

Whitmore, 1969

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We drove under a tin-white sun. In Des Moines, my brother and I had each dropped a tab of acid and now the Midwest rushed at us—great rows of corn and swaths of open field, a startling horizon of alfalfa haze. We stared out at a diorama of little wooden bridges and clapboard houses, processions of blinking radio towers, neither of us speaking. My brother, Whitmore, drove like a man skipping bail, forcing my father’s Oldsmobile into a high-pitched whinny. He streamed his hand out the window, his knuckles whistling in the wind. Slightly mesmerized, I watched his hand as it fishtailed into an elegant sine curve. We were listening to Bob Dylan’s *Bringing It All Back Home* on the eight-track. It was the summer of 1969. Men were getting ready to land on the moon. The girls I knew wore slacks and smelled of sandalwood and cherry vodka. You could fit the whole world inside an album cover.

My brother had his other hand on the wheel, his index finger raised like a flagpole, in exclamation at the music. He seemed to be saying, *Here, this is what I’ve been trying to tell you.* When “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” played, I saw a single tear appear in my brother’s right eye. I looked out my window at the neon-green farms and the heat shimmering off the blacktop roads, pretending not to notice. Whitmore was twenty-three—four years older than I was. He had returned to us a few months earlier, after a two-year stint in Vietnam. In the Los Angeles airport, as he disembarked from his trans-Pacific flight in uniform, a young woman with braids spat at him. This event had dogged him all summer.

He didn’t talk much about his two years in Southeast Asia but every now and then—when a young girl with an organdy bow in her hair sang at our church, or when my mother

forced him to receive one of her hugs—he wept. One night, as we ate dinner, my parents and I stopped mid-chew to see Whitmore, his face blotched red, quietly bawling into his pork chops and mashed potatoes. My mother touched the back of his hand and Whitmore looked up as if someone had slapped him in the face. Trying to make light of the situation, my father said, “I didn’t think much of the pork chops either.” My mother winced but Whitmore started to laugh. He said, “This will stop, Dad. You’ll see.”

Now, in the Oldsmobile, Whitmore wiped his eye with the back of his wrist and stuck his hand back out the window. He said, “I intend to swim my hand all the way through Minnesota.”

“We’re still in Iowa,” I said.

“That’s correct,” he said, nodding.

The road trip had been his idea. I woke up early one morning to find him sitting in my bedroom, smoking a cigarette in my father’s old bathrobe. The cigarette flashed through the blue dawn of the room. He said, “I’d like to take a road trip. There’s some people I want to see. I was thinking you could come with me.”

“Sure,” I said, sitting up in bed. I was scheduled to detassel corn that summer before college.

“I want to go to Hibbing, Minnesota,” he said.

“What’s there?”

“That’s Bob Dylan’s hometown.”

“Gotcha,” I said. I felt as if I should have known this.

He blew some smoke up at the ceiling. “Also, I’d like to visit an old girlfriend. I really need to be with a woman.”

“Right.”

There was a moment of silence.

I said, “Why are you wearing Dad’s old bathrobe?”

“It smells like the old house.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said. While Whitmore was doing his tour of duty, my parents had sold the old Victorian and bought a brick-and-tile in the suburbs of Indianapolis. He’d left for war with a bedroom of his own and come back to the foldout couch in the den. My brother finished his cigarette and said, “We’ll take the back roads and highways and stop in little towns. I want to buy fruit along the roadside. You ever had a Michigan peach?”

“We won’t be going through Michigan, Whitmore.”

“No matter,” he said, getting up to leave.

We drove all day and shot through the dusk, the windows down, Dylan and Hendrix and Van Morrison bursting from the eight-track. Outside of Minneapolis, my brother’s mood grew somber and he switched off the music. He said he intended to call on Tracy Thatch, whom he dated in high school, before she came north to go to college. He had her address written down on an old receipt and he kept looking at it as we drove into the city. We talked off and on—about a kid who’d hitchhiked through the Ukraine, some friends who’d had a naked wedding on a rooftop in Brooklyn. Then ten-minute stretches of quiet, great waves of silence, that seemed to pummel us.

