

Walk Like a Bear

by **Skye Davis**

I.

When I call Joel, he tells me my name brings back memories of a comic-book character he admired as a child, Captain Midnight. He also tells me that he had hoped to have his chores completed before sunrise, but that they rarely are anymore. He needs to chop more wood, but it's harder now; in the last ten years, he's lost forty pounds of muscle. "So, that's the state of my life—looks like we are on the way down," he says in a soft, amused tone. Then he launches into long-winded directions to his home. The identifying features I am to watch for when I get close—brush and boulders. Joel's driveway is overgrown and easy to miss from the main road.

The air is warm for October on Cape Cod. When I pull up, Joel jogs toward me, until I get closer; then he stiffens, coming to a stop, as a child might. I reach out my hand and he shakes it, his eyes round.

Joel is wearing a navy-blue sweater with a small hole at his right shoulder and pale blue jeans. In his eighties, he has a full and stiff grey beard that stops halfway down his neck. It seems alive, with unidentifiable crumbs sprinkled throughout. His nails are long, thick, yellow in places, and packed with dirt. His glasses, however, are spotless—clean enough for me to see my reflection on the surface of his eye. He's small in stature, and barefoot. Swelling gums obscure his few remaining teeth, but what's left of his smile is enough.

After years in the army, and more years as a sea captain, Joel eventually washed up on his family property in Brewster, Massachusetts, where he had spent summers as a child. Around the same time, he decided to stop working for a living. "I've never been in line with this society," he explains. He would only take a job if it met the following requirements: if it was so interesting that his curiosity made him take it; if it was just too damned much fun to resist, even if the money was bad; or if the pay was so much money

that he couldn't say no—"But it had to be *that* much," he emphasizes. At one point, he had a paper route, just for the fun of it; he also coded computers for a while, unpaid, simply because he enjoyed it—but neither stuck.

Instead of working, he sleeps in four-hour shifts, just as he did at sea; up before the sun to do his morning chores, he will go back to bed at ten AM. Resembling an elderly version of Tom Hanks' character in the movie *Cast Away*, Joel is happily marooned. He sees every part of the day.

We are standing in Joel's driveway, or what used to be his driveway. Now the impeding bushes make it too narrow for a car to drive through, but it's a perfect path for a bike—Joel's only means of transportation. At the end of the grass passageway is his yard. Objects peek out behind overgrown strands of grass like predators: rusty wheelbarrows, boats, lanterns, brown plant buckets, pails of dirty water, broken bicycles and bicycle wheels, a torn plastic sled, a damaged beach chair, multiple metal trash cans, heaps and scraps and stacks of wood, an axe, a ladder, tools, carts and various kinds of netting. Blue tarps are strategically strung above old bikes and naked bushes. Solar panels are scattered around the yard like bodies.

In the middle of everything stands a cabin. It's tiny; what his neighbors might consider a tool shed. A skinny, dark pipe rises out of the roof, releasing pillowed smoke into the white and blue sky. "This is home," he says, affectionately.

The land, tucked in a corner of the town, has been in Joel's family for over one hundred years. The original house, dated back to 1735, Joel can describe down to the rafters. He turns his back to the shed, facing a field of tangled bushes, and sketches his childhood home in the empty air with his finger.

The roof boards were laid vertically over the beams. In the middle of the 1800s, two little rooms were added. The kitchen had a walk-in pantry, and eventually a screened porch was added to the northwest corner—the porch where he would sleep during the summer months when he was a child. At the time, according to Joel, there were no trees in Brewster except for the pine forest that grew behind their home, which was a rookery for the black crowned night heron. A beautiful bird with blue wings, this heron makes a barking squawk when disturbed; when he was a child, the nights were filled with harsh screams and blood-curdling hollers.

When Joel returned to the house, he put everything back to the way it had been when he was young. He didn't use the electricity or running water that his parents had installed in 1960s, although he did use the phone occasionally—mostly to call into radio stations. He had a well and a pump outside, “and it was just fine.” He heated his home with a wood stove, used kerosene lamps, sometimes collected road-kill for food, cooking it over a harsh fire, and at one point had an outhouse on the property in order to maintain the local housing code—something he has since given up worrying about. Then, in March of 2007, the house burned down.

