

Raid at Rockbridge Baths

The front door was open, knocking in the wind against the inner wall. A mound of earth, the result of geologic force or of varmints, had invaded the dining room. Slumped walls in the den were crumbling to the ribs.

The Parker farmhouse looked like shelter of a vanished race.

Virginians for a century, the Parkers had sold off their fallow cropland in pieces but kept the farmhouse and a patch of trees until 1985. Then an executor sold what was left to J.S. Church, who bought up derelict properties only students would lease.

In the kitchen, Jon and Ivan scoped drawers black with mouse droppings for a matchbook. They were bundled, two jackets each, the emphysemic oil heater helpless against February and ten pizza boxes subbing for window-panes.

"That frozen wood'll probably need lighter fluid," Jon said.

"Bonfires don't mean much when started on petrol."

"But matches are okay?"

Ivan struggled against two swallows of gin. "If you want to scrape lint from your belly button and get two rocks to sparking, have at it."

From the trees between the farmhouse and the Maury River, Ivan and Jon hauled a mass of wood into the snow-covered yard: stumps, limbs, fence posts, an ax handle, wreckage from a collapsed shed. They excavated a fire pit down to the yellow, frozen grass, the snow flying over their shoulders, their smiles those of college boys who didn't know the hardship of shoveling earth. The pyre was taller than the roof and a dozen feet across and looked like a cage for some giant animal who'd long ago escaped. They transplanted good bulbs from lamps in the living room to the fixtures outside, and snowflakes floated down through the beams of light as though a deep sleep were settling over the world.

With a ceremony of nods, Ivan struck a match and lit the school newspapers they'd laid as a fuse. Snakes of fire curled over the paper and fluttered up into the storm. Snowmelt hissed, and the flames sank away.

Ivan ducked into the house with Jon in tow. Posters of New York Mets hung in the hallway with a map of Germany. Above the blue-striped mattress in Ivan's bedroom were gashes in the wall. The room was open to the air, and a draft caused the naked bulb overhead to swing back and forth, illuminating a cigar store Indian and then a cheap wood desk. Then the Indian again.

Ivan was neck-less as a boar, his massive head and bushy sideburns able, themselves, to incite dislike. He tossed aside a stack of typed pages, three-inches thick and bound with rubber bands. He dumped his desk drawers, spilling a wire hanger, dried pot stems, a slice of pizza coagulated to a gym sock, *Commentaries on Living* by Krishnamurti.

The bonfire raged, snapped at the wind. The wood of the Indian was checkered, pink and pulsing, like the cooking flesh of a god.

"Kindling," Ivan said and stacked the drawers in Jon's arms.

"We got three months to graduation. You might want a desk."

"Don't ever buy anything at Wal-Mart," Ivan said and stomped the desk flat.

Outside at the pyre, Jon rolled sections of Ivan's manuscript and slid them into gaps in the wood. The pages were covered with handwriting, blue ink resembling hair. Ivan struck at the particleboard desk with a burst of ax strokes. He gasped, clutched his knees. Puffs of steam rose from his mouth as from an old machinery asked to do more than it could.

"You interviewing at all?" Jon said.

Ivan leaned against the ax, chuckled. Then coughed. "They've been keeping us hungry and scared," Ivan said. "Learning all the secrets of getting through life doing exactly what we're told. And we don't even know it's happening."

"What?"

"Take an old Cheyenne off his horse and stick him in some office. Same misery he feels is happening inside us when we sit in that chair. We've just been centuries learning not to feel it."

Ivan drove the ax head clear through the particleboard.

"What about bills?" Jon said. "I mean, I got a little insurance money, but it won't last the—"

"You know what gets me?" Ivan said, blowing his nose into his sweater. "That you got to pay just to live. I mean, just to sit there on your ass costs money. Whose fault is it for becoming that way?"

Jon stared at Ivan until his inability to respond became an embarrassment. And he went for the gin.

Ivan propped the desk shards on the pyre. They knelt again with matches.

The papers swirled into a quick-dying column of flames.

"Get the lighter fluid," Ivan said.

