

The feeding tube at this college is not wide enough for Sam Blencher, according to Sam Blencher. It is a state college in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, and Sam has mistaken me, his teacher and his junior by fifteen years, as his broadband access to the academic enlightenment he is due. "You tenure profs are babysitters," he says in my office before we are quite seated, "deadwood. It's only the part-timers who bring it. You, you just walk around up there talking and you lost them twenty minutes ago. I'd about given up on you—on this whole college trip. But then you stomped my ass on this paper. I mean, *damn*. I told myself, I said, 'Sammy, you got to go as many rounds with this dude as your woodchuck ass can.'"

Sam Blencher is no woodchuck and knows it. Everyone does. The woodchuck act is a thin little blind from which he takes pot-shots at the faculty. Once he sees I see this, his act takes on a friendly gleam of spite. He's here to prove himself to himself, to pin all his perceived inferiority to the mat. But even though he wants to take the college seriously, he can't. He knows where he is. He sees the kids picking their noses around him. It's a community college in all but name. He visits my office sometimes after class, mincingly careful to schedule the appointments and rigid with derisive respect when he arrives, calling me Professor and all that—militaristic to the point of mockery, which it of course is. He's already sized me up, professionally, generationally. His problem is he wants me to overmaster him with authority yet

inherently hates authority. He wants to believe college holds the keys to the kingdom but, at forty-six, needs just as badly to prove it doesn't. I realize after a few of these office visits that this strident battle is ingrained in him and has propelled his life through a series of preemptive counterattacks. Fifteen years ago—at my age—he saw to it that he owned the finest tractor in the county; he raised cattle, sheep, hogs, raced hundreds of miles on a road bicycle, worked as an industrial electrician, EMT'd, dug out of an avalanche, and was already raising five of the six kids he would have. He donated his bone marrow to a stranger because someone told him how painful it would be. All this bridle-busting kept Sam too busy for college, but now college must answer for itself.

I listen to all of it with a manly glaze of admiration on my face and imagining over and over again Sam Blencher taking Tim Moon's throat in an iron grip and chipperly thwacking his face into hamburger. Because that's what Sam Blencher would do with some middle-aged hippie who'd trespassed on *his* family. Sam Blencher would correct him.

Let's get a beer, I want to suggest—as I've done before with students who seem to have suddenly realized where they were and discovered the score. But Sam has stalled his lucrative industrial electrician career and is paying out-of-pocket for all this, so time is money, and it seems like an insult to suggest he's wasting either. And he makes sure he gets what he's paying for. Today

again he shut down class, a freshman composition class in which he does not belong, and asked me to be more definite about the spacing in and around the ellipsis. The ellipsis is one of many things never properly explained to him. He also needs to know when it is that ellipsis becomes ellipses.

It was 9:15am in the middle of the gray spring semester, and already my eyes had begun slipping out of focus. I sat atop an empty desk in the front row, a mud-crust boot in the chair, knee probing over the desk of a pretty but vacant girl already dead-tired of college. I rubbed my eyes; no one would notice. I stood and wandered to the window, finning in my shirttail, maybe even picking my nose, who cares.

Sam has a perfect technical grasp of writing and an exuberant mind capable of marshalling its ideas into long, succinct essays, the syntax well-oiled, the clauses firing like pistons. His first drafts come out like overly-chromed car show engines. Ellipses? “Sam,” I finally said, yawning out at the parking lot. “Are you fucking with me?”

Sam Blencher’s face is thin-skinned, red with filament-fuzzed cheeks and just smooth enough that you can see the cropped silver hair is silver prematurely (he likes to ham up the old-feller act before hitting you with verbal rabbit punches). He glanced around the class, almost smirking—paternally embarrassed for all these kids sitting around in their pajamas, oblivious to the flimsy charade of college wobbling around them. They’ve already been suckered by life and won’t know it for decades.

Sam watched me, his face flushing in almost audible pulses, like tin. He was paternally embarrassed for *me*.

I returned to the board and spoke for fifteen minutes about past and current MLA guidelines for the ellipsis but did not give him the answer his tight, machinist pupils kept calibrating themselves to receive. Stay loose,

man, I wanted to say. Lay off. I was hard on his paper and everyone else’s because my wife took our son and left. I was freewheeling through spring mud and striking some traction where I could.

