FICTION

THE VAST HUMAN WHATNOT

by DAVID NUTT

Seven-year-old Gunderson: chicken hips, rubber muscles, a hasty gait. The boy's mother tortured him with lessons in Victorian etiquette that she herself had resisted as a youth, and when those instructions failed she resorted to scissors. The woman adored her scissors. She sculpted Gunderson's head so near to the scalp that the neighbors assumed he was undergoing some kind of withering chemical treatment. Whenever he pedaled past on his bike they quietly eased their curtains shut, depressed by the strange sight of the child, so hairless and brave. Today was another malevolent barbering. Gunderson stood before the mirror, flinching at his own pale head, the bare military cut.

"Would you like more off the side?" his mother asked. She gripped the scissors. Gunderson dared not speak. "A work of beauty," she whispered and forced him into a pirouette. "Be thankful I didn't make you Maltese."

Gunderson squirmed away from her hands, the scissors, his own contorted face.

"Son," she said.

"Gunderson," he corrected her.

He much preferred the country drives with his father. Backwater roads, hillside vistas. His mother stayed home, emboldened on her secret vodka and threatening the dachshunds with haircuts the boy had been spared. Gunderson thought the mountain views were unnatural. They looked nothing like the world. Then his father would steer them into some tire station or junkyard full of automotive curios, always the same rickety gates, the same filthy Labrador chewing the same ragged sock, vehicular carcasses with their copper innards spread on the dirt yard. Gunderson stayed in the car. His father walked slow among the grease-caked organs, marooned engine blocks. He'd pause at a chassis, reach into the exposed compartment, and yank free a coiled and corroded piece that he held up by its stem like a pulled turnip for Gunderson to observe. The boy nodded as if he understood.

When they returned the house was quiet and Gunderson's mother was sitting on the floor in the den, surrounded by tan strips of fake leather, whole burgundy flanks jaggedly sliced and full of fray. She had skinned the sofa chair with a bowie knife. The knife belonged to Gunderson Senior, who crouched over the pile of couch skins to shake his head at the handiwork.

"Sometimes scissors are not enough," shrugged the woman, who was now on her feet and kissing her men. She said the drapes were next.

"Bud isn't feeling so good," his father interrupted, hand on the Gunderson cranium.

"Even cowboys get carsick."

"That's not it. Is it, Bud?"

Gunderson was unable to swivel under the weight of his father's hand, so he grunted instead, a far-throated noise.

"Carsick or mute?" asked his mother.

"Tell her, Bud."

"What's this Bud business about?"

"Been calling him that for years."

"Years," she sniffed.

"The boy is sick. Said so in the car. But he can't describe it. It's just a feeling."

She stared beyond the men and the couch skins to the pale skeleton of chair, wood and scaffold, naked frame.

"Burgundy," she said.

"Pardon?"

She looked up at Gunderson's father, absently brushing the bowie knife on her skirt. "Who put all this burgundy into our lives?"

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They tested for vertigo, they tested for Crohn's. Gunderson lay tabled on the sanitary paper and imagined his body in giant X-ray, the smoky silhouettes of his organs inflamed and infused. He saw his body as a lump of dark matter, the bottom of a very black hole. The nurses, crisp in their uniforms, reminded the boy of nuns. The feeling was still shaky but it was other feelings too. Gunderson just couldn't name them. The test results were negative. His mother blamed him for vagueness and then she began to mimic the vagueness herself.

"It's like Shepherd's Pie," she said. "You don't know the exact ingredients but you get the awful gist. There might be some brain stuff we're not contending with. Specialist stuff."

"You mean a psychiatrist," his father replied.

"Head-shrinker, yes."

"Not sure that's covered by the insurance."

"You hear that?" she asked Gunderson. "You're uncoverable. How does that feel?"

The boy said nothing.

"That's my boy." Gunderson's mother smiled. "Now make sure you don't spend too long in the sun. If you look nice and tan and healthy, nobody will ever believe you're sick."

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Gunderson was buried in a chasm of blanket and darkness while his sister spun in a jointed office chair, phone against her head, talking her dirty talk to the boyfriend Spoon Boy. Their phone time was budgeted by the jail administration and came at off-peak hours, weekdays, mornings. Gunderson's sister's voice always changed in these conversations, shed its babyish squeak and attained a husky maturity, even though she was only a couple months into her fifteenth year. She was uttering something jaded, something dry in the larynx. The only trace of her brother was a small crest of chin protruding through the blanket.

