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CASUALTY OF HOME

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partially Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Literature

with Honors College Graduate of Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Molly Koeneman

***

Western Kentucky University

2011

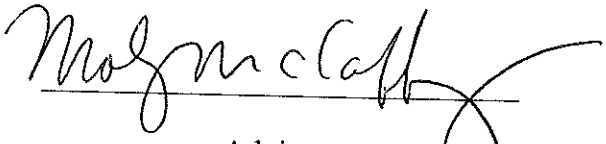
Ce/T Committee:

Dr. Molly McCaffrey

Professor Walker Rutledge

Dr. Angela Jones

Approved by



Advisor
Department of English

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ABSTRACT

Casualty of Home is a novel-in-stories focusing largely on the displacement felt due to situation or family. Often, members of a family have trouble making connections with each other, for each has its own thoughts, desires and expectations. Still, they have something rudimentary in common: blood. Because they are related, family members are inclined to care for individuals they might not even know, much less love. Spanning three generations, the characters in *Casualty of Home* deal with the constraints of family, the pressures of adolescence, and the limitations of the rural Southern culture in which they live. The characters face obstacles that force them to question their relationships to one another and their concept of self. These stories are inspired by the ones of my family—the characters draw upon the strongest attributes of my own relatives and their stories. By doing this, I hope to comment on the strength with which it sometimes takes to get through a day and how, sometimes, rebelling against circumstances can be done with just a word.

Keywords: novel-in-stories, family, Kentucky, culture, fiction, growing up

"A tune is more lasting than the songs of the birds,
and a word more lasting than the wealth of the world."
Irish Proverb

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Love be with all.

VITA

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PUBLICATION

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FIELD OF STUDY

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CASUALTY OF HOME:

A CREATIVE STUDY OF A KENTUCKY FAMILY

I'm a member of my generation, Tweeting and Facebook-stalking all the people in my life I just don't have access to on a regular basis. But I'm also the product of a close-knit family from small-town Kentucky, a family which sits down to dinner and talks about "the good ole times" and which gathers on every special occasion to reminisce and catch up. When I say "family," I don't just mean my parents and my brother, but all the relatives who are said to hide in the woodwork—aunts, uncles, and cousins, those twice removed and those who are practically but not fully related. Growing up with such a childhood has given me a deep appreciation for storytelling, and the stories I've heard around the dinner table all of my life inspire*d Casualty of Home*.

From my great uncle's stories of growing up on a tobacco farm during the Great Depression to my grandmother's memories of walking to the post office during World War II and my aunt's tales about struggling in the aftermath of her parents' divorce—the inheritance of stories I've been given is demonstrated in my writing. Fiction supplements facts I don't know, creating a sense of how I felt when I first heard these stories. This novel-in-stories, if you will, speaks to the limitations of the rural South, the quiet

desperation of the restless, and the threads that keep my family—and this fictional family—from falling apart.

The novel-in-stories is a relatively new form of creative writing, and I didn't even think about its emergence when I began the writing process. I started out with the plan to write six individual stories about related characters, designed to work the same way some of William Faulkner's characters do across various texts, such as *The Sound and the Fury's* Quentin Compson who also appears in *Absalom, Absalom!* and "That Evening Sun." I enjoyed this aspect of Faulkner because when familiar characters surfaced from an unfamiliar text, I became more invested in the reading, wanting to discover how this story laid the brickwork for what I knew was to come or to visit the characters in the aftermath of the story from which I knew them. My characters were drafted this way and were meant to appear—yet not fully participate—in stories other their own. In my story "Casualty of Home," Margaret Hornback is a young woman with a mother who weeps and wallows while Margaret, the daughter, is strong-willed and working to keep the family together and happy. Her appearance in "The Age of Maturity" comes briefly in the last scene, showing she has become much like her mother, and her daughter, Jodi, is the mature one. This adds depth to Margaret's character—she's fallen victim to every woman's worst fear: she's become her mother—but it doesn't change the reading of either story.

My first love affair with American Literature—and now that I think about it, all the books I'm about to reference are American—came by way of short stories. In high school I was a fan of British novels, favoring Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Virginia Woolf. These writers are not founding mothers, however, in my writing

education. Shirley Jackson, Flannery O'Conner, John Steinbeck, John Updike, and Faulkner—these are writers with a Southern flare. I was drawn to them, and they dictated the style of my own writing. To these writers I became attached because I knew their people, their places, and their communities. When I sat down for the first time, thinking, "Okay, I need to write a short story," my mind instantly flashed to the wild, Southern gothic imaginings in my head thanks to the aforementioned writers.

I didn't plan for my stories to work together as a complete book but rather expected them to remain a collection of separate pieces. But while writing, I read Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, two wonderful examples of novels-in-stories. In his first chapter, Anderson introduces the reader to the idea that the stories within are connected. The narrator says *Winesburg*, called "The Book of the Grotesque" in the text, has "one central thought that is very strange" (23). That central thought is the desperation to find something bigger that each character living in Winesburg, Ohio, shares. The fact that everyone is destined to be flawed and desperate unites the Winesburg community. Alice Hindman bravely accepts "the fact that many people must live and die alone, even in Winesburg" (101). She and Wing Biddlebaum and his hands, Doctor Reefy and his paper pills, Wash Williams and his disdain, Reverend Curtis Hartman and a cracked-corner faith, and Kate Swift and a naked prayer live and die in a single community. As such, they unite within George Willard, the town's young journalist. They see him escaping their small town, and they put their stories upon his back so that a piece of them may escape with him.

Much in the same way that Anderson's stories come together in *Winesburg, Ohio*, the six stories in *Casualty of Home* come together based on their common setting and the

commons themes of limitation and family. Similar to the way Anderson's George Willard wants to leave Winesburg, so do various characters in *Casualty of Home* want to leave their hometowns. Some of my characters are more like George's mother, desperate to escape their situation but seemingly destined to stay put, and the aftermath of each decision, good and bad, is explored—Marcus Hornback leaves his family in tatters, but Faith Hornback escapes without reproach. Those who stay and those who leave still have strong ties to their family and their upbringing.

Threading stories together based on family is more prevalent in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. This novel-in-stories gives a deeper meaning to the individual narratives by allowing them to fall under the same family tree. Independently, the stories work well. Read together, knowing that the characters are related and are, therefore, forced to interact with one another shows a family dynamic that makes the collection a novel in its own right. The characters excise authority in each other's lives and intervene when appropriate—or when inappropriate: nosy family members know no restraint. Once I realized my collection could function in the same way, I began to work toward making the stories overlap more, developing characters before their individual stories appeared and leaving crumbs of plot throughout the narrative to be further exposed.

The current organization of *Casualty of Home* fell into place without much difficulty when I simply put stories in an order that allowed each story to end at a place that referenced the main character in the next story. Though I didn't take note of how Erdrich organized her stories, by attempting the kinds of connections Erdrich achieves, I was able to organize the stories so that they were both comprehensible to the reader and also significant to the central themes of the book.

When I began this process in the fall of 2008 with my first story, "The Age of Maturity," I really wanted to improve certain aspects of my craft—especially dialogue, narrative perspective, and scene development. With "The Age of Maturity" I tried to develop the characters and let them exist in the story without much help from narration, allowing their actions—such as Jodi's walking out of the house into a cold evening without her jacket—to exemplify their characters rather than stating their inner thoughts and feelings.

It's the old show-don't-tell mambo. At the time, I was reading Ernest Hemingway's collection of short stories. I've always loved the way his straightforward plots allow the reader to separate the lines and dig into the motivations of his characters. In "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," there are two waiters, a young waiter and an old waiter. The young one is impatient to close up shop and get home while the old waiter doesn't mind if the customer has another drink. In a chunk of dialogue between the two waiters, there aren't any dialogue tags, and the young waiter even speaks twice without the older one interrupting:

> "How much money has he got?"
>
> "He's got plenty."
>
> "He must be eighty years old."
>
> "Anyways I should say he was eighty."
>
> "I wish he would go home." (289)

Should the reader not know the characters well enough to know what each would say, the speaker of these last two lines would be mistaken. Knowing that the old waiter speaks the first line means he should also speak the last, but Hemingway depends upon the

reader to recognize the characters' voices and know the difference. Though I did not venture as far and leave as much to my reader as Hemingway does, I modeled some of my own dialogue after his. One example occurs in "Age of Maturity" when Jodi Hornback and her father are talking in the car after she has walked to the electric company to have the lights turned back on at her mother's house:

> "I love you. You know that, right, babe?"
>
> "Sure."
>
> "You love me too, don't you?"
>
> The wind blew in the cracked door and hit her in the face. She nodded fiercely.
>
> "Good." (61)

This short exchange exists without dialogue tags, leaving the reader to deduce how such words were said and what each speaker was thinking. Hemingway's influence on my dialogue development can be seen throughout *Casualty of Home*, especially in the title story in which other important, quick exchanges are seen without dialogue tags. This is also why I've named one of the most dramatic characters in the book "Hemmy." Hemmy, who's real name is Henry, loves to read and wants to see the world, but dies when his twelve-year-old heart suddenly gives out after racing with his brothers. In Hemmy, I hope to capture Hemingway's existential beliefs, communicating the concept that we have to act as if we have free will even if we don't.

Point of view and narrative voice are also skills I've worked on improving while writing and revising this collection. "Apron Strings," "Barren," "The Age of Maturity," and "Casualty of Home" are written from the perspectives of young women, so it was

relatively easy to concentrate on characterization in those stories since I'm familiar with the feminine voice. The other two stories, "Turn Me Around" and "Hand-Me-Down," have masculine narrators; "Turn Me Around" has a male narrator who matures through his narrative voice. To prepare for this task, the only thing to do was read. I'm an advocate for writers being the best of readers, which is why I decided on a literature concentration instead of a writing one. Reading authors who write from the first-person, male perspective, such as Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner, aided me in the process of telling "Turn Me Around" through the eyes of an aging Marcus Hornback and "Hand-Me-Down" by a young Jake McCree. I immersed myself in the masculine psyche, becoming familiar with their expressions, their reactions, and their thoughts. There are certainly more authors with masculine narrators I could list, but these American writers are the ones I've studied most closely. At this point, one could say I have a professional and a personal relationship with them.

Not only was "Hand-Me-Down" difficult to write because it was told from the point of view of a young boy, but it was also challenging because of the material. Each story has a climax—the car crashing in "Barren," Jodi shaking Faith in "The Age of Maturity," and Marcus falling at Mount Rushmore in "Turn Me Around"—but these scenes were not at all difficult to create compared to writing the death scene of Hemmy McCree as told by Jake. A child's death is compelling, and it is made more so when told from the point of view of another child. For help in the matter, I turned to Maxine Clair's "Cherry Bomb," which is also part of a novel-in-stories. Clair's story depicts the death of a child as told by a child, and the description of that moment is subtle, but that subtlety has a heaviness to it as well. When the narrator reacts to her friend's drowning, it's not an

elaborate display of philosophy, contemplating life and death, but the kind of sadness that is expected of a child. The narrator says, "I didn't feel at all like I would cry. Blank was what I felt, blank and swollen tight" (67).

Unlike the "Cherry Bomb" narrator, Jake is with his brother when he dies, so my treatment of the matter is more dramatic. Still, I tried to remember the delicacy Clair used to convey that childlike awe when describing the scene: "When I think back on my last moments with Hemmy now, I wish I had said I didn't want him to die either. I wish I had told him he was the most interesting person I knew. I wish I had said I loved him" (103). Following Clair's example, I was able to build tension leading up to Hemmy's death and the book's conclusion, which comes at the end of "Hand-Me-Down." This experience also helped me build tension in my other pieces.

Casualty of Home starts with my most autobiographical story—one about a displaced twenty-two-year-old caught between being an independent adult and being a ward of her parents. Introducing the value of storytelling in "Apron Strings" through Elizabeth's interest in her parents' love story allowed me leave the story's modern setting and go back to period pieces that were set in decades past, fiction derived from those stories that was passed around my family's dinner table like green beans. I have learned a good deal about myself as a writer through this experience. Writing, editing, and sharing these stories has made me a better storyteller and has brought me closer to the home of which I'm a product, the home of which I'm a casualty.

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Roger "Sir" McCree = Lucy Hansboro
b. 1899 b. 1899
d. 1965 d. 1996

Henry "Hemmy" McCree
b. 1923
d. 1936

Jake McCree
b. 1925
d. 2009

Margaret McCree
b. 1928

Marcus Hornback
b. 1925
d. 2004

= Dianne Martin
b. 1933
d. 2011

Matthew Martin
b. 1950

Mark "Guy" Hornback
b. 1959
d. 1978

Brad Garner
b. 1948

= Jodi Hornback
b. 1951

William Tate
b. 1950

= Faith Hornback
b. 1957

Luke Hornback
b. 1960

FAMILY TREE

orge
rner
1975

Charley Garner
b. 1977

Maylie Garner
b. 1980

Elizabeth Tate
b. 1988

John Hornback
b. 1963

APRON STRINGS

Elizabeth, 2011

Under her coral-colored sheets, Elizabeth heard the antique brass doorknob of her bedroom door rattle as it was turned. The noise, though subtle, was enough to make her to groan sleepily. The door opened—she heard it—and light from the green painted hallway fell into her room and onto her bed. Then her mother yelled for her to get up, and Elizabeth rolled away from the voice of her mother.

Faith Tate yanked the sheets off her daughter's bed.

Elizabeth pulled the pillow over her face to shield it from the light, mumbling inaudible assaults directed at her mother.

"Get up. You're going to work with me."

"What time is it?"

"It's after four. You've got twenty minutes to get ready."

"I just got home a few hours ago," Elizabeth moaned. "And I don't want to go."

"Get up, Elizabeth," her mom said. "You smell like vomit." After turning on the shower in the adjacent bathroom, Faith left the room, slamming the door behind her.

Elizabeth attempted to pull the sheets back up with her feet, but her mom had removed them from the bed.

Last night—what had happened?

Her head splitting, Elizabeth sat up and looked around the room. On her cluttered desk was the tray her mom must have brought in, laden with a cup of coffee, two pieces of buttered toast, and three aspirin. Weakness and nausea began to take their toll, and she fell sideways back onto her bed, covering her eyes with her arms.

Then there were two sharp knocks on the door—"Up!" her mom commanded from the hall.

With another loud, rebellious groan, Elizabeth rolled her body out of bed. She took the aspirin and ate two bites of toast before making it to the steamy bathroom. The remnants of the previous night's mascara were streaked down her cheeks, and an off-color mess was smeared on the front of her low-cut dress.

Never again. No more alcohol.

The shower numbed her weariness. If it weren't the warmth of the water, it was the state of being clean that quieted her queasy stomach.

Think. What happened last night?

There had been a bartender in a red shirt and with her copper-colored hair twisted out of her face. She'd bought two rounds of shots—maybe three. Head spinning, Elizabeth had danced with a vodka tonic in hand. That had made her feel ill. The bathroom. Ben had been there, too.

Yes, Ben had been there for sure.

He was waiting when she came out of the bathroom, leaning against the wall with his arms across his chest. He smiled at her, and she stumbled forward, smiling back dumbly. Did she puke? he asked. Yes. Do you want another drink? he asked. Sure. At the bar, she had another drink, and his hand covered hers as he leaned forward to speak. That had felt comfortable.

What did he say?

He had met someone.

Yes, he said he had met someone, and she had a name. Elizabeth felt ill again and staggered back to the bathroom. Folding her arms across the unsanitary toilet seat, Elizabeth laid her head down and closed her eyes. She tried to make the spinning stop. She wanted to throw up or die.

When she came out of the bathroom, Ben was gone.

The bartender in the red shirt came walking towards her. She said Elizabeth's group of girlfriends had just left. They'd looked, but couldn't find her. This often happened to Elizabeth. She had a tendency to wander off during nights out and find her own way home. It annoyed her friends and gave them reason to assume she was safe.

Do you need a ride home? the bartender asked Elizabeth.

Elizabeth didn't answer; she just sat down on the nearest bar stool and sighed.

The bartender pushed the hair out of Elizabeth's face and tucked it behind her ear. She stood so close that Elizabeth kissed her. Taken aback, the bartender pushed her away. I'll be right back, the bartender had said with a smile.

Why had she kissed that woman?

How had she gotten home?

Elizabeth didn't remember coming home at all.

*

Elizabeth shut off the water and covered her face with her hands. The nausea began to regain control of her head.

While she was in the shower, her mom had stripped the bed of the vomit-soiled sheets and made it up again with fresh linens. She had also laid out clothes for Elizabeth to wear: khaki shorts and a hot-pink t-shirt with "Luca's Bakery" written across the chest in the cream and brown scrolling font. Elizabeth hated pink, but she grudgingly put it on and—after grabbing a baseball cap to wear—was downstairs at 4:25.

