

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SCHOLAR

The trouble was, only a few people drove that road, and, evidently, no one in the middle of a Sunday afternoon. Three flies buzzed around Josh's face, attracted by the trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth. Charlie shooed them away with both hands. "Fuckers," he said. It was calming to have something—even those tiny beings with their revolting appetites—to talk to.

Josh's car, a ratty, white Ford Escort, had rolled over a fence and landed on its side in a cow pasture. Charlie'd had his seat belt on and was hardly bruised, but Josh had been flung over thirty feet away, his head just missing the edge of a cement trough. His t-shirt was bunched under his arms, and his baggy jeans were drawn down to his knees revealing blue boxers and a ribcage like a plucked bird's. Their respective predicaments exaggerated the usual contrast between them: fourteen-year-old Charlie broad and large-headed, dark hair falling across his forehead like a toddler's, flushed with panic and the heat of early September. Josh, seventeen, looking more slight than ever sunken in the grass, drained of any color whatsoever, his porcelain features perfected by their stillness.

The pasture—one of Charlie's teacher's—was in the middle of nowhere, miles from any house. The afternoon's silence amplified the rasp of Charlie's breath and the buzz of the flies as they returned to their meal.

"You die," Charlie said, clapping his hands above Josh's mouth. The flies scattered, but Josh's eyelids didn't even flicker. Under the lashes, Charlie could see the whites rolled back in his friend's head; he looked away, down at the triangle of flesh that rose and fell reassuringly between his friend's ribs.

At first, he'd thought Josh was dead.

No, at first, dazed, he'd thought the older boy had disappeared altogether. Josh had been flung so much further than Charlie might have supposed possible that, climbing out of the upturned car and looking around, he'd ignored the object crumpled in the tall grass by the trough, mistaking it for a discarded feed sack, and scurried frantically between the other, closer objects jettisoned: a spread-eagled sweatshirt, a broken-sided cardboard box, and then, in still more irrational desperation, a scatter of fast food trash and a half-dozen cassette tapes.

"Josh," his voice squeaked over the asthmatic constriction of his air passages. Tears blurred his vision by the time it occurred to him that what was over by the trough was not a part of the pasture scenery at all.

"Don't do me this way! Goddamn it, Josh, don't!" He dropped to his knees and grabbed Josh by the shoulders, lifting. Eyelids slid back off senseless white, and slack lips flexed over the bloody teeth. "No, buddy, you can't! You're all I've got!"

Just before Charlie was about to let out an inconsolable howl, he noticed the regular motion of Josh's diaphragm. He let Josh back down into the grass and leaned back on his heels, wrapping his arms around himself, rocking. The relief was almost as hard to bear as the grief.

"You're breathing good, man. You're breathing better than me," Charlie said, but it felt funny, talking like that to someone with his eyes rolled back in his head, and besides, it used up air. Each breath was like trying to fight a nickel out of a clenched fist. They'd been on their way to Josh's mother's to borrow something—only a ten minute

drive—so Charlie hadn't thought to bring along his inhaler just the way Josh hadn't bothered to fasten his seat belt.

To say that Josh was all Charlie had in the world wasn't too much of an exaggeration: he'd never known his father, and, when he'd lived at home, his mother had divided her time between working at the shabby plastic extrusion factory in town, drinking at the VFW, and dragging herself back to whatever HUD trash they were living in to lash out at her three children. Charlie, the oldest, caught the worst.

She hadn't really tried to stop him when he'd moved in with Josh that spring. She'd stood cross-armed to one side of their listing metal doorstep, leaving him plenty of space to get past as he lugged his things out to the Escort.

"You think I don't know how it feels to want to just walk out, Baby-face? Probably never occurred to you that I was your age once, did it? That I had plans? I even looked like you, honest to God."

On his last load—two trash sacks of clothes—Charlie couldn't resist a parting shot. "And here I thought you was born all scraggle-headed with a bottle of Jim Beam in your fist, now it turns out you was a dreamer."

"Thanks for caring, Rosy-cheeks. Before I got saddled with you, I was going to be a pilot. Imagine that, me at the controls, 30,000 feet up in the air. What the hell *you* going to be, a frickin' Matthew Shepard? You think they won't catch up with you in this town? Do you?"

Charlie had almost made it to the car, but turned back toward her. "You know that's not the way it is, Ma! You run your mouth enough and you'll get me killed."

There were tears on her cheeks, but her lips were turned up in a smirk of satisfaction at having got under his skin.

"You got her to thank," Josh said, after they'd driven a little ways and Charlie had stopped sniffing. "She gnawed you free out of her trap the way a fox in a snare gnaws off its leg."

Josh lived in a little travel trailer behind his aunt's. A few months before, his stepfather had kicked him out because he was expelled for poor attendance.

"Thing is, I'd have been in college by now if it wasn't for that Dick -Face."

