DANA SALVADOR

Jimmy

On August 1st, 2008, Jimmy drove his El Camino to the Pawnee National Grasslands in northern Colorado. I imagine he took one last stroll along the trail we'd taken ten years before. His body weakened, I doubt he made it to the Indian Rings or to the Pawnee Buttes. I hope the prickly pear were in bloom that day with buds of yellow, pink, and red strewn across the ground like broken pieces of stained-glass.

When he returned to the gravel road, I bet he sat on the hood of the car and opened a Coors. I can see him taking sips and rolling a cigarette, slowly licking the white paper and twisting the ends. Toward dusk, when the sun dipped beneath the horizon, he put the gun into his mouth, tasted the nickel-plated metal, and squeezed the trigger.

Ten years earlier, I was escaping troubles at home by working the summer on the grounds at the University of Northern Colorado. One Friday, a few student workers and full-time employees piled into the break room. Jimmy didn't show.

"He went where?" I asked.

"He's out on the prairie getting drunk," our foreman Gerry said, "Experiencing nature."

"Jimmy gets naked and dances around like a wild coyote," someone else said. They laughed.

I didn't know what to believe. Compared to the other year-round employees in plaid work shirts and boots, Jimmy stood out. He wore K-mart jeans, fraying T-shirts, and beat-up tennis shoes. His disheveled hair gave him the look of a drifter, and broken capillaries along his cheeks made me wonder if he were an alcoholic. So far, we'd only exchanged pleasantries—"How's it going" or "Have a good weekend."

The following Monday, Jimmy and I weeded a flowerbed filled with marigolds. He'd stopped along his regular picking-up-trash route and kneeled down to help.

"Where were you last Friday?" I asked.

He pulled a thistle and placed it on the sidewalk in the pile of weeds. "I went out to the prairie for the full moon. It was amazing." He smiled. "There's nothing like watching that big old moon coming over the bluffs. All those stars. How could anyone miss that?"

As he spoke, I realized the color of his eyes didn't match. One was a much deeper blue than the other. I'd later learn that while Jimmy served in the Navy, doctors discovered a growth; they removed the tumor and his eye. More than once, I'd tell Jimmy to fix his glass eye. The good one looked directly at me while the other stared into the sky.

"I thought the guys lied to me."

"What'd they say?"

After I explained, Jimmy said, "I suppose I do like to indulge in some red wine while I'm out there." He winked then sat back on his haunches. He put his hands on his thighs. "I'll let the naked dancing be part of the folklore."

Jimmy and I began our friendship one conversation at a time, conversations I wasn't having with my own father; I'd decided my father's betrayal of the family didn't earn him that right.

Bit by bit, I filled in the pieces of Jimmy's story. He'd graduated from Northern Colorado a few years before with a degree in gerontology. Jimmy explained that the definition of gerontology is "to speak of old age."

"It's one thing to talk about getting old," Jimmy said as he untangled a vine weed attempting to strangle a juniper bush. "It's another to live it."

I nodded, though what did I know about aging? I was twenty-two and thankful for the company, even if Jimmy seemed quirky.

The more I learned about Jimmy, the more questions I had. Why hadn't he gone to college earlier? Why didn't he work during the rest of the year? Why didn't Jimmy pursue a job at a nursing home or health care facility? Why was a 55 year-old guy with an advanced degree in gerontology pulling weeds?

Like a lot of older folks, Jimmy received disability. Unlike most aging people, he spent considerable time looking through garbage cans. He exchanged the aluminum cans he found while picking up trash on campus for pocket change. I often heard about flea market bargains on tents, hiking equipment, or motorcycle parts.

While pulling weeds, we talked about books and ideas, Zen meditation and Tai Chi, philosophy and poetry. He asked me to bring him some of my writing. I was nervous but brought a few poems. The next day, he walked into the break room, smacked his hand on my knee, and said, "Girl, you got a talent, don't you?"

I knew the poems weren't that good, but the gesture seemed genuine, the way a parent might encourage a child. From that moment in the break room, I'd send Jimmy everything I wrote.

