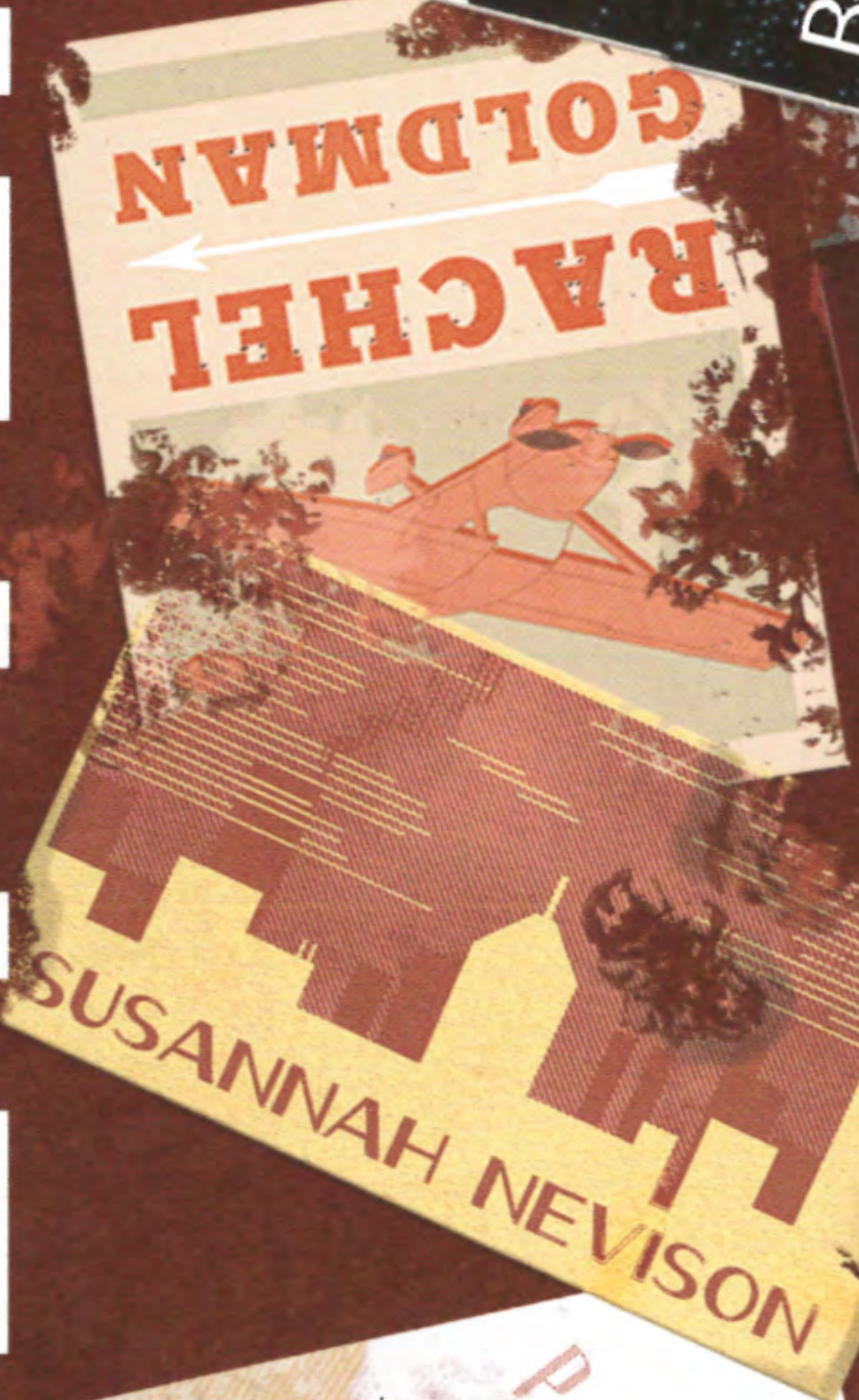


# INTER

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## Studs

Jim the foreman was tall and broad, with a stringy, gray California ponytail and a passion for coaching his son's baseball team. Despite his belly, which pushed over the edge of his work belt, he had a wild streak and was beastly strong, and perhaps for that reason (and because he was impossibly funny and warm) everyone admired him. His stocky right shin sported a huge patchy scar from an injury that nearly took him out of construction for good. He told the story with a typical combination of humor and testicular bravado: "The doctor told me I shouldn't work for six months, and I told him after a week that I was climbing on roofs for twelve hours a day and literally collapsing in pain when I got home. My wife didn't know what to do with me. He was like, 'You're a fucking *animal*.'"

We were working on the eastern slopes of the Green Mountains, building the boss's new house. Excavators and bulldozers had cleared a flat spot out of the living earth, scraping a shelf into the granite bedrock and clear-cutting an acre or so of maples and ash and birches. The foundation was laid; we were framing the garage structure, which had a lower level for cars and an upper level for a woodworking shop. Today was Thursday, the weather was sultry and sweaty, and we were bored.

