

E. KEENE

River Run

Gunning down the Des Moines River with Bubba was not on my agenda that afternoon. But when he called from Roy's pickup asking me to join them for a boat ride, it seemed a good idea. Three nights ago, sipping cheap margaritas in a Mexican restaurant west of town, he'd told me: "I'm a simple man." God but I found that refreshing. Something about him charmed me, like the way he spoke to his son who called every night from boot camp, always finishing with, "Love you, son. Proud of you." Or it could have been the novelty of dating a farmer. Then again, it could have been that I was lonely and he thought to pick up the phone. At any rate, I said yes.

"She said 'yes.'"

I could hear Roy in the background through the rumble of the pickup's engine. "Really? Alright!"

"How long will we be gone?" It was Saturday and a pile of work on my desk demanded attention. Outside the window a cardinal pecked in the birdfeeder, spraying safflower seeds onto the geraniums below. Beyond that, nothing moved—grass, trees, even the clouds stood motionless.

"Won't be gone more than two, three hours max. Be there in ten minutes." And he hung up.

I stuffed a beach towel and sunscreen beneath my arm and climbed in between the two of them. It was one of those rare Iowan summer days with a not-too-hot sun shining, clouds riding high and the sky promising to be blue all day. Roy's knee-length swimsuit and T-shirt looked dull against his reddish-gold tanned limbs. Bubba sported a bandana over his head, a sleeveless shirt and jeans cut off at the knee. He looked like a pirate.

"Got to pick up one more thing," Roy said. The pit stop at Hy-Vee involved choosing between butterscotch or cinnamon schnapps, called "Hot Damn."

"Well, I don't know." Bubba weighed each bottle in his hands. The air-conditioned chill nipped up my arms and down my spine. "Which one do you want?" he asked.

Roy didn't wait for my answer. "Hell, let's just get them both."

"Now why didn't I think of that." Bubba looked up, grinning like a bandit, and headed for the cash register. Following in his wake, I couldn't help but notice everyone said "Hi, Bob"—not Bubba as he had insisted I call him since meeting him the week before. I had sat in on a city council meeting, listening and taking notes while hundreds of farmers protested the commendation of a century farm adjacent to a newly incorporated city in Jefferson County. A bright-eyed, attractive man broke away from a conversation and approached me with one hand extended while the other tipped the bill of his cap.

"Hi." Hardened with calluses and colored burnt sienna, his hand felt enormous and warm. "I'm Bubba." His words, quick and hard, left me feeling like I hadn't quite heard right. "Saw you taking notes; thought you might be interested in my story." His neighbor down the road decided to sue because he built a hog lot, one of those digitalized sheds that holds twelve hundred head.

As we piled into the truck again, the sun's warmth realigned my sense of proportion. Roy popped a Heineken for himself, while Bubba removed the butterscotch schnapps cap, upended it, and then passed it to me. The sugary liquor forced me to grit my teeth, yet I resigned myself, having never developed a taste for beer. The tingling edge of a buzz tempted me to upend the bottle again. I gulped to bring it on for one of the top ten fine-looking days in Iowa.

Soon the three of us were bumping arms and legs at every crook along the gravel roads. I tried not to think—*What would it be like to lie in bed with him?*—but found myself gauging the warmth beneath his jeans and shirt—the vigor in his arms, shoulders, back. My first lover was a farm boy on the East Coast. My parents had found a place in the country surrounded by dairies. I was twelve. The farm boy delivered fresh milk and our newspaper, and if I climbed high enough in the maple tree I could spy him riding his bike a mile away. Haylofts, chicken coops, and the copse beyond the pasture served as refuge for our groping desires: his for sex, mine an ill-defined yearning fused with pre-adolescent mutiny.

Within minutes of rambling down dusty lanes, I lost sense of where the highway lay. Every few miles Roy stopped, and he and Bubba surveyed fields of corn, some as tall as a man, some only knee-high, having been replanted after the flood. Corn and soybean

fields rolled in every direction, their slow curves disrupted now and then by farmsteads buttressed with evergreens and oaks.

“Now there’s one thing we gotta be clear on.” Roy’s wrist hung over the steering wheel like a casual commander at ease in this backroad world.