"Come on." Plump Faith, with her dark hair braided out of her face, came sweeping through the kitchen grabbing her bag and two aprons. "Let's go."

Faith's plumpness was a feature that had established her as a trustworthy pastry-chef. For nearly thirty-five years she had been working in a bakery and, for about that long, had been collecting aprons. No two were alike. Each day saw a new one. Most of them were loud aprons that sparked conversations with her co-workers and customers.

It was still dark outside, but the sky was showing hints of light. The grass was dewy and the air a bit chilly even for an August morning. Faith's dad, in his matching flannel pajama pants and robe, was standing on the sidewalk taking pictures of a silver Camry that had run up on the sidewalk and mowed over the next-door neighbor's shrubs. Turning toward his wife and daughter as they got into the Jeep, he offered a curt nod.

Elizabeth groaned. She remembered how she had gotten home.

*

When the bartender left, Elizabeth felt a wave of embarrassment—she'd kissed her. She'd kissed a woman! Elizabeth went to her car. She sat in the driver's seat for a while, contemplating sleeping, crying maybe, but she desperately wanted to be in her own warm bed. So with a steadying sigh, she started the car and shifted into drive. She drove slowly with both hands gripping the wheel for concentration. At three in the morning, suburbia was still, and Elizabeth was safely delivered into the neighbor's front yard.

*

"You'll have to pay for the damage," Faith said to her daughter, "and help replant those shrubs."

Elizabeth nodded, embarrassed, and sank down in the passenger seat. The hangover was flaring back to full force.

*

At the bakery, Elizabeth cleaned the dining area, swept the kitchen, washed dishes, and stocked the displays. When the courthouse crowd thickened around seven, Elizabeth and her complaints were sent outside to repaint the backside of the bakery where a bunch of punks had graffitied what Faith called "devil symbols."

In the early heat Elizabeth thought about Ben. He still had the same sporadic freckles he'd had since she'd met him ten years earlier when they both played little league baseball. Back then he was a scrawny kid who wore a Bears jersey every other day. At twenty-two, he was a junior ad salesman who wore a tie. Elizabeth loved how he laughed at himself, how he called her without fail every day. Their friendship had survived even the three hundred miles that separated their respective colleges. And why

wouldn't it? They had nearly everything in common and rarely argued. Elizabeth could only remember one time they had fought. It was because Ben had called one of her college friends "a fag." They didn't speak for two whole days, and for two days Elizabeth was miserable. When Ben finally offered an apology, she cried with relief. It was then that Elizabeth began to think herself in love with Ben, to be very conscious of his proximity to her and anticipate his phone calls.

Should she have died last night, what would he have done? Would he have mourned because he never told her how he felt? Or because he didn't know he loved her until she was gone? She tried to picture him wearing one of his nicest suits and kneeling beside her open casket, crying. His mom would try to pull him to his feet, but he would fight her, repeating, "It's my fault. It's my fault." Imagining him in such a condition, Elizabeth felt a chill of satisfaction beyond the cloud of her nausea.

*

Two hours later, Faith came outside to find the wall half finished and her daughter leaning against the shaded part of the dumpster, holding her head with one hand and lethargically painting with the other. Faith told Elizabeth to clean up and eat breakfast in the kitchen.

The kitchen at Luca's was bright and bare with simple shelves that lined the walls. A large wooden table, twice as big as the one in the Tate's dining room that seated ten, sat in the middle of the room. Finishing half a mug of coffee and taking two large bites of a danish, Elizabeth put on a plain navy apron. "What are we making?"

"Cannoli," Faith said shortly, tying a soft, checkered green apron behind her back before turning to retrieve ingredients from the shelves behind her. The *cannolo* recipe had

been a staple of the summer menu since the elderly, Sicilian-born Luciana Marino first opened Luca's in 1979. Once a small bakery on the outskirts of town surrounded by law offices and empty apartments, over the years it had become a fully functioning café with a breakfast and lunch menu.

While she mixed the dry ingredients, Faith was silent. Elizabeth just watched, naming the steps in her head.

First the flour. Sifted.

Then shortening. Cut into the flour.

The sound of the mixer teased the pain of Elizabeth's hangover.

Faith added eggs, sugar, and a little white wine, the silence between the two of them filling with a persistent buzz.

The *cannolo* dough rolled around the mixer's hook, and the sound stopped.

"Thank you, Jesus!" Elizabeth held one hand over her eyes as the other arm clutched her churning stomach.

Dumping the dough onto the floured surface of the table and rolling it out with irritated force, Faith looked at her twenty-two-year-old daughter. Lips rolled against each other, Faith's gray eyes rested on Elizabeth with a kind of softness she wasn't accustomed to. Actually, it looked as if her mom were going to cry.

"What?" Elizabeth snapped. "What's that look for?"

"You could have died last night."

Again Elizabeth pictured her funeral. She lay in a fine casket, hands folded on her stomach. Wearing a light blue dress with hair curled resting over her shoulders, she

looked pale. Elizabeth imagined lying there—not moving and not thinking. She imagined not moving and not thinking ever again.

"Mom, I'm fine."

"That was so—what were you thinking?" As her anger mounted, Faith's words grew louder and quicker. "I'd like to know what you were thinking."

How could she explain to her mom how she felt? She didn't even know herself. Elizabeth tried to piece together exactly what she had been thinking, not just last night, but the nights before. "You wouldn't understand," she said softly as she started to place dough-covered forms on a large cookie sheet

"Try me." Faith turned to flick on the stove behind her, setting a large skillet of oil on the heat.

"I just wanted to come home."

"You could have called. We would have come to pick you—"

"Not without a lecture. I'm old enough to take care of myself, and I'm fine. Nothing happened." Elizabeth moved toward her mom with a full tray of forms wrapped in *cannolo* dough.

The oil was bubbling slightly, ready to fry the dough quickly to a crisp.

Elizabeth dropped the first two rolls into the hot liquid, and a small splash reached up and touched her mom's hand. Faith jerked her hand away and rushed to the sink to run water over the wound.

Having cooked with her mom since childhood, Elizabeth knew that in such a situation, it was her job to rescue the food rather than tend to her mom's injury. She

retrieved the two fried rolls from the oil and placed them on a drying rack, accidently cracking one against the other as she did.

"You broke them," Faith said, standing with a dishtowel held firmly against her hand.

"We have more."

"You aren't patient enough. You move too fast."

"You always say the first batch is never—"

"Sometimes it's all you got." A resolve passed over Faith's countenance as she spoke, and she rolled her shoulders back to give her optimum height.

"Mom, I'm—" Elizabeth started.

"How about you go home and get some sleep?"

"Let me help you finish these."

"No." Faith pushed a stay hair away and looked into Elizabeth's face with stern eyes. "I can do this on my own."

It was an affirmation of a fact. Elizabeth recognized in her mom the stubbornness she'd often heard her dad complain about. Faith's life demanded that she be that way, demanded that she be constant. To embellish life lessons, Faith had detailed having to take care of herself as a child, her parents' divorce, and her own severe lack of confidence. As the story was told, Faith was eighteen when she packed two suitcases and left a note for her older sister. The bus she caught was going to Chicago, and when she got there, she immediately started working for the Dickinson Family Bakery in Old Town. Years later, Faith joined Luciana Marino at her new bakery and inherited it at her death.

These were all Aesop Fables to Elizabeth, used to strengthen the life lessons her mom was trying to teach her. But they were taken with a grain a salt, and she could never picture her mom without confidence.

Faith Hornback had left home at eighteen and started living.

Now twenty-two years old, Elizabeth felt a curious pressure to follow her mom's lead and live on her own. But the transition to independence was an area of gray. At eighteen, Faith had made a quick and clean cut from her family. That transition had been clear. Elizabeth felt she had been sawing at the link with her parents since her first year at college. One semester she could pay most of her bills, another she'd be swamped with schoolwork and would have to make submissive phone calls to her mom asking for money. She wanted to be on her own, but she didn't know how to crawl out from under her parents; it wasn't as if they were kicking her out of the house. And without that kind of pressure, she relaxed in her setting, wondering what she could do, when she should do it, how it should be done, and most importantly, why she should do it at all. If her parents were willing to support her, why should she worry herself?

*

Home, Elizabeth felt energized with irritation for her mom. Her body was heavy from lack of sleep, but her thoughts were thrashing about angrily. If only someone would yell at her, she could yell back. Instead, everyone just looked at her disapprovingly. Sometimes she wanted to smack her own mother.

On the front porch sat a medium-size green bush with several pink and purple flowers beginning to bloom. Over her shoulder, Elizabeth glanced at the shrubs she'd ruined next door and sighed. She didn't want to pull out the shovel or the trimmers. She

didn't want to dig and haul this bush over there. But when she thought of entering the house and having her dad tell her to plant the bush, she decided to do so without the lecture. So she went to the tool shed and grabbed the shovel, the hedge trimmers, and a pair of her dad's work gloves.

By the time she made it to her neighbor's yard, Mr. Augustine was sitting on his front porch. "Hello, Miss Tate," he called. Mr. Augustine was a tiny Indian man who used to teach American literature at the community college. He always wore black bowler hats and called her "Miss Tate."

Elizabeth reached the ruined foliage and dropped the gardening equipment. The two shrubs were planted right beside the sidewalk so that every passerby would see and admire them. One was broken a bit, and the other was completely squished. "Hi, Mr. Augustine. I'm sorry I ruined your bushes."

He laughed and started to rock slowly in his chair. "Do you know what kind of bushes those are?"

"What kind, Mr. Augustine?"

"Rose of Sharon."

"Oh, like from *The Grapes of Wrath.*"

Mr. Augustine smiled smugly and said nothing. Elizabeth started to dig and was left to her work without interruption. Automatic in her movements, she wondered if Mr. Augustine knew that his Rose of Sharon shrubs were the victims of a drunk driver. She wondered what he thought of her. Wondered if her dad had gone over that morning, sat at the Haque's pink, plastic tablecloth and talked about her over tea.

Once, when her parents went on vacation, Elizabeth spent a few days with Mr. Augustine. He fixed her curry for dinner and then let her stay up past her bedtime, watching Bollywood movies and drinking chai. When Elizabeth wanted to run away from home, she planned on running away to India. She'd yell at her mom and say, "I'm leaving this stupid place. I'm going to go to India to live like Jasmine." Her mom would smile and tell her that sounded fun. But Elizabeth never went. She just wanted her mom to ask her to stay.

There had always been a disconnect between Elizabeth and her mother. If Elizabeth wanted comfort, she would go to her dad. Her mom would rationalize everything. She would never let Elizabeth simply be mad about something because Elizabeth's attitude was the only thing wrong.

The old bush was free from the soil, and Elizabeth heaved it into the Tates' front yard. She then set the new shrub down in the empty hole. "Make sure you pack some mulch around the base," Mr. Augustine yelled from the porch.

"Okay."

"And make sure you clip all the dead leaves off."

"I can do that."

"No, Miss Tate. You need more mulch."

"Okay."

"Miss Tate." Mr. Augustine got to his feet and leaned forward on the edge of the porch, hugging a stout cream column with one arm and pointing towards Elizabeth with the other hand. "Miss Tate. Miss Tate, you're doing that wrong."

*

Elizabeth closed the front door of the Tate house and sighed with relief.

Bed.

"Did you finish?" her dad asked from his study.

She stepped inside the small room and found her dad with one baseball game on the TV and another on the radio while he balanced account sheets. He did not look up from his work. Elizabeth said, yes, she had finished, and he went on working silently.

More than anything she wanted to slip onto her dad's lap as she used to as a child. He would touch the bottom of her hair and tell her things: how the White Sox were better than the Cubs, how to arrange an account sheet, or how he'd met her mom. The latter was her favorite story, and she'd interrupt her dad's other topics and say, "Daddy, tell me about the first time you saw Momma." Chuckling, he'd drop his pencil and wrap his arms around her. "Why always that story?" She'd shrug and lay her head down on his shoulder, listening to her father's steady voice as he recited the story exactly as he had before.

When she was twelve years old and her dad stopped calling her "Princess," she spent a month's worth of allowance on the blue, leather-bound journal that now sat on her nightstand beside the Bible her Uncle Caleb had given her for First Communion. The only thing ever written on the Italian pages was the story of how her parents had met.

At thirty-five, I was just a junior accountant. I had recently been transferred to Chicago. That day was one of the first warm days of spring, so I slipped out early for my lunch break. Walking past the bakery, I saw the most beautiful girl leaning over the counter counting danishes, the ones with the strawberries in the middle. So I casually circled the block and went inside. She said, "Welcome to Luca's. How can I help you?"

But I couldn't think of anything to say! Mind blank and palms beginning to sweat, I looked up at the menu and asked for the first thing I saw—cannoli. Only I pronounced it "Cuh-nol-eye," and the pretty girl smiled. She was beautiful. Her hair was braided over one shoulder, leaving the other side of her neck bare. I wanted to weep. I asked her to coffee. She replied, "I have enough of coffee at work. How about dinner?" Blushing at another blunder, I readily invited her to dinner. The day when I met your mom, she wearing a very special apron—the one that looks as if it could be a wedding dress, the cream one with the lace around the edges and tiny pink rosebuds stitched on the pockets.

With a sigh, Elizabeth crossed the room to the wingback chair that faced the TV and sat there silently.

She had always loved being in her dad's study: coloring on the floor, doing homework at his desk, or reading a magazine in the wingback chair while listening to ballgames. It was the many hours spent in this room that had made Elizabeth appreciate numbers and fall in love with the Chicago White Sox. With numbers, everything was easy; everything was valid and proven, solvable. Why couldn't life be more like that, more right and wrong, black and white, even and odd? It seemed that math was the only thing reasonable in the world. Graduating from high school, Elizabeth knew she wanted to do what her dad did and study accounting. But she still couldn't make the world fit into the lines and columns of a spreadsheet. Six months out of college, and she was back home with her parents. Going out drinking with her friends, sitting in that wingback chair, and watching sports consumed her life.

"You're not going out tonight," her dad said.

“I wasn’t planning on it.” She tried to make it sound funny, but it came out like vomit, coated in an acid her body rejected. “How about dinner?”

“Your mom won’t be home till late.”

“I can cook. What sounds good?” She rolled her head against the back of the chair and looked at her dad.

“Whatever we have.” He huffed and pulled out a stack of papers from his desk. “Here—they’re entry level jobs at a few firms. I already wrote in your references.”

“Firms?” Elizabeth asked as she took the stack. “Accounting firms?”

“That’s the education you have. That’s what you said you wanted to pursue.”

“I don’t know anymore.”

William pinched the narrow part of his nose and sighed. “You’re not going to find a job like this. You can’t live with us forever.”

“But I don’t know what—”

“Elizabeth, you’re not a child anymore. You have to do something with your life. I’m giving you three months.”

“Three months to do what?” Elizabeth asked, standing up and dropping the pages into the chair.

“To get a job and find an apartment.”

“Dad!”

“No, that’s the end of the discussion.” William stared at her with the stern expression his wife usually owned. Stunned and feeling somehow betrayed by her dad—the loving, protective dad she depended on when she squared off with her mom—she collected the job applications and left the room.

Hands shaking, Elizabeth felt hot all over, suffocated. She was being kicked out of her house; her own dad was kicking her out. Retracing her footsteps, she went outside, slammed the door behind her, and got into her car, throwing the applications in the back seat.

Unnerving, that's what this was. She wanted to beat her mom and make her cry, to throw clumps of mulch at Mr. Augustine, to wrestle her dad to the ground until he was still. She wanted to be different, but she wanted everything to stay as it was. She wanted to hate Ben, to hurt Ben, and she wanted Ben to love her. But most of all she just wanted.

Traffic began to add to her irritation, so she made Ben's apartment her destination. Fueled by her current irritation, she planned to demand of him the things she desired.

He answered the door, saying, "Where'd you go last night?"

Elizabeth crossed her arms and took a step back. "What do you mean?"

"Last night. I go to take a piss, and then you're gone."

"I left, okay?" She pressed her way past Ben into his apartment. "Was I supposed to wait for you?"

Shutting the door, he crossed the room and stood in front of her. "Well." His voice sounded a little strained. "I wanted to give you a ride home. You weren't fit to drive."

"Oh, I didn't drive," she lied.

"That bartender was worried about you."

Elizabeth covered her face and sank down onto the couch. "Who told you?" she said softly.

“Told me what?”

“That I. . . Did you see?” She uncovered her face and looked up into his.

