

Jordan Rossen

ROCK CREEK

After his daughter Erin passed away, Keith would sometimes drive to the Rock Creek rest stop over on I-90 and pick up men to fuck. He'd go around midnight and do what all the men who were cruising did: loiter by the half-stocked vending machine or pretend to study the glass-encased map of Montana or stand indefinitely by a urinal. The men seemed different from each other, as if delineated by casting agents—the first was a man in military khaki who limped, the last a German man with thick eyebrows. And yet, at the same time, Keith perceived a shared sense of displacement, as though they'd all been banished there. It unified them, and this unity manifested in furtive glances, in the looks of longing and mischief. It went beyond sex for Keith and felt gratifying and unsafe at a time in his life when he needed just that.

Erin had been outdoorsy, a sophomore forestry major at the University of Montana. She took courses in soils, dendrology, harvesting, and Keith liked to picture her in the woods with rubber boots on, collecting dirt samples in mason jars and checking their pH levels. He'd lived in Big Sky country all his life, and though he wasn't a real nature lover by Montana's standards, it warmed his heart to see his daughter so devoted to protecting the environment. The decision seemed generous, very salt-of-the-earth.

But even forestry majors could be scoundrels. Take Connor, whom Erin had been dating for a few months. To celebrate the end of exams, they'd driven thirty minutes south of Missoula to a modest tourist trap desperately named the Land of One Thousand Buddhas. Keith knew only three other facts: they went at night when the Land was closed, Connor brought a gun, and Erin was shot. The prosecutor's office disagreed; they said the entrance wound and bullet direction revealed that the gunshot was accidental and self-inflicted, that Connor was faultless. It was maddening to Keith—the absence of punishment for this gun-toting fiend—and Keith's body ached when he spent too much time thinking about Connor, which he often did.

He thought of Connor as he drove to Erin's studio apartment on the last Saturday in July, eight weeks after her death and the morning after the German man, whom Keith was also thinking about, the way he had whispered during

sex, “You’re a girl,” his voice pointed and unnerving. Keith was supposed to be deciding what of Erin’s to take home and what to throw out. Instead, like usual, once there he made coffee and drank it at her kitchen table, trying to match his mug to the numerous rings left on the wood’s surface. The first time he’d gone to the apartment after Erin’s death was with his ex-wife, Dee. It was devastating, opening the door and seeing the tiny apartment mid-life, left in a condition by someone obviously planning to return. Erin’s white hamper in the corner held her colorful tank tops, and a mug with the soggy remnants of Cheerios sat on the Formica countertop on which a few pages of her handwritten class notes lay scattered. Keith remembered how Dee had covered her mouth and immediately turned around, offering to get a friend to help Keith sort through stuff if he needed it.

He admired Dee’s ability to know limits, to know how to avoid getting swallowed up. Keith lacked this ability, and, against his own better judgment, he spent several days in a row in the apartment. He slept in Erin’s low bed, smelling her smell, finding loose strands of her brown hair. In the mornings, he showered in her tiny shower stall and used her herbal mint shampoo. He drank the rest of her orange juice and ate the chocolate ice cream in the freezer. He sat on her beanbag chair and listened to the Rattlesnake Creek splash by, the periodic horns of the North Reserve freight train, the shouts and music of drunk college kids.

Looking around now, it occurred to Keith that the décor didn’t seem Erin-specific. It seemed like a generic college student’s apartment—the blue futon, the George Foreman grill—and he couldn’t feel her presence. Or maybe it really was Erin-specific, and he just had no idea. Perhaps he’d always been confused as to who she was. As a child, she liked horses and braided pigtails, and she wore the same red cowgirl boots year-round. She went through junior high predictably annoyed, padding around the house in sleeveless dresses and rolling her eyes, or else shut in her bedroom belting songs from *Wicked*. In high school, after Keith and Dee divorced and Keith had come out, she grew rugged and political. She took long hikes, attended fracking protests, and petitioned for marriage equality. The few times Keith was in a relationship serious enough for the two of them to meet, she would approach the man with an amused excitement, the way a parent might greet a child’s prom date.