Bubba handed over the “Hot Damn.” “What’s that?” I asked.

“What happens in the boat, stays in the boat.” He paused, continuing to drive and stare through the bug-smearred windshield. He turned to me. “Deal?”

I took another swig. “Sure.”

Roy turned off the gravel road and backed into waist-high grass where a scraped-up metal boat rested on a trailer. Beyond it a prefab home, a few dents dimpling its beige siding, sat squarely on a cement foundation not twenty yards from the rushing Des Moines River.

The men hopped out and began hitching up the boat trailer. From the rearview mirror, I could see their moves were sure and easy though they seemed to be rushing—as if at any moment an unforeseen rainstorm might materialize and cancel the day’s fun. The week before, Bubba had asked if I was married, then admitted his wife had taken her own life. I hadn’t asked for more details, but now I wanted to know: How did she kill herself? Pills? That’s what women are often reduced to, swallowing their desperation. And did he miss her? If she hadn’t died, would she be there instead, in Roy’s truck waiting for a boat run up the river?

Roy flipped the cooler lid, tossed a beer to Bubba, and took one for himself before starting up the truck again and taking a long slug of beer. “Here you go.” Bubba handed me the schnapps and I swallowed as big a gulp as I could stomach as we backed down the ramp and put the boat in the water. With one foot in the river, one hooked over the boat, he offered his hand as I climbed aboard. The boat rollicked at the water’s edge, responsive to the river’s starts and tugs. After parking the truck, Roy ran down the ramp cradling a couple of six-packs plus the schnapps bottles and jumped in.

Bubba yanked at the starter-cord, but the motor sputtered then died. The current sucked us out past overhanging tree branches that curled like fingernails and dipped into the murky water. Roy tried his hand at the motor as we floated toward the river’s quickening center. Beyond us the river reflected sallow-faced clouds that

now appeared polluted beyond redemption. I marveled at the mud Iowa's waterways hold and was awed at the river's authority, at how helpless we were, drifting in its grip. These men had been boating this river all their lives, but it wasn't difficult to imagine the river having its way with us.

The motor sparked, caught, and held, whipping up furious bubbles. With a whoop Roy revved the motor, spun the wheel until the boat's side tilted inches from the water and we sped upstream.

"Bub. Take the wheel for me."

I was relieved. Roy favored swerving the boat wildly, his lips pressed together with determination I didn't find comforting. He side-stepped out of the way as Bubba took the wheel and the driver's seat. Popping another beer, Roy slouched in the once-upon-a-time-white vinyl seat opposite me, his legs sprawled. He sipped his beer and studied me.

"Frankly, I'm amazed you came today."

"Why?" even though I knew. Bubba and Roy's world—field upon field, less than a mile from my house—was as far removed from my reality as could be. What others may conceive of as a dull and predictable regimen—rising at three a.m. to cultivate, plant, then harvest ten thousand acres of corn and soybeans with equipment that costs millions, all the while remaining prey to weather and soil conditions, invasive species and fungus that could wipe out or limit yields—such a regimen was exotic to me. Given the odds, I was amazed they produced anything at all. Perhaps I identified with the risk they took.

Bubba ran the boat steadily up river, one hand on the wheel, the other gripping the "Hot Damn" by the neck.

I turned the question back on Roy. "Why are you surprised?"

Roy lifted his beer to the sky. "Hell, Bub. She wants to know *why* I'm amazed she came with us today."

Bubba placed the "Hot Damn" between his knees to yank his shirt off overhead.

"—So tell me," Roy continued, "what *do* you like to do?"

"Well, I love to read—"

"Really?"

I didn't care that he was mocking me, but I would have been glad for a shot of vodka.

"And what are you reading right now?"

“Right now, Dante’s *Inferno*.”

“Never heard of it.” He tilted the beer can skyward and finished it off, tossing the can to the boat floor.

We cruised past a few cabins on either side of the river. Mostly older folks tended their lawns, some stoking barbeques, others in lawn chairs watched the river pass. A few boats zipped by, and when they did Roy and Bubba waved every time.

