

# SHORT STORY NIGHT



INTERVIEW WITH  
AUTHOR STERLING  
HOLYWHITEMOUNTAIN!  
(NEW YORKER, PARIS REVIEW)

# False Star

STERLING HOLYWHITEMOUNTAIN

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# False Star

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Sterling HolyWhiteMountain

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As we know, there is a long and storied history of a certain kind of dealing on the part of Uncle Sam with his indians, and so there have also been times when America wakes up after a long weekend of terror only to rediscover its morals and decide a renewed effort is in order, and though I would not go so far as to say these efforts have been particularly . . . genuine . . . what did come from one such gesture was this thing people in my part of indian country—which is, indisputably, the best and most beautiful part, the Blackfeet Reservation—called a claim check, which in the end was money you might get when you turned eighteen. The check came from a land claim, settled with the Feds decades before I was born. As far back as I could remember, I had heard discussion of claim checks. There was something elemental about it: the talk circled round in a seasonal way. People joked about being claim-check rich and then later laughed about being claim-check broke. They bought claim-check cars, got claim-check drunk, and some got claim-check married. That's how it was for us for a long time, until the money ran out. The Feds are never more careful with limits and end dates on their moral awakenings than they are with us, such is the concern that we might steal the whole country right out from under them. Then we were back to where we were before, a bunch of broke skins way out on the Northern Plains, teasing one another. So this is a story about how I got my part of the money, how I spent it, and the people in my life at that time, such as Big Man, who raised me, and of course June, who I loved before any other, and who has been gone now longer than any of us had the chance to know her when she was alive.

It was near the end of April, the morning of my eighteenth birthday, and I had asked Big Man how I would get the check.

Well, he said. There is no check.

How's that? I said.

I don't know, he said. Maybe I already spent it. I can't really remember.

I waited to see what was going on, and while he patted his pockets as if he were searching for something I kept very still, hoping it was not true but also knowing it was probably not true. He stopped and nodded toward the front door and said to go to the truck. We would go to Blood Creek to take care of things. I didn't know what that meant. On the way there, after a long time of not talking, he said, You know, I got that money once.

Yeah? I said.

Yup, he said. In '62. Your uncle was younger than you are now. That was the first payout.

He stopped there. I hoped he might say more but he didn't, which did not surprise me. Beyond the truck the Plains went out to the horizon every which way but west, where they met the mountains that made up the backbone of our homeland, a long line of peaks strung together that went as far north and south as you could see. That day they were still white from snow, winter having only recently ceded its hold, and they seemed very far away and bright under the high sun. On the way to Blood Creek there were occasional grain elevators and there were dirt roads that broke off from the highway and angled out into the bright distance, and in the midst of all this I thought vaguely about what I might do with the money. No words, really, just moments of imagination like movie clips, and all the feelings that go with them. Mostly it was girls that ran through my big head. I had a deep and abiding belief that the money would in some way solve the problem of the girl. I would go to Paradise Falls and get a car—some kind, I didn't know which, I was not that kind of young man—and then . . . girls. Probably more than one! I would get ass, as the guys who got ass would say. Don't ask me how I thought this would happen. Maybe they would be lined up. Who knew how a guy with a new ride and some money in his pocket might be received. That's just how it was to me. That is how things were supposed to work, laid out and simple like a route on a map.

My cousin Roy LaForge's mom had spent his claim money. I can still see him standing in senior hall, mad as hell because it was his eighteenth birthday and there was nothing coming to him. Jim Three Suns had asked him if he was gonna tear it up claim style that weekend and would he spot us a twenty so we could get lunch across the street at the Snack Shack.

We gotta get somma them double cheeseburgers, Jim said. He was rubbing his hands together.

