

BUCKEYE THE ELDER

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THINGS I LEARNED ABOUT BUCKEYE a few minutes before he broke my collarbone: he is twenty-five years old, in love with my older sister, a native of Wisconsin and therefore a Badger. "Not really a Buckeye at all," he explained, sitting in my father's recliner and paging through a book about UFOs and other unsolved mysteries. "But I keep the name for respect of the man who gave it to me, my father and the most loyal alumnus Ohio State ever produced."

Buckeye had stopped by earlier this afternoon to visit my sister, Simone, whom he had been seeing over the past week or so. Though Simone had yammered all about him over the dinner table, it was the first time I'd actually met him. When he arrived, Simone wasn't back from her class at the beauty college and I was the only one in the house. Buckeye came inside for a few minutes and talked to me like I was someone he'd known since childhood. He showed me the old black-and-white photos of his parents, a gold tooth he found on the floor of a bar in Detroit, a ticket stub autographed by Marty Robbins. Among other things, we talked about his passion for rugby, and he invited me out to the front yard for a few lessons on rules and technique. Everything went fine until tackling came up. He positioned himself in front of me and instructed me to try to get around him and he would demonstrate the proper way to wrap up the ball player and drag him down. I did what I was told and ended up with two-hundred-plus pounds' worth of Buckeye driving my shoulder into the hard dirt. We both heard the snap, clear as you please.

"Was that you?" Buckeye said, already picking me up and setting me on my feet. My left shoulder sagged and I couldn't move my arm

but there wasn't an alarming amount of pain. Buckeye helped me to the porch and brought out the phone so I could call my mother, who is on her way over right now to pick me up and take me to the hospital.

I'm sitting in one of the porch rocking chairs and Buckeye is standing next to me, nervously shifting his feet. He is the picture of guilt and worry; he puts his face in his hands, paces up and down the steps, comes back over to inspect my shoulder for the dozenth time. There is a considerable lump where the fractured bone is pushing up against the skin.

A grim-faced Buckeye says, "Snapped in two, not a doubt in this world."

He puts his face right into mine as if he's trying to see something behind my eyes. "You aren't in shock are you?" he says. "You don't want an ambulance?"

"I'm okay," I say. Other than being a little light-headed, I feel pretty good. There is something gratifying about having a serious injury and no serious pain to go with it. More than anything, I'm worried about Buckeye, who is acting like he's just committed murder. He's asked me twice now if I wouldn't just let him swing me over his shoulders and run me over to the hospital himself.

"Where is my self-control?" he questions the rain gutter. "Why can't I get a hold of my situations?" He turns to me and says, "There's no excuses, none, but I'm used to tackling guys three times your size, God forgive me. I didn't think you'd go down that easy."

Buckeye has a point. I am almost as tall as he is but am at least sixty pounds lighter. All I really feel right now is embarrassment for going down so easy. I tell him that it was nobody's fault, that my parents are generally reasonable people, and that my sister will probably like him all that much more.

Buckeye doesn't look at all comforted. He keeps up his pacing. He thinks aloud with his chin in his chest, mumbling into the collar of his shirt as if there is someone down there listening. He rubs his head with his big knobby hands and gives himself a good tongue-lashing. There is an ungainly energy to the way he moves. He is thick in some places, thin in others, and has joints like those on a backhoe. He's barrel-chested, has elongated piano player's fingers and is missing a good portion of his left ear, which was ground off by the cleat of a stampeding

Polynesian at the Midwest Rugby Invationals. I can't explain this, but I'm feeling quite pleased that Buckeye has broken my shoulder.

When my mother pulls up in her new Lincoln, Buckeye picks me up and the chair I'm in. With long, smooth strides he delivers me to the car, all the time saying some sort of prayer, asking the Lord to bless me, heal me, and help me forgive. One of the more important things that Buckeye didn't tell me about himself that first day was that he is a newly baptized Mormon. I've found out this is the only reason my parents ever let him within rock-throwing distance of my sister. As far as my parents are concerned, solid Baptists that they are, either you're with Jesus or you're against him. I guess they figured that Buckeye, as close as he might be to the dividing line, is on the right side.

In the week that has passed since the accident, Buckeye has turned our house into a carnival. The night we came home from the hospital, me straight-backed and awkward in my brace and Buckeye still asking forgiveness every once in a while, we had a celebration—in honor of who or what I still can't be sure. We ordered pizza and my folks, who almost never drink, made banana daiquiris while Simone held hands with Buckeye and sipped ginger ale. Later, my daiquiri-inspired father, once a 163-pound district champion in high school, coaxed Buckeye into a wrestling match in the front room. While my sister squealed and my mother screeched about hospital bills and further injury, Buckeye wore a big easy grin and let my father pin him solidly on our mint-green carpet.

I suppose there were two things going on: we were officially sanctioning Buckeye's relationship with Simone and at the same time commemorating my fractured clavicle, the first manly injury I've ever suffered. Despite and possibly because of the aspirations of my sports-mad father, I am the type of son who gets straight A's and likes to sit in his room and make models of spaceships. My father dreamed I would play for the Celtics one day. Right now, having just finished my sophomore year in high school, my only aspiration is to write a best-selling fantasy novel.

My sister goes to beauty school, which is a huge disappointment to my pediatrician mother. Simone can't bear to tell people that my father distills sewer water for a living. Even though I love them, I sincerely

believe my parents to be narrow-minded religious fanatics, and as for Simone, I think beauty school might be an intellectual stretch. As far as I can tell, our family is nothing more than a bunch of people living in the same house who are disappointed in each other.

