

SHOTGUN LOVESONGS

NICKOLAS BUTLER



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THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS



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For Regina & Henry & Mom & Dad

For Swan, who hears sunsets

And for Levon Helm (1940–2012)

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But, heave ahead, boy, I'd rather be killed by you than kept alive by any other man.

—H

WE INVITED HIM TO ALL of our weddings; he was famous. We addressed the invitations to his record company's skyscraper in New York City so that the gaudy, gilded envelopes could be forwarded to him on tour—in Beirut, Helsinki, Tokyo. Places beyond our ken or our limited means. He sent back presents in battered cardboard boxes festooned with foreign stamps—birthday gifts of fine scarves and perfume for our wives, small delicate toys or trinkets upon the births of our children: rattles from Johannesburg, wooden nesting dolls from Moscow, little silk booties from Taipei. He would call us sometimes, the connection scratchy and echoing, a chorus of young women giggling in the background, his voice never sounding as happy as we expected it to.

Months would pass before we saw his face again, and then, he would arrive home, bearded and haggard, his eyes tired but happily relieved. We could tell that Lee was glad to see us, to be back in our company. We always gave him time to recover before our lives resumed together, we knew he needed time to dry out and regain his balance. We let him sleep and sleep. Our wives brought him casseroles and lasagnas, bowls of salad and freshly baked pies.

He liked to ride a tractor around his sprawling property. We assumed he liked feeling the heat of daylight, the sun and fresh air on his pale face. The slow speed of that old John Deere, so reliable and patient. The earth rolling backward beneath him. There were no crops on his land of course, but he rode the tractor through the fallow fields of prairie grasses and wildflowers, a cigarette between his lips, or a joint. He was always smiling on that tractor, his hair all flyaway and light blond and in the sunlight it was like the fluff of a seeding dandelion.

He had taken another name for the stage but we never called him by that name. We called him Leland, or just plain Lee, because that was his name. He lived in an old schoolhouse away from things away from our town, Little Wing, and maybe five miles out into the countryside. The name on his mailbox read: L SUTTON. He had built a recording studio in the small, ancient gymnasium, padding the walls with foam and thick carpeting. There were platinum records up on the walls. Photographs of him with famous actresses and actors, politicians, chefs, writers. His gravel driveway was long and potted with holes, but even this was not enough to deter some of the young women who sought him out. They came from around the world. They were always beautiful.

Lee's success had not surprised us. He had simply never given up on his music. While the rest of us were in college or the army or stuck on our family farms, he had holed up in a derelict chicken coop and played his battered guitar in the all-around silence of deepest winter. He sang in an eerie falsetto and sometimes around the campfire it would make you weep in the unreliable shadows thrown by those orange-yellow flames and white-black smoke. He was the best among us.

He wrote songs about our place on earth: the everywhere fields of corn, the third-growth forests, the humpbacked hills and grooved-out draws. The knife-sharp cold, the too-short days, the snow, the snow, the snow. His songs were our anthems—they were our bullhorns and microphones and jukeboxes.

poems. We adored him; our wives adored him. We knew all the words to the songs and sometimes we were in the songs.

* * *

Kip was going to be married in October inside a barn he'd renovated for the occasion. The barn stood on a farm of horses, the land there delineated by barbed-wire fences. The barn was adjacent to a small country cemetery where it was entirely possible to count every lichen-encrusted tombstone and know how many departed were lying in repose under that thick sod. A census, so to speak. Everyone was invited to the wedding. Lee had even cut short the leg of an Australian tour in order to attend, though to all of us, Kip and Lee seemed the least close among our friends. Kip, as far as I knew, didn't even own any of Lee's albums, and whenever we saw Kip driving around town it was inevitably with Bluetooth lodged in his ear, his mouth working as if he were still out on the floor of the Mercantile Exchange.

Kip had just returned to Wisconsin after about nine years of trading commodities in Chicago. It was as if the world had just gotten small again. For years, decades, our whole lives, really—we listened to the farm reports in our trucks on the AM radio. Sometimes you'd even hear Kip's voice during those broadcasts as he was interviewed from his office down in Chicago, that familiar self-assured baritone narrating fluctuations in numbers that dictated whether or not we could afford orthodontia for our children, winter vacations, or new boots, telling us things we didn't exactly understand and yet already knew. Our own futures were sown into those reports of milk and corn prices, wheat and soy. Hog-bellies and cattle. Far from our farms and mills, Kip had made good manipulating the fruits of our labor. We respected him just the same. He was fiercely intelligent, for one thing, his eyes burned in their sockets as he listened intently to us complain about seed salesmen, pesticides, fertilizer pricing, our machines, the fickle weather. He kept a farmer's almanac in his back pocket, understood our obsession with rain. Had he not gone away, he might have been a prodigious farmer himself. The almanac, he once told me, was almost entirely obsolete, but he liked to carry it around. "Nostalgia," he explained.

After he returned, Kip bought the boarded-up feed mill downtown. The tallest structure in town, its six-story grain silos had always loomed over us, casting long shadows like a sundial for our days. Very early in our childhoods it had been a bustling place where corn was taken to be held for passing trains, where farmers came to buy their fuel in bulk, their seed, other supplies, but by the late eighties it had fallen into disrepair, the owner having tried to sell in a time when no one was buying. It was only a few months before the high-schoolers began throwing stones through the windows, decorating the grain silos with graffiti. Most of our lives it was just a dark citadel beside a set of railroad tracks that had grown rusty and overgrown with milkweed, ragweed, fireweed. The floors had been thick with pigeon shit and bat guano, and there was a lake of standing water in the old stone basement. In the silos, rats and mice ran rampant, eating the leftover grain—sometimes we broke inside to shoot them with .22s, the small-caliber bullets occasionally ricocheting against the towering walls of the silos.

We used flashlights to find their beady little eyes and once, Ronny stole one of his mother's signal flares from the trunk of her car, dropping it down into the silo, where it glowed hot pink against the sulfurous darkness, as we shot away.

Within ten months Kip had restored most of the mill. He paid local craftsmen to do the work, overseeing every detail; he beat everyone to the site each morning and was not above wielding a hammer or going to his knees, as needed, to smooth out the grout, or what have you. We guessed at the kind of money he must have thrown at the building: hundreds of thousands for sure; maybe millions.

