

GODFORSAKEN IDAHO



STORIES



SHAWN VESTAL

Godforsaken Idaho

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amazon publishing

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And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not, there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away.

—THE BOOK OF MORMON

Contents

[The First Several Hundred Years Following My Death](#)

[About as Fast as This Car Will Go](#)

[Families Are Forever!](#)

[Pocket Dog](#)

[Godforsaken Idaho](#)

[Winter Elders](#)

[Opposition in All Things](#)

[Gulls](#)

[Diviner](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

Godforsaken Idaho

The First Several Hundred Years Following My Death

THE FOOD IS EXCELLENT. The lines are never long. There's nothing to do with your hands. These are the first things I tell my son. Then we don't talk again for something like two hundred years.

The food is excellent, but nobody knows where it comes from. Your mother's Sunday dinner. A corn dog from the county fair. You eat from your own life only. You order from memory, as best you can. Your birthday cake, your wedding cake, your graduation barbecue. You give the cafeteria workers some coordinate, some connection, and out comes the tray. Your grandmother's pot roast. The double cheeseburger from the Lincoln Inn.

If you try to take a bite of someone else's food, it vanishes as your teeth descend.

In the cafeteria the workers call out the year at regular intervals. For a while, every time you go to eat you hear them shouting: "Twenty-five thirty-four! Twenty-five thirty-four!"

Until, before you know it: "Twenty-five thirty-five! Twenty-five thirty-five!"

Right now, as I tell this, it's 2613. There's a long way to go.

Your age at death becomes your age forever. Your body at death is your body forever—from scars to missing limbs to brain damage. In the cafeteria, people sit with others of their age and era—tables full of bald old men from my century, children from flu epidemics in the 1800s, young soldiers from every time. When you see mixed ages, it's a family, and it usually means someone new has arrived and they've gathered in welcome.

I woke up here at forty-seven, a familiar arthritic throb in my hip. I couldn't think what came before. I beat almost everyone: my mother, my two brothers, my son, my daughter, my ex-wife, all possible grandchildren, and Janet, the woman who lived in the apartment down the hall. Not counting my father, I went first out of all the people who mattered in my life. I never went to a single funeral that made me cry.

After my ex-wife, Brynne, arrived and spent fifty years or so here, we talked about that. How I left so much grieving behind. She told me it was just one more example of me getting away with something. She was still angry, after all that time.

"You never wanted to do the things everybody had to do," she said. "You're like a child."

"No one's life is all one way," I said.

"Or an impulsive monkey."

In my whole life I never felt anything but thwarted and blocked. Nobody ever understands you, not even here.

Here is something I wish I'd told my son and never have: There is no peace here. All the trappings of peace, yes, ~~all the silence and emptiness~~, but those are just shells. If you want peace, you have to find it in the life you left behind.

You wake in a simple room of interlocking cinder blocks, painted gray. One chair, one cot, one window filled with opaque gray. You can't tell whether the gray is outside air or the windowpane itself. You will never know. It is like morning, in half-light. A late morning after a dream.

That's all.

When I woke up here, Dad came to see me first—he showed me out of my room and explained how the cafeteria works. He called me “buddy” and seemed maniacally happy about my arrival.

“Wasn't expecting *you* this quick,” he said, and then he laughed so wide I could see the metal fillings in his back teeth.

He was nervous, a lot nicer than I was used to. I'm older than him here, and that was strange. We stole looks at each other like kids at a dance. Pretty soon, my whole outlook on him changed. I always thought he was mean, but I started to see him as merely young, too young to expect much from. I hoped maybe I could teach him a thing or two, but nothing like that ever grew up between us.

I don't know why, but he never told me about reliving. I found out about that on my own.

A few decades later, my daughter, Annie, arrived and I started going to see her. She was too young to die—breast cancer at fifty-one—but she's older than me here. She seemed perfectly put together—neat black hair, big alert eyes, a stillness under every movement. I felt proud of her, though I had no credit coming. We would get together and share a meal, and I would try to give her advice about this place. I made a point of telling her about the reliving—how to control it, how to guide it.

“Now that it's gone,” I said, “your life is the only thing you have left.”

I told her how to concentrate in just the right way, to lock on to some detail or emotion from the moment in your life that you want to visit. Concentrate in the right way, I said, and the next time you know, you're back in it. Back in it for as long as you want. Back in it to hunt for perfect moments. I told her to watch out for the bad times, though, how the bad times are always underneath even the happiest ones. I gave her the best advice I could. I was afraid she might be forgiving me in the same way I had forgiven Dad—holding me one or two percent less to blame due to my youth and ignorance.

“Try sports,” I said, suggesting some avenues for reliving. “You always liked sports.”

She was a nice woman, no thanks to me, so I didn't find out for years that she hadn't played sport since she was twelve, that she never attended a sporting event as an adult, and that she refused to let her son play football because she was scared he would get hurt.

I am in the swimming pool, bob-walking through the shallow end, water tugging against me as I try to speed up, and the pool is a chamber of sound, of children's cries and parents calling and everybody shouting names, names, names, but none of them mine. I sink underwater and open my eyes in the stinging blue. It's like shade under there, legs like machine parts, moving without purpose against the pressure of silence.

