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My mother was a puncher. My father was not. Whenever the fog inside my mother's head began to suffocate her, she'd squeeze her milky fist into a square of unsentimental fury and let loose on the world. She would hammer down without warning, her face as straight as Bud Abbott's. She would hit the wall, the dog, the ripe country air, the windshield of our hatchback. She would hit my father. My brother and I were spared the physical assaults. Though "spared" is probably the wrong word.

Scooby and I would lie in the dark and listen to the slaps and the thunder coming from downstairs, noises we associated with the dull impact of deflated soccer balls and bags of sawdust, the whomp, the oof, the collapse. "Goddamn," Scooby would say to the ceiling. "Goddamn." Hit her, I'd think, throttling the stuffed killer whale beneath my pillow. I'd slow my breathing and knead the beans in Shamu's belly. I'd time my thoughts with the pulsing drum in my head. Hit. Her. Back. Hit. Her. Back. My father never did.

If they'd been yellers, I might have been able to get out of bed, rush to the top of the steps, and scream until they stopped what they were doing and came to stare at me. But the beatings were silent and systematic, my father taking it, as they say, like a man. The fights materialized like report cards in the mailbox. You could feel them coming, but you could only guess when the real trouble would start. Then, suddenly, howdy-do, there they were, failures and absences in black and white for all the world to see. My mother would flatten her cigarette into the remains of her rhubarb pie, and we'd look around the dinner table to see who was in for it tonight. Would it be Scooby and me, tongue-lashed into a corner, crying because we'd just been told that we were going to hell for worshipping Pete Rose, a false idol? Or would it be Ramsey, my father, already bruised beneath his cheap suit coat, accepting blow after blow, for reasons unknown, without ever saying, "Stop?"

When I was eight, I blamed myself for the methodical press that was mashing my family. Scooby was adrift in the world of junior high football and pinball arcades, so I'd come home from school and set the table, put sheet music on the piano. I'd arrange the house in a way that defied disturbance. I'd dust and vacuum and bury the steak knives in the basement crawlspace. I'd sit in the kitchen and do my homework, filling in pie slices with colored pencil or reading about young Daniel Boone shooting a panther with a squirrel gun.

One by one, my kin would slouch through the door, cross the linoleum, and grab a chicken leg from the fridge. My mother would show up first and look at me like I was an appliance from an alien world. Scooby would step through the screen door an hour later, keeping his hand on the frame so it wouldn't bang shut. He'd nod at me before flopping on the floor to watch *Taxi* or *Barney Miller*. I'd still be in the kitchen, the windows now dark, when my father got home from the furniture store, tie askew and glasses slipping down his nose. "Farris," he'd say, standing stiff as a toy soldier and placing a finger on my vocabulary worksheet. "Studying again." Then he'd laugh to himself, grab a Stroh's, and disappear into his workshop in the old barn, content to spend the evening surrounded by miniature figurines of Confederate legends.

I'd sit at the table and kick at my backpack on the floor. I considered what was left of my family: the whirr of my mother's sewing machine upstairs, the barn light spilling across the lawn, the canned laughter in the family room, the ticking of the kitchen clock. Each of us alone in the spaces we'd carved. I'd take a blank sheet of paper from my notebook and pull a compass from my plastic utensil pouch. I'd stab the compass point hard into the old oak table and begin to make circles. Every few revolutions I'd widen the angle so the pencil marks formed an expanding spiral. I'd go around and around, pressing as hard as I could, not stopping until I reached the edge of the page. Then I'd stare into the vortex and wonder what I'd done wrong.

I've told this story a dozen times in the last few weeks, ever since my father disappeared and the lizard man returned, and I always end up feeling soggy inside, like there's a spitball caught in my throat. It's a story about my father and me, but people would rather hear about the lizard. The claws, they say, how long were they? And did it really eat your car? They're less interested in my mother's death or my graduation speech or the tiny metal figurine of General George Pickett collecting lint in the front pocket of my Levi's.

But I tell the whole story anyway. If Suzy is with me, she'll hold my hand and nod at just the right times. "Twenty years," she'll say. "I can't even remember who I was back then. Can anyone?" She's trying to make things easier, to offer up some excuse to explain why I did what I did. In bed at night with the stars shining down on us, just as they do in a song, Suzy, my gal, my one true love, tells me she understands. She strokes my head, as if her simple caress has the power to draw the sorrow from my skull, as if she can pull apart my brain like it is so much cotton candy. Like the past—the crooked, shape-shifting past—is nothing but a cloud.

In September of my senior year, my mother started to die, murdered slowly like that famous baseball player, a victim of her own nervous system. We knew something was wrong when her speech turned oatmeal thick. She'd still cuss at my father, but the words came out like ketchup: gudam, subitch, dumfug.

I'd spent my childhood trying to avoid eye contact. Living with my mother was like living with one of those mummies from the late-night fright shows. If we stayed out of her way, didn't disturb her inner sanctum, my mother would let us live. If you want to understand my mother, consider her sense of humor: decorating the yard for Halloween with cardboard tombstones featuring the names of her only living children.

Candace Flanagan, 5'4", 125 pounds of spit and vinegar, believed in two tenets: go to church on Sunday and every man for himself. She wore no aprons, baked no cakes. She taught us

to scramble our own eggs, scrub our own socks. To the outside world, she was quiet, humble, perhaps even sweet. She wore her hair in a tight bun, smiled at church, politely refused spaghetti dinner invitations, and spent her evenings sewing dresses to donate to the Methodist relief pantry. She saved her true self for us, her family, her flesh and her blood. Her fury was ours alone. I realize now that my mother was not well, her psyche crumbling in a way that supposedly runs in families. When I was young, however, I saw my mother as a simple equation: she was edgy, tense, mean as a drowning squirrel. She was no one I wanted to know.

My father, meanwhile, sold tables and chairs, flowery sofas that turned into beds. He was no Steve Martin, but at least he would talk to me, occasionally pull a coin from behind my ear. I knew he loved my mother because he told me to pray for her every night. Plus, there was the black-and-white wedding photo nailed to a rafter at the bottom of our basement steps: my father running beneath a shower of rice, my mother clinging to his hand and covering her head, both laughing wildly. But as distant as that image seemed to me, there might as well have been dinosaurs in the background. No one in my family held hands anymore.

