

The Puppet Show

A hot wind pushes him over the crossties, deeper into the desert, and he has that feeling again—of slipping into the unknown. People die out here. Wide open, no rules and anything can happen. He stops and looks behind him: shiny rails slice past his town like blades and then vanish into the distant scrub. Any fool could see and hear the train and get off the tracks, but a man got killed just last month. They said he was drunk.

He continues east toward the bridge, planning to drop down into the gulch and follow it up—to hunt for stones, fossils or anything else he might find. But on a whim, at a place where the tracks veer close, he decides to throw rocks into the dump and see what he can hit. It's in a big hollow, full of hard trash—they don't allow garbage—which makes it nice to pick at and smash things. He arrives at the rim; small creases snake past him and then widen into gullies as they drop into the pit. Spread out below are chaotic heaps of debris dissected by paths for the front-end loader. The wind clatters through a mass of fiberglass panels as he takes a drink from his belt canteen, and then his eyes, ever alert to

new distractions, catch a flash of bright color. There it is again, to the right of some trucks. It's a girl—scrawny, blonde—in a neon pink top. In his dump.

His heart beats fast as he skids down the hardpan slope. He picks up speed near the bottom and almost trips over a tire. He hurries through scattered debris on the margins of the dump, collecting stones and stuffing them into the pockets of his cargo shorts. Such an easy target—she's in for a rude awakening. He's heard adults use that phrase and he liked it. "A rude awakening," he says aloud. He picks his way through so that he can approach from behind. Surprise the hell out of her. Maybe she'll even pee her pants—he's seen that before.

He catches her stooping over, trying to yank a board out. He creeps up within range and hides behind some fifty-five gallon drums. He pings a stone off some sheet metal past her head and she jerks upright and stares at the point of impact. He throws one onto the ground near her feet. She turns in time to see it skip away. Then he tosses a pebble that lands in her hair and she swats at her head to get it out. He laughs to himself until she looks in his direction. She starts walking toward the drums.

"What are you doing behind there?" she says.

He rises, his right hand cocked, gripping a stone. She's about ten feet away, standing with her arms folded upon her pink chest. It's the new girl he's seen on the bus. She doesn't look surprised and her pants are dry.

"Hold it right there," he says.

"Why are you throwing stones at me?"

"You need to pay attention to your surroundings."

"I saw you coming, you know."

"You did?"

"Yeah. I saw you walking along the tracks. You came down right over there." She points.

"Oh."

"Are you going to hit me again?"

"Uh, no."

"You shouldn't throw stuff like that. You could put somebody's eye out. You boys like to throw things."

"Yeah well, you girls are always acting stupid."

She ignores his comment and turns to glance at the board. "You want to help me with something? Do you like puppets? I collect them."

"Huh?" He lowers his arm and drops the stone.

"Come on, you can help me. I want to get this nice board out." She smiles, and her freckled cheeks turn into little

bumps. “I’m Pamela.”

“Oh, I’m Travis.” He walks over and jerks the board out with one pull.

“Yay.” She throws her palms up, flashing a wide smile, then bends down to inspect her prize.

“It looks like oak,” he says, “I can tell by the grain.” A strange sensation buzzes inside him, not unlike the pleasure of looking for stones or smashing the windows out of junked trailers. She has him carry the board over to a pile of scrap she must of all ready collected, near the edge of the dump.

“What you planning to do with all this stuff?” he asks.

“I’m going to make a stage for my puppets.”

“You’d better be careful down here, you could get hurt. They shoot guns sometimes. And there’s rattlers.”

“Well, I think I’m done now anyway. I better be getting home. You want to help me carry some of this wood back? I can show you my puppets?”

She twirls the stringy ends of her long hair as he presses his boot toe into a rusty piece of sheet metal, making it pop. His buddies might be out, plus he hasn’t gotten to the gulch yet, nor did he want to get stuck hauling this junk anywhere.

“Uh, no—I’m going to stay awhile. I can show you a short cut out of here, though—up to the tracks.”

“All right. I’ll follow.”