When I finished, Sam glanced at the room of dropped heads and crotch texting. It looked like a shooting had just occurred. Sam raised his hand.

“Yes, Sam.”

“If I forget to space out my ellipses, or if I use the recently outmoded additional space after the final period in an ellipsis occurring at the end of a sentence, will I lose points on the essay, and if so, Professor, how many points might I lose?”

The class was nearly over. Everyone was waking up and texting openly now. I felt, as I often do toward the end of class, a sudden pity for the freshman girls in their pajama pants who struggle with hygiene, for the little boys who grew up and went off to college and got Bud mud. They all seemed too young.

“You won’t lose a particle, Sam.”

A mind straight as a nail. Standing here woozy after a day and just in the door, flicking on the lights and trying to get a visual on the Aztec rug, I crave nothing so much as that. I used to crave a beer about now, but brain blur interests me these days not a bit.

I will refine this. I want now, above all, for my mind to focus itself around a hard, straight, cold, forward-pointed center that is exactly like a nail. A nail sunk so hard it barely registers all that hangs upon it. I want the nail to be doing the work.

The Aztec zags trouble my eyes; my pupils try to get a grip, without the command of my mind, but in my exhaustion the complex little triangles blur and unhorse me with some kind of actual little vertigo. My lenses

conk out. My foot hesitates above the rug. I cannot progress forward into my own house.

This need to get a hold on the day, finally: the imperative persists despite mind-flounder. The week of teaching has run through me like so many watery beers, leaving in me a tiredness filmed by inarticulate shame. It's Thursday, I've got nothing tomorrow, but I am *afraid* to get buzzed, or I am just not very interested, or too tired. My subconscious grew up, went impotent.

In the kitchen I open a beer left by some students a few weeks back and it is terrible. Blue Moon? What adult drinks this perfume? But it ballasts me in a way I had not expected and that is agreeable and warrants finishing, which increases the ballast even at the expense of brain blur, Aztec rug blur. I drift rudderless over the rug and accept the couch. I would be okay with some ice cream.

To think now there was a part of me that saw at the eye of all this impending horror of their departure some excitement about living alone, finally—as if then, at last, I might unspring with productive hobbies and indulgences, allowing my mind to crumble out the minutes with tinkering and reading and stuff. But I remain as dull to myself now as I'd been under her oppressive disappointment, and the loneliness only makes me see my reflection all the clearer. I am everything she said I was, only smaller.

There is no ice cream. I summon muster for a laundry errand to the basement. The transactions of washed and unwashed, the sorting—I can fathom none of it intellectually right now. I am trusting that I will know what to do when I get down there.

I am having to think too much. I have think exhaustion. My serotonin is having trouble covering the miles. It is tired of these daily enforced pilgrimages. Take me out to the ball game. Take me out.

The great victory of the last few weeks remains my purchase of a clothes-drying rack, which I have never owned. I took my last Wellbutrin and by the end of the day had a drying rack. Not only does this save on the propane that heats the dryer, but its twenty-six rungs provide a satisfying exercise in strategy. It is at precisely the right intellectual frequency and braces me with a vision of self-reliance. I could have never exercised this prudence in my life with her. This rack is the first fragile tower of a new city.

My son is two. Why couldn't she have waited? I asked her this and she said she'd never do that to him. Do what? I said.

Last month I'd come home to find folded on the front stoop of our apartment an old towel I hadn't seen in months, one of our floral bastards, with a chocolate Valentines heart stuck into it and a butane lighter shaped like the bust of a stallion lying on top next to a balled-up pair of my wife's socks, black with tiny pink hearts stitched on. I stepped over it and went inside. "Somebody has made unto you an offering," I said.

"It's over, it's done," she said, pacing madly around the house in a fit of pillow straightening. "I don't even talk to him anymore."

"Talk to who?"

She pushed past me to collect the artifacts from the doorway.

"To *whom*?" I said.

