

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

Matt McGowan
South of Truckee

GABE REACHED HIS MOTHER IN ST. PAUL, where there was two feet of snow and his sister lived.

His mother was not yet fully awake. Gabe was. At 7 a.m., he was finishing his third cup of coffee.

"What was the town?" she asked.

"Truckee."

"What?"

"Truck EEEE."

"That's an odd name for a town."

"I don't know," said Gabe. "It's near Tahoe. That's all the man said."

"What were they doing out there?"

"I don't know, mom. You know him. I'm sure it something to do with a mountain or river."

His mother caught her breath and coughed. Last night, she had one too many glasses of Riesling.

"You're at Angela's?"

"Yes," said his mother.

"What're you doing?"

"Helping them get ready."

"Right," said Gabe.

His mother coughed again. Gabe could hear her lighting a cigarette.

"Okay," he said. "Maybe I'll..."

"Yes?"

"I'll call you when I get there."

There was silence and then Gabe couldn't hang up. Though he wanted to.

"Honey...?"

"Yeah mom."

"I'm really sorry."

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He had to go through Dallas to get to Denver. The quickest way to Reno, where he would rent a car and drive west on I-80, across the mountains and California border. On the way to Dallas, while flying over Missouri, he thought about the day he cried in the car.

He couldn't remember how old he was. Thirteen? His father would know. It was just the kind of thing he held on to, to beat his head against a rock wall.

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"We're going to your grandmother's first and then we'll meet Will and the kids at the pool."

"Okay," said Gabe.

"I wanted to talk to you about something else..."

"Yeah."

"I invited Jessi to join us... She's driving up later today."

Gabe didn't say anything. He felt a burning sensation between his ears and the hinge of his jaw. He looked down at his lap and turned his head toward the door.

"Son?"

Gabe didn't move. He was sad and then he was embarrassed. He lifted his right hand and wiped away the first tear.

"Gabe, did you hear me?"

The boy nodded. Anything to get him to stop talking about it.

"Are you okay?"

Gabe nodded again but said nothing.

"What?" said his father.

Gabe shook his head.

"Look at me? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Gabe.

They drove a while longer. Gabe remembered the traffic. There were always too many cars on that road. His father passed a few of them, and then many more passed him.

When it thinned out, his father spoke again. "What is it? Are you sad about mom and me?"

Gabe placed his finger over a spot where a tear had fallen onto his shorts.

"Okay," said his father. "I wish I could..."

Gabe nodded. And cried again.

"No," said his dad. "I'm just sorry."

Gabe took a pen out of his pocket and scrawled furiously on the front of a sports magazine. As if the deputy's words would be lost as soon as they were spoken, as if Gabe couldn't simply re-play the message while driving the rental car.

The airport was busy. First he had to catch a tram to a different terminal. He wasn't sure how that worked. He hadn't flown through here yet as an adult.

He followed signs to an escalator at the end of a short hallway that bisected a bank of fast-food restaurants and a carpeted dining area. The lat-

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ter a mess. Tables littered with plastic containers, drink cups, pizza crusts and other food crumbs. Chairs faced a thousand directions. Some were flipped over, lying sideways on the floor, as if a herd of 13-year-old boys had trampled through there on their way to a wrestling tournament.

Gabe bit his lip. The chaos stressed him out. Part of him wanted to get in there and fix it. But he'd have to find the recycling bins, if there were any, and he knew he had to hurry.

Back home, in his tidy apartment near Wrigley Field, his chair was pushed in under his desk, and his t-shirts were stacked neatly on a custom-made shelf in his bedroom closet. He didn't think about this, but if he had, it would have provided some relief.

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Hello Mr. Penny, this is deputy McCormick with the Nevada County Sheriff's Office. Please call me at your first convenience. We have snow here and more coming. I want you know our location and the best route to reach us. From Truckee, you'll need to drive south on highway 89. Here, you'll be taking the road toward the big lake. When you get to...

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Gabe turned it off. In the new terminal, there was now nearly nonstop chatter on the intercom. He was afraid he would miss an important announcement. He sat there for a second, quietly, listening the crackle and the hum, trying to clear his head.

Why hadn't his sisters called? And the ranch? It had been months since he'd talked to his grandmother. He couldn't decide when to call her.

