Hibernate

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He was born with a blond pompadour in Comanche, Wyoming to raconteurs and pitiable circumstances. His father had just finished serving out the last months of a jail stint for writing bad checks and masterminding an elaborate pyramid scheme; his mother was a secretary for a shady utility company and spent her free time downing boxes of pink wine. They brought Deacon Friddle home from the hospital and installed him in the trailer like an imitation wood coffee table.

The infant lay drowsily in his crib, while his parents both snapped open purple cans of Tab. Jack and Jenna Friddle were unsurprised and uninspired by their baby, as they had been by the pregnancy, which they mistook for months as gut fat.

“How soon do you think we can tell if he’s ‘special’?” his mother wondered.

“Let’s hope he’s not,” Jack Friddle said, leaning over the baby.

The rest of their parenting could adequately be described as hands-off.

They rented a trailer on a month-by-month basis from a woman with a brown dog chained outside. She usually rented to migrant workers who roomed five to a trailer and split the two hundred dollar rent, or disappeared before it was due. The woman, Mary-Beth Unruh, had white-blond hair and deep vertical lines down her cheeks. She also had few expectations in life, so used was she to being swindled.
Like the Friddles, like most everyone in Comanche, Mary-Beth viewed life as a vast, flat plateau. Everything that you saw was everything that you ever would see, past and present, unless you went and did something stupid to put yourself over the edge. She didn’t bat an eyelash when the Friddles brought home their baby to a trailer that smelled of migrant sweat and barbed wire, with flesh-colored asbestos leaking from the closets, though she did feel quite sorry for the child.

Deacon grew up terrified of Mary-Beth Unruh. She was always coming over to yell at his parents, mostly his mother—his father would be gone soon, off to drive semis in the desert with an Indian named Kathy—for not paying their rent. His earliest memories were of his mother placing him belly-down on the green shag carpet, trying to buy another free week in the trailer. He couldn’t crawl yet, but he’d lace his fingers through the carpet and bawl. He remembered his mother’s toes out of their work heels, all gnarled up, and the dirty tennis shoes of Mary-Beth Unruh. Words were exchanged, voices raised, all bouncing from the fake wood walls.

Mary-Beth Unruh knew that Jenna Friddle brought out the baby for sympathy, let him drag himself around on the floor, but it worked anyway. Sometimes she got the rent, and sometimes she didn’t. Either way, when she was leaving, she’d pick Deacon up and jiggle him a bit. “Po, po, pitiful thing,” she’d say. “How’d you get so pitiful?”

Deacon was afraid of the dog chained to Mrs. Unruh’s trailer. When he was older, his mother would send him with a roll of twenties to pay toward the rent, and he made sure to give the dog a wide berth. It was a mix of something, yellow with a small head and big body, seemingly always pregnant, with big, purple nipples that hung down to the ground. The dog’s name was Martha the Terrible.

One time, a few years after his father left for good with the Indian, Deacon went over with fifty bucks. He was twelve. Outside was a stocky, dark-haired man smoking vigorously on the steps of the Unruh trailer, with what looked like fur on the tops of his hands. Deacon had never seen him before. He wore a shirt that said Comanche City Volunteer Fire Department. In smaller print, it read Beware: Oversized Hose. The man flicked ashes off into the gravel, and Martha the Terrible gobbled them up, her tongue stained black.
Deacon wasn’t paying attention and made the mistake of surprising the dog. Its head swung around like a hammer. Martha really only nipped him, her teeth pinching the back of his hand, but he screamed for five full minutes, even after the man kicked the dog in the ribs and it ran back yipping to its ashes. “Cut it out,” the man said, shaking Deacon by his skinny shoulders. “It ain’t like she took your whizzer.”

This is how Deacon met Mary-Beth Unruh’s husband, Grandad. Grandad Unruh was not a grandfather, it was just that everybody called him that. His real name was Kim.

Deacon figured it was a safe bet no one would have mistaken Grandad for a grandfather anyway. He was a womanizer who dyed his beard brown to match his hair and liked telling dirty jokes and playing the lottery with his wife’s money. He was a fraud, like Deacon’s parents. None of them were what their names suggested them to be. False advertising. It shook off them like gold dust.

Grandad Unruh had a separate place a little ways down into the divide, a small thorny ranch.