Keith poured another cup of coffee and used his iPhone to go on Connor’s Facebook page. Connor remained a mystery to Keith—the two of them had

never spoken, Erin had never mentioned him—and in the last eight weeks Keith had obsessed over his photos. There was only one of him and Erin, taken back in April, at a rock concert. His shaggy red hair framed his face, and Erin's arm was draped drunkenly around him. She looked happy, which both relieved and frustrated Keith. He wanted her to be happy but didn't want Connor to be part of it. Connor had been steadily uploading new photos, mostly fishing and camping ones, during the summer, and it incensed Keith to see them, to think that Connor had just kept living his little life without so much as a glitch.

"I can't talk to Newt about it," Dee told Keith later that afternoon at the Iron Horse Brewery. They'd gone there most Saturdays for the past two months. At first it was to deal with the cemetery plot and the thank-you cards for donations made in Erin's honor. Now they just drank. "If he gives me space, I feel ignored, and if he's attentive, I feel trapped." Newt and Dee had gotten married a few years after the divorce. He was an insurance salesman and seemed nice enough, though Keith didn't know him especially well.

Their beers arrived, and they each took a few gulps. "How's Phil?" she asked.

"Pretty good," Keith said. Phil didn't exist. A month after Erin died, Dee asked in a motherly way if Keith was seeing anyone special, and in a panic Keith had said, yes, actually, he was, and he made up Phil on the spot. Phil worked in advertising, was close with his sister, and recently became a vegetarian. "His allergies have been acting up," Keith added today.

"Oh, no," said Dee. "Because of ragweed season."

"Exactly," Keith said.

"I'd like to meet him some time."

"He's in Dallas right now visiting his sister."

"Is that where he's from?" she asked.

Keith had never been to Dallas, but sure, why not. "A suburb of Dallas, yeah." They were silent, forks scraping on their plate of pot stickers, and Keith felt the need to say more. "I worry he'll talk to his sister about our fights and sex life and stuff."

Dee grimaced. "He'd tell his sister that sort of thing?"

"Phil tells his sister everything. He tells his sister about the last dump he took." Suddenly, he felt bad for poor Phil. Phil didn't deserve to be disparaged

like this. "I'm being unfair," said Keith. "I think it's great they have such a bond."

At one a.m. that night, Keith drove to the rest stop and picked up a lanky Middle Eastern man dressed like an adventurer: cargo shorts, a white button-up tucked in, and a bandana tied around his neck. Sometimes these men preferred to hook up in the rest stop and refused to follow Keith home, but this man was game. Keith gargled Listerine, and when he got to his bedroom, the man was already naked, lying on top of the covers.

"Am I the biggest you've ever seen?" the man said. Keith didn't think he was. "Tell me I'm the biggest you've ever seen."

Keith told him, and the man giggled. "Really?" the man said.

Afterward, the man talked about how he and his wife were moving to California in October. He spoke of his marriage in a way that sounded like small talk, as if he hadn't just engaged in a betrayal of it. Keith had learned not to expect remorse from the men who were married and had grown accustomed to the seeming indifference, though his own lack of guilt from participation still startled him.

Keith kissed the man and watched as he got dressed. Soon Keith would feel miserable and gross; the familiar emptiness was already worming its way into his heart. But right now he felt delirious. He imagined serotonin being pumped into his brain. The man tied his bandana around his neck, ready for the next adventure.

"Thanks for not being a serial killer," the man said after Keith walked him to the front door. It was three in the morning.

"Same to you," Keith said. "I'm Keith by the way."

"Eli," the man said, and the two of them shook hands formally, like they hadn't just had sex.

