a lone figure on a distant ridgeline

JUST BEFORE HE BACKED into the tree, the father swore. He might have said shit or even fuck. The crack of the poplar breaking, the unpleasant metal sound made by the boot of the rental car, the shriek from the Spanish children waiting in the dust outside the pool, the sound of his children arguing behind him—none of these covered up the word.

The boy and girl were quiet. They stopped jostling each other, let their arms flop. The father could see their faces staring at him in the rear-view mirror.

Once, he had needed to run into the office on a Saturday and had brought the boy along. Half his mind on work, half on what the boy was saying, he had not seen the van swerve in front of him. He had sworn then, too. After the wave of relief that he had braked in time, he'd realised what he had said.

And the boy said nothing. He just looked at him, the same way he was staring now. Solemn. The father thought:

This is one more small line I can't cross back over.

Shit, he said again.

As he let the car inch forwards, the tree creaked and toppled. The girl giggled. The mother looked anxiously over her shoulder.

They're coming, she said, the girl from behind the counter. The lifeguard, too. Then she turned towards the father, Go, she said, just go.

He saw them, too, the thin Spanish pool attendant and the surly lifeguard, one shaking her head, the other raising a fist at him. He saw his children's faces; the girl's pressed against the glass and grinning, the boy's flushed and red.

When the girl started chanting, in a sing-song voice, *Dad broke the tree, dad broke the tree*, he saw the boy nudge her sharply in the ribs.

The silence was worse—the father thought—than all of the squabbling.

It had been a stupid idea to drive to the pool. The mother had made a schedule for their holiday: one day at the farm, one day for excursions. It had worked well. But the boy and girl were hot and restless. In a needling mood. And the idea of cool water—clean, not like the pond where the farm children swam—made it easy to relent.

Well—now he knew better.

For a moment, he thought about how he'd make a joke of this. The girl would like it; he knew that. It would be exactly like any other family story. Maybe they'd forget.

He saw the mother's lips purse. He saw the boy's face, still hot with shame. His smile faded. He drove on.

After dinner, the father looked in on the boy. He was sitting up in bed, reading Tintin by the light of one of the fat candles the farm manager had given them when they first arrived. His face looks so serious, the father thought, scrunched in concentration.

He shifted in the doorway, and the wooden floorboards creaked. The boy looked up.

How are you doing, Buddy, he asked, walking into the empty room, are you doing okay?

The bed is too small for the space, the boy too small for the bed.

The father knelt on the floor. The boy slapped the empty space beside him on the bed, Come on up.

Was I ever like this? the father wonders.

The first night, they had put the girl in there as well.

They knew she was nervous—she had never been somewhere that did not have electricity, that was so far from the noises of the city and suburbs. The father already knew, deep down, that the room was too dusty, too large for the girl, the cracks between the wooden shutters let in too much light, the old wardrobe too full of imaginary fears.

But when the mother crept down the stairs into the spare living room of the farm cottage and mouthed, So far so good, he had let himself relax, told himself that this place was not a mistake.

He led her into the room where the parents slept and said, She tried to be brave—she really did.

I did, the girl chimed in. She was squeezing one of the boy's fingers.

After she had shuffled in between the mother and the father, and they had blown out their candles, they both felt how violent her shaking was. The father wondered how long the boy had lain there trying to coax her into sleep, stroking her like a wild cat.

How are you doing? he asked the boy again.

The boy had been quiet throughout dinner. The farm manager had invited them to come and join them in the main house where most of the families ate. But he'd caught the mother's eye.

Not tonight, he apologised, we'd like to, very much, but not tonight.

Instead, the mother had lit the gas oven with a long-stemmed match and cooked—something. How could he have forgotten so quickly what they ate just hours before? The father rubbed his jaw.

I'm okay, the boy said, in a way the father knew meant he was not. He placed the volume of Tintin gently on the floor. Can you tell me a story tonight?

I haven't done that for a while, said the father, shifting. Then, Sure, let's see.

