San Antonio Review • San Antonio Review (Volume V | Spring 2021)

Riverbound

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Published on: Feb 14, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/9b43cd98.5cee8807

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They're walking through the country store, arm in arm, when Jason Mattlock remarks offhandedly to his girl, Carrie Carson, that fly-fishing is for fags. He says this under his breath, as they stroll past the display case with its flawless arrangement of hand-tied flies, and when Carrie slaps his arm and asks him where he comes off saying such a horrible thing about the beloved sport of Izaak Walton, Ernest

Hemingway and, all right, since he brought the subject up, her father, Charlie, the boy bends his lips to her ear and whispers, *Because it's boring.*

They stroll up to the counter, laughing. "Pack of Luckies," the boy says, turning to the clerk. "And these." He sets a fruit pie and two bottles of water on the counter. The water comes from a local spring. The artificial fruit pie, from some chemical factory people back east call a bakery.

"That it?" the clerk asks.

"Yeah, that's it."

Jason turns and smiles at Carrie.

He claims he isn't like the rest of the ball-scratching poseurs up here who kick around in flannel shirts and hiking boots, pretending they're mountain men. He doesn't need three-day stubble to make some kind of statement about himself. He lets his actions do the talking. He's a hope-to-die adrenaline junkie who's high on his own unstoppable luck, and if there's a sport that's the least bit dangerous, you know what? He wants in. Because what's the point of living if you're not living on the edge? Yeah, yeah. She's heard it all a zillion times, and sounds like one big crock of shit, the sort of braggadocio crap a guy in an antiperspirant ad would say. But she's been hanging with Jason long enough to know it's true. Every word of it. He's one of those guys who's going to squander his whole life base-jumping and climbing fourteeners and cave diving in Mexico. One of those puppy-eyed losers a girl like her wakes up to one morning, years from today, and realizes she's sold her life down the river for a dream that couldn't hold itself together. Only, she isn't going to be that girl.

But that's a conversation for a different time. Today's today, and tomorrow's going to come soon enough, and right now the only thing Jason wants to discuss is whitewater. Shooting a class IV rapids in his sport raft, which he's outfitted stem-to-stern for what he calls "maximum thrill-osity." An hour from now, he promises Carrie with a wolfish grin, they'll be chopping through the legendary waters of the Royal Gorge. The *Grand Canyon* of the Arkansas. A dangerous, wildass run, he assures her with a single raised eyebrow, and one she won't soon forget. It's going to be the craziest ride of her life, he says—excluding, of course, those rarified moments she's spent with him in the sack, doing the nasty.

They met on the slopes last winter, over at Monarch Mountain Resort, where her dad, Charlie, is a ski instructor. Jason cozied up to her on the lodge's stone balcony, in front of the fire, and, twenty minutes later, they were sneaking upstairs for a quick fuck in his buddy, Ryan Cunningham's, trashed-out, 50-dollar-a-night, toxic-dump of a hotel room.

Her folks are mostly okay with Jason—her dad is, anyway—but because she's only a few months away from her freshman year in college and looking at a full ride on an academic scholarship, they've been

dropping some not-so-subtle hints. *What's the rush?* her father says. *You're young, you've got a big bright future ahead of you. Why not get through your first semester and see how things play out? If Jason's the guy you think he is, he'll still be there, waiting.* Her mother, who's had it in for Jason from the get-go, isn't so generous. She tells Carrie not to be stupid. *Jason's a party-boy who only wants one thing, she says. He's got no ambition, no common sense. No future. He's a great big zero, so do your father and me a favor. Get him out of your system and move on.*

Carrie sometimes dreams about getting pregnant just to piss her mother off. Move in with Jason and spend her life as a ski-bum's loser, do-nothing girlfriend. But, she's too responsible. Besides, it would break her father's heart, and she could never ever do anything that would hurt her father.

Her eyes fall on Jason's arm as he reaches for his wallet and pulls out a sheaf of bills to pay the cashier. God, he has beautiful arms. Long and muscular. But her dad's right, she needs to put the brakes on. She'll be heading off to school soon, and with Jason looking for a job as a raft guide or whatever, there isn't much point in thinking of themselves as a couple anymore.

Jason stops on the front porch, next to the soda machine, and taps the cigarette pack against the back of his hand. She's going to miss his little rituals. His bad habits.

"You're gonna get cancer, you know."

He smiles, tearing the cellophane with his perfectly white teeth. "Not likely, baby girl. Not likely."

"Yeah? Says who?"

"Says me. I don't figure to live long enough."

She frowns at this.

"Besides," he says, pointing to the Hostess pie in her hand, "You're one to talk."

...

Carrie looks down at the river as Jason eases the van under a stand of pine trees and snuffs the engine. His flashy blue paddle raft is lashed to the top of the vehicle, which itself is a sorry-looking throwback to the days of Ken Kesey. Jason bought the van off his Uncle Nick a couple of years ago for popcorn money, but its upkeep has him just this side of broke. When Carrie's dad, Charlie, saw the van the first time, all he could say was, *Good God, son. That's one butt-ugly bucket of bolts.* Her mother went a step further, pronouncing it a *death trap*.

Never was one to make my personal statements by way of a vehicle, the boy had told them in a rugged, self-assured, snot-nosed way while giving a “so-what?” glance to Charlie’s shiny new Range Rover parked in the gravel drive. *I’m more the type to let my actions talk. You know?*

Yes, her father knew. So did her mother.

