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Matt Barrett is a senior English major whose work has appeared once before in The Mercury. He is looking for a job, so if you like his story and you know anyone who will hire this potentially homeless Gettysburg grad, please give him a call.

IN NOVEMBER

MATT BARRETT

He met me outside Mac's old General Store with a couple of loose coins and a helmet strapped to the handlebars. His breath smelled of licorice and I could tell, even as I looked him in the eyes, that his teeth were all stained purple.

"Mac started working again," I said.

The dusty bells rattled against the door when we walked inside and Tim flipped his cap on backward the way Mac wore his. His cap was bright orange and had a silhouette of a buck on the front. "But you don't hunt," I said. The store was mostly empty other than Mrs. Ryan and her husband and two middle school girls slurping milkshakes at the counter.

There were boxes of candy stacked one on top of the other and a container of Twizzlers beside the cash register. Tim took a handful and peeled off one of the wrappers. "I hear you're back," he said, chewing with his mouth wide open.

Mac hoisted the front of his shirt revealing a long row of stitches just beneath the bellybutton. "Makes for a good story, don't it?" One of the middle school girls glanced over at us and Mac shot her a dirty look. "Niece and her friend," he scoffed.

"Do they know what happened?"

"They think I was stabbed," Mac whispered. He leaned closer to Tim and took him by the shoulder. "I told my sister the store was burglarized and I got knifed trying to defend myself. That way she won't keep dumping her kid on me when I'm going about my business."

"Looks like it's working."

"Next time I'll have to get a bullet in the chest," he said, raising his hands in the air.

The store was quiet other than the piercing cry from Mr. Ryan's hearing aids. "Here's all I got," Tim said, shuffling the pennies in his hand and dropping three onto the counter. We took some Butterfingers and Tostitos and a newspaper Tim said was for reading. Then we reached into the refrigerator, grabbed two cans of Coke, and were on our way.

"That place is still a dump," I said as we left. Tim put his cap on forward and kicked dirt at the side of the building.

From the parking lot two round policemen approached, one undoing the holster on his gun and mumbling something as he fingered the trigger. By his red chapped face I knew it was Wayne Hunter. He had a tattoo on the left side of his neck, in neat black ink that looked like a crucifix, and writing underneath that began with "Thou..." trickling below his collar and out of

sight. He scratched at the tattoo vigorously, like a sticker that he hoped to tear from his skin. The other officer appeared young, although I avoided looking at either one directly and could only make out the dark brown of his hair.

Tim stopped for a moment, his lips parted slightly, revealing the purple of his teeth. Without a word, we began loading the food inside our pockets and Tim slid the newspaper into the pouch of his sweatshirt. "It's not stealing if he lets us do it," I said. Coke cans fit into the sleeves of my jacket. The policemen stopped momentarily at a beat-up car that I hoped was expired or stolen.

"Let's get out of here," Tim said. "I've got some place to show you."

We pulled our bikes free of the rack and pedaled past Abe's Dairy Farm and the Sunoco down on Spruce. First we stopped at Tim's uncle's house. He said it would only take a couple of minutes and I should wait with the bikes. The front of the house was rotting away; long peels of paint hung loosely to the sides and mold stretched to the second floor windows. Its gutters were reddened with rust. I figured it was the type of place where I could get away with pissing, but before I finished, Tim came sprinting back to me, sweaty and huffing. He squatted down for a moment, his hair on end and skin shining red. A single Twizzlers slipped from his sweatshirt. He buried his right hand behind his back and swayed rhythmically with each embellished breath.

"We should keep going," he said. As he stood up, I saw him slip something into his pocket.

Kicking up the bike stand, Tim started racing down the street, wobbling slightly as the rusted chain clipped the bottom of his pant legs. As he shifted into a higher gear, his helmet slipped from the handlebars and into the gutter. "Leave it," he said and together we headed down Walnut Street, past a doe and her fawn pacing carefully between the trees. The doe looked up and eyed us warily, maybe at the sight of Tim's bright orange hat, and appeared to step toward us, as if there was something she wanted to say. Then we passed Rhomer's Pond where an eight-year-old from Ferndale, Ronny Littleton, had drowned in June while swimming with his friends. There was a wooden cross by the bank of the pond and bouquets of flowers that had withered to shades of brown. If we continued to the end of Walnut, we would reach an intersection with Main Street, the only road in Rodney with two yellow lines running down the middle. Main Street led to the center of town and to the new high school, where we would graduate in May.

