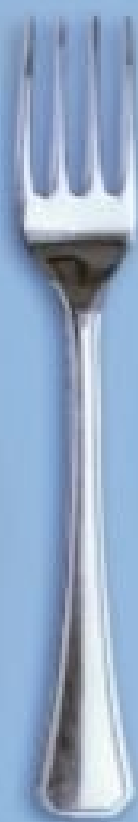


"A moving story of rebellion, lost love, criminal daring, and restless searching."

—LEONARD GARDNER, author of *Jut City*

# CURES FOR HUNGER



*Deni Y. Béchar*

COMMONWEALTH WRITERS' PRIZE-WINNING  
AUTHOR OF *Vandal Love*



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CURES *for* HUNGER

A MEMOIR

*Deni Y. Béchar*





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Also by Deni Y. Béchar

Vandal Love

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Because of our wisdom,  
we will travel far  
for love.

All movement is a sign  
of thirst.

Most speaking really says,  
"I am hungry to know you."

Every desire of your body is holy;

every desire of your body is  
holy.

Hafiz (trans. Ladinsky)

But he who is outside of society, whether unsociable  
or self-sufficient, is either a god or a beast.

Aristotle, Politics



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# PROLOGUE

My father died in a house empty but for a single chair. I never saw the property. I was told that it was heavily wooded, on the outskirts of Vancouver, and that a blanket of pine needles covered his car.

Two weeks before Christmas 1994, he'd stopped answering his phone. I was on the East Coast, so when I didn't hear from him by New Year's, I called the only one of his friends whose number I had. She didn't know where he was staying but offered to track him down. We agreed that the police shouldn't be notified; he'd had too many run-ins with them. A day later, she found his house.

I'd just turned twenty and was attending college in Vermont. A week before the second semester of my sophomore year, a police officer called with the coroner's report and told me that my father had taken his own life around December 16, a date that couldn't be confirmed since it was winter and the power had been cut off. His car had been repossessed with what little he'd owned inside, and the public accountant had put his remaining cash toward thousands in back taxes.

But for a few phone calls, the death passed uneventfully, a quiet ending to a life that had spanned so much of North America, a childhood on the Saint Lawrence in Gaspésie, and a poetry of names in his twenties: Montreal, the Yukon, Alaska, Montana, Las Vegas, Tijuana; Miami, Los Angeles.

Though I considered crossing the continent for his cremation, I was too broke. I might have gone in the spirit of his travels, bused or hitchhiked in a penniless homage, but I was unwilling to leave college. I'd fought for so long to be away from him that not even his death could bring me back.

And yet I hardly seemed to inhabit my rented room. I spoke to no one. I didn't see the forested road along which I walked to class, or the words scattered over the pages.

Often that winter I sat and stared at a paper on which I had printed three names.

Yvonne: the mother he hadn't seen since 1967; the grandmother I had never met.

Matane: the town in Quebec where he believed she and his siblings still lived.

Edwin: the name by which they'd known him.

In our last telephone conversation, he'd told me these three names. I'd grown up calling him André, and as for his family, they didn't know I existed.

I considered the names like keys to his past: the landscape of his youth, the face he'd worn as a boy. I'd never seen a photo of him from before he met my mother. Through his family, would I be able to make sense of the man whose reckless passions had shaped my life?

When finally I made the trip north to the village where he grew up, I found myself repeating the name they knew him by, as if preparing to tell them about a different father. His story belonged to me now, and in its telling he would return.

to those who had lost him.

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# part I

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# DAREDEVILS AND INVISIBLE FRIENDS

Racing trains was one of my favorite adventures. This was what we were doing on the day I first considered that my father might have problems with the law.

“Forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine!”

My brother and I practiced counting as my father kept up with the train.

“I’ll push harder,” he shouted. He thrust his bearded chin forward and bugged out his eyes and jammed the accelerator to the floor. His green truck heaved along the road, outstripping the train whose tracks, just below the line of trees, skirted the incline.

Almost instantly we left the red engine behind. He swerved past the few cars we came up on with shouts of “Old goat!” The road straightened and leveled with the tracks, and he shifted gears and kept accelerating, though the train was far behind. Then he braked, holding my brother and me in place with his right arm, the air forced from my lungs as he spun the wheel with his free hand. We pulled onto the crossing, though the warning lights on both posts flashed and bells rang.

