

INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY

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1

NORMAN CAMPBELL STOOD on a saddle of land between two mountain peaks on the Continental Divide and recited part of a poem.

But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Norman had once killed a man to avoid doing the very thing that he was going to do that morning. It was his son Sasha's eighteenth birthday. Nobody understood Wordsworth who hadn't read him aloud from the top of a mountain.

I must make the right decision, he said to himself.

"Dad," Sasha said when Norman came back to the camp they'd set up three days before. A stream, swollen with snowmelt, rushed past them on its way down what the maps still called Herman Gulch. Two miles downstream, Interstate 70 still split the Rocky Mountains; Norman's stomach rolled over at being so close to civilization. Sixteen years, he thought.

"Son." Norman sat by the campfire and spooned himself a bowl of stew. "Happy birthday."

Sasha squatted by the stream to rinse his own bowl. Norman could see the kid wanting to ask a question. He ate stew and waited for Sasha to work himself up to it.

"Are we going down the mountain today?"

The right decision, Norman thought again. "Yes," he said.

Sasha didn't look at him. "Will they arrest you when we get there.?"

"I'd be real surprised if they didn't."

2

A little less than nineteen years before that morning, Norman Campbell had been, if not the happiest man in the world, certainly the most immediately content. It was Friday night. Norm's account was swollen with his week's wages, his head was perfectly fogged with Coors, and the balls on the scuffed and chalk-smearred pool table obeyed his every command. He was twenty-four years old, and there was no place in the world he would rather have been than the Valverde Country Club on West Alameda in Denver, Colorado.

"Hey, Crash," Terence called from the table. "You got this one.?"

"I got'em all," Norm said, and rolled the eight down the rail, slow and easy as a Cadillac in the mag-lane of the Valley Highway. It dropped into the corner and Norm came back to the table to pay the waitress

for the fresh pitcher.

"Bet you wish you could drive like you shoot pool," Terence said. Beer foam clung to his bushy red Santa Claus-style beard.

"Shit," Norm said. The accident had been three months before, and he'd long since paid it off. "Bet you wish you could fuck like I shoot pool."

Matt and Bill Amidor, brothers who worked in the office-supply warehouse Norm and Terence drove out of, roared. Terence wiped at his beard to hide the fact that he was grinning too, then he said, "Hey. Look what just walked in the door."

They all looked. Bill whistled. Norm overfilled his mug and stepped back from the table to let the foam run onto the floor. "Good impression you're making there, Crash," Terence said. "You clip rental trucks in the yard, spill your drink whenever a pretty girl walks in . . . what's next, you gonna spit on the boss's shoes? Quote Shakespeare at him while you do it?"

"Fucking boss needs his shoes spit on," Norm said, but his attention stuck to the woman who now stood at the bar. Tall, long black hair, long black coat that cost more than Norm made in a month, face crying out to have a poem written about it. "Bet she's on the T," Norm said.

"Mm," Bill said. "A little too perfect, isn't she?"

Matt lit a cigarette. "What's she doing here?" It was a good question. The Country Club wasn't exactly dangerous, but even Norm -- since he'd never been in jail more than overnight and had a tendency to read books once in a while -- was a bit out of place there. This woman was a walking pearl in a pigpen. And, unless they'd all missed something, she was alone.

Oh, no she wasn't. Here came her friends: three equally perfect, perfectly beautiful, and beautifully incongruous young women. Like vid models after a day shooting, Norm thought, but the only place around here that used live vids was the porn shack around the corner, and no woman who looked like these would come anywhere near that place.

"Slumming," Matt grumbled. He liked to go to upper-class bars and light cigarettes just to get kicked out, but he hated it when his favorite dives were invaded by people who normally wouldn't look at him on the street. "Go talk 'em up, Crash," he said. "Recite poems, take 'em home, and piss all over 'em."

"Bitter, bitter," Norm said, but Matt had gotten it two-thirds right. Recite poems, take 'em home. It worked if you weren't too smarmy about the poems.

His next opponent called out from the pool table and he went back to win number fifteen. He won easily enough, but he could tell that his invincibility was ebbing; too much time looking at that first woman out of the corner of his eye. Norm decided that she was on the T for sure. She looked about twenty-five, but she didn't carry herself like she was fresh out of college. There was an assurance, a . . . he didn't know how to pin it down, but he would have bet his job that she was quite a bit older than she looked. Waiting for the next game to start, he debated asking the guys what they thought, but Matt would just start in on one of his eat-the-rich diatribes. Telomerase therapy was so expensive that practically nobody could afford it, and Matt wanted to be immortal as much as the next guy.

Except Norm. Live forever? Sounded like a nightmare to him. He'd probably see a hundred anyway, and that seemed like enough to him. As it was, he doubted he'd recognize the world in his old age.

But was that really true? Here it is, halfway through the twenty-first century, Norm thought, and all the

old tensions are alive and well. It's amazing how nobody ever predicts that the future will be exactly like their present. He broke again, was lucky to sink a ball because of a rack loose enough that it sounded like maracas when he hit it, and was struck by the idea that a hundred years ago, bars were probably full of guys shooting pool after an evening of loading office furniture and paper onto box trucks. Like him, they probably didn't do their runs on Fridays, coming in on Sunday night instead when there were fewer drunks on the roads. It was snowing outside, and Norm was glad he didn't have to go to Cheyenne.

One difference, though, between the nineteen fifties and now -- let alone desegregation, VR, electric cars, the Water Crisis, and whatever else -- was that back then, young women who went slumming weren't immortal.

The Greek gods coming down to Earth, Norm thought. Zeus sowing his wild oats, Apollo chasing Daphne through the forest. He caught himself. Were they really that far apart, people on the T and the rest of the world?

The four women sat in a corner booth by the fire exit. They watched TV, joked with each other -- probably sniggering about a bar that doesn't have terminals at every table, Norm thought. He missed his next shot, pool invincibility clearly slipping away, and realized that deep down he was more sympathetic to Matt Amidor than he'd thought. He looked at his three friends, laughing and waving their arms, finishing the pitcher he'd just bought. Well into a Friday night.

This is not so bad, Norm thought. I like my job, I like my friends, I make enough money to have some fun, and the world is full of pretty women. Who needs immortality?

Still, when the brunette immortal bought him a beer, Norm found himself as much curious as horny.

3

Sasha stayed a little ahead of Norman as they followed the stream down Herman Gulch. No wonder he's excited, Norman thought. Eighteen years old, and for the first time he's about to go into a town during daylight. Norman experienced a flush of pride, thinking that in twenty-first-century America, a nation of three hundred eighty million people, he'd managed to raise a son who was completely at home in the real world of trees, stone, and water.

Not that he'd stunted the boy. The battered terminal with its solar attachment and VR headgear had been a pain in the ass to haul around --at least until he'd destroyed it when Sasha was six -- but Norman had done it so Sasha would be educated. So he would have some exposure to the world of cities and human society. So he would know about literature, history, government, politics. So he would be able to make an informed choice when the time came for the choice to be made.

They stopped at the last big bend in the trail before it terminated in a dirt parking lot. Sasha's eyes were wide like a deer's as he watched cars whirring up the slope to the Eisenhower Tunnel, and Norman wondered what he was feeling. I've created a real-life Victorian novel two hundred years late, Norman thought. The boy coming back to claim his birthright.

"There's a world up here, and a world down there," Norman said. "We're going back down there, but you have to take this world with you when you go. Cycles, Sasha. That's a world that's lost track of its cycles." Sasha nodded, his eyes still on the line of cars.

"You know why I did this, don't you, son?" Norman wished he hadn't said it. They'd been over this a million times. But a man had to make sure his son knew . . . what? Why he'd had to pretend he was just out backpacking on the few occasions they'd met other people in the Rocky Mountain wilderness? Why he'd seen his father stab a man to death when he was six years old? Why he'd never been able to play on

a soccer team, take a vacation to California or the Moon, date girls?

