

Seeing Just Pieces

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April 16, 1999 is my first day as a crewleader for the Northwest Youth Corps and forty teenagers mill around NYC's parking lot. I scan the teens and mentally choose (though I have no final say) who I want on my conservation crew for the next six weeks. After looking over everyone, I don't care who I get as long as I don't get the Indian kid (wearing the red bandana and red sweat suit). The one with the four inch scar on his forearm and the smiley-face wound arcing from ear to Adam's apple to ear (a week old and just scabbing over). As if someone tried to cut that kid's head off. The look in this kid's eyes implies he'd do the same to someone else.



I drive I-5 south toward the poison oak infested central Cascades. Nine members sit in the back of this van. In the rearview mirror, I scan their faces and wonder how I'll survive six weeks living with this crew. For a first time leader, it can't get much worse. In the coming weeks, I'll learn their stories—James, a homeless heroin addict, Silas, hooked on pot and breaking into houses, Cori, a shy McDonald's manager, Kasja, a pathological liar, Nick, sent to NYC for assaulting his assistant principal, Stacy, a meth addict, Justin, a quiet farmer, Brook, just out of drug rehab, and Kevin, the Indian gangster. I'd take every other problem kid over Kevin—sitting in the back staring out the window, bandana almost covering his eyes, black hair in a ponytail, that scar arcing across his neck.

At a gas station, we get snacks because we won't be in a town for a week while living in the mountains thinning BLM trees. Kevin is just in front of me. "Let me buy that for you." I motion toward his drink and candy. I want to win him over. As I pay, I try not to stare at that scar, red and raw against his dark skin.

"Thanks," I think I hear him mumble. It might be the first words he's spoken all day.



I've wanted to see his landscape for seven years. Since 1999, when Kevin and I swung Pulaskis and hiked for what seemed like a decade (but it was only twenty-nine weeks). Kevin just nineteen. I was twenty-nine. We built trails in Oregon, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah. And when he talked (which he rarely did), he spoke of home—Warm Spring, Oregon.

For the first time I'm driving near Warm Springs, so I enter his reservation—a wide valley with the town between the river and a creek. Then a steady climb to a mesa with canyons dropping off (tight and deep). I cross the canyons on bridges before entering where lodgepole pines stretch toward the clouds. In the nearby-faraway, Mount Jefferson (a massive extinct volcano) is covered with May snow.

I think about the last I heard of Kevin. Five years ago, I talked with Scales, a former crewmember as he waited for a bus to Denver. Scales asked, "You hear about Kev?"

"No," I said, desperate for anything about Kevin. I had Kevin's phone number (and still do) but our relationship would never work as a phone-call friendship.

Scales paused.

"What?" I asked.

"Kevin was shot. Killed."

I froze. "Thanks for telling me, Scales. I gotta go." I shook Scale's hand and then spent the day at Storyville Bar ordering Pabsts and writing in my journal. Trying to hide tears. The next morning I called Kevin's family. I asked for Kevin (afraid to admit he was dead). "He's working on a Hot Shot crew," his mom said. Kevin hadn't been shot, he was a hot shot. If I hadn't written ten pages in my journal, gotten drunk, cried all day, it might have seemed funny.

Still, the last I saw of Kevin was in 2000 when he staggered out of my house barely able to stand (drunk and apologetic and silent because that was his way).



May 3, 1999, on a trail near Applegate Reservoir in southern Oregon. I pull Kevin aside. "Kev, what does this trail need?"

"Maybe I'd ...," he almost whispers.

"Wait, get down on a knee. Get to eye level with the trail. See what water would do."

Kevin kneels, studies the earth, then walks down the trail. Quietly, he says, "A drainage here, maybe a log waterbar. Toss a drainage in this switchback."

"Where?" I want to test how well Kevin knows trail, how much I can trust him on independent projects. So far, he's my best worker, but I need to know if he has good trail eyes. And with those scars and the gangster attire, I'm still trying to figure out who Kevin is.

"The uphill side. Here. At the curve. Shoot it off the trail. Move this rock."