I read the map and navigated us to a neighborhood of college dorms and fraternity houses. On this Friday night in July, most of the students had gone home for the summer. I could tell Whitmore didn’t want me to point this out. We stopped the Oldsmobile in front of a bungalow.

“Doesn’t look like anybody’s home,” I said.

“I’m enjoying just seeing the house,” he said, tapping on the steering wheel.

“Okay,” I said.

“Tracy studies biology. Wants to be a vet. She’s real good with animals.”

“Yeah.”

“One time we rode horses out at Blackman’s Ranch and I remember she rode English.

I’d never heard that phrase before—*riding English*.”

“What’s it mean?” I asked.

“Fancy saddle and such,” Whitmore said, nodding at the house.

“You want to wait here some?”

“Yeah, I’d like that. Maybe she went to a movie. Are there any good movies playing at the moment?”

“Probably,” I said.

We sat through another silence. Then, without warning, my brother got out of the car and bounded up to the bungalow. I watched as he rang the doorbell several times. There was no answer. He paced around on the front stoop, his hands shoved inside his pockets. Every now and then he’d turn and look at the door, as if someone were coming to answer it. Eventually, he headed back toward the car but then he stopped at the mailbox and opened it. I saw him pull out a small stack of mail and begin sifting through it. He put something under one armpit and put the rest of the pile back in the mailbox. When he got into the Oldsmobile he was holding a mail-order catalog.

“You can’t steal other people’s mail,” I said. “It’s a federal offense.”

“War is legal but taking a mail-order catalog will send you to jail? Is that what we’re saying?” he said. He stared at the front cover of the catalog. There was a picture of an old man in plaid assembling a bird feeder. The man had a fraternal look on his face; a kindly neighbor in shirtsleeves on a Sunday afternoon.

“It’s some kind of arts and crafts catalog. She always did like building things.” He held the catalogue up, pointing to the mailing label. “Look, that’s Tracy Thatch’s name.”

“I can read,” I said.

“This sounds crazy, but over there it seemed weird to imagine people still had addresses. I mean all the houses along this street, you can just up and send somebody a letter and they’ll get it and read it—just because you paid the government a few cents to put the letter in a little metal box. You see the drift of what I’m saying?”

“It’s kind of weird when you say it like that,” I said.

He looked back at the house. “Geez, I’d like to see Tracy Thatch again. She tasted like a packet of Juicy Fruit.”

Afraid that my brother might cry, I said, “Maybe you can call her, or maybe we can stop by here on our way back from Bob Dylan’s hometown. You could even send her a letter.”

“Oh, no,” Whitmore said, “I’m out of the letter-writing business for good.” He looked down at the catalog. “I’m going to put this back,” he said. “In case Tracy wants to make herself a bird feeder or something.”

“Do you want to leave a note?” I asked.

“Nope. Notes are worse than letters.”

He got out of the car and put the catalog back in the mailbox. When he came back, he started the engine and we drove down the darkening street in silence.

Before he was drafted, my brother was a Berkeley hippie. My parents sent him to California to study engineering, but he dropped out halfway through his junior year and stayed in the Bay Area. The letters from his first two years in college were littered with the words of the counterculture. He wrote about his thing and the project and neither my parents nor I knew what he was talking about. He described a world in which boys wore doormen's coats or Navajo blankets to their lectures, where students lived in cold-water apartments and kept exotic animals as pets—wallabies, turtles, armadillos.

On several occasions, in these letters, my brother told my parents to sell all their furniture and go to India. Or he told them to seek out a backwoods existence, a life in a cabin by a swift, cold river. I would come home from football practice to find my father, at the kitchen table, squinting at one of the letters. He would read them several times, his eyes scanning my brother's loose and hooped cursive. Finally, over dinner, he would share his thoughts: "Whitmore is becoming a communist. That much seems clear." He said this in a reasoned and flat tone, the same voice he used at his pharmacy to list the pros and cons of a particular nasal decongestant. After such occasions, I went to bed and imagined my brother in a red beret and a goatee. I imagined him living in warehouses in San Francisco, sleeping on the floor beside old radiators with women named Frida and Coco; I saw him handing out orange juice and literature on street corners.

