

WILSON A. KOEWING

WOODSTOWN

It wasn't Dean's schizophrenia that concerned me. It was his car.

My uncle Dean wanted to drive his neglected, soap-colored Chevy Lumina, fifteen hours from my parents' house in South Carolina to Woodstown, New Jersey, so he could show me the place where he and my dad had grown up.

I was interested in anything that got me out of South Carolina, so I agreed to the trip. I asked my dad if he wanted to join us.

"Are you insane?" he said.

Dean's car was a true horror. Passenger seat, floorboards, backseats covered in foot-deep piles of garbage. Greasy fast-food bags. Wrappers with cheese. Big Gulps with sticky rims. Tennis-ball cans. Mail.

Forgotten cigarette ashes and burn marks had created a wasteland of the car's middle console.

A sticky, black, mucous-like substance covered the passenger seat, a result of Dean's insistence on smoking with the window up, holding the cigarette in his right hand. I'd ruined a button-up shirt while riding into town with him the day before the trip. I used this fact as fuel in an attempt to convince my dad to fund a rental car.

The three of us sat in my dad's garage listening to classic-rock staples interspersed with B-sides.

Dean sat in a plastic garden chair, which groaned under the weight of his enormous frame, chain-smoking Winston 100's. His upper body was massive, formed from years of bench press. Unkempt hair thinned at the top of his giant head. An unruly mustache curled around his upper lip.

My dad stood by his workbench, sipping a Bud Light, within arm's reach of his beer fridge. He'd been a postal worker for decades and had recently retired at fifty-two.

"Put a towel over the seat, Wilson," Dean said. "Stop being such a sissy."

"Ride with your uncle, Wil," my dad said. "Just get a shovel and clean out the car before you leave—." My dad laughed from deep inside his chest.

"Paul, what is wrong with you?" Dean asked.

"I'm not riding in there," I said. "We'd have to get the whole car detailed before I'd ride all the way to New Jersey in that thing."

“Detailed?” Dean said. “Wilson, you are such a sissy.”

“I can’t imagine the place that would detail that car,” my dad said. “They’d just as soon go out of business.”

“Look at him,” Dean said.

My dad took the last sip of his beer and retrieved another from the fridge.

“It’s the most important thing in his life, that alcohol,” Dean said.

My dad laughed another deep-chested, red-faced laugh.

Dean lit a Winston and shook his head.

My first memory of Dean was at my grandparents’ house in Florida. I was swimming, minding my own business, floaties on my arms, when what I thought was some crazed lunatic jumped out from behind the bushes, screaming and growling. My mom, dad, grandma, and grandpa—everyone was shocked.

It was Dean.

I recall the terror I felt to this day. He was a maniac. I got that quick. He did not seem like any sort of adult to me.

I later learned he’d gone to Wake Forest on a full tennis scholarship but made it only to sophomore year. He took too much acid and never came down.

“I walked downstairs to our basement,” my dad said. “Dean was standing there, staring at the ceiling, eyes wide and bloodshot. When I said his name, he looked at me like he didn’t even know who I was. Man, he was fried.”

A decade or so later, Dean and my dad took my brother and me to a park with a basketball court. There were two other kids around the same age as Brian and me, eight and twelve. The older kid was tall and skinny. The kid Brian’s age was pudgy and not athletic. We asked if they wanted to play a game of three-on-three. They did.

“I’ll take your boys, Paul. You take those two,” Dean said. “We’re going to teach you what humility is.”

Dean called for a pick on the pudgy kid, waited for him to fight through it then flattened him on the way to the basket for an easy layup. The kid peeled himself off the concrete and got ready to defend again, rubbing his head. Dean stood at the top of the key, waiting for the ball.

“Brian, do a back door cut on this fatso,” Dean said. “He’s too slow to catch you.”

Neither Brian nor the kid knew what the hell a backdoor cut was.

“Paul, ball.”

My dad stood close to Dean, holding the ball on his hip. “These are children. You do realize that don’t you, Dean?”

“Give me the ball.”

My dad zipped the ball at Dean. It smacked against his hands. Dean stared my dad down, took a shot from the top of the key, and buried it.

The game went on, and Dean played rough. He set more picks on the kids. Called ridiculous fouls. Swung his elbows wildly after rebounds.

Eventually, my dad got the ball. He elbowed past Dean and made a layup.

