The Change
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I was out in search of the fun I had promised Jessica I would have and, of course, more beer. You would think a girl couldn’t swing lederhosen in the German/Polish-dense middle of the country in October without hitting a big beer tent set up in a cornfield. In fact, it was surprisingly hard to find one. This is because, as it turns out, the vast majority of Oktoberfests are held in September. Buffalo Grove, Illinois, actually had its Oktoberfest in August that year. This is baffling. This is another example of distressing decay: we are a bunch of pleasure addicts whose cultural celebrations have grown devoid of meaning. More evidence of this madness: towns that “schedule” trick-or-treating on, say, November 2 just because that’s a Saturday, turning the true spirit of Halloween into a meaningless state-sanctioned candy shakedown. Halloween is October 31. Period. An Oktoberfest in August is no longer a glorious celebration of Bavarian Crown Prince Ludwig’s wedding on October 12, 1810, but merely the eccentrically spelled name of a boozy street party. When words lose their meaning, a culture dies. Be warned.

Sullivan, Illinois, was home to the only Oktoberfest anywhere near my driving route that I hadn’t already missed, so I decided to be in Sullivan by October 18 even though it meant skipping Peoria and Galena and a planned visit to a meat packing plant along the way. Fun of the type normal
people understand would be had, damn it; I would go to Sullivan and I would take pictures of the dog.

That day we made it to the Peru, Illinois, KOA just after dark. I set up camp and made a fire. I sat and thought about nothing; to be sitting with my dog in a strange place of no special meaning to me was where I wanted most of all to be: nowhere. Heading into farm country, I would see fewer cities; there were far fewer ruins to distract me and more empty fields, and so all the confusion, grief, and worry I had been staring into would have nothing to land on outside myself. The Peru KOA was not Rockford; it was simple and quiet. I felt simple and quiet. I was alone with my thoughts there, and my dog.

In the morning in the women’s bathroom, ladies put on their faces with concentration above the sink. Girls dressed in the shower stalls and talked of hitting Dunkin’ Donuts for hot chocolate. The ground was scattered thickly with ugly bumpy green things, osage oranges, known locally as monkey brains. I took a long, slow run down the straight lines of roads that held the land in boxes, facing a hard wind both coming and going.

Back on the interstate, a mustang with Purple Heart license plates driven by a young woman passed me. I wondered how many women have been wounded in combat and awarded Purple Hearts. (It is not certain, but despite the ban that existed on women serving in combat roles, one group reported 106 women had been awarded Purple Hearts from the decade-long wars we were still in, then.) Then I saw an exit for Bloomington, a fair-sized city with a university, and realized I was as close as I would be for a very long time to any place that might serve me a latte; we were heading off the highways and deep into corn. The desire for fancy, overpriced coffee was lodged deep in my infinitely coffee-craving soul, but despite the power of this addiction I didn’t stop for it. I couldn’t, because something larger was at stake. If I hurried south to Sullivan, I would get to the Oktoberfest in time for Colby to win the cute pet contest, and that was what mattered most in the world to me just then.

I had no doubt that Colby would win this contest, which involved costumes. He was wearing his Green Bay Packers bandana, which seemed good enough; if pressed, I would tell the judges he was a pug dressed up as a Portuguese water dog and then he would not only win but people would...
be charmed and find us both terribly clever. Even naked, Colby was in my mind cuter than any dog alive and certainly cute enough to win some small-town contest. I had walked him for at least an hour a day for fourteen years; that’s more than five thousand hours logged watching him saunter magnificently. That was five thousand hours of holding a leash and looking at Colby’s fuzzy rear end, an absolutely princely dog butt, its long tail strong and jaunty like a flag. The wavy black hair on the back of his head parted naturally down the middle and feathered back light and fluffy and glistened as he walked with his confident bounce, and seriously, from my view, he sometimes looked so very much like my preteen heartthrob, David Cassidy. That cute pet prize at the Oktoberfest in Sullivan was ours.

I turned off the interstate without a latte and drove deeper into farm country until we hit the small town of Cerro Gordo; what I noticed first was a large old school, well kept and exuding a kind of authoritative goodness, a school that told of generations of farm children growing up and learning inside, meeting sweethearts there, starting families after graduation, sending new kids to school, continuing the cycles for generations in a pretty little town. In Cerro Gordo, almost everyone finishes high school but hardly anyone goes to college. It suggests a town of bright folks who don’t want to leave. Passing through that place I imagined sweet things: Ice cream. Shaded sidewalks where young boys in football uniforms walk home from the game, carrying their helmets, perky girls in cheerleader uniforms chasing them. A place to read Mark Twain and believe him. Dry leaves billowed up from neat lawns in the strong wind that just would not quit blowing. The wind in the leaves blew my visions of innocence right along ahead of me. It seemed I had found an American ideal, intact.