"Perfect. Do it."



A week later, we begin building trail in northern California. I'll be at the front of the line digging topline and I need someone at the back to keep the crew moving full speed. "Kev, can you do finish work and keep the crew hauling?"

Kevin smiles. "Bet I can keep you moving as well."

"You're on." I line out the crew and begin digging. I speed ahead. "See you all later."

Kevin looks up from the back of the line, wipes sweat from his eyes and says, "Bump," which means each crewmember should move down the trail five feet. They walk ahead and begin swinging. I get farther ahead. Kevin calls out, "Bump," again. The crew moves toward me.

"That the best you got?" I shout from out in the front.

Kevin keeps swinging but this time shouts, "Bump." I'm shocked to hear Kevin talk above a whisper, to hear him encouraging. He tosses dirt as he yells, "Bump. Bump." The crew runs ahead five feet. Kevin keeps his head down as he shouts, "We're getting closer, Sean."



accepted the position at SYC, I asked if I could bring my crewmembers. A week ago I pulled the crew together and said, "SYC told me yesterday that I could take one person. Who wants to go?"

Kevin who looks like his vocal box was almost cut from his throat, said, "I want to."

Almost everyone else followed, "Me too," and "So do I."

"Kevin said it first, so he's got dibs," I said (though I would have figured out a way to make Kevin the one even if he was third or fourth to pipe up).



Two days later, we sit around a fire. After five weeks together, everyone has told their personal histories. I even told mine (about drinking and failed relationships and running until I found the woods. How I wonder if working in the woods is just one more running. How I hope I'm a better person because of living in the woods.). Only Kevin hasn't told his story.

Yesterday, building trail, Kevin and I swung hazel hoes, creating drainage dips. "You going to tell your personal history?" Sweat dripped from my hardhat and rolled off my nose.

"Don't know," Kevin said, his face coated in a layer of dirt.

"You're the only one who hasn't gone." I rolled up the sleeves of my hickory shirt.

"Maybe," he muttered as he drew a glove across his forehead. I would have missed that "maybe" if I wasn't used to his reticence. I smiled and walked down the trail. He'd talk.

Tonight, Kevin begins his personal history quietly as he talks about Warm Springs. Then he veers into a fight where a kid stabbed his forearm. He flashes us his forearm. He talks about his brother, "He's in the Navy. And home on vacation, he got into a fight with this guy. Things are tough in Warm Springs. My brother beat this guy bad." Everyone is silent. The wind doesn't blow. The ponderosas (which smell of vanilla) seem to lean in and listen. "Since my brother was back in the Navy, this guy jumps me. Cut me from here to here." Kevin draws his finger across the scar that we have stared at for five weeks.

After Kevin finishes his story, Cori asks, "Are you afraid to go home?"

“Nah.” Kevin smiles. I see everything I feared when I spotted Kevin in NYC’s parking lot. His look scares the hell out of me. Not because I am afraid. Kev would never hurt me. But what might Kevin do to someone he doesn’t respect?

Brooks asks, “You gonna get paybacks?”

I try to cut off the question. I don’t allow talking about violence because it’s NYC policy and part of my beliefs, but before I can, Kevin smiles again, “I can take care of myself.”

I know it’s clichéd and maybe no one will listen and maybe I don’t fully believe it but I add, “Kev, violence doesn’t help. It just causes more trouble.”

Kevin nods and looks into the trees. I think, *Maybe he won’t do anything* (while not knowing if I believe it or not). I wonder how I would respond if someone cut my throat. I remember being eighteen and getting in the last fight of my life. I was jumped from behind by Kluska, a hometown thug. I (after fighting maybe once a week during high school) blew out his knee. Fifteen years after the fight, I’m still happy about his knee. I try to balance that with the moral side of me. Still, (in a place I try to hide) I understand the love of violence.



On the drive across Warm Springs, I snap photos of the wandering river, of deep canyons, of worn out houses and newly painted houses (Kevin lived in one of these), of the high school (that Kevin dropped out of), of the overflowing dumpsters and the high mesas bleeding into Mount Jefferson, of kids playing basketball and kids playing in a creek and of more rundown houses.



