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Skyward

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Skyward

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by
C.R. Griffin

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this project to my ever present and dedicated academic advisor Marina Van Zuylen.

With your guidance and unwavering support, my academic dreams have come true.

For Life.

Acknowledgements

I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to Wyatt Mason for providing me with encouragement and patience throughout the duration of this project.

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1 The Beach

Seaside Heights was hot and humid. A summer squall had recently passed through, leaving a few westerly clouds dotting a blue sky and permeating steam above puddles glistening in the sun. It felt as if the heat of the entire summer had condensed itself through the vents and was dripping off their foreheads. The old Caprice only had four-fifty-five a/c: four windows down at 55 mph. Ward looked for parking near the water park, between the motel and boardwalk. Soaked towels and abandoned beach toys littered the street behind the row of parking spots.

The weather report on the radio said the storm didn't even show up on their radar until it was too late. Ward rolled down the "a/c" when the car was parked. He watched a family emerge from the refuge of a dented maroon minivan. The kids zigged and zagged across the parking area to recover what didn't make it to their ark before the rain. The father yelled at the mother for not getting everything after the lifeguard told them the storm was coming. They didn't spend all this money on beach gear to leave it there, he said. The mother was clearly done with them all. Rather than engage, she left her family for a big BOGO MARGARITAS sign in a red bucket, unaffected by the storm.

The man started yelling at his anxiously scampering kids without missing a beat. He yelled something about playing mini-golf before the beach. They would have had a better time there, he said. No, you wouldn't have, Ward thought.

As it happened, they were parked just below the course. A tiered network of caves and putting-greens—a tropical smuggler's den on the Atlantic coast. It towered over them. Among the wreckage was a single-engine airplane—its livery: white with a blue cheatline, distressed by the sun—bolted into an eternal nose dive on the top of a wall. For most passers-by, the park stood

as some Hollywood chimera of drug dealers and traffickers. But to Ward, the plane stood out among the ornaments.

In the ashtray, humid air penetrated a pile of cigarette butts. Its aroma, mixed with the polyurethane foam that peaked out from tears in the fabric seats, defused a familiar scent Ward hadn't realized he'd forgotten.

"You kids see that plane up there?" He said. His grandkids were in the back seat of the sedan. Tethered to their devices by puffy DJ-style headphones. The older of the two, Robyn had curly blonde hair cut into a Bob she would likely blush over later in life. She was athletic, but she seemed even more thin and lanky next to her brother, the husky raven-haired Eli, through the rearview mirror.

"It's a Cessna," he said, blowing into each hand. They had blocked out Ward and the Talk Radio he kept playing along the drive. He made them leave their electronics in the motel after the batteries died. We are on vacation from all of it, he told them.

The boardwalk had just started coming back to life when they arrived. Kiosks opened their storm windows, and the games booth's attendants started to put up the oversized stuffed animals. Ward watched as Robyn and Eli ran from game to game, looking over each prize and calculating their odds.

"I will take the chicken, sir!" Eli declared to the hoops attendant, pointing at a big yellow rubber chicken. He saw it on a kids' variety show, and all his desires were determined to get one. The boy walked up with such moxie that the attendant nodded and pretended to tip the invisible hat on his bald sun scorched head.

"Five bucks for three shots. Make two, win a little prize. Make all three get a big prize. Miss any, and you get no prizes," he said, pointing and waving a weathered bamboo stick in front of the variously sized stuffed creatures hanging.

"Deal," Eli agreed and proudly handed the man his five-dollar bill.

Ward didn't tell Eli the game was rigged or that he would lose his five dollars. He certainly didn't want to see the boy upset; rather, he wanted him to learn a lesson about bad investments or something. Everybody had to learn about carnival scams sometime, he thought. With all his adrenaline, Eli tossed all three balls towards the basket one after the other, and surprisingly they all went in. Even the attendant was shocked. Eli walked proudly and asked for his chicken, but instead of claiming his spoils, the attendant handed him a fluffy blue bear.

"I said the chicken," he said.

"The chicken's not a big prize, kid. Take the bear." he handed Eli the bear and walked away, lighting a cigarette. Eli's pride deflated instantly, and he broke into tears and sobs. Robyn tried to console him by offering her five dollars for another game so he could win another prize, she said. He wanted the chicken, and that was that. The attendant slugged his way behind the game, oozing smoke through his hairy crooked nostrils. Ward left the children and followed him. They both returned after only a few seconds, and the man handed Eli the chicken. Eli tried to offer the bear back to the man, but he wouldn't take it. Ward told the kids that he asked the man politely to give Eli what he rightfully won.

