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Late Rumspringa

**A STORY**

[**BY AUSTIN SMITH**](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/authors/austin-smith)

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**ONE MORNING,** after chores were done, chores his boys used to do, Abraham Zimmerman told his wife through the door of their bedroom that he was going to town. He waited a moment to see if she would ask what the job was, prepared to tell her that he was helping a crew that had gotten behind on roofing work, but she said nothing and he was relieved that he didn’t have to lie.

The dogs tried to follow him down the lane. They were confused about where Abraham’s two sons had gone and so were cloying and needy. He had to yell and throw a few rocks to get them to stay.

It was a good two-mile walk to reach the county highway along the network of gravel roads that linked the community together. He knew that any interaction had the power to make him change his mind. If someone asked him to lend a hand with something, he wouldn’t be able to refuse. But he met no one.

He hadn’t been up Cording Road since the evening of the accident, but because the accident had everything to do with his decision this day, it seemed necessary to pass the spot where his boys died. There was no visible sign, and he resisted wading into the ditch grass to search for one. And then he saw, on the fence, the remnants of a bouquet someone had tied there with twine. Anyone who didn’t know about the accident would assume it was just a tangle of wildflowers blown off a windrow after haying.

At the top of the hill the land leveled out, and he could see, in the distance, the glare of cars and trucks headed toward town. He stood at the intersection, in the oblong, octagonal shadow of the stop sign. He didn’t bother putting his thumb out. There was no reason to. Everyone driving past could see, from his clothes, why he needed a ride. It wasn’t long before a pickup stopped, raising dust off the gravel shoulder. There were bales in the bed, stacked higher than the cab. He could never keep the names of the retired farmers straight, but he recognized the man from past rides. The windows were down, the radio blaring, and it was too loud to have to try to talk.

It wasn’t until the outskirts of town where the speed limit dropped that it became quiet enough in the cab for the farmer, whose name, he remembered now, was Keiser, to say, “The son-in-law wants straw for his berries but he doesn’t have the decency to come out and pick the bales up himself. Says he doesn’t want to get his car all chaffy. I pre’near popped a hernia loading these up this morning. But between the wife and the daughter, I’d never hear the end of it if I’d refused to deliver them.”

They pulled into the lot of the Oasis, the farmers’ diner at the edge of town, marked by a fake palm tree. The trunk was a telephone pole painted grayish, the fronds pieces of green plastic. Two testicular coconuts hung high up there by twine, and sometimes someone would get drunk and try to climb the trunk to get them, only to lose heart and have to slide back down.

The lot was full, and Abraham Zimmerman knew that every stool would be occupied by various versions of Keiser.

“Buy you a coffee?” this particular Keiser said.

Abraham Zimmerman shook his head.

“Roofing work?”

Abraham Zimmerman nodded.

“I don’t blame you for trying to get it done sooner rather than later. It’s gonna be hotter than hell up there this afternoon.”

And then, remembering his own tribulations and the suffering his son-in-law was putting him through, he winced and put his hand on his lower back and waddled toward the door of the diner.

**When** Abraham Zimmerman walked into Nelson Julius’s barbershop, everyone turned and stared. He was younger than most of them but seemed older, what with his long chin beard just beginning to gray, his old-fashioned clothes, his straw hat and suspenders. The men waiting for haircuts held the pages of the *Pearl City Standard* in the air, losing their places in the black columns of news. Two of the three swivel chairs were occupied by a father and son, and they stared too, only their heads visible above the paper collars (the one around the boy’s neck was too tight) and black capes. Staring, Jack let the buzzer delve too high up the boy’s scalp, but managed to rein it in, then fixed the nick as well as he could. Only the boy’s mother would notice, and soon the mistake would be lost under a football helmet and fresh hair. They all knew who this man was, if they didn’t know his name. His teenage sons had been killed earlier that summer when a car hit the buggy they were riding in out on Cording Road.

Nelson Julius himself was at the father’s head with clippers that whisked and snapped like a scolding redwing blackbird even as Abraham Zimmerman shuffled in across the hair-strewn floor. He remembered the days after the accident, how his customers had talked of what a tragedy it was, then proceeded to offer their opinions, which, aside from slight differences in tone, were more or less the same: if the Amish insisted on driving buggies on county roads, they’d better be prepared for the occasional accident. The men didn’t say that that’s what you got when you tried to live in a dead world in the midst of this living one, but that’s what they were all thinking.

Nelson Julius respected the Amish, even admired them. They seemed not only of another time but of another dimension. That a car could have hit that buggy at all seemed impossible, as if it ought to have passed straight through the bodies of those two boys and those two horses, causing them to flicker briefly and take on, for a moment, the forms of the world their people had refused. One world had met another on that road, and Nelson Julius was of the world that had triumphed, and that made him feel guilty. He felt he was as much to blame as the woman who was driving, and he’d even imagined apologizing to Abraham Zimmerman if he ever had the opportunity.