She paused and looked up at me. I saw all the thoughts crash into a pile-up behind her eyes. "You didn't know," she said, standing, the towel balled at her chest, her eyes staring into my neck. In her wonder there seemed some confirmation of whatever she'd suspected about me. "I mean, Jesus . . . how could you not know, Ellis?"

“Know what? What have you done?”

“Well, it’s old news now.” She was off again, dumping the towel and trinkets in the kitchen garbage, then marching down the hallway.

“It’s not old news to me. What’s the news?”

“Listen.” She turned to me at the far end of the hallway. “I was with Tim all during the fall. Pretty much through December.”

I looked at the bulging towel rolled in her arms. “That scumbag fiddler?”

“But why not, Ellis?” She marched toward me now; I had to step aside as she blasted into the kitchen, picked up a dishtowel from the sink, then threw it back into the skink. She turned to me and crossed her arms and was finally still, looking at me. “We, you and I—we weren’t really together.”

“Wait a second—I’m sorry?”

“We weren’t together, Ellis.”

“We—except we’re *married*? Correct? Am I correct?”

“No, we aren’t.” Her voice was shaking but cold. “And if he’s a scumbag, what does that make me? What is that supposed to make me?”

“Why does he have your towel?” I said, staring into the trash, then shook my head. “Never mind. Listen, this isn’t forgivable. It’s not okay.”

“You’re right. Marriages don’t recover from this.”

“That—*that’s* not what I’m saying!”

She looked at me from the kitchen, then walked to where I stood in center of the living room. “It’s okay. I know you don’t care. Or you don’t care enough, or you didn’t. And the thing is, Tim aside, you just haven’t been, well, enough. It’s okay, though.” She touched my temple. “It’s okay.”

“And Tim *Moon* is enough? The *fiddler*? He lives in a wrecked helicopter in the woods, Maddy!”

The stallion lighter lay on the floor beside the wastebasket—doubtless some memento of post-coital cigarettes, like they were in an Eagles song—and she picked it up and dropped it in on top of the towel and the socks and the Valentine’s chocolate that I realized was probably for Gleason. I suddenly recalled a strangely vivid story Gleason had told me weeks before about riding in a helicopter that smelled like chili.

“Didn’t you have a meeting today?” she said, pulling out saucepans for dinner.

“Yes, I had a meeting,” I said, walking back down the hallway toward Gleason’s room, shouting back at her, “I forgot it!,” then falling on my knees and blowing into Gleason’s stomach on the clown rug.

Friday morning I sit up from the couch, kick over the Blue Moon bowling pins, and remember the monthly lower division writing committee meeting today, which I am to chair. The meeting is in an hour.

Down in the basement I find the drying rack listing, the accordion joints on one side giving out under its load. Underpants and white shirt hems lap the grimy concrete.

The basement is still stuffed with junk even though she is gone. You would think we’d been married forty years to see it. I realize I’ve been cheated in this respect. She’s left this landfill for me to deal with.

Above the washer, stuffed on a shelf packed with camping gear and potting soil, is a small oblong orange box. I snatch it down and slide the bottle out, an expensive rum we bought on our honeymoon in Jamaica, twenty years aged. We were going to have a wet bar in the house for guests. This was as far as we got.

From a higher shelf I take a jelly jar full of nails, toss the nails into the plastic wastebasket used for dryer lint, and wipe out the dust with my teeshirt.

With a good forty-five minutes to spare, I set myself up with two fingers on the washer lid, unable to recall whether rum is ever with any seriousness drunk straight, or if it is mostly a mixing drink.

It goes down rougher than its faux eighteenth-century bottle would suggest. I utter a sociable “Yuck!” that captures the prudish ring of my mother and slosh the last sip at the slate wall, then drop the jelly jar into the waste bin—though the saccharine burn sticks in my mouth and slurs through my brain. Instantly I understand why the dryer rack is ruined only slightly but ruined, why really, and why this fresh-faced Friday is already ruined, and what it means to live with myself.

An hour later I walk down the aisle of the campus auditorium to find the meeting already in progress up on the stage. We have to rotate the meetings among different locations around campus each month.