"You kids want to play mini-golf?"

"No!" They shouted in unison.

They played at all the arcades lining the boardwalk, then ate popcorn from plastic bags. While looking for their next adventure, they walked along the boardwalk, and soon Ward noticed they had unconsciously started to follow an old man with his little dog. The children snickered at the mangy-looking terrier and its close resemblance to the old man. They both had wispy white hair and brown spots on their skin. They were a funny pair. The terrier would get ahead of the man, and if he pulled too much, the man would stumble. He would cuss at the dog until he was red in the face, then the dog would fall back until he forgot and start to pull ahead again. He tried in vain to keep the sweat off his wide-pocked face, but it was too hot.

Wards and the kids took refuge in a cabana cafe for lunch. Robyn ordered for Eli, and they complained about the heat. Ward drank a tall beer. He thought about the old man and his dog and mused about some comedic punchline he couldn't quite get to land with the kids. They called him Mr. Sweaty and laughed hysterically over it. They finished their food and started throwing the felt coasters at each other. Ward finished another beer.

"Could you please stop?" He asked them.

"I am EL TORO," Eli said, making horns with his fingers on the sides of his head. A young couple at the next table laughed with them. They were talking quietly about traveling and other things.

After the waitress dropped the bill, Ward nodded to the man and put cash under the receipt. The man drank a shot of something dark while the girl went somewhere else. The kids ran out of the restaurant through the beaded curtain by the bar. They had forgotten about the heat, and after having just eaten, they begged to go to the motel and swim.

The motel room had two queen beds and proper a/c. After cleaning up and dressing in their nightclothes, they climbed under the covers and fell right to sleep. Ward checked again before he opened his whiskey and went out to the balcony to smoke. He watched Robyn and Eli fast asleep through the sliding door, barely filling the top half of the bed.

The view looked over the boardwalk and the parallel street. The pavement was wet and shiny, and of the few people about, it seemed that they were all heading toward the only things left open on the boardwalk: bars. It was a weekday, and families had retreated to their rentals after dinner. Young people poured out from afternoon naps, and by their hooting and hollering, Ward knew they were ready to cause a little mayhem. He would if he could. It was a comfortable, cool night.

On the balcony, a breeze from the ocean brushed across the sweat on his brow. His arms were burned, and he wasn't ready to be tormented by a tepid shower. The amusement park on the pier was shutting its lights off for the night because another storm warning said lightning was 'highly probable. But after three or four cigarettes, the predicted storm was nowhere to be seen. The azure sky was filled with stars and a bright crescent moon. As he stood there staring up and down the coast, Ward realized why he wanted to play mini-golf that day. In a previous life, he was a pilot—a smuggler—a low-level transporter rather, of American goods, for a big nefarious organization. It was like an adventure story.

Now, Ward was retired, swimming laps at the Y at six a.m. and wondering what tooth would break next. He wasn't sure when it happened, but now, each morning when he looked in the mirror, he saw an old man looking back. His eyes, once glistening emeralds, were now dim iridescent robin's eggs roosted in wrinkles. He used to think of them as weapons of sorts, calming

people with their depth and hypnotizing any woman he desired. But in the last several years, they turned against him—macular degeneration. Part of the retinas had grown too thin, and his central vision started to disappear. After the FAA heard about his diagnosis, it revoked his pilot's license. The degradation was manageable enough, so he was able to keep a driver's license.

He labored to get up from the plastic chair because his back and knees ached from driving and walking around all day. He lit another cigarette. He wondered if he could do something while the children slept. He decided to go to the casino; he had seen a sign earlier in the day. There would presumably be some old-timers at the slots and plenty of young folks at the bar. He didn't want to talk with anyone, but being near their excitement could feel nice. The kids were fast asleep. Locking the door behind him, Ward made his way towards the lights.

Ward walked around trying to find that sign or something that led to an entrance but was soon distracted by the old man and his terrier whom he had seen earlier that day. Under the boardwalk lights, he seemed like a more wretched person, his big belly hanging over his sandaled and socked feet, pulling the lead and cursing at the dog. His voice croaked, "damn you, slow down." Ward asked him if he knew where the casino was, but he merely glanced back and went on yelling at the dog. Ward followed them towards the deserted amusement park and then deliberately sat on a bench facing the ocean, lest his stalking is noticed by the man. The man and his dog left the boardwalk while Ward distracted himself by trying to pull the whiskey from his gray Member's Only jacket. It still burned his throat when he drank it.

