

Theory of Patrick

Jeremy would explain his Theory of Patrick to anyone who asked him about the strange man who always haunted the break room during their lunch hour. After four years of working across from him, Jeremy felt duty-bound to deliver a brief to office newcomers about the danger of wandering unaware into the breakroom during lunchtime.

It went like this:

Everyone and everything, to Patrick, has a singular “thing” that you have to remember about them. In Patrick’s worldview, every object or abstraction in the universe has one single, indelible characteristic through which all its extraneous complexities can be explained.

Patrick seldom provides evidence for any of his claims. Those who bother to ask are assured that, if they’d seen half of what he’d seen, or lived half the life he lived, they’d think just the same as him.

On the first day they met, Patrick had told Jeremy, “The thing about Catholics is they take everything personally.”

In the parking lot, a week later, Patrick told him, “The thing about women is they want someone to tell them what to do.”

Last Friday, he found Jeremy watching replays of a football game on the TV in the lobby. They stood in silence as a referee penalized the home team 15 yards for a personal foul.

“The thing about modern NFL referees,” Patrick said, shaking his head. “They’re too politically correct.”

Nothing stops Patrick when he gets to talking, Jeremy had told the newest hire, Julie, on her first day half a year ago. You can say “uh huh”, “wow”, “no kidding” 100 times in a row and he still won’t get

the point. If you try to walk away, he will get up and follow you. You can say, “Patrick, I’ve got to run” and he will say sure, but then he’d launch straight into the next sentence like you hadn’t said anything.

Jeremy had made her laugh, then, with his impression of Patrick and a hapless victim.

Patrick, I’ve got to get back to work.

Sure, sure, no problem... You know, the thing you have to remember about the Marlins...

On Tuesday morning, their boss had announced that Patrick would be leading a sales call five hours away in Sioux City the next day, and he needed a second to drive up with him. A silence descended over the room as every member of the sales team sank into their seats and looked away.

After an uncomfortable minute, the boss had told them if someone didn’t step forward by the end of the day, he’d just send the person with the lowest sales that month. Everyone knew who that was, even though he didn’t say.

Julie had looked like she was about to cry after that. It’d been a bad month for Julie, Jeremy explained to the rest of the sales team after the meeting. She still hadn’t taken any days off since her father died. Or rather, the man she called her father died. He was really her distant cousin, or something like that. But he was still the guy who had raised her since she was a baby. The only member of her messed-up family she’d ever known or loved.

But company policy dictates that only the death of immediate biological family qualifies for “Grief Leave”. So Julie had been coming into work every day for the past couple weeks, deep purple bags under her eyes, looking like a hollowed out Julie-doll someone carved out of wax. Since her father’s death, she spent most of her time sitting at her desk, staring forward at the wall while her phone rang and rang. Her numbers dipped.

Sitting in that meeting, Jeremy had felt overcome by the image of her staring forward through the windshield from the passenger seat. Alone in the car with Patrick while he talked on and on. Five hours there, five hours back.

“The thing you have to remember about the death of a loved one...”

It took some convincing on Jeremy’s part, but the rest of the sales team finally agreed to draw lots for someone to take Julie’s place. They gathered around Jeremy’s desk, knowing Patrick would be where he always was at that time, feet propped up on the breakroom table, guarding the only route to the office bathroom. He would be working his way through one of his two limp tuna sandwiches real slow, just waiting for someone to walk by.

They tore up red printer paper into six long strips and one short one. Everyone drew long strips, and Jeremy reached for the last one, knowing he’d lost. As they walked away, everyone patted Jeremy on the back and told me what a nice guy he was. He stood leaning on his desk, after they’d all gone, holding that short scrap of red paper in his hand, staring at it. It looked like an open wound, lying there against his palm.

Patrick pulled into Jeremy’s apartment complex in the grey-lit hour before dawn the next day. Jeremy had already been awake for the past hour, lying in bed, fully dressed and looking at a yellow water stain on the ceiling, when he heard Patrick lay on the horn in the lot below. As he sprinted out of his apartment to stop Patrick’s honking, Jeremy’s neighbor Mrs. Killen opened her door in her bathrobe and cursed him.

“You could have just called,” Jeremy said, climbing into the passenger side of the company car. He looked up to see Mrs. Killen tapping her bony finger hard against her window glass and mouthing at them from above. In the window to the right of her, a young couple Jeremy hadn’t met yet appeared, the

girl wrapped in a white sheet and the boy shirtless. When they made eye contact, the girl sleepily gave Jeremy the finger.

“Can’t spare the minutes when honking’s free,” Patrick said happily. “The thing about phone companies is, they always try to screw you on the minutes.”

The clock crawled for the next three hours. Patrick talked, and whenever Jeremy noticed a pause in his speech, he said, “Interesting”. Patrick talked about Highway 80 truck stops, which had the worst lighting in the country. There were elderly rural Iowa drivers, who were kind at heart but overly cautious. He talked about their recently elected Democrat mayor, whose “thing” was being soft on border security.

“We live in Iowa, Patrick,” Jeremy said, before he could stop himself. “What border?”

The look Patrick gave him was almost gentle. Patrick looked at him like a teacher looking upon a dim child, envisioning the long, hard academic road ahead for him.

“You’re a nice guy, Jeremy,” Patrick said. “but you’re a political dunce. The thing about border security? It isn’t just a set of policies. It’s a state of mind.”

He must have dozed for a only a short moment, because Patrick was still talking about immigrants when Jeremy’s phone buzzed in his pocket and woke him up. It was Julie, thanking him profusely in text. *No biggie haha* he typed back. *Patrick is the worst.*

His phone buzzed again. *How bad is it?* she asked.

He typed back *haha maybe a 6 out of 10. Not so bad as far as Patrick goes. How have you been holding up?*

“Who are you talking to?” Patrick asked, frowning. He must have realized Jeremy wasn’t listening.

“Nobody,” he said. “Julie.”

“Julie’s hot, but she’s a little tease.” Patrick shook his head. “The sooner you realize that about her, the better off you’ll be.”

Jeremy’s face turned pink. “Her father just died.”

“Not her real father, though.”

Jeremy didn’t call him an asshole. He didn’t say anything. He just pulled out his phone again, hoping Patrick would take the hint. Julie hadn’t replied.

They stopped for gas, 200 miles or so out of Sioux City. As they were pulling out of the station, Jeremy noticed the needle on the temperature gauge on the dash was twitching against the red.

