

Down and Out

Sliding gravel, clatter of falling rocks, a fine mist of red dust. When the man glanced back, the boy was sitting on the ground, examining a fresh wound on his knee. The boy frowned in concentration, his mouth ajar. He traced a finger along the trickle of blood, brought it to his mouth and tasted it.

“How many times,” the man said sharply. The boy startled. He jumped to his feet. “Come on,” the man said, and he ran further along the trail. The boy dusted himself, scrambling to catch up.

Their world was beautiful, if impersonal: stubborn bushes broke the red earth, hills loomed around them. The boy watched his feet, which seemed to move of their own accord. The shoes were red like the rock, busted in both heels.

The path took them up in switchbacks. At the elevation, the boy panted, sweat streaming into his eyes. The man stayed a dozen or so paces in front. The boy would catch his scent on the breeze, salty and slightly stale. The boy didn't like to smell him; he had never gotten used to that odor. The boy's knees, elbows, and left wrist all bore brown scabs. By comparison, the bright red trickling down his shin seemed garish.

“Don't tire yourself on the uphill so much. It's a long way to go,” the man called out. The boy muttered something even he couldn't hear .

The path crested into meandering fields. Long yellow grass nestled amongst dollops of snow in the shade. The surrounding mountains all showed slanted layers of

rock in the lurid daylight, something raw, like the boy's bleeding knee. The path brought the pair to an overlook. The interior mountains were cloaked in snow. The man stopped, and the boy stopped next to him. The sky was a brilliant, late-afternoon blue. They didn't speak, but they looked upon the peaks, the waving pine forests that carpeted the valley below.

As the miles passed the boy started to feel vague, as if the stuff that made him had become fainter. The sweat had dried, leaving a coat of grit on his forehead. His legs pumped out of habit. He felt as if the hills were gnashing him into a fine powder. The expression on the man's face, when he glimpsed it, was a grim forbearance. Nevertheless, the boy had grown to admire the man's spring. He noticed it now, the way he skipped along over roots, nimble as a jackrabbit.

The trail became a knife's edge, with a steep incline on the right side. A hundred feet below, a thin and swift stream carved a narrow gorge. "Careful," the man said, "watch your feet, Daniel."

By the time they looped back to the car, it was late afternoon. With the windows down, the wind made billowing *floofs* in the boy's ears. The boy pressed his finger into the new wound, spongy and caked in places. A smear of blood came away on his finger. The man drove to a milkshake stand and ordered fries. They sat there, each ravenous. A little smile hesitated at the corners of the man's face, and he looked down at the boy. This was always the best part. The man watched as the boy, thinking himself sneaky, ripped an old scab off his elbow. The man passed him a stack of napkins. "Eat the last fry," he said.

They spoke a bit more when they were back on the road: “Chemistry test tomorrow,” the man said.

The boy shifted uncomfortably.

“We’ll study your notes when we’re back.”

“I threw them away,” the boy said.

The man said nothing. It was in these moments, when he couldn’t think of something to say, that the boy could smell him most strongly. He could smell difference on the man like rust, like saltwater, like blood.

When they arrived home, they sat in the foyer removing shoes and socks. The man told the boy to get his chemistry notes. “I told you, they’re gone,” the boy said.

“Get your notes,” the man said.

“They-“

“Get your notes.”

The boy fumed, “I never used to, he never made me-“

“I don’t care,” the man thundered, “how things were before. It’s not before. It’s after, it’s now. Get your damn notes before I get impatient.”

The boy stomped up the stairs, stomped back, and tossed a pile of papers on the table. He glanced in the man's direction and made a noise like snarl. The man ignored this. "Let's talk about the Ideal Gas Law," he said.

The house that they lived in was too large. The man had explained that it was the house he'd grown up in, that he inherited it when his parents had died. He said this in the spirit of apology, as if he, too, were offended by its size. It suited neither of them, and there were entire rooms that were unoccupied. Sheets left over antique furniture, mirrors that, when the boy ran his finger along their surface, yielded thick dust. The boy didn't even have names for those rooms, and if the man ever did they had passed out of his usage.

