

ELIZABETH KADETSKY

## LOUP GAROU

We were sitting in our basement vetting belongings and turning over our argument again about marriage. I asked for clarification as to what Morey was insinuating by his last comment, and Morey said he was insinuating exactly what he'd said—that I was timid, cautious, lacking in bravery, and not at all adventurous. “You’re not very courageous,” were his words, my beloved’s.

This I found unjust since I was moving cross country with him for no good reason, especially not a marriage offer. And Morey was less willful than I was, given his weak spot in the area of my ex-husband, Elliott.

I’d gotten married to prove something, Morey rebutted. Morey always struck back harder. For that reason I usually tried to drop things when we fought. But Morey had started something, and now it was started.

I placed a box of letters from Elliott in our *toss* stack.

Morey placed his bass guitar above that. “Possessions mean nothing to me.”

When the volume knob got turned to eleven like this, one of us generally changed the channel. The new station cycled the fact of our undying, everlasting devotion to one another.

“I’m not jealous if I know you love me,” Morey offered this time.

“Well I do love you.”

His eyes went dreamy. They had several moods. When they were flat, blue, and opaque was when he got smart and mean. Now they were deep and swirly. “Love is what’s brave. I showed up. Put my ass in the chair. I love you, baby.” He touched his fingers to his heart.

Even so, this seems the moment the competition got going.

We were moving because Morey felt a pressure pushing him from our comfortable life in Portland. He said it was a town you couldn't succeed in except according to about fifty people who were already your friends. No matter how far you strayed there was always rocket-fuel espresso and pounding, home-grown music, or a walk in the hills to cut the edge when emotions came like jackals. He had good pot, and friends to sit out nights with him crushing empties and listening to his tales, half made-up and mostly exaggerations. He had charisma and plenty of beauty, was how one of them put it. It made them feel privileged, like they didn't deserve a seat next to him on our sofa. Morey thought he could do better. He wanted to get a Ph.D. someday, but until then he was just another guitarist working in a bike shop. With his charm and intelligence and fluency in atonal scales, he thought he should be conquering not Portland but New York City.

He was one foot across the Willamette River, and I was inclined to follow. Some of his friends gave me the idea I could maybe try out writing. All I did otherwise was look exotic behind the hostess stand at a local fine-dining establishment.

Morey was broke as me—even more because I had credit cards rolling in via our mailbox like I was a duchess holding a family estate in France, maybe because of my name: Cecile de la Croix. Still, we paid hard cash for our used Toyota. It was because of Morey we never got a tuneup or invested in a map, and it was his idea too to sell or junk most everything we owned and pack the rest in the “boot” of our new car—this expression uttered by Morey in a fake British accent favored in sentences also sharing the word *Gotham*. We made a deal to use only low-grade fuel and barely anything in the oil tank, and to abandon the car soon as the glitter of the glorious city dusted our eyelids.

“Look, a strip club,” Morey commented somewhere near dusk. It was our second day, and I was driving, closing in on the Idaho border. He raised an eyebrow from the passenger seat, “You want to go?”

I'd proved myself through hardier acts since we'd left Oregon—blowjobs and handjobs in the moving vehicle, parking lot sex when we were stopped. It hadn't been all for the goad-

ing. I liked the way this competition made me feel different from the me I knew.

Morey was the one of us graduated from a lifetime in provincial places—his word, *provincial*: from suburbs to college town to a city that protested far too much its “under-the-radar coolness.” My life had been grittier, but even if some of the girls in my kindergarten wound up in strip joints—mostly half-Eskimos or from families dark skinned and down from Canada—I’d never seen one inside.

“I’m not scared,” I said.

“Why should you be scared?”

“No reason it should be more dangerous for me than it is for you.”

He turned his big eyes to me.

As we crossed the parking lot I got an odd feeling, not of fear, but a sense my body was not the same one I was used to most days. The club was so bright you could see every coil of cigarette ash on the carpet, which also showed many scars of long-ago burned-out matches. It was early so there weren’t many customers, and I was the only woman and had to hard-eyeball some men to let them know I wasn’t a hooker.

I wasn’t even much of a drinker. We ordered whiskey. It tasted bitter and sharp, and helped me focus on the excitement of being in that foreign setting rather than feeling let down it wasn’t more glamorous or raw.

