

"This is what Sherwood Anderson would have written if he had a sense of humor."

—Bryan Furuness, author of *The Lost Episodes of Revie Bryson*



# HORSESHOE

A NOVEL-IN-STORIES

WILLIAM J. TORGERSON

Praise for  
**HORSESHOE**

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“...always engaging and often hilarious...”

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“William Torgerson has brought to life in *Horseshoe* an entire community--basketball players, morticians, high school students, adulterers, alcoholics. His characters are at the crossroads of hope and despair, and he captures them all with real acuity. *Horseshoe* is a wonderful accomplishment.”

—Joshua Henkin, author of *Matrimony* and  
*The World Without You*

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# Horseshoe

**A NOVEL-IN-STORIES**

## Chapters

Suicide Hill	1
Eye Contact	25
Ye Olde Trading Post	29
The Secret	41
Aloe For The Burn	51
Heaven Forbid	67
Chemical Romance	111
The Bloody Bucket	119
Every Word I Said	131
Sanctuary	145
Nobody's a Rat	153
Friends at the Table	175
Fag	195
<i>Book Discussion Questions</i>	211

## SUICIDE HILL

A black Buick hearse moved west out of Horseshoe on Summit Street, a road that rose in elevation as it led to a rare Midwestern patch of land, hilly and wooded rather than flat and planted. Zach Hooper, "Coach Hoop" to the locals, rode in the passenger seat and stared through the rain-pebbled windows, over the gravestones, beyond the local recycling plant, to where muddy fields stretched out like an old man's history. Hoop's friend Russ, who'd recently taken over command of his father's mortuary, was driving.

"Kind of quiet over there, Partner," Russ observed.

"Ahh," Hoop said, a man with a lot to think about: mostly, that five weeks before, he'd called off his marriage right at the moment his fiancé Erica was about to put the invitations in the mail. "I was thinking that you owe me one."

"Wait a minute," Russ said. "Just who owes who for what?" Russ had just passed over a wad of fifty dollar bills—500 bones—to Hoop for payment for a few upcoming hours of work as a pall bearer for Bob King's funeral. It wasn't such a strange thing for a family to have to pay to get a couple younger folks to work a funeral, but for a local financial mogul such as Bob King, who'd made a grain elevator's worth of loot in the metal spinning business, it was a surprise. Bob's Company—Crown Metal—made everything from pizza pans to manhole covers. If it was round and made of metal, Bob King could get it for you, or at least it used to be that he could get it for you before he up and died right on the concrete floor of his factory.

As Russ eased the hearse to a crunchy stop on the edge of Maple Hill Cemetery, he rubbed the little nub of hair on his lower lip that he referred to as his *soul patch*. "Wait till you get a look at the coffin."

The two men got out of the hearse and walked toward the rear of

the Buick where a crow-black Lincoln pulled up behind them. The rain was cold but light, like a continual squirt of hairspray, and there were four people in the Lincoln: Bob's son Chad was at the wheel, the widow Linda was in the passenger seat, and in the backseat were two more of Bob's kids, his son Camp and his daughter Chris who was the youngest of Bob and Linda's children.

Strange work, Hoop thought, but he certainly needed the money. For at least three months now, Hoop had roosted atop Horseshoe's gossip fence because of what he'd done to Erica. At the root of the problem, Hoop believed, was that he'd been married before, very young at twenty-two, a marriage which ended inside of three years when his ex had fallen for a lawyer and moved off with him to Indianapolis. Because of the late juncture at which Coach Hoop had called off his second marriage to Erica, there were a lot of things that needed to be paid for: the invitations, the deposit on the golf course club house, the bridesmaids' dresses, and the wedding gown. Hoop's finances were, as they say, sinking deeper into the red.

"Get Linda's door." Russ's order yanked Hoop from his thoughts of Erica, and he saw that Linda was already emerging from the car. Hoop couldn't ever remember actually speaking to the woman, but of course he'd seen her around town and her picture was often in area newspapers—once even in the *Chicago Tribune*—for all of the charity work she did. Linda's posture was as erect as a ripe stalk of corn, and she was in her mid-fifties, thin and pretty, and her shoulder-length blonde hair was turning a distinguished and lovely white.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Hoop told Linda. He had no idea of what to say, this even though it had been fairly recently that he'd been a pall bearer for his classmate's funeral, a young lady named Angel Boardman. Maybe, Zach thought, there are some situations for which experience cannot help.

"I think Bob got what he had coming," Linda said. "He had a temper like a tea kettle and the appetite of a garbage disposal." Linda smiled. "Too much country fried steak, too many glasses of bourbon."

Hoop nodded his head sympathetically. What else could he do? Bob's death had been quite a scandal in Horseshoe. He'd thrown one

of his infamous tantrums—something about the upkeep of a lathe—and he'd suffered a surprise heart attack and died right there on the concrete floor of his factory.

Chad, Camp, and Chris—the King's were an alliterative bunch—got out of the car and joined their mother. They had all chosen lives outside of the family business: Chad lived down in Indy and worked as a biology teacher. Camp, who was based in Florida, was paid to sail other people's boats, and finally Chris, a former classmate of Hoop's, was now some kind of poet who lived in New York City.

Zuke noticed Chris had herself a brand new persona from the long-ago days during which they'd taken high school Spanish together. She'd sculpted her brown hair into a sort of ridgeline that ran down the center of her head, not so drastic as a Mohawk or even a Fohawk, but somewhere close. She was dressed in a corduroy blazer with patches on the elbows, men's faded blue jeans, and a pair of dinged rawhide boots.