"Safe driving," Keith said as Eli headed down the front porch. Keith was just a decade or so older than Eli, but the moment seemed paternal all of a sudden. A part of him wished to exchange phone numbers so Eli could text to let him know he'd made it home okay.

The next day, Keith made a decision. He found Connor's address on the donation form he'd sent in. Keith was the librarian at the branch on Brooks

Street, and donations to the branch in Erin's name had convinced the board of directors to consider a partial remodeling. Impulsively, Keith had volunteered to design a floor plan, though he didn't know the first thing about designing one. "I wasn't sure if you wanted to know or not, but Connor sent fifty bucks," Todd had told him during lunch last Wednesday. Todd, a library technician and the branch's only other full-time employee, was a good-natured, tactless friend. Four days ago, Keith hadn't been sure that he wanted to know either, but today he drove to Connor's apartment.

He sat across the street from it in his truck. It was a small apartment complex, just two floors with two units on each, and there was a carpeted balcony that snaked along the second story like at a motel. The building was stucco, a feminine pink, and Keith imagined Connor's deadbeat friends making fun of him for living there. The idea pleased Keith.

Connor's apartment was on the second floor, and Keith could see into the living room from his truck. Most days, it seemed to Keith that he had two basic trains of thought: missing Erin and hating Connor. He was furious Connor got to experience more of Erin's final few months than he did, not to mention the final hours of her life, and he thought Connor owed him the details. Before he really knew what he was doing, he took a pen and paper from the glove compartment and began writing a note. He said he wanted to talk with Connor, and he wrote down a time and place—six p.m. Monday at the library. He walked the note up to Connor's door, slid it underneath, and strode quickly down the stairs and back into his car.

That evening, Keith went to Dee and Newt's for dinner. He had declined their invitation two times before that month and didn't want to decline a third time. It wasn't the perceived rudeness that bothered Keith so much as the fear that they would stop inviting him altogether.

"Hope you like grilled salmon and asparagus," Newt said when Keith arrived. They'd already set up the dining-room table with candles and a tablecloth, and it seemed oddly formal to Keith, like a special occasion he'd forgotten about.

"Smells great," Keith said.

"Yeah, thanks, hon," Dee said, and she gave Newt a peck on the cheek. They appeared happy together, like a unit. He thought of Erin sitting in this exact seat and eating salmon and watching Dee and Newt be affectionate.

"How you holding up?" Newt asked Keith.

“Better each day,” Keith said automatically. He wondered if this was even true. He thought it had been, during the first couple weeks, but recently he wasn’t sure. “Except I can’t stop thinking about all the unanswered questions from the night she died.”

“There aren’t unanswered questions,” said Dee quietly.

“They barely interrogated Connor!” said Keith. “And his parents are close with the prosecutor’s office.” He had no reason to believe what he had just said, and yet he was convinced of it. He wanted badly to keep talking, but he told himself to close his mouth or shove food in it or drink some water. He felt beads of sweat form along his hairline.

Dee put her hand on Keith’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “How’s Phil?” she asked. “Enjoying Dallas?”

Keith had planned to tell Dee that he and Phil had broken up, but the plan dissolved in front of him. He and Phil were better than ever. “Good. He says he wants to quit smoking when he gets back.”

“You didn’t tell me he smokes,” said Dee.

“No?” said Keith. “Well, he wants to quit.”

Dee thought about this. “It’s weird to me that he’s a vegetarian and a smoker,” she said eventually.

“People are complicated,” said Keith, and he was thinking not just about Phil but also about himself, whether Erin’s death had altered him on some fundamental level, a chemical or physiological level like the soil samples she used to analyze, and whether the alteration was permanent. He thought about the note he’d left at Connor’s door. Perhaps he’d gone from behaving *like* a stalker to *becoming* a stalker, a difference that seemed significant. It was something that might have convinced the old him to back off, but of course the old him wouldn’t have gone in the first place.

