

Until the Breaking of Day
Stories from Penuel County, Georgia

Caroline L. Sanders

Honors Thesis in Creative Writing
R.T. Smith, Thesis Advisor
Chris Gavalier, Second Reader

“And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of day...And Jacob called the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.”
Genesis 32:24, 30

Table of Contents

I.	My Father's World.....	4
II.	John, the Baptist.....	19
III.	Some Glad Morning.....	43
IV.	Radio Man.....	68
V.	The Best We Can.....	88
VI.	The End of Things.....	112
VII.	Appendix.....	126
VIII.	Reading List.....	138

My Father's World

Mama's first husband was stupid. He worked part time at A&J's Grocery across the river on the dingy part of town, sweeping out the bathrooms and hibernating behind the cash register against a background of Skoal cans and lottery tickets. Granny used to tell me how he'd come home from work every day and settle his bovine body into our big, blue La-Z-Boy in the living room right under the framed picture of our blonde-haired-and-neatly-bearded Lord Jesus Christ smiling down on a fuzzy little lamb in his arms. We still have the painting and the chair, although now the fabric is worn gray in patches like a wet dog curled up in a concrete kennel. He'd sit right under Jesus and smoke Marlboro after Marlboro with a can of Planter's peanuts perched on his belly, while Jeff, Dale, and Kyle zipped across the television screen to a symphony of revs and crashes. I never saw him, of course, but I picture him like a sad little cartoon character, a cloud of cigarette smoke perpetually overhead and a miserable expression etched onto his dumpy face. He didn't make what you'd call a living at A&J's, and Lord knew he'd never be promoted. Mama, being the angel that she is, always supported them with her salary from the Sizzler. But when the money wasn't enough, and they had Skylar, he was gone, as distant as the freights that crawled by in the night headed for Atlanta.

Mama's second husband was mean as a cut snake. Granny told me that he'd come home from Ready Freddy's, snatch a tallboy of PBR from the fridge and plop down right under Jesus into the same La-Z-Boy that Husband One had sullied not yet a full year before. "Shut that damn kid up, Sheila," he'd grunt as he flipped on the television. Mama, still being the angel that she is, would scoop Skylar up off the floor and shush her gently, head to breast. In the muck of night, the beer would sometimes rage inside my daddy and turn hot as God's fiery furnace. To deal with the meanness popping inside him, he'd pop Mama square across the face. Once when

Granny had stepped in, he shoved her down too and left them sniveling and snorting on the carpet together. Mama would forgive him every morning, though—Jesus on the wall and everything. If there was ever a thing as loving too much, Granny said, Mama sure did it to my daddy. But when the love wasn't enough, and they had me, he too slithered away into the night, following the trains.

I grew up hearing these stories about my daddy and Skylar would've grown up hearing the stories about hers if she'd have listened. I don't know if Granny should've told us as much as she did, but she held on to the anger and bitterness until it ate her all up. Though the autopsy didn't show this, I wouldn't be surprised if half the reason her heart attacked her was because it was broken for her daughter. Mama wasn't ashamed of any of it, though. She told every man she fell in love with. And boy was she easy to give away her heart and all of its fillings with it.

After my daddy, though, Mama never bothered with the "I do" anymore. Said she don't believe in it: marriage that is. She's still looking for love and she's had more boyfriends than birthdays. She's dragged home some more stupid men, and some more mean men, some fat men, some ugly men, bald, hairy, bossy, lazy, poor men. And some were even nice. But none of them were good men. I hated them all and I don't plan to stop.

Last year in biology, we learned about genetics. Some come from your mama and some come from your daddy. Draw a square, do the whole dominant and recessive thing, and boom you've got the makings of little genetic offspring. Lord knows Sky's daddy's genes were dominant. I love her to death but I can't say her IQ's any higher than the squirrels that burrow into our crawl space in the winter. Mama babies her, never pressing her in any direction that could ever be perceived as uncomfortable or challenging. So, because she wanted to, Skylar

dropped out of high school last year and has been shadowing Patricia at Belle Bella's Beauty Salon on the Square since. Mama drops her off on the way to the Sizzler every morning. And now she's eighteen, working a paying job (barely more than minimum wage, but money's money), and gnawing to get married like a Rottweiler with its leg stuck in a trap. She's been dating Tommy for about a year now. He's 23 and unemployed. He used to live with his parents but now he spends almost every night in Skylar's pink cheetah print bed.

"Why do you keep him around?" I had just gotten home from school, dumped my book bag and sandals in the corner, and sprawled myself across the mustard carpet of the living room beside Jax, our old mutt we rescued from the pound a few years back. I stretched my head towards his scrawny chest periodically to make sure he was still breathing. The TV blared *Say Yes to the Dress*—some poor girl had gained thirteen pounds since she'd last tried on the dress and her wedding was only weeks away! I rolled over to face Skylar. Friday afternoons were always like this. It was her day off from Belle Bella's and I imagined she sat here the whole of it watching reruns and letting life drip around her. I checked the clock on my phone: no texts and only two and a half more hours until the football game. Two more hours til I could get out of this house.