“That’s a foul, Paul!”

“Wrong! You weren’t in position.”

Their interaction had devolved into something you’d expect from children.

Game point arrived, with the game tied ten-ten. My dad took the ball at the top of the key. He faked one way and went the other. Dean stayed with him, playing solid defense. As my dad neared the basket, a grin crossed his face. He stepped on Dean’s foot, pushed past him, and banked in the winning layup.

Dean slammed the ball down in anger. I wasn’t sure if it would ever come down.

“Paul, you are a fucking whale!!”

“Watch your language,” my dad said. “These are somebody else’s kids. What’s wrong with you, besides the obvious?”

“That was a charge, Paul,” Dean said. “Game’s not over.”

“Game over, Dean,”

My dad stalked toward our family minivan. “Let’s go, boys.”

“Quitters always lose, Paul,” Dean yelled.

My dad kept walking toward the van, ignoring Dean.

“Hey, Paul!”

My dad still didn’t turn around.

Dean hauled back and hurled the ball as hard as he could. It hit my dad in the back of the head and sent him staggering forward. His face flushed red. I witnessed anger in him I’d never seen. He balled his fists and turned around. Just when I thought he was going to charge Dean, he stopped and looked at my brother and me. He took a deep breath and marched to our car. We drove back to my grandparents’ in silence.

When Dean returned a half hour later, after jogging back, they acted as if nothing had happened.

I stood beside my dad in line at the rental car place. He shook his head, mumbling about how horrible of an idea the trip was. We could see Dean standing outside, sucking down Winston 100’s.

“You realize there’s no way in hell we’re getting the security deposit back?” he said.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said. “I can’t ride in his car?”

“Thank God I’m not going on this trip.”

“I don’t see why he can’t pay for the rental car,” I said. “He said he wanted to fund the trip, to show me where you guys grew up.”

“He doesn’t have any money,” my dad said. “He probably got your grandma to give him a thousand dollars for the trip.”

“What do you mean he doesn’t have any money?” I asked. “I don’t have any money, what am I supposed to do?”

My dad reached in his pocket and handed me two hundred bucks. “Just in case.”

Outside, my dad held the key out to Dean then pulled it away as he reached for it. “There’s no smoking in the rental car, Dean,” he said.

Dean listened, silent and annoyed.

“I honestly don’t even know why I’m saying this,” my dad continued. “You’re just going to do whatever the fuck you want to.”

“No one is going to notice, Paul,” Dean said. “I’ll roll the windows down.”

“Are you going to pay the two-hundred-ninety-five-dollar deposit?”

“What am I supposed to do, not smoke for ten hours?”

“You could consider not smoking three packs a day,” I chimed in.

“I don’t give a damn what you do,” my dad said. “Stop at every rest area you see and have a cigarette. You’ll make it there by next Thursday.” That red-faced laugh overtook him.

“Fine, Paul, I won’t smoke in the rental,” Dean said.

My dad held out the keys. Dean snatched them.

“You know, I think I’d like to drive,” I said.

“You don’t have any idea how to get there, Wilson.”

I held up my smartphone. “I’ve got the internet.”

“I don’t care about the internet,” Dean said and climbed into the driver’s seat of the black Ford Explorer. It dipped to one side under his weight. I trudged around to the passenger side. I looked at my dad one last time. He laughed at me as we drove off.

I was eight the first time I realized how volatile Dean could be. On top of his physicality, Dean possessed an acute mind. Throughout my life, I marveled at his immense, albeit often trivial, knowledge.

We were on vacation in Florida, and the entire family had gathered around the television to watch *Jeopardy!*, which we did most evenings.

Dean never missed it, and I don't exaggerate when I tell you he got ninety percent of the questions right on any given episode.

That night, for reasons I'm uncertain of, I decided to say the answers after Dean said them. When the answer proved correct, I gloated, claiming I'd said the correct answer before Dean. The first few times I did this, he laughed.

"You didn't get that one right, Wilson," he said after the fourth time.

By the fifteenth question, Dean grew angry. "Stop doing that, Wilson! You don't know any of these answers. You're just a child."

The other adults in the room shifted in their seats.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure I do, Uncle Dean, and I said it first." His anger was filling me with child-like glee.

"Dean, he is a child. Will you calm down please?" my dad finally said.

