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I Remember it Like This: Essays

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Waterville, Maine

May 15, 2017

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Environmental Studies Program in partial fulfillment of the graduation requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with honors in Environmental Studies

Gail Carlson, Adviser

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is composed of eleven personal essays. As an Environmental Policy senior, I wanted to write down some of my formative stories—not just any stories, but those that may reveal the environmental thread in my life, which, I believe, was somehow instilled in me by my parents. This thread has followed me from Texas to Maine, from childhood to almost twenty-three. It has been supported and tested by various characters along the way, sometimes growing faint, other times stronger. As I prepare for something new, I’ve found it valuable to look back on the people and landscapes and stories that have shaped the beliefs I have today. I remember it like this.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I like to say that this project began with me leaving Colby. It was the end of my freshman year, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be in school—I thought maybe I could be unsure somewhere else, and at least that'd be cheaper. I ended up sitting down with three of my freshman year professors, Bess Stokes, Gail Carlson, and Philip Nyhus, and told them that I was thinking of taking some time off. I think I was expecting to be met with some resistance—I thought one of them would tell me no, that I was ruining my future, or something to that effect. But at the end of all three meetings, the message was the same: *If that's what you need, then go.* “When you're done sailing around the world, or whatever,” Philip said, “come back. And make sure you write along the way.”

It seems fitting that Bess and Gail and Philip are the three members of my thesis review board this year, and I want to thank them individually. Gail is my advisor, not only for this project, but for Colby in general. She has given me extremely-detailed feedback on each piece in here, and has guided me, more generally, through the Environmental Policy major. Philip, for his part, steered me towards writing a thesis in the first place, encouraging me to read the essay-driven Environmental Studies thesis written by Blair Braverman '11. In many ways, Blair's work has paved the way for me, and I must thank her as well.

Like she was for Blair, Bess has been my writing mentor at Colby. Her feedback is often the most challenging to wrestle with, but, ultimately, still makes me better every time. Bess has shown me the tools that I use unconsciously, helping me to recognize what *it is* that makes my voice mine. She has helped with all stages of this project.

For the smaller things, I must thank my friends and peers who have looked over my work, helping me to line edit, to revise for clarity, and, in some cases, to get a little bit closer to the truth. To name a few of these helpers: Matt McIntosh, Ella MacVeagh, and Eliza Dunne.

Finally, thank you to Anne Vetter for helping me to find a title within the mess.

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A NOTE TO THE READER

I've worked on this project for nine months, and it's still in progress. For the purposes of printing and graduating, I've revised and edited these essays to get them as tight as I can. There's still much more to be done: more writing, more learning.

And I want to stress that this has been a learning process. In writing this thesis, I've been trying to recall stories from my life—a few from this year, but also stories that extend all the way back to my early childhood, and beyond that even, in a few cases. As suggested by the title, the memories that shape these stories—especially the early ones—aren't all factual. I have worked to supplement them by talking to my parents and relatives, comparing and incorporating their versions of some of these happenings. For the more recent stories, I've relied more on my journals and notes, but ultimately, subjectivity is unavoidable. So, these are my memories, and I remember them in a certain way, and the way that I remember them shows a bit about who I am. And I'm happy with that.

As a whole, this project is about *me*. Who and what and what places have shaped me—given me the opinions and sense-of-self I have now, in this moment, at Colby? By writing, I learn about myself. And by writing I learn more about writing. Throughout this project, I've played with different techniques—narrative, structural, and syntactic—to help me to tell my stories. I've written short pieces and much longer ones. Some of the essays are lyrical and imaginative. Others are more rooted in facts and narrative structure. In all the essays, I'm trying to find what works—how I can be a better writer and storyteller, how I can get closer to the truth, the truth of what it *felt* like to be me in a specific time.

I've written these essays with the hope that each one could stand on its own, if necessary. Because of this, some of the information between them is repetitive. It's also my hope that these essays function together to illustrate a greater narrative and emotional arc. Because I'm reflecting upon my past and—in a sense—upon previous versions of myself, many of these essays are self-critical, sometimes heavily. This is my intent.

One of the criticisms I've received is that I enjoy being an outsider, or a contrarian. This is true. In fact, the original title of this thesis was *Outsider*. I enjoy being the odd

one out—this allows me to criticize everyone else while dodging responsibility for the baggage associated with any one group. Becoming aware of this bias—and learning to challenge it—has been my most definitive growth this year.

I am an environmentalist and a writer, no matter how you look at it. These are my groups, and I'm prepared to deal with the complications associated with them.

I hope you enjoy these stories. Know that I have changed the names of characters within them. If you like, contact me (rclewis627@gmail.com).

Happy Trails,
Robin

ROBIN

If you happen to read the *National Geographic* issue from October, 1968, you will see my namesake. I like to think we look similar. Robin Lee Graham is skinny and blonde-haired like me, and in the cover photo he is standing in the cockpit of his 24-foot sailboat. He is seventeen years old, maybe eighteen, soon to become the youngest person to sail around the world alone. Sometimes I try to imagine the work that must have gone into taking the photo. The camera, some monstrous thing surely, is somewhere on the bow pointing backwards. It would've been on a self-timer. The sun is halfway under the horizon, the mainsail pushed out—broad reach, everything just so. In the photo, Robin is doing some bullshit thing, pulling in the mainsheet or adding downhaul, the type of action some inland editor would see and say *ah yes, that one—that one looks like sailing*. But the sailor doesn't always have a line in his hand.

When I sail, I think about wind direction, where the oil in the bilge is coming from, how much freshwater is left. Robin—I know this from his memoir—he thought about girls, about loneliness, about wanting to be anywhere else. By the time he completed his journey, it was 1970. He had been at sea for five years. My father was five years old.

It is fitting that I was named after a sailor, haunting that he was my Dad's childhood hero. The original *National Geographic* is on a shelf in my parents' house in Maine, and I often pick it up, look at the cover, and wonder if I am lame in comparison. Sort of a curse sometimes, being named after an interesting person.

But we have our similarities, Robin and me. We are both shy, overwhelmed by crowds, quick to love and to daydream. I hear he lives somewhere in Montana. He wrote a book about his travels. It's called *Dove*, named after his boat. I imagine him now with kids and grandkids, tons of them, all with long blonde hair and names like Alder or Iris. They all work on a farm together. The adults bushhog the mountainside pastures and the children run wild, sprinkling alfalfa seeds through the gaps in their fingers. Or maybe they run a post-and-beam construction company together. Maybe, they create sculptures from the fallen branches of Douglas firs.

“He built his own log cabin,” says my dad.

“He became an alcoholic,” my mom reminds him.

I want to know Robin and what has happened to him. I want to know because when we share a name I cannot shake the stupid notion that I must follow some variant of his life course. My dad comes from printing press operators and my mom from an oil family but me, I come from sailors and sea-folk. I owe that to Robin.

I like to imagine my dad, as a boy, putting his copy of *Dove* down, maybe it’s the second time because the spine is bent. He’s sitting in a rocking chair that’s too big for him, eating a peanut butter sandwich and sipping a glass of milk mixed with Ovaltine. It’s the 1970s, and this is Corpus Christi, Texas, just a few hours from the Mexican border. There’s beer in the fridge and pot in my grandfather’s sock drawer and no one is home, but my dad is content just sitting there. He’s thinking of the ocean and it occurs to him: *A boat could take me away, too.*

The next day, when his Episcopal school lets out, my dad loosens his tie and begins to walk, though on this day he doesn’t go home. In my mind, he chooses instead to make his way downhill—as much as you can in Texas—cutting corners through bright green lawns and tapping on palm trees. He’s following the few masts he can see. He’s going to the harbor, in search of boats.

* * *

Maybe for the sake of irony, it became apparent—from a young age—that I did not like to sail. I was scared mostly, scared of swells and wind and gray-blue water, scared of being out of control. When we lived in Texas, we sometimes borrowed my grandfather’s dingy, which was gaff-rigged with one red sail, a miniature pirate ship. During gusts, when it heeled over, Dad hooted and I cried. Mom would wrap her arms around my chest, squeezing my life jacket, the fabric catching and wrinkling against her tan arms. “I know,” she’d say. “But this is normal.”

Being afraid of sailing was painful because that was what Dad loved. In Corpus Christi, he’d used his afternoons to teach himself about windsurfers and boats. At nineteen, he left home to work on yachts with hopes of sailing around the world, like

Robin. And it was a boat job, ultimately—Outward Bound—that brought us from Texas to Maine.

I didn't want to be a sailor, but I wanted to be *seen* as one.

Our new home in Maine, at least for the summer, was Hurricane Island, a small granite bump with some spruce trees, a quarry, and a modest mountain. It's in outer Penobscot Bay, about ten miles offshore, and had once been a hub for granite collection. In the late 1800s and through the turn of the twentieth century a sizeable community formed there: men, women, and children, all there to live and to harvest the pinkish gray-rock. The blocks—six feet long, two feet wide, one and half tall—were loaded onto schooners, and from there shipped to Boston and New York and Baltimore. Wooden ships with holds full of stone, sailing through cold New England year-round. All for bridges and buildings and the future. If a schooner popped a seam or hit a shoal, it sank within minutes, the granite pulling the breached hulls to the bottom, and not just the hulls but everything inside—food, charts, men, families. Railroads were safer. And so by the early twentieth century, Hurricane Island was vacant.

In the time that I spent there, which was four consecutive summers, the island served as the base camp for Maine's Outward Bound programs. Students would go on two-week sails in double-ended "pulling boats," exploring the Gulf of Maine and learning to be uncomfortable—there were no cabins or bunks on board, and for toilets the boats offered a bucket-and-chuck-it system. About halfway through each trip, the students would stop at Hurricane. Here they resupplied their gorp bags, showered, if they were so inclined, and spent some time noodling around on the ropes course.

Dad was one of the pulling boat captains, so I spent a lot of time with my mom while he was gone. We had a cabin on the water, a little shingled box with a pitched roof, a two-burner stove and a loft. We had a hammock outside overlooking the water and thickets of blackberry bushes that filled up in mid-August.

When Dad was out sailing, Mom taught me about the earth: how to tiptoe through the forest, gathering up pinecones and chips of granite. She showed me how to catch a frog and how to lift a starfish from a tide pool without damaging its arms. Together we built gnome houses against the trunks of spruce trees, weaving pine needles through twigs to create thatched roofs, laying down footpaths with bits of green sea glass. The houses

were for real gnomes, Mom explained, though she also made me my own to pretend with, gnomes with felt clothing and faces and hands made from wooden beads.

It was always a big fuss when the pulling boats came in. If you were up on the hill on the morning meeting rock, you could see them making their way up into the cove. Each boat had two masts, two instructors, four oiled oars, eight students—all coming for us, the island-dwellers.

Mom and I would join the rush of other families and workers making their way down to the pier. There were always hugs, handshakes, introductions, kisses between reunited couples, everyone smiling. Then as a group we would unload, forming an assembly line up the hill to the main building, passing along bags of wet clothes, sleeping pads, and food containers. On those nights we all ate together in the galley—this monstrous pine dining hall that smelled like mothballs and cooking oil. We'd stand in a circle before the meal, holding hands in thanks. Almost like a cult. Then a collective hand squeeze, and on with the meal.

I learned to put on a show for our guests.

“So Robin, you like to sail like your Dad?” a student asks me over dinner. It's close to the end of my first summer on Hurricane.

“Yes, I'm a sailor too” I say.

“And will you start school soon?”

“Yes! Dad's taking me to kindergarten in a boat!” Little bits of rice spew from my mouth and my mom smiles.

But I do not yet like the ocean. In a few days, the students leave and I hug Dad goodbye. Then I run to the old bank. The granite people, they took down the walls before they left, but the foundation is still here. I crawl into the old safe, where I have built a small gnome house out of twigs and pieces of crushed brick. I pull the gnomes from my fleece pants.

Gnomes are good, I think, recalling some of what my Mom has told me about them. Kind of like fairies, they like to live outdoors. Fairies can fly of course. Gnomes hop from woodchip to woodchip and sleep on pine needle beds. They use natural materials

for their houses and blend in with the earth, which is a good way to be. And they stay home with their families most of the time.

To me, at five, the life of a gnome is better than that of a sailor.

I have three gnomes with me in the safe—one for me, one for Mom and one for Dad. I sit them around a table made from bit of rusted steel balanced on a pebble. It's dinner time for our small family.

I don't know it yet, but Mom is already working on another gnome for me—this one is just a wee thing with red hair. And soon I *will* take that boat to kindergarten, to the mainland, just as Robin took a boat to grow up in a different way, just like my Dad had followed boats from one stage of his life to the next.

STICKER BURRS

I remember it like this: while my parents packed the truck that would take us to Maine, I romped around in my boots, stomping on ant hills. The defiant blonde-haired king, at four years old, maintaining the property, squashing the little guy.

“Die fio ants! Die!” I couldn’t—both then and for years to come—pronounce my r’s correctly.

Our house in Galveston, Texas, was on stilts, three rows back from the beach. We called it The Blue House, named after its trim boards and elevated porch, both painted the color a child uses for sky—a dash of cream, too blue for real life. My parents were close to thirty. Mom worked as an elementary school teacher, painting Egyptians on the walls of her classroom. Dad stayed home, baking bread and making orange juice from those freezer cans. I went to daycare three days a week, and on these afternoons he’d pick me up on his bike.

Together we’d ride through the streets of Galveston, Dad with his calloused hands on the handlebars, almost bending them into the spaces between his fingers, me seated in a plastic chair that was clamped to an aluminum platform over the rear wheel. I had a helmet with the whole solar system wrapped around it, everything everyone knew right there on my head. From my throne, I stared out over our little part of the world—sandy, dotted with palms and neon signs, everything flat and baked, shimmering with bands of heat.

Afternoons were for collecting sharks’ teeth at the beach. Together, Dad and I squatted in the sand, raking our fingers through the grains, two-inch waves brushing against our bottoms. Dad was the best at finding teeth; he kept them in a ceramic fish with a lid lifted from the dorsal fin. I only ever found one. It was the size of my thumbnail and soft white like an oyster shell, but it slipped from my fingers when I tried to pull it from the murky gulf water. That was my first memory.

I had a friend next door, a girl with blonde hair. We played “palm-tree-hit” together, a game I made up where you hit a palm tree with a stick. Once we spotted a turtle walking through the lawn between our houses and ran to tell my parents. Another time, we found an opossum in my concrete basement, and Dad had to chase it out with his skateboard.

In our family, writing is important.

At a green table in my room, I often sat and worked on my memoirs, a task that entertained my parents.

“Oh, what’re you doing, Robin?” my Mom says in one of our home videos, walking around the corner into my room. There are orange and purple squiggles on a sheet of paper in front of me. Some of the streaks have extended past the edges and onto the table. I don’t look up at her.

“Writing?” she asks, giggling. “I better leave you to it.”

Dad wrote every morning then, by candlelight. Mom worked.

Even now, with me in college, Dad has the same morning routine. He’s been writing a book for over twenty years, though it’s scattered through journals that are piled into milk crates in our attic. In our family, writing is important to make fun of, partly so no one ends up like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*.

“When’s that book coming?” I’ll ask.

“When’s yours?” Dad says. We both laugh.

During the nights in Galveston, when we were all together, my parents would watch *Camelot* or *Mutiny on the Bounty* with Captain Bligh, and I would hide in the small compartment underneath our sleeper sofa—where I often got scratched by metal rods—and think about knights and the sea. Then bedtime, and I’d go into my room with the wooden zoo animals, past the green table with the two blue chairs. My parents would slip me into bed and I’d slip out of Texas, into some dream about the wild—a dream with hills and crags and changing seasons, parts of the world I had not seen or felt.

Around lunch, back by the moving truck, I began to feel a pain in my foot.

“Bammerhead Shark!” It was the ultimate bad word. I’d coined it myself after Mom had said I was *definitely* not allowed to say ‘fuck.’

“Fio ants in my boots!” I hopped to the staircase leading up to the porch and sat down on the first step. It wasn’t fire ants, just two sticker-burrs—the little spike-balls in Texas grass—poking through my worn rubber soles. Sitting on the steps, picking those two sticker burrs from my boot and looking out at the yellow moving truck and my parents loading our futon, that is my last memory of Texas.

* * *

Years later, at seventeen, I asked Dad how we ended up in Maine, one of those nice questions you ask because you think you know the answer, and then the story unfolds and you realize you know so little—so little about your parents before you.

“It started when I was nineteen,” Dad said. “I was in Antigua working on a boat and this girl told me that if I ever needed to go somewhere, go to Camden, Maine.”

I sat with elbows on the counter and stared up at him. We were in the kitchen. I was eating cereal, and he was noticing water damage in the ceiling drywall. “Well?” I asked. “When did you first go? With me and Mom?”

“No,” he said. “I went in my early twenties, after I left the Navy.”

I put my spoon down. “Why did you leave?”

“I developed a cataract, so I couldn’t fly anymore.” He walked over to the dining room table, picked up a chair and brought it back into the kitchen. He stood on the chair and began prodding the ceiling, noticing where the damp plaster was crumbling around recessed light fixtures. “I got in my car and drove straight from Pensacola to Camden. Then I walked down to the dock, met captain Ray—you know, the guy who owns the green schooners. Fifteen minutes later I had a job on the *Grace Bailey*.

“And Mom, Outward Bound?”

“Well, and then one foggy day—we were all wet and cold—these double-ended boats full of kids appeared next to us, rowing and singing.”

“The Outward Bound boats?”

“Yeah, the pulling boats. And I knew then that’s what I wanted to do. So, I started training to become an instructor, and I met Mom on that trip in Florida—I’ve told you. Then Cape Cod and marriage and you and Texas.”

“And then Maine.”

“Yes,” he said, stepping down from the chair. “Then Maine.”

LEWIS BOYS

Most of what I know in life is somehow related to boys or men or masculinity. This can be mostly blamed on my mom, or so she says, anyway.

“You want to know why I had three boys?” We are having dinner at my grandmother’s house. My two younger brothers—one seventeen, one fourteen, both with red hair—look up from their plates, suddenly interested in this turn the conversation has taken, away from Trump and traveling and college.

“I know why,” says my grandmother, bringing a glass of red wine down from her mouth and placing it on the table, where she swirls it. “It’s what you said to me after you came home from school.”

My mom raises her eyebrows, which tightens her lips into a small smile. Her blonde-gray hair sits beneath her shoulders. She interlocks her slender fingers together and nods.

“You told me that—deep down—boys and girls are just the same.”

Tristan, the older of my two younger brothers, spreads his lips sideways, making the universal “yikes” face. Alden, the fourteen-year-old, goes red and smiles. My dad drums his fingers behind his plate. I look at my mom.

“Yes. That’s why. God gave me the rest of my life to rethink that one.”

I was born on June 27, 1994. Twenty-seven is the favorite number of both my parents, or so they tell me. When my mom got pregnant, my parents were running a sailing yacht in the British Virgin Islands. Dad was the captain; Mom was the chef and first mate.

I was an accident, they remind me jokingly.

My parents moved to Cape Cod to have me, where my grandmother was living and where my mom had lived after graduating from college. As winter approached we relocated to Galveston, Texas, where we’d be closer to my Dad’s family. Then, in 1998, we moved to Maine, a place where we had no relatives at all. On July 4, the following summer, Tristan was born.

As we grew older, my dad used to tell Tristan the fireworks were for him. I became jealous of his birthday, not because of the fireworks, but because I came to understand—

more and more over the course of a few years—that he had a better chance than me of living in three different centuries.

“You’re too young to think about death,” Mom would say, as if that could make me stop.

The house Tristan was born in was Victorian-style and sat across from the middle school in Camden, Maine. This was our second home in Camden; the first being a seaside rental with a sign above the door that said *Dunnwanderin*, and, true to the name, it was in this house that my parents decided they wanted to live in Camden indefinitely, a town they judged to be more or less complete—the schools were good schools, there were mountains that tumbled down to the coast, and the harbor was well-protected. Dad would work summers as a sailing instructor for Outward Bound, and during the winters he’d switch to carpentry. Mom would stay home, with Tristan and me, at least for a while.

At some point my grandfather—Dad’s dad—came to visit with my step-grandmother, Robbie. They decided that they liked Camden, too.

“If you find a good house with a barn, we’ll buy it,” they told my parents. “You can live there until we retire.”

My parents began looking, and sent Grandad a photograph of the Victorian home, which he bought. Mom, Dad, and I moved in. A month later, Grandad and Robbie decided that retirement was too far away, and drove up from Texas with their two Keeshhounds in Grandad’s VW bus. This made the house smaller, and it was *their* house, in the end. Dad was away sailing; Mom stayed home and grew frustrated with the situation.

Recently, I called up my parents to find out a bit more about this time. They put me on speakerphone so they could both tell the story.

“We were looking at a few different houses then,” Mom said. “But we were worried about moving you again.”

As it happened, the place behind Grandad’s came up for sale, a three-bedroom townhouse with rotten front steps and white vinyl siding. My parents called it the white

house. It was on the same block as Grandad's, but faced onto Washington Street instead of Knowlton. If they bought the house, I'd have the same backyard.

"When I walked in I thought two things," said my dad, on the phone. "This place feels so good, and it smells so bad. There'd been smokers in it."

Mom and Dad sat on the house for two weeks until they learned that another family wanted to see it. This made them nervous, so they called the realtor and offered a hundred dollars over the asking price. My parents closed the first week of August, 1999. Then the painting began—seven coats on almost everything, all to mask the smell and cover the nicotine stains in the horsehair plaster.

Friends and relatives came up to visit and to help roll coats on. Robbie painted, her brother painted, her daughter and son-in-law painted. My mom's friend Eric from the Cape came up, painted, and installed new kitchen cabinets that had been lying in Grandad's barn. Floor guys came in and sanded the pine down to fresh grain, then re-stained it, bringing the gold back out. Rug guys came and ripped up the purple shag upstairs, replacing it with a modest tan carpet. A neighbor donated a white-picket fence to replace the chain-links.

For much of this, my Dad was gone. Mom would set Tristan in a car seat on the porch, away from the fumes, before going to roll a fresh coat onto the kitchen ceiling.

"Your father didn't really paint anything," she said.

"Well I was *working*," he butted in.

I laughed at their bickering.

On move-in day we drove the block with a load of boxes and pulled into the asphalt driveway, which was being cracked in slow motion by the trunk of young maple tree. Our car was a tan Oldsmobile named Amelda, the same one we'd had in Galveston, and there were still crayons melted into the leather backseat, little wax spots that—back in Texas, used to re-liquefy on the hottest summer days, mixing into the fabric of my shorts and leaving colorful marks there.

When we'd stopped, I hopped down from the car, secured my backpack, and walked up through the door up into the house, up the stairs and into my room, first on the right. I

set my backpack down and prepared to unpack my toys—matchbox cars, some Lincoln Logs, small plastic pirates.

“Robin!” my mom shouted up the stairs. “Come outside!”

I dropped my backpack and hurried out of the room, down the stairs, and through the front door. I ran to Mom, who was in the side yard looking up at the roof. Dad was up there, squatted down, one size-fourteen leather boot on each side of the peak, soles pressed against mossy shingles. He had a hacksaw in his hand, and was cutting through the base of a TV antenna. As he moved the blade back and forth, his forearms bulged. The antenna began to wobble with each pull, slightly, then in bigger sways. When it looked like it might topple, he reached out and steadied the base with his left hand. Then, extending his right hand behind him, he set hacksaw down on the dormer above the bathroom where the roof pitch was mellow. He then he grabbed the base with both hands, twisted it, grunted, and pulled the last strand of metal apart. He stood and raised the antenna above his head.

In this moment, arm veins popping and with sweat on his forehead, he looked out towards downtown, realizing, maybe, that he could see the new neighborhood from up here.

“Jeff! my mom shouted. “Jeff, throw it!”

He turned. A strained squat, then a push, and then the antenna was in the air—over the chimney, over the screened-in porch, over the back garden. Then a crunch, and the metal lay twisted and bent among patches of browning grass in our backyard.

Dad navigated back to his ladder, climbed down, and my mom—shaking her head—went to Amelda to grab the first box. Dad and I met by the antenna, naturally, and he cut a ten-inch section off one of the poles using the saw. There was a cream-colored metal box on the end of this pole—maybe the size of a brick. The piece he’d cut looked like a miniature sledge hammer, which he handed to me.

“Use this to break the antenna up,” he said. “It would’ve rotted your brain, having TV.”

* * *

For most of my childhood, my Dad spoke in what I considered to be absolutes. He towered over me, he was charismatic and capable, he knew about the world in a way that I did not—always reading Harper’s magazine, marking up Kant and Bonhoeffer readings with a fountain pen, repairing his surfboards in our garage.

“If you smoke or do drugs, I’ll kill you,” he often said to me. “And tell your friends. I’ll kill them too. It’s simple.”