Well, Roy said, and slammed his locker and flipped us the bird as he walked away. We had a good laugh over that. Later we found out that his mom had taken the check and spent it a few weeks after he was born, leaving him with his gram and going on a ripper. For those of us born in time to receive a claim but not old enough to handle it ourselves, the money was given to our parents or grandparents or whoever it was that was raising us, and they could do what they wanted with it. In the case of people like Roy's mom they spent it, maybe all of it that very day, maybe they took a drive to Blood Creek and cashed the check and then decided to gamble a few bucks at the keno machines at Diamond Lily's and then maybe they decided it was a nice afternoon, maybe they said, Hell, I am going to keep going. Why not! And then they were on the freeway and a few hours later there it was, Paradise Falls, rising up from the Plains like El Dorado itself. Then they were checking into a hotel. They were saying, I'm only gonna spend a little bit of this and then put the rest away for my kid for when they get older. They were at the keno machines downstairs in the small casino just off the lobby and then maybe they were having a drink, just one drink, and then it was another—but it would definitely be the last. Then they were talking to someone else from home who

happened to be there—Paradise is full of Blackfeet on the weekends—and then they were bullshitting, they were laughing about something they both knew, an old story from many years before, when they were in high school and you could hardly get off the reservation. Do you remember it? Nobody even had the money to go anywhere, and now here we are! And then later, as both the day and the money dwindle, they decide to have just one more drink and then off upstairs to bed—or maybe not. Maybe just one more! And that is how it went for some people, they grew up and hit the much ballyhooed age and they got nothing, because two hundred and sixteen months earlier it was their mom or dad or auntie in Paradise Falls, fucked up on too many hotel-bar gin-and-tonics, snoring belly down in a third-floor room with their shoes still on.

There were others, though, like Big Man, who did not go to Blood Creek or Paradise or Copperton or Highland or Industry or any of these places that were not particularly fond of indians but had no problem with indian money. There were those who put the check in a savings account and let it wax through that mysterious process called interest. Who let the money become part of the imaginations of their children and grandchildren as they grew up.

Just wait till I get that claim check, someone might say.

Ima be rich then.

Gonna live like a fuckin *white* man!

The calm of a bank is quite a thing. If you don't think too much you might believe it has always been this way, these quiet transactions around money. It was not long ago, though, that money was moved by whipped horses and coal-fired trains from vault to vault all over the West. Men with mustaches, men who wore vests and tracked the movement of time on pocket watches, men for whom the world was no more than a series of numbers. Men who believed there was nothing that could not be turned into money. Men who would in fact give their lives for it. Whereas for the grandparents of my grandparents, those ones here who first laid eyes on money and had no idea what it was, I imagine they could not understand what these pale men were so loony about. It must have been the way it will be when those little gray people finally land on the White House lawn and let everyone know they have come to *introduce* a new way of living.

The banker was a white woman with very blue eyes and very blond hair. She looked at my grandpa's I.D. and said, How are you today, Mr. False Star . . . Boy?

That's my name, he said. Don't wear it out. He smiled. He was always entertained by his own jokes. He nodded at me and said, This guy here needs to open a account with that money.

What money is that? she said.

That money I put in here for him a ways back, he said. It wasn't you I gave it to, it was some other woman, she had brown hair. She was a way bigger than you.

The woman had no idea what Big Man was talking about. Her eyes seemed extra blue and wide in her confusion. Another banker came over to help, an older woman with gray hair and a face that recalled a horse. Pretty soon Big Man was annoyed with both of them and was starting to take that tone I knew too well. I determined that I would sit things out in the waiting area. I looked at magazines for a while. There were a lot of white people in them and a few Black people and one Asian guy who looked like a nice guy, the kind of guy you would give your money to. He had a good smile. Everyone had such good smiles. After a while we were led to a desk, where I answered some questions and signed a few papers and was handed a checkbook and a temporary A.T.M. card, and I felt as big as I had ever felt in my life and maybe ever would.

A few weeks later Big Man drove me and June down to Paradise Falls. We left early because we were running on Big Man time and he was always up and ready for the day by 5:30. The sun cast the houses and the potholed roads of La Fleur in a pristine and brutal light. When we got to June's she wasn't ready so I waited at her door in the early cold and blew on my hands. Big Man was reading the paper he had picked up before I got out of bed, and he was smoking, of course, frowning, wearing the same blue King Ropes hat he always did, his glasses darkened by the daylight. When June came out she looked kind of rugged. She had real wicked oossii eyes; she could barely open them, like she had rolled out of bed only a few minutes before, but she was very pretty to me anyway, and I told her she looked good and she told me to shut up. It's too early to be talking, she said. I had asked June to come with me because she had asked the same of me a month before, when she got her own money and took her own trip to Paradise Falls. I had kind of assumed this was how it would go and maybe she had, too. We had been friends for a long time and done a lot of things together by then. It made sense.

