

Chapter 3

Walking now. There's an old water wheel just down the hill. It doesn't turn. Jesus. I still haven't eaten. I know this trail. Rock Gardens. Looking ahead I see the faint outline of my grandparents clad in khaki, using walking sticks, and leading the way. They are ghosts. My grandfather is excited. He is walking a bit too fast for the rest of us to keep up. He doesn't notice it's dark out. The moon cooperates, lighting our trail. I don't hurry. I know where we're going. My grandmother falls back, walking beside me, silent. We are with my grandfather when he dies, peacefully, at home. We sit with him, waiting for his last breath, like waiting for a tired baby to fall asleep for its nap. Finally, a single tear rolls from his closed eye and he lets go. My grandmother gives me his guitar and it claims me as its second master. The Devil's guitar was easy but with this instrument I hesitate. My grandmother stares at me while I draw conclusions about death. I stumble over the root of a tree lining the trail and forget about his dying moments. She is smiling now. We are hiking. Nobody cares it's the middle of the night and I am the only one living. I hear music. I know the voice, the notes. We come to a clearing where the ground is full of large rocks jutting out of the dirt at all angles. The ghosts of my grandparents sit down for a picnic. I trudge on. Leaving Rock Gardens miles behind, the trail descends sharply around a large rock, dropping into a clearing just high enough to jump down into but too high to climb back out of and I stop to peer over. A solitary figure plays a guitar under a lone Beech tree, teaching the woods to echo his perfect song. I want to rush to him but there is no returning. I listen only forever. The sun rises and it's June. I am tired and dirty. I stand up and head back up the trail through Rock Gardens. My grandparents didn't wait. I come to the waterwheel and no water. By the time I get

home the wife and kids are sleeping soundly. I undress in the hall leaving my suit on the floor. It will be hanging up when I walk back through, years from now.

It's morning and the windows are fogged over and I know it's snowing. I don't look yet. The radio crackles from the bedroom as the wife moves about in her slippers. In the kitchen, I push start on the coffee maker. I want to look outside but this moment is better. An act of love.

Another gift. To know the day is bright and the snow is fresh, but not to look, yet. The wife shuffles sleepily into the room as I rub a peep hole in the cold, wet kitchen door window with my bare hand. Snow everywhere. I open the kitchen door and sunlight warms my face through tinfoil gusts of wind. It is 7am. The kids aren't going to school. I step boldly into the fresh white crispness of my now clean looking backyard and fall head deep into a drift. I make my way to the surface and fashion snow shoes out of branches from a Weeping Willow. When I was a kid, one of the divorced neighborhood moms would whip us with weeping willow branches. She once asked me if I was a "boob man" or a "butt man". I told her both. She was pleased. Rumor was you had to pick your own switch.

I walk back inside wearing my weeping willow shoes. The wife hands me my coffee and the kids gear up. The wife kisses my face and sends us all outside. The kids fall into the snow drift, I hand them their snow shoes, and we're off. The youngest waddles cutely behind the other two as we sing a song of exploration.

“We're going off into the day with nothing on our minds,
We know not where we're going or what sort of things we'll find,
We know not if we'll 'er return, or feel her love again,
So kiss Mother goodby and fill your cup up to the brim”

The tree line is just over the fence in our backyard and I throw the kids over first before hoisting myself over.

Where are we going dad? The boy asks.

I don't know boy! Their faces are red in the cold. They're smiling. A deer leaps out of the forest, over the backyard fence, and bounds into the kitchen door we left open. We forge ahead, coming to the tree line.

Now or never! I proclaim. As we enter the snowy woods the sun sets and immediately rises. We exit the woods into a clearing for power lines and I know where we are.

It's so hot! the oldest girl complains. I have a bag I didn't pack. It's full of clothes. We all change. It's 1983 and we are headed to the neighborhood pool. We are on the south end of a perimeter trail circling a lake. In the winter the lake freezes over and you can walk across it. Once, when I was 12, it cracked up behind us as we ran across, opening up and swallowing the frail, Jewish boy from a couple streets over. Seemed like his mother was always fretting over him getting hurt and now here he had been eaten by Leisure Lake. He managed to crawl out before freezing to death but that was the last we ever saw him hanging around the neighborhood.