Then, unexpectedly, the cabins were gone. Both shorelines loomed, devoid of humanity, as if we had stumbled back in time hundreds of years. The whining of our boat was absorbed by wilderness enveloping either shore. Bubba reached back and handed me the “Hot Damn.” I took another swig, recoiling at its sugary kick.

“You going swimming today?” Roy asked.

“This is far enough, don’t you think, Bub?”

Half a mile ahead a blackened railroad track bridged the waterway. We had been traveling a good half hour upriver, full-tilt.

“No, let’s get past that bridge first before floating down.”

“That bridge still in use?” I asked.

“Not for a long time now,” Bubba said. “People fish off it, though.”

Roy sat up, squinting at the looming steel trusses straddling the river. “No one up there today.” Before leaning back, he removed his T-shirt and tossed it aside. His shoulders, arms, and chest bulked with well-toned muscle.

I turned away wishing someone, anyone, sat on that bridge today.

Then we were upon it. I felt the boat balk at the stiffening current when we passed beneath its brief shadow then onto the other side. Mud-caked banks, rising eight, ten feet straight up, were held back by elaborate root systems, naked snarls meandering in and out of the earth at will. Directly above, a tangle of timber loomed: willow, cottonwood, sycamore. Vine-cloaked trees, pressed close together, grazed the sky; some leaned against others, as if too weary to stand a moment longer. Greens upon greens—a chaotic symphony, yet silent. Nothing moved.

Bubba maneuvered the boat to face downriver and cut the engine.

The boat churned in lazy eddies.

Then it started. "I'm going to get naked."

Bubba stood, staggered to keep from falling, and unzipped his cut-off jeans. Out of the corner of my eyes I caught the whiteness of his thighs. *Maybe this is what they always do*—but my body knew otherwise. Nausea flashed up, then plummeted, leaving a sharp, cinnamon-flavored sting.

Finishing his beer, Roy crushed the can with one hand and let it drop without taking his eyes off me. "I'll get naked if you do." I adopted an air of nonchalance fully aware that I'm not clever at concealing my fear. "Do you guys usually go skinny dip together?"

Roy recoiled as if I'd thrown a handful of mud. "Ugh. God. No! I'm not queer." He reached inside the cooler. "So how do you like to cum? Sucking or fingering?"

"I don't think—"

"What play toys do you have?"

Keep it light, I thought, joke along. The current, as if hearing my vow, caught the boat in an unexpected rush downstream.

"I have the 'Blue Wonder,'" I said, leaning back with false bravado.

Roy was pleased. "Really? What's that?"

"It's a dildo about this big," I placed my hands an exaggerated distance apart, "and it's designed to hit the G-spot. A professor gave it to me, a scientist. I like nerds."

Roy laughed, and turned to Bubba. "She likes nerds? What's she doing with *us*? We're rednecks." Roy doubled over with laughter, spilling beer. Bubba laughed, too. "Hell, no, Bub—we're *hillbillies*!"

"Where's that butterscotch schnapps?" Bubba handed over the bottle. I swallowed one, two, three times, its syrupy taste ghastly, and handed back the bottle.

Then I saw it coming—a tangle of overhanging trees leaning far over the river—but decided not to say anything. Instead, I savored how both Bubba and Roy, facing upstream, were too drunk to notice. The boat hit, spinning us into an ambush of branches.

"Holy fuck!"

I ducked.

Roy tried to stand, but was forced to stoop. The current drove the boat deeper into the branches. I hit the deck on all fours. "Give me the oar," Roy shouted.

"Sure thing." I slid the oar across the boat's deck, trying not to smile.

Bubba laughed, pushing at branches digging into his arms and bare back. Roy kneeled, placing the oar against a tree trunk as leverage to push off. Overhead, the jumble of limbs reminded me of childhood forts with thick branches and leaves weaving in and around each other, enough to obliterate the sky.

“Shit.” Roy half stood, taking in our predicament, and grabbed onto a branch. The boat, momentarily stuck, jerked and bucked against the current while Bubba manhandled another branch.

“Why the hell didn’t you say something?” Roy asked.

