

Skip Wilson hadn't been within five hundred miles of home in nearly ten years. Part of that time was spent on a three-year spot in a medium security penitentiary in California, but that still left the better part of a decade away from the nest. Skip had never planned it that way. After he ran out his bit in California he'd had every intention of heading back to Roanoke, but had stopped to see some buddies on the way and had found himself... waylaid. The upshot was that he left the southwest facing his third strike for burglary, which would label him a habitual offender for that crime if he were convicted. Getting bitched for burglary carried a mandatory sentence of 25 to life. So Skip had skipped for good.

He'd wanted to go home, but Roanoke was on his jacket, and he knew the cops would check there first and go on checking. But five years later he just plum ran out of people to talk to and places to go. He dreamed about the Mill Mountain Star two nights in a row, and then one last time on a Greyhound south from Pittsburgh.

Winter left Roanoke a city of sullen pastels: blue from the mountains, grey from the three-tier rain, green, green from the very end of the virgin forests that overlook the city. The Greyhound depot was near the rail yards, where rolling stock from different lines intersected and re-linked, or occasionally sat idle overnight to be pilfered by the likes of a teenage Skip Wilson. Most of the freight was aggregate, coal and gravel and cement; too dirty and heavy and downright boring to steal much of once you'd mastered jimmying locks and playing Frogger with night watchmen. The majority of young Skip's petty criminality had gone unnoticed till he graduated from the rail yards.

Now the yards looked barren. There were fewer cars waiting, though Skip wondered if they just seemed smaller now.

Skip kept parallel to the yards, not so much getting his bearings as surrendering to them. He had decided on the bus to stop pretending he wasn't going back to his mom. Every man needs to see their mom once in a while, and why should a ten-year stint gone AWOL change that? If it was going to happen there was no sense in being embarrassed about it, but he figured since he'd admitted it to himself – and would tell

the same to anyone who asked, let's all be grown-ups here – it was cool for him to make a few stops first.

He turned right at Shenadoah and 10th and met the north wind coming down from the parkland. It wasn't raining but the air was damp, like being sprayed with a plant mister. Skip let the mist collect and condense on his cheeks. For a long time he'd been walking with his face to the dirt. If a man can't walk with his head up in his home town then there's no place he'll manage it.

Charley Wallace's house looked dead and reanimated. Everything once white was grey, everything once grey was sagging or collapsed. The surrounding lawn was a scruffy halo of weeds and crunched-up beer cans. Skip clambered up the path to the porch, stepping over a car tyre, the rusted skeleton of a bicycle and what looked like the internal workings of a computer. The doorbell resisted the pressure of his finger and then popped into its housing and refused to come back. The house smelled, not abandoned, but of true neglect, when people look and see and decide to ignore. Skip knocked heavily, and the sodden wood soaked up the vibrations and the sound. He slammed his flat palm against the door until he heard movement inside.

It was 9 o'clock on a Wednesday night but Charley Wallace looked like the tail end of weekend binge. — Skip Wilson, he said. — Holyfuck.

— Hey Charley Wallace.

— Hey Skip.

— Hey.

They stood facing each other for a moment, reassessing everything they knew. Skip could see ten years difference in every facet of Charley's face, but Charley seemed to weigh the time and then disregard it.

— You're back, he said brightly. —Who'dathought.

Charley Wallace had a verbal tic that sped up his idioms and exclamations into a single word, as if he had momentarily switched to fast-forward. Hearing it again made Skip smile, although in high school it had annoyed the shit out of him. Charley Wallace

gave a upwards jerk of his head that was his approximation of a friendly nod, and went back into the house. Skip followed and used the heel of his boot to push the door closed behind him. Charley was already walking through to the kitchen. From multiple rooms came the sounds of television turned to different stations. — You still live with your mom, Skip said to Charley's back.

Charley Wallace didn't turn around, but crossed the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. — Mom died, Skip, bout five years back. Sorry.

— I'm sorry.