With the truck straddling the tracks, he switched the motor off. He relaxed in his seat, looking out the passenger window, straight along the railroad.

As if on a TV screen, the train appeared in the distance, plummeting toward us. The engine broke from the shadow of the trees. Sunlight struck its red paint, and my brother and I began to scream.

My father turned the ignition.

“Oh no! It’s not starting!” He was twisting the key but didn’t give the engine gas. We knew the ritual and shouted, “Give it gas!”

He gave it gas and the motor fired. The truck shook but didn’t move. The train engine was sounding its horn, filling up the tracks, its two dark, narrow windows glaring down at us.

The truck’s wheels screeched, and we lurched and shot onto the road.

The train rushed past behind us, its iron wheels thudding over the crossing.

“That was a close call!” my father shouted and laughed like a pirate. But the color had drained from my brother’s face. He turned to me, his eyes round as if to make me see just how close we’d come to being crushed. “We almost died,” he said and swallowed hard.

I looked from his pale expression to my father, whose wild bellowing filled the cab. My fear had passed, and the air I drew into my lungs felt more alive, charged as if with a sudden, mysterious joy. I couldn’t help but laugh with him.

Our yellow farmhouse faced the narrow road that ran the center of the valley. An apple tree and a row of blueberry bushes separated our back porch from dam fields, and the only neighbor my age was Ian, a dirty-faced farm boy with

mentally handicapped older sister—surely the victim of malnutrition, I imagine given that my mother had explained how junk food destroyed the brain. Though I spent many afternoons with Ian, I never learned his sister's name. I simply thought of her as Ten Speed, because she raced up and down the road all day on what he referred to as "the ten speed." She had wide-set eyes and was always listening to a bulky black tape player clipped to her belt, its headphones holding her mess of brown curls in place.

Pine forest topped the mountains, large trees distinct like spurs against the sky in the hour before sunset. Many of the fields around our house grew Christmas trees, hundreds of neat rows of the pine, fir, and spruce that my father sold each December.

By the time we arrived home, he'd convinced my brother and me to keep our adventure between the three of us. His joyful mood had ended as soon as we pulled into the driveway, and he said he had to check the trees, something to do with an order for spruce. We were to go inside, but the thrill of train racing hadn't worn off, and I couldn't bear the thought of staying in the house. I begged to tag along, and he hesitated, then said, "Okay. Come on."

As the two of us walked the rows, I asked him to tell a story. He stared ahead, taking slow, deep breaths between his parted lips, and he stepped evenly, lightly over the wet, tufted earth that kept my attention. I had a specific story in mind. When I was younger, my mother had told me I'd someday grow facial hair, and I'd pictured myself, my face hidden in a dark, stinky beard as I showed up to class and sat in the back, terrifying the other kids. I cried, and my father laughed at me. I was so embarrassed and angry that he told a story about a fat bearded woman he'd lived with before my mother. She sat on him so he couldn't leave, and he wiggled from beneath her butt and ran away because he didn't want children with beards.

He stayed silent now, narrowing his eyes the way his dogs did when they wanted to run after something. He kept six German shepherds in a pen, and whenever he let them out, they sniffed the air and gazed into the distance, the wind ruffling their fur, and then they raced away so suddenly that I felt they were the happiest animals on earth.

But he just walked, and I followed him over the road to the Christmas tree field on the other side. We stepped over sagging barbed wire and crossed a stream on a plank nailed with asphalt shingles for grip. I lingered to watch for trout in the dark pools beneath overhanging trees, but he kept on, and I ran to catch up.

"Tell me the story again," I said and reached for his hand. His fingers closed slightly, and he glanced down.

"Which one?" He'd been like this more and more—at first normal, making jokes, doing something fun and crazy, laughing wildly; then, a little later, silent, staring off.

"About the bearded woman," I said. I loved replaying the stories he told and didn't feel satisfied until I could see each detail, so I asked why he'd lived with her and what kind of woman she was. He nodded but didn't tell it at all. He just said, "You're lucky. If she'd been your mother, you'd have been born with a beard."

We came to where the fields gave way to tall tangled grass and huge weeds and a forest. ~~The mountain rose steeply above us, and we turned and walked along its base, the rows of Christmas trees running on at our sides. With each few steps another long, thin corridor appeared, descending out of sight.~~

Where the trees ended, there was a shallow, overgrown ditch separating the neighbor's blueberry farm from our land. The air smelled bad, like an alley trash can in the city, behind one of my father's stores.

