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ONCE WAS LOST,

or

TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN

by

EVAN GRIBBINS

2009

A Capstone Experience/Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of

The Honors College

at

Western Kentucky University

Approved by

_____

David J. Bell

_____

Walker Rutledge

_____

Lindsey Westerfield

ABSTRACT

These are seven stories set in the rural, Central Kentucky Town of Lebanon. These stories, besides the intermission, may or may not chronicle the life of one young man. They revolve around the young man's life and friends during his time living in the area and his sense of loss upon his return.

INDEX WORDS: Turtle, Lebanon, Kentucky, Lost, Tree, Chicken

ONCE WAS LOST, OR TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN

by

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Electronic Version Approved

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Western Kentucky University
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Finally, I would like to thank my hometown of Lebanon, Kentucky. It has provided me with a wealth of material, and I could stand on the crest of a Central Kentucky knob, screaming my lungs out until my voice fades away into another faint whisper echoing through the hills, and I would never run out of things to say about Lebanon.

INTRODUCTION

What you hold in front of you is the culmination of my four years of study here at WKU. Through the blood, sweat, and tears (Mostly tears, though. Bitter, bitter tears.), these stories stand as the final period on the long, confusing, Faulknerian, and stream-of-consciousness sentence of my undergraduate career. Or maybe this project is three periods and a "To be continued."

My years as an English major have provided me with many of my influences for these stories. There are the major fiction writers, such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, J.D. Salinger, Cormac McCarthy, and I could go on and on and on with these influences, but there is also an influence of poetry in my writing. When I am writing a sentence, I sometimes strive for more of a poetic line. I may think of the rhythm of a sentence, for example. I don't do this for every line, because I am lazy and that would take too much time, but it does pop up every now and then. If I am not mistaken, there may be a few rhymes thrown in.

As for the stories themselves, I don't really know what to say about them. Whenever I am asked what I feel one of my stories is about, I shrug and mumble 'I don't know.' Somewhere deep in the catacombs of my mind, past the cerebral cortex, useless facts and trivia, and song lyrics, the meanings of these stories are lodged between a couple of nerves, but if I try to explain the meanings in words, they get lost somewhere in between my brain and mouth. Even if I could properly explain what the stories are about to my own satisfaction, I wouldn't. Where would the fun be in that? My part is finished. It is up to you to determine what the meanings are. If you believe they are a left-winged, anti-capitalist, communist ramblings, then God bless you. That is what they are about.

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And the boy returned worn out by life
And found the orchard vanished,
And the forest gone,
And the house made over,
And the roadway filled with dust from automobiles
-Edgar Lee Masters

Would-Section One

And the Tree stood at the corner of Stephen's Mamaw's home in her square backyard. It leaned almost horizontally to the ground, creating a dome over the ground, and in a cool, gentle breeze, its outer branches and leaves would innocently brush against the ground, a soft rustling sound for anyone who would stop and listen for the ever so faint music. Stephen's Mamaw and Aunt Joan lived next to one another. Stephen grew up playing with his two cousins, Cody the older and Timmy the younger, and considered them the brothers he did not have. Mamaw and Joan's backyards were one yard for the boys. Combined, the yard was a perfect football and baseball field. A fence, downtrodden and bent in places where the boys stepped and climbed over into the field and openness beyond, lined the yard opposite of the house, and trees in clusters spotted the fence line. Their trunks and branches climbed into the air and over the yard, a canopy of leave's turning the music of the Tree into a chorus in the wind. Mamaw's rickety wooden building endured on her end of the yard, the extremities of the planks decaying brown and the white paint peeling and falling off in clumps. Joan's dented metal building faced the wood building from her end. The boys grew up trampling the grass between the two structures.

A Nobody Night on the Town

The Young Man sat on his couch, staring absentmindedly at the television. He picked up the remote and flipped through the channels. He saw the news, then a baseball game, a basketball game, some people arguing with one another, and then the black, comforting silence of the screen.

He saw his sister's gossip magazine lying on the floor. He picked it up and flipped through the pages, not reading anything, only glancing at the photographs.

The Young Man's phone rang, muffled from being in his pocket. He thought about not answering, but he did.

"Hello," the Young Man said.

"What's up, dude?" his Friend said on the other line.

They had a brief conversation about nothing important.

"What are you doing tonight?" his Friend asked.

"Nothing," the Young Man said.

"Nothing? You can't never be doing nothing. You gotta be doing something."

"I was just planning on sitting around the house tonight?"

"Why the hell would you want to do that for?"

The Young man shrugged.

“Huh?” His friend said something after a few moments of blaring silence. “Don’t say nothing or anything.”

“Oh. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’ll probably just stay home.”

“Stay home!? You came back just to say home?”

“I guess so.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you, man,” the Young Man’s friend said. “I swear to god.”

“I don’t know either,” the Young Man mumbled.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, we’re gonna go see a movie if you wanna go.”

“What are you seeing?”

The Young Man’s Friend told him.

“Why do you wanna see that?”

“Because it’s playing.”

“Who’s driving?”

The Young Man’s Other Friend would be coming as well. His almost Friend might go as well.

“He’s going?”

“Get over it,” his Friend said. “I bet it doesn’t even bother him anymore. Quit thinking about it so much.”

The Young Man had a hard time believing that.

“So are you going?” his Friend asked.

“Probably not.”

A few minutes later, he called back and said he wanted to go.

Later that night, his friends pulled up in front of his house. The Young Man made sure the door was locked and walked towards the car. The Young Man’s other Friend was in the passenger’s seat, talking to his Almost Friend. His Almost Friend was driving. His Friend sat in the back seat, staring at the Young Man. He sat beside his Friend.

His friend hit him in the arm. “Man, man, man,” his Friend said, “it’s been a piece since I’ve seen you. When was the last time you came back?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Why don’t you come back anymore?” The Young Man’s Other Friend asked while turning around in his seat.

The Young Man’s Almost Friend gripped the wheel, staring intently down the road, and the Young Man gazed at his eyes in the rearview mirror.

“I have my reasons.”

They stared toward the movie theatre.

“How’s your new college life going?” the Other Friend said.

“Alright.”

“Learn anything,” his Friend asked.

“A few things.”

“Would you mind expanding?”

“They’re not important.”

His Friend shrugged.

After a few minutes of riding through the dark in silence, the Young Man’s Friend started bouncing his knee up and down and rocking in his seat. He took off his seat-belt and said, “Alright, I’m bored,” and pulled out what looked to be a cigarette.

“Don’t light that in the car,” the Young Man’s Almost Friend said. The Young Man’s Friend lit his lighter.

“Too late.” The Young Man’s Friend took a drag of it. Then another and he handed it towards the Young Man.

The Young Man put the tip in his mouth and inhaled. He handed it towards his other Friend, but he shook his head. The Young Man tried to force it in his mouth, but he smacked his hand away.

The Young Ma exhaled and the smoked billowed out of his mouth. He rolled the window down and the smoke seemed to be sucked out of the car. He took another drag and passed it back to his Friend. This continued for several minutes.

"What band is this?" His Friend asked about the song playing on the radio.

"Nevermore," his Almost Friend said. "I bought their c.d. the other day."

"That must have jacked their record sales up to a solid sixty-five," the Young Man said.

His Third Friend laughed. "That wasn't nice."

"It passes the time."

They pulled into the theatre parking lot and drove around looking for a parking space. There was an empty spot beside the single light pole in the lot. Every few seconds, the light would flicker out for a brief moment and then reappear. They got out of the car.

The Young Man squinted at the flickering light. When the light flickered out, the stars could be seen. They would sparkle brightly in the night sky before the light would flicker back to life and the stars would disappear, only to reappear a few moments later. The Young Man watched this cycle play out before hurrying after his friends.

Several groups of people were waiting outside the theatre. The Goth kids leaned against the wall of the cinema, smoking their cigarettes. A group of Middle School children waited for their parents while watching the Goths smoke their cigarettes. Some older men and women laughed at a joke only older people can understand. Two skateboarders stood on the curb,

waiting for the night crowd to leave so that they could resume their skateboarding. The Young Man and his friends weaved through the crowd and entered the cinema.

They took their place in line for tickets.

"How much do tickets cost?" his Other Friend asked.

"Same as always," the Young Man answered.

"Six-fifty," his Friend said.

"Didn't it used to be six?" his Almost Friend said.

"Used to. Now it's six-fifty."

"When did it change to that?"

"Before we got here, apparently."

The line shortened until the Young Man stood before the cashier. The girl smiled at him and winked. The Young Man handed her six dollars and winked back. With his ticket, the Young Man rejoined his friends.

A movie ended and the patrons filed into the lobby. The Young Man saw a Young lady he used to know in the crowd. Without looking in his direction, she walked past the Young Man towards the exit. One of her friends held the door open for her. She walked out and was gone.

"Wasn't that what's-her-face?" the Young Man's Friend asked.

"Yeah."

“What ever happened between you and her?”

“Nothing.”

The showed their tickets and the four friends entered the theatre. They watched the movie. It was mildly entertaining.

After the movie, the four friends walked back to the car. The light flicked as the Young Man got in the back seat.

“Y’all want something to eat.” His Almost Friend said.

“Sure.”

“Where at?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You have to tell me someplace.”

“You’re the driver. You pick.”

They ate at a random burger place. Burger places are all the same once one you get past the names. The Young Man had a burger and a milk shake.

On the ride home, the Young Man stared out the window. As the trees rushed past on the side of the road, the stars were constant fixtures in the distance.

The others talked a little, but the Young Man didn’t join. He only said a few words every now and then. He tried to fall asleep but couldn’t find a comfortable position. He

leaned his head back against the seat, then against the window, and then propped on his arm. So he stayed awake.

The Young Man leaned over toward his Friend and said something. His Friend laughed.

"What was that?" His Almost Friend said.

"Nothing." He went back to staring out the window.

Eventually, they pulled in front of the Young Man's house. He opened the door and started to get out.

"Same thing tomorrow?" His Friend asked.

"Hopefully not."

He made his way through the yard. This time he didn't look at the stars. He kicked the ball his nephew was playing with the day before. He walked up the porch steps and entered the house.

He walked through the hallway, past the pictures of his brothers, sisters, nephews, and nieces, and entered his room. He took off his shirt and put on a pair of shorts. The ceiling fan whirred lazily in the background as he lay down in bed. Her picture stared down at him. With his hands behind his head, he stared at the ceiling fan rotate around and around and around. The next morning, he couldn't remember how long he stared at the ceiling fan, but it was a long time.

The Young Man felt the tears well up in his eyes and thought he was going to cry, but didn't. Then I fell asleep.

Would-Section Two

And the tree watched over them through it all. When the boys played baseball, the tree stood in for first base and silently minded their game's progress. Stephen stood in front of the metal building, tightening his hands creaking on the rubber, and Cody stood smiling slyly and hummed the ball spinning and spinning around its axis through the air and Stephen dove onto the soft comforting earth and the ball crashed into the steel and Cody's laughter rang through the air. Every so often, luck smiled on him and he'd swing, eyes closed, with every bit of strength and might he could muster, and the ball would sail into the leaves hanging overhead and land across the yard. Stephen would then scuttle to the Tree and hold onto its deformed branches for safety.

"That was luck," Cody always said.

Hell Fire and Chicken Bone

If hell exists, cooking chicken will be my eternal torment for my sins and transgressions. What am I talking about? Hell does exist. I find it every day I come into work. My job is proof of life after death. As I parked outside, I thought about the metal slab on the wall in the walk-in, where we kept our coolers, boxes, and cups. It looked like a circuit breaker, only bigger. But it wasn't the breaker, because that was in the office. Whoever painted the store didn't pause to paint around the slab. The paint ran right over the hinges and into the screws holding the metal piece shut. The paint, peeled and cracked and dry to the touch, fell softly to the floor whenever I ran my hands over it.

My shift started at two, and I strolled in at five till. The place was deserted. A lone couple sat in the lobby, eating from the buffet, I assume. I hated the buffet. Well, the biscuit stealers at least. The biscuit-stealers were the worst part of the job. They were so damn nonchalant about it. They would walk up to the buffet bar, as if we didn't even notice, and just take one. It wouldn't have upset us me so much if they had tried to be sneaky about it. If they would peek around the Pepsi fountain, put knifes in their mouths, roll across the ground towards the bar, slowly reach their hand up, take their biscuits, and then crawl back to their seast, and triumphantly enjoy their stale treats. I would be perfectly fine with it. But no. They had no respect for the place. We never said anything, though. Because we just did not care. It was rude how-

"Hey," Annie interrupted.