"Hold on, Spoon. My idiot brother is being morbid."

Gunderson cinched the blanket but he could still hear the sneer.

"What the fuck ails you?" she said.

"Too many tests," Gunderson said.

"Maybe you caught dog herpes."

"Maybe."

"Spoon Boy could stab it out of you for a nominal fee. He's done it before."

Gunderson drew the blanket tighter until it smothered his face and he replayed each dismissed diagnosis in his head, scrolling them like movie credits that ended with a black screen and that incongruent phrase, final and horrid: *Gunderson Pie*.

"Tell him, Spoon," his sister was saying. "One day they're gonna set your craziness loose and you're gonna stroll it back into that International House of Pancake and make those mother-humpers run for the hills. You're not a dishwasher at all. You're a wolf, babe. You're a cool, sexy lioness. The highland prairie won't ever be the same. Isn't that so, Spoon?"

Gunderson's mother was in another kind of chasm altogether, badly splayed and snoring on a donut raft in the long murk of the garage. She had been a champion swimmer during her boarding school days. Pictures of the era showed a curly-headed beauty queen in high-waisted bikini, hung with medals and a squinty expression fresh with chlorine burn. Gunderson tiptoed around the woman, careful to not spy the skewed legs and a bathrobe inadequate in its pretense. He was scavenging for one of his father's chopping tools but he wasn't quiet enough. The woman raised her head, a wrist pinned beneath. Gunderson seized in place. A snifter materialized at the end of her arm.

"Ice," the woman said.

"Yes, ma'am."

She squinted through the scrim of partial dark, hazy-headed, temporary and blind.

"The tide," she announced, "is not yet in."

The peach tree was an elegant cursive, fruit hung like misplaced punctuation marks. Gunderson had always gazed at the tree from the far reach of his bedroom window but was scared to touch the thing. Now he

lugged the chainsaw two-handed from the garage and he took the tree apart, roving the wild machine in shaky strokes, a delicate massacre. So he cut down several others just like the peach one, all big and robust. Only a few hours and he had neatly deforested the entire backyard.

When his father returned from the foundry, face pinkly abraded from industrial soaps, the man smelled the mayhem before he saw it. Smoke clung the lawn, a landscape of subtracted masses. He found his son still wearing the goggles and hardhat and soccer shin guards, a cowboy kerchief tied debonairly around the neck. The boy had taken every precaution.

Gunderson Senior waded among the carnage, moving his large silent head back and forth, an arm squeezing his son's shoulder while the other arm instinctively reached for the chainsaw, still warm.

"They feel things," was all Gunderson could say.

"I hope so," his father eventually replied.

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By suppertime his mother had attained enough lucidity to chew her own meat and side greens and only required assistance with the complicated knife-and-fork work. Gunderson was still bashful about his crime against the horticulture. He reached around his mother and her tangy stink and pried apart the pink meat slab. Then he returned to his chair, standing between parents, unable to sit with his rearness so raw. His sister was upstairs with the phone and her dusky voice. Gunderson tested the chair with one spanked cheek, then the other, but the pain was too much and he stayed standing. His father was nibbling his steak, a series of tentative chews, serious-faced, shellacked with concentration. After letting loose a gamy little burp the older Gunderson speared a piece of albino cauliflower on the tip of his fork and raised it to the light. The piece was bulbous, rutted, seamed like a brain. He examined the vegetable as if it were a damaged fossil, counting ridges and pores, and he seemed on the verge of some expert pronouncement. But nothing came. He softly set the fork and its benign artifact on the rounded rim of his plate, stood and excused himself, while his wife and son sat gawking at the vacant chair he had left.

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His name was Dee-Wayne and he had toiled in smelting for twenty years before finding work on the first shift alongside Gunderson's father. The man had a haggard moustache and the wrinkled skin under his eyes resembled shucked shrimp, but there was melody in his voice, an ecclesiastic music. It was this sound that earned him a much-envied trove of "blue-ribbon snatch," in the parlance of his coworkers. Dee-Wayne came courtly dressed, bearing a sack of ice pops for the boy and frozen chicken tenders for his parents.

