

# The Old Main Line

or

## Seize the Day!

—

Chuck Masterson

=====

4.

He pedaled hard through the rain.

1.

“Hello?”

“Hey Schultzy.”

“Hey, Graham! What’s up? You coming over?”

“Well, actually, that’s kind of what I called to ask you about. Do you. . . happen to have someplace where I could, uh, crash for like a few days?”

“Hang on, let me think. Um. . . yeah, for sure, I could put you up. Why, what’s going on?”

“My dad just kicked me out of the house.”

“What? Seriously?”

“Yep.”

“Motherfucker.”

“Yeah exactly.”

“What’d he do that for?”

“Well, you remember that time I came over in I think November? And Trenton and John were there? And some other people, ah, I forget who, I can’t remember for shit.”

“Yeah yeah, I know when you’re talking about.”

“Alright. And we just hung out until, like, three in the morn-

ing or something, sitting down in the basement and talking and shit. Well, then Trenton took me home. But after he dropped me off, I saw my dad was just standing there on the front porch, like, staring straight at me. I don't know how he noticed I wasn't in my room. But, so, I knew I was caught then, so I just walked up to the porch, and when I got to him he said [Graham put on a deep, sanctimonious voice], 'Let me see your eyes.'—I guess they must've been all bloodshot. So he went, 'I can tell you've been smoking mari-joo-wana.' And then he told me if he ever found out I'd been smoking again, he'd kick me right the fuck out. So today he finds a Coke can bowl that I left on my table, and he calls me in and tells me he's Very Disappointed and he tried to raise me to be smarter than that, and I have until tomorrow evening at seven to move out. And that's that. But actually I just want to get out, like, *now*. I don't even want to be in the same damn building with him, I just want to *leave*."

"Dude, your dad is an asshole."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Jeez. That sucks, man. So I guess you could probably use a ride, then, huh? I'm not doing anything."

"Oh, actually that'd be super awesome, thanks, man. I just got all my shit packed up, so I'm ready whenever."

"Alright, I can be there in, like, twenty minutes."

"Sweet. Thanks a million, man."

"No problem. See you soon."

"See you then."

Graham folded the phone up and dropped it in his pocket, then looked around his room for anything else to pack. There wasn't much left besides a couple posters. There hadn't been much to begin with, anyway; he'd been keeping stuff down to a minimum lately. Partly it was because he liked to imagine himself as some sort of purified, ascetic philosopher. But he knew he wasn't; so mostly it was that he knew he'd have to leave this house at some point, eventually go and become an adult, however it is that that happens, and while he was waiting, the room felt more like a guest-house than a home.

There didn't seem to be anything left to pack, but still there was some extra room in the backpack that seemed like it ought to be filled up with something. He tossed in a few ramens from the stack on his dresser. Then he realized he'd forgotten about his artist crayons in the nightstand drawer, and placed those in the backpack too. It was decently full now, so that was it, he decided, and he zipped it up and put it on, then headed to leave. Standing in the doorway, he gave the room one last cursory glance, then turned around unsentimentally and mentally burnt down the room with everything in it. He wouldn't be here again.

His dad had intentionally made himself scarce, evidently taking his mom with him wherever he'd gone. Good: none of them would have to look at each other. Graham slammed the front door behind him, disappointed when none of the panes broke, and walked down to the big stone at the end of the driveway, where he sat and waited for Schultzy. Schultzy showed up right on time, plus a few minutes or so, and had barely even gotten to a full stop before Graham piled in to his old off-white Dodge. He tossed his backpack haphazardly into the backseat and sat down. "That all you got?" asked Schultzy.

"Yep."

"Cool," he said, and cranked up the music until they got to his house.

It was a small blue house, two turns away from the main artery through the suburb, but close enough to it that there was always a low din of traffic in the air. They tramped up the porch steps and Schultzy kicked a beer can to the side. "Damn Beagle," he said. They went inside and downstairs to a little alcove by the foot of the stairs, next to the washer and dryer room, carpeted entirely with laundry. "Just move some of that shit off to the side," Schultzy said, and went off to look for something in a closet on the other side of the basement while Graham got to work. After a minute he reported, "Huh, it's not in here," and went upstairs, and when he got back down Graham had succeeded in getting the alcove down to clear concrete, and had artfully put his alarm clock on the floor in accordance with what he imagined *feng shui* might be. "I just re-

membered where I left it,” Schultzy told him, pointing at his brain with his index finger, then reached up into the rafters and pulled down a dusty futon, which he beat and kicked a couple times and then spread out on the concrete. They both looked down approvingly at the nook they’d carved out. Then Schultzy turned to Graham and said, “Cool, man. Well, I should go to bed, got to work tomorrow. Sleep tight, enjoy.”

“Couldn’t ask for finer. Peace,” Graham said, and Schultzy ambled off up the stairs.

Graham turned off the light and lay down on the futon. It was a little after one, the alarm clock said, but for the moment instead of sleeping he stared up at the pure darkness between him and the ceiling. He always treasured these minutes before sleep; this was the time when he had all his best thoughts and ideas. In this liminal period there was no immediate future to worry about—no next doorway to walk through into a new room to negotiate, no person to talk to—and the past could equally well be consigned to the realm of irrelevancy, because it had no necessary effect on someone who had no other concern besides trying to get to sleep. Graham could be alone in the universe if he wanted to, in this blackness, and as a result he could seize ideas directly from their source, wherever that might be—the past or the future, if he wanted to go there, or else the bottomless wells of imagination in the uncharted reaches of consciousness. This was his time; it was when the magic happened.

