

*Worms*

Before his wife left him, before the oil spill, when he was still working with the research institute out there on eighty-eight, he used to stop in here and buy these plastic swimming pools we sell for kids. Like that one over there. Only he and his wife didn't have any kids, see. They said he was growing something in his garage at home. I never believed he was a druggie. Had too good a job. Smart as hell, they said. Married the prettiest girl in town. Then that truck turned over and spilled that oil all over them woods out there by the lake. Next day he come in and cleaned us out of swimming pools. Then we heard his wife left him. Said he was raising worms. Had worms all over the garage and they were getting into the house. Someone said when she found one in her underwear drawer, she was done. Pretty little thing. We wondered why someone like him would want to fool with worms. Thought he might be getting into the bait business, but that didn't make sense, man smart as him. Pretty soon they said he'd left the research institute, was living out of his car. We thought he'd hit rock bottom. Then we seen him on the five-o'clock news. They were covering the oil spill, you know, talking with locals, talking with the feds. They introduced him as a scientist who was using worms to clean up that mess. We about busted a gut laughing at that one. But he's the one laughing now. Swimming in all that money. His wife wanted him back, but he wouldn't take her. He's getting five-figure fees to go and talk about his worms. Talks to universities, scientific outfits. He's smart as hell. And to think we used to leave behind cans of Vienna sausages and sleeves of crackers in the campgrounds after our deer hunts, thinking he needed food. He knew what he was doing all along. He brought the tourists back to Leech Lake. Saved a lot of businesses here in town. I seen him on the cover of some magazine not long ago. The other day a reporter come in, just like you, asking if I know him. I said hell yes I know him. I knew that sonofabitch when he was just a nobody, living in his car out in the woods. Reporter's eyes got this big. He pulled out that notebook, wanting to know

if he could quote me. I said hell yes you can quote me, for two hundred dollars, same as I charge everyone else. Same as you just paid me. And I'll tell you like I told him: for two hundred more, I'll take you out to the woods where he used to live in that car. I know right where it's at. Something else: I bet there's still some of them worms out there, squirming their way through life, living off what he gave them.

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## *Wish You Were Here*

“I wish Momma was here,” I say, adjusting the straps over Jackson’s ears, clicking the buckle into place.

“Because you don’t know how to cook?” Jackson says.

“Yeah. That too.” I take a few steps back, kneel, and raise the camera. “Look at me. Okay, smile.” *Click-click.*

“Can we go now?”

“In a minute,” I say. “Your mother’s going to have a degree in two years, but she’ll never know what this was like. I want to have some photos to show her.”

“You know what to do if you see a car backing out, right? You stop. You pull the brake, like this.” I squeeze the lever and the brake calipers clamp the rim, immobilizing it.

“I already know that,” Jackson says, pushing my hand away.

“How’s your seat? Do we need to adjust it some more?”

“Fine.”

“I was going to oil that chain, wasn’t I?”

“You already did that. Can we go now?”

I’m jogging down the sidewalk behind Jackson, arm extended, hand clinging to the very edge of his seat. Just a couple days ago he still needed my assistance. Now, somehow, he’s ready. I can feel it. “There, just like that,” I say. “Ha-ha! Isn’t this fun?”

“Yeah!” Jackson says, his hands gripping the handlebars, legs pushing and pulling, turning the pedals as he negotiates the sidewalk.

A teenager in a car races by out in the street, radio blaring and providing me a brief glimpse of the future. I want to hold onto the seat and never let go, but any moment now I’ll have to release it, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

It occurs to me that this happens only once in a lifetime. Once you learn to ride, you always remember.

“You’re doing great,” I say. “Just keep pedaling.”

“You still holding on?” Jackson says.

“I’m holding on.”

“Don’t let go.”

“Just keep pedaling,” I say, my arm still extended, hand clamped precariously to the seat, to the seat... and then to nothing as I ease into a walk, straightening my back, feeling my heart pulsing in my chest, in my throat, wondering if I should sprint ahead to catch him, wondering if seven years is too early, too soon, and hoping, trusting, watching as Jackson turns the pedals, remembering my first real bike and the excitement, the uncertainty, of no training wheels, each pedal stroke a tiny victory as confidence slowly rolled into my mind, and now watching the same transformation in my son, watching instinct carry him along, his legs pushing and pulling him into life, into this great big world, and away from me.

He’s now too far down the sidewalk, too far away for me to help him. He’s on his own. And so am I. “Just keep pedaling,” I say again, to myself, realizing as Jackson pedals farther and farther away that I’m losing something precious and fleeting, that in fact I’ve already lost it.

## *Even Lifetime Warranties Have Expiration Dates*

Not long into your journey, a journey you haven't prepared for, one that, because you have no specific destination in mind has caused you to question your very origin—the where, the how, the why, the when—you realize that you're lost, that you have no idea what you're doing or why you're doing it. You stop for directions in a tired, dilapidated town that is rendered even more austere by the eye-squinting brilliance of the brand new day. A faded sign says the town was built during the gold rush at the turn of the century and, now, less than a hundred years later, it's teetering on the edge of this life, and eternity.

Nearby is a field with constellations of luminous wildflowers, bouquets of singing birds, and a clear-running stream full of rainbow trout. Purple mountains loom in the distance, their snow-capped peaks sparkling white in the sun and looking clean and new. They remind you of something.

Now a man wearing a hard hat and carrying a hammer appears before you. Very calmly, he explains the way home. It's not easy, he warns. You'll be tempted to take the wrong turn here, the wrong road there. Do as I say, however, and you'll get home.

But you're not paying attention. You're listening instead to another man who has crept up behind you. He is complimenting you on your shoes, your watch, your shiny new car. It's as perfect as the sky, he says.

Not for long, says the man in the hard hat.

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