Chapter 5

Honest Dirt

The mountain thawed and the Princess appeared on its face, her head brushing the sky. It was Sunday, a month after the accident, and everyone had gathered in the living room. Dad had begun to expound a scripture when Tyler cleared his throat and said he was leaving.

"I'm g-g-going to c-college," he said, his face rigid. A vein in his neck bulged as he forced the words out, appearing and disappearing every few seconds, a great, struggling snake.

Everyone looked at Dad. His expression was folded, impassive. The silence was worse than shouting.

Tyler would be the third of my brothers to leave home. My oldest brother, Tony, drove rigs, hauling gravel or scrap, trying to scrape together enough money to marry the girl down the road. Shawn, the next oldest, had quarreled with Dad a few months before and taken off. I hadn't seen him since, though Mother got a hurried call every few weeks telling her he was fine, that he was welding or driving rigs. If Tyler left too, Dad wouldn't have a crew, and without a crew he couldn't build barns or hay sheds. He would have to fall back on scrapping.

“What’s college?” I said.

“College is extra school for people too dumb to learn the first time around,” Dad said. Tyler stared at the floor, his face tense. Then his shoulders dropped, his face relaxed and he looked up; it seemed to me that he’d stepped out of himself. His eyes were soft, pleasant. I couldn’t see him in there at all.

He listened to Dad, who settled into a lecture. “There’s two kinds of them college professors,” Dad said. “Those who know they’re lying, and those who think they’re telling the truth.” Dad grinned. “Don’t know which is worse, come to think of it, a bona fide agent of the Illuminati, who at least knows he’s on the devil’s payroll, or a high-minded professor who thinks his wisdom is greater than God’s.” He was still grinning. The situation wasn’t serious; he just needed to talk some sense into his son.

Mother said Dad was wasting his time, that nobody could talk Tyler out of anything once his mind was made up. “You may as well take a broom and start sweeping dirt off the mountain,” she said. Then she stood, took a few moments to steady herself, and trudged downstairs.

She had a migraine. She nearly always had a migraine. She was still spending her days in the basement, coming upstairs only after the sun had gone down, and even then she rarely stayed more than an hour before the combination of noise and exertion made her head throb. I watched her slow, careful progress down the steps, her back bent, both hands gripping the rail, as if she were blind and had to feel her way. She waited for both feet to plant solidly on one step before reaching for the next. The swelling in her face was nearly gone, and she almost looked like herself again, except for the rings, which had gradually faded from black to dark purple, and were now a mix of lilac and raisin.

An hour later Dad was no longer grinning. Tyler had not repeated his wish to go to college, but he had not promised to stay, either. He was just sitting there, behind that vacant expression, riding it out. “A man can’t make a living out of books and scraps of paper,” Dad said. “You’re going to be the head of a family. How can you support a wife and children with *books*?”

Tyler tilted his head, showed he was listening, and said nothing.

"A son of mine, standing in line to get brainwashed by socialists and Illuminati spies—"

"The s-s-school's run by the ch-ch-church," Tyler interrupted. "How b-bad can it b-be?"

Dad's mouth flew open and a gust of air rushed out. "You don't think the Illuminati have infiltrated the church?" His voice was booming; every word reverberated with a powerful energy. "You don't think the first place they'd go is that school, where they can raise up a whole generation of socialist Mormons? I raised you better than that!"

I will always remember my father in this moment, the potency of him, and the desperation. He leans forward, jaw set, eyes narrow, searching his son's face for some sign of agreement, some crease of shared conviction. He doesn't find it.

—

THE STORY OF HOW TYLER decided to leave the mountain is a strange one, full of gaps and twists. It begins with Tyler himself, with the bizarre fact of him. It happens sometimes in families: one child who doesn't fit, whose rhythm is off, whose meter is set to the wrong tune. In our family, that was Tyler. He was waltzing while the rest of us hopped a jig; he was deaf to the raucous music of our lives, and we were deaf to the serene polyphony of his.