"You look great," Hoop said, and she did, as either a roundly attractive woman or a baby-faced hunk of a man. Chris smiled at Hoop's compliment, held out her arms for a hug, and Hoop embraced his old friend, wondering what she felt about her father's death, about her return to a place she'd seemed determined to never visit again.

A gold Lexus SUV pulled in behind Linda's Town Car. This was the King family lawyer, a man everyone called The Bull, and rumor had it that he was paid two thousand dollars a month just to have lunch with Bob on Mondays. Bull was on his cell phone and indicated that he'd be just a minute.

Hoop turned back to Chris. "Congratulations on your book." It had been about a year ago that Hoop had read in the once-a-week *Horseshoe Sentinel* that Chris had won a book prize. There'd been a release party in Manhattan at a bar called KGB, and the photograph of Chris had shown the old Soviet flag barely visible behind her hanging from the ceiling behind the bar. That, of course, had prompted some conversation in Horseshoe, where rumors often spread like the flu virus.

Chris's cheeks turned a deeper shade of crimson, and she looked down at the broken blacktop of the road. "Thanks," she said, her

voice barely louder than a whisper.

The Bull swaggered out of his Lexus, tucking his phone into his suit pocket. “We ready?” He was a stocky man, a former state champ in wrestling, and he’d been a member of Indiana University’s team before he’d gone on to graduate from its law school. Bull shook everyone’s hand when he got to where the hearse was. Greetings were exchanged. Everybody knew everybody even if it had been awhile.

“If you could line up three to a side,” Russ instructed.

Hoop was surprised that they were starting already. This was a very sparse crowd for a man as rich as Bob King, for a man who employed—what?—forty percent of the town. It was as if the people of Horseshoe had told Bob not to let the door hit him in the ass on his way out of this life.

Russ opened the rear door of the hearse, and although Hoop had been forewarned, he was shocked at what he saw. The casket was done up as if it were a stock car for the Brickyard, sponsored by Crown Metal. It was painted shiny white with purple and gold trim.

“Oh my God,” Chris said at the sight of it. She and her father weren’t close and since she’d skipped the wake, this was the first time she’d seen Bob’s final gift to himself.

“Special ordered from New Mexico,” Camp said. “Dad insisted I come see it as soon as it arrived.”

“Where has he been keeping it?” Chris asked.

“Out at the airport,” Linda said. Bob owned a small jet and hangar out at the air field that had been named for him.

Russ talked the pall bearers through their service. “Grab the side runners as the coffin comes out.” Russ waited for everyone to catch sight of the polished wooden shafts that ran along the length of the casket. It had a purple royal crest just below where Bob’s head rested. The crest on the lid of the coffin would have looked natural sashed across a knight’s armor, and the words *Crown Metal* were emblazoned in gold letters. The casket seemed to float back into the rain like a cloud. Water beaded on its surface as if it were the hood of a freshly waxed car.

Everyone except for Linda acted as a pall bearer, and they all

moved from the gravelly shoulder out onto the slick wet grass.

Linda called out to them. "You all be careful." The freshly dug grave was fifteen yards or so away, work that had been done by Horseshoe's Mr. Do Everything, Tom Boardman. Among one of many jobs Tom had was that he was the head janitor at Horseshoe High where Coach Hoop worked.

As the crew moved along, the weight of the casket jerked a little harder on Hoop's shoulder socket than he'd expected, and it wasn't until he angled in the direction of King Bob's grave, that he realized he was going to walk right past Angel Hulbert's stone. Angel was Tom Boardman's daughter, a former high school classmate of Hoop's, and after marrying a little late and having her first child, she'd died before her daughter Lilly had even reached her first birthday.

As Hoop drew closer to where Angel's body was buried, the gravitational pull of her headstone seemed to draw Hoop into another dimension, a solar system in which his classmate's tombstone was the sun. From Hoop's first days of kindergarten all the way into early high school, Angel Boardman had shined on him as a nearly constant source of cheerfulness, eternally smiling and friendly, very sweet to him when he was just a skinny and acne-plagued middle school student. Back then, while Hoop had still been afraid to talk to girls, his bolder classmates had been copping their first feels of bottoms and breasts. Hoop had always liked Angel, always had some degree of crush on her, and when as a freshman he'd confessed his admiration, Angel had been so sweet in her refusal that it took Hoop several days to realize he'd been artfully rejected. But now Angel was dead, and Hoop found himself unexpectedly caught up in the emotion having had a crush on someone who was no longer of this world. The sorrow of a death can sneak up that way: nothing at first, and then striking like a tornado tearing through the woods.

Hoop no longer felt the light rain falling on his face; no longer felt the way his feet wiggled a little more loosely than normal on the wet grass, and maybe most precariously of all, Hoop failed to notice that he was coming upon the edge of Horseshoe's fastest sledding run, a bowl of land in the middle of the cemetery left free and clear of graves probably due to the steepness of its incline. Most folks in

Horseshoe knew the place as Suicide Hill.

Bob's son Chad was the first to go, slipping on the grass, rising in grandiose style, his right leg whipping up first, an instinctual maneuver meant to help him stay balanced. Chad's left foot came out from under him too, and he pirouetted up into the air, his legs spreading wide, almost as if he were a ballet dancer at the peak of his jump. One corner of the coffin fell sharply into the muddy ground, and it was nearly a miracle, that in unison, as if they were players on one of Hoop's finely tuned starting fives, that the pall bearers pivoted toward their freight and grabbed the side runners with both hands.