“See what, Lizzy?” Sitting down next to her, he laid his hand on her shoulder.

“The kiss.”

“You kissed her?”

“You didn’t know?” Elizabeth felt drained.

“Lizzy, it’s okay. We were talking about you when you went to the bathroom.”

“You were talking about me?”

“The pretty one in the red shirt, right?” Ben rubbed Elizabeth’s back. She had leaned forward, holding her face in her hands and resting her elbows on her knees. “She thought you were sweet, and she asked if we were dating.”

“What did you tell her?” Elizabeth sat up and looked at him, holding her breath.

“Don’t worry, I told her we weren’t and gave her your number.”

“What?” She asked quickly.

“I gave her your number.” His voice was low as if he were questioning himself.

“But why?”

Ben was quiet for a time. His face was stern, and his eyes narrow as through trying to solve a math problem in his head.

“Answer me,” Elizabeth demanded.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m just thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

“Well,” he started. “She thought you were really cute, and she wants to take you out.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Lizzy,” Ben said quickly. “I’m sorry. I just—well, I mean, you’ve never had a boyfriend and—and you never seem very interested in anyone.”

“You think I’m gay?”

“You’re always. . . and your girlfriends are so. . . I just—” Ben stumbled over his words until Elizabeth cut him off.

“Ben, do you think I’m a lesbian?”

He rolled his lips against one another and shrugged.

Elizabeth shook her head and looked around the room. Nothing sounded right, nothing felt right. When she turned back at Ben, he wore a face of defeat. What should she do? Yell at him?

She put a hand on either side of his face, pulled him to her, and kissed him. But there were no fireworks, not even when Ben took hold of her hips.

Elizabeth pushed him away and stood up.

“I have to go,” she said.

“Go? Where are you going?” Ben asked, scrambling to his feet and following her to the door.

“Stop,” Elizabeth said firmly. “I have to go.”

“But where, Lizzy?”

“I don’t know. I just know I have to go.” She walked out of the apartment, leaving Ben standing in the doorway staring after her. Later Elizabeth would call to apologize. He’d say he was sorry, too, and admit he’d had feelings for her in the past. They would

laugh about the kiss, make fun of one another, and then apologize again. Surprisingly, Elizabeth was calm about the whole thing.

*

When Faith got home from work, Elizabeth was leaning over the stove picking out perfectly round dumplings.

"What are you making?" Faith asked, dropping her purse on the table and walking towards Elizabeth.

"Chicken and dumplings," Elizabeth answered as she spooned another dumpling into the simmering chicken broth. "I wanted some comfort food."

"Where did you learn to make that?"

"Grandma taught me when I went to visit a few years ago. When I dropped the dumplings in, the broth splashed on her hand. She said I moved too fast." Elizabeth gave her mom an apologetic smile and held a sample dumpling forward with a fork.

"Just like Mom's," Faith said with a smile after she tried it.

Elizabeth grinned and ate the other half of the dumpling. She was still wearing the pink t-shirt and khaki shorts, spotted with dirt and white paint. Over the day's outfit was the cream-colored apron with lace trim, the one from her favorite story.

"Oh, that apron," Faith said, leaning forward and touching the lacey shoulder strap. "Did I ever tell you where I got it?"

Elizabeth shook her head.

"I stole it. I stole it from my mom right before I left home."

Elizabeth, amused, gasped. "Does she know you have it?"

Shrugging, Faith smiled mischievously at her daughter. “It was my favorite thing she owned. I remember her cooking in that apron before she and dad got divorced. She was always prettiest when she was cooking.”

After a pause, Faith continued. “I was wearing that one the first time I saw your dad.”

“Yeah?”

Looking at Elizabeth, she studied her eager gray eyes and her fair blonde hair for a moment before saying: “He walked in wearing a navy suit and a bright orange bow tie. He made me smile.”

The simplicity of her mom’s statement felt so much richer than the elaborate story her dad told. For him, it was the room and the hair and everything about her. There was so much going on it was as if he were just a fool falling in love. For Faith, it was simple, as if she didn’t fall in love but rather discovered it.

Faith moved away from Elizabeth and started pulling plates and cups from the cabinets, and Elizabeth spooned the last dumplings out of the pot and laid them on top of the peppered chicken, pouring the broth into a separate bowl.

“Hey, Mom,” Elizabeth said. “Did Dad talk to you about the job applications?”

“We discussed it. That’s his thing though.”

“What do you think I should do?”

Faith took a moment to think and then asked, “What do you want to do?”

Teasingly, Elizabeth replied, “What if I want to live at home forever?”

Ringing echoed from the telephone in the foyer, and her dad yelled that he was busy. Faith called back that she'd get it and moved towards the sound. Passing Elizabeth, she laid her hand on her shoulder, and Elizabeth turned around.

"You don't want that," Faith said, and after patting her daughter on the shoulder she left the room.

BARREN

Faith, 1975

Faith Hornback went to mass every Sunday morning at eight o'clock even though her mother said God didn't exist. She went in neat, plain dresses and absent-mindedly fingered a rosary as she watched the children wander the pews. She went to church and said the prayers and did so with no Catholic guilt, even after getting knocked-up.

She had tried to keep it a secret—the baby—but when she missed Sunday service one weekend in February, the little old ladies fell over themselves trying to find out why, and the answer left them dancing in their wrinkled pants with excitement. Of course their Kentucky town had seen teen pregnancies before and had also seen the sadly patched-up marriages that followed. Faith's story, however, had more marrow to it: rich, juicy marrow upon which the gossipers happily sucked for years.

*

On prom night Faith had looked beautiful on the arm of her boyfriend, Conner Williams. Her mother had scoffed at the high-school affair—scoffed and said young love wasn't meant to last, these words from the woman who had married when *she* was

eighteen. But by the time Faith was born, her mother was struggling to keep her husband's affection. She told the nurse she wanted her baby girl to be named "Faith" because only a religious intervention could save her marriage, and, back then, Margaret Hornback had faith. Three years later the divorce was final, and Margaret stopped believing in God, in love, and in marriage. Faith, despite this, grew up with a resounding belief in fairytales, in happy endings, and, most importantly, in Prince Charming.

Since the winter of her sophomore year—about the time when she had started making eyes at Conner—Faith had fantasized about the perfect prom: the date, the car, the dinner, the dancing, the dress. The dress she wanted had a navy blue empire waist with beading on the bust and a low back. With her pale skin and her dark brunette hair knotted elegantly at her neck, the color would have deepened her dull gray eyes to a stony-blue: Faith's eyes were something, for sure. They might have even been what drew Conner to her in first place.

But in late December she decided to wear her sister Jodi's black prom dress instead.

*

"You looked fine," Conner said behind the wheel of his dad's car as he looked at Faith in the passenger seat. They had just turned onto a Kentucky back road on their way to an after-prom party.

"That's what Jodi said. But I don't want to look fine. I wanted to look… I wanted to look different." Faith was running the fabric of her sister's dress between her fingers. During the car ride she had changed into a pair of jeans and a loose-fitting black shirt, and now the dress was neatly slung across her lap for observation.

"Okay, you looked great."

Helplessly she nodded her head, ashamed of being humored. "Thank you."

Conner's face contorted into an easy grin, his dark eyes catching the light of a passing car. He was a handsome boy — handsome and thoughtful most of the time. The last few months had been difficult—difficult for her since she found the letters in his desk drawer and the condoms in his gym bag, and difficult for him when she finally confronted him about the situation.

She had thrown the box of condoms at his head and said, "The condoms we use are in the glove compartment." She had read lines to him from the letters: *All this sneaking around is sexy, but when are you going to get rid of her?* Conner had sat on the edge of the bed, his face clam. Finally he took the letters from her and held her firmly between his hands. "The guys at the gym gave me the condoms as a joke," he said. "We blew them up, being stupid. The letters aren't mine. They're Shawn's—he's cheating on Becky and keeps them here, so she doesn't find them."

Perfectly reasonable—the letters weren't addressed to anyone in particular, just "Baby." Still in the back of her head gnawed a sneaking suspicion. So she had fought to keep her man, to keep her young love alive and true.

As Conner drove, Faith sighed and touched her belly.

Lately she had developed the habit of spreading her right hand over the swelling. At first, she did so to press hard against her flesh, hoping to kill the thing that was inside, hoping to stop it all from being real. Then the habit grew to a type of childish curiosity: she was pregnant. There was something in there; something real existed inside her that bound Conner to her forever. She was only three months at best. No one could tell, yet

everyone at school knew. And Conner had changed after she told him. He was acting as he did when their relationship started: nearly tripping over himself to serve her. After the change in their lives was accepted, they made plans; they were going to get away after school; they were going to drive north and have the baby and be happy.

*

Once they pulled into Amy Allen's driveway, Conner threaded a hand around her neck and leaned over to grab her waist. Faith let him kiss her, and she let his fingertips slide inside the waist of her jeans to touch just the top hem of her panties, but when his hands began to fumble with her zipper, she slipped gently away.

"Not now."

"Oh, come on. It's prom night."

"We're sitting outside Amy's house. What if someone saw?"

He looked behind them and then back with a grin. "No one can see us."

Amy Allen's house was fifteen minutes off the interstate on backcountry roads. She lived alone with her mom in a little shack of a house that sat on a chunk of healthy land. When her dad was alive, the land had been divided into neat fields of profit, but since his death, nothing had grown. Hidden behind a line of thick trees was Amy's driveway. Standing at the mouth of her drive, you wouldn't even be able to see the house hidden behind an extending peninsula of woods, and the Lincoln was parked at the end of a line of cars that flanked the drive.

"Not now. I feel knocked-up and disheveled as it is. Let's wait till after." She touched his cheek lightly.

Conner had retreated to his seat and opened his mouth to reply when there was a knock on his window.

It was Amy Allen in the flesh.

She was holding a bag of trash and had apparently recognized the car on her way to the end of the drive.

“What are you two doing?” she asked when they got out of the car. Amy had worn a blue satin deal to prom, but now she had on a leather jacket and a little red dress, which swam around her narrow figure and fell three inches above her knees. She had raven black hair with mousey brown roots, big brown eyes and freshly painted red lips.

“That’s a great dress,” Conner said to Amy, before taking Faith’s hand and squeezing it roughly.

Amy graciously thanked Conner, and the three of them walked to the house, Faith excluded from the chatter.

In the house Amy and Conner grabbed a beer, Amy offering one to Faith.

“I can’t.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Amy said, flashing her eyes at Conner flirtatiously. “More for me, I guess.” She kept both beers, alternating between them.

“Little cousin!” Faith’s cousin Caleb said as he came stumbling towards her. A sophomore girl was trying to help him stand straight. “You shouldn’t be here with all this alcohol.”

“Shut up, Caleb,” Faith punched him, forcing his arm to fall off the girl. “Why don’t you find me some water?”

“Why can’t baby-daddy?”

“What did you say?” In a quick turn of fury, Conner moved his gaze from Amy to stare down at the slight frame of Caleb McCree.

“Oh, lighten up.” Laughing, Caleb kissed Faith on the temple and stumbled away.

“Amy,” Faith asked, “do you have any bottled water?”

“Kitchen.”

Faith sighed—Conner had made no movement to fetch her a drink—and she left him alone with Amy.

“Here you go, Hornback.” In the kitchen, Justin Lark handed a red cup to her. “It’s water from the tap. I couldn’t find a bottle. I figure you couldn’t drink—”

“Thanks. Who’d you go with? I don’t remember seeing you at prom.”

“Shelby, but we had a falling out, and I took her home,” Justin said, holding his beer out to her. “Here’s to getting ditched at prom.” He tilted his head back and polished off his can of beer, crushing it when he finished.

Faith smiled at him, mostly amused by his good nature given the circumstances.

“Let’s go in the living room. They’re watching music videos and —”

Interrupted by Conner’s sudden appearance, Justin was cut off, and Faith was taken roughly by the elbow. “Come on,” Conner said. “There are horse-shoes out back, and there’s no need to linger at the punch bowl—you can’t drink.” His eyes, glaring, rested on Justin. “Lark, how’s that grease job?”

Justin’s face grew hot. He nodded and walked away without a word.

When he was gone, Conner turned his gaze to Faith and said: “I don’t like you talking to him, Faith. He’s in love with you.”

“That’s nonsense. We’re just friends.”

“Girls and guys cannot be just friends.”

Faith jerked her elbow from his grasp. “So are you friends with Amy Allen?”

Conner made a fist with his hands, holding his arms straight and tense. “That’s different; she’s like my cousin, like you and Caleb.”

“Well, I never fucked Caleb now, did I?”

“I told you that never happened,” he said curtly, taking her elbow again and leading her outside.

Feeling guilty for exciting his anger, Faith lingered in Conner’s wake like the ever-useful girlfriend. For two hours she sought to suffocate the frustration out of him with her undivided attention. She brought him beer and cheered him on during his games. The longer and more fully she devoted herself to him, the more edgy he got, and the more alcohol he consumed. Around midnight her resolve to be the “cool” sort of girlfriend who is both understanding and tireless had left her.

“One more game, Conner?” Amy asked from across the yard.

“Conner, let’s go,” Faith said softly.

“Come on, baby,” Amy said. “Stay.”

Conner looked long and hard at Amy Allen. She had one fist at her tiny waist and the other dropped long against her rounded thigh. “One more,” he said to Faith.

“No, Conner, I’m tired. Let’s go.”

“Just one more, Faith.”

“It’s our prom night, and you promised—”

With a tightened jaw, one that clenched under his skin, Conner looked down at Faith with something near hate. “Take your pregnant ass inside and sit down.”

Faith stiffened and dropped her clutch on his arm.

Those around them snickered, one face looking on with concern.

Moving quickly away from the crowd, for fear she would start to cry in front of everyone, Faith stumbled to the far side of the yard and grabbed a nearby wrought iron bench to keep from falling. Justin had followed her. He sank down on the bench and pulled her to his chest. Without uttering a word, she leaned on his shoulder and cried for a good bit—cried because she was scared, cried because she was embarrassed, cried because she hadn't cried for weeks.

"You have choices," Justin said when she sat up.

"Like what?"

"Adoption. Abortion. There are choices."

"No—I couldn't. This baby—this baby is mine—this baby is my fault." Wiping another tear off her cheek, she leaned pathetically against the back of the bench.

"These things happen; they're no one's fault."

Faith turned away and brought her hands to her face.

Softly, Justin grabbed her forearm. "What is it, Faith?"

"He was cheating on me!" Faith quickly got to her feet and pointed towards the house. "I found the condoms and the letters—he lied to me. The son of a bitch lied to me. He—he made me believe I was just paranoid. He made me think I was stupid." She sank back down on the bench. "He made me feel stupid." Speaking softer and breathlessly holding back sobs, she continued. "I love him, Justin. I've loved him for two years. He betrayed me, and still I loved him. I couldn't lose him, I wouldn't lose him. So…so I

poked holes in the condoms. I thought — he's such a good guy, really he is. I knew that if I got pregnant he would do right by me; he'd marry me and stop cheating."

"Oh, Faith," Justin said.

"It worked — he's been an angel ever since I told him. He's spent every spare moment with me, just me. He's like he used to be."

"Are you happy?"

"I was at first. I felt like I'd won. But. . ." Faith paused and thought of her sister Jodi—Jodi who didn't know Faith was going to have a baby. "My sister is pregnant. She just found out last week. She and Brad are so happy. They did things right: marriage then started a family. What am I starting?"

"How do you feel now?"

"I feel like I've betrayed him. But I had to, or he wouldn't have stayed."

"He should want to be with you without your being pregnant. He should have taken you somewhere quiet tonight. You shouldn't be here, and you shouldn't be with him. You should be—" Justin didn't finish; his words just drifted into his pressed lips and twitching jaw.

Faith turned and gazed into his face. Eyes softened and the muscles of his jaw clenching, he wanted something, and she knew what. Every boy got that look in his eyes when he wanted something from her. The first time Conner had kissed her had been a snowy Tuesday. He'd had that look in his eyes, too. He'd been a bit shy, but his lips and the excitement of the moment swam through her body and made her warm.

Justin was different.

Cool, like a breeze, and confident, he kissed her. He put one hand at her neck and held her in his kiss, and, even if she'd had the strength or will to fight, she couldn't have escaped.

Two rough hands were what pulled her out of Justin's embrace, and, a moment later, a firm punch landed on Justin's chin, causing him to fall over the bench.

"Conner!" Faith scrambled to her feet and clung to Conner's arm. "Please, Conner. Don't."

"Shut up." He shoved her off, forcing her to take a bracing step back.

