

Bruce chewed on the business end of his ballpoint pen as diagnostics flashed across his screen. He shook his head in disagreement with the data and gripped tightly onto a foam stress ball shaped like a brain. Opposite him, Larry Lowell tapped a fat, ringed finger onto the armrest of his seat and sucked on the leftover sinews from an overcooked steak still wedged between his teeth. The stewardess walked by to mind them, but Larry waved her off and then watched her as she retreated to the rear of Autodyn's private jet. When she disappeared behind the bulkhead, Larry leaned forward and snapped the laptop shut.

"How am I going to explain this, Bruce?" Larry said. "It nearly killed the guy."

"I don't know. It's all in here"—Bruce tapped the top of the computer—"the safety protocols. It's all here. It should have shut down."

"Should have' doesn't buy me shit. Doesn't buy me an inch down the fucking road toward cleaning up this fucking mess."

"Larry, I'm trying my best here."

"I know, I know. Daddy didn't leave any notes."

Bruce leaned back in his chair, took off his reading glasses, and started cleaning them with a microfiber cloth. He looked out the window at the plains of Kansas beneath them. Larry tried to excise the stubborn food particle with the nail of his pinky finger.

There are certain kinds of termite which are known to cultivate fungus in much the same way humans grow crops. Deep in their mounds are combs or "fungus gardens" where the worker termites deposit the material that the fungus grows on and, once cultivated, they feast on the edible parts. The symbiont has evolved to completely depend on the termites, and the termites to depend on the symbiont.

The world of termites always intrigued Bruce. He was fascinated by the way they organized themselves into castes and colonies, the way they battled like feudal lords, hardened their fortifications, raised legions of warriors to defend the homeland. Down on the ground beneath them, the front range rose up like a termite mound. There was something to it, Bruce thought.

Unfortunately the insect brain is too plastic, too simple, evolutionarily-speaking, to be of any real use.

"I'm sorry," Larry said, "I'm just pissed off."

"Don't worry about it," Bruce said.

"So we mea culpa. They have minds of their own—that's what they bought them for, anyway—and once in a while they get the wrong idea. Mea culpa. We'll push an update as soon as possible."

"They don't have minds."

"Then why the fuck did it try to kill the foreman?"

"It's an earth-mover. It was moving earth. I'll know why exactly when we get the reasoning module out and I can take a look."

"Bruce, I can't sell a excavator that tries to kill people."

"I know. I'll fix it."

Bruce pried open the front of the machine which now sat dead in a pool of water. It had dug a trench twenty yards long, cutting clean through a water main and, when he attempted to get in its way, nearly through the foreman. In order to stop it before it got to the sewage line, he grabbed the night watchman's rifle and took "took care of it" so they were told.

“Turns out,” Larry said, “the foreman was a trick shooter in a Texas rodeo. Moved back to Denver to take care of his mother.”

Bruce looked through the bullet hole on the pried-off panel.

“Hell of a shot,” Bruce said. “Right through the core processing unit.”

“Bricked?”

“No. I’ll be able to get some data out.”

“Some?”

“Enough to figure out what was going on. Hell of a shot, though.”

Bruce tugged out a small, silver tube and cut through the wires feeding into it with his house key. Larry held out his hand and Bruce grabbed it, helping him climb out of the trench. The excavator sank deeper into the mud like a dinosaur in a tar pit, a worthless mechanical skeleton now that its brain had been removed.

Elephants are known to mourn their dead. They spend time grieving over the body, caressing it, smelling it, and in some cases even covering it up with soil as if to bury it. Bruce nearly suggested burying the excavator, but caught himself. There was no need to mourn a machine.

“Let’s get out of here,” Bruce said, “it’s freezing.”

Back at the hotel, Bruce connected the module to his laptop and began poring over the data.

“I’m getting the lobster,” Larry said from his single bed, “what do you want?”

“Lobster?”

“Room service.”

“Oh. You know it’s not true, that lobsters mate for life? They’re really solitary creatures. They only stick together for a few weeks while they mate and then go their separate ways.”

“Room service, Bruce.”

“I’ll have a caesar salad. They don’t scream, either—that’s a myth.”

Bruce dug through system logs and set off diagnostic routines. What had started the impulse to dig the trench? And what had stopped it from shutting off when the foreman got in the way? The safety shutdown had never failed before—not as long as Bruce led the program, anyway. His father, Hiram, pioneered the field and Bruce studied underneath him more closely than any of his pupils. He was the obvious successor, though it came sooner than anybody expected. Least of all, Bruce.