But we all love Buckeye. He's the only thing we agree on. The fact that Simone and my parents would go for someone like him is surprising when you consider the coarse look he has about him, the kind of look you see on people in bus stations and in the backs of fruit trucks. Maybe it's his fine set of teeth that salvages him from looking like an out-and-out redneck.

Tonight Buckeye is taking me on a drive. Since we first met, Buckeye has spent more time with me than he has with Simone. My parents think this is a good idea; I don't have many friends and they think he will have a positive effect on their agnostic, asocial son. We are in his rust-cratered vehicle that might have been an Oldsmobile at one time. Buckeye has just finished a day's work as a pantyhose salesman and smells like the perfume of the women he talks to on porches and doorsteps. He sells revolutionary no-run stockings that carry a lifetime guarantee. He's got stacks of them in the back seat. At eighteen dollars a pair, he assured these women, they are certainly a bargain. He is happy and loose and driving all over the road. He has just brought me up to date on his teenage years, his father's death, the thirteen states he's lived in and the twenty-two jobs he's held since then.

"Got it all up here," he says, tapping his forehead. "Don't let a day slide by without detailed documentation." Over the past few days I've noticed Buckeye has a way of speaking that makes people pause. One minute he sounds like a West Texas oil grunt, the next like a semi-educated Midwesterner. Buckeye is a constant surprise.

"Why move around so much?" I wonder. "And why come to Texas?"

He says, "I just move, no reason that I can think of. For one thing, I'm here looking for my older brother Bud. He loves the Cowboys and fine women. He could very well be in the vicinity."

"How'd your father die?" I say.

"His heart attacked him. Then his liver committed suicide and the rest of his organs just gave up after that. Too much drinking. That's when I left Wisconsin for good."

We are passing smelters and gas stations and trailers that sit back off the road. This is a part of Tyler I've never seen before. He pulls the old car into the parking lot of a huge wooden structure with a sign that says THE RANCH in big matchstick letters. The sun is just going down but the place is lit up like Las Vegas. There is a fleet of dirty pickups overrunning the parking lot.

We find a space in the back and Buckeye leads me through a loading dock and into the kitchen, where a trio of Hispanic ladies is doing dishes. He stops and chatters at them in a mixture of bad Spanish and hand gestures. "Come on," he says to me. "I'm going to show you the man I once was."

We go out into the main part, which is as big as a ballroom. There are two round bars out in the middle of it and a few raised platforms where some half-dressed women are dancing. Chairs and tables are scattered all along the edges. The music is so loud I can feel it bouncing off my chest. Buckeye nods and wags his finger and smiles at everybody we pass and they respond like old friends. Buckeye, who's been in Tyler less than a month, does this everywhere we go and if you didn't know any better you'd think he was acquainted with every citizen in town.

We find an empty table against the wall right next to one of the dancers. She has on lacy black panties and a cutoff T-shirt that is barely sufficient to hold in all her equipment. Buckeye politely says hello, but she doesn't even look our way.

This is the first bar I've ever been in and I like the feel of it. Buckeye orders Cokes and buffalo wings for us both and surveys the place, once in a while raising a hand to acknowledge someone he sees. Even though I've lived in Texas since I was born, I've never seen so many oversized belt buckles in one place.

"This is the first time I've been back here since my baptism," he says. "I used to spend most of my nonworking hours in this barn."

While he has told me about a lot of things, he's never said anything about his conversion. The only reason I even know about it is that I overheard my parents discussing Buckeye's worthiness to date my sister.

"Why did you get baptized?" I say.

Buckeye squints through the smoke and his voice takes on an unusual amount of gravity. "This used to be me, sitting right here and

drinking till my teeth fell out. I was one of these people—not good, not bad, sincerely trying to make things as easy as possible. A place like this draws you in, pulls at you."

I watch the girl in the panties gyrating above us and I think I can see what he's getting at.

He continues: "But this ain't all there is. Simply is not. There's more to it than this. You've got to figure out what's right and what's wrong and then you've got to make a stand. Most people don't want to put out the effort. I'm telling you, I know it's not easy. Goodness has a call that's hard to hear."

I nod, not to indicate that I understand what he's saying, but as a signal for him to keep going. Even though I've had my fair share of experience with them, I've never understood religious people.

"Do you know what life's about? The *why* of the whole thing?" Buckeye asks.

"No more than anybody else," I say.

"Do you think you'll ever know?"

"Maybe someday."

Buckeye holds up a half-eaten chicken wing for emphasis. "Exactly," he says through a full mouth. "I could scratch my balls forever if I had the time." He finishes off the rest of his chicken and shrugs. "To know, you have to do. You have to get out there and take action, put your beliefs to the test. Sitting around on your duff will get you nothing better than a case of the hemorrhoids."

"If you're such a believer, why don't you go around like my parents do, spouting scripture and all that?" I reason that if I just keep asking questions I will eventually get Buckeye figured out.

"For one thing," Buckeye says flatly, "and you don't need to go telling this to anybody else, but I'm not much of a reader."

I raise my eyebrows.

"Look here," he says, taking the menu from between the ketchup and sugar bottles. He points at something on it and says, "This is 'a,' this is a 't,' and here's a 'g.' This says 'hamburger'—I know that one. Oh, and this is 'beer.' I learned that early on." He looks up at me. "Nope, I can't read, not really. I never stayed put long enough to get an education. But I'm smart enough to fool anybody."

If this were a movie and not real life I would feel terrible for Buck-

eye—maybe I would vow to teach him to read, give him self-worth, help him become a complete human being. For the climax he would win the national spelling bee or something. But this is reality and as I look across the table at Buckeye, I can see his illiteracy doesn't bother him a bit. In fact, he looks rather pleased with himself.