Our lanky boss had been his usual irritating self that morning, unnecessarily urging speed and efficiency, acting as though he had something to do with the process. He had fallen twenty feet onto a concrete floor nine months earlier and had shattered his heel. All that kept the bones in a heel-shape, the doctors said, was his leather logging boot. So he walked with a swinging limp and had to take lots of breaks. We knew he hated it, because he was used to going fast. He bragged about racing his custom rally car up mountains and working on 45-degree pitches with no cleats, and we chuckled meanly afterwards about where that had got him. Some days he never came up to the site at all.

At around three o'clock, Jim was making us laugh about the time he bought glow-in-the-dark condoms and went prancing into the bedroom to show his wife. We were framing the walls for the second floor of the garage, building them flat on the deck before standing them into place. The day was nearly over, an hour or so left. Cheap beer was waiting in the fridge down in the tool trailer, and we had Friday off.

It was Gordon who saw it first. He was bringing up an impact driver from his truck, navigating the rebar-spurred foundation, when he yelled (he was always yelling) something incoherent. Gordon pronounced "garage" with an extra R, as good backwoods Vermonters do: "ga-rarge." We came to the edge of the gararge and looked where he was pointing.

A mouse was trapped in a section of foundation. It was carefully exploring its new confines: four concrete slabs forming an enclosure of about a cubic yard. There was no escape; it could not climb the smooth, newly poured walls, and under its tiny feet was at least a foot of rough, racquetball-sized drainage stones. The afternoon sun was beating down, and we knew the mouse could not last another day. It would starve or die of thirst, or something would eat it.

Gordon was already done looking. He climbed up to where we were working and began telling us about how he beat his dog that morning for shitting on the carpet. We turned back to building the garage wall. Then, as we were lining up the final studs, Jim straightened up. He walked to the edge of the garage and drew back the safety guard of the nail gun with his right hand. He was cackling, almost teetering in place. He pointed at the mouse and fired—a sibilant burst of sound that sent long, bright framing nails pinging off the stones. The creature froze, then started quivering and leaping in small circles.

We were in hysterics. Jim's big body shook from the shoulders, his ponytail twitching against his sweat-stained shirt. He put the gun down on the deck and walked off to his next task.

In five minutes, the wall was done, but we had a gable end to build before we could start standing them all up. I was tired of working, restless, ready to go. We were still making cracks about Gordon's dog as we swung our hammers, adjusting the studs. Hit it like you hit your dog when it shits on the carpet. I picked up the nail gun, flinging the air cord into an arc to clear it from the 2x4s littering the deck.

Firing a nail gun into the air is like throwing a rock from a high place: there's a power unleashed, dangerous and not quite predictable. I walked to where Jim had stood and looked down. The mouse was about twenty feet away, making short, cautious movements around its pen. I took aim, looking down the top of the bulky metal tool like it was a rifle. Unlike Gordon, who'd killed many deer and prided himself in his skill at dressing a carcass, I'd never shot a real gun before. I grinned and fired off a few shots.

"Dude, you were close!" said Mike, stepping up next to me. He lit his eighth cigarette from the dying one in his mouth, placed the pack back in his belt. His wife, Vanessa, thought he had quit.

He was right; I had missed by maybe six inches. It was too good. I couldn't help myself. I took aim again, stilled my body, concentrated. I squeezed the trigger, and the nails ricocheted off the stones, even closer this time. I moved the tip of the gun upwards, in line with the mouse, which was fully alert and beginning to move to the corner of the foundation hole.

The nail that hit the mouse knocked it two feet. It was like it had been smacked with an invisible shovel. Its body flew across the small space and lay still.

I threw my arms into the air and whooped. "Did you fucking see that? Look at that shot!" The others were laughing, asking what had happened, congratulating. There was an air of disbelief.

Jim caught my eye from down by the main house and shook his head, his face red and sweaty. "Is he dead?" he asked.

I figured the mouse had been impaled by the nail, but I had to see. I jumped down from the garage and strode over the foundation walls.

The mouse was there; the nail was next to him. It had not pierced his body, though it had certainly hit him. Its eyes opened, dazed; it began to struggle feebly. My whole body sagged.

“Shit. He’s still alive,” I said.

Mike looked down from the garage. “Did you just maim him?” Suddenly the air was dense and close, and nobody was laughing. Everyone turned back to his work.

I looked down at the mouse again. Its tiny body was failing. Still it strove to get out of my way, to find shelter from my shadow, from whatever else I would do.

There was a flat stone a few inches away. The mouse had gotten stuck in a small crevice and could not move. It was very weak now. I placed the stone over its body, feeling my face flush. I paused, raised my booted foot, and slammed it down on the stone with a great exhale of breath. I did not look to see if it was dead.