"Hey," Justin said from the ground. He nursed his lip with the back of his hand as he got to his feet. "Don't talk to her like that."

"This is none of your damn business."

"No, Conner. Let's leave." Faith placed her shaking hand on his chest. He was tense and red lipstick was smeared on his neck. "If you love me," she added, "you'll take me home."

After knocking Justin back down, he took Faith's elbow in his fist and guided her with a persistently rough shove towards his dad's Lincoln. She stumbled every few steps, slipping on the dewy gravel of Amy's driveway.

"Let me go," she demanded, pulling her arm away.

Conner grabbed her forearm and yanked her onward. "Little slut," he growled.

"It was nothing. It just happened."

"Like that damn baby 'just happened.'" He grunted a sarcastic chuckle and pushed her so hard towards the car that she had to extend her arms to keep from falling onto the trunk. "Get in."

"You're drunk."

"Get in the damn car."

"Give me the keys." Hands fisted at her side, Faith stared at him half in defiance and half in fear.

"Get in the car."

Under the commanding furrow of his brow, Faith became submissive. She slipped into her place and buckled herself in. She considered running, considered going back to the party and finding another way home. Yet, when she looked over at Conner as he attempted to get the key in the ignition, her heart longed to reach out. He was a lovely, spoiled child, and she would follow him.

He pulled the car out of the driveway without a hint of impairment and began to berate Faith. *Slut*, he said. *Ungrateful. Scheming whore. Worthless. Trashy. Disrespectful.*

With her hands neatly folded in her lap, glancing down politely, Faith thought about the afternoon she'd told him she was pregnant. The sun had been bright, and the breeze was cooing against the windows. He'd gasped and held her to him, muttering questions into her hair that went unanswered. Then he'd started to cry—cry for his future and his dreams—and his cries brought Faith to tears too. In that moment, there was also a sense of triumph, of success. She whispered, "I love you," and he went still and whispered it back.

Faith turned to Conner when he paused in his reproach and whispered, "I love you."

"What did you say?" Her words, spoken with such clarity and in such a rehearsed way, drew his attention to her face.

In that moment when his eyes left the road, a stop sign rose up from the darkness, and the blackened and broken stems of already harvested crops extended before the headlights.

Barreling past the stop sign, the car hit a small ditch and slid into the barren field of corn. The airbags exploded, powder clouding the air. Faith blacked out.

*

The chill of the late February night jolted Faith awake as Conner pulled her out of the car.

She screamed as though her voice could shake the night and rattle the trees.

"Faith, it's okay," Conner soothed. "It'll be okay." He took her forearms, willing her to stand. Turning her face up towards him, she met his frightened blue eyes with her bewildered gray ones. Under the pale glow of the moon, Conner Williams appeared to be lacking all the wonderful things she attributed him; he was a monster. She got to her feet, hit his hands away and ran a few steps before she fell to the Earth, holding her wrenching abdomen.

*

An elderly couple took Faith's normal seat in church the next morning. Faith was in the hospital. They aborted her child in order to save her life. And by the end of Sunday service, everyone knew that Conner Williams and Faith Hornback had been in a car accident, that he had been drinking, and that she had been pregnant.

*

The next Sunday, and every Sunday till the one in September when she waited in the hospital to hear the first cries of her nephew, Faith was at church with her hands

neatly folded in her lap and her glance held politely down as she silently fingered her rosary. She was quiet, she was reserved, and then, one morning in late September, she was gone.

The morning Faith's nephew was born Jodi placed a mewing bundle of blankets in her arms. She had held infants before, but in the wake of her own lost pregnancy, she cried at the sight of the sleeping babe. Within a week, Faith left a note for Jodi on the refrigerator minutes before leaving town. *Jodi,* it read, *I think I'm going to find something else.*

THE AGE OF MATURITY

Jodi, 1967

Jodi always made lists. She made grocery lists on post-it notes, chore lists on the back of her hand, and never-do lists in her head. Yet, whenever she wanted to consult one of these lists, the one she needed was either illegible or missing. Tuesday was no different, and Jodi was three blocks from home when she realized the brown grocery bags she was carrying lacked the ShopRite chocolate chip-cookies Faith had wanted. Her sense of obligation was quickly conquered by the prospect of walking back in the air that smelled like rain. Jodi sighed, mourning the forgotten cookies, and hoped Faith forgot to ask about them.

Balancing the grocery bag on her hipbone like a baby, Jodi gripped the slipping tote bag and heaved it higher on her shoulder. The maroon Sally's vest—which did nothing for her pastel skin tone—bunched up under the double strap of her heavy bag. Sally's was a beauty shop, and Jodi spent hours each day telling women which color complemented their eyes and what perfume fit their style. She walked home each afternoon with a quaint smile on her face. Her carefully tended tresses may have been in

limp disorder and her feet may have been reduced to thin strips of burning tissue, but she had made some woman feel beautiful, and, somehow, that was enough.

She always went through the back door of the one-story house with the cracking blue shutters. It sat on the corner of Mulberry and Popular with a healthy dogwood tree on the west side that was just beginning to don its pink foliage that week. The noise of the banging screen door was loud enough to beckon any souls within to unbolt the door, but no one came. Jodi, frustrated with the fussy keys, dropped the grocery bag. When the door was open, she used her foot to push the cookie-less bag across the threshold. The kitchen—normally lit with yellowed light above the stove—was grey. She flicked the switch twice with electric response.

"Faith!"

A door opened in the front of the house, and heavy footsteps quickened to the kitchen. It was nine-year-old Faith, wearing the chunky turtle-shell glasses, which were too large for her round face and, thus, sat cocked on her ears. The glasses hid eccentric grey eyes that seemed to be trimmed in royal blue ribbons anytime Faith smiled in full.

"Is dinner ready?" she asked.

"What happened to the lights?"

Faith shrugged. "I was just watching *Password*. They went out. I didn't do anything to them."

Jodi didn't reply. She walked over to the littered telephone table and fingered through a stack of mail addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Hornback, a stack of late notices and unpaid bills. The electric bill was towards the bottom—crisp, unopened, and three-weeks old. "Unbelievable," she hissed under her breath.

She glanced at the clock: 5:15.

She had forty-five minutes to walk the five blocks to the electric company. “I’m going to take care of this,” Jodi said, waving the envelope at Faith. “Put the groceries up.” The child stood there with a blank stare and watched Jodi dig into her bag, pull out her checkbook, and look at the balance. Pressing her lips together and shaking her head, Jodi walked back out the door with the envelope in her hand.

Outside, the wind had steadily started to pick up. Jodi pulled her arms over one another, tightening the vest across her exposed throat. The cars breezed by her on the narrow street, and to keep her mind off the cold, she made up stories about the drivers that filtered through the narrow lanes. The man across the street, pulling into number 317, worked at the bank all day, and each evening when he got home, he fixed himself a screwdriver before kissing his wife on the cheek. In the navy Accord, turning at the street ahead, was the father of a boy and a girl, both of whom were performing in a school play that night. He was late. That woman at the light, the one who rested her chin on her fist, was trying to think of something to fix for dinner. She wasn’t hungry, so she decided to let the kids decide.

Jodi began to wonder what story her fellow rush-hour travelers pegged on her. Maybe the tan Mercury thought she was a beauty struggling to reach a financial plateau for her young family. Or the man in the new Camry saw her as a gold digger, someone who slipped into red lipsticks to seduce the economic gods. If anyone were going to guess the truth, it would be a woman, for only a woman would know that she was just a girl walking to pay a bill so that she could cook dinner. After the second useless click of the light switch, she had thought about calling someone—a man—to drive her to the

office, to pay the bill for her, to make everything good again. But she was perfectly able to take care of the situation herself, and if she needed consoling, she would call her sister Tori. Though Tori would likely lecture instead of console.

Her thoughts accompanied her all the way to the electric office. She gave the ill-tempered receptionist the thick paper check and left after being assured the lights would be turned on promptly. Jodi gave her a "thanks" and fancied that she left the receptionist to paint her face for a man who promised to pick her up at six o'clock for dinner.

The sky had grown darker, and the street lamps were beginning to glow a rusty orange. Now quarter to six, the traffic had died down considerably, leaving Jodi's thoughts alone with the bitter wind. Of course she should have grabbed a jacket or maybe worn a long-sleeve shirt instead of the cute, scoop-neck top. Unlike the receptionist, men were not allowed to pick her up for dinner until she was seventeen. Jodi's mother was raised Southern-proper, and the rules of dating had somehow survived the years.

A copper-colored Buick Century slowed to a stop beside her. The car was familiar, but she still bent down to look inside the dusty window. The driver reached across the passenger's seat and opened the door. Jodi straightened up and stepped back.

"Jo, get in."

The man inside was wearing drawstring pajama pants and a button-up flannel shirt. Curly black chest hair trimmed the top button. His mustache and hair –both of which matched the black of his chest—were overgrown and shaggy that evening though they were normally sleek and proud. He moved his weight back to his driver's seat and said nothing else until Jodi sat down and shut the door.

The car started to move.

Jodi looked at the man beside her and saw a stranger. He looked like the broad man who used to walk her and Tori to the park and push them simultaneously on the swings, who smoked Te-Amo cigars at nights and who waited on the sidewalk bench every Sunday for her to get out of church. Something in his face had changed though. He used to smile more. He used to wrinkle his eyes into fine slits of hazel, as he did the first time he let her try beer. Jodi didn't like the taste, and he had laughed at her scowl.

"Your mother called me." His voice rose when he said "mother" with a note of surprise. The fact that her mother called him surprised her too. Since their divorce, the previous decade of lies and infidelity had discouraged any sort of conversation between Jodi's parents. "She told me about the electricity."

Jodi nodded and cast her eyes to her hands, which were pressed between her cold knees.

"I was on my way when I saw you walking."

Her eyes were down, and she did not look up at his face. If she had looked up, though, she wouldn't have seen anything. He was speaking to the dashboard.

"I was going to pay it off for you all, but I guess you already took care of it." He reached over and messed with her hair, pulling strands out of the ponytail band. Jodi jerked her head away, away from the very gesture that had once made her grin.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Daddy." She spoke in a whisper. In her shoes, her toes were clenched, but she couldn't bring herself to look up.

"Don't lie to me," he snapped. "I know your mother has told you to hate me, but don't listen to her, Jo. I'm not a bad guy. I was going to pay the bill, I was." He collected

the end of his mustache in his left hand. “Why didn’t you call me? You could have called me instead of walking in the cold like a dumbass.”

“I know, Daddy.”

“But you didn’t call. You believe her, you believe every lie she tells you about me.”

The Buick pulled in the driveway, crunching the gravel under its tires. The lights in the front room were on, and Jodi sighed with relief. He killed the engine, and both father and daughter stayed in the car.

“How’s Faith?”

“She’s good. I forgot her cookies at the store today. Maybe we could go get them really quick.”

“She doesn’t need them.”

“Right, of course not.”

They were silent for a moment.

“Tori called me last night,” he said. Jodi nodded, calculating how many days it had been since Tori had thought to call her two younger sisters and her mother. She understood why Tori didn’t call them though. Their mother turned all long-distance phone calls into a therapy session about her ex-husband, her lack of money, and the nine-to-five job she still wasn’t used to after eighteen months.

“She’s doing fine,” he continued. “She’s dating a fine young man, working in the Dean’s office, and keeping her scholarship. You should be more like her. You should get away from your mother. How old are you now, eighteen?”

"Sixteen, Daddy." Yes, she was sixteen years old with a B-minus in biology and a part-time job six days a week.

"Well, at eighteen you don't have to live with your mother anymore. You can move in with me and Dianne. Doesn't that sound nice?"

She nodded.

"Well, we're here. Go on and get out of the car, Jo, and tell your mother I paid the bill."

Before she opened the door, Jodi looked over at her father. His face was stern and his eyes were narrow, almost demanding. She didn't want to argue, and she was scared. After nodding slightly, she moved her weigh so to swing her legs onto the gravel, but her father stopped her. He reached across and held her against the fabric seat with his strong arm. Her skin was numb, but the arm under her father's hand felt the pressure of his grasp, his urgency, all the same.

"I love you. You know that, right, babe?"

"Sure."

"You love me too, don't you?

The wind blew in the cracked door and hit her in the face. She nodded fiercely.

"Good." He released her and let her get out of the car. She stood in the driveway and watched him back out into the street and return to his new wife in his new home. The first time he left for good, she had stood in the same spot, and it had felt that cold even though it was summer. Who was she to judge her father for falling in love, even if the affection, unfortunately, wasn't for her mother?

Jodi wiped her hand across her face and went inside.

The TV was on in the front room, and a live studio audience was laughing. Faith was in the kitchen, rooting through the cupboards. The stiff, brown grocery bag was thrown on the kitchen table, its contents scattered across the plastic pine counter. “Faith, what happened?”

“Where are my cookies?” she whined from the cupboard. “I want my chocolate-chip cookies!”

“I didn’t get them.”

“Why not?”

“I forgot them, but we have ice cream in the freezer.”

“I want my cookies.”

Jodi slowly placed her tote bag on the floor and walked toward Faith; Faith with her red nose and scratchy eyes. “I forgot them.” Jodi kneeled in front of Faith, her hands clenched on top of her folded knees.

“Why did you do that?” Faith whispered to her in a dull voice.

“I’m sorry. I’ll get them tomorrow.”

“No!” The half-eaten bag of potato chips, which had the misfortune of being in Faith’s hand, was thrown across the room to emphasize her cry. “Go get them now.”

“It’s freezing out there.”

“Please! Please go get them for me.”

Jodi’s shoulders relaxed sympathetically, and her chin took a daring dive to her chest. “No.”

The child’s face turned stern. “I hate you! I hate you! You never do anything for me! I take care of myself! I’m a little girl, and I do everything for myself. I hate you!”

Jodi's hands fell heavily on the narrow shoulders of her sister, and she shook her. Faith's head jerked back and forth, and her ponytail whipped her face. She was putty in warm hands. She was a disobedient toy to a vengeful child. She was a pair of cackling dice ready to be thrown.

Then Faith collapsed into Jodi's arms and dug her tiny purple-painted nails into Jodi's collar bone to keep Jodi from shaking her any longer. She sobbed into the matted mess of Jodi's hair. "She came home and started screaming 'bout the lights, started cussin' about Daddy, slammed the door. She called Daddy and was yellin' at him." Her tears only afforded heaving breaths. "She said she hated him, that he was worthless, and he never loved us kids. She said… She said…." Faith's explanation was broken into inaudible puffs of air and tears.

Jodi found herself in tears. Her arms, hung dead at her side, hadn't any more strength. All the power her anger had allowed her was suddenly deafened by regret and confusion.

"Faith," she whispered, tentatively raising her hand to touch her sister's smooth back. "Oh, Faith, I'm sorry." With each word, she grew bolder. Her arms held Faith so close to her chest it hurt. "I'm so sorry."

"I don't hate you, Jo-Jo," Faith murmured. "I could never hate you,"

"I know. I know, sweetheart."

Faith eventually pushed herself out of Jodi's strong embrace and backed up to the counter. She leaned her weight on her heels and gripped the counter behind her. Jodi silently put the kitchen back into sorts, the TV in the background providing the only haven to stray thoughts. The hamburger meat—that Jodi intended to make spaghetti with

only two hours before—was put into the freezer. Faith was forced to move only when Jodi swept up the broken potato chips from the yellowed, vinyl floor.

Jodi filled three bowls with heaping portions of Fruit Loops and milk for the evening meal. Faith offered the spoons and took her own bowl back to the TV room to continue watching Nickelodeon. Before she walked out of the room, she squared her shoulders to Jodi and offered a smile. A pencil-thin, royal blue strip circled the outside of her grey eyes.

Jodi carried one of the other bowls to the door at the end of the hall. She knocked twice and opened. The lights were off, and a woman wearing one grey and one brown sock was sprawled out in the middle of a king-size bed. Tan slacks, wrinkled from the recent wear, were slung over the back of an embroidered chair. The big, pearl earrings her mother always wore were sitting in a silver dish on the dresser next to the nametag reading, "Margaret Hornback, Customer Service."

Jodi put the cereal on the bedside table and threw a thin quilt over the woman. Then she leaned over and kissed her mother's forehead.

"Hmmm… tell her to turn down that TV."

"Sure, Momma."

Shutting the door quietly behind her, Jodi took the last bowl of cereal to the dark kitchen table where she sat and made a grocery list on the back of the recently paid electric bill. At the top of the list she wrote "Faith's cookies" and underlined it twice.

