

Search Party

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I'm not saying call the California Highway Patrol and Donner Memorial State Park Rangers to send bloodhounds and helicopters. Mom's only been gone half an hour. Grandpa won't let me look for her. That would be "enabling." Mom was like a little girl, *These pinecones are as big as my head!* Grandpa was the Voice of God, *Don't go in the woods!* But she wandered from the rest stop anyway, searching for even bigger pinecones. Grandpa's teaching Mom "accountability" by drinking Pepsi, leaning against the Mustang, *Isn't the view serene?*

I told Mom the pinecones are from Jeffrey Pines. Grandpa's name is Jeffrey. Mom sounded like a witch, *They're Jeffrey's seed. They're Dad's sperm!* She's going deaf in her left ear. She doesn't know how loud she is. Everybody was like, *That old lady's whacked!* But she's only thirty-something, and she wasn't born intellectually disabled. She's not a retard. She's just been to some rehabs and stuff.

It is a serene view. With the trees all green and the lake all blue, it's hard to imagine people eating one another. But for over four months the Donner wagon-train was stuck down there in the snow.

They got hungry.

How much sunlight is left?

Mom doesn't have a cell phone. Grandpa won't buy her one. Grandpa got me a cell phone for my eleventh birthday last April, but I can't even check my Facebook on it, and this week Katie Miller friended me. I could call 9-1-1; Grandpa would trip. But then Mom would

probably stumble from the trees with her arms full of pinecones and a cigarette dangling from her mouth, *Why all the cops?* Kind of like the last time I called 9-1-1. *I was fucking sleeping*, she said. But in school that week they taught us to call 9-1-1 if somebody is “unresponsive.” I was a hero. They said I was a seven-year-old with “wherewithal.” My reward was an all-expenses-paid trip to go live with Grandpa. He started carting me off to Cub Scouts and building my soap box racers for me. I was like, *When do I get to show Mom?*

We’re bringing Mom back to San Francisco for Uncle Mike’s wakeup call. They found Uncle Mike, Mom’s twin brother, up on Coit Tower. He OD’d and his heart stopped so they got it going again, but now they’ve got him packed on ice. Uncle Mike on the rocks. They induced coma and are keeping his body temperature low because it’s supposed to increase recovery and prevent brain damage, or something. Grandpa says if we’re all there when they wake him up, it might be the “bottom” Dr. Meena’s always harping about: Uncle Mike hurting so much it’s a turning point, a revelation. This will be Uncle Mike’s third bottom. Maybe his fourth.

Grandpa will be a tourist guide when we get to San Francisco. Maybe he forgets we’re all from the same place. *Your relatives helped build the Golden Gate*. We’ve been on this tour before. *One suicide every week off that bridge*. Mom will gnaw gum like she’s eating her tongue. *Here’s Coit Tower, where I courted your grandmother*. Mom will say, *The Big Dick*. And Grandpa will say, *Michelle, will you please try to act like a lady*.

We’ll have to get Mom cleaned up. Grandpa will want to put Mom in one of Grandma’s old dresses, but good luck with that. She’s still wearing the Faded Glory’s they *gave* her at Treasure Island. When Grandpa, Uncle Mike and I visited her at the rehab last year, she pulled out her dresser drawer like she was Vanna White, only bony and small with a shaved head, to show

us the two *other* pairs of jeans *with the tags still on*. It was like she'd seen Jesus Christ rising from the dead. *Look! Underwear!* And then, *Are you jealous, Mike?* It was like when somebody at school drops the N-bomb; you know there's going to be a fight. I laughed, but Grandpa said it was time to go and he pulled me out of there so fast I got whiplash. He doesn't think I know about Uncle Mike.

At Grandma's funeral a few years ago, everybody was like, *Keep the family together*. I guess those were Grandma's last words. I hardly knew her. She smelled like soap; she sent me six dollars for my sixth birthday. But Uncle Mike must have thought I was really grieving, because he kept bringing me finger sandwiches and stuff. I remember Mom yelling at him, *What would YOU know about raising a kid?* Then she puked. The caterers were all, *At least she got it in the sink*.

