

PAUL A. TOTH

*EL CONDOR PASA*

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I bet Tony watched the hammer in his father's hand shiver like a tuning bar. "Let's go outside."

His father might have been drunk. Then again, his hands always shook. Impossible to know. He hadn't begun to slur. Then again, sometimes his words remained sharp and clear as the machine-shop clouds, grey and black and cutting deep. Impossible to know.

"I said let's go outside."

Tony's mouth probably clammed open.

"I want to show you something."

His father might want to show Tony a new dog or a dog's corpse, that the car started right up or that its windows had been replaced with shattered air. Anything seemed possible except Tony's refusal to go outside. The sunken couch made a lap he resented leaving. Here we go again, he thought.

"What's the matter?"

"The couch hurts my back."

"Eighth grade and your back hurts? Your back will hurt later."

Tony must have pondered this statement: was it a sentence or a sentence, a prediction of hard times in the distant future or a plan for hard labour in the near future? Tony's father wasn't the strap-across-the-back type. He was creative, his punishments lyrical. He used to be in a punk band but had regrown the wings of his mohawk long ago. The factory produced the anger punk-rock once consumed, and he often announced he might as well have chopped off his guitar hands to save himself the work he did now: lathing screws, getting screwed. I know how it goes.

"Take some aspirin."

"I'm okay."

"When it really hurts, you'll be stuck on that couch all weekend."

"You're right. I don't need aspirin."

"I'll get you some."

"That's okay."

"I thought you said your back hurts."

Tony's hesitated, the answer-question still effective in its trick. "It doesn't really hurt. You're right."

"Then why'd you say it did?"

Tony floated an unspoken reply until he considered it safe to say, "Let's just go outside."

He followed his father through the kitchen and out the back door, avoiding the stacked cases of empty Miller cans which, if brushed, would flood

the floor in beer residue and aluminum. Tony never made that mistake, but his father often did. Whenever it happened, the kitchen paid for its collapse, the tower of cans so carefully constructed through months of consumption. His father would punch walls, cabinets or the refrigerator's ice maker, which now made only a cold noise. Tony would hide in his bedroom. He might have thought of a song everyone hated but which provided a perfect soundtrack for a father running amok in the pissed beer of his past: "We Built This City on Rock and Roll."

The sporadic grass appeared burned into the ground, the earth a handmade tattoo on the town, uglier with each passing year. Tony saw that the car windows had been replaced. The garage door rattled up its slots.

His father pointed. "That."

Tony's army men stood guard atop a fortress made of two-by-fours which had been intended to form a square but made some other shape he couldn't recall from geometry class.

"What is it?"

"A fort."

The army men, brainless, green in every way, offered no suggestions; they stood feigning action.

"You can't see?"

"It's crooked?"

"Bingo."

I can see his father sweeping the soldiers from the fort and clawing nails loose. "This is how we do it in the screw factory, Tony. If we get something wrong, we do it again, but that's not much of a problem because we do the same thing all day. See the way you drove this one in, how it slants to the side and the boards don't square up? If you worked where I work, the boss would come along with the boards and say, 'You did this?' 'Yeah, I did it.' 'Well, it looks like shit.' 'I'm sorry, sir, I must not have been paying attention.' 'I don't pay you to decide when you'll pay attention. I pay you to pay attention all the time.' 'I'm sorry, sir. Won't happen again.' "

"I'm sorry, sir. Won't happen again."

"Get used to it. You've got a whole life of apologies ahead of you. Don't join a band. It's another thing to tell your wife you're sorry every five fucking minutes. Oh, sorry, I'm not supposed to say 'fuck' in front of you."

The father pulled a nail as though yanking a tooth. Once it came loose, it shot from the hammer and out the garage, landing somewhere on the lawn. "Now I can run over your nail and wreck the mower."

Tony must have grimaced a grin. "I'm sorry, sir. Won't happen again."

"That's as funny as your fort. The enemy would come right through the cracks."

"There's no enemy."

"You sure I'm not the enemy?"

“They’re just toy soldiers.”

“If you’re gonna play with toys, play with them right, or I’ll save myself the money.”