Joel's family had left prior to his arrival, his parents opting for a warmer climate, his older sister—“a different one.” She lives in Indiana and now considers herself a Midwesterner, a sentiment Joel doesn't seem to understand. “I've never considered myself this or that, but this is home,” he concludes, his eyes raised to where the house used to stand, his toes snuggling the same dirt they had as a child.

II.

Joel stares at the ground, once scorched, before us. The earth is beginning to find new life; grey, knotted plants lift out of the dirt like weak flames.

He first left the Cape to attend a small liberal arts school in Wooster, Ohio—Scottish, Presbyterian. By the end of his junior year, he didn't have enough credits for a timely graduation. He was a biology major, “which in those days was a very soft science,” he says. “There was no math, there was no nothing, there were a bunch of taxonomists running around pinning species and genetic names on unknown plants.” In order to graduate, he had to complete an independent study. He had read about a site in Arizona, the Aravaipa Canyon, and decided to head out there.

Arizona was incredibly dry. As he drove across the state, he noticed two ruts traveling across the desert toward a horizon of mountains. “I couldn't go by it without going up there,” Joel says. He points to the top of the trees at the edge of his yard, and they morph into a series of peaks and valleys. The piles of fall leaves and abandoned projects melt into sand-colored dirt; green, sharp, desert foliage appears around us. Then, without warning, Joel finds himself in the middle of a flash flood. “All the sudden ... a wave this high is barreling down the canyon!” I can see the water rise to his knees. But the flood

then ends as quickly as it began. I'm not sure how he escapes. Joel's stories seem to last only as long as his memories do, but his details are so vivid that it's as if everything he describes he can touch.

While working on his independent project in Aravaipa, Joel stayed with Cowboy Fred. He spent his days in the canyon, recording the species that lived there, and returned to the farm by dusk, where he discussed shared memories of Cape Cod with Fred's newlywed, a feisty lady with red hair who "wore two guns whenever she went to town." There was a grapefruit tree by the walk-in freezer, covering the ground with large balls of produce. I see one in Joel's hand as he grips the air; it's the size of a volleyball. I watch his nails dig into the thick skin, ripping at the damp bottom of its rind. He can peel each segment away like tape, "The sweetest thing." Two girls, Fred's nieces, sit somewhere behind him, a bench by a barn. They ignore the scattered fruit, instead sipping on iced tea all summer.

"At any rate," Joel says, placing his hands in his pockets. With this phrase and a toothless smile, Joel humbly dismisses the world he's drawn around us. Desert sand sinks back into soil and the world begins to re-materialize—tarps sprawl blue in the sun, bent bikes reappear, smoke balls above the trees. "You're getting cold, I can tell," he says, shrugging a shoulder toward his home. We head inside.

III.

As we walk toward the entrance of his cabin, Joel's feet curve, delicately wrapping themselves around the strings of thorns pressed into the soil. His feet seem unbothered, reacting to the sharp spikes the same way they do to cold stone. "Don't be shocked," Joel warns, as we enter.

The cabin is larger on the inside than it appears from the outside, but crowded. It smells like fire. I stand in the entrance; there's no room to move any further. The stench of the burning wood is overwhelming; with every breathe I inhale a thin layer of smoke. Timber beams stretch above us; gear hangs out of a ceiling loft. Dirty mirrors and brown paper in chipped gold frames line the walls, with a few small windows in between. Books and cassette tapes, to entertain him when he isn't doing his chores, are stacked high everywhere possible. A broken clock with birds instead of numbers hangs on a tilt across

from me. Drying clothes droop along a line stretched from wall to wall. Materials are spread on the flat, low surface to my right—somewhere underneath them, I imagine, is a bed.

“It’s just a bloody mess,” Joel says, climbing to the center of the room, his bare feet dodging items. There’s something odd about the fact that he addresses the chaos, that he cares at all. He settles in the only empty space, which is about the size of a big square kitchen tile, in the center of the cabin directly in front of the wood stove. Something is there for him to sit on. In the left corner, behind the stove, a stack of wood climbs toward the ceiling like a ladder. As Joel stands, crooked, he grabs the first of a series of lines that hang above him. They are tied to the ceiling beam and fall toward his reach, secured by a bowline, a sailor’s knot. The rope holds him in place as he leans over an unidentifiable pile next to the wood stack. “You can tell I’m an old seaman, I just grab a piece of riggin’.”

He secures himself, looping his hand in the line, and extends his other hand toward the kindling, grabbing a wedge somewhere in the middle and tugging at its edge until it comes loose. He makes his way back to the stove. He does this twice more; his movements slow, precise, balanced—as if he is somewhere in the Atlantic and the waves are steep on his bow. He stacks the three pieces of wood beside his seat.