Gabe dialed his father's number. The phone rang two times before the service provider picked up. A recording said the voice-mail box was full. Gabe wondered about the content of those messages. He assumed they went back months, maybe even a year.

Without listening to the entire message, Gabe called the deputy back. He didn't like it when people did that to him, but he just didn't have the patience. Considering the circumstances, he hoped the man would understand.

But it didn't matter. There was no answer.

Then Gabe was on the next plane.

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Though his brain was racing, the pressurized cabin knocked him out like a shot of Diazepam. His head lolled side to side. He caught himself, almost waking, when it lurched forward and then immediately retracted, the muscles and ligaments in his neck stretched to the max. He dozed over Oklahoma and southwest Kansas and would have kept on if a flight attendant hadn't slammed the beverage cart into his armrest.

The attendant apologized and handed him a cup of coffee. The smell of it and he was with him again, at a campground, trying to get an early-morning fire going, laughing when his father raised his arms to the heavens and proclaimed, "There is a dog," after the leaves finally took. Pretty

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soon the kindling too and eventually there would be coffee. Trying it, at age 11, hating it, the taste and the grounds caught between his tongue and lip, his father laughing then when Gabe turned his head and spat the bitter liquid onto the grass.

“Whew,” said his dad, grunting after taking his own sip. “Cowboy coffee. That shit’ll grow hair on your chest.”

Later that day, father and son hiking a bony creek into a box canyon. Here and there the canyon pinched to strip. Hanging on to vines, swinging around ledges and junipers snake-crawling out of narrow limestone fissures. At one spot, Gabe fretting, incapable of trusting nature, taking forever to work up the courage to swing. Not a big drop below but a sprained ankle and maybe a big headache if your cranium slammed onto the water-pocked slab. His father waiting, offering words of encouragement, standing safely on the berm of the other side, holding on to a sapling while leaning out over the drop to help. And helping, catching the boy after a successful but clumsy go at it, grabbing him by the underarm, lifting his carriage and jerking him to the landing. To the boy, all of it a blur, a fingernail wrenched back but not ripped off, the father then, task conquered, bounding off again, hopping from rock to rock.

Before the end of the box canyon, they turned and bushwhacked up a soft but steep wall, twenty-five minutes of hard scrambling, pulling on limbs and saplings for leverage, digging their boots into wet oak leaves and loose moss tufts. At the top, the father feeling good about himself for finding the bench trail, pausing there for water before walking out.

They turned right, the only way back down to the river and the campground, and followed the bench trail around the contour of the mountain.

But the comfort of a trail, knowing it goes somewhere, can ruin an animal’s innate sense of direction.

Two miles later, Gabe’s father, without saying a word, turned sharply and began stalking through forest, stomping his boots, snorting and mumbling about the sun and moss on tree bark. They were bushwhacking again, Gabe following his dad down a sharp grade, not as steep as the hill they had climbed out of the box canyon, but steep nevertheless. And downhill, on damp leaves, which presented other challenges.

His father cursed. Gabe knew it was in his best interest to keep quiet, to do nothing but follow the man until the mood passed or they found the next trail.

Which appeared less than ten minutes after leaving the bench trail. His father now grumbled about the stupidity of parallel trails less than half a mile from one another. But if he’d consulted a map, he’d seen that the two trails led to very different places, one uphill, the other down. About a quarter-mile west of where they were standing, the trails actually intersected, which allowed hikers at the bottom of the valley to switch trails and make it all the way to the top, near the winding road to Low Gap.

Gabe and his father stood with their feet on the worn path, within the margins of the trail, as if having one foot off it would indicate they were still lost. His father pulled out a Nalgene bottle from his daypack, unscrewed the cap and offered it to Gabe. The mood had changed.

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"All right," said his father. "We'll go this way."

"But that's the opposite..."

"I know. I thought we were on the other side of the campground, farther east."

Gabe smiled. He wasn't used to his father being wrong.

"I know where we are, damn it," said the man.

But he wasn't mad. He too was smiling, showing Gabe how much he looked like Gabe's grandfather.

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On the tarmac at Stapleton, his phone off airplane mode, a text from Dani: *Are you there yet? I'm sorry Gabe. Call me.*

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He hustled to Terminal C and found the gate for the flight to Reno. There was a family there, sitting next to the boarding tunnel. Their configuration mirrored his own – a mother, father, a boy and two girls. The boy appeared older than one girl and younger than the other. But that's where the similarities ended. This family was young, Gabe's twenty years ago, and they appeared to be happy.

