

ADAM HUNAUT

The Royal Flush Saga

Miranda Genet was the daughter of my next-door neighbor. She was a beauty. There's no other way to say it. Seventeen, blond hair, a round, young face so quick to smile. Twinkling eyes a color that makes me think of the ice on Lake Superior where Jigger and I used to go fishing every winter. When I was younger, I would have been smitten. But, geezer that I am (sixty next January), it was impossible for me to see her as anything but a child.

She was the sort of young person who makes you smile when you see her. Bright, ambitious, and good-looking, undoubtedly the cream of the somewhat stunted crop we produce in what we call the "north country," the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Her father, Jack Genet, would sometimes tell me, his voice swelling with pride, how she got top marks in math, how she planned to take the Advanced Placement test for French, or how she was reading *The Odyssey*, not even for a school assignment, just for fun. I had a firsthand demo of how smart she was when she showed me how to use the secondhand computer I'd bought so Jigger could send me e-mails from Iraq.

Her father was the town doctor, but Miranda's love was music. At odd times of the day you would hear the sound of a piano drifting from her house. The classical stuff I recognized vaguely from Interlochen Public Radio as Schubert or Chopin or one of those guys. Or there'd be jazz standards like "Ain't Misbehavin'" or "St. Louis Blues," tunes she would "just throw together," she told me one time, because she never played them the same way twice. "Hi, Mr. Nelson," she'd yell from her porch when she saw me drive the ol' septic truck into my driveway after a day of pumping tanks, and when I waved back she took it as an invitation to tell me about her day, how she had got a summer job at the soft-serve ice cream stand on US-2 where the silly high school boys (she was way too adult for *them*) visited her like puppy dogs, or what she planned to do when she graduated high school, beautiful hypothetical adventures of how she'd go away to college in places like Oberlin or maybe even Juilliard.

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I'd listen and smile with real pleasure to her cheerful and animated tale, told in a voice that was music in its own right. And every time I'd hear some geezer like me whining about "these kids nowadays" or how they feared for the future of America, Miranda would come to my mind and I wouldn't worry.

Late in June, I drove down to Flint to pick up Jigger at the airport there. He was finally back from the Gulf, finally discharged. When I spotted him for the first time, dressed in brand new civvies, shoulders and arms huge from Army training, a damn good-looking kid with his sandy blond hair cropped to regulation stubble, waving, smiling, walking towards my Ford Explorer, I couldn't help myself. I got out, ran to him with as much of a run as my geezer legs can still manage, and hugged him harder than I've ever hugged anybody.

"Jeez, Uncle Mike, is everything okay?" He said it in a complaining voice, but he was smiling.

"Yeah," I said. I let him go and clapped him on the shoulder. I was more relieved at that moment than ever in my life. Jigger was home.

The government had delayed Jigger's rotation out of Iraq two times. During the whole brouhaha with the Mehdi Army the previous fall, which you may not even remember, I was glued to Fox News every spare moment, I was so scared. He was *in it*, he told me in e-mails, the occasional phone call. He tried to sound calm and put together when he'd write, in an e-mail, that three guys in his Humvee had been killed by a roadside bomb, or Al-Sadr's boys had ambushed them and his best friend Arnie lost his leg to an RPG before they managed to kill the bastards. "We have the worst luck of any company in the whole damn platoon," he wrote as a joke. But I could read between the lines.

Now he was home.

We drove towards the Mackinac Bridge at eighty-five, listening to the classic rock station I managed to find among all of the country and Christian stations in that part of the state, The Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Lee Greenwood heralding our arrival in the Upper Peninsula on the soaring Mighty Mack, and all I could think was, He's home! Thank the Lord.

Jigger moved into his old room. Except for his stint in the Army, he'd lived there ever since his father (a drunk) died in a snowmobile

accident and his mother (my deadbeat sister) took off for Denver. He was nine then.

At first, I didn't see him very much. He stayed out all night with his old friends. After a few days he got tired of that. He'd let me answer the phone, then say, "Tell them I'm not here," when I said the guys wanted to go to the bar.

