Hibernate

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They are twelve and sixteen the summer two orphan grizzly cubs wander into town and pop out Peg Batchelder’s windshield. It makes the papers, though not much else does.

The summer they catch their parents in the fogged up truck, run back in and pretend to be watching *Friday the 13th: Jason Lives*. That July, their dog Baby Rhino dies, and their father builds a coffin from potato boxes because he hates the thought of things eating him.

That summer they walk the ruts to the Jocko River, fed by jokes and cheeseburgers. “Growing like tall buttercup,” is what their mother says, and when they climb into bed, their sleep is like a small fire burning itself out in a thicket of wet trees.

Barry carries a ziplock bag of stoneflies for Micah in his back pocket, while Micah carries the beer in an old Muralts cooler he’s named Shelly. “I done packed Shelly tight,” Micah likes to say, gleeful, and though Barry isn’t sure why it’s funny, he laughs anyway. Barry figures Micah, older by four years, is privy to certain secrets, like how their mother predicts snow with her arthritic knee.

Last night their mother forgot to fill the ice tray, so Micah padded the beer with five packs of frozen peas that crunch against each other. Barry isn’t going to drink or fish, is instead going to look for arrowheads in the draw between the bald mountains. During Barry’s search, Micah will drain the beers and fill Shelly with cutthroats.
It’s too hot for gophers and too late in the day for warblers, only the zippering of grasshoppers through the sweetgrass, landing on their tennis shoes, wedding to the cuffs of Barry’s jeans. Barry wears his brother’s hand-me-downs, rolled up five times and pinned until their mother has time to hem them. A haze rises around them—the heat, their feet flattening the sweetgrass—and they break the silence by singing stupid songs.

_He’s an old man, in a big house, with two cars . . . and a wedding ring._ Barry makes up the lyrics—sometimes it’s _He’s an old man, at a dead end, with a heart . . . that’s full of sin_—and for some reason they pretend they’re singing about their father, even though he is none of these things and has none of these things, save for the wedding ring, a dull gold band over which his skin has grown as a tree will with a barbed wire fence. They sing of their father because he’s the only man they really know, except for Tim Orr who is tall and has a dead brother.

They sing of their father, of who their father might have been in another life and time. _He’s an old man, with a big boat, and a fence . . . that never ends._ Barry laughs, white X’s on his teeth where braces were six months before.

At the Jocko, Micah doesn’t catch anything. The fish aren’t there, are hiding in pools under the stone, under dead branches. Micah drinks two beers, puts his head back on the cooler, and watches Barry scrambling through the draw. Barry is exceptionally good at finding arrowheads, and sometimes finds other things besides. A flake awl, a bone scraper the year previous. A blue flint blade.

Micah opens another beer. The river is cool and fast and he can tell he’s going to fall asleep. He puts his hand up to feel the hot air. The light is like another hand with its fingers between his.

The next thing Micah knows, Barry is standing over him, his head an eclipse. They’re both redheads, but Barry’s got the worst of it, freckles across his nose. Barry laughs with his X’d out teeth, and Micah’s hand goes to his cheek, where Barry has lined up some chert shavings. Micah turns his head and they roll off into the dirt—“Boy you gone and done it,” he says.

Now he has his brother by the wrist, flips him, the nothing sound of a twelve year old boy hitting the ground. Barry threatens, Barry begs, Barry squirms and barters and prays, but there’s no way around it. They’ve performed this ritual long enough to sense when it’s time, the way that Barry senses those flint blades in the draw, even while museum men from Billings explore with machines and small wiry dogs and come up short.

Micah does the singing now, holding his brother’s head under. _Jocko River Lullaby, time to say one last goodbye._ Barry’s eyes, big and black
underwater. A cluster of fish eggs slides by his nose, his mouth pinched tight, but he does not struggle. Micah knows exactly how long to hold him before he’ll start being dead. Barry’s body always gets heavier, as if he’s been dredged along the bottom instead of held fast in his brother’s knotty little fists. Micah takes a deep breath for the both of them and yanks Barry out on the bank, where the sand sticks to him.

“Say you’re sorry, Bear.”

