

Chosen by Jaimy Gordon as Winner of the *Crazyhorse* Fiction Prize

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Samaritan

I

When Henry first saw the girl she was standing at the top of the exit ramp on Glisan Street, holding a cardboard sign and asking drivers for spare change. Her bag was a secondhand rucksack, the flaps held in place with safety pins and knotted twine, her dreadlocks tied behind her head in a towering bundle. Her name was Alana, and she was nineteen years old.

They ate at the first place he could find, an empty Chinese restaurant where the waiters moved silently over the carpet, appearing suddenly after long droughts of absence, their hands clasped behind the small of their back, foreheads glistening. She told him she was a runaway and spoke about nights she spent sleeping in doorways or in homeless shelters; the food she'd stolen, the miles she'd hitchhiked, the violence she'd seen and how suddenly it had happened, like a firecracker exploding in the dark right next to her. Her voice was nondescript, her tone unvaried and distant. "You sound as if you're talking about somebody else," Henry told her.

"I'm trying to get to central Washington," Alana said, shoving her right foot underneath the leg opposite and rolling a cigarette atop the paper dinner mat. "My brother lives in Yakima. He said

I could stay with him. I just have to get there."

After dinner he found a cheap motel near 82nd Avenue and rented a room that smelled of cigarette smoke and lemon cleanser. The carpet was threadbare. Flies crawled up in the inside of a lampshade, their shadows black as beads. "I'm afraid this is all I can afford," Henry said, wiping away the profanity someone had scribbled in the dust clinging to the television screen. "I'm sorry. You deserve better than this."

She dropped her bag on the floor and smiled at him. "Not really."

On his first day as a layperson Henry bought a secondhand Volkswagen from a man he baptized some years before, paying cash out of pocket and driving off with all his belongings in a suitcase on the seat next to him. Seven days later he arrived in Oregon having no memory of the country he'd passed through, knowing only that he could not stay still, aware of a force hovering just beyond the edge of his thoughts, something evil and particulate, a kind of emptiness coursing through the bottom of the world. Images of the hundred year old church where he once said mass haunted him, causing hallucinations that left him nauseous, his trembling hands unable to hold even a pen. In dreams he saw himself picking rice off

the statue of St. Christopher after a wedding, the yellow stone buttress along the chipped cement plinth. He heard the din of church bells on those mornings after a rainfall, how the clang seemed to elongate and deepen inside the wet pavement of the South Bronx, pavement he had once walked as a priest, his hands folded behind his back. At truck stop lunch counters bordered with dented linoleum, where men sipped coffee and smoked cigarettes bought at Indian reservations along the highway, he saw Father McCarthy on the nights he poured bourbon for himself in the rectory after evening vespers, his right eye fogged with glaucoma, a web of dried spittle in the corner of the old man's lips. Other times Henry did not see faces at all, only shapes colored by the language of stained glass, the spirits of parishioners rising sinuous as smoke from a snuffed candle. Corn mazes, grinning cowboys, mysterious vortexes where the laws of gravity did not apply, plastic jackalopes, the world's largest ball of string—each roadside attraction, no matter how insipid, filled him with a sense of his own ubiquity in the world. He thought about the house calls he used to make, the times he gave Holy Communion in the homes of those parishioners who were sick, paralyzed or lame; traveling to neighborhoods where entire buildings lay in rubble and car fires raged freely in the street. He remembered the shut-ins whose living rooms smelled of naphthalene and decayed food and human shit; the times his homilies were interrupted by the sound of gunshots and the subway cars that moved past his face in a blur of dizzying graffiti.

Somewhere in eastern Oregon he had purchased a pistol. His plan was to drive to the coast. Once he reached the Pacific Ocean he was going to end his life.

While Alana took a shower Henry sat on the bed, watching the sliver of light beneath the bathroom door and wondering if she was telling him the truth. When the shower stopped he stood and paced the dim motel room, aware now of the sound of a woman's voice moaning on the other side of the wall, a woman he did not know, a woman his mind did not allow him to imagine. He sat back down on the bed, blocking his ears with the palms of his hands and shutting his eyes until his breathing slowed. When the bathroom door opened Alana emerged wearing only a towel. She smiled at him. "Mind if I sit down?"