Norman forced himself to calm down. Never mind what Sasha's thinking, he thought. You'd better take care that you don't have a heart attack when you walk down into Georgetown.

But that was ridiculous. He was forty-three years old, and in better physical shape than most Olympic athletes half his age. What Norman Campbell had to worry about was his mind. In sixteen years of living in the wilderness, he'd developed an aversion to civilization so profound that to call it pathological would be charitable. Even now, before he'd spoken to a soul or set foot on concrete, it was all he could do not to turn around and disappear.

"I know why you say you did it," Sasha said.

Norman sat next to him. "Sounds like there's more you have to say," he said, and was suddenly afraid.

4

"I was wondering when you'd come over to say hi," the brunette said. "Do you always ignore women who buy you drinks?"

"Well, I was kind of on a streak there," Norm said.

"Mm," she said, the beginnings of a smile in her eyes. This is a woman who likes to play games, Norm thought. "Superstitious?"

"It's pool," Norm said. "You get it going, you don't want to do anything to screw it up. Thanks for the beers." She'd bought him three.

"You're welcome." The brunette put her chin in her hands and looked up at him. "What's your name, pool shooter?"

"Norm. What's yours?"

"Melinda. And these are Licia, Quincy, and Michelle."

"My pleasure." Norm raised his beer to them and finished it off by way of a toast.

"Are you going to invite your friends over?"

Norm considered. "Well, I could, but Matt there has a problem with rich girls on the T."

Melinda smiled, and her friends laughed out loud. "Is that so?"

"Fraid it is. And I doubt Terence would be able to speak in your presence. He's a bit shy around people who aren't as ugly as he is." Well, now, that wasn't very friendly, was it? Norm said to himself. It was true, though; Terence had said as much himself. But there was a difference between being self-deprecating and having someone else do it for you.

Norm stepped back from the table. "I'll get them over here anyway."

"She gonna take you out in daddy's suborbital?" Matt said when Norm came back.

"She just might," Norm said with a grin. "And one of her friends might take you. Come on, the ladies desire company. If your principles permit."

"Shit," Matt said. "It's only the big head has principles." They dragged their table over in front of the fire door. The four immortals already had another pitcher waiting.

5

"What I mean to say, Dad," Sasha said, hesitating over every word, "is . . . okay. You talk and talk about wanting me to be able to make decisions for myself, but you basically made all of my decisions for me, didn't you? I mean, when you took me off into the mountains. I didn't decide that. My mother didn't decide that. You did. You took away sixteen years' worth of decisions, and you want me to believe that this one moment when I can choose is worth it."

Norman was silent for a while. "We've had this discussion before," he said, mostly to buy time to gather his thoughts.

"And you say the same thing every time. I know, you did what you thought was right."

"It was right," Norman said. He floundered, mouth open, wondering what he could say that hadn't already been said. What he could say that would convince Sasha once and for all.

Remember, he told himself. When you have to move a skid of paper, and it's so cold and icy that the pallet jack's wheels won't grip, you break the skid down and horse the paper two boxes per trip. No man can move a ton at once, but just about anyone can do it a hundred pounds at a time. Norman looked at his son, so like himself. A little taller, a little leaner, framed more like his mother but with Norman's blond hair and Norman's face.

Sixteen years I've spent trying to teach you, he thought, and now the day my teaching stops, we're back to the very first lesson.

"Your mother," he began.

"No, Dad. I don't want to talk about her. I know her better than you do."

"You haven't -- " Norman broke off, unable to speak the question.

Had Sasha sent her a message, spoken to her? Left a note in some dumpster somewhere, during one of the winters when weather had forced them closer to the cities?

"No, I haven't talked to her. I haven't sent her Mother's Day cards. But I used to go back to places where you buried newspapers and dig them up to see if I could find the name MacTavish. You'd be surprised; it pops up a lot. I've kept up. I had to. Your only memories of her are older than I am."

"Okay. I see where this is going," Norman said. "You think I'm, what, poisoning your mind against your mother?"

Sasha said nothing.

"You think," Norman went on, growing angry as he always did when the conversation turned to Melinda MacTavish, "you think I would do that? Christ on crutches, kid, that's exactly the kind of thing that I did this to avoid. You better believe that if you'd grown up with her, she'd have made sure that you didn't even know who I was. She'd have had you believing that you were modeled in a lab and then turkey-basted into her, and your dear old dad would have gone on with his life not even knowing you existed."

Sasha was looking at him. Norman stopped. "See what I mean?" Sasha said.

Why doesn't he understand? Norman thought. He shrugged because it was either that or smack the kid down the hill, and after Ivan Klos he'd sworn never to lay a hand on his son. "Fine," he said. "You can't tell the difference between truth and sour grapes, there's nothing I can do for you. We might as well stroll on down into. . . ." His voice caught, and Norman swallowed. "Into town. But understand this, Sasha my son: it was pure luck that I ever found out about you at all."

6

When the Country Club closed down, everyone paired off, Olympian woman with United Supply mortal. "Shall we head downtown?" Melinda said. "I know a place or two."

"Lead on," Matt said. Norm stifled a grin, knowing that wherever Melinda was going to take them at three in the morning, it wouldn't be a place where smoking cigarettes would cause an uproar. Like all the rich, Melinda and her friends knew places that tolerated vice, and tolerance aggravated Matt's sense of injustice more than anything else in the world.

They took the maglev downtown and ended up on the roof of the Republic Plaza, once Denver's tallest building but now just another in a double handful of glass-and-concrete fingers. Things unfolded pretty much the way Norm had figured. Everyone got a little more drunk, and Matt acted like an idiot while Bill tried to calm him down, and Terence sat in the corner all night watching Orion creep across the sky to impale himself on the invisible ridges of Mount Evans, and the girls passed around eyedroppers of something felonious and intensely pleasurable, no doubt formulated in the basement of some startup gentech concern. Norm rinsed his eyes but good, despite his normal reliance on alcohol and the occasional joint to improve his state of mind. After all, rich people could be counted on to have good drugs, couldn't they?

They could. Norm's sense of time, not to mention any and all misgivings he'd had about mingling with a crowd of immortals (everyone had heard the stories about them playing lethal jokes on those whom they'd come to call "short-timers," as if immortality was one long war and they were already envious about mortals' ability to get sent home, and even though you couldn't trust the Urban Legend nets Norm had no desire to wake up splattered on the pavement with parameds scraping him into a bag for transport to a T-therapy clinic to see just how good the process really was), evaporated like the predawn rain from Republic Plaza's rooftop dome.

"So," Norm said eventually, "what's it like knowing you'll never die?"

Melinda arched one of her perfect eyebrows. Reflected light from the holos playing across the dome glowed on her face. "What's it like knowing you will?"

Norm laughed. "Okay, right. I don't think about it all that much. But still, you must. . . ." he waved one hand, and beer spilled into a potted yucca plant, blooming like crazy even though it was already September outside the dome.

"Come on, Norm, it's not forever. Nobody knows how long. It's not immortality." Melinda smiled over her drink. "And don't ask how old I am."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Norm said, but having brought the subject up, he couldn't let it go. "Nothing was more difficult for me in childhood," he quoted, "than to admit the notion of death as a state applicable to my own being.' Close enough, right?"

"Other than the fact that I'm not a child, sure. Who is it?"

"Wordsworth. He was -- "

"Please, Norm. I went to college. I know who Wordsworth was, and I'll bet that isn't actually a poem you quoted. Sounds too prosey." Norm nodded. "I'd even be willing to bet," Melinda went on, "that he was talking about," she tapped a finger on the edge of her glass, "either the Prelude or the 'Intimations' ode, right?"

