

## WITH MARBLES FOR EYES

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As they crested the final hill into town, the speed limit dropped and the noise from the tires was quieter and less constant. Travis looked out Sarah's window and she looked at him like he would say something, but he avoided her eyes. There was the tire shop, and the gas station with the dinosaur. There was the four-wheeler place with the sun-bleached mannequin in a tattered BYU t-shirt. A man in the shade of the awning over the front of the store waved. His name was Rick Anderson. When Travis was little he knew him in church and boy scouts, and seeing him now confirmed that being here was a mistake.

Farther down Main Street the Rupes sign rotated slowly. *Utah's burger and fry place.*

"Rupes. *That's* what it's called," Chris said from the back seat. "I was trying to remember."

The font on the sign was old-fashioned.

Travis slowed almost to a stop and pulled onto the shoulder, and the gravel was loud under the tires. He turned down the long driveway between the pastures, and the cattle guard buzzed, and a big black bird lifted off the fence and coasted away from the noise of the car. The driveway split, and Travis followed it to the right where it was shaded and the shadows from the leaves danced on his skin like they used to. The temperature was lower in the shade, and he remembered feeling happy here. He used to turn rocks over under the trees and collect bugs with Greg or Sam or Cindy, whoever would play with him. Later he walked the lane with Mary, talking or just holding hands. The silence made him feel good. He liked escaping from the noise at home, about church and school and boy scouts and sports.

He pulled up to the fence and put the car in park and Chris groaned and stretched and said to Ollie, “Hey buddy. We’re here! We’re at Grandpa Richard’s!” Chris got out and Adam unbuckled Ollie and held him while he woke up. Sarah was at the fence. She put out a hand and touched the rail, then rubbed her fingers together and came back to the car.

“Come on,” she said.

“I can’t do it.”

“What?”

“I can’t go in.”

“Travis.”

She got back in the car and closed the door.

“What the hell.”

“I can’t go inside, I’m sorry.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

She studied his face.

“I thought I could be okay with it. But I’m not. Sorry,” he said.

“So, what—we just turn around and leave?”

He shrugged. “You could go in and say hi. I doubt they’ll ask any questions.”

“We drove for two hours to say hi and leave?”

“I’m not rushing you. Stay as long as we planned. Whatever. I’ll go to Sam’s. I’ll go to the bookstore. I can entertain myself.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“I know,” he said, and she knew she couldn’t change his mind, he was decided already.

“Travis. Do you know what situation you’re putting me in?”

“Of course.”

“No, you don’t. I’m not making the call. This is your decision. You can be the one to explain yourself to the boys and your dad. Not me.”

“Okay. Let’s go then. Let’s leave,” he said. She wasn’t ready for this. When she responded, she was exasperated.

“Travis. Isn’t this a little silly? How long has it been? Ten years?”

“How does that change anything?”

“You said you thought it had been long enough.”

“I was wrong.”

“What do you think the boys are going to learn from this? You haven’t even given him a chance.”

“I can’t.”

“So now I have to be the bad guy?”

“The bad guy? How?”

He waited for her to explain. She looked through the windshield for a long time. She had no good options. If she told the boys they had to go they’d hate her. If they turned around and left without going inside she would be lumped in with Travis, inconsiderate, bitter, afraid. He left her no choice. She got out of the car and slammed the door. Travis opened his door and put his head out.

“Sarah, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” she said over her shoulder.

He scoffed and got back into the car, watching her just to make sure. She was going in. And she was acting like a victim about it, even though he told her she didn’t have to do it. She would be at the front door in a second and he would just be sitting here. He started the car and reversed down the driveway. He backed into a clearing in the trees where the driveway split. He could see the front porch from here and he watched them gather at the door and then disappear into the house, and imagined the conversation they were having, and what Sarah was saying about why he wasn’t there, and what the kids were thinking, and felt funny about being in the car down the driveway behind the trees, and laughed to himself in the quiet of the car. He was happy about his decision not to go in, and the feeling of freedom he had now made his chest swell. Like the time he told his dad he wasn’t going to get his Eagle Scout, and his dad paced the room like a lion, trying to figure him out, but he couldn’t, because Travis was his own man. He got out and closed

the door and walked the rest of the way to Sam's house, down the other fork of the driveway. The old orange truck was home. Lady pulled herself up from the shade and limped up to him, wagging her tail. She sniffed his leg and he pet her head.