I'll tell him about a time like this, he thought, and started, When I was about your age, my parents sent me off to stay with an uncle that I didn't know very well, up on his farm. You know that I grew up on a farm, too? he checks. Remember

we drove past it last year?

The boy thinks, then nods. Kind of like this one? he asks.

Well, the father starts. Then he says, Yeah, that's right, like this one. But my uncle's farm was different. Up in the high country. They ran flocks of sheep. We had to ride on horses to round them up.

The boy's eyes brightened, Like cowboys, he asked, like Clint?

Exactly, the father said. The boy turned towards the light that still came in through the shutters even at this hour. He's trying to picture it, the father thought.

Did you have cousins there? he asked.

Yes, the father said, we used to play cowboys together, too. One day, my cousin and I took the horses out when we weren't meant to. We rode up into the hills, pretended we were on the run. It was great, Buddy. You and I should do it sometime. Light a fire, heat a tin of beans on an open flame. It brings you together, a thing like that. Anyway, as the night began to fall, we knew we should turn back, but we didn't. Then we noticed a man climbing up on the ridgeline beyond us, walking to the darkness.

The boy shivered. He was still facing away. What happened to the man? he asked at last. Who was he? Where was he going?

We wanted to know. It was a mystery to my cousin too, and we wanted to know. So we got up on our horses and rode after him. But when we crested the ridge, do you know what we saw? A deer!

The boy looked like he was on the verge of asking a question. The father held his breath.

The sun raked the tops of the clustering of poplars that ran down the slope behind their cottage. The father sat where he could still hear the girl and the mother playing. The girl had a game where she was a travel agent. The mother would approach her as a new customer each time, and the girl would open up the boy's illustrated encyclopaedia and invent a new destination for the mother's trip.

She always asked the boy first, *Can I please borrow your book, Buddy?* and he always answered, *Yes, you may*.

Beyond the poplars, four roughly painted wooden targets bobbed in the pond. The father had watched the boy—and four of the farm children—make them, taking scrap wood and old nails from a shed somewhere just beyond the father's line of sight. They sat in a circle, passing the hammer back and forth.

He had watched them talk, hesitantly, then more quickly. It's easy to find a common tongue when you're that age, I guess, the father had thought. Now the boy and one of the children, the oldest he thought, a girl with a long chin who stood taller than the boy, pushed the final target out into the pond. The other children from the farm stood up. The boy pulled a handkerchief out from his pocket and unwrapped the catapult.

Wait outside, he had told the father, on the threshold of the old arcade the day before. Not there, he said, not just in the doorway, on the street. I'm okay.

After their long tour of the bullfighting arena, they had given the girl and the boy pocket money as a reward, hoping to stave off complaints or another fight. The girl had pulled the mother off towards a shop she'd seen when they arrived in the town. But the father and the boy had wandered the long, narrow cobbled streets, underneath barred shadows from the iron balustrades, until they had reached the arcade.

Unlike the girl, the boy didn't spend his pocket money all at once. So far, he had saved most of what they'd given him.

When he thought that it was safe, the father looked around the corner and down the arcade. There was a bookstore, the father noticed. Probably after more Tintin, he thought. That's just like him.

He did not ask the boy what was in the paper bag when he stepped back out into the dusty street. They walked quietly together to the square where they had arranged to meet. The father felt the usual flash of nerves about where they would eat. But the mother and the girl had found a bar not far from the gorge where the boy and the girl could eat potatoes, and the mother and the father could drink wine.

What did you like best about the town? the mother asked the boy and the girl.

The girl sat up straight and started to speak, but the boy said, The bullfighting ring was very old; I liked that you could see the Roman parts of it. And the bridges, they're impressive too. It would be terrible to fall, he said and looked at the girl, who nodded. But most of all I liked the shop that we found. The boy placed his paper bag on the table and

pulled out the catapult. The yoked piece of oak was smooth. The two thick strands of red rubber were linked by a leather pouch. The father wanted to pick up the wood.

The mother only said, A weapon? She said this to the father. A weapon is what he bought? Then she turned towards the boy, I thought you liked documenting nature, she said, like Jacques Cousteau. Not hunting. Not violence.