“Bernard’s point, I think,” says Genie Bell, wife of department chair Bernard Bell, “is that students are making these rhetorical moves in their work, whether they know it or not, and perhaps it’s enough for us to alert them to—”

Bernard interrupts his wife to continue his thought levelly: “Students are making these moves, *some* students, but unless we connect this to some kind of programmatic outcomes—”

“Are they really making moves, Bernard?” Claudia is as old as the Bells and a loose-faced radical who’s clung on here as an adjunct for twenty-five years. “That’s *not* what I’m seeing in my sections.”

“Let Bernard finish, Claudia,” Genie says.

“I think we can all agree that we’re seeing these, these *moves* in most of our sections, but—”

“They are not making moves in my sections,” repeats

Claudia, glancing around incredulously at the dozen or so at the table, but no one throws her a line. Everyone keeps blindered eyes on the ever-forbearing Bernard. He takes a formal breath, continues.

“The question for me is what moves they are *not* making.”

“How do these moves indicate an advancement of SLOs?” asks another mousy adjunct, Alice, who’s been here two months. “What can they tell us as data?”

“Well, a move can be an outcome in itself,” Claudia instructs.

“But Alice is right,” says tall sonorous Geoffrey, “the move isn’t specified in any *single* SLO; rather, it’s implied in *all* of them.”

“Exactly,” Alice says.

Bernard nods thoughtfully. “I think that’s exactly right, Geoffrey. So what are we talking about, then?”

Air ducts whomp on in the dark rafters above us; a bassy sigh descends.

Genie Bell clears her throat. “It seems, it seems to me that if we can codify the move in explicit language, we might create transfer, or the possibility of transfer.”

Bernard shakes his head—“We can create only the map for transfer. The contract.”

“Are everyone’s students making moves?” Claudia asks.

“Mine aren’t,” says Gladys, another wretched lifer with a jiggling chain hanging from her glasses. “They haven’t moved *once!*”

“I mean other than Gladys’s?” Claudia says.

“I’d say I *am* seeing some moves in my class,” says Geoffrey, “but not nearly all of them. A number of moves just aren’t showing up.”

“I am not seeing all of them, but they’re there,” says a woman’s voice from the shadowed end of the table

beyond the stage lights.

"I wonder what we're seeing most, across the board," Genie poses. "I mean, can we assess what we're seeing?"

"I'm more worried about seeing what we're assessing," Bernard says. Everyone chuckles.

"Does anyone in here have Sam Blencher?" says Alice, the new adjunct. She's doubtless one of the one's *bringing it*, according to Sam.

Half a dozen hands go up.

"God, he's wonderful—"

"He's amazing—"

"—electric intelligence—"

"He pushes me to *get it right*, you know?"

"Wait," says Bernard, holding up his hand. "Wait. Sam Blencher is taking five sections of comp *concurrently*? Again? He's done this for two semesters now."

"He's an *animal*," Claudia says, flashing the ghostly gums of her laugh.

"Perhaps," says Genie, "we can—"

"With all the right *moves*!" Claudia adds saucily—giving a *honk-honk* wink that paralyzes everyone at the table.

Genie opens her eyes after a moment and continues: "—tag Sam with some kind of assessment indicator, you know?"

"Like they do with seals?" Geoffrey says, perhaps seriously.

"He can reverse-assess the classes themselves."

"You mean assess *us*?" Gladys says, roused.

"After all," Genie says, "he *does* have a broader vantage than any one of us."

Bernard chuckles again, shaking his fragile temples wearily. "But something isn't *right* with the guy!"

Genie explains to the group, "Sam did the electrical work in our house last summer and Bernard said he just *wouldn't shut up!*" She laughs, but Bernard winces at the

tactlessness.

The meeting disperses without my having said a word. And there are too few of us for my silence to be inconspicuous, particularly since I'm the committee chair. I call out for the minutes, but Claudia is lecturing the Bells about their garden; Geoffrey details a glazed apple-chicken roasting recipe to Alice and the other young adjuncts; Gladys cleans out the vegetable dip tray. I call out again, but the auditorium is just too large. No one answers.