At the post office or the IGA, he talked excitedly about his plans. "All that space," he'd say. "Think about all that space. We could do *anything* with that space. Offices. Light industry. Restaurants, pubs, cafés. I want a coffee shop in there, I know that much." We tried our best to dream along with him. As young children, we had briefly known the mill as a place where our mother bought us overalls, thick socks, and galoshes. It had been a place that smelled of dog food and coal dust and new leather and the halitosis and the cheap cologne of old men. But those memories were further away.

"You think people will want to have dinner inside the old mill?" we asked him.

"Think outside the box, man," he crooned. "That's the kind of thinking that's *killed* this town. Think big."

Near the new electronic cash register was the original till. Kip had saved that, too. He liked to lean against the old machine, his elbows on its polished surface while one of his employees rang up customers at the newer register. He had mounted four flat-screen televisions near the registers where it was easy to monitor the distant stock markets, Doppler radar, and real-time politics, talking to his customers out the sides of his mouth, eyes still trained up on the news. Sometimes, he never even looked at their faces. But he had resurrected the mill. Old men came there to park their rusted trucks in the gravel lot and drink wan coffee as they leaned against their still warm vehicles, engines ticking down, and they talked and spat brown juices into the gravel rock and dust. They liked the new activity that had accumulated around the mill. The delivery trucks, sales representatives, construction crews. They liked talking to us, to young farmers—to me and the Giroux twins, who were often there, poking fun at Kip as he stared at all those brand-new plasma television screens, doing his best to ignore us.

Lee had actually written a song about the old mill before its revival. That was the mill I remembered, the one, I guess, that was real to us.

* * *

Our friend Ronny Taylor was an alcoholic. The drinking had made a bad detour of his life. Once, he had fallen down drunk onto the curb outside the VFW on Main Street and banged his head hard, broken some of his teeth. He'd been belligerent and loud that night, hitting on other people's girlfriends and wives, spilling his drinks, and twice he'd been seen peeing into the alley behind the bar, his dick out in the breeze while he whistled "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head." Sheriff Bartman had no choice and picked him up for public intoxication, though Bartman had no quarrel with

Ronny and simply wanted the man to dry out somewhere safe, to not jump behind the wheel of some pickup truck only to kiss an oak tree at seventy miles an hour later in the evening. But of course the damage had already been done. All that night and into the next morning as Ronny lay cooped up in jail for public intoxication, his brain was bleeding from the inside. By the time the sheriff took him to the hospital in Eau Claire for emergency surgery, it was too late. Damage had been done that could not be undone. No one ever said as much, but we wondered if all that alcohol had thinned his blood and worsened the bleeding. Ronny was never the same after that, but some slowed-down version of himself. More happy perhaps, but also less aware, and if you were a stranger meeting him for the first time, you might just think he was a little *slow*, but then again, maybe you would think he was normal. Either way, you might never have guessed about the young man that existed before in that same body. His sentences just didn't come as quickly and frequently he repeated himself. But it didn't mean that he was dumb, or handicapped, though sometimes, I wonder if we treated him that way.

Ronny dried out in the hospital over the course of several months, often restrained in his bed, and we came to the hospital to hold his hand. His grip was ferocious, his veins seemed everywhere ready to jump right out through his sweaty flesh. His eyes were scared in a way I had only seen in horses. We wiped his forehead and did our best to hold him down to the earth.

Our wives and children came to visit him too and he liked that. It forced him to mellow. Our children brought crayons and paper to the hospital and drew crude portraits of him, the colors always happy and beside his head a glowing sun or a leafed-out tree. Sometimes after the children left we would find him clutching their art and bawling, other times, holding them tenderly, studying them and touching their work like sacred artifacts. He saved those pictures and later hung them in his apartment.

After a period of time he came out of the tunnel and we took care of him as best we could because he was ours and he had no other family; both his parents had passed away when we were in our midtwenties—carbon monoxide poisoning at their cabin up on Spider Lake, near Birchwood. Ronny was Little Wing's orphan.

He had been a professional rodeo. He was tender with horses, brutal with cattle. He knew ropes and even before the accident he'd suffered any number of vicious injuries and insults to his body. There were times when he came over to our house for dinner that my children would ask him to list off his broken bones. That inventory took some time.

"Let's see," he'd say, pulling off his tired cowboy boots. "Well. I had all ten toes broken, I know that." Next he'd pull off his holey socks. What toenails he still had were yellowed and the dirty milk color of quartz; they seemed to grow in defiance of his flesh. "Some of these toes were broken twice, I think. An angry brahma is going to come down wherever they want to come down, see, and sometimes that'll be on you." Ronny would pick up our son, Alex, and set him on his back on the living-room floor and then pretend to be a bull, crashing down gently on the little boy's body, tickling his ribs, armpits, and toes. "In Kalispell they wanted to take both pinkie toes, but I escaped the hospital before they could put me under. Had a girl there who I called and she was waiting outside with the engine running...."

“This scar here,” he said, indicating his pale right ankle, “a bull named Ticonderoga come down on it and snapped my leg in two.”

My kids thought this was the best game in the world—seeing how many garments they could get off Ronny Taylor to shed, how many broken bones he could remember, how many nasty scars their little fingers could trace.

But the drunken fall had ended his rodeo life, and we were sad for that. He had dropped out of high school to rodeo; he had no trade and no skills.

Lee paid for his medical expenses, his apartment, his food and clothing. We weren't supposed to know any of that, but we had grown up with Rhonda Blake, who worked in one of the Eau Claire hospital's medical records departments, and she told Eddy Moffitt one night at the VFW. She had been shaking her head and smiling kind of winsomely and Eddy went over to her, bought her a drink and asked what was going on.

“You know, I could get fired for saying something,” Rhonda said, “but the thing is, something like this. People ought to know. I never heard of a good deed like this. Christ, I could lose my job, but truth is, it'd be worth it.”

And then she told Eddy that Ronny hadn't had insurance. That the bills had been well over a hundred thousand dollars.