Cerro Gordo is a prosperous farm town fifteen miles from the bigger city of Decatur, and on the radio on the very day I drove through town, the big news was that the big agricultural distributor, ADM, was packing up and leaving its longtime Decatur headquarters and moving to Chicago. The gloom of that announcement had come just exactly in time to taint the sweetness of the place and it troubled me, all this packing up and leaving; then a commercial for Heinkel’s sausages came on the radio, promising hunters that if they brought in their deer, Heinkel’s would make them some nice, fresh venison jalapeno sausage. That was more like it. I was
determined to find some Heinkel’s jalapeno venison sausage somewhere in Illinois.

It’s another half-hour drive from Cerro Gordo to Sullivan, where I needed to register at a campground and drop off the trailer before getting to the pet contest. Suddenly I felt like I was in a hurry. Since May I had been late for everything I had tried to get to except for two trips to airports, for which being late was not an option. Colby was sprawled in the back seat getting his beauty rest and I was glad for that and glad he did not feel my stress, as this would hurt his performance in the beauty pageant (as it had come to be called in my mind). I rushed on, trying to stick to my plan, but got hung up at the Lake Shelbyville Marina Campground office in Sullivan, where the woman at the desk did not look up, at first, from the paperwork my visit required of her. She just asked me, “You want one night?”

“I was thinking two,” I said.

“Okay,” she said, and firmly crossed something off the card she was filling out. “Make it two.”

I was working up my nerve to ask for three nights but I judged it better to wait on that. The campground was large and more or less abandoned. There were two women in the office, one about my age sitting in a chair, saying nothing, and the other, older, doing all the business. The old woman had tightly curled white hair, a flat, pale face and a pink-lipsticked mouth that was given to such salty expressions as “Oh my lord!” The woman sitting off to the side of the desk was younger and quieter, a more folk-music version of the Midwest, with long brown hair and a touch of makeup and a sweater vest. She was one of the campground’s owners, and the woman behind the desk was a regular camper who had, in the manner of many enterprising seniors living in RVs, scored with her husband the job of caretaking the marina campground in exchange for a place to stay.

Outside, the grounds were just about empty of people but still parked with big RVs; most campers had left for the season and the RVs in the lot were being winterized. I asked the woman behind the desk if the campground stayed open to the end of October, and she answered, “Around then, yes,” in a voice that sounded wary. My guidebook to campgrounds clearly stated this place was open to the end of October, which was still
about two weeks away. I felt like the person who walks into a restaurant
and orders a huge meal just a few minutes before the staff would have been
allowed to go home, had the place stayed empty. The older woman turned
her eyes toward me cautiously, apparently looking to see if I had in mind
to camp there endlessly.

At first I thought she must not like me, but that’s not exactly it. Her
wariness was, once again, a midwestern thing I recognized from my own
family. She had the no-fuss manner of a University of Akron vice presi-
dent, doing business at her desk. She had seen my New York driver’s license
and she knew plenty well what she was dealing with: someone who thinks
she knows but doesn’t know. Someone who would expect all kinds of
service, then turn around and mock the blue Jell-O with marshmallows in
it at the grocery store salad bar. Grow up in Cerro Gordo and raise your
children there and maybe grandchildren too, if you want to know a thing
about anything. Because of all this, and mostly because my attempts at
conversation were met with a politeness that resembled honest-to-god
contempt, I decided to sit down and talk until we were all friends.

“Where’s the best place in Sullivan to get a cup of coffee?” I asked, and
the women looked at each other. The younger one said, “I’ll go put a pot
on.” Really, there isn’t any place to go for coffee in Sullivan unless you want
McDonald’s. There was a family restaurant down the road but they didn’t
send me there—later I would learn it had been taken over by “foreigners,”
who in the opinion of the locals had ruined the food. Just didn’t under-
stand American cooking. If you wanted food and drink these days, you
had to make your own. I waited for my coffee and made myself comfort-
able, despite my concern over making it to Colby’s contest on time, and I
started telling the women without being asked about my trip, which drew
a silent “Oh” from the older one, who asked, “Don’t you have a husband?”
to which I said something like, “Shoot! Husband! I never thought of that!”
This made her laugh. Only two people on the whole, long trip ever asked
me that question, the second being a twenty-five-year-old married boy in
Kentucky who took me out to shoot clay pigeons with his twelve-gauge
shotgun one day and, when I hit twenty of my twenty-five, said, “Dang!
You shoot good for a girl!” When the Kentucky boy asked me, “Don’t you
have a husband?” I looked at him dryly, shotgun slung across my arm, and
said, “No.” He looked sorry.
Sullivan, the women told me, is the county seat of Moultrie, the least-populated county in Illinois, though the lack of people should not be confused with a lack of prosperity. The fact that the population in farm country is shrinking is not a sign that the farms are not doing well. It is the opposite, really. Moultrie County occupies a corner of the Midwest with excellent farms and good jobs. But fewer people are needed to get the work done these days, and so the population is falling. There are other reasons to leave. Young people leave the Midwest the same way they leave Albany or the deep south or anywhere that isn’t a big city, in search of more excitement. But the farm towns also empty out when people go the other way—moving deeper into the nearby countryside, swept off by better roads and better cars to bigger houses far from the center of things. On so many intersections of the long, straight roads weaving a loose basket on farmland, tiny towns dot the map but when you go to see them, they are half in ruins. The houses are half lived in, half not, empty storefronts, empty laundromats, empty cafés clustered around them. There’s a Walmart in Decatur, that’s all you need; the rest has been left to die quietly, and if it has died mainly because people have chosen what they like better, it is still unnerving to me to see the shells left behind, and I can’t imagine living daily in such a spectacle of loss.