“I think the car is overheating,” he said.

Patrick smiled, tapping the glass of the console. “It’s been doing that the whole drive. They take care of these company cars, though, so it’s the gauge that must be broken.”

“It’s been overheating for the whole drive?” Jeremy asked. “We should stop somewhere.”

“No, aren’t you listening? It hasn’t been overheating for the whole drive. We don’t have any time to stop, anyway. The thing about these sales calls is, punctuality is key.”

As he pulled out onto the freeway and picked up speed, the needle swung higher into the red.

It was about half an hour later when the smoke started pouring from the hood. They were on a particularly long stretch of nothing, and Jeremy’s attention had been bouncing in between his phone, which still hadn’t received any texts, and the needle of the car, which was steadily climbing upward.

Patrick was plotting out the finer points of his plan for the sales call. “The thing you have to realize about Saul Bellman is that he’s a ex-military man, so he’s going to appreciate a more straightforward approach. None of that pussy-footing around that characterizes your style. Bellman’s old-school. A no-bullshit kind of guy. Just follow my lead and say as little as possible.”

“I think I see smoke coming out of the hood,” Jeremy said.

“Are you listening?” Patrick said. “I need this sale, Jeremy. We need to be united in strategy, I need you to be focused, not constantly making smart-ass remarks and checking your phone-”

There was a loud bang from the front and smoke spilled out of the hood, pouring over the windshield in a sheet and blocking out the view.

“Oh shit,” said Patrick, “Shit”:

He slammed on the brakes and pulled the wheel blindly to the right. The car swung off the road onto the unpaved shoulder a half foot below. The back end fishtailed in the dirt, and Patrick jerked the wheel left, then right right, trying to regain control. Then they were airborne. The car landed with a sudden, yanking stop.

Both men snapped forward against their seat belts and were immediately blown back by the airbags. They sat there in silence. A towering cloud of dust fell all around them.

“Are you okay?” Jeremy finally said.

Patrick sat frozen, then reached up and touched his chest, his head, his thighs. “I think so.”

“Okay,” Jeremy said, pushing the airbag out of his face. “Okay.”

Then he said, “Jesus, Patrick, what the fuck is wrong with you?”

They climbed out to survey the damage. Jeremy held a wad of square Starbucks napkins from the glove compartment against his bleeding nose. His temples throbbed.

The car had hit an irrigation ditch and landed on the pole of a pasture fence, taking down a whole section stretching for about 40 feet. The front end of the car was crunched up like a beer can, the barbed wire fencing twisted up in the wheel well. A crowd of a hundred or so cows moored in distress in the field beyond, stamping their feet and shaking their heads.

“This is fucked,” Jeremy said.

Patrick had been staring at the damage in silence. He didn't say anything for a while, then he walked over and kicked the back tire.

"These cheap wheels. The thing is, when you skimp on tires..."

"Can you shut up?" Jeremy said. "Could you please, for one moment, shut up."

"Okay, so you're upset?"

"I'm so sick of your shit, Patrick. Even, you know, even with the smoking evidence of your ignorance here in front of you can't admit that you don't know anything about cars."

Patrick stared at Jeremy. Jeremy glared back, holding the wad of napkins, now soaked in blood, against his nose. The only sound was the wind and the mooing of the cows. A drop of blood fell from the napkin and landed in the dust.

Patrick looked away first and pulled out his phone.

"I'm going to try to walk around and find a signal," he said. "We need to call Bellman. You should get more napkins for your nose and sit down somewhere."

Jeremy sat on a concrete slab jutting out of the ground and watched Patrick wander down the side of the highway. Pulling out his phone out of his pocket, he saw that he had a single bar.

His phone dinged. A text from Julie. It just said, *Poorly*.

He typed back, *shit, I'm sorry* and then deleted it. He typed *Well, I'm here, if you want to talk*, and then deleted it. He typed, *I know how you feel, when my dad died...*

He snapped his phone shut without sending the message and dropped it on the ground. It all sounded like the empty, worthless consolations of a colleague. Which in the end, is all it was.

Looking down the highway, he watched the tiny figure holding up his phone high in the air with an outstretched arm, waving it back and forth. As if he was trying to catch a signal like a butterfly in a net. Jeremy laughed, and decided to keep his one bar to himself. For now.

He heard a loud moo behind him. Jeremy jumped up and spun around. There were cows in the roadway, moving in a slow line across the highway towards the meridian.

“Oh fuck,” he said.

They were filing out, a group of a dozen or so of them, stepping over the crushed wreckage of the fence.

“Patrick?” Jeremy yelled. “The cows are escaping.”

He was too far away. Jeremy ran over to the car, opened the door, and started honking the horn, startling the nearest group of cows into a gallop. Patrick, far in the distance, spun around. He yelled something, threw up his arms, then started sprinting back.

Jeremy charged with his arms spread wide towards the nearest cow in an attempt to drive it back towards the pasture. It mooed loudly, galloped around him, and joined the group walking across the highway. The cows were really flowing now, out over the fence in a steady stream that moved around where he stood.

“Ah, fuck,” Jeremy said. Patrick ran up, dirty and sweating and his shirt untucked and his tie loose.

“What is happening here?” Patrick asked.

“Well Patrick,” Jeremy said slowly. “The cows have escaped the field, and now they are in the road.”

After ten minutes of running they managed to chase a single cow back towards the pasture. Most of the cows had assembled on the meridian, where they clustered and mooed and ran away from the two men’s advances. A few began to graze on the overgrown grass that stretched in between the two sides of the highway.

“This is a real situation,” Patrick said, with his hands on his knees, catching his breath. “I’m not quite sure what to do here.”

Jeremy squinted down the road. “Car’s coming.”

A black, sleek sedan was speeding down the highway towards the cows. Patrick shielded his eyes with his hand.

“That person is driving way too fast,” he said.

They continued to watch the car as it sped towards them. A brown cow walked down the road between them and the car, heading toward an untouched patch of grass further the meridian.

“They aren’t slowing down,” Jeremy said. “They’re not slowing down at all. I don’t think they’re going to be able-”

The black car’s brakes screamed. It spun sideways, the back end swinging out in front. The tail of car whipped into the body of the brown cow. The cow flew through the air, turning in somersaults, and landed with a thud among a cluster of cows near the fence. All of the cows, bellowing in despair, scattered in every direction.