TURN ME AROUND

Marcus, 1996

I

It was a clear July morning in South Dakota, and Marcus sat outside the Bullock Hotel resting both hands on the polished walking stick his son-in-law had bought him after he fell at Yellowstone. Sitting beside Marcus, flipping through recently developed photographs, was his seventeen-year-old granddaughter, Maylie. She wore headphones around her neck and handled the pictures by their edge, careful not to smudge them.

"George took a picture of Seth Bullock's grave. Uncle Seth will think that's funny."

"Huh?" Marcus grunted.

"Seth Bullock, Papaw." She moved the picture closer to his face. "For Uncle Seth."

Marcus turned up the knob of his hearing aid. "Oh, yeah."

"Mom bought him a ridiculous t-shirt that says, *Sheriff Seth Bullock*."

Smiling, Marcus nodded at his granddaughter and turned his attention back to idle watching. It was a bright morning in July. Across the street, Maylie's older brothers

slipped into a novelty shop. Next to him, Maylie finished looking at the images of Deadwood and moved to more colorful pictures of landscapes.

"Papaw, do you know story about Devil's Tower?"

"What's that?"

"Devil's Tower," she said and again tilted the image towards him. This picture was of an oblong rock structure that seemed to spring up from the flat, kelly-green hills. Nothing around it equaled its height as it rose up against the clear, blue sky. Marcus looked down at Maylie so that he could use the movement of her lips to help determine what she was saying. He tilted his head a little to encourage her to continue. "It's called Bear Lodge. The Native Americans believe a Great Spirit raised the ground under six girls who were being chased by bears. The ridges on the side of the rock are said to be from these giant bears trying to climb up to the girls."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"A brochure." Maylie shrugged and continued to flip through photos. "Roosevelt is the one who made it a national park."

"Say, when are we going to Mount Rushmore?" Marcus asked his granddaughter.

"Tomorrow. Do you still want to go?"

He nodded, readjusting his grip on the walking stick. "Babe," he said, addressing Maylie with the pet-name he gave to all the girls in his family, "I remember reading about Rushmore in *National Geographic* when I was growing up. It took them fourteen years to do what's there. When I was in the fifth grade, I wrote a report on one of those presidents—Roosevelt. He was a great man."

Maylie gave her grandfather a quizzical look, and he looked away. Setting the collection on her lap, she gently touched the new copper cuff she'd bought at the Grand Canyon. "Did you see this?" she asked, tapping her new ornament.

"Is it Indian?"

She nodded. "The guy at the stand asked where I'm from. When I told him, he said that his ancestors were there before the Trail of Tears."

"Did you tell him about my great-grandmother?"

"What about her?" Maylie asked.

"She was a full-blooded Cherokee. When she was fifteen, my great-granddad hid her in the barn to save her from the evacuation, and then he married her. He was a great man." A faint, proud smile etched itself across Marcus's withered and tan face.

"So I'm—" Maylie paused as she figured the fractions in her head. "—one-thirty-second Cherokee?"

Marcus leaned back and tapped his walking stick on the ground as he laughed. "I guess so."

"Cool."

Just then, Maylie's mother emerged from the hotel and stood before them, a fanny-pack on the side of her hip and a folder against her chest. "There you two are!" she said breathlessly. "Where are George and Charley?"

"Gift shop," Maylie said and pointed across the street.

"We went in there yesterday."

Maylie shrugged. "George saw a shot glass he wanted."

With a sigh, Jodi looked over her shoulder and called for her husband: “Brad!” As if he had been waiting for her to say his name, out of the hotel came Jodi’s husband, wearing a button-up, short-sleeve shirt with big, blue flowers printed all over it. He looked tired and aggravated, pushing a loaded-down luggage cart out of the hotel front door. “Brad, go find your sons,” Jodi snapped before he had even cleared the threshold.

He held his keys out to his wife: “Get the car then.” She snatched them, and the two stormed off on their respective missions, leaving the luggage by the bench.

As soon as her parents were out of sight, Maylie sprang back into conversation. “Did you know your great-grandmother very well?”

Marcus nodded. “She didn’t die until I was eleven, lived to be a hundred and two.”

“Did she teach you to etch copper?”

“Sure. I used to sell it at street fairs when I was a kid.”

“Could you show me?” Maylie asked.

“I haven’t done it in years.”

“You might remember.”

“No,” Marcus shook his head. “I’d rather not.”

“Oh, come on,” Maylie pleaded. She saw the minivan at the corner and got to her feet. “It would give you something to do. All you do is watch TV anyway.”

“No,” Marcus said, shaking his head. He leaned his weight on the walking stick and heaved the mass of his body to his feet with a low grunt. “I don’t think I have enough energy left.”

"Papaw," Maylie said as she extended an arm for him to take. "Your life ain't over yet."

II

1936 was the first time I had ever worn a suit; I was ten years old. Clutching my mother's hand, I followed her as she wove through the other crying mothers at Hemmy McCree's funeral. I was unable to squeeze my hand from her grasp before I found myself in front of the boy's body. With his hair parted and his hands folded over a suit that looked exactly like mine, it looked as if he were asleep. If it weren't for his lack of color, I would have believed he was. As I stood, revolted by at the look of the thirteen-year-old's waxen skin and sunken eyes, my mother leaned down and kissed his forehead—kissed a dead boy's forehead. A chill ran down my neck and spread across my arms. I swore that her lips would never touch my face again. Never ever.

I guess that day was the first time I saw a dead body too.

My father, who was standing behind my mother, reached for and held her shoulders. It was the opportunity I needed to slip away from the casket.

Nothing is more interesting—especially to a child—than people showing emotions they don't normally show. So I went to find Mrs. McCree.

Sniffling women, who comforted each other and cast pity-filled glances at her, surrounded Mrs. McCree where she sat in a chair with Jake in her lap. Stupid and quiet, Jake was my age and had been in my class forever. Sam Garner, another kid in my class, told me that Hemmy had died in Jake's arms, and that when they took the body, Jake ran away. But the next morning he was found naked in Hemmy's bed.

Just like a lunatic.

His head on his mother's shoulder, Jake stared at the casket in the other room with a look of horror—eyes wide and seemingly unblinking, and his mouth held loosely open.

I stepped past the circle of observing mourners towards Jake and his mother.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mrs. McCree," I said and nodded sadly.

"Thank you, Marcus." She touched my shoulder—I was standing very close.

"Jake, do you want to go outside?" I asked.

His eyes—so dark they were almost black—looked at me for a moment and then drifted back to the casket. He did not answer. I told myself I was being nice, that taking an interest in Jake was the polite thing to do and that my mother would praise me in the car when we left, but really I knew I was being a shit. He didn't want to go outside and play. He didn't even want to talk. And if he did want to talk, he wouldn't want to talk to me.

"Jake, honey," Mrs. McCree said to her son softly. "Why don't you go outside with Marcus and get some fresh air?"

She received the same response I did—nothing.

Mrs. McCree spoke for him: "I'm sorry Marcus, but—"

My mother, who had followed me into the parlor, cut Mrs. McCree off: "Lucy, I just cannot tell you how sorry I am."

"Thank you, Vicky."

"It's just so sudden," my mother continued. "No warning signs, no illness, nothing. I just can't imagine if . . ." Her voice drifted off, and she collected my hand between hers. Mrs. McCree closed her eyes and leaned her cheek against Jake's hair.

“We—I—appreciate your prayers, Vicky.” Mrs. McCree spoke slowly, softly, and she raised her head up and looked my mother in the eyes.

In that moment, Mrs. McCree was as haunting as the dead boy in the other room. I felt another chill, and Jake sprang from his mother’s lap and pushed past everyone till he made it to the back door.

“Roger!” Lucy yelled, getting to her feet. “Roger, Jake!”

She sank back down to her chair, blubbering, and Mr. McCree was seen charging towards the back door, several men following him.

*

Fifteen minutes later, as Sam Garner and I were trying to burn ants with Sam’s glasses on the back steps, the group of men came walking back, Mr. McCree carrying Jake. “I guess he runs away a lot now,” Sam whispered, taking his glasses from me and putting them back on his face.

“Wouldn’t you if you killed your brother?” I whispered back. “I wonder if the police will show up soon.”

“Here, Jake,” Mr. McCree said as he set the boy down on the bottom step. “Stay here with Marcus and Sam. I’ll get you boys something to eat.”

As soon as the screen door slammed shut, Sam scooted down a step to be closer to Jake. “Hey, Jake. Are the police coming for ya?”

Jake stared straight ahead.

“Sam, he can’t say anything, or it’ll be a confession.” I got up and walked down the steps so that I could stand in front of Jake. With Sam sitting behind and me standing ahead, Jake McCree was surrounded.

“But weren’t the police already here?” Sam continued. “Maybe he’s under house arrest, and that’s why his folks can’t let him get too far away.”

“Sam, you idiot, house arrest is for people who steal or burn things, not for people who kill their brother.”

At my words, Jake’s head jerked up, and his eyes narrowed on me, flickering with angry tears. I remember thinking ridiculously, *He’s alive!*

And alive he was—alive as he propelled from the bottom step and tackled me to the ground. Sobbing and screaming, Jake punched my chest and smacked my face. Each violent contact from his fist brought on a louder cry of pain.

Covering my head with my arms, I didn’t fight back; I didn’t even cry out for help. I merely waited for it to stop. And when it did, I didn’t hurt much. I had a fat lip for a few days, a bruised eye for two weeks, and after that Jake, the quiet boy with eyes so dark they were almost black, would look to me for help when someone asked him a question because he didn’t want to answer.

III

Behind Marcus and Maylie in the third row of the Garner’s 1994 Plymouth Voyager, George and Charley played a game of Speed. Charley leaned his tall neck and shoulders over the cards as if prepared to make the game a physical match at the next moment’s notice. George, however, lounged back against the seat and chewed the side of his cheek. “Can we pull over? I’m hungry,” he said again. “I’m so hungry I would even eat something Maylie made.”

“Speed!” Charley yelled, holding his victorious arms up in the air.

George flicked his cards to the middle. “Shit”

Jodi, her long legs tucked under her in the front seat, was studying a map of South Dakota. “Fifteen minutes until we get to the hotel, now settle down,” she said without looking back.

“You said that fifteen minutes ago,” George argued.

Jodi ignored her eldest with a frustrated clearing of her throat.

“Hey,” Maylie said as she removed the headphones from her ears. “Do we have any chips?”

“No,” Jodi answered quickly.

“Well, I’m hungry. How much longer till—”

“Fifteen minutes.” Jodi’s voice was low and harsh.

“Let me look at the map.” Maylie leaned forward and reached for the atlas.

“Sit back,” Jodi snapped, holding the map out of her daughter’s reach.

“I was just trying to—”

“Maybe a fresh pair of eyes would help, Jo,” interrupted Brad.

“I know where we are,” Jo defended.

Brad and Jodi were quiet—the map still in Jodi’s lap.

From the last row of the van, George started another complaint—“Mom—” before Charley elbowed George in the ribs, making him grunt and stop talking.

“What, George?” Jodi asked.

George shoved his brother against the window. “Why the hell are we in Dakota anyway?”

“Papaw wants to see Mount Rushmore,” Maylie said as she turned in her seat to look at George.

“Rushmore’s gay. It’s just a bunch of heads on the side of a mountain.”

“George, shut up.” Jodi strained her neck to get a view of her father in the rearview mirror.

“Mount Rushmore is fucking gay.” George leaned forward so he could speak loudly in his Papaw’s ear.

“That’s enough,” Jodi said sternly.

The old man sat back in his bucket seat, looking out the window with a quaint smile on his face. The South Dakota hills cast a shadow upon the green land and were appropriately called the Black Hills for this very quality. Even as George spoke directly into his ear, Marcus didn’t turn around. “See,” George added, ignoring his mother and leaning back in the third row. “His hearing aid’s turned off. The damn thing is always turned off.”

“No, it isn’t,” Maylie muttered.

George kicked the back of her chair.

“Knock it off,” Brad hissed suddenly. “Jo, I don’t think the highway was supposed to be this far.”

“We don’t need a highway.” Jodi moved her finger along a pencil line on the map. “We’re looking for an intersection with a red light.”

“Jodi,” Brad said flatly, “there hasn’t been a red light for miles.” His knuckles whitened under his grip of the wheel. He turned to look at his wife and lowered his chin. “Did I take a wrong turn?”

"Did you take any turns I didn't tell you to take?" Jodi said with hints of both frustration and sarcasm.

Slamming the heel of his hand against the steering wheel, Brad said, "Damn it! You haven't told me where the turn is."

"A right at the intersection with a light—that's what the man at the gas station said."

"That was half an hour ago!"

A withered hand grabbed Jodi's headrest and, with the strength of that hand, Marcus shifted his weight and leaned forward. "What's the matter, babe?"

Maylie whipped her head around to glare at George, who was slowly sinking in his seat, a guilty look running down his face.

Jodi, forcing a calm face, turned to her father. "Nothing, Daddy. We're almost there."

"Okay," Marcus said matter-of-factly, and he moved back.

IV

It was well past midnight in 1945, and snow was promising. My bedroom was right above the back porch. On nights when I was out too late, it took very little energy—even with my sometimes-stiff leg—to shimmy up and crawl through the window. I was just about to jump up and reach for the porch's slanted roof when I noticed a figure sitting in my momma's swing.

"Margaret, is that you?" I whispered.

“Marcus Hornback, where have you been?” Margaret said with a shaking voice. She was Jake’s baby sister and had been my girlfriend for two years or so.

“Shhh,” I hissed. “What are you doing here?”

‘Marcus,” Margaret got up and stepped towards me, “Where have you been?”

“Out.”

She turned away, shaking her head.

“What, Margaret?” I threw my hands up in the air. My frustration had gotten the best of me, and I spoke louder than I should’ve. The very last thing I needed was for my parents to catch me out that late—even better, to catch me out with Margaret McCree. “Come here,” I said, taking her wrist and leading her away from the house and towards the tree line at the edge of the backyard. “Now, what’s the matter with you?”

“Tell me who you were with.” Margaret stepped out from my grasp and held her arms across her chest. I could just make out the scowl on her face.

“You won’t sneak out to see me, but you’ll sneak out to fuss at me?”

“Marcus, answer my question. Your parents told me you were with Jake, but I know—”

I had decided after Jake came back from the war that dating your best friend’s sister was a bad idea. Not because it makes things awkward between friends, but because the sister—the girlfriend—has amazing insight into every little thing you do. Cutting Margaret off, I said, “That’s what I told my parents, but really I went for a drive.”

“With who? Katie Hayes?”

No, Shelby Keller. “Who said I went with anyone? Look, Margaret, it’s late. I’m going to bed.” I turned to walk away, but she grabbed the back of my shirt and yanked. She was strong. I stumbled backwards. “Hey!”

“I’ll go inside and tell,” Margaret said sternly, pointing a finger in my face. “I’ll go knock on your door right now and tell your parents unless you start telling me the truth.”

“And what will you say?” Grabbing her hand, I pulled her towards me. “Say I was out with another girl? And please tell me your excuse for being outside my house at midnight.”

Jaw clenched and eyes wide, Margaret stared at me. I thought she was going to spit in my face, but instead she said, “I’m pregnant, Marcus.”

For a moment my grasp on her hand tightened, and then I let go. Her look of hatred faded, and she covered her face with her hands.

Pregnant.

“Are you sure?” I whispered.

“I thought—I thought you loved me,” she cried into her hands. “You said—I believed you loved me. Now look at the mess I’m in.”

Pregnant.

Turning away, I put my hands on the top of my head. My life, in that moment, collapsed into itself. Jake had once told me that the universe is constantly expanding, but one day it would snap back like a rubber band. That’s how I felt—the universe was snapping back, and all I could do was cringe for the coming agony.

Before I left for the war, I had thought I was in love with Margaret McCree. I loved how her hair smelled like honeysuckle, how she sometimes sighed when I kissed her, and how she cried when I boarded the train in my Navy uniform. I carried her picture with me as I soldiered; I thought I was in love with her, but that changed.

I found out there was a world out there that didn't even know our small Kentucky dirt-town existed. There was so much more than farming and Sunday mass and sweet tea. Margaret fit into this place, and I loved her when I belonged too. But things were different; I was different.

Pregnant.

I reached for her and hugged her to me. "It's okay."

When I came back from the war, wounded and in a foul mood, Margaret kept me company every day in my room, mostly playing poker. Part of me appreciated Margaret's attention, but another part of me felt suffocated. I was short with her, cruel even. I hated being back in my parents' house. I hated being torn violently from the possibilities I'd found. Margaret felt my distance; I could see the distress wearing on her face. That's probably why she gave it up. Since the time Margaret had first let me kiss her three years earlier, I had been trying to sleep with her. Two weeks after my cast was taken off, Margaret led me into her father's barn to a bed made of hay.