“All ninety-nine cents a bag,” Tony didn’t say.

“Plus I bought these boards for the doghouse, so I guess the dog can sleep in the rain.”

“We don’t have a dog anymore.”

“Not yet, we don’t.”

“We’re getting a dog?”

“A guard dog. Blacks moving in left and right. We might as well break in, steal our own crap and sell it to the pawn shop. With the money, I can buy more toy soldiers.”

I know Tony must have become used to these spiraling monologues, the way they swirled inward like an optical illusion. I know he could never guess the final statement which would form the bull’s-eye, only that when his father said it, his eyes would narrow. Then he would grab something, anything, and make a bullet of it. In that manner, lamps and cups and cans had been projected through windows, into walls, at the ceiling, and occasionally right over Tony’s head, though so far they had missed. Whether they missed on purpose was impossible to know. Still, it cannot be debated and science would confirm: objects flew in that town.

I see his father gathering the four separated boards. “Doghouse or fort?”

“I guess a doghouse makes more sense.”

“Then let’s make a fort, since you’re not used to making sense. Take this hammer.”

Tony took the hammer, his dad crouching over the boards and placing two of them at right angles. Tony probably saw the patch of moon where nature had removed the mohawk’s belly. Should Tony smash that moon with the hammer? Neither he nor his father would ever again be eclipsed by the early days of flight. With the sun coming out, Tony imagined in bright detail how the blood from that scalp would pour the way it had from the dog, only this time his father’s hands would be two paws shaking under a chin. Justice for the mutt, as the hammer had removed the old dog from its misery, better than a gas chamber, his father had claimed. “Cowards let somebody else do it for them.”

The soldiers, blotto on weekend passes, lay strung out on the floor with guns and grenades and minesweepers in hand. They had no leader, no captain or sergeant, to provide Tony with reports from the front. How had Friday gone? Had his father been forced to work late, or discovered on the way home that 7-11 had run out of Miller? Had a rock made a snowflake of the front windshield, suggesting that in the morning the rest of the car’s windows should be removed by hammer? Had the old dog’s ghost haunted his father’s sleep? Had his wife visited in the middle of the night, just about to kiss him when he awoke from the dream? Had he touched the Telecaster hanging on his bedroom wall, stroking

the strings, thinking for a moment to launch it like Pete Townsend before realizing doing so would be even more pathetic than leaving it on the wall?

“Grab a nail.”

Tony found a nail. He knew how to drive one straight, but his hands must have shook as if he'd inherited a thousand hangovers suffered in someone else's ripped punk-rock jeans.

“Hold it straight. It's just a nail.”

Somehow, Tony made his hands stop shaking. Everything reversed. He trembled less the more anxious he became, the father shorter in his lion crouch than Tony on his hands and knees.

“Now bring the hammer straight down. Focus.”

He focused. He saw his father's right hand, the strumming, hammering hand. Tony brought the hammer straight down. The nail went into the board.

“Now another.”

Four boards, two nails for each joint, seven more tries to hit or miss the hand, to fight the thought while simultaneously accepting and enjoying it, lingering in smashed ligaments and tendons, a dog's payback, the revenge of windows, the end of toy soldiers. Instead, he drove the rest of the nails to his father's satisfaction.

“That's what you get, a useless fort, but at least it's square now, a job well done and not much to show for it. Don't expect pats on the back from your army men. I just want you to know life's hard, that you get nothing when you do something right and plenty when you do something wrong. That's the way it works. Fuck it.”

His father walked out of the garage and rolled down the door, sealing Tony inside. It would not have surprised Tony if a hose poked underneath the door and exhaust streamed into the garage. Maybe his father had guts enough for the dog but not his son. So far, despite the dog, car windows, walls, beer cans, and lamps, his father's violence had touched him only inside, where it grew as long as his spine.

This must have all occurred right before Tony kissed Monique for the first time. They had been going together for a week. She said his lips felt like boards. Tony had a way with girls. They wanted to pry him open. Everyone did.