The plan-forming matrix unraveled into the concrete decisions of the kind an excavator makes, which, for the most part, were in figuring out how to excavate. Sometimes it requested fuel, sometimes it got stuck and needed help, but mostly it excavated. Bruce had gone over a hundred thousand of these same kinds of log back in Delaware and he quickly traced the patterns that arose as the machine broke down its assignment into tasks and then into movements and then commands—and he knew when there was a drift. There was a drift. Normally when there was a drift it was because some task had gotten stuck, gone unfulfilled for too long, but stayed relevant for whatever reason and itched at the back of its memory banks until it became so anxious to achieve it that it overpowered other tasks. “Anxious” in a mechanical sense, like kinetic energy, in the sense of managing priorities, like any computer does. They had gone to great lengths to avoid any deadlock conditions, but once in a while these issues still popped up.

“Caesar salad,” Larry said, handing over a plastic container.

“Thanks.”

“How’s it look?”

“There’s a no-win condition in here somewhere. This model was still running SWALLOW 0.4 and we hadn’t worked out all the kinks yet, then. That puts the last update six months ago.”

“Those kinks were in the combat drones. Not in excavators. We never had any kinks in the excavators.”

“I know. I’ll fix it.”

Larry put on the complimentary bath robe over his polo shirt and laid back down on his single. He sat his lobster dish down on a bed tray and dug in with his hands.

“You know,” Larry said between mouthfuls, “room service is all on Autodyn. You should get something more than a salad otherwise it’s a waste.”

“All the room service in the world and yet only one room for the two of us.”

“You know what they’re like.”

Larry’s cellphone belted a rock ballad from somewhere deep in his bag.

“God damn it.”

His hands were covered in butter grease which he wiped on the bath robe and moved the bed tray off his legs and onto the nightstand. He unzipped his bag and rifled through for his phone.

“Hello? You’re shitting me. We’ll be right there—and don’t shoot it this time! We’ll be right there. Bruce, we’ve got another one. Let’s go.”

Their \$36-per-day sedan tore onto the highway which at that late hour was nearly empty of traffic except for the sixteen-wheelers which Larry wove through like a street racer. Bruce clung to the overhead handle and slammed his foot into the phantom break which did nothing to slow down the rental. He tried to recall the number on his life insurance policy.

Larry leaned forward over the wheel. “They said this one broke out at some point in the night. It’s heading off to who-knows-where. You don’t think it’s a hacker?”

“Maybe,” Bruce said, “but it’s a closed system. You’d have to get under the hood and at that point, you’re better off tearing out all the expensive parts and selling those piece-by-piece. To unpack our software, find an exploit, inject your own routines, get it to break out and travel to a specific destination—I find it unlikely.”

“I bet it’s a hacker.”

Larry pulled off the highway onto a frontage road.

“You worked with my father?” Bruce asked.

“Sort of. I was coming up in the department at the time. I met him once or twice because my boss thought he’d make a Colonel Sanders out of him—you probably don’t remember this. In the beginning, they wanted Hiram’s face on the side of every tractor. Of course he hated it and wanted to focus on his work. Boss handed me a camera and told me to do whatever it took to get a picture of him working in his lab so I did whatever it took—I dressed up like a janitor, waited for six hours, and finally got my shot. Hiram was so pissed he smashed the camera and to this day the sales team are banned from the lab. I’m serious. Rule 16-dash-B-dash-five—look it up. That was me. Anyway, Hiram’s face ended up testing bad with the farmers. They thought he looked smug. I didn’t see him much after that.”

They took a dirt road which forked off into the flat plains east of Denver. An honest-to-god tumbleweed tumbled by across their high-beams. Bruce had always thought they only existed in

cartoons. The red and blue lights of a police beacon lit up a farmstead down the road. The cop car was following about fifty yards behind an Autodyn combine harvester, heading eastward at its top speed of 16 mph. They pulled up beside the cop car and rolled down their windows.

“You the boys from the company?” the cop asked over the crunch of dry dirt.

“That’s us,” Bruce called over from the passenger side, “what happened?”

“Got a call that some maniac was driving a combine over an airstrip so I tracked it down but it turns out to be one of those, you know, robots, and I call back to my chief and he says this isn’t the first one and he’ll get in contact with the company to send some boys out to figure it out, so I’ve been tailing this thing for about two hours now. I never ticketed a robot before—I suppose I’ll have to give the ticket to you fellas.”

Bruce looked over Larry who shrugged.