It was a while before anything started. Three women came out on a stage shaped like a kidney and moved their asses and torsos to bad pop. *You-ou. You make loving fun. . . .* The women weren’t fat, but they seemed to have too much flesh, as if they’d carried a lot of weight once and now had extra skin. Their costumes were sparkly and didn’t fit right. You could see nipples creeping over a suction bra on one woman, a crack emerging from under a thong on another.

We moved to a long banquette that ran along a wall. I got up to pee, and when I came back, sure enough, one of the strippers was hula-hu’ing with an invisible hula hoop in front of Morey; he stuck a bill in her garter, then frowned at me as the stripper shimmied to another gentleman.

“Nice air-hula hoop,” I said.

“Obligatory.” Morey, I suspected, was mostly annoyed about parting with cash.

By now there were a lot of girls flashing looks at him. They weren't bad looking, mostly immigrants from maybe Mexico, or Central America or Peru.

"It could be fun with some guy friends, I don't know," said Morey at another point.

"What do you mean?"

"Just, nothing happens when you come with your girlfriend."

"Sorry you're not getting action."

"Never mind."

When I got up again I was drunk. I came back, but one of the girls was chatting with Morey in my seat. She had on a stretch miniskirt too pulled at the weave to hold her shape. Her body was short and compact, like she was made for tree climbing, though she wore strappy sandals with telephone-pole heels that didn't match with her body. I walked to the bar by myself and imagined Morey here alone or with guy friends. I figured if I was really going to be a writer, I should start now with research. A writer's job was to think of people they knew acting out different facets of themselves, sides their friends didn't normally get to see. I sipped more whiskey and got to liking the way it felt to be someone who'd never met Morey and didn't care what he did in a corner with a chubby prostitute. He looked out of place here, with a FUCK STARBUCKS tee shirt and a stoner's paunch.

When a guy planted himself next to me I was relieved though; I didn't want to watch Morey and a prostitute. The man was easy to look at, tall and Western—slender, cowboy-hatted and blond—neat and trim in a pressed snap shirt and white denims.

"That your boyfriend?" he asked, gesturing to Morey's back.

Looking at Morey from the side, I suddenly found him handsomer than I wanted him to be just now, with long legs and shaggy black hair, in Steve McQueen sunglasses and that tee shirt.

"Sure."

"He ever get violent?"

"He's a stoner," I said.

"Not gonna beat me up?" He signaled the bartender and glanced at Morey again. "Nah. Probably not," he added, to himself.

He pointed to my whiskey tumbler and ordered me one, which he slid in front of me while paying for it.

“Nah.” I pushed back the drink to him. “I’m not done with my last whiskey.” I tipped my half-full one to him. “Aren’t you drinking?”

He grinned. “You want me to?”

“Sure.” A wave of something dangerous-feeling spread across my shoulders.

He toasted the air with the full tumbler and slugged it before slamming the empty on the bar. “Whiskey’s not for sipping, darling.” He put his finger on my straw and lifted it out.

This was how little regard he held for the boundary between my whiskey glass and himself. I’d felt dizzy like this when I fell in love with Elliott. Things hadn’t happened that way with Morey. When I met Morey I’d wanted none of passion. Soon as you let in emotion, the yearning was a fire that ate you.

I shrugged and finished the drink without the straw, at which point the cowboy ordered two more. He pulled the straws from each and handed me mine, lifted his.

Morey was still chatting with the girl. I tried to catch his eye but couldn’t. Maybe he hadn’t even seen this guy here. A panicky feeling in my chest began to rise through the back of my throat. I wasn’t threatened. When you wagered for love without passion, what you won was never having to meet that monster, jealousy. Morey was a cheapskate anyway. The girl wouldn’t make out with him for less than five dollars. No, I wasn’t jealous. But the panic was there. The world where Morey and I loved each other was out of focus against this one. It was as if there were two distinct realities coexisting together in this strip bar, one where Morey and I were a couple, and one in which we’d never met. The two lined up one atop the other like a piece of glass on, say, a map, where the space between them makes it impossible to see where you’re headed.

“*Parallax*,” Morey had said once, when we’d seen something like that.

I knew what it meant. “Yeah, they don’t line up.”

“I love having a girlfriend who’s smart.” He was congratulating me. It made me hot now wondering where he got off thinking he was so much smarter just because his parents had bought him an education.