I told my new friends in Sullivan that having seen so many places dying like that, I had lately come to favor the idea of just knocking stuff down. Just do it! Just let it go. Close the schools, abandon the towns. Rip off the bandage. “I now think it’s best if we just stop trying to save everything,” I said and sipped my coffee.

The older woman, who was a Cerro Gordo native, reached nervously for something near the base of her throat that wasn’t really there. I had delivered a verbal solar plexus punch. She turned to the younger woman for an answer to this mischief; here they had confided in me and made me coffee and I replied so casually that I would like to rip their guts out.

The younger woman said: “People do come back to small towns if they’re nice. They brought back Sullivan really nice after it was hit by two tornados ten or fifteen years ago and that makes a difference.”

Go compare, she said. Go to Paris, Illinois—another county seat, nearby. The shops on the square are unsavory. Around the courthouses in some county seats there’s nothing but pawn shops and bail bonders, not

nice restaurants or gift shops. A downward spiral takes hold. Every county seat has a town square that can be made inviting; squares were meant to be gathering places, but if a town fails to create that kind of atmosphere, decent people will get discouraged and leave. Good people will start wanting to host their Oktoberfests and chili festivals out at the fairgrounds, way out in the farm fields, when the whole point of a chili festival in a small town is to bring that town some life. It’s not like chili actually requires honoring; it’s not like you better put that sacred chili festival somewhere safe like the fairgrounds to be sure the celebration goes on. The point of a chili fest was and always will be to show off your town square, your downtown, to bring life back to the center. If the town is so crummy that you can’t serve chili in it, you may as well call the whole thing off.

“But people don’t always understand that,” the younger woman said. “People just want their chili.”

“Oh dear, it’s nearly three o’clock. You’ll miss the pet contest,” the older woman said with genuine concern.

“Of course! Better go,” I said and stood up and thanked them for the coffee. The older woman left the office and led me by golf cart to the very farthest edge of the vast, empty lawn where in the summer small trailers and tents set up, one alongside the next in a veritable pop-up city of nylon and wheeled-aluminum lakeside living. But the season had long since lost its appeal to all but me; everyone had packed up and left and I was gloriously alone in a vacant, grassy flat the size of three football fields. The land dwarfed my camper and ended abruptly at a bluff that dropped off into Lake Shelbyville. The scene—a browning field, wind-spun waves on a chilly-looking lake, birds catching updrafts in the gray sky—resembled the rugged and wind-whipped meres of Irish lake country, seen by me only in movies, but I think I know a mere when I find one. This was brilliant. It was perfect solitude. I parked overlooking the lake. Colby hopped out and ran directly to a pile of fish bones and heads left in the weeds by fishermen, then fell on them in ecstasy.

“Colby!” I shouted. “You’ll never win the contest with guts on your face!” He did not understand these words and so kept smiling and rubbing his head in the gore. Before I could reach him he threw his back down and slid his whole body along the pile of fish heads. I pulled him up and
wrestled him back to sanity. Scales clung to his muzzle, and he panted, and a black streak that looked like mud but smelled far worse was rubbed deep into his fuzzy hair. I fluffed him, licked my hand and did my best to gloss it over, then hustled his snorting and death-drunk self back to the car. I unhooked the trailer and we made our way ten or so miles to the Sullivan town square.

The best part about Oktoberfest in a small town is that there are no lines for the funnel cakes. No lines for anything, actually. Hardly anyone was in Sullivan that day by my standards, but if you live there it may have looked like a pretty good turnout. Colby and I parked effortlessly just off the square, where the booths and food trucks were set up, and I leashed him and we dashed out toward a cluster of people that at least resembled a crowd; there were a few dogs in their midst. Colby limped behind me at a good clip, stinky and excited, and we set out to find the cute-pet judging station. Within fifty feet of my car I spied a pair of little dogs coming my way, dressed up as Elmer Fudd and a rabbit, prancing ahead of a woman carrying a ribbon for first prize. It was 3:02 p.m.

“Oh!” I said. “Are these the winners?”

The round, redheaded woman walking the dogs was smiling so big it looked like her face hurt. She nodded. Colby sniffed the little contest-winning dogs graciously. I stood half-frozen in disbelief, sputtering compliments, as another woman came along pulling a wagon with a little dog on it dressed up as what I think was a ladybug. The ladybug dog wore a second-place ribbon. I swiveled to watch the wagon roll by.

Small banners hung from posts down the length of Main Street, each one with the name of a local man or woman in the military. As in all such county seats, the center of Sullivan is a square of roads around the courthouse and the courthouse exudes all the dignity the town’s founders could muster. It sat atop a high mound, crowned with bronze, steep steps ascending to it from the sidewalk on each side of the square. It told the world: behold! No one is above the law. Not in Sullivan.

