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# WYOMING

JP GRITTON



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*For John Lee*



I'll tell you what happened and you can go ahead and decide. This was about a year ago, around when the Big Thompson went up. That fire made everybody crazy. A billboard out toward Montgrand reads: HE IS RISEN. And I wasn't ever the churchgoing type, but seeing fire wash down the mountain in a crazy-ass wave made me think twice about All That. Like maybe He's already here, and maybe you can read Him in flame and flood.

Day it started, my crew was working an addition for this guy Ronnie, lived up Left Hand Road. Now that was a job: big timber penning us in on all sides, keeping the sun off our backs. Around one in the afternoon, Ronnie would come a-prancing down the porch steps, big smile on his face. Then he'd get in his car and drive to town. Don't know what he did for a living, but it didn't look like he was working too hard. When Ronnie come back around five in the afternoon, we'd pack it in for the day. Sometimes he even brought us beer. He'd float downstairs, a case of Bud in his hand, grinning like jolly ole Saint Nick. He'd hand the beer out to everybody on the crew, that big smile on his face. Some kind of bonus, I guess. He always had a line of bullshit, like, Don't you gentlemen get sore, working all day like this? And you'd laugh, cause you

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knew you had to. I didn't mind Ronnie. It was just he wanted poke so bad you could smell it on him.

Anyway, that was a good job. I made seven grand in three months, and I don't think I broke a sweat that whole time.

Then one morning the thunder come, loud enough to scare shit out of you. Great black clouds wash over the mountains and I turn around: "Get ready for a rain delay, boys!" and everybody laughs cause we all know this is about the downhillest contract we ever worked. But then I get this weird feeling. For one thing, it doesn't hardly rain. Then the lightning starts flaring. Then I see this bolt come down and just kiss the tree line.

We seen the red start in the brush by a hundred-year pine, and then we watched it creepy-crawl its way past bark and branches. Took about ten seconds for the fire to swallow that tree whole, and then it jumped, I swear to God, it jumped. And just like that it swallowed another great big pine. We must have looked like holy rollers at a revival: all slouching and slack-jawed, watching and waiting. I guess a minute went by before my best friend backslash brother-in-law, Mike Corliss, hollered, "Pack it up, fellas!"

So we did.

We got the chest onto the company truck and then we piled all the little stuff inside: skill saws and quick saws, pneumatics and drills. We had two compressors, a new one and an old one, and I hauled the new one into the back of my truck, I don't know why, I knew I had no cause to. But it was chaos by then: the whole time we're packing, we can see the fire chewing up the mountainside, coming right at us. It was raining a little, but near as I could tell it wasn't slowing the fire down any.

One by one, everybody takes off: Mike Corliss in the big F-250 marked LUNDEEN CONSTRUCTION LLC, then Tiny Tim and

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Eric from Boston and Eric from Phoenix, then the Mexicans. I don't know why I didn't haul ass out of there. I don't know why I just stood in the lot, looking around, trying to think of what we forgot. Then it hits me that nobody's told Ronnie.

So I hustle up the stairs, fast as I can, and when I get up to the door I pound on it like crazy. I guess the fire was about a mile off, maybe more, but it seemed closer. Maybe I imagined it, but I could feel the heat against my face. When he opened the door, he was in a pair of jogging shorts and a tank top, all barefoot and sweaty. I don't know what he was doing in there and I sure as hell don't want to. I pointed west. I told him, "Get your ass out of here!" Mother-fucker just looks at me. I can see "White Trash" ticker-taping over his eyes.

"Fire!" I shout, and I'll be goddamned if I can't help smiling. "Fire, you dipshit!"

Kind of seems like the Big Thompson going up was the beginning of the bad times for me and Mike. First of all, the work dried up. You'd think all them houses burning would mean a lot of building. Well it didn't. Now they were gone, wasn't anybody wanted to build up there. Plain scared, must've been. We did a reno out in Erie, we built a rich lady's deck in Boulder. That's about it.

By the time the boss man—Jake Lundeen, I mean—called me in, I hadn't had steady work in a month and a half. That was the first time I ever been in his trailer. Only reason to go in there is Lundeen wants to chew you out or you're picking up your paycheck. Account of he was my best friend, Mike Corliss picked up my paychecks for me, and I never gave Lundeen no reason to chew me out.