It's hard to keep straight, but it goes something like this: My father died first, then me, then my mother, my ex-wife, my daughter, Janet from down the hall, my son.

Janet, the last woman in my life, the last chance at a real whatever, told me after she arrived that ~~she didn't want to see me here. She was the first to turn. After I died, she'd started seeing~~ counselor. She said I had abused her emotionally.

"Emotional abuse is every bit as harmful as physical abuse," she said, nodding certainly. "Every bit."

"How would you know?" I said. "Even if I did abuse your emotions? Did I ever hit you? Did anyone ever hit you? Physical abuse is probably *a lot* worse."

This was fairly early in my death. I hadn't yet begun to prize relationships.

She said, "You didn't love me enough. You didn't love me at all, maybe."

"I absolutely did," I said, which wasn't true, not like with my wife, who I loved so much at one time that I felt like it could have destroyed me. Janet and I drifted together thanks to drink and the proximity of our apartments. I hadn't been aware that love was even hovering around our hemisphere. I had always thought that was the good part about us.

The food is excellent. The lines are never long. You eat from your own life only. Once I sat by two men eating greasy squirrel, just gnawing it off a greenwood spit. Looking all Appalachian. They froze to stare over the tiny blackened limbs at a tall, good-looking dude walking by, all big hair and swagger.

"If that ain't Joe fucken Smith," one of them muttered, then went back to his squirrel angrily.

For me, though, the food is excellent.

You can order generally or specifically. It's fun to listen to the people around you as they order.

Hamburger, please. Any one from the Oh-So-Good Inn.

I'd like the prix fixe meal I had with my wife in Paris, 1961.

Easter ham and scalloped potatoes. Whenever.

Once he discovered the cafeteria, my son, Tyler, ate the same thing for years and years. That was long after he'd arrived, and we'd started seeing each other occasionally.

"Thanksgiving dinner!" he would say, like he didn't know how loud he was being. And then he would shovel it in while I talked. I would ask him if he remembered this or remembered that, and he would nod like he was keeping time to a song. He was old, old enough to be my grandfather.

"You liked Thanksgiving, did you, Tyler?" I said once.

"I went by Reed," he said.

His middle name. His grandpa's name.

Here's what I should have told him, and what I still, for various reasons, have not: Now that it's gone, your life is the only thing you have left. Ransack it, top to bottom. Plunder that fucker. Find whatever you can in there, because it's all there is.

I am with Angela Jarvik in her bedroom and her parents are downstairs and we know that they never come up and she has her hand on me, over my jeans, and I have my hand on her, inside her jeans, and her mouth tastes like sweet metal and she groans and twists away. I am on my back in the sandy weed outside the kegger, and Jennifer Luttin has me pinned, slides onto me, her kinky black hair brushing my face, and I feel an exquisite tightness beneath a flaming center, and when she leans forward to kiss me, I taste beer and cigarettes and see a burst of white. I am in the apartment of a woman named Sandy, who I met over Christmas break in Boise, and she is whispering nastily in my ear while I

just trying not to let it end too soon, and then I am on my knees on a hardwood floor at the foot of bed, my face between the legs of my not-yet-wife, Brynne, and my tongue aches, and then I am in the shower with a woman whose name I can't remember, I'm behind her and she's leaning forward, and she's saying the filthiest things and I get all twisted up inside and thrust into her as hard as I can, like I want to hurt her, but she slips a little forward and then I do too, ramming my leg against the cold water spigot, which leaves a stupendous bruise, a bruise that I know I will have to lie about to Brynne and then keep straight in my head what the lie was in case it somehow comes up again, now that I'm careful about every story.

You know it when the people you love die. You become aware. I first visited Brynne right after she arrived. I took myself to her room and waited outside her door until she opened it. When she saw me she flinched.

Her hair was white and thin. You could see through to her scalp. Liver spots covered her arms and her heavy breasts made a stomach inside her smock. She seemed somewhat like the woman I had once loved, but thickened with sloughing latex and talc. I wanted to tug at the skin of her neck. I wanted to peel away the folds above her eyebrows.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Strange," she said.

"Can I come in?"

"I don't think so."

She seemed confused. She had to be eighty.

"You know I'm Rex," I said.

"I know who you are," she said.

I hadn't seen her for eleven years before I died. Now all I wanted was to find something beautiful in her, something that could remind me of her knockout twenty-three-year-old self. Then I thought, not for the first time: *I am a purely horrible person*. Her eyes were wet with anger.

"Are the kids all right?" I asked.

"You got used to not knowing that," she said.

"Come on," I said. "I've been dead."

I died lucky. You could go in a coma or after dementia. Some people never get out of their cots and never make it to the cafeteria. You could go young, without enough to relive. Because that's everything, the reliving, the hunt for perfect moments. The poor kids, the teenagers, the twenty-year-olds—you look at them and they're beautiful, you want to taste them. The younger kids run screaming through the cafeteria, playing tag, and you think at least they've found something to do and a way to make friends. The games of tag include kids from everywhere, all times and places, African kids and Japanese kids and American kids and Bolivian kids. It is the only joy you ever see.