Sometimes: on particularly magical nights. But tonight he could only seem to relive standing in front of his dad, staring at his hand while it turned the Coke can over and over, listening to him saying to leave. There was a different thought somewhere around the corner, out farther into the universe, but before he could quite see what it was, he fell asleep.

## 2.

*The Neverending Story* had never seemed quite so deep to Graham as it had tonight, nor indeed to John, Beagle, or Schultzy, as they all agreed while the credits rolled and the music played. It was es-

sential to let the music play, because it was intricately interwoven with the meaning of the story. When it finished, there was a gap of contemplative silence, and then Schultzy got up and connected the sound system to his iPod on shuffle.

He flopped back down into the chair but jerked away and took in a sharp breath in pain. “Ah, damn, we need a new chair. This one’s got springs poking out of it and shit,” he said, looking back where one of them had stuck him in the back.

“Graham oughtta be able to find one easy,” said John. “He pulled those two out of thin air, just one right after the other.” There were two chairs in the basement, on which Graham and Schultzy were sitting, mismatched old recliners, one blue and one brown, flanking the couch, where John and Beagle were currently slouched back about as far as possible without actually lying down.

“Yeah, but that was just good luck,” Graham said. “Two houses, like a mile apart, and they both just happened to throw out perfectly good chairs within, like, two weeks of each other. It was a gift. From on high.”

“Well you’re also the only one getting to work by bike,” Beagle said. “You can’t see if there’s any good shit on the curbs if you’re driving. Probably hard from in a bus too,” he added with a look toward John.

“Yeah, but I’ve been biking to the sweeper shop every day since I found those chairs and I haven’t seen a single thing the whole time. And that’s been. . . shit, how long has it been? Like a year? Is that right? That can’t be right.”

“Yeah, no, it must be,” said John. “’Cause I remember when you found those, right after I moved in upstairs. And I moved in last March, a little after you did, so yeah, like a year plus a month.”

“Yeah, yeah, and you found them right before you finished that kickass picture,” Beagle said, pointing to the painting hanging behind the couch: a coyote in mid-attack, catching a rabbit, out in a hazy forest somewhere.

“Huh. Man, that was the time when shit *happened*,” John said.

“Ah, that painting hardly counts as something that happened. It didn’t turn out for shit. Though, I guess I haven’t drawn any-

thing worth showing to humans since then.” Graham was still taking stock of the year, trying to remember if there was anything worth remembering. “Where the hell did that year go?”

“Like I said. The only time when shit *happened*.”

“Hey, shit’s happened since then,” Beagle said.

“Like what?”

He chuckled. “Well, I got fired, for one.”

“Oh shit, yeah, I remember that!” Schultzy said. “Did your boss ever get you to pay for his windshield?”

“Haven’t seen a bill yet,” he said and held up crossed fingers, and they all laughed.

“Oh yeah, and I got the big-screen last fall,” Schultzy said. “That was a truly momentous occasion.”

“Damn straight,” said Beagle.

“But other than that,” Graham said, “Where did the time go?”

“There,” Schultzy said, pointing knowingly at the TV. “We’ve been right here pretty much every night. Having a good time with some good movies and some good friends.”

Graham considered this. “Huh. I guess you’re right. That’s. . . a lot of movie time.”

“Suppose it is. But you know what, I think that’s about as good as it gets, anyhow. Know what I mean?”

“Hm?”

“Well, I mean. . . like this. What else are we supposed to do? Come home every day and start working all evening on some great lifelong project? What would the point be in that? It’s not like any of us are going to get famous, or write the Great American Novel or whatever. We’re not lucky like that. Hell, I could screw around on a guitar all night every night and I’d still never get that one-in-a-million recording contract and go on tour around Europe and stuff. And then in the end I’d realize I’d spent all my time messing with my guitar and none of it just enjoying life with my friends. There’s all this pressure in society to feel like you’re *achieving* something or you’re being *productive*, and if you’re not doing that then you’re wasting your life. But once you realize that’s all an illusion, you can see that the only important thing is to just relax and have

a good time. That's what people all over the world are trying to do anyhow. No one *likes* to work, everyone just does it because they have to so at the end of the day they can come home and just chill out in peace. And I think we personally, with these movies and this chill-ass basement and all of us being here together, have pretty much achieved the ultimate in relaxation. Or at least, I can't think of any way to improve it, and if I ever do I'll buy it right away. So when you get down to it, this is our version of making it. We're living the dream. There's no . . . *higher goal* in life that we need to feel like we're not quite reaching; the only thing left to do is just have this much fun for the rest of our lives."

"Hell yeah," said Beagle. "I work hard enough during the day. This is my time to do whatever the hell I feel like. Which happens to be nothing." He symbolically sank himself back somehow even deeper into the couch cushions, staring up now at the glow-in-the-dark plastic stars scattered around the ceiling.

"Totally," said John, and tilted back too, evidently deciding Beagle had the right idea there.

Graham looked over at the three of them. Schultzy had his eyes closed and seemed to be thoroughly lost in the beat. John and Beagle looked pretty content, too. Graham stared in no particular direction for a moment, until his eyes came unfocused. Then he snapped back. "Yeah. . . I suppose so," he said at last.