Everyone watched Abraham Zimmerman try to hang his straw hat on the hat rack with the seed company caps, but it wouldn’t hang, so he reached up and hung it on the antlers of a six-point buck that Nelson Julius had shot in northern Wisconsin a decade earlier. The canted hat made the buck look rakish and sly. Then Abraham Zimmerman sat down in the only available chair and took up the top magazine from the pile on the coffee table. It was an old issue of *Field and Stream.* On the cover a grinning man crouched on one knee, wrenching a dead buck’s head toward the camera.

It was August. An oscillating floor fan stood in the corner, shaking its head as if in disapproval, raising dandruff that the men breathed in, making their lungs tickle. The men sitting on either side of Abraham Zimmerman could smell him, though it wasn’t an unpleasant smell. It reminded them of how their grandfathers smelled when they came in from the barn, back when they still farmed with horses. His hair was longer than any of the men in that shop would have let their hair grow before getting it cut, long enough to curl. The men didn’t envy the barber who drew him, for either Jack or Nelson Julius would have to get right down into the lanolin-like odor of that hair and keep a straight face while cutting it.

Jack and Nelson Julius had been cutting hair together for so long that each could sense what the other was thinking. Nelson Julius sensed that Jack really didn’t want to cut Abraham Zimmerman’s hair, and Jack sensed that Nelson Julius, as the owner of the shop and the kinder of the two brothers, would volunteer to do it. As always, they had timed it so that father and son were finished at the same instant and neither would have to wait for the other, spinning them around and unknotting their paper collars and shaking their capes out. Nelson met them at the register. The boy kept rubbing his buzzed head in amazement while his father paid.

“Football starting up soon, then?” Nelson asked the boy, who was wearing paint-stained mesh athletic shorts and a Stockton Blackhawks T-shirt.

“Practice starts Monday, doesn’t it, bud?” his father answered for him. Had it not been for his father, the boy wouldn’t have played. He would have preferred to get off the school bus at Matt’s farm so they could walk along the river, reaching down into the cold water so that the surface encircled their wrists with the thinnest bracelets, pocketing stones that lost their luster once they dried. At some point Matt would turn back and Brian would continue on alone, crossing back and forth over the river, coming up to his house from below, his pockets full of unremarkable stones.

Nelson would have asked the boy about football and the boy’s father would have answered for him had Abraham Zimmerman not been there, but everyone who spoke was conscious of the fact that Abraham Zimmerman was listening, even if he seemed preoccupied with flipping through the glossy pages of *Field and Stream.*

Somehow Nelson managed to invite Abraham Zimmerman up to his chair without embarrassing him, knowing that the men who were waiting their turn wouldn’t mind. They wanted to watch Abraham Zimmerman have his hair cut anyway. Jack was relieved for two reasons. First, that Nelson had taken the initiative and, second, that there was something else to stare at for once that wasn’t the tumor in his back. It had appeared twenty years before as a hard knot under his left shoulder blade, and had grown, in the years since, to such a size that it was visible to folks when he was facing them, rising up over his shoulder. Even men whose hair he’d cut since they were boys couldn’t help but let their eyes settle upon it. And one day he had arrived at work to find “Jack the Hunchback” spray-painted on the side of the shop.

Usually Nelson’s was loud with talk, but the shop had become very quiet. The only sound was the golf tournament on the dusty television that, if anyone would have thought to wipe its screen of a decade of male duff, would have brightened to a degree that would have astonished the barbers. Anticipatory silence, the slicing sound of the club through air and the hollow thwack of the ball, then either groans or polite applause and the voices of the commentators.

Abraham Zimmerman sat down in Nelson’s chair.

“Who’s next?” Jack said.

“You go ahead,” said the man who’d been sitting on Abraham Zimmerman’s left. “I’m in no big rush.”

“No, no, you were here first,” said the man who’d been sitting on Abraham Zimmerman’s right, “if I remember right.”

The first man rose reluctantly. He wouldn’t have as good a view now, but Jack obligingly spun his chair in such a way that he’d be able to watch in the mirror. Jack had to ask his customer twice how he wanted his hair cut before he answered, but he was just making conversation. Jack knew how the man liked it. It wasn’t a style he would have recommended, but he was a barber, not a stylist.

The other men, some of whom had already had their hair cut earlier and were just hanging around because they were lonely, and now were hanging around to see what Abraham Zimmerman would look like with a haircut, had taken up their newspapers and pretended to have found their places, but the eyes hovering over the newsprint betrayed them. Aware that he was being observed more closely than usual, with a flick of his wrists Nelson made the black cape billow out. It seemed to hang in the air forever before settling beautifully down upon Abraham Zimmerman’s body. It covered his white dress shirt that was slightly yellowed at the armpits, his blue suspenders, his woolen black pants. Only his boots, with real nails in the soles, showed. Out of habit Nelson prepared the paper collar to tie around Abraham Zimmerman’s neck, but promptly gave up on the idea when he realized that the neck was too thickly bearded.

Coming around to face the man, Nelson Julius crossed his arms and said, “Well, how would you like your hair cut?”

“Short,” Abraham Zimmerman said. His voice was surprisingly high.