Over and over, I promised him I wouldn’t, although by myself, in bed, I sometimes worried it was a lie. “Most teenagers,” he’d explained to me, “They get brain damage. They stop saying I love you to their parents, they throw trash out their car windows, and they start doing drugs, even if they don’t mean to.”

This, along with the inevitability of death, made me scared to grow up.

That first fall in our new home, Dad and Grandad built a playhouse for me. It was two stories—a sandbox on the ground level, and an 8’ by 8’ building above. The house had a pitched roof and a small bunk where I might sleep. Fastened to one of the exterior walls, they built a swing set with two plastic swings and a wooden horse you could ride. On the far end, there was platform with a six-foot yellow slide.

Grandad bought most of the big lumber—4x4s for posts and framing, a twelve-foot 4x6 for the swing set cross piece, and 2x6s for the deck above the slide. All of this was green-stained with chemicals, pressure-treated to prevent rot.

“Can we get cedar?” my Mom asked.

“Too expensive,” Dad and Grandad agreed.

“He’ll just wash his hands.”

Some materials we didn’t have to buy—they were lying around in our crawlspace or Grandad’s basement or garage, or leftover from Dad’s construction jobs. We nailed on knotty pine boards to close up the house, and covered the roof with two old sheets of half-inch plywood and a few bunches of cedar shingles.

Dad banged home the shingles with inch and a half nails from some job, and these spiked through the plywood and stuck out angrily in the headroom above my bunk. Granddad gave me a hammer and I laid up there for hours, whacking the points and bending them back against the ceiling.

On a night in December, Dad and I slept in the playhouse, Dad down on the floor, me up in the bunk, shivering even in my fleece-lined sleeping bag.

“Your own house,” Dad called up to me. “And only six.”

* * *

Alden was born on May 22, 2002, my parents’ tenth anniversary.

In the hospital, Dad sat me down in a rocking chair and lowered Alden into my arms. I wrapped him into my chest and touched the bandage on his head—the birth had been an emergency C-section, and the doctor had gone too far when he’d cut into my Mom’s belly.

“Another brother,” I said, to my parents. Dad laughed and Mom rolled her eyes from her bed.

After a few minutes, Tristan took my place in the rocking chair, squeezed his arms into Alden, and bounced him on his lap a few times. “Okay,” he said. “I left my animal crackers in the car.”

My grandmother moved to Camden to help my mom with Alden, but also with us. After being an only child for five years, my transition into brotherhood had already been strained by Tristan. When I tried to read my *Redwall* books on the living room couch, he would scream, flex his biceps, and hurl himself into me.

I learned to hit him, in the legs and arms, but also in the head, if I needed to. “When you punch,” my dad had told me, “turn your knuckles down as you follow through. That’s what hurts the most.”

When Dad came home himself—he’d left *Outward Bound* and gotten a mate job on a local yacht—he’d grab Tristan and me and pin us to the ground, starfishing himself on top of us. “Two-hundred-pound-squash!” he’d yell, as we gasped for breath, trying to swing our hands against his legs.

“I’ll break your spirits!”

Mom had sent me to pre-K at a Waldorf school called Ashwood, where we built fairy houses, learned to finger-knit, and tapped sap from maple trees. Tristan went there for a

few weeks, too, before exclaiming, upon pulling into the driveway one morning, “Oh no, not this place again.”

Defeated, Mom transferred him to a more traditional preschool, where he ran wild and smashed his head through a fifty-gallon fish tank, sending guppies and betafish flopping across the puzzle-piece carpet. Tristan was unphased. When Mom gave in and bought him a foam-ball nerf shooter for his birthday one year, he immediately shot Dad in the face, who screamed *fuck* and smashed the toy to pieces against the garage wall.

That’s kind of how it went. Dad was loud and passionate. Mom was quieter and usually right; my memories of her are less rooted in specific moments.

Mom did have some success with me—she taught me to knit and to paint, and for a while I enjoyed going to her knitting group (“stitch and bitch,” my Grandad called it), where I created multicolored juggling balls, and miniature lambs, elephants, and lions. Still, it was toy swords, woodworking, and skateboarding that captured my interest as I grew older, Dad’s things, and in general, the trend in our family—for a while—seemed to be towards masculinity and chaos. Alden got into a tub of bleachy water in our laundry room, splashed around, and had sock patterns burned into his legs. Tristan lodged a rock up into his nose as a gift for my mom (which did not show up in the hospital x-rays, and came out two days later in the bathtub with masses of bloody snot). I grew my hair out like my dad had done when he was younger, and rode around town helmetless on my bike, at one point rounding a blind corner and slipping underneath the front axle of a moving van, ripping the skin in flaps from my left kneecap.

“Granddaughters,” my Mom would say, as she bandaged us, checked our stitches, and calmed our tempers. “I want some damn granddaughters.”

* * *

As we grew older the house swelled to fit us. Tristan and Alden shared bunk beds in my old room. I got the third bedroom, down the hall, which we painted Caribbean Blue, and Dad built me a double-bed loft in a nook between the closet and one of the walls. Mom put a bed on our porch as a summertime guest space, and planted different perennials all around the house.

We got a dog, a girl dog—this was one of Mom’s requirements. She was a droopy-eared yellow lab, and Tristan named her Rosie. She was docile and a swimmer. For the better part of five years, she slept with Tristan every night, until Alden found out what was going on. Now, they switch off.

Rosie is ten now. My parents work at a boarding school in Rhode Island, and live there during the academic year. Dad became an episcopal priest when I was in middle school, and has worked as a school chaplain for six years.

On vacations, my family comes home to Camden and to the white house, which is still the only home my parents have owned together.

Tristan is a senior in high school and is built like a moose, though he’s become calmer. He’s sailed across the Atlantic Ocean twice, sleeps outside when he can, and does little talking, though when he does, it’s in a deep voice and his tone is skeptical. Next year, he’s taking a job on a schooner with oil lamps for lighting and a woodstove in the galley. He has no intentions of going to college.

Alden is finishing eighth grade, boyish and skinny. He still snuggles up to my mom on the couch during movies. Over this last Christmas break, he became mortified with embarrassment when my Dad yelled at some twenty-something-year-olds for smoking pot at our local ski hill.

Mom is a librarian at the same school in Rhode Island and teaches yoga classes here and there.

Dad’s dad and Mom’s mom both still live in Camden.

I’m finishing college soon, and just starting to think about what it might be like to have kids or a house. People say I look like whichever parent I’m with, but when they’re together, I look more like my mom.

The other day she sent me a video she’d filmed in Rhode Island. Dad had Rosie on the nose of his standup paddleboard. He paddled into a little wave and they surfed into the shore together. Alden bodysurfed next to them. I didn’t see Tristan, but maybe he was underwater, building his lung capacity or something.

WILSON AND THE RIVER

The summer before second grade, in our attic in midcoast Maine, I wrote a letter to George W. Bush. I did this because my dad wrote to him first, and Dad was already good at most of the things I thought were cool—sailing, for one, but also skateboarding, reading, writing, and building wooden swords.

He had a sort of baptism-by-fire approach to teaching.

“You’re a reader now? How about *The Hobbit*? That was one of my favorite books when I was young.”

“You want to drop in on the big halfpipe?” he asks me, at the local skatepark. “Here, I’ll get you some elbow pads. Just lean forward.”

During a sail in the harbor together, he plopped me down in front of the tiller of our gaff-rigged dinghy, walked up to the bow, sat down with his back against the mast, dipped his bucket hat beneath his eyes and pretended to sleep. “Don’t crash,” he said, yawning.

“No, Dad please!” I’d screamed. Don’t make me!” He didn’t look up. Furious, I pulled in the mainsheet with sweaty fingers, and t-boned a moored lobster boat. *That’ll show him*, I thought.

The letter Dad was writing was in response to the Bush administration’s interest in drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. I asked my Dad why this would be bad—looking for oil in Alaska.

“Well,” he said, “They will probably have to cut down some trees.”

I stared at him. “Go get your colored pencils,” he said. “You’ll make one too.”

Sitting on the floor of our unfinished attic (Dad’s office) I drew a man with strong arms chopping into a pine tree with an axe. Next to this, I drew another man—this one sticking his tongue out at the first guy. In large capital letters, I scrawled underneath these drawings with a black crayon:

PLEASE DO NOT CUT DOWN TREES. WE NEED THEM TO BREATHE.

THANKS, ROBIN

I folded the paper, and watched Dad slip it into an envelope identical to his. Later that day, I dumped the letters into the blue postbox down the hill from our house. “Do you think he’ll write back?” I asked, kicking a stone from the curb.

“Well, he probably gets a lot of letters,” Dad said. “So, we’ll see.”

I checked the mailbox for quite a while. It was black and rusted, bolted to the side of our house. I’d flip the top open, stretch my arm up, and bend my wrist to reach down inside. I could just grab whatever bunch was there—usually some combination of bills and magazines—*The Sun*, *Surfer*, *Harper’s*. I’d written to Bush in June. The summer passed.

When the letter finally came at the end of August, it was my dad who found it. I was in the backyard playing with my aunt, who was visiting. My dad walked out from the screen porch. “Robin, uh, something from the White House,” he said, smiling.

It was a manila envelope, and my aunt and I watched as my dad cut the seal and pulled out a typed letter. There was a presidential stamp, and a few paragraphs of text, which said something to the effect of: “Robin, thanks for sharing your strong opinions with me. I will do my best to consider them moving forward.” Dad pulled the letter aside, revealing a signed 8x11 photograph of a smiling George Bush next to an American flag.

“Oh, gross,” said my aunt. “Let’s burn it.”

“I’ll go get some matches,” Dad said. He had not received a signed photograph or a response letter.

I did not fully understand, but—wanting to belong—watched in glee as the flames turned purple and green. George Bush, the environmental villain, burned in effigy in my backyard.

Today, drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is still a subject of controversy, though Obama has recommended to Congress that 12.28 million acres of the refuge be set aside as permanent wilderness, never open to drilling. Sometimes, I wish I still had that photograph of smiling George Bush, just to prove it happened.

* * *

When I was growing up in Camden, MSAD #28 split the second grade between two buildings. One was downtown—an old, traditional yellow schoolhouse with a bell tower and high ceilings. The other was on the outskirts, single-storied with tile floors, close to the highway. I was placed in the yellow building, just a few blocks from my house. Our classroom had wooden desks and a view of Penobscot Bay.

My Mom had known about Wilson before I did. She'd met his mother during church. Their family had moved in from Appleton, a more rural town twenty minutes inland from Camden. When it came time to take school photos at the beginning of the year, Mom came in to help get our class ready. I sat on a stool, smiling at the photographer, a plump man with Mickey Mouse ears and a rubber nose. "Squeaky squeaky," he said.

Next to me, Mom ran a comb through Wilson's blonde and knotted curls. When she hit a snag, he turned his head, looked up at her and growled.

Later that night, over dinner, Mom asked if I'd like to have Wilson over for a playdate. "I think he'd be a fun friend for you. And he lives just down the street."

I shrugged, watching cheesy rice slide off my fork. *I have Dad, though*, I thought to myself. I didn't know much about Wilson. He was quiet and drew dragons at his desk.

"Okay," I said.

He came over. We played with wooden swords or something. It went well, and so we became friends. I began to spend more time outdoors, and being with Wilson offered me a sort of escape from my own mind. I spent less time thinking about death—one of my childhood obsessions—and more about where to find worms and the best materials for fort-building.

It was, regrettably, sometimes a one-sided friendship. Wilson was reasonable and just. I had a temper issue.

Some of my anger stemmed from the nature of our play. We shared obsessions with Robin Hood, King Arthur, and The Lord of the Rings, and would combine these stories to create intricate battle scenarios—Lancelot vs. Aragorn, Merlin against Gandalf. We'd go into my Dad's woodshop and he'd build us staffs and swords. At Wilson's house, we'd pull the plastic cores from washed-up lobster pots and slide the washers down to form bright-colored samurai katanas—these hurt the most, and once Wilson hit my hand so

hard I ran home crying to my mom, neglecting to tell her that he'd only gotten me as retaliation.

We grew older, more important, and traded in our swords for bikes. We both had nice new ones with multiple speeds, but instead we opted for little kid versions—these were better for bunny hops and burnouts. I pulled the training wheels off the one I'd learned to ride on years earlier. It had a flashy #1 on the chain protector. Wilson's bike, decaled with the words *my first Schwinn*, had yellow tiger stripes painted onto the frame. When he rode it, his knees thumped against the handlebars.

I became fond of Wilson's house because it was a little more chaotic than mine—not quite as organized, some of the food expired, weird artwork and half-finished renovations everywhere. His parents often weren't home.

“Want to see something bad?” Wilson asks me. It is fourth grade, after school, and we are drinking chocolate milk in his kitchen.

“Yeah, dude. Obviously.”

He leads me into the living room, and pulls aside the corner of one of the curtains by the bay window. There is a baseball-sized hole in the stained glass. “Me and Dad got into a clementine war. He beaned one at me and I dodged it.”

“That's awesome,” I say, wishing I had been there.

“Yeah, but don't tell my mom.”

“Dude, why would I?”

He grins. “Cool. Let's go bike.”

Our bike route varied, but usually involved the same elements. Out of Wilson's backyard, up the hill where they used to hold the soap-box derby, past my house, along the rutted path through the corner property, down the hill by the middle school, and up through the bus yard. From there we'd speed past the sewage treatment facility, pedal across the little league fields and—checking both ways for janitors—tear through the middle school's maintenance area and into the woods. Once we were in, we dropped our bikes and covered them with brush.

I was always a little afraid of the woods—Wilson less so. There were a few posted signs and broken beer bottles that crunched underfoot beneath the oak leaves. *Were there drunk teenagers down there?* I wondered.

The first few times we visited we got maybe ten or twenty yards inside. Then a stick would break, I'd get spooked, run, and Wilson would follow me out. But after a week or so, we got far enough in to find a steep slope and a ramshackle path down to a dirty river—a stream really, in retrospect, but that's not what we called it. We slid down on pine needles to the banks.

As we stood there for the first time, I felt something new, something like guilt, but somehow twisted and turned sweeter. *My parents don't know where I am*, I thought.

"We could make a fort here," I said to Wilson.

For a month, we worked.

The river was about twenty feet across at its widest point, and didn't seem to be very deep when we tested it with sticks. Given the relative proximity of the sewage treatment facility, the trash bags and Budweiser cans on the riverbanks, and the colony of beavers living just upstream, we avoided the water. Wilson couldn't swim anyway.

There was a small island in the middle of the river. It was only ten feet wide, a tangled mess of swamp bushes and mossy soil, and had so little freeboard that after a heavy rain the whole thing became submerged for several days. Grungy and dangerous, it became the focal point of our property.

We built the bridge first, which consisted only of a few lengthy branches placed side by side, most of which were so thin they would half-submerge under my weight.

Once on the island, Wilson and I worked to create a platform that would sit above water. Using slippery logs and bits of washed up pressure-treated lumber, we created a sort of wrap-around porch with the island as the center. Then we just sat there. Water underneath. Sometimes, we would practice talking.

"So, who do you like?" I'd ask him.

"No one. Not right now," he'd say, flicking a bit of submerged grass with a twig.

"No. Seriously. Come on."

"Hmm okay, well, maybe I like Sam."

“Oh, cool,” I’d say, scratching a log with my finger and watching the green gunk build up under my nails. I liked Sam, too.

It rained for three days once, and on the third day we went to visit the island. We brought along a friend named Jack, our first visitor. The water was higher than either of us had ever seen it, and several trees in the area had fallen, one of them just downstream from our island. The water moved in swirls and circled trunks that were normally far up the banks.

“It’s like this a lot,” I said. I looked to Wilson to see if he would correct me.

He didn’t say anything. Jack nodded. “Cool.”

The tree that had fallen downstream lay perpendicular with the river at its widest point. A birch tree, maybe four inches wide. To us, it was a new bridge.

“I’ll go first,” Wilson said, sliding a cleat out onto the trunk—he had little league practice in a few minutes. I’d tried out, but wasn’t good enough for even the worst team. I’d cried in my bed for a while, privately. Later, when my parents tried to comfort me, I tried to shrug it off. “Not really into team sports anyway,” I said, echoing my Dad. “Total waste of time. I’d rather bike.”

Wilson dragged his other cleat out, and then—wobbling—stood up and took a step. He was graceful. White pants, light blue jersey, light blue hat, calmly moving over the trunk, one delicate step at a time.

When he was two-thirds of the way across, I’d had enough. He was going to make it, and I would not be able to. “Too easy!” I yelled, stomping on the trunk.

“Robin, what the hell,” said Jack. “Stop.”

But I kept stomping, the log flexing up and down, touching the water. Wilson’s knees knocked together over the deep spot in the river. Briefly then, I thought to myself, *he could drown*. I lifted my leg from the tree.

But one of his feet had already slipped. For a moment, he stood slanted in the air. Then he tumbled and slipped into the murky water.

* * *

As always, Wilson forgave me. He'd managed to grab the birch and used it to shimmy back to the shore. Sopping and muddy and silent he'd passed me—left me standing there wondering about what sort of friend I was.

Not so long after that, we came back to the island to watch the river again, which had reassumed its playful temperament. We were both finishing up fourth grade, and were looking forward not only to summer, but also to the transition into middle school. Soon we would have the liberty of waking up late and sprinting across the road to class.

“I bet I can get to school quicker than you can,” I said.

“No way. You're on the other side of the block.”

“Yeah, but I can hop through the yards or something, also I can use the gym entrance.”

Wilson dipped his hat over his eyes. “Maybe,” he said. “We're both pretty close.”

We sat. The water drifted by, and I pushed around some thoughts about its journey. Upstream of the island, the land was marshy and saturated. Downstream, the water was more contained. I looked to where the river bent left out of sight. I knew from there that it bent a few more times, then dropped over two dams and snaked underneath some of the shops downtown. Underneath the local deli, even now, the water would be piling up against a final dam, the top layer tumbling over and down into the harbor.

“Do you think it's dark or cloudy?” Wilson asked, eventually.

I looked up from the water. “Dark,” I said, as I felt my stomach tighten against itself. “I'm screwed. Damn screwed.”

We skipped across the bridge and scrambled up the hill to find our bikes, which we had covered with browning hemlock branches. We pedaled hard up through the now-closed parking lot, squeezing through a small gap between the bright yellow gate and the corner of the seventh-grade building. We reached the road. “See you!” I shouted.

Wilson peeled right.

Maple leaves smacked my cheeks as I ducked into the familiar path connecting Knowlton and Washington Street—where my home was. I skidded into my driveway and dropped my bike onto the ground. Leaping up the stairs, I opened the old front door to find my mother standing in the hallway, and crying.

“Where were you?” she asked, dropping to her knees to hug me.

“I’m sorry Mom,” I said, head down. “We—we made this fort by the river.”

In a week or so, when Wilson asked me to go back to the island with him, I suggested we go somewhere else.

“Why, did something happen?” he asked.

“No—well, I guess there could be wolves back there,” I lied. Mom had said I wasn’t allowed there anymore, but I was too proud to admit to Wilson that his leash was longer than mine. “We’ve just never thought about wolves before, you know. C’mon, we’ll go downtown or something.”

He shrugged, unconvinced. “Okay, that’s fine.”

The summer passed, and then so did middle school. We spent more time downtown, biking, then rollerblading, then skateboarding—pavement activities. Sometimes we’d find ourselves in a patch of forest, but never as often, and it was usually just to mess around—to play manhunt or to throw sticks at each other. Never quite the quiet sitting and listening we’d had back on the river.

In fact, we didn’t go back to the island until eighth grade. It was raining; Wilson and I were laughing and running. Across the little league fields, through the maintenance area, down the hill on sliding mats of pine needles. We tumbled down the path and onto the banks, Wilson clutching a beer can.

We’d filled the empty Budweiser with ground up sparklers and rocket engines, and wrapped the whole thing in duct tape so it would make a bigger bang when the fuse ran out. Standing there in the rain, shoes sinking into the mud, and with Wilson trying to get his lighter to hold a flame, I looked around, nostalgic.

“Do you remember our fort down here?” I asked.

“Of course, Dude. You remember how you were scared of wolves?”

I groaned. “Just seems so much smaller. Look, you can see the road over there.”

“Ah! Got it!” Wilson said, the flame finally lit. He handed me the can, and I crouched down, holding the fuse up to him.

“Hey!” a voice shouted from up the hill. “What are you doing?”

“Shit,” Wilson whispered. “Janitors.”

We made eye contact, both crouching now. Wilson set the Budweiser down and it began to seep into the muck.

I moved my lips silently. *Run.*

LUKE

One problem with being from Maine is that at some point, for a job or a concert or a used car without rust, you might have to leave. And though there are plenty of places that look similar—pine trees and granite and stony beaches—the rest of the world isn't quite the same, not quite as good, or not quite as good for Mainers.

In my family, we compare Maine to the rest of New England, a nasty pastime.

“Never find traffic like this in Maine,” says my Dad (495 through Worcester).

“I miss our little house,” says Mom, wandering from floor to floor.

“I miss the woods,” says one of my brothers, his tent pitched in a soccer field.

When I'm away, I miss other Mainers—honest and capable when you need them, reserved and invisible when you don't.

Around Christmas during my sophomore of high school year, Mom told me that we would be moving to Connecticut over the summer. Dad was likely going to get a job as the chaplain of an all-boys boarding school. I would attend. She told me this in our green minivan on the way home from the orthodontist. I sat in the passenger seat and pushed my tongue against the rubber bands I'd just had put in.

This was not a surprise; all roads had been pointing out of Maine. Dad kept hopping jobs—carpenter, urchin diver, first mate on a sailing yacht, boatyard human resources manager, insurance salesman (disaster), and finally, an Episcopal minister. He'd found time to go to divinity school on the weekends.

Money was also an issue, a reality which made my parents uncomfortable. I remember noticing this discomfort one day as my Mom sorted through envelopes at our dining room table. She'd flip through them, then pause, square up the edges, drop them and look out the window at the driveway. A few moments later, she'd turn back and pick up the bills again.

I was never uncomfortable, though. Our house was fifty-five degrees in the winter, but I relished the opportunity to cover my shrimpy arms in long-sleeve shirts and hoodies. On weeks when we relied largely on rice and beans, I looked forward to leftover burritos—my favorite meal.

Back in the car, I looked over at Mom. “I think this could be okay,” I said.

“Really?” She was expecting resistance.

“Yes. I need a change.”

I was in the middle of an extended temper tantrum, hopelessly angsty, often falling into inexplicable and inconsolable bouts of anxiety and depression. In Camden, our little coastal town, we’d moved houses and I’d claimed the attic bedroom. There was a blue futon I used as a bed, a small window covered with lady bugs, and a big TV so I could play shooter video games (I’d spent every bit of my money on this setup, against my parent’s wishes). When the TV was off, I’d lie in bed and write in my journal. *I’m not going to waste my life. I’m not going to follow the system.*

Dad got the job, and left for Connecticut to finish out the school year there, a sort of trial run. My dreary situation worsened. I’d skateboard after school with friends, then come home and argue with Mom. “I’m not going to settle down,” I told her. “Not the normal way. I’ll find something I love, and I’m not going to find it in a college classroom.” My grades were slipping—not a lot, but unusual for me. I hadn’t told Mom this.

“You know,” she said, looking around our living room, which was decorated with worn armchairs and used paperbacks, “Settling down isn’t so bad.”

I stormed upstairs, down the hallway and up into my loft where I walked over to the window, crouching to avoid the ceiling. I squatted down and pressed my nose against the glass. New ladybugs again. I squashed them, and watched their juices blend with the condensation into yellow streaks. They smelled bitter.

I wrote Dad an email that night—a thousand words maybe, rambling on about the American education system. *Always preparing for the next thing*, I wrote. *Learn in kindergarten what you need in elementary school, learn in college what you will need for the work force. We waste our foolish youth preparing. Always preparing, but for whom? And ultimately, for what?*

Dad responded the next day. “You’re right,” he wrote. “You’re right.” Then, “I would encourage you to see youth as innocent, not foolish.”

* * *

Depression followed me to boarding school, which was called Salisbury, like the steak. I went to class and was quiet. During lunches, I avoided the dining hall, coming home to make turkey sandwiches. After dinner, I lay in my bed and looked out at the mountains. My windows—two of them in this room—faced west. Those first few weeks, the sun slipped into the same gulch each night—annoyingly pretty, especially for a place that wasn't Maine, which I had begun to miss as soon as we'd left. The north wall of our brick house was connected to a dorm, and through this I could hear boys shouting and bouncing lacrosse balls. *Rich kids*, I thought. My brothers' rooms across the hall faced east, towards the ocean, far away. My parents' room had views of a high ridgeline in the south.

"The Appalachian Trail runs along up there," my dad often said. "I think it'd be cool to follow it home."

Our whole family agreed.

