

JOHN VIGNA

Gas Bar

BECAUSE IT'S THE THANKSGIVING weekend, he hangs around with the others at the end of the shift. They are a new crew, young, earnest, eager to provide for their families. He doesn't trust them, their big talk and brazen work, sloppy and sometimes haphazard. By the third beer, he's heard all he can take. He crushes the empties in his fist, tosses them in the slash, flexes his hand, the knuckles gnarled like lug nuts, strands of jagged scars across the top, and shakes out the numbness. He slings the rest of his six-pack, drops it in the cooler behind his seat, slams the tailgate shut and starts the truck. In his side-mirror, through the dust, one of the guys throws a can at his rear. Another raises a rifle. When the shot booms out he lowers his head and glances through the rearview. The men laugh, slap each other's backs, the rifle pointed in the air, the bottom of a beer can at one guy's mouth. It amazes him that these men have families to go home to. He fishtails out of the turn, flashes his brake lights twice to let them know he's in on the joke, straightens the truck and heads for town.

He punches in Merle and "The Running Kind" comes on. The beer buzz hits and he's speeding along a gravel road he knows well. Down the valley, the rain comes fast and blurs a blanket of green forest; the clear cuts and fresh slash piles he has helped fall litter the rearview. Tonight starts another weekend of six packs and TV hunkered down in his room, then another five-day shift with the same crew, the same long twelve-hour days—only the trees he fells will change, falling into other cut-blocks and other valleys. Rain smudges the windshield. There's nothing left except for driving and waiting.

Sarah used to love this section. They were going to build a cabin here when the girls got older. Retire. Raise chickens and cultivate vegetables and sip drinks on the porch at the end of the day. The foreman will probably have him cut the valley next spring and that will be the end of that. He admires the trees each time he drives through; he wants to take his saw to

every one of them, drop them like old friends, the chain chewing through their soft bones, until they lay in a heap of silence.

By the time he hits the blacktop, eastward on the Number 3, the rain pelts down hard dimpling the dirt shoulder. He can drive this stretch with his eyes closed but he doesn't. Others have. But not him, not here. He thinks about the holiday weekend feasts Sarah used to put on, the house warm with a roaring fire, the girls rushing to meet him at the door wearing their pink dresses, dragging him to their tea party around toy tables with bright plastic cups and saucers. He slows at Twelve Mile, wipers on high, the rain drilling nails on his rooftop, and stops at the big cedar. He leaves the truck idling, and walks to the tree.

He pulls the black and white photo out of his pocket. Sarah's smile is starting to fade, but the girls—Kate, Christine and little Jody—still have that photo studio shine as though the picture were taken yesterday, not last year. He wipes them with his shirt cuff and stands for a few minutes. It leaves him feeling useless to think about dinners and work and the oncoming winter—another washed-out year. The rain rakes the asphalt, gurgles in the ruts. The picture is getting wet so he curls it close to him and says, "See you Tuesday."

He drives slow until he hits the industrial strip on the outskirts of town, pulls into the covered gas bar, parks and tells the kid to fill it up. A wet dog lies outside against the garbage can. It cowers when he steps towards it. He bends down and offers the back of his hand. The dog sniffs his fingers cautiously and moves its tail back and forth.

Inside the store, he loads up on pepperoni sticks, a hoogie, bottle of Coke, dumps the stuff on the counter. He reaches for the blue whales. The girls used to squeal over those. He counts out six, two for each and asks the lady behind the counter for a pack of cigarettes.

A girl sticks close to the service station wall, trying to keep out of the rain, coming from the back where the trucks are parked. Filthy jeans cling to her skinny legs; she's not wearing socks or shoes. Her windbreaker is soaked through. She's probably making the rounds out back with truckers whacked out on amphetamines and caffeine, their families far away; it's only a matter of time before one of them bangs her up bad before climbing back into his truck and heading home. The glass door rattles when she pushes it open.

Her feet are a mess. Broken toenails, stripped back as though someone had taken pliers to them. "What are you looking at?" she says.

He turns to the lady behind the counter but she's busy adding up his purchase. Town unhinges him now, more strange faces showing up, seasonal types coming and going, people who don't give a damn about the place.

He nods to the girl, pushes open the door and drops a pepperoni stick in front of the dog. Its tail thumps against the garbage can. He stoops down and rubs its ears. It turns on its side, licks his hand. “You’re a good dog,” he says. He pets it a little longer and asks the kid who the dog belongs to but the kid shrugs and turns back to filling an RV. He thinks about how this dog needs a home and how nice it would be to have some company but he knows this game—he’s only fooling himself—he’s not ready for this, so he feeds the dog another pepperoni and leaves it sniffing the ground for more.

