted Stace to live, I mean. She wasn't a bad person, she didn't deserve this. Deek and them had set Justin Joss up to get hurt, but Stace Goodkin had tried to <u>save</u> him. Just listen to her <u>name</u>, right? Tonight she'd already saved one life--mine--and maybe Deek's as well. That was proof of her character, wasn't it?

So she thought a tarp would stop Justin Joss--would stop Death--okay. That was stupid, that was wrong, that was short-sighted.

She didn't need to pay for that mistake with her life, though, c'mon.

Having more Stace Goodkins in the world could only be a good thing, couldn't it?

"No, no!" I screamed, just from the unfairness of it all. Not because I was the kind of brave that wanted Justin's face to turn to me.

That drillbit must be loud, though. Justin either didn't hear or didn't care, was in the moment he was in. He made to sling the foolishness of this tarp to the side, stepped ahead to finish this, and was almost to Stace when--

The night suddenly went silent. Just Deek's stereo upstairs still draining Tesla out the window. And Amber, trying to work the buckle of the belt holding me down around to the side, so she could get at it.

And, me? I was numb, rapt, in awe.

Stace <u>hadn't</u> been stupid. She was the smartest of us all: that drillbit had chewed into the tarp like it was made of cotton candy, sure. It was made for rock, so fabric was nothing to it.

But Justin's <u>arm</u> could only swallow so much of that tarp. Two or three square yards of thick canvas tarp was too much for it. I'm not saying Justin Joss's forearm filled-to-bursting with canvas, and a tarp didn't start ribboning out of his mouth and his eyes, but... I wouldn't have known this then. Not like I do now.

You've heard of chainsaw chaps? And gloves?

Just hearing that name, you kind of default-think of some beefed up motocross armor, don't you? Chaps with metal plates sewed in. Gloves with smaller metal plates buried in them.

Wrong.

The thing with chainsaw safety gear, it's not thickness, though there is a lot of that. I know because small-engine repair's something I've turned out to have something of a knack with. Well, chainsaws anyway.

No surprise, right?

I am what I am.

But, those chaps, those gloves, how they work is that they're made from these really tough, especially <u>long</u> fibers, that are put together in a way that they instantly unspool, tangling up the blade of the chainsaw and stalling that mean little engine out. Your gloves or chaps are pretty much trash in an instant, but that's better than your hand or your leg, isn't it?

I don't know if Stace knew about this safety design in 1989 or not, or if it was just instinct that got her to rely on the tarp more than the axe, which would have been my go-to, even before I became a slasher.

Justin Joss slung his heavy arm again, like insisting that this tarp remove itself, but it had been sucked in deep, was there to stay.

Like that, Stace Goodkin had taken away his main weapon.

And she wasn't done.

<u>Now</u> she came in, screaming, dragging... the clothesline? Quarter-inch braided cable, coated in some sort of vinyl.

On the way, she stooped to grab that axe close to the head, never breaking eye contact with Justin.

Over the next two steps, she let that axe head slide away, so she was holding the axe by the butt of the handle, and sort of dragging it behind her.

It was to swing it ahead with everything she had.

Justin, like anybody would have, chocked his drillbit-arm up to block this. The axe head sparked against it at what sounded like the speed of sound, slid up the arm, and buried itself somewhere around his collarbone, spraying blood Amber and my's direction.

Just like Justin had just done, I held my arm up to shield my face, but a drop or two hit me anyway. But? I'm surprised it didn't go right in my mouth, as floored as I was at Stace's maneuver.

The axe, once again, had just been one hand waving, while the other did the real deed.

That laundry line she'd pulled down was the real weapon.

She looped it around Justin's neck and kept running, holding it high over her shoulder like trying to get a kite started.

It was enough to keel him over backwards.

On that slick tile, too, he <u>slid</u>.

Toward the pool.

For the second time that night, Stace leapt for the diving board. For an instant, I thought everything was over--she was overshooting!

But... the way she was curling <u>around</u> the diving board like a pole vaulter squeaking over the bar--this was on purpose.

And she was still holding on to that cable.

At the same time she went into the water, so did Justin Joss.

Stace surged up almost immediately, must have touched bottom with her feet and then pushed back up, <u>launched</u>, all of this choreographed out in her head.

Justin, jerked forward when he didn't have his feet set, was tilting over into the pool.

And Stace, she was collecting the cable?

No.

She was bunching it, she was knotting it—she was tying him <u>to</u> the diving board, on as short a line as she could manage.

She was straining and grunting, had to go upside down under the diving board to do it, planting her feet on the underside and pulling, pulling, tying and looping, hoping for enough knot to hold.

It almost worked, too.

It should have worked.

She should have been at school the next week, I mean.

But Justin, he was... he was what he was.

When she finally got the top of his head just below the surface of the water under the diving board, the cable strangling him only about two feet long now, his tarp-tangled drillbit surfaced like a shark, slammed into Stace hard enough that she erupted from the pool, crashed into the rounded concrete lip at the side with her ribs--<u>crunch</u>. And then her head came down onto the tile with a badsounding crack, and the only reason she didn't die right then, the only reason she didn't slough back into the bloody water, drown, was that her left hand slammed down onto the plastic lid of the pool filter hard enough to shatter it. There was nothing to hold on to in there, I knew, had been inside them before myself, but the sharp edge of that shattered lid bit into her wrist, both letting too much of her blood out <u>and</u> keeping her mouth above the waterline.

Behind her, though?

Behind her, her plan was actually working: Justin's drillbit hand was heavy enough to be dragging him down, but the noose around his neck wouldn't let him sink, so he was strung between, only had one hand to work this knot, free his neck. And that wasn't enough. "Good, good," Amber said, and when she still couldn't get the buckle underneath me to uncatch, she just took me by both hands, pulled me to standing all at once, lounge chair and all.

I staggered forward, almost into Trey's body, but Amber steadied me, stepped around behind, finally got this belt off.

The chair clattered away behind me.

"We've got to--" I said, taking my first step away from all this, and falling immediately. I was weak, didn't have any blood in my legs, it felt like. I needed to be in some doctor's office, not running over dead people to get away from Justin Joss, but I also had to <u>live</u>.

Amber didn't catch me, was already running around the pool, to drag Stace up and out.

"Look," I told her.

It was blue and red lights a mile or two away, and coming in fast.

In Lamesa, Texas, you can watch your dog run away for about two days. It's that kind of flat. Get out off the Caprock east of town and there's some up and down action, some canyons and draws, but before that, it's pancake land.

"We can't be here, we can't be here," I was saying, looking every which way, for how to not be here.

My kind doesn't stick around to talk to the law.

"But, but--" Amber was saying, about Stace.

"You're not supposed to move someone hurt like that," I told her. "Right?"

I was trying to give her a way out, where she could climb over her own good intentions, come into Tolly-land, where you're not exactly proud of how you are. But you're around to feel that shame, anyway. Not locked in Sheriff Burke's cell for the night.

"Look," I said, about Stace. "She's breathing, she's not going to drown..."

When Amber still wanted to save Stace, I took her by the wrist, started pulling.

Her "Oh" stopped me, though.

I looked where she was.

Justin Joss was no longer hanging by the neck from the diving board. Not because he'd untied himself, or his head had come off. Because the diving board had unmoored, was gone as well. Meaning... Justin could be about to jump up out of that red water, crash down with both feet on the tile, his drillbit chewing the air?

"Go, go go go!" I screamed to Amber, pushing her ahead of me, and we were probably two miles north on the Brownfield Highway with the headlights off by the time the blue and red lights got to Deek's place.

"Here, here," I said, telling Amber to get us off the blacktop.

She checked her rearview, downshifted, braked.

"Look," she said, directing the mirror to my side of the truck.

She touched her own forehead to show what she meant.

I looked.

Those two drops of blood Stace had knocked out of Justin, that had made it past my upheld arm?

They were still wet on my forehead, not quite heavy enough to drip, but thick enough not to have dried yet.

"Shit," I said, and guided my index finger up to pat them away... which was when that right I'd directed Amber towards turned out to have a cattleguard instead of a gate. The stray pen on the dashboard jounced up, my reflection in the mirror shattering, the whole cab shaking with each next pipe the Rabbit's cute little tires were coming into sudden contact with.

Instead of dabbing Justin Joss's blood away like I meant to, I smeared it across my forehead instead.

Right into the little cut already there from the windshield.

Saturday

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Even seventeen years later, I keep thinking what Amber and me could have done different that night, to have kept everything from happening. I mean, yeah, it was already too late. We couldn't un-go to the party. I couldn't not have drank those vile peanuts. We couldn't take some turn in our directionless retreat from Deek's that didn't rattle us over a cattleguard.

I guess maybe I could tunnel <u>way</u> back in time, un-invent cows, meaning mankind never has to dream stupid cattleguards up, but, if I had the ability to do that, then I'd end up sneaking answers to algebra tests and buying up number ones of comic books, and pretty soon I just end up erasing myself.

Which might be for the best, all things considered.

There's a few senior citizens still in Lamesa, Texas, who should by rights be grandparents right now, who would probably agree with that particular fix.

I'm sorry, all y'all non-grandparents.

Really.

If it helps you feel any better, then... I'll never be a parent, I don't think? Except in the sense of copycat killers, I suppose. Up-and-comers who strap on a mask, grind their machete sharp enough to carve through half a prom. But that's a different kind of offspring.

Maybe Amber has a couple kids now, though, right?

If she doesn't hate me--and she should, she should more than anybody-then maybe she remembers her high school friend Tolly Driver. Not enough to name one of the children after me, that'd be asking too much. But maybe in the summer she lets her son's hair get shaggy, say. And maybe it falls across his eyes in a way that makes her take a step back, one day. A step back to 1989, when she knew someone with unkempt hair just like that. Someone not necessarily full of promise, but full of promises, anyway.

I really did have good intentions. The best of intentions.

Instead, I ended up with blood on my hands. And spattered across my chest. Pooling all around me. Rising and rising.

I never walked the stage to get my diploma, no. I never got to paint my name on the Wall. What I'd done was inexcusable.

I can never show my face in Lamesa, Texas again.

By the time graduation rolled around... well, I'm getting there.

I need to go back to that night, now, though, just to get it all down straight.

After the party, Amber just drove us <u>away</u>, as fast as her little Rabbit could go. Which... it was a four-cylinder diesel, right? On asphalt, its chassis and suspension and unbalanced tires would get pretty nervous and shaky up around seventy, just like her dad intended. His two big sayings that year, both of which applied that night, were that nothing good happened after midnight, and that the grass wasn't really that much greener on the other side of fifty-five miles per hour. Though it could get <u>bloodier</u> real damn fast.

We weren't on asphalt for our big getaway, though. We were on caliche, dragging a huge plume of pale dust behind us.

And Amber was crying, quietly.

All the dead bodies the two of us had seen before? In real life? Before Deek's party? They'd been at funerals, after some mortician had cleaned them up, made them presentable.

There was nothing presentable about the bodies we were driving away from now. What I kept coming back to were the smells. A ruptured body's not sweet, but it's not foul either, right? It's... I guess "heady" is the only word that sort of works. Heady and intense, and sort of thick and fruity in your lungs, if that tracks. There was also the tang of bone, burning under Justin's drillbit, and then chlorine and beer wafting over it all.

And the puddle of pee my crotch was.

Five or ten miles after that cattleguard, I waved Amber over to the side of the road, which was stupid, as there was no ditch to speak of, just a sharp culvert for irrigation runoff to take, so the caliche wouldn't get slick. So she just stopped in the high center.

I made to step out but the glove compartment fell open in my lap. I slapped it shut but it wouldn't stay.

"Stace," Amber explained. "She didn't have time to figure it out."

Amber's glove compartment always took a lot of TLC.

Without saying anything, she reached back up under the dash, I held it shut, and did something arcane with the latch. Meaning, I guess, there was a hole in the cardboard cubby in there for her hand to shove through.

"Good?" I asked.

She nodded and I stumbled into the cotton field we were alongside.

In a straight line out through it were these beautiful silver umbrellas: a circle system, spraying water down from its hanging sprinkler heads.

For me, a shower.

And, yes, I knew the chance I was taking, here. A lot of farmers irrigate with sewage, so you can get hepatitis and worse from those waters. But the other option was stewing in my own urine, in the small cab of a truck, alongside a girl my own age.

I stood under that first sprinkler and rubbed and washed, giving special attention to the little cut above my eyebrows——I didn't want to get infected. Under that make-do showerhead, too, I could look up into the spraying water and finally cry like I wanted to, like I needed to, weak and shaky as I was from that peanut. I fell to my knees, covered my head with my arms.

A few seconds later, Amber plopped down into the mud beside me, her arm around my back, and we were huddled out there like two nobodies trying to survive Russia's warheads, even though there was no chance. But, really? It's less about survival, more about who you're holding when that big irradiated shockwave blows you to ash. I can't say that was the last time I was out in the lonesome open at night-there's been a few times, over the years--but I can say that I try to avoid it if I can. Not because I don't like to remember being on my knees under that upsidedown fountain with Amber, but because... when you have the tendencies I now have, and nighttime is when you operate, then you try to stay in the sunlight, if you can.

More people stay alive that way.

I never know when that old feeling's going to twitch my fingers. I never know if, the next time I look down to my right hand, it might be wrapped around the electric-taped handle of a bloody machete, and like that I'm knee deep in the sequel, and there's a trail of dead bodies behind me.

No thank you.

Old slashers may not die, but they can, if they're careful, if they're conscientious, stop killing.

Don't get me wrong, I still feel the old urges.

The world's so much simpler when you've got a chainsaw in your hand, isn't it? A chainsaw or a machete or an axe, that's the elegant solution to every problem.

And I wouldn't get caught, either.

My kind don't.

It does accumulate inside you, though, the weight of all these bodies you've left behind. You carry them with you, like. You remember how this one died, how that one didn't.

But you also remember the first time you saw your final girl in her true light, and how your vision tunneled down, your mind pulsing <u>her</u>, <u>her</u>.

In all the world, there's no feeling so pure. But the way there, it's brutal. And, you might pay in effort, but it's everyone else who pays with their blood.

So, no, I don't do that anymore––I <u>won't</u> do that anymore.

I owe you that much, Amber.

No, I try not to go out into the dark night anymore.

But, believe me, I still, with every fiber of my rotten being, remember your arm draped around me while I sobbed and shook in that cotton field. It couldn't have been easy for you either, I know--I know <u>now</u>--but you put your own feelings aside to console me.

I hope you did have a kid or two, Ambs. And a husband, or wife, and a perfect life.

You deserve it.

And if you tell your family about me, then... tell them about the Tolly Driver from before Deek's party, maybe? He wasn't perfect, then, he was still mostly an idiot, just thrashing around from the pain of losing his father, his flailing hurting the people around him, who for some reason didn't leave him to stew in his own mess, but--there were moments too. Glimmers of what he could have been, had things gone differently.

Had he been able to un-invent cows, yeah.

I don't even know what I'm saying anymore.

To get back: it's the small hours of the morning. Amber and me just lived through a massacre in our hometown. We're now trying to wash that all away under a circle system. And then, no warning at all, on some obscure clock a farmer could probably guess, but not two high school kids, the night splits in half from the worst, most metallic scream, followed by a series of clanks we can feel in our chests, in the base of our jaws, the root of our spines.

The circle system, cycling on to its next station a few rows ahead, leaving us behind.

"It's all right, it's okay," Amber tells me, threading my bangs from my eyes. "You almost <u>died</u>, Tolly."

"But Justin--Justin--" I stammer, not even able to put Justin Joss into words.

"I know," Amber says, and sits back, wrapping her arms around her knees.

"And Ezzy and Trey and Abel and Mandy and--and--"

"Grandlin Chalmers," Amber finishes.

"But not Deek," I say, finally.

"Not yet," Amber says, kind of enigmatically, and the non-initiate I am looks over to her, waiting. But she isn't ready to tell me yet.

That would be two hours later, in a different part of nowhere, under the same blanket of stars.

For now, what we had to do was get dry.

That meant taking turns driving while the other one stood in the little bed of the Rabbit, standing up and holding on to the rust holes in the top of the cab, our fingers protected by the work gloves Amber always had on her dash.

One time when it was my turn back there, <u>up</u> there, the wind whipping my hair, my shirt billowing and flapping around me, the road straightened out enough that Amber sucked the lights back into the truck and just plummeted us ahead into the inky darkness, and my eyes were watering and my cheeks were slapping my teeth and my gloved fingers were hurting from the edges of the rust craters, but I could have stood there forever, I think. Someone I trusted more than myself was at the wheel, I mean, and her foot was in it, and the whole world, it was sort of ours.

For the last time.

Neither of us knew where we were anymore, either. Just that we weren't back at the massacre. In the cab together, dry at last, we couldn't stop laughing. Our hair was crazy, our eyes were red, we were shivering from the cold, and we were <u>alive</u>.

Trying to find our way back to Lamesa for the rest of the night--I guess it was morning, really--I kept thinking my dad's taillights were going to fade in ahead, to lead us home.

But, really, the interstate was on one side of us, Tahoka and Brownfield were above, strung along 380, which is impossible to miss, and when we stumbled into Welch, we had no choice but to know we were back in the world again.

Dawn was already glowing to the east.

"Punkin Center?" Amber said, about her gas gauge.

Punkin Center was the cotton gin halfway between Welch and home, and they had these five-hundred gallon gas tanks up on stands that kind of worked like the oil tanks my dad used to measure: you wrote in a little book how much gas you'd just got, then they put it on your tab. You had to have a key for the padlock, but Amber's dad had slipped her one, for emergencies only.

We rolled in on fumes, smiling like fools to have actually made it--we shouldn't have--and it wasn't stripping season yet, that was more around Thanksgiving, but, still, every tumbleweed and fence and wall around Punkin

Center, it was draped in the dirty white blowoff from last year's harvest. It was like being in a giant spiderweb, sort of? Really, look a gin up, you'll see.

Then imagine it at night.

Amber coasted in, and we were both kind of holding our breath, like we knew better than to wake whatever was sleeping.

Because she'd had her little diesel for a few months, she knew to go that tank, with the most parking space around it. Where the tractors go. Nowadays you can get a fine for running red diesel in a street truck like hers. I've heard troopers will even run a probe down into your tank, to test. But this was 1989, so it was kind of just the honor system, I guess? We were more concerned with getting home than doing the right thing, and the night was a shroud we were hiding under anyway. Who would see?

"Okay then," Amber said, stepping down, which is kind of a generous word when your truck's barely got clearance for a pothole.

I followed, stepping up into the bed and across it, then plopping down by Amber.

To have seventeen-year-old legs again, right?

"I'll pump, you write it down," I told her, and she tossed me the keys, and it's only now that I can see I was being my dad, here, cribbing numbers down into little spiral notebooks.

And, yeah, the criminals among you are probably writing "Punkin Center" down in your own little logbooks, as a place with gas just one snip of a pair of boltcutters away, but: 1989, remember? As for us... Amber's dad was a farmer. What that meant was that no way in the world could we steal gas. If we had, then the next time a sandstorm rolled through, our hearts would sink, because we'd know the world was about to make her dad pay for this gas we'd stole.

I've killed six people, yes, in the worst ways--twelve or fourteen by some counts.

But I'm no gas stealer, thank you.

I had to squat down to get an even line on this padlock, but, no matter how much I wedged and crammed, the key simply would not slide in.

"Here, brainiac," Amber said, and tried herself.

Same result.

We pushed her truck back, turned the headlights on to inspect, and--shit: some other truckload of idiots had rammed toothpicks up into the keyhole of the padlock and broke them off.

If we'd had tweezers, we maybe could have done something, here. If we were smokers, or if the lighter in the Rabbit worked, we might could have burned those toothpicks out.

But probably not.

We pulled away from Punkin Center, Amber going easy on the shifts, to conserve diesel.

I figure we had about a thimbleful, then. This was a Volkswagen, though? It was full light by the time the Rabbit coughed, sputtered, kicked a hind leg in death. But we could see one of the water towers of town, by then.

We pushed the truck for probably a quarter mile, but it was useless, so we just guided its nose into the ditch like we always did, hoofed it the rest of the way in.

Because my house was closer, that's where we went.

By my thinking, nobody would find all the dead bodies at Deek's until lunch, probably. But of course, stupid as I was, I'd forgotten about Stace Goodkin's call to her dad. And I hadn't considered that Mel's bandmates might come back for their belts. And that you can't really hide a backyard of dead teenagers, can you?

When we shuffled around the corner of my street, Sheriff Burke was leaned back against her cruiser, polishing her chrome sunglasses with the tail of her shirt. She was the first-ever woman sheriff the county had ever had, and, weirdly enough, just her being behind the badge was straightening the men of Lamesa up—nobody wanted to know how they might respond if a lady cop threw them up against a wall, or the side of their truck. It would either be resist, which would be stepping over a line they maybe didn't want to, or live with a woman having taken them in, which was another line they'd never considered having to back over.

Being a dude in Texas in 1989 was needlessly complicated, yeah. But I have to suspect that being the first woman sheriff was even more complicated.

Sheriff Burke looked up to our muddy, windblown selves and tipped her glasses at us like toasting the new day, and the light glinted off one of her chrome lenses hard enough that I flinched, I think.

Or maybe it was the shock of seeing the law at my house.

My wish upon a star had been that nobody remembered the reason the party had gone over: Tolly Driver, drunk in the backyard, dying from an allergic reaction.

"Welp," Amber said.

I winced, closed my eyes.

* * *

The way it turned out, when news of a "death" at Deek's party first was making its rounds, it was just that: one regrettable death.

All the kids told their parents that it was me. That the peanut I'd been destined for my whole life, it had finally found me. Except, when the first deputy showed up at Deek's, Tolly Driver wasn't one of the bodies.

Which <u>could</u> have been the end of the story. Well, it could have been if only Justin Joss had stayed tied by the neck to that diving board. Or if Stace Goodkin wasn't missing. Either Justin being impossibly there <u>or</u> Stace telling the story of him could have ended things right there. Confusingly, sure, but in a way that didn't involve me, at least.

And I suppose Deek could have come out of hiding too, to explain how Justin had come for him and his friends for a very righteous reason, making me just an innocent bystander. Wrong place, wrong time.

But, while Deek could have done that--were he the kind of person to do that--and Stace could have told her version if she'd still been there, Justin, he was... the way Amber explained it, him not being a guilty body hanging by his neck from the diving board... it wasn't exactly his fault?

He'd had no choice but to slip away the moment Stace looked away from him.

Sounds stupid, doesn't it?

Well, hold on.

How I had to back up earlier, to say how Stace's dad was a doctor? This is my backup to explain Amber some more.

That big brother she'd scared off of dipping? He hadn't just been into Copenhagen and playing with his little green Army men. He was also bigtime into horror movies. And Amber, being the tagalong little sister idolizing her big brother even before he enlisted, became a hero... you can guess, right? She was the first convert to his gory religion, sneaking back into the living room after lights out to watch his VHS tapes with him.

Me? I'll be honest--I don't really have a taste for them.

They kind of bring back bad memories, you could say.

But, when it's all made up? I guess I can see the appeal, yeah. To each his own, all that.

Anyway, the result of Amber having grown up on that couch, in the steady glow of all those killer movies, was that she had a very particular education.

What she explained to me in the small hours after we'd skulked away from the massacre was that Justin Joss was a "slasher," come back to get revenge on those who wronged him. He wasn't following the pattern to a T, though, she explained. Usually his types like to pick the guilty parties off one by one, not crash in and just go to town on everybody's necks, get it all over with at once.

But?

It makes sense to do it like that, really, she said, kind of thinking it through out loud. More efficient, less chance of somebody figuring it out, and putting a stop to it. If you're a walking dead dude, too, then you probably need every advantage, right? It's not like you can really hide in plain sight. Maybe that was why Justin had to adopt the all-at-once tactic he did? Because that was the only one available to someone who looked and smelled like him?

And the flipside to any slasher, Amber told me in reverent tones, were the Stace Goodkins of the world.

The final girls.

They were usually only tangentially involved with whatever injustice made this slasher come back from the dead, have powers, whatever. But, to a slasher, even being sorta kinda guilty, that's guilty enough. You didn't have to be the actual camp counselor who'd done whatever bad deed, you just had to be <u>a</u> camp counselor—your whole species or class or whatever deserved the blade-to-throat treatment.

So: Stace, who had at least <u>been</u> there at the pumpjack, and was, technically, in that they were all on the FFA Leadership team, part of Deek's crew.

But what kept her swings true in Deek's backyard, her aim deadly, it was that she really wasn't actually responsible for what had happened to Justin Joss. She'd tried to <u>save</u> him, right? That meant she was sort of outside Justin's purview outside his revenge circle. Deek and crew, they were all fair game. Stace, though... not really.

Which gets me back to why Justin was able to slip away, after being tied up.

"It's like a rule, yeah?" Amber said.

We were still lost way outside of town for this, not even parked down a pump road like usual, but just a triangle of old winter wheat at the corner of some monstrous irrigated cotton field—a different one from the one we'd showered in.

Winter wheat's not that tall, but it was almost up to the window of Amber's squat little joke of a truck. The whole time she'd been telling all this slasher lore, this horror gospel, these rules, I'd been brushing my fingertips back and forth across the dry heads of that wheat, and imagining a giant shark fin cresting through that gold chaff, and just moving steadily away from us, side to side.

Anyway, so Justin being just--<u>blip</u>!--gone, that was a Very Important Rule of the Genre, Amber assured me. Evidently when you put a slasher down in some big and final way, then he <u>is</u> actually and really dead... for exactly as long as you keep watching him.

The instant you look away, though?

That's his window, his ticket, his moment.

Never mind if he's been hit by a train or had the moon dropped on him, he just fades into the background.

"Until the sequel," Amber added, like not having to say that part.

"Sequel?" I had to ask.

"All the good slashers have one," she said, and started the truck up, eased immediately into gear to get back to the caliche. Farmers don't mind you parking in their turn rows, but only so long as you don't crunch over any pipe or risers, so long as you don't leave your beer bottles behind, and—especially—so long as you don't let your exhaust get hot enough to set their field on fire.

We crept back down the road we'd come up, eventually lucked onto Welch, and I've told you all that already. "Who you think told about you?" Amber asked.

We were just out of Sheriff Burke's earshot.

"Everyone?" I said back.

My mom was already at the hardware store, was––Sheriff Burke was shortly to tell me––in a panic about where I was, and wasn't. Meaning word of the dead kids was probably coming in with each customer, and the story was snowballing bigger and worse, would probably be in the <u>Austin Chronicle</u> by Sunday, and the <u>Dallas Morning-News</u>.

When Sheriff Burke let me and Amber run inside to change into clean clothes, not trash the back seat of her cruiser up, I called my mom, told her I was fine, great. I'd been there, been at Deek's, but I left when everyone did, didn't see any dead people, nothing to worry about.

Lies, man, they come so easy, don't they?

To me, anyway.

* * *

Sheriff Burke was pulling a weed in my yard when Amber and me trailed out, Amber being swallowed by my mom's old jeans and a blouse I didn't know was even in the house at all.

And, okay, I'd be lying if I didn't immediately flash on whatever bra Amber must be wearing under that loose blouse.

Because it was my mom's?

Probably, I don't know.

I don't want to think about it.

But--and I should say this clearly, as explicitly as I can--I know slashers are supposed to be these psycho-sexual deviants, stabbing with a knife because they can't stab with other things, but... what does that have to do with revenge? With justice?

Nothing.

Yeah, I'm a slasher, and yeah, I admit to flashing on the idea of Amber's bra under there somewhere, in my mom's shirt of all places, and that's kind of twisted and wrong, but that's just the "twisted and wrong" that's part of being seventeen years old, maybe? It's not because I was already, by then, becoming a slasher.

I'd thought of plenty of boobs before that, I mean, and all on my own.

Plenty.

"So," Sheriff Burke said, standing with a handful of baby careless weeds-they were forever blowing in--"what can you tell me about last night, Tolly Driver?"

My full name didn't portend anything good.

I looked into the grass for some weeds I could distract myself with and dutifully recounted Deek's party as best I could, not prettying up my drinking even a little, and then even hiking my pants down to show the injection point that had saved my life, like flashing my underwear proved my whole story.

"And your face is part of all that?" Sheriff Burke asked.

"Burst capillaries from the allergic reaction," Amber answered for me.

"Including...?" Sheriff Burke added, touching the pad of her index finger to her own forehead to show what she meant--what I'd already, by then, forgotten.

"That was me," Amber said. "My truck, I mean."

"Which is?" Sheriff Burke asked back.

"Out of gas," Amber said with a shrug, tilting her head back behind us.

"Thought Rabbits ate grass?" Sheriff Burke said with a grin and some eye twinkle, proving, I guess, that it's not only dads who make these kind of groaners.

Amber, being Amber, didn't dignify this, just shrugged.

"And how much do you weigh?" Sheriff Burke turned to me to ask, pinning me in place with her eyes.

"Weigh?" Amber asked.

"I'm talking to Tolly, Ms. Dennison," Sheriff Burke informed Amber, never looking away from me.

"One-forty-two," I mumbled, half-embarrassed. Because? You know what it's like to be seventeen and have the assistant coach have to slide more and more weights to the left, during measurements day?

"That seems... generous," Sheriff Burke said back.

"One-thirty-five," I admitted, hoping Amber wasn't logging any of this. Part of being manly's having enough weight to push a door open, right? "Good, good," Sheriff Burke said, tapping her pen on the tip of her nose.

"This gym class, what?" Amber asked, no longer able to contain herself. Which is to say: no longer able to stand by, let me get attacked.

"Ms. Dennison," Sheriff Burke said, and finally gave Amber her undivided attention, and I think, for a glimmer of a moment, I cued in to the dynamic going on between the two of them: Burke was the law, and Amber, she had this dark skin, didn't she? No, she wasn't Mexican in Texas, which isn't exactly the best thing you can be when dealing with badges, but her skin tone and hair probably still kickstarted those same old feelings in a sheriff.

Meaning, Amber was having to watch herself, here.

Whereas I, a skinny white boy who'd just copped to underage drinking, and who might have been present at the scene of a mass murder? She treated me pretty much like a person, at least until I did anything to tell her otherwise.

If only I could write this one off as 1989.

I'm sorry, Amber.

God, if I'd... I don't know. I was going to say I should have stood up for you then. But, to be honest? I was worried about my own neck, here.

Let me just say it again, for the back row: I don't make any claims about being a good person.

I won't trot any excuses out either, though. At least give me that. No, I couldn't have undone centuries of prejudice then and there, and in <u>Texas</u> of all places, in <u>West</u> Texas at that, in 1989 on top of <u>that</u>, but that doesn't mean I had to just stand there toeing the grass and licking my lips, either.

I'm ashamed of the bodycount I drag behind me, yeah.

But I'm just as ashamed of my behavior on my own lawn, the morning after the first massacre.

Guess you can't be proud of everything, though. Or, in my case, anything.

* * *

The reason it turned out to be good--for the moment anyway--that I was 135 soaking wet was that, as Sheriff Burke delicately explained, someone of my

limited stature more than likely couldn't have taken out Ezzy and Mandy, much less Grandlin and Trey and Abel, fresh off their senior year of football.

"Unless I was on PCP," I offered, chucking my chin up.

PCP was something I'd seen on Simon & Simon, I think. Maybe Hardcastle.

"Tol?" Amber prompted, saying more than half of that with her tone and her eyebrows. She was reminding me of the seriousness of this.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"You should listen to her," Sheriff Burke told me, stepping out to the road to let her handful of wilting careless weeds go, to blow their seeds into some other lawn.

"He was, um, recovering, too," Amber said.

"Oh yeah," Sheriff Burke said. "My little sister's allergic to cats. I get it, I mean."

"And he was tied to that chaise longue," Amber added, unable to stop defending me.

"I think it's 'lounge," Sheriff Burke said back.

"That long patio chair," I said, this being about me and all.

"I heard," Sheriff Burke said. "To... to try to control your seizure?"

"Allergic reaction," I corrected. "Yeah, that."

"Then you could have seen what happened," Sheriff Burke said. It wasn't exactly a question.

If Justin Joss <u>had</u> been strung up from that diving board when Amber and me had split? Then what I do here is spill to Sheriff Burke what really went down, one hundred percent. How Justin Joss rose from the dead to seek vengeance. How he fitted an oilfield drillbit onto his right arm like a He-Man action figure. How his face was offputtingly white and blank. How the reason me and Amber were alive was that it wasn't <u>me</u> he was after.

Luckily I'd walked into town with who I'd walked into town with, though. I already knew there was no obvious perpetrator, and that I would just sound <u>actually</u> on PCP if I tried any of that story out.

"I wasn't exactly checked in to my surroundings," I said, forging into dangerous places, where I was going to have to start keeping my lies straight. "Surroundings,' big word..." Sheriff Burke repeated, dragging it out like digging back for something. "Oh, right," she said when she got it. "You did UIL the last couple years, didn't you? Heard you were good."

"Ready Writing," I filled in.

It's where you go to competitions at all the schools around West Texas and they give you a prompt and you write an essay. Miss Filmore said I was a natural, that I had that rare ability to get things down on the page like they were in my head, without my hand or my mouth or the page messing it up. My dad, before the wreck, told me he'd been a pretty good liar in high school as well—that necessity just makes the words reel out and out, doesn't it?

And, it had been the last <u>three</u> years I'd been a Ready Writing champ, actually, Sheriff Burke, but we don't need to split that particular hair.

"And you were gone by then, along with the rest of the party?" Sheriff Burke said up to Amber, and I knew Amber well enough to catch the little intake of breath she did here, and how her pupils dilated fractionally more open, sort of: why was this gift of an alibi being offered?

At the time, if I thought anything at all, it was just that not everybody's Thomas Magnum. Looking back from here, though... I get it, I think. First, as far as being big enough to do the kind of damage that had been done in Deek's backyard, Amber was no more physically capable than I was. I mean, she'd grown up with a big brother, could kick my ass six ways from Sunday and end up with her shirt still tucked in, but what was really going on in Sheriff Burke's police brain, I have to suspect, was that if Amber *had* been there, she'd either be dead as well, or she'd be completely freaked out right now, trying to offload her story on the first badge she saw.

So, it wasn't about her being a girl and thus incapable of all that killing, no. But it <u>was</u> about Sheriff Burke underestimating Amber Big Plume Dennison.

The coming days would prove that estimation wrong.

Still, "She cruised back, picked me up," I blurted out, so Amber wouldn't have to lie, and get tangled up in whatever this was.

"After you checked back <u>in</u>, you mean?" Sheriff Burke asked, using my words against me--interrogation tactic 101.

"I don't know how I got out to the--the road," I said, making it up as I went. "It's all kind of... blurry?"

"But you haven't asked me yet why I'm asking all these questions," Sheriff Burke said, hitching her wide belt a smidge higher. "I believe that means you know about the, um, <u>afterparty</u>."

It's a good name for that first massacre. I don't know why it never caught on.

"I sort of saw?" I tried out, trying to make myself small—trying to showcase each one of my 135 pounds.

"My uncle has epilepsy," Amber said. "When he comes out from a seizure, he's kind of there but not there."

"Your dad has a brother?" Sheriff Burke asked.

"My mom's big brother," Amber answered. "On the reservation."

Sheriff Burke nodded like she could buy this, she could buy this. Indians have all kinds of health problems, and this uncle being on the reservation? It might as well have been Mars, at least if you're from Texas, where the Rangers had chased all the Indians out a century ago.

Also, if it matters, Amber's mom had only had one sister, and she'd been dead so long that the only photos of her on the walls of Amber's house had her in about second grade.

Amber was gambling for me, here. Bigtime. She was challenging Sheriff Burke <u>not</u> to believe her.

"So you <u>did</u> see?" Sheriff Burke said, back to me now.

"Sort of?" I said, like an apology. "I thought it was a joke at first--"

"And then I was there, honking," Amber cut in.

"Because you'd forgotten who you came to the dance with."

"It isn't like th--" I tried to wedge in.

"Everybody was running away, yeah," Amber said. "We thought... you know."

"You thought I was coming to bust the party up."

Amber nodded, caught. Or, "caught," just like she wanted.

"And you're telling me even Stace Goodkin <u>ran</u>? After calling her dad with a medical emergency?"

She had us there: no way would Stace have run. She had no reason to. She even had a reason to <u>stay</u>—her dad was coming, and maybe he could put her back together. Too, I'd seen a sort of eagerness or hopefulness in Sheriff Burke, when she'd mentioned Stace. And I completely got it. If you want the straight story, go to the one person incapable of telling a lie.

What I wanted to ask back was if the deputies had checked the bottom of the pool? Because it could be that Stace's hand or wrist had unsnapped from that plastic filter cover, and she'd just slid down into the peaceful waters, was down there still, her hair floating above her.

Instead of asking that, though, I looked down the road like at something real interesting, said, "Stace <u>Goodkin</u> was there?"

I'm fairly certain Amber might have rolled her eyes here. I know for certain she let out a meaningful breath. Well, okay: a disappointed breath.

"She's the one saved you from the nut thing," Sheriff Burke said. Then, to both of us, "Isn't that right?"

"Like I was saying," Amber jumped in to say, "when my uncle has a seizure, his memory's just--" She poofed her fingers out from her temple.

"She did, though," Sheriff Burke said, right to her.

"Got the EpiPen from my truck," Amber said, nodding it true.

"Your truck that's out of gas north of town."

We both nodded. That was the one verifiable part of our story.

"But you're okay now?" Sheriff Burke said to me, nodding down to my leg, where Stace had jabbed me, but meaning my whole allergic self

"Thanks to Stace, I guess," I said with a shrug. "I thought it was Ambs who did it."

"Dr. Goodkin didn't sleep all night," Sheriff Burke said, like trying to guilt us closer to the truth, but her interrogating eyes had to flash over when her radio spit static up onto her shoulder. She quieted it, her lips peeled back from her teeth in frustration.

Stace's dad wasn't the only one who hadn't slept.

"Excuse me," she said, holding her finger up which somehow told both of us not to move from the exact places we were standing. She turned away for privacy, but we could still hear. Some deputy or dispatcher needed to tell her something, but didn't want to say it on the radio.

"I'm not driving back just because--" Sheriff Burke started.

"You should," whoever this was told her.

Sheriff Burke clicked off with a hiss, shook her head, and came back to us. "I'm going to need statements from the two of you, but not today, it's a madhouse back at the office."

"You can use my phone," I said.

Sheriff Burke regarded me about this.

"In my mom's office," I went on. "Where she does store business. Save you driving back."

Sheriff Burke considered, considered, then said, "Fuck it," which was kind of a thrill, at least to me.

Police cuss too? What next? A church deacon flipping me off? A kindergarten teacher offering me a drink from her flask?

The three of us trailed inside, I showed Sheriff Burke the back room where my mom did her hardware store paperwork, and Amber and me hung out in the kitchen, trying to make enough noise that hopefully Sheriff Burke could see we weren't trying to eavesdrop, either through the door or with the phone by the microwave.

"Borrow?" Amber asked, holding up a paperback Western I was done with. It wasn't Louis L'Amour like I secretly liked, mostly because I'd inherited a closet shelf of them from my dad, was just some off-brand sex romp with horses and guns.

"It's not that good," I told her.

"Then why is this page--" she started, opening to where I'd accidentally left it.

Her eyes wow'd out once she snatched a sentence or two up. Inside, I groaned. It was the scene with the bacon grease, I knew. I don't think I need to go any deeper into it than that? Though, the saddle tramp in that scene certainly was.

"I'm done with it," I fumbled out.

"Are you?" Amber asked back with a devious grin. "I need to worry about pages being stuck together, Tolly?"

I hated it when she used my whole name like that.

"Just throw it away when you're done with it," I mumbled, trying to prove to her that I hadn't been using it for exactly what I'd been using it for, and she shook her head, forever amused with boys, it seemed, and shoved it into her back pocket.

Which made her sway her back in.

"What <u>is</u> this?" she asked, kind of spinning in place, trying to get at the back of her neck.

"Here," I told her, and peeled the top of my mom's blouse down at the very top, Amber holding her hair up so I could see.

A tag.

This was a <u>new</u> blouse. That's why I'd never seen it.

"Oh shit," Amber said. "I can't––<u>she</u> should be the first one to wear this, I'm going to––"

"She doesn't care," I said. "I'll just--"

Holding the top of that blouse curled down, I reached back blindly for the drawer the scissors were in, but my blind fingers couldn't seem to ferret them up.

"Back up," I told Amber, and we took a long step back together, her still holding her hair up, and I reached back again, this time for the fancy knife block my mom and dad had gotten as a wedding present, six months before I was born.

When I pulled the big knife out from the center, it did that <u>schting</u>! thing.

"Holy shit," Amber said, kind of flinching in spite of herself. "You going to kill me now, Tol?"

"I didn't... here," I said, applying the raspy edge of that blade to the little price tag threaded through the washing instructions with a loop of black thread.

The tag fell down into Amber's shirt and she wriggle-danced it down into her waiting hand, eek'd her mouth out about the wrongness of her having grabbed this blouse instead of an old one.

"Tol?" she said, directing my eyes down to the large knife I was still holding. "Oh yeah," I said, and sheathed it back in the block. <u>Schting!</u> it went again.

Amber giggled, covered her mouth with her hand.

I pulled the knife back out.

Schting!

"What the hell?" Amber said, and reached out to do it herself—pull the knife out, make that wonderful sound—but when she did it, there was no sound at all.

"I'm over here, this angle," I said, because who cared.

"Well then let me——" Amber said, moving to step into where I was standing, but then Sheriff Burke was suddenly there, watching our stupid little game.

"About done there, kids?" she asked.

Amber let the knife slide back home. Soundlessly.

"Now where exactly's your truck?" Sheriff Burke said to Amber.

"Just a mile or two out," Amber said. "But my dad can--"

"Going that way anyway," Sheriff Burke said. "And, yes, we keep a can of gas in the county car."

Amber looked to me to be sure, I shrugged that this wasn't my party, and Sheriff Burke led off, Amber fell in, and I trailed enough behind to reach back one more time, nudge that big knife out from the block two or three inches, just to hear it fall back in.

Schting.

* * *

We should have figured it out before pulling over alongside the Rabbit truck, but... yes, as advertised, Sheriff Burke had a gas can sloshing with gas in her trunk, but that wasn't exactly helpful, since Amber needed diesel.

"Hunh," Sheriff Burke said.

"Hunh, yeah," Amber added, squinting.

"Hm," I said, looking down our backroad, I don't exactly know why.

If you don't think this is transcript, then go stand around Lamesa for an afternoon of your life.

"We can walk back," Amber said, making hot eyes to me.

"Again," I threw in, I guess to criticize Sheriff Burke's help, here.

"Can't leave two minors on the side of the road," Sheriff Burke told us. "Pile in, I'll bring you back after."

This time, instead of Amber riding up front, me in back, we both slipped into the back seat.

"If my dad sees this..." Amber said, just low enough for me.

"He was my second call back there, Ms. Dennison," Sheriff Burke said, tuned in all the same.

Knowing we couldn't open the doors ourselves or kick through the glass or pull the dividing screen in, we didn't put our seatbelts on, didn't need to feel <u>extra</u> extra-constrained.

"This was what the call was about?" I asked. "Something happened out here?"

"I think I like you better when you're not all the way checked in," Sheriff Burke said, giving us a fast grin in the rearview.

Amber chuckled, I elbowed her, and... and, yeah, it was a terrible day, five kids were dead and a dead one was walking around, but it still felt like something happening to someone else, yeah? Not to us. We were peripheral, way off to the side, innocent bystanders.

Sheriff Burke slowed for a left turn, had to get out herself to open the threestrand gate, because neither Amber nor me could get out, do it like we should, being the youngest in the car.

She didn't close it behind us. One of the perks of the badge: who's this landowner going to complain to?

The voice on the radio guided her the rest of the way in: two or three more turns, one cattleguard, a skinny horse with cracked hooves and gone-to-seed mane and tail, and... a pumpjack ahead of us, with a deputy's cruiser already there.

Parked right by what I instantly knew to be a pumper's truck.

"Shit," I said.

"Stay here," Sheriff Burke said, like we had any choice.

But if she didn't want us to see, she shouldn't have nosed in behind her deputy's ride.

Amber clamped her left hand onto my forearm and leaned across me for a better angle through the side window.

"No no no..." she was saying.

It was Deek Masterson.

I could see him clearly because Sheriff Burke and the deputy and the pumper were all at the power switch, trying to turn the pumpjack off. But evidently something was wrong with the handle. If there even was a handle anymore.

That big hammerhead just kept rising up, up, then coming back down, slamming its miles-long pipe down into the earth for another long drink of crude.

Attached either to the top of that pipe or the bottom of the hammerhead was Deek Masterson's intestines. At the very top of the pumpjack's cycle, that hammerhead—<u>horse</u> head, really—gathering itself for the plummet back down, would tug that long, glistening umbilical Deek now had enough to bring him up off the ground about six inches. Probably because his large intestine was still connected either to his stomach or his colon.

"He found him," Amber said.

"He?" I had to ask.

"Justin."

Of course.

Of my 135 pounds, not very much of it was actual brain matter. Or... maybe it was just that, where Amber gave other people space and consideration in her head, I was <u>Tolly-Tolly-Tolly</u> twenty-four seven, always worried about my own ass first.

Case in point: Amber immediately glomming onto this being Justin Joss's handiwork, and me, all I could think was that here was Deek, dead not that far from where the sheriff knows we were a few hours ago. Which Sheriff Burke had to be going to figure out, once the shock of seeing Deek like this wore off.

The sound of gunfire grabbed us by the face, pulled us back into the moment. Just reflex, I clutched onto Amber and she clutched back onto me, and, as proof that we hardly even saw each other as the opposite sex, I don't even recall where our respective hands grabbed on. Or maybe gunfire erases your short-term, I don't know.

"What the--?" I got out, before we both saw it.

Sheriff Burke had stepped back, just shot this contrary power box.

Slowly, a few turns still left in them, the counterbalances pendulumed down. I sort of held my breath on their last three-quarters turn, trying to urge them over one more time, like if that could just happen, then this would all work out.

Amber rattled the door handle on my side, rattled and pushed, but we were where we were. Still, she tried her side all the same, then mine, then rattled the screen in front us, screamed frustration through her teeth, pounding the heels of her hands into the headliner.

I just sat there, already knew it was hopeless.

At least Sheriff Burke had left the car on for us, probably because she didn't need any of her prisoners-who-weren't-really-prisoners getting heat exhaustion. It was July, after all, and in Lamesa, July won't take long to kill you.

As a lot of people were soon to learn.

The next thing was the deputy... falling back on his ass, then scrambling away from the pumpjack?

My first thought was "rattlesnake," of course. And probably not just one, but a whole writhing mass of them curled up against the delicious heat of the pumpjack or something. In West Texas, you're always hearing about unlikely shit like that. I'd sat around with a lot of my dad's friends, all pumpers, talking about how this or that surveyor had been out doing math, measuring this or that, and fallen down into a cave or old cellar out in some random pasture—a darkness that, when lit up with a light, would be skittering with black widows, or hissing with bullsnakes, who won't coil up in the corner, but stand right up along the wall and look you in the eye.

Snakes or spiders probably would have been better than what had made that deputy fall back.

"Well then," Amber said, about what we could see, now that the counterbalances were finally still.

There in the teeth of this unstoppable equipment was Justin Joss.

If you happened to know that he was responsible for the afterparty massacre, and that Deek was unfinished business to him, then you could connect the dots in the obvious way: he'd caught up with Deek, done what he had to do, in pretty grand fashion--poetic justice, even, using a pumpjack--but... how had he ended up in the counterweights again?

How it looked if you <u>didn't</u> know he was the drillbit killer at Deek's party, though, was that then the killer was still out there. And for some reason he'd gone to the cemetery, dug a body up, and thrown it into the maw of this pumpjack. The drillbit wasn't even involved, was just trash the last workover crew through here had left behind.

Staring hard at what was left of Justin, I opened the door and stepped up into the light, Amber following me.

When she tugged at my sleeve, I looked back to her, and her face was a question her mouth couldn't form--<u>how in the</u> hell <u>did you open that door</u>, <u>Tol?</u>--but all I could have told her was that I'd forgotten it was locked? I'd forgotten it was locked, and I hadn't wanted to be in the car anymore. So, not even thinking it wouldn't work, I'd pulled on that handle.

Instead of trying to explain it to Amber, I leaned into the front seat, turned the ignition back, and when we shuffled in with Sheriff Burke and the deputy and the pumper, I dutifully passed the keys over, upstanding citizen that I was. Sheriff Burke, not checked all the way in herself for the moment, took them, clipped them to her wide belt, and nodded a terse thanks, the rest of her face squinched in pain from this next crime scene.

I turned to the pumper when I could feel his eyes boring into me.

"Mack Driver's kid," he said, not so much in wonder as in... mock surprise?

"Tolly," I heard myself say, studying the heat waves on the horizon. In my dad's Westerns, that's always where the blurry shape of the stranger riding into town first appears.

For a hero, though, I should have kept my eyes closer to where I was.

"What the hell?" the pumper said, stepping back, using his hand to visor the sun away.

At first, we all looked over to him, and of course my first thought was that Justin was pulling him back together again. The pumper had his face angled up, though.

There was golden-blond hair spilling down over the back of the sleeping horse this pumpjack was.

And one white arm hanging down, slathered in blood.

Amber clutched hard onto my wrist, sucked air in through her teeth.

It was Stace Goodkin.

"Ms. Goodkin!" Sheriff Burke yelled up there, just to provoke a response, I guess, check for signs of life.

In response, Stace, bound by every letter of the law, tried to look around to us.

It unbalanced her, and she sloughed off, caught her head on the short railing around the pumpjack, meant to keep kids out, and by the time we rushed over to her, she coughed once, all blood and some teeth too.

Sheriff Burke angled her head over to save her life, her dad met them on the way in, saved her life some more——I've heard that his hands were stone, they were so still, doing triage on his daughter in the back of Sheriff Burke's cruiser—and I've never looked up how long Stace was laid up, but, knowing what I know now, I can see Justin dragging her by the hair across the fields out to this pumpjack, where he knew Deek was riding this night out.

And I know too that, hurt or not, Stace faced down the monster that revenge had turned Justin Joss into, and it cost her everything.

Right then, though, standing back to give her some air, I happened to look at a flash of brightness in among the giant counterbalances: Justin Joss's twicedead, balloon-white face.

I'm pretty sure he was staring at me.

You recognize your own, I mean.

* * *

The deputy who was supposed to drive us back into town pawned us off on his fiancee, which I know has that accent mark above it, but this rig isn't built for that either, sorry. The fiancee met him at the gate Sheriff Burke had left open, and hugged him for a solid five seconds, and I guess I sort of understood: she was communicating to him that she knew, she got it—he'd signed on because this was a small town. His job was supposed to be corralling high schoolers on Friday nights, ticketing big rigs using their Jake Brakes inside the city limits, and answering the occasional domestic disturbance call.

Not a killer taking his show on the road.

