

Hersu

My old Jeep Cherokee is loaded down, every square inch stuffed with boxes of books, clothes, Christmas presents, kitchen stuff. Just behind the front seat is a spot hollowed out for Laney's car seat. Laney is Jill's baby, a year and a half old, toddling well but not talking much, riding back there with her blankets, toys, books, and the puppy. Jill thinks Laney's still getting used to me, and that's why she doesn't talk much. Jill thinks it will be any day now. When I started seeing her six months ago, I thought being a father would be pretty much like having a pet dog. I pictured a baby lying in her crib, sleeping or making baby gurgling sounds or somehow else entertaining herself, while I sat at my desk to write or grade papers. Except for the occasional diaper change or feeding, I didn't see why a baby would require much attention. I quickly learned how naïve that picture was.

It's the week before Christmas and we're moving back to Phoenix after four months in Mississippi. I taught English at a college not far from the Gulf of Mexico and liked it enough that I wanted to stay. But Jill was always homesick and she thought the people were backwards. We didn't live there long enough to make friends. She wants mistletoe to hang from the rearview mirror, but I'm not sure that it grows in this part of Texas. I'm not sure I would even know it if I saw it.

I drove from Phoenix to Mississippi in twenty-four hours once. That was when I came to interview for the job at Pearl River Community College, the only offer I got. When I brought Jill out she couldn't get over how green everything was. I'm not in any big hurry to go back to the desert, so with Jill and Laney the drive home will take three

days, maybe four.

Laney entertains herself by pulling loose hair off the dog, a mottled blue cur, with silly putty, then she kneads the hair into the ball. Thinking about that hair forever synthesized inside her toy turns my stomach a little, but the game has kept her quiet for thirty minutes, and for that I'm grateful. The dog stares at me with a patient dog expression, his tongue hanging out and drool wetting the mattress.

A few miles later the dog yelps over some fresh indignity committed by Laney. I don't even look back this time, just pull the pint of bourbon from under the seat and take a sip. Jill turns around in the seat to deal with her, and she starts to cry. When Jill turns back around I offer her the bottle and she takes a drink.

"They're getting cabin fever," she says.

"I'll find a rest stop. Let her work off some energy."

"A shot of this might settle her down," Jill says. She slumps down in the seat and holds the bottle out at eye level, squinting.

"We can all use a time out. Traveling's tough on a kid." Jill measures the drink inside the bottle with a shake, then slides it back under the seat on the passenger side.

"Yeah," Jill says. She straightens up, and twists the radio on. "That's Parenthood 101."

There's nothing but static so she hits the seek button and we get a country station. She hits it again and it stops on gospel, and a third time finds Rush Limbaugh. The next time it goes through the dial to the first station, so she turns it off. "I meant it to be a joke," she says.

I put my hand on the inside of her thigh and run it down her coarse jeans.

Jill turns her back to me, stares out at the brown country. The sky is empty and blue from the front that came through last night. "Six months and you still don't know when I'm joking," she says.

I reach up and touch the back of her neck under her heavy red hair, knowing I have to work hard when she gets like this. Sometimes Laney gets to be too much. Still looking away Jill runs her fingers over my wrist, tugging at the hair. I pull her over and she leans her head against my side.

"You shouldn't be so mean," I say.

She nods her head, takes my hand so it's touching her cheek, kisses my fingers one at a time. I glance into the back and see Laney has the dog in a strangle hold.

"Puppa," Laney says. She has thin curly hair, and eyes that can stare right through me. A perfect version of her mother.

Jill sits up and gives me a proud look. "She said 'puppy.' Did you hear that?" She leans over the seat back and unbuckles Laney and pulls her and the dog into the seat with us. The dog between us and then rolls onto the floorboard under my legs. I reach down for the puppy but find the pistol instead, and slide it back under the seat where I carry it. I hardly ever use the thing, but I remember my dad always carried one on trips when I was little.

"Did you hear that?" Jill says again.