He sits, turning a black handle on the face of the stove. The glass window blazes red and yellow; the hinge squeaks as he opens it. He stuffs a block of wood inside.

After his childhood home burned down, Joel declined all offers from neighbors to rebuild. The house, in its original form, was what made it home. Any new building would be just that. Instead, he built a teepee out of local bamboo and recycled plastic in the middle of his charred land. He had a wood stove with a pipe that went right through the top of the teepee. He remembers those days with a smile; if it was cold he knew how to dress. “It was incredibly good,” he tells me, lining the stove with another log.

He lived there for almost four years, until one afternoon during the winter of 2011. He had just left the tent to collect more wood for the cold night ahead, “and suddenly WOOSH.” An explosion. The teepee erupted in flames. “The damned thing burned down,” he says, grunting. The stove’s hinge squeaks as he reaches for the last of his three pieces of wood. When I ask Joel what he thinks may have caused the explosion he explains that

outside the teepee, sitting over a large pit, there was a Coleman gas stove that he used for cooking. He thinks it must have had a faulty switch, unknown to him.

An article written by Doug Fraser in the *Cape Cod Times* explains the event was reported as a teepee fire. On the basis of that description, the firefighters could guess where they were going. Joel was known throughout town. Despite his many housing violations—improper venting or use of space heater or water heater; lack of electricity or gas; inadequate electrical outlets or lighting in common areas; failure to restore electricity, gas, or water, lack of a safe water supply, working toilet, or sewage disposal system; inadequate locks for entry doors; accumulation of garbage or filth that may provide food or shelter for rodents, insects, or other pests, or that may contribute to accidents or disease; and no smoke detector or carbon monoxide alarm—the town officials looked the other way.

According to his neighbor and friend, Kate, town officials have chosen to ignore Joel's disregard for codes and regulations, allowing him to live in the manner that he has preferred. In fact, when his teepee burned down, some of the town officials helped build the new cabin for him. He's often referred to as "the man who lives in the woods," or "the man with the beard," or "the man on his bike." Yet with the description also comes respect: respect for Joel and for the old Cape Cod. This peninsula was his before it was ever theirs.

IV.

Kate first met Joel twenty-three years ago, when she and her husband moved into a house down the road from his. Originally from Maryland, Kate was hesitant to move to Cape Cod, but her affection for her new home grew. When they moved to the house on Lower Road, Kate was pregnant with her third child. "One afternoon, I looked out my back door and observed a man with long hair and a beard walking around my backyard. I wasn't sure what to make of him, so I sent my husband out to see what he wanted. Rob went out back and began chatting with Joel, who explained that he was checking the water levels in the creek behind the house. After a while, Rob came back into the house and announced that, while he was certainly a character, he did not appear to be someone that was a threat."

A few years later, Kate and Rob ended up buying the property that abuts Joel's property, and it was then that she received a glimpse into how he lived. She admits that "There were a lot of people who cautioned us to be careful of the hermit that lived next door," but Kate found that she admired Joel's independence: "I thought it was kind of cool that he was living off the grid." The relationship grew after Kate found a book about a young boy and his pet raccoon in her mailbox. "Attached to the cover of the book was a note from Joel saying 'with your permission, I would like to share this book with Maggie,' our oldest daughter. I was very impressed that he would ask me before just giving the book to her." After that, Kate would often stop at the end of the driveway and chat with Joel when she saw him.

One time, when Kate and her son were checking their mailbox, Joel was just returning from running some errands on his bike and there was a dead squirrel hanging off the edge of his basket. "As Joel and I chatted cordially, my ten-year-old son just kept staring at the dead squirrel hanging off the back of Joel's bike. Joel noticed this, gave me a wink, and then turned to Alex and said 'That's *my* dinner. Go get your own!' Needless to say, my son Alex was horrified at the idea of going anywhere near the dead squirrel."

According to Kate, there are a lot of people around town who are a part of Joel's life. He had a friend, Randy, who worked in Boston a few days a week. Joel would take care of Randy's dog on those days, providing Joel with a chance to eat properly. His other neighbors, Gail and John, are close to Joel. Gail frequently brings him food, and he spends every Christmas Eve with them. "Despite the fact that he drives me crazy sometimes, Joel has come to mean a great deal to myself and my family," Kate tells me. "He is a very warm and caring person. He likes to act aloof, like he doesn't care, but that is not really his nature. He always asks about the kids. When he sees me, he's very concerned if I look tired or overextended."

