

I. Restless Men

On a rain-soaked afternoon in August of 1975 my mother took her shift behind the counter in the bar of the Enders Hotel. It would have been an ordinary afternoon in Soda Springs, Idaho, if not for the sudden downpour in that stretch of summer's furnace-breath. The rains drove farmers into the dank hollows of their Quonset huts that hugged the rocky landscape. And they sent, too, the ore-mine roughnecks scampering for cover. Some jobs shut down all together. Irrigation lines stopped surging their rainbow arc of canal water over the season's last run of alfalfa. But because it is high desert country, the rains passed, as they always do, and the clouds cleared as evening dragged across the basalt flows and barley fields, brooming the sky of its light.

Hours later, a man named Larry who was staying in one of the hotel rooms upstairs, shot and killed his best friend, Charlie—point blank—on our barroom floor. It was an accident, a drunken misunderstanding, as so many of these things are.

For first-degree murder, Larry was given a life sentence and sent to the Idaho State Penitentiary. He was admitted only a couple of months after my father, Jerry Imeson, a man I would never meet,

had been released from the same prison for knocking over a pharmacy.

Larry was thirty. Charlie was thirty-three, and my father twenty-three.

All these restless men.

My family had not owned the Enders Hotel but six months before that man's blood soaked the carpet. And although his would be the only murder to occur under that ceiling while we owned the place, he wouldn't be the only one to die there, or who would otherwise vanish.

2. Reconstruction

It was a rough patch for my mother. With her ex-lover (my father) recently paroled and out of the picture, she married a sandy-haired red-faced itinerant welder, a roughneck named Kent. But that wouldn't last and they would divorce soon after. He was violent when he drank and he drank often. It is the oldest of stories. I have a singular memory of Kent burning me with a cigarette. I don't think he did it on purpose. He was sitting in our kitchen with his arm draped over the back of the chair, cigarette between two fingers. In my mind's eye, he looks like James Dean. T-shirt and jeans and leather boots. I was shirtless when I bumped into the cigarette, or it bumped into me, and it burned my chest. It's either a memory or a dream I had once. But it's always been there and whenever I hear his name I think of that orange ember hot on my skin.

A few years after their divorce, my mother would get a phone call telling her that Kent had been killed. He was drunk. It was a single-car accident on a button-hook turn along some Idaho highway. "Well," she had said. "Thank God for that."

During much of that period—and earlier, before the Enders Hotel—I lived with my grandparents in their green clapboard ranch house east of town while my mother tried with varying degrees of success to get on her feet. The house had a long and wide wooden porch that peered off into a grove of crab apple trees, and beyond those, a flickering stand of aspens, and farther still, miles of open barley fields. A 1940s black Mercury sat on its rusted rims beneath the trees and was overgrown with sweet peas. Worm-holed crab apples dropped to the black hood in percussive thuds. The windows were long gone and springs jutted through the boxy seats. The car looked like an insect carcass and I loved it intensely. I would spend hours in that car with my cousins Jade and Angel who lived across the dooryard in the yellow clapboard. This was the Beus Ranch, a hundred-year-old operation of sheep and barley that grew to some six thousand acres. If the Enders Hotel, Bar, and Café comprised one half of our family legacy and inheritance—if there ever was such a thing—the Beus ranch comprised the other half.

My grandmother often recalls my “episodes” from that time. “You used to beat your head against the walls,” she always says. “You were so damned frustrated.” The story is always the same. “So your grandpa got down one day and hit *his* head against the wall. You thought that was the funniest thing you’d ever seen, and you never did it again.”

When my grandparents decided to buy the Enders Hotel, they leased the ranch to my uncle—Jade and Angel’s father—and moved into town where they unloaded their belongings in a spacious, skylit apartment on the ground floor. It was a high-ceilinged place with arched doorways, crystal doorknobs, and featured an enormous set of built-in cedarwood bookshelves with leaded glass. Initially, when my mother couldn’t arrange for another sitter, my grandparents tended me in this apartment. Years later it would become my home.

Not long after the shooting in the bar, my mother met Bud Schrand, a recently divorced dark-skinned electrician with long

jet-black hair who wore leather wrist bands and paisley shirts. An out-of-towner, Bud drove a purple 1971 Dodge Charger and their first dates were spent drag racing other roughnecks up and down the streets of Soda Springs and on the outlying farm roads. Later he would total the Charger (without my mother) and buy a 1974 Plymouth Roadrunner—a white one with a red racing stripe. Bud, who had two daughters of his own who lived elsewhere, moved in with us, and we lived in Soda Springs for a few months before moving fifty-some miles west to Pocatello. I remember fragments from that place. A one-room apartment at the end of a junked-out alley. Ants littered the speckled bathroom floor. I slept on the couch and shredded my T-shirts while I slept. I ripped each one so that when I woke, my fingers were sore, and I wore only white ribbons.

It wasn't long before we aimed the Roadrunner for the southeastern desert of West Richland, Washington. We had become job seekers. Bud hired on at the Hanford Nuclear Reactor site. There we moved into a white clapboard house that stood at the edge of a brushy field a quarter mile from the sandy banks of the Columbia River. That was 1976 when he and my mother were talking about marriage. I was four. I remember the desert heat and the white paint that flecked off the clapboard like blistered skin, a hush of fallout that speckled my fingertips when I touched it in the shadow of the eaves.

Those years in Washington are remembered for their extremes. We were a family. We went on vacations. We went camping. We ate together every night. My mother cooked. I helped wash the dishes. But there was the drinking. The slammed doors. The yelling and all the upset that occurs along that kind of alcoholic fault line. Bud had been thrown in jail for drunk driving, but my mother lucked out. Instead of getting stopped by police, she crashed our green pickup into the side of an iron bridge. No one was hurt, but when she lurched the truck into the driveway, the passenger fender was crushed and one headlight dangled out like an eye popped from its socket.