One time he asked if I wanted to drive up to Lake Superior. "I want to go swimming," he explained. I said, "It's June, the water's only fifty degrees!" He shrugged, I shrugged, and we got in the Explorer. We managed to locate a rope swing Jigger had found when he was fifteen and, with a rebel yell and a back flip, he launched himself butt naked into the icy water.

More often he'd sit around reading old copies of *Time* or *Newsweek* that I had lying around. Jigger only read the articles about Iraq. At all hours you could hear him turning pages and either laughing like a maniac or snorting indignantly. He often slept on the floor of the living room in a nest of open magazines. As carefully as I could on my creaky old knees I would kneel down beside him to put the magazines back on my bookshelf and the whiskey in the kitchen.

In the morning I would find him awake bright and early, no sign of a hangover. He'd sit on the porch with a glass of orange juice and a sliver of a smile listening to the piano music drifting out of Miranda Genet's window.

"So, what are your plans for the rest of the summer?" I asked him, one day.

Jigger looked at me for a moment with a shrewd eye and could tell I was worried. He shrugged. "Got some money saved."

"Still, might want to keep busy..."

I said it nonchalantly because I didn't want him to think I was minding his business too much. But he seemed to see that I wasn't keen on him spending his summer with newsmagazines and liquor.

"Maybe I could help you out in the septic business," he offered. "You know, earn my keep around here."

It wasn't exactly what I had in mind. But summer is tourist season and that's a lot of tanks for a fifty-nine-year-old man to pump all by himself.

The next morning we set out in my ol' septic truck. Its blue paint is peeling in a few places to show a layer of gray under it and block

letters on the side of the tank read ROYAL FLUSH, INC. SEPTIC SERVICES OF NORTHERN MICHIGAN. I tried to catch some Zs in the passenger seat but, all the way to Alger County, Jigger kept swerving the big truck to avoid pieces of litter drifting across the road. My shoulder was bruised where the seatbelt crossed it. I did the driving after that and Jigger just sat. Sometimes we'd talk or listen to some tunes. More often he would gaze out the window at the passing landscape of our northern home, the skeletal forests of dead birch trees, roots rotted by swamp waters, standing like leafless ghosts under the gray sky.

About seven one morning, I woke up to piano music. I went out on the porch in my bathrobe. Jigger was already there, wearing faded blue jeans and an Army T-shirt, looking wide awake. We nodded good morning to one another. It was about sixty-five degrees, the air still a little heavy with dew, a typical July morning in the UP. A window next door was open and the music escaped between the lacy curtains, which were alive with the beginnings of a morning breeze.

We listened for an hour before the music came to an end. Jigger's eyes were fixed on the window as though he could still hear the music playing.

A few minutes later Miranda came out in cut-off jeans and a Michigan State sweatshirt. She filled a big yellow bucket at a spigot, mixed in some dish soap, and started washing her dad's black Alero with the hose.

"Were you the one playing the piano this morning?" Jigger called to her from the porch.

Miranda smiled. She nodded.

"What a great way to start the morning!"

She blushed, looked away and said, "I hope I didn't wake you up or anything."

"I wasn't asleep," Jigger said. Since she had moved in next door after Jigger had gone to war, he walked over to her and offered his hand. "I'm James Nelson."

She took his hand, they shook. "Your uncle calls you Jigger," she said.

"Everybody calls me Jigger."

"Why's that?"

“When I was five I’d dance like a fool whenever my uncle’d put on ‘Great Balls of Fire.’ I’d do a jig.”

“Oh,” said Miranda, laughing.

“I could really cut a rug in those days,” said Jigger. He was quiet for a moment. He let her keep laughing without interrupting. Miranda was prone to spontaneous laughter even when things weren’t that funny. Her face still had a little baby fat, and when she laughed her eyes got all squinty and creased in the corners. Honest happiness. Very endearing.