"He got some bears. Let's have a look," he said and told me that our neighbor had set up bear traps. He waded into the yellow grass, crushing a path I followed. I pushed weeds aside and stretched my neck to see ahead. He'd often warned me to stay away from bears and their cubs, and he'd made me promise that if any came along when I went fishing alone, I'd get on my bike and hurry home. I'd seen them once, four dark spots near some distant trees, and I'd pedaled as fast as I could over the rutted dirt road, my fishing rod pinned to my handlebars. I felt a little nervous now, the stench of rotten meat stronger, but he was there between me and the bears, and I wanted to show him that this was no big deal.

"Look." He stepped to the side and motioned me forward.

The dense grass came up past my elbows, and I walked ahead, my heart beating faster. Two large dark shapes lay on the earth as if crushed into it, their legs twisted awkwardly, one haggard carcass just before me, its jaws open, eye sockets hollow.

"You're not afraid?" he asked as I stood, measuring my breath, studying the second bear, sprawled on its side, a naked leg bone raised stiffly, claws struck into the rank air.

"No," I said. The bears were dead, and this wasn't a big deal, after all. I made myself go closer to look at the fanged, gaping jaws, the rotting fur like torn carpeting over the ribs. The smell made it hard to breathe, but I took another step.

He turned and said, "Let's go."

"I want to look at them."

He chuckled proudly. "Come on. You've seen enough."

I crouched. Two long curved teeth protruded from the top and bottom jaws. A few weeks earlier, in class, I'd read a story in my fourth-grade primer about the loup-garou, the werewolf. Because my classes were in French, we often read folktales from Quebec, but this one was my favorite. I'd tried to imagine the werewolf's mouth, its sharp teeth, and how my jaw would feel growing fangs as I stared at the full moon. I'd turned in my chair and made bug eyes and growled at the girl behind me, and she'd called out to the teacher, who'd threatened to send me to the principal's office as usual.

My father started walking, and I spun and jogged after him, through the crushed grass. As I followed him back across the rows, I told him the story, feeling a little breathless at the thought that what I'd just seen might not really be bears.

"There's this hunter who likes to hunt more than he likes to be in the village. He hunts all day long and he sleeps in his cabin, and he almost never goes home or talks to anyone. Then, one night, when it's the full moon, his uncles and cousins

visit his cabin, but it's empty. They find clothes covered with animal hair, and there are huge wolf tracks in the snow."

Just describing this gave me goose bumps, and I rubbed my arms, picturing myself coming to the door and pushing it open and seeing my clothes on the floor covered in black hair.

"I heard that a lot when I was a boy," he told me, his eyes serious, maybe a little worried.

I stared up at him, trying to match his pace. What would he look like as a loup-garou? His beard would spread over his entire face and neck and arms, and I pictured him standing at the edge of the forest beneath the mountain, dressed in torn fur, the bear skull on his head as he stared out at the valley through the ragged jaws. I knew I was seeing this wrong, that this wasn't like a werewolf at all, but my brain always played tricks on me. I'd look at something and minutes later I'd picture strange things, as if from a dream, and then I'd no longer be sure of what I'd really seen. I glanced up again. I'd expected him to say something about the story or the dead bears, but he was silent, eyes narrowed.

We made our way back toward the farm, past a few sheds that smelled of wet earth, and he stopped to look inside, as if he'd forgotten something.

"See," he said quietly. "Each year the sheds are smaller. They rot into the ground. The valley's moisture eats up the wood."

He spoke as if he'd already forgotten the bears, and he sighed, looking back at the rows. I couldn't remember him ever acting like this. He turned in a circle, as if to do something, glancing slowly here and there. But then he moved on, and I hurried after until we came to the ditch before the road and walked along it and crossed over a large culvert.

As we followed the asphalt, I heard the low whistle of a bicycle chain against its gears, and Ten Speed shot past with a sound like someone snapping a wet towel. Briefly, shouting voices blared from her headphones. I'd asked Ian about this, and he'd said that she listened to radio shows. We'd once found her sleeping in the hay of the barn, curled up, the voices clamoring from her frizzy hair. Then her eyelids popped open on large, dark, terrified pupils, and she sprinted past us, staying crouched low, and went down the ladder and out the door.

My father glanced behind us. A white car had appeared in the distance, and he stared, then turned and kept walking, looking straight ahead. He reached out and told me to hold his hand.