"I'll take care of you—now stop crying." I kissed the top of her head. *Honeysuckle*. "I'm going to walk you home tonight, and in the morning, I'll talk to your dad."

"And tell him what?" Margaret moaned. "I'm so ashamed."

"Tell him I'm going to marry you."

"But I don't want to marry you if you're going stay out all night with other girls."

Helping her to her feet, I said, "That's never going to happen again, okay, Gigi?"

Margaret nodded and leaned her weight against my side, resting her head on my shoulder with a sigh.

V

The next morning had a chilly bite to it, but even that bite failed to jolt the Garner kids to alertness. Marcus sat on a wooden bench outside the Fort Hayes gift shop with his hands resting on the walking stick. With music blaring from her headphones, Maylie leaned her head against Marcus's shoulder and yawned. George and Charley remained in the back seat of the Voyager a few yards away in the parking lot, George's stray leg hanging out the open door.

"Are they still in the van?" Jodi asked Maylie as she walked out of the gift shop, a bag hanging from her wrist and a map clutched in her hand. "Maylie," Jodi snapped when she received no response, "are your brothers still in the van?" Her headphones kept Maylie from hearing, and Jodi flicked them off her daughter's ears.

"What happened?" Maylie nearly screamed as she bolted up right.

"Where are your brothers?"

Maylie huffed. "How should I know?" Replacing the headphones on her ears, she stood up and wandered along the outside of the barn where old wagon wheels and buffalo skulls decorated the outside walls of the fictitious Fort Hayes.

Jodi marched off toward the van, ready to wake her lazy sons.

From the seat he kept on the bench, Marcus saw Jodi lean in the open door of the minivan. Her voice did not carry to Marcus, but the message she delivered by the shaking of her pointed finger and the tightening of her other fist on her hip was evidence enough that she was yelling. George and Charley—both a head taller than their mother—clambered out of the van and followed their mother back to the gathering crowd outside Fort Hays, their shoulders hunched and their hair askew.

A minute later, Brad emerged from the cafeteria with steaming, Styrofoam coffee cups and set the cups down beside Marcus. He yawned and scowled at the trio walking towards him. "It's too early for this, huh, Marcus?"

Hearing aid turned down, Brad had to rock Marcus's shoulder and repeat himself, to which Marcus grunted, "Yeah."

After lingering for a moment, Brad walked towards Maylie with two coffees in hand. George and Charley took their respective cups and headed to the gift shop, looking tired and aggravated. Jodi put the tray in her lap and sat down next to her dad. She held the tray towards him, offering a cup. He shook his head.

They were silent for a moment in the fresh morning air. The hills that lined the South Dakota road and surrounded them were lush and green. In the distance, behind a patch of these hills, hummed the passing traffic. The light was soft, and Jodi rested her head where her daughter's had been.

"Daddy," she said, "do you remember when I was younger, and you'd take me out of Church after the Eucharist?"

Marcus nodded.

“I would walk along the cement wall you sat on while you smoked. You always told me I had ants in my pants.” Jodi released a short laugh and sat up. Since the birth of her children and since his second divorce, father and daughter had slowly worked toward a better relationship, one hinging on Marcus’ increasing need of assistance.

Marcus reached for one of her hands and squeezed it quickly before replacing his hand on the walking stick.

“I wish my family had ants in their pants,” she said.

“I’m here, babe,” Marcus replied.

VI

May 1957—at the time of my third daughter’s birth, I was asleep in a motel bed with Dianne Martin. Faith wasn’t early, right on time actually. But Dianne had found a sitter for her son, and that rarely ever happened.

Walking in the back door of mine and Margaret’s house at two in the afternoon, I was greeted by my sister-in-law, who walked towards me with open arms and a congratulatory smile. “Another girl!” she said. “What a blessing!” Shannon had just given birth to her fourth son. A jealous tear—only one—burned down her cheek as she kissed both of mine.

“Where are the girls?” I asked. “I want to take them to meet their new sister.” At thirty-two years old, I was a smug son-of-a-bitch.

Shannon called the girls, and they came from the back room. Tori was almost eleven, old enough to look at me with knowing eyes that held judgment and pity. Of course she didn’t really know what I was doing, but she knew I was the reason Margaret

cried in the afternoons. Jodi, however, was only six, and she sprinted across the room and jumped into my arms, exclaiming, “Daddy! Daddy!”

When Margaret told me she was pregnant the second time, I just knew I was going to get my boy. We’d planned on naming him Joseph, after my grandfather. Born a girl, Joseph became Jodi. But I couldn’t let it go. She was *my Jo*, and this masculine pressure was evident in her demands. Tori allowed Margaret to doll her up in colorful dresses with patterns and flowers and ruffles. My Jo, on the other hand, would throw a half-hour tantrum if not allowed to wear cut-off shorts like her male cousins.

“You girls ready to see your baby sis?” I asked them.

There were two benefits to my plan for a quick getaway. First, it would allow me to leave Shannon before she could ask questions I didn’t know the answers to. Second, when I walked in the door with Jo on my back and Tori’s hand in mine, Margaret would be less inclined to yell at me for not being there for the birth of our third baby girl.

VII

The Stagecoach West pulled away and left a large group of camera-carrying tourists at the base of Mount Rushmore National Park’s smooth, slate hill. Marcus had quickly found an empty bench to sit on, and the Garner family tried to regroup before walking up to the viewing deck. From the base of the wide, slatted path, they could just see the heads of the four presidents in the distance.

“This is pretty dumb,” George said as he cradled the hand a wild donkey had bitten a half hour earlier.

“Then wait here,” Jodi said flatly. “Maylie, let’s go to the gift shop.”

“Jodi, you haven’t even seen the damn thing yet,” Brad said, his voice dripping with distaste. Maylie and her brothers were already heading towards the shop doors.

“But I want to get postcards while I’m thinking about it,” Jodi said.

“I don’t see why we couldn’t have just gone to the beach like we always do,” Brad said, “and ordered those pointless postcards over the phone.”

“Daddy likes the postcards,” Jodi argued, her hands going to her hips. She glanced over at her dad, sitting on a nearby bench with his hand propped up on his walking stick. “Besides, he’s always wanted to come out west. This is for him, Brad.”

“Then why couldn’t Tori have brought him? She and Anthony go to Vegas and Denver all the time.” Brad pointed towards the parking lot as if Tori were standing there.

“I wanted to do this for my father,” Jodi said.

“What has he ever done for you? What was he like when you were growing up?”

“That’s not the point!” Jodi crossed her arms and stepped closer to her husband. Her voice got low and harsh. “He’s my father. He’s the only one I got, and I don’t know how much longer I’ll have him.”

“Oh, so just because he’s about to die—”

Marcus interrupted Brad, saying, “Babe, I’m going to see the fuss.” He patted Jodi’s shoulder and slowly walked away, leading his steps with the wooden cane.

“Surely he didn’t hear me,” Brad said, his face white and drawn long with guilt.

“He hears more than you think,” Jodi snapped. “I’m going to walk him up.”

Maylie appeared holding several brochures. “I’ll go, Mom,” she said. “I’m heading up anyway.”

VIII

That September morning in 1978 was gray and hazy. Nothing was clear to me until I was sitting at the kitchen table in a house I no longer belonged in, staring into Margaret's brown eyes, eyes that caught me and brought me back down to earth.

I tried to pull the fragments of the day together, tried to bind them into some sort of shape that made sense. That morning Dianne had come screaming into the kitchen, clutching her hair. I grabbed her shoulders and shook her. *What's wrong?* She didn't answer me, just fell from my grip to the floor. There she pawed the vinyl tiles and moaned. Leaving her there with her insanity, I ran in the direction I first heard her scream.

It was Guy.

The police came, and Dianne left. Then Jodi came, Jodi with her calm voice and comforting hands. *Get out of this house, Dad. Go to church; go get a drink. You need some comfort*. I did as I was told: I went to church, and then I knocked on Margaret's back door.

She had answered with a huff. She said nothing to me and just opened the door wider to let me in. Standing before me, her distaste for me was evident. "Coffee?" she asked impatiently.

"Anything stronger?"

"Jesus, Marcus. It's not even noon yet."

Slowly I looked up. Hands on her hips, she was no statue of comfort any man would seek. Scorned, furious and without warmth—Margaret owed me nothing, and I owed her everything.

“Margaret, I’ve lost my son.”

Narrowing her eyes, she turned to the kitchen cabinet and took out a bottle of bourbon. Into two glasses she poured the amber liquor, handed me one and drank the other herself. I missed that—a woman drinking. Dianne never touched the stuff. After I’d married her, she’d become a respectable woman.

I took a drink and sighed. Margaret sat in the chair on the other side of the table and didn’t say anything. That chair had been mine when we’d had meals together. For twelve years nearly every day began and ended in that chair, looking across that table at that woman, that woman who sat silently staring at me with a gleam in her eyes. I couldn’t tell if she was entertained or thoughtful. My son was dead; my nineteen-year-old son had killed himself and that woman sat there and said nothing.

My son.

Dianne named him Mark to remind me he was mine. When he was born, Margaret and I were fighting but still married. I couldn’t run away from Dianne and our son, she made sure of that. Margaret knew about my affairs, but Dianne made sure Margaret knew her in particular. I called Mark “Little Guy” to dilute the damage.

It was too late.

Margaret filed for divorce soon after. She looked at me and said, “I won’t fight your son,” dropping the divorce papers in front of me. I never asked for a divorce—I wanted one—but I thought my Catholic Margaret would be insulted.

She wasn’t my Margaret anymore.

I went to church the morning after our divorce was finalized, seeking confession.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”

Father Fitzpatrick said he already knew. “You forced a devout woman out of God’s house. You scorned her marriage and made her blame your sinful actions on the heavenly Father,” he had said.

The morning Guy died, I went to church for the first time since the day Margaret had kicked me out, seeking another confession.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.” Suicide is not accepted in the Catholic Church—it’s considered ungrateful. I told Father Fitzpatrick my son’s sin was on my hands. “I should have brought him to church,” I said in a whisper. “I shouldn’t have let him be raised without God.”

Father Fitzpatrick, tall and mannerly with liver spots on his hands and gray hair sparse on his head, made the sign of the cross over me and said, “Your sins are forgiven. Go in Peace.”

“And Guy? My son?”

“His soul is barred from Heaven. Go; let his sin be a lesson to you and your family. Teach them to live for Christ.”

“He was a good kid!” I said firmly, getting to my feet.

“I’m sorry,” he answered without emotion. “The regulations of the Church are clear, and a sinner who—”

Fury mounted behind my fist, and the next thing I knew Father Fitzpatrick was nursing the redness I left on his cheek as he looked up at me with the fearful eyes of a child. They reminded me of the first time I’d smacked Guy for cussing.

Across the table, in her chair, Margaret drew me from my thoughts and finally spoke: “How’s Dianne?”

“A mess. She took Luke and Johnny to her mom’s.” Margaret huffed a disgusted kind of laugh.

Over the years, her favorite topic of ridicule were the names of my sons—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew had been born when Dianne was just sixteen, and she’d named him for the same reason she did Mark—so his father Mathias couldn’t deny him. After we married, Dianne fell deep into religion. When Luke was born, we had planned on naming him Michael or Deborah. But Dianne, sitting in the hospital bed holding the baby with Matthew and Mark surrounding her, cried, “The Lord speaks!” Tears were running down her face. “He speaks to me through the Gospels and tells me to name my child Luke.” She was building her own little bible.

“Marcus,” Margaret said softly, crossing the room to my side. “I’m. . . I couldn’t imagine losing one of the girls. I’m sorry.” Resting her hand on my shoulder, she kissed my temple. I closed my eyes and leaned towards her lips—tender and sorrowful lips. “I’m praying for you.”

From the front of the house, a baby cried and broke the reverie.

“Who’s that?”

“Charley,” she answered. “Jodi’s Charley.”

Once she disappeared down the hall, I left. At my house, I found two large garbage bags sitting on the corner of the drive. The blood, bone, flesh, hair, and dust that had haunted my home earlier were gone. Jodi had cleaned, and I found her sobbing on the freshly made bed when I opened the door to Guy’s room.

IX

It didn't take much time for Maylie to catch Marcus. When she did, she took the hand not holding the walking stick and placed it on her shoulder. Marcus grinned at her and squeezed her bare and bony shoulder quickly as a sign of gratitude.

The path that expanded before them was called the Avenue of Flags. It was a smooth, stone path that slanted at a steady upward angle. Lined by state and territory flags and by the lush South Dakota landscape, the walk was about half a mile. Maylie read so in a brochure, but thought the fact too daunting to tell her grandfather. He was stubborn and would have refused a wheelchair. So she walked with him, slowly, as he leaned upon her and his walking stick. All the while, his eyes were turned up towards the stony faces of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln, faces that stared over the heads of their audience indifferently.

"Did you know that the Presidents were supposed to be full length?" Maylie asked with a brochure opened before her face. "Construction ended in 1941 because Borglum—the guy who made it—died trying to get more money."

Marcus nodded. Of everyone in the family, Maylie's voice was soft enough not to make his hearing aid buzz yet strong enough for clear words. "Babe," he started, "why did they choose these presidents?"

"Um—" Maylie hummed as she scanned the literature. "This says the presidents were chosen for their efforts to preserve the Republic and for expanding its territory by 'killing the most Indians.'"

Again he nodded, smiling a little.

Beyond the aisle of waving flags were the four faces of notable presidents, men who did the honorable thing, who told the truth and protected the weak. Marcus wanted

to see the faces of these great men up close, wanted to see if their stony eyes had any secrets. All his life, he'd been trying to do the right thing, but somehow he'd fallen short. Always putting himself first, he acted according to his own whims and his own desires. But apparently, greatness did exist. It was carved into the side of a mountain in Keystone, South Dakota.

The slope to the viewing porch became difficult. Marcus paused and gripped Maylie's shoulder more tightly. His breathing came labored.

"You okay?"

"Mhmm," Marcus hummed and slowly continued putting one shuffled step in front of the other.

The journey up the incline made him weak, and he felt guilty for putting so much of his aging weight on his granddaughter's shoulder. He shifted some to his walking stick, and, two steps later, the stick slipped away from him, causing him to fall towards it.

Pain shot through him, throbbing at his hip and up his back. His body had betrayed him—his body had been betraying him for years. Maylie knelt beside him, her brochures scattered, having fallen from her hands. Holding his arm, she demanded of the accumulating crowd, "Someone get me a wheelchair."

"Sir, are you okay?" a woman asked.

"He's fine," Maylie said sternly. As she helped the old man shift his weight so that he could sit up, she listened for a grunt of pain that didn't come. Marcus's lips were pressed together; he fought back the pain.

A man came rushing towards them with a wheelchair, and he and Maylie managed to lift Marcus into it. The man started to push Marcus down the slope, and Maylie walked beside them, her hand on the armrest.

"We should probably get him checked out," the man said.

"Yeah, all right," Maylie replied.

"I'm fine," Marcus demanded. The good samaritan ignored his words and continued to push him away form the visage in the mount. "Maylie, I said I'm fine."

"I'm sure you are," Maylie said. Her voice sounded mature, almost like her mother's. "Let's just get you looked at to be safe."

"There's a first-aid center by the gift shop," the samaritan said.

"That's where my parents are."

"Turn me around," Marcus said firmly.

"Papaw—"

"Turn me around, damn it." His back arched and the muscles of his thighs shook under his skin. He clutched Maylie's available hand firmly. "I want to see those presidents."

CASUALTY OF HOME

Margaret, 1943

Mother locks herself in her bedroom all day and only comes out to eat or exchange books. Sir assures us that the government would let us know if Jake were missing or injured or dead. Though I agree with him to make Mother feel better, I worry too. Nick wrote just last week. But Jake—it has been three months since his last letter.

Since February of 1942, when Nick enlisted as a medical officer, I have been beating the same path—once a day for a year and a half I have traveled the road that used to hold so much joy for me—with growing tension and deflating hope. It's a sad, weary ritual, one that allows me to kick the gravel and stir the dirt. Every day after lunch I make the fifteen-minute journey, as I do now, into town to see if Mr. Monte has a letter for the McCrees.

If Jake isn't missing or injured or dead, then he should write. For nine months—the length of time that separated Nick's leaving and Jake's leaving—Jake shared this daily ritual with me. We'd walk to the post office, most days coming back without a letter. On those days Mother would be solemn, and Sir would nod, reciting the news he heard somewhere concerning the war. Surely Jake—my big, bright, and breezy brother—

will write. Surely he remembers the hot afternoons last summer when we sat on the back porch listening to Mother's cries carry out the open, upstairs window. But how can he know that his absence is so much worse, that it's so much worse listening alone?

