

# Tweaked

Scorched air pressed in on him like a second skin. The oily smell of the melting asphalt burned his nose with each breath. He was within sight of the curve in the road. The one closest to the river. The one that you could see from the black rocks above the railroad tracks. The one that gave him a serious queaz and made his hands clammy. He didn't really want to walk through that particular stretch of blacktop again. But he couldn't afford to lose this job. So, he walked. And baked.

He stopped when the small, rectangular sign shimmered into focus – mile marker 49. That's how the Albuquerque Journal story had started, "Just west of mile marker 49 on New Mexico Highway 67..." But the labored growl of an old engine interrupted his thoughts. Turning away from the green sign, a shiver broke out on his damp neck as his thumb fluttered into the air. A ride would be nice, he thought, just to get out of the heat.

An old Rancho, Ford's version of the more popular Chevy El Camino, climbed the hill. Primer gray mixed with an otherwise chipped patchwork of bright colors. Cracks spidered across the windshield, obscuring the passengers. When it reached him, he could see the seat was stuffed with bodies, four people across. Several kids stared from the bed of the hybrid sedan/pick-up. On their way down to the store, or one of the Pueblo government assistance offices in the old village, probably. One of the boys in the back, in a white tee-shirt and cut-offs, waved at him. The Rancho sputtered around the curve and out of sight before he could raise his hand in return.

Near the curve, the wind didn't blow so much as it was drawn through the gap between the river on one side and the cliffs on the opposite, as though some great beast was inhaling, trying to suck everything into its mouth. And sometimes, Danny heard movement in the *bosque*. When he scanned the shadows dancing in the cottonwood and mesquite from across the road, he never saw anything. Though he would swear he heard laughing, or giggling. Like a kid watching a cartoon. But that wasn't quite right either. It wasn't high-pitched like a child's. It was deeper and slower, like a recording that had been damaged. When he was a boy, he and his friends used to try and find hidden messages on KISS records by playing them backwards. The sounds in the trees reminded him of those distorted belchings.

He couldn't wait here for a ride any longer. He dug headphones and an old Sony Walkman out of his backpack. He preferred hard and loud, a big sound – Metallica or Black Sabbath or even Pearl Jam. Today, he had an old favorite, Blackfoot's album – because he still thought of them as albums – *Strikes*. It was the one with the song *Train, Train* where the lead singer's old man, Stumpy or Shorty, jammed on a harmonica to make it sound like a train. Then, these sloppy guitars jump in over the harmonica, heavy and stubborn. He pushed play, rolled the volume dial up to the maximum, and he ran.

The turnout on the other side of the road was nothing but a wide stretch of dirt. The mile marker, measuring about a foot tall and six inches wide, was posted at the far end, where the river and trees squeezed in from the left. On his side, the train tracks angled closer to the road, crowded by heaps of tumbled volcanic rock. Just before the curve, the tracks and the road were side by side, bending around an outcropping. The rocks there marked his target. He ran with his head down and his arms out in front of him, hoping to break a collision with the rocks ahead. It came sooner than he'd expected. His elbows folded into his gut, knocking the wind out of him

and the headphones off his head. A sharp edge gouged his forehead and a warm stream filled his eyes. He rolled left and kept moving, feeling his way along the rocks' sheer face. Staggering around the bend, the ochre plain opened up in front of him, ruffled hills like an unmade quilt. The blacktop narrowed to a pinprick in the distance near the Pueblo, the glassy river and the train tracks mimicking its reduction on either side.

Danny walked the last mile into Isleta Pueblo, nestled along the river in the shallow valley below. An empty square patch of dirt marked the old village, bounded on all sides by squat adobe houses, the mud pockmarked and uneven from decades of desert wind and sun. On the westernmost side of the square, a break in the houses created an entrance where everyone entered during feast days. Radiating out from the square, the buildings were newer; first, modern Pueblo Housing Administration neighborhoods and then groupings of government buildings. They were adobe style, too, but modern and covered with stucco instead of the traditional mud. The PHA neighborhoods looked like any other suburban operation with two or three styles of houses repeated over and over again along rows, as if they had been seeded and cultivated instead of built. The government complexes were Pueblo style, with several buildings of different heights and sizes growing out of one larger building, a child's building blocks stacked willy-nilly. Decorative, rough-hewn ladders made it appear that you could climb up to the next level from the one below. The clinic sat on the outer most ring of construction from the square, just as you entered the Pueblo.

