

**I don't know what  
forever means.**



IMAGE BY NICHLAS ANDERSEN/UNSPLASH

**He told her he came looking for her because he loved her.**

I DON'T KNOW WHAT FOREVER MEANS BY ROBERT EARLE

**T**ommy's trailer made him seem different. After the first night they spent there, he opened the door toward the front and helped Maybeth down to have a good look at the trailer from the outside.

You could still faintly make out Morgan Movers in blue under the red primer paint on its side. Then the motto, Let's get moving! Then the telephone number. Not a St Paul area code, from somewhere else. An old trailer that would look all right when a new owner put a top coat on it and his own advertising.

They walked around looking at the others. Forty-two, Tommy had counted them once. Many primed red like the Morgan Movers trailer. Some still needing work. A few twisted and crumpled from flipping off the highway. One resembling a snail, its roof curled front to back from crashing into a low bridge. Others had been scavenged for wheels and axles and landing gears.

Tommy and Maybeth snuck to where they could see two men across the lot, one in his 60s, the other younger, repairing a trailer in front of a long metal shed with one end partly covered by heavy plastic for painting inside and partly open for access to tools and equipment and machines—jacks, dollies, welding gear, a metal lathe, a drill press, and the band saw the men were using to rip a sheet of siding. The younger man fed the siding into the saw's blade while the older man walked along holding the siding's outer edge to keep it level. The sound was wicked.

60

A trailer converted into an office stood by the gate. Its red side was painted in black letters, Stokowski Trailer Salvage—Parts, Repairs, and Sales—est 1996. Tommy said the men had lunch in there when a woman in a Grand Cherokee dropped it off. She'd cross the snowpack to the office trailer carrying a picnic basket and stay there after the men came out to go back to work. Tommy supposed she was paying bills, ordering supplies, arranging for the delivery of more jettisoned trailers, making sales. He thought the older man probably was the father, the younger man the son, and the woman the wife and mother.

Every few days someone hooked up a repaired and repainted trailer and took it away. Tommy told Maybeth that when the father and son painted, they connected one trailer after another to an old Diamond Reo semi and backed them into the paint shed. First, they climbed on ladders to give them a rough sanding. Then the father worked the compressor and paint buckets on the ground while the son worked the gun. He bet they hated painting. They moved as fast as if they were pissed-off bees.

"I call that primer they use Stokowski red. I like saying that—Stokowski red."

She didn't remember him liking to say anything. It was only three months since LA social services deported them—him to St Louis, her here—but he'd changed. Tommy talked more than he used to. The night before, after sex, he told her he came looking for her because he loved her. When she didn't say she loved him, too—she didn't know if she'd ever say that—it didn't bother him.

That was another difference. He would have been upset before, or he wouldn't have said anything in the first place, waiting for her to say it, which she hadn't during the year they were in LA.

But now he started talking about how much he loved the Morgan Movers trailer, too. He said it was like being in a boxcar without having to hassle about where it would end up. They climbed back into the trailer and Tommy pushed open the side door, so Maybeth could see in daylight what he'd done. For sleeping, he'd made a platform of fruit crates he covered with a piece of carpet and then a swathe of green foam rubber. On top of that he'd spread a quilted

61

## I was just sitting here. Didn't know what I was going to do.

mover's blanket. Exploring other trailers, he'd found a coat stand to hold his backpack, a small refrigerator that didn't work but kept mice from getting at food, and an old floor lamp. He planned to run extension cords through the back fence and across the field to one of the businesses along the highway south. But he couldn't do that until the snow melted, it would be a giveaway, he needed to hide the cords down in the weeds.

He said he'd sit looking at the field sometimes. You could see all kinds of weird humps under the snow—probably tires, washing machines, mattresses, and car carcasses. The spring melt would reveal it all if the spring melt ever came.

He'd never been anywhere as cold and desolate as St Paul. But cold desolation was good in a way. Along the road south, fast-food joints and the lumber yard and the used car lot and the minimart and the food bank depot were the better from being snow-caked and iciced. Otherwise they were eyesores. The cement plant was an eyesore, no amount of snow could dress it up.

