

SO HARD PULL THE INSIDES
Alligator Juniper 2003
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Even though the salmon were coming like hell, and I was sliming like mad, I got a full look at her as she climbed the ladder to the gutting table. She turned out to be the most stoic beautiful woman I ever met—I was twenty-three, free, horny, and her beauty was the heart-throb, land-in-her-loins-or-die kind, but it was also suffused with a silence that made me solicitous at once.

Alice the line boss from Texas—an obese widow in fish-filthy overalls and a big broad-rimmed hat—hollered from the floor below. "Odie, you teach her, you hear? Kansas, you listen! You show her, Odie, show Kansas, show her fast! Yank them guts! Move them fish!"

A headless sockeye shot down from Frap, slapped my side, fell off the table and smashed across Kansas' shoulder, spraying blood and green-yellow gobs of innards against her cheek. The fish flew down Kansas' back, and she climbed the last rungs with her lips drawn tight, so thin and pretty I doubted she would ever throw them open and scream recklessly—here at the Peninsula Fish Company where the most feasible way to communicate with a fellow human being was to shriek as if a grizzly bear were chewing your genitals, or to pelt a guy in the head with a forty-pound Chinook.

Kansas hopped lightly from the ladder to our scaffold, a yellow bandana tied tight as a snare across her brow, her chin angular, petite even as it dripped streams of offal. She whisked right by me and grabbed a salmon bare-handed, and I dug beneath my apron for my extra gloves—a plastic pair to go inside a wool pair, fresh and clean from the laundry room. Kansas' blue eyes turned gray, she shoved a bare hand through a slit in a sockeye's belly, sperm oozed out, and she clawed and groped inside the fish. You hear about hunters pulling out soft, warm innards, you know. But those are mammal guts. Salmon grow to full weight in a deep watery world, and though their insides are nearly all sex organ by the time they're caught, the guts feel as cold as the bottom of the sea. Their vertebrae can cut you like teeth, and the vein Kansas tried to snap could hold the guts inside, clinging to the backbone as stubbornly as sinew to muscle.

I had grown fond of Alice's tone, and I tried it. "Here, wear these! Shove your hand in like this! Don't pull the vein! Snap it, pinch it!"

Kansas whipped liver-smeared fingers from the gut cavity, dropped half a sperm sac and clawed inside the fish for more. *Suck-pop-splurt!* The rest of the sac came out with three clumsy swipes, but she shoved the gutted sockeye away like a pro—the silvery red fish flashed down a wet, stainless steel ramp, bumped against the slot of the mechanical slimer and got sucked into the spray box, which boomed and roared as noisily as the inside of a car wash.

Kansas snatched another fish, clawed into it and tore out a tangled mass of roe, her nails purple with heart-pieces, her knuckles bleeding. I tried my mom's style of courtesy, deferential. "Kansas?" She offered no other name, and I leaned close, catching my breath at the sunny sheen of her hair—bright like brittle wheat, curved like tongues of honey behind soft-looking ears. I was short, only five feet, and tough little blondes made my heart thump, especially in the cold Alaska summer. "Please, take these gloves."

Kansas grabbed my wrist and shoved my hand into the cold walls of a fish. "I ain't," she said. "It'll slow me. I'm going to work up there." She thrust my arm toward Vinny and Horn cutting heads from fish at the top of the line. "Nine'n hour 'stead a' eight. I butchered in Dodge since I was thirteen, and Alice said I can take up a knife soon as I prove myself."

She swung to our pile of fish, the tail of her bandana flapping as sharply as a city girl's, and I stuffed the extra gloves onto the safety rail behind us. "You want 'em, they're yours." We hunched above the table, gutting, and blood soaked the sleeves of the two beige sweatshirts Kansas wore one inside the other, and she peered silently at her hands as they pumped in and out of fish, getting pulpy with blood.

I glanced at the next station up the line for help, and Frap the slitter—twenty-year-old from Seattle in army surplus pants—threaded a thin blade along a sockeye belly, bobbing a shaved head beneath a basket-cap of rainbow-colored wool. He was too busy singing to himself, keeping time with his knife, and I clasped a vein, snapped it from a backbone, and a whole sac of roe came out glistening orange and pink, the eggs gelatinous, draped with gray-green intestines, held together by some secret, beautiful glue of nature. I cupped the roe in my palm and let the sac roll easily from one glove to another in front of Kansas. "Handle these gently, and you can work in the egg room," I said. "You can pack 'em in the cedar boxes that go to Japan. It's all women there, quiet too. They get at least ten an hour."