"What kinda question is that?" Skylar had one pudgy leg curled beneath her and one leg dangling from the La-Z-Boy as she played on her phone—likely Candy Crush by the way her thumbs pulsed back and forth sporadically. "I love Tommy and he loves me and we're going to get married." It was a matter of fact, not worth her time to look up from the screen in her hands. "Why the hell do you keep that thing around?" She swung her leg at the dog.

"Jax is part of the family!" I wiggled his ear but he just lay there motionless, the stoic middle child. "And besides, he smells and acts better than Tommy, anyway."

Skylar wrinkled her nose and snorted out a breath of contempt. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Mama hates that dog as much as I do. Annoying how it always wants attention.”

“He’s not the only one.” Skylar didn’t look up—whether out of maturity or ignorance that I was teasing her I wasn’t sure. “At least Jax has a personality. Tommy just sits around with a dead look in his eyes. What’s that gold chain he wears around his neck? Some sort of zombie emblem? A token of the undead?”

“Bitch.” Skylar finally looked up from her phone, her face ironing itself out into a scowl. “It’s a cross if you must know. He’s very religious.”

I scoffed, pointing one finger up at the hanging picture of Jesus to remind her to watch her language.

“You’re just jealous that boys don’t like you. You just wish you could find someone as good as Tommy so you could be as happy as us.”

I laughed.

“Look, Taylor.” Her voice dropped to a near whisper. “I finally found someone who will stay with me. Let me be happy.”

Her gaze back on her phone, all I could see of her eyes was her sparkly gold eye shadow and thickly mascaraed fake lashes. Maybe I was being too mean.

“Hey, look,” I began to apologize and tell her that you don’t find “finally” at eighteen, but Joel hobbled through the front door and into the living room. Of all the boyfriends Mama’s ever had, Joel is the ugliest. His dark gray curls are receding and perpetually greasy. That afternoon they shimmered with sweat under the wimpy florescent lights, making his face look even clammiest than usual. A scraggly mustache wedged between his droopy round cheeks,

shaped and colored almost exactly like the balls of bread dough behind the bakery counter at the Piggly Wiggly. His left eye was not quite lazy—more apathetic, I’d say—so you never quite knew where he was looking. He wore a hideous short-sleeve button down that was patterned with dogs of different colors, standing in horizontal lines as if they were damned to sniff each others backsides for all eternity. The armpits were stained with sweat and the hem hung sloppily untucked over his jeans. The worst thing about him, though, was his toenails and fingernails, so long, dirty, and yellowing it gave me chills to look at them.

“Afternoon, girls.” His voice was deep and cane syrup slow. He shuffled across the room and dropped heavily onto the couch as near to us as he could get, landing his toenails inches from my face. Jax and I recoiled. “Y’all are looking mighty pretty today.”

Skylar had recovered from her self-pity enough to smile back at Joel. He loved women. Everything he did or said was an attempt to make a girl grin or blush. Mama found it charming and Skylar thought it was cute that he tried so hard. I couldn’t see it as anything more than plain creepy.

“So I’s thinkin bout taking your mama down to Fernandina next week for a little vacation from the real world.” He motioned vaguely to his surroundings by circling his thick paws about his wrists like a conductor of some blue-faced and breathless brass section of an orchestra. I wondered what about the living room constituted the real world. “I got a buddy’s got a timeshare said we can use. Whaddya think?” His apathetic eye looked at both of us at the same time.

“Ooh, how romantic!” Skylar squealed. “She’d love that!”

“She’s working next week. I doubt she can take much time off.”

He dismissed my thought with another flick of his hand. “She can take time off.” Joel didn’t understand work. He hadn’t worked in almost five years due to his “disability,” although I

suspected it was no more than a toe stubbed on hot asphalt long ago. He seemed capable as an old push lawn mower to me—sure there was someone you’d rather do the job, but he’d suffice. He’d always complain about his limp, though, and happily rake in the checks from the government.

“Besides,” he added, “your mama works too hard. Needs to have a good time every once in a while.” His vowels stretched long like a copperhead sizing up its prey.

My phone lit up from the carpet beneath me and I snatched it before anyone else noticed. One message from Trey Blunt.

See u at the bonfire after the game tonight? It read.

I flipped the phone back over and covered the smile I felt stealing towards my face. Don’t respond too eagerly, I reminded myself, although I reveled in the thought of getting out of this house to go anywhere at this point—Trey Blunt present or not.

Mama called through the kitchen door that it was time for supper and magnetically drawn to the prospect of food, Tommy’s footsteps sounded from the back hallway. I checked once more to make sure Jax was breathing before I stood up.

Joel sat at the head of the rectangular table, his elbows resting on the cherry wood in preparation for the prayer. The blessing, slow in Joel’s sorghum voice, was about the only time Mama looked away from him the entire meal. Skylar and Tommy sat across from Mama. Sky conspicuously held his hand beneath the table. During conversations, she would lean over and titter into his ear as he nodded, his expression detached and cold. If he spoke—although the event was unlikely—it was with a thick, flat voice that never deviated from monotone, an impassionate smoke detector that half-heartedly wanted its batteries changed. He always wore a

fading Falcons baseball cap to cover up his receding hairline and gold chains around his neck that drew attention to the thin hairs protruding from the top of his shirt. I had always thought he might be inbred.