Tyler liked books, he liked quiet. He liked organizing and arranging and labeling. Once, Mother found a whole shelf of matchboxes in his closet, stacked by year. Tyler said they contained his pencil shavings from the past five years, which he had collected to make fire starters for our "head for the hills" bags. The rest of the house was pure confusion: piles of unwashed laundry, oily and black from the junkyard, littered the bedroom floors; in the kitchen, murky jars of tincture lined every table and cabinet, and these were only cleared away to make space for even messier projects, perhaps to skin a deer carcass or strip Cosmoline off a rifle. But in the heart of this chaos, Tyler had half a decade's pencil shavings, cataloged by year.

My brothers were like a pack of wolves. They tested each other constantly, with scuffles breaking out every time some young pup hit a growth spurt and dreamed of moving up. When I was young these tussles usually ended with Mother screaming over a broken lamp or vase, but as I got older there were fewer things left to break. Mother said we'd owned a TV once, when I was a baby, until Shawn had put Tyler's head through it.

While his brothers wrestled, Tyler listened to music. He owned the only boom box I had ever seen, and next to it he kept a tall stack of CDs with strange words on them, like "Mozart" and "Chopin." One Sunday afternoon, when he was perhaps sixteen, he caught me looking at them. I tried to run, because I thought he might wallop me for being in his room, but instead he took my hand and led me to the stack. "W-which one do y-you like best?" he said.

One was black, with a hundred men and women dressed in white on the cover. I pointed to it. Tyler eyed me skeptically. "Th-th-this is ch-ch-choir music," he said.

He slipped the disc into the black box, then sat at his desk to read. I squatted on the floor by his feet, scratching designs into the carpet. The music began: a breath of strings, then a whisper of voices, chanting, soft as silk, but somehow piercing. The hymn was familiar to me—we'd sung it at church, a chorus of mismatched voices raised in worship—but *this* was different. It was worshipful, but it was also something else, something to do with study, discipline and collaboration. Something I didn't yet understand.

The song ended and I sat, paralyzed, as the next played, and the next, until the CD finished. The room felt lifeless without the music. I asked Tyler if we could listen to it again, and an hour later, when the music stopped, I begged him to restart it. It was very late, and the house quiet, when Tyler stood from his desk and pushed play, saying this was the last time.

"W-w-we can l-l-listen again tomorrow," he said.

Music became our language. Tyler's speech impediment kept him quiet, made his tongue heavy. Because of that, he and I had never talked much; I had not known my brother. Now, every evening when

he came in from the junkyard, I would be waiting for him. After he'd showered, scrubbing the day's grime from his skin, he'd settle in at his desk and say, "W-w-what shall we l-l-listen t-t-to tonight?" Then I would choose a CD, and he would read while I lay on the floor next to his feet, eyes fixed on his socks, and listened.

I was as rowdy as any of my brothers, but when I was with Tyler I transformed. Maybe it was the music, the grace of it, or maybe it was *his* grace. Somehow he made me see myself through his eyes. I tried to remember not to shout. I tried to avoid fights with Richard, especially the kind that ended with the two of us rolling on the floor, him pulling my hair, me dragging my fingernails through the softness of his face.

I should have known that one day Tyler would leave. Tony and Shawn had gone, and they'd belonged on the mountain in a way that Tyler never did. Tyler had always loved what Dad called "book learning," which was something the rest of us, with the exception of Richard, were perfectly indifferent to.

There had been a time, when Tyler was a boy, when Mother had been idealistic about education. She used to say that we were kept at home so we could get a *better* education than other kids. But it was only Mother who said that, as Dad thought we should learn more practical skills. When I was very young, that was the battle between them: Mother trying to hold school every morning, and Dad herding the boys into the junkyard the moment her back was turned.