Her bare shoulders, gaunt and scarred with what he took to be cigarette burns, contrasted sharply with her youthful, pretty face. When he did not answer she walked to the bed and knelt before him on the floor. Then she put her hand on his crotch.

"You don't have to do that," he told her.

"But you bought me dinner. And you're giving me a ride."

"I don't want you to."

"That's not true."

"Take your hand off me please."

"What do you want then? I don't understand."

"I don't want anything," Henry said.

She stood, suddenly embarrassed, and then hurried to the bathroom. When she came out she wore clothes. He watched as she knelt on the car-

pet, stuffing her denim jacket into her rucksack along with the boxes of leftover Chinese food—sticky white rice and cashew chicken and half an eggroll she'd asked the waiter to wrap in a cellophane bag. Henry knew it had been foolish to pick her up, a moment of poor judgment he'd mistaken for clarity, but right then, watching her try to compose what little possessions she had—her small shadow muffled by the cheap, hiccupping bulb—a feeling of shame washed over him. That familiar sense of his own faithlessness, as if his internal organs were being flipped upside down while his exterior remained righted, gave way to a foreboding. He needed a distraction, something trivial, something immediate. "Don't go," he told her.

Alana slung her backpack over her shoulder. "Which direction is the highway? I don't remember how we came in."

"Please. Stay here. This isn't a good neighborhood. It's very late."

"Thanks for dinner but I don't feel right staying here. Not with you."

"I used to be a priest."

"Of course you did. And I'm a nun."

"It's true."

Alana pushed her hair away from her face. "What denomination?"

"Catholic."

"You're too young to be a priest."

"I'm thirty-eight."

"I still don't believe you."

Worried that standing too quickly might cause him to faint, Henry held onto the dresser, took a

deep breath, and walked out the door to where his Volkswagen was parked. When he returned he carried a suitcase. Alana stood by the window with her bag over her shoulder, watching as he removed his vestments piece by piece, placing each on the comforter as if they were items being considered for purchase. First he took out his clerical collar and the black cassock. Then the neckband and waistcoat. He snapped the case closed before she could see the gun.

Grouped together, the clothes appeared indecent, portentous even, threads pulled from the body of a corpse. Alana scoffed. "They let you keep those?" she said.

"I own them."

"That's creepy."

"Let me take you to Yakima," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I want to help you."

"You're not some freak, are you? Tell me the truth."

"I'll sleep in my car. You can have the room. A girl like you shouldn't hitchhike. It's not safe."

She eyed his vestments on the bed, her lips pursed. "You're lucky I'm desperate," she said, before dropping her bag and moving away from the window, "or else you'd be out of luck."

The next morning they set out toward Washington State, driving east on Interstate 84 along the Columbia River. By 8 a.m. the day loomed hot and endless, the July air pocked with tiny granules of dirt tossed from the wheels of the semi-trailers ahead of them. Alana's pink sunglasses—cheap and cracked across the right

lens in a small, zigzagging splinter—fell down the bridge of her nose as she went about stuffing marijuana into the brass one-hitter she pulled from a pouch in her jacket. She offered him the pipe. “Smoke with me,” she said. “It’s bad luck to get high by yourself on the road.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Of course you do.”

“We still have a long way to go,” Henry said. “I don’t want to drive impaired.”

“You won’t crash. Trust me. If anything it will make you more careful.”

She pulled a lighter from her bag and lit the weed, inhaling deeply and then holding the pipe in front of her lips as she tried to suppress a cough. She turned and blew a big cloud over Henry’s face. He looked at her. “Too late now,” she said.

The brass was still hot when he put the piece between his lips, but he smoked it anyway, the smoke expanding in his lungs like a hot balloon. “Hold it in,” she told him. “Hold it in for as long as you can.”