Mrs. Unruh used to live down there with him until he started getting on her nerves, not to mention the cheating and the lotto. She had been a teacher at the tech college in Cheyenne, and she used her savings to buy the first trailer for herself as a vacation home away from Grandad, and the other trailers as an investment. Then she bought Martha the Terrible as a guard dog after the migrant workers tried to rob her, and after Grandad tried to get back in her bed. Fortunately for Mrs. Unruh, the dog hated migrant workers; unfortunately, it liked Grandad, who brought it elk legs he found up in the mountains, with muscle and fur still attached.

Deacon grew up with the Unruhs. They understood his parents were losers without ever acknowledging it in any way. They paid him a little something to help out at the ranch. His mother didn’t care, so he went, sometimes for hours after school. Grandad showed him how to prop up the sheep for vaccinations and shearing. Deacon loved the heavy feeling of their wooly backs pressed against his legs, like suitcases.

Deacon was a smart boy. Eventually, he noticed the ranch beginning to fail, and Mrs. Unruh beginning to fail.

The dog died first, after crawling under the back wheel of the trailer. You could smell it before you got close to the trailer park. Mrs. Unruh
called Grandad in tears, and he came over to get it, pulling it slowly out by the chain. Deacon stared down at Martha, who didn’t look like Martha anymore. She didn’t even look much like a dog. Small flies made determined inroads beneath the skin around her eyes.

“Goddamn, they don’t wait long, do they?” Grandad said. “Wanna help me bury her?” He wrapped his furry fingers around the handle of the rusty shovel he had used to kill the marmots Martha only maimed. Even Martha was a fraud that way, not finishing the job, leaving the sandy things flopping around, all bloody and legless.

Grandad showed Deacon how deep to make the hole. To discourage the wolves.

“Might as well bury Mary-Beth at the same time, she’s gonna be so broken-hearted,” Grandad said. He was right.

After the death of Martha the Terrible, Mrs. Unruh never came over to ask for the Friddles’ late rent, or for anything.

In a few years, Deacon grew up. His mother liked to say it was all the milk and clean Wyoming air, but that was a lie, like all things. The air around the trailer smelled of oil, rust, and waste from the nearby ranches, and most of the time, the milk was sour, unless it was the chocolate milk Deacon bought with money he took out of his mother’s purse, the chocolate tending to stay good longer. Deacon got to over six feet tall pretty quickly, and his blond pompadour scraped the low trailer ceiling. He developed something like muscles, small lumps at intervals down his pale arms. Everyone in high school looked at him like he was an alien.

“Does anybody smell horse shit?” the boys would laugh when he walked into class.

Deacon never talked to anyone. He got to school late and left early, hurrying back to the Unruh’s, though lately that place was equally depressing.

Mrs. Unruh was well on her way toward senility. Her eyes were cloudy, like she could see into the future. Sometimes she held her cigarettes out away from her face, forgetting them in her hands until there was nothing but ash. She liked to play dress-up with her old school-teaching clothes.

Grandad kept his marbles but had had a heart attack the month before his 60th birthday. Now he walked around the ranch aimlessly, shirtless, with a zipper-scar on his chest. He remained, by his own admission, a thoroughgoing pussy hound.
Deacon believed that he was on his way to discovering the truth about Grandad, like finding a hard, sweet seed at the center of a sour fruit. No kin, no care. It was something his father used to say, though he had never really understood it.

Deacon looked at the Unruhs with occasional disgust. They disappointed him. He was a teenager, and he had hoped to stay on with them at the ranch. Now the ranch was a joke. They called themselves ranchers long after the ranch had been reduced to skeletal sheep and blooming weeds.

Deacon began to think about college as a way out. He didn’t really understand what it would mean for him, or what it would enable him do, if anything. Late at night, Deacon read his textbooks, brushing his blond bangs from his eyes, and he listened to his mother’s drunken sleep-talk in the next room, dreaming the accident of his birth. “Goddamn Jack,” she’d slur. “I’m pregnant, you fucker.”

One day Deacon landed a job interview, and Grandad agreed to lend him his pick-up. Grandad hadn’t been allowed to drive for some time. Doctor’s orders.