“One day,” she said, “we get a delivery from New York City. An envelope from some record company to Ronny's attention. And sure enough, a goddamn check for a hundred and twenty-three thousand dollars.”

She drank her beer fast, her eyes wet.

“It was just so sweet,” she said, “I couldn't keep it to myself.”

Eddy told us all this story one night after a high school football game. (Us versus Osseo.) None of us had children old enough to be in high school yet, but when you live in a town as small as Little Wing, Wisconsin, you go out to the high school football and basketball games. It is, after all, something to do, cheap family entertainment. We all stood underneath the bleachers, some of us sharing a pouch of Red Man chewing tobacco, others passing a bag of sunflower seeds, listening to Eddy as the crowd thundered its support right above us, boots stomping the wooden bleachers, the rickety metal scaffolding shaking loose rust. From overhead, aluminum cans and crumpled-up hot dog wrappers rained down. We crossed our arms, spat, tried to imagine what a check for a hundred thousand dollars even looked like.

Lee was already our hero, but this only deepened our love for him, grew his legend. We all went out the next day and bought ten more of his albums, each of us, even though we had duplicates at our homes. And that money we spent was precious too because so many of us were just scraping by; we could've been plugged into savings or used for groceries. Still. We mailed them to relatives and distant friends, donated them to libraries and nursing homes.

Ronny never saw a bill; Lee's lawyers took care of all the logistics. Ronny would be taken care of forever. Ronny did not seem to know that he had a patron in life, or, maybe he did, I don't know. All

know is that Lee never talked about it, and neither did Ronny. Then again, it was only right. There were countless posters of Lee in Ronny's apartment, and they had been there well before the accident and surgery. Most had gone a little faded with sunlight, greasy with kitchen smoke. They had adorned those shabby walls *long* before Lee became famous. Ronny had always loved him the most.

* * *

The invitations to Kip's wedding were heavy with paper and ribbon and glitter. We carried them from our mailboxes and vehicles into our houses carefully, reverently, as if they held priceless, exquisite news. We vaguely knew the woman he was marrying. Felicia was from Chicago and now worked as a consultant from their new house just outside town. Exactly what or with whom she consulted, we didn't really understand, though Eddy claimed that it had something to do with pharmaceuticals. She had come out to the VFW a few times with Kip, always beautiful, her makeup and hair and nails always perfect. We remembered her for her high heels, which she wore all through the winter, her toenails sharp shiny red. She was plenty nice, but there was something in her manner that seemed to indicate to us that our town was just a temporary place for her, a kind of layover, and that we were layovers too. Layovers to later be flown over one day and waved to. Flyover friends.

We scanned the invitation, surprised to see that Lee would be playing a song during the ceremony. He had not played songs at any of our weddings, and though we had all wanted him to, none of us had even thought to ask him for that kind of favor. We hadn't really thought of him attending as a performer, just as our friend.

Not long after the invitations arrived at our houses, Lee came home from Australia, as run-down and misspent as we'd ever seen him. We let him be a few days, like we always did, and then my wife Beth, invited him over to our farm for dinner and a bonfire. He always seemed to like playing with our children and the fact that we didn't have cable television, that in fact our *only* television was an ancient model inherited from my parents that looked more like a gigantic piece of wooden furniture than something that might actually connect us to the outside world. We owned a newish record player though—I collect old vinyl—and he always blushed as he passed it and noticed one of his LPs underneath the needle. Our kids knew all the words to his songs.

The kids squealed that night as they saw the headlights of Lee's old truck come down our driveway toward the house. They ran in circles and galloped, singing out all his trademark lines with gusto.

"All right, all right, all right!" Beth said, laughing. "Enough. Now you're gonna give Uncle Lee some room. He's tired, all right? He just got home from Australia. So don't pester him too much." Shooing them away from the front door, she checked her reflection in the mirror, pursed her lips, and ran her fingers quickly through her hair.

He came to the door carrying a bouquet of carnations that were obviously bought in a hurry from the IGA. Beth took the flowers and they hugged. He had grown skinny over the years and his hairline was quickly receding, though he let the strands grow long. He had a beard and his forearms were scattered with tattoos.

“Hey buddy,” he said, grinning at me. “Good to be home. Missed you a ton.”

Lee always gave good hugs. I felt his rib cage against my own, his long arms around me. The smell of tobacco in his beard and in his hair.

“We missed you too,” I said. Then the children attacked him and he fell to the floor in mock defeat. Beth and I went to the kitchen and brought the meal out to our old dining-room table, where there were candles already lit. Beth went to the turntable and flipped his record, placed the needle in the wide black groove at the edge.

We heard Lee groan from the entryway as he stumbled toward us, dragging Eleanore and Alex, his arms underneath their armpits, and shaking his head. “Let’s listen to something else, huh?” he said. “I’m so friggin’ tired of myself.”

* * *

We watched him eat, wolfing down the food; it made us happy to feed him. We drank wine and listened to jazz and outside the windows the autumn leaves were loud and dry on their branches. Snow was not inconceivable.

“Heard you’re playing a song at Kip’s wedding,” I said, after some time had passed.

Lee leaned back in his chair and exhaled. “Yeah,” he said, “I guess I am. Got a text from him one day out of the blue. I was so surprised, I didn’t give my reply much thought. Maybe I should’ve.”

“You okay with that?” Beth asked. “Singing, I mean. For Kip of all people?”

He shrugged. “You know, I like Kip just fine, but it’s not like we’re close. He’s more like an acquaintance at this point than a friend. But I came back, you know, to see you all and—I don’t know—to support him. Old time’s sake and all. He’s done some good things. The mill, for one. I think he’s a good thing for this town. Anyway, I’d rather be here than the outback.”

“Oh,” Beth said, putting her chin in her hand and smiling, “your life’s not so bad.” She traced something on the surface of the table with her other hand.

“No,” he said. “My life is good. Very good. But I get lonely too. For people I can trust. People who don’t want anything from me. It, it changes you after a while, you know? And I don’t *want* it to change me. I want to be able to come back here and live here and just be who I am. With you guys.” He exhaled deeply and took a long sip of wine.

