

*Josie Sigler*

## Breakneck Road

Walking home from Country Lake Liquor I see a red something there between the snowbank and the line of grey slush left by the plow: Coca-Cola box, the long tail on the “C” poking through the loop on the “L”. I almost kick it the way you do a thing on the roadside, make it fly and hit the ice on the edges of the swamp. But something stops me. Maybe hope gets to me. Even in this weather, a little something sweet to put with the 151. So I go and lift the flap. Even looking at it I don’t buy what’s inside that box: human baby, tiny, almost blue, curled up and no bigger than a skinned muskrat. Dead baby. But no, it’s breathing. The nostrils flare and its hand opens just a little bit and slow like one of those stop-action flowers on PBS.

What can a person do with a baby in a box when he’s no friend to the law? Especially once the thing opens its black-hole eyes and looks right at him like its accusing him?

I don’t even think about Cherry and what she’ll say. I drop my bag and take up the box. The cardboard is wet and collapses where I touch it. I don’t know what women do with babies, but it’s colder than fuck out and the thing doesn’t have a little sweater or anything. I tear one side of the box off quick. And like those climber guys who stripped naked in their tent to save their frozen friend in the arctic and didn’t even care that the whole world saw it on the television, I lift

my flannel and press the whole soggy deal to my skin.

Right away the thing starts to wriggle. Then, it expands and yowls fit to beat a bag of mad cats because I don't have tits and that's what it wants most likely.

Shhhh, I say, like it knows how to behave.

I look around to make sure nobody's watching. I've never seen a soul but the plow out on Breakneck this time of year and I can tell that prick Randy's already been by. But sometimes even when you aren't doing anything wrong, you don't want to be seen. The thing's having a hissy fit loud enough now to reach the horizon, all those houses cozied up on real streets, houses for folks who work at Great Lakes Coal, same ones I got busted for three winters back.

My bag's melted, so I grab my rum and the hotdogs Cherry's mom wanted and pick up my pace. I walk that baby right to the trailer, get us in the lean-to, and start stripping off wet layers. And that's what I'm doing when Cherry finds me, standing there in my fruit-of-the-looms peeling red cardboard off this screaming cheesy baby. It's a boy, his nutsack bright pink and enormous, his penis uncut. Where his belly-button should be is a purple snake tied with a yellow yarn. Other than that, he's all set, ten fingers and toes, no frostbite, sticky black hair, and a voice like a damned opera singer. Between the kid and the TV blaring in the back room where Cherry's mom's watching, Cherry can't hear me trying to tell her what happened. Of course she's talking over everything I say, anyway, so it all comes out in a jumble.

Are you insane, Joe? You can't just pick up a baby like a stray dog.

I come into the kitchen, elbowing my way past her. The kid's slippery and I'm trying to figure out how to hold him without breaking him or flopping him around too much. His skin's a hell of a lot colder than a living baby's skin ought to be.

I mean, somebody's got to do it, Joe, but it can't be you, Cherry says. It sure can't be you.

Cherry blows the smoke from her cigarette through her nostrils like a dragon and starts to pace on the other side of the counter. She's done near worn a hole in the carpet over the last few years between me and her mom.

It ain't legal. It ain't clean, she says.

I know it ain't clean, Cherry, I tell her. I'm about to give it a bath if you'll just give me a hand.

I hold the kid out toward her. His arms and legs fly out like he's skydiving and his cries are fast and raspy. Desperate.

Oh, no, Cherry says. She shakes her head and holds up both her hands palms out, her cigarette ash falling on the floor. I'm not having anything to do with it.

I stop and look at her for a long minute the way I do when I want her to know just how unreasonable she's being, but she's making a point not to look at me or the baby. I shrug. I wad the boy up and tuck him in the crook of my arm like a bundle of firewood. He arches his back and lets out a fresh series of howls. I struggle to plug the sink with my free hand. I turn on the tap. Water's ice cold. Out in the swamp we don't get much hot.

It's kidnapping, that's what, Cherry says. She lights a

new cigarette off the one she's smoked down.

Jesus, Cherry, I say. I didn't sneak into its crib and steal it, for Chrissakes.

Joe!

Cherry raises her cigarette hand like she'll smack me. Apparently, there's no situation that warrants taking the Lord's name in vain.

I rummage around in the cabinet for a pot, take a deep breath, and try again: Somebody left it, I say over the ruckus. He was just sitting there alongside—

You go out looking for trouble you're bound to find it.

Yeah, Cherry, I say, practically yelling now, jamming the pot under the faucet. Uh-huh. That's right. I woke up this morning and says to myself, what could make my shit life even better?

I juggle the pot against my hip the way I've seen Cherry do. I slam it on the stove, sloshing water all over. I crank up the burner, careful not to roast the kid's toes. Then I turn to Cherry like I'm in a soap opera and slap myself on the forehead.

Oh! Of course! A baby. Why didn't I think of it sooner? And so I head out hoping to find one. And lo and behold, there just happens to be a baby freezing its ass off right in my path. Lucky, lucky me!