The black sedan sat there for a moment, then straightened out and slowly pulled to the side of the road. The crowd of cows parted as it moved through them.

“What the fuck are you morons doing with your cows in the road?” A man with a shaved head, big, rippling forearms and wrap-around sunglasses climbed out of the car. He examined the back end of his sedan, which had crumpled against the bulk of the cow. The glass of the back window was shattered.

“These are not our cows,” Patrick said.

“Do we look like farmers?” Jeremy said at the same time.

The man pulled his sunglasses off. He had small, black eyes and a big red face. He surveyed the scene in front of him. Their company car, still smoking a bit from the hood, smashed up and entangled in

the fence. A line of cows now forming all the way across the highway to the fence on the other side. The two men, both in their disheveled business attire and covered in dust, one holding a bloody wad of napkins up against his nose.

“What is happening here, exactly?” he said.

“Why didn’t you stop?” Partick asked. “You can probably see these cows from a mile down the road.”

“This is a 100 mile straightaway of nothing. I didn’t expect there to be a fucking wall of cows across the road,” the man said, throwing out his arm towards the meridian. “I didn’t expect two freaks in business suits...”

Bill fell short when he saw them both staring at his outstretched hand, which was holding a small black cell phone.

Jeremy smiled. “Were you texting?” he asked.

Bill stared at the phone in his hand, looking surprised to see it there. Then he put it in his pocket and put his sunglasses back on. He folded his arms across his chest and lifted his chin.

“Would one of you just tell me what the hell is going on,” he said.

Jeremy and Patrick looked at each other. Then Patrick started explaining the situation they had all found themselves in, starting from the moment their car, which for some unknown reason, had started billowing black smoke all on its own. Jeremy stood and listened for a moment, until he remembered the cow that had been hit.

The mass of the cow lay slumped on its side in the ditch near the wreckage of the company car. As Jeremy approached, he saw it twitching softly and heard its faint, forlorn moan. The legs were obviously broken, crumpled at obscene angles out from the body like trees after a hurricane. Blood streaked in a long line in the dirt from the spot that the cow landed to where it had rolled into the ditch.

It was clear, even from a few yards away, the animal was done for. The massive, solid brown bulk shuddered with halting breaths. The eyes rolled sightlessly in their sockets, the mouth open and closed to let out guttural gasps. The one working leg kicked every once in a while.

Jeremy walked around to the other side. “Aw fuck,” he muttered as he saw the mess that was the cow’s underside. A slurry of blood, viscera, and milk leaked out from a gash running across the underbelly of the cow to the hip, pooling in the dirt. He watched the organs pulse and twitch as the cow shuddered and gasped for breath. Jeremy’s stomach twisted, and he turned away and closed his eyes. He loosened the tie around his neck.

He suddenly felt the midday heat. The sun was directly above bearing down mercilessly on the flat, dry landscape around him. Heat everywhere, from every direction, pooling under his stiff collar and black wool slacks. Heat rising in waves from the asphalt. Heat radiating from wreckage of the car, and maybe even from the guts of the enormous, ruined body of the beast in front of him.

“Jesus fuck,” someone said to his right.

Jeremy opened his eyes to see Patrick and the driver of the black sedan standing at his side, staring at the cow. Patrick looked pale. The driver was wearing his sunglasses again.

Jeremy worked his dry tongue inside his mouth. “It’s suffering,” he said.

No one said anything. The cow’s leg kicked a couple times, and it's right eye turned up, and seemed to fix on Jermeý’s face.

After a minute of silence, the sedan driver pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I don’t have a signal out here. Have either of you called for help?”

“I don’t have a signal either,” Patrick said. They both looked at Jeremy. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and looked at it.

“I’ve got one bar,” he said. Patrick looked furious. Jeremy shrugged and dialed 9-1-1.

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?” a woman’s voice said.

“Uh, hi, we’ve been in a car accident. Well, there were two accidents.”

“Has anyone been seriously injured?”

“No, I don’t think so. We’re just a little banged up.” Jeremy looked down at the body in front of him. “A cow was hit. The cow is dying.”

“You’re cutting out,” the operator said. “Did you say someone was dying?”

“Um,” Jeremy said. “No. No humans are dying or seriously injured.”

The operator asked for his name and number, and he gave it to her.

“What is your location?”

Jeremy surveyed the vast expanse of fields around him. “Shit, I’m not sure. The middle of nowhere. Um, okay, we’re on 29, about half an hour past the Jackson Rd. exit going north.”

He gave her a loose rundown of the incident, and she told him she would send two tow trucks and an officer to the scene. She said they should arrive in about an hour.

“An hour?” Jeremy asked. He looked around. “But there’s cows...there’s cows all over the highway.”

“We’ll send Animal Control as well, then,” she said.

“But...”

“There’s nothing we can do, sir. You’re very far from the nearest town. There’s only one tow truck available nearby. The officer might arrive sooner, but all he’ll be able to do is write down an accident report anyway, so I doubt he’ll be hurrying over. So you and the cows are just going to have to sit tight.”

Jeremy thanked her and hung up.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” the driver of the sedan said. “A whole hour?” He ripped his sunglasses off and chucked them down the road. They hit the backside of a cow and bounced off. The driver fumed for a second, then went to go retrieve them.

“Jeremy,” Patrick said, and stuck his hand out. “We need to call Bellman.”

Jeremy passed him the phone and Patrick yanked it out of his hand.

“Sorry,” Jeremy said.

While Patrick was making the call, Jeremy walked back to their car to look for water. He stepped tentatively over the barbed wire and opened the right rear door. Underneath the front seat, he found a crumpled Poland Springs bottle an eighth full. He poured it into his mouth all at once. It was warm and tasted strongly of plastic.

He climbed backwards out of the car, taking care not to step on the barbed wire. When he turned around, he was again facing the underside body of the cow. A stench like rancid milk and blood rose from the body, and flies had already begun to swarm around the wound. It lay still now, but as he watched, the leg twitched and a low moan escaped from the cow's mouth.

“Here’s your phone, asshole.” Patrick was standing at his side again, phone outstretched in his hand. Jeremy took it. “I don’t think Bellman believed me. You know, about the cows. I tried to send a picture, but I don’t think the signal is strong enough for it to go through.”

“I think the cow is still alive,” Jeremy said.