"A literary woman," Norm said, surprised. "It's the 'Intimations' ode." Most of the filthy rich college students he'd known had gone out of their way not to learn anything, relying instead on net tutors and Norton subliminals. It was nice to find an exception.

Of course, then Melinda had to squash his sudden magnanimity toward the rich. "I wouldn't have figured a truck driver would quote Wordsworth."

"I wouldn't have figured a rich girl on the T would take a guy out just to remind him that he drives a truck," Norm said slowly.

Melinda laughed. "Look at yourself, so defensive. Insult me if you want to, Norm, but remember this: if you could get on the T, you would. It's not my fault the therapy's expensive."

"Two things," Norm said, getting angry even as he reminded himself that he didn't want to be any more like Matt Amidor than he had to. "First, no I wouldn't. And second, I don't care whose fault it is that the T is expensive; it still pisses me off."

Melinda had stopped listening after the first. "You wouldn't?" she said incredulously. "Come on. Of course you would."

"No," Norm said stubbornly, "I wouldn't."

"Well, then." Melinda plucked a drink from a passing waiter's tray. "Nothing more to say about that, is there? I think you're in a minority, though. I don't know anyone who's had the chance to get on the T and turned it down. I sure wouldn't."

She produced an eyedropper, incredibly, from her cleavage, drawing out the motion to be sure that Norm's gaze followed her hand. "Your grin is looking a little strained, driver man. Look, we both know why we're here. Do you really want to bog everything down in arguments about social injustice?"

Norm forced his attention away from her breasts' perfect dusting of freckles -- like a constellation really, or was her neckline a cipher drawing his attention down? -- long enough to take the eyedropper. Don't want to be Matt, he thought, but he did wonder: why, he wanted to ask her, are we here? Really?

But there was no point, and my, those freckles. "You win," he said, tilting his head back. "Let's have a good time."

And so it was that around sunrise, Norm found himself fifty thousand meters above the Continental Divide in a robot suborbital, Melinda's heels bruising his lumbar vertebrae while they cruised over the San Juans. He laughed out loud, both from residual eyedropper goodwill and at the realization that Matt Amidor's sour prophecy had come to pass, from poetry quoting to suborb ride. Matty, he thought as Melinda laughed with him, I hope you're doing the same. Just don't piss on anybody.

By noon, he was sitting in the old White Spot just south of the Golden Triangle, watching cars whine down Broadway and suffering an eyedropper hangover of apocalyptic intensity. His head hurt; his balls hurt; the inside of his cheek hurt where she'd sampled him just as the suborb hit a little bumpy air; and he'd done something to his neck earlier, so even swallowing bites of huevos rancheros hurt. I never did get her last name, Norm thought, and chuckled. He couldn't decide whether that was a good thing or not.

Sasha didn't understand. Norman could see it in the boy's expression, in the rigidity of his shoulders, in the way he looked at the gravel surface of the parking lot instead of the mountains and sky as he usually did. He didn't look at Norman as they waited by the side of the freeway, thumbs out. After a while a car stopped and they got in, Norman awkwardly shoving the unstrung bow in ahead of him.

"I can take you as far as Idaho Springs," the driver said. He was young, midway between Norman's age and Sasha's. Probably not a sales rep; the car was too clean. Did he work for one of the ski resorts? Could just be visiting family, Norman thought.

"Idaho Springs is great," he said.

"Name's Gavin Dix," the driver said. Sasha introduced himself and, when Norman didn't say anything, said, "Sorry. My dad gets carsick."

Well done, kid, Norman thought. He had to try very hard not to vomit once the car was moving. It was like you lost the skill of seeing the world go by so fast. He'd had Sasha take virtual rides in cars, trains, suburbs, whatever other machines moved people around the world, but Norman hadn't wanted to take them himself. When he'd left, he'd really left. And now, coming back, he fully expected his return to kill him. One way or another.

He closed his eyes and tried not to feel the concrete flying by under the car. Choices. I leave the mountains, Norman thought, for my son's sake. Just as I went to them for his sake. He remembered what Melinda had said to him, the last time they'd spoken: Your son will live for hundreds of years. He'll be a piece of you in the world long after you're gone. He hadn't been able to answer her then, eighteen years before, and the only solace he could find now was Wordsworth: We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind. Wordsworth had been wrong about that, though. What was left behind didn't always give strength. After Idaho Springs was just Floyd Hill, and then the long slope down to Denver and the plains. Eyes closed, weakening, he whispered to himself as the car whirred past the Route 40 exit. "O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves," he whispered, his voice like the muffled sound of tires on pavement, "Forebode not any severing of our loves."

Like Wordsworth, though, Norman knew that saying didn't make it true. It didn't even mean that the speaker believed it.

Gavin Dix pulled off at the western Idaho Springs interchange. "I'm headed up into the Mt. Evans wilderness. Meeting my girlfriend." He winked. "How far you going, anyway?"

Norman opened his mouth, but Sasha jumped in. "Denver, eventually. But this is probably far enough for today, right, Dad?"

"You can get the maglev from here right downtown," Gavin said. "Here, I'll drop you off at the station." He eased the connector pedal down and the car rolled forward.

"No," Norman rasped. Gavin looked back at him and he raised one hand. Saw that it was shaking. "What I mean to say is thanks. But I think I need to walk for a bit." He saw the look that Gavin gave Sasha -- the old man all right there? -- but he didn't care. All he wanted to do was get out of the car. Get the whole business over with.

"Yeah," Sasha said. "Like I said, he gets carsick. Thanks for the ride."

Then they were out of the car watching Gavin Dix charge up the road toward Mount Evans. Not a Victorian novel, Norm thought. At least not for me. More like Rip Van Winkle, or -- he chuckled bitterly -- Tarzan dragged off to London. Once he'd lived in a city, but those memories now seemed to have happened to someone else. His eyes no longer knew how to look at bricks and concrete; his nose had forgotten how to smell paint, rubber, the occasional whiff of propane or gasoline. And the memories were no consolation.

"What's funny?" Sasha said.

Norman shook his head. "Let's head into town."

8

Six months after he'd spent the night in the company of immortals, Norm sat at the White Spot's counter just before five-thirty in the morning. It had been a long night, heavy snow from Greeley all the way up to Cheyenne, and fatigue whined in his head as he paged through the Denver Post's print edition. Strikes on the asteroid colonies, resettlement of Water Crisis refugees, Kasparov beating Capablanca in the Inter-Era AI chess championship, qualifying for the 2054 World Cup. Coming to the back of the entertainment section, he dropped a forkful of potatoes and chili on a picture, wiped it away, and saw Melinda's face looking back at him. Next to her, the other three women from the night at the Country Club smiled their best society-immortal smiles. "Huh," he said, grinning as he remembered her freckles, and read the caption. And dropped another forkful of food.

Pregnant? Norm looked back at the picture. "I'll be goddamned," he said.

She'd done it on purpose, had to've. Synchronized her period or something, and gone out to piss off her dad.

But why? What kind of perverse fucking immortals' game was this?

Despite energetic speculation about the father's identity, no clear candidates have emerged, the accompanying article read. And Ms. -- soon to be Mrs.? -- MacTavish remains coy, saying only that she's giddy about prospective motherhood. Sources place the due date sometime in the middle of June, just in time to celebrate wedding vows if any are in the offing.

"Unbelievable," Norm said. He counted back, and there it was. Arithmetic didn't lie.

He was going to be a father. Melinda MacTavish, of the MCT Research MacTavishes, the MCT Tower MacTavishes, the vids-taken-with-the-President MacTavishes, was going to bear his child.