After the long hug--which, okay, I gave it all that space because I'm sort of jealous of it, sure--this deputy passed his riot shotgun across to his fiancee.

In true Texas fashion, she racked the slide with one hand, holding that shotgun out to the side, and nodded once to her deputy.

"You didn't see that," the deputy told Amber and me.

He was right.

Even now, he still doesn't have a name.

All over town, too, I have to suspect that cartridges were being thumbed into chambers.

Really, the safer course of action would have been to leave the guns behind, just gas up at the Town & Country, head for the hills. And, when you say that in Lamesa, about heading for the hills? You mean New Mexico. You mean Colorado. Technically, you can mean down south, I guess, Big Bend country, Alpine, which isn't really that far, but plunging south on those forever stretches of two-lane blacktop, you know you're almost to Mexico, so you can get cornered, your back to a wall. Well, to a river, but you get what I mean: you'll have run out of America to hide in.

This deputy's fiancee had come out in a tall shortbed Chevy with mudflaps, rollbar, and turbine mags nestled in Bigfoot-sized tires. I know now they were probably just 33's, but back then they looked like they were off the front end of a John Deere.

Instead of parking the county shotgun in the rack on the window behind our heads, she ran it down her right leg, against the floorboard, and made a point of turning off the police radio mounted under her dash, so we wouldn't hear anything we maybe weren't supposed to.

"Tolly and Amber, right?" she said, grabbing second with the tall stick that had about three bends in it, each less likely than the last.

She didn't even have to think about it, though. Like I was saying: Texas.

The stick shift in Amber's Rabbit had about a four-inch throw.

"That go-cart back there, right?" the fiancee said with a playful smirk, about Amber's truck.

"It's diesel," I answered, trying to take this criticism for Amber.

"That's what I hear," the fiancee said back, and chugged us ahead into this unlikely day, just managing, I could tell, to not ask Amber how it felt both being a farmer's daughter <u>and</u> driving foreign, which of course meant hating America, and everything it stood for. Instead, she asked us for the scoop on Stace, that her fiance hadn't been able to commit to the airwaves. We lied that we'd had to wait in the back of the cruiser, didn't see anything. It was a lie she could check up on, but... like she was going to call us out on it later? Two kids who didn't even matter?

* * *

A few questions later, we're down at Amber's Rabbit. Since the fiancee's truck's in the sky, I'm elected to climb this Everest's tailgate—running boards and steps and trucker handles are for wimps—come back down the mountain with the two milk jugs of diesel that are still frothy, they're so fresh.

"Town diesel, cool," Amber said, meaning the opposite, and poured it into her tank.

"Good?" the fiancee asked, offering us both the empty jug and the still-full one.

"Can we pay you?" Amber asked.

"You're kids," the fiancee said, because we were obviously sitting on our butts on the asphalt, playing with jacks.

"Just wait?" Amber said, settling down into the driver's seat.

I draped myself over the top of the cab–her truck really was a go-cart with a bed–leaned in to watch her give this a go.

She turned the key, the starter spun, the injectors sucked for all they were worth, and... "Shit," she said, banging the heel of her hand on the top of the steering wheel, pushing away from this whole lost enterprise.

From previous outings on fumes, I had the vague notion that diesels could airlock when they ran dry. But, like I had any idea how to bleed one back then?

I'm talking engines, not people.

"Here," I said, and started rocking the Rabbit, to slosh the go-juice up to the pump.

The fiancee leaned in with me, was game.

"If this truck's a rocking..." she said with a joyful grunt.

"Then you can see whoever's in the bed," I tagged on. Then, quieter, "Because there's not enough room in the cab."

The fiancee chuckled at that and we fell into a rhythm, Amber's upper body slinging back and forth, the Rabbit's tires practically breaking contact with the ground on the uphill side of the slanted ditch with each rock.

"It usually starts?" the fiancee asked.

Amber didn't dignify that.

With most stick shifts, all you have to do is find a hill, roll down it, pop the clutch once you're at speed, and you're golden.

Again, though: Lamesa, Texas.

"I'll pull-start you," the fiancee decided out loud for us, and, before we could object, she was launching up into her truck—which was when my seventeenyear-old self got entranced with the view she was affording.

"Ouch!" I told Amber, holding my side, dented in from her sharp elbow. "You deserved it," she said.

I jogged around to slam the fiancee's tailgate shut--this is me being super manly--and that was right when she turned the key of <u>her</u> truck.

It ground its starter as well, and got the same nowhere with it.

"Oh, come on!" the fiancee was yelling up in the cab.

"Well, this is great," Amber said.

It was, yeah.

The fiancee gave it another shot, making a show of twisting the key back with her whole right side, and the truck tried, tried, just wouldn't quite catch.

Amber settled back into the Rabbit, spun her starter as well.

"Fucking Bermuda Triangle?" I heard coming from her cab.

"I'll show you, bitch!" was coming from the other cab.

The fiancee was climbing up from her window Duke-style, had on the cap that had been hanging from the passenger-side gunrack. Instead of coming down to the ground, she was edge-walking around to the hood, her boots finding the top of the tire and then the bumper.

When she leaned over, the half-shirt she was wearing...

I took a long step back from Amber, didn't need any more cracked ribs.

The fiancee cranked the hood open, her left hand keeping her attached to the front of the truck, and right when she leaned over the engine bay, the wind caught hold of her cap--I'm guessing it was the deputy's, wasn't fitted to her head.

The cap twirled and hung past her grasping fingers, then sucked away, skipping the ditch entirely, headed for East Texas, it looked like.

"Go," Amber told me, nodding after the cap. "You're the knight in shining armor here, aren't you?"

I guessed I was.

I trotted out, jumped the ditch past the roadbed, and then kept going. The hat was rolling on its edge now like an errant Frisbee, was going to find a ramp back up into the air soon enough, and then I'd never catch it.

I looked back once to make sure the fiancee was clocking this, but she was back in the cab, having done whatever she needed to to the battery or carburetor or whatever.

I gave my attention back to the task at hand, fumbled for the hat, then, far enough away that nobody'd ever know, I stomped it to stop it skipping ahead, just out of reach.

I stood with it like the hero I most definitely was, held it by the bill and slapped it on my thigh, dusting it off.

The tall truck fired up and the fiancee, in celebration, racked those glasspacks. Good for her.

I jogged back, handed the cap the long way up to her, said, having to almost yell, "Chain?" It was to pull-start Amber's truck.

"Don't need it anymore!" the fiancee called back down, and pulled that hat on backwards, scratched the tires when she pulled away.

In the absence of her pipes, I could hear what she'd already known: the Rabbit had started as well.

I settled down in the passenger seat.

"She profess her undying love?" Amber said, holding the clutch in.

"She's dumping the deputy, yeah," I said with a shrug, like a confession.

Amber shook her head, eased up onto the blacktop.

"So was there still some milk in those jugs, what?" I asked, about her truck not starting.

"We're talking about the jugs the diesel was in, right?"

"I don't even know what you're--"

"I think it was <u>you</u>," Amber said, already reaching for third. "You're bad luck, Tolly Driver."

That felt about right.

* * *

On the ride into town, Amber walked me through the showdown we'd missed between Justin Joss and Stace Goodkin—how it was built-in, pre-ordained, that Stace <u>had</u> to face Justin for the story to finally end.

"So that's why he dragged her out there?" I asked, not quite following. "Because he, like, <u>knew</u> the rules?"

"Far as he knew," Amber said, hauling the little truck around the corner onto the square, "he was taking her out there so he could take care of her and Deek at once, together."

"But she was Stace," I muttered.

"<u>Is</u>," Amber corrected, stopping in front of my mom's hardware store.

"Your dad going to kill you again?" I asked, stepping out.

"Was good knowing you, Tolly Driver," she said, our usual farewell when she was having to duck into her dad's disapproval and judgment and all that one more time. "Tell them about me, won't you? Tell them I burned bright, at least for a little while."

"A legend in your own time," I said, and saluted her and her little Rabbit away, turned to face <u>my</u> judgment.

It turned out to be a late truck. I could tell because Trace was at the counter, which Mom only let her do when it was all hands on deck.

I nodded hey to her and slouched on through, hands deep in my pockets, nodding to myself that this would just be an hour and a half of sweating the night out, that this would be good for me. That Dad would have leaned into this, so I could too, couldn't I? For the first few months after his funeral, I'd always felt like he was watching me.

Now, I was more always trying to hold myself up to some standard I foisted on him. It's probably part of some natural cycle of grief, I don't know.

When I scraped feet back through the warehouse——which was really space we were renting that should have been the store next door, if there was a store next door—and suddenly found myself lifted off my feet, at first I thought Justin Joss was back again, coming for me.

It was my mom, hugging me.

If I'd known the hugs in my life were already numbered, then I probably would have been less sulky about this one. But the crew was watching, then clapping, then hooting, which kind of felt like a step too far.

I lifted my hand to proclaim that, yes, I was alive, I'd survived the night, I'd faced The Dreaded Peanut and come out the other side, against all odds.

"Down to totes?" I said all around, because I could see that Franklin had already forklifted all the pallets and lumber to where it went. On his two feet, with his gut and his tremor and his bloodshot-from-drinking eyes, he could barely stab his coffee cup into the machine in the breakroom. Put him at the controls of a forklift, though, and he was Michelangelo with a hammer and chisel, he was Jordan with a basketball, Tommy Lee with a drum kit––he could accomplish feats that seriously boggled the imagination. If there were forklift Olympics, he'd have been gold, gold, gold, and if there's a special heaven for forklift operators, then I hope he's ensconced up there with all the praise he deserves.

Here's to you, Franklin.

Every operation should have someone like you on the roster.

As for the rest of the crew?

If there's a hell for half-assers who drop every third box, and put the boxes they <u>don't</u> drop in the wrong place, then... well, there's a hot seat waiting for you, fellas. Probably some pitchforks too, but don't try to carry more than one at a time, maybe? With you lot, it can only lead to a bunch of holes getting punched into the floor of hell. At the time, junior-going-senior, before everything that happened happened, I wasn't necessarily thinking about college in any real way—maybe a few classes down at Midland, just to see what the tall city was like on the weekends?—but I admit that lately I'd been watching all these washouts my mom kept having to hire, as it was them or nobody. What I was kind of starting to suspect, or at least sort of see the edges of, was that if I didn't get any schooling, then I was going to be one of them, wasn't I?

No, my grades weren't any kind of top-notch, and Mr. Avery, the guidance counselor, wasn't pulling me special into his office to go through career options and life paths, but—hadn't I heard that some places made you write an essay as part of your application? If I could target a place that did that, then I figured I might have at least a little bit of a chance. I don't know what it is, but when pen's to page, when my fingers are to the grimy keys of this keyboard, then... I don't know.

The world feels right? I guess that's the best way to say it. It's like I'm finally at the controls that matter, like <u>these</u> are the ones I can maybe turn the world with.

With words, I can compete.

I mean, okay: I'm also, now, pretty handy with a machete, a chainsaw, an axe, a hunting knife, a cudgel, a roofing hammer, a pry bar, and anything in the balland-chain category. I've never tried, but I bet I could even twirl a tamper or a post-driver like Mel and Janice could twirl a baton, and I can kind of feel in my bones that I've also got some facility with spearguns and ropes and nailguns and anything even <u>sort</u> of in the area of "javelin" or "lance."

Slashers are jacks of any and all trades, when it comes to getting some killing done. Whatever's at hand, right?

Only recently, I've found that applies to rocks and bricks and cinderblocks, too.

It's kind of sad, really, but I can bean a wild turkey or a coyote or a dog or a crow from... I don't even know my limit, really. I guess it's probably about as far as I can see?

And, no, I don't use this. I was just trying to scare this one annoying turkey off, toss a rock out there that would spook it into sort of flight--we don't need a

flock of turkeys roosting in that one greasy tamarack tree way over in the corner-but... yeah: one turkey, brained, its dinosaur legs kicking the dirt.

My bodycount ticked one higher.

This rotting turkey brought the crow in, then, and I tried to scare it too, thinking it had had to be a fluke, my throw, but: now one dead crow as well, the guilty half-a-brick somewhere in the dirt of this increasingly fragrant crime scene. Which brought the dogs in under the fence—other half of that brick, the same result—and then it was the coyotes, grinning their night grins, their eyes sparking in the floodlights.

For them, I threw the cinderblock we'd been using as a doorstop, which was way too heavy, and I aimed well to the side, because I was strictly looking to spook them off.

It didn't matter.

Lesson learned.

I mean, not for them, not for the turkey and the crow, the dogs and the coyotes, but for me, anyway.

Now I just use the little air-pump BB gun to keep the varmints away.

And, you'd have to see this to believe it, but, goddamn, I cannot hit thing <u>one</u> with that little gun. In the first place, it nearly always misfires, or the BB rolls out the barrel, plops down onto the toe of my boot, but on the rare occasion it's got enough air in it to fire, something still goes awry: <u>me</u>.

Seventeen years ago, Amber explained this to me, how slashers and guns are oil and water, if oil and water are the two most opposite things there can be, but I don't think I ever really believed her until now.

Again, Ambs, I'm sorry. I should have taken every word you said as gospel truth. Just because you learned it from VHS tapes doesn't mean it was bullshit, right?

I wish being a slasher made unloading a truck a snap, though.

But, we were down to totes, I was right about that, and totes were always where we had to really be booking it, because big trucks can't quite back into the alley, so were always poking out into the square, blocking the one or two cars cutting across town on a Saturday. To get the boxes way in the nose at the trailer, we'd roll out the conveyor-kind of like you see at funeral homes, for coffins? Except this conveyor accordions out way, way longer, like for three dead NBA players head to toe, and has all these aluminum rollers, for shooting a box fast from one end to the other.

And, yeah, the reason I describe it in funeral terms is because of my dad.

When will that stop being a key thing in my life? Am I just holding on to it because letting it go would also be letting him go?

I'm supposed to just think kill kill kill all the time, I know.

If I knew any other slashers, any other former teenage slashers, I guess I could ask them about their interior lives, their drives and motivations, their regrets and dreams and longings, but... we're a solitary lot, I'm pretty sure.

One time, standing right where I am right now, I did kind of get a dim feeling, though. From the interstate, I'm pretty sure--that direction, anyway.

What I think? A hitchhiker, maybe.

And I wonder if he felt me, too, looked out the side window of whatever ride he was catching?

It's best he didn't ask to get out there, though, to see who I was. I wonder if we're not like betta fish, I mean. You know them? Betta <u>fighting</u> fish? If we are like them, slashers I mean, then we probably each need our own private aquarium, because if you ever put us in the same one, we go mad, have to keep coming at the other one until we're alone again, and the waters we're moving through are wonderfully red.

I say "fish," too, but I've never had one, have only seen one in a pet store, for the half a minute I was there. Before I was asked to please vacate the premises, sir.

If fish don't explain it well enough, though, then how about mice?

Growing up, just being a kid, I used to go with this one cat out into the tall grass and mesquite, to corner field mice. When you corner them like that, they're twitchy, but something about the cat being there, hypnotizing them like that creepy snake in Jungle Book, it makes them easy to pick up by the tail, if you move slow and steady. Which is all well and fine, at least until you catch a second mouse, and are holding them each up by the tail.

As long as you keep them to either side of you, they're calm, they've given up, they're like baby possums, just hanging around by the tail. But when you bring

them together to say hey, talk about this upside-down life they're now living? Man, it's an instant pee-war. And if you get them any closer, then it's scratching and trying to bite, too.

I bet that's what it's like for slashers. Even ones who are in what they consider retirement—those who never got a sequel, the one-and-done's like me.

At least, I hope that's what I am.

You never know, though. There's no handbook. The closest I ever had to a manual for this life I'm trying to live was Amber. But I can never be close to her again. Just like that hitchhiker, we'd sense each other, I have to think, even after all these years.

And then it all starts again.

* * *

So: totes.

I'm there on the receiving end of the rolled-fast boxes, and to Timmy, at the head of this, slinging boxes, this is the best game ever. When you don't have to pay for the broken shit, yeah, it's probably pretty fun.

But our conveyor, our flexible belt of rollers, it didn't have side rails. I can't imagine any of them do. That would limit the size box you could use them for.

Meaning, like you've probably already seen coming, one of Timmy's slung boxes, it went off-track, burst, scattering its contents. And, the world being what it is, this couldn't be miter boxes or anything solid, that can survive a crash like that.

It was a box of loose spraypaint cans.

Of course some of them popped, spraying all the colors of the rainbow every which way. It was like we'd been sucked into the end of the "Freeze Frame" music video.

Just like J. Geils and his band, everyone jumped around and danced and laughed, Timmy too, not one of them thinking about the mess of colors this was leaving all around.

We couldn't have stopped those cans either, though.

My mom stepped out with her clipboard, her reading glasses cocked up on her forehead. She watched the last can finally stop spinning, and looked up to me.

"Sorry," I said, because even when it's a Timmy, you still don't throw a coworker under the bus. <u>Especially</u> if you're the boss's son, who's going to get favor at every turn.

"Zaney?" my mom called behind her, Zaney being an actual real name of a living person in Lamesa, Texas in 19 and 89. Her birth-certificate name was "Zanna," but continual misspellings in elementary--her own misspellings, I'd heard--had turned her into Zaney. Well, that and how continually spaced-out she was.

Anyway, she was in charge of stock, which meant orders and re-orders, and she now had to call in for another box of assorted spraypaint.

The cost of doing business.

"Got this?" my mom said to me, holding her glasses by the right side, like ready to slide them back down again, get back to her paperwork.

"Good," I assured her, and Timmy, not really chastised but fully aware that he was going to have to walk by the rest of us to get out of that trailer, he slowed his roll down, and we were done. With the unloading, anyway. Still to come: cutting boxes, flattening them, and either hand-trucking all this out to the floor or stashing it back here—each person to their own section.

"Where you need me?" I asked around, because I was kind of a floater, could stock any zone, but then the phone rang, startling Zaney enough that she dropped her clipboard and juggled her coffee for three or four seconds before dropping it, then trying to giggle it better.

Like I said, I was considering taking some junior college courses.

Maybe all of them.

Franklin picked the phone up, cuffing it with his wrist the way old-timers with arthritic fingers do. Usually it was Dick who snagged calls—he considered it the assistant manager's duty—but Dick didn't work weekends, so.

Franklin listened, looked up, chucked his chin to me, said, "Visitor, Tol."

"What, who?" I said, though nobody on the dock could have answered this question. "Up front?"

"Register?" Franklin said into the phone, and when that was somehow confusing--it was Trace he was talking to--he added, "Want him up by the

front doors?"

He nodded to whatever Trace told him back, relayed it to me: "She's swinging around back here."

I nodded, tongued my lower lip out in thought.

<u>She</u>.

Sheriff Burke.

She'd made the connection, done the math: Tolly Driver and Amber Dennison had pretty much been at the scene of that bloody pumpjack, they'd come in muddy to their eyebrows, possibly from digging Justin Joss up, and, no, neither of them weighed even close to a buck-fifty, but? Add them together, they're a whole, dangerous person, aren't they? One maybe capable of having done all that bad shit at Deek's, then chased him down, done something to Stace when she threatened to blow the whistle?

And of course she would pull her cruiser around back. No need to do this on the sales floor, and in front of my mom at that.

I ran my hair out of my eyes as best I could. Because I was so sweaty from working the truck, my hair actually stayed back, for once.

Was Amber going to be in the back of Sheriff Burke's cruiser already, or was she already at the station, so that we wouldn't have time to sync our stories up?

"Need some backup?" Timmy asked all close and confidential, like he was asking to be my second at Thunder Road.

He was bouncing on the balls of his feet, was always good to scrap. Grow up with your dad using you like a punching bag and any fight's a good fight.

"Nah, it's just--" I said, not even able to come up with a decent lie, just jogging backwards, planting a hand on the concrete lip by the trailer and jumping down to the blacktop.

"Watch out for S Dog," Franklin grumbled, meaning the truck's driver, probably already in the cab, waiting for one of us to close the doors so he could deadhead it down to Pecos or somewhere for his next load. <u>S Dog</u> was lettered on the doors of his rig, kind of arcing over Snoopy, in black domino mask and cape, lying on top of his red doghouse with his bloodshot eye wide open.

Truckers, man, they're a different breed altogether, aren't they? Us slashers don't have <u>nothing</u> on them, I mean.

Franklin was right, too. Right when my sneakers touched down, the rig tried to fire up, a short belch of coal pluming up into the pale blue sky.

Timmy took it upon himself to gather the doors, but procedure was that S Dog wouldn't jerk away until he got the thumbs-up in his stack of side mirrors—urban legend at the hardware store was that, before my mom and dad bought it, some other scrub had fallen between a rolling-away truck and the dock, and right when the truck was rolling back again.

Oops.

And, who knows? Maybe that's why Franklin was so deep in the bottle. He was the only carryover from the previous version of the store.

It doesn't matter.

I'm just stalling, don't want to do the next part.

But, I guess I've got to.

So, I'm down by the big tractor and trailer, which S Dog is trying to get to turn all the way over, I'm jogging alongside it to meet up with Sheriff Burke, running my fingers along the side of the trailer, and I'm going up and down higher than I really need to, to be sure I'm a body moving in the reflection S Dog's clocking.

Safety first, right?

Except, then--shit.

Right in front of S Dog's driver's side front tire is a sparkly new can of bright yellow spraypaint, the sole survivor of Tim's carelessness. More important, when S Dog rolls forward, that can's popping. I didn't think it would hurt his tire, he was probably crushing antelope skulls by the dozen up through Colorado and Wyoming, but it <u>would</u> leave a big yellow smear on the red brick of the square.

One it would probably fall to me, not Timmy, to clean off.

And, yeah, there was the distinct chance here that I was going to get to that can exactly when S Dog finally got his rig fired up and moving, meaning that powdery yellow on the red brick could very well have a silhouette of me in it.

On the way past S Dog's cab, I reached up, slapped his door to tell him I was here, below where he could see, and like punctuation to my slap, right when I broke contact, my palm stinging, the engine finally caught. Nimble as a monkey, not breaking stride at all, the world suddenly so loud, I dipped down, chancing my hand, and snatched that can up and out of harm's way.

At which point I pivoted into a champion's victory celebration, arms raised, <u>Chariots of Fire</u> here, but of course I wasn't stupid enough to even be a little bit in front of S Dog's cowcatcher bumper.

It didn't matter.

The moment I crested the front of his truck, my hands in the air, mouth open in mock scream, was right when <u>another</u> chrome bumper was coming around the front of the truck blind.

It caught me right in the chest, right in the sternum, folded me around itself so that my face shattered the plastic grill insert, and then this up-in-the-sky truck locked its tires, slinging me ahead.

I hit the red brick of the square like a rag doll, kept rolling, then sliding, and the way time had slowed down in my head, before the world went dark, I had to recognize that Sheriff Burke didn't drive an unnecessarily huge truck, did she?

A certain deputy's fiancee did, though.

* * *

Where did I go, then?

I'm not sure.

I wasn't just gone, though. I know that.

This isn't a matter of "it's been seventeen years ago already," either. No, these four days, they're seared into my memory, moment by moment.

I mean, yeah, in a sense I was in the corner with Mark Slaughter, having the time of my life, thinking one and two are the same, but... was that song even out yet, in 1989? I don't think so.

We keep the radio on here, though, even when the gate's locked, and whoever said that your musical tastes, for better or for worse, are usually forged in the most intense period of your life, aren't really a thing you can ever undo--<u>ding ding ding</u>.

As for why the deputy's fiancee had to see me bad enough to drive her fancy truck around behind the store... she was returning a book. It was that porny Western Amber had probably been taking just to keep me from abusing myself. It had slipped from her rear pocket, taken up residence on that bench seat in the sky.

Meaning, Sheriff Burke wasn't onto me yet.

She didn't know that, while I was conked, I think... I don't know. I think I was sort of under the water in Deek's pool? I know there were bubbles all around, and wetness, but there was a sort of "thrushiness," too, if that can be a word. A <u>surging</u>, and, under that—before that, really—an inexorable drive, maybe? Like, something I couldn't even start to deny. Not like when you tell somebody you need the bathroom, because in about thirty seconds here, whether you want to or not, you're peeing. No, this, it was more like... it was like when you're running downhill, maybe? When you're running downhill and you're going faster than you can actually run, and you know you can't stop, you've got too much momentum, and you know that pretty soon here your knees are going to lock, turning one of your legs into a pole, vaulting you up into the air for a moment, before you come back down in a rolling heap.

But that was still to come.

For the moment, I was just crashing downhill, to... to something. Or, someone?

I didn't know yet, I'm saying.

Soon enough, I would.

For the moment, though, everybody on the loading dock had carried me up onto the cool concrete, out of the sun.

My mom had called for an ambulance, but had been informed that they were all otherwise occupied, could she possibly wait to have this emergency later? That would really help everybody out today, thanks.

Like Deek and Justin Joss needed their blood pressure taken.

As for the make-do medics I had on hand to treat me... I shouldn't complain, I know. They <u>had</u> thought to drag me in out of the noon sun, and that's something, right? Wouldn't want the injured party getting sunburned, would we? Never mind any head or neck injury, though. And if any of their fingers were in my throat to clear a breathing passage, then I don't really want to know, thanks. I sat up fast, from the waist, like a vampire from his coffin at sunset.

Timmy flinched hard enough that he fell off the dock, but it would take more than that to ever keep him down.

Standing over me were my mom, as close as she could get while still holding on to the phone, its cord no longer spiraled, but stretched tight; S Dog, rolling the greasy brim of his red cap into a tighter and tighter tube, his eyes giving away all the trucker speed he had in his truck, and how he didn't really need the law poking around here, thanks; Franklin, smoking a cigarette in the wide-open for once, since all the rules were suddenly off; Zaney, a new cup of coffee spilled down the front of her shirt, it looked like; and, held to the wall by a chain looped over the twin forks of Franklin's forklift, the deputy's fiancee, to keep her from deciding late that this had been a hit and run. Her lip was busted, probably courtesy of my mom, who I'm sure would have done worse if she hadn't needed to get to the phone.

I should mention Rodrigo, too. I know he's just now coming on-scene, but trust me, he'd been there the whole time, helping us unload—he was pretty much next in line for Franklin's job, whenever Franklin croaked, but until then he was working the machine-shop counter, which was pretty much cutting keys, sharpening knives, and fixing lawnmowers.

What Rodrigo was doing now, though, was reading that scene from the book that I had dogeared. He was reading it and grinning a secret, kind of twisted grin, and looking up to me in both wonder and consternation.

Right when I sat up, he locked eyes with me, and we made an instant, silent, never-to-be-discussed deal: he would keep this book, not saying anything about it to anyone, and I would never ask for it back.

In that same instant, my mom let the phone go, its long cord snapping it across the dock, shattering that handset against the wall.

And then she was on her knees by me, her hands to my ribs, my collarbone, my shoulders, my elbows.

"I'm--I'm--" I said, bringing my fingertips up to explore my face.

It was whole.

After having shattered the deputy's fiancee's grill insert.

I should have had a bowtie stamped on my forehead, yeah. Right around that cut I'd got from Amber's windshield.

And then Timmy started wailing from his fall.

Franklin stepped over, looked down off the dock, and blew smoke out into the day.

"Ambulance still coming, boss?" he said back to my mom.

"This day," my mom said, holding me upright by both shoulders now. "You're--how can you be good?"

The same way I'd locked eyes with Rodrigo, I now made eye contact with my mom, and we both kind of just <u>knew</u>, or else I knew enough for both of us: because it would shatter her to lose her husband and her son in almost the same year, I'd been spared. It had been a fluke I'd even got hit, I mean, wasn't part of any grand design. So the world was kind of just taking it back, no harm, no foul.

"You?" I said across to the deputy's fiancee, and she sputtered into what I guessed was another crying fit.

Zaney and Rodrigo were down with Timmy already, and my mom had no words for this woman who had run her son down, so it was up to Franklin to explain that this was all about my book finding its way back to me.

"It's not even mine," I mumbled, in case my mom had leafed through before Rodrigo commandeered it.

"Amber reads Westerns?" my mom said, incredulous. I wasn't just super sure she hadn't intoned "Westerns" in a way that meant she'd already thumbed through that book I'd so brilliantly left right out on the kitchen counter. But she had discretion, too. Or, she understood, anyway.

This is where Saturday starts to kind of get bleary, for me.

I know an ambulance did finally show up, as well as the deputy. I'm pretty sure his fiancee elected <u>not</u> to divulge that Franklin had pretty much fastened her to the wall with some heavy equipment. I did see him doing some mystified version of crime-scene analysis on his fiancee's truck, though, his fingertips feeling through that shattered grill insert, and then the new crease in the bumper, the dent in the hood. Looking from that damage to me, like trying to make it make some kind of sense. The two medics, on their third shift in a row--they accepted all the coffee my mom had Zaney offer--cleared me for duty, said if I got nauseous or dizzy or anything to check in with someone with a stethoscope and bad handwriting, or just haul butt for the emergency room, but... they had bigger fish to fry, yeah?

By now news of Deek and Justin Joss and Stace Goodkin had trickled into town, and there was enough of a line at the register for padlocks and floodlights and ammunition that my mom had to step in for Trace.

Lamesa was becoming a killing floor.

And it was about to get bloodier.

Saturday <u>Night</u>

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Before what happened to my dad happened to my dad, my mom and me had kind of an evening routine, I guess you could say? Dad would usually be good until about nine o'clock, but after that he was conked. It's what happens when you roll out at five every morning.

How I know is that now, seventeen years after he died, I'm the age he was when he tried to pass that tractor.

It's not that I want to get up before the sun, and it's not that the world or my body's making me get up, either.

It's just... I don't know.

It's nice?

It's only me, I mean.

If there ever gets to be enthusiasts or anthropologists or documentary crews tracking the secret lives of grown-up slashers, then this segment on me is going to be killer-boring.

When it's warm enough, I just sit out front in a plastic chair to watch the sun come up, and when it's cold, I usually sit out there the same, just, wrapped in a blanket.

And, I say "enthusiasts" or "anthropologists," but... we're in the psychologists' domain now, aren't we?

<u>Tolly, Mr. Driver, when you sit out in the darkness like that, who might you be trying to commune with? Who might you want to sit alongside, if you could?</u>

I know, my head's transparent, my skull's glass, you can see right into all my desires and motivations and—you don't even need to look in to see my regrets. I'm saying them all here, aren't I?

But, it's not just my dad I'm sitting out there with.

Behind me--I can feel them--are those six kids I killed in 1989.

They don't say anything. They don't need to.

There's another reason I prefer that hour or hour and a half out there alone with my thoughts, though.

Before the sun comes up, there's no colors.

I'll explain, but first I've got to come back to my mom and me's routine.

She'd sit in the passenger seat, let me drive her truck to the video rental place, which was really just a little portion of the wall at the grocery store. You could also rent a VCR, but we'd gotten one my sophomore year already, so now watching tapes was so cheap it would have been stupid not to have done it every chance.

For the drive there, she wouldn't even critique my blinker and brake decisions that much.

And, if you're noticing I don't have my own truck here, my own car, even a dirtbike or three-wheeler to scream through the ditches with, then you're noticing right. My dad had tied me getting some heap to my grades. It was how he'd been going to guarantee I ended up using my brain to make a living, not my back, like he was doing.

Each progress report and report card, though... <u>Tolly needs to apply himself.</u> <u>Mr. Driver is still missing three assignments. Perhaps some remediation is in</u> <u>order.</u>

So, when Amber's dad got her that little Rabbit truck? It was freedom. The world was ours. I could keep on failing pre-algebra until I was twenty-five, who cared. Solve for X? No thanks. All we had to solve was Friday night. We could putter up and down the drag, now, take our place down at the carwash. When we could scrape together enough nickels and dimes, we could even pay for a double feature at the drive-in, and split a Chihuahua. We could nose into

Spurlock's for Super Dogs, and eat them right there in the cab like the whole world was ours. We could cruise out to Los Ybanez, telling ourselves that <u>this</u> time we were going to have the nerve to haul a twelve-pack or a bottle of something up onto the counter by the register, dare the old man on his stool to ask for our ID.

Anyway, I hadn't asked Mom yet if Dad's rule was, you know, outlasting him. Really, I think I was kind of on the honor system, here. That's the way moms are. Instead of telling you not to do this or that, they tell you to do what you think is best. Meaning, yeah, until I solved for X, I was going to be Tolly the hitchhiker.

Too, the truck Dad had been dangling like a carrot in front of me, it was one we were going to put together from all the wore-out pump trucks from his yard at work. Each of them was plus-five-hundred-thousand miles, had been driven into the ground and then driven just a few miles more, but me stealing a rotor from this one, unbolting a radiator from that one, it was supposed to get me more in tune with what I was going to be doing out on the road.

And, Mom had to factor in too, here. My guess? Whenever it did finally become easier to buy something to drive, then I was getting some decommissioned <u>tank</u>. When your husband died behind the wheel, I mean, I doubt you're all anxious to send your kid out onto those mean streets in just any crumply tin can.

But I keep getting distracted.

By which I mean I keep trying to go back, live <u>then</u>, before this night that has to happen.

Which I'm sure the psychologists would have an explanation for.

Anyway, so Mom sends me into the video store, and I can tell she's watching me walk, trying to clock whether there's a hitch in my step from catching the deputy's fiancee's bumper. So I try to walk just <u>extra</u> great, which pretty much turns me not into a teenage slasher, but an adolescent robot.

My explanation to her, to the medics, to the deputy's fiancee--whose lip my mom never apologized for--was that the truck hadn't even been going that fast, had it? And I'd exaggerated the contact, had flung myself back, and had already been moving that way anyway. It only <u>looked</u> bad, Mom. But I'm seventeen, I'm young and tough, my bones are practically still all cartilage. Remember when I jumped off the hayride and the whole parade stopped, because Tolly had just suicided?

Wrong. I bounced up from that tangle of irrigation pipe like Rocky, holding my arms up.

This was like that, wasn't it?

So, I robot-walked into the grocery store, and... immediately realized that this was the first time I'd come in for a movie since my dad's wreck. And, yeah, of course I knew that the reason we were doing it all was that Mom had to watch me close for slurred speech, for slobbering, for dizziness--keep the concussion kid awake, keep him awake, never mind that he says he feels fine.

But? There was nothing else going on in Lamesa that night. Amber's dad had forbidden her from leaving the property, had even gone so far as closing the gate by the road that they usually kept open, so he could let their pigs out, to patrol the property.

If you ever have to choose between having a sow or a pit bull coming after you in the dark, then I recommend the dog.

At Amber's place there was also a random llama, that her Army brother had come home with the year before. Evidently he and the girl who'd been his fiancee for six weeks had invested in it together. But, after the big break-up, when he was shipping out again... what to do with a llama nobody wants? Take it home.

It was nice, though. Mostly. At night, though, you'd think you were alone, just walking through the rusted-out stripper baskets and junky cotton trailers out in the tall grass, and then that llama would poke its head up, silhouetting itself against the dark sky, and you'd feel a weakness in your gut that you knew was your bowels, loosening up so you could make an even faster getaway.

But, Amber being locked up meant I had no options, either.

It was the same all over Lamesa, from what we'd been hearing. The drag was dead, the Sky-Vue was mostly empty. John-o at the Town & Country could have stripped down, stood nude behind the register, and nobody would have known, probably. When kids are dying left, right, and in the middle, then you lock up all the kids who <u>aren't</u> dead yet, don't you?

How I knew this was my first time back at the video wall, though, it was that the two tapes I reached for automatically, the only two I'd ever come out with before... this time I hesitated.

You'll think I don't have any imagination, but, really it's just that, when you find what works, you stick with it, don't you? Like, if a machete's your thing, then you always use a machete.

Me, I always started my movie selection in the A's, like makes sense, and, each time, what I came out with were the first two A-movies: <u>American Anthem</u> and <u>American Ninja</u>. Seriously, after my dad conked in his easy chair, my mom and I could pretty much recite each of them word for word, until we melted into giggles, would have to rewind, see that scene again.

Problem was, now that my dad wasn't around, <u>American Anthem</u> would hit differently, I had to think. The big emotional release at the end, I mean, it's when this one gymnast's dad, with whom he's had a troubled relationship to say the least, he actually, for once, shows up, and nods approval at his son's "sissy" sport.

The emotional release without my dad snoring in his chair... I didn't think I was ready for it.

I'm still not.

So I came out with another gymnastics movie, <u>Gymkata</u>. That and <u>An</u> <u>Officer and a Gentleman</u> would cover us for the night, I figured. I'd seen <u>Gymkata</u>, knew it was all just fancy kicking on conveniently placed pommel horses, and <u>An Officer and a Gentleman</u> had to be trying to cash in on <u>Top Gun</u>, didn't it? It would all be dogfights in the sky, no time for romantic interludes. Not saying I didn't linger on <u>Risky Business</u> and <u>Trading Places</u> like always, but when you're selecting a movie to watch with your mom, you don't go straight for the nudity.

And, never mind that Mom had been at the hardware store since sunup, and had one big adrenaline spike--<u>there's dead kids floating in a pool</u>?--followed by an even bigger one, that being this number one son getting slapped with a truck, and she <u>still</u> whipped up my favorite dinner: a pound of hamburger cooked loose in a pan with pepper, and a twelve-pack of split-top rolls with a healthy pat of butter in each.

I love you, Mom. Still. Always.

And I'm sorry about... about all of it. It wasn't my fault, but, yeah, about half of what you heard, that's me, I guess.

I might as <u>well</u> be dead, I know.

I wonder how Lamesa's changed since 1989, though? I wonder if you've updated the furniture in the house. The curtains. I wonder if Dad and my's photos are still on their nails in the hall. I hope you're married again, I guess? I don't know. I hope you're happy, maybe that's a better way to say it.

It's not easy, living through what I did. I can only imagine how people looked at you in the wake of it all.

They always blame the parents, don't they?

If I could write a letter to the paper to disabuse them of that notion, though, believe me, I would. And, you know me, Mom, I <u>could</u>, I can, I'd go on and on, this would be my Ready Writing essay for all the marbles, but... it would only start an investigation, wouldn't it? And the paper wouldn't publish it, I know.

I could just mail it to you, I guess. But, at the same time, isn't it easier thinking what everybody probably thinks? That Tolly Driver ran off into the heat of July, and just kept running. Not to get away, but to die out there in the heat, in the thirstiness. That the only ones to attend to his remains were the coyotes and the buzzards. Maybe somebody hoofing it up from Mexico, running from La Migra, stepped into my ribcage, tucked halfway under a mesquite bush, and maybe they stopped for a moment when they did, but it wasn't to mourn me. It was to see if I'd been carrying anything they could use.

It's best that way, I think. Isn't it?

Amber? You knew me best, after my mom. Does running off to bake my corpse in the sun seem like something I would have done? Did you ever take a horse out, just let it have its head in this or that pasture, to see if you could find me?

Would it have been to properly bury me, though, or to step lightly on my skull at first, and then heavier, until I crunched down into dust?

I'm a blight on your life, I know. On Lamesa itself. Maybe just on loser seventeen-year-old guys trying to survive high school.

But you have all those slasher movies in your head too, don't you?

You know that, no matter how dead I am, one of my eyes can still open, if the right person's near. You know that, when nobody's looking, a finger can twitch.

So, no, I don't know if you came out after me, Amber.

I hope you didn't.

Maybe you just went on with your life like I never happened.

Never mind all the proof otherwise, carved into headstones.

* * *

After twelve rolls and a pound of meat, I guess I was coming in more like oneforty, Sheriff Burke.

But it would all burn off soon enough.

And not just because I was seventeen.

We made it through <u>Gymkata</u> the way you're supposed to: my mom cleared a space in front of the television for me, and I tried to do some of the martial arts/gymnastics moves. We didn't break anything, quite. I'd do the move, collapse onto my chin halfway through, and my mom would bounce the scene back on-screen like the problem was that I wasn't watching close enough, not that I hadn't been training for the last ten years, and had about zero aptitude, and wasn't exactly physically gifted.

Looking back, I can see that she was already trying to figure out how to be both mom and dad to me—she was all I had anymore, so it was her job to cover all the parental bases.

But it went over, the good guys won, and then we were on to <u>An Officer and</u> <u>a Gentleman</u>.

Which was most decidedly <u>not</u> a <u>Top Gun</u> ripoff.

Instead of awkwardly watching all the sex scenes--was this movie <u>all</u> sex scenes?--I started paying attention to the film, if that makes sense. Like, the composition, the craft, the colors.

And that was when I cued in to what had probably been going on for the last few fights of <u>Gymkata</u>, that I had assumed was just "Eastern Europe" or wherever they were: the color was fading out.

<u>An Officer and a Gentleman</u> being a less actiony story, at first I didn't register that a sort of paleness was leeching in.

"You see this?" I said to my mom, my voice creaky.

"Uhh-what?" she asked back, meaning I'd just woken her up. She really was taking on my dad's role, even down to the inability to make it past nine o'clock.

"Nothing, nothing," I told her, and when her breathing evened out again, I scooted up to the set. First I tried adjusting the tracking on the VCR, but that only layered static in, so I went to the small knobs on the television. With the lights off I couldn't for sure tell which was what, but I trial-and-error'd my way to saturation or hue--something that made the colors get hotter or colder.

To me, though, it wasn't that the blues got deeper or brighter blue. They just got more contrasty--maybe that's the way to say it?

It was like I'd gone colorbind. No, not "like": I <u>had</u>. And it wasn't like I thought it would be. It wasn't all black and white. It was like a different palette had been used to paint the world. The colors were quieter, but there were more shades of them, now. Finer distinctions.

It wasn't An Officer and a Gentleman.

It was me.

And I was supposed to call someone with a stethoscope if I started experiencing symptoms like this, I knew. But it was kind of cool, too. I'd call later, I told myself. If it didn't stop.

I felt my way into the kitchen, not because I couldn't see, but because... it was like my fingers didn't trust my eyes yet, and were having to confirm all these things I'd seen thousands of times.

Mom had put the phone number we were supposed to call under the Case tractor magnet on the refrigerator. And that magnet--Cases are red--was <u>amazing</u>. My brain and my memory were telling me about its redness, but my eyes were giving me textures of a sort of wonderful, vibrant beige.

I opened the refrigerator, pulled a tomato out, and had to cover my mouth so my laughing wouldn't wake my mom. I wanted to call Amber, tell her all about this, but her dad didn't like the phone ringing after eight-thirty.

I contented myself with going slowly through the junk drawer pen by different-colored pen. The coffee mug my mom kept rubberbands in was amazing. Now, with these new eyes, I could untangle them so much better, could see each individual rubberband, and trace it, know just where to pull, where to guide it back through.

And then when I stretched one of them out? I'd never known there were little fissures that opened up, exposing a completely <u>different</u> color.

Of course I drifted back into the living room when the next sex scene started. It was the same, but it wasn't.

Either way, I watched, trying not to sneak looks over to Mom, to be sure she wasn't watching me watch this.

I turned the set down by slow degrees, so as not to pull a sound rug out from under her, and when it was completely muted, I rewound the tape and ejected it, leaving no evidence of where I might have left off watching. But I didn't click the television off—didn't want my mom, even asleep, plunging into darkness. Better to sort of just bask in the blue glow of channel 3.

What now?

That pound of meat had turned to energy, and my new and wonderful colorblindness wouldn't let me close my eyes yet.

With my mom asleep, I could take the car, I knew.

But, go where?

I eased the back door open, stepped into the dry grass of the backyard--my dad had been the big lawn care person of the family--and was amazed that all the fence slats were slightly different shades from each other.

This was like a superpower. And, just like with Daredevil, just like with Spider-Man, it came from an accident: getting hit by a truck.

Maybe I could run and jump too?

I bounced on the balls of my feet, felt the same, but that didn't prove anything.

"Here goes," I said, and came down to three points, blasted up out of that, racing for the back fence, and... splatted halfway there. Because I was in my socks.

I also hadn't gained an invulnerability to grassburs and goatheads.

I was still picking them out of my hip--goatheads don't joke around-when, for a painful flash, my vision switched channels, the whole backyard inverting to a washed-out negative of itself. I slammed the heels of my hands into my eyes, trying to press this back in long enough to call the doctors, but the pain only burrowed deeper.

"Aaagghh!" I said. No, groaned? Moaned?

Is that even how you spell that sound? I never had thought about it, before right now.

Anyway, I fell over on my side, exactly into where I'd been delicately dropping the grassburs and goatheads, and they <u>all</u> dug in, now, and probably deeper, since each little spine was already coated in my blood. I arched away from them as best I could, tried not to get any more in me, failed pretty hard at that, so just stumbled up, staggered to the back porch.

"Mom," I creaked.

You always want your mom when you're hurt. When you call your dad is when you've done something he can maybe be proud of. For pain, though, it's moms all the way.

I stumbled back into the kitchen.

"<u>Mo</u>-om," I said again, but still not loud enough to actually wake her.

What I was really saying was that I wanted this pain to stop, please.

And, what would she do to stop it?

Calamine lotion for the stinging in my skin, and maybe eyedrops for my eyes, or at least a wet washcloth.

All of which were in the skinny closet in her and Dad's big bathroom.

"I'll get it," I mumbled, and felt my way down the hall to her room.

Her bed wasn't made--it never was--her clothes were all over the floor, including stuff I didn't really want to be seeing, but I finally made it to the mirror, saw myself in this colorblind way for the first time.

My acne looked different than I thought it had before. Worse, but also dialed back, if that makes sense? Like, more inverted, less eruptive?

This is the way I must have looked to at least one or two kids from school, right? They probably didn't even know it was different. That it wasn't real.

"Lotion, lotion..." I was saying, though. Eyedrops later, because my eyes didn't actually hurt. But, for right now, the... well, not the <u>pink</u> stuff anymore.

I rubbed it between my fingers, read the name twice on the bottle to be sure I wasn't messing up.

Calamine lotion, yep.

I breathed in once, twice, then deeper, and finally ripped my shirt away from my side, taking twenty or thirty grassburs and goatheads out all at once, fully expecting my blood to start sprinkling out, or at least welling up in all these new holes.

And maybe it was, I didn't have the heart to look in the mirror again.

That guy in <u>Gymkata</u> would have just grinned and borne this, I knew, and the officer in that other movie would have just had sex, with some cool music playing.

<u>Tolly Driver</u>, he fell to his knees, teeth clenched, eyes watering to beat the band, and then he collapsed face-first into his mom's walk-in closet, hitting his head on something hard and sharp, which kickstarted his second seizure in as many days. A real flopper, but one I was very present for.

Where anaphylactic shock is like my insides in revolt, my outsides just suffering the tremors of that, this was more like all my muscles were trying to clamp down at once, in an effort to shatter my bones.

My fingers creaked, my skin burned even more than it had been, my toes dug into the air, each of them writhing a different direction, which I didn't even know they could <u>do</u>, my knees popped in a deep way they never had, that was both satisfying and unsettling, and somewhere in there the calamine lotion spurted all up my chest, onto the bottom of my chin.

Mom was gonna kill me.

That was my last clear thought, I think.

My last clear vision was looking up to the wire hanger she'd hooked clothespins onto, so she could hang each of her belts there by the buckles.

It was a good idea. One I don't use now, though I guess I could.

No, I couldn't. I can't.

I buy all my pants and coveralls about a size smaller than I need.

And that was no accident what I said earlier, about beating the band. Here we go.

* * *

Lesley Cantor was a year behind me, and Shannon Larkweather was in my grade. In kindergarten the two of us had had to sign little contracts with Miss Edmundson that we wouldn't eat any more of her white glue, and in fourth and fifth grade I'd had a not-so-secret crush on her, and my sophomore year I'd sat rapt in the cafeteria once, listening to what was supposed to have been a firsthand account of getting to second base with her in the back row of the Sky-Vue.

As for Lesley Cantor, I'd always had the idea he might be gay. It wasn't something I would have ever said out loud, though, as this was Lamesa, Texas in 1989, right? I mean, forget the "Lamesa" part: this was <u>Texas</u>, never even mind the year. On every third truck there'd be little rebel flags as front license plates, and bigger ones in the back windows of trucks, and even, some weekends, real actual full-sized flags whipping from poles in the beds of trucks, like this was the Second Battle of Bull Run.

Not the most friendly place to be gay, or to have some color to your skin.

But I guess it was an all right place to go on a killing spree, yeah.

Tolly Driver, always part of the problem, never the solution.

If that wasn't on half the progress reports I brought home, it should have been.

And I'm not even to Shannon and Lesley yet, here.

After seizing up and stalling out on the floor of my mom's closet... I honestly can't say where I was. "How," either. Could be I locked into my last bad position like some medieval saint, and slobbered down into the carpet for... ten minutes? three hours? half the night?

My mom was sleeping in the living room the whole while, presumably. Definitely not finding her son in medical distress, anyway. If she had... well, there might be a lot of hospital staff in my final tally, I suppose.

You'd think that, dragging bodies behind you, at some point you wouldn't be able to keep moving, wouldn't you?

Not so.

They're all there, they never go away, but they're tin cans, they don't weigh anything. Just make a lot of noise, get the crowd looking over to this commotion passing by.

Just me, your friendly neighborhood slasher.

Don't mean to be flip—sorry. But going back and deleting on this machine, you can drink a coke between each blip of the green cursor.

Anyway, when the world tunneled down on me there on the floor of my mom's closet, all I took with me were her belts, hanging like vines above me. Not because I wanted them, but because I was falling, I was trying to hold on to whatever I could.

My next image after that is of the Fireworks Camper.

It was at least a mile and a half from my house.

I should explain it, too, this camper. I mean, every little town's got one, I imagine. But still. Up in the mountains, where the high schoolers go to hook up might be a hunting cabin back in the trees, right? One that eventually gets called "The Stabbin' Cabin," something like that. If your town's by the ocean, then... the beach, right? "The Clam Shack"? That's a bad example, though. I'm talking about places with walls.

Tornado Alley, say. Where cellars and shelters are necessary for survival, but not occupied twenty-four seven. Surely the local kids figured out that there's cots and privacy in the one or two of them they have access to, right?

That's what the Fireworks Camper was for Lamesa High. Just––I'd heard–– it was minus any sort of mattress.

For June and the first week of July, the Boosters would drag the camper here and there and make money hand over fist selling bottle rockets and Black Cats. The rest of the year, though? The rest of the year, that camper got put up on blocks by the grain elevator, its four bald tires rolled up into where the Boosters stood to sell fireworks.

The idea, I think, was that the tires would be in the way enough that nobody'd want to break in, use the camper for any non-Fourth activities. In addition to the tires, they'd parked the camper right up against a bent-up box car, so that the camper's retail flap or whatever it's called wouldn't open anymore until the next summer.

Wrong.

Had these Boosters even ever been teenagers?

Not two nights after the camper was supposed to be safe, right down to keeping the tires from weathering any more than they already were, some enterprising Golden Tornado had stepped across from the top of the box car box, onto the roof of the camper.

The vent in the top of the camper, that had a little arm on it you could crank from the inside, wasn't even locked. Probably because it was too narrow for a Booster to wriggle through.

It was just right for a lot of Lamesa High, though.