Keith drifted through work on Monday, and at six o’clock sharp he sat at a round table near the audiobook shelves. His stomach churned as he waited.

Connor appeared and trudged toward the table. When he sat down, Keith stared at his freckled face—his wide nose, his chinstrap beard. His red hair was buzzed now, and he was wearing a black sleeveless T-shirt.

“Sorry I’m late,” Connor said, even though he wasn’t really late. His eyes looked a little red as if he’d been crying or getting high. Which was more

likely? "I can only stay for a few minutes."

"No problem," Keith said. Seeing Connor puffy-faced and nervous had deflated Keith's anger a little. Still, he didn't mince words. He told Connor he wanted to learn more about Connor's relationship with Erin, more about their final night together.

"Isn't too much to tell," said Connor.

"Shouldn't take much time, then," said Keith.

He told Keith they'd met at a house party in March and started dating in April. "Our first date was at the Hot Springs," he said. In May they studied for exams at Bernice's Bakery. "And we watched a lot of singing and cooking competition shows." He looked up at Keith and shrugged like everything had been explained.

"Can you think of more specifics?" said Keith, attempting calmness even though his heart was pounding.

"Hmmm." Connor ran his hands over his head but then stopped midway, resting them behind the crown, fingers laced, like a prisoner of war. His biceps formed two large mounds, and underneath each was a tuft of red armpit hair. "No, I can't."

"What about the actual night it happened?" Keith asked.

"I don't know," he said, sounding suddenly exasperated.

"Connor," said Keith softly, preparing to try again. Exasperation, helplessness—these weren't feelings Connor was entitled to.

"I can't give you what you want," said Connor.

A new question came to Keith's mind, one that was perhaps unfair, but he asked it anyway. "Did you love her?"

"I have to go," Connor said. He stood up.

"*You know what?*" snapped Keith. "You're a scared twerp with a gun, methodically arming yourself like the rest of America."

Connor's eyes flickered. Keith had frightened him, this kid who was stronger and bigger. He should be frightened, Keith thought, because for the first time since Erin's death Keith wanted to kill him. The desire didn't last long, but it was there, a heat pulsing in his hands and head.

"I'll be back at your apartment," Keith warned. He felt ashamed and indignant all at once.

“Is that a threat?” Connor asked. He pursed his lips, and his pale cheeks seemed to swell—the fleshy face of a dunce.

“Yeah, that’s a threat,” Keith said, and he watched Connor shuffle across the carpeted floor and leave the library.

Back at home, Keith cranked up the AC and paced around. He was less angry than before, but still he fantasized about knocking Connor’s teeth out, about walking up to him in a crowded grocery store or some place and punching him. He balled his hand into a fist and—*voom!*—quickly thrust his arm in front of him, then again. He panted from the sudden exertion and imagined how Connor’s teeth would feel against his knuckles.

At the library the next day, Keith presented his ideas for the partial remodeling. The board members seemed moderately interested, but afterward Todd told Keith that his floor plan looked like a Jackson Pollack and that he breathed too heavily during the presentation. “I’ll work on my breathing,” Keith said. “Thanks, Todd.”

In the evening, Dee phoned and asked to come over. They sat in the living room, and she told Keith she liked what he’d done with the place, although he couldn’t remember the last time she’d been there or whether he’d done anything new to it. Then she told him the landlord at Erin’s old apartment called her because none of Erin’s stuff had been moved out.

“I’ve made progress,” said Keith. “Most of it’s already in boxes.”

“That’s not what he tells me,” Dee said. “He tells me nothing’s been boxed up.” She fiddled with one of the buttons on her shirt. “He tells me you stay there on the weekends.”

“Did you invite yourself over to lecture me?”

“Partly,” she said, without hesitation. She glanced around the living room and then looked at Keith, square in the face. “Are you really dating a guy named Phil?”

Keith took a slow, heavy breath; Todd would be disappointed. “I’m not but only because he doesn’t technically exist.”