Race days were the boy's least favorite. The man would wake him before sunrise. The boy felt as though a mistake were being made, an obvious error of biological grammar. They would sit together on the kitchen floor, and the man would set the timer on his phone. The boy wished that he could fall asleep at this time, but his body was a traitor. He'd sit cross-legged with his eyes closed and pray for sleep to find him again. He hated the man for knowing that he wouldn't fall asleep.

The boy would sit, and he would think of the dark place around him. He would compare all the empty, unlit rooms in the house to the stubborn black of his eyelids. As always, he could only find one difference: something, or nothing. When the timer chimed, the sky outside would be bruise-colored.

The meditation caused the boy to feel suspicious. At school, everything seemed louder, more abrupt, less explicable. The boy would sit in empty corridors during his free period and flinch at the locker doors slamming shut; the squeak of tennis shoes on tile; the nearby screams of migrating geese. The teachers had never learned how to talk to him, and the other kids had invented their own ways. He sat alone at lunch; otherwise he was joined by a crowd led by a preening girl named Clarissa, who would blare questions at him in a tone that was meant to be kind.

The other boys on his cross-country team bugged him. They were all blond and wan and didn't have much to say. He made this distinction in his mind; he might be quiet, but he always had something to say.

He did have one friend on the team, Matthew, who was exceptional: nearly albino, functionally mute, and six-foot-three-inches tall. He was somewhere between parody and avatar. A Mormon, he brought the boy along to church, where they sat with Matthew's parents and six younger sisters. Each was simply enormous. This made the boy feel small and dark, like a pencil smudge, and imagined that he'd been granted permission to accompany royalty. He actually enjoyed going to the Mormon church so much that the priest had, against his better judgment, tried to convert the boy. The priest came away baffled and a little thirsty.

The boy didn't have to go to his last class on race day, which only implied extra homework for him later. As the team bounced along on the bus, he'd distract himself by spewing a stream of commentary toward Matthew. "I saw two squirrels fucking," he'd say, and then he would stare directly at Matthew and make him shudder. "Does it bother

you, when I say fucking?” Matthew just shook his head, his eyes closed tight. “Have you ever noticed,” the boy continued, “that it always smells like shit on race day? Like a big gross shit.” Matthew continued to shake his head, but he also said in a small voice “yes.” The boy grinned.

He would pace nervously at the line. “Don’t start too fast, Daniel,” the man would say beforehand, holding him by his shoulders and looking him dead in the eye. “You always start too fast.” The man had arranged to leave work early on Fridays to come to the boy’s meets. The boy paced, sensing the man in the audience. The boy muttered “not too fast, not too fast.”

He’d fly off the line, nearly sprinting. Half a mile in, he’d realize that he was too far ahead of his teammates and that he couldn’t undo what he’d begun. The courses involved rolling hills with dead grass, or gravelly paths in a prairie, or otherwise the neutered greens of a golf course. He’d stumble over his feet, a smear of red on the yellow or black or green, and the breath would tighten in his chest. Two miles in, and the ground would feel too close, too heavy, too insistent. He’d fall behind. He’d lose.

For the boy, losing still meant doing reasonably well. It meant beating Matthew, who was the worst runner on the team. It meant crossing the finish line, and making eye contact. The man never congratulated him, nor did he scold him. “You went out too fast,” he’d say matter-of-factly. Later, when the boy was at church, he’d whisper at Matthew in the pew. “Thinking about Clarissa makes me want to masturbate. Do you think about her when you masturbate?”

Once, on the way out of church, Matthew leaned over, whispering into the boy's ear, "I think about your dead mother fucking your dead father."

Some Saturdays the man would have to go into work, and the boy would run by himself in the fields near the big house. Burrs would stick in his shorts, and he'd pick them out with little pricks of pain. He'd think about God on these runs - at least, God as he'd heard of him at the Mormon church. In his mind, God was twenty feet tall and blindingly naked. The boy would keep that thought in his head, and he would gaze with wide eyes around him: a vague terrain, studded with brown prairie scrub. Its only redemption was in the distant mountains; its only sting the burrs. Cresting a hill, he would bark at the silence, echoing over the grass like a hyena.

