

The Pilkers

Twice before the age of eighteen, Tom Pilker was discovered by his younger brother beaten nearly to death. The street that he lived on and was found both times, Tenth, intersected with the main thoroughfare in the town of Washbrook, where Tom and his family had lived for four years. His father, an iron worker by trade, was fond of sports bars and hiking; Washbrook, nestled in the crook of the Lawain Valley, provided both in abundance.

Tom was a waist-high man, his deformity causing serious angst in his family. His mother, who his father was quick to blame

for his oldest son's deformity, was a flat woman: chestless, hipless, her dark skin dripping into sorrowful pools around her eyes. Her father demanded she return to care for her ailing mother after the birth of their second son, Richard, and she complied, leaving her husband and returning to her (and her ex-husband's) home-town on the West Coast. It was understood by Tom's father that she would not be a part of the family any longer and so, once his most recent power plant work had finish, he relocated with his two sons to Washbrook.

The two boys were three years different in age, though Richard had surpassed his brother in height and weight by his ninth birthday. In Washbrook they attended the same school, Talburn High (after Will Talburn, local ice climber and former mayor), though by sixteen, Tom no longer believed the benefits of his education outweighed the humiliation he suffered at the hands of his fellow students, dropping out shortly after the beginning of his junior year. His brother Richard was more fortunate, perhaps, in that his physical form did not draw much attention; he had inherited his mother's twig-like frame and kinked hair.

Richard found his older brother walking home from school, the crippled boy motionless, stretched across the sidewalk. Richard was calm in his ministrations, helping him up, careful to stabilize his brother's broken arm in a sling improvised from his outer-shirt. When they'd returned home, they waited for their father to return-- Tom silent, refusing to name his assailant, Richard nonplussed, accustomed to his brother's remote stubbornness. Their father didn't return for four days and when he did, their mother was with him.

He had driven across the country, leaving the morning that Tom was beaten, arriving shortly after sunset on the second day.

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He hadn't slept and, disheveled and stale-smelling, presented himself at her family's house. She had been home and answered the door, tears welling in her eyes. They sat in the yard, Tom's father pleading with her to return, explaining Tom's dropping out and his own growing ambivalence to the plight of his family. He pulled grass from the ground, rubbing it in his palms as she described her own troubles, the constant pressure of her father to somehow save his dying wife who's body was riddled with cancer—that and his restless, damning fingers. On the lawn they hatched the plan that would bring them to Washbrook three days later.

Tom's father would shave his telling moustache and disguise himself as a vacuum salesman. His ex-wife would invite him in for a demonstration. When he'd entered, her father would be home and Tom's father would, in careful disguise, demonstrate the quality of the vacuum (purchased shortly after the discussion on the lawn), citing the health benefits to the overly superstitious father. Her mother would cough and he would be reminded of her terrifying condition, the nearness of her death, and, in his desperation to save his wife, would agree to purchase the vacuum for his daughter, bent and pleading on the ground. He would head into the bedroom to get his checkbook, at which point Tom's father would lock him in and flee, Tom's mother screaming in the arms of her 'kidnapper'. Then they would return to their sons, perhaps move to another town, in Canada maybe, where Tom's father's trade background would be profitable and they could start over.

The plan was haphazard and juvenile, but the two were convinced it would work, and with enough willpower, any plan can succeed in part.

It wasn't until her father entered the bedroom to pay this strangely familiar salesman for his vacuum that the plan snagged.

Tom's grandfather, a former judge, was notoriously paranoid, and when his daughter convinced him to allow the haggard salesman to demonstrate his wares, he assumed one of two things: drugs or sex offender. Either way, he felt more comfortable with the handgun (always loaded, and always beside the bed) in his pocket. The door closing behind him triggered the doubts he had nearly written off, and the two shots he fired into the door went through the wood and into his daughter's side, knocking her to the ground and shattering the leg of the chair she'd been preparing to lodge against the doorknob.

Tom's father as the vacuum salesman, rippling with adrenaline, grabbed his ex-wife and fled, buckling her into the passenger seat and driving away into the evening. Tom's grandfather waited for the invader to cross the threshold of his bedroom, his gun aimed at the closed door.

The police arrived shortly thereafter to find the old man crying over his wife who had died during the turmoil.

Tom's father bypassed the nearest hospital, fearing the gun-wielding ex-father-in-law, and drove into the desert. His first thought remained his only thought: home. He didn't stop driving until his lack of gas forced him to peel into a lone Shell station. His ex-wife's moans had ceased miles back, but he quickly filled up and attempted to clean the wounds on her side as best as he could, with paper towels from the window-wash station. It's unclear when

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during their escape she had died, but when they arrived in Washburn and he stepped out of the car, the smell of her corpse followed him into the house.

The sight of his two sons waiting, staring at him as he walked in, broke him, and he fell to the ground, weeping even as they came to sit beside him. They sat on the floor like this for the remainder of the day, their father recounting the story exactly as it had happened. Richard suggested that their grandfather might come looking for them, despite his father's insistence on the quality of his disguise. Tom agreed with his younger brother and suggested the mountains, specifically an old mine that the family had visited on its initial visits to Washburn as a place to give their mother a reasonable burial.

What Tom did not reveal to his brother three days prior (or during the days that they waited for their father) was that he had already known where his father was going and had tried to stop him. He had quarreled with their father, claiming that the family was better off without their mother who had clearly abandoned them. He had aggravated his father to such a degree (after all, defaming the womb that bore you is simple sacrilege) that the older man beat him into the state that Richard found him in and left him on the sidewalk, leaving town immediately thereafter.

The Pilkers piled into the car with shovels, Tom and Richard in the backseat, their mother's still-thin corpse in the front. When they arrived at the pull-off, Richard and his father pulled the corpse from the front seat and began hiking up the faint trail towards the mine. Tom followed, though not closely, with shovels in his good hand.

The mine, like a great spider's home, was boarded over with aging planks; the three stopped outside to rest.

Tom bent down to the shovels cluttered at his feet. He looked up at his father and with an awkward heft, tossed him a shovel. "Dig," he said, his voice tremulous. His father looked at him once, then planted the shovel's tip into the ground, kicking it with the sole of his shoe. The shovel immediately screeched off a submerged rock, and a spray of dirt splashed across the ground. Tom's father dug by himself at first, sweat pouring from his back, and then his youngest son joined him, his thin arms straining under the effort. Tom watched them work, seated beside his mother, his thick hands clenching and unclenching, wanting to dig himself, but for the broken arm.