One Friday night, just before my mother was diagnosed, I got home from a football game and heard the sewing machine sputtering in the guest room. I stood by the door and watched through the crack as my mother pounded on the table with both fists and let out a frustrated shriek. She shifted her weight and slid like a teardrop to the floor. Then she picked up the foot pedal, banged it twice against the table leg, and fell on it with all her weight. The machine picked up speed, pounding like a jackhammer and buzzing like a blender. The blue cloth on the needle plate began to bunch and the machine hiccupped as if it were being choked.

I had already backed away and was leaping down the stairs three at a time when I heard the grand crash of a sewing machine. Something was wrong with my mother, and I'd lived with her

long enough to know that she'd blame the first of us who caught her sight. I slipped through the fence in the backyard and headed into the darkness, content, like so many times before, to let my father take the fall.

Now, when Suzy, my wife, is brushing her teeth and I'm lying alone in bed, I can wonder if things would have been different if I'd kicked open the door and grabbed my mother by the shoulders, shouting at her to tell me what was wrong. I know I couldn't have saved her. The dominoes had started to topple, my mother's motor neurons slipping off the conveyor belt one by one. But I was just a kid then, a seventeen-year-old chump who had given up on his family years ago. My mother was broken in some irreversible way, and, truth be told, I didn't care. I'd stopped praying for her to be normal long ago. Why would God listen if I asked for help now?

She died half a year later, on March 21, in room 323 of Lakeview Hospital. When it happened, my father was crying and holding her hand. That's what made me want to throw up. Not the sight of my mother full of tubes, not the flat buzz of the monitor on the wall, not the smell of mouthwash and cotton balls that had been hanging on my clothes for months, but the image of my father, Ramsey Flanagan, bowing before the beast. Scooby and I looked at each other while the nurses averted their eyes and began to disconnect the machines. My brother pinched two fingers together and brought them to his lips in a silent question. He tilted his head toward the door and I shrugged. My father didn't look up, and we didn't wave goodbye.

We listened to Pink Floyd in Scooby's 'Vette in the parking lot and let the smoke swirl around our heads. I stared at the familiar window on the third floor and waited for someone to turn out the lights.

After my mother died, the lights in Ramsey's barn remained dark. No matter how early I got up for school, I'd find him at the kitchen table, fingers wrapped around a coffee mug as if he were afraid it might fly out the window. He had gone to work at the furniture

store a few times, but mostly he spent his days driving endless loops around the lake. One morning, after I saw him throw his shotgun in the backseat, I skipped school and tailed him. He drove for hours, winding his way on 366, 235, Turkeyfoot Road. At sunset, I walked up as he sat at a picnic table looking toward Turtle Shell Island. He wasn't surprised to see me.

"Farris," he said.

"Ramsey," I said.

We sat in silence for ten minutes before I asked him what we were doing.

"What are we doing?" he repeated. "What are we doing?" He hummed a long, flat question mark. A duck descended on the water, wings flapping. "That's the $64,000 question, Farris. That's the one you save for the pearly gates."

I sat beside my father and imagined how many bruises he had absorbed over the years. I wondered if they would ever heal.

"We used to camp here," he said. "Before you were born."

I nodded, trying to picture my mother in a sleeping bag.

"We had some good times," Ramsey said, pressing his palms flat on the bench.

I wanted to ask him how his life had ended up the way it did, why he let her treat him like a chew toy. But my tongue began to swell. I looked in my father's eyes and knew that now was not the time.

My father got up, and I followed him to the water. He picked up a stone and weighed it in his hand. Then he cast it sidearm toward the island. It skimmed the surface and leapt wildly in a new direction, once, twice, three times. I grabbed my own rock and heaved it skyward. The lake exploded when the boulder hit, my ears filling with a suctiony ploosh. I stood beside my father and counted the rings as they bloomed from the impact, circles upon circles stretching toward the sunset, waves rippling outward all the way to the horizon.

Four weeks after the funeral, I was sitting at the kitchen table working on the second draft of my graduation speech when my

father was attacked by the lizard man. You can read all about it at the district library in Bellefontaine. Just ask old Ms. Barnes for every issue of the *Logan County Tab* from April through August 1989. If they've all been stolen, ask for the microfiche.

It was a Thursday night. My father's Nova ripped up our gravel driveway and skidded to a stop sideways, the headlights casting unfamiliar shadows on the cabinets above the stove. I dropped my pencil as Ramsey thudded into the room and scrambled for the wall phone. His hair was trying to flee his scalp, and his hands were jumping like trout.

"Jesus," I said, getting up and leaning out the door. The car was running, no one else in sight. "What the fuck is going on?"

My father spun the last digit and mashed the phone against his ear. He gulped the greasy kitchen air and wrenched the cold-water faucet before sticking his face directly under the rush. Dripping from eyebrow and nose, he waved me away and barked into the receiver.

"It's in the swamp," he shouted. "It went back in the swamp."

I sprinted upstairs and grabbed the other line. Dorsey Mason, Scooby's former classmate and recently appointed deputy of the Indian Lake Police Department, was demanding to know who was calling.

"This is Ramsey Flanagan, 1-2-5 Patterson Drive, you son of a bitch."

"Dorsey," I interrupted. "It's Farris. I don't know what's going on, but my dad is flipping out. You better get someone over here."

Dorsey let out a long breath. "He ain't hurt, is he?"

"No," my father and I said at the same time.

I heard the screen door bang, and I hung up the phone.

By the time Dorsey got to our house, I had heard Ramsey's story three times, but I couldn't figure out how he had destroyed his car, or why. The front fender of his Nova was torn in half, the left headlight busted to reveal a coil of twisted wire snakes.

Deep scratches crisscrossed the entire front grill as if a set of metal teeth had been gnawing on the hood. Additional gouges ran to the trunk which was broken, unclosable, wrenched off its hinges. The top of the car had caved in as if someone had dropped a bowling ball on the roof. The back left tire was shredded and limp on the grass, like a dirty piece of lettuce.

