LAST NIGHT AT THE DAIRY BAR

Tod Goldberg

Summer comes and Pelican Bob dies. Doctor Evans said it was pancreatic cancer. He probably had it for a year or more. You know Bob. He never complained about a damn thing. A proud man. Came to the Dairy Bar every day for lunch, never gave anyone trouble about anything. He'd get the ham and cheese melt, or sometimes he got the BLT on toasted sourdough.

Usually had a chocolate shake, or—if no one was around who might call the health department—I'd make him an old-style egg cream with a real raw egg mixed in, because that's how an egg cream is actually made. Somehow no one ever died from drinking them that way before people determined raw eggs could kill you, not even Pelican Bob. Doctor Evans said Bob was probably in great pain for a while.

Seems the whole town turns out for the funeral and in the back of the crowd I see my brother Vince walking around the gravestones, stopping every now and then to lean down and touch the engravings, which I've always thought was bad luck, but then I guess Vince doesn't care about luck anymore. I'm standing up since I was one of the pallbearers, but I can't make direct eye contact with Vince. Then I remember that Vince probably doesn't have any eyes, seeing as he's been dead now for going on ten years. I try to get to him mentally, try to tell him that it's not his time, that this is about Pelican Bob today and that if he wants to make an appearance, well, do it at a more appropriate time. But Vince he just doesn't pay that any mind at all. He keeps moving around in the periphery of things, stopping every now and then, like I said before, and then one time I see him pick up a rock and put it on top of a tombstone, which makes me think it must be either Jerry Rosen or Daniel Cohen's grave, since those are the only two Jews I can think of who are dead. I don't even think Vince really knew them. They both died in Vietnam, so maybe Vince was ten or eleven then, which means maybe he knew their names or saw them at the Dairy Bar or maybe he remembers that I went to school with them and he's just being considerate.

"You didn't have to do this," Pelican Bob's wife Janet says. The funeral party retired to the Dairy Bar, so I closed the cash register and just started making food and dishing out ice cream and pouring sodas for everyone and now it's almost eight o'clock and people are starting to get scarce, things having gotten a little too happy after a time, which made everyone realize that they should be sad. It's hard to be sad when you've got a belly full of cheeseburgers and hot fudge sundaes, but anyway, now it's just Janet and me and Pelican Bob's son Travis, who flew in from California where he's going to school, and then a few friends of Bob's from back when he was in the Navy and first got his nickname, and then Bob's sister Patty and her husband Kevin and some kids who belong to I don't know whom. And Vince, who last I saw was sitting on a stool inside by the dry storage. I don't know when he showed up. I just looked up from the grill at one point and he was there. I gave him a nod to let him know I saw him, but I was just too damn busy.

"It's the least I could do," I say. "Pelican Bob, you know, he was a good friend and a good customer."

"That's not what I mean," Janet says. We're sitting out front around one of the concrete picnic tables. Janet's been sipping on a Vanilla Coke but I haven't seen her eat anything all day. After the funeral, she changed out of her black dress and put on a yellow sundress, something that befits the season more, since Janet was never the kind of person to walk around wearing black in nice weather. "You ever wonder what might have happened if you'd gone off to Vietnam, too? How things might have turned out differently for you? For me? For us?"

"Janet," I say, but then I don't say anything else right away, because Vince comes and sits down next to me. He's wearing the same blue-

flannel shirt he always wore, except that it's clean. He smells like Barbasol, which is pleasant to me, and though I can't see his face (I never really can; that's the thing of it) I feel like he's happy today. Summer and the Dairy Bar is full of the residual energy of people; that weird electricity that sits in the air, so that everything and everyone feels wired to everything and everyone else, like the past and present and the future could all be happening at the same time. Close your eyes and maybe by the time you open them back up, it's already yesterday. "That was almost forty years ago, Janet."

She smoothes out a wrinkle in her dress and then reaches out across the table and casually takes my hand in hers and just holds it. "Maybe I'll move," she says. "Or maybe take all of my relatives up on their offers. Every night a different couch in a different state."