Jason unlashes the tie-downs and carries the boat down the hill to the water’s edge. He is busy stowing gear when Carrie appears from the van with the picnic basket and water bottles. He looks up, does a double-take, and allows an appreciative smile to cross his face. She’s wearing black shorts and a snug-fitting wetsuit top with a tunic collar, and she knows from the way the fellas at Doc’s Sporting Goods treated her when she stepped out of the dressing room, trying it on — catcalls and a couple of well-timed wolf whistles — how good she looks in it.

Jason straightens. Calls up the hill to her, “Jesus, Carrie. You look like summer.”

She laughs.

“I’m serious.”

Of course he is. The guy’s throttle is always humming, needle stuck true north, and like most guys his age he’s full of—okay, she wants to be generous here—*bad poetry*. She dismisses the compliment out of hand and goes to set out their lunch, but when Jason stands and rests the paddle on his shoulder, muscles rippling, her smile fades and she bites her bottom lip.

“What?” he says, innocently, walking up the hill toward her.

“Nothing.”

She needs to catch her breath. She’s thinking about doing it with him one last time, despite the promise she’s made to herself. A kind of goodbye thing. But then, no. She stops herself. It isn’t going to happen. Because what would be the point? Her father’s right. She’s going to college, and doesn’t need any messy distractions like a long-distance love affair to complicate her life. But even so, she’s young, too, and her heart is aching with happiness, and she doesn’t want to live her life regretting everything the way her mother does.

She sets down the picnic basket and looks up at the sky. The sun is smiling, a breeze coming up off the water, the drowsy scent of juniper.

Jason pulls out the blanket and spreads it under the trees, careful to get the edges right. He anchors his sunglasses to the top of his head and teases her with a grin. “You’re gonna die when you see the water down there in the Gorge, babe. It’s incredible. Best I’ve ever run.”

She smiles, unwrapping the turkey and avocado sandwiches she's packed for them. They were made fresh this morning with croissants from Smith's bakery. Her mother almost ruined all the fun she was having while she was making them, but Carrie isn't going to go into that here. They're having too good a time.

A shadow crosses one of the plates as she's arranging the food, and when she looks up the crotch of Jason's wetsuit is inches from her face.

She lowers her eyes. "We're not going there, today."

"Come on."

"No."

"Why not?"

She looks up again, harshly this time, going straight for his needy green eyes. "Here." She thrusts a sandwich into his outstretched hand. "Have this instead."

He looks at the sandwich, scowling. Takes it and plops down on the blanket. "This is stupid."

"What's stupid?"

"The way you've been acting." He locks onto her eyes and won't look away. "I don't get it. What'd I do? Did I say something?"

She shakes her head, and turns her eyes to the river.

"Well, what then? You've been standoffish ever since I picked you up this morning. Is it something to do with your mother?"

She tells him it's complicated.

"Complicated? Complicated how?"

She takes a bite—a small one—and sets the sandwich on the plate. "I'll be going away to school pretty soon."

"So?"

"So, I don't want it to be any harder than it already is."

"What does that mean?"

“It means I don’t see any point in us being *physical* anymore.”

He blinks, then laughs. “Then why the hell are we here?”

“You said you wanted to go rafting.”

His face reddens and he flings the sandwich away. It sails over the ledge, drops and splatters on the rocks below. “Christ. You’ve gotta be joking. I can raft on my own. I hang out with you because I love you, not because I need an extra paddle.”

She stares down at the discarded sandwich. Its contents smeared on the stones of the riverbank, the broken crust of the croissant already set upon by squawking magpies. She looks up, hurt. Regards her own sandwich and takes a tentative bite.

“Don’t, Jason.”

“Don’t what?”

“Be that way.”

She sets the sandwich aside, and rises to her knees. Runs one small, soft hand down the side of his face and tries to kiss him. He’ll have none of it. He pulls away, scowling.

“Come on.”

The more she cajoles, the further away he seems to move.

“Come on, Jason,” she says in a husky little whisper. “Can’t we just have fun?”

“You tell me.” He looks at her. “Can’t we?”

Christ. She’s had enough of him and his ridiculous, boyish moods. Sometimes she wishes school started tomorrow, just so she could get rid of him. But the day’s still young and she doesn’t want to see him all pissy and pouting the rest of the way downriver, so, after arguing with herself for a while, she thinks, Fine, have it your way, you sulky little shit. Only don’t expect to see me again after today. Because this is it, Jason Mattlock. The last time.

She snatches her sandwich and flings it out across the stones, the same way he did. It splatters on the rocks, startling the magpies who leap back, then return to feed upon it.

“You’re such a baby,” she says, making a half-hearted motion for him to pull out his cock, or whatever it is he’s going to do, and she lets him know by her sharp body language he’d better make it fast, too, because she’s still majorly pissed, and liable to change her mind if he messes with her.

“Let’s just get it over with,” she says in a voice that’s all business, and when he tries to smooth things out with another dumb-assed declaration of love, she raises a solitary finger and warns him to shut up.

“Shut up,” she says. “Shut up and don’t say another word. Because if you do, I’m stopping. Understand?” He nods. “Not another word,” she says. And then, as if to make things really plain, “And don’t touch my hair.”

The river flickers through the pine boughs. Appears amber from high up. Clear amber, like old film unspooled from a movie projector. Or real amber pried from a tree with a pocketknife. You can see the stones deep below in the current, trapped there a million years. Water tumbling over them. She’s angry with Jason for spoiling everything. She’s going to remember this day for the rest of her life, every moment of it, and she’s going to use it like an instruction manual for what *not* to look for, *ever again*, in a guy.

“Let’s go,” she says, her voice sounding as if someone had hung it on a clothesline and beaten the life out of it. “I’m tired.”