My brother's draft notice came to our family home in Indianapolis. My father was in the habit of opening my brother's business-looking mail and forwarding the important items to the cooperative where Whitmore lived, in Haight-Ashbury. When he opened the draft notice, my father was standing by the fridge. My mother was in the backyard taking laundry off the line. My father—looking unusually stern, with his lie-down crew cut, bifocals, and pharmacist's white

smock—said, “Your brother has been asked to go and fight in Vietnam.” I remember that the word *asked* come out dry and uninflected.

I was sitting at the kitchen table. I didn’t know what to say. Finally, I said, “On whose side?” It was conceivable to me that a communist dispatch had come from North Vietnam, a call to far-flung brethren.

My father, without irony, said, “Ours.” There was a pause. Then he said, “This will shake things up a little. I better go tell your mother.” He walked outside and told my mother while she was taking towels and sheets from the line. I watched as he padded out onto the lawn and stood by her, the letter in his hand. My mother—a schoolteacher in a sundress—took the letter from him and read it for herself, her head shaking. I couldn’t see her face but, from behind, I watched as she cried into a hanging bath towel. My father put his arms around her, and they stood like that for a long time, the white towels brightening the dusk.

A week later my father flew to San Francisco to find my brother and tell him the news in person. He was gone for three days and when he came back I was surprised to learn that Whitmore had agreed to report for duty. I had been certain that he would flee to Canada or Mexico.

My father reported back like an anthropologist fresh from the field, although he refused to tell my mother and me everything that had transpired. He looked shell-shocked by the ordeal of California. He told us that everywhere you looked in San Francisco runaways lined the streets, that the people Whitmore ran with all drank from the same soda and wine bottles and had names like Bear Man and Little Sue. Later, I would learn that my father had arrived in California the week after Whitmore’s girlfriend had committed suicide with sleeping pills. Maybe that was why Whitmore agreed to go and fight—it was as a way of leaving things behind. None of us

ever knew the girlfriend, or even her name. In his letters, Whitmore referred to her as *the girl I go with*.

Before flying to basic training and then on to Vietnam, my brother came back to the Midwest for a week. He kept to himself mostly, taking long solitary drives in my father's Oldsmobile at night. My mother tried to draw him out about his girlfriend's death and the impending tour of duty. By now we were watching graphic footage on the nightly news—I remember seeing a man's severed hand next to a bicycle tire, a naked child running from a burning field. None of us switched on the television the whole week my brother was home. The day before he flew out, Whitmore came home with a crew cut. He'd left earlier in the day with shoulder-length hair, wild locks bleached by the California sun. He opened the back door as my parents and I sat around the kitchen table. We all stared at him. With the aura of daylight around him in the doorway, his bone-white scalp exposed amid rows of cropped hair, he looked like an apparition, a drowned kid who comes back in a horror movie. He came inside and handed my mother a grocery bag. When she opened it and lifted out a handful of his shorn hair, my brother said, "That's all I've got of that life I had out there and I want to keep it here where it's safe. Would you keep it for me?"

My mother, somehow, did not cry. She put the hair back inside the grocery bag and said, "We'll keep it until you get back and then maybe you can grow some more." And then my brother came forward to receive one of her hugs, unbidden, and she ran her hands through his short hair again and again, while my father and I both looked at the same spot on our kitchen floor.

The sun had gone down all the way when we reached downtown Minneapolis. The acid had worn off and we were feeling raked-through and restless. Whitmore, in a burst of vigor and boredom, waved at passersby. People spilled out of restaurants and bars, chatted in pairs at the curbstone. Young girls swaggered out of movie houses in jeans or flowing skirts. We looked longingly at them and Whitmore said, "I may die if I don't touch a woman soon." He bought a bottle of cheap wine from a liquor store and we passed it back and forth as we drove along. We ate at a Chinese restaurant and my brother used chopsticks. We were running out of uncomplicated things to talk about. At about midnight, we drove into a motel courtyard on the outskirts of town.

Whitmore said, "I'm beat. We'll head north in the morning."

"You have any money?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "This place looks cheap, don't you think?"