The town square concept must seem obvious to those who have one, but I had never noticed or had much reason to think about them, except that many strip malls and other constructions in the East are named “town square,” or rather, “Towne” square, with no regard to geometry or the
actual meaning of such a place or the proper use of Anglo Saxon spellings. A strip mall can be named “Towne Square” anywhere in the U.S. and no one will object, so long as there’s parking. This troubled me. Beginning with Sullivan, I understood that the true central square design was another element of the vision for this country, when it was new and those planning its future were planning for greatness. It seemed to me that if a small town in the middle of America were to build a courthouse today, it would likely be at the edge of a parking lot that joined the fast food joint to the low rent motel, and they would have to settle for a double-wide trailer. Costs less, gets the job done; still meets the need to fill prisons.

The square around the Sullivan Courthouse was full of shops and galleries and restaurants, and on the north block, the Sullivan Theater marquee proclaimed “Nunsense!” The theater was once a major touring venue for shows bound for Broadway, and while the route to Broadway has changed, the theater remains a local treasure. Colby and I walked around the square, then settled in to listen to Christian rock bands on the near-empty Oktoberfest bleachers while eating pork sandwiches. Roughly ten out of about fifteen booths at the fest were set up by local churches. I thought I really ought to visit one. I accepted a wristband at a booth that lured me in with its Free Cookies! sign. The wristband noted a Bible verse, “Eph 3:20.” I fought the urge to look it up on the spot and just wore it instead, imagining I fit right in.

Finally, evening came and the chili contest began. I put Colby in the car so that I could concentrate. The chili booths were set up beneath blue construction tarps strung like a tent; inside, everything took on a blue glow reminiscent of the basement rec rooms where I had smoked weed as a teenager. At the first booth, blood-red barbecue sauce cascaded from a five-tiered fountain. Visitors dipped mini hot dogs into the ooze. This set a very high bar for the contest within steps of the entrance. It’s hard to top oozing sauce fountains, but every chili competitor tried to best it somehow. A table run by a women’s advocacy group based in Sullivan had a big poster of Rosie the Riveter up behind it, and I fully intended to vote for their chili just to support a women’s center in the smallest county in Illinois, which seemed downright radical, but then this happened: I tasted some chili made with smoked brisket. I mean, smoked brisket. Come on.
smiled at the team who had made it, it seemed as if we were touching each other’s chili souls. Our eyes softened and our hearts met in a space of pure chili ecstasy and my voting ticket floated gently from my hand. I think my vote missed the point, though. The most popular table, the one where the largest and loudest crowd had gathered, belonged to a group of guys whose chili I tasted and thought was okay. It was fine. But what do I know? These guys had won the contest two years in a row and it looked as if they were on their way to winning again and it struck me, then, that voting against them undermined the firmament of the Sullivan Oktoberfest. When the traditional chili wins, it feels good. When the local high school football team wins, it feels good too but that outcome is less easily controlled. It feels good to pick a winner, so the right thing to do is let the chili guys win, again, and just be happy. Just be happy and stop making trouble, Lori. Lori, who does not grasp the concept of simply feeling good. Lori, who votes for losers. Lori, whose mood still swings without warning, it seems. I finished my tasting and slipped from the tent.

Back at the courthouse, two zombies were being married in a public ceremony, grunting vows before onlookers who ringed them with cameras. I couldn’t look away. Was it theater? Or was it a real wedding, in costume? I joined the crowd and the newlywed zombies led us in a staggering march around the town square, then shared their wedding cake with whomever dropped by; it was shaped like a corpse laid out on a long table and they began cutting it by slicing off the head. I had a little piece off the face, then hit the Oktoberfest beer tent for a nightcap, and went home.

At the campground office, the older woman was sitting at the desk long after dark as if she had been waiting there for me.

“Did he win?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “Can you believe it?”

She shook her head.

Sunday morning, I sat outside the trailer drinking coffee as Colby lay at my feet on a blanket. I had thought I might go to church that morning, for research of course, but it was 9 a.m. and I was staring at the water and reconsidering. The night before, lounging on my Scamp bed in the faint
reading light, I had looked up the Bible verse on my Oktoberfest wristband. Ephesians 3:20 said: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”

And that was it. The verse ended midsentence. I had received a sentence fragment Bible bracelet. What could it mean? “His power that is at work within us” what? That night, as I struggled to make sense of the fragment in the stillness of the trailer, Jessica called. I told her I was going to church in the morning. She shrieked.

“Drive around the whole world if you want but I will be so angry if you join a cult,” Jessica said. She was teasing; I knew this. It was one of our jokes about me: I wanted to move to every place I ever saw, and I had a collection of obscure history books, and I liked football, and I was fascinated by cults. All of this was weird enough for endless teasing, but this time the joke made me angry. I snapped something like, “I will join any cult I want, dammit,” surely a unique retort in the annals of couples fighting.