But Tim turned down a gravel path, through thick woods with "No Hunting" signs nailed to the trees. The path was unnamed, as far as I could tell. Occasionally Tim would glance over his shoulder to check that I was still close behind and a smile would break across his skinny face each time he saw me following his lead. Puddles from last week's rain littered either side

of the path, soaking the bottoms of our jeans as we tried unsuccessfully to swerve around them. The back of Tim's sweatshirt was already mottled with mud. "Do you know where we're going?" I asked him. An old, abandoned trailer hid amongst a row of bushes to the right of the path.

"I got a good sense of direction," he said.

A plastic bag, damp and heavy from the rain, lay in the middle of the road with an empty water bottle beside it. In solid red lettering the bag said "APEX," a chain of grocery stores that had spread to Rodney roughly three years ago. Moby's Market, a family-owned store that sold local farmers' produce and homemade bread and jam, was forced to close within a year after Apex opened, leaving Tim's mom without work. She had served as some kind of cashier and stocked shelves at the market for nearly twenty years, but after it shut down, she, along with certain members of the Moby family, applied for work at the Apex. For a little over a year, she'd been working full-time as a bagger. "Better to be a bagger than a beggar," she'd joke. Tim rode his bike over the bag, leaving tire marks across the logo.

"My mom ran into Mrs. Ryan the other day," Tim said, turning his head toward me. "The old lady said she's been praying for us. She said she knows what we've been going through, and she's seeing to it that we receive some help."

A cool breeze swept through the trees and I pulled the hood of my jacket tighter around my neck. "What did your mom say?" I asked.

"Nothing, she just kept on walking." Tim pushed down on the top of his hat as the breeze tried tearing it from his head. "But just as she was almost out of earshot, Mrs. Ryan called out and said, 'Something good is coming to you, I've made sure of it!' She's got one hell of a nerve thinking we need her prayers to make something right for ourselves."

"I think she needs to start praying for her husband," I said. "He looks like the walking dead."

There was a clearing in the woods, and we met an intersection with Limekiln Pike. Limekiln was paved and much wider than the path. I pedaled quickly to get beside Tim and we rode past a barren stretch of field where corn would grow high in the summer. Beyond the field was a thin line of trees that separated one plot of land from another. "Even if her prayers did come true, I wouldn't want God taking responsibility for our good fortune," Tim said. "My mom doesn't need any men in her life trying to make a change."

A pick-up truck with its headlights on approached us in the other lane, and I tapped my brakes to fall behind Tim. It was getting dark earlier those days and the sun was already setting behind the trees. The leaves looked red in the sunset and the grass was a bright kind of orange.

The air smelled of something vaguely familiar, like cinnamon I thought, as we passed two young boys kicking a ball back and forth. I asked Tim if he smelled it too, but he ignored me or didn't hear and instead

answered, "It's going to rain again tonight. My mom says this month is going to set some kind of record."

It wasn't much longer before Tim stopped his bike. He put the brakes on quickly, stopping all at once, maybe to create a more dramatic effect. There was a new cast iron fence about ten feet off the road that ran for what looked like a quarter mile. The entryway was still open, with a big white sign that said "No bikes and No dogs." Tim wasn't one for breaking rules that weren't worth breaking, so he propped his bike against the side of the fence and motioned for me to follow him in. The sun had dipped below the trees, leaving a hazy mix of light and dark between us.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen the cemetery. I would pass it every day on the way to school in the early hours before sunrise. It was always eeriest that time of morning, especially after a thick frost had blanketed the ground. But the reason Tim brought me to the cemetery—and I suspected it prior to him saying anything—was because his grandfather had been buried there, before he ever had a chance to meet him. Sometimes Tim would fill up entire conversations about his grandfather, mostly with negative, aggressive thoughts like he'd been harboring some kind of grudge for years. Supposedly his grandfather hit it big in the newspaper business, making all sorts of money that never trickled down to his children's pockets. He died suddenly one day, without a will or anything for the sake of his family. Tim's mom said the family's money was buried with the grandfather, and I always suspected that Tim took this literally.

"What's your plan?" I asked him. We made our way through deep puddles toward the center of the cemetery, past a family mourning over a small grave. Soon they left a bouquet of red and white flowers in the mud and pressed their lips to their palms and their palms to the headstone and then filed back inside their car and headed down the road to continue with their lives.