"Like I've been telling you, it's not the reading, it's not the saying. It's only the doing I'm interested in. Do it, do it, do it," Buckeye says, hammering each "do it" into the table with his Coke bottle. He leans into his chair, a wide grin overtaking his face. "But sometimes it certainly is nice to kick back and listen to the music."

We sit there quiet for awhile, me doing my best not to stare at the dancer and Buckeye with his head back and eyes closed, sniffing the air with the deep concentration of a wine judge. A pretty woman in jeans and a flannel shirt comes up behind Buckeye and asks him to dance. There are only a few couples out on the floor. Most everybody else is sitting at their tables, drinking and yelling at each other over the music.

"Thanks but no thanks," Buckeye says.

"What about you?" she says.

I panic. My face gets hot and I begin to fidget. "No, no," I say. "No, thank you."

The woman seems amused by us and our Cokes. She takes a long look at both of us with her hands on the back of an empty chair.

"Go ahead," Buckeye says. "I'll hold down the fort."

I shake my head and look down into my lap. "That's quite all right," I say. I don't know how to dance and the brace I'm wearing makes me look like I've got arthritis.

Buckeye sighs, smiles, gets up and leads the woman out onto the floor. She puts her head on his chest and I watch them drift away, swaying to the beat of a song about good love gone bad.

When the song is over Buckeye comes back with a flushed face and a look of exasperation. He says, "You see what I mean? That girl wanted things and for me to do them to her. She wanted these things done as soon as possible. She asked me if I didn't want to load her bases." He plops down in his chair and drains his Coke with one huge swallow. It doesn't even make him blink.

On our way home he pulls into the deserted front of a drive-in

movie theater and floors the accelerator, yanking the steering wheel all the way over to the left and holding it there. He yells, "Carnival ride!" and the car goes round and round, pinning me to the passenger door, spitting up geysers of dust and creaking and groaning as if it might fly into pieces at any second. When he finally throws on the brakes, we sit there, the great cloud of dust we made settling down on the car, making ticking noises on the roof. The world continues to hurtle around me and I can feel my stomach throbbing like a heart.

Buckeye looks over at me, his head swaying back and forth a little, and says, "Now doesn't that make you feel like you've had too much to drink?"

Simone and I are on the roof. It's somewhere around midnight and there are bats zooming around our heads. We can hear the *swish* as they pass. I have only a pair of shorts on and Simone is wearing an oversized T-shirt. The warm grainy tar paper holds us against the steep incline of the roof like Velcro. Old pipes have forced us out here. Right now these pipes, the ones that run through the north walls of our turn-of-the-century house, are engaged in their semiannual vibrational moaning. According to the plumber, this condition has to do with drastic changes in temperature; either we could pay thousands of dollars to have the pipes replaced or we could put up with a little annoying moaning once in awhile.

With my sister's windows closed it sounds like someone crying in the hallway at the top of the stairs. My parents, with extra years of practice under their belts, have learned to sleep through it.

Simone and I are actually engaged in something that resembles conversation. Naturally, we are talking about Buckeye. If Buckeye has done nothing else, he has given us something to talk about.

For the first time in her life Simone seems to be seriously in love. She's had boyfriends before, but Simone is the type of girl who will break up with a guy because she doesn't like the way his clothes match. She's known Buckeye for all of three weeks and is already talking about names for their children. All of this without anything close to sexual contact. "Do you think he really likes me?"

This is a question I've been asked before. "Difficult to say," I tell her. In my young life I've learned the advantages of ambivalence.

Actually, I've asked Buckeye directly how he felt for my sister and this is the response I got: "I have feelings for her, feelings that could make an Eskimo sweat, but as far as feelings go, these simply aren't the right kind. There's a control problem I'm worried about."

"He truly loves the Lord," Simone says into the night. My sister, who wouldn't know a Bible from the menu at Denny's, thinks this is beautiful.

Over the past couple of weeks I've begun to see the struggle that is going on with Buckeye, in which the Lord is surely involved. Buckeye never says anything about it, never lets on, but it's there. It's a battle that pits Buckeye the Badger against Buckeye the Mormon. Buckeye told me that in his old life as the Badger he never stole anything, never lied without first making sure he didn't have a choice, got drunk once in a while, fought some, cussed quite a bit and had only the women that wanted him. Now, as a Mormon, there is a whole list of things he has to avoid including coffee, tea, sex, tobacco, swearing, and as Buckeye puts it, "anything else unbecoming that smacks of the natural man."

To increase his strength and defenses, Buckeye has taken to denying himself, testing his willpower in various ways. I've seen him go without food for two full days. While he watches TV he holds his breath for as long as he can, doesn't use the bathroom until he's within seconds of making a mess. As part of his rugby training, he bought an old tractor tire, filled it with rocks, made a rope harness for it and every morning drags it through the streets from his neighborhood to ours, which is at least three miles. When he comes inside he is covered with sweat but will not accept liquid of any kind. Before taking a shower he goes out onto the driveway and does a hundred pushups on his knuckles.

Since they've met, Buckeye has not so much as touched my sister except for some innocent hand-holding. Considering that he practically lives at our house and already seems like a brother-in-law, I find this a little weird. Buckeye and his non-contact love is making Simone deranged and I must say I'm enjoying it. The funny thing is, I think it's having the same effect on him. There are times when Buckeye, once perpetually casual as blue jeans, cannot stay in one spot for more than a few seconds. He moves around like someone worried about being

picked off by a sniper. He will become suddenly emotional, worse than certain menstruating women I'm related to: pissed off one minute, joyful the next. All of this is not lost on Buckeye. In his calmer and more rational moments he has come to theorize that a bum gland somewhere in his brain is responsible.