"Jesus Christ," my grandpa said, before walking outside to sit in his Florida room, disgusted.

My mom watched the scene play out in horror. Brian rolled around on the floor, in front of the TV, dying of laughter.

"Stop laughing, Brian," Dean said. "Get out of the way of the TV."

I stopped answering questions for a while . . . Dean calmed.

When *Final Jeopardy!* came around, I waited patiently for my moment. Dean kept glancing at me, weighing whether or not he wanted to say his answer out loud. The music wound down.

"Who is Mikhail Gorbachev?" Dean blurted out at the last second.

"Who is Michael Gorbachoff?" I followed.

When Alex Trebek confirmed the answer was right, I flung my arms in the air. "I did it! I beat Uncle Dean at *Jeopardy!*"

Dean sprang off the couch and headed straight for me. "I'm going to kill you, Wilson!"

My dad tackled him onto a chair before he could get to me. Brian ran circles around the couch, howling with laughter. My grandma retreated to the kitchen to make tea, cursing under her breath. My mom dragged me off to my room.

When I peeked my head out a few minutes later, Dean and my grandpa were screaming at each other. My grandpa told him to leave. Dean slammed the door on his way out. My grandpa sat at the kitchen table with his Budweiser to calm down.

It took Dean five minutes to light up a cigarette in the rental car. He lit it as we curled down the on-ramp and merged onto the interstate. He didn't roll down his window. Instead of arguing, I lowered mine.

We rode for an hour, listening to the radio. Dean named the bands that performed each song. Sometimes he'd ask me who performed the song. He acted impressed if I knew and shocked if I didn't. Entering Virginia, we crossed a river, so I asked Dean to name as many rivers as he could. He named hundreds. If I'd never heard of the river, I asked where it was. The locations of the rivers often sent him on tangents about history. He ran out of rivers to name at some point.

"You want me to quiz you on state capitals?" I asked.

"Wilson, that would be too easy. It wouldn't be fun for me."

"What's the capital of Kentucky?"

"Frankfort." He lit another Winston. "Let's do world capitals."

For the next hour, I asked the capitals of all the countries I could think of. When I ran out of countries I knew, he rattled off countries and capitals for his own amusement.

Eventually, he started pointing out blue signs with the silhouette of a seagull on them, signs signaling the path to the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel.

"That's the reason we came this way," Dean said. "You've never seen anything like it. One of the seven architectural wonders of the modern world."

"Didn't Dad and Grandpa used to go fishing on the Chesapeake?"

"That's what they did together."

"You never went?"

"Wilson, do you really think I want to talk about my father?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know what he did to me?"

"What do you mean?"

"My father has forsaken me." Dean stiffened in his seat.

"Let's just talk about something—"

"My father has forsaken me."

"I got that. What the fuck do you mean?"

He stared ahead at the road for a minute, silent.

"My father sent me to a hospital," he said. "You don't want to know what happened inside."

"Okay."

"You don't want to know what happened inside."

"Okay, Dean. That's fine."

"My father is dead, Wilson."

I stared straight ahead.

"I loved my father," he continued. "Even after all he did to me. After

all the years he hated me. I loved him. He didn't know what he was doing. He actually thought it would make me better. My parents were image conscious. Do you know what that means? Image conscious? We lived in a neighborhood with people my dad knew from work. He'd never had anything wrong with anyone he knew. He was embarrassed. He thought what was wrong with me reflected poorly on him. So, he sent me away."

In silence, we chugged toward the Chesapeake.

One morning at age ten, my dad was reading a book in his room when his older brother kicked open the door. Laughing maniacally and wielding a four-by-ten shotgun, Dean blasted him in the chest at point-blank range. The shotgun shell knocked out his breath, and he thought he was surely dead. Dean laughed and told him to get up. He'd taken all the pellets out of the shell, so the impact was devastating, but nothing had entered my dad's body. Or so they thought.

Years later, my dad needed to have some x-rays done. They discovered a blood clot in his arm. In one of the x-rays, the doctor observed three metal pellets lodged in his chest. The doctor asked what had happened and my dad recounted that golden childhood memory.

The shotgun in question was normally used for duck hunting, which Dean was obsessed with. During their childhood, the creek running behind my grandparents' house was ice cold and isolated. It proved perfect for a duck blind. Dean spent years meticulously caring for his duck blind. He spent hours standing in the creek in thigh-high waders. He built decoy ducks. He shot target to master the skill of the hunt. That duck blind was one of the only things Dean ever cared about.

