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The Ancient Art of Smile-Making

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THE ANCIENT ART OF SMILE-MAKING

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements of the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Elizabeth Ann Garrett

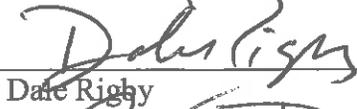
May 2014

THE ANCIENT ART OF SMILE-MAKING

Date Recommended April 24, 2014



David Bell, Director of Thesis



Dale Rigby



Wes Berry



Dean, Graduate School

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Elizabeth Garrett

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148 pages

Directed by: David Bell, Dale Rigby, and Wes Berry

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love.

-- Walt Whitman

If I am anything, I am a Kentuckian, which means I appreciate a good storyteller. In my writing, I hope to bring back some dignity to the “lost cause” of the good values from a broken culture. While I am not quite “southern” enough to qualify as a writer of Southern Gothic fiction, I can relate to this brand of identity crisis in which someone wants to maintain an archaic mindset in a culture charging towards “progress.” As technology and corporate success take precedence over a genteel and pastoral soul, our collective competitiveness has crippled a quaint future of back porch comforts. Being well-read or holding open doors won’t pay for student loans, and there is no such thing as stars in our crowns anymore.

For many regions of Kentucky, there is this conflict within the graying of small town communities. My region is one of these. As time marches on, the agrarian lifestyle itself becomes industrialized, and these old family farms, upon which small towns are built, are not self-sustaining. In my stories, I capture the perspectives of a rural community’s personalities. My Regionalism may be dated, but then so are the small town values. With these short stories, I hope to create a collection of characters whose backgrounds may be singular but whose messages are universal.

My stories are about the universal fear of loneliness. Perry and White, the cameo characters, pop up throughout because they epitomize this with their irrational companionship. “The Ancient Art of Smile-Making,” “A Well Meaning Marionette,” “The Peacock Cloister,” and “In the Garden, Swallowing Pearls” are essentially about this innate need for company. “Murdered in a Good Dress” and “Myrtle Slog” illustrate the homesickness experienced by those who divorce themselves from closeness of the rural community. Sometimes we call “friendship” kitschy and cliché. And why is that? I made Perry and White’s bond a bit absurd because it is almost ridiculous that there could be a person in the wild world who would sacrifice themselves.

The Ancient Art of Smile-Making

If someone were to ask him, Perry Romberg would have to admit that he had never been to Saint Louis. When he was twenty-one, he almost crossed that bridge. He would have to admit that as well, not that he ever would to Ave. It was because of Ave that he almost made it to Saint Louis once, but the important thing to remember is that he turned around. Perry and White ventured that way to the Mississippi River—all the way from New Castle, Kentucky—on the pretence of adventure time and root beer. Or that's how Perry initially persuaded White, anyway.

On June 27th of 2002, Perry and White could still remember all the lyrics to “The Long Good-Bye” and sang it in a breathtaking two part harmony, as if they knew what it meant. Though it didn't matter so much that they had to leave during the dead silence of night for some Mid-western, caffeine-free coke, it *did* matter that Perry's fiancé was still asleep and ignorant and happy in her ignorance. That next week Perry was supposed to marry Ave Maria Oppenheimer, who was raised by her grandfather, Bucky Oppenheimer, Perry's old gym teacher who led the Holt County Men to the 1965 State Championship as a point guard and then to the 1995 State Championship as a head coach. Perry couldn't dribble, and, despite his protests, Ave always made him hang up his white pants after Labor Day because supposedly she was perfection. This frightened Perry. Sure, he thought she was cute. Ave was a petite little peach with the makings of a fine community college education and a background in dance. She was very sweet to him, but Perry didn't know if he could really see himself tolerating her after she lost her youthful glow and her tone deafness took over her life.

By three in the morning, Perry and White had put an hour's worth of distance

between them and a life crammed with Ave's truisms, family game nights, and under-cooked catfish. Figuring the Audubon Parkway was far enough away to speak his mind, Perry blurted out, "So I guess you're wondering why I've brought you here."

"Not really, friend," White said, who was driving his mother's golden Cadillac because he still lived with his parents at twenty-one. "I figured it was because you relied on my sense of smell."

"So you don't understand?" Perry asked.

"I understand that following the smell of salt and water. That'll get you to the ocean. Follow the smell of birds and pine. That'll get you to the forests. Follow the smell of snow and gravel. That'll get you to the mountains. Is that it?"

They had ridden across Holt, Hancock, and half of Daviess Counties in bouts of nonsensical dialogue. Perry had been thankful his friend hadn't questioned him why "they had to sneak out of town when only the coyotes were still telling stories to the moon," as White called their adventure time. White always had a special gift of buoying Perry's spirits, made him feel bright and reconnected, but not even his dearest, oldest, loveliest friend understood him now. There was something divine in that, and not necessarily a kind divinity.

"I need to leave," Perry started to explain.

"Yeah, of course," White said. "You said we're getting root beer from that place nobody knows about. And you know how I feel about root beer. The beverage of my people."

In those days, Perry's face was still young and the syndrome was only beginning to cave in his face, and White only had tattoos of Chinese symbols. Perry had always

admired his friend. Even if White was as clueless as Ave, he still felt more comfortable with him. Many people in their hometown thought it was weird and unsettling when the Kanagalas family moved into New Castle back in the 80's. Especially when they bought the big, old Temple house without any financial hiccups, to the town's initial dismay, but Perry, even younger then, thought it was pretty cool to have a next door neighbor with whom he could play Cowboys and British Colonials, a friend who could fabricate broomsticks and turkey feathers into swords and other ancient relics. Things were simpler then, he believed.

Because Whitefeather Makepeace Kanagalas was his best friend, Perry knew he would explain himself eventually that night, just not as they approached Owensboro. It would have been still close enough to turn back and commit to commitment. Perry envied White's cinnamon skin that stretched tautly across his cheekbones and how his vast brown eyes narrowed to analyze the star's steady trajectory across the sky. Long ago when they didn't know they could know anything better, White would tell Perry how he liked to think he could read the minds of stars. Perry knew this was primarily because White's mother was Muscogee from Oklahoma and his father was from New Delhi, not from Oklahoma. White would go on and on about how his Indian-Indian genes enabled him to discern secrets out of the starry blood hemorrhaging onto Earth, and in the dense night sky he could track the footprints of his ancestors and their long-dead deer. Perry was always impressed because all he could do was wrap boxes and attract the attention of the prettiest girl in Holt County.

"Are you still glad you're driving me to Missouri?" Perry asked for the fun of hearing White's answer.

It was the little things—like White’s identity crisis—that made Perry feel a little bit better about abandoning his fiancé days before their wedding.

“I drive you Japan, friend,” White said as if testing the mettle of his vocal cords.

Perry had noticed for sometime White’s supposed mimicry of his mother’s family, or how he believed his mother’s family to be. At times, White’s slurred persona crawled under Perry’s skin—mainly because he was jealous of how easily White could escape from himself and how nobody would judge him for acting like he had forgotten his fifth grade grammar lessons or if he had a sudden enthusiasm for the rights of cattle just because his father was friendly, neighborhood Hindu optometrist.

“You require curry, friend?” White asked.

“I’m okay, White,” Perry said.

“Well, I believe the car does, I feel.”

They pulled off the Audubon to find a Shell station. White gracefully steered the car round and round the exit ramp. His single little beaded braid swung out toward Perry’s face against the momentum of the spiraled road. It was enough to make him spit. White so carefree. What did he know about growing older? Play acting like some third world buffalo lover who just had to find a Shell station because that was the only service station crested with “nature.” Perry knew, although White wouldn’t admit it, that Shell stations were the only place to get Dr. Pepper slurpies.

White didn’t have some five foot one hundred pound monstrosity breathing hot dependence down his neck—no blonde headed, pearl adorned grandpa’s girl to support with his old factory job. This was what Perry primarily envied of White, the free and openness of life. Sure, it was his grandfather’s and then his father’s artisan Christmas

bow factory and it would pass down to him one day. Where was it written that he was supposed to take on the Romberg business and marry a darling local girl? And wouldn't it just be so much easier if he could just run away, somewhere far, like Jefferson City or Iowa, and not have anyone to keep in mind but himself? No eyes to make cry, no hearts to disappoint. White could do that. But not Perry, not anymore. He was only twenty-one. Where was it written that he had to take on responsibilities?

White pulled his mother's Cadillac into the third and most reputable-looking Shell station he found. When he got out off the car, Perry considered moving over into the driver's seat and leaving White where he could slurp frozen Dr. Peppers all night until his folks came to pick him up. It's not like he would've minded. He was like a puppy. Some sweet, brown faced puppy. Everybody loved White. He had the exotic allure of a Bengal tiger and the sweet charm of prairie dog. He could probably take better care of Ave anyway, knowing White. He watched the long, lean denim-swallowed man pump the gas. Super. When White went into the Shell station to pay, Perry reseated himself behind the wheel.

"What's this, friend?" he asked, careful not to slosh his Dr. Pepper slurpie. He was clearly miffed that he had been relegated to the passenger seat.

"Why do you have to keep talking like that? What are you? Canadian?" Perry did a poor job of masking his annoyance.

"Something the matter?" White asked.

Perry didn't feel like answering, so he drove back into the night.

"You know," White said, feigning casualness. "My mother doesn't really allow anybody besides a Kanagalas to drive the Cadillac."

“You’re so gracious.”

“Seriously, dude! What is the matter with you? You’re totally ruining the trip. Weren’t we supposed to be having fun? Root beer? You’re starting to bum me out.”

“There’s not going to be any root beer, White,” Perry blurted out.

“Huh?”

“We’re not getting root beer.”

“Perry, what’s going on?” White sounded irate.

And a little bit scared, which was in itself satisfying, so Perry didn’t feel the need to respond. “I’m jealous of you,” Perry left unsaid.

Through the windshield, the night looked back at him through narrow, pin-prick eyes. Perry had to keep his focus on the road to avoid the shame creeping through his veins. The doctors couldn’t tell him what was going wrong inside his body. All they could say was that it was a syndrome. His fiancé was so beautiful, so innocent. Saint-Saëns played through his head every time she walked into a room, the swan movement. She never wore braces on her teeth, but her smile was so pure, and for some reason she claimed to be in love him.

Ave Maria Oppenheimer, whose grandfather sent her to Louisville every Thursday because she wanted to be a ballerina, agreed to marry him. Earlier that day Perry had been told by yet another doctor that he had some syndrome that cause premature baldness and shooting pains in his cheeks. Disappointed because he should’ve been a doctor if that’s all they knew, he almost went home, but he had to stay in Louisville for Ave’s dress rehearsal. She danced as Cygnet Number Two. When she twirled into sight from stage right, Perry felt like he’d been struck by the hand of God.

Suddenly his nerves buzzed and his heart stung with dread. With powerful toes that made her as light as air, she should have been Odette. But all the other ballerinas were all probably too jealous of her.

Perry realized he was dumb to think a swan like her would like a guy like him, doofy with the physique of a Ticonderoga pencil. His hair had been prematurely falling out in haphazard patches across the bulbous surface of his skull. His jaw often caused him pain on the left side of his face, and a good portion of his teeth had to be pulled, enough to string a noteworthy tribal necklace. All because of the “syndrome.” He could shave his face clean, trim his fingernails, button up his best shirt, buckle himself into his pressed khaki pants, but he would never be good enough for such a swan. This is what frightened him the most. Other boys were more of men than him, with strong faces and solid cowboy hearts.

“I was really looking forward to having adventure time and root beer with my friend before he got married and left me,” White said out of the silences that bled through the car.

His voice reverberated against the windows and panels of the car, causing the Perry to shake a little. The shame in his stomach seeped through his veins and burned.

“I can’t do it, White. I can’t marry Ave.”

White’s eyes bore accusingly into Perry’s face making his cheeks flush. He wanted to get those eyes off of him. There was something of anger steeped in shock in them. Perry wanted that mouth, that steely mouth, to say something that would alleviate the anxiety that roared within.

But White clicked his tongue and shouted, “Then tell her! Not me! Don’t drag me

all the way to Missouri! Am I kidnapped, Perry? Have I just been kidnapped into my own car?”

“No, you’re not kidnapped.”

White crossed his arms, and even though he turned his face away, Perry knew he was gnawing on the inside of his cheek as he often did when in disgust.

“How am I supposed to take care of a girl like Ave when I can’t even take care of myself!”

“What does that even have to do with going to Saint Louis?”

After the dress rehearsal, Perry wanted to have a moment with Cygnet Number Two, something secret and special he hoped. So he went backstage, pilfered a peachy rose out of vase that sat waiting patiently outside the Odette’s door. He met Ave coming down the crowded hallway with her hot pink duffle bag slung over her shoulder. The grotesquely synthetic nature of the bag created dissonance against her pristine, angelic beauty. She was so wispy and delicate, like a china cup. He caught her eye coming down the narrow hall. Her eyes were clear and blue, blue like Depression glass. The prettiest kind of blue, to Perry, anyway. He smiled with his mouth, but his eyes worked more effectively. She smiled back. He waved, but she walked past him telling him she would catch him back in New Castle and thanks for coming. She smelled like sweat and fermented cosmetics, but to him, she smelled dewy and golden. And she just walked right on past him. He tried to chase after her to at least give her the rose, but she disappeared into a throng of other swans.

“Ave doesn’t need me. I don’t think I’m enough. And I don’t know. I thought if I disappeared maybe she would break off the wedding.”

“What does that supposed to mean? Why did you have to drag *me* along too? I really don’t see where this is coming from, man,” White said as they crossed the numb river into Indiana. He didn’t have to look over to know White’s mouth was set into a hard line.

Perry felt like he was in a dark tunnel. “There’s has to be more than New Castle. And Oppenheimers. And tying things up in sweet bows. The way everybody expects. I can’t do it. I honestly don’t know what I’m looking for in Saint Louis, but it has to be something. I’m just afraid! There’s too much going on, and I needed my friend!”

Perry glanced at the pulsating green of the digital clock. It glowed a stick figure of three forty-seven in the morning. They rode in silence. He almost wanted his friend to try and dissuade him like he expected, but White never did.

“I’m sorry I’ve brought you here,” Perry said, his voice weird and unnatural as it recoiled against the droning silence. “I want to be free again, like you, because I don’t think I have what it takes. I mean, Ave is so beautiful. You should have seen her today. Man, she wow. I wanted to go talk to her. I wanted to tell her how beautiful she is and how I don’t fit. But she just disappeared with all her other beautiful friends. I’m sure there was a guy in there who’s just as beautiful as she is. They probably have more in common and she can take him home and he’ll be so impressive. They’ll have millions of dollars. And be strong and healthy. Ave would be better off with you, White. Look at you! You’re gorgeous!”

“Shut up, friend,” he said with a slight smile, Perry felt. “Nobody really wants a guy like me. Sweet ‘ol White! That cute brown boy that nobody knows what to do with. Oh. Give him your math. He’s Indian. Or-or ask him to braid your hair. He’s Indian.

Yeah. Yeah. When all you want to do is take Quinn Oglethorpe to see *The Bodyguard* with your best friend and his fiancé to impress her because she didn't seem to mind that I'm so different. But then you find out that she does mind because her parents mind. I'm jealous of you, friend. Don't you think I want the communication with equal parts body language, knowing looks, and impassioned gestures? Isn't that worth being afraid?"

Perry didn't know what to say. "Are you hungry?" he asked

White's cinnamon cheeks flamed. "Oh... I am hungry, friend."

"We're almost to Nashville, Illinois" Perry said.

"Are you hungry, friend?" White's voice softened.

Perry had to admit he was too anxious to be hungry. But he said "I'm starving." for his friend's sake.

"Do you think they'll have a Long John's open this late?"

"It's a fairly common restaurant."

"I don't mean any disrespect to anybody," White entreated. He said this more to the outside than to Perry. "But I really like the hushpuppies. I don't get them every day. I just figured I'd have a little taste of the sea while I'm out."

"Let's go in," Perry said as a quelling the torrent of butterflies pounded their figurative heads into the lining of his abdomen. Or maybe they were wasps.

There were only two other cars in the Long John Silver's parking lot on that mild evening. There was a hint of summer, even the night air confirmed it. White's Cadillac shone like an ostentatious harvest moon. Despite his famished state, White double checked the locks twice. Perry found his friend's protectiveness therapeutic. So he held the door open for him as they entered the sterile white light of the pseudo-nautical

establishment. However, not even White's idiosyncrasies could abate the anxiety that was pushing its lava up his throat.

"Just order me a Sprite," Perry pleaded as he flung himself into the men's room.

In the heat of the moment, Perry missed the commode. Eggy bile shellacked the partitions of the stall and dripped down the edge of the porcelain bowl.

"Oh, Christ," Perry muttered half to himself and half to his body's pitiful refuse.

He considered fetching White to help him. But he didn't want anybody, not even White, to see the mess. He knew he wouldn't leave the bathroom in such a disgraceful condition. It would reflect poorly on his character, and Perry wanted to believe himself to be a great guy. So he flagrantly disregarded the Employees Only Beyond This Point sign to obtain a mop. Silently and reverently, Perry cleaned the bathroom.

While he mopped, he contemplated what his swan must be doing on a Saturday night in late June. Was she with the other ballerinas in her troupe? Did she and her grandfather watch the news until he fell asleep? Did she do her homework? Perry really wanted to know what kinds of things suddenly. Did she ever find out what the heck broccoli rabe was? Did she wash the raspberries before she ate them? Was she wondering where he was? What would he miss being gone? Perry knew he hadn't been gone long enough to be missed, but he hoped she noticed. They didn't know what they were doing with their lives, and Perry although he wanted to know if she worried too, was too shy to ask. Did she imagine what they would look like in thirty years? Did she laugh? Would she mind being in New Castle forever? Why did she say yes?

After the bathroom's sanitation was restored, he indulged in reviewing his appearance in the mirror watching over the sink. He washed his hands and wiped off the

sickness from around his lips. He practiced his repertoire of smiles for the mirror, but it was more for his benefit than the mirror's. He tried on a few before he settled on the humble, closed mouth one he found most becoming. The mirror was in agreement. In all politeness, the mirror also reminded him of his rumpled clothes.

“Oh, Jesus,” Perry mumbled in response, embarrassed that he even cared.

The mirror made note of the hand dryer behind him and reminded him that he was not Jesus. It wasn't exactly an iron, but it supplied heat. Despite his reservations, he pumped the scratched silver knob. Hot air wheezed out in haggard coughs. The poor thing was in the twilight of life. For this reason, Perry honored it by continuing to brush out the wrinkles that marred his buttercup shirt. At first, he felt pretty ridiculous flailing his fingers about in a desperate dance to release wrinkles—all so his girl wouldn't regret her choice. Ave with her childish voice and her never ending quest to find the perfect flatware, china, waistlines. It frightened him, but Ave, who in some strange way, reminded him of the resilient hand dryer. Pittering on against it all. She was familiar and known—dependable. Derby hats on derby day, snowflake sweaters on snowy days, Chanel Number Fourteen all year long.

At that moment, as the dryer hocked its last bit of air, Perry realized that he kind of missed his fiancé, still asleep, ignorant, and happy in that, all the way in Kentucky. Under her grandmother's quilt, guarded by porcelain dolls. Perry could see his reflection, warped and ugly, in the worn nozzle of the dryer. Ave deserved his respect when there he was in some late night Long John Silver's in Nashville, Illinois ironing his shirt—a shirt she picked out and exclaimed made his green eyes just pop—with some absurd hand dryer. Ave knew he would be bald and mute by thirty. She knew of the syndrome and

studied sign language with him. She would sign “I love you” and smile. Perry had to admit before his distorted face that he liked to see her smile. All he wanted was to make her smile. How was running away to Missouri going to do that?

He looked down and noticed his slacks were just as unkempt as his shirt. He was too tall for his pants to receive the same treatment, but he was determined to make an effort. Perry was about to lift his knee to the nozzle anyway when White stuck his head in the door.

“My instincts told me you would be in here,” he said with a tinge of relief.

After being reminded of his ugliness, Perry marveled at his friend’s natural beauty. The florescent lights really accentuated his exotic features, marbled with the Far East and the Old West.

“Are you okay, friend?” White stepped into the bathroom, his polished cowboy boots clinking with self-assurance. “Your Sprite is getting cold.”

“Do you think I could be handsome?” Perry asked, although he was somewhat resigned to his homeliness.

White considered him a moment. “You have a nice hair cut,” he offered. “And I don’t know anybody who doesn’t like green eyes, and yours are the best I’ve ever seen!”

Perry was beginning to reconsider his clean-shavenness. White wore his hair like a dusky Legolas in those days. Perry tried to be elfish once. However, style of any the high fantasy sort just didn’t suit him. His efforts were too strained and obvious to be natural or suave. *Oh well*, he figured.

“Don’t worry, friend.” White smiled with his eyes and patted Perry on the back, who could see his friend straining to conjure up some ancient wisdom to say. All that

came out was broken Hindi.

Perry figured that was good enough and admired White for trying. “How were the hushpuppies?”

“Good to be sure. But I was waiting for you, so they’re just sitting out there.”

“I didn’t know you could order a whole bucket full,” Perry marveled when he saw his friend’s loot.

“Me neither!” White handed over the Sprite. “I think we better go. I’m getting a foul feeling from that woman’s brooding look.”

“She probably just wants to go home where people actually know her name.”

“That ill eye does not bode kindness, my friend,” White whispered wrapping his arm around the barrel of hushpuppies.

Perry followed his companion out the door, who rang the captain’s bell for good service and good luck.

“Ready to press on?” White asked.

“Let’s go home,” Perry answered with resolution.

“Huh?”

“I’ve come far enough. I know. We’ll get root beer another time. It’ll be a double date adventure time. Let’s go home.” Perry said this with a smile.

The Peacock Cloister

The weather just really pissed Dorcas Lester off. It was as if July got its jollies from molesting her with its hateful, balmy fingers. Dorcas was in the midst of a counterattack on the summer by sucking ice cubes on her porch swing. She always was one to enjoy a friendly porch swing. It reminded her of a simpler time when she had simpler wants. Things had been feeling pretty tense with her husband, Lesser, lately. Of course, he was withdrawn. But that was natural for their relationship. Ever since the boys had grown, he hadn't seemed to find any fun in her. Nevertheless, she kept her routine of watching for him to pull into the driveway.

She anticipated her husband coming home every evening for as long as they'd been married. She imagined herself as something like a hawk or a majestic eagle as she waited there for him. Her wristwatch told her it was half past four. Should be any time. Yes, just like a hawk or a graceful pelican, swooping around in the skies—scouting, making calculated moves, her eyes sharp and her wits about her. She could picture herself diving and snatching, and her eyes would not betray her. She would play with her mouse or her fish for a few moments, tossing them about in her keen little beak. Then she would chomp down with her birdy teeth and swallow, and it would be like there never was a mouse or a fish. Or a husband.

She crunched up her ice cube emphatically, wondering where her husband was. Dorcas didn't like to admit it, but she had a nervous disposition. Her stomach would get that feeling like it was being vacuumed or beaten like a dirty old carpet. If there was one thing Dorcas hated more than July's perverted, sticky fingers, it was feeling like a dirty old carpet on the inside.

To take her mind off her anxiety for company, she watched across the street as Tom Romberg's son chatted merrily with that Kanagalas boy on his parents' porch. Perry was his name, if she could remember properly. Dorcas never understood the friendship he had with that Indian-Indian boy named White, yet for some reason she badly wanted to cross the street and join them. Although she didn't care much for his parents' sense of humor, she thought the boy was nice looking. They talked so easily. Dorcas wanted to know how it felt to talk so easy, when suddenly the Indian...well...Native American woman stepped out of her house to call out to the pair. Dorcas hid her eyes. She knew she was supposed to be understanding about foreigners and Native Americans and other modern minded people who wanted to name their hard-earned children after colors. However, it just didn't sit well with her, and yet there that White, son of a voodoo Hindu, was friends with a decently name child. Basil and Marjoram, now those were good names for children, Dorcas thought. Lesser had argued and argued with her over the names of their boys, but Dorcas wouldn't be dissuaded. She thought about bringing up that old argument if Lesser would ever come home. It had been a lively argument to have, if Lesser was in the mood. Never mind the boys were grown.

Though fighting the summer was a constant battle, one win she would give July was the long days. It was four thirty-two, and the sun had no mind of tucking itself away just yet. *That* she knew how to appreciate. Dorcas pushed herself back on the porch swing and permitted herself the pleasure of the backward and forward momentum. It almost made her feel young again. Like when she and Lesser were courting. There was a porch swing just like this one at her daddy's house. Except theirs was at the front of the house. Dorcas and Lesser's was at the back. Better view of the garden and the driveway.

Despite the differences between her youth and her life with Lesser, Dorcas remembered waiting for Lesser's junky ol' pick up to come ambling up the drive so keenly it still gave her hear a flutter even in her late forties. Long drive it was too. This was out around McKirk, the fringe of Holt County where it was all open fields. Growing up, Dorcas didn't live in town. Her daddy was a farmer. Poor farmer. But one of those small men with all that concentrated, pent-up, convoluted energy that he hardly knew what to do with. Some of that energy came to good use, like how they had a porch swing for lazy days. Dorcas and Lesser would sit out on that porch swing holding hands. Holding them under her skirts because she wore skirts in those days. They had to hide their hands else Mama and Daddy would pitch a hissy about being sinners and fornicators. Really, it made their romance all the worthwhile.

