My hands gripped the wheel of the 65 Impala as we made it over Rogers Pass. The last of the gas station whisky passed between us. “Bah, that’s not bad, huh,” said Raymond, clapping. His mouth slipped at words with a hollow smile. He had lost his front teeth steer wrestling earlier that spring, and his speech was slithery and filled with saliva. “It’s all right,” I said, my mind lost on the road behind me, my knuckles holding the road ahead steady.

The drive had been slower than expected. We had set out early that morning. Though the traffic was light and there wasn’t too much snow to worry about as it was still early yet, the Impala was dragging. The drag got gradually worse the higher up the pass we got. Raymond had talked around the drag enough to boil my blood. He knew not to talk shit about my Impala. But the point was clear. The Impala did drag.

I had bought the Impala the week before from Raymond’s uncle Les. Les assured me that there was nothing really wrong with it. “Tires?” I asked. “I got them last summer,” Les said. “The engine?” “Sure. Fire it up and see for yourself.” “No drag?” “No, not really,” he replied, counting the cash.

The Mission was a red-brick building where I had once lived for most of the year. A series of smaller ancillary buildings reinforced the Mission, and broken, fallow farmland covered either side of the building. Saint Mary’s River coldly wrought the edge of the Mission to the north, blocking the Mission’s expansion toward the reserve’s hoodoos, while to the south, the road to town led...
to bedlam and Christian civilization. God and Jesus aside, the Mission was dedicated to the training and production of farm workers. Such dedication required much faith in ?amak?is Ktunaxa, where winter is present or promising at least half of the year, the other cut between seasons of heat, sun, rain, thunder, and the restless cold of late spring and early autumn. A symmetry of passing lovers, not a land of monotheistic agrarians. Yet we were the soil that the Mission ground down day after day, month after month, and beyond.

Though the Impala was pushing empty, the ride down from the summit gave us reason to believe we would make it to Revelstoke to gas up. To really know your car, you have to know the tank. It tells you things that aren’t measured on the dashboard. What gas it likes, how close to empty looks like hope, how empty looks like a lost horizon. Somewhere before Revelstoke, I pulled over to take a piss and let Raymond drive for a bit. Back on the road, I rummaged around the car, looking for a map, and somehow got caught up in the various items from Les’s glovebox: a few shells for the .30-06, some fishing line, two empty packages of smokes, a 1970 Eaton’s catalogue dog-eared to ladies’ fashions, and a Department of Indians Affairs pamphlet titled “An Indian’s Guide to Farming.” The pamphlet was more of a fragment than a cohesive work, the text stained from oil and coffee. One legible page read, “An inventory of farm tools and their purposes:

- auger, used for divination and fence posts
- small hammer, for fence repair and shed construction
- handsaw, for small woodworks
- scythe, for field harvesting”

Looking through the glovebox, my mind became a plate of leftover dreams and memories. Mostly of the old farm at the Mission. Farms teach a lot about pain, how much trauma a body can take before it succumbs, and the futility of a drawn-out death. We slaughtered animals at the Mission. And, for each task, we used specific tools. Each act posed limitations.
Reliance on an instrument makes the item too important, an invitation for fallibility. A rusted saw is no good. A hammer with a snapped handle, a fracture deep in the wood but oblivious to the eye, is trouble. Too many variables. It wasn’t until I saw an eagle clutch a rabbit’s neck with its talons that I knew my own hands offered the solution.

Brother Felix’s body was in perpetual flinch. He was lean and sullen with a confused, homesick look in his eyes that really came to the fore when he smiled. That is when he looked particularly lost. When his face stopped smiling, it found that small space of emptiness it recognized as home. His shoulders had a strength commonly found in hay-bale cowboys. And, though he was not a small person, he moved around nearly silently, appearing without warning, with a persistent and foreboding calm, like a storm that never fully crested. His fingers were dark, dry, and cracked with bursts and breaches in the skin. I knew his knuckles well enough. Most of the boys did too. They were the first I met at the Mission.

“Do you remember what he looks like?” Raymond said as the headlights from an oncoming car framed his bandit eyes.

“Gupsin?” I said, jumping out of a dream with fists and terror.

“What if he had a beard now?” Raymond said, picking at the dash for his pack of Exports, his eyes on the road. “Ya, but it’s been a few years,” Raymond said, offset by a hint of what-the-fuck-you-need-a-beard.

“Would you know ‘im to see ‘im if he’d shaved?”

“I looked back to the glovebox to check on the bullets. They were still there, rattling around.

“What the hell are you talking about? Jesus? Raymond! Christ!”

“Exactly, Christ, Christ Jesus. Our lord father.” Raymond smiled. “Without a beard, you might not recognize him.”

