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Volume 67 *Fall/Winter* 2007–08

Article 9

October 2014

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Recommended Citation

Ackmann, Alan (2014) "The Night Comes in A'Falling," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 67, Article 9.

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol67/iss1/9>

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The Night Comes in A'Falling

ALAN ACKMANN

JACOB RILEY HADN'T HAD A DRINK IN ALMOST TWO YEARS, and the chip proving this pressed through his wallet like a junior-high schooler's condom. The four years between his near-miss high school graduation and the evening he'd shown up on his father's doorstep after living in his car had begun to fade, and now that time of alcohol, drugs, and angry music seemed like a film of someone else's life. That wasn't Jacob splitting his head open on the corner of a stage when he'd fallen off smashed during one of his concerts, and it wasn't Jacob sipping Jack-and-Coke from a Big Gulp cup at stoplights. That wasn't Jacob sneaking into his father's house and stealing from his safe, or tossing snow globes from his girlfriend's collection into the freezing midnight air and swinging at them with a baseball bat. That wasn't Jacob at all—it was a long-haired, flannel-wearing stranger. The current Jacob had close-cropped hair, and on good days he could stand outside of corner bars and barely notice the temptation. He had a job as an Indiana land man, researching property rights to land on which there might be oil and making offers. He had a three-hundred dollar savings account. This new Jacob, he felt, could handle anything.

He stopped feeling this way, though, at last year's Thanksgiving, when the leftover turkey and casserole was cooling in the fridge. Jacob and his father had driven two hundred miles from Indianapolis to visit his aunt and uncle in Chicago, and all of them were sitting around the kitchen table in a house whose living room was bigger than most of Jacob's old apartments. Someone suggested an after-dinner game, and as his uncle shuffled a deck of Windy City playing cards, Jacob's father—a then barrel-chested man named Donald—scraped his chair across the tile and said, "Hold on; I have to share something with you folks." He left without looking at anyone, and when he returned he spilled a stack of pamphlets across the table, cleared his throat, and said "Okay! I'm not dying yet, but here's our situation..."

During his last physical—Donald continued amidst suddenly heavy silence—doctors had found some unaccountably high protein levels in his blood. It *could* have been a lot of things, they said, but what it *was* was multiple myeloma. “That’s a type of cancer,” Donald told them. “Blood based.” Donald mentioned that the cancer (being, well, cancer) could spread to almost any organ in the body, but by itself wasn’t fatal, and could even be controlled through calcium injections, certain drugs, and a handful of long-term treatments. Reputedly happy people lived for decades, Donald said. They ran marathons, went rock-climbing. They did lots of other things that he had never cared to do. When he finished talking—one of the longest speeches Jacob ever heard him make—Donald waved at the pamphlets and said he’d brought some stuff for them to read, even though he “couldn’t recommend most of it, really.”

Jacob’s aunt bit her thumb and asked, “So you’ve got...you’ve got cancer?”

“That’s right,” Donald said. “The same kind as Sam Walton, oddly enough.”

And she burst into tears.

Across the table, Jacob stared into the sudden, yawning hole before him, and he had the unexpected childhood memory of his father digging out a stump in their backyard, where he would later build a swingset. He asked, “What can we do?”

His father said, “At this point...wait.”

So Jacob did. He sat in the passenger seat of his father’s pick-up truck during the trip back to Indianapolis, waiting uselessly for the cancer to be addressed. After two hours of his father flipping off every fast car and tailgating every slow one, Jacob put on a CD of folk music that one of his clients—an old music professor named Owen—had recently been suggesting as a way to leave his metal band days behind him, and he waited while his father searched for some response. For the next six months, Jacob stretched his back in hard vinyl chairs and waited as the doctors pumped plasma from his father’s veins, sucked fluid from his bones, gave him things like thalidomide and dexamethosone. Then, three months after the diagnosis, his father began complaining of back pain, and they determined that the cancer had formed a tumor at the base of Donald’s spine.

And then the waiting ended.

It was a mixed outcome. The chemotherapy and radiation both went well, but the resulting spinal damage left Donald unable to bend at the waist, or rotate his shoulders, or drive, or climb stairs without help. His eyes, which had flashed once with arrogance ("Don't you worry," Donald had told him, "I'm a fighter."), began to seem glassy and terrified, and so without consulting anyone Jacob moved back into his old basement room. But after just one week in his father's presence, all the constant complaints about cooking and health began to smother Jacob, and he had to get away.

