

Up here on Casings

a short novel

by

G.T. Hogan

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Jersey Kid Wins

Dwayne walked past the young trees to the big open area with the trucks and cars to a long wall and the corner that led to the big set of doors. He'd been alone for thirty minutes and walked to the building to find me and my housemates. From a Wal-mart check-out line I saw him and raised a finger high to say we were almost done. He stopped and waited. We fingered our shopping bags and left the building, then went back toward the wagon-truck around the corner to the spot that has a good view of the lowlands west and north. We drove back to the San Juans and it was good. We were done there for a month.

I wanted to kill Dwayne for a few reasons, for my benefit and for his. But none of my reasons proved good enough. He used to be someone I might not even mention. And there's honesty to that, having all your cards up on the table, or up on the mesa. Life is about others, I've been told, so I cannot ignore his story with my own which is not nearly as incredible. In a special way I knew him pretty well over the years, and with all that's happened, it would be stupid if I didn't tell the whole Dwayne story as best I can. And no doubt it's better now being about more than just a young CPA living off in the San Juan Mountains for a time.

It wasn't me that shot both guns, but you could say with deadly accuracy that I was partly responsible for him being hit. I brought him to the bullets. The bullets I did deliver, wrapped in a bow. If stupidity was a crime this could be a showcase.

I imagined several times what the local headlines might say: "New Jersey Kids Win!" or maybe just: "Jersey Kids Do Better Than Expected!" Whether we truly won at the trial could be debated. I also imagined the Colorado Deputy Attorney General walking to his clean white pickup with a grin on his face. "The drive down to Telluride will be nice," he might have thought. But he didn't know he'd be facing The Great Dwayne Serend.

When Dwayne was twenty-two, he gave me his extra driver's license—after he lost his then found it again, after getting a replacement. I was nineteen. We looked alike somewhat so it worked. "You two look so much alike!" people often said, which I never liked to hear, but it did get me into bars when I was pre-twenty-one. My pals got stopped for their fake IDs. But mine was real. You could say I had a little Dwayne in my pocket.

I should've understood the goodness of Dwayne in the San Juan Mountains sooner than I did. He was largely crowding my space. I was doing my best to pull a *Cool Hand Luke* or a hip *Guardian of the Galaxy*. I thought that success in finding anything, including l-o-v-e, is quite rational! The harder you try smartly the more likely you are to get it—and you're better off if you understand everything! Crazy people don't win very often.

As for me, I was on the somewhat lackadaisical mission to do something not boring, and getting far from family was also a welcome idea, Kearny and the whole Tri-State Area included. You might say my chief interest was to avoid complicated things.

Dwayne didn't pack a big wardrobe for his move, but if you ask me, he did bring his unique baggage—and his clean brown socks of course. Smelly feet he never had—he was so conscientious he never wore the same socks two days in a row.

In the shell of a nut, despite his long history of loner-hood, Dwayne is the king of infinite smarts, one of the most selfless people who ever lived—not to mention a lucky one. He stood out being regular though—not short or tall, one sixty or seventy with medium everything—shoe size, brown hair, etc. He was never wild and smiling like he was a suspicious devil’s advocate. He brought his obtuseness to the San Juans but he was always the serious logician. He also came close to doing the most altruistic thing the world has ever known, but that’s a side story. Some say his move to the southwest was a “great coincidence”—and to say he shot a kid out there is misleading, doesn’t explain it well, but I’ll get back to that. On top of all the major drama, I was indeed very surprised by the two things I found on his kitchen table down in the little Vegas.

There are three undeniable miracles in the Dwayne story: the Ouray day, Ms. Kim Carson, and the Just One Year—and there was also of course the trial. Overall, his and my story, because of his, might be an inspirational one. He’s always had a different angle on life, the productive, efficient, and rational, but always the caring, too, I have to admit. Over the decades he’s been tough to be around. But his knowledge and personality—despite any criticisms from me—turned out to be bi-products of a life force.

When I was fourteen, nine years ago now, I remember my mom in the next room talking about careers to my much older brother James, then a new college graduate. I’m sure what she said didn’t help him much, but somehow he turned out well. He helps run a gigantic magazine now.

“Writers are decent people, carpenters are great handymen, but bankers are the best providers,” she said, referring to the things her elder boy, and also her nephew Dwayne were doing at the time.

She liked to throw in the banker bit instead of lawyer or doctor for whatever reason. Maybe she just knew what was likely with the young men at hand. Anyway, she was helping my brother James deal with his first magazine job. As a young kid I did have a vague interest in doing what my elder brother was doing. Dwayne on the other hand, syndrome or not, probably had total clarity that he would become as good a carpenter as ever existed, not to mention a multi-talented building professional. Genius is a strong word, but you could safely say he carried a few of the symptoms.

Almost two years ago at almost the exact time that I migrated to Telluride, Dwayne a few days later made the recommended move to the tiny town of Las Vegas, New Mexico. It was three months after my college, and I was not at all thrilled that he was moving to the same remote region of the country where I was going. But I slowly digested it. Soon after of course, he visited the majestic San Juans with the nice little mining towns. I pretended it was no big deal.

At the Telluride coffee-shop bakery he met Arnold the Casings Mesa foreman. In contrast to many people in the San Juans, the foreman Arnold always locks his truck when he's not in it. Of course Dwayne noticed this immediately, as he noticed me not lock his van that day.

“You didn't lock it,” he stated.

“What? No, we'll just be a sec,” I said, and Dwayne said nothing more. He just looked around.

Arnold is a local with a rifle in the gun rack and a thirty-eight in the glove box. After Arnold got out of his truck, Dwayne watched him discreetly put his keys on the top of the driver's tire.

After getting our coffees, we met Arnold again outside. Arnold quietly gave us a thumbs-up from twenty feet away as he got in his truck. Then Dwayne made a somewhat loud comment about a guy he knew back east who used to carry just an axe handle on the gun rack. Arnold smiled and then admitted in his medium talking voice: “It’s mostly for show. Whereas my thirty-eight in the glove is the dangerous one,” Arnold said grinning. The difference was duly noted. There is hunting. Then there’s being armed. The twain aren’t the same.

On the firearm subject, I saw Dwayne near a handgun once before, that summer I worked with him at the Shore. It was a nine-millimeter owned and registered by one of the guys we worked with who was showing it off to Dwayne and a roofer. They were standing by the guy's truck. The property we were on was big and for that reason the guy didn't hesitate to fire at a tree across the yard, and then he passed it. Dwayne took it like it was just a new tool he hadn't used before then surprised me ten feet away by raising his arms and shooting at the same tree trunk much quicker than I expected. He kept a serious look on his face, nodded, looked at the gun again, and then said thanks to the guy. He laid it sideways in his left hand and offered it back.

Back when the Shore thing ended for Dwayne, my mom’s friend said that her brother had a company in Las Vegas, New Mexico where they were building “a new wing” on the community center. She said she'd be able to get Dwayne a job with one phone call, with her brother or with the non-profit community group. To paraphrase: “Dwayne will love it out there.” It was further described as so unique and small-town-ish, not to mention so different than north Jersey. Loving adults wanted to find a place that might become his new planet, some special out-of-the-way

place where he'd be well appreciated if not celebrated. Girls? Women? A social life with young adults? As far as I knew he'd never really had these, these people in his life, these complications—and the community center, noted by the mom friend back in Kearny, made this little Vegas seem like a nice oasis out in “the meadows.”

So, Dwayne moved out there and was no doubt quickly known as an extremely helpful person to have around. He lived alone near the center of the little town where he was probably loved for being so smart. It was a different world, but all things equal, he was no doubt happy there knowing that his cousin, yours truly, lived nearby. His numerous visits were proof.

Even after the big Ouray weekend, Dwayne didn't hesitate to visit Telluride again, but it wasn't just for the fun-with-guns field trip. The mayor had invited him to lunch.

It's Just a Coincidence!

My trip to the mountains began like this:

On September Eleven after a humid and boring August, Aubrey pulled up in his gas-powered wagon and we drove to the San Juans. He said we needed it. He came out here with his parents once, which is a bit strange I say for a family whose home country

is by coincidence in the armpit of Africa. I'll ask him more about this. In his colonial-French accent he said:

"When we're there, you won't want to leave."

"Yes, yes. Let's go."

Like the above excerpt, I kept a journal out there, but that's not what this is about. My personal junk isn't important at all, so it won't get included. At the beginning the time out there was all about my mindless observations of things. But most of that stuff was chopped, edited out of the Dwayne story. As I know better now, there are people who actually live life, and then there are the lazier ones who sit and observe those people. Like an immortal one, Dwayne rose weightlessly from the mud, or the deep snow I should say.

"Be safe out there!" my mom called from the porch when I left. But then Auntie B countered it with: "Be free!" And her choice of words got my attention. From Aubrey's shotgun I pressed the window down and smiled to them.

"Those sound like good ideas!" I said, and I gave them a vague thumbs up.

My mom looked sideways at Auntie B but Auntie B kept her eyes forward and smiled. Over in Botany Village where they lived, Dwayne was prepping for his move but it would be a few days. He had his whole van to pack.

In many ways, Dwayne was always a strange one, as anyone is. He always had a different life, and a much different

head. When something was popular he would say: “Oh, that’s so Jon. That’s Jon’s world.” And to myself I’d say: He just doesn’t understand. There’s the world, and then there’s him outside of it. He never seemed to fully get it. It’s not at all my world. There’s reality—and I’ve always been an outsider the more I think about him! Almost loud enough to be called yelling, he’d call me “Cousin Jon!” like I was the lost one. This in its lack of clarity is a good way to show the riddle-y cloud he always brought, whether he knew it or not.

When I was a kid, maybe ten, I heard the mom and dad talking once: “No, he’s not like other boys,” my dad said. My mom said nothing which meant she was in rare agreement. It then cemented in my head. I should say, it started to rattle in my head. From that day forward, there was a mysterious factor at play, and getting a simple, logical explanation of life never happened. “Dwayne’s personality” said nothing and everything all at once. The can of worms was open.

Maybe if I get a director's cut, I will get to include for artistic reasons all my poignant and creative journal stuff, all the non-events without Dwayne. We’ll see about that. I’m not very good at compartmentalizing. It all runs together. That’s partly why I figured out that math and accounting was a better professional choice. It keeps me better focused, and it never asks for interpretation—things are either right or wrong, not maybe a little this or maybe a little that. And one might argue it’s also a more reliable source of income.

In any case, my account of the wild Dwayne story is the feature—and we hope you’ll hear it all from the great young storytelling accountant, working to be a CPA-G, a Certified Public

Account-Giver! For that, we've got work to do. But enough—Dwayne is the man.

For the big, hypothetical move I had no conflicting plans. I needed to get away from the noisy world and the people I knew so I could think straight. Who knows what the future would bring. If I come back, I'll be a better man for it. This was the only plan I had.

But I quickly learned that my cousin Dwayne would be nearby again. I was justifiably confused and a bit mad. Once for ten minutes I expressed some of this.

“Are you kidding? This is a big country!”

“It's just a coincidence, Jonathan,” my mom said.

“What, he couldn't have found a place ten hours farther away?”

“It's a nice thing! It's great knowing you two will be so close to each other.”

I blew out air and then decided by default it was nothing really to stress about. I looked at the map again. He'd be not-too-terribly-far, but not-too-terribly-close either. Yes, it would be good for the family to have us in the same general region of the country. I'd deal with any inconveniences should they arise. Getting totally free was impossible I learned over the years.

It took a year more than expected, but you could say I did find myself.

The distant mystery place I couldn't say no to, so I jumped in Aubrey's green getaway wagon as soon as he pulled up. The

first night on the road we stayed at a Motel 6 in St. Louis. Then we drove the rest of the way to Marcus' mom's house in Placerville, getting there at midnight, just a few miles from the old mining town of T'Hell-u-ride.

* * *

The next day, our first day, we hiked around. After pizza, we hiked higher on the east side well above the highest houses to the steeper base of the valley wall. We went along above town and came down without a trail to the flats by the river and re-entered the village on a western side street. Too much beauty there to take it in casually, nonchalantly, even in a long panoramic stare—can't put a surreal grip on it. T-ride can't be summed up as merely sublime.

Day Three was my first Sunday, and not like any before. We woke up with fresh snow covering most of the yellow aspen leaves in the mountain woods. To the south the view was of Wilson Mesa. The other views were all high mountain peaks covered by up-over-ten-thousand-foot snowfalls, explained friend Marcus. And the oxygen was a little thin for a sea-level ocean-coaster. But the air demanded respect for its super-dry purity and abundance—not at all mixed with any manmade junk. All at once you smell every leaf and needle in the world.

Marcus said: "I found our place. We get it tomorrow."

After a small morning hike we moved into our shack, our hovel—"our Sixties hogan," Marcus quipped. But we didn't stay long. We just tossed in our stuff and went out again.

Then we got jobs, faster and easier than expected. Alpaca Builders hired Aubrey and me two minutes after we walked in the

office, both as semi-skilled laborers, but I got a dollar more per hour for my questionable promise of carpentry skills, thanks to the teachings of Mr. Dwayne and a summer job or two. We left happy and went back to the shack to sit on the porch and look around at things. I wrote a postcard back to Kearny: "Made it here safely, already employed."

We also had a chat about girlfriends.

Marcus's girlfriend he's been dating since high school and she's now at the University of Southern California. When I met her briefly at school, she was not the archetypal California girlfriend I half expected. I met her in Boston once and she surprised me. She's five foot even or five one, and also a little funny-shaped, which is the best way to describe her physical presence. She was just hilarious and confident, and Marcus justifiably seems to like that a lot. He's maybe found the One. Her laugh was convincing, original, hilarious, and probably addictive. Visiting us, Miss Christy cracked a memorable line: "I tried to dump Marcus several times. But he kept crawling back to me." Marcus looked over at me then and nodded.

Aubrey's girlfriend back in the Congo a few years ago won a national beauty pageant, Aubrey told us, but he didn't seem to have a lot of pride in that.

"She's humble and therefore she isn't terrible," he started. "But she does think that she's God's gift to man. And I don't mean to mankind. I mean God's gift to the male gender. She's too used to getting looked at. Pretty girls have it rough," Aubrey said smiling wide.

"What about you?" Marcus asked. "Still solitary?"

I tried to smile and shake my head at the severe use of solitary, instead of single, but I didn't. I wasn't sure at first how to respond to that. I slowly took a sip of coffee, and nodded affirmatively, with a "Yup" to make it sound purposeful. The beautiful future was wide open.

Later that morning, Marcus and Aubrey said they were both bagel-hungry so we walked down to the bakery.

"I wanna get drunk on bagels!" Marcus announced.

Inside the bakery was the warm freshly-baked smell, but also the distinct odor of fennel—and it was definitely not caraway as Aubrey first suggested. He then guessed it was the mystery of the "everything" bagels.

"But nobody eats fennel for breakfast," clarified Aubrey.

Marcus then said he smelled nothing besides the gobs of onion and garlic. Probably then talking to himself, in his quiet independent way, he added:

"What is licorice, anyway? And why the s-h? Why not licorice?" He paused while hand-grabbing a bagel deep in the middle. "Was a person eating fennel and they were like, wow, this'd be a great candy?" These were obviously questions to himself so he didn't complain when we ignored him.

"It makes no sense," I said to Aubrey, and I let it go since we were leaving. The bakery was packed so we got a big warm white bag to go. Back at the shack, the fennel was gone—the "everything" bagels smelled more like regular "everythings."

“See? Like I said,” Marcus argued back in the kitchenette, like it was a totally separate discussion he was having. “The onion is the guilty one, but the garlic puts up a fight!”

Addressing up front any question about the housemates, Marcus and Aubrey, they were just who I happened to be with, the reason I was there in the first place, so unavoidably they’ll get portrayed a few times, even though they weren’t in Ouray or on the Mesa those days.

This story is mostly about Dwayne and the Big Three Occurrences, and I don’t want to over-develop or embellish it with conversations about the environment or politics—which are supposed to sound so natural in “a novel.” I’ll try to tell the Dwayne story and move on. As for me, I’m in a different place now, more grounded you might say—my center of gravity a little lower, closer to the earth’s core—or maybe back on earth you might say.

In one of those early days, my mom called to check in. We knew without saying it out loud that we wouldn’t talk more than once a month or so, so she probably knew it was counted as her early-Fall outreach. I love my parents, as they say—no big complaints here—but I show my love by not bothering them with constant updates, and they seem likewise happy with that. There were other more important things to spend our time on—at least that was my working theory. Mom updated me on her little brother Uncle Frederick. She’d visited him in the Newark hospital. He wasn’t doing well.

“Uncle Freddie was a gentleman scholar,” my mom said as she always reminded me, and she was talking about him as if he was already dead, as if she knew the future. “He made us laugh,”

she happily said. He was her and Aunt B's only other sibling. As a kid, I saw him once a year on New Year's Day in the early afternoon. In my head it was a magic moment from the past that stayed magic because I saw him only once a year and it was always the same, predictable and reliable. He taught U.S. History at a high school in Bayonne, and was, as my mom always put it, "an astute bachelor." For me, that certain amount of relative distance—excuse the play on words here—was a nice peaceful contrast to seeing the first cousin every single darn day.

Then Auntie B joined the conversation.

They were together in our front room back in Kearny and I then talked to both of them when they put me on speaker phone. I also had it on speaker but then I picked it up when I realized it wasn't for the other two who had just walked in.

In Kearny, my dad walked through the room and said: "How's it going out there? Everything good?" He's great at asking yes or no questions to keep things succinct.

"Jon, together we also want to chat with you about your sweet cousin."

"What did I do?" I asked half joking.

"For us, you're like a human surveillance camera on Dwayne," my mom simile-ed.

"You're like a one-man EMT out there!" offered Auntie B.

“Sure, a one-man EMT with no medical training, let alone no Band-aids,” I joked smartly. “But yeah, the spectrum, let's talk about that,” I suggested.

“It's not that simple, Jon,” by mom said.

“Who said it was simple?” I asked.

“Yes, we didn't. I realize that. But Jon, I know how you think,” said Mom.

“What are you talking about, you know how I think? I didn't say anything.”

“Auntie B, I apologize for this,” I said presumptively.

“Hey, Mr. Jon, we ask that you help us here, for my sake,” said Auntie B.

I was getting a little stressed by their unclear wishes.

“Just reach out a little. Is that too much?”

“Hey, I love him, but don't put that kind of pressure on me,” I said. But with that statement I lightened up a bit. It sounded like an amusing overstatement so I went with it.

“Of course. Honestly, he's like a brother to me,” I left it with.

“Let's all stay in touch,” my mom closed with.

We didn't, really, but it was a nice shared remark.

I'm not at all a racist, but I have known two other Dwaynes. The white guy spelled it D-u-a-n-e and the African-American guy spelled it D-w-a-y-n-e which is how my cousin decided it should be spelled, so go figure. He just preferred it that way. The w-a-y way is not how it's spelled on his birth certificate. When he was thirteen or fourteen he made the switch. He said it was because of the cowboy actor in really old movies, John Wayne.

When I was sixteen back in Kearny I took a big empty salad bowl back over to Dwayne's mom. Dwayne was sitting in their kitchen with the owner's manual for a new microwave. He was wearing his light blue work shirt buttoned most of the way up and tucked into his jeans, which were as usual exactly the right length, instead of being an inch or two longer and casual around the ankles. Blue jeans always hung straight on Dwayne, and that always made me wince. What else do you need to judge a man? I figured.

Below that, he had on his brown wool socks as he always did, with his five or ten pairs.

I said something like: "Hey, Dwayne. What's that?"

"My mom got a new microwave," he said.

"Huh," I started. "What do you need the owner's manual for?" I said as a compliment, figuring it wasn't as smart as he was.

"I always read them front to back, before I put them in the trashcan."

"Wow. I never do that," I said with honesty.

“Never do what?”

“I never read them.”

“You don't fix things. That's not who you are.”

“Yeah, well.”

Dwayne always let other people see themselves as the less smart. I used to think life was all about who looked pretty good in their long shorts and was faster. But slow and steady apparently wins the race—according to the old tortoise and the hare.

“Mom wants to make turkey burgers. I told her I'd see how long it takes.”

“I'd just press the turkey-burger button,” I said as a half-joke, thinking there probably was a button like that on new ones.

“What?” he asked, computing the inaccuracy of it. “There's no turkey-burger button,” he said back quickly. He kept his eyes on the manual and didn't flinch. “I'm looking for how many watts it uses,” he added.

“Watts? You mean like a light bulb?” I said without mind, stepping back to the back door. That time he stayed quiet, maybe just focusing, but probably not at all surprised that I would say something else that wasn't smart. I was just the younger one. And no, I didn't know that microwaves came in watts. But I did know after that.

These days there might be a person in our life who we just don't want around. Maybe it's a helpful person who we don't think we need. Maybe we just can't handle so much analysis and

explanation from such a “great” intense teacher. Sure, the helpful person forces us to realize problems we didn’t know we had, or at least didn’t want to think about. If it isn’t broke, don’t fix it. Don’t oil or grease or WD40 or wire-brush the rust off, especially if you’re not using it. We’re not going to need that thing until later, so why worry about it now, that rusty door latch, that broken belt in the vacuum, that small tear in the leather seat that will get bigger if we don’t stitch it right away. Dwayne always got yours truly to see the imperfect side of life, and to do things about it, or at least to watch him do it. Until recently I was the one with the purely lucky life. If it was only me, I’d have chosen not to worry about it. We’d have easily given a small problem a whole day of wondering what to do, or who to call for help. Then we probably would’ve paid too much to get a thing fixed that wouldn’t have needed pro service if only Dwayne had been around. He would’ve done it for no charge! If we’re very lucky, maybe we have somebody smarter than a girlfriend, boyfriend or spouse, who’s even more helpful!

I ask the world as helpful as they might be how a person falls asleep at night without a few happy thoughts? Is this where delusions come from? What do we do when our reality isn’t totally sufficient? What about fantasies, the somewhat realistic ones? I never graduated to that next level, where everybody is kept far away for their legitimate strangeness. I just stayed the same, a young guy who figured the friendly truth was real, and once you figured it out, you didn’t have to worry. But people don’t always agree! That’s life I learned. But I don’t think Dwayne ever had it that simple, acknowledging what people agreed with or what they didn’t. He made connections out loud that didn’t matter, stating truths like who went to who’s college or who works for the same company that so-and-so’s parent worked for. In a bar he’d survey the room, look off at the far stuff then turn his head abruptly

surveying all the faces and the TVs, doing an official head-count, accounting for who was there and if he recognized anyone. People wondered what the hell we were doing. Yes, it brought attention, and a tension, to our table.

* * *

Our shack in Telluride smelled like a clay and mud mixture and was old with plenty of rot under the porch from the ground up to the door, with the more visible stringer on the right being a little soft, plus half the three bottom steps. Enough rot you'd think it was hard to get the place rented. But either way, we were lucky to get it. Marcus' mom must know people.

On the first day at work on lunch break we listened to stories about shooting bull elk and dragging them over hills, through woods and across rivers to pickups. Apparently when running mad they care little about small trees, just plow through and knock 'em all down. We also got a heavy dose of what will be the daily vista: giant mountains everywhere.

Geographical landmarks noted: Western Slope, Four Corners, Ouray, Opher, Sawpit, Dallas Divide, Casings Mesa, the Black Canyon, Ajax, Bridal Veil Falls, Sneffles Highline, Jud Wiebe trail, Trout Lake, Hidden Lake, Uncompahgre National Forest. Places to go.

Who lives in the San Juans? Skiers, snowboarders, mountain-bikers, snow-shoers, skilled laborers, carpenters, masons, plumbers, lawyers, cops, real-estaters, restaurant owners, bar owners, bartenders, drinkers, drunks, waiters, waitresses, coffee servers, coffee drinkers, various-types-of-latte drinkers, double-espresso drinkers, otherwise hot beverage holders, dogs and people who live with these dogs, boutique salespeople, ski-lift

operators, ticket checkers, white kids with dread-locks, traveling band members, homeless travelers, home owners, dreamers, renters, deli-workers, skateboarders, roller-bladers, busboys, as well as haircutters that don't do much business, makers of and stars of bad movies, brew-masters, bierstubers, truck and bus drivers, ski-patrollers, avalanche controllers, school teachers, newspaper people, women who dance hypnotically to reggae, wood choppers, sidewalk sitters, librarians, hikers, bikers, booksellers, photographers, llama herders, hunters, and many, many bakers.

Up here with so many amazing mountain vistas, you have to turn your attention inward, to the lap or hands where the relative scope of appreciation is brought back to previously understood levels. Like a crazy person in a mental ward, we need to stop looking up and instead focus on our hands so as not to be overwhelmed. Need a small house or a room to retire to, if only to prevent insanity from some kind of visually-induced cerebral implosion, trying to forestall it with the antibodies of brief controlled glances, measured doses to counter-balance the otherwise unavoidable exposures to all that sits afoot and aloft.

In Mountain Village, working indoors with sawdust and no dust mask coupled with the super dry air isn't at all helping the sinuses. After a day, Aubrey said he woke up with red snot.

After second day at work, from our shack's porch, I surveyed the new view again and saw the jobsite of a house getting built down village, eight or nine blocks away on the south side, with matching pickup trucks and a poured foundation. It stood out plainly with its yellow caution tape, orange cones, and sculptures of frozen mud pushed up and around by truck and car tires.

Note the only reason you'll see descriptions of this other jobsite and from the work-sites is because I wouldn't care less about house construction if it wasn't for Dwayne and his history on me. Plus, this house getting built within view of the shack was a standout in the picturesque little old-and-skinny small-house town.

The Great Dwayne

Because of the San Juan events, everything about the life of cousin Dwayne has dominated the local universe. He used to be a guy I wouldn't even bring up, like a can of worms I was happy to leave closed and not worry about. My own life was much more important.

Little Big Man, he called me when I was younger, the nickname for a younger cousin in an adventurous Native-American kind of way. Sometimes it was Little Big Jon—not quite the big guy Little John from Robin Hood. When I asked why he never used my real name, he laughed abruptly and said it was over my head. “It's a complicated combination of things” he'd say to get away with not fully explaining it. My existence wasn't important. And he rarely talked to me directly, but only like there was a minor supporting character nearby. I didn't like it.

When he was nineteen, ignoring the “World Wide Waste of Time,” as he called it, Dwayne went to trade school and became a certified residential and commercial plumber. He was a plumber in Kearny for two years then moved to the Shore because he found a plumbing job in a big new condo development. I think he was also

ready to try living somewhere else. His boss in Kearny mentioned the Sea Bright thing for whatever reason, and Dwayne jumped on it. The bike shop was a weekend job.

At the Shore the new company liked him a lot for knowing a lot about everything once the plumbing work was done. So then he became an uncertified HVAC tech, an electrician, and a better commercial carpenter. That's how the younger cousin got his second Shore job as a nail-banger after the bike shop gig, which was something I was proud of in my nice tool belt and Carhartt work jacket. Professional proof we saw that he was much more than just a plumber. At home in Kearny, he started as a bike mechanic, but then went to plumbing school in Newark, which upped his pay grade.

He went further than most, getting pretty darn good at everything. The plumbing certificate, unofficial HVAC work, and also then an electrician's license—are all a lot more difficult than a simple nail-banger job or that of a “skilled” laborer who just carries things. Even good hammer work requites knowledge, I've learned, with the elbow and the wrist, with the swing, speed, force, aim, and a certain level of fearlessness. Dwayne went out of his way to teach me these things, so I'd better appreciate that banging nails was not the no-brainer that I used to think it was.

It was the middle of our last Jersey summer—well before the moves—when college friend Efraim with a big smile asked what I was up to. I told him nada mucho and that I had no plans. I told him I was out there at the Shore because my mom had told me to go help Dwayne pack up his stuff because he was leaving. I'd accepted the family chore without question and went with my mom's car and helped Dwayne close up shop.

But before Dwayne and I drove back that day, we were down at the docks having fish and chips and fried clams and all that good stuff and I couldn't help but ask him, making conversation, why it was that he was leaving the Shore, and he didn't say anything. He just looked off in the distance at several different spots that he seemed to be investigating. With his straight face he just said he was done there. He said he wasn't sure what he was doing next, but he was going back to Kearny for the rest of the summer just to think about things.

"That makes sense," I said to him, just that I knew thinking about things was always good, deciding carefully what to do next in your life.

Then I saw Efraim, and he roped me into doing another month. He said I could help him rebuild their garage and sleep on the couch in their living room. Good or bad, I'm too spontaneous with these things, so after three or four seconds I agreed to it. Then I said I was heading back to Kearny but I'd be back in a few days.

"....for the fun to start again," Efraim finished my sentence with. He grinned his big grin, slapped me a handshake and welcomed me for not jumping on the leaving train: "Hey now, Jersey redneck!" It made me smirk to have more Shore plans, but Dwayne was moving back home and he ignored the latest developments. But he did say this:

"Why did he call you that? That was an insult."

"Naw, he meant it in a friendly way." Efraim was not always the easiest to decipher, but my answer was simply right.

When the garage job ended I was still not in any rush to do anything. Then Marcus called and suggested I drive out there in

September with Aubrey. So for no good reason besides having no reason not to, I embraced the idea. I knew nothing about the town of Telluride—only that I'd heard of it and was sure it'd be a great place to be for a while. I remember the San Juans were mentioned in an old Clint Eastwood movie when a search party was down in the lower, drier New Mexico territory, looking for Joe Kidd perhaps.

Then prior to the trip, the two weeks around Labor Day were terrifying, in an albeit innocent way, unlike any I'd had before, in terms of Dwayne's research and what we discussed. But, I knew in my heart of hearts that it was only a very short time before I would be free from it all. And yes, it was a highly strange coincidence that Dwayne's new destination turned out to be the little Las Vegas, which though hours and hours away was in the grand scheme of things very close to the little mining villages up in the Colorado mountains.

* * *

Maybe we all have that family member or cousin who makes us wonder about what real happiness is, makes us at least choke up thinking about their lives twice instead of just once. If we don't have that person, that heart-wrenching story nearby, for the most part we're lucky.

Syndrome or not, the fact is that Dwayne was always a lot smarter. He was like the C3PO of handymen always with a plethora of information. For that reason he gets my serious respect, my adulation beyond measure. It's like having Obi-Wan as a mentor but with a droid's personality and a whole lot stronger than C-3PO to boot. With him as head primo, my goal here is to show the impact others have had on my un-rich but pretty easy life.

The only near-fix of Dwayne's happened sometime near the end of that summer when he was back in Kearny and I was at Efraim's. He came close to doing the absolute pinnacle of all selfless maneuvers, the ridiculous and impossible. It was in August or very early September—six months before the big Ouray day, and a week more before the crazy shooting accident. But I don't want to describe this maneuver in detail. It would distract us away from the many things that actually happened. The Ouray day was incredible, a week later the long-distance rifle accident was as wild as wild gets, and the subsequent events, let alone those, were simply not at all expected. Even so, I will still describe what he almost did back in Kearny. Now it's just a harmless drunken anecdote, a "funny story."

"Thanks to YouTube and will power," Dwayne said in September, "doing it myself made perfect sense." But it was definitely not a regular DIY project. Doing it at all made no sense.

On the critical subject of the male gender, there are so many deficiencies out there. An untrustworthy personality might find itself coupled with any kind of strength or coordination, let alone money-power—or just comfort with a weapon! It's far too easy to make a man—have a man—be an unpredictable animal. Let's leave it at that for now.

* * *

To add to all this, in mid September, Dwayne mentioned once what he called "*The New Jerseyer* thing", which apparently brother James wanted to ask me about, but I assumed it was for setting up a subscription to the magazine at the new Colorado address, because he could get me "a great deal," he always said. But then I forgot about it partly because I didn't live there yet and had no address—nothing to think about until later.

James, after I moved out there, asked one time when we were phone-chatting whether Dwayne had mentioned “the syndrome thing.” I was confused and said something like: “Of course not. He’s never mentioned it,” the Up-drome, I called it, “let alone think about it.” I was about to say that Dwayne did mention “*The New Jerseyer* thing,” which I confidently figured was about getting the magazine out there—but I got distracted, away from these non-issues, whatever they were, and elder brother James let it go.

James, I was guessing, just wanted to sound concerned about our beloved cousin Dwayne in a general way, with Dwayne’s new move out to New Mexico near a “supportive” relative. But again, the absence of any big news or headlines, like an official diagnosis of the mysterious Dwayne brain, let alone the involvement of a caring professional was an ongoing given. He saw a “head doctor” once that August but it was just to try Zolof. In conclusion, the “syndrome thing” and “*The New Jerseyer* thing” were both old subjects and a waste of time to worry about, if you asked the college grad.

* * *

Yours truly is the much younger one of two brothers, but Dwayne was over a lot and filled the gap like a middle kid. To me he was more like a brother than my actual brother. Firstly, brother James the chosen one is much older and in a different world, what you might call successful, at least in a prestigious, commercial magazine kind of way, as crazy as it sounds.

At one point Dwayne was fourteen, I was ten, and the highly-impressive elder-statesman brother James was eighteen. It was like the young man James was part of a different generation, a superior graduate having been accepted into everywhere, including

Mom and Dad's alma-mater. Whenever Dwayne was over, which was often, he was an ignored witness to the great praise of James, the intelligent one, with my parents giving James their full attention. It was borderline worship for the oldest son making such tremendous strides, for being “so successful” and one of the “brightest people on the planet,” whatever the ‘rents meant by that, whatever was on the table or in the headlines.

Once Mom said something like “Honey, don't worry about your brother. You're taking care of your cousin Dwayne, and we appreciate that more than you know.”

At those dinners, it was like Dwayne and I were sitting behind an observation window while my parents had a dinner with their favorite one. But, when Dwayne wasn't over, James would make a small effort for the dinner to be more fun for me the young one, to remind my parents that I, in fact, existed.

“Hey, enough from me,” James would say. “Let's hear what we learned at school today. Or, what we learned after school!” he'd say with a wink.

It was nice. I couldn't complain. But, Dwayne and his mom were over pretty often, and only twice did that actually happen. Dwayne and his mom were largely ignored, “out of respect,” my dad once said. In short, our nuclear family, besides me of course, knew that it wasn't going to be the cousin Dwayne who taught us anything over dinner. We were under questionable medieval leadership—though nothing physical or abusive—simply very boring times they were. Dwayne must have just listened and processed, maybe resting up for a later introduction of himself. We have to ask now: who was the thought-filled smart one at that table?

Dwayne's mom lives in Botany Village not far from Kearny—and she likes her privacy so we won't say precisely where. His mom and my mom are sisters and they're close in age. His dad was a high school chemistry teacher, but he died from a heart attack while jogging when Dwayne was three, so he never knew the real Dwayne. And the Up syndrome as far as I know was never even discussed. No, I never got stuck in the mud trying to figure out the cause of autism and Asperger's, let alone ADHD, etc. Maybe the world has become a disgusting, artificial, overcrowded place, and for whatever reason the spectrum has gotten louder over the last thirty years. It'd be like if grandmother got a brain tumor at age eighty, I wouldn't then consume myself with trying to solve cancer. First of all, I have no medical let alone science training, and second, just trying to make one life a little better is much different than trying to cure a whole disease. As for autism, my hat is off to people who have that nearby. It's a whole different world than just having a cousin who might have a mild case of the Up-drome.

His departure from the shore was part and parcel because of an interpersonal issue, my mom explained, with the contracting company he worked for being taken over by the kids—a young woman and young man—when the father-founder had a minor stroke. “They conspired against me,” Dwayne told his mom—then she told my mom, who naturally told me.

Dwayne was talking to the new woman-boss one day and apparently said she “didn't understand the gifts he was bringing to her,” which she took the wrong way. Dwayne no doubt meant gifts or skills he brought to the company. So they let him go—for downsizing reasons, they said—at the beginning of it, but others soon, they fibbed to Dwayne—but who knows.

“There’s something very wrong with going from completely busy to not at all needed,” Dwayne said to the back of his van the next afternoon. He wasn’t talking to me but I heard him from the shotgun seat. He was organizing his van-gear much more than was needed. Then he said a keeper: “Good tools are more reliable than people are,” he said in a calmer, quieter voice. This stuck hard in my memory for how simple, succinct and totally true it was.