“I didn’t think so,” said Dee.

He gazed at the dimples in her cheeks and her gray eyes. Up close they revealed the tiniest specks of other colors—turquoise and auburn and gold. “You make me happy,” he said.

“No, I don’t,” Dee said.

“Believe it,” Keith said.

At two in the morning, Keith drove to the rest stop. He sometimes had to wait a long time for a guy to show up, but tonight there was another car at the opposite end of the parking lot. The men’s bathroom was empty, and he went to his standard urinal. Immediately, he heard the door to the rest stop swing open and footsteps approach the bathroom. He began to get an erection. It was Pavlov’s experiment, the anonymous gay sex version.

The man was dark-haired, green-eyed, and he chose the urinal beside Keith’s. What came next were conspiratorial glances and their shoes inching toward each other’s.

“You’re naughty,” the man said, green eyes twinkling. His voice was loud and effeminate.

“It’s Mr. Naughty to you,” Keith said, and the man cackled.

Now was normally when Keith would invite the guy back to his place, but instead he stepped away from the wooden barrier between the urinals and exposed himself. The man’s affect changed. Instead of flirtation, there was masculinity and distance. He nodded formally, like he was a scientist and Keith had just proven a hypothesis. Keith thought again of Pavlov. The man pulled out a police badge from his shirt pocket and a pair of handcuffs from the back of his Levis. Keith considered bolting, making a mad dash out of the bathroom, but then the man had him in cuffs and was leading him by the arm to the unmarked squad car and reciting the spiel about his right to remain silent.

On the way to the station, Keith listened to the officer radio in the arrest and then describe in a monotone voice what had happened. The voice became the narrator of Keith’s life, and a montage of all the men he’d slept with these last eight weeks played in his mind. Keith silently called himself disgusting. He called himself a faggot. He called himself a sad, old queen of a dad. He imagined the police phoning Dee as though she were his mother, and Dee showing up in hair rollers and a nightgown and bailing him out. “Are you proud of yourself?” he imagined Dee saying on the car ride home. No, ma’am. “I’m just glad your daughter isn’t alive to see this,” she’d say. Yes, ma’am.

After a sleepless night in the holding cell and the arraignment hearing the next day, Keith took a taxi to the rest stop to get his truck. It was three

p.m. by the time he got there. He needed to call Todd and make up an excuse for missing work, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Exhaustion washed over him, and he began to cry. He reclined his seat and closed his eyes.

It was past six o'clock when Keith woke up. He told himself to go home, but he drove to Connor's apartment instead. Sitting in his truck on the opposite side of the street, he could see Connor walking around the living room. At some point Connor went to the window and peered down at the truck. He was talking on his cell phone, maybe to the police. The prospect of going back to jail didn't intimidate Keith.

He waited. Twenty minutes, an hour, two hours. The sun set, and the temperature dropped from eighty to sixty-five. Soon it would be dark. Connor closed the vertical blinds, but every so often he poked his head through, as if checking to see if Keith was still there. He was there, all right.

It started to rain. The blinds moved again, but this time the slivers of light between them went black. In a moment, Connor was standing outside his apartment, the light above his door flicking on and illuminating him. He had on a backward hat, the idiot, a green windbreaker, and carpenter pants. He descended the cement steps and headed straight for the truck. Here it comes, Keith thought. The confrontation. There would be a screaming match, a fistfight. He would be no match for Connor—that much was obvious.

"Are you armed?" Connor asked after Keith rolled down the passenger window. "I'm not getting in if you are."

The question seemed both ridiculous and reasonable to Keith. Ridiculous in that Keith had never owned a gun, reasonable in that he knew he was acting like someone who might be carrying. "I'm not armed," Keith said. "Are you?"

"No," Connor said, and he climbed inside the truck and buckled his seatbelt.

