

NEW RIVER

—FOR RONALD HOLDREN—

The parking lot of the funeral home was mostly empty, just as Kurt had hoped. The wake didn't start for another half hour, but in fifteen minutes, the cars would start to file in. This parking lot was empty most of the time, like church lots on weekdays and liquor stores on church days. Lylesburg needed only one funeral parlor, if only for once a month. There was a small town that straddled route 460 on a stretch of small towns. The old route veined through the Appalachians to West Virginia and to nowhere in particular. When the lot filled, folks would park along the side of the road. Everyone would be there because it could have been anybody's sons.

Kurt got the call the day before when he was working in the greenhouse. It was Jerry who called. Kurt figured Jerry called to say he couldn't meet at The Straight Eight later; his wife wouldn't let him. Kurt was used to this. Jerry canceled more often than not. But Jerry's voice was different, embarrassed or something, so Kurt had said, "Hey man, it ain't a big deal. I know you got stuff going on." This was when Jerry told him that Eleanor's boys had drowned while swimming in the New River. "It was the rain run-off Brush Mountain," Jerry said. "They didn't know it'd be so strong."

Kurt recognized Eleanor's mustard-colored Suburban, but he didn't know the other two cars in the lot. He hoped her family wasn't there yet. Kurt remembered, years before, sitting in Eleanor's living room across from her parents —her mother's clasped hands in her lap as she crossed and re-crossed her legs; her father watching the muted TV in the corner. They hadn't liked Kurt five years ago when he'd dated Eleanor, and he'd hate to suffer through talk with them now. Kurt hoped that

he could somehow slip inside, sign the book, and leave unnoticed. The whole town would show for this, so he doubted anyone would remember if they'd seen him, least of all Eleanor. Eleanor, who lost both of her sons the same day. When Kurt thought of the boys—Billy and Carter—and all that Eleanor would go through, the thought of saying some bullshit like, “I’m sorry for your loss,” made Kurt sick, but the truth was, he could think of nothing else to say.

Kurt sat in his truck and picked at the dirt crescents beneath his fingernails. His hands were dirty even when they were clean. He worked up the courage to open his truck door, and the August heat swamped the car. Kurt started to itch in his black wool pants, the only black pants he owned. He’d have to get out.

He stood for a moment in the parking lot and stared at Eleanor’s old station wagon. Kurt had driven it a few times himself because Eleanor didn’t like the boys riding in his truck. They would inevitably plead to ride in the flatbed and Kurt, who growing-up always rode in the flatbed, understood this and conceded every time. In the trunk of Eleanor’s station wagon, he spied a half-deflated soccer ball. He felt his chest clench up at the sight of it. She would go home to a houseful of evidence of her boys’ lives and every deflated soccer ball would remind her, and for all of this to fall on Eleanor—a spritely woman, eager to laugh, even at herself—it seemed more than unfair.

The funeral home was converted from an old colonial house. Kurt noticed the daylilies blooming in the flower bed. Prester John lilies. Kurt had probably sold them to the owner. Every year, he put an ad in the paper. He described the blooms as brief, explosions of color, fireworks. Each bloom lasted only one day. Come see the fireworks in our garden, his ad said. He had the time to think of those things.

Because it was once a house, he felt he should ring the doorbell but didn’t want to bring attention to his arrival. The sweat rolled down his legs, and he opened the door. A wall of chilled air from the a/c swept over him. Inside, he felt he had just walked into a stranger’s home, but an

unnaturally clean stranger. There was a light bell when he opened the door, and Kurt waited briefly there in the hallway to be found, but no one came. A wooden staircase led to where he imagined the bedrooms once were. He could hear the floorboards above him creak under someone's weight. He wondered what was up there now, or if someone still slept up there, and if that's where Eleanor was. He'd been in this funeral home a handful of times—lastly when a friend of his mother's, Mary Bailor, passed away from cancer, but the rooms had been filled with mourners, he'd been caught up in brief exchanges, and he'd never looked around.

On either side of the entrance were sitting rooms lined with pastel couches. Doilies flowered on the polished coffee tables. Crystal bowls of caramel candies were dispersed on various tables, right next to the Kleenex boxes. It reminded him of a spinster's house: sterile, unsexed, eager to please. Kurt heard music, something classical, coming from the back room, and he followed it. The expectant, emptiness of the space made him uneasy, and he considered slipping back outside to smoke a cigarette when he came upon the large, photo-collaged poster board that read, "Carter Ballone 2000-2010 and William Ballone 1998-2010."

Kurt couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the boys. He had little reason to see children; he'd never married. If Kurt saw the boys walking to Eddy's Ice Cream or someplace, he'd honk and wave, but he didn't stop. There'd always been a reason to keep driving—rotting peaches or wilting pansies. Now, the familiarity of their faces in their school portraits shocked him: Carter, a towheaded boy with springy curls, the youngest, had braces now. Kurt hadn't noticed. Billy, the elder, was freckled, quieter, with serious look to his mild smile.