A “minor interpersonal issue,” my mom repeated to me later, and another dead winter, made it a very good idea for Dwayne not to stay on the coast through another off-season. It was after two quiet winters out there that he needed—it was determined by the moms—a fresh start somewhere. That brought him back to Kearny as maybe a launch site. That much I’ve pieced together, but I have no idea when he started his deranged researching.

Vegas in New Mexico won the prize—and as the grapevine told me, he was pretty agreeable to the idea of a brand new location. When it first came up, the idea of a tiny town out West was glorified by both moms—distant and therefore romantic! Enthusiastically embraced is an understatement, not only for which state this little Las Vegas was in, but for family back home it was just plain exotic and wonderful.

“Dwayne’s looked at pictures!” my mom said, days before Aubrey swung by and offered me a ride. Dwayne took the suggestion and announced quietly that he’d go out there and give it a look. The moms were highly supportive. In fact there was a loving push, downright encouragement for him to do something wild. But wild it wasn’t. Just small and far away. The highly-smart astronaut explores Pluto.

His First Visit to Hollywood

First Wednesday, Aubrey worked on the roof with Cody. Aubrey said the kid stood up and raised his arms and said I'm king of the world, or something to that effect, I'm free! But his feet slipped. He fell hard and fast on his ass and started to slip and slide off the roof, but Aubrey grabbed and caught him, but then they both slipped and slid the rest of the way off, sixteen feet to the ground. The deep drift next to the house saved them. We saw it all from the boss's trailer.

The next day Aubrey said he breathed in too much drywall again, which will kill him soon if he doesn't get a dust mask. They don't warn of this at the university, as British alums might say. If Dwayne was there, he'd make sure his workers were wearing them. And note the lost appendages and other ailments that have stricken the other guys on the site. On a previous day apparently Sal cut off one of his seven remaining fingers, and Sal has mostly gold teeth shining through his steel-wooly beard. The nine-fingered boss came and shook hands with us. Howard is around thirty percent deaf. Karl has a lazy eye which he hides behind sunglasses. Carlo wakes up every morning with a sinus headache "that would kill a lesser man," he said. One of the old stone layers has three or four remaining teeth. Other stone guy seems to be working with maybe half his wits at the most. Yours truly and friends do have a thin film of urbanity on their not-rough skin, which does impair them a bit.

On breaks the crew seemed happy enough, but all smiles and laughs got interrupted by coughing, sneezing and phlegming,

and then we went back to work, lunch boxes emptied and tossed onto truck seats. And a big smart dog visited us on breaks, a Burmese mountain dog that knew food was around. Everybody fed him. And also these outrageous fat birds that eat out of your hand once they trust you enough. A motley gathering at its best, the people and the animals. Dog clearly loved himself as much as he loved the people. He barreled off before we were done.

Thursday, we hitched a ride from work with a guy named Hank driving a bomb, a boat, a cruise ship, the last thing you'd want in the mountains. The car was half rust, and the other half was rusting up to meet it. Hank had a thick hanging mustache and a broken-in cowboy hat. He gave us beers from his open twelve-pack on the floor—which we put in our jacket pockets. Hank told us he sells horse-rides up on Wilson Mesa. In the summer he has upwards of a hundred horses, he said. At work though, Howard said Hank isn't actually a cowboy. "Just rents 'em and sells pony rides." Then Howard paused. "But that's cowboy enough for lots of folks."

After dinner that night I talked with Marcus about college—classes, parties, friends—an authority on the last two, he having skipped a few. Then I started Wallace Stegner's All The Little Live Things which was recommended. Next is the bigger Angle of Repose which apparently won a Pulitzer.

Dwayne then called from New Mexico after we'd been out there for only two weeks. As usual, half the things he said on the phone were just plain awkward. That I thought meant he was crazy. I'm the nicest guy in the world but at times he made me feel a bit evil.

"Hey, when can I come up to Tell-u-ride?!"

I responded only with appropriate enthusiasm. “Hey, hey! How’s it going down in New Mexico?” I said happily changing the subject.

But he talked for a minute about directions and distances, not about life down there.

“When can Little Jon get a visit from his older cousin?” he then asked bluntly.

“Alright, you know me,” I told him. “I’ll figure it out,” I said with a friendly laugh.

“Don’t take too long!” he answered with an immediate hang-up.

Okay, then, I said to myself, not as psyched as clearly he was.

Friday, the phone rang after work. Dwayne called to prep us for his first visit. It was a new exciting place and he had to make sure we were home.

“Little Jon!” he announced without saying more. He always liked to say the nickname only he had for me.

“Sir Dwayne-a-lot!” I started with. “When are we going to see you?” I asked with slightly elevated enthusiasm.

“Eight PM!”

He was at a Durango gas station.

“Wow. Cool,” I said. Then to make conversation I asked a bit more. “Hey, how long since you drove out here? You didn’t tell me last week.”

“Eleven days.” He said answering my question directly. “The van broke down but I fixed it. Then I went to Qdoba in Kansas City.” He paused to control his runaway details with a car beeping in the background. “Soon I’ll get Little Jon down to New Mexico—introduce the young newbie to all the important people.” He mentioned his nearby state again as if to gauge my actual interest. Even so it did make sense for me to go down at some point, to have a look at his new little getaway. But that would happen at a later date, I figured correctly.

He’s getting here pretty darn soon, I remember thinking—two hours to prep the mind if not the shack for a guest.

He got to the shack’s side street at eight-o-five after dark, and his eyes were wide open as if to let in more light. Up on the porch he smiled for a few seconds, but it turned to a frown as he examined the porch under the door light, then the view of all the town lights—then turning his back on the view, he inspected the door, how smoothly or less-than-smoothly it slid open.

“So Little Jon is here! In Telluride! In Hollywood!” he said after the brief inspection. No, he never talked to me directly, but talked about me in the third person when I was standing right in front of him or at least nearby. If I wasn’t, I wasn’t even considered. After a quiet minute of putting his stuff down, he said mostly to himself: “...must survey this place, this village, this town.” Then he went to the bathroom. Aubrey and Marcus were both home and quiet in respect of Dwayne’s arrival. When Dwayne was in the banyo, Aubrey looked at me and grinned.

Marcus did nothing, like he'd had a bad day at work and was recovering or dealing with our shack now having a guest. He grabbed a bag of chips, sat down to relax and let out an audible exhale.

Out of the bathroom Dwayne picked up his bag again and dropped it by the edge of the main room carpet, then got to asking questions again, to the room in general or to the airspace.

“So... what will I see tomorrow? Where's Little Jon gonna take me?”

“Well, the first place we're gonna take you is to Wal-mart in Montrose. If we'd known you were coming, we would've planned something else—but it's a needed shopping trip.”

“What?!! No, I'll stay here, walk around and inspect the town. (pause) Wait until I tell everybody. Little Jon in the mountains!”

Dwayne didn't go to Wal-mart that time but a month later he went because it was part of the “San Juan experience.” Of course, he had no skis with him, not being a skier, not really caring less about skiing in a ski town, in the winter. He was visiting the new location of his great young cousin. He doesn't actually think of me as great, he just treats me that way, as if it's an important aspect of how others think. The family is optimistic. The young one has potential.

The next morning, he put this big wood box in the middle of the floor by our counter.

“I made you this case, but you left it back east when you came out here. It’s Mohena,” he said, “A close relative of teak.”

“Wow. It’s beautiful!” I told him, and it was of course. “Not sure I’m gonna need a big wooden briefcase out here. But it’s nice!” I added to make sure I ended well.

“It’s not a briefcase. Too wide. It’s a box for your tools when you’re not using them.”

“Oh!” I said, mystified. It was like a small piece of furniture with a padded leather handle, a good place to put things but not a good thing to carry. I thought about it for a few seconds and was sure he was suggesting that my construction jobs were temporary, not part of whom I was, so it would be time soon to put my things away in a nice box.

Saturday morning Marcus and Aubrey beeped the horn outside the bakery at nine fifteen. It was time for a Walmart trip, and they said I was supposed to be back home.

“Well, you know me,” I said to be droll. “I like to be casually late to things.”

“Early bird gets the worm!” said Aubrey. He was still quite impressed with all the offerings at Walmart.

“He might wake up early, but he’s no early bird,” Marcus said to Aubrey.

“Worms, schmerms,” was all I said back.

And then we were an hour-plus away in a huge Montrose parking lot where there’s just enough to look at to make it

somewhat bearable, nothing to do but sit back and try to enjoy it, as Marcus and I were waiting in the wagonaire this time for Aubrey who went back into Sam's to "just grab something." Utter plot-less-ness, a fair description of existence—and likers of road trips, the philosophy. Young men with no master plan, no firm grip on a single direction or major intrigue, just as no major intrigue seems to have its grip on us. Here it is: portraits of dopey guys as young ones.

If I was more mechanically minded, like Dwayne, I would never have written the above pointless anecdotes. I would have thought about other things more urgently, in a more detailed way, and gotten more done—like maybe a to-do list.

In the Wal-mart parking lot there was warm strawberry-rhubarb pie floating around. Either there was a bakery very near the Wal-mart or else someone wafted it out of their open car.

Then back in the village was a sterile cleanliness and new industrial carpet smell inside a rustic-looking real estate office called Fifth Ave Real Estate. Marcus got us to go in there on our way home because he had friends who might visit and he was getting pamphlets. We also figured it was important to step in once. Of course the place has no carpeting, just the painfully clean smell of it over the vintage knotty wood floor.

We were quietly looking at pictures of the choice giant houses then Aubrey spoke up.

"Wait, so are you saying that when your house is super damn expensive that things don't break as often? Or is it that you're so damn rich that you don't even notice that things are getting fixed all the time."

“Both,” said Marcus.

“Yeah, by the help,” I added as if I knew what that was.

There were many look-alike log cabins that cost five or ten million.

“Wow,” said Marcus. “I’d like to see one of these cabins.”

“Your President Lincoln grew up in one of these?” Aubrey asked smiling.

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t this one,” Marcus said, looking at a smaller deluxe cabin that was on sale for seven five.

* * *

The big news of that last summer in New Jersey was that Dwayne agreed to sample psychoactive medication. He saw a neighborhood psychiatrist and that led to a trial period, which lasted a few days. But then he decided to make the move out to New Mexico and start a new life, for which he didn’t take the meds—just his natural self helping the world.

On that first visit of Dwayne’s we saw Krapp’s Last Tape by Samuel Beckett in the theater on Main Street—all about a depressing old man. Only good thing is Mr. Krapp realizes he made a mistake when he gave up looking for love, for the sake of his shaky writing career. Marcus and Aubrey said it was boring. But Dwayne as usual perplexed me saying he loved it.

“Do you guys know other playwrights?” I asked. The housemates were with me but Dwayne was walking up ahead of us.

“Yeah, What’s-his-name Shakespeare. He was pretty good,” Aubrey said with a smile.

“Sure! If he really existed!” Marcus confronted us with. “Bill Shakes-sword, Billy Wiggle-spear, Will Brandish-weapon—don’t you guys see it?!”

“Okay,” I responded. “But maybe it’s just a pen name, for the guy who wrote it all.”

“Yeah, sure. Maybe a pen name for a guy named Bob... Cheesecake.”

“You guys ever imagine yourselves as characters? It’s fun when you connect to one.”

“We know which one you’d be,” said Marcus to Aubrey.

“No, no, no. Mr. Othello was a fair-skinned Moor, living up near the Mediterranean.”

But Marcus was on a roll. “I know who you’d be, oh tormented one,” he said to me, “You’re the Prince of Denmark and we’d be your Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.”

“Yeah, side-kicks—to the Man of La Mancha,” I answered for who-knows-why, with there being no connection to the Spaniard Don Juan.

At the pizza place after the play, we saw a guy say to his date loudly that he stuck his tongue down some other girl’s throat. “But she had nothing to do with how I think!” he clarified with a touch of drunken confidence. Marcus put a wide-eyed look on his

face and sat up straight with his eyebrows up. The young woman wasn't surprised and left the guy there. Aubrey and Marcus then agreed with smiles and nods that she did the right thing. Dwayne was paying no attention. He held the edge of the table firmly and leaned back sideways to inspect the legs and feet, as it had a slight wobble. He folded up a paper napkin into a thick wedge of sorts and dropped down to put it in place. Then the table felt like it was nailed to the floor—wobble gone.

A minute later, when I looked again at Dwayne, he was looking around, still developing his relationship with the place, with the town, ignoring us. He was there but pretended we weren't there, still surveying the environment, taking medium, controlled bites out of his two slices. Marcus and Aubrey both gave me glances, maybe to say 'Yes, your cousin is a bit strange.' I did a slight head-shake then shook it off and looked back at the menus on the wall.

Housemates are chummy acquaintances—college buddies, whatever that means.

On Thursday I passed by the job site where Aubrey was working and he was standing in the yard when the guy on the front porch yelled at him laughing: "Get out of here you French (the n-word)!" Aubrey turned and saw me and smiled.

"Everything good here?" was my stupid question.

"Yeah, everything is fine," said Aubrey. He shook his head. "Let's get out of here," he suggested. "He's a little off balance, that fellow," he said referring to his co-worker.

After work the next day I saw Aubrey on the street in town, and then a pickup passed with three guys in it and the one I recognized from his job site.

“Hey, there’s that Frenchie again!” the guy said laughing out the side window. Aubrey ignored him.

“I don’t get it,” I told Aubrey. “Why the French?”

“Oh, I think he just enjoys himself too much,” Aubrey said.

This was no doubt true, but I still didn’t know the whole dynamic. Guys on job sites have limited exchanges, so repartees or one-way comments often happen without sound reasoning. But I let it fly past like Aubrey did.

On our walk home we saw a guy in a Western Slope Energy parka, with some weight under his shell and well-combed hair. And then he surprised me by greeting Aubrey like they knew each other, maybe for business reasons. Aub gave him a smile and a heads-up after the guy turned and saw us passing.

“How do you know *that* guy?” I asked. Then I rephrased. “You’re more of a player than I realized!” I said to be dramatic.

“Well, I talked to his company the other day about zinc,” was all I got out of Aubrey at first, mostly because we then saw Marcus jog over from the other side of the street.

“You mean the metal?” I asked, as if zinc could be taken different ways, with the suntan lotion and what not.

“Yeah, the metal,” Aubrey said with a chuckle. “Billets of it,” he added, as if just to confuse my question more.

“Wow, it sounds like you didn't come here just for the construction gig,” I said, but he ignored that.

“Our steel company back home will pay a lot for zinc.”

“I thought metal mining was done in the San Juans,” was all I said before the distraction.

“Yeah, it is pretty much done... in these parts,” Aubrey said, giving it a bit of western slang. Then he added: “There’s big zinc in Montana, but Western Slope still keeps a nice office here, for vacation reasons, I suspect.”

“Hey, whasssup, yo’s,” said Marcus in a ridiculous style as if we were on the mean streets of a sizable city. Being downtown on Main St. brought out the urban in Marcus, the simple pleasantries of it, he’d probably say.

The next morning I saw Aubrey's stuff on the counter. I was more curious than usual so I flipped open his wallet. There was nothing in it, but underneath it was a cash clip and in it he had seventeen or eighteen hundred-dollar bills plus a bunch of twenties. I hadn't had coffee yet, but my eyes were wide open because I'd never seen that much green in one place before.

Later that week were several small house-fires, one with Marcus answering his phone while building a fire in the woodstove with the little metal door left open. An ember spit out on the newspaper and fatwood and lit things up quickly. It was highly noticeable from the street walking home, black smoke billowing

out the side window near the woodpile, after the window was opened just for that purpose. Luckily the only things caught were the paper and fire-starter stuff, and also the first towel Marcus threw down to suffocate it. It could have been very bad, and it made it very clear the smoke detector needed a new battery.

Three nights later Aubrey started a flash-fire while cooking. He was switching from the front to the back of our little two-burner, then the burner in back with the frying pan over-produced propane and three seconds later flamed big when the igniter worked. The dish rag over his shoulder caught, and the pan was full of a nice greasy vodka sauce. The whole thing was a nightmare. His rag caught and he “YOWEED,” put the pan down on the cool beige counter, which it black-marked, and then threw the burning dish towel in the sink with the water thrown on. The smoke-detector with its new battery made loud repetitive beeps, with the kitchen made all dark and smoky. He then opened the back door and windows and called us up to self serve.

Compared to Dwayne, I can't say I know them well, but we did have a good half hour of sharing after the smoke cleared that night. Aubrey's little sister died of cancer three years before at fifteen—as sad as it gets, and a story that deserves telling somewhere else. Marcus has five older sisters who live everywhere. He majored in political science, but to his credit says now he believes in nothing. A future snake-oil salesman, he admits or surmises. And he knows this part of southwest Colorado since he's been coming here for years, thanks to his mom living nearby.

Then there was cousin Dwayne, not far away.

We actually Fly there

On a Sunday in mid-November, all of us the shack inhabitants walked a longer way home from the bakery and saw the world's smallest church between two small houses. It looked like it used to be a garage, but they re-did the front to put in the pointed people door. It had a small cross on the front of the roof. The door was closed but there were muffled sounds of an organ and a few people singing. Church was an interesting concept, but Aubrey pointed out, and Marcus agreed, that non-believers get a bad rap.

“Just because a guy doesn't believe,” Marcus started, “it doesn't mean he's not spiritual.”

“Yeah,” I added to throw out a church term. “Spiritual but not in a Holy Spirit way.”

“Yes, you guys don't realize it, but you count more as Buddhists,” Aubrey gave us like it was a foreign term we'd never heard of.

“Yeah, good karma and dharma and all that.” Marcus added, like they were terms from the world we lived in, just not anything but super-casual. Then Aubrey laughed.

“You make Buddhism sound like a throwaway.”

“Yeah well...” Marcus sort of agreed. “Let's just say it's a noisy world we live in. This religious talk is part of the noise!” Marcus took another sip.

“Oh, I forgot. You Americans are jaded,” Aubrey redirected. “The rest of the world is catching up, but you guys already know everything.”

“Yeah, I like that!” Marcus smiled and offered. “But seriously, I think a nice walk on a Sunday is good enough.”

“Yeah, with a fresh baked muffin.”

“And a nice cup from the Steaming Bean,” Marcus said with it to his mouth again.

“Yeah, and the music’s nice,” I said before we were too far past it.

Aubrey made just a quiet “humpf” sound and closed the conversation.

On that walk I did think about believing, the pros and cons, and continued on home in the quiet. Yes, all I’m interested in is truth. Makers might not be great believers, I decided.

A few days later I saw Aubrey walking up the hill with a small crowd of neighbors, all friendly-looking fair-skinned folks—and the new three inches made it a very white world. Aubrey was like a black peppercorn in a bowl of plain noodles covered in Alfredo sauce. And you wouldn’t expect him to be such a positive thinker. On a previous day he said:

“Yeah, but that’s all they know!”

It was true, but I don’t remember the issue being discussed, something about the locals.

It was Marcus who cracked, with Aubrey chuckling, that Aubrey's from "way up the Congo River"—Joseph Conrad's adventure-land in Heart of Darkness.

"Yeah, we're so far up the river we actually fly there," Aubrey replied. Then he made sure we fully appreciated that his city Kisangani is now the third largest in the Congo, in the Democratic Republic, fourteen hundred miles up from the Atlantic, he said.

"But isn't it actually scary and dangerous there?" Marcus asked him. "In *The New Yorkan* there were pictures of young kids with machine guns!"

Then Aubrey laughed. "Yeah," he started sarcastically, "America doesn't have that—kids with guns. And don't forget, shocking photos sell magazines."

Marcus is from California, Oxnard. And that's partially what college is good for. Never would've met a kid from the opposite coast if it wasn't for school. One quote stands out. We were talking about past plans for after college, and San Diego with his on-again, off-again girlfriend was a possibility, before Telluride solidified. "Women—you can't live with him—you can't convince 'em to let you!" he said with a touch of humility.

Aubrey's from a distant country on another continent. His parents are dual-citizens, but not Aubrey yet, and he was the valedictorian or summa whatever of our pretty good school. One smart cookie—meeting him was another reason why college was good.

"Yeah but aren't the politicians corrupt over there?"

Then Aub had a nice comeback.

“Are you saying that general corruption doesn't exist in America? There's no selfishness? Isn't there a whole political philosophy here based on that?”

“Touché,” Marcus said after a pause, then dropped it.

Aubrey's a visual stand-out in any crowd—not just dark-skinned, but nearly black, the darkest you'll ever see a human. To be dramatic, for blacker skin let a search begin, or a darker tone I've never known! And no, he's not African-American yet, which he tells people to confuse them—not hyphenated with American yet—just African. His strong French accent gives away that he's a foreigner. And he doesn't strike you as a Montréalais. Anyway, his educational or travel visa or whatever it is has another six or eight months, so he's doing this for a while. Then he'll address, he says, “whatever needs to be addressed.”

Marcus on the other hand is just an American college kid, a plain noodle if you will, yet liberal-minded and generous. Must give thanks to him for suggesting Telluride and for his mom having the house nearby, a tight but good landing pad for those first few nights. And to his credit, it was he that found and grabbed our rental in the tiny village, whatever help his mom gave. The owner was probably deciding whether to tear it down, or else rent it one more time.

Marcus was at the sink when we were talking about humor vs. actual funniness. He was singing that old Santana song: “I don't really care... about tomorrow... today....” Then: “All I really need... is the answer...” Then he said: “Ahh yes, the humor tool. The least amusing word in the world!”

“I use humor sometimes to cover up how I feel about things,” said Aubrey.

“That's funny,” said Marcus, trying to be clever and amusing. “The word is so un-funny! Why is that?” he asked himself while wiping the counter in front of the toaster.

“Oh, well I guess I enjoy thinking about things, more than I enjoy laughing about them.”

“Wow, sounds like fun,” started Marcus.

“Come to think of it, I've never heard you laugh out loud,” added Aubrey.

Marcus calls himself Black Irish, explaining his dark brown hair and olive skin. Slightly darker with no freckles and so he's black now—Irish wordplay you might say with a big wide smile and always confident with his tight short comments. After a few silent moments when we first got to the shack he said: “the San Juan igloo,” referring to the old green shelter-shack rental.

Later that first day, we were talking about all the places in the world, and Marcus said: “It's Africa, man,” when we touched on that as one of the continents. “It's more fun to think about as a dark place. What will Earth be like when there are no more? No more dark mysterious places?” Marcus clarified the question.

“It's like that already,” said Aubrey, and then a minute later he said: “From darkness there was light,” Aubrey started to be dramatic, “and then there was electricity, and then...”

“...a trillion lithium batteries,” continued Marcus.

“Speaking of lithium...” Aubrey said almost following that tangent, but then he rescinded. “No, I won’t mention that.”

“Yeah, we know. It’s a valuable commodity,” Marcus added.

“Valuable and then some!” was all Aubrey said, though with an exclamation.

Dude, He’s Got the Spectrum!

As for Dwayne’s “Up” syndrome—referred to by some as Asperger’s—it seemed like just a hypothetical when my elder brother James first mentioned it. But I kept my mind open. It was Marcus at the pizza place who raised it again. Dwayne had gone to the men’s room.

“Dude, he’s got the spectrum!” said Marcus, and then he tried to explain it a bit. He looked around and then used the tables as a bad analogy. “It’s like we’re sitting at this table, just you, me and Aubrey, and there’s a second table just past us, and the people sitting on the near side of that table are touching the spectrum, while the people on the far side are on it.” Marcus paused to calculate. “The people at the third table have autism, which is the spectrum times ten!”

“Oh, so...” Aubrey began.

“Yeah,” said Marcus, confirming nothing. Aubrey nodded as if he’d said something.

“What? Math?” For me, the spectrum autism world was just a numbers thing.

“Dude, the spectrum’s always different. It’s a calculation thing,” Marcus summarized, “with, you know, social side effects.”

“Yeah, I call his the Up syndrome.” And Marcus smiled at that.

“That’s it! It’s like an ADHD with a real hyper factor.”

“Well,” I started. “But he doesn’t talk much.”

“Yes,” Aubrey added thoughtfully. “Hyper on the inside.”

“I guess until he wants to talk,” I started with. “And what about Attention Deficit? I don’t think he has trouble paying attention to things, you know, focusing on details and what not.”

“Unless what he’s hearing is crap!” Marcus started with, but then he backed up and re-stated. “That’s why spectrum is better—more ambiguous.”

“He’s ambiguous all right.”

Marcus smiled again.

“Yeah, it’s like spectrum is like a medical definition for ambiguousness.”

“Well, he’s just different, and smarter than us,” was all I said.

Then Aubrey made a joke, comparing Marcus' comments to an ad you might see on TV. He sat up straight and tall. "Most of my friends don't know I have the Up syndrome!" But he softened then and raised his chin to indicate Dwayne was on his way back to the table.

So, we dropped it, and I let it go for a while.

In the middle of the next week I hitched a ride with Kurt to town to get lunch. To my big surprise I saw Marcus outside the Town Hall in a nice suit with his hair combed back and gelled. He was coming out of the building right where we parked and I accosted him.

"What are you trying to do? Get out of a parking ticket?"

"That's funny," he said. "No, I was just meeting with some friends of my mom."

"Oh, I get it. You were applying for a job there," I guessed.

"Yeah," Marcus said with a quick laugh. "You could say that."

It's like Marcus considers it his obligatory job to the public, to society, to make a simple, somewhat clever, trustworthy statement on whatever it is that comes up, anything being considered. But he said no more this time. He smacked me on the shoulder and said: "See you back at the shack, working-man."

"Yeah," at least I have that going for me, I almost added, but didn't.

“I want people to respect me,” Marcus had said in our first week. “Maybe I’ll run for office,” he said, and we assumed he was kidding. We all chuckled at the idea.

“The only way to get real respect in my home country is to get rich,” said Aubrey.

“Yeah, sure, but if financial comfort is already part of the scene, then what do you do?”

“You’ve got it rough,” I said a touch sarcastically. “I feel for you, man. Big decisions.”

Sitting by the café window that next Saturday, Marcus and I saw on the sidewalk a middle-age man in a sharp gray suit give careful, pointed directions with an arm raised and a finger held out to an elderly woman with a long red-tipped cane who was clearly blind staring off into the distance. A minute later she stepped away slowly in the opposite direction from where he’d been pointing. We loved it but didn’t want to give up our little table.

Dwayne would’ve gotten up and helped.

We don’t need a big riddle in our lives, but we all would benefit from having somebody nearby who makes us think about things.

* * *

Later on that Saturday night, my phone rang and I was very surprised at the number. It was Auntie B, calling from Botany Village. She had never called my phone before.

“Hi, Jon. How ARE you?” She asked. And I guess I have to warn you. I’ve had a couple glasses of red wine.” Her voice sounded stone cold sober but soon it was her comments that made her sound a little different than before.

“Good! How are you?!” I said with enthusiasm, to sound comfortable and familiar with phone-talking to her, even though it had never happened.

“I’m drunk,” she immediately confessed, which explained things a little. But she was not a drinker by nature, so I wondered what else I might learn. She then added: “It’s a complicated combination of things,” she said next quoting Dwayne. She knew I’d recognize the expression. “And it’s my birthday!” She paused and took a sip from her glass. “I wanted to call a few people to laugh a little. Do you know I’m seven years younger than your mother?!” Auntie B added.

“Wow, so that makes you 39?”

“I wish!” she said with her light throaty laugh.

“But wait,” I asked. Dwayne’s twenty-four...”

She then waited while I did the basic math.

“So I guess you partied too much.”

“No. I partied too much once!” she drunkenly offered.
“Don’t ask.”

“OK. I won’t,” I said, but then tried to change the tone a bit.

“So you be forty... like that old band!” I said, with excitement as if it were great news.

“Hey, this isn’t just an aunt calling a nephew. It’s more like a girl who’s a little sister swapping things with a little brother-man.”

“Yeah, we’ve got secret wisdom... which no one else has,” I offered. “And don’t get me started on my brother James!” which made her chuckle.

“Don’t get me started on my big sister! Your mom!” she reminded me.

“I’m serious. Don’t get me started on Captain James!” I said for no reason, except to deflect the conversation away from Dwayne. “What a loser!” I said in a ridiculous tone.

Then she said something interesting, out of the blue.

“Autism, Asperger’s, the spectrum... it’s like a bad-colored rainbow,” she started with.

And then I couldn’t help but contribute.

“Yeah, I call it the Up drome.”

“What?” she asked, but kept on going. “There’s too much human junk out there. It’s a messy rainbow... caused by everything: water, sun, air, human junk, chemicals, what have you!”

“Too many humans!” I said to stay on her wavelength.

She laughed light-throately again and then took a few seconds with a deep breath.

“You're the man, Jon,” she said, with what sounded like a tired smile.

“No, Dwayne is the man,” I said seriously, to pay things forward—to stay firmly planted on the positive side. But then I told her we, the shack-dwellers, were getting ready to go out for food, to be polite, and keep the call brief. Whether it was true or not she accepted it and let it go.

“Okay, Jon. Stay cool,” she gave me.

“Alright,” I closed with. “You—be yourself, Auntie B,” I added to stay cool as instructed. “I’ll see you—maybe back on the mean streets... one of these days.”

* * *

No, Dwayne’s never been treated for anything, besides those few quick days the previous summer, so that’s got to mean something, right? The syndrome-spectrum thing might mean nothing at all! We’re all on the same great band or caravan of human junk. Maybe we all have it. Is it severe? Everything is severe. Life is severe.

Since then I’ve learned the “Up syndrome” is also on the spectrum but at the opposite end as autism. I always knew Dwayne wasn’t close to a *Rain Man*. But what about *Everybody Loves Raymond*’s brother? What’s his deal? The Dwayne deal is sometimes nothing less than mind-strength. It’s just a medical term that got slapped on people with different personalities sort of like:

“This person has a strong case of the Unique syndrome.” In the early days, I thought it was simply a label for people who weren’t great at being mellow.

Yes, it might be easier for me if Dwayne had some other syndrome like Down, because then you’d know. It’d be more obvious and clear. Take everything he says with a big grain of salt. “Up drome” is always detailed and deadly precise, with a more intricate comprehension of things. Or the UPS, but of course that’s already taken. As for a yours-truly medical condition, if it exists, you’d have to call it the middle or un-remarkable drome.

What Auntie B quoted on the phone stood out. At times before explaining something in fast detail Dwayne would warn us by saying: “It’s a complicated combination of things.”

It’s not in the least bit unusual to have intelligence, or a lack of it in some cases, affect a person’s ability to be calm and collected, right? If a person is super-smart, they might have real trouble, or just an astute lack of interest, in plain old fitting in. Yes, a lack of smarts might also lead to trouble—as we might see! Marcus had started the spectrum fire, and Auntie B’s call didn’t help me ignore things.

One of the big questions, which hasn’t been answered clearly yet, is whether the “Up drome” is caused by the immunization shots we all get when we’re babies and toddlers, like they say autism might be. Is it too many immunizations? Who frickin’ knows! It seems a little too easy to blame it all on this, on a basic human procedure, something that can be chosen not to be done. But wait! Who frickin’ knows! Blame it on earth, on the unavoidable human condition, the progression of things—evolution etcetera.

* * *

On a slightly different note—because love is more important than most things—let me introduce the two ladies in this story.

Pretty Mama Beáma and Kim

Beáma met Dwayne on his first visit to the Telluride bookstore, when I wasn't home from Wal-mart yet and he was out walking. There were touristy posters in the bookstore window along with a big display of scenic mountain books. He told me he went in just to see the pictures and: "to see what a bookstore in a ski town looks like." Then he was approached by Beáma who was the only person there at the time. Her co-worker Kim wasn't.

I heard about their meeting separately from both of them. I asked Dwayne what he did until I got home and he told me he went in there. He said the "mountain girl" offered him help and was "friendly and personable."

"What do you mean by mountain girl?" I asked him.

"Well..." he began. It was obvious he didn't know what he meant exactly. Then he just said: "Wild brown hair."

"Oh! That's Beáma. Yeah, she works there," I said immediately to paint myself as a knowledgeable local. "What about Kim with the wiry blond hair? Was she there?"

“No,” he said.

That first morning of Dwayne’s, Beáma said he came in when she was behind the front counter looking at the mail. She said she greeted him, and then he asked if they had any good San Juan map books. Beáma said she directed him to the back right wall. For friendly conversation she asked him if he was on vacation, and that set him off a bit.

“I drove in yesterday. My little cousin lives here.”

“Oh, so where’d you drive from?” Beáma asked casually

“I live down in Las Vegas, New Mexico,” he continued to her. “It’s six hours fifty minutes from here,” he said with automatic precision, based on his own measurement.

“Las Vegas... New Mexico? Is it a tribute to the other one?”

“No, it’s older,” Dwayne replied logically.

“Oh, so who’s your cousin?” she asked. “Maybe I know him?”

But I hadn’t met Beáma yet.

Later in that same morning, I also went to the bookstore to the café in back. Dwayne was still walking around but I knew I’d see him soon. We’d gotten back from one of our shopping trips to Montrose which Dwayne chose understandably not to go on. He’d been in the bookstore earlier that day but Beáma had no reason at all to mention it.

Beáma was distracting to me and a little intimidating with her adulthood and her matter-of-fact, somewhat exotic good looks, plus older in her later twenties. Kim was there then up front and Beáma was in back, where I was drinking a coffee at the counter. She wiped the free areas and then tossed her dish cloth half over a shoulder. The café was otherwise empty. Then she leaned down on an elbow with a cheek resting on a hand, her head bent sideways keeping the hair back. Looking at my messy notebook she said:

“Wow, are you writing a book?”

She was either teasing, or else just being seductive by accident—easily the latter.

“No, not really.”

“What is it then?”

“Just stuff,” I said.

“Hey, when’s your birthday?” she then asked out of nowhere.

“Uh, in a few weeks I think.”

“Aquarian?”

“No.” I couldn’t think of what else to say.

“Oh, then Capricorn!” she added with enthusiasm.

Then I turned the tables on her like I was a confident customer.

“How about you, when’s your birthday?”

“It’s in July,” she said with an eyebrow raised, testing me.

“Wow, so that makes you a... summer baby?”

“Yeah!” she said with a smile. “I’m Beáma by the way.”

“Jon.”

She stood up straight and we reached and shook.

“That’s all I know... about anything really,” I said with a lame smirk. I looked at my watch and figured it was time to go find Dwayne, so I got off my tall chair.

Then to my surprise we said hi to her little daughter who walked back from the front. She was cute but had a serious look on her face, and looked otherwise exactly like Beáma. The little version had on a hairy sweater which smelled powerfully of moth balls, a long-haired green and tan Afghan though on the very small side. I turned and asked the mama Beáma what the big sweater’s story was, and she said that her sister sent it to Stella for her birthday.

“She’s been saving it for years in a blanket chest. It used to be hers. But she doesn’t have any kids,” Beáma explained.

“Ah, so deep storage,” I translated it as. “Sweaters do need special care, I’ve heard.”

“Yeah,” Beáma said. “I told Stella you have to wear it out to air it out. Moth ball power is no patchouli!”

“Patchouli?” I asked. I didn’t get it. But it passed. “And she agreed?”

“Oh yeah. She loves it, being all wooly and whatnot.”

And then I wondered about the truth of it.

“Do they actually wear them a lot over there, you know, in Afghan country?”

Beáma smirked but wasn't impressed by the lame question.

I mention the attractive young woman from the bookstore, Miss Beáma, because my first stop in there was that Saturday when Dwayne was visiting Telluride for the first time. I do not mention her just so readers think there were nice women in my life and that therefore I'm a good person, or a good cousin to have. It's mostly because she met Dwayne, which proves significant.

Beáma was like one of those good-looking models from the Sundance catalog. My elder brother James and his wife Carolyn always have one on their kitchen counter. Unlike the average, she'd stand out in a crowd with her beauty and imperfection both, moderately tan and outdoorsy, with a snaggle-tooth canine pointed down and out and a little sideways—her mark. Later, I'll describe her sitting in the back of Arnold's pickup in the sun as we all rolled down Kim's dirt road to the main road for ice cream before our first team group meeting.

