Parker Roberts

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M-22, Leelanau County, 10 A.M.

Parker Roberts turned her head to the left for just a moment and crossed the yellow line. Our Honda sideswiped an oncoming Explorer and knocked it into the ditch. We spun out violently, sliding off the road and over the snow bank, through the air between scraggly trees, and onto the Grand Traverse Bay, covered in ice. We stayed there for four hours.

Parker liked to drive fast, like her grandmother, a traveling Powder Puff driver back in the thirties and forties. She didn't fly past other drivers or routinely collect speeding tickets, but on the highway she would set the cruise about fifteen over the limit. She drove fast enough to make a cop think about pulling her over, but not fast enough to make the cop's decision an easy one. She drove with enough latent talent to relax her passengers even as she pushed the envelope into legal recklessness. She was good enough to make us feel as though she drove defensively. She was smooth.

The ice cracked underneath us. Not right away because the west bay had been frozen for several weeks, but it was March and over forty degrees for the second day in a row. The mist over the bay was impenetrable and there was about two inches of water on top of the ice. We slid and slid over the bay, pushing a wave of water ahead of us as we spun out. I remember clenching my body, afraid that if I moved while we slid that our horizontal inertia would fail and we would sink. I knew cars should not be riding on the ice.

We did stop after a few seconds, leaving us in a blinding white room, our car surrounded by the curtain of fog. I couldn't see the road, the shore, the trees, or even the sun's outline through the glass in the sunroof. The trail left by the car instantly faded as the water lapped up against the tires. I looked all around, trying to remember the stories my father told me about the North Star, the Northern Lights, or which direction the sun rose, but I could not see any of those signs that morning through the mist rising out of the ice.

I don't remember my father's face except through pictures now. Someone had to die in the second Gulf War and he was one of the unlucky Americans. My mother, an undergraduate student at Central Michigan, vigorously protested the war before Strickland's call-up, mostly complaining about American imperialism and Iraqi civilian casualties. Though she did not express it in her letters to the local Members of Congress, she wrote in her diary that she feared being a war widow. She feared her son would be a half-orphan and that she would be a single mother. She would feel responsible for actions taken by her government in retaliation for her family's loss.

After Strickland accepted orders to travel to the war zone, Parker dropped out of college and came home to Peshawbestown. Gramma raised me, her duty as a grandmother according to the old Indians, while Parker took a job at Leelanau Sands and then at Eagletown Mar-

ket when a cashier position opened. She rented a small apartment across the street from a pizza place in Suttons Bay and bought a used Civic from her cousin. Parker hated American cars as much as she hated American wars. She explained her foreign car purchase to the local patriots on the basis that the Civic got better gas mileage. She worried about greenhouse gases too, and the fact that the bay never really froze over anymore.

But in February and March 2003, the bay froze and the ice both saved and doomed us at the same time. They explained to me later that Parker probably hit her head on the steering wheel either at the time we hit the SUV or when we hit the ice. I remember her leaning backward in her seat, sleeping peacefully, as we sat on the ice. She talked in her sleep. That day, she said Strickland's name several times, pronouncing every syllable, every consonant, carefully, as though lecturing him from her dreams. I closed my eyes to mimic her. I wanted to sleep too. I thought we were already in heaven. I may have even nodded off—it is so easy for the young to drift off—but Parker moaned in agony from the depths of her trance and woke me.

Parker loved to sleep. She worked the afternoon shift at Eagletown so she wouldn't have to get out of bed until after ten or eleven. I woke early and snuck into her room to watch her sleep. After we left Mt. Pleasant, Parker slept more and more, going to bed earlier and waking later. I watched over her because she was my mother and because she named me after the eagle. Gramma explained that I was supposed to watch over Parker, because that's what eagle does. In the mornings, I would stay as quiet as I could for a long time and watch her eyes for signs she might wake. Sometimes, she woke suddenly and I would run from the room, startled, while she laughed at my escape. We spent the most time together in her bedroom while she slept because she worked during the days and I'd be sleeping when she came to pick me up from Gramma's at night.