Jason tips his sunglasses from the tangles of his blonde hair and settles them over his eyes. “Yeah,” he says, smiling. “Sure.”

...

They tidy up the picnic site without saying anything, and when the gear is stowed in the raft, Carrie steps into the bow first and picks up her oar. A moment later they push with their paddles and the raft drifts into the current.

A slow force takes hold of them. Pulling them downriver, sideways at first, then backward, until Jason uses his oar as a rudder to straighten the boat’s nose. When they reach midstream, the raft begins to move with a purpose.

Carrie glances back at him. His face is set. His mouth is shut and his lips are taut. There’s an oxbow not far ahead, and as she watches him steer them toward it his eyes seem to widen, inviting it in. Challenging it. Or this is what she imagines, anyway, because his dark glasses hide the real truth from her.

As they drift into the ever-tightening curve, she senses something might be wrong. It’s either the river, or the raft. She isn’t sure. But first they’re broadside in the current and Jason is digging in like their lives depend on it—like he can change the course of the river just by looking cool in his wetsuit and sunglasses—and then, suddenly, they’re backward, swinging wildly over a deep swirling pool whose

right side is shouldered by a massive block of red granite that goes up and up and up so high she can't see the top of it.

"Ohhh!"

She loses her balance and nearly drops her oar.

"Paddle, goddamnit!"

Jason's voice cuts above the crashing water, and when the words strike her ears, the fear she's feeling is swallowed up in a flash of anger. A punk desire to smack the shit out of Jason with her paddle.

"Don't yell at me, you selfish little jerk!" she snaps, stabbing the water with her oar. "You paddle!"

Jason's oar blade clatters against the granite wall, and he swipes back at the rock as if it's human and this is somehow personal. And who knows, maybe it is? He's just young enough and just immature enough to see the thing as some sort of schoolyard rival. So maybe he thinks it's buying him something, cracking it with his oar. Maybe he thinks he's tougher than all outdoors—the river, the mountain, the earth itself. Whatever it is, when the craft gives way and begins floating downstream again, he smiles in his naïve little-boy way as if it's him who made it happen.

"Paddle!" he shouts. "Paddle!"

Carrie dips her oar, though not because Jason's ordering her to, and not because the effort seems necessary, but because her arms decide to do it on their own. Because something deep down in the current has taken hold of them, pulling them along by an invisible hand, and her paddle, like the rest of her, is under its control.

Something terrible, some god-awful smell is wafting down the canyon on the water's back, and the deeper they slip downstream, the worse it smells. Carrie sinks her face into her wetsuit, trying to move out of its way, but it gets worse, and when it's so bad it's nearly unbearable, she turns her head and tries holding her breath to escape it.

They round the oxbow and sail into a long stretch of deep water, where just ahead of them, hanging dead from the rocks by a shattered leg, is a filthy old Bighorn sheep. Its fleece is brown and scruffy, hind legs smeared with ragged strings of shit, and when Carrie looks harder she can see that one of its curled horns is broken midway from the tip. The carcass is half in the water and half out. The half that isn't is besieged by a snarl of buzzing flies.

"Paddle!" Jason shouts. "Fucking paddle!"

They slide down the current, through the rocks into deep slow water, and the raft drifts, cautiously, as if it's holding its breath. There's no sensation of urgency now. Only the lazy draw of the current, which pulls them toward the next bend, luring them down the stair-stepped rapids that lead to the monstrous, broad-shouldered stone called Toad Rock. A notorious hazard that splits the river in two.

Jason taps her on the back with his oar blade while the water's still tame, and when she looks over her shoulder at him, he lowers his paddle, grins and, like a strongman at the carnival, flexes his muscles.

She turns away without a word. He's such a *kid*. Such a spoiled, self-centered hotdog of a kid. She doesn't know what to do with him, is what it all comes down to. She'd like to smack him for the way he treated her back there, where they were supposed to be having a romantic picnic lunch, only what good would it do? What difference would it make? He's too dumb and self-absorbed to even understand why she's mad. So, she'll save it for later. Save it for when they're out of the boat, back on dry land, and he's trying to suck up to her for being a serious jerk. In particular, for tossing the nice sandwich she'd made for him down onto the rocks.

The current changes without warning, tightening its pull again. Roughing them up as they move into the rapids. They're both paddling, but it doesn't seem to make much difference because they're caught now, trapped in the middle of the river, and the big-shouldered, toad-shaped stone that splits the water in two is coming up on them like a thug in a dark alley.

She hears Jason shout, but the water-locked stone has all of her attention. She doesn't want to risk glancing away and crashing headlong into a wall of granite, so she ignores him and digs in with her paddle, long hard strokes. She's not sure how this is going to come out, but she knows, instinctively, from years skiing with her dad, maybe, that you don't go into a downhill run with a tentative mind. You attack, full on. Eyes open and alert.

Within seconds, waves are tossing them. Launching them from their knees, in a progression of flips and flops that brings butterflies to her empty stomach, and she can't help it. She laughs.

Then, something new happens, and, when it does, it unspools inside her head in what feels like slow motion — as if she's seeing it, frame by frame, in IMAX 3D. The bow of the raft strikes a small round boulder and high-sides, pitching her into the air — high up, where she's weightless. Like a cloud. Below her, she can see the roiling, foamy waters swirling around the rocks, and, above her, the blue, blue sky. It's as if she's suspended there, in a mist of a thousand-million-trillion water droplets, the wild smell of the river flooding her nostrils. Treading air instead of water.

