

# 1

Shep wondered if he would like being a fisherman. He couldn't recall ever having gone fishing, but the occasional windswept morning in the valley made the idea of life on the water seem, momentarily, both appealing and possible. He hadn't expected it to be so cold when he stepped outside, only wearing a flannel shirt with holes at the elbows that he'd closed up with safety pins. His overgrown mustache itched his nostrils. He scratched with his left hand, gripping Lionel's leash tightly in his right, because the little dog had gnawed off the loop some days before, leaving a ragged wet nub in its place. The dog pulled, requiring him to pull back every few feet as they walked to the end of the block, the wind whipping Shep's hair into his eyes.

Parkdale's wasn't open yet, so the two waited at the door. Shep tied Lionel up to the bike rack in front of the store and paced back and forth, stopping at the telephone pole at the corner, where a swath of flimsy notebook pages had been stapled from a foot off the ground up to Shep's chest level. Though the older ones had faded considerably since he'd first noticed them weeks earlier, he could still make out the faces drawn in a child's hand, some with wild scratches of hair, some stone bald, some filling the page, some just fist-sized, floating near the middle, all of them with big round jaws, tiny ears and pointed teeth, and skinny little necks protruding from the bottom. He counted thirteen missing persons. When he crouched down, he saw that there was a new one with floppy arms beneath the little neck, hanging slack, with dots drawn for buttons at the wrists.

Lionel started barking, and Shep straightened up from his crouch as the lights inside the store flickered on. Hung appeared at the door and flipped the closed sign to open.

“Don’t move,” he said to Lionel, who was still barking plaintively, his muzzle pointed up at the cloud-covered sun. “I’m gonna be right back. I’ll be back so soon you’re gonna feel foolish.”

Hung was already at his stool behind the counter, staring down at the word jumble, drinking a cup of soda with ice. It used to be Hung’s dad who always opened the store, but he’d been retired since a stroke left him unable to move the left side of his body. Now he spent his days watching game shows in the apartment upstairs, scowling lopsidedly at the TV, the volume turned up so loud you could hear the studio applause from the street below.

Shep went to the fridge at the back of the store and pulled out a Miller tallboy. When he got to the counter, without looking up from the paper, Hung handed him a cup, which Shep filled to the brim, tucking the can on a shelf by the cash register. He pulled a package of beef jerky off a hook and ripped it open with his teeth. He tore off several pieces of jerky and threw them outside, at the dog’s feet. Lionel gobbled them one by one.

“T-I-G-A-N-E-R,” Hung called out as Shep took his own seat behind the counter. “Last one. What the fuck does that spell?”

“Don’t ask me. I’m no good at puzzles. Sounds like tiger something.”

Hung pushed the paper aside in disgust. “Man, I don’t know my right from my left this morning. I had this crazy dream last night—like, I went to put on contact lenses, but I opened the case and inside were these big floppy things, like the size of pancakes, but still contact lenses, you know, all drippin’ liquid. Then I get to my job— I’m working in some kind of office— I sit down at my desk, ’bout to turn on my computer, when I see that instead of a keyboard, I got a big yellow sponge, like, in the shape of a keyboard. I was like, ‘What am I supposed to do with this shit?’ Then I woke up.

And I don't even wear contact lenses!"

"That's fucked up," Shep nodded, and topped off his beer.

"You ever have dreams like that?"

"Nah. I don't dream so much."

"They say you're dreaming the whole time you're asleep, it's just you don't remember it."

"Then I don't remember."

An old black man entered the store, wearing a khaki suit with a sweater vest underneath and walking with a shiny wooden cane. He had a small Styrofoam bowl secured over his left ear with medical tape. The man shuffled slowly down the aisle, picked up a bottle of Tabasco sauce and carried it to the counter.

"Give me a scratcher, Hung," he said, tapping the counter with two fingers.

Hung rang up the Tabasco sauce and pulled the ticket out from a locked drawer beneath the register.

"Six twenty-five," he said, dropping the sauce into a noisy plastic bag.

The man paid, then pulled a nickel out of his pocket and scratched the three silver boxes on the ticket one by one, brushing their ash-like debris onto the floor. He looked down, looked up at Hung, then quickly tucked the ticket into his right breast pocket.

"Thank you, son," he said, then took his bag and walked out, patting the right side of his chest.