A group of young women walked by, and he asked if they knew where the casino was. One said he was already there. Another said he should have gone to A.C. He was confused, and they laughed. They were all beautiful to Ward, so he kept asking questions to keep them nearby.

He looked them over. He felt guilty because they were so much younger; but I am still a man, he thought. They didn't stay long before scampering off to Jimbo's Bar and Grill. Ward watched their sundresses clutch to their breasts and caress the space between their supple thighs as they walked against the wind. He could still function, but at his age, he knew he would never feel one of their bodies against his. It irritated him, so he cursed them, but feeling guilty because they didn't deserve the terrible things he thought, he wished them well.

He arrived at Jimbo's but didn't see the young women. The whiskey didn't burn any longer, so he ordered a tall beer and chicken wings. He sat at the bar with his back to the boardwalk. An away Yankee game played on the tv, keeping the other patrons hypnotized. Ward didn't care about sports. In the dining room, he spotted the father and kids from earlier. Looking defeated, he barely tried to corral them as they ran screaming around the empty tables. The wife was drunk and yelling at him. It was his fault they acted this way, she said.

A seat down the bar, the young couple from the cabana watched the horror show that was the family in a bar after midnight. They were talking quietly to each other.

"You know, it's really nothing to make sure that is never you," he said to the man pointing to the family. "Just a quick 'snip," he gestured scissors over his groin. "It's really quite simple, and you're out the same day. My lady was in the room, too. We had one, then snip. I was a pilot then, so it made sense."

They smiled and didn't say much. While Ward tried to make friendly conversation, they essentially replied with yeah's or mhm-mhm's. They were convivial but condescending. He knew they weren't trying to be rude and that they were only entertaining conversation because they

wanted to seem nice, but really, they seemed narrow-minded and weren't very interesting, in Ward's opinion. He won some favor when he offered to buy shots. They ordered the dark ones from earlier. It tasted bitter but settled his stomach a little. He felt drunk. The humid ocean air finally cooled his burned arms, and he took on a chill. Looking around, the couple were still whispering to each other, the rest of the people in the bar watched the game, and the family was gone; Ward was done here. He left a one-hundred-dollar bill on the bar and left.

Between Jimbo's and the motel, time whiled. Ward was drunk, and he thought his excursion had turned into a disaster. There was no casino; rather, it was the proper name of the park: Casino Pier. What a fool he was. Outside Jimbo's, the wooden planks were saturated, and the rippling reflections of light obscured his peripheral vision making him dizzy and disoriented. It must have rained, he thought. He felt embarrassed that he likely looked more drunk with a stunted equilibrium.

An exit was close by, and he found refuge at a picnic table outside the late-night pizza shop. It just so happened that the group of young women wearing sundresses were there too. They asked him if he needed help. He explained what happened with the lights and that while he was, in fact, drunk, however, he was not as drunk as he looked. They laughed because they were also drunk.

On the whole, Ward was only able to see their silhouettes. Their little freckled noses and dimpled cheeks were details he hadn't forgotten and easily conjured their serene visages from memory. They each took a turn beguiling him with their night's adventures. He didn't feel guilty that their sweet sweat impregnated his nostrils, and he held his breath a little longer. "Boys, Bumps, and Booze—boning didn't happen because the men were foul," said Lou, the one sitting

next to him. Her knee accidentally pressed against his, and his heart fluttered. He regaled them with his night's excitement with resurrected buoyancy, embellishing details and capturing their attention with his charm. He felt good; he felt virile.

"I used to be a pilot," he told them. "See that plane up there? I used to fly one through the most dangerous places in the world." They looked where Ward was pointing but only a wing was visible. He tried to keep their attention, "even looked death in the eye a time or two" but he lost them. They were back to talking to one another and the emotions he tried to subvert began to surface again.

"...twice tonight, you ladies were my guardian angels," he said.

"What else do you need saving from?" Asked Lou.

"Time," he said warmly. The only thing he wanted to do now was sleep. He excused himself and made his way back to the motel. Robyn and Eli were still fast asleep. Ward got into bed and restlessly slept.

2 He broke it

Ward's plane was twenty or so feet away, grounded and silent. It was well after midnight, and dense clouds defused moonlight so that everything was still and cloaked in a shadow but visible. To the east, thunder roared as a storm approached. The weather broadcast from Nome said there would be a 48% chance of rain from a cold front pushing down from the north. Definitely 100%, he thought.