"I never saw my brother happier than walking across the field toward our house carrying a haul of ducks over his shoulder," my dad said.

We made a pit stop before the bridge and tunnel so Dean could get a gallon of soda. I called my dad while Dean was inside.

"Wilson, how's it going?"

"He's already smoking in the rental with the windows up."

I heard a long sigh and some cursing away from the phone. "Will you beat the hell out of him, please?"

"He's quite large."

"All right, boy," my dad said. "Glad things are going well."

He hung up.

Dean put the gallon of soda on top of the SUV and watched me walk up. “You didn’t tell him I’ve been smoking in the rental, did you?”

“You know I did.”

“Jesus, Wilson.”

We pulled up to the tollbooth before the bridge. Dean held the gallon of soda nuzzled between his side and elbow. Only Dean could look so normal holding a soda that size.

“Twenty-eight,” the attendant said.

“Twenty-eight dollars?” Dean said. “It used to be seventeen.”

The attendant shrugged. “Last increase was from twenty-four.”

Dean handed over the money. “It’s been a long time since I was here.”

We left the tollbooth in the rearview. Dean punched the gas. He looked inspired for the first time on the trip. He rolled down his window. Turned the radio up. His Winstons stayed in his pocket.

I didn’t think much of the view at first. A brush line gave way to a long row of houses on stilts. The houses gave way to a beach. It all leaked into the water as we sped out to sea. After ten minutes, we couldn’t see land. A man standing in a small fishing boat by one of the bridge pilings held a lifeless rod. He seemed so far away from everything.

“Here it comes,” Dean said.

I spun forward. Not far ahead, the bridge appeared to end in the middle of the bay. Like you’d drive right off. Then, on the other side of a massive expanse of open water, the bridge began anew.

“Okay, I get it now,” I said.

“I like the tunnel better,” Dean said.

We plunged straight down, deep under the bay. Cars in the oncoming lane appeared out of darkness. The deeper you went, the darker the tunnel became. Horns blared. Dean laid on his for thirty seconds. Then we climbed out, just as steeply, and emerged back onto the bridge.

Reaching the other side, we approached a trading post with a huge sign for crab-cake sandwiches.

“This is Maryland,” Dean said. “That’s probably the best crab-cake sandwich in the world.”

I went in and came back out with two sandwiches in a white paper bag. I handed Dean one, and we took off. I unwrapped what amounted to a crab cake on a hamburger bun with some tartar sauce and took a bite. Best crab-cake sandwich I ever had.



Not long after Dean took the acid and never came down, he reluctantly moved back in with my grandparents in New Jersey. He rarely slept and often made everyone uneasy.

One morning, after staying up all night, and for reasons known only to his diseased mind, Dean decided to sneak into my grandpa's room, put on one of his suits, a Stetson hat, his overcoat, and shoes, got in his car, and drove it to the Mobil Oil plant where my grandpa worked as a chemist. He somehow managed to get through security and use my grandpa's ID badge to enter his lab.

My grandpa, a proud man, whose internal devastation over having a disturbed son will never be understood by any living being, woke up that day like it was any other. He got ready for work, then opened the closet and realized his overcoat was nowhere to be found. His hat was missing too. He was resigned to the reality before confirming that his car was not in the garage.

He took a cab to work that day. The security guards looked at him like they had déjà vu. When he reached his lab, he yanked at the locked door. Through the glass he could see Dean spinning in his chair. They stared at each other until security came with a key.

The circumstances surrounding how it happened are unclear, but not long after Dean showed up to work as my grandpa, my grandpa convinced Dean to seek out psychiatric help. He shipped Dean off to a mental hospital not far from Princeton University. This was the early seventies, bad acid trips were new, and the preferred method of treatment was shock therapy. I'm not sure how complicit my grandpa was, but Dean received numerous shock treatments.

"He wasn't my brother anymore when he came back," my dad said.

As we left Maryland and entered Delaware, Dean told me a story about his first wife. They'd met in the mental institution where Dean got the shock treatments. My grandpa funded the wedding and secured a little house for them to live in upon their release. The bulk of Dean's story was about how the relationship ended, which happened before I was born.