But Mother would lose that battle, eventually. It began with Luke, the fourth of her five sons. Luke was smart when it came to the mountain—he worked with animals in a way that made it seem like he was talking to them—but he had a severe learning disability and struggled to learn to read. Mother spent five years sitting with him at the kitchen table every morning, explaining the same sounds again and again, but by the time he was twelve, it was all Luke could do to cough out a sentence from the Bible during family scripture study. Mother couldn't understand it. She'd had no trouble teaching Tony and Shawn to read, and everyone else had just sort of picked it up. Tony had taught me to read when I was four, to win a bet with Shawn, I think.

Once Luke could scratch out his name and read short, simple phrases, Mother turned to math. What math I was ever taught I learned doing the breakfast dishes and listening to Mother explain, over and over, what a fraction is or how to use negative numbers. Luke never made any progress, and after a year Mother gave up. She stopped talking about us getting a better education than other kids. She began to echo Dad. “All that really matters,” she said to me one morning, “is that you kids learn to read. That other twaddle is just brainwashing.” Dad started coming in earlier and earlier to round up the boys until, by the time I was eight, and Tyler sixteen, we’d settled into a routine that omitted school altogether.

Mother’s conversion to Dad’s philosophy was not total, however, and occasionally she was possessed of her old enthusiasm. On those days, when the family was gathered around the table, eating breakfast, Mother would announce that today we were *doing school*. She kept a bookshelf in the basement, stocked with books on herbalism, along with a few old paperbacks. There were a few textbooks on math, which we shared, and an American history book that I never saw anyone read except Richard. There was also a science book, which must have been for young children because it was filled with glossy illustrations.

It usually took half an hour to find all the books, then we would divide them up and go into separate rooms to “do school.” I have no idea what my siblings did when they did school, but when I did it I opened my math book and spent ten minutes turning pages, running my fingers down the center fold. If my finger touched fifty pages, I’d report to Mother that I’d done fifty pages of math.

“Amazing!” she’d say. “You see? That pace would never be possible in the public school. You can only do that at home, where you can sit down and really focus, with no distractions.”

Mother never delivered lectures or administered exams. She never assigned essays. There was a computer in the basement with a program called Mavis Beacon, which gave lessons on typing.

Sometimes, when she was delivering herbs, if we’d finished our chores, Mother would drop us at the Carnegie library in the center of town. The basement had a room full of children’s books, which we

read. Richard even took books from upstairs, books for adults, with heavy titles about history and science.

Learning in our family was entirely self-directed: you could learn anything you could teach yourself, after your work was done. Some of us were more disciplined than others. I was one of the least disciplined, so by the time I was ten, the only subject I had studied systematically was Morse code, because Dad insisted that I learn it. “If the lines are cut, we’ll be the only people in the valley who can communicate,” he said, though I was never quite sure, if we were the only people learning it, who we’d be communicating with.

The older boys—Tony, Shawn and Tyler—had been raised in a different decade, and it was almost as if they’d had different parents. Their father had never heard of the Weavers; he never talked about the Illuminati. He’d enrolled his three oldest sons in school, and even though he’d pulled them out a few years later, vowing to teach them at home, when Tony had asked to go back, Dad had let him. Tony had stayed in school through high school, although he missed so many days working in the junkyard that he wasn’t able to graduate.

Because Tyler was the third son, he barely remembered school and was happy to study at home. Until he turned thirteen. Then, perhaps because Mother was spending all her time teaching Luke to read, Tyler asked Dad if he could enroll in the eighth grade.

Tyler stayed in school that whole year, from the fall of 1991 through the spring of 1992. He learned algebra, which felt as natural to his mind as air to his lungs. Then the Weavers came under siege that August. I don’t know if Tyler would have gone back to school, but I know that after Dad heard about the Weavers, he never again allowed one of his children to set foot in a public classroom. Still, Tyler’s imagination had been captured. With what money he had he bought an old trigonometry textbook and continued to study on his own. He wanted to learn calculus next but couldn’t afford another book, so he went to the school and asked the math teacher for one. The teacher laughed in his face. “You can’t teach yourself calculus,” he said. “It’s impossible.” Tyler pushed back. “Give me a book, I think I can.” He left with the book tucked under his arm.