They came in pairs, holding hands, the guys––I'm guessing here––lowering the girls down first, then following behind, after one last look around, to be sure they had the camper all to themselves.

The windows already had plates bolted over them--can't have the merchandise walking away--so flashlights were the order of the day. There was even supposed to be a "No Candles!" sign in there, because it would leave a scent.

Not that there wasn't a scent already happening.

Amber and me imagined used condoms draped all over the interior, the flashlights showing the posters so that there were cartoon explosions on every background.

The drive-in was okay for some one-on-one action, sure, it was even kind of time-honored, a lot of us having been conceived there ourselves. For real privacy, though, it was the Fireworks Camper.

Because the camper was on cinderblocks, too, it was stable, wouldn't rock from all the rocking inside.

And I was standing about forty feet out from it, the grain elevator looming tall behind me.

The first thing I thought, just a knee-jerk reaction, was that it was finally happening, wasn't it? It was finally my turn in there. My time had come. And maybe this was what it was like for everyone, right? Maybe on the precipice of an act this monumental, all memory of how you got here just falls away. There's just you and this moment. Your head's already wiping away your other memories, so that this one has room to be the highest possible resolution. So that you can build benches around it to watch it again and again, from every possible angle, because this might not ever be happening again. Call it clarity of vision. A desire so singular, nothing else matters, a scene so timeless that all other time falls away.

A big reason I was pretty sure this was the case––that it was my turn at last–– was my breathing.

It wasn't just heavy, it was <u>heaving</u>.

I couldn't just feel my chest rising and falling, I could hear it through my whole head. The way, when you're a kid, you do all the deep breathing before this next "hold your head underwater"–contest? That's what I was doing.

But I was staring <u>out</u> of that, too.

The Fireworks Camper was the only thing in the world I had eyes for.

And, not my usual eyes, either.

Yes, the night was still washed out in that colorblind way that really made it brighter, gave everything more delineation, but--there was something restrictive on my vision, too. Well, on my sightline, maybe that's the way to say it?

Have you ever been to the carnival down at the fairgrounds, where you blow five of your dollars on sunglasses with lenses shaped like stars, or triangles?

That's the best way to explain this. There were angular cutouts around my eyes, so I was kind of studying the Fireworks Camper through a stop-sign shape, if that makes sense. Though I don't know if there were actually eight sides. Just, there were sharp lines of shadow impinging, and the angles they met at put me in mind of a stop sign.

Which, yes, might have been the last remnant of "Tolly Driver" whispering for this to please stop.

I wish.

I breathed in one more time, held it, and was about to step forward, into this, when a motion over in the weeds jerked my eyes over.

At first I couldn't even clock why I'd done that. It was just weeds, right? But then one of them shuddered a bit.

My right hand balled into a fist, but my face... it was only then that I realized my face was somehow different.

My left hand came up to inspect.

My right cheekbone was hard, and ridgy.

As wrong as it sounds, this was the most comforting thing I could imagine.

To me, masks had always been the wonderful thing about Halloween. Not because I got to be a monster or a president, but because, when I had this hard plastic or rubber over my face, then I was released from the burden of tracking what my lips were doing, how I was holding my cheeks, what was going on with my nose.

I could just be blank.

When I touched my face, realized that any expressions I made would be hidden from the world, my whole body relaxed.

I hope I'm explaining this so you can get how wonderful it was. Not all of this is going to be great, or even tolerable, but not having to show your face? That's the dream, for the Tolly Drivers of the world.

And, yes, drinking, that was another kind of mask, sure.

We all want to hide, don't we? To not have to be constantly navigating between our true self and people's expectations twenty-four seven?

Maybe that's why the marching-band kids did what they did, even: for the getups. Dressed identical to every other person on the field at halftime, they could sink into anonymity, be as wild and flamboyant as they wanted, then.

It's liberating, not having to be yourself, isn't it?

That was me, standing under the grain elevator. I just let my face go slack. It was a kind of empowerment I'd never really felt before.

And where I was focusing it all was on... I saw it probably ten seconds before I really should have, thanks to the way my eyes were working: a possum.

It was working its way through the stalks, about to cross the hardpack to some feeding or mating place it knew, I guessed.

But it stopped right before stepping out into the open.

It was too big for an owl to take, I was pretty sure, and it was nighttime, so, no hawks, but it was still nervous. Maybe because it hadn't <u>always</u> been too heavy for an owl? Or, maybe because coyotes are a very real thing in its world.

Probably that.

I'm guessing coyotes don't fall for the whole "I'm dead, don't eat me"-trick so much.

Anyway, I'm pretty sure I was hidden in the tall black form of the grain elevator. I'd picked this place to stand for a reason, I mean.

The possum edged out into the open, scuttling like they do--they move more like an armadillo than the giant rats they look like--but then, maybe ten feet out, it stopped, had gotten far enough that the grain elevator wasn't behind me any-more.

I opened my mouth to say something to it—like anybody was around to call me on this—but whatever I had on my face wouldn't let me.

Maybe <u>that</u> was why all the heavy breathing? My mouth was mostly covered, meaning I was having to learn to draw air in through my nose, and my nose only.

The possum shifted its weight back onto its haunches, then, so slowly, it rolled over onto its side and opened its deep mouthful of teeth wide, hissed.

I would say this was one predator acknowledging the bigger predator, except... what do possums even eat? I've seen them go after roadkill on the side of the road, but that has to be opportunity, not what they've been eating long before roads were even a thing.

Doesn't matter.

This possum was no threat.

I looked away from it like the nothing it was and stepped forward.

On the street behind me, a truck slammed past, its oversized tires whining on the asphalt, the sideglow from its headlights smearing my shadow out in front of me and then sucking it back behind, into the darkness.

Being a stone-cold killer, I didn't break stride.

* * *

Sorry for that break--I'm the only one here today, so I'm the one who has to deal with stuff.

You'd think it'd be different for a tried and true slasher, that we'd make our own rules, or live out in our cabins in the woods, licking our physical and emotional wounds, sharpening our implements, planning our next massacre.

Sorry, no.

Planning massacres doesn't buy you boxes of noodles at the gas station, and no matter how sharp you get your axe, nobody'll be impressed enough to let you trade that sharpness for a new pair of boots.

Well, okay, maybe if you plant that axe into the counter by the register. But that's not me.

And there's limitations, anyway. Not to what society will accept, but to what you can get away with.

I'll let Amber say all that, though.

Right now, I've got a couple of high schoolers to kill.

I was almost to the camper when that plastic bubble of a hatch on top of the camper slapped open.

Behind me, I could clearly... I want to say "hear," but this was different, more <u>Daredevil</u>-y, like I had radar on my surroundings.

The possum was booking it for the ditch on the other side of the clearing.

I wasn't there for the possum, though.

That little hatch in the top of the camper opening like it had, unhooked from its metal arm, it was making my blood feel like it was boiling.

I think <u>rage</u> is the word, but that one syllable doesn't quite cover how allconsuming this feeling was.

A very non-human shape was slithering up from the camper. My first thought, because of how casual and fluffy it was, was that it was Osh Kosh, Amber's llama, periscoping around.

Except he couldn't have possibly gotten into that camper. And he'd have no reason to. And he was out at Amber's anyway, locked behind the gate with the pigs. But then that casual, almost playful fluffiness resolved into a duster, like for dusting glass knick-knacks on a shelf, which made it settle in my head: a marching-band hat.

My breath came back heavier than before.

After the hat, Shannon Larkweather hauled herself up. And she was <u>laughing</u>.

"Turn the light off, turn the light off?" she said, rolling to the side.

The top of her marching-band uniform was unbuttoned, her pale skin flashing through.

She stood to have room to button it.

When she cinched her belt, the contrast no colors gave me let me see that it was an everyday belt, not a costume one, and I felt this in my chest like a spike, nearly had to fall to my knees.

Then Lesley Cantor's head prairie-dogged up.

"Did you get the wrapper?" Shannon said down to him.

He whole-body sighed, dropped back down.

Not-gay, I registered.

The instant after he was back in the camper to collect the evidence, Shannon was sliding off the rounded top, trusting there was no sharp equipment below.

She had to come down to one hand to absorb the impact, but she hardly slowed down.

And she wasn't looking behind her, where I most obviously was.

She was already stepping purposefully ahead, to the side of the trailer, and slapping it hard with her palm.

"The cops, the cops!" she screamed, smiling at the wonderfulness of this joke.

I cocked my head over to the side, and my vision sharpened from that, as if it was like "focus" was a fluid and I was sloshing it over to the good part of my eyes? That's the best way I can explain it.

It made the night even brighter, like Shannon was in a spotlight. This was that contrasty way of seeing through the darkness that had happened in my backyard. Except now it wasn't bowling me over.

It took me five deliberate steps to reach Shannon.

At the last moment, the possum in her must have sensed me: she started to crank her head back.

It didn't matter.

My right arm was already straight, and I had momentum, or inertia whichever it is you use like weight, rolling inexorably, unstoppably ahead.

Like I was saying earlier, I didn't even really go 140.

Given a little build-up, though, a little speed from walking and... 135 was enough: I slammed Shannon's head into the aluminum side of the Fireworks Camper. Deep enough to leave a real dent. Not in the shape of her face––I don't think noses and cheekbones hold together well enough for any action like that––but in the rough shape of a <u>head</u>, anyway. That didn't quite kill her, though.

"Shit, take it easy already!" Lesley called out from inside the camper.

I drew Shannon's head back, got a better grip, and slammed her again, this time against the ridge on the right side of the dent she'd already made.

When the blood splashed out, it wasn't just gloriously red, it was radioactive, at least in my vision.

I thought that was a color I didn't have access to anymore, but now that I was seeing it in its most pure form, I understood that it wasn't about rods and cones, or wavelengths, it was about <u>this</u> particular red being the only one worth studying.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't want to lick it or eat it or anything. Just, it was so perfect, right? It was divine. It was the truth under every flap of skin, coursing through every internal organ. It was what love and happiness and probably even sunlight were made of.

For probably too long--this was my first time--I just stared at this wondrous substance.

But then Shannon squirmed, groaned a bit.

I took a step back, loading our weight on my right leg, and used that to surge her forward into the camper again, the hardest yet.

This time when I let her go, she crumpled.

An instinct I didn't know I had told me to watch her. To wait.

She twitched about three times—well, her left foot did—and then her eyes went sort of glassy, I guess you could say? One of them was bloodshot, of course, but the other was still glistening. It stared into the dead space under the trailer, would never look anywhere else again.

I didn't smile, but the feeling in my chest was <u>like</u> a smile, you could say. The rage ebbed a bit, momentarily sated.

"What the hell?" Lesley said then.

He was standing above me, on top of the camper.

I looked up to him, he studied me like trying to decode me, and then he turned, was gone.

For a slice of an instant, I listened for if he was dropping back inside, to wrap himself safe, in aluminum.

Nope.

My strides long, I crashed silently through the weeds, rounded the camper and then the box car.

Lesley was already down, scrambling away.

In one hand he was holding his band hat, and his soldier-jacket or whatever they're called was flapping to either side, which in a dim way conjured Michael Jackson for me, and his other hand was holding his marching-band pants up.

I just watched him retreat.

When he crashed into the same weeds the possum had been birthed from, I finally stepped forward all at once, and then... <u>around</u> to the far side of the grain elevator. It felt like the longest of long shots that he'd be coming that way instead of all the other ways he could have gone, but it also rang with truth, like where else would he even <u>go</u>?

"Anywhere," you want to say.

Me too.

The night was his. He had the jump, he had terror to drive his legs faster and faster, and I couldn't be everywhere at once.

When there's no boundaries hemming you in, then it should be a snap to get away. Add to this the distinct fact that no way was I going to run, and... Lesley should have been able to disappear in just about any direction he chose.

Yet?

What he was choosing was to run around the grain elevator, like he <u>wanted</u> me to meet him on the other side.

As for why I wasn't going to stoop so far as to actually <u>run</u>, part of it was that, in my mask, breathing was sort of a chore. I could pass out, I mean. And with my vision limited like it was, I might impale myself on a derelict knifing rig, or fall into a rusted knot of rebar and concrete.

Which are just rationalizations, I guess.

Really, how I knew I wasn't going to run was that I didn't have to. Why run when I could just walk over to where Lesley was going?

When he rounded the side of the grain elevator, his hand staying in touch with that rough concrete because it was dark-dark, he didn't see me standing by the utility pole directly ahead of him. He only had eyes for Lynn, and how its blacktop and headlights had to mean safety.

I snapped my right hand down, and something slapped the top of the weeds. Something loose, and limber.

When Lesley angled his shoulders to swerve around the utility pole, I whipped my right hand forward, and the black strap I was holding snapped around his head.

I caught the fast end of that in my other hand.

The splintery pole was between Lesley and me, now.

With one quick jerk, I slammed him to it.

His hands came up to push this strap off, let him escape out into the night again, but I was already pulling.

Were I a full-sized slasher, I probably could have just muscled Lesley dead, here. Applied pressure with my arms until his skull cracked wetly.

I was only seventeen, though.

What I had to do instead was lean back with everything I have, and then walk my booted feet up the utility pole.

My last name is "Driver," right? If any of my ancestors <u>had</u> been an ox driver or whatever, then me leaning back on the reins here—he'd probably be proud, to be seeing me carry on the family tradition.

It took Lesley about ninety seconds to die. And by "die" I mean that black strap--the <u>belt</u>--was across his open mouth.

Slowly, by degrees, it dug deeper and deeper.

His cheeks were more elastic than you'd think, but bone is bone: his head slowly, ever so slowly, split on the horizontal, and all I could think of was the horizontal tracking I'd started the night with, trying to get <u>An Officer and a</u> <u>Gentleman</u> to behave properly.

I was neither an officer nor a gentleman, here.

When Lesley quit jerking, I dropped down, landing on both feet, of course. Slashers and cats, we both have perfect balance.

I reeled the belt back in, held the buckle in my right hand and pulled it fast through the clamp of the fingers on my left hand, wiping off what blood I could. I was still studying that deep, wonderful redness in the moonlight when a long honk over on the road pulled my eyes that direction.

It was the possum, scuttling across the lanes.

<u>Go</u>, I either said deep in my head, simpled down as I was, or that's what I, seventeen years later, want to have said.

I'd like something to live through this night, anyway.

Sunday Morning Coming Down

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I should talk about distance some, here, since it matters.

From our house at South 13th and K to the grain elevator over on Lynn, it was... a couple miles? I'm using the past tense because I'm not sure if my mom lives where we used to or not. Did the place have too many ghosts, after 1989? Was it hard for her to walk through the living room and remember me doing half-assed karate kicks in front of the console television? Does it hurt to remember the hustle and bustle of a weekday morning, her and me and my dad all trying to get out of the house on time?

Anyway, walking in the same line a crow might fly, from my house to the grain elevator, I'd skirt a few houses, I'd jump a few fences I hoped weren't hiding dogs, but it was mostly the park with all its giant trees and then one cotton field that was in CRP that year-being "conserved" so it would be better some later year, not get used up all at once, starting another Dust Bowl.

If you think of that line between my house and the grain elevator like the tilted-up-on-the-right base of a triangle, and the side walls of that triangle can be about the same length as the base, then the point's up at the high school, and inside that triangle's the square, with the hardware store just off it.

What I'm saying is that it all was walkable.

Amber's place too... depending how desperate you were. I mean, any place in Lamesa's basically walkable, but what I'm saying is that Amber, out on Airport Road, was outside that triangle. Her family farmed, so had to have a few acres around the house to park equipment and stack farm-sale finds, and basically start their own junkyard by dragging all the broke-down trucks and tractors and equipment twenty or thirty yards into the weeds, letting their tires rot off, their seats become home to generations of rats. Let's say it was about two miles from the grain elevator to her place? Reason I don't know the exact mileage is that the grain elevator wasn't exactly the starting place for all our weekend excursions. Start me at the carwash, though, and I can have it down to inches, probably.

Talking bigger picture, though—and this goes for anyone who came up in Lamesa—you could blindfold me, dump me out the back of a truck anywhere in town, and I'd still know exactly where I was, even at night.

Anyway, to back up: the grain elevator was a good walk from my house, cool?

I'm saying all this so it might can make sense when I tell you that I don't remember getting to the grain elevator that night. But, would I? I don't think I'd ever made that specific walk, with those silos as my destination—there was no reason in the world to go there—but I had hoofed it from Amber's place to mine a few times, and the grain elevator would kind of be the high point in the middle of that walk.

So, and mostly because I think I'd remember the heart-racingness of having taken my mom's car without permission, I must have walked it that night? I was just suddenly standing at the Fireworks Camper.

As for my memories of what I did to Lesley and Shannon--why can't <u>that</u> be what I get to forget? I would much rather recall walking through the dark park than standing against that utility pole, a buckle in one hand, the tongue of that belt in the other, its strappy middle slowly bisecting Lesley's face, and then giving all at once with a crunchy wetness.

I know I wrote all that down the same way I did the party and all that, too, but... this, it's trickier to get across.

It wasn't the same?

Before that night, when I said "I," I meant me, Tolly Driver, kid-genius, someday superstar, all around smart-ass and heavy drinker on the weekends.

The way I was when I came to by the grain elevator, though--the best way I can explain it? Do you remember that video game <u>Duck Hunter</u>? It was on Nintendo, which I had gotten for Christmas a couple of years before--a family gift from Santa, because it cost so much it ate up what Mom and Dad would have got. But <u>Duck Hunter</u> is where, instead of a joystick, you have an actual plastic gun in your hand, that's somehow having it's position tracked. Or maybe it was shooting an infrared beam, I don't know. Doesn't matter. You were supposed to sit back a few feet from the screen of your television and, when the ducks puttered up from those hedges, you aimed, aimed, and blasted them.

Whenever you hit one, the way they died mid-air made them look like they'd been flying up against a glass wall and your bullet was mashing them into it, making their eyes bulge up like on <u>Dig Dug</u>, when you put your footpump on a bad guy.

Thing was, though, if you sat a little closer than a few feet, the ducks were a lot easier to hit.

My method was holding the business end of that plastic gun right up against the screen. My dad swore that he'd tan my hide if I scratched the television, but that just made it more exciting.

What I'm getting at here, it's that looking over the back of that Buck Rogers pistol held right up against the screen, that's what it felt like, doing what I did to Lesley and Shannon. Like I was there, physically present, but like I was sort of inside a deep sea diver suit or something. One I was sort of in control of, but not really?

It sounds like I'm trying to say this wasn't my fault, I know.

That's not what I'm getting at.

Maybe rabies is a better explanation. Don't dogs that catch it kind of become riders in their own bodies? Like, there's some rational part of them thinking that this is weird, being afraid of water. And all this foaming at the mouth stuff. And they don't exactly <u>want</u> to attack their owner or another dog or that random person, but... they have to, don't they?

It's not them, it's the virus.

If the dog just crawled under the porch and suffered alone and died there, then the virus isn't satisfied, right?

That's how it was with me.

I could see what I was doing, but I was kind of like a rider, you could say. The infection was using my brain to coordinate this attack, and I was aware of each moment--well, when it got intense, I was--but... could I have stopped it?

I honestly don't know.

If I were just trying to shift this blame to something else, someone else, I wouldn't say that, I don't think.

Could I have stepped out into the road to herd that possum across, got slapped by a truck, and ended all this?

Could I have <u>not</u> killed all these kids, I'm saying? <u>Not</u> ruined all these families, broken my mom's heart, lost my best friend?

No, I wasn't myself. Not really.

That's no absolution, though.

For what I've done--just even for what I did that first night--I deserve no forgiveness.

It was me, Mom.

Amber, I did it.

Lamesa, you know my name.

Lesley, Shannon... I'm sorry?

You were just off summer marching-band practice, I guess, which I didn't even know was a thing.

All you were looking for in the Fireworks Camper that night is what every high schooler's after: a little paradise by the dashboard lights. Some front page drive-in news. To be a Monday morning celebrity.

It was summer, though, wasn't it? It was summer, and the two of you would be long buried by the time fall semester rolled around.

I don't even know if either of you ever knew it was me doing all that to you.

Did you? Could you recognize my eyes? Shannon, did you remember the two of us eating that white glue so long ago?

I know how long it takes to die from the outside–as in, watching someone's lights go off, that's something I've seen.

What's it like on the inside, though?

I know time slows when you're in a car wreck, all that, like this handful of seconds are slicing themselves into instant after instant, so you're sure to remember every possible detail, but... I bet that's what it's like dying, too. I bet your mind, trying to hold on to that last little tatter of life it can, it pretty much stops the world from turning, so you can kind of live forever in those last moments.

Did the two of you, in your heads, retreat back to homecoming the year before, when Mr. Hazelwood--the big surprise of the night--let you play Bonnie Tyler, and everybody in the stands stood up just from magic, and sang along?

If you did, then please remember me like that, if you can: just one face of a couple hundred, his eyes watering in the most embarrassing way, his lips moving with the words, and not like church, where you just mouth the hymn, but giving it voice too, because he understands what it's like to be living in a powder keg but giving off sparks.

Something in him knows that his life can also blow up with one tractor in the road. With one drop of blood arcing across a backyard.

Speaking of church, too: it was Sunday morning. I'd just killed two of my longtime classmates, and in the worst way.

And when I looked up to what rough, wet thing was happening to my face, to the inside of my nose and the roof of my mouth, a giant pair of eyes were looking back into mine.

They blinked once and I screamed, scrambled to my feet, and ran smack into the side of Amber's dad's barn.

* * *

Ten minutes later I'm sitting at Amber's breakfast table, one hand under my shirt, exploring the flakes of calamine lotion that spill out with every movement. Because Amber's house wasn't as cramped as ours, they had room for a fourlegged, fold-up table between the stove and refrigerator, and then a more solid table in the dining room part of the big mostly sunken living room. They never ate there, though. Maybe for Thanksgiving, I guess. Families, where they live is the kitchen, right? Sitting at a small table, you're closer to each other. And you don't feel like you need to put a suit on, use all the right manners.

Amber's mom had given me a folded-twice wet washcloth to hold over my eyes, and she'd already dabbed monkey's blood onto the little cut on my forehead, "Because it looks <u>infected</u>."

Right you were, Mrs. Dennison.

It was her dad who'd hauled me in by the scruff of my neck, his twenty-gauge in his other hand, his nostrils flared, thinking I'd slept drunk on his property half the night.

It was Osh Kosh the curious llama who'd snuffled me awake.

Seventeen years later, too? I can still dial right back to the uneasy feeling I had at the table that morning, holding that wet washcloth to my head but looking out from under it, at the llama stationed on the other side of the kitchen window, his ears radar'd in on me, his lips quirked, his all too human eyes locked back on mine. I guess when you lick the smooth cavity of someone's sinuses, that bonds you at the soul.

What Mrs. Dennison had told me about Amber was that she'd be down in a moment, which is mom-code for she wasn't presentable for guests, I was pretty sure.

Wrong, Tolly.

Five minutes into my recovery, Mrs. Dennison futzing around in the utility room behind me, where she could be sure to keep me in sight, Amber drifted down, her nose in a... <u>book</u>?

I'm not saying Amber couldn't read, but she was also the girl who, when called on in class, gambled that <u>Of Mice and Men</u> was "an epic novel about an exterminator, kind of like the human version of Tom & Jerry."

<u>My</u> guess, watching her cross the back of the living room, was that her dad must have found a beer bottle in the bed of her truck, so now she was having to pay that offense down by passing the only class she had a snowball's chance in: English.

Except, once she was to the kitchen table and plunking the book down, it was... an encyclopedia?

"<u>Challenger</u> in there, what?" I said, trying to be quiet enough her mom wouldn't hear.

In eighth grade, we'd all gathered in the library to watch the TV-on-a-cart, because a teacher was going to space.

And, as it turned out, not coming back.

It was the only interesting thing I could imagine might be in an encyclopedia. Except, now that I think about it, those encyclopedias had been in the shelves behind their TV set since elementary, well before <u>Challenger</u>.

"Just catching up on some stuff," Amber told me, neatly shutting the encyclopedia on an envelope she was using as book-mark.

"Hungry, dear?" Mrs. Dennison asked Amber, announcing herself as "in the kitchen" now.

"Sure," Amber said for both of us, and twenty minutes later we were eating frybread with butter and honey on it, a delicacy I only ever had at Amber's, and haven't had since that morning.

Amber didn't eat all hers, though.

I could feel her watching me. Trying to figure me out.

"What?" I finally had to ask.

"You slept out there?" she said, like trying to make my behavior make sense.

"Snakes, dogs," Mrs. Dennison tsk-tsk'd.

"Scorpions, spiders," Amber added.

"I tried knocking on your window," I weak-sistered out, but it had to be the most obvious lie: Amber's bed is right under her window. And, to be honest, I had zero point zero memory of anything after... what happened to Lesley. It was like I'd taken one step away and onto a landmine, which had blasted me all the way across town, plopped me down by Amber's dad's barn.

Mrs. Dennison whisked Amber's half-eaten frybread away, held it out the back door. Osh Kosh delicately took it from her, using his lips like a camel might--as these prehensile things. The way he raised his eyebrows to do this, like he was being polite, was wholly unnerving.

"You spoil him," Amber said across to her mom.

"He's not made for this country," Mrs. Dennison said back, her voice going kind of sing-song like it did sometimes—how she used to talk, before marrying white. "He deserves something good."

"Thought you were watching movies with your mom last night?" Amber said to me, her fingers laced together on the table.

"We did, yeah," I said back, trying to signal with my eyes that this wasn't the whole and complete story.

Amber considered this, as well as our current location, and its lack of privacy. Even the llama was listening, I mean.

"Going outside, Mom," she announced, standing all at once, scraping her chair back.

I stood too, got a headrush from it, had to go fingertip-to-tabletop to keep from keeling over on their linoleum floor. Pale pink flakes were raining down off my lap, to be a mystery for Amber's mom later.

"Sure you're all right, Tolly?" she asked from the sink.

I handed her the washcloth, nodded because I didn't trust my voice not to crack, and, following Amber out the screen door, I saw there were some rolled papers shoved into her back pocket—no, not papers, a booklet. Our pre-algebra workbook.

So she could solve for X.

"So you're going to college now, what?" I said, out of earshot of the house, reaching forward to pluck the workbook from her pocket.

Amber reached back, snatched it from me without looking, like her fingers had eyes.

"My brother says the Army's not like the recruiter told him," she said by way of algebra-explanation.

"So now you've got <u>plans</u>," I said with my detective voice, leaning down to scoop up a pig-rock. Meaning, a rock to sling at a pig if it came charging. Giving me heart attacks was their main fun thing to do, I think.

"Dad locked them up again," Amber told me, about the rock I wouldn't be needing. "And, yeah, I can't just stay around here forever. I'm not going to work at the feedstore, Tolly."

"'Tolly," I repeated, tasting my whole name, like that extra syllable was a burden. "What's up with you, Ambs? You're--don't take this wrong. But you're acting like her, a little." "Her-who?" she asked.

"Stace Goodkin?"

"The one who saved your life Friday night, you mean?" She turned to me, still walking backwards. "That so bad?"

"It's just——" I started, then reached forward to grab the shoulder of Amber's shirt: she was about to step on a baby bird.

"Oh, oh," she said, and almost reached down for it, except we all knew the rules: if the momma bird smells human hands on her fuzzy baby, then she stops taking care of it. "Do you...?" she asked, snapping her fingers.

"What?" I asked, rabbit-earring my front pockets out. "Have I ever carried a handkerchief? This isn't 1920, is it?"

"No, just," she said, touching her left wrist with the fingertips of her right hand, and I got it: back then, to try to be like Vince Neil and Bret Michaels, I'd sometimes wrap bandannas around my wrists. They'd remind me throughout the school day that my heart was somewhere else, somewhere better.

I shook my head no, not today.

Today my heart was right here with me.

"Don't look," she said, and turned around, slithered out of her bra in that one-arm-disappears-at-a-time way girls can do.

She shook her shoulders after the maneuver, getting her shirt to settle different, I guess, and I warned myself to not not <u>not</u> look at her chest.

Using one of the cups of her tan bra, she scooped the baby bird up, cradled it so gently, cooing sweet nothings to it.

Because I was trying so hard to be a good person, not look even in her general direction, where I ended up looking was back to the Amber I <u>used</u> to know. The one who got swatted for her and me throwing chickens in with the pigs, just to watch the almost instant destruction: pigs 10, chickens 0. Though they did get a bonus point because one of them had, when the pig snout's found it, squeezed out this egg that wasn't ready for primetime yet. Its shell was still see-through. At least until one of the other pigs snuffled it up.

I'm not saying that Amber would have stepped on this baby bird or anything--c'mon--but <u>that</u> Amber understood how the world worked, anyway. That Amber knew it wasn't fourth grade anymore. You can't keep a bird

in a shoebox under your bed and feed it with an eyedropper until the day its family comes back for it.

That other Amber would have looked over to the one-eyed, bent-tailed, heavy-teated cat watching all this from the cage of a springtooth harrow, and understood that we'd walked into the middle of something, here, and should probably just keep walking, let nature run its bloody course.

Instead, I sat back on a toolbar for the next ten minutes while Amber tended to this bird in the kitchen.

"So you're bird-Jesus now?" I asked when she finally bounced back out, moving her shoulders again--different bra.

"It was going to die," she said back to me, like that was all the explanation necessary.

"You're sure the pigs are locked up?" I asked when she lit off the way we'd been going, into the taller weeds and rustier equipment.

"I'm supposed to give you a ride home," she called back. "But... I don't have to, yeah? I mean, you could always <u>walk</u>?"

"I'm good with ether," I said, trying not to smile for having said it.

Amber did, though. Even turned around to flash it wide, show that we were good.

<u>I'm good with ether</u> had been my dad's joke, ever since my mom's truck always needed starting fluid in winter, to get going. From the breakfast table he'd say, in the truck's voice, that he was good with <u>ether</u>, Tolly, which was my cue to get my jacket on, take the spray can out, get the truck going. But I'd stolen that bit for myself since the accident, was always trying to find a place to work it in it's how I was keeping him around. Kids of dead fathers, we'll go to all kinds of lengths to still have a dad, don't we?

"Don't worry, I'll drive you," Amber said, leaning over to shoulder into me. "Wouldn't be able to get anything done anyway, thinking of you sadsacking it all the way into town."

"Least I don't have to ride with your dad," I said.

"He's not that bad."

"Unless you're his only daughter's friend, and not a girl," I added. She shrugged, couldn't deny that, but... I stopped, looked around. Her dad's tall one-ton supercab wasn't around.

"He's going to see my mom again, isn't he?" I realized all at once, out loud.

Amber shrugged it true: her dad was swinging by the hardware store to tell on me. For my own good. And so I wouldn't pull his daughter down.

"She's probably wanting those, think?" Amber said, to the edge of the pens now--where they first tried to keep Osh Kosh. It was where I'd slept last night, after that landmine blew me all the way over here from the grain elevator. From the scene of my crimes.

"She might, yeah," I had to say, about what Amber meant: scattered all under the tall yellow grass I'd bedded down in--my body shape still right there-were... maybe six or eight of my mom's belts?

On second inspection, it was probably all of them. She'd never gone for girly stuff, so there were no rhinestones, no red leather, no fancy tooling. Just different widths of utilitarian black, some tooled Western, some just blank and cracking like a strop.

"What's up with <u>you</u>, fancy dresser," Amber said, watching these belts like they were a nest of sleeping snakes and she didn't want one waking, slithering her way.

"I should probably show you something too," I said, and couldn't help but look to the left, to the idea of the grain elevator, and the two bodies I'd left there.

* * *

On the slow way into town--you don't put your foot in it on a Sunday, that's probably in the Bible--I patted the dashboard, told Amber to hook it left on Flint instead of going all the way up to Lynn.

Amber did it without question, of course--you always listen to your navigator--but she looked question marks over at me about it, too. I was taking us into a neighborhood? Why?

"That's why," I said, and chucked my chin at her rearview.

She narrowed her eyes into the mirror, and then bared her teeth about the police car scooting up the road we'd just been on.

"You have contraband on you, what?" Amber asked.

"Just––it's a <u>cop</u>," I said.

"How'd you know, though?"

I shrugged.

"They after you, Tol?" she asked--it felt so good for her to say my name like that.

"Not yet, I don't think," I mumbled, and when I didn't elect to add anything to that, Amber followed the turns I told her, until residential spit us up at the cotton warehouses. Before everybody figured out the Fireworks Camper, the cotton warehouses had kind of been the place. They cover acres and acres, have nooks and crannies that go for days, some of them high up near the ceiling.

But of course somebody left a cigarette burning one night. It didn't quite start a fire, didn't quite burn down the already struggling livelihood of probably half the families in town. But it could have. So the high school and junior highers were all warned off over the PA at school, and the town cops were supposed to be cruising through there on the regular, shining their dummy lights high and low, and calling about any cars or trucks that didn't have any reason to be parked in the area.

From where Amber's Rabbit was, the grain elevator was right behind the warehouses like some sort of concrete giant. Back then I didn't know cheapie Gothic thrillers, but in the seventeen years since then, I've familiarized myself night after night, and, believe me, if any of those books had been set in Lamesa, Texas, then the grain elevator would have been the spooky place on the hill, with fog always drifting around its base, and some woman in a sheer nightgown running away.

"<u>That's</u> where we're going?" Amber asked, probably from the way I'd cringed slightly back into my seat.

"I don't think I want to anymore," I said. "Can we just--can we run away instead? Far, far away?"

"What about graduation?" Amber asked back. "What about senior year?"

Looking back––God, it hurts. Amber didn't say <u>no</u> here, did she? I mean, she knew I was joking, sure, she could tell, but still. What if we had? Or, <u>could</u> we have?

Probably not.

"Is that bird going to be all right, you think?" I asked, sneaking a look across the cab to her.

"Have any of them ever been all right in the history of the whole world?" Amber asked back.

I had to shake my head no.

"But you'll try, won't you?" I said. "You'll try to save it?"

"I'll fu––I'll stay up all night with it," Amber said. "I'll give it mouth to beak, whatever it takes."

I nodded, could tell she was all in on saving this baby bird.

Why'd she skipped the cussword that came so natural to her, though? Amber didn't curse like a sailor or anything, but, outside parents' and teachers' hearing, she could damn sure make a guy blush.

"Wish you would have been here last night," I said, barely passing enough air through my throat to make my vocal cords vibrate with the words.

She didn't even ask, just sort of hugged her steering wheel to her chest in that way you do where you're making it a pillow for the side of your face.

It left her looking right at me, right into my soul.

"You saw him too, at Deek's," I finally said. "Justin."

Justin Joss.

"You told your mom?" Amber asked, not even being mean about it.

I shook my head no, said, "Just--do you think he was really in there? Like, controlling what he was doing?"

"Who else could it have been?"

I didn't exactly have this all thought out, so much.

"You're the one who watches the movies," I told her. "You tell me."

"He was there for revenge, for justice," Amber said, obviously.

"So that was what was making him do all that?"

"<u>Making</u>?"

"What if he was in there, but not so much... in control? You knew him, didn't you? Was he like that? Would he have done that?"

"They killed him, Tol."

"So he's pissed. Getting killed would do that. But--how many other times had people done shit to him?"

"Getting your pants pulled down in the cafeteria isn't the same as--"

"Okay, bad example, bad example." I chocked my knees up on the Rabbit's dash, shoved my fingers back through my hair. "What I'm saying--he wouldn't have killed Deek and them in return, would he have? He'd have sulked around like he always did. And then when they said they were sorry... he would have done what he always did, wouldn't he have?"

"Said it was nothing," Amber said, finally following.

"And then puppydogged around like he was finally part of the group," I added.

Amber nodded with this, shrugged.

"You're saying that wasn't him?" she asked.

"It <u>was</u> him," I said right back. "But it also wasn't."

"You make great sense, Tolly Driver."

"I know--<u>shit</u>!"

I slammed my feet down to the floorboard, shaking the whole truck.

"Sorry," I said.

"You were going to show me something?" Amber asked, holding the clutch in.

I nodded ahead, and she jerked forward harder than she meant--first gear in the Rabbit was <u>low</u>--stomped the brakes, and... my seat slid forward one more time.

I closed my eyes against the coming windshield and my head right above my hairline thunked off it.

It was enough that a thin line of blood dribbled down into my right eye. Out of the previous starburst in my skin.

"Sorry," Amber mumbled, and patted around for something to wipe it with.

"Think we already established this isn't 1920," I said, and she grinned, I had to as well, and she eased us up to the grain elevator.

We were on the sun side, so it was bright.

And there were no buzzards floating around?

"Have you heard from Shannon and Lesley today?" I asked, grimacing from even just the sound of their names. "Shannon <u>Larkweather</u>?" Amber asked. "Why would I ever hear from her <u>or</u> Les?"

Fair enough.

"You won't be, that's what I'm saying," I told her, and popped the door, stood up into the day.

Amber followed, squinting from how harsh the light was.

I tried to focus all my senses on the careless weeds to see if that possum made it back, but the world was in color again, and not nearly so loud. One thing I hadn't clocked in the dark, though, was that some of the careless weeds were showing their pink roots. Out pumping with my dad, he'd told me what that meant: it was dry enough that the rabbits were thirsty, going for whatever water they could find, or dig up.

He'd also told me about being a kid and helping his friend Martino's family collect mesquite beans, to let the cattle eat them. And how he also learned from Martino to use a torch to burn the spines off cactus, so the cows could get the water they needed that way.

West Texas, man. I both do and don't miss it, I guess.

It's not an easy place to try to hack a living out, but I think your heart only ever knows a single place, too.

You're my place, Lamesa.

I'm so sorry.

"Well, can't say that's exactly breaking my heart..." Amber said, about Shannon and Lesley never going to call her.

I shut my door and she shut hers and they shut together both at once, like some kind of sign.

It was so quiet. The grain elevator was soaking all the sound in.

"I was here last night," I said, looking over to catch Amber's eye about this.

"Coming to my place?" she asked back.

"Sort of?" I threw my chin over to the Fireworks Camper. "Shannon and Lesley were... you know."

Amber looked from the camper to me and then back again, trying to make this make sense.

"Shannon and Lesley?" she finally said.

"I guess they were together?"

Instead of pushing me on my past tense, Amber landed on "together." She covered her snigger with her hand, said, "Are you blind <u>and</u> dumb, Tol?"

"No, I saw, they--"

"He was doing her <u>hair</u>, you mean?" Amber said, and looked around, stepped right up into my face. "Lesley is Jack Tripper, don't you know?"

"I thought so too, yeah," I said, backing away from this assault. "And-wrong tense."

"Wrong te--<u>what</u>?"

"He's dead," I finally got out. "I––it was me, Ambs. I did it. Shannon too. Right here."

Amber turned around, pissed, and glared up at the grain elevator.

"So if you walked from your place to mine last night, you probably were here, I'll give you that."

"Yeah, but--"

"And, I can buy that some idiots who don't care about their future were making use of the camper, <u>fine</u>. It's a free world, idiots can do whatever they want, you can't stop them."

"I slammed her--"

"No, just shut up, you don't even know, Tolly. Yesterday you got hit by a <u>truck</u>. You were knocked <u>out</u>. And--tell me I'm lying. You're still afraid of the dark, aren't you?"

I licked my top lip, looked away.

"You are. And you're out walking <u>in</u> the dark, and your brain's been rattled. Do you know what a concussion even <u>is</u>? It can... it can make you see things, it can make you remember things wrong."

What I hadn't told her yet, and wouldn't: that wet washcloth her mom had given me, for my forehead? When I handed it back, it was bloody, some. But not so much on the side that had been pressed against that little starburst.

It was blooming red from what had been dried between my fingers.

"Can it do <u>this</u>?" I said, and took Amber by the hand, dragged her towards the camper. Which was like three truck lengths away, meaning I kind of said my big line too early, but screw it. We got there eventually. I waded into the weeds, pulling Amber along, and right when I expected to step onto Shannon's open-eyed corpse...

She wasn't there.

"Do what, Tol?" Amber asked.

I let her hand trail out of mine.

"No, no, she was right here..." I was muttering, kicking through the rest of the weeds, which eventually earned me a crack on the shin, from an old wheel with the rubber mostly rotted off.

I winced, had to hop around on one leg to hold my other with my hands. Me and walking into shit, right?

Amber was just watching.

"We need to get you to the doctor," she said.

"No," I said, putting my still-on-fire leg back down. "I––I––right here!" I was pointing to the dent in the trailer.

There were a few drowsy flies buzzing around the dried blood still there.

"What?" Amber said, stepping in, but not too close--it was gross.

"Blood," I told her, triumphantly.

"Says you."

I hacked up what spit I could into my mouth, tried to spit on the blood to redden it back up, prove it was what it was, but I missed.

One of the flies crawled over to my bubble of white spit.

"Listen, this has been fun and all," Amber led off. To my back. Because I was already striding over to the grain elevator.

I was waiting at the utility pole when Amber caught up, her footfalls still resonating on the scale.

"This is where... Lesley," I said, presenting the pole to her.

She looked from me to it, then walked all the way around it, inspecting.

"I don't get it," she finally said.

"Here, like this," I said, placing her back against the pole so she was facing the road. I whipped my belt off, slung it around, caught the tongue with my other hand. "Except it was in his mouth."

"This is the belt you wear when you stand at urinals?" Amber said, slithering out of this situation, only touching my belt with the tippiest tips of her fingers. I was having to hold my pants up, now.

"He was right here, Ambs. Promise. Swear on... on my <u>dad</u>."

This changed everything. It serioused the morning right down.

Amber wasn't smiling anymore. This was no longer fun.

"Take that back," she said.

"No, he was--"

"Take it back!" she said, stepping forward, taking me by both shoulders and slamming me against the grain elevator. "Tolly, you were dreaming! When you figure that out, you're—you're going to feel so bad, you're..."

The reason she couldn't finish was her voice was breaking, her eyes were hot and watering.

She was trying to save me, here, I know. In her way, she loved me, she only wanted what was best for me.

You'd do anything for your best friend, wouldn't you?

"<u>I swear on my dad</u>," I said again, quieter because she was right there and I wanted her to know I wasn't just making this up, and she backed up like, for the first time, she was either afraid <u>of</u> me, or afraid <u>for</u> me, I couldn't tell, and still can't.

Either track, I mean.

And, this is the moment in this Sunday morning when Sheriff Burke's car, evidently right behind Amber, chirped its horn, straightening Amber's back.

Me?

Guilty party that I was, I raised my hands.

My pants, of course, fell immediately down.

Just another day in the life of high school Tolly Driver.

* * *

Maybe six seconds later-probably less, because she was running at the speed of motherhood--my mom was hugging my neck so hard I thought I might black out all over again.

She'd been riding around with Sheriff Burke. To find me. Meaning Amber's dad <u>hadn't</u> told her I was safe yet?

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I kept blubbering, because I was sort of crying, yes. It's what you do when your mom's like that, I don't know why.

"He's... I think it's his concussion," I heard Amber saying.

My mom held me at arm's length, studied my pupils to be sure they were even, like she always did.

"Where were you?" she said.

"My place," Amber mumbled.

This got my mom and Sheriff Burke looking to her.

"We found him by the barn," Amber said with a shrug.

"You slept <u>outside</u>?" my mom asked, like this was somehow the worst thing.

I shrugged an I-guess-so shrug.

"He doesn't remember getting there," Amber said. "That's what we're... he thinks he might have come through here. We were looking for, you know. Footprints."

Footprints? I repeated in my head.

"Oh, my boy, my sweet-sweet boy," my mom said, and hugged me all over again.

"<u>One</u> down, anyway," Sheriff Burke said, kind of to herself.

Except we all heard.

She was checking a short metal door on the south side of the grain elevator. One that didn't even start to move when she pulled on it.

But then she realized we were all watching her.

She patted the door like it was a good door. Like it <u>should</u> be locked, or rusted shut, or crammed forever into its frame from the concrete silo settling above it over the years.

"What do you mean 'one down'?" I asked, and I could feel my mouth moving, saying this, making these words, but could only hear myself through my ears, not the usual way.

"Couple of his classmates are AWOL just the same," Sheriff Burke said, suddenly in the spotlight, and without anything to read from. "Like we don't have enough on our plate already, this weekend."

"Who?" Amber asked, her voice fake-innocent, and I distinctly saw a lump make its way down her throat, into her life. "Band kids," Sheriff Burke said. "You two run with them? Sissy Larkweather's daughter, that little blond number that looks just like her, and that other one, the--I mean, um. He plays clarinet, I think? That what it's called?"

She loosely mimed it.

"Lesley," I filled in.

"Lesley Cantor," Amber added, and when I chanced a look across at her, she was already looking at me, and I had to close my eyes to keep the screaming just in my head.

* * *

The whole time Mom processed me through nurses and doctors at our little hospital from the fifties, I hid behind my eyes.

I was out with Dad on a Saturday in November. We were bundled up, me in one of his old jackets—mine was for school, couldn't get oily. Because I was the kid, I had to open all the gates, usher my dad's pump truck through, and then shut it back and—this was the important part—shake it to test I'd really looped the wire right. If any of this rancher's cattle got out, clambered up onto the road, got hit, then my dad's company would be liable, which could all come back on him.

Also, that steer or heifer would be dead. And maybe the driver of the car that hit it.

That was the rest of my Sunday, in my head: opening gates, nodding to my dad that I'd checked them, and then climbing back in, warming up, going to pad after pad, dropping that plumb bob down into those huge silver tanks, then writing the measurement down in the little book.

My letters were all so perfect.

My dad's boss wasn't even going to suspect a no-account kid had been present.

Except, a few stops into it, one of those tanks we opened up so we could take our measurement, a frilly white feather drifted up out of it. My dad didn't see it. I couldn't not see it.

On one side it was smudged, but not with crude.

It was dried blood.

The feather drifted up, did a sort of loop—it felt like joy—and then it just kept going, probably headed east for the Caprock, to ride the thermals over those timeless rocks, those canyons thick with the spent breath of sleeping deer.

You know where the feather's from, don't you?

A Golden Tornado marching-band hat.

In my head I kept trying to write the reading from the tape down in the little book, but no matter how hard I tried to write the numbers down with square edges like my dad had taught me--like they'd look on a blueprint--it was letters that kept coming out. They were jumbled, jumbling, and I shut the book fast, didn't want to let them arrange themselves into names.

I touched my face, fully expecting those ridges from the night before, and to have that moment of dislocation, not sure if it was my cheek that was numb or my fingertips, but my face was just my same face. Not even wet like I think I wanted it to be.

I was supposed to feel bad, wasn't I?

I guess I did, but... I'll just say it: I might have been more worried about Sheriff Burke figuring it out? Figuring out it was me?

I'm not proud, don't ever let me say that.

The things I've done... I can't come back from them. And, yes, believe me, I've tried to blot them out.

Part of being a slasher, though—and this is a part Amber never knew about, because it was never in any of her brother's movies—it's that alcohol and drugs don't dull the memories even a little bit. I can feel that stuff coursing through me like cold sludge, but it doesn't provide any sort of escape. Not even for one single evening. Not even for one solitary hour.

What I think?

This is just me guessing, so take it with a grain of salt if you need to, but... I'm pretty sure slashers have some resistance to tranquilizers. That's why you can't jab us with ketamine from the tack shed and lay us out. Our metabolism burns those kinds of attempts away, so we can just keep on coming.

That's all fine and well for stuff that's supposed to knock us out, but what about when we want a beer to take the edge off having to remember every detail of how our victims died?

Sorry.

To our livers, our blood, our <u>systems</u>, one depressant's the same as the next, and the most important thing of all is that we don't keel over, we don't stop.

What this does is make my head a kind of prison cell, where I'm always, say, leaning back on both ends of a belt whose middle's digging deeper and deeper into a kid's mouth, to bisect his head at the vulnerable hinge of his jaw.

I'm always walking up the backside of that utility pole. I'm never not feeling that little four-inch snap when the belt finally pulls through, into the head, slamming the brain stem to mush, spinal fluid going warm down the back, the first time it's ever tasted open air.

Lesley, man, you never deserved that.

You either, Shannon, my fellow glue-eater.

Did you know that, until Sheriff Burke said it, I never even knew your mom's name was Sissy?

My mom's name is Brenda. Brenda Driver.

Let me introduce you. In 1972, she got married just a handful of months before her only son was born. As soon as she could, she was back out on the highway, being the flag girl she'd been in high school, telling the big rigs to slow down, slow down, please don't run over her road crew. Nine years later, her skin leathery from so many days waving that flag in the hot sun, she came into town for work, ended up running the scale at the gin, weighing the endless lines of cotton trailers, but that was more seasonal than we needed, on my dad's salary, so, when her mom died, she sold the land that had been her dad's dryland farm, took out a loan bigger than she could ever hope to pay off, and bought the hardware store, gave it her married name. And life was good, life was right. Did she think that, if she'd stayed flagging, she could have waved that tractor away from her husband? Probably. Did she cry herself to sleep each night after that husband's too-early funeral? Stupid question. And, sure, a lot of kids turned up dead at a pool party the summer between her son's junior and senior years, but her son wasn't among them. So, it was a tragedy, but she'd already paid into that particular kitty, so the world couldn't take anything from her. Her son did get hit by a truck the next day, and, in a concussive haze, do some pretty ambitious

sleepwalking a few hours later, but Lamesa wasn't that big, so she found him, she found him. It's what moms do. She found him, she took him to every doctor she could raise on a Sunday afternoon, and she held him close, and she told him to never scare her like that again, cool? Please? For your dear old mom?

I mean, I wish that's how it all turned out.

I don't know what Lesley's mom's name was, or is. "Mrs. Cantor," I guess? Though, I know that marriages hardly ever survive the death of a child, so... maybe she's back to her maiden name.

I hope that someone hauled a videocamera to one of our football games before all of this, anyway. Not for the game, but for the halftime show. For the marching band.

I want there to be a record of Shannon and Lesley as they were.

"Well, your blood pressure isn't where I want it to be," the doctor who finally saw me said, angling his head like to see through my eyes, into my thoughts.

"He hasn't eaten," my mom offered, hopefully.

"Frybread at Amber's," I mumbled, because, except about some very certain things, I was on a strict honesty policy.

"He needs something <u>American</u>," the doctor--this white doctor--said to my mom, like I wasn't even there.

My mom nodded, couldn't seem to stop nodding.

A medical professional was telling her to do what her heart already knew to do: feed the boy.

"But he's okay?" she asked, her hand holding mine.

"Little rattled, could use some rest," the doctor said, wrapping the blood pressure cuff back up and hanging it on its hook on the wall. "And it may not all be physical. I expect that in the following weeks, many of his classmates will be suffering from the... the <u>ramifications</u> of what happened at that get-together Friday night."

In Lamesa terms in 1989, "not physical" translated out to "emotional."

He was calling me a wimp.

He wasn't wrong.

Just, I was a wimp with a bodycount.

And I was just getting started.

* * *

Have you seen that TV movie about the Lamesa killings in 1989?

For what I guess are legal reasons——like I'm going to come out of the woodwork, make a fuss?——my name in it is Thaddeus Davidson. They kept my initials, made a big deal of the fact that I lived on "13th Street," and pretty much stirred the rest up to fit between commercials, I guess.