"And down," Russ said, using a voice as if he were a trainer at some gym, talking a person down from one of many sets of repetitions. Russ glanced over to Linda who only seemed a bit worried and possibly slightly bemused at her son's fall.

Chad lay flat on his back and grasped his crotch as if he were readying to make some sort of grotesque mud angel. "I just tore the hell out of my groin."

Russ hurried around to the other side of the coffin, slipping a little as he went, putting his hand down on the casket to steady himself. "Jesus," he said. "This is dangerous." When he reached Chad, he knelt down and offered his hand, expecting to help him up.

"Give me a second." Chad pushed Russ's hand away and shook his head. "I'm out, Ma," he said to his mother, meaning that he would not be able to help carry the casket. Chad grimaced, tried to sit up, but failed.

"Take your time," Linda said and moved over to where her son lay in the mud. Everyone except for Hoop gathered near Chad and waited for him to try and get up. Angel's gravestone tugged at Hoop's consciousness again, and he read the inscription etched into the limestone above Angel's name: *Death, The Golden Key to the Gates of Heaven*. Off to the side, right there on the stone, was a photograph of Angel, her husband Lance, and their little girl Lilly, all of them dressed in winter hats and kneeling down in front of the steps of their rental home on Riverside. There was a Border Collie in the photo too, stretched out in front of them lying in the snow.

The point of an emotional spade sank down into Hoop's heart

and turned up a cleft of anger. A month or so before Angel died, the family had held a ceremony at the church, a ceremony during which hundreds of people called on God and asked for Angel to be healed. Hoop had gone and sat in the back, right next to where an artist he'd never seen before worked to sketch Angel at the altar. Hoop remembered how she'd knelt up there at the front of the church for the better part of an hour, pouring out prayers and tears, begging God for her life, begging for the chance to be a good mother. Hoop had brushed quite a few tears from his own cheeks that night as he sat in a back pew sipping Jack Daniels from a small silver flask he'd started to keep tucked in his coat. It was a shameful memory for Hoop, a shameful thing for a man to have done who was supposed to be leading the town's young people as a teacher and the boys' basketball coach. Angel's funeral had come at the height of Hoop's drinking, about halfway between the present day and the day he'd told Erica Carr he wasn't going to marry her. How could God exist if He didn't listen to Angel Boardman? If not Angel, then who?

"Zach. Earth to Zach." Russ's use of Hoop's given name yanked him back to King Bob's funeral. Chad was on his feet and limping over to where his mother stood. Russ shook his head at Hoop and then looked to Linda. "I don't know," he said, "maybe this isn't the day for it?"

Linda smiled and brought her hands together right in front of her lips, almost as if she were going to deliver an open-eyed prayer. She looked up at the gray heavens again, and then, as if she were exercising a great deal of patience, she explained: "I was married to Bob King for nearly thirty years." Linda surveyed the group, not unlike the way Hoop looked over his team when it was halftime and they were behind. "I really need to put my life with Bob behind me as soon as I can. Let's be as respectful as possible and get him into the ground." Linda paused to let that sink in for a moment and then she added, "Today." A crease of a smile tickled the corners of Linda's mouth. Sometimes a smile helps a person not to cry. "Sound okay to you, Mr. Russell?"

"Sure." Russ repositioned everyone, asking Hoop to take his spot, sliding Camp to a corner, and then moving himself to a place

diagonally opposite Hoop.

Once again, minus a teammate, the casket-carrying squad began to proceed oh-so-carefully. Hoop noticed how close they were to Suicide Hill. He'd sledded there many a time from the ages of six to twenty, and remembering this, he touched a wormy scar on his Adam's apple from where once on his sled he'd missed the center of the little earthen ramp at the bottom of the hill and scraped dangerously close to the trunk of a giant maple tree. A low-hanging branch had pierced the skin of Hoop's throat requiring six stitches.

The pall bearers were now approaching the very spot someone on a sled should embark if they hoped to catch the center of the ramp at the bottom of the hill, launch into the air, safely miss the maple, and go skittering across the well of land and up a quarter of the other side.

The pall bearers had carried the casket about ten yards when Camp and Russ slipped, not quite at the same time. They were on the Suicide Hill side of the coffin, and it was Russ who went down slightly first, gripping the casket runner as he fell, an action that yanked Camp back and to his right, a few steps closer to the sledding run. Rather than pivot and grip the runner as Camp had done before, for some reason this time he let go of his hold and hopped back as if he'd encountered a skunk rummaging through his trash.

Hoop, now holding all of the weight, was jerked toward the ground and his chin bounced on the silver lid of the coffin, his skin splitting like that of a grape's. A peppering of stars razzed into his vision. A few red droplets of Hoop's blood dotted the front side of Bob's shiny white coffin. The side runners slammed down and because Hoop had never released his grip, the fabric of his sleeve worked its way into the little hinge that connected the runners to their load. Hoop went to one knee still attached to the coffin.

With Bob's casket inching along and Hoop beginning to realize his predicament, Russ and Camp worked their way into sitting positions. Linda stood with her hand over her mouth, and Chad, her injured son, unconsciously massaged his pulled groin muscle. With increasing momentum, the coffin began to move along toward that old sledding run, lining itself up as if King Bob himself worked a sail

and rudder from the inside.