In the dim light of the truck, Connor's eyes had the dazed look of someone who'd been drinking, though Keith couldn't smell liquor on him. His face appeared older and rougher than in the library. He'd gone a few days without trimming his chinstrap beard, and bristly red hairs had sprouted on his upper lip.

Keith pulled away from the curb. He had both hands on the wheel, his arms locked at the elbow. Connor stared out the windshield, one hand

gripping each knee. Keith's heart was pounding, just as it had done in the library, but something about the moment seemed different. He understood at a red light what it was: He was baffled by Connor's decision to get in the truck. Fairly or unfairly, he had felt entitled to Connor's presence tonight, so much so that it initially felt expected rather than surprising.

Outside, the rain was getting heavier. When the light turned green, Keith realized where he wanted to go. He took a left and followed signs for Highway 93 south toward Hamilton. Halfway between Missoula and Hamilton was the Land of One Thousand Buddhas. Keith merged onto the entrance ramp and could feel Connor take in the information.

He thought of Erin now, the way her hair would press against his cheek when they hugged. He used to tell her, casually, "I love you more than life itself," something his mother used to tell him, and now the truth of it seemed terrifying.

Keith clenched his jaw as he drove, his palms sweaty against the steering wheel. It was dark everywhere. The evergreens that ran parallel to the highway were barely visible, and Keith couldn't see the forested mountains that sat tall behind them. He drove past Lolo, and it wasn't long before he pulled into the Land's empty lot, his tires crunching on the gravel. He put the truck in park and cut the engine.

Keith turned to Connor. "I want to go through everything that happened up until the gunshot," he said. "Exactly what happened."

"I can do that if that's what you need to move on," Connor said.

They stepped outside, and the air was cold, in the fifties. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still cloudy and starless. Entrances to three cement footpaths beckoned them like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

Connor began to lead Keith down the middle one. "It was Erin's idea to come here, and at first I wanted to leave," Connor said. "I complained there were mosquitos, and she said give me a break. Then I said it was scary, and she said it was sort of scary."

The path was lit by lampposts that looked to Keith like ten-foot-tall brass candlesticks. Beyond it was the expansive Montana darkness.

"Near the end of the footpath is a secluded spot," said Connor. He spoke confidently, his voice informed and serious, like a tour guide at a battle site. "We held hands as we walked."

They approached a bronze statue of a goddess, and Connor stopped Keith. Here, Connor said, was where he first showed the gun to her. “For safety,” Connor said, and he lifted his windbreaker to reveal a silver gun tucked into his pants.

The sight of the gun knocked the wind out of Keith, but he couldn’t take his eyes off it. He heard Connor give some explanation for why he had lied earlier about having it, but Keith couldn’t focus on the words. He felt his throat close, his mouth go watery. He imagined coming across Erin’s body with her face blown off, and then he was bending over and puking, an acidic upheave that burned his throat. When he straightened up again, Connor’s face was turned away, as though to give Keith privacy.

They kept walking until they’d reached the end of the path. Keith had assumed Erin and Connor had been standing on actual ground, on dirt, but the path was made of large stones, irregularly shaped, that fit loosely together. Her DNA could still be here. Dried blood. Hardened brain bits. A scattering of skull shards.

“It was colder than tonight,” Connor said, “and we cuddled together.” He opened his mouth to say more but stopped himself.

“What?” Keith asked.

Connor said that he and Erin had hooked up. He used the phrase “oral sex,” and its formality sounded strange. A desire to be respectful, perhaps. An image that Keith didn’t want to picture flashed before him: Connor and Erin kissing, Connor groping her chest, his hand resting on top of her head as she sucked his dick.

“After we fooled around,” he said, “I took a piss in the brush, and I let her hold onto the gun in the meantime. She asked to hold it—I didn’t demand she take it. The gun went off when I was away from her.”

A knot formed in Keith’s throat, and he swallowed it away. “So she just pointed the gun at herself and pulled the trigger?”

