

AUSTIN

HOW WE LEARN

—This is the last of it, Craig says, handing Austin a bucket loaded with cleaning supplies.

—OK, great, says Austin. He takes the bucket from Craig and wedges it between two bookshelves. Then he walks around the inside of the truck, gives all the cords one last tug.

—Think it'll hold? asks Craig.

—Sure, says Austin. —At least until the first sharp turn.

Craig grins, then heads over to the curb, settling next to the two bottles of Leinenkugel's that they salvaged when they were cleaning out the fridge. Austin joins him a second later, after he's done closing up the back of the truck. They each pick up a beer. The afternoon is hazy and warm, and the cool wet glass feels good in Austin's hand.

—To new beginnings, Craig says.

—Amen, brother, Austin says, and they clink glasses.

—So this is the real farewell to the old place, Craig says. He looks over his shoulder at the brick building behind them. —It was easy for me to move out of here because I was always like, *well, Austin'll still be there, I can always drop by*. But now—. He raises his hands in an *oh well* gesture.

—Yeah, Austin says. —It'll be weird, to go.

—Yeah, Craig says.

They drink for a while without talking.

—Thanks for coming out to help me, Austin says.

—No problem, Craig says.

—Will you tell Debra I said goodbye?

—Sure.

Austin finishes his beer and turns the empty bottle in his hands. —So what's it like, anyway?

—What's what like? Craig says, squinting at something across the street.

—Being married, Austin asks.

—Oh, Craig says. —It's cool. I mean, I don't know, with me and Debra, it's not that different from when we were going out. And so it's just—it's just like going out with any girl, sometimes it's great, sometimes it sucks.

—Do you ever worry about shit?

—Like what kind of shit?

—I don't know. Like whether you made the right decision or whatever?

—Nah, Craig says. —I mean, I guess, sometimes. There's always that uncertainty. You can't *know* how it's going to turn out; you can't know *for sure* that you're not making a mistake. But when you're up there, saying *I do*, what you're basically saying is *that uncertainty doesn't matter to me*. Like that you're not worried *enough* about it to let it *stop* you from getting up there, in front of every fucking person, and saying *this person and I, we're going to make it*.

Austin tries the thought out in his mind. *Rose and I, we're going to make it*.

—And maybe you're wrong, Craig says. —You know? Maybe you *are* making a mistake. But you know what? It doesn't fucking matter. If it turns out to be a mistake then it was a mistake. That's how we learn.

Craig drains the last of his beer. —OK, he says. He stands up and dusts off his butt. They say their goodbyes. They even hug.

And then Austin starts up the van and begins to rumble down the street. Six hours forty minutes to Minneapolis. He punches the radio on. It's Don Henley singing "Sunset Grill." Austin begins to sing along. He feels good. He feels like he is never going to die.