There had been something about her even when she was young, not a woman or a young woman but still mostly a girl, something that made men, older men, pay attention. She changed when they looked at her and the more they looked at her the more she changed and I had been around and borne witness to this and had myself in the process been altered. She became like light run through the jewels of their eyes, and what she was on the other side was new and bold and somehow older. Boyfriends, guys our age, went in and out of her life with regularity, and though none lasted long she was not overly cruel with them. With the older men it was different. Her makeup got heavier. There was a darkness about her, and I can recall with great clarity what it was like to see her that way. She dressed like she wanted something, and I have no idea where she learned it, because I did not see any other girls doing what she did. She batted those men around on the late nights of a weekend and on Monday morning before class told me stories about laughing at them when they said how they felt about her, even making some of them cry, which disgusted her. He cried like a little bitch. That was how she might say it. And she would laugh. Those experiences were funny

to her, and she would confide about them in a careless way, and while she talked about how she wrecked these men and how they would beg her to come back anyway—then, when her focus was far away, I was free to look at her and watch how she moved her hands and see her face change and I didn't have to concern myself with her noticing me, she was so taken up with whatever she was talking about.

On weekends June and my other friends would often go out and party but usually I did not. Parties were loud things and at some point in the night a guy would tear off his shirt and try to fight anyone he could and it was only a matter of time before that anyone was me and I did not feel any need to mix it with some drunk prick. Instead I would sit on the couch for a while watching late-night TV, Big Man already long asleep down the hall with his door shut. Then I would go to my room and read whatever fantasy book I was reading at the time and I would do that until my eyes hurt and then go to sleep but if somewhere along the way there was a scene with a woman who was described in such a way that made it clear she was hot I would get hooked on her and then I was kind of in the book and maybe meeting her at some mountain lodge whose upper walls were adorned with the skulls of antlered beasts unfamiliar to me and we were on an animal skin or whatever by a crackling fire and then she was some other girl maybe Laura Many Spears who I thought about a lot at that time or maybe Haley Jones or maybe even June if I could manage to not think of the June that called me queer all the time and if I could do that then I would think about how her breasts would feel under my hands how good they would feel how soft her skin would feel and then I was taking her shirt off. Things went backward and then leaped way forward a lot in my head like I would be touching her bare breasts and then she would have all her clothes on and I was taking her shirt off again but maybe it was a different color this time it was a wash of things it was night and we were in the hunting lodge and then suddenly we might be in Big Man's truck, a red F-150, parked outside La Fleur the town was below us lights spread out all beautiful and whatnot and we were making out it was the June who was nice to me and I was kissing her neck because I was pretty certain that's what you did with a woman you liked but if I could not hold it together in my head then she became the June who laughed at me and everything would shut down if you know what I mean then I'm back in the mountainous woods with the super-hot babe the one from the book and I'm taking off her cloak-thing and she's got nothing on under that because for some reason women in that kind of world didn't wear underwear or whatever and the snow is falling around us we are outside but not cold and then we're doing the deed on a huge red dragon skin and then if I could make it happen she would be June again and we'd be in the truck but still in the woods with the dark snowy peaks around us and for a second we are really doing it good like in the pornos I saw at my cousin Jay's and then it is all sensation a sudden tension a white light and then I'm standing next to my bed with my jeans at my ankles trying to find the fucking box of tissues.

The east end of Twelfth Avenue in Paradise Falls is where all the dealerships are, with their long rows of shining hoods and unflawed windshields and black, black tires, all lined up under those giant American flags that hang heavy even in a decent breeze. We hit every

single lot, used and new—my grandpa was meticulous, something he learned in the military, I think—looping in and out of them as we went down Twelfth until we hit the end, beyond which there was nothing but the sudden Plains that went out and out until they met the blue of the sky in a hard, definite line. Big Man would not stop until I saw something I really wanted that had a price I could afford, and that led to us going through some of the lots twice because I was indecisive in my moment of greatness. June sat between us and when she grew sufficiently irritated she asked why weren't we stopping.

This is stupid, she said.

My girl, Big Man said. We'll stop when Little Man sees what he wants.