"Where would you move?"

"California maybe," she says. "Hawaii? I don't know. A place without winter. I'm not a young woman anymore, right? Haven't I earned the chance to live where I want now? What do I have left here? I mean, honestly?"

"This is where you live," I say. "Where you raised your son. Where you and Pelican Bob had a life. That's worth something, isn't it?"

"You should know now that he hated that name," she says.

That can't be true. Everyone in town called him Pelican Bob. His store downtown was called Pelican Bob's Fish and Gun. Damn near every birthday someone gave him a pelican of some kind. One time Grady Bauer even stuffed a dead pelican he ran across when he was vacationing in Florida. Brought it home in his suitcase and everything. A man goes by a name most his entire life, that's who he is.

"Why would you tell me that?"

"To hurt your feelings," Janet says. She's still holding my hand when her son Travis walks up a few minutes later.

"We should go," Travis says. He puts a hand on his mother's shoulder and gives her a little squeeze. "Let your friend close up."

"It's nothing," I say. "Stay all night if you want. Keep the fireflies company."

"That's kind of you," Travis says, but he's not looking at me. He's looking at the space beside me, where Vince sits. He blinks twice and gives his head a shake, like he's trying to knock something loose, or straighten something back up.

"Your dad," I say, "sure was proud of you."

"Really?" Travis says. "And how would you know that?"

Used to be sarcastic people got me angry, like it was a personal thing, like they were trying to pull something over on me, because you know how it is when you work with the public: everyone is looking to screw you, thinking that maybe you charge a nickel too much for this or that or the other thing, making cracks that for three dollars, they ought to get ice cream and the rest of the cow, too, or how they could make cheeseburgers for their whole family for the cost of just one of mine. But somehow it's the kids who made me feel worst of all, thinking they could best me mentally, getting me to make change and then saying they gave me a twenty and I gave them change for a ten, like I don't know how much money is in my register at all times. And sometimes it was just the sarcasm itself, like they thought I was so ignorant I couldn't pick out when the joke was on me.

And a guy like me remembers that sort of thing.

Maybe the next time they come in with a date or with their families or maybe ten years later, or twenty, I remember how they made me feel and so I cut up a clump of pubic hair real fine and mash it into their burger or pinch it along with the seasoning salt onto their fries or I just do something real nice for them instead, remind them that I'm a bigger person.

Strange thing about Travis, I don't remember him ever coming to the Dairy Bar without his mom or dad. Not once, not never.

"I don't have any kids," I say, "so maybe I'm not that smart about fathers and sons, but one time last year your dad came in for lunch and told me that school you're going to in California was bankrupting him. Didn't know how he was going to pay for it, really. He was sitting right here where we are now, eating his ham and cheese melt, and he had this big smile on his face, like what he'd said was the happiest news he'd ever had."

"Is that true?" Travis says to his mother.

"You think your dad ever told me anything about money? He swallowed everything, isn't that right?"

Travis sits down with us, asks me if I could fix him a ham and cheese melt, and then cries like he's all by himself, except Vince is right beside him, patting him lightly on

the back, like everything is going to be okay, and his mother is across from him staring out at the traffic on Route 7, sipping her Vanilla Coke as if nothing has ever gone wrong in the world.

A couple weeks later, I see Janet at the park during Ethan Allen Days. I've got a booth set up right at the mouth of the concession row, which is nice since from here I can see the American part of the reenactment without walking all the way out to the field. Really, you don't want to be too close to a reenactment, because the closer you are, the sillier it all seems since you recognize your friends and the people you see at the market and the guy who came to fix the toilet and overcharged you. And then the rest of the day they all walk around the park like they're some kind of celebrity, signing the signature books all the kids have, posing for pictures, judging the pie-eating contests and all that. But from here, it looks and sounds like war and that makes me appreciate certain things about the life I have. Here I am selling ice cream, grilling dogs and burgers and no one asks more of me than that, apart from taxes and common decency. Maybe you never know if the life you're living is worth much, but it's nice to feel like it's earned.

