

**Heavy copyedit of *The Step Back* by J.T. Bushnell using Chicago Style.**

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“Almost. I just have to finish sweeping.” She gave him a smile of infinite goodwill before turning back to me. “Want me to call if a poodle comes in?”

~~On a scrap of paper~~ I scribbled my father’s phone number on a scrap of paper, ~~not having one yet myself; nor the~~ I didn’t have the heart to admit that if Paris wasn’t there already, he never would be. But as I traded places with the man and moved into the parking lot, ~~it occurred to me~~ I realized that it wasn’t for Danielle’s sake that I withheld it. She probably faced bad news like this every day, taking down reports of missing animals just like this one, taking in abandoned animals like London. Why had I ever thought she was incapable of facing it?

The landscape was darkening under silver skies and the chill was starting to bite. “Not here,” I said, ~~dumping myself~~ sliding in behind the wheel. The smell of whiskey was strong, and the silence had a quality of freshness and restraint, as if the conversation had been cut short by my return. I wondered if they had been talking about me.

My father passed the flask to Tanya as I started the ignition, and Tanya leaned forward to shake it at me. “There’s a little left.”

I turned on my lights as I pulled out of the lot. “Just tell me where Derek lives.”

~~At her instruction~~ I followed a highway north at her instruction until she. ~~She~~ directed me onto another highway, this one narrower and empty of traffic. Trees crowded the shoulders, darkening the road and turning dusk into night. ~~its shoulders crowded with trees, which darkened the road, turning dusk to night.~~

“How far are the Redwoods from here?” my father asked.

**Comment [EW1]:** I changed the wording here to ease the repetition of “dumping myself/himself” into the seat of the car. Another option would be “settling in behind the wheel.”

“An hour or so,” I said, “but there are sequoia groves all over the place.”

“Maybe we’ll go through one,” he said.

“Not on this road,” Tanya responded.

“Do you remember that camping trip we took?” he asked me.

I nodded. “We used to have that picture on the mantle. That’s actually what I thought the campus here was going to be like—out in the middle of some forest.”

“Is that why you came?”

“Probably. That and basketball.”

“Do you remember that camping trip?” he asked Charlie, tipping his head back, but Charlie only ~~continued to stare~~stared out the window. “You were pretty young,” he added.

It was quiet except for the drone of the engine, the sticky sound of the tires ripping over the road, the occasional tapping of bugs, which spiraled whitely though the headlights before their black smudges appeared on the windshield.

“There was that fire,” Charlie finally grumbled.

I’d forgotten all about it, but I remembered instantly. During one of our short attempts at hiking, a fire crew ~~with equipment loaded on their backs had come~~came up the trail at a jog, ~~equipment loaded on their backs~~. We’d thought it was a training exercise until we came across a tree shaped like a horseshoe, the center hollowed out. It looked like it had been that way a long time except for the scorching around the base, which was black and dripping. I remembered my parents debating why the crew had bothered putting it out, since these trees had surely weathered a few fires since the Iron Age. I remembered all four of us standing inside it together, touching the crust of wet, black

charcoal, trying to sense the life behind it.

“That’s right,” our father said.

My headlights raked trunks as I swung us around the curves. We gained some elevation and then lost it. The forest thinned and was, replaced by piles of manzanita, which pulsed and whipped in the wind. The smell of saltwater and kelp crept through the car. Houses started to appear, weathered old structures repaired with blue tarps and particleboard. I started to wonder how far we were going, and what I was headed toward.

**Comment [EW2]:** A more precise word might work better here. Perhaps “flashed” or “skimmed.”

“What’s Derek on parole for?” I asked Tanya.

“Assault. Bar fight. Not a big deal, but the guy pressed charges and Derek had a prior. Never laid a hand on me, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“He fights a lot?” I asked.

“No, but sometimes.”

I remembered him pointing the plunger at me. He hadn’t looked very intimidating, but then again, neither did some of the guys who could throw a baseball a hundred miles an hour.

