

1st reading was sober-ish? can't recall when, mostly all caps notes
 2nd reading completely sober, more detailed, watch
 SHT Paris Review Adm Price
 decent enough setup, tension right away, I watch want to know more.

A Natural Man
 April 18, 2017

Oklahoma was where it all went wrong. Alex steered the juddering van to the shoulder, and, with his dog Munson howling along in the seat beside him, he cursed - everything: himself, the van, the criminal used-car salesman back in North Carolina who'd sold it to him, the forlorn stretch of road they were currently breaking down on, the distant memory of a service station forty miles back, his mother for conceiving him thirty-eight years earlier, the human race in general; also: destiny, the universe, God - everything. Smoke billowed in gouts from the hood, thick tendrils grasping through the open window. He rolled it up hard and the crank broke off in his hand. When the van finally lurched to a stop, he killed the engine and raced around the vehicle to free Munson. Unleashed, the dog bounded gratefully away into an adjacent cornfield.

decent set up, little words, engage bond that

He started after Munson but stopped. The dog had run off before and always come back. One thing at a time, he thought, lifting the hood and loosing a gust of acrid smoke into his face. After he'd coughed and spat for a minute, he tried examining the scorched engine again, with both hands on top of the grill in the posture (for whose benefit it was unclear - his own? passing traffic? there was no passing traffic) of someone who knew a thing or two about cars and how to fix them - although, of course, if he knew anything about cars, he wouldn't have bought this one.

Still, he should have known there was *something* wrong with the van, a mint-green Ford Econoline priced to move - then stop moving - at six hundred bucks. Why had he bought it? Well, he'd needed a van and could afford this one, that was one thing. But more generally, he believed in acting on instinct and living in a state of receptiveness to the world - you took what it gave you and trusted it to lead you forward. Times like this, however, tested his philosophy. Against the backdrop of the blackened cavity, he could vividly picture the salesman running an incredulous thumb over the wad of bills and handing over the keys, while overhead, a red-orange wind puppet writhed with laughter.

INCONSISTENT

He retrieved a jacket from the back of the van. It had been a warm day in mid-October, but the sun was setting fast, and the air felt like a turned pillow. In a couple of hours, the prairie would be cold. What would he do? He pulled out his wallet, though he already knew how much money it contained: eighteen dollars. Barely enough for two more days of food, not enough for a tow, or even gas to get to Los Angeles, where an independent gallery was scheduled to show the paintings crammed into the van's rear storage. He had begun stealing gas at little mom-and-pop stores along the way, places lacking surveillance cameras or other customers. His vague plan had been, once the paintings sold, to retrace his route and reimburse the places he owed money. He'd even kept a list on the back of an envelope - gas station, town, exit - and entertained himself on long stretches of the drive by imagining the look of wonder on some old Arkansan's face upon receipt of a hundred-dollar bill and an apology. Yes, he would say, *I took from you because I had to, but now I'm giving it right back. Plus interest.* The whole thing could wind up reaffirming some people's faith in humanity.

nic, simple
 That ain't 2 days of gas money

The dog had not come back. Alex scanned the gray and purple cornfield, the long stalks shivering in the breeze. He called out, to no reply. It seemed like the dog had vanished into another dimension. Zipping up his jacket, he scrambled down the embankment to the edge of the field. He'd never actually been in a cornfield, and found that what from the road looked like an impenetrable wall upon closer inspection

NO

contained narrow avenues between stalks, paths down which an Australian shepherd could bound to its heart's content. The dog's tracks were visible in the dirt, and he followed them into the field.

Munson! he called. Munny! As he moved, he bent the occasional stalk, marking his lane for the return journey. It wasn't hard to imagine getting lost here. And while the thought was not completely unpleasant—wandering this hidden realm had a strange appeal—the cold reality, in an hour, would be. A familiar bark sounded somewhere ahead, and he hurried his pace toward a distant break in the corn.