But the truth is, I do feel a little bit lucky. It's not like this shit happens to just anybody. I look down at the little guy. Cherry's pretty faithful to the pill and we're always broke, so we might not have any of our own. I've never seen a lot of babies up close. Outside of the gunk that's stuck all

over him and the noise he's making, he's kind of cool. Hard to believe you could start off like this and end up nearly forty, hairy, drooping, nothing to show for it but a parole officer and a trailer owned by your girlfriend's mother.

I wipe off my pinky finger on the kitchen towel and offer it up to the kid that way I once saw this guy do with his baby way back in high school. When the boy takes my finger, his sound is shut off like a stereo when the circuit's blown. The kid settles in that way, crosses his arms and legs over his body. The roof of his mouth is ridged and he sucks mightily, his eyes wide and hopeful.

I feel you, buddy, I say. I wish I had three arms so I could get to that 151 and have a pull myself.

You could get busted, Cherry says, turning off the tap. You could go back to jail. Or even prison if somebody thinks you done something wrong to it. She glances at my finger suspiciously, preparing her testimony, no doubt. Then she looks away. I can tell she didn't really see the boy, didn't notice how...human he is.

Now that the kid's quiet I can hear the announcer on The Price is Right from the other room shouting: Let's see what's behind door number three, Johnny!

A brand new baby, I say, joking as soft as I know how, stepping into Cherry's path. I just want her to look at the kid, really look at him, at me. Come on, Cherry, I say. Have a heart.

You picked it up, Joe, Cherry says. You're the one that touched it.

What was I supposed to do? He would've *died*,

Cherry.

Either due to fear of death or because he's caught on that my finger doesn't make milk, the boy cranks up his wailing again. This time it's a jagged series of cries precipitated by enormous inhales.

What's that racket? Cherry's mom rasps from the back room. The station must be on a commercial break because she's muted it and I hear the creak as she hauls herself up onto her walker.

For the first time, Cherry looks at me. I can see that she's working it out with me, trying to get our story straight. We struggle together like that. The edges of her eyes are like the woods that surround the swamp. You could get lost there if you don't know where you're going. But I can see I'm on a path.

That first summer out of jail Cherry had me trap a mess of raccoons that were raising hell under the trailer nights. She hated them even as she ate the damned stew. Then, when only the one baby raccoon was left, she up and took him in. Just for the night, she said. Thing lived with us for a month or two—until it tried to wash a couple of joints in the toilet bowl. It escaped when I gave chase. The look on that animal's face when it saw there was a whole world outside of the pre-fab one! It gave a little fuck-you-very-much sneer and waddled off into the swamp, no doubt stoned as Steve Miller from the few soggy bites of pot it ate before I caught it. Cherry was heartbroken.

I hold the flailing baby out like an offering, my hands cupped under his butt and shoulders. He claws wildly at his

own face and it hits me just how helpless he is, how close the call was. He really would have died out there. Maybe the coyotes would have come after dark. I feel a sick panicky tingle in my bladder. There would have been no trace. A whole life could happen, and never happen, at the same time.

I mean, what would Jesus do, Cherry? For real?

She barks a quick laugh. Then she glances at the crucifix on the wall and clutches at her necklace. The boy's chest rises and falls over his squalling. It's enough to wear on a saint. Even one like Cherry, who sighs and rolls her eyes, which is always how she starts her giving in. Right from our first time in the back seat of my old Buick it was like this. She shakes her head. Then she bites her cigarette and takes the baby under the arms like he's a cactus or made of toxic waste.

Out the corner of her mouth she says, Fine, then. But you know, you ain't Jesus, Joe. You're gonna have to turn it in to the cops eventually, and that means talking to the cops and that means—

Look, Cherry, I say. Least you could do is find him a towel or a blanket or something. And you want to put out that cigarette?

Who died, she says, and made you the American Cancer Foundation? But she tosses her smoke into the ashtray.

She and the kid disappear together into the hallway, but I can pinpoint exactly where they are by listening. The bathroom door closes and the cabinet opens, muffling the kid's noise further. I hear Cherry trying to soothe him: What's

the matter? What's the matter, baby?

Stupid question. He's cold and hungry. So am I, come to think of it.

I go out on the porch to take a leak and retrieve the bottle of 151 I left tucked in the snowbank. I unscrew the cap and drink deep and long. The slight sleet pelts my bare skin. I feel incredibly alive. The snow, the dark break in all the white where the swamp's melted through, it all seems more important now, somehow.

I'm hiding the bottle in a hollow in the siding next to the fuse box when Pauline comes clanking in, dragging her oxygen tank with her. She cocks her head toward the muffled sounds of Cherry trying to sing the theme song from *Gilligan*. Pauline's hair, which is done up in front with lots of hairspray, is flat and matted in the back, the cord from her oxygen pressed around it. Her lipstick is bright red and uneven under the clear plastic mask. I think she's going to ask me what in hell's going on, but she just holds her hand out. I pass her the bottle. She pulls the mask off her face and takes a swig.

Pauline settles the mask over her face, heaving. That a baby crying? she asks between drags of oxygen.

I don't answer. It's best if people handle their own mothers. I tuck the bottle away and secure the latch on the fuse box. I get a dry pair of long johns from the closet and haul them on. I go over and look at the water, but it's not boiling yet. Come on, I pray at it.