He blew into each hand like a baseball pitcher, then inspected the plane. As he touched down, a god awful grinding, crumpling sound rattled through the aircraft, and it pulled hard to the right, off the runway, and stopped in the grass. Though he was fine, a phantom vibration still coursed through his bones. The runway light strobed red and lit everything just enough to see that there was no new damage on the fuselage. He wanted to feel relieved, except something was wrong: a rear wheel disintegrated, and the frame was lodged in the soft earth. Despite being small enough to be moved around, with some effort, on flat ground, the Cessna 172 wasn't moving now. The grass next to the runway was more of a drainage ditch, and being at a slight slope drew the plane's weight downward. Behind it, a gash ran nearly fifty feet from the runway to the grass. Ward knew it could still fly. It had to fly if he wanted to get paid.

A benefit of flying at night to a remote Alaskan village was that the airport would be deserted till early morning. Unfortunately, there are no residential buildings around, so if nobody was working, nobody could help. The airport a few miles north of the village, on a high plateau, was the only air service for hundreds of miles in any direction but ran less than ten flights in and out a day. Being the only transport hub around, one could expect a plane or two to be parked by the

office or in the mechanic's bay, but nothing around that night. Ward would have played Dr. Frankenstein and collected parts from another plane otherwise.

The airport was easy to get familiar with. A half dozen buildings scattered across a few acres. The office was made from three converted shipping trailers fastened together and topped by a perforated steel roof. Connected to the office was a tool shed often left unlocked. Unfortunately, it had been picked clean by some vandals. Probably to hawk them at a pawn shop in the city, he thought. Another steel roofed building over a concrete pad was maybe one-hundred-yards west of the office. It was the storage room and a service bay. He looked around the few pallets and crates spread about but couldn't find anything but old grocery bags that littered much of the village and blew across the tundra constantly. The other auxiliary buildings were rented to the fuel company and had CCTV. His only choice was to go to town.

While most would assume asking for help would be a normal response, Ward avoided contact with people at all costs. His aversions weren't caused by anybody. He had to keep a low profile because his flight path wasn't logged with the FAA, and most importantly, his cargo was illegal. Though he meticulously kept two flight logs: one secret, the other a fabrication to keep any investigations cold.

There was only one person he could reasonably talk to who would likely keep his presence a secret: Markus Nelson, the airport mechanic. Regrettably, Ward didn't leave on good terms the last time they saw each other.

With haste, Ward set off for Markus' compound. The road from the airport had washed away into craters and ruts after the season's rain. Some time into his walk, Ward wondered if

Markus would be upset and what it would take to mend the damage enough to restore some trace of their old alliance. Nothing that a few drinks and some stories to settle things, he thought confidently.

Descending into the valley, Ward watched the village lights lining the next hill flicker in the river's slow current at the docks. He tried to find the old mission along the shore, but the light reflecting off the water only lit part of a rusty fence covered in dense vegetation. Lightning lit the sky, and before it dissipated, thunder roared above. The conclusive force of the thunder brought a tidal of rain down. Pulling up the collar on his worn leather jacket was Ward's only protection, though he was soaked after a few moments under the storm.

Ward squinted at the beginning of the driveway, seeing a flicker of light beyond the tree line. He tried to make out the derelict planes, trucks, and ATVs peppered about the acreage but could only see the light disappearing as it swayed in the wind. A black white-nosed husky patrolled Markus' driveway and growled at the sound of Ward's boots approaching in the gravel. Ward withdrew a stick of half-eaten jerky from his pocket and threw it as a peace offering. He swallowed it without chewing, then licked Ward's hands and followed behind.

"You remember me, boy?" Ward asked. Colt responded with a low growl.

He kept several paces back, flowing in Ward's wake with his nose to the ground. His vision was long gone, and the unique combination of tobacco and aerofuel was familiar to Colt. All he had were that smell and his feelings, and he wasn't sure how he felt about this visitor. He had marked the entirety of the property with his scent. He remembered every visitor, yet something seemed to encumber his sensibilities, leaving him feeling both comfortable and wary.

"Markus hasn't left here for a while, has he?" Ward asked, noticing letters stuffed into a fallen mailbox. He wondered if the old dog understood. Above them, willow limbs leaned bared down, narrowing the road to a corridor not much more than a foot from Ward's shoulders. He took a fallen branch and threw it flawlessly through the archway. Colt barked and ran to retrieve it. Retrieving is instinct, he thought; they just know.

Suddenly, a shotgun's blast sounded through the trees. Pellets whizzed by, sounding like supersonic bees shredding through the willow grove.