After the second fire, Joel was turning eighty and once again without shelter. Kate had seen the smoke coming from Joel's property while driving home and had offered to let him come to live with them for a few months. Instead, another one of Joel's friends, a professional house builder, made a deal with a local lumberyard: any lumber they couldn't sell, he would take for free. He gathered half a dozen people and it took them six days to build Joel's current cabin.

V.

Joel hurries me out of the cabin now, explaining that his friends always gets nauseated after staying too long. I offer to drive him to the next town over; there's a particular local sailboat—a custom Catboat—that he's always admired from a distance, and I happen to know the boat builder. He grabs a pair of sneakers near the doorway. "As you can see, I don't wear shoes very much, but just for the owner's peace of mind," he says.

Outside, his face crinkles at the sunlight. We climb down the two steps at the entranceway of his home, one at a time and together. After making our way to the bottom, he pauses to say something he's been holding back: "It seems that I have cancer." His eyes squint in the sun as he massages his gut, looking to name the illness. "What's your... begins with an R ... one of those." He hooks a finger in the heel of each shoe, carrying them down his driveway.

We don't make it very far down the grass path before Joel stops again by a pile of solar panels resting at various angles on a metal cart. Some are large, the size of a window, while others are hardly bigger than a deck of cards. He adjusts them carefully, facing them towards the sun. We will be gone when it is at its strongest. "It's a wonder I'm not blind," he says, staring into a large black square. He uses them to light his home and heat his water.

After Joel completed his independent study in the Aravaipa Canyon, his college let him go on to his senior year—"I guess mostly just to get me out of there." Joel lets out a belly laugh, without the belly. Shortly after graduation, he was drafted.

He was sent to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, to learn how to be a weatherman. Between training sessions, the army gave each of them ten days off. They handed everybody a train ticket, "Even the married guys." Joel exchanged his ticket for cash and decided to hitchhike to Wooster, Ohio, to visit a friend from school.

The same day, a blizzard came in from Kentucky. He hitched a ride in a truck heading north, but the storm followed them, becoming progressively worse. Joel decided to stay with the driver to Detroit. When they arrived, Joel went to the YMCA and purchased a room for one dollar and twenty-five cents. Marooned, he decided to buy a car. The next

day, in the midst of the squall, Joel found a used car lot, where he bought a 1941 Chrysler Windsor sedan. It was a wreck, but the salesman charged Joel \$100; “He knew he had me by the short hairs.” He made his rounds at the truck stops, looking for a large tractor-trailer he could draft behind and eventually found a driver heading south to Toledo, Ohio.

The wind was coming from the west. Joel gestures at the gusts against the frail window of his sedan. “Within minutes there was a drift this high right across the road,” he says, flattening a palm as high as his hip.

Joel followed the truck’s running lights. They stopped for coffee and a piece of pie. When they got back on the road, the wind direction had shifted, and it was dark. The heavy tractor-trailer held steady, but Joel kept spinning out, losing more control with each mile gained. “I couldn’t keep up with him any longer.” Joel points ahead, and we watch the truck disappear over a hill, into the dark.

Shortly afterwards, the sedan stalled. It was about midnight, and the sides of the road were walls of snow. “Jesus if somebody comes wheelin’ over that hill and there I am and he’s on ice and can’t stop...” he drifts off, reliving his panic.

Joel began walking. Eventually he found a house with “one little light on.” A man came to the door, “A son of a gun, not even in a night shirt,” Joel recalls, smiling. He owned a gas station nearby. The man wrapped his shoulders in a heavy leather coat and followed Joel to his car. They pushed the sedan a mile to the gas station, where he thawed water out of the fuel system. As Joel describes the man under his car, everything becomes small, the “little fuel line” and the “little heat lamp”—as if he’s playing with a set of vinyl dolls from his past.

He made it to Wooster by six AM. After a nice day spent with an old friend, he took off and headed back to New Jersey.

VI.