I'd convinced Ramsey that Dorsey wouldn't believe his story until he calmed down, so my father paced the yard while I gave Deputy Mason a tour of the Nova.

"Holy fuck," Dorsey said, running a gloved finger along the scratch marks. "This wasn't no car crash."

"Dorsey," I said quietly, turning my back to my father. "He says it was a lizard man."

Dorsey twisted his face into a confused corkscrew. "He says he hit a lizard?"

"No," I said, holding my hand above my head to indicate height. "A giant. Lizard. Man."

"Oh, shit," Dorsey said, looking over my shoulder. "Is he for real?"

I nodded and called Ramsey over.

What my father told Dorsey was reprinted on the front page of the *Tab* the next afternoon along with a photograph of the abused Nova. I don't know which was worse: hearing the story from my father's own lips or seeing it there on page one, knowing that this same black ink would soon be rubbing off in the sweaty hands of farmers, truck drivers, and high school students all across Logan County.

To his credit, Ramsey's story never changed. When offered the chance to embellish, hyperbolize, or retract his claims, he never wavered. What he told us that night was the same story he would tell for twenty years, all the way up until last month when he disappeared, some say, from the face of the earth.

While driving on the unpaved portion of Township Road 51 near the North Fork swamplands, Ramsey Flanagan, age 48, popped a tire. He had just removed the jack from his trunk when he heard a thumping from the trees to the north. He squinted

into the dusk and saw a "bipedal humanoid cryptid" (the *Tab*'s official description) scuttling toward him.

"It was 25 yards away and its red eyes were burning a demon's rage," my father said that night and every night thereafter. "By the time I got in the car, the thing was clawing at my door and hissing like a speared milk snake." Then it jumped on the roof and howled.

According to Ramsey, the lizard man had three black-nailed toes on each foot and green scaly skin. When Ramsey threw the Nova into reverse, the lizard man was jolted onto the hood where it stared my father in the face and flicked its pink tongue in and out like a flame. Ramsey shifted gears, floored the accelerator and jerked the wheel. The lizard man slid to the ground, grabbed the bumper and lifted the front end of the car three feet off the ground. When Ramsey laid on the horn, the lizard man dropped the car, smashed the headlight with his three-fingered fist, and glided into the swampy forest.

In my father's own words: "This particular lizard man was vicious. He was strong and he was angry." Garrett Simmons, the *Tab* reporter who usually covered farming and high school sports, must have typed this line two dozen times over the next three weeks as lizard man hysteria swallowed Logan County. Sitting at our kitchen table that first night, Garrett wiggled his pencil at me and asked for my thoughts on this business. "No comment," I said, setting my face in the aggravated glare that would mark my involvement in the story from then until eternity.

See, people knew my father. They'd never pegged him as a crazy man. He was the guy to find when you needed a deal on a leather sectional, Scooby's dad, the man who'd reconstructed Antietam in his barn. Ramsey Flanagan. Average Joe. Two sons. Dead wife. Church-going Methodist. Same as you and me. Maybe this is why the story stuck, why it wasn't just chalked up as the moonshiney ranting of a tattooed hillbilly. Or maybe I just didn't get the joke.

In any case, I think you know most of the rest. How the *Tab* thought they'd hit pay dirt and ran some variation of the story

on the front page for five days in a row. How the Logan County Sheriff's Department rushed in, with barely a wink, and held up to the TV cameras the plaster casts of "three-toed footprints" taken from the scene. How the story radiated to Springfield, Columbus, Louisville, Vermont. How my father grabbed every microphone in sight and told his tale, always ending with the same dire pronouncement: "We don't know what the lizard man wants, but you can be sure that he doesn't want to be our friend."

All I wanted was to get to graduation in June, maybe find a girlfriend, and figure out what I would do with the rest of my life. Classmates would pass me in the hallways, extend their fingers like talons, and hiss, "Lizard man!" then try to give me a high-five. I couldn't decide if this was worse than being known as the kid whose mom had croaked. I'd grin and shrug and dump my books in my locker which someone had decorated with a series of tiny reptilian footprints.

Only Mr. Kolman, my history teacher, cared enough to make sure I wasn't cracking up. He motioned for me to stay one day after Civics and told me he'd seen my father on TV.

"Yeah," I said. "He does that."

"Is he OK?" Mr. Kolman said. "I mean, with everything?"

I knew Mr. Kolman was thinking about my mother. He'd been one of the few teachers to come to her funeral. He was that kind of guy, even though all I'd ever gotten from him was Bs. I told him everything was weird but fine.

"You don't believe him, do you?" Mr. Kolman said, tossing me a Jolly Rancher.

I didn't know how to answer this question. Did I believe a seven-foot-tall lizard man had nearly eaten my father? Did anyone? I mean, really?

"I don't know," I said. "Something happened that night. I just don't know what it was." I unwrapped the hard fruity cube and popped it in my mouth to indicate I was done talking.

"Well, hang in there," Mr. Kolman said, walking me to the door. "Remember what Gandhi said: The truth transcends history. Lizards don't live forever. Your dad will be OK."

For a few days, Mr. Kolman was right. No reporters knocked on the door. The phone was silent. Ramsey, who'd spent the week staring at his Nova or flipping pages in the Animal Kingdom picture books he'd gotten from the library, would have to go back to work.

By this point, I was staying most nights with Scooby in his apartment above Buck's Drugstore, where he'd lived since my sophomore year. I couldn't handle my father's descent, his creepy sketches of lizard people on the refrigerator staring at me each time I reached for the OJ, so Scooby opened his doors. "Like you had to ask," he said, handing me a canned beer. Having a brother named Scooby (born Scofield Flanagan) carried with it all the joys and difficulties you might expect. He was a goof, a clown. He liked Donkey Kong more than anything in the world. Classmates, his and mine, assumed that Scooby could score them some weed, and usually they were right. He'd made enough from selling dimes and working construction to buy a used Corvette, yellow with red fenders. But Scooby, for all his flaws, was a protector, always there to shield me as best he could from the shitstorms of the world.