The row opened onto a neat lawn, the grass mown and borders squared. A backyard, he saw now. A large backyard, with a nearby shed—one of those prefab things you could buy at Walmart or Lowe's—and a clothesline running between two rusted metal posts. In the other corner of the yard, Munson stood on his hind legs, barking up an old oak. He looked over his shoulder, for a moment seeming as though he might push off and saunter across the grass. For Alex, imagining the dog as a person was habitual and reflexive—most of the paintings in his van were from a series of Munson taking part in human activities, both serious and absurd. His latest featured the dog clad in a punk-rock T-shirt and Oakley sunglasses, riding a Segway, flipping the bird at onlookers.

"Come here, Munson," he said.

Immediately—as though, in the deepest fulfillment of his master's fantasies, Munson was answering—a voice came back, "Who's that?"

An old farmer, wearing actual overalls and an actual gingham flannel, pointed an actual shotgun at Alex's chest. He was near the house, but steadily advancing. "Stand still," he said, "I will shoot you."

Alex noticed that his hands were up by his ears. "I believe you."

The man got closer. "Call off your dog, cat's up there."

"Munson!" The dog reluctantly dropped and ambled over. The man was now twenty or so feet away. Alex noticed that he wore Nikes, which seemed odd. The gun was still leveled at him, twin black discs, tiny voids from which death would come screaming.

"What are you doing in my yard?"

"My dog escaped, and I came after him."

"So you traipsed through my crops thinking what."

"Not thinking anything."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"I don't know, you saw him on that tree." The man bobbed the gun up at Alex's head. "I'm sorry," Alex said, "I was just trying to get my dog. Can we go now?"

"Where? Back through my fields?"

"I guess. It seems like a straight line."

"It isn't, you'll get lost."

They stood there for a moment. Alex was seized by a desire to laugh, and the fact that it might get him shot made it that much more irresistible. He pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth and squinted off into the gathering dusk, choking back a terrible guffaw. Did he want to die? Sometimes he felt he must. He seemed to court these situations—had some part of him really not known the van would break down, or that walking through the corn was a bad idea, or that at all costs, he shouldn't laugh right now?

POV.
Narrator/
author
confusion

but also darkening ???
light!

How could he see this or know it was there?

suppose
it's child
logically
sleeves will
be down

you didn't see him before

THIS IS A DOUBLE
BARREL.

not
shouldn't

and the complete check out
occurs & I do not care
any longer for a
decent, mindful read of this story.

THIS IS A 3
FUCKING
PUMPSHOTGUN

He laughed. The farmer advanced and, at the same time, chambered a shell with the ominous ka-chunk so familiar from movies and TV. Munson barked and ran around. Alex took a step backward and tripped to his knees in the damp grass. "Please, I'm sorry. I'm a fucking idiot."

"What's your name?"

"Alex. My name is Alex Pearson. I just don't know what you want me to do, if you want me off your property but you don't want me going back through the field. I have to get back to my van. Is there another way?"

"Up around the house, down the road about a mile, then left on 218."

"Where?"

As though sensing the panicked confusion in Alex's voice, the farmer sighed and lowered the gun to his waist. "Not from around here, huh?"

"I'm from North Carolina. I'm heading west and my van broke down."

"Well, I don't know how it works in North Carolina, but around here, you don't just trespass on people's property."

"Understood. Lesson learned."

"All right, then. Get up, I'll take you." The old man walked across the yard to the driveway and climbed into an ancient pickup that looked like it had once done time ferrying around Okies and their furniture. He cranked the engine until it caught and waved through the window for Alex to come on. Alex hesitated for a second, then ushered Munson into the back and got in the cab. The farmer reversed down the drive and onto a gravel road that curved around the front of the house. With a straight face, he said, "Name's John."

"Good to meet you," said Alex, fighting another urge to laugh while looking out the window. "Sorry, again."

"Just never know what kind of folks you're dealing with these days." Farmer John's face was unreadable, but a soft note of contrition had crept into his stoic drawl.

"I guess that's true."

"Yup. I got robbed not six months back. Came home and the place was ransacked. It's that meth nonsense."

