The axe was double-bitted. Maybe that was a warning – double-bitted: biting twice. First the metal of the old Volkswagen van and then the flesh and bone between my eyes.

My father bought old vehicles and bullied them back to life, transplanting parts from one to the other, then chopping up the derelicts with his axe and haling them to the dump on the back of his old Fargo. I had none of his mechanical skill. Sometimes I got tools for him, always having to ask if the Robertson screwdriver was the one with the square or the cross. Sometimes I held trouble lights or steadied the block and tackle. Sometimes I turned the ignition while he coaxed, manipulated, or threatened tired parts back into operation. I often wondered why he asked me to help. Even loading the large metal pieces on the back of the truck was something I couldn’t do alone, although my father could lift them with ease.

On this particular day, he was dismantling an ancient VW Kombi van in the field behind our house. The August air lay on us like a quilt, and I watched my father’s green work shirt grow black with sweat as the axe pistoned up and down. I longed to slip away to the river for a swim, but I knew my father. We would stop when the job was finished.

I looked at the growing pile of scrap metal and felt resentment work its way up my neck in hot waves. I hated being there. Not just because it was a Saturday and it was August, but because the work was a constant reminder of my brother’s absence.

My brother, who could make kites out of bread bags, who could build a raft out of poplar saplings and twine, who could fix the radio my father had given him, and who could die in four months from a disease I still couldn’t spell.

I hated being there.

“Daniel!”

I turned to see my father staring at me. “What?”

“I need the pinch bar.”

I reached toward the tools spread on the grass.

“Not the cat’s paw. The pinch bar.”

My hands darted from one meaningless implement to another until my father strode over and picked up an iron bar inches from my fingertips. My ears burned as I waited for the look and the silence. My father had a habit of staring at me for a moment when he was angry, saying nothing, as if he couldn’t quite believe that I and all my ineptness had sprung from his loins. Then he’d turn away, back to the work he’d been doing, that he was always doing. And he would go on.

He used the pinch bar to pry off a door whose hinge had stubbornly resisted the pounding of the axe, and I moved closer to watch as he worked the metal bar back and forth. This was the only part I enjoyed, watching steel give way to steel, bending and groaning as it rippled and then tore apart in ragged smiles. And then, like all things, it was over and the axe again rose and clanged in the mid-morning heat.

My thoughts returned to the river that ran along the western edge of my father’s property. Fed by mountain springs, even the slower water of August was so deep and cold that the only way to bear it was to dive straight in. I thought of
my brother, his slim body a white blade slicing the water.

Then the axe struck me.

I would learn later that the force of the final upward swing pulled the axe from my father’s tired, greasy hands; that the metal-reinforced frame of the thick glasses I wore and hated saved my sight and quite possibly my life. But I knew none of this now. I was somehow in that river, floating beneath a crimson sky. Oddly, there was no pain, only a strident jangling inside my head, and I felt myself beginning to sink before I was jerked into awareness by my father.

Shouting my mother’s name, he ran to the house with me in his arms. Moments later, all three of us were in our old Cutlass, my mother holding a dishtowel over my face. My father said nothing as he drove of course. What needed to be said? I’d been standing too close. It was my fault.

When the car skidded to a stop in front of the hospital, I thought about my glasses lying somewhere in the field behind our house. Broken again, no doubt. My father had already paid for a new pair this year. I told him I’d smashed them in gym class and he hadn’t discovered my lie, that I’d broken them myself, enjoying the sound the plastic frames made as I twisted them between my hands.

My mother opened her door even before the car stopped moving and, keeping the towel pressed against my forehead, she got out, guiding me behind her.

“I’ll park the car,” said my father.

My mother hesitated for only a moment. Then, her arm around me, she turned and steered me up the steps and through the large doors. Behind me, I could hear my father’s Cutlass driving away.

Emergencies in the county hospital were handled at the outpatients’ department. My mother spoke to the woman at the admitting desk. Standing beside her now, I remembered the last time I was there. My brother had been sick for days, and at first we thought it was the flu. My mother could do nothing but wipe his face with a cold cloth as he knelt over the toilet retching and heaving. I remembered lying in bed listening to the strangled coughing followed by the inevitable splash, my own stomach churning. Incredibly, my father slept – until my mother woke him to tell him about the blood. Then we brought him here.