A missed call from California. No voice mail. Gabe checked the number. It was different from the one earlier, the number used by the deputy who had left the message. Gabe called back.

"This is McCormick."

"Oh, it's you," said Gabe.

"Who I am I speaking to?"

"Sorry... This is Gabe Hollis."

"Mr. Hollis..."

Gabe heard a sustained, high-pitched beep and then the crackling static of a police radio. A man's garbled voice came through the static. "Affirmative," said McCormick. "Ten four." Then the noise died, but McCormick did not speak to Gabe.

"Hello?"

"The road goes along the western shore," said McCormick. "Take it south until you come to a little place called Emerald Bay. Not really a town, just a gathering of cabins and whatnot."

"Hang on," said Gabe. "I gotta write this down."

"You got GPS on your phone?"

"Yes."

"Don't even bother," said McCormick.

"Okay. But I can't remember the name of the highway that goes south."

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"Eighty-nine. You'll go through Tahoe City and a little town called Tahoma. Keep going south. Emereld Bay's another ten miles. Then things get interesting."

"What does that mean?"

"We're out in the sticks. Like I said, don't bother with the GPS."

While Gabe wrote it down, McCormick's police radio crackled back to life. "One minute," he said, and then he silenced it.

"Mr. Hollis..."

"Yeah, I'm here," said Gabe.

"What's your ETA?"

"I have no idea."

"What's your ten... Where are you now?"

"Denver."

"Denver!"

"Colorado," said Gabe, as if McCormick wasn't aware of geography outside the Tahoe area.

"Oh man," said McCormick. "I thought were driving. Thought you were already here."

"Nope. Still flying."

"Okay. We'll keep the... Just let us know when you get to Truckee."

"But I thought that's where you were. You told me this morning..."

"Uh huh. Just give us a call from Truckee."

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His phone buzzed seconds after McCormick hung up.

"I don't know why I had to say that to him," said Angela.

Listen," said Gabe. "I gotta get on this plane in about ten minutes."

"What time will you get there?"

"I don't even know."

"I told him mom didn't want to be in the same room with him."

"Yeah, well..."

"And that it sucked being around both of them."

"Right."

"At first he acted... I could tell he was trying to show me that it didn't bother him. But then he said he hoped it wasn't his fault. I just told him no, I don't anybody at the wedding."

"I don't know how long this is gonna take," said Gabe.

"What should I do then?"

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"What do you mean?"

"Never mind."

"It's fine," said Gabe. "Go ahead without me."

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Gabe couldn't make out what he was seeing. First it looked like a rainbow-shaped cloud hovering above the horizon. Then he thought it was a belt of snow on the mountains beyond the airport. Closer to the terminal, just before the plane turned, he realized what it was: Two long metal arms, stretching out from an area below the glass façade of the building, blasting water onto a plane parked between two terminals.

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"Where're you headed?" asked the man at the rental car counter.

"West," said Gabe.

"On I-80?"

Gabe nodded, "Yeah."

"How far?"

"Truckee. Then south."

"That's why I asked," said the man. "There's talk about closing the interstate."

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It didn't matter that he rented a four-wheel drive. Not even that would get him through the blockade east of Verdi, six miles from the border. He pulled over at a Chevron station. The snow was heavy, but the highway there didn't seem that bad. It was wet snow, and most of the pavement had been cleared off by semi traffic and the big blades of maintenance trucks.

But Gabe didn't know about the pass at Mystic. The cashier inside the station, a chain-smoking woman in her early 70s, said two west-bound trucks had collided and slid off the highway near there. Chatter about it was still coming out of the police scanner on a window sill behind the counter.

"Can you use that?" Gabe asked the woman.

"Can't call out on it, if that's what you mean."

Gabe looked again at his cellphone. It said he had service, but his calls weren't getting through.

"You need help?" asked the woman.

Gabe nodded. "Can I use your phone?"

The woman plucked phone a receiver off the wall next the cash register and stretched the cord over the counter. That left Gabe holding two phones, one from this century, one from the last. He read McCormick's number off his cell phone and dialed it on the landline.