“Huh?” I said.

She smiled at me from behind the register. “I said ‘hey’,” she said and gave a little wave. She was pretty. She had a nasty habit of making guys fall for her and then breaking their hearts right here in our chicken heaven.

“Why?” he screamed. “Why?”

“You’re just not right for me,” she said calmly. She stood behind the counter with her hands resting on the register. She was beautiful.

“What?” He really started crying. The good kind of crying with snot running from his nose and him slobbering everywhere. “I— ”deep breath “don’t—” deep breath “under—”deep breath “stand.”

“That’s why,” she said. “You don’t understand me.”

“What’s up?” I said while climbing over the counter. I clocked in and she stood by me.

“Nothing much,” she said. “Say, ugh,” she started fiddling with her hair. “What are you doing tonight?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ll figure something out.”

“Well, uhm, one of my friends…”

He somehow started crying harder. He said some more things, but we couldn’t understand him. I started to feel embarrassed for the guy. I walked around the counter and grabbed the guy’s arm.

"Let's go, chief," I said.

"…you know Rachel, right?"

"Huh?"

"Rachel? You remember her?"

"Oh yeah, I know her.

"Yeah, so Rachel is having a party. It's not too big, and I'm wondering…"

He looked at her and stood like he didn't want to leave. But after a subtle tug on his arm, he followed me outside.

"Which one's yours?" I asked.

He nodded to one of the cars. It could have been considered relatively new a few years ago.

"Ooo, nice ride," I said. "You'll have a new girl in no time."

He looked at me.

"You think so?"

"Sure," I opened the door for him and helped him in. "There are plenty of fish in the sea." I kneeled down and looked at him seriously. "Though," I began, "not every fish is as pretty as Annie." He started to cry again, so I patted his knee.

"Well," I said, "Live and learn, right?" I shut the door on his weeping and walked back inside. Annie smiled at me.

"I don't know." I didn't want to become one of those crying guys.

"Oh," she sounded disappointed again.

"Ask me again later." This cheered her up.

"Okay," she said. "I will." She busied herself wiping down the already clean counter.

I continued on into the pack area. Jacob sat with his feet propped up on the manager's desk.

"Aa-Ron," he always pronounced both syllables in my name strongly. "Come here, I've got something for you."

I went over like a good boy.

He reached into his pocket. "Here you go." He put them in my hand. "How 'bout those?"

I looked at them. "What are they?"

He told me.

"Really?"

"Yep." He smiled.

"Killer."

“Don’t take too many,” Jacob said.

“Do what?”

“I said don’t take too many.”

I looked at them. “How many should I take?”

“Oh, bout half should do.”

“Alright.”

Jacob and I dropped acid last summer. Jacob locked himself in the bathroom, and I stayed in the back and did my job like a professional. I saw a chicken rise out of a cooker. I would love to think it charged at me, seeking revenge for the countless lives of his brethren I had destroyed in the line of duty. But it didn’t. It sort of floated up to the ceiling and went on to chicken heaven, I assume. Words cannot describe my disappointment. Annie watched after me so I wouldn’t hurt myself.

“Hey.” He pulled a cigarette-looking object from behind his ear.

“Nice,” I said.

“Wanna start the day off right?”

“Of course.” I motioned to the kitchen. “Be my guest.”

We went into the kitchen and I saw him. Oh, how I hated him.

It was his first day. He could never remember how to cook the chicken, no matter how many times I told him. He stood next to me by the breading tables. I demonstrated the technique to him, and he stood with his arms crossed, nodding his head.

"How do you fix the chicken?"

"Put it in the dip. Then put it in the flour. Shake the extra flour off. Drop it in the cooker."

"How do you do it again?"

"Dip. Flour. Drop."

"Aaron, how do you do the chicken?"

"I'll do it."

"Hey, Aaron," Frank said in his annoying voice.

"Hey, Frank," I said.

"How have you been?" Jacob asked.

"Good," I answered. "Good."

I stood next to him, trying to make small talk.

"So…" I started. "What grade you in?"

"I'm a junior," he said. "I should be a senior but I got held back."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said. "The teacher wouldn't give me credit, but I did the work, so I hit him."

"…" I looked at him. "Yeaaaaah?"

"Yeah. They almost expelled me, but they put me in A-school."

"Well, I'll be."

"Yeah. I went home. Dad wouldn't listen, so I punched him. Mom called the cops. Bitch."

They had me working with a psycho.

"Go drop some chicken."

"It's the flour first, then dip, right?"

"Wanna join in on this?" Jacob asked. Damn him.

"Can I?"

"Yes," I said.

We passed the warmers where we put the chicken and into the kitchen. The things wouldn't work unless you grabbed the plug-in and shook it while flipping the power switch on and off. Rusty cookers lined the wall to the left. The timer on three of them had slowly stopped working over the years. We now had to guess if the pieces of chicken were finished by pulling them out, examining them, and dropping them back in if they weren't finished. On the left, the breading tables. I looked in the dip. Brown, murky, and bloody. The floors were clean,

though. He could mop, at least. As we passed the walk-in, I glanced at my source of comfort in the place.

We went through the back door and into the trees behind the dumpster. Birds perched on the edge of the dumpster cawing and flying to the building and back again. A fake owl was installed on the roof of the restaurant to scare away the birds, but the birds wised up to that years ago. We smoked it.

I couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve. My cousin sat on his bed, bouncing his knee rapidly. He pulled out his leather wallet. It had a faded deer stitched on it. He flipped open his wallet and pulled out a joint.

"Ever smoked before?"

"Nope."

"Want to?"

I shook my head.

"You positive?"

I thought for a moment.

"Sure."

"That's the spirit."

I found myself sitting on a bag of flour, smoking a cigarette and looking at the floor. The bag ripped when I first sat on it, and the flour poured out into a small pile on the floor. In

the flour, I tried to draw my face with my finger, but I couldn't get it to look like me. I looked at the metal slab and thought about what could be inside.

"Hey, Aaron," he said. "Have you ever looked at the trees blowing in the wind?"

I looked up. He stood looking out the back door.

"Huh?"

"Have you ever seen the trees blowing?"

"Yes."

"I mean, have you ever <u>really</u> seen the trees blowing?"

"Shut up."

"It's like they're 3-D or something." We should have never smoked with that poor bastard. He came over and stood next to me. He looked at me then to the slab then back to me again.

"Why do you look at that thing so much?"

"How many times do I have to tell you? I don't know why. I just do."

"Well, you gotta have a reason to do it or else you wouldn't be doing it."

I ran my hands through my greasy hair. "I killed the guy who worked here before you, and I hid his body in there."

He quickly looked at it and back to me and seemed to be thinking. He gave a slow smile.

"No you didn't. It would be smelling by now."

I shook my head.

"Have you ever opened it?"

Annie sat on the front counter with her legs crossed, flipping her shoe with her foot up and down, and with one of her hands on her flat stomach, she used her other hand to push the button on the cash register to make the cash drawer clang open over and over with her other hand. She told me how she wanted to move to Florida so she could lie on the beach all day and not have to go to the tanning bed. Then Andrew came in and she stopped bouncing her foot. I went into the back and threw a rack we put the chicken on into the metal slab. Annie hurried back and asked if I was all right. I said yes, and she smiled and wrote her name in the flour on the breading table as she went back to the front.

"I've thought about it," I told Frank.

"But have you done it?"

I picked up a handful of flour and sifted it through my fingers.

"I'm gonna finish some work." He started to move. "Stay there and chill."

"All right."

I cooked some chicken and filtered the cookers and smoked a cigarette and mopped the floors and washed all the dishes and smoked another cigarette.

When I finished, I walked up front to the pack area. Frank followed me like a puppy.

Jacob sat at the desk and Annie smiled at me. I leaned against the wall and Frank did the same. I looked at him.

"Go cut up the cabbage."

"All right." And he went into the back.

"Have you took yours yet?" Jacob asked.

"Nope," I said. "You?"

He smiled and sniffed. "Just did."

"Really?"

He smiled bigger.

Clarkson entered the store. Clarkson was an old man who came in at the same time every day, ordered the same thing every day, and sat in his seat in the corner every day. Some days he would smoke and read the paper after he finished his meal. Other days he would smoke and look out the window for hours and watch the traffic go by. He nodded at me, and I watched Annie wait on him.

I saw Andrew enter the store.

"I think I'm gonna take mine now."

"Need some water?"

"Yeah." Jacob handed me the knife.

I walked back into the kitchen and pulled them out of my pocket. Six or seven lay jumbled in my hand. I though about what Jacob said and I took them one by one. I smashed the last one with a knife and snorted it through a straw. I sat down on the prep table and waited.

The perky woman looked at me from behind the counter at the gas station. "How can I help you today?" She was so lively and happy it made me sick.

"Some papers," I said. "Please."

"Oh," her perkiness wavered for a second. She turned around and looked for them. I pointed them out for her. She grabbed the book with her thumb and forefinger and struggled to get it out. She laid it on the table like it was radioactive. "I've never sold any of these before."

I smiled and paid and left.

"Have fuuuuun," I heard in the background.

"I'll try."

My stomach started to hurt. The room started to spin. Slowly at first, but it gradually spun quicker and quicker and me sicker and sicker until I couldn't open my eyes without wanting to throw up. My body tingled, and I was numb.

"You okay?" Frank asked. He was a good kid.

"Yeah."

"Anything I can do?"

"Take out the trash."

"Okay," and he did.

I put my head in my hands.

"Feel it yet?" my cousin asked.

"Yeah."

"Light headed, huh?"

I looked out the window at the trees rushing too quickly by.

"I don't like it."

My cousin giggled.

I stood up. My legs were wobbly, but I somehow managed to walk up front. Jacob had his head on the desk. Annie flirted with the bastard at the register.

"So we're just done. Is that it?"

"Yeah."

"You're not gonna even tell me why?"

"I'm not ready for a serious relationship."

I walked past them.

The guy glared at me.

"I see."

Clarkson gazed at me as I made it to the bathroom. I opened the door and stumbled in. I looked at the shaking hands and then at the mirror. Sweat poured from my face.

I woke up in a strange bed next to a girl I didn't know. I climbed out of the bed, stumbled and fell and cracked my knees on the floor. She didn't wake up or notice. I managed to get up and make it to the bathroom and I locked the door behind me.

I looked in the mirror. Hollow eyes stared back at me. Dried blood lined my nose and I couldn't stop coughing.

Drums pounded in my head BA BOOM I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants BA BOOM A piercing jab pain hit my side BA BOOM I thought I was having a heart attack BA BOOM I sat on the toilet and waited to die BA BOOM It wasn't that bad, dying.

"I'm not going back in there twice in one night."

Cody sat in my car and me out in the cold. The gas station lights shined behind me.

"They won't care."

I started to go inside, and I saw the worker and turned back.

"It's the same woman as before."

"She won't care."

"Maaa-" I started back inside "-aaaaan"

I regained some composure. I slid the door out of the way and sun shone down on me and I walked out of the bathroom. Clarkson looked at me again. Andrew was gone.

I walked into the back. Jacob still had his head down. I went into the kitchen and past a smiling Frank and into the walk-in area and I lay down on the freezer. I stared at the ceiling and tried not to think of anything. I stared around the walk-in and saw all the cups and plates and bags of soda and the like. The metal plate welded awkwardly to the wall gawked at me.

"Why do you do this to yourself?" Clarkson asked over his coffee. He stared at me with those deep brown eyes I couldn't stop staring into.

"Do what, sir?"

"You know." He took a drink of coffee.

Annie stood at my side. "Hey," she said. I didn't notice and she poked my arm.

I looked at her. "What's up?"

I thought long and hard.

"You see that metal thing on the wall?"

She looked around. I pointed it out for her.

"That?"

"Yeah."

"What about it?"

“Do you think it used to be a window? And they closed it off so we wouldn’t fly away.”

She looked at it and I thought she was thinking.

She smiled. “What?”

“Nothing.” My eyes returned to the ceiling.

“So,” she started after a moment, “about tonight…”

I shrugged.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll go.”

She looked surprised. “Really?” She perked up. “You’ll go?”

“Why not?”

She smiled and said something and went back up front. I lay there for a while and listened to Frank do his work.