He was working at this Sizzler-style steakhouse, slaving over a grill.

"I used to have to take three changes of shirts to that sweat bath," he said.

He got his wife a job as a waitress and, before long, grew suspicious of a flirtation between his wife and the "salad guy."

One night off, Dean decided to go to the restaurant and wait for his wife's shift to end to see what he could observe. He watched her leave the restaurant with the salad guy and get in his car. Dean stepped out of his car calmly, dangling a baseball bat by his side, walked over to the salad guy's car and busted out every headlight, taillight, and window while his wife and the salad guy sat inside.

"I never saw anybody as scared as that salad guy." Dean laughed.

I kept quiet for a long while after that.

Outside Woodstown, we pulled up to a combination Econo Lodge/Quality Inn. Eighteen-wheelers filled the lot.

"There's a Holiday Inn Express across the street," I said.

"Are you paying for the hotel, Wilson?"

In an attempt to placate me, he paid an extra ten bucks to stay at the Quality Inn side. We entered the room, and within minutes Dean wanted to switch over to the Econo Lodge side.

"They're the same thing," he said.

The Econo Lodge wasn't much different, and Dean got his ten dollars back. He liked that he could smoke in the new room.

"You see, Wilson, it's exactly the same."

"Dean, it's a shit hole."

"So was the other side."

I dropped my toiletry bag by the filthy sink and tossed my suitcase into the dusty closet.

After we got settled, Dean wanted to visit a man named Robbie, his best friend from grade school up through high school. They hadn't seen each other in a dozen years, but Robbie was expecting Dean and excited to see him.

Robbie lived on the outskirts of Woodstown. We arrived as darkness fell. Robbie had told Dean he'd be late getting home from his commute to Philadelphia. I sat in the rental car in the driveway of his three-story, log-cabin-style home, listening to the mad barking of what sounded like a dozen dogs inside. Dean stood outside smoking.

Robbie eventually showed up in a Mercedes-Benz and rushed inside, acting as if he hadn't noticed us. After a moment, he appeared on the porch ledge above and motioned us inside.

"Come on up, Dean, if you can fit through the door!"

The first floor was a wide-open space with cherrywood floors. Seven dogs that had been lying around a massive fireplace rushed us as we entered. I was most concerned about the Chow, the Rottweiler, and some sort of wolf dog, but Robbie assured us they were friendly. They didn't seem to be. They surrounded me and pushed me into a corner.

Mercifully, Robbie filled dog food bowls in the kitchen, and they scurried off at the sound of the hard food hitting metal. Dean entered and leaned against the counter. Robbie sized him up.

“Jesus, Dean, you look like a house.”

Dean didn’t respond right away. Robbie opened and closed some drawers.

“How’s Dia doing?” Dean asked. “She still live around here?”

“Sure, she’s still around,” Robbie said. “What are you doing, man? Are you going to go on a diet? You’re going to have a goddamn heart attack at this weight.”

“Is she single?” Dean asked.

“Who?”

“Dia.”

Robbie couldn’t seem to find what he was looking for in the drawers. His behavior was erratic. He seemed on edge. I had a sneaking suspicion he couldn’t find his drugs.

“Divorced,” said he said after a minute. “I’ll be right back. I need to run upstairs.”

“We’re leaving,” Dean said.

“You just got here.”

We got back in the rental and drove away.

“Who’s Dia?” I asked.

“Robbie’s younger sister. We dated in high school.”

I decided not to say anything more.

“Robbie’s always been an asshole, but he’s my best friend,” Dean said.

When I was eighteen, my grandpa died, and the whole family went down to Florida. My grandma had moved from their spacious house to a modest two-bedroom trailer in a retirement village. Dean came over a few hours after we arrived. I was sitting outside with my younger brother, listening to the radio, when he pulled up. He’d been putting on weight for years, but since we’d last seen him, he’d grown obese. He struggled out of the car, wearing Velcro shoes. He couldn’t bend over to tie regular shoes. He wore basketball shorts. An XXXL workout shirt, stained with food and ashes, draped over his massive belly like a maternity gown. He badly needed a haircut, and the top of his head was balding.

“Wilson, Brian, get in the car,” Dean said. “We’re hitting the gym. I’m going to show you that I can lift four hundred pounds.”