Tim didn't answer me when I asked him if he had a plan. I suspected that he had no plan at all. It would make sense that he didn't. He kept on walking toward the center of the graveyard, shuffling his hand inside his pocket like whatever he'd taken from his uncle's place was of the utmost importance. I watched the way he'd grab at his pant legs and then glance in my direction, as if to remind me that there was something he held that was out of my reach. It was a way of moving me forward, towards him, even if his pocket held nothing at all. Now that the sun had almost completely set, I could hardly read the expression on his face.

I had seen him pull off this act before, mostly in the week after Moby's shut down and his mom had lost her job. She had spent the week on the couch, Tim said, promising him each morning before he went to school that she would look for work—but the longer she waited, the longer they had to live without any source of money. He decided to go to Mac's one day and told him that he needed to borrow a uniform that the workers would

wear in order to convince his mom that he had a paying job. When he went home later that afternoon, dressed in his brand new uniform, his mom nearly broke down in tears at the sight of him. She thought she had seen her son accomplish something that she was too afraid to attempt herself. I always thought that Tim had inspired his mom to turn her life in a better direction, and I congratulated him when she took a job at Apex the following week.

For a while, his mom was happy, or at the very least, had acted happy. But it wasn't long before Tim stopped seeing it as I had. He came to realize that he had not inspired his mom to take a job. At the sight of him wearing a uniform, his mom had become overcome with guilt. Nothing would have pleased her more than to open her own store one day, just like Moby's, but she knew that this dream had already been lost. She was living little more than a lie at Apex, hardly different than Tim's employment at Mac's.

"My grandfather was buried with the family's money," Tim said, stopping at a small grave covered in lichen. The name on the headstone was worn down and smooth and the dates of his life were hidden beneath the growth. I figured Tim must have stopped at the wrong grave—it was dark after all—and we hadn't brought a flashlight. It was too small to be for someone important, too decayed for the person Tim said his grandfather was. But he had visited the grave as a child and was convinced that this was the one. His mom used to take him there to pray and they'd kneel beside the headstone, reaching out to God, I suppose, that something in their lives would change.

He told me that he didn't believe in praying anymore because God never did anything to help his family. If you really wanted to talk to God, he said, you had to press a gun to His head and show Him that you're not afraid to shoot.

"I think we should dig him up," Tim concluded.

"Who?"

"Who do you think?" He put his foot on the blank headstone.

"God?"

"What do you mean 'God'?"

"He's on my mind, I guess."

"He's got nothing to do with this," he said.

A pick-up truck bounded down the road playing a country-western song that echoed across the graveyard. Tim pushed his hardest against the headstone, leaning his weight into its base. His feet dug into the ground, sinking deeper beneath the surface. I joined him, if for nothing more than to follow his lead.

"I've heard stories," Tim said, breathing heavily as we pushed together, "That he walked around with a cane made of solid gold just to prove he was the richest guy in a building. He didn't even have a limp—that's the kind of person he was." He stopped pushing to regain his breath and then looked around for something to dig with. "One night he was

walking up the steps and—this is what my mom tells me—he didn't lift his foot high enough and fell right on top of his cane. Seeing as it was gold and all, it cracked his ribs right down the middle and he died before anyone could find him."

"I thought you said it was a heart attack."

"That's a rumor too, but it's not a story like this one."

The headstone wouldn't budge and Tim found nothing that could be used to dig. He was covered in mud, all the way up to his chin. His body shivered a little but he didn't seem to mind. The newspaper he took from Mac's was still in the pouch of his sweatshirt and he ripped it out, throwing it at the ground. With his left foot, he pressed it deep into a puddle until it sunk beneath the mud. "I guess that's pretty ironic," he said as he watched the newspaper disappear. "Almost forgot I had it, too."

He crouched down for a moment, swaying back and forth on his toes. His hand went through his hair a couple of times and when he looked back at me, some of the puddle water had collected around his eyes. "It's not so bad stealing," he said, wiping his nose. "It's not so bad like people say. Not all the time. Not when it makes her happy."

I wanted to crouch down next to him, but I thought the closer I got to the mud the further I'd sink. "I don't think it's so bad," I answered.

"Not the way people say. Stealing doesn't make me a thief."

"I don't think so, Tim. I don't think you're a thief."

"Not all the way," he said. "Not wrong all the way." He looked at his hands and both of them were black with mud. "How did we end up like this?"

"I don't think we're doing much wrong."

"Not you," he said, wiping both hands on his pant legs. "Every day my mom comes home disappointed with what she's doing. Every day she says she's 'compromising her principles'—and for what? She used to be happy, you know. She used to think she was making a difference back at Moby's."

I thought about what Mrs. Ryan had said and asked him if she had anything to do with this.