Jimmy and I worked together more and more throughout the summer. He helped me with the flowerbeds; I helped him with trash, changing out sprinkler heads, or trimming trees. It reminded me of working with my father on our family farm in northeastern Colorado. I liked the companionship, and I think Jimmy liked having someone to talk to besides the old guys on the crew.

During one of our talks, I learned he and my father had more in common than their age: he'd cheated on his wife and left his family, too.

After Jimmy told me about his transgression, I kept pulling weeds, thinking. I'd learned about my father's affair a couple years before. In fact, that's why I was working on the grounds crew in the first place.

My father had walked out on my mother after twenty-eight years of marriage and moved in with his mistress. Though I'd grown up in a harmonious home, things changed—most likely when my father met his mistress, though none of us could figure out the difference at the time. In the months leading up to his abandonment, I'd witnessed his unpleasant treatment of my mother: ignoring her, belittling her, taunting her into arguments. Since he'd walked out, I'd rarely spoken to him. Previous summers, I'd worked on the farm, but my home wasn't there anymore. My relationship with my father seemed like a pivot road, a dead-end.

When I asked Jimmy how his wife found out about the affair, he said, "It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what I was up to, Dana-girl."

He kept pulling at the crabgrass along the edge of the concrete.

"Lynda—my girlfriend—she'd call, let it ring once and hang up. When I heard the signal, I'd find some excuse to leave. 'Looks like we're out of milk. I'll get some.' I'd be gone for two, three hours and come home without any milk."

Slowly, I learned about Jimmy's relationship with his ex-wife—how they were young and impulsive when they married, how he struggled to keep a job, how having children added tension to already strained ties. My parents' marriage wasn't much different, except my father hadn't struggled to hold down a job; he'd struggled to keep a farm running.

I learned Jimmy's two daughters were about my age. Jimmy hadn't talked to them in years. Like my father, Jimmy tried to stay in touch—leaving messages and sending the occasional note in the mail. His daughters acted like me—they didn't answer the phone, ignored messages, and didn't respond to letters.

While Jimmy's affair helped shorten an already floundering marriage, his girlfriend, Lynda, had her own set of drama. Jimmy explained she was paranoid, maybe even schizophrenic. Over the years, her mental instability caused her to believe their time together was televised.

"Televised?" I raised an eyebrow.

"You mean to tell me you haven't seen us on CBS® before? Eating dinner or washing dishes?" he laughed. "I've been interviewed by Dan Rather a few times now, but I always end up wearing the same damn thing." He motioned to his work attire.

Eventually, Lynda pushed him out of her life. But Jimmy continued to check on her.

I didn't know what to think about Jimmy's affair. I definitely didn't know what to make of Lynda, his girlfriend. My father's girlfriend, Susie, wasn't ill though I'd fantasized calling her a bunch of names: *bar fly, gold digger, home wrecker*. At the time, I could only see the world filtered through the injustice I felt at my father's decision to cheat on my mother.

Even though I knew the relationship had cost Jimmy his marriage, I found it sad that Lynda's condition ruined a shared future. While I understood Jimmy and Lynda loved each other, I couldn't make the same connection to my father.

My anger and heartache toward my father was as endless as the horizon, yet overlooking Jimmy's indiscretion seemed simple. I realized he'd wrecked his marriage and his relationships with his daughters, but I also witnessed his remorse, though he never mentioned a formal apology offered to the girls. I saw him struggling to contact his daughters and the pain their silence caused, though secretly, I hoped my father felt the same. I could sympathize with Jimmy's side of the breakdown of his marriage even if I didn't agree with his decision to have an affair.

And when Jimmy cut out newspaper articles to show me, brought fresh fruit for my lunch, or discussed the Rockies game, it was easy to feel like a daughter again.

Toward the end of summer, as Jimmy and I reached the break area, fat raindrops flecked the sidewalk creating a polka dot effect.

Jimmy confronted our boss, "Dana and I are leaving."

"What?" Gerry and I said at the same time.