I smile at Laney and tickle her stomach. She giggles and hides her face against her mother. A rest area is coming up and I slow to exit the interstate. It hasn't been long since the only word I ever heard Laney use sounded like "hersu." It was what she used to mean me, the dog, the Jeep, and any manmade thing that flies.

There are a lot of cars and trucks in the rest area, but it's cold enough that no one lingers, they just dash through the wind to the rest rooms and back again. I stand beside the truck and smoke a cigarette, watching the dog sniff around. It moves in short pounces like he's stalking an insect. Jill calls the dog Cola because we got him in Pensacola. She's going through the routine with Laney about checking her diaper. It's a standoff, but finally Jill gets her to lie down. I laugh at the way Laney goes limp finally, fiddling with the steering wheel and ignoring what goes on during the diaper change. It reminds me of the way my mind wanders when we make love sometimes.

Jill gets the diaper changed and they start the next routine about the coat and knit cap. There's nothing to the rest area except for a stand of oaks around the picnic area. I light another cigarette and wait. One of my favorite things is watching Jill and Laney, the way Jill maneuvers Laney into doing what she wanted her to do all along. Jill is a master of pleasant manipulation, even with me. Most of the time I don't mind. I like to know what's expected of me.

Finally Jill steps back, her face dark. "Your turn, Dennis," she says. She takes the cigarette out of my hand and walks across the grass trailing smoke. The dog follows her.

I step to the open passenger door to get out of the wind, and try my standard line. "I wish I had a pink coat and a fuzzy cap." I start to say, "I'd wear it all the time," but Laney's not paying attention. She leans against the steering wheel and traces the

finger grooves, then gives me the look that says nothing I try will ever work.

I reach under the seat for the bottle and wait for her to decide she's ready. I take a look around and then sip at the whiskey. Jill is over by the picnic area, tying her hair back with a bandanna, the cigarette still in her mouth. The dog is squatting to pee.

"You have to put this on," I say. Laney giggles and gives me a shy look. A natural flirt.

Jill and the dog are running in circles, Jill chasing and being chased.

The day we got the dog, we had driven over to Pensacola. That was our thing in Mississippi, to drive to the Gulf on Sundays. I saw him in a local *Advertiser News* I was reading on the beach while Jill splashed around in the surf, her jeans rolled up to her knees and still getting soaked. We went to get the dog and then fought all the way home about a name. Lying in bed that night, our backs to each other, Jill said she didn't think it was working out, and for the first time that she wanted to go home to Tucson. Things cooled off, but she still wanted to try Tucson.

I finished out the semester, closed our bank account, and got the Cherokee in highway shape. The plan was to move back, find work, see what happened. Laney's father, Jimmy, still lived in Phoenix. He called late nights wanting a second chance. I didn't like the way Jill talked to him, like a high school girlfriend. She'd laugh, tell him Laney missed him. I never said anything. She always told me I didn't say enough and I promised to do better.

Laney sees the dog chasing her mother and comes over to my side of the truck. She sticks the silly putty against my beard and then pulls it away, looks at it closely for new hair. She throws her hands over her head and falls back in the seat, laughing

about whatever she saw there. I pick her up and hold her, turning my face away from the putty, then work her arms into the coat sleeves and zip it up. She runs toward her mother and the dog in her under-balanced way while I jog along beside.

Jill is sitting on a picnic table, her face red and her arms crossed, hands tucked under the armpits of her blue Jean jacket. She looks prettier like that than she has in a long time. Laney and the dog pile up on the ground together and I wait for the opportunity to pull the hat over her ears. Her cheeks are already red too, and she doesn't notice the cap being adjusted. Only the white parts of the dog's eyes show as he struggles to break away from Laney. He snaps at her and she lets go long enough for him to get away.

I push Jill's knees apart and step between her legs, running my hands under her coat and shirt. She uncrosses her arms and moves my hands to her breasts. Her nipples are hard and I like the warm feeling there. Jill crosses her arms over mine so that I am held there. When we kiss I taste bourbon and cigarettes.

"Been a while since I had this much fun," she says.