Sometimes you envy these children. Then you realize all they'll never be able to relive, all the food they never ate, the places they never went, the sex they never had, the Christmas mornings, the Easter Sundays.

I am sitting on the couch in my bathrobe, and Brynne is cross-legged on the floor, helping Tyler and

Annie open their gifts. The odor of evergreen and coffee fills the room. Charlie Brown Christmas music. Tyler throws his new football and it hits Annie in the face, bouncing into her Barbie Beach House, and she begins to howl. Brynne says, "Tyler," and he says, "I didn't mean to," but I know he's lying, and a surge runs through me and I vibrate with fury that we can't just have a simple fucking Christmas morning, kisses and hugs and then some football, and not a house full of crying and the smell of dirty clothes and bad breath. Tyler picks up the ball and spikes it like one of those NFL showboats and it bounces onto the coffee table and knocks my cup to the ground. I pick him up by his arm and swat him three times, hard on the butt. I only hear him bawling a few seconds later, after I've put him down and something has evaporated inside my head. Brynne shuffles up onto her knees and wraps him in her arm. She kneels there, one arm around each child. Looks at me without blinking. Packages wrapped in silver and red and green. Tyler cries louder than he needs to. Brynne keeps her eyes right on me. She hasn't blinked in forever.

Nobody tells you anything. No instruction sheet, no welcome wagon. You wake up on your cot. Your room is empty and pleasantly cool. Eventually you go out, where the balconies stretch in either direction, up and down, for farther than you can see. Across a gulf is another series of balconies facing back, with precisely spaced doorways. The light is constant, institutional. At the bottom of the gulf is the cafeteria, filled with metal tables and chairs, welded to the gray concrete floor. Every few hundred yards is another line. The food is excellent. The lines are never long.

My father was the first to point this out. When he showed up at my door initially, he wanted to talk a lot, which seemed unusual. When we were growing up, he'd come home from work and the house would go silent for hours. Sometimes if he was watching TV and I started making too much noise, he would call out, "Shut it, Rex." If my mother was telling him a story, he'd interrupt before she finished and say, "Enough already."

Now he wants to talk.

We go to the cafeteria, and we try to order meals together. We pick Sundays out of a hat and see what we get. Chicken and potatoes. Roast beef with gravy. A lot of times we'll eat two in a row.

He asks me questions about my childhood, asks me didn't I think I was lucky to have the upbringing I did, wasn't our family one of the lucky ones, and because it's all over and doesn't matter I say yes.

He always was an asshole, honestly. But he was a good provider. That was what Mom said, and once I became a father I thought that was what I was too. A good provider. The head of the household. Later, after I'd vanished and left the household headless, I tried hard to remind myself how much I hated it whenever Dad was in the house, how the air grew thick with tension, how we held our laughter under our breath. How happy I thought we'd be if he would just leave.

At the cafeteria, people gather by age—tables of snowy-haired white people, tables of smiling gabbing African children with protruding bellies. Kids race between the tables, squealing, and sometimes a crank will yell at them. You can recognize a killjoy in every language in the history of the world. Other children sit glumly by themselves, and they are a shattering sight, because you realize that the allure of tag, like everything, can last only so long.

I made friends with a guy from the Middle Ages. He died old for his day: forty-three. He loved to hear about televisions and microwave ovens. Tells the damndest stories about the plague year about the exhilaration of every day. When things got depressing, he and his friends would go on

looking for Jews or lepers and beat them with clubs.

—“The Black Death,” he said, with an air of pride. “You knew you were alive. You knew the value of a day.”

He slurped from his spoon, and his smile fell. “When my daughter got it, that was the worst I’d have rather had it myself.”

He looked around for eavesdroppers. We were sitting at the metal cafeteria tables. I was eating a corn dog from the Ada County Fair, 1976. He was eating his wife’s mutton stew, with salt and bread from the winter of 1335.

He held his spoon poised between bowl and mouth. One cube of flabby mutton. He whispered, “I’d have rather my wife had it. I would have given it to her if I could’ve.”

I remembered how worried we’d been when Tyler had the flu as a baby. The chemical purity of the hospital.

The man’s eyes turned bright. “Tell me again about your toilet,” he said. “You would sit there and read magazines.”

My son sometimes eats four meals in a row. The same thing, four times in a row. He walks up to the counter and yells, “Thanksgiving dinner!” He is shiny on top, with blotchy brown freckles on his scalp, and his cheeks have slumped into jowls.

One time I told him, as he worked a huge forkful of turkey and mashed potatoes into his mouth, “I thought about you kids on the holidays every year. I really did. That might be part of what I had coming, I guess. I’m not asking for any slack, Tyler.”

He chewed for fifteen seconds, then said, “Seriously. Nobody calls me Tyler, Ray.”

“Rex,” I said, feeling a knot of impossibility tightening. “Or you could call me Dad.”