Patrick looked, then turned away and covered his mouth. “God, it stinks,” he said.

“I wish we could do something for it,” Jeremy said. “I wish we could put it out of its misery.”

“It’ll die soon enough,” Patrick said. They watched the cow's leg twitch again. “By the way, Julie texted you.”

The driver of the sedan’s name was Bill. Bill was using all of his remaining vacation days on a trip to stay with his girlfriend in Sioux City, he told them. He sat on the back of his car, chewing on a

Powerbar. Patrick was trying to lean casually against the car but Bill didn't quite give him the room for it. Jeremy sat on the slab of broken concrete by the road.

"God, I couldn't wait to get to her, and now I'm stuck out here in the middle of nowhere, and my car is wrecked, and it's hot as shit," Bill said through a full mouth.

Jeremy was re-reading the texts on his phone. *I appreciate everything you did, what with Patrick and all, Julie had written, and it's kind of you to ask. But I don't really want to talk about it with my co-workers yet.*

In a second text, she wrote, *I'm just trying to get through this. Please leave me alone for a little while. I'm sorry.*

Bill was showing Patrick a picture on his phone. "Huge, I mean *really big* tits. Not saggy, either, like sometimes big tits are." He gazed wistfully into the sky. "When I finally get up there, I'm going to make her get all dressed up. Make-up, black dress, hair all done up. Then we'll go to the bars, and I'll get her good and smashed. Then, I'm going to carry her home and fuck her til the sun comes up."

Patrick nodded knowingly. "You know, the thing you have to remember about women with big breasts is that they know they've got something special."

Bill turned to stare at him. Patrick smoothed his tie against his chest and went on. "You've got to be careful with those sexy women. If you don't make it there tonight, she just might find someone else to take her out to the bars."

Bill's expression was hidden behind his sunglasses.

"Is that so," he said.

"Oh yes," Patrick said. "I've had more than my fair share of big-breasted lovers. You should see this one girl I'm dating right now, I don't have a picture but..."

Jeremy shut his phone, got up and walked over the ditch where the body of the cow lay. The brown eyes looked dimmer now, but still blinked when a fly landed on them. The stomach swelled,

almost imperceptibly, with intermittent breaths. Every now and again, a faint shudder would ripple through the loose hide.

Jeremy walked back to the concrete slab and began trying to pull it out of the ground.

“What are you doing?” Patrick asked.

Jeremy wrapped his fingers around the edge of the stone, bent his knees, and pulled. The slab didn’t move.

“I need to put that cow out of its misery,” Jeremy said.

“You can’t smash it with a fucking rock,” Patrick said. “Jesus Christ, Jeremy. If you want to kill it, snap its neck.”

Jeremy gave up and sat down on the slab. He looked up at Patrick.

“I don’t know how to snap the neck of a thousand-pound cow, Patrick. I’m a fucking salesman,” Jeremy said. “Why don’t you show me?”

Bill laughed, hopped off the car, and clapped Patrick on the shoulder. “Hey, I’m interested in learning, too. Show us, Patrick. Never know when we’ll be in this situation again.”

Patrick turned to Bill, then back to where the body of the cow lay. “The thing about that is…”

Bill squeezed Patrick’s shoulder from behind. “You’re obviously a man who knows what he’s talking about,” he said. His hand clenched harder, close to the neck, bunching up the fabric of Patrick’s shirt. “A no-bullshit kind of guy, right?”

Patrick nodded and tried to wriggle his shoulder out of Bill’s hand. Bill let go, then threw his arm around Patrick’s shoulder and pulled him a few steps forward, gesturing down the road towards the body of the cow.

“Patrick, your good friend Jeremy is all torn up about the suffering of this animal. We could wait for it to die, but who knows how long that might take?” Bill said. “Luckily we’ve got a guy with the capacity to do something about it.”

Patrick looked unconvinced.

“No—not just a guy.” Bill poked him in the chest. “A real man.”

Patrick stood in silence for a moment. Then he squared his shoulders and nodded.

The men stood over the body of the cow, holding their shirts over their noses. There was little sign of life left in the animal but for the occasional blink or shudder.

“It’s going to die any minute now, I think,” Patrick said.

“It hasn’t yet,” Bill said. “Why wait if you can just take care of it?” He gave Patrick a shove towards the animal.

“Patrick,” Jeremy said. “It’s fine. Just leave it.”

Patrick stared at the cow and started pulling his tie. “I’m not even the one who wants to kill it.”

“Kind of seems like you’re full of shit, then, Patrick,” Bill said. “You can’t kill a cow, and I’m beginning to doubt that you actually have a girlfriend.”

Patrick stood a moment with his back to the two men, not moving. Then he unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt and started to roll up his sleeves.

“I’ve got to get a good stance going,” Patrick murmured to himself. “The thing about cows is they’ve got a lot of neck muscle.”

“Don’t try it,” Jeremy said. “Jesus, Patrick, just for once admit you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Patrick turned back to him. Jeremy had never seen the look on Patrick’s face before. His eyes were big and his teeth bit into his lower lip.

. But then the look disappeared and his mouth set in a hard, thin line. Without saying anything, Patrick lifted one leg over the body of the cow and stood straddling its neck. He reached down and lifted up the head of the animal. He held it for a moment, staring into its face.

Bill started laughing. “Are you going to kiss her? Does she remind you of your girlfriend?”

Patrick took a deep breath and put one foot on the cow’s neck. Then he yanked its chin back towards him. The head twisted about 30 degrees, then snapped straight back, almost throwing Patrick to the ground. The cow let out a low, strangled scream.

“You dumb bastard,” Bill said. “You’re making this cow’s last moments agonizing. Now you have to kill it.”

“Patrick,” Jeremy said. He put his hand on Patrick’s shoulder. Patrick froze, and then shrugged Jeremy’s hand off his shoulder. He leaned back down and grabbed the head again. Bending his knees, he gathered his strength for a moment like a weightlifter. Then he pulled back with his whole body.

Patrick's hands slipped off the cow’s chin and he fell backwards, landing on his ass in the dirt. Bill bent over hooting, slapping his leg.

“This,” Bill gasped out between laughs, “this lying fool!”

For a moment, there was only the sound of Bill laughing and the cow moaning, louder and more ragged now. Patrick lay in the dirt, staring up at the sky. He started to get up, and then his body seemed to collapse on its own. Jeremy walked over and offered his hand. Patrick ignored it. Jeremy stood there, hand outstretched, waiting. They remained like that for too long.