My mom still runs the hardware store in the movie, and the Sky-Vue plays a big part, probably because, by the mid–nineties, drive-ins had sort of become a marker for a bygone era, an era associated with, you know, machetes and masked killers.

Here's the only place the Sky-Vue really played a part in the Lamesa killings of 1989: when my mom finally got me home that Sunday, it was almost four o'clock. She told me she had some ground beef, another pack of split-top rolls—they have to have those split tops—did I feel like I could eat?

I smacked my mouth, imagining what could be perfect, and thinking of that ground hamburger frying its blood away in the pan made me picture the last of Shannon crusted on the side of the Fireworks Camper, with slow flies crawling on it, their iridescent thoraxes somehow never soaking up the sun like black things should... I had to run for the bathroom.

Mom, being a good mom, just stood in the hall, didn't intrude on my puke session.

I came out rubbing my mouth with the hand towel, my face probably pale.

"Nausea?" she said, making a face like she was feeling this with me. "That is one of the symptoms."

Nausea, dizziness, sleepiness, spotty memory.

Check, check, check.

I leaned against the wall, weak as a weak kitten.

"What can we do?" Mom asked.

I cycled through options, more options, decided home food was right out, since, even in the other room, I'd have to be aware of it in-process, meaning "from raw to cooked."

And a burger from anywhere in town was liable to be pink in the center.

"What's your favorite?" Mom asked, leaning against the wall with me, looking right in my eyes, probably partly to let me know she was here for me, but also partly to check my pupils for the thousandth time, to see if one was blown wide, meaning "brain bleed."

"Chihuahua?" I finally guessed.

It was the Sky-Vue's specialty, was something they'd invented, that only existed within the tall fences of the drive-in: cabbage and pimiento cheese and some chili all smeared between fried corn tortillas.

Technically, I suppose it was also sort of home-made, but they'd been a mainstay at the concession booth for so many years that they felt processed enough to be not-gross, if that makes sense.

"Sam doesn't open for..." Mom said, leaning back for the clock on the mantle.

"But he's up there, isn't he?" I asked, and could feel Charlie Brown parentheses around my eyes.

Mom had to nod, agree.

Sam got there early on Fridays and Saturday and Sundays, to start getting all the concessions ready.

"You know him, don't you?" I added.

It wasn't exactly an honest question, since we all knew Sam. He was as much a feature of Lamesa as the grain elevator, as the red brick streets on the square.

"You're sure?" Mom asked, watching me so closely.

She had never exactly approved of the Chihuahua.

I nodded, said, "I think I could eat it, anyway?"

Mom shrugged, went back to the kitchen counter to gather her purse, her sunglasses, her keys, but--

"You too," she said, from the front door.

"I'm--"

"Concussion boys need <u>supervision</u>," she informed me. "Doctor's orders."

I swallowed hard, looked past her to the blue sky out there.

It wasn't that I was trying to get away from her here, like it probably looks like--and will really look like in a bit. It was that I knew I couldn't be around where other kids were going to be.

Yeah, it was early, Sam probably wasn't letting people park in the good slots yet. But what if Mom got a flat, right? What if we had to find a jack, walk down the road for a spare... we could be there long enough for the Sky-Vue <u>to</u> open up.

And I wasn't to be trusted in that sort of situation. I wasn't feeling stabby or anything--my name in that movie is "Strappy"--but I didn't trust myself to <u>keep</u> feeling that way.

For all I knew, too, the drive-in was where I'd hidden Lesley and Shannon's bodies, right? I hadn't really stepped on a landmine at the grain elevator, I knew. Just, I'd blacked out for the part that came after the killing, like I'd needed so much attention and focus to get that bloody work done that, afterwards, my head had to turn off for a few hours.

I was being paranoid, sure.

When you're a killer, though, and you don't know when you're going to go off next, then... paranoid makes sense, doesn't it?

"Drop me at the store?" I asked.

Mom stared at me, tapping a leg of her glasses against her front teeth like she always did.

"You won't go hide in the office?" she finally asked. "If you fell asleep back there--"

"I'll help Rodrigo," I assured her.

Mom didn't love this--Rodrigo was bad about drinking beer on the weekends, "to steady his hands"--but she knew I loved tinkering on the repair equipment with him. If I could ever get a lawnmower sputtering again, even just for a few seconds, I'd run around the store with my arms pumping up and down, a parade of my own making, and everyone would play along, cheer for me, some of them even falling in behind me like whichever <u>Rocky</u> that is.

"I'm trusting you," Mom said, kind of with her warning-voice.

"And I'm trusting you back," I told her. "Don't eat my Chihuahua?"

She faked some gagging sounds, that, halfway to the truck, turned more real than she wanted, I think. I sat in the passenger seat and fiddled with her CB while she dry-heaved, leaning against the bed on her side. The CB was for talking to the truckers bringing our loads in, so she could be sure all hands would be on deck when the truck got there. "Good out there, Pukey McPukins, come back?" I said into the mic in one of my many fake voices, which brought her up to the window, to be sure I wasn't really pushing the button on the side.

I already had my thumb pulled away and obvious, was grinning wide.

"Pukey Mc<u>Pukins</u>?" she said, stepping up and in.

"Over, out," I said, hanging the mic back up, and—and that little ride with her from the house to the hardware store that afternoon—

I'm not going to say anything else about it, cool?

It's six minutes of my life, tops, but some memories you don't measure in minutes or miles, but by how much of yourself is still in that moment.

* * *

I shouldn't have been surprised to find Amber in aisle 9 at the hardware store, but I was.

I'd been aiming for the repairs counter, to help Rodrigo like I'd promised, but then had to cartoon-lean back to make sure I'd seen what I'd seen down by the boxes of roofing nails.

"Ambs?" I said.

She was carrying a six-foot pole (\$2.98) and a few scraps of wood from the wire basket we kept by the front door, kind of like a leave-a-penny/take-a-penny thing. Just, instead of pennies, there were little tailings from odd jobs—an eight-inch, half-routered baseboard, pieces left over from a fence or a doghouse, that kind of stuff.

"Thought you were doing algebra," I said to her. "Or, you know, reading the encyclopedia."

She handed me the pole, shifted the random tailings she was trying to keep from spilling onto the floor.

"It's going to be for birds," she informed me very curtly. "A house."

"For a certain baby bird that we both know's probably going to live forever and never-ever die?" I asked, batting my eyes, my lower lip pushing out.

"Hilarious as ever," she told me, then looked both ways and led me back to receiving. It was supposed to be just for employees, but Amber was pretty much family, was no stranger at Driver's Hardware & Emporium. Away from prying eyes, she pulled me close, hissed, "I asked around about Lesley and Shannon."

"They're still missing," I told her. It wasn't a question.

"That's not--yeah. I'm thinking maybe you might have really seen something happen to them, and your traumatized brain made up a story about it."

I didn't dignify this.

"But that's not what I was calling around about."

"Who'd you talk to?"

"Mel."

This fell like a brick between us.

Amber sat back on Zaney's stool, piled her odds and ends boards down beside her in a careful pile. She looked up at me with what I can only call sad eyes, like when a coach has pulled you into the office to tell you you're not going to this track meet. Maybe next year if you work hard, show him you really want it.

"You called <u>Mel</u>," I repeated, slowing it down for impact. "What about the enemy of my enemy is your friend?"

"How does that apply?"

"She poisoned me?"

"But you're not my enemy. So she's not my friend."

I squinted to keep all this straight, started over: "I mean, okay--the enemy of my friend isn't my friend either? That how it goes?"

"You should probably lie down, Tol."

"<u>Lie</u> down?" I had to ask.

I was pacing back and forth for this.

"Are you calling me a--a <u>liar</u>?" Amber asked, trying to make sense of my emphasis.

"No, it's... you said it the right way, I think," I told her. "<u>Lie down</u>. But you always say <u>lay</u>, don't you? Like a normal person?"

"And this matters why?"

"You're... I don't know. Something's different, here. My Spidey-sense is tingling."

I did my fingers to show what I meant.

"Different like, I don't know," Amber said, dropping to a whisper, "you thinking you killed two members of the marching band?"

"So you believe me now?"

"I believe that you believe it."

"Pretty magnanimous of you," I said back, kind of peeking for her reaction--I'd heard that word on a TV show, I think, and wasn't exactly sure how to wield it.

She didn't call me on it, which I took to mean either it passed muster or she didn't really know it either.

"That's not why I was calling her, though," Amber went on. "I called to ask her about the party."

"She left before--"

"I was asking about when she was there, genius."

I stopped pacing, sat on a stack of pallets that were one layer too tall for me, told myself not to slide even the littlest bit, because either direction would be splinterland. Which, talking asses, means lowering your pants for either your best friend or your mom, neither of which were exactly ideal.

On top of being a double-murderer, yeah, I was worried about splinters.

"You were asking her about when she gave me a glassful of peanuts, you mean," I said.

We both flashed our eyes up for Rodrigo coming in from the floor. He stopped, caught between us.

"I'm supposed to be watching you," he said to me.

"Look all you want," I told him, holding my arms out.

"I'm watching him," Amber said desultorily, which is harder to spell than it looks like.

Rodrigo considered this, was kind of light on his feet for it, like he was being drawn three ways at once, and then––"Go ahead," I told him. "I'm not a narc, I won't tell her."

"It's the <u>weekend</u>, ese..." Rodrigo said by way of explanation, and reached around behind the pallets I was on, came out with a bottle of beer. His running argument was that beer on Saturday and Sunday was a God-given right, and he didn't want to go against the church, did he?

Amber rolled her eyes, apparently forgetting the beers Rodrigo could usually be counted on to sneak us on those holy weekends. We hadn't mustered the courage to pull through Los Ybanez ourselves, no. But so long as there were Rodrigos in the world, we'd probably be okay.

"Five minutes?" Rodrigo said, holding his spread fingers up and rotating them around front to back, like me seeing both sides of these five minutes would really make them stick in my head.

"I'll fix everything you've got back there," I told him, and he toasted us grandly then tucked his beer into his greasy apron, whisked back out to his repair counter.

"So, Mel," Amber said when we were alone again. She was playing with the pen-on-a-string tied to Zaney's clipboard. "The peanuts weren't on purpose. Not that that means it was all right. But--okay. I called because I wanted to know who else was in on the... on the whole tie-the-drunkard-to-the-chair thing."

"'<u>In</u> on it?" I said, having to stand again, my hands in my hair.

"Whose belts those were."

"Marching-band idiots," I said with an obvious shrug. "I hope their belts are in evidence bags by now."

"And all their pants fall down at halftime, yeah, yeah," Amber added, like hurrying to get us past this part of the conversation.

"You have all this stuff at home already," I said then, about the pole I'd abandoned, the bits of board she was on the way to leaving behind. "You were waiting for me, weren't you?"

Amber didn't deny it.

"Because you think you have some bombshell to drop."

"Because I care about you, Tol."

"Drop away. No--let me guess. I put the peanuts in that coke myself. I'm a walking suicide."

Amber kind of squinched her whole face up.

"You really don't remember?" she asked.

"Remember what?"

"Who tied you up?"

I did my hands above my head to mean "feathers," "plumes," said, like this was all a person could possibly need to know, "The marching band, right? What else is there to know?"

"Mel said they're doing their own extra practices this summer. That they want to make regionals this year."

"Nerds nerd, it's a rule of nature."

"That's why they were wearing their stuff at the party."

"This is what you came all the way up here to tell me?" I said. "The secret lives of high steppers who like to dress like French soldiers and blow into oboes?"

We both kind of paused about this. I don't know about Amber, but I was scrambling in my head, trying to remember if an oboe was a stringed instrument, a drum, or a fancy clarinet.

Neither of us said anything about it, which was probably for the best.

"I'm just––<u>Mel</u>, okay?" Amber said. "She said that Shannon and Lesley were there. That they helped tie you up."

My breathing slowed here, I'm pretty sure.

Heart... <u>beat</u>, heart... <u>beat</u>.

"And that's why I--?"

"Don't say it!"

"Because then it's not real?"

"It makes sense that you'd fantasize about getting revenge on them," Amber said, quietly.

"'Fan-ta-size," I repeated, hitting each syllable.

"The Tolly I know isn't a killer," Amber said, a sort of pleading insistence to the way she said it.

I studied the one light flickering in its wire cage above the loading dock.

Amber tucked Zaney's pen back where it went, then stood, moving slow like she was sore, or reluctant about the next part.

Meaning she wasn't done with this yet.

"Come with me," she said.

* * *

The breakroom at the hardware store.

Fully half of my junior high homework had been done on that long table, with Franklin or Roy or Dick watching a gameshow on the lowest volume, because my mom didn't want me distracted.

It worked about how you'd expect: I learned so much useless trivia, straining to hear all those nearly muted answers instead of doing my fractions.

"You remember yesterday, at your house?" Amber asked.

She was leaning back against the low counter that was part of the wall of cabinets jigsawed together from remodels that had happened all over town. Home was on 13th Street, sure, just like the movie says. But the breakroom is still what I key on when I think "home."

"So who were the other ones who tied me up?" I asked back, trying to just be super no big deal about it, like I could just as well be asking what time it was.

"Like I'm going to tell you?"

"Because I'll probably go--"

"You'll think you did."

"I already know where Mel lives," I said.

"Yeah, her dad'll let you in," Amber said with a halfway chuckle.

She was right: Mel's dad was the kind of guy who didn't think a dispute was settled until he'd settled it with a crowbar. How she was ever supposed to go on even one date, I had no idea. Every time she was out there at the fifty-yard line in her short skirt twirling that baton, he'd be up in the stands keeping close track of anyone watching his daughter just a little <u>too</u> closely.

"But you know who else was there, now," I said, and the way I added "now" onto that so natural-like, so easy, so <u>sneakily</u>——it still haunts me. I was basically calling her out for having been in Deek's house, oblivious, while I was being tied to a chair and force-fed peanuts. I was sort of telling her that if she'd stuck closer to me that night, then... I don't nearly die?

Standard Tolly Operating Procedure. You just shrugged it off, Amber. "Yeah, I remember being at my house yesterday," I told her, backing us up to what she'd asked instead of what I'd just said--my way of apologizing without actually saying sorry, or taking any blame.

"I tried that at home this morning," she said. "With the knife?"

Immediately, what I snuck a fast look up at was her hair. It was the same long it had been since eighth grade, after it had grown out from the two of us sawing her braids off with a steak knife four years before <u>that</u>, because she didn't want to be Indian anymore, didn't want Miss Peterson in Art calling on her when we were making our Thanksgiving decorations, asking if the squaws wore feathers in their headbands, or just the braves?

Because Christmas was looming and we didn't want to get in trouble, we fed those braids one at a time into her father's bench grinder in the shop in the middle of the day, so it could all have been an accident. And the only reason her dad hadn't kicked my ass every day for the last seven years was the story we concocted, that it had been me to hit the off-switch on that mean little grinder.

That night, my mom made my favorite meal back then, nachos with Spam that had been blackened in a pan first, and my dad clapped his hand on my shoulder like a hug and shook me, just nodding his pride like dads do—like the dad in <u>American Anthem</u> does—but Amber in the breakroom right now wasn't trying to dredge all that up.

She did realize I'd snuck a look at her hair spilling over her shoulders, though. It was always awkward when, suddenly and out of nowhere, she'd be this glamorous woman, and I'd still be awkward, scrawny, not-even-really-shaving-yet Tolly.

"What?" she said.

I shook my head no, that it was nothing, and covered it by saying, "Knife?"

"On your counter, when Burke was on the phone? Knock-knock, anybody home?"

I narrowed my eyes to dial back to what she meant. A lot had happened since when we went inside to change clothes, I mean.

"Oh," I finally said, "yeah," and made that <u>schting!</u> noise with my mouth, being sure to stab that all-important exclamation point down right after it.

"It didn't work," Amber said. "When I tried at home."

"I don't--"

"We should really go to your house, try it again..." she said, sliding a drawer open beside her in a way that told me we <u>weren't</u> going to my house. We were doing this right here, right now.

She slid a butter knife up from the tray of silverware, held it out like evidence of some sort.

"What?" I asked, looking from it to her.

The refrigerator clicked on, its jangly little motor humming hard enough that the thermometer on the freezer door rotated over on its magnet a bit, like about to tip its red stuff out. By the end of the day, it would be all the way upside down, but then each morning it would be upright again, ready for work. I never found out who it was who reset it every morning.

Amber took a deliberate step forward, set the knife down on the table.

"Pick it up," she said.

"This some kind of trick?" I had to ask.

I suspected magnets, glue, a rubber knife she'd planted earlier.

Amber, using her index finger and thumb only, the rest of her fingers keeping clear, pinched the knife up by the handle. Soundlessly.

She set it back down just like it had been, then nodded to me, that it was my turn.

"I don't even--" I said, and stepped forward, picked the knife up with my whole hand.

<u>Schting!</u>

I took a step back, looked from the knife to the table, then to all four corners of the breakroom, because this had to be some sound effects gag, like <u>Police</u> <u>Academy</u>.

It was just me and Amber.

Amber closed her eyes for a solid five-count, like the sound from that knife had cut right to her soul.

When she opened them, she said, "Again."

"<u>You</u> made that noise," I told her.

She held her hands up, made a show of pressing her lips together.

"<u>Again</u>," she said, nodding down to the table.

I set the knife down, left it there long enough for all its molecules to settle down.

"What if I don't want to?" I asked.

"You have to," Amber said.

"What does it mean?"

"Just do it, Tol."

I did.

This time, I think because I kind of dragged the blade on the tabletop, the sound was more <u>shiiink</u>!

I dropped the knife back onto the table.

"Did you hear that?" I said. "It was--it was different, wasn't it?"

Amber answered by stepping forward, picking the knife up herself just real fast, like she could sneak up on the sound.

Nothing.

"Try a different one," I said, nodding to the silverware drawer.

She laid out all six mismatched knives that were left.

I breathed in and out, settled my feet, got my fingers limber, and--

Schting!

<u>Schting!</u>

<u>Shiiink!</u>

Schting!

Schting!

<u>Schting!</u>

"I--I don't... I'm not doing it on purpose," I finally got out.

Amber nodded, her mind dialing down to "scientific," it looked like.

"Here," she said, and set a single fork down.

I hesitated, didn't want to touch it.

"You have to," Amber said.

I got my fingers close to it, closed my eyes, and scooped it up.

<u>Schto-nng!</u>

I think the sound was different because of the tines. But it still sounded like a samurai sword in a movie, leaving its scabbard very dramatically.

"Shit," Amber said.

Next was a spoon.

"What does this prove?" I asked, not touching that spoon yet.

"Lab rats don't ask questions," Amber told me, and nodded down to the table.

I delicately lifted the spoon, trying to go slow enough this time that there <u>couldn't</u> be a sound.

Nothing.

I smiled, nodded.

"Do it normal, now," Amber said.

I gritted my teeth, hoped she hadn't noticed.

I set the spoon down, snatched it up again, no longer even suspicious what "normal" was.

Still: nothing.

"Now the knife," she said.

Schting!

I dropped it like it was hot. It clattered on the floor.

"Fork," Amber said.

<u>Schto-ng.</u>

There was no exclamation point this time, but I think that was because I was trying to sneak one past, go just a <u>little bit</u> slower.

"This is stupid," she said, which was when we both cued in that we weren't alone.

It was Trace.

She considered the mismatched silverware, looked to each of us, then shrugged, pivoted, removed herself from this scene.

"This doesn't mean it was you," Amber said, scooping the silverware up.

Instead of sorting it back into the drawer, she turned the water on in the sink, washed each one.

I stepped in to dry.

"Don't tell anybody I told you this," she said then.

"Told me what?"

"Mel told me," Amber said. "It's--it's Mrs. Joss."

"Justin's mom?"

I dropped the knife I was drying, had to pick it up, put it back in the washing line. Some people's help is really more work, yeah.

And yes, I flinched when it made that sound.

"She's on video at the Town & Country," Amber said, quietly.

"Because of--because of Justin?"

"It's from Saturday morning," Amber said. "She was getting two cups of coffee."

"Meaning Justin's dad was in the car?"

Amber shrugged, went on: "Justin's... his body didn't turn up until that morning. They live in Georgia now, don't they?"

"What are you saying?"

"You're not supposed to know this," Amber said, clocking behind us, to be sure Trace hadn't sidled back in. "Sheriff thinks--she thinks it's Justin's parents."

"But we were <u>there</u>," I said, probably way too loud. "That wasn't Justin's dad going all--"

I did my hand like I had a laser blaster arm. It was supposed to be an oversized drillbit, but those are hard to mime.

"Yeah, but he was already... <u>collected</u> by the time Lesley and Shannon went missing," Amber said. "Right?"

"You're saying it could have been her, or them," I said, picking up what she was laying down. "Not me."

"They've got actual reasons," Amber said.

"For what happened at <u>Deek's</u>, yeah," I said, putting the last knife into the drawer then drawing my fingers back because: <u>Schting!!</u>

"You really can't control it, can you?" Amber asked.

"I don't even know what 'it' is."

"But Mr. and Mrs. Joss," Amber said, leaning back against the counter again. "If it <u>is</u> them, not just her. Maybe they're... maybe they're after <u>all</u> Lamesa High students, now? For what happened to Justin?"

"Why now, though?" I asked.

"It's the five-year anniversary, almost?" Amber said. "Do you remember the date it happened? To Justin?"

She was trying so hard for it to be anything but me.

"It doesn't matter," I had to say. "It wasn't them, Amber. It was me."

The same way she only used my whole name when she really meant it, me calling her anything but <u>Ambs</u> carried some real weight.

She flicked her eyes away. From this whole scene.

"What was this supposed to prove?" I said. "The knives."

"It didn't work with the spoon," she said back, then nodded to herself, walked out of the breakroom without waiting for me.

"I'm not following you again!" I called after her. Another lie.

* * *

At this point, I'm pretty sure Amber knew what was up with me, more or less.

I was like a nickel in a change sorter, though, just rolling down all those little switchbacks until the final slot swallowed me down, told the world what I was. And Amber had her face pressed right to the clear plastic side of that change sorter, because she didn't trust it to work this time. Because, if I started to fit through a slot she didn't want for me, she could tilt the whole contraption, shake it like an Etch A Sketch, save me from my fate.

It wasn't me she should have been worried about, though.

I'm pretty hard to kill, it turns out.

Example: I'm pretty sure that about five years ago, something sort of evil bloomed in my gut. I didn't go to the doctor, of course--slashers don't have health insurance--but I did writhe around on my saggy couch a couple nights, my knees up to my chest, a sort of puley thin bile or vomit or something leaking from my mouth. It eventually tinged pink, then deep, deep red, and I knew this was it, that I was dying at last. Lamesa hadn't been able to kill me, but this ruptured appendix or colon cancer or liver cirrhosis was finally getting it done.

I'd always imagined that, when the day came for me, I'd try to prolong it. Not so I could hold on for one more drop of life, nothing like that, but so it could hurt more. This would be my chance to feel the littlest bit of what I'd inflicted, right? I could pay for my crimes. Pay in blood, which is really the only currency there is in the world. This was all well and fine to think, but when my marker finally got called?

I just wanted it to be over, I wanted the pain to please <u>stop</u>, forget what I owed, that didn't even factor in anymore.

You can think this makes me a bad person, but really, I think this means I'm human.

Mostly.

That second night of writhing, I finally blacked out--mercifully--and when I came to, my face puke-welded to the rough fabric of the couch... the pain was gone.

Lying there in the dark, the sound of nothing stretching out in every direction around me, the yard quiet as the tomb, I probed my gut with my fingers. Lightly at first, then deeper, trying to gouge the pain back to life.

Whatever it was, I'd beaten it.

Because of what I am, I have to think. Because the job I have to do-revenge--trumps any malignant cells. It doesn't care about burst organs.

Again and again, it props me up, so I can slouch out into the night with purpose, come back holding a severed head by its hair.

Which is another thing I've picked up on, over the years: carrying a severed head like that, the head's probably going to be leaking from the neck, isn't it? More at first, of course, but still, another drop after twenty yards, then another on down the road.

Enough for a good dog to follow, I mean.

Except they never do.

And not just dogs.

I can be on a mission in the yard the morning after a light snowfall, and, walking back, my footsteps will have rounded off into uselessness. Like the world's helping me hide? I think so, yeah.

I say slashers are all about revenge, but what's revenge but balancing the scales, right?

I think the world wants things to even out. So it lets my kind cheat.

That's the best I can say it.

So, no, after I woke with the pain gone, death averted one more time, I didn't check myself into the hospital, let the doctors poke and prod. It was somewhat

because part of leaving no tracks would probably be that all the tests and biopsies turned out bland, normal, fine. But it was also because... hospitals, man.

I can see myself waking in the morgue, leaving with a bone saw, and painting all those white walls bright red.

And I can't let that happen again, ever.

So when the pain comes—it's been three times since that first time, once in the gut again, twice in the head, so I couldn't even see—I just ride it out.

I know why it's happening more and more, though.

I'm supposed to be out there, doing what I do. Not hiding in my camper.

But still, it's like damage of some sort <u>has</u> to happen? Like there's a quota that's getting filled either way.

If not by others, then by me.

It's fair, I tell myself. At least when it's not happening.

When it is, though, when I'm on the floor of my camper, slow pedaling my feet into the cabinet of the kitchenette, I can sometimes feel my right hand twitching, and grasping.

It's feeling for the handle of something sharp. Because I should be carving through the world, righting wrongs. Except—except righting wrongs with even worse wrongs, does that really make the world any better? Is the world really that short-sighted?

Amber probably knows.

But she's the one person I can never ask.

* * *

She was waiting for me on the first aisle of the hardware store.

"I've got to--" I said, trying to slide past, for Rodrigo's counter.

"Hand me that," she said, nodding down to a screwdriver.

Because it was easier to just do it than argue, I slid it up from its slot, only stopped when it made the first half of that <u>schting!</u> sound. Still, when I let it go, it released the second half of the sound, like it had just been waiting.

"Now that," Amber said, tapping a white-headed mallet with her index finger.

I sighed my most dramatic sigh, hiked the mallet up by the handle: no sound whatsoever.

I let it fall back in line with the other one that hadn't sold.

"Good enough?" I asked.

"One more thing," Amber said, and pulled me into receiving again. On the way past Rodrigo I shrugged like I was helpless here, and he just grinned, toasted me with his beer.

In the very back corner, over the recycling bin, was the ratty dartboard that had been hanging there since the name on the store had been "Davis." No darts had been left <u>with</u> the dartboard––thanks, previous crew––but what Amber held up for me was... a two-inch galvanized <u>nail</u>?

"You could have at least got the cheap ones," I said, about how pricey these ones were.

"We'll put them back," Amber told me.

I looked to the dartboard and back to her. She was holding four nails out to me, fanned out like a card trick. There was zero humor in her eyes.

Out in the alley, I'd seen some of the more temporary of Mom's workers flinging nails at birds and, if it was dusk, bullbats, but they had the nailgun to launch those stubby arrows. And they never even got close.

I pinched one of the nails from Amber's hand, said, "What?"

My impulse was to do that trick my dad had always freaked me out with, with straight pins: he'd wedge one longways in the crook of his elbow, and then, with torturous slowness, so I could see every moment, know there was no fakery to it, curl his forearm up into his bicep, that pin... I never knew. My dad never had dabs of blood when he opened his arm back up. But that pin had to have gone <u>some</u>where, hadn't it?

That was straight pins, though.

No way could it work with a nail.

"There," Amber directed me: the dartboard.

I made a show of scoffing--when you're seventeen, this is second nature-turned to slope back to the floor, away from this foolishness.

"Show me how wrong I am," Amber said though, holding me in place by the wrist.

I could have pulled away, could have spun out of her grip, but Amber knew what she was doing, here. She knew I couldn't help but prove myself right. Especially after I <u>hadn't</u> been able to prove what I'd done the night before.

"If it gets this over with," I said, flinging the nail in the general direction of the dartboard without even looking, then holding Amber's eyes, shrugging like was that good enough?

Except--the nail didn't tink off the smooth concrete floor?

We both looked over.

It was dead center, a bullseye.

Amber closed her eyes in pain.

"<u>Seriously?</u>" I said, unable not to grin like the idiot I was.

I palmed the three remaining nails from her, and this time aimed one of them like a real dart, getting my rhythm down, <u>one</u>, <u>two</u>, and on <u>three</u> I spiraled it out into the void.

Instead of an exact bullseye like the first nail had been, this one came in from a slight angle, so its chisel-point had to be in metal-to-galvanized-metal contact with the first nail, inside the dry bristles of that dartboard.

"Bull<u>shit</u>!" I said, hiking my fist up in victory.

"Again," Amber said, "both at once," and cupped her palm over my eyes.

<u>Be the dartboard</u>, I inside-whispered to myself in Chevy Chase's voice, never mind that I should have wanted to "be" the nail, and baseball-threw the last two nails ahead of us.

No clattering <u>tinks</u>.

Amber lowered her hand, and these last two nails were just as deadly, were deep in the red like the other two.

"What does this mean?" I said kind of just out loud, to the world.

Amber scraped her feet away from me. She was shaking her head no. Staring up at the wall like an answer she actually <u>wanted</u> was going to present itself.

"Need a minute," she said, and something about her voice––was she about to cry?

I stood there for a moment, not sure what to do, but finally just said, "I'll be--" and backed away, being sure to scrape my shoes on the concrete as well, so Amber would know I wasn't lying.

On the way to Rodrigo's counter I latched onto the pole Amber had been going to buy and I twirled it before me all the way down the back wall of the store because I was a martial artist extraordinaire, was deadly with this staff.

"Hey, killer," Rodrigo said when I got there, and tossed me two spark plugs at once, which I of course fumbled, very much <u>un</u>like even a yellow belt, probably.

"Now you're going to need to gap them as well..." Rodrigo said, when I was trying to ferret one out from under the counter. He had a way of adding dots to the end of everything he said, like he thought he was the Mexican Fonz.

I finally got the spark plug, and headed immediately to the back counter. Any time he gave me spark plugs, it was because I was supposed to clean them in the Folgers can of solvent Franklin, our main smoker, was supposed to avoid at all costs.

Nine times out of ten, fouled plugs were the only thing wrong with whatever small engine he'd been brought. The tenth time, it was usually a clogged air filter. Okay, some of the time it would be old gas-gas left over from the year before-or someone putting straight regular into a two-cycle job.

That most of the fixes were easy was good, too, as Rodrigo didn't have any kind of mechanic's certification. Just a checklist to follow, that usually got things running again.

"Where's your girl?" he said across with a knowing grin.

"She's not mine," I said back, my usual response to his <u>constant</u>, grating call.

The solvent was cold and hot at the same time, meaning I'd have to be sure to lotion up later or my hands would crack open, bleed and bleed. Really, though, lotioning up wasn't exactly anything I had to set any special reminder for. Dot dot dot.

"Done!" I told Rodrigo when I was, and, deep in a magazine he had to have memorized by then, he tilted his forehead at where these two spark plugs went: a matching pair of chainsaws on the staging shelf.

"Whose are these?" I asked, in wonder.

Usually repairs were weedwackers and lawnmowers and, every once in a while, a siderow engine. I'd never actually held a chainsaw, had only heard them in Jackyl's lumberjack song. At least, I think that was a real actual chainsaw—but, yeah, the Harley in "Hot for Teacher" was just drums, I knew, and the

Harley in that Meat Loaf song was a guitar, so who knows if that was a real chainsaw or not.

These were, anyway.

"Sal Gunderson found them in her dad's barn," Rodrigo said. "If I can get one running, I get to have the other."

"You or the store?" I asked.

"We'll share it."

Like either Rodrigo or the hardware store had any use for a chainsaw. The reason I'd never held one before this was that this was Lamesa, Texas. If you needed firewood, you just collected dead mesquite and old pallets, made your bonfire from that. The biggest trees we had were those monsters at the park--willows, cottonwoods, elms?--but in a country with names like "Notrees," "Levelland," "Plainview," and "Brownfield," cutting down a tree that had somehow punched up into the sky all on its own, you'd sort of be asking for lightning to strike down at you. To say it different: in a land with no shade, you don't go around letting the sun in.

"Really want me to gap them?" I asked, about the dripping plugs.

"They're never going to run anyway," Rodrigo said, shrugging it true. "Those are from the sixties, I think, yeah? They had kerosene in them when Sal brought them in."

Kerosene was how the old men always protected their engines, when they parked a truck or whatever, knew nobody was going to be touching it for a few years. I guess because this 1955 Studebaker truck might as well be a lamp now, I don't know. Old men have their reasons—Sal Gunderson's dad had had his, I guessed.

Rodrigo turned his music up—I sort of liked it, could even sing along with some of the songs, I'd been tinkering in repairs so long—and I threaded the two plugs in, pulling the little cap over the top of each one, the rubber casing on those hot wires not just cracked, but crumbling. These were serious antiques.

That didn't stop me from hauling the rustier of the two of them down, though, holding it by my thigh like that big gun in <u>Predator</u>, and fake-spraying the backside of Rodrigo's counter, complete with sound effects.

"All it's good for," Rodrigo said, which was when Amber suddenly just appeared on the other side of that counter, holding those four nails up by her face, probably to show me that she was returning them like she'd said.

But?

It startled me enough that, martial arts master that I was--reflexes like a cat--I dropped this heavy chainsaw, my right hand scrabbling down for the top part of the handle, to keep the blade from gouging the floor.

What I grabbed instead was the ripcord.

The chainsaw pulled away, roared to life for the first time in twenty-plus years.

"Whoah! <u>Whoah!</u>" Rodrigo yelled, I think, but it was hard to hear over the buzzing. And my own yipping—I guess that's what I have to call it.

I was dancing around, trying to keep the spinning blade from cutting me off at the knees. I was still holding that chainsaw by the ripcord, I mean.

And finally it was just easier to drop it.

Back then, not knowing anything about chainsaws, I didn't know that its kill switch probably should have choked the engine down, for safety.

This chainsaw just spun, its whirring teeth hungry for something to chew into.

"What'd you do?" Rodrigo said, standing beside me.

I had no idea.

When I looked up to Amber, she was already watching me.

If she'd had sad eyes earlier, then now what she was about to tell me was that the moon was hurtling toward the Earth, and our only shot at stopping it was to catapult all the Earth's puppies up at it.

"The other one," she said, chucking her chin at the staging shelf.

"Nobody's that lucky, ese," Rodrigo said. All the same, he hauled that chainsaw down, held it low, and pulled the ripcord. The chainsaw did the chainsaw version of coughing moths out its exhaust.

"Again," Amber told him.

She was about to cry, I'm pretty sure.

Rodrigo was too into the chainsaw to pick up on that.

"Lady knows what she wants," he said, and this time gave that ripcord all the shoulder he had.

Nothing.

"Want a go?" he said to me, offering the chainsaw across.

I looked to Amber about this.

She nodded a barely there nod.

I held the chainsaw with my left hand, worked the handle of the ripcord under the fingers of my right hand, and... gave it the most weak-sister pull I had in me.

The chainsaw revved up instantly, the momentum of that whirring blade looking this way and that for 1962, 1963.

"Magic touch..." Rodrigo said, stepping in to carefully take this chainsaw from me.

The instant it was in his control, it sputtered, died.

"I think I need him for a while," Amber said across the counter, to Rodrigo.

Rodrigo, still holding the dead chainsaw, looked from me to Amber, finally said, "You know he likes a snack at three, and then takes a nap, right?"

I walked away flipping him off, hipslid over the counter, and I'd like to say that was the last time I ever touched a chainsaw, but... if I was a crane operator who'd dropped a load of beams onto someone, killing them, I'd probably swear off ever sitting up in that cab again, right? At least until it was either starve or operate a crane.

I admit, over the years, when I've needed a handful of cash, I've hired on at a few small-engine repair joints.

The lawnmowers love me, the weedwackers are my friends, but it's the chainsaws that really know my touch.

Cartoon princesses have little birds that flit around them every morning, and whistle sweet nothings to greet the new day?

Imagine what a slasher must wake to.

* * *

"Tell me again about last night," Amber said from behind the wheel of her Rabbit.

I had no idea where she was taking me. Either Ripley's Believe It or Not or Big Spring, I had to guess--Big Spring being where the state institution was, with all the padded rooms.

I could be that straightjacketed guy in the iron mask from Metal Health.

It would have been a public service.

Not that it could have held me.

"I already told you," I objected.

"<u>Again</u>," Amber said all the same.

I shrugged, leaned into it for her, but with that special brand of Tolly Driver pettiness: I started all the way back at the video store this time. Then dinner and what it consisted of, how I looked chewing it, finally taking her through <u>Gymkata</u> and how the color washed out of that sex-scene movie.

"<u>Officer and Gentleman</u> is a love story," Amber said, hauling the wheel over, her power steering pump whining so loud that she had to push the clutch in and give the engine some pedal to keep it from dying a little four-cylinder death.

"Got that right," I told her. "Gonna have to go back, pause some of those, um, lovey dovey parts."

In reply she tapped the brakes, threatening my forehead with another smack on the windshield.

"This is serious, Tolly."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you?"

"Keep going," she said, shifting into third.

I told her about how the food in the refrigerator had looked with my temporary colorblindness--my <u>concussion</u> colorblindness--how that little Case magnet on the freezer door had been the most freaky, and then sort of skipped the calamine lotion spurting up onto my chest, jumped ahead to the possum, and however I'd gotten to the grain elevator.

"You could see the possum in the <u>grass</u>?" Amber asked. "In the dark? Through whatever you say you had on your face?"

"Whatever I did have on my face?" I countered.

"You're saying you were wearing a mask."

"Something."

"Okay. But first--"

"The possum doesn't even matter," I tried to insist. "I didn't kill the <u>possum</u>, Ambs."

"But you could see it," she said right back. "That's what I'm getting at."

"It was right there."

"Have you ever seen one at night before?"

"Yeah, I mean--on the road. Who hasn't?"

"You saw it because it was in a pair of headlights. Not in grass that was taller than it."

"And?"

"There are no lights at the grain elevator, are there?"

"The moon," I tried. Then, with less oomph, "The stars?"

Amber didn't even have to shoot these down.

"Do you know why my dad was special in Vietnam?" she asked. "Do you know why, just driving past, he can see where somebody's growing squash and black-eyed peas out in their cotton?"

"He can do that?"

Amber switched hands on the wheel.

We were pulling into... the high school?

"It's because he's colorblind," Amber said, sounding kind of disappointed that I didn't already know this. "In Vietnam, this meant that camouflage didn't hide people from him the same as it did for other soldiers."

"It makes squash leaves look a different color too?"

"Different than cotton, yeah."

"That's why I could see that possum? That what you're saying? The concussion gave me better night vision?"

"That possum couldn't hide from you in the dark," she said. "That's what I'm saying."

Amber killed the truck, popped her door open.

"This is getting stupid, you know that, right?" she said.

"You mean stupid like being at school in the <u>summer</u>? Or--or is this where the really <u>good</u> encyclopedias are?"

"People who talk like education is a bad thing are usually doing that because they're afraid of it." "Algebra? Geography?" I asked, tagging along. "Terrified, terrified."

"Just stay in your little world where it's safe, then," Amber said, hip-sliding over the low fence to the track. "I'm sure your later self will thank you when you become him."

"Since when did you become Mr. Avery?"--the guidance counselor, if I haven't said that already.

"Good grades aren't anything to be ashamed of, that's all I'm saying."

"Your dad taking the Rabbit away again?" I asked, falling behind a bit because I felt bad for not having figured that out already: when her dad was in a mood, usually because of cotton prices or lack of rain, Amber's keys tended to get tied to her report card.

Instead of answering, Amber chucked her chin ahead of us: a couple of dogs had dragged a Spurlock's bag out onto the football field, were devouring it. As greasy as a bag was from Spurlock's, it was practically a food item, so it sort of made sense. Well, dog-sense.

"Wait," Amber said, her hand suddenly across me like making sure I stopped.

"Yeah, no worries, I won't be--" I started, the bigger of the two dogs trotting our way, the second one, the fast one I was pretty sure, falling in, lips raised. Wild dogs weren't exactly a problem in Lamesa back then, but they were a constant. You were always hearing about some of them packing up, which was when things could get dangerous.

I wasn't sure if two counted as a pack or a tag-team, but I didn't want to hang around, see.

"Three, two, <u>run</u>," I hard-whispered, but when I turned to do just that, I of course nearly splatted, had to wave my arms around and grab onto Amber.

When I looked back to the dogs that had to be on us by now, all flashing teeth and slobber... the little one had its tail tucked under, was blasting off, and the big one was trying, but it was so desperate that its hip collapsed.

"What the hellity hell?" I asked.

Amber just stared after them, said, "You scared them, Tol."

I did my arms all Muppet again, said, "I'm your secret weapon, aren't I?"

"You're something," she said back, and strode forward, leaving me to watch that Spurlock's bag roll over once in the wind, twice, and then give up. I understood.

* * *

Why we were at the track, Amber told me on the curvy walk around it: so she could time me on the forty.

Me, the non-football player. Never got a flag at field day. Considered running a punishment, a last resort.

"This about my concussion?" I asked.

"Don't worry about stretching," she said.

I was stretching.

"So each of these are ten?" she asked.

The ghosts of the gridiron were still on the field.

"I think the big ones are twenty yards?" I kind of mumbled. If she bought it, then my time might be less embarrassing, right?

She didn't buy it.

Neither did she have her watch, as it turned out. Even when she backtracked to see if I'd ripped it off when I grabbed onto her.

"Coach Baker has that one on the coat peg, doesn't he?" she said, pointing with her lips over to the field house. We knew the stopwatch was there because it was how he timed us in PE.

"Let's just call him up, ask him to let us in," I said. "We can use the phone in my mom's office."

"Nice try," Amber said, already walking to the field house, so that I had to jog to catch up. "Marching band's been practicing, right? I bet they're keeping their French horns and tubas in there until two-a-days."

"Up for a little breaking and entering, sure," I said, up along with her now that we were doing something interesting. "But why does it matter how slow I am?"

"Concussion test," she said.

"You read about it in the encyclopedia?"

"Will you please shut up about that?"

I play-zipped my lips shut, kept bopping along with her.

And, yeah, "bopping"—not showing much guilt for Shannon and Lesley, right? It wasn't that I'd forgotten them. It was more that every time I thought about them, my head gummed up. So, instead, I was trying to be Happy Tolly. Not Tolly-who-kills-people-and-hides-them-who-knows-where. I was my daytime version, not my nighttime self.

"So why do you think they're here, then?" Amber said on the long way over to the field house.

"The dogs?" I asked, walking backwards to make sure we weren't about to get pounced on.

"Mr. and Mrs. Joss."

"They used to live here?" I tried. "Their son's buried here?"

"Why are they here <u>now</u>," Amber clarified.

"They heard about what happened?"

"You don't drive in from Georgia in four hours."

I shrugged, said, "Because they want revenge, like you said?"

"That's the most obvious explanation, yeah..." Amber said, stepping up onto the sidewalk finally.

I think the sidewalk from the field house didn't go that far because the players running out from it were generally wearing cleats.

"You say that like you think they're being framed," I said.

"I don't know what's happening anymore," Amber said back.

"Maybe they're framing themselves."

"Because that makes sense."

"Maybe it's something for <u>Sheriff Burke</u> to figure out?"

"Along with where Lesley and Shannon are?" Amber asked.

I shrugged, my head slowing down a bit.

"I'm going to the side door, and any windows along the way," Amber announced. "You go around the other way, cool?"

"Because the world awaits knowledge of how fast Tolly Driver can run the forty."

"Just do it."

"Aye aye, Captain," I said, launching a salute off my forehead then kind of falling off my right heel, into this other direction, which... was that from Hogan's Heroes, maybe? Gomer Pyle?

I should say, too: yeah, I knew <u>Simon & Simon</u>, <u>Hart to Hart</u>, <u>Love Boat</u>, <u>Airwolf</u>, <u>Street Hawk</u>, all the regulars, but what I'd watched in elementary had been from my parents' era, since that was all that was in syndication on the two and a half channels we could pull in: <u>I Dream of Jeannie</u>, <u>Father Knows Best</u>, <u>Leave It to Beaver</u>, <u>Andy Griffith</u>. <u>Quincy</u> if I got to stay up late. <u>Happy Days</u> if it wasn't one of the ones where Potsie and Ralph were trying to score.

Just listing these out because the viewing history of slashers probably doesn't get talked about much. It's just assumed: horror, horror, more horror, the bloodier the better.

Wrong.

Amber had all that stuff in her head, from her brother, but what I had were black and white sitcoms, each more wholesome than the last. I think of them like a pendulum getting hauled back farther and farther, though, like the heavy brass weights of a grandfather clock, swinging back and forth. What I think? I think the further back in the fifties you start, with Wally and the Beave, then the farther you splash out the other side of that grandfather clock.

Like me.

Another way to look at it, I guess, is that Amber's brother effectively inoculated her against becoming what I am. What I didn't even know I was yet, that afternoon at the track. Yeah, I already had two bodies behind me, so I was fully on the path I'm still slouching down. But I also had... not sure what to call it exactly. Willful blindness? Selective idiocy?

<u>Hopefulness</u>, I think that's what it was: I knew bad shit had gone down, and that I was involved, but it didn't really feel like me who had done it, if that makes sense. I could still joke around with Amber, I mean. Still sneak out of the hardware store I'd promised my mom I wouldn't even think of leaving.

What I'm saying is that I still believed in good things. I still had the idea that if my intentions were pure enough, innocent enough, or at least not bad and evil, all this could work out somehow. Sheriff Burke would cuff the Josses, they'd have some convoluted, sensible-to-them confession, and then Shannon and Lesley would turn up, have a perfectly reasonable explanation for being gone an explanation that didn't involve yours truly. This is how you think when you're seventeen. You still believe in the world.

It lets you do things like stand at Coach's big window <u>in</u> his office and wait for Amber to walk past, so I could tap on the glass with the legendary stopwatch, then lean back and blow on the cornet I'd found in the hall, along with all the tubas and French horns and drums.

Amber turned to me slowly, like not certain she wanted to claim me as anyone she ever sort of knew, which only made me lean back to blow on that horn even harder.

I didn't think of it then, either, but I guess when she turned to me, kind of squinting, she had to be seeing her own reflection, with me kind of this hollow shadow trapped in the window.

She shrugged, then turned around like a dancer, pointing me back to the track.

"Look at what's happened to Toll-e-e," I sang, bounding up beside her, that stopwatch swinging by my leg. "He can't beli-eve it himself..."

Amber took the stopwatch, studied it, gave it a couple of exploratory clicks to make sure it worked like she thought.

"I might fall from a tall bui-lding," I went on, shifting gears hopefully, but Amber was having none of it.

"You're not getting it, Tol," she said, moving her whole arm with the next click, like Coach always did.

"Are we putting that back when we're done?" I asked, about the stopwatch.

Amber closed her eyes and her chest shook, kind of a mix of a chuckle and a sob, like she was barely keeping it together, here. Keeping my fingers wide, so just the palm touched, I placed my hand to the point of her right shoulder. It was supposed to count as a hug. Because I sucked.

She shook her head no and stepped ahead, away from this contact.

I stayed standing where she left me, no theme songs in my head anymore

"Really, Ambs," I said. "You're kind of scaring me."

"Not as much as you're scaring me," she said back. "I called my brother," she added, which felt like a weird confession of some sort. "That's why I came up to the store." "Is he--?" I asked, not sure how to phrase it, because I knew it was Amber's greatest fear and her greatest pride both: her brother was a hero for being in the Army, but he could die from being in the Army, too.

"He's fine," Amber said, kicking a divot into the football field with her heel, and holding her arm out so I could line up with her up on the track.

"Good," I said. "But why'd you call him?"

"To ask him about you," Amber said, then before I could press her on this, she was taking those yard-long steps with the hashmarks, counting her way upfield to "forty."

"I can barely see you!" I called over to her. It was a lie, but what I meant was that, <u>wow</u>, forty yards was no joke.

After some negotiation, I talked her into timing me on the twenty instead, telling her we could double my time to see what I would have run in the forty.

"You know the twenty-yard dash isn't really a thing, right?" she said, stepping up onto the track and using her heel to drag a line into the crumbly clay for me.

"Neither is running track in the summer," I told her back.

"Okay, stay there."

"You should use a special camera or something," I said, bouncing up and down like a boxer before the big fight. "I don't know how else you're going to know when to push that stop button, I mean. I'm going to be--" I did zoomhands to show her how I was going to be so fast as to be invisible.

"Okay, Speedy Gonzales," she said, finally playing along a little.

"Beep-beep!" I said back, trying to make my head perky like a roadrunner's.

"Ha ha-ha-<u>ha</u>-ha," she Woody Woodpeckered, walking away.

My average time, from three runs, was about eight seconds. Which I dimly knew was about how long it took everyone else to go the full forty. Everyone else wasn't worried about making their form look grand and dramatic, though, were they? They didn't have that Tolly Driver <u>style</u>.

"Okay, that's good, that's normal," Amber said, then pulled something slinky and stretchy from her rear pocket.

"Couldn't find a handkerchief, okay?" she said.

It was pantyhose, snatched from the shower rod in their bathroom--in their house, their dad had his bathroom, back by the utility, and the girls had theirs,

upstairs.

"Old man race, nice..." I said, doing my cool-guy nod. Playing it up, I mean.

The old man race was from elementary. Coach would bring pairs of pantyhose and a bag of oranges to P.E., and put one orange in each foot, tie the pantyhose around your waist—around everybody lined up's waist—and that was the race: trying not to trip on your own "balls."

Sick thing was, at the end of class we got to eat the oranges.

Lamesa, Texas, 19... I guess it must have been the mid-eighties, for that? But it felt like 1955, about. Eddie Haskell would have liked that race, I guess, but Beaver would have had some moral hesitancy about the whole thing. We never questioned it though. Of course we didn't. It was the best joke ever. It did make us watch the cuffs of our grandfather's pants closer, though.

The pantyhose Amber'd brought were the knee-high kind, though, wouldn't have worked for the old man race. I guess her mom wore them to work the front desk at the Ford house? I'd never thought about it. They must have been lighter than her skin, like her top half was Indian and her legs were from some white woman, but oh well.

These weren't for Amber to wear, anyway. She wedged the stopwatch under her arm and tied the pantyhose over her eyes. I looked around vaguely for a pinata or a donkey in need of a tail, because... why else wear a blindfold?

"Okay," she said, hooking the hose up so she could see out of one eye. "I'm going down there. When I drop my arm——"

"Like Cha-Cha DiGregorio?"

It was a name kind of burned into my head.

"Like <u>me</u>," Amber said, and went down there, held her arm up, held it up some more, sneaking a last peek at the stopwatch, then--<u>now</u>.

She stopped the watch and whole-body flinched when I clapped my hand onto her shoulder.

"Again," she said, to get it closer to right.

This time when she angled the stopwatch over to cut the glare, be sure she was seeing what she was seeing, she had to turn away fast, hiss air through her teeth in frustration.

"It not working, what?" I asked, trying to see.