He held it until his lungs burned and his eyes began to water. Then he exhaled a long puff of smoke that filled the interior of the car and hung there, unmoving and thick for several seconds before he cracked the window and it disappeared. “I haven’t done this since high school,” he admitted.

“I have a question,” Alana said, as she went about knocking the ash into her palm, “what’s the deal with the transubstantiation? I’ve always wondered about that.”

Henry looked at her. She was sitting with her

two bare feet resting against the dashboard. The paint on her toenails was cracked and peeling; a tattoo of rose petals choked her small ankle. “How do you know that word?” he said.

“How can it be a conversion? Are you saying that the wine and bread are literally supposed to be Christ *himself*?”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course you do. Tell me. I’m curious.”

“That is what the scriptures say, yes.”

“Wow. That is wild.” She held her arm out the window, letting the ashes scatter from her palm, her fingers wiggling. Behind her hand the trees blurred as they passed a sign for the old Gorge highway, a two-lane road that ran parallel to the interstate for several miles. Cars appeared sporadically amid the conifers, their windshields glinting with sun. “So do you still believe in God?” she asked.

Henry had been asked this question so many times by so many different people, both lay and ordained, his answer no longer carried any meaning at all. It flew as if by magic, leaving him without so much as a thought. “I have a respect for people who are spiritual. But I don’t believe there is life after death. I just can’t.”

Alana shook her head and grinned with teeth that appeared bigger than her face. “I never in a million years thought I’d be getting a ride with a priest. This is crazy.”

“I’m not a priest.”

“But you were—I mean, you gave so much of your life to it.”

“Twelve years is not that much time.”

"That is so a long time. That is almost forever."

He ignored her because she was young, and he was high, and at that moment the road seemed to break into a thousand moving parts that rearranged themselves and came back together different than before. He saw a station wagon with the ruddy faces of children pressed to the rear window, the bumper sticker boasting of a roller coaster they'd conquered in faraway Chicago. Then his rearview mirror filled with a chrome grill and a truck horn rang out behind him. "You're only going forty miles an hour," Alana told him. "You have to speed up."

Henry stepped on the pedal, swerving into the left lane as his small car fell in line with the speed of traffic. Another horn sounded and a man in pick-up truck passed on the right, hoisting his middle finger out of the window. "Wow," Alana said, her head leaning back against the headrest. "Maybe you are impaired."

"I'm fine. Just got distracted is all."

Farther up the highway traffic thinned and Henry felt himself begin to relax. It was a perfectly clear day, and this gave the trip a certain distinction Alana called attention to by continually reminding him how much it usually rained in this part of the country, though she herself had never been to Oregon before. Towards the east the snow-capped peak of Mt. Hood appeared at once tactile and impossibly distant, the craggy summit redolent of both beauty and death. Henry had never seen this mountain before. A flair of electricity seized his heart and he was filled with

a sudden desire to reach it. "I want to climb to the top of that," he told her.

Alana lit a cigarette, waving the match out. "Go for it."

"No. I'm serious. Right now."

"I thought you were going to bring me to Yakima?"

"I will. But first I'm going to climb that mountain."

"You're stoned."

"Well."

"You don't even have any equipment."

"I don't need any equipment."

"Do you know how many people get lost on that mountain every year? They never even find the bodies. It's like a graveyard up there."

"How do you know that?"

"Everybody knows that."

Henry stared up at the mountain, squinting in the glare. "That doesn't matter to me."

"If you die then what am I going to do? I'll be stranded. You promised to drive me to Yakima, remember? Did you forget that?"

He looked at her and then he looked back at the road. "You're right," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"I do." She pointed the pipe at him and smiled playfully before dropping it into her pocket.

Twenty minutes later they passed Multnomah Falls. Alana watched the groups of tourists aiming their cameras toward the top of the Gorge, snapping photos of the water gushing over the rocky face of abutments, the vapor thin as a veil. When they had passed it she turned away from

the window and fell back against the seat. "I like Oregon. It's a shame I can't stay longer."