June said nothing. My grandpa was one of the few people I had ever seen her show any modicum of respect for or deference to—and one time even fear. Her mother was one of the others, at least when June was a kid, and that was only because she used to show June the back and sometimes the front of her hand with regularity. I had seen her do it. It is not a thing you forget, a mother striking her daughter, who is a near-replica of herself. June's mom was a known drunk and had treated June's brother the same way until he finished high school and enlisted in the Corps and went over to Iraq and came back even quieter than he had been before, a man who had killed enough people as a sniper that he found it fit to spend the rest of his life, which ended not that many years after the time of this story, living in Paradise Falls, going through a series of women who eventually left him and working construction and drinking around town and then one day he went down to the big pawnshop off Twelfth and got a rifle like the one he had used in the Middle East and rigged it up in such a way that he was able to turn his head and most of his neck into a wall decoration. The old lady next door thought a bomb had gone off. A few days later there was an obituary in the *Paradise Tribune* that was a typical sort of tribute to the dead, but what caught me was the photo they used. It was his military photo and he looked so much like June, he was the other side of the indian-head nickel from his little sister, a beautiful face with a chilling distance. Here was a man you might befriend and treat with respect or hate and do your best to destroy, but regardless you would never know what was back there in the cold behind his gaze, you would only sense it in the echoes that reached the surface.

At Jerry's Used Beauties a black Bronco caught my eye and I decided to see what it was all about. Big Man pulled into a spot at the empty end of the small lot, parking so the wind hit the front of the truck head on. It was one of those days when the wind blasted you and everything else within a hundred miles so hard that you felt there was something personal about it. Before I opened the door and stepped down into what I was certain would be my endless future I asked Big Man if he wanted to come with us.

You know what you want, he said, waving the hand that did not hold a cigarette. Besides, he said, I can't stand them sons of bitches that work at these places. Buncha thieves, every last one of them.

On our way to the Bronco we passed a cherry-red Mustang convertible that seemed to catch all the light there was and I could not help but stop and look at it and put my hands on it and run my fingertips over the fenders, and I did all this in an unthinking manner, which led to June saying if I was going to touch it like that I better just hurry up and get nasty. Quit wasting my fuckin time, she said. We both laughed. A salesman showed up the way they do, all over-big smiles and ringed fingers and bright watches and hard handshakes like they had something to prove. He had curly brown hair and a mustache and a round freckled face like a child's doll and he could not have been more than a few years older than me but the way he conducted himself suggested a supreme authority over all things, and I felt about him the way I had felt about such white guys for some time, that I hated him and wanted to hurt him. He had seen me looking at the Mustang with its somewhat dirtied white drop top and said we should go look at some of the cars at the far side of the lot. He used his hands the way I had seen field generals do in old documentary footage.

Oh, I don't know, I said. I like this one. It's kinda sinuous and marauding, you know?

I smiled at him. I had never spoken to anyone like that in my life. June was looking at me. The salesman paused. I could see that there was something small and weak hiding behind his mustache and his brown slacks and his slightly wrinkled tan shirt with its sleeves rolled up his hairy arms, and I somehow knew that he had never been in a fight in his life or had not won a fight or had not had his face hit so hard that he lost all shame about running, and when I saw this he stopped being real to me and I felt relaxed and careless about him and had no need to prove myself any longer.

That's true, he said, that one is a real beauty. But I think there are some models over here that are probably more within your range.

How do you know how much money he's got? June said. Fuck, maybe he could buy two of these.

The salesman looked at her and did not say anything.

O.K., then, I said. Maybe we go look at those other ones.

Anyway, it was fine that I could not afford the Mustang. Within ten hours I would have totalled that car at a hundred and twenty and been thrown thirty feet through or over the windshield, feeling the amazing revelation of true human flight just before I landed and lost most of my face.

The Bronco was a slick boxy thing with tinted windows and had been pretty well taken care of by whoever had owned it but it was a piece of trash, too. That truth came too late, of course. The salesman said to take it for a drive so I did, across Twelfth and down past the high school, where everybody was getting out and walking the sidewalks with their backpacks and whiteboy haircuts and whitegirl makeup, which were not all that different from



the haircuts and makeup I saw back in La Fleur but were also very different; there was a neatness, something contained or shiny or soft about them that stood out to me in places like Paradise and still does. There were a few indian kids among them and as we drove past I could tell that June was really watching.