I see him positioning the army men on their newly-squared fort, but the fort wasn't his now, it wasn't even a fort, really; it was a perfectly made screw. The plastic men seemed forlorn in their impotence. They could never fight, never cut their teeth. Tony knocked one over and it couldn't complain, just as Tony couldn't tell his father he would not become like him by becoming more like him, and that he longed for the opposite advice: “Join a band. Don't say you're sorry every five fucking minutes. And don't care if you're supposed to say 'fuck' in front of me or anybody else. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Go ahead, practice. Don't drink to forget or stay in town so your wife can visit your kid once a month. Flee this town. Run to the sun. Go to California. Play guitar under the

moon. Dig gold. Tell your son to follow in your footsteps, and make sure those footsteps leave a trail to somewhere undiscovered, your particular mountain and its particular gold. Your son won't need plastic soldiers. He won't need a hammer. He'll need a shovel and a pan."

Up went the garage door. Tony slipped past his father, sitting on the couch with a back that deserved aching, leaning toward the football game, beer in hand, screaming at the television, "Run like you just stole my wallet, Leroy."

How would it be taken? It all depended. His father would glow or darken. Impossible to know. The shears became a hammer, the cutting a bludgeoning, except that Tony felt more creative than murderous. This was a possibility, the first he had imagined. Few escaped this town. They might mimic some fad from other places, but the fad always passed. The Slinky ran down the stairs and slunk out the door. But what if somebody found it and brought it home?

After the cutting, Tony ran the water to cover the sound of his father's electric razor. He buzzed, knowing he could not get it right by himself. He hoped his father would be reminded not of botched screws but of what he had once been.

The hair fell in the sink and on the floor. Tony gathered this evidence and wrapped it in the newspaper folded next to the toilet. If what was impossible became the worst possibility, his father might get drunk enough to forget by tomorrow. In the morning, Tony would claim that while he slept, one of his friends had done it, though friends never visited the house. They lived too far away; they were bus riders whose parents owned cars capable of only the most necessary trips: to work and back, to 7-11 on the way home and to the grocery store on weekends. Most worked in the screw factory, a few at 7-11, some at the grocery store. Hair stylists, barbers, the daycare lady, three cops, teachers, a principal, a road crew, and a doctor who lived in another town with mostly-paved roads.

Tony left the bathroom. His father turned. He smiled. He laughed. Without looking away, he found his Miller can and drank, and then he laughed more. He drank again and laughed. He got up and went to the kitchen, still laughing, and picked another can from the endless vine. He opened the beer and drank, then sprayed bubbles and froth.

I can guess some of the reasons why he laughed. In 1992, he attended an Iron John meeting in the woods, where he drank whiskey instead of beer and was banned from all future gatherings for howling too loud. In 1994, he joined the Promise Keepers and confessed many faults but soon found he couldn't keep his promises to return. In 1998, he bought on a whim five shares of internet stock. In 1999, he became passionately disturbed by the dangers of the millennium bug and bought a hundred jugs of bottled water, which remained unopened in the basement. In 2000, as a result of his internet stock purchase, he endured a ninety-eight-cent windrise. In 2001, he let the FBI know his suspicions

that the gas station owner, a heavily-bearded, non-Arabic man, supported terrorist organizations. And throughout all these years, he watched Oprah Winfrey, believing that one day he would learn the ten-minute solution to all his unnameable problems.

Tony's father laughed harder and walked to the bedroom, slamming the door.

Tony could not yet have known how alcohol makes laughter of tears. He probably sat on the arm of the couch, listening for clues from his dad's bedroom. He hoped his father would switch on the amp. There would be a low rush of feedback. His father would play one chord. He would try another and fail, but then he would remember and soon have two down cold. The third would be harder, but his father's fingers would eventually find their way around the strings, and three chords would make a song, only it wouldn't be the Jefferson Starship but something his father loved for a truth that had slipped away from him. What that song would be, Tony couldn't guess. His father never listened to music; he had sold all his discs years before Tony could develop any interest in them. Tony only knew the photos in the album, and that too had vanished over the last year, some time after he had accidentally left it on the coffee table. His father closed the photo album and took it with him. The car started and then the photo album was gone.

He heard his father talking to himself. It wouldn't be the first time, but pauses followed statements: the telephone.