It was the first time the truck had been started in weeks, and it choked to life, expelling a family of tiny field mice from the muffler. Standing in a cloud of exhaust, Grandad stared down at the mice, their brown fur stained with oily condensation. The mice trembled like homunculi in the yellow grass, stunned. He laughed and gently kicked them out of the way so Deacon could throw the truck in reverse before it died.

“Better light out, boy,” he said, secretly adjusting himself through his pocket. With his other hand, he waved goodbye.

Deacon drove slowly to his interview, not sure what to expect.

The advertisement had been almost buried in the paper, for it was spring, and there were chicks and ducklings listed for Easter. I Need A House Cleaner. Would prefer all-natural products.

“That’s for girls,” Mrs. Unruh had said, knitting her brows.

“Doesn’t say nothing about girls or boys,” Deacon said. “Can’t hurt to call.”

Mrs. Unruh tilted her face, confused. “But you can get a job right now, on the ranches,” she said. To her, Deacon was a puddle of strange ideas.
“Not on your ranch,” he said. “I need to save money for college. If I want a career,” Deacon pointed at the television. A show was playing with high-powered lawyers in business suits. The lawyers stood and argued outside on marble steps for what seemed like forever.

Mrs. Unruh stared at the men in suits. By their side were women with briefcases. The kind of women Grandad called femi-nazis, the kind he said needed a good roll behind the barn.

Mrs. Unruh’s white-blond hair was pulled back into a chignon. She was playing dress-up again. “Wanna come look at my purses?” she asked.

“I gotta get home and make my mom some dinner. Ask Grandad when he gets back if I can use his truck, ’kay?”

She looked at him for a moment, and then her frail hand wandered toward his cheek. He had the first traces of stubble, like the legs of a caterpillar.

“Po, po, pitiful thing. How’d you get to be so pitiful?” she asked.

Turned out the dirty house belonged to Dr. Scully, the heart doctor.

It was the first time Deacon had ever been inside a rich person’s house. He tried not to stare at the artful spiral of a wine rack, or the gold enameled Buddhas everywhere, or the skylights. He made a point of wiping his feet thoroughly on a mat that read Home Is Where Your Ohm Is. Though the house was a mansion and full of expensive-looking knick-knacks, it was furnished with second-hand furniture, ugly futons and stained chairs.

During the interview, Deacon sat at the Scullys’ kitchen table, which glittered like snow. Melodee Buttress-Scully, the wife of the doctor who operated on Grandad, explained that it was made of recycled glass from wine bottles all over the world. Deacon thought about his mother passed out on the brown couch after work, her lips stained grape-purple.

“A male house cleaner must be pretty controversial in such a provincial town,” Mrs. Buttress-Scully said, turning her head from side to side as if addressing an unseen audience.

“I dunno,” Deacon said, noticing a framed picture on the wall with a man suspended by a bungee cord in a canyon. He wondered if it was Dr. Scully. “I guess it’s not that different from being a janitor.” He didn’t know what else to say. He was about to mention his plan to save for college, when she said:
“Van and I pride ourselves on being progressive in all areas of our life. Do you know what that means—progressive?”

Melodee Buttress-Scully and her husband were not like anyone Deacon had ever met. They had lived everywhere, never one place for long, and Deacon had the sense that they didn’t intend to stay in Comanche very long either. During the interview, Melodee Buttress-Scully seemed distracted, as if she was running late, and her coarse black hair rose up in the dry air. It seemed as if she might have to move again by the afternoon.

She explained what she wanted of Deacon, that she was very, very busy, and as she described her high standards, she lifted a thin arm above her head. She wanted him to pay attention to the smallest things. She wanted him to take a Q-tip to the places between the numbers on the clock.

Deacon nodded, barely saying a word.

“And I will check after you,” Melodee Buttress-Scully said, with a tone that was serious but still polite. “I’ll run my fingers along the baseboards.”

“I understand,” Deacon said.

When he got back to the trailer, he found his mother smoking something that made the house smell of beef jerky. She was still in her work blouse, though it was open at the neck, revealing a small patch of freckled skin.

“Where you been all day, Deac?”

“At school. Then the job interview. I took Grandad’s truck.”

She rolled over on the couch, wrinkling her clothes. A gray cloud of jerky smoke hung down over her. “You know I don’t like you hanging around that old pervert.”