"You know you don't have to live like this. There are people who will help you. Schools. Organizations. You're only a kid."

She looked at him, her eyes skeptical and searching. "You're a strange man, Henry. I still don't know what it is you want."

"I'm just trying to help."

She blew cigarette smoke through the cracked window. "I don't have any money."

"I don't want money. I just want to help you."

"And no sex either? Really?"

"Why did you run away from home?"

"It's complicated."

"Tell me. I want to know."

"I got pregnant at sixteen and my father made me get an abortion," she said. "Then he kicked me out of the house. He was violent. I couldn't go back. For a while I lived with my uncle in Las Vegas. But that didn't work out either. My brother is my last hope."

Henry nodded, glad that her history—or some degree of it—was out in the open. It made him feel more comfortable about his decision to help her, as her life was now quantifiable, a series of events he could define and to which he was familiar. "You have your whole life ahead of you, Alana. You can do whatever you want."

"Now you sound like a priest."

"I'm not a priest."

"You sound naive. That is what I meant to say."

"Well I'm sorry you feel that way. I was only

trying to help."

"Of course you were. Everyone is only trying to help." She put her hands behind her head and hiked her bare feet back up onto the dash. "Tell me why you defrocked, Henry. Did you just all of a sudden wake up one day and realize you didn't believe in God? What was that like?"

"How do you know that word—defrocked?"

"Do you still pray? I mean, do you ever even think of God anymore?"

"I do when people ask me about Him."

"Be serious."

"I can't believe in Him, Alana. It's not a matter of whether I want to or not. There is just nothing there."

She looked at the road. "Want to know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think I like you a lot more than you like me."

"I like you fine. I just don't want to talk about God, that's all."

"Okay, then let's talk about confession. What's the worst sin someone ever confessed to you?"

"I don't want to talk about that either."

"Oh please. Anybody ever confess to murder?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

He looked at her, saw his own face reflected tiny and distant in the lens of her broken sunglasses. "I'm kidding."

They rode for the next ten minutes in silence. Alana watched the road with her elbow nestled in the crook of the window, her head resting in her

palm. "Can I ask you a question, Henry?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Why didn't you want to have sex with me? Do you think I'm ugly?"

He looked at her and then he looked back at the road. "I already told you how I feel about that."

"You used to be a priest. That means you're a virgin, right?"

He did not answer this. Instead he distracted himself by trying to keep the vehicle at exactly 70 m.p.h. He had a great deal to say but sensed his talking would only tip the car with its weight, increasing the vehicle's speed until he lost control and they both went careening off the side of the road into the Columbia River. A sign told them they were leaving Multnomah County. The year was 1986.

II

Farther east the trees thinned as the verdant hills of the Gorge gave way to the first hints of high desert east of the Cascades. Past Hood River the mountains softened into sandy, windswept hills and the Columbia River expanded massive and slow; windsurfers rode the choppy surface. At quarter past noon the Volkswagen passed the outskirts of The Dalles. Semi-trucks filled the parking lot of the highway rest area, ten gleaming silver trailers aligned diagonally like armaments on reserve. Alana awoke the moment the car came to a stoplight. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere called The Dalles. I thought

we'd get some food."

"Good thinking. I could go for a cheeseburger. And a pop."

Henry drove up Main Street, past large brick buildings still painted with the faded advertisements from the turn of the century—Harold's Feed and Straw, Ebenezer's Witch Hazel, Lucky Strike Cigarettes, Brody's Shoe Polish—but saw no restaurant. In front of an empty insurance office a man wearing a bolo tie and cowboy hat stood smoking a cigarette, watching the street.

At the end of Main Street the road forked right, leading past rows of tract houses and small ranches, the acres of property delineated by strings of copper wire stretched between slanted wooden poles. An old Pentecostal church occupied the corner of a four-way intersection, the wood siding peeled and bleached bone-white from sun, its glass marquee announcing the dates of an upcoming bake sale alongside a verse from Psalm 9:17: *"The wicked return to the grave, all the nations that forget God."*

Alana pointed to the road. "Look at that."