The first time I walked on the trail was in late September with a senior boy named Luke. Luke and I were in the Wilderness Club together. Salisbury requires all students to play a "sport" each trimester, and having little conventional athletic ability, I'd wound up there. Besides, I liked the outdoors, or at a minimum, liking the outdoors was part of my image.

In the Wilderness Club, we went on hikes and pounded acorns into flour.

Luke failed to see that I didn't want friends, that I didn't want to be happy either. He just latched on, asking me questions when we met as a club each afternoon.

"You miss Maine?"

"Good mountains there?"

"You snowboard?"

"Yes." I said. "Yes. Yes I do."

On a club walk through the woods behind Salisbury, he poked me in the ribs with a stick. "You smoke pot?" he asked. "You look like a surfer."

I looked around to see if any of the other students had heard. “Sometimes.”

“I have to show you Rand’s View,” he said. “No excuses, you have to see it.” And so, on Sunday morning, our one free day in the week (we had Saturday classes), I pocketed a clementine and walked out the front door. “Going hiking, Mom.”

I picked Luke up from his dorm room. He had white walls and a sticky note above his desk that read: *Dear Present Luke, don’t fucking procrastinate. – Future Luke.* That made me smile.

“Shall we?” he asked, layered in a wool sweater and windbreaker.

“Yeah, for sure.”

We walked downstairs, through the dining hall (pillars everywhere) and out over the JV football field. Then down the hill next to the freshman dorm, past the faculty kids’ playground, down a dirt access road and onto a leafy trail and into the woods.

Luke led, making bird calls now and then. I was a few strides back, looking down at my boots, trying to break sticks with my steps. We made small talk. Luke told me he had a younger sister. “I have two brothers,” I said, though of course he already knew this—they lived on campus, and my youngest brother often wore his Darth Vader suit to the dining hall. About a mile in, Luke got his phone out and pulled up the GPS. “Amazing, these things,” he said, resizing the map. He stared for a few moments before looking up and off to the left. “This way. We’re looking for a fire break.”

A few minutes later he pulled up a clump of moss from the ground, grinned, and pulled out a yellowed Tupperware. Inside there were a couple of lighters, some browning pot in a baggie, and a small glass pipe. We each took a few hits. I coughed; Luke didn’t, stoic if not a little pained. Then he put all the pieces carefully into the Tupperware and into the hole and under the moss out of sight.

“I get so paranoid about this stuff man,” Luke said.

I smiled. “I’m the chaplain’s son.”

We both stared at each other, red-eyed, and broke out laughing. A few healthy moments, and then I followed Luke uphill and along the firebreak—which was not a firebreak but a power cut—and we emerged into a great field overlooking a farm and two small ponds.

“Not damn bad,” I said.

“Just wait.”

We walked down between the ponds, each of them surrounded by cattails. The larger of the two had a wooden jetty pointing out towards the center. “They stock the absolute hell out of these things,” Luke said as we passed. “I should really bring my rod up.”

Beyond the ponds we began to ascend again, this time through another field that had been recently cleared for timber. There were still stumps everywhere. Two white-tailed deer, both of them does, skipped across the field a few hundred yards above us. I made a gun with my hand. *Bam Bam*, I whispered.

“Don’t look back from now on,” Luke called ahead of me.

I sped up a little, pressing my palms against my knees with each step as I grew more tired and the incline became steeper. The forest edge was close now, and I could see a small dirt path that wound out of the woods and along the top of the field. *The AT*.

“Well,” Luke said, stopping, a little short of breath. “Rand’s View.”

I turned and sat, glancing over the fields and woods we’d walked through. The school’s clock tower and steeple were visible just above the trees, several miles away. *My home, kind of*. Then beyond and up were the mountains, the whole range that I could only partially see from my windows. I pulled the clementine out of my pocket, which had become squished, and began to peel back the skin.

Luke, breathing a little easier now, pointed across at the range. “That’s Lion’s Head over there, the kind of funky-shaped one. Good hike. The senior class did it together earlier this fall. Good views of the school, you know.”

“What about that one?” I asked, pointing to the tallest peak. It looked rounded and open—all rock.

“Bear Mountain. It has a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view.”

“Wow,” I said, feeling stoned.

“And beyond that, those other peaks, that’s all Massachusetts. And even farther, those ones you can just barely see, those are the start of the White Mountains—New Hampshire.”

I turned and looked at the trail behind me, only a few feet away now. Nothing too special really, just a dirt path maybe eighteen inches wide, slightly rutted out. “Luke?” I asked.

“Yeah, man?” He was taking a photo.

“Which way down the trail towards Maine?”

He turned around, “Um, left, mostly east at this point.”

I nodded. “Thanks,” I said.

MR. WESTGATE

My dad became the chaplain of an all-boys boarding school when I was sixteen, which pissed me off because my family had to move from Maine to Connecticut before my junior year. Maine was my home, and the landscape had become familiar to me, slowly. *Mengunticook Mountain, Saddle Island, Goose Island Rock*. Down the road from our house, a man sat outside his retirement home in a motorized chair and waved to me every day as I skateboarded by. When I sailed through the harbor in our family dingy, our dog Rosie perched up on the bow, the schooner captains waved to me and shouted my name across the water.

In Maine, though, I was depressed and didn't know why—it had something to do with feeling older than my friends; I didn't want to talk about sports or dances or sex, not all the time, at least. But I did have a place there—in school, in the town—and that was good, enough to give me a smile here and there.

At the school, named Salisbury, you had to play a sport each trimester. I signed up for the Wilderness Club, which had a two-sentence description about hiking and the woods around campus.

“That’s what I would do,” said my dad. “Mr. Westgate, the guy who leads it—he’s awesome, like *nuts*-awesome.”

“Nice,” I said, disinterested.

There were initially six members in the Wilderness Club: a stocky senior named Luke, two other seniors with hip, shaggy haircuts, two freshmen from Korea, and me. A few weeks into school the thirds football team disbanded—not enough interest, ultimately—and so we ended up with four or five more kids. We became eleven, though this number varied from day to day.

We were different. One of the football boys was the son of an oil king from Kazakhstan. Another, a day student whom I sat next to in English, often confided in me how poor his family was, how he didn't belong here. Luke and I were knowledgeable in the woods (he could start fires with friction, I have a good sense of direction), and so we got along and went on a hike one weekend to a place called Rand's View. We smoked

pot together and got a glimpse of the White Mountains. The young Korean boys, who had spent little time in forests back home, were tentative and slow, using their hands to pull themselves up gentle slopes.

We called the club leader Mr. Westgate (or sometimes as a joke, “coach”). He was twenty-eight and this was his second year at the school, and his first leading the Wilderness Club, which was his brainchild. The purpose of the club was somewhat unclear—in those first few weeks we went on hikes off-trail and tramped through the woods after Mr. Westgate, who seemed to wander without purpose. I’d heard stories about him from kids around school.

“He’s from a wealthy family, but wants nothing to do with it.”

“He was a legendary lacrosse player, gave it all up. Could probably still coach varsity if he wanted.”

To me he was a wildman—long red hair, beard, short and muscular, always breaking into sprints unexpectedly, weaving around trees, throwing rocks and making animal noises. When Mr. Westgate ran, we chased him.

He had an enormous husky name Moco. Moco was white and tan and old, eyes clouded from cataracts, though you could still see that one was blue and one was brown. He wandered through the woods on his own, often disappearing for several days at a time, hunting presumably, drinking from puddles. Sometimes we would run into him on hikes miles from campus. “Oh Moco. I was starting to get worried about you,” Mr. Westgate would say, half joking.

“I got him from my brother,” he told me once. “From North Dakota. He broke onto the neighbor’s farm and killed thirty chickens.” Mr. Westgate paused and chuckled.

“Also, two llamas.”

“What!” I said. “How does a dog take down a llama?”

“Goes for the throat,” he said, gnashing his teeth in demonstration. “Anyway, he was sentenced to death by the state. So—that’s how I got him.”

We were all in the club because we didn’t want to be somewhere else. I didn’t want to play soccer. Luke didn’t want to play football, the Korean boys didn’t want to run cross

country, and the hip senior boys didn't want to do anything—they mostly talked about planning gigs for their rock band in New York.

And so the atmosphere in the club sometimes bordered on apathetic. Mr. Westgate worked to combat this. “Like every other sport, we will meet five days a week,” he reminded us one afternoon, a little irritation in his voice. We had walked down a dried-up streambed away from campus and to the east. “And for the kids who aren't here today, make sure they know this.”

I nodded.

“Here it is!” called Luke, twenty yards ahead of the group.

I looked up. “What. Here is what?”

Mr. Westgate came up next to me, smiling. “Must be well camouflaged.” He pointed over to a small clearing. I turned, scanning, and noticed a section of the ground that seemed to bend upward, an optical illusion, no—a hill made of leaves, maybe eighteen feet tall, a few spruce poles poking out of the top. I could see light through the walls of this hill.

“A teepee,” one of the senior boys said.

Mr. Westgate laughed. “Yes, a teepee.”

We walked over. The structure was about fifteen feet in diameter, and there was a small archway on the eastern side. Scrambling through, we sat together—backs to the wall, staring across at the other members and beyond, through the branches and leaves and out over the forest. Our first teepee circle.

“Men,” Mr. Westgate began, looking each of us in the eyes. “Luke and I started building this last fall. I want to insulate it. So, unless otherwise specified by email,” he said, faintly disgusted by the word, “we will meet here every day after class. Just follow the riverbed downhill. Sound good?”

We mumbled in agreement.

“Good,” he said, opening his palms upward and holding his arms out on either side. This looked like what my Dad did after he broke the communion bread in chapel. “Now, let's make firepits, one outside, a big one, and one for in here. Now go. Go get rocks.”

Like Maine, the cold came to Connecticut—a bit more gradually, a little less bitter, maybe, but it came. The winds grew stronger, funneling down off the mountains and through the gulches, past my house and my windows, pulling leaves and branches to the forest floor, which we gathered up and pressed against the walls of the teepee for warmth. One, then two, then three feet thick—we stacked the forest floor against the teepee.

“Still not warm enough,” Mr. Westgate said after another insulation effort. He added branches to the fire inside. The sparks and smoke rose thick up into the rafters, sifting up through small holes in the roof and into the sky.

“We’re losing too much heat through the door,” he said. “We need shovels. We need to lose the door and dig a tunnel entrance instead.” And so we dug the tunnel, a U-shape that went down and back up again inside the teepee. This worked until it rained and the lowest part of the passage was partially filled up with water. We carried large rocks into the tunnel and placed them in the water—we could use these as stepping-stones to stay dry when we crawled under and up. But soon even these were covered and then, even worse, the tunnel water began to stink and rot and smell like sulfur. We filled it in, defeated, and recut the door.

A few days later, sitting around the outdoor fire and whittling with the other boys while we waited for Mr. Westgate, I heard a car engine. I turned around on my stump to see a silver Toyota truck making its way through the woods.

“Holy shit, is there a road there?” Luke asked.

No one responded, all watching the truck. It stopped and the driver’s door opened. “Hey!” a voice shouted—Mr. Westgate. “Come help with these hay bales!”

We walked over and unloaded the truck, twelve bundles of straw. Then we turned and, forming a strung-out line, made our way from the road back to the teepee. Halfway between, Luke stopped and turned to me, dropping his bale. “If that’s Wildcat Hollow road,” he said, “which it must be, then I don’t know if we are on school property.”

I set my bale down, looking at the channels where the twine had pressed my skin in. I shrugged, tightening my hands in the cold. “I’m more concerned about the hay.”

We stacked most of the bales around the inside of the teepee. It reduced the space but looked homey. Mr. Westgate had also built a door out of twisted branches and a piece of

canvas. He backed into the teepee holding it, and once he was in, used it to cover the opening. “Let’s shake two of these bales out for a softer floor,” he said.

We did so, careful to keep a dirt barrier around the firepit.

Mr. Westgate sat, satisfied. “It’s warm,” he said. For a few moments, no one talked.

“Won’t the hay burn?” the boy from Kazakhstan asked, the obvious question. In silence, I thanked him.

“You know” Mr. Westgate said, “I don’t think so. Hay doesn’t seem that flammable.” He grabbed a handful and dropped it into the fire. They straw fizzled and smoked, seeming wet, but did not ignite, just sort of turned orange and wasted away into ash.

* * *

Once the teepee was more-or-less complete, we settled into a routine: out of class, across the football field, down the hill past the freshman dormitory, then left into the woods and into the riverbed and downhill to the teepee. The first boys to show up worked on the fire.

“I’d like to propose that we start all our fires here by friction,” Mr. Westgate had said. “I can help you get our own kits together.”

I was intrigued. I loved fire, but this was different—this was fire ground out of hot dust, fire toiled over and fought for—each initial coal protected, dropped into a delicate bundle of lichen and pine needles to ignite, or tucked into a dry tinder conk mushroom to grow, saved for later. This was deserved warmth, something real.

I began to see the components of fire in the woods. I gathered dry mullein stalks (spindles) from an overgrown field by my house—mullein likes disturbed areas, I learned. Next, I chopped a fireboard from a dead white cedar tree with Mr. Westgate’s hatchet. “White cedar is the best—the *best*,” he assured me. When I walked to and from the teepee, I began to look up at the birch trees for tinder conks, upside-down half-cones glued to the bark. When a birch tree dies, the tinder conks shrivel and crack, becoming vessels for fire. Most are about the size of a clenched fist. “The bigger the mushroom, the more time you can carry the coal,” Mr. Westgate had told me. “Native Americans used these to bring fire with them wherever they went. “With a big one,” he said, hands palming an invisible basketball, “you could carry a coal for a few days.”

I looked forward to the afternoons when I showed up before Mr. Westgate. “Should we try and start one?” I’d ask the other boys, emptying my backpack onto the ground—knife, spindle, fireboard, and a few tinder conchs spilling out. I’d place the spindle against the fireboard, twisting, burning a small pit, then I’d pause to cut a wedge out—this allows the coal to drop to the ground once it’s clumped and glowing. Then we’d begin, twisting and grinding, taking turns, arms aching, hands red and blistering against the mullein, looking for smoke in the dust.

Despite the routine, there were days when we didn’t go to the teepee. And so we checked our emails for messages from Mr. Westgate, which were never more than a few words, usually just written in the subject heading. *Men, meet down by the boathouse, bring a headlamp* (cave exploration), *Men, meet above the baseball field* (weeding the school’s organic garden), *Men, meet outside Carr dormitory* (acorn collection to make flour).

On some days, we went to Mr. Westgate’s apartment to shape bows with knives and worn hand tools. He had no furniture, so we’d sit on the floor in a circle. Moco might wander in through the back door—always open—and lie down among us. We’d slurp from cups of pine-needle tea and shave wooden spirals which gathered on the carpet and in Moco’s fur.

On other days we did not meet at all. *Men*, Mr. Westgate would write, *Go to your sit spots. Journal for an hour*. And so we would go to our self-chosen spots in the woods—I would anyway—and pull out our notebooks and try to be still and take notes on nature. My spot was on a ledge in the woods to the west of campus. I had to climb down to it. There was a thin overhang to protect me from the rain, and a small divot in the rock where I sometimes thought about building a fire. *I think Mr. Westgate and I are similar*, I wrote one day. *We’re somewhat normal, and like to have fun in the normal world, yet we also have some greater appreciation for nature. I want to be more like him*.

From time to time, we would go on a hike or wander. These became less frequent and were generally born out of spontaneity. When the boy from Kazakhstan—his name was Kaissar—found a pile of bear droppings near the teepee, Mr. Westgate insisted that we

try to track it. “Look here’s another pile,” he said, already a few yards away. This expedition brought us into a dense bramble patch, everyone scratched and bleeding.

On a snowy day, the first of the year, we arrived at the teepee to find a note inside. *Men, track me.* Outside the teepee, we found a set of prints leading south, a few circles and hops thrown in for flair. A few hours later, the half-inch of snow almost melted, and with the sun going down, we prepared to give up.

“I think I’m done,” said Luke. “I should do work.”

“Me too,” I began. A snowball came through the trees and burst into my chest, crumbling and slipping down my shirt. Ten yards away, Mr. Westgate was running through the trees. I gritted my teeth, grinned, and took off after him. As I ran I swooped down and picked up a hemlock branch half-frosted with ice. I smashed the branch against tree trunks as I ran—breaking the end off each time. The broken pieces spun through the air in Mr. Westgate’s direction, the branch growing shorter and shorter as I chased him.

That night I wrote in my journal. *Can I love Maine and not hate Connecticut?*

Near the end of the trimester, on a hike to Rand’s view, the two Korean boys became lost when the rest of us broke into one of our running spells. It was the first week of November, and below freezing at night. Unable to find the boys, Mr. Westgate sent us home.

Later that night—it had been dark for a few hours—I heard him come into my house to find my dad. They went into the kitchen, and talked in low voices, but I could hear them through the floor.

“I’m worried,” Mr. Westgate said, his voice sounding young and shaky in way I had not heard before.

“I have headlamps,” my dad said. “I’ll come out with you.”

They left together, and my dad was back within ten minutes. They’d stopped to grab fruit from the dining hall—in case of an all-night excursion—and had run into the boys there. They were eating ice cream, a little disheveled, but elated. “They found a road, began walking in the wrong direction, and flagged down a UPS truck just before dark,” my dad told me, back at the house. “I don’t think they knew enough to be scared.” He let out a nervous laugh.

At the teepee the next day, we cheered when the boys came into view.

“Glad you decided to stick around,” Luke said.

Andrew, the loud one, laughed and clapped his leg. Tree, quiet—and with a name that I envied—looked around through his glasses and smiled. “Me too,” he said.

* * *

At the end of the fall trimester, we slept in the teepee. Mr. Westgate had been moving in, bringing a pot and a couple of skillets down. I brought my mom’s acoustic guitar and laid it against the hay bales.

It was a gray afternoon, and there was a dance on campus. I skipped it, and walked down to the teepee around sunset to dine with Mr. Westgate and a few of the other boys.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked, taking my seat around the outside fire pit.

Mr. Westgate pulled a two-gallon zip lock full of yellow paste from his backpack. “Ashcakes,” he said. “This is kind of a curry-mix that will go inside them.”

We sat in a circle, whittling, working on little projects. Mr. Westgate was sewing shut a hole in the bottom of his backpack. I was carving a spoon. Kaissar scooped orange coals from the middle of the fire, and pressed them with a stick against the crosscut edge of a small maple log. As he pressed he blew onto to the coal, persuading it to burn into the still-green wood. “With time and patience,” Mr. Westgate had told us, the coals will burn a pit.” You can make a cup or even a bowl.”

Back at the fire, Luke made eye contact with Mr. Westgate

“Hungry?” Mr. Westgate asked, darkness settling.

“Please,” said Luke, standing up. Wood shavings slipped from his lap and onto the ground. He’d been sharpening sticks for marshmallows.

Mr. Westgate handed us all clumps of dough and we stretched them—with our hands—into pancakes, and filled them with curry and bits of pepperoni and whatever else we had. We folded each one and crimped the edges with forks Mr. Westgate had swiped from the dining hall. We dug a hole in the fire and placed the cakes among the coals there, where they blistered and blackened in the heat.

“This should be interesting,” Mr. Westgate said, pulling a charred cake from the fire.

“Have you made these before?” Luke asked.

“Just read about them.”

I pulled my cake from the coals and bit in. The outside was charred, but inside the mix was warm and I was hungry. *Food, raw fire food*, I thought.

We made s'mores—an outdoors cliché but tasty—and then funneled into the teepee where we started a fire. Some boys filed in from the dance and the teepee filled up. We told some stories, some scary, about the wilderness and the woods. Some boys whittled, others eyed the guitar, tried a few chords, clearly knowledgeable but not quite brave enough to sing. I put my spoon down and looked around, my back against the bales. We were still all different, but at this moment, in the teepee, together, we had the woods in common. I smiled and was warm.

Suddenly, a coyote howled, then another, then fifty—three different packs, it seemed, coyotes all around us. Moco, who had been resting by the door, stood and growled.

“Don't touch him,” Mr. Westgate said.

Then the door was gone, tossed out of sight. Andrew ducked inside through the opening, panting, a red headlamp twisted in his hair. “I just came from the dance,” he said. “Those things are everywhere.”

Before anyone could speak, Moco burst through the opening. Mr. Westgate, springing from a legs-crossed position, grabbed a half-alight stick from the fire and tore through after him. Luke looked over at me. Rising, we followed the wildman and his dog through the opening, throwing rocks and swinging branches, slipping through trees, hollering and howling and running, chasing coyotes through the woods and into the dark.

* * *

In early January, the teepee caught on fire. Mr. Westgate had rushed to the dining hall to find my Dad. “Totally fucking on fire,” he said. “I barely got out.”

The news circulated around the school like water in an underground aquifer—slipping around out of sight, reaching into all the far corners, ubiquitous and yet never touching the surface, never formally acknowledged.

“He had all his shit in there,” Luke said to me in the hallway between classes. “Guitar, clothes, wallet—he ran back to campus naked, at like four in the morning.”

“Jesus,” I said. “Do you know how it caught?”

“Nah, too soon to ask.”

After three days, I walked down to the teepee to see it for myself. No hill anymore, just a great ring of ash, the carcass of a melted pot in the middle where the fire once was. I went and sat within the circle, where I could smell the burning and watch the smoke still smoldering up from the ashes. The trees around the teepee were blackened forty feet up. *So lucky we weren't all here*, I thought.

All the leaves and brush seemed gone now, blown and burnt away. The woods felt empty and bare and cold. I could see the road clearly, not far at all. *Yes, probably not on school property.*

I stood up and kicked the melted pot. *The goddamn haybales*, I thought. *Stupid idea.* I put my hands on my thighs, squatted, breathed out, and then walked out of the circle, careful to step over the slightly smaller wall of ashes where the door once was. “You’ve been good to me, teepee,” I said, then stepped into the riverbed and walked uphill.

* * *

Spring came. Luke graduated, and got a nice silver bowl—the Leland Rhodes award, given to that student that demonstrates an undying love for the outdoors, or something like that. A year later I got an identical bowl. I smiled and said thank you and thought of chasing coyotes through the dark and being high and looking out at the White Mountains with Luke.

I was headed to college in Maine, back home, but felt that some part of me, maybe just a piece, would miss Connecticut and the woods that helped me to be happy, to feel useful and present in a time of struggle.

A couple years into college, I saw Mr. Westgate again. We were both visiting my parents. They'd switched schools and so had he. By the front door, Mr. Westgate squeezed me in a bear hug until I thought I might split. "Good to see you," he said. "I *mean* that, do you know? People throw that expression around."

"They do," I said. "I know."

We walked in my parent's living room and sat down with Dad. I explained to Mr. Westgate that I was back in Maine, studying environmental policy, still growing my love for the outdoors. He smiled.

"Moco?" I asked.

"Died, Totally badass though. Just walked into the woods and died. He gave me this look when he walked out the door, like—*see you dude*."

Dad and I looked at each other and laughed. When the room was quiet, I turned back to Mr. Westgate.

"How'd the teepee burn down? Did the hay catch on fire?"

He groaned. "Everything did. I think it was all dried out from the fire pit. A spark got into the rafters and caught. It went fast. I was just getting ready for bed."

I nodded, satisfied. "Do you like your new job?" I asked.

He smiled, a bit pained. "You know it's good. It's in the south, Virginia, so a bit different. I started another wilderness club—you know. Anyway I sent all the kids out to find rocks for a fire pit. They came back and said, 'Mr. Westgate, there aren't any.' I said, 'no way.' Except then I went and looked and they were right. So, it's different."

My Dad, who hadn't spoken much, leaned forward on his chair. "I memorized a poem you might like. Do you want to hear it?"

I wasn't sure who he was speaking to. "Yes," Mr. Westgate said.

"It's called *The Call of the Wild*, by Robert William Service." He began.

I settled into the couch and listened, a little shocked. This seemed unusual for my dad.

*They have cradled you in custom, they have primed you with their preaching,
They have soaked you in convention through and through;
They have put you in a showcase; you're a credit to their teaching...*

Still listening, I turned and looked out the window. A car drove down the street. A dog stood on a patch of grass and barked at it. Students would be getting out of their classes soon. No wilderness club here, not much in the way of woods—too many people and houses and telephone wires.

I stared at Mr. Westgate. Mr. Westgate stared at my Dad.

Let us probe the silent places, let us seek what luck betide us;

Let us journey to a lonely land I know.

There's a whisper on the night-wind, there's a star agleam to guide us,

And the Wild is calling, calling...let us go.

My Dad leaned back in his chair in silence.

Mr. Westgate grinned. “That is a great poem,” he said.

HATE BORROWING SHIT

During the year that I turned nineteen—the same year I abandoned college in search of what I then called “the real world”—I spent several months working for an excavation contractor. This was in inland Maine, where general capability is the most desired personality trait, that part of New England where people have basement freezers full of deer sausage and backyards full of pot plants growing in mounds of chicken shit. Here the old people die younger but they live rich lives. Here people know less about Chaucer and mitosis but more about living. When I tell someone I am from Maine, this is how I want them to see me.