One Saturday, the boy woke up to snow. He smelled it before he opened his eyes, the dry cold in the air reminiscent of fresh laundry. Yawning, he walked down to the kitchen. The man had laid out running tights, high socks, an orange.

"Seriously?" the boy said.

"Trust me," the man said.

It was early enough that the road was empty. They arrived at the trailhead parking lot, and the boy banged his door shut. He loved the way the snow muted the thud. The noises he made - the crunch of shoes on snow, his sniffles, the things he muttered under his breath - all sounded like vaporous secrets. The pair stretched,

jumped up and down a bit, and took the trail at a brisk walk. Rounding the first turn, they broke into a jog.

Though the snow fell steadily, it had only accumulated a few inches. Their steps left fresh tracks. The boy watched his breath steam out in front of him. As they climbed, he breathed harder, but his body felt comfortably warm. In fact, the air was like cool blankets; the flakes were soft on his face.

They topped the first hill, and the man stopped the boy short. An elk blocked the path, watching them. He was somehow both tense and perfectly at ease; a wilderness of poise. It was a kind of majesty. The elk turned and loped into a copse of trees. The pair did not resume running, not right away. The fields in front of them shimmered in the snow. Blond grasses glimmered and swayed in a quiet wind. The mountains beyond shrouded themselves in thin clouds, passing here and there gaily. It was this quality of motion that stilled the man and the boy, as if they had interrupted a native dance of winks and gestures. "Come on," the boy said, running ahead.

The going was no easier. They clambered up the hills. They slipped on patches of ice - the boy fell and got snow in his sock, numbing his ankle. But the man had big flakes in his beard, and the boy giggled to himself, and at one point the man stopped and *bellowed*, and the boy could tell he really knew how to bellow; had bellowed a number of times in his life; had had a life worth bellowing over. The boy thought, then, that he had this sort of life as well, and he sent his fiercest howl toward the peaks.

"Did you ever come here with my dad?" the boy said.

The man was caught off guard and turned around. “Yes,” he said, “we did.”

The snow tapered. Gradually, the day grew duller, light thin and parched. They ran through a wooded area, the fir branches heavy and sagging. It was completely silent.

Beyond the trees, the boy caught his foot on a rock. He fell spectacularly, landing on his right wrist, which he had held out to shield the impact from his face. He lay there, breathing the sweet air. The pain came in two stages: first, from the stinging patch of his chin, then slowly, throbbing from his wrist. The man hadn’t heard him fall, and he was far ahead. The boy stayed still, not ready to make a noise, his body cold and wet.

Eventually, he rose. He dusted himself off and examined his surroundings. They had just entered the boy’s favorite part of the trail. Ahead were steep canyons, jutting rocks like teeth. Once, the boy had seen a bobcat here. Another time, a rattlesnake. For now, the scene was empty. He realized, though, that he had never seen this part of the trail transformed by snow. It looked softer. He felt like crying.

Once, the boy had asked the man why he made them go running. It was a few months earlier, toward the end of a sweltering summer. The chirr of grasshoppers rose in the still air. They were stretching, sweating in the morning heat. The man had looked at the boy with a queer sad look in his eye.

“You like to run,” he’d said.

“But why do we have to go together?”

“Would you rather we didn’t?”

The boy shrugged.

“You know, Daniel, I do everything I can for you. But some of the things I do are also for me. Do you understand that?”

“I think so.”

The man sighed. The boy knew what it meant. *No, you don't.*

Probably only three minutes had passed, but it felt like twenty. The boy kicked snow around, drifting slowly down the trail. He threw a rock at a tree. He threw another one.

The boy suddenly wondered why he had never gone running with his own father. Or his mother, for that matter, who was thin but strong as leather. The answer came back to him immediately. He had been too young then. *But he hadn't been that much younger. Only a year.* But young didn't mean young in that sense, he countered himself. Young meant...it just meant before. That's what young meant.

The boy heard the man before he saw him. His feet sounded clumsy and uneven. When he rounded into view, his face was creased with worry. The boy felt a secret swell of pleasure at this worry, and the visible relief that followed.