I looked around the motel courtyard, at the rusted, slouching balconies and the drained swimming pool where several pieces of deck furniture stood arranged in the bottom.

"Yeah, it looks cheap," I said.

"Perfect," he said.

We got out of the car and went inside to a small reception area. The interior smelled of damp carpet. An elderly woman sat behind the front desk watching a small television set.

"We'd like a room," my brother said.

The old lady looked up from the television and cocked one eye like a marksman.

"Eight dollars plus tax," she said. "Checkout is at ten and the swimming pool don't work."

My brother put a ten-dollar bill on the counter.

“You boys brothers?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“That’s a relief. Where you from?” she said, making change.

“Indianapolis,” Whitmore said.

“I got a sister in Champaigne. Your neck of the woods.”

“It’s a ways,” I said.

“You ever visit her? Your sister?” Whitmore asked the old lady.

“Never. Here’s your key,” she said. She put the key down on the counter and turned back to the television. “I hear on the news that tomorrow they’re going to put a couple men on the moon. That’s a little much for my temperament,” she said. “I hope it don’t interfere with my TV reception.”

I craned my head over the counter to see her television set. On-screen, a reporter was demonstrating the various features of a spacesuit.

Whitmore took the key and said, “When those men walk on the moon, all the lights across the country are going to go out. The telephone lines will go down. Nothing will be the same. You might want to call your sister in Champaigne before the world changes for good.”

The woman apparently didn’t hear. She continued to stare at the television and we went to our room.

There were two single beds separated by a stretch of stained brown carpet. My brother collapsed onto the one nearest the bathroom. I lay down on the other one. Whitmore stared up at the ceiling, blew some air between his lips, and said, “I’m feeling lonesome.”

“Lonely,” I said.

“What?”

“We don’t say *lonesome*. That’s a southern thing. Why do you always have to sound like you’re a folk song?”

“Jesus, Jesus,” he said. “Someone has stolen my little brother and replaced him with a Gestapo agent.”

“Sorry.”

“What I’m saying is, I miss the way things used to be. The old house with the attic. And I haven’t slept with a woman in a long time. I’m lonesome for a woman is what I’m saying over here in this little bed.”

“How long has it been?” I asked.

“Not since I left.”

“That was two years ago.”

“This is my point.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I know. I couldn’t for a while after my girl died.”

“I thought guys went to hookers over there.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why?”

He considered and said, “Something got in the way. They were so sad-looking, you know. I went with some buddies once to a whore house in Saigon and all the women smelled like men and cigarettes.”

“That doesn’t sound so good.”

“They tried to make me sleep with this girl who was probably not more than fourteen.”

“Jesus.”

“Lenny Cruikshank held me while they paid her to get me hard by blowing on my trousers. But I couldn’t do it.” Whitmore folded his arms across his chest. “Lenny had his legs blown off when he dropped his own grenade in a swamp. He was the dumbest human being I’ve ever encountered. We called him Lenny the Brain Surgeon.”

My brother fell quiet. The motel’s broken neon sign shot strobes of pink light into the room. All summer long there was only one question I wanted to ask: *Did you kill anybody over there?* Instead I asked, “Did you see a lot of people die?”

Whitmore closed his eyes and said, “I saw some people go.”

I waited for him to say more about people dying but he didn’t. After another moment he said, “I wonder what Tracy Thatch is thinking about right now.”

I switched off the lamp and turned on my side. I watched my brother’s face in the neon shimmer. Within minutes, he fell asleep. He looked peaceful and I wondered what he saw in his dreams. Did he dream about napalm, or about the day that he and Tracy Thatch rode English across the Indiana plains?

Several hours later I woke to the sound of voices in the bathroom. I got up to investigate. Whitmore was talking to someone, a woman, and the conversation had a lilt that implied intimacy and sorrow. I craned my ear to the door but only heard my brother’s voice as a quiet rumble. The woman, her voice low and breathy, kept saying, “I know it.” I glanced at the clock and saw that it was 3 a.m. I went to the nightstand and retrieved a tumbler and held it to the bathroom wall, my ear pressed in tight. There was a sound like air through a seashell and an amplified version of my brother’s rumbling melancholy. This continued for a matter of minutes and then I heard the bath running. I stepped back from the wall.