The bleeding from the gash in his forehead had stopped by the time he reached the parking lot. The ER entrance was flanked by oversized pottery painted in Isleta patterns and crowned with a red neon sign buzzing like a spring cicada. The sliding doors whooshed open and he squinted into the glaring fluorescent.

“Hey, look what the coyotes dragged in,” Renata called out. Commanding the clinic from the triage desk like a chieftain of old, she sat plump and dark with long, straight black hair pulled back in a loose pony tail. Her family boasted of tribal leaders dating back to the Pueblo revolt. “And it looks like you tangled with the coyotes. Come here; let me see that. Looks like a couple of stitches.”

“It’s nothing. I’ll wash up when I change. Busy already?”

“It’s always busy on the rez. Stab wound to the abdomen in One, a shovel-cracked skull in Two, and Three probably used a kitchen knife on our boy in One. He has some pretty good lacerations in the palm of both his hands. It’s not a party unless somebody’s bleeding. The cops or the Feebs will be here later, I’m sure. Waiting room is full of assorted bumps, bruises, sniffles, and drunks. Go get yourself cleaned up and get back in here. I need a break.”

In the locker room, Danny stared into his locker. His hanging jeans and coat created an impenetrable darkness at the rear of the locker. Something stronger than the valium he was using to get to sleep was in order. Whatever was happening, it was getting worse.

What no one will tell you about hitting bottom is that there really is no bottom. There is always another level to descend, ever darker and more shameful. None of the AA counselors or sponsors had ever explained that. Sure, there was always some terrible event, some act of betrayal or crime, something so bad you didn’t think it could get any worse. But those moments of clarity – moments when you could actually comprehend the consequences of your behavior – weren’t the bottom. There were always new depths to plumb. And the depths are not truly sounded until you’re back to the point where nothing else matters except scoring.

For Danny, his bottom wasn't getting fired from the hospital or the day Carol left with the kids. He had thought it was that day with the car. He wasn't completely clear on all the details, but he'd read the newspaper. After, he'd sold his car to a buddy who was leaving town, and used that dose of shock to sustain him through a brief round of cold turkey. Another stint in rehab would have meant losing his license, and the clinic job which was only a few days old at the time. But, eventually, the bad dreams started. The bad dreams begat insomnia, and the insomnia begat problems at work. He gave prescription medication to people at the clinic every day, gave them what the doctor ordered for whatever ailment they suffered. And he was already using Adderall that he'd convinced a clinic doctor to prescribe for him. As long as he wasn't scoring and smoking or shooting up. So, he took some Valium from the med tray as he was doing rounds at the clinic one day. They helped him sleep through the night without any dreams. No dreams and eight good hours of sleep. Then, he palmed Desoxn on some days he needed some energy, or pocketed some Oxycotin when he felt jumpy. Now, he was building up a tolerance to the Valium and needed something stronger. Doctors worked through such problems with new medications all the time. Danny was just following the therapeutic model.

At his last job with the university hospital, he'd never considered taking prescription medication from the hospital. Everything was monitored closely. Besides, his drug of choice at the time was meth, so he could work extra shifts at the hospital, juggling a mortgage and two kids. Usually, he'd smoke before a shift, on the top of the parking garage where nobody parked and the fumes dissipated quickly. But Carol caught him lighting a pipe in the shed on one of his off days. She put an ultimatum to him, though he never figured out why, since she left anyway. Rehab was confidential, but people at the hospital seemed to know. And though he had never admitted to or gotten caught working high, they let him go. Even so, they hadn't reported him to

the nursing board because they didn't have any hard evidence, and he kept his license. He'd gambled that the Pueblo clinic wouldn't check references. It was a good gamble. All kinds of things slipped through the cracks on the rez.

Today, the first stop was to study the charts in the hopper and get an idea of the meds were awaiting administration. His typical mode of dispensing drugs to himself was to grab what was meant for the patients. Most times he simply pocketed what he needed instead of giving it to the intended patient. They didn't know what they were supposed to be getting, and if the doctor mentioned a specific medication, Danny told the patient they had already taken it or substituted a vitamin pill or an over the counter pain reliever. He kept bottles of both in his locker and a few pills of each in the pocket of his scrubs. The medications he pocketed got lost in the mess of other pills in his scrubs. If anyone ever challenged him, he could explain that he'd accidentally put the patient's pill in his pocket when he got busy.