It was about the kind of office you might expect a guy like Lundeen to have: had his contractor's license from the State of

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Colorado framed and hung on the wall, alongside photographs of himself looking cut in jungle fatigues, smiling with some other dudes. He had his POW/MIA flag in the far corner, next to a steel shelf where the company's books were lined up, each with a year wrote down the side in yellow: 1975, 1976, 1977, all the way up to 1987. Apart from that, I remember he kept some Indian shit in there. A little guy with a mohawk playing a flute etched into a hunk of flagstone. Drums. Eagle feathers. He had a piece of raw-hide about the shape and size of a dinner plate, strung up with rabbit fur and feathers and beads.

"Dream catcher," he told me when I asked him what it was. "Keeps all the bad dreams out. Anyway, it's supposed to."

"I need one," I said. I don't know why. Pretty much right away I wished I hadn't. I was nervous as all hell. When I'm nervous, I talk foolish.

"Well I guess we all need one," he said after a while. "How you doing, Shell?"

I said I was all right. I said I wished to hell the work wasn't so slow. See what I mean? Foolish.

"It's about to get a whole lot slower," he said. "It'll be winter soon. Actually."

He give me this look.

"That's kind of what I want to talk to you about," he said. "Cause it's been awfully slow. And when the work's slow, the money's slow. And when the money's slow, people will sometimes get dumb ideas that seem like good ones."

I nodded, to show him I got his drift.

"I'm not singling you out," he said. "I'm not accusing. But there's a few things gone missing."

"Like what?"



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“There’s a bunch of little stuff,” he said. “I’m not worried about the little stuff. But there’s one big thing I am sort of worried about.”

I asked him, “What’s missing?”

“We seem to have had an air compressor simply vanish. Into thin air.”

Now he’d said it, I didn’t feel half so nervous anymore.

“Which one?” I asked. “We got a few.”

“Not ‘we,’” he said. “I. I have a few.”

He figured he could flush me out, but he was dead wrong. I didn’t say anything at first, then I decided I’d cut right to the chase: “I guess you think I did it.”

“I never said that. I’m talking to everybody.”

“Well I don’t know about it,” I said. “Maybe it went in the fire.”

“I thought about that,” he said. “It’s possible. But I doubt it.”

I didn’t ask him why he doubted it. I said, “You asked Hector and Luis?”

“I know Hector and Luis,” he told me. “I don’t know you very well.”

“So you think I must of did it.”

He put his hands up and said he never said that. Then we were quiet. I looked around his office, waiting for Lundeen to tell me I could go. I looked at the picture of him in the army. Even in Vietnam, the dude seemed like he’d never had to worry about anything.

“I don’t know you very well, Shelley,” he said, “but I do know Mike, and I know that it hasn’t been an easy time for you, this past while.”

Momma, I figured he was meaning. Or Lij, maybe, and the hundred twenty acres he lost on his deathbed. Either way, I wasn’t about to bite on that one in a million years.

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“Anyway,” Lundeen went on after a good long quiet spell, “I’m not accusing anybody: just saying that I could see how it might seem like a good idea, even though it was a bad idea, to take something that belongs to me. I could understand it, I think. And if the guy who did it returned the air compressor to me, then I could probably see my way to not getting the police involved.”

Time kind of stumbled along.

“Cause the thing is,” he said, “it’d take me hardly any time to figure it out. Tell you what I’d do. I’d take a day off. I’d go to every pawnshop between the Springs and Fort Collins. I’d ask to see their air compressors, and then when I found mine, I’d ask to see the pawn slip.”

It was about the dumbest thing I’d ever heard. If he checked every pawnshop from Fort Collins to the Springs, he still wouldn’t find the fucking thing. I knew cause, maybe a week earlier, I’d got a little drunk and made up my mind to drive to Devils Tower. But that’s a hell of a long drive. I got as far as Cheyenne and hawked the air compressor there. Five hundred bucks. It was almost all gone.

Wish I could help you, I kept telling Lundeen. Maybe I overdid it. I guess it doesn’t matter: he knew I’d ripped it. It’s like he said: he trusted the other guys on the crew, but he didn’t trust me. When I walked outside, there was cold in the air, and I wondered what I’d do about supper.