I tapped Parker's shoulder, but she didn't stir. I pushed the parka she wore until I felt her bony shoulder, but she still did not stir. I kept the seatbelt on and reached for the radio. I knew we rested precariously on ice, so I moved slowly and deliberately, lest my sudden movements send us crashing to the bottom of the freezing bay. The car had stalled in the accident, but I knew the radio would still work. The morning talk deejays had left for the day and the news was on. A couple of snowmobilers drowned in Long Lake a few weeks before and the police

had called off the search for the bodies until the ice melted completely. They said it wouldn't be long—a few days maybe.

"Mom, wake up," I said.

I heard sirens and cars approaching. I heard adults talking urgently, some very scared, and I listened for someone calling for the Jaws of Life. I imagined the fire engines and ambulances that sometimes raced under our windows at home had stopped to help us, but I wondered how they would be able to drive out over the ice to collect our little car. I shut off the radio and rolled the window down (ever so gently) to hear them better. It was very cold on the ice and I immediately felt chills.

"Mom, wake up," I said again. I pushed her as hard as I felt the ice could stand. "Listen."

Parker did not move.

I listened to the authorities deal with the Explorer and its occupant, who suffered a strained neck and concussion caused by his stubborn refusal to buckle his seat belt. There was little injury to his vehicle, just a large scrape of red paint down the side and the alignment problems caused by going into the ditch. I learned later that the police treated the accident as routine. I began to worry that the police would forget about us.

"Parker," I said, repeating Gramma's mantra, "you sleep too much." It was too cold so I rolled the window back up and to wait for rescue. Instantly bored, I turned the radio back on.

I don't listen to the radio anymore. It reminds me of that day, how people can be so close but still too far. Sound creates the illusion of proximity. It lies.

I remembered something then. I reached over and gently pushed the orange triangle button on the dash, the button Parker told me signified emergency. I relaxed, knowing that the emergency lights would assure our rescue. I began to worry about how much it would cost to fix the car once they towed it off the ice—*if* they could tow it off the ice.

I dozed then, I think. The excitement of the car wreck had worn me down and fatigue hit me, as it does with small children, without warning. I took comfort in the presence of the authorities. I took comfort that Parker slept comfortably.

The deejay woke me announcing the eleven o'clock trivia question. I listened carefully, hoping the question would be about the Lord of the Rings trilogy or Star Wars, Parker's favorite collections of films. I knew some of those answers, but instead the deejay asked her listeners about a celebrity's birthday. I tired of the subject and shut the radio off. It took me another second to realize where we were, that we sat delicately on a thin layer of ice, surrounded by white. I rolled the window down and listened. I heard adults talking but they seemed to be saying their goodbyes to each other. I wanted to hear about their progress in reaching our car, but I didn't hear anything.

"Hello?" I said. As in a dream, nothing would come out of my lungs but a thin whisper of air. I tried again, but still the same. I took a deep breath and felt an intense pressure on my chest. I could not take in the air I needed to be heard. I prodded my chest and felt actual pain that time. I began crying, too tired to care anymore.

"Parker," I said, realizing that I could barely whisper. "Parker. Mom. Wake up."

I sat there for a long time trying to think about what to do. Men in movies acted swiftly, without caution, and with extraordinary wisdom and knowledge. I was little and didn't even know where in the world the Army took my dad. I thought that maybe the operator's manual would help. Parker carefully examined it when she added anti-freeze to the engine block. I reached for the glove compartment, but my arms were too short. I slowly, carefully, gently, fearfully, let myself out of the seat belt. Parker said that the seat belt would save my life. She had seen the horrible consequences first hand when kids didn't wear their seat belt. I fought through her warnings and peeked over to make sure she didn't see me cheat. I felt a twinge in my chest as I helped myself to the floor of the car, but it didn't seem serious.

Parker traveled to Barcelona and Amsterdam in college the year before she had me. She loved French fries and relied upon them to survive cheaply in Europe, but grew to resent the fact that European fast food joints charged her for ketchup packets. She felt condiments should be free, of course. To ensure that she never had that problem again, she decided to start saving ketchup packets from fast food franchises in her glove compartment. The packets built up in large quantity and she stopped collecting them, thinking she had enough for her next trip, but she left them in the glove compartment. I suspect she kept them in the car as a reminder of Old Europe and the packets would compel her to go back come day.

I rifled through the ketchup, a tire gauge, and scratched sunglasses to get to the operator's manual. When I found it, I leaned back onto the seat and replaced the seat belt. I could read, but not the grownup books. Parker read to me from Judy Blume, Dr. Seuss, and Emma Goldman, so I thought I could read anything. The car manual had many pictures but none of them showed how to wave down the police. There were no pictures of police anywhere. The only useful information involved the orange triangle button, but I already knew what that did.