"This the boy?"

"You know that's him, Dee. He throws your paper."

"Never collects. I must owe that kid my own weight in gold by now. One day he's gonna show up and bankrupt me with that tab."

"We're working on the collection part," said Gunderson Senior.

"It's money already spent is my point."

"Okay, Dee."

"Just saying."

Dee-Wayne broke into a snorty horselaugh and he settled himself on the couch, legs crossed at the knee, a scholarly comport. Gunderson's mother was noisily sipping her seltzer in the corner, trying to water down the venom. She sucked with such ferocity that the straw kept clogging with ice chips and these she picked out with her fingers and chewed in her front teeth, drawing a bead on Dee-Wayne and his thrift-shop ensemble. Drawing volumes.

"Hello missus," he told her brightly.

"I want the man's credentials."

"Well, let's see now—"

She interrupted him with a long slogging suck.

"The whole résumé," she added.

Dee-Wayne rubbed at his jowls and discreetly tongued his palm, which he ran over his gel-slicked hair, a crusted husk.

"I've carried a lifelong interest in the crinkled gray ick of our brains, that thing that gives us our reason, our spiritual plagues and graces and etceteras. The vast human whatnot of experience. But I'm no layman. I've done my research. The other foundry fellows go home after work and screw themselves into their women or their bottle, but I'm at the library most nights, the medical section. There's a whole shelf."

"I've read those books," said Gunderson's mother. "Everybody has read those books."

"I was a psych major in community school."

"With a minor in smelting?"

"Didn't say I graduated. But I held onto my notes."

Gunderson was maintaining careful custody of his ice pop, lapping the melt and angling the wooden rod so as not to dapple his white shirt or white pants or white tube socks. The boy was dressed like a milkman. He had no idea how this was allowed to happen. Likewise, Gunderson Senior was still stewarding the chicken tenders under his arm, and when he delivered them to the kitchen he took his time on the return voyage, eventually reappearing in the doorway with tobacco cud prominently in lip.

"Stage is yours, Dee," he said.

But Dee-Wayne's eyes were closed, arms folded in the concavity of his smoker's chest, mouth twitching behind all that moustache shag. Gunderson considered prodding the man with his popsicle stick. Dee-Wayne was serene in his trance at least. Maybe he *did* have some handle on the vast human whatnot. Before anybody could poke him, Dee-Wayne was awake and rigid on the sofa's ledge, glaring down at Gunderson as if from an enormous psychic peak.

"Your name."

"Gunderson," said Gunderson.

"Age."

"Seven something."

"First memory of the color blue."

"Sky."

"Ain't that a little obvious?"

"Blanket maybe."

"Maybe or absolutely?"

"Absolutely blanket. A blue one. My crib blanket. Mother cut it up last summer."

"You upset about that?"

"Just a blanket."

"Tell me your favorite holiday."

"Arbor Day."

"Salad dressing or the crouton?"

"I like the crunchers."

"Will the eggplant pertain?"

"Always."

"Granola?"

"Eats itself."

"The animal you fear more than other animals?"

"Tripod."

"Explain that."

"It has legs," Gunderson shrugged.

"Fascinating," Dee-Wayne replied, a fingernail parsing his moustache. "This is corollaries. I say a word, you react with another word."

"Okay."

"Peach tree."

"Sunset."

"Sun."

"Gunderson."

"Gunderson!" Dee-Wayne near-shouted.

"Gunderson?" asked Gunderson.

"Don't stall me, boy."

Gunderson shook his head and said, "I can't do much with Gunderson."

Dee-Wayne was working his neck in circles, a pugilist wringing his cramped junctures and arthritic strings. He leveraged his entire weight on the small spot where his knuckles touched his knee knobs and leaned forward. His face slabbed over, sedate.

"Tell me," the smelter said. "Which one diddles you?"

"Pardon?"

"Mommy or Daddy? Does he make you watch him shower nude? Does she take you to empty parking lots and worm around in her skirts?"