Before I could answer, the river drove us into more vegetation. I marveled at the implausible angles—some trunks ran parallel twenty feet over the river. Roy scrambled to seize another branch; he gripped it with both arms, his chest pressed against it, and began to roar. Bubba stood and joined him, their primal cry—part man, part animal—was enough to push us out of the tangled woods where the boat continued its placid drifting. Faces red with exertion, the men plopped into their seats, their chests heaving for more air. Bubba surveyed his torso and arms for cuts and scrapes, then started chuckling.

“Phew.” Roy eyed me. “You see something like that coming again, give us a holler.”

“I didn’t think it’d be such a big deal,” I lied. “Now I have to pee.”

“Don’t worry,” Roy answered, “I’ll find you something.” He revved the motor and sped toward shore again, pulling up to a stretch of muddy beach swathed in poison ivy below a thin stand of timber. He slowed down, catching hold of a protruding tree root to steady the boat.

“Lots of poison ivy up there,” Bubba noted.

“Hell,” Roy retorted, “you can climb on up to the trees, or just stay down here on the beach.” He crossed his arms and put one foot on the boat railing. “Up to you guys. I’m going to sit here and watch.”

Bubba stepped thigh-high into the river and again held a hand out for me. Once on shore, he crawled up the bank through the poison ivy. His nakedness struck me as stark, and somehow pathetic. Turning his back to relieve himself, Bubba peeked over his shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” I said, my feet boring into the gushy mud, “I won’t look at you.” He smiled and took aim for a sycamore.

Roy revved the boat motor again, egging me to get a move on. “I’ve seen plenty of pussy. Yours won’t be the last.”

Refusing to climb up and through the poison ivy, I turned sideways and squatted on the muddy shore. To keep humiliation at bay, I convinced myself that I was drunk.

“So, are you going to take your clothes off?” Roy asked when I was back onboard.

“I might strip if I was stoned.”

Roy laughed and backed the boat up, then shot forward full speed. “What do you mean?” he asked. “With mar-i-jua-na?” He pronounced each syllable as if they were separate words.

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Hell, Bub, we’ve got a hippie girl on our hands. You got any mar-i-jua-na on you?”

“I sure don’t.”

The boat blasted downriver. “Well, hippie girl, are you telling me that all we have to do is smoke a joint and then you’ll get naked?”

“You mean...you guys don’t have any joints with you?”

Bubba held up the schnapps. “Got plenty of this left.”

“But Bub, she’s a hippie girl. She’s into free love and all that shit.” He cut the boat’s engine mid-river and turned to face me. “Isn’t that right?”

“I’ve never been afraid to take a risk, if that’s what you mean.”

“Take a risk? Hell, we know that. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here with us right now, would you?”

Roy’s grin weaseled its way into my gut. He popped another beer and brought it to his mouth with deliberate slowness. Afterward, he sat the can on his thigh and stared at me, his face grim with resolve.

“Take your clothes off.”

I picked up the oar and started paddling.

“Put the oar down.”

“Come on, honey,” Bubba chimed in. “Just take your clothes off.”

Honey?

“Put the oar down.” Roy drummed his fingers along the boat’s side railing. “Well, then, looks like you’re forcing me to drive this baby real crazy.”

“Oh, you don’t want Roy doing that,” Bubba said, upending the “Hot Damn.”

“Guess that’s just what I’m going to have to do, unless—” Roy sat up and leaned his elbows on his knees. “How about taking your top off?”

At home I had figured swimming was a possibility, forgetting the muddy waters that mingled with toxic runoff from the farm fertilizers. Beneath my tank top I wore a bikini. I could remove my tank top, nothing lost with that, and appease Roy. I noted the sun and the strength of its beams, compared the warmth of the air to the muted thud of my heart and, placing the dripping oar across my thighs, pulled my shirt off and started rowing again.

"Now look at that, Bub, she's in good shape. You must work out, or something."

He stared at my nipples pressing through my bikini top. "You going to take off more, or what?" A rivulet of sweat, fine as a strand of hair, slipped past his jaw and down his thick neck before he moved to wipe it away.

I tried a "You've got to be kidding" look, a gesture useless against his gaze, a gaze that pinned me to the boat's deck while he fucked me.

"OK, then." Roy turned the key. The boat's engine jerked into action and Bubba held onto the back of his seat. The blast of speed lifted the boat's nose off the river like an untamed stallion, and we dashed across the water faster than before. I tossed the oar to the deck and doubled over, hugging chest to thighs, my head between my knees.