In 1969 I was a virgin and the sound of my brother running a bath with an anonymous woman seemed both terrible and heroic. I was being brought into my brother's realm. After a troubled childhood together, an uneasy friendship, our lives were finally intersecting, and what lay at this confluence was the sound of a bath filling, a woman's voice sifting through a motel wall. I immediately assumed that my brother had called a Minneapolis hooker to our room and was now having sex with her in the bathtub. A series of jumbled images ran through my mind: two naked figures squared up against each other, their mouths pressed tight, tendrils of steam rising from the faucet like smoke. I sat on the bed, paralyzed by a desire to both leave the room and fling the bathroom door wide open. I formed an arsenal of door-opening excuses—a need to pee, thirst, curiosity at strange voices—and then I waited for carnal sighs and whispers to issue from under the bathroom door. When the water was turned off, I resumed my motel-spy stance with the glass tumbler. It was at that moment that I remembered that the bathroom had an outside window.

I got up and left the room. On the outside landing, I looked around for something to stand on. I lifted a decrepit trash can into place. I leaned against the wall and stood quietly on top of the trash can. By standing on my toes I could clear the brick windowsill with my eyes. At first I could only see the tops of their heads, but then, as I strained higher, I saw their entire bodies.

Whitmore sat in his boxers on the side of the tub. The woman—dark-haired, with sorrel-brown skin—reclined naked in the tub. Whitmore seemed to be washing her long hair, and, as he did so, she was stroking her hand in and out of the slit in his boxer shorts. I don't know what I was expecting to see, but the image stupefied me. There was a kind of slow deliberation to the

scene that threw me; in the glare of white tile and fluorescent lighting my brother sat, patient as a monument, shampooing a stranger's hair, and all the while they spoke, made eye contact, smiled wryly. I got off the trash can and went quietly back into the room.

I went to my bed and lay on my back, listening to the whir of the highway, and to the low and reverberant voices in the bathroom. I waited for a crescendo, perhaps a pause and then a flurry of breathiness, but nothing of the sort happened. It never got any louder. After about thirty minutes, I heard the bathroom door open. I immediately feigned sleep. I heard my brother say from the doorway, "That's my little brother."

The woman whispered, "Hello, little brother." Then she added, "I hope we weren't too loud."

I heard the sound of the two of them sitting down on Whitmore's bed. I felt my face flush as I considered the possibility that they were going to do the bona fide screwing right next to me. But there were no sounds that resembled resumed foreplay. I heard my brother's signature movements—fluid and unhurried—as he lit a cigarette. After several beats of silence, the woman said, "Whatever happened to the guy who fell out of the helicopter?"

"Fell a thousand feet into the jungle and hit the trees. He was very dead when the patrol unit found him."

"That's got to hurt," the woman said.

"That guy stayed with me, guy from Ohio with a cleft chin and a little gap between his teeth and I remember looking at his mouth right before he fell out. I was standing next to him when the chopper reared up. If I'd gotten in last I would have been the one to fall out. That's the thing over there—your friends die because someone else's is stupid or late or sick. Whole thing is a numbers game...a handful of dice..."

“You’re sweet,” the woman said. “You want to try again?”

That my brother had revealed more to a hooker about Vietnam than to his family, his own brother, weighed nothing in my mind compared to the impending moment of hearing my brother have sex for the first time in two years. I waited, counting to myself. I heard something like the sound of fingers sifting through sand, of clothing being removed. She had this way of murmuring throughout the process, almost narrating it—*that’s good, now that, sure*. I could feel my face burning up and wondered if my eyes were clenched shut. My brother was silent apart from his mounting breath. The bed started to squeak and they both giggled, mid-stride, like joggers aspirating at a joke. Eventually, I couldn’t stand it any longer and I opened my eyes. The woman, her dark hair cascading down her brown back, sat astride my brother. He looked up at her plaintively, his face shadowed by the net of her hair. Suddenly, he turned and looked directly at me. His expression was vacuous for a second, then he made a cryptic smile and nodded uneasily, the way you might nod good morning to a lapsed acquaintance. The woman looked over at me and smiled good-naturedly. “We’re almost done. Sorry if we’re keeping you awake.” I was unable to respond. I turned my back and closed my eyes. I wanted to leave the room but felt pinned by something, by their assumption that I could handle this situation. When my brother came it was a sound that ripped the room apart. It was something wild and injured—a dog yelp—and I didn’t think I could ever look him in the eye again. Afterward, they lay together while Whitmore wept more than I’d ever heard a person weep. I stayed still, my back turned, looking at the wall. There was no going back now; Whitmore’s and my life had flowed toward the same point. I’d seen something of him that I couldn’t give back.