When Barry was younger and truly scared, sometimes he’d piss himself or black out, incidents that Micah would lord over him. This time he is only shaking from the cold.

“I’m sorry,” Barry gasps. He reaches for the rest of his chert shavings, finds them still in his pockets.

“We should go,” Micah says, collecting their mother’s dripping peas. “I left you a couple of them beers. You’ll have to dig through Shelly.”

“I hate you,” Barry says flatly, because that’s what he always says, after. “I hope you die a horrible death, worse than Tim Orr’s brother.”

Tim Orr’s brother had been on a work crew installing Les Schwab billboards on US-93 when a crossbeam dropped, slicing him shoulder to hip. He was a Gulf War vet; naturally everyone in Arlee went to the funeral. It was 102 degrees under the tent, and the minister talked about Joseph in Egypt instead of Tim Orr’s brother, who was in three pieces inside a closed casket.

“I mean it,” Barry repeats gravely. He doesn’t mean it, doesn’t cry anymore or tell their parents about the Jocko River Lullaby. Doesn’t care really, maybe even likes it a little. Not the beginning, when his lungs burn and thud. Not the river junk in his hair or the roar of the water against his jaw. He thinks of the muskrats he and Micah sometimes find drowned under the ice.

_Not supposed to be there._

The longer he’s under, the less he feels. Only his brother holding him against the current, his hands like two hooks in his chest. When he emerges, he’ll smell beer on Micah’s breath. Barry hasn’t passed out in years, but even that was nice, the world with its murky watercolor aspens whitening at the edges, a queer coiling sensation in his groin. He’d laugh underwater, thinking how their mother always said “quare” instead of “queer.”

Barry and Micah walk home through the ruts. When they get there, their mother will be off to her afternoon job, their father building potato boxes in the garage. Paul Harvey carping on the table radio. Barry is pleased that he’s almost dry, pleased when he realizes that they are accidentally walking in stride. He opens his hand to show Micah the
shavings, pointing to each, identifying where he found it, and how. Micah’s impressed. A yellow fly lands on the back of Barry’s neck and Micah slaps it until it falls dead into Barry’s shirt.

At four in the morning, they are in their mother’s truck, driving through the dark vein of the pass to the Wingate Inn in Missoula, where their mother is a breakfast attendant, making biscuits and rubbery eggs from a carton. If it’s slow, they sit on a stool behind the desk clerk, gnawing strips of bacon. They strip the beds, collect the trash from the housekeepers and drag the bags outside, take turns tossing them at the tabby inside the dumpster.

If there’s no school, in the afternoons they follow their mother to her other job at Muralts Travel Plaza. Her boss, Will Shrimpin, lets them unclog and clean the trucker showers. Micah reaches in and brings up huge fistfuls of wet hair, throws them at Barry who yips and retaliates, spraying Scrubbing Bubbles into Micah’s face.

“Don’t embarrass me,” pleads their mother.

Like everyone in Montana, she also holds a weekend job. A house call seamstress, but Micah and Barry rarely accompany her unless she’s going as far as Missoula, in which case they wait in the truck while she goes in, the promise of Chinese takeout at The Golden Bowl. A box of thread, a needle between their mother’s lips.

“Careful, Deb,” warns their father. “It only takes a sneeze.”

Her job is to let garments out and take them in, making allowances for pregnancies and missing limbs. She helped sew the parts of Tim Orr’s brother into his uniform at the request of the funeral home, sitting alone in a cold downstairs room with stained ceiling panels.

Summers Micah and Barry spend shadowing their father, who is, during different months, a fishing guide, an animal control officer, a part-time railroad worker, and a builder of potato boxes, bird houses, and jewelry boxes he sells on the side. When school is out, Micah and Barry pack boats for men from Belle Meade and Sausalito. They help their father extricate badgers from old women’s porches, rouse sleeping dogs from the middle of Dumontier Road, and, in the worst winters, shoot doomed elk who have fallen into snow graves.

Barry never leaves the truck for elk kills.