He leads the way at a fast pace, but once on the slope she slips in her canvas sneakers. He turns around and takes her hand. They pause at the top, huffing from exertion. She looks at his canteen.

“It’s hot and windy today, isn’t it?” she says.

“Yeah, especially up here. You better get used to it.”

Arriving at the tracks, they stop to face each other. A gust nearly pitches her into him and she laughs, and he doesn’t mean to back up and perhaps let her fall, but her presence confuses him.

“Will you come tomorrow?” she asks.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Well, can you help me carry the wood out then?”

He winces. “I guess so.”

“Let’s meet at the trucks again, same time. Good bye, Travis, see you to . . .” She turns and the wind swallows her tiny voice and whips her hair back toward him. She starts to skip in that peculiar way girls do and he turns to head for the bridge. When he arrives, he stops to watch a tiny speck of pink hop over a rail and dissolve into the scrub.

* * *

Travis hears the growling four wheelers before he reaches the

railroad bed. Their tracks are everywhere and he always tries to avoid them. Once they caught him out in the open and spun rooster-tails around him, spattering him with dirt. They were young guys, probably riggers, living in a group of trailers in town. And now they are in the dump.

He stops at the railroad and listens. Three, maybe four all terrain vehicles, out of view. How different today feels, with the noisy intruders and a heavy, overcast sky. The four wheelers go silent—the riders have stopped. Travis feels his heart start to thump, thump, thump. They've come to shoot.

Running in the track bed, he hears the first, loud crack. Another two rifle reports, then one more, then several in quick succession which amplifies the sound and now he can hear things getting hit. Before he drops into the pit, the pop of a shotgun startles him and he sees a dump truck's windshield get blown out, the shattered glass collapsing in one mass onto the seat below. He hurries toward the trucks. As he rounds a mass of crushed trailers, the sickening hum of a bullet cuts through the air and smacks into something behind him. He hits the ground and lays flat on his stomach. He can only wait until they have had their fill. When they finally leave and the invisible machines fade into a buzzing like bees, he begins to look for her.

He wanders about in between the trucks, yelling her name. There is no answer, and in the silence he imagines the worst. Finally, he hears a tiny voice, “Travis, over here,” and everything gets brighter. He finds her crouched inside a section of black pipe, clutching a coil of clothesline rope. He helps her out and she stands holding her left foot a few inches off the ground.

“They were shooting like you said, Travis.”

He looks her over; her white slacks are filthy, ripped, and she has on the same pink top as yesterday. They should have seen her. “Are you all right?”

“No, my foot hurts bad.” She sits back down on the end of the pipe.

He gently pulls the sneaker off and sees blood. “You must’ve stepped on something sharp—it came up through your shoe.” He squeezes more blood out of her cut and washes it with water from his canteen. He puts the sneaker back on. “You shouldn’t be wearing these here. Maybe you’ll need stitches.”

Travis helps her stand but she can only limp around in a circle, her face distorted in pain. “Let’s get to my wood,” she says, “we need to carry it back. We can use this rope.”

He knows her pile of junk couldn’t be cobbled together

into anything resembling a stage and stay together. The whole idea is silly. She doesn't seem to have much common sense.

“Pamela, that scrap isn't going to work for a stage.”

“What do you mean? Yes it can. I just need a little help.”

“No it won't. It's too heavy—too many odd pieces that won't fit together.”

“I'll get it myself then,” she says, and turns to go.

“No.” He grabs her wrist and she tries to jerk away but steps hard on her bad foot. She drops to the ground, crying out in pain. He crouches beside her. “Pamela—you've got to go home.”

Her lips tighten into a pout, her eyes fill with tears and she begins to cry. Travis doesn't understand these creatures, who are human after all, but so different from him and his friends. He knows the difference—he's not stupid—though he just found out last year what that difference means and how they have to fit together to make babies and families. He dabs her tears with his hanky. “It'll be all right, I'll help you with the stage later on. We have to go now.”