"Hey there girl. You're still kicking around, huh?"

He knocked on the door. He knocked again, harder. It was hot on the doorstep in the sun and he covered the back of his neck with his hand to keep the sun off. The door opened and a man stood in front of him wearing only boxer shorts.

"Travis?"

"Hey Sam."

"Travis Parker? What the hell? Get in here buddy!" He opened the screen door and they hugged. The landing was littered with empty twelve-packs of Mountain Dew and Bud Light from a half-full trash bag spilling onto the landing and down the stairs to the basement. They went up the stairs to the living room.

"Come on up man! How ya' been?"

"I've been good. You?"

"Oh you know. Can't complain."

"Your kids here?"

"They're with their mom today."

"So it's just you, then. Living the dream."

"As you can see. Let me get some pants on. Make yourself comfortable."

The living room still had his parents' old furniture in it. An oak entertainment system with glass doors and old VHS tapes inside. Dark blue floral couches with ruffled skirts. The pictures on the wall looked the same, different shapes and sizes of wood and gilded metal frames, old family pictures with big glasses and lacey dresses and double-breasted suits. There was a picture of the temple in Manti, where they used to go with the youth group sometimes to do baptisms for the dead, or feed breakfast to the cast putting on the pageant about the Book of Mormon

every July. He stared at the picture and wondered why it was still on the wall. When he moved, he was aware of it like it was watching him.

“So how you been man?” Sam came down the hall pulling a shirt over his head. “You want something to drink? I got beer and soda. And water.”

“Beer. Please.”

“You visiting your dad?”

Travis shook his head. “My family is. I couldn’t.”

“Your family’s over there without you?”

He shrugged, and Sam tossed him a beer. When he pulled the tab, it bubbled around the mouth so that he had to slurp up the bubbles before they dripped off the can. He cleared a couch-cushion and sat down.

“Thought maybe you were here because of Grace.”

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t heard? She left him.”

“Are you serious?”

Sam nodded.

“Is it just him over there?”

“Oh yeah. Grace hasn’t been there for a while.”

“Shit. Sarah’s going to kill me. I can’t believe he didn’t mention that. What happened?”

“I don’t really know. I heard a few things through the grapevine. Her sons are still around here. Sounded a lot like what I remember about him and your mom.”

“Like what?”

“Uh, he wasn’t that nice to her kids I know. Made her feel like they were screw-ups. When they were first married, Jeff was still at home and your dad was really hard on him. Probably a lot of the same stuff you guys used to fight about. He locked him out of the house once when Grace was out of town, because he was with his girlfriend past curfew. He came over here, but I was working graveyard and he couldn’t get in. Ended up walking back to his girlfriend’s house in the snow and moving in with her. Grace was livid.”

“My dad’s plans always backfire.”

“You remember when you told me how he used to give your mom the silent treatment? He did that to Grace but like, times-ten. I guess she wanted to get a king size mattress, but he told her they didn’t need one or they couldn’t afford it or something. Grace bought it anyway and to protest your dad slept on the floor for like a year. He wouldn’t get in the bed. I think that was the last straw.”

“What the hell.”

“Yeah. John said he slept on a camping pad and talked to her from the floor like nothing was wrong. She was totally confused because other than sleeping on the floor he was acting so normal about everything. Your dad kind of has a way of doing that to people.”

Travis could see the camping pad. It was army green and inflated by a black mouthpiece that twisted opened and closed. His dad bought those when Travis was young. He spent a bunch of money on really nice North Face stuff and treated it so reverently that Greg and Travis decided they had the best camping stuff in the world, and it must be important, because they didn’t have anything else like that. They stored it in special bins in the attic where it was organized and labeled. When they were camping Richard helped them with their tents and their pads and he was very patient while he was teaching them how to use everything. Travis wondered if he still rolled his pad up in stages in the morning, open the mouthpiece, roll the air out, close the mouthpiece, re-roll the pad, tight as a bandage, open the mouthpiece again at the very end to let out the last bubble of air, store the pad in its bag, out of the way for the coming day, no sign he was ever there. It was always embarrassing to see him when he was sleeping, if his mouth was hanging open or his hair was messy. But in the morning, he would be dad again, his bedroll neatly packed away. Travis wondered if he should feel worse than he did about Grace being gone, but all he felt when stuff like this happened was proud, because it affirmed all his previous judgments, and he liked it when his judgment was affirmed.