Dorcas checked her wristwatch again. Quarter 'til. Her ice cubes were turning into just plain tap water in her glass, and she could admit that she wasn't Jesus enough to change them into anything else. It was hot out, enough to make her feel irritated enough and determined enough to stay right there on her porch swing until Lesser came home from the bank. It gave her something to do with herself.

Her husband was one of those financial analysts at the First New Castle Bank. She didn't know what that meant other than she could form an intimate bond with the Home Shopping Channel. In fact, earlier that day she had just bought a gold bangle to go with her chandelier earrings. Dorcas had a long neck, and she really liked to show it off. If push came to shove, those chandelier earrings were an investment—not only to her neck but to Lesser as well. It's a good thing her daddy wasn't around anymore. He'd have a regular conniption over seeing Dorcas in chandelier earrings—like how he had a

conniption when he found out his daughter was going steady with a Lester. And for a quick second that's what she saw again as her husband finally parked their Buick in the driveway lined with a procession of yuccas. She was Dorcas Gude, and they were eighteen again, and Lesser was coming to sit beside her and hold her hand.

"Where have you been?" Dorcas demanded in a way she thought was flirtatious, jacking her spine up so she could gain a better vantage point for looking down the bumpy bridge of her nose.

"At work. How about you?" Lesser replied, walking past her.

The screen door slammed behind him with punctuation. Dorcas didn't like that very much. Although she could appreciate the nuances of tension her husband left wafting in the thick summer air, she did *not* care for being ignored. She was mad enough to spit out her ice cube right into the flower pot. However, as that would be degrading to herself and her petunias, Dorcas just crunched it up and swallowed it down. The cool shards of ice did little to chill the bubbling venom.

"Lesser! Lesser!" Dorcas hollered. The door slammed behind her in an exclamation.

"Sorry," Lesser said halfheartedly, opening and closing the kitchen cabinets.

"What do you mean by slamming the door like that all? I was talking to you," she said, aghast he was still ignoring her.

"What's for supper?"

"What is this, Lesser? Lesser, you know darn well that I need you to look at me whilst I am talking."

Dorcas would have died right there in her Keds if anybody knew, but her husband

still gave her butterflies, despite his slumped shoulders, heavily bagged eyes, and deflated demeanor.

“Dorcas, honey, I’m sorry. What’s for supper? Is this it on the stove? What is this?”

“Apparently it doesn’t much matter, does it, if you’re just gonna eat cheese and crackers anyway? I slave away all day, you know. I worked really hard at that tuna salad. That’s just water on the stove, Lesser. I’m making tea. I don’t know why I even bother. Those cheese and crackers are all you eat anyway. I made the tuna salad more for myself anyway. It’s so damn hot outside.”

“Careful, Dorcas. That eye doctor can hear you squawking from across the road.”

“*Squawking! Squawking?* You best apologize to me, Lesser. I’d have you to know that I most certainly do not squawk. And even if I did, it would be a whole lot better than your mumbling and carrying on. Like a sorry old mop. And I would also have you to know that it had really been a trial working with those hard boiled eggs. I scalded my hand a little.”

She rubbed the pink skin that bloomed in her palm and displayed it before Lesser as if she hoped he would kiss it and make it better. However, Lesser Lester didn’t even bother waiting for the tea to finish brewing before he took his cheese and crackers into the living room.

She really wanted to draw more attention to herself. Dorcas wanted her husband to at least pity her. Too bad he decided he had spent enough energy on her and would rather spend time melting into the local news. Dorcas stayed in the kitchen watching him watch television. She wondered why he didn’t turn on the lamp. An epilepsy of blue and

white light from the T.V. illuminated his droopy face like a pathetic spotlight. If Dalí had ever been inspired by Basset Hounds, something like Lesser's sorry visage would have materialized onto the canvas. He looked older than he should.

“Lesser,” she yelled into the living room just to see him react. “Why do you always have to eat in there? There's a fine table in the dining room. Thatta way I can clean up after you.”

She liked to tag on a barb or two for subtlety. Dorcas considered herself something of an artist when it came to deep-seeded rage, even if it was just an act. Dorcas's philosophy was if you really wanted your barb to find its mark, make it quiet, but make it sharp. If it had been loud, like a gunshot, he would have bled out too quickly. Where was the fun in that? Watching her husband bleed because of her words was one of the few pleasures Dorcas found in life. So she clipped her barbs and loaded them into a pea shooter. Also, if you were clever, as she knew herself to be, you could shoot off more. That way, if she was ever in the mind to watch him bleed more profusely, she could. And what a relief it was to get it all out. Then sit back with a cool glass of tea to nurse on with your guilt. However, she only reserved the barrage of barbs for when she was *truly* mad—like when she didn't get to wear her new mink coat to the Derby dinner party at the Romberg's house. If she had been in the mind to, Dorcas could have lit candles and danced around his drained corpse, prostrate in supplication upon the Persian rug. Figuratively, of course. She wouldn't want to ruin the rug.

Lesser didn't fight back anymore, so she had to fabricate her own outlets for her creative energy. He hadn't fought back in nearly fifteen years. Half of their marriage. Even now, what did he do? He didn't turn off the T.V., and Dorcas listened with

discontent, ill at ease, as he tore the plastic wrapper further down on the cracker roll. She racked her brain for what she should do with herself, beginning to feel agitated as he continued to ignore her.

The water was finally boiling in the kettle. *What would it feel like to stick my eye over the steam?* She almost did it too, had it not been for the off chance fear of being seen. She may have wanted attention, but she didn't want her foolishness to be widely known. Instead, she dangled the tea bags over the curls of steam. *Luzianne in the hands of an angry Dorcas. Domestic goddess? Dominatrix?* She blushed at the thought. She let go, and the family sized tea bags filled with water, impregnated with heat. She wanted to watch the tea bleed out, but idle hands, idle hands. Dorcas dumped a scoop of sugar into her crystal pitcher. Seven minutes in heaven and then the tea would be done.

"Dorcas," he said, catching her by surprise.

"Holy smokes, Lesser!" Dorcas was caught off guard.

"I think we need a divorce."

She stood listening to the seconds tick away, as if enough would go by and change what had just been said. Watching the steam roll out of kettle spout, Dorcas grasped at the straws of normalcy. Her Kentucky bird clock pounded, like normal. Summer light still spilled into the kitchen. The marble countertops still felt cool. The labored breaths of impatience rolled out of Lesser. He was still her husband. But it was not normal. The air was heavy, pushing its weight against the scales of what's normal and what's not. *So this is what it all comes down to*, she thought. *Holy shoot! Holy virgin shoot! What?*

"Well, Lesser, I think you ought to think a bit harder on that now. Don't you

think you're being a bit hasty? You need to really think on this now."

"Don't you think I haven't?"

It was clear he had. All those shadows. All those imploring shadows. Deep set frown lines. He was forty-nine, but he looked a day older than a hundred. But this was nothing new to Dorcas. He was her masterpiece of manipulation.

"That's insane, Lesser. What do you know about getting a divorce?"

She would have left the kitchen had it not been for the tea. She would've left if it meant for those few more seconds she could still say she was married. She was not about to risk over brewing the tea just because Lesser was threatening something so...silly...absurd...pickadilly! Was she losing her grip? She refused to ruin good tea for nothing, so she held her ground.

"I don't think I need to know much to know that I want one," he said.

"I don't think you do, dear."

He sighed. "Well, it's either this, or I'm gonna stick a shotgun in my mouth."

"You need to stop thinking so much. You don't even have a shotgun."

"I'll stab myself with the butcher knife then! Drive my truck into the pond. Hang myself on the front porch. I'll take a bath with the toaster. Something. I really don't like you, Dorcas. I just really, really don't like you."

"My toaster's clean. I cleaned it this morning while you were God knows where. You can't take a bath with it. I don't care what you say. Besides, what would the neighbors think? I think that weird Hindu eye doctor would put some Hindu voodoo curse on us, seeing you dangling there like a fruit basket," she insisted.

"Well, I'm just not staying here another night. So, good bye."

“You don’t know where to go!” Dorcas’s voice betrayed her. She shripped. She hated shripping. “You don’t know where to go, dear.”

“It’s New Castle, dummy. Not New York or Santa Fe or Louisville.”

Usually he stutters when he argues with her, but his words rang clear. There was a clarity in his voice that rang for emphasis and impact. No stutters. Why hadn’t he stuttered? Everything turned sour so suddenly, and Dorcas was dumbfounded. She couldn’t her eyes off her tea kettle. It burned too much. Something like steam percolated against her eyelids. She willed herself to look at him. Maybe then this would all turn out to be some sham—some awful dream, like the one she had where a nasty shaggy dog ran into her house and swallowed up all her diamonds and rubies and turquoise—and her wedding band. Then he puked on her bed, but when he puked it turned out to be one of her wigs.

Dorcas drilled Lesser with her gaze. Drilled him as if she were to find something precious at the bottom of it all. Thinking about dreams wasn’t going to help her now.

“Have you considered our sons?” Finally, there it was—her perfect and last barb.

“Where do you think I’m planning on staying tonight?”

Then, just like that, he left, taking only an awkward cloud of tension with him. No baggage. No crackers. He slammed the door with conviction. No question in that slam. That slam could have been spoken from only one door, their sturdy oak front door. Not the back door. It was one of those wishy-washy storm doors. The kind with the screen and aluminum frame, painted white in a sort of pseudo-purity. That storm door would have given Lesser time to change his mind it was so delicate to open.

Dorcas couldn’t do anything about it anyway until the tea was done steeping, so

she just let him go. She cleared her throat a few hundred times so she wouldn't have to hear the engine purr so smoothly within their Buick. That beautiful blue Buick. It was like a sapphire. She even helped pick it out. Gracious, how she loved taking trips in that Buick. It was just like being inside a jewel, if jewels had leather and faux-wood interior and smelled like an old wineskin. One of the few times Dorcas minded her manners was when she was riding in that Buick. Only to have it roll away with her husband inside.

For the sake of maintaining any shred of dignity she could possibly claim, Dorcas drained the drippy brown bags into her crystal pitcher and squeezed them dry with a wooden spoon, just as she was squeezing her eyes. *It has to be a wooden spoon. This wooden spoon.* The spoon was stained from years upon years of this single purpose, stained so dark. She made gritty syrup from the highly concentrated tea and the sugar in the bottom of the pitcher. *What if I drank this?* Dorcas tried imagining what it would like to be poisoned. It couldn't feel worse than how she felt at that moment, an autumnal bouquet of bitter sweetness, scalding her throat as it went down. Would it then be okay to cry?

Decidedly not. Dorcas just cleared her throat a few hundred more times and pressed on mixing the tea. If she hadn't been a godly woman she would have made this that northern tea. Seattle or Long Island or whatever you call it. But since Dorcas didn't know the first thing about Vermont, she just left it well enough alone. She wondered if he had made it to their son's house. Of course that was a kind of tricky question to answer. She hadn't paid attention to which direction he turned when he pulled out of the driveway. That would have helped a little bit.

Their eldest son, Basil, pronounced like the herb you use in meatballs, lived in

town like they did, over on Fourth Street—within walking distance to the funeral home and the gas station. His house wouldn't take long to get to. But why would he want to go to Basil's house? Basil was messy and could hardly tie his own shoes. Not like their younger son, Marjoram. She gave him a prettier name because she thought he was going to be a girl. Although she found out that he wasn't a girl, she still thought he was pretty enough to be, so sweet and smart. Not a clumsy goof like Basil, all barrel-chested and awkward. If she had been a gambling sinner-woman, she would have put money down on Lesser going to Marjoram's house out in McKirk, close to where her parents used to live when they were still alive. Marjoram was such a good boy. He could have been a doctor if he'd had the mind to. But she knew he wouldn't want to leave his parents for the sake of medical school. Dorcas always thought he should have been a preacher, but foreman at the Romberg's Artisan Christmas bow factory there in New Castle wasn't too bad. Much better than some deputy sheriff like Basil. All he did was cruise around in that flashy Charger with that Rick Powers as if it was something to be proud of.

Dorcas considered calling her son. She wanted to make sure Lesser got there all right—and to ask him what was going on because she wasn't really sure. If anyone had any sense in this family it was Marjoram. She felt a flicker of relief. *Maybe when Lesser gets there, my baby will tell him, "What the heck are you doing here, Daddy? Why you leaving Mama all alone?" Yes! That's just what he'll do. Tell his daddy to get back home.* Dorcas's heart steadied after that. She would just drink her tea, eat her tuna salad, and when Lesser finally came back home she would have a list worked up on all the things she felt while he was gone. She hadn't done that in a while, a nice, healthy guilt trip. That always helped.

Although Dorcas worked up a mighty fine list, complete with bullet points and sub-bullet points, he never came home. Even after all that trouble she went through figuring out the word processor on their computer.

* * *

She put up a tenacious fight all through the court proceedings. She had been more tenacious than her lawyer, who, in her opinion, should have been a florist or a garbage truck driver. Dorcas's beautician had more gumption than her lawyer. But, in the end, she got everything she should've wanted—their house, their Buick, their porch swing, their bed, and a healthy cash settlement. Everything except Lesser, who did get exactly what he wanted—an ex-wife. He would just look so cheerful and jolly every time they met before the judge. Seeing him made Dorcas want to run over and pour water all over his law papers. However, the only paper he had was an index card. "Just give her everything she wants. Just let her have it" was all he would say. She wasn't about to stand for that, though. She wasn't going to stand for that sitting down.

But she had to. And she did. Lesser would leave the courthouse with his lawyer, who wasn't some newborn out of law school baby type with quaffed brown hair. Who thought she should be happy. Who shook her hand like he had done something useful. No, Lesser's lawyer was his old friend, Blarney Stein. Dorcas knew Blarney pretty well. She had champagne at his house that past New Year's. She had massacred his wife in gin rummy. Blarney and Lesser would go down to Dairy Queen while she drove back to her empty house on South Tower Street where she would sit on the porch, swinging and refusing to eat supper.

While she was swinging herself one night, telling herself she wasn't lonely, she

just needed someone to talk to, Basil cruised into the driveway.

“Why’d you have to drive that fancy, flashy thing, Basil?” she hollered at him as he stopped through the yuccas.

“That’s my car, Mama,” he said.

“Why don’t you put that thing to good use and drive over to your brother’s house and bring your daddy back,” Dorcas insisted.

“Ah, Mama, you know I can’t do that. Besides, Daddy’s not living there no more,” Basil said, leaning his back against the post. “Nice evening, isn’t it?”

“What you mean Daddy doesn’t live there anymore? Where did he go?” Dorcas asked.

She didn’t really want to think much about it. For the past few weeks she’d been playing a little game with herself. She would turn on the T.V. in the living room. Turn it to the Louisville local station like Lesser used to do. She dial the volume to twenty-one, just how Lesser liked it. Then she would stay in the kitchen and pretend like he was sitting in his easy chair, those flashes of blue and white flickering across his face, accentuating his skin puckered with wrinkles. If she closed her eyes she could almost hear him sigh for the girl that died of pneumonia in Adair County. But, inevitably, she would remember that he was happy now and would never again sit in that old leather recliner watching channel ten WHES-TV news. Dorcas always lost the game she played with herself.

“He’s got himself a fine house out on the river,” Basil answered.

“Stratford upon Ohio? Whose house?”

“Forks’s old house. Before they moved to Indiana. Remember that?”

“Gee whiz, Basil! That was thirty years ago! Why’s Daddy living all the way out there? That’s halfway to Egypt! I can’t believe he’s a river rat!”

Dorcas didn’t want to cry.

“Because it’s a fine house and it’s out on the river, just like he always wanted,” Basil explained.

Lesser always loved fishing, and that made her feel insecure and nervous. So she made him stop years ago. He did it willingly, but they were still young. She was still helping her daddy strip tobacco so her brother could go to college and not have to stay home shooting squirrels for dinner. Squirrel tasted good, especially when her mama fried it and served it with poke and beans. But, it made Dorcas frustrated that they were Gudes, so they were poor and had to eat coon and rabbit while folks like the Rombergs or the Temples or the Oppenheimers got to eat beef and chicken for everyday meals. It was unfair, unjust that Ruthie Oglethorpe wore tailored skirts while she had to wear her brother Lordy’s hand-me-down blue jeans. Her mother would remind her that she should be thankful they have a home, even though it was the old farmhands’ house, drafty and too small. Her mother reminded her that she should be thankful to have strong men around who could shoot and farm. Never mind that they spend their earnings on pedigree coonhounds and always missed the planting window. She was tired of being poor. She was ashamed of her family. She thought marrying a Lester would make her happy. She got her strong house and she never had to strip tobacco in that freezing barn. Dorcas tried to be proud.

“This here’s a nice house. Isn’t it, Basil! You lived in this house! This here’s a just fine house! I’ll tell you why he went and moved into the Forks’s house. It’s because

of Ophelia Forks lived before she married that Temple fella. That's exactly why. Your daddy always did have some sort of fascination with the Forks. Because the scandal. Nobody but your ornery daddy would live in that house."

"Mama, I'm not sure I know what you're talking about."

"You never do."

"I think we should go inside. These masquitas are gonna eat you up. Can I make you your tea? Lemme make you your tea."

"Dagnabit, Basil! Do I look like I want some tea? I hope these masquitas suck me dry. Nobody cares about your poor mama, Basil. Nobody cares. Just these masquitas. And even them are trying to kill me."

"Please, Mama. Let's go inside."

"I don't even know where inside is. I don't know anything anymore."

Dorcas followed her son inside where the bills waited. She'd been hoping going out on the porch would make them go away, but it didn't. There were at least ten of them stacked up on her counter, insulting the beautiful marble craftsmanship with their garish colors and numbers and dates and decimal dots. They had about sent her into apoplectic shock. She got all jittery and nasty feeling when she looked at them. She wanted them out of the house as soon as possible. Ignoring them for the past month hadn't helped much. The credit card people, the electric people, the water people, the lawyer people, the car people, the phone people only sent her reminders. Then they sent her threats. Rude, well-articulated threats. She thought she was a valued customer. Dorcas watched Basil's expression as he looked at her bills. His face sunk.

"Mama, I can help you out a little, but I think you ought really to get a job."

Dorcas's nerves seized up. She felt like she had been wacked in the face with a sheet of ice. "That's out of the question."

"I can't pay all these. Maybe I could've helped before they passed their due date. But now?"

"Well, isn't that just a surprise. I'm just shocked. Marjoram will pay them for me then. He's such a good son."

Basil scoffed. "Marjoram will slam the door in your face and tell you to get a job."

"Hush. Marjoram always helps his mama. Unlike some people, but I won't name any names, Basil."

"All right. You can ask him, but he'll just tell you to get a job."

"The water's boiling."

Dorcas crossed her arms against her chest. She watched her eldest son lift the pot from the burner, carefully remove the lid, and drop in three tea bags, just like she taught. He moved just like his daddy, dragging his feet when he walked like he was trying to keep his shoes from falling off. Lesser didn't always move like that, though. Back in high school he would tell people that he was an All-American baseball player. Even if that wasn't necessarily true, they believed him. That made Dorcas proud. She was proud to be his girlfriend. Lesser was a good man. He didn't care if her nails were cracked and black with tobacco grease. He didn't even care if she was shy and talked to her books more than her classmates. She wrote "Swell Guy!" in his senior annual. Back when Lesser was young and could run as fast as an Olympian, he made promises to her. Promises that she would never have to work again, and he would give her big pearls and opals. She kept

him to his word.

Dorcas watched her son clang her nice copper kettle against the gas burner. This may have been an old, antebellum house, but Dorcas insisted on having a gourmet kitchen. Just like the ones in the *Southern Living* pictures—a beautiful kitchen with robin’s egg curtains and marble countertops. Her perfect, clean kitchen where no nasty, tick-ridden coonhound named Maud or Hank would drool all over the floor and eat the poke greens right out of the boiler. This was her gourmet kitchen where she didn’t have to fry up squirrel if she didn’t want to.

“You’re doing it wrong. No, no, no, Basil. My stars! Just get on out. I’ll do this.”

Suddenly, watching Basil move about like her ex-husband made Dorcas inexplicably sad. She was confounded with the need to be left alone. She may have wanted her sons’ money, but she never wanted them to see her cry.

“What are you doing just standing there! I said leave me alone! I want to be alone!”

“Okay, Mama. If you need me, holler. I’ll be at home.”

“I know where you live! I’m old, but I’m not that old. Now, go away!”

He bent to kiss her cheek. She was inclined to back away, but she wanted to know at least one of the Lester men loved her. The seven foot oaf for whom she could never pants that would fit—always buying new pants and new shoes, new shirts—eating everything.

“You smell like cattle,” she said trying to keep the tears abated.

“Love you, Mama.”

Basil gently shut the screen door on his way out. She listened to his engine rev. It

rattled her windows. Dorcas felt something in her trying to erupt. Even though she was alone, she choked it down. Basil's car gargled as it went down the road. Chocking back her tears was useless, though. She felt so lonely and wished to goodness she'd been paying attention when Basil dropped in the tea bags. Dorcas considered calling him on the phone to ask, but she doubt he even knew. Instead of making due, Dorcas just pitched that batch out and started all over because sometimes you just gotta start all over.

That next afternoon she called her best son, Marjoram, as soon as she got out of bed. Dorcas had been sleeping in later and later these days. She didn't even bother with her alarm clock anymore. With the sun streaming through her sheer curtains, touching the un-crumpled pillow next to her as gently as a kiss, Dorcas just wanted to close her eyes and believe that when she opened them it would be back to the way it was.

She just slumped on down to the kitchen in her satin pajamas. She thought about using the tiny cell phone Marjoram had bought for her. But when she flipped it open, she just got all confused by the touch-tones on the keypad. So she used the telephone mounted to the kitchen wall. She counted four rings before he finally picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Marjoram? This is your mother,"

"I know, Mom. I saw it on the I.D."

"The who?"

"The I.D."

"You did what?"

"Come on, Mom. You know what I'm talking about. I don't know why you have to act so uppity. People much older than you can use this stuff."

“It’s the Devil’s handiwork, baby. You have to be careful. I saw on the news how the government listens to the telephone calls and how those mobular phones mess with your insides. It’s just not natural. I read in the paper that spiders lay eggs in the holes and then the babies crawl into your ears. And they’re so tiny you can’t even feel them.”

She heard Marjoram exhale into the receiver and felt a quick stab of guilt. She just wanted a little bit of attention.

“What do you need, Mom?”

“I’m going to make your favorite supper tonight, baby. Hot ham and cheese. I was wanting you to come over!”

“I’m afraid I’m going to be busy—”

“Oh, that’s nonsense. What could be going on over at that factory?”

“If you’d remember I’m dating—”

“You’re not old enough to date.”

“I’m twenty-six,”

“Why do you want to abandon your poor mother? I’m fixing your favorite supper tonight, and I’ll keep it warm until you come over.”

Again the phone sounded like it was full of wind.

“Fine. I’ll be over at six.”

“I have something important to ask you.”

“I’ll be over at six. Bye, Mom.”

Before Dorcas could tell her baby boy that she loved him, he had hung up the phone. In the silence, maybe the little hatchlings felt the warmth of a mother’s approval.

She had been watching the Home Shopping Channel when she heard Marjoram

slam the screen door. Hot ham and cheeses were the last thing on Dorcas's mind. *Rose Garden Gold* was on, her favorite shopping program. The well-manicured fingers of the dashing host, Timothy Bean, swiveled the ring this way and that, the bands of stunning Black Hills gold twinkling under the studio lights, wherever they were. Dorcas imagined Timothy Bean and his beautiful model, Linda, to be standing in some railroad tycoon's house in Nevada or Utah. She heard once that there were silver mines. Maybe Idaho where, despite all the potatoes, they managed to be called the Gem State. The Midwest. Dorcas envisioned horses and women in fringed buckskin jackets, pure white gold earrings dangling from her ears, her long brown neck adored with chunks of turquoise. How wonderful life must be in the Midwest. Dorcas had never been, but watching *Rose Garden Gold* Mondays at seven transported her. She would close her eyes and almost feel the leather of the cowgirl boots making her legs sweat, the air, fragrant with alfalfa and corn, whipping through her graying hair. It was okay to have graying hair in the Midwest, Dorcas imagined, although they never had models on *Rose Garden Gold* with graying hair and budding wrinkles. Typically they were exotic mannequins with prominent collarbones that showcased the dazzling Byzantine weave of gold chains.

“Hey, Mom,” Marjoram said, interrupting her reverie.

“Are you hungry, baby? I'm sorry I haven't fixed supper yet. I was hoping you could help me.”

Her son sighed audibly. She didn't want to tell him she had lost track of time. The great thing about Home Shopping Channel was the limited commercials. Dorcas was thankful those obnoxious peddlers kept their noses out of quality television.

“Gold is a *treasured investment*. This is a *stunning* lifetime investment,” Timothy

Bean said with conviction.

“Mom,” Marjoram finally said. “Why did you call me over tonight? I’m not making you supper again.”

“I need your help, baby. I can’t pay my bills. They’re gonna cut off my electricities!”

“What happened to the cash settlement?”

Dorcas could tell she was testing his patience. His shoulders looked like they had given up on carrying anymore weight she thrust upon them. He looked like his father. She quickly turned away.

“If you’re a flight attendant or retired or-or-or just need something to wear to your next company picnic, then these hoop earrings are perfect for you. They come in white, yellow, and rose gold,” Timothy Bean answered.