Tim Moon lives halfway up Mount Mansfield in an old dual-rotor rescue helicopter set upon blocks, which I've seen only in a picture: our local glossy, *Moose Pie*, did a profile on him for their local music issue. One must hike in to crash site, and everyone's used to seeing Tim Moon's blattering rusted-out Bronco nosed up to the trailhead behind Doug's, the alpine bodega up near the ski lodge. Tim Moon skis all day and plays out most nights at places like The Matterhorn and Frieda's. Everyone here knows him and shakes their head with affection. He's the guy skiing in jeans.

The Bronco isn't there when I pull up, this afternoon, so I park in front of Doug's, buy a four-pack of Heady Toppers, whose tall silver cans feel like ordinance under your arm, and walk up the narrow, knobby trail. I call Maddy as I walk.

"Does Gleason want to come over for dinner?"

"Like, you want me to ask him? He's still two, Ellis."

"Listen . . . I'm using a little . . . a little friendly irony . . ."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea right now. Why are you out of breath?"

"The lower division meeting was this morning. I'm still recovering."

“Like I said, Ellis. I don’t think the irony’s a good idea. If you want to have Gleason over tonight, just ask me, okay?”

“What do you say—a handoff at the notch?”

She breathes into the phone. The joke is that she once used her hand on me at the notch, a kinky canyon where the road cuts through the peak of Mansfield. We always called it a handoff.

“Call me later and try this again, Ellis.” She hangs up.

The helicopter’s riveted fuselage has been repainted since the magazine photo and is now glopped with a crude mural of a yellow sun setting or rising behind a green lump into a dark-blue sky—the blue too dark for any sunny effect. It’s as streaked and clumpy as finger-paint. A string of Tibetan prayer flags hangs around the helicopter, snagged on the broken rotors like it’s just crashed into a used car lot. Stiff longjohns, underwear, coveralls, jeans, and socks dangle from a clothesline strung between the helicopter and a tree. Nothing of hers is there.

“Hey, Tim!” I slap the bay door or whatever the term is. “Tim! It’s Ellis! Ellis You Know Who!”

Without waiting, I wrench the door open a few feet on its rusted tracks and stick my head into the gloom. “Yo! Ready for a Heady?”

I swat through a mess of tapestries. My eyes have to adjust. The bay’s diamond-plated floor is covered with a Navajo-looking rug. It smells like smoked wool and a little like chili. Up against the bulkhead, on palettes, lies a mattress covered with a green Johnson Mills woolen blanket. Up in the cockpit I make out a few brown stacks of paperbacks, Siddhartha stuff, and a thin stained teacup and saucer perched on the console, teabag still in it. At the rear—the aft?—squats a Lil Sweetie stove, flumed right out of an oval window patched with plywood and

expansion foam.

I sit on the bed and run my hand over the wool blanket, sniffing at the wet hempy air, and look around for somewhere to put the beer. At the back of the copter, opposite the stove, is a rusted freezer. I walk over and open it up to crisp up the beers, but out comes that warm, freezer-burned mildew smell. Five fiddle cases lie in there, puzzled together like sarcophagi. “Hi,” I say, exhuming each and popping the clasps, then walk each brittle fiddle out and brain it against a tree.

I’m almost to the bottom of the trail when Tim Moon comes walking up with a girl of about eleven with long blonde hair and tall legs, one of his incidental local offspring, though she slinks behind him with the morose cool of a Tim Moon groupie. He’s wearing Carhart overalls and his forearms are streaked with white paint. “Hey,” he says up the hill when he sees me, drawing it out with a kind of sweet, reconciliatory sadness, as though we pass on this trail all the time. “How are you, man?”

I stop and he stops. I look at his daughter, then back at Tim. Tim pats the girl’s back. “Go on up, Ava.” She plods up the trail and passes with a smile that wrecks me. She’s just a little girl. Tim watches her as she goes, then returns his eyes to mine.

“Hey,” he says again. “I’m Tim.” He holds out his hand.

I have met him four times with Maddy up at the Matterhorn where we used to go see him play, and the idea that he still doesn’t know who I am is enough. I summon Sam Blencher and slap his hand away, or try to; I only nick a couple fingers. “Don’t hold out your hand to me, creep.”

He looks disappointed but not surprised; the breezy affability drops from his face. He’s older than me by a decade at least. It hits me he’s probably Sam’s age. Sam

would eat him alive. Or maybe they would both turn to me and laugh, then grab a beer.