“And what are we doing with the beard?”

“Shaving it off,” Abraham Zimmerman said.

It was hard to detect any accent in these few words, but there was something, a singsongy quality to how he said, “Shaving it off.” He accented the first and last syllables (“SHAVing it OFF”) so that the phrase started high and fell and rose again, as if he’d said, “LA-dee-dee-DA.”

If the onlookers had been interested before, they were fascinated now and gave up all pretense of reading the paper. Not only were they going to see Abraham Zimmerman get his hair cut: they were going to see his face.

Nelson Julius had gazed down upon countless heads in his career. He knew cowlicks and thinning patterns the way a weatherman knows high and low pressure and warm and cold fronts. But Nelson was no mere barber. He also considered the minds beneath hair, scalp, skull. The reason he was so beloved a barber was not because he was excellent at cutting hair (though he was that) but because, aside from certain bartenders and the priest, he was the only man many men would confide in. In fact, unlike the bartenders, whose advice was doled out with intoxicants that led to that advice being forgotten, and the priest, whose office was a little too close to God’s, there was nothing preventing his customers from being honest with him. He liked to think that by cutting their hair he was also cutting their worries, if only by listening to them. He would have liked to do the same for the man sitting in his chair now. Had they been alone, he might have tried. But with the shop full, and everyone watching, it was impossible.

He started in. The man had beautiful hair, beginning to gray in places, but still mostly black. It was the beard that made Abraham Zimmerman seem older. Looking down at the thick, rich hair, Nelson realized how young Abraham Zimmerman was, and the tragedy of the deaths of his boys struck Nelson anew. It was a shame to cut this hair, but he had no choice but to give the man what he was paying for. The black, oily ringlets fell on the black cape in a pretty way, like maple seeds whirling down upon still water, and they were the prettiest shape, full circles, like lorgnettes.

“Not so hot today, is it?” Nelson said quietly, weather being his go-to topic of conversation. He couldn’t exactly ask Abraham Zimmerman what he thought of the Packers’ playoff chances, or if he’d seen the great upset at the tractor pull the week before at the fair, and he certainly couldn’t ask him if his boys were ready to go back to school, not only because they had been homeschooled, but because they were dead. But Abraham Zimmerman seemed to have taken Nelson’s question for a statement and didn’t see any reason to respond.

When Nelson was done cutting Abraham Zimmerman’s hair, he spun him around in the chair so he was facing the mirror. He looked odd, with his long beard and short hair. He didn’t smile, but there was a softness in his face that encouraged Nelson to make the joke he’d been considering making the whole time.

“Well, we can give you a discount on the shave since we’re not having to shave any mustache.”

The joke was worth the risk of making it. Abraham Zimmerman smiled, and everyone else laughed, and the man in Jack’s chair, who was balding, said, “Does that mean I get a discount for the top of my head, Jack?” to which Jack replied, “If we gave discounts for thinning hair we’d go out of business.”

There was more laughter and chatter. A tension that had been in the air since Abraham Zimmerman walked in had been released. But now Nelson was focused on the problem of Abraham Zimmerman’s neck beard. And it was a problem. He’d never dealt with anything of its like. It was impossible to discern where the beard ended and the neck began. But slowly, like someone wading a fast-moving river by feeling their way along the gravel bottom, he entered in. The beard hair, surprisingly soft, almost silken, fell away from his clippers. Gradually, the face revealed itself, the jutting chin, the sallow cheeks.

“Where would you like your sideburns to end?” Nelson asked quietly. Abraham Zimmerman had closed his eyes. Without opening them he brought a hand up from under the cape and touched his earlobe. Nelson Julius cut there with the electric razor, but when Abraham Zimmerman flinched he realized he’d likely never heard a sound like that before, so close to his ear, and put the electric razor away. Then he opened a drawer he rarely opened anymore. The old shaving kit had been his old man’s, as had the shop. He remembered, when he was a boy, how men would come by every morning for a shave. His father had a policy that if he drew blood, the shave was free. The very look of the box, the embossed initials on the lid, the snugness with which all the pieces fit into the maroon velvet compartments, made him miss his father with such intensity he nearly doubled over. He took his belt off and stropped the straightedge. Everyone was watching, even Jack, who kept clipping fruitlessly at the air above his customer’s thinning hair.

Working the warm lather into Abraham Zimmerman’s face and neck, Nelson was afraid he would cut his throat. But when it came time to shave him, his hand was as steady as a surgeon’s. The shop fell away, the golf tournament, the red-and-white pillar swiveling upward infinitely outside the door, the eyes of the others. It was just Nelson and the problem of Abraham Zimmerman’s neck beard. The blade was so sharp it made no sound and met no resistance. The wake it cut through the lather was beautiful. Even without running his fingertips over it he knew it was as smooth as baby flesh. Little did Abraham Zimmerman know that the problem of his neck beard would lead to men asking Nelson for a straightedge shave again, like their fathers used to.