Cherry comes into the kitchen. She's got the boy wrapped in my robe. She's looking down into the boy's face.

There's something in the flush of her cheeks I've seen but can't place just now.

That's what I thought, Pauline says. She shuffles over to the boy and draws back the folds of terry cloth. No more'n a few hours old, she says. Where'd he come from?

Somebody left him, Cherry says, looking up with tears in her eyes. Can you imagine?

It's love. I'll never know what happened to Cherry in that five minutes she was alone with the kid, but maybe it was like what I felt when I was hoofing it home. The universe chose me. Us.

Truth be told, Cherry's always been a little funny in this way. Example? She knew me since we were kids—I grew up on the other side of Breakneck. Anyway, she must've refused me twenty times in all those years. Then, she shows up at my door one night wearing a triple-fat winter coat over her nightgown. Says her mamma's sick and will I drive them to Monroe Mercy because it's snowing and she's too scared. Of course I do. After I drop them off, I leave east and hit all the houses I can find empty down by the riverfront just in case it's any kind of date we're on and I could use the cash. I'm taking a nap in the Buick when she opens the door. She presses her nightgown against me. And two months later I go to jail and even though it goes far above and beyond the call of grateful, she sticks with me through the whole thing.

Sure, says Pauline. People are shits.

Mom!

It's true, she says. She laughs the laugh of the lungless and holding out her finger to shake the little guy's hand.

When the first folds of steam come off the water in the pot I pour some into the cold water in the sink until it's just right, and Cherry hands the baby to me and gets a fresh washcloth.

Watch his belly-button, Pauline says as I slide him into the sink. And support his neck.

The boy's suddenly more turtle than human, his arms and legs coming out one by one as Cherry moves the washcloth over them. He's quiet now but for some small hoarse hiccupping noises. He seems to like the water. When Cherry's gotten all the mess off him, I pull him out and swaddle him in a couple of dishtowels.

Cherry puts the steaming pot back on the stove, finds the hotdogs, opens the package, and drops them in.

He needs something, too, I say.

Milk? Cherry says.

We ain't got none, I say, feeling bad for buying the 151 when I could've bought milk.

Momma always said sugar water'd keep a little one a few hours, Pauline says. Pauline's from down in Mississippi and she always has ideas like this, pee on your hands for chapping, butter for burns, etc.

How do I get it in him? I ask.

Straw? Cherry says.

Cherry mixes the boy a drink and I sneak another myself. I can't find a straw, but Pauline volunteers a piece of her tubing. I unplug her briefly, cut a bit with Cherry's nail scissors, and go to work feeding the boy. I draw up a few drops of sugar water at a time. I put the tube in his mouth.

He sucks again and again and cries between rounds. It takes forever. And the whole while I'm feeling bad that the kid's first meal is so shoddy. Deep inside I hear myself promising him that it won't happen again.

The boy yawns, rests his head on my collarbone, stares at me again with his huge eyes. I watch the pulse in the small sunken diamond on the top of his head. I feel a bit sleepy myself. But the sun is going down. I hear the late plow coming up Breakneck a second time. The boy's pee has sunk through the towels and into my leg hairs real good. I realize no matter what the weather's like and how broken the Buick is I've got to go out and get the things the boy needs.

With what, Cherry says, your good looks?

Money's a rough point between us, especially since Cherry lost her job about six months back and the unemployment's about to run out. I was never able to get in down at the plant or even any of the auto plants up in Detroit. No diploma. Born too late. Last job I had was over a year ago now, painting houses with my cousin. Even he had to let me go. People complained. Seriously, once you figured out I was the one broke into all those people's houses, would you want me to stack all your stuff in the middle of the room under a tarp?

On top of this, I've missed my last two phone calls with my parole officer. I haven't gone to the AA meetings, either. No good reason besides I got traps to check, a furnace that breaks twice a week, and I don't like people up my ass. I know the cops won't come down to the swamp unless I really fuck up or they want to have some fun. If they're looking

for fun they won't take me in, they'll just harass me. So I've been pretty committed not to go past Country Lake Liquor if I can help it. But this is going to require a trip up to the Wal-Mart out on the highway because I don't think the liquor store has diapers and even if they do, how would I explain why I need them?

I shift the baby into Cherry's arms and stand up. I walk out to the lean-to and start to get bundled to head back out.

Cherry follows me, the boy passed out on her tits.

Joe, she says.

I ignore her, haul on my boots and rummage around for my hat. I'll miss the plow if I don't hurry.

Joe! she almost yells.

You're gonna wake him, I say. I fumble around on the top shelf for the gloves with leather fingertips and my kit.

Cherry says, Maybe we shouldn't go buying him things. Maybe we should leave him at the church or the police station or something. Maybe we should do it tonight so we don't get too attached to him.

She says all of this looking down into his face like she's the mother of God.

Sure, maybe, I say. Then I wait.

Or maybe we could keep him just one night, she says.

Leaving him in the cold like that, I say. That would make us no better than his parents, right?

She won't say so. She just clutches him a little tighter.