That was about when the cowboy put his hand on my thigh: John was his name, or so he'd said. I let him. His palm felt good, warm and determined.

"John." I tried hard not to slur. I peered at Morey and got the desperate lacy heartbeat. He still hadn't bothered to look.

I sized up John. "I would like to make out with you." It was the whiskey talking. "But I would like to let you know beforehand, however, that that is all I am going to do. And I am not going to do even that unless you assure me that this is all right, that I am not doing anything more than to make out with you. Will that be all right with you?"

He nodded, making an exaggerated gesture of weighing tradeoffs.

"I'm not a hooker, see?"

He made a businesslike frown. "Not dressed like that you're not."

That was spot on. *Spot on*—a Morey-ism. I wanted to get Morey out from my head. I sipped more whiskey and looked down at my clothing. I was wearing Converse All Stars with no socks and a denim miniskirt with a holey Led Zeppelin t-shirt of Morey's, and my hair was in a kinky knot with stray corkscrew curls angling in all directions, like arrows pointing anyone who wanted to look at me someplace else.

"But you still look pretty."

I raised my whiskey glass in the direction of Morey, who, continuing to face the other way, gave all impression of never having met me. "I do have a boyfriend there," I confirmed to myself and to John.

John touched my waist. The pressure was gentle, but charged and firm too. He pulled me closer, a little roughly, and kissed me. I kissed back, then pulled away, supposedly to smooth my hair and place the straw back in my whiskey. I smiled at him, and then we kissed more. That time I felt nothing but the kiss.

Then I asked myself about tomorrow. *Tomorrow*: killer of one-night stands and liquor courage. If this went on tonight, tomorrow I'd be that much more hung over, or I'd have tossed away mine and Morey's dream of a life in New York City. I made a terrible outlaw, just like Morey said. I pulled back from John and pushed errant ringlets into my elastic. "I gotta go."

"You're really pretty," he repeated.

"Thanks. You're handsome too," I said, because he was.

"Probably hear it all the time but I don't get what brings a girl like you to a place like this."

"I don't hear it ever. I'd only hear it if I came to places like this. I'm sorry. This was part of a game. Some dumb competition. It wasn't fair to you."

"Not a problem, gorgeous." He nodded his head up and down and grinned. "You're out of my league. What are you, anyway?" He looked me over.

"French," I said, which wasn't a lie. "White," I added when he didn't look convinced, which I didn't really know if it was true. No one usually believed it. They came from Québec, my family, and were natty-haired and crazy-eyed and by and large alcoholics. Sometimes they said we were a quarter "original American," as they call Indians up there. But maybe my ancestors were really from New Orleans before they ever got to Canada, or maybe they'd come from Algeria before they made it to France.

I shrugged. "We think so. We don't really know. Okay, bye."

John raised his glass to me.

When I walked across the bar to Morey, I felt as if my feet were not planted on the ground, and that the grand effort I was making to move in a reasonable straight line from one shimmering point in the room to its opposite diagonal was obvious to everyone. I was five inches off the ground. Morey and I would soon roll across that pavement slick and free. It was like magic getting so close to danger and escaping. We'd been dusted by powder. We could walk through walls.

Morey didn't look up till I was just in front.

"We have to go."

"Ceil, this is Lupe." Morey gestured to the girl.

"Sorry to interrupt, Lupe."

She grinned with I couldn't tell what but maybe disgust, or boredom, or just amusement. "Bye," she said without looking at us.

The car zithered across the blacktop. I imagined it glowing like a light bulb, with a flame like anger that shot color out into landscape washed dry by punishing sunlight.

I had a sudden pang for Elliott, and had a vision of myself

phoning him from a Plexiglas phone booth someplace deep in the barren desert. I'd slide shut the door and seal myself in its rectangle of oxygen. "Sure, sweetheart, come on home," Elliott would tell me.

After a while I noticed a hitchhiker on the road whose clothes and way of standing reminded me of John. "What if things had gotten out of hand with him?" I accused Morey. The figure faded into haze and heat vapor behind us.

"The cowboy from the bar?"

"Don't pretend you didn't see."

He made a dismissive gesture with his lips. "Dunno. You saw that hitchhiker back there? Should have picked him up."

"There's a great idea. Then we can definitely die." I turned to the rear of our car. You could fold down our backseat so it linked up with the trunk, and both were swollen with everything in the world we owned now that we'd discarded everything else in the world we owned while arguing in our basement. "Anyway there's no room."