Once Miranda had stopped, Jigger turned and yelled to me, “Thanks for making me seem so cool, Uncle Mike!” and Miranda started laughing all over again and Jigger watched her face as she laughed and he smiled.

I waved a hand at him dismissively and went back into the house. I started washing some dishes Jigger had left in the sink. Out the kitchen window I saw Jigger sponging a large splotch of white and black bird poop on the windshield that Miranda apparently didn’t want to risk touching. He went on scrubbing the car as she sprayed it with the hose. He did most of the talking, which was strange. He hadn’t said much at all to me in the weeks since he was back, while Miranda would reliably go on and on when I saw her. Now her only contribution was a question every now and then, plus the frequent musical laughter.

Next time I passed the window they had finished washing the car. As it sat dripping on Miranda’s pea gravel driveway, the two of them chatted away. I walked away from the window and turned on the TV.

Jigger came back inside half an hour later. “Nice girl,” he said, suspiciously offhand.

“What did you talk about?” I asked with an indulgent smile.

“Oh, you know, the Army and things. The war.”

“What did she have to say about that?”

“She doesn’t think we should be there.”

That seemed like a naïve thing to say about a country Jigger risked his life to free from tyranny. Besides, it always struck me as impolite to talk about politics right out in the open like that, stirring things up and not respecting people’s opinions. I was half a second from telling Jigger not to take it personally when I noticed he didn’t seem to.

“Anyway, she asked if I could still dance a jig and I guess I’m going to the Fourth of July dance Monday.”

The dance was the same every year. Pasties and dancing; red, white, and blue crepe paper; a local band playing polkas; maybe some swing dance recordings for the more adventuresome. A damn good time, in short. And Jigger was in desperate need of a damn good time. I was thinking of what fun Miranda and Jigger would have as we drove out to that day’s septic tank job when something occurred to me.

“She’s still in high school, you know,” I said to Jigger.

“Really?” he said.

“Sure is.”

“Huh,” Jigger said. He shook his head. “You wouldn’t know it to talk to her.”

When Miranda started playing at seven sharp every morning after that, window open so Jigger could hear from the porch swing, it didn’t take a rocket scientist to guess why.

A few days later Pete Bergman stopped by. He was Jigger’s age, a real smart kid who was working for the newspaper now. Jigger opened a beer for him, and Pete said how good it was to have him back.

“Did you manage to get anything good with my camera?” Pete asked. Jigger had always been a shutterbug when he was growing up. As a ten-year-old he carried a blue Fisher Price camera everywhere. Not a bad eye, either: he could take a snapshot of a funny-looking tree or a certain time of day that made you look real close at what you otherwise might have passed by. So Pete had offered to pay him to take some pictures of Iraq for the paper, and lent him his own brand-new camera that takes pictures on a computer chip instead of film.

“Sorry, man,” Jigger said. “This friend of mine wanted to take a picture of something so I loaned it to him. One of those roadside bombs went off on his side of the Humvee, and he didn’t have any body armor yet.” Jigger shrugged. “There wasn’t much left.”

“Oh,” said Pete. He didn’t say anything for a bit.

Jigger shrugged. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

“No,” Pete said quickly. “Forget it.”

I went to the pastie dinner in the church basement. Beef and potatoes, carrots and rutabaga wrapped in a bread shell to keep them warm for half a day. Pasties are what kept the lumberjacks going when they cleared the Upper Peninsula of its hundred-foot pine forests a century ago. They're nearly as good eaten under the florescent lights of a Lutheran church basement while the kids and younger married couples dance like crazy to hits from the '50s that had replaced the polka band due to popular request. I can't think of a better way to celebrate the Fourth of July. Jigger danced with Miranda the whole night, then asked if he could borrow my car so they could get free cones at the soft-serve place where Miranda worked.

Later, as I walked home, I smiled to see the SUV parked on the street and Jigger and Miranda kissing in the front seat. I didn't take any pains to sneak by. They didn't seem likely to notice me if I pounded on the window.