Deacon started pulling things out of the refrigerator and pantry, one by one. An onion. A bag of egg noodles. Chocolate milk.

“Don’t worry about him, he just wants people to think he’s an ignoramus. He’s really an old soul,” Deacon said, using a term he had heard his English teacher say. He liked it, even though he didn’t completely understand what it meant. “How was work?”

Deacon’s mother laughed, her teeth dark. “You said something about a job?”

“It’s a cleaning job I found in the paper. I interviewed with Dr. Scully’s wife after school, and I guess I’m hired.”
“Fucking rich people,” Deacon’s mother said. “Can’t even clean their own houses. You want me to make some dinner?”

“I’m making it. Don’t trouble yourself.” He glared at his mother, folded over like a pile of dirty clothes.

“Call your aunts before you do that. Tell them about the job. They’ll be proud of you, like I’m proud of you.”

She was always telling Deacon she was proud of him for doing the littlest things, for putting his shoes on in the morning. Deacon’s Aunt Jeanette once told him that his mother had been convinced that Deacon would be born retarded because she couldn’t stop drinking wine boxes during the pregnancy, even though she had been warned to quit. Maybe, Deacon thought, that was why she was so proud when he could even breathe or take a shit.

As he made powdered mac n’ cheese, Deacon cradled the phone against his shoulder and called his Aunt. His mother was right. Aunt Jeanette was proud. Aunt Jeanette said she’d hang up and call the other aunts.

When the family matriarchs heard that Deacon had taken a job as a cleaning person, they were pleased and nodded sagely, their small heads rolling like grouse eggs. Though they universally acknowledged his mother to be a mess, they figured there was still hope for him. A job was a job. Frankly, they said, they were just grateful he hadn’t driven off with his father and that Indian.

Deacon started the next day. He took Grandad’s truck again, and Grandad waved goodbye and shouted at him as he drove off. “They don’t make you wear an apron, do they?”

Deacon felt no remorse asking Grandad for the use of his truck, or for money, not that there was much of that anymore. Grandad felt guilty for Deacon’s pitiable life, and being a whip-smart boy of the prairie, Deacon exploited Grandad’s guilt. Also he had been eyewitness to Grandad putting his tongue down a sixteen-year-old girl’s throat the summer before. The Gomez family only spared Grandad’s cheek bones because his wife rented them the trailer, and because Deacon—now tall enough to look at least mildly threatening—offered to intervene. After the Gomezes left, kicking up a cloud of dust and threats to crush Grandad’s balls with their monster truck, Grandad patted Deacon on the shoulder.

“You really saved me.”

“Don’t forget it,” Deacon said, sounding a little like his father.
That morning when he got to work, Deacon learned that the Buttress-Scullys had children. They were all different colors—a black boy, a brown girl, and a white boy. The children were restless, beginning games and puzzles in brief bursts of activity while breathing heavily. Sometimes they spun in rapid circles, their bony arms outstretched like fan blades, and shouted the names for animals in English and French until the two names became almost indistinguishable. Then they’d fall to the carpet laughing, vomiting up frothy saliva from their lips. With each game, they focused themselves completely with piercing concentration, only to abandon their endeavors abruptly with a barely a flinch.

Deacon was frightened of them. He hadn’t spent much time around small children. There were Grandad’s farm animals, but it wasn’t the same. There were rules with them, like the horses you had to approach from the side, leaving them ample room to move. But these children were smarter and therefore more unpredictable.

The white boy, Torrance, ran up to Deacon when he was dusting and shoved him in the stomach.

Melodee Buttress-Scully, who sat on the futon reading a story in Spanish to the brown girl, said “Boys will be boys.” She ran her fingers nervously through her frizzy hair. “I’m sure you remember from your own childhood.”

Deacon thought of crawling on the carpet, being a pawn for his mother.

“Actually, my dad would have tanned me pink,” he lied. It felt good.

Mrs. Buttress-Scully shrugged. “I don’t believe in corporal punishment. Van and I believe you should talk to and treat children like people.” She looked out the window at the mountains. “Of course I realize that’s not how everyone was raised.”

“That’s okay,” Deacon said, and went back to dusting. He cautiously observed the children while carrying out the remaining tasks of the day.