Janet is across the way drizzling sugar onto a funnel cake. She's wearing the same yellow dress as the day of the funeral, but I don't think it's some kind of Jackie O thing. I tell the kids working in the booth that I'll be back in a few minutes and not to give away too much free ice cream (I let them give their friends a couple free scoops, since that way they won't feel like they have to sneak around and get fired for doing the same damn thing—give a kid some self-reliance and they'll police themselves, I believe) and I walk over to where Janet has taken a seat beneath a towering old black willow oak.

"I thought you'd be gone by now," I say.

"No you didn't," she says.

"No," I say, "I guess I didn't."

"Anyway," she says, "I'm thinking of selling the store. Turns out I don't know anything about fishing or guns."

"You don't need to. Bob never knew much of anything, either. Just have some guys there who do and you'll be fine. Maybe Travis will take over when he's done with school."

A THOUSAND SEXY WIVES

Chris Haven

after Ander Monson

They walk all over town, carrying movies in their hands, skin like wine and cherries. Their feet stipple the sidewalks and roads. The husbands are lost, or they are by their side, or they are lost. They walk. On cobblestone streets, historic stone roads grouted with grass and weed. They walk up hills, ankles wobbling. They cannot be slowed. They are lonely and committed to their sadness. They are sexy as old wars, hearts empty as a movie set, empty as a diamond, empty as geography. These banded women, their drowsy, wanton honor. They are relic and untouchable. They move older than direction, under timelapse skies. Their bodies urge them to the tallgrass field with a thousand junked VCRs and microwaves and plastic refrigerators convalescing where the frogs of this world hide, parting the blades of grass, waiting to sing to them.

"I don't see that happening," she says. "He's been off to school for two years and it took his dad dying to get him home for more than one night. And anyway, in the will he said I didn't have to keep the place if it was a drain on me emotionally or physically."

"Doesn't really sound like words he'd use," I say.

"I thought the same thing," she says.

"I try not to," I say.

"Bob never even said he had a stomachache. Isn't that funny?" Janet starts to say something else and then stops. She sits perfectly silent for a time and then says, "I keep saying that. Have you noticed?"

"What?"

"That things are funny. I keep saying things are funny. I haven't laughed in forever and yet everything I think about is supposedly funny."

EVERYONE IN TOWN CALLED HIM PELICAN BOB. HIS STORE DOWNTOWN WAS CALLED PELICAN BOB'S FISH AND GUN. DAMN NEAR EVERY BIRTHDAY SOMEONE GAVE HIM A PELICAN OF SOME KIND.

Janet takes a bite of her funnel cake and powdered sugar ends up raining down onto her dress, but she doesn't bother to sweep it away. I see other stains now—a blotch of oil over her right breast, something that looks like either chocolate or coffee by the scoop of her neck—and wonder if maybe it *is* some kind of Jackie O thing she's doing.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Janet says. She's looking past me at the reenactment, but I think she's speaking literally.

"Yes," I say.

She faces me with her eyebrows raised in honest surprise. "That was fast," she says. "No qualification at all?"

"I seen some things," I say.

Janet nods and then she's looking at the reenactment again, so I sit down beside her and watch, too. "I'm sorry," she says after a while, "I forgot about your brother."

"That's okay," I say.

"It's funny. Like yesterday, I was in the store after closing, counting a bunch of lures that had been delivered, just to make sure it was what was on the order sheet because I think that's what I should be doing, right? Making sure of everything, even if I have no idea what I'm making sure of. So I'm at the counter counting these damn things and there's Bob dusting off the postcard rack. No white sheet with eyes. No glimmering blue light or anything. Just Bob holding a feather duster."

In the distance, a cannon blast rings out, followed by a cheer from the crowd.

"Sounds like we won," I say.

"I think I'm going crazy," Janet says.

"No," I say. "It's normal."

"What's normal anymore? You ever think about that?"