Tim Moon lifts his arms. “What do you want, Ellis?”

“I want you to tell me about . . . about this . . .”—I fumble my back pocket for the stallion lighter and fling it. It pops off his sternum. I fished it out of the coffee grounds last month, and now Tim stoops slowly to pick it up, thumbing away the spring mud. “Tell me the story here, Tim.”

“Ah Jesus, Ellis.” He tucks the lighter into a perfect tiny pocket on the breast of his overalls. He shakes his head and starts up the path. “Go home, man.”

“Go home?”

“Get out of here, asshole.”

He moves to walk past me and I tip my shoulder into him. My cheek grazes his stubbled cigarette-smelling neck; he stumbles awkwardly. I push harder, which I should have done at first, and he snatches at my hair and sends me tripping down the hill. The taste of mud in my teeth shocks me to my feet, and when I start back up the hill for him, Tim very easily lifts his boot and shoves me hard in the chest, which is what I should have done in the first place when I’d held the higher ground. I fall back again and now he’s sidestepping down the hill after me. “All right, then,” he says and clamps my neck, lifting me and popping my face twice, then tripping and bringing us both down again, right into the loose stones where the trail meets the broken asphalt of Doug’s lot. We’re almost under the grill of his Bronco. I get to my knees but he stands before I can land anything, then flings a fist-full of rocky dirt at my face. It kills my eyes and gets in my ears, and I’m on my knees doing these kind of spastic blind defense moves before I realize he’s already walking back up the trail.

“I diddled your fiddles, asshole!”

He stops, glances back at me, then jogs up the trail, then stops again. He turns and runs back toward me. “You stupid fuck!”

But I’m already in my car and out of there, unable to see right as I skid out onto the mountain road and speed toward the notch, smearing mouth-blood and mud across the back of my wrist—letting up on the pedal only after student papers explode behind me from the open windows.

Early Monday morning, I drop Gleason at Maddy’s apartment on the way in and arrive a little late to class. Sam is waiting in the hallway with his fourteen-year-old, whom he’d like to bring to class. Sam gives a very formal introduction and makes a show of not noticing my face. Kenny clamps my hand and lays on the sirs. Sam wants to show his son what college is. He asked my permission last week but I’ve forgotten; he asks me again now with a meek and grave deference performed, I suspect, for his son’s benefit. I know all about Kenny from Sam’s visits to my office. The kid is homeschooled on high-fiber stuff like Thoreau and Emerson and carries a gallon jug of water around as part of his father’s enforced hydration program. Kenny is small and still with delicate cheekbones but is competing for a state wrestling title. His chin maintains a slight lift; he is preternaturally respectful. We talk that day in class about dualist, multiplist, and relativist thinking, and for some reason I show slides of the Dresden bombings, carts piled with charred bodies.

Despite his curricular dissatisfaction, Sam has taken to waiting for me after class, squeezing me out all the way to my office and sometimes to my car. I’ve noticed he often parks near or next to my car, his skinned-up navy electrician’s van pressing in on my skinned-up Hyundai hatchback. No matter how late I stay on campus, how

empty the lot when I leave, the van is always there. Sam is enrolled in nine classes at the college. Six of them are composition.

In the hallway after class, Kenny shakes my hand again and thanks me for a really interesting class while Sam stands several feet behind him. Sam shares a tender grin with me, and they head off down the hallway with the other kids, Kenny trying not to list from his water gallon.

I hear from Maddy around lunchtime.

“His daughter was with him, Ellis. What is wrong with you?”

“So you two are back at it, huh?”

“My god, it’s not even your business anymore. *No.*”

“I have to tell you, I’m starting to feel pretty hemmed in by all these statutes of limitation. It’s not fair, really. I didn’t get to ask you this stuff when it *was* my business.”

“You could go to jail, dumbass. You have a son and—”

“I don’t know about that, Maddy. It was a bit too messy for charges. And this Tim Moon guy, he cheats, Maddy—threw dirt in my eye and ran. I mean, that’s what kind of guy we’re dealing with here. He’s—”

“I’m not talking about your stupid fight. Do you know what those fiddles cost? It’s his livelihood, Ellis. He can’t just replace them.”