Grandpa's downed his Pepsi. "This isn't easy for me, but your mother has ten more minutes and we're leaving."

It's not warm anymore. When does it start snowing in the Sierra Nevada? September's too early, right?

Mom lives in the desert, in Beowawe, in Nevada. No TV, no internet. The library's open one day a week. Doesn't have running water or a toilet, even. Poops in a pickle bucket. She's a pioneer, chops wood for the stove, carts water from the town pump in an ATV. She's the official Weed Whacker for this cattle ranch; they've got her set up in an abandoned trailer. The weeds are a fire hazard, up against the walls of the barns and trailers, and she keeps them *whacked*. She calls herself The Sober Cowboy, which is karma because when she was a little girl she used to wear cowboy boots and toy six-shooters *all the time*.

I spent the night at Mom's last night. It's half an hour to the nearest gas station, an hour to a grocery store, so Grandpa stayed in Elko. She cleaned up the place for my visit: dumped the ashtrays, stacked the *National Geographics*, beat sand from the throw rugs, locked up the cats. The throw rugs are Shoshone. Sage was hanging all over the place. In my honor there was a fresh pickle bucket in the bathroom, and it smelled like Subway in there. She had me bring a bunch of junk food and a cooked chicken. We shared the chicken with the cats. I built Mom a fire in the fire pit and we cooked Jiffy Pop and she played her guitar. She asked if I remembered "Dem Bones Gonna Rise Again" from when I was a baby, and I told her like I always do when she asks me that same question, that I don't remember. She said I'd rock and smile. And I told her like I always do, that all I really remember about that guitar was how it was always leaning in a corner of the living room, caked with dust, half unstrung with broken wires like cobwebs. I was four-years-old when I reached for it one day, and a guitar string stuck in an electrical socket. There were sparks and snaps, and I ended up on my back with the sound of the guitar like a gong. But it didn't wake up Mom. Nothing ever did. She started to cry when I told her that story by the fire, and I knew she would cry because she always does. She told me she loves me, that she always loved me even then. And I said that I know. Then we made S'mores.

Grandpa's in the bathroom. How long before Mom starts eating herself? I'm going to look for her. Just a little. Just up this path. She could be smoking a cigarette and have no idea how long she's been gone. Mom just does what she want's, but sometimes she doesn't know what she's doing.

After I went to live with Grandpa, I didn't see Mom for months. But then Grandpa brought me to meet Dr. Meena. I figured Uncle Mike already knew Dr. Meena, because Uncle

Mike was sitting there with his legs crossed like it was *his* office, too. Mom was all swallowed up by this huge leather chair, her arms on the rests like she was going to be electrocuted. She sprang up from her chair and didn't straighten herself up, so when she ran around the glass coffee table it was like she was stalking me. Like a mountain lion. It hurt how hard she squeezed, and she was slobbering my face and it was freaking gross. *Mom is so sorry, Chase. Mom is so sorry.* And then we all sat there, Mom and Uncle Mike and Grandpa and Dr. Meena and me, and they explained to me what Mom was so sorry about. How bad Mom felt. How Mom had hit her "bottom." How they were getting her the help she needs. Like how when I needed help tying my shoes, Mom got me shoes with Velcro. I said, *Why don't we get Mom some Velcro?* Nobody laughed. Dr. Meena goes, *Chase, why do you think you said that?* But I didn't know and I still don't know, so I just shut up after that.

That was Mom's first bottom.

I was joking in the car as we got to Donner Pass, Grandpa should take Mom and me to dinner. We'll tell the maitre de that our name is Donner, and he'll say, *Donner, party of three?* And we'll say, *It's only two now.* I don't think Mom got the joke. And Grandpa was like, *You want to turn the radio on?*

I had my headphones.