On my next visit to the bookstore a guitar was in the corner and she said she plays it. This made me almost chuckle, because I thought it almost too pretty a picture—almost cliché to have a good looking young woman in the southwest mountains, living life, serving coffee, playing guitar on the side, wearing silver bracelets that jangle when she strums. I asked her how she spells Beáma and she told me. “It's got an accent over the ‘a’.” She scribbled it on a small notepad instead of spelling it out loud to give me a visual. “It's different! My dad came up with it high,” she

started seriously, “to pay tribute to our French and Spanish sides at the same time. We used to say it was Spench or Frannish.”

“Oh,” I said, not sure what else to say. “Back in high school, I studied Spanglish,” I said with a straight face, which made her smile fast, but I quickly determined it was just polite, like she’d heard that joke many times before.

I saw Kim the time before but she wasn’t there the second time for whatever reason. Kim worked in the front where they sell books, not the warm muffins and lattes offered in the back. Beáma said Kim and she don’t really have “a ton in common,” besides girls the same age who are best friends at the little school. But they get along really well “as coworkers do,” I was told. “She manages the place,” Beáma clarified, as if that explained it all. She laughed, though a bit on the hesitant side. “She’s always up at the register with a calculator adding up the day’s receipts and managing inventory and all that.”

Kim is not as sexy a woman in the obvious way. She’s a little more conservative in her dress style, not quite as earthy, casual, smiling or “personable,” as Dwayne called it, like Beáma, who I can’t describe any better besides as an eye-catching guitar mom.

I officially met Kim a month after I first met Beáma. To some extent Beáma must have already told her about Dwayne and me.

Kim introduced herself in a strange way without a smile.

“Hi. Kim. I’ve been on the spectrum for fifty-four weeks.”

“Whoa,” I started, wondering how I should respond. “You make it sound like it’s a miracle drug.”

If I’d known better, I would’ve introduced myself as “Jon—I’m a little slow.”

“It’s a crazy world,” she said quickly, but then slowed down a notch. “For a year now I’ve known for certain that the spectrum is in me.”

“That’s great,” I said. “Not great, but very real and upfront and honest!”

I was very surprised and impressed and gave Beáma a look of happy wonder.

* * *

A week or two after I first met Beáma, I heard the pitter-patter of light boot-steps up the outside stairs at the shack. Without seeing who it was—which you can do from the front window when it’s a slower person coming up the stairs—there were three knocks on the door. I slowly went over and opened it to greet the unforeseen visitor. With beauty all around her, I acted low-key and simply surprised to see a friendly acquaintance.

“Hey!” she said with a smile, as wide as she could for a flash. She looked nice and bracing, casual purple, brown, and black yet zipped up tight in her form-fitting hipster jacket. “I’m starting this new thing and I wanted to give it to you personally—instead of putting it under a rock on the railing. So here’s a copy—it’s a new thing I’m doing... to make a little cash.” Then she stepped back and looked around. “Hey, this place looks even more rustic up

close!” she said with a smile. Then she handed me one of her freshly printed copies, her beta as she explained, of what she called a “friendly village newsletter.” That night I saw that her description was a bit misleading, because it didn’t feature any real news, just ads for the local shops. But that, I figured, could be considered news, what’s new these days, even if not late-breaking.

I invited her in to have a cup of coffee or some of Marcus’ medical-recreational, but she said they had to keep moving—Stella and her—they were passing them out from their shoulder-bags to the whole neighborhood. Her bag looked a little like what newspaper boys carry in old movies, somewhat shapeless with the dirty-white canvas color and a red stripe. Then she turned and smiled again for a long second or two—indeed making an imprint on me, the shack’s hermit—and turned and pitter-patted down the stairs.

“Coming!” she called to her daughter in the street.

It was later I learned where the name for her newsletter, *The Gambit*, came from. She’d lived in New Orleans for two years and loved the name of their weekly down there. Back in the bookstore the first time we met, she mentioned New Orleans and I was like: Wow, time there, too? I’m talking to the paragon of cool womanhood here.

On a mid-November Sunday morning, I saw Beáma and her daughter coming up the hill. I very slowly went out and said a big Hi from the porch. I’d slipped on some damn ice the previous afternoon on my way back from the store and it swelled up more than expected. At the town’s emergency room, which usually sees skiing-related injuries, they called it a fractured patella and gave me a big brace and told me to wear it stiff for a month. It was such

a stupid minor fall, but I was officially out-of-commission for a while.

I called down something ridiculous, like ‘Hello Seafarer!’ Then she told me she and Stella do their Sunday walk between nine and ten, so I could always expect to see them then. She said something to her daughter then waved up to the shack with a big smile like she was two-hundred yards away. Stella was frowning.

“Great!” I added after a few seconds in a very non-creative way.

Whenever she walked by, her daughter was with her every time. But then she came alone! She said she saved our house for last. She ran up the stairs again and I knew who it was just from the sound her feet made, though not quite as speedy as her first time up the stairs, but still brisk, and she knocked again more slowly, but I had my little table in front of the window so I knew who it was. In twenty seconds or even slower, I got up and over there and slid the door open. Then she stepped in fast so I could close it behind her to keep the cold air out.

“I thought I’d take you up on that cup-of-tea offer. Does it still stand?”

“Of course!” I said. Marcus and Aubrey were both gone. She stayed for nearly an hour and we talked about many things.

“Hey, did you vote for mayor?” she asked out of the blue.

“Uh...” I started—thinking of what a more interesting answer than “no” would be.

“Sorry, do I strike you as a political activist? I know I should be, but I’m not.”

“Well you’re a voter, right?”

“Yes, I do reserve the right to vote,” which I liked—reserving the right.

Then getting up she changed the subject naturally.

“Hey, how’s your cousin Dwayne?” she asked, seemingly just to make conversation, having heard me mention him once or twice and also having met him. I took that to be a nice sign that she was remembering little details about my life.

After she asked about Dwayne, I snapped a little, though as indiscreetly as possible.

“Hey I got an idea, how ‘bout a story about me?” I said which surprised her.

“Oh!” she started. “Well, how about a story about both of you?!” she said for no reason, just to sound randomly social, maybe just to avoid any deeply personal info.

For no good reason I embarked on the sordid tale about when I went to the Shore to sleep on Dwayne’s couch for the summer, right after junior year in high school. I gave her the oral Homer version. This visitation of hers was months before I took her smart advice and started to write down the Dwayne stuff.

* * *

My first summer at the Shore, when I was seventeen, I witnessed for the first time cousin

Dwayne shit-face drunk at a party—in a social situation where he'd had a few—which I'd never seen back in Kearny. In ten minutes, I went from young and hapless to downright worried.

His place was through the side door of an older house in Atlantic, the first town in on the upper coast, a pass-through on the way to Highlands and Sea Bright facing the ocean. The standout is the National Recreation Area up on the skinny tip. Dwayne also worked at the bike shop down in Monmouth.

The driver let me out in the center of Atlantic where 36 and 7th come together six blocks away. I knocked on his side door, but no answer, no van, nobody home. I was just happy to be out there, with the light breeze of late June and the saltier air. It was magic. I couldn't have cared less that he wasn't sitting home waiting for me—a good sign that he wasn't, probably somewhere important since it was Friday evening in such a great place. His side door pushed right open when I touched the rusty doorknob. At the end of the kitchen counter there was a note: "Party on Shrewsbury off Miller off 36."

Wow, cool, I thought. Summer begins with a bang. Places to go, things to do. I put my duffel down, found the bathroom and left Dwayne's place as soon as I got there.

With my thumb out I got the third car to pull over and it took me a half mile from the party. I was more than happy to walk the rest. It was obvious with all the cars and the music.

Dwayne was out front in the driveway practicing his set-shot free-throw from the faded foul line. He was shooting very carefully, as predictable, but missed his second shot.

“Hey, Dwayne!” I called to him in a celebratory way. He said “hi” back, but impersonally, like he wasn’t at all surprised, like the preparation for his next shot was more important than a greeting. His free-throw went dud against the rim-back and the backboard at the same time. He turned away then put his hand up to wave me toward the back.

It was the best place in the world, the center of everything. There were lots of great people there. I was sure, mostly in their twenties and thirties, on the left, straight ahead, and everywhere. A few motorcycles were parked in front on the grass and a few pickups and a bunch of cars on the otherwise quiet street. In back the little stage for the band stood out, especially when the band stepped off on break and the stage was empty.

The grass in the yard had been cut but wasn’t at all perfect—good spots and bad spots and mostly yellow. But clearly it had been cut for this little event. At the sides of the stage were tall blades

up against the fascia and the stage's wooden legs, old six-by-sixes that looked extremely sturdy. But the grass at the stage was high, like the whole yard might have been tall the day before. At the corners, it flopped toward the front and sideways. That and the old wood gave the stage a nice lived-in look, like they'd had many parties and bands there. Farther back near the small trees, the grass had grown so much that it wasn't even grass anymore, like stalks of wheat or rye, layered and tipping every which way with the skinny grass stems—like it was all kept wild and untouched on purpose to be a nice backdrop.

In the back yard, Dwayne faced me and it was obvious because of his red swollen eyes and the slight loudness of his talking that he was super drunk, drunk as a skunk on a busy road.

“Did you tell your mom you made it?!” he asked drunkenly. No, I hadn't. I frowned and shook the head quick and minimal to say no.

Then he turned and got up on the empty stage, took the microphone and pretty-much yelled to the fifty or sixty people there that he had an important announcement.

“Hey! My baby cousin is here! Everyone wave to my cousin!”

A few people turned but didn't know where to send their wave, so they waved slightly to the stage then turned back to their friends.

Then Dwayne stumble-jumped down and said we had to go.

“What?”

He looked at his watch. “I've been here for two hours and forty minutes,”

Dwayne was my ride and place to stay, so I had little choice and walked behind him to his van, distraught and confused over what exactly to do, why we were leaving at eight forty. We got in his van and he started the engine before I could think straight, and then after a deep breath he looked straight forward and said: “This is the first time for me.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I've never been drunk before.”

“Oh!” I responded as nonchalantly as I could. “Well, that's nothing to worry about,” I added. But I was thinking it was extremely strange for a guy in his mid-twenties, if it was true, to have never been ripped. Then I asked: “Are you sure you want to leave though?”

“Yes,” he said clearly. “You drive.”

He took another deep breath, climbed out and walked around the vehicle to switch seats, which I did also, though not happily—not about being the driver of course, but driving at all. Dwayne got in the passenger side and as I pulled out of the driveway he immediately leaned his head against his seatbelt strap and passed out. Back at his place, I went around and opened the door and in a flash he straightened up enough to stumble in through the side door to his room.

The next day he didn't mention anything about drinking. He talked about the party as just a typical boring event that he'd been obligated to go to. There was the chasm between Dwayne and hanging out. It was familiar to me. There had always been issues. But I loosely figured incorrectly that the issues, whatever they were, had dissipated over the last few previous years. I'm optimistic by habit. At breakfast in the kitchen to make conversation, I said something like: "It was amazing, just getting out here yesterday. And then the party!" I added laughing lightly to keep it friendly. "You said you'd never been drunk before?"

He was standing over his toast and jelly jar as if he was a hung-over surgeon, making very slow, precise maneuvers with a butter knife.

"No, I wasn't drunk."

"You said it was your first time."

“But I wasn’t... drunk. You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said combining wrongness with honesty. “I don’t get drunk,” he added. “I’m not that type of person. If I drink anything, I have very controlled amounts.” Then he paused while putting the jelly back in the refrigerator. “It’s socially strategic. When you’re older, you might understand this.”

“When I’m older?” I asked. “How much older?”

“I can tell with you,” he said without looking at me again. “Getting drunk out here is something you’re going to do a lot of. It’s in your nature.”

“Yeah well...” I started. But I let it drop.

* * *

After I rambled for a minute or two, Beáma stood up.

“You probably don’t want us stopping by all the time, and besides, you probably like your quiet. You’ve got notebook work to do!”

“Yes, I should get better at using this time. The bad patella is generous that way,” I said.

Then, at risk of being considered nosey, I asked about the missing father of Stella.

“Hey, so tell me. Where’s Stella’s dad?”

“Ahh,” she started. “Yes, well, let’s just say he’s indisposed for six-to-ten years.

“What?” But when I repeated it in my head, it was clear it was a jail sentence. “Oh.”

“He was more of a dealer than I realized—before distribution was legalized,” she added.

She went quiet for a second, but then added:

“So these days I can visit anyone!”

Yes, besides the brace, any time with Beáma was the real elixir. In the future maybe a looser brace would allow for even warmer, two-person activities! In the meantime though, no doubt mas plutonia.

“Next Sunday, coffee’s at nine forty sharp,” I said with no smile.

“Great. Maybe I’ll take you up on that,” she said leaving.

The next Sunday was a standout. Still at the door standing on the porch she asked me with a smile if I’d play a game, “have an experience,” as she described it.

I wouldn’t include this at all if it didn’t actually happen. It was the strangest, most provocative, titillating and unfulfilling thing up to that point in my life. She convinced me far too easily to completely expose myself.

“Hey would you play the full frontal game with me? It’s a real mind-bender, but fun and meaningful. She came in past me while she was talking. Are the guys here?”

“Nope, it’s just us,” I told her with an open mind.

“Step over here with me. You stand here, and I’ll stand over there, ten paces away.”

She walked to her spot then turned and took off her sweater and bra in one fell swoop.

“Was there a bra in there?”

“Yeah, but I wanted to get right to the point.”

I looked at the clothes on the floor and I could see a black strap on the inside-out part of the sweater.

“What word first comes to mind?” she asked.

“Gorgeous... and that’s an understatement,” I told her. I was nervous and couldn’t control what was coming out my mouth.

“Pretty handsome yourself, if that’s the right word,” she said with the world’s most natural smile. “I’m impressed.”

“He’s usually not this bad.”

“Bad?”

“He would usually fit in a clamshell. We heard the door and came across the room to open it, and now he sees that it’s you.”

“The wondrous me,” she said with another smile.

“Yes, ma’am.”

This experience was painful and sort of like being at a train-crossing for a long time. The train has already cleared but the gate is still down. Then eventually the gate goes up slowly. But you're frustrated for waiting so long. Then the gate re-thinks its decision and drops back down for another train to roar through.

“Well my ex boyfriend is six four and let me just tell you that I think size has nothing to do with height.”

“Yeah, I’m a big boy now,” I said to compliment my juvenility. “Glad you don't see it when you're not here,” I then said. She smiled but then un-smiled like she wasn’t sure she got it, but then smiled again with a glance to the side acting coy for the repeat compliment.

I never imagined I would pose like this, but it could've been worse. I did go to the gym a few times in the past to work out some, and it was all to look a little better. But it wasn’t for this.

Then there were five more seconds of gazing, which seemed like an hour.

“Okay, now look at my face and maintain eye contact for ten seconds, then we’ll say it was an experience.” As the time

ended she smiled again. “Consider us both doctors,’ she added, “giving each other a look over.”

“You're not like any doctor I've seen before,” was all I thought to say. “Should I cough?” I asked. Things felt very impersonal. Usually taking your clothes off in a room that has a person you've got the hots for means something, but not this time.

“Take a deep breath. The nice full-frontal experience is coming to a close.”

Then we heard the footsteps jogging up the steps, which was in retrospect maybe a good thing. The experience would have been even more painful if it had continued. Marcus and Aubrey brought it to a fast close. Beáma ducked into the bathroom, and I, in two seconds flat, put on my t-shirt and pulled up my boxers and sweats.

“Hey, guys,” I said when they came through the door. “Beáma stopped in for a visit again. She's in the bathroom.”

Marcus paused his movements and looked left and right to survey the space.

“Oh, oh, oh!” he said. “She likes you!” he then said with exaggerated mouth movements but almost silently.

“Yeah, maybe. We'll see, I guess,” was all I said. She came out of the bathroom, said good morning to the fellas, but then said she had to get going.

“Thanks, Jon, for letting me use your bathroom.” She smiled very matter-of-factly and then was gone with a pitter-patter down the outside steps.

In short, it’s quite taxing to have big sexual thoughts—even if that’s all they’re going to be—and then to have them suddenly interrupted. Though it’s also quite difficult to get them totally pushed off the table by other stuff, like a close relative.

The next Sunday at nine fifty, she came up again and knocked on the door and I happily let her in. I poured coffees and suggested we pull chairs out onto the porch because it was nice out, a good warm-up to whatever might come afterwards.

“This morning earlier,” I started with, to sound less selfish, “my cousin Dwayne was here and went out for a San Juan walk,” I called it, and Beáma then looked at me with her eyebrows up, so I kept talking. “And I found myself thinking about him.” I paused and clarified to show a little depth of thought. “It’s good on a Sunday morning to commune with human nature, right?” Then I went on after a medium breath. “I got a bit wondering about Dwayne’s actual existence,” I offered, “his relationship with the planet Earth.” I paused yet again dramatically to keep it extra slow largely because it was so improvisational. “I saw him down the hill at the stop sign standing at the corner in his proud Dwayne way.” And I went on further to Beáma without a good plan. “This morning I got a little, I don’t know, sad thinking about Dwayne’s unique and very lonely kind of life, being so insanely helpful,” I added, as if that was a symptom of something.

Beáma looked directly at me justifiably wondering where I was going with this.

“But seeing him down there,” I continued in a steady way, “I relaxed a bit,” and I took a big breath. “Fifteen minutes ago,” I said, as if it was a significant moment, “I decided that being proud and standing up tall is a good reflex to have, no matter what your life is like. We should all stand with pride—justified or not,” I added to better layer the conversation.

“Yeah, it’s in our nature, to be proud of ourselves!” Beáma said in a very general positive way. Then she added a bit more. “Maybe you should try to write about Dwayne, to help you deal with your history and your feelings about him,” she said.

“Yeah, my feelings, whaaa, whaaa,” I said sarcastically to make light of it.

Beáma smiled politely but didn’t laugh at all.

But then I had a story for her out of wherever.

“One time...” I started with emphasis on the “One”. Beáma stared as if I was on the verge of uncovering something important, maybe sensing its realness and that she should be serious and sympathetic. “...I came home from school and was so damn proud of my sculpture, my little rider on a snow-mobile—it was baked in our school kiln and then I painted it, and the guy’s scarf was blowing in the wind. Then my own mom put her hand on my shoulder and said: “That’s nice, honey, but we’re looking at Dwayne’s thing right now.”

“The young artist!” Beáma sat up straight and said with a supportive smile.

“Aghh, it wasn’t the most important in my oeuvre, my portfolio, but still, I was in third fucking grade!” I said to Beáma, almost as upset about it as I sounded.

“Awww,” she started, like that was what it called for.

“Damn straight!”

It was my portrait of the artist as a young kid and I deserved recognition. Then of course I went to the bookcase and got for her the actual original piece. I’d brought it out to the San Juans because my mom found it while I was packing, and it had a nice snowy wintery theme.

“The scarf broke off years ago, but it’s still a good little paperweight,” I added.

“Wow!” said Beáma. I’d surprised her with this dramatic show and tell.

“The fellas would enjoy this, I knew,” I told her.

“Were they impressed?”

“No. But tickled I think that I still had it.”

“I am, too! I mean, I’m so happy you kept it all these years.”

“It wasn’t just me though,” I clarified. “Mom helped. She probably wanted to make up for not caring so much at first.”

Beáma looked at it closely and turned it around inspecting all the angles like she was a judge at a performance.

“His jacket’s painted so well it almost looks soft.”

“Yeah, I tried stabbing it with voodoo needles, but that didn’t work,” I said as a joke. But Beáma ignored the comment.

“How long was his scarf?” she asked while putting it on the window sill with the mountains behind it.

“Too long. That’s prolly why it broke.”

“He’s got good posture.”

“Yeah, well, maybe it was the Dr. Seuss in me,” I added. The look of a real snowmobiler I knew nothing about. Then I stood up. “Hey, can I get you a beer or something?”

“No thanks,” she said as warmly as she could.

On a very different tack, I continued on to make it a real show.

“Despite what we go through, I’ve learned the rest of us are not inconsequential! Everything should be real and justified and important! Instead of having an older cousin nearby who you want to be proud of but you’re not! You can’t be!” I blew out a hard breath and acted like I was admitting something deeply personal. “I always wanted to be the best kind of man or at least a darned good man.” I paused and tacked hard right. “Yeah, it’s been a little hard with a good example of human “wildness” around,” I said with raised quote marks, “like my dear old cousin Dwayne. And I don’t mean an animal that parties too hard,” I added.

“I understand,” Beáma said perplexed.

But I wasn't sure that all I was saying made good sense. Maybe the less clear the better! I freewheeled it and went off on a meaning-of-life tangent, and I don't know why or where it came from, but I knew part of me was just lighting this up for the nice pretty visitor. I was mostly honest but to the point of being nonsensical, as well as a bit over-the-top unreliable. I was full of untested thoughts and turned them into a big unknotted balloon letting the air out. She should know I'm a thoughtful guy with the occasional tirade.

“Everything people say, even if it's by an elder or your dad, is dumb when compared to the reality of The Mighty One! Everything is insignificant! Does everybody understand that? There is a lot more going on in the world than just the regular guy happy thing.” I paused but rolled on. “Everything you see or hear or do in a regular way is pointless! The madness is right next to you! Your own stuff is relative to actual human shit!” And then I came up with this specific history. “My parents never complimented me! Whatever I did was nothing compared to the other one—he who will remain unnamed!”

She was no doubt taken aback a bit. So I added a conclusion.

“The truth you learn to respect out of proximity—because you just happen to know a person who makes everything that isn't them so damn second rate.”

I sounded frustrated and a little guilt-ridden and maybe worthy of thoughtful care.

“Wow, your cousin Dwayne's really had an effect on you. When I met him, he struck me as just an honest caring soul.”

“You don’t know the world of it,” I said—as if I was the keeper of a big lock-box of knowledge, to which she had access only through the mighty key-master.

Then it happened unexpectedly. I welled up fast and bang, an eye flood happened from a few big tear drops. Crying didn’t actually occur, or if it did, it became a happy cry immediately since I’m so experienced at putting everything in good perspective. Beáma then smiled in a slightly surprised way and just sat there like I needed a minute to collect myself.

With a gulp of air and a back straightened I was closer to regular again and I got up and hit my eyes and cheeks with a dish towel. I knew I’d gone off a little. She reminded me of that by not moving, from our not knowing each other very well, then standing up to go in a friendly neighborly way, mentioning the “beautiful warm sun” that Telluride was getting.

The Sunday after that, she’d already passed our house, and I let them go on their merry way without interrupting. I’d heard the thump of the small rock on the post at the bottom of the stairs. Then I saw her and her daughter continuing up to the neighbor’s. Again the hermit’s questionable behavior was partly due to the fact that she was really just a friendly fantasy. Sometimes these things are better left in-tact by not letting an actual visit interfere with them. And three is a hoo-ha, so we’ll leave it at that.

Howard

Work is also important, I've learned.

At the first jobsite I met the carpenter Howard, a paragon of soft-spoken, old-man steadiness originally from Amarillo, Texas. He wore a long ponytail but only to keep his thin, gray, straight hair “out of the chop-saw,” he said. His hands were very leathery like he had gloves on made of thick broken-in layers of what was maybe regular skin fifty years ago. My newcomer's hands looked bathed in buttermilk compared to his. His favorite book is Tomboy Bride, which is an old local favorite out there, Howard said, a woman's account of living in a mining camp in the Nineteenth Century. His favorite movie is without a blink the long one about the West Texas rancher, *Lonesome Dove*. His second favorite movie is the sequel.

Howard was a friendly storyteller, grinning out his wide smile, with stories about enjoying life in middles-of-nowhere kinds of places. He went to New York once and would regret the trip entirely if it wasn't for the concerts he saw. He says West Texas is paradise, and the only reason he came to Telluride is the building work. The guys on the jobsite all liked Howard, who found something pleasant and amusing in just about every story he heard. Everyone loved going to him with their half ass stories, as I did.

Howard first met Dwayne the big day in Ouray, but I told him on one of my first days, to be dramatic, about my “weirdo cousin in the trades” who was “a one-man contractor for a while,” and that I'd worked for him one summer back east. Howard listened carefully and looked at me out of the corner of his eyes before closing them. He nodded very, very slowly, as if he understood exactly what all that meant. He'd probably met a lot of

weirdoes in his life, so my word choice was good enough, vague enough, honorable enough. So I left it at that.

“Then he was a two-man contractor that summer,” was all he said, putting his tape back.

“Yeah,” I started slowly, “But I was only there a month—and he’s always been very independent,” was all I said.

Our lunch breaks in my first week were like an unofficial story time. The guys honored each other and took turns, except for Karl who mostly stayed quiet. Then the mid-twenties Little Mikey said he wanted to tell a funny story and nobody stopped him.

“In Grand Junction last summer a guy was cutting down a tree next to the driveway and the trucks. Then he cut a giant branch. But not all the way, so it swung down instead of falling straight. And it fell right next to the guy’s own truck. He was up in the tree and wailed cuz it almost squashed his hood. It was hilarious,” said Mikey.

“He was lucky,” Carlo said minimally.

Karl waited a second then said: “So nothing happened.” And Howard chuckled.

“Mikey, next time, you should tell that story different,” started Howard. “The branch should land hard on the guy’s truck and damage it. The guys, you know, will laugh more.” Then Howard paused before continuing with another idea, “Or, the branch should land on a Range Rover or a Mercedes that was parked too close... the owner’s car.”

Mikey bunched up his blond eyebrows.

Carlo laughed for two seconds after Howard's help and coughed up a chunk of food.

A minute later after silence, Little Mikey popped up again.

“Hey let me tell another one”—which nobody said no to.

“Once the Grand Junction boss lost his car keys and nobody would help look for ‘em. So he had to call his wife to pick him up. It was hilarious!” Mikey looked around quick, then put his face down, giggled and shook his head to at least show that he remembered it as funny.

Carlo was done first, so he stood up and stepped out of our little trapezoid.

“Hey Mikey, that was you, wasn't it,” he lightly cackled, “losing your own keys.”

With his small eyes wide open and his jaw down, Mikey looked over at Howard, as if Carlo had just guessed the combination 1-2-3 on a new combination lock.

In the first week mid-morning, I planned two lunchtime stories, but as it happened, without years and years of experience, both my stories were about Dwayne—even though I didn't mention that. I made them about different people so it sounded like I'd been all over the place. I told the Dmitri story, then the crazy, broken-loose, collapsing-staging story. But I made them about other guys. I improvised the thirty-second audio versions, but as luck had it, they were received well. Mikey said “Woah,” Howard

said “Nice,” and Carlo and Karl both looked down maybe out of a quiet respect. Not much later, as recommended by Beáma, I wrote my Dwayne anecdotes down.

Five summers ago I had a Shore job because of Dwayne working at a bike shop in Rumson—and he had the small apartment with a couch in the front staring at the door which I turned into a room. Very happy I was about not spending the summer in Kearny.

So I went there for the summer and didn’t think anything of it until I got there, seeing more of Dwayne. But, then it was a daily struggle to balance real concern with trying to stay relaxed and independent of what I was witnessing, which was painful to be related to. Making it worse, he was like my doppelganger, sometimes mistaken as a twin brother.

“Hey, this is my baby cousin Jon! He’s a graduate of high school now!” he’d say at a bar, to any female that would listen. “He used my old driver’s license to get in here!”

“Uh, why’d you say that?” I would ask him to myself.

Yet it was nice to be out there, bike-shop working, doing nothing, freedom from home life, hanging out in the sun, talking to people about whatever, selling bike clothes, working the register, being an up-front man—not a mechanic in back, not fixing up bikes to run better—that was Dwayne’s

job. “Pass me that hub,” he’d say. “Over there next to the truing stand... next to the wrenches,” he’d add, knowing I might not know what a truing stand was. “What? Oh, sure,” I’d wonder out loud, trying to help.

However, the events of that summer were very eye-opening, and in a way inspiring. In July, the accident happened at an outdoor party between a car and a person, and this shows Dwayne’s extreme helpfulness well, plus his strange-at-the-time, anti-social behavior. There were young women at the party, and lots of them—it seemed like a great place to be.

Then it happened in the driveway and it was disgusting—the collision. This guy Dmitri needed to be rushed to the hospital, bleeding profusely, and it was Dwayne who stepped up, took his t-shirt off exposing his not-intimidating upper body, tied a strip of ripped T-shirt tight around the guy’s leg just below the knee, and then carried him to the back of his old pickup where he got on-lookers to hop in and spread padded drop-clothes around, folded up to be softer for this guy Dmitri. I just stood there watching it all.

He chose to be the helpful one, but he went it alone, too quickly it seemed, taking care of a somewhat random guy at a party. And that seemed a bit strange, highly unusual to me. I asked him as he was getting in why he was the one leaving the big party. I was a little drunk. Then he gave me an

answer that was more than I expected and it stuck in my head.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said and turned pointing a finger at me. “How could a guy possibly leave a party like this?” Then he turned back forward. “Don’t get me wrong,” he paused for a sec, “I do like females, but... they usually don’t like me.”

What? I wasn't expecting it. Ugh—it couldn't have been harder to hear.

A month later he saved a guy from breaking a leg or two on a jobsite. The staging broke away from the edge of the roof and the board slipped off thirty feet from the ground. Dwayne was five feet from him, closer to the good stilt, and reached out for both the good stilt and the guy’s hand reaching out. The board slid and crashed all the way down. Dwayne wrapped an arm around the stilt, put a knee fast and hard on the exposed metal jack then reached for the guy’s wrist so the guy didn’t go crashing down after the board. It was a wild show.

Dwayne didn’t look particularly strong, but when it mattered he could lift up the world. Hanging by his wrist the guy looked up at Dwayne like he was an unexpected demigod.

* * *

On the afternoon break, Little Mikey after a long drag of an unfiltered Pall Mall cigarette jerked his head up to indicate he was going to say something.

“Man, your friend sounds like a hero.”

“Yeah, that guy?” I smiled. “He was a hero that day, for sure.”

Carlo there also agreed with a slow nod.

Howard picked up on me though, like he knew me too well already. On one of the first days, when I was working near him, I had told him that my “cousin in the trades” was now down in New Mexico. Inside, a few days later, after I told my second story, he called to me quietly.

“Your stories were all about your older cousin, weren’t they?” And he wasn’t even asking, just making a comment.

“Yes, you got me on that.”

“He sounds like a good guy to have around.”

I didn’t respond to that comment, but then I said sideways:

“That’s my limited experience as a storyteller, I guess.”

“There’s no such thing as limited,” he said slowly. “Experience is experience.” He paused but then asked:

“Your cousin is down there, just east of Sante Fe?”

“Yeah, he is.” Then I added the golden crux. “But I’d rather leave him down there.”

* * *

Week Two Saturday I saw Howard’s pick-up by The Last Dollar, so I strolled in to see if his presence was obvious. It was good to know a local, or another transient I should say, and I hadn’t seen the Dollar yet. On the outside it looked like a historic saloon. On the inside it looked like a nice old bar. Howard was there sitting at a table halfway down the right side, and was talking to a young happy couple who was standing up to leave when I came in the front. They smiled, laughed, nodded, and bowed their heads and said thank you a few times.

Then he smiled and waved when he saw me. I walked over and took one of the warm vacated chairs. After a careful sip of his lemon water, moving the lemon with his straw to the other side of the glass, he asked the big why-here question.

“What brings you here?” he asked surprising me with his inquisition. Then he clarified. “Not here at the Dollar, but why out here in the San Juans?”

So I gave him the synopsis version of the story. But of course it put Dwayne on the brain—similar to the medical condition involving too much water up there—and I talked too much, more than just an answer to his question. It was a few months later that I worked to put it on paper as recommended by Beáma, and made efforts to tighten it a bit.

The two moms—the sisters—years ago sat me down in our living room after a long day of high school to remind me of stuff I wasn’t so freshly

aware of. I was pretty sophomoric, junior year I think it was. I'd heard a few things over the years, but not everything, and not all together, which made it pretty hard-hitting and impactful. Dwayne's mom was crying or had just recovered from a cry when my mom told me about the past again, the earlier years. She recollected all the times when Dwayne's "innate helpfulness" was brought to life by the needs of his younger cousin.

"I get it. Dwayne took care of things," I said quickly to both of them.

"No!" my mom answered fast. "He took care of you!" Then she said: "It's important that you always remember that." She was dry and composed but Dwayne's mom was smiling with her eyes wet.

More than once Dwayne took a badly-bleeding younger cousin back home on the back of his bigger bike. A few times I sat on the curved-up back of his long seat because some accident had happened. Once it was after we were hit by a plastic bat hard enough to break the skin wide open requiring six stitches. Another time was when I went off a bike jump at the side of a driveway, where the cement was ramped up meeting the butt-end of the curb—we flew through the air pretty well, but without the bike, and landed hard on the chin producing quite a bit of blood plus many more stitches. Young nine or ten year old Dwayne put the six year old on the back of his seat and rode him home. He delivered the young one to the mother,

who then thanked Dwayne profusely before driving the stupid reckless one to the ER. Oh and the little guy was crawling on the nine-foot edge of a sailboat on a trailer in a neighbor's driveway when he rolled off the side and banged his head down on the pavement, causing a good amount of pain ongoing, that he apparently complained about a lot. Then of course Dwayne was there—and everywhere really, with his pedal-powered emergency-transport vehicle. He rode to the station-wagon ambulance which then transported the little one to the hospital where he lived for several days with a small fracture to the skull. Not an extremely big deal though. Kids fall down.

Near the end of the talk with the moms, Dwayne himself walked in. He was looking for his mom, when my mom decided to tell him what in fact he had walked in on, what we were going over, and he seemed to immediately understand. Then he said, which kind of cracked me up, even though there was nothing funny about it:

“You have to wonder why I did all that,” he started. “Thought I was saving a new baby Jesus or something.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” I said to make it sound more like a joke. I looked directly at Auntie B and my mom. “I’m doing the best I can.”

To balance that, a few years earlier, dear cousin Dwayne got me good. He was seventeen or

eighteen, and I was the small younger targeted one. One afternoon, a March Saturday in Kearny, I walked in the back with a friend and got blasted by Dwayne with the hose for three minutes straight. It was a cloudy afternoon in the high thirties. He was waiting for Aunt B who was inside discussing with my mom a future gardening thing. In a flash my friend jumped out of the hose's way but I got completely soaked—head, face, clothes, shoes, backpack, everything. It was beyond annoying, and I was hit too hard, too wet and shocked to do anything but take it. And I thought Dwayne would eventually calm down, but he didn't. He kept it on me straight and forceful beyond the point of it being funny—not at all like a quick “I got you with the hose!”—he just didn't stop. In minute number two he still thought it was funny, I was more than wet and still getting blasted though I didn't have anything dry left. He was laughing at first then just wildly smiling. Then finally in the third minute he stopped, got bored and started thinking about something else. He put the hose down like he was done watering the garden and went to the garage. I looked at my friend who just said: “Wow.” Then we went slowly in the house.

No, Dwayne wasn't always conversant. What he was thinking was never obvious, and details about his personal life are in short supply, if they even exist anywhere but in his brain—besides the unexpected research he ended up telling me about last summer.

* * *

The next week Howard gave a good-size list of rock shows he saw in the old days. He saw most of the big names early at clubs and small events, including seeing “the purple-glasses hippy girl” on the grass outside in Dallas. He looked at me then puzzled and asked my age. I told Howard I wasn’t even close to alive then.

“And look at you now,” he said, probably impressed by nothing, only with a calculation of decades and that I knew who she was, Janis Joplin. I remember he ran the radio dial for a minute and found a famous guitar solo that I knew well but couldn’t name. He stood up straight, arched his back and stared at the ceiling with memories running through him like vein blood, nutrients previously delivered. He turned it up and went to the next room to cut baseboard.

Then the money guy in creased pants and dress shoes showed up, the man who apparently put up the million-plus for the big house we were on. He came in and went straight to the radio and turned it off. He said something asinine like: “I don’t mind music, but this stuff?!”