When the lizard man struck again, I was on Scooby's futon, smoking a bowl and watching a *20/20* report on a Colombian jetliner that crashed into a mountain. During a commercial break, the local anchorwoman broke in with a tease about the new sighting. "Keep your pets indoors tonight." She smiled brilliantly into the camera. "The lizard man is on the prowl. Details in twenty minutes."

"Fuck," Scooby said. "Fuckin' A."

I turned up the volume. The lead video on the local broadcast was Pop Newman, a frantic man in a baseball cap, shouting at close range into the news camera. He had spotted the lizard man while penning his goats earlier that evening. "I seen him peepin' his head around that tree," Pop said. "His eyes was real big. Kind of like …" Pop raised his eyebrows and glared at the camera as if he was trying to win a funny face contest.

The next thing they showed was a clip of my father's chewed-up Nova. Then the toothy anchor said my father's name, and I got the sinking feeling that the real madness was just beginning.

Two days later, Gus Mitchell said he saw the lizard man loafing along the grassy runway as he prepared to lift off in his crop duster. That weekend, Alf Henderson, wearing a homemade Lizard Man! t-shirt, appeared on the seven o'clock news raving about how he'd seen a creature walking right on top of Indian Lake as he fished for crappies one morning. That same day, Dixie Smith went to the police with a story of "six or seven" missing cats. When the reporters showed up, she unveiled her station wagon, pieces of which were ripped and bent, scratch marks on all four doors. "Whatever did this was big and bad," she said, solemnly, before looking into the lens and warning that, from now on, her shotgun was locked and loaded and waiting for the lizard man should he ever choose to show his face.

Like an electric cattle prod, my father's story had Logan County bucking and kicking, confused, out of breath, and stumbling toward an unknown destination. The general atmosphere was not one of fear, as you might expect when a terrible beast is lurking in your woods, but one of excited anticipation. The sleepy streets of Logan County were buzzing like the carnival had come to town. Huddy's Hardware even tied some green balloons to their porch railing and put out a sign for a Lizard Man Special: Flashlights, Batteries, and Bibles, 50% off. A stranger from Toledo showed up in Town Square and started selling Lizard Man tee shirts from dented cardboard boxes. People gathered for parties on lake house decks and, I imagine, tried to startle each other by throwing rocks into the dark underbrush when no one was looking.

Ramsey, for the first time in his life, was a star. He organized hunts, leading a daily parade of slow-moving pickup trucks around the lake, scanning the deepest, darkest groves for a pair of burning red eyes. He felt—he told me on the phone— just like Lieutenant Henry Thomas Harrison, lead scout for General Lee, wandering the hills of southern Pennsylvania, trying to convince Longstreet to summon enough troops to counteract the Union army's secret advance. I told him to get a grip, then slammed the receiver into its cradle.

The torture of living with my mother was supposed to be over. Ramsey was unbound, free at last to be my dad. And now he'd gone and spotted a lizard man. I mean, Jesus Christ, embracing the lunacy was no way to grieve. What was he trying to prove?

I'd never understood my father. I'd watched him absorb my mother's abuse, punch by obstinate punch, and never raise the slightest defense, as if he were a silent lump of dough. On the good days, my mother would pack Scooby's lunch, leave the box of Cheerios on the table for me to pour. She might even set aside her sewing on Sunday nights and come down to sit beside my father on the couch when we all watched *TV's Bloopers and Practical Jokes*. On the bad days, when Scooby left the cap off the Listerine, when I had been coughing too much in my sleep, when Ramsey's commission check wasn't enough to cover our monthly Methodist tithe, my mother breathed fire. My father would stand in her path as if summoning the flames, and my mother's inferno would sear him to the bone.

For years, I'd wanted nothing more than for my father to toss Scooby and me into the backseat of his Nova and drive until we woke up next to an ocean. Then we'd buy tickets for the boat that would take us to a place my mother could never go. At the very least, I expected him to grab my raging mother by the wrist, just once, yank her arm behind her back, and tell her that he'd had enough. She wasn't allowed to treat us like this anymore. She was going to start acting like a mother, the kind we'd seen on TV. One day, I kept hoping, he was going to save us all.

One afternoon when I was in third grade, Scooby and I got off the bus and, as we approached the house, heard familiar stomps coming from my mother's room. She was home early from the hospital phone bank, where she transferred calls from nine to five, every Tuesday through Saturday. "You better clear out," Scooby said, ducking through our split-rail fence and jogging back down the road toward his friend Lonny's house. "Come find us if you need to."

I stood on the porch for a minute, moving from foot to foot,

having to pee but not sure I wanted my mother to know I was home. A slammed door sent me scrambling across the yard, backpack leaping wildly on my shoulders. I rounded my father's barn and leaned against the peeling paint. Seventy feet away, the house was still. I looked toward the neighbors' windows in the distance, then peed a hard stream into the woodpile.

As I was finishing, I stared into the dark glass of the barn's only window. This was my father's workshop, the place where he became even more of a mystery, just a distant buzz of power tools and the occasional burst of sparks from a soldering iron. Hours and hours of silence. I'd been inside twice before, each time with my father's cold hand on my shoulder and his cold voice in my ear: "Don't touch anything."

On Saturdays, bearded men like Otto Kunstmann and Emil Brugger, guys who sold crummy antique furniture and dusty old six-shooters, would show up and knock on my father's barn. From my bedroom window, I'd watch my father open the door and welcome them inside, patting each man on the back as he crossed the threshold. They were there to marvel at Ramsey's latest re-creation, study the sweeping miniature landscapes of Corydon, Honey Hill, Shiloh, Manassas. My father, for all his stoic isolation, liked to show off.

As I stood on tiptoes that day and gazed into the barn, I could just make out the series of tables against the far wall. This is where Ramsey worked his magic, his nimble fingers rearranging life beneath a single bare bulb hanging from an extension cord. I zipped up, slipped out of my backpack, and placed my palms on the windowsill. The window was open an inch, a rare oversight for a man who kept his workshop padlocked and dark at all times. I gained a foothold on a loose log and wedged my hands under the window's crack. By climbing higher up the woodpile, I managed to create enough leverage to rattle the swollen window wide enough to wiggle through. I thudded onto the dirt floor and wiped my mouth on my school shirt, a move I would pay for on laundry day.