Morey looked over his shoulder at it too, scowling. "Bourgeois sellout belongings."

"You're crazy."

He didn't say anything

"You really want us to die."

Maybe he did want us to die. Back when we used to trust each other Morey had told me what it had been like for him as a child. He'd had a rare form of leukemia, which he'd overcome, but sometimes he still got the taste of the chemo in his mouth, metallic and yellowish if taste could have a color. The chemo had given him jaundice, and his liver was still weak. He always said that having almost died made him different from other people. Also, he couldn't have children because of the chemo, and that made him different too.

Morey and I went back to ignoring each other, and I began composing a short story in my head, about a couple that sets off on vacation in their car hoping to resolve a disagreement about whether to have a child. The husband is against it, for ethical reasons. The wife suggests they adopt. In the climax a child appears miraculously by the side of the road, like in a fairytale, a swaddled orphan with an invisible message glimmering on her forehead: *Take me*. I was thinking of a story my grandfather used to tell about a loup garou who paddled up



the Saint Lawrence River in Québec scooping up lost and abandoned children. The loup garoux, as everyone knew, were really agents of the devil.

Finally I broke the silence to tell Morey the premise of my story, which he then took as opportunity to convince us both he was smarter than I was. “Any story that’s worth telling is a hero’s odyssey. The main character undergoes a trial. The resolution is revealed through a denouement. The characters have psychic transformations.”

“Sure,” I said, tuning him out. I tried out various resolutions in my head—denouements. The driver doesn’t see the baby soon enough. Startled, he or she swerves and hits it. After a while, though, I started remembering how Morey never apologized about John. “The only thing you cared about was watching.”

Morey stayed silent.

“Not even that. You weren’t even looking out for me.”

He whistle-sighed. “Don’t start on that, baby.”

“You’re completely blank. Empty.”

“Leave me alone.”

We were homing in on Steamboat Springs, three days into the road trip. The radio continued a daylong rotation of twenty all-time, all-the-time pop hits. “They’re mocking me,” Morey had said earlier of the DJs and their playlists. He was driving, with his head arched back to meet the headrest like he was basking in something—sunshine, or the adulation of as-yet-nonexistent followers, or just satisfaction with all things life or love could deal him. He had that kind of off-putting confidence people didn’t like in a man sometimes, but when I saw it so transparent like this I sometimes felt bad they couldn’t see he was just acting. I pulled down his sunglasses to the tip of his nose and peered at his eyes from the side. They were flat-opaque again. Sometimes when they got swirly I saw yellow in them, and I could see him as that sickly child so scared of things. “You get jealous, don’t you, sometimes?”

Just about that moment the Toyota began to stutter on an uphill, and a lumbering, multi-axle trailer passed us. Morey seemed to take the superior power of the larger vehicle as a personal insult. “*Mother fucker! Lagoon-crawler!*” He pulled to the shoulder and slammed out the driver’s seat.

"I just—" He shouted as he walked. "Don't. Care. A fuck. About. Bourgeois. Sellout. Belongings."

I watched through the back window as he stalked to the trunk—"the *boot*," I thought, keeping calm. When I got out to meet him at the pavement he was removing his amp, which he'd recovered in an earlier prisoner exchange in our basement over a box of my family photos. A child-size abyss cratered together in the trunk as our pillows and sleeping bags heaved inwards to fill the space of the equipment, as if they were taking an inhale of air.

"Honey," I said.

There was a moonish and make-believe feel to the setting, though maybe that was me. I felt adrenaline, and for the first time understood why people said fear was a drug. The amp looked small and out of place on the road. Behind it were pale white rock, dry pines, and waxy green shrubs. With both doors flapped open and the trunk lid raised in the air like a wing, the car looked like a dinosaur about to flight off. I imagined the young Vincent Price stepping from behind a painted backdrop with a blonde in a loincloth and halter: *Welcome and congratulations. You have penetrated Forbidden Planet*. This was a movie I'd seen thanks to Morey.

I deposited my box of family photos on the pavement beside Morey's amp. "Can we go now?" I was getting smaller and smaller, soon to be invisible. This shape-shifting, too, felt electric.

When Morey finally turned the ignition and pressed the gas, though, it ignored him. After a few attempts, finally it sputtered, back-firing a wispy white exhaust cloud. Eventually the car crawled slowly up the pass.