"How long does it last? The ghosts, I mean."

"Hard to know," I say. "I've been seeing Vince for going on a decade. Not all the time, but a few times a week. A lot lately. Probably on account of Pelican Bob." I don't catch myself in time and Janet winces. "Sorry. That's how I've known him since he got back. It's not personal."

"You knew him before," she says.

"In elementary, remember we called him Robbie?"

HERE I AM SELLING ICE CREAM, GRILLING DOGS AND BURGERS AND NO ONE ASKS MORE OF ME THAN THAT, APART FROM TAXES AND COMMON DECENCY. MAYBE YOU NEVER KNOW IF THE LIFE YOU'RE LIVING IS WORTH MUCH, BUT IT'S NICE TO FEEL LIKE IT'S EARNED.

"He hated that, too. His sister still called him that."

"What did he want to be called?"

Janet shrugs, takes another bite of her cake, wipes her mouth with the back of her wrist, the way she did when she was a girl. "You live with someone long enough," she says, "you get to a point where you don't ever really use each other's names. No real reason when it's just the two of you or when you become Mom and Dad."

Out in the field they've begun collecting the dead. The way they do it here is a rip-off from a documentary that ran for nine nights on PBS a few years ago. Everyone moves in slow motion and they've got these huge speakers on the four corners of the field hidden behind rocks and shrubs, so when "Amazing Grace" starts lilting out into the air, it's a real surprise…or it is if you've never been to our Ethan Allen Days before. Pretty much everyone cries, regardless, and then the eating contests start. In ten minutes, I'm to help judge the hot-dog competition along with a few dead redcoats.

"How do you keep them from going away?" Janet asks.

"I've not figured that out," I say.

Janet stands up abruptly and dusts herself off, pulls her dress out from her skin and examines it. "Jesus," she says, "I'm filthy."

"Maybe it's time to get a new summer dress," I say.

"I'm not myself," she says.

"Janet," I say, "you've got to give yourself time."

Two ladies walk up to Janet. It's Mrs. Jeff Whitaker and Mrs. Louis Barton, their names long since abdicated to their husbands in what can only be thought of as terrible tradition, but then tradition dies hard in these parts and then is resurrected for the purpose of having a fair. They see me, too, but don't bother to say a word to me. Which is fine. I can't remember the last time they came to the Dairy Bar.

"So sorry about your husband," Mrs. Jeff Whitaker says. She takes Janet's hand in hers and holds it for what I think is too long and stares into Janet's eyes with this puppy face that makes me want to spit. Mrs. Jeff Whitaker used to be Tania Cook back before she married Mr. Jeff Whitaker fresh out of high school. She went to school with us. Back in fifth grade, I gave her a dollar to see her cooch. Now she's this other human being. Jeff Whitaker was the mayor's son and now he owns a good portion of the new developments north of Route 7. He's the person who brought in Starbucks and all three Dunkin' Donuts and wants to have a permanent Revolutionary War amusement park down over by the old quarry. He's the one who wants to expand the Wal-Mart into a Super Wal-Mart. "Jeff and I couldn't make the funeral. I hope you understand."

"Thank you," Janet says.

"We should have you over for dinner," Mrs. Louis Barton declares, but then doesn't say anything else. I don't know who Mrs. Louis Barton used to be. She came to town with Mr. Louis Barton a few years ago. He teaches some kind of liberal art over at the college; liberal enough that he's driving a Cadillac and Mrs. Louis Barton has a Range Rover.

"Thank you," Janet says again and then the three of them stand there without speaking, because what else is there to say? Finally Mrs. Jeff Whitaker and Mrs. Louis Barton go in to hug Janet at the same time, kinda trip over each other and then, apparently, think better about the whole proposition and melt back into the fairgrounds.

NO WHITE SHEET WITH EYES. NO GLIMMERING BLUE LIGHT OR ANYTHING. JUST BOB HOLDING A FEATHER DUSTER.