She eyed me curiously, and then a soggy bolt smashed against my neck—a salmon eye flew down to the table, its yellow ring so luminous the blue-black pupil looked alive. Vinny the header from Long Island bellowed. "In the dike bucket, dupe, the menstrual bucket!" His smile stretched enormously into the five o'clock shadows on his cheeks. "You don't study the eggs! You drop 'em in the dike bucket! Look at you! You're buried! What you doing? You grabbing ass or working? Humping fish or hustling fox?"

Eye-slime dripped down my skin, and while I felt myself flush, Vinny grabbed a second eye and flung it across the plant. "FISH, FISH, I WANT MORE FISH!" he screamed, letting everyone on the line know he had finished heading his pile before Horn. "FISH, ALICE, FISH! MORE FISH!"

Alice waddled below his scaffold, shaking her head no, and Vinny banged his knife-handle against the elevator shaft. "MORE FISH!" he screamed again, waving his twelve-inch blade above his Yankee cap, blood shining like an open wound on his

yellow apron and throughout the thick black hairs on his arms.

Horn from Anchorage blew out a blast like a ferry leaving port, affecting his famous imitation, announcing he was finished too. Alice carted a bucket of roe toward the egg room. "Break!" she yelled. "Top of the line, quit! Coffee! Donuts! Twenty minutes! Break, I say, break!"

I glanced secretly at Kansas whipping out a bloody sperm sac with a bloody hand. "Take off!" I said. "Soak your hands! When we come back, wear gloves!"

"We ain't done!" she said.

"I'll finish this hump!" I said. "You finish the next!"

The brow-bite below her bandana tightened, and she sucked her cheeks into shallow depressions, but she went down the ladder, and I gutted the last fifty fish. Tendons tensed in my fingers and wrists, and pain leapt to my elbows, and down on the floor Vinny hollered above the quieting machinery, way ahead of me. "Hey, Yellow Head, you got naked fingers! You want me to bite 'em, or you gonna cut them off yourself?"

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After the break I climbed the ladder, and Kansas stood beside the gutting table, flexing her fingers inside my extra gloves, and I put a pair of plastic wrist guards beside her, the same yellow as everyone's apron, but shiny and new. "The drier you keep your bones, the warmer you'll work," I said. She turned away, gazing grayly at the fish elevator—it thumped and banged, and the first salmon of the hump dropped out, a thirty-inch sockeye, a big male with its mouth curved into a grotesque hook, for he had quit eating weeks ago, channeling all his rippling muscle into spawning.

Vinny in his Yankee cap poised his knife above the buck's throat and then snickered at Kansas' gloves and the guards she left on the table. He screwed up his eyes at me. "Boston?" he said. "You a Sucks fan?" I had forgotten about my Red Sox cap. I had found it hanging on a dead dwarf spruce in my camp in the thicket beside the cannery, and I wore it only because hats were required. I lived in Minnesota, not in Massachusetts, and I did not stay up late to watch ball games. I got up at dawn to listen to birds in Mom's apple trees, to draw the tear-drop speckles on the thrasher's throat, the curve of the cuckoo's bill, the hunch of the catbird. I had told Vinny weeks before, not the bird part, hell no, but the hat and the Minnesota parts, and now he slashed his knife through the sockeye, knocking the head away petulantly with the handle. "Picasso!" he yelled. "Picasso Yazstremski!" Apparently someone else had told him about the birds and art. "Fourteen games behind, and the Yanks caught your ass, and we left you beating your meat!" He spit out loud laughs, deep and short, haughty. "Evans choked! Fisk choked! Yazstremski choked!" His knife flashed through another head as if he were merely chopping tenderloin.

"Yazstremski Picasso Audubon! If I had a Sucks hat, I'd give it to a bum without any hair!"