Hoop trailed the coffin at first, rising from one knee and beginning to walk along with it, his mind just conceiving of what was happening as the blood from his chin pattered along with the rain onto the coffin. As a coach, Hoop had taught his players the art of visualization. That is he taught them to prevision the things they would need to do in order to win basketball games: they saw themselves making shots, running to spots on the floor at the precise right moments, and maybe most importantly of all, they saw the passes of their opponents before they were ever made. Hoop had been especially good at this as a player, nearly psychic in his ability to be an anticipator of his opponent's actions, and now in the cemetery, these same skills were put to use. Hoop saw his own body, fastened to Bob's coffin, launched from the earthen ramp. Hoop could see his head smushed, as if in a vice between the maple and the casket, his grey brain matter oozing out like the pulp of an orange. Suddenly, Hoop considered how it was that he would be remembered, and what he thought of was not the Final Four he'd just led his basketball team to, but that he had gotten drunk at Angel's church service and been the man who'd hurt Erica Carr, hurt her with probably a force as emotionally crushing as he was about to receive physically himself.

Hoop ran along with the coffin until he faced a choice: he could either get dragged down the hill like a loose chain on a truck, or he could leap onto the coffin as if it were a rocket he would ride into another world. Hoop jumped into the air, opened his arms as if he were going to hug an old friend, and he grabbed hold of the coffin with his arms and legs.

Atop Bob's coffin and plunging down the hill, Hoop knew—from the times he'd taken this route as a child—that he was headed too far to the left. Hoop felt the wind and rain smack him in the face and his senses registered the sting of the cool air in his nose, the scent of the long wet grass, the sight of the scattered maples, pines, elms, and sycamores. Hoop saw a little squirrel perk its head up at the commotion, and over on the other side of the dip in the bowl of the cemetery, Hoop's grandfather's memorial stone seemed to stand up as high as the Soldiers and Sailors Monument down in Indianapolis,

a height as tall as his grandfather's character.

Hoop thought of his grandparents' marriage which had exceeded fifty years. He thought of the tomatoes his grandfather had grown in his backyard and taken to those who couldn't get out, of the times he'd chauffeured children and their parents to distant hospitals, and of the way his grandfather had been a quiet man, a man who said very little to his grandson except for that each time they'd been together he told him that he loved him very much. Hoop's grandfather had won no regional coaching championships; there was no multimillion dollar business left behind as in the case of Bob King, but somehow the features of Hoop's grandfather's life seemed to dwarf anything that Hoop had been headed for up to this moment.

Turning his face away from what would be the impact side of the casket, Hoop pressed his cheek and temple into the cold lid and braced for the collision that he was sure would come. Blood from Hoop's chin dripped onto King Bob's purple crest and streaked its way down the length of the shiny-white casket.

When Hoop had called off his wedding, he'd told Erica that he couldn't marry her because of his history, specifically that he'd been married before, but the truth was that when Russ had gotten divorced a few months before Hoop's scheduled wedding, singledom had twinkled a little brighter than it might have. Also, with the coaching success, Hoop had begun to have new goals, specifically collegiate assistantships where he'd be required to be on the road with the team or else recruiting new players. Hoop knew that Erica was of no mind for moving far away. And in all this, in Hoop's calling off his marriage, he had not used his free time to make connections, apply for jobs, or even work with his own team. Hoop had used his free time to go out and drink with Russ. More and more, Hoop was becoming a drunk, a drunk who spent his time in pursuit of the single women who lived within a sixty mile radius of Horseshoe. How awful it would be to die on this day, Hoop thought, and be buried in the ground next to his grandfather with a life's work such as he'd built. The earth would probably vomit him back to the surface.

The weight of the coffin, the grade of the slope, and the slickness of the rain-soaked grass all worked together to launch Hoop into the

air at a speed nearly equal to that of the white-bearded ospreys that Hoop loved to watch dive for their fishy meals into the water of the Tippecanoe.

The front-left corner of the casket caught the edge of the maple tree, cleaved off a shiver of wood, popped open the top half of the hatch, all of which exposed King Bob's upper body and sent Hoop into his own freefall. Still airborne, Hoop realized that even though Death had fired an arrow for his life and missed, there were still many more shots jangling in that great hunter's quiver. In other words, there were dangers looming ahead beyond Hoop nailing the tree at the bottom of Suicide Hill.

First, there was Hoop's impending impact with the ground and then the matter of the coffin's landing, that its own short flight would surely end somewhere very near his own. Hoop splashed face-down onto the wet ground, where because of a blocked drainage gate, quite a bit of water had accumulated. Face down in the wet grass, Hoop braced for the weight of the coffin to split his head like a melon at the Saturday Farmer's Market. Instead, he felt something heavy—not so heavy as a whole coffin—land on his left arm.

Silence followed all that action, a silence within which Hoop savored the possibility that he might be okay. Russ picked his way down the hill, sort of stomping into the ground as he came, digging his feet into the mud. "Are you all right?"

Perhaps, Hoop thought, he was all right, or perhaps he was paralyzed. There was a moment of peace and terror in which Hoop wondered if he would be able to move. Suddenly, Hoop's leg snapped up as if it had been thumped with a doctor's reflex hammer, and his heel cut the air like a judge's gavel working to call Hoop's silly and daydreaming mind to order. Hoop rotated his head around and found that he was face-to-face with Bob's face, which was as round and plump as his stomach was fat. Hoop had certainly never realized it before, but from this distance, he could see that Bob's face was severely pock-marked. Thankfully, Bob's eyelids were still down. Seeing into Bob's nose, Hoop thought it odd that a man with such caterpillar-thick eyebrows had nostrils so devoid of hair. Hoop wondered if maybe Russ hadn't cleared them, that maybe down at

Vincennes where Russ had earned his degree in Mortuary Science if they didn't have a class in nostril-hair trimming. Bob's right arm had popped free of the casket and fallen onto Hoop's shoulder as if he were a friend who had something important to tell him.