Despite his assistance, she quickly fades from hobbling on one foot and sits down. He frowns, frustrated, until an idea pops into his head. He has her get on his back, then locks his arms under her legs. She hugs his waist as he

piggybacks her out the long way around. Luckily she's not a big girl, and he's relieved that his friends are nowhere to be seen. She tells him she lives in a travel trailer, section D of the campground.

As they approach, Travis sees a man at the campsite standing by a four by four pickup. His bib overalls are hanging down around his waist and his white tee shirt is filthy with dark stains. He flicks his cigarette butt to the ground in a way that makes Travis wary.

“Pamela, where the hell have you been?”

Travis feels her arms stiffen against him.

“You're late, and what're you doing with my rope? Did you forget we all have to go shopping for your school crap, because your mom won't drive the truck? Son of a bitch you're a mess—get inside.”

Travis lets her down but before she can move the man strides over, grabs her by the forearm and yanks her toward the trailer. She hops on one leg, trying to keep up, but then she goes down and gets dragged. As her body twists about her captive arm, Travis notices she's wet herself.

“She's got her foot cut real bad,” he yells, “can't you see that?”

The man stops and glares at him a second, then grabs the

foot she's holding. He rips her sneaker off without unlacing it and blood spatters onto his arm. "Son of a—" He jerks her off the ground and then carries her high on his shoulder into the trailer. There is more shouting and then the man's arm reaches out and the narrow door gets slammed shut.

He stares at the trailer, unable to move. A semi jakes brakes on the highway—a harsh, guttural moan—and he turns to find the sky has darkened. Raindrops begin to patter into the dirt lanes and then pop off the trailer roofs, and now more fall until they find his ball cap, and he begins to walk home.

* * *

"Travis, hurry up. You almost missed the bus yesterday—now come on." His mom is already in her waitress uniform, a black skirt with a white, cowgirl type blouse that's always buttoned too low. She's worn many different uniforms over the years, one for each move.

He shoves his cereal bowl to the side and slings his backpack up on the counter, where he gathers his folders and books and packs them away. He heads for the door of their singlewide trailer.

"Hey—come here and give me a hug before you go, young man."

She hugs him and kisses his cheek. He's ready to go but she grasps his arms and pushes him back. "You've been moping around for two days now. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, ma'am." Travis loves his mom but he's a big boy now, almost as tall as her, and he feels certain information about his private life should be more or less off limits.

He hurries to the bus stop. He hasn't seen her for two days. Not outside, at school, or on the bus. Sagging Butte is not really a town—more like a camp for the gas riggers, and it doesn't have a school, so they are bused twenty miles away to Wandayco, where they have these weird Quonset huts for classrooms.

The bus is already parked on the access road, idling diesel fumes into the fresh, spring air. He hops up the steps and walks toward his buddy Dan. As he sits next to him he spies her, sitting alone toward the back, staring out the window and clutching some kind of doll to her chest.

"Travis, what you looking at?"

"Nothing."

"Where you been lately? You missed the big fight behind the arcade—oh, it was crazy, Travis, I'm telling you—Suttenhowsier got dusted!"

"Dusted? What happened?" Travis turns so he can see

her again.

“You know Mickey Schwartz and him been feuding all week, right? And then it just took a little bump into the pool table and Mickey exploded. They went outside and everybody followed and then bam, they got right into it. Mickey was taking the worst of it until he slung a handful of dirt into Suttenhowsier’s eyes, and that ended it—they had to take him to the ER. Hey, you’re looking at that new fifth grader, aren’t you? You got something in mind?”

“No. She was limping last I saw her. Did you see her limp this morning?”

“You did something to her, didn’t you?”

“No, course not—what do you think I am, a bully?”

Dan cocks his head for a second, then continues. “She got shoved hard last week—them Wandayco girls cornered her at recess, grabbed her puppets—you know she carries them around, which is weird. She won’t last long.”

“Well I’m going to sit next to her.”

“Why? What you going to do?”

Travis slides in beside her. “Hi Pamela.” She turns to face him, but there is no smile and her blue eyes are lifeless. She is holding onto some puppets.

“Hi Travis.”

“I haven’t seen you anywhere—is that because of your cut?”