I sat on the temp stairs and mourned the living dead. I imagined the guy’s funeral. Here lies a man who didn’t appreciate music. Forgive him. Have mercy on his soul. It needs all the help it can get. Howard came out after the man passed and said: “It’s a shame people can live with so much less happiness than what life can give ‘em.” Then he added he no longer liked the house very much.

Later that day, long before Dwayne’s “theatrical” performance, I ran into Marcus who carried a paper shopping bag

with milk and a box of frosted flakes, and we walked back to the house before it got dark, slowed down a notch by the nice late sun on Main Street. And it seemed a busy crowded time, though everyone walked a bit faster when the sun dropped behind the western mountains. In the cold like us people went their ways.

The Riddle Solved!

On one of the early November Saturdays I hiked with Dwayne down in Ouray south of Telluride. He told me both times he came the Ouray way up from Santa Fe and Taos and that a sign coming into town from the south says Ouray is the “Switzerland of America.” When he brought Ouray up on the phone, I jumped on the idea, using this great alternative location as an excuse not to have him come all the way up again and harass the Telluride locals, or me. There was a great hiking path I’d heard about up to a spot called Cascade Falls with an incredible view of the tiny town, and I figured it would be a great way to spend a couple controlled hours with the cousin, appreciating the great outdoors, what Colorado is all about. He’d always loved physical endeavors, walking and such, so I figured this would be a great thing to do before the snow got any deeper. In a silent way, we hiked up the two-mile, snowy, switch-backing path—up around the back side then wrapping around to the front side with the great high view of Ouray, plus the old mining cabin right on the edge.

I learned from my older brother back east that our moms were pushing for Dwayne’s move to the West to be long term, not just a visit or hiatus. Maybe they’re sick of him, too! James also

said that Dwayne agreed to try “head meds,” as James casually referred to them—which I already knew. James said it was meant to “help calm his inner self.” But apparently they didn’t work. He tried them only because it was a great unknown and he knew it would make people happy if he sampled “the druggy approach,” he called it. “Never again,” he stated firmly. “They dumb me down,” he said when I asked about it, hiking in Ouray. “They make me like everyone else. Not for me,” he closed the subject with. I figured it was the typical Dwayne making problematic decisions independently, different than decisions others might make for him.

As an example of being ‘dumbed down,’ he said he could sit in front of the TV for long periods of time surrendering to bad movies, for the first time ever. With his regular brain, movies bored him, he said to me once back in Kearny. “They move too slowly, even chase or action movies,” he said. And the love element he never seemed to enjoy. He said a few years back: “It’s dumb what people say. It’s never anything useful.” “Why do things have to be useful?” I asked. The romantic comedy is from another planet where the stupid people live. Laughing is a sign of weakness the Dwayne Handbook probably says.

Dwayne stood on a rock up near Cascade Falls, on a precipice at the very top of the trail. There with the incredible view down in front of him, he said out of nowhere with a straight face that he was down there in the little Las Vegas “on leave, or on sabbatical.” “Right!” I said, standing behind him. Then he slipped. It was just a few inches before he caught his balance. A moment later I had a quick evil thought, about the sudden and unfortunate loss of Dwayne—on a bad slip, at the edge of a cliff, on a mountaintop in Colorado. But of course he was fine with stable footing again, untouched. I did have a ridiculous thought about

giving him a little push, but it wasn't real and didn't last long. The problem of the riddle would be solved! All problems would be over! I briefly induced.

After making it down to his van and my borrowed wagon-truck we made our departures.

“Hey, see you soon, cuz,” I started with.

“Yes, soon it shall be!”

“One of these days,” I said to be friendly, “I’ll come down and see your place.”

And he responded by just nodding. Then he said:

”But it’s no Ouray!” which didn’t mean anything, but was a nice finish.

“Yeah well, neither is touristy ol’ T-ride,” which is good praise for Ouray.

Mid-week when I was home alone at dinnertime—Marcus and Aubrey went to the sports-bar karaoke contest—Beáma slowly patted up the steps and knocked on the door. I didn’t see her coming but I recognized the steps.

“Hi, you!” I offered with an all-knowing mellow grin.”

“Sorry about that other day,” she surprised me with. “I don’t know what got into me.” It was obvious enough that she was referring to the big full-frontal minutes.

“Sorry?” I asked. “Dudette, there’s nothing to apologize for. I sort of liked it,” I told her.

“Yeah, well, I was in a crazy mood. Not sure why I subjected you to that”

“I don’t mind crazy moods,” I told her. “And how crazy was it? You acted like you’d played the game.”

“It’s been years,” she said with a smile, though she was looking off to the side.

“A phase you went through?”

“Yeah,” she said turning back towards me. “I played that game a few times in college, with new acquaintances.”

“Acquaintances?”

“Yeah, a few guys I’d recently met. Guys I hadn’t kissed yet—to get to know each other—in a forward-thinking progressive way,” she said with a half smile.

“But you eventually kissed them?”

“A few. The game didn’t always produce results, you might say.”

“Of course!” I added. “Sometimes you don’t like what you see.”

“Yeah, there’s that. But sometimes just nothing happens, that day or whenever.”

“Right. You made it pretty clear that the game isn’t meant to be foreplay.”

“Yeah, fun, though, right? It makes foreplay on another day that much more....” She delayed to find the right word, “...inevitable!”

“I can see that,” I said strategically, or at least I thought. “Foreplay might be a given once you’ve played that game.”

“Yeah, not always, but hey.” she repeated. “Anyway, I’m sorry I put that on you.”

“I still don’t know why you’re apologizing,” I said. But she stuck out her right arm long and straight to offer the world’s most polite hand-shake. I couldn’t help but to mimic her and put my hand out also.

“Let’s walk down to the bakery,” she offered. The bakery was in another world from the cozy shack, and out in public. Like the hand shake it was too polite and didn’t make much sense to me. It was contrary to my interests. To play it cool, I was more distant and replied in a tired anti-social way.

“Hey, I think I’ll stay here,” I said with a slight smile. “But hey, don’t forget—the door’s always open,” I added.

“Yes, I know,” she said with a straight face. “Ok, then. G’night, Jon.”

Like a Nobody

At the end of the cold work week, Carlo the tall carpenter in flip-up aviators gave me a ride halfway home, up to where he goes left towards Sawpit away from town. He talked about four years with a search and rescue team that went all over western Colorado. One story included this: "When we got to him his eyes were wide open and he was waving to us. The thing was, he was frozen solid. His friend was just sitting there trying to get a little fire going. Not just cold—frozen solid—dead for five hours."

Then Carlo said this: "A woman drove her snowmobile off a fifty-foot cliff. When we got to her, eight hours after she went over, she was still alive, pinned underneath the thing. We got her halfway up to the chopper before she died." Carlo's nature was deadly serious, so I just said "Wow," shook my head and thanked him for the ride.

Later that Friday evening was another unplanned visit up to the San Juans by Dwayne. It was seven-thirty or eight and I was only half-surprised to see him. He smiled to announce himself and I flashed back a smile to of course welcome him.

It was the next morning, Saturday that I accepted the invite to go shooting. I ran into Arnold at the Post Office. Dwayne was unexpected Friday night but he'd left already—it was the day of the Ouray Film Fest and it was suggested by Beáma that he go there. At our P.O. boxes, Arnold invited me casually for a week later on that Saturday to go "play with guns," as he aptly called it. Though now of course it seems extremely irresponsible, and first I thought there might be a conflict because Dwayne was a frequent visitor. However, I figured there was little chance he'd visit two weekends in a row, so I quickly accepted the invite, for me and

possibly Dwayne also in case he was there. Going up in the mountains to do some shooting will be great, shooting only at targets or decoys, Arnold said, since official deer and elk hunting is only in the fall of course. And by then I knew my leg brace would be even looser, not in accordance with the doctor's recommendations, but that's not important. I'd meet the big priest hunter who Arnold always talks about—and I'd get to see Oscar again too, previously the short loudy with unkempt, super dirty greasy hair. I'd get to see him handle a gun.

Oscar coincidentally happened to be the cousin of Arnold. He was a year younger than Arnold and was sleeping on his couch then. Arnold got him the job in house building. Thought of the day: Jesus was a carpenter, they say. But, that doesn't imply all carpenters are smart or trust-worthy. Arnold said Oscar sometimes treated him "like a hero big brother who demands respect." "But in Oscar's unique way," he added, "I'm like a nobody sometimes." As when Oscar got an idea in his head, or lack thereof, and acted on it without thinking. Even telling stories at work, there wasn't any thought given to who he was talking to, like what would or wouldn't be a good way to tell a story—his mind let go and he did his thing. Respect or consideration for others just flew out the window, probably never there to begin with.

* * *

The next weekend, with Dwayne visiting again, Marcus told him that he absolutely had to do the hike up to Bridal Veil Falls with the big mining house on the edge of the cliff there. Being his host, I went with him in order to spend part of the day together, and also to give my imperfect knee a decent stretch. The snow and ice was everywhere but it was pretty well packed down even up higher at the far eastern end of the box canyon below the

signature Mt. Ajax which you see on postcards overlooking Main Street. There was significant foot traffic all the way up, and the path was very walk-able, even in late February.

We could see from the bottom of the trail that the falls was all ice, and as we got closer there was a guy and a girl tightening their straps and ropes and checking carabineers.

Then we kept on going, past the base of the frozen waterfall up around to the top. At the house, at the edge, we both stood with as much a view of the town as possible even though the end of the canyon and the falls have more of a northern view instead of a straight-western view over the town. After an hour of walking I was exhausted. I was surprised that it took that long to hike up since the entire switch-backing path was visible before we started. Dwayne was less tired and loving it. I think in fact he loved us being together even though we didn't talk much. We made comments in each other's direction about the path, the snow, the ice, the mountains, the directions, the sun and the sky and the elevation, but all in all it was minimal conversation. I realized I was winded from the less oxygen. Dwayne made a few heavy hard forceful gasps on purpose as if he was testing the air for its strength. He was clearly fine with the serious exercise and proud to be up ahead a bit. The view was amazing of course, but I was ready for the long walk down.

Once when I was thirteen and Dwayne was seventeen he was over to help paint our living room and my mom tipped over and spilled a gallon onto the wood floor. Immediately Dwayne's OCD did an incredible job cleaning up every last molecule of paint within five feet of the center-point of the spill, the eye of the storm—compulsively, obsessively, quickly. Dwayne hit his knees with a rag nearly before the spill stopped spilling. He used a rag

then hopped to his feet and grabbed two more towels from our pantry and made two rolled-up speed bumps or levees, controlling the spread of the spill, and got the trash can from the kitchen five seconds later and with the dust pan scooped up large flat shovel-fulls of the thick liquid, getting up large amounts of the off-white and dumping it into the trash can. Minutes later the floor was nearly paint free. He used another clean towel with fresh hot soapy water as a clear wash to dilute the thin paint film left on the floor. Then he used another fresh towel to mop up the final traces. I was blown away, awed and amazed at Dwayne's crazy dexterity and response time and ability to take action faster than imaginable when intelligence and hyper-fast action were both needed. I just stood there. My dipped brush almost dripped so I scraped it back in my paint can.

On the trail we saw the couple again, this time climbing the misshapen, unsmooth ice. They'd gone up ten or twelve feet.

"I prefer walking," Dwayne said, which made me laugh.

"Yeah, me too," I agreed.

"Climbing is too slow, even if you're an expert."

"Maybe they hiked to the top already—saw the view already," I added.

"Yeah, maybe," Dwayne agreed with a nod, which doesn't happen very often. "The view is very important... no matter where you are."

"Yes!" I added. Then we hiked down. Farther out and down the box wall we were under the peak of Ajax and could see all the town rooftops.

Go Check on Him

Two summers ago just prior to our moves westward, Dwayne left the Shore and was back home in Botany Village. Labor Day weekend I saw his mom in Kearny, which wasn't unusual. She whispered to me, just to honor the concept of privacy, that she was worried about Dwayne. He hadn't done anything for several weeks, and for several days he hadn't left the house.

“Go check on him, would you?”

“Hey, sure,” I said. “I miss that guy,” I added in a friendly distant way.

“He just hasn't gone out in a while,” she started. “He's not working, but how hard would it be for him to find work?” she added, which was a good question, a good point.

“I'll go say hi.”

“Yeah, just stop by and say hi,” my mom added repetitiously, as if it was a very delicate situation and a controversial suggestion she was backing up.

“I think he's been researching something, He's gone back into his room a number of times with a new library book.”

“One book or multiple books?” I said as if I was a trained investigator.

“Well, you know him. He reads so much—manuals, books—I can’t keep track.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“He just seems even more intense than usual—more focused on something.”

“Wow, more than usual? That’s pretty...” and I couldn’t decide how to finish.

In my unconcerned way, I gave the moms a smile and promised to visit him. I’d go over and knock on his door, in our special way, to check in and say hi, to see if I could do anything, in my last week or so before getting picked up. His own plan, his move to New Mexico, wasn’t definite yet. Everybody was guessing and hopeful but understood this move would happen on its own schedule, at its own pace. Dwayne was twenty-six. Decisions of his were very much his.

A day later I went to see Dwayne. And after the initial hesitation, it was Dwayne’s unexpected decision to talk a little that explained what he’d been doing—researching.

“Hey, I just wanted to check in,” I started. “Also, your mom is a bit worried—said you’ve stayed inside for a while?” I put it right on the table to see what his answers were to all this. He then said that there was a big difference between what was thought by outsiders, which was appreciated by his mom, and what he was actually doing.

“Jon, as you would probably guess, I haven’t been doing nothing. I haven’t been sitting around with nothing on my mind,” he stated, which I knew. “I’ve been reading,” he added, which was a bit more of a confession than expected, and humble in that he

admitted he was reading something besides an owner's manual, something written by someone else.

"Research?" I offered as a translation for reading. I pretended that this cracked me up with a smile to keep things light. "You making a bomb?" I asked as a joke, then with a slightly nervous chuckle.

"No, of course not." Then he paused and looked to the side. "Let me just say I was considering a big DIY project," he said. "If I tell you, you'll understand it would have called for an enormous amount of mental preparation."

"Well now you have to tell me."

He didn't end up doing it—then or since then—but it speaks to his out-of-the-box thinking—more his different-box weirdness—that he was even thinking about it. Part of me doesn't even want to mention this—but I know I should. You could say I'm like a best man giving a toast at his friend's wedding, telling eye-opening stories about the groom, like getting very drunk one time and running across a football field naked. People would laugh politely. Those would be harmless stories in comparison to what Dwayne came closer than most to doing. It was a truly sad, scary consideration if he was as close to it as I think he was. I can only feel comfortable sharing this because of where he is now, what happened to him. The joke is on me.

In all honesty, I'm not sure that this meeting of ours actually happened, these things were in his room, or that he said these things. It might have been just a mild nightmare. I feel a little better when I believe it was just my dumb self thinking about things too much.

* * *

Back in Kearny at the end of last summer—at his mom’s request, I went over to say hi. He then told me in so many words what he almost did—which in my book would have been way-way beyond impossible. He started by throwing a thumb over a shoulder to the right to get my attention to his bookshelves. On top and in the middle were books and magazines, including the ones I could see: *Bicycling*, *World’s Most Dangerous Book for Boys*, *Virtue of Selfishness*, etc. But at the bottom there was more open space with a few small tools and accessories in position, but slightly askew as if they had been used once—new tape and an almost-new gauze roll, a needle and syringe next to a small jar of Novocain, a tube of Lidocaine, and a sharp piece of metal with a handle and a slightly rounded blade, some sort of scalpel or else carpet knife. I didn’t look any closer. It was all on a blue towel on the lower shelf of his bookshelf on the left. There was also the big bottle of bourbon, which was not full, which his uncle, my dad, used to drink too much of—from our house Dwayne probably snuck it over.

“It’s more than just grounding the delivery trucks,” Dwayne started with, “so they don’t deliver to their destination. It’d be more like getting rid of the machines at the factory, so the product doesn’t get produced in the first place, let alone thought about.”

Visiting him in his room, at his mom’s request, the scene was predictably outlandish. For starters, the big bottle of Kentucky bourbon made it clear that something highly unusual was going on or at least being researched in a drunken way. As far as I knew, Dwayne didn’t touch the stuff, let alone beer or wine very often. I

didn't know what he was talking about at first, but my imagination made the leap to figure it out.

But first was my knock so he'd know it was me: knock, knock, knock, (pause) knock, knock. A few summers before this on the Shore, at my suggestion, we decided on a knock that would tell the other person who it was, before we entered ten seconds later, in case we were entertaining company, on the front-room couch in my case, which never happened. It might sound too simple, but it's not. When it's slow and steady at the knocking end—and the ten second wait—it's a very reasonable delay by someone who might live there.

He was sitting at his desk with his laptop and a book to the right called—I could see it clearly—*The Romance of the Eunuch*, the title in pretty big letters, close to his more comfortable reading chair so it looked like maybe just his casual reading. It wasn't a scary situation I walked in on, but the fact he was reading about the eunuch subject at all was alarming enough. Though great of course it proved to be hypothetical mostly.

He gave me the analogy of delivery trucks versus machines at the factory, and he also mentioned a YouTube vid-chat. And then for no good reason it clicked—and it would be a good decent understatement to say it blew my mind.

“Woah! What?!” I began with. “Wait a second,” I slowly restarted with for clarification, “YouTube instructions for one fell swoop?” I couldn't believe I was even saying this, like it was the actual subject-matter of a conversation I was having. “What are we even talking about?”

“I was reading up on the disconnection and removal process,” he answered quickly. “Clearing out the shed,” he offered

my analogous brain. But he also shared more thoughts. “No to one fell swoop—didn’t want it to be so... medieval.”

Then, which he never did, Dwayne admitted to being incorrect about something.

“I was thinking for a while it might be only a minor procedure—a technical adjustment.”

“Minor?!”

“Yeah, well,” he began, seeing an opportunity for a casual insult, “You might not realize, I’m not right all the time.”

It was pretty clear in retrospect but at first I was completely baffled. It was very difficult to put into terms my brain would accept. What he was implying was much-much more than a DIY vasectomy, which I guessed at first, but a vasectomy is not even in the same universe. You might say more of a virtual DIY lobotomy of sorts, a Nazi-esque improvement of one’s questionable behavior, a careful neutering of the dog or cat’s male owner—along with an impossible and unimaginable level of will-power and surgical precision to begin with—the end goal being to render oneself an albeit disguised eunuch with an empty factory left in place, taking the unpredictable human drive to spread seed out of the equation.

“I was thinking for a while that it might bring me peace. Better focused. Not depressed anymore,” Dwayne said.

“What? No, you’d be more depressed!”

“Jon, I’ll be forthright with you. Maybe you’ll understand this, or maybe you won’t, but sometimes my life hurts a bit,” he

said, which killed me. Dwayne I think was saying what we all feel to some extent, but can't really imagine in other people's terms. Sure, we all get the blues, and we feel "better" when we hear sad music, but that's it. And empathy isn't experience—it might be seeing the fire but it's not being burned by it. I had to think about him then more than I'd ever wanted to—in his shoes. "The world is full of bad stupid men," he started, "For a long time, I've known that I don't want to be one of them—nothing but apex reliable."

"Ugh."

"But I'm okay, Jon-boy. Crossed that bridge yesterday—definitely not going to do it."

I looked around then, to better orient myself, including at his closet and his metal mesh trashcan—then a bit of used gauze grabbed my eye, thrown away with a tablespoon of blood on it. "What the—what's that!?" I asked very clearly pointing.

"Oh, that."

"What?"

"You could say I was just testing the waters."

Then I thought back to his metaphor. "You said you crossed that bridge yesterday."

"Yeah, yesterday. It was a test session. Let's leave it at that."

"That bridge," I slowly repeated, thinking about the way-too-simple metaphor, making sure to digest the whole picture, the little bridge, with the crazy raging violent rapids underneath.

“Well...” I started again, for no good reason, to oversimplify, to maybe wrap up the whole subject and tuck it away, “C’est la vie... right?”

“La vie, la vie,” said Dwayne, which from him was a very unusual kind of remark, for him to play off something someone else said.

I paused with a deep breath, then a genuine smile. It was good that he returned to Earth.

But in my head the questions continued. What the fuck? Why, and how, would he or anyone even think of this? How in the hell was it even possible, to think about let alone do it?

“Yeah,” I said out loud with a headshake, in response to nothing, like I was possessed by an annoying demon. “The pain factor I’m still stuck on.”

He answered quickly like he knew it was a question I’d ask.

“My mom was going to help,”—Aunt B is a dentist by the way— “without knowing anything, of course—with Novocain,” he added. “I got that jar from her office.”

“Yeah, well—just the thought of a blade...”

“And Lidocaine, for topical use.”

“Right. Of course.”

“Yes, Little Jon, nothing was fully done—and won’t get done. Do not worry about it.”

And then I kept talking, beyond the self-control that would've shut me up.

“Why'd you even let me in? Why are you telling me all this? Why do I have to know?”

I didn't want to know. I just wanted to drop the subject and tuck it away. I grabbed his bright white Nike's on the floor by the door and tossed them lightly in his direction. They had his brown wool socks neatly folded up inside them.

“Hey, let's go have lunch. See what the moms are up to.”

But he continued.

"When you knocked, I knew it was you, and I knew you'd honor my privacy. It's not in your nature to tell anyone...." (pause) "...what I was researching. So I let you come in. You won't of course, right?"

"No, I'd never!" I stated firmly with confidence. "I wouldn't enjoy it." Then I said: "Hey, like I said, let's go say hi to the moms."

I didn't want any more of his creative thinking, or personal information. Again, it was the unexpected that was always possible in a Dwayne scenario. Plus, I knew he was generally more comfortable in a non-personal mode, with less sharing, so I was happy to just say a last Wow to myself reaching back to make sure his door was still open.

“Why though? Why even the research?” I couldn't help but ask in the hallway.

“I already answered that.”

“Yeah, but...”

“In other words?” he knew to offer, “I’ll answer that again. I wanted to be smarter, more trustworthy—wanted my brain to work better.”

“Okay, then,” I said, as if that settled it.

And then Dwayne never mentioned it again.

Later, unavoidably, I thought about the whole subject a little more, what my official argument was, being generally against this course of action—out of date by five hundred years—not really a line of thinking for male humans anymore. When I looked at it in those terms—even though we’re talking about a highly individualistic Dwayne idea—it still didn’t make sense. But, it was acceptable according to the Dwayne standards.

The next day, I successfully didn’t think about the visit and our talk, and again the day after that, and the day after that, too. It was easy enough for me because it was off in the Dwayne world where things could be ignored and then forgotten about. I successfully compartmentalized. I really gave it no more thought until the more recent events got me to put this all together.

Better to have Dwayne be more like us, I say. If he had done it, its aftermath probably would have stopped him from moving to New Mexico. Anyway, quite glad it wasn’t done. For all practical purposes he’s a regular guy, whatever that means.

A Ground-Breaking Diagnosis

After Dwayne left town early that Sunday morning—after our big Bridal Veil hike on Saturday—Beáma stopped by alone again, but this time with a crutch and an ankle in a plaster cast. She was proud and happy to show off what she got for a bad sprain skiing.

“Ah, see you’ve joined the club,” I said.

She smiled quickly but then changed the subject.

“It’s so great, the view here.”

“Oh,” I said, then questioning why she was there in the first place. “Yeah, it’s nice.”

“When’s your cousin Dwayne coming again?” she asked next.

“What? Oh, not sure. Soon, I’d guess.”

“You know I saw him at the bookstore again last weekend, in the late afternoon.”

“Oh, sure. Yeah, he likes the scones there he told me.”

“I made him sit for a while and I asked him a bunch of questions.”

“Wow, a conversation? That’s not every day for him.”

Then she gave me her read on him. She said she’s convinced Dwayne’s never had a real girlfriend, which is impossible or crazy I’d say, for a straight twenty-five year old.

Personally, I never asked myself this. I never wanted to think about that world too much. Then with Beáma there, I thought about it freshly for twelve seconds, all the years, and I had to agree with her.

“You might be right. He never mentioned any girls to me, or brought home any as far as I know. Maybe his trade school is partly to blame for that,” I added for no good reason.

“I wonder if he isn’t a little bi,” she then threw out.

“What? No, I don’t think so. Not possible really.” Then I thought about it. “Too creative for him, I think.”

“Not possible? What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, nothing. Just not likely, I meant.”

“Too creative?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I guess I meant too liberal, liberal minded!”

“You make it sound like politics are involved,” Beáma said. “I don’t think he’s gay-gay, but I do think he’s out there.”

“Yes, I agree with that!” I said, knowing the term “out there” was appropriate. Then I added: “Well, a gay thought is a gay thought, right?”

“Yeah, maybe he’s never done anything about it, but it might be part of who he is!”

“Well, he did almost cut his balls off,” I said, but then pretended it was just a joke.

“What!?”

“That was just a funny jig-saw accident,” I said to keep that subject covered up. Beáma didn’t need to know the details. In a drunken way the previous summer, Dwayne just said he didn’t find his testicles “trustworthy” which I remember laughing at.

“I think he needs and wants love,” Beáma said, as if it was a ground-breaking diagnosis.

“Sure!” I agreed. Though I wasn’t convinced he really wanted anybody else around.

“That’s why he works so hard. Like you said. He does so much, and so well!”

“That’s to make money,” I put in, to simplify things.

“Sure, but let’s not forget sexuality.”

“Sexuality?” I asked her, as if I was suspect of that word, that whole official subject. “That’s a school word,” I might have said. I was trying to steer us away from it. “That’s a subject for him to discuss with himself, not something you and I should be thinking about. Isn’t that personal private HIPPA shit?” I asked, to be somewhat manly about everything.

“Okay, whatever. I thought you’d want to talk about this stuff—Dwayne and all.”

“Sure, Dwayne. The Dwayne that I know. Not the abstract hypothetical Dwayne,” I said honestly to sound a little narrow minded—and maybe therefore a little interested, focused, distracted by her, the woman visiting the injured man’s house. “I

try not to think about the inner workings of people, especially not family.”

Beáma then dropped it, smiled, and stood to go. She looked at her watch, which we know is the official symbol of “I’ve got better stuff to do.” I enjoyed seeing her from the back, but I knew it might be a few weeks before I saw her from the front again.

I know what some readers might be thinking, as Beáma considered. Let’s slap a label on him. Straight? Gay? Bi? I think the only category remotely appropriate is independent, a non-participant. In other words, if you’re looking up the technical definition of his identity, I think Dwayne counts as none of these common categories. But who knows, of course. Whatever went on in his head was his own business. What do you call a person who doesn’t have interactions with other human beings? What do you call it if they happen to do it with furniture? What if they don’t do it at all and never even touched someone else? What if they’re never within four feet of another? Whether or not he’s pleased himself can only be guessed at or assumed, but we know that nothing should ever be assumed. So add this to the list of great unknowns for Mr. Dwayne.

Mark us Failin’

The next morning, they were getting ready to put up the walls of the many-sided house down the road—which would soon be the only new place in town. Under a very dark blue sky there

were already two trucks and guys in matching jackets walking and talking on the plywood floor. Big day—walls go up fast.

The day started with guy from yesterday making a formal presentation to the seven or eight workers all with hats pulled down and gloves on, a few with those neoprene face masks, all with sub-zero exhales visible in the binocs. Then they dispersed, got their belts, and a few had final sips of coffee realizing it wasn't hot anymore. Two older guys laughed, shook their heads grinning, and the head guy got back in his clean truck and drove off. Too exciting not to watch closely, so we pulled the table, chair, and foot-stool over to the side of the kitchen window. Marcus then quietly said: "What the fuck," when he squeezed in to get his OJ.

I knew if Dwayne was there, he'd be in charge of everybody—the foreman—with official disagreements to the strange design, as given by the very knowledgeable one.

Later that morning college friend Jessie called. Spent fifteen minutes on the phone listening to how fascinated and in love with The City he is. He told me it's always a challenge, begging for your thirst for the different. I told him that it's really sunny here and almost everyone on the sidewalk greets you if you look their way. "Oooh! We don't have that here," he said.

In the late afternoon, some movie-star guy ducked under a rope he wasn't supposed to at the top of the mountain. Marcus came out of his lift-op's hut and yelled before he recognized him. Marcus said to the guy's date: "Boyfriend's an idiot. Tell him to read the signs, or else put him on a leash." Marcus probably had fun saying all this, if he really did—his story, so maybe it was dramatized a bit.

The same couple was sighted later in the day at the bakery. Aubrey was there and overheard the guy's conversation with the wise-ass acquaintance from Brooklyn who works behind the counter. Movie-star-guy approached the counter passing a salad bar, a cooler-frig with drinks, and a whole wall of fresh bread. He asked whether the bakery had any fresh bread for sale. In response, the helper said: "You mean like fresh bread like the fresh bread on the wall of fresh bread behind you?" Aubrey said the movie-star guy flashed a smile but the Brooklyn guy was talking to somebody else then. A proud moment for the migrant worker. No other sightings yet reported.

After sunset I tried to talk to my much older smarter brother about everything, all the important stuff in the world, what have you. Yes, he works for that well known story magazine back east that's also very political! We talked current events and reality stuff for tens of minutes on end. J-man forces me to talk about the news, which we're never great at.

"Oh what was my final point going to be?" I said near the end.

"Forgot it. You don't know what it is yet. Let that one simmer."

James also then asked whether Dwayne had "mentioned the spectrum thing?" I didn't understand. Why would he?

"No," I said quickly, not even knowing what exactly he meant by "the spectrum thing." I got distracted by Marcus asking where his car keys were. After Marcus' loud question again, I pointed to the keys on the counter then pressed the phone to my head again.

“Yeah, so, I’ll let that one simmer, I guess” I said, remembering only that we were considering what my final point would be.

“Okay, Jon,” brother James said. “We’ll talk soon. Gotta go.”

James was no doubt busy at work, so I gave our conversation no more thought.

I remember that same afternoon, the shack’s owner knocked on our door. As luck had it, the vertical blinds were mostly closed—preventing an outsider from seeing much. Marcus smartly didn’t open the door too widely, maintaining that proper amount of tenant privacy. With our multiple mattresses around the wood-burner and the general amount of crap laying around, it was pretty obvious it wasn’t just Marcus and I living there. Marcus then repeated twice to the New York guy that of course we knew it was just a two-person rental.

“We’re great here. Thanks for stopping by,” concluded Marcus, and the man seemed to say nothing in response. Marcus slid the door closed the final six inches and turned inward with his eyebrows raised and mouth wide open in a big circle, like a cartoon of surprise and relief.

Yes, three of us—and maybe more if we could find another to share the rent with.

Then we relaxed.

"What's that old expression?" Marcus said coming back to our living space. "The higher you are, the farther you'll go."

"High is the opposite of low," Aubrey added smiling. "What would you rather be?"

And then Marcus said a minute later while holding his breath: "I'd rather be right in the middle, man."

Aubrey laughed, as I might have.

"High at the same time!" Marcus added with a big smile and a higher pitch on purpose. Then he let out his breath.

Aubrey was stoned too, but I still asked him a few questions, for the first time, about his past life. His eyebrows raised in surprise at my line of inquisition. He stayed on the couch and looked to the side for a few seconds. He then started by saying he went to the American School of Kinshasa, a boarding school. Otherwise he spent summers with his parents in "the burbs of Kisangani," he said, and that his parents both used to work for "Mobutu in the Zaire days."

Aubrey then went on about Congolese politics, about the party Democratique, the Labour party and other stuff, and I was nodding like I appreciated the analysis, but had stopped my scribbling to just listen, nod and feign full understanding. He then went back to his parents who moved to Kisangani to work for two big trading companies. As a result there were then "international connections," for new opportunities like "having your kid go to the States."

"Yeah, right-on," Marcus jumped in. "Then we met you."

"Yes," said Aubrey. "College is a wonderful thing."

"Thank you, sir," I said to him, "for all that. I know you a little better now."

Aubrey then carried the story a bit further and said his parents now spend half their time in Illinois, and just recently became dual citizens, after almost a decade.

"Wow, Illinois," said Marcus.

"Yes these days it's all about vegetable oil—genetic modification and all that."

"Vegetable oil? What about..." Marcus started, with a pause—

"Yeah, just that for now—but soy is coming! Watch out!" Aubrey smiled, stood up and put his finger in front of his lips. "Shhh. Don't tell anyone. I said too much."

"Woah, the inside scoop," said Marcus to the side grinning. "Soy! International intrigue!"

Their full names are Aubrey Kidiaba and Marcus Phaellen. I told Marcus I want to use his name in a great novel someday because it's great the way it looks and sounds—pronounced either way like 'Failing' or 'Fallen'. Mark us fallen, or Mark us failing. Ain't that the truth.

Later that same night Marcus was stoking a super-hot aspen fire in the shack's woodstove, "part for essential heat but as much for entertainment reasons," he said. It was highly seasoned deadwood he and Aubrey had taken down themselves from behind the jobsite where Aubrey was working. "It's fun to play with fire when it's already raging to see just how hot you can get it," Marcus

added. And the shack's electric bills would be unreasonable if only the electric baseboards were relied on. In mornings the thermostat by the bathroom said fifty.

Early the next morning with coffee number two, I couldn't help but shake my head at the new house. Despite the regular appearance of plywood over two-by-twelves—with regular two-by-fours used for inside walls—despite all that, it was absolutely clear again that the design of this house a few blocks away wasn't at all plain or regular. On the joists on the far end of the second floor, what looked like the framing for a ramped-up floor was going in—shouldn't even call it a floor—a ramp—and when plywood's down, I figured, maybe it'll be more clear what the heck it's for! A gigantic custom fish tank, or a giant custom-tiled Jacuzzi bathtub? Or, maybe an indoor skate park?!

Oh My God Unbelievable

One dark morning in late January, Aubrey and Marcus got to the kitchen first. They were talking more than usual, taking turns looking out the kitchen window. Aubrey turned and said: "You won't believe what we saw last night." Then Marcus jumped in:

"You know that house getting built down there?"

"Two guys were leaving the Dollar right before us..." picked up Aubrey, "and they were talking about ripping and carving, just snowboarding, I figured. They were drunk and loud."

Aubrey's slight French accent was definitely that of a well-educated foreigner, well announced for so early, the 'ing' in ripping and carving clear like a bell, which you don't hear every day. "We followed about thirty feet behind them."

"They were laughing hard," Marcus said and smiled, "about skating and ramp-riding and one guy said: "Let's do it!""

Aubrey said the two guys started to drunk-jog. "In a few blocks they took a right off Main, where we go left."

Aubrey and Marcus followed because it sounded to them like there was a skate ramp at a jobsite. They turned off Main and immediately saw the new house getting built two blocks down, even though it was in a dark spot with faint light from a street-lamp. The other guys scrambled at a Sierra and came away with a skateboard from the lock-box behind the cab, and they were still giggling hard, Marcus said.

"We could see them from up at the corner," Marcus added. "But we went down a little."

"And then the noise was crazy! We couldn't see inside the place, but we could hear the ramp—upstairs—back and forth, back and forth with the rolling noise wicked loud, then the skater would wipe out and the other guy would go SSHHH! and laugh."

"Yeah, with the half-inch dusting, the skating conditions were crazy," said Marcus, "with no real wind and giant holes where the windows'll go."

"Woah, wild, wow," I said—though not quite as surprised as they thought I'd be. I hobbled over to the window to see this jobsite they were talking about. Nobody was there yet.

Marcus and Aubrey then soon left for their jobs.

The next morning Marcus rolled over on his mattress and mumbled that avalanche patrol must be dropping charges far closer to our house than usual. Those sounds are usually just far away, like a storm in the next valley. Dynamite sticks wrapped in masking tape thrown over the back-side of the mountain in the off-piste un-ski-able territory high above Bear Creek across from the shack. Apparently, people do ski there sometimes. A big boom shook the house. The candles and modified wire-hanger fell off the TV, and keys fell off the shelf onto Marcus' head.

However it turned out to be something else. A new red pickup lost traction on the hill and skidded into the side of the shack's cheap cinderblock foundation. It was a highly unusual car house accident. The driver was fine, though his newish pickup did get a good character mark over the front right wheel.