“How was it?” Grandad asked when he came home.

“It was a job.” Deacon threw him his keys. “I don’t see how it’s going to pay enough for college. And the kids are weird. Paloma, Torrance, and Kwezi.”

“Kwezi? That doctor cut open my chest, he didn’t look foreign.”

“I think they’re adopted,” Deacon said, going in to wash his hands.
“Or two of them, at least. Your truck needs work, old man,” he shouted over his shoulder.

“You just call me old?” Grandad asked, thrusting out his damaged chest. “Punk.”

Melodee Buttress-Scully was too different for Comanche. She ran fourteen miles every morning, pushing Kwezi in a stroller the whole way. She gave herself beet juice enemas. After dipping her fingers in olive oil, she stood in front of the mirror and smeared her fingertips down the length of each strand of hair, letting the loose hairs fall to the bathroom floor where Deacon knelt, scrubbing the base of the toilet. Sometimes Mrs. Buttress-Scully rolled out a little mat in a patch of afternoon sunlight on the carpet, and bent her back into octagons.

Her greatest passion was her involvement in an organization called Leche Internacional, an operation celebrating the joys of breastfeeding. Deacon gleaned most of the information about Leche Internacional from papers on the Scullys’ desk, which he frequently, clandestinely, flipped through hoping to see pictures of breasts. He listened as Mrs. Buttress-Scully took phone calls in her “office” regarding the Comanche start-up branch she was attempting, which mainly seemed to consist of women in Sheridan. She spearheaded an effort to ship the frozen breast milk of American women to Bhutan.

She didn’t seem to care for Deacon. “You could have done a better job in the kitchen,” she’d say, her bony fingers pinching at her waist. When she made lunch—usually recipes from back issues of a health food magazine that he had to stack neatly on the counter—she never offered Deacon anything. If people came to visit Melodee Buttress-Scully, as they sometimes did, usually people Deacon had never seen around town, she gestured to him with a degree of embarrassment, as if he were an unfortunate water stain on the ceiling, but did not introduce him.

One day as he was windexing the living room window, Deacon noticed a man on a skinny racing bike wending up the hill to the house. The bike was the gunmetal color of a cattle prod, and the bicyclist wore a serious black helmet with green stripes bisecting it. Dr. Van Scully. Deacon had been working for the Scullys over a month and had never met him.
Dr. Scully was the bungee jumper from the picture. He was probably in his forties, Deacon figured, but even from within his spandex biker’s suit, his muscles protruded in shiny, rubbery waves. In the absent-minded manner of ritual, Dr. Scully bowed at the gold-plated Buddha squatting near the front door before coming in.

Dr. Scully walked through the house with his hand extended. “You must be the wunderkind. What did we ever do before you came?”

Deacon put down his dust rag to shake the doctor’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Ah, so formal!” The doctor boomed genially. “I feel like I’ve known you forever, everything Melodee says about you.”

What had Mrs. Buttress-Scully said about him? Deacon couldn’t imagine what she’d tell Dr. Scully, except maybe that he sometimes skipped the top wine bottle when dusting, but that was because he couldn’t reach it and the Scullys didn’t own a ladder. He scrambled for some kind of response but was distracted by the image of Dr. Scully with his helmet still on. His head looked like a sideways almond.

“Hey. You’re a godsend, I’m telling you. She was going crazy before, with the children, balancing all her international work, trying to hold things together here. I’m sure you can imagine. You probably wish you had someone to clean your own house, huh?” He laughed raucously, causing the Tibetan prayer flags to flutter in the doorway.

Deacon tried to laugh back. He tried to imagine the doctor stitching closed Grandad’s chest, sealing up his well-worn heart.

Dr. Scully pulled a lunch bag out of the refrigerator. “Well, I’ve gotta run back to the office, but I’m glad to finally meet you. Thanks for holding down the fort.”

“Van?” Mrs. Buttress-Scully had been doing one of her detox soaks in the upstairs bathroom. Deacon always avoided the upstairs when she was there, as she had the habit of walking naked from her bedroom to the bath.

“Who else?” The doctor cheerfully rummaged through some papers on the kitchen counter.

“Are you staying?” She descended the stairs, pulling closed her green silk robe. In a dramatic motion, she crossed the room and embraced Dr. Scully, who kissed her open-mouthed while holding her face.