Truth be told, it had been Eternity Scarf week when the divorce was settled and Lesser signed her off. Printed chiffon—the ideal scarf for everyday femininity, which they assured her was coming back in style. Dorcas supposed it to be perfect to wear out on the breezy plains of her imagination. Timothy Bean talked her into it. His model Linda wadded it up in her palms, caressing it between her soft pink tipped fingers. His eyes pointed through the camera lens in Nevada straight into Dorcas’s heart. Machine washable. The Deep Orchid scarf of her dreams. Five easy payments of sixty-two thirty. But shipping and handling was free. Feminine flare. Feminine very, very in style. Dorcas wanted to embrace her femininity. Understated elegance. Just like Dorcas. At five feet, Dorcas was an easy petite. Petite was the most popular size. So Dorcas had to act fast if she wanted her Deep Orchid femininity scarf. When Audrey from Detroit came on the

line, well, that just made Dorcas mad enough to spit.

Audrey, the seamstress. Audrey, who lost forty five pounds and had to give all her clothes to her sister. Audrey, who ordered the Vibrant Teal. Thankfully Audrey didn't know how to shut up. Timothy Bean and his Argentine models had to wave good bye to the air. Reassure Audrey of how much they appreciated her business until the phone operators had to just hang up on her. Dorcas was glad Audrey never got to say good bye. That's what she got for rambling on and on about needing new clothes. When Dorcas called Timothy Bean, she never rambled. She always got to say good bye. And they said good bye back.

“Home Shopping,” Dorcas confessed. “I bought a scarf and a dress.”

“Holy shit, Mom! You got more than that.”

“I also got the ring.”

“Ring?”

“The chocolate diamond collection. Brown is in style this year. Everyone needs brown this year. And how special the chocolate brown was! It was a first time offer that was only offered this one time.”

“But still. This doesn't make sense,” he said as he collapsed beside her on the sofa.

“They covered the shipping and handling,” she explained.

“Well, thank our stars!”

“Marjoram, it's all gone!”

Dorcas felt her throat tremble and her eyes sting. She couldn't afford the Caribbean bangle Timothy Bean was flashing before her. Dorcas had worked really hard

to feel accomplished in her jewels and dresses, pants and jackets, watches and brooches. Not that she ever wore them very often. In fact, the majority of her purchases since 1996 still sat in the back of her guest closet. Still in their packaging. If it had just been about finding a sweater or a winter season handbag, then she would have just gone to the mall over in Owensboro. Just “checked out” with some cranky woman in orthopedic shoes. However, in the mall she never had to race another lady for the last one X small petite. There was hardly any work involved. No real purpose. Shopping at the mall just made Dorcas feel shallow and conventional and like she was wasting her time. The cranky woman would just give her disgruntled looks when Dorcas tried to make a comment on the dress. The cranky woman just wanted to get her out of the store so she could get back to flipping out price tags or sorting bow ties or something. She was just another housewife who had nothing better to do than to buy superfluous cocktail dresses and disrupt an otherwise peaceful shift. Dorcas had that unspoken bond with Timothy Bean, though. They were tied together through miles and miles of T.V. waves.

“When are you going to take responsibility for yourself?”

Dorcas didn't know how to react to that. Wasn't that what Lesser had been for? Lesser had told her that she was his queen darling. That once they got married, he would be her king and make her feel pretty and clean and taken care of. All their young promises. She took them to heart. As far as she knew, her job had been to hand over responsibility. Wasn't that what the “happily ever after” meant?

“I do take responsibility for myself,” she replied. “That's what I called you for.”

She didn't look at him as she spoke. Watching Timothy Bean trace his finger down the chevron patterned choker made more sense. He was so tender. So knowing.

Dorcas imagined the necklace circling her throat. The gold may have been cold, but Timothy Bean's fingers should be so warm and soft. She closed her eyes to remember what it was like to be touched.

Marjoram said, "Nope. You're going to find yourself a job."

He left without waiting for supper, and Dorcas was so sad she would've made a red velvet cake if she knew how. She didn't even bother with Timothy Bean. Disgusted with the distorted reflection of herself she saw in the empty face of the television, she went to bed early and was afraid to wake up the next morning.

* * *

Dorcas got into the sapphire Buick with the intention of speeding over to Stratford upon Ohio and proposing to her ex-husband, but she broke into tears before she got out of the driveway. All she could think about was when she was pregnant with Basil, and Lesser would rub cocoa butter all over her stomach. Technically it was a long time ago, but the fingers felt like they just left her skin. She got out of her car because she couldn't even fool herself. The yuccas looked so inviting that she just planted herself in the mulch along with them.

The last thing she expected was for her strange little neighbor to find her, but he did.

"Ms. Lester," he said. "Do you need help with something?"

Dorcas could sense that she was covered in fire-dyed woodchips. She wanted to tell the dark skinned man to leave her alone like everyone else. But she cried, "Yes!" The optometrist studied her, and Dorcas didn't know what to think of that. So she said, "I've been waiting for so long!"

“For what?”

“I don’t even know!”

He helped her to her feet and dusted a few scraps of mulch off her sleeves, studying her as if she were strain of glaucoma. They sat for a while on Dorcas’s porch swing. He seemed to enjoy the whoosh of the swinging as much as she did. This, for some reason, pleased Dorcas. She didn’t want to talk, even though she had a lot she wanted to share, for fear he would run back across the street to his own porch.

“Mrs. Lester, could you do me a favor?” he asked suddenly.

Dorcas was anxious as to what the favor might be, but after sharing a swing with an Indian man, she felt up for anything. “Sure,” she said.

“My wife has been overwhelmed at the office lately. We need another receptionist. Would you be interested in a job?”

She had to admit she was a little disappointed in the favor. Her first inclination was to slam the screen door in his face, but something akin to better judgment got the better of her.

It was to be the first employment of her adult life. Her first job ever, really. For this reason, she was optimistic when she got ready to start her day. She took a two hour shower, used hibiscus shampoo and a pumice stone on her feet, curled her hair with the curling iron. She smiled at herself in the mirror. She was almost proud of the gray streaking through her blonde hair. Running her fingers through the tubular tendrils, Dorcas thought she felt something bubble in her stomach, something that she might even call giddiness. It had been a long, long time since she had folded herself into the throng

of humanity—around people who would actually see her and maybe even depended on her a little bit. However as she assessed her face marbled with fresh wrinkles, she flirted with the idea of being a cog in the clockwork. Feeling like a rivet or a bauble to the machine, she lacquered on a couple layers of passion pink lipstick and smacked her lips for the toothbrush to admire.

Dorcas buckled her Mary-Janes around her ankle, girding them like a gladiator might her sandals before the facing a coliseum of lions. All in all, she felt pretty sharp in her navy dress with faux pearls sticking to her collar bone. Something like Jackie O., that is if Jackie O. ever answered phones or filed files for a strange little optometrist. Regardless, Dorcas slung her white leather purse over her shoulder with flare and got into her car.

Parking the sapphire blue Buick in the small lot, Dorcas didn't feel like an adult, divorced and a mother of men. She was late. She knew she should be grateful for this job. She tried not to hold it against the optometrist that he'd been born in India. Although it felt nice to have people inside the building depending on her, Dorcas couldn't summon the determination to unbuckle her seatbelt. She could still go home. She could call Lesser again, beg him to come home. But she knew that would do no good, really. If she was telling herself the truth, sitting in her car, trembling before her first day of work, Dorcas never felt more real. For once in her life she wasn't compensating for her loneliness or her nervous energy. Yet still, as giddy and dressed up as she was, she still wanted to go home and hide.

Looking out her window, she watched other cars roll down seventy bypass. Mostly pickups and a minivan or two. The minutes ticked away and still Dorcas sat there,

afraid to seize the diem. She admitted to herself that she had no good reason for sitting there either. She just wanted someone to seize it for her so she would bide her time 'til she died. It was the only thing she really knew she could do well. In that building, well-maintained as it was, phones would ring and she would have to answer for them. She would have to put on a face of wellness for people she may not know. And she didn't know if she could manage it. It had never been asked of her before. She felt a little foolish sitting there thinking about her ex-husband and sons who were happier without her around. She was afraid that everyone in that building would feel the same way. It wasn't like she had much to offer in the way of charm or education. She was too old to be attractive.

“Hey, there, Ms. Lester?”

The face in the passenger window made Dorcas jump. Life tapped on the glass, and it looked like her neighbor, the optometrist's wife, Kelley Kanagalas. Dorcas had never seen her neighbor so close up before. She may have been around about the same age as Dorcas, but she was not too old to be attractive. Her complexion was dark, creamy, and well-maintained. Her eyes were dark and a little golden. Dorcas was surprised she liked the look of her. She looked very warm.

“Is everything okay? I saw you pull up, so I got a little worried.”

Dorcas tried to smile. “Oh, well, yeah. I was coming. It's just that I lost my gum,” she said although she never chewed gum.

“Okay, well, whenever you're ready. We've got a busy day, I'm afraid.”

Kelley was just outside the car, but Dorcas felt like she was miles away. She had a sudden respect for the neighbor who she always thought was poisonous or something.

She didn't know what. That woman could do stuff like tap on windows and answer phones. Dorcas thought maybe, just maybe she could too. It couldn't hurt to try, she supposed. Kelley made her feel a little brave and willing.

Getting out of the car, Dorcas called to her beautiful neighbor as she went back inside the office. "Coming! I don't think I need gum after all."

Kelley held open the door for Dorcas. "You look very nice. That's a gorgeous outfit! I could never pull something like that off."

Dorcas didn't know why, but she blushed. Not knowing what to do with her hands, she brushed off imaginary lint. "Thanks. I got it off the home shopping network."

"You'll have to take me shopping sometime, Ms. Lester."

"You can call me Dorcas. I think you would look very nice in something green."

Dorcas thought she may have a friend.

A Well Meaning Marionette

When the timer finally went off, he thrust the orange stick through the slot of the Easy-Bake Oven to push the little metal pan to Whitefeather waiting with oven mitts on the other side.

“Careful, dearie. It’s rather hot,” an eleven-year-old Perry told his friend.

“Oh, quite so, old chap!” White said as he dexterously maneuvered the little pan to the kids’ table.

“Blighmey! This bugger’s perfect!”

Perry marveled at the shapely brown mound cresting over the pan.

“Not bad at all,” White said out of respect for the light bulb roasted cake.

The summer of 1992 made a great impression on the boys. White’s sister, Yani-Appletree, was sentenced to a morning of cheerleading camp at the high school, leaving White and Perry to sate their curiosity of her room and its troves of interesting, pastel treasures. For reasons they could not explain, other than because Yani had told them not to and threatened them with the police, they would steal away to the attic to play with her surgeon Barbie, ballroom Ken, and their contemporaries. Maybe it was the thrill of the secrecy or maybe from fear of Yani suddenly popping in and finding them apron-clad and baby cradling? Regardless, the dust coated clutter of the Kanagalas attic provided the boys with the sanctuary.

“Perry, darling, would you kindly blow on the cake ‘fore I cut it?” White asked as he wiped the blade of the pocket knife.

“Hey, that’s my knife. I think it’s high time I cut the cake!”

Perry was agitated with White for hogging his new pocket knife. Although the pocket knife in and of itself was not new. His pappy had just given it to him last week. It was a Case with a mother of pearl, small Texas toothpick handle and a long clip blade. It was made in the U.S.A., and Perry loved his knife.

“I thought you were too scared to use it.” White closed the blade and stroked the slick, pocket-polished handle like a maestro warming up his baton.

“No, no, no. That’s where you’re wrong. My pappy used that knife to unscrew all the screws of his submarine ship in the Cold World War Three in the Navy in the moon landing. He saved Neil Young and fifty of his men from the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. My pappy gave that knife to me because I’m eleven now, and I’ll be enlisting in the draft soon. So I need that knife.”

In truth, he just wanted to clobber White, feel what it must be like to have the bones and muscle beneath him. However, he knew all too well how that fight would go. White had three inches and nine pounds on him, according to the bathroom scale.

“No. You mix the cake. I cut the cake. Besides, Edmund Fitzgerald was lost in paradise. And Neil Young won the Nobel Prize for goalkeeping,” White said, cleaving to his mini cleaver.

“Freaks!” Yani’s voice ricocheted in thunder against the old timbers of the attic. “You freaks! Get away from my stuff! Freaks! Leave my stuff alone! Do you hear me? Why won’t you ever listen?” she continued to cry.

White dropped the knife, and Perry was too stricken to pick it up for himself. He never knew hurricanes could look like a cubby girl in soft pink shorts.

“What?”

“Hey, you can’t take to my friend like that!”

“Never go into my room again! Never go into my room again!”

Tears began to well behind her eyes, but before anything happened she grabbed up all her dolls and ovens and slammed the door. This left the boys dumbfounded.

“Geez, she always gets like this after that cheerleading stuff.”

“Ug. Then why does she go?”

“Something about that’s what girls are supposed to do. She comes home and yells at me for being in her room. I don’t care when she’s in mine. I just want to know what kinds of things go on in rooms with pink. Why aren’t we allowed?” White’s lip trembled, but he did not divert his eyes from Perry’s.

The knife wasn’t worth fighting for anymore, and Perry just wanted his friend to know that it was okay if he needed to cry if he felt ashamed and didn’t know why. The best thing he could think was to tell him about the dead man who died.

“You know, my dad told me that someone *died* in this house,” he said, hoping the chubby girl in the soft pink shorts could be forgotten.

“What?” White asked. “How did they die?” White came over and sat down with Perry at the kids’ play table. He discreetly wiped his nose with the back of a little brown hand that Perry wanted to hold.

“Okay,” Perry began. “Once upon a time, a long, long, long time ago... maybe three or eight... probably seventeen years ago... the Temples lived here.”

* * *

Vickers Temple came home from the funeral not knowing whether to feel sad or thankful. He pensively rubbed his belly as he surveyed the empty house, lit only by the

twilight filtering in through the curtains. The food was good. He knew that for sure. He wondered if he should be ashamed of how hungry he was. Hadn't he often heard that people don't eat for weeks after someone dies? Is it a custom in some far away, more spiritual place to fast? His stomach spoke louder than any other voice, so he followed its advice.

Feigning respect for the dead, he tiptoed to the kitchen. Folks had been dropping by all week leaving dishes and plates and Tupperwares of all shapes and sizes. Despite being refrigerated, the glow emanating around the casseroles was warm and ethereal. He allowed himself a guiltless sigh of pleasure looking at the haloed food. Vickers bet he was the only son to have ever survived his mother's death to believe his supper was closer to heaven than the dearly departed. It was as he filled his plate with chicken á la king that he decided *Yes, yes. I am glad she's gone.* And for the first time in thirty-two years Vickers Temple enjoyed a meal. He ate the mushy glop cold, and he ate it by the angelic beams of the refrigerator. Sitting there at the kitchen table, Vickers finally felt peace. Alone. He was finally alone.

But now that he was alone, he hardly knew what to do with himself. He figured for starters he could shut the refrigerator door. Although he would miss the cold air breathing down his neck. It was refreshing. He stood in front of the open door a few seconds before he put the chicken á la king back into the labyrinth of polite sympathy. The gentle hum of the fridge could have been an angel choir. He shut the door with a little regret on his way to the sink. Running some water over the plate, he squirted yellow dish liquid on the sponge. Wipe. Wipe. Round. Round. Get the back for good measure.

Rinse for ten seconds. Clean. He had a similar routine for the fork. Only abbreviated. It was only a fork, after all.

What was the pattern on this? No, Vickers, no. We don't care what the pattern on the fork is. It is just a thin metal thing that you use to eat with. We don't care if it's Michelangelo. Or Saint Dunstan. Don't look at the flowers and try to figure it out.

Mommy Person would know. Ask Mommy Person... Wait you can't ask Mommy Person anymore, can you? No, Vickers, no. Mommy Person is gone. Oh, well...

We don't need Mommy Person. No, we don't, no.

Vickers willed himself to put the fork back into its drawer without looking at the intermingling of flatware. It was very difficult considering the gross pluralism going on inside his silverware drawer.

You want to sort them, dear. They need it, too. Look! What is Royal Danish doing with King Edward? They don't belong together. No, they don't, no. Only you can fix them now, Vickers. You know what Mommy Person would do if she saw them. How did you let it get this way...?

Vickers, who went the whole funeral without shaming himself before the New Castle high society, erupted into tears before the silverware drawer. Piece by piece he took out the silverware and sat with it on the kitchen floor as the night snuffed out all light. Salad forks, soup spoons, butter knives surrounding his sorry, slovenly form, as he arranged them according to design, size, and race. The next question would be whether or not he should dig out the silver polish. His mother loved polished silver. Oh, she would be so pleased if she stumbled into the kitchen and saw him polishing the silver.

No! No! Oh, no! Vickers why are you on the floor? This filthy, dirty floor! So many filthy, dirty feet have walked on this floor! You don't want the ropes, do you? Didn't you see those nasty loafers Matilda Powers was wearing when she brought over those cupcakes? You know she had been stomping around that nasty house of hers. And now you're getting that Powers filth all over the beautiful silver? The beautiful silver Mommy Person took years and years to collect! Look at what Mommy Person did when her mother died. Did she sit around blubber about? No, Vickers, no. She harassed Auntie Belle and Auntie June until she got all the silver. And the table with the marble top. And the Waterford. For shame, Vickers. Shame. You know better than to sit around carrying on like this. Now that Mommy Person is gone you have all this new found liberty? No, Vickers, no.

Realizing even in death he was still her marionette, Vickers found a new wellspring of terror. It was different—sharper—than what he had known when his mother was still here. As if her voice still found a way into his head, willing him to the ropes.

He tried closing his eyes. Maybe if he couldn't see the silver organized into sweet little stacks of spoons, forks, knives. Sweet little silver moons orbiting his bulbous, planetary body. *I'm on a beach. We're not hanging by her strings. We're on Lake Superior. There are no ropes. Just pebbles. Cool breeze. Free, like we always wanted to feel.* Vickers also tried taking some deep breaths, which helped like always. He wiped his tears and blew his snotty nose on the sleeve of his nice yellow shirt, and he felt a little better. *No voice. No voice, no, no.*

Vickers heaved himself up off the floor. Washed the silverware. Polished it in peace at the table. Although he spent six hours at the task and didn't head to bed until midnight, he had turned on the lights at least. Working under the dim kitchen light almost made him feel content. The bird clock chirped merrily as the hours flew in and out of his corner of the antebellum house. He even decided that bird clock was okay now that his mother was gone. At ten and eleven he even whistled as the bird chirped the hours. The finch and robin hours, respectively. *I think I'm gonna be okay.* Vickers decided that he was okay in the house without his mother haunting his every step. As he lay his head down finally, as the midnight bird, the crow, croaked down the time. Twelve chirps. Twelve months in a year. Twelve days of Christmas. Twelve apostles for Jesus. Everything was okay.

Vickers lulled himself daydreaming about being a skylark or something that could fly too high to be reached. Anything to keep out those other opinions. Those other nagging, suffocating opinions that wanted to hang about him like shadows or ghosts.

Fly north to Michigan. Fly north to the atmosphere. Fly north to Mars.

Isn't that romantic? Why not fly to the moon?

Vickers tried to snub the giggles that were building up behind his brain, pinching his spine. Anxious to erupt. The giggles made his heart race. His flannel pjs began to prickle against his skin like horsehair rope.

He could now definitely hear the giggles. They broke through in a whisper.

Only to fall back to earth and be pummeled to death.

Hahahaha! Can you sleep suspended?

* * *

“I can’t believe you screamed!” Perry said, forcing his laughter longer than what he actually felt.

“Lar. Lar. Lar. Okay, okay, I screamed. But it was because of the moon. We Indians revere the moon,” White said, indignant.

“Huh? That’s bogus. You’re only half Indian.”

Perry knew his friend was just a little embarrassed.

“Nu-uh! I’m half Indian and half Indian. My dad came from New Delhi and met my mom at the reservation in Oklahoma. My grandparents are still there! That makes me whole Indian. You’re just jealous because you don’t even know where your parents came from,” White said.

“Jealous! That doesn’t even make sense! I’m German and Swiss. One half shepherd and one half cheese.”

White tried not to laugh. Perry shined the greatest when his friend was feeling down.

“You’re my best friend, Perry.”

“You’re my best friend, too, White.”

“Hey, Perry?”

“Yeah, White?”

“Why do people say boys can’t cry?”

* * *

On the morning after his mother’s funeral, Vickers knew he couldn’t stay in that house any longer. All night long the walls groaned and the ceiling cackled, and he thought he saw the floor ripple. *Surely the floors didn’t really ripple, though.* He decided

it must have just been his weary eyes playing tricks. Floors don't ripple. Ceilings don't make giggling noises. And the walls were only groaning because this was an old house. That was perfectly normal. His great-great-great-grandfather built this house to keep the white folk safe from the darkness outside.

Vickers never really understood what that meant. That was just what his mother would say: The darkness, Vickers. Protect your mommy from the darkness. Then she would lick his face and tell him he was sweeter than honey. Sweeter than Clorox. So sweet she could just bite off his head and bake him in the oven to keep the ants from running all over his body and eating him up before Mommy could get a bite in. "You'd taste so sweet with a side of cauliflower, Vickers. Mommy's sweet boy. Yes, Vickers, yes."

He shuddered in remembrance of her. But the house disagreed, and the wooden floorboards hummed and whispered as he walked atop them on his way to his chest of drawers. Vickers felt her around him. There in the house. Like she possessed it. He tried to throttle her out of his brain. Tried to focus on the task of laying out all the clothes he would need for his trip.

Where you going, Vickers? Do you really know? How is sweet Vickers going to get there without Mommy Person? Mommy Person would hold your hand. Comb your hair. Look at your hair without Mommy Person! The outside doesn't like a chubby Vickers with messy hair. They laugh at a chubby Vickers with messy hair. Don't you think you should stay here close to Mommy Person?

We'll be happy on Lake Superior. We'll be free as a bird and fresh as a daisy. Clear water licking our toes. The rolling water applauding when we approach and waving as we leave. No ropes to hold us back anymore. No ropes.

The house shuddered, and Vickers could feel the angst. But he cleared his throat and managed to ignore the guilt wringing in his stomach. As long as he focused on his packing.

Vickers stacked his shirts in neat little piles, three shirts high, next to his pressed slacks, three slacks high. Although he was estimating how many clothes he would need, he felt he was fairly well prepared. Next he stacked underdrawers. Then socks. And he laid out the outfit he would put on after his shower. His refreshing shower. One that could possibly wash away the voices and the peeping. Vickers laid out his only pair of denims, then his brown suede blazer over that. It was summertime, and the outside blistered beneath the fervent sun. But Vickers wanted to come across as a sharp dresser. He nestled into the brown blazer the reddest red shirt he could find in his wardrobe. Red like the tulips in the garden that had all died by now. At the bottom of his denims he carefully laid his socks, placing them pointing forward, as if there should be feet filling them. He liked to arrange his clothes across his bed like a man had melted and gone away forever. Vickers wished it wasn't true that men melted and left women adrift, but that's what his mother taught him. Hope against hope, Vickers didn't want to melt.

Finally, he pulled out his valise. The leather was cracked, and dust festered within the lacerations. Vickers hadn't seen the old valise since he was young and his mother brought him back to New Castle with her. He lived with his grandparents in Stratford Upon Ohio and was happy while his mother went looking for the daddy he didn't know

he had. That was too long ago, but the horrible tears and touches kept house with them. “You won’t leave Mommy like Daddy did. No, Vickers, no.” So she hid the valise in Vickers’s closet.

Vickers made an attempt at a brave chuckle, recalling the past to which he would not be roped. He almost felt happy packing his valise. He wanted to see America and make a friend. However, the house throbbed and raged against it. Vickers headed to the shower anyway. He had the intention of jumping in and out like a frog or the men in Vietnam, or so he imagined. Cronkite said they were pulling out, pulling out, but part of Vickers wished he could have gone to Vietnam. All the crawling around Victor and Charlie. Whoever they were, they almost sounded pleasant when Vickers watched it on the news after his mother went to bed. He tried to imagine himself there in Vietnam. Exotic plants and people. If his mother would only have let him go, he would have had a great time with other boys. Vickers never got to play with other boys. Only Mommy Person. Vickers was only allowed to play with Mommy Person because men melt and leave women lonely. For twenty some odd years Vickers tried not to melt and be a “man,” as if he knew what that meant.

The house shuddered, and he realized he wasn’t alone in the bathroom. Although he tried locking the door, it hadn’t kept her out. She was there in the walls, in the carpet and the tile, in the plaster on the ceiling. He knew it was her. It could only be her. Vickers knew he should be surprised when the electric wires and the pipes for the plumbing bubbled and gushed like neurons and capillaries, but he was only frightened. Just like she told him not to be, yet just like she wanted him to be. Even the showerhead was spitting mad.

When Vickers stepped into the shower, the water resisted and clogged itself up. The house was obstinate. He thought the water wanted to come, so he tried arguing with the walls. *Please. Please. I won't be long. I won't even use the hot.* This prayer appeared to appease the house, as it gave a resentful sigh, and the water sputtered out in irregular squirts. It was arctic cold. He convinced himself to linger there awhile, contemplating his trip north to American and the Lake Superior, letting the pins and needles harass his skin. *I'm going. I'm going.* Vickers decided he would be brave enough to leave the house.

He pretended the house wasn't watching him. He reached for the shampoo and tried to mimic a yawn. But the house saw through him, and the showerhead withheld its water. He gave the showerhead an *ahem. I know you're just an old house. Someone will come along and treat you with respect and dignity. I think it's time I moved on. Please?* The water roared within the arteries of the wall, obstinate. Vickers shifted his weight, uncertain of what to do with shampoo and soap mummifying his body.

