

# TROUBLE FINDS YOU

*a novel*

*Joshua Marie Wilkinson*

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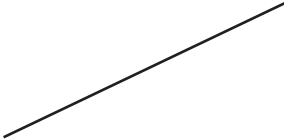
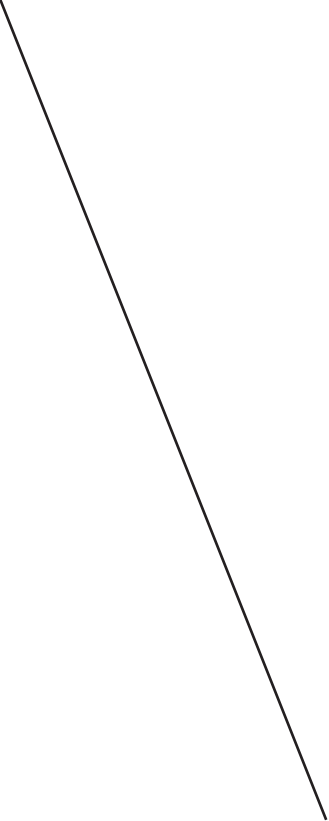
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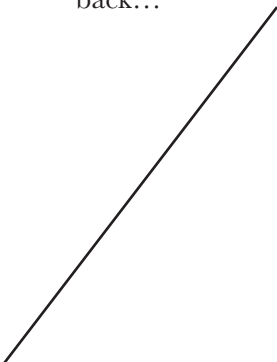
*for Lisa & Jude*



When we ask for advice, we are usually  
looking for an accomplice.

— Saul Bellow

I discovered, though, that once having  
given a pig an enema there is no turning  
back...



— E.B. White

PART 1

MONTANA





## HARRY

Two high school kids are sitting on the curb in the parking lot at Marty's Mart when Harry pulls in at the far pump after dark.

He takes out the nozzle, sets it into the tank, and squeezes, but his hand is shaking. He can't get the fuel lever to rest snugly in its clip. He shuts his eyes and leans against the truck's dusty fender as he holds it there, letting the gas flow in. His shoulder throbs.

One of the kids approaches, avoiding eye contact, and offers Harry five dollars to buy them a case of Busch. Tells him they're going to a party. Harry stares through him, tells him to fuck off. The kid shrugs and shakes his head as he walks back to his friend sitting beside the bundles of firewood.

Harry has the feeling that each of his movements is being clocked from above, like he's a rat in a maze. And driving a random route through the night had felt slightly less foolish than heading directly back to the cabin.

Dust is stuck to the dried sweat above his lip. He can feel the grit of it between his teeth. His shirt is soaked through with sweat. The back of his hand has been sliced by glass, but there's somebody else's blood on him as well. He doesn't even want to look at his ankle, but he knows he's going to have to wash it out. The pain from down there is electric. It feels runny. He imagines a nest of spiders wriggling under his sock.

He pulls his hat down on his forehead and pushes open the door of the convenience store. Lights blare. A pop station plays on a portable radio where the cashier is studying herself in a compact mirror. With her free hand she's doing something to one of her eyebrows. Harry makes his way past the frozen pizzas and ice cream to the heavy door of the washroom.

Inside, the mirror is scratched with profanities and extravagant symbols. In his reflection he finds someone else there: covered in dust, chin stained with tobacco spit, and sweat tangling the hair at his temples. He removes his hat and sets it beside the sink. His ears are still ringing from the rifle shot. That Harry in the mirror, he looks far away.

He washes the blood off his hands and notices two tiny cubes of glass in the breast pocket of his flannel shirt. He pictures Kristin in her dark hoodie at the edge of the fire pit, her face partly obscured by shadows. She'd pulled on his sleeve when the screaming started, but Harry had run the other way, back to his truck. He'd just left her there.

He pulls out his cell phone, but there's nothing from Kristin—only a missed call and a voicemail from his sister. He'll have no service out at the cabin, but his mind is too addled to know if he should try to call Kristin now, or call the police himself, so he returns the phone to his pocket.