She smashes face-first into the current as the river turns below her, and, the next moment, her lungs are sealed off and she's underwater, the rapids stealing away with her body, sucking her down, dragging her to the bottom where darkness envelops everything.

The raft, now emptied, flips and bucks across the rocks, lifted here and there by the wind, skating downriver in a spinning, cartwheeling, incoherent tumble. A hundred yards later, at a difficult oxbow, it slides across the current and lodges itself against a fallen log, the lost paddles trailing after it, first one, then the other, bobbing. Bobbing.

• • •

Sheriff's deputy Welfort is a small, thin man with a thin mustache and brittle gray hair. He has an annoying accent—or maybe it's just the way he talks, some kind of speech impediment—but his voice, coupled with stupid questions he's asking, are driving Jason Mattlock out of his skull.

"You're sure that's where she fell in?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"You've got no doubts at all about it?"

"No, none."

The deputy looks at him, then out at the rock that looms in the channel. Lowering his eyes, the deputy scribbles into a small black Moleskin notebook he later puts in his shirt pocket. He stalks the riverbank, taking shots with a digital camera, saying little, except to ask Jason the same ridiculous questions over and over and over.

Before they leave to go back to Indian Paintbrush, the deputy rests his hands on the steering wheel and cocks his head. He looks into the rearview and scratches his earlobe. "You're sure this is where it happened?"

Jason is fed up with the man's questions. He's here to help, and the deputy—an overachieving jerk with a bad hat and cheap-looking badge—is treating him as if he were Ted Bundy. The Green River Killer. Some miscreant fugitive from a History Channel documentary.

"Why do you keep asking me that?" he says. "I already told you. Yes, I'm sure. She fell out of the raft. Down there. Just where I said."

The deputy takes the black Moleskin from his shirt pocket and reviews his notes. Says quietly, a bit antagonistically, "What were you doing when she fell out?"

Jason pauses before answering. "I was trying to hold on."

"To what?"

“The gunwale rope.”

The deputy leans forward, looking for something on the dash, but sits back against the seat with a sigh when he’s unable to find it. He picks up his pen and looks down at the rushing water. Taps his bottom lip, and says, “You say she was swept around the left side of the rock, and you went around the right?”

“Correct.”

“And then you lost sight of her?”

“Yes.”

A great black crow swoops over the river. Jason shivers when he sees it and looks toward the cliffs on the other side of the highway.

The deputy clicks his pen and adds a word or two to the notebook.

“Was she a nice girl?”

“Yeah.”

“How long did you two date?”

“Half a year. A little longer, maybe.”

“You ever raft together before?”

“No.”

“So this was, what? A special occasion?”

“I told you. We were just hanging out.”

The deputy nods. Rolls his shoulders and scribbles a few more words.

The crow returns, folding back its wings, dipping toward the stones. It scoops at the air, throws its pinions forward, and lands lightly on a smooth white rock where the lapping water spits at its feet. It stands there, head cocked, and looks up at them.

“What’d you two do up there on the rocks.”

“We ate sandwiches.”

“Picnic lunch?”

“Yeah. A picnic lunch.”

The deputy lifts his chin, scratches his ear again, and says in a slow monotone, “If you ate ‘em, how come they’re scattered on the rocks back there?”

Jason looks out the window. Closes his eyes.

“You two have a set-to?”

“Set to?” Jason sighs. “What’s a *set-to*?”

“A fight. An *argument* over something.”

Jason lowers his eyes, stares at the current. “She fell in,” he repeats, voice crushed flat as a penny on a railroad track. “The raft high-sided and she fell in.”

The deputy looks at him, eyebrows raised. “Did you try and save her?”

. . .

Weeks pass. Nothing. Still no body. The river refuses to release its hold on Carrie Carson, and for a while she remains alive, if only in the prayers of the people who know her and want her back.

You’re sure that’s where she fell in?

Yes, I’m sure.

Then, where is she? Why hasn’t her body appeared?

I don’t know, goddamnit.

A fly fisherman up on the shoals saw the whole thing, Jason. Did you know that? He talked to Sheriff Wilson yesterday.

Good.

No. It isn’t good. It only raised more questions.

What questions?

Did you have a fight, Jason? Did Carrie do something to make you angry? Why were the sandwiches she made scattered on the rocks?

Go fuck yourself.

Was she a nice girl?

Go fuck yourself.

Where is she, Jason?

I told you. The raft high-sided and she fell in. She drowned.

Cadaver dogs are driven in from the next county over. An underwater robotic camera employed to scope the channel. The work is slow going, tedious. But the girl's remains are discovered in an underwater sieve of rock and debris, eleven feet below the river's surface. Where the raft high-sided. The spot where Jason Mattlock told Deputy Wolford she'd been pulled under.

The current in the channel is deadly swift near Toad Rock. Treacherous and unpredictable. A diving team is assembled in Colorado Springs, a hundred miles away, but the recovery crew is instructed to wait until a formal plan can be put into place. To ensure the divers' safety, the water must be diverted with concrete cofferdams. The hitch here is that the installation of the special dams is going to require legal clearances and hearings. Environmental studies. It's going to be a hazardous, time-consuming operation, beginning to end, and Carrie's grieving parents will need to be patient in waiting for her return.

. . .

Early one Saturday morning, five weeks after her daughter's drowning, Anne Carson rises, agitated, after a night of terrifying dreams. She'd known Carrie was in over her head — *Christ, no, she didn't mean to put it that way. She never realized how often she thought in ridiculous clichés* — the moment she met Jason Mattlock.