We're not going to let her embarrass us. Try the sink.

So Vickers tried the sink. But again, the water hissed at him from behind the faucet.

Remember the commode? Mommy Person would wash you in the commode. It feels so good to... That soap is starting to itch. Like the ants. Remember the ants?

Mommy Person is gone. We don't have to wash in the commode anymore. No, no.

Vickers's heart milled against the bars of his ribcage. The bathroom walls could hear it, and the plaster on the bathroom walls popped and giggled at his expense.

Commode, Vickers. Use the commode.

The water held its breath, waiting, hopeful. The eyes of the house prickled more than the shampoo. The walls laughed at all the suds running off his fleshy body, soaking the bathmat. Vickers wrung his hands, flailed them, and then squeezed them into fists, as if he was going to box the walls. A pressure welled up against his lids. Like little knives. The salt poked and prodded, determined to have its way with him.

Mommy Person washed you in the commode not too long ago. Isn't that right, Vickers. You didn't seem to resist so much then. Be a good boy. Wash off in the commode.

Vickers felt an egg crack inside his gut. The tiny pieces of shell shrapnel lodged into his stomach, trembling like little moths with razor blade wings. The cold yoke snaking down into his spleen caused him to fidget. He tried to fool the eyes of the house by running to the toilet to vomit. But the house knew just as well as he did. Vickers lifted the lid then the rim. He bowed before the toilet, cupped the water like he would take a drink. Then poured it over his head, baptizing himself in the name of the shower, the sink, and the holy commode. He sighed then the house sighed, and although the showerhead and the faucet finally relaxed their clinched water, Vickers would only christen himself with the toilet water. Like a good boy should. He splashed water under the volumes of fat around his stomach, down his thighs and across his back. Slowly he washed away the suds from his body. Finally he dunked his whole head in the pink commode and let the water run down. Just for good measure. The water fell into his mouth and caused his eyes to burn, but he felt clean and purified. He mopped the floor up and dried himself with the wet towel. He flushed the commode on his way out before the house could pester him about it.

Vickers quickly dressed himself in the melted man's clothes, grabbed his valise, and dashed down the stairs before the house could articulate itself. He made it to the front door before the voice found its mark.

Breakfast? Eat some breakfast. Stay. Eat. Heart and Stomach ache.

Vickers's hand pumped the golden doorknob for strength. The air licked his hesitation and latched on.

You'll be hungry later.

We can eat anywhere. Never mind the cherry pie and the shepherd's pie.

Mommy Person warned you against the grumbles. The grumbles. Nobody likes a grumbler. Have some pie. Have some breakfast.

His stomach was grumbling. But out of principle, he quit the house without eating. Not after the commode incident. He loved to eat. So it was something of a sacrifice. Regardless of how hungry he was or would become, Vickers could amble downtown boasting some sense of accomplishment and triumph. That boosted his spirits enough to save him from crumbling into hysterics when he locked the door. And walked past the well. *It is well. My soul. My soul.* He did feel a chill squirm beneath his skin, causing gooseflesh to pucker across his neck and arms.

* * *

“Have you ever wanted to be a girl?” White asked.

“I’ve just wondered how sweetheart pink feels against my skin. Do you think they wonder what it’s like to stand in the bathroom?” Perry didn’t expect an answer.

“Have you ever wanted to be what they call a ‘Hottentot’?”

“I think we have to watch out for extremes, man.”

“But haven’t you ever wondered what Venus prays to?”

“Only Mars.”

“Who ever told you about extremes?” White asked.

* * *

If there was anything Vickers knew about New Castle, it was the bus station. He watched it every day from the front window of the antique shop where he worked. Big, long silver buses with that skinny dog-creature running on the side. The buses reminded him of a candy bar, pristine in its wrapper. Sometimes, though, there would be a customer, usually an old lady with pink or lemony hair who only came in because they felt sorry for his mother. He would miss the bus stop at its downtown station because of them. He loathed those ladies. They called him “sweetheart young man” and paid only in their husband’s pension. He wanted to smash the old lady’s china teapot against the counter and tell her to never come back. But that would be incredibly rude. Besides, another bus would round the courthouse corner before too much longer, and he would watch that one with a rejuvenated appreciation.

All the filing off and filing on. People trading seats with folks they would probably never meet. The ones coming off might walk down the block to the courthouse with their head hanging low, feigning invisibility over invincibility. And maybe it did, but Vickers saw them and watched them until they climbed the marble stairs of justice into the courthouse where they really did disappear. Others would walk with more purpose. They would throw their bodies into Main Street traffic in order to cross onto the boulevard where Vickers’s antique shop was. However, they wouldn’t usually be risking

their lives to come into Vickers's shop. Typically, they would be dodging cars out of some act of desperate hunger. One of those forms of survival of the fittest or something. That's how Vickers reasoned it anyway.

Flanking Vickers's antique shop were the Magpie's Castle-town Delicatessen and PopPop's Good Foods and Cold Drinks. Vickers made a point to not play favorites and frequent both restaurants with unbiased regularity. However, his favorite was PopPop's, but he would never tell Mag that. Mag was short for Margaret, and she had been a friend of his mother's whenever his mother was young and lovely and thought she could melt with the men. Mag, who married a man with the last name Stein, would often ask how his mother would be doing. He would tell her just fine. Then she would say something inside her head and give him an oatmeal cookie "on the house." Vickers liked Mag and the oatmeal cookie in an all right, pitiful way.

That day, the day after his mother's body was hidden underground, when Vickers walked downtown with the intention of ignoring his antique shop, he wondered if he should tell Mag goodbye. *Decidedly not.* He didn't want to create a scene. She might convince him to go back home. Force feed him ideas about home insurance or mourning periods. Like she roped him into her cookies. He would not be roped any longer, so he decided. He avoided that side of Main Street all together and flew to the bus station, as swift and straight as William Tell's arrow.

The interior of the terminal was surprisingly bright. For some reason or another Vickers expected the station to be ablaze with the warmth and intimacy of candlelight. Disappointed, he thought the florescent lights were nice as they made everything so evident and clear. He felt as though he stumbled into a blue bottle. Everything was so

glossy inside. The floors looked like pristine slabs of polished alabaster. The ticket counters were flawless obsidian, most of which flooded with fellow travelers.

He picked the longest line so he could savor the notion of humanity and flight. As if his valise could empathize and squeeze back in either reassurance or enthusiasm, Vickers tightened his grip around the handle. He felt something like Walt Whitman on a good day, and he had to suppress the desire to press his body into the throng surrounding him. *I hear the sound I love, the sound of human voice. I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused...* And Vickers didn't know who to watch—the bald, bespectacled man seated under the clock caress and read and reread his ticket or the bearded man in front of him scratching the skin constricted by his sock or the young, long haired man waiting outside the women's room, chewing and grooming his fingernails. Vickers didn't want to play favorites, so he watched them all not thinking their moments to be private.

“Where to, sir?” the girl asked. “Oh! It's Vickers Temple! Where are you going?”

Her voice caught him off guard. She sounded like a mermaid, or at least how Vickers imagined a mermaid to sound. He did not recognize her and had no experience talking to mermaids and consequently was at a loss on how to answer her. But he was pleased she knew him from somewhere. *Lost. We're drowning...Vickers.* Her long blonde hair draped across her shoulder in a suggestively thick braid. Vickers wanted to take that mermaid hair and see if it tasted like the sea or bread. At that thought, he wished he hadn't worn his brown suede blazer after all. *So hot. Like we're boiling...Vickers?*

“Going?” he answered, confused. Disoriented. *Why am I carrying my valise?*

“You must be going somewhere, Vickers. You’re in a bus station, silly. I’m glad you finally came in, too, even though I’m sure sorry to see you leave.”

He wished he knew where she knew him from as she leaned forward, her forearms pressing into the ticket counter. The top of her blouse opened its maw. Vickers tried not to peek, but it was summertime and the buttons were undone.

He didn’t know what to say other than, “Yeah, I know that. Sorry, ma’am, I thought it would be a funny joke. Guess not.”

He wasn’t prepared for this.

“Oh!” She gave a bubbly giggle. “That’s funny. You got me!”

She giggled like a bursting bubble, continuing to lean across the counter. Vickers didn’t know if he was imagining things or not, but he thought she may be pitching herself forward, towards him of all people. He caught her eyes. Cerulean. They were a blue he wanted to get to know, and she smiled like a friend.

“I’m going to Lake Superior, ma’am,” Vickers said, packing confidence into his consonants because he thought she might like that.

His voice rang louder than what he was used to. This made his cheeks heat up. But the mermaid girl didn’t seem to mind. She even pouted a little.

“That’s far away, sir.”

“Well, that’s the beach for you.”

She did that bubble giggle again. Vickers wished he knew where this wit was coming from because he liked making a mermaid laugh.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I need you to be more specific. I don’t think we have a bus that runs straight into Lake Superior. Actually, I don’t think we have a bus that runs outside of

Kentucky. I'm afraid the best I can do is sell you a ticket to Louisville. Then you can go from there."

Vickers's heart sank a little hearing her talk so indifferently about his departure.

"Okay," he said reaching into his blazer for his Velcro wallet.

She handed him one ticket to Louisville, leaving at eleven forty-five. Vickers was beginning to feel a bit of remorse for his impulses. The mermaid must have sensed this.

"Hey, I just got a radical idea!" the mermaid sang handing him back his change.

"I go on break in at ten thirty. Wanna grab some lunch?"

Vickers's heart perked back up and forgot to beat for a few seconds. "Sure, I'm hungry, sure!"

"Okay! See you at Magpie's?"

* * *

"How are boys allowed to love?" White asked discretely.

"Are boys not people?"

White closed his eyes and whispered something in Perry's ear. It could've been a secret of the things man could build, but Perry didn't listen for fear it was. Still, Perry *wanted* to speak of love and some of the other enigmas.

"I can touch you here, and it would be okay," Perry said, pressing his finger to White's throat, causing his friend to choke.

"But I could touch you here, and it would be terrible," White said, pressing his lips to Perry's throat, causing his friend to choke.

"Who made these extremes?"

"Martians behind Venusian blinds."

* * *

Vickers forgot all about the ticket poking out of the front pocket of his blazer while they ate their respective lunches.

“You know what I like best about working at a bus station?” she asked.

Vickers slurped his tap water.

“I’ll just tell you,” she said before Vickers could figure out a clever way to ask “what.” “The best thing about working at a bus station is that you’re a part of everybody’s trip. Like, I’m always on the road without ever leaving New Castle.”

Vickers thought that was rather special. He thought she was a rather special girl. She insisted on being called “Ayesha.” “We ought to have the right to name ourselves” is how she explained it. Evidently, that’s what you just do in this day in age. Vickers didn’t understand that much, but he went along with it and called her Ayesha since she didn’t give him any other option.

“So, are you gone to look for America?” Ayesha asked with a smirk, pushing her braid off her shoulder.

It was laced with blue ribbons. Vickers was sorry to see it disappear behind her back. The ribbons reminded him of seaweed, causing him to stammer.

“You know, it could take you to four days hitchhike from Saginaw. That’s in Michigan, right? The Great Lakes?” A laugh twitched behind her lips.

“I don’t know much about Saginaw, myself,” Vickers said apologetically.

Ayesha bubbled. “No, Vickers, no! It’s a song. Don’t you listen to music?”

Vickers thought that was an odd thing to ask. Mag was giving them an off putting look.

“I play the harp from time to time.”

“Oh! You’re a string man, then?” she asked.

“The harp does have strings,” he could consent.

Vickers thought that was pretty obvious, actually. He was afraid to tell her that he hated playing the harp. His mother would press her skeletal body into his as she taught him to play. Her bones stabbed his skin like blunt knives. She would mash his fingers into the strings. “Play pretty for Mommy, Vickers. Sweet and pretty. Mommy’s stringy song bird. Yes, Vickers, yes. Mommy’s stringy song bird.” Then she would rest her head on his shoulder. Her hair smelling damp and musky like the well in their yard when his forefathers drew their water.

“Oh, Vickers! I would love to hear you play! It’s only eleven. I don’t go back to work for another half hour. I love the harp. So romantic!” Ayesha exclaimed.

Vickers was hesitant. He never played the harp without his mother. He didn’t even know if he could without her fingers over his. But Vickers was feeling confident there in Mag’s restaurant with the mermaid Ayesha ogling him with her cerulean eyes. Clear as any great lake. Mag hovered behind the deli counter like a smoked angel. Something like sadness or dread prickling in her eyes. Vickers preferred those expectant, engulfing eyes, which engulfed him from across his booth. He was weary of being governed by sadness. He wanted to be happy and see America and maybe make a friend. He thought may even have chance.

“Okay,” Vickers said.

His voice came out louder and more assured than he had heard before. “I have a harp next door at my shop.”

“Is that so?”

Vickers nodded, thinking she didn't sound as surprised. But what did he know about mermaids and other deep things? So he emphatically picked up the tab. He had never expected his harp playing to be his way into society. And not just society, but this Ayesha, who Vickers led to his shop, the Somewhere in Time Temple. His mother insisted on their name being added to the sign. He didn't really have much say in the matter. She kept his father's name in the business, despite the grief.

“I've always admired your shop, Vickers,” Ayesha said as he unlocked the door. Her hand rested on his shoulder.

For probably the first time, he was proud to switch on the lights. It even crossed his mind to take her hand. The lights sputtered slightly as they coughed up their beams. The harp lorded in the back. It hadn't been touched in years, the wood and strings a virgin again. *Has the music been sacrificed to the mice? Could God give you more?* Vickers couldn't tell his beautiful mermaid she would have to be cast out without a little farewell tribute. He could summon a hymn for the mermaid that touched his shoulder. For her the world and Vickers began to wonder if this was what they called “living.” As Vickers navigated around shelves of dusty Depression glass and crates of stained, molting dolls, his skin trembled and twitched. The mermaid girl clipped his heels as she followed, her warm breath on his neck, her chest brushing his back. He felt his blood rush, and he flushed.

They were almost past the last citadel of rosy-cheeked Hummel people when Ayesha exclaimed, “Oh! And what are these sweet little boys!”

Vickers choked on his own breath. He turned around to see it was only his marionette collection, which he took especial pride in. Those sweet little boys had been his playmates. He loved his sweet little playmates. They were on sale for a minimum of fifty thousand dollars apiece. Fifty million for the set.

“Why are they so expensive?” Ayesha asked, picking one up.

Vickers found it curious that she selected Mr. Grover Dancingpants, his favorite. She cradled him like a baby, his wooden legs dangling over her frail arms.

“Where are their strings, Vickers?”

She gave him an accusing glare. *No guilt, Vickers. No. No.*

“Because I cut them off,” he said simply.

Ayesha sat Mr. Grover Dancingpants back down, smoothing out his tuxedo jacket and cummerbund. Mr. Grover Dancingpants always reminded Vickers of a soldier in the French Foreign Legion. Vickers could plainly see her accusation.

“And just why did you do that?” she asked.

“Because they would get tangled up when I threw them down the stairs.”

Vickers didn’t know why this needed to be explained.

“And why did you do that?”

“So they could move. They wanted to see America.”

“Marionettes belong on strings, Vickers. That’s what makes them good little boys.”

Mr. Grover Dancingpants gave Vickers a sympathetic look.

“The harp’s right over here. If you’ll follow me this way, Ayesha.”

He made a point to call her by her preferred name in hopes of smoothing over the mutilated marionette.

“Oh no! It’s missing six of its strings. You can’t play this harp. How old is it anyway?”

Vickers resisted a shudder.

“It’s my mother’s cross-strung harp. I guess it’s probably sixty years or something. I have another one just like it at home.”

“Oh! Is that so! I’m not going back until I hear you play.”

Vickers was oddly thankful for the opportunity to show Ayesha to the house. He wanted the house to see he could get by just fine. And he could move and do what he wanted. He expected the house to grumble and groan, for the walls to trimmer and the floor to snap and crackle. Vickers was anxious to show off this beautiful creature he might call his first friend. His very own guest, despite it all.

However, he was surprised to find that the house purred and sighed when Ayesha stepped inside. This made Vickers’s stomach drop.

“Ah! It feels so nice in here!” she exclaimed as she dashed into the kitchen like she had lived there all her life.

She yanked open the silverware drawer.

“Excellent, excellent, Vickers, excellent! The silver is just like Mommy would want it.”

Although her groping through his silverware unnerved him, Vickers had to admit he was proud of his late night’s work.

“Have you ever felt pretty, Vickers?” she asked, running her fingers over the silverware.

He wanted to answer in honesty. “I made my mother feel pretty.”

“Is that true?”

“I tried to make my mother feel pretty.”

“Was she pretty?”

“Her name was Ophelia.”

“Oh. Drowned?” Ayesha asked knowingly.

“The harp is in the drawing room. Over here,” Vickers directed. He didn’t need to nod.

He tried guiding her, but she left him standing in the dining room and darted up the stairs to the second floor where he lived. He followed her instead.

“I needed to see the powder room, Vickers,” she explained. From behind the shut the door he heard, “Everything seems to be fastidious. Yes, yes.”

“Would you like a tour?” he offered.

Vickers was surprised that the house was acting so polite. As long as the mermaid Ayesha was pleased, though. That’s all that really mattered.

“Yes, Vickers, yes! Let’s start at the top and work our way down,” she said, clapping her hands together.

He led her to the third floor where his mother used to live.

“Why are we stopping?” she asked, fidgeting a bit.

“This is the top floor,” Vickers explained.

“No, Vickers, no. The very top. I need to see the attic. Let us see the attic, yes?”

Vickers had to admit that was rather unsettling. He dreaded the attic. The ropes hung in the attic. The ropes made Vickers's heart scream. Vickers hated the ropes.

Maybe. Maybe if Vickers faced the ropes one last time? Yes? No?

Ayesha marched ahead. Her feet thundered against the floor, causing Vickers's nerves to tremble. The house almost seemed to hug the lithe figure, the walls bowing slightly inward around the hall.

“Are you coming, Vickers? I don't have much longer until I go back. Not much longer, Vickers! Come, come, Vickers. Come.”

Vickers hurried after her, the floor creaking little pops of laughter. *I'm not scared of the attic or the ropes. I'll prove. Just wait and see.* As they climbed the attic stairs, he decided would face them for Ayesha and show that the ropes didn't matter anymore. She swung the attic door open revealing the dark walls swaddled in sinister, remembering dust. *Deep nose breaths. Deep breaths.* He cleared his throat, but that didn't keep his hands from shaking.

There were a number of marvels of a kinder time kept in the attic, which his mother wanted to keep out of sight. Like her lace dress that turned yellow where it used to be white and pure. And his father's love letters, tattered and tangled from misuse, compounded with time. But, Ayesha ignored all the trunks and boxes.

“What are these, Vickers?” she asked innocently enough, fingering the two ropes slung over the main support beam of the house.

Vickers girded himself against the deluge of lurid memories that marauded his brain. Memories of a boy waiting for happiness and a father to come home. Memories of a melted man waiting for America and great lakes of a kinder place. Hanging to make a

mommy type of person stop crying. *Stop the crying. It's drowning us all. Are you still frightened of the ropes? After all this time? Surely not. Surely not.*

“Umm... Want me to show you?” Vickers offered, relieved that Ayesha’s face brightened with a hopeful smile.

“Yes, Vickers, yes! Please show me!”

The old ropes hung low from the rafters, latent and limp like sleeping vipers. Vickers remembered all too well how that thick hemp felt around his wrists and ankles. Sunlight trickled in from the small, hexagonal window, illuminating the ropes like a spotlight.

Be a brave boy, now. It will make her happy. Happy.

Vickers shucked his brown suede blazer and his socks and shoes. He folded his blazer, his socks, and placed them over his shoes for safe keeping.

“Ayesha, you’re gonna have to help me,” Vickers said as he lay prostrate, belly-down across the tall stool that waited under the ropes.

“So I tie this rope around your wrists and this around your ankles?”

She sounded as if she had it all figured out.

“That’s right.”

“And then I pull the stool out?” she asked knowingly.

Vickers tried to sound calm. “Then I’ll just hang here.”

Ayesha bound his wrists, wrapping twice around, pulling the end through the first loop, then the second, pulling as tight as she could. Vickers winched as the rope seared into his flesh. She made another loop up and under. She yanked twice for good measure.

“Oh! The rope is like new!”

Then she tied his ankles just the same. Vickers's limbs bowed back slightly, his joints clicking and sinews popping. Just as he remembered. He made an attempt at a chuckle.

"Taa daa! Just like a marionette," he said weakly, suspended above the stool.

Ayesha laughed, too, with strength and vigor. She unraveled the ribbons from her braid, her hair fell down to her waist. Her face haloed in gold. She smiled as she reinforced the rope ends with the ribbon. Four ribbons for four limbs. She laughed with conviction as she kicked the stool over. It clattered to the floor. Vickers tried not to panic, but he couldn't stop the thunder inside his chest.

"Tell me. How did Mommy die, Vickers?"

Her cerulean eyes bore into him with an eerie, scorching familiarity. He felt an explosion crack behind his ribs. He thought it may be his spine, but through the numbness he couldn't tell.

"Yes, in the well, yes. That watery abyss. Tell me. Tell me. You can see the well outside the window, can't you? You said she fell in. But no, Vickers, no. That wasn't true. She didn't just fall and drown. No, no. You listened to that bad voice. That bad voice that Mommy warned you about. It told you to push Mommy. Then you stayed and watched Mommy drown. You watched her bloat up with that well water. Watched! You watched her turn blue. And you didn't even try to help Mommy out. You disobeyed her. Disobeyed."

Her voice rattled the walls, and her eyes spilled tears. Vickers gasped for air, wrenching against the ropes. *No use*. Giggling at his efforts, she edged her way to the door.

“Does Michigan seem like a dream to you now, Vickers?” she laughed.

With that, she pulled his bus tickets out from his blazer pocket. She flashed him a knowing look, giggled quietly, and ate his tickets, ripping and gnawing the paper with her pretty, white teeth. Vickers felt a dagger shred his across his nerves.

“Now, Mommy would watch you. But Mommy has to go. But Mommy wants Vickers to think about what he’s done. Vickers will hang there and think. Then Mommy will come back and let her good boy go. But now Mommy has to go. Bye, Vickers, bye.”

He screamed after her as she slipped down the stairs. Noiselessly, like a wraith. But as he heard his voice tear against the silence of the house, he realized she was gone. He thought he might be dead, but he could taste the emptiness of the house. Yet, that flooded him with relief. As if his soul was suspended, uninhibited. A stale peacefulness drifted among the dust motes. It was quiet enough for him to hear the bird clock in the kitchen chip twelve. In the stillness, Vickers sighed. All he wanted was a little autonomy. So he imagined himself floating on Lake Superior with a crow circling overhead. He watched the birds slice through the sky outside the window and pretended he was one of them. It made the clock down below a bit friendlier as it coughed down the hours. He talked to it as if the birds were real, and the clock responded with obliging, eager chirps. While he hung with the robin and the finch, her voice kept to herself.

Vickers confided in the birds that, like them, he too felt free. They could be friends.

* * *

The day had crept away from them. The noises of Yani and White’s mother could be heard in the kitchen. One of them dropped a pan, and the sound of metallic rattled

beneath them. Supper would be ready soon, and Perry would leave his friend and go home.

“Sometimes I can see him from my bedroom,” he said by way of conclusion. “I watch with my telescope. I tried to tell my mom, but she thought I was just talking about pears.”

“So what do we do?” White asked.

“Obey yourself, not the ropes,” Perry said, pressing his pocket knife into friend’s hand.

Murdered in a Good Dress

Quite frankly, Don Dinapoli had wanted a divorce for years, ever since his wife became something of an icon. So when he looked at the beautiful actress sprawled out dead in the Jacuzzi, as if relaxing in a bubble bath of her own blood, he had to admit—at least to himself—that he felt a chilling surge of relief. Her skin had that eerie, unearthly pallor by the time he came to his senses and called the authorities. It was Sunday and the maid was nowhere to be found. So Don made his own sandwich as he waited for the symphony of sirens to break the stillness of what could have been any other Sunday. The harsh reality hadn’t even crossed his mind that the husband was almost always the number one suspect in these types of things unless he had a good alibi, which Don did not. He had a cold sandwich.

Don wasn’t known for his quick wit or cavalier displays of charm and personality. That hadn’t been why Veronica had married him anyway. No, she picked him over all the other college boys because of his tenacious loyalty and his easy willingness to take a

supporting role in her life, which had held true for the better and worse part of eight out of nine years of marriage. She picked him for his simplicity and because he was dark skinned and “Old Hollywood” handsome, as she called it. Don didn’t particularly enjoy being led around high artsy society like a Humphrey Bogart Maltese mix. Nevertheless, he took it all in stride, just as he had taken everything else from Veronica’s lifestyle in stride, and just as he would take this in stride.

When the police splintered the wood on their heavy Spanish-style door, Don was found to be unsettlingly calm and cooperative. Some said he must have been in shock. Most disagreed entirely.

“The body, my wife, I left her upstairs in the bath,” he told them. Crumbs from his hero sandwich dusted his lips and soft lavender lapel. “I couldn’t find the maid,” he said by way of explanation.

The police couldn’t even look at him.

“I would’ve cleaned up a bit, but I didn’t know.”