We had discussed the weather, who the Penuel Panthers were playing that night, and how crazy Gus McNeese set up his radio show at the nearest booth to the buffet line at the Sizzler at lunchtime and wouldn't let anybody eat their chicken fried steak in peace. The room fell into a contented lull. The only sound was Joel's fork clanking against the plate and Jax's heavy breath under my feet.

"Well you know what I've been thinkin about lately?" Skylar's voice shattered the silence.

"Let me guess..." I began without looking up from my plate of spaghetti.

She rolled her eyes. "I think I've decided I want the wedding to be in the spring. I'd been leaning towards summer but that would just be too hot I decided. I could still wear a strapless dress—you know how my shoulders look so good in strapless dresses."

"Mmmm hmmm." Mama smiled. "You look beautiful in just about anything."

I imagined Skylar in a strapless gown looking like a sequined, sweating semi truck. Not even engaged yet, the season of her wedding was the least of her worries. Her eyes were almost iridescent, though, as she talked about the dress and the church. Tommy slumped in his chair beside her, holding her hand under the table with a distant, swampy expression. Something told me he wasn't envisioning the flower arrangements. No tinge of excitement on his wilting face, no sparkle of mythical, otherworldly glee. In fact, I didn't see a glint of anything at all. He just sat there as if he had already lived his life and was watching it go by again. The only itch of defiance in him was the slump of his spine in his straight-backed chair. He was stuck. The

weight of inevitability hit me like the hot August air outside, relentlessly driving into me from all directions. Poor Tommy. This was his life. And poor Sky. This was her finally.

“And then at the reception—I’m thinking maybe out back of the community center in that little park long the river. Anything but the fellowship hall, really. At the reception, we can do dances and the cake and speeches and stuff.”

Skylar finally took a breath and a bite. “So we’re reading *The Scarlet Letter* in my English class.” I tossed my words into the center of the table, hoping they’d catch on something. Skylar’s eyebrows furrowed, but I couldn’t talk about that wedding a second longer. Tommy’s expression hadn’t changed. “It’s pretty good, although I do kinda feel sorry for the main girl. She gets knocked up and the whole town turns on her.”

“That happens sometimes,” Mama said without looking up from the ball of spaghetti she’d rolled onto her fork.

Joel looked at me (I think) with a smile forming under his wiry mustache. “Penuel’s really stepping up its game since I was a kid. I can’t remember nothin they made us read.” He chuckled. “Course I probably never read it anyway.”

Mama giggled. “You know, Tay loves readin. I bet you she’ll be the first one of all of us to go to college. I mean I don’t think we can afford UGA or anything, specially not with housing these days—but I hear Central Georgia Tech’s on the up and up. I guess we’ll just have to see.”

“All this talk of reading and money is just about to wear me out.” Joel clapped his hands. “What do you say we eat dessert?” He looked at Mama, signaling her with a nod of his oversized head to go get the box of cookies from the pantry shelf. Mama smiled with her sweet angel-doe-eyes locked on him and obliged. Sky admired Tommy as he watched the cookies in Mama’s arms.

I declined when Mama offered me some.

The bonfire consumed the sky, casting our shadows long and dark as if we were giants. I looked across the field at my own shadow, moved one arm out and wiggled my fingers so my shadow fingers wiggled back, a sure sign of solidarity. I always felt more like Jack than a giant, but you're always the hero of your own story, I guess. Nikki squeezed my arm by the elbow and pulled me out of the circle of people, through the hazy ring of other partygoers, my shadow contorting as it followed. It didn't much want to be here either.

I'd gotten real good at pretending, though. I swirled around the Coke in my red cup like it was a fancy glass of wine. "Don't leave me," Nikki breathed into my ear, nearly inaudible over the rap music blasting from a K12 speaker across the fire pit. Her breath was hot and pungent. Perhaps I was Jack and this was a dream world, high above the clouds someplace where nothing was real. Or maybe it was hell, which seemed more likely. Tingles of heat scalded the back of my bare knees and I had the feeling of ever-present distress that someone was looking for me and I was perhaps looking for him as well. I craned my neck as we walked, checking for signs of Trey. All in all this anxious hell was better than home, I supposed. I wondered vaguely if I'd ever really want to be anywhere.

Nikki pulled me through the lone gaggle of black kids; I recognized Isaac Abelson from the soccer team and Shawna Payton from English but was being pulled too quickly to say hi. We passed by the cheerleaders, still in their skirts from the game but they were too busy passing around the water bottle of vodka Carrie Campbell had stolen from her older sister to notice us. I followed Nikki in and out of crowds to a large group of girls huddled by the bed of one of the trucks someone'd backed up to the bonfire ring.

“Taaaaayyyyy!” Two skinny arms grabbed me around my neck, squeezing me tight and knocking some kind of liquid down the front of my shirt. Coldness dripped down my chest. It didn’t smell at all like Coke.

“Hey Anne Charlotte.” I grimaced but hoped my voice came out cheery.

“Trey Blunt’s lookin for youuu.” Even though her voice caught and held on tight to the last syllable like one of the obnoxious new country songs on the radio, my stomach knotted. Trey Blunt was seventeen—a junior—and as good-looking as any of the movie stars in Skylar’s magazines. His hair was long and dirty blonde, swooping a little over his forehead barely letting the little scar on his temple show through. I’d noticed it in math class.