When he was finished, Nelson put a towel under hot water in the sink and said, “Be right back.” In the back room, among the clutter of haircare products, broken electric razors, scissors that had rusted closed, he found what he was looking for: a tiny, unlabeled, faceted glass vial. He dabbed some on his wrist, smelled it. Rosewater.

He tipped the vial upside down into the steaming towel and rubbed Abraham Zimmerman’s face and neck so vigorously that someone looking in the window might have thought he was trying to smother him. Then he spun him toward the mirror for the second time and the men who’d been watching saw the man see himself. They were all waiting for some kind of affirmation, but he merely nodded. The cape came off, his beautiful hair shaken to the floor. In his white dress shirt and blue suspenders and black wool pants, he looked somewhat like himself again. But if his intention in getting his hair cut and his beard shaved off had been to see what it was like to live in the world that had killed his boys, he had succeeded.

To pay Nelson, Abraham Zimmerman pulled out the biggest wad of cash the barber had ever seen. He had counted the money before leaving home. Three thousand four hundred and forty-three dollars. Because most of the bills had circulated within the community, they featured the old designs, so that there was something old-fashioned about them. One of the men waiting to get his hair cut, a young kid Nelson had never seen before, whistled when he saw the wad, but Abraham Zimmerman didn’t seem to notice.

“How much?”

“Twelve for the cut, five for the shave.”

He gave Nelson a twenty, then reached up and took his old straw hat off the buck’s antlers and put it on his new head. It sat a little loosely, slightly awry. He said, “Much appreciated” to the whole shop and walked out, the summer air cool on his neck.

**He walked downtown,** keeping to the shade of the storefronts. From time to time he touched his new face. It was surprising to reach his bare neck. He thought he must look strange, though no one would have thought twice about his face, only his clothes, inherited ones, made before he was born and mended so well that they’d improved in quality as time went on.

Now when he saw clothes hanging in the window of a store, he went in. The conditioned air wicked the sweat right off his skin. It was a Goodwill, a name that gave him confidence he might have lacked had it been a Dollar General.

The store smelled of old lives, a laundry-like and slightly sour odor, clean and unclean at once. The woman behind the counter, wearing a blue vest too big for her shoulders, was preoccupied with hangers. Her greeting was to raise one into the air. After he walked past, she glanced up and stared.

There were a few other shoppers, women all. They had either just been or were about to go to the city pool. Their shoulders were bare and oily looking, like buttered rolls. Their flesh troubled him. It amplified the discomfort he felt at being clean-shaven.

He spent some time considering pants before realizing that he was in the women’s section. Intimidated by clothes now, he walked over to the power tools and kitchen appliances, their cords taped up, stuck with pieces of paper that read, simply, “Works.” It was amusing to try to divine what each was for. The egg beater resembled a wire whisk, the flashlights suggested lanterns, and so on. He felt a sudden longing to be back home, but it had grown unbearable to be there, in that empty house with the sounds of ticking clocks and the sweep of his wife’s dress on the floor.

He found the men’s section. He was interested in a pair of jeans but had no idea what size he wore. The numbers, beginning at 28, ending at 44, meant nothing to him. He chose a pair he figured should fit and moved on to the T-shirts. Most were sports-related, donated by empty nesters in epic bouts of spring cleaning. Then there were the funny ones, their humor lost on him, featuring popular cartoons and their common one-liners, or jokes with the punchline on the back.

A green shirt that said “Irish Yoga” featured a drunk man in three positions of blackout. Another said “Exercise? I thought you said ‘Extra fries.’ ” Another showed two ears of corn lying side by side on beach towels. One of the ears was exploding into popcorn. The other ear said: “I told you to wear sunscreen!”

In the end, he chose a shirt that said “Muck Fichigan” because he liked the color, a familiar blue. It resembled the gingham shirts still hanging in his sons’ closets. From the shoe rack he chose a pair of white Converse sneakers.

In the changing room, blocked from the browsing women by a mere curtain, he put on his new clothes. The jeans were too big. He tried clipping his suspenders to them, but they hung too wide around his waist. He would need a belt. The shirt was fine, as were the sneakers. He thought he looked strange, but he couldn’t tell if he looked strange only to himself or if he would look strange out in the world. Carrying his old clothes in his arms, he emerged. The women turned their heads at the sound of the metal rings sliding on the curtain rod but promptly resumed shopping, which assured him that he looked more or less normal. He took a belt from the rack, passed it through the loops, cinched it tight, and went up to the counter.

“Wearing it right out of the store, are we?” the woman said, not unkindly. “Well, what do we have here? Jeans, shirt and shoes, is it?”

“And belt.”

“And belt.”

“Seventeen dollars and fourteen cents.”

When he pulled out the wad of cash, she said, “Sure you don’t want to buy a wallet to keep all that cash in? We’ve got a few down here in the case. I’ll throw it in if you just give me one of those twenties.”

And so he bought a wallet too.

“Want me to cut those tags off for you?”

She came around the counter and for the second time that day someone was at him with a pair of scissors. The belt presented an issue. The tag was around the buckle. Sensing his unease, she said, “Here, I’ll let you get that one.”

He took the scissors and cut it.