I sit back and listen to the pipes moaning like mating animals behind the walls. Hummingbird Lane, the street I've lived on my entire life, stretches off both ways into darkness. The clouds are low and the lights of the city reflect off them, giving everything a green, murky glow. Next to me my sister is chatting with herself, talking about the intrigues of beauty school, some of the inane deeds of my parents, her feeling and plans for Buckeye.

"Do you think I should get baptized?" she says. "Do you think he'd want me to?"

I snort.

"What?" she says. "Just because you're an atheist or something?"

"I'm not an atheist," I tell her. "I'm just not looking for any more burdens than I already have."

The next morning, on Sunday, Buckeye comes to our house a newly ordained elder. I come upstairs just in time to hear him explain to Simone and my parents that he has been endowed with the power to baptize, to preach the gospel, to lay on the administering of hands, to heal. It's the first time I've seen him in his Sunday clothes: striped shirt, blaring polyester tie and shoes that glitter so brightly you'd think they'd been shined by a Marine. He's wearing some kind of potent cologne that makes my eyes tear up if I get too close. Damn me if the phrase doesn't apply: Buckeye looks born again. As if he'd just been pulled from the womb and scrubbed a glowing pink.

"Gosh dang," Buckeye says, "do I feel nice?"

I can handle Buckeye the Badger and Buckeye the Mormon, but Buckeye the Elder? When I think of elders I imagine bent, bearded men who are old enough to have the right to speak mysterious nonsense.

I have to admit, however, that he looks almost holy. He's on a high, he's ready to raise the dead. He puts up his dukes and performs some intricate Muhammad Ali footwork—something he does when he's

feeling particularly successful. We all watch him in wonder. My parents, just back from prayer meeting themselves, look particularly awed.

After lunch, once Buckeye has left, we settle down for our "Sabbath family conversation." Usually it's not so much a conversation as it is an excuse for us to yell at each other in a constructive format. As always, my father calls the meeting to order and then my mother, who is a diabetic, begins by sighing and apologizing for the mess the house has been in for the past few weeks; her insulin intake has been adjusted and she hasn't been feeling well. This is just her way of blaming us for not helping out more. Simone breaks in and tries to defend herself by reminding everyone she's done the dishes twice this week, my father snaps at her for not letting my mother finish, and things take their natural course from there. Simone whines, my mother rubs her temples, my father asks the Lord why we can't be a happy Christian family, and I smirk and finish off my pistachio ice cream. Whenever Buckeye is not around, it seems, we go right back to normal.

No only does Buckeye keep our household happy and lighthearted with his presence, but he has also avoided any religious confrontation with my folks. Buckeye is not naturally religious like my parents, and he doesn't say much at all, just goes about his business, quietly believing what the folks at the Mormon church teach him. This doesn't keep Mom and Dad from loving him more than anybody. I hope it doesn't sound too bitter of me to say he's the son they never had. Buckeye goes fishing with my father (I'm squeamish about putting live things on hooks) and is currently educating my mother on how to grow a successful vegetable garden. They believe a boy as well mannered and decent as Buckeye could not be fooled by "those Mormons" for long. They are just biding their time until Buckeye comes to his spiritual senses. Then they will dazzle him with the special brand of truth found only in the Holton Hills Reformed Baptist Church, the church where they were not only saved, but where they met and eventually got married. They've tried to get Pastor Wild and Buckeye in the house at the same time but so far it hasn't worked out. Up until now, though, I would have to say that Buckeye has done most of the dazzling.

One of my biggest worries is that I will be sterile. I don't know why I think about this; I am young and have never come close to having

a girl. About a year ago I was perusing the public library and found a book all about sterility and the affliction it causes in people's lives. The book said that for some people, it is a tragedy that transcends all others. In what seems to be some sort of fateful coincidence I went home and turned on the TV and there was Phil Donahue discussing this very topic with four very downtrodden-looking men and their unfulfilled wives. I didn't sleep that night and I worried about it for weeks. I even thought about secretly going to the doctor and having myself checked. I guess I believe my life has been just a little too tragedy free for my own comfort.

This is what I'm thinking about with a rifle in my hands and Buckeye at my side. We are in a swamp looking for something to shoot. One of the big attractions of the Mormon church for Buckeye was that they don't have any outright prohibitions against shooting things. Buckeye has two rifles and a handgun he keeps under the front seat of his Oldsmobile. I've got a .22 (something larger might aggravate my shoulder) and Buckeye is toting some kind of high-caliber hunting rifle that he says could take the head off a rhino. My parents took Simone to a fashion show in Dallas, so today it's just me and Buckeye, out for a little manly fun.

I'm not sure, but it doesn't seem as if we're actually hunting anything special. The afternoon is sticky full of bugs, and the chirping of birds tumbles down out of old moss-laden trees. A few squirrels whiz by and a thick black snake crosses our path, but Buckeye doesn't even notice. I guess if something worthwhile comes along, we'll shoot it.

I tell Buckeye about my sterility worries. He and I share secrets. I suppose this is something women do all the time, but I've never tried it with any of the few friends I have. This sterility thing is my last big one and probably the one that embarrasses me the most. When I get through the entire explanation Buckeye looks at me twice and laughs.

"You've never popped your cork with a girl?" he says. The expression on his face would lead me to believe that he finds this idea pretty incredible. I am really embarrassed now. I walk faster, tripping through the underbrush so Buckeye can't see all the blood rushing into my face. Buckeye picks up his pace and stays right with me. He says, "Being sterile would have been a blessing for me at your age. I used to lay pipe

all over the place, and while nobody can be sure, there's a good chance I'm somebody's papa."

I stop and look at him. With Buckeye, it's more and more secrets all the time. A few days ago he told me that on a few nights of the year he can see the ghost of his mother.