### 3.

Schultzy held in a breath awhile, then let it out: "Ahhhhh," he went. "Trenton, you should come over more often. And bring more of this stuff."

"Yeah, totally, man. That sounds great. I'm all for it, yeah," Trenton said.

Beagle was sitting next to him, on the recliner. Its springs were still poking out and in the past two months no replacement had been found. "Dude, you're bad at calming down," he told Trenton. "Take a little more of this and, uh. . . call me in the morning, or something."

Trenton took the bowl and said, "Hahahahahahaha," like

a machine gun trying to laugh, but it sounded close enough. He took as directed by Beagle. Everyone was quiet for a minute while they listened to the bass wafting out of the sound system.

“Yeah, I guess I used to come over here more, didn’t I?” Trenton asked.

“Yeah, like last, no, the year before last year. Wasn’t I with you the first time you brought Graham here?” John said.

Neither one of them, it seemed to Graham, appeared to have noticed that Schultz’s comment was really just a one-off joke and didn’t need any elaboration. Sometimes conversation here didn’t seem to work quite right. But he couldn’t think of any good way to fix it. So he looked up from the floor, where he’d sat so as to let Trenton have a chair, and put in, “Yeah, I think he was, I think we were all together the first time I came here.”

“So was Will,” Beagle said, “or well, maybe not that time, I don’t know, but I remember he always used to come here with you guys.”

“Oh, shit, Willy!” Schultz said. “I forgot all about Willy! I haven’t seen that dude in, like, fucking ages. What happened to him? Did he go to college somewhere?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Graham said. “I lost touch with him mostly, after we graduated. Well, maybe a little before. He was always pretty cool. I think he went out of state somewhere, actually. Denver, maybe. I should find him sometime. I still owe him an ice cream cone.”

“Awww, an ice cream cone. That’s adorable,” Beagle said. “You were always hanging out with him.”

“Yeah, him and Jeff. Oh, and Lance. . . . Ha ha, Lance and Jeff and I were in chess club together back in like our sophomore year.”

“Ha ha, dude, you were in chess club? That’s just too priceless. Yeah, I’ve got it, I can see the whole thing. Definitely you’re wearing some real thick glasses. And you’re all hunched over the chessboard and just staring at it. And then you move something and you slap the, uh, clock thing super quick, and you’re like [Beagle pushed imaginary glasses up the bridge of his nose] *‘I believe that is checkmate.’*”

“Man, you laugh, but I could still beat all of you put together



if we got a board out. I will save the world with my chess skills one day. General Petraeus will call me for some emergency planning assistance.” Everyone laughed. Probably to cover up that they didn’t know who General Petraeus was.

Schultz sighed, “Ah, man, how did you end up someplace like chess club anyhow?”

“I guess it must’ve all been my dad. He loves chess. Used to tell me his boring chess club stories when I was a kid and he was teaching me to play. I think he believed it would make me an Upstanding Young Man. He wanted me to be one of those, and go to law school or whatever and Make the Family Proud. What the fuck.”

Trenton said, “You just gotta be your own person. You understand that, your dad just doesn’t.”

“Yeah, something like that. Well, I mean, he’s been working at the factory most of his life, so I kinda get it, you’ve got to work hard and improve yourself. But still.”

“Well, also he’s just an asshole, like you said before,” Schultz said.

“I guess there’s that too,” Graham said noncommittally, and the conversation went dangling again.

“Lance,” Schultz said eventually. “Hang on, who’s Lance? I’ve heard of him somewhere. Lance McManus? Did he come over here one time, or what?”

“Ha ha, no-o-o-o,” Trenton laughed. “Not him, not someplace like this. That dude would probably call the cops on you for jaywalking. But I dated his sister Laura for a while. A couple years back. That’s probably how you know him. I hated that fucker. Oh man, he was so awkward. I had dinner with Laura’s family one time and he just stared at me the whole time and never said a word to me. And whenever I looked his way he pretended he was looking real hard at his dinner. That was one weird-ass night. And Laura said he would ask her questions about me sometimes after we went out. He thought he was being all subtle but she could tell from miles away that he was trying to get her to think she shouldn’t be dating me. I just wanted to punch him every time I saw him. But I was nice to him for Laura. Then after she broke up with me it was

like he vanished. I think he understood.”

“Well, but he was an okay guy besides that, though,” Graham said. “We used to go to Connolly Park, with Jeff, and play Frisbee golf on that little course they have. One time we went to the corner with the tables that have chess sets built in, and Lance challenged one of the homeless guys to a game. He got his ass handed to him so bad. Jeff and I didn’t quit laughing for days. But he also got the homeless guy to tell him a bunch of stories. That was cool. That guy had one hell of an interesting life. Fucked up, but fascinating.”

Trenton said, “Ah, Jesus, I can’t believe you liked that guy. That’s the kind of fucker you stay far away from. I guess you figured that out eventually, though? I haven’t seen you with him for, uh, hell, I don’t know. . . like two years.”

“Well, *he* kinda stopped hanging around with *me*. That was my fault really, though. I got him fired.”

“What? How’d you pull that off?” Schultzy asked.