Knowing her last name, Norm didn't have much trouble tracking Melinda down, and the next weekend he caught up with her outside a benefit for the Denver Dumb Friends League. "Hey," he said, and she looked right through him, walking on to a waiting limousine. He stepped in front of her, and a cluster of net stringers appeared from nowhere.

"Hey yourself," the limo driver said. He grabbed Norm's arm.

"It's okay, John," Melinda said. "Take a ride, Norm?"

The driver scowled at Norm, but stepped back and held the door while they got into the limo. Melinda moved carefully, scooting across the seat until she found a comfortable spot and sank back against the cushioned armrest. "How have you been?" she said.

Norm ignored the question. "Were you planning to tell me about this?" he asked, nodding at her belly.

"Why? So we could get married? Please, Norm." Melinda took a bottle of water from a small refrigerator set into the wall. "We had a good time. Leave it at that."

"That's -- that's my child there," Norm sputtered. "You can't just ignore me. We did that together."

She drank, set the bottle down. "Norm, we need to get some things straight'. First of all, you don't know the child is yours. How do you know what I did the night before we met, or the night after? How do you know I didn't just decide to bear a child and have something worked up in my dad's lab? I could, you know"

"Okay," Norm said. "Is it mine?"

"Yes, it is. Which brings us to the second thing. I can too ignore you, and I intend to do exactly that. You can make noise, go to the nets, do whatever your sense of injustice demands. But nothing will happen; you know that, don't you? Don't take this the wrong way, but my father is one of the richest men in the world. He decides who represents you in Congress, and he decides what the nets decide is news. You better believe they'll ask him whether or not to cover a truck driver's paternity claim against his only daughter. He'll make your claim disappear. He could make you disappear."

Sure, Norm thought. I won't take that the wrong way. They rode in silence for a while. Finally he said, "Why?"

"Why what? I should think you'd have lots of whys."

"Why did you do this? You go slumming for short-timers, working guys you normally wouldn't look at, that much I can understand. But why a kid?"

"What answer would satisfy you? Do you want me to say that it's some decadent experiment, the elite playing with your gene pool? Nature versus nurture?" Melinda drank more water. A frown crossed her face, then a smile. "He's moving," she said.

Norm gaped at her. He? A son. Norman Campbell's son. "Can I feel?" he said, his voice trembling.

Melinda looked at him for a long fragment before nodding. "You deserve that much, don't you?" she said. She took his hand, placed it on the right side of her belly.

A small shift, then nothing, then a sharp kick. Norm made a small noise in the back of his throat, and realized he was about to cry. His son shifted again, then the motion subsided.

Melinda picked up his hand, put it in his lap. "Why are you taking this away from me?" Norm said,

She shook her head, the shadow of sadness on her face almost believable. "I'm not taking anything away from you, Norm. If you'd never found out, you wouldn't have known there was anything to take away."

Still staring at her belly, Norm said, "But I did find out."

"Yes. I'm sorry. Think of it this way. Your son will live for hundreds of years. He'll be a piece of you in the world long after you're gone. I thank you for giving him to me."

His son would live for hundreds of years, Norm thought. His son would be immortal.

Whether he wanted to or not.

The limo cruised to a halt. "I should let you off here," Melinda said. "I know you're angry, Norm, but Sasha will have the best of everything. Isn't that what every father wants, for his children to grow up in

better circumstances than the father had? I didn't do this randomly, Norm. I looked for quite a long time before I chose you."

Sasha, Norm thought. His son's name was Sasha.

"You're right about one thing," Melinda went on. "Most of the people I know who are on the T, I wouldn't let them within ten feet of my uterus." Her forehead wrinkled. "Does that answer your question? At least in part?"

The driver opened the door. When Norm didn't move right away, he reached in and laid a hand, hard, on Norm's shoulder. Norm got out and the driver walked him firmly to the sidewalk, then went back to the limo and drove away.

Sasha. Not what he would have chosen, but a good name.

It was Saturday night. Terence and Bill and Matt would be at the Country Club. Norm stood on the downtown sidewalk for a long time as people walked by and thin clouds passed across the face of the moon. After a while he got on the maglev and went down to the warehouse, where his loaded truck was parked. Seven hours later, when he got back from his loop through Greeley and Cheyenne and Fort Collins, he went to the White Spot. When he paid for his huevos rancheros, he saw that the balance in his account had been multiplied by a factor of one hundred.

That was when he decided to kidnap his son.

9

They walked together over the freeway overpass, Norman's feet bewildered by the flatness of the road. At the first intersection in town, a service station faced a little cafe next to a ski and bike store. An old man in coveralls stood on a ladder screwing a sign into the wall over the service station's garage: WATER SEPARATORS SERVICED HERE. Water separators, Norman thought. The last time I was here, that station still had a gas pump at the end of a row of charging docks.

"Let's get something to eat," Norman said, hoping someplace in town still took cash.

"Yeah." Sasha's eyes were even wider than they had been looking over 1-70 from the Herman Gulch trailhead, or down into Georgetown from the Guanella Pass road, wider even than the one afternoon they'd spent sneaking through Air Force holdings to look down at the city of Colorado Springs. Different looking down on a sight and suddenly finding yourself part of it. Sasha's whole face seemed to have expanded somehow, his nose twitching like a rabbit's, to accommodate the torrent of novelty from this one intersection in this one little town.

"Wait'll you get to Denver," Norman said, and they turned down Idaho Springs's main street.

The old BeauJo's pizza place was still there, still dark and open and woody, its walls festooned with customers' napkin artwork. Some things never change, Norman thought, and he fervently hoped it was true. "You take cash?" he asked the hostess.

"We'll take whatever you have," she said, and led them to a table near the old mine shaft in the main dining area. "Something to drink?"

"Water for me," Norm said. Sasha looked over the menu terminal, his eyes dancing as his fingers played over the display. He ordered a citrus soda.

The hostess disappeared into the kitchen. "Careful," Norman told his son. "The carbonation might be a

little much."

Sasha shrugged. "If I don't like it, I'll get something else. What does orange juice really taste like?"

That's right, Norman thought. You've only tasted it on the VR. His taste buds stood at attention, remembering the sharp sweetness of fresh-squeezed OJ. "It's wonderful," he said. "Maybe you should try it instead of a soda."

Sasha changed his order when their waiter showed up with the drinks. Then he returned his attention to the menu terminal, asking Norman questions about this topping and that appetizer. They settled on a large Mountain Pie with ham, tomatoes, and fresh garlic-- all things Sasha had never tasted. "Wow," Sasha said, tasting the orange juice. "Wow."

They ate until neither of them could move, their biggest meal since Norman had brought down an elk the previous winter and they'd spent three days gorging on steaks. Sasha was immediately smitten with cheese, picking it off the pizza slices and eating it by itself before going back to finish off the crust and sauce. Norm, too, found himself tasting the food as if he'd never had any of it before. Amazing, he thought. I used to eat pizza twice a week.

"If this is civilization, Dad," Sasha said with a grin, "I'm not going to mind it at all."

If this was all it was, Norman thought, I wouldn't either.

10

It took Norm two weeks to formulate his plan. At first he'd just had wild ideas about grabbing Sasha and heading for another city -- Miami, maybe, where wave after wave of immigration had made South Florida into a patchwork of informal city-states. He could hide there. LA was the same way, but people in LA were crazy after the Water Crisis. Norm had no desire to get shot for using a public water fountain in the wrong neighborhood.

This was the MacTavishes he was talking about, though. If anyone had the resources to find him, they did. Could he get out of the country, head for Asia or South America? Norm didn't know Mandarin, and only had enough Spanish to follow soccer broadcasts when the Anglophone nets were preoccupied with baseball or hockey, but he thought he could get by long enough to land a job. Problem was, there was no way to get through the airports without leaving your name, and more importantly your retinal scans, in a database that Conrad MacTavish would crack open like a peanut shell, civil liberties be damned. Drive to Mexico, hire a coyote to get him south of the border? Possible, but all the charging stations refused cash, and if he got to the Rio Grande Norm didn't want to trust his son to coyote ethics. A dilemma.