As we continue toward the car, Joel notices me look down at his toes. His nails are uncomfortably long and the dirt within them seems decades old. “My feet are the very best part of me,” he explains, stopping again, “Even the physicians at the hospital don’t know what I’m talking about. I say, ‘Look, you people with shoes don’t even know how to walk; you walk with your heels first.’” He demonstrates. “Watch a bear when he runs, he

runs first off pigeon-toed—at least his front paws; they’re like this,” Joel spreads his toes. He explains the mechanics of the foot, how the first part that touches the ground should be the outside edge. “If there’s something like a stone or a thorn down there, its amazing how your foot, without you thinking about it, will automatically shift its weight so it doesn’t poke a nail up through the bottom.” He holds his shoes up in disgust. “You just use up a lot of energy flailing these things back and forth—when you’re barefoot, you’re light on your feet.” As we begin walking again, my boots feel heavy.

When I reach for my seatbelt, Joel takes the hint, reaching for his own. He struggles to match the latch with the plate. I help him. He explains that he has lost all feelings in the tips of his fingers, that he has no tactical or olfactory senses left—if he picks something up, he has to look down to see whether or not he’s holding it. “I can’t do anything delicate,” he explains.

I ask him about last winter. With record snowfall and freezing temperatures, I’m curious as to how he fared. It was described in the *Cape Cod Times* in March of 2015 as the worst Cape Cod winter ever. Joel, a man whose only means of transportation is on two wheels and who doesn’t believe in wearing shoes, responds carelessly, “I didn’t think it was that bad.” His secret: he doesn’t shovel snow; he just walks on top of it. Eventually, it packs down like soil. Also, he doesn’t have a commute. As we drive, he points to a road sign that reads “Route 124.” He comments, “That used to be just 24. Why go and make it complicated?”

VII.

After eight weeks in New Jersey, Joel was sent to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Fort Huachuca lies right on the Mexican border. “Well, the weather in the summertime is just blue sky and sunshine, day after day—you didn’t need a weatherman at all.” Beautiful clouds would form over the mountain every afternoon, “little puffy cumulus clouds.” They would rise, traveling almost six miles into thin air. When night fell, he watched lightning drill into the tops of mountains, the bolts of yellow lining the horizon.

Joel and his peers spent their weekends off in Tucson, partying at the home of Agnes De Mille, the choreographer of the movie *Oklahoma*; a thespian friend got them

the invite. The musical was being filmed in Arizona for the clouds, Joel explains; Oklahoma had empty skies: “No mountains there to make orographic winds.”

De Mille lived in a beautiful brick adobe building in Tucson: “You could hardly tell if you were inside or outside.” There was an irregularly shaped swimming pool with underwater lights that lit up the Sonora Desert. They spent summer nights floating in cool water, looking up at stars through the unpolluted western air. The word “unpolluted” melts out of Joel’s mouth with longing.

We continue along the route that connects Brewster to Orleans. Thick yellow lines center dense pavement. Houses emerge along the edge of the road.

“See, there used to be land everywhere,” Joel says. Growing up, he had never known Cape Codders to be wealthy. They were farmers or fisherman, and they all lived on large pieces of land inherited from their ancestors. They would have a metal pail to milk their cow, a field full of asparagus or turnips or potatoes, and a wood lot near a locust tree where they chopped their way to a warmer winter. And they shared. “Your neighbor’s cows knew you as well as they knew anybody—and that’s the way the Cape worked.” As he speaks, the houses we pass seem to dent the forest like cavities.

“Then the tourists started and people started coming here,” Joel recalls. “They really liked certain parts about the Cape, and there were certain things that bugged the hell outta them.” Things like having to drive down a dirt road through the woods to get to their house, or the trip to the local general store: “You could get a can of house paint, a tablecloth, or a loaf of bread—but you could only get what they had.” The newcomers demanded supermarkets, pavement on the roads, streetlights at intersections; taxes were raised and, before he knew it, “the land was lost.”

Of the thirteen acres Joel’s family used to own, he is now left with his share of two. On the land that he inherited, he used to have goats and chickens, eggs, milk, and cheese. The goats would walk along the stone wall that edged his property and play king of the mountain, two of them trying to knock the third off. They had incredible balance and would roam the land, feeding on anything that grew green. He had an apple orchard, where his chickens would range freely, rooting in the apple trees. His dog at the time, “a

St. Bernard divided by two,” would look after them, protecting them from the fox, hawk, and coyote.