There is no peace here, and so you go looking in the life you left behind. You think it will be full of perfect moments—great days, great afternoons, great nights, a collection of moments that constitute a shorter, more perfect life. First you relive all the sex, then you try the peak days—the weddings, the births of your children, the graduations. Then sports and hobbies, then work, then your kids’ school plays. You remember something that seemed good and you go back to it.

But you find it hard to land in a single untroubled moment. Every second is crowded with life, with misery and anxiety that just won’t be stomped down. Even the happiness can kill you. I went back for the birth of my son, and it shocked me how disfiguring it was, all that intensity, how it broke me open in a way that soared way beyond happiness.

The door at The Mirage lets in a slab of yellow light. A woman comes in, fortyish. Tattoo on her freckled bosom. Can’t tell yet what it is. Smoker’s laugh. I am at the bar, four hours in. It is cool and drunk. I am cool and drunk. I turn a pack of matches in my fingers, folding and unfolding the cover. I want to climb that woman. I light a cigarette and watch her, raising my eyebrows and holding out the pack, and she accepts. Janet. We tell our stories in the dark. The world is full of hope, and mistakes are easy to spot. We’re at her apartment by eight thirty. When I kneel to tug down her pilled satin panties, I notice curly hairs escaping from the homeland between her legs, little strays on the pillow inside of her thighs.

The first time I saw my son here, he seemed confused, like Brynne had. Then I relived a bunch of the old times I'd had with him, and my self-loathing became richer, developed shades and nuance. Even the safest-seeming times roiled with undertow. We played catch in the backyard, and I yelled at him for throwing wild. I taught him how to ride a bike. When he fell over and skinned his knee, I mocked him for crying. I wanted him to be tough.

And then, back here, I couldn't make myself go see him again for a long, long time.

I relived the first years of my marriage. Some days I relived morning to night, over and over again. Hardly any undertow.

Then I'd come back here, where I hate the way my ex-wife is now. I longed for the young h everywhere, and the only way I could get her off my mind was to bury myself in diversionary reliving. I repeated four hours drunk at The Mirage with my buddies Kevin and Jayce thirteen times in a row. I went to a Foghat concert, Boise, 1972. One week I spent in Belize with my college girlfriend, mostly on a king bed with the balcony door open to a perfect blue seam of sky and sea. The small, cocoa-colored man at the hotel's front desk smiled shyly at us whenever we passed. We did it in the shower in a chair, with her leaning out over the balcony in the middle of the night. I held her from behind, feeling her ribs in my hands.

Every time I came back here, I was ravenous. In the cafeteria, I ordered the Belize meals again—whole red snapper, pit-roasted pig, bottles of clear Belikin beer. I would sit there and eat slowly, watch the children at tag, and feel a tender ache in my balls and long for sunburn and the whispery feel of dried seawater on my skin.

After Brynne showed up here, we started seeing each other from time to time. She softened. I wondered when my children might appear. She told me about their lives. Tyler was a train wreck, married, had a son, divorced, went to jail, his ex died, took the kid back, messed that up something awful. Eventually, he lived alone in Denver, and almost never called. Annie had married a guy who used her good credit to buy cars and a home, and then ruined it before she knew what was happening. Spent money like crazy. They had two children, a boy and a girl, and Annie decided to stay with him even after they had to turn their house over to the bank and rent an apartment.

"Did they ever ask about me?" I asked her.

"All the time," she said.

"What'd you tell them?"

"I told them how we met. I told them about the day we got married. How handsome you were. How hard you worked. How no one could understand the way you just vanished. How you still love them."

"Wow," I said. "I don't know what to say."

"How it was probably hard for you to live with what you'd done."

All I'd done, at first, was the usual rigmarole. Sleeping around. All that urgency about women. Your whole life concentrated into tiny waves and crests. We had a teary day when Brynne found out, the day I found myself dragged back to repeatedly when I wasn't careful about reliving. She told me I didn't deserve to have a family anymore. The kids watched us fight like they were peering through a fence at barking dogs. I moved into a room downtown, and within a week she and the kids had moved to her mother's in Oregon.

I've spent years trying to figure out why I did what I did next. I didn't call the kids for eight

months, and then, after fourteen minutes on the telephone, I didn't talk to them again for four years. They sent a few letters at first.

"How you probably hated yourself," she said. "And who could blame you?"

I am driving home to Gooding from Twin Falls on I-84 when the semitruck in front of me begins to change lanes and slides sideways on a patch of ice. It stretches out before me, then I hit the ice myself and when the semi reaches the next dry patch it crashes onto its side, sparking off the freeway and into the snowy weed chaff alongside the road and ramming a power-line pole. I slide off, roll once, and come to rest. The world goes silent. Something cloudy in my head. Adrenaline racing. Trembling.

I think of the kids.

I think, *OK, Rex.*

I open the door and step out and a surge of unbelievable whiteness passes through me, shooting out my eyes and fingertips.

January 13, 1979.

Then I woke up here. I always wanted to know more about it, see my funeral, see the days after, watch how my void took shape. Like Tom Sawyer at his funeral. But you don't get to do that.