Laney is running from the dog and falls down. The dog tugs at her hat until she starts to cry. Jill mumbles something and shakes her head. She releases me and I pull my hands out so she can pick up Laney.

The attention only makes Laney worse and she goes into a crying jag that leaves her short of breath. Nothing works to calm her down so we all three sit on the table with Laney bawling in her mother's lap.

I take out another cigarette and start to light it, but I look at Laney and put it back in the pack. We're supposed to be trying to quit, at least in front of the baby.

"Look, mistletoe," Jill says, pointing up in the tree above our table.

The grove is loaded with twigs of mistletoe standing out in sharp green from the bare branches. Laney refuses to look. I put the pack back in my pocket and climb into a crook of the tree and shinny out onto a limb, break off a twig of mistletoe and drop it to the ground. Laney stops crying and stares at me in the tree, and I wonder if she recognizes new possibilities the world might hold. She climbs down and runs over to the mistletoe, picks it up and shows it to the dog. When the dog tries to take the twig away Laney holds it over her head and runs around the table. The dog chases her, leaping at the twig.

I break off a whole branch and drop it to Jill, who picks it up. She touches the cluster of white berries, then holds the branch close to smell it. "Throw down some more," she says.

I move around the tree, breaking off branches and dropping them to the ground, until they cover the table where Jill has been stacking them. After a while I stop to look down at this family I've taken on, the four of us somewhere in Texas, with no one to depend on except each other. When I drop to the ground Jill comes over. She wipes the bark and the green mistletoe stain off my hands with the sleeve of her coat. I put my hands around her, into her back pockets, and we start a slow dance under the tree.

In San Antonio we get a room for the night. Jill plays with the remote control, Laney plays with the dog's food in the ice bucket, and the dog wets the floor in the corner. I go for the shower.

When I get out Laney is already tucked into one of the twin beds, asleep. Jill has arranged a circle of mistletoe on the floor around our bed. She sits there, pushing buttons on the phone. I take the receiver away and set it back on its cradle, gently press Jill down.

"I wanted to tell my mother we were okay," she says.

I pull her long t-shirt past her hips, kiss her just above the panty line. "Let them all wait," I say. "It's just us right now."

Laney mumbles something in her sleep and rolls to her stomach, twisting the blankets around her. The dog's legs twitch with his dreams as he sleeps beside Laney. "Rabbits," I tell Jill.

She smiles and sits up enough to pull the bedspread over us. We work down between the sheets. The heater is on low and the room feels cold, but warmth funnels out of the bedclothes around our faces.

By morning the weather feels better, but the skies are heavy with dark clouds and the radio is calling for sleet mixed with snow. We cut off the main road down to Del Rio, and then West on Highway 90. The country is rolling hills with sparse brown bushes stretching away on both sides of the road. We cross little canyons with steep walls and muddy water trickling along the sandy banks.

Jill acts mad about getting off the interstate in this weather. She says it will take longer. I feel protective about this family right now, happy. The longer we're on the

road, away from her mother, away from Jimmy, the better. I'm aching for something to happen, something to prove. Last night was the best for me and Jill in a long time.

We listen to Mexican radio. It sounds too bright for the weather, rain turning into sleet. Ice forms on the bare branches of the scrubby trees that run along the fence line on either side of the road. When I get out to lock in the front hubs on the jeep my fingers go numb instantly. The grass is sheathed in a film of ice, glassy brown jewels sprouting up from the ground. I remember an ice storm when I was little, how the ice was so heavy it bent the tops of trees all the way to the ground and broke the branches and trunks in two. I get back in the truck and shift into four-wheel high range and drive down the center line. Jill fixes sandwiches from the cooler and we drink beer. She tells me not to stop for anything and then sings a bit of "Graceland" by Paul Simon. Her voice always surprises me, how pretty it sounds.

Laney sits in her Mother's lap because the back is too cold, even with the heater going full. They play patty cake to pass the time. The dog curls up against me on the seat.