“Probably nobody ever thought there'd be any use for this part of town. People just dragged what they didn't want and pitched it in the field. And then they said, wait a minute, we can put businesses down here we don't want to look at. That's how come they've got all these crummy stores and warehouses and this trailer lot here.”

Maybeth hadn't thought she'd ever see him again. It was the biggest surprise in her life, him showing up and having this trailer and her being able to run away without even leaving St Paul.

If they walked along the highway south past the bowling alley, with its inflatable tube dancer rising up and waving people in and then sagging down again, they had a choice of Burger King, McDonalds, and Dunkin' Donuts. They walked single file on the soft shoulder because of the ragged banks of ashy snow that had been plowed off the roadway.

When things seemed to have settled after she got back, her mother had given her a prepaid credit card with a lecture about how what you bought was what you were, not a lecture as in a scolding but her mother's kind of lecture, an explaining lecture, pompous and insecure. She had \$1700 left on it. Tommy had stolen \$1200 out of his mother's ATM in St Louis. So, they had more money than they ever had in LA.

At the Burger King over Whoppers, he said he knew as soon as he was back in St Louis he was going to take off. “How about you?”

“I was just sitting here. Didn't know what I was going to do.”

“How has it been with your parents?”

In LA she'd been on the street for so long before he showed up—three years—that she didn't talk about her parents, and he didn't talk about his because he thought that was the rule. Now she said her father was a dentist and she showed off her three new teeth you couldn't tell from the real ones. Her father didn't do the work, she wouldn't let him. Someone else screwed the teeth into her jaw.

Her mother had been her father's dental assistant. She was a sociology major as an undergraduate, just couldn't get a job as a sociologist. She never gave it up, though. What she thought about society was important to her. Your behavior put you in your group, and your behavior was a decision. So, she'd ask about Maybeth's decision about how to behave and what was Maybeth's group.

## I'm the little ex she can't get rid of.

"When I say probably the street's my group, it drives her crazy. She says the street isn't a decision. It's the absence of a decision. The street's more than she can take."

Tommy said, "I'm more than my mother can take."

Since his parents had split and his father moved to Chicago, his mother was the one LA social services sent him to. Pissed her off. Why to her? She had no idea how someone who was half his father could coexist in the same body with the half of him that was her.

"Every guy ever interested in her, she drives away bitching about me. Having me in the apartment is why she can't get laid. She says she can't be sexual if I'm there. These guys get the message and disappear."

"Did you think about going to your father before you went to LA?"

"I thought what if I showed up in Chicago and he sent me right back to her. She'd detest me even more."

"That's how she puts it?"

"One of her words. Whatever I do wrong is because I'm the little ex she can't get rid of."

"Do you think she suspected where you'd take off this time?"

"I never told her about you."

"Why not?"

"She didn't want to hear anything about what happened to me in LA. She said it would spoil things if she ever had a chance to go there herself."

They walked back up the highway and looked in at the old man and the son working. They had a giant scissors jack they could crank up to position the siding where they could rivet it onto the trailer they were fixing. The son did the riveting from a ladder. The father held the ladder. The rivet gun cracked like a real gun. Every time the son fired off a rivet, the father would flinch backward. When the son had made it to the bottom of a panel, he walked along bang-bang-banging the panel's lower edge in place.

Tommy said he could do that kind of stuff. Maybeth asked if he had been thinking of talking to them. He said no because that might lead to them chasing him out of the trailer lot.

"I've got to stay clear of them. You, too."

Like it wasn't obvious she had to keep out of sight? Him saying that was different, too. She used to be the one who said things to him.

That week the temperature would go from zero up to the low twenties and back down again. They spent time rummaging through other trailers looking for stuff and ended up with a chair, a little sofa, a table, and a bookcase. When it got too cold to be outside, they'd warm up in bed having sex, or just sticking to one another, his hands pressed together between her legs and her hands in his armpits. They called it their fire barrel when they did that, like they were the hot spot on a street corner. Sometimes he would slip a finger into her and leave it there so the fire wouldn't be out when they woke up.

Snow falling on the roof of the trailer made a clamoring sound more like sand than ice crystals. She liked listening to that in the middle of the night. The rising and falling wind made the trailer's sides swell inward and then roll back outward with a sound like a kettledrum. The doors groaned and rattled. She liked that too.