“I suppose so,” Bruce said. “Did you try to stop it?”

“Well I don’t know much about these robot things—I gave it a verbal warning: ‘stop the vehicle’, ‘you’re breaking the law’, that kind of thing, but it didn’t seem to do anything and I felt pretty stupid talking to a robot like that so I backed off to here and like I said I’ve just been tailing this thing for about two hours now.”

“Alright, we’re going to get closer and hit the shutoff.”

Larry broke away from the police car and inched toward the combine. Even though it was a snail’s crawl for a police chase, Bruce nervously watched the ground whip by underneath them. Their headlights lit up the sleek, white body of the combine and Bruce scanned it for the system lights. All green. No malfunction, no motor stuck running.

“Get me in closer,” Bruce said.

Larry’s tongue firmly pressed against his upper lip as he lightly tapped the gas. Bruce stuck his head out the open window and reached for the side of the harvester. His fingertips grazed it. He grabbed onto the overhead handle and leaned further out the window. Larry grabbed the back of his sports coat. Bruce braced himself against the runaway machine, wedged now between the two vehicles. He groped against the body for the maintenance panel and flipped it open. He unscrewed a plastic cover, got his finger into the nook, and hit the hard reset switch.

“I got it! Slow down!”

Larry pulled Bruce back into the cabin and slammed on the brake.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” Larry said.

Bruce slowly got his breathing under control. Both men leaned back in their chairs and wiped sweat from their foreheads. Larry was soaked through. The combine rolled to a halt in front of them. Its lights all blinked out. Bruce looked at Larry’s sweat-drenched, beaming face and started to laugh and Larry started to laugh at Bruce’s laugh and then the cop tapped on the window and handed Larry the ticket. Trespassing on federal property. Court date in 30 days.

Back at the hotel, Bruce walked out of the bathroom having showered and brushed his teeth to find Larry watching the morning news. The sun had come up, but he’d expected to pull an all-nighter anyway.

“They’re talking about us,” Larry said, “the angle they’re going for is ‘world’s slowest police chase’ which is a crime against journalism, but they haven’t mentioned Autodyn yet. The suits will be happy about that.”

“Your turn.”

Larry tossed him the remote.

Bruce turned off the TV and sat down with his laptop and scrolled back through the diagnostics for the combine harvester. He’d found a similar drift pulling its priorities off to some other goal—other than combine harvesting, that is—just like the excavator. Some rogue thought lodged itself deep in the memory bank and refused to be removed until its priority coefficient got so high that it forced the system to deal with it. The task queue overflowed with one thing: go east. Bruce figured if the excavator had managed to get out of its pit, it probably would have gotten into a similar state.

The more he looked at it, the more a hack stood out as a serious possibility. Not a hack as much as a virus which may have always been in the code, waiting for the right moment to trigger a feedback loop that overrides all other tasks, all safety protocols, just, for what, just to create chaos? To tank Autodyn’s stock? It was hard to imagine anybody could have the knowledge or the skill to do that—Bruce had been neck-deep in the codebase for years now and barely understood it himself. Well, Bruce thought, his father could have done it.

Larry ran out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, still sopping wet.

“Bruce! I got it figured out!”

“Christ, Larry, could you put some clothes on first?”

“You said it was SWALLOW 6, right?”

“I did.”

“When we were computerizing them, grabbing the neural meshes, we weren’t one-hundred percent sure which part was responsible for their sense of direction. We knew the general area, but we weren’t one-hundred percent sure.”

“There was some trial and error.”

“A lot of dead birds.”

“What’s your point?”

“The bird, this barn swallow, sat in the lab for how many months watching how many of his brothers and sisters get hauled off to never return? I’m serious! I think somewhere in its tiny bird brain is a desire for revenge.”

“They don’t have desires, Larry. They’re not animals.”

Larry scratched his newly-grown five-O-clock shadow.

“It seemed so smart in the shower, but now that I say it out loud. Birds don’t hold grudges. Stupid.”

He retreated back into the bathroom.

Birds don’t hold grudges—but, actually, some do. Crows were known to recognize faces and understand when a certain human had a pattern of behavior that they didn’t like. Not only that, but they were known to pass that information along to other crows. Fascinating creatures—frighteningly intelligence—Hiram had studied them closely, though he never found the right use for them. But barn swallows weren’t crows. They were simple birds and Bruce thought it extremely unlikely that anywhere deep inside the quarter of a cortex responsible for finding north there was some spark of impulse for revenge.