In retrospect, maybe I should have started worrying then. As they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty. The truth is the only thought that crossed my mind was, Good for them. She finally found someone who doesn't bore her, he's getting on with his life.

What with the cold, the low population, the poverty, the alcoholism, the boredom, the isolation geographical and spiritual, the Upper Peninsula has been the home of some pretty strange couplings. An honor student and a smart, good-looking veteran parking together doesn't turn heads up here just because one of them's a few months younger than is strictly legal.

A few days later, Jigger's door was standing open a crack. I walked in without knocking and he was holding Pete Bergman's camera (all in one piece) in his hand, staring at the screen that's on the back of new cameras, where you can see the pictures. He tried to hide it, like I'd walked in on him looking at a porno magazine.

"Sorry," I said, backpedaling out the door. "We should get going," I said from the hall. I'd promised him we'd go hunting that day.

Deer season wasn't till November so we drove an hour and a half to an area where we weren't likely to run into a nosy sheriff or the DNR. We parked the Explorer half a mile down a forgotten two-track that veered off of a dirt road. Jigger talked about Miranda, something called a nocturne that she had played for him and he wanted to buy it on a CD so he could listen to it whenever but he

thought maybe he wouldn't like just listening to a recording. We didn't really have our eyes peeled and we were only twenty yards from a doe and her three fawns when we finally spotted them. She was no trophy animal, that's for sure—medium-size even for a doe. And the fawns were young ones, waist-high. Their coats were freckled with white spots. Two stayed close to their mother. One was boldly adventuring out ahead.

None of the fawns moved when Jigger fired his gun. The adventuresome young one was the first to gather the courage to approach their mother. He poked her with his nose. The others joined him in trying to wake her up.

Jigger chuckled and pointed. "Like Bambi," he said with a grin, put his rifle over his shoulder minuteman-style, and sauntered away, still laughing.

I shot the fawns. It broke my heart to kill the adventuresome one, but the cruel thing would have been to leave him to starve. I carried the doe back to the car, but I left her children there, where no one would ever find them.

Jigger drove home, the doe wrapped in a plastic tarp in back. His jaw was set. When an empty paper bag suddenly blew onto the road from the ditch, Jigger swerved so hard I thought the SUV would flip, mashing ejected deer carcass to hamburger all over the road.

I invited Miranda over for dinner the next night to help us eat Jigger's victim. She sat next to Jigger. They smiled and laughed and held hands under the table, and it was an entirely different Jigger than the founder of the feast.

"I ought to turn you guys in right now," Miranda said about our illegal hunting. "So, which one of you big manly men killed it?"

"Uncle Mike did," said Jigger. And he gave me a look to keep my mouth shut. For an instant, I saw a threat burning in his eyes. I imagined that if I told the real story, Jigger might appear in my room that night. The man across the table from me wasn't my little Jigger for that split second. He was the man who had seen his friend's leg blown off by an RPG and without pausing to think had kicked down doors and pumped hot lead into the insurgents who did it. After he'd applied a tourniquet to his friend's bloody stump, had he cracked a joke? Did he laugh at the children of the men he had killed?

Jigger took Miranda to get ice cream after dinner. Hours later, they still weren't back.

While debating the kind of damage I would cause if I called Jack Genet and told him his seventeen-year-old daughter was missing late at night with a combat veteran, I flipped on Fox News. It was a late-night repeat of *The O'Reilly Factor*. I wasn't paying attention at first, but it gradually sank in that the mother of a dead soldier was picketing the President's ranch, and Bill O'Reilly said she hated her country and the government and didn't have a right to her opinion because it was disrespectful to other families who lost their children.

Now I'm not saying I would have taken a bus to Crawford, Texas, if Jigger had been killed. There are sacrifices in war. The President has to be more concerned about making that country free than about each soldier. But it seemed to me you didn't need to be a radical to sit out on his lawn and ask for a few minutes to give him a piece of your mind. Just a little misguided is all. Hell, I'd want at least that much consideration if Jigger had been killed. Not somebody saying on television that I hated my country.

