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*What Coal Tastes Like*

Slavko was waiting around for repairs to the dragline when one of the men wandered to the edge of the bluff, picked up a small chunk of coal and popped it into his mouth like a plug of tobacco. It was the second shutdown in Slavko's five days at the mine, and already he knew to cringe when the machinery slicing sky and earth around them became still.

Alarms blared. Repair crews arrived. The men gathered by the huge tires of a truck and fell into the coughs, sighs and mutters that counted for conversation. This mumbling seemed to sustain them, affirm their agreement on some point. Slavko couldn't recognize much of it. His English was good, but it was official English, buying-a-train-ticket English, nothing that helped him out on the gashed earth of the Rock Springs Mining Company. He stood off to the side and watched the man sucking on coal.

Burt? Ned? Al? Slavko tried to remember. The man crouched at the edge of the bluff, away from the others, resting his elbows on his knees and touching his palms together, as quiet as the steel cables and pulleys that towered over their heads. He was on the short side, with a heavy build. Slavko thought that must be why he held his crouch without a waver; low center of gravity. Art, that was his name. On Slavko's first day the man had shaken his hand and introduced himself, the only one to do more than nod.

The shutdown lasted about an hour—not bad, the men observed. Another alarm sounded, and the dragline rumbled back to life. The rest of the day, Slavko kept glancing at Art's left cheek pulsing gently over the bulge. When he spat, he arced the output neatly through his front teeth and propelled it some distance away, where it disappeared among the general grayness on the ground.

"Just sucked on it, like a candy," Slavko told Drazen and their father that night. Drazen reported that a man had done the same thing in their part of the mine. But for Slavko, the act would forever belong to Art.

A month earlier their nearly three years as refugees had ended on a boat from Naples to New York City. There, they met up with their sponsor, a barely known relative who had arranged jobs for them out west. Slavko wished the relative had arranged jobs for them in New York. He liked New York, its hugeness. On their one free day before catching the train out to Wyoming, Slavko had herded them to the top of the Empire State Building. It was an overcast day, but Slavko didn't care, as others on the observation deck evidently did, that they couldn't see all the way to the Poconos. He stared down at the valley of skyscrapers spreading out around them and knew at once that he'd much rather disappear into a tiny cell in one of those massive buildings than some remote coal mine.

Waiting for the elevators back to ground level, he turned vehemently to his father: They should stay in New York. They could find work. There was excitement here. After an adolescence of war, was a little excitement so bad? They should stay, sink into the throngs. What did they want out west, so far from life and people? His father wouldn't hear of it. Right now they needed jobs, he said, real jobs, not the possibility of jobs. Their relative had worked hard for them. They couldn't just change their minds like ungrateful boors. Slavko didn't argue. The one thing they would not do was separate. They descended the eighty-six floors in silence.

The next day, their sponsor loaded them onto a train. They never heard from him again. Four days later the train belched them into Rock Springs at six in the morning. The mine hired them by noon.

They fell into ten-hour shifts and seizing back muscles. It was October 1948. At first, they walked the three miles to work, trudging silently through the smoky early hours, half-sick with sleep, no noise except the light clink of their lunchbox handles and the crunch of gravel under their boots. The sky paled as they walked, giving shape to the black buttes that jutted up from the gouged landscape. Exhaust pipes of passing pickup trucks coughed into the emptiness.

Slavko hated it. No one else was on foot. Heading west on the train, Slavko's queasiness had grown with the ever-greater spaces between things. Anything that existed seemed obliged to explain itself. *What are you doing here?* Every morning he ached anew over leaving New York. Musty subways sounded just fine to Slavko. He'd had his fill of walking along chilly roadsides in the dark. From

their first day in Wyoming, Slavko insisted that the minute they had enough money, they buy a car, that it be their very first major purchase. He insisted several times a day, as though his father and Drazen were not in total agreement on the subject.

“We should be able to save enough before winter,” Slavko said one morning in their second week, lagging behind his father and brother on their way to work. “We each put in half our wages, don’t forget.”

“You would let us forget?” his father said.

“They haven’t even paid us yet,” Drazen pointed out.

“But when they do,” Slavko said.

When they do, they agreed.

They turned onto the half-mile road leading up to the mine. Here, they reflexively cupped their hands over their eyes to guard against the stinging, dusty air. Slavko blew his nose and crammed the handkerchief back into his pocket, no longer fascinated by the gritty result.

A pickup truck passed them, slowed, and pulled off onto the shoulder. They looked down and kept walking, hoping the truck would leave before they drew up beside it.

“That you, Slavko?”

Straining his eyes against the irritating air, Slavko looked up and saw Art hanging out the window and wagging his thumb back toward the truck.

“Hop in,” Art called.

They half-walked, half-trotted to the truck. Slavko got in front next to Art while Drazen and their father climbed wordlessly into the bed.

“Thank you,” Slavko said.

Art studied Slavko’s father and brother in the rearview mirror. “There’s room up here. Don’t have to haul them around like a cord of firewood.”

Slavko stepped back out and brought his father up front. Drazen stayed in back. Normally, as the younger brother, Slavko would have been relegated to the windy, cold seat, but it was understood that since the ride was somehow Slavko’s doing, he claimed the warmth of the cab. There was no need to discuss any of this.

Art, however, thought it heartless to leave a man out in the bed on a chilly morning. He pounded on the rear window and motioned

impatiently for Drazen to come inside. Drazen smiled hard and shook his head. "Not far," he shouted, waving in the direction of the mine entrance.

Art turned around. "Suit yourself." He released the brake and eased onto the road. "You walking every day?"