Tony made his way toward his father's bedroom. From two feet away, he could hear through the door's cheap construction.

"Now he thinks he's me. Ain't that a laugh? No, you're not coming next weekend. Why? You're drunk. I'm the drunk, get it? You've got no excuse. But go ahead, have another. It won't work, but just in case it does, come over and take a look at Tony. That ought to remind you of just about everything."

Tony returned to the couch. His back hurt again. One football game ended; another began. He watched the unformed and helmeted men chase a ball, chase each other, not paralyzed like his soldiers, not yet, anyway, but struggling through rain and mud ... for a ball. He laughed, for he had crawled to the borderline of his father's past and shouted "War!" or "Peace!"

Halftime arrived. He would have fallen asleep. The marching bands kept him from going all the way under, and he waited half-awake, but no guitar raised its voice behind the closed door.

Half an hour later, his father appeared at the foot of the couch.

"I'm gonna get the dog."

The car started and then his father was gone.

A dog was coming home, but his mother wasn't. During her random visits, she brought groceries and cleaned the house. She timed these visits to catch Tony's father drunk again and rub in the fact that he was a no kind of ex-husband but might have a second chance with her if only he rehabilitated himself.

That he was no kind of father seemed not to bother her. She cleaned the house, Tony suspected, to avoid him. Her touch, when it came, was something he caught, like a fish that wasn't hungry. When he was younger, he used to grab her arm and reel in a hug. Otherwise, she might pat his back, as if he were the dog. Lately, he preferred she not touch him at all, and she obliged.

I can guess the following from personal experience: "Look, Tony," she would say, unpacking groceries and smiling with pride, as though the box of Captain Crunch had what he wanted at the bottom of its sifted nuggets, in a vacuum-sealed plastic wrapper. "And this," she would say, displaying Oscar Meyer bologna, expecting him to sing B-O-L-O-G-N-A so well that an agent would call and make them all rich.

At first, she would pick him up from school. He had never decided which was more embarrassing, his father's weaving or his mother's makeup having not run far enough. Then came the buses, some kind of government program, progress anywhere else, but here it was more like letting the bars stay open later or letting the 7-11 sell beer all night. He was no longer picked up or dropped off by car, though in either case he would have preferred walking, thereby preventing friends from seeing his parents or noticing the grooves in the lawn from the time his father almost ran into the house after a night in town.

I know for a fact that Tony accompanied his father to the bar on several occasions, underage but ignored. They sat with his father's ex-bandmates, who explained how they were once paid to play with money from this very bar, that the joint used to be packed every Thursday night, and if only ... But then they paused, and Tony's ears would ring from the live band's music. By then, Tony was studying basic science and had begun to think of his father as a dead archeologist digging up his own bones under the town. Eventually his father must have realized this, too, and he quit going to the bar. He stopped appearing in the world as much as the unnatural laws of the afterlife allowed. There was no use trying to find himself; he was long gone. He would change his mind about Tony's mother, hoping she would rediscover him.

Tony removed the Telecaster from the wall. It would take his father an hour to return from the animal shelter, and there would be papers to sign. Subtracting rumination, Tony figured he had time. He grabbed the wire which for years had coiled beside the amp like a hibernating snake. He plugged guitar to amp and turned the latter to seven out of ten, knowing this act, if discovered, might be considered a war crime. This worry went down as the volume went up. He meant it as a peace treaty.

He tried to play a chord, finger positions guessed from music videos. Then, mohawked and strumming, he saw himself in a river of beer. He would know the beer was coming for him, would absorb him in the local stream of life, add him to its drowning traffic, jam him in its current. He looked around and noted the walls of his father's bedroom prevented his escape. Perhaps one day the room would be his, and in this bed he would die. Whatever happened until

then, he would regret. In the ocean to which he would be carried, the corpses of a million mothers and fathers like his own would bob, and he would be one of them, with a son of his own, waiting to occupy his room without the slightest impatience.

He checked his watch. He still had time. He placed the guitar next to the amp and twisted the volume knob. Feedback gained momentum, pooling its chaos, snatching loose associations, until its sound became the howl of a murdered dog. Having raised the dead, Tony replaced the guitar, turned off the amp, set the volume back to zero, recoiled the cord. Rest in peace.