“Alright, so, we were both working at Subway for a while. And one day Lance had to go to his grandma’s birthday over in Blainesville in the evening. ‘Cause she was pretty sick and everyone pretty much knew it was gonna be her last one, and the McManuses do birthdays really big—anyhow, he couldn’t work, but he couldn’t get our boss to change his shift either, because a bunch of other people were already taking off that day. So he asked me if I could cover it for him and I said sure. And then on the day of, I went to. . . actually, I guess I came here. Yeah, and we were all watching a movie together. In fact, I don’t think we were even smoking that day, but I was just completely chilled out and into the movie. About halfway through it Lance called me, I guess because the shift had started and Sarah—that’s our boss—had called him to ask where he was. But I just turned my phone off and finished watching the movie. And then a couple hours later I realized, and I was like, ‘Oh, fuck.’ So I called him up to say I was sorry but he was just like, ‘Don’t even bother.’ I went in to work the next day, which was the day when we normally had a shift together, so Lance was there too. And I tried to explain it to Sarah that it was all my fault, but

she was so rules, rules, rules, and she told me it was nice of me to try and take the blame but it was Lance's shift in the first place and I shouldn't even have been taking it, so the decision was final. And after that Lance never really talked to me again. Neither did Jeff, really. And I guess I can't really blame them."

"Aw, man, that sucks," John said.

"Oh, hey, I remember that," Beagle said. "When Lance called you while we were here. That was. . . actually, that was hilarious. We were all chilled out as hell, just listening to some music. And then all of a sudden you're like, 'Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck!' And then you called him right there and you had to tell him, 'I'm sorry I didn't cover your shift, I was too busy watching *The Land Before Time*.' That was some top-notch comedy right there."

Graham scowled at him. "I'm really not proud of that."

Suddenly Schultzzy's face lit up like he had just discovered gravity. "Oh, I've got it!" he said. "I didn't know Lance from when you dated his sister, Trenton. He was the motherfucker in the locker next to me junior year. And one time it was just me and him there, and my pipe fell out of my backpack onto the floor, and he saw it. Stared straight at it, and that thing was obvious as hell, all psychedelic colored and covered with resin. And the next day the cops came with the dog squad and searched my locker, and they found that pipe and charged me with paraphernalia. I *knew* he would do something like that. He just had that look. And that was right before my eighteenth birthday, so if he'd been three weeks later that would've been an *adult* charge. I forgot all about that fucker, I can't believe it."

"He called the cops on you? What a bitch," Beagle said.

"Yeah, hey, good job getting him fired!" Schultzzy said. "You were the agent of karma."

Graham was still hung up on the image of Lance's face when they'd gone in to work and Sarah had told him to hand in his uniform. "Jesus, guys. I got him fired on his grandma's last birthday. She died a couple months after that. It was like dickest of dick moves I could've pulled on him. Cut him some slack, you know?"

"Alright, yeah, yeah," John said. One song finished and they lis-

tened to the next one for a while.

Trenton snorted. "You had a crush on him." Everyone laughed like tyrants watching a jester.

"I fucking did not!"

"Oh, I guess it was Jeff then." Cackles.

"No! I just happen to think it was a decent person that I screwed over!"

"What, because he tossed a Frisbee with you and got some old junkie to tell his life story? I knew the dude, intimately. You gave him exactly what he was asking for. You go around fucking other people over like that, and you eventually get something back. As far as I'm concerned, he's worthless, as a person, and he deserves anything that gets thrown at him. The whole world would be improved without him and people like him in it. That's the truth, and if you don't like it, screw off."

Graham lowered his voice to a careful growl. "So we get the truth from you once again. You know, Trenton, in all the time I've known you, I don't remember you ever once even *starting* to admit you're wrong. It's uncanny how you happen to have just never been wrong. And of course it's because you're better than everyone. 'Lance is worthless.' 'My dad can just go to Hell.' Know what? It turns out you're wrong a whole fucking lot. When Laura ditched you it wasn't because of Lance, it was because of your own fucking enormous head. She told me that personally, and I'm pretty sure I told you about it, but of course you've forgotten that now. And Lance and Jeff are both good human beings, and your dad bought you a fucking car and you maybe said thank you one time. There's more to shit than you think. What the fuck was Schultzzy even doing with his pipe at school? Schultzzy, hadn't your mom *just* finished taking you to Narconon practically *every day*, and wasn't she pleading for you to get clean at least long enough to get a decent job? Probably so you could finally move the hell out of her house. Who deserved what here? Who was the real motherfucker?"

"Where the hell did this come from?" Schultzzy asked, his eyebrows raised high.

"From you!" Graham shouted. "From all of you! Who in this

room has ever been wrong? Who's not the best person in their own sad pathetic little world?"

"I'm wrong a bunch," John muttered inconsequentially.

Schultz eyed Graham. "You've been saving this up for a while, haven't you? This is too cute. The big righteous fuck you speech to everyone in the room, including the guy who's giving you a rent-free bed out of the kindness of his heart. What crawled up your ass and how long has it been dead in there?"

"Yes, the fuck you! You could all stand to hear it for once!"

"*Fuck you! You could all stand to hear it!*" Schultz said in a monkey voice. Everyone laughed at Graham. He opened his mouth but instead of words just let out a sort of manifestation of pure frustration and loathing: "Ngraurgkhhhh!" And he got up and pounded up the basement stairs, trying to collapse each one under his feet as he went.