Eventually, you give up on finding the shorter, more perfect life. You start hunting for a single great day. One day of peace. One day of still water, start to finish. Then, after a few years, you start to think, *OK, one great afternoon. One morning.*

One great hour.

Ecstatic moments lose their thrill. The worst times start feeling attractive. Everything presses to the edge, pulled into focus.

I stumbled across a day right after my wife had her miscarriage. It came between our kids, late in the pregnancy. A humid oppression over everything. Everywhere we looked, we saw babies—mothers carrying red-faced infants, strollers crowding the sidewalks.

One day we were watching TV and a diaper commercial came on, with a peach-colored infant sitting on a white backdrop.

I said, "Jesus Christ. We ought to make a drinking game of it."

Brynne began to cry and wouldn't let me touch her.

Her tears didn't move me much. That's not the way I wish I had been, but I have to say I felt nothing. Nothing felt important.

Later that night, after she'd gone to bed, I sat on our front steps. It was summer, the night cool, and as I sat there, a skinny gray and orange cat came into our yard and looked at me. The cat seemed hungry and shrill, alone, and it mewed at me. I looked away. The cat made the sound again, more keenly, with more ache, and then wandered off.

My eyes burned.

When I came back here, I developed an unbelievable longing for a cat, a desire to hold a cat in my lap or scratch one between the ears, and the emptiness of the days became defined by catlessness.

Once, for what felt like a hundred years, I became obsessed with cigarettes. I found myself reliving ten minutes of smoking from 1977, perched on a stool at The Mirage Lounge, over and over again.

was like smoking thirty-seven cigarettes in a row and then emerging with clear lungs. And then lying around and eating meals and longing for the cancerous bite of the smoke in your chest, yearning for like you were yearning for the return of your one great love, and all you can feel the entire time is desire, which bleeds the reliving paler and paler with each turn. Sometimes you need to sleep for a long time afterward. It's really the only time you can sleep, when you've relived something so exhausting, and when you return, sadness follows you around like a dog you want to kick, and so you sleep for a long, long time, until your hunger forces you awake.

My son died at ninety-three. He went in his sleep, which made me happy. I went right to his door. The sight of him shocked me. A distorted version of me—larger in every particular: head, hands, frame, nose. And yet his whole body cramped down, hands gathered inward like claws. He looked like he was still dying.

“Tyler, it's your dad,” I said, and he said, “OK.”

“You remember me, don't you?”

He worked his mouth for a second, and said, “You seem like someone.”

He fixed his eyes on the wall somewhere behind me, and I left. For two hundred years or so I thought about that moment the most. You can drive yourself crazy. I don't know what made me go back, besides having enough time to think it over.

Tyler seemed the same when his door opened to me a second time. I went in and sat on the chair, and then he sat on the cot. He waited.

“I've been thinking about you a lot, son. Thinking about you and me, and realizing how much I let you down. You and your sister. And your mother, of course.”

He nodded absently. He sat forward in his chair, and his head bobbed.

“I know I wasn't much of a father. I know that. But I hope we can work back to something together. All of us. We're still a family, you know, no matter how much hurt we've suffered.”

He cleared his throat, and seemed to wait for a few seconds to make sure I was done. I couldn't read anything in his face.

“I don't go in for a lot of talk,” he said.

We sat in silence for what must have been an hour, until I said, “Are you hungry?” and he said, “I don't have any food.”

“What about the cafeteria?”

He looked at me blankly. I became aware of the possibility that he had not yet left his room after all these years. I walked to his door, then out to the balcony, and looked back at him. He was unmoving for several moments, and then I said, “Come on.”

He came uncertainly onto the balcony. Brittle on his feet. He looked carefully out and down into the chasm.

“What is this place?” he asked.

I had been dead for 326 years when I got an idea. We would have a family dinner. Me, Tyler, Brynne, and Annie. When I told Brynne, she said Annie would want to bring her husband. I'd never met him. And their kids. My grandchildren.

“And why not my parents?” she said.

“And mine?” I said.

Brynne made a face. She'd never liked my folks. She was from Boise people. Golfers who

dressed nice and acted nervous around me. Smiley and fake. My dad milked cows for other men. We lived in Eden, didn't even have a post office.

"Look, if we're going to invite everybody, we can't go leaving out my family," I said.

"I don't see why not," Brynne said.

"Maybe I should invite one of my girlfriends," I said, and here's maybe one thing about me that's different now: I knew that was shitty the moment I said it. Used to be, when I said some shitty mean thing, I justified it to myself for days and days, until I realized that it was shitty and told myself I'd never do it again. Now, I recognized it immediately. It was a hopeful sign. There's a long way to go.

I told my friend from the Middle Ages about my plan for a family dinner.

"That sounds awful," he said.

"Why?"

"I'm sick of this food. I'm sick of eating the same thing every day forever. I'm sick of omelette and lamb. I'm sick of potatoes and mush cakes. You know what I did? I went back and ordered the gruel we ate during the winter of 1329, when we were damn near starving, and the soup had got rotten and made us all so sick we almost died. I laid about in bed, shitting myself until I couldn't shit again. Days of that. I thought I was going to die. My wife crying all the time, begging God, this and that." He laughed. "We didn't know what we had then, is what it is. We had no idea what we had."