“Tony? Get your ass out here.”

Back outside, almost caught and found guilty of guitar abuse, Tony’s scalp itched in the sun. The mohawk let him know he hadn’t even found the trend of his era. He and his father were excused from the Information Age, a computer-less, TV-bound family, guarded by this new dog and not about to fly anywhere, without any need to calculate available flights and order tickets online. The Rottweiler’s mouth sagged open with a smile that might be one of love or bloodlust, the way his father’s laughter about the mohawk might have been one of two things.

“Well?”

Tony didn’t like the squat knot of muscle and its wagging stump. His father liked both and seemed to have forgotten the hair incident.

“You get the chocolate man, boy, you get the chocolate man. He’s all yours, when he comes.”

The dog’s purpose puzzled Tony. He knew it would live outside, leashed to the doghouse still in its box, an aluminum shed. It was better than the old dog’s home. Still, only someone stupid enough to walk within the dog’s radius would be attacked, and unless the blind began breaking and entering, no one would ever take that approach. The entire house was accessible outside its protector’s providence. True, the dog could bark a warning, but that was all. A puppy, one Tony might have liked, could have done the same. This dog was at least a year old, nearly full-grown, beyond any beauty it might have had on loan.

“Wanna know its name?”

No. “Yes.”

“Darkie.”

“What if somebody hears?”

“They’ll think I’m saying hello. What’s the look? Go play with your fort.”

He did.

The garage door was open, and his father divided his time between assembling the shed and sitting in the lawn chair, getting lit more by Miller than the sun. The dog, already roped, exhausted by the emigration process and now forced to take its oath of allegiance, weakened by the minute.

“You know what to do, Darkie, when they come at night.”

So, Tony thought, in the future I will have my own dog, trained to attack. For now, he had his useless soldiers, a pitiful crew, mincemeat for his remote-control Godzilla the last dog had destroyed, mistaking it for one of the invaders his father had trained it to attack. Wrong colour but close. And Godzilla had arrived because of others' mistakes, a monster for monstrous failures. Everybody loved Godzilla.

Tony wished he had somewhere to go, but the nearest destination—the barbershop pinball machine—was an hour's walk away. He could return inside, but that would attract his father's curiosity. So he stayed, and slowly the doghouse came together, a how-to-do-it-while-drunk-out-of-your-mind show. If he tripped, the yard needed rolling ("potholes"), and if he staggered, his shoes were too big ("goddamn Payless shit"). The more he lost control, the more slap happy he became.

"Look at that dog. Go, Darkie, go."

This was the most tenuous time, for at any second his father's manufactured happiness would slap him awake and he would realize how unsunned he remained no matter how long he sat in the lawn chair drinking Miller. He was pale inside and out, leached and bleached, wrung of colour like an overwashed shirt squeezed in a sink.

On cue, his father kicked a Miller can. "Honky-tonk shit." The can landed in the dog's radius. Darkie tried to bite through the aluminum. Tony's father went inside, throwing the screen door back so hard it flung open. He re-slammed it and two hinges popped loose. Less than a minute later, he returned, banging through the door and breaking the other hinges, the screen twirling to the ground in slow motion like a dying soldier in a movie. Darkie looked up. One less gate protected the castle. In his father's left hand shook the guitar.

"What's this?"

Resisting the obvious answer, Tony shrugged.

His father turned the body of the guitar toward the last of the sunlight. "Fingerprints. You think you're me, playing guitar, walking around with a goddamn mohawk?"

Tony's intentions resisted translation, a foreign language he didn't know. To attempt explanation risked saying the opposite of what he meant. "No habla Espanol," he remembered from class. He wanted to point at himself: "No habla Tony."

Darkie barked, agitated by the tension. Tony had become one piece of an unsolvable geometry problem, incapable of escape, though nothing prevented him from running except a lack of destination.

"Did you play it loud enough for the neighbors to hear? The new ones don't like rock and roll. I hope you played some rap."

He swaggered, staggered. He grabbed the neck and with a great lifting motion, almost heroic, he raised the guitar straight above his head and brought it

down, driving it into the ground. That it had not broken seemed to confuse him, and he remained in a half-squat, gasping.