We followed his lead, raising our wineglasses to him, and they made a sound like dull chimes. Then there was a silence. Just the children’s feet swinging beneath the table and the wind in the desiccated corn stalks and tree limbs outside, and Lee smiled again and poured himself another glass of wine and we could see that his teeth were already stained purple and that he was happy.

“I wish I had your lives,” he said at last. “You know?”

I kissed Beth’s hand, then took it in my own, looked at her. She smiled at me, blushing, then looked at the floor.

Lee rose from the table then, pressed his knuckles into the small of his back, and stretched like a cat, before collecting our plates and walking them to the kitchen sink. Beth followed him, wineglass

clutched in her long fingers, and I watched for a moment as they stood close beside each other cleaning, him passing her wet dishes that she dried with a towel. His hands soap-sudsy, then hers to both of them swaying back and forth just a little with the jazz. It made me feel good, to have everyone together, to have him back. I took a roll of newspaper and some matches and went out into the darkness to light a bonfire.

The wind carried cold and the stars were all out, the blue-white throw of the Milky Way gran overhead. I went to the woodpile and carried a load of logs to our fire-ring in the backyard, then bro up some kindling and lit a match, blowing carefully against the tender new flames. I have always loved bonfires.

Lee came out of the house at some point, and I sensed him behind me.

“Want a joint?” he asked.

I looked around, though we had no neighbors for hundreds and hundreds of yards. “The kids bed?” I asked, rubbing my hands for warmth, blowing into them, the smell of alcohol still there faintly.

“Beth’s putting them down now,” he said, grinning. We were silent a moment. “I needed tonight man,” he said finally. “Needed to be with you guys. Just to, you know, have a little room to breathe. Eat some good food. I can’t tell you.”

There were rolling papers in his hands and he passed me a plastic bag, heavy and pungent even through the plastic. He pinched the buds into the paper and licked it along its edges. He always made great paper planes.

“Wanna just share?” I asked.

“Why not.”

So we stood that way, our faces red and orange before the fire with two different fragrances of smoke swirling around us, and overhead the heavens very slowly spinning and strange beautiful lights arcing down to earth every so often.

Lee started laughing at one point, shaking his head. I touched the flannel of his jacket and said “What is it? *What?*”

“I’m dating someone.”

“Yeah? You’re *always* dating someone.”

“Not like this,” he said. He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. The smoke was big in our lungs, sticky and good. We passed the joint between us.

“So, who is she? Come on now.”

I choked on the smoke when he told me, coughed into the night before beating a fist against my chest. Lee was dating a movie star who appeared regularly on the glossy pages of at least three different magazines lying around our house. She was famously elegant, unfathomably beautiful, undeniably talented.

He nodded his head at me, still smiling.

“And what’s she doing with a bum like you?”

“A guy’s entitled to get lucky every now and again,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, though I could see perfectly clearly that he was in love with her.

“I’m bringing her to Kip’s wedding,” he said, a moment later. “I can’t wait for you guys to meet her.”

“Jesus, Lee, I’m—*shit*, I’m just really happy for you,” I said, though there was something in my chest that snagged like jealousy. “I’m so happy for you,” I repeated, staring into the fire, past the flames to where the coals were throbbing, the palest, brightest orange. I wondered what it would be like to touch her body, to be with a woman that beautiful. Then I shook my head, shook away those thoughts and was back alongside Lee, happy and proud of him.

Strange, I thought to myself right then, how his life was like my own and yet not at all like mine though we came from the same small place on earth. And why? How had our paths diverged, why were they still even connected? Why was he then in my backyard, on my farm, the sound of almost two hundred cows, faintly in the background, mooing and lowing? How had he come back, this famous man, this person whose name everyone knew, whose voice was recognizable to millions in a way that made it impossible for him to be a stranger in so many places?

It was difficult for me to look up at the night sky and not think of Lee and his fame. All over the world at that very moment there were people no doubt listening to his music. I watched him take his final drag on the joint before flicking it into the fire. He was incandescent.

* * *

Ronny frequently stayed over at the old schoolhouse when Lee wasn’t on tour. They played music together, Ronny on the drums, banging away, Lee smiling appreciatively at his damaged friend. They rode on Lee’s tractor together under the sun. Lee made Ronny breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The two of them would sit on Lee’s huge porch, just being quiet. They watched the bats swooping in the night against a backdrop of stars. They listened to the owls. Watched deer grazing out in the fields.

Lee was careful about Ronny’s sobriety. They would sit together in their Adirondack chairs with mugs of coffee or hot chocolate, and that was good and enough. When he was with Ronny, Lee was clean, or mostly clean. And if they went out to the VFW in the evening to watch a Packers game or to eat a hamburger or share a paper boat full of cheese curds, Lee kept Ronny close, ordering his friend Coca-Colas and paying rapt and sincere attention to his friend’s sometimes convoluted observations and conversation. Prior to Ronny’s accident, none of us had fully understood the alcoholism that had almost killed him, but it seemed that alcohol had become his closest companion while traveling for the rodeo. After an event was over, sprawled out in some motel bathtub icing his purple-bruised body, he would grow drunk on cheap beer or rotgut vodka. Drinking became his lover and his lullaby, his needle and his pillow.

* * *

Lee had had an entire bull killed and taxidermied and then mounted to a platform on four sturdy tires

The two friends would roll the dead bull into one of Lee's fields and then spend the afternoon taking passes beside it on Lee's tractor, a lasso in Ronny's hand, expertly twirling over his smiling face and then thrown out into the field, where it never failed to snag the impassive creature's two shining horns.

"All his muscles still remember," Lee would say, shaking his head in sadness. Then, "I ought to buy him a horse."