“The thing is, we were having a fun night, and she was in a good mood. I think she was probably just careless with it.” He paused. “I don’t think she planned on doing it.”

Keith looked at Connor’s face, the bewilderment and honesty in it, and for the first time he understood that Connor, too, had been searching for

answers, for a better sense of why and how. They were bonded in this way, Keith realized, and he almost felt sympathy.

And yet.

And yet the gun was Connor's, and Keith's only child was dead, and these truths formed a gulf between them.

"You shouldn't have given her the gun," Keith said.

Disagreement appeared on Connor's face, and Keith could see him debating whether to voice it. "Like I said, she asked to hold it. I think it's okay that I gave her the gun."

"I don't think she'd even held one before," Keith said.

"She asked to hold it," Connor repeated. They were silent, a tense silence. "Agree to disagree," Connor said.

"Then can I have the gun?" Keith asked. "Please?"

Connor eyed Keith suspiciously. "Why do you want it?"

"I don't have a good answer," Keith said, and he really didn't, except that he felt it was important to hold. He thought holding it would make the pain worse, more visceral, and that was what he wanted.

Connor withdrew the gun from his waist but kept it, weighing the decision. Eventually, he held it out for Keith.

Keith took the gun, and time seemed to slow. It was heavier than he thought it would be, and the metal felt oily, pawed over like spare change. He wrapped his fingers around the grip. Then he extended his arms, pointed the gun, and moved it slowly across his field of vision, left to right. Connor tensed when it approached him and raised his arms to shield his face.

Hands trembling, Keith put the gun in his own mouth. He put the gun against his head. "I'll be right back," he said.

"Where are you going?" Connor asked.

"Just give me a second," Keith said. He needed to be alone. He left Connor standing there, confused, and he walked off into the dark sagebrush.

He walked for a few minutes until he was far enough from the paths that he couldn't see Connor. He couldn't see anything for that matter; he was surrounded by darkness. He was contained in it, like the sagebrush and foothills and mountains were contained in it. Like bobcats and rattlesnakes and bears were.

An old alcoholic friend had told him once that it wasn't rock bottom that was the scariest but the moment before rock bottom, when you saw yourself barreling toward it and there was nothing you could do. That was the moment people did themselves in. Keith had the urge to speak suddenly. He wanted to say, "I love you, Erin," but he couldn't seem to move his mouth. His lips stayed clamped, his cheeks bulged. It felt like he had too many words stuffed in his mouth. A garbage-can mouth, thought Keith. A mouth full of rinds and fish heads.

He pointed the gun high in the air, up toward the sky, and pulled the trigger. There was a loud crack, and Keith ducked idiotically. How high would the bullet rise and where would it fall? He felt faint and overcome with nausea again, so he sat down on the hard dirt. Keith had no ideas at this point, not until Connor started to call his name. He called Keith's name twice and then a third time. When Keith didn't answer, he heard Connor's hesitant footsteps, and then he could vaguely make out Connor's shape. Keith realized that Connor couldn't see him, that he was looking too far to the left and too far back. Connor called Keith's name a fourth time and a fifth time. Keith said nothing.

Connor continued to walk deeper into the sagebrush until he was a good thirty feet from Keith and getting colder. "Please," Keith heard Connor say. "Please, God."

But Keith didn't move a muscle. Connor called Keith's name a sixth time, a seventh time. Somewhere toward the mountains Keith heard the high-pitched yips of coyotes, and for a second he saw what seemed like a pair of eyes—greenish gold and glow-in-the-dark. Connor started to cry.

Keith was devastated by his own meanness. Erin would have been too. In his head, he apologized for doing this to Connor. He told himself to stand now, to call out to Connor and say he was okay because, Jesus, enough was enough. And yet he stayed seated and quiet.

Now Connor was weeping loudly. He began hiccupping pleas—a single word over and over: "Don't."