When he came out to the station, Renata handed him the charts that were up. "Did you get that cut cleaned up?" she asked as he flipped the pages. Mostly cuts and sprains with a few unspecified aches and pains. His best shot was probably the stab wounds or the head trauma.

Before he could say anything, a scream pierced the din in the waiting room, "Help!" A woman stood in the open space between the sliding doors of the ER, covered in blood. "Help me, please, he's dying." The glass panels jerked back and forth, sensing her in the way.

She was running from the building before they could reach her. Out front, the beat-up Ranchero that had passed Danny on his way to work was idling, a front tire hitched up over the curb, pushing the whole vehicle into a slant. The people who had been shoved up against each other in the cab were now hanging over the bed, reaching in at something. The kids from the

back were pulling themselves up on the lip of the bed to peer over. Some faces were compressed in anguish, and some were blank with shock. The lady who had come into the ER pitched her head back and howled.

Renata reached the Ranchero first, angling between people, and bending over into the bed. As Danny approached from behind, he heard her gasp. Everyone begin talking at once. “He fell out ...” “...hit the...” “His arm, look at...” “What’s wrong...” “Help him...” “He’s just...” “...didn’t see...” “His brother...” “...inside right away.”

The amount of blood on the woman hadn’t prepared him. One of the boy’s arms stuck out akimbo in crooked, unnatural angles. The other was tucked against his side. One leg was too far underneath the boy’s body to be seen completely. The visible leg was naked, not covered by a shoe or sock, but slick with blood. His cut-off denims and white tee-shirt were shredded and streaked with red. His distended chest heaved, an overripe piece of fruit. But the head was the worst. It was oblong rather than round and a jagged gash opened down one side.

Renata’s voice broke through , “Danny. Danny! Snap out of it and go get a gurney. We need to get him inside.”

The sliding doors, slow to open, nipped his arm as he burst through. A gauzy haze darkened the harsh, white light as he dodged around the counter and back to the treatment area. Sliding a hand along a wall, he made his way down the hallway and bumped into a gurney before he saw it. He slid around to the opposite side to push, bouncing between the walls toward the double doors at the end of the hall. The laboring wheels squealed louder with each turn. Deafening clatter erupted as the gurney crashed through the double doors. Danny heard the whumping and scraping of metal. He was sure he had broken the gurney but it continued to roll.

Once he entered the waiting area beyond the double doors, the familiar florescent sheen of the lights shimmered back into focus. No one looked up as he rolled through; no one seemed bothered by the crashing sounds or the flickering lights. A dog warbled a chorus of barks, but he didn't see a dog.

Approaching the sliding doors, a red veil fluttered down over everything. It pulsed, threatening to obscure his sight, and then reduced itself down to a small oval, hovering over the ground outside the doors. The shape mutated, squaring at the edges, until it was a small tee-shirt, the size a boy would wear. Arms and legs grew out of it and a head emerged on top. The newly arrived boy flashed a glistening white grin.

There's no way the boy he'd seen bleeding and broken in the back of the Ranchero could have gotten up and walked to the entrance of the clinic, Danny thought. His injuries were too severe. The leg he'd seen folded underneath the boy meant a broken, or at least dislocated, hip. It wouldn't support weight. And the head injury? It must be one of the other kids from the car.

Danny kept rolling toward the glass doors. They didn't budge for the boy standing on the other side, only for him when he got close enough. When the doors swished open, the boy disappeared. A clipped yelp accompanied the whoosh of air from the doors. Danny looked to the side as he rolled past the place the boy had been standing, thinking he might have knocked the child down with the gurney. But there was nothing; no dog and no boy.

Renata was standing in the bed of the Ranchero, wind-milling her arms and shouting. He pulled the gurney up short of the curb, and everyone moved away. Supporting the boy's head, Renata lifted while Danny slid his arms under the boy's waist and legs, trying to immobilize the spine. He shuffled to the gurney and laid the boy down. Renata jumped over the



side of the car and pushed the gurney back inside, with Danny pulling and the Rancho-ites gagging along behind.