"We don't have the car," Slavko said. "Soon." He nodded firmly.

They quickly figured out that they lived two blocks away from each other, their company houses exactly alike. Art leaned forward a little to talk around Slavko's father, who sat furiously still between them, staring straight ahead. Of the three of them, Slavko's English was the best, so talking usually fell to him. Slavko guessed his father would have preferred to ride out back with Drazen.

"As long as we're on the same shift, happy to give you all a ride," Art said. "Gotta get yourself a car, though."

"Soon." Slavko looked at the black metal lunchbox on his lap.

"Might be able to fix you up when you're ready. My idiot brother-in-law north of here is looking to sell a year-old DeSoto, pretty nice."

Slavko thanked him. He glanced from Art to his dad and back to Art. They looked about the same age, late forties, though Art could be older. His dad's face certainly wore more years than it'd seen. All their faces did. At nineteen, Slavko was the youngest on his work crew, but if anyone had figured it out they never teased him about it. He guessed he looked as old as they did.

"So where you all from?" Art asked.

"Europe," Slavko said automatically.

Art chuckled lowly. "We're not all as stupid here as we look. *Where* in Europe?"

"Croatia." Slavko had the feeling he should apologize, but he didn't know for what.

"That's part of Yugoslavia, right?"

Slavko confirmed this, annoyed, as he knew his father was, that here their country was only known, if it was known at all, as part of something else, the way Wyoming was merely a part of the United States. Slavko and Drazen and their father had never thought of Croatia this way but didn't feel like explaining why it was wrong.

"Unlucky place to be, Europe, last ten years." Art swung past the gate and into the parking area. "Hell, longer'n that."

Looking out at the blackened peaks receding into the seam of gray sky and gray earth, Slavko thought that there are terrible places and then there are nice places that terrible people come to and ruin.

Art drove them home that day and honked in front of their house the next morning, but they'd already left on foot. Slavko had argued for waiting on Art, but his father overruled him. They must not be even a minute late for work, not with talk of layoffs crackling among the men. Slavko reminded him that they'd only just been hired. Why would the mine hire them only to turn right around and lay them off? And wasn't it just as important for Art to be on time? His father chopped his hand through the air. They left.

Art caught up with them a half mile out. He frowned as they clambered into the same positions as the day before. "I said I'd give you a ride. Christ it's depressing to see you walking along the road like that." He tossed a blanket out back to Drazen.

Slavko and Art fell to eating lunch together, companionable half hours that were, at least on Slavko's part, mostly wordless. Art alternately kept up a line of talk or sat silently, focusing on a far mesa as he bit into his sandwich. His unpredictable moods puzzled Slavko, but he didn't mind them. Out on the ripped-apart land, Slavko's voice either vanished under the wail of machinery or boomed into a sudden silent moment, as though his accent had stopped the world. His English was functional, but he had been a smart boy before they left home—too smart, his father would holler when he caught him reading a book when the cows needed milking. Slavko wanted to speak effortlessly, automatically, and he couldn't yet. He was grateful for a half-hour break from the exertion of trying.

When they finished eating, Art usually snapped a piece of coal into his mouth like an after-dinner mint. Slavko could not bring himself to ask Art why he did this. He didn't trust himself to phrase it delicately, and he didn't want to upset their easy quiet. In the darkest pits of his flight with his father and brother, they'd gone days without food. They'd eaten grass and chewed on branches to calm their grinding stomachs. But that was desperation. And at least they'd eaten something *natural*, which Slavko could not think of coal as being, no matter that he spent his days taking it directly from the earth. Here, the landscape was exposed, dug up, perhaps even bleak, but it wasn't desperate. The people weren't desperate. It plagued Slavko that Art would do something so toxic and unnecessary.

Gradually, Slavko learned about other immigrants in Rock Springs. Ukrainians and Turks, and the Poles who had built the Catholic church that Slavko, Drazen and their father attended spottily. The Chinese, Art told him, had been around since the last century, wandered over from California once they finished the railroads. And there were other Croatians. Slavko felt deeply ambivalent about this. What good was just a little of your homeland, a pebble pocketed after an earthquake? Drazen, though, clung to them. Most nights after work he went to their de facto club, a couple of wobbly tables and chairs behind the pool table in the back of a tap room.

Now and then Slavko joined them for a few shots of someone's homemade pear brandy. The brandy gave way to bellowing against communism and against Franklin Roosevelt, which gave way to pained stories about vanished relatives, which gave way to bellowing about buying land for a club of their own. Their shouts sometimes broke out over the mumbling, dusty men playing pool and drinking at the front of the bar. Slavko noticed their disapproving glances. He told the group to keep it down or keep it in English. They did neither. It felt too good to let loose in their native tongue, without stutter or pause, the sweet violence of a voice that matched the intensity of their emotions. Slavko himself got caught up in it sometimes. Other times, he heard his language the way others in the bar heard it, as a blunt-edged intrusion.

By early December they had, not easily, saved up eight hundred dollars for a car. On a Saturday morning, Art drove Slavko up to his brother-in-law's sheep ranch. When the rancher stepped out to meet them, Slavko felt the jolt of encountering his first real American cowboy. Curve-legged and taciturn, right out of the few Hollywood westerns they'd shown at the refugee camp. Slavko didn't expect regular people to look like cowboys, but he'd thought there must be some tucked around somewhere in this enormous land. Art's brother-in-law answered his expectation like a casting call. Spurs jingled on his black snakeskin boots, the toes of which came to a point better suited to housing a spear than a human foot. It was a cold day, but the cowboy wore only jeans and a blue shirt with red piping down the sleeves. He walked slowly, his face half-hidden under the tilt of his ten-gallon hat, black with white and red

embroidered curlicues around the rim. Slavko stared at the dips and curves of the hat, entranced. It was as though a splendid, nude woman were curled on top of the cowboy's head.