I yanked a sperm sac from a fish, the sac firm like yogurt, gritty and ashy white, stinking of sea water and come. Vinny cut another fish, carrying on about the Yankees beating Boston the year before. "Couldn't even hold a lead in a play-off in your own ballpark! Couldn't even stop Bucky Dent!" I cocked the sperm as if to throw it at him, and Vinny howled. "Where's the liver, Yaz? The kidney? You got to go deeper, Pablo, get everything!"

A chuckle rolled through Horn's bearded cheeks, and he eyed Kansas laughing behind me, and I spiked the sperm down into its bucket, pissed at myself, and then Horn screamed, and a knife flashed down the shoot of the mechanical slimer. "Hell!" yelled Vinny, and I was knocked against Kansas, shoved by Frap, who grabbed fish everywhere. Sockeyes flew against my legs, my boots, and Kansas beat me with fists. "Off me, you ass!" she yelled. I leapt sideways, and Horn hockey-checked a gutter across the line, pushing past him, eyeing Frap as if he might punch him in the face. Alice climbed suddenly beside Horn, lifting his hand high. His pinkie was gone, and blood bubbled from his green glove.

"You cut the fish, Horn, the fish!" yelled Vinny.

"Git it!" yelled Alice. "Git it! They'll sew it!"

Frap cleared the slimer-shoot of fish, lifted the knife. A thick hunk of wool dropped from the blade, Frap did not see it, the wool splashed into the shoot. I jumped for it, was knocked back again. Vinny busted past me, past Frap, slammed his palm against the mechanical slimer. "What the hell?" The spray box sucked clear empty water through its slot, and Vinny glared at Frap and me. "Jesus God damn you guys!"

"Turn it off!" yelled Alice.

Vinny punched a switch, slid a panel from the machine, bent into hissing water, came out with a fish. The wool-hunk lay flat against the fish's flank, shreds of pink pulp and nail mashed against scales and sea lice. Frap and I jumped out of the way as Vinny thrust the fish toward Alice. "The dildos missed it!" he yelled. "They would have missed a truck!"

He and Alice and Horn climbed down, and Alice peeled off Horn's glove, put on compress on his hand, led him out. A forklift skidded to stop inside the door, and the foreman Simpson jumped from behind the wheel, and Vinny yapped in his ear, waving the Yankee cap at Frap and me. Simpson stretched a bullish chest and darkened an inky stare, and Frap leaned to my ear, earrings swaying from his nostrils, blood-spray caked across his acne. "Finger, dude!" he said. "They want more finger!"

Kansas wrested Horn's knife from Frap's grip. She turned and climbed the slope of the scaffold to the top of the line, gauging the weight of the white handle in her hand, and then she reached deliberately into a giant mound of unheaded fish.

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Vinny slashed his blade against a sharpener, spray from the slime machine still dripping from his cap. He slammed the sharpener on its hook and ogled the table in front of Kansas as if he could see through the steel to the denim pulling snugly at her crotch, one pair of jeans pulled over another. "They call you Kansas, not Two Pants?" he said. Kansas paid no mind. She stared intently at her glove-tips, biting and stretching them out with her teeth. She snapped her blade past her mouth, and Vinny scoffed at her fingers emerging through new holes. "Not Stumpy?" Kansas bit her other glove's fingers, pulled and chopped them. "You butchered cows, buffalo or what?" said Vinny. "Elephants?" Kansas watched his hands as he grabbed a fish by its gills. "No chick ever hacked sockeyes, not up here, no way, naked fingers or not!" He flipped the fish toward her, tickled the soft pouch of its throat with his middle finger, chopped the throat. Blood leapt up in a little fountain, he stopped his blade a hair behind an eye. "Right through her bone!" The head shot off the table, banging against the elevator shaft, and he slapped another onto its back.

Kansas grabbed a fish and swung her knife smoothly above its throat. "No, faster!" said Vinny. "You keep whacking, and you keep your extra fingers closed *all the way all the time*, because if you don't, your fingers'll shoot down the line, and Metal Nose and Picasso'll let 'em wash clear to the gurry pipe!"

Kansas pressed her knife easily into her fish, working her blade across the backbone. "Don't saw!" yelled Vinny. "Saw, you'll get tendonitis! Saw, you'll get a crooked fish, a grade number three!" Kansas pressed harder and sawed lower on the bone. "No, Two Pants, no!" She hacked into the throat, sawed higher. "No, Toto, no!" She slashed a throat crosswise, chopped through the bone. "No, Dorothy, no!" Her blade slammed through a throat and flashed straight through a spine.