* * *

The bachelor party was a mess. Kip had rented a stretch limousine and bought us all matching Polo shirts to wear for the day. We were to spend the day golfing. Thirty-six holes. He had rented out the entire course and the clubhouse. There was a rumor of strippers. But Kip had not invited Ronny, and Lee was irate. I wasn't surprised. Kip had a way of moving too fast, of talking too fast, of barely listening, and he'd always been that way; he and Ronny had never quite meshed and maybe none of us ever really meshed with Kip. But certainly not Ronny, who would just stare at him, even when we were young, and say things like, "Now Kip, who gives two shits about advanced placement history?" I mean, really. There's a party at the quarry this weekend. That's what I'm focused on. Focused on getting laid." When I imagined the party we were invited to, I pictured his colleagues from back in Chicago: suit-and-tie men, martini men, expense-account men who'd gone to good universities and drove nice cars. These men would own their own sets of new golf clubs and spiked golf shoes. Their hands would be office-soft. Perhaps Kip had not invited Ronny to protect him, or because he was too embarrassed. But I also knew that none of those excuses would fly with Lee, whose love for Ronny was almost righteous.

Ronny had marked the date of the wedding on a calendar that hung from a magnetic hook attached to the side of his refrigerator, and in the preceding months, he asked Lee and me regularly when the bachelor party would be.

"Got to have a bachelor party," Ronny would say. "You just got to. It's the last hurrah. Right? The last hooray."

It made me sad to think that Ronny himself might never be married.

Lee and I went to Ronny's apartment on the day of the bachelor party.

"Did you get an invitation?" Lee said, looking anxiously through the mass of mail piled up on Ronny's kitchen table, mostly junk: coupons, political propaganda, credit card offers; no bills were ever posted to Ronny's apartment.

"Nope," Ronny said, "probably just lost in the mail. I know he wants me there."

"Oh, no doubt, bud," said Lee, seething with anger, "no doubt. Hang on there, buddy, okay? I got to make a phone call real quick." He eyed me seriously and I knew to watch Ronny, to keep him entertained. I turned on the television and flipped the channels until we found a nature program about a herd of Montana buffalo.

"You can use my phone!" Ronny yelled, but Lee was already down the stairs and outside. I watched

him from the window as he paced the sidewalk and shouted into his mobile. He looked like a man who needed something to kick.

A few moments later Lee came back up the stairs, his face red. "Hey buddy, look, no problem, all right!" he said, reentering the apartment. "I just talked to Kip and he explained everything to me. Your invitation, turns out, just now came back to him in the mail. He had the wrong address or something, I guess."

Ronny was watching the television, buffalo grazing on an endless expanse of prairie. "But I don't understand," he said. "Why didn't he just bring the invitation over himself? I wave to him every day when I walk by the mill." Ronny shook his head at the illogic of it and chuckled good-naturedly.

Lee exhaled. "I don't know, buddy. It's a good question." His fists were clenched. He looked outside. It was a beautiful October day. The sun bright and clear, the autumn leaves a cool inferno across the land. In the air: the smell of overripe apples, manure.

Not long after that, a limousine pulled up outside Ronny's apartment and blared its horn six times. Lee looked at me and I saw then, noticed for the first time, that he was a powerful man, that he could get things accomplished with a single telephone call. I saw that he was used to getting his way, he was not accustomed to disappointment.

Ronny turned from the television, his face bright with excitement. "Party time," he said, grinning, and he gave us hard, loud high-fives. My palm hurt.

We nodded. "Party time," we said with as much enthusiasm as we could muster.

We all went downstairs to the idling limousine. It was packed with most of our better friends as well as a few strange faces, among them a photographer, a young woman with two different cameras slung around her neck. She seemed to be capturing just about any moment of even the slightest interest with her elaborate Nikon, paying particular attention to everyone's hands, where glasses of champagne, bottles of beer, and highballs of whiskey sloshed extravagantly.

"Yeah!" Ronny shouted, taking all of this in. "Yeah! Yeah! *Yeah!* Party tiiiiime!" The tight little crowd cheered reflexively.

We ducked into the limousine after Ronny and settled in as the stretch turned off Main and reoriented itself like a giant compass needle toward the golf course. The vehicle was loud with music that I didn't recognize, and Lee leaned in close to me. "Don't let Ronny out of your sight. Don't lose sight of him," he said. "Do you understand me?" I nodded, realizing that the limousine and the party had been a bad idea, that it was all a very bad idea, and now we were swept up into it; Lee had demanded that Ronny be invited, but now he saw the party as being a great danger to his friend. Lee sat rigidly, his fists clenched, jaw set.

"Get him something to drink," Lee growled at me through the racket. "No beer, though, no booze."

I reached for a can of Coca-Cola and popped the top for Ronny, who slugged at the aluminum can. "Yeah!" he said, coming up for air and wiping his mouth with his forearm. "Yeah!"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Kip called out now. "Hey!" He rapped a Swiss Army knife against his champagne flute. "I need to make an announcement, all right? Announcement time!" He reminded me of

Scoutmaster who could not control his troop. “Can everybody please shut the fuck up? Hey!”

“Speeeeech!” the mob called out. “Speech! Speech!” The group was mostly comprised of friends, but in that moment, I felt that it was just me and Lee, with Ronny beside us. The photographer aimed her camera at us, at Lee, and the flash went off momentarily with light, blinding us. Perhaps not surprisingly, she seemed to only be interested in taking photos of Lee, and I could already imagine her cropping Ronny and me out of the image. I wondered if this was what fame was—a lot of strange cameras and then the subsequent blindness of some unexpected portrait. I thought about a middle school history class in which we were taught that some Native Americans thought that having their photograph taken was tantamount to their souls being stolen.

“Can’t tell you guys how much it means to me that you’re all here today,” Kip said, “helping me celebrate my big day tomorrow. I’m overcome, guys, I really am,” though he did not look overcome. His reddish brown hair was thick and long and greased up away from his tight calm face and the closely trimmed beard that followed his strong jawline, his smile utterly controlled and almost ironic. “Me and Felicia,” he said, “we’re so happy you’ve all welcomed us back into the community the way you have. With open arms. And that you’re excited too, about the mill. You know? It means the world to us. And *tomorrow*”—and here he paused with all the phony gravitas and dramatic flair of a seasoned corporate toastmaster—“we’re all going out to that big old barn to see a great wedding and to *par-ty heart-ty*.”