"What do you mean, 'nobody can be sure?'" I say.

"With the kind of girls I used to do things with, nothing was certain. The only way you could get even a vague idea was to wait and see what color the kid came out to be."

There's a good chance Buckeye's the father of children he doesn't even know and I've got baseless worries about being sterile. Buckeye points his gun at a crow passing overhead. He follows it across the sky and says, "Don't get upset about that anyway. This is the modern world. You could have the most worthless sperm on record and there'd be a way to get around it. They've got drugs and lasers that can do just about anything. Like I say, a guy your age should only have worries about getting his cork popped. Your problem is you read too much."

I must have a confused look on my face because Buckeye stops so he can explain himself. With a blunt finger he diagrams the path of his argument on my chest. "Now there's having fun when you're young and aren't supposed to know better, and then there's the time when you've got to come to terms with things, line your ducks up in a row. You've got to have sins before there's repentance. I should know about that. Get it all out of you now. You're holding back for no good reason I can see. Some people hold it in until they're middle-aged and then explode. And frankly, I believe there's nothing quite as ugly as that."

We clamber through the brush for a while, me trying to reason through what I've just heard and Buckeye whistling bluegrass tunes and aiming at trees. I haven't seen him this relaxed in a long time. We come into a clearing where an old car sits on its axles in a patch of undergrowth. Remarkably, all its windows are still intact and we simply can't resist the temptation to fill the thing full of holes. We're blazing away at that sorry car, filled with the macho euphoria that comes with making loud noises and destroying things, when a Ford pickup barrels into the clearing on a dirt road just to the south of us. A skinny old geezer with a grease-caked hat pulled down over his eyes jumps out.

To get where we are, we had to crawl through a number of barbed

wire fences and there is not a lot of doubt we're on somebody's land. The way the old man is walking toward us, holding his rifle out in front of him, would suggest that he is that somebody, and he's not happy that we're on his property. "You sons of bitches," he growls once he's within earshot.

"How do you do," Buckeye says back.

The man stops about twenty feet away from us, puts the gun up to his shoulder and points it first at Buckeye, then at me. I have never been on the business end of a firearm before and the experience is definitely edifying. You get weak in the knees and take account of all the deeds of your life.

"This is it," the man says. He's so mad he's shaking. My attention never wavers from the end of that gun.

"Is there some problem we don't know about?" Buckeye says, still holding his gun in the crook of his arm. I have already dropped my weapon and am debating on whether or not to put my hands up.

"You damn shits!" the man nearly screeches. It's obvious he doesn't like the tone of Buckeye's voice. I wish Buckeye would notice this also.

"You come in here and wreck my property and shoot up my things and then give me this polite talk. I'm either going to take you to jail right now or shoot you where you stand and throw you in the river. I'm trying to decide."

This guy appears absolutely serious. He is weathered and bent and has a face full of scars; he looks capable of a list of things worse than murder. I begin to compose what I know will be a short and futile speech, something about the merits of mercy, but before I can deliver it Buckeye sighs and points his rifle at the old man.

"This is the perfect example of what my Uncle Lester Lewis, retired lieutenant colonel, likes to call 'mutually assured destruction.' He loves the idea. We can both stay or we can both go. As for myself, this is as good a time as any. I'm in the process of putting things right with my Maker. What about you?"

I watch the fire go out of the old man's eyes and his face get slack and pasty. He keeps his gun up but doesn't answer.

"Shall we put down our guns or stand here all day?" Buckeye says happily.

The man slowly backs up, keeping his gun trained on Buckeye. By the time he makes it back to his pickup, Buckeye has already lowered his gun. "I'm calling the police right now!" the man yells, his voice cracking into a whole range of different octaves. "They're going to put you shits away for good!"

Buckeye swings his gun up and shoots once over the man's head. As the pickup scrambles away over gravel and clumps of weeds, Buckeye shoots three or four times into the dirt behind it, sending up small *poofs* of dust. We watch the truck disappear into the trees and I work on getting my lungs functional again. Buckeye retrieves my gun and hands it to me. "We better get," he says.

We thrash through the trees and underbrush until we find the car. Buckeye drives the thing like he's playing a video game, flipping the gearshift and spinning the steering wheel. He works the gas and brake pedals with both feet and shouts at the narrow dirt road when it doesn't curve the way he expects. We skid off the road once in awhile, ending the life of a young tree, maybe, or putting a wheel into a ditch, but Buckeye never lets up. By the time we make it back to the highway we hear sirens.

"I guess that old cooter wasn't pulling our short and curlies," Buckeye says. He is clearly enjoying all this—his eyes are bright and a little frenzied. I have my head out the window in case I vomit.

Once we get back to civilization Buckeye slows down and we meander along like we're out to buy a carton of milk at the grocery store. The sirens have faded away and I don't even have a theory as to where we might be until Buckeye takes a shortcut between two warehouses and we end up in the parking lot of The Ranch. The place is deserted except for a rusty VW bug.

"Never been here this early in the day, but it's got to be open," Buckeye says, still panting. I shrug, not yet feeling capable of forming words. It's three in the afternoon.

"When's the last time you had a nice cold beer?" Buckeye says a little wistfully.

"Never, really," I admit after a few seconds. What I don't admit to is that I've never even tasted any form of liquor in all my life. My parents have banned Simone and me from drinking alcohol until we reach the legal drinking age. Then, they say, we can decide for our-

selves. Unlike Simone, I've never felt the need to defy my parents on this account. When I get together with my few friends we usually eat pizza and play Dungeons and Dragons. No one has ever suggested something like beer. Since I've known Buckeye, I've discovered what a sorry excuse for a teenager I am.