Nikki squeezed my arm again. “You should go find ‘im.” But I didn’t have to.

“Taylor!” I knew it was his voice as soon as I heard it and I prayed to God he hadn’t been listening to Anne Charlotte talk about him. He walked up behind me and placed his hand on my waist. The knots in my stomach tightened hard like a noose. “I’ve been looking for you all night. What did you think of the game?”

“Um...” I looked over at Nikki and Anne Charlotte, but they had pulled away from me into another pack, a poor attempt to look like they weren’t listening. “It was great. You played great.”

“Ah, you don’t have to say that.” He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and cringed. “Damn. Okay, Tay you’re gonna think I’m lame but my mom’s gonna kill me if I’m not back by midnight. Jake’s driving if you wanna come?”

I looked back over at Nikki, who raised her eyebrows and mouthed extravagantly: “GO.” I paused and chugged the rest of my drink, wishing for once it was alcohol. I nodded hesitantly, and followed him back across the ring of shadows to Jake Hudson’s truck.

“Can you drop Taylor off at her house?” Trey asked through the rolled down window.

Jake nodded and said, “Pile in.” I wondered if he’d been drinking.

We hopped in the back with about five other people. The party was on the Miller Twins’ farm just south of town. Although it wasn’t too far back, the drive stretched on forever as we dropped off people one by one. The wind was loud and cold against my cheeks, which was fine because I didn’t know how to hold a conversation with Trey anyway. He kept his arm firmly around my waist. He tried to yell something to me about the football game, but gave up after I asked twice what he was saying.

We pulled up to my house and I was suddenly sorely aware of my little modular home. We kept it clean but I felt cheap, nonetheless, and I chastised myself for not having thought of this before. Trey didn’t seem to notice, though, as he helped me down off the bed of the truck, told me to have a good night, and kissed me straight on the lips. His lips were cold and dry from the wind, but I could feel a hint of warmth and dampness from his tongue. His hands—big and graceful enough to catch a football from fifty yards—squeezed tighter around my waist. He pulled away and I looked back at him, eyes wide. But he wasn’t looking at me. He’d already jumped into the truck and signaled for the Jake to drive away.

I felt myself hovering over my body, unsure of where I was, who I was. I felt numb where his hands had touched. My lips felt heavy. I didn’t even notice Joel leaning against the door of the garage, watching me intently with his good eye.

“Was that your first kiss?” His voice shook me from my stupor. He laughed. “Didn’t mean to scare you. I was just about to drive home when I saw you and your friend out there.” He stood only a few feet from me but his face was hidden in the shadows. He still wore the ridiculous dog shirt and the way he breathed deeply with his whole body looked as if some of the

dogs were panting and others were wagging their tails. I could see Jax tied up to the doghouse a few yards past him.

“I...I hate that shirt.” It was all I could think to say.

He made one limp towards me then stopped. “But this is my favorite shirt. I thought we were friends. We see things eye to eye, me and you.” His reptilian vowels stretched even longer in the dark.

“I really don’t think we do.” I was seized by a confidence as warm as Trey’s tongue. “The dogs look like they’re smelling each other’s asses. Ugliest damn thing I’ve ever seen if you ask me.”

“You think it’s ugly?” I could see the glint from his scraggly smile—or was it a grimace—as he stepped further out of the shadow towards me.

“It’s fitting, really,” I spit.

The space between us diminished and with it, my confidence. It was a grimace on his face. He reached for me now with his yellow nails—whether to ruffle my hair like a child, stretch his claws around my neck, or pull me into an embrace I didn’t know. “I’ll show you ugly.” My body tightened as I imagined his thickset hands on me, his sharp nails brushing against my skin and I jumped out of the way of his arms, tripping him and knocking him face first onto the pavement.

“Oh,” I cried. “I didn’t mean...” My hands shot to cover my mouth but I didn’t move to help him up.

He released a slow, grim chuckle from the cement beneath me and his glare, no longer apathetic in the slightest, made perfect contact with mine. “Mean, just like your daddy.”

I waited inside the door until I heard his engine start and watched his headlights disappear.

The lights were on in the kitchen. Through the cracked door, I could hear Skylar talking and Mama's heavy voice sighing responses. Tommy, luckily, was nowhere to be found.

"Mama." I opened the door and stuck my head inside. Mama sat back in one of the straight-backed chairs, her arms crossed in front of her. Skylar sat across from her, her elbows on the table as she leaned towards Mama like gravity.

"Oh, so glad you're home!" Mama smiled. "Come sit." She patted the wooden chair beside her and I ebbled towards it.

"What's with you?" Skylar asked. "You look like you saw the ghost of Brigham McCullers who was shot dead in the square."

"Oh." I tried to think of something clever to say, but I couldn't even remember the Penuel legend of McCullers enough to correct her history. The only thoughts that appeared on the screen of my mind were shrinking expanses of darkness. Trey's dry lips moving towards mine. Joel's body falling towards me. The warmth of Trey's tongue. The thud with which Joel had hit the pavement. "I guess... I just had my first kiss."

Skylar squealed and a wash of joy ran over Mama's face.