So now—instead of watching Donald sit at home and flip past the outdoor channel as he remembered old hunting trips, or waited for his chemo-ravaged bladder to send him shuffling to the bathroom—Jacob was back at work, standing motionless in a wide Indiana field with his sleeves rolled up to the elbow as, for the last time, he examined an ancient graveyard. It was the kind of cemetery, small but proud, that his father might have once appreciated, and underneath the ground—his company believed—were millions of gallons of oil—oil that would be free for the pumping once the graveyard was moved almost fifty miles due north. And in an unexpected show of confidence, Jacob's boss had charged him with the relocation of the dead.

It didn't exactly take his *mind* off his father, but it was a change of pace.

Standing beside Jacob was a thin-faced man named Owen, a retired music professor at the College of Fort Wayne whose last name—Taylor—was the same as on most of the tombstones. Owen owned the land (someone in his family had for generations) and until five months ago he had also owned everything beneath it. With Jacob acting as executor, Owen had sold the subsurface rights the previous December, and as Donald's illness progressed the pair had grappled with the legalities. Now, the day before the relocation, Owen crouched beneath the oak tree and pressed his fingertips against a small grey marker the size and shape of a cinder block. In this spot, Owen declared, lay Pruitt Michael Taylor, who lost his hand in an 1846 threshing accident. Two plots over is Lindsey Grace Taylor, buried in a flower-bodiced dress handmade for Christmas 1867. Lucas James Taylor was killed in a Civil War skirmish in 1864. Owen spoke rapidly, and finished by saying, "I didn't mean to lecture at you. I just think it's important to know

who we're digging up, is all." Jacob was tempted to ask if any Taylors were ever cannibalized by their own blood cells, and then said he'd take care of these people like they were his own.

"How are your own these days?" asked Owen.

"About what you'd expect," Jacob replied quickly.

"I see. I remember when my Alice had the cancer. It was never-ending. Horrible." Owen stood there quietly, nodding. Then, in a tone like something had been settled, he said: "Well. Shall we then?"

At Jacob's nod, Owen crossed the cemetery and returned with an old guitar—a Martin—which he handed to Jacob, saying "Play!" and Jacob did. These practices had become something of a ritual between them since Jacob commented about his love for music during their first meeting about a sale, and an enthusiastic Owen began almost immediately to lead Jacob away from the music of his past. A few years ago, music had meant shrieking back-up and playing his bass, but Owen's music was alive with old guitar and rhythm, sturdy and tough as the side of a barn. When Jacob finished the coda he passed the guitar, and Owen's fingers dashed across the frets. When his arthritis wasn't bothering him, this old music teacher could play John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, BB King, and he could play them like he was fifteen or a hundred. Jacob could sit and listen for hours...but he was needed.

When Jacob left this morning, his father had wrapped both hands around a steaming coffee mug and asked—in a low, emaciated voice—whether Jacob would be back in time to drive him to the oncologist's office, and Jacob had stared at Donald from behind. Since the cancer hit, his father had lost close to thirty pounds and shrunk almost three inches. After battling the strange, tender impulse to kiss his father on the back of the head—as well as the more familiar impulse to smack him—Jacob had answered, "I'll be back. I promise."

"Moving a graveyard?" Donald had snorted, when Jacob first told him about the project. "That's tough shit, son. We wanted to move one on the job site once, and these protestors put the whole thing to a goddamn county vote. I tried pushing to build

somewhere else—I thought about quitting—but nobody listened and we had to build our mall around the damn things, just kept the graveyard near the parking lot. Now some poor souls are living out eternity thirty yards from the Auntie Anne’s pretzel shack. Bangers tag the headstones. It’s a tragedy.”

“Well, that’s why we’re moving them Dad—to give those people more dignity.”

“Bullshit,” Donald said. “You’re moving ‘em to get what’s underneath.”