"That's right. We can't work under conditions like these." He pointed to the sky, which held one gray cloud.

"It ain't raining any more Jimmy."

"What do you call that?" Jimmy pointed to the specks of moisture drying on the sidewalk. "One, two, three, four, five—you're not going to make me count all of them, are you?" The guys on the crew who'd gath-

ered for break laughed. "Dana-girl, run get your stuff. We're leaving. No sir, they can't make people work outside on days like today."

I grabbed my keys and jacket from the break room and raced to catch up to Jimmy.

I knew he'd caused such a scene because he'd noticed my exhaustion.

As we drove down Eighth Street, I thought about how hectic my schedule had become. Attempting to save money to complete my student teaching in New Zealand, I didn't just work on the grounds. I also worked evenings for a survey company, calling people who didn't want to answer questions.

By the time I rode my bike to my apartment, it was 9:30 P.M. I'd eat, sleep, and wake in time to be at the university by 7:30 A.M. Though the schedule was frenzied, it left little time to dwell on the heartache at home.

Jimmy pulled into a parking lot, and we entered a small tavern. An older woman in jeans and T-shirt walked from behind a long-wooden bar and asked if we wanted to play pool until the grill was ready. We ordered beers, burgers, and fries then picked out our cues. Jimmy asked that the beers be brought out right away.

As he glided around the table, and corrected my form, Jimmy told me stories. He started with when he graduated high school and moved to California to live with a brother. He was supposed to get a job but hustled pool instead, which was never enough money to satisfy his brother. Eventually, his brother "suggested" he join the Navy. Jimmy told me about life on the submarines, the excitement of getting back to port, and his eventual return to civilian life.

He told me about riding his motorcycle along back roads, camping under the sky, and drinking binges that lasted too long.

When our burgers arrived, we gave up the pool table and slid into a booth.

"What's that saying," he scratched his chin, thinking. "'A good traveler doesn't have plans and is not intent on arrival.' That's how you need to be in a few weeks when you land in New Zealand, Dana-girl." Jimmy dipped a fry into some ketchup.

"All those new places and experiences are going to be great for your writing," He finished his fry before he picked up his half-empty glass. "Even better for your spirit." He toasted me then finished the beer before raising his forefinger to get the waitress' attention.

My father and Jimmy were much different people, but listening to Jimmy's stories and encouragement made the place where I missed my father ache a little less. While Jimmy tended to wander, my father's life has played out almost entirely in a thirty mile radius; he's anchored to the ground like a windmill, his decisions made by the weather and a long history of successes and failures. Though they never met, I like to think my

father and Jimmy would have respected each other in a way that people who approach life in disparate ways can see the benefit of alternatives.

After we finished lunch, Jimmy and I spent the day drinking beer and playing pool. When Jimmy dropped me off, he asked if I wanted to go to the prairie sometime. I told him to let me know when; I'd be there.

At a café in Nelson, New Zealand, I wrote Jimmy a postcard, one of many I'd write in the coming years. Nearing the end of my trip, I woke, wrote for a few hours, and wandered around the small town. I'd read through the afternoon then meet friends in the evening.

Jimmy had supported my adventure by giving me money for a backpack, a going away present. The backpack—crammed with clothes, books, journals, food—and I trekked the Milford, Routeburn, and Kepler trails. It was on my back when I first stood awestruck by the Incredibles, and the bag stayed on the beach while I swam in Golden Bay. Tucked beneath busses in the storage bin, we traveled from Queenstown to Christchurch, Wellington to Roturoa, Auckland to Taupo.

Here, among miles of golden beaches, where I didn't belong and couldn't recognize landmarks, things seemed serene. The seascapes and mountainous landscapes didn't remind me of home—this both comforted me and made me intensely homesick.

I sipped at the last of my hot chocolate and watched people pass by the café. I couldn't wait to tell Jimmy about my adventures: skinny dipping at the millennium in Lake Taupo, crossing over suspension bridges hundreds of feet above the ground during my hikes, and hitchhiking to the East Bay lighthouse. After nine months away, I felt more confident, more open to other people and different ways of living in the world. I felt Jimmy was right, travel had been the best thing for my spirit. In the postcard, I told Jimmy to keep an eye out (the good one), he'd see me soon.

