

Chapter 7

Wylie Frye seeks solace in a mineral hot springs pool, braving the intense contrast between the freezing air and scalding water. He finds comfort in his usual spot, "Wylie's Corner," where the heat is just right. As the water soothes his body, he reflects on his improved financial situation, which has eased tensions with his ex-wife and allowed him to upgrade his workshop. Despite his contentment, a lingering odor of burning hair and roast chicken haunts him, stirring guilt he can't shake—a feeling tied to his past and his Catholic upbringing.

The hot springs offer Wylie sensory immersion, sharpening his hearing as he listens to the river, ducks, and distant voices. He prefers the solitude of late-night visits, avoiding the crowds of tourists and locals. The pool becomes a sanctuary where he can escape reminders of aging, like his mother's retirement village. Wylie's routine includes a precise twenty-minute soak, which warms him enough to endure the cold walk to his truck, his body radiating heat like a "hot water inner tube."

At times, Wylie ventures into the adjacent North Platte River, seeking the thrill of geothermal plumes amid icy currents. These moments of adventure contrast with his usual routine, adding variety to his life. However, his tranquility is disrupted when two men arrive, their guttural voices familiar—one from a troubling phone call. Wylie remains hidden in the steam, eavesdropping as the men discuss the pool's heat and a mysterious, "mind-blowing" project involving significant money. Their conversation shifts to a waitress, but Wylie is left curious about the unnamed venture.

The chapter closes with Wylie's unease as he overhears the men's plans for the next day, hinting at looming conflict or intrigue. His attempt to relax is overshadowed by the guilt and mystery that cling to him, suggesting his peaceful routine may soon be upended. The hot springs, once a refuge, now feel like a stage for something darker, leaving Wylie—and the reader—anticipating what comes next.