Gunderson's father was gone to the kitchen and Gunderson's mother was trying to unchoke the ice from her throat. Dee-Wayne held his awkward pose on the couch as the house expanded with the sound of Gunderson's father stomping chicken tenders into linoleum. Dee-Wayne nodded, slow and sagely, in smug confirmation. He did not notice Gunderson's mother going for the scissors until it was too late.

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"Oh God," she whispered, so early it was dark, Gunderson rising for his paper route and hearing her voice rasped under the door. "They're gonna impound you forever. Your smile, those handsome cheekbones, your wing-wang, even the orange outfit. None of you will ever know daylight again. You're gonna go crazy with lonesomeness in that brick hole. Aren't you, Spoon Baby? You and the murderers and sexual lechers and the firebug who torched that car dealership last week. I can see you standing between your gross toilet and gross sink, your skull shaved and your ankles in shackles, that perfect pretty face printed on commemorative t-shirts we'll sell in the prison parking lot. I can hear the chair creak, the leather straps, the electric hum. All those evil volts rushing through you the way I want to rush through you. Everything's going to go dim. You're gonna burn in there alone without me, or my voice, or my hands brushing the sweaty hair out of your eyes, and that's the worst part. Isn't it, Spoon? Isn't that the worst part?"

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At the same time his sister bayed her adoration for all things Spoon Boy while shunning a world that could not contain the worst of him, Gunderson had been grounded. Maybe it was maternal spite or misunderstanding, or the woman was legitimately afraid that Dee-Wayne would skulk back onto the premises with another inquisition. Gunderson proceeded around his bedroom and the immediate yard under constant supervision with a tin bell tied on his wrist. His mother watched him. She wore sunglasses or sunbathing veils or opera binoculars, but always she watched him. After three days she issued her own formal diagnosis.

"My boy," she said. "You are occluded."

Gunderson nodded, giving the aluminum around his wrist a cheerful jingle. His mother shook her head. To illustrate, she stacked her hands horizontal, offset, paired crooked.

"Mismatched. Things aren't aligning. Your blood is blocked. It's wreaking havoc with your lamb-like constitution."

"Occluded," Gunderson repeated.

"You won't have a childhood like other boys your age."

"But I can still fish with Dad. Throw papers. Do his drives."

His mother smiled, reached for his hand, and tightened the bell's twine.

"Not on your pretty little doomed life," she said.

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Gunderson remained on the rumpus room carpet, relishing the swarm of his mother's six dachshunds: Claudius, Tiberius, Titus, Caligula, etc. His mother inflicted the dogs with embarrassing haircuts and hand-fed them beluga, a courtesy she never extended her own children. But Gunderson was soothed by the dogs, these snoring abominations who knew not of his occlusions, nor their own.

The doorbell roused him. A young man in pastel shirtsleeves and khaki, a muddle of pimples on his nose and forehead, stood on the porch. He didn't smile or nod or acknowledge the dogs—Augustus and Maurice—Gunderson had slung in each arm. He didn't acknowledge Gunderson.

"Are you in cahoots with Dee-Wayne?" asked Gunderson.

The young man produced a yawn and touched a finger to the doorjamb. He was shaggy-headed and pale and his preppie ensemble was too baggy for his skinny starved frame. "Sister home?" he said in a shy whisper.

"Are you the boy they call Spoon?"

"I would like to visit with your sister," the young man said.

Gunderson noticed a distinct clicking noise. Spoon Boy was thumbing a butane lighter, roving the minor flame around the wire door screen, now black and smoldering. Gunderson gulped, stumbled backwards, and watched in fascinated horror as the convict opened the door and sauntered inside.

He took a seat on the sofa, sitting primly, like he was waiting for the next bus. Gunderson hovered over the coffee table and gaped. He could see vague patches of purple ink spanning the young man's clavicle like a skin condition in insatiable creep. Homemade tattoos. Spoon Boy gave a look and pointed at Gunderson's bell.

"House arrest," Gunderson said, giving the bell a friendly jingle, but Spoon Boy stayed on the sofa with a blank expression. Then he scrolled up a leg of khakis so Gunderson could admire the apparatus: box and wires and pale skin. It didn't jingle. Just blinked its smart red light.

"They shaved your ankle," said Gunderson.

"I did that. The whole leg."

"Why?"

"It was my leg."