Both boys, in the tradition of the rural town where they lived—talked, walked, and ate slowly—as if there were nothing propelling them towards the coaster of youth. They had the air, as some country boys do, of seeming much older than they were. This was probably because of the long pause they would take before answering a question. Kurt did this too, he imagined, but he

found the affect endearing in children, and it seemed to him a thing of the past, given the flippancy of other boys he'd talk to when he sold produce downtown. Kurt remembered, when the boys were younger, how Billy used to whisper his jokes to Carter, who would laugh and say the punch line too soon: "A numb skull!" Carter had shrieked, "A numb skull!" before Kurt had the time to pretend to ponder the riddle.

Kurt traced their ages through their pictures. The boys at soccer. The boys canoeing. Boys in the snow. Boys in diapers. Boys with their father. And there it was, a picture of him. The boys, five and seven, were on either side of him on Eleanor's couch. They had all just watched a movie, some kids' movie. The kids had their legs outstretched on the coffee table. A half-eaten bag of chips at their sneakers. They wore the half-posed, giddy smiles of young boys. Kurt had an arm around each kid, and he, too, wore a goofy, satiated smile. This was a picture of him as a father. Probably the only picture like this. He hadn't known this picture existed, but why would he? He saw Eleanor only in passing, and she might make him laugh with a comment about Billy's teacher, an anecdote about the dog, but she'd erected a wall of niceties between them, and he didn't begrudge her that.

In the few months that he had dated Eleanor, Kurt had tried to play the role of Dad, but the boys' wariness amplified his own, and at times, he felt they'd had a better grasp on that business than he did. Eleanor had once asked him to get the boys' hair cut, but he couldn't remember why or where she had been. Perhaps it had been a test. So, Kurt drove them to The Hair Port and was surprised how quickly their calm gave way to sly distrust as he parked in front of the mobile home-turned-salon. The hairdresser was out that day, and the hairdresser's niece, Teresa, was filling in. She hadn't helped matters when she began cooing at the boys as if they were toddlers. Kurt nearly felt offended on their behalf. Noticing their anxiety—the boys' blank, overwhelmed expressions ripe with the potential for tears—he changed his tune and resorted to bribery. He promised to take them on what he advertised as "foraging" on his parents' property. Carter's attention was quickly diverted

by the vacant hairdresser's chair as Teresa washed Billy's hair, and as Kurt pumped the chair up and down with his foot, Carter supplied a soundtrack of mechanical mimicry to suggest the chair was en route to someplace else. The whole ordeal took longer than expected because Teresa, her face pained in concentration, would only snip the hair in half-inch increments.

Later, as Kurt parked his truck on the hill beside his house, he explained to the boys that when a guy gets really lost, like on an expedition, he has to be prepared to survive in nature. The boys squealed with disgust when Kurt popped a pansy flower into his mouth. Kurt told them that people put pansies in their salads. The boys refused to try, but minutes later, Kurt barely caught Carter as he stuffed a trumpet flower in his mouth. He scared the kid so badly that Carter started to choke, and Kurt had to rinse Carter's mouth out with the hose. You gotta ask me if it's okay before you eat something, he said, and the boys nodded, their thrill deflated. Kurt gave them each a strawberry basket and led them to the blackberry bushes on the edge of his property. The bushes were at the end of their season and the berries scarce from the deer, but the boys had picked enough to leave them stained and impressed.

Eleanor stood next to him at the window overlooking her backyard when they'd returned. They watched the boys chase each other in her backyard. "They look ridiculous!" Eleanor laughed. "They look like she attacked them with hedge cutters."

It was true; they did look terrible, but Billy looked the worst. There wasn't a straight line in his cropped brown hair. Carter's curls, at least, disguised the unevenness. Kurt admitted, "I don't think hairdressing is Teresa's calling."

Without looking back at him, she said, "Carter'll get a fro if this keeps on. He's got hair I would've killed for at his age."

Kurt watched Carter as he ran screaming after his brother, arms outstretched for his toy rocket. He looked to Eleanor's dark brown hair pulled into clip at the base of her neck. Her arms

were folded, and she watched the boys in her backyard with a kind of bemused pride. Eleanor turned her small, serious eyes on Kurt, and he suddenly felt happy to be a part of it—the scene that was them.

But Kurt had rushed into the relationship, without considering what he'd signed up for: that is, to be a second-string father for someone else's kids. Eleanor had been a high school unrequited love, recently divorced, and miraculously standing alone by the bar one Friday night in winter. He'd made some promises he couldn't make good on. Eleanor called him on this one evening after the boys had gone to sleep. She'd been lying next to him on her couch, and he was resting his chin on the top of her head. She turned, without warning, and said, "Kurt, I want to be wrong about this, but I'm in no place to gamble. You're not ready for all this, are you?"

"No," he said. Her question provoked the answer before he'd turned it over in his mind. "I thought I was, but I don't think so."

She nodded, smirked sadly. "I can tell," she said.

He felt like a coward as he drove home that night for making her say it and not him.

In the adjoining room, rows of chairs faced the pair of open caskets. He stood in the doorway, and at first, he thought he was mistaken, but he looked closer and the caskets were filled with something. She'd filled the open caskets with her sons' toys. Stuffed animals, comic books, Nintendo games, and action figures. Kurt didn't know what would possess her to do this. He didn't dare to come any closer, but he couldn't avoid boys' sleeping profiles. Kurt looked around for the book to sign. He couldn't find it. They hadn't put it out yet. He felt he didn't deserve to be alone with the bodies.