Ahead of them a truck carrying crates of chickens had overturned beside a grove of cottonwood trees. Two dozen birds lay in the road, some alive, most dead. The ones still moving did so with petulance, squawking and pecking at the air as if protesting any further passage of traffic. Henry thought it odd that a truck would overturn on an empty desert road driving straight—it seemed almost intentional. An ambulance was parked on the edge of the grove, but neither the paramedics nor the victim were visible. Two po-

lice officers and a man in overalls pushed the chickens aside with shovels and then motioned for Henry to pass.

A quarter-mile later they found a small café at the edge of the desert. Hills of sagebrush shaped the distance like giant hunchbacks dozing among the stacks of basalt and andesine; a thin telephone wire sagged above the roof. The strip of pavement leading to the door gave the clap of Henry's boot heel a conspicuous rhythm not unlike the ticking of a clock in a mortuary, marking the passage of time in a place where such a measure seemed futile. They took a booth near the window. Henry tried to sound out the name of the café, reading the letters imprinted on the window, guessing at those areas where the print had faded or was stripped and gone. They were the only customers in the place. A man in a cook's apron sat sipping coffee at the counter.

"The napkin container is empty," Alana said holding up the dented chrome square. "How are we supposed to eat without napkins?"

"She's out back having a cigarette," the old man at the counter yelled, as if to answer her complaint. "Give her a minute. She'll be right with you."

"He means the waitress," Henry said to Alana.

"I know."

The walls of the place were decorated with dusty photographs of pioneers from the early nineteen hundreds, the faces obscured or smudged by time, the glass footprinted with the path of insects gone over it. From above a glass case filled with the remnants of half-eaten pies,

a speaker played Christian radio. A lopsided fan turned above them.

Ten minutes went by before an older woman emerged carrying two glasses of water and a pair of menus. She wore her white hair tied back in a ponytail and her skin was dark and crisp from sun. "Help you?" she said.

Alana ordered a cherry cola and Henry an ice water. He watched as the waitress walked back to where the old man was seated at the counter. They spoke for a while and then he got up and went into the kitchen. She returned a minute later with their drinks and then left without saying anything more.

"My mother is a paraplegic," Alana said, as she pushed the straw up and down in her drink, eyeing the surroundings. "She would hate this restaurant. Not a handicap ramp in site."

Henry picked up the menu, which was water stained and dog-eared at the corners, the prices taped over and certain items blacked out completely. The name on the menu said DONNA'S DESERT CAFÉ, but the name on the window said CHARLIE'S.

"Tell me the water into wine story," Alana asked him, pinching her tobacco out into the paper on the table.

"I don't want to."

"Did Jesus just touch the water and make it wine? Is that literally what happened?"

"Yes."

"Didn't he also turn fish into bread or something?"

"I thought you were going to go outside and

have a cigarette."

"I am. I want to order my food first." A newspaper lay scattered on the table next to them. Alana grabbed a section and turned to the horoscopes. "When were you born?"

"September 15th."

"So you're a Virgo, then."

"I never looked into it."

She opened the newspaper and read: "There's a loving tenderness in the air that you'll find very comforting, Virgo. Ground your sensitive emotions and make room for love to enter the picture. It could be that you're feeling indecisive when it comes to matters of love and romance. The best thing for you to do is stabilize your emotions and then make the effort to connect intimately with others—"

"Made a decision on food yet?" The waitress stood over them, resting her knuckles against her hip.