In a mile or so, they swung back onto the little highway, and ten minutes later, the mint-green van came into view. They U-turned across the empty lanes, parked on the shoulder, and got out. John lifted the van's unlatched hood and looked at the engine. He shut it again, and said, "Everything's burnt to shit."

"I see that. Any ideas?"

"Get a new vehicle. This one's done."

"That's what I figured," Alex said. He filled the dog's food dish and set it down beside the rear tire. Munson smacked his kibble while looking back and forth at the two men.

John said, "Well, what's the plan?"

"I guess I'll hitch into town."

"What town? Edison? Edison's fifty miles. Hitch what?"

It was a good point. The isolation demanded by his gas thievery had seen Alex onto remote byways and obscure detours. They'd passed one lone car—a two-tone beater, its rear corroded away—on the drive over. "I don't know," said Alex. "We'll sleep here and figure out a plan in the morning. Thanks for the lift, though."

WHEN YOU STEP BACK YOU DON'T
FALL FORWARD. JESUS.

SIGH.

This is the point where the author realizes, holy shit, does not get a story going
where I'd need to ditch the hands. 1.4.4

HES WEAK
FLANNERS
see previous entry pg. 2

Where is the light coming from?

John said, "I'd take you there myself, but my niece is coming over with dinner here in about thirty minutes."

"It's no big deal, really."

The farmer looked off down the road, as though he saw something heading their way. His sun-worn face remained inscrutable, like a mask worn by a younger man. His thick arms were roped with muscle. "Look, why don't you stay at my house tonight? Have something to eat, and we'll get you set up tomorrow. I can call around, might be someone around here heading in that direction, you could scare up a mechanic."

"Wow," said Alex. "That would be great. Thank you very much."

Of course, he knew, it wouldn't really matter if someone gave him a ride to Edison. Unless they were handing out free vans there. Still, that was tomorrow. He took pleasure in how, immediately following disaster, the world had brought him this next thing. Maybe tomorrow it would bring something else.

He lifted his bag out of the van, and John peered in. "What do you got in there?"

"Paintings." The farmer turned to look at him. "I have an art show in California, and I'm hoping to sell some."

The blank look lingered, and it occurred to Alex that perhaps this man had never heard of painting. Or California. Then John said, "My wife used to paint."

"Really?"

"Nature stuff, mostly. Fields and flowers. She painted the same goddamned marigolds about twenty times. I never saw the point, but she liked it."

"That's great."

"Yup."

"Hey, do you want one? A painting?"

"Why?"

"You're being so generous. It's the only way I can repay you, right now."

John rolled his shoulders and neck in a gesture that might have suggested assent, so Alex leaned into the van and picked out one he thought the man might like. It was Munson, wearing a business suit and carrying a briefcase, looking depressed as he pushed into an office building. In the corner, Alex had signed his name. John took it and nodded. He said, "I'll be honest with you, it's not my speed."

"Oh. Well, don't feel like you have to take it."

"But Lee Anne might like it."

"Lee Anne?"

"My niece, I told you. She and her boy are coming over for supper." He put the painting in the bed of his truck and shut the tailgate. "Better than marigolds, I'll say that much."

Supper was the type of meal you would imagine eating at a farm in Oklahoma owned by a farmer named John: fried-chicken drumsticks, green beans, buttered potatoes, rolls, iced tea. The food had been brought over, already prepared, by the niece—Lee Anne. Apparently John's wife had died earlier in the year, and their extended family was still in caretaking mode, often bringing over meals to John, though he said it was unnecessary. Lee Anne was attractive, sort of, in a hearty, unfussy Midwestern style. Or was she? It was hard to tell. She was either a young thirty-five or an old twenty-five—there was fatigue in her bearing, if not her appearance. Her child, a noisy brat named Jamie, was five years old and fully engaged in chasing Munson everywhere in the house.

Impress. Not doing an only thing.

THEN WHY BELABOR

BACKSTORY. UNNECESSARY
AWFUL

John had gruffly bestowed the painting on Lee Anne, and she eyed it, propped on the kitchen sideboard, as they ate.

"What a thing," she said. "Where do you get your ideas?"