There was a moment of tension in the basement. Then Schultz laughed. Trenton joined in, then Beagle, then John. It rolled up from the basement like distant thunder awhile. Graham was rummaging through Schultz's toolbox, which he'd left in the middle of the living room floor again.

The thunder died down. Graham found the big metal mallet. He walked silently to the stairwell and sat a few stairs down from the top, listening through the rectangular opening in the wall between the stairwell and the room.

Schultz sighed. "Ahhh. What a bitch." He chuckled again and it spread immediately to everyone else.

Graham screamed and leapt through the opening in the wall to land on the floor where he'd been sitting. He took the mallet—it felt too light—and smashed it into the TV screen with the speed of wrath, busted it instantly to shards. He was about to look for something else to wreck but Schultz had stood up and yelled, "*What the fuck!*" and was two steps away from throttling him.

Schultz was a big man. Graham was wiry and breakable. He turned in an instant and bolted up the stairs, with Schultz doing his damndest to pull his heels out from under him. Graham dashed through the living room and snatched up his backpack

from the couch there without breaking stride, and had it on his back by the time he got to the door to the garage. He vaulted over Schultzzy's car and got to his own bike, and thanks to whoever had left the garage door open, he was riding it off the driveway, pedaling with legs circulating pure adrenaline, before Schultzzy got around to the other side of the car. He saw Schultzzy watching him take a left at the end of the street, then heading into the garage to start the car and come after him.

Graham quickly doubled back so Schultzzy would be heading the wrong way, and made for the nearest side street, which led to a labyrinthine subdivision where he knew he could hide himself. He looked back as he whipped around the right turn, nearly horizontal on the bike, and saw Schultzzy's headlights glaring at him through the afternoon rain, which caused him to dimly register for the first time that it was raining, and afternoon. Schultzzy had figured that out far too quick. Within seconds Graham came to an intersection and shot off left. There was a long straightaway and by the time he got near the end of it, Schultzzy had spotted him and was gunning up behind him, clearly planning to ram him from behind, but Graham managed to turn at the T-junction soon enough, and found another intersection right away, turning off down a street that had a blind curve he could hide behind for a moment. Impossibly soon, Schultzzy's headlights appeared behind him again, and he made another desperate pair of turns. At this point he rode off the edge of his mental map; now he would have to just hope that there would be enough turns ahead of him to hide behind. Schultzzy's headlights appeared again. He made it to another T-junction while Schultzzy was still a hundred feet behind, and chose left because it took him plummeting down a steep hill that would give him precious speed. The houses here were no longer suburban. This was a half-rural neighborhood of forested lawns somewhere between the suburb and the country. The wind riffled Graham's hair as he descended at a speed that would almost definitely kill him if he fell. There were no intersections in sight. Schultzzy's headlights had appeared at the T-junction. Graham decided to just enjoy this one last descent while he could.

There was a trail. Made of gravel and grass. There was a fence around it and thick yellow posts thoroughly barring cars from entering. It crossed the road and plunged between the houses on either side into the forest behind them. No better thing, Graham thought, could possibly have appeared at this moment, and he slammed on his brakes and skidded into a right turn onto the gravel, just as Schultzy caught up with him and stopped his car at the yellow posts. He ran after Graham, but Graham's legs were still as good as steam pistons and carried him out of reach.

Schultzy got back in his car. He would find the next intersecting street and wait for Graham there. So Graham turned around, cautiously, and crossed back over the empty road and took off that way. It didn't matter that he was going the opposite of his original direction, since he didn't know which direction either was. And even if he did know, he thought hazily, it still wouldn't matter, because he had nowhere to go anymore. Any direction was as good as any other. Strictly speaking, his speed didn't matter either, but still he put his whole spirit into it.

## 5.

The trail was long and straight. It was impossible for Graham to tell how long he'd been biking down it, because he had no watch and the rainclouds kept the day at a constant dim light regardless of the time. Eventually it would get dark but it hadn't yet.

After some amount of time, Graham found it possible to drop out of the trance he was in, where the only things in the world were the pedals, the handlebars, the next ten feet of path, and him. As he regained the ability to think, the first thing he thought was that it was strange that there were no crossroads here: he hadn't seen one since turning onto the trail. There were also, come to think of it, no slopes either up or down, a change from every other bike ride he'd taken in the riverside hills of the city. He'd left the city almost before he got on the trail, he knew, but that left him no closer to knowing where he was now. The farther away the better, though, he decided, and kept going.

He looked up for the first time. The gravel hadn't changed

since he started; it would be fine to let it go by unwatched beneath him for a moment. Everything around him was trees. A tunnel of them closed in over his head, mostly hiding the dim sky. He tried to see further into the forest, but in this light he could only see a few trees deep. For a couple feet to either side of the trail there was grass. As he pushed on, the individual trees swapped out, but the tunnel of them stayed the same, like water in a wave.

When a crossroad finally appeared, he didn't notice until he had nearly crossed it. He ground to a halt; stillness now felt foreign to him, like walking on the moon. Yellow woodburnt letters on a brown post said, ZELLSBURG. There was also a sign that said this trail had been made from an abandoned railway line thirty years ago, which explained the flatness, and it had a list of the mileages to the next few towns, as well as the mileage back to the city. He hadn't bothered to guess how far he might have come since leaving, but if he had, he definitely wouldn't have dared to guess this far. To get to Zellsburg from this crossroads, which was actually a one-mile trip, there was a two-lane road called Route K that hadn't been paved for maybe a decade, and sloped up sharply from the crossroads.