Out of all the wrongs Josh felt he had suffered since his mother had remarried, he was most riled by the additional income of his stepfather's pipe-fitter's salary that rendered Josh ineligible for a state-sponsored scholarship. "School was pointless once he screwed it for me."

The trailer was antique, oval, its silver finish mottled like a weathered Easter egg. Josh slept in a bunk at one end. They made up a second bed by folding the table down and laying a sleeping bag over the seat cushions for Charlie.

That first night, Josh startled Charlie out of near sleep, calling out from his bunk that Charlie ought to become a Twenty-First Century Scholar himself.

"I'm not exactly scholarship material, Josh, and isn't 1995 still the 20th Century?"

"We can turn that smart ass into real smarts—I've got what it takes to see you through, trust me."

The next day, Josh kept pestering till Charlie gave in, completing the necessary paperwork. They used Josh's aunt to sign on as a witness under Charlie's pledge to earn at least a C average and swear off drugs and alcohol.

Josh worked with his grandfather dragging scrap out of ravines: fifty-year old barrels and harrows and farm trucks, sold to the highest bidder at an auction in a nearby city. The work was sporadic, but paid well for a teenager, and soon Charlie was helping out here and there, enough for groceries and copays on his asthma meds.

Weeknights, Josh kept Charlie on track, the two sitting at the reassembled table, sleeping bag pushed aside, laboring together over whatever Charlie's teachers sent home: maps, stories, equations, vocabulary. The only writing Josh did was on scrap paper—"I'm not doing your work for you, understand, just helping you along".

On weekends, homework seemed less pressing. Delayed, it fell on Sunday afternoon—the grandfather was a Nazarene and didn't work on Sundays—and coincided, with less than ideal results, with Josh's weekly screwdriver.

"None for you till you're a scholar, Puppy Face."

One cup ice, one cup orange juice, and two shots of Smirnoff lifted from his stepfather. Charlie had to be satisfied with licking the spoon. The remnant of alcohol made his tongue prickle.

"You sure that's not battery acid?" he'd ask.

Once the slurpy-sized screwdriver kicked in, Josh's big brother mode gave way to diatribes about stuck up teachers and corrupt schools. Worse, his usual book wisdom evaporated, giving way to gleeful parody of the pedantic textbooks instead of helpful explications. Charlie was left wrestling with the mysteries of exponents or paragraph structure on his own, the sick-sweet of the orange juice clinging to the back of his tongue where he couldn't reach to scrape it away without gagging.

Sometimes Charlie gave up and crossed the yard to ask Josh's aunt if he could call his mother. He'd had to call her for tax information for the scholarship, and when she'd sounded genuinely proud of him for applying, he'd felt a tug of regret, and each time he picked up the phone there was another tug, even though most conversations didn't go well, and twice he'd hung up on her.

When he got back to the trailer, he'd find Josh, glass emptied, loose faced and rumped, playing Mario on his Nintendo. Usually he'd act as if he hadn't noticed Charlie had left, but once he looked up with a funny smile and said, "Didn't get you all the way gnawed off, did she?"

The screwdriver habit had played its part in the accident, but not in the way that might be expected. The blender had burned out before the drink got mixed that afternoon. When they'd headed down to Josh's mother's to borrow hers, Josh forsook the blacktop route for a gravel shortcut that ran past Charlie's world history teacher's—Mr. Carey's—pasture. Josh was still sober, but he'd already begun his sarcastic digging at the educational establishment, and Mr. Carey was one of his favorite targets.

"Maybe you'll get a chance to wave at your hero on the way by."

Charlie had been glad his teacher wasn't in evidence as they came up over the rise. Josh might have been ballsy enough to pull over for a mocking hello. But then a rabbit had leapt out of the grass and Josh, already going too fast, overcorrected from swerving to miss it, slid on the gravel heaped on the shoulder, and rolled into the ditch.

Still marveling over how far his unconscious friend had been thrown, Charlie held his breath to listen for the sound of a truck's engine and tried to remember what Mr. Carey had said about his Sunday routine. He was the kind of teacher who inserted personal details into his lessons—not, the way Josh let on, like an ego trip or anything—just here and there, mostly for humor. He'd tied Sunday chicken dinners at his wife's parents' into medieval table manners and, comparing agrarian to pastoral cultures, joked that he and his brother were like Cain and Abel: his brother toiling in his quarter-acre garden every spare moment while Mr. Carey only spent a few minutes—was it each morning or afternoon?—driving over to check on his cattle. The Careys' house—the closest—was three miles away by road, maybe two as the crow flies, but even if Charlie could've found his way through a network of ravines that a line of woods on the horizon indicated, it might as well have been a hundred miles without his nebulizer.

Somebody will come along, he kept telling himself, somebody has to. But, at the same time, he was thinking how, if he could find a piece of rope, tie it to the axle and run it pulley fashion around a fence post, he might be able to haul the Escort back down on all fours. He knew how to drive even though Josh was always saying he was too young.