He had been in St Paul three weeks when they ran into each other at the skateboard park.

"Where'd you sleep to start?" she asked.

"A steam grate behind the library."

"Don't you get wet from the steam?"

## If I thought you were skateboarding, I'd never think it would be in St Paul.

"The people there use trash bags, one you cut open for over your head and one you don't cut for over your feet. In the morning, they go inside for the bathroom. The library people can't keep them out."

"How'd you find this place?"

"I got lost. It took me a while to get through the fence, but so far, no one has bothered me."

"Except me."

"I'd been everywhere looking for you and then you just show up. Because you thought I'd be skateboarding?"

"If I thought you were skateboarding, I'd never think it would be in St Paul."

The skateboarding park was out now. Too snowy and icy. A hundred kids couldn't shovel it out. Then there was the worry Maybeth had going farther into St Paul and her mother driving around a corner, finding her. So what were they going to do? Sometimes it was colder in the trailer than it was outside. Your tongue could freeze to the roof of your mouth.

Tommy said he didn't split this time because of school. He was better at school than anything except skateboarding. School was okay. He got good grades. She said she hadn't thought about school in LA, but here

she thought about getting at least a high school degree. Anyway, school was warm. Maybe she could go see her counselor and get Tommy into school with her.

"But we keep living here?" Tommy asked.

"Absolutely. I like it here."

She stuck her head in Mr Weese's office doorway. He stared at her as if she were interrupting him but he just wanted to let her know he wasn't happy with her. He took off his wire rim glasses and wiped them on the hem of his cardigan. When he slipped them back on, the earpieces half went under the wispy, corn-silk hair over his ears and half pressed it back against his temples. He had a chewed donut of a nose. He couldn't ever have been anything but a high school counselor.

After she explained, he said, "You've been out a week now. This is why and who you've been with?"

"He was on YouTube with me in LA, the Dr Paul show you saw."

"You say he was sent to St Louis and now he's here? Where, exactly?"

"I'm not saying where."

"We can't enroll him if he doesn't have an address. He belongs in St Louis. That's where his parents pay taxes."

"It's just his mother. His father is in Chicago."

"One of them would have to pay the out-of-district fee. Otherwise, he's undocumented, like a Mexican."

"He's American."

"That's worse. We have provisions for Mexicans."

"But he lives in the school district."

"Really? Where?"

"I told you I'm not saying."

"What about your parents? Your mother is here every day. Do I have your permission to call and tell her you're all right?"

"You're going to call her anyway. Why are you asking me?"

"Because I want you to be part of the solution, not just the problem."

"What problem?"

"You disappeared for four years. Now you've disappeared again. That problem." He pushed out his lips, meaning he was thinking. "What if we contacted this boy's mother and she agreed to let your parents sponsor him here? I think your mother would accept anything if it brought you home. Could you both live with your parents?"

What adults did was circle around you with a ball of string, walking slowly first. Then they'd go faster, wrapping you in so much string that you couldn't move, couldn't even scream, and when that was all done, you would be an adult, too, bound head to foot for life, ready for the next 60 years until you died.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

She knew her mother would try to trace her by the credit card, so they crossed the Mississippi to Minneapolis where they bought stuff at a surplus store, waterproof boots, warmer gloves, sleeping bags. She didn't like spending so much, but Tommy kept grabbing things. Brown wool shirts, medium for him, small for her. Two bundles of socks so the boots wouldn't blister their heels.

You could outfit a whole army with the stuff piled from one end of the store to the other. She thought maybe that's where the stuff had come from, the army, stripped from dead soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan and sent back for resale in Minneapolis, the blood washed off, everything folded.

But she didn't really mind it when Tommy pushed for this thing or that thing. He never pushed for anything in LA. He did what she told him and sometimes that got old. Sometimes she'd lose him for a day or two, go places he didn't know about, see people he'd never heard of. Tommy obviously didn't love her because he wasn't upset.

It wasn't until he got shipped back to St Louis that he decided the only person in the world he wanted to be with was her. Because he loved her—he'd said it twice now—and the strange result was that she thought about him all the time whether she loved him or not. She liked it when he laughed, she liked being hungry at the same time as him, she liked him splurging money.