—Yeah, said Charley Wallace, turning from the refrigerator with two bottles of beer dangling from the fingers of each hand. Skip took two, and felt his stomach clench as Charley used his teeth to remove the caps from his bottles. Skip had used to open bottles like that, but knew from bloody experience that his teeth were no longer up to it. He looked around the kitchen for an opener. The surfaces were surprisingly clean, and there was no trash on the floor.

— There a woman here? said Skip. The sentence sounded odd, like a child trying to talk like a man. Skip rolled it around in his mind, tested it. It was what he would have said elsewhere, he decided.

—Yuhman. My wife. Peach.

— Peach? Your wife?

The woman walked into the kitchen with timing too perfect to be accidental. Skip figured she must have been waiting outside, listening. Peach Wallace was petite, with reddish blond hair cut short and swept over her forehead. Skip thought the cut looked expensive, though her hair was greasy. She walked past him and butted against Charley Wallace's side like a cat. He moved a shoulder back and she settled into the incline. — Who is this? she said, looking straight at Skip.

— This is Skip, said Wallace, and the girl eyed the both with naked scepticism, as if they were playing a prank on her.

— Why is he called Skip, she said flatly.

Charley Wallace began to speak but he interjected. — It's just a nickname, he

said.

— That's not very interesting, she said, and ducked under Wallace's arm and left the kitchen. Skip resisted following her with his eyes until he noticed that Wallace was looking at her instead of him. The look on his face told Skip more than he needed to know about Wallace's relationship with his wife. He frowned, which saved him some grief when Wallace turned abruptly to look at him before he could shift his gaze from the girl's ass.

— She's just a little ratty today. She's nice as whatever when you get to know her.

— She's a peach, said Skip, and Charley Wallace laughed and laughed.

By the time the beers in the fridge ran out Skip had decided it was too late to go to his mom's house. He had avoided asking Charley Wallace about it, because he didn't want to risk being told she'd moved. Tracking her down wouldn't be hard, but it was an avenue of stress that Skip decided he'd rather ignore for the night. Charley Wallace seemed content to quiz Skip on his time in Cali, and specifically his time in stir. It seemed to be common knowledge that he'd done some jailtime. He wondered if that meant the Feds *had* been to Roanoke to look for him.

The temperature outside had plummeted, and the first ghostflickers of snow moved on the wind, reflecting the streetlights with firefly briefness. Wallace went back inside at the sight of the flake and returned ludicrously encumbered with scarves and caps and some mouldy looking snowpants. Skip raised his hood. If he'd seen nothing else in five years on the run, he'd seen real snow, and this was just rain in disguise. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, and waited at the kerb as Charley Wallace fell over every obstacle in the yard. The house looked unblemished in the darkness, the warm light from the windows blushing out the peeling paint and swollen fittings. A shadow moved at an upstairs window, and Skip watched as Peach Wallace bloomed out of silhouette as she stood under the light. She stared down at him, and he glanced at Charley Wallace, who was stepping gingerly over the busted computer as if the slight

incline of the path was the pitching deck of some stormbound trawler. Charley's wife watched him fixedly as she unbuttoned her shirt and let it slide off her shoulders and down out of sight. She wore a black bra without straps and the skin on her stomach was pink. She kept his gaze as she retreated from the window.

— Yeah I should fix it up, I know I know.

— The house.

— Yeah. Since we got married there's always something to do. And it never seems to fucking quit raining recently. I need to get out here, fix up this yard. Before someone falls over and kills themselves.

Skip nodded inside the hood, and the light at the upstairs window went out. Charley Wallace walked off down the street, and Skip stood at the curb for a moment, with the sense that the world had sharpened to a point right under his feet, leaving a rainslick precipice on every side. There was nowhere to go but down. He took a step.

The Angry Man pub looked just the same, and was filled – to Skip's silent apprehension – with the same people. There were men and women, now in their early thirties, with whom he'd attended high school. Charley Wallace at least knew better than to go up to them. Skip eyeballed the side of faces and turned heads, trying to ascertain if people had noticed him. Wallace grinned at him. — People round here don't remember that well, he said. — Plus, you look pretty different. Thinner.