"Markus!" He yelled. "Markus Nelson, you old bastard, it's me, Ward Cooper." The blasts grew in and were soon coming near Ward faster and closer. Branches were severed from their trunks, exploding into mulch and flying in every direction. Ward felt a hot, piercing sensation in his arm and dove to the ground while shots continued firing overhead.

"Markus!" He yelled again.

After a few dozen more rounds, Markus stopped firing, and the only sound was the rain beating through the trees. Ward crawled on all fours towards the light. He felt sure that that blitz was Markus' way of saying he remembered, also that the ceasefire perhaps was a sign of his pardon, he hoped.

Colt returned with a new stick, a spindle from a chair, and dropped it at Ward's muddy hands. With an excited yelp, he goaded Ward, who reluctantly threw it again.

"You want to play at a time like this?" He said.

Another folly of shotgun blasts rang out after Colt disappeared again, filling the cold air with shrapnel and pulling the smell of sulfur from the end of the Markus' barrel across the property. Ward crawled behind a boulder and waited. He thought he was hit in the arm by a

pellet—birdshot. The wound seemed like a scratch and barely bled, but the pain surged deeper and more intensely with each passing volley.

"If ya' still breathing, call out. Colt says he knows ya. He don't give nobody his chair. Come on out, it's clear."

"It's Ward Cooper," he shouted. Slowly he rose from behind cover and walked towards the house. Another shotgun blast sounded, and more pellets whizzed passed his head.

"Your aim is a little rusty, old man," Ward yelled, and Markus shot again, this time hitting the ground just in front of Ward's feet, which sent a geyser of mud that covered him. "I have whiskey!" Ward shouted.

"Irish?"

"Uh, Kentucky."

This was, in fact, not an unusual greeting from Markus: a few over the bow, he would say. He hated uninvited guests, loved the second amendment, and a good drink--if it wasn't the cheap stuff. Ward waited near the tree line for Markus' orders or another volley of pellets. Markus' long silence had reached a point when the rain stopped, so Ward blew into each hand and then ambled out of cover across the only clear path through the driveway. The archway abruptly opened to the overgrown acreage. Colt had worn a zig-zagged path through layers of leaves and fallen trees that covered the ground.

Markus' compound was in a valley between the airport and the village. At the center of the property was a double-wide trailer on cinder blocks. Over decades, Markus had added annex rooms that were ugly yet sturdy. He filled them with an unimaginable amount of plane and

automotive parts. The exterior walls were multi-colored plywood and other recycled materials. One lamp lit the porch while dim yellow light peeking out through a crack of the front door lit the curious spaces behind tinfoil-covered windows.

"Ward, ya shouldn't have," said Markus after Ward put the bottle at his feet and backed away.

"It's been too long, Markus."

"That's not what I'm saying," Markus said peevishly.

"Can't talk this out over a drink?" Ward said confidently

"Go get some glasses out of that chevy," Markus said, pointing with the shotgun at a rusted old white truck with faded DOT logos across the doors. Ward reached through the broken window, took two mason jars filled with keys or bolts, and poured their contents onto the ground next to the truck. After wiping them out with a corner of his soaked shirt bottom, Ward filled the glasses with whiskey. Markus drank his glass nearly dry, then nodded for another fill.

"What brings ya 'bout, Ward?" Markus asked.

"Snagged the gravel wrong, and I need a wheel. And maybe a quad," Ward replied.

"How long ya got?"

"Not much time."

"Well, I got the rest of my life."

It was hard for Ward to read Markus' face. He often thought that about other older people's faces; their deep-set wrinkles, especially the natives, hid slight movements that a youthful face couldn't control. Markus had aged a lot, and his dark face was like a stone. Ward was looking for anger, a familiar smile, or even sadness, but his face revealed nothing.

"How 'bout some vodka as a retirement present?" Ward joked.

Markus drank and was unaffected by his joke. In fact, for years, Markus had remained quite unsettled on the matter of their friendship. The last time they spoke, Ward was flying to Nome for fuel and asked him to hold onto a pallet of goods overnight. Little did he know, the State Troopers were following a lead and investigating that shipment. Markus didn't see any harm, so he let Ward leave it in the mechanic's bay at the airport. Upon his return, Ward opened the pallet and took a few of the cases of Russian vodka recently smuggled into the States to pay him.

"You know the PSO found those bottles on my land," Markus said.

"I heard something like that a while back," said Ward. "I also heard you didn't do any time. He just took what was left, and that was that."

"No white boy, no. You paid me with that Ruskie booze, and the state found out. They asked me where I got it. I said I found it, but they didn't believe me."

"But you didn't get arrested."