“Ed,” my father said. “I want you to let me handle your dog.”

“That’s not necessary, Dad.”

“Has it occurred to you that this could be the whole reason he took it? To entice you into a confrontation?”

“I’m not going to confront him. I’m just going to ask for Paris.”

“He might not be reasonable enough to field that kind of request, not from you. The fact is, however Derek and I may differ, we’ve both lost a wife. I might be able to use that common ground to reason with him.”

I appreciated the offer, but this wasn't campus housing. I wasn't going to hide in the car while my father worked things out on my behalf. "Please just stay in the car," I said.

We passed a country store with battered ice machines, a hotel with river-rock siding, a gas station blazing with light, where a man with no shirt was filling a red gas can. The first stoplight we hit swung like a lantern from its long metal arm, and the street sign beside it was on hinges, ~~allowing it to flap~~flapping in the wind.

"Take a left," Tanya said. Half a mile later she said, "Left again."

~~This was a~~We drove down a dark residential street webbed with black tar, no center line or sidewalks. Blackberry vines ~~were~~spidered low to the ground along the shoulder, the leaves flashing their silvery undersides. On the left was a row of decrepit Victorians with porches and colonnades, on the right a row of prefabricated houses that looked like they might go tumbling down the bluff at any moment, blown off their foundations by the heavy wind. Straight ahead was a dead end, piled with more manzanita, and beyond that the black immensity of the ocean.

"There," Tanya said.

I followed her finger past the last Victorian. On its far side, at the very end of the street, was a boxy add-on with a separate entrance, its paint peeling. ~~The~~the color was indistinguishable in the porch light's cold ~~monochrome~~, which segregated everything into sharp distinctions of ~~blue-silversilver-blue~~ and black. A jacked-up Chevy was parked on the road out front, the right hindquarters bashed in. I pulled in behind it and cut the engine. The wind rocked the Volvo on its loose suspension, whistling in the door seams. Beneath the add-on's entrance was a concrete landing. It was level with the big scabby

**Comment [EW3]:** A more precise phrase here like "glare" would help clarify the meaning of this sentence.

yard, which disappeared into the structure's black shadow around the side, and it was from this shadow that a brindled, short-snouted dog emerged. Even from a distance I could see its broadness, its wide head and thick muzzle, its knots of muscle at the shoulder and jaw. It stood with the shadow bisecting its back, motionless and alert, ears perked, eyes trained in our direction.

"Is that your dog?" my father asked.

"No."

"That's Romeo," Tanya said.

A heavy chain trailed from the pit bull's collar, but there was no telling how far it reached, just as there was no telling whether the eagerness in the dog's stance was for human company or the opportunity to do violence. But then Tanya got out, gripping her shoulders as if to hold in the heat, her hair flying sideways, and the dog cowered beneath the immensity of its joy. It came crawling over on its belly, trembling and whining, lips peeled into a menacing parody of a smile. She met it halfway, and the dog writhed with pleasure, snuffing and snorting, pressing itself into her shins as if trying to burrow beneath her, while she crouched and petted it, asking, "Who's a good boy?" I got out, wanting that reception from Paris, and wanting to give the feeling of it to my father and brother.

There was no walkway, so I moved across the yard. It was littered with chewed up scraps of plastic, gutted toys, beef ribs gnawed into pale blades. A blond baseball bat, pitted with tooth marks, was splayed halfway to the landing, and I paused over it, recalling Derek's threat, his conviction for assault. But it seemed like an unnecessary escalation, so I left the bat and did my best to think of Derek charitably. My father was

right—his divorce had probably been equally painful, his sense of abandonment equally strong. He had made mistakes, but who hadn't? The opportunity to correct one was precious, and that was what I could offer him. I stepped up and knocked.