He wanted to explain why he didn’t clean Veronica up a bit and changed her out of her beautiful party dress that always became her but now seemed heinously absurd. He wanted to let the police know that she wasn’t the type of person who died in a tub of her own blood, but they didn’t listen. They only searched the house like they were children on a ghost hunt because that was the natural thing to do in an unnaturally grand house.

“She’s upstairs,” he said at last.

It all just seemed so indecent, degrading to bring them into her bathroom without her consent, even if she was still wearing a good dress. The late morning light made the

beads sparkle, casting rainbows on her pale hands and unblinking eyes. Don had seen her make that face a number of times on stage. She looked like she was practicing Lady Macbeth, screaming “Unsex me here!” Only she never got to finish the scene. If Don had memorized the lines like Veronica, he would’ve said them for her.

The police swarmed her body and officially pronounced her dead and called for an ambulance on their little radios. An ambulance seemed a little late, Don thought to himself, but he didn’t question their call. It was a shame this kind of thing had to happen while they were on sabbatical back home—her back home, that is. He was from New Jersey, and the police watched him like he stank of it. If the backwater sheriffs and Kentucky state trooper hadn’t trusted him for being the husband of an elegant prodigal daughter, they certainly didn’t trust him for being out of town, let alone out of state.

“You’ll have to come with us,” the biggest bellied one announced as three or four of them filed out of the room that reminded Don of gardenias and his wife.

The rest of them called for backup and continued to stare at his wife as if she would flirt with them. Don wasn’t the jealous type, but the way they acted around her didn’t sit right with him. He would’ve done something about it if Veronica needed it. He supposed she didn’t need him now.

“Are you going to come politely or else?” the biggest bellied one said gruffly.

He was labeled as “Powers” and looked at Don through narrowed eyes as if he were more than half inclined to hang him good and proper from the spindly birch out back. Don knew he was a petite man and that he wouldn’t be much trouble. He didn’t notice any of the exchanging glances, of course. He wouldn’t have, given his temperament. He trusted them to be on his side, to console a man who had just lost his

tragically beautiful wife. He took their coolness and efficiency as pity. Don enjoyed the calm before the storm as best he could under the circumstances. Pretty soon an ambulance would come to whisk her away to the Holt Memorial Hospital across Old 60 from the Dairy Queen. Don wondered if he could go with Veronica instead of the police. Because what if, even in death, she would want her hand held as the know-it-all in the white coat looked her over with objective eyes? Veronica distrusted doctors and other people with a little too much education. No wonder she settled for a big city zookeeper.

The police led him out the backdoor where the driveway looped and their cars were parked like sterile Christmas lights. There were other houses around, and the neighbors that weren't at church had no qualms with being nosey. Don kept his eyes on the lake that they shared with FFA camp. He could just see it through the trees, which undressed for winter. He thought the lake and the small woods wouldn't be watching, but they were.

Soon reporters would be raining down and Veronica's dementia-riddled father would descend upon him. Even though he wanted to run away from her and all the glamorous, theatrical chaos that followed her, Don knew he would miss her. Shivering and choking back sobs, Don slid into the back of the police car like he was going on a perverted limo ride to the county detention center.

Officer Bill Jaynes listened to the drum and rhythm of police work that rang through the house. He listened to his own heart, which beat at a different pace. He told the sheriffs and deputy sheriffs to find the housekeeper and the husband while he worked with the body. Evidence. They trusted him. Nevertheless, Bill wished he could forget the

raw scent of death that assailed him in the bathroom. The beautiful woman had pale skin in life. She was a porcelain dream to touch. Bill brushed an auburn curl from her face. Her blood seemed to burn his finger. He wished he could forget how she burned to his touch, even in life. He wore latex gloves to protect himself, but her eyes still seemed to watch him. He closed them, closed out those green pastures of eyes. Her mouth persisted in a pout, lipstick just as vivid as in life. Violins played within the caverns of his body as he watched her. The bleeding had stopped hours ago, but she was still beautiful to watch. Pale and porcelain. Fragile and deep. Gently, he fingered the hole that stopped her heart.

Bill had known Veronica well in high school. In fact, he had dated her until she left New Castle for something bigger and juicier. She would say they had just reconnected recently when she made her brilliant homecoming, but Bill would agree to disagree. He never lost touch. Touch. Veronica was sticky with blood. He ran his fingers through her hair and pushed her thighs together. Her good dress was ruined. And for what? Was passion so wrong? Was it a crime to feel? Why couldn't she just see to eye to eye? Pastoral green.

“Bill?”

He tugged at the diamond on her finger. It resisted. Evidence.

“Bill?” the deputy sheriff named Lester repeated.

“What?”

He was a state trooper. He was thought to be trustworthy.

“The husband went willingly to the station. What should we do about the neighbors? And we can't seem to find the housekeeper.”

Bill decided to just leave the ring.

“Okay, well, don’t worry about the neighbors. Let’s not ruin their Sundays for no good reason. I’ll go find the housekeeper.”

He didn’t want to leave Veronica. She was getting colder and would be taken away for good. The last thing he wanted her to do was leave. She was the sweetheart of his youth who came back. Evidence that she cared. Surely she came back for him. She just wasn’t brave enough to leave her husband. The man found and taken in. He would flick off her husband for her, since she was fragile. But she got in the way. He didn’t want to fight with her after she’d been gone for so many, many years. But they did fight. It was all passion and gun smoke.

Lil Beau wanted to be a policeman when he grew up. He held a basketball like it gave him a reason to be standing out on his driveway on a cold February morning in his khakis and Oxfords. The blue lights and the torrential downpour of sirens officially called off church for him. He liked Sunday School well enough, but this was more important. Inside, his mom and dad were getting his baby sister ready because Sunday School wasn’t called off for them. They wouldn’t miss him for a while.

There were all seven county sheriffs, the two constables, and one state trooper. Boy, Lil Beau loved state troopers. He walked out to the edge of his driveway, as if he were practicing his three pointer. But he was watching the commotion across the yard instead. He held the ball at his hip like he’d seen his dad do. The policeman had a gun on his hip. Boy, Lil Beau would trade anything to have a gun like that. Sure, he had plastic ones. But they were just toys. Lil Beau would trade anything to not be five years old anymore so he could stand tall and wear a uniform and drive a car with sirens and lights.

Maybe then he could protect his mom better.

He tried now. He hated it when his dad got out the fancy bottles and glasses and broke things and hollered at his mom and said nasty things in a language he didn't think was English. He tried to put his body between his dad and his mom when his dad got weird acting like that, but he wasn't big enough yet. One day he would be, and he would be a policeman so he could lock his dad up in jail. Just until he threw up and got back to normal, though. Then his dad could come back home. Lil Beau loved his dad, whose name was Big Beau or Coach Holmes. His dad taught him about basketball and taught basketball and other things to almighty high schoolers.

A few of the policemen came out onto the back deck with Mr. Dinapoli. They held him tight by the arm. Lil Beau memorized how they held their hands, their fingers. He had great eyesight. He didn't need glasses like his friend Joey. Joey wanted to be a UK basketball player when he grew up. Lil Beau thought that wasn't very ambitious. He would practice the way the police held Mr. Dinapoli on Joey's arm. Lil Beau watched as Mr. Powers pushed Mr. Dinapoli into his car. He knew it was Mr. Powers' car because it had a black streak. Lil Beau would keep his car in better shape. Boy, his own car. Then he could take his baby sister on rides when she got bigger.

Mr. Powers noticed Lil Beau and gave him a stern nod. Lil Beau made sure his face was stern as well and nodded back. It was important. He thought it was a bit odd that they were taking Mr. Dinapoli away. The backseat was for bad guys, and Mr. Dinapoli was not a bad guy. Lil Beau knew Mr. Dinapoli because he invited his family to have supper sometimes at their big house. His mom and dad and Mr. Dinapoli's beautiful wife knew each other from a time in the nineties, which seemed like ancient Egypt. His

parents really liked Mr. Dinapoli's wife, but Lil Beau and his sister liked Mr. Dinapoli who talked funny and could tell them great stories and promised to take them to work with him at the zoo if they ever visited a place called New York, which Lil Beau figured was in Jessamine County because they talked like it was far away.

When Mr. Powers drove away with Mr. Dinapoli, Lil Beau itched to wave, but that would be undignified and would for sure mark him as a kid. So he made his face stern and nodded as they drove around the curve of Lake Street and disappeared. A few other policemen stood on Mr. Dinapoli's back deck talking with their hands on their hips, touching their guns slightly. Their legs were square with their shoulders. If their knees were slightly bent, they might be able to make a nice free throw. But these guys weren't the playing around type. Lil Beau liked that about them. The state trooper joined them and stood the same way. They acted like they couldn't see their breath when they talked. That was cool. Maybe cooler than pretending like you had a cigarette. Lil Beau made a mental note not to pretend like he had a cigarette in the future. Maybe. The state trooper was slightly taller and leaner than the county sheriffs. He had a hat on but he could tell that the state trooper's head was shaven. Something else for when Lil Beau got older.

As the state trooper broke away from the county sheriffs and went for his police tape, Lil Beau willed him to come over and ask him some questions. *Please come. Please come.* The state trooper was walking so erectly in his direction with a swagger and purpose much nobler than a basketball player, although no less tall. *Please come. Please come.* Lil Beau stood a little taller himself, maybe four feet, as the state trooper came closer. He anchored his feet into the asphalt, square with his shoulders. The wind bit his cheeks and hands and made his nose run, but this was important. *Please come. Please*

come. Please come. The state trooper unlocked his car and reached in for the tape. He could hear his mom yelling for him. She would find him pretty soon, and he would have to go to church. *See me. See me.* He bore his eyes into the state trooper. He tried to use the force. He thought he must be sweating blood like the great man Jesus.

When the state trooper rose out of the car, cruisers, Lil Beau remembered they were called, he did see him. His heart pounded and nearly knocked his small body down. The state trooper looked troubled. Lil Beau had never seen those kinds of eyes before. Something was wrong. Something bigger than him but surely not bigger than the state trooper in the smart blues. The state trooper smiled at Lil Beau a little smile as if it was the best he could do at the time. Lil Beau wanted to understand, so he smiled what he thought was knowing smile and let the state trooper do his job. *I'm not big enough yet,* he thought sadly as the state trooper and the county sheriffs when back inside.

His mom was really hollering now. She probably saw the police cars outside, and they made her nervous and a little scared. He knew he should go back inside and ease her worried mind. But something caught his keen eyes just as he turned to go. A figure ran through the woods. It made a ruckus in the leaves, but it disappeared quickly behind Mr. Dinapoli's garage and Lil Beau never saw it again. It wasn't a deer or a goose or a turkey, and in his five years of life experience, he had never known a human to run through those woods, let alone an adult. Boy, this was something important.

It was important. She kept hidden in her dark apartment. It was important. The body had a name, and that name was Veronica. Yani Kanagalas repeated this to herself over and over as she watched the police tape up the big house like children playing with

construction paper. Although she was admittedly pleased that Don's wife was gone, Yani wouldn't have chosen for it to happen the way it did. From her vantage point of her window above the Dinapoli's garage, Yani felt something like a sniper. Not long after Don was taken away by Rick Powers, paramedics, more police, reporters, concerned citizens, and the like invaded the property as if they weren't strangers. Yani watched, breathless, as the paramedics wheeled the body—named Veronica—into the ambulance. She was covered by a white sheet. Yani wondered where they produced that from because the Dinapolis didn't own any white sheets. She would know, being the housekeeper. Yani wanted to know what the body named Veronica looked like under the sheet. As far as she knew, she was still wearing the good party dress, not in Yani's taste.

She never could understand how a man like Don could marry a woman like Veronica. Yani would think that because she was in love with Don. Not just because he was kind enough to hire her as housekeeper while they stayed in New Castle “to save the marriage”, as they say. Yani was in love with Don because he didn't act like it was backward to get a Ph.D. in History and choose to live in a little empty place like New Castle. Yani wasn't ready to leave home to teach at Central Oklahoma Technical College. Even at thirty-four, she wasn't ready to leave her parents and her little brother.

But she was ready to take a lover—if Don would notice her. She had been losing weight and wore a little makeup. She even touched on a little of her mother's perfume. Yani considered herself to be a beautiful and intelligent Indian-Indian woman. Maybe now that the wife was “out of the picture”, as they say, he would notice. Isn't that how these things go? The beautiful butterfly with hypnotic wings flies a little too close to the light and burns into happy oblivion, and then the good gentleman at long last notices the

dark skinned girl who had been there all along. It had been his wife who led him to New Castle, but Yani hoped against hope that Don may find a reason to stay. “Yani Dinapoli” had a nice ring to it, she thought.

Outside her window it was a nearly noon. Folks would be getting out of church and pushing and shoving themselves to get to Dairy Queen. This included Yani’s folks, who would ask where she had been all morning. For a freezing day in February, it was encouragingly sunny. Without Don’s wife telling her what to do, what to rearrange or pull from the closet, Yani hardly knew what to do with herself. She contemplated retreating to her parents’ house, but ever since she’d take a job as a housekeeper rather than an adjunct professor in Oklahoma, her parents looked at her differently, looked at her with something like disappointment. It didn’t even matter that the Dinapolis paid her considerably better than Oklahoma would have. Outside her window people crawled like an army of ants all over the house. In a way, she half expected Veronica to step out on to the front porch and join them like it was a party. She would’ve been dressed appropriately. That wasn’t what Yani was waiting for, though. In the deepest part of herself, Yani knew that Veronica wouldn’t be coming back.

She was waiting for Don. She wanted to talk. Just talk. She persistently stood guard over the day, willing Don to come back. In her vigilant stupor, she must have missed the car that broke through the trenches of law and media because she didn’t hear the heavy tread on the stairs. The pounding on the door startled her. Her heart thundered against her ribcage, and she felt her nerves ignite then go numb in anticipation. In her mind, it could only be Don.

However, her monomaniacal patience was not rewarded. It was just her younger

brother, White, and his shadow, Perry. They wore smiles despite the strange commotion. They came to take her home. Little did they know she was set on not going. She had to talk to Don. She needed to talk with Don. She needed to tell him about the body and how the bathtub would never be clean again. How she didn't know how a person could hold so much blood, have it all spill out, and still look so hauntingly beautiful in spite of it all. She needed to stay and wait and watch, but White and Perry forced her into the Cadillac because her parents were beginning to think something was amiss and she needed to clear her name or something. She wanted to talk about how she ran and how afraid she was, for herself and Don. She just needed to talk.

Don felt he had talked enough to the backwater policemen who seemed to be convinced he killed his wife. They were waiting for him to confess to something heinous and beyond anything Don's understanding to create.

“Where were you last night?”

He had been asked that at least thirteen times already.

“At my house. I was home.”

He had answered that at least thirteen times as well.

Rick Powers stared at him as if he could turn back the clock and put the knife in Don's hands. Until his time spent with Deputy Sheriff Rick Powers, Don had the utmost faith in policemen. They represented justice and weren't ordinary men with simple minds and vendettas against guys from New Jersey.

“You're married to the victim, correct?”

Don didn't know if that was a trick question or not and neither did Rick Powers,

and for the sake of tradition, Don answered the same way.

“Yes, since June second two thousand and four.”

“Until this morning,” He paused. “Right?”

Rick Powers got out of his seat again and walked around his desk littered with coffee stained papers from the eighties and the dawn of time. Don knew by now not to be bothered when the bulbous man flashed the hilt of his pistol. It probably wasn't even loaded, but Don let on like he didn't know the difference for fear Rick Powers would resort to wielding his tobacco breath and Gold Bond stench like a weapon. Don preferred to take his chances with the gun.

“Well, I don't know when she died, exactly. She was gone out all night. I never heard her come in. Separate bedrooms. Have you ever been to Jersey? We can sleep through a lot.”

Don had mixed feelings about sleeping through a lot.

“Separate bedrooms? Likely story, Yank.”

On the other hand, Rick Powers had strong feelings about sleeping through a lot. Don could see how inconceivable it was to these people for a woman like Veronica to be cast aside into another bedroom. Truth was that she cast him aside after she lost that puppy love quality of the impetuous youth. Don rarely looked at his interrogator, and he didn't care if that was damning. The man wore disgust like he was born with it. On his desk amongst the papers of various crumpled-ness sat a picture frame, cheap and red and metal. Don desperately wanted to know what was on the other side, reserved for Rick Powers' eyes only. He wanted to think it was a woman, new or old didn't matter, but he had a feeling it was of Lyndon Johnson.

“I should be getting together arrangements, don’t you think?”

Don already knew that wouldn’t fly with the deputy sheriff, but he tried it again anyway. Veronica had left him with very specific directions for her funeral. She wanted to be buried among her own kind. So it was lucky she died back home. Don counted it as a small blessing. He needed to call the caterer because he would need to fly down. Veronica had pre-arrangements and a will and a fine executor.

“Shut up. Don’t *you* think Miss Bers doesn’t have home folks who are taking care of that?”

Of course, it bothered Don that everyone around New Castle referred to his wife as “Miss Bers” or “Augusta’s granddaughter” or “Jim Bers’s youngest”. It was like he never existed. Don didn’t reply to Rick Powers’ pointedly rhetorical question. He wanted to just wash his hands of this whole backwood, inbred town. They could keep Veronica for all he cared. New York could keep Veronica for that matter. But she just keeps him pegged down somehow, even in death. Especially in death. She always had an affinity for tragic endings. She probably relished every moment of her death from the fly battering itself senseless against the window to the taste of warm blood on her lips.

“Well, I think I may have stumped the Yankee.”

Rick Powers was visibly proud of himself. He swung his girth back around his desk, probably to find approval in the portrait of Lyndon Johnson he painted himself.

“So let me ask you outright, Mr. Uh Dinna Pole E, did you murder your wife?”

He slammed his hands down on his desk like this was a courtroom and he was presiding over Judgment Day. Week old coffee sloshed onto the clutter.

Don was about to announce his answer once and for all when another deputy

sheriff stormed in like another harbinger of Armageddon crying, “Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ!”

Rick Powers turned on his fellow horseman in flaming choruses of “Goddamn, Basil!”

“Yank’s got a lawyer. Called his goddamn lawyer, Rick. We gotta let him go.”

Rick Powers tugged at his pants, securing this girth. “Daggum. Well. Can we charge him with something at least?”

The other deputy sheriff was a vision in khaki. It was the one they called “Basil”, like the herb. Don didn’t care if they charged him with anything. He just wanted to leave this rank town where they forgot his name and in favor of “Yank” because they thought it was cute.

“I dunno. We never had this happen before. Where’d Bill go?”

Since they couldn’t find Bill, they just dropped him off at his house on Lake Street, which was decorated with Do Not Crosses and percolated with people Don just wanted to avoid. He wished he could go back to New Jersey where hopefully he wouldn’t be bombarded with cameras and attention. He couldn’t even go back inside his house for fear of another barrage of interrogations.

Sneaking around back to the garage Don felt a little sleazy. He would talk when he was ready. At the time, he just wanted a room to himself and figured the maid’s apartment would have to do for the time being. He hadn’t seen her around all morning. Of course, it was only lunchtime. For all he knew, she was sleeping in. Maybe she would be normal acting. Maybe she hadn’t fled the scene like the police wanted to believe. Maybe she was just sleeping in. If she had fled the scene, that would be just fine. He

would get his room of his own. Anything quiet was fine, really. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

Don wanted to collapse on the wrought iron exterior stair that led up to the single bedroom apartment. His body felt brittle and hollow. He just wanted a little peace. That's all he ever wanted, to be honest. Why else did he forego his own acting career to be a zookeeper when Veronica decided she needed the spotlight and roses more than life itself? He climbed the stairs slowly. With the adrenaline drained, his limbs felt weighted with lead. He was almost grateful for the cold, bleak mid-winter air that washed over him. Don was less surprised than he should've been when he found the apartment door unlocked.

Nothing more than darkness greeted him inside. He breathed a sigh of relief and contemplated seeing what kind of lunchmeat the maid kept in the refrigerator even though he didn't really feel hungry. In fact, he didn't even bother with finding the light. He didn't feel thirsty or tired. Just tiny, prickling tinges of relief before waves upon waves of remorse and heartbreak crashed upon him.

Don filled the room of his own with visions of Veronica under the observation of unseen eyes, which, once satisfied, moved somewhere else.

Samantha Wood knew they wouldn't find anything at the Dinapoli's house, and for a morgue, the Holt Memorial Hospital's was uncharacteristically tight lipped. She figured if she wanted anything different from her "friends at WGGO" or "friends at WLLX", she would need to go to the Dairy Queen and comb the church crowd while they digested their lunches. This was just the kind of story Samantha and her crew needed

to receive their just deserved recognition from WHES-TV's producers. This field work exhausted her. She wanted the desk and the teleprompter. Not the wind. Not the "Brian, back to you". So, Samantha gritted her teeth and positioned herself outside New Castle's Dairy Queen awaiting the buzz of townies who just wanted their moms and ex-lovers to catch them on the local news.

Samantha reapplied her own lipstick, a sheer pastel pink. Professionally unassuming. She blotted her lips on a used tissue and stuffed it back into the pocket of her dove colored cropped trench coat. The February wind sliced through it like a hot knife. She was shivering, but her face was composed.

"Are they ready, Frenchie?" she called to her cameraman.

She hadn't needed to ask. Their faces were pressed up against the doors and windows like she was on T.V. and couldn't see them. She pitied them more than herself. A little girl with a chocolate ring around her mouth was losing her ice cream drip by drip. God, she was ugly. People outside of Louisville or Lexington acted like they'd never heard of a wet washcloth. Samantha would not miss this menagerie of destitution and vulgarity when she got placed behind the desk. The studio lights were so warm.

"Are you ready?" he asked pointedly.

Samantha got in place in front of the doors where a line was eagerly forming for her to interview.

"Let's just get this over with," she said with a smile that only came with practice.

Frenchie counted her down.

"New Castle, Kentucky," Samantha began her report slipping into her best Diane Sawyer persona. "A typically quiet town far off any major interstates or parkways. A

town probably a lot like your own where families leave their doors unlocked and the biggest news is the high school basketball game. But even quiet little towns are not safe from tragedy. Notable Broadway actress Veronica Bers Dinapoli came back home to New Castle seeking a retreat from the commotion of New York last September. She and her husband Don were thinking about putting roots back down. Only who could have foreseen their plans destroyed by a mysteriously heinous death. The town was just waking up when Veronica was supposedly going to bed. In the still winter night, the beautiful actress died, found hours later by her husband in her tub, filled with her blood. Authorities claimed she was killed by a single bullet, fired at point blank range, through her heart. Her husband, Donatello Dinapoli, had been into custody by local authorities, but was curiously released with more questions than answers. Why was she wearing a designer cocktail dress? Where was Veronica Dinapoli the night of February eighth? Who did she see if anybody at all? The more the police search, the less they seem to find. The town is stricken by the tragic death of the golden child. These are their stories of their star.”

Samantha braced herself not against the weather but the cultural climate that awaited her behind the Dairy Queen doors. Inside, the odor of frying grease and unwashed bodies assaulted her. The line had morphed into mosh pit of drowning people, desperate for air time. She prayed Frenchie didn't have the cameras on her. They didn't have time to do extensive editing. People raised their arms like they were saluting her or begging her like a kindergarten teacher to call on them. As if they had the answers. Samantha had never met Veronica Dinapoli and didn't care much for theater, but she knew that bringing *these* people into the circumstances surrounding her ghastly death

couldn't exactly be humane. She tried to not let the mockery she could be making of a beautiful and possibly innocent woman's death interfere with her work. If they made an absurdity of it, that was just the nature of the beast. They didn't have time for due respects.

There were so many of them that Samantha didn't know where to begin. Luckily, one man volunteered.

"I know the family. Good people. Damn shame. Don't see why we don't hang that sonofabitch right now."

Then a woman.

"I taught music at the elementary school. We didn't have the funding for theater, but you could see it in her. Veronica was a performer. Sweet child."

Then another man.

"My boy saw something run through the trees by the Dinapoli's house."

Jesus Christ.

Then another.

"I want a number four with a diet coke and a vanilla cone."

Then the chorus:

"Yeah, I saw a state trooper 'round here somewhere. Where'd he go?"

"I seen ten ambulances whiz by my house this mornin'. Almost kilt my cat. My tax dollars don't pay for no one goin' hun'red'n'twinny 'round my neighborhood."

"Bill Jaynes, you mean? He's just takin' a leak. He should be here for this."

"Miss! Hey, Miss! We have a state trooper takin' a leak. You ought to interview him! She's not listenin' to us."

“Miss! Nope. Why’d she come anyway, then?”

“Miss! You ought to interview the trooper. He’s from around here.”

“You know he dated Miss Bers back in high school.”

“I knew that.”

“I didn’t know that!”

“I bet he wants to find that sonofabitch that killed his old sweetheart.”

“He’ll find ‘em. Jaynes’s a good one. He played center in ’95.”

“How’d you remember that?”

“You know I also dated her once?”

“Yeah, I know. You never shut up about it.”

“Well, I chose you in the end, didn’t I?”

Samantha stuck the camera in a few people’s faces while she waited for the state trooper. She’d already interviewed one constable at the house, but the state trooper would be more credible. She interviewed a kid with a clean face. He said he lived next door and that he wanted to be a policeman when he grew up. Cute enough. She interviewed another supposed neighbor who thought she heard screaming but just chalked it up as a fox at the time. She even found one of Veronica’s long lost friends from high school. Another teacher.