"Freedom ain't the only thing they can take from you. Lost my job, and they cut my checks in half."

"It wasn't my fault Public Safety found it," Ward said anxiously. He tried to recall what he had read about the investigation in the papers. He recalled that some of the evidence used against him was illegally obtained. Then, his defense attorney got the case out. So what was the need for Markus' theatrics if nothing was lost? Losing a job is awful, but he could still work; he wasn't dead yet, and more than a million dollars of parts were on his property. Ward felt sympathetic—or perhaps pity—for his loss. He tried not to worry about the fragility of their exchange and how it could affect his drop waiting at the airport. He would miss the window if he wasn't in the air before sunrise. The lucky consequence would be money lost, but he wasn't going

to a casino. There were plenty of hungry pilots looking to make some extra scratch who would take his place.

"That's true," Markus replied. His voice and face remained static.

"He was doing his job."

"He was."

"I did what I could to help. I paid your fees and made sure you stayed out of prison." Ward said, becoming irritated by the way Markus stayed stone-faced.

"Okay, calm down, white boy. You movin' booze again?" Markus asked.

"Levis and cigarettes," Ward said.

"You puttin' freedom on the line for some smokes and blue jeans?"

"It's a good payout. You know I got a kid to think about."

"Yeah. Family..." Markus mumbled to himself for a few moments. The two men sat quietly for a while, watching a scourge of mosquitoes moving like a shadow hoard around the porch light. The wind calmed, and smoke from Markus' cigar floated horizontally around their faces.

"How you gonna pay?" Markus asked, taking small measured sips from this glass.

"Cash," Ward said, "but after I make my drop.

"Oh nah, white boy, you screwed me over good last time. Can't risk it."

"Brother, I know it seems that way, but I want you to know that I did all I could to keep you from serving any time." Ward pleaded.

"Brothers?" Markus said. "No, white boy, you pay me fists, and we drink on it." He raised his glass and waited for Ward to pull a wad of wet cash from his jacket pocket. He unrolled the bills and laid them flat on the porch decking to dry.

"What you flying?" Markus asked, smiling wide as he counted the bills.

Ward was struck by Markus' response because the conversation quickly turned to the plane and where the part might be in the yard. For as long as Ward knew him, Markus talked problems over, without exception. He was always prepared to work things out over a few glasses of the good stuff. That night, Markus instead started giving an oral catalog of what plane was in what section of the yard. He listed off how many of what part was on which shelf in which storage room in the house. He went on and on about how he thought about scrapping out vehicles and selling the parts on the internet to make more money.

"You know I could sell that landing gear for almost two thousand online? You bring me another bottle, and I can let it go for \$800.

"I have \$570 on me, and I'll bring you another case on the way back."

"That's acceptable," he said. Pointing with his shotgun, Markus told the exact place where the parts would be in the house.

Ward entered the trailer and went directly to the shelf where Markus said the part was. It wasn't there. In fact, the entire room was filled with nothing but bolts and keys. Ward had never seen so many keys: flat key, corrugated key, tubular key (or barrel key), dimple key, warded key and jagged key, sidebar key, combination/mixed key, and spool key. All labeled and organized.

"Are you a locksmith too," he shouted, but Markus must not have heard him because he didn't reply. Ward moved about the various rooms looking for the plane parts, but none seemed to have the part he was looking for. One was filled with old newspapers and magazines, another with clothes and dishes. It was like a hoarder's den, but everything was organized in neat boxes and

shelves by a system of letters and numbers that correlated to each section. This is either a hoarder's wet dream or living nightmare, he thought.

In the kitchen, cabinets still hung across the walls. Yet, a door was cut out where the refrigerator should have been, and the room opened into a long shelf-lined corridor. It was there, in that cold, damp room where the airplane parts were stored, that Ward found the wheel assembly. He headed to the front door when Markus materialized, gun in hand.

"You thought you could just come back and screw me over again?"

"What are you talking about? Ward asked.

"You were gonna leave without paying me what you owe me. All you white boys the same. Just come out here and take advantage of us. It's wrong, and it's going to stop!" He pointed the gun at Ward.

"So, you are going to kill me?" Again, having a gun pointed or shot at him was a familiar response to Ward's presence. Markus seemed to get around the trailer like a reptile silently moving between all the creaks in the floors. It was jarring. "How are you going to clean up my body and any trace of me being here? Have you thought about the plane parked at the airport? My name is all over that. And it's filled with illegal cargo. You haven't thought this through, have you?"