Well it’s hard working for a man when he’s pretty much looked you in the eye and called you a thief. I wasn’t ever quite fired, and I didn’t exactly quit, either. I just sort of dipped out, if you read me. Never told nobody I was doing it, just quit going. It must’ve been Mike told my brother about the situation. That fat bastard come

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swinging through the front door, didn't even knock. It was cool out, but apart from sweats he didn't wear anything but a tee shirt, and in just that he was still panting and red in the face.

"You run here?" I said, just like always. I didn't even get up to shake his hand. From the couch I watched him do his Godzilla march over to the easy chair I kept in the corner. It was leather with three settings (sitting, laying, reclining), and the truth is I hardly set in the fucking thing. I don't know how to explain how come I didn't, except to say I never felt clean enough. When Clay set down, the chair groaned like a church organ.

"Heard about Lundeen's," he said.

I said, "Yeah, well."

"How you holding up?"

"Oh," I said, "you know."

I should've told him scram, but now he was here I figured hell with it. I even went and got him something to drink out of the fridge.

"You got no Pepsi?" he said when I handed him Coke. It was like him to razz me when he hasn't been in the house but five minutes.

"There's Pepsi down the road," I said, meaning the 7-Eleven on Main. "You want Pepsi, go there."

He said, "No use us fighting already."

I thought about getting one last dig in, but on the whole I figured Clay was right: there was no point.

"Anyway," I said. "I'm okay. Had a little scratch saved up."

He smiled: "I bet you did."

I guessed he must mean the compressor. Well, fine. If that's what he thought, let him think it. Still, I figured it wasn't any of his damn business.

I don't know what it is, I just can't concentrate when my brother is in a room. The TV was on, but my brain didn't know what my eyes

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saw on the screen. It was all of it just shapes and colors, twisting on the glass like ghost acrobats. My whole life was passing me by.

“I guess I’ll get something together for the winter,” I told him.

“Something like what?” he wanted to know.

Which is when I smelled a rat. It wasn’t like my brother to wonder. Matter of fact, it wasn’t like my brother to come to me like this at all. Tigers don’t change their stripes, neither do jailbirds. I could see his, plain enough.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told him, getting sulky. “I’ll find something.”

We watched the TV awhile. Then I guess Clay must’ve got tired of beating around the bush.

“I come here as a favor.”

“No favor to me,” I told him. “Tell me what you want before you break that chair.”

He didn’t say anything for a second. Then he said, “I didn’t mean you. May told me to come.”

May, he said. Our sister. Which was a load of bullshit.

“We heard about your trouble, is all,” he said. “Kind of figured you could use some help.”

I just about messed myself, laughing. Help, my ass.

Anyway Clay didn’t stay much longer, a half hour or so. Just enough to catch his breath, I guess. The TV thundered: pure noise. When he stood up finally, he didn’t say goodbye. He walked right on out the door. When he’d gone, I stood up and turned the deadbolt.

The day I went to visit Mike, this was toward end of November, the whole house stunk like what was coming. I forgot to tell you that Mike’s little girl had got sick in the summer. I don’t like children, but I almost liked Layla. She was a quiet thing, but not so quiet

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she made you nervous. She looked a lot like Mike, matter of fact: golden-haired, with big blue eyes and a sad mouth. I guess it was about a couple months earlier they'd figured out she was about rot-through with cancer.

That girl was bad sick. Just this stumpy little skeleton, and the sheets pulled up to her chest. It did something to me, seeing her fingers that were just like matchsticks, and her eyes set deep in bruisey sockets, and what was left of her hair all damp and twisty on her forehead.

May set there next to her on the bed. My voice was gone and she had to tell me, "Say hello to your niece."

I said, "Hi, Layla."

She was a polite girl but she didn't make no move, not even a tilt of her head, to show she'd heard me. Veins ran crooked in her skinny neck. She watched me standing in the doorway, thinking whatever she thought. Fuck all. I wondered does she know I'm a bad man.

May bent to the girl, whispered soft: "Say, Hi Uncle Shell, Layla."

The girl lifted her hand. She had no voice to speak to me. And maybe if she had, she still wouldn't have said anything. I don't blame her. The poison they ran into her veins made her weak: cure's worse than the disease, like they say. But then again the disease seemed pretty god-awful.

"I just come to say hello to your daddy," I told her.