One winter evening in 2003, after my husband and I had been married almost two years, Jimmy introduced me to Lynda. I'd returned from New Zealand three years earlier and drifted to Nebraska to take a teaching position and found a husband. Jimmy had moved to Ft. Morgan to care for his ailing mother, inheriting her trailer when she passed.

I stopped by to see him whenever I could. Though I'd called ahead to ensure Jimmy's presence, I wasn't prepared to meet Lynda. She'd recently been released from a mental hospital and had moved in. Her gray, scraggly hair stretched down her back, long enough to sit on. She had the look of a beautiful woman in her day, though now she seemed anorexic. Her skin was blotchy and dry, and her collarbone shone through her long-sleeved T-shirt.

At first, we carried on a general conversation—the weather, my work as a teacher, her move to Ft. Morgan. Suddenly, she started speaking rapidly. She rubbed her hands against her thighs rhythmically before wringing them in her lap. Repeating these motions several times, Lynda expressed happiness that I was an artist. Yet, she stated concerns that outsiders might program my mind.

Jimmy had shared my poems with her. She hoped the government wouldn't interfere with my work. I figured the government wouldn't be too concerned with a farm girl using cryptic metaphors about social injustice and teenage angst. I nodded with her worries, growing more and more uneasy.

"Come on Lynda, let the girl alone."

"You just don't believe me, do you?" Lynda said. "Don't you know they're listening to us right now?"

"Lynda gets a little excitable, don't you Lynda?" He smiled and winked at me. "I tell her she needs a hug once in a while. It'd do her good."

Lynda excused herself.

"Come on Lynda, don't leave in a huff." Jimmy laughed. He turned and said, "I'll be hearing about this one in the morning."

After we'd exhausted all topics of conversation, including if I'd seen or spoken to my father lately, Jimmy would say, "I guess that's about it. If I had anything else to say, I would. Have a good trip. Say hi to the family for me. And stop by again when you can." I never took offense at his ushering me out the door. As I look back, maybe Lynda embarrassed Jimmy. I found out, years later, that Lynda's family had disowned her. They'd refused to pick her up from the mental hospital. The only other number she knew was Jimmy's.

The next time I visited, Jimmy's trailer was filled with newspaper. Sheets of paper towel hung off the lamps, filled space under the refrigerator, and in the tracks of the windowpane. Newspaper covered the windows. When Lynda entered the room, she wore slippers made of paper towel and masking tape. Jimmy later told me he'd bought her slippers, but she believed "they" were tracking her through devices sewn into the fabric. We laughed at the absurdity, though now I see more clearly Lynda's fragility—Jimmy's, too.

Lynda surprised Jimmy when she came out of her room to see me when I visited. She would go days without leaving her room. As far as Jimmy knew, she never left the trailer the entire time she lived there.

I'm not sure why Jimmy put up with this. I knew he was too kindhearted to throw her out on the streets or into another mental facility. Besides, he'd have to pay for it. And she'd proven herself stable enough

to leave the state-run asylum. The next step might have been to contact Lynda's parents, but they'd given up on her.

Lynda first met Jimmy while she worked as a secretary at a meat packing plant and he slaughtered cows; her parents hadn't approved of their relationship. They knew about the affair and had encouraged Lynda to stay away from Jimmy. He was either too proud to convince Lynda's affluent family to reach out to her or too proud to admit he couldn't handle the situation.

Before Lynda moved into the trailer, I'd knock on the door. If Jimmy weren't home, I'd grab the key from the mouth of a ceramic frog next to the door and let myself inside. I'd leave some writing on the table, maybe a bottle of wine, or just a note to let him know I'd been there.

Once Lynda moved in, I wouldn't enter the house alone. I knew Jimmy owned guns. I feared she'd get scared and shoot me thinking I was an agent of evil forces. I thought about bringing Lynda a present, but I didn't know what she might accept besides paper products. I figured Jimmy would appreciate my humor. Lynda might not.