Deacon, deeply embarrassed—he had never even seen his own parents kiss—looked away, but not before glimpsing the inside edge of Mrs. Buttress-Scully’s small breast as her robe stretched open.

“I was going to go for a run, if you could watch the children for a while,” she murmured into his mouth.
Dr. Scully looked up, surprised. “I’m due back at the office.” He turned toward Deacon. “But I’m sure our good friend could watch them for an hour or so. Those buggers aren’t too much of a handful.”

From Paloma’s bedroom came a crashing sound, and Kwezi appeared in the doorway, staring at his parents with huge ghost-eyes. Deacon forced himself to nod and smile fakely at Kwezi, all the while realizing that Dr. Scully either didn’t know or had forgotten his name.

Though the afternoon passed without incident, Deacon drove home with a bad feeling. Bad omen. Like the kind his mother claimed to get just before her period. Her whole body, she’d say, like chicken wire in the wind.

Grandad and Mrs. Unruh announced they were leaving. They had planned on settling in Seattle, but after they determined their only surviving relatives were less than enthusiastic about taking them in, they decided to move to Florence, Oregon, where apartments were relatively cheap and the weather decent, rain notwithstanding. Grandad knew someone there who could get him a Parks & Recreation job and someone who could keep an eye on Mary-Beth, who had begun to leave the door unlocked. In late spring, they sold all the trailers to a rental corporation called WestSky and the ranch with the starving sheep to a couple from Los Angeles.

“Can’t you wait til summer?” Deacon asked. “At least then I wouldn’t have school, and I could help you move. I could drive with you.”

“We don’t need no help. There ain’t nothing to be moved,” Grandad said matter-of-factly, taking off his shirt. His scar had become brown and scabby. It was hot for April, and Grandad and Deacon dragged the hose out to fill up the water buckets. “Besides, you can come visit when you get done. Before college. They got them huge sand dunes there, people ride ’em with dune buggies and skateboards and all.”

Deacon didn’t have it in him to tell Grandad he hadn’t even applied for college.

In the window, Mrs. Unruh stared out at him, one hand shielding her brow. Her eyes were nearly white with cataracts. She waved at him once with one of her patent leather purses. Deacon was surprised to have to swallow something down in his throat.
“You think you’d like to run them dunes like that, boy?” Grandad asked, yanking hard on the hose.

“How the hell do you skateboard on sand?” Deacon wondered, pulling one of the sheep down into a squat against his legs. Grandad aimed the hose at the sheep’s mouth, but it turned its head trying to avoid the water. Against his shins, he could feel the sheep’s spine.

“Fuck if I know,” Grandad said.

After they finished with the sheep, Grandad dropped Deacon off back at his mother’s trailer.

It was scorching hot, and Deacon went from room to room, opening the windows. Each one was limned with black mildew.

His mother had acquired a boyfriend of one month, a man from work named Nave Goodall. He was one of her two bosses at the shady utility company. He had a habit of driving his car through the small patch of grass Mrs. Unruh had seeded years ago in the center of the trailer park, a square of green in the midst of yellow prairie grass and gravel, and his tires left ugly dirt tracks where the grass had been.

When Deacon opened the door to his mother’s bedroom and found her pinned beneath Nave Goodall, his sweaty ass bouncing above her bed like a rubber kickball, he was not surprised. Nave Goodall, however, stopped in mid-air, and Deacon’s mother craned her head from under his ruddy shoulder.

“What is it, Deac? You want me to make some dinner?”

“Nah. I just wanted to tell you Grandad and Mrs. Unruh are moving to Oregon. Somebody else is going to be renting us the trailer from now on. Some corporation. They’re raising the rent two hundred bucks.”

Nave Goodall gently lowered himself back down on Deacon’s mother. Deacon’s mother laughed, her purple lips crinkling. “Fucking old pervert, Unruh,” she said. “How am I supposed to afford that?”

Deacon pulled the door closed behind him. “I’ll go see if there’s anything in the fridge for dinner.”

“Seriously,” Deacon’s mother said into Nave Goodall’s shoulder. “How the fuck am I supposed to afford that?”