I worked out language for my story: *The couple struggles to the top of the hillside with the swaddled infant, only to face an army of desert snipers. Summoning superhuman strength to rescue the child from the grips of the bandits, the couple fends off a cruel raid and coasts briskly to the other side of the mountain, free and redeemed.*

After a while Morey touched my leg and looked at me with his eyes sultry and yellowish like the shrubs.

I looked back at him.

"I *do* love you," he said.

"I know."

That night we made love in our tent. We were at the base of the Rockies, and the dry mountain air made our skin slick and powdery and tingly. Afterward, I got out and stared at the black sky with its million white exclamation points. It was shouting out to me.

As we packed our tent next morning, I still felt that exhilaration. In my head I retold myself the story of the child so the baby had a chance of surviving.

“So in the denouement, they’re so grateful the kid survives they vow to be good to each other.”

He shrugged, as if he had no idea who this *they* was. Morey drove with his sunglasses on, his left foot and thumb pad tapping out rhythms in a thankless attempt to redeem the bad music. *Been through the desert on a horse*

I sat in the passenger seat, one foot on the dash, shoulders leaning into the door, a hand separating squiggles of hair in a hunt for split ends. I hummed a song in my head I knew from my grandfather to drown out the music—*V’la l’bon vent, v’la joli vent, v’la l’bon vent*: Go good wind, go pretty wind, go good wind.

After not too long, I saw a cloud of heat haze and imagined the hitchhiker on the side of the road. I began working John into my story. Morey and I were dropping slowly into that horizontal America east of the Rockies, racing smoothly through acres of plains and farm country. Our Toyota was uncomplaining through homesteads of little surprise, where all was laid out for us across a hundred-mile survey of easily announced flatness.

That evening we crossed back to rugged terrain, the Black Hills. There were several small Indian reservations you didn’t know you’d passed through till you saw a LEAVING . . . sign and an obligatory worry-dolls-and-Tricksters table at just the goodbye edge. The earth turned from deep red to black. We entered another dusk, and the earth turned shimmery in patches, purple in others. While I drove, Morey kept watch for state park signs to camp. But after a while the signs disappeared.

Maybe Morey pretended not to see the last turn-in to the park they’d told us about at the last gas station, or the fork in

the road that led us off the national highway and onto a side road where there were no place markers to tell you where you were or where you'd be a hundred miles from now.

I didn't know, because I wasn't talking to Morey. I couldn't get it out of my head John hadn't made me more beautiful to him. Echoes and flashes of light, white marks on the side of the road, they seemed to be everywhere. Every time I saw one I imagined a ghost-like hitchhiker on the side of the road. *V'la l'bon vent*. I never heard from Morey I was beautiful. I wished I were brave enough to run away from him. I'd do it soon as we hit striking distance of a subway, and after another while I told him I wanted to break up.

"Why do you say things like that?"

"Because they're true."

"They're not true."

"You don't love me."

"Who are you to evaluate?"

"I know you don't."

"Don't leave me, baby. You don't know what love feels like to someone else." He turned to me with those eyes, the colors like an animal's.

"There's nothing you like about me. I can't imagine why you want me to stay."

"You're pretty."

"Fine."

*"I love you."*

"If that's what love is."

A pale sunset reflected in the metallic hillside, and then as darkness descended the sky turned the colors of mica. Stars grew bright in a moonless sky. The car felt wrong driving it, the steering off kilter and loose. The engine continued to go sluggish even on mild inclines. Something seemed to have gone off with it, probably when we'd stalled back at Forbidden Planet.

"I'm turning into that gas station," I said.

"Why?"

"We're lost, and the car's *folle*."

"We're fine. We're getting rid of the car in—" he looked at his watch "—two days." He shook his head as if imagining,

like me, the start of something unrecognizable, each of us without the other. “You worry too much. Why do you have to be so—?”

I waited for him to finish.

“It just makes me wonder—” He trailed off again.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just—”

“Say it.”

“If you really can go the distance.”

I already felt numb and lightheaded, had got there before he’d said that. “Maybe I can’t then. It doesn’t matter anyway. There’s no state park here.” I angled the car into the lot.