She waited long enough for the state trooper who probably didn’t even exist, let alone be an old boyfriend. She had enough of this place anyway. If only the husband wasn’t pleading the fifth until his lawyer got here. He would’ve made a nice addition to her interview collection Or the housekeeper who seemed to always be missing. That would’ve made her national. Maybe.

If Yani hadn't been so perturbed by her family forcing her to have lunch with them, she would've noticed she was being watched. Under normal conditions, she had a keen eye for detail, but she was worried that Don had run away from New Castle by now. Her apartment looked particularly dark inside, despite it being early afternoon. The sun was already preparing itself for bed.

"You sure you want to stay here? Mommy and Pop would much prefer if you stayed at home until this all blew over."

White leaned out his window as he pulled away. He was a good brother. She couldn't tell him she was in love with a married man. Or had been in love with a married man. At this point she was in love with a recent widower. She didn't know which was worse.

"I'll be fine." She needed an excuse. "They may be looking for me."

White was visibly confused. "Who? Regardless, they would have better luck finding you at home."

"This is my home," she replied.

She couldn't define the shades of sudden understanding and disappointment that colored her brother's honest face.

"Well, if you ever need anything."

Yani's body relaxed when his Cadillac finally rounded the sharp curve of Lake Street. She needed to find Don. The house loomed before her. Its eyes were closed, all the blinds drawn. Maybe Don was hiding too. Her heart picked up its pace as she hoped to find him inside. As she always did, she tried the back door that led into the kitchen. It

was her door, even if she didn't actually own it. To her surprise it was locked. It was never locked. Surely Don was hiding inside. The landscape was immaculate. It was peppered with old creek rock Veronica pulled from her family's swimming hole from long ago. The rock was heavy. The cold that pierced her hand felt ancient and pulsed from the core of the rock. Or maybe it pulsed from the coldness within her body? Regardless, the bay window of the breakfast nook would have to be sacrificed. Surely Don was inside. The hope of it chilled Yani. She hurled the rock with the greatest strength she could muster. The glass splintered against the rock's contact.

Someone had turned off the alarm system, and the watching eyes knew who.

Bill had disarmed the alarm in case he felt the need to be surrounded in Veronica's things once again. He watched the housekeeper cut her winter coat on the knives of broken glass and disappear into the scene of the crime. Passion. There shouldn't be anything wrong with passion. Bill had tried and tried to beat the passion out of himself. But it couldn't be done. Veronica still haunted him long after she left his world. If only he could've understood her passion.

Don wanted to take a nap, not necessarily because he was tired, but because that was what he always did on Sundays. However, he felt more than a little put off by sleeping in the maid's unkempt twin bed. He would trade his best tie pin for three minutes in his own bed. If only he had the freedom. His lawyer, Sean, warned him against going back into the house until he got down there to straighten everything out. Don felt helpless and trapped. Signs of Veronica covered the small apartment like a pox.

This had been Veronica's museum to herself before the maid moved her bed in. Old playbills in frames hung from the walls with black and white glamour shots and stills that broke his heart. A small simple frame housed a four by six of Veronica as Elizabeth Proctor in their college's production of *The Crucible*. Veronica was dainty enough to play Abigail, but always exuded too much womanliness for those types of roles. Don remembered the play well. He played the Reverend Samuel Parris and was hardly memorable. No picture existed of him. No picture existed of any of the cast, actually. Except for Veronica. For drama students, they were all terrible and insecure and too pretentious for their own good, but Veronica with her Grace Kelly ways kept the house packed.

Veronica as Elizabeth Proctor was the first play Don had ever seen Veronica act in. She took his breath away, but she had that effect on nearly everybody. Her blue eyes pierced his as she was frozen in a different time. Still a teenager, in fact. He regretted not going to more of her plays even if he was falling out of fashion with her. Maybe it was better if he could only remember her as the regal nineteen year old still haloed with the innocence of dormant potential.

"I was there."

The deep voice made Don's heart stop. He was afraid to turn around. A few fragments of winter daylight still broke through the window. He didn't want to see whose deep voice that was. It sounded familiar, but it made his blood run cold.

Slowly Don faced the voice. "Where?"

He was surprised to see the state trooper and wanted to be relieved, but a pulsating tension in the air prevented that.

“To that play at NYU.”

The man’s face was calm, and he had an otherwise comfortable demeanor. However, Don could not shake electricity throbbing between them. Don tried to chuckle, but it sounded more like a whimper. The state trooper managed a slight smile.

“Hi. I’m Bill, by the way. I don’t think I properly introduced myself earlier today.”

He extended his great hand toward Don, drawing him closer. Bill’s hand was rough and hard. It was shaking hands with limestone.

“Don,” he said simply, not meeting the trooper’s eyes, afraid of what they would show.

“Oh, I know who you are.”

Bill pulled his handgun from his holster, and pointed it right at Don’s chest. Don didn’t know much about guns, but he memorized every detail from that one. How it made the room smaller like they were standing toe to toe in a closet. How it was impossibly black. How Don could almost make himself believe it was made out of plastic rather than steel if it didn’t look so cold. How the tunnel of the barrel wouldn’t take its eye off him. How Bill’s finger rested right on the trigger. How Don’s brain went numb and he could hear his own heart thundering. He didn’t want to cry, but the tears started coming anyway.

“Yeah, I went to that play at NYU. *The Crucible*. You were in it, too, weren’t you? I don’t remember you though. At least not in the play.”

Don knew he was crying. He wanted to stop, but he couldn’t control himself.

“And then she dumped me. Even after I’d driven over fourteen goddamn hours

and bought her flowers that cost me nearly one hundred goddamn dollars! I loved her. I loved her more that she understood. But still. It didn't matter."

The gun clicked like it was warming its voice before a recital.

Don screamed, "Please no! Please I want to live!"

"You know, I can make this look like a suicide."

Don whimpered pitifully, and Bill couldn't hide his disgust.

"That's the thing I don't get. You? You! Look at you? You're small and pathetic. She needed a man. Not some cute boy. You know, I thought we had chance once she came back here. Did you even know we were having an affair? Doubtful. She wanted to protect you. Protect *you*. Right until the end, too. Like it was a love *I* didn't understand. A love of a pet. Well, I was going to put you down last night after we got back. And we'd had a great night, too. More romantic than you all ever did, she said. I knew I had to get you out of our way then. She said it was because I was drunk. I was not drunk. But I slipped."

His voice broke. His face contorted like he was sobbing. His body heaved like he was sobbing, but no tears came. All the while the gun looked steadily on like it could see straight through to Don's pounding heart.

It disturbed Yani when she couldn't find Don anywhere in the house. Outside on the driveway she looked up at her apartment. Although it looked the same, it read of trouble. She ascended the steps as quietly as she could, but it was hard being filled with so much purpose. The frantic voice on the other side was deep, gruff, deranged, and unfamiliar. Don was in danger. Yani's heart drummed to the rhythm of fear and duty. He

needed her, so she swung open her door like destiny waited for her inside.

She saw the state trooper named Bill Jaynes. He turned on her and fired three times. The clap, clap, clap of the gun deafened her and shards of the door's threshold cut her, but they didn't make all that blood. The pain riddled her entirely. She wanted to help Don, but the blackness gripped her bodily in a vice. It pressed her down and consumed her.

Don saw Veronica in the maid's face as she collapsed against the open door, blood spilling from her. The winter air washed the room of the suffocating doom. It felt bigger. He felt bigger. Don knew he had to help the young woman lying folded over in the floor. He didn't know if she was dead or alive, but he would save her from her attacker regardless. He'd been blind to Veronica, but he was not blind to this.

He rushed at Bill's back with a heavy oak chair, feeling a surging strength he didn't know he possessed. Don slammed the chair against Bill's solid back. The legs cracked against the collision with his neck and head. The state trooper fell in heap on top of the maid, whose name he believed was Yani. Of course, the blow didn't knock Bill over, but it caused him to drop his gun. Don slung the chair around again, the four legs breaking off as they made contact with the state trooper's body. Bill charged at him with his fists, pounding Don with the senseless forces of a machine. Down. Down. Down. Bill beat him. Don felt his nose bones shatter. His cheekbones snap. He coughed out blood and teeth. His body told him to stop, to drop to the floor in submission. But he pummeled Bill with the remains of the chair. With strength that he didn't know he could summon, he parried his assailant. He forced him to the ground.

“You will stay down!” Don heard himself yell over and over.

One swing made contact with the side of the brute’s head. He struck the state trooper’s temple. Finally, the man lay still.

Sean Fawkes made it from the Louisville airport to New Castle in record time. Veronica had been a good client and friend. He’d been surprised that Don had the sensibility to call him before things got too far out of hand. Of course, he hadn’t anticipated a murder and an assault charge against a psychologically unstable state trooper. Of course, the hearing would be at the Holt County Justice Center. But this would be an easy case for Sean.

A reporter accosted him in the parking lot of the justice center. She was blonde, wore a tailored dove colored coat, and had the ferocity of a gladiator in her eye. She wielded her microphone like a sword, thrusting it towards his jugular.

“Hello, Mr. Fawkes, I’m Samantha Wood with channel ten news, WHES-TV. Do you have a moment?”

The cameraman shifted under the weight of his equipment. The wind whipped the curl out of Samantha’s hair. Normally he was disgusted by reporters, but this lady intrigued him. Probably because he’d never been pressed for an interview by a cute local reporter who was *not* from New York. She was the first one on the scene. Maybe the only one until the national news got a hold of the story. He told her sure and sat down his briefcase even though calls and volumes of paperwork and analysis demanded his attention more.

“Mr. Fawkes, what are your hopes for this case?”

The unmasked broadness of her question made him laugh. He knew he shouldn't let this third string reporter waste his time, but she was a nice distraction.

“Well, I'm hoping my client will find justice for his wife and himself and that Officer Jaynes will be pronounced guilty for the murder of Veronica Dinapoli and for the attacks on Yani Kanagalas and Don Dinapoli.”

“Will that be difficult?”

She took her job too seriously. So much so that she didn't know what kinds of questions to ask.

“Nope.”

So much pomp and circumstance followed a beautiful woman everywhere she went. Even in death. Sean had advised Don on what to say while on stand. He told him to stick to the facts. Not to get caught up in emotions or else he could go to prison for being an abusively negligent husband and the assault of a police officer. But Don didn't care. He just wanted to be done with this. All this. The production of everything. Don didn't mean to be cynical, but the courtroom felt like just another stage. The woodwork. The audience. The goddamn lines he had to follow.

“Mr. Dinapoli, were you aware of the relationship between Officer Jaynes and your wife?” the defense attorney asked. It was some woman, Garnet, he thought the name was.

“No. I was not aware.”

That was the fact. For all he knew Veronica had a number of boyfriends back home in New York. But it hardly mattered now. They were probably trying to make him

look careless, like Sean said they would.

“Why were you not aware?”

Garnet the defense attorney clasped her hands together. She watched him smugly as if he were about to incriminate himself. She probably thought she was about to catch him. Don didn't know.

“Because I trusted her.”

It was the truth. He still hardly believed she'd done such a thing. It just didn't seem plausible. Especially when a man like Bill hardly seemed human to him.

“Did it not strike you as odd that your wife would go by herself to a party out of town wearing an expensive dress? Did you not think to question that?”

Garnet reminded Don of a snake. Some may see her as noble or intelligent. But to Don, she was just another hungry actress, preening for the sustenance of attention. Don slammed his hands down on the stand. The room shook with sudden alertness.

“No. It did not strike me as odd and I did not think to question it. And before you ask me why, because I know you will, let me just go ahead and tell you that it is because Veronica was who she was I am who I am. She loved lights and cameras and action. She was vivacious. She wore expensive dresses and unseemly gobs of jewelry because it made her feel important.” Don knew he was talking too much. Sean was trying to signal him to stop, but he wouldn't. “And you know what else, yeah, I disagreed with it. But I didn't want to make her stop being who she was, being who I loved.”

Garnet hesitated before she asked her next question.

“Not even a little bit odd?”

Don crossed his arms.

“Not even a little bit odd. She was a glamorous woman who liked glamorous things and to go to glamorous places.” More than he even realized.

The attorney shifted her weight before saying, “The defense rests.”

Don left the stand feeling tall. He knew they wouldn’t call him back. They had to acquit him in the end. For Bill, however, there were other plans. When Sean called him to the stand, he still looked sturdy and sure, but his eyes were vacant. He had aged a thousand years since Don last saw him lying unconscious a few days ago.

“Officer Jaynes,” Sean began. Don admired the lawyer’s soft gray suit and easy confidence. “did you murder Veronica Dinapoli?”

The policeman stared at the floor.

“Yes,” he said.

“Why?” Sean asked softly.

Don thought it was a curious question. He didn’t know if it was a smart one. If he had been a lawyer rather than a zookeeper he would have advised against it. But Don was surprised when Bill took his eyes at the floor to look at him.

“Because I didn’t understand her.”

Sean laid the policeman out. If the case hadn’t been as open and shut as it was film producers would be making a movie of the justice he served that day. Don thought he may have been a little disappointed that all the tests he ran all the tactical questions he carefully asked didn’t get as grand of a stage as they may have deserved. Regardless, Sean got to leave a hero for saving Don from a backwater prison and for clearing the murkiness of Veronica’s death. Don felt happy for him, even if Hollywood wouldn’t be pounding down his door.

Don never could identify with those performing types. He could see the appeal of the attention and the admiration. He was just glad he was going home to feed a few giraffes.

Myrtle Slog

There are so many rounds of tic-tac-toe one can play with oneself before the monotony makes double checking the ceiling tile count more appealing. Hadassah was just learning this lesson and noting it in her guidebook to life as she struck up another game. Her wristwatch told her it was practically a quarter to two and the airport window told her must be in the morning. She consulted them because her cell phone was resting peacefully in the shallow grave of her back pocket, having died without hope of resuscitation as its charger fell off the face of the earth somewhere between Boston and Chicago. Otherwise, she would've called upon her oldest friend Calli-Opal Muse to pick her up that the Louisville airport over playing three tournaments with herself waiting for some divine intervention. She would've called, but she forgot the number. So, there she was stranded only hours from home, only miles away from her grandmother's ninetieth birthday celebration later that day. Minnie was her name, and she was a goddess, and Hadassah wanted to be there.

The problem was that the airport security was beginning to give her disconcerting looks as she had not moved for nearly four hours. She figured it was about time to figure out what she should do. Nobody back home knew she was running away from college, so nobody knew she was about to be charged as a bomb threat or a public nuisance or something. Nobody knew that she wasn't just home for the weekend, considering she left on a Tuesday. Not even her friends back at Ixion University knew that. Nobody knew, besides Hadassah of course, that she was going to be kicked out of her program if she didn't muster up some scrap of art this weekend. She had until Monday, and then she would be formally asked to leave the arts department entirely. Something about

regrettable grades, talent, and an awkward deficiency of artistic vision. Not that Ixion cared about dreams and desire, as Hadassah had been slowly learning for awhile.

As she sat there in the poorly vacuumed, overly air-conditioned airport rethinking her X and then her O, Hadassah wondered if her acquaintances back in Boston would even notice her sudden disappearance. She attended Ixion to learn about art, beautiful and old. Little did she know when she would have to put her finger in it, she rendered it into some new form of grotesque. That had been her fear, after all. Four years. Four of what they told her were the most important years of her life. All her fears came true, and Hadassah didn't know what to do with herself. Her preschool plans and refrigerator gallery displays told her she was an artist. But they were wrong, so now what? Her best friend, Calli-Opal, still lived in New Castle in her father's pillared home, down the street from the gas station in town. Calli-Opal Muse graduated high school to coach cheerleading and enroll in a community college, working part-time at Dr. Helicon's optometrist office as an armature filer. While Hadassah prided herself on her acceptance to an out-of-state school four years ago, now, as a Senior shouldering the weight a red ink stained portfolio, she looked at Calli-Opal's life with a exponentially green tinted eye.

If asked, Hadassah wouldn't claim she had the world figured out at twenty-two, but she would say that she wanted to be an artist, and that was proving to be something of failure. Alone in the Freon blanketed baggage claim area, she tried transforming an O into a star, which was easy enough, but she couldn't give it meaning. Meaning. *Meaning*. Everything needed to have meaning, and that was the problem. It was probably why her academic advisor encouraged her to change her major from Studio Arts to Art History. That was her sophomore year, so she still believed shame was an urban legend. Initially,

Hadassah was proud that an “illustrious” faculty member invested in her academic endeavors. *Maybe he saw potential? Surely he saw potential. I couldn't be that off base,* she thought. Despite her fellow art students always excusing her mistakes – *Oh, Dr. Pontellier was probably drunk by the time she graded your sketch.* – or offering her backhanded encouragement – *Oh, pointillism is a bitch. Hardly anybody can do it, anyway.* – And Hadassah had unwavering faith in her talent. She had been accepted into Ixion University, after all. *Ixion*, the school of only five hundred acceptances per fall semester. Sure, she was the last of the bottom fifty still hanging around. Sure, she was the only upperclassman to not have her work displayed Penelope T. Machus Art Gallery in Boston. But she had been *accepted*, and that must mean something. Nobody else back home could say that, especially.

Hadassah ran her finger over the star she drew, smearing the ink. Mistakes. Outside the window a plane taxied, lights pulsing. The rose-fingered dawn was pushing against the horizon, and she would need to decide on how to get home pretty soon. Thinking that ingenuity was something that came easily for her, Hadassah fingered through her sketchbook as if it were an oracle and would tell her what to do. Something like The Burning of Troy spilled before her as heavy suitcases thundered down the baggage chute. In Hadassah's mind it sounded like bloated rain, so she flipped to a clean page in her book and drew the sound again, forgetting she was still far off course. A crescendo of voices like wind soon collided against the rain, so she drew, her thoughts shipwrecked, like shards of flotsam, settling the peaceful shore of her brackish paper. She hummed to herself for a while.

“Hadassah?”

The unmistakable garbled voice of her cousin gave Hadassah a start. “Perry?” she said, turning to the hand on her shoulder. She didn’t know whether to be relieved or surprised.

“What are you doing here, girl?” he asked in response, his friend White Kanagalas walking towards, pulling their luggage on wheels.

Perry often said she was easy to spot in a crowd because her curly mass of hair consumed the whole room, but it could be argued that he was considerably more conspicuous. Some disease that the dentist could never define crumpled the left side of his face into an absurd and withered mess of skin. Devoid of an upper jaw, half his teeth, and a distinguished head of hair, many took Perry Romberg for another tobacco victim, when that was hardly the case. He was only thirty-two, but Hadassah thought her cousin was beautiful in tragically dignified sort of way. Her hand itched to embed his image into her book.

“I was on my way home. I have no way to get home. I want to go home,” Hadassah answered, proud that at twenty-two she at least could school her tears. She splayed her hand across her sketch to shield the star from the harsh florescent lights and perhaps the weight of White’s eyes, which she felt.

“That’s a neat little doodle you’ve got there,” White said outright.

Hadassah couldn’t meet his eyes despite how painfully handsome the nuances of brown were. She traced her finger across the star’s hyperbolic wing, protectively as if to soothe its subconscious fluttering.

“Yeah, Hadassah’s always been a great drawer, haven’t you?” Perry chimed, pumping the ball of her shoulder. “We’re so proud. Hadassah’s going to *Ixion*.”

She did not care for all the wanted attention her star attracted.

“Please, can you take me home?” she answered.

Perry whispered something to White with a glance, and White at long last withdrew his study of the “neat little doodle”. Hadassah was grateful.

He said, “Well, of course!” and clapped her on the back. “White, get her bag.”

The Romberg company car was waiting in the parking garage. The Honda Odyssey was done up in garish crimson and gold, but was tastefully done. Hadassah was just glad to be out of the baggage claim area. She wanted to lose herself in the kaleidoscope of cars whirl outside the window, but of course Perry and White wouldn’t allow that. Like most people from Holt County, they wondered about life beyond the Ohio River. And it seemed they counted themselves lucky to have a castaway strapped into the backseat of their minivan. White looked at her out of the rearview mirror while Perry turned and asked her the question she knew to be coming,

“So, what are you up to in that New England school?”

Hadassah then remember why she spaced her visits home so far and in between. It was that question, quickly followed by the next, which White shot,

“So, what are you planning for the future?”

To be honest, she didn’t know. Her four year investment proved bankrupting. But she could hardly admit that. She wanted to tell them the truth, to at least have it out in the open. Having it out there, though, like a nasty tumor or hernia winking at her knowingly, would mean she would have to deal with it. That was just another thing that Hadassah didn’t think she could do, so her body slumped in the seat, resigning itself to another menagerie of wishful thinkings.

“I’ve been studying art, and I plan on getting an internship with a museum in Boston where I will continue to work with art,” she told them.

“Oh, interesting. Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out then,” Perry told her right back.

She took her eyes off the parade of traffic. His disfigurement made the tell tales of skepticism all the more striking. It was like looking her future in the eyes. She didn’t know how to wish it away.

White was still watching her, as if the minivan was a horse that knew the way home without being led. Hadassah’s felt her heart faint, and it wasn’t just because she thought White was pretty cute, although he was practically ten years older than her. He knew too that she had a shame hiding within. Perry and White weren’t the sort of people that want to hear that college was great. That she traded friendship bracelets with hordes of beautiful people. That she made the ancient oak paneling of the lecture halls glisten with the brilliancy of her masterpieces. No, they sold Christmas bows for a living. They wanted to know what was underneath the metallic wrapping paper, silenced by the buoyant façade of ribbon.

Hadassah’s tongue ached to confess, and she felt herself inflating with anticipation. They stared at her. The car still propelling itself forward. White still laughing at her with those brown eyes under thick lashes. Perry still weeping for her in a sad carriage to his face.

“My academic advisor advised me to switch to Art History rather than Studio Arts. So I did. Does that sound like I have a future? Would you think Art History is more challenging than Studio Arts? Because I think it does, but not necessarily for the reasons

that you would think. I loathe Ixion. I loathe college, if you want to know the truth. And do you want to know something else? That was two years ago. And I still can't do what they want me to do. If I don't make something this weekend they're gonna kick me out of the art program all together. Did you know people could do that? I was supposed to graduate next month. But that hasn't been the plan for a while now. They hate everything I make. I love it, and they hate it. I just want to go home. So stop looking at me like that."

"I told you she was hiding something, friend," White said, finally turning his attention back to the road. "I knew she wouldn't come home if things were well."

"Well, you never know, do you?" Perry answered White, but he was addressing Hadassah. She didn't know if she should respond or just let it lie. She wanted to let it lie, so she did. Finally after a few seconds of begging her with his eyes, Perry gave up and turned back around to watch Hardin County roll up on the road.

Hadassah told herself that she should be sighing for relief because they didn't interrogate her any further. But when she decided to be honest with herself, she admitted that she wanted to talk about Ixion some more. She wanted at least somebody to know that she was failing. Maybe if she had the tumor out in the open, breathing, declaring its realness, then somebody could fix it for her. This great, terrible tumor that said, "Yes, yes. You are a failure. Yes, yes. You are not going places in life. You have chosen poorly, and it's time for you to go home where you belong. Refreshments are not provided. You know that paint and color that your hands push around? Yes, yes. It is aimless, and it is meaningless. You do not get a rose."

Eventually, though, the sweet rocking of the minivan dulled her inhibitions. The sheer monotony and security of driving west of Ixion, Eden, and Louisville lulled

Hadassah into a tongue-loosening stupor. In her compromised state of comfort, cultivated by the humming silence, she convinced herself that Perry and even the beautiful White were made of the matter of confidants. Something about Perry's absurd appearance, more than anything, told her that he wouldn't fully understand her enough to judge.

"I painted a lovely *Dulcinea* once, and that's what I called it. *Dulcinea*," she said suddenly, her voice harmonizing to the drone of travel.

Perry and White snapped to attention, as if slapped by the soft unnaturalness of speech. Hadassah felt the awkward pressure of their awareness. She pressed her back into the hard padding of the seat. They weren't going to utter their interest, she knew, for fear she would succumb to the byproduct of a beaten confidence. She braced her truths by hiding from their eyes. Hadassah kept hers on the gray blur of Dixie Highway and thoroughbred lounges. She spoke in a low whisper at first, acclimating her tone to rhythm of the road.

Hadassah continued her wellspring speech keeping an eye on the luxurious sweep of White's cheek. "I loved my *Dulcinea*, but I was the only one. She was busting of high romance and aubergine of my own design. I wanted her to be the best thing I had ever painted. Little did I know she would get me 'encouraged' out of Studies in Studio Arts and into Art History. The only consolations are the lies I tell myself and the fact that I still get to take classes on creation here and there. But I can't shake the feeling of being a cast off. As if I'm a student of Mephistopheles, blind and dumb only to the weeping and wailing and gnashing teeth of the Old Masters. I have friends who paint black and white somethings of Post-Modern dots on fabric, and they call it art. Always I'm reminded of my nagging mediocrity. Did you know I'm average? It's the worst feeling in the world. I

know, believe me I know, that I'm hardly a master, let alone old. I just wanted a chance to be something better than myself. But steel sharpens steel, or so they tell me, and I was too dull. Just a chance. I guess I messed it up somewhere. That's why you found me in the airport. I'm on my way home to try something maybe more my speed."

When she concluded her speech, her eyes itched with the burning need to release their deep briny secret. Rather than let them have their way as well, Hadassah contemplated the meaning of the giant chicken outside the gas station. Her cousin was kind. He only "umhummed" compassionately, somehow joining her in the moment of silence for *Dulcinea*, who was a lady with whom they could have become enamored if she had been given a purpose. The back of Perry's head wagged with the ebb and flow of the highway home. His hair was yellow like margarine or fine strands of synthetic sunlight, and it grew in haphazard patches and in a tragic thinness that nearly brought Hadassah to tears as she watched it flutter in the gentle breeze of the air conditioning.