The real challenge was finding time to study. Every morning at seven, my father gathered his sons, divided them into teams and sent them out to tackle the tasks of the day. It usually took about an hour for Dad to notice that Tyler was not among his brothers. Then he'd burst through the back door and stride into the house to where Tyler sat studying in his room. "What the hell are you doing?" he'd shout, tracking clumps of dirt onto Tyler's spotless carpet. "I got Luke loading I-beams by himself—one man doing a two-man job—and I come in here and find you sitting on your ass?"

If Dad had caught me with a book when I was supposed to be working, I'd have skittered, but Tyler was steady. "Dad," he'd say. "I'll w-w-work after l-l-lunch. But I n-n-need the morning to s-st-study." Most mornings they'd argue for a few minutes, then Tyler would surrender his pencil, his shoulders slumping as he pulled on his boots and welding gloves. But there were other mornings—mornings that always astonished me—when Dad huffed out the back door, alone.

—

I DIDN'T BELIEVE TYLER would really go to college, that he would ever abandon the mountain to join the Illuminati. I figured Dad had all summer to bring Tyler to his senses, which he tried to do most days when the crew came in for lunch. The boys would putter around the kitchen, dishing up seconds and thirds, and Dad would stretch himself out on the hard linoleum—because he was tired and needed to lie down, but was too dirty for Mother's sofa—and begin his lecture about the Illuminati.

One lunch in particular has lodged in my memory. Tyler is assembling tacos from the fixings Mother has laid out: he lines up the shells on his plate, three in a perfect row, then adds the hamburger, lettuce and tomatoes carefully, measuring the amounts, perfectly distributing the sour cream. Dad drones steadily. Then, just as Dad reaches the end of his lecture and takes a breath to begin again, Tyler slides all three of the flawless tacos into Mother's juicer, the one she uses to make tinctures, and turns it on. A loud roar howls through the

kitchen, imposing a kind of silence. The roar ceases; Dad resumes. Tyler pours the orange liquid into a glass and begins to drink, carefully, delicately, because his front teeth are still loose, still trying to jump out of his mouth. Many memories might be summoned to symbolize this period of our lives, but this is the one that has stayed with me: of Dad's voice rising up from the floor while Tyler drinks his tacos.

As spring turned to summer, Dad's resolve turned to denial—he acted as if the argument were over and he had won. He stopped talking about Tyler's leaving and refused to hire a hand to replace him.

One warm afternoon, Tyler took me to visit Grandma- and Grandpa-over-in-town, who lived in the same house where they'd raised Mother, a house that could not have been more different from ours. The decor was not expensive but it was well cared for—creamy white carpet on the floors, soft floral paper on the walls, thick, pleated curtains in the windows. They seldom replaced anything. The carpet, the wallpaper, the kitchen table and countertops—everything was the same as it was in the slides I'd seen of my mother's childhood.

Dad didn't like us spending time there. Before he retired Grandpa had been a mailman, and Dad said no one worth our respect would have worked for the Government. Grandma was even worse, Dad said. She was frivolous. I didn't know what that word meant, but he said it so often that I'd come to associate it with her—with her creamy carpet and soft petal wallpaper.

Tyler loved it there. He loved the calm, the order, the soft way my grandparents spoke to each other. There was an aura in that house that made me feel instinctively, without ever being told, that I was not to shout, not to hit anyone or tear through the kitchen at full speed. I *did* have to be told, and told repeatedly, to leave my muddy shoes by the door.

"Off to college!" Grandma said once we were settled onto the floral-print sofa. She turned to me. "You must be so proud of your brother!" Her eyes squinted to accommodate her smile. I could see every one of her teeth. *Leave it to Grandma to think getting yourself brainwashed is something to celebrate,* I thought.