"Right after Laney was born Jimmy and I had to go to Denver for something," Jill says. "I forget what. The last two hundred miles were blizzard and we ended up in a ditch." She gives me a look.

I use my bandanna to wipe the inside of the windshield.

"Anyway, this trucker picks us up, but after a while he had to pull over. It was too rough. I had to pee so bad I couldn't stand it, so this guy gives me an empty orange juice bottle."

I look at Laney but she's just staring out the windshield. I tickle her foot and she

gives a little kick.

"I give Jimmy the baby but the guy's right there. Finally Jimmy hands Laney over to the trucker, then he shifts around and holds his coat open wide so I can pee." Jill adjusts Laney in her lap and gives her a kiss on the cheek.

"You couldn't go in the sleeper?" I say.

Jill gives me a sharp look and turns toward her window.

"It's a good story," I say. "I mean, what were you going to do? The guy was right there." But now I'm thinking about Phoenix and Jimmy, wondering what will happen there. "Every time the guy called us in Mississippi he exaggerated this southern accent."

Jimmy was afraid Laney would grow up talking like that. He was the reason I took the job in Mississippi to begin with, so Jill and I could have a chance.

"Yeah. That was stupid," Jill says, but she's still staring out the window.

We go for a long time without talking, and then Jill says, "Mother knows someone with the school district. She should be looking for you."

I nod but don't say anything, pretend to concentrate on my driving. Her mother knows everyone but it never works out. Jill and Laney start on itsey-bitsey spider.

"We've got to talk about it sometime."

"I don't have a license to teach high school."

"You can substitute. Maybe do some temp work." I reach over and take one of her hands away from Laney. We ride like that for a while. Ice starts to build up on the wipers.

There is a dark shape lying across the center line, some animal. As I pull to one side and stop I see it is a wild pig, still alive. The animal tries to get to its feet to run,

only the back legs don't work and the front legs can't get any traction on the icy road. It makes a huffing, painful sound.

"What's wrong?" Jill says.

"It's a javelina, I think. Like a wild pig. I've never seen one before."

Jill sets Laney on the seat and leans over me to look out the window. Laney tries to look too, but Jill holds her back.

"Let's get going."

"I think the back is broken," I say. "It'll just freeze."

Laney starts a fit because she can't see. The thing is as big as a bulldog, laying on its side now, breathing heavy.

"Why don't you fix it?" Jill asks.

I reach under the seat for the twenty-two and pull it out of the holster. I put in the clip, cock it, and aim out the window and shoot, but the bullet skips off the pavement past the pig's head. The sound shocks us inside the cab. Laney screams and Jill covers Laney's ears. I aim again and shoot. There is a solid sound and the javelina's front legs relax and its head slowly slides to the pavement.

We sit there for a minute while Jill tries to quiet Laney down. Sleet bounces off my shoulder and rattles against the roof of the Cherokee. Then she says, "Let me drive."

Jill leans back and I slide over. She gets behind the wheel and looks out at the pig, then starts to drive. I pull Laney into my lap. She's still crying, trying to go back to her mother.

"Will you do something with her please?" Jill says.

I look down and see I'm still holding the gun. I lean over and push it under the seat.

"Slow down a little," I say, and then whisper a song to Laney. My ears are ringing.

Jill takes out the pint and takes a few sips. She offers the bottle to me but I shake my head.

"You're pretty good with her when you're not being a cowboy."

I look at Jill a minute and then at Laney. "Yeah. She's the best part of this deal."

Jill keeps on driving like she didn't hear. She pulls the road map off the dash and tosses it across the seat. "Just get us back on the interstate," she says.

By dark we have driven out of the storm and make good time. We pull into El Paso around midnight and get a room. I'm sorry that tomorrow we'll only be one state away from Arizona. I go out for a pizza and when I get back to the room Jill is on the phone. She talks for a while longer and I try not to listen as I pull off some melted cheese for Laney. After Jill hangs up we sit on the bed and eat.

"I told mother we'd be there tomorrow night," Jill says.

"That's fine."

"She's going to call her friend about a teaching job."