The wailing procession stopped in the waiting room, collapsing around the weeping, bloody woman. This time Danny maintained his vision and balance down the hallway, though he had a firm hold on the gurney with one hand, just in case. Renata was on the telephone in the treatment room as soon as she crossed the threshold, paging, “Attending to ER Four, stat.” As she talked, her voice doubled and echoed over the speakers in the hospital. Danny stared down at the boy’s bloody, misshapen face, tilted to the side as though trying to look away. The pores on his baby-smooth cheeks pooled like lakes with the red runoff streaming down from the gashes in his scalp. They seemed open, spacious. Waves rippled the crimson reservoirs, responding to the ragged breaths shuddering out of the boy. Viscous streams cascaded onto the white sheet below.

“Danny, I need you to focus.” Renata had been on the phone for a lifetime, long enough for him to watch the boy bleed what seemed like buckets. “Cut his clothes down, now.”

He retrieved shears from a rolling cabinet against a wall and pulled down the adjustable treatment light hanging from the middle of the room. The hem of the shirt was tacky and cold, reminding him that he hadn’t gloved up yet. Latex snapped behind him as Renata fitted a pair onto her own hands. “Just get the shirt off. Then glove up.” The scissors chewed the fabric more than they cut. Nearing the collar, he looked back at the boy’s face. His head was now facing up, not to the side. Black eyes stared up. Not the dull, blank stare of the unconscious, but intelligent and hungry. Danny froze with the scissors open, anticipating one last stroke. The boy’s slick, red lips twitched a little, and then spread to reveal a large white smile. Renata closed

her hand over Danny's, collapsing the scissors and shearing the final piece of cloth on the boy's collar. "Go get gloves." With her voice, the boy's face tilted away again. She collected vital signs for the boy – blood pressure, temperature, heart rate – and then started fluids for the boy in the undamaged arm. With gloves, Danny was cutting away the tattered denim shorts when the attending, Hunter Panik, swished into the room and began shouting orders.

Panik was one of the traveling physicians that gravitated toward Indian Country for government breaks on med school loans, but also for the adrenalin. The attending listened to the heart and lungs, reporting decreased breath sounds on the left side. The spreading discoloration on the boy's chest suggested he was bleeding internally and that a lung had partially or completely collapsed. "We're gonna need a chest tube on the left side, but I want to take a look at that head first."

The white sheet underneath the boy budded with larger patterns of red. Most of it was from the boy's head, though some had started to ooze from the gash on the right leg where a jagged bone had erupted. When Danny looked directly at the wounds, the light in the room wavered. The boy on the table flickered, transforming him into the boy in the red shirt, the one with the gleaming teeth, the one he'd seen in front of the clinic. Panik lifted a flap of skin on the boy's head, shined a pen light into the dark space underneath, and then into the his eyes. He reached under the boy's head and palpated the neck. "Danny, get a neck brace on here. I'm not sure how much skull damage there is without a scan, but we need to get him into surgery up at the university hospital and I want a chest tube in to stabilize him for transport." Without being told, Renata began packing the fracture on the boy's leg. But Danny stood staring at the boy.

"Danny," shouted Panik, "move!"

Snapping to, he took a neck brace from one of the cabinets that lined the walls. Standing at the head of the gurney, he bent over at the waist with his head inverted just above the boy's. As soon as his hand touched the neck, the boy's eyelids fluttered open. The black eyes were bottomless. Then, a speck appeared in the center, a tiny red dot. It darted left and right, speeding up and covering more distance with each pass. It grew in size, taking up more and more of the blackness, and then passed from the boy's eyes into Danny's.

The boy was not beneath him any longer. And Danny wasn't in the treatment room, not even in the clinic. The redness rippled and grew until it was a shirt again – the shirt he had seen the other boy wearing. He was behind the wheel of his old Buick, driving down Highway 67, on the way to the clinic. The red shirt shimmered in the distance, weaving back and forth at the crest of the hill where the road narrowed into a curve. A smaller shape bounded along beside the boy in the red shirt – a dog.

In the car, Danny reached into the bag sitting on the passenger seat, rummaging for the Adderall he'd been taking before shifts. The paperwork he'd filled out for the business office rested on top. Reaching underneath that, he felt his pull-over cap and gloves, then a newspaper. He balanced the steering wheel on his knee to drive and used both hands to root around inside the bag.