The boy's smile had disappeared. The girl looked from the mother to the boy and back. The father asked her, What did you like best here in the town? What was it?

The girl said, I don't remember. She said it so quietly, the father thought.

Now the boy stood and passed the wooden catapult to the taller girl. She fitted the rock she'd scooped up from beside the pond and pulled back the leather pouch. The father heard the thwack of stone against a corner of a target. He saw the wood bob and rock. The children cheered.

Now the boy took back the catapult. The father watched him stoop and fit his stone, slower than the girl had done it. He watched the boy draw back his right hand and felt the straining in his own arm. He thought he saw the boy close one eye and squint.

The farm children were silent. They watched the same wooden target sway that had been hit before. There was a dent in the wood—the father was certain—closer to the centre than the girl's had been. The girl jutted out her chin. The children watched. The girl placed one hand on the boy's shoulder and then the other on his chest and nodded.

Hmm, he heard his own girl say somewhere in the cottage. This is just the sort of destination that would suit you, miss, yes sir it is. There are wild tigers in the forests, did you know?

Every night, whether they had been on another excursion or resting at the farm, the boy wrapped the catapult in the handkerchief and placed it beside his bed.

The father watched him do this once more, from the doorway. He was getting better. He could hit the centre of the targets more often than not.

When the boy had finished climbing into bed, he spoke. Can I join you, Buddy?

The boy slapped the bed again.

We missed you this afternoon, the father said, where did you go?

Well, the boy said, well, you know how we spent this morning looking with the other kids for tadpoles in the stream.

I do, the father said, I remember.

After lunch, she asked if I wanted to try looking in the other stream.

But we found enough, the father said. He spread his hands. There are plenty, aren't there, in that big old jar.

Well, the boy said, she wanted to look for more, anyway. So we went out past the orchard.

Which one, asked the father, do you mean the olive grove?

Not the olives, no. We went down to where the oranges are. She said she wanted to show me something down there.

The boy looked away. His face had grown red. Then he looked back. We crawled underneath the orange trees, he said, and I fell asleep.

The boy and the girl were quiet on the day they left. They hardly spoke during breakfast. The girl pushed her cereal around her bowl. The boy took his toast outside and sat in the dust to eat. The father sat beside him with his coffee.

Look, the boy said, there, a lizard.

They left early for the drive to Malaga. Maybe we can do a little shopping, the mother said to the girl, twisting in her seat. The girl yawned. The boy had his copy of Tintin placed on the seat beside him. Like the girl, he stared out the window at the farm buildings as they receded into a long line of cream and gold smudges against the far hills.

Look, the girl said suddenly. What does that say, Buddy? There was a sign with a tiger painted on it and a cowboy.

Mini Hollywood, the boy said. Can we stop, please can we?

The girl cried out, Hollywood! Yes, let's stop. And then she growled like a wild cat.

The mother looked at her watch. She said, to the father, Perhaps, if we're not too long, perhaps it will be fine. The father grinned. He growled back at the girl. He saw the boy was smiling.

He could have walked through the town a hundred times before. Waves of sand blew in gusts between the long wooden houses, the brick bank, the old saloon. Porches and verandas

and a tower for the clock. If he squinted, the father could be sitting on the couch at home, early on a Saturday, before the mother or the girl were up, watching Clint Eastwood saunter to his final duel.

He knew that most of the spaghetti westerns of the 1960s had been shot in Spain. Cheaper than filming in America, he'd told the boy, cheaper to build sets and get extras too. But he hadn't realised, when they'd made the turn off, that this was the place where they had filmed so many of the films that he and the boy had watched.

In the distance, the khaki plateau rose in barren tiers.

Come on, the boy called, come quickly. It's about to start.

The mother looked at the father. She looked at her watch. It's nearly twelve, she said, will we have enough time to get to the airport if we stay?

But it's the gunfight, the girl said. This was the way the boy had said it, earlier, when he'd found the photos in the brochure.

The father shrugged. Well, he said, well, it is the gunfight, after all.