Henry ordered the first thing that came to his mind—Shepherd's pie—though his thoughts remained locked on the horoscope Alana just read to him. He was conscious of a need to believe the newspaper's prediction, to feel that it spoke to him directly, that its accuracy meant *something* was aware of his existence in the world. This is what humans did, he thought, they exchanged one God for another, the purposes of which were one in the same. The God of the horoscope spoke in newsprint instead of tablets. He wrote on the permeable canvas of sky, with stars and constellations and planets, instead of dusty Bibles kept inside the drawers of cheap motels. Henry thought

back to the moment when he lost his faith, how simple it had been, how subtle and quick. He was standing in the chapel at an assisted living facility on 163rd Street, saying mass for a group of Alzheimer's patients when he'd suddenly forgotten the words to the Lord's Prayer. For a full minute he stood there, pretending as if something had gotten caught in his throat. His mind raced; he felt both vivid and faint. Staring back at him, almost *into* him, were the confused faces of the patients, each one locked in an agonized frieze, as if trying desperately to break through the hold of their disease and help him. When he started the prayer over again one of the patients—a very confused old man who'd once tried to attack Henry with a breakfast tray—began to slap his knee and laugh hysterically. Though it would be another year before Henry could put the experience into words, he'd known then, with more certainty than had ever informed his calling to the priesthood, that there was no God, no life for the soul after death.

When the waitress left, Alana went outside to smoke a cigarette. He watched her pace back and forth in the parking lot, kicking up clouds of dust with the toe of her sneaker, both legs skinny and bare, her denim jacket unbuckled. He took a sip of water and looked past Alana to the road, where an escaped chicken pecked in a dirt warren, its beak moving with a rote motion at odds with the rugged emptiness of the desert surrounding it. She pointed to the animal and smiled. Henry thought of a passage from Luke 16:25: *But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life*

you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.'

III

An hour later they crossed the Columbia River by way of the Sam Hill Memorial Bridge at Biggs Junction, driving north on Route 97, a road that wound up the edge of the Gorge before delivering them with a certain elegance into the rolling hills and high desert of central Washington, the crooked spine of a single apple tree set down against the horizon. The road ran straight and flat for a hundred miles, rarely deviating from the fields of wheat grass, the air stiff with heat, cows lying defeated in the shade of barns and ranches.

In Goldendale he stopped at an old clapboard service station and waited in the parking lot while Alana used a payphone to call her brother. The station hadn't been open for years. None of the gas pumps were working and the front door was barred over, the words KEEP OUT spray-painted in bright red across a two-inch piece of plywood nailed across the front window. It felt hotter there than it had in Oregon; flatlands made him feel somehow closer to the sun. Ahead the road rippled in wobbly lines of heat and the pavement itself was soft to the touch, almost sticky. Behind the gas station was a barn in front of which stood a white horse, unsaddled. Its neck was bent, the hair along its mane blurry with flies. Henry watched the horse for a while, wondered if it had a name and how old it was, if it was prop-

erly taken care of or neglected. Returning to the car Alana said she could not contact her brother.

"What are you going to do once you get to Yakima?" he asked later, as they merged onto I-84 at Union Gap and saw the first signs announcing their destination.

"Don't know. Just live, I guess."

"Do you have a place to stay if you can't contact your brother?"

"Don't worry about it. He must be at work."

"What does he do?"

"Who knows? Probably cleans shit for all I know."

By the time they reached Yakima the sun was setting, imbuing the windows of the motels and motor lodges along North 1st Street with a deep, glistening crimson, as if the town were slowly being brought to boil. Despite the relative symmetry of the streets, the city felt scattered and improperly constructed: residential neighborhoods were built right behind commercial districts, rail yards next to grocery stores. Alana tried her brother at a payphone but still could not reach him. With nothing else to do they found a corner dive and drank at a small table decorated with a fake plastic coconut in the middle. Alcohol reversed the roles of their conversation—the whisky sours Alana sipped quelled her curiosity, making her distant and introspective, while the vodka Henry drank birthed in him a need to contribute something honest to the world. "Do you ever think you'd like to go back to school?" he asked, caring little for her reply, hoping only that she'd ask him something in return. Alana

plugged the end of the straw with her tongue, pulled it from her drink, and tipped the contents down her throat. Then she dropped it back into her glass. "I thought you weren't going to act like a priest anymore."

"I'm curious."

"I don't know."

Henry pulled at her wrist. "Come on. Tell me."

"Want to know the truth, Henry? The truth is I don't want to be anything. When I die I don't want to be remembered by anyone, anywhere. I want my life to be completely unremarkable."