They’re always alive, just their heads showing, following Micah’s every move. When he approaches with his father’s rifle, he can hear their legs cracking.
They are twelve and sixteen that summer, walking the ruts to Jocko River, Micah for his cutthroats, Barry for his arrowheads, and nothing is different except for the man with the Minnesota license plate and the dream catcher hanging from his mirror who insists on giving his beer to Micah and argues with him about wolves but then laughs and shows him a picture of his girlfriend. It looks like something torn from a magazine.

"Her name’s Wren," Micah hears him say, as if from a great distance, and he watches as the guy puts his head back and lets his ponytail shake down, gold streaks like aspen leaves. Micah is having trouble focusing.

“My birth name’s Hoyt. But as of today, I’m Jacques, like him that named this river. And that’s . . . ”—he brings his finger slowly towards Micah’s chest as if to poke him, stops with his fingernail against his shirt, or maybe it just seems that close to Micah, it’s so hard to concentrate— . . . “that’s all you needs to know.”

When Micah comes to, Hoyt or Jacques from Minnesota is gone. Everything is the same, the cutthroats and the peas in Shelly, a lukewarm beer by his cheek. The only difference is Barry, sitting up in the draw, blood in his pants. He is crying hard, the way Micah hasn’t seen since Tim Orr’s brother’s funeral.

“Hey. You okay? Want me to get Dad?”

But they don’t get him because Barry shakes his head. They don’t do anything except try to wash the blood out of Barry’s pants and underpants, Barry sitting with his thin white legs folded under him like cow bones in the sand, Micah scrubbing at the stains with his mother’s peas. His hands turn purple.

Barry won’t talk until they get home, and then he bursts through the door, asking for dinner.

“See any bears?” their father asks, and Barry says no, no way, José. “Let’s see your loot then.”

Micah disappears in the bathroom, looks at himself in the mirror and runs to the toilet. Afterward, he stares at the tendrils of blood curling in the water and listens to Barry tell their father about the blue flint knife he found, but lost.

They don’t talk about it with each other, or with anyone. Which is fine. Everything is busy, always.

Micah takes a job washing dishes from 3–11 at The Buck Snort with a
guy named Britt, the two of them scalding their arms until they look like skinned squirrels. Steek and Peg Batchelder have warned them it’s only a summer job, but they know they’ll get hired on again when the hunters come at Christmas. It’s Arlee, and everyone knows which high school kids are reliable, who’ll stick around for work after they graduate.

The Buck Snort’s busy with tourists, fly fishermen and hikers who don’t notice or don’t care about the sign above the bar: _Environmentalists: Welcome to Montana. Please Park at Border and Walk In._

Each time Britt gets hold of a fork, he stabs Micah. There are tine marks up and down his arm like a junkie, some threatening to bleed. Micah doesn’t say anything because he deserves it, first of all, and because Britt is seventeen and crying.

“Asshole.” Britt wants to finish the load and take Micah outside, bust his face for taking his Josie, but here comes Josie with another stack piled high.

Josie is half Mexican and wholly in love with Micah. “_Pobrecito,_” she calls Britt, which makes him cry more. No boy, Micah knows, wants to be pitied.

Micah loves Josie back, realizes loving her means the necessary evil of taking her from Britt, who only ever managed to get her shirt open. It wasn’t hard, took no machinations—she wanted to be with him. Like his mother leaving the pasture gate open to let the deer wander in.

After work, Micah is going to take Josie to his parents’ place, introduce her to Barry, who’s been kind of dark lately, holing up in his room with Stone Temple Pilots, but who will like Josie if he gives her a chance. Introduce her to his mother’s collection of strays and to his father, making his potato boxes in the garage.

Josie leaves love marks all over his neck. Neither of them are virgins, but he feels like he’s done more with her, working her warm shell with his knuckles. He’s taken her to the Jocko River but has not dunked her, nor sung the weird, depressing songs about their father. Instead he brought the boom box, full of love songs. _Sweet Child O’ Mine. I Remember You._

Told her even about the draw between the bald mountains, pointed to the places where Barry used to find things, artifacts, but when she asked him to take her up there to look, he said no. Kissed her, said no, pulled her under him.

