

Anna Solomon

THE PRIZE

The first house stood on a bare patch of dirt between two trees James Seed didn't recognize, their bark a thick, cracked gray that went black in the deepest crevices, their leaves silvery and round – sized about like beech leaves, he thought, once they've shrunk in the fall. An old woman sat on a porch swing. Their first interviewee.

"Perfect," Noah said. He skidded the Make Noise! van to a stop in the sandy drive, then turned to James. "Pass me the shotgun mic? We'll want to get the squeak of that swing."

James surveyed the van floor, looking for the black microphone case. He saw plastic baggies, an open jackknife smeared in peanut butter, lidless Tupperware stained yellow with some terrible spice he'd nearly gagged on, a pile of apple cores Noah and Brooke hadn't let him toss out the window. Drying upside down was Brooke's "She-Pee" funnel, which allowed her to go – like Noah – in a jar. Against the back doors loomed the keg of biodiesel, recycled vegetable oil they'd been collecting at Chinese restaurants the whole way out from Maine to South Dakota. The air smelled like clay, and overcooked broccoli.

Anna Solomon's stories have appeared in *One Story*, *The Georgia Review*, and *Shenandoah*.

At last James spotted the case, capsized beneath a box of prunes near one of the wheel wells. He picked it up, handed it to Noah, and awaited further instruction. The old woman was teetering toward them now. She wore a long denim skirt and a denim blouse which puffed at the shoulders, and shook one hand against the air as if guiding an invisible cane. But Noah was busy fumbling at the clasps on the case, and Brooke, in the front passenger seat, was bent over her lap, plugging a second microphone into the recorder. It was omnidirectional, James could see that much, and he ran through Mr. Valento's microphone lesson from Media class: most omnidirectionals were rugged, required no battery, and were forgiving when it came to recording levels. The con? They couldn't isolate sounds. That was what the shotgun was for. James wished Noah or Brooke would test him. He'd signed on to be their "intern," but so far, the entire drive, the only thing they'd asked him to do was look at the atlas.

When the old woman reached the van, she waved and smiled. James guessed that the sun was glaring off the glass – that she couldn't make out the fact that Noah and Brooke weren't looking back at her. He opened the door and stepped out, his back popping as he unfolded, then stooped a little, not wanting to make the woman feel short.

"Hello," she said. "You must be Mr. Goldman."

James looked behind him. Noah was fitting the shotgun microphone into a windscreen big and black enough it looked like an assault rifle.

"No," he said, "I'm James Seed. I'm – the assistant."

The woman reached up for his hand, then Brooke was wedging her microphone between them, shouting, "Mrs. Scanlon! So nice to meet you. Brooke Hartford."

James hadn't known Brooke's last name. He wasn't surprised it was a Cape Cod heiress sort of name. What surprised him was the way she costumed herself to obscure it. Her yellow hair tangled into nests under her headphones. She wore the same purple t-shirt she'd worn when they left Portland. James had imagined she would at least put on a bra once they started doing interviews, but her breasts were as free and nippy as they'd been the whole trip.

Mrs. Scanlon looked at Brooke in the same warm, skeptical way James' mother watched the evening news. "Can you hear me in those things?" she asked. She took the microphone and held it close to her lips. "Hello. Hello?"

Brooke laughed and plucked back her microphone. "Oh that's for us to do, Mrs. Scanlon. All you need to do is relax. Try to forget about the equipment. Why don't you tell me where we're standing."

James watched Mrs. Scanlon's eyes go small. She was looking at Noah, who'd joined them now with the menacing windscreen. "But can't you see where we're standing?" she asked.

"We can see," Brooke said, "but all our listeners have is sound. We want to give them a sense of what it looks like here."

Mrs. Scanlon looked to her left, then her right, then started to turn a slow, wobbly circle. There was almost nothing, James thought, to describe. The only moving objects in the landscape were the leaves on the two trees. The house was small, its paint smudged in places like someone had rubbed it with an eraser. Beyond it, brown rows ran to the horizon.