Of course I am from the coast, where there are private islands and rich people—most of whom do not spend the winter, choosing instead to retreat to Boston, or New York, or maybe even Florida. “Who can afford to pay the heating bills?” they ask downtown, trying to small talk with locals. Wealth is not hard to find. I learned how to see it from my parents, who did not try to teach me, but who showed me how through outbursts and slip-ups in their conversations. I would ask why the Wilders’ had a new car for example, and my dad would grumble, muttering something about their father and insurance.

“I just haven’t sold my soul yet,” he’d say.

“Jeff!” my mom would intervene. “Your son is listening.” But I had already made the connection. *Insurance salesman: Rich*. And so in second grade, around the time I was learning to write cursive in school, I began to build a mental list of professions and their corresponding paychecks: *Radiologist: Rich*. *Estate Lawyer: Rich*. *Restaurant Owner: Depends*. I contrasted these with my dad’s jobs since we’d come to Maine: *Carpenter*, *Urchin Diver*, *Divinity Student*. These were the jobs that didn’t make you wealthy.

There were many jobs I never understood. Others I never thought of. My range was narrow. I wanted to be a professional skateboarder or a boat captain, then in middle school a writer, and then—in sophomore year of high school—I decided the world was fucked and I would be nothing, just a traveler.

The summer after my senior year, when a Maine girl I’d met told me that her father, Barney, was an excavation contractor, I figured his job must involve a backhoe. I told her

that my father was an Episcopal Priest who didn't believe in heaven. "The word 'heaven' isn't even in the bible," I said.

* * *

There are parts of Maine where family means something different. I think it might come from older times, when having a big family meant having more hands, and when being part of a family meant being part of a profession. This was true in Barney's home, where work and family were tangled. At anytime of day you could be asked to drop whatever might be important to you and help the family business along. And so the more time I spent around Barney—by now I was dating his daughter—the more at-risk I was to be called upon to work.

It started with simple favors—grabbing a hammer drill from his shop and bringing it to a job site, or picking up some grass seed if I was driving by Linscott's. Then Barney hired me to work weekends, then weeks, sometimes both. The job was always different. He had excavators, dump trucks, bulldozers, wood-chippers and skidders. He had four-wheelers, chain saws, and trailers full of carpentry tools. He had concrete guys and carpentry guys, full time truck drivers and a weathered back up named Dave, who had lost his license for drunk driving and could only take back roads.

In the time I worked for Barney we built barns, cut horse trails, and stacked boulders to form retaining walls. We dug up roads, shaped ditches, and set in culverts under the pavement. I baled hay, split wood, and learned to drive an excavator. When a lumberyard employee tried to sell me crooked boards for a job, I heaved the pieces off of my roof racks and onto the cracked pavement.

"If you don't mind, I'll pick them myself," I said.

Barney taught me things about people and life too—things that in some cases were true, and in others I am still unsure what to think. He made good money for a rural man with a high school diploma, in part because he usually worked on high-end projects for rich people and always backed out when he sensed a client was going under. He did not trust the rich, especially when they were friendly. "You accept a few favors and then they think they own you," he often said to me. "You have to remind them that you don't need their help."

It was with this idea festering in my mind, with Barney at my side seven days a week, that I first developed a fear of borrowing things.

It began on a horse farm—one with an indoor riding ring with heated floors, so the horses' feet wouldn't get cold in winter. There were multiple barns nicer than my childhood house, and a full staff of ten or fifteen workers, many of whom lived there full time to help the owners along. We were hired to clear riding trails, great big wide ones with bridges over rocky creeks, trails where the pitch never got too steep and where there would be no roots to foul a horse's hooves. Barney was shaping the trails and digging drainage ditches with his orange excavator, and I was following in a four-wheeler, dragging a crude mat of metal spikes that groomed the trails and filtered out rocks. Around mid-morning the four-wheeler sputtered out and died. I had been expecting this; I had forgotten to fill a gas can on the way to work. Fortunately, there was a farm hand nearby, a guy named Cal who was a few years older than me. He offered to go and get the farm's four-wheeler so I could finish the job. Nervous to tell Barney about the gas, I accepted and thanked him several times. Within a few minutes Cal was ripping back down the dirt trail with an undersized yellow four-wheeler, the bent brim of his camouflage hat shadowing his eyes. He helped me to hitch up the grooming trailer, and I was back to work.

I should have asked Cal for a gas can instead. Before I had made it to end of the trail the engine clanked, smoked, and the four-wheeler shut down. No warning. It would not start with the key—it didn't even make a noise—and Cal was gone.

I ran my fingers through my hair until they found scalp. I would have to get Barney. I began to walk through the woods in his direction, my rubber boots making deep craters in the freshly turned dirt. As I moved I shuffled through various scenarios in my head, trying to gauge how he would respond. It might be all right actually, if he was in a good mood. I could find a way to break the news smoothly. No, he would see me on foot and know I'd fucked up.

It was a mile before I saw the excavator, an orange blur between trees. It was uphill from me, and through the glass door I could see him—a thin man with brown curls and a green, collared shirt. For a moment I watched him work. He was deep in it, kicking aside stumps with the bucket of the excavator, and smoothing the trail with the front-mounted

plow. In a way the machine was part of his body, and it felt wrong to interrupt him, like I was sitting down next to a writer scribbling away in a coffee shop. And besides, an hour in the excavator hour billed out at two hundred and fifty dollars. I approached and started to wave my arms.

“Fuck, really?” he said. “That’s fucking bad.” He hopped down from his leather seat, pushed by me, and started down the trail, walking fast for a moment, and then switching to a run. I ran behind him—feeling guilty, and praying that the four-wheeler would start—that I had missed something obvious—and that he would call me a dumb liberal again and we could move on.

Barney checked the gas, and the oil, which were full, and then connected the terminals of the battery with his Leatherman. There was a spark and an arc of light surged from the metal and into Barney’s fingers, who lurched back.

“Battery’s fine,” he said.

It was a problem that would have been better left alone, but Barney, determined to prevent a conversation with the couple on top of the hill, would not give up. Instead he got more involved, ripping different pieces off of the machine. The mess of parts piled up around him in a semicircle—and he grew more frustrated at every dead end. As the afternoon light began to dim, and when our gallon water-jug was empty, Barney finally gave up and walked over to his truck. I slumped up and shut the passenger door, and we drove up to the farm to let someone know about the four-wheeler.

It went fine. We told Cal, he nodded, and we knew he would be off to tell the owners. On the way home Barney did not talk, which left me inside my own head. I told myself that the farm owners were kind and wealthy, that for them the four-wheeler was insignificant. But it had broken on my watch. Even worse, I knew that Barney was paranoid—he was worried that this would be used against him somehow, that he would be blamed and would have to pay. And I was mad at us both—because it was fucked up that after a hard day’s work in the woods, when we should have been looking forward to beer, we were sitting here and feeling inferior, worried that we were going to owe something to rich people.

We pulled off into a small roadside convenience store, and Barney looked over at me. “Hate borrowing shit,” he said, and then laughed.

I smiled, grateful. “Definitely hate borrowing shit.”

“Maybe just a quick six-pack for the road.”

* * *

In midsummer, when it was time to lay grass seed on the horse trails, I borrowed a push-along seeder from the same farm, and Cal gave it to me without question. In a rush to get home, I left it out at the end of the day, and Barney ran over it with his truck as we backed out. Unlike the four-wheeler, which turned out to be okay, we had to pay for the seeder. In mid-September, when I went to pull my grandfather’s boat out of the water, Barney insisted that I borrow his truck. I pulled the boat and drove it home without a problem, but while I was backing it into its resting place for the winter I nudged against a lilac tree, gouging a two-foot scratch into the driver’s door.

In the fall, I got Barney’s dump truck stuck in my backyard with a load of firewood, and he had to bring in a front-end loader to tow it out. He popped a rear tire in the process.

My borrowing mishaps always made me anxious. I knew Barney didn’t like fuck-ups. He’d fired people before for making too many of them. But I still I felt that in a way, things weren’t my fault, I was just cursed, unlucky. The more things went wrong, the more paranoid I became, until I resolved that anything I borrowed would surely turn to dust. “Hate borrowing shit,” I’d say to Barney, not just after my fuck-ups, but after other people’s as well, and before I embarked on any task that involved something that wasn’t mine. It was an apology and truth we both understood, a way to send blame elsewhere. It was an acknowledgment that sometimes things went wrong, especially when the timing was bad, or when you didn’t have the money to make them right. And in a way when I said this I was apologizing for something more, for being from the coast, and for being liberal, and for not quite understanding all the things I was supposed to understand by now.

WOODSPLITTING

“Environmental policy huh,” said Dale, pulling up his Carhartts a bit and taking a step back. With a groan, he pressed his palms against the deck of the woodsplitter and half-lifted his ass to a rest there—not quite sitting and not quite standing. He pulled a Marlboro Red from the smushed pack in the breast pocket of his flannel shirt.

“You hear that Howie?” Dale turned his neck as far as it would go, grimacing, trying to find his buddy. Howie was rolling a sixteen-inch-long section of a maple log towards us. He was bent over, and his greasy shoulder-length gray was draping down in front of his face. “Hey, Howie!” Dale shouted. “Drop that fuckin’ log and get over here. Smoke break!”

Howie ambled over, clutching his back, and pulled out his own cigarette. Dale looked up at me and lit his, the filter tucked into one of the gaps where a tooth had been. He exhaled and grinned. “Howie,” he said. “This college kid’s gonna save the world.”

Howie looked my way and laughed. His glasses had one normal lens and one from a pair of prescription shades.

I pressed my molars together. This was the part I dreaded—the taunting, the baiting, the little jabs. I’d left college after my freshman year and had moved into a log cabin with my girlfriend from home, Addie. I’d told her and my parents I wanted to know more about the “real world,” you know, real blue-collar central Maine. She didn’t want to go to school. And so, boiled down, we’d ended up playing house in her parent’s old cabin. She worked on a yacht, made lots of money, decorated our home and cooked dinner. I got a job with her dad, Barney, who was an excavation contractor that also did carpentry. Barney and I built barns during the week, and on the weekends, I split, transported, and stacked wood. It was mid-October. I’d worked out a deal with Barney: one load to his house, one load to the cabin, no pay. It had gone well the first weekend, just me, cutting, splitting, stacking, feeling capable—but today these two had turned up in a smashed-up black Toyota. “Here to help you,” Dale had said. “Barney’s orders.” So far, they’d only slowed me down.

I stared at Dale as he leaned against the woodsplitter. I squeezed the brim of my hat, pressing the edges together, working to get that nice U-shape that all the local rednecks seemed to have.

“Well,” Howie said. “How you gonna do it?”

Well, I thought. A good start would be to knock Dale’s ass off the woodsplitter so I can get another cord to my basement and don’t have to turn on the furnace this winter. Instead, I said something easier, something easier to believe, too. “I’m probably not going to save the world.”

“Then why bother?” Dale asked, tugging open a button on his shirt and touching his pacemaker—making sure it was still there, or something. “Aren’t we all fucked anyway? That’s what all you liberals seem to say, scientists, whatnot. We’re all fucked right? It’s all fucked. Shit I’m fifty-nine I’m dead soon. Why should I care?”

I thought back to my classes at college, good classes full of thoughtful students, most of them liberal and white and wealthy. All of us in little clean rooms on a manicured campus on a hill, a hill overlooking a Maine mill town that died decades ago, a place where many people still struggle and vote Republican and sometimes do heroin. *Because it’s right, for our grandkids, for the island nations that are being swallowed by the Pacific, it’s right.* That’s what we would say in class. All good arguments, all useless here, quickly dismantled by two Mainers expecting to die and only concerned with living just a bit longer. *They don’t care, I thought. They really don’t care. And why should they?*

“I don’t know,” I said, a little shaken. “I like being outside—I like the outdoors. I want to keep some of this the way it is.” I spat on the ground nervously. “I’m trying to see what it’s like in the real world,” I said, something I thought they might like to hear.

Howie nodded. Dale grunted.

“Guess we better get some work done,” Dale said. He yanked on the pull cord and the splitter roared. Howie started his chainsaw. I put on my gloves.

We were a slow team. Howie measured the logs and cut them into sections. Dale pulled the splitter’s lever and crunched the sections into firewood. I became the sort of idiotic third man—not having a definitive role, always in between, fumbling. Ideally, I would bring the sections from Howie to Dale, though sometimes Howie would roll them over on his own, leaving me to try and gather the cut pieces from the splitter and toss them into the bucket of Barney’s spare front-end loader, which was parked a few feet away. Of course, this was sort of the splitter’s job, and it’s dangerous to have too many hands near the blade. Annoyed, Dale shooed me away with his eyes. And so, in the

moments where there was no work to be done, I just stood with my earplugs in, fuming. *Oh, the satisfaction this must give you,* I thought at Dale, who did not wear earplugs and remained expressionless as the wood sections parted against the fixed axe-head. *Yes, it's me, the liberal college boy, just standing here, useless, not capable of using the woodsplitter or the chainsaw.*

When the loader's bucket was full, I leapt over to the ladder, scrambled up, and sat in the cab before Dale could. Key turned, hydraulics flicked on, I backed up, cut the wheel hard left, then swung it right, drove forward, lifted the arm, and flipped the bucket over the bed of Barney's one-ton dump truck. Every piece slid in. Reversing, I dropped the bucket on the ground next to the woodsplitter and jumped down, pleased with myself.

Dale was smoking a cigarette. "When you set the bucket down, make sure you don't push the hydraulics too hard," he said. "Look,"—he pointed with his cigarette hand at the machine—"the front is resting on the bucket too much, the tires are barely touching the ground. Hard on the hydraulics."

Turning around so he could not see me reddening, I climbed back up the ladder to raise the bucket.

That afternoon, before driving home to the cabin, I stopped by Barney's house to drop off a cord of wood—I generally did the delivering while Dale and Howie stayed at the pit and managed to split three or four logs and smoke a pack each. The truck was a five-speed and I was teaching myself to drive stick. When I tried to back up onto the concrete slab and into Barney's barn, I stalled and lurched about in the torn foam driver's seat. "God dammit!" I yelled. "Too much clutch, too little clutch. Jesus Christ."

I ripped at my laces, trying to take my boots off. Only then, with smart wool socks on the pedals—big toes poking out through their respective holes, did I find the balance and manage to bump the truck up and in. I dropped out of the cab and pulled the hydraulic panel from under the seat, dumped the bed into the barn. *CRASH. BANG.*

I picked up the first armload of split maple and walked to the back corner of the barn where I had already stacked two or three cord. Barney's wife, Danielle, had told me she normally goes through about ten in a winter. Plenty more work for Dale, Howie and me.

"You figurin' that thing out?" a voice called.

I turned to see Barney. He was a little shorter than me, 5' 10" or so, with short curls and inward-facing front teeth. "Huh?" I said, "Oh the truck, yeah, uh, slow going but I'm getting it."

He had been on the second-floor landing of the barn, but now walked down the stairs so we were both standing on the slab, him with his hands on his hips, me with the wood in my arms, which I set down. In general, there was a strange tension between us—him forty-five, a high school graduate, successful with his business; Me, nineteen, with a year's more education, diddling around in a part of Maine that didn't need me, trying to understand a way of life I hadn't grown up with. I sometimes wondered if he thought we were trying to pull Addie in different directions.

"Good man," he said—the best compliment I could hope to receive. "Why don't you take the one-ton home, it'll be good practice. Remember to pull the positive terminal from the post so the battery doesn't die overnight."

"Oh, yeah sure," I said. My little red Subaru was outside and I'd been looking forward to driving it—simple, automatic transmission. I thought of the massive hill-start by the cabin I would have to pull off the next morning. "Thanks."

Barney nodded, and began walking back towards the stairs.

It has to be now, I thought. "Barney!" I shouted.

"Yeah?"

"Dale and Howie," I said, pausing. "They're slowing me down. I'm just as fast without them. It's a waste of money having them around." Barney talked about money a lot, government spending and taxes mostly.

He laughed. "Somethin' you gotta know about those two. "There's the A team, the B team, the C team, so on." He paused. "Those two are the goddamn F team, the worst team in the history of teams, always smokin' and never workin'. I know that. But Dale worked for my dad since he was eighteen. Dad would go and pick him up from jail and they'd go work. Now he works for me. Howie—he's Dale's buddy, just got divorced, he's around. I'll tell you this, Robin." He rocked back on his heels—he always did this when he was a bit uncomfortable. "They need this. They have nothin' else. They say they need work, I give 'em work. No matter what, no questions asked." He turned and walked up the stairs.

Embarrassed and wishing I'd kept my mouth shut, I went and grabbed another armful of wood.

"Hey Robin!" Barney shouted from the landing.

I looked up.

"Ask Dale what he's doing this winter. It'll be good material for your writing. You know, if you still want to do that."

I nodded. "See you, Barney." I dumped my armful and arranged the pieces one by one into the stack.

* * *

November brought the cold and Addie and I began to run the cabin's woodstove around the clock. I borrowed a ladder from Barney and covered our exterior windows in agricultural plastic. Addie paid the electricity bills, canned peaches, and washed creosote stains from our chimney. "I'm gonna shoot the biggest damn buck this year," she told me. "Enough meat for the whole winter."

On the weekends, I continued to stack wood—wood into the cabin's basement, wood into Barney's barn. As I stacked I was working on this thought, something about how preparing the cabin for winter was kind of like preparing our relationship too: we were making a commitment to each other, a commitment to settle down for the colder, quieter and likely less romantic months that lay ahead.

"How many cord do you think we should have at our place?" I asked Danielle—It was the first Saturday of November, and she was helping me to stack a one-ton load at her house. She had dark red hair, and was wearing a beret, Carhartts overalls, and Xtra-Tuf insulated boots. Like me, she'd voted for Obama and no one had ever let her forget it. And like me she treated rural Maine selectively, savoring the beautiful bits and letting the rest sift slowly from her memory. On a family hunting trip, we'd gotten paired together. We sat on the mossy forest floor, matching .308s lying harmlessly our laps. We talked too loud, and laughed to each other as a group of does and then a six-point buck ran between us.

"Didn't see anything," we later said to Barney and Addie.

In the barn, Danielle built up the corners on the woodpiles, alternating the direction of the pieces she placed—this is one of trickier jobs. I filled in the middle area between the corners, dumping armload after armload without much thought.

“You’ll probably still need eight cord,” Danielle said. “Could be a cold one.”

I stacked a birch log a little harder than usual.

“Why? Are you tired of Dale and Howie yet?” she asked.

“I don’t like working with them,” I said, ashamed of my transparency.

“Well, Dale is going to jail soon, if that helps.”

I dropped an armload onto the stack and stood there. “Jail? For the winter?”

“Oh yes, drunk driving. Seems to happen to him every year around this time.”

Shocked, I walked over to the loose woodpile and resumed working. We stacked in silence—an armful of maple, and armload of oak, an armload of birch.

That afternoon, back at Barney’s gravel pit, Dale throttled the splitter down until it died, wedged his ass up on the platform and pulled out his cigarettes.

“You going to jail Dale?” I asked, surprising myself with bravery.

“You betcha,” he said, breathing in smoke. “Trial’s this Wednesday actually, so just a few days now. I’ll probably go in December.”

“Good old Twin Bridges,” Howie said, looking towards the forest edge. He pulled his glasses off and wiped the tinted lens with his shirt.

I leaned back on my heels. “I’m sorry, Dale. About that, you know.”

Dale kicked one of the splitter’s tires with his heel, looked at Howie and laughed.

“Oh sorry are you? Ha! Oh jeezas buddy, no by god they don’t know how much I like it in there. Three meals and a warm bed, what else could I ask for? Sorry!”

“Oh. Well what about you Howie?”

“Oh no not me,” he said. “I’ll be puttin’ around in Dale’s truck for the winter. Someone’s gotta keep a license.”

“This’ll be my fifteenth OUI,” Dale said proudly. “More time without a license than with one.”

I tried to smile.

On Sunday, Howie showed up by himself.

“Dale’s heart is feeling weird,” he muttered.

“Alrighty,” I said, a little excited to have a bigger role, but feeling guilty for it.

Howie cut and rolled the logs over to the splitter. I split, tossed the pieces in the loader bucket, and dumped them into the one-ton. We both delivered and stacked, Howie at the wheel. His shifts were smooth, effortless. When he pulled up to a stop sign, he worked down through the gears methodically—I usually just tossed the stick into neutral and hammered on the brakes.

“Why do you do that?” I asked. “All the down-shifting.”

“Safer. You don’t rely on the brakes as much.” As an afterthought, he said, “Used to drive trucks.”

“Does Dale do all that downshifting, or is he not as worried about safety?” I asked, joking.

Howie sighed. “Dale’s a good driver. Those OUIs are no accident. Just his way of getting through the winter.” He cranked the RPMs in first gear and jumped right to third. “How old are you?” he asked.

“Nineteen.”

“Jesus. What I would give. When I was nineteen I worked twenty hour days. I could lift eight hundred pounds above my head.” He didn’t seem to be speaking symbolically. “Dale too, my god—that guy dug this pond for Barney’s old man, biggest damn pond you’ve ever seen. We used to work, I mean *work*.”

“What’re you going to do for the winter?” I asked.

“Same thing I always do,” he said. We had pulled down into the cabin’s driveway, my turn for a cord. “Drink a bit, fix up chainsaws, sell them on eBay. Had a good winter last year doin’ that.” He backed the truck up using his mirrors. “Right here good?”

I nodded. He stepped out, stood by the door, and dumped the firewood in front of my three pressure-treated front steps. For a moment, he stood and looked at the cabin. I stayed inside the cab, a little embarrassed that at nineteen, I had a home, and a nice one. I wondered what he was looking at. *The kitchen window?* He’d be able to see the little orange gourds, the mini-pumpkin sort, which were arranged in the window box there.

Addie's fall decorations. Inside, there was a small vase of drying black-eyed-susans, a glimpse of summer and the happiness we'd shared.

Howie stepped up into the cab, and used the panel to drop the truck bed, stopping when he heard it thunk down against the frame. "Nice house," he said, clicking his seatbelt behind him to avoid the alarm. Clutch out, gas in, up the driveway, back to the splitter and to work.

Without Dale, Howie and I were efficient. And lonely.

The barn building slowed down, and Barney put me on wood duty full time. On the day of Dale's trial, I was at Barney's house stacking up the tenth cord against the wall with Danielle. It was cold now, officially. All the leaves were gone. Addie and I were fighting, the novelty of our little domestic life wearing off. "We're more different than we thought," she'd said to me one night. "We have different families."

But I love your family, I'd wanted to say.

Back at Barney's, brakes screeched in the driveway outside.

"Who could that be?" Danielle said, dropping her gloves, and looking down at her watch. Eleven AM. I looked outside. A Toyota.

Howie wobbled through the door, blindingly drunk. His shirt was unbuttoned all the way. His chest sagged a bit, but the skin was tight and you could tell he was still strong.

"Well hello there, mister!" Danielle said, stale cheerfulness in her voice. This was bad.

He came over to us, dragging a boot, past the woodpile. There were tears on his face. "Call the p-police!" he stuttered, still coming closer.

Danielle held a hand in front of me, not touching, but holding me back, protecting me. Calmly, she spoke, like a mother to a distraught child. "Oh Howie, what's happened to you?"

"It's Dale!" He spat on the ground. "Oh Dale, I told him not to drink this morning but he did and went to court drunk."

"Have you been drinking?"

Howie groaned. "We had three or four coffee brandies and a few beers each. We've been driving around all morning, and now—now they took him right to jail. He wasn't

supposed to go yet, not till December!” His words twisted together and he held out his hands as he talked. “It just sucks!” He wiped his eyes beneath his glasses. “I didn’t know who else to go to.”

Danielle nodded to me, and went inside to call the police (a pretend call, she’d tell me later). I stood in the barn with Howie as he spat and cried and complained and squeezed his hands together.

“I’m sorry, Howie,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

Howie screamed, screamed from the gut, and kicked the woodpile hard with one of his boots. I backed against the wall. “This is just horrible, Howie.”

Danielle came down from the landing. “No information on Dale,” she said.

“Let’s get you home since you probably shouldn’t be driving.”

Howie started for the truck.

“I think we’ll leave the Toyota here,” she said, motioning to my little red Subaru.

Howie nodded. “They’re probably looking for that one anyway,” he said, and as if that thought somehow made him proud he hopped into my passenger seat with a half-grin. At Danielle’s request, I got in Dale’s truck—a five speed filled with cupholders full of cigarette butts—and drove it up the hill behind the barn without stalling. Then I walked to my car, and slipped into the backseat.

“That side,” Danielle mouthed.

I slid behind Howie, who was already smoking in my car.