This conversation had taken place in a hospital, with Donald propped up in a steel frame bed enduring periodic bolts of radiation. There were endless hours of vomiting and pain, explosive diarrhea and John Wayne movies shown on TNN. Now, two months after the treatment, his father had traded in those thin white sheets for an oncologist’s leather chair. He wore a suit (he almost always did, when visiting this doctor) and he also wore his Indianapolis Colts draft day hat, under which his head was perfectly bald. Donald’s walker—an actual *walker*—was folded up beneath the seat, and the old man nodded while his small, white haired doctor described a potential treatment for multiple myeloma known as a stem cell transplant, which he made sound like the second coming of the polio vaccine. Except, of course, for all those stubborn risks.

“There’s some uncertainty, of course. There always is.” The doctor had a habit of gliding through unpleasant sentences, and Jacob hated him for this. “We have to do some testing first, and if you have a certain chromosome all bets might be off right away. But if you’re approved for the procedure, here’s how it works: healthy stem cells will be extracted from the body by separating the blood in a centrifuge, and then the remaining cells will be eradicated with extremely high doses of chemotherapy—as high as the body can tolerate, in fact. Once the body is taken down to its low-point the healthy cells are reintroduced into the blood stream, with the idea being that they will then overtake the damaged cells. The procedure takes about one month, and includes a twenty-one day stay in a hospital clean room, during which time the body will have almost no immune system; even a mild infection could spread unchecked. But once we tear you down, we build you back—and you’ll have stronger, healthier blood.” The doctor leaned forward dramatically. “I won’t mislead you, Mr. Riley: in

most cases this procedure isn't successful. But when it is successful...it sometimes buys people years."

Jacob suspected that this stem cell transplant was trendy in cancer circles, but this time around it had been he who requested to hear the details. After listening to the pitch again, however, Donald chuckled and said: "Well shit, Doc. If it's anything like that first round of chemo you can stick me in the ground right now."

As they merged onto the expressway later, Donald asked if they could stop by Oak Lawn Cemetery, where Jacob's mother was buried. Jacob nodded vigorously. *Of course we can*, he thought. *We can go anywhere you want*. Since Donald lost his ability to drive, the truck had become something of an issue between them. A few weeks ago, when Donald began complaining about the amount of time he spent cooped up, Jacob had offered to take him "to a park or to the mall or something" and Donald had replied, "Well, how 'bout this: when you head off to work tomorrow just leave me a nice bowl of food and some water, and then you can let me out in the yard when you come home." Donald had never apologized, of course. Just like he'd never apologized for threatening to pour his meds down the sink and let the illness take him, or for claiming that Jacob was a selfish little shit of a son who only cared about himself. Now this same man, alternately heartbreaking and cruel, wanted to visit his dead wife in the cemetery. And what was Jacob going to do? Say no?

Cemeteries, whether they were the stately rows of Oak Lawn or the modest, brittle stones of Owen's field, always made Jacob feel strangely guilty—like a sinner passing church. But the shame of his past was never more intense than at his mother's gravesite. Five years ago, Jacob's mother had died of a degenerative brain illness, and as her connection to reality had grown weaker, Jacob spent more time away, unable to deal with the situation other than to drink, to rage at it, to play his music longer and louder. His father had never forgiven him for being an eighteen year old boy drunk at his mother's funeral, or for falling backwards into grief and disappearing after her death. Sometimes, as a way of apologizing for his moods, his father would share sentimental stories about his wife, as though letting Jacob in on everything he'd missed. Now, in the cemetery, Donald cut a few buds from a potted chrysanthemum and said "We searched for weeks before we found this place, you know; your mother was a hard woman to please

about some things. The grounds had to be well maintained, a certain distance from the highway. But she liked it here. That fence," Donald pointed, "reminded her of where she went to school. The formal gates or something. She also liked the playground next door, and...well, she liked it here." Donald trailed off. "She'd want me to do this procedure, Jacob. I think she would have made me."

Jacob shoved his hands in his pockets, aware of the little good that aggressive tests and treatment had done his mother towards the end. He asked, "So will you do it?"

His father sighed. After a moment, he answered, "I just have one question for you, son. These people you're moving...what the hell gives you the right to do that?"