Them two on the bed seemed to wait. They must want me to leave, I thought, but I couldn't. I just stared at that kid, into the blue-black eyes where her life was fading and flickering like a bum lightbulb. Even if she looked half-dead, you could still see how much Layla favored Mike. And the thought went through me like a blade: I got to do something about this.

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“She’s a little angel,” I said.

“She sure is,” said May, and she almost smiled. I didn’t get any kind of pleasure from watching May suffer like that, I’ll tell you. I was grateful to her when she let me go, nodding her head at the door:

“Mike’s out in back,” she said.

I went through the den, where old magazines had been stacked into crushing towers, and the radio played so low that all you could hear was a slanty buzz. I pulled the black doorknob and stepped back into the cold I’d just come from. Them days, Mike and May lived out past the Montgrand city limits. They’d got a nice place, bought when the land was still cheap: about two acres, and the Saint Vrain Creek run right through it.

Mike was a ways off, at the edge of the property, setting on the cutting stump and smoking. He had a pushcart and in the pushcart there was some firewood. I guess he must have heard me coming through the door, but he didn’t turn around when it shut.

“Hey,” I called. Still he didn’t turn around. My guts sunk when I thought he might be having himself a cry. Nobody could fault him for that. I sure as hell wouldn’t. I slowed up my pace a little, I guess to give him a chance to get himself together. But when he stood up and turned to me, his eyes were dry.

“That chimney’s got something wrong with it,” he said. “Gets smoky as hell in there.”

“Seemed all right to me,” I said.

“That’s cause May put the electric on.”

I nodded.

“It’s like living in a muffler. That kid, like she ain’t got enough problems.” Mike was quiet for a while. Then he said, “This is a bad deal here.”

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“It sure is,” I told him. “Y’all can stay with me, you don’t like the smoke.”

I meant my place down on Hover, Mrs. Gamliel’s building. It was real cheap account of I did the mowing sometimes, and the gutters and things like that. Besides that, Mrs. Gamliel likes me. There was gas heat and plenty of space there. Layla and her momma could stay in my room. Me and Mike could camp out on the living room floor.

“Thanks,” Mike said, “but I guess we better leave Lay be.”

Probably he was right about that. I thought about her waving at me. I said, “How are you all fixed?”

Mike said, “What do you mean?”

I said, “For cash.”

He give me a funny look: “That an offer?” he said, and I knew what he meant. He meant: What happened to the air compressor?

By now Mike had been working for Jake Lundeen since him and May and Layla come out to Colorado, back in ’85. Since it was Mike got me the job there, I knew I had put him in a jackpot. I didn’t like it, but that was how it was. When I didn’t talk, he said, “Anyway, we’re all right. I had some savings, so did May.” Then after a while, he goes on, like it isn’t any kind of big deal: “Clay’s been helping some.”

Boy, it spread through me like wildfire. I couldn’t keep my voice straight cause I felt like I was choking.

“He’s been what now?”

“He’s helped us some,” Mike said. “We’ve got a hundred-dollar copay every time we go in that fucking place. Clay pays.”

“He pays for the hospital?” I said.

“And other stuff.”

Turned out Clay gave them money for all kinds of things: helped with the groceries and the electric, a down coat for Layla.

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I said, "I don't know where to hell he gets the money."

It was a dumb thing to say, considering, and I guess Mike couldn't help smiling at me. We were quiet, and then he said, "You better bring it back, Shelley."

I said, "Bring what back?"

When he quit smiling, he looked as awful as I felt right then.

"All right," he told me, "your funeral."

I stood out there with my friend Mike Corliss, watching him chop the wood slow and steady. He pulled the axe over his head. He drove the bright edge into the heart of the wood. The kindling fell around the stump with a clatter, and I stooped to gather it into the pushcart.

While we worked I thought about Clay, wondering what his game was. On the face of it, he was helping Mike. But I knew Clay too well, and I knew help from Clay was no help at all.

"When's he want the money back?" I asked.

Mike set a big white block of wood up on the stump, drew up the blade, halved it.

"I don't think it's a loan," he said. "I think he just means it as a kindness."

And it didn't sound right: didn't sound much like Clay, anyway. Maybe he didn't want anything now, but that didn't mean he would want nothing later. It was a loan, even if Mike didn't know it was. And the devil was to pay.

"Come on," Mike said when we'd done. "You ready?"