I wonder if those guys even know they're indian, she said.

I laughed.

No, really though, she said. Do they even know, or are they like one of those dogs that grew up with cats. Do they just think they're cats?

I don't know, I said. I guess I don't care.

Way to think, she said. Big smart guy over here.

We drove around some more and ended up on the north hill where some of the big houses were and though the last snowfall had been only a few weeks before there were already those older white guys out, the ones who hold some vision of America together, tending their lawns, probably thinking with strange anxiety about that first ride on the mower. Back at the dealership I said I was good to go and what's next. June was laughing at me by that time. However it was I was being, I guess I had never been that way. I must have looked rich or at least like a real fancy guy or something.

June had got her money exactly thirty days before me. She had withdrawn all the cash and closed the account her mom set up for her and then asked me if I could get Big Man's pickup for the day to drive her to Paradise but I could not because it needed the brakes done, so we rode with her cousin's girlfriend's brother—his name was Seth Jackson, he drove this maroon Impala that had had its back window busted out by his ex's brother, Tom Jack Big Bear III—and I sat in the back and froze my ass off the whole way and by the time Seth dropped us off near the used-car lots I was shivering all to hell.

June bought the first thing that caught her eye, an orange Camaro with flames on the driver's side and fat tires in the back and windows with blue-silver tint on them that was peeling at the edges and a black leather gearshift worn smooth and gray and frayed at the stitched seams. Before we pulled out of the lot she did this thing that made a great impression on me. She opened her backpack and said, Check it out.

She reached into the bag and took out a purple T-shirt and unfolded it and then took this beautiful and surprising thing from the shirt and using the leather string run through its stem she hung it from the rearview mirror and then there it was, hanging in front of both of us. At that point in my life I had seen many things hung from a rearview—crucifixes and rosary beads and fuzzy dice from the county fair and air fresheners and sometimes a combination of several or all of the above—but the sight of an eagle feather hanging from a rearview was

really something. These days a feather hung from a mirror is a common thing but at that time it struck me as having a meaning larger than I could say. And even now I am not sure what to say other than it is good. An eagle feather in a car is a good thing. But what I said at the time was: Holy fuck you got caddy! When did you get so caddy?

She set a hand on the worn black steering wheel and smiled at me and then nodded toward the feather.

I got it at one of those old eagle-catching pits way out to the Sweet Grass Hills.

Naw, I said. Really?

Fuck no, she said. Still sacred as fuck though.

We both laughed.

Here is what having your own ride means where I am from. Your house could be falling apart, you could be wondering what you are going to eat next week, you might owe seventy-three of your relatives a twenty spot here and a five spot there, but the first hint of money and there you are, you've got a light in your eyes, you find yourself at a dealership, you are walking into the Great American Dream. In the old days, after the horse had come to us and changed everything forever and we had mastered a not insignificant part of the continent and left the peoples around us with a lot of bad memories, it meant everything to have a good warhorse and if you had one you might paint it in such a way that anyone who knew of you could see from quite a ways out that it was your horse, it was you riding into camp, and I believe we do the same with our cars and trucks, that in a subterranean and profound manner the meaning horses once had for us we now find in these vehicles. I have long suspected this is why we spend so much time driving around—we rode our horses in the same way, going where we felt like going when we wanted to go. The difference is that now we cruise Main. We joke with one another at the pump while we fill up our tanks. And sometimes we park in the empty lot where an auto-parts store or a restaurant or a tire shop once stood, watching the headlights stream by, waiting for the night to take us somewhere, anywhere.

Inside the dealership we sat in chairs before a broad L-shaped desk in a large-windowed room, waiting. June had her long legs crossed and her long hair was pushed back behind one ear and it fell over her shoulder like a broad stroke of black paint and she appeared the way she very often did at that time—bored, insolent, impatient. I had such an easy time looking at her that there were moments I had to remind myself to look away. She knew I liked her but she was used to that. Someone was always looking at June. She could brush them off as easily as the morning shakes off the night.

God damn, she said, do they not take indin money here or what?