He climbs into his truck, slips it into gear and within minutes the Lamplighter sign comes into view. The frayed carpet is damp and the bedding smells of smoke and sorrow. But it’s got good TV and it’s close enough to the house to feel like home, far enough that he won’t walk over there when he gets drunk. Cold beer and wine, next door to the tavern. At the front desk Alice hands him a fistful of messages from the realtor. “He ain’t one to give up, is he?” he says, stuffing them in his pocket. “Sorry for the bother.”

“Keep prepaying each month in advance, and he can call all he wants,” she says, returning to her crochet.

He drives around back, buys a fifth of rye and case of beer and slips into his room. He peels off his wet clothes, tears the paper wrapper off a stubby glass in the bathroom, pours three thick fingers of rye and splash of Coke. Goddamn blue whales. He shakes them out of the bag onto his palm, the gelatin bleeding on his hand. What was he thinking in buying them? He whips them at the bathroom mirror. They bounce off, scatter on the counter and floor.

He gets under the covers and leans against the headboard, sips slowly. His arms ache like something dying hangs from his shoulders. He lights a cigarette, flicks on the TV. Baseball. Canned laugh tracks. A show on elephants. Families move around in herds, led by the oldest female. They swim and run fast and they tear leaves off branches with their trunks. One of the elephants has lost his trunk to a crocodile at the edge of a lake and it can no longer hunt for food. It makes a rumbling sound in its throat as it wanders the dusty plains. When the rumbling turns to a low-pitched moan, he hits mute. The girls loved every animal they ever met.

He flicks to the porn channel and turns on the volume. Bored sweating faces. Camera angles for circus freaks. A guitar soundtrack that doesn’t match the action. He turns it back to the elephant and in every whimper he hears it ridicule him. He hits mute, takes a deep drink, butts out his cigarette, glances at the alarm clock. 6:29 p.m. Already a long night. He pours another, drinks it in a gulp, and thinks of how this is all the home he

has. He can still hear the elephant and no longer feels like getting wasted. He stares at the ceiling and waits.

8:03 p.m. The glow of the silent TV flashing in the dark room. He gets up and goes to the bathroom. The whales lie on the ground twisted and upside down and that makes him feel more miserable so he picks them up and sets them on the counter side-by-side. He feels better after taking a hot shower and shaving his five-day beard. He dresses, pulls on his ostrich skin boots, a last Christmas gift from Sarah, and crosses the highway to the Steak Pit.

It's busy and warm and the young hostess is too perky when she asks if he needs a table for two. He holds up one finger and remembers that she, too, is someone's daughter so he says, "Just one, thanks," in a voice he hopes comes across as pleasant. Her neatly plucked eyebrows scrunch as she studies her seating map, drops a menu, and leads him to a table at the back near the salad bar where a couple of high chairs line the hallway towards the toilets.

He splurges and orders a porterhouse. He meets the eyes of the tourists in the restaurant sitting with their smiling wives leaning in close across the table, some with their children desecrating the paper placemats with crayons, others flush with wine in the candlelight, and he knows what they are thinking—that poor pathetic man eating alone. He wants to shout how they got it all wrong. He did the best with the time he was given. Now he's waiting on God-knows-what. Eating alone makes him feel mean, gutted, like his chest has been split open and all that's inside is rotting wood. He pays the bill, leaves a generous tip, and walks out.

It's still raining when he crosses the highway and heads towards the tavern. Beneath the awning, the girl from the gas bar slouches against the wall, smoking. Her eyes are narrow and she gives him a grin that unnerves him, one that says, "You can't fool me with those fancy boots." He enters the tavern, glad to be amongst the living. Orders a shot of bourbon and a Pilsner. Knocks back the shot, takes a deep sip of beer, motions for another. He turns the can in his hand. The girls used to count the little white bunnies out loud from the can but he'd turn it around so they'd lose track and have to start all over again. They never tired of the game. He never bought any other brand of beer.

On the small square of parquet floor, a woman dances by herself. He enjoys watching her, eyes aflame, body moving to a beat that's all her own. He's not one for dancing but he used to like watching Sarah dance alone, guarding her from afar. He couldn't believe his luck. Fire and gin. Sarah knew how to light him up.

He catches his reflection in the gloss of the mirror behind the bar. Passes his hand over his eyes. Too old to be drinking in bars alone. He finishes his beer. The gas bar girl leans against a pillar in the shadows at the back, staring at him and he's had just about all that he can take. He digs in his pockets, pulls out a fifty and clenches it in his fist. His hands are looser now, thanks to the drink. He makes his way towards the exit.