He pulls up the damp leg of his jeans. He has to pinch the fabric of his sock and sort of tug it down—one side and then the other, gently—to see the marks. It's worse than he thought. Four clear holes full of blood, each the size of a ladybug.

Looking over his wound he allows himself to replay the scene. At first, all he sees is that woman in the headlights. Her

arm splotted. Someone had lost a great deal of blood. Running from the field back to the truck, Harry had swallowed some of the chewing tobacco that had been wedged in his lower lip. His stomach is roiling now. There's a faint smell of dogshit.

Somebody is pounding on the bathroom door.

"Just a minute," Harry says, his voice breaking like a child's sob.

He brings a two-handed cupping of soapy water down from the sink, his arms trembling, and flings the warm splash onto his ankle area. He lets out a cry. Clenches his teeth.

He makes to leave but stops short. He can't bear the smell. He unlaces and pulls off his boot and then wedges its smeared-over sole under the sink's hot water. His hands are still shaky. It feels as if his eyes are going to fall out of his head, and he turns his face away, mashing his nose into his shoulder, to avoid inhaling the odor. More pounding follows. A man's voice telling him to hurry it up.

"Give me a second," Harry says. "I shit myself in here."

With a handful of foaming soap from the dispenser, he splashes water onto his shoe and then lathers it onto the stubborn excrement squished into the boot sole's rubber traction. It starts to come loose from the grooves, his fingers tickling it free in the hot water. The citrusy soap fragrance mixing with the scent of the warm dogshit all steam up into his face. He gags. Stifles it. Gets his boot back on over his wool sock.

A tall man in overalls, with a squirrel-gray beard, curls his lip when Harry comes out.

He hears the door lock click behind him as he walks back through the candy aisle. He's going to need Band-Aids

and something stronger to douse his wound with, though he doesn't want to risk being recorded by the store cameras any more clearly than he already has. Harry counts at least four people who could ID him here, including the night clerk: a pale woman behind the counter, now lip-syncing to Mariah Carey's "Fantasy."

"Alcohol?"

The cashier gives him a bored look and points a long, turquoise fingernail at the coolers of beer.

"No," Harry says, "like for a cut."

"We don't carry nothin' like that. Sorry."

Outside, Harry leans on the trashcan and looks out at his truck. He'd swept the chunks of glass out of the passenger window, so that side just looks rolled down now. The truck is covered in dust and mud but for Montana this is hardly strange. A shinier truck than Harry's would have drawn more attention. If his Arizona plates weren't doing him any favors, at least Missoula was a college town, full of undergrads driving crappy sedans from Idaho and Washington.

The two high school kids are performing their forlorn boredom, drinking slushies out of child-sized cups on the curb between a cooler for bagged ice and firewood. One of them eyes Harry's damp pantleg before looking away.

This will all soon be evidence of some spectacular crime. A team of investigators will be tweezing everything into Ziploc bags. They'll spot the fresh puddle of glass on the road. A trained shepherd will sniff out the rifle in the weeds about nine seconds later, and some rubber-gloved, stubbly detective will whistle in a couple other uniformed cops without so

much as a glance over his shoulder.

Harry's blood is on that rifle. So are prints from all ten of his sweaty fingers. There will be hair and saliva and perhaps even flecks of blood on the door of his vehicle.

"That truck look weird to you?" Harry says.

"I didn't touch it," one kid says, his hat on crooked. He looks up at Harry.

"We'll give you ten bucks, man," the other one says. Something's wrong with his ear. It's closed up like a dead flower.

Harry stalls a moment, pretending to consider the offer. He'd scooped the wad of chewing tobacco out of his mouth in the washroom, but its hot particles are in his belly, reacting with the acid in there. He can't tell if he'll be sick, but it passes.

An ambulance soars by on the interstate, headed east, in the direction of the party.

"That's the third one," the kid with the ear says.

"Third ambulance?" Harry says.

"No, cop car or whatever. Third or fourth."