He was not finished with his soliloquy, but Ronny yelled, “Party time!” and pumped his fists in the close boozy air. Some of the group laughed a little uncertainly, but Lee threw an arm around his friend and whispered intently into his ear. I watched Lee’s lips move, though I could not hear his words. You *stick close to me, buddy*, I imagined him saying. *We’ll party hearty together, okay? You and me.*

Nodding indulgently at Ronny, Kip moved on. “So listen,” he said, “I got you all a little present, okay? Some shirts. It’s not much, but hey—it’s something, right? I want you to put them on now. Because today, we’re like a team. A team of friends. You know? I want you to have fun. I want you to forget about everything else today, all right? Okay. So that’s it. I’ve said what I had to say. Now, let’s go have some *fun*.”

He reached into a black plastic garbage bag and pulled out a multitude of red Polo shirts and a specially embroidered across the left breast with two crossing golf clubs and the date. Kip began passing them around. He even knocked on the Plexiglas window of the limousine and passed a shirt up to the driver. Then he passed one to the photographer. It appeared to be at least one, perhaps two sizes too small for her, and I averted my eyes as she gamely removed her button-down shirt to don the confining garment. Some of the assembled cheered at the frustratingly brief exposure of her stomach and bra. And then Kip tossed a shirt to each of his assembled friends. To everyone, that is, except Ronny Taylor, whose face drooped, almost imperceptibly, his hands empty and waiting. Lee noticed immediately and handed his Polo shirt to Ronny.

“Here you go, buddy,” he said. “Kip must’ve just forgot about getting me one.”

But when Ronny looked back at his friend, his face was sad with knowing. Ronny paused a moment

before he pulled off the shirt he was wearing, and we saw then the scars of his rodeo days, the me grossly missing from an area near his shoulder, the crudely sewn stitches of some arena paramedic small-town ER. His stomach, still admirably flat, was corrugated with muscle, and a tattoo over h heart in blurred blue lettering read CORVUS—Lee’s stage name—along with a roughshod image of a crow perched atop a telephone wire. The tattoo, already almost ten years old, had been there before Lee was even famous, when we were all little more than kids.

“I still can’t believe you ever did that,” Lee said now, reaching out to touch his friend’s tattoo. He shook his head and smiled.

“I believed in you,” Ronny said with all the earnestness in the world. “I still do. You’re my friend.”

All eyes in the limousine were on them. Outside the long automobile, the world continued to move on—traffic slowly blurring by, the occasional tractor, an old farmer walking along the gravel shoulder, perhaps toward the bank or library downtown—but inside, life was a diorama of open mouths, unblinking eyes, and held breaths. Then Kip broke in. “You, Lee. Where’s your shirt?”

“I didn’t *get* one,” Lee said. He had a hand on Ronny’s knee. His voice was stern. “But don’t worry about it, chief. It really doesn’t matter.”

“But,” Kip began, and even as his eyes fell on what had to be Lee’s shirt, *right there*, on Ronny’s back, we could all hear in the falter of his voice that he wouldn’t push Lee any further. That evening though everyone in the limousine was equally uniformed except Lee, who sat heavily against the limousine’s glossy leather upholstery in his omnipresent flannel shirt and torn blue jeans, Kip would not now challenge him. Kip rapped his knuckles against the glass of the limousine driver’s partition and we began to move faster still, the volume of that bass-heavy music increasing even as the giant vehicle picked up speed.

* * *

We were farmers, most of us, not golfers. But it was a good day and the course unfolded before us spectacularly, the links verdant and shimmering, the sky overhead unfettered by so much as a single cloud. Kip had rented carts, and we were divided into pairs. Eddy Moffitt and I were to share a cart and I noticed that Kip had paired himself with Lee. The photographer was quick to snap several shots of the two men standing near each other, clubs in hand. Ronny stood off to the side, examining the sheet of pairings, a finger scrolling down the page, but never finding his name. I watched him scratch his head and then, leaning in close to Eddy’s ear, I said, “Listen, Eddy, I’m going to partner up with Ronny, that okay?”

Eddy was a good guy, everyone’s insurance salesman, and he understood immediately. “Hey Ronny!” he called out. “Ronny! Yo, you’re over here with Hank.” Then Eddy slapped me kindly on the back with a big thick hand and pulled my head in close to him, whispering, “I don’t know what Kipper’s pulling here, but it’s some real bullshit. Anyways, you guys have fun. I’ll just head over to the clubhouse. See if those strippers have shown yet.” He patted my back again with the slab of his hand. Eddy had farmed for many years before a tractor accident had sent his farm in

bankruptcy. He'd hadn't had any insurance, had never been able to afford it, and the hospital bills had ruined him.

I shook Ronny's hand and we found a cart with two sets of bags attached to the back, and the driver drove off to the first tee. Sitting in a rack just above the clubs was a cooler of beer. I saw Ronny's eyes go right to it, the ice within jiggling against all that cold aluminum with every bump of the cart. The driver braked and got out to remove the cooler. The Giroux twins were holding down their own cart, and as they moved to pass us, I handed the cooler to Cameron, who gave us a surprised salute as his brother Cordell stomped his foot on the accelerator, no doubt for a fast getaway before we could change our minds. Ronny seemed to deflate just a bit and I saw him lick his chapped lips as he watched our other friends drink in the warm sunlight, their throats working the beer down, lips wet, the air suddenly perfumed with the sweet aroma of cheap American beer. It was the smell of our childhood: the smell of silos and of barns and of harvest-time fields. Beer was our tonic, and I understood Ronny's torments. His brain wasn't so damaged that he couldn't recall the dim lights of our favorite bars and the boom of our favorite jukeboxes. The nights we had spent parked in the countryside, laying in the bed of an ancient pickup truck, emptying dozens of cans of beer and throwing the empties out into the ditches and into those infinite fields of corn. The drunken lovemaking that ensued: the touch of fingers, the weight of breasts, the caress of legs, the struggles with stubborn zippers, the yanking down of too-tight blue jeans. All our best memories were fueled by beer, and I saw then just how sorely Ronny missed his favorite vice; that somewhere in the broken circuitry of his brain there was still an unquenchable thirst. Part of me wanted to help him, but of course I could not and never would. And maybe we could have offered him a beer every now and then, but no one wanted to take that chance, and *what for*? What good could *possibly* come from it?