She laughed. Her fingers were long and graceful and her nails were purple, the paint chipped. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her thighs. Some other part of her had begun to pace the office. It was like this to be around her, you felt her lose interest and then though her body was next to you she was gone. The salesman looked up from his paperwork.

No, no, he said. That's the great thing about money. It's all the same, doesn't matter who's spending. A dollar is a dollar is a dollar. He had a wide smile on his face. I wanted to bounce a quarter off his teeth.

Outside it was very bright and you had to squint to see anything at all. The wind had dropped off some, though it was still going hard enough that June had to keep pulling her hair away from her face. Fuck, she said. Is this for real? We both laughed. When we got to the truck Big Man had his window cracked and he was resting an elbow on the doorframe, holding his most recent cigarette below the opening while he read the sports section. He was always reading about high-school sports, checking to see how the La Fleur teams were doing. I knocked on the window with a force that surprised me. In the past hour it seemed I had become a changed man. The lightning of all the great champions ran through me. He rolled the window down.

Bet you feel like you could do anything right about now, he said.

Heck yeah, I said. I smiled a big smile without even meaning or wanting to.

Don't come home too late, he said. There's still ice on the road in some of those river bottoms.

I'll do my best, I said.

That Eagle Strikes girl is a hell of a runner. There's a big picture of her in here.

Jolene, I said. She's a sophomore.

Sure, he said. I'll have to get down to State to watch her.

He rolled up the window and put the truck in gear and with that the man who had brought me up drove off. The man who had been generous with me and taught me to be respectful and a few times had raised his voice when I was not—moments that I still remember with a terrible clarity. Now that he has been gone for many years I can see that my grandpa was a handsome man who carried himself with dignity and conducted himself in relation to others, whether indian or white or otherwise, with a supreme sort of confidence that often found its residence in the country of indifference. He did not care what you thought about his life or what he did with it and usually he did not care what you did with your own unless you were fucking up so badly that he would lose patience and tell you how stupid you were being. He was profoundly Blackfeet in ways I cannot say he understood or that I understand now,

though I can see he was a way only Blackfeet have been without quite knowing we are that way, and when I finally lost him I knew that some part of myself I had taken for granted had broken from the rest of me and been tossed into the great emptiness around us and that somehow this, the truest loss of my life, had left me both more and less than I was before.

With some help from the wind the Bronco's driver's-side door banged shut with that hollow, metallic thud you hear only in what are now called older cars. I adjusted the seat and checked and tilted the rearview and rolled down the window and adjusted the side mirror, and then I sat there and did not know what to do.

How caddy do you feel? June said.

Goddam caddy, I guess.

That's how I felt when I got that Camaro, she said. I felt plum fast and brand-new.

We laughed.

"And, to make no difference, add a three-year-old bay leaf."

Cartoon by Mads Horwath

Link copied

I took us out of the parking lot onto Twelfth and then down to the mall. I got a huge salted pretzel with extra cheese and June got an orange smoothie and we walked down the long, broad halls for a while and kind of meandered in and out of stores and bought a few things and stopped at the mostly empty arcade and played all the co-op games that cost more than a dollar per round for as many rounds as we felt like, and on our way out I stopped at the A.T.M. and then got another pretzel. We walked back to the Bronco under a vast and quickly darkening sky, the western horizon on fire with the last of the day's light. I was looking up the whole way.

The sky is really beautiful, I said.

Yeah, she said. She had her arms crossed.

I took a huge bite of pretzel.

Are we lucky? I said, chewing.

How do you mean? she said.

Like don't you look at this sky and feel lucky? I said.

Not really, she said. I'm freezing.

Driving down Twelfth the air coming in the window was very cold and June told me to roll it up but I left it down so she turned the heat on full blast. I wanted to hang an arm out there so I could feel like all the people I had seen in my life driving with their windows down, their arms hanging out and looking cool in the cars they owned. I leaned my head out the window and howled.

You're such a weirdo, June said.

Don't hate me because I'm beautiful, I said.

*Ewww*, she said.