When he wasn't being a caretaker, Jimmy's life consisted of the regular tedium: chores, errands, bills to pay. He spiced things up with a few too many drinks at his favorite pool hall. If Jimmy wasn't at home or at the bar, he was probably at the grasslands.

He often rode his motorcycle out to the trails, using the gravel back roads. He'd spend the night, go birding, or hike trails. He craved the wind rushing against his face, the sound of the engine droning beneath him. And yet, from the stories he told, he returned again and again to the trailer and to Lynda.

On the phone, he once told me, "She may not be much of an interior decorator, but I figure if I leave her to cook for herself, I might find she's a worse chef." He laughed, "Who knows? She could burn the whole place down." I joined in his laughter, though an undertow of seriousness tugged at the punch line.

Torn between freedom of the open road and caring for Lynda, I wonder what made Jimmy stay. So much of Jimmy's life had been a compromise between independence and responsibility, between what he yearned for and what was needed from him. Maybe what we think ties us down actually allows us to become who we are, who we're intended to be. But isn't this a hard lesson for all of us?

When I visited in the fall of 2005, Jimmy seemed anxious. Before I had a chance to ask what was wrong, Lynda said, "Did you tell her?"

"I would if you'd let me." He looked at his hands before he told me he had prostate cancer. Though I could read his nervous energy, he seemed hopeful. The cancer had progressed far enough he'd continue chemothera-

py the rest of his life. In my naivety, I believed everything would be fine. Even though chemo is horrible, I thought he could manage to live comfortably. Wouldn't the advancements in science make it easier? I also knew Jimmy wasn't adverse to herbal medication; he could smoke pot for pain relief.

But I underestimated the severity of his cancer.

In July 2008, Jimmy called and asked, "How much longer until those twins show up?" Rubbing my swollen belly, I said, "Their eviction notice says two weeks." He laughed.

During our conversation, Jimmy said he'd begun to stay in Cheyenne overnight after his treatments in the VA hospital because he didn't have the energy to drive home. I didn't push for details like if he'd lost more hair or how often he needed to self-medicate.

I asked about his girls. He planned to meet one of his daughters and grandson at the zoo. I felt happy he'd reconciled with them; yet, it was a tentative reunion.

"Talk to your dad lately?" he asked.

"Every couple of months now."

"Good."

Like Jimmy's daughters, I'd begun to take cautious steps towards my father. I'd started answering the phone, and once in a while, I'd even call. After so many years of sporadic contact, I sensed that if I waited to forgive my father until I understood his flaws, I'd never move on with my life. Maybe Jimmy's daughters felt similarly. Perhaps a type of healing came in letting go of some of our anger, our disappointments.

We hung up with a quick good-bye, but I didn't think much of it. I knew I'd call him in a few weeks, once the babies were born.

Two weeks later, Jimmy's daughter called to tell me they'd found his car in the Pawnee Grasslands. I stumbled to a chair feeling a similar shock I'd felt two years earlier when Jimmy called to tell me about Lynda's death. Jimmy had seen Lynda asleep in a living-room chair when he left for a chemo treatment. Later that afternoon, she was in the same position. For weeks, Jimmy had tried to entice her appetite while his own cravings dwindled. Lynda refused. She thought "they" were trying to poison her. Without food, her heart couldn't continue.

Jimmy's daughter explained that the following Saturday, the family planned to spread his ashes at Devil's Backbone, along the foothills. I wanted to protest, to tell her Jimmy's ashes should be placed in the Pawnee National Grasslands. But I wasn't family.

I told her I couldn't make it to the memorial because I was expecting any day. After finding out about my condition, she was upset.

"I shouldn't have called and told you."

"No, I'm glad you did."

"He left a list, and your name and number were on it. I remember he talked about you at the zoo. He said you were like a daughter to him—I was angry because I thought, 'I'm your daughter.'"