“Yeah, I had to stay inside, but it’s better now. My dad soaked it in kerosene, then put tape on it.”

“Oh, that’s good. Did you get to go shopping?”

“No. I was supposed to get shoes and stuff.” She turns away, squeezing the soft puppets under her chin, and mumbles something.

“What’s that, Pamela?”

“I said my mom is going to have a baby.”

“That’s good news. You don’t seem too excited.”

“My dad doesn’t want it.”

“Really? Why not?”

“I don’t know. He hurt her last night.”

“Oh. Sorry about that.” He taps her shoulder. “Hey, why don’t you tell me about your puppets?”

She turns to him and smiles. “Okay.” She tells him the brown, fuzzy one is Buddy the Dog and the colorful one with big feet is Claude the Clown. They are hand puppets, and Buddy she’s had the longest. She slips him on her hand, holding it close to her lap so no one can see, and whispers in a squeaky voice, “My name is Buddy, what’s yours?” She giggles, then asks, “see how easy—you want to try?”

The top of his head is buzzing, but he looks around and tells her, “No, that’s okay, maybe later.” Then he remembers his promise. “I think I found something we can use for your stage.”

“Oh tell me, tell me,” she says, raising her hands, her delicate fingers spread out like two fans.

“First tell me what you’re going to use it for.”

“I’m going to do a play with my puppets. Missus Denning said I should enter them into the school’s talent show. It’s coming up—you’ve heard of it, right?”

“Yeah, but I never been to one.”

“Tell me what you found, Travis.”

“I’ll show you soon enough. It’s at the edge of the dump. It’ll be perfect.”

“I can’t wait to see it. Hey, I have an idea. I need a boy to help me do the play—would you help me? Please?”

He frowns. “Ah, I don’t know—I’m not good at stuff like that. Can’t you get somebody else?” But he knows there is nobody else.

“Please Travis? It’ll be fun—I don’t want to do it by myself.”

He shakes his head and she cradles the puppets against her chest again. She turns and stares out the window; the bus

has lurched onto the cratered, dirt drive of the Wandayco Regional Middle School. She bends down between her legs to get her pack off the floor, and when she sits up and sweeps her hair back, he sees a bright red mark on the side of her neck.

* * *

The two children race after a refrigerator box as it flips through the air. It finally lands in a ditch and stops. A gust of wind had wrenched it from their grip, and Travis kneels on it before it can sail away again. He cuts holes in it for handles using his jackknife, and wonders if she is impressed. They carry it to the hard road and manage to make it past the railroad crossing and into town.

They open it upright in front of his place and toss rocks inside to keep the wind from knocking it over. Paint is scarce in a trailer town, but Travis's mom had poked around at the diner and found two different colors of latex. She helps the children cut out a back door and then the stage opening. Pamela paints a gable on the upper part of the box to make it look like a house. Travis adds a curtain, operated by a lever and some string. Pamela claps her hands and giggles when he drops and raises it for the first time.

After his mom leaves, Pamela joins him inside the box.

“What a great idea,” she says, “nobody will see us in here—they’ll just see the puppets. Thanks for helping, Travis—you’re my best friend.” She kneels close to him, smiling, but he doesn’t know what to say. She sighs, looks away for a second, then asks, “I want you to be in my play—you’d make a great daddy puppet.”

“No, I don’t think so. I wouldn’t be any good—I’d probably screw it up.”

“No you wouldn’t, I’d teach you. I have a script.”

She waits for a response, but he turns away.

“Don’t you like me?”

Travis purses his lips and remains silent.

“I better go,” she says.

He watches her run home, upset and maybe even crying, but why does she keep asking? He folds the stage up and stows it under their crawlspace. When he enters the trailer, his mom is waiting for him in the kitchen, her arms folded, leaning back against the counter top.

“Well Travis, she seems like a very sweet girl. Next time you invite her over for supper, hear me?”

“Yes Mom. Hey Mom, I don’t know what to do. She keeps asking me to do stuff, like now she wants me to do a play with her—you know, work the puppets and be in a talent

show and all. I just don't feel like doing it."