"My mom's been praying for the same thing," he said. "I can hear her in her room at night, wishing for something better in the morning, like some kind of miracle waiting by her bedside. Something that she wouldn't have to work so hard for, something she could just take. Praying's not so different from stealing, after all." His lips shuddered and he tried to force a smile. "I listen to her from my room every night. And I've been trying my best to make her wishes true. But sometimes it scares me to think I'm the only one who's listening."

He put his head down and buried it between his arms, his eyes closed. For a moment or two, he didn't say a word and he cupped his hands together. Leaning my weight against a tall headstone, I eased myself down

toward him.

"Sometimes I think the only way she'll be happy is if I'm different. That's what I get from her praying. She's hoping for change—any kind of change—she doesn't specify what kind she wants. I know her better than whoever she's praying to."

"What do you plan on doing, Tim?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said, shifting his attention toward his grandfather's grave. "Look at me. Trying to raise the dead for some kind of answers." He wiped his face with the bottom of his sweatshirt. "I think I've been digging in the wrong place all along." A smile nearly broke across his face. "I gotta change something. Something's gotta go different."

A kind of deep, purposeful silence came between us. In the summer months and the late days of spring we could go for minutes without talking, and the insects and the wind would break that silence—and the trees and the birds and the young kids yelling. But in November, it got really quiet if there was nothing left to say. An intentional kind of quiet. That's how I figured a car was coming toward us, from the same direction we rode our bikes. There wasn't a single sound to interrupt it.

"Do you hear that?" I asked. My face must have shown fear because Tim stood up quickly and shot me a questioning look. Then he turned his head down the road, and together we listened to an engine with an all too familiar sound.

Perhaps it was because of the cold or the fog or the damp chill of darkness—or maybe it was because of the mud, the way it swallowed us up to our ankles, clinging like freshly laid cement—that we kept standing there, waiting, even as Wayne's car approached. We could tell it was Wayne's car when it came within half a mile, maybe further, down the road. There was no mistaking his car with another. Its engine revved violently, the siren sounded mean, and its red flashing lights announced to everyone that it controlled the road. By no means was Wayne sneaking up on us. He wasn't trying to pounce on our backs when our heads were turned the other way. That wouldn't be like Wayne. He gave us plenty of warning before he pulled up to the cemetery gate, flipping on the car's siren once or twice, as if to scare us into running. He even slowed down before coming to a complete stop, as if he hoped we'd scurry away, off into the woods like two escaped prisoners who've just seen the warden. I would have liked it that way, too. But instead Tim and I stood there, exchanging empty glances as if we hoped the other would decide what to do next. We could have run or hidden, we could have shot at the car—if only we had something to shoot with—we could have been selfish and forgotten about "we," we could have left the slower one of us behind. But we couldn't decide on anything of this at the time. We remained motionless, eyeing each other blankly like two complete strangers who did not speak the same language.

Wayne's car was parked by the entrance of the cemetery; its swirling

red lights still spinning rhythmically after he closed the door behind him. He played with the strap on his holster, undoing the gun, and he raised his weapon upward to the sky. It looked like he was about to fire; instead, he brought it back down, cupped firmly in his right hand, and pointed it somewhere near our feet. He strode toward us menacingly, breathing heavier the closer he came.

As I turned my eyes to Tim, it seemed that he was in the middle of deep contemplation, the way his gaze remained focused almost solely on Wayne's gun. Inconspicuously he reached inside his pocket—the same pocket where he had hidden something of his uncle's—and left his hand there, with the other dangling quietly at his side. There wasn't a sign of fear anywhere on his face, just an unwavering determination that I couldn't comprehend at the time. A breeze picked up behind us as Wayne came within a few yards, his hair blowing to one side, holding the gun more toward Tim's ankles than my own. "You know you can't be here," he said, scratching the chapped tattoo on his neck. "I've told you before you can't be here." He stared directly at Tim. But Tim offered no response. He just aimed his vacant eyes directly at the gun.

My feet had slipped further into the mud and I felt a cool liquid dripping down my ankles. The ends of my jeans were almost completely hidden. If I continued to sink, I wondered how far it would be before I reached a coffin. Tim's hand shifted slowly inside his pocket.

Wayne didn't say anything about freezing or putting our hands up like I thought he would. The other officer, the younger one with dark brown hair, got outside the cop car and watched carefully from afar. He fidgeted beside the headlights, reaching for his gun, then thinking otherwise, scrambling for the walkie-talkies—until he stopped again, gathered himself, and fixed his arms across his chest. A quick burst from the breeze carried a plastic bag across the cemetery, rolling slowly before the headlights, with bold red lettering imprinted on the front.