Startled, Jacob replied. "Well, we talked to Owen and—"

"Owen?" his father repeated. "I don't think so. Those people lived a hundred years ago, Jacob. Think about your mother. If we're talking forever—*forever*, I'm saying—could you pick one place from a thousand that she'd love? I doubt it, son; you barely knew her...and there were times I thanked the Lord that was the case. So what makes you think this Owen fellow has any idea at all what those people would want? We're talking about consecrated ground here, Jacob. It's something bigger than..." He turned around. "How much money would it take for you to move me, son? Hey, how much time? I really want to know."

Nothing that Jacob could say here would be kind.

"Oh, hell," his father said, returning his eyes to the headstone. "Do whatever you want. You always have, I guess."

There was no way to respond to that, Jacob thought. This was an old discussion between them, as old as their silences over the cancer. In the past few months Jacob tried reasoning with his father, listing pros and cons of treatment. He'd tried getting him to join a support group, and he'd tried letting the old man make his own decisions. He'd even tried just being there for Donald, offering to play games with him like one of the doctors had suggested...but this had just been bullshit. Even at their best they'd never exactly sat around playing Scrabble. But now his father seemed to have given up—this man who'd always been a fighter. In his youth, Donald Riley had served as a bombardier in the Korean War, strafing enemy villages. After the war, he had fought for his family, through his wife's death. Donald had fought

for Jacob when Jacob didn't even realize that someone needed to be fighting for him. And now it was his turn to do the same.

And that was well and good, but there was so much pain between them. In his lower moments, Jacob remembered one particular Friday just before he'd disappeared for years. It had been about nine o'clock and Jacob was going out with his bandmates later, but he needed some distraction first. And so (in what had then seemed like a flawless idea) he'd dropped a tab of acid. The effects were just beginning when his father came downstairs, wearing the same white button down shirt he'd worn at his wife's funeral. He sat across from the bed, and after a moment of silence breathed deeply and said, "Jacob, I have something to tell you. I've been watching you since you graduated, son, and I'm afraid you've got a problem with alcohol. Maybe drugs too. I don't know. But you come in at four in the morning, and I have no idea where you are until then. You haven't held a steady job in months; you keep losing weight. You spend all your time with this band, and I...I don't know what to do...Listen, I've saved up some money for a clinic. We can go tonight, if you want to but...Son, I'm terrified about the way you've been living your life. I'm afraid it's going to kill you." Donald had glanced at the wall behind Jacob, blinked, and then added, "And I'm so, so sorry if any of this is actually my fault."

In a slow thick way like speaking through syrup, Jacob had answered. "Maybe I do need help. But you should know it's really, *really* hard to concentrate when you keep fading in and out of the couch like that."

How the hell, exactly, did you even begin to apologize for those kinds of things?

On the night after visiting the graveyard, Jacob stayed up late playing guitar in the basement, since any attempt at music only made his father think about addiction. At three in the morning, he heard the familiar *shuffleclump* of his father's walker and went upstairs. Through a thin rectangle of light he could see his father in the bathroom mirror, touching the crown of his newly bald head and feeling the dents, the previously unseen moles and scars. Jacob felt like he should turn away, but he could not. Not even when the old man placed both hands on the counter, lowered his head, and stood there for moments on end, as though listening for something Jacob couldn't hear.

He awoke four hours later to the scrape of his father's chair, and when he climbed the stairs Donald had a newspaper on his lap and was shoveling in corn flakes excitedly as he said, "There's a bit about your move in the paper. You might get a couple protestors."

"Let me see that," Jacob said.

As he read, his father's sickness vanished temporarily. The article, which had been picked up from Owen's small town newspaper, took the stance that Jacob's company was disrespecting the dead for the sake of profit. Towards the end they mentioned that a few protestors might show up, before implying that they *should*. "Damn," Jacob muttered. "It was the registry of historic places, I bet. They've been trying to block us for months."

His father smiled. "Those *bastards*."

"I'll go look in on things this morning," Jacob said.

With an unexpected energy Donald asked him, "Can I come?"

Jacob looked up, and his father waved a hand. "Hey, come on. I got a little sour yesterday, I know that. But I can't spend another day cooped up, all right? I can't. Now if you need to go to the courthouse and do some other...whatever the hell it is you do all day...I'll go get coffee. Come on, huh? I been to lots of funerals, but I ain't never seen one in reverse."

Jacob smiled cautiously and said, "All right. Why not?"