I leaned back and tried to think through the problem. Parker sleeping, more soundly than ever before. Police a few feet away but leaving. I couldn't yell to get their attention. Trapped on ice. Cold air outside. I could feel the cold in the car then. The engine stopped and the heat stopped, too. I flicked the heat switch but nothing happened. At least the radio worked.

The radio.

I got excited and turned it on high. I rolled the window down as quickly as I could. My chest hurt more than ever before and I had to stop and rest a moment. I thought Parker would wake up when I turned the radio up so loud, but she wouldn't. I couldn't believe it. How many times had I sat with Parker complaining about the radio being up too high while waiting for Gramma to walk out of Hansen's with ice cream and coffee cake? I couldn't understand.

I croaked out her name. "Parker," I said, but my chest constricted and nothing happened.

I began to think that we would not be discovered and that we would have to leave the car and travel across the ice and save ourselves. The authorities had failed. Maybe they were afraid of falling through. Or maybe they didn't care. Or maybe they didn't know. I developed a plan—probably my first plan to save a life—in those few seconds before the radio station break ended and started blasting an advertisement for the Victories Casino in Petoskey, that ad with the singers screaming out "Victories!" with several seconds of sustain.

WEST GRAND TRAVERSE BAY, LEELANAU COUNTY, 11:30 A.M.

The ambulance had taken away the driver of the SUV. The fire truck from Peshawbestown had driven off when the police determined that the Jaws of Life were not needed and no gasoline had been spilled. Most of the tribal police had returned to their patrols. Only two officers remained, waiting for the tow truck that would take the damaged SUV to a body shop. They probably stood on the roadside drinking coffee and talking about what they would do to the person in the red car who had apparently violated the law by leaving the scene of the accident. To this day, no one has explained to me how the collected group of police and rescue personnel, as well as a few gawkers, had missed the tire tracks that marked our sudden entrance onto the bay.

Parker complained about the police in general a great deal, but always defended the tribal officers. Digging through her school materials, I read about her police practices class, about how the criminal justice professor explained that cops regularly ate too many donuts and got fat and lazy. She drew little pictures in her notebooks of obese police officers surrounding a suspect, guts uniting in one large jailhouse wall, saying that the suspect was free to leave at any time, but that it would be better for everyone involved if he explained how the marijuana got on the bus.

I learned to be suspicious of police officers from Parker's outbursts while watching cop shows. After Strickland left, Parker rarely expressed much emotion except when ridiculing the writers of crime dramas and cop-based reality shows for brainwashing the public into trusting the police. I enjoyed her animation and joined in with her, glad to see her move, to live.

But with tribal officers, Parker said nothing bad. She felt they did a good job. I don't know how the local police were better than the cops on TV, but I took her word for it.

"Parker," I said. Maybe she couldn't hear me over the radio. I turned it back down. "Wake up, mom," I said again. "The police are coming." I hoped the reference to the police would stir her. She said nothing but I could see the faintest outline of her breath. The cold had invaded and I shuddered, suddenly awake with chills.

The two officers had heard the radio. The sound shot through the moist, cold air, but it was also devious.

"Who's there?" I heard from the male officer on the road. He spoke with authority, the kind of authority that pre-school teachers and day care attendants would never use with a three or four-year-old. He spoke with the kind of authority that made me quiet, lest the police bust down the door and arrest me and my mom. I stiffened and listened.

The other officer, a woman, spoke to her partner about hearing a radio and that there might be another vehicle in the fog. She spoke up and said loudly, "Is there anyone there?" It sounded more like a teacher and I felt compelled to answer, but nothing came from my mouth but a weak croak.

The officers must have conferred about the sound of the radio and decided to call it in, but Parker did not react to the very loud noise of the deejay cackling or to my warnings about the police. She remained still.

West Grand Traverse Bay, Leelanau County, Noon

The ice first began cracking at noon. I heard a noise from the front of the car that reminded me of my Uncle Frank popping ice cubes out of the freezer for his Sunday football scotch. It did not concern me until I heard the female officer shout that she heard the ice crack and they had better hurry.