"Yes, Oz!" Vinny stood his full six-foot-three, beaming, pointing his knife at her, and she looked up slowly, shyly, I thought. Her eyes turned steely blue, and I was afraid she might smile at him. "Almost!" said Vinny. "Remember, it's hard, and the more you cut, the more it hurts!"

Kansas shook her head matter-of-factly. "No," she said. "It don't hurt that much, and it ain't so hard either. It's a hundred times easier'n cutting up a pig."

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"RED SUCKS SOCKEYE! GIVE ME MORE SUCK-EYE!" A red salmon fell from the

mouth of the elevator, and Vinny shoved it to Kansas. "You're twenty fish behind! Horn and I did ten totes a day, and we're doing seven, and you want nine an hour?"

"Ten." Kansas pressed her palms against the table-edge, set her jaw, eyed the rinse water getting oily, pooling around the fish's mouth, and then she drew the sockeye to her cutting board, shutting her lips as tightly as a storm hatch.

Whirr-splat-crunch! Whirr-splat-crunch! The knife, the throat, the bone! Kansas the Clam versus Vinny the Vociferous went on day after day, and each day promised no tangible end, only a pause. Each morning the sun hung above Cook Inlet, skimming the massive snowy cone of Mount Redoubt as my skinny arc of pee watered a dwarf birch, and mosquitoes nearly as large as my thumbs swarmed my fly. I trudged to work, and the sun shone directly against Kansas' windshield, usually with a dismal drizzly light, and during lunch it hung pale in fog above the Kenai Range, and during dinner it glinted stingily through heavy scudding clouds down upon the gravel ruts that descended from the highway to the plant, and after work it looped behind my camp, lighting up a distant harbor of fishing boats, and as I heated my last pot of hand-warming water before sleep, it dipped into a salmon-colored horizon by Redoubt again and ten minutes later slanted up through clouds flaming magenta. "No stars," said Frap. "Awesome. No ancestors staring down at us, and we can do anything we want, but it's like ten dicks to one chick here. We need more syphilis, dude, more clap."

The solstice passed, the sun tightened its circle around the cannery, and one morning Kansas wound an Ace bandage round and round her wrist, bending solidly into a cloud of steam, kneeling above a Coleman stove beside her pickup. Whiffs of menthol drifted through the thicket, and she bit and fastened the bandage, grimacing, and she snuck a look up and down the road, and for the first time she put on the yellow wrist guards I had given her weeks ago. *Never gloat*, Mom said, and as I walked the road to work, I nodded hello, ignoring the guards, and Kansas bent away, turning off the flame beneath her pot of water and ointment. Her eyebrows tilted softly down--free of fish splatter, silky, curly--and I shuffled a rubber fish boot nervously through a powdery tire track. "I make a fire every night," I said. "I heat water for my hands. If you ever want to come by, you're welcome."

She stared into the pot, still mute, and I skedaddled, and when she climbed to the top of the line a few minutes later, Vinny laughed. "The butcher lady sore?" he said "Hiding something?"

She hitched up her chin proudly, absorbing his taunts with her brow-bite, and halfway through the hump she boomed out in a voice as rich and throaty as Bonnie Raitt's. "FISH, ALICE, FISH! I WANT MORE FISH!"

Finally she had cut a pile faster than Vinny, and she leaned back against the safety rail, wiping her blade coolly with a rag, and Vinny shoved his six remaining fish across the table to her. "FISH, ALICE, FISH!" he yelled, refuting Kansas' claim, whooping down the line. "GIVE VINNY MORE FISH! SUCK-EYE, MORE SUCK-EYE FOR

VINNY!"

"Asshole!" Kansas swatted the six fish backhandedly, sending them splashing brown-bloody water against Vinny's hip. "Big stupid hack!" She flashed a brand new smile, a silver filling gleaming in her mouth, eyes shining as if Vinny had handed her a thousand-dollar bill.