We make it around the lake and jog up a small embankment that leads up into the back of the lower parking lot for the pool. You have to be a paid member of the pool to go swimming. The kids are members. I don't have a tag. I leave the kids at the pool and head back down the embankment to the trail around the lake and through the clearing for the power lines. In 1983 I would walk this route every day in the summer. I wanted desperately to fly like Superman. To the beach. Always the beach. I put my arms out, taking flight.

I go surfing in Malibu with Gidget - The Flying Nun, drive a big convertible to a beach party, and drag race. I have a girlfriend that only looks "good" but looks can be deceiving and she

likes it when I speed and risk our lives around the kind of turns that kill movie stars. I'm surfing and my convertible is in the parking lot of the public beach access and the preacher's daughter is leaning on my car waiting on me and of course she's pissed and I see her there so I catch one more wave before unzipping my wet-suit and carrying my board over my head back up to the car and throwing it into the back.

What's shaking toots? I throw her a wry smile and jump over the door into the drivers seat before leaning over and popping her door open. *Hop in baby. You look like you could use some wind in your mop,* I say, or something else hip and she jumps in but continues to put on her mad act. I speed up, her hand is on my thigh, my foot is on the gas, and Dead man's curve is just ahead. We make it through the turn but eventually she sleeps with my friend. It's a good summer. I find the flying nun and we convert. I remember the kids back at the pool. I put my arms out and fly like Superman back to the path around the lake that leads to the pool. It's getting cooler out. By the time I get back to the pool it's been closed for years and the kids are standing outside the gate waiting on me. We make it back through the woods and into our snow filled back yard and I wonder how I left things in Malibu. I throw the kids back over the fence and the same deer bounds out of the open back door, leaping over the fence, and into the woods. The kids rush into the house where the wife has hot cocoa for them. I stand outside for a bit and think about the time I went camping in North Georgia, a week after I'd had the kind of acid-trip that makes you want to peel yourself like an orange, and how we got surprised by snow and I'd needed Tequila to quiet the screaming that nobody else could hear, back before Tequila turned me out.

A vehicle careens into the driveway on the other side of the house. The snow melts and I walk around to see who's just now thundered into my yard. I'm stopped by a gate that I keep locked with a combination.

John! a voice calls from the driveway. I can't see who it is, as the house is blocking my view.

What!? I yell back, annoyed at the lock and scrambling through my phone for the picture I took of the combination a million years ago.

LEAVE THAT YARD'S BOUNDS, the voice shouts.

I'm locked in! I shout back. A figure emerges from the corner of the house, large-framed and big-bearded.

Shit, John. Jump the fence. It's Gene. My old roommate and older friend. I haven't seen him since I moved to Birmingham. He doesn't acknowledge this. "Who's house is this?" he asks me looking around quizzically, his glasses dirty with fingerprints.

Don't worry about it buddy. Where are we going?

Gene is a big man, six and a half feet tall, in his early twenties with a tawny beard that he doesn't manicure, wire framed glasses, shoulder length hair the color of dirty sand, and holding a book for each hand. He lives on a cot in the hall of his house, and, although episodically successful with finding dates, has an aroma that is not suggestive of good flavor. I love him how I imagine one should love one's brother. We are detectives. Hard at work on "The Case of the Cosmos". Early on we figure out how best to keep beer, cigarettes, and women in our lives by writing songs. I look around. There is nothing here for Gene. I stick my head in the door and call out to the family,

I'm going out! The wife rounds the corner from the kitchen into the bonus room.

Okay, John. I love you.

She is happy. I am happy. The kids are happy. Gene stands expressionless in the yard until I return to him and he reanimates.

Gotta light? he asks. I don't.

Gene's car is horse drawn carriage and he sits magnificently atop the cushioned seat holding the reins in one hand and a beer in the other like a drunken summer Santa Claus. He places his beer in a cup holder, leans down with an outstretched hand and gives me a pull onto the carriage. He almost throws me over his head and out the other side.

Lost some weight have you, John?