So there was only one option, really. Fly in the grass. Go under radar. I will take my son, Norm thought, and disappear into the wilderness. There are plenty of places in the Rockies where a man can disappear, and Arizona's practically empty now. Southern Utah. Up in the Cascades.

The next morning, he spent two hundred dollars in a South Broadway used bookstore buying old wilderness-survival manuals, autobiographical narratives of people who had survived extended periods alone in the mountains, and biographies of the great nineteenth-century mountain men. That afternoon, he signed up for a Colorado Free University course on wilderness survival, spending three consecutive weekends in the mountains learning how to distinguish edible plants from poisonous, set snares, find or build shelter, and -- most importantly -- hunt using concealment and ambush. His job kept him fit, but he bought a bike and started riding back and forth to work instead of taking the maglev from his apartment in Edgewater. During the week, he read all day and ran his route at night, leaning out his truck's window to learn constellations and how they moved across the sky.

This would be a hell of a lot easier, he thought one night while wrestling a fire safe over the doorjamb of an office-supply store in Cheyenne, if I could take a gun. Not to mention GPS gear and two decades' worth of vitamin supplements. And oh yes, a babysitter. Norm had started lurking around new-mother net chats, and they'd given him nightmares about all the things that could go wrong with a baby.

It wouldn't work, though. Gunshots could be heard, vitamin supplements would just expire, and so on. The only way to do this, Norm thought, is to go completely native. Become Jedediah Smith or Jim Bridget. Wear skins, hunt and gather-- and raise a son. He felt a deep stab of fear at the realization that his plan could very well kill the son he was trying to . . . what, save? Not quite. But if the boy grew up among people like Melinda MacTavish, what would he know of the world?

"Pretty thin rationalization, Crash," Norm said to himself. The truth of it was that he was doing this because Sasha was his son, and he deserved to be a part of his son's life. And if that meant he had to spend years wandering through mountains and deserts, well, Sacajawea had done it with Lewis and Clark.

Sasha was born on June 9, 2054. In the two years following his son's birth, Norm spent lots of time on the gossip and society nets, getting an idea of where Melinda went with and without him, looking for the time and place when she would leave him alone. The MacTavish estate was out of the question: they had photoelectrics, dogs, human sentries, the whole bit. Likewise one of the many benefits Melinda was taking the baby to; too many people, too many net stringers.

Norm finally settled on swimming lessons. Melinda took Sasha to the Cherry Creek Golf Club's gym once a week, starting when he was about a year old, and Norm took out a membership himself -- gym only, no course privileges or AI trainer time. Then one day, when Melinda left Sasha in day care while she took a shower, Norm waited until the provider was preoccupied changing one of her charges and then simply walked in, picked Sasha up, waved at her, and left.

In later years, Norm would spend entire nights looking up at the sky, trying to remember what it had felt like to hold his son in his arms. He could never recapture the sensation, and as he grew older his meditations on that night came to be a sort of timekeeping. Instead of remembering the first time he held his son, Norm would stare up at Ursa Minor thinking of the last time he'd stayed up all night staring at Ursa Minor trying to remember the weight of a tiny child held against his chest.

At the time, though, Norm just walked. He did not run, and he didn't hurry out of the parking lot in his old converted-electric pickup truck. It wasn't until he'd gotten on the Sixth Avenue Freeway that he floored it, and when he got to Grand Junction he walked into a garage run by Mexicans and let it be known in miserable Spanish that he had a truck to get rid of, cheap. They looked at Sasha, still squalling for his mother, and shook their heads. "All right, then," Norm said, and tossed his keys on the floor. "At least give me a lift somewhere." One of the mechanics gave him a ride back east a bit, into the national forest north of Rifle, and then he shouldered his backpack and compound bow, cradled his son in one arm, and struck out into the mountains. It was July 28, 2056, and he had two months to prepare for winter.

11

Sasha demolished the Mountain Pie in fifteen minutes, chasing it with orange juice. The Coke upset his stomach a little, Norman could tell; he left it alone except for a periodic experimental sip. "Careful there, kid," Norman said. "Too much processed food, you're going to spend your first civilized night in sixteen years puking into a real toilet." Sasha laughed and munched down the last of his crust.

Not him you have to worry about, Norman told himself. He's eighteen, invincible. You're past forty now.

The wilderness made him tough, but it beat you down. He could feel those sixteen years in his knees, the soles of his feet, the small of his back. Even the Indians had known to stay out of the mountains in winter, and they'd all lived to be leathery and wise. Norman was leathery, but he didn't feel wise. He felt old. Should have known, he thought. Coming down the mountain to surrender my son. Childbirth and empty-nest syndrome all at once, plus this damn noise. Smells. It was true: you could forget how to live in a civilized society. Even if you remembered how to order a pizza.

"Let's go," he said. "I want to see if I remember something."

The bar was just named Red's. Two antique pinball machines stood against the rear wall by the bathroom doors, and two pool tables occupied a quarter of the floor space, and there was not a single terminal screen on the premises. Red's, Norman thought, made the Valverde Country Club -- if it was still around -- look sophisticated. The carpet smelled of long-ago spilled beer, and cigarette smoke burned his nostrils. Norman loved Red's immediately.

"Your first beer, kid," he said to Sasha, handing him a stubby brown bottle of Coors with a softly blinking logo. "If you don't like it, that's okay. The second's always better."

Sasha drank, grimaced. Drank again.

Norman drank too, the sharpness of the hops flooding up into his sinuses, making his eyes water, or was that just nostalgia? No way to tell. He set his bottle on a table, dug for change in his pockets and was almost able to forget that he had spent the past sixteen years hiding from the twenty-first century and that he would be in jail before the next sunset.

"Come on." He caught Sasha's arm. "Time you learned to shoot pool."

Sasha picked up the game quickly, and Norman's shooting eye had suffered from sixteen years' hiatus, but the older Campbell still whipped the younger easily. Sasha took it all in stride, intrigued by the challenge of the game and more often than not distracted by the occasional woman who walked in. After they'd been there for an hour or so, a group of young women clustered around the bar near the pool tables; Sasha quickly lost all of the pool skills he'd acquired. He asked Norman for another beer and they sat.

"So, font of wisdom," Sasha said, "what do I say?"

"What, to those girls?" Norman shrugged and the beer coarsened his speech. "Shit, boy, don't say anything. Last time I did, a chain of events ensued and I became a fugitive from justice."

It was the wrong thing to say. Sasha looked down at the table, his shoulders hunching defensively. What have I done? Norman asked himself, knowing that the answer was as obvious as the question was useless. Knowing that he had condemned his son to years of asking himself what to say, what to do, where to go -- that he had made his son a stranger to his own time.

I did the right thing, Norman silently insisted. I did.

Norm spent the first three winters, until Sasha was five, hiding out in the cliff dwellings that dotted southwestern Colorado and northern New Mexico. Other than the touristy little square of Mesa Verde National Park, the Four Corners was empty enough that a man could hide. Norm hid in the arroyos, shot deer and snared jackrabbits, learned how to sneak through Mancos and Cortez late at night, stealing from produce trucks when he could and dumpsters when he couldn't. He began to feel a strange empathy

with the coyotes who sometimes accompanied him on his foragings.

Sasha learned early on the necessity of silence. Too young to be left behind, he followed Norm through canyons and alleys, piggybacking until he could keep up on foot. Wide-eyed he pointed at the coyotes the way other boys his age were pointing out beagles and retrievers in Denver parks.