Two more patrol Blazers scream after it, and the three of them watch the blue and red lights melt into the distance, the sounds of their sirens bending and fading.

"Must've been a fire or something," Harry says.

"Nah, no fire trucks," the other one says, squeaking the straw up and down through the lid of his plastic cup.

Harry practices walking slowly without any suggestion of a limp back to the pumps. The wound at his ankle feels unusual now, sort of fat and taut. Many moths and littler insects batter the lights above his truck. He takes a deep breath as he starts the engine, and he watches the red arm of the fuel gauge float

itself up to full.

The cool night air is wetter as well. It pours in through the missing window with a feather of gasoline. Harry leans over to roll it up but catches himself.



Just before escaping the party, Harry had rolled down the driver's side window, stuck his head out, and started to ease back as if to push people out of the way until he got his pickup pointed the right direction.

Those who hadn't scrambled back into the house or disappeared into the high grass where the shooting started were running through the front yard. The white dog was barking at him as everybody scrambled into their vehicles, and for a moment Harry thought the animal might try to leap into the truck.

Two women appeared in his headlights, crossing in front of the truck, the sisters he'd seen earlier at the fire pit. The bigger one was sobbing, muttering something. The prettier one with short hair was stone mute with a brownish stain of blood on her dress, smeared down the length of her arm.

There was more yelling behind him from a scuffle of panicked bodies when he felt the unmistakable pressure of the truck's back end dipping down, pressed now with some load. He turned to shout at the white dog to get out, his mouth burning with beer and tobacco. But it was not the dog.

It was two men flattening themselves down into the bed of his pickup. He leaned out the window and screamed at them to get out.

“Go, motherfucker, go!” one said as he pressed himself down out of view.

Harry swallowed a gob of spit and tore out of the yard, following the beams of his headlights back to the county road. Dirt and rocks sprayed up behind him as he drove out the way he’d come in, Kristin’s birthday flowers replaced by the shell of their plastic wrapping on the empty seat beside him.

Harry’s heart was thudding like a trapped moth. He watched the high beams light up the road before him as the truck picked up speed and rattled along the empty lane. Something smelled of dogshit, and he glanced down to see that he’d stepped in a fresh one on his sprint back through the grass. He had no clue who was riding back there, but he was helping them escape the mayhem. Harry might have done the same thing had his own friends left him for dead. He’d drive down the road a ways. Pull over and figure out what to do. Maybe they’d know what the fuck had happened back there.

There was a hard tap on the glass of the truck’s cab. Harry turned just enough to see that it was the nose of a rifle. Whatever momentary calm he’d felt vanished as his blood went to ice in his fingers. The rifle gave two more hard raps on the window, and Harry took a deep breath as he unlatched the black handle. He was driving sixty, then sixty-five, then nearly seventy. Without taking his eyes off the road, he slid open the window. And then the rifle slid its long barrel into the cab of his truck, like something with a brain of its own. One of the men said something Harry couldn’t make out, and the rifle nosed his shoulder.

With one hand on the steering wheel, Harry reached his

left arm across his chest and wrapped it around the barrel, grabbed hold, and yanked. The force on the other end jerked it back and Harry lost his grip—his hand too sweaty to grasp the slick gunmetal. He stomped on the brake. The two men fell forward, ramming into the back of the truck’s cab, and the rifle came free, its nose spearing into the empty cup holder at Harry’s knee, and a cloud of dust was kicked up on the road and came over them like smoke.

Harry got his seatbelt off and turned around.

It was Tommy. Little blond guy in the yellow hunting vest from the field. He’d let Harry shoot his rifle and here it was in his cup holder.

“You tried to kill us,” Tommy said. His teeth were small, his gums prominent.

“Just get the fuck out of my truck.”

“Okay, okay,” Tommy said as he got himself up.

“Tommy, you stupid asshole,” the other one said. “Why’d you do that?”

“Keep your mouth shut,” Tommy said. Then to Harry: “We’re climbing out, okay? Just throw me the Ruger.”