A chill swooped through me, and I gutted without energy until Alice bolted up the ladder, gasping, sweating. "Out, out, out a' way, boys!" She hustled up the scaffold, smashed the new gutter Lance against the rail, threw her belly across the fish-filmy table, cupped her hat beside her lips and hollered down the elevator to the fish feeder. "Let 'em go, honey! Send 'em up!" She stood and put her hat back on dirty, scraggly, brown hair. "Kansas! Vinny! Whichever cuts the last fish wins the hump! Cut the last, you do the yelling, and you get twenty extra dollars, you hear?"

"The last?" howled Vinny.

"You get to the last first, you're the fastest!" cried Alice.

Thump-clang-whunk-bang! The elevator roared and rumbled, suck-eyes and humpies and silvers swirled down the mouth's funnel, Alice threw out her sagging monstrous arms and blocked the fish until they spurted beneath her pits. They wiggled down her sides as if they were alive, she stepped back, the pile collapsed fifteen deep and eighty wide across the steel. "No pissing! No moaning! No cheating! Last fish, you're champ of the hump!"

Vinny raised his knife like an athlete lifting an Olympic medal, and Kansas grabbed salmon with her tiptless gloves, her fingers bruised yellow and purple, swollen beet-red in places, but without scabs, methodical, always moving.

Vinny ranted, whacking off heads, forearming fish from his cutting board. "Red Sucks Two Pants! Kansas City Cottonmouth! She sets on the mound! She looks in, wiggles, flicks her tongue, delivers her pitch! Reggie Jackson, Reggie of the World Champion Yankees, he swings, he hits a fish long, deep! Out of here! Gone!

"Red Sucks Cottonmouth! Cottonmouth Two Fangs! Two Fangs Two Pants! Two Fangs curls around the rubber, hisses, lifts her head, shakes off the dust! D'amato steps in, Big Vinny the Clipper, Vinny the Head Hatchet, Vinny the home run champion of the Slime Circuit..."

Fish piled in front of Frap as high as his chin, he winced as he slit each belly, his mouth gaped like a carp's as he passed each salmon. I yanked guts, whipped sperm into the sperm bucket, eggs into the dike bucket. My head throbbed, and finally Vinny shut up. Brownish blood shone on his table as thick as maple syrup, and fins, scales, fish fungi and squiggles of pink and orange flesh floated like tips of tiny organic icebergs across the steel, where Kansas sawed the neck of the last fish deliberately sideways.

"How many you think you did?" said Vinny. "Four out of ten?" Kansas leaned sighing against the rail, wrist limp against her thigh, blade flat against her knee. "Four and a half?" Kansas bit her lip, looked dimly at the water Frap sprayed across the table, allowed herself a scant nod.

Vinny barked the same questions, and Kansas nodded the same small nod, cutting the last fish of the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth humps, and at the end of the seventh, the end of fourteen hours, Vinny slapped an open palm against the fish film, and Kansas squinted, spitting away the splash, digging her fingers into the gills of the last sockeye again. "Four of ten, my ass!" he yelled. She gritted her teeth, sawed the fish. "Four and a half, your stinking button!" The elevator shaft rang out, dented by his knife-handle. "Your stinking rules!"

He thundered down the scaffold and ladder, and she looked up, watching him from across the plant as he stiff-armed the back door, bashed it open, stormed outside. She gulped and then aimed her chin at me, gripping the wrist of her knife-hand, pressing the bone hard. "Can you pry my fingers?" she said, and she climbed down, bracing her blade against the rungs of the ladder.

I followed her out the back door, and she squatted by a five-gallon bucket and plunged her fist and knife into water steaming hot and white. "Sometimes my fingers close up even when I sleep, and I almost got to boil 'em before they open," she said. "But they never been this bad, like a rattler biting onto a gopher, and he won't let go."

I knelt against her thigh, wrapping a hand around her wrist, and she scowled harshly into the steam. "Pull hard," she said. "Don't be no dandelion."

"I've been to Dodge," I said. "I hitched through last summer, and I sketched a meadowlark there, a dickcissel too, my best birds of the trip. I saw dandelions grow clear through country roads there, pushing up stronger than pavement."

"Not dandelions," she said. "Not in Dodge. They are sunflowers."

"All that Kansas wind makes the sunflowers grow strong stalks," I said. "It makes them winners."