Balaclavas, he said, they needed balaclavas. She said she knew what he meant but never knew how to pronounce that word. He said if he heard a word once he never forgot it. That's how he picked up so much Spanish in LA.

"La calle, el arbol, el gato, fumar, andar, chingar," he said. The street, the tree, the cat, smoking, walking, fucking.

Hearing him say these words made her homesick for LA. There was the blue highway to eternity directly over your head, and there was the temperature that was always okay. People wore T-shirts and jeans and sandals or went barefoot. Grocery stores smelled sweet when you walked past them. Even the garbage in the alleys smelled sweet.

One day they were heading to their hole in the fence and they had to stop because they heard the men nearby. Where Tommy and Maybeth crouched, they could see their boots. The father was saying the only way he could retire would be if he sold off all the trailers for whatever they would fetch and the land too. The son was saying what about him and his wife and kids. The father said when he and the son's mother died, the son would inherit 80 per cent of the estate because his sister never did anything for the business, and that's where the money had come from all these years even though now most of the stock probably would go for scrap.

Let's go into the scrap business ourselves, why don't we, the son said. Get a bank loan, get a crusher, get some contracts, diversify.

The father said he was too old for that. The son said he wasn't. The father said to get a loan he'd have to second mortgage the land. He'd never been able to retire.

What was the point of retiring? the son said. What would the father do with himself except go back to driving?

Maybe that was what exactly he'd do, the father said. Maybe he'd fix up the Diamond Reo and get an east-west route lower down, not up here with all this snow and ice.

Did the father mean a route in tornado alley? the son asked. Catch a twister up the ass?

They laughed. The son's boots walked away. The father's boots stayed put. Maybeth and Tommy moved so they could get a decent look at him, dirty and rumpled, a seaman's cap pulled cockeyed down on his head and one eye closed against the smoke of his cigarette. He was wearing gloves that stopped at his middle knuckles and holding a pen and

clipboard. He looked around with his open eye until he was satisfied he had right whatever he was trying to get right. Then he made tally marks, four down, the fifth across. Then he began walking toward the fence to get a different view of things. Meanwhile the son was back in front of the shed moving a pallet of sheet metal with a forklift.

The father didn't go inside any trailers. He just looked. He passed the Morgan Moving trailer, still just looking. One of the tally marks he made would be for it.

Tommy whispered, "Guess pretty soon we're going to be on the street again."

One day Maybeth's mother drove past them in her CRV. The lights up ahead turned red, so her mother had to stop. Maybeth ran up to the CRV and knocked on the window. Her mother turned. Her eyes widened. Maybeth yelled at her to leave her alone. The light turned green. Cars began honking. Maybeth's mother crossed the intersection and pulled over.

By that time, Maybeth and Tommy had found an alley and went crunching over the snow

piled deep in there. When they made it to the next sidewalk, Maybeth was shaking and her teeth were chattering. Tommy said it was all right. Maybeth said no, it wasn't, how could he say it was? He said because it happened to him in LA a couple of times. It wasn't the cold, it was adrenaline. All of a sudden, he'd freak out because he'd see some doped-up bum and start thinking he was heading toward being that bum. People on the street were like yourself turned inside out.

"Like I think I'm really my mother?"

"No, like she's exactly what you don't want to be."

She wanted their battery lantern on all night. Its light cast a glow like snow falling but never accumulating, disappearing into itself, never stopping.

They found a church that had racks of free secondhand clothes. She took a black and red and yellow plaid scarf. He took a belt with an Indian head buckle. They found a free medical clinic but didn't go in. They checked out the library where Tommy had slept on the steam grate. Sometimes they'd go in a while and be warm and use the bathroom. They knew other street people more by sight than acquaintance. They didn't want anyone following them to the trailer lot and wrecking things. Street people always did that to you when you found something good.

In LA the best place they had was up on the second floor of a half-finished office building. There were metal dividers between the offices but no wallboard. Almost right away some other kids crashed two offices over from theirs and spoiled it. Tommy fell asleep quickly, but she never did. She used to lie by a window with no glass in it and feel the breeze surfing over her body. But the other kids yammered and moaned and went ah-ah-ah when they had sex. That ruined the place for her.