Ten days later Kevin and I work for Southwest Youth Corps in Colorado on the Red Crew. This crew (only three days into a ten-week session) is already about to fall apart from homophobic jokes, sexism, quitters, lazy work ethics, and pot being smoked.

I put the crew to bed but keep Kevin up. “Kev, want to go for a walk?” He nods. Out of earshot of the crew I ask, “So, are there drugs on this crew?”

Kevin stammers (trying to figure out his allegiance—with me or his peers). I understand. He's 19. I'm 29. He's a dropout. I'm college educated. He's a crewmember. I'm a leader.

"Here's the deal. I know people are smoking dope. I just don't know who. You're the best I've ever worked with; you know that." I pause. "That's why I brought you to Colorado. But I cannot have dope on my crew. Will not."

Kevin looks at the Dolores River, the sloping hills, the deepening nightfall and runs his hand through his ponytail.

"The pot ends up on the picnic table tomorrow morning or I'll catch whoever is smoking, and I'll fire them. Deal?" I ask, knowing it isn't much of a deal. Kevin nods. By morning, a bag of pot sits on the picnic table.



Two weeks into this Colorado summer session, Kevin and I sit at a picnic table after work. Kevin pulls his blue bandana to just above his eyes. "Did I tell you I have a kid?"

"No." I hide my surprise (both that Kevin has a kid and that he's telling me).

"This girl from Connecticut, we hung out in Warm Springs, and I, um, get her pregnant."

"How old's your child?"

"Two years."

"When was the last time you saw your child. Boy or girl?"

"Boy. Never."

"Kev, you've got to. That's your child." I think about what it'd be like if I never saw Kev again, what it would be like never to have him in my life and he's not my son, just a member.

Kevin looks at the table, graffiti beneath a new coating of brown. "I know."



A week later, evening, the middle of summer, the sun sets. Red Crew crawls into their tents in the dusklight. Only Kevin and I still outside. "The sun's setting," I point to the west.

Kevin nods and begins climbing an aspen, grabs where the branches meet the tree. "Sunset'll be good up here." I follow in an aspen next to his. Fifteen feet in the air, we watch the sun set on Colorado scablands. A pink folding into orange into blue into cobalt and then to the east into black, like Kevin's hair.

"Holy," I say.

"Can't believe they're sleeping," Kevin replies.

"I'd rather go without than miss this." As I speak, I step out onto the branch (and aspen branches are weak so that during winters they break under the snowfall rather than the whole tree). The branch snaps. I fall, flail my arms, grab onto a branch and it holds. "Holy sh..."

Kevin laughs, "Nice catch," talking about my branch grabbing and my almost curse.

I slide my feet in on the branch and we watch the day end, the gibbous moon rise, Kevin in a tree beside my tree. He and I quiet as the world fades.



The next night, Kevin asks me during dinner, "Why you angry?"

"I'm not angry," I lie as I hide my rage at Kevin. Before the crew eats each night, the cook, tonight Kevin, shares a dinner quote. Kevin's quote was, "Snitches end up in ditches." All session we've had tension, and I viewed Kevin's quote as a threat against some of the other crewmembers. "I'm not angry," I lie again. I want to wait until Education Hour to vent.

"I can tell." There's no rudeness in Kevin's statement. Just awareness. Normally I love how well he knows me, how he has the same work ethic, the same appreciation for nature, the same set of trail eyes. Tonight I just wish he'd be tricked like the rest.

For three and a half weeks, Red Crew has been a mess—three quitters, more threatening to, sexual harassment and homophobia. I am tired of failing. Tired of only one member, Kevin, working until

the sweat drips and smiles when he swings a tool. Sick that he used a threat as a dinner quote.

The eight members sit in a field of wildflowers (Indian paintbrush, columbines, lilies). It is so beautiful that I will remember this field for years and years. The crew thinks we're going to discuss national parks. They're bored and play with twigs.