Summers in the Four Corners were brutal and dry, forcing Norm back up into the high country. He worked his way from the San Juans to the Absarokas, moving every few days whether he'd seen anyone or not, staying under tree cover as much as possible, hiding from every overflying aircraft, worrying at night about the brigades of pursuit that must have been swarming up the slopes of the Rockies after him. The old ghost towns saved his life. Apple and pear trees, grapevines, wild corn; the gardens planted a hundred and eighty years before fed him and his son, and their dried fruits, cached in mineshafts and fault caves, kept them going through the winters after he'd abandoned his southern haunts. It was like living in a post-apocalypse world, having the ability to travel back in time and not doing it. Sasha learned to snowshoe before Norm had a chance to teach him how to read from newspapers stolen out of rest-stop trash cans.

Occasionally, three or four times a year, Norm stumbled across a backpacker. As soon as Sasha was old enough to talk, Norm taught him to tell other people that his name was Billy and that they were from Louisiana. It became a game, and Sasha loved to put on the overbroad Southern accent Norm taught him. He grew disappointed and little-boy sulky when too many months passed without encounters with other people, and during these sulks Norm's own self-interrogations grew more pointed. He's a little boy, Norm thought. He wants to see other little boys, wants to chase the girls around the playground.

Except Sasha had only seen little girls in a picture book stashed in a shelter cave south of Loveland Pass. Norm waited until his son was sleeping, and then he wept.

One morning after such a night, when Sasha was six years old and Norm was thirty, rain kept them from venturing too far from the rocky overhang under which they'd slept. Norm read to him from Shakespeare's sonnets, wishing he had more books in contemporary English. He could only carry so much, though; other than Shakespeare, he had small editions of Wordsworth and three novels: *The Hobbit*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, and *Pynchon in Dreamland*. The first two had been favorites of Norm's father. Apparently, Norm often thought, along with taste in literature, he'd picked up some of the old man's resentment of the twenty-first century. *Pynchon in Dreamland* was the only exception, and even it was a time-travel novel dragging the great TwenCen novelist into the 2040s, where he disintegrated when confronted with the death of print.

Reading Shakespeare was good for the boy, though, since the dated language kept him asking questions and kept Norm answering them. Questions, Norm believed, were good. Better than hyperlinks that taught you only to select highlighted words. He limited Sasha's terminal time to one hour a day, and encouraged the boy only to use it when he wanted a specific question answered and Norman couldn't or wouldn't answer it. It was irrational, but Norm kept Sasha from reading the books in the terminal's library. He wanted Sasha to grow up believing that books were made of paper and questions were asked of other people before being surrendered to machines.

Questions taught. Questions were good.

Then Sasha looked up from the sonnets and said, "Who's my mother?"

Norm gently took the book from him and closed it. He had been waiting for this, but still was not looking forward to it. "Her name is Melinda," he said.

"Why didn't she come backpacking with us?"

"Sasha, buddy, can you do me a favor? Ask me that again when you're about ten."

"I want to know now, Dad."

"I can't tell you now, son." Norm took a deep breath. "If your mother found out about us up here, she'd take you away from me."

Sasha's forehead creased. He needed a haircut. "Why?"

This was the hard part. "I can't tell you that either, Sasha," Norm said. "Promise me you won't ask again until you're ten."

Sasha didn't like it, Norm could tell. He picked at his moccasins, already wearing through at the toe; scratched at the bridge of his nose, so much like his mother's, blew the hair away from his forehead. "Okay," he finally said.

"Thanks, buddy." Norm wanted to stop there, but with a flash he remembered Melinda saying He could make you disappear. "I took you because I love you, Sasha," he said. "If your mom finds out we're up here, I might be killed." He felt something die in himself as he said it, but the words went out into the air, found their way into his son's ears, then drifted away to be hammered to bits by the pounding rain.

13

On the maglev platform across 1-70 from the Arapaho National Forest ranger station, Norman Campbell stepped up to the retinal scan to charge passage down to Denver. The invisible light played across his eyes, codified its findings, sent them off to the Transportation Department's central processor. Along the way, Norman guessed, the burst of information that represented Norman Campbell was noted by either the Colorado State Patrol or whatever private people were still working for the MacTavishes. Hello, forces of law and order, Norman thought. He stepped back. "Go ahead," he said Sasha. "Give it something to think about."

Sasha looked at him for a long time before approaching the scanner. Probably my accounts are long since seized and he doesn't have any, Norman thought. Either it'll let us on anyway, just so they know where to catch us, or it won't and I can buy some tickets. It'll all turn out the same. Maybe in Golden, maybe in Lakewood, maybe at the Alameda station, they'll be waiting.

Sasha blinked, turned back to face Norman. "Dad -- " he began.

"Too late, kid," Norman said. "Let's get on the train."

The maglev accelerated smoothly out of the Idaho Springs station and swept down Clear Creek Canyon. Twenty minutes later it coasted into the 19th Street station in Golden, where eight uniformed state patrolmen were waiting. They were polite and efficient, bonding Norman's wrists firmly but without malice while Sasha was led away by three men in suits. Norman was incongruously struck by how little fashion had changed. "Sasha," he called, "son."

Sasha was looking over his head, at the Denver skyline that towered to the east. He didn't appear to have heard.

14

It was less than three weeks after their rainy-day conversation that Norm and Sasha stumbled across the path of Ivan Klos.

"Howdy," he called, walking toward them on a ridge somewhere in the Mosquito Range. "Y'all don't have a map, do you? I am purely lost."

Warning prickles tracked up and down the back of Norm's neck. The Southern accent, he thought. It sounds as fake as the one I taught Sasha.

Sasha waved back. "Hi," he called. The man approached, dropped his pack, and sat next to them on the ridge, looking down a broad valley just beginning to lose its early-summer green. "Are you from Louisiana too?" Sasha asked.

"No, Texas. Casey Kenner," the stranger said, and shook Sasha's hand.

Later Norm would be unable to figure out what had set him off. Paranoia, maybe. Too many years, even then, without enough human contact. Maybe the fake-sounding accent. But what always came back to him was the sight of Sasha's tiny hand disappearing into Ivan Klos's knobby, tanned fingers.

Someone else holding onto his son.

Norm drew his knife, leaned forward, and drove it into the side of the stranger's neck just below the hinge of his jaw. Sasha screamed, an impossibly high-pitched and endless sound that lasted as long as it took Norm to jerk the knife out, as long as it took a bright arc of blood to splatter Sasha's arm from the hand that held the stranger's to the collar of his leather shirt, as long as it took for the stranger who was not Casey Kenner to topple over and try to get up again. Norm held him down, pried Sasha's hand out of his, leaned across him and listened to him die.

Sasha's screams subsided into hitching soundless whoops. Norm reached out to him, tried to wipe the blood away from his hand and the side of his neck but found that his own hands were also bloody. "Sasha, Sasha," he said, "breathe. You have to breathe, son." Sasha rocked forward into him and Norm held his son close, sshhing at him until his breath evened out and he started to relax. Norm stood and walked a mile or so down into the valley. He set Sasha down. "Wash your shirt, okay, buddy?" he said. "Wash yourself real good and stay here. I have to go get our stuff."

Back up on the ridge, flies were settling on the dead man. Norm took a deep breath and went through his pockets. The first thing he found was a compass and GPS locator with beacon.

"Purely lost," he said, and crushed the instrument with a rock. "How did you find us, you son of a bitch?" In the man's back pocket Norm found a wallet containing an investigator's license identifying him as one Ivan Klos. A holstered gun nestled in the small of Klos's back.

Norm sat back and his hands began to shake. The shakes spread up his arms, into his jaw, into his stomach. He turned away from the body and vomited on the delicate tundra flowers, heaving until threads of blood laced his bile. "I did the right thing," he choked each time he could draw breath. "The right thing."