Raymond was a crazy Indian. Everyone knew this. Back at the Mission, he was always in a good mood, didn’t complain about the chow, and was praised by Brother Felix for his folded clothes. He read everything at the Mission, from the Bible to the pantry’s cookbooks, and it was Raymond who knew when bears were near well before the musk.

“If Jezzuz shaved, and maybe got fat like Uncle Les, he might not be easy to spot,” he said with a grin of contentment, plain about the chow, and was praised by Brother Felix for his folded clothes. He read everything at the Mission, from the Bible to the pantry’s cookbooks, and it was Raymond who knew when bears were near well before the musk.

“Uncle Les,” I sighed.

“He might have a beard. Nowadays, everyone’s got one. Not just hippies,” Raymond said, pointing with his right hand for emphasis.

“Hippies,” I said.

“Ya,” Raymond replied, his fingers fiddling with radio static.

“Hippies do have beards,” I said.

“Ya, and hairy women too,” said Raymond, laughing me into a good and necessary cry.

“Not that you’d complain,” I said, shaking my head.

“Hell no! I like hairy women,” he said. Raymond eyed the rear-view mirror as an oncoming semi overtook the Impala and flanked the car in a flash of consumer goods. The wake of the load shook his grip.

“Jeez, frigging semi trucks,” Raymond said as he kept looking for a signal through the static.

I FOUGHT MY WAY into the Mission. Like everyone’s before me, my first day of school was a shit kicking. Brother Felix got the older boys to beat up Raymond and me right after we got to our dormitory. We didn’t see it coming. A door closed and the room became punches, kicks, and laughter. I worried that my pressed white-collared shirt would get stained. Ka titi had told me to keep my collar clean and dry at the Mission and I should be okay. After the first stain, I fought back. Raymond was turtled while I dragged my nails across ankles, faces, and the shine of the hardwood floor.

Every day, after morning prayers, Brother Felix would organize the punch up. This carried on for the first week until they made Raymond and me fight each other. I knocked Raymond out cold with one punch. He never held that against me.

I graduated to fighting older boys. Some were cousins from our tribe, others came from elsewhere. I got a reputation for being a tough kid. Tough enough to keep fighting even when there was no hope. There were these three brothers from Penticton who took turns beating me up. As I got older and grew into my body, they had to double team me to beat me until one day I brought the fight to them. They were swimming in Saint Mary’s when I found them. I waited until the oldest came to shore. While he towelled off, I popped up and knocked him out quick. He was the toughest of the brothers, but he didn’t know what hit him. The two others swam in to try to get me. I had a few good stones set aside, and I pelted them hard in the face and chest. By the time they came to shore, they were hoarse from shouting. I took a makeshift reed bullwhip and bloodied their backs until they were all at my feet, blubbering and knocked out. They never fucked with me again.

Felix was from somewhere around Enderby. As we drove closer to the town, Raymond and I didn’t speak of him any longer. We spoke about horses, rodeos, and a woman out in Wardner who held
a special place in her heart and trailer for young bucks like us. We never spoke of our purpose either. The mandate was more than skin deep. It was in the blood.

From what we knew, Felix wasn’t in jail. Not anymore. When you have someone in, you know who is out. And he was out. Jail stories arrive in letters and didja knows told between passing family. There was some chance he got killed shortly after he got loose. That happens just as much as going back inside. But Felix was a survivor. He adapted, no matter the circumstances.

At the Mission, when everyone else was asleep, Felix would talk to me. He’d and others started using that name too. I gave enough shit kickings that no one called me that to my face. But that was what they called me in the Mission. I hated it. And I hated him for naming me so. For taking my name and my body and returning them to me as things that belonged to him.

**W**e searched for him, for days, in a country I had only imagined. A country I could feel only in dying moments of summer, as towels dried riverside. A country he had told me of past midnight, when locations dream into spaces where horses the back. His slurping snores came quick. As much as I loved him, I hated him for his ease of sleep. I watched his stupid face, asleep, pressed into the nook of the front seat, a foal with a slipped lip. How easy it would be to place my hands over his mouth, to hold him there, to witness his awakening to the moment, to feel his shudder toward a permanent darkness, to inhabit his empty body afterward. His night farts were deadly to any dreams of murder I had. Naturally, I always slept with the window open. Only when the night was coolest could I find the space to allow my body to fully wake to its weariness. And, once there, dreams of the Mission would welcome me in fits and fidgets. No matter how dusted my denim was, I’d be sweat soaked by morning. Each night the dreams found me close to whole; I’d need a creek bath to wash the scent from my skin.