We shrugged and climbed over various trash into his car. I sat in the front seat, terrified the entire ride. The windshield and side windows of

this car were covered with a grimy film. I had no idea how he could see the road, yet he drove with disturbing confidence.

On the ride, he informed us that his longtime girlfriend, Lou, a saint of a woman who rescued greyhounds from the dog track in Sarasota, had cancer. He told us that he sat with her a few hours each day while she sewed quilts. He slept the rest of the day and stayed up most of the night. He blamed his weird schedule on his medication; he'd been on disability for years. He'd also taken up smoking to cope with Lou's illness, a man who once boasted of running a marathon for fun without training. They'd met at the grocery store, where she was a cashier, Dean explained the first time he introduced her to our family. One Christmas, he announced she'd become his girlfriend. A few years after our car ride to the gym, she would die, with no immediate family, leaving Dean alone with a house full of quilts.

We made it to the gym and climbed out of the car. Halfway to the door, Dean stopped, turned, and walked back to his car. He dug around in the trash in the backseat, tossing debris around like a dog, until he found a filthy black comb. He ran it through his balding hair several times then tossed it back into the muck.

Inside the gym, we stood around awkwardly and watched Dean bench press four hundred pounds. Four sets of two. His face turned an indescribable shade of red, and we thought he might have an embolism and die right there.

Midway through the set, a gym guy, razor-shaved head with a giant upper body walked over, clearly concerned. "Hey, man, be careful," he told Dean. "Nothing to prove here."

"Thank you," Dean replied. He watched the guy walk all the way across the gym. He didn't blink the whole time. Then he looked up at us from the bench.

"I guarantee you that idiot can't bench four hundred pounds."

When we got back to the Econo Lodge, I decided I could use a drink. There was a hole of a bar on the far end of the motel's massive parking lot. I power walked across the parking lot before Dean had a chance to object.

The bar was smaller inside than it appeared from the outside. Townies and cheap beer. I can't remember the name. Shuckers, maybe. I had a few drafts, and the night crawled along. At some point, I noticed a middle-aged blond woman walk in and sit across the bar. I couldn't quite make out the bartender's greeting to her, but it sounded like he'd called her Dia.

“Your name isn’t Dia is it?”

She looked at me funny. “It is.”

Talk about a one-horse town.

“Your brother is Robbie?”

“That’s right. Who are you?”

“You know a man by the name of Dean?”

“Dean Koewing?”

“He’s my uncle. I rode up here with him to see where he grew up.”

“Dean Koewing is here?” She lit up a little, like she remembered a Dean I’d never known and couldn’t imagine.

I had a few more beers and listened to her tell me stories about Dean and Robbie growing up, about how they drove fast down the long, straight roads outside of town. It got later and later. Around midnight, the door flew open, banged against the wall, and there stood Dean. He spotted me.

“Wilson! Did you ever plan on coming home?”

“You do realize I’m an adult, right?”

“It’s after midnight, Wilson.”

“Dean?” Dia said.

Dean’s head whipped in the direction of her voice. “Dia?”

“Sure, it’s me. How are ya?”

Dean looked at the ground. “I’m fine. It’s been a long time.”

“Come have a drink,” Dia said.

“No, I can’t. It’s too late.”

“Jesus, Dean, come in and have a drink,” I said.

“Time to come home, Wilson.”

Dean shut the door. I asked for another beer.

Six months after the road trip, Dean visited us at Christmas in South Carolina. My grandma had moved to South Carolina from Florida a few years earlier to be closer to responsible family, leaving Dean, a man who had never worked in his life, marooned on the southwest Florida coast among retired snowbirds.

When he arrived, he looked worse than ever, health deteriorated, personal hygiene ignored. He’d developed a debilitating cough that caused sharp pains, but still he chain-smoked Winstons.

“I think he’s got emphysema,” my dad said, sitting in his garage, drinking, staring off at nothing.

In the past, I’d made a Christmas tradition of giving Dean gag gifts. One year I bought him a couple packs of Winstons and wrapped them

up in seven boxes, each larger than the next. The box wouldn't fit on his lap. He was surprised and excited to see what might be inside. When he'd opened all the boxes he tossed them on the floor and went outside to smoke a Winston. He definitely didn't find it funny. Another year I pulled the same trick with a gift card.