“You do it.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Come here and do it, boy.”

Pinocchio, a liar by default, with strings attached, dangled above the guitar. Tony lifted automatically, his heart not in it. His head was made to move, eyes directed toward the sidewalk his father had missed, until concrete formed the bull’s-eye of this particular illusion.

“You’re me? Then do it yourself.”

Tony grabbed the neck, lifted the guitar as his father had, and brought it down, driving it into the concrete. It split at the neck, strings springing free, grasshopper antennas. There was no Pete Townsend roar of feedback yet Tony felt a reverberation of memories, howls of dead selves not resting in peace but climbing out of the ground, zombies in ripped punk-rock jeans.

His father stood and stepped on the neck of the guitar, finishing the job. Tony expected the spat saliva of long-gone audiences to pour like blood from the frets. The dog licked the beer can, seeming to know better than to make himself a secondary target.

“In the morning the mohawk goes.”

Through the space where the screen door had been, Tony watched his father grab a case of Miller and head to his bedroom. Another door slammed, and that, Tony probably thought, marked the end of the day.

He decided to bury the guitar in the trash, guessing how his father would react in the morning. He might not remember wrecking the guitar. He would blame Tony if he forgot, and he would blame Tony if he remembered. He might not even remember buying the dog. “What the hell’s this?” he might say. “Who told you to buy a dog?” As usual, tomorrow offered no promises. Now Tony knew why the emerging moon sometimes disappeared.

The dog looked at him as if to say, “I know how you feel.”

Tired of television, he would have gone to his bedroom. His father came out for bathroom breaks, drunker each time, the impossibilities endless. Thinking he might bore himself to sleep, Tony sat on the mattress with legs crossed. The last few hours confused him: a big day with new battlelines, and the hill on which his father sat could not be taken. The wallpaper, supplied by his mother before she’d left, mocked him with illustrations of astronauts on the moon, obviously bought at great discount since he had been born long after children had stopped dreaming of being Neil Armstrong. One man planted a flag, another drove a rover, the pattern repeating, rubbing it in: “The moon? You’ll be lucky to land on Earth.” Drapes hid that place, but he did have books in which he pictured geography: rivers, mostly, the Amazon and the Nile, and he often daydreamed of explorations in which he controlled the destination, his attendants acquainted with the territory. He searched not for the source but for

adjacent rivers which would lead him to places still dark on the map. He knew none remained except, as a teacher had explained, the deepest regions of the ocean. In class, he had seen photos of strange, deep-sea creatures, and millions more of them existed, impossible to know. This, he believed, was the ultimate source, and it repelled him.

In his room, the day rushed past dusk to night. He turned on the light and lay back, trying to imagine his way out, but he lacked the energy, events racing around the track, a motorway of remembrance, the constant Indianapolis 500 of a permanent Memorial Day. He wished to turn off this television. It was only a matter of time, he suspected, before his family would be telecast on Cops.

He turned off the light. He heard talk in low bass, his father on the phone again. Words clarified in the darkness. "I know you still love me. Yes, you do. Why don't you just come back? I told you no black guy would stay. Everybody at work laughed about it. 'George?' they said, but I kept quiet. Let's not argue. Shh. Why don't you come home? I figured you'd be tired of whoring around by now, that you got it out of your system. I guess not. You're coming home, one way or another. You know exactly what it means. I wouldn't call it a threat, no. More like a promise. Marriage is a contract. If one person breaks it, that doesn't mean the other one pays. That's what we got going on here. Anybody else would knock your brains out. It's bad enough everybody at work knew, laughing, still laughing. Don't hang up. Come home. Don't—fucking bitch."

How the phone survived these slammings, Tony couldn't know, but he did know his father would pick up the phone and call back, re-slam the phone, call back, until he passed out with the receiver in hand, the operator demanding that he please hang up and try his call again, the worst possible advice.

Tony returned to the couch, not wanting to hear another word. Tony turned on the television and closed his eyes to the flicker.