"I guess not."

"So here, I go up and order that rotten soup and eat it, and you know what happens?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"That's good."

He looked at me in disgust, and spat a piece of bone into his bowl.

It's hard to get a group together. There's no way to communicate—if you want to see someone, the only thing to do is go and see them. So Brynne and I split up and went door-to-door. Brynne went to get her family. I went first to Tyler's.

"You want to have what kind of dinner?" he asked.

Tyler and I went to Annie's.

"I guess, if Reed's coming," she said.

Tyler, Annie, and I went to see Annie's husband, Duff. He looked pretty good—he'd come here at fifty-eight. Heart attack.

Then Tyler, Annie, Duff, and I went to see Duff and Annie's kids. When I introduced myself they had looks of uncertainty in their eyes. Like they'd forgotten the details, but remembered the general idea.

We all went to see my mother. She wept a little when I told her what we were doing.

"Oh, Rex," she said. "I always knew you were a good boy."

Then we went to see my dad.

"Sounds like a lot of noise and trouble, buddy," he said, and the words filled me with a painful nostalgia for childhood.

Brynne went around to her people, too. And they went wild. Shook the whole family tree, back through the generations. By the time we arrived at the cafeteria, the lines were outrageous at even

station, and all of them, somehow, supposedly, tied back to us. The branches of my tree, the Todd family, and Brynne's, the Warrens, stretching backward and forward in time.

Right away, I saw how lame this would be. It wasn't going to work at all. I had envisioned something shared, a real family meal, I don't know why, but Brynne was over in a different line with her folks, who nodded at me coolly, and Annie and her husband were way behind me in my line, and I saw others walking away from the stations with all different kinds of food—stews and charred hunks of meat and mush with butter and tacos and potatoes of every shape and nature, from French fried to mashed to baked to whatever. One lumpy guy shuffled past holding a tray with four enormous identical bowls of Neapolitan ice cream. A striking, large-eyed young woman with a single braid of dark hair carried a tray mounded with Christmas stockings, spilling out oranges and peanuts and hard candy.

I was standing with Tyler and his son, my grandson, an old man named Zachary, who was talking on and on about the family tree. Zachary was thin and frail, and spoke with a careful precision as though he were being recorded. He'd converted to Mormonism during his life, then become fascinated with genealogy.

"You might be surprised to know," he said, all playful and smug in a way that I already hated, "that you and Grandma are actually related, if you go back far enough."

"Yeah?" I asked. It was hard, still, to think of me and Brynne as grandparents. "How far back, far enough?"

Zachary looked at me in the assessing way, the withholding way that Brynne's parents always used—like they were expressing a tolerance for my very existence. He looked at me in that way, and also with a kind of mischief, as though he could not wait to tell me this thing that he thought was so important, this paltry fact about who gave birth to whom all those impossible years ago.

"Your great-great-grandmother is her great-great-great grandmother!" he said.

"Fascinating," I said, and stepped up to place my order: the rib eye with mushrooms and garlic mashed potatoes from Diamondfield Jack's in Twin Falls, 1978, a meal from a date with Janet, not too long before the day of my death.

We sat down, Tyler, Zachary, and I, and started eating. Zachary introduced me to some of the others there, but I soon stopped paying attention. I looked around, at the tables full of strangers spilling in every direction and tried to estimate how many people were there. Hundreds, easily. Though it was impossible to tell exactly where our crowd ended and the line of other, unrelated people began. I tried to find some family feeling inside myself for all these strangers, and could not, but I noted the return of something I remembered from life: the sense that these people, all these people, was knotted to without choice, would steal my life and harness it to theirs.

"There she is," Zachary said, pointing to the beautiful young woman with the long braid, sitting before the tray of oranges and Christmas stockings. "That's her."

I crammed an enormous piece of steak in my mouth and chewed. Tyler did the thing he always did, loading a fork with a piece of turkey, a glob of mashed potatoes and a bit of stuffing.

"Sara Warren," Zachary said. "The one I was talking about."

When I merely stared at him, chewing, he said, "Your ancestor, and your wife's."

"Wonderful," I said.

He giggled. I considered flipping a mushroom at him with my spoon.

I said, "Isn't the food here wonderful?"

Zachary looked at me like I was insane.

That was when I realized. The food here is not excellent. That's just a lie. It's the same food, the same food, the same food forever.

That was the last one, that family dinner. If the rest of them are getting together, they're not inviting me.

You finally find it, and it's not even an hour.

For me, it lasts thirteen minutes and forty-seven seconds. I stand on a bridge and look into the Snake River Canyon. It's two weeks after Brynne kicked me out. I hear the wind sound of planes. The air smells like sweet hay and cow shit. My mind hums. I light one cigarette off another and watch the butt tumble out of sight into the canyon below. I am entirely alone. The emptiness makes a sound that takes in everything.

About as Fast as This Car Will Go

I NEVER WANTED TO BE a criminal until I was one. And then, for a while, I couldn't imagine wanting to be anything else.