Aubrey and I were then invited to a house-showing for the first house I worked on. Outside the mansion in the Mountain Village we saw this guy Mikey's mid-size Tacoma. It was not a pretty vehicle but it was parked right next to a Rover. To top off its inappropriateness for a showing, it reeked of beer and vomit with the windows open.

Aubrey and I were told there would be wine, cheese and crackers, with maybe thirty other people. When we got there I was immediately told by Mr. Dress-shoes that all my interior trim had to be re-done. Apparently it had dried out and shrunk. Not happy about that, I looked around and recognized only a few older pieces. What I'd done there was grab boards from the giant pile out the back door by the garage then brought them in for cutting and nailing, but they weren't acclimated yet to being released from

nature. Mr. Dress-shoes said all around the downstairs the shrunken pieces were obvious, tall pieces inches above the blocks they were supposed to be sitting on. Aubrey commiserated. We had extra wine and moved on.

I went back to work that week, with a different contractor at a different house—within walking distance so I didn't need a ride or a borrowed vehicle. One day I was chastised for the way the copper flashing went up under the front windows. Nice cedar shakes and redwood trim. Every outside sill and underside was done in copper flashing which gave it that nice old-fashioned art-deco look. So... we didn't like the first piece of flashing because it was somewhat wavy. It didn't seem to be a perfect symmetrical piece, so we tapped it with the head of the framing hammer very lightly forty or fifty times, giving it a nice tight even look, but also giving it that look of flashing which has been tapped a hundred times with a framing hammer, with a waffle-head no less. Yeah, it had a nice aged look—in fact the highly abused look, which I didn't at first fully appreciate. Then the boss saw it and yelled out "Oh my god. Unbelievable. Who did this?!" So we had a little discussion. It was the end of the day and I was done with the put-away and coil-up. I walked home and decided to request a different new jobsite.

* * *

After a long thoughtless walk one of those mornings, I looked down and across from the shack again at the party-house. It looked like a post-post-modern Disneyworld joke. From a distance saying it looked like special effects were used for a “fun” movie would be a vast understatement. Maybe there's a special standing-point from which it all would appear 2D, the inverse of one of those street drawings that look 3D at a certain angle. Maybe there

was a reason behind the madness of it all! Who's in charge there, kids or grown-ups? If Dwayne was there, none of this cock-eyed cartoonish BS would ever be allowed.

House Party and Pizza

A few days before the big Ouray day, I went out early to walk again and get a light-bean coffee and a muffin. In December Howard at work told me: "The lighter the bean, the more caffeine." When I left the shack a guy was outside his car right across the street up on the steep part. He got out fast, walked down and over and then said he loved our "humble abode."

"Is it available for a summer rental?" he asked.

"Sorry?" I said, surprised at first. "Don't know. You'll have to talk to Mr. Landlord."

"It's so retro. I want to see the inside, but I don't have any time right now—can I come back later around dinner, around six-thirty?"

"Uh... sure!" I said with a little enthusiasm, to sound helpful.

"There's nobody home right now, right? If there was..."

"Yeah, nobody home, and I gotta start walkin'. Have a good one," I said sincerely, and continued down the hill.

“Yeah,” he said simply. But then he asked if he could walk around it once, to give it a full look, having already stepped off the driveway towards the porch.

“Sure, of course. What's the ol' expression? Knock yourself out.”

Permission was granted, yet he was back in his car before I was half a block downhill. Car door shut and engine turned on. Only thought was that the humble shack didn't deserve this strange enthusiasm—retro and falling apart are not symmetrical attributes.

On the corner of Main and Maple a sign with an unmistakable picture of the place said the new house was having a party that Friday. So we went. The place was nearly done—not really a jobsite anymore—but not for sale either, just being shown-off to town folk. We walked down in the dark around six, and of course it turned out that the inside was a perfect match to the outside, in an utterly creative, mismatching way.

Outside there were people on the porch with drinks and then a small fireworks show launched from the side on the wiggly walkway, impressive enough with twenty or thirty canisters shot up over the house a hundred or so feet with colored explosions, then a dozen or so bottle-rockets to round out the show—whistle, bang, whistle, bang. Impressive enough as it seemed the two guys and a lady friend at least half-knew what they were doing.

In the main downstairs room, maybe the living room though it didn't look too comfortable, a big section of wall was devoted to a display of house sketches, which I figured were done by the guy in the pom-pom hat there, who I'd seen the week before, standing on the side street looking up at the shack

sketching. And there it was, the shack itself, the stand-out. It didn't look like other houses pictured, but apparently he'd found it worthy of artsy capture.

Other than that, the new house produced a small headache with all its originality. For example the wall of pictures leaned out forward a foot or two, and the couches, the super flat sectionals that dressed up the center of the downstairs room, were too wide and low like they were for a taller skinnier species maybe with short lower legs, people with no need for actual comfort. Visitors stood near the mod couches but nobody dared try to sit there. Near the Living Gallery entrance a scripted metal print showed a funny view of the big room with a cluster of folks under the picture wall like they were trapped there.

“Wow. Stupid,” said Marcus. Aubrey looked around and grinned but said nothing. Dwayne looked around quiet also but not grinning.

So we left, destined for the dilapidated, scarred but still standing rancher. And we never actually saw the owners, just heard them across the room behind the gaggle of attendees:

“We wanted to do this. We wanted to do that.”

“Wow. Brilliant,” someone said.

“Yes,” someone agreed.

We didn't stay long enough to get a “full exploration” as they were calling it. But before we left the big room, an outsider appeared, eleven or twelve, dinged-up skateboard under his arm with a visible but blurry Buckwheat sticker under the clear grip-tape on the front of his board. He was standing alone over by the

food table. It felt like we were seeing a rare animal that you don't see unless you very carefully observe its habitat over a stretch of time. He turned and looked over at us, observing his observers from a distance, and picked up slowly without looking at them three thin baguette pieces. We were all looking at him except for Dwayne who was surveying the big room's ceiling. Quietly Marcus then mentioned pizza, so we left.

At the pizza place Friday evening we were leaving when Beáma and her daughter just got there. She then suggested to Dwayne and me that we should go down to the "little town on the other side of the mountains" the next day for their "cute little two-movie film fest." She said it's only an hour, as we knew. Then she added: "But you guys should definitely do the truck trail this summer. Its way better than the paved roads," she told us with her trademark toothy smile. "But not for the faint of heart. It's a wicked-fun drive up and over."

Dwayne looked at her stone-faced. He was interested in Beáma's existence—having not met her co-worker Kim yet—and took the Ouray film fest event as a personal invitation.

His decision to go was seconds after it came out of her mouth. She convinced him to go by inviting him just once. She was then working on me as the host of the visitor, but Dwayne spoke up independently and said he would definitely stop there on his way back to New Mexico. He'd go back home Saturday instead of putting it off until Sunday. I said an earnest no thank you. Ouray was beautiful but I wanted to stay home and do nothing.

Almost Live

Two hours later after pizza I almost saw Beáma play and sing live, but not quite. It was Marcus' suggestion to go to the Moon Saloon to hear a few bands, and I knew it would be a semi-planned event that Dwayne would appreciate. Dwayne's not the most social guy in the world, but of course he did enjoy days that involved more than just me and our shack.

At the top of the stairs down to the place, you could hear the people and the music. Marcus and Aubrey were down and in already and the door swung shut behind them. I went down slowly and carefully and eventually got the door open again, only to hear clapping and whistling. A minute later, Beáma was packing up in the music corner. Her daughter was standing in front with a tambourine. Beáma smiled her little smile to a few others then to the arriver.

"Hey!"

"Hey."

"Did you like it?" she asked.

"I missed it all—just walked in if you can call it that," I said glancing down.

"Good! It was terrible." She rubbed her daughter's head, smiling down. "Except for the percussion."

"Well," I started. "Can't take these peoples' word for it—I'll have to review it another time—your performance skills."

"Alright then," she smiled again. "If you insist."

Then some friend got her in a conversation so I went to the bar to join the others. Then I didn't see her—maybe just past bedtime for the accompanist, or so we figured. Thirty minutes later while I was playing mediocre pool with a stranger she came back into the bar from the outside as if she'd come back for something. She looked a little different. She'd pulled back her hair and put on a dark red turtleneck under her long jacket. She must have left something, I figured, but she took her thin gloves and coat off and went over to the bar with a relaxed smile. She put her jacket on a free stool by the front wall and then got a pint of something.

I left Dwayne over there with Marcus and Aubrey and was happy to let them have an uninterrupted social time without me involved. Dwayne was standing there a foot or two back with a full beer in his hand as if just observing, but then Beáma turned and engaged him. She put her hand out palm up and slid it sideways indicating the free stool next to her. He stood there and did nothing as if shocked she was talking to him, but then nodded and sat down where suggested. I couldn't hear them, but twenty minutes went by and they were still over there. Marcus and Aubrey didn't mind, with their backs turned talking to two or three other locals. Then my opponent called near side pocket and sunk the eight ball.

When I walked over to everybody, Dwayne and Beáma were zipping and buttoning up their jackets and I gave them an obvious confused look.

“She asked me to walk her home,” Dwayne said, and he was acting like it was an extremely important duty to honor such a request like he was doing it only out of obligation. It made no sense that she needed an escort, on the mean streets of Telluride, but it was honorable to let the guest be treated with respect by a local.

“Okay, then,” I started with. “G’night, Miss Beáma,” and she smiled nicely as if we were in cahoots on the treatment of the cousin. “Dwayne, if you’re looking for us, we’ll be here for a bit, I guess.” They said nothing and Dwayne followed her to the door where she put gloves on and he opened it for her.

In a simple twenty minutes Dwayne came back as the rest of us were getting ready to go. Then walking home he made a few unexpected comments about Beáma that were dead-on accurate, critical, true and quick, though he’d only talked to her for an hour or less. He started describing her as having too much tiredness “in her looks and manner of speaking,” he said. I was going to say that’s a common side-effect to life for most of us, but I didn’t.

“She seemed exhausted. She wasn’t drunk but her eyes were heavy. She needed sleep.”

“Yeah, don’t we all,” I said to bring it back around. Then Dwayne synopsisized:

“She said life here is hard if you have to work.”

“Yeah!” I agreed with enthusiasm. “I guess some people don’t have to.”

“That’s a waste of time,” Dwayne immediately said, “Choosing not to work.”

“Well...” I started, thinking to add a decent comment. “I guess we need spenders, too. You know, people who fuel the economy.”

“She’s not one of those,” Dwayne said. Then he summed her up with this almost conclusive statement “She’s not sure what

to do, or where to go. She likes it here but isn't sure it's best for her future, or her daughter's future."

"I guess that makes sense," I closed it with, as if familiar with all the challenges of life.

Saturday morning at the bookstore, before they all went down to Ouray, Beáma said she liked Dwayne, and criticized me for being over-critical. I might have said: "Oh, he's a handful." But then she said she asked him out when he walked her home, for "after Ouray—the next time he found himself in Telluride." I countered with: "Ha ha, funny." But she did. And there it was. Dwayne never mentioned it.

I remember exactly what she said to me, long before the Kim factor was discovered.

"I told him he didn't need to go over his whole life with me, and I think he liked that. No rush on anything. He could just relax and be, I told him." Then she gave me TMI or Too Much Information. "I kissed him outside the Moon and he didn't kiss me back and it made me laugh a little." She said he stood there motionless, almost frozen.

"Well, it was cold last night," I said.

"He'll be unused to me for a while, a bit overwhelmed," she said. Then she paused. "It might take a year or two for him to fully relax, but it'll be nice."

"Yeah, pretty sure the love thing is new to him." But then I redirected. "I don't want to think about Dwayne anymore today."

“Oh, don't get me wrong,” she said, not understanding at all my real interest in dropping the Dwayne subject. “There are other parts of him that I'm sure he'll give me,” she said with a smile. “He's just not a kisser yet.”

“Yes you've got to calm the inner robot.” I said—not knowing yet that it wouldn't be her.

“Yeah! He's like a machine.” She liked my analogy. But then I wrapped it up.

“All right. That's great. That's a good story.” I looked at my watch and pretended to see important info on it. “Hey, I've gotta go,” I said. When I moved toward the bookstore door, she turned away and let me go.

Later Beáma went down to Ouray with Kim, their daughters, and a kid-friend in Kim's small five-seater Kia.

Boom!

The day after the big Ouray day—when I was happily ignoring my cousin the new San Juan celebrity—I walked stiff legged to the bakery. The town doctor came out with a corn muffin and a super-tall coffee. He heard the clicking of the loosened-up brace and shook his head, slowly sipping.

“Should be more rigid, Mr. Acheron. Too much movement.”

“Feels okay, sir,” I told him. “Thanks, though.”

I remembered his wayward office, not your everyday small-town emergency room. The day I was there, there was the deep smell of burning marijuana inside the whole suite of offices, coming from everywhere, or at least somewhere down the hall. The mystery was solved when I saw the short fourteen or fifteen year old in long dread-locks in the front, wearing a Guatemalan hoodie, and with a fresh cloud of it, like he put it out only when someone asked him to.

Inside the bakery waiting in the coffee line I heard the big boom. Everybody stopped whatever they were saying or listening to, sat up straighter and looked around. In three or four seconds, most people went back to their conversations, but with a few others standing near the milk table by the door we went outside to look around. People across the street were also out temporarily without their jackets and one lady pointed east and uphill a bit. The boom got peoples’ attention because it was much louder than the distant dynamite blasts you hear from the backside of the ski mountain—it sounded very nearby. As I walked east toward our side street the town fire truck rumbled past with its very loud siren. It turned left at our street and went up the hill, blocks before I got there. And when I did get there I looked up the hill and saw where it had stopped, three blocks up next to the shack. I tried to hustle a bit with the looser brace then saw the whole operation. In three minutes flat they got a hose out, ran it down to the fire hydrant while the other end was brought closer to the stairs and in thirty seconds the orange flames and the dense blue smoke were getting blasted around the porch and side of the house.

When I got all the way up the tallest fireman was standing closer to the truck and watching, delegating, managing, with his

arms crossed and feet spread apart, so I stopped and immediately asked what happened. The air smelled like we were at a super-dry chemical fire. As if it wasn't at all a worry though, the tall guy said fire had grabbed the west end of the porch and was trying to run up the shack's front side with its hard asbestos armor-plates. He said "fire" slowly like it was a foreign weed like a Chinese ivy, or just a troublesome creature that was misbehaving and had to be stopped.

"You probably heard the boom like everybody else did."

"Yeah!" I said.

"The propane tank—it exploded," he said, "on the old gas grill there." He pointed, as if we didn't know where the grill was. "Announced itself with authority—a foolish move on its part," he added like a wrangler at a big-game zoo. Then he said: "Technically, it was the grill itself. Tank must've been leaking, and with the doors closed... well, BOOM!"

"My god! That never happens," I said.

"Actually, happens all the time—there's a class at the Academy called Common Household Flammables and that's on top of the list. Outdoor grills—propane," he clarified. "Not sure what caused the ignition, but that was it," he said with a confident nod. "It's so dry up here all you have to do is drop a rock on a piece of metal, then sparks fly."

"They fall in love?" I said cracking a pointless joke. But he chuckled.

"No, they do a quicky," he said still chuckling. Then he added that one of the shopping bags, full of fat-wood he said—

wood soaked in gasoline, like the other by the stairs—flamed up big and high, but before it spread they caught it.

He went on to say the side of the house nearest the grill was for some reason highly and strangely flammable, but luckily the old pea-green asbestos “known to be a good fire-retardant,” he said, “basically saved the place.” Even with several shingles missing, the fire didn’t “penetrate or spread too quickly,” and the fire department had plenty of time to control it and put it out, spraying the shack’s whole south side.

"Yeah!" I told him. "I saw it all... coming up the hill!"

What I didn’t see was Dwayne—as if he wasn’t already enough of a hero.

Apparently, the wooden wine barrel that serves as an all-purpose trash receptacle next to the grill fell on its side with the blast and rolled down the hill to the house where a “special non-denominational” Sunday school is—as Beáma described it, where hers and Kim’s daughters go. The Chief laughed and said something was lit up inside the barrel and it banged into the outside stairs of the downhill house where the loose burning paper fell out and lit up an old wood siding piece that was loose and tilted out and down. I still couldn’t believe that something in a trash barrel could just roll and catch a neighbor’s house on fire, but as the Fire Chief said: “Things catch very quickly here. Fires don’t start when you want them to, but when you don’t...!”

Even though there were firemen there, Dwayne ran right in between two of them, down to the side door and up to get the kids and the teachers. He brought them out the back downhill door where there was no fire to worry about. Apparently, they looked out the window and saw the grill fire soon after it boomed and saw

the flaming barrel rolling down at them making another bang noise. Afterwards it might as well have been Dwayne that put out the fire at both houses. He was the Great Doer, the all-powerful heaven-sent savior of the children.

When I returned my thinking to the shack fire, it was a little bit strange that the torched bag of fat-wood was where it was, under the porch, closer to the grill than the stairs. But no, you wouldn't want all your kindling and fire-starter out in the open to get snowed on. So that made sense. The other bag of fat-wood was right at the base of the stairs, but it had the landlord's note taped to it. Note said: "Thought the fat-wood might be useful over here," and that he got the old grill from a friend's house—but not to use it until he got a new propane tank. With a Sharpie he wrote again in bigger letters: "Don't use it!"

NYC landlord man showed up soon after and walked fast to where we were. It was clear who the Chief was, the tall one with an open fire jacket and no helmet.

"Oh my! What happened?" he asked. He also asked if anyone was hurt, or inside when it happened. Nope. We were all out. "Oh thank goodness," he added.

The man across the street below us apparently saw it all happen, ran to a neighbor's and called it in. The fireman turned and pointed to him so I looked—it was the same guy who I'd seen at the party, previously out walking the streets to sketch in his art pad. Again he was in the same green ski hat with the pom-pom, and again he seemed to be looking carefully up at the shack. He flipped then to a new page of his art pad and started drawing again. Waste of paper, I figured, but certainly the fire department made it interesting.

An hour later, the Chief knocked on the sliding door at the top of the stairs and said the porch was off-limits—cordoned off with yellow caution tape. He went down then back to the street with the landlord.

Later when Marcus and Aubrey got back I told them about it and we stood where the Chief had been standing, looking at the damage. Dwayne was standing there silent and frowning.

"Go figure," said Marcus.

"An act of God," Aubrey said laughing.

"Yeah, but the Chief said it's actually pretty common, grill leaks and all," I started. But they said nothing, so I summed it up as a simple blessing in disguise. "Another fire... and we're all okay."

The front side now had a big battle wound, a blackened swath, much like an upside down shark fin, or the skeg of one of the devil's own surfboards.

Then Aubrey said something very suggestive. "All you need is a little stove-igniter guy, a timer, and AAA battery."

"What do you mean?" Marcus asked him.

"Well, pretty simple to make a bomb here. You drill a pin-hole for a slow leak, then tape the seams and doors shut."

"Woah! You might be right!"

Later in the afternoon NYC man came with a friend and hauled away the burned-out grill. "Just trash now," he called up to us on the porch carrying half of it while his friend wheeled the rest. "Removal of evidence," Marcus mumbled sideways—kidding or at least not caring at all.

"Right."

"Yeah, proolly."

But we did nothing.

Dwayne's Life Force

Sometimes people live in an unusual way and give us an unexpected view of ourselves that we didn't ask for. Likewise sometimes waves smash into each other, even though they began as deep-ocean swells moving in the same direction. When the waves are big, there is a physical liquid monument to this at the northern tip of a small Atlantic island.

At the mainland-facing point over a low tide sandbar, two bodies of water come together, as parts of the greater whole, with surprising violence. They are parts of the same water, but the directions of the waves can fool you. Because the island is small, and poking up out of the ocean for only several miles, it gets broadsided and wrapped by big ocean rollers.

When the swells are huge in the later summer and fall—the hurricane months—they bend around the island, so at the top, at the North Light, the defined flanks of each ocean swell have curled around the island and then rise up facing each other. They stand erect peering at what approaches them, like marchers approaching unexpected enemy ranks, over the heads of the lines in front of

them, with a quizzical but surrendered look on their faces as they fall into an unscheduled confrontation—both sides, equally puzzled in this case, in the ocean where everything is a bit puzzled.

Two sets of wooly swells travel all the way around opposite sides of a whole island just to run into each other. And yes, it's in fact just one wave running into itself—more like two end-lines of the same battalion, doing mis-ordered self-destructive battle at that spot for a few fateful and fatal moments. This is a wild scene—to be seen from the shore—where it's impossible to ride either wave from either direction. On a big day, it would be nothing less than surfing suicide—getting involved with a bit of nature where human laws of physics and logic are being denied access. It's just not a people place—immeasurably, you might say gnarly, as it is.

It's great to watch, from the point of wetted sand that reaches out off the beach towards Nature's confused display. On a big day, the clap of the two waves slams a few thousand gallons of icy cold salt-water thirty feet into the sky—as when you squeeze water out from between your palms pressed together, though on a much bigger scale. More like a hard hand clap when your hands are just half an inch under water, in a tub, or in a lake, anywhere where the water would be still otherwise, as still as that air seems on one of those seemingly noiseless nights.

On the shallow tip, when the waves are big and the wind is blowing, the spray hits your face and scalp on the beach from sixty water-yards. In a minute, it goes right through your clothes to the skin, and then through the skin into the blood, where it churns.

We cry at this thing because it's beautiful—and because it's more. Crying there is a body response to what is both amazing and humbling, a vivid spectacular surprise and a physical terror—a

wave-scene that makes my astonishment, asks authoritatively that we be smart enough to know our place—to stay standing, out of water, away from the waves. It is a time like anytime we observe a beautiful danger or a bad car wreck—or standing at the railing at the top of the Canadian falls at Niagara. It's a cataclysm that shames our vanity as it frightens us from a scary place we're not meant to be.

This crying is all about being human and knowing it, in front of the greater strength that is Nature. We're filled with pride and humility simultaneously, crying for knowing both sides of the balance at the same time. We are great today, and we are weak today—this is my Grand Significant Insignificance, as heart-bending a notion as there is, shouting in to us from an unapproachable place.

Yo soy uno fan of waves for their own sake, much more-so than mountains or waterfalls or anything else out there that isn't man-made. They have this way about them, of helping justify my own creature's smallness. We are adequately able maybe—powerful but only so much. We have only the potential for survival. It's possible but that's it.

Playing with waves means not questioning them, or tracing their ancestry—just accepting them, and hoping they accept you in kind. Surfing them is the sport of kings, a gift from noble Hawaiians who knew stoked-ness long before we had a word for it in our language.

More than from any other pastime—besides maybe love?—we get our kicks from going out and in with waves—ideally for an extended ride, just on the precarious inside of a safe shoulder, down a long line always heading for the clean hill ahead—

negotiating the destruction and mayhem at your back—on a fleet-finned medium-length board that gives up in maneuver-ability what it gains in speed and grace.

Humbling and empowering, a time of fight and surrender, when you take a gamble for the momentary ability to walk on a big mass of liquid earth, largely unpredictable and maybe powerful beyond human leverage—a brief thrill of facing the monster, knowing in the rear of your mind the monster will surely die if you can just survive its final headless tirade around the ring, the dragon-whale's final flail at the edge of the puddle. Yes, it's a walking-on-water thing, if you'll excuse the predictable analogy—more like running on water but faster and smoother.

And you'll never feel as though you've beaten a truly strong wave. Fast and fortunate, it's a tear-inducing feeling if ever there was one, very near to out of control. As good as we are, or maybe even as good as we think we are, the wave always rules, from the moment you turn with it, until it decomposes against the shallows which just sucked themselves back from the shore, slipping underneath things to add a little last-gasp punch to the dying thrust of the next.

With a board or without, there's a reflex and a response that speaks for human inexplicability and nature's undeniable stubbornness—even when we're doing everything in our power, there's only so much we can do. When do we cry? When do we breathe unsteadily? Then and as it happens right now just thinking about it. Do we want to? That's not an issue. Do we enjoy it? Well, why else would we be talking through all this? Waves are the meeting of land and sea and gravity and sun and moon and wind and air. Surfing happens when these things meet our thirst for exhilaration and exaltation, the things that prompt our grand

pursuit for happiness. The man and woman element—of course an ‘and’ rather than an ‘or’—enters the scene when weak-side negotiations begin for safe passage to the shallows.

When a wave crashes at a coastline, we’re allowed to try to feel it under us. And we know the falling crashing ocean does make a noise, without fail as ocean lovers of all kinds will be near enough to hear it. Un-ignorable, cacophonous, caterwauling, cataclysmic. There are people who design their lives around being close enough to oceans to hear the waves breaking. And it seems this is one of the finest designs, to be amidst the mist, the spray, where the force of water meets the ends of our solid earth.

To ride waves is ecstasy. It has all the elements of amazingness. It combines craft with effort and finesse. It gives the same satisfaction you might get from building something by hand, or perhaps from designing and building a free-standing building—a skyscraper if you will—but again, it’s much faster, and, of course, infinitely cooler and more refreshing.

Designing and building a skyscraper—a little like Ayn Rand’s Howard Roark does—or maybe a great stone pyramid, would feel as good if you could do it all yourself, in a minute, in the middle of a wild wind-storm—if you could then paddle out to build a second one a minute later, and then a third, and then another and another, until sundown, or until hungry and happily weak, confident and humble enough both—comfortably purged and beaten for the day.

My cousin Dwayne is like a wave, shaped by every bump it rolls over. Yet it’s far from perfect. Scientific maybe, but you can’t say perfect.

World's Smallest Film Fest

Dwayne became a hero the big day down in Ouray. A day later on Sunday afternoon, after the propane fire, with floored housemates as well as Beáma over, Dwayne's recapitulation of the Ouray events was full of basic detail, and Beáma helped us see the bigger picture from the audience's point of view. The sidewalk perspective was useless.

For me it officially started at lunchtime Saturday when Dwaynr said "See ya" like he was going to an important event that was intended for him, not me. I was happy to say goodbye and stay home and turn on music. It was partly sunny that morning but after twelve the blue had filled in and it got grayer and darker. Round dark clouds unrolled over the San Juan skies.

Dwayne described the drive being typical but the intersection at Ridgeway had a few more cars than usual. He said he drove the rest of the way at twenty-five or thirty because of the cars and trucks in front of him. He'd driven through Ouray a few times already but never stopped there or looked at the buildings very much, he said. The mountains all around town do take your attention away from the small human settlement down between them.

I didn't want to go at first mainly because I didn't feel like being with Dwayne all day, but also because I didn't have a car and would have to find a ride back.

At the bakery I overheard the people in front of me said they were going down to Ouray to visit friends of theirs. Then, thinking about what was being missed, I got spontaneously inspired to go to The Movie Fest, so I waited for a pause then politely interrupted to ask if I could have a ride down to Ouray that afternoon. They looked at me and seemed happily surprised that a stranger had said something.

“Isn’t that a great little town,” they said first. “Yes, of course you can have a ride. But, a ride back is on you,” they clarified.

“No problem,” I said. I’ll find a ride back, I figured or hoped.

Later in our recap of the big afternoon, the next day, Beáma said: “So wild! It’s like you came, but you didn’t make it all the way,” she said.

Then Dwayne responded almost rudely, without a thought about meaning or impact.

”It’s not like that, it IS that,” he said just to correct her grammar. Sometimes, yes, he spoke before thinking about the phonetics of things.

“What do you mean I didn’t make it all the way?” I asked seriously, not wanting Dwayne’s comment to get any dead air around it. “I saw that something was happening!”

Well before my late arrival, people got there for the official start of the reception before the first movie. The “festival” in Ouray last year was just a basic double feature starting in the late

afternoon, as well an effort to raise more money for the old theater. I later found out that Howard and also Arnold the Casings Mesa foreman were both there, as well as Beáma and Kim and kids, and other big-name locals including Mr. Dress-shoes, the Telluride mayor, and the owner of the ski resort. Aubrey had driven to Aspen and Marcus to see his girlfriend in San Diego for the week.

The first movie was a documentary about the history of immigration through Baltimore, Maryland. Later Beáma said it was a very low-budget one-hour thing about the immigration trains brought down to the docks in Baltimore and the fast spread of eastern Europeans out West. The second was a big deal because it was made by a young San Juan director from Orvis. Beáma said it was a sad romance about a young train conductor and a female police captain who meet in Arizona back in the 1970s. Dwayne said he liked the first movie but then stepped outside after the “romantic love story” started. He was across Main Street when he first saw the Malibu pull up, a little downhill closer to the visitors’ center and the hot-spring pools.

The friendly folks and I got to Ouray’s Main Street near the theater just when Dwayne was walking down the sidewalk with the gun forward as if he was about to enter the theater.

As if they forgot I was going to the movie theater, they were chatting about the houses and old storefronts on the left side and continued on up the little hill. Then they found a parking space even farther up Main Street and I had to walk four blocks back. Then I saw Dwayne up ahead by himself and I called to him.

“Hey, what are you doing? What’s going on?” I almost yelled up to him.

He heard me but just shook his head and kept walking towards the doors, gun out straight-arm forward.

I was very confused, like ‘what the heck is going on.’ And I was still a half block away when I heard the first shot.

I didn't know what to do, so when I went up to the first door I got low and peaked in the glass. I saw a tall guy on the floor and Dwayne standing over him.

Then by huge surprise a little kid came up behind me, opened the other door and walked into the theater. He was wearing a little black overcoat and was carrying a big rifle in his hands.

Afterwards, I heard about the magical afternoon from the inside-the-theater perspective.

Dwayne first said the theater building was obvious just past the pools with the people gathered out front and the orange banners. He said he saw it immediately and turned down into the hot springs parking lot, where he said an old man was helping with a parking flag. He parked on the far side opposite the pools and the play area with the water slides.

The orange banners on the Ouray light-posts said: “The World’s Smallest, Once-in-a-While Film Festival.” The first thing Dwayne said to the ticket girl was that they should shorten their title so it fits better on a banner or a sign. Dwayne said she looked at him with a professional smile and then lightly laughed as if she was in total agreement, but said that it was advice for the owners. He said the young lady also laughed at something the people behind him said. It was a warm day in the thirties with no wind, and for that the doors were propped open for the arrival of the

crowd. Dwayne said he immediately looked up and saw the big round metal air vents over everybody's heads. They were bulky and obvious as having been added in the last ten or twenty years, but Dwayne said the big front room had clearly been expanded sixteen or eighteen feet on the left with the HVAC system updated. Dwayne said: "the system was working hard" and "they were losing money" with the hot air blowing over people's heads and out the propped-open front door. There was another banner hung from the ceiling above a center table which Dwayne said was catching hot air blowing directly from a vent facing the front. He said he knew it was the air blowing because the banner was slightly pushed, hanging towards the doors in a fixed position, not swinging in the little gusts you'd see from the doors and the people.

Dwayne said the new open space on the left was blonder than the rest of the room with high horizontal windows "to modernize the old space." The right side was dark and cramped in comparison but he said spacious. Later, Beáma said there were fifty or sixty people at the film fest. Dwayne said there were sixty-seven, not counting the host who came down stairs at the far right and stood on a one-foot-tall box to address the crowd. Beáma said it was the theater owner, a medium-height, fifty-something guy, Tom. The crowd on the sidewalk came in and the front doors were closed ten or fifteen minutes later. Dwayne said the left-to-right architectural mismatch was then explained by Tom, who welcomed everybody to their "annual shindig" and said this time they were seeking tax-deductible help to finish the theater's renovations. The front space was just part of it. The big theater room was to be "re-built and re-painted," with "big new deluxe movie seats that reclined," Dwayne said as he was just repeating what Tom the owner said, reporting the facts, not acting

enthusiastic at all. “The Ouray movie experience would be brought into the 21st Century,” Tom said. He raised a plastic champagne glass and got a few toasts from the crowd. He held up to show then handed down a glass one-gallon mayonnaise jar, cleaned of any labels, with a rectangular slot cut in the top suggesting donations. Dwayne said it already had a few twenties in it for show, and he got a ten out of his wallet for when it came to him. It was a forty or fifty minute reception before the inside theater doors were opened. There were champagnes and more plastic flutes on the center table and a small “over-punctuated sign” that encouraged people to “ENJOY!!!” The owner later said that after all the mingling the theater initially received almost two thousand dollars that day. After three days it jumped to over ten.

Dwayne said there were name tags including a few that said what a person’s job was. He said the theater owner Tom had one that said “Tom – theater guy” and the Ouray mayor had one that simply said “Pedro, mayor.” Dwayne humbly put “Dwayne, handyman” on his, Beáma said she put “T-ride local/bookstore gal” on hers, while Kim used the more official moniker “Kim, Telluride Bookstore Manager.” All three of them said they mingled for a while, Beáma describing it like it was totally superficial and Dwayne saying it was a “great opportunity for regional professionals.” Dwayne said he talked with many people who lived nearby, closer to Ouray than to Telluride. He said the people he met were real with real lives and real jobs. I wrote down names, along with all the other details, to get his full, detailed account of the day.

April and Sinclair Smith lived closer to Ridgeline with the local propane business, and Sue and Jefferson “Sonny” Javitz lived on the outskirts of Durango. Sue is a foot doctor and Jefferson

manages a sporting goods store. He said Sue and “Sonny” were very glad to meet him and would definitely go all the way to Las Vegas next time they went down to Santa Fe. Dwayne said he also met Tom and talked to him about the theater’s renovation. He also met the Ouray mayor, but it was quick before the movies. Tom the owner listened to him carefully when he made a point about the theater’s HVAC system, and then he also complimented Tom on the re-finished wood floor and asked whether water- or oil-based polyurethane had been used. But Tom was apparently distracted by something. After everything, Dwayne said he still wanted to know, but Tom wasn’t mingling anymore.

The Mayor of Ouray shook Dwayne’s hand after he stepped down into the crowd with the theater owner. But the town Mayor certainly didn’t know who he was meeting.

Dwayne put his plastic flute down which he said was still mostly full, and happily followed Beáma, Kim, their girls, the friend, and all the other guests into the darker theater. Beáma later said Dwayne was very happy to be there and looked around proudly as she and Kim chose their row of seats, whereas Kim had her usual more serious look with the business of “seating their small gaggle,” as she later put it. Dwayne was by the aisle next to Beáma, partly because he didn’t know Kim yet, but more importantly because he might want to step out if the first or second movie wasn’t “interesting enough.”

Sure enough soon after the second movie started Dwayne stood up and left the theater. *Slow Train Coming* is a tragic romance and he sensed immediately it wasn’t for him. I made a point of seeing it a month later. There are long scenes at the beginning with the main characters spending lots of time by themselves, which no doubt sent him a signal. He went outside the

theater to check out Ouray's Main Street. The sun had long ago set behind the mountains. It was the long dusk that mountain villages get, but at six it was getting dark fast.

The main gunman was a late teens or early twenties kid from Utah. I never learned much about him nor did I care to. He was later described in *The New Jerseyer* as a "deranged young soldier on leave from an Army base in Tooele, Utah," suffering from "a very bad case of PTSD." Beáma was quick to label him a "Christian extremist," probably knowing it was a loaded statement, on purpose trying to be dramatic instead of accurate. A more fair description might simply be "a deranged young man who happened to be raised a Christian."

The tall would-be shooter, who seemed to be alone, showed up in front of the theater in the old Malibu. Then he pulled into the alley and got out leaving the passenger side blocking the emergency exit at the back of the theater. Dwayne said he immediately knew something was wrong. Across the street he was immediately watching the tall kid for looking so highly bad, with a rifle, a sleeve of extra bullets and then walking briskly around the back to the other side.

Dwayne went thirty paces south to see down the other side, and the young soldier then tried to chain the other emergency door shut, but couldn't. There were no bars or handle to attach the chain and padlock to, so the kid just dropped it and walked up the side toward the front doors on Main Street.

Dwayne figured it out. Without coming off as thinking too hard, at least not in a typical way, he pretended not to notice and pretended to be off in his own world walking uphill away from the theater. He walked two doors farther and then casually looked back. The kid turned and walked toward the front doors of the

theater, swung a door wide open and went in. Through the big window to the left of the doors, Dwayne saw him lift his assault gun and mouth something as if threatening to shoot the kid selling popcorn.