"Let's begin." I take a deep breath and try to stay in control. "I want to be clear. There will never be threats on this crew again. No one will ever say, 'Snitches end up in ditches.' If you do, you will be fired." Kevin and I have talked about nonviolence for nine weeks, and I trusted that he was changing. Everything boils and my voice rises. "I have never been more disappointed with a crew than tonight. We're supposed family." And when you live side by side for weeks, you need to trust each other, or you'll never realize your potential as an individual or a crew. "But you." I point at Kevin. I have never belittled him before, but I refuse to put up with violence maybe because nonviolence is a part of NYC's mission, maybe because I grew up fighting and finally quit, maybe because I fear the anger I still carry. I point at myself, "I'm disappointed in myself for not getting this crew in order. I have failed. That changes now. There will be zero threats. Zero sexual comments. Zero homophobic comments. Zero pot smoking. Zero quitting. We will be great. There is no other option." The crew stares at the bunchgrass. "Understood?"

Two members nod.

"I said, 'Is that understood?'"

One by one they say, "Yes," all barely audible.

"Go to bed. Zero talking. Now." The crew crawls into tents, and I wonder if I've just turned Red Crew around (maybe tomorrow we will be great). Or if tomorrow everyone will quit, even Kevin. And I will be fired.

Ten minutes later, Kevin walks toward me. As the sun sets, I think of last night when we climbed the aspens. Kevin kneels until we are eye to eye. "Sean. Sorry."

"Thanks, Kevin. I appreciate it. Sleep well."

"You too."

We could say so much more, but we don't need to. And I know that tomorrow we will swing tools and laugh. We will stare at Hesperus and wonder how we have been so lucky.



This is the memory not set in time or place. Maybe it is the first week with Red Crew, maybe the first week of the coming fall session with Orange Crew. Maybe we are at a picnic table or we are sitting in the grass or hiding under the kitchen tarp during a rainstorm. I know that by this point Kev is the best crewmember I've ever worked with and a friend. I know that we are in Colorado. I know the scars, they are older (scabbed and almost healed). Reminders.

Kevin seems uncomfortable. "Remember when I went home over break?" Kevin rubs his fingers through the grass or over the table's rough surface.

"Sure." I think about the week between Yellow Crew and Red Crew or was it between Red and Orange Crew? I think about how I was afraid of him drinking too much and fighting.

"I saw that guy." Then there is a pause that lasts forever (like his personal history night when the wind stopped blowing and the trees hugged us). All I can do is sit beside Kevin and wait for the world to begin again. And whatever he is about to tell me, I do not want to know. I have these dreams of me being a perfect leader and Kev being the perfect crewmember and us working side by side for months on end in a wilderness of innocence.

Kevin continues, "I shot him. Would've killed him but I ran out of bullets."

I blink my eyes. Clench my teeth. "He didn't die?"

"No, but I wanted him to."

"Shit." I don't know what to say. I understand that there is another world out there (one far removed from the quiet and safety of the woods), but I've been training Kevin for weeks to be non-violent. I hoped I had begun to give Kevin techniques so he won't get more scars.

"I thought should know." He stands and presses his hand softly on my shoulder as he looks at me. What's in that look? That it's okay

if I fire him. Okay to report him to the police? Or that he wants me to keep silent?

I look into the surrounding trees. “Thanks, Kev.”

He walks away and I think maybe he told me about the shooting because he thinks I should know his failings, maybe because I yelled at him the other night for making threats, and his apology was a promise to be the crewmember he was capable of becoming, and he couldn’t be great with this secret holding him down, maybe so I can carry some of the secret, the burden.



July 16, 1999, Kevin staggers down the trail with his scar smiling at the heavens. The veins in his arms rise like rivers as he carries a rock so big that I grab my camera and snap photos and shout encouragement. Kevin drops the rock where the trail sloughs into the creek, rubs his arms, tucks in his faded blue work shirt, and heads for another rock. I think I see him smile.

When I develop the photo three months later (once I no longer live in the woods), I protect it as if it can tell some new truth. But then I flash back to, “And I shot him.” I try to balance these Kevins—woods worker and attempted murderer. I can’t when I’m in the woods or when I am looking at the photo.