The ride to the trailer was uncomfortable and smelly. I could think of little but washing my front seat of the grease, sweat, and saliva that Howie emitted—selfish thoughts, which I tried unsuccessfully to shoo away.

Howie talked the whole ride, covering a variety of topics—chainsaws, neighbors, his ex-wife, all inexplicably linked.

“I don’t got any wheels,” he slurred at one point. “Dale says I could have his truck when he went to Twin Bridges.”

Neither Danielle nor I spoke.

“I did have a truck though.” His cigarette was gone and he was now smoking the filter. “Then the transmission gave way a week later. So I grabs a tire iron and stoves in

all the windows, then I call the guy and ask for my nine hundred bucks. *You sold me a fucked truck!* I said to him.” He laughed and laughed.

We laughed, too.

“This is it,” Howie said, suddenly seeming sober.

We pulled into a short dirt driveway. In the front yard there was a disassembled snowmobile and a few chainsaws. The trailer was half a trailer, one half intact, the other smashed and rotting and covered in tarps. Howie was talking again.

“So I had this friend that’s known to cause trouble. So I tells him not to come over.”

I’d heard this story before.

“He comes over anyway and runs over my dog. Man that dog was old but I loved him. The guys says to me *he was in the road!* But that dog never went into the road. I said to that man, *You’ve got about ten minutes to get off my property.*”

Or else what? I wondered. But the story was over and Howie was crying again.

We left the property—me in the front seat, Danielle driving, Howie standing in front of his home with half a cigarette filter, and thinking about his dog and Dale.

“I had you sit behind him in case he tried something,” Danielle said, after a few minutes. “That guy has taken down state troopers.”

“Really?” I didn’t feel like talking.

“But you know what?” she said. “If we called him up right now, and needed anything in the world, he’d bend over backwards to do it.”

We arrived back at the barn, and stacked the remainder of the wood. I slid the last few pieces up above my head. *There it is*, I thought. Ten cords, packed to the ceiling, ready for winter. Plus eight cords at the cabin, filling the basement there, surrounding the woodstove and my little tool bench. I did it, college kid that I am. None of us will need heating oil now, not Addie or Danielle or Barney or me. Sustainable living? Carbon-neutral living? Maybe not. What do they call it when you heat with wood or biomass? Renewably-sourced carbon? I struggled to remember the terms from class.

Gloves off, sweater on, I got into my car and drove home, where I opened a beer and sat on the couch and looked outside at the woods. In a few hours, Addie would come home. We’d have a big fight, saying everything but what we meant: *I am not ready to be grown up with you.*

I packed my car, and drove up to school, where I visited my friends and told them about Addie and me and spoke with them about their classes. One of my friends, a boy I was supposed to live with, was also studying environmental policy and he walked me through his course load: ecology, international environmental law, natural resource economics, environmental ethics. “They’re good,” he said. “Definitely harder than last year, but I’m learning lots.”

“Me too,” I said, thinking about Dale and Howie and Barney, and wishing there’d been a class to help me talk to Mainers about science and the white-collar side of things.

After a few days, I went back to the cabin, got some more of my stuff—Edward Abbey books, my circular saw, my tent and dry bags. I gave Addie a hug and stood strangely in the kitchen, looking around for a final glimpse of what had just been my home. “You can keep my couch,” I said, as if I had somewhere else to bring it.

She nodded, and turned to stare out the window. “Well it’s been real.”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s been that.”

I had plans to drive to Rhode Island that night, where my parents were living, but first I went to see Barney—he had to pay me for some of the carpentry work I’d done. We stood in his driveway outside the barn full of firewood. He said I’m sorry, leaned back on his heels, and wrote me a check for a hundred dollars more than I’d earned.

“What now?” he asked. The hardest question.

I stared at my car, ready to get in. “I’m not sure. Travel, write maybe.”

He nodded. “Go back to school,” he said. “That’s what I would do. Get a degree. People don’t listen to you otherwise.”

I bit my lip. “Thank you. Thanks for everything.”

He shook my hand. “You’re my friend,” he said. “You’ll do good things.”

Tears coming, I got into the car, backed up, waved to Barney, then snapped the shifter down into drive and pulled out onto the road, accelerating down the two-lane highway, gears changing automatically.

AVOCADOS

I went to New Zealand to tough-out a break-up. In part, I chose New Zealand because it was far away. This in my mind, made it different, and I was looking for different—different ideas, different people, a different landscape. As a bonus, Kiwis speak English, so, different, but not necessarily uncomfortable or exotic.

My ticket was one-way and I had no formal plans, though I envisioned myself, somewhat romantically, wandering through the hills and spending time alone, journaling. Maybe I would land a job on a sailboat, catch a delivery to South Africa, go home the long way, across the oceans.

It was mid-November. I'd taken a year off from school with the intention of traveling with my girlfriend. With those plans crumbled, I had ten free months before the fall semester.

I landed in Auckland, exhausted from the flight (I hadn't slept, despite trying several different wines, suddenly able to drink in international airspace). From the airport I boarded a bus and rode to a well-kept little hostel which was referred to as a *backpackers* by the receptionist, a word that sounded cutesy and foreign to me. Twenty-four hours out of central Maine and there I was, single, buying alcohol, conversing with other young travelers (most of them German), already becoming cultured in my *backpackers*.

After a few days wandering around the city (mostly spent trying to sneak into gated marinas to speak with local boat owners, mostly unsuccessful), I set out to hitchhike north to a small town called Mangawhai—I'd read about a little avocado farm there when dinking around on the expensive internet offered by the hostel. The farm was listed on Wwoof.net, a website that helps organic farms find workers, or wwoofers, as they call them. In exchange for part-time work, wwoofers generally get a bed and meals. On a whim, I'd sent an email to the woman named Anne who ran the farm, offering to volunteer for a couple of weeks. *I have carpentry experience* I'd written, a trick my dad had sent me off with. Carpentry, he'd theorized, is one of the few trades that will help you anywhere.

Anne had responded to me the same day. *Good timing.* They'd just had a cancellation and there was a spot in their wwoofer hut. I would be working and living with a twenty-one-year-old French boy named Thibaut. We'd do two weeks there—Sunday to Sunday.

The man who picked me up from the side of the highway was a traveling tool salesman.

"Hate to see anyone hitch-hiking, mate," he said. "Sketchy business that."

"Much sketchier back home," I assured him.

"You from the states?"

"Ye," I said. "I mean yes." *Idiot, already slipping into a New Zealand accent.*

The man's forehead crinkled, but still he pushed open the passenger door. "Hop in," he said. "I'm Dave."

Dave's car, a Dodge station wagon, was filled with all sorts of battery-operated gadgets—impact drivers, drills, pocket-vacuums, circular saws. I wedged myself between the boxes, and looked out the window eagerly as we pulled out of Auckland, three lanes quickly converging into one. We sped along, winding through hills covered with grazing sheep and cattle, across one-lane bridges, everything green and wet and pretty and new.

The drive took two hours. We spent the time small-talking about tool prices (astonishingly more expensive in New Zealand). As we approached the exit for Mangawhai, I reached for my backpack straps, preparing to leave.

"I'll bring you right there, mate," Dave said.

"Please, you don't have to. Really."

We exited left, looped around over a bridge, and thundered down a winding road—pavement giving way to dirt—towards Mangawhai and my farm.

The driveway was rutted and marked with a wooden sign, weathered: *Avocados.* As we worked our way into the property, I ducked my head to peek out the windows. There was a sort of tree barrier to the left of us—redwoods. To the right—avocado trees, big ones with interlacing branches. An orchard.

"Don't see any fruit," Dave said.

I shrugged. "Could be out of season."

After a quarter-mile we veered right and the driveway ended at a single-story house with a terracotta roof, gray clapboards, and a front porch. Gardens in front had two levels: flowers and lattice work down below, vegetables up top. To the right of the gardens, there were fruit trees—just little things, newly planted. In a clearing between some of the trees, there was a trampoline minus the protective mesh fence, and an A-frame playhouse built from pressure-treated lumber and rusty, corrugated metal—both liability disasters, or would be, back in the states. *These belong to the eight-year-old*, I thought, remembering Anne’s email. *What a place to be homeschooled.*

Dave left, and I thanked him, and tried to pay him, but with no luck. I walked down a brick path to the front door—heavy backpack on my shoulders, an equally heavy duffel pack weighing on my right arm. I knocked and a man came out. He was thick with gray hair, maybe in his forties, I guessed.

“Who are you?” he asked. His eyebrows arched.

I stuttered, having expected a warm welcome. “I’m—I’m Robin, I’m wwoofing, here to volunteer. I spoke with—I emailed Anne.” I felt frustrated with my timidity.

A boy with blonde hair appeared in the doorway and tugged on the man’s hand.

“Not now, Ronan,” he said.

Right, Ronan is the boy’s name. And this is— “Are you Vanya?” I asked.

He grunted. “Yes, I’m Vanya.” He looked at my feet and worked his way up to my head—my boots and jeans were covered in green and gray paint from a barn I’d painted in Maine. I wore a ragged t-shirt from one of my father’s favorite surf shops, and a light-weight collared work coat (Carhartt knock-off) from Goodwill. My bent-brim hat said HOS—Hornbeck Offshore Services, a company that supplies oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. A friend had given it to me and I wore it ironically: I was (and am) an environmentalist, at least in theory.

“I don’t deal with wwoofers,” he said. “Anne does that and she goes to pick them up so we know when they are going to arrive.”

I kicked the toe of my right boot against the bricks. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

Vanya nodded at my apology, as if I was right to be sorry. “You can go and set your things in the wwoofer hut up the hill there. Anne will come and find you later.”

“Thank you,” I said, as Vanya shut the door in my face.

The wwoofer hut was cozy, the perfect home for two. Outside: a small front deck with a washing machine. Inside: two little rooms connected by a louvered door. The first room had a kitchenette—antique-looking mini-fridge, shallow stainless steel sink, toaster, microwave, another strange countertop machine (breadmaker?). There was a metal trunk repurposed as a coffee table and a pull-out couch. I walked into the bedroom, dropped my duffel on the floor and let my pack fall from my shoulders. I sat on the bed and looked around the room—bare studs everywhere, no insulation. *It must be warm year-round here*, I thought, remembering the palm trees I'd seen in Auckland.

I kicked my boots off, lay down, and fell asleep on top of the bedspread.

“Robin!” someone shouted.

I blinked my eyes open, disoriented. From my side, I watched a pair of legs fast-walk by my window.

“Robin!”

Wwoofer hut. Avocados farm. I stood up and shuffled into the kitchen-room, where I opened the screen door to find a middle-aged woman with frizzy grey-blonde hair and glasses. She smiled, tight-lipped.

“Robin,” she said.

“Anne?”

Together, we took a walk around the property. Anne took long strides and talked quickly. On the deck of the wwoofer hut, she pointed to the washing machine. “This is the washing machine,” she said. “We do not have a dryer. Dryers are ridiculous and unnecessary.”

“Sure,” I said. *So, they are environmentalists, too, serious ones.*

From the deck, we followed another brick footpath to a small outbuilding with corrugated metal walls and a roof to match, all spray-painted green. There were two doors. Behind the first door, there was a shower. The floor, a cement slab, was decorated with a spiral of inlaid stones.

“This was a wwoofer project,” Anne explained. “The whole shower.”

“Very nice,” I said. *Was she trying to intimidate me?*

“We take five minute showers.”

“No problem.”

Anne opened the next door.

“Outhouse,” I said.

“No, composting toilet. Look closer.”

I bent over the hole, an opening cut through three barn boards, side-by-side, well-worn. Down below, only a few feet, there was a five-gallon bucket. Inside the bucket there was some sawdust and a bit of residual feces.

“Nice,” I said.

Anne pointed to a bag of sawdust by the door. “When you use it, put a handful in, do your poo, then add some more sawdust.” She threw a handful of shavings in, as if to demonstrate the proper technique.

“What do I do when it’s full?” I asked.

“Take the bucket out back. “Put it in the barrel there—are you allergic to bees?”

“No,” I said.

“Perfect—there’s lots there. Anyway, that barrel business breaks down into fertilizer for the gardens.”

We began to walk again.

“Water tank,” she said, pointing to a big plastic cylinder.

We moved through the orchard I’d seen from the driveway. “Avocado trees. Bad season,” she said, shaking her head. “No pesticides, no avocados.”

We crossed the driveway, making our way towards the house.

“Vegetable garden, fruit trees. Take what you need, when you need.”

We stepped up onto her front porch, through a pair of sliding doors and into the house. There were hardwood floors and near-floor-length windows everywhere. The countertops were hardwood too, unfinished, and with live edges.

Anne grabbed a binder from the counter and motioned me over to the dining room table.

I sat facing her, where I could see into the front yard. Vanya had Ronan in his arms. He was tickling him. Suddenly, he crouched and threw the boy into the air. Ronan

squealed and bounced down onto the trampoline, his blonde curls bobbing. I looked at Anne. She had enormous blue eyes.

“Your home is beautiful,” I said.

Her lip twitched towards a smile. “Thank you, much cheaper here in the country. Vanya can work from home. I hope he wasn’t too short with you,” she added. “I usually deal with the wwoofers.”

“No, he wasn’t” I lied. “What’s his work?”

“He’s the ethics manager for an international company. Very good at what he does.”

“How interesting!” I said. *Imagine that, her asshole husband, an ethics manager!*

“What’s in there?” I asked.

She opened the front cover and slid the binder across the table to me.

I flipped through the pages, full of rules and expectations laid out for the wwoofers, for me. I was to work half a day, every day except Sunday. Afternoons were free—there were bikes I could use to take to town, or I could catch a ride in the back of Anne’s pickup if she had errands to do. All food was provided, generally from the garden but also by request. “We are vegetarians,” Anne said, “But if you and Thibaut want some meat—American hamburgers or something—I can get it for you.”

“Lovely,” I said. “When *is* Thibaut coming?”

“I’m supposed to get him this evening.” She glanced down at her watch. “I’ve given him your phone number already.”

“Oh cool,” I said, reaching into my pocket to feel the cheap phone I’d bought in Auckland—twenty New Zealand dollars a month, twenty minutes of talk time.

“We usually have couples,” Anne said.

I glanced up from the binder. “Excuse me?”

“Our wwoofers are usually couples, girl and a guy, you know, works well that way, especially for the hut, only one nice bed. Maybe you and Thibaut can trade sleeping on the futon.”

I nodded, suddenly feeling hot and self-conscious.

“Should I start working now?” I said, too loud.

Anne stared at me, blinking. “Oh, but I thought you might take the afternoon off, get settled.”

“I would prefer to work,” I said, then added: “I like working. Keeps me from thinking too much.”

Seeming skeptical, Anne stood, said okay, and led me out to the fruit trees.

“Most of these are pretty new,” she explained. “These are peaches, those are plums. Anyway, this grass is coming up around them—it needs to be cut away so the trees can grow and give fruit.”

“Do you have a weedwhacker?” I asked.

She stared at me, eyes wide in horror. “No, we have a *scythe*.”

I swallowed. “Okay,” I said, feigning enthusiasm. “Never used one!”

By nighttime, Thibaut had still not arrived. I cooked some penne using a propane stove on the hut’s deck. I covered the pasta with the contents of a jar I’d found in the fridge: *Chutney*. The noodles were underdone. The sauce was too sweet. I’d never cooked a meal for myself before.

My phone buzzed around eight. *Robin. I am Thibaut, Anne picking me up?*”

I swung open the screen door, leapt over the deck, and jogged down to the house, bare feet slapping against the brick path. I paused in front of the door and took a breath. *Not Vanya, please*. I knocked and waited. A mosquito landed on my cheek, sat there, bit me. I slapped at it. There was no wind here, everything so still. The door hinges turned.

“What,” Vanya said.

I looked past him, hoping that Ronan might appear in the spaces between his limbs—a child to diffuse the situation. “Thibaut is in town,” I said. “He wants to know if Anne will pick him up.”

Vanya chewed on his lip, his nostrils growing wider, face muscles twitching, right hand on the doorframe, forearm tense and muscular, bulging. “It’s too late,” he said. “Anne already went and he wasn’t there. It’s too late!”

“Okay. Yeah, that makes sense,” I said, avoiding eye contact and turning. I walked back to the hut, where I shut off the lights, walked through the louvered door and slipped under the sheets, which were damp from humidity. I stared at the ceiling and thought of home, where it would soon be winter, a season I’d miss this year.

* * *

In the morning, around nine-thirty, I had a breakdown. I was scything again, trying to carve around the fruit trees. When Anne had demonstrated for me the day before, she worked from the hips, slicing the blade through the grass at an even level, calmly rotating her upper body, clipping all the little green strands that were too long, stepping forward, rotating again.

I (by comparison) hacked, crunching into the young trunks and leaving gashes in their bark. *What a goddamn waste of time! Americans don't have time to scythe*, I thought (twisted patriotism). I threw the tool down, checked to see if anyone had seen (no), then picked it up and walked over to the house where Anne had left me a sharpening stone. I turned on the hose and splashed cool water over the blade while I ran the stone back and forth: one pass on the inside of the blade, one on the outside. I sharpened faster, angry about scything, angry at Vanya, angry at myself for coming here so hastily—not just to the farm but to New Zealand as well. I whisked the stone against the outside of the blade and it caught in a notch.

My hand slipped. My index finger ran against the metal and parted. Blood blended with running water and splashed into the ground, where it sunk down into the gravel beneath the hose and under the house and into the earth below.

Anne found me knocking on her door, shirtless, my t-shirt bloodied and wrapped around my hand.

“Robin!” she shouted. “Are you okay?” She pulled at the shirt and grabbed my bloodied fingers with hers. “What’s happened to you?”

I looked at her, let her see my tears. “I think I’m homesick,” I said.

Half an hour later, I was sitting with Anne on her porch, eating coffee cake she’d baked from scratch and drinking a cup of Irish breakfast tea with milk.

Anne had hugged me and bandaged me. She’d covered me with a blanket and sat me down, asking questions until there were no more.

“So you left school for a year, moved in with your high-school girlfriend, split two weeks ago, and now you are here, across the world? And only nineteen.”

I let out a small laugh, still wiping my eyes, and nodded. “Yes,” I said. “That’s me.”

She shook her head and pulled her glasses off. “Honey, you are crazy. And your parents, why did they let you—?”

“I’m stubborn,” I said, cutting her off.

Anne filled her tea again, sat back in her seat and looked at me, lips pursed.

I leaned forward, set my tea down, and squeezed the edge of the table. “Do you need any carpentry projects done?” I asked. “I saw that Vanya has a toolshed out back.”

In that moment, a sedan pulled around the corner, up the driveway and into view, dust rising into the air.

“Now who’s that?” Anne said.

“Thibaut,” I said, frustrated by the interruption. Anne and I walked off the porch to meet the sedan, along with Vanya and Ronan, who had come from the house.

Thibaut was with a local couple who had picked him up in town the night before when he was stranded. They hugged him, spoke kind words, and waved goodbye. Thibaut turned to us. He was tall and handsome with curly brown hair.

He shook our hands. “Hello, Anne. Hello Robin. Hello Ronan. Hello Vanya.”

Vanya scowled at him. Thibaut didn’t notice, which made me happy.

“Robin, will you show him around?” Anne asked, smiling.

I nodded, looking at Thibaut, wondering if my eyes were puffy. “Come with me.”

I showed him around the property, almost skipping, drawing on an energy I had not felt in weeks. I was still far from home, and still homesick, if not a little lovesick, too. But I wasn’t alone.

Of all the friendships I’ve had, the one with Thibaut was easiest.

“This is the toilet, you put sawdust in it. Nasty.”

“This is the bread maker, Thibaut. Have you made bread? Can you cook? I can’t.”

“This is the bed I’m sleeping in, the couch becomes a bed, too. We can switch if you want.”

Thibaut touched my forearm as I opened the fridge. “Robin,” he said. “My English is not good.”

I laughed. “That’s okay, Thibaut,” I said, trying to speak slower. “I will help you to learn.”

Together, we settled into a routine. Every morning, I'd wake up and walk through the louvered door, turn the kettle on, and step outside to pee. Thibaut usually slept through the boiling, so I'd tap him on the shoulder once I'd mixed the milk and sugar into our drinks. Then we'd go outside, me in my baggy American boxers, Thibaut in his skin-tight French briefs, both of us sitting on the plastic deck chairs, sipping tea and looking out through the avocado trees. Thibaut cooked breakfast (usually eggs, peppers, and onions), while I followed the painfully simple recipe for bread: measure out the ingredients, put them in the machine, start the machine.

During morning chores, we gathered eggs from the chicken coop. Ronan showed us how to hold the hens by their feet and tug them from their nests, wings flapping. The ducks' eggs were harder to find, but Thibaut enjoyed the challenge, down on all fours, parting the patches of tall grass in search of treasure. We put chicken feed into the trays, water into the bowls, and fresh water into the duck bath (half an oil barrel). We'd scrub the eggs, take a few for ourselves, and leave the rest in a bowl for the family.

After morning chores, we had tea with Anne. Thibaut relaxed easily during teatime—feet up, shirt off, reaching over and over again for bits of cake and spoonfuls of sugar, rolling cigarettes and smoking them real slow. I was not used to this level of relaxation, which seemed like a waste of time. I waited anxiously for Anne to give us the list with additional chores. With tea put away, I would read the list out loud to Thibaut. *Weed the vegetable garden, pressure-wash the deck, mow the lawn, play with Ronan.*

“What do you want?” I asked. We were approaching the end of our first week at the farm. The cut on my thumb had just started to scab over.

He looked at me, sunburnt under the thin ozone layer. “Robin. I want a beer. Then I want to drink the beer and skype my girlfriend.”

“I know,” I said, sighing. He and Vanya had gotten into a fight the day before over the Wi-Fi. Thibaut had brought his laptop down to the house to use the internet and call home. Vanya had stormed out of his office, screaming about bandwidth, how the internet was for him and his business. *Ethics.*

“Why don’t you start with the weeding.” I said. “I’ll mow the lawn.” *Yes, give me that sweet, sweet, combustion engine.* “Whoever finishes first will pressure wash, then we’ll both jump around with Ronan on the trampoline.”

After chores, we would laze around in the hut, reading books and noodling around on a guitar someone had left there. Thibaut usually cooked dinner. I did the dishes and took out the compost. After dinner, we played cards—a game called shithead I’d learned from some friends back in Maine. No winner, just a loser, the one that fails to get rid of their hand. The shithead generally must do something when they lose: take shot or drink a beer.

“Hey Thibaut,” I said. “Loser takes out the poopbucket.”

He laughed. “I will make you the shithead, Robin.”

On Friday night, after a week of work, we finally told our stories: both of us retracing the steps that had brought us here to New Zealand. Thibaut had just finished graphic design school. He too, was here for something different, a break before his career. His girlfriend, an underwear model, would be flying to New Zealand in two months. They’d travel together.

Thibaut listened with a tight cigarette in his mouth as I explained the events of the past few weeks to him, detailing the breakup, my thoughts more refined than when I’d spoken to Anne. “The hardest part,” I said, “is giving up a life you were starting to build. The repairs I did to the house we had together, the friends I made in her family, it feels like lost time.”

Thibaut stared at me, smoke draining out of his nose, one leg crossed over the other, poised and looking intellectual. “I don’t know if I understand everything you are saying,” he said. “I think it will be okay for you. You know how to do many things.”

I chuckled and blushed. I’d showed Thibaut how to fell a tree that afternoon: We’d cut a notch facing away from the house, made a clean felling cut on the other side, and—pushing together—had sent the thirty-foot tree crashing down neatly between the chicken coop and a rose bush. From the kitchen window, inside, Anne had cheered and clapped

her hands. Vanya, hands on his hips, came outside and walked over to me, staring down at the mass of limbs and leaves. “What else can you do, Maine boy?”

On the first Sunday Thibaut and I grabbed two decrepit bikes (his only had a front brake, mine had one pedal) and made our way into Mangawhai to have a look at the ocean. We raced downhill together, helmetless, leaning into turns and carving big S shapes, invisibly, passing each other, both of us slipping into the right-hand lane out of habit, laughing and hollering all the way to the coast. At the beach, we looked glassy-eyed at the turquoise waves and shook our heads at the hills that came down to meet them—everything too beautiful to understand, and all of it accessible to us; no one can own the coast in New Zealand. You can walk around the entire perimeter of the country.

The ride home was a brutal climb, and I popped a tire. “Go without me!” I shouted.

A man with gold teeth and a lazy eye pulled over when I held my thumb out. His van had no windows, but it was getting dark and I set my bike on a trailer he was towing. I walked up the passenger door, opened it, and stepped up into the front seat, slipping my fingers into my right pocket to feel the knife I kept there. “Hi,” I said, feeling sweat bead under my arms. “Popped my tire.”