"I don't know. I guess I just like animals."

"Me too," said Lee Anne. "We have two cats and a guinea pig."

"We?"

"Jamie and me. His father, Bill, is in Afghanistan right now. Another four months."

John squinted at his niece and said to Alex, "Bill's a contractor. Comes and goes as he pleases."

"That's not fair. He's been good sending the money."

"Next time he leaves with no warning," John said, bending to his beans, "I'm putting a load of shot in him."

She turned back to Alex and said, "So you're from Los Angeles."

"No, Asheville. North Carolina. I was on my way to LA."

"For a show."

"Right."

"That's so cool. How did you get that?"

"Uh. It's a long story. There's an Asheville gallery that sometimes shows my paintings, and the woman is connected with a guy in Venice Beach. He liked my stuff and asked me to show. I had to buy a van to take everything over from home."

"What do you do back home?"

It was a good question, and one that could be answered a number of ways: *not much* came to mind first—it was honest enough, but didn't have a good ring; *paint* would have been true, though obvious; *paint houses* would have been more accurate from an economic standpoint. What he really wanted to say, though it would sound facetious, was *live my life*. After a terrible marriage seven years earlier, a lost epoch of pretend adulthood and ownership of various things, he had worked on narrowing his existence—to Munson, a house in the wilds of North Asheville, his painting, and work when he could get it. He aspired to a condition described by an old soul song he'd heard once, long ago, that had lodged itself in his head: *a natural man*.

A natural man, in his formulation, lived simply. A natural man followed his instincts and moved through the world, guided by chance and opportunity, like a loosed animal rooting down a forest trail. Like Munson dashing into the corn, a natural man did what he wanted because it felt right, because he was free.

"I paint houses," he said. "And paintings."

Lee Anne nodded, and he wondered what her breasts looked like under the floral-print blouse she wore. Her chest had a dense look, like everything was carefully strapped in and would explode forth cartoonishly when freed. "The chicken is very good," he said. It was.

"Thank you," she said.

He was about to ask her if he tasted paprika when, from the other room, rose a wail of almost unimaginable sadness and pain. They all rushed from the kitchen into a sterile, museum-like living room. In the middle of it sat Jamie, fighting for breath between howling sobs, clutching his bleeding hand; in the corner hunched Munson, abashed.

HAND.

"Munson!" yelled Alex. "I swear he has never bitten anyone the whole time I've known him. Owned him."

Lee Anne knelt and held her boy, murmuring softly against his red, outraged face.

John disappeared and reappeared momentarily with a length of rope. He said,

"Tie him up outside."

"Tie him up?"

"To the clothesline, in the backyard."

"I don't know."

"What don't you know? He just bit the boy, I don't want him in the house. Tie him up overnight, it's not January."

Alex led Munson by his collar down the stairs and out into the backyard, where he tied him to one of the clothesline posts. The surrounding prairie sky was black and enormous. The dog whined piteously, and Alex bent and embraced him. "I know, it wasn't your fault. That stupid kid wouldn't leave you alone. You'll be okay, I'll be back soon."

When he returned, Lee Anne was in the large downstairs bathroom cleaning off the boy's arm in the tub. The water swirled pink around the drain, and the bite mark was visible, a small flap with two puncture wounds just below the elbow. The boy was whimpering, calmer now, or else his upset had entered some extreme realm of stupefaction. She said, "I think we should go to the hospital."

"Really?"

"He needs stitches."

ELFUCKING-BOW

"God, I'm so sorry about this. I'll go with you. Keep you company."

"You don't need to." But the look she cast back at him was pleased.

She wrapped Jamie's arm in a hand towel and led him to the kitchen, where John sat again, mechanically finishing the half-eaten dinner. Alex supposed it was habit—you don't let food go to waste on a farm. Lee Anne told her uncle what they were doing, and he nodded to himself. "You can let him in when you get back. I'll be asleep."

"Thanks, Uncle John."

"You'll be okay," said John to the glazed boy. He didn't look at Alex. To Lee Anne, he said, "Take your artwork."