At the ranch that night, he holds open the gate and she walks right in. Past the porcupine eating toast in a box. Past the spitting goose and the queer deer, all bumpy and short-tempered.
“Mom’s mistake,” Micah says. “He was in rut, so she cut his balls.” Antlers had begun sprouting out in all the wrong places. A cheek. Between the eyes. “Nature doesn’t like to be fucked with,” he tells her.

Twenty-eight years later, Micah and Barry will sit across from each other at The Bum Steer, the renovated Buck Snort, and pile talk on the table between them, along with three bottles of Moose Drool and two fist-sized bowls of pretzels, Micah’s sunburned arm kitty-corner across the edge, his palm burning. He hasn’t shared a drink with his brother in years, not since prison, not since Lee Ann was born, and his leg won’t stop twitching. When he takes his arm off the table, it’s so he can pull up cuticles on his thumbs, like peeling wood with a paring knife.

Barry’s become spiritual since he left prison, or at least that’s the word that Barry has used around Micah. He told Josie too, one night after she’d put the kids in bed and the phone rang.

“You talked to him and you didn’t put me on?”

Josie said he’d called just to hear a woman’s voice. “He’s into that stuff my mother, she used to dabble with. Kept talking about getting his house in order, houses of the planets. Mierda. Crappity crap.”

Now Barry is sitting across from him, searching for a memory of their parents asleep, their mother stumbling around in a robe. Their parents were always up and dressed, their mother sweeping snow off the steps or cooking, their Dad leaning against the counter with the dregs of his coffee.

“When the hell they sleep?” Barry wonders, just wanting to talk. “Always working. When you’d go to the bathroom, she’d have the bed made.”

Micah downs the last of his beer, then rolls it against his forehead. “I used to climb in their bed first thing in the morning when I was sick sometimes, January, February, and the sheets was ice cold.” He isn’t sure what to say, what exactly Barry is looking for, or why talking about this stuff feels like walking into the basement, motor oil smells and spider webs brushing against his lips.

“There was one time with Dad, when we, when I was in second grade. You was two or three. He’d been up all night with the Orrs, shooting over coyotes to keep them off the calves. He had to talk Tim and Mike out of shooting them jokers dead. So, Dad, he doesn’t get home until maybe six in the morning, comes in the kitchen and pulls out a chair. Mom, she puts
a plate of bacon in front of him. No lie, he says to me, he says, “You all ready for school?” and that second he falls dead asleep, still chewing.”

“No shit.”

Micah considers mixing in some made-up stories, just to see if Barry can tell the difference. “That time they told us—remember, Bear—to watch Dallas, two episodes back to back, so they could have sex.”

But Barry is staring past Micah at the television on the wall. A woman reporter talks and gestures on mute. Fires jumping through Choteau.

Barry says, “You kept on looking through the keyhole, saying, they’re doing it, they’re doing it! I didn’t have a clue what you was talking about.”

Micah laughs, his belly convulsing against the table, ketchup bottle trembling, basket of jelly. He places his palms on the sticky mat that says Soot-Away: Protect Your Family. He hasn’t laughed with Barry in years, and now here is Barry across from him, a 406 tattooed on his fingers, an eye on his lower back. Here is Barry with a smoker’s cough and a skinny crank body. Their parents, shadows in the keyhole, shadows by the river. The smile dies right off his face.

“Goddamn, Barry.”

Barry breaks down and chews a pretzel. “Hey. Hey.” He’s not going to let it go dark, jabs a finger in the air to pop whatever it is building around them. “Now, I’ve got your blast from the past. Man, you ready?”

“Lay it on me,” Micah says. He feels for some reason like crying, or at least crinkling up his face the way his boy Zeke does when he cries.

And then Barry is singing. He sings, right there at the table. “He’s an old man, at a dead end, with a heart . . . that’s full of sin. That song, and your dumbass jokes about the cooler. There’s your blast. There’s memory lane for ya.”

Shelly, who got lost over the years. Micah looked in the bottom kitchen cabinets, down by their mother’s grease pans. “Daddy, you seen Shelly?” Their father said no, no son, said he hadn’t seen her, must have been you boys lost her fishing, but it wasn’t.

Micah stares at Barry’s finger, still in the air, the nail burned black obsidian. This man is his little brother. This man was in prison.

He takes a breath. “A fence that never ends.”