But then the door opened, and I wished I had the bat. Derek's eyes took on a beady intensity that made the back of my neck prickle, as if he couldn't believe his luck but knew better than to show it. His stubble was dark and an oversized T-shirt billowed around him like a sail. His pants were made of windbreaker material and his pale feet were splayed beneath them like two nocturnal creatures. Behind him there was only an economy-sized bag of pretzels next to a jug of Wild Turkey and a dented beanbag chair, all of it bathed in the shifting blue light of a television. There was no sign of Paris, and I knew that someone who kept his own dog chained in the yard wouldn't keep mine inside.

"I'm here for my dog," I told him.

His eyes moved to Tanya, then the Volvo, pausing briefly on each before returning to me, his expression flat and inscrutable behind his oversized glasses. He stepped over the threshold and closed the door, and I felt my body register the breach of space between us.

"Could you please tell me where he is?" I asked.

Derek offered only a cruel smile.

"I'm sorry about what happened," I told him. "I didn't mean for it to hurt you."

"Well if you didn't mean it then I guess it didn't happen."

"I just want my dog back," I repeated.

"You think I give a fuck what you want?"

"I think you want to do the right thing."

His hand came up, and I was instantly aware of its innocuous trajectory, as if all my life I had been studying hand trajectories, classifying outcomes. It ended with two fingers pistoled toward my chest. “I told you not to touch her, and now you’re standing here telling me about the right thing?”

**Comment [EW4]:** This sentence is a bit unclear. Is Ed aware that Derek wasn’t going to hit him? How would he know that? Perhaps describing Derek’s movement as less menacing would convey this point better.

“If you want to hate me, fine. But you need to tell me where my dog is.”

The two fingers came forward, landed on my shoulder, and shoved. He seemed to know just the right amount of pressure *to use*, enough to have an effect but little enough for the effect to make me feel weak. My shoulder snapped back, and I became aware of the attention from the Volvo the way you become aware of attention from the bleachers as you concentrate on a free throw.

“Or what?” he asked.

“Quit it,” Tanya said, as if it was part of an old argument between them.

“The dog doesn’t have anything to do with this,” I said.

“The dog is gone.” Derek shoved me again, and my shoulder snapped back again, and all I could think of was my father and my brother waiting patiently for the dog they should’ve had since my mother left, watching me be pushed around by this *silly* man. I made myself take a breath. My heart was pounding and my limbs felt weightless.

**Comment [EW5]:** A stronger adjective would enhance this sentence. Perhaps “ridiculous” or “absurd.”

“I’m not going to fight you,” I said.

“Won’t keep you from getting your ass kicked.” He shoved again. “Didn’t I warn you what would happen? Didn’t I?”

Then my father was calling across the yard, “Everybody just *calm down*.” He staggered toward us on his bad leg, shoulders seesawing from the effort to hurry, palms in the air. Behind him, Charlie was pale-faced in the far reaches of the porch light,

watching from the Volvo's window. Closer, Romeo looked at us eagerly from the end of his chain, his tail swinging a slow rhythm until he pounced on a soggy-looking rope toy and shook it violently.

"Everyone just *take it easy*," my father called.

I was annoyed at my him for breaking his promise to stay in the car, and I forgot to strip the aggravation from my voice when I turned back to Derek and said, "Would you just give me back my dog?"

"Forget the dog, man. You're never gonna see that dog again. I got rid of it."

I pictured him leading Paris toward the dark beach, a rifle slung over his shoulder, and my chest clenched. I remembered what it felt like—never seeing a dog again, not knowing what ~~had~~ happened or whether there was any chance at reversing it, and I felt as powerless now as I had been then. If Derek didn't relent, what could I do, other than send my father and brother back to their lonely house in San Seguro, without me or the dog I had promised them? A feeling of wildness opened up in me, one I recognized, and black shapes billowed around the edges of my vision.

"But I'm here," Derek said.