After missing the rodeo, we checked out every bar we could find. We found where Skins were gathered and where they weren’t. The King Eddy, The National, The Branding Iron. They were all bars where we were welcome. Well, mostly. It didn’t take much to feel unwelcome in them. A woman would like the wrong way I’d look at her and her old man would get pissed, or Raymond would tell a joke too bad to be funny and we’d have a fight on our hands. Sometimes we had to run, but mostly we’d stay, fight it out, and someone would buy a round after the bust up. Those beers were always best. Those laughs were always true. That’s how it went after the Mission. It still goes that way.

One night we found Raymond’s Auntie Lyla singing with a pickup band. She had taken up with a faller from Head of the Lake a few years back and looked good. We were down to our last few dollars and she could smell the road on us, so she brought us back to a lakeside spread for a few nights. Next to Lyla’s cabin was an old grey shack that had been used for canning and smoking years back. We found a half-stunk mattress in there and a good view of the lake in that beautiful country. For a while, there, we didn’t search for anything. We’d swim first thing in the morning, have some of
Lyla’s coffee, and find ourselves helping around the farm with fence post promises and barbed wire postcards. It was good living, if fleeting and borrowed.

Lyla was the only family Raymond had who didn’t ask him for money or try to stab him. That’s what it was like then. Just nuts. Lyla had known Raymond when he was a baby and saw something good in him. She was always smiling at his stories and never asked him to explain himself. Lyla didn’t say much to me, and I thought that had something to do with her knowing my old man.

She did ask to trade me her Chrysler for my Impala. Naturally, I said no. But she kept on about it with a purpose and sincerity I could not deny.

One morning, Raymond left with Lyla’s old man to deliver hay to a ranch out past Lavington. I was replacing a spark plug in the Impala when Lyla came by with a cup of coffee and offered me a smoke. The car’s radio was on, sending out a mix of static and faint signals.

“Nice car,” she said, her smoke sawing on her lips as she searched for a back-pocket lighter. I offered no reply. My hands were smudged and my throat was dry. It was the perfect moment for a coffee and a cigarette. Even if it was a Benson and Hedges.

“Does it drag?” she asked, looking at me over her Marilyn Monroe sunglasses as a willow of smoke carried her smile north.

“Does it d—” I started, getting ready to boil my blood. Shooting a look south at the lake, I said, “Only uphill.”

Lyla laughed at me, and when she laughed, her right elbow kicked out from her body like a pitcher getting ready to strike. She had a red bandana wrapped around her head, a floral halter top, lime-green shorts, and bright-pink flip-flops. She was brown and relaxed, and she looked at the engine like a hawk over a field of mice. For a while, nothing was said. The song on the radio took my mind to someplace else as I grabbed a splash of coffee and enjoyed the smoke. Seeing the hilltops as though for the first time, I ran my mind across the horizon as far south as I could and came back again to the north. When my mind came back, Lyla was leaning against the car and looking at me.

“Did you find it?”

“Find what?” I said, looking back to the hilltops for some obvious formation or animal I had missed.

“Whatever you are looking for,” she replied.

“I know what I’m looking for,” I said, turning to put my face inside the engine once more.

“You do?” She laughed. “Well, let me tell you something. What you are looking for is older than you. And older than them hills or this car.”

“Jesus,” I said. She really was Raymond’s auntie.

“Jesus’s got nothing to do with it,” she replied, sipping on her coffee. She turned toward the hills as the drone from an airplane far above crawled across the afternoon. Lyla looked into those hills for a moment and began to walk away but stopped and said, “What you are looking for is not something that can be found. It is something that can only be lost. And, when you lose it, let it go. Only then will it come back to you.”
That night, Raymond and I started the drive home. Lyla gave us some preserves and canned salmon, but the Impala was low on gas and got us only as far as Enderby. We siphoned gas from a Ford pickup parked outside a diner after closing. The town had an empty presence, like a familiar graveyard that told us to leave soon or stay a long, long while. We had just gotten back in the Impala, set on making our way north to Sicamous, when a hitchhiker came into view.


Raymond looked hard into the dark, saying nothing.

Brother Felix called out to us. He was moving slow, walking down the highway backward with his left thumb out in the wind.

“Jesus,” I said. “And Mary and Joseph,” Raymond added.

It was Felix. We crawled up the road until the high beams caught up to his frame. He had turned his back and was walking up the road with a sluggish gait that suggested drink. But it could have been a fall from a horse. It was tough to say. He wore a green flannel coat too warm for the season and brown corduroy slacks. His head was low, as though he was laughing, coughing, or saying a Hail Mary. I stopped the car for a moment until he turned to look over his shoulder and gave me that empty smile from the Mission.

I drove ahead of him and pulled the Impala over. Raymond hopped out and opened the back door. Brother Felix got in without hesitation and said, “Thank Moses.” Moses was the name of some other kid he’d taken to at the Mission. Moses had gone missing last summer, but Brother Felix must not have known that. Raymond closed the back door and got into the Impala as I turned onto the highway and headed into the night toward Sicamous.