"I don't have to explain anything. A trespasser walked on my property, and I was afraid for my life. So in defense, I shot him. The PSO will take my word for it. Nobody knows you, Ward. You don't exist. Do you know how many pilots go missing around here?"

The timbre of Markus' monotone voice became gruff, almost predatory, and worry took hold of Ward. He felt defenseless, and his heart beat like a washing machine with uneven legs on a

spin cycle. The only way out was through a maze of furniture and around the lead-bound path of Markus' shotgun.

'All I have to do is store you till the freeze comes, then drop you in the river. Your body will wash up somewhere south in the spring.'

Suddenly, Colt came racing into the trailer, chasing a squirrel. Being blind, he collided with Markus, sending them both, in a tumble, to the floor with a bang. Ward ducked but wasn't fast enough, and the blast tore his jacket's arm shreds. If a blessing could be seen in that situation, Markus had reloaded birdshot again. Adding to the fact that he was a terrible shot, most of the pellets went into the wall behind Ward. The pellets felt like iron bee stings.

"Twice in one day!" he yelled.

Markus had fallen to his chest and labored to breathe, trying to right himself. Ward stood over him and stared. He was nearly killed, rightfully so, but did he need to help him now? Markus' labor quickly soured, and heaving and grasping his chest laid flat on his stomach. He had a heart attack. Colt howled and barked over him, trying to push him with his muzzle.

Ward stood over him dumbfounded. There was nothing he could do, so rather than call help, Ward lifted Markus and dragged him, panting and heaving, to the front porch. It would look like he got drunk and fell when he had the heart attack, Ward thought.

"Aspirin," Markus grumbled. Ward looked in the bathroom's medicine cabinet, which was perfectly organized, and found the Asprin. He put one under Markus' tongue and left for the airport.

"I did all I could," he said and disappeared into the night.

3 Artifacts

Before leaving the house, Ward checked his pockets: wallet, knife, and cigarettes. He didn't smoke anymore, but he liked to keep a pack around. A particularly stressful day could push quitting another week or so. Lately, he spent Saturday driving north on a winding road past farms and long rows of sun-bleached power poles to the state prison. A brick artifact of the gilded age, with oppressively dark barred windows and rusted fences surrounded by a wildlife refuge highly protected by the state.

The visitor's hall was a long and narrow whitewashed room with a dozen square metal tables in two parallel rows. All the seats were welded to the floor. Most of the room was empty. A low hum from the other visitor's mutterings reverberated off every surface. Ward waited at his usual table and exchanged nods with guards and other familiar visitors. After the numerous visitations, his discomfort with the repressive lights and atmosphere never eased. He knew he should have been in there for several reasons, but some kind of angel protected him over and over.

When the security doors buzzed open, everyone stopped talking and looked to see if their inmate was first to enter the room. Roland was the last released into the room, shackled by jingling chains at his hands and feet. He hadn't met with Ward since he was sentenced. The guard secured him to the loop on the table and walked away without a word. Roland stared at Ward, waiting for him to speak first.

"Twenty-five years, you goddam Kane," said Roland.

"It's good to see that you are still able-minded. I hear that you're up for parole," said Ward.

"Twenty-five years."

"And you still have more than another thirty good ones left in you. And when the board goes well, you can do it with the sun on your face for more than an hour, big brother."

"Brother? Brothers don't sell each other out. Brothers are supposed to be loyal; they are supposed to look out for each other; they are supposed to die for each other," said Roland.

"And you are the prodigal son. The prophecy has been fulfilled, and you are returned," said Ward.

Roland vacillated between hatred, and something he could only assume was love for Ward. In his cell, staring at the metal frame of the bunk above him, counting each weld on each seam, he planned his revenge on Ward: one shot to the back of his head. "I didn't betray you. I've been by your side our whole lives."

"You snitched."

"I didn't snitch. I didn't say anything," Ward began. "Who would it help if we were both in here? Why do you think the board is reviewing your case? Me."

"You want to talk about loyalty? Who slept with whose wife? Who-"

"Point taken!" Roland shouted. "I'd like to point out that you two were separated."

"Okay, but I still had to wonder if Ray was my kid."

Ward's and Roland's relationship was bitter-sweet. As boys, they were inseparable, best friends. After their father lost his business, next was the house, and then their mother, Ward, and Roland were sent to live with an uncle in Tennessee. They sold razor blades, newspapers and collected bottles so they could eat. Their uncle had always been poor. They were new to poverty

when their father sent them away. Roland was four years older, and after he graduated high school, he joined him and became a pilot. Ward followed when he was old enough to enlist. Roland flew in just about every military operation from Korea to Vietnam. After which, he retired and started a freight company in the Philippines. Ward served four years and was discharged. Soon after, he started flying with Roland.