In the morning we drove into the North Country, sharing a joint, the windows down, the air rushing all around us. The copper ridges flattened out and the woods dappled with sunshine. Neither of us had been this far north before. I looked off into the underbrush, scanning for wolves and bears, emissaries of the Arctic. We didn't play any music; my brother drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and smiled at the dash.

He said, "That woman last night was Miya. She's a half-blood Cheyenne Indian."

I waited for more, but this was all he said on the subject of the hooker in our motel room.

Sometime in the middle of the afternoon we came upon Hibbing. I expected the town to be something from a Bob Dylan song. I expected an indolent settlement of barefoot girls and roadhouses, repentant men sitting at bus stops, worn bandstands in municipal parks. In reality, Hibbing was a collection of wide, clean streets and cropped lawns. We saw a post office, a library, several banks, a drugstore. Some of the buildings showed vestiges of iron-mining money—the stately stone and brickwork facades of the high school and the Androy Hotel.

We drove down Howard Street. My brother brought out the receipt with Tracy Thatch's address on it. Other addresses were listed beneath hers.

"A buddy of mine from 'Nam gave me some addresses. He makes the pilgrimage once a year from Buffalo, New York."

The *pilgrimage*? I was still high from the joint, and this word annoyed me; it suddenly cheapened the deep and imagined connection I had to Bob Dylan.

We pulled down 7th Avenue East and parked in front of a modest two-story house at the corner of 25th Street.

"This is the house where Robert lived from the time he was seven," Whitmore said, squinting at his list and then up at the house.

“*Robert*,” I repeated.

Whitmore ignored me.

I stared at the house, trying to feel some gravity. It was boxy with a nearly flat roof; it had a squat and fortified appearance. We both looked out at the house for several long moments.

“Looks like it’s got a basement,” Whitmore said.

“Yeah.”

“I wonder where his bedroom was,” Whitmore said, biting his lip in speculation. “I’m going to say that his bedroom was upstairs and that he had his bed pushed all the way against the window.”

“And he used to watch the stars and listen to Woody Guthrie albums,” I offered.

“Yes. And he kept a notebook and a flashlight under his pillow.”

“Because he didn’t know when a song would keep him awake at night.”

Whitmore smiled. “You have to wonder when it happened, you know? When Robert Zimmerman became Bob Dylan.”

“When he changed his name?”

“No. I mean when the boy became Bob Dylan. There are events that change us. They make us become something different and I think it happens in the span of a single day. One night Robert Zimmerman went to sleep and he woke up as Bob Dylan.” Whitmore looked down the street and then back at the house. “If we go to the library we can see Robert’s senior class picture from 1959. They keep that particular yearbook in a safe.”

“Are you serious?”

“People keep stealing it and they’re running out of copies.”

I nodded, part of an imagined conspiracy.

We drove over to 5th Avenue and parked in front of the library. We went inside and found a librarian in a chlorine-blue dress. Her name was Miss Spalding and she took us down to the basement where the yearbook was kept. It turned out it wasn't kept in a safe but in a locked filing cabinet. Miss Spalding lay the yearbook out on a reading table and opened it to the relevant section. Then she left us alone with the book. The page corners were slightly dog-eared and the glossy surface was smudged with the whorls of previous fingerprints. Robert Zimmerman was wearing a jacket and tie. His hair was slicked back in what appeared to be a ducktail cut and he had a wry and affable expression on his face.