Buckeye shakes his head and whistles in disbelief. I guess we surprise each other. "Then let's go get you a beer," he says. "You're thirsty, aren't you? I'll settle for a Coke."

The front doors, big wooden affairs that swing both ways, are locked with a padlock and chain. Buckeye smiles at me and knocks on one of the doors. "There's got to be somebody in there. I know some of the people that work here. They'll get us set up."

Buckeye knocks for a while longer but doesn't get any results. He peers through a window, goes back to the doors and pounds on them with both fists, producing a hollow booming noise that sounds like cannons from a distance. He kicks at the door and punches it a few times, leaving bright red circle-shaped scrapes on the tops of his knuckles.

"What is this?" he yells. "What is this? Hey!"

He throws his shoulder into the place where the doors meet. The doors buckle inward, making a metallic crunching noise, but the chain doesn't give. I try to tell Buckeye that I'm really not that thirsty, but he doesn't hear me. He hurls his body into the doors again, then stalks around and picks up a three-foot-high wooden cowboy next to the cement path that leads to the entrance. This squat, goofy-looking guy was carved out of a single block of wood and holds up a sign that says, "Come on in!" Buckeye emits a tearing groan and pitches it underhand against the door and succeeds only in breaking the cowboy's handlebar mustache. Buckeye has a kind of possessed look on his face, his eyes vacant, the cords in his neck taut like ropes. He picks the cowboy up again, readies himself for another throw, then drops it at his feet. He stares at me for a few seconds, his features falling into a vaguely pained expression, and sits down on the top step. He sets the cowboy upright and his hands tremble as he fiddles with the mustache, trying to make the broken part stay. He is red all over and sweating.

"I guess I'll have to owe you that beer," he says.

...

Simone, my father and I are sitting around the dinner table and staring at the food on our plates. We're all distraught; we poke at our enchiladas and don't look at each other. The past forty-eight hours have been rough on us: first, my mother's diabetic episode, and now Buckeye has disappeared.

My mother is upstairs, resting. The doctors told her not to get out of bed for a week. Since yesterday morning old ladies from the church have been bringing over food, flowers and get-well cards in waves. In the kitchen we have casseroles stacked into pyramids.

As for Buckeye, nobody has seen him in two days. He hasn't called or answered his phone. My father has just returned from the boarding house where Buckeye rents a room and the owner told him that she hadn't seen Buckeye either, but it was against her policy to let strangers look in the rooms.

"One more day and we'll have to call the police," my father says. He's made this exact statement at least three times now.

Simone, distressed as she is, cannot get any food in her mouth. She looks down at the food on her plate as if it's something she can't fully comprehend. She gets a good forkful of enchiladas halfway to her mouth before she loses incentive and drops the fork back onto her plate. I think it's the first time in her twenty-one years that she's had to deal with real-life problems more serious than the loss of a contact lens.

It all started three days ago, one day after the incident with the guns. I spent that entire morning nursing an irrational fear that somehow the police were going to track us down and there would be a patrol car pulling up outside the house any minute. I was the only one home except for my mother, who had taken the day off sick from work and was sleeping upstairs.

I holed myself up in my basement bedroom to watch TV and read my books. At about four o'clock I heard a knock at the front door and nearly passed out from fright. I had read in magazines what happens in prisons to young clean people like me. I was sure that trespassing and destruction of property, not to mention shooting in the general direction of the owner, would get Buckeye and me some serious time in the pen.

The knocking came again and then someone opened the front

door. I pictured a police officer coming in our house with his pistol drawn. I turned off the light in my room, hid myself in the closet, and listened to the footsteps upstairs. It took me only a few seconds to realize the heavy shuffling gait of Buckeye.

Feeling relieved and a little ridiculous, I ran upstairs to find Buckeye going down the hall toward my parents' room.

"Hey, bubba," he said when he saw me. "Nobody answered the door so I let myself in. Simone told me your mother's sick. I've got something for her." He held up a mason jar filled with a dark-green substance.

"She's just tired," I said. "What is that?"

"It's got vitamins and minerals," he said. "Best thing in the world for sick and tired people. My grandpop taught me how to make it. All natural, no artificial flavors or colors although it could probably use some. It smells like what you might find in a baby's diaper and doesn't taste much better."

"Mom's sleeping," I said. "She told me not to wake her up unless there was an emergency."

"How long's she been asleep?" Buckeye said.

"Pretty much the whole day," I told him.

Buckeye looked at his watch. "That's not good. She needs to have something to eat. Nutrients and things."

I shrugged and Buckeye shrugged back. He looked worried and a little run-down himself. His hair flopped aimlessly around on his head. He rubbed the jar in his hands like it was a magic lamp.

"You could leave it and I'll give it to her. Or you can wait until she wakes up. Simone will be home pretty soon."

Buckeye looked at me and weighed his options. Then he turned on his heels, walked right up to my parents' bedroom door and rapped on it firmly. I deserted the hallway for the kitchen, not wanting to be implicated in this in any way. I was there only a few seconds when Buckeye appeared, short of breath and a peaked look on his face.

"Something's wrong," he said. "Your mother."

My mother was lying still on the bed, her eyes open, unblinking, staring at nothing. Her skin was pale and glossy and her swollen tongue was hanging out of her mouth and covered with white splotches. I stood in the doorway while Buckeye telephoned an ambu-

lance. "Mama?" I called from where I was standing. For some reason I couldn't make myself go any closer.

I walked out into the front yard and nearly fell on my face.