"Well, have you helped her so far?"

"Yes I have." Travis nods his head, very much in agreement with himself.

"And now, when she needs you the most, you're not sure?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I can't tell you what to do, but I know that whatever you decide, you'll make me proud." She leaves, sits on the couch and picks up a magazine.

* * *

"Oh Travis, come in." He hesitates and she waves him into the office. "Shut the door please."

Missus Denning is young and pretty and all, but Travis is not excited to meet with her in the principal's office, with the principal. He was pulled out of history class. The same framed, family photos rest on the front edge of Mister Penski's large desk.

"Am I in trouble or something," he asks.

"No, no, not at all," Missus Denning says, smiling.

"Would you like some water, or a pop?" She sits beside him with a writing tablet and folder on her lap, and they both face the principal. This can't be good.

“Uh, no ma’am.” He glances at the principal and he smiles too, nods his head.

“Travis, I think you’ve grown much taller since I had you last year—you look so mature. And it’s so sweet of you to help Pamela—you’ve got one big fan there. She’s a quiet girl but she just lights up when she talks about you. Anyway, we are very concerned about her, and her mother as well. We’ve brought you in to ask a few questions. Would that be okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Mister Penski will have a few questions for you as well, but everything we say must remain in here, Travis—that’s very important—do you understand me?”

“Yes ma’am.” He looks out the window at a distant bluff and wishes he was climbing it. Missus Denning continues.

“Since Pamela has arrived in my class, she’s been a withdrawn and shy little girl, and has had trouble making friends, but lately things have gotten worse. In class she just sits in the back, holding her puppets, never saying a word. In private I’ve tried to get her to speak with me about certain things, but she’s reluctant to open up. She has told me you’re helping with her puppet show?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to be in it, but now I am.”

“Do you know what the play is about, have you seen her

script?”

“No, not yet.” Mrs. Denning pulls some papers from a folder and stares at them, shaking her head, then sighs. Travis looks about the room as if he could actually get up and hide somewhere.

“First of all, I could never allow a play like this to be shown—our students would be there, families, and she wants her parents to see it. It’s very disturbing, Travis. I hope you don’t see it. Oh my, I’m sorry.” She pauses, looking away, and when she turns back, her eyes bore into him and her voice sounds strange. “You shouldn’t have to be involved in this, but we have to help her—such a sweet girl, trying to save her family, and I can’t believe how, how someone—” She throws her hands up and lets them drop onto her folder with a thud.

“Missus Denning,” the principal says, “do you need a break?”

“No, no, we have to move on, I’m sorry. Why don’t you go ahead, Mister Penski.”

“Travis, we have noticed some bruises on Pamela’s body—on her neck, her wrists. Have you seen them? Do you know anything about them?”

Travis twists in his chair and it feels like something is

clutching his throat. “Ah.” He sweeps his face up toward the curved, corrugated ceiling. “I don’t want to get her in trouble.”

“This is very, very important for Pamela’s safety,” the principal says, his stare frozen upon Travis, drilling the point home.

Travis explains what he saw on that dreary afternoon—except for the fact that she peed herself—and what she told him on the bus, and they write it all down in their tablets and start speaking to each other about things he didn’t understand. But he knows what the play means to Pamela.

“Missus Denning, we built a stage for the puppets, and I need to help her do the play.”

“I’ll tell you how you can help. Take her to your place directly after school today and keep her there with you. We don’t want the father to get near her. Lock the doors and wait for your mom—she’s expecting her. Do you think you can do that for us?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh good, thank you—you’ve grown into such a fine, young man. You don’t realize how worried we are. We’ve spoken with Pamela’s mother and she’s agreed to have some investigators from Cheyenne talk with her and the

father tonight, soon as they arrive. There are issues they need to look into, to make sure everyone stays safe. They'll be talking with you and Pamela as well. But I'm afraid the puppet show is the least of our worries."

* * *

Travis sat through the rest of his classes that day, but his mind was on her, and when he sees her walking alone to the bus, he sneaks up from behind and takes her hand. She smiles. Her white tee shirt is wrinkled and her hair is twisted and knotted as usual.