"It's stupid, it's stupid..." she was muttering to herself, walking over to the gravel between the track and the fence, to pinch something up.

A sharp little fleck of black rock.

"Put it in your shoe," she told me.

"Couldn't find a centipede for me to hold in my mouth?" I asked, hopping on one foot to get that hateful little rock into my shoe.

"Again," she said, and I dutifully limp-walked back to the starting line, waited for her to lower her blindfold again, and—

Next thing, I was touching her on the shoulder again.

It made her flinch again, even though she had to have heard me coming. Right?

"It's not really happening, it's not really happening," she said, plunking down all at once in the grass. When she laid back, tears were slipping out from the sides of her eyes, trailing back into her hair.

"Ambs?" I said, clumping down beside her, not even a little out of breath. I peeled my painful shoe off, shook the gravel into my hand and slung it back across the track, where it belonged.

"Not even three seconds," she said, holding the stopwatch face out so I could see where the hands were. "And I think I stopped it late."

"That doesn't make any--"

"No, it doesn't."

I laid back into the grass beside her.

The clouds were scudding across the sky, probably to drop their rain in some other part of Texas, or even over in New Mexico.

Never here.

"I think I'm scared," I finally had to say.

Amber's hand found mine in the grass, and her fingers threaded through mine, and she squeezed me so tight, like I was falling into some great chasm, and she had to hold on, hold on, if she didn't want to lose me.

It was already too late, though.

It had been since Friday night.

Summer School

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That thing with the gravel in my shoe?

I confess I still use it when it's late on a Saturday and I have to hike all the way out to the far corner of the yard and back, with a line of weekend warriors and shade-tree mechanics shuffling around the front office.

It can be as simple as a sharp piece of gravel in my boot, like Amber's brother had told her to try—a joke, I'm pretty sure—but, if I'm going to be carrying it in my pocket, then my preference is a stubby 9/16th bolt with a nut spun onto it, so I can worry it on and off throughout the day. I tried just carrying the nut, since that's what I need, but it kept getting mixed in with quarters and pen caps and twist ties and everything else in my pockets—it was hard to ferret up and get it into my boot in the two or three steps I have between the side door and the window, away from prying eyes.

Trick is, when I've got a limp and nobody's looking, I'm faster. It doesn't make sense, I know, but... it does for slashers.

Reason I now keep that bolt and nut in the cash drawer on the ones, instead of always with me? It's because, for a while, it was getting too easy. It was starting to feel like a gateway behavior—the small, seemingly inconsequential thing I thought I could get away with, that wouldn't lead to anything bad. I was fooling myself, yeah. Or, my true nature was whispering to me that this was fine, that–to use Rodrigo's old argument–this was my God-given right.

Except gods don't have anything to do with my kind, I don't think.

The Bible says vengeance is the Lord's, yes?

Not when I'm around.

Anyway, twice I've left that nut out in the yard, trying to break up with it. Once in the ashtray of a Corolla with dried blood on the dashboard, that ashtray pushed all the way in, shutting off that part of my life, and the other time rattled down over the aftermarket whip antenna of a Nissan 720 up by the gate--one of two trucks in the whole yard, cars being more what we're known for.

After a few days without that nut, though, I find myself out by that Corolla by the west fence, or up by the gate, listening to my own rationalizations. And, so far, when I make my way back up to the office, I'm half an ounce heavier.

So, now, if it's late in the day and I'm jammed, and having a sort of weak moment, I'll sneak that little nut into my boot on the way out the side door. It hurts, don't let any of us tell you slashers don't feel pain, but that enervated jolt shriking up through my leg to the base of my skull—it might be a gateway, but it's a gate back to you, Amber. A gate back to you waiting for me at the end of my mad little dash. And I can't get there fast enough, because it means lying—laying—back on the grass of the football field with you, the sky Texas blue, July all around us, my fingers twined into yours.

"We never should have gone to that party," I remember I said to you for the first time, that afternoon.

You full-body shuddered, pulled your hand away from me, and rolled over into a ball, sobbing.

I wonder if you still remember? The two of us like that?

I get now why it was so bad for you, and... apologies aren't enough.

It shouldn't have been you who had to tell me, and I'm sorry that it was. There should have been a pamphlet, a manual, a flyer drifting down from the sky to explain myself to me—what I was.

Like an <u>afterschool special</u>, I should have had to decide whether to tell my best friend, or whether to spare her this terrible knowledge.

I wish it hadn't had to fall to you, Amber Big Plume Dennison.

Not that I would have believed it from anyone else.

* * *

"Let's go up--" Amber said when she could, nodding to the home-side bleachers. They were ribbed aluminum, so wouldn't have soaked the sun in enough to cook our asses.

"Okay?" I said.

I teetered back and forth on my back like a turtle then sprung up all at once $-\underline{Gymkata}$ --so I could haul her up like the gentleman I'd always imagined myself to be. We went all the way down to the gate then walked back along the fence to take the steps up like a citizen.

It felt like a funeral procession. Like we were carrying a casket between us.

And I guess we sort of were.

Who I used to be was in it.

"Is that <u>smoke</u>?" I asked, maybe halfway to the top.

Amber looked back to me to track to where I was looking. When she didn't see it, she came back to me again, for an explanation.

"I think it is smoke," I went on, seeing this through. "My mom just blew up, when I wasn't there."

Amber shook her head, kept climbing.

Me, I kept looking behind us. Like I was going to see Shannon and Lesley down there on the field in halftime formation, going through the motions, playing their clarinet and flute. Or was Shannon drums?

If I were a better person, I'd remember. If I were even better than that, they'd have kids coming into high school right about now. One of them would probably be a glue-eater.

Had this thing not happened to me, would I have married too, hired on somewhere, been dad to a couple kids?

I can't even imagine it.

You always hear about people who suffer trauma and lock in at the age they were then, never really keep growing up, not on the inside.

I didn't know it that summer, wasn't far enough away to tell yet, but I suspect my dad was that for me. Even if Amber and me don't go to Deek's party,

I bet I'm still seventeen forever. Which plays all right until you're about twentyone, I figure. After that, it gets harder and harder to fake, doesn't it? What was funny before, it starts looking kind of sad.

But maybe I'm rationalizing, as a way to keep the grief and longing for what might have been at arm's length.

I know I wouldn't have married Amber, anyway. I mean, sure, I would have woken up at <u>some</u> point, realized how amazing and perfect she was, but... after high school, which is the time to pop a big question like that, Amber would have had so many better options than me. Not talking other dudes, here. I'm talking not getting together with anyone at all—being alone would be better than hitching her wagon to mine. My wheels were already falling off, I mean. I was a scrawny gonna-be drunk headed for scrape after scrape with the law, and already stocking up on all the excuses I'd need in ten or fifteen years, to explain why I'd never realized the potential my mom always insisted I had.

I would have dragged Amber down, I'm saying.

Even if I don't become a teenage slasher, even if Justin Joss coming back had been a vision kicked up by a peanut, even if Shannon and Lesley weren't really dead, my concussed head just dreamed that up as well, then I still wasn't ever going to make anything of myself. I'd keep using my dad as an excuse, and if that ever wore thin, then it's coming from a small town with nothing much going on that did me in, or having been born with no real talents aside from Ready Writing. I couldn't even run half a forty in the time it took everyone else to run the whole forty.

It's not best I did what I did, leaving a trail of bodies behind you is never the best way a thing could have turned out, but it is best I left Lamesa, Texas. That I stepped out of Amber's life, let her—hopefully—go on, find whatever life she deserved.

"Strappy" is in her rearview mirror where he belongs, and maybe inscribed just really lightly on the muscle of her heart, but he's not ringing any phones in her new life, he's not corrupting her kids, he's not making her husband or wife be someone they never wanted to be, to chase me off.

Once upon a time, though.

Once upon a time, Tolly Driver walked behind her up into the sky, and sat with her on the highest bench at the football field, our backs to the chain link, the parking lot below us just crickets and tumbleweeds.

Well, tumbleweeds, anyway. It was too hot for crickets.

And, the bleachers weren't the highest you could get in Lamesa—there were the water towers, the grain elevator if you could get up there, radio towers if you had the nerve—but they were high enough for us.

"So you're faster when I'm not watching," Amber said after a bit, wringing her left hand in her right and sneaking a glance up to see how I was going to take this. "And you're even faster than that if you've got a rock in your shoe."

"You pushed the button too soon," I told her. "Don't think we need to call the <u>Enquirer</u> or anything."

"It doesn't make sense, I know. But... that's the way it works. My brother told me."

"He has military intel, what? Were those, like, boot camp tests we were doing?"

"He's been watching the movies a lot longer than I have."

I nodded, had no objection to that.

"You should ask him if the initiation stuff's true or not," I said then.

"Initi-<u>what</u>?" Amber asked.

I was forever left-fielding her. Well, I mean, I'd always <u>lived</u> out in left-field, pretty much.

"Do girls not know this?" I said, turning sideways on the bench to look off the cliff behind us. It was maybe thirty, forty feet. "The guys all know. I never asked my dad, though."

"<u>What</u>, Tol?"

"The seniors used to drag the freshmen up here, make them tie kite string to their... you know."

"I do?"

"Their, um, well--"

"Their peckers," Amber filled in, because I couldn't dredge anything even close to a right word up.

I nodded, a bit thrilled hearing a girl say that, and went on: "They tie a brick to the other end of that string, then throw the brick off from here."

"Urban legend."

"The string was just long enough, but the freshmen never know that."

I grinned into my chest, just from imagining this all over again.

"Your dad would have known, yeah," Amber said.

"I thought we had forever to go through it all, yeah? That I could ask him someday when it wouldn't be, you know. Weird."

"I'm sorry, Tolly."

"It's not--it happened."

"It's gotta be bullshit, though," Amber said. "If——if they really did that? They'd have to account for different heights. Of the freshmen, I mean. And also, wouldn't one of those unravelling kite strings have tangled at some point? Or some senior used too much of the string up in the knot?"

"Or some kid dove off to--to save himself," I added. "Yeah, I don't know."

"I'm not making <u>this</u> up, though," Amber said, leaning back into the fence again, all of it rattling, her long hair blowing through the diamonds.

She held the stopwatch up to show me what she meant, and clicked her thumb on the button, starting those hands whirling again.

A moment later she shut it down, froze that clockface.

I'm not sure how that was proof that she hadn't pushed the button too early down there, but her demonstration was convincing, somehow. Maybe just because it proved that she didn't push any button unless she meant to.

A little brown bird landed way over on the corner of the stands down from us, on top of a post, and made its little sound.

I touched my own throat, suddenly worried I'd made that sound myself.

"But nobody's faster with a limp," I finally had to tell her, just to bring us back from crazyland.

"And that's not all of it," she said back.

"Do I even want to know?"

"I think you have to."

I closed my eyes hard, opened them back, and the world was just the same. This wasn't a nightmare I could wake from. "I really killed them, didn't I?" I said.

"I think so, yeah."

I blew all my air out, which I guess would have been more dramatic if I'd had my lungs filled with smoke, but, at this point in my life, every cigarette I'd tried breathing in, it just made me cough hard enough that I usually threw up.

"Tell me," I said. "Pretend I'm somebody who can take it."

"The field house was locked," Amber said. "I checked on the way over."

"Did you put the dogs out there, too?"

"Dogs do hate your kind," Amber said. "And hate's just--"

"Fear turned inside out," I finished for her, mockingly. It was on a poster by Mr. Avery's office, had probably been there when my mom and dad passed through. Maybe they'd even built the building around it, I didn't know. Why not? Amber was leading me into crazyland here, and in crazyland, anything goes.

"The field house couldn't have been locked," I told her, trying to tug us back into a place where the rules could hold. "I—I walked right in. Coach must have been up here to do something, and forgot. Or... or Janice or Mel, right? Do they keep their batons up here with all that band crap?"

"It was locked," Amber said. "Just, not for you, it wasn't. But you... you had to try it with nobody watching. I think that's a big part of it."

"Like Burke's cruiser," I mumbled, hating having to say it.

Amber nodded, had maybe been nodding the whole time.

I was breathing deep now.

I so did not want any of this to be true. And I didn't even know what "this" was, yet.

"So all dogs hate me now? Like I'm a Terminator?"

"You sort of are."

I touched my face, pushed the skin of my cheek around, but Amber knocked my stupid hand away.

"You knew that cop car was ahead of us, didn't you?" she asked. "Before we even saw it."

"Lucky."

"More like radar. It's a good thing to have if you're, you know, out killing the marching band."

"They shouldn't have tied me up."

"That's part of it too," Amber said. "It's all their fault, not yours."

I stared down between my feet, kind of nodded.

"I've always been like that, though," I sort of mewled. "Shit's never my fault, it's always somebody else who did it."

Amber shrugged, couldn't deny the truth of that.

"Remember when we got into Burke's car?" Amber asked.

"Her cruiser?"

"It took her three times to start it, didn't it?"

"And the... when that deputy's fiancee was out in the ditch with us."

Amber mimed cranking the ignition key back, feathering the gas, and did the starter-grinding with her mouth.

"That's not even..." I said. "How can a person make engines not turn over?"

"I know," Amber said. "Doesn't make sense. Doesn't mean it's not true, though."

"But your truck started just now!" I said, my back straightening with how true this objection rang.

"I got there before you did," Amber said. "On purpose."

She was right, she had. I had been dilly-dallying, I mean, touching that spray of yellow paint on the red brick of the square—I had the idea it might still be wet enough I could draw a happy face in it—but, looking back, she <u>had</u> been hustling, hadn't she? To get there first.

The Rabbit was running when I sat down into it.

"And--and what about you getting hit with a <u>truck</u>," Amber went on, "and not being in a body cast, now?"

"I'm lucky," I told her. "Charmed. The world... it already got my dad, so I get a pass."

"Or your mom's prayers saved you," Amber said, like one more thing impossible to seriously buy into. "Or... or I'm right about this."

"About what?"

"That you're a slasher now, Tolly Driver."

"A <u>slasher</u>?" I asked, pushing away from her. "That's just from the <u>movies</u>?"

"Was Justin Joss from the movies the other night? Was that drillbit he had for a hand a special effect?"

My face was hot and cold at the same time. My fingers were dug as hard as they could dig into the front lip of the aluminum bench.

"That too," Amber said, nodding down between us.

I followed her eyes down, and, one by one, raised my fingers.

There were indentions in the metal.

"I mean, we all know I'm buff," I said.

It fell flat between us.

"I'm sorry, Tol," Amber said, putting her hand over mine on the bench.

"So what do I do now?" I asked. "Not that you're right, not that this isn't batshit, but--what now?"

"When it gets dark, you go out and do it all over again."

"Shannon and Lesley?"

"The rest of them who wronged you," Amber said. "And anybody who gets in the way, or tries to stop you."

"But what if I don't want to?"

"It's not about 'want.' It's about have-to. You can't stop until... until it's over. Until all the guilty parties have been, you know. Punished. That's why—it's probably why Stace was finally able to take Justin Joss down, yeah? Because he'd done what he came to do."

"You're telling me I'm out there killing people just for tying me to a <u>chair</u>? How is braining the marching band payback for that?"

"Your logic is slasher logic now," Amber said with a shrug. "I don't make the rules."

"You just know them," I told her.

"How else can you explain what you say you did to Lesley and Shannon?"

"Concussion? Like with my eyes?"

"We already went through this," Amber said. "Your colorblindness isn't a symptom. It's a thing for hunting. An advantage."

"But look, look!" I said, standing. "The water tower's white, isn't it?"

"I think it would be white if you're colorblind or not."

"The grass is green. That truck over there--blue! Sort of."

"Yeah, it's not night."

"It'll still be blue at night."

"No, I mean——" Amber said, pulling me back down beside her. "Your rods and cones won't go all whatever until they <u>need</u> to."

"Rods and cones..." I repeated.

"They're in the encyclopedia, yeah," Amber said, catching my tone.

"But there's no proof of any of this yet," I told her. "This is all accusation."

"I think 'conjecture' is the word you want."

"Said Miss Brainiac."

"The chainsaws, at the store?" Amber said then, like a nail in the coffin of all this. "That Rodrigo couldn't start?"

"That was--"

"You're good with anything you can kill someone with," Amber said. "Chainsaws, like, <u>listen</u> to you. They stretch their backs like a cat when you touch them."

"But I don't even <u>want</u> revenge!" I insisted. "My revenge will be--like Filmore says. Living well. That's how I'll get them back!"

"That's not how it works."

"Anyway, I deserved it, I was being an ass, I splashed Mel. Can't they just... what if they told me they're sorry? Would that work?"

"Lesley and Shannon, you mean?"

I winced, stood, ran my fingers through my hair, then sat down again.

"I think the bench was already bent like that," I said. "My fingers just sort of fell into the grooves."

"Sure," Amber said, meaning the exact opposite.

"Then who's next on my naughty list?" I asked.

"Like I'm telling you?"

"But you're saying... you're saying I already know. That some part of me knows."

She shrugged yeah.

"Mel," I mumbled.

"Your final girl," Amber mumbled back.

"My what?"

"The one who finally maybe stops you."

"Mel? What, is she going to <u>baton</u>-twirl me to death?"

"I think the same way you're changing, she's probably changing too."

"Into what?"

"Somebody who can fight you. My brother says it's the way this whole thing, you know. <u>Works.</u>"

"In the <u>movies</u>," I added. "Just to be clear. In the movies that are made-up, not real, imaginary."

"Is a movie about a football team making all the football parts up?" Amber asked.

"It's--" I started, but had no end to it.

"Here's what proves it," Amber said then, and leaned back, straightened her right leg to jam her hand deep into her pocket.

What she came out with was the yellow Schrade pocketknife that had been her white granddad's, handed down through her dad like this big important ceremonial thing, but what she dislodged, that I caught on the way down, was her wristwatch.

"Oh yeah," she said.

I held it up for her to take it back.

"That was just me-reflexes," I said. "Not a slasher thing."

"A slasher would have let it fall," Amber said, strapping the watch back on and shaking her wrist to get it to fall right.

"Then you really did come up here," I told her, about her having hidden her watch so we'd have to get the stopwatch. "You really did plan all this."

"The dogs weren't me," she said.

With her hands high like a demonstration, she unfolded the big blade from that yellow knife, laid it down on the bench between us.

"You not afraid I'm gonna go all killer on you, here?"

"Pick it up," Amber instructed.

I looked from her to it, then to my hand, and finally snatched the knife up.

Schting!

I dropped the knife like it was hot.

It clattered at our feet.

"This is a <u>special</u> knife?" Amber said, diving after it.

"Sorry," I muttered.

"Again," she told me, setting the knife down between us for a second time.

"It's the metal of the blade touching the metal of the--"

Before I could finish, Amber's hand darted down, plucked the knife up. Soundlessly.

She set it down just the same.

"So this proves you're a ninja," I said. "I'm not? I don't think that's some big revelation."

"Just with your fingertips," she said, ignoring me. "Real slow."

I nodded, telling myself I could do this, and did, exactly like she said.

<u>Schtiiiiiing</u>, this time. No exclamation point.

My eyes were hot now. I was licking my lips too fast.

"I don't want to be this," I told her. "I don't want to have to... Mel, whoever else."

"You don't have to," Amber said. "I mean, yeah, you have to, but... what if we can <u>keep</u> it from happening, right? Send you back into, like, remission? Hibernation?"

"What's that?"

"It's the space between the original and the sequel. Where you're not killing people left and right. Where you're all, like, waiting to be woken up, start all the carnage again."

"Like a locust."

"Like a locust, yes."

"Good, good," I said. "Yeah, that. Please."

I stood to get this started, sort of bouncing on the balls of my feet again.

"Why me?" I finally asked back to Amber, leading us down the long, high steps.

"I don't know," Amber said. "It's... it's like you're a werewolf, isn't it? Like you got bit, like you're infected, transforming during the full moon or whatever. Justin didn't scratch you or anything that night, did he? How could he have? He was never... we didn't even get that close to him, did we?" Her hand was on my shoulder now, because that's what you do, following somebody down dangerous stairs like this.

"He never touched me," I said, or, I guess, sort of <u>heard</u> myself say?

In my head, though, I was back in that lawn chair in Deek's backyard, watching two drops of Justin Joss's tainted blood arc in slow motion across to me, from when Stace hit him into the pool.

The little starburst of a cut on my forehead wasn't just an injury anymore, though.

It was an open mouth, waiting.

* * *

Back in the Rabbit, I could tell Amber was delivering me to the hardware store.

I reached across, took her wrist right before the last turn onto that red brick, and shook my head no.

"But your mom," she said.

"She's why," I had to say.

"You're only out to get the ones who... Friday night," Amber said. I guess she'd been cycling between <u>the ones who tied you to that chair</u> and <u>the ones who</u> <u>hurt you</u>, but didn't exactly love either of them. Or, didn't like having to say them out loud, anyway.

"In your movies, are the ones who did whatever to the slasher the only ones who end up dying?" I asked back.

Amber pressed her lips together, bored her eyes through the windshield, back to all those nights watching horror movies—<u>slasher</u> movies—on the couch with her brother.

"Are parents who stand in the way always <u>safe</u>, I mean?" I added, in case she wasn't with me.

She answered by shifting into first and letting the clutch out slow and quiet, turning us away from the hardware store.

"She's gonna call Burke," Amber said. "Your mom's definitely calling her when you don't show up again."

"I either endanger her or I don't," I said. "What's the middle ground?"

"You call her. You explain it all to her."

"Hey, hey, Mom!" I said, doing a stupid version of my own actual voice, my pinkie and thumb the handset. "I know you told me to be careful, but... it turns out I'm this thing called a slasher. I've got all these powers, and all I want to do is get revenge on—no, no, I want to <u>kill</u> them, see? That's the only thing I can do. You always told me to find my reason, didn't you? I think I finally have, Mom. It's bashing heads and opening necks. Yeah, yeah—no, it's not like th—"

I hung that phone up on the dashboard, held it there.

Amber kept driving.

"She's going to freak, I mean," she said. "It's not nice, Tolly."

"Yeah, well, nice was last week. This week it's all blood and decapitations."

"I think 'blood' is sort of included in a 'decapitation'?"

"Yeah, this is the conversation I want to be having."

"Okay. How about this, then," Amber said. "What were you doing with your mom's belts all night?"

"You're calling me Boy George? Is that my slasher name?"

"You don't get a name until--forget it."

"I told you about Lesley, right?" I mimed killing him with that belt. "I guess—I don't know. We don't have a machete at the house. Do slashers make do with whatever they can get their hands on?"

Amber shrugged sure, whatever, was already onto the next thing: "<u>Lesley.</u> I forgot about him."

"That makes one of us."

"Him and Shannon."

"Thanks, yeah. I didn't just kill one classmate, I killed--"

"No, no," Amber said, not even driving us anywhere, I don't think. Just keeping us moving. "Lesley <u>and</u> Shannon, I mean. In the Fireworks Camper."

"At least they got some before I... you know. 'Got some' in a different way."

"That's what I'm saying," Amber said. "I went to church camp with Les in eighth grade, remember?"

"I think I was at a different camp."

"You don't remember?"

I nodded, sort of did: "He didn't get to finish, did he?"

It was a big scandal, back then.

"They caught him and a boy from Sterling City holding hands after the bonfire," Amber said.

"Supposedly."

"Not that supposedly," Amber said. "I was there?"

I narrowed my eyes, considering this.

"You're saying –-?" I finally asked, not having to finish it.

Amber nodded. "Lesley Cantor with Shannon Larkweather isn't... it's not something that would ever happen. He wasn't, you know, <u>into</u> her kind."

"Her kind being your kind."

"Girls, yeah."

"You heard what his dad and uncle did?" I asked, wincing from even having to remember it.

Supposedly--and not surprisingly--his dad had picked Lesley up from Bible camp down at Stanton and taken him to his own brother's house way down close to Big Lake, and when Lesley came back a week later, he was different.

"All they taught him was to hide it better," Amber said. "To not get caught. They didn't hit him in the face, but I saw him at the pool later that summer. His side was——" Amber's eyes heated up with tears. She wiped them away, shook her head no. "I think they did... other things to him too."

"Shit."

"More like shit <u>heads</u>," Amber said, making a turn too fast.

She was taking us to the Town & Country, I could tell.

"I heard they sort of, like, did things to a sheep with a mop handle or something, to show him... I don't know what it was supposed to show him. It's not like he was into sheep."

"But I saw him coming out of the camper," I said. "He was--they'd just been... you know. It was obvious."

Amber parked us in front of the Town & Country, killed the Rabbit and just sat there.

"This is where they were," she finally said, nodding inside. "Justin's parents." "We know it wasn't them, though." "But what were they <u>doing</u> here? Why this weekend, and not any other weekend?"

I shrugged, popped my door open then pulled it back fast: a welding truck was crashing in, looked to still be going highway speed.

The welder kicked his door open, caught it just before it would have forever marred Amber's truck, then stopped, seeing me sitting there.

"Waiting on me?" he asked.

He was tanner than I'd ever been, had kind of a scruffy beard and long rangy blond hair. Exactly the kind of guy who could have his pick of any senior girl at Lamesa High.

I shook my head no, sat there with my hands in my lap while he shimmied past, stuffing the last town's Whataburger bag into the trashcan on his way inside.

"Why can't I choose," I said across to Amber.

"What?"

"When I... you know. When I slasher out. Why can't I like, be all pissed at Lesley's dad and uncle instead?"

"Tolly, you shouldn't——" Amber said, holding my wrist now, like bringing me back down to earth, here. "Don't wish that. Then you'll have to live with it."

I nodded that she was right, but inside, I'm not sure I meant it. Let me choose, I mean, and I'm standing outside Lesley's house in marching-band getup and a sheep-head mask, to teach <u>them</u> a lesson.

"I don't know what they were doing here," I said to Amber about the Josses, my eyes staring straight ahead, into our watery reflection in the plate glass window.

"I didn't either," Amber said. "Until... until you told me about Lesley."

"More from your brother?" I asked.

"Just guessing. How long do you think it took Justin to walk all the way to Deek's from the cemetery?"

I hadn't considered this.

"Assuming he didn't have a limp," Amber tagged on.

"But he did," I said. "Remember? One of his legs had been... you know." <u>Tore off. Sewed back on.</u>

"Okay, even with that, then."

"A day?" I asked—a stab in the dark.

Slashers are good at that, yeah.

"So he climbed out of his grave Thursday night, then," Amber filled in. "And then his parents show up here Saturday morning, conveniently turn up on the camera in there."

She was tilting her forehead inside the store again.

"What are you--?"

"I bet Thursday night to Saturday morning is about how long it takes to drive from Georgia to here."

"So you're saying they <u>knew</u>?" I asked. "They, like, felt it in the Force, what?"

"I think if we could find them," Amber said, kind of like a question, "then... they don't even know what they're doing here."

"But--"

"I don't think Lesley knew what he was doing in that camper with Shannon, either. Speaking of, I don't know if you... okay. I never went to church camp with her, but we've been in a lot of the same locker rooms. She was saving herself for marriage."

"'Herself?" I, the smart-aleck, just <u>had</u> to say, evidently.

"You know what I mean."

"But I heard--"

"That was just Sampson talking. And you know he's an idiot."

I nodded, did. Or, if you believed Sampson, then, first, that \underline{p} wasn't really part of his name, and second, his mullet gave him what he called "chick-bagging powers." Which really, we all knew--even though he was too big to call him on it--translated out to "making up stories about all the sex he was constantly having."

Yeah, his mullet did look cool hanging out the back of his helmet in the stadium lights Friday night. But once he went military like his dad and his granddad, it was getting chopped, meaning—if we were to believe his stories—that his days of getting to second and third and rounding home with this or that girl were gone as well.

Sampson wasn't the kind of guy to think ahead that far with his lies, though. So, no, he probably hadn't really gotten into Shannon's pants. He just had the story of it, and, let's face it, anybody, even your friendly neighborhood slasher, can make a story up.

"She was a virgin before Lesley, you mean," I said.

My armpits were streaming. Sitting in the tight cab of a little truck in July in Lamesa? I'd rather have been in an Easy-Bake Oven, thanks.

But I wanted to hear the end of this, too.

"And Lesley wasn't into girls, before her," Amber added, like I might have forgotten that part.

"And... and this makes you understand the Josses being here how?" I asked.

Amber looked at me like to check if I was joking, here. Like how could I not be seeing this?

"I'm stupid, okay?" I told her.

"Justin's parents are the red herrings," she said. "They're the ones keeping the cops and parents busy, so the slasher can... do what you do. It's like, once Justin woke up, they zombie'd out, went to the car, gassed up--"

"To be a red whatever for Justin?" I asked, not really following.

"Herring, a red <u>herring</u>," Amber said back, not <u>un</u>frustrated with my interrupting. "And yeah, I think when they set out, it was to distract from him, even though they wouldn't have said it like that. But now they're here for... this. To, you know, play their part."

"Like Shannon and Lesley."

"The only virgin in the slasher is the final girl," Amber explained. "That's why Shannon..."

"So she didn't know what she was doing?"

"She was just doing it, she probably didn't even know why."

"And Lesley?"

"Were they half-dressed when you... you know?"

I nodded, added, "They were getting dressed."

"The teens in slashers are nearly always skinnydipping or rolling out of a sleeping bag without their shirts on," Amber said. "It's kind of stupid, I know. But--but Lesley and Shannon wouldn't have been getting dressed again if they hadn't been--"

"If they hadn't been--" I filled in, doing the action with my hands.

"That really how you think it works?" Amber asked.

"Like you'd know?" I asked back with a grin.

Amber didn't dignify this, just stood from her side. I followed, and then had to watch her and the surfer moonlighting as a welder two-step back and forth on the sidewalk, trying to get around each other, him holding his forty-four ounce coke high, the teeth in his smile startlingly white against his leathery skin.

How Amber had just been saying the Josses and Shannon and Lesley had all fallen into their respective roles? That was exactly what was going on here, in front of the Rabbit, under the shade of the Town & Country: Amber was grinning and looking down, playing demure and embarrassed not because she was, but because of some guy-girl dynamic she couldn't help, in the handsome face of this twenty-six-year-old probably making an impossible fifteen dollars an hour just because he could lay a bead like a line of dimes.

He could have bought her anything, yeah, could have showed her the world and then some. But? I'd seen a lot of girls from school get into those welding trucks, and they always came walking back a month or two later. Sometimes pregnant, sometimes with a black eye, but they never would say anything. Just, their life's now going this way, not that way, thanks.

"Hey!" I said to Amber, trying to stop this from being her, and she and the welder stopped their little courting ritual, looked my way.

"Oh," the welder said, swallowing his smile down and pivoting away, "didn't realize she was... <u>spoken for</u>."

It was his way of asking if Amber was with me.

"Let's go," I said to her, not him, and turned sideways to wedge between them, my hand finding Amber's as if we <u>were</u> together.

And she let me, too.

I could tell she was lighter on her feet now, though, that she was floating like a princess in a Disney movie, but I didn't stop, just kept chugging.

"What was that?" I said, holding the door for her.

She ducked under my arm, shrugged, and, no, we never would have gotten together, the two of us, but, looking back, and knowing now what I can do when I put my mind to it—no, when I take my mind <u>off</u> it—I think I would have been content to stand in the shadows for the rest of Amber's life, just to hold back all the beautiful welders massing up on the horizon, angling in for her with their cool walks and killer smiles.

Too, though?

She was, and hopefully <u>is</u>, Amber Big Plume Dennison, and she never needed anyone to fight her fights, to keep her safe. The reason she had that middle name, even, it's that she came from a people the cavalry couldn't kill, the diseases couldn't wipe out, that America itself couldn't even erase.

No, she could stand up for herself just fine, thanks.

But we're not to that part yet.

* * *

While Amber talked on the pay phone to whoever she didn't want me killing in a few hours—it was best she wouldn't tell me which marching-band idiots it was—I used my five-finger discount on a birthday card from the trucker aisle of the Town & Country.

By the time Amber got back to the Rabbit, I'd already written what I needed to, tucked it into the envelope.

"That's how you're telling her?" she asked, waiting to turn the key.

The card was to my mom, yeah. I'd scratched the birthday part out. And the cartoon dog.

"I need a plastic baggie," I said, which is a thing Amber told me I was always doing: I wouldn't ask for what I needed, because then I might be all indebted to whoever finally gave in and got it for me. I would just announce my lack out loud, generally, like complaining to the gods, and then wait for that lack to be filled. That way I wouldn't owe anybody, by what she said was my reasoning.

My reasoning that I didn't even know I was doing, yeah.

But, I mean--she wasn't wrong? In addition to killing all who I killed back then, and doing what I did with them, I was also some kind of manipulative.

Surprise. Slashers aren't just dangerous with blades and darkness. We can also weaponize the least social interaction.

Amber sighed and dug behind my seat, came out first with all the belts I'd woken with by her barn, that we'd forgotten to sneak back into my mom's closet--one of them was a murder weapon, now--and then, finally, a plastic baggie. I popped it open, gave it a hesitant sniff, on the chance peanuts were involved. I hadn't grabbed my extra EpiPen from the house, I mean.

"Frybread?" I asked, going more by the crumbs than the smell, if I'm being honest.

"Do you want to wait for a better one?" Amber said, cranking those four cylinders over, and then cranking them again. Finally she looked over to me, said, "Mind?"

I dutifully stepped out and away from the truck so she could start it, then climbed back in. It really was a pretty good little truck, so long as I wasn't sitting in the passenger seat.

Back in, I folded the card once in its envelope, sealed it in the bag, checked to make sure that seal would hold, and I didn't even have to ask Amber to take me to the cemetery. Why else would I need to weatherproof my letter?

"Sorry, Dad," I said at his headstone, and put the baggie there with a rock on top of it, and the glittery front of the card facedown, so the birds wouldn't get interested.

My mom would show up here sooner or later, I knew.

Amber was hanging a couple of graves back, giving me this moment, the way you do. But when I turned to catch her eyes about being done here, she was... ever see a cat when it's walked up onto a tarantula? It's different than when it's seen a snake. With a snake, a switch flips in the cat's head and it becomes a predator, its tail swishing back and forth, its face slack, its eyes kind of heavy lidded.

When a cat sees a tarantula, though, a different switch flips. It's not a panic thing, but the cat isn't exactly a hundred percent sure what to do about this giant spider. It's not a hissing affair so much, but it can turn into an arched-back and tippy-toes thing, anyway. With Amber, it was her eyebrows arching up, not her back. That and the intensity of her eyes, and how her hand was wide open by her leg.

I followed where she was looking, and had to gulp as well.

Mr. and Mrs. Joss.

They were half the cemetery away, by their son's burst-open--to them, "dug up"--grave.

"But he's not even <u>there</u> anymore," I whispered to Amber, even though the wind wasn't delivering my voice to the Josses.

"Where else do you go," Amber said back.

The Josses had to know Justin's body had been found tangled up in another pumpjack, like this prank would never end, but, still wanting to be as close to him as they could, they came to the one place they'd probably had so many conversations with him at. So they could remember him at rest and peaceful, maybe? I don't know. My dad was never dug up, so I can't say for sure what you do in a situation like this.

Okay, not "dug up."

More like Justin Joss woke up, climbed out.

It's a thing I can do too, I'm pretty sure. I hope it never happens, but... I don't know if I could stop it, either. Meaning, I don't know if I could wake in the musty close darkness of the coffin and not have a panic attack, <u>have</u> to dig my way up to open air.

At which point the killing spree continues, no matter how much time's passed since the first round.

Sequels gonna sequel, right?

Unless, like with Justin, you one-and-done it, get all the bad business taken care of in a single night.

Tell the truth? Justin Joss may have been the baddest of all of us, however many there are. The only reason I'm showing grey hair at my temples, I mean, it's that I didn't finish everything up in 1989, like I probably should have.

So I linger.

Ghosts aren't the only ones who have to stick around for unfinished business. Not that I want to finish what I started, mind.

Never that.

"Should we tell Burke?" I hissed, about the Josses.

"Yeah, how?" Amber hissed back.

There were no pay phones at the cemetery, surprise. Probably because if it rang and rang, finally got annoying enough, who might finally rise up, answer it?

"We should pay our respects," Amber said then, and drifted a grave ahead. "Whoah, whoah..." I said.

The Josses had already seen her, though. Mrs. Joss clutched onto her husband's arm, alerting him to us.

I had fallen in behind Amber, yeah.

"You don't know us," Amber said when we were close enough.

"Granger's girl," Mr. Joss said.

Amber nodded once, properly identified.

"And... we're so sorry about your father, Tolly," Mrs. Joss said, and just having someone blurt it out like that out of nowhere, out of <u>Georgia</u>--my eyes filled and I had to look away, breathe in deep through my nose.

"He would be twenty now," Mr. Joss said, looking down at Justin's headstone.

"Were you at that--that <u>party</u>?" Mrs. Joss asked, dialing her voice back for the emphasis, like Deek's party had been too terrible an atrocity to even mention.

"They all got what was coming to them," I spurted out before I could reel it back in, I think sort of as misdirected gratitude for them having remembered about my dad.

Amber's hand came back to mine, pushing me the kind of back that isn't physical, but that told me my contributions maybe weren't super necessary here, thanks.

"We didn't, we would never want--" Mrs. Joss started, but couldn't even finish that thought.

"Of course, never," Amber said.

"You knew Justin?" Mr. Joss asked. Translation: Had we staggered across the cemetery solely to disturb their mourning?

"Not really," Amber said. "Younger classmen, you know how it is."

Mr. Joss nodded twice fast in a lips-pressed-shut way, and I didn't get what Amber was doing then, but I think I see it now: she was telling them that their perpetually bullied son had himself been socially more advantaged than someone else--than us. Which is sort of nothing, but it's sort of everything, too. What it meant was that what had always been happening to Justin, it was just the natural order of things. It's how it goes in high school.

It's the sort of thing you could never say to someone directly, because there aren't really words for it, but if you let them put it together in their head, then it's better, sort of?

Mr. Joss put it together like he was supposed to, I'm pretty sure. Short of giving them their son back, I don't know what kinder, more compassionate thing Amber could have given them, right then. And she did it just naturally, without even having to think about it.

While I just stood there like the idiot I was, wondering why they hadn't cheered and patted me on the back and bought me a milkshake when I told them their son's killers had all been violently slaughtered in the prime of their lives.

Parents of dead kids don't automatically rejoice when they hear about more dead kids, though. They're kind of against the whole concept altogether.

"Thank you," Mrs. Joss said, reaching across to squeeze Amber's forearm and hold her eyes a moment.

"Just--be careful?" Amber said to them.

"Be <u>careful</u>?" Mr. Joss asked, a grin of disbelief to his voice.

"Everyone's on edge, I mean," Amber said. "Especially Sheriff Burke. So, if you see her? Be sure she can see your hands." Amber held her own open and innocent hands up to show what she meant. "And don't reach into your purse, your jacket," she added.

"Lacey wouldn't <u>shoot</u> us," Mr. Joss said. "I took her to homecoming, a lifetime ago."

Another thing I'd never known.

"I just don't want anything bad to happen, please," Amber said, talking mostly to Mrs. Joss.

"We'll be fine, dear," Mrs. Joss said. "This is still our home, isn't it?"

"Okay then," Amber said, her voice wavering so slightly that I was probably the only one who could hear it. When we had enough distance from the Josses, I said it, even though I didn't really want to know: "What?"

"The red herrings always die," Amber said, trying—and failing—to be matter-of-fact about it. "That's how we know it for sure can't be them."

"How 'we' know?" I asked, looking around for who else might be included.

"People who watch slasher movies," Amber mumbled.

"What about people who are <u>in</u> them?" I asked, trying to be playful like Mr. Joss had just been. "What do they do?"

Amber pulled ahead instead of answering.

* * *

Forty minutes later, we were in her cavernous barn. Though the huge sliding door for her dad's tractors was open—like there was room in the clutter to park them in there—we'd gone in through the people door.

Or, Amber had probably just gone in through the same door she'd been going through her whole life. Me, I very consciously went through like a person. Not slouched over like some kind of monster. Well, except that I was hunched over, I guess. It was the only way to not drop my mom's belts.

I dumped them on the workbench by the grinder, said, like it was an obvious fact, "You should have called Mel too."

Amber slid the big door shut, looked back through the people door to see if her mom had clocked us.

"We're good," Amber said, closing that door as well but watching the house until the last instant.

"She won't investigate why you parked over here?"

"Not that interesting a mystery." Amber surveyed the junk spread out all over the barn: half-finished jobs, projects abandoned and then plundered for parts, and then just odds and ends that didn't fit with anything else. Or with themselves.

"I don't want to have to kill Mel, I mean," I added, because Amber still wasn't answering.

"You don't get to her until you've been through all the others," Amber muttered, nodding to herself about this pile of rusted junk instead of that other pile.

"Was that why Justin..." I said, putting this together as I went: "He was working his way <u>in</u>, to Deek, wasn't he?"

Amber yelped when whatever she was pulling on gave, spilling her back a couple feet.

"But he's not a girl, and also not a virgin," I went on, with or without her. "And also not... Stace, who's both of those things?"

"The final girl doesn't have to be a <u>girl</u>," Amber explained, climbing back into her archeology expedition. "She just usually is. And... I don't know. Maybe being a virgin isn't actually a part of the whole final girl thing? Or it doesn't have to be?"

"Does there have to be one?" I asked. "A Stace, a--final girl?"

"If there's a slasher, there's a final girl. If there's dark, there's light. That's just the way it works."

"So, me and Mel..." I said, trying to picture the two of us facing off.

"It won't get to that," Amber told me.

"Because everything is different this time," I drolled out--she wasn't looking my way, wouldn't see any quotation marks I hung in the air. "Even though it's all already the same?"

"Because we <u>know</u>," Amber said, struggling to shift an old water heater out of her way. "Kids in slashers never know the genre they're in. Us knowing is our special power, see?"

It was just <u>half</u> a water heater, it turned out. Cut longways, so its gross crumbly innards were exposed.

It kind of made me never want to drink from the tap again.

"I think the genre we're in is just high school," I said to Amber after a hitch, so it could feel like I'd really thought this through. "Can a town be a genre? Are we in an <u>afterschool special</u>, really? Am I about to learn something?"

"You still don't believe all this, do you?" she asked, and let that half a water heater slap down, scaring dust and mouse droppings up at us so we had to turn away and cover our mouths. When we could open our eyes, Amber said, like this was what we were talking about, "The other half of this is the pig trough."

"Lucky them."

"Lucky <u>us</u>..." Amber announced, about whatever had been under that half a water heater.

"<u>That's</u> your secret weapon?" I asked.

"From when I had that rabbit for 4-H," she told me, and stood with what turned out to be a roll of chickenwire that had been huddled under that half a water heater for years, it looked like. Or, not a "roll," exactly. It was whatever you get when you <u>try</u> to roll used chickenwire back up. Meaning it was a <u>mess</u> of chickenwire. A tangle. A snarl.

When Amber propped it up beside her, it came up to the bottom of her ribs or so, and hadn't seen sunlight for years. Just spiders and rats and darkness.

"This should be fun," I told her.

"It's not supposed to be fun," Amber said, walking it into the light. "It's supposed to keep you from... from doing what you do."

She left the chickenwire tangle over by the workbench, liberated some pliers for both of us--bulldog for her, slipjaw for me--and we started in trying to unroll it, which was pretty much like trying to unravel the fabric of the universe.

"I called Rodrigo too," Amber said a couple minutes into it, very intentionally looking down at her pliers instead of up to me.

"Seriously?"

"So he could relay a message," she said. "You and me are going up to Muleshoe to see my cousin."

"That's almost New Mexico."

"So we'll be gone overnight. And my cousin's a doctor."

"He is?"

"As far as your mom knows, yeah. I wanted to get a second opinion on your concussion. I left my cousin's number, too. And then I called him, informed him he's a brain doctor."

"What's he really do?"

"Recaps tires for truckers, last I heard."

I slow-nodded with this, picturing it. Working tires was in a category of jobs I'd always figured were waiting for me when I finally got strong, and knew how to do car things, and shop things. Okay, and when I knew how to weld, too, which would always have me rushing around from here to there.

"Thanks," I told Amber. "I guess. But... I mean, my mom's not stupid, either?"

"Your <u>usual</u> mom isn't," Amber said, straining with her pliers.

"My what?"

"How the Josses showed up because a slasher story needs red herrings? And Lesley quit being gay, Shannon quit being a virgin?"

"But my mom isn't in this. Is she?"

"She has to be," Amber said with a what-can-you-do shrug. "And in slashers, parents are oblivious. They have zero clue. And, if we go to them for help, or to my mom or dad... it'd be talking to a wall."

"So she would have believed anything," I said. "My mom, I mean."

Amber nodded, pulling on the baling wire threaded in and out of the links of chickenwire.

"Then... why didn't you tell her I was doing church stuff, or filling out a college application, or getting a job? That way I could, you know. Go out a hero."

"You're not going anywhere," Amber said, and finally undid the key twist of baling wire keeping the remains of her old rabbit hutch tied down.

It sprung open both ways at once, nearly knocking us down.

"Are there rabbit diseases?" I asked, looking at a new dab of blood welling up from the heel of my hand.

Amber considered my hand, said, "I'd be more worried about tetanus."

"When?" I asked, about this chickenwire I could already guess she was going to burrito me with.

"You tell me," she said.

She was still holding those bulldog pliers, here. They have this sharp point on one side that's like a rhino horn, except harder. Especially compared to a human skull. She saw me watching them and set them purposefully on the workbench, then flicked them out of arm's reach. "You don't have to do that," I told her. "Probably, you shouldn't."

She was just watching me, here.

"<u>Hopefully</u> you don't?" I added.

"How long until it happens?" she asked.

I dialed back in my head, considered, finally said, "Last time it was... it'd been dark for a while? One and a half movies into the night?"

"And you knew because your eyes...?"

I nodded: because color had started to drain from the world.

"Then we've got time," she said. "One more... experiment."

I was still looking at this chickenwire.

"You know I'm not a rabbit, right?" I asked. Then, quieter, "Not a guinea pig either?"

Amber nodded over to my mom's belts, said, "Don't you want to know about your face?"

"My <u>face</u>?" "Your mask."

* * *

Amber was lining my mom's belts up from widest to thinnest——I'd have done it by length——and trying to see which buckles could go with which tongues when the school bell evidently six inches from my head exploded with ringing.

I fell back off the stool I was perched on, crabbed backwards and backwards--danger, danger.

Which was my heart taking control.

My head, even on the way down from the stool, already knew that this bell was one Amber's dad had brought home from a farm sale, then wired into the barn so his wife could toggle a switch in the kitchen, call him in to dinner. Cutting metal with a torch, making sparks on the grinder, welding that row of dimes I was talking about, it didn't matter: this was a sound he would <u>hear</u>.

"Shh," Amber said, probably about the pounding in my chest.

"Go," I told her, pulling myself up.

"I'll bring you some food," she said.

"What is it?"

"Pozole, I think?"

"Hominy," I filled in, because I'd had this at her place before. The hominy in pozole always freaked me out, because I had to imagine how big the cob it came from must have been. And then, if it was in scale to the stalk it had grown on, how big must <u>that</u> have been? And then how big were the tractors that worked those fields?

"Killers who hide in barns can't be picky," Amber said. "And, if——if you start to go colorblind..." She was looking around for what alarm I could ring.

"I'll honk the horn on the Rabbit," I told her.

She shrugged sure, said, "Radio's over there," nodding to it as if entertainment was the problem I most desperately needed to solve, and then she took another look around. A slower look. The kind where I could tell she was cataloging all the implements and tools in here that could be a deadly weapon, in a slasher's hands.

The answer to the question in her eyes was everything.

"I'm not after you and your mom, right?" I said.

"I just don't want us to be in your way."

"I'll honk the horn," I assured her. "Go, go."

The reason I couldn't come in, eat at the table--why Amber'd parked out here by the barn--was that her mom couldn't know I was out here. For if <u>my</u> mom called, asking about this cousin up in Muleshoe who was suddenly a doctor.

Sure, maybe the genre or whatever was gumming up my mom's thinking. But not enough where she couldn't put two and two together.

Amber turned, shut the door with a resounding clang, and then she was gone.

I was on my own for however long it was going to take her to eat a bowl of pozole. Or, until her dad rolled in, found me huddled under the workbench, and threw me in with the pigs like the chicken I was, just to see what kind of egg I might lay.

And all I could think of, pretty much, was that Chihuahua my mom had picked up for me from the drive-in.

When there's a Chihuahua with your name on it, it occupies a lot of your head.

To distract myself, I reorganized my mom's belts from longest to shortest, like made sense. There were seven of them, and each was a little different than the next. Nothing a guy would notice, but it was probably a world of difference to a woman--different outfits, different eras, different moods, probably ones for different times of day, even.

I tried to figure which one had cut Lesley's face in half, but there was no dried blood in any of the holes.

And then, like the night before, I touched my fingertips lightly to my cheek.

What kind of mask <u>had</u> I been wearing?

Sure, I suppose it could have just been that my fingers had been numb-maybe I'd walked through some tall weeds that had been sprayed, got that pesticide on my bare skin?--but... this had been more like how your lip's dead and doughy after the dentist. Like it had been my <u>face</u> without feeling, not my fingers.

Amber was right: I had been wearing something.

Either that or--

"No," I said, staggering back.

I pushed my fingertips deeper into the skin of my face, kneading it this way and that. Maybe my mask was still under my face, right? What if, when it was time for me to slasher out, my mask pushed up to the surface, to the outside, my face skin just sloughing off? Maybe--maybe, like a dog with a placenta, I <u>ate</u> it?

This crossed in my mind with the Chihuahua my mom had waiting, and then I was dry-heaving, was finally down on my hands and knees, waiting to throw up.

I fully expected to look up through my tears, see Amber's dad watching me, zero surprise in his eyes. Instead, at the little window over the workbench, it was Osh Kosh. Like the herbivore he was, he had to turn his long head sideways, flat to the foggy glass, to see me. Which somehow made it more judgey.

"Go!" I said to him, trying to shoo him away with my hand.

He just watched me.

I looked around for something to cover that window with, and all I could find--that I could lift--was some old wooden coatrack thing that had been banished from the house. It was a shallow little open cabinet with hooks at the bottom to hang jackets and hats from, and there was a square of mirror above the hooks, I guess to check your look before ducking out into the world.

It fit almost perfectly in the window, blocked Osh Kosh out.

Leaving me alone with these belts.

I slithered the longest one off, wrapped it around and around my forearm, the buckles and tongue in my hand to keep it tight, like armor. I held another by the tongue, whipped it back and forth a couple of times, not quite tracing a Zorro- \underline{Z} or getting that Indiana Jones <u>crack</u>, but nearly blinding myself, anyway--nothing new.

I sat the belts back down with the rest, tried to see them with Amber's critical eyes, tried to see them through all her encyclopedias.

Like she'd been doing, I puzzled together whichever ones would fit together, making a belt long enough to go around a truck.

"Mask?" I said then, still trying to see this as Amber was.

I took all the belts apart, laid them out like stripes again, and... finally wrapped the thinnest one around my forehead like a Rambo bandanna. Because it's what you do, I leaned forward to check my reflection in that coatrack mirror--having to hold the belt on, of course.