Russ spoke again with more than a hint of irritation: "I said, are you all right?" He took Bob's hand and removed it from Hoop's shoulder, tucking it back into the boundaries of the purple and gold racecar coffin. Hoop found that he could pull his arm out from under the casket. It was as if he'd mucked his arm deep inside of a cow giving birth. He'd seen that once—the birth of a cow—at a friend's house when he'd slept over as a kid. With his arm free, Hoop propped himself up on his elbows.

"I'm okay," Hoop said. "I can't believe it." He sat up and held out his arms, studying them for signs of injury. They were, along with the entire front of his body, covered with mud and grass. It was as if he'd belly-flopped into a mud pit. Hoop reached up toward Russ for help.

"Are you kidding?" Russ asked. "You're filthy."

Hoop laughed, and the laugh pulled the string on a bucket of guilt, and Hoop remembered that one should avoid laughing at a funeral. He looked up the hill toward where everyone was standing. Linda stared right at him—not smiling—but her seriousness seemed to have risen from concern for Hoop. She called down to inquire about his condition, and Hoop waved a confirmation that he was all right. Hoop rose gingerly to his feet and looked at his coat sleeve. It was torn from where it had ripped free of the casket hinge. He asked Russ to check out his chin.

"A couple of stitches," Russ said. Suicide Hill had once again drawn Hoop's blood. Russ moved to one end of the casket and signaled with a nod that Hoop should do the same. The casket itself was a wreck: covered in mud with streaks of Hoop's blood running down the side and a big chunk taken out of the corner where it had smacked the maple.

"Look at that," Hoop said, rubbing his finger where the coffin had been chipped away. "It's made of wood."

Russ wasn't in the mood to take a moment to appreciate the

construction of the coffin. "On three," Russ said, directing Hoop back to the cleanup. The two of them, with nearly perfect synchronization, pushed the coffin over so that Bob would once again lay flat on his back. The weight of the coffin made it impossible for Hoop and Russ to take it slow and so the coffin splashed to the ground and the lid swung shut. Hoop narrowly avoided having his fingers crunched.

"Could have told me to close the door first," Hoop observed. Russ shrugged his shoulders. He was getting cranky.

Linda called from atop the hill. "What do you think?"

Chris had started to pick her way through the grass toward them, and her brother Camp was reluctantly following, waiting for someone to tell him to stop.

"Wait a sec," Russ said. He turned to Hoop and asked in a soft voice, "What the hell are we going to do?" Both men eyed the coffin.

Hoop pursed his lips. "Not carry it anywhere. I can guarantee you that." Hoop looked from where King Bob lay, and he followed with his eyes the steep grade of Suicide Hill now paved with a green path from where the casket had smeared down the grass. "This isn't a need more guys sort of problem," Hoop said. "This is a matter of getting what?" Hoop didn't know. Some sort of machine.

"I'm stumped," Russ said. "I'm thinking a group of guys could carry it up once the ground dries out."

"Bob can't spend the night down here, can he?"

Russ looked disgusted. "Of course he can't."

From up the hill and toward Summit Street, a sound like a shotgun blasted into the air. Hoop and Russ jolted and ducked their heads as if they were under fire.

"What the hell?" Russ asked. The day's troubles were pouring down too hard now. Russ was nearly beaten into submission.

"Maybe," Hoop said, recovering from the initial startle that the blast had given him, "maybe help has arrived." There was something familiar about that noise. Hoop led the way up the hill.

As the two men crested Suicide Hill, there stood Tom Boardman—father to Angel, high school janitor, also a yard and handyman—leaning over so that he could expel a big spat of chewed sunflower seeds to the shoulder of the road. He smiled at Hoop and shook his

head. “Why does this not surprise me?”

“Mr. Boardman,” Hoop said, holding out his hand. He’d gone to school with Tom’s daughter and although the two now worked together, he just couldn’t seem to drop the *Mister*. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you.”

Tom jerked his head back yonder to where there was more cemetery and an old white house where Hoop’s father had grown up. “Helping the Ewalts with a big branch they had go down.” The Ewalts owned The Corner Tavern and now lived in the house where Hoop’s father had once lived. Back when Hoop and his dad were talking—Hoop’s father had no stomach for his son’s decision regarding Erica—some of his favorite stories were about walking through the cemetery at night as a child on his way home from wherever. Tom squinted at Hoop as if he were a troublesome storm cloud on the way. “How *is* your dad?” Tom asked. He’d been buddies with Hoop’s father since childhood and knew better than Hoop how he was. The question had been Tom’s way of saying he didn’t approve of how things were between Hoop and his father.

“Same ole,” Hoop said, not taking the bait. Russ sort of stepped forward and this saved Hoop from any more talk of his father.

“Bigshot,” Tom said to Russ. He meant that he’d taken over the mortuary. “How is business?”

Russ bit his lower lip. “Having some trouble today.”

For all those in the cemetery, there was no escaping that the relatively fresh grave of Tom’s daughter Angel was less than twenty yards away.

The King family came walking over to where Tom was. He held out his hand and introduced himself to Chris, a young lady he’d known for all her life but didn’t—at the moment—recognize.

“Mr. Boardman,” Chris said, a young woman who no longer resembled the chunky girl whose go-to attire in high school had been a pair of blue jeans and a Horseshoe hooded sweatshirt. “It’s me, Chris King.” There was an unspoken additional sentence: *I was in Angel’s class*.