"Pamela, where's your puppets today?"

"In my pack. The other kids don't like them."

"I like them. I want to meet them all tonight—we have to practice that play you have."

"You're going to help me?"

"Yes. We have the stage all ready, right? We can practice at my place. My mom can be the audience."

"Oh that's great—can we really practice tonight?"

"Yeah, we'll do it. First we'll stop at your place to get the puppets."

"Oh I'm so excited—I've finally decided which ones to use. I'm going to have a mom and a daddy, a girl, and an angel. You only have to work the daddy puppet."

The two climb on board and sit together and soon they are on the highway, headed west. It's another gusty afternoon, the bus getting jerked about by cross winds, and the students grow rowdy. One of his friends teases him about sitting beside the girl with the silly puppets, and Travis watches her smile vanish. She's against the window, and he pushes in close. He pulls her hair aside and whispers things to her about some of the students and teachers, and she giggles a bit more with each story. His lips occasionally brush against her ear lobe, but one time, when the bus lurches sideways, his entire mouth touches her ear, and there is a rush, like running into a pit. He reaches around and presses her temple into his face, and the smell of her hair swirls inside him.

* * *

As their noisy schoolmates scatter from the bus stop, Travis and Pamela pause to watch antelope flee a tanker truck racing down a wellhead road. A young one, confused by the plume of dust, starts heading for the highway, but the mother circles back in time for a rescue. Two buzzards sail overhead, and to the north, all over the vast interior of the Red Desert, dark blue clouds are massing.

“Let's run,” Pamela says.

A gritty gust cuts across their path and she grabs him and

buries her head into his chest to shield her eyes; he twirls her about and they laugh and run on. As they pass the last site in section C, Travis looks up and stops. He sees her trailer but now it's attached to the pickup, and there are colorful lumps scattered all around their picnic table.

“Oh, my dad is home,” she says. “What’s that stuff on the ground?” She tries to pull forward but Travis holds her back.

“We better leave,” he says, “something’s wrong.” The wind catches the lumps and some tumble across the ground, landing in distorted poses. They’re her puppets. He then hears a voice so pleasant he doesn't recognize it at first, and in a flash, in a cold wave of dread, he comprehends the stupidity of his mistake. The man is standing behind them.

“Hey sweetheart, I was waiting for you. How was school today?” He has on clean clothes now but the same look in his eyes, and in an instant his hand is on the back of her neck. She mumbles something about the play but he’s already leading her away toward the truck.

“Yeah, we just need to get the puppets and we’ll be out of your way,” Travis says, walking fast to keep up.

“No, I don’t think so,” the man says, his eyes never leaving the truck. “You go home—she’ll be out later.”

The strength drains from Travis's legs as panic sets in, and he feels like a balloon about to blow away. "She's supposed to come home with me, everybody knows that."

The man stops.

"What did you say, kid? Who's everybody?"

"Everybody knows you're hurting her—I saw you hurt her."

The impact of the man's hand is so hard that Travis is flung onto his back, gasping for breath. He rolls on the ground, clutching his chest, tears of pain in his eyes. Pamela moans and then squirms within the man's grip, tight around her neck. He jerks her about like a doll and her hands leap as if to pry him away, but she only raises them in surrender.

Travis sees this and all the times his mom's been shoved, hit or slapped, and it burns into his brain until a powerful strength rages inside him. He leaps up and runs against the wind—but it also masks his approach. They are nearly to the truck when he rams his head into the man's kidney and all three lurch forward onto the ground. Travis rolls and jumps up in front of the man, who's still on his hands and knees. He scrapes up a handful of sand and flings it into the man's face. He roars, grabbing at his eyes, then fumbles a sheath on his belt. He snaps open the blade to a Buck knife and slashes it

about, but Travis has her hand and they're already running.

"I'm going to kill you, you little bastard," the man shouts, adding, "go ahead and run, there's nowhere to hide." He's on his feet now, staggering sideways and rubbing his face.