Skip tried to picture how he'd looked the day he left, riding shotgun in Will Shaw's clunky old Bluebird, feet up on the dash. With a feeling he likened to being released from prison, until he found out what that actually felt like a couple years later. His last mugshot was well out of date, and Skip had some pretty earnest plans to keep it that way, but he'd made a point of keeping his hair cut short now, the way it had been inside. They'd photographed him going in but not going out, and Skip's hair had been back to shoulder length when he'd nearly been busted that last time, so shaving it off had been almost symbolic. It slimmed out his face, and he dressed taller now. After a half hour he began to relax, and he saw that a couple of the faces he'd recognised weren't people he

knew at all.

Charley Wallace was beginning to slur his words, and Skip got a couple glasses of ice water with the next beers. Wallace eyed him with disdain and so Skip chugged them both: he knew better than to get too drunk in public. When Wallace asked about his mom he didn't deflect the question.

— I haven't spoken to her in a few.

— She still lives down by the Yokohama plant, Wallace said. — My moms saw her a few times, before she died. She makes stuff, badges and shit. Sells them over the internet.

— I know, said Skip. He'd found his mother's chintzy website during an internet search of his own name, at the public terminal in the Greyhound station. The website was an eyestraining kaleidoscope of Flash banners and tiled low-res photos, but there seemed to be a lot of products and testimonials. Skip used the internet for little besides pornography and home medical advice – since he couldn't afford to get sick – and so he couldn't gauge the success levels of an online sales venture, but he knew desperation when he smelled it and his mother's website seemed free of the stench.

— She's doing good, man, said Charley Wallace. — She's gonna like seeing you again.

— You think?

Charley Wallace held his beer bottle up to the light, and though his eyes were unfocused it gave him a cerebral aspect, like a scientist examining a sample. — Cops came by here one time, maybe five years back. That was it. They ain't looking for you no more, Skip. I don't know much about it, but I reckon you could come back and stay. Keep low, keep the heat down, but stay.

For a moment Skip imagined it. Breakfast made for him by someone you could leave in charge of your wallet. Borrow a credit card, fold the costs among the other bills. Work for cash in a yard somewhere, keep it in someone else's bank, instead of in a strongbox under the floorboards. Nod at your neighbours without wondering what they

see. It all stretched out before him, a life with linkages. Without that feeling, the one that sometimes retreated to his bone marrow but never truly went away, the feeling that someone stronger than him was holding his head under the water. He almost nodded at Charley Wallace. And then Peach Wallace walked in the door.

They went to a party, which said a lot about Charley and Peach's life. Wednesday night was apparently a big night for some of the college bars in town, and the students of Roanoke and Virginia Tech. were happy with a mid-week blowout. Nobody at the party looked hard at Charley Wallace, so Skip figured he must be regular fixture. Peach Wallace got more than a few glances, and so did Skip, though they came from the same guys looking at Peach. This was fundamentally worrying for about two more beers, and then it ceased to bother him.

He sat on a bench in the garden, smoking a cigarette, watching the fluttering snow evaporate in the steam of a hot-tub set on a deck. Girls in their underwear ran tippy-toe through the slide doors of the house, picking their feet up off the chilly lawn, clambering ungracefully into the torrid water. Two frat-looking boys brayed and hooted in the tub, hawking contempt and scorn at guys who tried to climb in. Every so often a girl would clutch her hands crosswise across her breasts and run back to the house, undermined or dismissed or bored. The garden smelled of wet grass, both kinds.

— Who are you?

Skip turned and frowned. A girl was sitting on the bench next to him.

— Excuse me?

— Who are you? Don't worry, I'm asking everybody, the girl said. There was a manic burble in her voice.

— I'm Skip, said Skip.

— Why are you here?

— Just getting some air.

— No I mean, who did you come here with?

— I'm Charley Wallace's friend.

— Oh, Charley. I know Charley. His wife's a bitch. She slapped a girl one time.

Don't you think she's a bitch?

— I don't know. Probably.

— Why are you really here? said the girl. Skip looked at her again, surprised, but her voice was wheedling, drunkenly plaintive, like a child asking why it can't stay up late. It robbed the question of any significance.

Solemnly he said — I'm going to see my mom.

— Aww, said the girl, and the whine made Skip's teeth clench. — That's cute. You're cute.