"I'm willing to be perfectly reasonable," Roy yelled back. "Just take off your clothes and I'll stop the boat."

He swerved to the right then cut a sharp left, the portside tilting toward the water. A scream escaped me and I sank to the deck. He kept the boat circling as water sprayed—a frenzy of glass-sharp pinpricks stinging my arms and back. Finally, the side of the boat dipped below the water's edge. Powerless to stop him, my fingers clawed at the metal deck.

"Take your clothes off and I promise I'll stop." I heard but couldn't comply. Rage had taken root, but rage, merged with fear, was worthless except for gut-punching the breath out of me. I'd have to ride it out.

"Bitch." Roy suddenly charged downriver, then abruptly turned upstream to double back over the boat's wake. Bucking up till airborne, the boat crashed with jolts—*Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!* I yelped every time, forcing my eyes closed to keep from crying.

“Oh, Bub, she doesn’t like it rough. She likes it smooth and even.”

Bubba stood on his seat—bracing himself against the boat’s windshield with one hand, “Hot Damn” held sky-high in the other—whooping like he was riding a bronco.

“Me?” Roy laughed. “I like a woman that wants it hard so I can pump away.” He swerved to catch the waves. “Yeah, a woman who likes it hard.”

Bubba called from his perch, a drunken grin widening across his face. “Come on, honey, get naked like me.”

I felt mute and filthy. The river water sloshed across the deck, washing over my hands and legs, and soaking my shorts as Roy swerved up and downstream in a nauseating Möbius strip, eliminating any sense of moving toward land.

While Bubba’s voice faltered into crackling hoots and hollers, vanishing more often into raspy whispers, the riverside cabins tucked behind overgrown willows reemerged. At the sight of them I swallowed the scream lodged at the back of my throat. Roy aimed toward shore where lawn mowing, gardening, and barbeques came to an abrupt halt at the sight of buck-naked Bubba waving. Another boat came into view with two potbellied men wearing fishermen vests. Bubba greeted them with an enthusiastic howl, albeit rusty and hoarse. He almost looked happy pumping that schnapps bottle to the sky. One fisherman raised a beer can. Bubba dug into the ice chest and traded the schnapps for a beer, letting loose yips of delight.

“Hey, isn’t that the Peterson’s boat up ahead?” Roy stood, straining to see downriver. A score of people sat aboard a pontoon beneath a green-striped awning—an idyllic scene if ever I’d seen one.

Bubba leaned over the windshield to see as well. “Sure looks like it.”

Roy pressed full-speed ahead while Bubba saluted his beer to the sky and let loose another war cry that lasted until we reached the Petersons. Roy burned a flashy circle around the pontoon, setting it to rock and causing its occupants, including what appeared to be a ninety-year-old woman, to hang on to their seats.

A sunburned fellow asked, “Hey, Bob. We were wondering who the heck that could be?”

A couple of women giggled and looked away—then back once more.

“How’s it going?” is all Bubba replied, as if standing stripped of all clothing was no stranger than shaking hands with them at the fairgrounds.

Another man asked, “What you guys drinking?” Laughter erupted from the pontoon crew.

“Got plenty of this.” Roy held up his beer.

“Schnapps, too,” Bubba chimed in.

“Hell, wish we had some of that schnapps.”

Roy turned to Bubba, “Where’s that other bottle?”

“Wait a minute.” Bubba dug around for the butterscotch schnapps. “We’ve got some for you.”

Roy maneuvered the boat close enough for the handoff. A few more pleasantries were exchanged and we were off. No one had spoken to me. I may as well have been invisible, a witness, certainly not a participant.

I edged myself off the floor and into a seat, the stiff breeze snapping tendrils of hair against my cheeks. Bubba renewed his yelping, inviting the same stares of disbelief as he had upstream. Perhaps I had it all wrong. Perhaps I was making a big deal of a simple prank. No one on the pontoon seemed concerned.

When we reached the ramp, Bubba volunteered to retrieve Roy’s truck and back it up to the boat.

“You sure you’re not too drunk to drive it down?” Roy asked.