The car was edging over the double center line when he looked back up through the windshield. The red-shirted boy was on a bicycle, but he and the dog were still a ways ahead. Another shadow followed them along the edge of the road. He brought his left hand back to the wheel, corrected the car's drift, and then resumed the search for the medicine bottle with both hands. It was buried in the far bottom corner of the bag, under some Kleenex. Fumbling with

both hands to manage the security top, the one pill left in the bottle spilled out onto the seat and rolled down into the bench seat's crease. With his left hand back on the wheel, he inverted his right and probed in the tight junction between the upper and lower seat cushions with his fingertips. He pinched the little pill between his index and middle finger and slid it up out of the fold.

As he raised the pill up to his mouth, the boy was in front of the car and he could hear the dog barking. They were so close, right in front of the bumper. He'd misjudged the distance when he first saw them. A man was running next to the car, reaching out, impossibly, as though he would be able to snatch the boy off the bicycle seat and out of danger.

Dropping the pill, Danny wrenched the wheel with both hands, tensing every muscle in his body.

The boy on the gurney sputtered into sight below him again. Danny's arms were rigid, and his fingers were pressed into the skin on the boy's neck. This boy's shirt was red now, too, either from blood or because it was the other one. White teeth beamed up from his mouth.

Danny squeezed his eyes shut and the wheel was in his hands again.

The car slewed to the right, angling for the sandy shoulder. The boy pushed one hand down on the car's hood with the other still gripping the handlebar, as the bumper started to chew on the bicycle. The dog's barks were loud above the screech of the tires and the groan of bending metal, but he couldn't see the animal. He yanked the wheel in the opposite direction, trying to swerve around the boy. The sun burst through the car's windows.

A groan from below him pierced the veil of sun in Danny's eyes.

He had turned the boy's head to the opposite side with his hands. The groan was gathering momentum, inching up the scale to a scream. Panik was holding a clear, plastic tube up to the boy's side with one hand. The end of it was seated in a bulge of the boy's flesh. With his other hand, Panik pushed the quivering tube. The boy's whole body shook, and he screamed. A pop reverberated through the room, as the tube found purchase in the chest cavity.

The pop rippled through Danny's arms.

He felt several thuds quake through the car. His head bounced against the window. The wheels locked, and the car slid to a stop in the dirt turn-out on the opposite side of the road. It shimmied back and forth in a cloud of dust, shaking off the force from the sudden stop. The dog was barking again; the only sound along the deserted, sun-baked road.

Danny looked through the windshield and the driver's side window but couldn't see the boy or the bicycle or the other person he'd seen chasing the boy. If not for the barking, he could have believed that he'd imagined the whole thing. He slid off the seat and fell to the ground. On his knees, he saw a large dent in the left front panel. Pulling himself up by the open door, he saw another depression on the hood of the car. Peeking around the front of the car, he saw scratches on the chrome bumper. But there was nothing else. He swiveled his head, looking first down to the *bosque* along the river, then to the railroad tracks and volcanic hills on the opposite side of the road. Nothing. No sign of the boy or anyone else. The dog, a German shepherd, hadn't given up, though. It was standing at the back of the car, bouncing on its front legs with each bark. "It's okay, boy. He took off. I just put a little scare into him. Go on, get outta here. Get!" But the dog wouldn't budge.

Danny edged down the length of the car to the open door, hoping to slide into the car before the dog decided to charge him. When he angled around the door, he saw a small blood-speckled hand on the dirt, just behind the rear tire. The dog gave way, reversing as he walked toward the rear of the car. The twisted bicycle came into view first, several feet beyond the back bumper, doubled back onto itself, the wheels ovaled out of shape. An arm stuck out from under the car. Crouching down, he held onto the trunk and peered underneath. The boy's head looked like a melon that had fallen to the ground and split. Gray and red pus seeped from the opening. Though the boy faced him, his hips were pointed in the opposite direction. Danny reached underneath, sweeping raven-black hair off the boy's forehead and looking for signs of breathing. The boy curled his lips curled back and he shrieked.

Danny fell backward, scrambled to his feet, and hurried for the car door as the scream diminished into a series of gurgling sobs.

Sobbing fetched Danny back to the treatment room. Pink bubbles gurgled out of the boy's mouth. Panik was shouting, "Danny, get that brace on. Ren, secure the tube. I'll push something to sedate him. How long for the chopper?"

Danny released the boy's neck. The sticky gloves crackled as he peeled them from his hands.