"Here, take this," he says, handing her the money. She looks at him and he knows she's sizing him up to see if he's playing a con or he's for real. "Take it."

"You want some company tonight?" She doesn't glance at the bill.

"No." She's prettier close up, maybe older than he thought, although he can't tell with women. Never could.

"Nice boots."

He's not sure if she's being sarcastic; he asks her name but she shakes her head. "And I don't need a drink," she says. Her eyes are glazed and soft and he thinks she must be high. But it bugs him—he can't figure out why she won't tell him her name or at least make one up.

"Where's your shoes?"

"Listen, I just need a warm, dry place for the night."

"I'm not in the mood."

"I just need a room."

"You don't understand. I'm not into it. No offence." He places the money in her palm but she yanks her hand away.

"I don't need money."

"Everyone needs money."

"That ain't true. That ain't true at all."

"Suit yourself." He sets the money down on the counter and turns to leave.

"I'm only taking this so someone else don't come along and grab it," she says.

They cross the parking lot, her bare feet slap against the wet asphalt. It's nice to have someone next to him, walking. He's wary of her and has nothing to say but he likes the idea that he could say something and have someone talk back to him. She slips the fifty into his pocket.

"Nice weather, if you're a duck," she says.

He doesn't respond.

"The only truth around here is that droughts always end with rain."

He can feel her looking at him but there's nothing to say.

"We might have to build an ark. Though I don't know if we could find two of everything in this hell hole."

“This hell hole happens to be my home.”

She smiles and laughs for the first time, and he thinks of how she should be studying at home or helping her mother cook or something. She slaps his arm. “Ah yes, of course, a sentimentalist.”

He’s not sure what she means by that but she cracks him up.

He holds open the door to his motel room and bows. “Miss, welcome to my hell hole.”

Her hair ends are wet and cling to her face, cover her eyes like twigs. He hands her a towel but she ignores it. He offers her a glass of rye. She shakes her head, “I don’t drink.” She opens the night table drawer, pulls out a Bible, places it on the night stand, flattens her palm on it, closes her eyes and whispers to herself.

“What’s that for?” he says.

Startled, she opens her eyes. “You never know when your card is drawn.” She stuffs the Bible in the front pouch of her windbreaker and takes it off, folds it over a chair. “You don’t mind if I take this with me, do you?”

He thinks about what she said and she’s right, you never know when it’s your time. “Isn’t that breaking a commandment?”

Her fingers hook the underside of her T-shirt. She peels it over her head. “Kill the light.”

It’s dark and they undress silently and climb into bed. He lies on his back, the covers pulled to his chin, shuddering uncontrollably and he convinces himself it’s the cold. She curls into him and holds him. There’s no face to stare at, just warm flesh pressing against his, somebody who is sweet, and for a moment everything seems possible once again. She wriggles against him and pulls him on top of her and in that brief instant, when he eases into her, he feels something strange like relief. But the girl is nothing like Sarah. Her silence unnerves him; she’s quiet, efficient and moves with a bloodless sigh. Despite the dark, her eyes bore into him. He pounds her slow and hard, feels ugly with each punishing lift of his hips and turns his face away, leans into the pillow, hoping the disgust in himself will fade. He holds his breath but he’s unable to finish, rolls off and turns away from her. She lays on her back for a long time. He wants to apologize; he wants to help her understand that it’s not her fault but also to make himself feel better. He lights a cigarette. “It’s been a long time,” he says.

She grabs his cigarette, inhales deeply, pauses and exhales long towards the ceiling. Car lights flash across the window. In the parking lot, a man shouts, a bottle breaks, more shouting. She sits up and examines his face. “You look chock full of it.” Her ribs poke out like slats. A large welt curls around her side. He touches it.

“Don’t.” She slaps his hand away, the nerves tingle. He holds out his hand, turns it over. He opens and closes it. Pain shoots through his wrist up his arm. The booze has worn off.

“Jesus Christ, you’re all the same.”

“I didn’t mean to—” He touches her shoulder.

She slaps his hand away again. The pain tears into him like searing metal. By reflex, he reaches to hit her but stops himself, his open hand poised in front of her. “Anything but my hands. Christ, they’re all I’ve got left.” He shakes out the heat until it thins and his fingers go numb.

“Go ahead,” she says. “Punch me.” Her eyes blaze. “Go on, punch me.” Her quickness surprises him when her fist smacks his face. He rubs his jaw. She punches him again, harder. “Get it out of you. Hit me.”

His skin burns along his jaw up the side of his face, and for an instant he is tempted to slug her, to strike out his sadness, his anger, destroy what remains. He grabs her wrist and forces her to slap him again and again with the heel of her hand and it feels better than anything he’s felt for a long while.