Suddenly, Eleanor appeared at his side. She looked up at him. He'd forgotten how petite she was, 5'3" at best. Her face was like a wrung-out washcloth. It was such a nice face, he found himself thinking. She had a clean, broad Polish face with defined cheekbones. Eleanor had always been guarded, and Kurt never seemed to know what was going on in her mind, but Kurt knew about fragility, and he was afraid to touch her. He said, "Ellie. I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say."

"I know." She shook her head. "Everybody keeps saying things, but there's nothing to say." She looked at the ground and then pointed to the photo collage. "Did you see the picture?"

"Yeah," he said. "I had no idea."

"I love that picture," she said. "The boys were so happy."

He wanted to say the right thing, but he was tearing up just looking at her. He hadn't expected to. She waited a moment for him to speak and when he didn't, she walked past him to the coffins. She leaned over them and was stroking their faces. He stayed back. Kurt couldn't will himself to come any closer. Their faces were painted, but they were not painted the right color, and the boys' faces were whiter than their tan summer necks and hands.

"They were great kids," he heard himself say. "I'm just so sorry. I don't know why this happened."

"They tell me that Carter probably got caught," Ellie said, "and then Billy went in after him. That's what they say happens."

"It never should've happened," Kurt said, and Ellie turned quickly to him. He'd said the wrong thing as if he was blaming her. He assumed she wasn't there when they drowned. "It's not your fault," he blurted. "Christ. Of course, it's not your fault."

She nodded, clearly not believing him.

“The toys,” he started to say. He wanted to ask her about them but wouldn’t. “The boys look real nice.”

He took a step toward her and put his hand on her back, looking around him, hoping someone else would appear. She was trembling as if she would shake herself apart.

“I just,” she said. “I always knew I’d screw it up. All the good things I had. I knew that I’d lose them somehow, but all at once...”

She sunk to her knees. She put her head down on the coffin, and she howled. It was a terrible sound. A dying sound. He had the sudden urge to pull her away from the coffins, to scoop her into his arms and carry her away, but he was frozen by the sight of her. He’d never dreamed he’d have to see anything so goddamn sad and unfair. He worked with plants. He made things grow. He sold his vegetables downtown. He lived his life quietly outside the sphere of tragedy.

“Ellie, you did your best... you did better than anyone could’ve done. Your boys were so lucky.”

Her crying slowed, and she turned to face him, her eyes billowed with tears, the indentation of the coffin edge on her cheek.

“I need you to do something, Kurt.” She said this coldly. He saw her eyes as she spoke, wild with an idea, wild with conviction, and he was afraid.

“Anything,” he said. “Just say it.”

“I want to hold them,” she said. “I need to hold them again.”

He didn't know what this meant until she stood up. Kurt took a step backwards as she leaned over the coffin. She reached in and cradled the eldest boy, Billy, one arm under his legs and the other under his head. In a long, unsteady heave, she lifted him out of the casket. Kurt watched a stuffed rabbit tumble over the coffin's edge. She took a quick step to the side as she turned, as if she would drop him, but she caught herself and came toward Kurt. She held the boy out to him.

“Take him.”

“Oh, Ellie. I don't think...” but he couldn't stop her. His arms went out instinctively as if to take something too heavy for her. She put the dead boy in his arms and turned for the youngest. The boy was much heavier than he looked, and Kurt thought, he's been waterlogged. Billy's thin, muscular legs dug in to his forearm. To his horror, the boy's head rolled back, exposing his neck. There was a swipe of rouge on Billy's cheek, and from afar, he could be sleeping, but so close, he was lifeless, painted. He'd never seen the boy so neat, his brown hair side-parted and gelled in place.

Eleanor, her face cold and determined, stepped forward with her blonde son, Carter. She pressed the boys together, side-by-side.

“Look at them, Kurt.” she said. “They were my boys.”

“Oh, Ellie,” he said. “Fuck.” He was crying then, not sobbing, but he felt the wetness on his face, his trembling lips.

“They were all I had,” she said. “It's not home without them.”

Kurt searched his mind but could find nothing that would console her. Her arms trembled with Carter's weight, but she didn't move to return him. Kurt watched as someone appeared in the doorway. He looked down at the boy in his arms. It was like the boy was still underwater. Kurt had

taken them to the River once when he was around. The spot he liked to go when he was growing up, and then even just to think as an adult, was a gravel clearing off McCoy Road where the river was a quarter-mile wide. The murky brown water bent at the base of the evergreen mountain and snaked out of sight. Shelves of large granite jutted into the riverside and the large boulders formed ellipses across the river's surface. The current, much stronger than it looked, was whitewater about the rocks. He and the boys had been alone that day, only a fisherman had been in sight upstream. He'd put them each in inner tubes and tied a rope between them and his arm. He listened to the boys' laughter and the river's familiar shushing. Kurt would have held on to them until his arms broke.