“That’s the idea. That’s the learning outcome we’re going for.”

“You need help. Talk to somebody. I don’t want you talking to me, and I’m not comfortable leaving Gleason with you until you get help. I would have *never* left him with you this weekend had I known what you did.”

“Yet I leave him with you given what you did. I am now forced to wonder why. And why we’re forced to say ‘fiddles’ with gravity. Why aren’t they ‘violins,’ Maddy?”

She sighs, says, “Well, here we go, I guess,” and hangs up.

That afternoon, Sam and Kenny wait for me in the lot. Kenny steps forward and clamps my hand again—I feel the counterweight of the refilled water jug in his other. “Thank you again for having me in your class today, sir,” he says with eye-contact. “I enjoyed it.” I am struck by the evident scope and rigor of Sam’s homeschool program.

Sam stands back, watching us, a glimmer in his flinty eye as he waits to see my horseshit professorial act. Behind him, his van rocks gently.

“*Elias!*”—he whaps the van.

“You got other kids in there?” I say.

“Hell no. That’s Elias.” He flicks a glance at Kenny, trying not to smirk. “The old bull.”

“There is a bull in your van?” The van rocks again; there is the muffled thunder of warbling metal. “That’s a bull in there? Really?”

“Off to slaughter. He and the goat.”

I look at Kenny. “My god, there’s a bull in there?”

“And a goat. Kenny has to shove away Elias’s head while I drive and keep the goat out of my lap.” He digs out his keys. “After a while they get to sliding around in the shit. It gets hairy.”

He glances over as he unlocks the driver’s door to make sure I’m eating it all up.

“Ride out with us. We’re just going to Wolcott and back.”

I smile at the pavement—a polite professorial smile I can feel Sam appraising. “I got some laundry to get to.”

“Come on.” They are already hopping into the van. “How are we supposed to pay you back for all the Dresden shit? I’ll drop you off coming back. Won’t take an hour. We won’t keep you from your laundry.”

* * *

I feel the weight of the bull take over as Sam rides the brakes down the hill from the college, the front axle loading, the hooves sliding forward across the van's slimed diamond-plated bay behind us; I am certain we are about to be crushed. Kenny squats between the passenger and driver seats with the water jug between his feet and his hand on the bull's snout, pushing it back, pushing hard—a physically absurd but fundamentally authoritative act. I feel the horns press into the back of my seat as the bull tries to turn loose from Kenny's grip. An abrupt stop would impale us.

I wonder briefly if Sam is negligent. Or if this is how life must be lived if it is to be lived at all: improbably. A dialectic of delusion and luck. The windows are down and the shit is still overpowering, sour and devoid of farmyard charm. A heavy snowmelt breeze whops through the van like soaked curtains. My brain goes baggy and ejects the day's troubling classroom palls. A few weeks ago, I used to drive home thinking how there would be no lamp on, no human noise. Now I just don't think of home. It doesn't occur to me anymore. Home is a coffee stain on the kitchen floor I won't stoop to wipe, a blown-out laundry rack I can't fix.

"So goddammit, what do I do?" Sam yells over the wind, hunched over the wheel for traffic as he coasts heavily past the stop sign and across the highway intersection. "Do I need this degree? Do I keep bleeding out my savings for this? Is it worth it?"

I shake my head. "It's not worth it. I don't know, what do you want with a degree?"

"I want to *have* it."

"Then it's not worth it, Sam."

"I'm fourteen grand in, man. I quit my job."

I shrug at the side-mirror, dose him with an ellipsis.

Sam drives for a while. Elias puffs wild tubular air through his nostrils, shuffles as Kenny's hand rests on its filthy snout. The goat keeps making the noise of a turn-over farmyard noise toy. I don't know where the goat is. "All right, then," he says, shaking his head, then nodding. "Goddammit all right, then." He slaps Kenny's hip. "You hear that, son? Your daddy just learned something." He's elated. He's eye-deep in shit and slaughter, but at least he's not dissolute. He hasn't been missing a thing and now he knows it. Here's the answer, professor, what's your question. 🐐