Dwayne said the young guy was dressed in a dramatic fashion. "He was in a long black overcoat with black sunglasses," said Dwayne, like he was out to make a fashion statement along with the apocalypse. After Dwayne described his outfit, I saw a parallel between this kid and the main character in the not-too-old movie *The Matrix*. But Dwayne gave me more details. Under the overcoat he later saw the t-shirt which said: "SELF DEFENSE FOR THE HOLY." And I don't think there's a movie parallel for that.

Dwayne very quickly looked around, saw the small parking lot next to the visitors' center and hot springs and quickly went back across to the theater-side once the kid had gone inside. Closest to the road were a few cars but next to them he saw it was the foreman Arnold's truck. He jogged to it. He got Arnold's keys from the top of the driver-side front tire, and got his thirty-eight from the glove compartment. With no fear of noise he released the safety and shot it at an angle at the ground to make sure it worked. It was loud and dirt flew. The kid was inside and Dwayne figured smartly that a test shot was worth the risk. He didn't want to complicate or slow things down by checking the quiet way for bullets. He knew there was no time but for action.

Dwayne, with the gun straight-arm down in front of him like a police officer, didn't hesitate to go in the front doors. I called to him then but I wasn't a factor. Dwayne later said:

“The young man was adjusting his shoulder holster and that's when I surprised him.”

The kid then spun when he heard the door, to no doubt shoot whoever it was, but Dwayne shot him without hesitating, shooting twice at the chest. With a bad view through the window, I saw it all. The first shot missed left, but the second hit and the kid was definitely falling.

Getting shot so quickly and very surprised the would-be shooter yelled: “What!” and then from the floor pulled his handgun out from his thigh-strap and tried to swing it up. Standing nearly over him Dwayne shot one more time through the shoulder of the reaching arm and brought him into heavily wounded submission. The kid dropped the gun and Dwayne with his foot slid it and the rifle twenty feet away. Dwayne then dropped Arnold's and also kicked it away in the opposite direction, like its usefulness was over, distance from it was also important. In the big room, people heard all three shots over five seconds and that was it. Dwayne sat down on the front bench on the wall and waited, probably catching his breath, assuming the crowd would carefully come see what the noise had been. But nobody came to the lobby fast. The kid was breathing hard and making pain noises and holding both the left side of his chest and his right shoulder.

Ten seconds later, while I was crouched outside peeking in, the much younger *Matrix* kid opened one of the front doors, who Dwayne later said he never saw at the Malibu. The kid, just twelve or thirteen, very quickly threw down the rifle he was carrying before Dwayne made any move to cross the room to pick up Arnold's handgun again. But then Dwayne did, because it was the responsible thing to do, and the kid was calling for it with his arms up, surrendering to Dwayne's authority. The kid saw the popcorn

kid face down on the floor, who wasn't shot, and saw his big brother over closer to the inside doors, clearly hit but still breathing loudly. The smaller kid then dropped his empty hands and started to cry. "Don't shoot me! Please, please, please. I... don't... want..." But he stopped. Dwayne said he then instructed the kid to kick his rifle farther away from him and to disarm himself of any other gun he might have. The kid looked at him and nodded. He slowly with his right hand reached behind him and with two fingers pinched a small .22 out by its handle like it was a dead rat he was holding by the tip of its tail. Dwayne said he told him to get on his knees, put his hands behind his head and face the front wall on the other side of the front doors. Then Dwayne, as if he understood what the little shooter brother was going through, walked over and stood behind him, as if to almost protect him.

Dwayne called out to the hidden crowd that it was "safe to come in," and when he did that, he was surprised again. The door off to the right to the men's bathroom by the staircase opened and out walked Kim's daughter's eight-year-old friend, Russell. "He looked very scared," Dwayne said with almost a tear in his eye. He said the spacious foyer filled up quickly with people from the big room and a bunch of people circled around the wounded one like they understood what needed corralling. Then the two cops showed up five minutes after the shots. It was a wild scene with a tall teenager on the floor and his little brother still sobbing. Like rubber-necking with a fair amount of bumper-to-bumper behind them, people largely wanted an explanation of what had happened. But it was relatively obvious, and most of the people just filed through to cluster in empty corners or else to the front doors and out. Many figured that outside the theater was a smart and safe place to be, and made an obvious target for the ambulance ten minutes later, which took the two kids and a cop to Montrose. The

other older officer pulled Dwayne aside for a little official questioning, a formality with Pedro the Mayor as a self-described eye-witness. Of course, it was a justified shooting. No charges were submitted by the state.

The gunshots interrupted the second movie, *Slow Train Coming*, but as I said, I did eventually see it. At risk of giving away the movie's ending, the man and woman do not end up getting together. It was a tragedy about lost opportunities. It was sad but very realistic, I thought.

So, as you might imagine, a small event became a huge event. It turned into a big story in San Miguel, Ouray and other nearby counties, though national news paid no attention. And for whatever reason, the ol' Internet didn't care. The boring small film fest probably didn't have the right demographic, too old and a few too young. Devices weren't pulled out to cover the aftermath. The networks probably saw it as too unclear and confusing, a strange event that may or may not have turned into a mass killing. It wasn't seen nationally because it was so quick and prevented before it started. Who knows what would have happened. Glad we didn't find out.

And I know the too-obvious question. If he had done his DIY procedure would Dwayne have done this? The answer is no because he wouldn't have been in Ouray that day. He probably wouldn't even have moved out West. Only Dwayne, exactly as he was in exactly the same circumstances, can be analyzed or appreciated for having taken action. We can't generalize or leap to conclusions. Would that old *Die Hard* guy have done it? Not a great example, but would anybody have gotten up feeling disinterested after a good movie started and gone out of the theater like Dwayne did? That sort of thing defines an act of heroism: circumstance, not conjecture or capability or likelihood, just an act

that surprised the world nearby. Was it a testicles thing—a balls thing? Dwayne's were there, we know that much. Maybe Dwayne is fine-tuned for survival of the species better than most of us. Is there a movie out there about vigilantism with a eunuch as the lead character? Anybody can rise to the occasion, but this wasn't a hypothetical. It was fast-thinking, good-with-tools cousin Dwayne.

The would-be shooter and his little brother are from south of Ironton, but I won't say exactly what their town is. But I will say that they aren't from Ouray.

The next day back in Telluride, I overheard strangers at the coffee shop. A teenage girl said: "Yeah, I heard some amazing guy from New Mexico did it." Then I listened to them throw out a few more random details, which Beáma and indeed Dwayne confirmed back at the shack .

The theater events did not go viral because it wasn't caught on video and nobody except the shooter was shot. It was a nothing story. And the network TV affiliates largely got it wrong—maybe on purpose—who knows why. "Outside a small-town theater, a young man was shot by a passerby after the young man was seen carrying a gun." The news also said: "Whether the passerby will be charged with vigilantism is yet to be seen."

In the aftermath, Dwayne was immediately offered a hotel room and the next day given an official Sunday hand-shake by the mayor, which was covered by the local paper, and then the same up in Telluride. Dwayne was taken out to a nice lunch on the Ouray Main Street and then in the afternoon met the Lt. Governor who happened to be passing through the San Juans and heard about it by a phone call from her brother-in-law, Tom, the theater owner.

Dwayne was then invited back up from New Mexico the following Friday for a day of celebration and thanks with a small town parade given in his honor. I went down to Ouray for that and honestly enjoyed seeing Dwayne celebrated as he was. He was brought down the winding hill into town on a padded throne carried by three strong volunteer firemen and I was very surprised to see, by Howard from work also. Howard couldn't have looked happier. Afterwards he just bumped fists with me smiling and shook his head.

Dwayne wore a big green ribbon down across his chest, and a small high school band of fifteen kids played some kind of marching tune. At the bottom in the center of Main Street, Dwayne was given keys to both little cities, and also a season pass to the Telluride ski mountain by the Telluride mayor who was also there—which of course he'll never use. He also received a lifetime pass from the Ouray mayor to the Ouray Hot Springs right there next to the theater. Dwayne looked pretty serious all morning but the hot spring pass made him smile and bow a thank-you to the parade leaders.

To add to the smorgasbord of gifts, a little later the Ouray mayor offered Dwayne his guesthouse up the hill—rent free for a few months, the mayor said with a smile. To make it even more confusing for all who weren't there, the owner of a Chevy dealership in Montrose offered Dwayne a new Silverado pickup of his choosing, which Dwayne officially accepted in March. Apparently this guy and his wife were sitting in the front row that night.

Dwayne later then generously offered me his wonderful van.

A few days later, Dwayne said to me: “Jon, you would’ve done the same.”

“No, Dwayne,” I told him. “Not sure I would have.”

And while I was walking by the bookstore, Beáma saw me and stopped me.

“Your cousin Dwayne is truly, truly an amazing person,” she said to me. “We should all be more like him.”

“Yes, I agree,” I told her.

Up here on Casings

One week later, the day on Casings Mesa where Dwayne was shot was very quiet.

It was Dwayne’s most famous day in T-ride—before the later trial days of course. That Friday night we stayed home in the shack. I fell asleep on the early side while Aubrey and Marcus were watching something and Dwayne was looking at his big paper maps spread out on the little table near the front.

We got up Saturday when the sky was still dark blue and the small thermometer outside the shack’s kitchenette said twelve degrees. By eight when we left and went down to the bakery it was already twenty on its way to fifty. There was a small cloud in the east, but that was it—no clouds anywhere, absolute blueness. The plan was to meet Arnold and the others up on Casings at eight. It

was cold but warming up as always and Dwayne was wide awake as always. He was also no doubt ramped up for the adventure, to which he let me drive his van. He looked around and enjoyed the views, like a tourist on sabbatical.

“Wow, this is great” he said, talking more to himself than to me, or to the airspace alone, bouncing up twice as we hit a couple bumps rolling down the hill to the stop sign. He adjusted himself to get better suited to the unusual position of passenger.

“Yeah, this’ll be fun,” I started. “And we’ll pass the house I was working on.” But he said nothing. He paid no attention to me and as always had whatever he saw or was thinking about determine what he might say.

“That saloon looks like an original. (pause) So many real estate offices. (pause) Wonder what a gallon of milk goes for here?”

“Oh, yeah. I can give you local knowledge on that one,” I started, but I knew he was already onto something else. “Eight seventy-five! And that’s not even the organic milk.”

“Mayor of this town is a king,” he said.

Then he made sound effects, like a humming with a slight mumbling over the top of it, the kind of noise one makes when they’re seeing new sites, driving without music and alone.

If he was asked, if he’d called home to Kearny to tell his mom, or my mom, about this drive that morning, he’d be quick to tell them he was with me. Yet the common polite move to engage me in conversation was not his method, his technique, his habit. I knew all this so I wasn’t surprised.

I pulled over at the bakery. He got out and followed me up the sidewalk. I didn't lock the van which he turned halfway around once to calculate and I guess then accepted, weighing the risks versus the environment. He knew we were just getting to-go's.

I ordered a coffee while he stood back left of the door. He was no doubt absorbing the radical coffee-shop culture, or else just staying back from it. He had his serious observational look in the presence of so many strangers who were making it apparent to him that they were really doing nothing but enjoying themselves—skiers and people of all ages and locals in laid-back leather and flannel, and a few arch-typical folks with a little silver and turquoise jewelry. Regular people enjoying their myriad of different coffee drinks.

In the coffee shop, a stranger turned and asked Dwayne if he was the Dwayne from New Mexico. When Dwayne said yes, the man started clapping, and then all the other people at the coffee shop noticed Dwayne and clapped. Dwayne was startled but quietly proud. He said nothing but nodded and stepped forward when it was his turn to order his tea.

At the fixings spot, I added milk to my coffee and he added a good pour of sugar—important for black tea I remember him saying on the Shore. But here he said nothing, just quietly stirred then walked back to the door. We were driving, not sitting inside he knew, so we were out and heading back to his van. The sun got above the ridgeline and sort of shocked us when we stepped back out to the bright sidewalk. A big brown mountain dog perked up outside the door, as if he had heard a distant sound, not tied to anything, his leash in casual loops next to him. The sun was strong and the air was dead still. And it was too early for any music there—just the quiet cold morning and the hard sun.

Then we saw Arnold. He was already to his truck but we chatted for a minute before he closed his door. Oscar was sitting in the tight back seat and they were picking up the priest near the school on the way out. Arnold was highly respectful of Dwayne after the Ouray performance and asked if he was enjoying himself back in the Happy Valley. In a complimentary way, Arnold said to both of us that Dwayne should still be on a much-deserved vacation. Then he asked Dwayne what exactly he was doing for work. All he knew was that Dwayne was in the trades, and up from the little Las Vegas. Dwayne then looked side to side as if he was in front of a tribunal, maybe not sure what to say or not to say. He looked at Arnold's navy wool cap maybe to measure Arnold's rank above the questionable face. It was a typically quick Dwayne stare, instead of the general acceptance you might give a stranger when you first meet them and give eye contact. Dwayne then said, a little louder than people usually chat outside coffee shops:

“HVAC, plumbing, electrical,” then he paused, “and finish work of course.”

It was polite enough professional work talk, but absolutely no smile at Dwayne's end—and it was all he said. Then Arnold responded again in a pleasant, polite kind of way:

“Oh all that?! Sounds like we could use you up here!” Which was a nice thing to say, but I didn't want them to start talking about Dwayne moving to the San Juans. As Arnold got the rest of the way in his truck, he laughed and said: “You should meet my sister Kim.” Dwayne ignored this and kept on looking around.

Then I jumped in. “Hey, let's get our coffees and go up to the mesa.”

"Let's see if you can handle rifles as well as you handled the thirty-eight," Arnold said to Dwayne. It had been just a week. By happenstance, Dwayne had become a semi-famous gun slinger. Arnold smiled and closed his door. Dwayne said nothing else and followed me.

At the van, I stood for a minute taking a few more sips before getting in and Dwayne just stood there near the front bumper holding his tea in its cardboard up to his chin as if it was still too hot to sip. He secured the top then got in after me, letting me make all the next-step decisions a host-driver makes. I loosened my leg brace and then drove Dwayne's van out and up to Casings Mesa.

In ten or fifteen minutes along the San Miguel we reached Sawpit where I went into the general store for two water bottles. Dwayne stayed in the car. He wasn't interested in Sawpit, a true one-horse town, if that—a one-building town, plus just a handful of houses. I got back in and then told Dwayne off the cuff that Marcus' mom knows the person who did the dancing cowboy sign. I said that for no reason, but not without a care like Dwayne treated it. He didn't even acknowledge that I'd said anything, as you might with a Huh, or an Oh. Absolute disregard was his signature reaction to me, his Little Jon. Who knows, maybe he was working on a specific criticism, like a dancing cowboy being the antithesis of hard work, and that therefore he didn't agree and the cowboy sign shouldn't be there. As I shifted into drive he just sipped his tea.

We left the Sawpit store and drove across the road up between the houses at the start of the hill, a back-door way to get up to the highlands of Casings Mesa. It's shorter in miles, but ten

minutes longer, with all the turns on the dirt road that gets you up higher than you expect.

At the beginning we drove past the three old houses, two on the right, and one on the left with a bigger side yard. Three kids were playing there with their sleds in the three or four inches of newer snow. They had a short hill at the top of the side yard up against the hillside and two plastics, a red saucer and a long yellow tray with handles. There was also an old runner sled sitting in the snow down by the house being ignored. One kid was at the top of their run up near the bigger rocks. We could see from earlier runs what the track was, down the steep little section before it mellowed out and ran down across the yard to a parking area, with footprints around the tire tracks of whatever had driven out.

The two younger kids stood holding their sled handles and rope up at the start, laughing hard about something. The bigger kid stood down near the driveway with a frown.

"Stop," Dwayne said. Then he got out and walked around to the tire tracks and the bigger kid who was maybe eleven or twelve. The kid didn't look in our direction until the van stopped, then his frown seemed more severe, straight at us.

I heard the muffled sound of Dwayne asking about the runner, which I deciphered because he nodded towards it and the kid looked. Then I rolled the window down.

"Get a candle," said Dwayne, and the kid immediately turned and went inside without question. Dwayne then picked up the runner, turned it over and looked at the blades, the rails. He walked to the back of the van, opened both doors and reached in for something. I put the van in park and stepped on the parking

brake, then got out to see what he was doing. When I got around he was already scraping the runner-rails with a metal wire brush.

"Rust," was all he said.

In forty seconds he switched to a sheet of sandpaper and rubbed the rails in long strokes three feet at a time front to back. Then the older kid showed up holding a cream-colored candle.

"Candle," said Dwayne with his hand out, as if it was a certified tool for this procedure.

"My mom's gonna kill me," the kid said.

Dwayne then rubbed the candle butt end first against the bottom of the rails. He did it for a whole minute it seemed and the candle was an inch or two shorter when he stopped. Lots of wax was coating the rails and much was off the sides with his generous application.

"Try it now."

The kid obeyed, took it with the same frown on his face and said nothing—just turned and walked away towards the top of the little run. The other two kids saw him with the runner, following his mysterious trip to the strange van, and the little kid at the top laughed.

"You're gonna try that thing again?!" the kid said loudly like it was an accusation.

Below the boulders the older kid put the runner down in position and glided it back and forth like a racer on a luge track before the timed run starts. He got partially down on top of it holding the steering handles and then pushed off with a foot from

his kneeling squat before lying flat. The runner ran fast and smooth, down the steep start, across the whole yard, and then so steady it didn't stop at the tire tracks and footprints but kept going across the driveway until it hit the bushes well below the house at the base of the yard and scrub pines.

"Let's go," said Dwayne.

I looked at my watch. We were ten minutes behind schedule as loose as it was.

"Yeah. Let's."

The other two kids ran down the new run like the ice-cream truck had just appeared.

"Wow! Wow!"

Dwayne got back in the van and we started up the snowy road. Then he said, as if to the airspace and not to me:

"Might have Asperger's, that kid."

When I looked back sticking my head partly out before I closed the window, the kid was halfway back to the top pulling effortlessly the runner gliding smooth behind him. The other kids were leaping like little sideways kangaroos ahead of him. "It's my turn!" "No, it's my turn!" The older kid still had the serious look on his face, but was leaning slightly forward like he was on a mission, a performer and a teacher.

Farther up past the kids with the sleds, we met the other road coming down from the darker west. A sign below the junction says "paved road," which makes little sense after the mile of ruddy, snowy dirt road—but the new and old snow covered

everything, not just from the previous night but from the weeks of it. Packed down by the cars and trucks, it was dirty in spots but still deep. A pickup-plow had taken the fluffy snow off the top but didn't go all the way to the ground. The road from the western heights came over from the development of six new houses to the triangle—all matching and probably advertising the “paved road” part.

An SUV of sorts was heading across the high road just as we got there. The roads converged and we were then approaching the side of the other vehicle—and it wasn't clear what to do—who got there first. We slowed to let it go but then Dwayne told me to stop again, so I did. The other car drove up ahead of us. Dwayne got out and walked up and across the empty triangle, and then reached down to pull up a short wooden sign-post that was leaning most of the way down. It was basically invisible under the snow and tall weeds but somehow Dwayne knew it was there. It was a homemade yield sign, a temporary fix with yellow and black paint, stuck badly in a giant terracotta flowerpot filled with frozen dirt and tipped over, probably by a car and never put back upright. Dwayne came back to the van, grabbed a spade and then jam-dug a big hole in the hard ground. Two minutes later the hole was a foot and a half deep and Dwayne transferred the yield sign from the pot to the hole, which he then filled back up and jammed the chunks of dirt down around the wooden signpost. The flowerpot he pulled up against the base of the sign, which was shorter then, yet made good and visible. He put the spade back in the van and got in. And I drove on realizing I'd never shifted into Park.

Up past the triangle and the upright yield sign, Dwayne's van conked out. At first I was mystified, as the driver of someone else's vehicle, why it wasn't going up a steep incline the way any vehicle should. It was fine that morning after starting so why now?

It just got anemic and tired, or so I diagnosed. But Dwayne then helped me, as they say, live in the moment.

“Step on the emergency brake,” he first told me. “Pop the hood. Latch on the lower left.” He was out of the van before I did all that, then I waited for further instructions. He lifted the van’s short hood and in seconds it revved so high it surprised me, super-high RPMs, without me touching the gas pedal. The engine sounded healthy, but only my basic trust in the unknown, and Dwayne’s knowledge of things, explained it revving by itself. I never saw how he did that.

“Move over,” he said from the driver’s door after stepping around fast, opening it.

“Why?” I asked without cause, getting my ass up and reseating it. He revved it high with the pedal then he waited. It went back down to idling. Then he revved it high again and shifted into drive. The van drove forward five or six feet fast. Then he braked again, kicked down the parking brake while still in Drive facing the incline, jumped out, closed the hood, climbed back in, revved it to six again and released the brake. The van spit pebbles on the left and flakes of snow on the right and drove hard up and around the red house. For thirty seconds or a minute he kept it moving five miles an hour faster than I had.

“Tell me where to go.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Just go straight for a while.”

The snow deepened in a minute but the van did fine. It was acting like a moody horse that now had its favorite jockey on its

back. I was the puzzled spectator who made sure of nothing, that it had four legs and was going the right way around the track.

“Go straight for a bit, up to the top—then the big obvious turn-off to the left.”

The snow got whiter and deeper as we went, a few hundred feet up and then a thousand or more. The mesa is wild because you truly feel like you’ve made it up onto the table. You continue to climb a bit higher here and there, but the world changes. Fewer trees, bigger and bigger snowy fields, and much longer views. You see more, where you are, where you’re going.

At the turn near the end of a rock wall, we saw fresh tire tracks in the new deeper snow from the other side and followed them left to the little stand-alone gatehouse. I had seen it from a distance but never up close. It was narrow and looked like a small Victorian shed but with windows and a steep overhanging roof. Yet it had no actual gate and was empty.

There was no fence or wall leading up to it or from it, and if there was one it would have been ridiculous. The mesa’s first field was too big and untouched for a fence to make any sense—dividing what from what? The gatehouse marked the entrance to a great big open space.

Next to it we saw the small sign next to the window: “Welcome to the Palisades Properties.” It made us both chuckle, which made me smile. Dwayne made a light, almost-laughing noise. “Huh?!” There was nothing past it. The field went from wild mountaintop nature to officially-named real-estate, along with its cool alliterative sophistication. When I saw it the first time from the lower jobsite, I truly thought the gatehouse was just a nicer outhouse so small and all by itself.

“Ah, the properties! Excuse us while we trespass,” I improvised—over Arnold’s tracks.

Before we got up there, the open-air house I was working on was off to the left. I told Dwayne and he looked over. Then up slightly higher was a neat and clean stone wall with a loose mailbox on it, which started thirty feet to the right at a clean new garage with Tyvec—another jobsite. The road went around near the garage like it was just a driveway, but then it continued on straight and up a little higher towards the official Palisades entrance.

This is what happens when your house is on a mesa that didn’t have any houses the year before, when it’s not part of a lower-elevation development. Official road and traffic decisions are not a part of it, more an afterthought as other houses are slowly one by one added—only then are other motor vehicles thought about. The main path somewhere under us was largely invisible except for Arnold’s tire marks on the pushed down powder as well the occasional reflector pole. His aim with the steering wheel wasn’t perfect but Arnold’s new tracks were mostly in the same soft powdery gullies that were made the days before.

Then the house and garage were behind us and there was nothing in front except the tiny gatehouse and the snowy first field and distant trees. Dwayne knew we were supposed to follow Arnold’s tracks to the end, so he stayed quiet, as if he was just absorbing the world. Everything was new. We went across the open field to a second batch of trees. Then I looked over at Dwayne and he had his serious look, but it was different—not the familiar-territory look, but a new one, like a traveler to a savannah where you might see a few big cats, with the usual tightness in his eyes and cheeks given away to a softer look with wonder, maybe

like any of us on a good vacation. The next field and the sky opened up with the early sun.

After the last un-finished house and the first field and the little copse of trees, we then passed in the second field the world's biggest, inflatable, mock-up show home, a giant balloon house that looked a sorry bit off-balance as well as incredibly pointless in the second high meadow out of sight from the entrance. It was twenty or twenty-five feet tall with very long straps and tie-downs and giant tent-stakes sticking out of the snow. It looked somehow forgotten, leaning too far right and partly deflated or else unstrapped somewhere in the back.

"I don't get it," said Dwayne—which he never says.

"Wow!" I started with. "I had no idea—never been over to this field."

"Now I get it. It's a giant play-house for a ten-year-old."

"You think? It seems too... architectural," I said.

Yet Dwayne was spot on. I asked about it later and it was Howard that knew. The kid in question wasn't ten though—when he turned nine the summer before they gave him an over-the-top party. Then after the "mountaintop mesa blast" Howard said the giant nylon tent house was just left there, because it had no other purpose—it didn't have to be returned anywhere. It was a gigantic sign of the future!—a celebration of wealth and high mesa development.

"Wow," was all Dwayne left it with, and I couldn't add to that so I didn't.

Past the giant plastic party house, we continued on to the third white field then turned east toward the low sun and we saw the silhouette of Arnold's truck. His tire tracks came to an end with a curve to the right as if he'd lined up with a parking space in a field of powder.

They were all out, standing and walking back and forth between the truck and a little card table farther out. The priest said something we couldn't hear which made Arnold laugh hard once or twice. Oscar was standing over the table looking down. Arnold then called to Oscar and the priest when he saw us approaching behind them. The priest stopped and smiled. Arnold kept on reaching for something in his front seat, and Oscar kept on looking down at the table.

Arnold closed his door and then waved us in to park next to him, which didn't really matter it seemed, only it made sense that we were using or creating a little parking area, as if the vehicles needed to share body heat up there on the mesa. The snow and the grasses underneath no doubt prefer it when the trampling by man-made stuff at least happens in an orderly fashion, as if somehow that makes the human footprint of carbon almost non-existent. Our damage to the field would be minimal.

When I started working up there on Casings Mesa it was a different place to me, forty-five minutes from town, down valley, up Dallas Divide, up through the hills near the top. There were just a few houses up there. There were very few people and there was no electricity or land-lines. There was snow though. There is snow wide and deep, the way we like it, like an ocean on a mountain.

Foreman Arnold said I remind him of the Catholic priest he goes hunting with. He said this friend has a similar voice and stupid-dry sense of humor whatever that means—doesn't take off

his collar until he's out there, shows up in his blacks and then changes into camo and orange when they're parked for their hunt. He straps on his compound bow and goes off to hunt God's flock with fury, apparently with a real thirst for animal blood. Not really sure why Arnold wanted me to know this, but he talked about him more than once so I'm reasonably confident it's some kind of praise. Don't know what this means or implies, but do hope we give off a similar air of insanity. Yet another doppelganger for me to balance things out—here a god-fearing priest who loves to kill animals.

Up on the mesa, when the snow was blowing and we're beginning to feel like dying up there, out by the garage a huge golden eagle drifted over the tops of the trees that edge the long driveway. Its wing span was longer than my body span—wider than the average human is tall. On the drive home with Garcia the roofer, a former motorcycle bad-ass from Atlanta, we discussed Star Wars action-figures and Evil Kneival motorcycle toys—similar worlds, a thousand miles apart.

One day at five on the nose I followed a woodpecker into the wall-less living room and called to the others to come check it out. Arnold came in from the deck and fired his thirty-eight at the bird. He put a bullet into the beam that spans a future living room in front of the fireplace. The bird was pecking so hard it didn't seem to hear the bullet. Maybe though it knows Arnold's not a very good shot.

Oscar, the loud late-forties laborer with the oversized mouth, had told me and Garcia the roofer about going down to carnivals in Mexico when he was a teenager, about “_____ing Mexican whores”, about double-_____ some guy's wife with a friend of his while the guy watched and _____-off. Oscar was

unbelievable. Hard to believe this was all true with his giant cartoonish chin and loud delivery. Then he told us about watching the notorious “donkey __ck” during which an obese woman gets a donkey inserted into her ____y with the assistance of three carnival workers. Two guys _____ off the donkey while the third lined up the woman for pene_____. Oscar told us the woman was knocked fifteen feet when the donkey eja_____. She passed out in the dirt. Wow, I thought. Wow, about Oscar as much as the poor woman.

On a previous Friday on break Arnold took shots at beer cans on fence posts with his handgun. Oscar, for twenty minutes on the half-hour lunch, said loudly over and over again: “Four and a half months without pu___! Man, I can’t believe that guy!” Oscar was talking about Garcia not seeing his girlfriend since September. Yet, as it was, Arnold said he was staying those days on the cousin’s couch.

For a ride back home that day from the top of the Mesa, Tim a hippie and a ten-year resident of the region gave me a ride down way too fast in his 307-horse-power, broken-seat-belted, rusty old Chevy. He said he builds his own ski boots, out of everything from hockey skates to telemarking boots to scarpas to old leather work boots. He’s got some patents pending but he’s not really sure about that. For now, he spends his extra time building his boss’s house, skiing, hacking sepa, and learning more about computers. He says he might take a class.

Spent another full day on the roof of the Mesa place clearing snow off, roped to another rope at the ridge using a push broom and big plastic shovel. Jorge is in his early twenties—just moved back to Colorado after spending three years in the Utah State Penitentiary. A convicted drug dealer on parole—and one of the friendliest drug dealers around, no doubt. His wife was due

with their second kid in the next week or so. Jorge, the hard-working dad, works hard all day then drives an hour forty towards Utah and Moab. Asked him what he did for those three years locked up, whether he got anything out of it—he said he got an education—went to jail an eighth grader and a few years later left a high school graduate.

The bad day up on the Mesa had started quietly with no wind. Then we saw and felt gusts that seemed to drop down from nothing. The sky was totally blue. There was no obvious wind system pushing out clouds slow or fast. The priest was putting on his hunting jacket, no doubt for symbolic reasons because it wasn't that cold. As he raised the jacket behind him the wind blew hard for two seconds. The jacket flapped then caught the wind like a parasail, but then it came down and he pulled it up over both shoulders hard and fast with his arms in the lower sleeves, as if to expedite the process in our challenging world. Arnold walked out to the table with his chin down facing a headwind, and Oscar's wild longish hair blew straight up and then hard sideways and down as the gust raced by us, as if it was running away from something but with trouble knowing which way to go.

Dwayne got out, met me at the back of his van, and waited for the proper next move. But he seemed to decide quickly that it wouldn't come from me, so he paused, then stepped out towards the established gathering place only well to the side of it, to show that he was an official participant who was available ten feet away if needed, without crowding the traffic at the table.

Casings Mesa is much like a mountain table. Up on top, you see pretty darn far, not only from the Mesa, but you're able to see quite a long way across the tabletop, too. In our case the high flatland with the multiple fields was roughly a mile.

Up on the mesa, Oscar picked up one of the rifles like he was an expert who hadn't seen his favorite gun for a year.

"Yeah, that's the new one," Arnold said, seeing Oscar's choice.

"I like," said Oscar minimally, to imitate a simple-minded man or else being one.

Dwayne stayed far from the table then when the priest stepped over to him he turned with visible respect and shook his hand when the priest put out his.

"We have to do this, you know, so we're more humane when it comes time to hunt," the priest said with an easy-going grin.

Dwayne with a serious but not aggressive look took three or four seconds.

"Humane makes humans feel good," Dwayne said finishing the handshake, not letting go until the priest did. He looked hard to gauge the priest's response but turned away after a second with his chin down out of respect.

"Yes, yes," the priest replied with a chuckle turning and looking out. "In the fall, we must honor all creatures by dropping them fast. We don't want to cause pain." Then he added this, which twenty feet away made Arnold smile. "Pain takes the fun out of hunting," said the priest.

Dwayne stayed quiet. He was trying to stay happy in a foreign land. On the way, I made sure to tell him that it was going to be just shooting. "There will be no life and death involved."

“Dwayne, I know this isn’t much,” Arnold started, “but when you gotta play, you gotta play,” he said, celebrating the morning’s juvenility, and maybe downplaying the scenery, or else just not realizing how amazing it was for being used to it.

Dwayne said nothing for ten seconds. He turned with eyebrows up and listened to Arnold’s remark. He formulated what to say back and then looked back out at the field.

“Oh, I wouldn’t call this play. Play is for children,” Dwayne said, which made Arnold laugh. But Dwayne wasn’t kidding at all.

“You’re right!” Arnold said, as if he’d never thought about this. “Play is for kids.”

Then the priest jumped in.

“Yes, the child in all of us.”

Dwayne then turned back and spoke without hesitation.

“No. Not in all of us,” he said, to contradict the priest who made a harmless wise comment. “Some of us are adults.”

“Too true,” Arnold responded, to be agreeable to all guests in an obvious way.

“There’s no such thing,” Oscar then said. “Anybody who calls themselves an adult is just lying—living in denial.”

This got me by surprise, such a controversial comment in Dwayne’s presence that would ring some sort of bell in him. Oscar wasn’t being rude to Dwayne on purpose, it seemed, just speaking his small mind.

In the gusts, Dwayne said nothing in response to Oscar, and kept looking out forwards. He processed the adulthood comment and then decided internally no doubt that Oscar wasn't a real person that mattered at all. Oscar was one of the millions of questionables. Your life mattered or it didn't, and these questionables Dwayne would always keep as strangers. Now he knew for sure that a person he was near was not worth a dime. He went on to ignore Oscar completely and kept whatever distance could be established and maintained. At the same time Oscar thought he was smarter than everyone because nobody commented after him. He was probably full of misguided confidence caused by people not responding to his clever conclusions and decisive statements. It takes a certain mind to achieve that—common sense so overly simple it isn't that common or sensible anymore.

Up on Casings, the earth was beautiful, white, brown and yellow, with the sun up just left of our giant field's far end, which did cause a huge amount of glare. Three rifles and a separate scope were laid out on the card table like they were showing and testing the merchandise, and maybe doing a deal. Arnold went back to his truck twenty feet away to get something. The priest took a content enough Dwayne east toward the sun to adjust the quasi elk decoy. I stood there.

Like that scene in the movie *Reservoir Dogs* when they are walking in slow motion, Dwayne walked and carried himself like he was six one, even though he's only five seven or eight, like Al Pacino, I used to tell him. His mom said his dad was six feet, but he wasn't. The snow messed with the smooth stepping but still he walked as the priest did looking purposeful in the deep powder. He kept his eyes forward but not straight down like he and the priest were having a serious conversation while they surveyed the snow ten to twenty feet in front of them.

Oscar pissed. Arnold and the priest seemed to be properly, systematically prepping, but Oscar seemed drunk, stoned, and who knows what else he was on—opioids?—with that realistic animal look of his with his tongue forward, not hanging out of his wide mouth, just a little more front-wise and visible than most. He went over and down to the trees closer to us, which seemed a bit strange to piss that far away, as if great privacy was important like he was a bobcat—though it makes some sense not to yellow the snow in the middle of a beautiful white field. Then he came back up breathing hard and supercharged, which was also no big deal. We were both at the table and we picked up things to look at, or look through in the case of the scopes. Two scopes weren't attached to anything. Oscar held the longer rifle by his hips at first and lifted it up and down a few inches to feel the weight of it. I looked at him when he giggled for a second—"fun with guns" seemed perfect with the Oscar factor.

The sun was too bright to look eastward so with the longer scope alone I looked south. I was able to see in great detail the leaves and branches of the trees on the side of the field probably eighty yards away. It was powerful in its own way. When I lowered the scope from my eye I noticed Oscar had raised one of the rifles up to shooting position and was aiming it directly at the sun.

In a stupid, far-too-mellow way I started to say: "Hey now, don't—"

Then Oscar interrupted me with a bang.

"What are you doing, man? They're down there!" I said.

Oscar looked at the rifle holding it out sideways like he liked it. I just stood there.

“What?” he then said. He turned and looked at the trucks and then back at the sun. We could hear Arnold’s voice over by the trucks. He was talking on his phone. Maybe it sounded like the others were over there also, but I knew they weren’t—it was just Arnold.

“I thought you were just holding it.” I was staring at Oscar in disbelief at his irresponsibility.

Then we heard the priest in the distance—with his height and girth and Dwayne with his medium size—they were both down there, and impossible to see in the bright white glare. The priest yelled again.