As the miles fell away (Owen lived forty minutes north, outside of town) Donald talked more freely than he had in months. He told a few stories about fishing this neck of the woods with Jacob's grandfather, and he pointed out malls that had appeared, roads that had vanished. He predicted picks for the upcoming NFL draft, and chuckled in annoyance when Jacob didn't know any of the players. It was nice. But the going got rougher as they drew closer to Owen's, and the smooth expressways broke off into dusty country roads. When the truck thudded into potholes his father grunted in pain, and as Jacob pulled into the quarter mile drive of Owen's house (whose single story ranch design seemed modest for a man now worth three quarters of a million) his father mumbled, "Jesus Christ, I thought we'd never get here."

Jacob went around the cab to help his father out, but before Donald's feet hit the dirt Owen was striding out of the house, his long arm extended as he cried out, "Mr. Riley! Welcome, welcome."

"Hello, Owen," Jacob said. "This is my father, Donald."

"Of course! Of course he is. How are you feeling, Mr. Riley?"

"I'm all right," his father responded. "You know, for a guy with cancer."

The word hung there for a moment, floating between them, and after a moment his father added: "Thanks for letting me crash this, by the way. We heard there might be protestors."

"Oh," Owen said. "Oh yes, of course. Well, I wouldn't get your hopes up, honestly. People rattle the sabers; get themselves in a huff...but in the end I've heard they leave you alone."

"Has anyone been giving you a hard time?" Jacob asked.

"I've gotten some strange looks in the supermarket," Owen said proudly. "But it doesn't matter. Once the excavation is completed, off I go—not that I could hang around once you start drilling. In any event, I'm afraid you wasted a trip. We're fine here. Better than fine in fact; it's been fascinating. They've already got the fences out, and earlier today they shoved this metal rod into the ground until the consistency changed, and then they dug the first four feet out with a backhoe. Since then it's been like a full-fledged archeological dig. Fascinating really. I insist you take a closer look." Owen glanced at Donald's walker and he said, "The backhoe mashed a fairly level tread on its way in, so it should be easy going across the field. If you'd like to stay here though, I'll wait as well. It's up to you."

Donald said, "I think I can manage. Thanks."

He struggled though, and more than once the tips of his walker were sucked into the earth. Mosquitoes swarmed them as they moved, and Owen's voice was loud as he called out the names of songs that he and Jacob had been working on. When he suggested a brief recital later Jacob's chest tightened. After a hundred yards they reached the graveyard, which was now surrounded by the backhoe, two small trailers, a handful of folding tables, a growing pile of tree roots, and three men and a woman hunched down in the dirt, with only their torsos visible. As they approached, the woman put both hands on the small of her back and stretched. In a light southern accent she called, "Well, howdy folks. Name's Alex Winterbourne. Welcome to the Taylor exhumation."

Owen was right; it *did* look like an archeological dig. The entire graveyard was criss-crossed with a grid of yellow rope, and each square had been tagged with a small cardboard number. The tombstones themselves were clean and tagged with an orange decal listing their new locations, and the worker's kind, undistracted strokes reminded Jacob of brushing someone's hair. He had known that it was going to be like this, of course, but for the first time after all the genealogy and fights Jacob began to understand the significance of what they were doing. With a mildly irritating note of pride Owen said, "See? As gentle as anyone could like. Just Fascinating."

From behind him, Donald asked: "So how much have you found, anyway?"

The words came out urgently, and Jacob turned around to see his father out of breath, his face red and wet. Jacob looked around for a chair as Alex scrambled out of the grave and said, "Not very much, of course. After this much time not many remains...*remain*. But we've found a couple of bones, some shards of the coffin. A few years ago I found some scraps of children's toys in a grave that was almost a hundred years old. You never know."

His father said, "You can always find something worth saving, I guess."

It was an odd, sentimental statement, and Alex's eyes glanced towards the walker. "Let me show you something," she said. She led them over to one of the tables, which was shielded from the sun by a tarp, and gave them each a pair of latex gloves before reaching into the debris and presenting a thin, dirt-covered piece of cotton decorated with light flowers. Jacob wasn't sure what he was looking at exactly until Owen gasped and said, "My god, that's utterly amazing."