The thought, the anticipation of what’s behind the door ran and ran through my head, never ceasing. I hopped up and hurried next to Frank who stood by the sink washing the dishes. His sleeves were pulled up to his elbow and water soaked his apron.

“Where’s the knife?” I asked him.

“What do you need it for? I done cut up the cabbage.”

“I’m going to slit my wrists.”

He looked at me concerned. “Now why would you want to do that for?”

Shaking my head, I thrust my hand in the murky water and fumbled around until I found the knife. I wiped it dry on my shirt and rushed back to the walk-in. I sliced off the remaining paint from the screws, slid the tip of the blade into the groove and started turning.

"What are you doing?" Frank asked over my shoulder.

"What's it look like?"

He smiled. "Making a discovery."

"There you go."

The screw popped out and I dropped it into Frank's cupped hands. The same with the next two. The door wouldn't open, so I slid the knife into the side and tried to push it open. I slammed my hand into the handle of the knife and the door popped open.

"Reckon what's in there?"

"Don't know," I said. "Fixing to find out, though."

The air smelled old. Bugs scuttled around the back of the door. Cobwebs were thick and shone in the dark. With Frank's ever-present presence over my shoulder, I flicked to life my lighter, put the flame into the hole, and gazed over the ledge into the depths.

After looking at what was within for a little while, I shut the door and put the screws back into the place and went to the front.

"I'm going on break," I said to Jacob.

"All right." He didn't move his head from the desk.

I walked past him and Annie smiled at me and I went into the lobby. I saw Clarkson. He nodded at me and I nodded back. I went over to the table and sat across from him.

After a few moments, he pulled out his cigarettes and offered me one. "'Preciate it," I said and he nodded. We smoked in silence, looking out of the window at the flowing traffic.

Would-Section Three

Every year, the boys made bold predictions about the Tree. It's not going to bloom this year. It's on its last legs, only a matter of time. A strong storm will knock it over. And every spring, the Tree bloomed greener, fuller, and the pink flowers more vibrant than ever before.

When the boys were teenagers, strangers in hard hats poured concrete over the fertile grass. A basketball goal was planted deeply in the ground. Whenever the ball struck the corner of the court and went rolling the yard, the Tree would stick out its branches and stop the ball. One of the boys would then run over and snatch the ball from the ground, and the Tree continued to look after them.

Yet older, the boys set chairs on the concrete and drank and threw their bottles over the fence and didn't play any longer. And the Tree rustled sadly, singing of baseballs and young boys now missing.

Stephen brought his first love to the yard and she exclaimed how the tree was oh, so pretty. The Tree gave up one its flowers to Stephen's clenching hand and he put it in her hair

while telling her she was beautiful. They lay on their backs on the court and watched the stars peek through the treetops and the Tree was content.

Turtles All The Way Down

"What's he doing here?" Callie asked with a hint of disgust on her soft voice.

Through the window we watched his truck pull into the driveway. The red rising morning sun rose over the twisting, turning hills and knobs in the distance and the outside world was bright. I had to squint and cover my eyes. Shaking her head, she turned around.

"I don't know," I lied. I turned around. Four walls, a closed door, and a bed in which she sat with her legs crossed and her hand over her almost flat stomach.

Knocking on the door. A shave and a haircut. I heard Callie's dad answer the door and then he hollered Davey, it's for you. Cody stood at the door, already rocking back and forth from foot to foot. He gets antsy if he stays in one place for too long. As if complacency and stability are the worst things for him. He'll rock faster and faster and his gaze will become serious. His speech increases in tempo and frequency, leaving fewer occurrences for you to chime in on the conversation. Eventually, he'll start to look around almost frantically for a possible escape route so that he can escape into the world to experience something. Anything.

“What’s up,” he said.

“Shit, nothing.” I stepped out of the false coolness of the house into the heavy air. “Hanging out with Callie.”

“Cool. Cool. Figured you’d be doing that. So what you gonna do?”

“What’s there to do?”

“I don’t know. We’ll find something.” He jerked his head towards the truck and started to turn around. “Let’s ride.”

“Man, she’s wanting me to stay here today.”

He stopped.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, she’s gotta go to the doctor tomorrow and she’s wanting me to stay with her till then.”

“I figured that, too.”

“Yep.”

He looked at me like he was thinking.

“You got any bud?”

“I did last night but not no more.”

“Well, that doesn’t help you now does it,” he said. “Does she have any?”

I gave him a look.

"Well, now." He slid up to me and put his arm around my shoulder. "I happen to have a little. Not much, but enough to last us for the beginning of this fine day. She doesn't and won't have any for a while now. That ought to make up your mind for you."

I looked at him, nodding and smiling.

"Alright."

He clapped his hands in excitement.

"Let's get to getting then." He hopped down the porch steps. "You may have just made the most important decision of your life just now. This just might be the beginning of the rest of our lives. If not, we can make it anyway. We've got the best bud in the M.C. Johnny Boone himself would love to smoke and, of course," he spread his arms and spun around, presenting the scenery to me, "we have endless roads and possibilities spreading in all ways to anywhere you want. We may even find the all-too-elusive American Dream itself, if we're lucky. And I have a feeling we might."

He gets so excited in his conviction. It's hard not to believe him.

"Hang on a minute," I said. "I gotta tell her."

"You're already delaying your self-discovery. It's out there, somewhere, on the dusty trail. Getting farther and farther away…"

I turned around and entered the coolness again, leaving him to his good-natured rant. He wouldn't care if anybody was there to hear it or not. He is there to listen and that is fine

with him. He must have noticed that I was gone because as I retreated into the comfort of the house, I heard him yell the finer aspects of his speech, such as the American Dream and Death and how women shall not damn the eternally flowing river of man's soul.

Callie was still where I first left her sitting. She didn't look at me for a moment. Then she asked me what Cody wanted and I told her and, finally looking at me with those too-often-sad eyes, she pleaded for me to stay.

"I told you I wouldn't be able to stay today," I said while I started to grab my things. I quickly slipped on my shoes and my hat and threw my clothes in my satchel and zipped up the shell. I slid it over my shoulder and onto my back and looked at her.

She pleaded again.

"I'll try to come back later," I lied again. "I'll be back tomorrow, I promise." That was more of the truth.

She stood up, put her arms around me, and tried to pull me onto the bed. She said she loved me. "Don't go don't go stay stay here." And I only kissed her, gave her a hug that she didn't seem to want to let go, and I walked out. Her dad reclined in the living room, reading a paper, and he pretended not to notice me. I don't blame him. Cody sat in his truck admiring his joint like an idol as I seated myself in his filthy truck.

"You know," he started spinning it around in his fingers, "I'm a professional at this."

Empty cans, condom boxes, and other filth rustled as I moved my feet.

"If they legalize it, I believe I can get a job rolling them. And make a fine living. Some rich fucker would pay for a hand rolled one."

"You only have a joint?" I asked.

"It's all I have in Lebanon," he said. "I didn't feel like driving out to bumfuck to get any more. And if you don't like it, I'll smoke it mydamnself."

We backed out of the driveway and sailed down the blacktop. Identical-looking houses lining both sides of the roads created a middle-class tunnel we were merely passing our way through to the outside world. A lonely-looking man stood in his yard with a water hose. Water gushing and gushing out on one isolated spot on the green grass he threw fertilizer on so it'll grow rich and green. As we passed, he looked up at us longingly, momentarily escaping his isolated world of bills and an endless mortgage for a house that will only continue to decrease in size and coil around him like a snake until his heart steadily beats slower and slower and he dies an old man dreaming about what could have been, if only for a ephemeral but eternal moment in time as the truck with two young men, that could have been him only a few short years ago, become smaller and smaller down the street into the mysterious and tempting place he used to know: freedom. I turned around and watched him disappear into the distance.

"You know what the sad thing is?" he asked while lighting it. "All these people think they've made it. Nowadays, success equals looking like everybody else."

"We gonna smoke that here?"

"Why not?" He coughed. "These people need a reminder of how great life can be."

We pulled out of the Ogygia subdivision and into the open road leading out into the sweeping world. Spacious fields on both sides and a beautiful bright blue sky bursting out in all directions and white blotches of clouds blowing across into oblivion. We rolled the windows down. The breeze provided a primal coolness, which can never be reproduced.

"So what are we gonna do on this fine day of our lord?" He asked.

I shrugged.

"It's Lebanon. There's nothing to do."

"Now what kind of way to talk is that?" He sounded shocked. "We're in the heart of America, the real America. We have nothing but endless possibilities and unreachable dreams."

He slapped the steering wheel to animate his point. If he were being sarcastic, he sure could hide it.

"You know what the funny thing about dreams is? Not real dreams, mind you. Life ambitions dreams."

"What's that?"

"They're only attractive when they're only dreams. You know what I'm saying?"

I didn't, but he was already started, so there was no stopping him.

"Once you realize your dream, you'll start noticing little things wrong with it. That nice car will only increase in mileage and fade; your beautiful wife's wrinkles will grow deeper and

deeper. Your house will slowly fall apart. And then, one day, you'll finally see it wasn't so dreamy after all, but it will be too late and you'll wonder why oh why I sold my soul to get it." He looked pensively at the passing open fields of growing corn. "You see, those people back there ain't living. They're alive, but not living."

We continued on down the road and talked about other topics, ranging from his falling-apart truck ("I spent more on repairs than I spent on the damn thing to start with, man.") to our former school ("All it did was teach us to sit.") and, out of the blue, he asked if I wanted to hit some golf balls.

"Hit some golf balls?"

"Yeah," he said, "pretend we have some money for a while."

He jerked his head towards the truck bed.

"With those."

I looked at the back and, amid empty beer boxes, fishing poles, and pieces of wood, lay a set of clubs.

"Where'd you buy those?"

"I ain't never bought a golf club in my life," he said and left it at that.

The country club was just outside city limits. We took the bypass to get there. A farmer used to own the land, but he sold it and built a brilliant mansion on a green hillside overlooking the whole course. At any time on the course, you could look up and see the house sitting godlike on its own Olympus. The single lane road to the course cut through a lush green

corn field and past an old decrepit barn. We pulled into the lot, parked, and looked at a group of men walk into the country club.

"The closest thing these people get to nature is this course." He smiled and shook his head.

He told me to wait while he went to get the balls. I watched him as he approached a nice-looking car that I would want to drive around town and have people look at me and desire to be like me. He looked around, checking to see if anyone was looking. He tried to open the door, but it was locked and no alarm shrieked. He took his keys from his pocket and, much to my chagrin, he jabbed the key into the door and slid it down the side of the car. He looked like he was laughing as he walked away.

Carrying a bucket of balls from the machine outside the clubhouse, he returned a few minutes later, and I asked him why did he just do that.

"I honestly don't know." He handed me the bucket and grabbed the clubs from the back. "I think God told me. Did you know that? God speaks to me. He's not much of a conversationalist."

At the driving range, a little sign stood and proclaimed: STAY OFF THE GRASS. ONLY HIT FROM THE PADS. Cody snickered and dropped and spread the balls over the grass. He grabbed two clubs and tossed me one saying get to hitting. He stepped up to the first ball and, without setting his feet properly like they do on television or looking at which direction he was hitting, smacked the ball. He didn't notice or care where the ball sailed. He approached the second ball, did the same as before, and then the third. I joined him.

“Jolly good hit, sir,” he said. “You could play on the tour, my boy.”

We finished and started back to the truck. A car pulled into the lot and a couple of rich-looking bastards got out.

“A beautiful day for golf.”

“Hear hear!”

“I’m glad we took the day off from work.”

“What work?”

“Hear hear!”

They laughed and patted each other on the back.

I may have exaggerated this a bit.

They set their clubs down by their car and entered the country club. Cody glanced at their clubs, then at his rickety set, and then at me, smirking. As we passed, he reached out and pulled one of their nice Callaways out of the bag like a saber and placed it into his bag.

“What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like? I’m expanding my collection.”

He noticed the incredulous look etched on my face.

“He can afford it,” he said. “I’m a communist, Davey. You should know this about me. What’s yours is mine, my brother. We share the world, why not golf clubs?”

He saw I was still upset.

"By the time he notices it missing, we'll be long gone."

In front of the clubhouse, a putting green with several holes dotting the surface was planted between the lot and the clubhouse. He tossed the clubs into the back of the truck, carefully selected a club from the bag, looked at it and, deciding it wasn't the correct one, inserted it back in to the bag, and grabbed another.