"Oh, baby girl!" Mama threw her arms around my neck. "That's just wonderful."

"Look at you go." Skylar grinned. "I knew this would happen soon."

"Thank you." The words were sand dry in my mouth.

"See, Mama, she gets it. Tay, help me out with this." She turned her attention back to Mama. "We were just talking about when Tommy and I should try to have our first baby and I

think the sooner the better, but Mama wants me to wait. All I'm saying is she didn't wait and we turned out fine!"

"Babies make boys leave." Mama sighed. "That's all there is to it."

Emptily, I stared at Mama's downturned face.

"That's not fair!" Skylar began. "You don't understand how much me and Tommy love each other! We're gonna be together forever. I finally found someone who will stay—"

I still felt Trey's hands on my waist, but all I could see was Joel looking up at me, his hands and knees scraped bloody on the concrete.

"I don't think you should have a baby," I said quietly. Skylar jerked her head in my direction.

Mama smiled. "My rational Taylor, always comin through."

I turned and looked at her and her angel eyes. "And I don't think you should go to the beach with Joel next week."

"What are you talking about?"

I wanted to say everything, spill it all out onto the linoleum floors, but all I could say was, "No."

"You're being silly, it's a great idea. We're gonna celebrate our three month anniversary while we're there. Heaven knows I need a break from the real world."

I shrunk inside myself, feeling a damp perspiration on my forehead. I slid my chair out from the table and stood up, backing slowly out of the room. "I don't wanna do this anymore."

"What's gotten into her?" I could hear Mama whisper once the door softly clicked closed.

"Eh, she's just bein mean I wouldn't worry bout it. Fernandina's gonna be incredible, Mama. So romantic. Now bout the baby—"

The blood pounding in my ears drowned out the rest of the conversation. *I'm mean like my daddy.* I felt my fists clench, and my breath settle into a deep anger I hadn't felt before. "If they want me to be mean," I whispered. I looked around the living room for something to destroy, but before I could pick a target my eyes landed on Jesus and his lamb, both looking out over the top of the La-Z-Boy. "Did you hear that?" I asked him.

For a moment, I thought his misty blue eyes were looking down at me, but they were just skimming the top of my head, pointed instead at Alex Trabek flashing in and out of frames on the muted television screen behind me. I fell to the carpet at the foot of the La-Z-Boy and began to cry, but Jesus didn't seem to hear that either. Men. They can all go to hell.

John, the Baptist

His loafer slipped off the back step of the pulpit and the full weight of his body fell heavy to the floor as if God had smote him right then and there. “Shit.” The wireless microphone clipped to the front of his robe amplified the expletive, but the wrinkling of his stole and the concerned murmuring of the congregation covered it for the most part. It had been a premature “amen” that had done it. In his nervous fluster he’d completely skipped the penultimate bullet point of his sermon, bumbled a closing, and stepped back from view, forgetting the loose piece of carpeting they’d been meaning to fix for a year now.

He had been talking about perfect love, the theme from the lectionary that Sunday. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect,” he had read. It’s the lesser-known follow-up to an eye for an eye and turn the other cheek—Matthew 5:48—but no one ever paid attention to this part, which is why John liked it. He had always liked the obscure parts of the Bible: the begats of the Old Testament, the scary parts of Revelation, the sneaky little verses that hide in the shadows of the ones they print on bumper stickers. They were like inside jokes with God that he could pull from his back pocket when he felt alone, smiling at the thought of God smiling at him. This one was especially overlooked because people tended to shrink away from the word “perfect.” He’d tried to explain in his sermon that it’s not about behaving perfectly, but instead about the perfect love you’re supposed to have for God and fellow men. This love is so full we can hardly understand it, but we feel it inexplicably.

Now as he raised himself up from the carpet behind the pulpit, he wondered if anyone in his congregation had understood, or even listened to what he was trying to say. “It’s a love that we can’t understand. It transcends,” he had said. “Amen.” Thud. That’s what you get for rehearsing in front of the T.V.

The congregation whispered like a horde of barnyard fowl. Recover, he told himself. He met the congregation's wide eyes with an embarrassed smile. "Proverbs does say all kings shall fall before Him, am I right?"

That got them. It hadn't even been that funny—and it was actually Psalms he recalled quickly—but their imprecise flapping turned to pointed chuckling and he had them back in his control. "Please rise for the hymn of invitation."

The pipe organ in the balcony began to play and the people stood to sing hymn 243: "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

John wiped the beads of sweat on his forehead as he looked towards the back row where the new family sat. They, too, seemed to be recovering pleasantly from his spill as they flipped through the hymnal and readjusted their skirts and pantsuits as they stood.

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never fai-ai-ail-ing.

He didn't quite know why he couldn't stop staring. There were plenty of racists in town, but he wasn't one of them. He'd been in seminary with a Nigerian and a light skinned black woman from Chicago. He volunteered at the downtown soup kitchen every other Friday afternoon alongside Miss Rhonda Means and Miss Virginia Thumb. He'd seen plenty of black people, he'd just never seen any in his church before.

Well, there was Winston, the custodian and Tim, the Wednesday night supper cook, but they both went to the AME church right across the river on Sundays. This new family sitting in one of the back left pews was a splash of ink in his otherwise pallid congregation.