The DeSoto was parked outside the garage, which stood well behind the house, atop a slight rise in the land. As they walked up the gravel driveway, the car loomed into view. It was sky blue with white darts along the side panels, bulbous and gleaming, long as a horse and wagon, magnificent against the empty gray sky.

"There she is," the cowboy said. "Have yourself a look."

Slavko opened the heavy door and slid inside. He ran his hands over the wheel, encased in the same white leather as the seats. He skated his fingers across the polished wood housing the instrument panel. He gently wiggled the gearshift. He spun the shiny radio dial. He breathed in the fragrance of leather. Then he got out and slowly circled the car, dragging a knuckle along the sparkling blue surface, pausing to check his reflection in the chrome fender. It was a hell of a car. It was one hell of a beautiful American car.

The cowboy popped the hood. The engine lay before Slavko as unfathomable as a brain.

"I would like the car," Slavko said.

The two men turned to him and blinked.

"You don't want to try her out?" the cowboy said.

Slavko shook his head. "I like the car."

Art frowned. "Oughta try her out, Slavko."

The whole of Slavko's driving experience amounted to a few hours atop a tractor his family had shared with a neighboring farm. But he saw the cowboy shoot Art a glance from under his unbelievable hat—*This boy an idiot?*—so he climbed into the car.

He killed the engine three times. The fourth time it caught, and then he was bumping intently down the driveway. At the first curve, he turned the wheel too far and veered up onto the grass. By the next curve he had more of the feel of it. At the road, he threw the car into reverse and backed up until he grew dizzy from looking over his shoulder. He pressed the brake with his left foot and understood he would never make it all the way back up in reverse. Going on nothing but instinct, he furiously cranked the wheel, spun the car around and somehow ended up with the front end actually pointing toward the garage. He stepped more daringly on the gas; the car's horsepower surged into his legs. Grinning in spite of him-

self, he pulled up to Art and the cowboy, slamming the brakes with a gravel-spraying flourish.

"You never got out of second," Art complained. "Don't you want to take her out on the road? Open her up a little?"

"Thank you. I would like the car."

"Well, suit yourself," the cowboy said. "I'm asking eleven hundred."

Art stepped forward before Slavko could say anything.

"Hold on, Wayne. Why should this boy pay eleven for used goods when a brand new one is only fifteen?"

"Now there, Art. This car's in great shape. One year old. Good motor, you saw yourself. Good tire tread. If Marian were around I wouldn't even be selling it."

"Yeah, and when she did drive it, it was all over these pot-holed ranch roads. Car might be a year on paper but it's ten, at least, on the inside."

They settled on nine fifty. Art would loan him the hundred and fifty Slavko lacked, a favor Slavko accepted with great inner anguish. He didn't care to stand any more beholden. Art had been giving them rides to work and around town for two months now, and Slavko guessed Art was as eager as he was for that arrangement to come to an end.

The cowboy hung onto the DeSoto to get the paperwork in order, so Slavko rode back to Rock Springs in Art's truck, unresolved about handing over eight hundred dollars and leaving with nothing.

"Pretty good deal you got there," Art said. "Eleven hundred, hell. You're smart not to have taken it. Listen. My sister run that ranch after they got married—the only one in our family with any head for business—but now the place is going to hell. Couple sheep wander off every week, never come back. Wayne's too tight to hire enough hands to run a decent operation, keep an eye on the investment. Now he's behind on bills. Selling her car'll catch him up for this month and then he'll be right back in it. How he does everything, short-term. Probably sell all the furniture next."

*Her car.* "It is not the cowboy's car?"

"Cowboy?" Art let loose a booming laugh. "Slavko, there are damn few cowboys left in this state and you can be sure Wayne ain't one of 'em. No matter how big a hat he wears." He sighed. "No, it's



his car, too. They are legally wed, I'm sorry to say. But she was the one who picked it out and drove it. It was hers."

"Your sister is"—Slavko searched for the softest word that would cover all scenarios of death, divorce and disappearance—"gone?"

The crease across Art's forehead deepened. He cracked the window and spat expertly through the gap. Cold air whistled into the cab. "She's in a hospital in Casper." He closed the window. "My other sister's in Casper, and she wants Marian near. They were always real close."

Art and Slavko rolled out of sheep country and back to the gashed land closer to Rock Springs. Slavko didn't like knowing that he'd gotten a great deal on a car that belonged to a sick woman. Maybe the cowboy was asking too much, but Art had, in effect, bargained down his own ill sister. Slavko didn't like that, either. But they needed a car. Slavko wanted *that* car. Art knew Wayne's situation as well as theirs. Maybe he thought theirs was the more needy.

Around them, dark buttes lay scattered like buckets of black sand kicked over and forgotten. Slavko was sorry Art's sister was sick, he was sorry she was married to a moron, but torment was endless, and Slavko wasn't sure what room was left in the world for remorse.

The next week the mine closed for a day because a man had gotten crushed under a conveyor belt. Not having known the man, Slavko took the unexpected afternoon off to meet Wayne at the tap room for the official transfer of the car. Art agreed to take Drazen and their father, who had worked in the same section with the dead man, to the funeral with him, dropping Slavko off at the tap room on the way. They'd meet up after the service, and Slavko would take his brother and father home in their new car. After days of Slavko's grand descriptions, his father and brother were about to see the DeSoto for the first time, and because of this, the mood in Art's truck on the way to the bar was decidedly less than somber.