That Christmas in South Carolina, I bought Dean a UNC-Charlotte jersey and wrapped it in a box. I didn't put it inside of a bunch of boxes; instead I wrapped the box with duct tape over and over and over again to the point where it would be nearly impossible to open. In my head I saw Dean furiously ripping open the box to show everyone his strength.

After trying and failing to open it, he set the box down beside the couch at my grandma's house. His eyes were bloodshot and watering.

"Wilson, why do you treat people this way?" he asked.

"I thought it would be funny."

I felt bad. I got some scissors, opened the box, and handed him his jersey. He examined it and acted as though he liked it. He went to bed early that night.

My grandma arrived at my parents' house alone on the next morning. When we asked why Dean wasn't with her, she said he decided to drive back to Florida. No one heard from him for two days, which was unlike him. He called my grandma almost daily, mostly to complain. Then on the night of December 30, 2011, we got the call that they'd found him in his bed, hooked up to an oxygen machine, dead.

The morning after visiting Robbie, I was awoken by a sliver of sunlight shining in through a slit in the curtains. Dean sat at the table across the room, silhouetted by the black curtains, smoking and staring at me.

"Wake up, Wilson," he said. "We're going to Princeton today."

I crawled out of bed and made my way to the sink. My razor had been removed from my toiletry bag. The blades were filled with clumps of hair.

"What did you do? Dry-shave with the fucking thing?"

"Just rinse it out, Wilson."

"Why didn't you rinse it out?"

Dean lifted himself from the chair and labored across the room. He didn't have any socks on. His toenails were an inch too long.

"Never mind," I said and got in the shower.

Before heading to Princeton, we stopped by the neighborhood he'd grown up in with my dad. Everything had changed, and he had trouble

finding the house. When he finally did, he got out and wandered around. I stayed in the car. I had no connection to the place.

“They added a room in the front,” Dean said when he got back in the car.

We drove around the neighborhood behind the house to get as close as we could to the creek where he’d fashioned his duck blind. There were several large mansions built in a row. The creek was behind them, through some woods.

“You want to go back there and see it?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t be able to find it.”

We left.

“I can’t believe all those million-dollar houses out here,” he said.

We drove an hour and a half up to Princeton. We ate lunch at a deserted Princeton bar. Dean picked at an order of fries. I had a sandwich and a beer.

Dean didn’t want to walk the campus even though it’d been his idea to visit. I wandered around. Ivy crawled down the sides of stone buildings. A stunning campus populated by some of America’s most extraordinary minds. In some different life, Dean might have attended.

I returned to the car, where Dean was waiting in silence, and we took off again. Dean remained silent as we headed back toward Woodstown. Not far outside Princeton, he whipped a left at a fork in the road and headed in a direction we hadn’t come. I said nothing.

When we pulled through the gates of the sprawling, one-story facility, it hit me. We’d arrived at the mental institution where he’d received his shock therapy. We rolled over a speed bump. He stopped the car in the middle of the driveway, lit a Winston, and rolled down the window. He pointed at a door.

“You see that door, Wilson?”

I stared at the dull brown door.

“If you think you’re free, walk through that door.”

We continued along the driveway that looped around the hospital. The place looked like an old-folks’ home or a grade school, nondescript brick buildings, the occasional tree. Not scary. A chain-link fence surrounded the grounds. Anyone could have jumped it. We passed an empty bench under a maple tree.

“I met my ex-wife on that bench,” Dean said.

We drove back toward Woodstown in silence.

When we made it back, we drove around the outskirts of town. I understood for the first time how New Jersey earned the name The Garden State. Before visiting, I’d imagined all of Jersey as Trenton, as Newark, as an industrial wasteland, Atlantic City, and the Jersey shore.

Now, viewing fields of grain measured in perfect squares so golden they shone back at the sun, I realized it wasn't that at all. Rolling hills tumbled and fell covered in sunflowers and purple lavender. Lone, bulbous trees, placed at random, rose amongst them. Scoff if you'd like, but it's not so dissimilar to an American version of Tuscany. The symmetry of the fields reminded me of how plots of land look from an airplane. Being too close to something masks imperfections and blurs edges.

I looked over at Dean as we rode. Tears rolled down his cheeks. The beauty of those fields wasn't lost on him. He'd driven those same roads forty years before. A dream of a life had rolled out before him then, a life far different than the one he now left behind.