Everything went black for a moment. I thought I'd gone blind. When my sight came back the world looked so sharp and real it hurt. I picked up a rock from the flower planter and chucked it at the Conleys' big bay window across the street. I guess I figured that if my mother was dead, no one could blame me for doing something like that. I had always felt a special distaste for Mr. Conley and his fat sweating wife. I missed the window and the rock made a hollow thump on the fiberglass siding of the house. I cursed my uncoordinated body. If I had played Little League like my father had wanted all those years ago, that window would have been history.

I reeled around in the front yard until my father and the ambulance showed up. My mind didn't want to approach the idea that my mother might be lying deceased in her bed, so I didn't go near the house to find out. I hung out in the corner of the yard and swung dangerously back and forth in the lilac bushes. I watched the ambulance pull up and the paramedics run into my house followed a few minutes later by my father, who didn't even look my way. Neighbors were beginning to appear. I noticed their bald and liver-spotted heads poking out of windows and screen doors.

After a little while my father came out and found me sitting in the gardenias. He told me that my mother was not dead, but that she had had a severe diabetic reaction. "Too much insulin, not enough food," he said, wiping his eyes. "Why doesn't she take care of herself?"

I'd seen my mother have minor reactions, when she would get numb all over and forget what her name was and we'd have to make her eat candy or drink soda until she became better, but nothing like this. My father put his hand on my back and guided me inside where the paramedics were strapping her onto a stretcher. She didn't look any better than before.

"She's not dead," I said. I was honestly having trouble believing my father. I thought he might be trying to pull a fast one on me, saving me from immediate grief and shock. To me, my mother looked as dead as anything I'd ever seen, as dead as my aunt Sally in her coffin a few years ago, dense and filmy, like a figure carved from wax.

My father looked at me, his eyes moist and drawn, and shook his head. "She's serious, Lord help her, but she'll make it," he said. "I'm going to the hospital with her. I'll call you when I get there. Go and pray for her. That's what she needs from you."

I watched them load her into the ambulance and then went upstairs to pray. I had never really prayed in all my life, though I'd mouthed the words in Sunday school. But my father said that was what my mother needed, and helpless and lost as I felt, I couldn't come up with anything better to do.

I found Buckeye in my sister's room kneeling at the side of the bed. My first irrational thought was that he might be doing something questionable in there, looking through her underwear, etc., but then he started speaking and there was no doubt that I was listening to a prayer. He had his face pushed into his hands but his voice came at me as if he were talking to me through a pipe. I can't remember a word he said, only that he pleaded for my mother's life and health in a way that made it impossible for me to move away from the door and leave him to his privacy. I forgot myself completely and stood dumbly above the stairs, my hand resting on the doorknob.

Buckeye rocked on his knees and talked to the Lord. If it is possible to be humble and demanding at the same time, Buckeye was pulling it off: he dug the heels of his hands into his forehead and called on the Almighty in a near shout. He asked questions and seemed to get answers. He pleaded for mercy. He chattered on for minutes, lost in something that seemed to range from elation to despair. I have never heard anything like that, never felt that way before. Light was going up and down my spine and hitting the backs of my eyes. I don't think it's stretching it to say that for a few moments, I was genuinely certain that God, who or whatever He may be, was in that room. Despite myself, I had to peek around the door to make sure there was really nobody in there except Buckeye.

After Buckeye finished, I stumbled into my parents' room and sat on their bed. I put my hand on the place where my mother's body had made an indentation in the sheets and picked the hairs off her pillow. Buckeye's prayer had been enough; I didn't think I could add much more. I sat there and mumbled aloud to no one in particular that I backed up everything Buckeye had said, one hundred percent.

We went to the hospital and after an eternity of reading women's magazines and listening to Simone's sobbing, a doctor came out and told us that it looked like my mother would be fine, that we were lucky we found her when we did because if we had let her sleep another half-hour she certainly wouldn't have made it. Simone began to sob even louder and I looked at Buckeye, but he didn't react to what the doctor had said. He slumped in his chair and looked terribly tired. Relief sucked everything out of me and left me so weak that I couldn't help but let loose a few stray tears myself.

While my father filled out insurance forms, Buckeye mumbled something about needing to get some sleep. He gave Simone a kiss on the forehead and patted my father and me on the back and wandered away into the dark halls of the hospital. That was the last any of us saw of him.

My mother's nearly buying the farm and the disappearance of Buckeye, the family hero, has thrown us all into a state. I poke at a mound of Jell-O with my fork and say, "I bet he's just had a good run of luck selling pantyhose. By now he's probably selling them to squaws in Oklahoma." I don't really know why I say things like this. I guess it's because I'm the baby of the family, a teenager, and making flippant, smart-ass remarks is part of my job.

My father shakes his head in resigned paternal disappointment and Simone bares her teeth and throws me a look of such hate that I'm unable to make another comment. My father asks me why I don't go to my room and do something worthwhile. I decide to take his advice. I thump down the stairs, turn up my stereo as loud as it will go, lie down on my bed and stare at the ceiling. Before I go to sleep I imagine sending words to heaven, having the clouds open up before me, revealing a light so brilliant I can't make out what's inside.

I'm awakened by a sound like a manhole cover being slid from its place. It's dark in my room, the music is off, and someone has put a blanket over me. Most likely my father, who occasionally acts quite motherly when my mother is not able to. There is a scrape and a thud and I twist around to see Buckeye stuffed into the small window well on the other side of the room, looking at me through the glass.

He has pushed away the wrought-iron gate that covers the well

and is squatting in the dead leaves and spider webs that cover the bottom of it. Buckeye is just a big jumble of shadow and moonlight, but I can still make out his unmistakable smile. I get up and slide open the window.

"Good evening," Buckeye whispers, polite as ever. He presses his palms against the screen. "I didn't want to wake you up, but I brought you something. Do you want to come out here?"