I heard footsteps approach. “Well that’s quiet a mess you’ve got there,” came a young woman’s voice. Crusted with dried blood, the dishtowel clung to my forehead until she gently eased it away. Everything was a blur and again I thought of my glasses lying in the field behind our house. “How did this happen?” the nurse asked.

“An axe,” said my mother. “It was an accident.”

“I’ll make sure the doctor sees you next. Have a seat in the waiting room.” Three other people were already there, but my nearsighted eyes could make out only their forms. No one spoke as my mother and I sat. Voices echoed everywhere, crying and conversation knitted together by nurses bustling importantly back and forth. A speaker hummed and quietly asked for a maintenance worker to report to the mechanical room, and I thought of my father, who still had not appeared.

“How does it feel?” my mother asked.

“Doesn’t hurt. How’s it look?”

My mother brushed my hair off my forehead. “Swollen quite a bit.” Taking something from her purse, she got up and walked down the hall and, in a moment, I could hear the shir of a water fountain. She returned carrying a wet handkerchief, which she rubbed gently over my face.

The wetness brought things into clearer focus. My mother’s face suddenly looked old, lines like the branches of bare
trees on her forehead and under her eyes. But it was the fear in them that surprised me. I had seen that fear the night we brought my brother here. That was the first time I’d realized my mother could be afraid.

The nurse returned. “The doctor can see you,” she said. I saw my mother glance toward the entrance. “You can wait here,” I told her.

“No.” Her voice was firm. “I’ll come with you.”

The examining room was blue, with two high beds separated by a drawn curtain. From the second came voices, the doctor with another patient speaking in low tones, but I had no desire to listen. My legs were trembling and my face was beginning to wake up, nerve endings whispering about the pain I would feel. My mother stood at the door.

The night we brought my brother here, the on-call doctor immediately admitted him for tests, so my father went to fill out the necessary papers while my mother and I followed a nurse who pushed my brother in a wheelchair to the men’s ward. At first I thought it would be better than the children’s ward, but most of the patients were old. Someone’s grandfather lay in the bed nearest my brother. He was perfectly still from the waist up, his wrists strapped to the bed’s metal side-rails, but his legs were in constant motions, hilling and troughing the blankets. I couldn’t stop staring at that old man, forever walking with his mouth open and eyes closed and it was then that I knew my brother was going to die.

Four months later he did.

I must have slept because one moment the doctor and his low tones were behind the same curtain and then bending over me. When he spoke, it was with the same low voice. “Your mother tells me you had a run-in with an axe.”

I turned my head and saw that my mother was sitting near the doorway. My father wasn’t there.

“You need stitches, but I have to disinfect the area first. Keep your eyes closed,” he said as he swabbed the area, then added, “This will sting a bit.”

My face slowly bloomed with pain as the wound took root between my eyes and grew, unfolded, blocked out everything else with bright red buds of fire. I squeezed my eyes tight and clung to the bed.

Finally it was over. “Now I’m going to freeze you,” he said.

This time the pain was immediate, yellow sunlight wrung to a white point under a magnifying glass, and my hands lost the sheets they’d been gripping, pawed the air until I forced them down again. And then, slowly, there was nothing.

“We’ll wait a few minutes to make sure it’s completely frozen,” he said. Then, “What were you doing with the axe?”

The question surprised me, made me feel I’d been doing something wrong. “Helping my father junk a van. We were cutting it up to take to the dump.”

He raised his eyebrows, “You must be pretty strong.”

“Where’s your father now?”

I had no answer to this question. It made me think of Jimmie MacBurnie and his red yarn. Jimmie was the only mentally challenged person I’d ever seen. Thirty-something, he lived with his parents near Taylor Lake where my brother and I used to fish. Often we found pieces of bright red yarn tied to trees a few feet apart around the lake, and we asked my mother about them. “Jimmie puts them there so he can find his way in the woods,” she’d said, then warned us not to touch them. A few years earlier, some kids had hidden several pieces as a prank and Jimmie had gotten lost. It had taken a search team all night and the following morning to find him curled up on the ground
crying. I thought of Jimmie wandering about looking for that red yarn, knowing it had to be there but not being able to find it – like the answer to the question the doctor was asking now.

My mother spoke for me. “He went to park the car.”