And of course I don't mention that I'll have to hit a house or two over in that fancy Wal-Mart suburb to afford

the shit because she'll never have to know. I'll tell you this: almost nobody's as good at what they do as I am. I can slip into an house so seamless that it doesn't matter how many I have to hit in one week. It's because I don't get a thrill out of it like some guys I met in the therapy group for burglars I had to go to in jail. It's just a job. I never take anything big, anything more than I need, anything someone would notice missing until much later. There's a whole class of people, in fact, who are always wondering: where did that last twenty go? And they think they lost it. I'm here to tell you: they didn't. Somebody smoked their last Pall Mall. Somebody made a sandwich in their kitchen while they were in the john. I steal like their own kids, like the wife who needs an extra ten for a dozen eggs and a loaf of bread.

At least, that's how it was before they put Pauline on that coumadin her Medicaid didn't cover. That was right after Cherry and I hooked up for the first time and for two weeks straight I took any dime I could get my hands on. Love-stupid, I guess. But I swore it was my last gig. I was going to look for a real job after I got Pauline in that coumadin and before Cherry got suspicious about how I made my money. Of course, she knew. She always knows.

I walk out to the road just in time. Randy nods at me through the icy window of his truck and swings it toward me. I hop over the plow as it slides past, open the door and climb in. The truck smells of booze and the cheap cigarillo he's got clutched in his teeth.

How's it goin', man?

Good by me, I say. There's nothing else to say. The

baby's not really a story I can tell, though Randy and I go way back to grade school. He's always been kind of an asshole, but he was the only one gave Cherry a real hand when I was in the clink, coming over to chop wood and all. Randy's got a record, too. Statutory, about ten years back. He took over running the plow for the county when his dad died. Cancer in the balls. Must have been a rough storm, too, because my old buddy looks like hell. His stubble is going grey a lot faster than mine and his eyes are bloodshot like he's been drinking heavy. I been there myself, so I don't think anything of it. We used to drink together, sometimes, back when I drank with other people.

Where you headed? Up to Country Lake?

Naw, man. I need to get out to the highway.

Sure thing, he says. Headed out there after I hit Miller one last time. Roads are a shitty mess. Been everywhere today twice.

Gotta grab a few groceries at Wal-Mart, I say. A few things for Cherry, I add. I'm a little nervous.

Gonna hit the parking lot up there later, he says, if you need a ride back.

Be great, I say. Might have my hands full.

Sure thing, he says. He crushes his cigarillo in the ashtray and reaches over my knees to get into the glove compartment. He brings out a baggie of weed and papers and dangles it in front of my face with one hand while he maneuvers the truck at the intersection to shove a new pile of snow against the bank. His fingernails are thick-crusted with power-steering fluid or rust. Seems the dude's truck is

shitting the bed. On top of that I heard he lost his girl, too, a few months back.

Naw, man. It's cool, I say, as he lifts the plow and puts the truck in reverse.

Roll me one?

I take the baggie and get down to business. My mouth waters at the smell of it, but tonight's not the night to get fucked up. If it's my one night to do right by the kid, I'd like to do it. By the time Randy gets us to the highway, I've rolled him an acceptable joint. He lights it right there at the intersection, inhaling deeply. He hands it to me, but I hold my hand up.

You sure, man?

Yep. Cherry'll blow a gasket.

Women, he says, shaking his head. Women, women, women!

He's in fine form. Like I said, I've been there, so I don't pay attention to how off he is. I just ask to be dropped at the gas station. Cherry's smokes are cheaper there, I say.

Cool, he says, holding his breath, skidding into the parking lot.

I jump out.

Meet you up to the Wal-Mart in an hour or so? he says. He blinks like a mole as the stadium lights around the gas pump's island buzz on.

Thanks, buddy, I say. An hour oughtta do it.

I watch as he skids out of the parking lot. I guess he's gotten a little loose around the bolts. I think prison must do that to a guy and I was lucky just to get jail time. I was lucky

my dad just up and disappeared instead of dying slowly right before my eyes.

Once Randy's out of sight, I double back, jog across the highway. I walk along the edge of the forest like I'm headed home. When there are no cars, I slip into the trees. It's the first secret of both hunting and stealing, my dad taught me. Think like a tree. Move so slowly no one knows you're moving. Be part of the landscape.

This time of day in winter is amazing because it's already pitch black out and nobody's home from work yet, at least not people in this neighborhood, who have better jobs than down at the plant. This neighborhood's always been a great deal for a thief, too, because it's a cross between what we've got in the swamp, empty land, and what they've got in town: neighbors. You can stand in the trees for hours and wait to make your move, not like the real houses in town, where there's no place to hide. And then you can hit another house.

The backdoor of my first house faces the woods and has your standard pickable locks. All the houses here work pretty much the same and the people are predictable, too: in about sixty seconds, I'm robbing yet another guy who keeps a safe-deposit box in the closet and the key in his bedside drawer. Sure enough, there's an emergency fund. Plenty for me to take forty and not have the family starve if suddenly they ran out of canned green beans and peaches in syrup. There's no thrill, like I said, just the small joy that comes with returning to an occupation after a long absence. I open the guy's closet to see if he has more than one pair of hunting socks. He does. Score. Mine are full of holes. I sit on the

edge of the bed and double up so my feet are warm and snug. I wipe the floor near the door with the hand towel I carry in my kit. I grab an apple from the fruit bowl. Then I get the hell out of dodge.