"She's upstairs," Gunderson said.

"Maybe I'm not interested in that now."

He stretched a long finger and pressed it to Gunderson's forehead.

"Hello there," Spoon Boy said.

"I shouldn't be touched."

"Did she tell you to say that?" Spoon Boy stood and fixed his pant leg and moved for the staircase.

"She must be somewhere," he quietly croaked.

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Gunderson's mother was reclined on a beach blanket with a pair of opaque sunglasses pushed high up on her head and her hair in a knot, surveying the treeless backyard while Gunderson leaned against her. He occasionally glanced back at the house and could see the dark shapes, the swaying curtain, Spoon Boy silhouetted in his sister's window. He couldn't see his sister anywhere. Only the convict, a pale blot in ill-fitting clothes who in turn was regarding Gunderson and his mother. The woman had a garden trowel sheathed in the waist of her skirt. She nudged her son and held the trowel up to his mouth like a microphone.

"Any news to report?" she asked.

"Just him."

"And your opinion?"

"He's here."

"I'm looking for color commentary. Emotions, hasty judgments, a crackling wit. If you don't give me good color our newscast will be canceled. We'll be living on the street in a cardboard canoe, eating dog food."

She waved the microphone trowel closer to his mouth but Gunderson remained mum, so she re-sheathed the tool and cupped a hand against his bad haircut, gently rubbing it.

"My other little husband," she smiled.

Gunderson smiled in turn.

"A mother's love, a mother's love," she spoke-sang.

They sat this way for some while, heads aligned against a mottled landscape and hazel sky, a lawnmower chewing foliage in the distance, and when they finally stood and turned around they saw Spoon Boy perched in a gargoyle huddle on the slanted roof outside the daughter's window. He had his pant legs rolled up to the kneecap and his Zippo, burning the thick dark hair off his other leg.

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Gunderson Senior spent the majority of supper white-knuckling the cutlery while his daughter swooned in her seat, his son sat occluded, and his wife grinned at the awkward tension that was bending them all away from their food. Spoon Boy had been positioned mid-table. His posture was angled and abrupt, as if he'd been guy-wired to the furniture. He seemed to be trying very hard not to look at his plate. Gunderson's mother picked around her mashed potatoes and hummed a variation of "Amazing Grace" that neutered the high notes and major key transitions and when this failed to amuse she set her silverware aside, swallowed the last of her potatoes and said, "We finally meet our little girl's favorite pen pal and he won't even indulge us in some casual chitchat."

"Ma'am?"

"You fit right in with all our other stoic men. Yes you, Birdman."

"Birdman?"

"That movie," she said. "You know the one."

"I do not."

"Well, somebody shoot me in my goddamn stupid face for trying to make a little small talk," Gunderson's mother laughed, a nervous volume.

"What would you like to know?" he asked.

"Just what kind of institution were you in?"

"You mean was it a place for crazies."

"For starters."

"It's not a polite question," Spoon Boy said.

"No, it's not, but thank you for trying."

The woman beamed at her husband, who was masticating his food stiffly, near ashen. There was a dachshund under the table and the man was kneading it with his bare toes.

"Anything else you'd like to add?" the woman said.

Spoon Boy's voice shrank, as if squeezed through a tiny pinhole.

"I would like to ask for my girlfriend's hand in matrimony," he said.

The dachshund yelped. The daughter lunged over Gunderson's lap, struggling to fit both arms around the convict, who only shook his head and knocked her back to her side of the table.

"Not you," he said. "My other girlfriend."

"What?"

"Mary Betty. She sends me these short letters. Picture postcards. Telegrams. The letters are *very* short."

"Darling," said Gunderson's mother. "Put down the meatloaf."

But Gunderson's sister had already hurled the brown and red brick, an overhand toss that greased the wallpaper a misty hue some distance from Spoon Boy's head.

"Don't feel that way," he told her. "Mary Betty has the rickets disease. She's not well. But she's pure. You are not. I am not." He looked around the table. "The other fellows in my room called me Lothario. Can anyone tell me what that means?"

Gunderson had leaned so far forward in bewilderment his bell and clip tie were dangling in the gravy. He could feel his occlusions parting, not hugely, but enough to make way for the strange disaster rolling through the room. His family had tumbled into a stunned silence.