“He’s really painted himself into a corner over there,” Sam said. “I don’t think he really sees anyone. Greg and Cindy still in touch with him?”

“Rarely. I don’t think either of them know about Grace.”

“He’s probably not eager to share the news.”

“He still going to church?”

“I’m sure.”

“Of course he is.” Travis sipped his beer and shifted his eyes around the room. “You going to church now too? That temple’s staring at me like the Eye of Sauron.”

“You kiddin’ me, I haven’t been to church since I discovered tits in high school. What temple?” He turned to look. He got up and took the picture of the temple off the wall and tossed it down the stairs to the landing. It smacked the trash bag and slid to the floor.

“There,” he said.

Travis finished his beer. Sam worked the tab on his can back and forth until it broke off.

“Twenty-two,” he said.

“Twenty-two what?”

“Don’t you remember? We played that in high school. Twenty-two girls are thinking about me right now.”

Travis’s came off in four and they laughed. He flicked his tab at Sam and missed and it tinked across the kitchen floor. He set his empty can on the window ledge next to a small stack of dirty cups and plates. The blinds were down but open and the room was bright without the lights on. A bluish light that didn’t quite reach the corners but made it so that you didn’t want to turn on the overhead lights and ruin the color.

“Don’t you ever have girls over? This place is a sty,” Travis said.

Sam surveyed the room and shrugged.

“Still smells the same though,” Travis said.

“Good or bad?”

“Neither. Just a smell. It’s your smell. You used to bring it with you to my house. It’s in your clothes. It hasn’t changed since we were little.”

He rested his head on the couch. Dried water spots showed through the popcorn ceiling, dark at the perimeter, light in the center. He wished they were covered up. The blades of the ceiling fan were dusty, and the bells of frosted glass had cobwebs inside. It was quiet everywhere. There was nothing between the sun and the earth in this town. Just people and desert. Long summer days. Hot rooms.

“You want anything else to drink?” Sam said.

“What?”

“You want anything else to drink?”

“No. I think I’m going to head in a minute. Take a stroll around town. Maybe hit the bookstore.”

“I haven’t had lunch yet. I’m going to make some eggs if you want to stick around.”

“Nah. Just want to sit here for another minute.”

It was like being in a museum. He’d lain on this very couch and watched *Ghostbusters* and *A Walk to Remember* and made out with Mary. He’d come in his pants and been surprised and tried to hide it even though it smelled like a swimming pool, and she’d laughed and put her hand on his crotch and said “uh-oh,” and he couldn’t laugh with her because her hand was on his crotch and he could hardly breathe. He knew he shouldn’t let it happen again because that was the thing they talked about most in church, but he did, again and again, and when he finally decided to stop and confess to the bishop, Mary felt betrayed. His dad was bishop then, and he was proud of Travis for being brave enough to come to him and confess his mistakes. He was happy when Mary broke up with Travis, and he congratulated him, because even though some decisions were hard, in the long run it would always be better to do the right thing than the easy thing or the fun thing.

Travis stood up.

“I’m going to take off,” he called into the kitchen. Sam came out, licking his fingers.



“Alright man,” he said. “Well I’m glad I got to see you. You going to be down here more regular?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Well keep in better touch at least. I’ll hit you up when I’m up your way.”

Travis flicked a wave over his head. Outside the shade hadn’t moved. Lady was lying in the grass. He walked back over the dirt and gravel, hands in his pockets. Sarah was leaning on the back end of the car. He stopped and said “hey” and then came closer.

“So Grace,” he said.

“So Grace,” she said. “How did we not hear about that?” She seemed resigned, and he smiled, and the tension broke.

“How’s it going in there?” he said.

“I told him we couldn’t stay long. Didn’t seem surprised. He’s in there building Lincoln Logs with Ollie.”

“What’d you tell the boys?”

“They didn’t ask.”

Travis took his cigarettes from the glove box. He offered one to Sarah and she took it and he lit it for her.

“Have I showed you what’s back here?” he said.

She looked where he was pointing and said he hadn’t.

“Come on.” He led her into the trees where there used to be a trail. It was grown over now, and the branches scraped their legs. They inched around a swarm of bees on a plant with purple flowers, then the foliage thinned out and they could walk between the trees down hard-packed earth to a creek at the bottom. It burbled through the channel.