The bedroom door opened. In the bathroom, a stream headed to its source, the sewer, and pooled. If alligators had ever infested that underworld, they would find no better pipes for their sloshing in all the world.

Then something original happened. The door remained closed, his father asleep on the toilet, probably slumped with one hand searching for the newspaper in which Tony had wrapped his clippings. The kingdom was peaceable, the armies abandoned by their general. Tony fell asleep to the voice of an evangelist.

At three, the phone rang, or Tony thought it rang, and he heard his mother say, or dreamed she said, "I'm leaving the state. I'll be gone by tomorrow. Don't ever call me again."

The next morning, Tony saw that his father had made it back to bed some time during the night. Now he rose, early, as usual, as if he couldn't stand lying under the covers with yesterday beside him. He revisited the bathroom, then came into the living room holding scissors and the electric razor.

"Let's go."

Tony had wondered how his father would get him to the barbershop in his Sunday condition; he hadn't guessed this option. Tony followed his father into the kitchen and sat in the chair, cans rolling by his feet, with the hammer on the counter in case his father trampled over the sprawling heap. A sheet fell around Tony's neck, and his father began cutting, at first with care but then surrendering to his incapacitation and simply shaving everything off.

Tony brushed the stubble that remained. But as Tony began to worry about what they'd say at school, what he thought had been a dream reasserted itself in the answering machine's blinking red light, a little dot he hoped his father might miss long enough for the words to be erased before they had been heard twice. That would give Tony and his mother enough time. Instead, his father took the sheet of hair toward the door, stopped and looked down, then paused as if he knew what he was about to hear: a terminal diagnosis. A finger shook above the dot, then stabbed the button. The machine announced: "One new message, left at 3:35 am."

"I'm leaving the state. I'll be gone by tomorrow. Don't ever call me again."

His father grabbed the hammer and pounded his left palm, catching the claw, letting go, catching it again. Tony wanted to point and say, "Tears," even as he backed away from the table, giving himself room to run.

"Where you going? You leaving, too?"

"Yes," he didn't say.

His father kicked open the door, but this breaking and exiting failed to alert the dog, still sleeping with chin on paws. Tony followed his father not by choice but by gravitational pull. His father stopped on the sidewalk, the concrete speckled by plastic bits of Telecaster hail. Tony wondered whether he or the dog would pay. Then he thought: Darkie. The last dog: Blackie.

"Come here, Darkie."

"Dad, no."

Still playing catch with the hammer, Tony's father moved in close. The dog stirred, smiling, it seemed, the way George must have smiled at work.

His father raised the hammer. Darkie rose higher. The dog leapt with all the force of its muscles and caught Tony's father's arm in its teeth, skin thinner than aluminum, and the hammer dropped. Tony's father fell with Darkie on top of him and still latched to his arm.

"Do something."

Tony saw the dog's head shiver, and then he saw the moon on his father's head. He picked up the hammer with one target in mind while swinging at the other, uncertain which choice would be called an act of mercy and which a crime. When the hammer struck, he must have known that they were the same. His father watched it happen with eyes of sudden, absolute sobriety.

Tony backed away from the blood. "It was all your fault."

He waited for Cops.

But no cops would arrive because no matter how much violence occurred, this prison yard remained inescapable despite another dead guard dog in the grass. Somehow his father tracked through blood toward the door, and somehow he wrapped the sheet of hair around his arm, and somehow he stopped the bleeding, and somehow he stood and got into his car and drove to the hospital.

Tony would have felt the water gather. The soldiers in the open garage met his lack of expectations. The river took him into the future, only this time the bodies bobbed in the ocean upside down, bound by leg chains, floating as one.

“He must have thought the worst was over.”

Monique puts her ring finger to my lips. “Shh.”

She knows I assembled this story over the many years following Tony’s service as my quiet friend in middle school. Some of it happened to other kids, some of it to me. My father the guitar player, Tony’s father the singer, somebody else’s the dog killer, another one whose wife left him, and yet another one who gave only plastic green soldiers on birthdays and Christmas. I built the story to explain why the father trapped Tony in the garage with exhaust fuming from a hose, then did the same to himself.

Monique leans close. “That’s enough.” She kisses me and says my lips feel like boards.