"Damn idiot," Art said of the deceased. "Knows it ain't safe to work alone. State's up there now, investigating. Union reps, too. There'll be some fines against the company, then the company'll lay off some men to make up the loss. We haven't had a death in two, three years."

Outside the tap room, next to a battered gray pickup and a motorcycle two-thirds rust, the sky blue DeSoto commanded the center of the parking lot like a prom queen. Drazen and his father were out of Art's truck before it stopped. They circled the DeSoto warily, as though someone would come out at any second and yell at them to scram. Slavko, flush with ownership and good taste, opened the driver's door and told his dad to get in. Drazen slid in on the opposite side. They sat without closing the doors, cautiously touching and stroking things. Slavko, fervently wishing his brother and father didn't look so bewildered in fine surroundings, protectively closed the doors.

"My God, I do believe he waxed it." Art bent over, practically touching his nose to the hood. "That's a first, Slavko. That is a first right there."

Slavko's father got out of the car and walked over to him. With one hand he squeezed Slavko's shoulder and with the other he patted his son's heart.

As they drove off with Art, Slavko turned toward the bar, chest tingling.

Usually he came in the back, so he'd never noticed the red neon martini glass and letters—"Tap Room"—flashing weakly in the front window. He labored to open the heavy wood door, and when he pushed it closed behind him, it completely sealed out the mid-day sun.

Wayne sat right up front, facing the door. He'd chosen a table flush against a window covered with wood shutters. Still, he wore his hat pulled down nearly to his nose, as though he were standing out on a treeless mesa. This time it was an ordinary brushed-brown hat. Slavko wondered how many hats he owned and why he wore the fancy one on the ranch, in the middle of nowhere, and the dull one in town where there actually were some people.

Wayne had the papers stacked in front of him. In five minutes the title was exchanged and the keys were in Slavko's pocket. He wanted to run right out and drive somewhere, but Wayne settled back in his seat and ordered a pitcher of beer. Slavko understood that Wayne expected them to pass the time until Art returned to drive him back up to the ranch, and he felt bound by his hospitality. After all, Wayne had driven all the way into town for this. Slavko looked around the bar. He'd never sat up in the front part. The only

other customers were a few solitary men sighing over their glasses. Miners, probably, not knowing what else to do with themselves on a day off. The alcove behind the pool table was dim.

Pear brandy was more familiar to Slavko than beer, which put him in mind of spoiled bread, especially American beer. It took a few sips to defeat the urge to gag. But soon an easy glow spread across his belly and limbs, and Slavko warmed to his situation—sharing a beer with an American cowboy in the American west, in a dark empty bar in the middle of the afternoon when he would otherwise be at work. Soon he would drive home in his magnificent American car. All because a man he didn't know had died on the job. Slavko couldn't muster the quiet reflection he knew this fact required. The world was enormous. There was no accounting for where and when you found yourself; a year ago, they had been in a tent near Naples. Art was wrong. The dead man wasn't an idiot. He was just doomed.

Wayne pushed back his hat to reveal a pale swath of freckled forehead, ringed by wisps of tea-colored hair. He tapped the papers lying between them.

"That car there," he said, "belongs to my wife."

Slavko carefully set down his glass.

"Belonged, I meant to say. Past tense." He laughed. His teeth were yellow and spaced far apart.

Slavko nodded once. "Art said."

"Art said, did he." Wayne reached up and hooked his hat on a stray nail in the window frame. Then he pushed his chair back, stretched out his legs, and stared down into his beer glass, resting on the low mound of his stomach. Hatless in drab gray clothes and ordinary work boots, he didn't look anything like a cowboy.

"She's dying. Did he tell you that?" Wayne scooted his chair in and brought his face closer to Slavko's. "Let me put it to you simple: I didn't want to sell that car. Art talked Marian into it. Convinced her I would go bankrupt otherwise. Just like he convinced her, little by little, that I didn't know how to run the ranch. Wouldn't doubt if he even convinced her not to get pregnant."

Slavko understood enough of what Wayne was saying to know to stay quiet and keep his motions small. He recognized a man on the brink of something. The important thing was not to push or inflame. Just stay quiet. If all Wayne did was seethe, everything

would be all right. Because no matter what, Slavko would not give the car back. It was theirs.

“She’s all worried about my financial security after she’s gone. Says, ‘You got the truck. You don’t need the cost of two vehicles.’ She never thought, and Art sure as *hell* never thought, that I might want to keep the car because it was hers.”

He would not give it back. For two months they had drunk powdered milk, washed their clothes in the bathtub instead of at the Nice ‘n’ Clean, lit candles to save on the electric bill. Slavko had signed the papers. It was their car. *His* car. He would hear out the sad, sputtering cowboy. He would sit with him until Art came to drive him back to the ranch. And then Slavko would leave as fast he could.

“I’ll buy it back,” Wayne said. “Fifteen hundred. Give you five hundred right now, drive down tomorrow with the rest.” He folded his arms around his beer glass and presented Slavko with the unhatred view of his plain, fallen face.

Slavko took a tidy sip of beer. He felt certain that right now his father and brother were thinking about the car they would drive home in and not paying attention to the eulogy for their fallen co-worker. He couldn’t help turning and looking at the door, in the direction where the car sat out in the parking lot. He also couldn’t help calculating how much of fifteen hundred they might have left after buying another, more reasonable car.

“After she’s gone,” Wayne said, his voice thin and wavering, “I’ll have nothing.”