Everything about First Baptist Penueel was white. It was a white building that sat squat and stately on Sumter Street like one of the old men in the rocking chairs outside Donnie's Barbershop in the square. If the building got any wider its sides would spill over into the parking

lot, with white-gray gravel that nearly bubbled on summer afternoons. Behind the parking lot was a splintering whitewashed playground and the white-painted Sunday school annex. The main building had a lovely steeple, though, and a brand-new-ten-year-old pipe organ the Sarah Collins Pipe Organ Fund had graciously provided. The sunshine that seeped in through the stained glass windows of the sanctuary cast everything in a hoary light. Each window depicted a different phase of Jesus's life, beginning with his birth to the left of the pulpit and moving neatly and chronologically in a clockwise motion all the way to the Ascension by the piano. The new black family was standing as they sang right between the loaves and fishes for five thousand and the triumphant entrance into Jerusalem.

The Houston family stood in a line in front of them looking like well-dressed ducklings with the three little boys' blonde hair combed back across their pink foreheads. Mrs. Mary Jordan Lee was in the second row by the aisle, the only woman left who still wore a hat—yellow when it was warm and dark blue when it wasn't no matter the rest of the outfit. John's fall had woken her from her weekly sermon nap. Todd and Julie Masters stood near the back, like always, so they could sneak out right after the benediction.

It wasn't such a small crowd—he'd seen worse. But the spots of red cushion on the unfilled pews were like his prematurely thinning hair: not too bad but a throbbing reminder of what used to be. How was it that he could look at the sanctuary and see a hundred and fifty people, but feel like there were only thirty? He took one hand from under the hymnal and scratched the back of his head.

The hymn ended and he offered his benediction, hands spread wide like the pictures of Jesus blessing the little children framed in the children's Sunday school annex. He liked the benediction because it rolled easily out of his mouth, the same thing every week. No one listened

to it anyway as they were so focused on it ending. He said his last amen and the people began to mill around like chickens once more, a murmuring fuss growing throughout the sanctuary.

He glanced towards the black family, but like the past two Sundays, they were already gone. He would've liked to ask them where they were from, if they were Baptists, why they'd decided to come to his church. He'd been so surprised to see them that first Sunday he'd botched his whole sermon, not just the ending. He couldn't believe when he looked out the next week and there they were again, sitting in the same spot with their hands crossed in their laps. After the benediction last week, he'd nearly knocked over Lou Ray Collins trying to catch up to them.

"Wonderful as ever, John." Ivy Blanton rapped her knotty hands on his shoulder like she was knocking on a door. She stepped close to him, pulling his ear down to her purple-lined lips. "I know I've told you this before, but you remember my late husband, Bill? His best friend from the Navy's niece just got divorced and she's coming into town for Janelle's eightieth birthday. I really think you two would be just wonderful together. She is a little younger than you, though. How old are you? Thirty-five? Forty? You know, honestly it doesn't matter. I hear she's a wonder at baking. Janelle says her pecan pie is to die for. And she sings in her church choir. The prettiest soprano you ever heard."

John's shoulder tightened under her grip. He smiled, but before he could open his mouth Miss Janie Fields appeared. Somehow she never seemed to be that far away. One Tuesday night last year, John had been locking up the church office when he heard Miss Janie's voice squawking in the Fellowship Hall. She had been talking to Winston about what type of Pine-Sol he used because she had never seen a hardwood floor so clean and she just had to know his secret to tell her daughter-in-law, whose kitchen floors she saw over Christmas and were in dire need.

“Oh Ivy, are you pestering him about Bill’s cousin or whatnot again? John, don’t listen to her. You will get yourself a darling wife when you are good and ready. Now what you really need to be thinking about is the church picnic coming up because I was thinking that the Fellowship Hall could use a little bit of sprucing up beforehand. You’re supposed to be welcoming in a new school and work year not breathing in mold and dust in that windowless excuse for a room. Half this church is about to die and they don’t appreciate the staff trying to rush it.”

“Yes ma’am.” His cheeks were beginning to hurt from grinning.

“Excuse me, Pastor Jacobson?” The voice behind him was deep and firm. He spun out of Mrs. Blanton’s clutch.

The black man stood in front of him in a dark suit and a light blue tie. His shoulders were wide and sturdy, and although he was not much taller than John, he towered over him.

“Uh, hello...sir. Call me John, please.” John reached out to shake the black hand before him. His grip was as sturdy as his shoulders.

“Oh Lordy, we are just SO happy to have you here visiting with us.” With a spin of her Coldwater Creek pumps on the thin carpet, Mrs. Blanton transferred her attention to the new family. She reached out to clutch the man’s forearm. “I’m Ivy Blanton and I live right up the road on Honeygrass Hill. This is Janie Fields.”

“I’m chairman of the greeting committee, Ivy, of course I’ve already met them.” She reached out and patted the wife on the shoulder. “I caught them right when they walked in the door last week. Now, did you visit the Sunday school class I told you about, Melody?”

The wife smiled a wide toothy grin and smoothed a piece of hair behind her ear. Her skin was much lighter than her husband’s, yet John couldn’t help but notice her features—especially

her eyes and lips—were distinctly ethnic and alluring. John looked down at the floor, ashamed as if everyone around could read his thoughts.