Morey walked to the restroom, and while he was gone I went to the edge of the parking lot. There was, just like in my fantasy, a rectangular Plexiglas phone booth where I could easily call Elliott. It made me feel a little more powerful seeing it, as if I’d created it purely out of my thoughts. I walked over and when I reached it knocked my knuckle against the plastic to check if maybe I had conjured it from my mind, but it made a flat and low bell sound and seemed to be real. I levered myself inside. As the door closed, the air seemed to get dense and still. Inhaling, I tasted something rich, as if the atmosphere had those same sparkly minerals from the soil. I unhooked the receiver and held it to my heart and ran my fingers over the buttons on the phone. I could feel every Braille mark. This place felt, suddenly, more solid than anything over the three days before, realer to the touch than the inside of our car. I put back the receiver without dialing and unsealed myself from the booth.

I watched Morey exit the restroom and wander inside the minimart and then come out again looking disoriented. He couldn’t see me. I wondered if he could see anything true about me at all from the vantage of the darkness, that I was someone standing on earth for the first time, alone and firmly planted.

I should have been looking more closely at Morey. Now, when I remember the moment, it’s as one of those images that tattoos itself inside the brain and never changes. It may not be quite right: Morey, his FUCK STARBUCKS tee shirt sweaty and clinging to his chest, his face pale and pulled. He is thinner, thinner than I remember him having been usually, thin-

ner, I don't know, than when we'd started the road trip. In the freeze frame his eyes are also too big for his face. Their color is part hazel, part orange, and they are translucent, bright and watery, and they don't focus right. There is something kinetic about his movements. His head makes jerks; his walk is nervous and jagged; he carries his weight high in his chest.

He walked to meet me. The guys inside told him there was a campground a mile and a half up, he said, and down a dirt road off to the right about three miles, past a fork where you veered left, and a stream.

I walked inside to the bathroom. There were three guys, drinking beer and wearing black cowboy hats and black snap-shirts stretched across pot bellies. Everything got silent when I walked in, and I got a bad feeling. They took in my legs, my same short denim skirt, my ass. Back in the car I looked at Morey's FUCK STARBUCKS tee shirt and got the bad feeling again.

The only light was our headlamps. Morey drove. He seemed uncertain and out of control. The steering wheel shook as the axle bent and swayed over rocks and sagebrush, and Morey kept turning the wheel back and forth without the movement ever getting carried through in the tires. We odometered the whole thing, but there was no fork, and no stream, and there hadn't been a single sign for a campground.

"There's no campground," I said.

"They said there was." The Toyota lurched ahead. "They live here, they should know." A little farther, though, he stopped. "Shit, I don't know."

I stayed quiet.

He cut the motor but left the headlights, which shone on a flat and brambly surface, not even a road. "We can camp here. There's nothing for miles."

"I've got a bad feeling."

"Yoou-ooou." He said it whistling, drawing out the word long.

"I give in. You're tougher than me. I want to go to a motel."

"What are you afraid of? Anyway we can't afford it."

"I don't care."

"You want to pay for it?" He knew about the credit cards.

"I said I don't care."

Then suddenly, five creatures crept from the darkness and walked into the glow of our headlamps. They seemed drawn to

that spotlight, as if to perform. I had no idea what they were. They could have been mythic beasts they were so different from any animal I'd ever seen before. But they stayed there a long time, paralyzed, maybe, in the glare. That was long enough for us to guess they were bobcats, lean and big, with legs that seemed too long for their bodies and small, intelligent faces. Their hinds looked almost human, like athletes'. They watched us as if they knew something better than we did. Later, I read it's rare to see bobcats in America. I also read the animals are dangerous, but I didn't feel that. I felt protected. It was as if they were telling us the story of ourselves and they knew exactly how it was supposed to end.

The problem was, I didn't know how it was supposed to end. The cats were an omen, but whether of reconciliation, or doom, or violence, I couldn't tell. The animals leaped away, and then Morey said with certainty that we should camp there.

For lack of anything better, I believed him, again. "Okay."

We pointed the car lights on the flat patch and popped the trunk. I was taking out the sleeping bags and tent when we saw headlights rise in the distance and then disappear, as if dipping lower into the hillside, and then reappear again, moving closer. I froze. I felt empty inside. I could feel skin on every part of me. I was aware of every piece of the desert too, each blade in the scrub shimmering in the light of our vehicle.

"Get in the car," said Morey. Fear made his voice scratchy and high pitched. He stumbled into the driver's seat and flicked off our headlights.