Standing still astride the bike, Graham suddenly noticed that he was deeply hungry. He let go of the brakes, shifted down, and powered up the first hill toward the town. It was starting to get dark now. The road turned out to be a roller coaster, and exasperated Graham right away, but the mile went by mercifully fast and there he was looking at Zellsburg. It was a name he'd only heard when the weatherman described storms that had finished what they were doing in the city and were now moving on to less important things. Next he would mention a couple more towns after Zellsburg, the same ones from the sign, and then the business part of the storm would be too far away to really matter. Zellsburg was nestled in a bowl in the hills, with Route K skirting around a little lower than the rim, and it consisted of a cluster of houses that he could see all at once from his vantage point, each one two stories high and shining warm yellow light out the living room windows. All around the town was forest, invisible except in silhouette



against the sky. One of the four streets going down from Route K into town was a business street, which meant a gas station, a grocery store, and a diner the size of a doublewide mobile home. Graham turned onto the business street and parked his bike in front of the grocery store.

Inside, he silently picked up a loaf of bread and a plastic pack of cold cuts and brought them to the one register that still had a cashier at it at this time of the evening. She was maybe seventeen, with CRYSTAL on her nametag, and looked at Graham, it seemed, with a certain wariness. He took a moment to remember how to smile, then smiled at her to ease the tension, and she smiled back. The total came to \$3.78, and Graham then discovered that he'd left his wallet at Schultzy's house. He smacked his forehead to illustrate his featherbrainedness and said, "Ahhh. Dang. Well, I'll go put these back." For a moment he considered sticking them in his backpack, but he did put them back where he'd found them, and then he walked out, waving goodbye to Crystal.

He stood by his bike looking at the nearly-night sky and felt a bit contemplative, as though if he stood there long enough, he could speak a wise new adage about the ways of the world. But before that inspiration could strike him, a different one did: that there was a dumpster behind the grocery store. He hadn't dove a dumpster for years, but one never forgets, so he made himself as inconspicuous as possible and walked around back. It was gated in an enclosure, which he slipped into quietly. He opened the lid and hopped in, trying to stay on top of crates and cardboard boxes in order to keep his shoes out of the two inches of rainwater that had pooled in the bottom. There on top were three loaves of bread. There were no cold cuts, but there was a raw chicken. More usefully, since Graham had no way to cook the chicken, there were a half dozen slightly bruised apples, two bags of salad greens, three miscellaneous canned soups, and a six-pack of yogurt cups. He dropped it all in his backpack, closed the lid silently once he was on the ground, and left the enclosure, feeling giddy. He got on his bike and turned back down the hill to the trail.

He nearly missed the trail, but saw it in time to turn. In the

entire ride back there he had seen two cars, but it still somehow seemed better to bike out of view of the street. Once he'd gotten a little ways into the forest, he sat down on the gravel in the middle of the trail and ate a few slices of bread and an apple, then used the can opener on his pocket knife to open a can of cream of asparagus soup and drink it cold. He chased that with another apple and wished he could punctuate the end of the meal with a belch, but none came. And then he stopped being able to ignore the fact that it was now night, he was utterly exhausted, and there was nowhere to sleep.

He thought about sleeping right there on the gravel, where it was less wet than in the grass on the margins of the trail. He even lay down to test it out, but it proved to be more uncomfortable than any other surface he could ever remember lying on, so he stood up and mounted the bike again and rode on. As during the day, nothing continued to present itself along the trail, and Graham started concluding that he would have to bike all night. But then the path went over a wooden bridge. He stopped on the middle and looked down: there was a creek about twenty feet below, sounding slightly engorged from the day's persistent drizzle. He rode to the end of it and got off the bike and climbed down next to the bridge. Underneath it there was a flat ledge of dirt, retained by a wooden frame, with about three feet of clearance beneath the bottom of the bridge.

He opened his backpack and looked through what he had in it besides the food. The last time he'd used it was to get to the other side of town to the art supply store a month and a half ago, on a cool day when spring was still refusing to cede to summer. So there was a button-down shirt he'd taken off once his blood had gotten pumping fast enough that he was warm without it; also a half-drained bottle of water; also a receipt. And there was his flashlight, which he'd left in there months before and forgotten about. He put on the shirt but saved the bottle of water for later; he shone the flashlight on the creek, but it was a lousy flashlight and didn't illuminate that far. He cleared a layer of damp leaves off the flat spot, swatted around aimlessly to destroy any spider webs that might be

there, and lay down on the dirt with his backpack for a pillow.

It was pretty uncomfortable, really, but he kept his eyes steadfastly closed and listened to the water. It carried the contents of the day through his mind and he watched them drift by, once, twice, three times.

Something called out in the forest. Graham's eyes snapped open, but all he could see was the planks of the underside of the bridge. It called again: a coyote howling, definitely. Nothing else sounded like that. Another one howled from the forest on the other side of the trail, moaning high and long. Now a whole chorus of them started howling all at once, from every point of the compass; it was a sound Graham could almost see, bouncing through the trees, filling up the forest, stealing under the bridge to greet him. The coyotes were standing on knobs jutting out from the sides of the hills, all looking him in the eyes, expressions on their faces of understanding their world down to the last rock, knowing they were masters of their domain. It was a sort of a smile. They looked up into the black and let out more howls fueled by the force of their lives. And then they fell silent and ran off to continue the night. Graham couldn't remember when he had ever felt so alive.