"Watch out for me," he said strutting towards the green.

"What?"

"Make sure nobody's watching."

I looked around the lot and didn't see anybody.

"Are we clear?"

"Yeah, what are you doing…" and it dawned on me. I started to say no.

He peeked through the glass doors at the entrance of the clubhouse. He stepped onto the green, dragging his boots across the surface, creating two jagged, practically parallel brown lines amid the sea of green, until he found a spot that suited him in the middle of the green. He settled his feet as a golfer putting for the win on the eighteenth. He raised his hammer of the gods high above his head. It glinted in the sun.

"My house will be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers," he said with a tone of finality and he drove the club deep into the ground. He attempted to pull it out, but it

was buried deep. With a great heave of a jerk, the club came out and a heap of dirt flew out and tumbled through the air and plopped onto the ground a few feet of way.

"What…" I started to slightly hop and look around nervously. "What are you thinking?

He gave the clump of dirt a kick and I saw him mouth "goal."

"We're just having a little fun," he said while hurrying past me. "You like the quote? I heard it in church a while back. I like it. You coming or just gonna stand there."

Cody gave the club an enthusiastic toss and it spun and spun and spun through the blue sky and it clanged onto the ground next to a car on the other side of lot.

"Aww, man." He started jogging toward his javelin.

"What are you doing?" I asked him.

"I missed."

He sounded so much like a kid. I had to fight a smile.

"We've got to go. Come on come on!"

"Alright," he said. "You big baby."

We drove over the median between the lot and drive and left. Once we were in the comforting safety of the highway, bright sky, and cows, I said, "What were you thinking? We could have been caught."

"Could have, that's the key phrase, he said. But we weren't."

"But still…"

I struggled to find the words I wanted to say and this was one among many areas where I envied Cody. He always had the right words to say. Even if he didn't, whatever he said still sounded like pure poetry. One time, he had a girl from Springfield constantly calling and texting him and he always ignored her because 'she had an annoying habit of smacking her lips in between sentences.' Then, one day when we were sitting at his house, he called her, on the same phone which he ignored her with, mind you, and told her his phone broke and he just recently bought a new one. And she believed him. She fucking believed him.

"It's the conviction, Davey," he told me at the time. "You have to believe what you're saying."

I finally found what I wanted to say and he sat there, politely listening, and he probably already knew what I was going to say and had his own retort.

"You just can't do that, Cody. There are rules… and standards you…have to abide by."

He shrugged ever so slightly at that.

"What if someone saw us? Did you think about that, hmm? We'll get the law called on us and that's exactly what I need."

"Do you want to go back," he cut in.

"What?"

"I said do you want to go back?"

“To where? The golf course to see if they called the cops or not?”

“No, not there. Do you want to go back to Callie’s?”

“What?”

“You’re obviously not having a good time,” he said. “Do you want to go back to Callie’s?”

I looked out the window at the fence posts whipping by.

“No.”

“What’s that?”

“I said no.”

“That’s what I thought I heard.” He sat back in his seat. “Now stop your bitching and enjoy the ride.”

We drove around on the outskirts of Lebanon aimlessly for a while. We took the bypass down towards the new Wal-Mart, turned around before we got there, and headed back up the bypass and turned on to Loretto highway. His phone started buzzing. He picked it up and tossed it to me and told me to see who it was.

“Heather,” I said.

“What does she want?”

I read the text. “She wants to know what you’re doing.”

“Tell her I’m thinking of her.”

I typed it in and sent it to her. I feel that, now, I should take the time to explain our mutual friend Cody a little bit more. You see, simply put, he is not like me.

“That’s why we’re such good friends.”

Let me illustrate this for you. He had a beautiful girlfriend a while back, one whom I would give anything to be with, and she would cook these fancy meals for him and even for me when I was around. He said he broke up with her because she gulped too loudly when she drank.

“It’s fucking annoying, Davey. It doesn’t seem much at the time, but it adds up, man, it adds up.”

I’ve lied for him.

“Cause your good people.”

He was going out with… what’s her name?

“Allison.”

That’s right, Allison. She wanted, one time, to go see a movie, and Cody, well, didn’t. He wanted to go see some other girl. So, he had me take her to the movie while he went to see the other girl. I felt bad about it for a while, since Allison was a nice girl and all, but I got over it.

But here's the kicker. His last girlfriend was different. He would fuck her and then not see her for a few days, but he would talk to her on those days, you have to give him that, and then he would fuck her again. For Cody, this was a solid commitment and relationship.

"I always thought, in the back of my mind, that I would end up with her. Even when I fucked other girls, I always went back to her. She was something I could hold onto, you know what I'm saying?"

No. They would break up from time to time, just to spice things up a bit, but they always got back together. It's beautiful if you stop to think about it. She starts college in the fall. Somehow, a big fight broke out between the two and this fight led to a "permanent" breakup when he, in a moment of passion, told her about the other girls. This, in turn, led her to fuck the first guy she met when she visited the campus. She told him, to get back at him, I suppose. And he hit her.

"I didn't hit her. I threw her across the room. There's a difference."

Close enough. I know about his problem, and it kills him. This isn't the way it's supposed to be. She's reversed our entire relationship. I'm the one who's supposed to have the problems. Not him. If I have a problem, I come to him and, in most cases, he'll give me sound advice. But he won't do the same. Whenever I try to bring it up, he'll try to change the topic, leaving this little conundrum bubbling under the surface.

As follows:

His phone vibrated again.

“What does she say now?” he asked.

“It’s Jennifer.”

He snatched the phone from me. He flipped it open and looked intensely at what she said.

“Grab the wheel.”

I took control of the wheel and he typed his response, closed the phone, and let it drop from his hand into the change-filled cup holder.

“Fuck.” He put extra emphasis on the K sound, making the word: Fuc-Ka.

“What does she want?”

He rubbed his forehead wearily and took the wheel back from me.

“I need a cig,” he said. “You got any?”

See?

“Nope.”

“Fuck. You got any money?”

“Sure don’t.”

“Me neither.” His face brightened up. “I know how to get some money.”

He was back in his element. He now had something in mind to fill our empty day. He turned the truck around and we drove down Loretto highway, past the Now Entering City Limits

sign into town. He told me we were going to the Chicken House, what the old locals call the residential chicken fast-food establishment and my former place of employment. We entered and passed through the heart of town, nothing much to note, and past the Golden arches suspended in the blue sky like an offering to the gods and the long line of pious followers kneeling around the altar. A few years ago, across the street from the Chicken House, a new chicken place, bearing the name of our glorious state, was constructed. It has been steadily sucking away customers with its flashing lights and new splendor ever since the ribbon was cut by our mayor who said this is a new step for our burgeoning town. Except for the old people who are still loyal to the place, it's only a matter of time.

It was almost empty and cool inside. Clarkson sat in his usual corner booth. He nodded at me and I nodded back. My feet stuck to the floor as I tried to walk. No one stood at the counter to greet customers. Only empty seats and a stale odor.

"Frank!" hollered Cody.

"What," a voice called from the back after a second's pause.

"It's Cody and Davey."

"Come on back, dude."

In the manager's office, a spaced-out looking guy in a white apron sat next a pretty girl watching a television on the desk. They looked just like how Callie and I used to look. Jesse, the manager, had his head on the cluttered desk and appeared to be asleep, just like I remembered. Taped to the wall, a faded sign proclaimed PLACE APPLICATIONS IN THE FILE, and an arrow pointed down towards a small trashcan.

“What’s up, y’all,” Frank asked us.

“Not a damn thing,” Cody said. “Rolling around town.”

“I feel you.”

“The fuck y’all watching?” I asked.

“Some show Ashley wanted to watch.”

On the screen, brief flashes of a bustling city and the newest, hippest music played. Then a cut to two blonde-haired girls sitting in a dimly lit restaurant. There’s a little talking and a great deal of silent, soulless staring.

“What’s going on?” Cody asked.

“Well,” Frank said, “that blonde-haired chick-“

“Which one?”

“The natural one.”

“That ain’t natural,” Ashley cut in.

“What ain’t natural?”

“Her hair.”

“Why ain’t it?”

“It just isn’t.”

Frank poked Jesse. He poked him again, harder, and Jesse snapped up.

“Huh?”

“Is her hair natural?”

“Who?”

“Her.” Frank pointed her out. “The one on the left.”

“Yeah,” he said, “she’s hot”.

He looked at me and smiled. “Oh, what’s up, Davey? Get some food out of the warmer if you want some.” And he put his head back down.

Frank and Ashley looked at each other and smiled. I remember those smiles. Callie and I had the same smiles.

“Alright,” Frank said, “Blondie is friends with the skankier looking one on the left. Am I correct in those assessments?”

She nodded.

“And Blondie is going out with some shady looking dude. What’s his name again?”

“Tony.”

“Tony. That’s it. It’s been bugging me. Now, the Skank is fucking Tony behind Blondie’s back.”

“Fucking bitch,” she said.

“And that’s all I know,” Frank said. “Oh, and Blondie thinks the Skank is fucking him but isn’t really sure…aaannnnd the Skank is thinking about telling Blondie.”

The two girls started speaking. Cody and I stood transfixed watching until the commercial.

"What were they talking about?" I asked.

"I'm not really sure," Frank said. "What did y'all want?"

"We were wanting to ask," Cody said, "if you were doing any good?"

"A little," Frank said, "a little. How much y'all need?"

"We only need two, right now, but we were wondering if you could front them to us and we'll bring you back the fifteen bucks when we get it?"

"No problem. I can do that." Frank stood up. "Follow me to my office."

We followed him to the kitchen. Old cookers lined grease-stained walls. Sizzling. A full trash can sat flanked by two breading tables. A list detailing what needs to be cleaned lay on the floor and Frank picked it up and threw it on one of the breading tables. Cody and I almost slipped on the slick floor.

"Watch out," Frank said over his shoulder. "It's slick as shit back here. You should remember, Davey."

I remember, but I often times try to forget.

He stopped at a metal table. Little pieces of cabbage and carrots covered the table and a rack ran across the wall over the table. He grabbed an old cigar box from the rack, opened it,

and pulled out a sack and started to roll two joints. A timer started to beep on one of the cookers.

"Are you going to get that?" I asked.

"It'll be fine."

It kept on beeping. I walked over to the cooker and pushed the lever on the top down to let the steam burst out. When it was finished steaming, I opened the cooker and used the hook to pull the rack of chicken out of the brown grease.

"Man," Frank said, "you didn't have to do that."

I slid the rack into the slot on the cooker to let the grease drip off.

Frank finished and handed Cody the two joints.

"Just bring the money whenever. I know you're good for it."

"Man," Cody said, "we appreciate it."

"No problem," Frank said. "Y'all come back if you get bored. I'll be here all day."

We left and decided to head to the old Wal-Mart parking lot to see if we could sell the joints. It was the local haunt of young people in town. Every day after school let their students roam free into the world, people would come to sit around in herds. A kid would get a new car and immediately parade it around the lot to catcalls of ohhs and ahhs. Every now and then, an older gentleman would roam around from group to group, looking for a place to belong and looking for where his youth went.

It was nearly empty when we pulled in. We parked down a lane from an overweight guy with graying hair sitting in his green Corvette. Loneliness and despair were busy commodities around. Cody turned off the truck and we sat there waiting.

"It won't be long now," Cody said.

He started taking pennies from his cup holder and bouncing them off the dash into the windshield.

"Once someone sees us sitting here, they'll park beside us and the chain will start. They'll crawl out of the woodwork and, pretty soon, we'll have us a nice congregation."

On our left, a row of stores lined the side of the lot. A glass-fronted furniture store and a CLOSING SALE: EVERYTHING MUST GO! sign hung by a single rope blowing in the wind. Pretty women stared out at me from the walls of a women's clothing store. A Chinese woman smoking a cigarette knelt next to a vending machine near the entrance of the Gold Star Buffet. And, at the end of the line, the deserted Wal-Mart towered over us all like a Roman amphitheatre. The faded remains of the removed sign still emblazoned and burned into the dark blue siding, it's presence an ever constant reminder of a stranglehold that has only just tightened.