The man was harmless and dropped me at a mechanic’s shop, where a boy my age patched the tire and would not accept payment. I tore home, relishing the steepness. I turned left into the driveway, pedaled by the fruitless avocado trees, and dropped my bike by the hut, sweaty and elated and loving New Zealand.

“Thibaut! You’ll never believe what happened,” I said, bursting through the door. “A mechanic patched me up and a murderer gave me a ride and I stopped at a convenience store and I got us beer!” I held up the blue-cardboard twelve pack in my hands, grinning.

Thibaut, sitting on the futon, looked up from his phone. His eyes were puffy and his nose was red. “What’s happened to you?” I said.

He whimpered. “My girlfriend is in hospital. Her kidneys—they don’t know.”

I ran to the house, stood at the door and knocked. Vanya opened. “Oh for Jesus—I mean Christ, what time do you think—”

“Thibaut needs to call home now,” I said. “His girlfriend is in the hospital and he needs to call her *now*.”

Vanya blinked, extending his fingers to grab hold of the doorframe. “How’d he find out?”

“He needs to use your internet, please,” I said. “A text, he got a text, but he can’t call. I’m going to get him. He’s going to come down with his laptop, and he’s going to sit on these steps and talk until he knows what’s going on.” I breathed, patted my hands against my thighs, and jogged back up the hill.

The next day, Vanya went to Auckland—a business trip, he said. Before he left, he grabbed Thibaut and me from the hut and showed us into his office. There were papers strewn everywhere, three computer monitors, and heaps of books on the ground. Ronan’s drawings covered the walls: dinosaurs, knights, sailboats.

He pulled an Ethernet cable from the back of his computer, held the connection end out to Thibaut. “Um,” he said. “This will be much faster than the Wi-Fi, while I’m gone.”

I stared at Vanya.

He looked at me, then Thibaut, and pushed his fingertips into his gray hair. “Sorry about everything,” he said. “Trying to make it work for us, out here. Maybe Anne told you—since we’ve tried to go organic, no pesticides, there’s just no more avocados. No money. That’s why we get wwoofers—we just can’t pay for help.”

Thibaut stood, holding the Ethernet cable, blank-faced, not quite understanding everything Vanya had said.

“Can I see your tool shop?” I asked.

Over the next few days, Thibaut and I worked on larger projects. Thibaut was sanding and staining the front porch. I was building steps from the lower garden to the upper one. The treads I was using were from a tree Vanya had cut and planed years ago. “Been meaning to make them forever,” he’d told me when we pulled the boards from a corner in his shop. “Just can’t find the time.”

“I’ll make them while you’re in Auckland,” I’d promised.

While Vanya was gone, I used his tools (chop saw, belt sander, jigsaw, CO2-powered nail gun, all beautiful and expensive) and thought mostly of Thibaut's girlfriend. Updates on her health came in small chunks of broken English, delivered by Thibaut each morning as he walked out of Vanya's office, laptop clutched to his chest, eyes nervous but usually relieved.

"She talks," he said.

"She can stand."

"Her cheeks have color, once again."

I'd run inside to Anne, relaying the news.

"She is getting better, Anne."

"Thibaut is talking again."

"Anne, she is okay," I said. It was Saturday, the last full day at the farm for Thibaut and me. "She's going home."

Anne was chopping peppers on the counter, facing away from me. She set the knife down. Her back seemed to shudder. She raised her hands and wiped her eyes, almost silhouetted by the morning shadows. "Thank heavens," she said. "You boys and your girl problems. Scaring me to death." With the blade of her knife, she slid the peppers from the cutting board and into a bowl. "I don't want Ronan to grow up."

"He is going to be a wonderful man," I said. Ronan was helping me with my step project, pounding in stakes, standing back and covering his ears when I fired the nail gun.

"How *are* the steps coming?" Anne asked, now turning to me, her hair frizzled in the heat.

"Almost done. But don't come out yet."

She smiled. "A surprise? Vanya is coming home tonight, by the way. We're having pizza. Big family dinner—you and Thibaut, too."

I stared around the room, looking over at the dining room table. *Family dinner, I'll be damned.* "Can't wait," I said. "Better go. Ronan's waiting."

I stepped outside to find my little blonde worker sitting patiently. He was chewing on a piece of grass, thumbs tucked inside the straps of his tank top and pushing out.

"Do you have a girlfriend like Thibaut?" he asked, standing up to greet me.

I laughed. “Nope, it’s just me now, little man. Just me. Which is good—more time to torture you!” I reached down and grabbed him by the waist, flipped him over and adjusted my hands onto his ankles. He screamed and I swung him in wide circles, faster and faster, then slowing until he stopped, looking uphill and upside down at the steps.

“Do you ever count upside down in homeschool?” I asked.

“No! Why would I need that!”

“Well, now you can’t count how many steps we have!” I let one of his ankles slip from my right hand and he shrieked.

“Six, six!”

“I guess we need one more then!” I lowered him to the ground where he somersaulted and sprang up; his hands and arms stiffened like a karate fighter. “Where’s that sledgehammer,” he said. “I have some stakes to pound.”

The stakes were made of pressure treated lumber that resembled 2x4s, but which were a little beefier and were measured in centimeters. Using the chop saw, I cut the corners off each stake to form points, then using the nailgun, attached two stakes to the bottom of each tread. Ronan and I then sank the treads into the earth with a sledgehammer, using a plywood buffer when pounding to protect the surface of the treads. When all the steps were in, I connected them underneath with small 2x4 sections, screws, and an impact driver. This, I hoped, would prevent wobbles when walking up and down.

Ronan and I stared at the steps. Seven in total, varying in length, shortest at the top, widest at the bottom, the corners of each tread cut, rounded, and sanded down.

Ronan looked over at me, jogging in place.

“What are you waiting for!” I shouted. “Run up them! Jump on them if you want! Get your Mom, too.”

Giggling, he skipped up the stairs, jumping from tread to tread, up then down, then back up again and through the vegetable garden towards the house.

For a moment, I was alone, looking at the steps, feeling proud and capable. In the next moment, Vanya was standing next to me.

“Didn’t hear you pull up,” I said.

He shrugged, looking tired. He was wearing a collared shirt and khaki pants, both wrinkled and dark with sweat.

“You’ve been busy,” he said, walking toward the steps. The treads flexed slightly under his weight, but as a whole, the steps were solid and did not wobble. At the top, Vanya knelt and looked underneath the last tread, then extended his hand down and felt the one crooked piece—there was a slight gap between the top of the left stake and the tread above, a poor cut, the first one I’d made.

I pushed my thumbs into my fists and squeezed them there.

“Robin,” he said, standing and turning around, walking down towards me, putting a hand on my shoulder and looking me in the eyes. “These are beautiful. Thank you.”

I smiled, tension leaving my body. “Thank *you*,” I said. “How was Auckland?”

“Developed. Crowded.”

I nodded. “Kind of looks like America.”

“It does. A rotting tooth,” he said.

“What?”

“America, and Auckland, many developed places. My analogy for them is a rotting tooth. All appearances, everyone so concerned with maintaining the enamel, and meanwhile, the insides are rotting away.” Vanya kicked the grass at our feet, making a divot. His shoulders were hunched.

“New Zealand has a better mindset than we do,” I tried. “The Department of Conservation, from what I’ve seen with the waterfront property rule, people seem to have a desire to protect the environment.”

Vanya was silent.

“And just in terms of beauty, it’s all better here, two-lane highways, single-lane bridges, not so many straight lines.”

“It’s just new,” he said. “We are new and we are small. And most Kiwis still want what you have. A bigger economy, better jobs. To most of us, America is still the model.”

I squatted down and meshed my fingers into the grass, tangling them there. “But not for you,” I said.

Vanya looked at me, and gave a half-nod. “That’s right, Robin.”

And not for me, I thought, gradually hearing screams and the pattering of bare feet on soft dirt. Ronan came racing through the rows of lettuce and arugula, chased by Thibaut.

He leapt from the top step, through the air, landing with thunk and a gasp into Vanya's arms. Anne came next, walking down the steps, grinning and holding an armful of beer bottles—home brewed, evidently, judging from their swing-on caps.

“The deck looks beautiful,” she informed us. “Thibaut did an absolutely gorgeous job.”

She turned to me. “And my goodness—these steps. These are just what we needed. I've wanted these for years.” She opened the bottles and handed them out, one for Thibaut, one for Vanya, one for her, and one for me. Vanya set Ronan down, who stared at all of us with wide eyes and a gaping mouth, fake pouting. *Where was his bottle?*

The beer was dark and cold and crisp. We gulped it in silence.

PATAGONIA SIN TOMPKINS

In Patagonia, everything is either covered by ice or was a moment ago. You cannot see the landscape without imagining the glaciers, so recently receded.

The town of Cochrane sits in a glacier-cut valley. From the *Careterra Austral*, Chile's Southern highway, you drive down into the town—down past rows of two-room homes built from logs and corrugated metal, down past a few concrete-walled shops with random items in their windows (skillets, dresses, electronic keyboards), down from the dirt highway onto a small grid of pavement surrounding the town center, down from the mountains into a pocket of civilization.

Cochrane was founded in 1954 as the result of a border dispute with Argentina. A Chilean police officer had been shot and killed in the mountains nearby, and the government responded with a town. A civilian presence, they hoped, would establish Chile's claim to this region. The town was originally called *Nuevo Pueblo*, or “New Town.” Years later, it was renamed to honor Thomas Cochrane, a British Naval Captain and revolutionary.

Because Cochrane is so difficult to reach even now (it was unconnected by road to the rest of Chile until 1988, when the *Careterra* opened) the government incentivizes living here by building subsidized houses. Unlike the homes that you see on the outskirts, the government versions are two-storied, clean, and identical—white clapboard siding, steep-pitched tin roofs, and small front porches. The first time I drove by them, I saw a boy there, out front. He was standing on a skateboard, and the wheels were sunk slightly into the packed dirt. *In a way, I thought, this looks like an American suburb. But at the end of the world.*

I'd applied to come to Patagonia and study abroad almost a year earlier, in Maine, at my small liberal arts college. Patagonia sounded far away, though really, I didn't know where...*South America? Was it a country?* I thought of the outdoors company that shares the same name, trying to imagine what this place might be like from the small black logos I often saw on down jackets around campus. *There will be mountains, I thought.*

It was fall in Maine and I was freshly back at college after a year away. I'd spent it doing carpentry in central Maine, traveling, and working on several different sail boats, two in New Zealand, one in Newport, Rhode Island. Towards the end of that year, in August, I got an offer to go south, to work on a race boat in the Caribbean for the winter.

"I'm not going back to school," I told my mom. "I could make 40,000 dollars on this boat, maybe more."

"You get that much from school," she said. "And a degree."

In the first few weeks back, I was critical of everyone and everything. It was wrong, but it was how I coped with the return, which felt unglamorous in comparison to my year away. "Let me leave," I begged to my mom over the phone. "I don't belong here."

When a group of fellow environmental studies students formed a clean investments club and pushed hastily for the college to divest from fossil fuels, I defended the endowment blindly.

"I'm a financial aid student," I said to them, almost teary-eyed in anger. "I *need* the endowment to do well just so I can be here. Without that, I might not be in college at all."

They'd stared at me, silent and nodding, eyes locked with mine. These were my people, good friends trying to do something good. They heard me.

"I want to divest, but it's complicated," I said, backtracking, feeling guilty for exploding on them.

A few weeks before Christmas, the director of the program I'd applied to wrote back, accepting me, which I felt that I did not deserve. My Spanish was atrocious, I had no real backpacking experience, no gear, and little enthusiasm. I'd just applied so I could leave school again.

"Where in Patagonia are you going?" a friend or relative would ask me.

"I don't know. I think we're working in a National Park?" Summer had begun, I'd rejoined the same boat in Newport, and hadn't read the travel itinerary the program had sent me. As fall approached, I became more reticent about the whole thing, wondering if study abroad was a cliché for American college students, a catered and cautious way to travel and poke around into other cultures.

* * *

I flew first from Boston down to Santiago, the warm September in New England fading quickly behind the plane's contrails. In Santiago, I met the eleven other Americans I'd be studying and backpacking with. Like me, they were outdoorsy and liberal, and except for one Memphian, they were all from the Northeast or Midwest, hotbeds for liberal arts colleges and environmental studies. There were eight girls and four boys, including me. We boarded a smaller plane from Santiago to Coyhaique, a town of 50,000, the largest in the *Aysén* region of Chile.

At the airport near Coyhaique—little more than a warehouse with a baggage carousel—we met our instructors: Feña, a thirty-year-old Chilean man with a small belly, long brown hair and a beret; Bennett and Maryjane, a married couple from Portland, Oregon, both with strong hugs and smiles; and Sam, another young Portlander with a tight pony-tail and a mole just above her upper lip. When everyone had met and grabbed their bags, it was Sam who hopped up onto a bench to round us up. "Let's get to the trucks!" she yelled.

From the parking lot, we looked around and saw mountains in every direction. These were not like the rounded mountains from home in New England—these were new, geologically, crunched up into jagged peaks that shone with blue-white snowpack. It was early springtime here. Matt, the boy from Memphis, tilted his head and hollered into the sky. Some of the other students stopped to take photos, panoramas with their iphones. There were three pickup trucks and I followed Feña towards the one he was driving, a green Nissan. I stood next to the passenger door, claiming my spot, figuring the Chilean instructor would be more honest and authentic than the Americans.

"So," said Feña, pulling his puffy lips away from a thermos he'd been sipping, "You have chose to ride in the green machine! With me."

In Coyhaique, where the air was thick with the smoke from woodstoves, we spent two days in a hostel—a little cramped but getting to know each other more. There were three or four bookwormish sorts, a few lost partiers, two or three Frisbee players, a photographer. Most everyone skied and was in a relationship. In general, I felt intimidated by them all, but especially by some of the girls, who—judging from our

introduction circle—seemed brilliant and science-minded in a way that I was not. They were aspiring loon researchers, milfoil experts, and future PhD students, intentional in their decision to come *here* to study conservation.

“Won’t it be weird to see what the Tompkins have done?” said Becca, a girl from Carlton College who I judged to be the smartest of us all. We were cooking quesadillas in the cramped hostel kitchen. “I wonder if we’ll see them.”

There were nods throughout the room. I looked around, searching and hoping for confusion. *Who were the Tompkins?*

Early one morning we left for Cochrane, where our base camp was. Once again, I rode with Feña, who’d spoken proudly at the hostel—in slightly roughened English—about being the fastest driver. I was in the backseat this time, Matt up front. A few hours down the *Careterra* the pavement gave way to dirt. I bounced in the backseat, bumped my head on the roof. Feña hooted and downshifted from fifth to fourth. Shortly after, we descended almost a thousand feet through switchbacks, and began to drive along a Gatorade-blue lake that sat in a steep valley beneath the snow-capped Andes.

“This is *Lago General Carrera*,” Feña said. “It is the biggest lake in Chile.”

With my left cheek pressed against the window, I stared out across the whitecaps and wondered how cold the water was—all of it runoff from glaciers and snow far above.

“Feña,” I asked, tapping on the back of the driver’s seat, “What’s a *gaucho*?” It was a word I’d heard in Coyhaique somewhere.

Feña cackled. Ha! “*Gaucho, gaucho, gaucho*. You have a word for it...cowman?”

“Cowboy,” said Matt.

Feña clapped his hand against the wheel. “Yes, like a Patagonian cowboy—but for sheep too. And a *gaucho* wears a hat like mine, and a knife on his belt, a big knife. They are like a—a symbol for Patagonia you know?” He drummed his fingers on the wheel. “*Gaucho, gaucho*,” he muttered. “They will soon be no more.”

Seven hours in, we drove through a highway expansion site. The road was still dirt, but there were dump trucks, excavators, bulldozers, and skidders lining the ditches on either side. The forest had been clear-cut, making way for widening lanes and a straighter

road. Feña accelerated. His cheeks puffed out. His fingers pressed into the steering wheel, creating impressions in the foam. He didn't speak.

As we passed through a group of workers in high-visibility vests, Feña rolled down his hand-crank window and screamed at them in Spanish. He tightened his fist and shook it wildly, eyes far from the road, head jutting out the window. Matt turned back from the passenger seat and looked at me, grinning. *Yeah*, I answered silently. *This is badass, real Edward Abbey-type shit.*

Feña turned his attention back ahead, stomped the clutch in, downshifted into third and hammered on the gas. The engine roared and the rear wheels lost traction, throwing gravel. We fish-tailed hard to the right, drifting towards the far edge of a left turn. Feña grunted and spun the wheel back, overcorrecting; we fishtailed the other way, rear wheels sliding and almost losing the edge of the road.

Once we straightened out, the cab was silent. "I'm sorry," Feña said, after a few moments. "These fuckers, pardon me, but these *fuckers* are destroying Patagonia."

* * *

We drove through Cochrane, past the subsidy homes, and over a one-lane bridge. "This is the *Río Cochrane* below" Feña said, and then pointed out the windshield to a property at the base of a steep but rounded hill. There was a log cabin with the riverside edge on stilts, its chimney puffing out a thin spire of smoke. Behind the cabin, I could make out a few more outbuildings. This was the most-developed property I'd seen since leaving Coyhaique.

"Welcome to your base camp," Feña said. The road curved towards toward the cabin, and we rattled over a cattle guard and into a driveway, which was cut into the side of the hill. A speckled dog yipped at our tires and chickens scattered out from in front of the truck. There were sheep grazing in the lawn, and a couple standing there, waiting for us.

"Those are Hilberto and Angelica," Feña said. "They are the owners here."

We parked and stumbled from the trucks, stiff-legged and sore, and walked over to introduce ourselves. Hilberto was a little shorter than me and wore an unmarked ball cap, a wool sweater, and there on his hip, a ten-inch knife in a sheath. His face was brown and

wrinkled around the eyes, and he laughed when I stumbled through my Spanish introduction, clasping my hand and squeezing it to cut me off. “*Si, si, gringo, mucho gusto.*”

Yes, I thought, reddening. *Yes, I like you.*

Angelica, short and with slightly lighter skin, had muscular arms and deep hazel eyes. She wrapped me in a hug and pecked my cheek.

“*Bienvenidos,*” she said.

Hilberto and Angelica led us into one of the outbuildings, the back half of which was built into the hill. Sam walked behind them. “This is the *quincho,*” she said to us. “We rent this room. We use it for classes and cooking and studying. You can keep some of your stuff in here.”

We filed in. The floor was tiled and a long table set up in the center of the room was mostly covered with bottles of red wine. The right side of the room was all windows, offering a view of the *Río Cochrane*. Beyond the river was the road we’d driven in on. Beyond that, there were a few fields dotted with horses and sheep. Then there were forested foothills, and these crawled up together into mountains, forming a ridgeline.

The left side of the building was natural rock—a ledge that was blasted into during construction. There was an enormous stone fireplace here, packed with logs that looked more like tree trunks, the whole space filled with flames and throwing heat towards us. To the right of the fireplace was a small enclosed kitchen. To the right of that—two small bathrooms, one with a bathtub for washing clothes. Angelica picked up two bottles of red wine from the table. “*Vino vino?*” She asked, waving them and laughing. I noticed that she had braces.

And so we settled in—put our packs down, filled glasses with wine, sprawled out around the *quincho* and chatted, smiles building with the wine. Feña pulled out a guitar and began to strum and belt lyrics in Spanish. Sam stood in the corner, eyes darting around. I wondered if she was uncomfortable with all of us drinking. But soon Feña stood, put his arm around her, poured a tall glass of red, pushed it into her hand. Sam rolled her eyes but accepted.

For dinner we had pepperoni pizzas, which felt almost too comfortable. Feña cooked these in a brick-oven just outside the *quincho*. Slices in hand, we wandered around the

property. Some of the other students went to stake out tents spots. I went down to the river, where there was a dock and a gasoline generator for pumping freshwater uphill to a tank.

As the afternoon changed to evening though, the air became much colder, and everyone returned to the *quincho* for warmth. As the bottles of wine emptied, the group size dwindled. Hilberto and Angelica were first to leave, then Bennett and Maryjane, and then some of the students. A smaller group of us congregated around the fire, Matt, Feña, Sam, me, and a few others.

“What does Hilberto do?” Matt asked to the group.

Feña looked to Sam, suggesting the answer was complicated.

“He’s sort of a middle-man between local ranchers and the meat distributor,” Sam said. “And he has his own ranch too, outside Cochrane.”

“Like a *gaucho*?” I asked.

Feña sipped his wine. “Kind of a *gaucho*.”

Sam nodded. “He represents them, like an agent.” She leaned out of her chair and calmly placed another log among the coals, the flames rubbing against her fingers.

“Angelica is beautiful,” someone said.

I nodded. I’d struggled to look at her.

“But she is tough as hell,” Sam said, staring into the flames. “She chased one of Bastian’s girlfriends out of the house with a knife.”

“What?” I said. “Who’s Bastian?”

Feña laughed. “Their son. Hilberto thinks he is lazy.”

“He’s shy,” Sam said. “But he wants to practice his English.”

I’ll talk to him, I thought. I gulped down my wine, stood, and went to the kitchen to rinse my glass. “Goodnight,” I said and walked outside into the cold, feeling a bit drunk. I walked uphill, pitched my tent on a flattish spot near the top, crawled through the flap and went to sleep.

* * *

Kristine (Kris) and Doug Tompkins are conservation heroes, American philanthropists, defenders of the natural world, ecowarriors fighting international

development. In the first few days of class in the *quincho*, these were some of the lessons I learned.

As I had begun to sense in Coyaique a few days earlier, everyone knew more about the Tompkins than I did. Outside of class, when I talked to the other students about them, I began to discover that I was not *outdoorsy* or *environmental* in the sense that the rest of the group was. The other students were real backpackers and canoers and wilderness first responders. They collected the names of mountaineers and protected areas like I did for well-known sailboats and their captains.

As I learned more about the Tompkins, I became skeptical of their altruism—partly because I am that way, but also partly because I didn't belong to the group. I was the outsider. *If the group likes the Tompkins, I thought, then maybe I won't.* In those first few days, the only other student that expressed skepticism was Matt, and I made it an immediate goal to become friends with him.

“So Doug founded *The North Face*,” Becca said. We were cooking dinner together, mashed potatoes and chicken thighs. “And Kris used to be the CEO of *Patagonia*.”

“So that's where the money comes from,” I said.

Becca smiled. “You could say they are a power couple.”

A day later, by the fire and over a glass of wine, I picked Matt's brain on the matter.

“Doug was actually a famous rock-climber when he was younger,” he said. “He had a lot of first ascents on some of the peaks around here. I knew about him growing up.”

“So, he's always had ties to Patagonia?”

“Maybe not always, but for a while. He's still American.”

What I knew from class was that the Tompkins had bought a great deal of land just north of Cochrane—the *Chacabuco* Valley. Before the purchase, the valley had been part of an *estancia*, a large-scale sheep and cattle ranch.

“It was suffering from overgrazing,” Bennett said.

The *Chacabuco* lay directly behind the mountains I could see from the *quincho* windows. The Tompkins had plans to restore the valley to its “natural state,” a massive conservation project, and one with unclear goals, I felt. What was the natural state? No humans? Buried under two thousand feet of ice? I wondered what the landscape looked

like now. We'd be visiting soon. Was it a wilder version of Cochrane? The instructors often spoke fondly of the valley, describing the native wildlife.

"You'll see *guanaco*," said Bennett. "They're a camelid, the wild version of llamas, basically."

"Last year we saw *ñandú*," said Sam. "They're like South America's ostrich, you could say. About half the size."

"And there should be *viscacha* in the cliff sections," Maryjane said, curling her pointer and middle fingers like fangs in front of her lips. "Big, cute rodents!"

"And there is *puma*," Feña said, trying to scare us. "They say that for every *puma* you see, a thousand *puma* sees you."

"Will we see *huemul*?" someone asked.

"Maybe," Feña said. "But it is rare, these days."

Huemul are the national deer of Chile, and well loved. In the center of Cochrane, there is a bronze statue of one, a buck. Now critically endangered, largely because of poaching and habitat fragmentation, there are only around 1500 in the world, 150 of which live in the region surrounding the Chacabuco. The *huemul* are not recovering—their subpopulations are too small and lack genetic diversity. Chile's *Corporacion Nacional Forestal* (CONAF) is considering supplanting members from other subpopulations into the Cochrane group, with hopes of strengthening the gene pool.

In general, though, we learned that wildlife was returning to the Chacabuco. The Tompkins had taken large efforts to replant local vegetation—*neneo* bushes and bunchgrass mostly, food for *guanaco*. They'd ripped out many of the existing fences, allowing movement across the valley. And they were protecting the animals, cracking down on illegal hunting, placing radio collars on *huemul* and *puma*, monitoring the movement of populations and individuals.