“What in God’s name are you men doing?” a voice over a loudspeaker said.

They all looked up. A patrol car idled 30 feet away down the road. A cop sat inside staring at them, holding a loudspeaker microphone in his hand.

Patrick clambered up quickly, trying to slap dust off his pants and back. The cop car rolled forward slowly, bumping a cluster of cows out of the way, and stopped next to them. The cop rolled down the window.

“I’m going to ask you again,” the cop said slowly to them. “What you men were doing to that poor cow.”

Bill and Jeremy looked at Patrick, who stopped slapping at his clothes and stared down at his shoes. They all waited. Patrick hands crept up to his tie, and started tugging at it again.

“The thing about that cow.” he said, finally, still looking at his shoes. “It was suffering.”

It was dark when the tow truck finally dropped them off in Jeremy’s apartment parking lot. The ride home had been mercifully quiet. Patrick had stared out the window most of the ride, fingering and smoothing his tie against his chest. Jeremy, too, had stared out the window, until the gentle hum of the engine and his exhausted mind finally pulled him down towards sleep.

He’d woken up as the truck pulled off the highway into town. The two men stood now in the parking lot, beneath a streetlight, not looking at each other. Jeremy tried to think of something to say, to make Patrick feel better, to tell him that he was sorry that what happened had happened. But his mind was still fogged from sleep, and though he grasped for them blindly through the haze, the right words were nowhere to be found.

“I can give you a ride home,” Jeremy said.

He looked at Patrick, who stood gazing up into the lighted apartment windows. They could hear the clink of dinner plates, the low murmur of voices, and in the distance, an ambulance beginning to wail.

“The thing—” Patrick said, and stopped. Jeremy waited.

“It’s a warm night,” Patrick said at last. “I think I’ll walk.”

The Bobcat Fire

The morning after Catherine left, Mason sat alone on the torn and bent lawn chair on a rocky outcropping behind the manufactured house, looking through his binoculars at the scorched side of the distant mountain. A midsummer wildfire had ripped over the range across the valley from the farm, leaving a jagged line of burnt black across the far off golden hills—a long charcoal smear on the blonde mountainside that ran halfway up to the tip of the ridge.

The month of burning, he and Catherine had sat silent behind their facemasks on this same spot every night. In the darkness, they watched the far black hillside glow with embers that lasted weeks after the flames died down. They watched helicopters dumping buckets of water that didn't do much. In the end, the fire reached the tree line, ran out of fuel and put itself out.

Before it died, the fire had taken out the Lechnier operation, as well as the Jacksons. The exact locations of weed farms are well-kept secrets, even between friends in the grower community. But with the tree cover gone, Mason found the burnt frames of their trailers, exposed and abandoned among razed clearings on the mountainside. Piles of dirt lay in straight lines across the meadows where plant beds used to be.

Underneath his facemask, Mason licked his dry lips. Looking through the binoculars too long made his head ache. When he stood up to leave, the hangover in his gut twisted. His vision swam and he felt he might pass out.

The late morning was silent, no birds singing, and no wind to blow away the smoke that still hung low in the valley. The sun was already high in the sky, beating down hard on the rock where Mason stood..

Scooter the hound dog began baying inside the house for his breakfast, just as the phone in his pocket started to buzz. Mason let it ring for a while, pulling his face mask away to take a long swig of warm water from the hose by the porch. He wiped his mouth, then pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“Willie,” Mason said into his phone. He unlocked the door and entered the kitchen. Scooter stood over his bowl, and at the sight of Mason he wagged his tail and his howls increased in volume and frequency.

“Is that Scooter?” said the raspy, tinny voice on the line. “Why haven’t you fed him yet?”

“I just came inside to do that,” Mason said. He snapped the fingers of his free hand at Scooter. The dog didn’t stop wailing until his full bowl was set in front of him, making conversation impossible. Willie waited until Scooter had started slurping and crunching over the bowl to continue.

“It’s good news, Mason my friend.” Willie said. “Coming in from all over the state. Final total: fifty-six Shasta grow sites destroyed in the Bobcat Fire. The Collins Fire in the Santa Cruz Mountains probably took out thirty, maybe forty more.”

Mason let out a rattling cough. “How is that good news?”

Willie laughed. “Basic supply and demand, Mason” he said. “Our competition this year has literally gone up in flames.”

While they spoke, Mason lowered his body to the kitchen floor. Willie detailed the size and the scope of this year’s destructive fires, and the havoc they wreaked on the grower community. His voice cut in and out, but Mason didn’t say anything because he wasn’t really listening. He rolled over and touched his face to the floor. The cool tiles felt merciful on his cheek. He pushed Scooter away with his foot when the dog came over to lick his face.

“I suppose that means that all your properties survived,” Mason said, once Willie had stopped speaking.

“That’s right, Mason, old boy” Willie said. “Death has passed over my door.”

He went on for a few more minutes, listing off the names of his friends and acquaintances who'd lost their farms. The pretense of friendly conversation satisfied, he turned the talk to business.

"Harvest should start today, Mason. Think you and Catherine can handle all those plants yourselves?"

"Um," Mason said, raising his face from the floor. "I was going to tell you. Catherine's gone."

"What does that mean?" An edge crept into Willie's voice. "Where did she go?"

"I'm not sure. We fought last night. She left." Mason touched his palm flat against the floor. "Probably for good."

There was a silence on the other end of the line. When Willie spoke again, his voice was tight and harsh.

"She isn't coming back?"

"I don't think so, Willie," said Mason.

Willie's voice grew more measured as he spoke, but assumed a flat affect that Mason knew meant he was holding back anger.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mason, for a couple different reasons. You need to hire a new harvester today. Take the truck into town and find someone—can you do that?"

Mason said he could. Willie remained on the line silent for a moment, then grunted by way of sign-off and hung up.

Scooter approached again, and this time Mason sat up to scratch behind his ears. The old dog licked his cheek, and Mason pulled him closer and sank his face into the fur of his neck.

After he got off the phone with Willie, Mason didn't drive into town. Instead, he busied himself cleaning the house, in the hope of jogging memories from the night before. Catherine left most of her

clothes behind, along with her books, her hairdryer, and a straw cowboy hat he'd bought her in town the day she arrived.