I run upstairs, go out the front door and find Buckeye trying to lift himself out of the window well onto the grass. I help him up and say, "Where have you been?"

When Buckeye straightens up and faces me, I get a strong whiff of alcohol and old sweat. He acts like he didn't hear my question. He holds up a finger, indicating for me to wait a moment, and goes to his car, leaning to the right just a little. He comes back with a case of Stroh's and bestows it on me as if it's a red pillow with the crown jewels on top. "This is that beer I owe you," he says, his voice gritty and raw with drink. "I wanted to get you a keg of the good-tasting stuff, but I couldn't find any this late."

We stand in the wet grass and look at each other. His lower lip is split and swollen, his half-ear is a mottled purple and he's got what looks like lipstick smudged on his chin. His boots are muddy and he's wearing the same clothes he had on three days ago.

"Your mother okay?" he says.

"She's fine. They want her to stay in bed a week or so."

"Simone?"

"She's been crying a lot."

For a long time he just stands there, his face gone slack, and looks past me to the dark house. "Everybody asleep in there?"

I look at my watch. It's almost three-thirty in the morning. "I guess so," I say.

Buckeye says, "Hey, let's take a load off. Looks like you're about to drop that beer." We walk over to the porch and sit down on the front steps. I keep the case in my lap, not really knowing what to do with it. Buckeye pulls off two cans, pops them open, hands one to me.

I have the first beer of my life sitting on our front porch with Buckeye. It's warm and sour but not too bad. I feel strange, like I haven't completely come out of sleep. I have so many questions loop-

ing through my brain that I can't concentrate on one long enough to ask it. Buckeye takes a big breath and looks down into his hands. "What can I say?" he whispers. "I thought I was getting along fine and the next thing I know I'm face down in the dirt, right back where I started from. I can't remember much, but I just let loose. I lost my strength for just a minute and that's all it takes. For a while there I didn't even want to behave." He gets up, walks out to the willow tree and touches its leaves with his fingers, comes back to sit down. "I think I got ahead of myself. This time I've got to take things slower."

"Are you going somewhere?" I ask. It seems to be the only question that means anything right now.

"I don't know. I'll keep looking for Bud. He's the only brother I've got that I'm aware of. I've just got to get away, start things over again."

Not having anything to say, I nod. We have a couple more beers together and stare into the distance. I want to tell Buckeye about hearing him pray for my mother, thinking it might change something, but I can't coax out the words. Finally, Buckeye stands up and whacks some imaginary dust from his pants. "I'd leave a note for Simone and your folks . . ." he says.

"I'll tell them," I say.

"Lord," Buckeye says. "Damn."

He sticks his big hand out for a shake, a habit he picked up from the Mormons, and gives me a knuckle-popping squeeze. As he walks away on the cement path toward his car, the inside of my chest feels as big as a room and I have an overpowering desire to tackle him, take his legs out, pay him back for my collarbone, hold him down and tell him what a goddamned bastard I think he is. This feeling stays with me for all of five seconds, then bottoms out and leaves me as I was before, the owner of one long list of emotions: sorry that it had to turn out this way for everybody; relieved that Buckeye is back to his natural self; pleased that he came to see me before he left; afraid of what life will be like without having him around.

Buckeye starts up his battle wagon and instead of just driving slowly away into the distance, which would probably be the appropriate thing to do under these circumstances, he gets his car going around in a tight circle, four, five times around in the middle of the quiet street,

muffler rattling, tires squealing and bumping the curb, horn blowing, a hubcap flying into somebody's yard—all for my benefit.

I go into the house before the last rumbles of Buckeye's car die away. I take my case of beer and hide it under my bed, already planning the hell-raising beer party I'll have with some of my friends. I figure it's about time we did something like that. On the way down the stairs, I wobble a little and bump into things, feeling like the whole house is pitching beneath my feet. All at once it hits me that I'm officially roasted. Gratifed, I go back upstairs and into my father's den where he keeps the typewriter I've never seen him use.

I feed some paper into the dusty old machine and begin typing. I've decided not to tell anyone about Buckeye's last visit; it will be the final secret between us. Instead, I go to work composing the letter Buckeye would certainly have left had he learned to write. I address it to Simone and just let things flow. I don't really try to imitate Buckeye's voice, but somehow I can feel it coming out in a crusty kind of eloquence. Even though I've always been someone who's highly aware of grammar and punctuation, I let sentence after sentence go by without employing so much as a comma. I tell Simone everything Buckeye could have felt and then some. I tell her how much she means to me and always will. I tell her what a peach she is. I'm shameless, really. I include my parents and thank them for everything, inform them that as far as I'm concerned, no two more Christian people ever walked the earth. I philosophize about goodness and badness and the sweet sorrow of parting. As I type, I imagine my family reading this at the breakfast table and the heartache compressing their faces, emotion rising in them so full that they are choked into speechlessness. This image spurs me on and I clack away on the keys like a single-minded idiot. When I'm finished, I've got two and a half pages and nothing left to say. A little stunned, I sit in my father's chair and strain in the dim light to see what I've just written. Until now, I've never been aware of what being drunk can do for one's writing ability.

I take the letter out on the front porch and tack it to our front door, feeling ridiculously like Martin Luther, charged with conviction and fear. I go back inside and try to go to sleep but I'm restless—the blood inside me is hammering against my ribs and the ends of my fingers, the house is too dark and cramped. Instead of going up the stairs,

I push out my window screen and climb out the well and begin to run around the house, the sun a little higher in the sky every time I come around into the front yard. I feel light-headed and weightless and I run until my lungs are raw, trying to get the alcohol out of my veins before my parents wake up.

CONTRIBUTORS

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