The Tompkins are also known for having fought against a major hydropower dam project in Patagonia. The fight was against one company in particular, *HidroAysén*, which is owned by an Italian, Spanish, and Chilean consortium. *HidroAysén* intended to build five major dams along the Baker and *Pascua* rivers, a project that would generate almost 35 percent of Chile's electricity needs. Most of the energy would've been sent

North to Santiago through a 1,912 kilometer transmission line, where it would've been used to power mining operations.

The *Río Baker* is fed by *Lago General Carrera*. I'd seen it briefly from the *Careterra*, blue and winding. The *Río Pascua* is farther south, hours below Cochrane.

When Hidryoy Aysén issued its proposal for these dams, the Tompkins responded with a negative advertisement campaign. Campaign workers and volunteers took high-resolution photographs of the Patagonian landscape, and then photo-shopped dam infrastructure onto them. Some of the photos depict massive dams, or flooded valleys. Most focus on the transmission lines. In one of these photographs, a transmission tower is contrasted against a section of the Patagonian Andes. In another, *guanaco* in the foreground are grazing; in the background, the power lines loom. The message was consistent: dams and transmission lines will destroy the natural beauty of Patagonia. Each photograph features the same slogan in enormous white lettering: “¡PATAGONIA SIN REPRESAS!” *Patagonia without dams*.

The Tompkins bought full-page advertisements in the Santiago papers and submitted these photographs. *Gauchos* on horseback rode to Coyhaique to protest the dams. In this moment, Patagonia united against the outside world.

The campaign was successful, we learned. In June of 2014, a little over a year before we arrived in Cochrane, the Chilean Community of Ministers cancelled the environmental permits for the dams. “It was a victory,” Feña told us. “And, also, they will be back.”

“One of the dam sites is just north of Cochrane, along the *Careterra*,” Sam said. “We could go there sometime.”

As I learned about the Tompkins, I began to learn why I was here, why this program was *here*: Patagonia, and really, Cochrane, was at the forefront of international conservation. The Tompkins were defending the environment with money. It worked for the dams. Now they were going to give the *Chacabuco* back to Chile as a national park.

“How much did they pay for the *Chacabuco*?” I asked during a discussion.

“Ten million dollars,” Feña said.

I pursed my lips and moved them to the side. “That’s not a lot. Not for an American.”

Feña stared at me and shook his head. “Maybe. But enough for here.”

That afternoon, I walked into Cochrane, searching for the internet café that Sam had told me about. “There’s an old woman who runs it,” she’d said. “She’ll usually open if you knock. Her husband is sick up in Coyhaique, real sick. It’s good to spend money there.”

I ordered a heaping plate of French fries, a coffee, and a beer. After skyping home (parents happy, teenage brothers barely responsive) and checking my email (full of housing and course sign-up reminders, all logistical bullshit, in my mind) I began doing some googling on the Tompkins. *Doug and Kris Tompkins Patagonia*, I typed. Then: *Chacabuco valley history*.

The general story was as I had learned it in class, but I gathered some more details. The Tompkins had acquired the Chacabuco in 2004 through their non-profit alias, *Conservacion Patagonica*, more locally known as CP. The ranch was 173,000 acres in total, and had been used for ranching since 1904. In 1980, following a United States-backed coup led by General Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean government seized the Chacabuco and put it up for auction. The buyer, a Belgian landowner named Francisco de Smet, would spend the next twenty-four years raising over 30,000 head of sheep and cattle there. Local *gauchos* worked on the land.

The Tompkins were able to buy the estancia because de Smet was struggling financially. The area they bought is bordered by two Chilean National Reserves—The *Jeiniemeni* to the north, and the *Tamango* to the south. The Tompkins plan to combine all three properties into one, which will form the new national park—around 640,000 acres, in total.

I browsed the CP website.

“As wild as Patagonia is, human misuse has left lasting scars on the landscape.”

“The goals of our restoration initiatives are to reverse trends of desertification and exotic species intrusion, to restore grasslands to health, and to ensure that all native species of the region thrive in and around the future Patagonia National Park.”

“Setting aside land and restoring native ecosystems is vitally important, but perhaps even more critical is propagating the conservation ethos through the broader community.”

Nice big words, I thought. “*Propagating the conservation ethos.*” I returned to the google homepage, twitched my fingers above the keyboard for a moment, then brought them down. *Tompkins controversy.*

The internet loaded in chunks, the signal working its way up through the clouds, over the Andes, into space to the satellites, then pinged down to the rest of the world, most of it more connected than here. I chewed a French fry. The hits crept in. The first two were news articles:

“Douglas Tompkins: Can Billionaires Really Save Nature with Cold, Hard Cash?”

“Eco-Friend or National Foe?: A Gringo Buys South America One Ranch at a Time.”

I chuckled in delight before shutting my laptop, not bothering to read the articles. *I am not alone on this*, I thought. I stuffed the remaining French fries into my mouth, chugged out the rest of my beer, left some pesos on the table and walked out the door towards base camp.

Our first trip to the *Chacabuco* was an overnight, a car camping trip just to get a sense of the park and the landscape. The dirt road into the property snaked beneath hills and foothills. The landscape was grey-green, mostly covered by spikey undergrowth—*neneo*, *neneo macho*, bunchgrass—arid, but not desertified, as I saw it. We stopped at the base area to check in. There was a large parking lot here, bordered with clean fences made from stone pillars and horizontal wooden poles in between. There were two mini excavators, parked, not running. And in front of the parking lot was a monstrous hand-carved wooden sign. I left the truck, walked over to this, and—reaching up—felt the grooves where the wood had been scratched away. *Parque Patagonia*. The writing was in two rows (one for each word) and in the space between the wood was still elevated. An uncarved rectangle.

Feña saw me staring. “That’s where *nacional* will go.” he said. “For when they give the park back to Chile.”

“When’s that?” I asked.

“It keeps getting pushed back,” said Sam. I hadn’t heard her walk up.

From where we were standing, I could see most of the buildings that formed the Visitor Center. They were huge, beautiful in the mcmanion sense—flatstone walls and wide chimneys, pitched metal roofs with circular windows tucked up under the gables ends.

“You can rent most of these,” said Bennett. “Eco-tourism.”

“For five hundred dollars a night,” said Sam.

“Is there a place to pee?” someone asked.

We walked over to the main building, where strips of bright green sod had been laid down to form a lawn. I leapt and somersaulted through the grass. “Thank god for this green,” I exclaimed, falling to my knees. “Makes me feel just like I’m in America. On a golf course!”

Sam looked at me, eyes fixed. *You could be quieter*, she seemed to say.

She was cut off by Matt. “Oh my god. “Oh. My. God.” He was laughing. “That’s heinous.”

“What?” I began, turning towards the building’s entrance, and quickly finding the large lettering that Matt had just read. *El Lodge*.

Sam looked around, making sure there were no CP workers nearby. “Want to know something worse?”

“No,” I muttered, too quiet.

“One of their campsites is named *Los Westwinds*.”

I groaned and walked up into the building. The floors were a light hardwood and there was a wooden sign by the door. *Sin Zapatos*, it read.

“Hey Matt,” I said, nudging my head towards the sign. “Patagonia without shoes.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “Yikes.”

In crusty socks, I walked farther into the building. There were blown-up photos of *ñandú*, *puma*, *guanaco*, and *huemul* on the walls. I moved through a hallway and entered a barroom with exposed beams. The bar itself was varnished and glossy, untouched, waiting patiently for tourists, not us though.

During the time that I spent in the lodge, I saw one worker. She was mopping the floor a few rooms over. I saw her through a hallway, her figure bordered by doorframes. She smiled nervously, and scuttled out of sight. Otherwise, *El Lodge* was empty.

At camp that afternoon, we pitched our tents between clumps of spiky *neneo* mounds. From my sleeping bag I could see the *Aviles* valley, the start of the *Tamango* reserve to the north. Before dinner, we met as a group around the camp stoves to discuss a reading we'd done.

"What is TEK or LEK?" Sam asked to the group.

"Traditional ecological knowledge."

"Local ecological knowledge."

"And what does that mean?"

It was silent. I'd lost my spoon and was carving a new one from a block of *lengawood*. I watched the shavings peel away in front of me, forming small piles on the ground. "Well," Matt said, "Basically it means you listen to people who know more than you."

There were nods around the circle. I stared down at my spoon and did not look up.

After dinner, walking towards my tent in the dark, I bumped into Matt.

"You think the Tompkins are big on LEK?" I asked, trying at sarcasm.

He laughed, "Oh man I don't know. Old Doug Tompkins down in Cochrane asking the gauchos for help? I don't know."

"So you're a skeptic, too," I said. "Is that bad?"

Matt unscrewed his water bottle and took a long gulp. "How can you not be a little bit? We're providing another side to the argument. It's healthy."

* * *

Spring settled over Patagonia. The rivers grew wider and deeper. I wore fewer layers to bed. We settled into a loose routine: research in the field, write-ups back at base camp. Our backpacking trips became longer, more rigorous, and led us farther and farther away from base camp, deeper into the *Chacabuco* and its neighboring reserves.

We worked on a multitude of projects, and we rotated between them depending on the landscape, weather, and the general situation. If we came across the base of a cliff section, we'd often conduct a *viscacha* scat survey—*viscacha* are rock-climbers, and rely on cliff habitat for protection. If someone stepped in *huemul* dung, they'd stop and split a single piece of scat between their fingers. If it was dark all the way through it was fresh; we'd pair off and run transects in search of deer.

When we did research in the reserves—*Tamango* and *Jeiniemeni*—we worked side by side with two CONAF workers, full time employees of the Chilean forest service. In Chile, CONAF workers are known colloquially as *guardaparques*. We knew them as Julio and Wilson. Julio was middle-aged and Wilson was twenty-nine. There were both dark-skinned and Cochrane natives. Wilson had enormous biceps and wore small sunglasses that made him look like the Chilean Terminator.

To me, the reserves felt more authentic than the Tompkins park, which supported my skepticism. The guest housing here was dilapidated, and filled with *ratas*, Julio had told me. The trails were narrow with worn signs, and the maps were difficult to navigate. The reserves were not tourist destinations, and I felt lucky to explore them.

On a *huemul* transect with Wilson in *Tamango*—transect, in this case meaning a regimented, straight-line search for deer and scat—I saw my first *huemul*. We were bushwhacking downhill near *Lago Cochrane*, the source of the *Río Cochrane* in front of our base camp. Wilson was clearing thorny branches with his machete; I was trying to stay out of his way, and was focusing on my compass to make sure we maintained a straight course. Suddenly, Wilson was holding his hand up, beckoning me to stop. He removed his tiny sunglasses and turned to me with a gap-toothed smile. “*Huemul*,” he said. This was one of the only words we had in common.

The deer was standing about fifteen yards away and slightly uphill. It was a doe, we made eye contact, and she did not run, just stared. *Huemul* are not skittish. They are easy to hunt and to hit with vehicles, and this, among other reasons, has led to their demise. I pulled out my GPS and placed a marker.

“*Numero 88*,” Wilson said, pointing to a radio collar.

I labeled the marker and gave the thumbs up.

Wilson pulled out his phone and took a photo. Then he sat down, cross-legged, just watching the deer. I walked over and crouched next to him.

¿Ves huemul frecuentemente? I whispered, after stumbling through conjugations in my head.

“No,” he said. “*Ya no.*”

In between backpacking trips, we returned to base camp, sprawling our tents all over Hilberto and Angelica’s property. I picked a spot near the top of the hill between two *nirre* trees—short and stubby things, almost bushes, native to Patagonia. At night from my tent I could see the lights of Cochrane, an electric glow in the basin between mountains. I often tried to coax Hilberto’s dog Duke (pronounced Duke-ay) up the hill with me.

“Come, Duke!” I’d say. “*Ven aqui! Vamanos.*” He couldn’t critique my Spanish, but he didn’t listen either. He’d just stand outside the tent flap, tongue out, majestic against the stars.

“Fine you bastard,” I’d say, dragging my sleeping bag and pad from the tent. “But it better not rain.”

In the mornings, Duke was always gone and I went down to the *quincho* to make breakfast—eggs and whatever else we had, blended into a large skillet. I’d wolf it all down along with an atrocious cup of instant coffee.

Usually, I was the first one up. I’d start a fire and do some reading or journaling while I built up the flames. People would filter in slowly—usually Sam was next, a few more students, then Bennett and Maryjane. Matt was last, always.

As the semester progressed there was more to do: memorizing birds and their calls, identifying plant families, writing up term papers—I was working with Becca and another boy to build a habitat suitability model for some of the *nañdu* we’d seen in the *Chacabuco*.

And we kept field journals. About once a week, we’d rewrite all our entries for a single day in meticulous fashion—recalling every species we’d seen during a hike, where they were located, what the weather was like, where we went and for how many kilometers. These extended journals were called Grinnells and we grumbled over them.

“In what other part of my life will I have to remember things in this much detail,” Becca said to me.

I laughed. “I know. Also, how far away do you think we were when saw the American kestrel?”

There were also chores to do—going through camping equipment, cleaning the bathrooms, running the generator to pump water uphill from the river. Sometimes, we’d take trips into town to buy groceries. This was one of the better chores because you could buy beer or wine at the store, and then wander over to the internet café for some screen time and a snack from the owner. You had to walk home if you bought something—alcohol was not allowed in the program’s trucks under any circumstances.

After loading a few cardboard boxes of half-rotten vegetables into one of the trucks (we usually bought all the vegetables that were available), Matt and I began one of these forty minute walks, toting twelve packs on our shoulders. We called it the walk of shame. “Woah, look at that,” he said, as we approached the subsidy houses. He pointed with his foot at the fender of parked pickup-truck.

I read the sticker. *Patagonia Sin Tompkins*.

“Woah,” I said. “Them’s fightin’ words.”

Matt looked at me with raised eyebrows and laughed. “I might actually have to get one of the those.”

In my mind, doing chores for Hilberto was even better than grocery runs. When he knocked on the *quincho* door, requesting “a gringo,” I was the first to stand, notebooks, drawings, and Grinnell pages falling from my lap.

“I’m not gonna put homework over being here,” I often said to Matt, self-righteously. “Look around. Everyone’s head-in-books. There’ll be plenty of that back home.”

Eventually, Hilberto learned to just open the door and shout my name. This, I felt, was one of my greatest achievements in life—that Hilberto found me, a gringo college student, useful.

The work was never particularly arduous, and usually did not last more than an hour. With Hilberto I cleared piles of *nirre* wood that he’d cut with his chainsaw. I carried firewood for him. Once, he gathered Matt and me from the *quincho*, and beckoned us

over to the edge of the river. Maryjane was there, along with one of Hilberto's *gaucho* buddies.

"Hilberto has said I can kill this lamb," Maryjane said. "We're going to roast it in front of the fire. It's called an *asado*, a Patagonian tradition."

Hilberto looked at us, smiling, and said something in Spanish.

"What'd he say?" said Matt.

"I think something like, 'Good for Americans to see this?'" I looked at Maryjane for verification. She nodded.

Matt exhaled. He was a vegetarian, for ecological purposes. "If you're going to eat meat, I guess this is the way," he said. Hilberto pulled the knife from his belt, and held the point to the lamb's neck, which laid sideways against the ground. He mimed stabbing through the middle. The blade edge was pointed upwards towards the lamb's head. He moved it an inch through the air in that direction. He spoke quickly, and I missed most of the words.

"He is saying that you want the jugular and the veins, not the windpipe," Maryjane said. "Or it will suffer."

Hilberto handed Maryjane the knife. She looked at him, he nodded, and she brought the knife down, stabbing through the skin, then pulling upwards towards the skull. The blade seemed to catch. Maryjane pressed her weight against it. The sheep coughed and screamed. Blood spurted from its neck.

Matt tightened his lips together. I looked at Hilberto. His *gaucho* friend whispered something in his ear. Hilberto almost seemed to shake his head.

Bad cut, I thought. *Maybe I could've done it*. Hilberto walked over to Maryjane, who took her hands off the knife, looking worried. He took the knife and shook it around. The lamb screamed again. He pulled the knife out, and—placing one hand on the top of the head, and one in the bloody wool under the chin—cranked the neck to the side and snapped it.

For twenty minutes, we watched the lamb kick and bleed, its nervous system slowly deteriorating. Hilberto and his friend sometimes broke into laughter, pointing at the dying animal.

"Pobre cordero, pobre codero."

“*Un día mal para tú.*”

“*Pero un día bueno para nosotros!*”

The blood ran downhill, among patches of bunchgrass, down, down, through a buffer of *nirre* trees and into a calm pool in the *Río Cochrane*. There the water turned red and two ducks began to copulate in the blood. *Those are spectacled teals*, I thought.

When it was done, Hilberto cut the belly open, spilled out the organs and fed them to Duke. Then he walked over to me and clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Too much for you, Robin?” he said in English.

“No, no,” I said, feeling a little queasy, but also proud for having watched.

“*Bueno*. Next time, you do it.”

In a way, I felt that I had to act tough around Hilberto if I was going to be skeptical of the Tompkins. To me, Hilberto represented the *gauchos*, Patagonia, and the past. The Tompkins were the future, the rest of the world, slowly creeping down the *Careterra*, seeping into all corners of the Patagonian wild, bringing with them people and change.

I could see the change manifested in Bastian, Hilberto’s son, who I finally met while working on a fence-mending project. Hilberto had requested me from the *quincho* with a shout. “The sheep are escaping to the neighbor’s,” he said. You will work with Bastian to walk the fence in one direction. I’ll come from the other way.”

Bastian was seventeen and handsome. He had short black hair, ear piercings, and wore tight black jeans and a flat-brimmed Quiksilver hat. He looked more like Angelica than Hilberto. We walked up to the property line at the top of the hill. I carried a bundle of wooden slats in my arms. Bastian had a loop of silver wire and a pair of cutters.

As a team, we made our way down the fence line. The fence was composed of four horizontal wires with vertical slats in between. Every ten slats or so, there was a fixed post. We were looking for areas that might not have enough slats, places where the sheep could squeeze under the bottom wire.

I practiced my Spanish. Bastian responded in slow English, nervous to make mistakes. He rarely looked up from the ground.

“¿Tienes una novia?” I asked.

“Yes, a girlfriend. Do you?”

“Sí. ¿Uno aquí?” I kicked at the bottom wire.

He frowned. “A sheep may come there.”

I dropped the slats and held one against the fence. He cut a section of his wire spool and, twisting the piece around the slat and the top fence wire, fastened it there. Then he worked his way down the other three fence wires, repeating the process.

“What do you do for fun?” I asked, switching to English.

“I like—I like to BMX.”

“BMX, like biking?” I asked.

He grinned. “Yeah. Do you?”

“No, but I skateboard, sometimes.”

“Skateboarding,” he said, tasting the word. He finished attaching the slat and stood up. We kept walking.

“Do you finish school this year?” I asked.

“Yes. This year.”

“What do you want to do then?” I looked at his feet as he walked. He was wearing puffy, high-top shoes with pink and green stripes.

“Leave,” he said.

Bastian told me that he wanted to go to New Zealand or the US, somewhere where he could practice his English (and be away from his parents too, I gathered). I told him I’d been to New Zealand and he looked at me, brightening a bit. It’s a nice place, I tried to explain to him. Pretty, *though not as pretty as here*, I thought. There are many cool things to do there, I told him. Skydiving. Bungee-jumping. Surfing.

He smiled. “Skydiving,” he said. “Surfing.”

As we worked along the fence, Hilberto eventually came into sight. We were converging on each other, though he was moving much faster than us. His fingers were a blur, cutting wire and attaching slats, gathering his materials, moving closer again. I looked at Bastian, who did not raise his head to look at his father. He just crouched in front of his work, twisting the wires with his smooth hands.

* * *

Unlike our time in the reserves—which we spent with the *guardaparques*—when we worked in the *Chacabuco*, we worked by ourselves. Sometimes we saw volunteers wandering around *El Lodge* or the parking lot, but in general, the park was lifeless, not open.

Sometimes, though, a single engine airplane was tied down next to the parking lot. “Old Dougy Tompkins,” Matt would say. “Conservationist *and* pilot.”

“Coming to check in on the gringo park,” I’d chime in. “Dougy T.”

We never saw him. “You won’t,” Sam said. “He doesn’t go into Cochrane, really. But if you must know, he looks like an old white guy. White hair. Kind of non-descript.”

The one CP worker we did see regularly was the garden manager. He was well over six feet, had a thick brown beard and a man-bun. He was handsome and carefully groomed to look rugged. On a day when some CP higher-ups shot down our request to venture into a far corner of the park, we were forced to stay the night at *Los Westwinds*. That afternoon, we got a complementary tour of the organic garden.

“It is a goal of CP to teach organic gardening to the local population,” the manager said, stroking his beard and walking slowly between neat rows of tiny lettuce plants, pointing out carefully positioned irrigation hoses.

I thought of the grocery store in Cochrane, which devoted a tiny section to vegetables, all of which were moldy and rotten and non-organic, shipped from far away. Angelica had her own vegetable garden, which didn’t seem to require a full-time position.

After the tour was over, we began the walk towards *Los Westwinds*, which was nearby. “Is organic gardening really a priority for Cochrane?” I said to Matt, who was walking next to me. “They won’t give a fuck about that. They’ll take what vegetables they can get. And you know, they probably don’t fucking want vegetables. They want to raise sheep and eat sheep! They probably want the *estancia* back.”

Our boots crunched against the dirt road, which had been well maintained, no potholes. “Hmm,” Matt said. “The gaucho dies, and is replaced by the organic gardener.”

“Yikes.”

He chuckled. “Did you see that clothesline by the garden?”

“Nah,” I said.

“It was hidden behind this ten-foot stone wall. Just unbelievable, this place. Everything’s manicured.”

That night at the *Los Westwinds* campsite, which had flush toilets, showers, and a green sod lawn, we got into a heated group discussion about the Tompkins. I was already pissed off about the garden, and got angrier when the group dinner I made with Matt had turned out poorly: we’d dumped a few handfuls of onions into our pasta. It was a last-minute decision and they came out raw. I crunched through them in disgust.

“I fucking *haaate* onions,” I said loudly, my eyes watering. No one responded.

Our readings for that night were about CP and the future national park. Feña had left for a few weeks to be with his wife and daughter up near Santiago. The stage was set for a rant, I thought.

Some of the students started the discussion by remarking on the good work the Tompkins had done, mentioning the dams, the *guanaco* population recovery, the fence removal, all good points.

“It’s not perfect, though,” I said, cutting someone off.

“What?”

“It’s not some goddamn miracle. They’re a wealthy American couple right? Let’s not forget that they just came and bought the land where all the jobs were. How many *gauchos* work on this property?”

“Robin—” Maryjane began.

“No seriously. Is the garden man a *gaucho*? Is he Chilean? Looks white to me. What do you think’s happened to the price of meat in Cochrane since 2004? Think it’s gone down?” I shouted (this was something I’d heard Feña mention once, off-hand).

I let the words hang, then jumped back in. “Have you seen the bumper stickers? *Patagonia sin—*”

“It’s gone up,” Sam said, interrupting me.

I paused. I hadn’t planned on being cut off. I turned to her. “When we work with CONAF, they use our data, right? The GPS points for *huemul*, the vegetation data we give them. They use it. Yeah?”

She nodded.

“Does CP care that we are here doing research?” I asked.

“Well,” said Bennett, “maybe they would be interested in some of the *guanaco* data, some of the *nañdu* work, I think we’ve found some useful things.” I let him finish.

Sam looked to Drew, then to me. The other students looked on, not talking. Sam had been here for three years. This was Bennett and Maryjane’s first semester, along with us. “We give them the data,” Sam said. “They say thank you, and that’s about it.”

“Right. Because it seems to me—” I said, pointing at the lawn and the lean-to above us, the restrooms, all carefully built, much nicer than almost anything in Cochrane— “it seems to me that CP is just going to do whatever they want to get their aesthetic, to create a comfortable experience for their American friends. The fucking road widening that pisses Feña off? It’s for the goddamn park traffic. It’s all connected.”

Maryjane looked at me and then to Bennett. “I don’t know Robin. Do we just dismiss all the good things because of the bad? If some *gauchos* get displaced to save a piece of the environment, I say do it.”

I watched Matt swallow.

“You don’t *do it* in someone else’s country,” I said. “And no. You accept the good, and you work on the bad. We talk about it.”

“Look.” I slapped my bowl of pasta—mostly just onions now—down onto the floor of the lean-to. “Think of it as a feast. In the US, we’ve been feasting for decades. Technological revolutions, a booming economy, more food than we can eat, good education. For most of our growth, we did nothing to protect the environment. Nothing! Now we say, through people like Doug and Kris Tompkins, we say, look, everything we have, it’s not like it looks. Yes, we are fat and rich. But trust us, you don’t want this. Let us protect you. Let us set aside your land. We know best.”

“If I was a *gaucho*, I’d say, ‘Fuck you, Doug Tompkins. Fuck you, Kris.’ If the people of Patagonia want to destroy their own land, let them do it.”