“You fell?” the man asked.

The boy nodded.

“Just a cut, but you’re bleeding.”

The boy brandished his wrist at the man. It had swollen. “Oh,” the man said. “Can you run?”

The boy cocked his head.

“We’ll go slow,” the man said.

The boy was in front of the man now. He wanted to make the man feel bad for leaving him. He held his wrist gingerly. He limped at times. A heat glowed in the middle of his skull, a coldness everywhere else.

The path narrowed as they reached a ravine. The stream below was steel gray. “Be careful!” the man shouted, as the boy’s feet slipped. In truth, the boy had meant to frighten the man a bit, but he had gone closer to the edge than he’d expected. His stomach clenched at the near miss.

It was hard to stay focused on the trail. The landscape grew more severe at each turn. The pair hugged the mountain: the descent on the right side was merciless, cleft with bleak granite. With its mantle of snow, the cliffs and valleys looked brilliant and clean. The boy wanted to shout again, but it seemed wrong. It was so quiet, and the boy felt afraid. Silence was not a mere quality of the landscape but a rule to be followed. A crow flew by at a high altitude, and the boy wondered how it would be to move so effortlessly, to know of no geography other than wind and clouds.

The boy didn't hear the man fall. The sounds behind him were indistinguishable from the noise of running. When he turned around, his first thought wasn't *oh, no*; it was *now I understand why he kept running when I fell*. He wouldn't have turned around if he hadn't heard the noise the man made afterward, childish, somehow; a whimper of innocent surprise.

The hot feeling in his skull went away. Now, he only felt cold. He pivoted, and the path behind him was empty. The boy teetered at the edge, where the hill descended steeply.

“Are you OK?”

There was no answer. “Are you OK?”

The man was sprawled about halfway down the cliff. He had grabbed onto a sumac bush, breaking his tumble. The pair, man and bush, now hugged in a desperate equilibrium. Panic stung the boy. He considered the decline. It was precipitous, but it wasn't a sheer drop. He could find his way down to the man if he charted the right course. He kept his bad wrist uphill, sat cautiously at the edge. He looked down at the gray water rushing in a thin chute. The boy sucked in a breath and half-slid, half ran down the hill, halting a few feet above the man.

The man's eyes were shut tight, and he breathed heavily. It took a moment for the boy to understand what was wrong. The left leg had an extra joint between knee and ankle. A dark patch of blood was spreading. The man opened his eyes. He eyed the boy

with alarm. “Daniel,” he said, “you should have gone for help.” The man shuddered in pain.

And then the boy did cry. Because he realized that he couldn’t safely climb back up the slick slope. Because now they were both stuck. “Help!” he yelled, his voice cracking stupidly. “Help! A man is hurt!” The surrounding hills were mute. The boy looked at the man. “What do I do?” he asked.

The man was panting. “Do you think you can make it back up the slope?”

“I’m not sure.” The boy considered his swollen wrist. He considered the distance between himself and the path. “I don’t think so.”

The man winced. “OK, OK, let me think.” He surveyed their position, the bush he clung to, stubbornly rooted to the rock. He glanced at the boy, wedged into an awkward pose a few feet uphill. He glanced up to the path, and down to the stream.

“Listen to me, Daniel,” he said, “the first thing I need to do is to take off my shirt. Do you think you can do that? I don’t know if I can safely do it in my position.”

The boy nodded. He eased his way down to the man. With some awkwardness, he stripped off the man’s jacket and shirt. The man’s torso was now bare, and he shivered in the cold. He seemed brittle, deficient in flesh, his shoulders knobby and his chest narrow. The boy wrestled the jacket back on.

“Good. Now, take the shirt, and rip it so that it’s just one long cloth.” The boy did what he was told. “The good news is that it’s not bleeding very much. Can you reach my

leg? I need you to wrap my shirt on my leg above the break. Use a lot of pressure so that it stops the bleeding.”