I slip into the woods and check my watch. Six minutes. Not bad for an old guy. I'm thinking forty bucks will do it when I pass a house with the living room lit up so I can't help but see a woman handing a baby not much bigger than our boy to a man wearing a button-down shirt and a tie, just home from work, no doubt.

I stand there eating my apple, watching. The man makes a big excited face like the baby is the most surprising thing he's ever seen. The mother leans over and kisses the baby's feet. Then they settle into the couch, the three of them. And they look like one body. The guy holds out the remote and turns on the TV to reveal a newscaster standing in front of a giant map of Michigan shoving another big storm forward with his hands.

I walk down to the window on the end of the house, the one I know looks in on the smallest room. I want to see what kind of stuff these people have for their baby. Light from the hallway falls on the crib that looks more like a little prison with a mobile dangling over it. There's a high table stuffed with clothes. I put my fingers on the window and push up slightly. It's locked. These people always think that will stop a guy. Then they leave keys under fake rocks near their back doors. I slide along the edges of the house, gently turning each stone. I find the key under the ceramic sunflower near the back door.

I let myself into the far door, which leads me down into the basement. This one's unfinished, the same kind of dank grey basement I'd retreat to for hours in my twenties waiting for someone to go to sleep or leave again. I take my towel and work at getting my boots dry. Listening to make sure the TV is still on, I creep up the stairs. Stupid as a spring chicken but slick as butter, I go to the kid's room. I check for a place to hide should somebody come in. No place, so I lock the door from inside. People always think they've accidentally done this themselves, and it gives you an extra minute to get out the window.

I pull the little flashlight out of my kit and look at the stuff that's on the table. Big pink bottle of lotion. Plastic container of wipes. Aloe-scented. On the second shelf, there's a whole stack of tiny shirts, about twenty. I unfold them to see that they have snap-on underwears attached. I pull two out of the stack. Two pairs of socks. Then I hit paydirt—I find a tiny set of red long johns in the very back near the bottom. It's risky, for sure. My dad always said: Never take anything that's one of a kind. But a kid living out near the swamp is always gonna need thermals more than a kid who lives in the land of central heating. On the side shelf there's a stack of small blankets with different animals on them. I pull one from the stack, giraffes. I toss the rest of my loot in it, roll it up, tuck it down the front of my pants, cover my crotch with my flannel, and get the hell out of dodge.

Ten minutes later, I'm wandering the endless rows of diapers in the Wal-Mart feeling like I've got the biggest set of balls in Monroe what with those baby socks crowded

into my underwear. I get the diapers that say *newborn*, two blue plastic bottles, *improved natural suction*, and ten cans of formula, *gentle*. I get Cherry a carton of smokes and pick up Pauline's prescriptions. I roll my cart up to a checkout manned by some girl too young to know me and ask questions. By the time Randy's sliding into the handicap space, I'm standing out front waiting with my bag like I'm his wife or something.

Thanks, man, I say, climbing into the cab.

You betcha, he says. He pulls onto the highway, driving over the snow and ice like it isn't even there.

Everything goes along fine until the plow skids out on a patch of ice near Breakneck and my bag tips to the side and one of my cans of formula rolls out onto the seat.

Randy looks down at it. What in hell's that? he asks.

Can of milk, I say, catching it in my left hand and stuffing it back in the bag.

Yeah, but ain't that baby milk? he says.

I pretend to examine it. Shit, I say. I must have grabbed the wrong thing by accident.

Randy shakes his head, shuddering. Weird, he says.

Yeah, I say.

He looks at me funny when he drops me on Breakneck, like he wants to ask me something more about it, but he doesn't. I reach out and shake his hand.

See ya, buddy, I say.

In the house, it's all chaos again. Cherry's pacing by the door. She nearly throws the kid at me when I walk in.

He's starving, she says. You were gone forever.

She and Pauline make the boy a bottle, boiling nipples and warming formula. I get him all dressed up in a diaper, a pair of socks, and one of those T-shirts. The crotch comes nearly to his toes. I fumble with the snaps. Then I pull on his long johns. The arms and legs hang past his feet and fingers. But at long last, the four of us sit on the couch together. I touch the nipple of the bottle to the kid's lips and he hooks right on, sucks wildly, grunts with pleasure.

Pauline pulls her mask away from her face. You ask me, she says, I think it's a message from the universe or something. A gift.

She can't say more because she's choked up. Pauline's lived one hell of a life of drinking and whoring and I've never seen her get weepy about anything. She paid for that trailer with blood and sweat and turned out four decent kids. Her breathing and the boy's suckling make a nice rhythm. Cherry puts her arm around my neck. Everything is so perfect I never want it to end. I keep picturing stripping him back down, handing him over to the cops, trying to make up answers to their questions about something they can't understand.

That night, the boy sleeps between us for the first time, but we don't sleep. We take turns watching him, waking up to feed him. I thump his little back and pace the room with him. Snow and wind rock the trailer, but it's as if we're safe in the hull of a great ship.

When the sun comes up orange in the room Cherry's sitting by the window, staring out at the snow.

He'll end up going to fosters, she says.