"Well," the woman began, when at last she'd returned to her starting point, "we're in Hand County, South Dakota, in the corporation of Ree Heights, population 36. We're standing in my yard. I'm Elizabeth Jane Scanlon." She squinted up at James. "How's that?"

He looked away.

"Okay, Mrs. Scanlon," said Brooke, "but maybe you can describe the landscape a little? Imagine you're someone from a big city, or from the mountains or ocean, what would stand out to you?"

"It's flat?" said Mrs. Scanlon. "There's no water?"

"Yes." Noah spoke now, one hand on Brooke's arm. "It's flat, and what else? Would you describe it as empty?"

"No. There's the cottonwoods, and the house. And the road."

So the trees were called cottonwoods. Based on their scraggly shape, James guessed they were good for burning and not much else. His father wouldn't bother cutting trees like that, much less hauling them out; he would let them dead-fall under the pines.

"And beyond those things?" asked Noah.

"Fields," said Mrs. Scanlon. "Alfalfa, mostly, but it's been droughty, you can see that. Whole state's dry as a bone."

"So there's a general brown tone to everything, yes?"

"I guess that's right."

"Would you mind saying that?"

Mrs. Scanlon raised her forehead, then shrugged and brought her mouth up to Brooke's microphone. "It's brown," she said.

"Whoa!" Brooke jerked away. "Try that again, if you don't mind - I got distortion. James, could you stand to Mrs. Scanlon's left? I need a little wind block."

Again, the old woman looked up at James - her mouth open to something between a smile and confusion, like she couldn't decide if she needed his help, or he needed hers. His hands shook as he moved to her side. He was hungry. He hadn't been able to swallow another handful of cashews that morning.

"It's brown," Mrs. Scanlon said again, in a near whisper.

"That's fine," Noah said. He wrapped an arm around the woman's thin shoulders, and began walking her toward the house. "When we spoke on the phone, you told me how things have changed out here. Those crop fields, for instance, they used to be native prairie. That's what we want you to talk about . . ."

James heard little else after that. He stood near them on the porch, but he was barely there. His hunger had erupted, releasing a series of groans – though if the recorder picked them up, Brooke didn't seem to notice. James saw eggs and potatoes and his father's filthy coffee which he'd recently begun to like. He thought of ribs. Meatloaf. When Noah placed the shotgun in his hand, James was tasting the doughnuts he'd imagined, waiting for them after the long journey, glistening neatly in a motel lobby display case. But that was before last night, when Noah had pulled onto the shoulder of a two-lane highway, tossed James a tent bag, and hopped a wire fence into a field. Brooke had swung a leg over and looked back. "You coming? What? You don't think we'd bring shelter only for ourselves, do you?" Then she squatted down, not ten yards from James, close enough he could see the white of her ass, its dark cleft.

He startled when Noah grabbed the shotgun from his fist.

"I'm getting all your hand noise," Noah hissed. "It's an extremely sensitive microphone. You need to stay totally still."

James felt himself nod. He thought of what he'd told his parents about the internship: *a radio documentary*, he'd said, knowing all they knew of documentaries were the poor-wildlife sagas his father cursed at when he flipped past PBS. Owls, marmots. *Mr. Valento nominated me to assist on a documentary*. James knew they'd choose to focus on the word "nominated." He'd never been nominated for anything.

"Mrs. Scanlon," Noah was saying. "I'm sorry. Please continue. You were talking about how after the ag company bought the land and plowed it up, your children moved away. You were saying, if I remember, that it felt like death. Yes? Can you back up to that thought? And would you mind swinging just a little faster? It sounds great."