“Man down! Man down!”

Arnold was closing the truck’s driver door then yelled and ran and jumped on Oscar from the side, but it was way too late. Quite confused I just stood there.

Oscar probably never even knew what happened until three seconds later when he was lying on his side in the beaten-down snow. The rifle made a loud enough noise in the soundless air so the priest saw immediately what happened. He was standing right next to Dwayne, to the left of the homemade giant decoy-target. It was antlers on a human dummy torso on a sawhorse, like a DIY centaur. The bullet ripped sideways along Dwayne’s forehead. Dwayne fell and the priest yelled back his “Man down!” then added: “NO, Oscar, NO!” He knew it was Oscar and not me or Arnold—the sun was on us. I was just standing there with nothing

in my hands not realizing at all what had happened, just standing there in kind of a daze, hypnotized by everything, the gigantic field, the snow, the unbelievable vista all around us. I was still taken away by the whole scene of me and my cousin out there to shoot rifles with a few random locals at ten thousand feet out West, with no other human beings anywhere around us.

‘Man down’ was a line from a war movie. I didn’t know a bad thing had happened but the action-movie line was supplanted by the crisp air and the absence of any music. It was truly dead quiet in between shouts and snowy tackles. The clunk of Oscar putting the rifle back own on the table was a clear sign that it was reality. The priest was visible now, standing with his arms up and shouting. But Dwayne wasn’t. He had dropped. He was shot. He was hit. Animals drop like that when they’re hit and dead by the time you get to them.

I started walking fast if not trying to run toward the sun, without my own head knowing exactly what my legs were trying to do. It was like my body was on a slow conveyor belt. I was trying my damndest to jog across the Mesa field but the snow was much heavier and deeper than I expected. The route Dwayne and the priest had taken was faster and easier, but maybe they’d taken their time, not in the same rush to get down there. Then somehow Arnold ran past me like a big antelope. I looked up and the priest was still thirty or forty yards away. Arnold skidded to a stop there like he was the Roadrunner.

As I ran I was madder by the second, mad at them, myself, Oscar, and the world! What the fuck was going on? What was I doing? What happened? Still running I heard Arnold and the priest talking loudly but I couldn’t hear exactly what they were saying.

There was then a steady backwind but it didn't get me there in a flash. The last ten or twenty were slightly downhill and easier right up to the fake elk target and the trees.

Everyone was totally quiet for probably twenty seconds like Arnold and the priest had made all their crisis decisions before I got there. But the priest was mumbling and I heard what sounded like Latin or Italian come out like he was praying or at least saying something that he was taught with "nomine patris" in it. He wasn't as quick-moving as Arnold and seemed to be sweating more like he was in a hot airless church. Arnold had immediately taken off his own jacket and his t-shirt to use it as a blood rag, but the priest just stood there like it was his duty to oversee things. Arnold tied it around Dwayne's bad-bleeding forehead like a headband then picked him up fast and started with Dwayne back across the field. He said just a "let's go" like it was a routine he was familiar with. The priest kept mumbling like he was crazy but then turned with an arm out, as if to direct me to walk with them in the crisis-management direction. I looked up and saw Oscar west of us very well lit with the sun straight on him just standing there looking in our direction like the only thing he was supposed to do or qualified to do was keep his distance. I must have said something about him standing back there and not helping because the priest then spoke up angrily.

"But keeping distance doesn't mean anything when you've got a hunting rifle!"

"Right. Keeping your distance is a bad thing," was all I could think to say.

“Arnie, he’s back there with the guns,” the priest said, as if asking if that was a risk.

Without looking Arnold just said: “He’s not a killer!” Then he shifted Dwayne. Right next to him I tried to help more but there was nothing to carry back besides Dwayne. There was only the orange spray-paint can that the priest or Dwayne had dropped.

“Grab that,” Arnold said as he passed it, with Dwayne in his arms like a baby.

The wind shifted back across and it was at our backs again, and this time it was just fast and in line with the priest and Dwayne’s initial walk. It was more agreeable for whatever reason so I was able a little to keep an eye on Dwayne while Arnold carried him. His head was turned toward the back a bit and the sky. At the table, Oscar muttered loudly: “I thought....” And Arnold quickly cut him off: “No! You didn’t!”

Then everybody, with Dwayne placed comfortably in the back seat of Arnold’s truck, drove to the Montrose ER. Arnold also called 9-1-1 to make sure with whatever had happened that it would simply be considered a bad accident, “shooting for practice off season,” Arnold explained. “Yes,” he seemed to agree to the phone, “crazy accidents do happen!”

“Oh my god oh my god oh my God,” I think I said at one point when we were driving out but still up on the Mesa.

“Yes,” concluded the priest. “We could use his help today.”

“Ya think?” said Arnold leaning forward a bit as he drove. The priest paused for ten seconds but then he said:

“I'm glad somebody is thinking of him.”

I was then going to say that I didn't mean my ‘oh my gods’ in a religious way, but I let it go by the wayside.

“God didn't have a thing to do with it,” Oscar said softly explaining it to us after being silent for a while. “It was an accident plain and simple,”

Then the priest redirected his talking straight to Oscar back across from him.

“Oscar, you don't pray, do you,” he said as a statement, not as a question.

“Pray?” was all Oscar responded like it was totally off the subject—even though we had a priest in the car with us.

“This is highly simplistic but I think you'll get it,” the priest started. “Mr. Oscar, if you were God fearing and doing something outlandish up here,” he said sarcastically, “like saying thanks or even praying—and I mean doing something else with your fidgety hands instead of firing that rifle—we might still be having fun.”

The priest then turned to Arnold next to him in the front seats.

“You should keep me away from this sort of thing,” he told Arnold, his hunting pal.

Arnold shook his head like he didn't know what to say or was thinking of something else.

Then I spoke. For whatever reason I had thought of a bumper sticker that seemed almost somehow appropriate, God knows why.

“You guys seen that bumper sticker: “I knit so I don't shoot people”?”

But there was no response. After a long minute getting down to the bottom to the road to Ridgeway, Arnold offered this connifcent advice:

“Yeah, Osc, you should probably learn knitting.”

Oscar was quiet most of the time looking out the back side window with his face at the glass. Then I heard him mumble to himself: “I don't want to knit.” He paused showing it was a thinking thing. “I like playin’ with guns,” he admitted, as if he was on trial in an honesty case.

“Oscar, nobody is going to make you knit,” promised Arnold like it was a possible repercussion or punishment for bad behavior.

Then everyone shut up for a while and we drove on at a much faster road speed.

Dwayne had shallow breathing that we could still hear and his eyes were ever-so-slightly cracked open, almost like he was surveying his long-awaited ride to the ER. He was a bloody mess, but the t-shirt around his head had stopped it from running down his face. For a while he seemed on his way to dead from all the bloody damage and his being motionless. He was snug next to me leaning on my right shoulder in the back of the four-door. For a

minute I thought he might just be tired and napping, with a minor head-wound that we were taking in to get dressed. But I shook that off. He might in fact be dying, on his way to gone.

One of the young doctors said there was “a good pulse” when they first checked. But they put him into a temporary or drug-induced coma, which meant nothing, or so I learned. We the onlookers didn’t know how to see that, but they said it was to keep him from dying.

Then four hours later the ride back to Telluride was dark and bad. We were told to go home and check back tomorrow. Arnold sped for no reason. He felt guiltier than Oscar did.

"You guys thirsty?" asked Oscar.

The priest up front shook his head.

The next day it was explained to us by the doctors. The bullet hit his forehead sideways. It tore through the skin and front wall of the skull but it basically left the brain unharmed. He bled a lot but that was misleading. Dwayne got a TBI but his brain wasn’t really touched so it was more like a traumatic injury very close to the brain. There were thirty stitches very visible an inch and a half above his eyebrows. A week later I joked with him that it looked like he’d had a frontal lobotomy.

Despite what you might think, I don't consider Dwayne getting struck by a bullet to be one of the three miracles. However, it might have led more or less directly to the third miracle. There were technically four, but being badly injured and rushed to a hospital shouldn’t really count as one.

The permanent side effect at least until now is that he's slightly different than before, slightly slower and a little more easy-going, a touch more open and friendly, you might say. And he's got a gigantic scar on his forehead now, all the way across with a slight rise, as if he was actually struck by lightning there.

* * *

The next day I got a ride from Aubrey to Casings Mesa for Dwayne's van. Then I had to call in the crazy news. I called just my own mom to keep it simple—let her distribute the news. Then I had to coordinate—which was pretty easy since I still wasn't working—driving his van down to New Mexico to get up some of his stuff for his temporary stay in Montrose, what turned out to be a week. That Tuesday was a sensible plan. At first mom said: "Why not tomorrow?" Then I just took the rush factor out of it. I said I had to do a few things, and then also said that I'd probably be a better helper, which was meaningless, after the shock-effect had passed, which mom said she understood.

I got back to the hospital just before Beáma and Miss Kim got there. I was quite surprised to see both of them so soon after the accident. Beáma said she heard about it from Aubrey on the porch and then came to Montrose right away, along with Kim who explained quietly that she'd met him a few times on his several visits to the bookstore. She said she came because "it was obviously a very frightening event." Beáma probably also needed the ride from her but she didn't mention that. The bookstore would open at three PM that day, Kim noted.

"How is he?" Beáma asked on our way to his room. I said something thoughtless like: "Well, he used to act strange. Now he looks strange." That was my somewhat-clever effort to say he was alive and that he'd recover, the doctors said. Beáma smiled but

Kim didn't. Then I let them go in first. He was fine but he ended up sleeping in his drug-induced coma for another two days with his big head-wrap. Beáma was at his bedside while Kim stood back and surveyed the room in greater detail than seemed needed. She looked closely at all the dials, switches, and cords even though they mostly weren't being used on Dwayne. She looked like a hospital techie the way she nodded and seemingly approved the general set-up. I stood back happy that Dwayne was getting the lady visitors. His eyes were closed but he might have felt it.

Vegas

I went down to his place that early afternoon. The map told me to go down via Taos and Santa Fe and then up north-east seventy miles to the little Las Vegas. The drive was pretty and scenic in a northern New Mexico way with all its smaller red-brown mesas and buttes. When I got to Las Vegas, I was truly surprised at just how small it is—a few buildings plus a lake and fields, “the meadows.” What happens in the meadows no doubt stays there. It has its own suburbs of course, but nothing that probably doesn't look like a natural wasteland to a city tourist. It has a cute little town center, the small town green, a movie theater, and of course the community center two blocks off the green. Dwayne's apartment was a block farther.

And then inside, there they were—the two. If it was one book, you'd know which one it was. But it wasn't that one. One thicker used book had an old library sticker on the bind, and the other was brand new. The thick one had dog ears, page-marker

inserts and a highlighter next to it, and the other had nothing, just with words written on a green post-it note in big letters with the mighty colon, “TO-DO:”. There was a pen on the table left uncapped. The thicker book was an official-looking medical treatise, written by a Dr. Walter S. Asperger, MD. The other was exactly one hundred pages as marked, a basic spiral notebook, the same as any other. There was nothing else on Mr. Dwayne’s table except a Ouray mug with a string over the side, a tea bag.

The older medical book was a big surprise. If asked, I would have assumed he had total denial or at least absolute disinterest in the subject. This was the opposite, real acknowledgment or at least a curiosity. I was quite floored to see Dwayne wasn’t just the hyper-smart guy I always thought he was, living in his own world. Apparently he occasionally did things quietly that we might not expect of him, out-of-character, regular-world stuff that wasn’t for others to worry about—like self-study, psychological or psychiatric research. He was secretly acknowledging that in fact he didn’t already know everything.

The other book, the largely blank spiral notebook, blew me away even more. It was a new college-ruled Mead waiting to get used, and a simple one-subject one. Before taking the mug to the sink, I flipped the cover open not expecting it to say anything, looking so new—and there at the top of the first page was an underlined complete sentence.

It said simply this: “Write it all down, so Jon understands things better.”

I stared at the written words long after I finished reading them—my eyes were on them frozen for a few seconds like I was a manikin in a store, trancelike, mindless. My mind drifted off to

many different places at a hundred miles an hour while I stood there.

It? Better understands? Jon? Me? Write it down? What? What don't I understand? Sure not everything, but... What?

Extremely slowly I'm sure, I stepped to the sink with the mug and lowered it in without letting it fall and stared out the little window there. To the left was a little car-port and shed, and to the right was a view of nothing but field and flats for two miles before a slight rise in the dirt to very small hills in the distance. I coughed loudly to clear my throat and shook my head to clear my brain. The shake didn't work fully, but it was enough for me to turn and take action. It took all of a few minutes to gather stuff into his army-duffle including the books and the mug and to lock up shop like it was just a hotel room where he'd been for a day or two. There was a blank calendar on a brad in the wall next to the refrigerator.

It took just ten minutes. I put his stuff in the back of the well-organized van, told his first-floor neighbor that he'd almost died in a shooting accident then drove out of town. My mom would talk to her friend who would talk to her brother—not my worry. Then I drove back to the San Juans. It was a nice long day in the car-a-van. Dwayne always kept it clean so that made it somewhat easier.

Uncle Frederick's Funeral

The next weekend I flew back temporarily, at mom and dad's expense, from Montrose to Newark for the funeral of my

Uncle Frederick who had lost his long battle with the big bad C. Flights straight from the mountainside airport in Telluride were highly uneconomical.

“Man, he died? I asked my mom before the flight back, knowing it called for heartfelt acknowledgement at the very least. “Well, you know me,” I added to be light, “I love funerals!” She didn’t laugh at all, but I knew she wouldn’t at a questionable comment from the young one.

When I asked Dwayne, near the end of his week in the hospital, if he was going back for Uncle Freddie’s funeral, he said no.

“Beáma and Kim invited me to recuperate in Telluride.”

“What, at my place?”

“Yeah, at Little Jon’s,” he added with no smirk, like he was just referring matter-of-factly to a person we both knew.

“Oh, wow,” I said a bit surprised at first by the amount of female attention he was getting. Things were slightly different than they were a few weeks ago.

Close to when we left, I heard, or listened in on I should admit, Kim and Dwayne alone in the hospital room after we stepped into the hall and Beáma went to get a coffee. I was surprised to hear them immediately talking. It sounded like Kim and Dwayne knew each other well, like they’d known each other for years.

“Things only matter if you let them,” I heard Kim say. Then Dwayne said something very quietly that I couldn’t make

out, but Kim responded to it. “Yes, the world is our choosing. Life doesn’t come with a list of demands. We’re free.”

Beáma came back and without hesitation pushed the door open and led the way back into the room to get Kim and say a goodbye to the honored resident. Kim and Dwayne were then silent like we left them. But it was clear there’d been a conversation going on that we weren’t privy to. It was sort of like science fiction where the aliens are disguised as humans and carry on their secret talks when the humans aren’t around. Dwayne turned his head to look at Beáma while Kim kept her eyes on him like she was his therapist to see how he dealt with people.

That Saturday in our parents’ driveway back in Kearny I saw my elder brother James.

“Oh my God, Jon. What a bit of wild news you’ve given us.” He was pulling out and then turned inward so he could look out the back window. That’s all he said at first. But then he stopped again. He paused looking forward with two hands on top of the wheel, then said: “Wow, a hero and a victim.” He smirked at me out the side window. “I guess Dwayne’s always been that way, hasn’t he.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I started with, on top of his big empty theory.

At Frederick’s funeral, at the nice big church off Schuyler, people looked at me like Dwayne had gone missing and I might know something. Nobody had heard about Kim let alone Beáma. Outside the church I stayed for a few minutes while thirty people went in. The insides of churches make me nervous. Then when I did go in—or I should say when the service was over, I was one of

the first people out and standing on the sidewalk. There was an old couple who came out first that I recognized from our street. Then lots of people noticed me when they came down the steps, with upset looks on their faces, almost angry, as if I'd punched a young kid or something. However, to be accurate, when they saw me three people with a gasp and hands over their chests quietly said: "Dwayne!" Others just dropped their heads and shook them as they walked back to their cars. Wildness from the Wild West was not to interfere with the sadness of Uncle Frederick's death.

If only they know Dwayne like I do, I said to myself, they'd appreciate him differently. Probably best that they never heard all his most interesting thoughts. Then a bit of bile rose in my throat just thinking about the old Dwayne, the previous back-east days, the cold, dark world. I'd told his mom that it was just car stuff he was reading up on that day. But things were now different. Dwayne was the San Juan enthusiast. New Jersey folks didn't know the new Dwayne.

On the road in my brother's other car, I went the long way east on Route 3 a little too far past Giants stadium and the whole Meadowlands sports complex and then did a turnaround. Meadowlands, a nice coincidence. From then on, I'd more simply call it "the meadows."

At the cemetery it was sunny and muddy and extremely windy—high-pressure system pushing out the low. On the way the street lights were blowing sideways.

After Uncle Frederick was lowered, we were walking back to the cars. Dwayne's mom, who'd been walking with my parents, dropped down as if to tie a shoe but then she pulled on a tall sock inside one of her gardening boots. She stood up and looked at me

when I caught up. She like me had no expression on her face minus an appropriate somber frown, but then glimmered a quick smile. I took a breath and was going to say something but she stood and put a finger on my lips and shook her head. We turned and walked more.

"I remember Dwayne once called Jersey the Gardening State," I said to honor her tall muddy boots. Things stick in your head sometimes—Dwayne was twelve or thirteen. She smiled looking ahead then asked if I liked it "out there."

"It's pretty," I said to show a certain amount of indifference. She looked at me to see if I had more to say. But I didn't. I just waited a second then turned with a plain face again.

After the cemetery my elder brother insisted I do a couple of errands with him. First, to Lowes where he said he needed something.

"Hey," I started to James, once we were in his car and moving. "So when are you guys coming out to visit us?"

"Oh, man. I haven't figured out when yet, if it can even happen this year" he said acting a little disjointed or just wanting to talk about something else. "I've been super busy," he added. "But I'll talk to Carolyn, I promise."

Then he re-directed.

"Did you say hi to mom and dad?"

"Actually, no." I hadn't. They were together, and that's always a mystery—but that's another story.

Then James said: "I need your expertise," purposely sounding like he was addressing an important subject, which I didn't like because he was no doubt addressing something that wasn't important. "I think I need a saws-all or a jig saw but I don't know which—the difference." Then he added, to sound particularly dumb: "Aren't they the same, with those finger blades?"

So just to spite him, to show the "wildness" he seemed to be catering to, I said: "Well, it's like a rifle versus a thirty-eight. Two hands versus one," I added.

"Oh!" he started. Then he read some labels and figured it out. On the way to the front he said: "You know it's that gun friendliness that's going to keep you from getting published."

"What?!!" I couldn't believe what he said. "Friendliness?!! I don't have any, not since I was ten, and probably never will."

"Good."

Though have to say we were a tiny bit more gunnish after speaking with the elder. Yes, we often act similar to how we're treated. But, all in all, I felt fine.

Then we drove to his magazine offices in Jersey City. I could describe the outside of the building, but who cares really. It's a magazine, not an architectural showplace.

"I'm grabbing something—you want to come up?"

"No," I quickly said.

"Suit yourself."

Call it superstitious, but I don't care to be in the building unless I'm in the magazine.

James then asked, leaning back in before closing the driver door:

"Has Dwayne ever mentioned *The New Jerseyer* thing to you?" which baffled me because it made no sense, that there was a "*New Jerseyer* thing" with anything to do with Dwayne.

"No, what are you talking about? What *New Jerseyer* thing?"

"I asked you before when we talked on the phone."

"No you didn't. You asked me about the "spectrum thing"—but I forgot about that."

"Oh, is that what I called it? Well, it's the same thing. I'll tell you about it in a minute."

Then elder brother James came out again and on the drive back to Kearny he explained his whole thinking behind this, the story behind it all.

He said he brought up the "spectrum and syndrome thing" to Dwayne carefully.

"What syndrome?" I asked him. "The lack of love syndrome?" I said jokingly as if that was the only syndrome in the world, the only syndrome that was real and mattered.

He half-chuckled to show he didn't think it was at all funny. Then he went on. He got Dwayne to at first listen and then to eventually admit to the possibility that there might be a

connection between Dwayne's own personality and the "Up" syndrome, which he also liked to call it, with the spectrum involved. He said he convinced Dwayne to be part of an exposé in *The New Jerseyer*, that he, Dwayne, would help write half of—contribute significant amounts to—and it would be not only about the syndrome in general, but specifically it would be about two guys with very different lives and situations, very different personalities and lifestyles.

Dwayne was carefully explained to by James that it was going to be an exposé that he would be very much a part of. It would be a two person project, with an additional editor, where Little Jon—me—would write about his cousin Dwayne and his personality, with him growing up nearby—and likewise cousin Dwayne would write about his own experience—and work with the editor—with Little Jon and his personality, growing up near him!

So, for that reason, cousin Dwayne agreed to this possible project. As it was explained by James, it would apparently be "an extremely helpful thing for cousin Jon who is looking hard to write his first piece for the magazine. And this could be it—this could be the answer!" So elder James explained that Dwayne said okay, he agreed because he liked the idea of helping his needy young cousin. It fit Dwayne's deep internal nature. He also liked the idea of working with professional editors at the magazine to produce a professional, informative piece.

"Wait wait wait. Are you saying you told him the needy young cousin has some degree of the syndrome?"

“Well, I didn't use those words specifically,” James started. “But I was able to get his interest... believing his was not the only story being told.”

“Wait wait wait. Are you saying you not only told Dwayne that I have the syndrome, but that I'm probably on the same spectrum somewhere?”

“No, I'm not saying anything like that, not saying at all that you're like him—God no. But first of all, I know the magazine would be very interested in a good, unique story about the real-life syndrome. I knew we needed Dwayne's participation, and I had to try to draw him in by explaining that you'd be talking about him, and that he'd be talking about you.”

“Wow that's great. So I get to start my adult life with some degree of the syndrome? Is that what you're saying?”

“Let me just put it this way. We're all human.”

“Yeah, human. That doesn't mean we have a syndrome.”

“Well, you can look at human-ness either way, I think.”

“Forgive me,” I told him. “I like the ‘We're all human’ thing better. Not quite sure it's helpful to have a syndrome sign around your neck.”

And I still had questions floating in my head, but I realized they were ridiculous so I kept my mouth shut. How do you achieve hero status? And victim is a bad thing, right?

Indeed, I was glad that *The New Jerseyer's* syndrome-spectrum story fell by the wayside, off the table, or mesa you

might say. In a new life down in Durango as far as I know, Dwayne has made no additional effort, and I would have received word either way from elder James, which I haven't. No, I don't have a strong interest in working on that version of our story.

They're Not Gonna Write this one Off

Back at the hospital, Dwayne was awake. Beáma took a picture of him in his bed and then three days later it was on the front page of Telluride's weekly. Everybody reads the newspaper there. The day it came out people said: "Dwayne's your brother? Of course he is. You look just like him, minus the big bandage on the forehead" they added smiling. Others simply said: "You must be Jon!"

In Montrose, I told Dwayne I got his stuff from the little Vegas and tossed him his notebook with the unwritten To-do list.

"You've got some work to do here," I told him. And then he actually smiled, which he never ever does. It wasn't clear how to interpret the smile, so I looked around. Two new books were on his rolling table, probably gifts from his thoughtful caring visitors, Guns, Germs & Steel and Blood and Thunder. It made sense knowing he only enjoys non-fiction. I found out later that Kim and Arnold Carson are the great great great, great, etc. grandkids of Mr. Kit Carson, the famous fur-trapper-turned U.S. General, with his name all over the town of Taos.

Then I got the big surprise. At the hospital with Beáma, before I got there, Arnold via Kim offered Dwayne a job at the Mesa house. An hour later Dwayne tells me he's moving to the shack. I looked at him with a blank stare with no initial response.

"There's room for me to roll out my sleeping bag by the back window," he then said.

"Uh..." I started with. "Yeah, sure, but is there room for you in my life?" I was going to ask but then chose not to.

"You can handle that, right?" Dwayne asked, looking at the wall in front of him instead of at me, sounding like he was officially answering it and that it wasn't really a question.

"Of course!" I said with a smile widened to go with it. "The more the merrier!"

He looked to the right in Kim and Beáma's direction again with the shack question already settled. I knew the others didn't have to be asked because splitting up the rent more made it a definite yes. Dwayne wouldn't be expecting a rent-free offer so it was settled.

So a day later Dwayne left the hospital and moved in with us. He spent basically a month there, one of the most painful months of my life. But of course nothing bad happened, and the other guys didn't mind one little bit. They liked having him around. He was full of highly useful information. It's almost like he was performing for his little cousin's friends from college. He was always explaining something. He wouldn't really converse with them, or do much listening, but they hardly noticed. He'd let them get half a question out then he'd continue his ongoing lecture

maybe in a slightly modified way. Once they were standing with him in front of Aubrey's wagon-truck with the hood up. Another time Dwayne was with Marcus on the porch holding up Marcus' snowboard lengthwise. Dwayne let Marcus do most of the talking that time because Marcus was explaining camber and rocker. "Skis have then, too," Marcus said, bringing the subject wider for greater appreciation. Dwayne just listened and said: "Hmmm." It was a surreal conversation I'd never seen before.

Later that week, we went to the pizza place, Aubrey, Marcus, Dwayne and I. By total coincidence, arriving at the same time was Beáma, Kim, and their daughters. They all looked healthy and fresh. Our party of four was like a small dirty band of cave-dwellers. More so than at the hospital, Kim looked surprisingly vibrant and younger than Beáma, even though Beáma said Kim is a bit older. I hadn't seen her anywhere in town besides at the bookstore.

We all seemed to figure immediately that two tables pulled up next to each other was a good idea. After we all sat down, our end was quiet compared to theirs, but Marcus and Aubrey were friendly, almost jovial once they were re-introduced to Beáma and met Kim. And we all met the daughters, Stella and Kim's daughter Rory, short for Rosemary, we learned. And there was Dwayne himself who was almost social in a mellow, mildly-miraculous kind of way. He said an easy-going "hi" to all the ladies and seemed just simply happy to be there.

We also learned that night that Dwayne liked Kim, much more than he liked Beáma who was still somewhat proud of having analyzed his unique self, as if she was partly responsible for him being rendered a real person. Outside after we finished eating Dwayne took two quicker walking steps to catch up to and walk

next to Miss Kim on Main Street. Beáma stopped whatever she was saying, and then chuckled sadly when she saw this. And I saw it too. It was obvious. Any kind of social move by Dwayne was like a blast on the fog horn even though it was a subtle move. We couldn't hear what they were saying but it was a true talk that lasted a few blocks.

After a minute or two of witnessing this, Beáma preempted me by saying quietly—describing what Dwayne apparently had done:

“You and I both need to explore the world more,” she said. “Get smarter, more experienced,” she added, as if that’s what Dwayne was and we weren’t—like he’d sailed around the world solo and we just stayed in boring old America. I nearly said something, but let it pass. I also took this to clearly mean she and I weren't going to get intimate. I was too much of a young writer-guy, too selfish in other words, for Beáma to take a real interest in me beyond that of just seeing the amusing existence of a kid who has a lot of learning left to do.

“You and I are good friends.” “We have a lot in common,” she added, as if that was a pearl discovered in the ugly oyster.

On North Alder, Dwayne and Kim continued across the side street hill to Dwayne’s van. Then Kim turned and waved her daughter over to them. Dwayne without turning to signal or say anything got in the van with his riders and pulled out, around, and down. An hour and a half later he was back and said nothing.

After that weekend, it solidified in my head that the San Juans weren't for me at this particular time in my life. I'd head back East and consider things, maybe back to the Shore.

But then I shot Oscar.

* * *

On morning break, Oscar handed me Arnold's gun and then walked around the backside of Arnold's truck. In the meantime, I raised the gun down along the driver side of the truck and pointed it at a distant tree, only to get distracted by what the gun actually looked like in my hands, so I changed my focus from the long distance aiming at the tree to a close-up so I could see my hands holding the thing. Then I lowered it and Oscar was taking a piss directly behind another big tree next to it, with a low branch where he'd put a soda can. I raised the gun again and aimed at the new big tree and in a happenstance way, which I can't explain at all even today, I pulled the trigger. If it was loaded—and I wasn't sure it would be—I think I thought the bang and the sound of the bullet hitting the tree might make him pee on himself. However, that's not what happened. The bullet hit a hard knot or something, slowed down, redirected a bit, and came to rest in the dead middle of Oscar's cranium.

I heard nothing but the sound of something heavy behind the tree hitting the snow. Oscar dropped dead twenty feet away and I was—what's the best way to say it?—stunned. To say the least I didn't know what to do. I remember his soda can was still sitting there.

To be honest and clear, I absolutely didn't mean at all to even come close to wounding let alone killing him. I guess I just meant to come off as a little crazy-dangerous in a well-meaning fun way. It had the opposite effect. It didn't come off to him at all. Once I fully realized it was him that fell, I boot-jogged in the snow over to the tree and saw him lying there and took probably two very deep, hard breaths.

For a very long minute, I thought maybe things that happen on the Mesa can stay up there. But I was wrong, as Arnold noted. I called loud to him but had to walk fast to the house and call again to get him. He hadn't heard the shot because of the generator and his ear plugs.

"I don't know what happened," I told him. "It just went off in my hand," I said stupidly.

He looked at the whole area and then shook his head with a very surprised look on his face. "We have to call this in, you know. This is bad," he added sounding justifiably shaken up. With a frown he added: "Accidents usually don't happen with a thirty-eight."

"But it was! It was an accident! Up here on the Mesa..." I started, but I dropped it and shut up.

"They're not gonna write this one off."

And they didn't.

The San Miguel County Sheriff knew well the Dwayne Serend scarred forehead story and decided his cousin wouldn't accidentally shoot the previous shooter up on the same Mesa. So, with the 7th District D.A.'s office and the San Miguel criminal prosecutor accepting his lead, they charged me outlandishly with second-degree murder. I was called by the Sherriff at his Telluride office. He gave me the bad news but also then explained the nicer part that they didn't need to take me into custody as long as I didn't leave town.

"Yes, I promise. I'll just keep working for now," I said.

I'm sure I came off to some extent as a law-abiding citizen, so that was good. But it was a huge negative nevertheless, that I might have to pay for this legally with a huge chunk MY life.

* * *

A week later, a month before my trial, we had dinner at Kim's house, followed by multiple meetings including at the bookstore. Beáma arranged it the first time. I guess it was her selfless act, bringing the new "team" together. She made sure I went not only because I was the one facing a trial, but probably also so she wouldn't feel like an extra at a Kim & Dwayne dinner.

In advance of that first meeting, Dwayne was already taking control of things.

"Time to go to Kim's for our strategic planning session," Dwayne said at five-forty PM.

"Sure," I said, and then we walked down the outside stairs and Dwayne headed towards his van while I just stood there halfway to the street. Dwayne read my suggestion, looked at his watch, puckered his lips then came over to where I was. My very-slightly cracked kneecap from one month before was basically okay then, even though I still wore the brace. My bad slip had more than bruised me. The town doc identified the hairline crack and told me not to bend it for a while. But I was by then, so walking to Kim's was no big deal.

"Okay. We can walk," Dwayne said after a look at his watch.

Kim lived on the outskirts of town. It was the first house you come to when you approach the village before the steep town-

valley walls, a mile from the shack. Beáma's place was much closer to us up against the ski mountain. Beáma was living in the old hippie hotel, owned by an old friend of hers, she said. The Lodge, or the hostile as she called it, is in the opposite south-west corner. At the shack we got the late sun and sunset, whereas the Lodge gets only the morning and early afternoon sun.

Halfway down the hill I asked Dwayne about his wound and his scar. But at first he seemed to ignore my question.

"Tell me honestly, Dwayne. Don't you feel any different from the wound and the hospital-time and all that?"

"Tonight we'll go over your general lack of comfort with guns." Then he paused, considering whether or not the question deserved an answer. "No." Then he paused again. "That bullet almost hit me. But it missed."

"You sure bled a lot."

"Well," he gave me, "I must admit things seem a little different. But I'm not sure what it is or whether it's real or not."

"No kidding!" I responded. He walked quietly for a few houses and I thought it was just a momentary pause before he continued. But there was little else.

Maybe it was the thinner air, or the distance from Jersey. His doctors said there wasn't any impact on his brain, but close proximity to the brain must do something. One person's traumatic brain injury might be another person's minor improvement! He was the same old Duane, just very slightly different, I decided. Was it because of the San Juans, or the different latitude farther south, or the distance from Northeast urbanity? Who knows.

"Its impact on me was very minor."

"What? Minor?" I questioned. "Man, it impacted me!" I said to remind him of the big ordeal it was. I was enjoying looking at his case.

"Where were you exactly?"

"When you were shot? Just standing by the back of the trucks and the table."

"Wait a second. I thought it was Oscar that shot me," he said as a joke which surprised me. The occasional joke from him is so damn dry you don't realize it's a joke at first.

"Ha!" I said when I realized it.

Then we walked in silence for three or four more minutes until we got there.

* * *

Before our first meeting we were offered a ride in the back of Arnold's pickup slightly downhill on the dirt road driveway that goes up to Kim's house just past the Sheriff's station. It was the sunniest and warmest day of the early spring. Dwayne was in the front passenger seat, Kim stood in the bed behind the cab holding onto the base of the antennas looking forward and Beáma sat on the right wheel well looking backwards. Arnold had just brought a few bales of straw to Kim so she could put a layer over the front and side yard where the snow had quickly melted and turned to mud. The remaining pieces of straw were blowing around as if in a closed-in space but a few went up too high and blew out onto the road behind us. I sat on the open bed of the pickup in the back with the good leg dangling off, the other turned up sideways so I could

see Beáma and Kim enjoying the ride. Beáma with a cider in her hand was just sitting there smiling and shaking her head for a few seconds like she couldn't believe she was there, in this no-seat-belt fun-ride to get ice cream down at the kids' ice cream stand at the bottom of the dirt road driveway where it meets the main paved road into town. The hard cider jumped in small droplets out of the bottle a few times when the truck hit the bigger bumps

At the bottom we all got strawberry ice cream on little flat-bottom cones from the kids' cooler and Arnold paid them a few extra dollars to make them as happy as he was. He seemed to like seeing the new group together. The boy and the girl both smiled and looked at each other. Then Arnold back in the truck started the engine so he could motor us up the hill. The ride up the hill strangely enough was windier and no longer sunny as the sun had just dropped behind Wilson Mesa. We'd closed the bed and the three of us all faced forward squatting and holding our cones, with free hands grabbing the side walls.

"Wait 'til our girls hear about this," Beáma said to Kim, and Kim simply nodded with a straight face. Then Kim said they shouldn't.

"We shouldn't tell them," she added with a smirk. The girls were in Opher at a sleepover at a third friend's house so the adults could meet undisturbed.

After Arnold left us, Dwayne out of the blue explained to everybody that he did feel a little different. We were in Kim's kitchen area. He looked much like the regular old Dwayne but he was just sitting there. Kim was making noise with some pots and plates and swore quietly when she almost dropped a water glass.

Dwayne didn't jump up to help or take over. He wasn't over there orchestrating the physical operations. That's why he seemed mellower than before. I don't think it was just the Kim factor. There wouldn't even be a Kim if he hadn't gone through everything. The Ouray event was spectacular, but he was still Dwayne after that, as far as I could see. A week after Casings, I think it was in the Montrose hospital where a little metamorphosis must have happened. Miss Kim, more than Beáma or me, treated him like he was the messiah up on the cross and she was right there witnessing it. That near-worship by an attractive stranger might've had more of an impact than the bullet did.

The first night, Beáma said: "I don't even think they slept together yet." Then I said I don't really care. But I told her they probably had. Then she got a few details from Kim, and gave them to me, without me asking for them, like how they got "almost cozy on Kim's couch" looking at old printed photos.

From Dwayne, I got only a sparing amount about their first romantic night, or at least their first few moments. "She came out of her room into the hallway and presented herself in all her human beauty. I was surprised and I admit I stared, but I saw that our relationship had reached a higher level."

"Wow, yeah, a higher level!"

"So I took it from there," was all Dwayne added. Then he changed the subject.