Cody asked me if I wanted a coke and he grabbed some change and walked towards the vending machines. I watched as a guy, who couldn't have been much older than me, held a little girl's hand and led her past the truck. Bouncing curls of blonde hair covered her head and, with her left hand, she pulled the bottom of her blue dress out and let it float gently down and she swung her daddy's hand back and forth back and forth back and forth in a hypnotizing rhythm as

they walked. I finally felt the full gravity and weight of it all fall directly to my gut and my vision started to blur around the edges.

"Oh shit."

I thought about the man I saw standing in his yard earlier in the day and envisioned it wasn't him watering his yard but me. I stood with the water hose in my hand. The other hand placed proudly on my hip. Cody and some others stood in the driveway watching me. I sat on a mover and rode around like a medieval king on his golden chariot, soaking in the cheers and adoration of his minions, and I cut the grass, looking down from time to time to make sure I stayed on the all-important straight and narrow.

Back to the vending machine, I saw him holding two cans and speaking to the smoking woman. They talked for a bit and she pulled two cigarettes from her pack and handed them to Cody. Later, when he sat in the truck, he handed me the can and cigarette. He looked me in the eye and thankfully didn't say anything. He knew when to keep quiet.

I lit the cigarette and felt the jarring rush of much-needed nicotine. I felt better. Someone finally pulled beside us. Two guys in a muddy truck I recognized to be Gary and Joe Joe.

"What's going on, Cody," Gary said, "Davey?"

"Shit," Cody hung his arm out the window, "just rolling around."

"We've been doing that, too," Gary said. "Hey, have y'all heard what they're gonna build by Wal-Mart?"

“Naw.”

“A Captain D’s,” Joe Joe said. He looked in the back of the truck.

“Yeah,” Gary said. “We saw them driving bulldozers around.”

A car parked on Joe Joe’s side and he looked in the back again and then started talking to the new arrivals.

“Hey,” Gary said, “y’all wouldn’t happen to have a joint or anything, would ya?”

Cody slapped my arm.

“We’re just the two fellas you wanted to see.”

Joe Joe looked in the back again.

“What the fuck are you looking at, Joe Joe?”

“Huh?”

“What are you looking’ at?”

“A turtle.”

“A turtle?”

“Yep. We found him crawling across the road.”

“What are y’all gonna do with it?”

“We’re gonna kill it.”

“What,” I said.

“Yeah,” Gary said. “We’re gonna sling it with a catapult and shoot at it.”

“Say what?” Cody said.

“Yeah, my cousin’s got a catapult. We’re gonna go later on, if y’all wanna go.”

“Why would you want to do that?” I asked.

“Cause it’s gonna be awesome.” And they laughed.

“Come on,” I said, “you can’t do that. Everything deserves a chance to live.”

Cody stared at me.

“Yeah, my…” Cody turned back towards them, “my grandpa wants a turtle. You remember that turtle he had in his pond?”

“The one in front of his house?” Gary asked.

“Yeah, and you remember the turtle that used to live in it?”

“Naw.”

“Well, we had a turtle in the pond and it died not too long back,” Cody said, and even I believed him. “And, you know, all my little cousins and nephews liked it and papaw wanted a new one.”

“Shit.” Joe Joe and Gary looked at each other. “Y’all can have it if you want.”

“For real?”

Gary said yeah and Cody got out and took the bucket with the turtle from Gary's outreached hands and he gingerly placed it in the bed snuggly between the golf clubs and wheel. We sold them the joints. Like moths to a single burning bulb illuminating brightly in the cold cold night, more cars were already joining the herd. We went to the gas station and bought a pack of cigarettes.

We returned to the Chicken House. Frank sat in a booth tucked in the corner. A cigarette dangled from his mouth, and he waved us over.

"Did those girls ever solve their problem?" I asked.

"They're fucking each other now." The cigarette bobbled up and down as he spoke. "Can you believe that shit?" He lit the cigarette and took a deep inhale.

"You been busy today?" Cody asked.

"No."

"You ever busy?" I asked.

"You already know the answer to that." He looked at Cody. "On Sundays, the church crowd comes in. They steal biscuits from the buffet."

Nothing has changed since I left.

"Guess what we found."

"What?"

"A turtle."

“A turtle?”

“Yeah.”

“The hell y’all doing with a turtle?”

Cody looked at me.

“I dunno.”

“I know what you should do with it.” He crushed his cigarette into the ashtray on the corner of the table. “You should set it free.”

Cody looked at me and raised his eyebrows.

“You know,” he said, “we just may have to do that.”

We talked for a few minutes longer before departing. When we left, Frank lay down on the cracked seat and put his arm over his eyes.

“I have the perfect place in mind to take the turtle.”

“Where’s that,” I said.

“On my papaw’s farm. There’s a pond out in the back. Secluded away from the hustle and bustle of our splendid metropolis. The country equals good for the soul.”

“All right.”

We looked down at the turtle. It moved from side to side in the bucket. Running its head along one side and then moving to the other and doing the same.

“We should name him,” I said.

“Like what?”

He reached down and grabbed the turtle. It withdrew into its shell and Cody inspected the entire shell. I thought.

“Willy,” I said.

He nodded and put Willy back into his home.

We rode past the city the city limits and wound our way through narrow, curvy roads into a holler with trees and vines lining the sides of the road, creating a dark tunnel of green blocking out the sun, and through the twisting spines of hills and knobs.

“I read, one time in a book, I said, about a scientist, right?, and he was giving a lecture on the origins of the universe and shit like that. And this little old lady raised her hand and she said that the scientist was wrong and that a turtle held all of creation on its shell.”

Cody stared absentmindedly out the window but I knew he was listening.

“And the scientist got all smug and he knew he was going to stump this lady. And he asked her what was holding up the turtle. And she said, without hesitation, why, it’s turtles all the way down.”

“That’s the dumbest fucking thing I’ve ever heard,” he said. “Here’s what I think. Everything outside of Kentucky is a myth. The sun, California, the stars, everything is a lie. We’re here and that’s all there is to it. So enjoy your life while you can.”

I stared out the window the rest of the way and longed for open spaces.

His grandfather's house lay in the shadow of two tree-covered knobs. The knobs protected the home from the sun's rays. There was no sunset. Only the sun's sinking into the hills and the gradual appearing and disappearing of red light. A gravel road extended from the main road through a tobacco field and past the house and disappeared into the hills. His grandpa sat on his porch, crossed legged and looking at his watch as we pulled in. When we got out of the truck and grabbed the bucket, he asked us what we were doing. We told him, and he shook his head and entered the house.

I cradled the bucket softly in my arms as we walked down the path, looking silently at the old twisted trees and squirrels jaggedly running away from us and birds flying into the warm sunlight. A hawk proudly perched on a tree limb, and Cody picked up a rock and chucked it at the hawk. The hawk spread its majestic wings and took off, slightly sinking as it started, but gaining momentum and soaring into the sky. It floated over the tree tops and was gone.

"Why'd you do that for?" I asked him.

"I just like seeing things fly," he answered. "Nothing is beautiful when it's settled. It's only when it's soaring does it become beautiful."

The path started to incline.

"It's just over this last hill," Cody said.

I was lost in my thoughts. He looked at me and, somehow, as always, knew what I was thinking.

“You don’t have to stay with her, you know it?”

Again, I said nothing.

“Yeah,” he continued on. “The standards have changed. The values of our fathers and grandfathers don’t apply to us. What was once moral and right is outdated and cryptic to us. You don’t have to worry about what she wants. Worry about what Davey wants.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But you need to.”

We walked on for a bit more and he kicked a rock.

“You need to tell her to get rid of it.”

Here it was. He finally brought it up. I tried to butt in and tell him to shut up but he continued on.

“You know, you’re going away to school and all, and you can’t have a responsibility at home and still leave and shit.”

I twisted the bucket in my hand.

“Let’s say she does have it. She’s not ready for one. And I know you, and you’re not ready for one either. You two would only be detrimental to it. Yeah, you would be doing it a favor.”

I looked down at Willy lying peacefully in his bucket.

“Are you going to marry her?” He paused for a response. “It’s a broken institution and we’re left with the remains. You two would just get divorced and we all know what that does to a kid. Are you gonna get a house in the suburbs or some shit like that?”

The vision came back to my mind. I finished cutting the grass. I admired the freshly cut grass and the house with Callie peeking through the window at me. Later, while bragging to Cody and my other likeminded neighbors, I said It’s a Silver Eagle, zero-degree-turn mower and they’ll whistle and say damn and offer me another beer. At night, I’ll wonder why Callie made herself look so pretty and alluring just to go to the grocery store. I stared at the house, and my dejected look said, but only to the trained eye, why why has it come to this?

“Hey,” Cody said. “Are you even fucking listening to me?”

“Man, what do you know? Really know?”

He turned around and looked at me.

“I…”

“You don’t. You think you know but you don’t. Who are you to… lecture me on these things? Look at Jennifer.”

He turned around and kept walking towards the hilltop and said I should stop there.

“You had her but you couldn’t stop. Every other girl you saw-”

“Just shut up, man. Be quiet.”

"-you jumped at them. How many girls did you cheat on her with? And you act all surprised and hurt when she does the same and fucks some dude-"

He snapped around and hit me. I dropped the bucket and fell and Willy started scuttling around to the grass and Cody said shit and picked up the bucket and trapped Willy inside and sat down on the bucket and rested his elbows on his knees. I sat up and looked at the ground between my knees.

After a few moments of silence, he pulled the cigarettes from his pocket, tossed me one, and we sat there smoking.

I flicked my butt way.

"There's a cruise ship," I said after the silence became uncomfortable, "sailing across the ocean past an island. And this old boy is on the deck and he sees, on the island, this man on the beach come running out, waving his hands over his head like a madman. He asks the captain, 'Reckon what that fella wants?' 'I don't know,' the captain said, 'he does the same thing every year.'"

Cody chuckles as you do when you hear a bad joke.

"That's funny."

We sat for a few more moments. I could see sunlight and a blotch of blue through the jumble of trees.

"Man, fuck that bitch." I know it wasn't very deep or poetical but it was what he wanted to hear. "She wasn't worth the trouble. You can do better."

"You think?"

"Yeah. It's only a matter of time and effort."

"Yeah," he said, "I guess you're right."

He rose from the bucket, flipped it over, and placed Willy back in it. We ascended over the crest the hill. He broke off the path, and I followed. The grass stood to our knees and danced in the wind. We had to walk up another small knob. My feet kept slipping in the rotten leaves on the ground. It was hard walking up the hill with bucket in hand. I had to hold onto trees to keep myself from falling. Cody had to turn around and grab my hand to help me up the knob a few times. On the top of the knob, behind a natural fence of grass and weeds, the sun reflected off the blue-green murkiness of the pond. The bank was muddy and sloshed at our feet.

"Well," Cody said, "this is it."

I put the bucket down and threw a rock into the water. The ripples spread out over the water and over the bank.

"This'll do," I said.

"Let's hurry up and do this. It's hot."

I picked up Willy and looked at him in his shell. I placed him on the bank near the water. He slowly poked his head out, then his legs, and crawled into the water. We could see his shell for a few moments until he sank into the water.

"That was anti-climatic," Cody said.

We made our way back down the knob. Towards the bottom, where the trees were thinner, I sat down on the leaves and slid down the rest of the knob like a kid.

We walked back to his grandfather's. He fixed us something to eat and told us how he used to catch barrels full of minnows with his brother and sell them in town, but you can't do that anymore because the schools are smaller and nobody fishes with them anymore, nohow.

Would-Section Four

Then the ice storm came and the world was bright and cold. Trees that stood proudly for a hundred years, who silently watched generations upon generations rise and fall like leaves spiraling to the ground, fell with a crashing thunder to deaf ears. Kentucky was without power. A silence that hadn't been heard for years and years rang through the state.

Intermission

Many years ago, when your parent's parents were still children, a giant roamed the countryside of the state of Kentucky. The giant's actually measurements were not known, but he was said to be twice as tall as a full-grown man and twice as wide. Now, you can't put much merit into these claims, because like everything that is told from person to person, details change.

You may think that a giant would terrorize and strike fear into the hearts of Kentuckians, but this couldn't be further from the truth. People couldn't help but like this kind, gentle giant. The people also affectionately gave him the name Charlie, and although this wasn't his name, he didn't correct them. "I don't care what they call me," he would often say, "as long as they don't have pitch forks and torches."