Reaching into the cushion of the faded red armchair in the living room, Mason pulled out an empty fifth of Wild Turkey. He'd woken up in this same armchair at 4 AM the night before, alone, the television screen painting the living room a glowing blue.

Still drunk, he'd risen from the chair and walked towards the bedroom. The bed was empty, but the drawers had all been pulled open, clothes were strewn about in evidence of a hasty departure. In the bathroom, Catherine's side of the sink had been cleared away.

When he walked outside, he found the old Ford truck still sitting in the driveway. How far could she have gone? There was two hours of driving, down pitch black, winding mountain roads between here and the freeway, and another forty-five minutes before Arceville, the nearest town.

When he walked around the side of the house to find that ATV gone, he put it all together. But there wasn't nearly enough gas in the ATV's tank to make it to the highway.

He started up the truck, and almost made it to the property gate before the front tire slipped off the flat road into the soft dirt of a ditch. An hour of jamming in the accelerator only succeeded in driving the wheel deeper into the earth. While he struggled, he called Catherine's phone over and over again. She never picked up, and eventually the calls started going directly to voicemail. Drunk and defeated, he'd left the truck there and returned to the empty bed.

The night she left remained a mostly black void in Mason's memory. All that was left were flashes of scenes like still images of a movie. The two of them were screaming across the table, and Scooter cowering in the corner. Mason hand jerking the doorknob of the locked bathroom, and his other hand was slapping flat against door. Standing alone outside without his shirt, staring up at a sky full of blurry stars..

Today, he sat on the armchair, the TV now dark and Scooter sleeping at his feet. His head hurt from the effort of remembering. Eventually he gave up, his hungover exhaustion overtaking him.

When he woke up, it was dark again outside. He sat, absorbing in the vast silence, broken only by the occasional quiet snore from Scooter.

With a start, he remember the truck in the ditch. Too late—too dark—now, he thought. He walked to the fridge and retrieved a beer. He would have to dig it out tomorrow.

“Scoot,” Willie said aloud. The old dog stirred at his feet and looked up at him. “Your owner would kill me if he found out I’ve been sleeping all day.”

His voice breaking the silence sounded strange. It disappeared too quickly, as if the stagnant air in the house formed a vacuum that sucked the sound away. Mason spoke again, louder this time.

“I mean.” He stopped, cleared his throat and started again. “He might actually kill me.”

Mason let the words vanish at the edge of his lips. After a moment, he rose from his chair and walked to the window. Outside, he could see nothing. A perfect dark pressed on all sides. Mason felt the house was a small, enclosed capsule within a sea of black, like a submarine hovering just above the ocean floor.

The next day Mason woke up at noon. He donned his mask and set out for the truck with a shovel, determined to make it into town by evening.

Digging was gruelling work. The sky was overcast, protecting him from the usual blazing sun. But the clouds kept the heat and smoke low to the ground and Mason soon began to sweat underneath his mask. The tire had burrowed deep into the heavy clay beneath the soft topsoil, and each shovelful strained his muscles as he lifted and dumped the earth a few yards away. His lungs and arms began to ache after an hour.

By four, he'd managed to dig and pat down a makeshift ramp running from the wheel of the ditch to the road. He'd just removed his mask to wipe his mouth when the first raindrop hit the tip of his nose.

The rainy season wasn't supposed to begin until after harvest, but here it was, first as a light shower, then harder as Mason rushed to back the truck, gunning it out of the ditch. By the time he'd returned to the house to grab his jacket and wallet, it had begun to pour.

There'd be no going into town now. The dark rain clouds were growing darker with the coming evening. The road would soon become treacherous with puddles of uncertain depth. It'd be just his luck to get the Ford out of a ditch, only get it stuck in fresh mud on the road into town.

Mason hung his key on the hook by the door, and a knot of worry began to form in his stomach. Rain would double the drying and curing period. Willie would expect at least some of the crop to be indoors by now. Mason would have to think up a lie, to explain why none of the supply would be ready come shipping time. He wondered what kind of excuse a man like Willie might accept.

As a temporary hire, Mason was introduced to Willie only a few weeks before he took on this harvesting job. But he'd known Willie's name. Every grower in California did.

Willie and his unknown associates had built one of the largest networks of pot farms in the state, seemingly overnight. In only five years, they'd seized control of a lion's share of the local market away from operations that had been in business for generations. Rumors swirled among growers. Willie's crew started their own fires. Willie's guys showed up on doorsteps with guns. Willie's crew made people disappear. Mason dismissed the rumors as stoner lore when he took on the job. Each of them came back with a vengeance now.

It began to thunder, and Scooter drew his bony body close to Mason on the couch and trembled. Mason stroked his fur until the dog stopped shaking and fell asleep. It rained hard the whole night, and would continue for the next two days.

On the second night of rain Willie called Mason four times in a row before he answered. Willie's own farm in Chico was caught in the same rainstorm. The waterlogged buds of his plants had begun to sag, threatening to snap their branches with their weight.

There was no pretense of friendliness in Willie's voice now. He almost shouted his instructions at Mason in a steady stream of words, pause only to yell different orders at unseen workers on the other end.

Mason needed to get to the field now, and shore up the unharvested plants with twine, tying the thinner outer branches to the trunk for support. Each branch needed to be tied separately, Willie said. No bunches.

"No bunches, Mason" Willie repeated. "Do it now. Tens of thousands of dollars are on the line."

He hung up before Mason could reply. .

Mason put on his headlamp and rain poncho and headed out for the field. He couldn't see past the circle of light from his lamp, but all around him he could hear the howling of the wind and unceasing splattering of the rain. By memory, he navigated a path through the thick bushes and pine, emerging into a clearing an acre wide, where the shadowy forms of the plants stood in long lines.

As he approached, Mason could see that the buds were indeed sagging on their branches, some covered in dirt from dragging against the ground. There were almost a hundred plants, each with dozens of branches that needed tying. It would take all night. Maybe longer.

His boots sank deep into the soft earth as he worked. More than once, his foot slipped into a puddle and he fell on his knees and hands. His pants were soon sopping wet, his feet soaked and freezing. The sticky sap from the plants covered his hands, making it almost impossible to work with the string and scissors.

. After an hour and a half in the freezing, wet dark, he'd only managed to finish ten of the 97 plants. He took a break on a rock at the base of a pine tree, taking deep pulls from the flask he'd brought. Bursts of wind shook the tops of the plants and blew the freezing rain sideways..