“I need the bathroom,” I said.

Alone in the hall I walked slowly, pausing with each step to let my toes sink into the carpet. I smiled, remembering that Dad had said Grandma could keep her carpet so white only because Grandpa had never done any real work. “My hands might be dirty,” Dad had said, winking at me and displaying his blackened fingernails. “But it’s honest dirt.”

—

WEEKS PASSED AND IT was full summer. One Sunday Dad called the family together. “We’ve got a good supply of food,” he said. “We’ve got fuel and water stored away. What we don’t got is money.” Dad took a twenty from his wallet and crumpled it. “Not this fake money. In the Days of Abomination, this won’t be worth a thing. People will trade hundred-dollar bills for a roll of toilet paper.”

I imagined a world where green bills littered the highway like empty soda cans. I looked around. Everyone else seemed to be imagining that too, especially Tyler. His eyes were focused, determined. “I’ve got a little money saved,” Dad said. “And your mother’s got some tucked away. We’re going to change it into silver. That’s what people will be wishing they had soon, silver and gold.”

A few days later, Dad came home with the silver, and even some gold. The metal was in the form of coins, packed in small, heavy boxes, which he carried through the house and piled in the basement. He wouldn’t let me open them. “They aren’t for playing,” he said.

Some time after, Tyler took several thousand dollars—nearly all the savings he had left after he’d paid the farmer for the tractor and Dad for the station wagon—and bought his own pile of silver, which he stacked in the basement next to the gun cabinet. He stood there for a long time, considering the boxes, as if suspended between two worlds.

Tyler was a softer target: I begged and he gave me a silver coin as big as my palm. The coin soothed me. It seemed to me that Tyler’s buying it was a declaration of loyalty, a pledge to our family that despite the madness that had hold of him, that made him want to go to school,

ultimately he would choose us. Fight on our side when The End came. By the time the leaves began to change, from the juniper greens of summer to the garnet reds and bronzed golds of autumn, that coin shimmered even in the lowest light, polished by a thousand finger strokes. I'd taken comfort in the raw physicality of it, certain that if the coin was real, Tyler's leaving could not be.

—

I AWOKE ONE MORNING in August to find Tyler packing his clothes, books and CDs into boxes. He'd nearly finished by the time we sat down to breakfast. I ate quickly, then went into his room and looked at his shelves, now empty except for a single CD, the black one with the image of the people dressed in white, which I now recognized as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Tyler appeared in the doorway. "I'm l-l-leaving that f-f-for you," he said. Then he walked outside and hosed down his car, blasting away the Idaho dust until it looked as though it had never seen a dirt road.

Dad finished his breakfast and left without a word. I understood why. The sight of Tyler loading boxes into his car made me crazed. I wanted to scream but instead I ran, out the back door and up through the hills toward the peak. I ran until the sound of blood pulsing in my ears was louder than the thoughts in my head; then I turned around and ran back, swinging around the pasture to the red railroad car. I scrambled onto its roof just in time to see Tyler close his trunk and turn in a circle, as if he wanted to say goodbye but there was no one to say goodbye to. I imagined him calling my name and pictured his face falling when I didn't answer.

He was in the driver's seat by the time I'd climbed down, and the car was rumbling down the dirt road when I leapt out from behind an iron tank. Tyler stopped, then got out and hugged me—not the crouching hug that adults often give children but the other kind, both of us standing, him pulling me into him and bringing his face close to mine. He said he would miss me, then he let me go, stepping into his car and speeding down the hill and onto the highway. I watched the dust

settle.

Tyler rarely came home after that. He was building a new life for himself across enemy lines. He made few excursions back to our side. I have almost no memory of him until five years later, when I am fifteen, and he bursts into my life at a critical moment. By then we are strangers.