The mirror was spotted with transparency in places, like something corrosive had been spilled on it——I'm still not sure exactly how mirrors work——giving me leopard-spot shadows, but... the headband didn't make me scary. More like I was playing dress-up with my mom's stuff while she was at work.

I lowered the belt, put it back with the rest.

"Think, think," I told myself.

Whenever some comic book hero got his new powers, there'd always be a bit right after that where they also got a power that nobody ever talked about: tailoring. As in, with a bolt of fabric, they could fit and sew the coolest costume.

Was it that way with me?

I held my hands out to interrogate them. Could I... maybe not <u>sew</u>, but cobble a mask of some kind together?

The belts were my only clue, too.

I pulled up the widest one, now. Moving gingerly, like I could sneak up on this, I laid it across my cheek, pulled it at an angle around my head, then tried to buckle it back around in front of my nose. The holes were too close to see, but I finally got it done.

"Okay, okay..." I said, and felt down for another belt, wrapped it twice around my head going the other way, so it made an X across my face with the other one.

Wash, rinse, repeat with all the rest of them, until I could only see out of one eye, and could hardly hear my fingers snapping by my ear.

I leaned forward delicately to see my reflection, and when I angled over to my good eye, one of the belts—a deep one—gave up the ghost, and took the rest with it.

They sagged down, fell to my neck and shoulders.

And the way I had my head turned sideways meant that only one of my eyes was in my reflection.

Until, watching it, I turned face-on into the mirror, and that eye stayed right where it was.

I sucked a breath in, felt my bladder loosen, and--

It was Osh Kosh the llama.

He hadn't moved, was looking through one of those transparent leopard spots in the mirror's backing. Watching me the whole time.

"I don't know, okay!" I said to him, and pulled the coatrack down, set it down exactly where it had been.

"Beltface gives up," I mumbled, and sat under the workbench without turning the radio on. If Amber's dad heard it whenever he got home, he'd have to come investigate. For that reason, I turned the light off as well. But not before finding the striker for the torch, and a bright red rag from the bucket.

Huddled there in the darkness, I sparked the flint while watching the rag in my other hand.

"Red," I said.

Then I counted to a hundred, did it again.

Red.

I'm sure Osh Kosh could hear me, but I was past caring what a llama might think of me.

The beams of dusty sunlight coming in through the loose places in the barn's walls faded, faded, went.

I wanted to start counting to two hundred between each colorblindness check, but that felt like asking for trouble, so I kept it to a hundred.

And, as for this mask thing? It's hardwired into us, yeah. I wouldn't have believed it if Amber hadn't told me, but, with all this time since then to think on it, I guess it makes sense. It's never guaranteed that you're going to get all the pranksters in one night, right? So, you do like Justin Joss had done: pull something over your face, so that'll be all the survivors have to identify you by.

And, even Justin, he had to chase down the one that got away, didn't he?

I tried to imagine what kind of struggle that must have been out in the cotton fields, with nobody watching. Just Deek falling over and over, screaming for help. Justin trudging closer and closer, dragging an unconscious Stace by the hair or the leg or the wrist, his face blank and emotionless—which is another part of it, I have to think. When you see a clown mask, a goalie mask, even just pantyhose flattening the features down, you don't try to negotiate or barter or beg, do you? You just scream and run. You get reduced to your basest, most instinctual self. The rabbit in you only knows to <u>move</u>.

Which is when you make the most mistakes. Mistakes that get you killed. If you were thinking, you'd close this door behind you, you'd go out the front door instead of up the stairs.

Masks take the guilty party's thinking away.

And that's when we've got you.

I sparked the striker again, panicked when the rag looked faded to pink, but a scramble to the pegboard of tools showed me that I could still see the red handle of a screwdriver, anyway. And that red was more vibrant than the rag, which was pretty washed out.

I felt my way back to the workbench, guided myself under again, this time with that bright screwdriver.

And, yes, when I'd drawn that screwdriver down from its two-pronged little peg, it had given the little <u>schting!</u> it had to.

I was getting used to it.

A minute and a half later, give or take, I thumbed that striker, threw some sparks at the screwdriver, and: <u>red</u>.

Again, again, until the people door creaked open.

I held my breath, <u>wished</u> I had night vision.

"Tol?" Amber said.

A flashlight beam stabbed out from her, found me under the workbench.

"Smart," I told her, about the piece of rebar she'd picked up on the way in. She was holding it in front of her like a shield, a bowl of pozole in the crook of her arm.

"You're good?" she asked.

I hunched out, stood, and we both looked to the screwdriver I was holding low.

"For the red handle," I explained, and offered it across to her.

She took it, set it on the workbench without watching what she was doing. "When's your dad home?" I asked.

"Any minute," she said. "You're sure?" She flourished her fingers around her own eyes to show what she was asking: Was I colorblind?

"Hard to tell, in here," I had to admit.

I sparked the striker as some sort of proof.

"Here," Amber said, and strode across to a wall by the workbench. She flipped the grimy calendar back and back—it was from 1987—and what she got to was a <u>secret</u> calendar under that one: topless women posing by motorcycles. "Gross, I know," she said.

"Super gross," I said, stepping in closer to see just how gross this blond woman straddling a chopper backwards might be.

Amber hit me on the back of the head.

"The <u>colors</u>," she said.

The blonde's blue eyeshadow. Her shiny green G-string. The color of her, um--

"All the colors of the rainbow," I said, nodding with probably a touch too much eagerness.

It was weird, being asked by a girl to study a calendar like this. It was kind of thrilling, kind of wrong, but pretty right, too.

Amber let 1987 fall back down.

"I hate men," she said.

"I prefer women, yeah," I added.

Amber scoffed, angled her head over to listen to a truck barreling down the road.

"That him?" I asked, being perfectly still.

"It's passing," she said, nodding when she was certain about that.

I exhaled.

"So, about your mask," she said then.

"After food?"

She passed me the bowl and I slurped it down. It wasn't a Chihuahua, and the hominy had swelled up to truly disconcerting proportions, but it was good.

"Tell your mom Osh Kosh liked it," I said.

"He has better manners."

I shrugged, wiped my mouth with the back of my arm.

"Now," she said, going to the belts.

"I already tried," I said. I mimed mummying my head with them.

"And?"

"They won't stay."

"Were you going each to its own buckle, or were you mixing and matching?"

"Both," I lied. I mostly didn't want them wrapped around my face again.

"Then what?" Amber asked.

"Make-up?" I asked.

"It would have still been around your eyes," Amber said. "You don't know how to remove it, do you?"

"Scarves?" I tried. "My mom has scarves."

"But you woke up with <u>belts</u>."

"Maybe I just made a face?" I asked, squinching my cheeks, monstering my lips.

Amber didn't even dignify this.

"Again," she said, directing me to the calendar.

This time I was sure to open to a different, um, month.

"I'm starting to like motorcycles..." I said, studying.

"Please shut up," Amber said, slapping 1987 back down. "What color was her hair?"

"Blond again," I told her.

"And her high heels?"

"She had feet?"

Amber breathed in for control, for peace, for serenity, and directed me there again. I flipped to the right month, said, about the shoes, "Oh, yeah. Grey."

Amber took a long step back.

"You're sure?" she asked.

I looked again, nodded.

"Grey is for business meetings," she said. "Not motorcycle humping 101."

I touched my face, to see if I had a mask on yet.

"What do we--?" I said.

"Come with me," Amber said, and, when she couldn't carry the unrolled chickenwire herself, I hauled it out the back door with her.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Scram, Osh Kosh!" Amber said when there was an obstinate llama in our path through the tall careless weeds. I guess, really, technically, it was <u>his</u> path. But still.

He turned around in place like he was on a narrow mountain trail in South America, like he was showing off how he could balance on a dinner plate, and then he trotted ahead of us, his knees coming up a smidge higher now, because he was part of the expedition.

"He thinks he's human," I said ahead to Amber.

"Well, he doesn't look at naked llamas on calendars," Amber said. "He might be <u>better</u> than about half the humans in the world..."

I didn't have any comeback to that.

We wended past the rusted tractors, the hulls of yesterday's cars, and finally got out to the stripper baskets and cotton trailers that would never get called into action again. "Maybe they're your secret weakness," Amber said. She was considering each cotton trailer we passed, but I could tell they weren't what she was talking about.

"The belts, you mean?"

"Since you were tied up with them at the party?"

"Do slashers have kryptonite like that?"

"Final girls are their kryptonite. But they know how to exploit your weaknesses."

"Exploit," I mocked. "You know this isn't the SATs, right?"

"They use their <u>brains</u>, I mean," Amber said. "Because using muscles... the slasher will always win that game. But the final girl can outthink you."

"My concussion," I said. "Maybe that's my weakness?"

Amber didn't answer, was studying a stripper basket tipped over onto its side. The way it was twisted, and where it was—pushed in among the more crushed of the cotton trailers—it had to be one of the ones that got flung around in the tornado from Amber and my's kindergarten year. It had just torn up equipment, and a telephone pole or three, but the elementary had made a pilgrimage out to Amber's all the same, to witness this damage. I think it was supposed to make us listen when the teachers told us to take shelter.

Amber hooked her fingers in one of the basket's wire walls. It was as thick as hogwire, but with smaller links, or windows—whatever the holes in a fence are called.

"My dad says he used to ride in these when he was a kid," Amber said. "The heads would suck up cotton, throw it down on him and his brother. But it would also suck up rats."

"Rabies and suffocation," I said. "Two of my favorite things."

"This'll do," Amber decided, and dropped the chickenwire.

Instead of asking what we were doing, I just watched her climb up and into the basket. She snapped for the chickenwire and I guided it up to her. Little by little, with about a thousand snags, we worked it in.

"Now you," she told me.

I clambered in. The basket was tilted over and bent all to hell, but I could see why she'd chosen it: unlike the cotton trailers, it was fully enclosed. A cage. "This'll hold me, yeah," I said, shaking the side of the basket--trying to, anyway. There was zero give.

"Let's hope it doesn't have to," Amber said. "You're feeling good?"

I looked at my hands for color, couldn't see any--we weren't using the flashlight, didn't want to be found--then looked all around.

"I don't know?" I had to admit.

"Then, <u>fast</u>," she said, and flattened out a section of the chickenwire as best she could. "Here."

There was hardly enough room for both of us and the chickenwire in there—the weeds had been growing up through for years—but I dutifully laid down onto that first flap of chickenwire, let her fold the rest of the roll over me, lifting a hip or shoulder or heel so she could wrap me up better.

"Can you move?" she asked.

"Don't show me that calendar," I told her, because of how tight the chickenwire was across my hips. It took her a moment to get it, but when she did, she rolled her eyes.

"Now this," she said, and pulled one of my mom's belts up from her pocket. I hadn't even realized she'd snaked it.

With my help, she worked it around my shoulders, cinched it tight.

"My special weakness," I said, getting it.

"Just in case," she said back.

We both flinched when the bell in the shop rang.

"I got to--" she said, tilting the silhouette of her head houseward. "You're good?"

"I can't move, if that's what you mean."

"Then you're safe."

"Until I have to pee."

"Just go in your pants."

"Ew?"

"Hold it, I don't care."

"Thanks," I said after she'd climbed out, was just standing there taking stock of all this. "Not good enough," she said at last, then disappeared into the darkness, came back with a come-along.

"I don't--" I said, because I didn't get it, but then I did: she hooked the long end of the come-along to the cotton trailer beside the stripper basket, and the cranking end onto something I couldn't see beside me. Then, creak by creak, she tightened that cable until the cotton trailer tilted over onto what we'd been using as a hatch in the stripper basket, effectively shutting me in.

"<u>Nobody</u> gets out of this," she said, satisfied.

Her mom rang that bell again.

"I'm going to tell her I couldn't find Osh Kosh," she said, torn between going into the house and staying there with me, it looked like.

"He's a sneaky llama," I said, working with her, here.

"The sneakiest," Amber said, her fingers in the walls of my cage. "I'll check on you?"

"Don't," I told her.

"But what about peeing?"

"I'll go in my pants."

"I'm sorry this is happening to you," she said then, a slight break in her voice. The alarm rang again, for longer this time.

"It's not me it's <u>happening</u> to," I said back. "But I don't want it to be you, either."

It was maybe the most real we'd ever talked.

"I love you, Tolly Driver," Amber said, and I was glad it was dark. I was glad she couldn't see my face.

"Name him Chirpie," I managed to get out.

"Chirpie?"

"That baby bird."

"Chirpie," she said as goodbye, and, two, maybe three seconds after she faded into the night, into the rest of her life, I said it back, that I loved her too. And then I went on about how she was my best friend, how if she hadn't been there when my dad died, I probably wouldn't be here now, how she was the best thing to ever happen to me, to Lamesa, and I blubbered on and on, finally just sputtering and sobbing in my chickenwire burrito. And then Osh Kosh stepped in, right up to the wall of the stripper basket. He blew air through his nostrils—a question.

"Tell her?" I asked, because his radar-dish ears had heard it all.

He blew again, stomped his front foot once, and that was when I realized that, even though it was pitch black, I could see him so clearly. His eyes, his eyelashes.

"No," I said weakly. "Not again, please." But yes.

Skinnydipping in the Moonlight

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The other two marching-band idiots turned out to be Wes Stripling, who'd lettered in track all the way back in his freshman year, and Jenna Gonzales, soon-to-be head cheerleader, always running to the locker room right before halftime to shuck her pompoms and skirt, step into her polyester pants and cummerbund and goofy hat for twenty minutes.

When Amber had called to warn them to duck and cover, get some distance from town, arm up, hide in the cellar, not go to sleep, whatever she'd said, they'd evidently taken that as invitation to strip down and go swimming in the stock tank we all knew about off the Stanton Highway, just south of town—not that far from my house, really.

And, like Shannon and Lesley, Wes and Jenna weren't dating. Meaning they didn't have much reason to be naked out there together.

I guess I showed up just before dawn.

Slashers are Houdinis, yeah. I don't know how Amber and her brother missed this. Or, Amber even kind of knew--I'd opened that locked door of the field house? I'd gotten us out of the back of Sheriff Burke's cruiser?--but I guess her encyclopedias didn't help her anticipate that I might be able to shrug out of that chickenwire, climb up from that stripper basket however I did, and step out into the night one more time.

But, it's not like I remember it myself.

And, Amber, please don't blame yourself for this. That cotton trailer leaning down over the stripper basket, it should have shut me up until you backed that come-along off the next morning, snuck me a pair of your brother's pants.

Except slashers, we don't play fair.

Maybe I used an old tie-rod or piece of rebar to release the come-along myself? Maybe I rocked that stripper basket back and forth until the side of the cotton trailer finally broke off from its flatbed? Or, who knows, maybe one of the unbent wire panels of the stripper basket grew hinges for me, and I just had to push it open, or Osh Kosh sprung me for his own personal llama reasons, I don't know.

What I do know is that when I came to, I was wading through mesquite. I guess because slashers walk as the crow might fly—a straight line. It makes sense, I guess. Following sidewalks or roads or fences just gets you seen, and getting seen slows you down.

I'd never run cross-country, but evidently I could walk it at a pretty brisk clip.

I had my mask on, too, could feel it pressing on my face, but I no longer had any curiosity about it. Not saying slashers aren't curious, we are. Just, our curiosity tends to show itself in the moments after someone's death, when we're watching this person we've pinned to the wall's life pulse out, beat by beat. There's something about that last little remnant of maybe that we can't look away from.

It's not limited to people we've killed, either.

I can stand in place for hours and watch a windsock sigh down to its pole, be right about to die, and then flicker back with the breeze we both thought wasn't coming back. When nobody's standing in front of the counter, I can slide a penny from the ashtray by the register and spin it into a furious little blur, turn to arrange catalogs and manuals behind me, and be completely incapable of not looking around when that penny finally starts to fall over, chase its tail down faster and faster, riding its own rim, each last flurry of holding-on absolutely entrancing to me until the moment that penny's flat and dead.

I come alive for those pennies, I'm saying. They're my worst weakness. Well, okay: my <u>second</u> worst weakness.

And I would never, <u>could</u> never, slap that penny still right before it dies all on its own. Slashers don't really have an inbuilt religion or sense of decency, but there are still things that would be absolute sacrilege to us, make our souls recoil with travesty. Slapping that dying penny down, it would be the worst of the worst, an insult no amount of blood or screaming could drown.

I wonder if Amber's Army brother is still a believer in us, in slashers? If he never outgrew us, I should send him a list of things he never would have guessed could be true. Except it would always be an incomplete list. Even now, seventeen years into this, I don't really think I've plumbed every aspect of what I am. I'm not sure that's even possible—I bet slashers adapt and change to the circumstances, so they can cut through whatever situation like the softest butter. We do whatever we have to in order to keep chugging along, dragging our axe behind us, always looking ahead to the next victim, and the next.

Or, in my case: the next day, and then the next one after that, my so-called revenge perpetually delayed, always in the distance.

I didn't kill everybody I was supposed to in 1989, I'm saying. So, unlike Justin Joss, I can't rest yet. Which I guess means it's just a waiting game, now.

Slashers are good with that, though. The best. We can stand in the shadows for hours, for days, for years, and then, when the time comes, there we are, our blade already sharp, our swing always true, our faces giving nothing away.

Which—maybe that's another reason for masks? To hide our identity so we can keep killing, sure, and so our expressions can be blank and terror-inducing, making our victims trip and fall instead of get away, but... striding through that mesquite, none of the thorns were dragging lines in my face that could give me away, right?

I wasn't protecting my face with my arm, I'm saying. I wasn't ducking this or that wall of thorns. Because my face was in a shell, I didn't have to.

And, I was still a rider in this thing I'd become, like a camera inside the monster, looking out, but... how to say this: it was kind of <u>thrilling</u>, now? If, the night before, with Shannon and Lesley, I'd been trapped in the cab of a destructive tractor, slapping my open hand on the glass, screaming for someone to help me, now I was resigned to sitting in the padded seat. And when you sit in a seat like that, your hands fall naturally to the wheel, the throttle, the shifter.

I wasn't in control, no. But I could feel the controls under my hands.

Old Tolly would have been fairly terrified of being out in the pasture under the night sky. Who I was now, though $--\underline{I}$ was the scary thing in the dark.

There's a seduction in that.

And, that slasher logic Amber had been talking about... I could feel it now. It was whispering to me, like. No, Shannon and Lesley hadn't deserved what I'd done to them, not even a little. But? Stand them up alongside the rest of the high school and they did deserve it just a little bit more than most everyone else. They <u>shouldn't</u> have belted me to that lounge chair by Deek's pool—they <u>shouldn't</u> have enacted mob justice on me, made themselves judge, jury, and executioner. Well, jury and executioner, anyway. I guess Mel was the judge, for that.

What I'm saying, though, is that they'd overstepped.

And so, in a sense, they were asking for this--for me.

Them being at the Fireworks Camper like they had, then, it was just them setting out an invitation. Because they also knew what they'd done was wrong. They knew their punishment was coming. Yes, they ran from it, but that's what you do. Even when your mom's swatting your behind with her sandal, you might know you deserve it for having dropped her earring down the garbage disposal or whatever, but, all the same, you reach back to cover your ass, keep that sandal from making contact.

I'm not saying I <u>wanted</u> to kill Shannon and Lesley, or Wes and Jenna. But I'm not saying they were completely innocent, either—slasher logic.

As for how I knew they were going to be out at the stock tank, though, I have to suspect it's that cop radar Amber said I had, just, it was dialed over to "Skinnydipper" instead.

It's a setting slashers have.

We also know when people are making out, when they're in the shower-you know how we are, where our tastes run.

And I'm just trying to make this walk to the stock tank longer, I think. But it was nearly twenty years ago, too. Wes Stripling and Jenna Gonzales are just bones and rot in the ground, now.

And, no, I don't know for sure what instrument Shannon played in marching band. I do know what Wes Stripling played, though: trumpet. I know because, about a quarter mile out from the stock tank, I could hear him playing it.

<u>Ceee</u>, <u>Ceee-Eeeeff</u>.

<u>Ceee</u>, <u>Efff-Ayyyy</u>.

That's "Taps," yeah.

It was so clear and mournful in the dark that I stopped crashing through the mesquite for a moment, just to give these long, pure notes more space to fill.

I breathed in through my mask, whatever it was, and then out again, and that was when I saw it, spinning up into the sky, twirling high enough that the sun breaking over the horizon could just glint off it.

A baton.

* * *

Given the choice, I bet the slasher in me would have chosen full dark for this skinnydipper massacre.

You have to take victims where and when you find them, though.

So, the stock tank at dawn it was.

And--do I need to explain that? In Lamesa, in all of West Texas, there aren't creeks or rivers or lakes. Not really. There's pools at the Richie Rich houses like Deek's, but they frown on random skinnydippers invading their backyards at three in the morning.

So, if you want to swim, it's either a stock tank now or, I don't know, Balmorhea three hours later. Which——I'm being dramatic. You could just drive two hours to San Angelo, jump in the river there. You could slip up to Snyder for Lake JB Thomas——it's uglier than sin, but it is wet. Forget about Big Lake, though. That's just its name, not its description. And there's a lake down at Robert Lee, but if you're not into moccasins and rattlesnakes latching onto your face, then you probably want to avoid that one.

I guess I'm forgetting Lake Alan Henry, which is closer than all of them, but for some reason that was always a place for Lubbock people to go, not us.

So: stock tanks. They're about the size of an above-ground pool like you see in a thousand backyards nowadays, but they're a couple feet deeper, and have these thick concrete sides. The cattle don't actually drink from them, either-- they're not that tall. They drink from the little trough the tank drips down into, working on a float kind of like a toilet's. And there's usually a windmill alongside the stock tank, pumping the water up from the ground.

Which makes them sound pretty ideal, I know.

They're not. But, if you're desperate enough to be naked with someone in the moonlight, then yeah, you can brave that scummy water, you can stand in the algae or pond weed or whatever kelpy stuff that is that grows up to the surface. You can latch onto the side if you don't mind years of white birdshit under your fingers. You can lower yourself to eye level with the water and watch the bugs skate every which way from your face.

Just, don't inhale that metal-tasting water if you can help it. And don't smell your skin after you get out.

Maybe back in Old West times, swimming in a stock tank was the best pleasure, I don't know. But they also just yanked people's teeth out left and right, so I'm not trusting any cowboys from back then, thanks.

Still, the same as riding a pumpjack could sort of be an initiation, if you lived through it, so could swimming in a stock tank. Kind of like a test you had to pass. A badge you earned, showing that you were really from West Texas.

Me, I'd been out there once, with Amber, just to see what the fuss was about.

We'd stood on the water trough, looked down into that impenetrable water, and shaken our heads no, never, no matter what. If this was a ritual of high school, then we needed to be part of something different now, please.

Not so, for Wes and Jenna.

Wes, still haunting the coming dawn with his trumpet, was halfway up the windmill, naked as the day he was born, his muscles all contorted and weird from being so starved down from track and then blowing his heart into that horn.

Jenna was treading water in the center of the stock tank, her right hand thrust up in metal horns, her head thrashing back and forth, the tips of her black hair touching the water three feet in front of her and then slinging back, kissing the surface of the water behind her.

This is the same Jenna who worshipped Whitney Houston, probably had no idea who Lita Ford or Vixen were.

The part of me that was still me appreciated this change in her. The part of me that was more predatory was snapping my eyes over, though, for the flurry of motion that resolved into that baton erupting up into the sky again, even higher this time, hanging even with the vanes of the windmill for a moment before plunging back down to the other side of the stock tank.

Me, I was standing just back from the dirt that had been packed down by thousands of days of cattle coming in to water, and everything was that nightvision kind of black and white, like there was a spectrum of light shining out that only my eyes could register, washing everything pale and grey.

Looking back, no, this wasn't the Jenna Gonzales who had told on me and Shannon eating glue, but it also wasn't the same Wes Stripling I'd known since second grade, when his family moved to town. Wes wasn't holy roller like Jenna was, always taking on whatever extracurricular activities would keep her from having to decide whether or not to smoke cigarettes under the bleachers with the burn-outs, but that's just because Wes's one true religion was track——he was only in band so he wouldn't have to sacrifice his body to football and basketball. His body was his temple, I mean. He might have a beer for show, like at Deek's party, but he would never inhale anything but air into his lungs, and, as pertains to skinnydipping all night, he would never miss the sleep he knew he needed, I was pretty sure, and I was certain he would never do anything to endanger the track scholarship he all but already had.

But here they were.

According to Amber, they were sort of zombie'ing into pre-assigned roles, I guess you could say? Because of me. Because I was what I was, now. So, in turn, they had to shuck their clothes, sneak a twelve of beer, and head out into the night to give themselves to justice.

What I suspect?

I suspect they'd been there since midnight or so, waiting for me. But I was so far off it was taking me forever to walk in. They couldn't leave, though, meet me halfway. The rules are the rules. So they swam, and they swam, and they climbed the windmill, and their skin was probably pruned, their teeth chattering with cold, but they couldn't stop this loop they were caught in.

Wash, rinse, repeat, until I showed up to release them.

I'm staging this like I'm doing them a kindness here, I know. Like, the same as them, I'm just fulfilling a role, serving a function, doing what had to be done.

Don't let me sell you that, though.

I had to kill them, yes, but I don't think I <u>had</u> to. What I'm saying is that, yes, they were the guilty parties, I was the hammer balancing the scales of justice, and we were bound to find each other in the night, but... couldn't the me trapped in this have stepped loudly enough to have alerted them? Didn't I have at least that much control?

<u>Run!</u> I like to think I could have said.

Except what was roiling through my head, what was becoming larger and worse in the rearview with each step I'm taking through the mesquite that night, it was how terrible it had been to be strapped to that lounge chair by the pool. How this had been five against one, and that one had been drunk past being able to defend himself, and that, really, the only reason he'd been drinking in the first place was to, for a moment, forget that his dad was gone and never coming back. So, pretty much, what they'd done at Deek's party was spit on my pain, on my grief.

And now here they were flaunting their youth, celebrating how free from consequences they were–how <u>alive</u> they were, when my dad wasn't.

It's not a sound argument, I don't think, but... if it feels true, then it's true enough, isn't it?

What I knew? I was hurting. And here were the people who had hurt me.

The next step was obvious: give some of that back to them.

With interest.

The first step of that was just to stand there. Like I was saying, slashers are good at waiting. At looming. At bringing the menace. I just stood there at the edge of the mesquite until Wes, cannonballing off the windmill for probably the fiftieth time that night, saw me on the way down.

After his splash, the water still surging back and forth, Jenna riding it up and down, her hair spread out all around her like an oil spill, Wes came up sputtering, pointing over the side, where I'd been.

"There's someone, he's watching!" he was saying, hopping up as far as he could to try to see me again.

Jenna looked around slow, like she wasn't checked all the way in.

Behind her, that baton spun up into the sky again, held in place like the rotor of some invisible plane, and either the me who had failed pre-algebra or my always calculating slasher instincts added up that neither Wes nor Jenna was waiting to <u>catch</u> that baton.

Before I could get everything properly assessed— $-\underline{tactically}$ assessed—Jenna stood up and \underline{up} from the stock tank. She wasn't really nine feet tall, but she was on Wes's shoulders now, her hair functioning as a pretty good bikini top.

"What?" she said in her disconnected way. "When do the cows come in, you think?"

"It wasn't a cow!" Wes said. "It was--his face!"

Jenna, in response, cruciformed her arms out to the side and fell slowly back into the water.

I was standing alongside Wes's shortbed Chevy, now. It's another thing that's automatic with slashers: we don't skyline ourselves, always choose to be alongside something that can disguise our shape, not give us away until we want to be seen.

From the truck, I could see that baton twirling on the palm of a white hand, a falling star that was too hot to hold, but if you could keep it in motion, keep it spinning, then you could glory it around in the most sparkly arcs. What I was saying about pennies winding down on some flat surface faster and faster? There was a bit of that to a baton, in motion. It was entrancing, kind of zoned me out a bit, gave me that good swelling feeling in my chest like I was standing in a giant balloon steadily inflating, and I could breathe that rubber-tasting air in, let it suffuse me, this wonderful new pressure hugging me all over at once.

This time when the baton launched up again like a catharine wheel, its path both wild and controlled at the same time, I followed it up and up, where it hung and fizzled in the sunlight.

When it came down, it was into that white hand, whose arm and shoulders and head and body had had to step to the side a bit to catch this magic, and that's when I knew who it was, without even having to see her face.

Mel.

Unlike Wes and Jenna, she wasn't naked, was in the Rocky Mountain jeans and a halter top every girl in Lamesa was wearing in 1989. She had her back to me, but, with my sharpshooter eyes, I could see that the veins in her arms and shoulders were bulging, crisp on her skin. Meaning she'd been hurling that baton up into the sky for hours and hours, caught in a loop of her own.

I nodded about her, but told myself she was last, she was <u>after</u> Wes and Jenna. And, this was me, Tolly, saying this to myself, not slasher rules dictating anything. But it's what Amber had told me: the final girl is last, the same as Deek had been for Justin. And that she's usually got some sort of secret weapon or ability or knowledge that helps her—that baton, and how I couldn't look away from it when it was going good.

I stepped around to the other side of the stock tank, and, using both hands, my back, and both legs--I still weighed what I weighed--I yanked away the narrow pipe that had been dripping water into the trough for probably three decades.

It was about as wide around as a mop handle, and about as long as one too.

"Go high, go high!" Wes said, clambering up onto the side of the stock tank and jumping for all he was worth for the cross supports of the windmill. He caught them with his chest, held on, and then was in a panic to get higher, higher.

Behind him, Jenna was laughing in her dopey way--maybe they'd spirited away more than a twelve pack, had been through a whole case by now. And, if she wasn't the kind of girl to smoke cigarettes under the bleachers, then no way did she have any kind of tolerance for beer.

Instead of showing myself yet, I hefted that pipe on my shoulder to get its balance, its feel, and then I took two running steps, javelined it up at about a forty-five degree angle, and I swear there was a moment in that pipe's missile trajectory where my eyes zeroed in through the inch-wide hole at its center, so I saw Wes's pale skin there.

And then it was driving in between his shoulder blades, splashing out tight in the crotch of two crossbars, pinning him to the windmill like a bug.

Now Jenna screamed, finally waking up to what was happening.

Exactly, either me or my slasher self thought--I was losing the difference between us.

Though dead, Wes was still twitching up there.

Worse--or better, depending--his meat and grossness had impacted into the pipe, was coming out the back of it now like slow sausage.

It drip-dripped down in a neat six-inch or so length, plopped into the water.

Jenna screamed some more and splashed away, but now we were in what I call that old under-the-bed-scenario, where you can't come out any side, since you don't know where your killer is.

Jenna tried the far side, right under Wes, which was nervy, but then I clapped my hand over that concrete lip, driving her back.

She never stopped screaming here, either. Just one long, constant wail trying to taper off into sobs, but this wasn't the time for crying, yet. This was the time for screaming, in the hope that someone would help.

I'm not sure where Mel was for this.

For the moment, it was just me and Jenna.

She went to the far side of the tank, by the truck, but when she hiked herself up to fall over, there I was waiting.

She fell back, probably scraping her forearms on the rough, wide lip of the tank.

"Go away, go away!" she said, slapping the water now like that might be the thing that finally drives me off, keeps her safe.

By the time I finally thought to look for Rocky Mountains and a halter top, a baton was connecting with the bridge of my nose, sending me teetering back. Which is another reason for a mask, I suppose––or, the same reason: damage control.

Without padding, that baton might have knocked me out, given these wouldbe victims time to run me over and over with the truck, or chain me to the base of the windmill, or drown me.

Except, of course, whenever the slasher's knocked down, everybody just scrams, I know. Because it's "over now." "He could never get up from <u>that</u>."

This time, I didn't have to.

I caught myself on the side of the tank, shook my head twice, fast, and looked up to the source of this blow.

There was nobody there.

Of course. Because final girls, they adopt the tactics of their attackers, don't they? The prey turns around at the pivotal point in the chase, has been a predator all along.

I got my feet under me, stood, and instantly conked my head on the pipe I'd broken off. Instead of snapping off in the concrete, it had been rusted enough to break about a foot out from the side of the tank.

I checked behind me for twirling batons, and both ways along the tank. When I was alone again, just like the song, I clamped both hands onto that pipe stub, as close to the concrete as I could, and I kind of sideways climbed up the concrete wall, so as to give that rust-crumbly stub all my weight.

At first, nothing happened, because why would it, but then I started jerking, and bouncing, working it back and forth.

All at once, the pipe gave maybe four inches, a surge of water gouting out around it.

I pulled hard, using muscles and weight, and that pipe was still solid enough in the six-inch thick wall to finally collapse the concrete out.

Gross water poured out past me, taking more and more of the wall with it, until a whole section fell outwards.

The stock tank was a dam, bursting.

"Noooo!" Jenna screamed, halfway up the other side of the tank.

The water had her, though. She held on as well as she could, but the top lip of the tank was too wide for her hands, and she didn't have an arm hooked over yet, so--

Hello.

She slid past me, rolling fast on her side when she finally touched the ground, her hair wrapping around her like a shawl.

When she looked up, I was standing there.

"T-<u>Tolly</u>?" she sputtered, shrinking into herself.

I touched my face, sure my mask had been taken in the water, but no, my fingertips still didn't touch my face, quite.

She must have recognized my build, my body language, my size or lack of size, I don't know. But? It could have been the rules, too. At some point in slasher stories, I'm pretty sure someone figures out who's behind the mask.

It's their own death sentence.

"We didn't mean anything bad!" she said, using her elbows to try to crawl away on her back. But she was also trying to keep herself covered, as if that mattered anymore—as if she hadn't been naked since midnight—and there was a wall of prickly pear behind her, anyway.

She jerked back when her scalp caught a spine.

"You don't have to..." she said, crying now that the screaming was over. "I'll--I'll do charity stuff, I'll become a nun, I'll leave town, I'll quit band, I'll never swim again, what do you <u>want</u>!"

If I could have spoken here—if my kind was into that kind of thing—I would have told her that what I wanted was for all this to just be over. But underlying that would be the truth that it couldn't be over as long as she was still alive.

<u>I'm sorry</u>, I said inside, while at the same time stepping forward, onto her left hand.

She tried to pull away but I ground down, bringing her other hand over to try to stop this pain.

At which point I reached down for a handful of her hair and wrapped it around my hand twice, leaving about two feet of that silky blackness between her head and me.

Instead of grabbing my hand to make this harder, Jenna used the hand and arm she had free to cover herself, which I guess must be more automatic than I ever would have guessed.

What it made it feel like, though, was that she was helping me, here. That she was giving her neck to me.

I took it.

Her hair looped around her neck easy as anything. I took my shoe off her left hand, planted it high up on her chest, and pulled back for all I was worth.

It cut her scream in half.

With Lesley, when I'd had that belt looped through his mouth, he'd been facing away from me.

With Jenna, I had to watch.

She was wet already from the stock tank, but even so, I could see the tears streaming from her eyes.

Her face, as much as it could, with her skin, went... not so much "red" as purple. And her mouth was open, trying to gasp any bit of air she could past this strangulation. But it was hopeless.

Using both hands now, at last, she clawed at my shins but her nails just broke off against my denim, so she scratched at me with bleeding fingertips, her feet pedaling uselessly behind me, pushing her back a few inches, then a foot enough to run her into the base of the cactus again.

Moving slowly, so as to not overbalance, I reached ahead, broke off a high patty of prickly pear, and covered her face with it so I wouldn't have to see her seeing me.

The spines pushed into both of us, but the cactus stayed there.

Now, instead of tears, there was beautiful entrancing almost iridescent blood trailing down the sides of her face.

I shook my head no, couldn't get lost in that right now, and I was in control enough to <u>think</u> that, but I was also in too far to stop this, so I just leaned back more, and harder.

After maybe forty-five seconds of this, Jenna's legs stopped pedaling, and she got off this bicycle called life. Her hands sagged down from mine.

I pulled even harder for ten seconds, then let go all at once, falling back, tripping over a clod of concrete, splashing down into the mud. I was breathing hard, was sort of crying behind my mask, even, which I think meant I was kind of waking up, coming back to myself?

Which is when the truck's headlights speared me in place.

I shot my right hand up to shield myself from the brightness, which was a me thing, not a slasher thing, but then had to feel the real danger in the ground: the truck was <u>coming</u>.

It spun in place, digging for purchase, and when it got it, it fishtailed right at me.

In the alley behind the hardware store, I'd taken a hard jab from a tall truck and come out all right. But I'd been standing, then.

Sitting on my ass like I was, this chrome bumper was going to jam into my face. Mask or no mask, that would be bad.

Yes, I think I can come back from most things. No, the grave probably doesn't stop me, is more of a cocoon than a final resting place. Still, that same way you can't help but try to stop your mom's sandal from swatting you? Even if it's just a foam Tiddie? Instead of holding my hand out to try to stop this truck, which would have been hopeless, I don't care who you are, my slasher brain took over again, knew instantly the only hope I had: to lie back flat.

Wes's truck wasn't 4x4, was just street, but still, it had some clearance. And, even with that, I only could have been lying in one of two places—–either left or right of center. Enough to clear the rear differential, but not far enough over that the Pitman arm up front would drag a furrow in my face. Or, talking the rear end, the long ends of the upside-down U-bolts keeping the leaf springs attached to the axle housing.

And still, if I hadn't turned my head to the side, I still don't think I make it. And if—let's be honest—if we hadn't been in West Texas, where the ground's baked so hard that it doesn't know what to do with precipitation, so just passes it downhill and downhill for this season's flash flood, then the truck's front tires would have sunk down an inch or three, lowering its clearance.

The gods smile on slashers, though. Maybe it's because we stand for the downtrodden, because our missions are so righteous, I don't know.

Whatever the case, Wes's truck crashed over me and into what was left of the stock tank, and only came to a hard stop when, its momentum drained, it made sudden contact with the far wall of the tank.

I lay there breathing in and out, in and out, sort of just testing whether I could still do a thing as simple as that.

And then, like I had to, I sat up from the waist, all at once.

I stood in the rubble, regarded this truck. Its taillights were washing me and the whole night red and alive. Truckers and early morning risers—including pumpers—passing on the Stanton Highway had to have seen our glow out in the mesquite, but probably figured we were some rancher working on a pump, or deworming cattle. Which is another thing about West Texas: you don't ask questions. Ever. If you see someone doing something out in a pasture, you just pass right on by, tell yourself it's none of your business.

We were safe, I mean. I wasn't worried about the noise we were making, the light we were throwing.

I stepped forward, through the shattered concrete and slick greenness, and stood directly behind the truck.

It had stalled.

In the cab, Mel came awake with a gasp, must have conked her head on the steering wheel. I touched my own padded forehead, knew the feeling.

She twisted the key with her whole right side, got nothing. Then, making herself calm down, she pushed the truck up into Park, tried again.

The engine turned over once, sputtered, and by the time she twisted it again, I had my hand clamped on the tailgate.

The starter just spun, but, in the engine, because of me, the spark could no longer find the gasoline.

Mel screamed, didn't even sound like herself anymore.

I stepped up onto the rear bumper, hoisted myself over into the bed.

She saw me in the rearview mirror and pushed forward, away from whatever I was about to do, which was right when another plug of meat from Wes fell like a bloody turd down onto the windshield.

Mel screeched and pushed away, then clawed at the door but it was jammed from how the front quarter panel had wrecked back into the hinge.

She beat at the glass but just with the heel of her hand, not with anything sharp and sudden.

The window didn't break.

"Noooo!" she screamed, probably mad at herself for having tried to take me out rather than just peeling away in Reverse like she should have.

When you're a final girl, though, you have no choice, right?

I stepped forward, was halfway to her now when I sensed movement, looked immediately up to it: Wes, golden in the coming sunlight, was sliding down the length of that rusted pipe. The impact of the truck hitting the sidewall of the stock tank, that was connected by pipe to the windmill, must have changed the angle of something enough for gravity to get hold of him.

After about four seconds, he finally fell off, into the darkness we were still in below.

He--there's no other way to put it--<u>burst</u> on the windshield of his own truck.

Mel screamed even louder somehow and pushed back as far as she could, her voice different than I remembered—not that I'd ever heard how she screamed. She pushed away from this gore smeared on the shattered glass right in front of her face, and—

One end of the shiny baton I'd picked up from the bed of the truck spurted out through her mouth.

You'd think this would be hard to do, as those batons have blunt, rubber tips at either end.

It's all about how hard you drive it, though.

Trust me, it can go through a back window like that, can crash through the back of a skull and come up through the throat.

One of Mel's teeth clattered onto the dash, rattled into the defroster, and one of her feet, still pushing, climbing, trying to run from this, turned the wipers on. They flopped back and forth, through the stringy chunks of Wes, through the pebbles of safety glass, and, I guess I should be embarrassed to say I was captivated by how each time they struggled to rise again, it was a bit slower, and slower, and then... nothing.

I stood there in the bed, one hand to the top of the cab, and only looked behind when the sun finally crashed down on me. I held my hand up to block the light, then lowered myself out of it, because the darkness is where I belonged, now.

Shifting my weight in the bed like that changed something with the connection the wipers were trying to make, too, and they sputtered back to life for a magical little moment, dragging themselves slower and slower through Wes's redness, leaving a sort of streaky, monotone rainbow in the hazy new sunlight.

And then, fixated on the wipers, I changed focus and saw myself, small in the rearview mirror.

My face was black, and crisscrossed somehow, with an uneven slit to see through.

I touched my cheek again, was touching one of my mother's belts, wrapped around my head, buckled into a different belt.

Amber had been right.

Again.

* * *

Just like an Old West cowboy, what I did next was bathe as well as I could in the... "drinking trough"? I'm not sure what to call it, exactly. I would have said "tank," which makes complete sense, except the truck had just crashed through the tank, and I can't use the same word for both, can I?

Anyway: the little oblong rectangle of concrete maybe two feet deep, that the cattle actually drank from, that people are always getting thrown into in Westerns.

This is how I know that the water in the stock tank had tasted like metal.

I unwound the belts from around my head and laid them out like dead snakes on the concrete wall of the tank that was still standing. And, I don't know how they did it, how they knew, but this is also a thing that happens in the movie: Strappy unwinds the belts that make his--<u>my</u>--mask up, and lays them out very intentionally on the short chain link fence around the football field, walks away from them, for his mom to find the next morning.

And, no, I never got bigtime enough to have an actual mask at any store, I don't think. It was just a TV movie, I mean. There and gone.

And, yes, my mom probably did notice all her belts weren't in her closet anymore, and make the connection to accounts of me and the horrorshow face I was flashing all over town, but she never found them striping any fence or wall or stock tank or tailgate.

I did think everything was over at last, though. That all that was left now was somehow living with the memory of all this, and not getting sent over to Huntsville for it--it still didn't feel like my fault, I mean? I know that doesn't exactly track, since I was saying Wes and Jenna and Mel were pretty much asking for it.

I was still considering myself a victim in all this, though. If that drop of blood doesn't arc up from Justin Joss, I mean, splash into the cut on my forehead, then I never get infected, right? And if I never get infected, then I don't have to transform at night, follow through on this whole vengeance thing.

<u>Again</u>, please don't let me tell you I'm a good person in any way. I don't claim not to have done what I most definitely and really did. My hands are forever red, and my heart will always be black. But, for that second part anyway—having rot and corruption inside you—I think that, so long as you never act on it, then you're maybe not that bad a person. You've just got to control these roiling evil impulses.

If Justin's slasher blood never finds its way into my veins, I think my bad impulses stay just that: impulses. I slowly, via ten thousand beers and as many poor decisions, destroy myself, but I probably don't drag a bodycount.

I don't know.

That morning, anyway, I splashed my face with cold water and shook my hair, then did it again and again, trying to get the ridges on my face to go back down. They were from those belts being strapped so tight.

The bridge of my nose was sore too, from that baton Mel had caught me with. I moved my nose back and forth to see if it was broke. It wasn't. And, idiot that I was, I was kind of bummed about that—I'd always thought that people showing off once-broken noses were tougher, were cooler. That welder that had danced with Amber at the Town & Country, I mean, I bet he'd had his nose broke a time or two.

The belts had held me together, though. And, this time I hadn't even had to whip one off to use as a weapon.

My hand still stung and sort of ached from the cactus spines, but—it was weird: it hurt on the inside, but wasn't showing any holes on my skin.

It's a slasher thing, I'm pretty sure. If you've been out all night mauling, getting whacked with batons and hit by trucks, any of that damage being on display the next day in Geography will give away who you are. So, the damage stays on the inside. You might wince walking into class, but that doesn't scream

"slasher" to last night's survivors, sitting in the back row. Wincing's just the logical response to proximity to math.

I whipped my hand back and forth a couple of times, trying to shake the sting away, and squinted across the top of the sea of mesquite I was standing in. What now? Walk away? Try to bury Wes and Jenna and Mel, and hide the truck too?

Stupid.

When the cattle in this pasture turned up dying of thirst, someone was going to come out, check what was wrong. And there was going to be a lot obviously wrong. More than I could hope to hide.

I stared up at the windmill.

It was churning slowly, facing the sun.

My shadow stretched out before me like my other self. I turned away from it, studied the truck, told myself the one good deed I could do would be to make cleanup easier—make it where the truck could be backed out, wouldn't have to be pulled. And all I had to do to let that happen was turn the key back, so the battery wouldn't get sucked dry.

This was sort of self-punishment too, I think. Making myself face Mel in that cab, I mean. Making non-slasher me be that close up and personal with her.

I fully expected to dry-heave, throw up.

I deserved so much worse.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I rounded the bed, slithered between the shattered concrete wall of the stock tank and the side of the truck, and, just like Mel had already found, the door didn't open, no matter how hard I pulled.

It shattered with a piece of concrete, though.

The glass crumbled over Mel and stuck to her frontside, where most of the blood was.

"Just do it fast, do it fast," I told myself, which was exactly what my dad had told me the first time I'd ever had to gut a fish.

That time, I'd failed, not had the nerve.

I wasn't going to let him down this time, though.

I breathed in and held it, didn't want to smell the inside of Mel's head, and reached in past her, my elbow dislodging some of the glass glittering on her chin, and felt for the ignition. The keys came out easy as anything, and the wiper motor stopped making its buzzing, please-kill-me sound.

I dropped the keys on the seat, praying they wouldn't lose themselves in the front pocket of Wes's saddleblanket seatcover, proceeded to reel my arm back as delicately as I could, but at the last moment, the bulge of my thumb caught the grabby, tacky end of the baton extending from Mel's mouth, and turned her face to me straight on, her mouth open in a forever scream.

And--and--

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, but it was too big to get down: <u>it</u> <u>wasn't Mel looking at me from the other side?</u>

It was Janice Dickerson, Lamesa High's <u>other</u> baton twirler.

I fell to my knees, my chest heaving, my breath too fast to do any good, and I just stared at my hands, framed by the stained knees of my jeans.

At first there was still dark red lining my nail beds, but as I watched, that dark red darkened ever more, become almost black.

Because I was going colorblind again.

I pushed away from this, stood, and fell through the mesquite, trying to get away from what was happening to me, but you can't run from what's inside.

My memory stops there, maybe fifteen feet into the mesquite.

Because this isn't over yet.

* * *

From the two times this had happened to me before--my vision washing out, vengeance or the genre or whatever puppeting me around--I had the dim notion that the slasher could only claim me once the sun went down, but, so long as it was daytime, I was still my same old self.

Wrong.

You shouldn't try to base a pattern or a cycle on just two times. Maybe not even three, or five. Wait until it repeats and repeats some <u>more</u>, right? Then you can say what a cycle even is: it starts <u>here</u>, it ends <u>there</u>.

So, no, I don't know what happened after I rushed back into the pasture, to try to get away from myself. My mind just winked out. My guess? First thing I did was go back for those belts, because masks are primary to my kind, I'm pretty sure. Cover the face, protect the identity. After that, though... I can't imagine I would have driven Wes's truck somewhere else. Why? Mesquite's not tall, but it is tall enough to hide a little half-ton.

Maybe I needed to be tranced out for the long walk into town, without any water. Or? Maybe I drank my fill from that gross trough, filtered it through my slasher liver.

All I <u>do</u> know is that the next time I looked up, I was in the cab of a moving truck.

The guy driving was talking to me.

At first his voice was just a steady burble, but then I started catching a few words, then a sentence, then two sentences in a row, and then, "--but I think he would have wanted you to have this?"

He was offering me a white hardhat with D R I V E R in blocky Magic Marker letters on its forehead.

I took it, took this truck in, realized where I was: with a pumper, in a pumper's truck.

"You knew my dad," I said, my voice creaky, but definitely mine.

This pumper leaned over the wheel and made a show of looking directly sideways at me, like to see if I was pulling his leg, here.

"I mean--sorry," I told him. Evidently we'd already been over this. "Thank you," I said, about the hardhat.

"It was in his locker," the pumper told me, shrugging one shoulder to show me the hardhat was no big deal, was the least he could do.

He was probably fifty, judging both by his mustache being grey and by how long and droopy it was——it reminded me of either Crosby or Stills or Nash, I still don't really know the difference. This pumper was white, had movie-star blue eyes, and his skin was leathery from how long he'd been in the oilfields. There was a blurry tattoo on the back of his right hand, but it could have been anything. Amber had a blue smudge on the back of her hand that, in fifth grade, had been pencil lead.

For an instant, when we topped a rise at speed and we both kind of sighed up, weightless for ten or twenty feet, I was one hundred percent certain I was dead at last, and this was my angel, my grim reaper, coming for to carry me home, and that of course he would have taken on the appearance of a pumper. Otherwise I might startle, bolt back into life, where I'd probably just keep doing more and more damage.

If this was death, too, then... my dad had to be at the end of this road, didn't he? Waiting for me at the top of a set of metal stairs, so we could step into that great oil tank in the sky?

I felt bad for Mom, losing both her men in what had to feel like the same season of life, but maybe the trade-off was that I'd turn up another victim of this rash of violence that had settled down over Lamesa. I'd be a <u>victim</u>, not the main killer, and, after a few years, she could rest easy, maybe.

But then, on the radio, Skid Row started in with "18 and Life," which was and is my actual situation—well, "seventeen," but I'm not splitting hairs, Sebastian Bach couldn't have known. But, if this were actually my ride to the pearly gates? Or even the fiery gates? And if this ride is supposed to keep me from freaking out? Then I'm pretty sure what I dial up on KBAT is "Home Sweet Home," or "House of Pain," or "Every Rose Has Its Thorn," or "When the Children Cry," or even "Fly Me to the Angels," though it being by a band called Slaughter might taint it, a bit.

I know I wouldn't land on a song about a kid who made a bad mistake, and's going to have to pay for it with his life, now.

"Well <u>this</u> sure isn't Creedence," this pumper said with a throaty chuckle, and rolled the dial over.

And then, finally, I looked out the side window.

What I expected to see was a fence line streaking past, endless miles of mesquite behind it, the horizon wavery with heat, like the land was baking.

What I saw was the Country Store with that car up on the roof, which, when I was a kid, had been all the proof I needed that Lamesa was the most magical place in the whole world.