The path runs out. Just piles of fast food garbage. Plenty of pine cones. People at the rest stop are all, *Nice view. Cool pinecones. Wan't some cheese?* My family's like, *PINE CONES 9-1-1!*

I'm going to try up this hill. This is how it started with the Donners. What's for dinner? Mom. Sweet and sour femur. Save room for head cheese. I won't go farther than the sounds of the interstate.

My cell phone keeps searching for service. What crap.

Mom moved in with Grandpa and me. Uncle Mike had already been living with Grandpa for as long as I remember. Grandpa called it his halfway house. Uncle Mike started taking Mom to his "meetings." Then Mom found her *own* meetings, started taking me to *her* meetings because she said it was important that I understood her "disease." She was always, *It's not me; it's the Disease*. But Grandpa didn't think it was a good idea for me to go to those meetings because it meant I'd miss Cub Scouts. I thought Grandpa was right. The people at Mom's meetings were normal, but there was something wrong with them.

The woods are opening up. I'm going to climb onto this rock pile. I can barely see the interstate. I've got this God's-eye view of the mountains between me and Donner Lake, and they seem so small, like they're groomed, manicured, smooth fairway mounds. The lake is a putting green. God's golf-course. I'm going to spread my arms and close my eyes; maybe God will whack me with His driver.

"Fore!"

It echoes. Mom must really be deaf. I've been calling her name, but there's nothing. She's probably back at the rest stop. If she's not, at least Grandpa will be there when she does get back. There's no way Grandpa's leaving without *me*.

I'm an enabler. "Enable enable enable." It's like a birdcall.

It was weird: Mom and Uncle Mike are twins, Michael and Michelle, but they never looked alike to me until Dr. Meena's office. They looked like mini-Grandpas. Like those skinny, mini Snow Misers that sing and dance in that Christmas show. *He's Mr. White Christmas, He's Mr. Snow*. Kind of scary but kind of funny, so it's okay.

It's getting windy.

The edges of the clouds are smoldering, like when we made S'mores. The sun's behind me and it's low, so everything's in the shadows now except this huge beam of light between me and the lake. I AM THE SUN, and when I hop off this rock, I'll be the sun going down and it will get dark.

I'm going to take a selfie.

For a while Mom and Uncle Mike were always finding stuff. Mom would find Astrology or Eckhart Tolle, or something, and Uncle Mike would find Tao or Tony Robbins. It was like a contest. Mom actually took me to church once and freaking Katie Miller was there and her parents were all, *Peace be with you*. But Mom had never been to church and was like, *How ya doin'?* When I found out that night you're supposed to say, "Peace be with you" when somebody else says, "Peace be with you" I pretended I was sick so I wouldn't have to go to school Monday. Katie Miller is hot. Jesus.

Mom took me to Great America and Six Flags and stuff, pretty much whenever I wanted. And Uncle Mike was the Volunteer Father for Cub Scout camping trips. He always packed us candy. Grandpa's too old for camping and I don't have a father; well, I have a father but I never met him.

I guess the lake is full of trout. The Donners cut holes in the ice and stared right down at the fish, and the fish stared right up at them. But they wouldn't take the bait. The Donners didn't know how to fish.

Mom and Uncle Mike became Opposite Twins. One of them was always going "out," while the other one was sober. When somebody told us they saw Drunk Mom panhandling on Market Street, Sober Uncle Mike went looking for her and got the shit beat out of him. And while they were kicking Uncle Mike's ribs, Mom was sleeping it off back at Grandpa's. Uncle Mike was all, *You're welcome*, and Mom was like, *You're not my Savior*. Then a couple months later Sober Mom went looking to save Drunk Uncle Mike, but while she was gone he pulled up to Grandpa's in the Mustang. One was always in a rehab, while the other one was living in the Tenderloin. If they hadn't been twins, if they hadn't been two people, if they had just been one person, maybe that person would have been perfect. Or probably the opposite.

Cars have their lights on now. The interstate is like fireflies. I bet Mom's back at the car. I bet she's worried.