The car pulled next to us, and the darkening sky warped in the window that descended on two clean-shaven men. The driver, with eyes as blue as my mother's, said, "Excuse me. Can you tell us where André Béchard lives?"

My father squeezed my hand. He tilted his head to the side and looked at the man as if he didn't understand. Then he scrunched up his face.

"Who?" he said in a loud, ridiculous voice.

"André Béchard. Do you—"

"Oh, 'ey, dat guy. Yeah, I see 'im. 'E drive a big blue truck and 'e out drivin' in de city. Oh yeah, 'e out in de city. Dat's right."

The men stared as he gesticulated, and it was all I could do to stand perfectly

still and make no expression.

~~“Oh, yeah, ‘e come back later,” my father was saying. “Dat’s right, later.”~~

The driver gave me a long, searching look, and I barely breathed, certain he could read on my face that my father was lying. But he finally shrugged.

“Okay,” he said, his eyes like my teacher’s when she was fed up with me. He drove off.

I gazed up, trying to understand why my father had pretended to be someone else, but he just laughed.

“I played a good joke on those guys,” he said. “But don’t tell your mother. She doesn’t like jokes—not the way you and me like jokes.”

I smiled and agreed, though there was a wincing look in his eyes, nothing like the wild joy of escaping the train. As we walked home along the asphalt, he stepped faster, and the hand holding mine felt hot and damp.

Often, after school, I wandered the fields alone, catching frogs and snakes, putting them in my pockets as I explored the woods along the stream. I couldn’t stop thinking about the two men in the car. I was certain they were police. My father knew everything about police and had told me that they didn’t always dress in uniform or drive cop cars. Whenever he saw them, he made fun of their clothes, especially the yellow stripe on one leg of their pants. He said he’d have joined the RCMP himself if their outfits weren’t so ugly. Then he called them criminals in uniforms and told stories about the stupid pigs he’d fooled.

As I sat beneath the trees, a memory resurfaced: a night I couldn’t place, that I was afraid to ask about. It seemed distant, like a bad dream after waking, but so vivid, constant in my recollection. There was a house where we’d stayed, at a river ferry crossing on an Indian reservation. My father and mother had spoken in hushed tones. Was this years ago? I’d wanted to know what was happening, and he’d told me that a man was coming to fight him.

“I want to fight, too.”

“You’re too little.”

“No! Let me fight.”

“Okay. Maybe. You just wait inside. Maybe you can help me.”

“You promise?”

“Yeah,” he said, smiling at me. “All right. I’ll probably need your help.”

I sat on the couch as he paced the small living room, stopping only to draw back the curtain and look out at the gravel driveway and the dark road to the ferry landing. The man who was coming had worked for him and wanted money he didn’t deserve. My father had told me stories about fighting. He always made it sound fun, and I was desperate to hit the man, too.

“He’ll be here soon,” my father said and prowled back and forth, hunched like an angry dog. His rage burned into the air so that I breathed and tasted it.

But then I was opening my eyes, lifting my face from the cushion, rubbing my cheek.



He'd come in the door, dark red gouges on the skin around his eyes, the collar of his shirt torn. He picked up the telephone's black receiver. Blood covered his knuckles.

"He's knocked out," he told my mother. "I knocked him out."

"What happened?"

"She jumped on my back. His girlfriend—she tried to scratch my eyes."

"She's out there?"

"I broke her jaw. I didn't mean to. She jumped on my back."

My mother just stared.

"I wanted to fight," I shouted and began to cry.

She hurried to the couch and lay me back against the pillow.

"Go to sleep," she told me, her voice stern. There was a tension in her face that I knew from my father's rages, when he was angry at her, though he wasn't now.

"I didn't mean to," he kept saying. He was holding the phone.

I understood that outside the man and his girlfriend lay on the dark gravel.

My father dialed and spoke into the phone, telling what had happened, that two people had come onto his property.

Then I was waking again. Red and blue lights flashed outside, rippling in the folds of the curtains. My father was putting on his jacket, the door opening, cold night air and the smell of the river washing into the room.

After the fight by the ferry, there'd been a visit to court, my brother and I neatly dressed, our mother grim and silent, trying to keep us quiet, giving us the candy she usually forbade, rotting out our teeth and bones, turning us into retards.