“How about a bag for your old clothes?” she said. She took them from him, folded them with care, and slid them into a plastic grocery bag. As soon as he took the bag by the handles, they lost the form she had given them.

As he walked down the street, his jeans kept dragging under the heels of his shoes. He stopped to roll them up.

**On the next block** a man was smoking an e-cigarette and looking at his phone, leaning against a van that said “Schultz’s Heating and Cooling” on the side.

“Do you know where the nearest used-car dealership is?” Abraham Zimmerman asked. He’d been rehearsing the sentence in his head.

“Break down, did you?” the man asked, glancing at the bag of clothes.

“No.”

“Just in the market for a beater then, are you? Well I think the nearest would be Barker’s, but it’s a ways.” The man paused, seeming to consider what sort of day he was having and whether he was in the mood to indulge his inherent tendency to be kind. “I could run you out there, I suppose.”

When they got in the van the man held out his hand and said, “Eric.”

“Abraham.”

“Abraham. Well, okay.”

On the way, Abraham Zimmerman observed Eric’s driving so carefully that Eric worried he was about to get carjacked. Abraham Zimmerman had been in many trucks in his life, but he had never paid much attention to how one went about driving one.

After deciding he wasn’t in danger of getting carjacked, Eric said, “Now, you’re gonna wanna be careful with these guys. The kid’s all right but the old man is a crook. Careful he doesn’t sell you a lemon.”

Abraham Zimmerman nodded, imagining an old man holding out a yellow lemon and taking all his cash.

Stopped at a light, Eric turned to face him and said, “Mind if I ask you a question?”

Abraham Zimmerman looked at him with a look of such pure innocence that Eric took it as a yes.

“What do you have against Michigan?”

Abraham Zimmerman said nothing. He kept staring at him just as he had been staring at him before.

“Your shirt?”

Abraham Zimmerman looked down, then back up.

“That personal, huh?” Eric said, raising his hands off the steering wheel. “I understand.”

The light turned green. They were through the intersection before Eric let his hands fall back on the wheel.

When they pulled into the used-car lot, Abraham Zimmerman peeled a twenty off the roll.

“No, no, no, I don’t need that,” Eric said, which was a lie. But when Abraham Zimmerman didn’t put the bill away, he said, “Oh, all right. Maybe I’ll swing by the Dairy Queen and order a blizzard.”

This sentence made as little sense to Abraham Zimmerman as the sentences about the lemon and about Michigan. He imagined a beautiful woman, the queen of the cows, from who one could request snow, even in August.

Eric wished him good luck and drove off. Of course the kid wasn’t at work that day. It was the old man who came out of the store, still chewing his ham and cheese sandwich, not having expected any customers in this heat.

“What can I do you for?”

“I need a car.”

Barker swallowed.

“Need a car, do you? Why, we’ve got a few of those.”

Barker considered himself a genius when it came to character types. After discerning what sort of person he was dealing with, he could change, chameleon-like, to become the sort of man they trusted. With the elderly he was hokey and sanctimonious. With a man who seemed to know cars, he was profane and shoptalky. With a woman, who was usually with a kid or two, he was mellifluent and compassionate. There were as many Jim Barkers as there were customers. And for this reason he bristled whenever anyone suggested that all used-car salesmen were crooks. Sometimes he was a crook, sure, but other times he wasn’t. It depended on the situation.

Even so, to reverse the prejudice, which seemed broadly held, that he was a liar and a thief, Barker worked hard to polish his public image. He was active in the church, where he stuffed the collection envelope with another envelope so it would feel more substantial as it was passed down the pew. He’d helped carry more coffins than any man in Pearl County, quick to volunteer if the funeral home was in need of pallbearers for a man who’d alienated his family and whose funeral was a mere formality. It stood him in good stead with the church ladies who made a point of attending these funerals out of respect for the dead. If a customer came back to the dealership, on foot or in a cab, and demanded a refund, he was quick to give it to them, all handshakes and apologies. Then the car would go back to his partners, a self-described hack mechanic out near Lanark and a demolition derby kid who was an expert at bodywork and detailing. Once they’d put the minimum amount of money into it, it would be back on the lot, for sale again.

It bothered Barker that he’d gone and had such a morally upstanding son. Jim Jr. was easily talked down and practically had Tourettes’s when it came to blurting out what might be wrong with a car. Barker had always figured he would be retired by now, spending all his time on the river, where he had a little hunting and fishing cottage, but instead he felt inclined to stay close to the lot, lest his fortune slip through his son’s loose hands.

As good as he was at figuring a customer out, this man stumped him. The plastic bag of clothes suggested hard times. He had the look of a man whose wife had left him for another, taking the car with her. What had that van he arrived in said? “Heating and Cooling.” That must be it. He’d gotten off a shift fixing burnt-out air conditioners and his partner had run him over. Well, not run him over literally. That would be mean. But he looked about like he had been. Run over, that is. Barker laughed at his own wit and decided to try the marital trouble angle in order to shake things up a bit.

“Let me guess, the old lady drove off with the car, but not before filling her up with everything she could fit in her?”