I turned off the TV and stormed out on the back porch. To tell the truth, I was a little steamed.

O'Reilly's usually a good guy. I like the way he breaks down the issues to just what I want to know. And I couldn't pick out exactly what he had said that was wrong, I was just goddamned angry at him for some reason. Arrogant fat ass prick! was what I was thinking. He's a lot smarter than me and he was probably right about everything he said, but this woman was a mother and her boy was dead 'cause he went to defend his country, and at a time like that Mr. Bill fucking O'Reilly should keep his mouth shut out of respect, right or not.

The truth was I didn't know *what* had made me so angry, so I just ran through what O'Reilly had said over and over, but I still couldn't figure out what bothered me and I got a little more frustrated.

I was so angry finally that I didn't notice Jigger climbing out of a first-floor window in Jack Genet's house until he was nearly on the ground. Miranda leaned out after him and he stood on tiptoes to kiss her. She playfully ran her hand over his close-shaved head and then disappeared back into the dark window.

Jigger turned around. He had an enormous grin on his face. It immediately faded when he saw me standing there on the porch,

looking angry (the emotion transferred easily enough from the television to Jigger) and glaring right at him.

Casanova I ain't, but I was married twice and divorced twice, plus I've hung around in bars all my life. I've studied the fairer sex up close and personal, and I've long since been disabused of any old-fashioned ideas about women. Like all that stuff about women losing their virtue and their innocence just because they love a guy and decided to do something about it. A bunch of bull is what that is. A woman is either virtuous or she *really ain't*.

Why was I so angry? Why didn't I shrug and say, "What the hell, they're young and they're in love and they're not very bright"? I asked myself that a lot. She was young, but there's not a lot to do in the UP besides drink or fall in love, so I couldn't blame either one of them for that. Was it possible I was jealous of Jigger, at my age?

I don't think so. Miranda was just young, smart, talented, college-bound, naïve. Jigger was young and smart too but definitely not naïve and he didn't have a bright future with his head still in Iraq. Nothing I'd experienced living in the UP for sixty years helped me understand the way he had been acting since he got back. At seventeen, Miranda understood even less, and a dagger turned in my chest when I thought what she might learn.

Jigger followed me into the house. My teeth were grinding. I was ready to rip him a new one when I ordered him to sit down at the table. I just *couldn't*, is all. He sat down and crossed his arms like a defiant child, but he wasn't a child. He was a man, a man who had fought a war for his country. He was older than *me* in a lot of ways. I had no right to tell him stay away from that girl. I had no right to tell him anything.

I chickened out.

I asked him what precautions they had taken.

He told me. The answer was satisfactory.

I told him she was a wonderful girl.

He said he didn't need me to tell him that.

I told him to be careful not to hurt her.

"I'd never do that," he said. "I *love* her."

I didn't doubt that he meant what he said. Despite what happened next, I still don't doubt it. So everything just continued the way it was before.

Except I started watching the news on CNN, and it turns out they're not as left-wing as all that.

Never in his life had Jigger shown any interest in music. Suddenly the regular tunes we listened to on our septic runs were gone, and it was Interlochen Radio classical music all the way there, all the way back. One time Jigger interrupted a funny story I was telling so I could "really listen to this next part" of a piano piece. After whatever I was supposed to hear had passed, leaving me none the wiser, he sagely commented that it was Debussy. I vaguely recognized it from Miranda's morning concerts.

The reformed Jigger wore nice clothes every day. He didn't swear. He would drink only two beers in a sitting, and then he'd go on a quest to find breath mints and gum.

One time I saw him reading a book.

"It's called *Dubliners*," he said. "Miranda read it for her Advanced English summer reading."

"What happens?" I asked.

He closed the book. On the front cover there was an old oil painting of a lady in a wicker chair reading yet another book. Jigger squinted at her like she might clue him in. "Not much," he said, sort of nodding and shaking his head at the same time.

He was always buying little pieces of crap like Pez Dispensers to give her. At the grocery store claw machine he won an orange bunny that looked like it had been made in Taiwan from a polyester suit, and Miranda jumped up and down hugging it to her chest when he gave it to her that evening.