By the end, I was looking at the floor. I looked up now. Some of the students were nodding. I looked towards Bennett and Maryjane, both of whom were pursing their lips and wouldn’t quite make eye contact with me. Sam did, though. She wasn’t angry. She just looked sad. “These are complicated issues to think about,” she said. “Thank you. Let’s also remember that, like it or not, we have a relationship with CP, and we wouldn’t be here without them.”

I stood up.

“Don’t worry about the onions,” someone said. “Didn’t bother me.”

I tried to laugh, then turned and walked towards my tent, wondering, along the way, if I had exiled myself permanently from the group.

One of the other students ran up alongside me.

“That was good stuff, man. Bennett and Maryjane, they’re really drinking that conservation kool-aid.”

I looked at him, confused. *Why was he agreeing with me?* “I don’t know,” I said. “I think I might be wrong, actually.”

* * *

Towards the end of the semester, we began to move far south, abandoning the *Chacabuco* entirely, working our way down to the end of the *Careterra*, entering the Chilean fjords, butting up against the edge of the Southern Patagonian ice field. Here, we conducted vegetation surveys in newly de-glaciated landscapes and woke early each morning to sample bird populations. When we found scat, we looked for *huemul*.

In the fjords, locals think of Cochrane as the big city.

Provisioning and scheduling became some of our largest considerations. We’d prepare in chaos for these trips, stashing food into dry bags, checking off lists for research materials, food, cookware, medical supplies. Sam would run around the fieldhouse, pulling up her hair in stressful moments, gently ordering Bennett and Maryjane to do this or that, setting up food and dish teams, double-checking everyone’s work, micromanaging and assuming a burden too great for anyone but her.

During these frenzies, Feña, who had returned as an instructor, often sat by the fireplace, one leg crossed over the other, calmly sipping from his *maté* gourd, refilling the green stew with fresh boiling water, careful to pour from the kettle just so, wetting only a fraction of the leaves each time.

“You wanna *maté*, Robin?” he’d ask me.

“Just a quick one. For this trip I have to test and clean the stoves.”

He shrugged. “We have this saying here, a good saying I think.” He pursed his lips against the *bombia* and sucked the gourd dry, producing a slurping sound. “It goes: You can plan all you like, but in the end, Patagonia will decide.”

On the fjords trips Feña often packed light, not bringing a tent or many layers. It seemed sort of wild at first, like he needed less than us to survive, but it also meant that he used a tiny backpack and didn’t have much room to carry group gear.

I began to harbor a little bit of anger towards him, watching him bounce uptrail, skipping from rock to rock, dropping epic quotes in broken English here and there: “Dreaming is easy, and for free,” he said to us during a mid-trail lecture. “Has like two meanings, you know? Anyone can dream, but you have to do more.”

Feña went on to explain how he had started his own national park near Santiago at the age of 24, raising money and garnering support, fighting off developers and corporations along the way.

Later, after we’d made camp by a brook, and when I’d had time to rework the story in my mind, I approached Sam as she was boiling water.

“Does Feña come from money?” I asked, my voice barely audible over the scream of the stove.

She cocked her head a bit, but nodded. “He comes from one of the most powerful military families in Chile. His last name is recognized everywhere.”

I nodded and stood up.

“Are you feeling okay?” she asked.

I kicked the ground, unearthing the roots from a patch of bunchgrass. “Yeah. Yeah. Just thinking. I’ll see you at dinner.”

In the fjords we were on CONAF land and were accompanied by two *guardaparques*, two men named Felidor and Orlando. Felidor was somewhere around forty with a rounding belly. Orlando was leaner, grayer, and about ten years his senior. Orlando crunched my hand when I met him.

“*Robin, como Robin Williams,*” he said.

The *guardaparques* had brown, wrinkled skin and called each other *gaucho* and drank *maté* throughout the day. I loved them, mostly, and thought of them in contrast to Feña, who was white, from the north, and had money. The *guardaparques* were from here. They knew the land in a way that we did not—how to lead with their heels when walking down muddy slopes, which plants would hold their weight when grasped by the roots. They carried the heaviest packs of all, and seemed the least burdened by them.

“I would like to make a second national park here,” Feña said to me during one of the fjords trips. He was behind me on the trail. His cheeks were red and puffy.

Unsure what to say, I nodded. *How different is he from the Tompkins?* I wondered.

Orlando and Felidor led us through snowy passes and over scree fields, through waist deep glacial rivers and bogs filled with carnivorous sundew plants. The farther south we traveled, the more outrageous the landscape became—steeper peaks, fewer people, dwindling roads, cow trails instead of footpaths.

In the fjords, we walked south towards the glaciers and studied plants. Each student was responsible for three or four species, and we were to mark their abundance every two hundred and fifty meters in our matching waterproof notebooks. I had three of the smallest plants, and so my eyes were often on the ground, searching for ferns and forbs. *Frutilla del Diablo—Rare. Pinque—Very Rare, Dwarf Calafate—Absent.* I began to remind myself to look up, to ignore the plants every now and then. I wanted to see the sky, the glaciers ahead, and far below, the fjords—first murky from silt that had been trapped in the ice, then deep blue.

On one trip, we hiked all the way up to the edge of the Southern Ice Field. For the last kilometer or so, we walked on bare rock, loose and wobbly. This was a fresh moraine. *Absent. Absent. Absent.* I marked in my notebook.

“Well, Glacier Bernardo O’ Higgins,” Feña said, one foot on the ice. “One of the fastest melting glaciers in the world.”

I looked out over the ice, which was blue underneath and black on top, dusted from volcanic ash. The ice rose into peaks in the distance. From here, the glacier extended for another four hundred miles. We could go no farther. I squatted, and pulled a small stone

from the glacier. I moved it between my fingers, wondering how many years it'd been buried for.

As a whole, the fjords and the time we spent there tempered some of the tension between Bennett and Maryjane and me. Not being in the *Chacabuco*, we didn't discuss the Tompkins as much, though we thought about them, or I did.

"I know this story about Hilberto," Bennett said one night, after dinner. We'd become deterred by a storm and had spent the last two days retreating through muck and thorns to Felidor's house—a two room homestead near the end of the *Careterra*. The *Río Pascua* flowed through Felidor's backyard and we drank from it, unfiltered. In a few days, we'd be returning to Cochrane, not to venture south again. "Matt and Robin," Bennett said. "You'll like this one."

I pulled my arms from under my thighs and used them to draw myself in towards the fire. We were in Felidor's goat barn.

"Shoot," said Matt.

Bennett grinned. "So you know the CP *puma* collars?"

We nodded.

"Well, ever since the Tompkins have moved onto the land, the puma populations have been recovering—the *gauchos* can't shoot them anymore."

I curled my toes against the inside of my shoes, tensing.

"A lot of Hilberto's clients were complaining. Their sheep were being killed and eaten by puma. That's their money. So, Hilberto gets a party together, guns and stuff. They go up into the hills and they kill ten *puma*. Shoot them dead, gut them."

"Jesus Christ," one of the students said.

Bennett continued. "Well the thing is, a few of the *puma* had the collars on. And it's up to ten years for killing a puma. They're endangered." he stroked his beard, which had become quite long, and spat on the ground. "So Hilberto puts the collars in a bucket, and drives into the park, and he walks to the front office, and he knocks on the door. And he dumps the collars on the ground."

"And they didn't fucking touch him," Matt guessed.

Bennett nodded. "Nope. Not Hilberto."

Later that night, Matt and I walked up to Felidor's house, still reeling from the story. "He's like the godfather," I said.

"Just unreal," said Matt, knocking on the door.

The latch clicked and the hinges turned. Felidor stood there beaming. "*Entra! Entra!*" he said. Orlando was sitting next to the stove and looking drunk. There were a few candles for light. "*¿Quieres una cerveza?*" Felidor asked.

I stared at Matt. He gritted his teeth. "A beer? Ah, no thanks," he said. We weren't supposed to drink with the *guardaparques*. *They're alcoholics, almost all of them*, Sam's voice echoed in my head.

"*Vino?*" he tried.

"*Maté?*"

We took our seats, me on the bench next to Orlando, Matt tucked into the back corner. I boiled water and filled a gourd with leaves. We warmed our fingers by stove. Felidor ran out of the cabin, and a minute later I heard a gasoline engine fire up somewhere in the night. The lights in the cabin flickered on. An old TV whined to life. Felidor came back inside, pulled out a guitar, strummed barre chords wildly and began to belt in Spanish. Matt hooted and I drummed along with my feet on the soggy wood floor.

It went like that for a while. Then Felidor handed the guitar to me. Matt and I stumbled through "Old Man," by Neil Young, which was the one song for which we could overlap chords and lyrics. After that, I handed the guitar to Matt, who began to noodle around. Felidor urged him on, clapping his meaty hands.

Next to me, Orlando looked glassy-eyed at the TV, which was showing some old western. There was a girl in a low-cut white dress wandering through a field.

"Bailey," Orlando whispered. "Bailey."

I pressed my teeth hard against the metal *maté* straw, squeezing my eardrums, trying not to hear.

"Bailey," he said. "No, Caroline."

I clenched my calves, feeling anxiety burbling around in my stomach, tightening me from the inside. These were the names of girls on our program. *Stop talking*, I thought. *Stop. I want to like you. Stop.*

Orlando looked at me and smiled. “*Caroline, como Caroline,*” he said, sighing and pointing at the TV.

In that moment, I was reminded of a river crossing we’d made a few days earlier, our deepest one to date. Felidor and Orlando had gone first. Matt and I went next, and the *guardaparques* gave us curt nods of approval when we reached the far side. When the girls began to wade in, the water reaching their chests, the men had walked back into the river to meet them, offering hands and arms to hold, being touchy. When Sam waded in, full speed, charging through the ice-water, she’d shoved their arms aside. I hadn’t thought much of it at the time.

“Matt,” I said. “I’m going to bed.”

In my tent, I worried until I was nauseous. What was I doing here, so far from home? And these men I’d romanticized—Hilberto, Julio, Wilson, Felidor, Orlando, the men that represent the *gaucho* and the past—what did I really know about them? I didn’t see them at home, behind closed doors with their wives and children. I didn’t live with them. I just walked with them—through beautiful country—for a few days at a time. And how authentic or pure were they, really, just because they wore knives and knew the land? Who was I to defend their way of life?

The Tompkins were not right. But they were not responsible for the death of the *gaucho*, not more than the internet, or the *Careterra*, or travelers like me—desperate for one last look at the undeveloped—who bring glimpses of the outside world, glamorous and exotic and desirable. *Skydiving*.

The outside world is on its way, I thought to myself, in my tent. And the Tompkins want to control its entry. Is that wrong?

I zipped my sleeping bag and curled up into a ball inside, pressing my face up against the wall of the tent, letting the condensation cool me until I fell asleep.

* * *

On December 8, 2015, a few days before I was supposed to fly home to Maine, I walked down to the internet café to call home. We were returning to Coyhaique the following day. I’d done my part to clean the *quincho* and I was more or less free for the

rest of the day. I was in no rush. I knocked on the café door and a man opened. He was thin and had a hunched back. I took a step away from the door.

“Where is Maria?” I asked.

“I’m her husband,” he said. “Please come in.”

The dying husband, from Coyhaique, I thought. I wandered into the shop and set down my things. I ordered a coffee and some eggs, and the man brought them over promptly. I set up my computer and my adaptor, and began to call my parents on Skype. The phone rang and rang. The man disappeared around the corner.

My mom picked up.

“You’re coming home!”

“Soon!” I said. “And I’m ready, too.”

“Is it good there?” she asked.

“Yes, I—

The man was back, standing in front of me and tapping the top of my laptop. “*Ven aqui.*”

“I’m speaking with my parents,” I said, folding the top of my computer down.

“*Ahora,*” he said.

Apologizing to my mom, I hung up and followed the man tentatively around the corner. There was a couch and the TV was on, some news channel. “Look,” he said. “You know this man, yes?”

I looked at the white-haired man and the headline below, which I translated as best I could. *Douglas Tompkins in Kayaking Accident, Lago General Carrera.*

“I have to go,” I said.

I ran all the way to the *quincho*, my backpack bobbing up and down, touching me in the back of the neck. They had no internet there. They would not know yet. I pushed open the door and tumbled inside, panting.

Hilberto and Angelica were there, setting up a farewell dinner for us, evidently.

“Oh,” I said. “*Hola.*”

“Well?” Sam said.

I stared around the room—half-packed bags everywhere, some new bottles of red wine, a few students with bandanas on scrubbing the floor. “Doug Tompkins is dying,” I said. “Flipped his kayak in *Lago General Carrera*.”

The room was quiet. Sam translated the news to Hilberto and Angelica.

“¿*Dónde está?*” Angelica asked.

“*Coyhaique. En el hospital.*”

An hour or so later, we had dinner—roasted chicken with mashed potatoes, a salad, very American. I sipped my wine, cradling the glass, watching Hilberto, who had not left the *quincho* since hearing the news. He did not speak, just sat and drummed his fingers, checking his phone from time to time. It was a Blackberry, which I had never seen him use before.

Angelica tried to brighten the mood, filling a *maté* gourd and passing it around to anyone would take it. “Yes, please,” I said, over and over, until it was just her and me. Her smile seemed thin.

Halfway through dinner, Hilberto looked at his phone and grunted. “*He’s dead.*” Angelica tightened a fist in front of her mouth, then placed her other hand on Hilberto’s shoulder. I watched him muttered something to Angelica.

“What did he say?” I asked Sam, who was sitting next to me.

She responded loud enough for the whole table to hear. “He said I wonder what this will mean for *HidroAysén*.”

* * *

On the drive North, I rode in Sam’s truck. We thundered up the *Careterra*, out of Cochrane, through the road-widening work, the project now much further along.

“Can we stop at the dam site?” I asked.

Sam looked at the backseat. Everyone nodded.

We pulled into a gravel shoulder, and walked along a mossy path through a forest of head-high *nirre* trees. The path began to curve left and down. I could hear the water, drowning out our footsteps. The detritus floor gave way to rock, and there it was: *El Río Baker*.

It was too loud to talk. We just nodded and motioned to each other. *Come over here. See it from here.* The water was deep blue, and tumbled over worn boulders, gnashing and separating and rejoining itself—fierce but unified, smooth and determined on its journey South, downhill towards the fjords and the Pacific. From where I stood, the Baker must have been close to one hundred yards across. There was no way for me to estimate its volume, to understand the power it had in that moment.

Sam stood next to me and pointed ahead, towards a bend in the river a quarter mile away. *There, she was telling me. There is where it would go.*

I grimaced and looked at her. She looked back at me. *I killed him, I wanted to say. I'm sorry. I sucked the good out of everything they did, him and Kris. It's my fault.*

Sam crouched down, picked up a twig and scratched it against the rock. She squinted her eyes, blinking out the sunlight that reflected off the water.

I closed my eyes and listened to the thunder.

MELO

In the week before the presidential election, my friend Jaime and I went to the Humane Society in Waterville, Maine. Jaime and I look similar—both almost six feet and skinny, both of us with long hair we cut ourselves—his brown, mine blondish. Sometimes, people ask if we are brothers.

“Nah,” I say. “Roommates.”

We live in a great decaying farmhouse together—Jaime, me, another boy, and two girls. We are all twenty-one or twenty-two, seniors at Colby College, a small liberal arts school up the hill and across the interstate. We are all sort of goofy and loving, sharing beds, running around in boxers or towels, yelling at each other, sometimes, to do the dishes or empty the compost bin or pay the rent.

Every animal shelter smells like a mixture of cat piss and cleaning products. We opened the front door and *Ah, Windex is winning today*, I thought. “Nice shelter,” I said to Jaime. He nodded, making his way to the front desk, where he signed us in as visitors.

“Can we just go in and see the dogs?” he asked the receptionist.

“Oh, please do,” she said, glancing up.

We walked through a door into a sort of airlock area. Jaime immediately turned to the whiteboard full of dog names and began scanning through the rows. “Jethro, Jethro, Jethro,” he muttered.

I bit my lip. We were at the shelter because of me. We’d talked about getting a dog after signing our lease in the summer, but had agreed it’d be too much work—too difficult once college was over and we needed places in the real world. Then the other day, halfway through the year and during lunch, I’d brought up the local shelter website on my phone. It was clunky and difficult to navigate. “Look at this one, Jaime,” I said. “His name is Bones, nice and old, maybe he’d die around graduation.”

“That’s fucked up,” Jaime said. He grabbed my phone and began swiping down through the page. I sat back in my chair, waiting. Jaime gets fixated on things, and I’d set the hook. “Have you seen this one?” he asked.

I leaned over and Jaime tilted the screen so we could both see. “Jethro,” I read. He looked small and lean—a dark back and brown legs—hound-like almost, but a mutt. “Looks like your sister’s dog,” I said. Jaime and his sister are close. He smiled, sheepish. “We could go see him, maybe.”

Jaime breathed out, pointing to a name on the whiteboard. “He’s still here.” He pushed open the second door, and the room erupted with barks. I grabbed a leash from the wall and followed him in. There were maybe thirty cages or so, mostly filled, most of them with medium sized bulldog types—lots of these jumping around and screaming and scrambling up the walls of their wire cages. I’m a dog person, I suppose, but not fearless. I moved through the rows slowly, squeezing my teeth to dim the pain of the barks as they bounced off the concrete walls. I was mindful of my fingers, and smiled at some of the nicer dogs, offering milkbone chunks from a hanging tin can to the quietest ones.

Jaime found Jethro first, and I squatted beside him next to the cage. Jethro growled at me softly.

“It’s your sweater I think,” Jaime said. “He doesn’t like it.”

I looked down at the thick lamb’s wool. I believed Jaime, but was unsure how he already knew what Jethro did and didn’t like. “I’ll put it in the car,” I said.

We took Jethro outside, and took turns running him through the field of browning mullein and milkweed behind the shelter. We ran circles and sprints, stopping to rest and to try and pet him and rub his soft ears. He nipped at our forearms and tugged on the leash, choking himself. *More running, please*, he seemed to say.

Back inside, the receptionist thumbed through his file. “He’s a transfer, so not much information. Found him on the streets, you can see the scars on his nose. About a year and a half old, we think.”

I looked towards the door. “We better go. We’ll be back. I just need to reread our lease.” Jaime and I made our way to his car, and slipped into the seats without talking.

“Well,” he said, turning the key, “what does it say?”

“No pets, except for service animals. Pretty cut and dry.” The lease was at home, but I’d read it several times. Jaime began to drive, and we turned out of the parking lot. “How

about this,” I said. “I’ll e-mail the landlords, but if Trump wins, we’ll just get him anyway.”

* * *

Our house is somewhat of a symbol for central Maine: lots of beauty still—white clapboards, stone foundation, hardwood floors and a two-story shingled barn attached to the rear. Like Maine, you can see the story. The long narrow dining room was once full of milking stalls, and there is an exterior window between the living room and the foyer. There are two sections to the house really—two heating zones, the second zone all extra bedrooms and hallways, rooms to accommodate a growing family, maybe.

Like Maine, you can see the struggle. Peeling paint on the outside—not enough preparation, or the clapboards could be rotting. Peeling paint on the inside—no slab in the basement, so the moisture creeps up on summer days. There are squirrels in the attic above my bed that wake me each morning, and mice that sometimes crawl through the pantry and steal the cheese sticks from our useless have-a-heart traps.

Jethro scrambled up the front steps and through the mudroom. I dropped the leash, and he did a circle through the foyer, sniffing the floor, head down, tail tucked between his legs. “All this is yours,” I said. “The couches, beds, nothing too nice here, so don’t worry.” I talk to dogs like I talk to people.

Crouching, I reached under Jethro’s belly to scratch him. He escaped into the laundry room, dragging his leash towards Jaime, who was filling up a water bowl.

We renamed him Melo (pronounced *mellow*), an optimistic name maybe—he has no shortage of energy—but the name sounds smooth and almost wild and still ends with an *oh*. Jaime and I tried the name on, offering him treats and dollops of peanut butter when he responded. “Oh Melo Melo Melo, that’s a good boy.”

As with any dog, the true test is when the leash comes off. Always a scary moment with a new one, wondering if they love you enough to stick around, or whether they would rather try their chances in the world.

After a few days of walking Melo around the backyard, Jaime and I turned right and led him down the frosty path through the field behind our house. Melo sniffed and leaped around clumps of brush. I opened the wire gate at the edge of our property, and we started down the dirt road that leads to the Messalonskee stream—me in the back, Jaime next with the leash, and Melo up front, leaning forward and gasping for air. “We should get him a harness,” Jaime said.

“Definitely, maybe tomorrow.” I worried what all the tugging meant for letting him off the leash.

The road splits, and we followed the right arm, which lies adjacent to a set of railroad tracks. The tracks continue up by our house, passing just below our field. Cargo trains come by twice a day, covered with graffiti and blaring their horns. The engines change, but they all say *PanAm* railways. Jaime often tears off his shirt and swings it over his head when a train goes by. *Train! Train! Train!* he shouts. The conductors never look over.

We followed the tracks towards the stream, woods on either side, and after a quarter-mile or so saw water through the bare limbs of oak trees. There is a concrete dam here, about twenty feet tall. Though the map says stream, the water held behind the dam looks more like a pond. A barbed wired fence cuts off access to the top of the dam, and there are several warning signs that prohibit swimming and boating. *Danger of Death. Water Intake.* Above the dam, a rusty trestle bridge holds the train tracks up. From here they go south, away from central Maine, into the rest of the state and the rest of the country, places where there are more people and where the mills still run and where the houses don’t all sag.

“Alright Melo,” Jaime said. He reached down and unhitched the clasp. Melo stared up, yawned, blinked, and bolted into the woods.

* * *

It’s winter now. We still have Melo, and he likes the snow. I take him on walks most mornings before class, no leash. We walk down past the train tracks, past the dam, and

into the woods. Here, we hug the shore. Melo is always full-speed, mostly out of control, power sliding over pine needles and ice patches.

On our walks, I tell Melo about the world.

“I’m presenting my senior project today, Melo. Climate change and the Maine lobster fishery. Young lobstermen are worried, but only fifty-eight percent have plans to adapt. Jaime’s coming but you can’t, unfortunately.”

A twig cracks ahead of us, and Melo stops, pointing with his paw.

“And get this: Donald Trump is still going to be president,” I say to him. “And he’s picked the CEO of Exxon-Mobil as Secretary of State.” Melo stares at me blankly, wriggles his head, and his tags clink together. I toss a stick down the trail, and he runs off. “Not good for the Arctic, Melo,” I say to no one. “He’ll want to drill for oil up there.”

After the second snowstorm of the year, and just before winter break, I take Melo for a final walk. He will be going home with Jaime for the holidays, and at the end of the year, too, we’ve decided. Melo sleeps in Jaime’s bed (under the covers) and scratches against the front door when he hears Jaime’s car—loud from an exhaust leak—coming home down the road. Everyone knows he’s Jaime’s dog.

I am thinking about this as Melo and I are walking downhill, to the water—how it must be nice to know that you are loved above everyone else, by someone, or, by a dog; nice because it’s a quiet confirmation of something done right, something that you might continue to do. Jaime doesn’t yet have plans for next year, but he’ll have Melo, who will need to be fed and walked—a burden, but one that may also bring some structure and a sense of self-worth. Melo’s life is better now. You can point to it: his legs have grown stronger, the dandruff is gone from his coat, and he no longer whines with anxiety at the bottom of staircases; Jaime has taught him to climb, laying treats on the steps, lifting his paws onto the treads.

Next year, I worry, I might get lost—not scary lost, but lost in the privileged, college-educated, male and liberal and white sense of the word, lost in inaction. I’ll soon be twenty-three with a degree in Environmental Policy, and already I feel paralyzed by the damage that exists. Damage to the earth. Damage to people. Damage that—in so many cases—has been done by men, and damage that is much easier to cause than to undo.

Soon people will call me a man, even if I don't feel grown up in that way. And I'll have to help with the undoing, though I don't know when or how is best to begin, or how to know if I'm doing good.

Melo stops and lifts his right back paw—this is always the first one to get cold in the snow. I cup it in my hands and rub his pads to warm them. “I wrote a poem about Trump for class, Melo,” I say. “It's sort of about how I've wanted sons my whole life. Now I don't know what to want. Daughters maybe. I'm scared of guys these days.” I pause. “I cried, Melo, just right there in front of the class while I was reading it. Almost couldn't finish.”

Melo drops his paw down and waits for me to pull my hands away. Then he tumbles downhill, biting off chunks of rotten logs, tossing them in the air, biting them again, losing interest. He runs to the water, his paws break through air pockets in the ice, the sound scares him—he thinks it's thunder maybe—and he runs off through a grove of young Balsam fir trees, twisting and crunching out of sight.

In a few minutes, he'll come crashing back. I'll reach for his ears. He'll bite my arm, rejecting me, and run down the trail towards our home.