Weekday afternoons at five, they showered at a Y. The shower room was full of baggy breasts and loops of belly fat and big dimpled asses. She liked the water needling her back, but she wouldn't stay long. If you took a picture of them up and down the curtain-less showers, you'd know they were all street people, hard people. Any of them might do anything.

The same in the men's locker room, Tommy said. They were all like inmates in a city jail with the Y being where they were herded for daily sanitation.

He never said anything like that before. She asked him, "You mean us, too? We're in jail and don't know it?"

"I haven't decided yet."

The oddest thing was that he thought he could decide whether they were prisoners or not.

"When did you start thinking like this?"

"I don't know. It's like bones. Who knows when they're growing?"

They were in their sleeping bags, the bags zipped together, them zipped together, and they were warm, just right. She might as well say it. What would she be saving it for?

“I love you,” she said.

He said he thought she probably did. She liked that—how he didn’t go nuts about it when she said it.

One day in mid-March a bunch of trucks began hauling away trailers painted Stowkowski red and completely repaired. Wherever they took them wasn’t far because they came back for a second haul. The father walked around with his clipboard directing all this. The son kept working by the shed, fixing an axle on an old trailer and then running fresh wire to its brake lights, which he tested by connecting the wires to a battery and flicking the brake lights on and off.

When the trucks left for good, he finally had a long look. He didn’t appear happy. It looked like the father might be following through on unloading the whole inventory. There still were so many trailers left that the lot seemed full, but there’d never been a day when 16 trailers were taken away before.

Nothing happened for a while except the son worked by himself now. The father didn’t show up, only the mother. She walked across the lot and handed the son

his lunchbox and thermos and headed back to her Cherokee, not going into the office. The son kept working as he ate. He’d take a bite of sandwich, then a swig from the thermos, then go back at it. Either the son wasn’t giving up at all, or he was determined to squeeze the last dollar out of any trailer he could fix.

Two weeks later, a dozen more trailers were hauled away. The lot began looking ragged. Where trailers had stood all winter, there was no snow, just brown and gray gravel licked with frost.

The temperature fluctuating meant the skateboard park was growing patchy, too. Skateboarders began bringing shovels, reclaiming rails first, then the step cascade, then the short half-pipe, then the tall half-pipe. Tommy would shovel some and skateboard some, and Maybeth would walk around and watch and listen in on chatter that wasn’t dope deals.

The death of winter pleased her. She liked things turning soggy instead of slick, and she liked smelling the rest of Minnesota on the wind—its earthy fumes and mud scents. That helped her as she thought about losing the Morgan Movers trailer.

One afternoon a kid she’d known since elementary school came to the skateboard park with no skateboard, just to hang out. He came over when he saw her. Steve Moore. He had features too big for his face, the way kids did who hadn’t grown into themselves.

“I thought you took off again.”

“Nope.”

“Haven’t seen you in school.”

She gestured toward Tommy. “We’re doing other things.”

Steve looked at Tommy like, who cared about Tommy? “Want to get a cup of coffee?”

“No thanks.”

Steve leaned back against the fence next to her. “Where’d you go when you took off the first time?”

“LA.”

“How was it?”

“It was all right.”

“Why’d you come back?”

“What’s with all the questions?” She laughed in a friendly way. At least she thought it was friendly. “What are you doing here if you don’t skateboard?”

“Nothing.”

“Looking to buy?”

“I don’t use. Do you?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“What do you do all day except watch him go up and down and shit?”

“What difference does it make to you?”

“Curious, that’s all. No one could ever figure you out.”

When she didn’t react, Steve said he’d thought of taking off, too. What was it like?

“It’s like everything’s on you.”

“Are you on the street now? Is that what you did this time, run away except not go anywhere?”

“Never mind.”

“Where’s that guy from?”

“Never mind.”

“Do you just like pissing people off?”

“Steve, if you ever do get on the street, don’t ask anyone anything. It’s like rule number one. Questions can get you hurt.”

He said have it her way and went over to the Java Shack across the street. Watching him go, she felt as though everyone she had ever known in St Paul had walked across her face.



The next morning she said to Tommy that maybe they should leave before they lost the trailer. It would be full spring in lots of places already.

Tommy said it was getting to be full spring in St Paul too.