This was harder than it sounded. The boy had to maneuver beneath the man. As he tied the knot, he skidded and caught himself with his bad wrist. He yelled out in pain. He felt hot tears of frustration and fear, but if the man observed this he didn't react. The boy righted himself and wrapped the bandage. They spent a moment in stillness, both out of breath. The land had a hallucinatory quality: the austere beauty of the hills, their violence, the horrible fragility of man and boy clinging to the side.

“Alright, Daniel, this is the tricky part. I need you to do exactly what I say. You must slide down the rest of the hill. I'm going to try to get down without hurting my leg. I need you to spot me from below. If I lose control, you have to catch me. We are going to walk out using the animal tracks along the stream. Do you understand?” The man's face was pale, an alarming shade of yellow against the fresh snow. The boy had never seen that look in a person's eye, simultaneously distant and urgent. He felt light, as if part of himself had remained up on the trail, stuck in a before that seemed as remote as the cliff.

“I can do it,” he said.

The boy slid down on his butt. It was easier than he expected: the snow aiding the descent. He paused a few feet down. “OK, I'm ready.”

The man shuffled the injured leg upward. The boy recalled a time when this graceless action would have been embarrassing for him to watch. The man worked to orient his body, leg canted uphill and his head facing down. It was undignified, crude.

The boy thought to the day, the hour, when he learned that he would soon live with the man. They'd stood in the hospital, each filled with shame. They couldn't look each other in the eye.

The boy watched as the man struggled, losing a few precious degrees of inversion. "Grab with your left hand," the boy said, "like that, now push."

When the man was ready, leg overhead, arms straining to hold the position, his eyes moved back and forth from the wound to the boy to the wound. His expression was distorted and gray.

"Drop," the boy said, "I'll catch you. Drop!" The man did so with a grunt. He fell backwards, his leg posed delicately. In that moment the boy apprehended a sort of wild beauty, part surrender, part defiance.

The man's weight collided with the boy, and the boy lost his footing. He tried his best to steady the man, but it was too much for him. Together, they slalomed the down the hill. The boy grabbed the man's shoulders, trying to keep him upright. The pair slid through brambles. The boy's shins were cut on sharp rocks, which pummeled the man and knocked his leg, eliciting yelps of pain. The boy lost his grip and tumbled blindly the rest of the way.

They landed near the water. The man was on his back, panting through pangs of agony. The boy held his wrist, twice swollen and beet red. He had held it out to brace the man's impact, receiving the brunt of his weight. His whole arm felt stiff. Shoots of pain jolted through it. The boy observed this with a fascination that didn't seem to belong to him.

It was even colder down here. Very little sun had penetrated to this spot. The icy water made the air smell like cold steel as it roared by, frothing like a rabid beast.

The man was not well. His eyes were half shut, and his face was vacant. He barely registered the boy as he said, "Hey! What do I do now?" There was no answer. "What do I do?" the boy said again, as if he were asking his chemistry teacher how to proceed on a lab.

The man stayed silent, and the boy walked to the bank and stared downstream. An animal path gripped the edge. The boy thought he knew this river. It was the same one that crossed under the highway. How far was that? The boy estimated to himself. He could make it. His backside was drenched. His breath issued in small clouds. The boy didn't feel terror or panic. A crow circled far overhead, perhaps the same as before. The boy wished he weren't in such a low place.

He turned back to the man. "I can't leave you here, it's too cold." There was no answer. "I'm going to carry you." Again, no answer, but the boy saw the man nod.

The boy lifted him. It was difficult - he had to be mindful of the leg. He draped the man's arms like a thick cloak; the man held onto the boy's neck and shoulders. The

boy took a few steps. Despite his wiry frame, the man was so heavy that the boy thought he might fall forward. His legs wobbled but didn't buckle. The snow was deeper down here than on the trails. He staggered forward.

When he had hoisted the man, the boy had realized that he had never been in such close physical proximity to him, had never felt the man's body in this way. His scent filled the boy's nostrils: salty, slightly ripe. His beard rested on the nape of the boy's neck. The flesh, the weight, the physical *body*-ness pressed the boy. Something hot and wet was soaking the boy's running tights.