After my dad left and my mom died I went to the system because there was no place else for me to go. I remember how one of the fosters liked to whip us out by the leaf-burning barrel in the fall. How I snuck off. How I could sneak off because my dad taught me the skills to fend for myself in any economy.

Look, I say. If its own parents did this to it, how do we know some foster family's gonna be any better? The only chance this kid has is us. We're his chance.

They'll never choose us, Joe, she says. She raises her arm and points to the wall, to me, to herself as if our very existence is proof enough. Never, she says.

Yeah, Cherry, but how will anyone ever know the baby's not ours to begin with? You been home now for months. How could anyone say you weren't knocked up the whole time?

I've been thinking about this all night. I've been standing over pans with bottles of formula and dripping some on my wrist and offering it up to the boy and the whole time all I can think is: this is my boy I'm holding, our boy who's waking up again, waving his fist.

I press Cherry to me. She doesn't say anything for a long while. Finally she makes some small noise deep inside that I hear. And I know we aren't going to take the boy to town. We aren't going to sell him out. And in that moment, I love Cherry Jenkins more than I ever have in all the years since I was ten.

For the next few weeks, we hardly do a thing that isn't about the boy. We settle into a real routine with him.

Cherry watches him in the early mornings when I go to the swamp to check my muskrat traps. He sleeps on my chest all afternoon. Cherry keeps him in the evenings if I have to go out. I get up with him in the night. I'm hardly drinking at all. Before we know it Pauline's referring to herself, in the third person, as Grandma. As in: Grandma is gonna give the baby boy a big old kiss oh yes she is! We've tested calling the boy Joey. It hasn't quite caught on, maybe because we're still scared.

The next ice storm is a real doozy and we lose our electric. The plow thrashes outside and I wish for the second or third time that folks would find another way out to the highway, leave Breakneck alone. Finally, on his third pass, Randy parks the plow down at the end of our driveway and starts walking up.

What're we gonna do? Cherry says.

We're still trying to figure out how to introduce the boy in town, get our story straight. In winter, if you live out in the swamp, no one really bothers after you, asks where you've been. You never even see your neighbors. But once it gets to be March, you don't emerge, people might start thinking you've been done in by the gas heater.

Maybe we just tell him, Cherry says. He's not the worst guy to tell, is he?

I look at Pauline, who's got the same gut I do. She hooks her thumb toward the back of the trailer. It's been a rough day for her breathing because she can't do a nebulizer without electricity.

Go to the bedroom, I say to Cherry. I toss her a bottle

that's not quite warm, but it'll have to do. Keep him quiet, I say. Your mom and I can handle this.

I nod at Pauline, who nods back.

I know Randy's thinking we'll ask him in and give him a drink and I can't think of a way to say no. Everybody out by the swamp gives the plow guy a drink. It's tradition. So while Cherry scurries off, I open the door and Randy stomps in, tracking snow all over the carpet.

How's it goin', buddy? Ain't seen you in a coon's age!

Good enough, I say, slapping him on the back.

It's getting late and we've only got a few candles lit so I'm hoping he doesn't notice all the baby stuff scattered around.

It's a shitty mess out there, he says, slapping me back. When he raises his arm I can smell that he hasn't showered. His beard has grown and there's food in it. Being a bachelor, I think, doesn't suit this guy. He reeks of booze, but he lurches forward when I bring out cups.

Want a little sniff of something? I ask.

Sure thing, he says.

I start working at the fuse box, rummaging around to find the hollow. But I'm nervous, and I knock the bottle down inside the paneling. It smashes onto the concrete foundation.

A muffled wail goes up in the bedroom.

Randy looks in the direction of the noise. That a baby? he asks, his eyes widening.

I look at Pauline again, but her eyes are turned toward the ceiling as if to say: What can you do? You have to tell

him now.

Sure is, buddy, I say. He's a drunk. Maybe he won't remember or think much of it.

A baby, he says. Whose?

Well, ours, of course, I say. Then I yell to Cherry: Bring Joe Jr., out for a minute, hon, so Randy can see.

Cherry comes creeping from the hallway, terrified. I tip my head to the side, tighten my lips. Calm down, I mouth.

Since when you got a baby? Randy snorts. You was in my plow a month ago with baby milk falling out your bag saying you didn't have no baby.

So much for the theory that drunks don't remember things.

I'm fumbling around behind the fusebox again, hoping beyond hope that Pauline hasn't gotten the rest of my stash. But she's shaking her head no, pointing to the space behind the fridge. I go over, start digging there.

Sure we do, Randy, Cherry says. I been pregnant since right around when I quit work.

Let me see him, Randy says.

Cherry holds him up in her arms just as I put a glass of whiskey in Randy's hands. He sips, steps closer to look at the baby.

Cute little guy, he says, absently. He backs away. And I understand this, because I would have done the same thing myself a month ago.

Why didn't you say? he asks, stumbling as he tries to navigate his way to the door.

Insurance reasons, I say. Out on Breakneck, it's a

good enough excuse for keeping any secret.

Randy looks confused.

Health insurance, I say. Cherry lost her job, I point out, hoping these random facts will add up to some kind of story in his head.

Oh, he says.

We sit around and try to make conversation, but my old buddy's in such a state with liquor there isn't much to talk about.