“Yes, ma’am we actually did.” The woman’s voice was slow and neat as plates stacked in a cupboard. She rounded off each sound the way they teach you to in kindergarten. “We went to the Wilcox-Snow class and they were exceedingly welcoming. Jeff Shepton—that’s the man with the long gray beard, right?—was teaching and we talked to him for a long time, afterwards. It was really a great fit for us, thank you so much, Mrs. Fields. And Isaac went to the youth class and Maizie went to the children’s department.” She beckoned to the two children to her right.

Isaac was skinny and tall and had wide set eyes that made him look broodingly serious. He nodded a polite yes ma’am and stuck his hands in the front pocket of his ironed khaki pants. Mrs. Ivy reached out and patted the little girl who had been standing behind her parents. She looked no more than ten and had her hair smoothed back against her head with a green headband that stuck out like cotton true leaves against spring soil.

“What grade are you in, Maizie?”

“Just started the fourth grade, ma’am. But in Sunday school this morning there was only one other fourth grader so we got to go to the fifth grade class, which is much better, I think. The kids there are smarter and more mature.” Her smile was almost as big as her mother’s. “Mama, no one else in there was wearing a dress like mine. One boy didn’t even have a collar on his shirt. I told you we dress up too nice for church. It sucks.” She pulled at the lace-lined neck of her dress.

“Maizie!” Her mother seemed shocked. The adults standing around laughed pleasantly as Maizie apologized. “We dress up for God not the fifth graders in your class.”

“Pastor John,” the father of the family spoke quietly, leading John aside as the rest skirted forward through small talk. “I’m Donte Abelson.” The two shook hands again before he gestured back to the crowd. “My wife, Melody.”

Donte’s voice drew a warm reverence in John like distant heat lightening in the summer: harmless yet awe striking.

“Yes, sir. It’s so nice to meet you. I’ve noticed you and your family sitting near the back of the sanctuary the past few weeks and I’ve been wanting to introduce myself. I mean I’ve noticed everyone, not just you. Not that I didn’t notice you, I did...”

It was always a losing battle with his words. It’s why he wasn’t a very good preacher, although he’d wanted to be one his whole life. When he was a little kid he’d stand out on a woodpile in his back yard and preach a sermon to Samson, his family’s lazy basset hound. Sometimes the sermons would be about nothing more than what they were having for supper that night, but Sammy sure seemed to like them. He imagined an audience of five thousand, and they all liked them, too. John also enjoyed reading the Bible. His mother had given him a palm-sized, red-lettered New Testament for his tenth birthday that he’d pull out during reading time at school, hiding it behind Hardy Boys novels so no one would notice. He felt a comfort with it by this point in his life, like he could turn it over in his hand with ease, quoting off any page it landed on. It never changed.

His plan had been to go to seminary at Mercer, maybe meet a girl there, then go somewhere—Atlanta, Charlotte, anywhere really—and get out of Penuel forever. He couldn’t find a big suburban church that would take him, though, and so back home to Penuel he returned like a puppy with its tail between its legs. The best day of his life, though, was when he was ordained and experienced the laying on of hands. Every person in his congregation lined up to

rest their hands on his shoulders and whisper a prayer in his ear. He could feel each person's prayers pulsing into him. It was the closest he'd ever gotten to God and on days he felt his throat filling with incompetence, he remembered that.

"I'm just glad y'all are here." John attempted to cover his misstep.

Donte chuckled. "Oh we're glad to be here. But don't worry we know we stick out a bit." He looked over his shoulders with a smirk. "But we're not so different. You like basketball, right?"

"Uh, I, I'd say I'm more of a football fan...but I follow the sport from time to time," John felt color rising into his cheeks.

"I'm just messing with you, John. I don't like it much either." Donte smiled and slapped him gently on the back. "But in all seriousness, my family and I really like it here. I wanted to speak to you about joining the church."

John's jaw fell. They needed new members more than the Braves needed a win—which was saying something. "We'd absolutely love to have you," he finally managed to sputter. "We're honored you chose this church." Lord knows why. His eyes brushed to the rest of the congregation which was thinning even more now as they meandered through the pews to greet one another and slipped like jelly out through the wide back doors into Sunday afternoon. "Our congregation really needs y'all. Or people like you." John cringed. "We're so happy to have you here."

Donte chuckled again. He was hummingbird-humored and for that John was grateful.

"We just really like it here. Honestly, Maizie was a big part of the decision." He motioned to the little girl still talking to her mother and the elderly women about her outfit. The two old ladies were cooing as she looked down at the reflection in her Mary Janes. "Maizie

wants to be baptized and she wants to be baptized here. I'm not sure quite what got into her but I've got a feeling it's the Holy Spirit and who am I to argue with that?"

John watched the girl smooth out the front of her dress and laugh coyly as the ladies buzzed about her. He looked up at the lofty baptismal pool nuzzled into the wall above the pulpit. He'd have to tell Winston to super soak the linoleum in bleach and dust for cobwebs. The white and gold cross hanging above the pool glittered in the rays from the stained glass.