I gave myself a pat on the back for having an open mind and not saying anything about Miranda's age. Listening to Jigger singing in the shower in the morning I'd say to myself, "Ain't love grand." When Jigger got back from Iraq he barely said a word. I had been so worried. The strange behavior (like the erratic driving) was gone. He was better than new.

The day before Miranda was going to start her final year of high school, they had a fight. I was coming in the door with my fly pole and tackle box and caught the end of it. "Who told you you could go through my things?" Jigger was shouting as he chased her down the stairs. Miranda pushed me aside to get out the door. When she

turned in the doorway, I saw she was crying. "Don't come over any more," she said, "you sick bastard!"

Jigger stood there as the screen door eased itself closed.

"Fuck it," he muttered finally.

It was hard for me to talk, like I was scared to. It was a few seconds more before I managed to say, "What happened?"

"She was nosing around my stuff," said Jigger with an angry wave of his hand.

"Oh," I said, although it didn't seem right that Jigger would be this angry.

"You just don't go through another person's stuff like that," Jigger continued, even more agitated. "It's theirs, you don't touch it."

"Of course," I said.

That night, he tried to call her a few times, but she wouldn't talk to him.

When I woke up at nine the next morning, Jigger wasn't home. He had taken my Explorer. I figured he needed some time alone.

I went to work by myself, came home and made myself dinner. At seven o'clock in the evening, I was still alone in the house. Jigger barely saw his friends from before the war, but nonetheless I was thinking about calling them, asking if they'd seen him.

Jack Genet saved me the trouble by ringing my doorbell.

"Where's your nephew?" he demanded.

"I don't know," I said a little slowly.

"I can't find Miranda," he said with more than a trace of accusation. "I called the school. She didn't show up for her first day."

When I didn't know what to say, Jack demanded to know what was going on between his daughter and Jigger. "I don't know," I lied. "They fought yesterday. She said she didn't want to see him." It was clear enough that wherever Miranda was, she was probably with Jigger; I didn't even bother pointing it out.

Jack asked me, "What should we do, Mike?" He didn't have much accusation left in his voice. He was just scared and I realized I was too. Jigger would never hurt her, I told myself. I led Jack to his car and drove him to the sheriff's office to report his daughter missing. Mark, the deputy we talked to, had played Varsity football while Jigger was JV. They'd been friends. I told him Miranda had dated Jigger and that Jigger had just come back from Iraq. Mark just nod-

ded. I told him my blue '97 Explorer was missing, rattled off the plate number and then went home and waited for news.

In Jigger's room, I found the digital camera smashed to bits. I wondered what this meant.

After it was all over, when Jigger was in jail, I took the debris to the drugstore and showed it to the photo developer, an overweight twenty-year-old with long, dark stubble spread thinly on his chin and cheeks. It turned out the memory chip was removable and undamaged and he let me look at the pictures on his computer. Along with uninteresting pictures of soldiers who must have been Jigger's friends, scowling Iraqis and their happy kids, and hot, dry Baghdad neighborhoods, were pictures of Jigger and his friends posing with insurgent corpses. In one, Jigger is hugging two dead boys, about seventeen, his arms around their shoulders like they were pals. Another picture features him and a woman who is missing part of her face. He's fondling her breasts. I found I couldn't swallow as I paged through them on the drugstore's touch-sensitive screen. I guess when you're in a war you need a tough skin. Gallows humor—stops all the terrible stuff from getting to you. Not a pretty sight, that's for sure.

Jigger had carried that camera with him everywhere. I can only guess which photos he stared at for so long, trying to recognize himself, to reconcile the mercenary with the young man who was home, and in love, and happy again.

I can only guess that, like me, Miranda noticed the camera that he carried everywhere. That she went to Jigger's room when she couldn't control her curiosity any longer. And this is what she saw. Her beauty and intelligence are already that of an adult, but her experience didn't include anything like those boys or the half-faced woman.