She picked it up, and said, "What a thing."

The hospital was almost an hour away, in Edison, a flat, dreary place that seemed to exist mainly for the staffing and patronage of fast-food restaurants. The waiting room was empty, save for a TV in the corner on which baseball highlights flickered orangely. By the time they were driving back, it was around eleven. Jamie had received five stitches and a sedative—from the backseat, his tiny snore rose and fell in volume. They were mostly silent on the drive, speeding past endless fields, a denser blackness against the blue black of night. The car had filled with Lee Anne's scent, rose perfume underlain by sweat, the pleasant funk of a day's exertions; like its owner, the smell was earnest and kind. She found a country station that came in and out, playing one soaring, melodramatic ballad after another. *Jesus, take the wheel.*

"Sorry again," he said.

"Again, not your fault."

Well, yeah, kind of my fault. My dog's fault."

JAMIE'S UNCLE

I'm done

WHAT?
BOTTLE OF
109711051
again
Ugh

"I'm sure Jamie was roughhousing. He's so much like his father." She let this one cryptically lie as she turned right, down a gravel road with a small white house at the end. "I'm going to get him in bed, and then I'll take you back."

"Okay."

"Actually, you feel like a drink first?"

"Okay."

The house was cluttered and rank with the smell of animals, and she led him quickly through it with the lights low. He stood in the hall as she put Jamie to bed. The floor was linoleum, the wall wood paneled, and on it hung a small square needlepoint of the sun rising over a snowcapped mountain. What did it mean to her? he wondered. Was it where she wished she could be, or where she liked to imagine she already was? When you got down to it, was there a difference between where you were and where you thought you were? Yes, he told himself, there was. *To imagine otherwise is to accept a brokered delusionalism as the price of your happiness.* His last therapist, two years earlier, had said that. Illusions, she'd said, no matter how comforting, could not provide the basis for a real life.

Staring at the needlepoint, he began feeling very depressed, and he was relieved when Lee Anne reappeared and led him back outside, to the porch. It was screened in and jumbled with what seemed like rummage-sale leftovers: a child's bike, a floor lamp, a rusted hibachi, a box of mildewed books. She went back inside and returned quickly with the bottle and glasses, as though he might bolt off into the night. As though there was anywhere he could go.

They had one large glass, then another, in quick succession. He asked how long she'd lived here, and she stared out into the backyard, where the porch light cast flat gray rectangles on the grass. "I'm so lonely," she said.

They kissed and she led him back to the bedroom. In the mirror of the nearby vanity, as they embraced, he looked at her back, a spray of brown moles, and at himself over her shoulder. Light-blue eyes twinkled above a thick beard that only partially obscured the handsome face beneath. His good looks were simply one more means of following his trail and being free. Not everyone could live like this—even if they wanted to, most people lacked the endurance. All of the friends he'd known from his younger days had settled into jobs and marriages, bought houses and had children, and no longer even attempted to track the scent of their own wild lives.

see page 1



They got in bed and she got on top of him, this big, lonesome creature, bucking and moaning. That it was infidelity barely occurred to him—it seemed so necessary for her, so good and right and easy for him. They came together, and she rolled off, telling him to wait there, as she went to check on Jamie. In her absence, Alex imagined this was his life: a good woman, a child, a house and car. On the one hand, there were worse things; on the other, the thought of it seemed impossible to him. Living in constant denial of your instincts would not be living at all. again page 8

She returned with the painting—Munson and his briefcase. Alex winced with guilt at the reminder of his best friend, roped up alone in that backyard. She hung the painting up on a nail already hammered into the wall next to the room's lone window.

"There," she said, getting back in bed. "To remember you by."

"Won't what's-his-name—Bill? Won't he wonder where this came from?"

Probes not happen. Real money gets took. Right of the fork away. NOT PINNED TO A WALL.

It think I was so confused that thing meant. I believe he was @ the family house?

more confused now.

"Bill's not coming home." She lay propped on her side, pillow between her arm and head. Her breasts were somehow innocent in their soft size, and they spilled out in front of her like the confession she was making.