## 6.

He woke up to an insistent pain in his back that was making inroads to his neck and legs and the rest of his body. His toes were numb and his clothes were wet but he made up his mind to ignore these vagaries of the world and roll out from under the bridge. It would've been fun if a pedestrian had been walking over at that exact moment so he could be a troll, but alas, he emerged into the upper world unseen.

The sun was still too close to the horizon to be seen through all the trees, but the clouds had burnt off overnight and it was going to be a brilliant day. He ate three yogurts and a sandwich piled up with lettuce and spinach to the point of losing its stability.

He decided to take the luxury of standing on the bridge and watching the creek flow by underneath him while figuring out what he should do next. Obviously he could never go back to

Schultzzy's house. Maybe he could go to his dad's house. But that would feel like a step in the wrong direction in his life. That house was a bygone phase. Besides that, he had never apologized to his dad for anything. He didn't deserve the place. A few other options presented themselves: Grandma's house, his cousin Jessica's house, Will's house. But they all wouldn't work for one reason or another. Some flimsy reason. What it really came down to was that they didn't feel right when he considered them.

He looked around at the trees, casting mile-long shadows in the horizontal sunbeams, each leaf delineated with razor clarity at this hour. They were swaying slowly in a sleepy breeze. Underneath, the creek was politely refusing to take any rests, diamond clear over its bed of pebbles so far below. The noise of its flowing blended with the rustle of the trees in the breeze to create a new, indivisible noise, like primary colors mixed together. Now that he could see all this, he realized it was the most beautiful thing he'd seen in years. Maybe something he remembered in the bright but distant colors of childhood could equal it, but he couldn't think what that might be, and anyhow here was this right now. So this was why none of those houses would quite do. "This," he said. "This feels right." He took a deep drink of cold water from the bottle in his backpack, walked to his bike, and started riding, same way as yesterday.

Since the creek was the levellest thing around, snaking around the bottoms of the tall, steep hills on either side of the trail, the train track had followed it for quite a while, and the trail now crossed the same creek's meanders on bridge after bridge. A few bridges into the morning, the sun finally broke free into the canopy of the forest and Graham soaked in the new light. It was a while before he thought about anything besides just this. He passed through a tumbledown series of houses that was probably once a corner of a modestly prosperous rail town. Nowadays there were chickens pecking carefree through the yards and a collection of vintage signs hung on one of the mobile homes. Dogs worked up enough morning energy to bark at him a couple times, then forgot about him. An intersection appeared and near it was a little gazebo with

a hand water pump sticking out of the ground next to it, so Graham filled up his bottle, drained most of it, then filled it again. An old blue pickup went by and the man inside it waved friendly, and Graham waved back.

With no reason not to, he took a little excursion around the hamlet. There were two streets—the main thoroughfare that crossed the trail and led out of town, and another parallel one made out of gravel and connected to the thoroughfare at either end—and no stores; the people here must have to drive to someplace like Zellsburg for groceries. A couple of the houses had porches, and on one of the porches an old man was sitting holding a mug. “Where ya headed?” he called out, waving.

Graham stopped the bike. “Oh, I’m not really sure yet. I guess I’ll just see where I end up.”

“That’s a new one. Most people just say ‘Adamant’ or ‘Churchmont’. You’re comin’ outta the city, I guess?”

“Yeah, but I think I’ll stay out here for a while. I don’t really see any reason to head back too soon.”

“Well, it is pretty nice out here, that’s for sure. I’d say there’s no finer place in the world to sit on the porch and have a cup of coffee in the morning.”

“Yeah. But mainly I just can’t face the thought of going back to town. Nothing for me there.”

“Mm, let me guess—your sweetheart ran off with another fella?”

“Nah, it’s just. . . that place was killing me.”

“Ah, alright. Well, you’re in the right place to take a rest from it, I suppose. Say, can I get you an apple?”

“Oh, I’ve got a few already. Thanks, though. Thanks.” Graham put his foot up on the pedal to go.

“Alright, well, take care. Have a good trip!”

“Will do!” Graham said as he started pedaling away. He reached the far end of the hamlet and looped back around to the trail; it couldn’t have taken more than three minutes, including the conversation. As he got back into stride going through the forest, his own words started echoing around his head. “That place was kill-

ing me.” The more he thought about it, the truer it seemed to become. The pot didn’t matter, or even anyone’s self-importance. It was that there was absolutely no spirit, no life or future, in anyone in the house. It was a dead place.