“Positive.” He looked to his lap and mumbled, “Better get dressed first,” and grabbed his cutoffs. I sat wordless, watching him dress then hoist himself over the side of the boat. Not once did it occur to me to climb out after him. Roy’s eyes followed Bubba hobbling barefoot up the cement ramp, the boat engine still running to prevent the river from sweeping us back into its fold.

Roy turned to me. “Quick—” he leaned forward as if to whisper. “Just a hand job. Before he comes back.” He nervously peered up the ramp.

Too numb to move, I clung to my refusal to speak and instead watched a flotilla of grimy bubbles clasp fast to each other while spinning on the current.

He swiveled to face me, legs spread. “A hand job is no big deal.” The river lapped at the boat’s side, setting it to sway. I steadied myself by placing my hands firmly on the seat while Roy kept one hand on the steering wheel. “Bub’ll never see—”

Bubba stumbled against the side of the truck, took hold of the door handle and yanked. That failing, he widened his feet and grabbed with two hands.

“Give it to me... come on.”

Just then Bubba opened the door, staggering to steady himself before climbing inside. Roy turned back to see Bubba’s zigzag descent in his truck toward the river. “Jesus.” Roy half-stood, waving to keep Bubba from wandering off the far edge of the ramp. His hand popped up, stopping Bubba just short of the river.

Once on shore, I watched the river stretch and ripple like a vast expanse of undulating skin, while the men hitched the boat despite their inebriated state. Though I saw the sun slipping quietly toward the west, I said nothing. Roy swore under his breath when he noted the time. Speeding away down the dirt road past cabins we had boated by, I was confused when he suddenly parked beside a riverfront cabin where a dozen people stood eating and drinking beer around a barbecue pit. Beyond them the river flowed, setting me to wonder if I’d ever be free of it.

“We’re making a quick stop, some of my distant cousins.”

The breadth of my distress, still within the river’s reach, stuck in my gut, surprising me—I didn’t think there was a scrap of disappointment left.

Pats on the back from the men greeted Roy and Bubba. “Best entertainment we’ve had all day,” said one woman holding a grease-smearred paper plate in front of her perfectly round belly. “Were you all naked? That’s what it looked like from here.”

Rather than answer, Roy and Bubba laughed.

“Here, help yourself to some catfish. Fresh as can be. Caught this morning and fried in my special bread crumbs.” The round-bellied woman led us to a shady spot where picnic tables pushed together stood loaded with catfish, biscuits, potato salad, pickles, cherry pie, and plastic tubs of whipped cream.

But I wasn’t hungry. “Where’s the bathroom?”

The round-bellied woman looked at me for the first time, as if she hadn’t noticed me shadowing them, and pointed to the cabin. After closing the bathroom door my reflection held my red-rimmed eyes and troubled mouth adrift on a wasteland of pasty skin. *I’m drunk*, I realized for the first time. Muted conversations merged with a broadcast baseball game, seeping through the cabin wall and into

the bathroom. I turned the cold water faucet to full blast. Water splattered against the porcelain sides and onto my face until ripples of nausea forced me to turn to the toilet and heave. I must have stayed longer than I thought because Bubba knocked.

"We've got to go. Roy's in a rush to get to Danaher's place in Packwood."

I followed him out the cabin and without a word climbed into the pickup again.

Not a minute had gone by when Bubba was hit with a revelation. "That wasn't right, what happened today." A thin skin of dust clouded the windshield. I felt him trying to catch my eye. "I don't blame you if you're mad at me," he added.

"Ah, come on," Roy said. "All we did was have a little fun. Hell, if she can't take a little fun, she's not worth having. Isn't that right?"

Bubba shook his head. "Nah, she's done with me. I can tell."

"Jesus, Bub, have another beer. We had a hell of a good time."

Bubba uncapped the "Hot Damn," took a slug, then offered me the bottle.

"No." The road slanted, causing a subtle tremor in the pickup. "Thank you."

Bubba took a swig. "You're right, Roy. What, for the price of a couple of six packs and two bottles of schnapps...." The men took a moment to figure out the exact costs of booze plus gas. "Yep, for under fifty bucks we had fun today."

"You got it," Roy said. "Now there are rich folks that will spend a hundred times more and not have the fun we had today."