“Well look at you,” Tom said. “Simply gorgeous. You look divine.” He opened up his arms and the two embraced in a giant hug.

"I'm so sorry," Chris said, softly into Tom's ear.

"Me too," he said, as they broke their embrace. "For both of us." His eyes were shining, and he took a step toward Suicide Hill as a way of not crying. "Let me take a look."

Everyone came along behind Tom, and they all stopped when the coffin came into view. There was a trail of smushed down grass that followed it as if it were the wake of a boat in the river.

"I'm afraid," Linda said, "We've made quite a mess."

"Huh," Tom said. "I doubt you had much to do with it." He looked at Russ and Hoop.

Russ sighed. "Mrs. King, this might not be the right time, not here in front of everyone, but of course you won't be charged for any of this. I'm so sorry..."

"Don't be ridiculous," Linda interrupted. "I just hope you won't give up." For the first time of the day, Linda's voice cracked a little, a hairline fissure in her bone of composure. She swallowed hard and looked away to where little explosions of raindrops splashed onto her husband's casket and pattered on the leaves left over from autumn. "Please just get this done today." Linda began to bounce her heel on the wet ground, her knee shimmying back and forth. Her daughter Chris came over and put her arm around her mother.

"Shouldn't be a problem," Tom said, his gaze moving up the hill from the casket to his pickup truck.

"Not a problem?" Russ asked, hope against hope that Tom was serious.

"I got me some bungee clamps that we can secure to the casket. I'll stretch rope under the straps and hook 'em to the back of the truck and then pull the casket up just like it was a giant tree trunk." He looked around at everybody. "Done it hundreds of times." He smiled. "Not with a coffin understand you."

"How about that?" Russ asked. He was as giddy as if the Purdue Boilermakers—his favorite college football team—had won the BCS Championship.

"Never work," The Bull said. His loot—whatever it was that he would make off of King Bob's death—was probably already set up to slide right down into his bank account. "Too slick."

“You’re such a tool,” Chris said. “Like you know.”

The Bull eyed Chris as if he’d like to put her in a headlock and take her to the mat, but although Bull was cocky, he was not stupid.

“If you think it will work,” Linda said, addressing Tom, “by all means try.”

Twenty minutes later Tom was putting the finishing touches of attaching the ropes to his old Ford. Hoop stood, arms folded across his chest, chin patched up with a couple of Band-Aids from Linda King’s purse, and sunk deep into thinking about Erica Carr. There had been a time when Erica said she’d understood why a man who’d already been married once might have some reservations about marrying again. But that had been months ago, and Hoop knew that she’d had at least a couple dates with a few different men. One, Hoop had heard, was a school teacher over in Rochester, and there’d also been a guy who managed The Boatman in Culver.

Tom started the truck. Linda, her sons, and Bull were over on the other side of the casket. Chad, the one with the pulled groin, sat on the corner of a gravestone, still rubbing the inside of his thigh. He caught Hoop looking his way.

“It’s my great Uncle Fred,” Chad explained, patting the stone. “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.” Now that Tom had the hood of his truck up, there was some sort of hillbilly trick to getting it started.

“He’s such a bastard,” Chris said. She’d come so close to Hoop that her comment startled him. Hoop had a way of losing himself in the corridors of his thinking.

“What do you have against The Bull?” Hoop asked. “He’s all right.”

“I mean my father,” Chris said.

“Did he have a problem with your homosexuality?”

Chris laughed. “He didn’t even know I was gay.” She held out her arms as if Hoop ought to take in her appearance. “How much more gay can you get?”

Hoop looked his friend up and down. “I think you’ve got some of the big ones covered. Maybe put a rainbow bumper sticker on

your car?"

"I don't have a car," Chris answered. "Fucker."

The banter with Chris put Hoop right back into his high school years.

Tom leaned across the cab of his truck, reached out the window and gave Hoop and Chris the thumbs-up sign. They returned the signal in unison, as if they were a couple. Chris smiled and folded her arms across her chest. "You think Tom is going to be okay?"

"Don't know," Hoop answered. "He sure is keeping himself busy."

"What about Dorothy?" Chris asked. Dorothy was Tom's wife.

"It's all church for her," Hoop said. "She can't stop talking about Angel."

"I hate that I missed the funeral," Chris said.

"New York is a long way from Horseshoe."

"I think Mom might move to the city." The fog of anger that had enveloped Chris seemed to dissipate when she said that, as if her dark emotions had been burned off by the fiery love of a mother for her daughter.

Tom had the truck going, and he'd eased it into gear and already travelled the first few yards away from Suicide Hill and toward where he'd dug Bob's grave. There was a narrow gravel road that cut through the cemetery, and Tom was able to angle for that. He'd covered the lead end of Bob's casket with a bunch of foam pads that served to round off the sharp corners. Tom had been right. It wasn't going to be a problem.

"I stand corrected," The Bull admitted. He was standing atop Suicide Hill along with Chris and her mother. Hoop was there too and suddenly, he was starting to feel a little bit happy, but he wasn't sure why.

Tom and his truck were ten yards or so past Bob's grave and on the gravel road. When Tom shut the truck off, he had dragged the casket right next to the silver rectangle of poles of the lowering device. There were bright green straps that ran across it horizontally. With Tom on a corner, the casket-carrying team was back to full strength, and they easily lifted the coffin and placed it onto the contraption

that would help Russ lower it into the grave. Now they'd come to the time when if a pastor or priest had been present, he or she would say something. In Russ's brief history as a mortician, there had never been a funeral when there wasn't a member of the clergy present.