As his land diminished and neighbors moved in, his goats still knew no boundaries. The neighbors kept finding them on their lawn or in their driveway, but Joel thought little of it, “People built their houses on my animals’ home.” Eventually, he was taken to court for animal trespassing, where the judge told him he had to fence in his goats—“And I says, ‘You want me to fence in the deer as well? I suggest, your Honor, that if those people don’t like me or my goats, that they fence us out.’”

He was fined two hundred dollars. The judge complained that he couldn’t fine him two thousand dollars, due to the law being 250 years old. On the other hand, the two hundred dollars that Joel ended up paying, he had earned in the 1960’s. In the 1970s, due to inflation, the money he had saved had suddenly become worthless, “I says, Judge—it’s just like you *were* fining me \$2000.”

Suddenly, his goats disappeared. He believes the town confiscated them. He lost his dog to heartworm, something he had never heard of, and his chickens were picked off slowly. Defeated by the memory of it, Joel sighs.

When we arrive at the boat yard, Joel is like an artist in a museum. He runs the pad of his index finger along the edges of a boat, his long nails shadowing the woodwork. He climbs ladders and peeks inside cockpits, cautiously—like a kid hanging over the edge of a lobster pool. And as he dances his palms over the various hulls, he relives his days on the ocean.

After his time in the army, Joel attended the University of Washington, where he tried his hand at oceanography, eventually becoming part of the scientific staff on a research vessel. He remembers the cobble beaches, the day-lit nights, and the original whaling boats. He wags a finger at certain thoughts, as when he tells me it never snows in the Arctic because there’s not enough water in the air. “It’s a very dry place, it’s a desert,” he says, happy to see my eyes widen.

He tells me a story about Willie Goodwin, a man he met while anchored seven miles off Kotzebue, Alaska. Willie, a local fisherman, was returning a salmon that had been tagged by the research team. “We saw this little Inuit guy, and he’s holding a salmon

in his arms like this,” Joel gestures. “So, a couple of guys help him up on deck.” As they go to place the salmon in the freezer, Willie tells Joel he has a walk-in. Joel explains that while other locals dug a hole in the permafrost to store their fish, Willie dug his into the side of a hill.

Instead of attending the meeting, where they were to be told the results of their most recent study, Joel and a friend took “little Willie Goodwin” and went into the galley, where they sat him down at the table, got the coffee pot out and stayed awake until two AM drinking coffee and listening to his stories. “Old folklore stories, ya know, like the old woman that lives at the bottom of the sea and the battle between the sun and moon.”

Years later, when he was back living on the Cape, he received a phone call. It was his friend’s voice on the other line: “Willie Goodwin lives!” His friend had found an article in the *New York Times* about Willie Goodwin, Jr.—after four years tracking rockets, he was returning home to Kotzebue. As he tells me this, Joel catches his breath: “That about blew me away.”

VIII.

After exploring the boatyard, I realize I’m imposing on Joel’s fourth hour awake. But when I ask him if he’s tired, he responds, “Me? Get tired?!” He has a similar response when I ask him if he was ever married: “Oh come on, this society wouldn’t let me have kids. I knew it wouldn’t work, not the way I did things.”

When he was young, he dreamt of going to sea. He liked the feel of the helm, what it meant to handle a boat. “It’s great to get good at,” he explains. Joel became a captain during his last few years on the west coast. He bought a “split-rigged” Bristol Bay Alaska gillnetter. “She was a lovely old vessel. She would roll her scuppers when there was hardly a sea runnin’; she would just wallow, make everybody seasick.” He fished in every salmon run in Alaska; he would “knock all over” Puget Sound, British Columbia, the San Juan Islands, and Vancouver. “All I did was sail,” he says proudly. He quickly points out, though, that a captain must balance his ego as he does his ship and his schedule—four on, four off. If you aren’t humble and careful, you can become overconfident, and too self-satisfied.

He returned to the Cape in the 1960s after a friend of his, Jerry Milgram, called. “He says, ‘How ‘bout comin’ East?’” He was starting a sail loft and wanted Joel to be a part of it. Joel bought a VW Bus for two hundred dollars and drove east. The van was in rough shape, “A light breeze from dead ahead would slow you down to second gear,” he says, laughing. Joel didn’t last long at the loft, but Jerry became famous the day America had a clean sweep in the Summer Olympics: “His boats always pulled ahead.”

Throughout the day, I ask Joel why he has chosen to live life the way he has—why he never took the well-paid job in Provincetown and bought a car, why he never rebuilt his home and sprung for a shower. He never has a straight answer, but instead comes up with another memory, another story. But he does tell me, after a trivial explanation of his sleeping patterns in college, “You know why I do things the way I do? Because I don’t have any reason at all not to.”