We golfed for hours, our faces sunburned, our lips growing dry and cracked. Carts came by with cheeseburgers and hot dogs and bottles of water and Cokes, but it did not matter; the golf exhausted us. The sun arced over our heads and began its descent in the west. We were brutal golfers, Ronny and I. But every now and again, we might light into a shot and send the little ball sailing over the countryside toward some small banner over a minor cup in the earth. We laughed together and I could see all of a sudden why Lee was such good friends with Ronny. Of course, they were both bachelors, natural grown playmates, no children or wives to encumber their fun, and maybe that was why I hadn't called Ronny more, invited him to go grouse hunting with me, or take a trip to the implement dealer to price out equipment. I don't know. He was kind and sincere and gentle. All afternoon we rode together over the links, taking our swings and encouraging each other, and he asked me the best questions about Beth and the kids, my farm and tractors. He was not interested in our scant income or our used vehicles or our paltry investments. His concerns were real. I invited him to come to dinner at our house.

"Thank you," he said. Then, "What can I bring?"

"Just bring yourself, Ronny. Just yourself."

Thirty-six holes of golf later, our palms riddled with blisters, we turned back toward the clubhouse

though Ronny seemed content to simply drive around, looking at the different holes—all the berm sand traps, ponds, long narrow fairways. We were not the first ones to come back. Most of the bachelor party was already there, drunk and on a slide to either camaraderie or savage belligerence. Standing atop the bar were two female dancers, nude, their bodies shining with what appeared to be spilled champagne. I watched Ronny's face break into a sunburned smile. I smiled, too.

"Party time!" he announced loudly, at which the entire bachelor party turned to him and roared their agreement. In that moment, Ronny had become their mascot. Someone grabbed him from me and pushed him toward the bar and dancers, where he stood, mouth agape, staring up at their hard, tanned bodies. They were attractive in that more and more familiar way, unapologetically enhanced, the scars of plastic surgery darkening the skin just beneath their breasts, their gaze out over all of us at once energized and stupendously bored. I realized that to them, Ronny must look normal, even handsome. Before his accident he had been our homecoming king, dated the best looking girls in our town. Even now, his body was rodeo lean, his face brutally handsome and carved. He looked at the dancers and I could see he was remembering some previous time in his life, some western town where perhaps he had fallen in love a night or two. Motel magic in Butte, or Billings, or Bozeman. There were times when it was too easy to forget that Ronny was still a virile man.

So I retreated to the margins of the party, watching Ronny from a distance as he stared up at the dancing women, his fingers occasionally reaching out for their toned calves, their painted toenails, supple ankles.

It was dusk before Kip and Lee finally entered the clubhouse, faces badly burned, hair crazily windblown, both of them scowling at each other. They went to either ends of the bar, ignoring the naked women dancing above them, and I saw them both order what looked to be whiskey. As soon as they'd tossed back their glasses, they ordered seconds. Their eyes were angry. Finally, after ordering a third glass, Lee left the bar and slumped into a chair beside me.

"Fucker made me play *every fucking hole*," he said. "All thirty-six. Fuckin' death march." The ice cubes in his glass sloshed as if in gasoline. "He throttled me! Every hole. And not by a stroke or two. I mean, by like, six, seven strokes. Every hole. No mulligans, no nothing. Made me count everything. Laughed his ass off at me the whole time. Fucker." Lee eyed Kip at the bar.

"Lee," I said, "relax. Everybody's got to be friends by tomorrow."

My eyes were still trained on Ronny up at the bar. He was holding a single dollar bill in the air like a torch. One of the women accepted the bill between her breasts, and I could see him sigh with something like ecstasy. The wedding party had moved away from the bar, and they were watching him, too. Feeding him singles.

"Fuck him," said Lee. "Seriously! Fuck *him*. I get paid ten thousand dollars sometimes just to show up at a place and play one goddamn song. Fucker treats me like that. Shit."

He was quiet then, and I was too, his words hanging in the air like smoke that could not be wafted away. I had never heard him say anything like that before, had never heard him talk about money before. He clenched and unclenched his hands in his lap and then reached up to smooth the hair on his

scalp.

“Sorry, man,” he said. “That was shitty. It’s his big day. Who cares if he beats the shit out of me golfing? I never golf. Goddamn yuppie nature walk.”

We sat that way awhile, and there was nothing for me to say. It had been a difficult year for me on the farm, with low milk prices coupled against exorbitant diesel and fertilizer prices. I’d also just had to replace my combine and pay for Eleanore’s tonsillectomy. We were at a point with our dairy herd where the general feeling was *grow or die*. Either we invested more in the farm and took on more cows, or else it was time to think about getting out. Beth and I were mortgaged to the hilt and there was no room to save for the kids’ educations, our investments having tanked along with everyone else’s. Beth had just brought home information about food stamps and state health care. I hadn’t been sleeping well at night, and didn’t know what I’d do if the farm failed. Until that moment I hadn’t had any concept of how much Lee made, though we had wondered, sure. But I understood that his income was like his travels—inconceivable to me. Now, the starkness, the reality of it all made me very sad.

I had considered asking Lee for a loan in the past, when things had been especially rough; Beth had even encouraged me to do so. But I never had.

“Look, Lee,” I began, and he looked over at me, his pupils still small and angry. But I could not continue.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s get Ronny and get out of here. I have to pick up Chloe at the airport tomorrow morning early. We oughta get out of here before something happens.”

But Kip had come over in that very moment and was now hovering over us, the photographer just over his shoulder, balanced on her toes, snapping photographs in the half-light of the clubhouse. Kip held a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue in his hand, his lips shiny with alcohol.

“So where’s your uniform anyway?” he barked down at Lee, something between a smile and a sneer on his face. He gave Lee’s arm a gentle jab. “Huh?”

Lee shook his head. “You forgot mine, remember?”

“No, I didn’t,” Kip said. “You gave it away’s what happened.”

Lee shrugged and looked at Kip, and I saw then that something had shifted—that they were no longer friends, or even friendly, just two men who didn’t like each other, two men who shared nothing anymore, beyond a common geography. Any intersection in their lives now, and moving forward would be like mere coincidence.