"How do you know?"

"He said when he left. He's got a situation in Berlin, Germany. A 'situation'—that's what he called it. I haven't told anyone but you."

"Why me?"

"Because I don't know you."

They lay there in silence for a bit. He told her, "I used to be married."

"Yeah? What happened?"

"She was a regional pharma rep, and I was remodeling our investment properties. You slap a little stainless steel and marble top into rundown condos—bang, instant mountain getaway. We had a lot of money, and we did a lot of drugs, and we tore each other to pieces. Things got really dark for a while. I wound up going into the hospital, and when I got out, she was gone. She'd taken everything. All our possessions, all our assets, everything." *but I thought he was this free spirit as referenced - page 7.*

"Wow, I'm sorry."

"I'm not. It made me start over and live on my own terms. I paint, and I have my dog, and that's enough."

"Is it?"

"For me, it is. I go wherever the world takes me."

"And how's that working for you?"

"Not bad," he said, pulling her toward him. She smiled and touched his shoulder. A large truck rattled by somewhere out on the distant road, and he said, "Should we go back?"

"Let's just lie here a little while."

"I think your uncle is expecting me."

"He's asleep. I'll take you back before morning, it's just down the road."

"Where," he asked.

She pointed to the wall. "A mile across the highway. Stay with me a little."

"Okay."

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

Soon, she was snoring—like her son, a thin and quavering rasp. Alex rose silently and grabbed his clothes, dressed in the living room, and looked around. On a small laminate bar top that looked into the kitchen sat a silver cage; inside, a calico guinea pig rooted around in a pile of wood shavings. The cage looked and smelled like it hadn't been cleaned recently. Alex stuck his finger through the bars, and the little thing waddled over to grasp the tip of his finger. It was like they were shaking hands.

"Hello, little man," he whispered.

Reluctantly breaking the grip, he turned and further scanned the room. A desk in the corner supported a mess of paper, and high up on the wall over the desk was tacked an envelope with a foreign-looking stamp—a lime rectangle depicting a mosque. He looked inside, already knowing what he'd find before his fingers fanned the bills, plucked them, and put them in his wallet.

JESUS.

DINAR ARE WORTHLESS.

The night air had, as he'd expected, grown cold, and he walked briskly down the uneven gravel road while humming to himself. *Jesus, take the wheel.* The thing was ... the thing he learned over and over was that being a natural man did not always mean being a good man. Not that it necessarily meant being bad or selfish—sometimes it meant being extremely generous. Last year, for instance, he'd given a dumbfounded homeless woman his car so she could get to Florida and visit her dying father. But beyond anything else, being a natural man meant letting the world guide you, and it didn't always guide you to nice places.

What it did do was lead you forward, if you let it. He'd needed a van and the world had led him to one he could afford, one that had gotten him as far as Oklahoma. He'd needed help and money, and the world had seen fit to introduce him to John, then to Lee Anne, who brought him to her bed and, from there, to an envelope of cash nailed to the wall. Should he really have not taken it? The idea seemed repellent, an insult to the universe.

Distant thunder cracked, but the sky was totally clear, pricked with white stars. Fifteen minutes after crossing the highway, the road curved around a stand of trees and John's white farmhouse edged into view. He would free Munson, go back through the cornfield and out to 218. There, he would flag down the inevitable car that would come his way, get them to call a tow truck (maybe it would be a tow truck), get towed to Edison, and either have the van fixed or buy whatever clunker he could afford for eight hundred bucks. Maybe this vehicle would actually get him to Los Angeles, though, if not, he would figure out something else in the new day. He thought now of that mountain with the sun rising over it and of Lee Anne sleeping on her stomach, and he resolved to send her back the money. A thousand: 25-percent interest! She'd come out ahead on the deal.

Munson lay sleeping on the ground beside the clothesline pole. Alex crept across the yard and whispered, *Munny*. When the dog didn't stir, he bent to shake him, and his hand came away wet and black. Shaking Munson a second time, he could feel the raw flesh and a rib exposed to the night air. His shout was silenced by the roaring blast of a shotgun, just as his jumbled thoughts were erased by the sting of stray pellets on the side of his face. He fell to one knee next to his dead friend, and everything in the world quieted to nothing. But the *ka-chunk* of a round being chambered roused him from his stupor, and he scrambled across the yard, into the deep rows of corn.