The creek rejoined the trail; apparently it had taken a broad loop around the little town. Very soon he was back out of sight of any buildings or anything besides the timeless forest and creek. Graham decided it must be pretty close to lunchtime by now. He passed over one more bridge, and then at the next one he stopped to have a bite. The creek was no longer in a deep gorge; now it was running right there alongside the trail, a dozen or so yards away. He walked through the forest over to its banks, and from there he could see a big, flat, dark gray rock in the middle of the stream. There could be no doubt that he needed to sit there for lunch, surrounded by the water, watching it come to the front of the boulder and gently split, to close up just behind him. There was no path of rocks leading to it and it was much too far to jump, so he took off his shoes and waded over the rocky creekbed. By the time he got to the rock his shorts were underwater nearly to the waistline, and he had to hoist himself up with his arms. But it was the perfect seat, as he’d known. He set his backpack down next to him and got out a can of beef stew and ate it with lots of bread, followed by some yogurt cups. He dropped the garbage in the backpack and threw it back to shore, where it landed in a heap on the stones lining the bank, and he leaned back on his elbows with one foot in the water and just looked. For a moment he thought of the rock as a throne, but that didn’t seem right; he wasn’t the king of anything here—he was only a visiting traveler for now. It wasn’t quite a traveler’s saddle either, though, and finally he decided it was a rock, in a creek, in the woods.

Nothing was moving out there in the forest, or at least nothing Graham could see, besides the branches in the wind and the water flowing toward him around the bend in the creek. There were birds chirping and sometimes one of them would move invisibly and start chirping from somewhere else. But not seeing anything in the forest didn’t bother him. He could feel it okay. And when he

looked down below the surface of the water, schools of minnows came by now and then.

Something gray moved on the shore in the very corner of his eye. He turned his head: it was a rabbit, come down out of the woods to dine on the greens growing along the bank upstream a ways, on the side opposite the trail. Graham smiled: it was lunchtime for the rabbit, too. He made sure not to move a muscle except for his head while he tracked its progressive meal down the bank, finishing right across from him, nibbling silently away.

Suddenly he heard a coyote, howling loud and high. It took him a few seconds to realize he was only remembering it, it seemed so clear. Involuntarily he had stiffened and tried to look in the direction of the coyote's calls, which seemed to be no direction, or every direction at once, and the rabbit noticed him moving, cocking its head in alarm, but then cautiously returned to its grazing.

"Of course a coyote wouldn't be howling like that in the middle of the day," he thought. "But it felt like it could've been *right here*, on this rock with me." He closed his eyes. There it was. Walking down out of the forest toward the creek. It stopped at the edge of the water and took a drink. Graham could see every hair of its rusted gray coat; he could taste the water it was drinking; he could feel the muscles moving in its muzzle and its tail switching back and forth. The coyote finished drinking and looked up straight at him, and there was an entire conversation in that glance. Then it turned around and walked back toward the forest—the creekbank almost seemed to be glowing vaguely in its wake. He opened his eyes. The rabbit was gone: the coyote had scared it off. Without a doubt.

Then it hit him.

He took off his shirt and tossed it over next to his backpack, then jumped into the creek unhesitatingly and swam over to where the coyote had been. The rocks there were all different colors—some black, some white, some red, some yellow. He loaded his pockets down with some of every different kind he could find and then swam heavily back to his rock and dumped them onto it in a pile. Scratching them against his rock, he tested each one

to see if it would make a mark, and threw all the ones that didn't back into the water. He was left with a palette of all the colors he needed, and got to work straightaway. Working with a rock in his right hand and both feet on the canvas, he finally started drawing the right version of that failed painting that had hung on the wall back in the place he'd left, the picture he'd imagined but never really *seen* until today, the coyote catching the rabbit. There was no way to erase with the rocks, but it didn't matter because no mark went astray. He could feel every muscle as he chalked it onto the rock, and even the ones that were invisible in the drawing. He worked slowly and carefully but with complete absorption and covered the whole rock with color, down to the surface of the water. As he drew, the sun went steadily down, and by the time he was finishing, he could barely see the drawing, but he knew it well enough to make up for that. When he put on the last stroke, it was so dark that he could only get a good look at the whole thing if he stood in just the right corner, out of the way of all the last rays of sun still reaching it, and even then he could only see it for a minute or so before that residual light got swallowed up by the shadows of the trees. But in that time he could see that it was exactly how it was supposed to be; the smiling coyote and the rabbit were there on the rock with him. He took all the rocks, some of them worn down to nubs, and tossed them into the creek, watching the splashes break apart the shadows on the surface, and then he jumped in himself and swam back to shore.

Shivering in the night air, he found his backpack and shirt and shoes and navigated back to the trail. He sat down in the grass next to his bike and opened the last can of soup. The rock was invisible from the trail, he thought as he ate; no one would ever see the drawing. It would probably vanish within a few rainfalls; it would definitely be gone the next time this creek flooded. But he never considered drawing some kind of sign or making an arrow out of sticks to point people to it. The rock belonged to the coyote and the rabbit, and it didn't matter if anyone ever admired it. In fact, even he would never see it again: he packed up his backpack and got on his bike again and rode down the trail a ways further, barely



able to see his path ahead, staying on track only thanks to how straight it was. There wasn't another bridge to sleep under, but he didn't need one, because tonight the grass was dry and the night sky was perfectly clear, so clear he could see stars he'd never seen back in the city. So after a while he stopped nowhere in particular, parked the bike, and lay down on the grass with his backpack as a pillow again, looking straight up into the sky. He fell asleep within minutes.

Some time later, he woke up to the sounds of coyote howls again, real ones, from all directions. The moon had risen into the corridor of sky above the trail. He smiled. Maybe coyotes really did howl at the moon, or maybe they didn't. But the moon shining on them was shining on the coyote on the rock, and tonight all these coyotes, and Graham too, had come alive.