Maybe the police had come to the valley because he'd beaten someone up again. Or the train engineers had complained. But now that I was listening and watching, I realized that something had changed, my mother withdrawn, my father—when he was home—like a watchdog in the seconds before it snarled. If I could read minds, I might make sense of the shouting that woke me at night, the slammed doors, my mother crossing the house, naked but for a blanket wrapped around her, telling him to leave her alone.

Sometimes the fights were obvious: he got angry when she cooked strange meals like boiled oranges and rice, or he told her to stop nagging him for having shared his vodka with me. He'd let me have a swig on a fishing trip, and, proud of how much I could handle, I'd snuck more, the bottle lifted above my face, shimmering bubble rising with each gulp. My brother called out to my father, who snatched it from my hand. I became drowsy and passed out, but at school I bragged that my father had let me get drunk. My mother turned the color of charcoal when she heard me say this, and my father later reminded me that drinking was one of our secrets. But everything was becoming a secret. Even most of the fights were mysterious. They just had to look at each other and they started yelling.

So maybe she knew. Maybe she'd discovered he was in trouble. I wondered how

long it would be before the police returned.

---

We were driving to get the mail, the five of us, my father at the wheel, my mother holding my sister on her lap, my brother and I wedged in between.

Large, distant mountains stood at the horizon, the highest already white. A few rusty leaves still clung to the roadside trees, and as we drove, sunlight broke in along the clouds, flashing over the hood of the truck.

The post office was a two-story building next to the muddy slough near where I was born, just outside the valley. A brass bell rang when we opened the door. The owner, a soft-looking, bespectacled man who lived up a set of creaky stairs, was reading the paper. He got up from his stool, pushed his glasses high on the bridge of his nose, and gazed at the wooden pigeonholes on the wall. He took down a sheaf of letters.

I followed my father back outside and down the steps. He stood in the sunlight as he tore the envelopes open. One held a flowery card. He stared into it. I had never seen him get mail like this, and I stepped in close but still couldn't make out the words.

"What is it?"

My mother laughed. "It's from his other family."

The skin of his neck flushed. He didn't appear to breathe.

"What other family?" I asked. I had no idea what she meant, and I looked up at him, trying to see inside the card. He never talked about his parents the way she talked about hers. But he didn't respond, and she stared at the ground and sighed. "It was just a joke. I was just joking."

He folded the card and put it in his jacket pocket, and we got in his truck and left. But I couldn't stop wondering what had made him so angry. We often received cards from my mother's parents in Pittsburgh, but this was the first time I'd seen him get one. Though I knew he was from Quebec, he almost never spoke about where he'd grown up, other than to say, "My brother and me, we beat up all the kids in our village, so you and your brother should stick together." And then he'd look a little angry, probably because of all the fights he'd been in.

It was frustrating. I knew almost nothing about him. Why hadn't I realized that before? Did he keep secrets from me the way he did from her? The only time I thought about where he came from was at school, because that's where we spoke French and often read about Quebec. My mother loved French but didn't speak it, and she told me that my father grew up speaking it even if he almost never did now. He claimed it was useless, but she insisted on making us learn it. Though French classes weren't offered when my brother started school, they were the first year I began.

That evening, as I did my homework, I couldn't stop trying to make sense of the card and his other family. I approached the chair where he watched TV.

"Est-ce que tu peux m'aider avec mes devoirs?" I said. If he checked my homework and spoke in French, I might figure something out. Maybe there were

questions I could ask in French that I couldn't in English. Besides, I was always curious to hear his voice change.

"Okay, viens," he told me, but as soon as my workbook came into his big, dark hands, he furrowed his brow. His eyelids drooped, his expression guilty, as if he'd lied. He hunched in his chair as I rattled away, explaining the assignment. When I stopped, he made a suggestion on how to write a sentence, but I was pretty sure he was wrong, and I corrected him.

He lowered the book and stared at the TV. Black smoke rose from an aerial view of a city. He seemed upset, as if this were a place he knew. All around him hummed familiar danger, the electric buzz of his irritation, and I didn't move or speak.

When he switched to English and said, "This isn't a good time," I felt relieved.

My mother had clear blue eyes, not dark like his, and silvery stripes in her light brown hair that, when she pulled it back in a ponytail, reminded me of the markings on a cat.

"Whose eyes do I have?" I asked. We were alone in the kitchen while she made goat cheese and I pretended to do my homework, my brother and sister watching TV, my father gone. I spoke as if the question weren't a big deal, though my teacher had made us read about eye color and told us that to have blue eyes the genes had to come from both parents. My mother said that mine were probably from her, unless someone in my father's family also had blue eyes, but she didn't know. I didn't bother to explain how it really worked and asked, "Why don't you know?"