She shrugged and then gazed at all the slimers pulling off aprons behind the plant. She was looking for Vinny, I supposed. I pulled her thumb from the white handle, afraid she might scream, and she ground her teeth, sucking air through her nostrils, and I pulled her forefinger free, and the knife dropped to the bottom of the bucket. She stretched her other fingers wide, and I let my hands hang in the hot water too. She glared at fish membranes floating like dead flatworms in the bucket.

"I don't get you," she said. "Why'd you come here? What'd you want?"

I glanced at Mount Redoubt across the inlet. "I want to fly up to the snow and draw a white-tailed ptarmigan. I want to take a ferry to Kenai Island and draw puffins and oldsquaws."

She grunted. "You ask me, you looking for something you ain't going to see for a long time."

I returned her grunt, peeved. "What do *you* want?"

"Horses," she said. "Big ones. We want big stallions in our corral outside our house. We want to breed 'em, to hear 'em kicking and snorting, to ride 'em."

"Who's we?"

"I got me a dumb-ass husband on a big-ass boat. He got on as a hand, and they wouldn't let no wives on, and I told him not to go. I told him I didn't want to work no place alone, but he took all our weed, and he got on, and he told me to drive my ass over here and get a job."

I stood nodding a quiet nod—hers—at her damned wrenched jaw, and I hustled away, ripping off my gear. Hands made a lot of money on gil-net boats, but it was none of my business. No one wore wedding rings on the line, but what did I care? I felt as if Mom were peering silently, frowning at one of my sketches.

Frap shouted, heading to the same steps as I. "Dude, you should see your face! Looks like you sucked up a suck-eye all day, and you died before you finished!"

I went into the men's room with him, wondering if he had ever imagined Kansas married, if he cared at all.

The cinder-block bathroom stank. Many mornings I had waited in line outside the stalls, and after every flush the sweet brown aroma had merely hung more heavily in the chill, and now the toilets seemed quiet, but the odor reeked about twenty-gorillas strong, seeping from the condensation on the walls, I thought. We lathered liquid soap against the fish-itch on our cheeks, and then Frap grinned in the mirror, drying himself with a brown paper towel. "Red Sucks Vinny!" he said. "Chump of the hump!"

"I wish he would get laid, so he wouldn't spout off so much," I said, testing a theory, my denial.

"I think he gets laid plenty," said Frap. "But it doesn't work for him. Like what if you were the chick beneath him, and he was whoomping away, hitting home runs, and you had to breathe all that garbage from him? You'd quit. I mean, it comes from every inch of him, and so you'd fake your thrill, so you could get out from under him."

Porcelain clinked, the door of a stall creaked, Vinny grew wide in the mirror, his belt buckle still open. He reached around Frap, grabbed his chin, and Frap flew backward, head hooked inside Vinny's grip, rubber fish boots scuffling across the floor. Frap whined, his mouth trapped against Vinny's arm, and Vinny punched the basket-cap, thumping Frap's scalp with loud, hollow knocks. "Hey!" I said. "Hey!" Vinny threw Frap into a stall, and I raced after them, fighting wobbly legs. "Vinny, he's sorry!" I said. "He's sorry, Vinny! Come on, stop!"

Vinny drove a knee into Frap's back, shoved both hands against Frap's nape, pushed Frap's face into the toilet, and Frap's hands groped backward, slapping the floor. "Who don't work?" yelled Vinny. "Tell me, Metal Nose, who don't breathe garbage?" Frap groaned. "Bite it with your teeth!" yelled Vinny. "Smear it on your earrings! Smear the name of the last girl you did! Smear what she called you, how she said you did! Smear the name on the seat, or eat it!"

Frap moaned, hacking. "Want to whoomp away?" said Vinny. Frap squirmed against the seat, and Vinny pushed him farther in. "Tell me, who's not working?" said Vinny. "Who can't get out from under?" Frap blubbered. "Who?" boomed Vinny. "Who don't work?"

The band of Vinny's briefs showed above his loose pants, and I grabbed and yanked it. Blue cotton and white pinstripes tore halfway up his back. My chest stung, felt split from nipple to nipple. I shot through the door, whacking the back of my head, and my ass bounced against a wall, and Vinny slammed out of the stall, hunching like a wrestler, squeezing his fists as if to grab my balls.