His smile was like an invitation, and when his fingers landed on my shoulder again, a charge shot through my arms, ~~so that they~~ They almost seemed to be acting on their own ~~when as~~ they knocked his hand away and drove themselves into his chest, wrenching a cry from my throat too long and desperate to be only from exertion, It a cry ~~that~~ sounded miserable, even to me.

Derek recovered his two fumbling steps, then planted, pivoted, and sent a quick straight fist expanding rapidly into my field of vision. It came as a surprise, not only



because of its speed ~~or, and not only because of~~ its impact, which sent sparks and pinwheels exploding across my vision, but also because of its grace. A pressure and numbness spread across my cheek and into my sinus; ~~and everything~~ Everything that encumbered me seemed to break cleanly away, leaving me free, unobstructed, empty of everything except a steady, focused, homicidal tranquility.

I charged him, running straight through a second punch at my ear and a third to the back of my neck. ~~as~~ I drove a shoulder into his stomach and lifted him with wrapped arms, ~~bringing and then brought~~ him down hard on his back; ~~I felt~~ feeling the impact of the ground through the meaty pad of his body, ~~and heard~~ hearing the deep involuntary “*unh*” of the air leaving his lungs. My momentum sent me somersaulting over the top, and I scraped my shoulder and hip on the concrete landing; ~~I scrambled to my feet while~~ then scrambled to my feet while Derek writhed on his back, mouth moving like a fish pulled from the water, trying to take in oxygen he had no access to.

Then Tanya was between us, palms out, restraining me the way referees and umpires ~~did do~~ when one player ~~pursues~~ pursued another in wordless fury. She was shouting words that collected at the back of my attention like a television playing in another room as Derek got up; ~~looking strangled, his~~ His eyes looked small and angry without the glasses covering them, ~~and they~~ trained-locked on me with the same brutality that coursed through my veins. My father grabbed at Derek’s shoulders ~~the same way~~ while Tanya grabbed at mine, but ~~he broke away, and so did I~~ we both broke away, and we rushed rushing at each other again, swinging and slipping and grasping ~~at each other~~ until Tanya ~~and my father intervened again~~ was pulling at me again, my father at Derek. We circled each other as we struggled away from them, ~~and suddenly, splayed in~~

~~the grass only a few feet away, was the chewed-up bat~~ and I suddenly noticed the chewed-up bat lying in the grass just a few feet away. I broke toward it, ~~and~~ but then Romeo pounced, pinning it with his front paws, rump in the air, tail wagging. ~~and I was fighting through a six-handed seizure~~ tried to fight through the flurry of hands, grunting and struggling to loosen myself, or maybe to drive all four of us across the yard ~~—, or to do~~ anything else in my power to reach the bat. ~~though the~~ But the three of them overpowered me, driving me backward until my feet got tangled and I went down.

That was when things got bad. Nobody was restraining Derek anymore, and so nobody could prevent him from jumping on me, pinning each of my shoulders with a heavy knee, or raining down one blow ~~and then~~ after another, ~~a blast to the cheek that turned my head, a thump on my forehead that left me dizzy.~~ I thrashed, trying to throw him off, and when I couldn't, a feeling of helplessness settled over me like cold snow.

He raised his fist again, elbow flared, face calm except for the crease of concentration between his eyebrows. ~~and not~~ Not even the sight of my father above him, fist raised awkwardly, showing the spiral where his pinkie curled into his palm, could relieve the hardening fear that I was in real trouble. My father brought his fist down, driving from the elbow like a man trying to hammer home a stubborn nail, landing it atop Derek's head. ~~and though~~ Though I appreciated the effort, it had no effect other than to distract him a moment, and to throw Tanya into action. She stepped between my father and Derek, as if to defuse their skirmish before addressing ours, knocking my father off balance. ~~and he~~ He couldn't get his bad leg under him fast enough. It looked almost involuntary, the way he grabbed the tail of Tanya's untucked work shirt. ~~He pulled~~ pulling her after him, so that they both went spinning to the ground. ~~and~~ Derek, his

neat row of knuckles still angled by his ear, was free to return his attention to me.