"Because I've never met them. He's not close to them anymore."

"Why not?"

"I don't really know. He didn't get along with them. He doesn't like to talk about it."

"Oh," I said, grudgingly, surprised that even she didn't know much about him. I fiddled with my pencil and considered my workbook. "And whose hair do I have?"

"I had blond hair when I was younger."

"And my nose." She'd often told me that I was lucky not to have her small nose. She called it a ski jump, though I saw nothing wrong with it.

"Your nose is your father's. You have his real nose."

"His real nose?" I repeated. "His nose isn't real?"

She was always doing this—telling me shocking things.

"He had his real nose smashed in a fight. Doctors rebuilt it and gave him a new one that's smaller and very straight. I never saw his real one, but I'm sure you'll have it when you grow up."

I looked down at my workbook. I was sitting at a picnic table, the kind you saw in parks but never in other kids' houses. My life was nothing like other kids'. I never said Mom and Dad, but André and Bonnie, and no one I knew had changed homes so often. Every winter, we used to move to places with heat, round

houses where my father got electricity using jumper cables, clipping the ends above and below the meter after stripping away the rubber. Summers, we stayed in a trailer on blocks in the valley, goats and German shepherds in pens outside, my first memories sunlit days and broken-down motors, the mountain just above us, no electricity or running water, and our drinks in wire milk crates set in the stream.

From my mother's stories, I knew she'd gone to art school in Virginia but had run away with a draft dodger. I pictured a guy really good at dodgeball, but, as angry, she said he was dodging war, not balls. She met my father in Vancouver while working as a waitress, an encounter that—because he'd once described it to me as "She served me ham and eggs, and I left with her"—made me hungry whenever I thought about it. After that, they'd traveled British Columbia, living out of a van and fishing, an existence I fantasized about—mornings waking up and going straight outside to the river, no bedroom to clean, no school to worry about. But they'd decided to settle down and have children, and my perfect life ended just before I was born.

Whenever I asked her questions—about war or why it's wrong—she answered carefully, explaining with so many details—Vietnam, corrupt government, the loss of individual freedom—that I didn't understand much. She never talked to me like I was a child, but as if I were a very old and serious man, and so I sat and listened, trying to remember the big words she used. And then, to let off some steam, I asked her to retell *The Little Engine That Could*, and she did, though she seemed much less interested in this than in the world's problems.

As opposed to my mother, whenever I asked my father about his family, he barely answered. "Why don't you like to speak French?" or "What did your parents do?" earned me few words: "There's no point," or "He fished. She took care of the kids." And then he'd tell me how he'd traveled cross-country to Calgary and gone to a party and got in a terrible fight over a beautiful woman.

"This bruiser," he said, "was two or three times as big as me. We were throwing each other across the room. We broke the table and chairs and knocked all the pictures off the walls. There wasn't anything we didn't break. That guy was really tough, but I just didn't let myself get worried. You get worried in a fight, and you've had it. So I kept hitting him, and pretty soon everyone at the party started cheering me. They were originally his friends, but he was arrogant, and I was the better fighter. They could see that, so I guess they wanted to be on my side. Each time I got him down, I'd say, 'Stay down,' and everyone else would shout, 'Stay down,' but he'd get up, and then I'd hit him five or six times, and he'd fall on his ass again, and everyone would yell, 'Stay down.' I tried to be nice, but that guy was really big, and he kept shaking his head and trying to get back up and then I'd have to hit him again. It wasn't easy, but I finally made him understand."

By this point I no longer remembered my original question, and I asked him if he'd had worse fights, and he told one story after another. His confrontations with bruisers, this being one of his favorite words, often had strange endings.

"The bruiser was so strong I had to bite his nose to win. We were on the docks by the fishing boats, and I got him down and bit his nose and just hung on until he

started crying. Sometimes you have to do things like that to win a fight.”

He told me about journeys, from Calgary to Tijuana in a truck without brakes, or driving an old Model T along Alaskan railways to get to towns not connected by roads. Whenever a train came, he swerved off the tracks, and afterward he and his friends hefted the Model T back on.