I slammed back the trunk and tossed the sleeping bags and tent into some tumbleweed. Our car clanked as it jolted forward into the darkness—not on any road. I could see from the lights in the side-view, and we could hear from its rumble a hillside away, there was a truck out there. It was looking for us. Morey spun the wheel this way and that, but it was still loose and he could barely navigate the bramble. That's when he cut the motor and we listened, and let our eyes adjust. We were just that side of a paved road, and sunk, nearly, in an arroyo. The truck passed, then, on the road—a primer-blotched utility pickup with a rifle box and three heads bobbing inside. When they got close I thought I recognized the rednecks and their hats from the minimart, and I imagined I could make

out one of the hitchhikers from the road too, though I couldn't be sure. Maybe that figure was all those hitchhikers—those specters in my mind. Or maybe he was John. The truck drove on. We were invisible to the men. I didn't stay awake with Morey while he drove even though I told him I would. When I woke we were angling into the middle of the Middle West. It was dull-colored and gentle and moist, with a bleached-out sky and mouse-brown hills. Morey slept the whole next day while I drove. The car was damaged. The steering was limp, and you had to rotate the wheel double before anything moved down under. You felt impotent driving it. But if the steering was sloppy, the road was straight and blameless.

In Ohio, Morey spotted another hitchhiker and said he wanted to take him. We'd purged enough belongings in petty fights, and then the sleeping bags and tent, we had nearly a backseat.

"Are you still on that? I already said you won. You're tougher than me."

"That's not fair. You can't just walk away from this. You're trying to change the rules. Now you want to prove you're a nicer person than me."

"I am a nicer person than you. You won. That's what you won."

From far off the hitchhiker looked like someone we might have left behind days earlier in that Western stage set of other codes and creatures, in that other America, back when we were different. He wore white pants and a cowboy hat and boots, and you could see even from a long way off he had only a small duffel. In my head I put him in my drama of the sacrificed child: *The child has been left at the side of the road by his wife because this man means to harm them.*

The hitchhiker wasn't John but he could have been his twin. The resemblance was remarkable. It took me several seconds to know for sure it wasn't our John. I don't know if Morey noticed the resemblance before he stopped or after. I do think Morey wanted to hurl himself someplace empty and self-destructing, and that he wanted to take me there with him.

The man wore a triumphant smirk when he tossed the duff-



fel into the backseat and wound in his long legs after, as if he knew our story himself.

I felt fear immediately, there was something about his face. I put my story about the child in my mind, to think of something else: *The couple carefully angles the car to the shoulder to retrieve the swaddled thing. Together they gather it into an embrace only to discover it is stiff and blue—stillborn, perhaps, or smothered.*

“Where you going, sir?” asked Morey from the driver’s seat.

I glared at Morey.

“Same place as you. All the way.”

“Where would that be? It’s a long stretch here to the ocean.”

“Ocean.” The man made a mawking face at me that was mildly sexual.

“Where you coming from?” Morey asked.

“Idaho.”

“*I da’ ho, you da’ ho!*” Morey laughed. “That’s a long way.”

“Sure thing.”

“Hitchhiked the whole way?”

“Sure thing.”

“Not a lotta luggage.”

“They don’t give you much.”

“*They?*”

“Prison.”

The word sat there like bread so hard you could hurt someone with it.

“You going home then?” Morey said after a while.

“Thought I’d start someplace new.”

“I can relate to that.” Morey let in the silence again. “I think we saw you back a ways. You made awful good time, without a car. You been following us?”

“Truckers. They’ll drive you all night.” The man cackled ambiguously. He held up his thumb in a hitchhiker’s gesture, and then hugged his arms to his body. He took off his cowboy hat and put it on top of his duffel as if the bag were a fourth passenger riding along with us in our car.

Then no one had anything to say. I waited. I thought we might die. I was numb enough it would be okay. I heard my grandfather’s singing: *O fils de roi, tu es mechant. Tu as tué mon canard blanc*: Oh prince, you are wicked. You’ve killed my white duck.

"We're stopping pretty soon," I said after a longer while; minutes, maybe several, had passed. I turned to the man with a firm, pleading, expression. It was dark. "We can drop you. There's a rest station coming up, I saw a sign."

No one said anything.

"We're seeing family."