Jon dug through the snow with the bill of his Lobo cap. He curled his fingers around the can, and his mind drifted back to September when he'd arrived late to school after the funeral, the early snowstorm at Raton Pass delaying his drive to Virginia towing the last furniture from his father's house.

Ivan came through the backdoor with the five-foot wooden Indian.

"Jesus Christ what are you doing?"

"I should have done this months ago."

"Where did he come from?"

"You know that old store in Rockbridge Baths?"

"You bought him there?"

Ivan stood the Indian in the snow.

"I kicked in the door."

The Indian's face was chipped, splintered, the red paint faded mostly to brown. His right arm, once raised, had loosened and fallen to his side. Ivan flipped the cap of the lighter fluid, doused the tobacco in the Indian's hand, his robes, the beads at his neck, the buckskin leggings. They lifted the Indian, one at each hip, and slid him under the branches on his back.

*With a ceremony of nods, Ivan struck a match
and lit the school newspapers they'd laid as a fuse.*

Students dragged silver kegs through a chute in the snow, lined them under the eaves like barrels of gunpowder at a fort. Ivan tapped the first keg. Jon worked the piston. Frost and foam dribbled out and the beer ran golden onto the snow and they bent in turn and drank without cups.

"You heading back to New Mexico after graduation?" Ivan said.

"I don't think so."

"Your mom's still around." Ivan's forehead tensed as the words left his mouth. "I hope."

"Atlanta."

"You could go there."

"I haven't been."

Ivan's massive eyebrows were striped with snow, like patterns on a pelt.

"Sucks what you've been through," Ivan said and scratched his jaw.

"Hey, up Furr Mill Road I found an old guy who knew the Parkers."

“Who?”

“The family who built this place. The old man said there were sixteen kids or something ridiculous and every one of them left, moved away—Richmond, Norfolk, Washington.”

Jon shrugged.

“They had a big farm with apple groves and barley fields.”

Jon was staring into the woods.

“Grandma and Grandpa Parker died,” Ivan said. “Don’t know when; I can’t read the gravestones and the old man didn’t say. They’re buried out in the woods with one Parker boy who washed down the Maury in a flood.”

Jon turned and thought for a second he had something to say.

“The Parker children started selling chunks of land. The house sat empty. No one ever came back.”

Ivan emptied the lighter fluid onto the Indian’s feet. He called to Hollins girls at the keg and waved over a pair of Sigma Nus sitting on an old tractor beside the house. The dozen people in his backyard formed a half circle around the pyre.

“Drink to the man,” Ivan said and tilted his cup and watched as each around him did the same.

Flames shot up both sides of the Indian, across his chest and neck in veins of yellow, orange and then blue. The cauldron of smoke and steam forced them back onto shifting, melting snow. Wood settled downward, and the Indian disappeared in a swirl of fire.

Ivan was motionless under his hood, save for the rock of alcohol in his veins.

“Jon?” Ivan said. “Jon? Move in to the house here. Take any room you want. Just get out of the dorms. We’ll stay until the walls cave in. Living on apples and pears.”

The bonfire raged, snapped at the wind. The wood of the Indian was checkered, pink and pulsing, like the cooking flesh of a god. Two dozen students danced and stumbled around the fire, their enormous shadowy heads flickering on the curtain of trees. James Brown’s voice rose into the snowfall, and they drank cup after cup of keg beer, as if it were a shaman’s potion meant to usher children into adulthood.

Jon stood beside a girl whose hair was tucked into a ski cap. The rims of her irises were blue in the light.

"Where are you in school?" he said, glancing at her and then at Ivan, who was on the far side of the fire.

"Randolph Macon."

"Tough drive in the storm."

"Don't flatter yourself," she said. "We came for a reading and decided to get stranded."

Jon leaned over to fill her cup and their hands touched and he wanted to kiss her.

He looked down.