"You see his ticket? Think he won something?"

"Nah, man," Hung said, "he always does that. If he had a winning ticket every time he squirreled it away like some damn priceless jewel, he wouldn't be here. He'd be living on a yacht or some shit. He probably stores them all in boxes filling up his house like on that show about hoarders, all sleeping in the hallway 'cause their bedroom's full of thirty-year-old magazines and spelling bee trophies from the fourth grade."

Shep drank the last swallow of beer and tossed the can

in the trash. "I'll be back."

He rose from his stool and nodded to Hung as he grabbed an airplane bottle of tequila from behind the counter on his way out. As he approached the door, he could see Lionel wagging his tail and shuffling back and forth on his paws. The sun was pushing its way through the clouds now.

"Ingrate," Shep said.

"What?" Hung squinted at him.

"The jumble. That's what those letters spell." He'd finally hit on it after trying out countless configurations in his head.

"Ha!" Hung said, and shook his pencil in the air.

Shep untied Lionel and turned the corner toward home. The Cowboy had arrived, and was sitting in his usual seat, a nook carved into the side of the building that served no purpose but for sitting. He was a thin man, and old, his lined face like tanned leather. He always wore the same thing: a thin, almost translucent button-down shirt, brown polyester slacks, and a ten-gallon hat pushed back on his head to reveal an inscrutable, unwavering gaze. His left hand was perched on the handle of the shopping cart that held all his belongings, loose silver and turquoise rings threatening to slide down his bony fingers. Shep didn't know where the Cowboy went at night, but most days he spent hours in that nook, alternating between reorganizing his things—several stiff wool blankets, an old transistor radio, a plastic shopping bag of unknown contents—and sitting still, staring out, speaking to no one. Hung periodically tried to offer him a cup of water or something to eat, but he always declined with a raised palm. Shep stopped for a moment. He nodded, as he always did, but the Cowboy didn't nod back.

It was early yet, but he didn't feel like going back home just to wait around, so he took the alley back to the carport shared by the four apartments that constituted his building and climbed into his fifteen-year-old Ford, lifting Lionel up onto the passenger seat. He'd intended on saving the tequila

for later, but when he sat down, the little bottle began to bother him, digging into the meat of his thigh. He pulled it out, tossed its contents down his throat and popped the empty bottle into the glove compartment, where it rattled into the others as he slammed the compartment shut. Lionel gave him a look.

“Who’re you to judge me, huh? I don’t begrudge you your vices.”

Lionel turned three times, curled up in his seat and let out a little sigh as he closed his eyes.

“You’re just full of ideas, aren’t you?”

Shep leaned his seat back and settled down to a nap, though he never sank fully into sleep, instead hovering at the lowest level of consciousness, aware only of his breath and Lionel’s, and the intermittent *coo coo-woo* of a mourning dove.

Some time later the sun shifted and the car grew toasty. Shep opened his eyes and smacked his lips, feeling clammy all over, his mouth hot and parched. Specks of lint floated through the sunbeams that cut through the windows. He looked at his watch—it was nearly eleven.

“Lionel, wake up.” He patted the dog’s back. Lionel grumbled and rolled over onto his other side.

“Do what you want.”

Shep put his seat back up and plugged the key into the ignition. To start the car, he had to first let it run for a minute or two, then rev the engine once or twice before he could pull it out of the carport, the engine, he imagined, made of hardened dust that could loosen and crumble at any time but that somehow hung together through the sheer force of his will, or the grace of God, or just somehow.

As he pulled onto the freeway, his thoughts returned to the Cowboy. It was confounding to him that the man could sit in one place for so long, day after day, looking at nothing, and yet people did it all the time, behind counters, at toll booths, front desks, everybody just sitting. He’d managed

to dodge such a fate for the most part. He'd spent eight months driving a truck in Desert Storm, but that wasn't quite the same thing; the constant threat of calamity and alien landscape had offered more than enough excitement. Most civilian jobs he'd held had kept him outdoors, from his first job detasseling corn as a twelve-year-old to his last, landscaping in Kearney—the only city within forty miles of his hometown of Harner, NE—until he couldn't do that anymore either. Now, he could fill his days as he pleased.