What the fuck! What just happened? Something snapped. I hopped off the rocks and something just fucking snapped. There's an electric shock from my foot through my leg into my stomach and I'm down. But it's not my bone that snapped. I don't think. It's all these other bones. I'm tangled in a rib cage. Is it human? I'm tangled in a fucking skeleton and I'm kicking all these bones. I have to get up. I have to get up.

My foot hurts like a motherfucker. But I run. I limp. I limp run. It's dark in the trees. It's dark.

Was it human?

“Mom!”

I do remember Mom singing “Dem Bones Gonna Rise Again.” *Serpent coiled around a trunk. At Miss Eve his eye he wunk.* I’m rocking. I’m smiling.

And I also remember lying at the bottom of the stairs, pretending that I fell. I shout for Mom and wait, but there’s silence. I think I smell. I think I feel it warm in my diaper.

Is there school today? Why didn’t Mom wake me up? My room is so dark, I can’t tell if my eyes are open. My head is overinflated. It’s full of wind. I taste metal. I know that taste.

It’s blood.

Just chill. Just chill.

Just chill.

Where is my bed? Why am I on the floor? Why is the floor...? Pine needles. The floor is pine needles. I spit pine needles. I’m in the woods. It’s a tree. I must have ran into a tree.

It’s fucking freezing. It’s fucking black.

Just chill.

I’m going to sit up. My brain is deflating. I’m instant hungry, shaky, tingly.

My cell phone lights up trees.

Trees trees trees.

How long have I been here? Holy Shit!

I try to hear the interstate, but all I hear is wind.

Was it human?

Just chill.

I’m okay. I’m okay. I think I’m okay.

I walked uphill the whole way. The rest stop is downhill.

If I can move my foot, it's not broken. I can limp. Numb is okay.

I brush pine needles off my legs. Seersucker shorts. It was supposed to hit ninety at Mom's.

I'm going to go downhill.

I'm okay. It's okay.

Probably a deer. Probably a deer carcass.

My phone only lights up tree trunks; I can't see the whole trees; the branches are high in the dark. They smell like butterscotch, like vanilla. The Donners boiled bark, tried to eat the trees. Pine soup. Pine cone soup.

It must be a feeding frenzy back at the car. *How could you let him walk off like that? How could YOU walk off like that?* When I get back, we're going to Burger King. Dunkin' Donuts. Ice cream. Pizza.

My stomach sounds like a cougar. I think there are bears in these woods, coyotes, mountain lions. Sasquatch. Ghosts of the Donners.

When my Boy Scout troop camped up here, they let us raid the Girl Scouts. We snuck up on their campfire and started screaming like wild animals. Some of the girls pretended they weren't scared, but they were. And I think some of them weren't scared, but pretended to *be* scared. After Lights Out we wanted to sneak out and scare them in their tents, but we couldn't get passed the troop leaders. Everybody was like, *There are tits in the next camp.* We were all, *I'm going to pretend my pillow is tits.* I was like, *My pillow is Katie Miller.* Chris Jones and Michael Day started dry-humping each other. Danny Becker was laughing so hard, he sprayed

Pepsi all over. Then Danny Becker started dry-humping me. At first we kept our pants on, but then Danny Becker goes, *I want to see what it really feels like* and we did it with our pants off. I don't remember falling asleep, but the next morning I said, *Tell me you guys didn't take pictures*. But everybody was like nothing happened.

The cell phone light is dim now.

That time when Uncle Mike pulled up in the Mustang, Grandpa sent me to my room, but I watched them in the foyer from the top of the stairs. Uncle Mike was wearing one of Grandma's dresses. He had a lot of really long hair and makeup on his face, like those "ladies" on Larkin Street. Grandpa was holding his rolled-up *Wall Street Journal* really hard. Grandpa looked like he was waiting for a firing squad.

Grandpa said, *Why can't you just be who you are?* Grandpa couldn't look at him.