“So, when do I get to meet her?” Kip bellowed over the blaring music. Behind him, the dancers had moved off the bar, grinding their tawny hips against Ronny.

Lee stared at Kip. “*Get to?* What the fuck, Kip. What, you want her fuckin’ *autograph?*”

Kip absorbed Lee’s words for a moment, and smiled, then turned back to leer at the dancers. “The driver will take you back, if you like, boys. I certainly don’t want you ruining your voice yelling at me.” He took a pull off the bottle and walked back to the rest of the group, though by then, I recognized few of their faces. Gone were the Girouxes. Gone was Eddy.

We rose, collected a somewhat resistant Ronny, and left the place, ear drums pounding, the sme

of strange perfume in our hair, noses throbbing with sunburn. Ronny slumped back against the so leather seats and looked up into the night sky through the open moonroof. There was a smile on his face and two scraps of paper lodged in the pocket of his Wranglers: both dancers' numbers scrawled out with their names—*Lucy* and *Brandi*—and embellished with red lipstick Os where their lips had kissed the paper good night.

“Not my first time at the rodeo, boys,” he kept saying. “Nope. Not my first time at the rodeo.”

Lee put his arm around Ronny and they looked up at the stars in the sky. I smiled at the two of them, closed my eyes, and let the driver take me back home to my bed and my wife and my children.

* * *

I can recall that next morning with perfect clarity. The chaos of our house, Beth's parents downstairs with the kids and the television loud with cartoons. Beth was in the shower, taking a little longer than usual. A radio on in some room broadcasting an early football game. I stood in the mirror and knotted my tie. It had been my father's actually, and the silk was frayed in places, the design already dated. I did not like my face in the mirror that morning, my nose red from the prior day's sun, a razor burn beneath my jaw, the first sagging signs of a double chin. I sucked in my gut as I buttoned my pants. I needed a new suit probably, but there was no money for new suits. I knotted the tie over and over again, but each time the silk just ended up looking flimsy, too narrow. In the mirror my hairline looked almost cowardly, creeping away from my eyebrows, and I was suddenly nervous about meeting Chloe. Beth and I had been invited to brunch at Lee's place before driving out to Kip's hobby farm. Lee had picked her up from the airport in Minneapolis early that morning. We were supposed to collect Ronny en route.

Beth changed her ensemble five times that morning, switching out her shoes, her necklaces, her earrings. I understood. Had I owned more than one suit, I would have done the same thing. As it was, I just sat in a battered old chair in our bedroom and watched her. She was beautiful to me. I could see that she had shaved her legs, supple and taut above the easy grip of her heels. She mussed her hair and pursed her lips at the mirror.

“What do you think?” she said finally, turning to me.

I stood and went to her, understanding right then that we were already growing older, that we would grow old together.

“I think you're beautiful,” I said. I kissed her.

“Hey—watch the lipstick,” she said, swatting me away playfully before pulling me in close again. She set her chin on my shoulder and we slow danced that way, there in our bedroom, the worn carpeting beneath our best scuffed shoes. “I love you,” she said, “even if you're not a rock star.”

“I love you,” I said, “even though you're not a movie star.”

We kissed again and held hands as we walked downstairs, our garments good enough. The kids came up to us, hugged us good-bye. Beth's father shook my hand, and I noticed for the first time at that instant that the skin of his left ring finger had begun to overcome his wedding band. The ring had

become part of him, in the way that a fence-tree gradually absorbs the barbed wire wrapped around its bark. I felt happier then—less, I don't know, anxious. I knew that we would make it together, Beth and I, no matter what happened to the farm or anything else.

The town was abuzz. The local B&Bs and motels were full, the VFW and the other scattered townie bars jumping. Even the Coffee Cup Café was busy, with patrons banging the screened door shut as they walked out of the restaurant carrying Styrofoam cups of coffee. Main Street was bustling with strange vehicles adorned with out-of-state plates. Eddy had heard the guest list totaled over five hundred. An entire truck full of kegs had been driven up from Milwaukee, with a separate truck carrying hard booze. The caterers were not local; they'd come all the way from Minneapolis. I suppose Kip didn't want to take any chances; only the best would do.

The day was a golden kind of gray, the gauze of clouds in the sky occasionally obscuring the bright coin of the sun. It was a good day for a jacket.

Ronny sat on the curb out in front of his apartment, his hair wet and combed back. A scrap of red tissue clung to his chin from where he'd cut himself shaving. He waved happily at us as we approached, unself-conscious in a tight polyester suit, a white shirt, and bolo tie. His old cowboy boots had clearly been shined up with polish.

"Looking good, Ronny Taylor!" Beth said, sliding over toward me on the bench seat of our pickup truck while Ronny took her spot near the window. She kissed his cheek, and he blushed as she proceeded to rub the lipstick off his newly smooth skin.

"Thanks, Beth," he said, shyly.

We listened to the radio the whole way there: local sports scores, the weather, a story about a cougar sighting not far from town. The truck hugged the back roads smoothly and we rode toward Lee's place silently, nervously, happily. Chloe was a major actress, well known and loved. Between film projects she worked on Broadway. She had won a Golden Globe for playing a poet whose name eluded us all.

They were out on Lee's front porch as we bounced down his driveway toward them, their shoes off their feet propped up on the railing and they waved to us cheerfully as soon as we came into view. Even from fifty yards, we could see the steam rising off their coffee mugs and the smoke meandering off of what I assumed to be two smoldering joints in Lee's favorite ashtray. There was a big herd of deer out in Lee's pasture and he pointed to them as we approached the schoolhouse.

"They've been there all morning!" Chloe cried out, smiling at us, her hand shading her eyes from a patch of sunlight that careened through a hole in the clouds.

"Sweet," Ronny said cheerfully. "I loves me some venison." Beth punched him gently in the ribs and we laughed together as the truck came to a stop before the schoolhouse.

Other than Lee, I'd never met anyone famous before, and like I said, even though we *knew* he was famous, we didn't really think about it that way. But meeting Chloe ... it blew my mind. Her hair smelled of vanilla and I remember the feel of her skeleton, her fine bones in my hands as she embraced me. Her strawberry blond hair was lustrous and thick and her eyes were wide open and

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