I was seventeen when Dad got out of prison for the second time. Aunt Fay didn't want me to go back to him. "Stay," she told me, fanning out community college brochures on the Formica table. "Finish your school."

For two years, she and Uncle Mitch had been great—everything open-door, come and go, free access to the fridge, a place of my own in the basement. Mitch worked at the seed company, and Fay baked bread and fried doughnuts at Safeway. They liked to drink beer on the couch or head down to The Mirage to play pool and listen to the same songs on the jukebox.

Then Fay woke up New Year's Day with a huge bruise on her hip that she couldn't remember how she got. It was spectacular—a saddle around her side, back, and stomach, purple-blue and wavy at the edges, yellow and red in the middle.

Mitch said, "Search me."

That morning I'd woken up before everybody else, gotten a box of Count Chocula, and sat on the couch with the TV on, eating by the handful in my underwear and T-shirt. Fay came out at noon, dream-logged and slow. She was poking at her side and wincing when she saw me. She stood in the frame of the hall, and her guilty look made me ashamed.

After that, Fay always wanted to know where I was going and how I was doing in school. She quit drinking. She cut her hair short. When Dad's release date started getting close, she talked to me about staying put and finishing school, about stability, the importance of education.

"Look at this, Zach," she said one night, turning the glossy pages on the community college brochures. "You can train for all kinds of good jobs."

She wore her Safeway smock and smelled of fryer grease. She flipped pages on programs to become a diesel mechanic, a licensed practical nurse, a computer programmer. I looked at the brochures, with the smiling students taking a temperature or probing a truck engine, and tried to picture myself in that world, getting smarter and earning money, falling in love and living in a house like a real person. Fay was so hung with expectation that I told her OK, but I never thought we were talking about anything real. I figured her for two or three months on the straight and narrow until something glassy showed in her eyes again.

Dad wore the same thing coming out he wore going in: jeans, snap-button shirt, cowboy boots. His clothes seemed hangy and big, like he'd shrunk inside them, and his sideburns were turning gray.

We drove to Boise to pick him up in his own car, the slouching, soft-shocked Pontiac. Mitch drove, guiding us in and out of the passing lane, and Fay talked and talked. I stretched my legs out

the back seat, sick with nerves, but then we saw him and he was just Dad, and he hugged me and joked around and called me kiddo.

“You’re getting *huge*,” he said, like he hadn’t seen me two months before. He and Fay and Mitch all laughed at this, my unbelievable growth. Fay had us stand back-to-back and said I had hit her by an inch. “Stop it already,” he said.

In the car Fay talked about where to go for lunch. Dad said he’d heard about a good Basque place from one of the guys in his anger-management sessions.

“Embezzler,” he said, and laughed. “Angry embezzler.”

We ate lamb stew and chorizo and spicy potatoes and thick soup, drinking it all down with red wine. Dad ate two of everything, wiped his bread around the curve of his bowl and smiled while Mitch chewed. Mitch rambled on about Y2K, the upcoming computer apocalypse, and Dad pretended to listen. Afterward we went to the park by the river and Dad kneeled and ran his hands over the cool grass, put his face down and breathed it in, and then he lay on it, face down. He turned over on his back, eyes closed, smiling.

On the way home he sprawled on the seat beside me, so relaxed he seemed ready to come apart completely.

“Must be great to be out,” I said.

“It’s all right,” he said, opening his eyes and looking away.

Months later we picked up the man in the tan suit at the diner. We drove him into the desert. He was trying to get home to see his daughter in Boise. He’d left her and her mother years ago, left and never went back. He was afraid she’d never forgive him.

“Nothing more important than family,” Dad said. “She’s got to realize that.”

I had no friends then. Not one. I knew people, and I’d had friendships here and there, but something always broke them up. Mostly we’d just gradually stop being friends, the way we’d gradually started. When my seventeenth birthday came, a couple months before Dad got out, Mitch, Fay, and I went to Café Olé in Twin Falls, where the waiters come out and sing and put a sombrero on you and take a Polaroid. Fay told me I could bring a friend, but I couldn’t think of anyone. We’d lived in Gooding and our lives.

In the picture, Fay is poised, arm around my shoulder. Mitch gazes out of the frame. My face is hidden by the shadow of the sombrero. If you saw it, you’d think: mother, father, son.

On the way home from Boise that first day, Fay worked herself up and turned around and told Dad she thought I should stay with her and Mitch, at least until I finished school.

Dad tipped his head—like, *maybe*—and chewed the inside of his lip.

Fay said it would just be for stability, so I could get through classes without disruption. I was three months from graduation. Class of Double Zero. She told him about the community college, the mechanics program, the bright future, and common sense.

“Well,” he said finally, “I guess I just figured I’d have my boy with me.”

My blood raced. Nobody spoke for the longest time.

“You’re not exactly set up to be a parent right now, Reed,” Fay said. “Forgive my saying.”

Mitch said, "Fay."