Exhilarated, but too scared to turn on the light, I moved

from table to table, letting my fingertips linger on the small metal soldiers charging across the scorched earth, their exquisite battle flags frozen in mid furl. Each table featured a separate combat zone complete with bucking horses, dying boys in dirty blue caps.

The entire room smelled of my father: oily rags, turpentine, an ocean of Old Spice. I'd often imagined him behind these locked doors, hunched on his workbench, painting an expression of surprise on one of his toy soldiers with a brush no thicker than a toothpick. I'd wanted to join him in the creation of these silent campaigns, forgetting for a few hours the theater of war across the yard. But whenever I'd ask, Ramsey would tug my ear. "Not today, Farris. Maybe when you're older, OK?" Eventually I stopped asking, convinced that my father was nearly as freakish as my mother. Following Scooby's lead, I assured myself that the secret to survival was to dismiss them both. I began to react to my family the same way I reacted in gym class when I had to square dance with one of the ugly girls: I chalked it up to bad luck, gritted my teeth, and glided along, step by step, promenading in time, content with the knowledge that the song would eventually end.

But that day, alone in my father's workshop, I was still sure that I could save my family if I could just uncover the magic words. They had to be in here somewhere. Hours later, as the actual sun slumped behind the western treeline, I studied the precisely placed farmhouses of Virginia, the rows of infantry crouching behind fence posts and taking aim. Their gray-clad enemies advanced in a perfect line, erect and determined, as if begging to be cut down. I leaned in close, picked up a rebel by his head, and brought him to my ear as if he might whisper me the secret. All I heard was a screen door banging in the distance, two dogs yapping to beat the band.

I laid awake that night, listening to the muffled sounds of my father at work in his barn. I was sure that, any minute now, he would come stomping up the stairs, flick on the light switch, and tell me to get my sorry behind out of bed. I had purposely left the window open in the barn, my quiet way of letting my

father know that I'd been in his space. I wanted him to be angry, to raise his hand. I wanted my father to defend his turf like a good little soldier.

The downstairs clock was chiming eleven when I heard my father come inside. A moment later, the upstairs hallway flooded with light, and I held my breath. Ramsey climbed the stairs and clomped down the hall. I heard him pause for a moment, whether outside my door or his own, I couldn't tell. Then I heard the creak of a hinge, the rush of a faucet, and, once again, I was back in the familiar silence of night.

By Memorial Day of senior year, I had moved in with Scooby, far from Ramsey's bloodshot eyes, his maps of Logan County blanketing the kitchen table. I hadn't seen my father this worked up since, well, ever. He was twitching with energy, eating nothing but instant oatmeal and Bagel Bites. His workshop remained dark.

On a Tuesday afternoon, I was home to wash some socks, when Ramsey burst into the laundry room and raised a rolling pin over his head. "Jesus, Farris," he said, setting the tool on the counter with a shaky hand. "I didn't know you were home."

"Hmmm," I said. "No kidding."

"Well, so, you're home."

I had nothing to say to this man. Not anymore. "Apparently."

"Aren't you supposed to be at school?"

"It's 5:00, Dad."

Ramsey was rattled, like a dog scared of thunder. "Oh, I see."

With my foot, I nudged a plastic chair in his direction, and he dropped into it like he'd been shot. "You know, I'm graduating on Sunday. High school. Like, this is it. No more school. I'm giving a speech, remember?"

Ramsey was looking past me into the spin of the wash. "Farris. You are? You are. I know. I remember. I'll be there. We're so proud of you."

I fiddled with a knob on the dryer. *We're so proud.* I tried to let it go. I was 17 years old. My mother was dead. My father was falling to pieces. What was I supposed to say? I didn't know the magic words that would make the misery disappear.

"Why are you doing this?" I said, banging my fist into the dryer, making a hollow boom. "This whole lizard man story is insane, you know that? People think you're fucking crazy." I wasn't convinced this was entirely true, but it was easier to say "people" than it would have been to say "I." "This whole town is fucking nuts. And it's because of you."

Ramsey reached down and picked up a bottle of stain-removing spray. "I saw something, Farris. I don't expect you to understand."

"Oh, bullshit!" I shouted. "Mom's dead and you can't handle it and you came up with this—all this crazy shit—because you're pathetic and I can't understand why you can't just act normal for once in your life. Jesus Christ!"

This is when my father started squirting me with the stain remover. It came out in a stream, hitting me in the chin, the neck. It smelled like my mother's flower garden. He stayed in the chair, squeezing the trigger with both hands, as I put up my fists to shield my face. I lunged forward and grabbed the bottle, trying to wrench it from Ramsey's grasp. The plastic chair bent backwards and we ended up in a heap on the tile, damp and sputtering.

I scrambled to my feet, bottle in hand, nozzle pointed at my father's head. He lay beside the overturned chair, staring at the ceiling with his hands near his face.

"Are you OK?" I said, backing away. "Dad?" I was filled with anger, not at my father, but at the world, the dirty-kneed citizens of Logan County, for letting him become this pile of flesh on the ground, for believing every nutty word he said and celebrating like it was the Fourth of July.

Ramsey sat up and pressed his back against the wall without looking at me. His breath was slow and steady, like air from a punctured tire. He nodded. He was OK.

I left my father on the floor. I set the bottle down, pushed a button to stop the washing machine, grabbed an armful of dripping socks, and left my father, sad and confused, on the cold, hard floor.

Graduation Day was blustery and cool, weather that turned umbrellas inside out and had all the girls in the class of '89 reaching for extra bobby pins to keep their hair from whipping everyone in the face. As a featured speaker, I got to sit on the dais in the middle of the football field and look down at the sea of 155 blue-gowned Lakers for what I knew would be the last time. I saw Scooby leaning against the fence that surrounded the track and raised my chin in his direction. He waved. I scanned the bleachers for Ramsey, not sure whether I wanted him to be there or not.