"Your uncle called," Wayne said. "Told me he's missing something."

Tim shifted his attention halfway between Wayne and me, so that he was looking at Limekiln Pike. His hand stopped moving inside his pocket and he maintained his gaze on the road, as if he was waiting for something to appear out of the darkness. His bright orange cap was tilted upward toward the sky, resting loosely on the back of his head so that even the slightest movement would likely knock it off. The smell of something rotting lurked across the cemetery.

"Take your hand out of your pocket," Wayne finally said. "Raise them high above your head." Tim looked back at him but did not move his hand. The expression on his face shifted, from one of unwavering determination to a kind of subtle reflection. A biting pain struck me in the core of my stomach at the sight of their standoff. What Tim held in his pocket had suddenly become clear. "Tim," I quivered. "Tim"—but I could

say nothing more than his name. My throat felt like a sock had been pushed deep down inside, and with one last gasp, again: "Tim—"

It was then that Tim freed his hand from his pocket. Swinging his arm upward toward Wayne, two shots were immediately fired. As I stood there, motionless, my friend tumbled theatrically to the ground, and I saw his uncle's gun gripped firmly in the palm of his hand.

Between heavy but restrained breaths, Tim released a guttural cry as his body tightened against the ground. Lying beside his grandfather's grave, he tried shifting his weight to one side and his breathing quickened as he grabbed his shoulder. He was turned in my direction, and as I hoisted my feet from the ground, I began moving towards him. Where he landed, he was no more than a few steps to my right.

Wayne met me by Tim's side just after I crouched beside him. With both of his hands, he began applying pressure to a spot near Tim's chest. But he had shot him twice, and my friend's shirt was already stained with a cool, thick liquid that felt different than the mud and water around him. Wayne's hands became darkened as he pressed against him, his wedding ring muddied, and the veins in his upper arm tore through his skin the harder he pushed. The second officer appeared from behind us, shouting for back-up on the walkie-talkie, using God's name a lot as if he were speaking to Him on the other end.

As Tim's breathing continued to get faster, it also grew fainter, until it became so heavily strained that the act alone sounded painful. "You'll be ok," I said to him over and over. "Nothing's going to happen." He focused his eyes on mine as I spoke, and I repeated exactly what I had already said, nodding my head rhythmically to match the sound of my voice. But the more I recycled through these same words, sifting through these same thoughts, I began to find myself stuck in some kind of cycle, until the words themselves sounded hollow to my ears. Flashing red and blue lights—alternating back and forth with the same consistency as my words—illuminated Limekiln Pike as an ambulance found its way beside the cop car. The young officer ran toward them nervously and shouted something I was not able to hear.

There were no final words for Tim. I didn't think it was right for him not to say anything more. If only he could have brought himself to speak—couldn't he have at least tried to make a sound?—then maybe I would have found the right words in return. His mouth hung open, silent, with a dark shade of purple reflected in the blinking lights. "You're gonna get some help," I said. "Just hold on. It's almost here." But it was already too late. As the paramedics flooded the cemetery, Tim's breathing slowed until he released a final feeble sigh.

I could feel Wayne's cool, wet hands slide around me from the back, moving me further from my friend so that the others could try to save him. He whispered something to me, something to keep me following him, and

I did, as he gripped me by the arm to guide me past the graves. "We can't stay here," he said. Tim's body looked skinny, frail, curled up tight against himself. Wayne directed me away, his hand fidgeting around the buckle of his belt like he was reaching for something but did not know what. The second officer was talking on the walkie-talkie again, this time more calmly. As Wayne and I reached the police car, the smell of cinnamon collected faintly at my nose, as if it had followed me from the road. Perhaps one of the paramedics was wearing perfume.

"We have to go," Wayne said, opening the car door. Tim's body was placed onto a stretcher, hoisted off the ground with his arms spread out, dangling over either side.

There were voices from far off, screaming voices, the sounds of children running. We would head in that direction, down Limekiln Pike and onto Ferry, past Laura's Bakery, and make a right onto Main Street, where the lights would show our way through town, and past the spot where Moby's once stood—but we'd keep on past it, not like old times when there was something good to eat—and there wouldn't be a whole lot to say, we'd both know there was somewhere else we'd have to be. And Mac's would be closed tomorrow, for one reason or another, he'd have his excuses, but it would only be for a day or two, and he'd be open again by the weekend like nothing had happened at all.