Roland kept his nose clean—relatively. After each war, a market for imported American goods sprung from the ashes and Roland made some extra money moving things for people with big pockets. He tried to keep Ward away from that world, but they were two of the best pilots. They could fly anything and land anywhere.

Fast forward to the fall of the USSR, and Ward started moving all types of goods across the ocean into the newly formed Russian Federation. Demand was high, and the pay was higher. Trouble came around the time Ward's wife was giving birth. Ward called Roland and asked if he could deliver a plane full of consumer goods in his C-130. He had made a few trips already, which was meant to be a routine there and back. The drop went smooth. Roland loved the bigger payout. Unfortunately, his fuel calculations were off by nearly two hundred gallons. He had to make an emergency landing in Nome, Alaska. Upon his arrival, US Marshals and the FAA raided his plane. It was clean, but Roland's logbook and transponder weren't. Both logged his trip to Anadyr, Russia. Initially, they fined him and restricted his license, but Ward needed him to make the trip again.

"You told me it was jeans and other innocuous contraband," Roland said. After years in prison, his eyes had sunken in, and his skin was pale. His hair fell out, and he looked ten years older and

twenty-five years frailer. Ward and Rolland looked like twins most of their adult life, but Roland was a shell of who he once was in his state-issued jumpsuit.

"I didn't know they were going to change the cargo. Look, it's been twenty-five years. Can we look forward and move on."

"You must be joking. You see this?" He pointed to a long pink scar from his left hand up under his sleeve. I didn't do this. You did."

"Roland, I did everything I could. I paid for the lawyers and always kept your commissary full. It happened. There was nothing more to do. I had to cop out. I had a kid on the way, man."

"What about my kids?"

"The ones you abandoned in the Philippines? Their kids' kids don't even know you exist."

"So your life was more valuable?"

"That's not what I'm saying. It was shitty for everybody, but now Ray is about to have his first kid. Look, I know we can find a way to work through this. I have some friends who we can talk to."

"A shrink? You want to have couples fucking counseling? I don't know what I expected. Guard, I'm ready to go."

"Come on, Roland. You are almost out. Just hold on a little longer."

"I'm holding on for far different reasons than your shitty little family. I'll get my penance from you, brother, when I get out." Roland shook his shackles at the guard and didn't say another word.

"I'll be here, and I'll be at the gate when they release you."

"I don't get you, Ward. You come out here over and over thinking something will change. "

"I'll see you next week, Roland," said Ward. He put his hands over Roland's before the officer noticed, but Roland heaved his hands away and spit on his hands.

"You won't. If I ever see you again," Roland leaned in and whispered, "I will kill you."

Ward pressed the cigarette lighter in the car and pulled the pack from the dash. He smacked the top of the pack on his hand three times, rotated it, and smacked the bottom three more times before opening it. The lighter popped, and Ward held the leather-bound steering wheel with a fresh Marlboro on his lips. He breathed in the fresh tobacco taste without lighting it, trying to be satisfied by its unlit crispness. The sight of concrete and razor-wire of the prison from the outside pushed Ward's quit date back another week, he thought. It could have been him in there, staring out small barred opaque glass windows, but it wasn't.

4 It's time.

At dusk, the lake was calm and glass-like. The sun was setting, and the silhouettes of the trees were still visible in the last touches of light. A loon called a long wail, searching for its mate before all the light was gone. Moments later, the other loon wailed back, marking the fall of night, and setting the mood of solitude and peacefulness that Ward sought out.

Sitting on a fold-out chair at the end of a dock, Ward watched a group of mallard ducks waddle up the shore from the water. Two drakes turned their iridescent-green heads to a female, trying to win her affections. The other males, still mottled with light and dark brown feathers, show the blue speculum patches in their wings, merely practicing to become a drake. It was early in the mating season, and the coupling had just begun. Ward waited silently as the female entered the cattails alone. Then he let out a loud cough he had tried to keep silent, but frightened by his noise, the group of males honked and quickly flew away out of Ward's sight. He sat on the dock through the night, listening to the animals of the night.

Behind him, a rustling and footstep came from just beyond the grass. Ward took his mobile phone out and called Ray. No answer. He called Robyn. No answer.

"Hello brother," Roland said, approaching the dock. Ward kept his eyes on the lake.

"You found me. Well, I suppose it's time?"

"It is," said Roland.

"I did all I could do," Ward said and closed his eyes.