After he leaves Pauline pulls her mask off her face and says: County's got no right letting that boy drive for a living.

Next morning at dawn I swaddle the boy in old sweaters and a hat and scarf and rig him to my chest using an old backpack. I put a warm bottle in my hunting sack and we go into the swamp. It's a good day, too. We get three muskrat and locate a new den. I explain to the boy what we're looking for: bubble trails, mud under the ice. We set up a 110 Conibear, wire it up nice and steady. People don't know anymore that there's an art to trapping, but there is. A friend of mine in the clink said that they're even eating raccoon and beaver up in Detroit now that the city's disappearing, being swallowed again by the wild land like we got here.

We're headed back to the house for lunch—the boy's cheeks are getting cold, the air picking up—when I feel someone else moving in the swamp. I still myself until I can hear the boy's breathing. I turn. There's someone at the far edge near the road, a figure in black. A man thrashing around, waving something in the air, walking a few feet, then

crouching down to touch the ground.

Following the line of trees, I get closer. It's a shovel the man is waving. And the man is Randy. And right away I know what he's looking for. I realize I've known all along. And my knees almost buckle with the weight of it.

I turn and drop the rats and my traps and hold the boy close to my chest and run.

That bastard was looking for the boy, I tell Cherry. The boy's body, I say, swallowing and trying to catch my breath. I crane my neck around to look at the boy's face, as if the very mention of the result of another version of history is enough to turn back time, kill him.

Cherry opens her mouth wide and then covers it with her hands. She reaches out, unclips the clasps, and lifts Joey out of the backpack. She presses him to her chest, kisses his little head over and over.

There's only one way he would know to look there, I say. And what else would he be looking for?

No, she says.

I grab them both and pull them close to me. We're like one body, now, like a real family.

We have to leave, I say. We have to leave Breakneck.

What? she says. Us? I can see the famous Cherry Jenkins rage machine about to turn crank and flare.

I've known Randy a long time, Cherry, and I'm telling you, something ain't right with him these days.

She says, He leaves a baby to die and we're the ones run out of town?

Except, we don't get out of town fast enough because

the Buick's a wreck and I have to hit a few houses to afford to fix it and Pauline needs her prescriptions. By nightfall, we've started to doubt. Think it's a coincidence. Maybe Randy was out there after muskrat, we start to say. We have no choice. I can't get us out of there. And you know how when you're helpless you'll convince yourself you were crazy to think you needed whatever you need? That's us. And though for the next five days I work through the night and Cherry pulls the drapes to peek out about four-hundred times, we try to pretend it's all normal.

On the sixth day, Randy shows up, stomping his way onto the front porch, hauling some girl behind him. He's carrying a shotgun and he doesn't knock. They just walk into the kitchen while we're sitting there eating our corn flakes and toast. They stand in the entryway.

This here's Nadene, Randy says.

The girl is skinny and pale with dark circles around her eyes, the same eyes our boy has. She's got two ratty black braids tucked into her faded blue ski jacket. She can't be more than seventeen. She stares steadily but somewhat blankly at the boy, who's snuggled into Cherry's arms taking his after-breakfast snooze. I try to stay calm.

We know why they've come. But Randy's taking deep breaths, searching for the words to tell us, anyway. I wonder if it's so hard for him because he wants the boy back so badly or because he just doesn't want to be the guy who ditched the boy in the first place.

Cherry draws herself tighter around the boy as if to say it will be over her dead body that Randy will touch so

much as one of our boy's toes. I feel my heart shrinking. It could get ugly before I have a chance to come up with a way to make everyone happy.

Thing is, Randy says to me, I think you been lying to me.

He punctuates each word with a short, jerky wave of his shotgun, which he's holding by the base of the barrel. People out on Breakneck always think that they need to have a gun in their hand to get their point across. I've never been one of those, so of course, our gun is buried somewhere under the bed. Not even sure if it's loaded.

And I don't much care for liars, Randy continues, his whole enormous body waving back and forth in an invisible wind. He points his finger, trying to think of what to say next.

The girl shoves him aside and he falls into the empty chair at our table. Sit down, R, she says. For Christ's sake.

Watch it, Cherry says, but the girl's got no idea it's about Christ. She thinks Cherry's getting up in her face so she immediately starts bobbing and weaving the way women do when they're in a fight. One of her braids falls out of her shirt. It's tied with a bit of yellow yarn.

That there baby you got. That baby's our'n, the girl says.

I'm thinking I remember seeing her face before. She's not the one I met at the Railway a year or so back, the one I heard left Randy back in September. She looks like one of Con Waverly's daughters, the little girls who lived in a trailer off Breakneck about a mile out from the one I grew up in. Her jacket's too small, would maybe fit a child. Her wrists

stick out, red from the cold.

I'm still trying to figure out what gentle thing to do, but Cherry's already had it, I can see, and she says in a low voice: You always in the habit of leaving your possessions on the side of the road?

The girl heaves a fast sigh and says, You don't know my life, okay? What it's like to be pregnant and not have nobody know! Don't you be all up in here judging me. She turns to Randy. See? she says, I knew they'd fucking leap to blaming!