Stories of Charlie the Giant soon spread throughout Kentucky and the surrounding states and people would travel miles and miles just for a glimpse of the giant, but in all likelihood, they wouldn't see him. For Charlie loved to travel and he would never stay in one place for too long. He would travel west until he could see the flowing water of the Ohio River and then he would turn around and travel east until he caught the first glimpse of mountains. "They're tall, dark,

and dreadful," Charlie always said, "and you never know what's lurking in them." He loved the rolling hills and knobs of Kentucky, but the mountains were the only things that actually terrified Charlie. "You can't trust anything taller than me that isn't a tree or a house," he would say when people questioned him about his fear.

For years and years, Charlie traveled throughout the state freely and peacefully, but soon time began to change Charlie's beloved Kentucky. The countryside that Charlie loved to roam began to shrink as the suburbs and cities to expand. As Charlie's area to roam dwindled, Charlie began to grow in size compared to the areas he dwelled in. Soon the once loved giant became a nuisance to people who once welcomed him with open arms.

Eventually Charlie grew tired of the problems he created whenever he traveled to an area where he wasn't wanted, so he pledged to find a way to rid these problems for good. Charlie thought about leaving the state and going to another state that had much more area to roam around, but leaving his beloved Kentucky was out of the question. He determined that he would have to find a suitable area in Kentucky that could house a giant without causing problems with the surrounding people.

Thankfully, Charlie found such a city on one of his final journeys. Within the rolling hills of central Kentucky, Charlie stumbled upon the small town of Lebanon. Lebanon was a classic small town everyone envisions when they think of a small town. Everybody knew everybody, the ice cream shop was the hot spot for all the teenagers, and everyone greeted you a with "Howdy" and a smile. Beautiful hills and large fields fit for a giant surrounded Lebanon. And most importantly, they loved Charlie. Lebanon was a perfect place to house a giant.

So Charlie made his way to Lebanon and, just as he wished, they welcomed Charlie with open arms. On the day of his arrival, Lebanon threw a large parade fit for a giant. The floats were made extra large, the Lebanon High School marching band played extra loud, and they threw paper-sized confetti down upon Charlie. And for the first time in a long while, Charlie smiled.

The happiness that Charlie exuded spread to the people surrounding him and soon every person that crowded Lebanon's main street to see the parade began to smile. Charlie hadn't seen this kind of happiness for a long time and he couldn't help but laugh. His booming laughter echoed through downtown Lebanon and out into the surrounding hills and fields of Lebanon. Several days after the event, people who did not attend the event came forward and stated that they heard a mysterious, distant laughter that filled their hearts with joy.

Lebanon simply adored Charlie and he loved it. Children would visit Charlie in his fields and he would stop anything he was doing, whether it be walking around the vast fields or reading a book from the local library, and he would lift every one of the little ones high above his head to give them a giant's eye view of the world. Other times he would be called upon to fetch a ball or cat out of a tree or they would simply ask him to stand over them to give them shade from the hot afternoon sun. Charlie would carry out anything that they wished for him to do and Charlie wouldn't have it any other way. To show their appreciation for everything that Charlie did for the community, every person in Lebanon sent Charlie a card or letter. Charlie would tack every one of these cards or letters onto the tree that Charlie loved to sit under in the shade. He would spend hours upon hours reading these cards and letters. After he would read every one of them, he would start over again.

Although Charlie loved everyone in Lebanon, there was one person that held a special place in the giant's heart. Rather than treating Charlie like just a giant like everyone else in Lebanon, Kelly treated Charlie like a normal human being. She never asked him to fetch anything from a tree, to give her shade, or to hold a basket when the park's basketball goal fell down. She only asked him to read with her (for she loved the sound of his booming voice), to walk with her through the beautiful fields, or to simply talk with her.

Counting all of these reasons (and too many others that there isn't enough time to tell), Charlie soon fell in love with Kelly. He loved her gorgeous blonde hair, her deep blue eyes, and most importantly, how she treated him normally. Unfortunately for Charlie, she already had a boyfriend.

It was common knowledge around the town that Ray (that's Kelly's boyfriend, by the way) wasn't the best boyfriend to Kelly. He liked to drink and he liked to take his aggression out on Kelly. He never beat her but everyone said it was only time until he did. No one in town ever spoke to Charlie about how Ray treated Kelly, because they were worried about how Charlie would react. An upset giant can't be a good thing. But over time, Charlie found out about how Ray treated her.

"Why do you go out with him if he treats you like that?" he asked her one day as they walked through a beautiful hay field.

"He isn't really that bad," Kelly responded. The setting sunlight made her hair and eyes seem even more beautiful to Charlie. "He's really sweet when he's not drinking." She paused.

Charlie knew she was lying by the way she looked at the ground as she spoke. She usually looked Charlie in the eyes. "He's trying to stop, though. I really hope he does."

Charlie didn't say anything after this. He wanted to, though. He wanted to tell her how he felt about her, but he was afraid of what her response would be. Who could feel that way about a giant? A freak? They sat down and watched the sunset in silence.

Later that night, just as everyone said, Ray took it too far. All you need to know about what he did is that he put Kelly into the hospital. Nobody wanted to be the bearer of bad news and tell Charlie what happened to Kelly. It took several arguments and a game of shortest straw to determine who would tell Charlie.

As you can guess, Charlie did not take the news well. He let out a howl that could be heard echoing throughout the hills and he ran straight towards the hospital. But he didn't go in. He didn't want to see Kelly lying helpless in a hospital bed. He stood outside of the hospital doors and cried.

"Where is Ray?" he asked through his sobs. The small crowd watching him stood in silence. "Where is Ray?!" he yelled. No one had ever heard Charlie yell before.

"I think he's at his house, Charlie," a local farmer said. "Now Charlie, don't do anything you'll regret-" the farmer started, but Charlie had started running towards Ray's home.

Charlie found Ray sitting in his front yard with a look of sorrow upon his face. Charlie stared at him for a few moments. "What are you doing, Charlie?" Ray asked, not looking up at Charlie.

Charlie didn't reply. "The sheriff is probably going to come get me in a few minutes," Ray said while taking a drink from a water bottle. Several neighbors came out to see what was going on. He looked up at Charlie. "Well, don't just stand there," Ray said, looking up at Charlie, "if you're gonna do something, do something."

Charlie looked at Ray and felt angry for the first time in his life. "Do something ya fre-" Ray started, but Charlie ran up to him, grabbed him by the arms and threw him as far as he could.

Ray soared into the air and disappeared into the distance. The neighbors gasped and one woman screamed and Charlie began to run. He had no destination in mind, he just ran. "Call the Sheriff!" a woman screamed and several people ran into their houses to get the phone. Charlie didn't waste any time by waiting around.

He ran straight to his favorite tree and grabbed every one of his letters and cards, stuffed them into his pockets, then he grabbed the books he had checked out from the library. He wanted to take them back; someone else might want to read them. . By the time he made it to the library, the Sheriff had already summoned a group a people and police officers to try to stop Charlie. Charlie saw them in between him and library; the Sheriff stood by his car, several people were on horses, and several more were on foot.

"Charlie," the Sheriff yelled, "just stop and take it easy. Nobody blames you for what you did. Anybody with any common decency would do the same thing. We'll take it easy on you. We'll make sure you don't get into much trouble."

Charlie stared at the group. A horse neighed and moved around and Charlie saw that the rider held a rifle. Charlie knew they weren't going to take it easy on him. Charlie laid the books down on the ground. "Turn them in for me," he said before he turned around and started running.

In case you have never seen a giant run before, they can run quicker than nearly everything on Earth. The people on foot and on horses had no hope of catching the running giant. The Sheriff was able to keep up with Charlie in his car, but Charlie ran off of the road and ran into the woods. The Sheriff slammed on his brakes and watched the giant run away into the woods. He sat in silence for a few minutes before he slowly drove back into town to inform nearby cities about Charlie.

Charlie had no idea where he would go. He knew that everyone would be searching for him and truth be told, it isn't easy to hide yourself when you are a giant. He had to keep running. He couldn't stop. There was only one place where he could hide. He had to go to the mountains where he could easily hide. Charlie started to cry. He would never be able to see Kelly again and he had to go to those dreaded mountains.

Would-Section Five

The once boys stood in between their past homes surveying the damage in the back. Blinding white reflected the sunlight back to them. Large chunks of leafless limbs lay on the ground, court, and building and dangled loosely from the trees, barely clinging. The trees bore a tremendous weight and hung low to the ground. The Tree was slick white and the already jagged trunk bent dangerously. Stephen approached the Tree and grabbed one of the low hanging branches and felt the stinging wet cold on his hand.

"Looks like your tree is about to fall," Josh said.

"No, it isn't."

"Might as well cut it down," Mark said. "Save the trouble of waiting for it to fall."

"No." Stephen let go and looked at his glossy hand. "It'll be here forever."

Careful of the branches close to falling, they picked up the fallen branches and threw them in a pile in between the houses. The snow and ice melted beneath their muddy feet. When they were finished, their clothes were filthy and wet, and the men walked to the front and sat on the porch and waited for the man to arrive and pick up the limbs.

Stephen pulled out his cigarettes and handed two to his cousins. They sat smoking and looking at the road. Stephen told them he was going to lie down for a while. He walked over the slick ground to his grandmother's, briefly glanced one last time at the Tree, and entered and fell tiredly onto the couch. He fell asleep and did not hear the buzzing.

Burning

In that house where she raised her five children and me and where she found her husband laying with their future step-mama, my mama died lying in her bed with the window open so she could listen to the rain soothingly drum against the porch. Sheila found her the next day after she called and called and called and mama would not answer. Then she called me. Robert, mom is…moms passed on. Come home, come home. I drove there listening to the sucking sound of the tires on the wet asphalt. When I arrived, Sheila hugged me and rubbed my back and asked if I was alright and said she'd already called the rest and not to worry.

I walked down the picture-framed hallway to her room. She had a picture of me and them together. I could not have been older than four, and they were already adults or almost adults. Sheila held me in her lap, David, who looked like me but didn't, sat to her left, Paula stood behind and between them with her forearm resting on David's shoulder, and Myer, smiling his youngest smile, and Teddy, staring seriously, flanked Paula. A newer replica of this picture nailed next to the original. The first few strands of gray highlighted Sheila's hair. David's hair had just started to recede. The day of the picture, we all gathered at the photographer's studio in our nicest clothes, and the photographer told me I looked handsome and just like David.

She took a picture of the five alone, and I watched from the side, unbuttoning and buttoning my shirt. She placed me jaggedly to the fringe of the group and said Smile, Robert, smile. One year, at Christmas, they gathered and I was present at Teddy's home. Over his television, among other pictures, he had the photo of the five of them placed on the highest level of photo hanging hierarchy. I stayed, but did not join in the joyous festivities and waited for mama to take me home.

I walked into mama's room and look at her resting peacefully on the bed. What looked like a smile etched on her still face. The setting sun shone flaming red through the window and engulfed her milky white body. I walked out of the chamber and to my room and stared at the posters she always refused to take down, no matter how many times I told her I am grown and she was free to do with the room as she pleased, and the picture of Callie I have always refused to take down, no matter how many times I told myself I was grown and needed to move on from the past, and I waited for the five headlights to pull into the driveway.

When she divorced her husband, she kept the house and he built a new home on his land in the country. Her kids, the three who had not sprung from the nest, chose to live with him and his green promises. The once vibrant and robust home became silent and still. They still came over from time to time. Teddy used to play football on my Sega, and I would watch the action on the screen and guess how many yards he gained after his rushing or throwing play until he punched me on the arm and told me to leave him alone.

I heard the crunching of the driveway and two beams of light flash across the window and car doors shutting.

They left her alone to live with him, to live on his farm. When I was a child, Sheila would sometimes take me there to his house, and I would walk across the creaky floors and look into Myer's vacant room. This is my room and my bed and my home. Then Sheila returned me to my real home.

During Lebanon's annual fall event, the FFA built a float for the parade through town. Teddy, being the president, oversaw the making of the float. On the way to the parade, their father hauled the float behind his green tractor. In front of the tractor, Sheila drove a van with Teddy and the rest of the FFA members. I sat in the back looking out the back window with Cody by my side. I narrated to Cody everything that was going on with the float. That's my ex-Dad driving the tractor. You see those tobacco sticks, Cody? Those are my ex-Dad's. They built the float on my ex-Dad's wagon.

Why don't you just call him by his real name, Sheila called back to me.