We laughed. When we reached the edge of town I stopped at a drive-thru that looked like it had changed very little since it opened. It had the old-style sign with the neon outline and the long awning you parked under, and there was a bouncy white girl going from car to truck to car taking and delivering orders. When she got to us her voice was so bright and high and chipper that I felt myself leaning away from her. I ordered a triple cheeseburger and a large fries and a large Coke and June ordered a double cheeseburger with no onions and a large fries and a Dr Pepper and then asked if it was on me, and when I said it was she added a strawberry shake. Other girls were always talking and fretting about their weight and trying to diet and meanwhile June ate whatever she wanted and remained thin and mean about the whole thing. Whenever another girl or an older woman—to June that meant anyone past high school—put on a few pounds she would go after them: Fuck she turned into a cow. Or, Did you see that one? Holay she just got fat. Or, a personal favorite, Ho, she just looks like she got into a fight with the pantry and won!

We ate in silence and when we were done I pulled out of the parking lot and took us onto the main road and then we were on the ramp and hitting the freeway. A few miles down the road there was a hitchhiker walking slowly, and without looking back he put his hand out. I could tell he was an indian just by the way he walked. Most of the hitchhikers you see in this state are indians. He had his shoulders up by his ears and he looked very cold so I started to slow down and June said what the fuck was I doing.

He's probably drunk, she said. Hitchhikers are always drunk or perverted.

I told her that might be true and gave it some gas and watched his silhouette disappear in the rearview and along with him the brightly burning lights of Paradise faded and I did not understand why but a sadness ran through me. June tore off a loud burp and I said God damn she was rough and she laughed. The Plains were rolling and wide and still dappled with big patches of snow that shot by off the sides of the freeway and there was just enough light left that what snow there was appeared luminescent and strange. For a while there was nothing but the sound of the Bronco taking us home, and then June pulled a tape from her purse and put it in. It was a country album by a musician I have never liked, mostly because I have never liked country, but on that particular night it worked for a bit. The songs were the

old kind, a guy and his guitar discussing the miseries of the world, which people often mock, but the world is a hard place to be. The farther we went the stronger the wind got and eventually there were gusts that hit the side of the Bronco so hard they took us to the shoulder so I tightened my grip on a steering wheel that for the first time since I started driving was mine. I had decided to take the longer way and go through Lucero because my uncle Lyle lived there and I had an idea about the rest of the night. After a while we went down into a deep cut in the land and at the bottom was a river lined by leafless cottonwoods standing like tall gray ghosts on its banks and as I usually did in such places I thought about what Big Man had told me when I was a boy, that in the old days this was where we would have made our camps in summer and winter because wood and water were close at hand. The only evidence of human presence now, though, was a golf course, closed for the season, the long fairways and greens covered with snow. A few minutes after we made it back up the other side of the cut we passed the prison, and I told June look her dad was waving and she laughed. Then we were in Lucero, driving past the biggest American flag I have ever seen, hanging silent and massive from a very tall pole. As we made our way to Lyle's I was reminded of how shabby the town was. The houses were a little rough and so were the white people there, more so than in Paradise, and as a result I felt much more at home.

Lyle had been in Lucero since I was a kid, after he married this white girl who had grown up on a farm outside of town. They met in Seattle but her parents were still out on the acreage and she wanted to be nearby, so she moved back and there went Lyle. His dad was Big Man's brother—everyone called him Ice Man but almost no one could tell you why—and Lyle looked a lot like him, big ears and big nose and kind of sleepy eyes, always going around with this smile on his face like he knew something you didn't. Which he probably did! Everyone knows something you don't. But only the rare person takes advantage of that and turns it into a life style. He came to the door wearing that half slouch I remembered well and he was easy in himself, his shaggy hair coming down a little over his ears, and even though we had not seen each other in a long time he went right into it.

Heck, you got ugly, he said.

He gave me one of those soft handshakes I was not accustomed to getting when I was not on the reservation.

Thank you, I said. I had to work *reeeeeeal* hard to get this way.