Eventually his stomach settled and he went back to his search. Klos's backpack contained ordinary camping stuff -- stove, dried food, clothing, sleeping bag -- and one extraordinary thing as well.

I look like myself, Norm thought stupidly as he unfolded a laminated photograph. It was blown up and enhanced from a softball-team picture; in it twenty-three-year-old Norm Campbell grinned his third baseman's grin, beardless and without a care in the world. This is what I gave up, Norm thought. I threw this over so I could take my son away into the wilderness, so he could grow up not knowing the rest of his family, so he could never know his culture, so he could watch his father kill a man.

So he would know how to live in the world. So he would know what he was accepting, and what he was losing, if he decided to go on the T. So he would be a human being.

He gathered his and Sasha's possessions, set them to one side, and took out the solar-powered terminal he'd used to teach Sasha about governments and genomes. Using the same rock he'd used on Klos's GPS, he smashed it to fragments. When he realized that he'd been growling, "No more chances," with every blow, he dropped the rock and put both hands over his mouth. For a long time he stood like that. Then he gathered up the pieces, put them in Klos's backpack, hooked his elbows under the body's armpits, and dragged the dead Ivan Klos down into the valley. In a clearing he piled dry brush and tree limbs, threw the body on the pile, and burned everything that would burn, stoking the fire to keep it hot.

When nothing but ashes, bones, and metal remained, Norm sifted out the bones, wet and scattered the ashes, and buried everything that hadn't burned. The whole process took four hours, and Norm spent every second scouting the horizon for planes and helicopters. He wouldn't be able to see suborbitals, but it was cloudy and they wouldn't be able to see him either. Pray for rain, he thought grimly as he smoothed over Ivan Klos's unmarked grave. Rain and a little luck.

It was dusk before he'd recovered his gear from the ridge and found Sasha by the stream. "Hey, kid," he said, sitting down next to his son.

Nightfall was noticeably closer by the time Sasha responded. "Why'd you do that, Dad?"

"He was looking for us, buddy," Norm said. "Remember what I told you; if they catch us, they'll put me in jail for sure, and -- and they might kill me." Norm tasted bile in his throat. What right do I have to do this to him?

A father's right. And he has a right to grow up and make his own decisions, not be Melinda MacTavish's damn trophy.

Again Sasha paused for a long time before answering. Night fell around them, recast the stream in moonlight. "Are we ever going to go back?" he asked.

The right thing, Norm told himself. I'm doing the right thing. "When you're eighteen, buddy, we'll go back. We'll go back together."

"Why not 'til then?"

"I can't tell you yet." Norm reached for his son, felt a teary wave of relief when the boy didn't jerk away. "Bear with me, Sasha. I'll tell you everything when I can."

15

On the vidscreen, people in Bangladesh tried to rescue a water buffalo from a rising river. Norm flipped the channel, found a soccer game, settled into his bunk. How easy it was to fall back into old habits.

Already forgetting: the feeling of strength as the right hand draws the bowstring. The peace of sleep in silence. The pure smell of nothing.

Someone scored a goal, and the quick succession of shots that followed -- crowd, goalscorer, goalkeeper, crowd, ball in net, defenders standing with hanging heads, crowd, goalkeeper kicking ball back upfield --dizzied Norm. He closed his eyes and could see the purple ghost of the vidscreen scored into his retinas.

Already forgetting: the Milky Way in the dead of winter, seen from Guanella Pass. Sunrise over the

Continental Divide. Sunset over the Continental Divide.

The look on Sasha's face when he caught his first fish, learned to swim, understood Shakespeare's hundred and twenty-seventh sonnet.

The purity of a poem composed at dawn on a mountaintop, remembered ten years later, taught to one's son on the same mountaintop.

Around him, three concrete walls and one made of steel bars. A low ceiling with a recessed fluorescent light, artificial and uncomfortable. A sink. A toilet. Five books in a corner. An electronic port set low near the door -- net jack for prisoners? Or something for jailers? He got a little chill as the word interrogation whispered through his mind.

"Stone walls do not a prison make," Norm quoted softly, "nor iron bars a cage." Not Wordsworth. Who? Forgetting, forgetting.

Jail, Norm thought. Prison. This is where they put kidnapers. This is where they put killers. He felt his strength ebbing away. I am a kidnapper. I am a killer, although they don't know that. He debated confessing, decided: No. I did the right thing.

16

When Sasha was twelve years old, he had enough confidence to claim that he could just run away back to civilization. It was a moment Norm had realized was approaching, and he'd spent months agonizing over whether to broach the subject himself or let Sasha do it. Ultimately he decided to leave the initiative to his son.

It was very sudden. "Rifle's just ten miles or so southwest of here, isn't it?" Sasha asked one day.

They were tanning a deerskin. Both of them needed moccasins. "Yeah, ten or twelve," Norm answered. In fact, they were even closer to the place where he'd first carried Sasha into the wilderness. "We'll have to head north a ways once we get this done."

"It would only take me one day to get there."

Norm stopped scraping.

A new look creased and tensed in the lines of Sasha's face. "I could do it," he said.

"Yes," Norm said. "You could." He started scraping again. He told himself that this was all normal, that testing of boundaries was part of human development, that Sasha was beginning to understand that he could exist without his father around and to desire that existence. Perfectly normal.

But he couldn't breathe through the cold squeeze his son's expression put on his gut. Are you afraid he's going to run off and die? Norm asked himself. Or are you afraid he'll run off and not die, that he'll run back to Melinda and tell her where you've been all these years?

If he was honest with himself, he had to admit both.

"Why shouldn't I go?" Sasha said. "Everyone lives in cities. Why are you so afraid?"

"I told you, kid, when I go back it's straight to the inside of a jail cell." Norm stopped scraping again. "I made you a deal. I'll go back when you're eighteen. Not before."

"You made me a deal when I was six, Dad. That isn't fair. I didn't know."

"Well, now you do."

"What are you afraid of? You can't just be a hermit."

"I'm not. I've got you."

Sasha's face darkened. "Well, I can't just be a hermit."

"Okay, kid," Norm said. "I'll tell you what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid that when I go back your mom's going to make sure I never see sunlight again. I'm afraid that I've forgotten how to live anywhere but here, and I'm afraid that if we go back -- when we go back -- you're going to forget everything I've tried to teach you. I'm afraid that the world I took you away from is still there, and I'm afraid that it isn't." He tossed his scraper to the ground. "I threw my life away for you, son. I don't expect you to return the favor, but I do expect you to respect the gift."

"What gift?" Sasha shouted, and just like that he was crying. "What gift? I don't know anyone but you. I don't remember ever sleeping in a house. I don't remember my mother. I want to have friends, Dad, I want to go to school, I want to eat chocolate and drink soda pop, I want to read a book that I pick myself, I want to watch vids and surf the nets, I want to live like everyone else does!"

"Like everyone else does?" Norm repeated. "What do you think would happen to the average person who had to spend a week in these mountains?"

Sasha was silent.

Norm knelt and picked a stem of flax. "Look at this flower. You know when it blooms, you know when it dies. You know where it grows and where it doesn't. All of them; you know which you can eat and which you can't. You know where to hunt for deer in April, and where they go in November. You know how to build a lean-to and live in a snow cave. You can smell a mountain lion from farther away than any of them," Norm waved in the general direction of the world, "can smell their own shit. You know the cycles here, and you're part of them. You want to live like everyone else? Everyone else has their senses scraped away by living in a place where there's light and noise twenty-four hours a day, where the air and water are full of chemicals you can't see. Everyone else spends their lives trying to make money and please their bosses. Everyone else experiences the world that the vids tell them to experience. You experience the world that is there. That's what I gave you, Sasha. You've got your whole life to be like everyone else. All I'm asking for is these first sixteen years."