At school, Deacon was barely there, just counting the days until the end of the year. Sometimes it felt like he really was invisible. He could go a whole day without a single person speaking to him. No one even made the horse shit jokes about him anymore.
At work, his responsibilities grew, though he suffered less supervision. The doctor’s wife disappeared for hours at a time, and Deacon was asked to listen out for the children during their afternoon naps. He prayed that they wouldn’t wake up; he wouldn’t know what to do if they did.

When she was home, Mrs. Buttress-Scully had little patience for Deacon. Her irritation seemed worse as the weather grew warmer, when it became too hot to jog and her hair frizzed up in the desert heat. “Do you have to do that?” she’d carp when he ran the vacuum during her stretching sessions.

Once, when he yelled at Torrance for pulling cat turds out of the litter box, she grabbed his wrist hard. “You aren’t allowed to discipline him.”

“I wasn’t going to touch him,” Deacon said, reddening. “You saw him. He was getting his hands in cat shit.”

He was sure in that moment that she would fire him, cut him a check for the rest of the day’s work and let him go. Instead she slowly released her grip like she was coming awake, leaving the mark of her fingers on his skin.

Deacon told himself he didn’t care. He didn’t want any part of her, with her honey hair treatments that clogged the tub or her new ability to place her legs behind her head while using prayer hands; though truth be told, he sometimes did think of her instead of girls at school when he touched himself late at night. He didn’t understand how it was that he could be aroused by a woman he didn’t even find all that attractive, with her skinny fingers and flexible legs—but just the same, when he came staring at the wood paneling in his bedroom, it was her small breast he thought of.

Still, she was a bitch, as Grandad had always said.

Deacon developed a technique of cleaning several rooms at once, allowing him to move freely to a different room if Mrs. Buttress-Scully came in. He worked diligently and quickly in the hopes of being released early. Unfortunately, with the children running around, Deacon’s work was frequently undone by the end of the day, and he found himself staying later, ultimately subjected to Dr. Scully’s idle chitchat when he biked back home, energized from a day of cutting open people’s hearts.

More and more, Deacon thought about quitting, now that it was clear he couldn’t afford college. But he knew his mother would have to forfeit
the trailer if he did. Despite the fucking, Nave Goodall wouldn’t give her a raise.

Sometimes when he came home from school and work, he’d stand around in the empty lot where Mary-Beth Unruh’s trailer used to be. The trailer itself had been moved to the edge of the park, back where the Mexicans lived, to make room for a new trailer office that the WestSky people were going to build. Once or twice, a man in a white shirt with a notebook had come to look around, taking measurements, bringing other men who took more measurements. Deacon avoided them, but he heard his mother talking to the man in a loud voice, and then later, in a strange, desperate voice, fingering the open button on her work blouse. Since WestSky had taken over, she had upgraded to nearly two boxes of wine a night.

Deacon stood in the empty square, kicking at the gravel. He thought about Grandad in Oregon, getting rained on, and Mrs. Unruh’s cloudy eyes looking out at the sea. Deacon wondered if they ever missed Comanche. He kicked harder, deeper, and imagined he was rattling poor dead Martha the Terrible’s chains.

Just before school let out, Deacon slipped in Melodee Buttress-Scully’s personal lubricant and nearly cracked his skull open on the imported Greek marble floor. He landed with his head at an awkward angle behind the toilet, where there was more lubricant, and also the greenish stain of old urine from Dr. Scully’s prostate. He lay there gathering his wits for several minutes until it became clear that no one was home, and even if they had been, they would not have concerned themselves with him.

He finished cleaning the remainder of the upstairs, gently picking up the Scullys’ things. Dr. Scully’s palm tree decorated boxer shorts, their meditation manuals, wooden statues from their travels, and books about Gandhi, about the Donner party, stacked next to pictures of their children. Kwezi somewhere in what looked like Africa, Paloma in a swimming pool at SeaWorld, flanked by killer whales.

Deacon considered how little time it had taken for what once seemed so exotic and strange to him to become commonplace and boring. The doctor who stuck his fist into people’s chests. The woman who had never breastfed a child, shipping milk around the world. Would his life have been different had he been given clean milk, untainted by cheap wine?
Around the house, he had begun to notice change-of-address forms. There was talk of Dr. Van Scully taking a fellowship in Canada, of Mrs. Buttress-Scully joining The Yoga Institute of Vancouver, raising the children among a bilingual people. The Scullys would move on soon, taking their children with them—maybe even adding to their brood—to the next town where they would include a small cowboy statue for Comanche, WY on their shelf of curiosities. Deacon wondered if they would even remember him in a year’s time, that strange local boy who cleaned their house.