He looked from me to June and back and somehow his smile got even more sly and he asked what we were up to and when I told him he laughed. All right, he said. Let's do it. We went down to the store and I gave him some cash and he got a couple of eighteeners and a bottle of what turned out to be very bad whiskey and we went back to his place and by then his wife, Cindy, was home from her shift at the E.R. We drank and laughed in the living room and she made chicken and peas and potatoes for everyone and while she cooked she had a

few beers herself and snuck a shot or two of the whiskey before Lyle went to the kitchen and got the bottle and by the time dinner was ready I was a few sheets to the wind and looking to add a few more and Lyle looked as sleepy as I had ever seen him and Cindy was staring dumbly around the room like she would be calling in sick the next day and June looked as fine and perfect as new snow. Some time later, when we had come to the end of whatever part of the night we'd been in and there was a long silence, Cindy looked at each of us with the kind of seriousness that only hits when you are halfway to the grave or halfway to hell with drink. Let's go for a drive! is what came out of her mouth and then we were cruising around Lucero, Lyle taking us up and down the main streets and the side streets real slow, staying so perfectly within the lines at such consistent speed that anyone who saw us would know our condition. We were in his old, beat-to-hell Pacer, a strange, rounded-off vision of a future that never happened. They'd asked me to drive but I told them I was too ripped out of it. Then Cindy had said to take her rig, a Chevy S-10, but Lyle asked how the hell we were going to fit in that and she said, Oh yeah. So there we were, cruising around in a yellow car with a green stripe that ran up the hood and a weird door, the dash lights all burned out and windows poorly tinted and not even a rearview or a driver's-side mirror for Lyle to see if a cop was behind us. I sat in the back seat with June, the two of us crunched in together, thigh to thigh, which had been part of my foolproof plan. June was leaning away from me, and I had one arm along the back of the seat and was leaning toward her, just enough that I could see out the windshield. We went down Main, the string of yellow lights that ran along the edges of the marquee of the old theatre still lit up. We hit the end of downtown and turned and crossed the tracks and it was clear that whoever could afford to live where they wanted did not live on this side of town. There were fewer street lights or maybe there was more distance between the lights because the blocks were longer, I don't know, and there were more cars parked on the streets than where Lyle and Cindy lived, which was across town and up the hill. Everything good is always up on the hill. Down below things get crowded. This is where I'd live if I lived here, June said. Typical indin, Lyle said. I had never been drunk after buying a car so I told June she looked beautiful and she smiled and I was so surprised by this that I could not say anything more. For years after that I thought about why she had smiled and eventually concluded what many people do about such matters, which is that most things are not worth dwelling on. Lyle kept driving around town and we kept drinking and at some point Cindy turned to us and said, Are you two together? And with that whatever spell I had been under and hoping June would fall under was gone.

Fawk no, June said. Not even a chance.

God damn, I said, immediately wishing I hadn't spoken.

Huh, Cindy said. She reached down by her feet and came back with the bottle and handed it to me. Have some of this bad whiskey, she said.

She faced forward again and I took a long swig and winced it down. We stopped at a bar and Lyle put his hand back and said to give him some cash. He and Cindy went in and they were there for what seemed like a long time. June flipped the release on the seat in front of her and pushed it forward so she would have more legroom. They had left the windows open so there was a breeze that came through the car and I popped open another can and took a long drink and a few minutes later I felt totally fucked up. You look really fucked up, June said. I laughed. Fuck hey, I said. Look at me. I got a wicked Bronco. We both laughed. Then Lyle and Cindy were back and they had drinks in plastic cups in their hands and a sixer of Olympia. This guy is really fucked up, June said. Cindy looked at me hard in that drunk way and laughed, and Lyle drove us home. Puking on my knees in the bushes by the neighbor's driveway and June laughing about it and my uncle helping me to the couch and me saying, Someone better kiss me, I'm a really rich indin! In the morning I woke up and it seemed like more than a few horses had walked over my head and then walked back over it. June was sleeping nearby on a mattress that had come from the back room I think. Her breath was coming quiet and easy and I realized I had never seen her sleeping and whatever ragged edge it was that followed her around when she was awake was gone. Soon Lyle was in the kitchen cooking and then it was bacon and eggs and fried potatoes all day in that house, and Cindy came out from the bedroom and was leaning on Lyle like the night before had not happened and me and June had not passed out listening to them fight. I put my forearm over my eyes to protect my brain from having to deal with the day and a little later someone tapped my elbow. Cindy had not taken her makeup off and up close she looked like a melting clown.

Can we borrow a few dollars? she said. Just till payday. We can get you back after that.

Sure, I said. Check my coat. I don't know where it is. Front pocket. With legendary effort I turned onto my side and June was awake now and staring at me with her dark eyes and if there was someone who could read the look on her face I was not that one. ♦