When we first lived together, Jessica and I had a conversation one morning about faith and marriage that I had never forgotten, and that we had never seriously attempted again. I was in favor of both. My starting point in faith was that there must be more to life than what we see. I vaguely sensed a “power that is at work within us,” to borrow words from the bracelet, and I wanted to know that power, but I didn’t think I would find it through religion, formally. I figured the power would reveal itself on a need-to-know basis. As for marriage, I wanted to believe marriage joined beings in that same space within us that my vaguely imagined holy power occupied, a point of view that was hard to articulate and that most people I knew, married or not, found to be an overthinking of the contract. Marriage was a construct that was once thought necessary and was now just a formality. Mostly. Still, I believed something else about faith and love. I had never really discussed it with Jessica before our conversation that morning about a year into our living together; our partnership as a gay couple was unconventional, or it seemed so in that time, so big talks about God and marriage, and even about children, and checking accounts, much less joining souls in public ceremonies, seemed beside the point. But these talks really must be had before joining your life to someone, because the
answers turn out to matter eventually. Jess and I did not believe the same things, at core. And yet still, I would have married her, as if the fact of being married would make that other part true, the part about something within me having power and value. When I said I wanted to be married, I could not see what I was really asking, so unfairly, from Jessica. What I did see was that we shared an ease and comfort I had never shared with anyone, much less found on my own. It mattered. But there was more, and it kept quietly mattering too.

In my trailer I had been thinking of church, and all the crosses along roads I had seen, driving, and of the changes that could not be controlled or ignored and that frightened me. Jess had teased me about church but she was also right, because I was vulnerable. I might have joined a cult after all, that morning, if only there had been one in Sullivan besides the Baptists, who would send me to conversion therapy. Sometimes I wished God would show up and explain the whole thing, and that I could accept every word of the explanation without doubt, right down to such highly dubious claims as penguins and dinosaurs riding on Noah’s Ark together, and the Earth being only six thousand years old, all evidence to the contrary be damned. Certainty is seductive, even when it’s absurd.

“I was teasing,” Jessica said. “You know I was.”

“Not funny.”

“But you know you like cults. It’s one of your charms.”

She had a point. I should not have snapped at her. I was taking things too seriously, as usual, and I had promised to lighten up and church was not the way to do it. I decided to go to a matinee of Nunsense instead. Close enough.

I stopped in the campground office on my way to Nunsense and there was coffee waiting for me. The younger woman did not come in on Sundays, so only the older woman was there, and the instant I walked through the door she started to tell me about how she and her husband used to spend their winters down in Texas but they had been forced to come back to Illinois because of the drug cartels.

I watched her over the lip of my Styrofoam coffee cup and sipped as she raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. This was the big bombshell, I supposed. This was the thing she knew and if I wanted to understand her
at all, I had better hear this story and listen well. I almost might have guessed that she had not slept the night before, knowing that she would tell me when she saw me.

She was a shuffler, you see. I thought that meant she dealt cards at a casino but she hushed me and went on. She had made the Shuffleboard Hall of Fame (halls of fame: a strategy that draws tourists to broken places) down in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, where RV parks hold national shuffleboard tournaments (tournaments: another bit of economic genius). She had won a fair share of trophies. Shuffleboard is a game with strategy, if you didn’t know. You don’t just shove the puck down the concrete and try for all the points you can get, like I did at the municipal swimming pool in Millburn, New Jersey, nearly every summer day that I was not in Wisconsin from 1972 until 1979, whether or not I had anyone to play against. The strategy for my kind of shuffleboard was all shove-and-watch. But the old woman told me it’s better to play careful, get a few points, and spend the rest of your shots setting up a defense to protect the points you’ve got. You play it safe, see?

“What you do is,” she said, “you make a barrier of shuffle pucks around your first big score so when everyone else is getting knocked off the court, you’ve still got yours.” She built shuffle puck walls. She sat back in her desk chair and pursed her lips into a closely held smile and narrowed her eyes shrewdly.

She had shuffled in tournaments, sometimes at her campground in Texas and other times out on the road, on the shuffleboard circuit. Many try for the hall of fame, few make it. She made it. She had the trophies. She had the plaque. She brought the trophies and her plaque back to Illinois with her when things in Texas got too dangerous and they had to leave. Those were the very best of times for her and her husband, happy and retired down in Texas, but the good times ended. It was horrible, how things changed. The campground was near the Rio Grande and the land by the river had grown lawless. People were crossing the borders with drugs, and these people did not value life or security or anything that people in the RV parks valued, and the drug people were violent. Too many came. Things changed, and she and her husband had to leave.
This is one of the things that she knew: A missionary couple she was friends with at her Texas RV park went across the river, as they often did, to bring toys and clothes and things to the Mexican children, but then one day on a goodwill trip to Mexico, the missionary man’s truck was car-jacked and his wife was shot and killed in front of him. This was a tragedy of unbearable darkness, and yet as I heard her tell of it I also knew that no one in my pretty little Upstate New York town had heard about the murdered missionary, that we did not know this exact pain or anything about what that place was like. The world is far too big a place for news of one tragedy to spread much beyond where it happens. There is enough hurt for all of us to have our own. On the Rio Grande there are bad guys and drugs. At the Texas campground, after the murder, there were rules. You could go to matinee movies only, and you had to go in pairs and be home by dark. Still, one day after that murder, a friend’s new Toyota dually truck was jacked. It was simply no longer safe there.