Feeling both honored Jimmy would compare me to one of his daughters and knowing he never meant to hurt her, I tried to explain how I'd been estranged from my father while she was at odds with Jimmy. The words fell like rocks from my mouth. We hung up with promises to talk soon. That was over five years ago.

A few days after I learned of Jimmy's death, I walked to the mailbox. Among bills, I found an envelope with Jimmy's handwriting. I stood frozen in the August heat. I pulled out a card with a cartoon picture of a mother duck and two baby ducks around a pond. Inside the card was a hundred-dollar bill. In scrawling letters, Jimmy wrote: *Buy the babies something cute from me. Love, Jim.* The money is still tucked in the envelope inside my dresser drawer.

The last week I worked on the grounds crew, more than ten years ago now, Jimmy picked me up at my apartment. We headed northeast from Greeley to the Pawnee National Grassland. I'd grown up with sparse views filled with buffalo grass. I missed the open area; I think Jimmy knew this.

I'd never visited the national grassland, which contains roughly 190,000 acres of preserved short-grass prairie. The area was once part of the ocean's floor. When the water receded and the earth's crust moved, streams eroded the land and slowly formed the Pawnee Buttes. The buttes rise 300 feet in the air—evidence of another space and time.

We left the car, and a flat-line horizon met us in every direction except the west, where the faint edges of the Rocky Mountain foothills traced a jagged line against the sky. After walking over a few slight rises, the bluffs presented themselves. Natural landmarks.

In jean shorts, a T-shirt, and my hair tucked beneath a ball cap, I followed Jimmy down a narrow line of dirt between yucca and prickly pears. Jimmy pointed out hawks in the cloudless sky, and we paused to watch them land on fence posts. Here and there, we compared the different colors of cacti in bloom giving the only hints of color on the brown earth.

After a couple hours, we took a break and sat beside the trail. Jimmy pulled out a bottle of wine, some dried salmon, and soda crackers from a

small backpack. We poured the wine into plastic cups taking long sips, savoring the flavor. We rested until the sun on our backs pressed us to retrace our steps.

On our way to the car, Jimmy showed me an abandoned homestead. The shack must have been similar to the tar-papered one my grandparents first lived in on the prairie. We entered the one-room dwelling, which tilted slightly to the right.

Jimmy walked the length of the small shelter, running his hands across the timbers. He looked up to a small opening in the roof—most likely a vent for a cast-iron stove. Eventually, he walked across the dirt floor to look through the broken-out window. He placed his arm on the windowsill, rested his chin on his fist.

I tried to imagine who might have lived here; I wondered if it was an old bachelor, alone and content. Or newlyweds excited about their adventures. Maybe it was a couple with a family, on the edge of hard times and running out of patience. What had they thought when they looked out this window and could only see prairie all the way to the other side of the world?

"How'd you like to feel blizzard winds out here or see a tornado inching towards you?" Jimmy said. He stood from his hunched position, walked to the door, and put his arm on the door frame. He carefully scanned the horizon. "No place to run from things out here, Dana-girl. No," he stepped away from the house a few feet, "you're living in the moment out here."

"Maybe a bleak moment," I said.

"True enough."

He walked away from the homestead into the vast prairie. He stopped, blocked the sun from his eyes with his hand, and examined the immense horizon. After a moment, he asked, "You ready?" I said I was.

We left the shelter and wound our way back to the trailhead. I took one last look across the wide expanse; I tried to memorize the way the afternoon light hit the Pawnee Buttes or how the wisps of wildflowers swayed in the searing breeze. I think of the Neruda line, "Love is so short, forgetting is so long." This moment etched in memory attempts to teach me over and over again to slow down, to look around, to give quiet thanks for what's in front of me. It reminds me that time is short, and our connections to each other, as delicate as those wildflowers, are so easily lost.

I slid into the car, burning my legs on the leather seat—the same seat where Jimmy would be found slumped over, a bullet pierced through his skull.

Jimmy adjusted the rearview mirror, put the car in gear, and pulled out of the parking area. As he drove down the gravel road, I glanced out the passenger side mirror. The dust kicked up behind us then settled softly back to earth.