"That should help."

Laney acts like eating on the bed is the best idea anyone ever came up with.

She talks to us in unintelligible sentences that roughly equal the length of what we have just said, then laughs to herself at the meaning.

"I told her you tried to kill a pig today. Know what she said?"

"No." I pick up the piece of crust off Laney's paper plate and take a bite.

"She said, 'Did he get the meat?'" Jill laughs and tosses her plate into the pizza box. "Like I can see you in the middle of the highway cutting up a pig in an ice storm."

She stops laughing and stares at me, then folds the pizza box so it will fit into the waste basket.

"I'm going to take a bath," I say, and start to unbutton my shirt.

"You know the thing I liked best about Mississippi?" Jill says. "When we went out to the river to shoot the gun. I've still got a scar where the ejector thing pinched my hand."

"That was a good day."

"I could have shot that pig," she says, and gives me a look meant to be intimidating. I smile at her while I take off my pants.

I stand in the shower for a long time soaking up the heat. The phone rings, I think, but it could only be the pipes knocking. When I get out Laney is tucked into the bed, fighting off sleep. I pick up the dog and set him next to her. He groans and tries to move but I push him back into place. Laney sits up and gives me a hug. She has a strong grip which always surprises me. I promise myself to always be patient with her.

I sit next to Jill on the other bed and we share whiskey mixed with tap water as we watch Laney fall away.

"I won't miss Mississippi," Jill says. "Couldn't buy beer on Sunday." She hands

me the plastic cup and leans back against the headboard.

"That's not so bad," I say. Jill is staring at the dark paneled walls that soak up all the light in the room. Her face is as lost as anything I've ever seen.

"Jimmy wants more time," she says. "I told him you were doing pretty good with her." She doesn't look away from the paneling.

"He called?"

"Mother gave him the number."

"He's getting ambitious, isn't he?"

"Said he was worried about the weather. With Laney and all." Jill stands up for a second and then sits back down. "He is the father," she adds.

I nod. "Tell him we brought our own orange juice bottle."

"To Laney a father is some big dopey man that smells like bourbon," Jill says. She takes the cup back and gets up to fix another drink. "What a future."

When Jill comes back I turn off the light between the beds and crawl under the covers. We lay there for a long time listening to highway sounds and watching headlights move across the wall through the cracks between the curtains. A TV goes loud in the next room. I feel the bed move when Jill throws the cup and hear it bounce off the dresser somewhere close to the wastebasket. Jill moves over me, pulls her t-shirt off, kisses my chest and works her way down. She makes circles around my navel with her tongue.

When we begin to make love it's rough, Jill bouncing up and down, throwing her body at me, shaking the bed, knocking my breath away. I think about a woman in the class I just finished teaching. She was just starting college in her twenties, probably

working at WalMart, and she didn't say ten words the whole time, just sat in the back being beautiful and shy, her face very pale but with dark, dark hair. She didn't belong in my class, her writing was that good, and I'm sure that I had nothing to teach her. She wrote a paper about how she grew up on her grandparent's farm. There was a creek that went through a little wooded valley somewhere in Mississippi. One day her grandfather was cutting firewood and dropped a hickory on himself. The cows they kept shouldered their way in close to look at him. She told about cranking the chain saw, how it shook in her hands and the exhaust was heavy with the smell of oil, and about cutting out a section of trunk that had her grandfather pinned down. She had to keep shutting down the saw so the old man could explain how to make each cut without binding the chain. He talked to her the whole time, even while she dragged him to the truck and drove him thirty miles to the hospital. It was her first time to drive a truck.

When Jill and I are through we lay there for a while, and then I hear her sleeping. I think about how quickly things change. How one day you're going along and suddenly you have a girlfriend and a daughter, and can't even remember how it really happened. Like that, I know that soon I'll forget what the voice of the girl with the chain saw sounds like. I'll never get to meet her grandfather, never see her farm, or her closet, or her bed. I sit up and can just make out Laney, how she's kicked the covers away again. I reach over and fix them back.