They passed a sign speculating twenty miles to Muldraugh.

"I'm working on a painting even now. Not that it matters. They're just gonna kick me out anyway. Promising freshmen." she confessed. "My painting is of Troy. You know Troy? I think it was real, and we can still feel it today. I wanted my painting to be of Helen." She met White's eyes. "We love beautiful things, don't we? But beauty has a tendency to call itself a whore. I did paint a *Helen*. But I couldn't make her grotesque, not like the bleached dots on cotton fabric. She wouldn't still be *Helen* if I painted *Helen* just like they wanted. And there you have it. Some things are beyond my control. But I lost my fantasy by point by point. I couldn't paint *Helen* like they way they teach you. *Helen* is a bow. You know bows. They don't want bows these days. I want to call myself a

Miniver Cheevy, but they don't like that either. It's just an excuse. So I'm painting Achilles, and I barely know him."

She paused because she didn't really know *Helen* or *Dulcinate* either.

"Do you want to know Achilles?" White asked.

Hadassah told herself he was just inquiring out of good manners.

"I wanted to know Helen, but she is meaningless. Apparently," she replied.

It was a relief to have it out in the open like that, to admit that she wanted to believe Helen could enjoy her holiday at Troy with a Pre-Raphaelite wistfulness. These bodies from Holt County who wore dumb, feigning knowing, smiles were an unmitigated comfort. They reminded her that there was a fuller life outside Ixion University. Her peers from the Massachusetts box would call them "quaint", but Hadassah didn't want to peg them that way. She wanted to believe that she knew more about "the world" than they did. Their leathery skin and unblinking eyes, however, suggested otherwise.

"Do you still keep up with Calli-Opal Muse?" Perry asked.

"More or less," she replied.

The truth of the matter was that Hadassah kept in contact with her childhood best friend partly out of a loyalty to nostalgia and mostly out of primal need to feel important. In Hadassah's mind, Calli-Opal was a Helen, senselessly graceful with preposterous cuteness. She was the most beautiful creature, and if her peers at Ixion had known Calli-Opal they would hide their jealousy under the wolf-skin of disdain just like Hadassah did. However, the true charm of Calli-Opal lied in her utter ignorance of the world beyond Holt County. Hadassah knew her friend was in awe of her audacity to attend a school out-

of-state, let alone in New England, rubbing elbows with the Ivy League. Hadassah only ever called her friend when she was disappointed in herself because she could admit to Calli-Opal her pitiful shortcomings and like a beautiful piano riff, her friend would inspire her. In comparison. Hadassah could console herself in saying at least she wasn't like Calli-Opal Muse. At least her happiness wasn't fettered to what her mom made for supper or her ambitions still tied to high school politics. In comparison, she could tell herself that her rejections to galleries and Fs on simple shadowing exercises didn't mean her life's goal wasn't a lie. At least she wasn't like Calli-Opal. At least she tried. Once. At this point, her call to action was to prove that she still had value, if not in a fantasy that was only real to her, then at the very least in a reality that she could mold into a fantastic masterpiece of mediocrity.

The Odyssey's right blinker pulsed as they turned onto highway 60. The familiarity of the car ride was pleasant. It dulled the bitterness of Hadassah's occupations at school. They crossed the county line, and she seemed to be the only body in the minivan to feel the gravity of the situation. She wanted to go home because it was hard being a failure, and it seemed like nobody failed in Holt County. People in New Castle, people like Calli-Opal, just woke up and went to work, and it was all so simple that it made anything else seem absurd. They passed the billboard for Brown-Blancett Chevrolet, the only billboard in the country, really. It was just plastered to the side of a tobacco barn, showcasing the much ado about nothing Hadassah had committed to. She could almost kick herself for thinking she could be an artist.

"So your parents don't know you're coming home?" Perry asked as they drove down her road which parted her family's fields of winter wheat like a comb.

In April it was still green, and it billowed and churned in the wind like angry waves of water. In her younger and more vulnerable years, Hadassah would walk out in the middle of the great sea of grain imagine herself to be something special, that the dancing green was something meant only for her and only she could properly capture it. She wanted to capture the feeling the heaving beauty of the winter wheat, and the outlet of coloring pencils upon printer paper filled her with an awesome, unsettlingly satisfaction as she blending the shades that mimicked the field and feeling. She shaded and scribbled with a dexterous fury. She tacked her picture on the refrigerator. Her mother called it “lovely” and her dad said “hey!”, but not even they knew what it was or what it meant.

“No, nobody knows,” she replied, imagining that the wind was gentle as it grazed her cheek. Most would have probably called it subtle spring breeze, one that suggested summer and the end of April. But to Hadassah, it carried more weight than that. The winter wheat billowed like a deep emerald sea. If she wanted to be considered a real artist, she would’ve gone and stood amongst the sharp, slicing grass.

Needless to say, her family was surprised to find their prodigal daughter home so close to finals. It was as if she didn’t even care. Not that it wasn’t nice to have her at Minnie’s ninetieth birthday celebration, because it was. It was as if she was suddenly apathetic. They watched her as she sat at the breakfast table slurping Life like a six-year-old. Her hair was still curly and her fingers were still long and slender, as if they were made for typing data entry but didn’t know it. She ate with them, but she was so pale and thin like something out of the underworld. Her mother squeezed her mug of coffee while

her dad slid out the backdoor to check on something. Her mother asked how school was going. Hadassah shrugged and said in a chipper way that school was school and that shoo she needed to get cleaned up as if it were natural to leave Massachusetts on a whim.

As to be expected, however, her extended family crawled all through her Minnie's Victorian house like they owned it. Her aunts exclaimed to see her at their little get together because it was still April and it wasn't an event intended for children and hardly intended for Minnie who sat mildly in her living room crocheting despite all the commotion. Her mother's sisters remind her of the Valkyries. There were eight of them all together, Minnie's only children. After their lunch, Hadassah's mother, Perry's mother, and her aunt Lois set the clean dishes out to dry across Minnie's table, which lay naked underneath the ornaments of casserole dishes and heirloom crystal bowls. They moved in tempo with the heavy click clack of the grandfather clock that loomed in the corner near where Hadassah stood, watching. Typically, Hadassah tried to avoid her aunt Lois, but on her grandmother's ninetieth birthday she clung to her like a bad habit. Hadassah lingered in back corner of the dining room when everyone but Lois left to visit in the living room.

Once, Lois had left this hearty land of reality too. Hadassah studied an old time photograph of her Minnie and Pappy on their wedding day. Minnie chose a nice frame to put it in and even went so far as to hang it in the dining room above the head of the table like she was proud of it. Hadassah could see Lois' reflection in it, and she watched the movements of her aunt when she thought she was unnoticed. She kept up appearances commendably. It was like she was happy and content and had never left this pretty country of calluses and honest night's sleep. Never left to search for something beautiful

inside herself and outside in the world. Like she didn't once try. All Hadassah knew of her aunt's story was that she had left in the 80s and lived with a man in California. She went west, young man, they say. She broke a lot of hearts, they say, including her own. Hadassah didn't know what she accomplished in those cities on the Pacific coast, and her aunt didn't reveal much beyond jewelry making and a chapter on love which wasn't finished yet. Hadassah saw this when she looked at her directly.

There was a clamor of voices in the living room where the other Valkyries were gathered around Minnie, who was undoubtedly silently weaving scarves for the winter just past. Their soprano roar was heinous as they undoubtedly pilfered through carrion of old albums, memories, and other catalogues of happiness. Lois stayed in the dining room where only the filtering sunlight could touch her. She was a small woman with a brittle frame and skin like an addict. Her blue black hair was long and hung about her in an indifferent ponytail. It feigned a shine of cleanliness. Lois sank down to the hardwood floor where she held her own court of nostalgia. From her jeans pocket she withdrew the shards of a Polaroid and laid them about her crossed legs haphazardly. She looked like a child amongst her wrappers. She arranged them with the deliberation of an undiagnosed disorder.

“Hadassah, I do know you're over there. Sit with me,” she said making Hadassah jump.

She joined her aunt on the floor while the Valkyries carried on, muffling even the grandfather clock.

“When I was young I thought I knew everything,” Lois said and Hadassah could feel it in the air. “When we held ourselves responsible only for our love and our ambition,

we thought we'd never thought we'd have to compromise. Who knew that compromise is harder than diamonds and love? We didn't care that much. I didn't care that much."

Her eyes were dry, but her words were saturated. Lois fingered her crumpled Polaroids in dim light of the room, their colors smudged and faded to oblivion.

"When I was young I thought love was like fruit from the tree of knowledge. Who knew it was a great and terrible beauty? Here's a cheap little caveat, Hadassah. Love is not a victory march. It's remembering when someone forgets to say goodbye. We were neither Cain nor Abel, just lackluster, lackadaisical bodies unwittingly wandering north, south, west of Eden. And I can know all this, and I feel it within the very wild breadth of me. It sits with me even today. I knew it then. Our last night we sat out in the open air, and when I beheld the panorama heavens and drank its cosmic perspective, I realized I didn't know how to unpack that overwhelming gift. So I continued to sit back. We continued to sit back because to make yourself small after you've been so big takes more effort than I can muster. It was so easy to come back home."

Hadassah agreed, though she didn't say so. She continued to watch her aunt as she packed the Polaroids back into her pockets.

"Apathy," her aunt concluded in encouraging words, "is a honey-sweet fruit. It's like a lotus. After a while, you'll lose all memory of what your ambitions were. I know you're trying to see the forbidden holy of actualized dreams. But please, Hadassah, don't. It's not worth it to make yourself small. Your energy will only evaporate. Stay home where you can be happy without desires. Don't trouble yourself so much."

Lois pushed herself up off the floor and was gone, leaving Hadassah alone to contemplate the secrets uttered by the grandfather clock behind her. Her aunt probably

thought she had a romantic fling back at Ixion. And that wasn't entirely untrue. However, like everything else for Hadassah, it was wadded up and congealed with her love for art for art's sake. After Lois's speech, though, Hadassah was tempted to renounce it. It brought her nothing but grief.

At Ixion, Hadassah knew a boy who looked much like her cousin's friend White, beautifully made in form and color. Art incarnate. He never presented himself with an awkward carriage. Deor Wilde was too much an artist to do otherwise. He was a student of Studio Arts and had unspeakable promise and talent. His name was Deor Wilde, and that's what everybody called him. Hadassah never hoped that somebody like Deor Wilde would ever speak to her, and he didn't. But she thought she might be recklessly infatuated with him. He painted things like Cyclopes milking goats and hurling rocks and transformed them into abstract truths, unspeakable ripples of color and shape. Their professors said he was "Allan Kaprow with a defter painting hand". He didn't look flattered when they said these things, but Hadassah imagined he felt it. Deor Wilde kept himself tucked away in the cavernous bellows of their art building, Sterling Tower. Hadassah kept herself tucked away as well. In fact, she had spent the entirety of her spring break tucked away with Deor Wilde, little did he know it. She tinkered away at *The Burning of Troy*, trying and trying to make it mimic the shades and hues of Michelangelo. She felt pretty good about it too. She felt pretty good about being the only other painting student willing to sacrifice her break and haunt the dusky floors of Sterling Tower with Deor Wilde. He played raucous music of the pop-rock variety. Occasionally he would sing along, not knowing anyone was around to hear him. Always Hadassah would sing along, hoping Deor Wilde would hear her. One day he did. She was making

her way to fill in her outline of Achilles' sandals when he stumbled upon her.

At the time she was stricken with the gusting pang of excitement. "He's noticed! He's noticed!" her heart cried with girlish abandon. She saw him as a colossus who graced her with his attention. The hereto only time a colossus had done so. He was a man-mountain in her eyes, and by the quiet light of the desk lamp from which she toiled away, Hadassah imagined that he looked on her with the warmth of solidarity.

But reflecting back as she sat dumbly on her that hardwood floor on her grandmother's ninetieth birthday, she began to realize what their encounter actually meant. Deor Wilde said not a word and looked at her through one eye, the other blinded by her lamp. He huffed with inhospitality and left Hadassah to eat her heart out. She felt foolish the flames of embarrassment prickled beneath her skin. There in her Minnie's dining room, she quaked in fear of her own mediocrity. If only she could stand eye to eye with giants like Deor Wilde, then she would be happy. Then she would feel like her time invested at Ixion was worth all the shame and failure. Yet, there she was sitting on an old floor in New Castle, Kentucky. *The Burning of Troy* could go unfinished and nobody would care. *The Burning of Troy* could be Hadassah's greatest achievement and nobody would care. She had heard once that the essence of all great art was gratitude. And that made Hadassah feel absurd.

Hadassah felt dashed upon the rocky shores of a terrible Ogygia within her mind. She stroked the time-beaten floor as her brain took many twists and turns. The smooth cool of the hardwood was calming. The voices in the other room pounded upon her ears like waves of hateful water, reminding her of the happy sisters laughing at their respective lives. Her own mother was amongst them. Hadassah had always identified as

an artist because she hardly knew what else to do with herself. However, she could just as easily throw it all in. Her mother had a simple life, but it was a good life. She used to teach fourth grade years ago. After Hadassah was born, she took to the domestic upkeep for a farmer, and that certainly seemed to be enough. A poetically straightforward existence without the judging and guessing game of success seemed suddenly so obtainable to Hadassah. All she would have to do is continue to sit there like a child until her mother told her it was time to go home. She could be like Calli-Opal and work as a high school receptionist. The siren song of lethargy rang so sweetly in her mind, allaying her wrecked confidence. The intoxicating notion clung to her like Calypso, keeping her captive for what felt like eternity, each tick of the grandfather clock a year. The sonorous rhythm of the clock was about to lull her to sleep when she was roused by the irregular pace of her Minnie's footsteps.

“Get up off that floor,” she said. “Why come all the way home just to lie on a floor. You know you could do that just as well with a hammer in your hand and get something done.” She shoved Hadassah's shoulder with ferocity, forcing her up and out of the dining room.

Minnie's kitchen was recently remodeled, which had been somewhat difficult for Hadassah to process at first. Not much had changed, really. It was still small and contained the same little four burner stove and refrigerator without an external freezer. But it bust with light from the new bay window. The room glowed and it took Hadassah's eyes a few moments to adjust to the sudden and rapid intake of sunlight.

“If you're gonna sit somewhere and be unsociable, sit there,” Minnie said as she propelled Hadassah onto the window seat that looked out onto the unusually large crepe

myrtle that lorded over the yard. Minnie's tenacity startled Hadassah and somewhat frightened her.

Although she acted like she was about to return to her crocheting and leave Hadassah to her musings, Minnie continued to grip her arm. The gravity of her strong weaver's fingers pinched Hadassah's pulse like a needle. Her hands were wrinkled beyond recognition, black top soil and wisdom forever embedded under the nail. At four foot nine, folded by osteoporosis and ninety years of weight, she stood like a goddess.

"Do you want to stop this vagabondage?" Minnie asked, her eyes, blue and veined like marble, trembling like an interrupted sob.

"Vagabond?" Hadassah hardly understood the meaning.

"My crepe myrtle is blooming, isn't it? Early, don't you think? Smells like an aphrodisiac, eh?" Minnie asked the rhetorical questions like riddles.

"I can't really disagree," Hadassah replied.

Minnie laughed only to make noise. "I favor you, Hadassah, because you could be a bright star, but you are neither cunning nor shrewd. Only wily in your blind, tumbling passions. Just look at your hands and you gave up the art? Why did you give up the art? You see the crepe myrtle. I was given that when father died nearly sixty years ago, and every morning before I start my day and every evening before I go to bed I take my myrtle slog. I've done this for nearly sixty years. I planted the crepe myrtle myself, and just look at us. If anyone knew I did this they would think I had lost my wits, but I don't think so. No, I think it's keeping alive immortally. I can tell by the dullness of your eyes that you believe me."

"I believe you," Hadassah said to herself.

“They say that the myrtle is a tree of love. So what does it say about me that I consume it religiously only for the benefit of myself? Or is that love is all about yourself? Hmm? I never even offer to make any for Pappy, and I couldn’t even tell you when he died because it feels so long ago. I know why you came home on a Wednesday. I see it as clear as the nose on your face. I’ve seen it before, and I’ll be damned it it’ll happen again. I’m going to give you some myrtle slog bark to take with you back to that Massachusetts school. It’s magic.”

She reached inside the pocket on her homespun dress and pulled out a bundle of shavings of crepe myrtle’s trunk and pressed it into Hadassah’s palm.

“I only take it when I can clearly see Venus in the sky. The bright evening and the bright morning star. Nobody needs to think of you as a star but yourself, Hadassah.”

With that she sauntered off to the living room to resume her crocheting. It wasn’t out of the ordinary for her grandmother to call her a “star”. It wasn’t even out of the ordinary for her grandmother to talk about magic. But it wasn’t every day that she got inspiration from a fistful of bark tied up with old string. Hadassah squeezed her treasure for emphasis and watched the crepe myrtle blooms bounce merrily against the breeze. Under her watch the tree seemed to grow into a monolithic creature with emotions and voice. It swayed like a nymph and was happy to tell her that she was all right.

Hadassah’s roommate hadn’t noticed she was gone when she reappeared on campus Thursday afternoon. Not that it really mattered to Hadassah that she was noticed by her phantasmal roommate because what their relationship boiled down to was an amicable exchange of Capri Suns and mechanical pencils. The only reason Hadassah

even bothered to come to her dorm room was to collect *The Burning of Troy*, which she had nearly finished. Their room was a cluttered mess of half open textbooks and t-shirts that reeked of overuse, and in the corner propped up against the post of their bunk bed rested her painting. When Hadassah left it for Kentucky, it only needed a little touching up. But then she squinted at it as if she hardly recognized it.

“It really is rubbish,” she muttered to herself knowing the painting couldn’t hear her.

If Hadassah had been the highly symbolic type or if she had been permitted matches, she would have purged her portfolio by fire and eradicated the stench of her paintings produced in nervousness and wishful thinking. After passing through Kentucky, which some called the valley of the shadow of death, Hadassah hardly cared about those paintings, so desperately shielded from all and everyone but a grade. She disposed of them the best way she could think of at the time. She drowned them in the hall bathroom. Other girls were in there, but Hadassah hardly minded. The perfumes of body wash and shampoo made the downing more pastoral and maybe more benevolent in her thinking. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine herself in a perfect garden of steam and Japanese cheery blossoms. Hadassah concealed herself with her assassinations behind a curtain of heavy cream colored plastic. She turned the water on high and hot and watched the acrylic and oil wind down the shower drain in a serpentine swirl. It felt like murder and it felt delicious.

When she finally emerged from the shower stall, she was coved in the colorful blood of her canvases, which were marred beyond recognition. The girl from room S109 dropped her toothbrush on the hair carpeted tile from the grisly sight of mottled carnage

that clung to her, and Hadassah felt like a true artist for the very first time. She gathered the dripping canvases within her arms like a mother hen and walked with deliberation to Sterling Tower, taking herself very seriously. The sting of winter still hung about Ixion's campus, but the manicured trees were beginning to don their pale emeralds. Hadassah sucked in the buoyant spring air feeling the renaissance of her youth unfurl.

On the painter's floor of Sterling Tower, Hadassah could hear Deor Wilde's top 40 hits pounding against the concrete walls like a sledgehammer. For the moment she ignored him and her other peers who seemed to follow Deor Wilde in an awkward gaggle of feigned importance. She had something to share with them later. At that time she needed to unleash herself upon the canvases of streaked failure like an interrupted sob. She picked up her brushes, palette and rested her first canvas on the easel. She had three in total, her *Helen*, *The Burning of Troy*, and *Dulcinea*, all unique in their churning colors. Upon them Hadassah created a trinity of her grandmother's crepe myrtle. *Dulcinea* became the roots in hues of spindly darkness. *The Burning of Troy* became the branches, flaking and reaching. And *Helen* became the leaves and blooms like garish feathers. It was all blowing in the wind.

Hadassah labored on her creation for hours and hours that felt like pinprick seconds. She titled it *Myrtle Slog: Three in One*, and on Monday her professors argued over the meaning of it. Within the crepe myrtle, Hadassah painted herself as a grown woman at rest. Her back was turned to the observer, only her ear visible beneath the masses of curls and blooms. They put her portrait in the Penelope T. Machus Art Gallery in Boston. She told them the mistress of the crepe myrtle was Nausicaa, and they seemed very pleased when she lied.

Hadassah would travel to Boston on weekends to share a Saturday afternoon with her painting. Sometimes Deor Wilde and fragments of his gaggle would accompany her because it suddenly seemed vogue and dignified to be invested so thoroughly. The Penelope T. Machus Art Gallery loaned Hadassah a set beautiful frames, and Hadassah used them for the time being. Deor Wilde said begrudgingly that he respected the *memento mori* of the captured woman's ear that Hadassah didn't know was there. He and his gaggle went on and on like that, clapping Hadassah on the back.

What they didn't know was the painting meant more than an assemblage of allusions and symbols. Although the captured woman was framed in gilt and made seamless in oil, Hadassah still found something redeemable and human in her. Deor Wilde and many others tried to see the woman's face, as if it were easy for her to turn her neck a few more degrees. As if they needed to see the imaginary eye with the real tear in it. As if she needed to tell *them* her heart was broke in several different places or she lost her fingers working in a watch factory long, long ago.

One day, soon before graduation, Deor Wilde found Hadassah standing before her exposed canvas, painting in earnest. Hadassah wanted Deor Wilde to bear witness to her half-formed creation in its exposed state of chaos, naked and confided. She stepped back proudly, not caring if he criticized or not.

"You know, I never realized how good of an artist you are," he said, arms crossed. His dark hair shone in the hollow lamplight. The common studio was blanketed in fumes of polluted paint water and oil palette. Hadassah's fingers were caked beyond recognition with the stuff.

“I value art,” she replied looking at him poignantly. “I want to be an artist. But I can’t draw. I can’t paint. I can’t play music. I can’t rhyme. I can’t dance. I’m not creative. I’m not original. I don’t have an eye or an ear or a hand for anything, to be honest. But I value art. I want to be an artist. So I remember. I remember Beethoven and Raphael, sure. But I also remember Salieri and Charles Allston Collins, who also had an eye, an ear, and a hand. I know no one will remember me for remembering, and I wish this school didn’t have a problem with that. However, I still want to try. And I am going to continue to try forever. After you’re gone on and famous, I’ll still try. I’ve had one lucky go, sure. But it’s because I value art. I want to be an artist because it shows the hands, the head, and the heart.”

Hadassah felt more vulnerable and beautiful than the zygote growing beneath her brush. So she smiled, feeling at home with herself.

In the Garden, Swallowing Pearls

When Ruby woke up that morning, she knew she must find the meaning of life. She was going to die in three days. Her body argued with her soul and bargained only so much time. Ruby had turned eighty-four the week prior. It was time to go—past time to go—but she needed to remember the meaning of life.

She had been young once, believe it or not. She even held her breath when man landed on the moon. This was the type of memory that bubbles up out of the frothy chaos of her mind as she imagined men floating past the Sea of Tranquility again. She used to remember the day much better when she was much younger. Out of the frothy chaos, she can say that she knows we can't remember the things we want to when we're still vibrating on the epicenter. It's only much later that we can ascertain what all happened. Ruby had been young once, and she could tell you or anyone who asked what the meaning of life was. She could've died young. What a pity that she hadn't, she thought.

The week before she needed to remember the meaning of life, when Ruby had turned eighty-four, one of her daughters put Ruby in a car with the cloth seats. The car was made of plastic, and Ruby wanted to know where her Thunderbird was. The car was also black inside and out, and seeing as the week before had also been July, it nearly baked Ruby as her daughter drove her out and away from That Place That Wasn't Home. All the way Ruby believed she was at long last being brought back home, to her own house where she had old glass bottles—green, blue, pink, yellow—all arranged in her windows. When the light hit them just right, it felt like a church, and Ruby would remember the meaning of life again. The white-white room with the off-white accents that they kept her in did not. Neither did her daughter's house, which is where her

daughter drove her.

Ruby always asked her daughter where her bottles were and about other things like Freckles and Ahab and if her water was boiling or where did she put all her jewelry. She wanted to ask about Jack when she could remember his name. But for some reason, it always made her cry. She wanted to ask her where Laurie was. But for some reason, it always made her cry. Then her daughter wouldn't visit for a while. When she was at her daughter's house for that sweet birthday party—that may have been her own—Ruby was sure to be on her best behavior and to not speak her mind and to not try and help.

All the while she kept looking for Jack. There were so many people there that she loved. Her boy Tom was there with the sweet girl he married, one of Minnie's daughters. She couldn't remember the girl's name, but they chatted amiably about Minnie and her sisters. The girl said she looked so well! She had said it like a compliment, but it cut at Ruby and made her feel angry and confused. She was happy to see her only grandson Perry there with his friends that handsome dark boy they kept calling White and Bucky's granddaughter. She thought surely they were married. She was a beautiful girl. Surely they were married. Her other daughter, Janie, was there all the way from Louisville and didn't even bother to bring her boyfriend. It made Ruby mad, and she told Janie as much, but Janie said she hadn't been dating Beau since high school and laughed at her. She kept wondering where Laurie was, but she didn't ask. She thought she heard someone say he was at the factory. Her son and the boys Perry and White talked a lot about the factory, even when she asked them about it. But Jack didn't work anymore. He was retired and let Tom do most the work at the factory. Where had Jack been?