“Listen here,” Barry goes on. “Micah, you gotta pay some fucking attention in your life. I could have gone to the Jocko when we was boys and known that our whole lives was gonna be shit. I’m thinking, if you knew how to read it, you could look in that river and see our whole future.”
Micah pulls a triangle of skin from his fingernail and drops it on the floor. *Time to say one last goodbye.*

He is sick of tiptoeing. Every conversation with Barry—even on the phone—eventually goes this way, scrabbling through weeds and gravel and dust, following shallow game trails that peter out on the rocks. Micah is going to say that Barry is shit-faced and wrong, that his life is better than Barry makes it out to be, that Barry doesn’t know the first thing about him or Josie or the kids. That if Barry wants somebody to blame for his life, he better stop throwing around memories, can the drugs, get a damn job.

He leaves a ten and pushes his chair back.

—

It’s a Tuesday in March he’s supposed to pick up Barry from jail, the day before Micah’s 38th birthday. “That must be a nice birthday present,” the Batchelders say when they learn that Barry’s about to be sprung.

“At least,” is all Micah can come up with.

Josie asks Micah to go with her to her mother’s before, help her flip her in bed so she doesn’t get bedsores. “You know I can’t do it by myself,” she says, yanking a sweater over her head.

Micah lets the truck idle for thirty minutes, and sets about scraping the ice. He dug out the drive at six, but it’s already icing over, little crystals in the air around his eyelashes.

No one has told him what to expect when he goes to fetch Barry. Will it be like the movies, he wonders, Barry moving through a series of larger cages toward his freedom, collecting five-year-old twenties and keys to a house that’s no longer his? He has, ridiculously, an image in his head of his brother at the state prison in Deer Lodge, unmet by loved ones, speeding away on a black streetfighter.

“I ain’t gonna be late for him,” Micah growls as they head east.

“*Relajate.*” Josie stares out at the line of magpies on a jackleg fence, the heat blasting her cracked face. “Whatever happens, happens, like always.”

After five years, Micah has adjusted to Barry being in prison. The hour and a half drive down to Deer Lodge is pretty enough, the occasional moose by the side of the road. Fall turning everything yellow in increments up the mountains. He stops sometimes for a meatball sub at Yak Yak’s, makes sure he doesn’t have any gum in his pockets before parking and walking to the Wallace Building.
The first time, after waiting for his questionnaire and visiting approval, he was nervous, sure of a strip search, but it was nothing, just a pass through a metal detector, a visitor badge affixed to the front pocket of his flannel shirt.

Half the time, they don’t pat him down. Never even seem to carry guns.

Barry is always there already, waiting for him, uncuffed, sitting at a metal table. They are left alone in the room, allowed two hugs at meeting and parting. Once Micah brought Lee Ann, who was two, and a guard obliged when Micah asked him to take a picture of them together, Lee Ann balanced on Barry’s knee.

Their parents, who have aged twenty years in five, don’t ask about his visits, nor do they discuss their own. Even if Micah had the words, he wouldn’t have wanted to use them. His brother some kind of drug addict, some kind of prostitute. So dumb he kept buying meth-making equipment from the same Reserve St. Walgreens.

“He was lucky,” Josie said once, and Zeke turned his head, sensing that they were talking about something juicy. “He could’ve done a lot more time.”

“Who’s lucky?” Zeke asked.

“No one,” Micah said.

Josie’s mother’s house smells slightly of urine, all the furniture and rugs covered in plastic. The midnight to morning hospice nurse has just left, the afternoon person, Scott, not yet there, and Josie scurries around, vacuuming and checking after them.

“I’ve got to make a run to IGA and stock her up on Boost,” Josie says.

“I told you, I ain’t going to be late for him.”

“Jesus Mary and Joseph, we’re not going to be late. Why don’t you sit with her til I get back.”

Micah watches her through the window, peeling out of the driveway. At the top the snow is deep, and the truck tires spin.

He doesn’t want to go sit with Margarita. The death room. He doesn’t like sitting with her in all that quiet, remembering his mother-in-law before the stroke. There’s a sign on the front door—No Smoking Oxygen In Use—that makes him think all of Margarita’s old timey clocks are counting down to a huge explosion.