My favorite was the time he and a friend were driving through Nevada and picked up a Mormon. He drove so fast that the Mormon prayed in the backseat and wept to the Lord until my father, racing at over a hundred miles an hour, slammed the brakes. The Mormon flew onto the dash, his back against the windshield so that the car was briefly dark and all my father saw was his screaming face. The friend kicked open his door and they chucked the Mormon out. The man grabbed at the earth, kissing it—“Like the goddamn pope,” my father said.

I didn’t know what a Mormon was, but I’d seen the pope on TV, descending from an airplane and kissing the ground.

“I bet dogs pissed all over that ground,” my father had told me and changed the channel.

Neither Mormons nor the pope could be too bright or brave. Hearing his descriptions, I forgot about my questions and his secrets. Reckless speed and the thought of untamed distance thrilled in my blood.

The proof that his stories were true was his madness. He raced through traffic and hit large puddles with such speed that his truck appeared to have wings of mud and water and sputtered until its engine dried. Watching TV, he contemplated Evel Knievel, who, dressed in his cape and the shirt with crossed lines of stars, jumped his motorcycle over buses. Though he calculated how difficult this would be, he preferred Houdini. Having seen a documentary on him, he discussed ways of escaping handcuffs, live burial, and torture cells.

Yet many of his exploits had involved not escaping torture but subjecting us to it. In the mall, when I was four, he’d hidden, standing with mannequins in a window, arms lifted and motionless, head cocked at an angle as he stared into space. He blended in perfectly, his posture so convincing that my brother and I walked past him repeatedly, crying as we called out his name. Only when a woman stopped to help us did we see the mannequin in the display leave its place and hurry toward us, laughing.

Or once he took my brother and me to a store that he intended to rent. Though he ran Christmas tree lots each winter, he also had three seafood shops in the city and wanted to open more. But while we snooped in back, he locked us in and hid outside. My brother was six or seven and, having taken on the role of voicing our terror, pounded on a window until it cracked. My father loomed in the broken glass. His key ring jangled against the door right before he threw it open and spanked us for acting like babies. But as he tried to strike me, I struggled and shouted, “I wasn’t crying!” Even afterward, following him back to the truck, I was

enraged, yelling, "I wasn't crying!" until he turned and glared at me and said "Okay. That's enough!"

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Train racing was more frequent and always fun, though he did it rarely now unlike when I was little. Sometimes he didn't stop, just raced in front, swerving past the gate, striking the embankment like a ramp and sailing to the road with the clatter of rusted shocks. Or he waited on the tracks, though under normal circumstances his battered truck was known to stall or refuse to start. He even got out once, pocketing his keys after telling us to wait. We screamed as the train heaved into sight. We beat on the windows and called, "André! André!" until he hurried back and jumped behind the wheel and pretended to turn the key, yelling "It won't start!" But finally the engine fired, and we screeched from the tracks.

Only later did I wonder why we loved danger so much, why my mother hated this feeling that made me happier than anything else.

Usually when I woke up, my father had already gone to his stores, and he returned after I was in bed. But some mornings before school, if his truck was in the driveway, I searched the misted rows of pines through our windows. His figure passed between them, followed by the swift movement of his German shepherds, all soon obscured by rain.

The November of my fourth grade, while he worked his tree lots, I worried that the salmon runs would end and checked spawning dates in the books I'd hoarded from the school library. He and I used to fish often, in the streams between the fields or in the reservoir outside the valley, but he had less and less time and often wasn't even around, so I couldn't ask. I lay in bed, looking at pictures of fish—the toothy great barracuda or the gaping goosefish with its antennae. Their mystery riveted me, the way they appeared from the deepest, darkest water and vanished again, how they belonged to a different world. I wanted nothing more than to catch one, for my father and me to go to the river the way we used to and stand together and then laugh over what we'd caught.

When I woke, my face was on the book, the page glued to my cheek. I carefully peeled it off and sat up. He was shouting somewhere downstairs.

I got out of bed and opened my door. No one was in the kitchen at the bottom of the stairs, and I crept down, gently setting my foot on each step so that it wouldn't creak.

I went to their door and listened. My mother was crying.

"It's all bullshit," he said.

"I saw it. It was as real as you standing here. I was lying there dead, and my body rolled over, and half of my face was rotted. It was me from a past life."

My hand fit against the edge of the doorframe, my cheek to its cold, painted wood.

"Stop going to those things. What's wrong with you?"

"I'm not stopping. I need to figure this out. I want to know who I used to be."