"I know living away from home makes you *feel* old enough, but a fourteen-year-old's synapse aren't fully developed."

Charlie remembered watching how the rabbit was going this way and that, trying to out-dodge the Escort. Why had Josh tried to avoid it? Charlie figured he'd have had the sense to keep his hands steady on the steering wheel, maintaining a straight line, respectful of his powerlessness, the rabbit's fate out of his hands.

But thinking that made him feel disloyal. Charlie had already worked it out: the accident had been his fault: if Josh hadn't been jealous of the way Charlie always went on about how Mr. Carey was his favorite, they'd have stayed on blacktop. Why couldn't Charlie have kept his mouth shut? There was Mr. Carey—bald spot combed over, baggy pants hitched up under a shelf of polo-shirted belly—saying all of two words to Charlie, nodding at him in class—but didn't he nod at other students?—asking Charlie, just once, if he'd thought about what he was going to do when he grew up. And here was Josh: keeping a roof over Charlie's head, patiently explaining—except on Sundays—everything from fractions to conjunctions to the Civil War, heating up canned chili for dinner, ruffling Charlie's hair when he got frustrated.

"You're gonna make it, Charles Conrad, for sure you are—feel here where your hair goes zagging to the left back there? That's your strength. Nobody can take that away. Look, I've got one, too."

The trickle of blood at the corner of Josh's mouth was tiny, but some of it had somehow got smeared in his zag, bright against the bleached blond of his hair. Charlie looked up from where he'd been watching the boy's breathing and reached to stroke the cowlick. "Nobody," he said, but his voice broke: all that swagger amounting to nothing, now. Fly fodder. "Die you fuckers!"

It was his voice that died, slowly, resounding in his skull, but then he realized the reverberation was morphing into another sound: a distant engine. He leapt to his feet and ran for the road, gasping as he scrambled through the wrecked fence, waving his arms in the air. What direction was the truck coming from? Suppose Mr. Carey was stopping on his way back from his in-laws and their finger-licking chicken—would that mean he'd be

coming from the south? Charlie faced first one way, then the other, his tennis shoes slipping in the gravel, his waving arms wearying as he realized how he longed for the reassuring bass of his teacher's voice, for a calming hand to rest on his shoulder till he could draw enough breath to explain what happened.

He stopped his frantic dance for a moment, wheezing. In the stillness he realized that the engine sound wasn't getting closer anymore. Bewildered, he finally looked up and spotted the long white line left by a jetliner heading east to Indianapolis.

"Assholes!" Charlie screamed. He pictured the uniformed pilot and flight attendants, business passengers in suits, smiling families, students with college names printed across their chests. He shook his fist as if they, too, imagined him.

"And fuck you, too!" He swiveled to yell down both directions of the road. "Josh knew you didn't really care, he knows it's just him—just us, me and him—up against it. But how would you know anything with your stupid cows and shitty Sunday dinners!"

He dropped to his knees, the gravel digging into them, clenched fist in his gasping mouth, biting down hard enough to draw blood into the dents, stifling whatever else might froth to the surface and rob the breath needed to get back up and help his friend.

Mr. Carey's cattle knew their master's Sunday schedule and showed up twenty minutes later. Even in September, when there was plenty of forage—a good brome-clover mix—Mr. Carey brought a big coffee can of oats so that the cattle would make it a habit to gather at the trough to be counted and looked over. Their leader, a broad-hipped Angus-Hereford cross, stopped a little distance from the unconscious boy to appraise the situation. The others, a dozen heifers following her in two single files—sisters, daughters, nieces, their calves all gone to market—stopped with her, gazing with their cow-bland curiosity at the spectacle: an upturned car, its windshield made as white as its body by the thorough fracturing, a section of fence broken down a few feet from the gate, one human—not the oat one—lying in the grass by the trough, another one some distance further—could he have the oats?—struggling with a piece of wire. Weak-eyed, the cow leader lifted her nose, took a long whiff of the air like a sigh, and then turned her herd back around, away from the metallic blend of blood and desperation.

At first, wrapping the sweatshirt around his hands had protected Charlie from the barbed wire, but sometime while he was pulling it off the fence and tying it to the Escort's axle, the barbs started tearing his hands, and now, as he looped it back around a post and began to pull, his blood slicked the wire.

He hadn't noticed the cattle come and go, but he did hear Mr. Carey approaching: first a thin whine in the distance, then the roar of a muffler-less farm truck, and finally the creak of its brakes as it pulled up to the gate. But Charlie didn't look up. His attention was completely on his task. Hauling on the wire, he kept his eye on the rusted underside of the little Escort as it trembled in indecision before dropping to earth.

When the car met the ground, the flies, startled, rose up from Josh's face. Still, he had to spit one out as he rolled over to wretch in the cool of the grass, dimly aware of someone sprinting towards him and then of Charlie—was he crying, or what?—calling out, "Don't touch him, Mr. Carey, don't! He's mine."