"Don't look at me," Camp said.

"If you don't have anything nice to say," Chad added, looking to Linda.

Linda looked to Russ and Hoop. "Would one of you boys send Bob off with a prayer? God knows he could use it."

"Are you serious?" Chris asked.

"Me and the Lord aren't on such good terms," Tom said. He looked at Hoop. "Didn't you go to Indiana Wesleyan?"

"To play basketball," Hoop said, "but okay. Whatever." Hoop looked up at the budding tree tops of Maple Hill Cemetery hoping that some lines of prayer might float into the empty sky of his thinking. When it came to the impassioned speeches Hoop sometimes made to his basketball team, they were almost always the result of practice. Hoop tried to imagine every possible scenario—what if we're up by one or down fifteen or make a terrible play going into the half?—and he practiced these speeches into his hallway mirror at home. Now here he was off the plain of his imagination giving a prayer at Bob King's funeral, a man who probably didn't think about God very much and hadn't been to church—ever—as far as Hoop knew.

Russ gave Hoop a little nudge and cleared his throat.

At one time in Hoop's life he had prayed passionately for his failing marriage, and since its collapse, he hadn't uttered one solitary line of anything to God, not even on Angel Boardman's healing service night. Hoop could understand that God wouldn't listen to the requests of a man such as himself, a man who didn't pay attention to God until he needed something, but he couldn't wrap his mind around God not answering Angel's prayers, not answering Tom or Dorothy Boardman's prayers, and not saving the life of Lilly's mother.

"Bow your heads," Hoop said, and he felt Chris take his hand. Once in an email, Chris had written to Hoop that if she hadn't been queer, she might have become a Methodist minister. Hoop was thinking that some church—maybe not the Methodists but maybe

so—might be open to the possibility of gay clergy. “Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in Your sight.” The lines just sort popped out from Hoop’s mouth, and he realized he’d heard them at least twice a week for four years in the Wesleyan chapel services. They were the words the preacher of college church began every sermon with. “Lord, I ask that you give the members of Bob’s family courage and strength.”

That was pretty good, Hoop thought, critiquing his own prayer as it happened. “I ask that Bob be given the chance to know the truth about love so that he can act on it.” Hoop held no belief of whether or not there was consciousness in the afterlife or even an afterlife at all. “Please bless our attempts to love one another.” Hoop thought of what it would be to try and love Erica, a thought that caught him by surprise, that he would think of her again in this moment. “May we be patient with one another. May we feel empathy for each other’s lives. May we be kind to one another.” So simple, Hoop thought. Love as more of an action and less of a feeling. “Amen.”

“Amen,” Chris resounded in response.

“Kind to one another,” Linda said, nodding her head. “What a novel idea.” She smiled, and then there was another loud popping noise, this time more like a pistol than a shotgun, and two more pops followed the first. The head-end of the underside of the casket had dropped out, and since Russ had forgotten to set the green straps of the casket lowering device, a sort of slide was formed that deposited Bob’s body into the grave.

“For pity’s sake,” Tom said, amazed as if he’d witnessed some kind of miracle.

“I should have known,” Linda said, “that Bob wouldn’t make this easy on us.” Russ habitually checked the straps every time he was ready to lower the casket, but they hadn’t gotten that far in the routine. He knew right away what had happened. The men in New Mexico, where Bob’s customized Crown Metal coffin had come from, had somewhat understandably built a coffin unable to withstand the sort of collision this one had suffered with the large maple tree at the bottom of the hill.

Russ and Hoop approached the silver lowering device that still

held the shell of the coffin in place. The men peered over the edge of the bottomless coffin down into the grave where Bob's body had fallen.

"How does he look?" Linda asked. Chris laughed. Bob's sons came up to get a look too.

At the bottom of the grave, flat on his back and a bit tangled in the gold upholstery that had gone down with him, Bob's expression had changed. The matter of arranging the face of the deceased is a tricky one for a mortician. One moves around the lips, the cheeks, and the eyebrows as one might mold a chunk of soft clay, and Russ had done a good job that had now been redone by the fall. Maybe Bob's face had bumped up against the side of the coffin or maybe one of his own arms had smacked the bridge of the nose, but Bob's left cheek and the corner of his lips had been transformed into a sort of devilish sneer. Worse yet—or better depending on your perspective—all of Bob's fingers except for the middle one had been pushed or turned so that he appeared to be flipping off the party standing over his grave and looking down on his dead body.

"He looks," Camp said, "like he always did, but happier."

"Will that God-awful casket still fit into the grave?" Linda asked.

Russ seemed to double check Linda's expression to make sure she was serious. "If you're okay with it," Russ told Linda, "I'm okay with it. Maybe don't tell the whole world." Russ looked at The Bull who shook his head. He waved his hand as if to say, I don't care.

"Coach," Linda said, taking the crook of Hoop's arm. "Might you help me to my car?"

"My pleasure," Hoop said. The two started to walk toward Linda King's Lincoln.

Tom, who'd evidently worked a casket lowering device before, came over to assist Russ with getting the coffin down and around Bob's body. The King boys—Chad and Camp—shook their heads and began to follow Hoop and their mother. Chris came up on the other side of Hoop and took his arm too.