Nothing was said. The lines on the highway were the only ones spoken. Soon, Brother Felix passed out in the back seat. He must have been drinking, though he didn’t smell at all. Not that I could notice. My knuckles held the road as Raymond kept a steady diet of Exports burning away while Felix snored, sleeping soundly in the back of the Impala.

We drove this way for a time. I couldn’t tell how long it was. Usually, Raymond would start on with some story I had heard about one too many times or we’d find some space on the radio to tell us stories we could hardly imagine—“Long Tall Sally,” “American Woman,” “A Horse with No Name.” But, on this night, on that road, with Brother Felix in the back seat, I and Raymond were quiet, attentive, and nearly invisible.

A rattle from the back of the Impala took my mind off Brother Felix. My first thought went to Uncle Les and some sleight of hand he may have played. Raymond took to my shift in focus and turned his head to listen. The rattle continued as Raymond gave a “Huh.” That was enough for me to pull the car over.

“Go take a look, Raymond,” I said. Raymond said something, but all I could hear was Brother Felix’s breath. It sounded old, like the exhalation of the glaciers between ice ages.

Darkness held the western part of Three Valley Gap. To the east, only hints
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of dawn’s truth could be seen. The sound of the roadside creek kept the night with us. In the back seat, the limp drunk body of Brother Felix remained. He looked a lot shorter than when I’d seen him last. Maybe it was his drunk slouch. Maybe it was the weight of the glacier on his flinched shoulders.

Silently, Brother Felix turned his head and said, “Raymond, check the gas cap.” Raymond was bent over looking at the back tire. Hearing Brother Felix’s voice, he popped his head up and looked into the back seat like a worried boy. I turned the car off, got out, and went to see what was going on. Sure enough, the siphon hose ran off the side of the car like a floppy arrow. Somehow, this blinded drunk knew what the story was. Raymond stood up, dusted off his pants, looked at me, and said, “Well?”

I watched him in the back seat. He didn’t move. He hardly breathed. He was content, lost, and unaware. In a fluid motion, one learned by baling hay at the Mission, I flung open the Impala’s back door, grabbed Brother Felix by the collar, and threw him into the roadside creek to sober up. His body hit the water with a clap that rang around Three Valley. For a moment, he floated on his back like the Nazarene. The body slowly turned and sank into the shallow water, finding a home among the reeds and muck.

“Fuck,” Raymond gasped as we looked into the creek for an awakening. None was forthcoming.

“Ah, hell,” I said as I hopped from the road into the shallow water below. My hands dug around for Brother Felix. I found his shoulders, grasped at his soaked flannel jacket, and pulled his head above water. I slipped my arm under his chin and dragged him to the creek’s edge, gasping for my own breath in the cold muck.

Raymond leaned over the embankment, his hand on his knees. He looked into the darkness of the ditch to see if I was okay, for any sign of life. I looked up to Raymond, my arms around Brother Felix. In that moment, Raymond started to laugh. It was slow at first but quickly turned into a real belly laugh as he pointed at me from the embankment.

“Shit, you look like a damn steer wrestler,” he said, his whole body shaking. I looked up the embankment as the crazy Indian laughed at me, his face a flurry of lips and shaking cheeks. Then I looked at myself, my forearm under Brother Felix’s chin, his body underneath me. And then I started laughing too.

“Well, Raymond, at least I still have my goddamn teeth!” I said as I released Felix and turned to lie flat on the embankment in a laughter of tears, cries, and deep sweats. Somewhere in that sound, I found I was the only one who laughed. Raymond had stopped and was watching again. Brother Felix’s knuckles had gripped the earth of the embankment beside me, his shoulders slowly rising and falling.

I climbed up the embankment. Raymond gave me a once over as I walked past him and got into the Impala. My boots sloshed into the car, the muck of the ditch caked to my legs. Raymond took one more look toward the water and then joined me in the Impala. We left Brother Felix there, soaked but alive.

When we got home, we told everyone that we had kicked the shit out of Brother Felix. The truth was that he had nothing left in him. Felix was empty and long gone before we got there. Everyone said, “Oh ya,” “That’s good,” and “Mmm hmm” when we told the story the first time. Later, some said they had forgotten Brother Felix. Others said he had died years earlier. Some found the tale an excuse to ask how much I’d given Les for that ’65 Impala, then to say I’d overpaid for such an old and broken-down machine. A few tried to trade me for rusted pickups. Nearly everyone asked how Lyla was doing. Later that summer, Raymond got killed by a semi on a walk back from town, and come winter, I sold the Impala to my cousin, who said the best cars are the ones you leave behind.

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**Nupqu ?a-kia̓m/ Troy Sebastian** is a Ktunaxa writer from ?aqaam. He lives in Lekwungen territory.