I piled the last bit of the kindling into the cart and we headed on in. We were busy for a while piling the firewood against the wall of the house, where Mike had a strip of plywood cantilevered against the wet. It was good work, I could see that. When we'd got through, we took a few of the bigger wood blocks and went inside.



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In the house I could hear the girl's voice all soft and crumpled-sounding: "I'm not thirsty," she kept saying. "I don't want it." She would die soon and everyone knew she would die and Clay was liable to come out the better for it. Drove me crazy, thinking about it.

After we'd set the wood against the claws of the stove, Mike walked to the kitchen and pour his little girl a glass of water. I followed him.

"Set on down there," he said, poking his chin at the red Formica table him and May'd brought with them from Missouri. I did. With the glass of water in his hand he made for his little girl's room. I just set there, listening. I could hear their voices, low. May laughed and then I heard Mike laughing, too. Maybe the girl was laughing, but I couldn't tell.

When Mike come back to the kitchen I asked, "What were y'all carrying on about?"

"Nothing," he said, quick, so I wondered maybe were they laughing at me. It made me feel silly, and shy, like a kid hanging out with grown-ups. I didn't appreciate it much.

I said, "You needed help, you should've come to me."

We were quiet. I thought about them laughing in the next room. I wanted a drink bad but it was not the time for it. One of these days, it's all going to make sense. Just then, though, Mike wasn't helping things.

"How can you hate him so much?" he asked.

And before I could think of a way around it, I said, "How can you not?"

"Cause he's May's brother," Mike told me. "And cause family's all you got, when it comes down to it."

You're all I got, I almost told him, but I knew it wouldn't sound right. He looked so tired all of a sudden. Some reason, I felt like

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apologizing to him: it was like I was the one who'd brought all this down on them. I knew it was crazy. I was Mike's best friend. All the wickedness in the world wouldn't change that.

"Don't you know where that money come from?" I said, when I couldn't think of what else to say.

Mike just shook his head, like he couldn't believe my nerve.

"You can ask him yourself when he gets here," he told me, standing up and making for Layla's room. "Clay and the girls are coming for supper."

I wouldn't've stayed but that Clay and me had business.

Back in '72, a while before I come out West, Clay married himself a piece of redheaded Arkansas trash named Nancy, and then Nancy had two girls by Clay named Erin and Aileen. Them girls were redheaded trash just like their momma and you could see a reckless future playing out when you looked them in the eye. The one called Erin already had tits even if she was just twelve that year. Aileen was ten but she had as foul a mouth as you ever heard. She was prettier than her sister, and knew it.

When they showed up, the dark was already edging in on the plains. They walked in and seen me setting at the kitchen table, and I heard that little bitch Aileen mutter, "Oh, shit."

Clay had on a jean jacket over his tee shirt, and a pair of sweats. I'm pretty sure they were the same sweats he wore when he come to see me that day in October. I told him, "Guess the whole family don't bother with knocking."

Nancy laughed and stooped down to kiss my cheek: "Family don't have to knock," she said. "How you doing, Shelley?"

I don't know, I guess Nancy's all right: a good woman, even if she is trash. She's sick, too, a little, though just at the moment I

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can't remember what the sickness is called, and she doesn't ever complain. In fact you'd hardly notice but that some days she moves slower than others, and kind of jerking and jittering around some, like an old dog.

"I'm all right," I said, but I wasn't fooling anybody. Truth is, I couldn't stop thinking about Clay trying to get my best friend Mike Corliss over a barrel.

"You look like you just sucked a lemon," said Nancy. Her girls smirked.

When Mike come in he put on a brave face: smiled and kissed Nancy and hugged Clay like the brother he sure as hell wasn't. When he scooped up Erin and Aileen, you could tell by the way they looked at Mike they were kind of sweet on him.

"May'll be out in a second," he said. "Layla had a accident."

"Poor little bug," said Nancy.

We were all quiet for a while, and then Mike wondered if burgers sounded all right to everybody. He fetched a package of ground beef from the fridge and set it in the sink. He turned to the girls and asked were they hungry now, and even though they shook their heads he fetched down some potato chips from the cupboard and opened them up. That's just like Mike: trying to make everybody happy.

"How's she doing?" Nancy wondered, while her girls laid into the chips.

"She's all right," Mike said. "We won't know much until next month. That's when we see the oncologist. They got to see how everything's going."