The female officer, whose name was Lola Ilaria, talked to me from the shore for ten or fifteen minutes. She couldn't see me or even tell my age. She asked me all sorts of questions that I tried to answer, but my lungs kept me from talking. She asked me my name. She asked me if I had a cell phone they could call. She asked me if we had accidentally collided with a Ford Explorer. She asked me if I was injured. She asked me so many questions that I could not answer and I became exhausted and frustrated in my efforts to talk.

Eventually, Lola asked me to honk the horn if I understood her. I recalled enjoying the sound of a car horn very much until Parker rebuked me sharply several weeks earlier for using it at inopportune moments. She explained that a car horn had the same importance as seat belts and they could save lives. However, unlike seat belts, car horns were not to be used except under dire circumstances. I looked at Parker as I thought about the request to sound the horn, considered Parker's distrust of the police and her warnings about using the horn, and decided I wanted to honk the horn anyway. And besides, maybe she would wake up, the lazy bum.

Parker did not stir even as I held my hand on the horn for a long, long time.

I began to cry and cry and cry and cry. I wept for a long time and refused to answer the calls of the police, even the mean male officer who tried to use his authority to scare me into submission. I cried until I shook. I cried until my eyes and nose felt as though a very angry person had rubbed them with sandpaper and acid. I cried until I could cry no more. I cried until I felt the car jerk a few inches forward suddenly and I heard water slowly begin to trickle into a sink somewhere. I stopped crying when I heard the ominous sound of Uncle Frank's ice cubes clink in his scotch glass.

I heard more and more activity on the shore, but the mist continued to keep us hidden from them. They asked me to honk the horn a few more times so they could triangulate the distance and direction, but the mist tricked them again and again. I could not understand exactly what they were trying to do, but I took comfort in the fact that they were finally trying. I realized I felt a terrible hunger and that I would miss lunch with Gramma. She had asked us over for Spanish rice and fry bread over two hours ago.

The hunger, the crying, and the attempts to talk had exhausted me again. I dozed.

WEST GRAND TRAVERSE BAY, LEELANAU COUNTY, 1 P.M.

In my dream, Parker tossed a Frisbee to me and I caught it easily, my bare feet cradled by the sand at the public beach in Suttons Bay. I was about six feet tall in my dream, all grown and smiling. Parker took off running toward the water and I led her with a perfect flick of the wrist and she caught the disc as she dove into the waves of the bay. I laughed as she stood, completely drenched. I realized that she hadn't aged at all, that she would forever be 25. We all would. Strickland walked over to the edge of the water and helped her dry off with a large beach towel. The water in the bay would always be cold, even in the warm sun of summer. Strickland kissed her in the way he always did, his hands buried in her black hair. I watched them and envied them.

"Hey, kid!" the male officer roared. "Honk the horn again!"

The order shocked me into clenching my body. My chest hurt and I forgot why. I looked up through the sunroof and I could see the blurry outline of the sun through the fog. I imagined what the world would be like without ice.

I rubbed my eyes and looked at Parker. She had not moved.

With the window down, the car had become freezing cold and I could see my own breath before me. I reached over, surprised at how difficult and painful moving had become, and touched the horn. A short squeak followed.

"Over there!" the male officer shouted. He seemed further away than before.

I looked at Parker. I could see her breath, but she appeared to have no life in her.

I hadn't realized it before, but I could hear a bathtub filling with water. I looked out my window and realized that we had fallen further into the bay. The whole front end of the car up to the grill was level with the surface of the ice. The sun seemed to warm my arm. Perhaps the mist would burn off.

The water covering the ice reflected the emergency lights back to me. I hoped the Civic could navigate the water like a submarine, that all I would have to do was roll up the windows and wait for rescue, safe in our little red car.

I clenched my fingers into a fist to test my strength. They were cold and numb, but I calculated that I had enough energy left to roll the window up. It took me so much time. I listened to the efforts of our rescuers fade as I forced the window up. I could still hear them work toward us after I closed the window, but they seemed far away, their exertion dulled by distance and glass.

"Wake up, mother," I said. "Please." Parker would not move. She was stubborn and would not move even when I would shake her in the morning to let her know I was hungry, that I wanted oatmeal with raisins and brown sugar and not that horrible granola cereal. I had let her sleep long enough. I reached over and grabbed her parka with all my remaining strength. I shook her as hard as I could. She was heavy as a bear and I had no energy left to move her, but I did everything I could to wake her. I held her nose and her mouth opened to breathe in. I pinched her cheeks. I pulled her hair.