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The cashier greeted a work crew coming through the door. Gabe aborted dialing when she motioned for him to come around the counter. As the woman rang up customers and reached for packs of cigarettes on a rack next to the scanner, Gabe re-dialed and tried to stay out of her way.

McCormick didn't answer.

"Where you trying to go?" asked one of the workers, a stout man who'd overheard Gabe leaving a message for the deputy.

"I don't know, really," said Gabe. "South of Truckee. Somewhere near Emerald Bay, if that means anything to you."

"You know they got a blizzard over there?" said the man.

Gabe felt stupid and annoyed. "Is that what they're calling now?" he said, immediately regretting his tone of sarcasm.

At the counter, the workers bustled, shuffling around each other and grab-assing. They were just kids, but the guy who was talking to Gabe was older. Must have been the crew-leader.

"It's kind of an emergency...," said Gabe, sounding less certain than the actual meaning his words.

The crew leader had massive forearms and the darkest, densest five-o'clock shadow Gabe had ever seen. He stared at Gabe cockeyed, like he was mildly curious about what Gabe meant by "an emergency" but also certain that knowledge of it would complicate his day. He paused for a second and then offered a solution based on this assumption.

"We could probably get you up there," he said.

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They were one of eight Nevada crews rushing to the California side of Lake Tahoe to clear roads engulfed by snowfall and an avalanche on a mountain called Dick's Peak.

"It's up near Lake Aloha," said the crew leader, his name Sid, to which Gabe simply nodded.

Sid smiled. "Did you hear that? Lake *Aloha*. Am I the only one who finds that ironic?"

Sid's coworkers didn't respond. They were in the back, huddled together, watching a video on a smartphone.

When Gabe laughed, Sid sensed that it was merely a polite gesture.

"So...," he said, "if you don't mind me askin'..."

Gabe looked across the cab and shook his head. "I don't mind."

They were climbing, at much higher elevation, and the road appeared treacherous. But Sid steered the big truck casually, like he'd been doing this his entire adult life, which he had.

Gabe didn't know where to start. Then, before he did, the light switched on, and he knew what had happened. "Did you say there was an avalanche?"

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His question coincided with a loud roar from the back seat, the men reacting to whatever it was they were watching on YouTube.

"Shut up!" yelled Sid. "Jesus... you guys are obnoxious."

"It's okay," said Gabe.

The workers back there were about his age. He realized that if circumstances were different, he could have been one of them. Despite his grief, Gabe could see himself doing the same thing.

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At Camp Richardson, they met a police cruiser parked diagonally across the road. Its lights were flashing. Soon they realized other official vehicles were lined up behind the cruiser, parked in a row in the north-bound lane.

With Sid in control, Gabe hadn't paid attention to the highway signs. If he had, he would have known that they were on the right road, highway 89.

The cop standing outside the cruiser waved at Sid, and Sid drove up to the car. When he stopped again, the cop walked to the big truck. Sid told him where they were headed and who they were meeting. The officer then returned to his car and backed it up, so Sid could get by.

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They met McCormick at the bridge over Tallac Creek. Snow was blowing hard here, sideways, blasting in from the lake. The road was terrible. McCormick said the worst was behind him, on the ridge between Tallac Creek and Emerald Bay.

Until then, Sid had done all the talking. Gabe wasn't even sure McCormick knew who he was. But now it was his turn to speak.

"Where was the avalanche?" he asked.

McCormick stood on his toes and tried to see across the cab. "Where'd you hear that?" he said, as if Gabe had violated a pact.

"From these guys," said Gabe.

"They weren't calling it that..." said McCormick.

The young men in the back were quiet, so much so that Gabe had forgotten they were there.

"What the hell does that mean?" said Gabe. "What were they calling it?"

"We just didn't know yet," said McCormick. "And that word makes people panic."

"You know who I am, right?" said Gabe.

"I do," said McCormick. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hollis."

Gabe turned his head and faced the windshield. There wasn't much to see in front of him but snow and more snow. He thought about the day in the car, when he cried. It wasn't going to happen again.

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“Mr. Hollis...” called McCormick.

Gabe heard the deputy but didn't answer.

“I can take you up there now,” said McCormick. “We got snowmobiles.”

Gabe nodded. “Okay,” he said, to himself more than the deputy. He thanked Sid, and then he climbed down out of the big truck and met McCormick out on the snow-covered the road.