The door opened then, cleaving the dimness with a slab of light, out of which stepped Art, followed by Drazen and his father, smiling apologetically.

“You know how crowded that church was?” Art pulled a chair over to their table and sat on it backwards. “Had to stand outside, couldn’t hear anything. If we had gotten there earlier, sure, but we decided it wouldn’t insult the dead or the family if we left early.”

Slavko’s father and brother stood a few steps behind Slavko’s chair in identical poses—heads slightly bowed, eyes looking up, fists punched into the side pockets of their jackets. Slavko leaned back, they leaned in, and a low, furious conference that could only happen in their own language took place. His father wanted to go back to the church. It wasn’t right that they skipped out early, these

people should know what it means not to bury your own dead. No, Drazen said, the service is almost over, they'd just look like fools coming back at the end. Slavko interjected that the cowboy had just offered fifteen hundred dollars to buy back the car, so maybe they shouldn't leave yet. His father said, That car is too much for us. Drazen said, What cowboy?

A door opened again, this time in the back, and the area behind the pool table went from gray to yellow. Three of the Croatian regulars started moving chairs together. One dropped a brandy bottle on a table. Drazen and their father straightened up. One of the men waved. They told Slavko they'd just be over there, come get them when he was ready to leave. Slavko heard calls of *Bog, bog!* as his father and brother joined the men in back.

"Wayne here's been telling me how he was going to swindle that car back out of you," Art said when Slavko returned to their conversation.

"Swindle?"

"Art," Wayne said pleasantly, "when was the last time you got laid? 1938? And with all those Samoan girls giving it away. What a shame."

"What is 'swindle'?" Slavko demanded.

"Cheat," Art said. "He don't have fifteen hundred dollars. His own wife told me. 'Art,' she said, 'don't let that dumbass husband of mine do some dumbass thing.'"

"Your lovely sister," Wayne said, "would never use such language." He raised his beer glass high. "Slavko, enjoy the car. I take back my offer to you of a six-hundred dollar profit. I forsake the one last memento of my dying wife. I hope it brings you years and years of dependable transportation."

"I'll drink to that." Art downed the rest of his beer.

More Croatian words spiked out up from the back of the bar, where the men leaned together around a bottle of brandy. Slavko turned to Wayne. "This weekend, I have appointment to get the insurance." Slavko thought Wayne would at least like to hear that he was being responsible with the car.

"That so?" Wayne sounded bored. "You got your driver's license already then?"

"Driver license?"

“You know, little card?” Wayne formed a rectangle in the air with his hands, as though he were holding a sandwich. He explained that a license was required to drive legally in the United States of America.

Slavko rose up in his seat and patted his pants pockets. “Don’t think I have,” he muttered.

“You’d know if you did.” Wayne put his hat on. Slavko looked helplessly at Art.

Art shrugged. “I thought you just *knew* about getting a license. Don’t worry. There’s a driving school out Hamelin Road.” He yanked his thumb over his shoulder as though the school were directly behind his chair. “They’ll set you up.”

“How long it takes?” Slavko asked.

“Oh, two, three months. Not long.”

Wayne pushed his chair back and clapped his hands together once. “Well, Art, no reason to prolong the misery. I got to drive up to Casper in the morning, so let’s get going.” He pulled his hat down over his face. Art stood up and felt for his keys.

Slavko grabbed Art’s wrist. “Can I drive home without the license?”

“Oh, sure! Just don’t get caught.” Art’s laugh backed up from a rusty pipe. He and Wayne left, dropping a shank of light into the bar as they went out the door.

Slavko tipped his beer glass into the pitcher. He mashed the sopping paper coasters into a ball and returned the chair Art had dragged over. Then he stood, turned toward the back of the bar and raised his arm to beckon his father and brother. A solitary drinker in white overalls yelled, “You may *not* have permission to go to the bathroom!” and exploded into spittled laughter.

The sky had grayed over while they’d been in the bar. A few morose snowflakes were flitting down. Slavko’s father got in the front seat, and Drazen climbed in back. Slavko walked around to the driver’s side, gripping the title papers against his chest. He wasn’t even a citizen yet. Could he get a license before he was a citizen? The library had given him a card after he showed them a piece of mail. They hadn’t asked for citizenship. Or a license.

His father knocked on the window. Slavko looked through the glass at his father and brother, their faces turned up like goldfish in a bowl. His father was waving at him to get in.

The snow came down harder. Slavko had never driven in snow. Now he was about to drive two miles in it, and in so doing commit an illegal act. He sagged against the car, crushed by the simple, enormous wish to pass one day without complication. A single day when everything encountered was a thing understood, when he didn't have to claw out the words to buy a cup of coffee or describe how he'd like his hair cut, when the path to day's end was straight, bright and uncluttered.

People here, with their shiny boots and embroidered hats and filthy handkerchiefs, got to stay in their homes. Kids here got to finish school—without warning, and to Slavko's complete mortification, hot tears massed behind his nose.

He turned away from the car. He couldn't let Drazen and his father see him crying. None of them had cried since they left. Not once. Slavko hadn't cried when his father slapped him for looking back at their house, not when he walked past his school for the last time, not on that deathly hot day in the camp when only air wheezed out of the pump, because the British officers had closed the valve to scold the refugees for the waste of trickling cool water on their foreheads.

Slavko's tears came hard and silent. He covered his face with the papers and ignored the urgent knocking coming from inside the car.

When he looked up, the back door of the tap room was open and one of the Croatians, a man named Dujo, was crunching toward him across the parking lot. He wore a gray cap that said DJ's Gas and Service. Slavko could see that he was carrying Drazen's wallet. Slavko bent his head down, quickly wiped his eyes and took several deep breaths.