“Sam’s parents used to own all this. It’s probably his now. Didn’t even think about that. He might be rich.”

“The boys would love this.”

“I know I used to.”

From the time they discovered it, he and Sam lived down here. The stream followed the line of trees behind the driveway, all the way between

both houses. It was like the backstage of a theater and they could run from house to house without being seen before they emerged on stage again. They stopped searching for bugs in the driveway and the new games were searching for creatures in the water or building a ladder into the branches of the best tree there ever was for a fort. The tree was still there, with their names carved into the side. He brought Mary back here to fool around in the grass until he told her he'd confessed to his dad and she broke up with him because he was always doing what he thought other people wanted him to do and never making his own decisions. He was confused about why she thought that was a bad thing. He didn't learn that there was another way until later, during the divorce, when he was getting emails from his dad that expressed regret about all the bad decisions his mom was making, so that Travis took her guilt for granted, and started to hate her. Then Greg told him their dad was a liar and that he needed to ask more questions, he couldn't just believe everything dad said, and Travis realized that he was right, and he was embarrassed, and wished he would have known that by himself.

"When do you want to go?" Sarah asked.

He was on his heels by the stream listening to the water.

"What?" he said.

"When do you want to go?"

"Whenever."

"We should probably give the boys a little more time." She put her cigarette out in the dirt. "I'll feel it out."

"Okay."

She watched him.

"You want to wait inside with me?"

"No."

"Okay," she said.

He watched her.

"Thanks," he said.

She nodded. He moved closer and sat by her in the grass above the stream. He lay on his back and she put her hand on his knee and he covered it with his. The ground was soft and the air was cool and the only sound was the water. He pulled her down to him and she came willingly and his hands glided down her sides and then they were under her pants and her hands were under his shirt and they tried to shush themselves but it was exciting to be loud in the wild.

Afterwards they cleaned off with water from the stream then got dressed and walked the length of the stream to Richard's house, and Travis showed her how they used to get out on this side, since there was no path. He hoisted her up to a tree branch and she held on and reached her foot over the bushes to the fence and balanced herself with one foot on the top rung until she could stand and hop down to the yard. Travis followed her. They were in the backyard and Richard was at the pond with the boys and he could see them, and he waved, and Sarah looked at Travis because now she was caught in the middle. Travis could feel her anxiety and wanted her to know she didn't have to feel it.

"It's fine," he said.

"What?"

"It's fine."

They were walking in the direction of the pond and he had to squeeze her hand to keep her walking and assure her this is what he meant to do.

"You sure?" she asked.

"Yeah. It's fine."

She didn't ask him to explain and he held on to her hand to keep her close. He stopped a safe distance from his dad.

"Hey guys. You found the pond," he said to the boys.

Ollie stood up and showed him the mud on both his hands and grinned widely because he knew he was protected if a grown-up had said he could do it. Travis smiled and said he was like Clayface and he better be careful in his good clothes. Chris and Adam already had fishing poles in the water, Richard's good Shimano poles they used to clean

with Q-tips in the shower when they were done using them. All the time he was aware of his dad.

“You still keep fish in here?” he said to Richard.

“Haven’t for a couple of years. What’s in there is just what’s left over.”

Travis shifted his hand in Sarah’s and acted absorbed in watching the boys fish. He had ideas about what to say next but the longer he waited the harder it got to say anything. His dad was cleaning his hands with a bottle of water and when he was finished he came up from where he was standing on the rocks and opened his arms for a hug. Travis hugged him with his free arm. Richard kissed his cheek and said it was good to see him and his lips were dry and his skin was rough and Travis was glad that part was finally over. They were standing on the same level now, and Travis towered over his dad, who was wearing his John Deere cap, and prescription glasses. His short-sleeve plaid shirt was tucked into his standard pair of supermarket jeans. His face was small and the hair under his hat was short and thin and grey. His cheeks drooped where they used to be tight around his jaw, and when he stood back he had nothing to do with his arms except hook his thumbs in his pockets, then cross them in front of his chest, and ask Travis what he was doing these days. Travis didn’t have much to say, and then there was the fear of silence again.

“The place looks good,” Travis said.

“Oh, thanks. Trying to keep it up.”

A goat bleated from its pen and another one tried to stand but its front legs just slid off the fence rail and it stood there stupidly with marbles for eyes. A cow lowed from the field and Travis asked about the rest of the animals.