The blows were like shots of Novocain. I got another in the cheek, one in the ear, the mouth, the other cheek, until my whole face felt thick and dull. The one to my nose made it feel tight, out of place, and then the blood came warmly down the sides of my face, filling my mouth with the taste of copper. I wasn't worried about the blood, though, or even the pain, ~~as much as~~ I was worried about the damage he was inflicting, because the part of me being battered was full of important apparatus I would have liked to keep intact. But there was simply no way to keep the blows from coming. All I could do was squeeze my eyes and clench my jaw and turn my head from the place the last one had landed, but again and again they emerged from the darkness to send white sparks exploding across my vision.

And then they stopped.

And suddenly I was released from Derek's weight.

And when I opened my eyes, I didn't believe what I saw—Derek floating above me with wide, startled eyes. I wondered if it was a hallucination until the black tunnel of my vision opened, ~~and~~ I took in the two massive hands clenched over Derek's biceps, the dark figure looming overhead, blotting out the pin-pricked sky. And when Derek went flying, ~~when he was flung spinning~~ across the yard with such force that he bounced and skipped and nearly regained his feet before face-planting, I knew who had done it. Derek moved his limbs in the patchy grass like a late sleeper being asked to get out of bed. Tanya was sitting near him, looking one step further in this process, hair flung over her face, an arm propped behind her, grimacing and touching her forehead, ~~while My~~ father, nearer still, got to his feet, panting and discombobulated.

Charlie was kneeling beside me. “Ed? You ~~okay~~OK?”

But I was already on my feet, blind with rage and humiliation, rushing for the bat. Pain pounded through my skull, and the ground tilted under my feet, making me lurch from side to side like a drunk. The pit bull was already there, handle between his back teeth, flexing his powerful jaw. “Drop it,” I said, my tongue as thick and foreign in my mouth as a dentist’s gloved fingers, but he understood the command and obeyed. The wood was gouged, the handle slick with warm saliva, ~~As~~~~and~~ as I lifted it, the dog backed up a couple steps, eager, ~~ready~~ for me to toss it, as if this was all an elaborate game for his amusement. It helped me understand that the dog had nothing to do with any of this, that the dog was every bit as innocent as Paris was. But Paris was gone, and my face throbbed from the beating I’d just received, and my heart was too full of fury to care. So I raised the bat like an axe, feeling the weight of the barrel, ~~and~~ the strength in my muscles, and the invigoration of my hatred and pain, ~~and in~~ In the moment it stopped ascending, the dog seemed to understand what was happening. It cowered, ducking its head ~~and~~ looking up at me with disbelieving eyes, as if asking what I intended and if I might consider mercy instead. But it didn’t keep my muscles from tugging, my arms from straining, my hands from pulling down with all the strength of my rage and longing and grief.

As I strained down, however, something else strained up. The bat didn’t budge.

I looked back and ~~found~~ ~~saw~~ Charlie towering behind me in the cold blue light. He was ~~gripping~~ the barrel with two huge hands, ~~his hair wild in the wind and~~ his arms bare, ~~revealing~~ muscles etched like line drawings, ~~hair wild in the wind~~. Behind him, on the wraparound porch of the adjacent house, a brown-haired family stood watching, the

**Comment [EW6]:** The phrasing here is slightly awkward. Consider using a verb other than “strained,” perhaps “As I struck down, however, something stopped me.”

father holding a little girl and covering her eyes while the mother pressed a cordless phone to her ear. I could already hear the distant sirens, though it might have only been the howling wind, which plastered my clothes to my chest and dove down my collar, frigid and moist and laced with the ancient odors of the ocean. It lashed Charlie's hair, threw it over his eyes and then lifted it away, and his face, swimming in the black sky above me, showed gentleness and concern. He, and it looked like my brother's again as he said, "Let go, Ed."

I did, then sat on the ground and wept.