They talked and drank, and the alcohol caressed the back of Jon's neck like a soft hand. She clutched his fingers and walked him into the living room, and they lay on the shredded, mildewed couch, the bonfire glowing behind them like the last light of the sun. They kissed and tried to sleep and kissed again. She eased Jon's hand off her breast, dragged it from her crotch. A friend came and pulled her up and fixed her collar, and she wrote her number on Jon's arm because they'd burned all the paper in their pockets.

"I'm Sara," she said, "if you didn't hear me say it."

People were passed out on the floor like bodies dragged in from the wolves. The storm had moved on. The fire was a great mound of coals and the snow dusted with ash.

Jon lifted his chin, looked at the moon and saw Ivan perched on the roof.

*To Jon the sound of his breath was awkward, out of place
in the silence. The rest of the world had ceased to move.*

Jon climbed the old tractor, grabbed the snow-filled gutter and pulled himself onto the low hanging eaves over the kitchen. He followed Ivan's skids in the snow to a patch of shingles kept bare by a misdirected heating vent.

The land was as cold and barren as the constellations.

"Evidence we're nothing," Ivan said, slurring, pointing vaguely at the heavens. "Damn Intergalactic Manifest Destiny fucking go forth and multiply."

Clouds of heat rose from their mouths.

"Listen to how quiet it is," Jon said. "You can hear your body working."

"Every damn one of them left."

"Half the party's asleep in your house."

"No. The Parkers."

"Who?"

"And everyone like the Parkers."

"I don't know what you're saying."

Ivan turned up the handle of gin, launched it at the fire. He nodded off, jerked awake. Crawled onto the snowy slope, pointed himself at the trees and tobogganed down the roof.

The gutter snapped as he flew free of the house.

Ivan struggled out of a snow bank, slipped, zigzagged toward the woods like a marauding bear. Jon eased himself down to the tractor seat and gave chase, his boots mashing pores to the buried earth. He passed remnants of the apple grove and a barley field taken back by seeds. The blanket of snow was thinner where the canopy was full.

With each step Jon took from the house the night grew colder.

Ivan was sleeping beside a gravestone.

Jon closed his eyes and was back in New Mexico, standing among uncles who lived across the country as if scattered by the wind. His father had died at dinner, as though shot by a rifleman from a ridge. His father's girlfriend burned her hand on the stove calling 911, and Jon cried as he drew up for air and then blew into his father's mouth.

"Ivan," Jon said. "Hey!"

Jon shook him, shook him again, punched his shoulder.

"Ivan, wake up!"

Ivan licked his lips.

Jon propped him against a tree, put his right shoulder against his waist, lifted him. But slipped on the rubber soles of his Redwing boots.

Ivan's eyelid twitched.

Jon tried again to hoist him off the snow, but stumbled and then rested where they fell.

The girlfriend had helped, packing dishes and books. When a third plate shattered at her feet, Jon said, "I can finish alone." Six trips to Goodwill and his father's house was empty, save for a dozen boxes and an old desk and bookcase. Jon towed the heirlooms to Virginia, taking the long road from Albuquerque into Colorado, even though he was already late for class. His first week back, he didn't unhook the trailer. His second week, he unhooked the trailer but kept it locked. Finally, he moved the furniture and boxes into

his room and covered it all with blankets.

To Jon the sound of his breath was awkward, out of place in the silence. The rest of the world had ceased to move.

When snow melted through his jeans, Jon stuffed Ivan's hands into his coat pockets. Then he returned to the house alone. The bonfire was a mountain of jewels in a ring of mud. The heat turned Jon's face when he thrust a shovel into the coals. He jumped backward and retraced his path to Ivan, measuring his steps with the precious and perilous load balanced on the shovel.

The pink of the embers intensified the faster he moved.

Jon dumped the coals onto snowless ground beside a gravestone. He built a pyramid of sticks and blew until his breath brought fire to the wood. Then he dragged Ivan closer and turned him, chest to flame.

At first light, a small creature materialized from the morning, then another—five raccoons in all. The large one rose on her legs as if to study Jon's scent. The kits tugged at each other, purred, moved off in a caravan, nose to tail. Jon heard paws brushing away the snow. He heard the sniffing of a nose still tuned to the smell of old fruit.