We were headed north through town.

Somewhere behind us on the right was the backside of the Sky-Vue's drive-in screen, and behind us on the vague left there would be a giant fiberglass cheerleader in gold and black, rah rah.

Where had this pumper picked me up? Because this isn't the side of town you end up on, if you're coming up the Stanton Highway, which was what the stock tank had been off of. And, for him to even stop and pick me up... had I had a thumb out, or did he just see some sadsack shuffling on the shoulder, and slow, wait for me to walk up alongside?

At least you haven't killed him, I told myself. Then had to add a yet to that.

"Here," I told him, when the Town & Country was rolling up.

"Sure?" the pumper asked, letting his foot off the gas. "I hear this town's, um... there's been some bad shit going down here, hasn't there?"

"I'll call my mom," I said, my fingers already to the door handle for my big escape. Before he figured out I <u>was</u> the bad shit.

The pumper crunched into the parking lot, taking the transition from blacktop to parking lot tire by tire, since the shocks on pumpers' trucks are always shot from a thousand and one cattleguards, and even more pump roads.

"Thanks," I said, stepping down.

"That's just keepsake, now," the pumper said, about the hardhat I had chocked under my arm like a football. "I don't believe your dad would have wanted this life for you. He--he said you were smart, that you were going places, were going to write your own ticket. Couldn't stop talking about you, you know how it is."

"I--"

"I'm not going to say you look like him, either," this pumper said. "But goddamn, kid. I thought–I thought he'd gotten TDY, was back for the day."

I nodded to him, my lips pursed tight because all my emotions might come spilling out, and shut the door.

It was late afternoon already. It was late afternoon and I fucking did not and do not look like my dad. If I did then, if I do now?

Then it makes everything I've done even worse, because he's part of it.

I scuffled up to the Town & Country. Well, more like I slumped in out of the heat, glaring at my reflection for the last few steps.

When I didn't have any change for the pay phone, I made my way inside to scrape nickels and dimes up from the leave-a-penny/take-a-penny dish, but it had already been scraped clean by the last malcontent.

"Buying something?" John-o asked me.

He'd been a senior when I was in junior high.

I just glared at him.

He held my eyes long enough for me to know he could kick my ass if he took a notion to, and then he looked down to the front of my shirt, said, "You were <u>there</u>?"

I looked down to my shirt with him.

It was... I guess it had to be Janice's blood? Not Wes's, because I got him from a distance, and not Jenna's, because that was a no-oxygen situation. Janice, though—you cram the bouncy end of a baton into the back of someone's head, then I guess some of that head's guts maybe spurt out onto you.

"Bloody nose," I said, rubbing my nose hard.

The same as I wasn't buying anything, neither was John-o.

Instead of calling me on my lie, he just shrugged like to show me how little I mattered, how little he had invested in me, so I shrugged just the same, walked outside, sat against the front of the store. The hardhat was between my feet, facing out.

Had Wes and Jenna and Janice already been found? It wasn't outside the realm of possibility, I supposed——if the rancher checks on that stock tank once a week or even once a month, then I guess any day is as likely as any other.

But still, if they'd already been found, that was some serious bad luck, wasn't it? I mean, on my part. Not that the night had exactly been kind to Wes and Jenna and Janice, either.

I rotated the hardhat on its brim, imagined some Mole Man was wearing it, that he'd been sent up to periscope the Town & Country parking lot, but it was all so alien to him. Why I mention this? Look at me, there: I'm still practically playing with action figures on the ground, aren't I? Just, I'm doing it with the blood of one of my victims splashed onto the front of my shirt.

I peeled out of it, turned it inside out, pulled it back on, then sucked my arms into the sleeves to turn it around backwards as well, just in case. It left the tag fluttering under my chin, but, compared to getting shot in the street for multiple killings, that's a small inconvenience. I leaned over to spit the bad taste in my mouth out but had nothing. Just that bad taste. And the unwanted, slowed-down image of that plug of meat from Wes, slumping out the end of that pipe and holding together all the way down into the water.

The water bugs probably swarmed it.

Tired of playing Mole Man, I scraped some gravel chips to me and tossed them one by one out into the parking lot, trying to land at least one on a stripe. When I finally did, almost in the exact <u>moment</u> I did, a truck pulled up, parked right on top of that champion gravel chip.

I looked up from the trashed bumper, over the hood, and into the prettyboy face of that same welder. He lowered a crudded-up workboot down and then pivoted on it, doing some sort of dance move away from his truck that ended with his hand coming the long way around to shut the door. It was graceful, I guess, but kind of extra, too. But? He was a welder, right? Welders do what they do, and nobody ever really understands it. He could have cartwheeled out of his cab and that would have probably only gotten him more work.

I glared up at him, mostly to show I wasn't dead or sleeping, and he nodded the way you do, was about to be all the way past me when he slowed, like just registering who I was.

"... the little German truck," he said, identifying me.

In West Texas, you are what you drive.

I looked across the road at nothing.

"She break up with you already, what?" the welder said, doing me the kindness of taking one step ahead, so he was blocking the sun. The result, what with his long-in-the-back blond hair, was that he looked pretty much like a Greek god, with that golden haze behind him.

"We weren't together," I mumbled, hardly getting my lips involved.

He nodded, could accept that even if he didn't believe it. But he still wasn't leaving.

"You good there, hoss?" he finally asked, squatting down to be more eye level with me, which left the world bright again.

It made his faded jeans tighten across his thighs in a way I'm pretty sure Lesley would have liked, before all this started--a way I know Amber would have paid attention to as well.

My legs back then didn't come near to making my pants look like that.

I nodded that I was okay, but nodding as desperately as I'm pretty sure I did means the opposite, of course.

The welder watched me for two or three seconds more, said, "Welp," then popped up, shrugged, and continued on inside.

Two minutes later he stepped out, already lighting the first cigarette of the pack he'd just bought. He blew smoke out then delicately worked the fountain drink up he'd had under his arm for this smoker's maneuver.

"Dr Pepper," he said, and held it out to me. "Much ice as it'll hold."

I shook my head no, which he considered, but then rejected.

"For if you change your mind," he said, and set the styrofoam cup down by me, stepping back like not wanting to invade my personal space. Like respecting me, though he was who he was, and I was what I was.

"Driver?" he said then.

I flicked my eyes up to him about this, and he flicked his down to the hat.

I nodded yes, that was me, "Driver."

"Bo," he said back about himself, turning to the side to blow smoke again. When he did it, his eyes slitted down like a gunfighter's, and I kind of wanted to get into his truck with him, go wherever he wanted to take me.

"So you're just sitting here with your shirt inside out and backwards," he finally said, kind of to me, kind of about me, I don't know.

I nodded.

"And you don't need anything."

I shook my head no, I didn't.

"If you do," he said, like an apology, "I left a five with John-o in there at the register, told him it was yours. Turn it into a hot dog, a magazine, quarters for that game, whatever."

That lump was back in my throat.

I was supposed to be hating this idiot.

I'd just killed three people, five total, and he was doing me random kindnesses?

He should have been kicking me over and over. Using my dad's old hardhat to beat my face in. Lurching his truck ahead to jam me back through the window.

Instead he'd shaken a cigarette up from his pack, was holding it out for me to take.

"Don't worry, man," he said, his voice lowered just for me, here. "If it's meant to be, she'll come back."

I took that cigarette, lit it off the lighter he held out, and held that vile poisonous smoke inside until his truck was chugging out of the parking lot, belching black smoke up into the pale blue sky.

Then came the coughs, which turned into throwing up a thin yellow bile, and trying to soak it up with gravel, which is really just trying to hide the sick. I finally give up like I guess I knew I was going to and hid my face between my knees and cried, my shoulders hunching fast up and down, a full-body sob-athon.

I'm not proud.

Two cars pulled up, two people walked past, but no one else stopped.

If I wasn't what I was, a dog probably would have sniffed me, maybe sat beside me, but... well. Slashers, we don't get pets.

After maybe ten minutes of this, I dragged that Dr Pepper over to me, drank it dry, then stood with it, slouched inside.

"John-o," I said to John-o.

Knowing his name was supposed to give me power over him.

"Tolly?" he said back, making fun of my formality.

"Refill," I said, holding the cup up to show what I meant. "Take it out of that five."

I filled up at the fountain, drank it down again, then filled it up again but slower this time, just barely pushing that black paddle like Amber and me had learned to, so only the thick syrup dripped down.

John-o charged me for both refills, I could tell.

"How much I have left?" I asked.

He shrugged, wasn't a math major.

"I need a quarter from it," I told him, and stood there until he slid one across to me.

"You won't beat my high score," he warned me.

"Playing a different game," I told him back, walking out the door.

"This five runs out at the end of my shift!" he called across.

I lifted my syrupy cup that this was fine, so what, and let the door sigh shut.

Outside, I dropped that quarter into its slot, called Amber.

* * *

"What's wrong with your shirt?" was the first thing she asked.

"Yeah, that's what I'm worried about," I told her, setting my dad's old work helmet between us, where the console would be if she'd had a console.

She backed us out of the parking lot, found first, eased us into the last little bit of the day.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Twenty-thousand dollar question."

"When did you... you know. Break out?"

I shrugged. The details were mattering less and less.

"I can get the key to that shipping container my dad has," she said. "That he keeps the tires in? Then I'll back the Farmall up against it. There's no way you could--"

"Don't," I told her.

She shifted, snuck a look over at me, then turned left.

We were going nowhere again. Just moving, staying in motion.

"Wes and Jenna," I said, as quietly as I could. "And Janice too."

"Janice <u>Dickerson</u>?" Amber asked.

I nodded.

When I looked over, Amber was blinking fast.

"What?" I asked.

"This means——" she started, unsure how to get it out. "It means you're not just going after the main ones anymore. Where was she?"

"With them."

"Super helpful Tolly Driver, to the rescue."

"At the stock tank."

Amber considered this, then finally hauled the wheel over, doglegging us south through the heart of Lamesa, I was pretty sure.

"You don't want to see," I told her. "Trust me."

"Well you can't stay in town," she said.

"Because that's where Mel is?"

"I'm not telling you where she is."

"Why can't I stay in town, then?"

"Because," Amber said, having to take a right, "Burke knows it's you."

I leaned my head back, stared up in the headliner, then finally just closed my eyes against all this.

"How?" I asked, my head loose on my neck.

Any other time, Amber would stomp the brakes, send my seat sliding forward.

That was when we were kids, though. Forever ago. This was grown-up stuff.

"Because the red herrings are dead?" Amber said, finally stepping the Rabbit out onto the Stanton Highway.

"The red--?" I asked, then remembered: "The Josses?"

Amber squinted this correct. Both her hands were on the wheel, here.

"How?" I asked.

"That's... there's already like five versions. But, they went out to Deek's, to talk to his mom and dad. And then somehow Mrs. Joss got shot with a shotgun, I think, and Burke had to go out there because Mr. Joss had driven his Buick into their living room, was going at them with a table leg or a golf club or something."

I put this together in my head, finally said, "Burke had to <u>shoot</u> him?"

Amber nodded.

"That's how she knows it's not them," she said, and over the next couple of miles, delved into what she figured Sheriff Burke's thinking had to be: I'd been there at Deek's, causing my own brand of trouble, maybe as distraction from what I was really doing, and then Shannon and Lesley, both still unaccounted for, were two of the five who had bound me to that lounge chair, and two of the others who'd done that were now missing. Add my mom into the equation, hounding Sheriff Burke about how she couldn't find me, how I was probably stumbling around in a concussive haze, and... it didn't exactly take Crockett and Tubbs to make sense of it all.

"Well then," I said at the end of it, and then, almost an involuntary thing, "Right!" I called out, pointing hard to the gate on that side of the road.

"But the stock tank's--" Amber said, pointing with her lips ahead, to where the windmill was.

"Do it!" I said, and she did.

I reached over, turned the truck off, and we sat there until, in the mirrors, a town cop rolled past, coming from the south.

"Does this mean they already found Wes and them?" I asked.

"It means they're watching the cemetery," Amber said somberly, letting me complete the rest. Or, narrow it down to a single grave: my dad's.

It was one of the places I could show up. It was where I'd just been yesterday.

Amber backed out of our hidey road and continued on, going slow because the left turn to the stock tank was only about fifty yards up.

"I can't believe they're dead," I said. "Justin's parents, I mean. They're because of me too."

"Tol, you can't--"

"Can't I? Shouldn't I?"

Amber guided the Rabbit over the cattleguard, braking so it wouldn't shake us too much. It sent my chair sliding forward but I caught myself on the dashboard this time.

"You're getting better," she said.

"I'm getting worse," I said back. "It's going to happen again, I mean."

"Because Mel's still out there."

"Did you ask your brother what we could do?"

"He thinks it's just... that I'm doing a project. He doesn't know--about you."

This made sense. If he knew it was real, he'd have stolen a helicopter, already touched down at the courthouse, come at me with stolen ordnance and not stopped until nothing was left.

Fine by me.

"Osh Kosh okay?" I finally asked, sneaking a look over to check if she was about to lie to me. I had this distinct terror that his long neck would be an invitation, when I was in that kind of mood.

"Ate my oatmeal for me this morning," Amber said.

"Promise?"

"Well I didn't <u>watch</u> him, but, yeah."

"You were right, too," I said. "It was the belts."

She looked to me, not getting it at first, but then I lifted my shirt so she could see I was wearing eight of my mother's belts.

"Boy George," she said, trying to reach inside for a grin she could paste on this situation.

"I'm good with ether," I said back with the smallest smile, and Amber laughed a breath of air out her nose about this, that we could still be even a little bit normal. Except, "No, really," I added.

She didn't get this, but was at the sharp turn to the stock tank, couldn't look away from the rut road.

"<u>Ether</u>," I said again, cupping my hand over my mouth and nose to show her what I meant. "Or freon. Freon works too, doesn't it? Anyone ever tried to freeze a slasher?"

Amber shut her eyes like if she couldn't see me, she didn't have to hear this.

"It's not your <u>fault</u>, though," she said.

"It's not the dog's fault it got rabies," I said back. "But it's still got to be put down, doesn't it?"

A fat tear tumbled down Amber's right cheek, and then we were there.

Wes's truck wasn't crashed into the stock tank anymore. But the stock tank had definitely been crashed into.

"I thought his truck--?" Amber said.

I had no answer.

Amber crunched her emergency brake in and I stepped down––<u>up</u>, really–– looked around.

This was definitely the right place. Just, none of the evidence was here.

Still, "There," I said, about the buzzards roosted in the scaffolding of the windmill, watching us like old men. Old men who didn't think very much of us.

Amber gingerly walked through the concrete rubble. Her shoes weren't even getting muddy, either.

Shining dully from all around her were all the cans and bottles that had been left in the tank by decades of swimmers. It was a beer museum.

"Maybe you dreamed it," Amber said back to me. "Because––I mean, I <u>told</u> Wes and Jenna to not do anything stupid, didn't I? I think being out here would count as pretty stupid."

"Pretty damn stupid," I heard myself sort of hiss-whisper.

Amber cranked her head over to laser her eyes into mine.

"Excuse me?"

"You usually say 'pretty <u>damn</u> stupid," I said.

"Forgive me if something about this place feels sacred now."

I shrugged it off as the nothing it had to be.

"Buzzards don't mean they were here," Amber finally said.

I pulled my shirt off, flipped the inside out, and showed her the blood.

"It's Janice's," I said with a one-shoulder shrug.

"Or a nosebleed," Amber said right back. "Your nose still bleeding all the time?"

"Wes was there," I said, nodding to the pipe still speared into one of the main legs of the windmill. "His clothes were over..."

I stepped around the stock tank to a mesquite, carefully unstuck Wes's shirt from it and pulled it on.

"If his truck really did this," Amber said about the smashed-in stock tank, "his dad's going to kill him."

"Think I already took care of that."

Amber looked up to me, and neither of us so much as grinned about this.

"What about fire?" I asked, then. "Does fire kill slashers?"

"I'm not helping you do... that," Amber told me.

"Then I turn myself in," I offered, holding my hands out before me for imaginary cuffs.

"That won't--"

"Take me back into town, let's see."

"Tolly, I don't--"

"That mean I can use your ether?"

Amber crossed her arms, turned away from me. Away from this.

"Justin did it, didn't he?" I said. "With the pumpjack?"

"Stace did that to him. Because it was time. Because he was <u>done</u>. <u>Finished</u>, not--"

"Yeah, well, it doesn't have to get that far, does it?"

"Tolly--"

"Don't you think Shannon's mom's flipping out right now? And Lesley's, and Wes's, and--"

"I get it."

"If I break out of Sheriff Burke's holding cell, then--she can shoot me, right?"

"Bullets don't work."

"We don't know that."

"It's belts. I think your mom's belts are the only thing that can--"

"Here," I said, whipping one off, holding it out to her. When she wouldn't take it, I threaded the tongue through the buckle, looped it around my neck, and pulled it tight. Not joke-pulling, either.

My head started to swim.

When you cut off blood to the brain, it doesn't take long.

"Tolly, <u>please</u>," Amber said, her hands balled into fists, covering her mouth.

I fell to my knees hard enough to jar my teeth, my eyes locked on her the whole while.

The world tunneled down to just a shattered crumb of concrete half in, half out of the dirt that had dried around it, and then that crumb of concrete was coming closer, was my own personal iceberg to crash into. Because I was tilting forward, falling, falling--

Amber slid in on her knees, caught me, hugged me close to her, undoing that belt. It was the main way she was always saving me, apparently.

"Your mom, what will she... if you--?"

"What's she <u>already</u> going to think?" I mumbled into her collarbone, and then my tears were coming. I was surprised to have any left.

Amber held me to her and patted the back of my head.

"Okay, okay," she finally said when I was mostly done. "You're right, I think. Sort of."

"About turning myself in?"

"Burke already thinks it's you. So, she's going to find you eventually. Lamesa's not that big, even out here. This way, at least you don't get shot."

"With bullets that don't work."

Amber pulled me up to standing, opened the passenger door of her truck for me, guided me in.

It took a J-turn, maybe a whole K-turn, but she got the Rabbit flipped around, felt her way back up the road.

Back on the blacktop, she reached across, placed her hand on my shoulder and left it there, like holding me in place. Keeping me beside her.

"Osh Kosh is fine," she said. "You didn't hurt him, Tolly. You wouldn't."

"I wasn't supposed to come for Janice, either," I said, and looked across the top of the mesquite again, this time at the setting sun. It was vibrant orange, and looked to be steaming on the horizon.

Back in town, "<u>Right!</u>" I said, in that way Amber knew she had to, because it meant another cop car was coming.

She cut across, I directed her away from a false alarm—the deputy parked at his fiancee's place, in the shadow of her tall truck—and finally we were in third gear after turning around in the ditch on the other side of town, like we were headed out to drive off the Caprock.

The Sky-Vue was rolling up on our right, and Sam already had the first movie flickering on the screen.

"<u>Star Trek</u>," I said, because I'd forgotten there could be good things in the world, too.

"Admit it, we're lost," Amber quoted. We'd seen it the weekend before, from the very front row, so that we were practically in space with Kirk.

"But we're making such good time," I said back with a grin--it was the comeback in the movie. Then, "Projector's messing up, isn't it?" I sort of mused, not really meaning anything by it. Just one of a hundred casual observations I could have made.

Amber leaned forward to see the screen.

At the Sky-Vue, sometimes the focus was off, sometimes the reels were out of order, and someone was always washing the screen out with their headlights, or trying to do shadow animals in that dusty beam of light shining up from the booth.

"What do you mean?" Amber asked.

We were almost past the part of the curve in the road where you could sort of see the screen, if you really tried.

"It's--" I started, then realized what was happening.

The projector wasn't messed up.

It was my eyes that were making Spock neck-pinching this horse black and white. Because... Mel was close? it was almost night again?

It didn't matter. I couldn't let it happen here. Not to Amber, who would put herself between me and anything.

"I'm sorry," I said to her, and opened my door, let myself fall out.

The grass I was instantly rolling through whipped my face with each fast steamroll, but that was just because I didn't have my mask on yet.

"Tolly!" Amber screamed into the dusk.

Through the tall blades of grass I could just see her. She was standing in the road, the Rabbit nosing away from her, into the other ditch.

Run, I said to her in my head, and then laid back, lifted my hips.

It was so I could take off the first of my belts.

The Final Frontier

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I should make a confession here, before this goes any further: I sort of made that interaction with the welder up?

The way it really went was he pulled up to the Town & Country like the Hanna-Barbera cartoon he was. That means his lowslung, heavy, overbuilt truck with the shopmade utility bed was somehow dragging a plume of caliche dust, even though there was only blacktop under his tires. That's just the way welders are.

Instead of clocking my sadsack self hugging my knees in front of the Town & Country, though, he just waltzed right in—him having a dancing gait was gospel truth—came out probably ten minutes later. To get his cigarette going, he had to set his drink down on the lip of the trashcan, and then that first inhale was so sweet that he completely forgot about his drink, just climbed back into the driver's seat.

It was on his way out that he finally braked, looked over at me like trying to place me.

I upped my chin to him not because I wanted to start something, but because, in my secret heart, I wanted him to think I was cool.

He stared at me a moment longer and then launched two fingers off his forehead in salute, resituated his welder's cap, and peeled off into the rest of the afternoon.

I didn't know he'd had Dr Pepper until I took a tentative drink. The ice was melted a bit, but he had done that syrup thing at the fountain, I think, so that pretty much just made this Dr Pepper a normal Dr Pepper.

John-o was still his bad attitude self, though, Town & Country was the same as ever, the sun was bright, the day was hot, my shirt was bloody, my soul corrupt, and I was infected with something that was making me kill people. And--I have no explanation for this part--the quarter I used to call Amber turned out to be right there in the return slot of the phone when I hung up.

So if me telling how the welder and my's interaction that day <u>felt</u> instead of how it actually was makes everything else I've written here a lie, so be it.

But there's another way to take it. Ask yourself why I would go to all that trouble, right? What's motorvating—as my dad used to say—me to do that, and what am I saying without really saying it?

I'm asking, here. Because I honestly don't know.

Is it a slasher thing? Another mask, maybe? Some kind of deflection?

I will say it's embarrassing, to lose most of a day like that. So maybe it's natural to want to fill it back up with whatever made-up story you can.

Except?

Now, <u>now</u> I know where I actually was, that day.

And in 1989, I was about to find out.

This is my last night in the town I grew up in.

With Amber, I'd just seen the sun set for the last time over Texas.

I wouldn't see it come back up.

* * *

What I expected, what I thought was built into this genre I'd been abducted into, was that the drive-in was going to be the big showdown, one way or another. It was going to be dramatic and epic, all the cars honking, madness and panic everywhere. Someone's Chihuahua left behind in the gravel, then stepped on, the melted pimiento cheese holding the waffle print of that shoe, Sam stopping his run when he spotted that, a new idea sparking in his concessionbooth mind. When I stood from the ditch with my new face, though, my <u>Strappy</u> face, my senses opened, drank in the night, and I knew immediately that Mel wasn't at the drive-in, or in line to <u>get</u> in there.

As for why Amber wasn't rushing to tackle me down, rip those belts from my face, save me from myself, it was that a sharp-nosed 1972 Riviera was just clipping the back of her truck, folding the bed over and taking the tire and wheel on that side with it, the Rabbit staying on its feet like the trusty little truck it was but spinning deeper into the ditch all the same, never to be driven again. And then the Riviera overcorrected, slid its heavy ass around at <u>Amber</u>, standing on the yellow stripes the same way I'd seen kids stand on the high dive board at pools, when they know there's no good way out of this.

According to Amber, when I was slashered out like I was, then I had no choice but to follow every last rule of the genre, until I'd processed through, gotten my revenge.

But fuck the rules.

I think I screamed in my mask of belts the whole way from the ditch to Amber, and I was leaning so far forward that once or twice the fingertips of my right hand scraped the hot asphalt, and every other pair of headlights and taillights coming and going, they were frozen in place for me, and I had swivelhips for the first time in my life, was stiffarming this car away, vaulting that hood, sliding through and across and among, and only ever going faster and faster.

Really? And this is terrible, so get ready, but I wouldn't have had this kind of speed if I hadn't even been infected, would I have? And if Amber or anyone had been actually looking my way, instead of hers? And if she dies here, then everything else in my life is for nothing. The world can just crumble apart, drift into the sun for all I care. Without her, nothing means anything.

What I'm saying is that I'm <u>glad</u> that drop of Justin Joss's blood mixed with mine. If it hadn't, then this is it for Amber. Instead, right when that big Riviera was maybe six inches from her, your friendly neighborhood slasher flew out of the night and tackled her.

Meaning that Riviera tagged <u>me</u>, yeah. Right in the swivel-hips I was so proud of.

The impact flung me around, sent me off like a Frisbee, I'm pretty sure-horizontal cartwheels, the facedown variety?--but the one thing I'm most proud of in my whole waste of a life, it's that I didn't let Amber go, through all this. I pulled her closer, tucked and rolled into the other ditch, until we came to a crashing stop against the pole of a sign.

I like to think that was the city limits sign, but I doubt it. Just, it would be nice to have "Lamesa" in reflective letters a foot tall, right above us.

Amber spilled out one way around the pole and I started to go the other way, but, slashered out, I had instincts I didn't even know about: my left hand struck out, grabbed onto that pole, stopped me from rolling any farther.

And, yes, this is the first time anyone in Lamesa saw me in my mask. I mean, the first anybody who <u>lived</u> was seeing me, which only confirmed whatever word Sheriff Burke had already released about how I was a person of very much interest in these killings.

Tolly Driver was now officially the one responsible for all these dead kids. And probably for the Josses as well, why not.

Probably my dad, too.

It doesn't matter, though. None of that matters anymore.

What does is that that Riviera hadn't slapped Amber. And that the deputy's fiancee had her hazards on, was stepping down from her tall truck to wade into the ditch, render whatever aid Amber might need.

She was going to be all right, she was going to make it.

You can't save everyone, I know that now, but you don't have to kill everyone, either.

I chocked my hand higher on the pole, pulled myself up all at once--me who the coach just let pass the Presidential Physical Fitness Test--and then I took my first timid step on what I could instantly tell was a shattered hip.

The shards ground and screamed, wanted to fold me over with the pain, but... it's hard to explain: it hurt like nothing else had ever hurt, but all that was in the hot part of my brain, if that makes any sense?

But there was a much larger cold part.

That part was registering this injury and compensating for it, using stomach and back muscles to haul my right leg forward, take that first step. Because–and Amber was right about this–because I didn't matter, here. All that did was my mission, my revenge.

Never mind if it used me up in the process.

* * *

Funny thing is? Well, depending on what might make you laugh. But, my hip's fine, now. I keep expecting arthritis, something chronic, for my leg to give when I've got a whole quarter panel up on my shoulder like some mythic logger, some great hunter back from the wilds of the yard, but... nope.

I can still accelerate my pace like I was saying, by slipping something gougey into my boot, but... I honestly don't know. What I <u>suspect</u> is that my body figuring out how to navigate around a shattered hip was just a bigger version of how it had hidden all those cactus spines spearing my hand: it's got to hide who I am, the next day, so I can keep on doing what I do. But, just dial up some of the movies in my genre for the proof of this, right?

In the struggle to subdue this or that victim, the slasher usually takes serious hits to the face, the torso, and the mask they're wearing isn't always hard like a turtle shell.

All the same, next day in the hallways of school, at whatever counts as the kids' malt shop, the not-yet-revealed killer's face is mar-free.

You don't show your damage, I mean. Not in a way that keeps all the revenge from happening.

Even now, years later, all but one of my assigned victims dead and buried, my body is still hiding who I am. Meaning, anyone who was there that night, heard my pelvis crunch, and so would expect seventeen-years-older Tolly Driver to be limping, maybe even using a cane or a walker or a wheelchair... sorry, y'all.

And, Tolly-who, now? Is that even a real name? It short for something, what?

In 1989, though, even with all those belts cinched around my face, I knew not to push it, by just standing there in the sideglow of all these headlights.

I limped away.

All any good slasher needs is a shadow--even half a shadow--and we can turn on the thrusters, fade from view completely. Especially if we've earned that limp. No, you'll never see us run, that would be undignified, too much like scrambling, which is a desperate thing, but don't worry about us. We'll be right there behind the door when you close it. We'll be standing there in the bathtub. We'll be down on the lawn, looking up at your window.

As for what it feels like to limp-walk at Olympic sprinter speeds... it's just normal walking, at least to me. I could definitely feel my leg dragging that night, hustling away from all those headlights, and that was taking enough mental coordination that my peripheral vision kind of blurred away, tunneling what I could see down to just my next step, and then the step after that. If I could have gotten a bead on either side, the fences and trees and whatever would probably have been smearing past, yeah, like I was on a fast moped, say. But I've always been susceptible to carsickness, so, maybe just with me–or, <u>for</u> me–my head knows to limit what I can actually see, and have to make sense of?

What I'm trying to say is that the next time I looked up, I was blocks away from the Sky-Vue.

Instead of people, what I had to deal with now were dogs.

There's always been loose dogs in Lamesa, they're probably Indian dogs from wayback, even, are just waiting for someone to strap a travois across their backs, but, until they all hated me, I'd never really paid that much attention to them.

Now I had a snarling pack on my heels.

I wasn't scared, I could tell they were no threat, that their shrieks were terror, not rage, but I didn't need them announcing me, either.

At which point, limping down the middle of a darkened street, houses on one side, low buildings on the other, my black and white eyes saw an old friend huddled about twenty yards ahead in my path.

The possum from the other night.

I think it recognized me as well. Just two strangers, meeting again in the darkness.

It stood up on its hind legs and tasted the air, and my ears were jacked up enough for even the softest, sneakiest footstep that I could hear it inhaling about fourteen times all at once, fast and nervous.

"<u>Go</u>," I hissed to it, or tried to through my belts, waving to the right with my hand.

Instead, the possum lowered back down and clutched onto the blacktop. Because of the dogs boiling up behind me. It's what cottontails do, too: freeze, try to become part of their background, not even twitching a whisker. Which might can work in the tall grass, back in the mesquite.

Not so much in the middle of a street in town.

I stomped my right shoe, the lightning pain from that striking up from my hip to the base of my skull, dropping me to a knee.

When I looked up, the possum was still there. If it had a thought balloon, that thought balloon would have been <u>I'm invisible</u>.

Wrong.

To try to keep the dogs off it, I limped over into a yard, crashed a Honda's driver's side window in and stood there. Some of the dogs cued in to me, directed their terror my way, but the stupider among them just kept right on going.

The possum stiffened, played dead--its last defense.

The dogs swarmed it. And they were already worked up from me.

Add that to my count, sure. Everyone at Deek's, then the Josses, and Shannon and Lesley, and Wes and Jenna and Janice, and... and where I was evidently going already. I hadn't even considered I might have a direction, has just been fast-limping away from the Sky-Vue.

Two blocks later, though, like a bad joke, there I was on South 2nd.

The Wall. The one all graduates of Lamesa High get to paint their marks on, like leaving childish things behind, so they can slouch forward, into the adult world and all its many burdens.

Nobody monitored or patrolled it, which maybe had something to do with it being right across from Sheriff Burke's office, but nobody would ever sneakpaint their name early, either, even if the Wall had been outside the city limits. That would be jinxing yourself. Neither would you ever mark out your enemy's name. It was a sacred place, I mean. Holy. I think way back before my time, it might have been one wall of a lumberyard, the same way the Country Store had been an egg processing plant back during the Second World War—that's why it has that tall smokestack. Anyway, the Wall was a kind of town ritual, so I guess it was fitting that it's where I suddenly was.

My dog attendants boiled up in the darkness behind me. The possum murderers, I guess I should call them. And because all the deputies were dealing with whatever'd just gone on at the drive-in, we had the place to ourselves.

And, I would say the dogs were what alerted Mel to my presence, but... the same way I'd zeroed in on her, from fate or whatever you want to call it, I bet her radar had also pinged on me, standing there with my chest heaving, my face crisscrossed with evil, my eyes absolutely humorless.

This was it, then. The big showdown. The place where it would all get decided. And just because I'd been half-expecting Mel to have a baton to fight me with, that didn't at all compel her to have one.

What she had instead was a spraypaint can, one she was furiously shaking to get just one more spurt out of it.

"I'm not <u>done</u>, you idiot!" she screamed at me, and, though she was eighteen already, the way she said this was pure sixth grade.

I tracked up to what she meant, and... that was when I realized that slashers can't read. All I saw framing her, as high as she could reach in every direction, was differentiated lines and curls.

"Not yet, Tolly!" she screamed—maybe it was all one scream—and turned back around to finish what she was doing.

I took a step forward, then another.

The dogs were my chorus, my cape.

I looked back around to them and caught the silhouette of the grain elevator, looming over Lamesa.

I nodded once to it, realized that that's where I'd <u>meant</u> to be going, anyway: I didn't have any ether, any freon, any kerosene to soak myself in before sparking a match, but if I climbed that and plunged down from it... then this would have to be over, wouldn't it?

Well, if I was done, I mean.

For Justin it had been Stace Goodkin and the pumpjack's weights, probably moments after he'd finished Deek off.

For me, after Mel, it would be gravity.

I was even halfway planning to take my face-belts off one by one before tilting over into all that open air, just to be sure my face would crunch along with the rest of me, so my mom wouldn't have to run her fingertips along my dead jawline at the funeral, wonder how her boy could have done all this.

It was going to be a closed casket, Mom, sorry.

But, first: Mel. Mel Boanerges.

The same way I don't know where "Driver"'s from, I also can't tell you how Mel's last name happened. Her front name, though... yeah, final girls, nine times out of ten, their name goes for either a girl or a guy, I guess.

I don't know––I don't make the rules. I just follow them, whether I want to or not.

And, right then, Mel had her back to me. Like daring me to finish this.

With the aim I probably didn't know yet was an everytime thing, I probably could have beaned her senseless with a stray rock, here. But? I think the reason slashers don't use guns, it has a lot to do with that guns aren't up close and personal.

We're not snipers.

We like our faces to be right up against yours, when the time comes. So we can watch that penny in your eyes spin down, finally lie flat.

So I took a lunging step forward, which, with the limp I had, landed me maybe ten feet behind Mel, here.

I have no idea what this must look like from the outside, either. In someone not involved's peripheral vision, from forty yards off. Do I just hyperspace forward, like <u>Defender</u>? Do I blur with motion? I bet not. I bet I move between blinks. Where and when you're not looking, that's where my kind lives and seethes.

You might flinch, seeing me suddenly, impossibly, closer to my target, but you probably blame yourself for having looked away for a split instant.

"I know you're there," Mel said, very intentionally not looking around at me like I guess I wanted––can't be face-to-face if one party has their back turned.

And I can't even imagine what Mel's last few days must have been like. I was feeling out my slasheriness, which was its own slice of hell, but she had to be becoming more and more a final girl, didn't she? Studying late, being prim and proper, helping old ladies across the road, bottlefeeding kittens while applying for college <u>and</u> listening to church hymns, always being home by nine, I don't know.

I'll go on and on about how <u>my</u> turn to being a cold-blooded killer was sharp and sudden, that I'd never had that inside me even a little, and maybe that's even mostly not a lie. But, let me tell you, Mel wasn't exactly final girl material herself. I don't want to be spreading rumors nearly two decades late or anything, but... let's just say Stace Goodkin didn't exactly chum it up with Mel?

Maybe a better way to say it is that at a fight after school in junior high, after Lance had beaten up this new and temporary kid Derrick for talking to Kim Jones, Derrick was on his hands and knees trying to catch his breath and make the world make sense and Mel had stepped forward and tipped her bottle of Big Red over bit by bit, playing it up for those of us still there, until she finally just held that bottle high, poured it all over Derrick, pretty much guaranteeing he was going to have to move away.

Final girls who are born to be final girls, they don't do that kind of stuff.

Mel, though, what I was thinking then was that she had to be infected the same as I was, didn't she? Meaning, her past didn't matter to the story we were in, now. All that did was her suddenly upstanding morals, her keen sense of decency, her compulsion to help and save and try try try.

But she was still herself, too.

"We should have pushed you into the pool when we had the chance," she said into the wall, still spraypainting.

I don't disagree.

If I drown in Deek's pool while strapped to a lounge chair, then I never get infected, and a whole lot of people get to live, and, I don't know, if anybody slashers out to get revenge, it's Amber, it's my mom, it's my dad, climbing up from his grave.

I wouldn't want this for any of them, though.

Again: it's best things fell out like they did. That it all came down to me.

Standing behind Mel that night, I didn't even grunt an inarticulate comeback, telling her I should have drowned. I didn't reply at all.

My kind aren't big on witty comebacks. The arguments we win, we win with a blade, or a blunt object.

I took another step closer, just waiting for her to turn around.

"There," Mel said, and stepped back, into me.

She didn't flinch from the contact, just readjusted so we could both appreciate her spraypaint work.

"What do you think?" she asked. "I figured I wouldn't get to later, with everyone else."

Once again, I looked to whatever she'd just done, but... shapes, lines, smudges. Not even colors. Or, not the ones Mel was seeing, anyway.

I reached up, unhitched one of my face-belts. It slithered down onto my shoulders and I pulled it the rest of the way down, held it by the buckle, its tongue licking the ground.

"Everyone's going to know, <u>now</u>," she said then, and I still couldn't make sense of what she'd spraypainted. But I did see it in the TV movie.

Tolly Driver 14

<u>Lamesa 0</u>

It was my bodycount done up like a scoreboard, complete with a square black background, yellow letters made of huge dots, a possession arrow, all of it. But I'm not sure what number Mel actually assigned to me that night—she didn't know about Shannon and Lesley and Janice yet, did she? I don't think she could have. And this number from the movie includes the Josses, I guess, but, again: I'm not one to split hairs.

Just heads.

"Oh, wait, I almost forgot," Mel said, and stepped back up to the Wall.

She held her hand high, fingers out, and lowered them all, except the middle, and then she sprayed that hand with her paint, making a negative image of her flipping me off. Next she held her hand right to the wall, shook her can even harder, and sprayed a heart-shaped frame of wet paint around her illegible-to-me words.

"For Lesley, for Shannon, for Abel, for——" she started, but I cut her off with my belt, whipping forward.

It wrapped around her neck.

I yanked her close, body to body with me.

The dogs were circled around us, barking and snarling, their muzzles red with possum, their eyes practically glowing.

"I don't think so," Mel choked out, and twirled hard to the right, unwinding my carefully wound belt, her body a top now, spinning away.

We were dancing, I realized. All those times at all the dances I'd been to, I'd always imagined myself going <u>Footloose</u> or <u>Flashdance</u> out there to everyone's surprise and delight, but the part of me checked into the real world knew that would never happen. Some people are made to come to life out on the dance floor, with everyone watching, but I was never any Ren, any Alex. In <u>Grease</u>, I don't even get that tap on the shoulder, telling me that's enough. I'm just a wallflower way off to the side, nursing my fifth cup of punch that's been spiked so hard it's melting the red plastic.

Put a mask on me, though, and I can dance, apparently. So long as it's the last dance. So long as a final girl's my partner, twirling away then coming back over and over.

Instead of running off like she could have, I mean, Mel extended her left arm, sprayed my face and eyes with paint.

I fell back, only knew burning, and she took advantage, stepping forward to push me back even more.

I splatted onto my back, was about to surge up, away from this pain, when--The dogs.

I was at their level now, like the possum had been.

I held my right arm up to fend off the first one charging in, mouth open, but that just let it clamp on, pull me to the side.

The next one latched onto my belly, which must be instinct for a predator.

It ripped back and forth in that fast way dogs have, like they want to shake this prairie dog or rabbit senseless, so it can never run off. Another dog—a white German shepherd—clamped onto my shoulder from the back, a smaller dog had hold of my left foot, and all I could do was ball up, roll sideways as fast as I could, out of this scrum of teeth and claws and snarls.

The dogs rolled with me, at least until a tall truck screeched in, bore down on us.

At the last moment, the dogs let go, dove away, squealing and whimpering, their tails tucked under.

The truck skidded to a stop, its not-just-for-show grill guard inches from my face.

Amber stood up on the running board, looked over the hood at me, and because this was the deputy's fiancee's truck, and that fiancee was very grownup, Amber standing in her place like that pulled the rug out from under me a bit, made me feel like I'd missed a few years—that she'd gone up growing up with-out me.

"Where is she?" Amber said, breathless, her eyes red.

I didn't have words anymore, though. The only language I spoke was violence.

I ducked down, out of her eyeline, and... I want to say I crawled under that tall truck Amber had commandeered, but I honestly don't know. All I do know is that I was suddenly under there.

The glasspack on the passenger side hissed against my face-belts when I rose too high and I jerked away from that.

By the time Amber took a knee to find me, I was gone.

Look away for even half an instant, that's what my kind does.

But thank you, Amber.

You didn't have to screech in like that.

Or--were you saving Mel from me, not me from the dogs?

My guess is that, looking around for me, you caught the still-wet outline of Mel's birdfinger was right there in your tall headlights—a birdfinger <u>not</u> in the movie, thank you. But I understand why they didn't include it. Final girls are pure, are princess-angel-warriors, shining and perfect.

They would never flip anybody off.

Even their would-be killer.

And you probably didn't clock it when you pulled away in the deputy's fiancee's truck, but your headlights swept across me, blasting my shadow out behind me.

I just watched you leave, Ambs, then turned away like I'd never even known you, like I'd never gotten the best plate of Spam-and-eggs ever for having cut your braids off.

There was no time for that kind of stuff, I mean.

Places to be, people to eviscerate.

* * *

I'll give Mel some credit, too. She could have run to the drive-in, she could have gone to her house, she could have run to <u>people</u>, for that whole "safety in numbers" thing, which my kind pretty much counts on.

Instead of putting bodies between her and me, though––this is probably her final girl impulses––she ran and ran and <u>ran</u> all the way to... to 13th and K.

My house.

Because, yes, putting my mom between us, that would definitely be a thing.

Mel never made it to the front door, though. About ten feet from it, a town cop pinned her in a spotlight. He was sitting on the roof.

Mel looked up, shielded her eyes, and then--

Sheriff Burke came flying out of the darkness, full-body tackled her into the bushes.

Maybe ten seconds later, Sheriff Burke backed out, leaves in her hair, one of her shirttails flapping, her knees not really grass-stained--dead grass doesn't leave marks--but definitely scuffed.

She delicately pulled her chrome sunglasses from her shirt pocket.

They were wrecked.

She dropped them, looked up to Mel, stepping out now as well.

She was leading with Sheriff Burke's service revolver.

It was big and silver and so, so deadly.

I stepped deeper into the shadows.

"Drop the gun!" the town cop on my roof said, his light all over the place because he was trying to get his pistol into play, but was lying on that hip and trying not to roll off like gravity wanted him to.

Mel flicked her eyes up to him—not that big silver pistol, just her eyes—and when she did, and he flinched, thinking this was it, the big shootout, he slid down our roof, doing one complete roll before plunging into open air. He came down on the sharp edge of the planter we only ever had dirt and cigarette butts in.

I don't know if it was my slasher hearing or if I was just tuned into pain, but I distinctly felt three of his ribs not just crack, but break into jabby little spears in his side.

He rolled over, groaned, and spit blood onto our welcome mat.

Which was when Mel fired that big pistol.

Not at Sheriff Burke, but out into the darkness.

At <u>me</u>.

Either because she was lucky or due to some radar or luck most people never have, she <u>hit</u> me, too.

My shoulder jerked like it was tied to the back bar of a three-wheeler in first gear, and I fell flat on my back.

Above me now, the stars were so serene. And they were streaky, too--I could see their infinitesimal movements, their gonna-be arcs. It was like time-lapse, except hardly any time was passing. It was just that my eyes were that jacked into the night.

I'm not saying I ever want to get my hands bloody again, but if I do, then I want to see the stars in that same way, please. Just once more.

There'd always been that vast beauty right over my head, and I'd never even had the eyes to see it.

"Die, you--!" Mel screamed.

The reason she didn't get to finish was that Sheriff Burke had hold of the pistol now, was directing it up.

Mel, in anger, in frustration, shot again and again, until the hammer fell on an empty cylinder.

Then she collapsed, sobbing into Sheriff Burke's chest.

"He's not there, he's not there," Sheriff Burke said, smoothing Mel's hair down on the back of her head. For her part, Mel was leaving splotchy yellow handprints on the back of Sheriff Burke's uniform shirt. For my part, I wasn't even breathing, wasn't even sure I could until I did, gasping in all at once.

And the dogs weren't with me anymore. Coming across the draw that cuts across the south end of Lamesa, they'd... I didn't know: they'd just fallen away. Probably a skunk or something. Or maybe it was that my smell was different to them, now that I'd engaged my final girl?

Doesn't matter.

They weren't barking is what I mean to get across. As far as Sheriff Burke was concerned, I <u>wasn't</u> there.

Too, though?

I didn't need Amber to tell me that the cops and teachers and parents never believe there's really a boogeyman. Sheriff Burke was probably just reading the lines she had to read, here.

She hauled both her and Mel up and they stood there swaying like this was over, like they'd made it.

I wish.

As for me, I was just lying there, feeling the life pulse out of me. My shoulder was a crater. The air touching my muscle stung in a way I still don't like to think about, and I think there was bone involved as well.

I was just focusing on evening my breathing out, though.

And listening.

Up and down 13th, porch lights were fizzing on.

"Here, here," Sheriff Burke was saying to Mel, somewhere in the upright world.

I rolled over enough to see Mel being guided into the back seat of Sheriff Burke's cruiser. Mel tried to fight back, didn't want to be confined like this, a fish in a tiny bucket, but Sheriff Burke wasn't taking no for an answer.

To show Mel she was safe, Sheriff Burke closed the door firmly, then had Mel try it.

It wouldn't open.

Then Sheriff Burke hiked her nightstick up from her thick belt––I didn't even know she had a stick like that––and tapped once on the glass by Mel's head,

to tell her to lean away. When Mel was on the other side of that back seat, Sheriff Burke reached back, baseball swung her nightstick against the glass, and... the nightstick rebounded.

"<u>Bulletproof</u>!" Sheriff Burke over-enunciated to Mel.

Mel pulled into herself, finally cried.

Then, just to be super sure, Sheriff Burke opened the front door, locked all the doors, and shut her door back.

Then she stood back up, looked all around with Clint Eastwood eyes.

"Go inside, go back inside!" she called out to the four or five of my neighbors out in the street in their boxers and robes, shotguns pointed down. When all the neighbors just stood there, Sheriff Burke ducked her head down to her mic, called in that an officer was down.

Fifteen steps later she was trying to make that town cop comfortable on my front porch.

Across town, I could hear sirens winding up.

Up and down the streets, more and more doors were opening, nobody following Sheriff Burke's orders.

I breathed in, held it, then exhaled, nodded to myself.

One by one, I unbuckled the belts from around my face, let them fall away.

"Tol, that you, man?" Glenn from two doors down said when I limped past him in the street.

The limp was fake, felt like what I was supposed to do after getting shot, but the throbbing red crater in my shoulder was most definitely real, and my pelvis was still gravel. And I guess I probably had a stripe across my eyes. Yellow? Either that or black, I figure.

I was holding my shoulder with my right hand.

Bullets don't work, no. That doesn't mean I like them, though.

"What's happening, Tolly?" Dana from across the street asked. She was twohanding a pistol even bigger than Sheriff Burke's. "Your mom back from New Mexico yet?"

This stopped me.

I looked over to her, just had my eyes, no words. My mom had left town? Because of one of my lies? More important in the moment, though: this wasn't the slasher stopping to process this intel—it was <u>me</u>, who had convinced myself I was only a rider, a spectator, that nothing I could do while slashered out made one whit of difference

What did this mean? What <u>does</u> it mean? If I could stop from getting blindsided by information like this, then... does that mean there was some workaround I could have used to stop all the killing I was doing? Did I know it already at some instinctual level, but wasn't making use of it because a secret part of me really thought those marching-band idiots who'd tied me up deserved what they were getting? Was I even infected at all?

Live with a thing for half your life, you spend a lot of time poking holes in your own story. The rest of your time's spent filling those holes back in, with more story, I don't know.

I wasn't thinking all of this in the street right then, anyway. If I need an excuse for having stopped like that, then... "When slashers don't have their masks on, they're less monster, more whoever they were before." Or, "The slasher I was, always thinking tactically, needed to assess who might and might not be around at this house he was walking to."

Either of those hold water? Enough to live on for seventeen years?

"I mean--not New Mexico," Dana sputtered, definitely not letting that big pistol go. "Muleshoe, that it?"

I stared at her a moment more, that soul x-ray thing, then just kept walking.

Because nobody in the street was raising any alarm, Sheriff Burke didn't clock my approach. She was all about trying to get that town cop into a position where less of that glorious red would froth out of his mouth.

I ran my hand along the back of the cruiser like soothing a spooked horse, and when my hand found that chrome handle on the back door, it opened exactly as if Sheriff Burke had never locked it.

I settled in beside Mel and pulled the door shut right when she was breathing in to scream. By the time she <u>could</u> scream, she couldn't: my mom's skinniest, dressiest belt was noosed around her neck.

When I pulled it tight, cutting off all her air, all her blood, the gunshot in my shoulder screamed, the muscles writhing in rebellion, but it made me pull tighter, my hand right at the back of her neck. Mel's eyes bulged, her lips shaded darker, and then she full-body spasmed. I think, had that belt not been constricting her throat, she might have squirted vomit all over the two of us. Instead, she choked on it, her hands clawing uselessly at me, even finding where she'd shot me.

Her fingers gouging into my shoulder hurt right down to my soul, if I still had one, but they didn't stop me from doing what I had to do, here.

If I didn't do it? If I didn't, then this would go on and on, night after night, to everyone between Mel and me. This, killing my final girl, was the only way to make it go over. The only way for it to end.

She kicked at the back seat, she pushed her hips as high as she could, but there was nothing she could do. Not really.

Forty seconds after I settled down beside her, my final girl was dead.

I slithered my belt back to me, wrapped it around my waist with the rest– the loops on my grimy jeans would only admit two belts at a time–and flicked the door open easy as anything, stood back into the night and breathed it in.

"Mr. Driver?" Sheriff Burke said, from the other side of the cruiser.

Instead of looking around at her, I instead focused on Dana, from across the street.

She'd had the best angle into the back of the car, might have seen what went down.

Then I saw it in her eyes: she <u>had</u> seen.

That big pistol started to come up, and up.

And? If I thought it would have worked, I would have held my arms out, let her blast away. But I would have probably just had to get revenge on her too, then. So, right when she was settling that bead on me, I leaned away, just slightly to my left.

It was enough.

Dana's shot tore a canyon across the top of the car, sent Sheriff Burke diving for cover, and in that kind of madness—

That's where my kind is at their best.

The next time anybody thought to look for me, I was gone.

* * *

If I were into poetic stuff, then I would have saved that bullet Mel shot me with. It would be what I slip under my heel now, when I need some pep in my step.

I just left it balanced on a fence pole outside Clayton, New Mexico, though.