Of my father, I only know of the hard seats and tables, bright lights reflecting against the white tile floor, vending machines, men with walkie-talkies quietly whispering to one another against the wall and the seemingly endless waiting, and of my two half siblings visiting me on the verge of my sixteenth, and my almost brother telling me Boy, the last time I saw you, you was yay big and him leveling his hand next to his knee.

I left my room after waiting, I can't remember how long, and they were sitting in the living room sniffling, crying, and talking quietly to one another. I fixed a cup of coffee and sat at the kitchen table in the dining room adjacent to the living room and listened.

What do we do now?

I don't know.

What are we supposed to do?

Who do we call? The police or ambulance or what?

Let's call 911. They'll know what to do.

Put your phone up.

Don't call them, yet.

We can't just let her lie in there.

You can call in a bit. Just…just not now.

Mama used to drive me into the country and point to the field her and my grandparents lived and say This is where I was born and raised. And this is where I want to be when I die. Two fields lay to the side of the road and a narrow strip of a mound carved through the middle of the two. At the far end of the pasture, the Rolling Fork River flowed along the edge of the field at the foot of a knob. We used to live in the far corner of the field, she said. See? You can still see the path, barely, where it used to go to the house.

What about the will?

Is this the time to talk about that?

Now?

We'll worry about that later.

Now? Now?

We got to talk about it sometime. Why not now?

One time, your aunt and me were at the house by ourselves. Your grandfather told us a group of workers were coming over to cut a field of tobacco. And only that field, he told us, and not the other. When they showed up, we told them to cut one field and not the other. Well, they finished and we saw they had cut both fields.

There's no need to look at the will no ways. She left it all to Robert.

Robert?

All of it?

The house and all.

Everything?

What about her grandkids? Did she think of them?

Mama held my nephew and said he looked just like I did on a baby. She bounced him on her knee. He looked at her, drooling with his fingers in his mouth. He looks just like you, you know? You had the same blonde hair and everything. I picked him up, and he put his wet hands on my face.

He won't keep it all to himself. He'll let the kids come over and stay. Won't you, Robert? He should sell it if it is his.

Hush.

Won't you, Robert? You'll let them come over, right?

I held him up in the air and brought him down to my face and back up again. He started crying. Mama took him from me and rocked him in her arms. Shh. Shh. It's okay. Mamaw's here.

He's not listening.

Leave him alone.

Mama took me to the state fair every year. A kid's ferris wheel caught my attention. Bright, shining cars spinning round and round. She placed me in one of the buckets and told me to have fun. The ride started and she receded further and further into the distance until I reached the crescendo of the wheel and it stopped, the car tranquilly rocking back and forth. I looked down at her and I couldn't see her face anymore.

I started to cry.

Is he all right?

Leave him alone.

He's not saying nothing.

I said leave him alone.

So we packed our bags, Mama said, and waited for daddy to get home. We thought he was going to kill us, so we packed our bags to leave. When he got home, he didn't do nothing or say nothing. He just sat in his chair and listened to the radio.

I looked into my cup and started twirling it. Watching the liquid spin round and round. A vortex spinning down down down into the cup.

We need to talk about the arrangements.

Not now, Teddy.

Not right now.

Why not now? We don't have to plan the whole damn funeral or nothing. But we can at least start.

Like what?

What do you want to talk about?

Well, is it going to be an open casket or not?

I stared down at grandmama's casket. Her face was thin and pale, made up with makeup to recreate the life that was now gone, and her hands were crossed on her stomach. Her face did not move, and I stared. This isn't life. Stand next to her so I can take a picture, Mama said. I looked at the camera and smiled because I did not know what else to do. You shouldn't smile. She handed me the camera. She crossed her arms and gazed solemnly down at grandmama. The view was boxed out black around the edges. I don't want an open casket, Robert. The trees rolled past shiny down the side of the road. People who didn't give a damn about me will come and look at me and cry, and I don't want that.

We're not having an open casket, I said.

What?

I said we're not having an open casket.

Well, it's not up to you.

She said she didn't want an open casket. We're closing the lid.

Funerals aren't for the dead. They're for the grieving, Robert.

I kicked my chair back clanging against the floor and wall, and I flung the cup into the living room. It crashed through the window and they tossed their arms up and quickly lowered their heads and shrieked shocked gasps. Teddy marched into the dining room, grabbing me tight by the collar, and slammed me onto the table, cups, papers, flowers, and the pot flying through the air and against the ceiling fan, and I came in crying and mama said, rubbing my back and head, Shh, sometimes a boy has to fight. She's better off with you, anyways. Don't cry. My face turning red and Teddy staring down at me with my own eyes. Get off him. Get off him. Sheila jerked at his hands, and my lungs gasped. I spit up at him, smiling at his serious face. David hit him on the side of the head and Teddy fell off me, and I could finally breathe. Dust fell like snow down from the still shaking ceiling fan onto the overturned table. I put a cigarette in my mouth and flicked to life the lighter. The flame danced mesmerizingly. I inhaled deeply and watched the white recede against the tide of the red cherry.

Don't smoke in here.

Why not? It's my house.

Hold it, Teddy.

Let's get out of here. Give him some time alone.

That's not all he needs.

Where to?

I don't know. Let's just go.

Some coffee. Let's get some coffee.

That sounds good. Let's go.

Leave him alone.

Call us, Robert. When you're ready.

Sheila hugged me like mama used to do, and they left. I stared at the ceiling and finished my cigarette and pressed it against a flower and watched it start to burn. Then I put it out and closed my eyes for a while.

I walked outside. The stars twinkled overhead. The cool night air echoed in my bones. Winter is almost here. I parked my car in the garage and shut the garage door. Searching for the water hose, I found the white Christmas tree mama set up every Christmas. Me and the rest would gather every Christmas eve because they went to their father's every Christmas morning while I played alone. I threw the tree and the hose in the back seat and walked into the house. My footsteps echoed through the cold dead house. The milk jug cold in my hands as I poured the white circling down the drain. I threw it in the back seat and, staring down at my feet so I couldn't see the faces staring accusingly but I could still hear their voices hollering at me, walked down the hall where she always told me not to run and when I did and fell, she said to me

she told me so and she kissed my throbbing knee. She lay tranquil in her bed. Not sleeping. The drapes still flowing over the open window. I slid his arms under her and lifted her up and out of the room and I fell asleep hugging a truck under the tree and she carried me to my room. Her feet kicked down pictures as we went down the hall. I placed her in the trunk and closed the lid. I backed out of the garage and drove under the firmament to the field his grandfather toiled and plowed until his shoulders rounded and the earth took him. I pulled off the road and stopped in the middle of the large field. Alfalfa swaying in the night. The road was distant and black and trailed off into nothingness. If a car came, I could hear the engine whining through the hills. I tossed the tree away from the car and inserted the hose into the belly of the beast and sucked until I could taste the bittersweet concoction. I stuck the hose in the jug and waited for it to fill. The moon hung low on the horizon, and the tree stood out like a bonfire. The creaking of the crickets seemed to die down as I poured the gas onto the tree. Even in the dark, the white beacon shined until it darkened as it absorbed the gas. I took mama from the trunk. Her white gown flowing and she glowed in the moonlight. I stomped the tree down flat and placed her on the altar and crossed her arms the way grandmama's were. Standing back, I lit a cigarette and stared at the sky curving around all of creation. I inhaled and exhaled, tearing a strip off the pack and put the weaving flame to the strip. I threw the flame onto the gas soaked tree, and the fire engulfed her white body. The fire caught my pants leg on fire and I stomped it out. The flames dance around her body. I got into the car and left the body burning in the field. In the rearview mirror, the flames blazed higher and higher, tickling the moon, and vanished into the past.

Back at the house, I filled the tub with water and striped my clothes and sat in the water overflowing the brink of the tub and pooling and creeping across the tiled floor and under the

door into the hallway. I dunked my head under the water and, seeing the world clear, rose out of the water gasping and spitting water.

Would-Section Six

When he awoke, he walked into the cold and saw Mark leaning against his truck. He looked at Stephen and then glanced nervously to the back. Stephen followed his gaze to a small brown stump.

"Who cut the fucking tree down?"

"Nick cut it down when he got here to pick the branches up," Mark said. "He cut it down before we could say anything."

The screen door opened and slammed shut, and Josh walked out onto the porch.

"Stephen saw where Ole Nick cut down his favorite tree."

"Ooh," Josh said while hopping down the steps, "sorry about that."

Stephen left them where they were standing and sloshed through the snow, ice, and mud and looked down at the naked brown spot and remembered when they were boys, how they found a stray dog wandering the street and they took it and named it Cole and tied it to the Tree,

and Cole puked onto the ground and it lay orange on the ground and none of them wanted to pick it up.

Small Town Event

- Friday -

It was held every year on the same weekend of the same month. It started over thirty years ago when the town's important citizens held a country ham dinner banquet. It was a very fine event, and they decided to have another go at it the next year. And the next. And the year after that. Soon, the once simple dinner event expanded to the fill an entire weekend with carnival rides, flea markets, and crying children. The town grew to revolve around the event. The citizens spent the first half of the year looking forward to the event and the next half reminiscing and looking forward to next year's event.

And I went back to my former home specifically for this event.

In fact, I left early. After my last class, I packed my books away, walked to my beat up car, and started my journey home. The bright lights and neon signs of the city slowly gave way to the dark trees of the winding country roads.

It was a long trip made even longer by the fact there was nothing playing on the radio. I would push the search button until I found a song I halfway liked, listen to it, and then start the process over. I never listened to c.d.s in the car. They are an excuse to not talk to your passengers, Callie always told me. In the seat next to mine, she always hung her feet out the window, tapping them to the beat and humming along to whatever old country music station she found on the radio. That was then.

After a couple of monotonous hours, I arrived at my mama's house. No one was home. When mama went into the ground, I couldn't stay there anymore. So I moved in with my sister, Sheila. But I spent most of my time with Andrew. His mother even squeezed in an extra bed into Andrew's room for the days or weeks I spent at their home. Callie would always come over and hug Andrew while looking at me. This housing arrangement ceased when Callie left Andrew.

When I started college, I sent whatever money I could spare back to Sheila to help pay the bills. She paid whatever I couldn't. They weren't much. She shut off the power and only turned it on when she came over to the empty house to clean the cobwebs and dust from the walls. She asked me why did I want to pay the bills when I never came back home to begin with. I wanted to tell her I missed everything and wanted the house ready in the hopes that God listened to prayers and returned everything to the way things were. He doesn't.

I pulled in the driveway and sat in the car, looking at the house. It was a small, white house with a wood porch running the length of the front. It used to be my home.

I grabbed the bags from the back seat, climbed out of the car, walked through the unruly grass and up the porch steps. Once on the porch, I scanned the scenery. Hills and knobs crisscrossed in the distance. Corn, ready to harvest, spotted the landscape. Cows ate lazily on a hillside. The neighbors sat on their porch and talked. I didn't know their names. I could see the newly paved road running like a scar through the land. When the road opened, traffic was busy with townspeople driving on it, looking at the beautiful landscape they never bothered to look at before. The road was now empty.

I took one last view of the scenery and turned to go in the house.

I shoved my hand into my pocket and wrapped my fingers around my keys. They jingled as I put the wrong one in the lock. I tried to open the door. Realizing my mistake, I took the incorrect key out and put the right key in. I entered the house.

I dropped my bags on the floor and looked around the living room. Though the red setting sunlight seeped through the cracks in the window blinds, I could still feel the darkness coiling around me and staring deep within and through me. In the closet, I found the circuit breaker and flipped the switch. The power softly hummed to life.

The couch was worn in. The armrests had cracks and tears lining them. The lamp sputtered to life in the corner. Small handprints in the dust covered the television.

Down the hallway and trying to ignore mama's closed door, I went past the pictures dotting the wall and into my old room. It seemed much smaller. The bed was shorter, and the television had shrunk. Outdated posters covered the walls. I didn't listen to those bands anymore.

I saw the picture of Her on the head of the bed. She looked young; exactly as I remembered. I recalled when she had given it to me and how she blushed and how I felt my face burn and how she scrawled 'with love' on the back and how I had gone home and put the picture up and how I had felt invincible.

I thought about doing something poetic to disregard the picture, but I left it sitting in its spot.

I lay on the bed, but couldn't find a comfortable spot. The couch felt nice.

Ringing woke me. It finished, and I sat up.

I stood up and walked to the kitchen to get a drink. I opened the cabinet to see bowls sitting where the glasses used to stand. The glasses were in the old bowl cabinet.