Morey laughed. "I thought we were camping tonight, weren't we, babe?"

I flashed him a glance. "No. We've got family." I looked at the hitchhiker again, who was watching out the window with his legs stretched apart. "We haven't got a tent, babes, remember? We dropped it back in the hills."

"It's warm. We still got that pepperoni and some bread. Tomatoes. A coupla blankets. What do you say?" Morey's head swung quickly toward the hitchhiker in a driver's over-the-shoulder. "You got a bedroll in there?" He gestured to the small duffel. "Or we could loan you a tarp. Start out again come morning? What's your name?"

"Sure." The man grinned at something out the car window, or maybe at just his reflection. "John," he then answered.

*John.* Another John. The coincidence meant something, Morey had to know, but he told him our names anyway.

He didn't talk to us much that evening, nor we to each other. His presence, its unspoken menace, made it easier to postpone Morey and I having to hear each other, or hear ourselves, say what couldn't be denied now: that we'd wanted to destroy each other and very nearly had, that we'd done such a good job cutting each other off at the knees each of us was just a half inch tall now. Our dialog was all in my head, deep into a fitful sleep that began too many hours before bedtime. I lay awake and tried not to think about Morey or the hitchhiker or even my story about the child. I sang to myself: *Alouette, gentile alouette. Alouette, je te plumerai. Je te plumerai le queue, je te plumerai le queue* : Quail, pretty quail. Quail, I'll pluck your feathers. I'll pluck your feathers off your neck.

I wasn't exactly asleep when I felt a firm touch on my shoulder. I had my eyes blinked open before John released it. "Pssst. Cecile," he whispered.

"What?" I whispered back. Then I said his name—John—*John.* I think I said it tenderly, maybe even intimately. All that fear, and suddenly all I had in my head was how much he

looked like the John from the strip club. He was handsome. I wondered if that John had felt something that night, in the strip joint, something like what I'd felt. I'd felt somehow more myself than ever before. Maybe he had too.

The new John was bent on his haunches with his boots on, the tarp wrapped around him. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and looked at me uncertainly. "What?" I said again. He still seemed unsure. I sat up and looked at him. His eyes darted between mine. I think I helped him make his decision in the moment our eyes locked. I thought, very carefully and clearly, *You cannot kill us, you will not kill us.*

He appeared to arrive at a decision. "I'm cold. Gimme the keys."

"What keys?"

"The car." He made a shiver gesture. "Wanna sleep in the car."

"Morey has the keys."

"Nah. He gave them to you. I saw."

"Okay." I handed them over.

*I handed them over.*

At the moment, I felt a benevolent protection from the universe. But my dream told me something else. It said John was standing over me with a knife. In the dream his eyes shifted back and forth from me to down the long highway ahead of us. I woke, my heart pounding. For the first time since Oregon I knew I wanted to survive, would sacrifice anything to survive.

Then, with my eyes barely opened, I heard Morey scream in his sleep, "*Stop! Stop!*"

I shook him awake. "What?"

He sprang up. Morey whispered, "I dreamed he had his hands around my throat. He was strangling me."

I felt alone, yet with Morey, and alive, yet close to death. Morey and I touched something there, together. We'd wanted to know what risk was, to feel intensely something more exaggerated, something maybe better, or at least more palpable, than the usual. Maybe we could find it in power over one another, maybe we could find it in pain. We found it in that moment, in unadulterated fear. It changed me further. Maybe it changed Morey.

A second later that door that had opened between us slammed shut again. I didn't need Morey to know this feeling.

Just about then we heard the Toyota screech on the pavement.

“*Sonofabitch!*” Morey bolted to his feet. There was a tawny, dawn sky behind him. He scrambled to the roadside and ran twenty-five yards one way and twenty-five the other, like a chicken.

There were only eighteen-wheelers on the dewy road, making crashing or groaning noises depending on their load. The regular relay of one truck and then, so reliably, the next, was rhythmic and constant, and you felt after a night dozing to their music they were invisible as your heartbeat, and just as much a part of you. *Dormez vous. Dormez vous*, they sang.

I thought of my story of the baby. The baby wailed, or, maybe, the baby died. Or maybe the baby cooed and gurgled and slept. All the possibilities seemed to exist at once, in a universe of pure potential. I looked down the long road and imagined I was watching the Toyota careering one way and then the next, John holding tightly to the uncertain wheel.