Jack would've hated the party that Ruby went to. It had balloons and china made

out of paper and silverware made out of plastic, much like the car her daughter drove. “Easier to clean up, Mother,” her daughter had said. But that wasn’t the point. Jack would’ve understood and would’ve insisted they go home after coffee. It was probably for the best that he hadn’t been there because the coffee never came. That had been last week hadn’t it?

Ruby tried to remind herself of the day and all the details. The cake was chocolate with seven minute icing. She’d taught her daughter how to make it, but her daughter put too much water in the double boiler and the stiff peaks never formed. It ran off the cake like a glaze, melted and messy. She wanted to correct her daughter and tell her to not put so much water in the double boiler, but her daughter kept her bound to that chair. All she was allowed to do was talk to Tom’s sweet wife and say the cake was so delicious. Her daughter should’ve used melted shortening not margarine, but she couldn’t get up to help her. She just had to sit there and pretend she enjoyed Perry playing the piano with Bucky’s granddaughter and the dark boy they called White. That had been last week. She was sure it had been last week. Luckily, Ruby had a little rip-the-day calendar on her bedside table next to the picture of Freckles and Laurie. She thought the days synced up. She turned to ask Jack, but he wasn’t there.

But there was a knock at the door. Ruby’s heart jumped thinking it was Laurie.

“You don’t have to knock, baby mine. I’ve been waiting for you.”

It wasn’t Laurie, though. It was the woman shrouded in sterile blue who comes to see her three times a day, most days, every day. She thinks the woman knows her. She calls her “Ma’am” and “Now, Mrs. Romberg”. Ruby once knew a Ma’am. She could see her face when she closed her eyes, and she is not shrouded in sterile blue. She wears

lipstick of a common vermilion shade, but her voice swirls and swishes by inside Ruby's ear, not unlike a shell pressed to her ear as if she were calling to the ocean. Ruby concentrated on the voice. She squeezed her eyes tight until the skin ached in the corners. Maybe if she could hear what the voice has to say she would remember what all I forgot. And she could finally sail away to the crystal water beyond the Sea of Tranquility.

"Could you play me my song," Ruby asked the woman who dropped a few pearls into a Dixie cup.

The woman moved with busy fingers. She laughed like she was supposed to and didn't meet Ruby's eyes, but she did say, "I took guitar lessons when I was in the fourth grade. It would hurt your ears to hear me."

That disappointed Ruby. "Could you sing?"

The woman laughed the same little laugh. "Now, Mrs. Romberg, take this. Here's your O.J. I'll be back this afternoon. Want me to turn on your T.V.?"

"That's okay." She swallowed the pearls while the woman shrouded in blue watched.

Ruby had played piano when her fingers were nimble and whole. She wouldn't tell you she played beautifully or that people listened. But, she knew the notes, and she knew the silence that pounded when she left the room. Her life was so hard to understand. It was still chaos, wet and massive. She could see a red stain on a white robe. The stain was not hers, but the robe certainly was. She tried to scrub it out, but the stain persisted. Like the silence that pounded when she left the room. She had played for him. But she didn't think it helped clear the chaos or the stains that riddled her life. The cold, broken beauty of the stain held her transfixed, suspended like notes above the piano. In moments

like these of silent chaos she remembered that piano. She remembered that stain most of all. But little else remained behind. She wanted to ask what they knew, but she was terribly afraid of what she'd find out.

The bottom line was that Ruby hadn't found the meaning of life yet, and her body was giving her up. She tried not to panic, but there was no one to turn to. Ruby was alone in the white-white room except for the picture of the irises that hung from the wall opposite her bed in a gilded frame. She knew they weren't real irises, but they hung their soft purple heads in exhaustion from their slender and sturdy bodies. She would talk to them when there was no one else to turn to.

"All this must be plenty confusing for you, and for that I must apologize," she confided. "I'm trying to sort it out for myself and all I can do is thank you for listening. I have a feeling that much like the woman shrouded in sterile blue that you don't pass judgment either. When I close my eyes I can see you, and that is a comforting thought."

Talking to the irises relaxed her when she couldn't find Jack or Laurie or her glass bottles in the window sill bringing the church light full of meaning. They couldn't stop her crying, though. It was one of those violent, silent cries with tears that fell in heavy drops. She kept thinking about those irises. They needed water and dirt and sunshine.

"Please, someone help!" she called out into the air. "Please! They're dying!"

Ruby knew no one would come.

"Please!"

She hated to beg. It distracted her from finding the meaning of life. But the irises needed her. She couldn't just lay back and let them die. Ruby hoped she had conserved

enough energy. She was losing time. Their heads seemed to be wilting against the glass of the frame. She'd had applesauce for lunch. She hoped it was enough.

"I won't let you die," she comforted the irises, which were still in the prime of their life.

She carefully peeled the sheet from her legs. She needed to catch her breath after freeing her feet from the tangles of bedding, but the irises looked weaker. It frightened her. She hoped they didn't die before she got to them. Ruby didn't think she could live with herself if they did. She inched her fragile legs to the side of the mechanical bed. They used to be strong and muscular legs that could walk for miles up and down rows of tobacco and climb trees and into hay lofts. But now they were just sticks of old skin wrapped loosely around brittle bones. They could hardly support her weight, which was less than her age. Gingerly, like easing a tomato plant with thin, spindly roots into the earth, Ruby touched her toes to the cold linoleum. Her cane was across the room, not that it mattered. Slowly she shuffled one foot in front of the other. Each little push was a calamity and a triumph.

"Hurry, hurry," she told herself, heart pounding.

She felt her limbs wanting to give out. But the irises needed her help. They hung high up on the wall beside the dresser that held up the television she never watched but always turned on at five o'clock. Even when she tried to unbend her back and stretch her broomstick arms, she couldn't reach the irises. Tears pooled in the ripples of wrinkles down her face. She tried calling for help again, but her voice was weak and only came out as a whimper.

"This isn't any way to live," she said partly to the flowers as she fell to the floor.

It was cold. Such a cold, cold floor.

When Ruby was younger she had a husband whose name eludes her now. But he treated her kindly when he was near. If she could recall correctly, he was bearded and short in stature. When she asked, she was taller than him, as people tell her. She can't attest to that to tell you truly, but she can say it does not matter to her every now and then. If it ever did, she wouldn't know. Nevertheless, she loved this bearded man who she doesn't see so much anymore. When she folds her lids over her eyeballs and stills her breath as if she's preparing for sleep or death, she can see him perfectly. His voice pounds in her ear with heavy weight. He sings a song and wears a sharp suit. She remembers him with lips smiling, eyes wide and green with ripples of gray. His skin never wrinkles. The song he sings when he comes home from work has a sweet rhythm in a major cord. Ruby led herself to believe he hid a shofar in his briefcase. He plays it for her when he sings the song. The song was her song.

The woman shrouded in sterile blue often gave her pearls in a plastic cup. She tells Ruby to swallow them down with orange juice. She wanted to cry because they were pearls, after all. Sometimes she did cry, but the woman shrouded in sterile blue didn't pass judgment. She acted like it was something she saw every day. After Ruby swallowed the pearls, she asked the woman shrouded in sterile blue to sing her song, but she just sings what was on the radio that morning. She didn't live in a white-white room like Ruby did. She wondered if the shrouded woman didn't pass judgment when she saw her cry because she understood her search for the meaning of life.

“Mrs. Romberg?”

Ruby looked up at the woman like she would if she weren't crying.

“Mrs. Romberg, who put that picture in the window?”

“I did,” Ruby said.

The woman’s eyes widened and her mouth hung open slightly like a shy girl who was afraid to sing too loudly. She moved to hang it back on the wall.

“Don’t. Don’t do that. They need the sun.”

The woman didn’t listen. “Why is it wet?”

“They needed water. I couldn’t find the dirt.”

The woman ignored Ruby.

“No, no, please. They need the sun.”

“They can get the sun from here.”

“No, they need the sun.”

The woman ignored Ruby and left the old woman to her crying like it was something she saw every day.

She would be stolen away in the kitchen, of course. Ruby would always be in the kitchen in those days. Her hands would be covered in red. Still, she always saw red when she looked at her hands (although she didn’t usually tell other this detail). The red was not a natural red. She closed her eyes tight, so tight until the skin ached, so she could remember what the red is from. But, her husband loved what she made in the kitchen from the red. The memory played in her head like a voice she couldn’t find the context to. The red from her hands brought a yelp of excitement from her husband. Alone in the chaos that turned her memory into mud, she could sometimes find herself. As soon as her husband came into the kitchen and yelped at the red, the memory floated like foam on the sea, away and far beyond reach. It went where she could not follow. No matter how much

she wanted to chase it, she's stopped. She believes that if she could catch it, she could finally sail away. She couldn't stop the red. The red just kept coming. They took Laurie away, and she wasn't allowed to follow. She looked up at the irises to tell them apologies like she told Laurie.

“The color was red,” she said. “My son, Tom, called the dogs “hounds”. My daughters caught his drift and played along. I wished I could, too, but the color was red. They wanted me to play along, play along that they were British because, in fairylands, little boys were kind and clever and got to grow all the way up and be kings. To distract them they wanted Ruby, their mother, to play along, or that's what she wanted to believe at the time. But she was afraid that maybe they really wanted to distract her from the redness.”

The irises nodded their noble heads.

There was another memory Ruby liked to tell herself as she settled into bed. She wouldn't have told it if she didn't think that others would've enjoyed it as well. Every night she would tell herself the memory after the woman shrouded in sterile blue urged her to swallow the pearls and turn the television down.

“If it helps you to close your eyes as well, you're welcome to do so. I won't pass judgment. I think I'm old now, so the story may take me a while to tell. You understand. My mind feels like it's like drowning under the ancient of days. Sometimes I can catch a breath of air, but most of the time I'm holding my lungs, clenching them tight. I hold my breath just like I did when man landed on the moon,” she began.

She was speaking, of course, to the irises.

“I can see my home in the wintertime. All white. This was a year of snow, 1978.

It's January, and Janie and Laurie still are in high school. I am so proud because Janie is reading even though school is canceled. Tom comes and checks on us even though he had a new wife. My eldest daughter is engaged and getting married at an indefinite date. I feel so warm because they are all home with me and safe. I feel so warm because my husband who loves me is safe. We are all inside my home. The girls may groan because we're having gray squirrel for supper, but the boys are beside themselves because they shot the gray squirrel so cleanly. I say it's okay if brave Ahab and herculean Freckles come inside for the night. The girls groan, but they put down their books to hug the "hounds" and scratch them in the soft tufts behind their droopy ears. I pretend I don't notice when the boys feed brave Ahab and herculean Freckles under the table. The boys feel complete because our supper would not be on the table without their help."

She couldn't get much further before she fell asleep. That was the first day, and it was not so good.

When Ruby woke up the next morning her heart was sore, her joints screamed, and she only had two days to remember the meaning of life. It was a Saturday, which meant the lovely children from the high school would infiltrate her white-white room and read stuff to her. Some weeks she dreaded Saturday. Others, she looked forward to Saturday like it would never come. She didn't know how she felt that Saturday. Regardless of whether Ruby wanted the lovely children to come or not, they came. Just like death and taxes, as they say. They didn't ask her what she wanted to hear or if she was reading something of her own. They would just pull a book out of their backpack and go at it until the man in the khakis came and told them that was a good job. In the

beginning Ruby would pretend to sleep. When that didn't work, she would ask them about their parents and grandparents. But that didn't work either. So Ruby had pretty much just given up and sat there immobile with an immobile grin just like they wanted. They would keep plowing on through those lines. It was typically a boy and a girl, and they would trade off when the other got tired. That week was no different.

“Good morning, Miss Ruby,” the girl said.

She was smiling so wide she could've been related to a frog. For all Ruby knew, maybe she was. Ruby wanted to correct the girl for calling her “miss”. She knew she didn't look young, and didn't the girl see Jack standing across the way?

“Good morning, Miss Ruby.”

It was the same with the boy. She always felt mortified when those young boys came into her room and she was wearing nothing but the night gown they kept her in. They never seemed to notice, though. Ruby caught Jack's eye. He was standing with his arms crossed, leaning against her dresser. He had his work pants on. They were dusty, and his shirttail had been worked loose out from under the belt. Jack was young again, but not as young as those birds of paradise who started reading chapter six out of *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fennimore Cooper. The two birds would giggle to each other if one could not pronounce one of James's words because it was such a long time ago. Sometimes one would get out their cell phone and show it to the other, and they would giggle some more. Jack would shake his head, and Ruby would shrug her shoulders, wanting to understand the two lovely children who reminded her of birds. They were dressed down to their skin. Ruby understood that it was July and hot. But look at Jack. He was building a factory with his younger brother and working in his daddy's

tobacco patch. He wore long pants like a decent human being. And a hat. Where was his hat?

Ruby turned to ask the lovely children. They looked at her like they were afraid. They stammered and said it was outside.

“Go get the hat then, honey! Jack needs his hat.”

The girl looked at the boy, and the boy looked at the girl. Ruby looked at them both. Why wouldn't they help? Two strong bodies, much stronger than her own, but Jack needed his hat if he was gonna go out in this weather. She twisted in her sheets, trying to get out so she could fetch Jack's hat from outside. The two lovely children reacted like she might pounce and toss them into her oven to roast for supper. They flew out of their plastic chairs. Ruby wished she could've found her good oak chairs so they wouldn't have to sit in those. They flew out into the hallway and called out. The woman in the blue shroud came in. Ruby could almost see the hearts beating out of the two young chests. Like little frightened birds.

“I just need Jack's hat,” Ruby tried to explain to the woman.

But she just “umhummed” her and gave her two little pearls in a Dixie cup with some water, also in a Dixie cup.

“Please. He needs to go back out. His brother, George, is waiting for him. They're laying concrete today.”

Ruby was so confused. The two lovely children stared at her like she was speaking German or Japanese. Maybe they needed comforting.

“Jack's not angry. He's a patient man, children.”

She smiled, but it didn't work. The girl held the paperback loosely as she watched

the woman in sterile blue tuck Ruby back in.

“Here, Mrs. Romberg, take these,” she insisted pushing the cup into Ruby’s shrunken hand.

“But they’re pearls. Look at them!”

The woman looked at the children apologetically. Ruby looked to Jack, but he was gone. Maybe he’d found his hat. Ruby took the pearls and tried not to cry. It was no use. If she didn’t swallow them, the woman shrouded in blue would just crush them up. And she didn’t want the children to see that. They may never come back.

“Just holler if you need me,” she told the children, patting the boy on the back.

The children watched her leave, fluttering in their chairs to turn and see her go. They watched with heightened awareness at Ruby sunk back into her pillows. She needed to say something to make them feel more at ease.

“Can you play any songs?”

The girl picked up her book and continued to read aloud. Ruby listened for the song, but never heard it. After turning a couple pages, she handed it off to the boy. Ruby didn’t hear a song there either. She just wanted to fall asleep. She’d heard the story before. Laurie had read it before the redness came and covered their hands. He screamed in pain at the redness that spilled out of his mouth and arms and chest. It was an accident. He called her Mommy Mommy, which he hadn’t done since he was little. It frightened her, but she never thought she would lose her baby to the redness. Thick and dark. It spilled out all over her as she held him. Jack was gone. The girls were sleeping at their own houses. Laurie was her last baby bird, and he was trying to beat his wings and fly away. Tom had found him and brought him into the house. It woke her up. Tom looked at

her with wild eyes, not knowing what to do and hoping she did. They let Freckles in the house even though he was wet and reeked of summer. Freckles sat by Laurie as Tom called for Jack.

“Mother, we need to get him to the hospital.”

She was frightened because Jack was out of town, and Tom had never seen death before. Laurie was still a baby, even though they called him a man. He was crying. Tom helped her carry Laurie to the old truck. She rode in the bed while Tom drove, Laurie spread out, dripping redness into the cloth seats. They were too late when they got to the hospital. Laurie had stopped breathing. The redness choked him and stopped his breathing. Ruby didn't understand why they couldn't take Laurie home. He needed her. He had been calling for her only earlier.

“Mother, we need to get back home.”

Jack came home early from his trip with George. They waited up all night, Tom and her girls. They let the dogs in, and they told stories about ancient times. Even when Kentucky was young. Ruby married the people who settled New Castle, and her children were proud of that. They told Ruby about their old school projects and the fort and shooting the Indians. It was like the big winter in 1978, when they were all together and safe, when Laurie and Tom shot the squirrels the “hounds” had found. She kept by the window, waiting for someone to come home. Her children would call her back. She would look down at her robe, stained.

“Mother, can we get you anything?”

“Laurie?”

Her children tried not to cry. They were so brave, and she was so proud.

The boy and the girl were dismissed by the man in the khaki pants who never poked his head in just to say hello and thank you. Ruby must have fallen asleep while they were reading. They must've liked that. She looked for Jack under the irises, but he had gone too. She felt utterly alone. It was a lazy Saturday afternoon, and the irises were sleeping, too. She wanted to join them in their peaceful dreams. Watching their dowdy heads, Ruby thought about when she was younger and when she knew the meaning of life. But all she could remember when her baby was attacked in the night and couldn't find his way back home. It was a sad memory because her children kept so much from her.

“Why won't they tell me?” she asked the sleeping irises.

It was decades ago, and some days Ruby worried over it while others she didn't. But during those days when she needed to remember the meaning of life before her body gave up, it worried her a lot. She pressed her hands into her eyes, hoping that closing them tight enough would help her conjure the images of the days. The summer nights when Jack would leave her alone, and Laurie wouldn't come in for supper because his friends were back from college. Even though she ate it alone, she didn't stop making a big meal every evening. It wasn't a matter of remembering, she knew. She remembered Laurie dying from all the blood. But she didn't remember why the blood came. It troubled her that she may have forgotten.

The woman shrouded in sterile blue returned with the cup of pearls. She was about to go home where she had a little son of her own named Moses. Moses would probably run through the house and hug her like Ruby's boys used to do all those years ago. The woman had told her all this through the days and weeks that she'd been kept in

the white-white room. She never told Ruby this in conversation, never sitting or with eye contact. Ruby would ask, and the woman would share just to get her to swallow the pearls.

In the beginning, Ruby couldn't understand why she had to stay The Place That Wasn't Home. She would sit at the window trying to find her house, afraid of the dust and emptiness. However, she would only end up crying for the confusion. Her daughter who still lived in New Castle tried to keep her, but Ruby wouldn't stay and her body began to crumple under the weight of time. Ruby didn't want to be left alone like she had been after Jack's funeral. After his funeral the chaos overcame her. Every day she sank deeper. The pearls she swallowed created a void, without form. Darkness rolled over the face of the depths of the chaos, and the meaning of life moved upon the face of the sea. Ruby couldn't grasp it as she churned amongst it. But on the second day, she broke through. She found a firmament and found the tall grasses where the meaning of life hid. She didn't swallow the pearls on the second day but hid them beneath her tongue and spat under her pillow. That was the second day, and she declared it better.

On the third day, Ruby knew she was going to die. Her rip-a-day calendar told her that it was Sunday, and she needed the rest. Great bursts of sunlight poured through her window, leaving a rectangular pool on the linoleum. She could hear the birds twittering and singing merrily in the tree outside. It was a pretty average Sunday, all in all. A church group would probably come to sing at them. The people who wore that sterile blue would encourage her to walk and sit out there and be polite. She would pretend to enjoy the songs, as if they took her back to a time where she was useful herself. But none of the

songs were her song. The song Jack would sing to her when they were young.

The woman shrouded in blue, Kimberly, she believed her name was, opened Ruby's door without knocking.

“Ready to go, Mrs. Romberg?”

“No, I'd like to stay here, if you don't mind.”

The woman brought over a walker with neon yellow tennis balls on the feet.

“I can use my cane.”

“Here we go. Up you get! Okay, Mrs. Romberg, we'll see you out there.”

She left the door open when she left. Ruby felt mildly ridiculous standing in the white-white room, bent over that walker that wasn't even hers. She watched a few other people in night gowns similar to her own shuffle down the hallway.

“I'm not going,” she said to no one in particular.

She maneuvered the walker over toward the dresser that held up the television set. She'd forgotten where some of her things were, but she recalled her daughter folding her best dress and hiding it away in the third drawer from the top. Ruby opened the drawer and found it. It probably wasn't in fashion any more, but Ruby had made it herself when she was still able to take care of herself and her children and her husband, Jack. It was undoubtedly too big for her at eighty-four, but she wanted to wear it nevertheless. Ruby shut the door and shook off that night gown like an old snake would shed its skin. With her own dress on, she felt a little peace of mind. It wasn't exactly a well-made dress or a beautiful dress, but it was a deep emerald color and kept her warm. She could hear the singers from her bed. They did nothing for her.

At lunchtime, Kimberly, the woman in blue came in with the applesauce Ruby

would refuse to eat.

“For Jack’s birthday I always made his favorite. Red velvet with cream cheese icing. Homemade. I was a good cook, but the food dye would turn my hands so red,” she told Kimberly who bustled with Ruby’s bedding and discarded nightgown.

“You need to put your gown back on, Mrs. Romberg.”

“But I didn’t care it turned my hands red. Every year on May eighteenth I would make that cake just the same. Jack would be so excited. Even the year Laurie died. Laurie died lying across his brother’s lap. I was riding in the back, but I like to think Tom was telling Laurie about Ahab and Freckles and how they treed those squirrels and how my boys shot them so cleanly. Jack was so proud. That was a long time ago.”

Ruby wrestled with Kimberly as she talked. Eventually Ruby won and Kimberly gave up trying to get her back in the nightgown. The emerald dress kept her warm enough. When Kimberly retreated and left Ruby to herself, she sighed and leaned back against her pillows. She felt her body getting more feather-like. She was about to say her goodbyes when Tom came to chat.

“How’re you feeling, Mother? You look pretty in that dress,” he said pulling one of the plastic chairs closer to the bedside. Ruby wished she had a better one for him to sit in.

“Pretty good, baby. How’s the factory?” She stroked his cheek as if he were ten or eight again as was asking for supper.

“Pretty good. Can I get you anything?”

“Tell me about when you and Laurie shot those squirrels.” Ruby closed her eyes. Bracing herself against the back of the memory.

“Squirrels?”

“Yes, those gray squirrels. They were so good.”

Tom looked at her like she was sick and pitiful.

“Don’t you remember the squirrels you shot so cleanly?” Ruby felt herself welling up for a cry.

“I’m sorry, Mother.” He was unable to meet her eyes.

Ruby knew if she started to cry he would leave, so she controlled herself enough to ask, “Where had Laurie been when you found him so covered in blood?”

Tom watched her for a moment, somewhat startled and somewhat ashamed.

“Mother, please—”

“What happened to Laurie? How did you find him?”

“There’s just some things you’re better off—”

“No! Tommy, please. I can’t remember, and I just want to remember where my baby was when he got covered in blood!”

“Mother, we never told you.”

“It was August twenty-ninth?”

“That’s right,” he said softly, his face paling.

“Jack was out of town, but I still made his cake. He was always so happy when I made that cake. That was a good red,” she said. “That was a good red.”

Ruby sat quietly, relaxed. Tom seemed to relax as well when she didn’t press him more about Laurie. She was remembering when Laurie was little, just a toddler. Tom, who was so much older, a decade older, helped take care of his baby brother. He would make up little stories about a snake and a tiny man who lived outside in Ruby’s

flowerbed. She was so glad she could remember. Sometimes the man and the snake would fight, but other times they would be friends and cause trouble. Laurie loved those stories. They were so simple.

She focused on Tom pitched forward in the plastic chair. His eyes were dull, but coffee brown like her own. They looked tired from caring bags for so long. His whole face was worn, making him look like an old man. She reached for one of his hands that propped up his chin. He gave her both and she rubbed them.

“It was that bad, bad winter of 1978. You remember it?”

He nodded. “When the snow plows finally made it back to our old road, the snow piled up so high on either side it felt like you were driving through a tunnel. Janie and Laurie were out of school for months.”

Ruby smiled, encouraged. “That’s right! And it got so muddy! But before that, when everything was closed and we couldn’t get out, you came over to check on us. And we were all together again. It was so nice.”

“And Daddy got out his guitar and you got on the piano and played your song.”

Ruby closed her eyes and hummed a bit of it. “I remember. It was so beautiful.”

Her son squeezed her hand.

“I need a story, Tom. As humans we love stories. Our lives revolve around stories—hearing them, telling them, making them. We’re a bit like buzzards, aren’t we, circling around the remains of a memory or a make-believe, hoping to forget or to creating something new and better for ourselves. We separate ‘in the story’ from ‘in real life’ but only because the laws of sanity tell us to. We don’t really want to, though.”

Tom’s face brightened and he laughed slightly. “Mother, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just need a story.”

Tom cleared his throat because he understood. “Okay. This is one I used to tell Laurie. It’s one about the snake and the tiny man in the garden. What? Why are you laughing?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just remember the meaning of life.”

“Oh, okay.”

Ruby listened to a pleasant story with a happy ending. Jack met her with bright green eyes. They were young again, and he didn’t have to work. He helped her along as they worked in the flowerbed and the vegetable garden. It was spring. Jack’s hair was wet around the brim of his hat. She’d found it in the kitchen. They would use real china because it was Jack’s birthday, and she had a new recipe she found, called red velvet. He’d taken off work because they were young again. She wore a beautiful green dress. That was the last day, and it was good.

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