"What?" Donald said. "What are you talking about?"

"This fabric," Owen said. "It's from a dress. I can't believe it's still around."

It was then that Jacob remembered Owen's story about Lindsey Grace Taylor's Christmas dress, its flowered fabric. Owen had read that in a journal somewhere, and now here it was, ripped from the hole now in front of her headstone. Alex held the fabric towards him, and when he touched it the piece was surprisingly stiff—like the ancient deeds he sometimes handled in courthouses, and he felt a rush of shame and guilt. His eyes rested on a horseshoe sized

clump of dirt that he recognized as a human jawbone, and out of nowhere he remembered some advice that he'd gotten in AA, that part of step three was abandoning yourself to some kind of higher power. He had always found that difficult, and now it was damn near impossible. His father was licking his front teeth the way he used to when deciding how to punish Jacob, and Jacob handed the fabric back.

In a quiet voice his father said, "I can't believe that's really all that's left."

As his now silent father struggled back through the grass a few moments later, Jacob was filled with regret that they had come. A funeral in reverse, what the hell was that about? Donald's walker caught a chunk of mud for the fourth time in twenty feet, and Jacob had the foolish urge to run up and carry his father, though this would probably have gotten him hit. When they reached the porch, Owen went to grab a padded chair and his guitar, having insisted again that Donald "must hear Jacob play, he must," and when he returned Donald blurted, "How do you know they'd want it?"

"I'm sorry," Owen responded, "Who'd want what?"

"Those people you're moving. The ones in the ground."

"Oh! Them! Yes, I see." Owen put down his beer and studied Donald closely. After a moment he said, "Let me tell you a story, Mr. Riley. My wife had cancer herself a few years ago—pancreas. After she passed I took some pictures, and when I got them developed there were these strange orbs in front of her headstone, just...floating. More than a few people have told me that these were her spirit." Owen smiled. "I don't know your thoughts on that, of course, but I can see how you'd be tempted to give into...sentimentalities. But in the end I feel—and I'm sorry if this sounds callous—that those remains are something similar to souvenirs. Whatever made those people who they are—their essence, soul, whatever you want to call it—has long since vanished. And I don't see the point in pretending otherwise."

Donald asked: "What if they wanted you to move your wife, Mr. Taylor?"

Owen breathed deeply. "Donald, I'll have you know that after a hundred years most states only require that you transfer a pound's worth of soil. They just assume that everything else is...gone."

As he spoke, Jacob remembered walking into Owen's house six months ago armed with a binder full of arguments for moving the

graves, only to have Owen sign over the rights without a second thought. Something about this still bothered Jacob. After one of their early lessons, Owen had downed a swig of beer and commented that this deal was “proof that God likes teachers after all.” Owen had researched his ancestors, knew their stories, but there was nothing *warm* about the knowledge, and Jacob couldn’t help feeling that for the money they gave him, Owen would have disregarded everyone’s last wishes.

And Jacob wondered, then, if he would have done the same.

“We should probably get going,” Jacob said.

“No,” said Owen. “It’s all right, just...stay for a moment.” Owen thrust the guitar into Jacob’s hands and commanded: “Play.” Jacob hesitated, and then formed a simple chord. But he couldn’t quite shake Owen’s words, or the scrap of fabric, or the frail, toothless jawbone. Then he looked at his father, exhausted and sweating, and he wanted more than anything to impress this weak old man. He started playing. He and Owen had been working on an old John Prine tune called “Often is a Word I Seldom Use” and the music was meant to paddle swiftly against its serious undertow, but in Jacob’s hands the melody floated aimlessly. After a minute of drifting Owen tapped his knuckles against the arm of the porch swing and removed a small harmonica from his pocket, its tin notes pulling the guitar up out of its depths. Jacob began to play faster, his chords and runs taking cautious chances, and the steel strings echoed across the prairie. When the song faded Owen whispered, “That’s the stuff, right there.”

Donald heaved himself out of the chair and shuffled around the corner.