The man looked at him blankly.

“Okay, tell you what. Let’s start here. What’s your price range?”

Abraham Zimmerman approximated what he had left in his pocket, after the haircut and the wardrobe.

“Three thousand.”

Barker whistled.

“You can get a nice car for that. Hell, you can get a pretty damn decent car here for *two* and walk off with an extra thousand to thumb through. Tell you what. I don’t show this one to many folks because to be honest I’ve been thinking of driving her home myself, but I can see you in this car, sir, I can see you in this car as clear as if you’d just pulled up in her.”

Barker led him to a blue Cadillac he’d been trying to get rid of for months. It was one of those cars that’s striking at first glance but that, upon closer inspection, suggests all sorts of problems. It was a money pit, this one. It had been left in a weedy, appliance-strewn yard for years and, though his mechanic and touch-up guy had done wonders with it, it had just barely been salvaged from the salvage yard. The seats were covered in mismatched upholstery where they’d been torn open and tenanted by mice, and, running, the car made a low rattling sound that was concerning but that his mechanic had chosen to interpret optimistically, saying, when they’d taken it for a drive, “Would you listen to that purr?”

The price had been extravagantly slashed from an absurd price to a lower but still absurd price to a final price that, while still absurd, suggested one was getting a great deal. Barker looked at Abraham Zimmerman looking at the car. He wasn’t inspecting it. He was simply looking at it, the way certain high school kids, suddenly flush with cash after summer work putting up grain bins or detasseling corn, just looked. Had their fathers come with them, the salient questions would be asked, the hood raised, but their fathers were always absent, so that they saw the surface only, and only considered how the car would look in the lot of the McDonald’s, where they gathered before football games. Color and style were more important to them than whether the car could be trusted to start in winter, which was why Barker invested more in the detailing than he did in the engine.

But this man was many years out of high school and, based on what he was wearing, didn’t seem terribly concerned about appearances.

“Go ahead,” Barker said. “Sit behind the wheel there, see how she feels.”

When Abraham Zimmerman climbed into the driver’s seat, it wasn’t for the first time. When he was a boy he used to go walking through the woods in winter, when there was less work to do, to a gully of wrecked cars. They’d been there so long that good-sized trees had torqued up through the chassis. Sitting in this blue Cadillac in the lot at Barker’s, he remembered sitting in a junked car as snow settled down upon the cracked windshield, making the light within strange and holy seeming, and afterward he’d walked back through the woods to feed and curry horses.

Around this time, a cousin had left the community. Most who went through Rumspringa promptly came back, but this cousin hadn’t. The world had gotten ahold of him like a river you try to cross, underestimating its current, that bears you away. The elders never spoke his name, as if, by entering the world, he was dead to them. But Abraham Zimmerman regarded this vanished cousin with awe. His leaving the community had opened a door that he hadn’t even know was there. Maybe this was why, when it came time for his own Rumspringa, Abraham Zimmerman had declined to take it. He was afraid he would be sucked into the world like this cousin had. Remembering how he had felt when he heard that his cousin wasn’t coming back, and how he had felt sitting in those junked cars, he hadn’t been confident that he was strong enough to resist the temptations of the world.

Abraham Zimmerman counted out the cash and handed it to Barker through the window.

“Sure you don’t wanna take her for a spin first?” Barker asked, suddenly suspicious of the ease of the sale. For all his brashness, he was at heart a petty and insecure man, and he wondered whether this man didn’t know something about this car that he and his mechanic and his touch-up guy somehow didn’t. But the feel of the cash in his hand comforted him.

“Trust me then, do ya? Well, you might be the first,” he said, pocketing the money.

Abraham Zimmerman managed to drive off more or less smoothly, leaving Barker standing there thinking of the gambling boats on the river near Dubuque. His favorite was called the *Mississippi Belle.* He would take one of the nicer cars from the lot, leave his wedding ring in the glovebox, lay his smallish, ringless hands on the green felt tables. He always met a woman, and even if nothing ended up happening it was still fun to make her laugh, using the indomitable dealer as a common point of contact, saying things like, “You folks would be a hell of a lot more trustworthy if you dealt cards in T-shirts.” His neck reddened at the thought of it. He took the money out and, licking his finger, which tasted vaguely of the cheddar-and-sour-cream Ruffles he’d been eating when the heating and cooling van pulled in, he counted the money again. Three thousand on the dot. Why, wasn’t that something. Hadn’t he told him he could buy a perfectly good car for two?

**When** Abraham Zimmerman walked into the Schapville Tap, only one man recognized him. The summer before, John Williams had hired an Amish crew to put a new roof on the barn after an F3 tornado lifted the old roof off, scattering the shingles in the woods, to be discovered and wondered at years later by as-yet-unborn boys. But Williams recognized Abraham Zimmerman only because everyone had just been talking about how an Amish guy had walked into Nelson Julius’s barbershop and had his hair cut and his beard shaved off.