“This is it. Just storing a few for renters now. Haven’t kept my own for a few years.”

Travis was surprised because that’s why they’d moved down here, so that Richard could have some space and some animals.

“Just living the life then, huh,” he said. He realized that his dad might think he was being facetious and the silence was awkward again. They watched Chris and Adam cast their lines out into the water. Richard helped Chris with his grip and the timing of his release and his next cast was much better. Chris was the first one to catch a fish, but Adam caught one shortly after, and Travis and Sarah were happy to see him so excited. Richard asked if there was time to gut the fish before they had to go and taught the boys how to do it right there on the shore of the pond with a knife he kept on his belt. Travis worked on the second fish with Adam. Richard wrapped the fish in paper and put them in a cooler with ice for the drive home. They could keep the cooler, he had plenty. Sarah went inside to get Ollie cleaned up, and the boys stayed at the pond skipping rocks. Travis and Richard were alone on the back porch. Travis explored the porch and complimented his dad on the improvements he noticed.

“Those stairs used to sag like crazy,” he said.

“Well I’ve got a little more time on my hands these days.”

“I remember how busy you used to get,” Travis said.

He ran his hand over the railing. Richard must know he had heard something about Grace, otherwise he would have asked where she was. If he didn’t acknowledge the divorce at all it would seem like he thought it was embarrassing or taboo. He didn’t want to give that impression. His heart pounded in his throat.

“I was sorry to hear about Grace,” he said.

Richard was quiet and Travis was wary.

“What did you hear?” Richard said.

“I heard you were thinking about . . . divorce? Is that right?”

Richard shook his head to himself.

“Oh. Am I wrong?”

“I don’t know, because I don’t know what you’ve heard.”

“That’s basically it.”

“From who?”

“Sam just mentioned it when I was over there.”

Richard looked skeptical. This isn't what Travis expected and he was confused.

“You'd think we'd have learned our lesson by now,” Richard said.

“What do you mean.”

“We've been through this before, son. People talked about me when your mom left too. I'm just trying to move on with my life, but every time I turn around there's someone there who insists on dragging me back to the past.”

“Sam's not a gossip, Dad. I just hadn't heard about the divorce. You didn't mention it in your email.”

“That's because there's no story, son. We parted ways for reasons that are between me and her, but she is a wonderful person. We are still best friends. We hang out together, we go to the temple together. I love her as much as I always have.”

“I'm glad to hear that you're still friends,” Travis said. He remembered when Richard said stuff like that about Dawn too. He didn't know if Richard believed what he said or if he just said it.

“Why shouldn't we still be friends?”

“I just know what divorce can do.”

Richard sighed. “We're not children, Travis.”

“I don't think you have to be.”

“It's how I wanted things to be with your mother, too.”

Travis felt the anger returning. He saw the severity in his dad's eyes that was there when he was talking about himself and being doubted was more than he could handle. It was always there when he talked about Dawn too. They'd tried to continue getting together as a family after the divorce, many times. But Richard looked ill when he was in the same room with Dawn, and he wouldn't look at her, and she felt so insecure all she could do was babble to cope with her feelings.

“Why do you call her ‘my mother’?”

“What would you like me to call her, Travis?”

“How about ‘Dawn’?”

“Do you ever defend me like that in front of your mom?”

“She already calls you by your name.”

He sighed again. “Okay Travis. Okay.” He adjusted his hat and folded his arms. He was sitting on the bench that wrapped around the railing and he crossed his feet below him and looked shrunken with his arms folded and his back arched like that. Sarah had been waiting on the other side of the sliding-glass door and Travis finally looked. She stayed behind the curtain and shrugged to say, *what should I do?* She was holding Ollie. Travis didn’t know and he shrugged and broke eye contact, hoping that she would make the decision for him. The boys finished skipping rocks and disappeared around the side of the house, and Travis’s heart swelled with sadness, and he wanted them to understand, and to love him.

He stood.

“Looks likes it’s time to go,” he said. He went to the sliding door like Sarah was trying to get his attention. Richard followed them to the front yard. Travis carried the cooler and didn’t turn around to say goodbye until he was far enough away that there was no question of how to say goodbye except to wave. He waited for his boys to say goodbye, then they walked to the car under the trees. They got in the car and drove over the dirt and gravel and then on to the road that was quiet until they picked up speed, and the tires hummed until the noise was like silence.