“So you can shoot me with it? Get the fuck out.”

Harry opened the door and Tommy sprang forward, squeezing himself through the cab window again and grabbed the wooden stock up once more. Harry turned and got hold of the barrel before Tommy could pull it all the way through the back window.

Tommy pulled hard, but Harry managed to joust him in the ear, scraping his jaw with the hard rubber of the rifle’s butt end. Tommy still wouldn’t let it go. Sweat was dripping



from Tommy's forehead and his yellow vest hung over his shoulder. The little guy was as strong as a cow. Keeping hold of the weapon, Harry pushed his head through the window and spit a wad of tobacco juice the size of a strawberry into Tommy's eye, and Tommy screeched and a shot was fired—shattering the glass of the passenger side window, which burst like so much water.

Harry pulled the gun back through the opening then, and he let it fall to the passenger footwell. It lay there, the business end jabbed into the lining between the dirty mat and the door. Crumbled glass was on the seat, on the cellophane bouquet wrapper, but most of it had splattered out onto the road. The ringing from the shot came into Harry's ears like a swarm of insects.

He shouted for them to get the fuck out of his truck as he held the horn down. Its far-away sound joined in some peculiar dissonance with the ringing of the fired shot, which lingered in his eardrum, and the horn's echo boomeranged strangely from the dark mountains around them.

Tommy and the bigger guy had stood themselves up in the truckbed. The dust from the gravel road was on them, and they had a scrim of dirt in the sweat around their eyes and mouths, visible in the moonlight. Both men's arms were held out, palms up, as if to say, *Do not take your foot off the brake.* They would've toppled, maybe bounced out like big sacks of corn. Harry screamed at the two of them once more, his voice coming from somebody else inside him, as if buried under a bed of soil. He kept his hand on the horn and it droned on into the darkness.

Tommy leapt out first and started to work at his eye with a finger.

“You better not hold onto that rifle. That doesn’t belong to you.”

“Step back,” Harry said, “I’ll throw it out.”

The bigger man was moaning. Harry hadn’t recognized him until now. He’d been with Tommy out in the field, shooting at empty bottles. The guy had a beer gut and a goatee, and he must have mashed his face when Harry had slammed on the brakes: a cut across his nose bled onto his chin. He had on a long white shirt and red basketball shorts. Even in the moonlight Harry could see that every part of him was mired with dust or blood.

The big guy was slow in hoisting himself out of the truck-bed, like a baby maneuvering onto furniture. He gave out an awful groan as he wrangled himself over and fell hard onto the gravel.

Harry let go of the horn then. Its empty blat faded into the valley.

The two men stood there like ghosts, gaping. The bigger one kept his hands held up, palms out.

“My cousin’s a State Trooper,” Tommy said, his gummy smile back on his face. “You’re fucked, man. I got your license plate.”

“Get away from the truck,” Harry said.

The bigger one looked right into Harry’s eyes, pleading. “Don’t fucking leave us out here, man. I didn’t do shit. I swear to god.”

With the flat of his hand, Harry gestured for them to step

back, and when they'd gotten far enough away, he reached across the gearshift, his shoulder squishing against the seat with a sinewy throb, and grabbed the weapon. The wound at his ankle—which Harry had forgotten till now—sent a ripple of wet pain through him. Both of the men moved back into the plants of the overgrown ditch, and the bigger guy sort of hopped one-footedly down into the weedy grade and then tripped, tumbling once more, and crying out.

As Tommy went over to help him up, Harry reached across and got the passenger door open, cutting his hand on a cube of glass as the last of the window crumpled out of its frame. He took up the rifle by its stock and flung it into the darkness opposite the two men.

“Tommy, you’re so screwed,” the bigger guy said, and Tommy told him shut his face as they scabbled around the back of the truck to recover the weapon.

Harry put the truck in gear and tore off, laying another lake of dust over them both. The wind gushed through the truck’s open window, and it sucked the bouquet’s cellophane wrapping off the seat, letting it out into the darkness, like a thin membrane over nothing.