A bunch of kids come running by holding pinwheels and hollering about something or other. They've got their faces painted like the American flag or the Union Jack, depending, I guess, on what side their dads are fighting on.

It's a happy day of recreating a killing field.

Janet watches the kids until they're out of sight, lost among a couple hundred other kids who look just the same, holding the same pinwheels, screaming the same unintelligible sounds, sticky from sweat and candy and ice cream and summer, but she doesn't bother to smile or well up or anything; instead she just picks at a green spot she's discovered near her hip. "Let me ask you something," she says. "After what happened with Vince, why did you stay here?"

"Nothing happened to Vince," I say. "He killed himself."

Happened indicates to me some kind of accident, or introduction of fate or bad luck or voodoo or whatever. He hung himself inside the walk-in freezer at the Dairy Bar, that's what Vince did. Simple as that. One day he was alive; the next day he was dead, and where he killed himself or how or for whatever symbolic reason doesn't matter to me. You're either dead or you're alive and if you're dead, then nothing no one says about anything is going to change that. You can't save anyone from anything in this life and no one can turn back time, and even if you could, what good would come of it? Round up every medium on the planet and ask them to talk to the dead and what do they always come back with? That the dead are doing fine. They aren't in any pain anymore. That everyone should carry on. No one burns in hell anymore.

"I didn't realize it before, but I've got so many memories attached to different places in this town," Janet says. "It's like every leaf is haunted. Everyday you go back to that place and you serve all of these same people, and then what? You just go home and you're content?"

"The Dairy Bar, Route 7, these kids running around here, that's what I know. Why would I want to go and try to mess up somewhere else? No, right here is fine. Comfortable. All I could ever want has always been less than one mile away. You could say it's been a good life."

A queer look comes over Janet's face, like maybe she's finally solved a problem she didn't even know she had. "I'm sorry for what I said the other day," she says carefully. "About us. I don't know where I was coming from."

"It's all right," I say. "I didn't mind it. Those are good memories."

"Those are terrible memories," she says. She looks at her watch. "You'll be late if you don't hurry on," she says. "Hot dogs can't be eaten without the Grand Judge, isn't that right?"

I stand up and feel dizzy. Maybe it's the heat, or just moving too fast, but the vertigo lasts for a few seconds, the world capsizing. I reach out toward Janet in hopes of gaining purchase but her back is already to me, her dress a flash of yellow against the blue sky and the rich green of summers present and past.

PRETTY MUCH EVERYONE CRIES, REGARDLESS, AND THEN THE EATING CONTESTS START. IN TEN MINUTES, I'M TO HELP JUDGE THE HOT-DOG COMPETITION ALONG WITH A FEW DEAD REDCOATS.

Last Friday in August and it's practically fall. Can't be more than 45 degrees outside when I start to close up the Dairy Bar for the night. Not a single customer came by after lunch. Used to be I closed the Dairy Bar after Halloween until after Valentine's, but on account of the economy I've been thinking about only closing up for December and January, keep a few kids employed, a couple cooks, whatever I can do to help. Besides, everyone loves ice cream and even if it's cold outside people still like a hot fudge sundae on a special occasion. Hamburgers and hot dogs are perennials. And people really seem to like the garden burger I added. I changed the name of the ham and cheese melt to "The Pelican Bob Special" and added fries to it at no extra charge, but it's not been moving like I thought it would. Pelican Bob's only been dead going on three months, so maybe it's just too soon for people to be eating his signature dish. But in winter, when it's cold, I bet people wouldn't mind a ham and cheese melt with free French fries. Problem is that I have no indoor seating.

Across the street they're building a Chili's—another one of Jeff Whitaker's bright ideas—and I took a look at their menu on the Internet the other day and they have a hot fudge brownie sundae year round. They have indoor seating, of course, but I can't imagine a lot of people will want to be inside when it gets nice again, so I'm not viewing Chili's as a threat, though I'm gonna look into getting a smoker this winter and doing ribs on Friday nights. I could maybe add some Mexican stuff to the menu. Tacos and the like.