The mother fanned herself with the folder that contained their black and white photographs—the girl and the boy had put on moustaches and black Stetsons, the mother a dancer's flouncy dress. What about me? the father had asked the boy and the girl. Who am I to be?

You're still the sheriff, said the boy. He handed him the vest with its golden star, and the white hat, too.

Now they leaned against the veranda outside the saloon. A group of tourists stood outside the general store. The wind

blew sand across the town square and towards the group of figures who were walking down the avenue of wooden-boarded shops.

Where is Clint? the boy asked. The man with no name?

The girl stood on tiptoes. Shush, she said. Look there.

A silhouette advanced from the opposite direction. The father blinked. For a moment, he was watching a lone figure climb a distant ridgeline. Then the shooting began.

Cracks echoed across the square. Patches of sand burst in plumes. One of the tough posse fell.

Look, the girl cried. One man stood on the roof above the general store. The lone gunman spun, shot once from the hip. The man tumbled from the roof, slowly. He fell into the wide wooden barrel next to the tourists. The girl laughed. The boy was silent, even when the actors all picked their bloody bodies from the sand and bowed.

By the time he'd signed the final papers for the rental car and found the correct desk, they were already late. The attendant for their airline looked from the father, who was sweating at his hairline and down the middle of his back, to the mother, hauling the children's suitcase, to the dusty figures of the boy and girl. She made a brief call. She nodded to the father and took their passports and itinerary.

Hurry, she said, as the bags rolled along the conveyor belt. I shouldn't really do this.

The mother said, Thank you, you're an angel, and the woman nodded. But the girl did not move. She can feel the

stress, the father thought and prepared himself to lift her up. I'm too old for this.

The boy took her hand. It's okay, he said, it's all okay.

When they reached the security line, the father found someone official and showed him their tickets. They passed other grumbling travellers.

See, the boy said, still holding her hand. It's okay.

Sir, the attendant said. Is this your bag? He held the boy's backpack up. This. It is not allowed, he said. A weapon. He pulled out the slingshot. It is not allowed, he said again, dangerous.

The girl let go of the boy's hand. This is all your fault, she wailed, all your stupid fault. Now we'll never get home.

The father turned on the spot, from the attendant to the girl and back again. The mother said, What if we removed the rubber band, then it's just a piece of wood, see, just a piece of wood.

The attendant shook his head. The father was ready to swear. A whole list of curses, like the captain in the boy's Tintin books, with asterisks and exclamation marks. But he didn't swear. He noticed the boy had put his hands into his pockets.

Then the boy said to the man, It's okay, and turning to the father, said again, it's okay. I don't need it anymore.

They were seated two by two on the plane ride out. The girl was behind the boy. She leaned through the gap between the boy and the father, patted the boy on the shoulder.

There there, she said, it's okay, Buddy.

The khaki coloured mountains peeled away underneath them, melting into darkness. The plane flew into the night. The boy was reading again, but every five minutes or so, he would pause and turn to look out the porthole window.

When the trolley came along, the father ordered wine.

Can I have a Coke? the boy asked.

The girl was asleep.

Sure, the father said, go on Buddy. Sure.

The boy said, She took me to see a dead dog. Before we went to the orange grove. It was the dog, you know, that chased the geese and ran after the cars along the driveway.

I know what you mean, the father said. His voice was soft. How did it die, do you know?

She said that a car had hit it. Probably reversing suddenly. The body was split apart, the boy said. Nobody cared. And the eyes were empty—is it like that for people, too?

It's like that for everyone, the father said. The eyes. He thought about the lambs on his uncle's station. Headless chickens spasming. The pigs that he and his parents had kept on their farm. He thought about his father.

He put his arm around the boy. The boy folded up his tray and leaned into the father's side.

What happened to that man, the boy asked, the one you saw with your cousin when you ran away. What happened to him?

The father looked across the boy's head. The cabin lights dimmed. Stars stretched into diamonds against the deep indigo night.

He went to die somewhere, the father said. It happens, sometimes. He walked into the night, and he disappeared. That's what it's like for all of us.