It wasn't that Anne didn't like Jason, it's just that she didn't think he was right for Carrie. She never thought so, from the moment she shook his hand and he'd given hers an extra little squeeze. Oh, she understood the attraction — Jason with all that curly blonde hair, those broad shoulders, the swimming green eyes — she wasn't blind. But she didn't want Carrie getting *involved* with him. She didn't like the fact the daughter she so carefully raised and groomed and encouraged academically, might throw away her virginity on some party boy who fancied himself the great American sportsman. She knew she couldn't keep Carrie's innocence under lock and key forever — she wasn't naïve — but she had hoped the boy Carrie finally gave her heart to would be, more, what? *Deserving?* Hormones made people reckless. Rebellious. Stupid. It made Carrie reckless and rebellious, and her recklessness, egged on by Jason's juvenile bravado, killed her.

She'd had a heart-to-heart with Carrie while Charlie was away at work one day. A good long talk where she laid it all on the table. She spoke what was in her heart (thinking the truth would be the best way to reform her daughter's behavior), but she feels badly now about the course the conversation took. No, wait. That isn't exactly true. Yes, she feels bad — in fact, she feels *horrible* — but not so much over *what* she said as the *way* she said it. The reason she feels awful, the reason it tears at her insides, is because she believes she was far too easy on Carrie. She should have been merciless. Insistent. She should have come right out and said, *Carrie, watch yourself with that boy. He's trouble*. If she had, Carrie might still be alive.

I suppose you're sleeping with him.

These were the first words out of her mouth. The opening salvo that started the war between them.

Mother!

Well?

I'm not going to answer that. Even if I were, it'd be no one's business but mine. I'm an adult, in case you haven't noticed. I'm eighteen.

You're living in my house. You're my daughter. That makes it my business.

Anne Carson didn't bring up the incident where she came home early from work and caught Jason coming out of the bathroom, pretending he'd been using the john, when what he was really trying to do was put himself back together so she wouldn't know he and Carrie had been going at it, hot and heavy, on the living room floor.

Honey, she said. Your dad and I can fix a lot of things, but a broken heart isn't one of them.

I don't have a broken heart, Mother.

You will if you don't get this thing under control. You'll be leaving for college this fall. Jason won't. Don't start things that aren't worth finishing.

What's that supposed to mean?

It means don't throw away your future. That's what it means.

Carrie could be so sweet and innocent and dumb. So maddeningly stubborn. No wonder Jason couldn't keep his hands off of her. She had everything every boy wants. The whole package. She was beautiful, an absolute knockout, and smart as a whip. What boy doesn't enjoy a girl who plays hard to get, but who, after all the heavy breathing and slapping away of hands is still willing to put out?

Sometimes — though she's ashamed to admit it, even to herself — Anne imagines Carrie and Jason *in that way*. Doing the things she herself longed to do when she was Carrie's age, but was too embarrassed or afraid to try. She sees their smooth, beautiful skin come together. Their young limbs tangle themselves in knots. She hears the sighs and feels the hot, breathy hunger of desire on the nape of her neck. But it isn't that she's jealous, all right? Or that she wants Jason for herself. Or that she remembers that extra squeeze of the hand and wonders if it was some sort of overture, some sort of mother-daughter fantasy the boy had hoped to fulfill one day. It's that there's something in the thinking of it that makes her grieve for her own youth. Makes her sad for the things her daughter had, and deserved more of, but will never know again.

At least tell me you're using protection.

Leave me alone.

I don't want to see you pregnant.

Why? Because I might have a daughter like me?

Carrie, please.

I can't believe we're talking about this.

Anne Carson knows they were doing it on the floor that day, because even though everything looked good and proper, Jason coming out of the bathroom, tossing back that hair of his, looking surprised — as if what an unexpected pleasure, Mrs. Carson! — it didn't change the fact that the toilet in that downstairs bathroom had been broken for months. One more honey-do repair Charlie's been promising to take care of but hasn't yet found the time to fix.

Friends ask Anne whether she thinks there was anything weird or suspicious about the way Carrie died. Whether she thinks maybe Jason Mattlock *did* have something to do with it. *Why else*, they ask her, *would the guy have been called a "person of interest" by the sheriff's department?* She tells them no. Unequivocally, no. She says that if Jason had been involved in some sort of foul play, the authorities would have uncovered it. It was an accident, plain and simple. Even the fly fisherman who claimed to have seen what happened that day, firsthand, from somewhere up river, insisted there'd been no ill will in the mishap. Yet after saying all of this, Anne never tells her friends what's *really* in her heart. That, political correctness aside, yes, *fuck yes* she blames Jason for her daughter's death. For her daughter being trapped, even now, in that underwater sieve. But she keeps it to herself. Locks it away in her heart because it's somehow easier and more comforting to play the sorrowful, enigmatic saint than the heartless she-bitch out for revenge. It feels right, somehow, to make them wonder at her pain.

Do not let that boy get you in trouble, she'd warned Carrie the day of the rafting trip. The morning she found Carrie in the kitchen putting together a romantic little picnic lunch of avocado sandwiches and diced fruit and cookies. *Am I making myself clear?*

Carrie had turned brusquely, setting her hip. *Yes, Mother! Quite clear! Abundantly clear! Transparently clear!*

She didn't realize it for a moment, but when she'd spun round she cut herself with the knife she was holding. *Oh! Oh!* She'd clutched her hand, tears springing to her eyes.

Anne ran to her, but the damage was nothing. The skin barely broken. She'd folded the poor, sweet girl in her arms, and the knife fell from her fingers and clattered to the floor. *Men are weak*, she whispered in an iron voice. *They're slaves to their desires.*

I don't want to hear anymore, Mother! It's a picnic, for God's sake. Not my honeymoon!