He was right. They had one of the back doors open. She was lying between his legs with the back of her head resting on his crotch and her own legs dangling over the tailgate. She liked the smell of his blue jeans getting warm in the sun. She liked him stroking her hair. She liked the fact that the snow on the field had begun yielding to the furniture and appliances and shit out there. Along the highway south, the buildings had a soot stain where the drifts were sliding down their walls.

In the mornings she would slip through the side door and drop to the ground to pee. Then she hopped back into the trailer and closed the door and opened a thermos they had filled with coffee from Burger King the night before and got back into the sleeping bag. Tommy woke up with a hard-on, so she'd hold the coffee with one hand and mess with him with the

other. Not really thinking about it until she had him going. They never had this much sex in LA.

The first time they met, under a bridge, she wanted him to buy her some food, so she gave him a blow job. He said she didn't have to, but she wanted to so she would feel all right ditching him after they ate. He was a total rookie. He actually believed how old she said she was, 19.

She was the last person to see her father when he sat on the picnic bench behind her at the skateboard park. When the others started leaving, she turned to see why, and he was there, looking over the top of his glasses at her.

"Someone told Mr Weese at the high school you hang out here. He told Mom."

"Where's she?"

"She's at home because we don't want a scene, Maybeth. We just want you with us."

"There's not going to be any scene."

Her father gestured toward Tommy. "Is that your friend?"

"That's him."

"The one you met in LA?"

"Yes."

"Mr Weese says he came up here from St Louis looking for you."

"He found me."

"You have some place to stay, I take it."

"Sure."

"Where?"

"I'd rather not say."

"I'd like to know. Your mother would, too."

"You want us to invite you over for dinner?"

"Are you somewhere you could serve us?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay, we'll skip dinner. May I raise something else?"

"Depends on what it is."

Her father did his little thing, pushing his lips out and cocking his head to the left. He did that as part of pretending that they both still believed she had to listen to him and do what he said. But she wouldn't listen to him, wouldn't do what he said, and he knew that. He only was saying what her mother told him to say, not what he wanted to say, didn't dare.

"We'd like to contact his mother and ask about him staying with us. The two of you could go to high school together. Mr Weese says he could make that work. Tommy could stay in your room if that's what you want."

She realized having to say that made him angry, and if he could, he'd go after Tommy, but she wasn't scared. She felt like she was talking to someone stuck in a movie screen who couldn't get at her.

"We don't want you out here, Maybeth. You can have anything you want if you'll come home and go back to school. You're going to be 18 next fall. Too much time already has been lost. It's a big house. We'll share it with you."

She thought of how dead she'd felt before she ran into Tommy. She thought of living in the basement to get away from them. She thought of not wanting to wake up. She thought of wandering around the city to kill the afternoon. She thought of Steve Moore going to Mr Weese and ratting them out.

"I don't want to."

“Why not?”

“I just don’t.”

“What do you mean—just don’t?” he asked, demanded, wanting this discussion over with. “Your mother says it’s the way we behave as your parents that drives you crazy, not us, not the human beings we are. We’re saying we’ll change that.”

“Can you do that if you’re still the same human beings?”

“Maybeth, she can’t take much more of this.”

“I’m not talking about her.”

Tommy positioned himself so that she could see him in case she wanted him to come over. It was obvious to him the man in the leather bomber jacket was her father.

“Do you want to meet Tommy?”

“Not unless he’s coming home with you.”

“Neither of us is going to do that, Daddy.”

“I guess there’s no point in meeting him, then, but you should know that as of tomorrow the police will keep a lookout on this place. He’s a missing kid in St Louis, and you’re one here. We filed with them the day after you disappeared. Mr Weese says his mother did, too.”

“He contacted her?”

“He contacted social services in LA and got word to her through them.”

“Did Mommy push him into doing that?”

“Sure, she did. Either we’ll see you when you’re picked up and brought to us, or we’ll see you when you come home by yourself. This can’t go on forever, can it?”

“I don’t know what forever means.”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

“I guess we will.”

Her father extracted himself from the picnic bench and walked over toward where he’d parked his car in front of the Java Shack, the old Lexus he drove so that his patients wouldn’t think he’d gotten rich fixing their teeth.