Uncle Mike's lipstick was smeared on his face, like a little girl drinking Kool Aid. He was teetering, kind of smiling, like how you smile when you're torturing an insect. Through all the makeup and hair and stuff I could see the Uncle Mike that took me camping.

Mom never made it home that night. Three days later we found out San Francisco General had her in "psychiatric hold." Grandpa said, *Keep her*. Grandpa said he was cutting the cord. On both of them. He was raising his child's child, and that was going to have to be enough. He told me that not every grandfather would make this sacrifice. He said, *You're lucky you're not institutionalized*. But I still had a hard time falling asleep that night.

Grandpa gave me the Mustang. Well, he said I could have it when I'm sixteen, but only if I maintain my wherewithal. He said it's not because of the dresses, but because of Uncle Mike's drinking and driving. It's a classic.

The cell phone light is dead.

I freeze.

Dark is being sucked into my body. My body's a sponge to the dark and it's making everything go fast inside me. Nothing separates me from anything. What if Uncle Mike is one of those furries now? One of those dudes dressed like a stuffed animal that's come to life? What if he's standing right in front of me in the black, right there, and when I reach out I feel fur? What if I step into a skeleton? What if I fall off a cliff?

This is like being in the closet at night. This is like infinite closets. I woke up in the closet when I was sleepwalking, once. I had been dreaming I was in a coffin, and my own screaming and pounding woke me up. But even after I was awake, it was like I was still in this dark coffin. Uncle Mike found me crying and got me out of the closet. Maybe he'll open the door now and I'll be back at Grandpa's house.

Imagine Uncle Mike opening the closet door and he's this human squirrel in my face with all these sharp teeth.

Just chill.

I drop to one knee, just to feel the ground. Just to know it's there. This is like last night. I couldn't sleep last night on the floor of Mom's trailer because she unlocked the cats, so I went outside. She didn't wake up, even though the trailer rocks and creaks and squeaks like an earthquake.

Then I saw stars; I mean, I was *in* the stars. It was like the vacuum of space was touching the desert. Not like being on a beach looking at an ocean, but like plunging into the whole universe and the cold water gives you chills. Maybe I was sleepwalking and the stars were waking

me up, because I was kind of stumbling around and thrashing around like I was drowning. The Milky Way was closer than the nearest gas station. The stars were making me dizzy. I was going to fall down, so I got on my knees. Then I saw the embers of the fire pit, the glow, and it kind of woke me up. I was back on Earth. I had been drifting through space, but now I was tethered again.

It was cool: I started imagining myself as a constellation. I was trying different poses and matching them to the sky. Like that star cluster was me building Mom's fire. Those stars were me and Katie Miller. And when I turned my head, it was like Mom's trailer was already a constellation in the sky.

I look up to see the stars, but it's just black with trees. I know the stars are there, though. And the highway's somewhere and Mom is somewhere and Grandpa and San Francisco and Burger King and Katie Miller. There's nothing in the dark. There's no furry Uncle Mike Sasquatch Big Foot. There's no teeth. And if something or someone in the dark is about to pounce on me, I don't care. Just do it.

I reach out my hand.

Nothing.

Stand up.

I shuffle. Limp. Limp shuffle.

Tree. Tree trunk. Bark.

I'm alright. It's alright. They're just trees.

Trees trees trees.

The Jeffrey Pine grows eight feet thick. I forget how high, but high. They can be six hundred years old. Old-growth forest. The canopy is so high and dense that the sun can't get through, so there's hardly any underbrush. I'm going to feel my way from tree trunk to tree trunk.

Downhill.

It's Pin the Tail on the Donkey. I reach in the dark and find a tree and dig my fingers into the bark. The bark is like canyons, but I'm not thinking about spiders and stuff that might be in those dark canyons. I work my way around the trunk to the opposite side of each tree, clinging with one hand, extending my other hand into the night.

Then I let go.

I must look like Frankenstein, limping, arm extended, gawping for the next tree.