The girl struggled to break free, but Anne would not let go. *We're stronger than they are, Carrie. Tell me you'll be strong. Tell me you won't let him break your heart.*

She sees now how wrong she was. That it was Jason who was the stronger of the two. Which is why he was the one who was able to swim out of the river that day. The one who was able to come home to his mother and father alive. The one who was able to use her daughter to get what he wanted (she can't stop thinking about this, or about that bastard fisherman who floozied-up the news with his heartless story about Carrie being involved in some sort of amorous activity) then watch like a spectator as she was sucked under the current.

When she wanders downstairs in this numbing fog of grief, she finds Charlie standing before the fireplace in his pajamas, staring into the cold black andirons like it's Christmas morning and he's warming himself before a crackling fire.

"Charlie, honey."

Charlie doesn't answer. It's as if he's in a coma. As if he's been in a coma for weeks. Jason Mattlock stopped by yesterday to talk to him, and that's what made it worse. The boy's visit unhinged him—as if he wasn't bad enough already.

Jason had come to apologize in his own narcissistic way, and while Anne was pleased that the drowning had taken its toll on the boy (he looked as bad as Charlie), she refused to allow herself to feel sorry for him. Besides, she didn't believe in the sincerity of his remorse. Carrie — *her* Carrie — was dead, her body trapped in the river, and he was alive, standing here in her house — smug, arrogant, as clueless as ever — and, even though he might not have been criminally negligent, she wanted him to know that

she wasn't going to help him feel better by telling him it wasn't his fault. She didn't care about his boyish grief, and she came close to saying so. He was a kid, for Christ's sake. An adolescent in a man's body. And he'd get over it. A few months from now (when the touch of Carrie's fingers were so far from his consciousness they'd be nothing but a dream), he was going to use this unlikely story of his, this tragic story of her daughter's drowning, to endear himself to as many women as he could find. That's right. He'd be bedding a whole new flock of girls just by tearing up a little, making puppy-dog eyes and telling them his sad story of "the beautiful girl he once loved and lost." *Sympathy fuck*, she'd have liked to say to Jason's face. *That's what you call it, isn't it? A sympathy fuck?*

Charlie didn't say much to Jason, but he listened, politely, and nodded, and shook the boy's hand before he left. *Shook his hand!* Charlie and she were worlds apart in that way. Charlie could forgive anybody for anything. It was one of his weaknesses, one of the things that kept him from getting any further ahead in life, from aspiring to be more than just the head ski instructor at, let's face it, one of the state's lamest resorts. When Jason had said goodbye, and Charlie had risen and thanked him, she turned and walked out of the room. She couldn't make herself watch.

"Charlie?"

He stands there before the soot-darkened bricks of the fireplace. Motionless. A statue.

"Charlie, you can't stay like this."

Charlie's hair has fallen forward on his face, and, though she can't see his eyes, she knows what they look like. Black and empty. He's lost weight, an alarming amount of weight, and it shows in places you'd never think. His hands. His fingers. His wrists. She thinks he needs exercise, and tells him so. She says he's letting himself go, and that if he isn't careful, it could cost him his job, which they can't afford to lose. She doesn't say *you'll lose me, too*, though God help her, she's thought it because this thing, this terrible weight they've been forced to carry, it's killing them both. When the drowning first happened, they were able to hold one another up. Now, it's as if their daughter's memory has turned to lead, dragging them into their own inescapable hell. Suffocating them while they wait for her body's return.

"Charlie, you need to get out. I can't bear having you lock yourself up like this anymore. It isn't good for you. It isn't good for us. Carrie—" She stops herself. She won't say it because, like all the other clichés that once rolled off her tongue with no meaning, the words now seem like barbs flung into her heart. She wants to tell him that Carrie would have been heartbroken to see him like this. That she would have told him to stand up, and shake it off. Get on with his life. She would have said, *Daddy I can't bear to see you like this, not over something I've done. I just can't bear it.*

“We’re still here, Charlie,” is the best she can muster. “That’s all I know anymore. Carrie’s gone, and we’re still here. So, we have to make peace with it. We have to go on.”

Charlie has no words for her.

“You should get out,” she says. “Get out and do something that makes you happy. Something you used to do with Carrie. Why not take a hike in mountains? Or go for a bike ride? Dust off your fly rod and go fishing? Carrie loved the water, Charlie. She’d be happy to think you went fishing. She’d be proud of you, knowing you could go back to the river and not be sad on her account.”

His eyes are lost in the soot and stone.

Anne lifts his hand, kisses it.

“I’m going out, Charlie. I’m sorry, but I need to get out. If you don’t want to go out by yourself, you should come along with me. We can go downtown and stroll around. Get some air, some exercise. How about it? I’ll buy you an ice cream cone.”

He shakes his head, *no*.

“All right, all right. I won’t press.” She gives him back his hand. “But I’ll tell you what. I’ll give you a call, all right? Later? And if you don’t answer, it’ll make me happy. You know why? Because it’ll mean you’re out doing something. Anything. So, don’t answer, okay? Don’t be here when I call. Go for a drive, anything. Just don’t be here when I phone.”

An hour later, she’s wandered through every store downtown, and is still going out of her mind. The grip this thing has on them, the way it won’t let go, is worse than a ball and chain. It’s a disease. An evil spell that makes her think even if someone were to come along and change everything back the way it was, make it all right again, her heart would still feel the shadow of her daughter’s death. The mark is so deep, the scar so ugly, there will never be any repairing it. Not in this world or the next. She’ll never be able to look into a mirror again without seeing the woman she’s become, a woman she doesn’t recognize anymore.