There was nothing there but his own breath, ragged in the dark of the grasping stalks. How they tore at him! Blood trickled down his cheek in a rivulet that ran over his collarbone and into his armpit. He thought of Munson and wanted to scream again, but he knew he was being tracked, could hear rustling behind him. John would expect him to beat it hard for the highway—where he might lock himself in the van, and, if he'd owned a phone, call for help—so he took a hard left through a thick stand of corn, and many more, crossing row after row before collapsing in the cool dirt.

He took several deep breaths, trying to slow his mind and figure out what had happened. After a minute or two, he saw it: Lee Anne waking with him gone, entering the living room, checking the envelope on the wall, calling her uncle; Farmer John being woken by the phone call from Lee Anne, donning his overalls and Nikes, grabbing his gun with the grip of moral authority, walking into the back of the house and shooting the dog who'd bit his kin, the dog of the man who'd robbed his niece. A flashlight spot

By the time we get here I can't be bothered to care.

NO MORE BEANS

WAIT WHAT?
HOW DOES HE KNOW?
THE TRUCK

floated by like a jittery ghost, closer to him than he'd have expected or liked. It stopped, thinking about its direction, then moved on.

Now he was alone. What would he do? Munson had been the only person left in the world who could stand him. His family and friends had all had their fill long ago. What he'd told Lee Anne about his divorce had been true, more or less, but he hadn't told her everything, not nearly: the psychiatric evaluation while he was in the hospital (borderline, possible bipolar), the infidelities, the relapses and false promises, the money he'd taken over the years; and after she left him, the arrests for DUI and petty theft, the late-night begging calls to anyone who would still pick up the phone, the demotions and evictions and general failure, the wreckage of a life, if you could call it that.

Finally, last year, he'd moved back into one of the old condos he'd once remodeled—foreclosed on during the housing bubble and gone to rot in the woods. His old key had still worked, and he'd let himself in. He could see it now, his home, filled with paint cans and paintbrushes and dog toys and not much else. A single old chair in the middle of the living room. A pail for fetching water from a nearby runoff. A pile of filthy work clothes. Gray mattress in the corner. Some old pill bottles. Three tin cups. Two books. Moss.

He awoke under a leaden dawn sky. Retracing his path from the night before was easy, as he followed the displacement his body had created blundering through the stands. John, he thought, could easily have done the same. Had he been spared? The disruption in the rows ended, and he turned left, making his way toward a sliver of gray light.

Up on the road, his van smoldered black in this new and horrible day. Rather than killing him, it seemed, John had merely opted to destroy everything he loved. Smoked wafted from where the windows had been knocked out, and gasoline poured in. The smell, hours later, was still strong. He approached, pulling his shirt up to his face and breathing through it. The heat from the fire had melted the tires to the road, and a charred semicircle fanned out onto the shoulder. He looked through one of the broken windows. His paintings—three years of work, and the only record of Munson—were cinders inside.

There was nothing to do now but walk, so that was what he did. The shoulder scrolled by, plastic bottles and potato-chip bags and purple fields asway in the greasy breeze. A car passed, but Alex didn't thumb—who in their right mind would pick up this wretched person, face and neck smeared with dried blood, eyes rimmed red with fear and grief? Soon, he would approach the intersection that led, rightward, to John's, and leftward, to Lee Anne's. Many miles ahead waited Edison, where he would call the gallery and tell them what had happened, cancel the show, and find the nearest Greyhound station. A bus would take him back East, back to a life with the meaning burned out of it. He would throw away his painting supplies, ask his father for one last loan, return to therapy, get on some meds, find a little apartment, rejoin civilization's gray and chastening scum.