I find a rhythm. The trees are pinball bumpers. I'm a pinball.

That's probably the wind, but maybe not; maybe that's the highway. I think I hear cars; I think I hear a truck. Yes, that's a sixteen-wheeler. They sound like they're farting when they're on the hills. Like the Mustang when Grandpa grinds the gears.

I'm going to order two number ones. Three number ones with cheese. Taco Bell for dessert.

Award me a merit badge for finding the highway. Anoint me Troop Leader for pin pointing the rest stop. It glows like Saint Elmo's fire. I wonder if the Donners saw lights. I wonder if they saw one another as pork chops and heard dinner bells. I wonder if the lights are real. Floodlights are like the sun. As I get closer, pulsating reds and blues. Rescue trucks? I see flashlights.

Those are searchlights. They're starting to walk from the rest stop into the woods. They must be searching for Mom. God, she must really be lost.

But they're calling my name. They're looking for *me*. It feels like Velcro being ripped from my skin.

I can't answer.

Grandpa's got to be pissed. I'll be institutionalized, Scared Straight, sent to military academy. Even though it's Mom's fault. It's Grandpa's fault for not letting me look for her. It's Uncle Mike's fault we're all here in the first place.

I don't answer.

I'll let them think I'm dead. I'll live in the desert, eat scorpions and snakes. I'll secretly watch Mom at her trailer grieving my death. Or Katie Miller will hide me under her bed at night, feed me scraps from their family dinner. We'll spill our guts and I'll make her laugh. She'll be like, *I need you*.

But God, I'm hungry.

The lump on my head feels like a wet golf ball.

I hide behind a tree.

Their radios are static. I can't tell what's being said, but it sounds like worry. They walk like monks, really slow and careful. Their lights have minds of their own, telling them where to go. The light beams are solid things, lazars, like they could see through the trees.

If they find me hiding, what will I say? *How ya doin'?*

They'll think I'm crazy. Maybe I am crazy. But I AM the search party. I don't need to be saved.

I want to see Mom's face when I walk into the rest stop with the rescue trucks and the flood lights and the cops. I want to see her face when I ask, *Why all the cops?*

I let them pass.

I sneak closer to the rest stop. The lights are a birthday cake with all the candles; when it's set down in front of you, you want to take a picture before digging in.

Mom and Grandpa are leaning against the Mustang at the edge of the rest stop. Grandpa looks like he's being attacked by a dog or something, the way he's got his arms folded up high and tight. Mom's yelling. Her voice sounds like a sawmill. Something about fucking Mother's Day. Something about the desert. Mom's pinecones on the hood of the Mustang look like giant turds.

I limp out from the dark. Mom's cigarette is a traffic wand. The red ember glows up to her mouth, down to her side, up to her mouth. It flares like it's mad. She's signaling me to come in for a landing.

Mom and Grandpa creep close. "Is that really him?" I'm walking into my own funeral.

Mom starts crying. I'm taller than her.

I open my mouth. "Why..." and Mom slaps me.

I drop to one knee. Because of my foot. Because of the lump on my head.

Grandpa holds her back. Mom's roars, "How could you fucking scare me like that?" She's all teeth; it's like her teeth are too big.

I sit on the asphalt. Because of being lost in the woods. Because I was just trying to keep the family together.

My voice is perfect, not shaky. I'm not going to cry. "I guess we won't be there when they defrost Uncle Mike."

The cops are like, "He's back! He's back!" They all race from the other end of the parking lot. Hard, worried looks and flashing lights in my face. My shirt is red. That's my blood. That's my blood.

I want to take a picture of my blood. I want to post it.

"We're going to lift you onto the gurney."

Mom's being held back by Grandpa and cops. They won't let her ride in the ambulance.

"My baby needs me!" The interstate sounds like Mom's cats.

One of the ambulance doors is closed, but I can still see Mom trying to get through. She's being devoured by cops.

I want to take a picture. I want to post it. Katie Miller says my posts are hysterical.

My stomach is growling.