“Fuck this,” Mason said aloud.

He rose and began tying up branches of the nearest plant in groups of three, and then five, and then just winding the string several times around the circumference of the bushes like Christmas tree lights. He worked with a half-drunk, single-minded ferocity until the last plant was tied up, just as the sky began to lighten with the approach of dawn..

His body aching, his limbs numb, it was all Mason could to get out of his muddy clothes, climb into bed and pull the covers haphazardly over his shivering frame. He fell asleep quickly, and didn't wake up until three the next day.

The rain had cleared the air of smoke , no small mercy after a month of breathing bad air. Mason kept the windows open as he drove down the mountain, sucking up the first fresh air he'd tasted in months—a sweet, piney, damp breeze swirling about the car and lifting his spirits.

No rain so far today, but it was still slow going down the mountain. Deep, muddy puddles pockmarked the surface of the road. Mason drove around them when he could, and when he couldn't, he stopped the truck to measure their depth with a stick before pushing slowly through them.

Mason rolled into the Acreville Walmart parking lot around 7 pm. Inside, he bought enough food and toilet paper for the next three weeks, as well as a case of wine. As he was leaving the store, he caught sight of a young Hispanic man in his early twenties standing on the curb. In his hands he held a cardboard sign with the word “TRIM” written in sharpie.

“Excuse me,” said Mason. “You’re looking for work?”

The man sized him up and down, then nodded.

“I need a harvester,” Mason said. “You ever do that before?”

The man shrugged and gestured to his mouth. “*No Ingles.*”

Mason tried to remember his limited Spanish from high school. “Necesito harvesters. No trabajo por...trimmers. Ahora.”

The man shrugged again, so Mason patomined cutting a branch off of a bush with shears. The man’s face lit up with understanding, but he shook his head and pointed to his sign.

“I think it will be alright,” Mason said. “It’s not so complicated.”

On the way back the rain started falling again. The kid, Eduardo, seemed nervous to Mason. He kept looking back the way they came, and reading the signs at every fork in the road—as if trying to memorize them for a later escape.

Mason tried his best to keep the mood light.

“I know you can’t understand me,” Mason said in a chipper voice, navigating around a puddle that took up most of the road. “But it’s nice to have someone to talk to who isn’t a dog.”

Eduardo nodded and smiled thinly whenever Mason looked over. He played with a loose string on the cuff of his work jacket.

“We’ve got our work cut out for us,” Mason told him. “Tomorrow Willie is going to call, and he’ll want to hear that I’ve prepped the sheds for drying and cut down at least half of the plants.”

The car struggled at the bottom of the steep grade of a switchback. Mason pushed the accelerator and the truck groaned up the hill.

“I haven’t done any of that,” he said. “So we’re going to have to lie a little.”

They were about an hour past the highway when Mason caught a glimpse of bright red and yellow among the greenery. He slammed the brakes. Eduardo jerked forward against and his backpack of gear flew off his lap, tumbling to his feet.

“Sorry,” said Mason. Eduardo muttered something under his breath in Spanish as Mason pulled the truck to the side of the road and hopped out.

Two tracks of crushed foliage led to the ATV, where it had been pushed into a hiding spot behind the bushes a few yards from the road. A trash bag of clothes, now soaked with rain, was bound to the side with a bungee cord.

Mason searched the surrounding area but found no other signs of Catherine. When he returned, he was carrying the trash bag. He threw it in the truck bed.

“I guess she decided to travel light,” Mason said to Eduardo with feigned cheeriness, as he climbed into the front seat.

Eduardo nodded again, twisting in his seat to look at the ATV.

“We’ll have to come back for that,” Mason said. “Add it to the lengthening To-Do list.”

He started up the truck and pulled back onto the road. After a moment of staring through the windshield in silence, he started talking again.

“I wonder what happened after she ran out of gas,” he said. “She must have started walking.” He whistled low. “That’s a long, long walk in the dark. I hope someone picked her up and gave her a ride. Someone nice, and safe.”

He turned to look at Eduardo. “What do you think, Ed?”

Eduardo stopped tugging at the string. He pulled up the corners of his mouth again and shrugged.

“If she just waited, I could have taken her next time we went into town,” Mason continued, turning back onto the road. “If she just waited, maybe we could have...”

He trailed off. They rode for a little longer, then Mason suddenly slapped the palm of his hand, hard, against the steering wheel. Eduardo jumped.

“Women,” Mason said. “One bad night, and she runs away into the dark—leaving behind her paycheck! And a whole bunch of work for me.”

At his side, he heard Eduardo cough. Maybe he understood more English than he let on, Mason thought. Maybe Eduardo was judging him.

“I’m not bitter,” said Mason, returning to his upbeat tone. “I’ll send her the money, and her clothes. Once I figure out where she’s gone.”

It was pouring again when they arrived, and Willie called that night instead of the morning. Mason stood in the kitchen and assured him that he’d found a harvester, a good one, and that they were right on schedule.

“You’d better be, Mason,” Willie said. He made no effort to disguise the threat behind his words. Rain didn’t just mean delays—the damp also brought with it the chance of mold. Within the thick clusters of buds, mold spread quickly. Blind, hungry microbes might eat through thousands of dollars of product in a single night. Willie’s income was now subject to the whims of nature and the relative strangers that he’d hired. He did not respond well to matters so far out of his control.

Mason hung up the phone and turned to Eduardo, who was unpacking his backpack and rolling out his sleeping bag on the couch.

“Muy trabajo mañana,” Mason told him. “But tonight, we should rest.”

Eduardo nodded, and looked around the house. Then he turned to Mason, and pinched his finger and thumb together in front of his lips.

“Ah,” said Mason. He fetched a quart-sized jar from on top of the refrigerator, still full of small buds and shake left behind by last years harvesters. The masking-tape label on the jar read “Dream Queen”.

While Eduardo rolled, Mason went into the kitchen and uncorked a bottle of red wine. He emptied the bottle into a plastic Big Gulp cup from the cupboard. He sipped and pulled his phone out. No messages. He tried Catherine’s number.

This time, a robotic voice on the other end told him that the number he had dialed was no longer in service. He snapped the phone shut. She’d blocked his number. Or maybe she changed hers. At least that meant she was alive, wherever she was.

When he returned to the living room, Eduardo had lit the joint. The boy offered it to him with an outstretched arm.