*

The day Nick left for Basic, we rode home in silence. Jake and I were in the back of the pick-up truck while Mother wept bravely in the front seat and Sir drove. It was a relatively warm February day, but the moving truck circulated an extra breeze that cut straight to my bones. With his head resting against the cabin, Jake watched the dust flare up under the tires and hover above the road in a cloud of misty orange. I sat beside him and reached for his hand when the silence got to be too much. He looked over at me and smiled a sad-looking smile. "I'm okay, Margaret." Normally he called me "Gigi" as he had since I was born. But that day he said "Margaret" flatly and squeezed my hand before letting go. Then he folded his arms across his chest, lowered his chin, and imitated the stern, thinking expression of Sir.

Sir's face has always been drawn long by age and work, but when Nick shook the hand of the captain at the recruiting building nine months earlier, Sir stood beside him with his shoulders rolled back strong and his face glowing with pride. I stared at my father's face with envy. Never before had he looked at any of us with such an expression. Once I had won a spelling contest at school, and Mother left my trophy on the mantel for two whole months. Sir had only messed my hair and nodded at me with a stern kind of grin.

In the enlisting office with Nick, Jake saw Sir's face too.

When we got home Mother nodded to Sir's proud boasts, and then she fixed a traditional Fourth-of-July meal in the middle of February: hamburgers, corn on the cob, and cole slaw. We sat down the family of Nick the Patriot: Sir laughing, Mother praying to God, and Jake eating three slices of apple pie.

All spring and all summer and in the fading days of autumn, Sir had gone about his work with robust effort, a poster of patriotic pride. His conversation consisted of elaborate and repetitive talk of rations and Japanese airplanes and government. Mother was distant. The house was fresh and the food was good, but she was lost inside herself. Always ready with cheerful attention whenever someone sought her, she still hesitated in her smile, perhaps even twitching her eye.

*

After his birthday dinner in late October, Jake helped do the dishes—drying the plates I soaped and rinsed. He had just turned seventeen.

"It was my idea," he said.

"What was?"

"Enlisting. I told Nick I'd like to get into the Navy and sail around a bit. Maybe earn a medal or two and see the world."

The year before, Jake had wanted to go to New York to build ships, and, before that, he wanted to fly airplanes in California. Jake didn't want Sir's farm, and he'd outgrown Mother's library. Wanting something else, he just didn't know what to do.

"But Nick enlisted as a medical officer," I said.

"Yeah, but enlisting was still my idea—he didn't think of it on his own."

“The war isn’t the only thing happening, you know? You and Sir have to make ends meet here and feed the—”

“This war is the biggest thing that’s going to happen in my life.”

“They say that about every war. Besides, you said you just wanted to sail around a bit. What will another year hurt you? The war might be over by then, and you wouldn’t have to fight.”

“It’s more than just fighting and killing, Gigi. It’s about pride and adventure. Mostly pride though.”

“Jake, there will be other wars. There always are. You’re not even old enough to enlist. Just stay here. Sir and Mother need you.”

“There will never be a war like this one.” He put down the dishtowel and pulled my elbow so that I had to look at him. “Help me convince Sir.”

I opened my mouth to answer but was lost for words. He nodded and left the room.

*

A month later, the day after Thanksgiving, Jake enlisted.

Afterwards Mother and I sat alone at the kitchen table. Taking one look at the house, Sir went out to the barn directly, handing me his hat and coat before he did. He didn’t spare me a glance. I gave Mother my handkerchief and sat down beside her, touching her arm.

I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“He’s already taken one child. Does He really need all my children?” Mother finally said.

"I'm still here." I tightened my grip on her shoulder, but Mother sat back, moving away from my reach. With a sigh I added, "I—I can't go anywhere."

She looked up and reached for my face. "Sweetie, I know. I know."

"Would you like me to fetch the Bible? Maybe we could read Psalms."

"No," she said quickly before standing. She pressed the creases of her dress down and folded the stray hairs back out of her face. After a controlled sigh, she said, "There is a book I've been meaning to find. Jake had it in his room. Can you manage supper?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good girl."

She kissed the top of my head before she left me alone in the kitchen. I heard her walk through the family room and slowly climb the stairs, pausing halfway up where I know she looked at the family photograph that hung above the landing. That day I wanted her to stay in the kitchen with me; I wanted to hug her as she cried, and I wanted us to make dinner together while we talked about the boys. As the days and weeks and months passed, and as she continued to whimper about the house, I wanted her to go upstairs so I wouldn't have to see her misery as I cooked and cleaned when she didn't have the strength. It frustrated me.

The door to my parents' bedroom closed after my mother, and the normally noisy house was silent. It was a loud silence, the sort that demands to be broken. My ears nearly started to throb from straining for sound. Maybe I could hear Mother crying into the quilts. Maybe I could hear the earth vibrate under Sir's heavy steps.

No, all around me was silence.

I went into the family room and picked up the Bible from the coffee table. It had belonged to Sir's great grandfather. He'd brought it from Ireland along with one change of clothes and his last name. The first few pages were for family records. Sir's birth was written in my grandmother's narrow hand and, a few lines down, his marriage to Mother. Nick's, Hemmy's, Jake's, and my births were recorded; Hemmy's was followed by a second date, thirteen years separating the two.

When I was seven, my brother Hemmy died of a heart condition that runs in Sir's family. He was three years older than Jake, and his death brought Mother cowering to her knees, almost crawling towards Jake, the child who held her dying son when his heart stopped beating. But it affected Jake the most. In the waking weeks of Hemmy's death, Jake could not be prevailed upon to speak—he stared blankly when addressed—and every night after dinner he ran out of the house. To the edge of town is where he later told me he went. After Nick left for the war, Jake began to run almost every night.

I opened to the back of the Bible and read a line from Psalms I thought to recommend to Mother. It didn't make me feel better, so I went to the kitchen to fix pork chops, clanging pans and slamming cabinets as I did.

*

At the eastern most section of our property I pause on my journey to the post office. In front of me is the section of fence my brothers had been fixing the day Hemmy collapsed and died in the field. Jake lost it a bit that day. He ran halfway to the next town in a thunderstorm. Beneath my fingertips is an engraving Jake did with his pocket knife a few days later: *My big brother.* I trace the letters, the words, the meaning, before I turn away and lean back against the post.

I'm waiting for Marcus Hornback.

Since Jake enlisted, his best friend has been walking with me to town. Tall with clear gray eyes and coal-black hair, Marcus is honestly the most handsome boy I could ever wish to see. Seventeen-years-old and me only fifteen, yet he still concedes to give me attention.

Sometimes when we're alone, and I'm laying my head on his thighs, Marcus will run his hand along the neckline of my dress and pull the little brass locket Sir gave me into his palm. "Why isn't my picture in here?" he'll ask.

I laugh and tell him he needs to buy me another locket because this one's full. Inside the tarnishing compact are pictures of Nick and Jake—Sir sat patiently at the kitchen table one night and cut the pictures of my brothers into circles small enough to fit the locket he gave me.

"Good morning, Miss McCree." Marcus's slow, sensual voice draws me from my thoughts.

"Oh, Marcus." Blushing, I smile at him.

"May I walk with you to town?"

"Oh, you're walking to town?"

Marcus holds the crook of his arm towards me. Eagerly, I place my hand there. He smiles down at me, and we turn onto the stretch of highway that leads straight into Glendale. It's nice walking with Marcus like this: me leaning upon his arm in my brown dress with yellow-stitch roses. For the last year, Marcus has never hesitated to show attention to me, undivided, though the other girls pine. Such attention serves a girl's pride well. I let him treat me like his sweetheart, and the distraction is welcoming.

“We need our ration of sugar. My old man hasn’t had a dinner in forty years without a glass of sweet tea. I guess you see the emergency.”

Smiling, I look at Marcus with a tilted chin. “We can get some on our way out of town.”

Marcus leans towards me. I can feel his breath on the back of my neck. “Actually,” he whispers, “we’re fine on sugar. But you can tell your mom that when you’re late getting home.”

“Why am I going to be late?”

“You didn’t meet me last night. I missed you.”

Thoughts of empty barns and black fields come to my memory with reddening cheeks. We haven’t done much, but we’ve done some things I will never tell my mother.

Chuckling at my blush, Marcus’s grip on my arm tightens. He wants a reply. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing,” I fib. “I’m just—I’m just worried is all.”

“Don’t worry. There’ll be a letter from Jake today.”

The red of my cheeks deepens, I feel their flame touch the roots of my hair and my ears. *Jake*.

“Each day without a letter,” I say, “Mother gets more and more distant.”

“I’m sure he’s doing fine.”

I nod, agreeing. The thought of Jake lying out of my reach, injured or dying, makes my stomach twist. Such thoughts—such disgusting thoughts—I try to push away. Leaning more upon Marcus’s arm, I press my head against him. The November wind is chilly.

"How's your father?"

I simply shake my head. "Sir—Sir is full of pride. He won't look me in the eyes, won't speak to me unless he needs something. He's even forgotten prayers twice this week."

"Men—" Marcus begins, "—you wouldn't understand, but there is a sort of hidden connection between fathers and sons. Fathers and daughters—they just don't have that kind of link."

Sir removed his hat and wiped his brow with the back of his hand before he leaned over that sheet of paper and signed his name below Jake's. Jake's face was solemn. He shook hands with the Captain and looked at Sir, whose face was frowning, his eyes moist. After seeing Sir's expression, Jake hung his head and walked away. With his expression seeming to jump with rage, Sir turned and looked at me.

Heavy upon Marcus's arm, I don't say anything. Close to tears, I purse my lips.

"You never did tell me—how did Jake convince your father to let him enlist early?"

"I did it," I say. Mother doesn't know it was me; she doesn't know that every piercing look of blame that she casts upon Sir should be directed at me. I don't know if I can ever tell her. But it makes me feel better when I can offer her a letter.

"You did what?"

"I spoke to Sir. I convinced him to let Jake go. Jake just had to ask what day was best."

Marcus doesn't respond. He is silent and takes the inside of his left cheek between his teeth. Thinking—that's what he does when he's thinking.

Word and actions that send boys away from home, that's all war is—the silent ride that carries a boy from home, one that makes mothers and sisters shake with guilt. If this is noble, I don't see it. It is easy for soldiers to walk away with their heads held proud—proud to be fighting for their flag and to be defending their home. But what of their family and friends? They're the ones left to take up the slack of living, to cling to hope, to keep the home.

We walk in silence. Two cars pass, and town is in sight.

In a swift motion, Marcus clutches my hand more tightly and pulls me toward the side of the road. Pressed against a tree, Marcus gives me a fervent kiss. His fists are full of fabric collected at my hips, and he is pulling me to him.

He whispers the pet name I once told him I'd missed since Jake left: "Gigi."

"Marcus, stop," I say half-heartedly.

"Oh, come on," he mumbles against my skin, showing no hesitation as he moves his kisses along my jaw.

"I said, 'No.' You're going to make me late."

"No, I won't." His lips are to my ear.

A tremble pulses through my body, and I push him away. "That's what you said the other night, and Sir almost caught me climbing in the window."

"Come on, Gigi," Marcus says as he leans his forehead against my cheek, nuzzling. "Carpet dee."

"What?"

"Carpet dee. Seize the moment or something like that."

Placing my hands on his shoulders, I smile and say, "*Carpe diem,* Marcus. It means 'seize the day.'"

"Exactly." He pulls me to him firmly and kisses me quickly. "We have to seize every day we have together."

"I'm not going anywhere," I say.

"But Gigi, I'm leaving next week."

"What?" I squirm out of his embrace, pushing away his shoulders and dunking under his arm, and stand aside.

"I turn eighteen. I'll be old enough to enlist."

"Enlist? You're going to enlist?"

"I thought you knew that." Marcus leans his shoulder against the tree and studies me. "Why wouldn't I enlist?"

I never thought about it. Other girls had beaus who went to war, other girls stood by the train tracks and waited to faint at the sight of their lovers waving merrily from the passing windows. Other girls—but not me. With two brothers gone, I hadn't considered the necessity to sacrifice another comfort. And that's what Marcus was—a tall, strong, good-kissing comfort.

I bat his hands away as he reaches for me, and storm off back towards the road.

"Gigi," he says, stumbling after me.

"I don't want to talk to you right now, Marcus Hornback."

"But Gigi."

"I said, 'Not now.'"

"Can I see you tonight?" He reaches for my arm and turns me around.

“I don’t know,” I say and remove my arm from his grasp.

“You have to say you’ll meet me.”

“I don’t have to do any such thing.” I turn and continue to walk.

“Christ! Why not?”

“I need to think.”

“Gigi—Margaret, please.” I know instinctively that he stops following me. Tempting as it is to turn around and see that tall boy—almost a man—standing in the middle of road staring after me, I keep walking.

Think of something else, I tell myself. Think—think of Jake. In my steps, I close my eyes and try to imagine what a letter from Jake would look like. I can see Jake’s handwriting, having read his few letters so many times. Unlike Nick’s large, loopy, and rushed cursive, Jake wrote in a lean, even hand. His lines were always slanting and his font unchanging. His letters were thoughtful and deliberate, communicating something he really wanted Sir, Mother, and me to know. His letters rarely repeated themselves. His letters were never shallow.

Nick’s were cheerful, speaking of God and of healing and of how much he was learning as a medical officer. He saw strength in soldiers—strength and hope.

But Jake saw the destruction. He wrote about causing it.

In the post office, Mr. Monte leans on the counter with one hand fisted in front of his mouth. He stares at the radio sitting on the counter, listening, and does not look up when a tiny bell announces my entrance. The volume is not turned down until I wish him a good morning.

“Good morning, Miss McCree. How is your mother?”

"Fine, thank you. Any letters?"

"Oh, yes. One from Connecticut, your Aunt Charlotte, I think, and one from the war. I can't make out which boy it's from though."

After snatching the letters from his hand, I look at the second envelope and strain my eyes at the handwriting. The ink and parchment have melted together. I can barely make out our address, but it is written in a narrow print that slopes evenly to the right.

Jake.

*

"But Jake wants to go to war, Daddy. He and Nick used to talk about it, and Jake was the one who had the big ideas—the big plans."

"Margaret, Jake isn't old enough to enlist. I—we—need him here to work. I've fought in a war, fought in the trenches and ate the rats, slept in the mud. It's like I used to tell your brothers: I used to hate this land, but it's the thought of this land that brought me out of that mess alive." After he'd finished his speech, he sighed and wiped his brow.

"Daddy, Jake doesn't love this land like you do," I said. On my tiny desk in my room sat a piece of paper that listed the things I could say to Sir. Jake had helped me with it. "He probably never will. Let him go."

"No—my answer is no, Margaret. I will not sign my son over to war."

"But didn't Grandpa let you enlist at seventeen? It's not fair that—"

"I was too young to know what I was getting into. Nick is a sensible boy with a good heart. He'll come home. Jake—well, Jake is young and passionate. He'll do something heroic and. . ."

The silence rested for a moment, permeating the flesh and bones that stood silent in the room.

Death.

But Jake would probably die if he stayed on the farm. Day by day, he was drifting farther away from me.

"But Daddy, it's what he wants. He's miserable, and it's what he wants."

It's despicable what I did; little girls have the power to manipulate their fathers with a word and whimper. I hunched my shoulders and put my hands over my face, shaking my head.

"Oh, Daddy!" And tears brimmed my eyes because either way I'd lost.

*

"It's from Jake," I say to Mr. Monte.

"Oh, good," he replies. "That will ease your mother."

"A letter from Jake." Shaking, I want to tear it open, want to eat his words and make their existence part of my own. Jake has written. He hasn't forgotten us, hasn't landed on foreign soil and forgotten his father's land nor the people here.

"It's from Jake."

"Yes, it is. Now get it home to your folks."

Holding the letters to my chest, I nod at him like an obedient child, turn and run all the way home, smiling. The thought of losing Marcus Hornback is forgotten for now. I've found Jake.

HAND-ME-DOWN

Jake, 1936

Most of my clothes were shirts, pants, socks, and shoes that had been worn by others, repaired by my mother and given to me out of charity. The clothes were technically mine, I guess, but they had previously belonged to someone else in my family, and I could never shift the idea of ownership. Exactly one week before Hemmy's thirteenth birthday, I put on my father's red flannel shirt, which I cuffed to the elbow, and Nick's faded blue jeans, patched on both knees. But I didn't mind hand-me-downs when I was ten.