During the last week of summer session, August 1999, Kevin and I hike from Hesperus Mountain ten miles back to camp. Our job—saw through every tree blocking the trail.

“Kev? You know about Hesperus?” He shakes his head. “Hesperus is one of the most important mountains to the Diné. Before they were herded onto the reservation, their land was defined by four mountains. Hesperus was the northern edge. They called it Black Mountain.”

I think about the evening spent watching the sun set and the night I yelled at Kevin. Kevin, as usual, reads my mind and says, “The crew’s better.”

“Yeah, great. Really.”

Kevin smiles, maybe because he's back in my good graces. I smile because I love this crew, this mountain, this kid. If only there was some way I could keep everything the same. Keep the crew near Hesperus forever. Forget the homophobia, the sexism, the quitters, that Kevin shot someone (though I still haven't decided what to do—say nothing, tell my boss, talk to the police). I shift the Stihl on my shoulder and look toward Transfer Camp where we need to go. "How many miles till dinner?"

"Six," Kevin says. And I'd bet everything (everything) that it is not five or seven.



Outside the car window, lodgepoles whiz by. I wonder if I would pull over if I saw Kevin on one of these Warm Springs roads? Yes, if we could climb trees and watch sunsets in a pure silence, if we could swing tools and wouldn't have to say a word because we saw the world the same way.

No, if there would be an awkward silence (as if he were on one side of a canyon and I on the other). I know too much to handle that. He (once) knew all of my failings. He has seen me angry and mean and lazy. He was there when I was fired.

I drive past the river, past the town the size of my home town (2,500 people), up the grade, until I see the canyons and Mount Jefferson. If I could, I'd turn Jefferson into Hesperus.



September 15, 1999, my fall crew, Orange Crew, creates a fire break in the hills between Durango and Pagosa, Colorado. All day I chainsaw, dropping dead trees and bucking them into six-foot sections. My crew (Jenny, Shane, Aaron, and Kevin) tosses the trees from the firebreak line. With ear pro, eye pro, and a hard hat, my world thins to only what is in front of me—that spinning chain, a tree, a notch, the falling, a thump.

All day I work in the silence of an endless scream of the saw dampened by ear pro. For the first time in months, I have hours

alone to think, so I do—Kevin tried to kill someone (I don't get what that means). I press my chain and dogs into a dead aspen. Curls of shavings, long and thin fly into my chaps. Kevin with a gun—I only see him with a Pulaski. I force myself to see a gun because I need to understand what I will or won't tell. The choice must be intentional.

I throttle the saw and visualize this: *Kevin spots the guy near downtown Warm Springs. It is night. Kevin, drunk, pulls a gun from against the small of his back. Then there is a shot, the guy runs. Kevin shoots again. Again. The guy stumbles, grabs his leg. Kevin shoots. Misses. The guy limps around the corner. Kevin follows. Another shot, another shot, another. These more warnings than anything. The gun is empty, and Kevin runs away, crying.*

Another aspen drops. I must be up to thirty, and it is only midday. I leave a wake of dead and down around me. I try again: *Kevin sees the guy and turns away so the guy won't notice him. Kevin pulls out his handgun (and I know nothing about handguns so I don't know what to imagine other than an L-shaped thing) and walks toward the guy, out of his vision. Kevin rubs the scar along his neck, remembers the feeling of knife slashing skin. Kevin raises the gun, aims, shoots. Hit in the shoulder, the guy stumbles, scrambles to his feet. Kevin chases, fires, fires, fires, fires, fires. Hits the guy in the leg. Another stumble. The guy on the ground. One hand on the leg. The other hand holding his right shoulder. Kevin slows to a jog. Then walks. Gun dangling from his hand. Five feet away, Kevin pulls the gun up, beads on the guy's head and thinks nothing, thinks revenge, thinks strength. Kevin pulls the trigger. No sound. No recoil. No bullet. Kevin runs, angry that there isn't one more bullet.*

I drop another tree and another. I lead a crew that teaches life skills to troubled youth. Drop another. Do I set an example and turn Kevin in? Drop another. My training hasn't taught me how to deal with an attempted murderer. Another. What is worse? Silence or telling. I push my ear pro deeper, rev my Stihl, and cut into a fir. The holding wood cracks. I step back as the sixty-foot snag leans, leans, falls to the forest floor. Hits. Bounces. Settles on duff.