Yes. Except by now he probably had the hood up and was cleaning the spark plugs or tightening the fan belt. Important things that needed doing. I thought about how my father hadn’t come up from the admitting office the we brought my brother here, although my mother and I stayed stayed in the men's ward over an hour. I thought about when we’d gotten home from my brother’s funeral, listening to my mother crying in the next room while my father went outside to change the oil.

I thought about my mother sitting near the doorway of the examining room now, watching the corridor when she wasn’t watching me.

And before I could stop myself, I was crying. Long, uncontrolled sobs that seemed to come from somewhere else, someone else. Ashamed, I tried to bury them in the pillow but, muffled, they resembled the sounds my mother still made at night sometimes when she thought everyone was asleep. I cried even harder. Then my mother was bending over me, her hands stroking my hair.

“It’s shock,” I heard the doctor say.

My mother said nothing, just kept stroking my hair. I cried for what seemed a long time. And then I couldn’t cry anymore.

“The freezing should be ready now,” the doctor said finally. “He won’t feel anything.” I thought he was probably right.

The stitching didn’t take long. This time I kept my eyes open, watching the doctor’s smooth hands move deftly over my face. They were nothing like my father’s hands, thick and scarred, the nails always dark with grease or oil. These hands were soft and white against the room’s blue walls, snowbirds in an October sky. They were like my hands, yet capable and sure. I wondered what my father would think of these hands.

“The stitches should come out in a week,” the doctor said to my mother, perhaps afraid I’d burst into tears again. I didn’t care. I just wanted it to be over.

And then it was. Ten minutes later, we were outside shielding our eyes against the sudden sun, scanning the parking lot for the car.

“There it is.” My mother pointed.

Without my glasses, I knew which car was ours – the hood was up. As we made our way down the steps and over the loose gravel, I stumbled and silently cursed the stones under my feet. Then I cursed the car. And then my father.

As we approached the Cutlass, I could see his blurred form leaning in under the hood and I wondered what he could possibly have found to fix this time. As we came closer, though, I didn’t hear the familiar tap and crack of tools in the act of resurrection and repair. Instead came the crack and snap of something breaking.

I had never seen my father break anything, my father who only ever put together or took apart. Even the dismantling of vehicles in the field behind our house was purposeful and controlled. The sounds I heard as we walked toward the care were anything but that. I’d heard these sounds before, but their meaning was unclear, blurred like my vision.

His back to us, my father was staring at something in his hands, but he straightened when he heard us coming. Stepping back, he pushed the hood shut, the sound heavy and final. Without turning, he shoved something in his pocket, but the flash of sun off its polished surface told me what he’d been holding, what he’d been breaking.
I was sitting in English class, everyone reciting the parts of speech (“A noun is the name of a person, place or thing”), when the principal had come across the PA telling Mrs. Wheat on they my mother was in the office.

“You may go Daniel,” the teacher said.

But I didn’t want to go, didn’t what to hear what my mother had to tell me. Instead, I sat there looking at the board, wanting only to crawl inside the safety of those rules that made people and things the same.

“I said you may go,” she repeated, and there was nothing else I could do. But I didn’t go to the office. I ran for the exit, flying out the door toward the woods behind the school. Branches lashed my face and arms as i crashed through the trees but i kept running, ploughing through jack pine and cat spruce until I fell headlong into spongy, dark soil.

When I got up, I wasn’t wearing my glasses. I had to scratch and paw through leaves and pine needles to find them, unaware I was crying. When my hands finally closed on them, I didn't put them on my face. Instead, I bent back one of the bows like a wishbone and listened to it crack, the brown plastic snapping cleanly in two.

My brother had stopped dying.

My brother was dead.

I bent the other bow – this time more slowly – and watched the plastic cloud before it broke. This time the crack and snap were almost simultaneous. It somehow seemed important that I could do this, that I could make this happen.

It made it easier to be angry and afraid and alone.

These were the sounds my father had made under the hood of the of the Cutlass, made with the glasses he'd gone back and found but would never give me.

I’d expected to go on feeling hurt, expected to feel the fury swell in me like our river during the spring melt, but my anger evaporated. I climbed into the back seat while my mother slipped into the front beside my father. He started the car and backed it out of the shade into the bright sunlight and we headed home.