"I bet your wife would be interested in what you consider fun." I hadn't meant to say anything. Even though I kept a fixed eye ahead, I could feel Roy smile.

"Now, you know you must stick to our agreement—remember?—what happens in the boat, stays in the boat." He patted my knee. "You gave your word."

It was like a slap in the face. He knew how the day would unfold and had read my gullibility with the same ease as he read a field of corn. I ached for the turn of the key to my front door, the hush of neglect from my desk.

When we arrived at Danaher's farm, I stood outside the pickup, aware only of my powerlessness to get home, yet within ten miles of it. Bubba stood an awkward distance away. Now and then he picked

up a piece of gravel and pitched it toward a cornfield. “Hey, Bub,” Roy shouted from the doorway, “how about you drive my pickup home; I’ll be along later?”

Relieved to be given the task, Bubba hopped to and started up the truck. Fear of further delay (how many times already had I persuaded myself to ride it out?) forced me to climb in when Bubba called out, “Ready?” Bouncing along gravel roads, he pulled off to the dirt shoulder and leaned out the window. “See the tags at the end of the rows?” For the first time I noticed creases in the back of his sun-browned neck and the fine lines of white flesh tucked inside. “Those are the male species. The next four rows are female.”

I nodded. It was all I could do.

Contrite once more, Bubba mentioned with a sigh that I’d have nothing to do with him, although at one point he tried holding my hand, his thick, dense fingers wedged between mine unwittingly crushing them.

Eventually we made it to Roy’s farm with its silver silos, a couple of semis parked in front of the biggest barn I’d ever seen, John Deere tractors, combines, and numerous other buildings I couldn’t identify, all of which dwarfed the two-story farmhouse flanked by a swing-set and sand box. Collectively it spelled success—man’s dominion over nature—a place where Roy’s reign was indisputable.

“We ought to stop in and say hi.”

I didn’t bother to ask who we were to meet. Bubba led me into the barn that connected to a large, inner room adorned with multi-antlered buck heads, a kitchen in one corner, pool and poker tables lined up to the north side, a half-dozen couches lining the walls and assorted relatives sitting around a table in the center. Roy’s father stood in the kitchen area, tongs in hand, frying up a batch of catfish Roy had caught early that morning. I tried not to think about my river-drenched clothes and muddy feet. Bubba sat me at a table and introduced me to a half-dozen of Roy’s relatives, then brought me a plate of catfish with a scoop of fruit salad. I remained voiceless, an idiot unable to eat, drawn to Roy’s daughter playing on her grandmother’s lap while a wheelchaired old woman flirted with Bubba.

Roy joined us, freshly showered and wearing a creamsicle-colored polo shirt that matched his sneakers. “I’m ready to roll now.” Not once did he look my way.

His little girl told her grandmother she was going outside to play. I followed and together we made sand pies beneath a swing set until Roy's wife pulled up in the family van. Arms full of groceries, she gave me a glance that both confirmed how awful I looked and that she had a notion of what had gone on.

The last stop before Bubba drove me home was his farm, two miles down the dirt road. When we pulled in, his son called; I stood between Roy's and Bubba's trucks unsure what to do. With the sun about to set, mosquitoes swarmed. Wandering toward the house, I smelled the flowers before I saw them. Clusters of yellow lilies grew along the south edge of the fake-wood white deck attached to the front of the house. The closer I walked, the more obvious the disarrayed state of the garden became: dead weed stalks from former summers intermingled with the new, creating a snare that all but strangled the lilies. I knew the flowers must have been planted by his wife in an attempt to brighten, or civilize, the farm. A toppled statue, boyish and elf-like, lay half-buried in the weeds, as well as a rusted garden trowel and moldering garden gloves. *A wasteland*, I couldn't help thinking, a morass festering beside Bubba's plastic deck, which was void of lawn chairs or table or any sign that he used it.

I seized a lily stem and snapped it, my fingers instantly slick with its translucent juice. Hundreds of lilies remained despite the encroaching weeds. I knelt and began breaking stems as near to the ground as I could, collecting them in the crook of my arm like a parade queen. It wasn't polite to pick from a stranger's garden without asking, but that didn't stop me. Their sweet perfume and arching petals, bold and fresh, goaded me on. I tore stem after stem, needing more than an armful. I wanted to fill every vase in my house with the lilies. I had earned them.