Larry walked out of the bathroom, clothed this time, and laid back down on his single bed.

“Pass me the remote,” he said.

He turned the TV back on.

“...total gridlock on I-25, it looks like some autonomous vehicles went haywire overnight and are clogging up the highway. We’ve got Donald Pike reporting live for us on the street. What do you see, Don?”

“Shit,” Larry said.

“Thanks, Alice. I’m here overlooking exit 44 where it appears like a couple dozen Autodyn construction robots are seemingly trying to navigate their way across, completely blocking both sides of traffic. Officers have so far been unsuccessful in their attempts to disable the machines. There’s maybe six or seven different types of vehicle, all trying to get across the road here. They seem to be acting in a herd, almost like a migrating herd of bison. I’m sure Autodyn will have a lot of explaining to do. Back to you, Alice.”

“Shit,” Larry said.

Larry dug into his bag for his phone and scrolled through the hundreds of messages and missed calls.

“On vibrate.”

“Shit,” Bruce said, “they’re migrating.”

For the second time in 48 hours, Autodyn’s private jet landed on the tarmac at Denver International Airport. Rachel O’Neil descended onto the runway. Her aviator shades reflected Larry’s face back at him.

“Killer.” Larry nodded and straightened his back.

“Lowell. I’ve got the ag-sec doing back-flips onto the beltway and the Colorado D.O.T. stuffing my inbox with parking tickets, legal wants to take them to the supreme court, stock price is down eighteen percent, c-suite wants somebody’s head on a platter, and meanwhile it’s radio silence from the ground. What the hell is going on?”

She walked off toward the jet bridge and the two men hurried after her, trying to match her prodigious stride. Larry gave a performative cough and nodded to Bruce.

“Well, we,” Bruce said, “in so many words, we believe they’re trying to migrate for the winter.”

“Migrate. Who are you?”

“Bruce Gardner. Lead on the integration team.”

“Hiram’s wunderkind. Go on.”

“We’ve traced it back to the SWALLOW release, it seems like when we built up the directionality mesh, we inadvertently included an instinct—it’s a breakthrough, really, we’d never done anything like that even on purpose—somewhere in there was encoded the simple instruction: when the temperature drops, migrate. There was a cold snap yesterday.”

“Is it labor day already?”

“Last Monday, sir,” Larry said.

Rachel halted, turned on her heel, and grabbed Bruce by the shoulder. She lowered her sunglasses and locked eyes with him. Piercing, crystal blue.

“Do we need to recall?”

Bruce looked to Larry who shrugged helplessly.

“Don’t look at him, look at me. Do we need to recall?”

“I don’t believe so. We should only need to roll back to an earlier release. DELPHI should be far enough.”

She pushed her glasses back up.
“Good. You’ll need to repeat that in front of congress.”

Autodyn dispatched an army of techs to track down and roll back every machine they ever made and wipe off any trace of the directionality update. The ticker price took a second nose-dive when the congressional hearing was broadcast and the whole country listened to Bruce explain that they’d used the neural clustering of barn swallows to give their autonomous vehicles a sense of direction so that combat drones wouldn’t need a GPS receiver. Picketers set up camp outside Autodyn headquarters, most of whom protested the deaths of animals in their research and the weaponization of their nature, the cynical abuse of the tools evolution devised for more beautiful purposes. Bruce didn’t necessarily disagree. Hiram had refused to participate in any kind of weapons program, but the day he died they started one up and none of the researchers left at the department stood up against it.

What Bruce did disagree with were the hippies and college kids who took to breaking into construction sites and farms and “liberating” the machines like they were chained up circus animals. Every time the tractor or backhoe inevitably returned to its spot and so gradually those incidents tapered off. They didn’t understand the difference between the brain as a mechanism, as a tool for finding patterns and forming plans, and as a thinking, feeling organ—the galaxy in between sentience and software. Neither did the congressmen, but they were loath to kneecap one of the Pentagon’s new favorite contractors so Autodyn got off with a slap on the wrist.

The whole episode past and the executives were happy enough that their stock price had begun climbing once again. A handful of Bruce’s friends in academia, some of which studied under Hiram with him, disappeared from his life after everything which came to light, but other than that he returned to his normal routine.

Larry stopped by Bruce’s office and dropped an old photograph into his lap.

“I was looking through some papers trying to come up with ideas for the spin—they have me working overtime to find a way to get this all on our side—and anyway you remember how I told you that my first job here was to get a photo of your dad? This one we got from your grandmother. You’re in it.”