Now Williams remembered the day the Amish roofing crew came down his lane not in a horse and buggy, as one might expect, but in a brand-new F-150, pulling a flatbed trailer of hand tools and wooden ladders. There were four men squeezed into the cab: Abraham Zimmerman, two other Amish men, and the driver. The latter was an odd guy, a historian of sorts, who got off on all things Amish and enjoyed driving them around.

Williams remembered them as silent and unsmiling. Not unfriendly but, rather, turned toward one another, as if the world could offer them nothing that they couldn’t provide themselves. Despite the heat, they wore woolen pants that looked itchy and long-sleeved white shirts that seemed composed of too substantial a material to be cool. He showed them the barn, open to the sky, covered here and there with blue tarps. The fresh black shingles were piled up on the grassy earthen ramp that horses would have climbed once upon a time, pulling the rickety ricks of loose hay. He wondered at how that time was theirs still. Seeing that they had all they needed, he commented on the heat and pointed out the hydrant, a few mason jars lying wide-mouthed in the grass.

Feeling awkward, he said, “Well, I’ll leave you to it then.”

Williams had watched them throughout the day, black silhouettes against the white July sky. There was no noise of power tools, nor did they seem to call to one another, as most work crews would. In midafternoon, when the sun was most brutal, they took their lunch in the shade of an oak tree. Williams just so happened to be replacing a broken float in a water tank nearby. He watched this same man, bearded then, snap a quilt out in the dead air and lay it down over the grass. They sat casually, with one knee drawn up, one elbow on the ground. He wondered what they were eating. He supposed they had pie. Weren’t the Amish famous for that? He had half a mind to walk over there and join them but didn’t want to impose, and anyway, they had lain down and placed their straw hats over their faces, the sunlight dappling their cheeks through the hexes of straw.

They finished in two days what would have taken professional roofers a week. Near the end, Abraham Zimmerman’s boys had come along to help, riding in the bed among the tools. He assumed they were his boys anyway, by the way they followed him, their thumbs tucked under their suspenders.

Paying the men in cash, as they’d requested, he expected a moment of connection, a smile and a handshake, but they hardly looked at him.

“Were they not friendly then?” his wife asked that evening as they sat on the porch, where he’d situated himself in order to think back upon the experience of hiring the Amish to put a new roof on the barn.

“It wasn’t that,” Williams said. “It was like they were of another world.”

“Well, naturally,” his wife said, turning the pages of *Home and Garden.* He knew that she believed they were foolish for living the way they did, as if it were a choice and not their identity. She longed for more modern everything: a more modern dishwasher, a more modern microwave, a more modern vacuum cleaner. He gave up trying to explain.

When he heard about the accident, he wanted to send a note of sympathy but didn’t know where to send it to and, even if he had, he couldn’t have thought what to say. He remembered the boys, how they had followed their father as closely as his shadow. But he couldn’t tell whether the news of the accident had affected him so much because this man and his sons had worked on his barn, or because of an experience of his own.

A few years before, Williams had been responsible for an accident that had broken a hired hand’s back. Williams had thought the man yelled “Go!” when he actually yelled “Ho!” The hired hand was paralyzed from the waist down. The hand, who was deeply religious, had forgiven Williams long ago, but Williams still went out of his way to avoid running into the injured man.

Williams figured that whoever hit the buggy and killed those Amish boys was feeling even worse. He’d heard it was a group of four women from Chicago, two pairs of sisters. They’d driven out to Galena to shop for antiques. They had gone too fast over the hill, and the driver, distracted by an antique the other three were studying, panicked and stamped the accelerator instead of the brake. It wasn’t her car. She’d just offered to drive because her sister was feeling sleepy from the wine they’d had at lunch.

And now here was this man come beardless into the Schapville Tap on a Friday afternoon, wearing a T-shirt that said “Muck Fichigan,” oversize jeans, and white sneakers. He sat down to Williams’s right, a stool between them, with such nonchalance that Williams began to doubt whether this really was the man. But then he ordered.

“What’ll it be?” Jim asked.

“Whisky.”

“Okay, you’re gonna have to help me out a little. What kind of whisky?”

Williams winced. Jim could be a bit of a jerk. Williams tried to catch Jim’s gaze to convey, somehow, that he should be gentle with this man. But Jim didn’t glance toward him, and when Abraham Zimmerman still hadn’t answered Williams took it upon himself to say, “Two Wild Turkeys.”

“Pair of gobblers, okay,” Jim said, turning away.

“Ice?” Jim asked over his shoulder.

“Ice?” Williams asked Abraham Zimmerman.

“No,” Abraham Zimmerman said.

“No ice,” Jim said to himself.

“This one’s on me,” Williams said to Abraham Zimmerman, who made no sign of having heard him.

Their drinks came. Abraham Zimmerman threw the shot back like it was some kind of herbal tincture that would clear up an infection. Williams thought about leaving the man alone. He seemed to want that. But he couldn’t go without saying something.

“Excuse me, but I think you might have done some work for me last summer?”

Abraham Zimmerman turned toward him.