**T**hey were running low on money. Tommy came up with a plan. He crawled through the back fence and crossed the field and then turned north on the road south and passed the gate to the trailer yard. When he was over the hill, he turned around and walked through the gate as if he were approaching from the north.

The son was hitting a stuck latch on a trailer’s doors with a small sledgehammer. He didn’t stop hammering until Tommy had stood beside him a minute.

“What’s up, pal?” the son said.

“I was wondering if you could use some help around here.”

“Doing what?”

“Whatever you need.”

The son gave the latch another whack. That fixed it. “Sorry, we’re shutting things down, not hiring anyone.”

“Couldn’t you use someone to help you shut it down?”

“Too late for that. Almost done.”

“What’s going to happen to all these trailers?”

“That’s my father’s problem, not mine. He owns the place.”

When you were on the street trying to get into something, the deal was to keep them talking. Maybeth had taught Tommy that in LA. She crouched behind a nearby trailer’s wheels watching him do it.

“It’s just I’ve been going up and down the highway, checking for work, and it looks like what you do is pretty hard for one person to do by himself.”

The son wiped the sweat off his face with his sleeve. “Like I say, I won’t be doing it long.”

“Your father’s selling everything?”

“Kit and caboodle.”

“What will you be doing after it’s shut down?”

“I’ve got some lines out.”

“Any place I could work too?”

“You’re not in school?”

“No, sir.”

“Did you graduate?”

“Some day I will.”

The son said Tommy ought to go back and do it now. Tommy said he would once he had some money to work with.

“All right, I’ll give you 20 if you need it. That help?”

“Couldn’t I do something for it?”

“Here, take it.” The son held out a 20.

Tommy took it. “Thanks very much, sir. Can I check back with you later on?”

“No, go back to school and learn how to do something better than this.”

One day the son didn't show up. The next day he didn't show up. On the third day, a Wednesday, the father and mother let themselves through the gate and waited for a man to arrive with two Latinos who spent the morning pushing old tires up a ramp onto a flatbed. The father and the mother stayed in the office until all the tires were loaded. Then the father and mother came out and the father talked with the driver a while. They both wore khakis and sports shirts. They both wore ball caps that they raised to smooth their hair back the same way. Eventually, the driver pulled an envelope out of his pants pocket and handed it to the father. The father extracted some bills and counted them. Next, they shook hands. The Latinos rested against the tires on the flatbed watching this.

When the flatbed was gone, the father walked over to the mother sitting behind the steering wheel in the Cherokee. He stopped directly in front of the hood. Suddenly he pounded the hood with his fists. Not with his knuckles, with the fleshy sides of his hands. The mother kept looking right at him. Didn't move. Waited to start the Cherokee until he was finished.

May settled upon them like the soft breast of a fat bird. They liked the days getting longer. Toward twilight they would sit on chairs they pulled out of the trailer and eat their dinner looking at the thigh-high grasses that were covering up the junk in the field the way the snow had covered it in the winter. They couldn't afford Burger King all the time, so dinner was scavenged from the loading dock at the food bank—whatever had fallen out of boxes destined for church basements and community centers and such.

One evening Maybeth was eating an apple, taking little bites the way she did. Tommy was eating a carrot the way he liked to eat a carrot, cracking it sideways with his molars, not his front teeth. He said that was how Bugs Bunny ate a carrot even though he'd read one time that rabbits didn't like carrots. But they did have molars, he'd also read, and pre-molars, too. So, Bugs Bunny might have eaten a carrot exactly the way he did if he ever ate a carrot.

She laughed but came back to what they talked about all the time. "What are we going to do?"

They couldn't go to the skateboard park, and they had to be careful on the streets. It was too warm to hide their faces in hoodies.

"Maybe we head west in the field tomorrow, see where it goes."

"Where is that?"

"I don't know. Pretty far. Go until the field hits a road and take the road."

He wasn't serious. He'd just begun to talk that way, but she liked it. In LA he was always worried about what would happen next.

They sat there thinking a while, both minds one mind.

At last he said, "The trailer works for us as long as it's here, but St Paul doesn't work regardless, not with your parents."

She was back to not talking about her parents any more. They were over, like his.