After work, Kevin and I sit near the kitchen tarp. "My dad taught me how to build a sweat lodge. He and I sweat once a day if we can."

"Can you build one?"

"Yeah."

So Kevin, Shane, Aaron, Jenny, and I use Education Hour to make a sweat lodge from ponderosas and gamble oaks and cover the structure with three tarps.

"This isn't perfect," Kevin says.

"What would you do differently?"

"Use animal hides rather than tarps. A different type of tree. And specific rocks."

"What type?"

"Can't remember." This is the first time that Kevin actively teaches. Normally he leads by example. But lately I've discussed with him the possibility of him becoming an assistant leader next year, about being vocal, about being a teacher. He's not great at it yet (or really good), but he's trying. And if he tries, he'll be successful. Have I decided to say nothing?

We build a bonfire and since it is a September evening, the warmth feels nice. We toss rocks into the fire and add more wood. The smoke curls into the clear, cool evening.

"We need to boil water," Kevin says. Jenny runs to put a pot on the two burner.

"Why hot water?" I ask.

"So the rocks don't cool down. We got to keep the heat."

With the rocks red and the water boiling, we strip to shorts and crawl into the sweat lodge. "Go in clockwise," Kevin says, "like the seasons." The tarp tight against backs, low against heads. Jenny closes the flap, and darkness envelops us. Kevin takes the ladle and pours water over the rocks. They hiss and steam and the sweat lodge jumps in temperature. He pours another. The steam burns my nose. 110 degrees and rising. After fifteen minutes, Aaron, Shane, and Jenny open the sweat lodge and crawl into the night. Cool air sweeps in.

"Can you put some more rocks in the fire and some water on the stove?" Kevin asks.

"Yeah," Jenny says as she closes the tarp.

Kevin pours water and the temperature again spikes. More water. More.

Half an hour later, Jenny sends in a shovel of hot rocks. More water. My nostrils burn. More water. The top of my mouth stings with every inhale. More water. My back burns from steam. More water. After another half hour, Jenny shovels in another round of rocks. More water. More steam. More burn.

"How you doing?" Kevin whispers.

"More." I want to feel what Kevin feels, to understand his world, to help me decide. If I tell, he'll be punished. He needs rehabilitation. He seems to be getting that here. He's learning how to teach, how to lead. "More," I say. Another ladle. Another.

"More?" Kevin asks.

I want to understand Kevin's violence. "More."

"Almost out of water," Kevin says.

"One more," I say because I want this night, this sweat lodge, this life never to end.

He pours the water over the rocks. The steam burns my nostrils, stings my forehead, falls hot on my back. We sit in silence until the steam falls from the roof. Kevin opens the flap and we crawl into the night. I lay a hand on his sweaty shoulder. "Thanks. That was powerful."

"Yeah."

We head off to our tents. We've only got a few more weeks until Kev returns to Warm Springs and whatever is there. Passed out drunk on the street? Finding again the guy who cut his throat (or being found by that guy)? Or maybe next year he'll come back as an assistant leader. In a few weeks, I'll be seasonally unemployed. Drinking. Sitting on corners writing in a journal.

Kevin walks toward his tent. I watch his shadow-figure and see just pieces of parts of him breaking from the darkness (an arm, a leg, his neck). Is that how I've see him in the woods? Just parts of Kevin? Never all of him?

Steam wisps off his shoulders, curls around itself and rises.



It is seven years later as if it is a day or a hundred years. I drive across central Oregon and remember everything from those weeks as if my memories will die if I forget a single thing.



And how does this story end? The way every story does.