"Come inside for a minute."

Bubba stood towering over me, my knees pressing into the matted weeds. He didn't say anything about the lilies.

"Please," he insisted. "I want you to see my house."

Cradling the lilies, I followed him through a door leading to the garage. The smell of dog shit permeated the garage the moment we entered, though I couldn't see any evidence due to the piles of clothes on the cement floor.

"This is where I keep the key, in case you ever need to know."

He reached inside a discarded hole-worn sneaker and removed the house key, unlocked the door and entered the kitchen. Two steps inside, I stopped. Bubba walked through a narrow path lined with garbage waist-high. Black plastic bags, piled one atop the other, flooded every living space except the narrow channel he moved along. He continued through what must have been a dining room, followed by what must have been a living room. I glanced over the chaos, unable, unwilling to move on. Instead, I found myself consumed with the kitchen muddle: cardboard boxes and papers heaped over garbage bags, clothes, dirty paper plates—hundreds of them, wadded napkins. Other jumbo-sized plastic bags bulged with—what? He stopped at the far end of the house and turned around.

“Last time it was cleaned was four years ago. My sisters came in, it was after my wife killed herself, and they cleaned.”

“I’m sure they would be willing to do it again.”

“They’ve offered—”

I stared at him, purposely blurring the edges of my peripheral vision, unwilling to identify specific items Bubba was unable to either discard or put away. Here, I realized, was a man adrift, lost to himself, his privation far worse than my sorry-assed trauma that day.

“—But I haven’t taken them up on it.”

He started back, stepping one foot in front of the other so as not to disturb the black walls of garbage threatening to cave in at each bend. Before reaching the kitchen, he waded into another room.

“This is the bedroom.”

He didn’t turn on the light, though from where I stood I could make out a mattress floating in a similar sea of disorder. Whatever window the room may have had was shuttered. *A black hole.* Any light once there had long ago disappeared. I shivered in my half-dressed vulnerability.

He rummaged around the bed, as if to clean up, but it was hopeless.

“Come and see.”

“I’m not moving,” I said.

“I spent three years on the couch after she left before I slept in here again.”

Without meaning to, my eyes sought out the living room couch. A depleted, sorry, orange and green plaid thing, it retained Bubba’s misery with every rise and fall of its cushions. It didn’t occur to me

at the moment that if I had seen his house first—before the river ride—I might have cried.

The next morning, vase by vase, I dumped the lilies into the garbage can wedged between my backyard fence and house.

He called a couple of times, once to ask if I wanted to go for a ride on his Harley. Another time to see if I would join him and other local farmers on a bus ride to tour a slaughterhouse his feed company operates in Missouri. As the months passed, however, I wondered about Bubba and the court case regarding the hog shed he built. Autumn descended on the Midwest, and daily I watched monstrous combines harvest the corn and soybean fields. By Thanksgiving my curiosity won out and I called.

“I settled out of court,” he said. He wasn’t happy about it. Settling set a bad precedent for other farmers. “Cost me over fifty thousand. My attorney screwed me.”

Bubba confessed he had thought about calling during the past months, “you know, to go out for a margarita or something. I figured you were too busy, though. I didn’t want to bother you.” Twenty minutes later we were talked out with no plans to see each other again.

Winter bullied its way hard and fast into Iowa and, hurrying home early one afternoon in December, I ended up in a ditch less than a mile from Bubba’s place. Cell phone reception was impossible from the bottom of the ditch, so I crawled out of the car and started walking home. A small white truck zipped by, its trail of dusty snow kicking up from behind blinding me temporarily—I wouldn’t have recognized him if he hadn’t turned around. I had forgotten how dazzling his smile could be. “Need some help?” was all he said.

Two hours later, after aborted attempts to haul my car out, he called Roy. But Roy didn’t answer his cell, which was just as well since a tow truck showed up. I offered to take Bubba out for a drink. But he’d have none of it.

“Nope. Nope.” He shook his head. “That’s what friends are for.”

I thought about making a batch of cookies and dropping them off at his house, but Christmas loomed and I let it slide.