I was whipped by my armpits to my feet. I whirled against a mass of soft flesh—Alice shoved me away, her shoulders heaving tremendously, and I saw Simpson lean against Vinny. He shoved an orange hard hat against Vinny's chin and backed him against a sink. Vinny turned his head roughly, glaring hatefully at Frap's stall.

"What if I don't hear this?" said Simpson. "You go to jail, that's what! And you cut too good, too fast, too clean to go the jail! These Frisbees got a gripe, you forget it, Vinny! You tell me, I'll fix it! You take a shower, and you have a beer! You forget these boys!"

The toilet flushed. Alice knelt her huge bulk above Frap, and he spit and then vomited as if his stomach were about to splash in torn pieces onto the floor.

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The first star came out, really a planet, Venus above Mount Redoubt, pulsing high above my back as I drove an alder branch into an old net shed and pried until a clapboard dropped from a stud. Three rusty nails stuck from the end of the four-foot board, and as I slid into my sleeping bag, I laid my club and bear mace beside my head, and my chest and tailbone ached, and if Vinny tried to forearm me again, at

least the bastard would bleed a little before he beat me to death.

Scores of mosquitoes clung as usual to the outside of my tent screen, silent, but gulls mewed and snipe winnowed as if they were in the lower forty-eight, and a full dark night were clearly falling. Chickadees stopped buzzing, and the white-crowned sparrows stopped their whistle-wheeze, and dusk pooled beneath the dwarf spruce, crawling with new thickness across the gray, pebbly ground.

A slender dark figure padded between two stubby trees. "Dude," he whispered.

"How you doing?" I said.

"The freezer crew's going into Kenai, and I'm booking it," he said. "Next time you do Seattle, take the Green Hills bus and ask for my sister. Ask for Cody Salal. She does the orders, and she'll tell you where I'm hanging." Frap wiped mosquitoes from his throat and then tapped his nose. "She makes these, and she'll turn you on to some."

He turned noiselessly, limping a little, and I knew I should have asked if the car had room for me, but I sank into my cocoon of down, dreaming of the day I could pick up a pencil instead of a cold fish or a splintery club, of bending fingers and drawing without twinges—and then of Kansas, her cheeks rosy from a shower, her blouse pink and sleeveless, her collar flared open to the edges of her clavicles. She shook a wet tangle of sunny hair and squinched up her nose, sliding into my sleeping bag, and her frayed shorts brushed my stomach, my thighs, and her ear tasted moist beneath her hair, slick, and she smelled like brown hay getting musty and damp, and she bit me as she pecked me, and she lapped my tongue as if to eat it, and she wore no panties, and I found her flower, and she gasped, letting her moans go, and her hot liquid pollen steamed through my fingers to my elbows, flooding me, easing and soothing all the tight lines in me, and then a sac of roe ripped from her, plopping into my palm, rolling across my wrist. Blood streaked it, I groped beneath her leg, she pulled me roughly against her body and shrieked. "Fucker! Fuckhead!"

I woke scanning trees, feeling a warmth on my hand as if the eggs had been real. A man screamed, not Vinny. "Whore-bitch! Cunt-wife!"

"Ain't no one!" cried Kansas. "I told you, you ass!"

Metal banged, a fist against her truck, and I got up batting mosquitoes with my cap, and I ran in socks and jeans across the thicket.

Down in her camp a man in an oil-splotched tee shirt heaved up Kansas by her arms and shoved her against her pickup, his biceps bulging. "Say it!" he yelled. "Say it, or stay here, or walk your ass home! Say it, I swear, and I'll kill the fucker!"

"I said it!" cried Kansas. "It's nobody!" The man's hand rose, and then he slapped her face, and I fought wobbly legs again, crossing the road.

"Hey, stop!" I said. "Stop what you're doing!" The man bounced Kansas onto the ground, and she skidded against a twelve pack of beer, cupping an eye, and then he wheeled, charged, caught me by the ribs and lifted me up, his hands digging into my bones, pinching me. He shoved me into a spruce, and the tree tossed me back, whipping me deeper into his grip. I pushed my hands against his chest, and he rammed a fistful of blue cloth against my nose. "These yours? You like the Yankees, do you?" He shoved the cloth into my mouth. "You leave these somewhere?"