I go around the back of the Dairy Bar to dump the garbage and find Vince standing there smoking a cigarette. Since talking with Janet at Ethan Allen Days, I haven't seen Vince but twice or so and, to be honest, I haven't been missing him. Be dead or not be dead, right? That's what I've been thinking. I've also been thinking that maybe it's not healthy to have a ghost hanging around, that maybe I have some kind of brain lesion.

Well, that's what the Internet said, anyway.

Truth is I only sleep maybe four hours a night. If I'm lucky, I pull five out of the hat but that's only if I have a glass of beer before bedtime or take down some cold medicine to turn my mind off. All those things could make you think you're seeing ghosts.

Of course, then there's the nights when I don't sleep at all. That's maybe three times a week in the winter. I get out of bed and drift through my house. Used to be I'd pull scrapbooks down from the attic and spend hours touching all those old pictures of me and Janet from when we were kids, like the one where we're sitting on the Easter bunny's lap, or that one we did back when we went to Sears to get pictures taken together against a starscape and a big dumb crescent moon, or when we made that trip together to Niagara Falls, or from Janet and Pelican Bob's wedding, back when I was best man.

I keep a padlock on the attic door now and put the key out in the shed in an old coffee can filled with nails. Gives me time to reason with myself. Time to maybe find the Robitussin instead of traipsing out into the shed in the middle of the night to look for a key in a can of tetanus.

SHE WENT TO SCHOOL WITH US. BACK IN FIFTH GRADE, I GAVE HER A DOLLAR TO SEE HER COOCH. NOW SHE'S THIS OTHER HUMAN BEING.

I close my eyes and decide that I won't concede that Vince's ghost exists, but when I open my eyes back up he's still right there, kicking at a burger wrapper with his shoe, smiling in that way he used to when he'd done something foolish, smiling like he's telling me he's missed nothing in ten years. It's all still the same.

Old pictures get me angry about the stupid choices I've made or not made, which I guess is a choice in itself.

So that's why I keep the scrapbooks in the attic, right? But in the wee hours, when every light and shadow takes on the appearance of something alien, I stupidly pull them down and start to think of the three moles that form a triangle below Janet's wrist, remember how each night while she slept I'd stare at them and wonder at the science. This was back when I thought maybe I'd go into science, seeing as the government decided I wasn't mentally fit to go kill anyone, but then I wasn't any good with math in the least, either, nor was I really any good at anything but scooping and grilling. What did I tell Janet? *Almost forty years ago*. A couple lifetimes when you think about the young people who've died or killed themselves or who live every day with headphones on, missing what's happening around them.

Fact is, it's those hours in bed with Janet that I miss the most. Not the sex. Just the being there, the smell of her, the way she'd cry and her tears would make her skin smell like sour milk, a smell I like, and then she'd go home in the morning to wait for a phone call or a letter or for someone to say something to her about Pelican Bob, Robbie, Robert, Bob so she could tell me it was over, even though it wasn't really over until I said it was over, and I don't recall ever saying that, now that I think about it. Time took care of that. Time and marriage and a baby and the Dairy Bar, which I guess is like a wife now, constantly in need of my time and attention.

Maybe that's what Vince has realized and that's why he keeps showing up like this tonight.

Or, maybe I've drawn him back.

Other times, I wake up and I'm in the center of my bedroom, which at first was disorienting, but now I accept it as another sign of my worsening condition, even though I do not know what that condition might be. There are ghosts in my bedroom walls, too: Stains on the wallpaper where pictures hung. First of my parents, then of Vince and then of the motivational posters I hung up for a while: a dock stretching out across a lake, a lone person riding a bike up a mountain, a small child licking an ice cream cone under a desert sun.