In 2011, while biking home from the Brewster library, he was hit by a car. He went over the hood, his shoulder breaking the windshield. “I feel that first impact and I’ll never forget it,” he says, circling the cap of his knee with his palm.

When he slid off of the hood onto the road, he landed on his other shoulder, “Of course I didn’t have a helmet on—never do.” When he regained consciousness another twenty feet down the road, pain was extreme: “It’s like your skin is a bag full of red hot coals, and you are full of thorns and barbed wire.” A black viscous liquid pooled in the corner of his eye. He wasn’t screaming; he couldn’t breathe. He compares it to the feeling he had as a child when he would swim to the bottom of the bay, forcing himself to stay underwater until he found a moonstone—a rock known for its charming play of light.

When he got to the hospital he could feel them probing him all over, but even with an X-ray, they couldn’t find one broken bone. Then they sent him up to the sixth floor. “I had a nice room, toilet to myself—had a bathtub with a handheld shower and about five big fluffy towels,” he recalls. After he showered, four nurses pounced on him with gauze to cover up the abrasions. “I told them no, get away, forget it,” Joel continues. “I’ve known all about abrasions ever since I first skinned my knee as a kid—I know they heal themselves. They take a little bit of time because they’ve got lots of skin that they have to grow, but they do it all by themselves.”

The next day was a Sunday. Breakfast came (“Not bad, actually,”) and then lunch, but no one came to talk to him about his injuries, and by mid-afternoon Joel was bored silly. Finally, he shuffled over to the nurse’s station to tell them he was leaving. A nurse explained that there was a physical therapist coming. “And I tried to keep a straight face,” Joel recalls. “I told her, ‘I got all the therapy at home that I need.’”

Joel knew it was going to hurt the next day and that he was going to be stiff, but morning came and he managed. He walked outside, picked up his brush hook, and started swinging, swearing a blue streak all the while “because I always get mad at myself when I do something stupid, and somehow I did something stupid when that car hit me.” Every day, for four days, Joel hacked away at the woods. By Friday, he was back on his bike: “The pain was gone.” With these words, he stares at me, a tear forming on his lower lid, blued by his iris, fighting the urge to fall.

IX.

We settle inside the car on the way back from the boatyard, driver and passenger. As we steer along Route 124, heading back to his property, Joel describes to me the different types of cancerous cells. In the midst of melanoma, he stops—turning his head to look out the rear window. “That wasn’t a VW bus, was it?” At close to eighty-four-years-old, after his cancer diagnosis, Joel would bike fifteen miles to a doctor’s appointment—two hours to get there and two hours to get home. The only thing he had to complain about—terrible directions.

He is not yet sure if he will be doing chemotherapy, exclaiming, “Those buggers don’t tell me anything.” It occurs to him that he would lose his hair: “That’s a tempting thought! Not a single soul in Brewster will know who I am if I lose this mop around my face. If I can lose this bush in front of me here, I bet I can go all around town and just be a fly on the wall.” He pulls at the strings of his beard with his nails as we turn into his driveway.

We sit in the car for a while. Joel stares out of the sunroof at the empty trees. He was in the west when they began building houses around his property. Neighbors would complain about the birds with blue wings and their blood-curdling screams in the middle of the night. Finally, someone stomped into the woods with a shotgun, destroying every

nest he could find. The first night Joel returned, he slept on the screened porch. He could hear the crickets, he could hear the bay, even the faint motor of a passing engine—but there was something missing.

He lifts his bare foot onto his knee. The flat of his foot stares at me.

“Your feet must be tough as nails,” I say. He presses the cushion of his finger along the curve of his foot, treating it like a foreign species, something alive and unattached to his own body. “My feet are in good shape, still soft and beautiful,” he says proudly. “They grow thicker and tougher from the inside out.” He pulls his foot closer to me, urging me to touch it, wiggling his hip out of place. I finally do. The skin is cold and stiff but smooth.

He continues, “I guess this is the reason why I live the way I live, you find out all of these things that nobody else knows anything about—because they are wearing shoes all the time.”

I stare again at the foot I have touched. The earth is spread like a map on his skin. Dirt lines the peaks and valleys; crests of white edge his toe mounds; brown and green grids mark his heel: a topographic representation of everywhere he’s been.



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