During my retreat from Texas, which was mostly one ride in a big rig-whose driver I <u>didn't</u> kill, thank you--that twisted little slug had worked up under my skin, which I guess was as far as my body could push it.

I had to slit my bicep about a quarter inch to birth it the rest of the way out.

The blood slithered down my arm like veins on the outside, dripped down off my fingertips, and I looked away from it, to the uncertain north.

Amber had told me once that the reason she was the only Indian at Lamesa High, it was that the Texas Rangers had driven them all out a hundred years ago. Well, driven out the ones they hadn't slaughtered or starved or raped to death, all in the name of America.

Now, in the passenger seat of this truck, I was following that same trail north, I figured. If I was being driven, though, it wasn't by any law--any killers with badges, I should probably say--but because the only way things ended if I stayed in Lamesa was that I would be king of the hill. Only, that hill would be the bodies of all my friends, my mom, and anybody else who stumbled into my slashing radius.

This doesn't mean I'm a hero, mind.

Heroes don't settle down in the back seat of a car beside a high school senior, look them in the eye, and strangle them so hard their tongue bulges from their mouth.

You'd think it would be Jenna's face I still see, but it's Mel's, actually. I think it's because she thought she was safe. That it was over, and she was safe.

Not while Tolly Driver's around.

Sorry.

Walking away, down the middle of 13th, Glenn from two doors down, who was always trying to borrow my dad's tools, grabbed me by my hurt arm, said, "What's going on, Tolly?"

Without even thinking, I stiffarmed him away, didn't even watch him splat on his ass, just kept walking, and--not to be vain, but I bet Glenn's told the story of me pushing him that night back and forth across West Texas for the last seventeen years, until it's legend.

Along with everything else.

Probably even things I had no part in. But why not, right? It's not like I can be hated any worse, right?

Bring it, Lamesa, Texas.

I did it all and more, and, so far as you know, I'm still on the prowl.

Tell your kids to be in before dark, because Strappy's out there behind the tall cotton, waiting. Even when slashers die, they're not really dead, are they? Not so long as even just one person remembers, can tell one more person.

On my street that night, Glenn sort of chirped, falling back, and Sheriff Burke fired once in the air when she saw me hunching away, but I wasn't stopping.

Minutes later I was moving through the darkness of the park. It was a cathedral of trees. I kept moving, kept moving, probably retracing my steps from Saturday night, when I'd been zeroing in on Shannon and Lesley. Just, I didn't remember that walk, just assumed it.

This time, I was aware of each step.

Swishing up out of the tall grass at the edge of the park, a dog growled at me. I stopped, not sure where it was coming from, but then finally teased her shape out of the darkness: a yellow Lab. She was laying on her side so her litter of wriggling pups could feed, but her eyes were locked on me.

"It's okay, Momma, it's okay," I assured her, holding my hands out, and she must have been somebody's dog at one point—she gulped her anger down, let her face soften, and thumped her tail once against the ground.

I smiled, covered it with the back of my right hand, and laughed around it, my eyes hot and leaky: it was over, wasn't it? Now that Mel had been taken care of, slasher-style?

My first proof it was over was that this dog wasn't growling at me because she instinctually hated slashers, she just didn't want me stepping on her pups. My second proof that all this was finally over was that this Lab, she was actually <u>yellow</u>.

I was seeing color again.

I nodded fast to myself about this, maybe even had to purse a grin back.

"Take care of them," I said to the momma dog about her pups, and turned around, could feel the massive shape of the grain elevator ahead of me, calling to me, waiting for me.

I'm coming, I'm coming, I said to it in my head.

Fifteen or twenty stumbling minutes later I stepped off Lynn and onto the pale caliche pad around it that had, I guessed, drank in Shannon and Lesley's bodies, like, in its ancient wisdom, the grain elevator was conspiring with me to keep these killings hidden.

I maybe should have thanked it, I don't know.

Instead I just stood there, looking up its six or seven stories of concrete, and finally I nodded.

I didn't have my black and white eyes anymore, but I could still see the shape of the rusty ladder on the north side of the grain elevator.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I said out loud then, talking to my mom now.

I was disappointing my dad too, but I had to think that, from his vantage point, he could see what was really happening, here.

Mom, not so much. She would just know that her son had gone on a rampage no one could explain. And she'd probably, in the ways of moms, end up blaming herself, and would never stop leaving casseroles on the porches of the classmates I'd slaughtered. Casseroles that would never get so much as taken into the house, because what I'd done, it was essentially unforgivable.

Even me sailing down off the top of the grain elevator with my eyes open and my heart shut wasn't going to change any of that.

But it was the only thing left for me, I knew.

I nodded to myself for strength, and to fake the resolve I wasn't quite feeling, now that my slasher impulses had drained away, and was stepping ahead anyway when--

"Does it hurt?" a voice asked behind me.

My first thought was that it was Sheriff Burke, that there were crosshairs between my shoulder blades, that my chest was about to splash out in front of me, and then I knew it was my mom, to ask me why, Tolly, <u>why</u>? In that same instant, though, it was also Miss Filmore, pushing me to conclude my Ready Writing essay with more punch and resonance, so that the judges would know I was the real winner, and, and--

The reason I was only thinking it was a woman behind me, it was that I was trying to match a face to a voice.

One I actually heard and remembered, after a hard swallow.

"Amber," I said, my face lowered in defeat.

I turned around and she was just standing there.

"Where's that tall Chevy?" I asked, casing the darkness.

"It looks like it hurts, I mean," Amber went on, reaching for my shoulder.

I stepped away from that contact, clapped my hand over my wound.

"Burke?" Amber asked.

"Mel," I told her, in that TV way that also means she's dead.

"Then it's over, isn't it?"

"How did you know?" I asked, about this place.

"This is where it started," she said. "Killers always... you know. Return?"

"Thought I was a slasher."

"Killer, slasher..."

"But... what about Deek's? Didn't it start there too?"

"Still a crime scene."

"Because of the Josses."

"Because of all of it, Tol."

I nodded, knew that, was just arguing details because I didn't want to acknowledge the big picture I was standing in. The one dripping blood out the bottom of the frame, to pool on the floor, reflect me right in the middle of everything

"It does hurt," I finally had to say, about my shoulder. "It's not like <u>TJ</u><u>Hooker</u> at all."

"Why are you here?" Amber asked right back.

I didn't answer, but the way she held my eyes for the fleeting moment I looked up--she knew.

"Is that warpaint?" she said, about my eyes. "Should I be insulted, Tol?" I grinned, shrugged, didn't know.

"War's over," I told her. "I won?"

When you say it like that, though, it means pretty much the opposite.

"You skipped a step, you know that, right?" Amber said.

"Was I supposed to call someone from inside the house?" I asked back with a shrug.

"The..." Amber said, flipping through index cards in her head, "the part where your final girl runs through the--the haunted tunnel or hallway or whatever?"

I shook my head to tell her this didn't mean anything to me.

"It's where you've got all the people you've... you know."

"'Killed.""

"And they're all posed in a hallway or wherever."

"This just to scare her even worse, what?"

"I think it's like a Valentine's card?" Amber said. "Or--like how a cat will bring you dead rats and moles?"

"So, I have to go back to Go, now, not collect my two hundred dollars?" Amber just squinted up the side of the grain elevator.

"You can't," she said, about what she knew I was about to try.

"Everybody knows it was me," I said back. "I can't cut my hair, be the new kid in Algebra this year. I'm pretty sure somebody would figure out that 'Hey, that's that idiot who went on that killing spree last year, isn't it?"

"But--"

"I'm just doing what Justin did," I told her.

"That's what Stace <u>did</u> to him. It wasn't––I don't think it was suicide."

"Well, we can ask Stace whenever she wakes up," I said with a shrug, holding her eyes. "I'm sure my bodycount won't be that much higher by then."

"Tolly."

"Mel can't throw me from up there," I said. "That leaves me to do it, doesn't it? Getting hit with a truck didn't work. Bullets don't."

To prove that last one, I slapped my hand on my shot shoulder, tried to swallow my wince.

"Doing this won't bring any of them back, Tol. They're already dead."

"So am I," I told her.

Amber hugged herself like she was cold, turned around so I couldn't see her face.

"What color is my sweatshirt?" she asked.

"Don't, please," I begged.

Her sweatshirt was one of her brother's old ones, so it was forever going to be too big for her. And it was inside out for some reason.

"What color is my sweatshirt, Tolly?"

"John Deere green," I mumbled.

It was one of our jokes. It meant that everything in Lamesa was cotton, cotton, cotton.

"See?" Amber said. "You'd be killing <u>you</u>, Tolly. You'd be paying for what somebody <u>else</u> did."

"Somebody who looked a lot like me," I said. "I can't––I can't live with it, Ambs. You didn't... you weren't in here when––Mel. Lesley. All of them."

"Maybe you'll start forgetting, after tonight? Ever think that might be part of it?"

"Will Shannon's mom forget? Jenna's? Will Wes's grandma pray for me?"

Amber rubbed at her left eye with the pad of her right thumb. Hard, like she was getting pissed off.

"This isn't fair," she finally said.

"It's called high school," I said back. "Nobody said anything about it being fair."

She blinked fast, lost a tear down her cheek, and I took that as my cue to close-range wave bye to her--kind of pointing, the way you do with your up hand on the steering wheel--and stepped to the side to get around her, to the ladder I needed.

When the grain elevator had been shut down, the town or whoever had torched off the first twenty feet of the ladder, but that was a problem for a few steps from now.

At least, it was until Amber latched her hand onto my forearm.

We both looked down to the contact she was making. Not because it was alien or weird or anything, but because a sort of shock passed between us. Not static electricity, but... her touch made the whole world around us collapse away, like the two of us were standing at the end of time, like who we were or what we stood for has been fighting back and forth since the dawn of things, and this was the big final standoff, for all the chips.

The slasher and the final girl, face-to-face.

"No," I said, looking up into Amber's eyes.

She shook her head no as well. At first slower, like trying to make it make sense, and then faster, more insistent. More desperate.

"But I never--I didn't--" she sputtered.

What she meant to finish with was that she hadn't been part of the tie-Tollyto-the-chair crew at Deek's party. She'd been trying to <u>un</u>tie me, even, which should have kept her out of my big revenge thing. And she couldn't even <u>play</u> an instrument, much less march in a stupid costume in front of two hundred people.

But, with her still holding on to my good arm, I raised my index finger on that side up to my forehead. To that little cut she'd opened, once upon what was going to be a perfect Friday night.

If I hadn't had that cut, I could have just wiped Justin's blood away, never had to get infected.

The same way Stace Goodkin had technically been involved in Justin falling off that pumpjack, so was Amber—as far as slasher stuff goes—at fault for me, you know, <u>becoming</u> a slasher. This was why she was saving unsavable baby birds now. This was why she was reading encyclopedias, and doing higher math. This was why she was using proper grammar, and avoiding cusswords.

The whole time I'd been changing, she had been too.

"Run," I said to her in as pleading a voice as I could, and pushed her away, but already her sweatshirt was fading from John Deere green to a bright moonshadow grey.

It wasn't over.

* * *

If I'd known the genre better, I could have guessed the next part.

I wasn't guessing anything at that moment, though. I was pushing Amber one direction and running away the opposite direction. Except?

Instead of plunging back into the night like I was trying to do, it turned out I was right on Amber's heels. It felt like I was in a nightmare version of <u>Amazing</u> <u>Stories</u>. No matter which way I ran, it was always going to be on Amber's heels, my fingers grasping at her hair.

To add to the terribleness, she was running for the grain elevator, which had to be hopeless—that ladder was too high, wasn't it?

And, really, with my slasher limp, she shouldn't have been able to keep ahead of me. Had she been Shannon and Lesley, she wouldn't have been able to, I bet. Even if she would have been Mel, I still could have caught her inside a few steps.

But Shannon wasn't my final girl. Lesley wasn't. Mel wasn't.

It had been Amber all along.

Still, even with her burst of final-girl speed, I almost had the back of her bulky sweatshirt. She clattered across the old scale, jumped the grate on the other side, and then hooked a hard left.

Instead of running back into Lamesa, though, she grabbed onto the rusty door in the side of the grain elevator, heaved it back with a screaming creak, and dove in.

In the moment, I didn't stop to think why she was doing this. If it were a slasher movie I was watching, then of course she'd be running into the most stupid place.

Amber Big Plume Dennison wasn't stupid, though.

No, looking back from states away now, I get why she chose the danger of the grain elevator over all the hiding places in town: in the grain elevator, no one else would get hurt.

She was a real and true final girl, yes. Whether she wanted to be or not.

I stepped through that rusty door half a step behind her, pulled it shut behind me because the darkness could be deeper that way, and instantly had to duck under the spiral staircase that wound its way up and up.

Ahead of me, deeper in the belly of the grain elevator, Amber screamed.

I stepped ahead, but slower now, and--I <u>hadn't</u> skipped a step, had I?

We were under the silos of the grain elevator, which was this hunched over space crisscrossed with supports and chutes and augers, all of it coated white with spiderweb and a decade or two of dust.

Hanging upside down in front of Amber, his legs somehow tied to a metal beam so he could swing down at the slightest provocation, was Lesley. The lower half of his face was completely missing.

Amber had fallen back, was trying to pull farther away from him, but then she saw me, stepping into this dark space with her.

"No!" she screamed at me, and forced herself to scooch past Lesley. Only to fall splat onto Shannon, whose face was just as bad, her eyes just as open and dry.

I pushed past Lesley, and Amber scrambled on.

Next in her own personal haunted house—Tunnel of Love, as she would have it—was Jenna. Her I'd posed with her baton, but, to get her hand to hold it like a real twirler, I'd had to bore a hole through the palm, evidently.

Cockroaches poured from her mouth when Amber brushed past, and... had I scooped them up from somewhere, carried them in my shirt, funneled them all into Jenna's mouth, what?

It didn't matter.

I crunched after Amber, the soles of my shoes coated with cockroach guts.

"You don't have to do this!" Amber screamed back at me, crawling now, never mind the gunk her hands were pushing through.

I stepped around Jenna, then felt terror for the first time in my slasher form: Amber was to a hatch on the other side of the grain elevator.

"Just stay here!" she said back to me, then gave her shoulder to the hatch.

It was rusted or welded shut, didn't even budge the littlest bit, but the impact of her shoulder did dislodge a raft of dead moths and worse. They sifted down over her, left her spitting crumbly wings out.

I was maybe eight feet from her, here.

She rammed the hatch one more time, just got more dusty moths in her hair, and, right when I was practically on top of her, she slithered under, was running back the way we'd come, already crawling up the other side of the grain elevator's understory, now, Wes Stripling falling down in front of her, his eyes lidless, staring.

"No, no, no!" Amber said, and batted him away to struggle past.

I was coming up the other side now, the way we'd already been.

We were racing for the door.

Amber beat me, but when she clasped onto the handle on the backside of that door, she stopped, looked back to me.

This was the second point in this night where she could have saved herself, or saved Lamesa.

She chose Lamesa.

I stopped when, instead of pushing the door out, she pulled it deeper in.

I got to the door right when she was breaking that handle off.

She was running up the metal stairs now, her hand on the rail, smearing through a coating of pigeon shit probably three-quarters of an inch deep.

"Tolly!" she screamed.

I followed her up and around, up and around, and finally birthed out into the night, so high above Lamesa.

Amber was standing way over at the edge, panting. There was no rail, just a sudden drop.

"Stop already!" she screamed. "Tolly, I don't want to do this! It's <u>me</u>, Amber!"

I hesitated for a moment, indecisive on the balls of my feet, the real me doing battle with my more killer self, but then what surfaced all around in my head was Amber braking her Rabbit truck hard, so that windshield could rush into my vision, make that little rupture that would let all this death and violence and loneliness in.

Inside, I fell to my knees, shaking my head no, that I didn't mean to dredge that up, I didn't blame her, it wasn't her fault, she wasn't part of this. But--it's like in Sunday school, when the teacher says you can't even <u>think</u> bad things, because God will see, hear, know, and you instantly, completely against what you think is your will, think every single worst thing you can conjure up, including some you didn't even know you had in you.

I'm sorry, Amber.

If I were a better person, I might could have stopped this right here, taken temporary control.

Instead, I was already rushing ahead for you.

Can I explain how intense and wonderful and fast and slow and beautiful and forever it is to have your actual final girl right there within reach? The world blurs away, just falls somewhere else, and she--she's the only thing there is anymore. The only that matters. Your world is her her her.

If that's not love, then I guess I don't know what love is.

And I think Amber had some sense of this, too--my tunnel-vision.

Because she used it against me: at the last possible instant, she dove away to the side, and it was too late for me to turn, too late for me to stop my plunge forward, too late for me to do anything but go over the sudden edge of the grain elevator.

But, that way I'd stopped my roll through the ditch by clasping onto the city limits sign? I was now hanging by one arm off the side of the grain elevator, my feet pedaling through open air.

I heaved my other arm around to latch onto the concrete lip, and my blownapart shoulder screamed at me not to do this, but the slasher in me didn't care how much this hurt.

I hiked a leg up, managed to hook my heel over, and then, impossibly, I was standing there, chest heaving from the effort.

This is the moment when I think Amber could have rushed me, pushed me right off.

She was still hoping this might work out, though. It's one of the many failings of final girls--hope.

"Tolly, Tolly..." she was saying, her arms pulled inside her sweatshirt. It was cold, this high up.

I opened my mouth to, I don't know, say something, I guess, but of course I couldn't. Not because of my mask this time--I was still me in my head, might could have creaked something out--but because what could there even be <u>to</u> say? "Sorry" wouldn't even cover it. I'd have to, I don't know, write a whole <u>book</u> or something.

I took a step across to her, and then another, and now it was <u>her</u> with her heels hanging over seven stories of open space.

Instead of rushing her--where could she go?--I just dragged my bad leg and worse shoulder across and across, I guess so we could be face-to-face for the end.

Or maybe because she was still my best friend.

"Tolly, don't," she whimpered, tears running down her cheeks.

I had to, though.

My good hand rose, sure and steady, and wrapped around her windpipe.

I angled my head over to the side, to drink in these last moments of life, and she... she--

She worked her right arm out from under her sweatshirt and cupped the side of my face, maybe trying to kill the monster with love.

When it wasn't working, she cupped the other side of my face with her left hand, and held it there, smearing coolness onto my cheek.

I squeezed harder on her throat and straightened my arm such that, if I let go, she would drop.

Instead of grabbing onto me, though, she just kept her hands to my face, kneading my skin, working something on, something in--

And then I finally smelled what she was doing to me.

Final girls are far from stupid. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise. They're MacGyvers, they make do with whatever's at hand. The same way slashers are all about revenge, they're all about <u>surviving</u>, and they never look at the price tag.

Amber didn't want to, but in order to make it through this night, through this friendship, she was having to kill me.

With peanut butter.

The jar she'd had under her inside-out sweatshirt, in the kangaroo pocket, fell down between us, tumbled off the edge of the grain elevator, into the suck.

I stepped back from this poison and brought Amber with not because I wanted her to live but because all my muscles were bunching, contracting.

This, by far, was the most peanuts I'd ever encountered at once. And, while slashers might be able to shake off tranquilizers and worse, we're evidently always still susceptible to what we came <u>into</u> this with. The same way that salt from the margarita had sizzled on Justin Joss's skin, because of his bad history with it, this peanut butter was my kryptonite.

I shook my head no, brought my good hand to my face to wipe this vileness off, but that only got more of it onto more of my skin.

My throat clenched shut all at once and I fell to my knees.

Amber wheeled her arms for balance, just managed to stay on the roof.

"I'm sorry, Tolly, I'm so sorry," she was saying, stepping around me.

I fell over onto my side, was already spasming. It was Deek's party all over again, but this time no EpiPen was going to save my life.

I looked up to the night sky, saw the briefest flicker of a star, twitching ahead in its sacred path, and then my field of vision washed down from black and white to somewhere in-between.

I rolled away from the rancid poison killing me, and--

It was into seven stories of open space.

I've been falling ever since.

* * *

Where I land, finally, is behind the tall, grimy counter of That Great Junkyard in the Sky. Because Red, who owns the place but only comes in about once a month anymore, now that he's on oxygen, thinks he's some kind of joker.

We're a U-Pull-'Em salvage yard in Pueblo, Colorado. Our specialty is foreign vehicles. The southeast corner of the yard is all Hondas, the west fence is Toyotas, and there's rows and rows of the rest, and I've got them all in my head, hardly even need the computer.

I started out shagging parts for cans of Wolf brand chili, then Red started slipping me one sleeve of crackers a day to go with, and, when he figured out I was sleeping in the back of a VW bus, he dragged the camper I still live in back to the yard, left it on the flatbed trailer he'd used to fetch it. Over the years, I built a little four-step staircase up to my door, and I wedged cinderblocks under the trailer front and back, to keep it from rocking each time I went three steps this or that way.

It's more than I deserve.

And, since parts monkeys come and go, I'm still out there in the sun and snow some days, shagging rotors and radiators. What Red never ceased to be amazed by was how I could get out to the Hondas and back so fast. Used to, in the downtime between customers--which, at a junkyard, can be a whole afternoon--Red used to put a stopwatch on me for the telephone orders.

I never went too fast. But I went fast enough.

The story I told him to explain it was that my dad was six feet nine inches tall, but it hurt his knees to walk slow enough for me and Mom to keep up. Meaning, ever since I could walk, I'd had to learn to really hustle. And now it came natural to me, I guessed.

The story I told him about how my dad died, which was why Red would never see him, was that a hurricane had hit when I was in junior high. We didn't live in Texas for this past I was making up, but Alabama. What happened to my dad in this lie was that he had seen a yellow Lab drowning in the swollen-up creek during a hurricane, pulled our car over, and waded in. The last thing he told me was to take care of my mother, Son. And so we watched him wrestle this struggling dog up onto his shoulder, then hike it higher, which, for him, was <u>high</u>.

This was when his trick knee locked, stranding him there.

He stood in those rising waters and held that whimpering dog up in the air for what felt like five minutes after the waters rose above his head, until I broke my promise, <u>didn't</u> stop Mom from swimming to the basketball player she'd fallen for in high school.

It was the last time I saw either of them.

Neither would ever show up at the gate asking after me.

That part was true, anyway.

And the rest of it is too, pretty much. My dad was a hero. My mom loved him with everything she had. They're in Heaven together, now.

The fine, leathery skin around Red's eyes crinkled, hearing this, and for the last seventeen years he's been the granddad I never had. He even stopped bringing in the peanut butter and sugar sandwiches which had been his lunch since he quit school in eighth grade.

There's kindness in the world, surprise. Even for someone like me.

I've even come to like the country music Red won't budge on, when he's here. Not Barbara Mandrell——if she ever winds up on the radio, I have to book it out of the front office, find something to do for thirty minutes or an hour. But there's one song by a band called Alabama, "I'm Not That Way Anymore."

I always nod a bit with that one, and let the corners of my eyes crinkle up.

Used to, in the down hours, I'd call in, request it.

Before Amber's Rabbit showed up, that is.

The Great Junkyard in the Sky is really the drain for all the imports the other yards are just going to crush. Sometimes we get them for forty dollars.

The night I forklifted that ruined little truck out to the VW row, behind the gross tamarack tree, my face was streaming with tears.

That's when I started writing this.

It's to you, Amber. It's <u>about</u> you, but more than that, it's <u>for</u> you.

I thought Texas was behind me, but I guess it's turned out to be still inside me. Along with everything I've done.

But I can tap-tap-tap it into this parts computer, between customers. And it prints up just fine on the receipt paper page-by-perforated-page--there's not enough space on the dinky hard-drive to store all this.

Where I'm putting it is into a three-ring binder that used to be for a 1982 Honda manual, once the glue on the spine let go and we just had loose pages all over the counter. I have to use a hole-punch, the kind that's a dull little spike you hold and hammer, to make holes for the rings, but... I've got time, don't I?

And, there still aren't any notches on my bedpost, don't worry. That's not something slashers get to experience, I don't think--what if I infected someone, right? No, the only dates I ever get to go on are through this one guy Asael Sandoval, who's always coming in with time to kill himself, and taking me through his exploits and adventures from the weekend before, with chica after chica, as he says it, painting the world beyond these fences as so magical, so enticing.

Leaving Texas, I thought my days of hearing Spanish were over, but I was wrong.

About a lot of things.

One important one being that falling seven stories straight down would kill me in a way that I could stay dead.

Some afternoons I stand at the front window and look through the prison bars Red welded there and I just watch a father and a son pick through the junked cars.

It's not all father-and-son weekend projects, though.

I don't make my way into the yard to interrogate any of these weekend warriors about what they want, though, so I can tell them where it might be. You don't come to a U-Pull-'Em because you're jammed for time. You come to us because you want to meditate out there in our wasteland of rust. You come to us because, while you're here, the world falls away, leaves just you and this blinker housing you're looking for, that the factory quit manufacturing thirty years ago.

And when you find it... I've seen grown men's fingers shake with joy and pride and luck when they're digging in their wallets for the four-fifty they owe. These are the cars and trucks they grew up in, that they're restoring because they didn't pay enough attention back when. But now they can. Now they will.

And never once has a face from Lamesa turned up, given this scrawny, shaggy, wrong-named guy behind the counter a second look.

We're only seven hours north, though. It's not outside the realm of possibility.

As for how I got out, got away, never paid for my crimes——I guess I should say. Or, I already did, didn't I? A trucker. One who may or may not have had an aviator dog painted onto the doors of his truck. He was heading north on 87 now, the end of a run that had maybe started with us, and here I was with my thumb out. His brake lights were waiting for me a quarter mile up.

All across the panhandle, he tried to talk to me, but I couldn't. Not yet.

It had all just happened, I mean.

So, thank you, S Dog, thank you for understanding that I couldn't maintain conversation that night, and just maintaining it without me. And thanks for fudging your log that night, so you could pack a few more hours in, get me how far away I needed to get.

Your steady, rollicking voice is still the sound of escape, for me.

But, I feel like I owe you, too. So, here's what happened earlier that night: my best friend in the world left me for dead on the top of an abandoned grain elevator, and I rolled off it into open air, and I plunged seven stories straight down.

I'd meant to land on my face, to erase myself, but I landed splat on my back instead.

Blood and something else spurted up from my mouth, and my broken pelvis broke some more, and I kind of think the back of my head might have flattened, the skull in there splintering through my brain.

As most of my teachers could have told you, though, that was no great loss. Tolly Driver was never any great thinker.

And, that way that, when I was slashered out, I was kind of locked in the cab, my hands at the wheel even though I couldn't exactly steer?

I was still inside, looking out. Looking straight up.

The stars didn't have their delicate little drag-tails anymore. Meaning this was really me.

I'm sorry, Dad, I would have said if I could have.

Mom too.

And you as well, Amber.

I don't blame you.

If you hadn't done what you did, then we probably go sailing off the grain elevator together. Instead it was just me, falling like a dead thing, then trapped in my husk of a broken body, watching the stars hang there like they were never going to move again.

And they weren't supposed to, I don't think.

Everybody who had tied me to that lounge chair in Deek's backyard was dead and punished, and I'd gone toe-to-toe with the one who'd made it so I could get infected, become what I was. I hadn't killed her—thank you, slasher gods—but, too, she was different than Mel and the rest, wasn't she? She was the same as Stace Goodkin, who hadn't actually tricked Justin Joss up onto that bucking pumpjack, but was, just due to bad luck and poor timing, still implicated enough in what happened to him that he thought he had to dispatch her. But she was still alive. Beat to hell and traumatized, sure, but not dead. Neither was Amber. And her opening my forehead up on the backside of her windshield, there was no malevolence there, just the kind of fun you have one summer with your best friend in the whole world.

There was only love, and more and more days opening up before us. It hurt, hitting my head on that windshield, but even when it happened, there was nothing for me to get pissed off about. I should have seen it coming, I mean. And, talking about one girl to another girl--I deserved it, didn't I? I'd been asking for it.

Still, the rules are the rules, right?

Amber wasn't in some hospital room like Stace, but-except for whatever it would have taken to get like that-I almost wish she had been. Then she wouldn't have had to see what she'd done to me.

You can't change what's already happened, though. If you could, then me and Mom would have already sung and prayed my dad back before any of this even started.

Slashers, though--you already know this, don't you?

We keep coming back and coming back. Just because I was dead didn't mean it was over.

Maybe four minutes after my big fall—however long it took Amber to spiral back down that metal staircase, probably stopping every few steps to collapse into sobs—I became aware of her—of <u>you</u>, Amber—huddled over, me, holding one of my hands in both of yours.

Your whole body was shuddering.

Even now, typing this, I can still feel your fingers around mine, Ambs.

Your mouth was moving, but I guess when a body's officially and technically and all the way dead, you can't hear so well. What I wouldn't give to have heard you here, though. To have been able to hold on to those words for the last seventeen years.

But it was enough that your mouth was moving, really.

It was enough that you were just there, Amber.

Thank you.

Next, you were slithering that blue sweatshirt up over your head, and using it to wipe the peanut butter from my hands, from between my fingers, from my face. I think you were realizing what I hadn't yet figured out: the peanut butter, so long as it was still touching me, was like a bowling ball on my chest, like antifreeze in my gut--because it was from before I was a slasher, it could <u>actually</u> put me down, and keep me there.

You rubbed and smeared, still crying, but I was still dead, wasn't I?

You straddled across me, then, shaking me by the shoulders, and then you moved my mouth open and shut, and then you lowered your mouth to mine, Amber Big Plume Dennison, and you breathed your warm life into me.

I felt it expanding my lungs, but my lungs were punctured by my own ribs, couldn't hold on to those breaths.

This wasn't a fairy tale kiss, no.

When you finally figured this out, you lowered yourself to me and hugged me so hard, my face in the side of your neck, and you held on and held on, like if you squeezed tight enough, you could keep me here, with you.

I'd fallen seven stories, though.

Finally, after I don't know how long–minutes? an hour?–you sat back up, stepped off me, wavered on your knees beside me in the caliche.

And then you stiffened, sat up straighter.

You looked around like was there anyone around who could have seen this full-body realization you were experiencing.

Your mouth was moving again, and I caught the shape of my name from your lips.

If I could have, I would have shaken my head no, Amber, please, don't do it. But you were too smart. And you knew the genre we were in, didn't you? So much better than I did.

You nodded once to me that this would work, that it <u>had</u> to work, and then you stood all at once and walked out of my limited field of vision.

The only thing I could think you were doing was going to get the deputy's fiancee's truck, to roll me up into the bed, take me to the hospital, to my mom, to Sheriff Burke. Instead, two of the stars thousands of light years away scratched into their infinitesimal motion.

What? I screamed inside.

No, no, it was over, it was done, I was down and was going to stay that way. Except then I was sitting up fast and steady from the waist.

I never felt any part of me knit together, I didn't feel my heart start pushing blood again, I don't know how my punctured lungs were supposed to hold air, but the slasher genre could care less about all that shit, couldn't it?

I was sitting up.

I was cranking my head over to, to--Amber.

You were standing twenty feet away, hugging yourself tight, your back turned to me. Because you know that that's the way it always works: you can put a slasher down, sure, but if you ever turn your back on one of us, then...

Yeah.

I hate you, Amber.

And I love you.

When you heard the caliche crunch behind you, your head dropped and your shoulders shook and this was our big goodbye.

I raised my right hand to you, but even on the way up, I could tell it only wanted to wrap your Indian hair up, jerk you back, into my chest.

So I ran, Amber.

I ran away from you. From what I would do to you if I stayed. And maybe it was because I was too weak to fight, and maybe it was because I was in control at last, but either way I ran and I fell and I got up and I staggered ahead. My body was whole, but inside I was falling apart.

When a pair of headlights pinned me to a fence--I was almost to 87, I was so close, I was almost gone--I let my shoulders slump. Because of course Sheriff Burke would be here, wouldn't she? Of course she was going to unwittingly start everything all over again, before I could slip away, into the future.

I turned around, shielding my eyes, and took a lurching step back when I made the distinctive Ford shape of those high headlights.

Mom, pulling back in from Muleshoe.

She had the door open, was standing on the running board, her CB mic in her right hand, along with--

No. Mom.

It was the letter I'd left at the cemetery.

She turned her brights off, hooked the mic in the hinge of the open door, left the running lights on, and just stood there watching me, her lips pursed in that kind of pain for a child that only a mother can ever know, I think.

She knew what I'd done, I mean. She knew what I was now.

I shook my head no to her, to go away please, that I can't, I can't--

She stepped down, took the two steps to the front of the truck, her eyes locked on me.

"Go," she said, tossing her ring of keys across to me, that one word pulling all the tears from her at once.

The keys rattled and rolled up to the toe of my boot.

I looked up to her standing there.

I'm so sorry, Mom.

I didn't mean to do any of this to you.

"Take it," she said, stepping away from the truck, giving it to me because it was more important that I live than that she not go to jail for helping me escape.

I shook my head no, and she hugged herself to try to keep the sobs down, and I think I was crying too, but it was hard to tell, as broken up inside as I already was.

"Tolly," she said at last.

"Mom," I said back, forever.

She nodded once, like having just figured something out, and stepped back to the cab.

This time what she tossed over was the Chihuahua she'd gotten for me from the drive-in.

I caught it.

"<u>Go</u>," she said to me then, her CB mic already raised to her mouth, the button not quite pressed yet. "I'll—I'm going to lead them all back to your dad. It'll make sense. But you have to be gone, Tolly. You <u>have</u> to!"

When she said she was going to lead Sheriff Burke and her deputies to the cemetery, she'd looked that way for half an instant.

It was all the time I needed.

I was already walking north on 87 when S Dog, roused from sleep by some crazy lady giving him do-or-die orders from his dash, eased over to the side of the road for me, and I never came back to Lamesa, Texas, and I never will.

But that doesn't mean you can't come to me, Amber, does it?

Standing at the big window in the office, looking through the wrought-iron bars, I just saw a mom with this silky long black hair walking past the Toyotas

and the Hyundais and the few Fiats we've got here at The Great Junkyard in the Sky.

You were picking your way back to the VW row, and no way will you stop at that stinky tamarack tree like everyone else does. Because you don't let that kind of stuff put you off. Because you know you have to push through the ugly to get to the good. And the reason you didn't swing by the office to ask directions was that Red was on his walker by that little Nissan truck at the gate, to direct you back to the VWs. He'd just been checking the mail, getting the exercise his doctor tells him he's supposed to, and if he hadn't been, then you would have walked up to my counter, and you would have seen through the years, seen me, and what would we have done then, Amber?

What would I have done to you?

I would have asked you to dance, I know. And then it would all be starting again.

But it can't. I won't let it.

The moment I saw you, I walked away from that window, I went to the lowest cabinet on my side of the counter, the one Red can't stoop to, and for the first time in fifteen years, I opened it, stood back up wearing my dad's old D R I V E R hardhat for strength, for resolve.

Even from behind the register, though, from under this plastic brim, Amber, from behind these keys I'm tapping so fast, I can still see you.

You have a kid now, don't you? And she or he's about to start driving, and you want to show them the truck you used to have, so you tracked it down by the VIN.

You found it.

And, when you get to that bashed-up Rabbit on the other side of the tamarack tree? When you get there, there's going to be something flashing from the rearview mirror, behind that windshield that's somehow still uncracked, all these years later.

It's the feather earring your granddad made for your grandma, those many years ago.

It was still there under the seat, just like we left it. I dug it out just like I promised. And in your trick glove compartment now, the one only you can

open, there's a three-ring binder, with all the pages of this I've gotten together before this one.

This one will still be in the printer, Amber.

For you.

And I can see him now. I can see him.

Your son.

He's running across the top of the cars beside you. He's leaping and vaulting and floating and he's probably going to kill his idiot self when one of those rusted-out roofs crumble beneath him, but the way his hair's falling across his eyes, the way he's smiling, how he thinks he's going to live forever--

Please don't tell me his name, Amber.

But I know it. I can see it from here, from how stupid he is, and how hopeful. You still remember.

Thank you.

And when you come in to pay, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be here anymore. Or, I mean, I will be, but I also won't be.

I'll be sitting with my back to my side of the tall counter.

Tilted over my face will be my dad's hardhat, and in my lap, the jug of peanut butter I've been saving in a secret cabinet, for this day. For years now it's been carefully wrapped in the foil from the last Chihuahua I ever ate, like that could be the shield that protected me. From it. From myself.

But not anymore.

By the time you walk up to my counter, I'll have swallowed as much of this peanut butter as I can before it hits my system, and then a few fingerscoops more, and because it'll still be in my gut and on my fingers and smeared around my mouth and packed into my nose and eyes, I won't be able to get up for any sequel action, and this will all be over at last, and that's how it should be, that's the only way it can be, this is what I've been waiting for.

Thank you, Amber Big Plume Dennison, or whatever your name is now. Thank you for being my friend. We burned bright once upon a growing up, didn't we? I've never loved anyone like I loved you, but I didn't need to. You were enough for me, and I was lucky to know you for the few years I did.

Now, raise that boy, please.

Let him run crazy when he needs to, but hold him close too, and never let him go until you have to. Rebuild that ridiculous little Rabbit truck and drive it right into the screaming heart of Texas, and know that I can still smell your hair in that bench grinder, I can still smell Spam burning in the pan like victory, and know that, in my heart, I'm lying beside you on the grass of an empty football field one July afternoon in Lamesa, Texas.

That's where I'll be by the time you read this, Amber.

It's where I've always been.

It was the first time you held my hand, I think.

I'll never let it go.

Acknowledgments

I finished this novel right between Lita Ford's "Kiss Me Deadly" and Ratt's "Lay It Down." That feels about right. I meant to finish it at six in the morning out at the Stanley two nights ago, and I also meant to finish it at the tire shop an hour ago, but you can't really tell novels when they're over. They tell you, don't they? Where I started it was on a fourteen-hour flight to Dubai, which is a crazy place for a West Texas kid to find himself going. But? Headed there, I got hold of a friend who's over there now, who I grew up with in West Texas, so… crazy things happen, don't they?

Like slashers.

I'm about to head off to Germany, too, and Spain, and France. Books can take you places.

I only ever planned on farming, though.

And, I don't even know how many novels I've set out in the cotton fields and oil patches of West Texas, now. It's where my heart is, I guess. But, having not been back for years and decades, I needed some help with this one. That came in the form of Travis Burkett, whom I met in California. Travis knows Lamesa better than I ever will. I mean, grew up in Stanton, not even an hour south along what Lamesa people call the Stanton Highway, but that road will forever be "<u>137</u>" to me, at least until it hits Cloverdale, at which point it becomes the Big Lake Highway. But, nobody calls Cloverdale "Cloverdale" anymore, either. Things change. And they should. But, for me, it'll always be 1989 in Lamesa. I remember going to the Sky-Vue back then, and falling in love enough with the drive-in that, ten, twelve years later, up in Lubbock with two babies, my wife and I took them to their first movies. Sliding them down the slide at the Sky-Vue's playground... I don't even know if I can get into words how that felt like all the circles in my life closing around me, in the best way.

Anyway, meant to say: Travis, thank you, man. So, so much. You didn't just tell me where this road hit that road, you asked around town for stuff that happened before you were born. You snapped pictures of pages from old high school annuals I don't know how you found. I never would have known what the Golden Tornado marching band looked like. I never would have known about the egg processing plant. I never would have known all the things that make the Lamesa in here hopefully real. Or, at least, not just super wrong. Still? There will be some wrong stuff—that's all on me. Novels make things change to fit. That's the way it is. And, writers—we tend to follow Richard Hugo's advice, and just move the water tower to the other side of town, if the story needs it to be there.

I should say too that this novel, man, it was one of those ones I didn't plan. On that flight to Dubai, I mean, I had a new and cool keyboard for this tablet I'd just got, and wanted to finally try typing on it, to see if it was going to work out. For a year or two I'd had the vague idea for this novel rattling around in my head, so, just exercising—just typing—I ran through two or three pages, then angled my screen over to show off to my wife that this could work out, couldn't it? Then I shut that tablet, went to the Middle East, and didn't remember I'd started this novel until spring break, in March. So, it only sat for a month, but still, with a writing project, sometimes it can be hard to get the foot pump back on the thing, push some air into the thing.

Tolly was right there waiting, though.

I know I've written Jade Daniels, and the guy from <u>Growing Up Dead in</u> <u>Texas</u>, the LP Deal from <u>The Bird is Gone</u>, that kid who narrates <u>The Long Trial</u> <u>of Nolan Dugatti</u>, that other kid in <u>Mongrels</u>, and those are all some version of me, one hundred percent. But Tolly, here, he's the exact same idiot I am. The only other time in my writing I've accidentally written myself into things like this is this one story from so long ago, "The Many Stages of Grief."

Anyway, thanks to Cinderella and Kix and Lita Ford and that whole KBAT gang. You guys have been my heart since about 1987, and you always will be, I'm pretty sure. Thanks to Steve Woods, who I grew up with. That cop radar you had for those few months in 1989? It was so real. You saved us so many times. I never knew how you did it, and neither did you, but you definitely had it for a

while. It was the most magical thing. And thanks to Randy Howard--no, you weren't actually in Dubai when I texted you that I was coming over, you were stuck in Kuala Lumpur with COVID, but that's the way you are, man. West Texas was never big enough for you. But, do you remember when I'd give you a ride home from Greenwood High after school every day? I had that 1976 F-150 that I'd painted black in Teddy Smith's garage, and it had that big 460 in it, and I'd put my foot in all the way down FM 1379, past my Grandpa Graham's old house, which my mom and her brothers always called the Rock House, and, at the turn down to your sister's trailer, there was the water station, with its caliche road shortening that turn. I'd hit it doing about sixty, and, because I thought we were Bo and Luke, we'd slide screaming across to the next blacktop, and each time we should have hooked a tire and started rolling, but the world wouldn't let us go yet, I guess. Thanks also to Teddy Smith. You probably don't remember this, Teddy, but, driving to Eagles on the other side of Midland one night in your tall shortbed Chevy, it was foggy and you turned the headlights off, and we just plunged into darkness after darkness, and with each mile I knew this was it, it had to end, but it never did. Thanks to an old, old deacon who sneakily flipped me off in church, once. I've never forgotten that thrill, dude. And thanks to my sister Katie. I remember riding in one of your first cars when you were in high school--was it a VW too?--and you telling me to watch that seat, it'll slide forward. I didn't believe it until my head was banging off the windshield. Thanks to Diane Womack. You were both my lab partner my sophomore year at Greenwood High--you were only a year older--and my babysitter, I used to always hear, back when we weren't even in kindergarten yet. I don't know where you are anymore, Diane, but I still think about you. Thanks to a guy I used to work with at Dekalb, Butch. Over at your house once, Butch, you showed me your pet possum, which I think was really just a possum you were keeping prisoner in a hutch. I'll never forget you stealthily opening the top of that hutch--it was just chickenwire--so I could slowly reach my hand in, "pet" this laid-over, mouth-open, hissing possum. I didn't like it, the possum didn't like it, but you were nodding, Butch, like this day was coming along just fine, just fine. Thanks to Tod Goldberg, for being so good at doing those <u>20/20</u> or <u>60 Minutes</u> voices. I don't know either, but, through you, I felt I knew them well enough to

fake it, for that first chapter. Thanks to Jesse Lawrence, for being the first one to catch typos in this. Think you read this in a single day, yes? Thanks to Paul Tremblay, for flash-freezing (in words) a certain girl jumping over a railing--I may be stealing that, here, because it really stuck with me. I think it stuck with all of us, really? Thanks to Stephen King, whose Billy Summers might have got me thinking along the lines of this kind of then-and-now delivery; I know I read it not all that long before starting this one, anyway, and, on revision, it was the book I was thinking of the most. Thanks to Kim Jones--or, sorry? I haven't seen you since fourth grade, but I always wondered what happened to you. So, I put you at Deek's party. And, Ezzy, I stole you from <u>Shadowhunters</u>. As you do. Same for a Mike Birbiglia bit that's in here now. Thanks to Greg Greene and @eweytx on Twitter, for a Micronauts-assist. Thanks to Robert Fulghum: I stole the rhythm of one of your titles, man. It was too perfect not to. Thanks to my Uncle Bruce, for telling me about sharks in the cotton field when I was young enough to believe that, so would always know it to be true. Thanks to my mom, for your stories about riding in the stripper basket as a kid, and the rats pouring down on you. Thanks also, Mom, for letting me rent <u>American Anthem</u> and <u>American Ninja</u> so many times in a row. What did you think was up with me? And Casey, I won't say your last name, but I remember what you ate that day in the cafeteria, in elementary. Thanks to my grandmother Josephine, for letting me use the name of the family you grew up with for Amber. As a kid, I'd always wonder and wonder how it must have felt to grow up Big Plume, when you were Calflooking. And, thanks to my Grandpa Graham. When you lived in a house we ended up living in in Greenwood years and years ago--Darla, you're there now, and this feels so perfect--you used an old oilfield drillbit for a counterweight on the hatch down to the cellar. Or, I think it was you? It could have been Roy, your son, or somebody working for him. Anyway, I've known that cellar a long time, and hidden from a lot of tornadoes in it, the horses screaming above us, back in the corrals, and that drillbit always made me feel safe.

So, yeah, um, I guess I made it into a He-Man killing thing. I am a horror writer. And, while this novel starts in a lot of places, one of the main places is a grad class I just taught at CU, "Found Footage Fiction." What we were trying to figure out for the whole semester was what techniques and tricks writers use to get the reader to believe in the "reality" of their stories. Not just non-fiction novel stuff, and not only "suspend the disbelief" stuff either. More autofictiony kind of fake-outs, I guess? But not exclusively. Anyway, I've been lucky enough to teach a whole slew of cool courses, and I've learned from each of them, but this one, this one spit me out the other side a completely different writer. Well, I mean: okay, still a writer who likes to see the blood splash on the walls, that'll never change. But, I feel like now I don't just have more tools in my toolbox, but I went to the hardware store and this nice woman with a son long gone handed me over a completely <u>new</u> toolbox, that she wants someone to keep getting use from.

I'm having so much fun trying out all these weird new tools.

Thanks to my agent BJ Robbins, too. None of this without you. Without Mongrels and Good Indians and Chainsaw and the rest, I probably never ride on books to other parts of the world, right? I bet not. Having you there fighting for me, it means everything. And, that scene with Tolly and his mom right at the end, you're the one who asked for that. And, Travis Burkett, thanks again, this time for pushing me on how Stace's story might go places it wasn't in that draft you read. Now she's ending out at the pump with Justin, and it feels right, doesn't it? Hope so. And, Joe Monti. Were we on the phone when I told you about this novel? That I was doing a teenage slasher thing? I kind of doubt we were, but that's also the way I remember it. Anyway, thank you for letting me do it. I mean, you could have, instead of just kind of being quiet when you heard that I was writing another slasher, told me that maybe I should explore some other room of this haunted house I'm writing my way through? Thank you for letting me do this one. I don't think I'm complete if I never get to put Tolly and Amber on the page. If I never get to stand up on top of that grain elevator. If I never get to go back to the Sky-Vue. And thanks too for pushing me to find just a little bit more on Amber. As usual, the one thing you identified, it turned out to be a sort of pivot for the whole narrative. And, thanks also to <u>Happy Death</u> <u>Day</u> and <u>Freaky</u>. Which really means thank you to Christopher Landon. Not completely sure I think of this novel without those two movies. Well, <u>A</u> <u>Nightmare on Elm Street 2</u> might be an inception point too. I remember watching Freddy claw his way up from Jesse the first time, and wondering if I had something like that in me as well, maybe.

I guess I did?

It's this novel.

Thanks as well to my son, Rane, for talking this one through with me, some. You've got a good story head on your shoulders, man. And thanks to my daughter, Kinsey, for always having a knife on you. I think you're sort of Amber, here? And thanks to my wife just now--but this is always--for letting me play hair metal at high volume here in my study. I told you I needed to finish this novel right quick, cool? You just nodded, gave me these forty-five minutes once again, and, when the dog was scratching at my door to get in and I was typing all clickety-clack loud, couldn't hear any scratching, you somehow heard her, opened the door enough for her to come in, lie down right behind me like she always does.

And? We're about to go to Germany, yeah. But I'm only going because you're going to be right there beside me. Without you, I don't go anywhere. The world's only interesting because I can see it with you.

Anyway, the last song in this playlist just went over (King Kobra's "Mean Street Machine"), which means it's time for me to stop again. And I owe Joe another novel, one I'm supposed to have started eleven days ago, now.

Better go get on that.

Maybe on the plane.

Stephen Graham Jones Boulder, CO February – May 2022

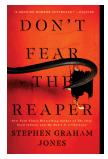
I. narrator: Stephen caught COVID, didn't make that plane, but he did get *The Angel of Indian Lake* written all the same^{II}

II. (possibly the first footnote the author's deployed in a novel, slasher or otherwise, since *Demon Theory*, 2006)

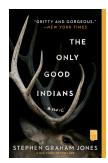
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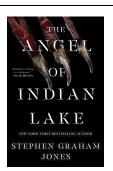
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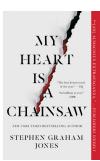
Don't Fear the Reaper



The Only Good Indians



The Angel of Indian Lake



My Heart Is a Chainsaw



Attack of the 50 Foot Indian

About the Author



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STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Only Good Indians*. He has been an NEA fellowship recipient and a recipient of several awards, including the Ray Bradbury Prize from the *Los Angeles Times*, the Mark Twain American Voice in Literature Award, the Bram Stoker Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, the Jesse H. Jones Award for Best Book of Fiction from the Texas Institute of Letters, the Independent Publisher Book Award for Multicultural Fiction, and the Alex Award from the American Library Association. He is the Ivena Baldwin Professor of English at the University of Colorado Boulder.

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About the Type

Per the author's request the novel was written within the limitations of what may be found at the counter of an auto parts salvage yard in 2006, namely a Windows 95 machine and dot matrix printer. This aesthetic was shared with the interior design team at Saga Press and executed with the following fonts which would have been prevalent at the time.

The fonts used were:

- Body text font: Sabon LT Pro
- Display font: **Pixelar Regular**
- Sans Serif font: Helvetica Now Display

ALSO BY STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

The Indian Lake Trilogy

My Heart Is a Chainsaw Don't Fear the Reaper The Angel of Indian Lake

Novels

The Fast Red Road: A Plainsong All the Beautiful Sinners The Bird is Gone: A Manifesto Seven Spanish Angels Demon Theory The Long Trial of Nolan Dugatti Ledfeather It Came from Del Rio Zombie Bake-Off Growing Up Dead in Texas The Last Final Girl The Least of My Scars Flushboy The Gospel of ZNot for Nothing The Floating Boy and the Girl Who Couldn't Fly (with Paul Tremblay) Mongrels

The Only Good Indians The Babysitter Lives

Novellas

Sterling City Mapping the Interior Night of the Mannequins

Short Stories and Collections

Bleed into Me: A Book of Stories The Ones That Got Away Zombie Sharks with Metal Teeth Three Miles Past States of Grace After the People Lights Have Gone Off The Faster Redder Road: The Best UnAmerican Stories of Stephen Graham Jones

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