At that point, I saw that Parker had been bleeding. Just a little, just a thin line out of her right ear, but I knew that couldn't be good. My chest hurt me then, more than I could bear. I slid off Parker and back to my own seat.

"Niko," Strickland said the evening before he left us, "be nice to your mom."

Wasn't I always nice? What was he trying to say?

"Pick up your dirty clothes and your toys when she asks," Strickland said. He sat down on the couch and pulled me to his lap. "You're getting big. Big enough to help out around the house."

"Maybe," I said, dubious. I wasn't that big.

I remember hearing Parker make dinner in the kitchen. She made lasagna for Strickland that night. It was the only real meal she knew how to make but she still struggled with it. She cursed and spilled and burned ingredients that night, but it was the best lasagna I've ever eaten. And it was Strickland's favorite dish. He could have cooked it better, but it tasted so good because Parker cooked it and we three ate it together. Parker made a huge casserole plate full of lasagna, enough for ten Indians, but we ate it all. We never wanted that dinner to end. Strickland left at four o'clock in the morning. Parker made me get out of bed to kiss Strickland good-bye. He told me to be good.

I held my hands to my mouth and breathed warm air into them. It didn't make a difference. I remembered Strickland joking that we should all stop breathing until the car warmed up or else the windows would fog up. We would laugh and try to hold our breaths. Parker could always hold her breath the longest, but the windows would still fog up. I looked up at the sun and it seemed much brighter. I realized that my breathing had completely fogged up the windows. I rolled down my window a little to look out and I could see that the sun had finally burned most of the mist away. I could actually see the shore and, forty yards away, two women wearing bright yellow approaching the car. I waved, but they weren't looking.

I could still hear the bathtub filling but I ignored it until the floor of the car became wet with water from the bay. It smelled like the beach. I knew it was time to move, but I didn't know what to do. I reached over and tried to shake Parker. "Get up!" I ordered her. "You'll be late for work, dummy!" I pulled her hair again, much harder that time, and she screamed. She screamed so loud I thought my head would explode.

"Stop that, boy!" Parker said, more angry than I had ever seen her. "Goddammit! That hurts like fucking hell!"

I fell back into my seat, my chest heaving and crying out in pain. I began to cry.

Parker leaned over to me and pointed her finger at me. She was no longer angry but would lecture me. "Don't pull my hair," she said, her voice soft and wavering. "My head hurts." Her eyes rolled back into her head and her head drooped. She used her hands to hold her neck steady. Her skin went gray.

"Where are we?" She seemed breathless.

"In the bay," I said, making no sound above a whisper.

Parker blinked and looked around. She saw the fogged up windshield and said, "You've been breathing too much, Niko." She looked at me and smiled.

Then the front of the Civic collapsed completely into the bay.

Parker screamed again. I loved that sound and hated it. It meant she was awake and could save me. It also meant she was terrified that we might die. The water moved inexorably up the hood. She must have grasped our predicament instantly and she reached for the sunroof controls. Slowly, achingly slowly, the sunroof receded.

"Go up there, boy," Parker said calmly, as though she had not just screamed to wake the dead, as though she had not lain silent in a concussive coma for nearly the last four hours. She hoisted me up.

I could hear the rescue people outside, struggling to reach us, the ice cracking underneath them as the Civic sank. The water had reached the level of the seat cushions before the sunroof had opened enough for me to fit through. I squeezed my way through, more than once bumping my cracked ribs and sternum, forcing me to silently cry out in ag-

ony. I finally pushed my butt through the tiny opening and sat on the drooping roof. By then, the sun shone brilliantly over the bay and I could see both the Leelanau shore and Old Mission Peninsula. The two rescue people, Lola Ilaria one of them, shouted at me to Move! Move! Move! Move! and I stood. I looked down and saw that the water had already reached my mother's waist, that the sunroof would open no further, that she could not break through the strong glass in time to escape, that she would be sunk with the car and drown in the icy bay. I took a running leap like the cartoon coyote, hoping that by reducing the weight on the car, it would somehow bob back to the surface and allow these professionals to save my mother. I landed right in the arms of the two women in yellow. I turned back to look and I saw my mother look me in the eyes and smile before she sank with our car into the water.