Vince stands between me and the dumpster, so either I walk right by him to throw out the garbage or I don't throw out the garbage, which is a problem since I'm always complaining to the Health Department about the fact that the bowling alley on the other side of the parking lot leaves trash bags all over the place after closing, so I can't very well leave my trash out. Something about Vince tonight makes me scared. He picks up his head a bit and that odd smile is gone and he's not quite all the way there. Just a haze of Vince. I turn my head to one side and he disappears, except for a haunting of blue in my peripheral. You can't be haunted by a color, but I know it's still Vince.

So I just take the bags back inside and decide that I'll let Jack, my morning cook, toss out the trash. It will be a nice surprise for him, since he's always telling me that I shouldn't be skulking around the parking lot at night when all the drunks are leaving the bowling alley, which is a nice thought on his part, except that he's actually one of the drunks. Around town he's known as Jack and Coke. People around here aren't too big on subtlety.

I wonder what they call me.

I lock up the rest of the Dairy Bar, turn out all the lights and step back outside in time to see Vince getting into the front seat of my car. It's Friday, after all, and Vince and I used to fish together on Friday nights out at Lake Biddle, usually with Pelican Bob, even though Vince didn't care to fish too much. He just liked sitting out on the water at night. So we'd close down the Dairy Bar, swing by Pelican Bob's, pick up some night crawlers and grubs, glow hooks if we needed them, maybe a can of corn if we thought the silvers might be biting on that. We'd drink beer and whisky sometimes, when I felt like there wasn't too much to be worried about, and talk for hours about bullshit. Vince, he was always trying to figure what the hell made me and Pelican Bob stay here, which strikes me as ironic now. Last time we all fished together, a couple three days before he hung himself, I remember Vince saying the same damn thing he always said, the same thing Janet keeps asking me: "You think you'll ever leave here?"

"I dunno," I said, same as ever. "People here are good to each other. Not a lot of crime. It's a pleasant place."

"You're aging like a dog here," Vince said. "What about you Pelican Bob?"

"No, no," he said. "Janet, she loves it here. Travis, he's got a great set of friends."

"What about *you*?" Vince said.

"It's no offence to me," Pelican Bob said. "I used to think I was sad or afraid of change, or that this place had sucked away my happiness, but that's not the case anymore."

"Bullshit," Vince said.

"Yes," Pelican Bob said. "Bullshit. But maybe you've noticed you're sitting right here with us, Vince."

"What choice do I have?" Vince said. "Indentured servant to your friend over there."

"It's his name on the Dairy Bar, Vince," Pelican Bob said, "not yours."

I corrected Pelican Bob. "It's a *family* business," I said, but the truth was that Vince didn't have any choices. He'd been in and out of jail so many times that no one in town would hire him and no one out of town would, either. Vince was a good kid but a bad adult, stole from our parents, stole from the Dairy Bar, beat up a tourist once and stole his van and then crashed it into Morgan Strong's farm, killing Morgan's horse which he used to take tourists out to the Revolutionary War sites. Vince even tried to run a book out of the Dairy Bar we closed down over on Long Ridge and then, when the cops came, tried to burn the place down with people still inside of it. People say most criminals aren't evil; they're just stupid, but there were times when I believe Vince actually was evil. Not like a serial killer or a rapist, but he lacked the ability to care about other humans he didn't know and that led to problems with violence. Know him and he was your best friend. Come across him on the street and it could be bad news.

Thing about Vince was that, in the end, he just didn't have any purpose.

We caught nothing but catfish that night, big ugly catfish with jaws like bear traps. Lake Biddle isn't really a lake. It's a dammed river that the Pleasing Valley Logging and Paper Company created in 1935 and named for the CEO of the company because he wanted to fish without worrying about getting swept away or some such madness. No one remembers that anymore, so that night on the lake I told Vince what I remembered about the place, all the old stories our dad told us before he got the dementia, and then at some point, I started talking about Janet and me and about what that was like, because I didn't think Vince knew and because I was drunk and because Pelican Bob knew it all, anyway.

"Where to tonight?" I say to Vince once we're in the car together, but Vince doesn't say a thing, as is his new nature. Used to be he couldn't shut the hell up about anything. I decide to drive by Janet's house, which I've been doing quite a bit lately. Too much, maybe, but I'm worried about her. Living in that house by herself.