I carried the water-filled glass back to the living room. I sat on the couch and took a long drink. A gossip magazine lay on the carpet. Sheila must have left it. She got the habit from mama. I picked it up and thumbed through the pages. A certain celebrity couple was featured on the cover. It said they were on the edge of a heartbreaking break up. Next week the magazine would say their marriage is stronger than ever.

I put the magazine down and returned the missed call. It was Timmy. My old friend.

"What's going down, mon ami," Timmy said upon answering.

"Nothing," I said. "Just got back not too long ago."

"Bout time. You had to come back didn't you?"

“Had to,” I said. “It’s Ham Days.”

“That’s right. No one can leave and stay away forever. It calls for you when you leave.”

I heard some sounds in the background and someone say something.

“Hey,” Timmy asked whoever came in the room. “Guess who’s back?”

“Who?” A familiar voice asked.

“Davey.”

The phone tussled around.

“Yeaaaah!” Cody’s voice rang in my ear. “What’s going on, man?!”

“Shit, there’s no need to yell.”

“Got to!” Cody kept on yelling. “I’ve been yelling since you left! The only way for me to stop is for you to get your ass down here!” He let out a yell that everyone in the neighborhood must have heard. He hadn’t changed at all.

“All right, Cody,” I said. “Just calm down.”

He said he would seriously contemplate it and handed the phone back to Timmy.

“Who all else is coming?” I asked him even though I already knew. The group hadn’t changed in years..

“Andrew’s coming,” Timmy stated.

A few moments of silence pass.

"Really?"

"Yep."

A few more pass.

"Oh."

A few more.

"Has he ever said anything about us…" I looked around the room, trailing off. "…About Callie…and…ugh…yeah?"

"You shouldn't bring it up."

"Oh."

More.

"Stop talking about depressing shit," Cody hollered. "And get your ass down here."

I told Timmy I would be down there in a few. As I hung up, Timmy started yelling something in the background. Through the garage, thinking about my reoccurring dream about mama, I went to my car and backed out. I had to drive through town on my way to Timmy's house. Booths lined the streets. They were covered off for the night. Groups and groups of people walked towards the stage in centre square. A sign proclaiming BATTLE OF THE BANDS hung over the stage. My eyes fell upon a young couple holding both arms a child between them, swinging the child back and forth back and forth, the child giggling. I drove the

rest of the way with the windows down and the radio off. The wind felt beautiful on my face and the silence refreshing.

I parked next to Cody's truck, the same as it used to be. I glanced in the bed of the truck, delighted to see cans and filth. Timmy's mother answered the door.

I walked to Timmy's room. The door was shut. I thought about knocking, but I didn't, and entered the room. Timmy lounged on the bed. Cody leaned forward in a chair, concentrating, putting the finishing touches on a joint. Andrew sat on the ground. A baseball game blared on the television.

Timmy looked just like I remembered. His long, curly hair was still unruly, but he had shaved his beard. His blue vest lay in the corner of the room. Cody had lost a little hair, and the lines etched across his forehead were deeper, and his skin was a deep red from long periods in the sun. Andrew still looked sad.

"Look who finally decided to show his face again," Timmy said.

Cody looked up at me and grinned widely. "Yeaah! Your boy is back!"

Andrew glanced at the Young Man and back to the television.

"The prodigal son returns," the Young Man said.

Cody hopped up, placing the joint safely behind his ear, shoved my shoulder, grabbed my hand and gave me a hug.

"Goddamn, boy," Cody said. "It's been too long. Too long." He pointed at his chair for me to sit in and hurried into the kitchen. With another chair in hand, he returned and sat

next to me and slapped my knee. "Well," he snatched the joint from behind his ear. "Let's get the festivities started. It's not that I don't want to hear about your new life or anything," he placed the joint in his mouth, "but this is more important."

He put the flame to the tip and inhaled deeply. When he tried to pass it to me, I shook my head. Exhaling, he gave me a confused look.

"You don't smoke anymore?"

"I quit."

"Man, that sucks." He rolled the joint in his fingers. "You're in college now, so you do coke or something now?"

I laughed and shook my head.

"That's a yes," he said, presenting me the joint again. I shook my head again. "Come on, man."

I knew he was getting started.

"Think of all the bud we've smoked. Think of all the bud I've smoked with you for free. They were good times weren't they? Remember Ca-" he glanced at Andrew still staring at the television and held whatever he was going to say. "So do this for me."

I stood strong.

"That hurts, ya fucker," he said. "That hurts."

He could still do it. I relented and took the joint from his hand. He clapped his hands in excitement.

After it was finished, Timmy went into the kitchen and brought back a case a beer and passed around bottles. I opened my bottle and sat back and watched Andrew trying not to look at me.

We relaxed and drank for a while. Cody started rocking in his seat. Standing up, he brought up the idea of walking to town to watch the battle of the bands going on. We left the house into the cool night air. We walked to center square while swapping High School Stories. The lights were bright over the stage and the night was beautiful.

- Saturday -

The ringing phone woke me up again. I answered this time.

"What's up," I said.

"What's going down, dude," Timmy said.

"Just woke up." I sat up and looked around the living room. I slept on the couch. The night before, I tried to sleep in my bed, but I just tossed and turned. I opened the blinds and squinted at the pinching light.

"Just woke up? You know what time it is?

“Yeah. I couldn’t fall asleep last night.”

“Couldn’t fall asleep? What did you do?

“I just lay for a while.”

“Don’t you mean laid?”

“No, it’s lay.”

“All right, college boy.”

“That’s right.”

“So what are your plans for this fine day?”

I turned around and stretched. “I don’t know. Head to town, probably. That’s what I came back for.”

“I feel you. We’re getting ready to go.”

“Who?” I already knew.

“Who do you think? Me, Mark, and Andrew.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t know what’s the matter with you, Davey,” Timmy said. “Head on down to town.”

“I’ve got to take a shower and get ready first,” the Young Man said. “Then I’ll come.”

“We’ll most likely be on Main Street. If we aren’t there, just walk around hollering for us and you’ll eventually find us.”

“Alright. I’ll see you when I get there.”

I took a shower and examined myself in the mirror. I wanted to reach in and touch him and see if he was real.

The weather was too nice to drive. Sun shining over my shoulder, I made my way downtown. Ham days was in full swing. People strolled around the flea market, looking at all of the useless junk. A man with hands full of hot dogs turned away from a small, hastily made building. Classic cars lined both sides of Main Street. I walked down the wrong side of the street and had to cut and weave through a sea of people.

On the stage, a bluegrass band played. The singer crooned about a lost love. I found them standing on the edge of the crowd. Timmy and Andrew sat on the curb looking bored, but Cody stood, puffing a cigarette, and tapping his foot to the beat. Their skin was starting to turn a bright red.

Timmy saw me approaching. “Your boy,” he said.

Cody turned and smiled at me knowingly and back towards the stage.

I stood by them and watched the band play.

“How long have y’all been standing here?” I asked.

“Too long,” Timmy said. “Cody likes this for some reason.”

“Let’s go do something,” I said to Timmy.

“What do you want to do?” Timmy asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Exactly. So enjoy the show.”

The band finished with a final stroke of the guitars and banjos. Cody put his cigarette in his mouth and clapped and hollered.

“You happy now?” Timmy said to Cody.

“It’s called culture, Timmy.” He looked at us. “So where should we go?”

“Let’s go to the flea market,” I said.

“Alright,” Timmy said.

Andrew said nothing.

We turned away from the stage and started to the flea market. I saw old friends and relatives along the way. I waved, nodded, or sometimes stopped to say a few words.

Then I saw Her.

She was standing with two of her friends, talking. I looked at Her. She looked up. She might have seen me. She might not have seen me.

“I’m hungry,” I said.

“Huh?” Cody said.

“I said I’m hungry,” I glanced at Her. “Are you all hungry? I’m hungry. Let’s go get something to eat.”

“Where at?” Timmy said.

“It doesn’t matter. Anywhere is fine.”

“You got to choose somewhere.”

“All right.” The Young Man thought. “Let’s go to the pizza place.”

“Ohh yeah,” Cody said. “They got those seven dollar pizzas today.”

“Let’s go,” The Young Man said. I started walking away from Her without waiting for the others.

I looked over my should to see Andrew looking back at Her and then starting to follow.

There was a tent in front of the pizza place. They had stacks and stacks of pizzas in the shade of the tent. Two girls sat under the tent. I couldn’t see their faces.

“Who’s paying?”

“I’ll pay,” I said walking up to the girls and one of the girls looked at me and smiled.

“How are you doing today?” I asked.

“Fine,” she said. “How ‘bout you?”

“Just dandy,” I said. “I can barely contain my excitement.”

She laughed. The other girl glared at her. I got a better look at the girl. She was one of Callie's old friends from High School.

"How many do you want?" She asked.

"Two."

"Fourteen dollars," the unsmiling girl said.

I handed her the money, and she shoved two boxes into my hands.

"You girls take it easy."

"We'll try," the smiling girl said.

The other one frowned at her as the Young Man walked inside. In the window of the store, I saw the unsmiling girl whisper into the smiling girl's ear and point at me. It was empty inside. A bored looking woman sat at the counter. A football game was on the television in the corner. They were sitting at a booth watching the television. Cody had his hands on the table watching intently. I laid the pizzas down at their table and walked to the counter.

"How may I help you?" the bored woman asked.

"Can I get a coke, please?"

"Bottle or Fountain?"

"Bottle."

"Dollar Thirty Nine."

I paid and went and sat down with my friends. We ate while watching the game.

The away team scored.

"Goddamnit!" Cody screamed and slammed his fist on the table. "Kentucky can't win a game to-" He looked around at the woman at the counter staring at him. "Sorry," he said to her, and he stepped outside and paced around, dragging on a cigarette.

We three kings sat in silence.

Timmy must have felt the awkwardness of the situation. "I've got to go to the little boy's room," Timmy said and hurried to the bathroom.

Andrew and I sat in silence. He had his elbows on the table, rubbing his hands together.

"I'm thirsty," Andrew said.

I handed him my drink. "Want a drink?"

"Sure," Andrew said and he took a small drink. "How much are these?"

"A buck-thirty nine."

"I wouldn't mind a fountain drink."

"They're always better."

"They are," Andrew said. He smiled a little. "I don't know why."

"It's cause the carbonated water is added at the fountain."

"Really?"

“Yeah,” I said, excited for anything to say. “When I worked at Lee’s, one of the drink bags busted and oozed all over the floor. I had to mop it up. It didn’t look like soda.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It was thick and shit. And there is a tab on the fountain for carbonated water.”

“That’s why it tastes so… fresh,” Andrew said.

“Yep.”

There was silence between the two of us.

“So,” I started, “you seen Callie lately?” I regretted it as soon as I said it.

Andrew gazed at me, saying nothing. Then he stood up and went to the counter and bought a fountain drink and he sat down across from me, drinking his drink in silence.

- Sunday -

Timmy called me.

“What’s going down,” Timmy said.

“Nothing much,” the Young Man said. “Sitting at the house.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“Yep.”

“What are you doing today?”

“Nothing,” the Young Man said. “I might head to town.”

“Oh,” Timmy said. “We’re already down here.”

“I’ll meet you all down there.”

Timmy paused. “We’re getting ready to head back.”

“Oh.”

“You can meet us down at my house if you want.”

“Alright. I might.”

“Alright. See you.”

“Good bye,” said the Young Man.

I packed my bags and took them out to the car. I returned to the house and walked slowly to the breaker and switched the power off. Outside, I took one last look at the small house and scenery. Then the Young Man entered his car and left.

Would-Section Seven

Warm waves reverberated through Kentucky, and the first birds were chirping in the trees overhead. The snow and ice had melted and mud oozed and reached across Mamaw's yard toward the house and the remaining grass was thing and weak, but around the stump, the grass grew green and plants had started to grow around the remains of the trunk. The men stood on the court, shooting a basketball. They play like boys again. Cody missed his shot, and the ball plopped into the mud circling the court. Josh picked up the muddy ball saying oh, man, and he slammed the ball on the ground and it bounced high into the air and spun and spun and spun and flecks of mud freckled their shirts. Josh missed the next shot. It sprung off the corner and rolled past the stump and into the wooden building. Stephen jogged to get the ball, not looking at the brown spot staring up at him.

"Y'all remember when the Tree used to be here to stop the ball?"