Sasha walked away.

Norm sat up that night without a fire, counting shooting stars and trying not to admit that he was praying. Around sunrise, Sasha returned, and that day they struck north and didn't stop until they reached Montana.

17

When he'd been in jail for six days, Melinda came to visit. He'd been wondering if she would, wondering too how she would look. Did the T really work that well? Would she look like his memories?

She did. "You have to disappear, Norm," she said from the other side of the bars. "We'll send you to the colonies if you tike. It's all been too embarrassing; the nets got hold of it and now it's everywhere."

"I know." He was following the stories, drinking in the images of his son, hating the images of his son that looked so little like the boy he remembered.

Remembered? he thought. It was only a week ago.

"You're a celebrity," Melinda said.

"I know," he said, and thought, oh God.

"I'll be honest with you, Norm My father was hoping some of the people he'd sent after you would just kill you and bring Sasha back. Even now I'm holding him off."

"Why?"

Melinda sighed. "I don't know. There have been enough times when I'd have killed you myself."

"Spring me," Norm said. "I'll disappear. No more celebrity, no more embarrassment."

"Explain to me why I should do you any favors, Norm."

Norm paced quickly around his cell, returned to face her. "Is he going on the T?"

Melinda turned frosty. Norm could see her father in her gaze. "That's up to him now, isn't it?"

"If he does," Norm said, "you'll have him for how long, Melinda? How many centuries is the T good for? You'll have him forever. I just wanted him when he was a boy. He only got to be a child once, and I wanted to show him . . . I wanted him to know what was real."

"He only got to be a child once," Melinda said, "and you took that away from me."

18

After he'd destroyed the terminal, Norman worked harder to educate Sasha, teaching him the basics of math and science and trying to use unfamiliar words in conversation -- atmosphere, adjective, allele, atom, anthropology -- so the boy would have to ask what they meant. This activity had the desirable side effect of keeping Norm's memory sharp, and for that he was grateful. He'd reconciled himself to spending the rest of his life in prison, starting about six months from right then, but he didn't want to be an idiot too.

Most often, Norm's educational efforts showed up when he and Sasha got into an argument, and this was the case when, in December of 2071, Sasha exercised his vocabulary and called Norm a hypocrite.

They were cheating that winter, staying in the falling-down remains of a cabin deep in the Mount Evans wilderness. With only six months before Sasha's eighteenth birthday, Norm found he couldn't help letting his guard down. Part of him wanted to be captured so he wouldn't have to go and turn himself in. After protracted internal arguments, though, he concluded that being captured would tarnish his image as someone who had, out of principle and concern for his son, gone into the wilderness and then come back. If somebody tracked him down and dragged him back in handcuffs, he'd look like just another nut who kidnapped his son.

Which was, more or less, the offense of which Sasha was accusing him. "All this about saving me from civilization is bullshit, Dad," he said. "You were just pissed off at Mom and you used me to get back at her."

Norm counted to three, slowly. "Partly," he said, and stirred the fire. "If your mom had come to me and said, 'Hey, I'm pregnant, let's work something out,' this never would have happened." Saying it, he wondered if it were true. "But there's quite a bit you don't know about this, kid. Let me be blunt: are you

going on the T when we get back?"

Resentment flashed in Sasha's eyes. Norm had only told him about telomerase therapy the year before, and Sasha was still angry about having it withheld for so long. It must sound like magic to the kid, Norm thought, not for the first time. He's only seen DNA in a model I built him. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't believe in it.

"I don't have to tell you," Sasha said.

Norm remembered everything his parents had said about teenagers and tried not to get angry. "No, you don't," he agreed. "You don't owe me anything. I deprived you of a normal childhood, of all the girlfriends you would have had before now, of two whole years of driving and sucking in hydrocarbons. . . ." He cut himself off before his sarcasm got too sharp.

"There you go again." Sasha pointed an accusing finger. "I say something, and you drop guilt on me because it's the only thing you have."

"That's where you're wrong, my boy," Norm said. "You are the only thing I have. This is not guilt. This is fact. I threw everything away to give you a chance."

"You threw everything away to give me a chance at something you didn't even know I'd want!" Sasha shouted. "This has been about you from the beginning!"

"Well then, tell me!" Norm snapped. "Did you want it? Do you see what it's worth? Tell me, Sasha. When you go down the hill next summer, and you have the rest of your life to do whatever you want to do, are you going to look back when you're fifty, or a hundred, or two hundred years old, and be angry at me because of the way you spent your childhood? Because if you are, boy, go ahead and put on your snowshoes and head right over that ridge to Chicago Lakes. There's a trail there that'll take you right down to a lodge. You leave in the morning, you can have dinner in Denver tomorrow night. I'll wait for the police here." He was shaking with anger, and also with fear that Sasha would go, fear that everything Norman Campbell had done these past sixteen years was not only worthless, but simply and ordinarily criminal.

He could see it all working in Sasha's face: fear of the city, desire for the city; fear of leaving his father, anger at his father; fear of what lay down the hill, fear that he would never see what lay down the hill. The war of the son with the father's shadow and the father's likeness in the mirror.

"You see?" Norm said, more softly. "You're all torn up about it because you've realized that there are alternatives. You can go on the T and live a thousand years, or you can not go on the T and when you're eighty your grandchildren will be able to see you for what you are. Don't you want to know what it's like to be old? Before the T, I never thought I did; now I know better, and I've tried to pass that along to you. God knows I've tried not to preach to you, son, but this is my last chance, so here it is: you belong in this world. You don't belong in the world out there where rich people outlive redwoods. Next year, you can either join them, or you can bring this world with you into that one. You can choose. Whatever else you might blame me for, son -- and I'm sure you've got a list -- you could at least thank me for that."

A pause stretched out, broken only by the whistling of wind on the peaks. Norm forgot to breathe. The entirety of the last sixteen years seemed to narrow down to a point that slowly thrust its way into his aging, mortal soul, driven by the weight of a childhood's accumulated guilt and misgivings.

The suborbital arced down out of the afternoon sky, ghosting to a landing at the base of the ridge encircling the upper Chicago Lake. A couple of fishermen looked up, annoyed at the interruption, as Norm slowly got out, scratched at his cropped beard, and reached back into the suborb's hatch for a tall frame backpack and a compound bow.

He saw himself in the suborb's mirrored window and thought Old. A man who has been left behind. Norman Campbell in jail was a celebrity; Norman Campbell in the wilderness was just a hermit. Forgotten. A nut who kidnapped his son.

"Come out and have a visit sometime, son. You know where to look."

"Yeah," Sasha said. Norm looked at him, looked hard, burning him into memory. A line from Wordsworth floated through his head, from what poem he couldn't remember: "the little actor cons another part." Already Sasha looked somehow harder around the edges, his gaze a little less direct, his shoulders a little less straight. The city getting into him, Norm thought.

"You going to go on the T?" he asked. It was clumsy, but Norm was a little stunned by being outside again.

"Don't ask me, Dad. I don't know." Norman kept looking at his son, wanting to believe.

But there was no way to tell.

"Thanks, Dad," Sasha said.

"Thanks?"

Sasha shrugged. "You know," he said.

I wonder if I do, Norm thought. "I'm serious, son. Come find me sometime."

"I will." The suborbital's hatch slid shut and it lifted away. The fishermen went back to casting. Norman Campbell shouldered his pack and stood in the shadow of the mountain, looking back down the valley. After a long while, he turned to his left and began making his way slowly up the side of the mountain, a man without answers.

Alex Irvine's first story for us was "Rosetti Song" earlier this year. His new one is a compelling story that, like James Morrow's "Auspicious Eggs," examines the decisions we make for those too young to choose for themselves.

Mr. Irvine and his wife Beth live outside of Boston where they are pursuing careers in academia.