Janet has a garden with a little windmill out front now. She's planting tomatoes. The soil is very rich in these parts. If she happens to be outside when I drive by, I like to sit and watch her from my car. She pretends not to see me, but it's impossible. I'm just like another ghost to her. A person she remembers vaguely from another life, a person who used to stare at the moles on her wrist. She married too young, I think. The time to get married is around the age of 60. You know then about how much longer you've got and can make better decisions about how you want to live your life. No regrets about stupid things because you know you've only got, at the most, twenty years to be in real love.

There's a car I don't recognize in the driveway.

Janet's car is under the carport. Better for the paint.

There's a light on in the living room and I can make out movement behind the thin summer curtains. Maybe it's Travis. Maybe that's Travis' car. I bet Travis is a nice boy. Cares about his mother, that's good. Not a lot of kids end up giving much thought to their parents. It's hard for me to remember my mother and father anymore. My life with them seems like ancient mythology. I carry a picture of them in my wallet from their wedding day. They look like wax figures.

I reach into the glove box and find my flashlight. I've got the mind to get out and look inside that car. Could be that whoever it belongs to is here to do Janet harm. Vince lights up another cigarette and now he's back to full strength. He's wearing the blue flannel and his hair is cut close. He smells of Barbasol again. He's gained weight in his face. His cheeks look doughy and smooth, like when he was a baby. *I'm sorry this had to happen*, he says. It was bound to, I say. *Pelican Bob, he was a good man*. Truth? He was like a car salesmen, I say. Didn't even like what he was selling. That's dishonest. But that's not important anymore. *Time to make a move*, Vince says. *You're all alone up here.* I can't just walk away from my job, I say. *Sure you can. Leaving is the easy part.*

I put my fingers to my lips and am not surprised to find them moving. Live alone long enough and you'll talk to yourself. It's scientific fact. I saw it the other night on one of those cable programs about crazy people and murder and forensics.

The light goes off in Janet's living room. It's near to eleven o'clock and I should be going home, but I already know tonight is going to be one of those sleepless affairs. Too much rattling around in my head. I turn to look at Vince, see if he has any other words for me tonight, something that might put me at ease, even a recipe for a new sandwich would suffice, anything for me to twirl around for a bit, but he's gone. For the last decade, I've always felt him around, even if I didn't see him, just like you feel it when someone has just been in a room and has departed.

Energy doesn't stop. You go to a place where people have died and it feels alive, because of the persistence of energy, positive, negative, whatever. That's what ghosts are: Residual energy. Crackle and hum. You don't gotta be dead to be a ghost.

I get out of my car and walk across the street toward Janet's house. The air is so cold that I think tonight might be the last night for the Dairy Bar. Stay open days, close nights. I walk up to the three front steps cut into Janet's lawn and realize I've never gone further than this. All the years I've known Pelican Bob and I've never been inside his house, never even been past his lawn, and yet every day he came to the Dairy Bar.

I take a step onto the finely cut lawn, and then another, and another, and I feel the past collect behind me. An entire existence lived on the cusp of someone else's history.

I will knock on the door and Janet will throw her arms around my neck. I will pick her up and turn her about in the air until she giggles and begs for me to stop. She will smell of summer. Her lips will be painted pink against her tan face. I will be invited inside and I will sit on the sofa. Janet will turn her wrists to me and I will count her moles. We will marry. We will invite all of the ghosts. There will be Pelican Bob. And there will be Janet, but Janet at 19 so she can know that it is really over.

And there will be my parents with Vince, but when he was a boy, back before the trouble.

And there will be the long American cars that have disappeared from Route 7.

And there will be the smoke of cooking meat and melting cheese, the rise and fall of conversation, the dying light of an endless day.

And there will be no tourists, no reenactments, no winter, no past, no new people in town, no end to the beginning of all that I have waited for ever so patiently.