As the faculty processed into the stadium, Mr. Kolman gave me a thumbs-up, and I returned the salute. He was the one who'd convinced me to enter the speech contest back in January, probably assuming I needed something like this to help me keep my mind off the fact my mother was dying. I was pretty sure he'd rigged the whole process, which was supposed to be anonymous, and made sure that my speech was chosen as the winner. I'd made it funny and sweet, a masterpiece of metaphor with all the standard lines about rivers and clocks and windows of opportunity. I reminded everyone that commencement was a beginning not an end.

I was scheduled to speak after valedictorian Anna Miller and class president Corey Hanes, but suddenly I realized I had nothing to say. I didn't feel like telling any of these people to go forth and follow their dreams. They were nothing like the "seedlings" to which I was about to compare them. I could not, with a straight face, encourage these grinning goons to spread their wings and make the world a better place.

As the pomp ended and the circumstance began, I saw Ramsey in the top row, seated near the press box, hair combed and glasses straight on his face. Principal Krapptauer was

introducing Anna to the crowd, giving a two-minute bio that mentioned her scholarship to Wittenberg and her hours of candy striping at Lakeview Hospital. I tuned out her entire speech as well as Corey's. I focused instead on Ramsey, studying his attentiveness, squinting to see how the other grownups in the crowd were looking at him. He was clearly by himself, plenty of space on the bleachers in front and to the side. At one point, Lonny Murphy's dad leaned back two rows, tapped my father's foot, and said something that made Ramsey smile.

I was still staring at my father when the crowd rippled with laughter, and I realized Corey must have made a joke. My ears burned when I heard the words "lizard man."

"As we've seen by now," Corey was saying, "the world is full of lizard men. Our challenge, as the Indian Lake High Class of 1989, is to tackle these beasts head-on and take them down. In the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a man who faced many lizard-people in his days, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Thank you, God bless, and go Lakers!"

The crowd cheered its approval, the senior boys woofing like dogs as Corey cranked his fist in the air. Heading back to his seat, Corey high-fived everyone on the stage. From the podium, Principal K thanked him and then looked my way. "Our final student speaker is the winner of our commencement speech contest, Farris Flanagan. Farris?"

I approached the microphone to polite applause. For the first time in my life, everyone knew who I was: the kid with the dead mother, the brother who sold ditchweed, the father who'd come face to face with the lizard man. It was time for me to speak.

I pulled the speech from my pocket, the typed words blurring, spinning off the page. I gazed out at the parents and children of Logan County, the teachers, councilmen, and priests, the potential victims of a bloodthirsty lizard man. I blinked at Scooby who was already turning to walk away as if he knew what I was about to do. I stared at my father, Ramsey Flanagan, anxious and alone in the top row, and I crumpled my speech into a ball.

My wife and I talk about what I did next. "You were under so much stress," Suzy says. "You were only a boy." With my head pillowed in her lap, I can almost believe her. But even back then, I wasn't sure whether I was trying to save Ramsey from himself or destroy him once and for all.

What I did was breathe once, heavily, into the microphone, and speak what was in my heart. "My father," I said, pausing and glaring at the audience long enough that they knew we were all in store for trouble, "is a liar." The simple words tumbled out and sat there, big as boulders, on the fifty-yard line.

I told the assembled crowd that the lizard man was a lie, a story made up by a lonely man. My father, I shouted, was crying for attention, and, God damn it, Logan County had obliged. How could anyone believe him? I pounded the lectern. I pointed my finger at the pep band, the droopy dads with cameras hanging around their necks, the gray-haired grannies in the front row. What was wrong with everyone? By the time Mr. Kolman wrestled me from the podium, I had managed to indict the entire town as blind, gullible, idiotic, and insane. I was still shouting, "There is no lizard man!" when Mr. Luchsinger, the gym teacher, wrapped his arms around my waist like I was a sack of flour, carried me into the locker room, and dumped me on the moldy shower floor.

You can probably imagine the rest: how the town was chirping about who was more crazy (my father or me), how everyone I met treated me like I was carrying a loaded weapon, how I quit my job at the lumber yard, withdrew my registration from classes at the Ohio Hi-Point Career Center, and began to study schedules at the bus station.

For a week, I stayed on Scooby's futon, smoking and watching *The Price is Right*, eating Kentucky Fried Chicken by the bucket. Scooby would get home from painting houses, shake his head at me, and say, "Best speech in the history of Indian Lake High School." I'd give him the finger without looking away from the screen.

I was beginning to feel like maybe things could go back to normal, like maybe I hadn't blown a hole in the middle of the universe and been sucked into space. I wasn't yet ready to look Ramsey in the eye, but I considered the possibility that maybe some day he could forgive me. Maybe I could forgive him.

And then the lizard man returned. Logan County needed him. He was, after all, so much fun. A whole truckload of midnight skinny-dippers went on record with the Logan County Sheriff's Department describing a "walking lizard person" who "menaced and molested" them at their "campfire gathering near Sassafras Point." Within hours, the Lizard Man t-shirts returned, the hunting parties, the out-of-town media. Lizard Man mania had never really gone away. The only difference was that, this time, my father was taking a backseat. I never once saw him on the news. Scooby had heard that Ramsey was back at work doing full shifts and minding his own business. He hadn't retracted his story, but he wasn't shouting it from the hilltops either.

Three days after the return of the lizard man, I got my diploma in the mail with a note from Mr. Kolman. "Let me know if you need anything," he wrote, ending with a postscript: "A lie would have no sense unless the truth were felt as dangerous. —Alfred Adler." I didn't know what to make of that. Why did grownups always have to be so mysterious? I tossed the note, and the diploma, in the Dumpster behind Buck's.

At the end of June, I told Scooby I was leaving. I asked him to keep an eye on Ramsey, and he said he'd do his best. He handed me a bag of aces and told me not to smoke them all in one place. I said I'd call him from wherever I ended up, probably Columbus or Cincinnati. Then we hugged the way brothers do and exchanged punches.

When I walked out the door that Friday morning, I had a backpack full of flannel shirts, $1200 in cash from three years of carrying wood, and one piece of unfinished business. I found Ramsey in his workshop, cutting two-by-fours and assembling them into what I assumed would become a series of antebellum farmhouses. I stood in the doorway and knocked until he heard

me.