~~Dad didn't say anything. I held my breath, afraid I'd be asked to decide.~~

The man in the tan suit said he was trying to get to Boise to see his daughter. He hadn't seen her in twelve years. She was flying in from Oregon. He smelled like the front part of a department store, glass cases and glass bottles, chemical sweet. He'd moved to Idaho and taken another job and bought a house and met another woman.

"Like that other life hadn't ever been," he said.

Dad drove us down the freeway. He kept smiling at the man, tapping his hands on the steering wheel. I sat with my legs out on the back seat. We'd put our last seven dollars into the gas tank.

The man told us bits at a time. He had been driving to Boise from Twin Falls, going to pick up his daughter at the airport, when his car broke down. The mechanic needed a day to get the part, but that airplane from Oregon was on its way.

There was something utterly unbelievable about him, and yet I felt he was telling us the truth.

My father kept looking at me, his icy green eyes framed in the rearview mirror. He might have been mad at me, still. Or trying to communicate something. But there was nothing that perfect between us, no secret eye language of family.

The muscle beneath his left eye quivered, and he placed a finger on it, held it in place until it stopped.

When I was eleven, I watched Dad drag a teenager from his car in the parking lot at the swimming pool, shouting so loud a lifeguard came out to break it up.

"I'm going to kick your ass up between your shoulder blades," Dad shouted as he backed away. "You'll have to take off your shirt to take a shit."

The guy had been taunting me and Bucky Torr, a neighbor kid who'd come swimming with me. We were standing in our wet suits, wrapped in towels, on the lawn outside the pool. He'd called us pussies, dared us to grab the tits of the girls nearby. Bucky was about to cry, and when Dad pulled up and asked him what was wrong, he told him.

Watching my father, I could see it all happening, even though I couldn't tell you what it was. Something widened in his pupils and his nostrils. His face filled with blood. Then the door was swinging open, and we jumped out of the way.

Dad rented us an apartment downtown, above the Lincoln Inn. He got a job milking and lost it three days later, when the owner found out he'd been in prison. The guy said if Dad had only been honest, he might have kept him on.

"No way," Dad told me.

He started working the swing shift at Quik Mart, coming home afterward and telling me to go to bed. He asked about school, tried to keep the fridge full. He seemed nervous and dry-mouthed all the time. It was almost two weeks before they let him go.

He went to visit his parole officer in Twin Falls, and came back agitated.

"Like I haven't already had two jobs," he said. "Like I'm just sitting here."

He started staying out later, and then he vanished for two days. I stayed home, skipping school.

and waiting. I thought maybe I was already alone and just didn't know it yet, like he'd crashed the Pontiac and died but nobody knew to find me and tell me. I thought if that was true maybe I'd just stay still forever, inside the gray bubble of those days, and stop pretending there were other people for me.

He came back with a little money, said he'd found work roofing in Idaho Falls and meant to call, etc. We went downstairs for burgers. He had three beers with dinner, and he stayed in the bar when I came up and went to bed.

The next morning, a Thursday, I walked down the hall and saw Dad sprawled out on his bed, on top of the covers in his clothes. Everything was gray-lit and quiet. I walked back down the hall and climbed into bed. And that was it for school.

The day we met the man in the tan suit, we were out of money, angry, quiet. In a diner with vinyl seats, looking out a plate-glass window onto the Snake River. The man came in, looked around, and walked over and offered to pay us for a ride to Boise.

“What do you think—twenty bucks?” he asked. “Thirty?”

He wore a tie, neat as a banker. He carried a deep maroon briefcase. He smelled nicer than the men I knew, and his eyes seemed loose and watery on his face. I could probably remember his name if I had to. It was just him and us in there, not counting the waitress and the cook.

“We're going that way,” Dad said. “Buy our coffee, and we'll call it good.”

I scooted over and the man sat down.

“I've got money,” he said. He took a worn envelope from his briefcase, thick with bills, and slid out a twenty.

Dad wouldn't hear of it. He never looked at the money, but it seemed he was smelling it or tasting it. A blush high on his cheeks, and a spasm under one eye.

When Dad's parole officer knocked, announcing himself from the hallway—“Reed? It's Barre Rudman. Open up”—I was both surprised and not, because some part of fearing is expecting. Dad motioned me into the bedroom and closed the door behind me.

I heard the man say he'd had a report that Dad had been drinking in a bar.

Dad asked who'd said that, and the man said it didn't matter, was it true, and Dad said no.

“If it is, I don't have to tell you what that means,” the man said.

Dad said he hadn't been in a bar since his parole. He said he'd been working construction jobs on day work, and gave the name of a contractor to check with. He said he spent a lot of time with his boss Zach, who lived with his aunt Fay and uncle Mitch.

He was an excellent liar. Really good. But it sounded like the parole officer didn't believe him. He told Dad to be careful. He said, “I'll be stopping by again.”

Dad said fine, good, look forward to it. After the man left, Dad said, “That fucking Fay,” and he went into the kitchen, opening and closing cupboards, slamming things, and then again, “That goddamned fucking Fay.”

Dad disappeared again. For two days I went back to thinking he'd died without me knowing, or some other bad thing, but by the third day, when the food ran out, I knew he'd just left and wouldn't ever be back, and that Fay had been right all along.

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