"We'll be praying for you," said Nancy.

Mike didn't say anything. I thought maybe he's thinking it won't do no good and I thought maybe he's right to think it.

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It was a solemn-type moment, quiet but for the girls sucking down them potato chips. I stared hard at the one called Erin. I said, “You keep on eating like that, you’re liable to end up like your daddy.”

Don’t think I’m proud of what I said, cause I’m not. Matter of fact, I felt sorry as hell for saying it. The room gone real quiet. Erin got this worn-out look on her face. Then Mike smiled at her and said she ought to have just as much as she wanted, cause we weren’t liable to eat for another hour or so.

I don’t know what to tell you: I have what you’d call a mean streak.

When May had finished cleaning up Layla’s bedsheets, she come out and hugged everybody and they set around and visited in the den. Nobody talked to me or asked me anything, which I didn’t mind. I guess Layla must’ve been sound asleep in the next room, cause she didn’t make a peep that whole time.

“It’ll be mighty slow this winter,” Mike said, shaking his head. “Slump got everybody scared.”

“I’ll tell you who isn’t hurting,” Clay said. “The boss man. He isn’t hurting one bit.”

Mike shrugged: “Lundeen’s fair.”

“Fair, shit,” Clay said. “Get your contractor’s license. Then you’ll see what’s fair.”

Never mind he didn’t know the first fucking thing about it.

“I don’t have time to study,” Mike told him. “And that test cost money.”

Clay said, “If it’s the money, don’t worry about it.”

That was about as much as I could take. I stood up. I said, “Come on outside.”

For a second Clay looked like he didn’t aim to follow. Four years earlier, after he got out of Huntsville, maybe he wouldn’t

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have. But I was big now, and strong from the work. I guess he didn't want to see what would happen if he stayed put. After a minute he got his ass off the couch and follow me outside.

I walked down to the woodpile and the axe face-first in the cutting stump. In the way-off I could see where the mountains reared up into great purple piles, and before that the fields of splintered corn and winter wheat the yellow of old teeth. My breath was a ghost in the hard blue air. I watched Clay come. He was panting and drawing the collar of his jacket up around his wattle. I didn't want any part of this. I didn't want anything to do with him. And still I said: "Well go on and tell me about it."

Before he answered me, he took a roach out of the pocket of his jacket and lit up. Took this big old drag: "Tell you about what?"

I might've figured he'd play dumb. I said, "Tell me about this job you've got."

He looked at me, the roach flaring red. I watched the smoke floating east on the cold wind, headed for night. He said, "Two thousand dollars."

I said, "That isn't much."

He said, "It's plenty for what you'll be doing."

I said, "What is it you think I'm going to do?"

He said, "Drive to Houston."

And I said, "What's in the car?"

And he said, "What do you think?"

And I just laughed at him: "Favor, my ass," I told him.

Well there we were. Two thousand dollars to run his weight. Okeydokey, forget it. I said, "You can kiss my ass, Clay."

He did not appreciate that. He said, "I'm trying to help you. It's either you do it or I find somebody else to do it. And it won't be hard to find somebody else."

**JP Gritton**

He puffed away and I saw meanness at the corners of his eyes. He sort of chuckled to himself. He said, "Hell, I bet Mike'd do it. Sort of sounds like he could use the work, too."

I seen what he meant clear enough. He meant the groceries and the electric, a down coat for Layla. He meant: Mike'd just about do it for free if I asked him, wouldn't he? I'll tell you right now, I wanted to swing that axe at him. I wanted to bring the bright edge hard against his goddamn neck. I might have picked it up and did it, but to tell the truth I seen this coming. After a while I just said, "What gets to me is you don't even know how evil you are."

He looked at me. And I thought to myself, No: he knows damn well. After a second I said, "All right. But I want three thousand."

He said, "Twenty-five."

"Okay," I told him, "but I need five hundred up front."

After something like that I couldn't abide staying for dinner. I walked around the far side of the house, past the garage, so they wouldn't spy me from the den. When I come around the edge of the garage, though, May seen me from the kitchen. She had the window open to let the grease smoke out and she called to me, stooping under the glass.

I went over and nodded at her. I said I couldn't stay.

She watched me for a second before she spoke. Quiet like that, she looked just like Momma. She said, "You and Clayton are at it again."