— Thanks.

— Give me a cigarette, and then we'll go inside.

Skip looked up. She was staring right at him, her eyes wide in a pantomime of implication.

— Sure, said Skip. He passed her a cigarette and lit it for her. Later on he patted her back while she puked into the flower bed near the hot tub, while the boys and girls in the water pointed and hollered.

The snow had begun to settle. They took a cab back to Charley Wallace's house, and the driver muttered and swore under his breath, while the wheels spun as they pulled away from the college house. Peach rode up front, and Skip balanced his chin on his palm and watched his hometown glide past. The beer had drained away, leaving his mouth dry and burnt tasting. He put his cheek to the cool of the window, and tried to relax.

Charley Wallace lolled in his seat, hauling his head up with great effort, only to have in plummet forward towards his lap every time the cab slowed.

— You sleep on the couch, he said.

— Thanks, said Skip.

— See your mom in morning, OK?

— Yeah.

— You gotta come back, Skip. Come back stay. They ain't lookin' f'you nuhmore. Your mom. Your mom can, y'know.

— Yeah man, said Skip. I know.

He levered Wallace up the stair a few steps at a time, and then deadman dragged him across the hall into the bedroom. — Nononono, said Charley Wallace softly, as Skip pulled him up to the head of the bed by his lapels. When his head touched the pillow he tensed for an instant, then unwound and began to snore extravagantly.

Skip retreated to the doorway and leaned against the wood, breathing hard. He couldn't see a lightswitch anywhere. He was still lowering his breath when Peach Wallace slid past him, and stood looking down at Charley. — There's a blanket downstairs, she said, and he knew that she turned to give him a hard look, although he was already out of the room and towards the stair by the time he felt it prickle his neck.

He lay on the couch, staring at nothing, surrounded by the soft underwater light of the muted television. On the screen crimelab cops took samples from test-tubes, and sprayed ultra-violet solution onto hotel sheets covered in blood and semen. At one point there was a shoot-out, although Skip had never known a crime scene guy carry a gun.

She came down wearing nothing but panties, as if to pre-empt him, brook no argument. There were three condoms held playing-card style in the fingers of her left hand. Skip felt his gut drop away, that rollercoaster feeling that tells you the top is already long behind. She stood watching him for a while, assessing something he couldn't discern, and then she moved to the couch and began industriously unbuttoning his pants.

He surprised himself in the end, but not by much. She sat up with her head back against the cushions, and he knelt below her and between her, and eventually she reached for the remote and switched the TV off, and he was grateful to her for that at least.

The snow hadn't lasted the night, and there was the smell of green on the breeze, the light butter-coloured. Skip alighted the bus opposite the Yokohama plant, and walked slowly to the end of his mother's street, letting his feet swing at the end of his legs, trying to stroll like a man with no cares. There was no physical hangover, only a psychic one, saturated with blue light. She had come down into the kitchen as he drank from the tap, wearing a t-shirt and no panties this time, an inversion he couldn't even guess at. He had tried to give her a sustained look and failed, gone back to drinking from the tap like a pet. — You don't need to come round here no more, she had said. — It's done now. You go on and do what you want, but you don't need to come round here.

He continued until his mother's house was in sight, though he had no plans to go anywhere near it. He stopped and put his arm around a lamppost, putting his cheek to the frigid metal. His eyes closed, and he wondered if he might just stand there forever, his weight supported by adamant metal, and if people might just see what he needed and leave him be. Eventually the skipping tinkle of a bicycle bell made him open his eyes. A little girl was riding a trike from out of an open garage, down her drive and onto the street. She eyed him steadily as she tricycled past. After a while she came back into view, and wheeled the trike around to look at him. He gazed levelly back at her for a while, and then she stepped up on the pedals and rode the trike back into the garage. After a time a flashing movement in the house attached caught his attention, and he saw that the girl was watching him through a living room window, her plump face smooshed up against the glass. He guessed it was only a little while before she went to get her mom, and asked about the silent man hugging the light-post outside. It would soon be time to move, but he lingered. Skip Wilson hadn't been this close to home in ten years, and he strongly doubted he'd make it this close ever again.