"Hey there, Birdman," Gunderson's mother eventually said. She brought up her purse and withdrew an intimidating scissors. "How about a haircut?"

Spoon Boy regarded the teary slump of girl, the occluded boy, the patriarch blotting his forehead with his napkin, and at the distant end of the table, a very drunk barber. He smiled faintly and stood and pushed in his chair, then used his foot to slow the mound of meatloaf slugging down the wallpaper as he said, "I'd appreciate that immensely, ma'am."

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Gunderson's sister retreated to her bedroom where she rested on its ugly lime rug, sorting through the shoeboxes that had been crammed into the breach beneath her mattress. Each box was dedicated to a different correspondent who had passionately inflamed her uterus only to later snuff it. Prisoners, terminal patients, disgraced celebrities, wards of any state that wasn't hers. She archived the love letters and receipts and knickknacks they mailed her, made files, rubber-banded things, the boondoggle bracelets and license plates in deliberate stacks, a mini-menagerie of scattered animals carved from soap. The rest of the room was a pantheon of pink paints and modest cosmetology décor. She had Spoon Boy's shoebox in her lap, stirring through the contents with a novelty switchblade, the kind that opened into a comb. The box was only a quarter full. She glanced up and saw Gunderson in the doorway.

"They look better with shoes in them," she said, clicking the knife-comb shut. "Why didn't I save any of the shoes?"

It was Gunderson's turn to occupy the sofa and watch Spoon Boy rub his new, ruined hair. The mother had holocausted it in her usual way, although he didn't seem to mind the patches of exposed scalp and cold skull and he still wore the impromptu bib of drapery that wrapped him at the neck. Gunderson had finished all five plates of meatloaf and now his belly was distended. His parents were upstairs and his sister had gone to the arcade, where she could wallow in violent noise and flash-pot lighting amid the hackles of adolescent kids too inexperienced to plug the enormous sucking chest wound she currently had for a heart. It was a Sunday evening. The dachshunds were curled into a large helix, a living collusion of long shivering meat, snoozing in the corner under the dark TV. Spoon Boy picked up its remote control.

"One time I wanted one of the big screens," he said quietly. "I've seen them in the windows. People sit around them, whole families. I found a store that was closed and I used a hammer on the glass. A whole *room* full of big screens. I got the biggest. I could barely carry it, that was how big. Luckily the store had carts and I used one of those and got the big screen into my car. I had the car running. I was ready to go home with my big screen and watch it, but I realized I needed a controller. You always see the people in their windows holding the controller. So I went back. I got one, only one, although I could have gotten lots. When I came out the piggies were at my car. They were *laughing* at me."

Spoon Boy had quit scratching his pale head. He sat erect, motionless, narrating his story into the blank TV.

"I didn't mind the laughing. That's just what they do. But I didn't like the room they put me in. The room was cinder blocks and a lot of cold light and not much bed. I was alone and I didn't have my big screen but you know what they did? The piggies? They let me keep the controller. I sat in the room and aimed the controller at everything, floor, ceiling, walls, pressing buttons and

changing all the big screens that it could reach. I didn't need to know what they showed. I just knew they were all changing. It made *me* laugh. All the big screens in my head were changing at once. I loved the controller so much I broke it apart and that's how I saw the piggies had taken away the batteries."

Spoon Boy gave the hair butchery one final rub. He untucked the drapery from his neck and folded it into a triangle and dabbed his cheek.

"We are not sick boys," he said. "God made us wrong because God's made wrong."

Gunderson nodded, absently scanning the rec room for the remote. Spoon Boy flicked open his lighter and flicked it shut and began moving for the door.

"Mary Betty's house is next. I have gasoline. Would you like to watch?"

Gunderson tried to speak but a hard knot of tissue had swelled his throat. Things weren't aligning inside him, or outside him, but maybe that was the point. He remained in this state as Spoon Boy strode for the yard. The truck was a new model, immaculate, the windshield still stickered with its price. Spoon Boy's look had returned. It was the look of a man who has grasped the cosmic joke but each time he tries to repeat it in the company of others he gets the punch line wrong. All of the lines.

He had the truck door open and the look was gone.

"Someday," he said.