“Sweet Jesus,” she says, pulling her hand away. She sits on the edge of the bed facing the window. “I’ve got no where to go. No family. No friends. Nothing.” She keeps her back to him, her voice a whisper.

The girl isn’t going to last long at this. She’ll be dredged up from the river come spring thaw, unrecognizable, bloated. His skin crawls to think what could happen to her; he tells himself it was just a waste of time. What did he think he’d do by bringing her here? Save her? From what? Tell her about Sarah and the girls? He reaches for his jeans in a clump on the floor. Rifles through the pockets and pulls out the remaining bills, sets them on the night table on top of the phone messages. “This should get you through the next couple of days.”

“And then what?” She wipes her eyes and nose on the sheet.

“You do what anyone else does. You carry on.”

“Carry on?” She shakes her head sadly, steps across the room, her stark skin stained black and red with bruises and welts on her back, thighs, calves. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to take a bath to warm up before I leave.” As she passes the mirror, he notices the front of her body is the same. She turns on the light and closes the door. The toilet flushes and the bath starts.

He flicks on the TV. Polar bears lumber along the impossible white of the landscape. There’s enough iron in their livers to kill a person if someone ate it. He doesn’t know how folks figure these things out but the part that gets him is how a polar bear fishes. It swims in the water alongside ice floes and covers its nose with its paw to camouflage itself, floating slowly until

it reaches an ice floe where seals and their pups lay. Some pups scatter into the water, some aren't able to. The attack is sudden and messy.

He looks down at his hand holding the remote and lets it go. He stares at his hand, empty, older, tells himself there is no remote or daughter's or wife's hand in his hand. He counts out all five fingers with the other hand, reaches for the remote and clicks the TV to mute.

A few months before the accident, he had walked along the river with the girls at the back of his property. The river had been frozen over and five deer dashed across one after another in single file. The girls stopped; they could hear the ice cracking behind the deer's hooves. "Daddy, they're talking!" Jody said. But when the first deer dropped through the ice and thrashed around, breaking up the ice around it, Jody started to cry. He lifted her up and turned her away. "Look," Christine said. The other four deer stopped and twisted around on the spot, followed their tracks back to the river's edge, trotted a few hundred yards upstream and crossed there. Christine and Kate grinned. Jody stopped crying. "It must have been her time," Kate said.

"Nothing she could do about it."

"Are they safe now, Daddy?" Jody said.

The deer jerked against the ice, then was still. He nodded.

"Promise?"

He nodded again. The deer flailed in the river, trying to get its hooves on the ice to prop itself up, steam rising off its neck, its nostrils shrill.

"Daddy? Promise?"

"Yes," he said, setting her down. "I promise."

She looked at him before he sprinted towards the river, her little brows wrinkled in confusion. "I don't believe you."

They are never really safe, no matter what we do to protect them. He knows that now.

He rubs his eyes hard, the knuckles digging into his sockets. He glances at the realtor's messages and considers paying a visit to the house, letting the girl have this room for the long weekend. He thinks that if only he went back, stepped on the porch where the girls played with their dolls, where Sarah and he sat late into the summer evenings watching the stars in the sky, he wouldn't count anymore or need to know what to do next, and he wouldn't be like some animal looking for something dead to drag in.

The sound of the faucet rumbles in the bathroom; the girl coughs. He runs through the options. Drive to Cranbrook; go shopping; get her some shoes and new clothes; pick up a bucket of chicken for the drive back; or, let her sleep late; bring her breakfast, watch TV together.

The taps shut off and her body stutters as she slides in against the

tub. Outside, another bottle smashes, a car horn honks. Then there's silence all around and he feels uneasy again. He peeks out through the curtains. The sky is dark and the fog hangs like cold blue smoke, low to the ground, the neon sign of the tavern faint.

"It's still raining out," he says. "You're welcome to stay. Just don't expect me to hit you. Not till we get to know each other better." He chuckles to show that he's making a joke. "So, what do you think?" She could come to the house, he thinks, sit in the truck while he checks things out. He flips through the phone messages, crumples them and tosses them on the carpet. He knocks on the bathroom door. The girl hums; it sounds like she's chewing something. Water splashes. His fingertips are numb against the doorknob. "So, what do you think?"

"What's that?" she says.

He can hear small ripples of waves, the drip of the tap, the soft pulse of her voice. He holds onto the doorknob, turns it. The veins on the back of his hand rise next to the scars from where he punched through the ice to haul out the deer.

"Tomorrow," he says. "I was just wondering about tomorrow."