"You forgot this," Dujo shouted through the window. Drazen cracked open the door and accepted the wallet with a nod of thanks.

"That's the third time he's left the wallet on our table. Lucky for him I'm always there to return it." Dujo stepped slowly around the DeSoto, taking it in from grille to tailpipe. "Nice car, Slavko."

"My first time driving it." Slavko crammed the damp papers into his coat pocket.

Dujo jerked his head toward the car's interior. "They don't drive?"

Slavko shrugged.

Dujo had come to Rock Springs years ago, before the war. After quitting the mines, he'd opened a service station. Now he owned three. He had an American wife and kids who spoke English only. Slavko always had the feeling that, for some reason, Dujo liked him.

With his coat cuff, Dujo rubbed a clear spot in the veil of snow on the windshield. "You should come sit with us more, Slavko," he said, rubbing.

Slavko sighed. The cold air flamed the waffled ache in his chest. "I had to finish business for the car."

"Sit with us more," Dujo said. "It helps. You think it won't but it does." He patted Slavko's arm and walked back into the bar.

Slavko, Drazen and their father drove home without speaking, the crinkled papers on the dashboard. Warm air huffed from the defroster, but the windshield didn't completely defog. Slavko had to keep wiping it with his bare hand to see where he was going.

His last day in school, Slavko had glanced at his friend Stjepan's science test and copied an answer. He'd never cheated, ever, but he'd blanked on a problem and panicked. After school, he found out that the partisans had come that morning to their house. When his father would not declare allegiance, they took chickens, eggs, grain, coffee and jam. They were lucky, his father reasoned. Most others they just shot. They wouldn't be lucky a second time. When the partisans came back, probably that very night, the family would not be there.

Slavko didn't want to leave, but there was no time to think with his father barking at them to put on extra clothes and carry what they could in their pockets. A half hour before dark, Slavko wrote a note to his teacher: *Mr. K: On my test today I copied from S. the answer for the second-to-last question, the one about the circulatory system. I am sorry. Slavko.* He tucked the note into the fence behind the barn.

They set out into the March night, Slavko, Drazen, their oldest brother Presnan, and their father, leaving the cows on the pasture. They traveled back roads at night and hid in barns and empty buildings during the day. After a few days, Presnan met up with some friends. Over his father's hoarse pleas, Presnan went off with them on another route. It was the last they'd seen of him. In the refugee camp, they waited for word from, then just word of, Presnan. There



was not much more to do but wait. They lived in a putty-colored sea of tents thrown up in a shadeless field. Drazen tied his one shirt, a blue one, to their tent so they could identify it at night, coming back from the latrines.

They were fed soup and bread and potatoes, enough but not a lot. Slavko read the few books that circulated, worked on his English, allowed himself to wonder what had become of their cows, his note, his soccer ball, his two model airplanes, Stjepan, Presnan. Then he forced himself to stop wondering. Which brought his thoughts back to chicken and lamb, roasted with crispy skin, and the dark breads and sour cream cakes brought weekly by neighbor women who took pity on the man with a dead wife and three sons. Not hefty to begin with, Slavko slimmed into a gauntness that caved in his cheeks and sank his eyes beneath the awning of his brow. His dark hair shaded his skin like a black umbrella. He understood that he was sad to look at, even among permanently sad people.

Nearly two years in the camp, another nine months in temporary housing. It took forever, arranging for passage to the United States, sponsored by a great-uncle Slavko had never heard of. Every night, their father talked about their new life as though the boat would sail the next day. Slavko had no more faith that it would than that Presnan would show up. And who was this great-uncle? Why would he help? Why would anyone help anyone, when the world was an unsalvageable mess? But then one day it was happening. Slavko was boarding a boat and sailing away from Europe. It was so miraculous, he was almost ashamed.

After the new year Drazen left Rock Springs with four other young Croatians for factory work in Chicago. Some weeks later, Slavko's father was laid off. The double blow knocked his father profoundly out of sorts. Slavko reminded him that they could write and call Drazen any time and even visit. If it didn't go well for him, he'd come back. But Drazen's first letter reported no plans to do so. He found operating a stamping machine in a steel factory altogether preferable to working in a coal mine. Better pay, less loneliness. His second letter brought news that he'd met a nice Slovenian woman. Slavko's father grew inconsolable. First Presnan, now Drazen, gone. "Am I such a horrible father?" he asked Slavko with rheumy eyes.

Slavko said no, thinking with envy of Drazen's new life, his nice Slovenian woman.

His father recovered somewhat when he found a lady himself, a Rock Springs native named Vera. When Slavko first met her, she laid a palm on his cheek and said, "I'll be your mother, dear boy." He disliked her immediately. His father started spending nights away from home. Slavko pulled double shifts, catching grief from union reps whose crusade for more employees and less overtime Slavko was not helping. Most nights Slavko fell asleep on the couch, a book tented on his chest, the lamp shining into his face. Like an old man, he thought. Nineteen in straight years but ninety in wear. The odometer didn't tell the true distance traveled. Even his father got more action than he did. Once in a while Slavko thought about Wayne's fifteen hundred and had to steady himself against a pang of regret, which would be completely forgotten the next time the DeSoto came to life under his hands.

Slavko paid down his debt to Art five, ten dollars at a time. Most weeks he also managed to add a few bills to the shoebox under his bed. Until he got his license he still drove to work with Art, and thus learned that Art's sister was getting worse. Many nights, after dropping Slavko off at home, Art drove the four hours to Casper to see her, napped in the waiting room chairs and then headed back in the morning. He usually dozed now during lunch and dragline breakdowns. Slavko had to jostle him when it was time to go back to work.