"Where are you going? Danny? Danny!" Both Renata and Panik continued yelling as he stumbled out of the room, their voices echoing down the hallway with his foot-steps. He sorted through the pills from his pocket, spilling a few as he walked. Nothing but vitamins.

In the locker room, he dumped everything out of his bag, reaching to the bottom of every compartment and searching with his fingers. He turned the pockets out on all of his street

clothes, looked in the toes of his boots, and emptied the locker until it was bare. Nothing. Changing back into jeans and boots, he slid his jacket back on over the scrubs shirt. He shoved everything else into his bag and slung it over his shoulder.

The door to the treatment room with the lacerated hands was open. The young man's hands were resting palm up on an elevated tray. Medical instruments and a metal pan were laid out on the tray. Panik had left in the middle of the stitch job on the right hand when the Rancharo boy came in.

“Hey, man, where'd dat doctor go? Dis hurts.”

He was a skinny teen with ratty, shoulder-length hair. Dirty athletic socks drooped at his ankles, revealing scabbed and bruised shins beneath the hospital gown. Bloody clothes in a clear plastic bag rested under a counter on the far side of the room, waiting for the Pueblo cops or the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

“Hey, can I put muh arms down? I can't feel 'um.”

Danny ignored him, crossing the room and opening the plastic bag.

“Dose are mine, man.”

Danny pulled out the jeans, crusty with drying blood and dirt. He turned the pockets out rather than risking a needle or something else sharp, and emptied the contents onto the counter. A crumpled up piece of plastic fell out with a wad of money, some coins, a lighter, and some folded paper. Danny teased apart the edges of the plastic and found about a dozen round, pink pills.

“HEY! Whatchoo doin'? Dose are my pants!”

“These pills yours, too?”

“What pills?”

“What are they? Oxy? V? X?”

“Come on, man.”

Danny picked three pills out of the plastic, shoved the rest in his pants pocket, and strode out of the room. The pills scratched his throat on the way down. First, one on his way through the doors from the treatment area, and then another on his way across the waiting room, and then another as he passed through the sliding glass doors and ran flat-out out into the pulsating sun.

Blinking away sweat, Danny pulled up into a jog as the mile marker sign came into view ahead of him. His back was sticky and his shoulders were raw where the bag had bounced during the run up the hill. Pain stabbed at his side, forcing him bend over and hold himself up by the knees.

He couldn't go through there again, not after what he'd just seen. Had he seen it? Or had he just imagined it? What he'd seen in the boy's deep, black eyes was more like a memory. He had felt himself turning the wheel of the car, felt it shimmy and bounce with the collision. He had seen the violent thrashing of the kid on the bicycle through his own eyes, not from afar, but from within.

Veering off toward the rocks, he climbed up the ancient, volcanic bed. The rocks had a reddish tint to them, especially up close, but the ground was near black with their eroded dust. Danny's boots teetered on sharp, jagged spines with each step. If he fell, he would break something or end up bloody again.



The run should have exhausted him. He hadn't run since high school, and he hadn't been much of a runner, even then. But he felt rejuvenated, clear-headed for the first time in months. Every breath tickled his insides. His heart pounded in his temples, his neck, and along every vein in his arms. The drops of sweat languidly hesitated over his pores, and prickling every fine hair until it was all standing on end. Outside of feeling a little queasy, probably because he hadn't eaten much, he was exhilarated.

He wobbled up the rocks, holding his arms out to the side for balance. As the mesa finally leveled out, he scrambled to the top, tripping over the edge to safety. On his hands and knees, his stomach seized and he vomited up a pink, sour string of bile. He rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. The things he'd seen in the treatment room, or imagined, still played in his mind. Real or not, he didn't want to see any of it again. From his back, he fished three more pink pills out of his pants pocket. The first three had cleared his mind and given him a burst of energy. They hadn't given him the foggy, drowsy feeling that Oxy or V always did. Whatever kind of narcotics they were, they weren't strong. Three more would give him another boost of energy and probably cure the queasiness. They were bitter on his tongue and he sat upright, pushing his face into the sun and straightening his neck to gag them down.

Though sweat streamed off him, he shivered a little as he looked out over the Pueblo in the distance. The road below wasn't visible, just the top of the cottonwoods along the river. Standing he stutter-stepped on rubbery ankles and wavered until he could balance himself. A patch of red stood out against the trees – the top of a car or truck. Shuffling over to the mesa's edge, an old side-step with faded, oxidized paint came into view. A gray-haired man was sitting in the dirt; sitting in the spot where his Buick had come to rest.