“Not for me,” said Mason, waving it away. He took a long gulp of wine. He closed his eyes as he felt his body relax. When he opened them, he saw Eduardo staring at him, his eyes asking an obvious question.

“Never took to the stuff, myself,” Mason said. “It’s just a job for me.”

He rose to the tips of his toes, stretching his arms and his cup high above his head.

“It makes me feel too light,” he said. He stood there, frozen and holding his breath. Then he lowered his cup to his lips and gulped, holding it to his mouth until all the wine was gone. Mason tossed the empty cup into the kitchen and sank to his knees, lowering his head down slowly until his forehead touched the carpet.

“When what I really need right now,” he said to the floor, “is to feel heavy.”

When Mason raised his head, Eduardo was still staring at him. When their eyes met, Eduardo nodded quickly and forced a smile, stretching the sides of his mouth out in a flat line. In the dim living room, the wide whites of his eyes looked brighter.

It was the next morning that Eduardo found the mold. They'd been working on opposite sides of the field when Mason heard Eduardo calling for him.

"Mira," said Eduardo when Mason jogged up. He held up a clump of branches lashed-together with twine. With his free hand, he clipped the string, and the cluster of fell open. In the center was a soggy, decaying mass of mashed-together buds, speckled white and blue with mold.

Mason breath caught in his throat. There was easily five hundred dollars rotted away in Eduardo's arms.

Mason grabbed at another bunch of lashed-together branches and pulled them open. It was there, undeniable, corruption gaping like a wound or a sore. He ran from plant to plant. It wasn't in every bunch, but it was more than enough. Much more than could be overlooked in a final tally. More than could be explained away. More than could be forgiven.

Through a panicked set of gestures and elementary Spanish words, Mason sent Eduardo to find every branch and bud with mold and bring into the house.

He filled his own arms and carried them to the living room's fireplace, where he tried in vain to light the waterlogged branches by setting fire to crumpled pieces of newspaper underneath. Eduardo appeared behind him, dripping and shivering. He watched Mason struggle with the fireplace in silence, then dropped his pile on the floor and walked out.

"Won't light," Mason muttered to himself. He pulled the branches out of the fireplace and searched the house something dry to burn. There was nothing made of real wood except the dining table and chairs.

He turned a chair upside-down and kicked with the heel of his boot, splintering the legs until they snapped off. Behind his head, he heard Eduardo enter the kitchen, throw down his branches, and leave

right away. Once he'd kicked off all four legs and their connecting spindles, Mason threw the pieces of the chair into a pile in the fireplace.

The newspaper burnt up quickly, the flames licking the lacquered wood for just a moment before going out. After some thought, Mason retrieved the trash bag from the back of the truck and began pulling out Catherine's clothes. The clothes closer to the bottom of the bag were the least damp. Crouching by the fire, he held his lighter to her thin white, lacy top. It caught, and Mason let the flames build until they almost reached his hand. He flung the shirt into the fireplace. It extinguished immediately.

Mason stood up, and surveyed the scene in front of him. The splintered limbs on top of newspaper ashes, covered by the smoldering, half-burnt top. Two large piles of rotting weed, liquefying plant matter and mud staining the carpet.

When Eduardo returned with his third load, he found Mason sitting in the red armchair, drinking wine straight from the bottle.

"Just throw that somewhere," Mason said, waving at the ruined living room carpet. "We're giving up."

Mason sat up that night, drinking, looking into the cold fireplace and talking. Eduardo, unable to fall asleep on his couch, was forced to stay up and listen to babbling in a language he did not know.

Mason speculated on how many pounds of product had been destroyed. He wondered aloud what Willie might do to him, once he was found out. If he should just make a run for it tomorrow, grabbing Scooter and trying to get as far from Willie and his network as he could. Couldn't leave Scooter of course—someone needed to feed him. But where would they go? Willie would be even angrier that Mason stole his dog. But he couldn't just leave Scooter alone until Willie showed up. Once, after dozens of unanswered calls, Willie finally realized that Mason had skipped town.

Mason stopped rambling for a moment, his breathing hard. Then it suddenly lapsed quiet in the room. Eduardo peeked open his eyes, hoping that Mason had finally fallen asleep. But he saw the shadowy figure leaning forward with his arms on his knees, head bowed.

“It was all because of the wildfire.” Mason said suddenly. “The smoke drove us inside.”

He twisted in his chair to face Eduardo. His eyes were bright and glassy, and he shivered at random intervals as he spoke.

“Smoke gets in everything. It got in our hair, in our clothes, into our heads. We were stuck inside for months, and the smoke still snuck in through the cracks in the walls and under the doorways. We were always coughing, always short of breath. We had no one to talk to but each other. We fought all the time, she cried all the time. I drank too much, and then I’d cry too. I told her things would get better, but they just kept getting worse.”

Mason pointed his bottle at Eduardo. “I moved onto that couch. Then we stopped fighting. But we also stopped talking.”

He turned back to the fireplace, and took a long, deep swig, finishing off most of the bottle.

“That was worse. I hated not talking. I hate the quiet,” Mason said. “After a week, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I got it in my drunk head that if I started a fight with her, at least we’d be talking. At least there’d be words in the air again.”

He held his bottle up to the firelight, considering his last glittering sip of wine.

“That didn’t work. Now it’s quiet all the time.”

He slugged down the wine and raised the bottle over behind his head with one arm. Eduardo flinched, and Mason swung it into the fireplace, shattering the bottle and scattering glass and ashes across the carpet.

“First comes the burning,” Mason said. “Then the rot.”

Neither of them spoke. Mason frowned at the fireplace, as if someone else had thrown the bottle instead of him. He got up and stamped out the burning embers on the carpet, not looking at Eduardo. He mumbled an apology as he disappeared into the bedroom.

In the morning, Mason woke once again to find the house empty. This time, the Ford was gone from the driveway, along with its key that hung from the rack by the door. He walked outside and stood in the spot where the truck once sat.

From here, he could see the opening to the path that led to the unharvested field, where mold was still spreading from plant to plant like a cancer. The phone began buzzing in his pocket. He held his breath until it stopped.

A gentle wind blew across the treetops, bringing with it the scent of sap and rainy earth. Just underneath, Mason thought he could detect the faint smell of must. In the house, he heard Scooter start to howl.

His phone went off in his pocket again, stopping, and then beginning again a third time. Mason didn't move.