The season after working with Kev, I am promoted to Program Director. I bring Kevin on as an assistant leader. He'll be perfect for the position. He can learn to be a leader. But seven months into my job (and nine weeks into working with Kevin again), I am fired because I feel my job is to support my crews in the field. My boss (new to the position) feels I should be at my desk. I visit Kevin's crew and tell them I have been fired. Then I move onto my girlfriend's porch until I can gather enough money to move indoors. Plus everything feels better with a breeze.

My ex-boss promotes Kevin to leader though I beg her not to. Kevin is impressionable, not ready to be in charge. And in the end, he and his crew drink and smoke pot together. My ex-boss fires Kevin a month after she fires me. Kevin has nowhere to go (just like I have nowhere to go), so he crashes with me on the porch. After twenty-nine weeks of woods glory spread over two years, we've both been fired from perhaps the only thing we'll ever be good at—swinging a tool and living in tents, building trails and bridges. The first three nights, Kevin comes to my girlfriend's porch stumbling, unable to talk, barely able to see. The fourth morning, I pull Kevin aside. "Kevin, you can't keep coming home drunk. If you don't sober up, you'll need to leave."

"I will." And I wonder if that means, "I'll sober up" or, "I'll leave if I don't sober up?" Eight hours later, Kevin enters my girlfriend's apartment, and there is nothing interesting in how he staggers, grabs a hold of the couch.

"You're pissed." Kevin always knew my moods.

"Kev, I'm not." I say this as if I am afraid it will hurt him to be wrong. This is the first time I've told him he couldn't do something and then he has done it. I remember the marijuana, the threat, how he always improved.

"Let me help you get your stuff."

Kevin packs his backpack. And just like that, his failures and mine pile around us creating silence. But not the silence we used to have. How do we talk about the pot, the threat, him shooting someone, my never reporting him, him and me getting fired after twenty-nine

weeks of building trail that meanders through beautiful forests. How do we speak about sleeping on a porch because we have nowhere else to go and me kicking him off that porch?

The great memories weigh us down as much as our failures do because now we can never live up to them—climbing the aspens, hiking around Hesperus, the sweat lodge.

We hug, and as I hold him I look at Hogsback Mountain. My girlfriend loves Hogsback, but I don't care about it. But if Kevin and I hiked north from Hogsback, we'd find Kevin's huge rock. To the west rises Hesperus. Those weak-branched aspens ten miles farther, where we watched the sun set. If we started walking now we could reach there in a long day. It is so close—just over that ridge.

I try not to tremble. After today I'll never see him again. That is one more failure piled on top our others. He lets go and staggers toward Hogsback. I don't believe in god, but I pray. I pray. It does no good and Kevin turns onto the street (away from Hesperus, the aspens, the rock). The road curves and Kevin disappears toward town.



I crest a final reservation hill and look in the rearview mirror (I can see almost all of it). I'm glad to make it free without seeing Kevin. I don't have to tell him that I've quit working in the woods, that I still find beer too many nights. I don't have to find out if he's sober. If he has any more children he doesn't know. If he had any more violent outbursts.

After seven years, it's easier to pretend we will always wear those work shirts—traveling the west, creating memories and trail. Easier to pretend that our 203 days of sharing burnt mac and cheese while etching trail were perfect. To admit anything else would unravel everything, and almost everything is already ruined. Maybe that is why I have never reported Kevin. If I do, it will destroy the memories. I know that logic doesn't really work but I need something.

All around, it's mesas piling on top of mesas, lodgepoles, sage, Mount Jefferson (how I wish, I wish, it was Hesperus). How the hell did this ever work—the Indian and the white kid, the leader and the member, the nonviolent activist and the attempted murderer.

ASCENT

Soon I pass the sign letting me know I'm no longer on the Warm Springs Reservation. And that is that. And this is this. Or so I tell myself to keep from crying, which I seem to be doing too much lately. In 1999 as he walks away. In 2006 as I cross his reservation. In 2007 as I write. As I drive past that sign I breathe a sigh of relief. There will be no more additions (good or bad) to our story. The old memories are protected and preserved. And they can remain pure. They can remain almost, almost, holy.