"Farris," he said, surprised, like he was speaking to someone newly risen from the grave.

"Yes," I said, noticing his mouth was full of nails.

"I haven't seen you," he said, looking at the backpack near my ankles. "I was wondering when you'd be leaving."

"Now, I guess."

"Oh."

We stared at each other for another minute. I was waiting for him to take the nails out of his mouth and eventually he did.

"Do you, uh, need anything?" he said, gesturing toward the house. "Anything?"

I shook my head, tired of our stupid dance, our inability to say the words that mattered.

"I want you to be well," I said, at last. "I just want you to—." My voice trailed off. I was going down an unfamiliar path, and I had lost my way.

"I know," Ramsey said. "I'll be OK. You don't have to worry about me." He turned his head and nodded at the nearest table. "Gettysburg," he said. "You want to see?"

I stepped across the room and looked down at the battlefield as my father pointed to the companies of soldiers assembled on a landscape that stretched nearly eight feet on each side, the biggest construction I'd ever seen Ramsey attempt. There were hundreds of meticulously posed soldiers, a labyrinth of rocks on a hillside, actual water bubbling in a stream, dozens of handcrafted trees. My father directed my attention around the board. "Little Round Top," he said. "Devil's Den. Spangler Spring."

Just as I was thinking the word, Ramsey said it: "My masterpiece."

It was beautiful. So delicate, so precise. It could not have been the work of a crazy man.

"What's going to happen?" I said, pointing to a gathering of soldiers atop a western ridge.

"Ah, well," my father said. "This." He picked up a Confederate general on horseback and held him to the light. The man's mouth

was open in a silent scream, his sword was raised, his horse was bucking on two legs. "General George Pickett," he said, placing the man back in front of his troops, "is about to lead a charge down this hill." He traced a finger out onto the open plain. "Nine brigades," he said, continuing to point to various locations. "Dust, smoke, fog. The 8th Ohio Infantry is about to hit them with a surprise artillery barrage from Cemetery Hill. Pickett will obey orders, keep telling his men to advance, expecting to get help from Pettigrew to the south, but, by the end of the day," my father paused, "it will be a bloodbath. Confederate casualties over 6,000. It will turn the tide of the war. Pickett will be humiliated. Lee will be scrambling just to survive." Ramsey sighed like a man who'd just watched the sun set.

A question occurred to me, a question I had never asked.

"So who did you want to win?" I said. "I mean, if you had been there."

My father squinted down at Gettysburg. "Oh, Farris," he said, "always taking sides." He trotted a blue soldier onto the field, then slid a gray soldier out to meet him. "What does it matter? Winning was an impossibility. You should know that by now." With a flick of Ramsey's finger, both soldiers toppled over, wounded, dying, dead.

I thought of the hours it had taken to build this battleground, this monument to the slain. I pictured Ramsey as a young father preparing his troops, then marching silently across the lawn, directly into the line of fire, bracing for the barrage that awaited him despite his ever-present white flag.

"Why didn't you save us?" I said, the words falling, like marbles, from my mouth. "Why did you stay with her?"

Ramsey breathed a circle of air and bumped his fist against his lips three times. "You didn't know her, Farris," he said. "You never did."

As Ramsey gazed down at Gettysburg, I picked up a nail and clenched it between my teeth, hoping the taste would trigger understanding. My dry mouth filled with the bitter tang of iron.

"She was my wife," Ramsey said, picking up a screwdriver and jabbing it absently into the tabletop. "She was my wife, and

I thought I could help her. It's not easy, you know, walking away."

Ramsey fixed me in a stare, and I almost swallowed the nail. Then he smiled sadly, a look I recalled from a road trip we'd taken when I was ten. He'd driven me to an Amish farm to watch the bearded workers build intricate furniture. When they were done, he'd placed his hand atop mine and run it down the long, smooth edge of a bed frame. "Feel that?" he said, his smile on the verge of collapsing. "That, son, is precision. That is the work of a man who cares."

I removed the nail from my mouth and placed it carefully back in the box. Inside the house, the phone rang, and my father and I shivered out of our reverie. "I'll get that," Ramsey said. "I'll be right back."

As he moved, slow and steady, across the grass, I remembered that day, long ago, when I'd sat in this room and tried to figure out my father's life. I might have sat there for years and never understood. My father, then, now, and always, was a mystery.

I reached down, like the hand of God, and plucked General Pickett from his lead position on the hill, wondering what his doomed troops would do without their leader. Maybe, when the bugle cry came, they wouldn't go rushing into battle, heedless of their enemies. Maybe they'd simply curl up in the grass and take naps, pour their buckshot into a rabbit hole and go home to eat some pigeon stew. The massacre, I dared to imagine, could be postponed.

I pushed my thumb into Pickett's sword and felt a quick flash of pain as the surprisingly sharp metal sliced the skin. I dropped the tiny general into the front pocket of my jeans and scooped up my pack. Before I walked away for the final time, I pressed a bloody thumbprint into the doorframe, a crimson swirl to let my father know that I had been there, to let him know I was sorry for what I had done.

Twenty years passed before I set another foot in Logan County. Suzy can't believe this is true. "Not once?" she says, pulling a bowl of tomato soup from the microwave. "Not once," I say, cupping my hands around hers to steady the sloshing liquid.

"But it's your home," she says, blowing on a spoonful.

"No," I say, snapping the crackers in half. "You are."

We've done OK, Suzy and I. We've got three engineering degrees between us, a summer cabin near Lake Erie, two golden retrievers—Bud and Weiser—and only a handful of regrets. Suzy, I'm beginning to think, would be a good mother: soft hands, broad smile, killer apple crisp. But that would thrust me into fatherhood, an infinite jigsaw I've yet to unpuzzle.

Life, as you know, is full of surprises. Here's one: Scooby is a lawyer now, an honest-to-God, state-licensed attorney of law. He still lives in Logan County, specializing in labor disputes and workers' comp. He tells me he only smokes on the weekends. Good old Scofield Flanagan, Esquire, further proof that life doesn't have to be a one-way street to Pittsville.