Jacob found his father sitting in the truck, his face limp and expressionless, his hands folded like a man in church, and he felt a sudden urge to lash out at his father, beat him down. He wanted to scream at Donald for ruining what should have been an utterly successful day, and for groaning at him constantly, and for having the nerve to get this sick just when he—Jacob—was finally beginning to get his life together. Jacob flung open the door of the cab, slammed it shut...and then said nothing. Something about his father’s posture—the sunken shoulders and the T-shirt hanging limply, showing more skin with his newly lost weight—made it impossible to yell, and as his anger faded Jacob wanted just to bring his father home.

"Jesus Christ, son," his father muttered. "You might have told me we were gonna be walkin' halfway across Indiana."

"Dad," Jacob said firmly, "I have something I need to say to you."

His father looked as though Jacob was about to be an ass, and so he began speaking rapidly. "I know how hard things have been for you lately, and I...No. You know what, I don't know at all...I can't even imagine. But I haven't made it easier on you; I've never made *anything* easier. And I'm sorry I've been leaving you alone, but I've been trying to get better. With this job, I've been able to, you know, build myself up and...I may even be able to keep doing some music. I know I screwed up...*everything* before and I know how it feels to not be able to escape something. There's no real reason I should even be alive at all, but..." Jacob stopped. He was babbling. He tried again. "Dad, the doctors said this treatment might get you a few more years so maybe you could think about giving it a chance, and—"

"It's got a two-percent success rate, Jacob. Two percent."

Jacob slapped the dashboard and yelled, "Well, you know what—I understand the math, okay? But they just want to do some tests, so...*Please*. Let's just go to the doctor and then we'll see what everybody has to say. We can just see where we're at, and—"

"We are not anywhere, Jacob. *I'm* the one who's dying."

Jacob stopped, and opened his mouth uselessly. His father's eyes were terrified, furious, sad and Jacob pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting a breakdown. He shut his eyes so tightly that spots formed in the darkness, and then he felt a bit of pressure by his neck. His father had a hand on his shoulder, and was squeezing gently. Jacob kept his eyes closed. His father said, "I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry."

Jacob could not remember the last time he'd been touched like this, and soon he was close to bawling, crying the way he'd erupted three years ago when the apartments, money, alcohol and girls had all run out completely, and he had found himself sitting in the parking lot of a grocery store at 2:00 a.m in February, hoping that his half-full tank of gas would keep the heater running until morning. He remembered the expression on his father's face when Jacob had shown up on his doorstep, and how smooth his sheets felt on that first night back, and then another image, equally unexpected, came to Jacob's mind. On their mantle at home was a

tin-plate photo of his father and mother taken at the Indiana State Fair before Jacob was born, where the two of them had dressed in frontier clothes. Jacob's youthful sunburned father, his paunch sticking out like a barrel of nails, had put on the clothes of a professional gambler and stood smirking next to his mother, who looked amused but gently uncomfortable in her pioneer housedress. Her hand was resting on his shoulder, and while Jacob's eruption ran its course his father's own hand stayed exactly where it was. It didn't move. When Jacob calmed his father said, "Okay, boy. You convinced me. I'll go ahead and get the tests, and then we'll just see where we're at. Okay?"

"Thank you," Jacob said. "That's all I'm asking."

"Can I make a small request though, son?"

"What's that?"

"When I kick off you better leave me where you fling me. I don't care whether there's gold or silver or natural gas or goddamn Jimmy Hoffa, you had better leave me be. I'll haunt your ass. You got it?"

"Sure," Jacob responded. "Got it."

Then, because he wasn't sure what else to do, Jacob started the truck. But as they rounded the bend back out onto public property Donald cried "Hey, check it out!" and pointed. At the end of the driveway was a small band of protestors, their posterboard held high as they walked endlessly in a tired, determined circle. Donald asked Jacob to honk the horn. Jacob did, and Donald gave a thumbs up as they passed, proclaiming "Hot Damn, boy! I was hoping I'd get some excitement today!" He rubbed his hands together, settled back into the seat, and rested. And then, a moment later, he began to sing gently in a low, off-key voice as though Jacob wasn't there. It was an old Bob Dylan song, and once Jacob recognized it he began to tap the steering wheel, humming along but not loud enough for his father to hear. In this moment, Donald seemed happy. Genuinely *happy*. Jacob gripped the steering wheel and saw the road stretched out before them, heard his father's raspy bass. And in the rearview distance he could barely see the diggers, backs bent low as they removed the dirt from some small portion of the past.