There was a traffic jam at the mouth of the valley, where the 101 skirted the hills. Shep turned the radio dial looking for a good song. In the summer corn fields, among all the other twelve- and thirteen-year-olds, he would tune himself in to a world of his own creation, blasting the songs he'd copied off the radio on his portable tape deck as he moved down the line, yanking the tassels off one by one, wearing thick work gloves that would be worn through by week's end. He came to associate his favorite songs, the ones he'd fast forward to get to—"Dream On, Brandy (You're a Fine Girl)," "Love Hurts," songs that had been his mother's favorites, the records he'd found amongst her things in Gran's attic—with the feeling of the sun boring through the top of his head, the smell of fresh corn, the mosquitoes buzzing, the cramps in his fingers as the days wore on, and the simple solitude of work. Every time he heard those songs, he was transported to days when he didn't have any past. He took certain songs as talismans to hold onto throughout the day, not promising success or good fortune, but reminding him, at least, that the passage of time allowed for some small threads of continuity. No luck this time, as all the stations seemed to be on a synchronized commercial break. His back ached. His knees were pulsing and restless. Lionel snoozed on the seat beside him.

After several minutes at a slow creep down the freeway, Shep came to the source of the delay. A jeep was pulled off to the side of the road with flames and black smoke climbing

up from its hood, the driver on a cell phone, pacing through the wiry brush on the other side of the guardrail. A lone firefighter climbed out of the rig that had pulled up behind the jeep, shrugging his coat on, taking his time, because the fire wasn't going anywhere. In their cars, everybody turned their heads to watch, windows rolled up and AC blasting, while the black smoke floated in clouds along the overpass.

Shep exited the freeway at Sunset and parked with a clear view into the front window of a café somewhere on the hazy barrier between Hollywood and West Hollywood. He checked his watch and scratched Lionel's neck, his coarse brown fur warmed by the sun, like Shep's own hair when he would board the school bus that would take all the kids home those corn field summers, the metal of his headset burning his neck, the tops of his ears screaming red. Once seated, he would stare drowsily out the window at the ocean of land, at one with the bumping rhythm of the dirt road.

This too gave him some measure of relief: the constancy of the sun, and the fact that it was the same sun, here as there, then as now. He checked his watch again. She was late.

A young couple on the café's patio caught his attention. They were drinking lemonade from tall, sweating glasses and chattering over each other, gesturing dramatically, laughing like kids. When the server brought their food out, they bugged their eyes out, making approving *oh boy, oh boy* faces at their plates. He wondered how they got and stayed so pleased.

Finally, she appeared on the sidewalk in the wake of a wheezing orange-and-white bus. She ran toward the front doors with her apron gripped in one hand, strings flying, her dark blonde hair tied up in a messy bun on top of her head as she hurried inside and behind the counter. The manager followed her, speaking calmly but pointedly. Shep's jaw tightened. She shook her head in apology as she tied the apron around her waist and smoothed the loose strands of hair around her face.

He should go have lunch, he thought. He could have lunch here. He could sit at the table beside the young couple, ask to hear about the specials, choose thoughtfully, tip generously. He could pull the manager aside and tell him what a fine waitress she'd been, smooth things over, help her out. She'd been late a few times lately, and he didn't want her to lose her job over it. There was nothing on earth stopping him from getting out of the car, crossing the street and pulling up a chair. He wasn't hungry yet, though. And who was to say they allowed dogs on the patio—a lot of places didn't, and it had gotten too warm out to leave him in the car.

"We're living in a dog-phobic society," he said. He paused, watching her make the rounds of the place with a pitcher of ice water.

"Who needs 'em."

No, he wasn't hungry. And he didn't like that kind of food anyway, those artfully arranged little salads and baguettes full of tooth-cracking seeds, all of it described on the menu as "artisanal" and served on rectangular slabs instead of plates, so food would probably fall off the edge and you'd get down on the ground to pick up whatever you'd dropped, then hit your head on the underside of the table with everybody looking. *No thanks*, he thought, watching the girl through the window, barely remembering to blink.

When her shift ended a few hours later, he watched her take her hair down and slip on a pair of giant tortoiseshell sunglasses. She dragged herself to the bus stop and sat down beside an old woman who was reading a paperback with a magnifying glass. The girl tucked her knees up under her chin and wrapped her arms around her ankles, looking like a little kid waiting to be picked up after school. Shep started the car. The engine sputtered for a minute before settling into a hum.