He had the sudden urge to smash their Buddhas, to carve his name into all of their belongings.

At the end of summer, after school was over and after he had quit the Scullys with a firm but polite letter, Deacon Friddle took the Greyhound from Sheridan to Oregon to visit Grandad. His mother didn’t mind. It meant an uninterrupted week with Nave Goodall.

Deacon had never been more than a hundred miles away from Comanche in his entire life. He was privileged with the window seat, his only company a businessman who slept with his mouth open for almost the duration of the journey. Watching the scenery change as the bus carved its way through mountain passes, the rolling yellow hills soon poked through with pines, and eventually the white, misty blankness of the coast, Deacon was thrilled. His blood rose to his face and seemed to set his pompadour ablaze.

Finally, there was the Pacific Ocean, crashing with a violence he could not look away from.

Grandad met him up on the dunes. He had rented him a board. “Turns out they don’t need wheels,” he said, smacking Deacon on the back. He stood back and laughed as Deacon made an honest effort to surf his way down an enormous, rock-hard dune, ending up flat on his face with a mouth full of sand.

Afterward, Grandad took Deacon out for lunch at a crab shack. Grandad’s hair and beard had gone completely white, and his hands shook a little when he went to break off the crab legs. Grandad asked after Deacon’s mother. Deacon shrugged, as if to say, more of the same.

“Some people aren’t meant to be parents,” Grandad said sadly. His shirt was unbuttoned at the neck, and his skin was dark, darker even than it had been back at the ranch. The zipper scar alone was white as abalone.
“How do you know?” Deacon asked. “You never had any kids. You’re not even a real Grandad.”

Grandad waved his hand dismissively. “She shoulda never done it if she weren’t gonna do it right. Drinking and lazing around like that.” He shook his head and sighed, making a small whistling sound as he exhaled. “Ended up treating you something pitiful.”

“I don’t want to talk about her,” Deacon said. “I want to hear about you.”

So Grandad told him about his life, which had mostly been good, with some bad spread in between. The Parks & Recreation job wasn’t much of anything, basically cleaning public toilets and picking up trash. But there was one great part: Every so often a whale would wash up on shore. Usually a fin whale, sometimes a blue. There was no way to get rid of them once they died, and they’d stink up the beach for tourists if they weren’t disposed of. Grandad’s job was to pack them with dynamite and blow them up.

“Like goddamn Fourth of July!” He grinned. “You should see it.”

Grandad talked and talked. Mrs. Unruh had died. Grandad said the worst part was how confused she got at the end, talking about her imaginary children. “She mentioned you a lot. I think she somehow got in her head you were hers,” he said. But he was not too grief-stricken; he had convinced himself it was for the best. “She’s out of her suffering. Doesn’t have to worry about scoundrels like me.” What he felt most bad about was the fact he couldn’t bury her with the dog back in Comanche.

Deacon stayed with Grandad for five days. Grandad showed him a good time, doing his best to erase the previous pitiable eighteen years of Deacon Friddle’s life. They walked along the shore, and Grandad took him up the dunes near the fancy houses, where there were remnants of gray-white blubber from one of his recent whale explosions. It glittered on the grass.

On the last day they went to the Oregon Coast Aquarium, where they observed the fragile movements of jellyfish and the stalking, stiff-legged gait of giant crabs, and Grandad made a joke about butter.

They watched a young, attractive girl diving in a tank with small sharks, cleaning the walls of a fake coral reef with a toothbrush. Every now and then a nurse shark would swim up behind her, and she’d turn around and take stock of it.

“That one’s sure pretty to look at,” Grandad said. “Must be a pistol to take a job like that.”

“Shut up, pervert.” Deacon said.
The diver continued swimming through the reef. Her red hair—buffeted by the mechanically engineered currents—rippled out from her mask.

Deacon stared at her slender body as she scrubbed at the fuzzy algae. Suddenly she looked up at him and waved.