"Hurry Pamela," Travis yells, gripping her hand tighter. Glancing back, he sees the man running toward them, his head cocked to the side, a hand over one eye. He's only partially blinded and he's coming fast.

In the distance a train sounds the first blast of its horn. Warning bells ding, lights flash, and barrier arms drop over the crossing, and Travis knows that in no time dozens of cars will come roaring through, blocking their escape. He's taking her to the dump.

The engineer sees the children running toward the tracks and jams the horn open. With several thousand tons of coal pushing forty-five miles an hour, braking is useless. Gusting winds distort the horn into a deafening wail, and still they come.

Travis veers around the crossing, and just as his boots crunch into gravel, he feels Pamela hesitate, terrified of the black and orange mass thundering toward them. Without stopping he scoops her up against his chest and bolts across the rails, past the hot breath of engines, over more gravel, and

onto the other side.

* * *

Raindrops thud and ping, bouncing off trash, and the cold wind forces anything loose to scrape and pop—freakish noises that freeze Travis into a motionless knot. They huddle inside a horse trailer—its roof crushed from some mishap—and hug each other for warmth. Pamela starts to shake, and he tries to pull her tighter. But she won't stay still.

“Pamela, settle down.”

“I'm cold, Travis. I want to get out of here—I want to see my mom.”

“Not yet,” he whispers. She crawls away to sit opposite him, and staring past the trailer's blown-out doors, begins to cry. Lost in her own despair, she seems unreachable. He grips an iron pipe, ready to kill this time. But the man never comes, and after what seems like an endless vigil, he hears a high-pitched whine coming from the interstate.

The sound transforms into wailing sirens—police cars are approaching. Ever louder, the sirens turn into town, cross the tracks, then silence. Car doors slam. Shortly he hears frantic voices: “Trav-is, Pam-e-la.” It sounds like several people are in the dump, and one of them is his mom. He leads Pamela from their hideout and toward the voices.

“Travis, oh my baby, we were so scared—some kids saw the fight and you two running—we thought you were killed by the train.” She hugs him and Pamela together and when she pulls back, tears stream from her eyes. More sirens are heard, coming closer to town.

Two grim faced deputies walk over and one hands Pamela a puppet. She takes it and presses it against her neck and he wraps a blanket over her. He picks her up and she asks him about her mother, but he only jokes about all the puppets she has. Travis’s mom pulls him aside and there’s a fierce sadness in her eyes.

“Look son, I’m so proud of you—you saved Pamela’s life. But she’s had a tragedy—her mother has been killed. That man, her father, they just caught him speeding down the highway. They found her in the trailer. She was murdered.”

He feels his stomach drop and then ache as if sucker punched. “But she was going to have a baby?”

“I know. Missus Denning told me.”

“What are we going to tell her?”

“The sheriff found a number and has called her grandparents. They live out of state but will be coming soon to take custody—they’ll be the ones to tell her. Right now we’re all going to meet with the state police. But we have to

handle this right, and you need to stay with her and keep her busy with the puppets.”

“What will happen to her?”

“I’m not sure. Most likely she’ll be leaving.”

“Why can’t she live with us? She can have my room and we can do plays and you can watch, and I can ride with her on the bus, and help her with homework, and—”

But a deputy interrupts and says they better go, and the other deputy has already left, carrying Pamela in his arms. Travis follows beside his mom and studies her face but knows it’s pointless to ask again. They can’t afford to keep her and Sagging Butte is just a sorry-ass place for transients anyway. He’s seen it at school—friends leave never to be seen again, onto somewhere new, and don’t count on nothing but yourself she once said—don’t get too attached.

The deputies place Pamela in the rear seat and then Travis and his mom sit on either side of her. She holds the soft puppet tight to her neck and stares ahead—his heart breaking because he knows all the puppets in the world won’t save her from what’s coming, and because he loves her.

The car jolts over the tracks and he turns toward the window: the storm slashes at the land, obscuring the distant mountains, making the vast spaces even more lonely, and it

occurs to him there's nothing that can hold anything down,
nothing to stop what's soft and sweet from getting blown
away into the desert, nothing that can stop the hurting of
things.