One afternoon, while shoveling coal onto a truck, Slavko picked up a small piece and, turning away from the man working next to him, touched it to his tongue. His mouth and throat instantly seized up against the foreign grit. Slavko spat it onto the truck and wiped his tongue on his sleeve. At home he brushed his teeth for ten minutes, ate bread, gargled baking soda and lemon juice, but the taste stayed in his body until the next day.

Three evenings a week, Slavko went to driving school. At the end of February, he came home to find his license in the mailbox. Standing on the cement stoop, he cupped the license in his hand and inspected it. He did not expect the boyish thrill that ballooned in his chest. Over the months he'd used the car frugally, fretfully, for unavoidable errands only, poking along to attract no attention. Now he could really *drive*. Slavko crammed the license into his back

pocket and hurried into the house for his wallet. Five minutes later, he was gunning the engine, determined to follow whatever direction presented itself, now that the whole of Wyoming, the West, and North America lay legally within his reach.

He drove two blocks to Art's house. Art opened the door in his socks, wearing a clean version of the dirty work clothes Slavko wore himself, dark blue twill pants and a light blue shirt, untucked and unbuttoned to the chest, revealing a pallid gray undershirt.

Art peered past him out to the street. "Car looks good." He motioned Slavko inside. Slavko went straight to the living room, instinctively navigating the twin sibling of his own house. Crumbs had collected in the seams of the plaid sofa Slavko sat on. The edges of the coffee table looked as if they'd been gnawed on. An unshaded lamp glared in the corner of his eye.

The single exception to the general shabbiness was a deeply polished walnut liquor cabinet that gleamed in one corner. A bottle of whiskey and a single glass stood on the pulled-out serving board. Art withdrew a second glass and carried the glasses and bottle over to the coffee table. Even half empty, the fat bottle held a lot of liquor. As Art poured, Slavko announced that he'd gotten his driving license that day.

He hadn't even told his father about it. When he'd gone in for his wallet, expecting an empty house as usual, he'd gasped to bump into his father sitting on Drazen's bed in the room Slavko and Drazen used to share. He was holding a letter from Drazen urging them to come to Illinois.

"You won't understand until you leave," Drazen wrote, "how far away it is there."

Slavko grabbed the letter and rattled it in his father's face. "Let's go, Papa," he said vehemently. "Forget this mine. We can get better jobs."

His father took the letter back and set it on the bed beside him. "I can't do it again."

"We've only been here a few months. This place, it barely counts. Once more, then we'll stay for good."

His father shook his head. In a detached voice he explained that Vera wanted them to be married, and he supposed they should be. Her brother worked for the county road crew and could get him on there. Besides, Rock Springs was where the great-uncle knew to find

them, in case Presnan ever . . . He'd shrugged and smiled at Slavko, his loose skin folding around his eyes from above and below. An old man didn't have so many options, he'd said. "I stay here."

Art handed Slavko a glass. "To your license then." Slavko didn't really want to drink. He wanted to drive, far out of town. He wanted Art to ride along and direct him on the unfamiliar roads. He supposed that was why he came, but now that he was there he didn't know how to ask for this. Maybe Art was staying home to catch up on his sleep. Slavko was about to apologize for bothering him when he detected a delicious smell wafting from the back of the house.

"You are cooking?" Slavko pointed at the smell.

"Cherry pie. I'm planning to bring it to my sister. Hard to get her to eat anymore. Thought she'd like something sweet."

"I bother you, then."

"Nah. Stay 'til the pie's done. I'm hitting the road in a short while here."

Slavko eyed the half-empty whiskey bottle. "Wayne goes with you?" he asked, hoping Wayne would drive.

Art shook his head and sipped his drink. "Wayne's dead." He said this the same way he sucked coal, as though there were nothing at all remarkable about it. "Accident in his barn. Police aren't sure what happened. I know he stored propane in there. Wouldn't be surprised if one of the tanks rolled off a shelf and bashed him on the head. Goddamn idiot."

Slavko didn't know what to say, and Art didn't seem inclined to say any more. Silence rushed in around them. For the first time, it unnerved Slavko. It felt like his responsibility to break it, and with relief he remembered a piece of outstanding business he had with Art, although he had not meant to settle it tonight. He dug into his pocket, took out a twenty-dollar bill and set the bill on the table.

"What's that?" Art asked.

"The loan. Now I pay you one hundred fifty dollars."

Art leaned forward and looked curiously at the bill without touching it.

"Forget it," Art said.

"But I owe it."

"Forget it."

"No." Slavko was baffled and annoyed. Art had accepted every other payment without a word, just tucked the money into his

breast pocket. Those transactions had pleased Slavko. He was meeting his obligations, lessening his dependence on someone else. It was what men do. Now that he was this close he wasn't going to let Art wave off the conclusion, as though he'd just been humoring him all along.

Slavko pushed the bill closer to Art. "Take it."

"Look, Slavko, I don't even *remember* how much money I gave you."

"You don't remember?" Slavko's voice broke. "Every week I give you some almost."

"So you've paid back the lion's share. That's enough."

"I can pay all of it," Slavko insisted. "I don't need favors."

Art crumpled the bill and flicked it lazily at Slavko. The wad tapped him on his neck and dropped inside his collar, lodging between his work shirt and undershirt. Slavko groped around inside his collar, but the wad fell further down. He untucked his shirt and shook the bill out. Then he stood and whipped the tight ball down on the coffee table, sending it skidding across the floor. It came to rest underneath the liquor cabinet.