When he does, finally, go into her room, after washing his hands in the guest bathroom, after flipping through the television on mute, she’s where she always is, facing the window in the medical bed. Gray March
light falls over her, over her caved-in mouth, and Micah stares at the papery sheet over her knees.

There’s no reason to wait for Josie.

He slips an arm under her, grabs the sheet on the far side, and begins rolling. She doesn’t smell like anything, like a concrete floor, maybe, and her white hair falls across his arm, thin and coarse as a possum’s fur. What was that thing his father used to say about owls and possums and old women? He’ll have to ask Barry. Barry would remember.

He is thinking just then of a night when they were boys, twelve and sixteen, following their father out into the winter night on a call. Some business to do with the railroad. “Watch Dumontier Road,” their mother said. She was in her robe, drinking coffee over an old Woman’s Day.

Micah and Barry waited in the truck cab, fighting over who would get to turn the knob to the heat, while their father ran back in for his rifle.

The truck slid a lot on the drive, its headlights cutting long beams over black ice. Micah and Barry were tired and fell quiet.

“Ain’t we gonna park around back?” Micah asked, eventually.

Their father enjoyed certain railroad privileges, and Micah and Barry liked walking through the gravel lot among the other trucks and broken rails, old ties and rail grinders, the ground around them rumbling.

“Don’t need to park,” their father whispered. Barry had fallen asleep.

That moment Micah saw them, what was left of thirty or forty prong-horn antelope on the tracks, after the Great Northern had come through. Raw flanks, legs scattered and bent. Fluffy hind ends stained purple. From every piece, steam rose.

“They use them tracks,” Micah’s father whispered, even though there was no need, now they were out of the truck, closing the doors softly so as not to wake Barry, “when the snow gets too deep, you see. They use them tracks.”

It had started snowing, and Micah stood there, watching his father walk through the vastation, the rifle under his arm. He lifted his legs over gut piles, heaved the biggest parts aside, shoulders and torsos, into the drifts.

Micah wanted to ask what the gun was for, even though he knew Survivors.

They are twelve and sixteen, but once they were something else. The root of a tall buttercup under five inches of unbolted earth.

Barry is three and squalling, their mother running her finger inside his
lip, searching for a cut or a new tooth, rotten or hiding. Their father is in the garage making owl boxes for the outside of The Buck Snort. Tourists, he says, love them owls. Owl’s like an old lady, likes to watch her back. Old lady’s like a possum, white hair down her crack.

Micah’s mother squeezes a tube of gel on her finger and presses it into Barry’s mouth, but his screams grow louder and more desperate.

“Should you of had him if you can’t shut him up?” Micah asks, tearing off before his mother can come after him. She pinches his shirt on the way out, or maybe he imagines it. She wouldn’t leave Barry to topple off the counter top.

Micah stops running halfway to the Jocko, once he realizes no one is after him. He walks barefoot through the ruts, old wagon trails, his parents say. His father’s buzz saw skirls from behind, along with the mumble of the radio.

The Jocko is choked with spring ice, and Micah sputters into a run to its banks. He remembers being here when he was Barry’s age, barn swallows scooping mosquitoes off the water in summer. Breaking up the ice with a rock, Micah sends pieces skidding across the sheet. He grabs a large shard and daggers it into the ground.

He’s not sure how long he sits listening for the water slipping by under the ice. Waiting out his mother’s anger, letting it dry up. When he returns, running sloppily up the hill, tears running down his face, he doesn’t know what he’s about to do, or why.

It is true that it’s been hard to get their attention, since the baby.

Once they see he is crying, the baby long since calmed, his parents come to him, sit with him on the couch and pray, weep with him, over him, when he tells them he knows he has sinned, that his heart is too heavy for him, but a boy. For twenty minutes, they ignore Barry and tend to him, only him. The truth is what he gives them, or something not far away from it, like a cousin, a blood relative.

That he is ready to ask Jesus, or for them to ask Jesus on his behalf. That he is ready, through tears he says it, ready for forgiveness, ready for divine salvation. He tells them everything, and they believe.

Why would they not?