"Let's get drunk," Chad said from behind them, and his brother affirmed that this was a very good idea. Hoop took a deep breath and

again noted that he felt unexplainably happy, less antsy than he had in a long time. Maybe it was that he was among friends—as the head coach of the local basketball team Hoop often held himself apart from those in the town—or possibly what beamed through him like a dose of cancer-killing radiation was the joy emanating between mother Linda and daughter Chris who were in anticipation of once again living in the same place.

"I understand that there's to be a big move in your future," Hoop said, squeezing his arm a little on Linda's hand.

"It will be divine," Linda said, leaning forward so she could look around Hoop to make eye contact with Chris, "to be back in my daughter's regular company." Hoop opened the door to Linda's car, and she began to climb in.

The Bull gave them all a wave. "Talk to you next week," he told Linda. Chris and Chad walked around to the other side of the car. Camp got into the driver's side.

"Thank you," Linda said and closed the door. Only Chris hadn't gotten into the car yet. She stood waiting with the door open, as if she expected Hoop to say something.

"Want to hang out this week?" Hoop asked.

"Back to the city tonight," Chris said. "Got workshop tomorrow." Hoop reached out and squeezed Chris's forearm. "I miss you," Chris said.

"I miss you."

"Somehow," Chris said, "I didn't realize it until today." Hoop stepped back from the car and nodded his head. Chris gave a little wave as Hoop gently pushed the car door shut. Up front in the Lincoln, Camp put the car into gear and it went into motion down the road and toward the recycling plant and Hoop's father's childhood home. As Hoop watched the car go, he began to also follow a trail of activity in his mind. Let's say, Hoop thought, he returned to Erica and asked her once again to marry him. This he would do not because he felt bad for her, not because he had hurt her and didn't want to be remembered as a bad guy, but because he could see that it was something good to do with his life, something that would hopefully be good for himself as well as Erica.

Hoop was attracted to Erica; she logically made sense as someone who would share a life of coaching and teaching. Hoop thought maybe he was so afraid of making another matrimony mistake that he had fixed up his insides so no sparks of love could fire. In his mind, Hoop could see Angel, see her posing for the photograph that was now on her gravestone behind him. He thought of Angel's little girl Lilly without a mother. With Bob King, there was a family who wouldn't miss him, a family who felt relief rather than grief at his passing. Bob hadn't known his own daughter, maybe not his sons either, and rather than loving the family that he had created with a marriage proposal and by fathering three children, he'd devoted himself to making money and running his metal spinning plant. Hoop of course couldn't speak for Bob, couldn't know what his last thoughts had been as he lay dying on his factory floor. Perhaps he died with no regrets, but now Hoop could see if he were to die today (and isn't that always something to consider?) regret would fill his thoughts if he had the chance to have any before he went. In particular, Hoop remembered that his regional title in basketball had been especially empty once he'd cut down nets in the gym, rode the bus back to the school, participated in a congratulatory pep rally, and then closed down the local tavern with a few of his buddies. That night in his bed had been one of the loneliest of his life. Everything had seemed pointless.

Like Bob King had done before him, Hoop could see he was executing a plan which would cause him to miss out on much of what was most pleasurable in living: the company of a loved one, a friendship stretched out over the span of a lifetime. The cold rain felt good on Hoop's head, a baptismal sprinkle of a different kind.

"I owe you some money," Russ told Tom.

"If you give me a dollar," Tom said, "I'll set fire to it with my lighter."

"It's raining," Russ countered.

"Don't insult me," Tom said. Russ shrugged his shoulders and conceded. Anyone who knew Tom knew that he was no man to argue with.

"What are you doing the rest of the day?" Russ asked Hoop.

"I was just thinking," Hoop said, "I might try and go see about a girl."

"No kidding?" Russ said. Erica had been coming up in their bar conversations more and not less.

"That sounds good to me," Tom added. He knew what Hoop meant too. Most of the people in the town of Horseshoe would have known what Hoop meant. "Some people work fine ridin' solo," Tom explained, "but you ain't one of them." Tom reached into his back pocket and pulled out a bag of sunflower seeds. "You neither," he said to Russ. Tom tucked some seeds into his lower lip as if it were tobacco. "You can't control yourself all by yourself."

Russ laughed, and he and Tom shook hands. Then Russ and Hoop got back into the hearse. "See you Coach," Tom said. "Bright and early Monday morning." He meant he'd see Hoop at Horseshoe High.

Sitting there next to his friend, Hoop felt more hopeful than he had about his future, even coming from a funeral and a morning of dark clouds. It was an easier feeling that filled Hoop now, a feeling foreign to him, as if the needle of his life's compass had fluttered crazily about on the dial even since his birth, restless and frenetic, but now for some reason had begun to hold steady.

Hoop sensed that what he was feeling had something to do with love as an emotional sensation and love as an action that a person could take. It was as if Hoop had been playing a freelancing and playground game of emotion his whole life, and now for the first time, he could see some connections between the ways in which he thought about basketball and the ways in which he tried to love Erica Carr. Love could be a choice that Hoop could make in some of the same ways that a person might choose to go to practice or workout every day. This probably wouldn't sound very romantic to a certain kind of person, but it made a lot of sense to Hoop, who organized his life into little routines of work.

Hoop liked to work. He believed work led to more work, and he thought bringing a little enthusiasm to a project was the way to make it grow. Often Hoop would not feel like going for a run but he would take off out his front door anyway, and before he knew it he

was caught up in what it was to run. Love could maybe be that way too. Something clicked in Hoop's head the way a shooting slump could suddenly end, and the net began to crackle with the swish of a basketball. For the first time since Hoop's divorce had become final, it was as if the horizon of his life would now at least contain a degree of light.