“John Williams. Out Highway 53 there. You put a new roof on the barn. We had a tornado tore through two, was it three years ago? I don’t know that there’s a tighter roof in Pearl County what than the one you folks put on there. I go up the silo from time to time just to admire it.”

The look on Abraham Zimmerman’s face said neither no nor yes.

“Well, in any case, I was sorry to hear about your boys,” Williams said. He had to say it.

“Another pair of gobblers?” Jim asked.

“Not for me,” Williams said, feeling uneasy. He placed a ten on the bar, stood up, and left.

It was dark by the time Abraham Zimmerman stumbled out of the Schapville Tap. Drinking had been easy. Every time his glass was empty, he simply slid it toward the bartender, who’d fill it to the brim and break whatever bill was on the bar and give him the change. There were bills riding up out of his jeans pockets, bills under his chair.

Drinking had been easy but walking was harder. He couldn’t seem to make it through the front door. First his left shoulder, then his right, hit the doorframe. Then there were hands on both shoulders, guiding him outside and across the parking lot. He was appreciative until the hands spun him around and a voice said, “Give me that cash you had today in the barbershop.”

He tried to say that he’d spent it all on the car, but his tongue wouldn’t work. The same hands that had seemed so kind before were in his pants now, pulling loose bills out. Then the hands reached around, grabbing his backside, feeling for the wallet. He opened it, took out the last of the bills, and said, “Where’s the rest?”

When he didn’t answer, one of the hands punched him in the jaw and Abraham Zimmerman fell on his knees to the ground, feeling the sharpness of the gravel pressing into his knees. And the kid, who, like him, had gotten his hair cut that day by Nelson Julius, walked away.

The punch sobered him up a little. For a while he looked for his car, and when he found it, he struggled to get into it and then to start it. When he finally managed to, he thought better of trying to drive it. What if he killed someone? He shut it off.

**He started walking.** The ground slanted, first this way, then that. He careened from one side of the sidewalk to the other. At some point he had to stop and be sick in some bushes, after which he felt better, sturdier. The ground didn’t slant so, as if whatever fulcrum it had been tottering on had lost its fine point. Such were his thoughts as he walked.

Outside town and its miasma of artificial light, the stars came back. He followed the north star north. The houses were sparser. Dark ranch-styles, half garage. He was spooked by a garden gnome. He thought it was a pale child, beseeching him for help. From time to time a car would come, first the swishing sound of tires on pavement, then the false dawn of its lights. He imagined what his sons had heard.

Another car was coming. Instead of walking down into the ditch, Abraham Zimmerman stepped out into the middle of the road. The driver saw him at the last moment, swerved as if he were a deer, and barely avoided hitting him. The driver was a man who had taken his wife, who was in the early stages of dementia, out for fish for the first time all summer. He had never bothered locking his doors at home, but he did that night. Watching him do so, his wife thought he was locking her in. They lay awake a long time, afraid without reason, isolate in their mistakenness.

Getting to his feet, Abraham Zimmerman realized he was desperate to get home. His desire was akin to thirst. He started running down the road until he came to a sign he recognized. It was a yellow caution sign, warning cars that they were in Amish county. The sign held a black silhouette of an Amish horse-drawn buggy. Someone had shot up the sign but not hit the image of the buggy. Beneath the yellow caution sign another sign read “Next 18 Miles.” But he had only a few to go.

He came to the bridge his father had always called the Bluff Bridge because from it, if you were going slow enough, you could watch the swallows flitting in and out of their nests along the bluffs of the Apple River. Just past the bridge was the intersection with Cording Road.

As if to avoid it, he sidestepped down the steep bank to where the river slowed amid the buttresses that held the bridge aloft. He washed his face in a pool. It had been years since he had felt water on his face like this. He remembered waiting his turn at the basin his mother kept on the bureau, the drying cloth hanging from a hook on the wall. The river was low from the heat. He walked along its margin for so long that he began to worry he’d gone the wrong way from the bridge, but eventually he came to the old mill. He knew where he was now. He scrambled up the bank on all fours. The road he came out on was gravel.

It was only another mile or so, though he had never measured it that way. There was the oak that the road seemed to bend around, and the old house they had harvested stones for fences from, though not so many that it wouldn’t be able to stand, and the farm where his cousin Aaron lived with his wife Hannah and their sons, Jacob and Daniel and Moses, and their daughters, Mary and Rebecca. He passed their house, candlelight dancing in the windows, and the thought of those children, which had pained him before, made him so glad that he started running, his jeans slipping down his waist.

He wondered what Rachael would say when he came to the door beardless, in a T-shirt and jeans and Converse sneakers, smelling of whiskey. But it didn’t matter what she thought when she saw him. When he saw her he would tell her everything.

He was close now. The land to his left was his. He and his sons had built the fence that separated him from the horses that came galloping up to him in the dark, whinnying and tossing their heads. And as Abraham Zimmerman ran alongside them, he became aware of a strange sensation. He was weeping, but there was no beard to catch his tears. They were running down his neck, over his Adam’s apple, which Nelson Julius had shaved so carefully, without nicking it, without drawing even a single drop of blood.