Because we were job seekers, we endured the perpetual ebb and flow of work—the overtime followed, always, by the lay-offs, the shut-downs, the walkouts. This cyclic pattern first flung us into the desert near Hanford, only to send us back to the Enders Hotel in Soda Springs (during a walk-off); once again back to Hanford (when a deal was brokered).

Then one day Bud came home from Hanford and said the electrical workers and others were going on strike—again. “Could be a sixty-day walkout. Could be a ninety-day walkout. Just depends.” The workers organized the strike in response to widespread corruption that had then recently come to light. My mother spent hours on the phone with my grandmother. In her housecoat, on our golden couches, wreathed in cigarette smoke. I was crouched on the floor playing with dozens of green plastic army men and would look up at her every now and again and try to guess what it was she was talking about by weighing the seriousness of her tone. Then one morning she hung up, looked at me, and said, “So, Brandon, how would you like to stay with Grandma and Grandpa for awhile?”

As it turned out, the walkout could not have come at a better time. Shortly after we moved to Washington, my grandparents received an offer they initially dismissed, but later accepted. The United States Forest Service wanted to lease the Enders Building for their Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) for one year. That year, my grandparents thought, would give them some time to seek treatment for my grandfather’s emphysema with which he had been recently diagnosed. So in 1978, three years after buying it, three years after a man lost his life on their barroom floor, they shut down the entire operation and turned it over to the YCC. Busloads of gangly troubled youths arrived in Soda Springs, luggage in tow, and filed into the Enders Building. In twelve months they had nearly destroyed the place. They painted rooms and hallways in psychedelic hues of orange and bright green, flowers and mushrooms and peace signs. Someone painted one room on the third

story in a black and white swirl that caused momentary vertigo when you stood in its vortex. Another room featured a sign that read, THE GETTING LOADED ZONE. But the destruction exceeded cosmetics. Busted chairs cluttered hallways. Wiring panels were gutted, the plumbing ransacked, carpet scalped from its floor. They slashed mattresses, smashed mirrors, shattered china, and defaced paintings. The building looked ship-wrecked.

A year later, in the final months of 1979, when my grandparents walked in the abandoned building on a bright afternoon and pushed through the lobby doors, it was as though part of them had been killed in the process. My grandmother paled. My grandfather kicked a clump of lath across the floor. Their complaints fell on unsympathetic ears at the local level of the Forest Service, but within weeks, my grandfather gave a tour to a Forest Service director at the state level. The director's mouth fell agape when he saw the damage. "We'll make it right," the director kept saying.

"I know you will," my grandfather said. "I know you will."

And so it was decided that during the walkout, we would pack a few things, lock up the house in Washington (our neighbors, the landlords, would watch over it), and go back to Soda Springs, to the Enders Hotel, and help in the recovery. We crossed Oregon's Blue Mountains in our Plymouth Roadrunner loaded down with suitcases. This was early summer 1980. My mother sat in front, a pile of nerves, snapping her gum, and flicking cigarette ashes out the window. If Dad was a confident driver (and at times overconfident, even menacing), my mother was neurotic, solicitous, certain our traffic deaths were imminent, particularly through high passes like those in the Blue Mountains. Never mind that shafts of sunlight washed through the forest's canopy, and that the road was dry, or that if we rolled down the window we could smell the rich scent of piney earth. My mother feared travel in any conditions. "Buddy, slow down," she said. "Slow. Down."

"Going too slow causes more wrecks than going too fast, Karen," he said.

Eventually we arrived safely at the Enders Hotel where my mother and dad took a small apartment on the ground floor that had an outer entrance from the alley, and another that opened into the lobby. It was situated between my grandparents' apartment and the Enders Bar, and its living room transformed into a bedroom by dropping the Murphy bed down from behind a set of closet doors. A tiny kitchen and bathroom flanked either side of the living room. Because of its impossible size, I would stay in my grandparents' spacious apartment next door.

That first day back I followed my grandfather up to the third story to retrieve my rollaway bed. He carried a jangling set of keys that retracted on a chain to a spool clipped to his belt. A place with so many doors required many keys. On the third floor, we turned down the dimly lit hallway, stopped before a room, and my grandfather pulled a key from the set and opened the door. The room was unfinished and housed a half dozen rollaway beds, one of which was reclined. "Hop on," he said.

I lay down across the middle of the bed with my arms and feet barely dangling over the edges. He folded up the bed with me in it, locked it in place with a bar at the top, so that I was sandwiched in the bed with my head sticking out one side and my toes out the other. Then he started wheeling me down the hallway on the bed's casters. I felt pinched but comfortable. As he eased the bed down four flights of stairs, I squealed and pretended to be afraid that he might let go and the bed and I would go bouncing down flight after flight of stairs. After he rolled me into the apartment and unfastened the lock-bar at the top of the bed, my grandmother stepped in to see me. The café was closing, she said, and then she would be right over. "Your mom will be over soon."

My grandmother positioned the bed directly beneath an enormous skylight into which I stared. Beyond the apartment's doors I could hear the building breathe and move, shift and settle. Cackling people from the bar who would stumble into the lobby to use the pay phone. The jukebox, and the rumbling release of billiard

balls for a new game. Then a lull. After my mother came over to say goodnight, she shut off the light and I turned on my side shoving my arm beneath my pillow. The glass in the arched French doors that led from my grandparents' apartment into the lobby was opaque, so all I could see was a kaleidoscope of colors and shadows of movement. I rolled to my back, glad to be there, and looked up. Slowly I drifted off to sleep with the songs of this new place floating on my dreams.