"At our next meeting, let's discuss motive, your clear lack of motive, to make it clear to the jury."

“Right! Motive! I have none, had none! I don’t want to kill people!”

Unavoidably I got a little drunk and after dinner on the porch I tried to suavely offer Beáma a goodnight kiss.

“Hey, I’ve got a game I’d like to show you,” I said to be a little stupid and rude in a funny way, but she just offered me her pretty cheek and smiled it off.

“Didn’t I apologize for that?” she added, which I still didn’t understand, even with the all the development of things.

Dwayne and Kim walked around the inside and outside of the house quietly talking about what could be done, and it was mostly Kim talking and Dwayne listening with only the occasional word or two. They were talking quietly and Beáma and I couldn’t hear what they were saying. They’d disappeared for a while talking about things, then they came out and down the stairs to the small yard around the place.

Whatever, I figured, getting back to Beáma and yours truly on the porch. So much was going on, I later figured. Things were happening—it wasn’t just us and our simple lives anymore. And it was no doubt thanks to the mighty Dwayne that Beáma had taken a metaphorical step back. From that night forward—and backward—she offered me nothing. When I asked her a week later if anything in general was wrong, she said there wasn’t. “Just trying to get my life in order.”

* * *

Sitting in Kim's kitchen, Dwayne referred to me as the "despondent dreamer." I got back at him by telling a few of the old Dwayne stories, doing my best to stay complimentary.

"You all should know Dwayne is not at all like me. He's more obsessed with details—my opposite. Before there were cars and vans Dwayne worked on bikes you should know. And he eventually had every kind of tool—for plumbing, electrical, carpentry—everything. You might be surprised to hear that he wasn't always a therapeutic teacher, but even when not on purpose, he did teach me, many things... with the special Dwayne technique," I said.

I had Kim and Beáma's attention so I continued.

"Do it like this.

"Okay, I'll try.

"No. I said like this!

"Okay, but...

"Here, give it to me.

"Then Dwayne'd do it, showing me.

"Oh. You meant like that?

"Get it now?

"Yeah maybe, but...

"Here, watch again.

“So I would.

“Oh, so...

As it happened, I told Kim and Beáma, I learned more from seeing than from actual doing.

“Back home my bike was always greased, tuned up and had good air in the tires. And most times he showed me what he’d done, like a racecar pit crew teaching a dumb driver.” I paused then continued. “Once he cleaned every single piece of the bike, each actual piece, by disconnecting it from the piece it was connected to before. Everything was alone and soaked and brushed and scrubbed. And then of course he put the bike back together, cleaner than any bike had ever been, than any bike should ever be! At twelve or thirteen, I was totally impressed—so cool to have your bike so thoroughly cleaned. It was no doubt lighter, faster, and would jump higher!”

I raised my beer glass to the ladies and to Dwayne and made a toast.

“To Mr. Dwayne!”

Then I rounded it out.

“Tools for bikes, then house stuff like socket wrenches, levels, stud-finders and wall anchors,” I listed. It was indeed fun talking about him as if he wasn’t there.

I finished with: “Then he took all his skills out to Little Vegas, where he said there’s now an active group of townfolk trying to fix things and riding bikes everywhere.”

Dwayne like in a trance just nodded.

Later on I thought about him once again, and I've come to recognize that most of what Dwayne ever said was for the most part smart, at least totally direct and accurate, though never easy going, and that's why I didn't always get it. He didn't make silly jokes. These days I know it might have been my own brain causing symptomatic confusion—only a small part of the time was it his words or phraseology causing the lack of clarity. There was probably some intelligence going on that I didn't fully realize. I used to get the more obvious stuff, but a complicated explanation of how something worked went largely over my head, if not just speeding by it.

“The internal fan blows over the Freon which produces the ice on the inside while warm humid air blows out the back side where the water molecules gather and drip but don't freeze.”

“Right, so...”

“The air gets conditioned that way,” he'd say.

“Right, so... they should get a new one,” I said, about my parents and the AC unit in the TV room window that was making snow but otherwise not working.

“No, I'll check first. Might just need new fan blades, or a hydrocomposilator.

“That makes sense,” I said half joking.

When I was a teenager, I didn't think or care much of it, and I largely blamed things on others, often Dwayne, not myself. But that's what intelligence can be—speech that is not clearly understood by the non-intelligent. And of course you can be the

world's most intelligent brain without being a great and patient teacher. C'est la vie. I probably could have learned more.

* * *

Back in the day it was a struggle to realize who the mentor was. When I was sixteen in Kearny, just before Dwayne moved to the Shore, we were driving back from Succasunna still on a side road before you get to Route 10. He was sitting shotgun staring down the broken line of a straight-away, telling me it was too short and therefore unsafe for a pass. We weren't talking except for what was low under my breath for the bad driver in front of us who wasn't letting me get around him, wasn't slowing down or hugging the breakdown lane.

Dwayne started a one-sided conversation, which wasn't uncommon. We never had true give-and-takes. When getting along, if you'd call it that, we said things in each other's vicinity.

"It's very important to realize..."

"Yeah, whatever," I would say in a special sixteen-year-old way.

That afternoon, Dwayne tried to make a critical statement on civic responsibility, how he had noticed a "serious lack of care" with which the road-lines were painted on that road. As was often, he was audible—but I was distracted by all the many cool things in life.

"The lines on this road were not painted well!" he stated. And no, the lines weren't perfect—squiggly and crooked. Then he paused and turned it into a lesson. "Nothing gets done right—we

live in a world of imperfections!" Then he turned to me. "Doesn't that bother you?"

I felt like I'd missed something, and his criticism of the world seemed only depressing to me as I worked to find a good radio station.

"Huh?" I asked—then started with conviction: "But what are you gonna do about it?" I asked. "We should worry about things a little closer to home, don't you think?" (pause) "Hey, hand me the CD case. You shouldn't be so angry."

As usual, he didn't like what was said.

"Fuck off telling me I'm too angry. You'll learn one of these days, things don't just happen! Shit doesn't get done by itself! People do it! They plan! Then they pay people for quality work—or they get paid to do it themselves! If everyone hung out, having a damn-good time the way you do, the world would be up a fine creek." Then he handed me a CD. "Here."

"What is this?"

"Jazz."

"No way, man. I meant get my CD case."

"What's wrong with jazz?"

"It's old and slow and boring, man. Hand me mine."

"What the hell."

"Sorry, I just don't feel like listening to jazz right now. I'll find a good one."

The argument was over. He gave me the case.

"Fine—whatever," he said. "Woah WOAHH! WATCH OUT!"

I looked up quick from my lap, then jerked the wheel hard over, careening the car all the way back to the east-bound lane from the edge of the dirt and weeds on the other side.

"Holy shit!" he started. "I can't believe this. Pay attention! Stay between the goddamn lines. Forget the music. Gimme those."

He grabbed the CDs and dropped them on the floor. We drove back in the quiet.

* * *

Dwayne and I walked together every time to our meetings. With this project now, he was focused and it felt beneficial. I'd always known it was good when he got fully committed to a thing, figuring out what it needed and how he would provide that. The stated goal was for me to get a minimal sentence, if any. But as far as I knew the goal had never involved me before. I was the broken appliance—or a bad paint spill—that needed his attention.

At our second meeting at Kim's house it was obvious we weren't a tight team yet.

"This is a good project," Dwayne said. But he rephrased it. "Projects like this are good to be challenged with," he said as if it was actually just a math equation. But then Kim looked at him in a trance, as if truly surprised that anyone else would know that. For the first time all evening she lowered her long wooden pointer to her side. She was running the meeting like the young version of an old schoolhouse teacher.

Myself, I tried to break the ice a bit more. Nobody was talking at first, and I knew we'd all benefit from a little humanity in the room. Kim was watching Dwayne and he was watching the table in front of him. Beáma was watching both of them, the clock, but also gave me a few glances to see if I knew what to do. All I could think of was to tell this little anecdote about Dwayne in the old days. He was our leader in this strange situation and I couldn't help but poke a little fun at this.

“Back in Jersey, my mom was at Dwayne's house, with his mom,” I started, “...in Botany Village,” I added to be coy, like the young one was starting to bloom. “Apparently they both smirked when Dwayne came down the stairs to the front. Imagine, Little D at seven,” I added to celebrate the cuteness of it, “in green jammies wearing a little kid tool belt with a bunch of new kid-tools: tape, screwdriver, hammer, and a big carpenter's pencil stuck behind one of his ears,” I concluded the image with. And I realized then another important detail. They weren't toy tools. They were actual tools that a small kid would use. His mom had taken him shopping at True Value Hardware. He was then looking for jobs where his little tools would solve the problem, where they'd be big enough. As a result, he learned earlier than most how to swing a hammer, and use the different screwdrivers—a nice foreshadow of his future professional skills.

Kim looked at me while I told that story as if I was giving her secret information, which I basically was because she'd never get this story or anything like it from Dwayne himself.

“Why'd you come out here in the first place?” Beáma asked Dwayne directly at the first meeting at Kim's place, as if trying to thread all the events together.

"I came out here so Jon doesn't get lost." he said, which I laughed at, even though it was probably more true than clever.

At the bookstore meetings, Beáma volunteered to watch the door because she was trying to be helpful yet maybe suspected she was out-classed or out-brained back in the café. She moved to the front to run the open store, but probably also to have a little distance from the intense and strategic sessions in back. Before she made the move, a few customers came in while we were all in the back. Each time Kim stood up at our table and said: "Hold that thought." We were interrupted three times until Beáma saw the solution. A downside to her move was that she, even more than before, treated me with a certain distance like I was just part of a travelling debate team with its own goal to accomplish, not as a free-to-be young man who was worth her time or attention. It was probably for the best though. With the forthcoming trial I had quite a lot in my own room to deal with.

The next week at the end of a prep meeting on Main St., I offered to Kim to rebuild her backyard shed on that following Saturday. When I mentioned this to Arnold the next day on the Mesa his eyes lit up and he raised his brows. "That's a very generous offer! I'm impressed," he said. But then the trial got put off another two weeks so I went back on the Saturday after that for a few finishing touches including adding a new lockable latch to the doors and giving the inside a little sweep and clean-up. Dwayne was probably impressed but stayed quiet about the project when he heard me give Kim a little update. I think he let it be my own personal thing.

In contrast, Dwayne had become a professional consultant on her house, which was obviously a more complicated site. She received real advice for various house projects that would

“increase the resale value.” When I was done with the shed work Kim patted me on the shoulder and said: “Awe Jonathan, you’re so sweet.” The little shed out back was an eye-catching creative eyesore, as sheds should be!

* * *

"Four years ago my boyfriend was a lot like you," Beáma said to me directly, "but much more social," she clarified.

The subject of my jail possibility came up, appropriately enough, at Kim's, and with it Beáma told me and Dwayne about her ex-boyfriend who was incarcerated. Kim already knew. With her straight face she was clearly sharing. Stella's dad was in Cañon City in the main state penitentiary. A little less than four years ago, Beáma said he was sentenced to eight years for dealing drugs, back when marijuana wasn't "officially legal." But he was found guilty of dealing other drugs also, including cocaine, heroin, and opioids, too. As far as I know, opioids still aren't technically illegal, unless you're distributing them over the counter of the bar where you're working.

Beáma used to live in Denver, but after her boyfriend was sentenced, she moved to Telluride for anonymity or "a fresh place," as she put it. She knew the people who owned the hippy lodge in the village's south-west corner. She was offered a place there with a kitchen in exchange for working at the bookstore.

Beáma then looked at her watch. She winced because it was time to get Stella to bed on a school night. "Kim's got it easy," she said walking towards her coat on a chair.

"Okay, so where exactly is the dad?"

"Oh, John? He's actually serving a pretty long sentence," said Beáma.

"Woah. Where?" I immediately asked, not knowing yet. She'd made some reference to him being gone for a block of years, but I hadn't inquired any further.

"At the big house in Cañon City," she said.

"Man, for what?" Then I remembered back at the shack she'd said: "before drug dealing in Colorado was legalized," or something to that effect.

"Well, as he used to say, he was convicted for giving people what they want."

"Ah, maybe more than pot?"

"Yes, people were given a full menu."

Beáma took Stella to see Stella's dad a few times a year at most. Telluride is just far away enough for distance to be an excuse not to go to see him very often, Beáma explained. "And the conviction also pretty much ended our togetherness."

"Your relationship?"

"If you want to call it that."

Stella's dad was "a bartender of some notoriety, just east of the mountains," Beáma said.

Insults Tend to be True

On Dwayne's and my last walk to the bookstore, I asked him outright:

"Dwayne, why are you so damn helpful?" To which he did his fake laugh and then said:

"I'm not helpful to everyone, only those who need it."

"Why do you turn everything I say into an insult?" I asked next.

"Oh, they're not insults. Just realities." Then he paused again as if to prepare for a bigger statement: "To get back to your first question—and to put it into terms you might understand—being helpful might get a guy laid."

"Well that's funny," I said not knowing what else to say on the 'getting laid' subject. But then I was like a snowball rolling downhill. "Hey though, tell me this! Why do you talk to the room I'm in, more than you talk in general?" This made him look at me cinching his eyebrows.

"How would you know?"

"What?"

"Well... I'm not afraid of you," he said. "You're my kid cousin." He stopped talking and I was out of questions so I just waited. He took a deeper breath and then said: "It's like I'll be judged in the end by how much I was able to take care of you, teach you, help you."

"Oh," was my comeback. Then I thought about it more. "So we'll be judged in the end?"

"Yes, I'll be. Not sure about you though."

Then I counted the insults. "That's three put-downs in three minutes by the way."

"I thought that's how you and your friends talk?"

"That's different, very different."

"How?" he asked.

"Well, when you do it, insults tend to be true," I told him.

* * *

At the last meeting we got a last bit of strategic planning done. And I was surprised when Dwayne presented this angle.

"You know, Jon, Oscar might've said those things because he thought that you might like to hear them, being a construction worker," Dwayne said.

"Yeah, but isn't everyone who they really are?"

"What do you mean by that? And why are we making it sound like he may or may not have deserved to be killed?"

"Right, thank you. It was an accident."

Never Much on Purpose

The criminal trial was a bit unusual at the quaint and historic San Miguel County Courthouse, and word got out that Dwayne was going to act as the lawyer at my trial. The hero of Ouray was going to perform at the historic tower-clock courthouse on Colorado Avenue. As a result of the village rumor, the turnout was huge, more than the court has had room for. Extra people went back down to the coffee shop next door and crowded up the sidewalk in front of it. That was the first day of the trial, according to Beáma. The next day the courtroom was more crowded because people figured out that the verdict was coming. You'd think everyone had jobs and such, but obviously many people didn't.

Once the jury was picked the trial took the rest of two days. With lack of an expensive great lawyer option, I made the official choice of Dwayne as my lead council. He was a "partner" to our largely silent public defender. The public defender was there just as a legally required consultant. It was Dwayne's insistence to represent me. The public defender was a thirty-year-old blond guy who looked like he was out of the LL Bean catalog, so I was quick to let the hard-thinking Dwayne have it. But at first of course the idea didn't make total perfect sense to me.

"Don't get me wrong, Dwayne, but you've never been the most convincing talker."

"It all depends what mood I'm in. And sometimes teaching is what a situation calls for."

"Yeah, maybe," I surmised.

Dwayne never talked much in his teen years, but then he did! When he was away from our dinner table, away from the

elders, he talked mucho—explaining everything—even when something didn't really need explaining. He just shared his knowledge, his expertise. No doubt, it had to do with the younger one being present, to witness all this—the student.

Dwayne stopped talking at twelve or thirteen for a couple years. At least he got a whole lot quieter. He talked when he had to, to his teachers and his mom, but nothing when he came over to our house. He quietly worked on bikes in our garage because he and his mom only had the apartment. We had a little space, and a few bikes next to his one. But then he revved up again at fourteen or fifteen and couldn't be stopped.

He'd grab a question when he wasn't the one asked. He was over once on a Saturday and we were having lunch with our moms, and they asked how my bike ride was that morning, which was never long or much above casual. Then, before my ride was described or qualified, Dwayne spoke loudly about my bike's great potential, about how it was clean and well greased and designed for both road-riding and touring because of its geometrics. He went on for a while not at all answering the question, the question which they asked to me.

Dwayne was in his vocal stage, and all the times I saw him for a while, that sort of thing happened pretty often.

At some point he was at a new level! He made it a habit of answering everything asked to anyone in the room, or maybe to anyone within ear-shot even if they weren't in the room. So when someone walked in the room and saw for example that my elder brother was there, they might ask him why the dishwasher or maybe the dryer wasn't working. My brother would be about to say something like "Well..."

But then Dwayne would jump in and offer loudly an explanation of that particular machine's operation, its current quirk and an explanation of that quirk, for two or three minutes straight, and the person who asked the question, say my mom or dad or whoever, would raise their eyebrows and be taken aback, surprised, but not quite shocked. As a result of many of these moments, Dwayne must have come to understand that it was a little rude, but he seemed to figure that his smarts or natural helpfulness made up for that. I'd just stand there.

And then he moved his profound explanatory skills to the Shore towns.

At the Telluride trial, there was voir dire and jury selection, opening statements, a few character witnesses, then closing statements and deliberations, followed by the verdict. It was a lot like an old Law & Order episode, only the lighting through the big wide windows was glaring and not soft and perfect like a well-shot TV show or movie.

Before opening statements, I turned and looked around and saw Arnold, who with his chin and a head-toss indicated people who turned out to be his and Kim's cousin, aunt and uncle, Oscar's sister and parents. They were sitting patiently in the second row behind the state's table waiting for the proceedings to begin.

The state prosecutor and the Chief Deputy Attorney General together made it look like the case was a very serious concern. The Chief Deputy stood first after the prosecutor made a simple opening statement.

“A man was shot dead up in the mountains. Our job is to make sure the shooter is held responsible. It's a simple case of guilt. The weapon was a thirty-eight caliber handgun, and it was

nowhere near hunting season. The defendant saw clearly that the deceased was out in front of him directly in the line of fire, and pulled the trigger. A sane shooter doesn't do this unless they know there is a strong possibility that they will hit and kill the other person. The state of Colorado will show that this was not likely a planned killing. Therefore Mr. Acheron is not on trial for first-degree murder. Second-degree takes the advance planning out of it. We accept that. But murder it was. (Pause) Thank you."

With the state's persuasive opening, it didn't seem at all good for us.

When Dwayne was asked for an opening statement, he nodded. As if in a rehearsal he seemed to be just registering that it was his turn to speak. But then the judge interrupted:

"Wait, please. Are you the same Mr. Dwayne Serend that was at the Ouray Film Festival two months ago?" Dwayne looked down—and then Kim said:

"Yes, that was he."

Then the judge said to be unavoidably dramatic:

"Are you the same Dwayne Serend that was on Casings Mesa a week later?" The scar on Dwayne's forehead was not obvious to everyone, but it was fully visible to the judge. The judge seemed to know everything about the story but didn't mention the details or the scar. He then told the jury to disregard his previous questions so as not to effect their objective considerations.

Dwayne then paused for a long time before beginning. I looked over at him and I thought I saw him shaking like he was going to vibrate, steam out the ears and then persuasively explode.

He took two deep breaths, stood up in his nice shiny loafers and the brown socks, and began talking slowly though still with his eyes down on the tabletop before he looked up and made eye contact with the judge and then turned to the jury.

Although not highly complementary, Dwayne's remarks were concise and borderline poetic, not too dissimilar from the great Gettysburg Address, delivered in a slight more nervous way.

“Hello, everybody. I am Dwayne Serend. I am representing my younger cousin Jon Acheron,” he began. “A score of years ago, a baby was born and his name was Jonathan. Today in many ways he is still a baby. He is not very intelligent. He’s inexperienced, and causing big messes as he lives his life. Much like a young child, Jon should not be considered responsible for his mistakes. Over the last eleven weeks, young Jon has suffered greatly from taking a human life. He knows we can't say that anybody else did it, but we should make sure that you the people of the jury know that it was simply a tragic accident. Thank you.”

Dwayne then sat back down and the young public defender patted him on the shoulder. Dwayne didn't seem to notice.

After that, I was the asked by the prosecution to take the stand. When the Deputy Attorney General was about to start his questions, I said my own opening statement.

"Sir, let me just start by saying I didn't mean it!"

“I didn't ask that,” he said as he aligned a stack of paper and put the stack down. "My first question is this:" he said, stepping to the side next to his table in the center of the room. “Do you believe in God?"

"Uh..." I wasn't sure how to answer this. It took me a few seconds. It was my first official answer to an official question. "Sure," I said, as if it was an obvious answer.

"Hmm," he started back with. "Perhaps we'd all agree that maybe you should believe in God with more conviction."

"I do. I'm sorry," I said. Then I said a little more. "He's everywhere!" I added. "How can a person not believe?" But it probably came off too much like God was annoying or oppressive.

"Would any of the fine churchgoers of this area recognize you from any of the Sunday services?"

"Uh, well, probably not. I'm not a churchgoer really," I said, "even though I am, you know, religious to some extent."

"To some extent, you say? But you stay free to do whatever you want, don't you?"

"No!" I couldn't help but exclaim a little louder. "I didn't want this!"

"To be on trial? No, I don't think anybody wants this. Let's just say it's very believable that you would like to be free of all this."

The Deputy asked a long series of questions about mine and Oscar's precise locations and drew a diagram on a large dry-erase board so the jury had a visual.

Then we had our two character witnesses, Arnold and Garcia who probably weren't very helpful. Oscar and I had never worked on something side by side, but that can't be seen as any kind of motive for killing him. Both Arnold and Garcia took turns

on the stand saying basically that I'm "a nice guy who's okay at things and shows up on time." My thought after them wasn't positive. We now know officially that I'm a common guy who doesn't go out of his way to kill everyone.

The state had two expert witnesses. One weapons expert who testified that this particular model thirty-eight was very accurate when shot at anything less than sixty feet away. The other was an ornithologist who explained that there was nothing hard enough in the softwood of a big old aspen tree that would redirect a bullet shot from less than fifty feet away. So it was established, whether I knew it or not, that I was roughly pointing the gun near enough to his head, regardless of the fact that I half expected the tree to stop the bullet.

Mid afternoon of the first day, the state made its closing statement. It was a repetition of parts of their opening statement.

"As we explained, a man was shot dead up in the mountains. The shooter was Mr. Jon Acheron. Mr. Acheron saw clearly that the deceased was out in front of him and pulled the trigger. A shooter doesn't do this unless they know for certain that there is a strong possibility that they will hit the person. The State of Colorado, and the defense, have both shown clearly that this was not a well-thought-out shooting. Therefore Mr. Acheron was not charged with first-degree murder. Second-degree murder takes the advance planning out of it. We accept that. But murder it was. There was motive in play because of the accidental shooting and wounding of his close cousin a month or so before, and Mr. Acheron took an opportunity presented to him to take on the roll of an albeit less-than-scary vigilante. However, we all know that such killing is not legal, even if it's not planned ahead of time." He

paused then before ending. “Mr. Acheron must pay for his illegal actions. We know that. Thank you.”

For closing Dwayne was supposed to just repeat his opening statement in order to solidify the basic truths in the minds of the jurors. But he surprised all of us, not just me, by saying more. He didn’t follow the State’s lead and instead went for a close that he later said was meant to be more dramatic.

He stepped out from behind the table as the State had done.

“Jon Acheron has never done much on purpose. That’s not who he is. What he did here, he didn’t mean to do. At risk of repetition, he is being charged with murder in the second degree. That implies recognition that the victim might die as a result of the person with the gun’s action. But Jon is innocent of this. To the charge we are not pleading insanity, but it is something similar. He pulled the trigger but he did not know it might kill Mr. Oscar, even if it was shot in Oscar’s direction. Aim has never been a strong point for Jon, either. He’s never been good at hitting things, and on the inverse we can also say with certainty that he’s never been good at intentionally missing things either. He testified himself that he intended to miss Oscar. But he didn’t. The bullet hit Oscar’s head and came to rest there. It caused a sad death that was unintentional. As I said, punishment is for people who know a little about the possible results. Jon shot the gun but he might as well have been unraveling an extension cord or testing the sharpness of a saw blade. He was more like a child playing with a toy, a harmless activity until Mr. Witchel’s death showed the worst possible consequences. Yes, a bullet from a gun that Jon Acheron fired did kill a person, but we’ve tried to show that Jon is innocent of any intention. He had no understanding of what his actions might do. The very sad death he accidentally caused was simply

not a case of second-degree murder. Thank you. The defense rests,” he said in the judge’s direction.

The Verdict

The judge paused for a minute before making his own short summation. He directed that it was then the jury’s turn to deliberate, which they did, but not quickly. It was late the first afternoon and they weren’t done so the judge brought us back the next day. The need for Day Two surprised me, but I was already sold on me getting a guilty verdict. The fact that deliberations were taking a while told me nothing. They were no doubt just working out the details of what guilty might mean. Second degree is a big deal, and manslaughter sounds worse than it is, but it's still a killing—much more than a pure accident. The more I thought about it, the guiltier I felt of something.

After lunch on the second day, the jury filed back into the courtroom and the head juror stood with a piece of paper in his hand.

“For the crime of second-degree murder, how do you find?” asked the judge.

“On the charge of second-degree murder, we find the defendant not guilty.”

“On the subsequent charge of manslaughter, how do you find?”

“On the charge of manslaughter, we find the defendant guilty.”

The judge again explained the difference between second-degree murder and manslaughter, and then silently nodded to himself as if he agreed with the verdict. At one fifty he said we’d adjourn for a few days, meet back on Thursday when he’d decided on the sentencing.

Then first thing Thursday the judge got right to the sentencing. He made it a speech.

“Well, up here, pot might be legal but killing a person isn’t,” he started with, which made a few people chuckle. “You can get an official license to kill animals, but no, not people. So,” he said as if a transition to the official decision, “as the law virtually states, here in the San Juans you can’t shoot a gun in a person’s direction, let alone kill them, without consequences, and I’d lose my job if I didn’t give any. So again, I’m going to remind everybody right now that our defendant was found guilty of manslaughter. Mr. Acheron, you will serve a one year sentence for the death of Mr. Oscar Witchel, however accidental it might have been, with a potential release on probation after six months. You could’ve gotten ten to fourteen for this, but I gave you just one, the required legal minimum. This sentence is still probably a big inconvenience that will force you to think about things before you move on to whatever is next in your life,” he said directly to me.

“In summation, we all must remember that at any altitude you can’t shoot someone in the head with a handgun from any distance and get off scot free without paying for it. Life doesn’t work that way. The shooter of the gun has to pay a little, no matter

how harmless he might seem, no matter what the circumstances. It's that simple.”

The judge closed a notebook and we all stood up. Nobody clapped. Kim gave Dwayne a hug which he pretended wasn't happening, and Beáma gave me a hug. I was in limbo-land, being a good witness to it all but then having to realize it was Reality with a capital R.

The judge's final statement was almost an afterthought after the bailiff tapped him on the shoulder and asked him something.

“Yes, Mr. Acheron, the court gives you a long weekend before you'll be taken into custody and brought to your new home at the penitentiary. Report to the Sherriff's office on Monday morning 9 AM just outside of town. Okay?”

“Yes,” I told him.

“Good.” He took a step back and told everybody to have good day.

* * *

With a few days to kill, with my knee continuing to feel better, I walked around town after Telluride twice got a few fresh inches of heavy Spring snow. I knocked on doors and offered free snow shoveling. It surprised people and made most of them visibly happy. Eleven or twelve villagers took me up on that astute business offer. It was my public offering, like my unofficial goodbye.

On that Saturday afternoon, before the official move to Cañon City, in one of my last conversations with Kim and Dwayne

of the entire year, Kim said with a small smile on her face that she and Dwayne were moving to Durango. But then she added that they might move eventually down to Las Vegas. We were outside the bookstore and I was headed home. Dwayne was expressionless but that probably meant he was just listening as he slowly looked around. He was absolutely silent, no doubt very happy that she was doing the speaking for both of them. I nodded, smiled politely and moved on.

After the first week or two, it was two and a half months in Cañon City before I received my first visitor. It might seem like an eternity, but I told people not to worry about me and that the sentence would pass in no time. In late summer, Beáma came but it was to visit her ex-boyfriend there also. I thought at first it was only to come see me, but then I realized it was maybe vice versa. Who knows. Maybe she was killing two birds with one stone. After that there were more frequent visits, one or two per month. Then I figured it out. It was a concerted effort to help one of the birds.

"What are you going to do next?" Beáma asked me on a January visit.

"Get outta Dodge," I said, or something like it, with a smile as if I'd been waiting to share that with someone. "Going back east," I added more clearly with a very faint laugh. "Get out of this one-horse town," I added again, referring to Telluride as if I was still there.

She smiled. "Me, too—I could use a little family time."

"If you wait a few months, I'll give you a ride, if my cousin still has my new old van."

“Actually, that might work,” she told me.

I wasn't disappointed with the idea of having company for the drive east.

So, without probation, I served almost a full year, which by no coincidence is how long it takes for a person to write a short book. And the free room and board of prison worked pretty well. Colorado didn't care about keeping me in-state very long, so when I was out I was free to go un-probated.

Since then, my story in conversations has been that I was required to serve a little time for what was a total accident.

Yes, Dwayne's forehead was scarred, but you would have to say he's done just fine. In addition to his performance at the courthouse, he threw me for a huge loop by somehow winning first prize, a steady girlfriend that turned into more. Real as real gets, love he found, with the quiet Kim Carson the manager of the bookstore. Now she and Dwayne are in a small house in the Durango suburbs and she's thinking about teaching. I heard about this and their engagement from Kim six months after I relocated to Cañon City. I called Dwayne on a Sunday, but Kim answered. They're getting married next year but nobody's invited. Kim told me they will have a party in a year or two when they're ready.

Six months later, I was picked up and driven back to Telluride by Arnold who happened to be driving back from Denver. He asked me how it felt to be out. “Super great,” was my understatement. Then for the four hour drive I kept mostly quiet enjoying the side view.

A week later, at the loaded van which Dwayne had by a stroke of luck kept for me, he and Kim showed up from Durango for my departure before my other riders were dropped off.

Beáma and Stella were going back for Beáma's dad's 50th birthday party and staying for a month or so, she said. She was going to get her dad's old car then drive back out to the San Juans. But she'd stop in Cañon City, she said. Her ex was in his final year.

Dwayne immediately reached in the van and popped the hood. Then he did what he could do to help prep it for the trip. He pulled the dip-stick and wiped it dry to check the oil. He said out loud that it was fine, but the windshield washer fluid was on the low side. Out of the back on the side he got his electric air pump, grabbed an extension cord "that stays with it," he said, and made sure all four tires were good. I saw the driver side tire rise an inch.

"Take good care of her, Little Jon," he then said referring to the van looking away at first but then turning to face me straight on as if we were having a more significant conversation.

"What about long trips?" I asked. "The stalling," I clarified. Then Dwayne said that it would be fine "as long as you don't go up any steep hills."

"We're in the mountains, though."

"You'll be fine on the highways."

"Right. We'll be fine," I repeated.

But then my brain and heart froze at the same time like a mysterious delay of conscience, like the big drop in barometric pressure before a storm starts. I settled and then wondered what the

darned heck was happening in the world? Why in fact is Dwayne really here? Not out here in the San Juans, but why here on Earth? What's the logical explanation for him as such a player in my life? Sure, there are weirdos in the world, but they're usually kept as strangers. Was he put here on purpose? Is my life going to prove to be better and more developed just because he's a part of it? Has my life always been a bit more special than the average? Has he already saved me without me realizing it? Sure, he rode me home on his bike when my head was hurt, but what has he done in recent years? Was I supposed to be god-fearing-blown-away by that still-hypothetical To-do list of his? Has he found a real somebody now, the love of his life, so his work with me is now done? Is it just a love, like a first love, a temporary thing, but not a true love, the one true deal? Is he happy I'm leaving? Does he care? Is he here to stay out in the San Juans?

Then Kim walked over to me behind the van and I have to say she looked different than the previous times, a more wild look. It was crisp and cool but she had no hat on and her hair was down and blowing around. She gave me a brisk but polite hug and said a few nice quiet things without smiling like she "loved Dwayne," and was "very happy to have met him." But then she threw gasoline on my internal fire by saying even more quietly that she was "so glad he didn't do it," or something to that effect with a wink and a nod to go with it.

Madly, I can't say that I could exactly figure what her words were, or precisely what she was referring to. Glad he didn't shoot the guy again? Glad he didn't shoot the kid? On replay now it reminds me of that nightmare of the kid years with that voice on the other side of the fence that doesn't go away when you wake up. The world has unknowns! But, then I figured it. She was talking as

if she was now on the ultimate Dwayne wavelength, as if nothing was secret and she knew everything. As I digested it, I just took it to mean she was saying she'd take care of him the way others had done, or the way family had done, the way anybody who cared about him had done, or tried to. "But Me? What did I do?" I almost said, but then nipped it. Then she turned and walked over to Beáma on the passenger side.

When I passed near them for the last time to grab Beáma's bag from the steps, I heard Kim say even more quietly that she hopes that one day they will, she and Dwayne, "make a cute little baby together," and she giggled, but her face went straight and serious as she turned to inspect the final packing of the van. Beáma smiled but seemed like she was in her own world, not warm and chatty the way Kim seemed. Lastly Kim turned in my direction and said, a little more loudly, that she hopes we'll both "come back and visit family," which I took to mean there might be a real effort to expand it. But who knows? I looked at Kim with my eyes wide for a second like it was a scary and outlandish idea, though in a friendly way as best I could. Then I went around the van and got in, shaking my head, slightly confused a bit about absolutely everything. Beáma and Stella got in and we backed out slowly. Dwayne had a blank look on his face while Kim waved goodbye.

When our threesome finally left the village, we drove north to Montrose then east to a motel in Dayton, Ohio. In Kansas mid-day during her driving shift, I read a piece of Beáma's she'd gotten in the Telluride newspaper a month before. She'd made a character, based on herself, with the nick-name the "Disposable Photographer."

The Disposable Photographer is on
the move again, armed with her

trusty old Kodak—or is it a Fuji? She's moving, shooting shots while standing still, shooting shots while walking to and fro. She never stops for long. She waits for nothing, except for passing cars and trucks. Then she moves on.

The Disposable Photographer has a nice cold-air buzz now, with fresh snow on her boots. She's got an urge for abstraction, walking around in the snow-shine sun-time crystalline flake field and the barbaric "YA!" written with boot drags through the field edge of the valley floor. Disposable camera shots of light spots with dark parts, knee deep and ankle deep crusted double-deep powder pack. Telluride walls behind San Miguel steam because today the icy cold river-water is much warmer than the air.

The Disposable Photographer is approaching the llama pack which listens attentively when she speaks, all furry ears and eyes forward, funny and grand. "Hello you mellow horse sheep. May I interest you in a slow time conversation with a deep-stepping wanderer? I promise you, you need only listen. I have plenty to

say today, and I could use the company.”

“Yeah, that was a fun day,” she said, after I told her it was nicer than what we see in most papers. “Fun to write, but impractical!” she added. “But maybe there’s a song in there.” Then she said with a smile, “Yeah, there’s still a little beatnik in me.”

“Yeah!” I added with surprise. “You should do a song, with the wise llamas,” I added for no reason, except to show I could be in there, in the same moment.

Then without any motel drama, which Stella might have totally prevented without knowing it, we drove the rest of the way east, retracing the steel-belted radial steps along 70 and 76 back to the center of the universe. Beáma Oberge said her dad and sister live on Long Island about thirty minutes out on the north shore in Sunnyside. All they needed though was a drop at the subway in Jersey City because she was first going to a friend’s place she said in Rebetri.

“The time has come for me to take my big act to the City,” said Beáma. “Time to tackle the Apple,” she rephrased sitting up straight to show poise and motivation. “Give it a show!”

“Telluride is boring. I want to see skyscrapers,” Stella offered calmly. Her mom then said that she’d seen the more important ones, “natural skyscrapers.” At mile marker 96, we saw the distant metal, glass, and brick boxes of Manhattan. Stella leaned forward between the seats and said a quiet: “Whoa.”

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