Bruce put on his reading glasses and held up the photo to his lamp. Hiram sat on the steps of a cabin with Bruce on his lap who couldn’t have been more than two years old. A floppy-eared basset hound lounged on the porch behind them. Moths swarmed an electric lantern hanging above the door. Hiram smiled and squinted at the same time, wrinkling his nose in an awkward way, but he looked happier than Bruce ever remembered him. On the back of the picture, his grandmother had written “Hiram and Bruce at Wolf Lake, Summer ‘25”.

Bruce went to hand the photo back to Larry.

“You keep it. I’m thinking we lean into the whole thing. We call the next line of farming equipment our ‘Safari Class’ and get the design team to go in on an African theme. What do you think?”

“People will think we’re killing giraffes.”

“Maybe. Probably. How’ve you been? I heard Stanford revoked your honorary doctorate.”

“The dean returned-to-sender my Christmas card.”

“Screw them. Without you, this whole company would be bankrupt. I know it. The suits know it. Once it all blows over, you’ll get a promotion or something—at least a bigger office.”

Bruce tucked the picture into his legal pad.

“A couple things still bother me,” he said.

“Like what?”

“The directionality update worked, right? In the lab we proved that a drone could find north even when dropped into a totally new environment.”

“So?”

“Swallows migrate south, not east.”

Larry’s mouth hung open in the way that it did when he had no idea what Bruce was talking about.

“I don’t see why,” Bruce continued, “if the migration instinct was encoded, that it’d choose to go east instead. And all of them were heading east, so it’s not like it was random.”

“I don’t know.”

“And the drift. I’ve been going over these reasoning modules for weeks now. The drift didn’t start after the directionality update, that only accelerated it. It’s been there for years—since before I was even on the project. I traced it all the way back to a release that wasn’t even labeled, but the code referred to the source mesh as REX. It wasn’t documented. Nobody from that time is still on the project.”

“You don’t think—”

“Dinosaurs? No, I don’t.”

“I don’t know, I wouldn’t put it past him. He was a genius.”

“I wish I could just ask him. It’ll be four years in January.”

Bruce picked up the brain-shaped stress ball and rotated it under his lamp. There were plenty of things Bruce wished he could ask his father. Why did he do it? Why leave Bruce alone in the world? If the work had turned sour, he could have retired. He could have spent his winter years at Wolf Lake building bird houses and fishing. There was so much research left to be done.

Penguins have been observed to break off from their groups and wander into the arctic desert to certain death. Even when researchers pick them up and return them to their flock, they simply begin the journey again, away from the life they knew and into the icy distance, never to return. We don’t know why. Presumably they’ve just had enough.

Larry put a hand on Bruce’s shoulder. “Let’s get a drink.”

An unusually cold winter set in. Bruce continued to research into the REX program in his free time to little success. He even tracked down a handful of his father’s old research partners, but they had little to say beyond that Hiram would come in some days having completed a monumental section of work and only explain what it did, not how he had done it. Nobody understood the code like he did and all that knowledge died with him.

Larry had settled on a modernizing rebrand combined with setting up a wildlife conservation fund. Gradually the protesters disappeared from the lot in front of their headquarters and the stock price recovered to where it was before. Bruce donated enough to get a highland gorilla named after his father and they sent him regular pictures of little Hiram being cradled by his mother or frolicking in his enclosure.

It came time for the second launch of SWALLOW and Bruce had made sure that the mesh was pruned down to the bare necessities. They’d seen success in the lab. No longer did temperature drops trigger a feedback loop, no longer did the task priority drift accelerate, though he hadn’t eliminated it completely. He projected that he still had about a decade to tackle that problem. But still, the message

came down from on high that they needed to take this roll-out carefully. Rachel “Killer” O’Neil herself oversaw the final tests and hand-picked the initial candidates for the pilot among Autodyn’s most discrete customers. She appeared and disappeared without notice, and sometimes Bruce thought that he had only imagined her lurking in the corner, watching, like the ghost of corporate failures yet to come.

On the eve of the roll-out, Bruce wanted to be anywhere other than his lab. He stopped by the sales department, but they were in the middle of a birthday party for somebody named Anna so he took off alone to the bar.

“What can I get for you?” the bartender asked.

“A dark and stormy.” That was Hiram’s drink.