But when he reached the intersection, he was surprised to find himself veering left, down the gravel road toward Lee Anne's house, moving on pure instinct, a little of that old, good feeling coming right back. What was he doing? He wasn't sure, but it felt right, and the farther he went, the faster he moved. Upon sight of the distant house, he broke into a jog—it was as though he was inhabited and impelled forward by Munson's

memory and spirit. A glimpse of himself in the window of her car, parked where it had been last night, ratified this feeling: yes, he was a creature now, the true thing—filthy and ragged, and totally unbound in a joyous perpetual moment of freedom.

Hunching around the car, he crept to the living-room window. No one stirred inside. He traced the perimeter of the house, peeking into the kitchen, the back porch, and then the bedroom, where only hours before he'd felt such tenderness toward Lee Anne. John, he imagined, had taken her on a proud morning tour of his night's work. This thought made it quite easy for him to pick up a paving stone from her fallow garden plot, break the front-door window with it, unlock the door, and enter the house. He moved quickly, putting half the money back in the envelope—a remorseful impulse that directed his attention to the desk, where Lee Anne, and fate, had providentially left a set of car keys.

The keys were on a souvenir key chain from Mount Rushmore. A crappy little tourist trinket, but looking at it, a plan asserted itself and his heart leapt with pleasure. He would go to LA as a first stop, explain what had happened to the gallery owner, and perhaps get put up for a little while. After that, he could go anywhere, see anything. He'd been needing to escape from his life, his history, in North Carolina for so long—without meaning to, he'd brought about the exact events necessary for this to happen. And he had no fear of her calling the cops, not after what had happened to his van and the dog. The dog: from the bedroom, he retrieved Munson's painting. *To remember you by*, she'd said. A querulous murmur sounded in the back room, and Jamie shuffled in. He rubbed his face, ridged pink with a pillow's imprint.

"Where's Mama?"

"Out with your uncle."

"Oh." The boy's eyes were funny, unfocused, and Alex understood he was still in some kind of drugged zone between consciousness and sleep. "Who are you?"

"No one, you're dreaming. Go back to bed."

But the boy just stood there. "Who are you?"

"We met last night. I'm Alex."

"Your dog bit me." The boy looked from the painting to his bandaged arm, and the memory seemed to rouse him a little.

his arm again. not hand

"His name was Munson. I'm sorry he did, and I'm sure he was sorry, too. Is your boo-boo okay?"

The child shrugged and followed him into the living room. "What happened to your face?"

"Your uncle shot me."

"Why?"

"He was mad."

"Why?"

Alex turned to speak, and with the boy looking at him, he choked up a little, feeling as though he was eulogizing an old friend. "Listen, Jamie. When your mommy gets home tell her I returned most of the money, and that I'm sorry. I've made mistakes, of course I have. But I've tried to live my life in an authentic way. Tell her that when she gets home, okay? And you remember that, too. Be true to yourself."

The child wandered away, not seeming to have understood, or maybe having understood but not agreed. He was, after all, according to Lee Anne, his father's child, and Alex imagined Bill, a faceless figure in Afghanistan—a hard, mean man doing hard,

mean work, sending envelopes of cash home and shacking up in Berlin with his "situation." Alex thought about him as he went out to the car and put the painting in the trunk. As he closed the trunk, he saw Munson, holding his briefcase, and it occurred to him that there was one more thing.

The guinea pig knitted its hands together with worry as its cage left the countertop. Looking down at him, Alex could already envision a new series of paintings: "Little Man Hits the Road." He was opening the door to leave when he heard a clicking sound behind him and turned. It was the boy again, still sleep-battled, but now looking like a miniature ranch hand with the comically large pistol he held, and Alex was poised somewhere right between yelling and laughter when the gun went off and shot him square in the chest. The boy ran back into his bedroom, slamming the door. The cage clattered to the floor beside Alex, and as he lay there taking his disbelieving, agonal breaths, Little Man cautiously emerged. It sniffed at his face, brushing his lips with its tiny whiskers, and Alex watched with dead eyes as it scampered free through the front door he had so kindly opened for it, and down the long road that lay ahead.

Final Thoughts: FUCKING TERRIBLE.