I have, Gene. He let's go of my hand and I fall to his left, into the seat next to him. Looking around, I turn to him. *Well, I begin, You're looking about the same.* He smiles and grabs his beer out of the holder and finishes it as we back out of the driveway. He alternates between looking behind us and looking at me. The carriage doesn't have a rear view mirror. We are sitting close. I notice a hair in his beard, not his, blonde. *How's Jeanna?* I ask him.

Fine. Argumentative. He moans, grinning slightly, and I feel a kind of satisfaction that only comes from his chagrin. He pats me on the back way too hard, like always. *It's good to see you Train Wreck.* I remember, he calls me Train Wreck.

You too, Gene. Riding now we come to the end of my street.

Which way? he asks. I tell him I've never been right. *Should we try it?* Gene holds his arm straight out from his side to signal our turn. We turn right and one of the horses blows a shoe. Our carriage is in the middle of the road as the sun warms our work. I hold the horses leg as Gene replaces the broken shoe. We climb back into the carriage and are back on our way, having managed to go right once and for all. It starts to rain and I lean back in my seat. We are cleansed and again the sun is in the sky. Before long the houses are fewer and farther between. The day wears on like an afternoon by the pool and we are quiet. *Mind if I stop for gas?* Gene turns to me, out under the evening's stars, as we ride bumpily down the road which suddenly turns to dust. We are surrounded on all sides by a blanket of darkness, like we have ridden into the bottom of a

sack. The horses have flames for hooves, which no longer touch the ground, and Gene has grown large and menacing next to me. I back away from him before the lights of an upcoming gas station appear through a hole in the darkness, bringing me back. He is my friend. *Here we go*, he states, his wagon wheels kicking up dirt and rocks as we pull into the gas station and park at a pump. *Do you need anything?* he asks, turning before I can answer. I stick a finger in my mouth, pull it out, and hold it in the air.

Gene! I yell just as he reaches the door going inside, *Walking shoes! Size eight and a half!* He acknowledges my request with a nod and rushes inside. I fall back into my seat, breathing a sigh of relief, and get anxious. Last time I breathed a sigh of relief I ended up in the emergency room. Sharing our pump is an angel in a hot rod on her way to a poker game. She has bleach blonde hair sprayed a mile high, chews gum with a wet, smacking sound, and stares at me through our mutual pump. A muscular bald man with desire on his face walks oddly fast toward us like a scene out of a silent film before leaping over the car and disappearing into the sky. I hear the bell on the door to the gas station ringing incessantly and begin to sweat. I need to eat. I look around but the gas station pump is all there is. Still in the bottom of the sack, I look at the horse and all I can see is its tail, jumping as it neighs. Its head appears over its tail and I see it from behind, cackling, mocking me and my fear; knowing what's out there and enjoying the advantage. Gene is back with beer and my shoes, drinking two beers in the time it takes me to try on my shoes. We sit in the light of the gas station by the pump and chat for awhile. I ask him how he's been.

I hate everybody, he begins but I know this song already; He thinks he wrote it. The white fluorescent lights flicker atop their poles, looming over the parking lot. I think about music while he goes through the motions. *I admire your freedom*, he thinks he confesses, *Who would blame you? You*

could be dead tomorrow. So could he. I just want a place to think about God and somewhere to sleep. Gene takes notice of the woman on the other side of the pump. They fall in love and get married. I'm the best man but object from the pew in the back of the church. We have a falling out and they jump in his chariot and drive away under handfuls of rice. I know the band playing the reception and sit in on a song. Back at the pump I'm glad to be wearing walking shoes but wish it wasn't so dark out. Gene's an asshole. I'm sorry I ruined his wedding. The gas station fades into the distance behind me as I walk on alone. On the horizon, a sliver of light peeks out, smiling upside down at me, the only thing other than the darkness. Then there is a fence-lined field to my left and a family reunion is taking place. Hundreds of brothers, sisters, nieces, uncles, mother-in-laws, half moons half removed, and so forth frolic in the half-darkness. They all take notice and wave me over, making me family. I eat my fill, finally, and fall asleep on a blanket - my head in the lap of my third cousin once removed who strokes my hair as I lay dreaming.