She stops. Finds herself standing before the marquis of the old Rialto Theatre. A movie poster in the display window catches her eye, and she walks inside, following the impulse that’s been guiding her since she woke up this morning. The first thing she notices is the cool. The dark cool that always meant relief. Not just from the heat or rain, but from the outside world. She gives in. Goes up to the ticket counter, and pays for a pass. Walks up the stairs to the balcony and finds a seat a few places down from a young couple, necking, like it was the old days.

She's in the movie for half an hour, maybe longer, before she realizes she hasn't the first notion what's taken place on the screen. Or why the actors have suddenly broken into song. Not that it matters. She didn't come for the movie so much as the chance at finding a moment's distraction. But the thing that's bothering her, that's making her shift uncomfortably in her seat, is that even here, she hasn't been able to outrun her thoughts. Getting up, she knocks knees with the kissing lovers and side-steps down the row, where she exits into the aisle.

Outside she remembers the promise she made to call Charlie. But goddamnit, she's left her cell phone back at the house—it's like she can't remember anything anymore!—so she's forced to fumble through her bag for change, and slot it into a payphone outside the movie house.

No one answers, and when she hangs up she feels a wave of relief wash through her. He's done it, she thinks. Thank God. He's taken her advice. He's gone out to get some fresh air and a little exercise, and maybe when he gets home he'll look human again. She can only hope. When she remembers Charlie the way he was, back before this hopeless bag of shit landed in their laps—back when the two of them were ordinary people with ordinary lives—she remembers how she never had any doubts about her love for him. It was always there. Permanent. Like gravity. But now she's embarrassed to say that there are times when she can barely tolerate his presence. Barely will herself to be in the same room with him, he's become so pathetic.

She decides to stop at the liquor store on the way home and buy a bottle of wine. With Charlie out of the house for the afternoon, she could draw a bath, pour herself a glass of chardonnay, and light a few candles. Sink into oblivion. The blissful places she used to know when Carrie was alive and all it took to drift into the pure, warm, simple pleasure of the moment was a sip of alcohol and a hot bubble bath.

"Hey, Douglas," she says, holding up a chilled vintage she's just pulled from the cooler for the clerk to see. "Is this any good?"

He lowers his head, squints, and speaks to her over the unlit cigarette dangling from his bottom lip. "Yeah, I think so."

"Have you tried it?"

He rakes his graying mustache with his fingernails. "I don't drink anymore."

"Oh?"

"Court order." He shrugs. "Meant to cut back anyway."

He asks if she needs anything else, and she says no, she's good. But when she gets behind the wheel of the car, something grips her and she realizes she isn't quite as good as she thought she was. It isn't that

she's sick. It's nothing like that. It's just that Charlie has popped into her head again, and while she doesn't know why, she's getting this weird vibe. This wifely sort of intuition that's like radar, and when it bears down on her—going *blip, blip, blip* in her head — she decides to forget about the bakery where she hoped to pick up a baguette and a slice of coffee cake, and head straight home instead.

Every weekend since Carrie fell from that raft, Anne and Charlie have stuck their heads in the sand. Lived like exiles in their own little village. They shut themselves off from everyone, friends and neighbors alike, so they wouldn't have to answer any more questions. *What about the recovery operation? What was holding up its approval? What bureaucrat bastard refuses to return a dead girl's body to her grieving parents?* No. They had no choice but to turn themselves into ghosts. Insulate themselves from the news and the telephone. It was self-preservation is what it was; their only hope of remaining sane until Carrie was home again.

She flicks off the radio, and presses her foot to the accelerator, racing out of town. Their house is way out in the sticks. Anne's never had a good feel for *exactly* how long, but today she's getting a sense of it after having been obliged to count every turn and bump in the road, and curses every RV and horse trailer impeding her otherwise swift advance home.

When she turns into the drive, the back wheels spin in the gravel and send the Range Rover fishtailing. That's when she finally pulls her foot away from the pedal. *Easy*, she tells herself. *Easy. Don't get ahead of yourself. Don't go buying trouble.*

The vehicle slows under her braking foot, and rolls the rest of the way up the drive, coming to a stop in front of the garage door. She leaves the engine running for a moment or two while she collects her thoughts, reminding herself she can't just burst into the house looking hysterical. She needs to be clear, rational. *Normal*. She needs to remind herself that she loves Charlie, and that she always has, and that this summer has done terrible things to both of them. Worn them down and made them crazy. Hurt them in ways they never deserved. It wasn't their fault. They would've taken their grief and heartache and gone off by themselves and found a way to survive if it had been possible. But it hadn't worked that way.

She shuts off the engine and gathers her breath. Counts *two, three, four*, trying to slow her heart through the sheer force of her own will. The garage door opener's been on the fritz for six months now — about as long as the downstairs toilet Jason Mattlock pretended to be using the day she caught him and Carrie screwing on the living room floor — so, when she gets out of the car, she has to set the bottle of wine down in the gravel in order to raise the door manually (using both hands, at that), because the goddamn thing always jams halfway up.

Charlie's waders are hanging from the rafters. She sees this as the door rises, and the first thing that goes through her head is—*wait, that isn't right*. She takes a step back then. Stunned, her splayed hand comes to rest on her breastbone. She doesn't have to push the garage door up any further to confirm the mistake in her thinking. Or to know her life has just taken another deep desperate plunge into darkness. But she raises it anyway. Gives it another good yank, feeling it loosen under the slip-and-pull of its own momentum as it rolls up and disappears into the rafters, she takes two steps back, knocking over the wine bottle with her shoe. A long, soul-deadening look at the scene before her confirms what she's already suspected but has so far refused to believe. What she'll never really believe, though the truth of it will haunt her until the end of her days.