The boy continued to walk. The sky was iron, lustrous and dull. It began to snow again. Fat flakes flowered on the boy's face. He didn't have a free hand to wipe them out of his lashes. At times, the trail abutted the water so closely that droplets sprayed onto the stumbling pair.

It stopped snowing. It started again. The sky changed from gray to bright white, then a strange, sea-foam color. The boy halted once, setting the man down, and tried a few steps. He could barely walk. There were some granola bars in the man's pocket, reduced to crumbs. The boy shook the contents from one wrapper down his throat. He offered the other to the man, who only moved his head wordlessly, mouth sealed. He had grown paler. The running tights over his bad leg were soaked through with blood, and the leg itself seemed frozen. The boy chewed the second bar. He picked the man back up, and he was twice as heavy as before. He took another step.

A little further on, the trail vanished. The river had tapered into a chute between two sheer cliffs. The boy considered his options. "Should I go in?" he asked, but the man

didn't answer. Gingerly, they entered the water. It wasn't too deep: maybe shin height on the boy. He had long since lost feeling in his feet. The water washed onto the man, but if it bothered him he didn't react.

It was hard going in the water. Each step threatened to overturn the boy's balance. The stones were slippery and shifted in places. Once, the boy lurched forward but held onto the man, afraid that if he let him go he wouldn't be able to pull him out. For a moment, the weight of the man's body held him under, and he couldn't breathe. He forced himself to a kneeling position, then to his feet. The boy tried a step, and he fell again. Again, he forced himself up.

The snow returned, this time with greater intensity. The sky dimmed. The boy's clothing wore a sheen of ice. The trail appeared on the opposite side of the stream. The boy had to mount a slope of crusted mud to get back out. He lost his footing again, this time colliding hard, face-first. His nose was bleeding - the boy could feel it flowing around his mouth. He didn't stop, though, to mind it. He didn't want to put the man back down. He didn't want to see him, however he was.

Yet they had made it back to the trail. The boy observed himself as if he were a spirit peering through the chokecherry. A black place, shadowed so the spirit could watch the boy, but not the inverse. He watched how he could still move his legs, even though he barely could feel them. He watched how he stooped under the man but didn't collapse.

He thought of his parents, the day of their deaths, without the shock it usually would have given him. He thought of the doctor who had asked him to identify their

bodies. The doctor had a kindly, idiotic beard, a big belly, wide nostrils. The boy could see the pores on his nose. He had actually been *relieved* because he looked upon them and had been so sure that it was two strangers who had died instead.

And even as relief flooded him, the man entered the room. He confirmed: *yes, that's them*. Now, the boy conjured the anger he felt toward the man in that moment. It was a careless verdict. If the man had only said otherwise, said that it was indeed two strangers, then the following events could have been averted. Even the present situation, the boy noted, could have been prevented.

The boy realized that he still felt angry. He realized that they both might die today.

For a long while, the boy thought about nothing at all. He spoke to himself, mouthing indecipherable words. Dusk fell, purpling the hills. The snow dwindled, and a tiny piece of moon was up over the thinning clouds. The boy registered the profound loneliness of the mountains. He was moving ever slower, each step a marathon of effort.

They reached the highway. It was pitch black, and the stars had come out in number. The boy dropped shivering on the side of the road. The man was motionless alongside him. He knew he should will himself up the road. Nevertheless, he lay there, gazing up at the stars, the sky clear now. The Milky Way was a blur of color, silver and blue like a tapestry. Stars blinked wildly. For how long they lay there, he couldn't say.

For months after this event, the boy would wake in the middle of the night, screaming. He would dream of those stars, unable to look away. In the dream, he sensed

the man next to him, dead. He couldn't turn his head, but he could feel the coldness of the man's flesh, smell the sour rot of death all around him. And the man would limp into the boy's bedroom, clasping him by the shoulders.

"I'm here," he would say. "Say it back to me."

"You're here."

"I didn't die. Tell me how it happened."

"I walked out."

"You walked out. You carried me."

"I carried you out."

"And then what?"

"A car came. It took us to the hospital. It saved us."

The man would hug the boy. "You saved us. Say it again, from the beginning."

And the boy would look at him in wonder, repeating and repeating.