I was the first to impose upon my mother that morning. Small but clean, Mother's kitchen was a well-lighted place thanks to the open window above the sink. There, on the sill, my mother had placed a handful of sea lavender in one of her fancy vases. The day before Hemmy had come in for supper with the indigo blossoms in hand. When I stepped into the room that morning, she looked over her shoulder from her cooking to smile at me, and I habitually set the table.

Sir came in minutes later with my brother at his heels. Nick was fifteen, the oldest, and nearly as tall as our old man. His pants, though new to him six months before,

hit him right below his calf when he sat down at the breakfast table. Except for Mother's perky ears, Nick looked like Sir. When he sat at the table he opened his book and tried to show Sir something on the page about horse birthing while Margaret, my seven-year-old sister, slid in the chair besides him.

After setting the bacon and pancakes on the table, Mother handed Sir the pot of steaming coffee and then she called Hemmy.

"Don't call him 'Hemmy,'" Sir said. "His name is 'Henry.'"

"Henry!" Mother called again, smiling jokingly at Sir as she wiped her hands with a dishtowel.

Thunder rumbled the stairs. My thirteen-year-old brother was in flight. Jumping the last three stairs as he always did, he landed in the hall with a heavy and muted thud. Sir cleared his throat in his disapproving way when Hemmy entered the kitchen, and then he pointed to the refrigerator. Punishment for such poor manners was served standing with your face in the corner. As Hemmy walked to the spot where the refrigerator and cream-colored wall met at an angle, he grinned at me. He looked like my mother with his big gray eyes, thick smile, freckled nose, and sharp chin.

Like Nick, I look like my father. My mother has no claim on my features. In those days, when Sir wasn't in the house, she would call me to her and stroke my cheek, talking to me in a hushed whisper. She'd tell me things of little consequence, maybe the recipe to her grandmother's cookies or the plot of her most recent novel, but she'd always stroke my cheek and study me with gray eyes. It made me feel hollow, as if she were gently peeling off my skin to find a piece of herself in me. I longed to show her what she was

looking for, to dissect my every organ if our similarities were hidden so deep. But inevitably she would sigh, and I would know her search had failed.

"Jake, would you say grace?" Sir asked me.

I clasped my hands together and rested them on the corner of the table. Sir, Mother, Nick, and Margaret did the same. "Bless us, O Lord and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen."

"Very pretty, Jakey," Mother cooed.

I scrunched my nose and filled my glass with milk.

When Sir finished his first cup of coffee and cleared his throat, Nick and I had already started our second plate. "Henry, say 'The Nicene Creed.'"

"In Latin, Sir?"

"Do you know it in Latin?"

"No," Hemmy answered. "I know part of the 'Hail Mary' in Latin, though."

"I asked for 'The Nicene Creed.'"

When I was ten, I never questioned authority. I figured everyone else knew better. I did the chores Sir told me to do, and the dishes Mother pushed me towards. I obeyed Nick and Hemmy when they wanted to use me against one another, and sometimes, I even played dolls with Margaret because she told me to.

"Yes, Sir. Er—I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth and of all things—er—seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ—er—the—the—"

"Only begotten Son," Mother added.

"Yes, the only begotten Son of God, begotten…"

Hemmy continued to stumble through “The Creed” till finally he accepted the resurrection of the dead and of the life of the world to come. Amen.

“Sit down and eat,” Sir said.

Hemmy left the corner and took his seat next to me, grinning and nudging my shoulder with his as he sat down.

*

Hemmy, the first out the door after breakfast, kicked rocks and dust out from under his feet. Quickly following, Nick treaded on Hemmy’s heels, finally causing one shoe to slip off.

With a groan, Hemmy stooped to retrieve his shoe. “God, Nick.” He took off after Nick, who was laughing and chased him into the barn with the shoe held up and ready to strike.

And me, I chased the brothers I never caught.

Milking the cows, Hemmy told us the story of Ali Baba and the flying carpet. Nick fed and brushed the horses, explaining to us something he learned about horse birthing while stammering like Hemmy had during “The Creed” to make fun. Laughing at Hemmy and asking Nick questions, I tended to the chickens and contributed little else.

Sir was not back by lunch; he had gone to town for his annual check-up. So when we finished all the morning chores, Mother let us take a picnic in the backyard under the whitening leaves of the dogwood tree. Margaret arranged a big blanket, and Mother brought out cold sandwiches, potato salad, and apple slices with sweet tea. We ate out of the basket without utensils and drank the entire pitcher.

When we finished, Nick produced a deck of cards from his pocket, and we started to play bridge. Opening a book, Mother leaned against the dogwood; she was always reading. When she cooked, she hummed and read. When she sat by the fire at night, she read. When she tucked us, in bed at night, even Nick, she read something pretty—a poem, a children's book, a prayer, anything.

"Mother, what are you reading today?" Hemmy asked. He, like mother, avidly read. He read about flying carpets and maraudering pirates and ancient heroes. Late at night, when the house was dark and quiet with sleep, I liked to stay awake and watch Hemmy read by the glow of his flashlight. Sometimes he would giggle like Margaret, but mostly he would have a devilish grin. He never knew I watched. Nick's snores convinced Hemmy the rest of the house was asleep. But I stayed awake; some nights I stayed with him till the flashlight fell out of his sleeping hand onto the floor.

Closing the book over her thumb, Mother said: "*The Red Badge of Courage*."

"Do you like it?" Hemmy asked.

"It's sad, baby."

"What's it about?"

"It's about a young boy going to war."

"Is he going to die?" Nick asked.

"I don't know," Mother said. "He just met a dead man under a tree."

"Met a dead man?" Margaret said with her voice rising at the end of her statement.

"Yes, he runs away from battle and meets a dead man sitting under a tree, and he talks to him. The dead man reassures him that his reservations and his fears are legitimate. The dead man gives him courage."

We were silent for a moment.

"Nick, what would you say to a dead man?" Mother asked.

Nick pushed Hemmy so he lay flat on his back, hands crossed over his stomach. "Excuse me, mister, how did you die?"

Hemmy answered Nick without hesitation. "I had a fever and a bad headache, and in the end I was nauseated and vomiting. It was like my insides wanted to become my outside." Hemmy held his eyes half closed and rolled around the blanket as if he were in pain.

Margaret and I laughed as Mother covered her smile with the book.

"Hmmm," hummed Nick. "Sounds uncomfortable."

"That's not even the worst, Nurse Nick!"

"Hey!" Nick pouted.

"I had all these buboes on my neck and under my arms."

"The plague!" Mother giggled.

"What would you ask a dead man, Hemmy?" Margaret asked.

Hemmy rose from the dead and put me in a headlock, slitting my throat with his finger after messing my hair. The audience on the blanket gasped at my pretend murder, and Hemmy pushed me down and asked: "What is it like to be dead?"

A chill ran across my skin and I was completely still: to be dead. Well, I wouldn't be here, I thought. My body would be, but I wouldn't. I guess I'd be floating up in the air,

watching everyone as they cried a little and buried me and eventually moved on. I'd float over the people I knew until they were gone, and then I'd find new people to float over and watch. I'd be dead, so there wouldn't be any pigs to feed or cows to milk or meals to eat or fences to fix or races to run. I'd just watch because I'd be dead.

"It's like floating," I answered.

"Floating in heaven?" Margaret asked.

"In the air," Hemmy said. "Like floating in the air watching everyone you know."

Raised up on my forearms, I looked at Hemmy, and our eyes met. For a moment I saw fear strike his eyes. But just as quick as it appeared, it was gone, and he was grinning again.

"This is a silly subject," Mother said. She stood and started collecting everything in the basket, her hands shaking slightly. "Boys, get to the rest your chores, and Margaret get this blanket."

*

After Mother and Margaret had carried the things into the house, we decided to work on the broken section of fence in the east pasture. Nick carried a load of lumber in his arms like a baby while Hemmy did so across the back of his shoulders. I brought along the bucket of nails and three hammers.

"I hate hauling lumber," Nick said.

"It's not as bad cutting tobacco," Hemmy said.

"Sure, but I still hate hauling lumber," Nick said, swinging his load to hit Hemmy in the back.

Hemmy swung back. “In two years, you should be ready to go away to school. Thank God.”

Nick smiled and threw the weight of the lumber back up in his arms.

“How far away will you go?” I asked.

“I want to go east; one of them big, northeast schools would be fine.”

“That’s expensive,” Hemmy noted.

“Sure, but I got the marks. Besides, they practically pay people to go to medical school these days.”

“No, they don’t,” Hemmy snapped.

“They do too!”

“Maybe *after* you graduate, but you have to pay for school up front.”

“Mother says I can get a scholarship if I study good and hard.” Nick gripped the lumber tighter to his chest and bounded forward two steps. “What do you want to do, big shot?”

“I think I want to fly,” Hemmy said. “Join the Navy and get on one of them boats that planes take off of. I’d get to see the ocean, all the oceans, and then I’d get to see Asia and Europe and Africa.”

“Didn’t Sir go there?” I asked.

“He was stationed in Italy. He fought in the trenches and ate the rats, slept in the mud.” Hemmy said these words just we’d heard Sir say them before. We had reached the section of broken fence, and Hemmy relieved his shoulders of the lumber before climbing on top of a section of good fence. “When I was growing up,” he said, mimicking Sir’s voice again, “I wanted nothing more but to be away from my father’s goddamn fields. I

hated these hills and this tobacco and this house more than anything in the world. I got away. I got away and got myself into the United States Army, into a boat, and into a war. I was too young to understand that damn war. And what got me back state-side alive was this damn piece of land here."

Nick sat on the ground, laughing.

I smiled in awe of my brother's acting, yet wondering why he was making fun of Sir. Sir was trying to tell us to appreciate what he had, to be thankful.

"Land is everything!" Hemmy pointed at me, scowling like Sir. "These hills and this tobacco and this house—it's everywhere I ever wanted to be. I was just too much of a blockhead to understand that when I was young. Being a farmer takes heart, a lot of heart. Some people just don't got enough of that. Some people run away if they don't got enough heart to work hard."

"You sound just like him," Nick said. "Now sigh and wipe your brow. That's it! That's Sir to a science."

We all laughed, me because they were, remembering the times when Sir would lecture us for being lazy and go off on a tangent, thinking he was inspiring us to love what he loved and be like he was. Back when I was ten, his speech worked too; I was sold on the idea of wearing other people's clothes and loving what other people told me to love, even doing what other people told me to do. It made things simpler when you were obedient, so I thought it was better not to disagree.

As a child, I thought the sigh after his breathless lecture was a gasp for oxygen. I look back at that speech and remember the sigh and the wiping of the brow. I remember it on my skin as if his words are resting there, telling me something more. The speech was

Sir's confidence, but the sigh conveyed his doubt. It was as though he was locked in a cage, a soldier afraid of dying, condemned to stay.

We finished repairing several sections of fence before Nick looked at his watch, then at the setting sky and told us it was getting close to six o'clock. The rotten lumber we decided to come back for after supper.

"Let's race," Hemmy said

"I don't wanna," I protested.

"That's only because you never win," Hemmy said. "Come on, don't be a baby."

"I'm not a baby," I muttered as I took my place in line next to Nick.

Hemmy yelled, "Go!" and we ran.

Hemmy pulled away.

Nick followed.

And I followed.

As the heat of the late March afternoon swam around us, our coats and thick socks collecting sweat, we ran over fields still hard from the winter cold, breathing air that smelled of rain.

Hemmy was far ahead of us, his face turned upwards and his arms held out mimicking an airplane.

He began to make a circle.

Nick followed.

I followed.

Ahead of us the laundry from the line waved in the wind and, from where we were, we could see the sheets dancing like flags. Home was so close. In a looping circle, the race became about catching Hemmy instead of winning.

Then Hemmy stumbled and stopped, dropping to his knees. Nick tackled Hemmy, pushing him to the ground. I ran up beside them.

Nick laughed.

I laughed.

Hemmy gasped and rolled over. My body jerked to an automatic stop, and I stood as if I'd been planted in that spot a yard away from Hemmy since God created the earth, unsure if legs were even meant to move. He was clutching his chest with his left hand, a hand full of fabric caught in his fist. With his right he was reaching up towards me. Nick was on his butt, pushing away from Hemmy with his feet and hands like a crab. The sight before me weakened my stand, and I fell forward as though kicked in the back of the knees.

I pulled myself to Hemmy's side and took his hand, holding it to my chest. I moved closer and felt his neck for a pulse.

"His heart is beating like a jack hammer," I said.

Nick was silent.

"Nick, go get help."

When I looked at Nick, my big brother, I saw his face contorted in unblinking horror as he looked past me at Hemmy, who was breathing rapid, shallow breaths. Our eyes never met, we never exchanged any unspoken realization, but I knew that Nick was thinking the same thing I was—Hemmy was dying.

“Damn it, Nick, run!”

Nick ran, scrambled up in a stumbling sort of cartwheel, he crawled to his feet as he took off.

I could feel Nick’s steps shake the Earth. I envied him in that moment more than I have ever envied anyone in my entire life. He was smarter than me. He was taller than me. He was stronger than me. He was faster than me. Most of all he was faster. And he was fast enough to run away from that scene. It was then that my strength left me, and I became dizzy.

I held Hemmy’s hand to my chest with both of mine, trying to steady us both. With deep purposeful breaths, I took in oxygen and blew a heavy gust of carbon dioxide into Hemmy’s face as thought the feel of the air on his face would compel him to breathe, too.

What do you say to a dying boy?

“Nick’s gone for help,” I said. “You’ll be okay.” But the words choked me.

Hemmy was crying. “I don’t want to die,” he gasped. He was short of breath, and all the energy he seemed to have was clutching my hands and flitting his eyes towards everything around him.

When I think back on my last moments with Hemmy now, I wish I had said I didn’t want him to die either. I wish I had told him he was the most interesting person I knew. I wish I had said I loved him.

The unwitting thing I actually said was “I know,” and then I choked on vomit that didn’t make it all the way up my throat.

Hemmy took a deep, steady breath and looked up at me with his sad, gray eyes and said, “Jake. Jake, please—”

Then he closed his eyes and died.

I still remember the weight of his hand as it fell limp in mine. Pressing my forehead against his body and pulling at his clothes with my desperate fingers, I beat his chest with my angry fists, trying to make his heart beat, trying to put life back in the organ that had stopped for no reason whatsoever. He had been running, running with his face to the sky and his arms open. And the night before he had been reading. Smiling. Breathing. Living. Minutes ago he was alive.

Nick came back, the family in his wake, and then vomited when he saw Hemmy.

Sir bent down and picked up Hemmy’s body, leaving me to slide onto the ground. He turned and walked back to the house, Margaret clinging to Nick’s arm as they followed.

Mother, trembling, turned away from the funeral procession and looked towards the eastern fence. Her cheeks were white.

Left with only Mother beside me, I traced the faint outline Hemmy’s lanky frame had started to impress upon the grass.

I stood slowly and looked to the same faint point in the distance.

We stood there, silently listening to the sky quake with a pregnant storm.

She held a hand to me and said, “Come on home, baby.”

I looked at her curiously, cocking my head to the side, considering.

“No,” I said plainly. And then I ran, deciding to chase the vanishing point beyond that fence. I ran, and when I got to the fence, I beat its planks till my knuckles bled.

At the end of our property line, pain took claim on my legs and my chest. I could not breathe; I could not feel my feet. Still, I ran.

When I got to the end of the dirt road, I stopped and looked behind me. Back there was a boy who had died, a boy who would be buried in the family cemetery, a boy who used to read late at night with a flashlight, a boy who used to be my brother.

I ran to the edge of town. Ahead of me was a long road, a road that led to bigger towns, cities even, and eventually—one way or another—the ocean. He would never see the ocean; Hemmy would never see or do any of the things we dreamed about. There, standing at the edge of town—the farthest Hemmy had ever been—I could decide whether to keep going or to turn back. All the things Hemmy wanted to do lay before me. I was alive, and I could choose.

It started to rain. I stood there for a while, and I remember contemplating how far a kid with no money could get before someone called his parents. I wondered how much more running I could physically do. My skin was tight and wrinkled against my bones just as the skin of a baby left in the bath too long. Cold and a little hungry, I decided to walk home.

When I got there, the storm had kicked up into a battle between the lightning and the wind. Cars—those of the police and of people from church—littered the front lawn. Shoving off sympathetic arms, I escaped to the room that three brothers had once shared and took off clothes that belonged to others. Crawling into the bed that once belonged to a lanky and freckled boy, I picked up one of Hemmy's books, the one he had been reading the night before, and read until I fell asleep, the flashlight slipping from my hand and hitting the floor.