Shadows separate themselves from the light, and shapes come forward out of the darkness. Among them, resolving itself to the intruding glare, is the twisting form of a man at the end of his rope.

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Jason Mattlock is there the day of the recovery operation, looking down through field glasses from the rock ledge where he and Carrie spent their last few hours together arguing over a picnic lunch. He's come back every week since her drowning, still trying to make sense of what happened. He told himself he owed it to her. To her father, too, who he'd always considered to be a decent, if somewhat odd and unknowable man. Her mother? He doesn't know what to think about that woman, and never has. She left for California after her husband's suicide, but Jason thinks maybe that's where she always wanted to be anyway, since all she ever seemed to do — at least if you asked Carrie — was bitch about her life up here in the mountains.

He watches as scuba gear and other equipment is ferried across the river on nylon ziplines guided into place by stern-looking men wearing gloves and hardhats. There are teams of rescuers on either bank, east and west. Just downriver, Toad Rock stands tall and mocking.

He stares at the great stone monolith now, the summer all but gone, remembering the fateful day he and Carrie set out in his raft. He can still smell the water. Still feel the sun on the back of his neck. Still imagine the smooth wet stone against the palm of his hand, and the sound of Carrie's voice before the current swallowed her.

The rescue team gathers around a central figure, the incident commander or whatever they call the man in charge of these sorts of operations. They confer for a long time, several of the men pointing to different sections of the water, nodding and gesticulating. When they finally agree on whatever it was that has their attention, they move away and the first of two divers—a big man with broad shoulders and sturdy thighs—straightens himself and steps forward along the stones. He's outfitted in a gray

and black drysuit with gloves and an oxygen tank. His face is fitted behind a glass mask, and a special tether is rigged to his body harness.

Carrie's memory comes shimmering back, now, as Jason watches the man wade into the bright chilly water. It's winter, and she's wearing a ski jacket. Black tights. A smile as white and dazzling as the powdered snow on the mountains.

You ought to wear sunblock, he says, walking up behind her with a pale ale in his hand. *You're gonna spoil your complexion.*

She turns around. She's just come in from the slopes, and her face is red and windburned except for the white around her eyes where her sunglasses protected her delicate young skin from the sun. She's been on the slopes all day, but this is the first time she's noticed him.

They stare at one another. Gawk, really. And when she allows herself to tumble into his beautiful green eyes like a little girl throwing out her arms and falling backward into a patch of wildflowers on a summer afternoon in the mountains, his heart is there to catch her.

Do I know you?

You know my type.

What? She smiles. *Strong and silent?*

He puts out his hand. *Hi. I'm Jason.*

Carrie.

They chat. He learns her dad is the resort's head ski instructor. That her last name is Carson, and that she's just graduated from high school, with honors, and that she's going to college in the fall to study biology. Get a degree that will allow her work in the mountains. She likes skiing, she says. But she loves water, rivers in particular, and she wants to get a job that puts her closer to them. Forever.

He smiles. He's listening, but he can't help himself. She's so hot, so goddamn gorgeous, it's all he can do to keep from sweeping her into his arms, then and there, and kissing her.

Buy you a beer?

I'm underage.

So am I. Technically.

What does that mean?

It means I'm a man who lives outside the law.

Of course it does.

Johnny Scofflaw. That's what they call me.

When they're not calling you Jason.

Exactly.

She laughs. Blushing.

Here, he says, handing her the bottle.

She looks around. Takes it from him. Downs a quick sip and hands it back, giggling. *My dad would kill me if he saw me do that.*

Jason brings the bottle to his mouth and drinks. *We could go upstairs. Your dad wouldn't see you there. My buddy, Ryan, has a room on the third floor. And I happen to know there's a cold sixpack sitting on the windowsill. What do you say?*

She hesitates. Tells him she doesn't think so. But when he holds out his hand and smiles his million-dollar smile, she takes a quick glance over her shoulder, and gives back with a million dollar smile of her own—plus change. *I know I shouldn't*, she says. *But all right.*

They pretend nothing's up as they exit the lounge. As if they might or might not be leaving together. But everybody in the lodge sees where they're heading, and it's so predicable and naïve and dumb, there's a strange, comic element to it. Comic, yet sweet. Because everybody's been there at least once in his own life, and it's understood how that sort of electricity can trip a breaker and short-circuit your judgment.

Jason has to keep his pace in check as they go up the stairs. She doesn't see it, but he's hurrying. And that's not his style. Not at all. When they reach the door to his buddy Ryan Cunningham's trashed-out, 50-bucks-a-night, toxic-dump of a hotel room, he concentrates on keeping his cool. Keeping the key from shaking in his hand.

She's so beautiful, this girl. So incredibly good looking. And, yeah, it only gets better with every shred of clothing she leaves on the floor. Jacket. Tights. Mock turtleneck. The rest. He scoops her in his arms, lays her on the bed. Presses his lips to hers, slowly but hungrily.

The rest is a blur. The flicker of a long-gone memory. Like a picture somebody took with an old SLR after they'd slowed the shutter speed way, way down. The whole thing happened so fast. So very fast.

And then it was over.

[Robert McGuill](#)'s work has appeared in Narrative, the Southwest Review, the Saturday Evening Post, Louisiana Literature, American Fiction and other publications. His stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize four times, and short-listed for numerous awards.