Even in the best of circumstances, your first love can be a disturbingly close look at another person's soul. As much as I loved my first ex-wife, I remember struggling to accept her insecurities, which were, on the whole, the normal ones. What does a seventeen-year-old think when she sees a photograph of the skeleton in her lover's closet?

Mark the deputy was put in charge of the search by the sheriff, on account of his friendship with Jigger. Around two o'clock on the

afternoon of the second day, he called to say he was on his way to Sault Ste. Marie. Using my credit card, Jigger had gassed up the Explorer at one of those new gas stations with security cameras to identify the cars that drive off. Miranda was definitely a passenger. Jigger put her back in the car when she tried to walk away. The State Police were already combing the area.

I didn't say so, but I doubted they would find Jigger there. He didn't know anybody over there, and the pit stop had been in the early morning. I would have guessed he kept heading south, but the deputy said he'd checked and the Explorer hadn't crossed the bridge to the Lower Peninsula, nor had it crossed into Ontario at the Soo.

I started thinking about where Jigger'd be heading. Before I knew it, I was in the ol' septic truck, my only vehicle with the Explorer missing, pretty sure I had guessed where Jigger was.

It was barely September, the week before Labor Day, but the leaves in the Upper Peninsula were already turning red and yellow. The two-track road was difficult to maneuver down in an SUV. There was no hope of navigating it in the Royal Flush septic truck, so I parked off on the grassy shoulder of the dirt road, pulled an Army surplus compass out of the glove compartment, climbed down, and started to hike down the intersecting two-track.

I had been walking for twenty-five minutes when I found the empty Explorer parked to the side of the two-track. Though I've never been worth a damn at tracking, it was impossible not to see the trampled-down ferns and burr-berry bushes where Jigger had pulled Miranda into the forest.

All of the old-growth trees were clear-cut a hundred years ago, so now the UP forests are filled with tall trees with trunks so thin you hardly believe they can stand sixty feet tall. They only have leaves in May through early October, and they spend all of their energy trying to break out from the forest floor to the sunlight, risking that a particularly violent wind will snap them like twigs. With the exception of patches of ferns with stalks that cut you if you try to pick them, there isn't much ground cover.

I ran through that forest faster than I should have in my sixty-year-old chassis. I couldn't track Jigger but I had a fair idea where he was heading. I paused only twice to check my direction on my compass and let the sun and my memory of the landscape from several

hunting trips take care of the rest of the navigation. I twisted my ankle on a root that was hidden under a thin layer of leaves that had fallen early but pressed on, wincing with each step but not slowing down. After only a half hour, I reached the place where Jigger had killed the doe.

Sure enough, there was Jigger. He was sitting on a fallen log that had snagged diagonally on the branch of another tree. Miranda was nowhere to be seen.

Although I was panting loudly, Jigger didn't seem to notice me. He cradled a hunting rifle in his lap and was hunched over it like he didn't have the energy to sit up straight. He was staring at the ground, his eyes focused so far away that you would've sworn he was looking straight through it and out the other side of the Earth at what was happening in Iraq. I was afraid the moment I saw his eyes.

"Jigger," I said gravely.

His name seemed to worm its way into his brain a few seconds later, and he suddenly looked up, as if surprised to see me.

"I was just thinking about how I killed those fawns," Jigger said.

I reminded him I had killed them.

"Might as well have, though," said Jigger, shaking his head. "I can't figure why I did it. Killed their mom, I mean. I just sorta *liked* it, you know? Just sorta wanted them to feel helpless or alone or something. I've never done anything like that, not even in..." He was quiet for a little while. He fixed his eyes on that same spot of ground. "And it was different over there," he added after another bout of thinking. "It wasn't the same rules anymore; that's why Miranda couldn't understand what was on my camera. I smashed it so nobody else could see it. I don't need it anymore," he said, tapping his temple with his index finger, which I took to mean that all the photographs were in his brain in perfect detail.