Art looked after it. "Well, that's where it's staying now."

"Good."

"Would have thought you'd need that yourself."

"We had a deal."

"Jesus, I'm trying to be nice, Slavko, give you a little bonus for paying up so prompt. But if you can't accept—" Art stopped, and in the same instant they detected a stench of hot fruit and scorched flour.

"The pie burns!" Slavko yelled.

Art galloped back to the kitchen, unleashing a wave of swear words that didn't stop until he dropped the smoking tin pan on the living room table next to the whiskey. He smacked away the smoke with oven-mitted hands.

Art declared it a goner just as the pie's latticed top collapsed, scattering black flecks over the dark red filling. He ripped off his oven mitts, threw them onto the couch and went into his bedroom. He returned with his coat and boots on.

"Tell you what." He buttoned his shirt, tucked it in, and picked up the bottle of whiskey. "Instead of that twenty, you drive me to see my sister. Tonight."

They were on a two-lane highway out of Rock Springs, the headlights vanishing in front of them. Slavko had never driven an empty road at night before, had never felt the lull of straight speed or the spread of blackness that pulled his thoughts to fill it. He found himself wondering about Art, why he lived alone and did he ever have a wife or kids and why he hated his brother-in-law so much. Slavko understood that he might never know these things. He decided he could accept those terms of friendship, but he wanted a few basic facts.

“Art, what is your family name?” He didn’t even know this much.

“You mean my last name? St. Lawrence.”

Slavko thought he’d heard wrong. He’d never known someone with a saint for a family name. Before he could ask again, Art wanted to know his last name.

“Jukic.” Slavko spelled it, explaining that there was no “y” in Croatian.

Then Art asked him how old he was.

“Nineteen. Twenty in May.” He glanced at Art, sunk low in the passenger’s seat. “You?”

“Thirty-seven.”

A decade younger than Slavko had guessed, but it was no surprise to him how a man’s age could have nothing to do with his face. In fact, the information wouldn’t have mattered to Slavko beyond mere curiosity if not for the one thing that the dropping of a decade suddenly made likely, the one thing Slavko had never even considered.

“You were in the war.”

Art sighed. “Signed up not a month after Pearl Harbor. I was almost too old; it was still early then. They were being selective. Later, of course, they were glad to have me.”

“You were in Europe?” Slavko whispered. He tried to lift Art out of this car, out of the coal mine, out of Wyoming, and deposit him into a town square exploding with shattering bricks and glass, onto a sunny field where men were executed, into the rubble of a seventeenth-century church. He couldn’t do it.

“Shipped out to the Pacific just in time for Midway.”

“Oh.” Slavko didn’t know much about the war in the Pacific. It was hard for him to think of it as the same war as his.

Art set his feet on the dashboard and pointed at them. “You mind?”

Slavko shook his head. The night was black. His throat was dry. The whiskey he’d drunk earlier fumed in his veins. Slavko was not entirely sure where he was.

“My dearly departed brother-in-law managed to get himself deferred. Bad knees, supposedly.” Art huffed. “Seeing as he can’t even keep himself alive on a ranch, I guess it was just as well. He’d be shooting us instead of the Japs. So, while every eligible man in Wyoming is gone, he moves in on my sister. Whose sweetheart before the war, a good buddy of mine, died at Normandy.” Art straightened a little. “They had a homecoming parade here. It was a pretty big crowd for Rock Springs. So there I was, up on a float, waving, and all these girls ran up. I kissed every one I could grab. And you know what? *Wayne* was kissing them! Like *he’d* been there! The girls didn’t know any better or didn’t care, but the guys who had been there, we cared.” Art’s cheek worked over his jaw, as though hunting for a piece of coal. “A parade, hell. Like all that stuff over there never happened. Pretty soon all the parades and celebrations were over and I went back to my old life.”

Slavko would always remember the dark drive to Casper as when he learned that to understand a country, you had to understand its prepositions. In this country, war was a thing you went *to* and, if you didn’t get killed, returned *from*. *Over there*, Europe, his home, you lived in war. War was everywhere; war was atmosphere; war swallowed you up or flung you out or left you broken but definitely, no matter what else, definitely left no old life to go back *to*. Slavko wished then that he had eaten some of his own home before he left, sucked on the dirt of their farm, blackened his insides with it. But there hadn’t been time.

Art returned his feet to the floor. He unscrewed the whiskey bottle and downed a long swallow. “Slavko, my sister doesn’t know about Wayne yet. That he’s dead. I haven’t told her. She’s pretty doped up most of the time. I mean, I may not tell her at all.”

Out on this blasted-out land, Slavko thought, a man could lose his footing so easily and disappear off a ridge. Or, like his father, run out of momentum before fifty and call this place home by default. But Slavko’s shoebox was filling with money. He had a brother in

Illinois, where factories were groaning for men. He had a car. He was still young. He'd go.

"She's going to die in a week or two," Art said. "The cancer is everywhere. She won't even know." Art lifted the bottle but didn't drink. "If it happened, say, a year ago, she at least could have gotten some use out of his life insurance money. A month from now, it would even be, I don't know, romantic." He pounded his fist on the leather seat. "To die so *stupidly* a few weeks before she does."

Slavko gently removed the whiskey bottle from Art's lap. He wanted to help. He wanted to believe that help was still possible, so he offered Art what he could—the warmth and protection of his car against the vast, unfurling country. He held the wheel steady for his friend and concentrated on the short funnel of light in front of them.