The twelve pack flew against the guy's back, and he flexed his shoulders, shaking me, kicking cans away from his heels. "Pete, look at his hat!" cried Kansas. "`B,' Boston, not New York! Red Sox, not Yankees! Them ain't his, I told you! They ain't no one's! They got in the laundry! They got caught in my bag! Drop him! They're a rag! They're too big for him!"

Pete threw me across the road, and then my legs turned strong, beating a path to my camp. Pete did not follow. He stood down by the truck, large as a professional fullback, the pinstripe briefs bunched in his fist, and Kansas stepped to him, raising her chin, a welt around an eye, a beer can poised like a rock in her hand.

I knelt in my tent and grabbed the clapboard, weighing it, gulping breath. Pete's voice turned low and private, my pulse pounded inside my head, and the nail points shone black and copper, scraped clean, and I thought I should get someone to help, anyone, *Vinny*. But then I spat the cloth taste from my mouth, and I threw the board onto my woodpile, leaving it for the next sorry slimer who would pitch his tent at my camp. I was getting out. I reached farther into my tent, grabbed my hiking boots, listened, heard only the drone of the freezer trucks outside the plant. I tied my boots, clipped the mace to my jeans, knelt and grabbed my sleeping bag, and then rocks crunched against the ground, and I stuffed my bag into its sac, waiting for Pete to hit me, refusing to turn and look at him.

"You tell me who's been fucking my wife?" he said.

My bag felt warm on my fingers, like evidence against me, and I thought of Frap in the bathroom, and that Kansas must be running already, leaving too, and I foresaw no harm to anyone who did not deserve it. I got up slowly, afraid for my face, and I lifted it only after I stepped without flinching to the far side of my fire pit. I pointed across the thicket and beyond the plant. "The cannery rents trailers," I said. "You go to the one with the Yankee tee shirt nailed on the door. You ask for Vinny D'amato."

Big pockets of leathery skin hardened beneath Pete's eyes, and his pupils grew so dull I thought he would rage again. He gawked at my boots, came over and picked up the clapboard as if he had seen me throw it, or he had smelled the rust on the nails. "Don't," I said. "The guy-Vinny-he's all mouth."

"And he's going to eat this like it's his father's cock," said Pete.

Pete walked away through the dwarf spruce and birch, Yankee briefs sticking out his back pocket, his gait eager, and then I looked at the pickup. The tailgate was open, and there was an ice chest and a fish on it. Beer cans and my Boston cap lay on the ground, and there was still no sound but the freezer trucks, and I went down. Flies flew up from the fish—a big sockeye with thin black lips curled up tight against its snout—homecoming dinner, I thought. Something beige rose in the side-view mirror of the driver's door, and I went to the window. Kansas sat slouched against the seat, pressing a sweatshirt full of ice against her face, staring with her uncovered eye past the top of the steering wheel.

"You have the keys?" I said. "You need to go, to get out. I told him about Vinny. He'll come back, one of them will. You get to the clinic, you get patched up. You get away from here."

She closed her good eye, and three brown mosquitoes swelled on her cheek below her lashes, their abdomens fat and red. I reached in and laid my fingers on them, and she pulled her face away and aimed her gaze crookedly down through the steering wheel.

"Can you hear me?" I said. "Your husband hit you! I told him about Vinny! You'll get killed!"

She started the engine, dropping her sweatshirt—a second welt had formed on her brow, a ball of pink and yellow flesh lay across her bad eye. Her good eye glared at me, the truck lurched backward, I jumped away, and her chin rose stiffly toward her rearview mirror, and she set her jaw hard the way I had seen her hundreds of times—as she had positioned heads, raising her knife.

The back tires threw dust, spinning onto the road, and the ice chest tumbled down, gushing water and cubes, and the sockeye slid off the tailgate and slapped onto dirt. I waited for her to turn onto the gravel that led to the highway, but the truck swayed back and forth, bouncing on the rough ground that led to Vinny's trailer. I tried to imagine her going anywhere but between Vinny and Pete, and then I gave up on it. I did not feel so free or so horny anymore, and I left my tent standing. I walked away from that place, and I never went back again.