"He's not looking at the camera," Whitmore said.

It was true. Robert's eyes rested slightly to the left of the camera. We both stared down at the photo, trying to infer some larger meaning from the direction of his gaze.

"This was before he set off for Greenwich Village. In this photo, he doesn't know exactly what's going to happen but he has a sense of things. People who refuse to look at the camera know that something better is waiting."

I allowed my brother his speculation. We stood there a long while staring down at this seventeen-year-old kid's photo, looking for an indelible mark, something that singled him out. This was not only because we were on the philosophical tide of a joint, but because it was the end of a long, strange decade and we each wondered if it wasn't too late to be favored by some invisible kindness, some watershed talent. Miss Spalding returned and interrupted our reverie with the closing of the book. "We're getting ready to close for the day."

I looked at my watch. It was almost four o'clock.

"We should go eat lunch," I said to Whitmore.

He nodded, still dazed and infatuated with Robert Zimmerman's high school photo. We went outside and walked in search of food.

On the main drag, everything was closed. We had forgotten about the moon landing until we noticed a sign in the drugstore window that read Closed Early to Watch Astronauts. We plodded down the street, the only people in sight, hungry and less high by the minute. Hibbing had become a ghost town; I imagined people huddled around their TV sets with popcorn and soda. Eventually, we came upon an appliance store that, although closed, displayed twelve televisions tuned to Walter Cronkite. We pressed our faces to the glass, pulled in by Walter's grave and judicial face. Mostly I heard a dull buzz but now and then I heard the faint narration of the astronauts. I can't say how long we stood there, watching the near-silent montage of the first moon landing. But I remember seeing the suggestion of a tear in Walter Cronkite's eye, and the footage of Armstrong climbing down the ladder, delicately, like a man climbing into an icy pool of water. Then I remember the slow, first footstep and Buzz Aldrin coming down and the two of them taking photographs and jumping across the white, lunar terrain. It was like some spectral beach scene—two men frolicking on some strange and distant shore. I remember thinking that they too had been boys marked for history, that they too had probably slept in beds pushed up against the window to allow the onrush of stars. When they planted the American flag—a swath of fabric surrounded by gray-white dunes and a rushing darkness—I heard my brother say in a tone of perfect melancholy, "Now they've gone and put that up there."

For almost forty years, this comment has stayed with me. Somehow, it seemed to contain everything that he'd seen so far in his life and who he was becoming. I turned to look at my brother, his face somber, just inches from the window. A cloud of his breath was on the glass. He was utterly mysterious to me—nothing but vapors and smoke. I knew we would never be

friends, that life would pull us into parallel streams. I would go to college, and he would move to New York; he would become a bartender, an itinerant neighborhood poker player, and call me at three in the morning for money. I would stay in Indianapolis, become a lawyer, marry the first woman to fall in love with me. He would stay single, in and out of troubled love. He would retain his propensity for crying—tearing up during movies and when certain songs played on the radio. His hair would stay short. His friends would call him Whit. My brother and I would go years without seeing each other. We would have a reunion at a Bob Dylan concert in 1995 and the night would end badly with him punching me in the stomach. Four years later, at the age of fifty-three, he would die in a Brooklyn efficiency with a cat and no stove. At his funeral I would cry for this first time since grade school.

I want to say that all this seemed to be contained there in the plate glass of that appliance-store window in Hibbing, Minnesota, a little after five on a July afternoon. Not the facts, but the sense of things unraveling. I want to say that a man's life can run aground in a matter of seconds, but he may not know it for years. I've asked myself countless times whether Whitmore's life had taken its turn when his San Francisco girlfriend opened the bottle of sleeping tablets, or when the guy from Ohio fell from the helicopter in Vietnam, or when the woman in braids spat at him in the Los Angeles airport, but I have no way of knowing. Maybe it was when he saw two men standing on the moon, or this country's flag, slightly stiff and unyielding, amid the lunar void. I remember that we stood at the window for an impossibly long time. I was staring at the enigma of my brother's face and he refused to look at me. Finally, I turned back to the wall of televisions, pressed my hands against the glass, and watched Neil Armstrong take a telephone call from the president.