It was unfair that he didn't want her to learn more. Her description was

thrilling, like a mystery in a novel. But maybe he was protecting her. That happened in stories, too. All this was confusing. I'd thought she was angry at him, not the other way around. I was so frustrated by all I didn't understand that I stomped back to my room, not trying to be quiet at all.

The next day he was gone, and she made us sit with her on the living room carpet. She wanted to teach us something special she'd learned. We sat cross-legged and closed our eyes, and she told us to calm our minds and look inside until we saw a white light. The white light was our soul. This, she said, was called meditation.

I rolled my eyes in the dark, then opened them. My brother and sister sat, my mother, too, eyelids settled, faces smooth. The sun descended against the mountains, the fields already in shadow, the last flare of daylight in the dirt window glass. I closed my eyes again, and there it was—the glow, a pale thumbprint in the dark substance of my mind.

That night, when she came to say good night, I told her.

"I saw my soul. I saw the white light."

Tears came into my eyes, not from sadness but the spinal thrill of mystery—a truth that could be known and discovered. She knelt by my bed and stroked the hair from my face.

"I'm proud of you," she said. "I want you to keep looking inside yourself and tell me everything you see."

My mother often talked about purpose.

"You all have one," she said, driving us home from school, staring off above the glistening, leaf-blown highway as if we'd keep on toward our purpose and never return.

She told us that our gifts helped us to understand our purpose. Since my brother's and sister's report cards held stars mine lacked, they were clearly gifted in school. In particular, my sister's gifts were singing and, when necessary, punching boys, and my brother's were math and behaving. He was also gifted with an obsession for space travel and chooseyour ownadventure novels, and he played so many hours of Tron Deadly Discs on his Intellivision that his thumb blistered.

Though I'd tried my hand at creating sculptures from trash and even made dolls with my mother's old maternity underwear, stuffing them with cotton and twisting them the way clowns did with long balloons, none of this was appreciated. The sculptures returned to the trash, and the dolls, shortly after I gave them to the neighbor's toddlers, unraveled and were left on the roadside so that it looked as if a pregnant woman had been carousing the valley night after night.

As we were nearing home, I asked my mother why I had a purpose.

"So you can do something great for the world," she said.

Maybe this was why I always felt unsatisfied or craved to see something amazing. Whenever I learned about anything new, I couldn't stop thinking about

it—meditation or fishing, the police or my father's other family. My mother had once told me how society had become corrupt and might end, and I'd thought about this until it seemed as if the destruction should happen any minute now. It would be the greatest story ever. There would be no more school, and I'd live in the mountains and fish and meditate forever, unless this wasn't my purpose after all.

"But how can I know?" I practically yelled.

"What?"

"What my purpose is?"

"Just ask inside yourself," she said. "All the answers you'll ever need are inside you."

I sighed. Something had to happen right now, like in a novel. I wanted the sun to burn up the mountains, the sky to dissolve into the fields, the earth to melt into crystal blue water. But along the road, dead autumn grass resembled a dirty shag rug. Ten Speed appeared in the distance and zipped past, turning her head to take us in with her wide, empty eyes. And then the road before us was clear. A few naked trees leaned this way and that, hunched and bent and reaching, like old people.

"Do you have any invisible friends?" my mother asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Are there people you talk to?"

It seemed like a dumb question. I talked to everything—to stuffed animals and books, to my pillow and the trees. I walked across the fields talking.

But my brother was eager to explain. "Not real people," he said.

"Spirit guides," she interrupted. "Your brother and sister have one. How many do you have?"

I looked out the window. Ten Speed had made a U-turn and was trying to pass us, her chin to the handlebars. I watched her a moment, giving my mother's question some thought.

"Twelve," I said.

Briefly, no one spoke.

"Well then," she told me, "you should have no problem finding your purpose. Just ask. I'm sure at least one of them will tell you."

Novembers were disappointing. My father was gone, running his seafood store or selling Christmas trees. My birthday passed while he worked, and that Friday at school, the kids sang *bonne fête à toi*, though I wouldn't actually turn nine until Sunday. As they yammered, I mourned the few remaining weeks of salmon season and that my father was too busy to take me. The teacher told the class my age and they all asked, as they did each November, why I was a year younger. She explained how my mother had thought kindergarten was a waste of time and made me go straight to first grade. They told me kindergarten was fun, and I said it was for slow learners, which she'd also said, though from what I'd heard, it di



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