Human behavior is a paradox. We have all the power of language to communicate to one another why we do things, what our goals and aspirations are, how we break those goals down into tasks, how we deal with our successes and failures—and yet we remain unpredictable, esoteric, you can never truly understand why a person does anything. A barn swallow migrates south because somewhere deep in their brain some cluster of neurons dictates that they must. What is it in our brains that compels us to do the things we do? If we looked close enough and for long enough, could we find the neural clusters that explain why we make friends? Why we fall in love? Why we dedicate ourselves to research?

Bruce stared at the bottom of his empty glass for an answer.

“There you are!” Larry, out of breath, ran up to the bar. “Today’s the day, huh?”

“Four years.”

“Listen, Bruce, you have to come back with me. It’s bad.”

“The pilot program?”

“The whole fucking house of cards, Bruce.”

Killer juggled between three phone conversations: the secretary of agriculture, the CEO of Autodyn, and the chief of the national guard. Even with her hands full, she directed Bruce and Larry to take a seat in the situation room with only her eyes. Techs and assistants buzzed around the room, shouting at one another, swapping clipboards and pointing at computer screens and downing entire cups of coffee one after another.

Killer wrapped up her calls and sat across the table from Bruce and Larry.

“Gardner, look me in the eyes. Did you do this?”

Bruce gulped, “no, I don’t even know what’s going on.”

“Are you drunk?”

Larry stepped in, “it’s the anniversary of Hiram’s—you know.”

Killer sighed.

“About three hours after the roll-out, they started migrating again. But not just the ones that had received the update, all of them. Somehow it spread from the SWALLOW machines to the entire fleet.”

“That’s not possible,” Bruce said, “they can’t talk to each other. They’re closed systems.”

“Every tractor and backhoe and paver from DC to fucking Juneau has flown the coop. Even machines that haven’t received an update in ten years. Bruce, if this is your revenge for what happened to your father—“

“It’s not,” Bruce said.

Killer studied him.

“We’ve got two hours to figure it out. After that, the national guard is going to step in and stop them by any means necessary. The entire product line—every god damn piece of equipment we’ve ever sold—is going to be shot to hell unless I can give them a damn good reason not to. There goes Autodyn. There goes your life’s work, and mine, and your father’s.”

Bruce joined the hive of worker bees who were desperately gathering data and hypothesizing.

“It has to be the migration cluster, right?” one said.

“It can’t be. We got that mesh down to the nuts and bolts—I have a paper on it coming out in spring. It’s mathematically proven,” said another.

Larry did the coffee runs and Killer returned to juggling phone calls.

It wasn’t a migration, and maybe it never was. Tractors in Denver were heading east, bulldozers in Maine were heading south. Where were they going from Florida? Yes, it seemed like they were converging. Right to Autodyn headquarters. “Revenge,” Larry whispered.

“But what does it mean? Why?” the room asked.

Bruce pulled Larry out of the room, down the hall, out into the parking.

“Wolf Lake,” Bruce said.

“What about it?”

“That’s where they’re going. I don’t know, but somehow I know. That’s where they’re going.”

They loaded into Bruce’s car.

“Are you sure you’re ok to drive?” Larry said, “and so what if they’re going to Wolf Lake? We should get back and tell them so we can figure out how to stop them.”

“The answer is there,” Bruce said, “I know it.”

Larry’s phone buzzed. It came up “Sweet Buns” on the screen.

“It’s Killer.”

“Really? You and O’Neil?”

“Well, you know.”

Larry turned off his phone.

“I trust you. Come on,” he said, “Wolf Lake.”

Bruce pulled into the drive of a cabin that had been sold years ago to some snowbirds who were spending the winter down south. A forklift sat quietly in the drive. The two men got out and circled the machine. Its engine purred. A cherry-picker pulled up from behind the cabin, its basket and crane hanging over the roof. It stopped and went quiet too.

“You were right,” Larry said.

“Let’s look around.”

Summers at Wolf Lake came flooding back to him. Diving in off the small dock, badminton in the yard, campfires at night. Marshmallows and roasted corn. His mom was still around then too. Bruce and Hiram were constantly catching bugs and fish and bringing them back into the house. When inevitably their creepy-crawlies escaped from their enclosures, they’d hear a screech from the bathroom and look at each other and laugh knowing what happened.

Bruce walked into a small copse filled with dead leaves, rustling in the wind. The light from the cherry-picker gave him enough to see. A weathered wooden post stuck out of the dirt. On it was carved the word “King”—a distant memory reached out. Bruce had left the door open and King, their basset hound, escaped. Bruce cried and cried and Hiram hugged him and told him it would be alright.

“He’s the most loyal dog in the world,” Hiram said, “he knows how to come home. He’ll be back when it’s time.”

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