It would be many years before I would understand what leaving that day had cost him, and how little he had understood about where he was going. Tony and Shawn had left the mountain, but they'd left to do what my father had taught them to do: drive semis, weld, scrap. Tyler stepped into a void. I don't know why he did it and neither does he. He can't explain where the conviction came from, or how it burned brightly enough to shine through the black uncertainty. But I've always supposed it was the music in his head, some hopeful tune the rest of us couldn't hear, the same secret melody he'd been humming when he bought that trigonometry book, or saved all those pencil shavings.

—

SUMMER WANED, SEEMING TO evaporate in its own heat. The days were still hot but the evenings had begun to cool, the frigid hours after sunset claiming more of each day. Tyler had been gone a month.

I was spending the afternoon with Grandma-over-in-town. I'd had a bath that morning, even though it wasn't Sunday, and I'd put on special clothes with no holes or stains so that, scrubbed and polished, I could sit in Grandma's kitchen and watch her make pumpkin cookies. The autumn sun poured in through gossamer curtains and onto marigold tiles, giving the whole room an amber glow.

After Grandma slid the first batch into the oven, I went to the bathroom. I passed through the hallway, with its soft white carpet, and felt a stab of anger when I remembered that the last time I'd seen it, I'd been with Tyler. The bathroom felt foreign. I took in the pearly sink, the rosy tint of the carpet, the peach-colored rug. Even the toilet peeked out from under a primrose covering. I took in my own reflection, framed by creamy tiles. I looked nothing like myself, and I

wondered for a moment if *this* was what Tyler wanted, a pretty house with a pretty bathroom and a pretty sister to visit him. Maybe this was what he'd left for. I hated him for that.

Near the tap there were a dozen pink and white soaps, shaped like swans and roses, resting in an ivory-tinted shell. I picked up a swan, feeling its soft shape give under pressure from my fingers. It was beautiful and I wanted to take it. I pictured it in our basement bathroom, its delicate wings set against the coarse cement. I imagined it lying in a muddy puddle on the sink, surrounded by strips of curling yellowed wallpaper. I returned it to its shell.

Coming out, I walked into Grandma, who'd been waiting for me in the hall.

"Did you wash your hands?" she asked, her tone sweet and buttery.

"No," I said.

My reply soured the cream in her voice. "Why not?"

"They weren't dirty."

"You should always wash your hands after you use the toilet."

"It can't be that important," I said. "We don't even have soap in the bathroom at home."

"That's not true," she said. "I raised your mother better than that."

I squared my stance, ready to argue, to tell Grandma again that we didn't use soap, but when I looked up, the woman I saw was not the woman I expected to see. She didn't seem frivolous, didn't seem like the type who'd waste an entire day fretting over her white carpet. In that moment she was transformed. Maybe it was something in the shape of her eyes, the way they squinted at me in disbelief, or maybe it was the hard line of her mouth, which was clamped shut, determined. Or maybe it was nothing at all, just the same old woman looking like herself and saying the things she always said. Maybe her transformation was merely a temporary shift in my perspective—for that moment, perhaps the perspective was *his,* that of the brother I hated, and loved.

Grandma led me into the bathroom and watched as I washed my hands, then directed me to dry them on the rose-colored towel. My

ears burned, my throat felt hot.

Dad picked me up soon after on his way home from a job. He pulled up in his truck and honked for me to come out, which I did, my head bent low. Grandma followed. I rushed into the passenger seat, displacing a toolbox and welding gloves, while Grandma told Dad about my not washing. Dad listened, sucking on his cheeks while his right hand fiddled with the gearshift. A laugh was bubbling up inside him.

Having returned to my father, I felt the power of his person. A familiar lens slid over my eyes and Grandma lost whatever strange power she'd had over me an hour before.

"Don't you teach your children to wash after they use the toilet?" Grandma said.

Dad shifted the truck into gear. As it rolled forward he waved and said, "I teach them not to piss on their hands."