At the sound of her screaming the boy starts to scream, too, and Randy leaps up out of his chair and shakes the gun at us. Fuck off! he says. It ain't your baby, so you got no right to say!

Well, I say, trying to sound reasonable, like a father talking to a teenager, Just about everybody might have something to say about this, Randy. Just about everybody. Probably the cops, too—

Don't you fucking threaten me, Joe! He reaches up around his collar and scratches at himself fiercely. Don't you go all townie on me, neither!

I know he's right; I shouldn't bring the cops into any of our business out here in the swamp. So I try to appeal to his sense of fairness. I say, He would have died if it weren't for us.

Yeah, well he wouldn't exist if we didn't make him, the girl says smugly, drawing her lips back and flaring her nostrils.

I get up, slam the chair out of the way, and say, You

fucking tried to kill him!

I see, out of the corner of my eye, Pauline raise her finger in warning. He's got a gun, her finger says. He's crazy, it says. She pulls her mask off her face and says to Randy, Would you and your girl like a cup of coffee? Piece of toast?

I see the girl sudden and quick eye the plate, purse her lips. And I stole that damned bread. But here's a reminder that there's always somebody poorer than you.

I hold the plate out to her. Seriously, I say.

Cherry glares at both me and Pauline. And I love her for that fierceness. But Pauline's right.

The girl eats the toast carefully, with her eyes on me, like I might take it back, or maybe laugh at her for wolfing it, which is clearly what she wants to do. I wonder how our boy managed to grow inside of her.

Randy's working up to say something, emitting a whole new series of grunts. He finally gets his shit together and says, I freaked, okay? I didn't know what to do and Nadene, the whole time she was screaming she didn't want it and then she was passed out and I just fucking freaked but I didn't mean to hurt it, Joe. I swear I didn't.

He says all of this, but he doesn't move to put his gun in the corner of the doorframe, which is how someone on Breakneck would say that he was mistaken, he was sorry, he's ready to negotiate without threats. Some kid down the way blew his foot off come tromping in a door where his dad was having a meeting that had gone well.

Once back in grade school Randy and I went hunting for muskrat. We found one that had managed to swim its

way out to the middle of the swamp with the trap on its leg. I hauled it in, nine years old and cursing Conibear's bullshit "sudden kill" advertising. But Randy, he laughed, shoved me aside. He tossed the thing out into the water to watch it swim frantically, dragging its cage to its death.

He and I negotiate, with that gun over his knees, what you might call a custody arrangement, similar to something the courts might cook up, similar to being Godparents, and Cherry cries the whole time because she thinks I'm dealing for real. Randy and I shake on it. Like my dad always said: Shake if you have to, but cross your fingers behind your back because the other guy's probably crossing his fingers, too.

I look into Cherry's eyes, try to send her the message. I lift the boy from her arms. She sits totally stunned for a minute. Then she runs to the bedroom, screaming, Go to fucking hell! And that's pretty strong commentary from a woman like Cherry Jenkins.

I see Randy's finger tremble on the gun.

I put the boy in the girl's arms. You know how to hold him? I ask, relaxing his neck into the soft of her elbow.

She pouts when he starts to whimper, says, Got tons of little ones around my daddy's house. She looks down into his face. But he's the prettiest, she says. Ain't he?

I nod. My throat feels like someone's choking me.

They stand to go, and the terrible panic rises. I can't get a breath. I look at the boy, and I try to tell him with my eyes, too, that my promise is true. If there's anything I want my son to know, it's that there is such a thing as a no-fingers-crossed-real-deal between fathers and sons, a deal you strike

and keep.

Will your wife be okay? Nadene asks.

She'll get used to it, I say.

But the fact is, she won't have to. Because that whole day while she's crying in the bed, I'm packing the car. Soon as it's dark, I'm outside Randy's windows, looking for one unlocked or loose. When I find it, I let myself into the room where the girl sleeps. She's still wearing her jacket, her leg bent up on the mattress, her hair untied. I wish I had something more for the first mother of my son, but all I can do is slip fifty dollars in the back pocket of her jeans. I don't usually pray, but I say something like a prayer to her for what I'm taking. I know better than to think it's for her own good.

While I'm at it, I thank my dad for teaching me that if I ever needed to get lost fast, I-75 was a straight shot to the Florida Keys where it was hard to find a guy. I thank Pauline for suffering the cold air, for stroking Cherry's shoulder while they wait in the car down on Breakneck. I pray to Cherry because she never asks for more than I can give her.

But most of all, I'm praying to the boy. Because the first time he looked at me, he saw right into my bones. He saw everything about me, how once, after my father left, I punched my own mother in the mouth. He even saw how, for just a minute, I was going to leave him there on the side of the road and let him die, but I didn't. He let me want something better for all of us.

I creep through Randy's dark and stinking trailer to the living room where they've pushed a couch to the wall to make a crib. Randy sleeps nodding in a chair, guarding

the boy, the gun across his knees. The boy's eyes are open in the dark and I can see them shining, like he's been there waiting for me, knowing I would come. He kicks his feet like he always does when I bend down to get him. I scoop him up in my arms. I stand there for a minute in the cold air just holding him to my chest. Then, we take the Breakneck road, get the hell out of dodge.