"You have no goals?"

"No."

"What about children?"

"I had a child. But he's dead. Have you forgotten?"

He paused. "I'm so sorry. I forgot."

"Don't talk to me anymore," she said. "I just want to sit here. In silence."

A half-hour later they were both too drunk to be in public. When the bartender cut her off, Alana began throwing ice cubes, forcing Henry to grab her and exit through the back door. They stumbled across the street to the first motel they could find, a dusty motor lodge with a view of the interstate. With the last of his money, Henry rented a room no different than the ones that had preceded it, passing a twenty-dollar bill to an Indian woman seated behind bulletproof glass and thanking her for the key. Alana took off her shirt the moment they got to the room, flinging it from her body and then falling half-naked onto

the bed. When Henry came out of the bathroom she was pointing his pistol at him. "You're kidding me," he said.

She smiled lazily, her small body recumbent on the bedspread. "I found this in your suitcase. Is it loaded?"

"Give that to me. You're going to hurt yourself."

She moved the gun into her pants, keeping her eyes on Henry as she slowly pushed the muzzle past the tattered waistline of her jeans, her wrist disappearing after it.

"Please Alana. You're drunk. We both are. I don't want you to get hurt."

"We're you going to kill yourself, Henry? Was that the plan? We're you going to kill me too?" Her voice heightened with anticipation, her head tilted to the side. Henry watched the bump below the crotch of her jeans move in a circle as she massaged her sex with the tip of the muzzle, her eyes subdued, her dreadlocks splayed over the comforter behind her. He pushed himself off the wall and moved toward the bed, the coils spraining softly beneath his weight.

"You should kiss me," she said.

He complied, bringing his lips over hers, tasting the whisky and the cigarette smoke on her breath, the histories that passed between them. When he lay back down on the bedspread beside her, she pulled the gun out of her jeans and dropped it into his lap. Moisture dripped from the muzzle, dampening the crotch of his pants. He turned to face her, angry at what he took to be a drunken stunt designed to make him look

foolish.

"That was silly," he told her. "You could've gotten hurt."

"And you wouldn't want that?"

"Of course not. Would you?"

Alana said nothing. She unbuckled her jeans and slowly pulled them off her body, the copper belt buckle snapping as they puddled on the floor. When she reached her arms out toward him the orange streetlight cast bands of shadow over the scars on her stomach, imprinting her flesh with a kind of stitching, a lattice of checkered light. Each breath made visible the bones around her lungs.

Henry felt the rigidness of the prior moment give way to a calm as he took her hands, felt her fingers hot against his face. A headlight swept through the room, illuminating the dismal interior with a slow yawn of light. Wire hangers twinned against the peeling wallpaper; the space appeared to deepen and thin. Henry's mind, long blighted with the voices of others, their needs, their suffering, was finally a void.

When he awoke she was gone. Half-drunk and naked, he called out into the darkness, felt his lips carve her name into the room's stale heat, but heard no reply. Rising from the damp

sheets he telephoned the front desk but no one picked up the phone. For the next three hours he roamed the streets of Yakima until the sun came up, checking the bus stations and homeless shelters, the youth hostels and diners. But the faces he found were all pudgy, strange. She was gone.

When the sun rose he gathered his belongings into his suitcase and drove back to Portland, passing a landscape that he recognized only in how it related to Alana—what she'd been doing at the moment they'd passed heading in the opposite direction; how she had sat, what she had asked him. He spoke out loud, answering her questions about God and the Bible and his failed priesthood, all those things she wanted to know but which he had been too frightened to tell her, immersing himself in her memory by indulging his own. Crossing the Columbia River into Oregon his heart beat with a desire as hot as hellfire and he knew that he would never get over her, that her gift to him would be her absence, her refusal. That night he slept in his car at a rest stop outside Portland and in the morning overdrafted his credit card buying climbing equipment at an outdoors store in the area. Two days later he made contact with a group of climbers in Government Camp and at dawn the next morning set off towards the summit of Mt. Hood. 