"Okay, we go somewhere else," she said, "but what do we do when we get there? Do we rent somewhere so we can stay inside? We're getting down to where we wouldn't have the deposit money. Who'd rent to us anyway?"

"Sooner or later someone will. They'll have to."

"Why will they have to?"

"I don't know. We'll figure it out."

He began eating another carrot.

She returned to her apple. The lights were coming on along the highway south, gassy yellows and reds on the signs, puddles of brightness seeping out of windows, headlights sweeping away the deepening darkness that resettled after the passing of each car or truck.

They heard air brakes and the rattle-chug of big diesels.

"Maybe today's the day," Tommy said.

"Fuck. Let's go look."

The lot was full of trucks hooking up two trailers, one after the other. Other trailers were being hitched solo, one per truck. Others were being winched onto flatbeds. Not everything was going right. The truck drivers didn't all work for the same company. There was horn blowing and yelling.

The father didn't get involved. He was over by the office with the wife and mother, who rested against the hood of the Cherokee as if to keep him from pounding it again. He didn't look like he would. He stood very still except for lifting his ball cap now and then and smoothing back his hair. The only time he moved was when

a dump truck showed up with a block and tackle rig mounted on its side. Its crew lashed up the heaviest equipment—the drill press, the lathe, the tire mounting machine, the table saw, compressors, generators, and so forth—and hoisted it into the bed. Then they began throwing lighter equipment on top of the heavy stuff—jacks, coils of hose and wiring, rims, wrenches, small power tools. The father walked over to watch this. He put his hands in his back pocket and pushed out his beer belly and did nothing to help or direct.

Tommy said that he probably was thinking how much he paid for all that. Maybeth thought about how her father would react if someone emptied out his dentist's office. It would kill him.

Some trucks had pulled away. More were arriving. The trailer lot had more life in it than they'd ever seen. In a way, the commotion made it look as if it was fighting what was happening, trying to save itself, but it was losing.

"They'll come this way soon," Tommy said.

"We should get inside and decide what we're going to do."

They climbed into the Morgan Movers trailer and sat down on the bed. With the doors closed, it was pitch black in there. She was so upset she wanted him to hold her a while before they talked. Then she wanted to fuck. He didn't.

"Come on, one last time," she said.

"No, we're here to decide. I don't want them catching me with my dick out."

"What are we going to decide? We have to go. I mean, this is it."

He pulled her tighter against him. "Yeah, but I like it here."

"Tommy, it's over."

"It's home."

"We'll find another home."

"Why not go elsewhere with this one?"

She softened against him as if they really had had sex and might do it again. All of a sudden, she wasn't upset. The excitement, building a little more and a little more, was wondering if they had the guts to do this. It seemed like he did. Did she? They lay back on the bed listening to the clattering, squealing sounds in the lot. Then they heard a compressor being pulled beside the Morgan Movers trailer and the hissing of its tires

being inflated. Then they felt the jolt of a truck backing into the coupling.

Tommy put on the lantern. He said he wanted to see the place as it was.

"What do you mean as it was?" she asked.

"Before things start shifting."

"What do we do if that happens?"

"Get out of the way."

They felt the first tug securing the coupling. Then they felt themselves moving across the lot.

"We're leaving, and we can't even see ourselves go," she said.

"Probably the way you should always leave somewhere."

The truck stopped. They knew they'd reached the gate, and when the truck got moving again, they knew they were heading south past the field and its junk. But they couldn't see it. Couldn't see anything. Tommy had turned the lantern off and was yanking down her jeans.

## ROBERT EARLE

I have written five stories about Maybeth and Tommy, teenage runaways from the Midwest who meet in LA.

The first Maybeth and Tommy story, *Under a Bridge*, was published in a collection of my stories called *Nowhere is Always Somewhere* (Wordrunner eChapbooks). *Bluer Blue* was published by the UK magazine *Storgy*. *Resurfacing* is being published by *The MacGuffin*. *Memphis Was a Sad, Moaning Place* is being published by *Rock & Sling*.

Vine Leaves Press published my latest collection of stories, *She Receives the Night*. The Naval Institute Press published a memoir of my experiences in Iraq, *Nights in the Pink Motel*. *DayBue* published my novel, *The Way Home*.

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