The old couple decided to come home to Illinois and were living in a trailer at the marina now. She brought the shuffleboard trophies with her. Her husband had cancer, and she herself was scheduled to have a biopsy that week for something they had found on her lung. She thinks about the trophies. She said she keeps thinking she ought to give them away to a school or some place that could use them, but whenever she goes to get them and looks at them again, she knows she isn’t ready to let go.

I listened to this story and she watched me to see if I understood. Such sorrow, such loss, and even in that moment perhaps she feared there was yet more to lose and she had no power to stop it.

I said, quite logically of course, “The trouble is drugs. If we could stop people from wanting drugs in the first place, things would begin to get better.”

She studied my face. I had missed the whole point, clearly. I was not whom she had come to hope I was—a woman who listened and so would understand her pain and thus would agree with her. The people doing this harm had to be stopped. Simple. How could this be misunderstood?

The old woman said: “Well they’re making half the drugs legal now anyways.”
“Good,” I answered. We looked at each other. I raised my hands in a kind of surrender. “That would get rid of the criminals.”

A moment passed. “Aren’t you going to be late for your show?” she said.

On Monday, I walked with Colby down to Lake Shelbyville and had a swim. It was October 21 and sunny, but not really swimming weather. As November drew near, it seemed to me that my chances to pretend it was still sort of really almost July were growing very slim. So I dunked, and Colby barked me back out of the water and we wandered the beach, watching ribbons of pelicans drift across the sky and turkey vultures circle over husks of washed-up fish.

I wanted to explore Lake Shelbyville but when I asked in the campground office if I could rent a boat from their marina, the old woman told me they had stopped renting boats a few years ago because “too many drunk idiots” get into trouble on the water and then I heard a few stories of drownings. Apparently, people like to rent several pontoon boats, or “party barges,” lash them together like tails to the rat king, and float around the lake like that, all day, drinking. I just wanted to go fishing. The only boats I found to rent were twenty miles away, down at the Lithia Springs Marina on the south end of the lake near the dam, and because I had a dog they would only let me take their smallest model, a rowboat with a little ten horsepower engine on it.

It was a cool day and cooler still in the wind when the boat got going. I made a blanket bed for Colby near my feet on the bottom of the aluminum boat and motored us through a channel and up the bleak water. In his younger days, my dog would stand up on the bow of whatever boat I put him on and let the wind whip his ears back. He would hold his nose in the air and grasp at the rush of scents we plowed through. He was a water dog, and though he did not like to go into the water, by god he loved to go on it. Now, Colby was laying on the blanket at my feet, where it was a little safer and warmer. When he looked up at me, his fuzzy face rustled in the breeze and his eyes squinted and blinked and his nose tried to recapture a scent of the old days. Then he gave up and lay his head down to endure his discomfort.
Lake Shelbyville was created in the late 1960s by the Army Corps of Engineers as part of a regional flood control plan. They built a dam on the Kaskaskia River in a region of loose shale, digging up Indian artifacts and old coal mines as they worked. This dam created a seventeen-mile-long lake that on local maps looked, at least to my eyes, like an elongated uterus with fallopian tubes attached and also many nubs of cut veins and arteries hanging off it. Or, if you prefer, it looked like a decorative dragon drawn on a medieval scroll. From boat’s-eye view, riding on it, the lake was a long, wet seagull feather, with clumps of feather hairs arranged into slivers along the feather spine, in a series of narrow bays to either side of the lake’s center. It was sweetly desolate. I steered our boat north and then into one of those countless narrow bays. The shores rose up from the narrow bay sharply, making a thin canyon. Deeper into that crevice, tiny fish started hopping in silver arcs all around us. They would splash up as if a school had been disturbed by the boat and then just as quickly settle back down for a while. I shut the engine. Colby sat up and we spun our heads left and right, watching fish jumping, then not jumping. When the fish did not jump, all was quiet but for the wind. Then a few fish would dart out again and sprinkle back into the water like rain.

We were having fun.

I baited up my hook and tossed it out. In about five seconds a little striper bass about five inches long bit it. I threw it back and tried for the bass mother but she never came, only the babies. I caught a few and in a while I gave up against the cold and I motored us back to the marina.

The woman behind the rental counter was my age, maybe fifty, maybe younger, but she also seemed so much older somehow; everything about her from her short, neat hair to her simple dot earrings to her clean pleated jeans spoke of the common sense and security that come with surviving to a certain age without embarrassing yourself in front of your neighbors. I stood before her in my camouflage coat, wind-whipped hair sticking out from my orange cap, my dog on a rope (I forgot his leash) beside me. I chattered on about the pair of five-inch bass I had caught. She seemed familiar, like a high school friend who had stayed behind when others had gone off into the world and changed, and when we came back, we saw her as simple; she judged us for judging her. What did we know about how
hard it was to stay? If she thought anything about me at all she never said, and her silence made me lonely. She took my money without a word and I tipped my cap, and Colby and I went on to Shelbyville.