Suddenly his eyes snapped up from the ground and fell on me again and at the same time his hands tightened on the rifle. For an instant I was afraid, but he had only picked up the rifle to lean it against the tree and stand up. He was about fifteen paces away and was staring into the forest. I picked up the rifle and unloaded it. It was fully loaded and the metal parts cold, so I doubted he had fired it. The thought that he had shot Miranda hadn't formed in my mind until the moment it was disproven. I was very relieved.

"Jigger," I said, approaching him, "where's Miranda?"

“I let her go,” he said. “Hours ago.” He checked his watch and I saw it was about five o’clock. “Must’ve been about eleven.” He turned to me suddenly. “Why? Wasn’t she the one who told you I was here?”

“Jigger, the sheriff and the State Police are looking for you.” It seemed impossible that he didn’t know. “You kidnapped her.”

“I just needed to talk to her, you know, convince—” He broke off. “We drove around, all over the place, and she was scared for some reason and I kept trying to talk to her. Finally I thought if I brought her here and told her what happened she could understand what I’ve been through. But she yelled at me. She said she hates me.” He broke off again. “She begged me to let her go. So I did. She ran off that way,” he said and waved the back of his hand in a vague direction where there wasn’t anything but miles and miles of forest. By now, Miranda would be very lost.

“We’ve got to go look for her,” Jigger said as he realized this.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “Even if we could find her, she’d probably run away again. Come on.”

We walked back to the Explorer and I drove to a diner on the highway. I phoned up Mark the deputy from a pay phone. Jigger and I had burgers and beer while we waited, and I iced my twisted ankle, which wasn’t even that swollen. After forty-five minutes, Mark pulled up along with Jack Genet, a State Police cruiser, and Joe Watson, a lifelong Yooper a few years older than me with the best tracking dogs in the area. Jigger was arrested and taken away in the cruiser.

I took the others to the spot where Jigger had killed the doe and told them in what direction Miranda had run off. Jack had brought a piece of Miranda’s clothing and the dogs found the scent almost immediately. We found Miranda, by flashlight, an hour after dark. She was scared and hungry. She had broken a finger that Jigger had accidentally slammed in a car door but said through tears that he hadn’t hurt her on purpose. Not wanting to risk getting lost in the dark, Mark and I made a campfire to keep us all warm. Nobody slept but Joe Watson and his dogs. At first light, we put out the fire, buried the pit in loose sand to prevent a forest fire, and hiked back to the cars.

Jigger's lawyer argued that Jigger had just recently come back from Iraq where he had heroically defended his country in some of the worst fighting the US Army had seen in that country. He had spent too much time in combat where picking someone up and holding them against their will was standard procedure when you wanted to have a serious talk, so when he kidnapped Miranda he didn't understand the seriousness of his actions. Unlike most courtroom defenses, I think this might have been true. The jury seemed willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, and he only got three years, not much for kidnapping your underage lover and holding her at gunpoint.

Other than Jigger going to jail, the only result of the kidnapping was that I didn't hear Miranda playing the piano in the morning anymore. I asked her father about it one day when we ran into each other raking leaves. Jack said she doesn't play anymore. She applied for early admission to the University of Michigan, he said, but she hadn't touched the application for Oberlin after going through the trouble to send away for it a whole year early.

"Maybe she just wants to take some time," I said.

"I hope so," said Jack.

I've never been a classical music fan. It shouldn't matter to me that a girl decides she doesn't want to play the piano any more. It *does*, that's the thing. I damn near choke up every time I think about it. I can't quite figure out why. You'd think that if I wanted to cry, I'd cry over my own flesh and blood, Jigger, who went to the Army, got trained to fight a war, and came back from it with his sense of right and wrong all screwed up, and, yeah, that bothers me too, but what really gets me is that piano with its lid shut over its keys, gathering dust. Whenever I hear somebody mention the war in Iraq I think about that piano and how maybe nobody will play it again. I don't know why I think about that, but I know it means something. That's what this whole pathetic saga amounts to. Nobody'll play the piano tomorrow morning.