In the next town over, they stopped to restock the groceries. While Noah and Brooke took their cloth bags and searched for a place that sold whole-wheat bread, James ducked into a mini-mart called Common Cents and bought and ate three hotdogs. He bought beef jerky, four Snickers bars, and a jug of Hi-C, and shoved all of it under his seat in the back of the van. Finally, he saw Noah and Brooke trudge across the deserted main street and into Common Cents. It had taken

them twenty minutes to realize it was the only store in town. James slouched low in his seat.

Back home, he should have asked more questions. But he'd felt honored – nearly giddy – when Mr. Valento had pulled him aside a month before graduation and told him about the job. It was everything James wanted: to make real radio, to see a place he'd never seen before, and to be paid for it, however meagerly. The payment part would convince his parents, who wanted James to work for the family business, Seed Timber, who couldn't understand why he'd pass up a job, straight out of high school, with benefits and long-term security.

It was possible, James knew, that Mr. Valento had said more, and that James had blocked it out. Maybe he'd told James that the documentary team operated out of a rolling granola heap, and that their plan was to drive two thousand miles without stopping at a gas station or other commercial establishment. Maybe, if James had listened more closely, he would have understood that Noah and Brooke were not in fact strangers, that he'd met them before, in other guises: they were the men who'd come through the county last year, lobbying to turn half of Maine's woods into a national park, saying what people lost in timber, they'd make up in tourism; they were the scientists who'd shut down half the state's paper mills because of some chemical found in a dead eagle that wasn't even near a discharge pipe; they were the summer-town cops, paid to keep things tidy, the cop who'd pulled James' father over for driving the wrong way around one of the little traffic circles built to save small children and dogs, so that James had woken in the passenger seat to his father shouting, "I can't make it around some fancy rotary, I've got a trailer hitched to the back of this thing! Since when are real people not welcome in this place?"

James chewed a piece of jerky. Noah had called him to talk "details." They'd talked at some length. And yet James could only recall one sentence: "I hear you're the best radio student at the school." He'd been stupid, to take Noah seriously, to be gulled in by that, like a fly by sap. Yet here he was, stuck, barely helping make a documentary called, "The Loss of the Great Middle: the Death of America's Grasslands." And today was just the beginning. Their ultimate destination was a town called Faith, where a man Noah called "The Prize" lived. Noah spoke of The Prize like a normal man might talk about a woman, his face flushed, his eyes damp. This was a rancher, he explained, who "epitomized" everything that had gone wrong with American agriculture: he'd raised eco-friendly cattle on native prairie all his life, only to be suckered by grain companies willing to pay him

more to plow up his grass for corn and soy. He would be, Noah liked to fawn, the "heart" of their story.

The van door slid open. James dropped his jerky.

Brooke smiled. "You okay?"

He nodded. She looked small behind the grocery bags piled in her arms. James felt the day's heat rush into the van, felt his mouth suddenly parched, felt himself staring at the four gallon-jugs of water gripped in Noah's right hand.

"There's more in the store," Noah said. "You could help."

Again, James nodded. But as he moved to get out, Brooke put a bag in his way.

"Don't worry about it," she said. James saw her eyeing the stash under his seat. She turned to Noah. "There's only two more bags. Why don't you just grab them?"

When Noah was gone, she said, "He's a serious man. Don't take it personally. He's just passionate about his work. He's not mad or mean, he's just serious." She spoke fervently, but she was looking down again, at James's food.

He reached under his seat and grabbed a Snickers.

"Oh no." Brooke grabbed a fistful of her tangled hair. Her face pinked. "I haven't had a candy bar in forever."

James pushed it toward her. "They're just going to melt." Already he could feel the chocolate slipping under the wrapper.

Once Brooke took hold of the candy bar, she moved quickly, teething open the wrapper, taking half the thing in her mouth at once. She chewed fiercely, looking toward the store, then Noah appeared and she swallowed the rest in one gulp and James knew – how many times had his mother caught him in the kitchen cabinets between meals? – he knew how food felt, unchewed, knocking around your throat.