Much of Shelbyville is made of bricks; some of its streets are, and many of its houses are too, and so is the courthouse (it is the seat of Shelby County). It was really very pretty and I liked it there, except that the shop that sells cupcakes and coffee was closed, because in small towns, apparently, shops keep the hours they feel like keeping. I like this in theory but I wanted my coffee. Abraham Lincoln practiced law in Shelbyville. It was a stop on the Eighth Judicial Circuit, a route lawyers traveled together as a pack through fourteen counties of Illinois, county seat to county seat, courthouse to courthouse. Roads were awful then so the lawyers walked and without motels, they camped along the way. Lincoln said those rugged, traipsing years were the happiest of his life. I can see why. I would have liked to spend a few years traipsing the country in my trailer with my dog.

Eventually I asked what I always asked about all of these places—“Why is there even a Shelbyville at all?” This time truly I was mystified, because the town was not on a large river; it had no oil well. Trains didn’t make the place; trains came decades after the courthouse was built. So what was Shelbyville doing there at all? Simple: When new states were organizing themselves in the nineteenth century, the authorities cut the map into counties, and put county seats near the center of each. It was a shift from the days of exploring and growing up alongside what was found into a more strategic way of planning. Shelbyville was ordained. There was no other particular reason.

I was losing daylight and I had one last mission in southern Illinois: Heinkel’s sausages. Maybe venison jalapeno. My old lady friend at the campground had told me that I should go to a butcher shop in an Amish town called Arthur, where all the meat is raised and processed old-style. But I wanted Heinkel’s. I had heard about it on the radio. I wandered from sleepy Shelbyville into the town of Windsor, where, across from the Windsor farm co-op and silos, a giant manlike pig in a blue vest and chef’s hat was mounted on a platform, waving a flag above the Windsor Food Market. Was the pig not there to beckon me? I went inside the market and marched straight back to the meat case to find me some Heinkel’s. I saw all
kinds of things in there but all I found with a Heinkel’s label on it were red tubes of “Chili Con Carne.” I didn’t want those, but I did find them odd, so I decided to break out my camera—meat tubes were no less noteworthy to me than spelling errors in public art, which I had documented exhaustively.

The meat picture was a mistake. The butcher came out moments after I took it and asked, “Can I help you?”

I was glad to have his help and I began to ask about Heinkel’s sausage and whether he had ever heard of their jalapeno venison kind, and about what other kinds of sausage he carried and also about whether he cut all this meat up himself, and if it came from local cows. The butcher was dressed in white with an apron and cap. He was a stout man, beefy even, and not smiling. He only answered in monosyllables and never took his eyes off me, and I got the feeling pretty fast that he did not really want to “help” me. He said they didn’t have any Heinkel’s and I shrugged and tried to explain why I wanted to find that type in particular, that I had heard about it on the radio, and as I was talking I turned and saw a standing freezer case and realized, they DO! They DO carry Heinkel’s!

“Look,” I said, “here it is,” to which the butcher said, “Oh. Yes. Yes, but it’s not breakfast sausage. I thought you meant breakfast sausage.”

We stood there looking at each other, and I don’t know what he was thinking but in my mind I heard Sean Hannity, a right-wing radio personality who had been keeping me bad company in the car, saying that the threat to America today is not barbarians at the gate but our own internal stagnation; “The enemy is us.” The enemy was me; it was him; it was all of us. Sean Hannity had been going on about this in the car while I was driving, how we had become a welfare state like the French; in the parking lot of the Windsor Food Market a bumper sticker on a truck said, “Annoy a Liberal / Support the Second Amendment,” which did annoy me, but only because I didn’t understand why it was anyone’s goal to annoy me just because I’m a liberal and anyhow, I sort of like shooting. I’m a natural. I didn’t know it just then but in about two weeks, I was going to hit twenty of my twenty-five clay pigeons at a shooting range in Kentucky, as I’ve said. I was at a loss to understand why the butcher did not like me, but he didn’t, and I thought it must have something to do with all of that. The enemy was me. It was the strangest feeling.
I thanked him for his help and bought a little store-made beef jerky, a New York strip steak (which is known as a Kansas City strip in that part of the Midwest), and grabbed some all-natural homemade real chicken dog treats for Colby, and of course, one pack of Heinkel’s polish sausage. They did not have venison jalapeno, sadly. At the checkout, to which the butcher and another woman who worked at the store followed me at a distance, I decided to ask if the cashier could break a large bill. I held up a hundred; I knew this would upset her. “I’m sorry,” she said, eyes locked on me. “We just changed the register.” So I paid for my meat in dollar bills and quarters.