Danny sat and hung his legs over the edge of the mesa. The man was bent over some planks of wood in his lap, rubbing them. After a few minutes, he took the wood from his lap and laid it on the ground. It was a large cross, with a double bar construction on top like he'd seen around the Pueblo. The bare wood gleamed in the sun. The old man tottered over to the truck and pulled a post-hole digger from the bed and returned to where he'd laid the cross. The tool disappeared further into the ground with each thrust as the man dug. The guy might be old but he had some grit, Danny thought.

A breeze started in the trees across the road, whistling a little, and then whipped into a funnel that seemed to blow out of the ground from the hole. The old man covered up in his arms and held onto the tool. The funnel disappeared but the wind careened toward Danny, battering him back against the ground. A strange voice washed over him as the wind whipped by. At first, it sounded like the injured boy's mumbles in the ER. But it built into a piercing giggle that split through Danny's head. He took the pills out of his pocket, sat up, and stared at them, straining to remember how many he'd taken. He put two in his mouth and shook them down his throat.

When he looked over, the cross was erect, its limbs covered in some kind of cloth. How long had he lain there? The piercing sun was baking him from a new angle in the sky. The old man was now kneeling at the foot of the cross, nearly prostrate on the ground. His head was down, and his whole body shook. A barking dog roused them from their individual distraction, Danny from the old man and the old man from the cross. The dog's bark was familiar. But don't all dogs sound the same when they bark? A German Shepherd, like the one that tried to protect the boy that day, squeezed out of the undergrowth and trotted out. It sat down on its haunches next to the cross, looking back into the trees.

Shrill giggling broke out again, this time sounding from directly behind him. With the laughter, he felt hiccupping puffs of breath on his sweaty neck. He shivered, nearly to the point of convulsions, even though he throbbed with heat. This had to stop; he had to get control of himself. He pulled another pill from his pants and swallowed it.

Wind thrummed through the trees from across the road and rushed at him, knocking him back again. The laughter assaulted him, needling into his skin and digging into his ears. The heavy breath of it crawled up his body, holding him down. It was different from the hot, dry wind that held him pinned to the ground. It was wet and sticky. When it reached his face, it had a rotting, sweet reek. Swiveling his head to the left and right, eyes closed, he tried to avoid the smell. Small pricks pierced the meaty ridge of his neck muscle. The sharp pain forced his eyes open.

At first, everything was red. Then, his eyes focused and he could see the boy – the boy in the red shirt. Bony knees cut into his chest. Sticky hands pressed at his forehead, making it impossible for him to move. The boy arched his neck and bayed into the sky. He choked off the yell, grinned down, and hinged his mouth wide. Blood dripped down, sliding over Danny's cheeks, mixing with his sweat.

Suddenly, the air was still again; the trees silent. The sun pulsed above him. Left and right there was nothing but the empty, blue void of the sky. Below, the old man's truck sputtered to life. The dog was in the bed of the pickup, quietly staring up. Nose in the air, ears cocked, it rocked from side-to-side with the truck as it rolled onto the asphalt. But it didn't bark.

Danny dangled his legs over the mesa again. He leaned back far enough to wedge his hand into the pocket of his jeans for the pills. Three pills. Weren't there more in the piece of plastic? He slapped the pills into his mouth and felt them slice down his tight, dry throat. A few

more would get him down off this mesa and back home, feeling right. Drenched with sweat, he swung his legs, waiting for the pills to kick in. He looked down at the rocks below him. He looked over at Pueblo, the roof of the clinic edging up beyond the scattered houses and trailers. He looked left along the edge of the mesa. Even though he didn't look up at the cross, he felt it throbbing in time with his heart. Sweat coursed down him in rivers, scouring his raw skin. He breathed deeply, filling his lungs with scorched air. Exhaling, pain sliced through his chest. All his muscles cramped in place. He hung his head, trying to focus on drawing air through his nose, but he didn't have the strength. His heart slammed through his chest in irregular bursts.

Danny sagged, and his chin bounced on his chest. He somersaulted over his legs and pitched off the mesa's edge, falling between two large rocks. There was a loud snap that reverberated through his whole body. It was the last thing he felt.

Above, a dark-headed boy in a red shirt with a brilliant white grin peered down over the mesa's edge.