When he called me last week with the news about my father, it was the first I'd heard from Scooby in three years.

"Farris," he said, right off the bat. "Ramsey is gone."

The words stung harder than I thought they would, like a paintball pellet striking bare skin. When I'd walked out of my father's yard with General Pickett that day, I'd known the slim odds of ever seeing him again. Still, he was my father.

"Gone," I said, not quite a question. I'd been anticipating his death for years.

"Disappeared," Scooby said. "Not a trace."

This was news. "Disappeared?" I said, loudly enough that Suzy came to the doorway of my study, her eyebrows knit up in a question mark.

Over the next twenty minutes, I got the full story, minus the kicker, which Scooby saved until I showed up on his doorstep the following day, Suzy in tow. Ramsey, ten years retired from selling chairs, had last been seen by Ned Hartman at the Coffee Stop the previous Saturday. When he'd missed a Wednesday appointment with Doc Schulz (his first no-show in 15 years), the good country doctor stopped by the house and found it quiet but for a clock radio beeping in the bedroom. He'd phoned the police, and the next day they found my father's Chevy out near

the lake on SR 254. Ramsey was nowhere in sight. The police, grim-eyed and heavy-voiced, had no leads. Scooby had said it best. My father was gone.

It was a four-hour drive to Scooby's, but Suzy and I pulled in at nine in the morning. He fed us toast and OJ, and steered us through some obligatory life updates before tossing me a stack of newspapers. I had to look twice at the date to make sure he hadn't pulled them from the archives. *LIZARD MAN RETURNS*, screamed yesterday's front-page banner, *Second Sighting in Five Days*. A hunter, this time, had fired on an aggressive bipedal creature near Milford Heights. County Sheriff Dorsey Mason was proceeding with caution. "It was probably a bear," he said in the article. "But we've seen enough in this part of the world to not take anything for granted."

"Bears aren't green," was the hunter's elegant reply.

As the article mentioned, these latest sightings were the first since August 1989. Since then, the lizard man had remained a legend, a weird source of civic pride. You could still find tee shirts in Buck's Drugstore, coffee mugs featuring a cartoonish grinning reptile welcoming you to Logan County. The original hysteria had faded by the end of that crazy summer. One of the skinny-dippers had admitted that her story was bogus, broken down during a filmed press conference and told everyone they'd concocted the joke just so they could "get theirselves on TV." My father, according to Scooby, called this girl a damn fool, and rejected all the reporters clamoring for interviews. He continued to tell his story to friends and co-workers, but, as far as he was concerned, from that day forward, the lizard man was a personal affair, his own private puzzle of terror and defeat.

I flipped through the rest of the broadsides and found my father's disappearance below the fold on page three of Friday's edition. I flapped the papers at my brother.

"Is this for real?" I said.

Scooby took a sip of coffee. "As real as it ever was."

For a minute I felt like Jimmy Stewart looking down the stairwell in *Vertigo*. Everything sliding, nothing in focus,

swallowed by a wave of déjà vu.

"So what do we do?" I said at last, gripping the edge of the table.

Scooby linked his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "I guess we face the facts," he said. "I guess we say goodbye."

After busting off the lock with a crowbar, we found Gettysburg in my father's workshop, back in a corner, beneath a blue tarp. He must have worked on other projects over the years but could never bring himself to disassemble his masterpiece. The miniature soldiers were just as I remembered them, brave and focused, ready to meet their fate.

"Olly olly oxen free," I said, as I gazed around the dusty room.

We'd agreed that Scooby would handle the legal complexities caused by an officially "missing" person. I told him to do whatever he needed to do; I didn't want any of Ramsey's stuff. After today, Logan County was not in my future. Though I did hope Scooby would preserve the barn.

"This is amazing," Suzy said, kneeling down to study the clay terrain, the painted wounds of the slaughtered warriors.

I reached into my pocket and removed the battered old general. The paint had faded, but you could still tell that this was an important figure. Pickett's sword had long ago snapped off, lost on a golf course or a subway. All that remained in his gloved fist was a blunted hilt. I'd carried him in my pocket for years as a charm, a talisman, as casual as a set of keys. He didn't come with me every day, but he was always around, keeled over on my nightstand or rearing back on my computer desk. When I felt the mysteries of the world getting under my skin, I'd drop him in my pocket and go forth to meet my challenges head-on.

As I set Pickett upright on the battlefield, back in front of his men where he belonged, I imagined Ramsey's final adventure: the glow he must have seen in the woods, the tentative exit from the Chevy, the uncertain steps into the darkness, the wonder

of it all. Was there really a lizard man waiting for him in the shadows? He'd been patient for years, and, at last, his lizard man had returned. Why couldn't this be true?

I knew that the more likely story was that Ramsey Flanagan had gone for a hike, slipped on a rock, hit his noggin, and been swallowed by the swamp. He had died quietly and alone, leaving behind one final mystery, more mythology for us to puzzle over when the moon was full, and we simply couldn't sleep.

My father, I tell people now, was a good man. Sure, he was weak and flawed in some fundamental ways for which I was never able to forgive him. But I've come to realize that this was just as much my fault as his. Like the boy sitting alone at the kitchen table, my father had been searching for the magic words, the secret potion that would have made his family whole. With each quiet punch he absorbed from my mother, he delivered a message to all of us: I love you. I love you. I love you. If only I'd heard it then. I might have understood his plummet when she died. I could have been the one reaching out for him in the darkness of that April night, instead of a scaly, three-fingered phantom.

Scooby and I replaced the tarp, threaded the broken padlock through the latch. We walked slowly to the house, fireflies blinking in the dusk like distant beacons on rocky shores. In the kitchen, Scooby put on a kettle for some tea, while Suzy and I collapsed into chairs at the old oak table. I brushed my hand across the surface and felt a series of dots, tiny pinpricks depressed in the wood. I peered down and began to see the traces of curving lines, faint circles radiating from the center. While Suzy rubbed my back, I pressed my finger into a narrow channel and swept it around, expanding outward until I began to sense that I was no longer following the groove. My finger was moving along on its own, spiraling away from the center, a lost soldier searching for home.