Not wanting to disappoint my old lady campground friend, I then raced up to Arthur in time to bang on the door of the closed Amish butcher shop, which a woman in traditional dress opened. She sold me a frozen lamb steak. Mission accomplished, I headed for home. On the radio, the classic rock station I had tuned into had begun to annoy me by replaying the same classic rock songs that stations play everywhere, over and over, as if the world were determined to relive an endless loop of hits from the same seven or eight years we had lived in the 1970s, just at the dawn of industrial collapse. It seemed like no coincidence to me. It seemed like a longing to stop time before disintegration gained speed. This urge to remain in the past had moved from delusional to dangerous, to my mind. If this obsession with the familiar was intended to feel safe, it did not. I like Bob Seger and Foghat as much as the next tail-end boomer but this soundtrack was growing warped. I switched to NPR, which, as I sped through vast plowed-under fields, reported to me that the average age of the American farmer was now sixty. All around farm country, the young had left and the old held on, but also, apparently, the young have started to come back, because farming is a good business if you can get in, if you can buy the combines that cost six figures and patch together enough land. It is a way of life that people have started to think they might enjoy, again; maybe, out on the land, things can be simple. I don’t know if that’s true or just wishful, but I do know farm country is lovely.

On the road to the marina near Lithia Springs I had stopped at an abandoned farm—not a failed farm, it seemed to me, but a finished one; an old family farm with a collapsing silo and a fence strung with vines, and a name still on the mailbox, Birney F. Canfield. I thought maybe Birney
had possessed something essential that had been left off my list of demands for a happy life, or for a forgotten place attempting a comeback, as I had been thinking of these things on my drive; anywhere I might live must have a good coffee shop, high-quality dog care, some kind of arts presence that would bring vibrant neighbors, and a truly open door to “others,” which in my case meant an open gay community. Also, an availability of craft
beers and maybe a wine shop would be helpful. An actually delicious vegetarian option on at least one local menu, also desirable. And good cheese. Those were the things I would have said I needed; not a casino or hockey arena or a hall of fame, not a metropolis. But I had the things I wanted where I lived, and still, it was not right, and maybe Birney knew why. Certainly, he knew how it felt to have stayed in that quiet place not for minutes but decades. His old farmhouse was another empty building in such a long string of them I had seen, certainly abandoned, but this one looked different to me. It did not feel as sad. The stillness was the thing. Even with people living in it, I thought the Canfield farm would be still. It had become hard for me to sit still long enough to even read a book; whatever else this life offered, the sorrows and frustrations and trips to the vet and flat tires and soured milk and crop failures, death, cancer, furnace explosions, bee stings, bankruptcy, maybe a wedding now and then, maybe some fun stuff too, whatever the stories were in this house, on this farm in such fertile farm country, I imagined Birney F. Canfield, whoever he was, returning always to this stillness. Out in the fringes of the smallest county of Illinois, with no hip culture to hide inside and no distraction to be found: to be so still seemed really hard, mind numbing even, but something in it felt right.

Back at the campground, I pulled up to the office just to use the bathroom but as I stepped out of the car the old woman dashed outside.

“My husband said he saw someone so I knew it must be you. Did you have a good day?” she called out.

“Yes, I did!”

“Did you see some Amish?”

“It’s hard to miss them.”

I showed her the picture of the little fish I caught on Lake Shelbyville and she tipped her head and looked at me admiringly. I don’t know why. Maybe just because I was alive and did things that suggested I was not tired of living, or that I had better ideas than to lash my boat to other boats and get drunk; whatever it was, she said, “Bless your heart,” and when she did, my heart warmed noticeably. Then she told me that she and her husband
were moving that night from their trailer to their rooms above the campground office, and that there was supposed to be a frost.

“See you in the morning,” she said.

That night, Colby got wild. I think it may have been from eating too much meat. I had ended up with an awful lot of meat that day and had to cook most of it on our fire to keep it from spoiling. There was far more food than I could eat, so Colby got a belly-full. He tossed his snout back and chewed and chewed and snarled and hacked and chewed some more until he was exhausted. He walked to the Scamp door and barked. He preferred by now to be inside the trailer most of the time, his fear of it long past and his general preference being anything but sitting in the dirt.

All night, he had meat dreams, his legs kicking furiously, small yips forming in his throat; he awakened from his meat slumber at odd hours, apparently craving more meat, panting, not wanting to go outside, just wanting to eat. He barked at the refrigerator. I persuaded him to settle down and then cranked up the furnace, which I had finally learned to use, discovering it had just one little switch I had to slide to get it started, and then it warmed us up remarkably.

We were heading south toward Kentucky the next day. The cold that had come seemed to have settled in to stay. If I could make it south to Kentucky soon enough, I figured, I would stay on the right side of the sun, the warm side. I stopped by the office on my way out to say good-bye to the woman and to wish her good luck with her biopsy. This woman had said things I couldn’t bear about the mass of Mexicans being dangerous, and she had worried about “foreigners” taking over American athletic teams and the local restaurants, and she was afraid of changes in the world that she could not understand. Yet still I liked her for daring against her judgment to show something of herself to me. I believed she had simply wanted to be happy and had found that to be as hard as anyone does. I tried to push back on her fears; where she lived, no one else would do that much and so those fears had hardened and they wouldn’t change over a few days, but at least we had been able to talk and I was fond of her, and I think she was fond of me. When I stopped by the office, she wasn’t there. I left without saying good-bye, and for the first time I can remember, I was sorry.