It wasn't any kind of question, so I just shrugged.

"Are you going to do it?" she asked.

I played dumb, I don't know why: "Do what?" I said.

"Clay might have some work for you, is what I heard."

She drew up her shoulders, turned her eyes away from me.

"Yeah," I said, deciding there wasn't any harm in them knowing. "I'm going to do it."

## WYOMING

Something soft and cold fell on my cheek. I looked up and saw the snow had started. Its smell in the air was heavy, like an animal's.

"Wait a second," she said. I watched her go to the counter and take out a bun and scoop one of the hamburgers onto it. Then she reached out and give me the hamburger, the grease still running down the side. My stomach growled when I smelled it. I said thank you, and then I walked to my truck and drove off.

It snowed fourteen inches that night, but by the morning they had I-25 cleared pretty good. I made Cheyenne in just about an hour. I always expect Wyoming to feel different, but it never does. When I got to the pawnshop and lay the ticket on the counter, the dude just squinted at me for a second. He said, Didn't expect to see you again. Yeah, I told him, me neither. After a minute he hauled the air compressor from where he had kept it in the window with an \$800 price tag and set it down next to the counter. I took Clay's five hundred dollars from my wallet and handed it to him, then I picked up the air compressor and walked out the door. I didn't even look back, that's how mean I was feeling.

Somehow it seemed longer, going south.

Lundeen's car was out front, by the trailer. He drives a 1983 Lincoln Mark VII with tuck-and-roll upholstery and a cobalt-and-silver paint job. It give me a funny feeling to park right next to him. Opening the gate, I said out loud to nobody or everybody: "I'm never going to have to do this again."

That compressor weighed about three tons. I guessed that's what it was like, being Clay: like having a great big stone hanging round your neck. I humped that thing across the lot, up the rickety two-by-four stairs. Don't think I bothered with knocking.

**JP Gritton**

Lundeen was at the desk, all his books and papers around him. Just judging by his face, I don't think he was all that surprised to see me. I set the compressor down on the floor, and then I turned round and walked out.

I must've been halfway to my truck when I heard him come out the door of his trailer: "Hey!" he called. "Wait a sec."

Something about his voice made me stop and turn and wonder. He waved me back up the stairs. He said, "Cold out here."

I wasn't afraid. I did not even feel ashamed, all of a sudden. I walked up the steps and back into the office. He didn't try making small talk, which I appreciated. Next to the desk where his papers were, he had a blower going. I just stood in the warm, waiting. From the top of that steel bookshelf, he took down one of the books. When he opened it I could see that inside were checks, three to a page. He was busy a while, deciding how much to give me, and then writing it down.

"What were you getting here?"

"Thirteen," I said.

"Lucky thirteen," he said. Then he tore the check loose and walked over and handed it to me. Six hundred sixty-six dollars, made out to Shelley Cooper. The memo read SEVERANCE PAY. You had to hand it to the guy, he had a sense of humor. I couldn't help it. I smiled.

Walking to my truck, I told myself I'd never cash it. Driving home, I told myself I couldn't afford not to.

Three weeks later, I drove to Texas with Clay's dope.

Night before I left, I went to that site up Left Hand Road, Ronnie's place. I don't know how to explain to you why I went there, but it pulled me like the current of a river. Like one minute I'm



## WYOMING

turning the keys in my ignition and the next minute my headlights are carving the gravel out of the dark, and my hands are twisting the wheel. After the fire, that big old house was nothing but a patch of concrete and a couple black logs laid one on top of the other. The add-on was just gone, so were all the trees: fire plucked that mountain like a chicken. He Is Risen: See what I mean? Sometimes you'll get an idea of the size of things.

With the car still going and the headlights on, I walked around the lot. I had my work boots on and I didn't care if they got dirty. The snow had melted by then, but the ash must have been an inch deep. Unbelievable.

I got to wondering whatever happened to old Ronnie.

Last I seen him, he was standing outside his car, watching the flame coming: I don't believe he knew whether to leave or stay. I wondered did he have insurance. I wondered did he land on his feet. I thought about how funny it would look, him driving up right then, finding me at the spot where his house used to be. I couldn't think of what I'd say to him. Sorry about all this.

Nobody ever come, though.

For a while I stood there, watching the snow make stardust in my headlights. Then I got in my truck and drove back to town.