"I can't argue with it either, Mr. Abelson. God works in mysterious ways, I guess. We'll talk details later, but First Baptist is excited to have you."

The next afternoon was the perfect afternoon for golf. The college boys who worked at the Lake Chihoowa Country Club called them the "gospel golfers" and expected to see them on the fairway every sunny Monday afternoon. During the warmer months, John and his associate pastor, Junior, and Pete, the Methodist minister, and his minister of music, Al, would drive the half-hour down to the lake after picking up a combo #1 from Gerty's Chicken Shack. The other three men saw it as an excuse to get away from their wives and to commiserate about their congregations. John just liked the company.

"Well who woulda thunk it." Pete laughed and scratched his beard as he stepped out of the cart at the twelfth hole. "You got a little diversity in your congregation now."

John reached into his bag for his driver. "I hate to tell you I'm a little shocked, but I am."

"Don't be shocked." Junior leaned against the golf cart. "A little before you were hired we had three or four families. We even used to have an Asian family before they moved down to Macon."

“Don’t kid yourself, Junior. First Baptist has less diversity than a bucket of chicken breasts.” Pete laughed again. “You’ve got, what, one black family? But hey, that’s almost a fourth of your congregation. Congrats!”

John rolled his eyes.

Junior turned to Al with a smirk. “We’d have more people if y’all would stop poaching all our members. I see you wheeling and dealing. Luring them in with your mission trips to Haiti and imported Wednesday night speakers. It’s the social effect: the more people you got, the more money you got, the more people want to come.”

“It’s not cheating, Junior, it’s just how you do it.” Al shifted his weight to lean on the golf club in his hand. “It’s how you fish for people these days. You can’t just call out to them on the boat anymore. You lure them in and then boom, they’re tithing and coming every single Sunday. Just like that.”

John glanced at Junior. “Guess we need an event.”

Junior laughed. “We do have our church picnic coming up next week to kick off the school year. I’m not sure if Janie Fields has mentioned anything to you.”

“Good Lord,” John breathed.

“In the Fellowship Hall?” Pete crossed his arms across his chest. “That room is about as old as the average age of your flock.”

“A hundred and twelve years old?” Junior’s laugh thinly masked annoyance.

Al laughed, too. “Gah lee, this is getting too heated. Tee off already will you John so we can go grab a beer.”

Her thin ankles were crossed and dangling from the olive green armchair, not quite touching the ground. She wore the same type of lace socks and Mary Jane shoes she had at church on Sunday. The same green headband held her dark hair in place.

“Yes sir, I’ve thought lots about this. I love Jesus and I love church and I think I am old enough now to be a part of it.”

It was a mature answer for a ten year old, and John lowered his reading glasses down his nose to get a better look at her. Her light amber eyes met his straight on.

“It does seem like you’ve put a lot of thought into this, Maizie. Have you talked a lot about it to your family?”

“To Mama and Daddy, yes. They’re very happy about it because they love Jesus, too. They didn’t even have to tell me to do it because I came to your church and I looked up at that big old bathtub up there and I knew I wanted to do it.”

John smiled. “What about your brother? Have you talked to him about it?”

“No, Isaac’s never been baptized and I don’t think he really wants to be. He doesn’t talk about Jesus very much. But sometimes he’ll say the blessing at supper if Mama asks him too. He always does what Mama says.” Although her voice was high and clear as hand bells chiming in the choir loft on Easter, her answers came out matter-of-factly. If her father’s voice was heat lightening, hers was the mist that comes through the screen of a porch on a summer afternoon. It made John want to close his eyes and listen.

“Well let’s call your parents in here and see what they think,” John said as he hefted himself from his chair and walked to the door a little too quickly. Melody and Donte sat outside in the hall on a little cushioned bench, their backs straight as fence posts against the wall. They,

too, looked to be dressed for Sunday morning. He ushered them in. “We were just about to talk logistics. When do y’all want to do this?”

“As soon as possible!” Maizie chirped.

“We can wait for a special occasion if that’s easier to work into the schedule.” Melody’s voice was as measured as sugar and baking soda; John realized that she injected intent into every word like no one he’d encountered before.

“We do have the church picnic coming up next week. That would be a great addition to the service beforehand. It’s both a special occasion and as soon as possible.” He smiled at Maizie who squealed.

“Oo I love picnics! Is it outside?”

“No it’s in the Fellowship Hall.” Her expression fell. “But, you know...there was a time when...Never mind.”

“What?” Donte asked.

“Oh, I don’t think we should do this, but there was a time when this church did river baptisms. My grandma used to call it being baptized in living water.”

“In the river?!” Maizie’s eyes lit up once more.

“I don’t think that’s very practical in this scenario, though. People will think it’s a tent revival,” John chuckled. “So next week, here, with the picnic to follow?”

“Wait a second.” Maizie lifted a hand and the whole adult world seemed to halt. “I like this river idea.”

“I’m not sure she’s old enough for that,” Melody said, leaning forward uncomfortably.

“I do like the picnic outside idea, though,” Donte inserted. “In theory, if we did it in the river we could have the reception right after in that park on the river bend.”

Maizie nodded vigorously. “It would be good for everyone! And I could be like Jesus. What’s better than being baptized like Jesus?”

Donte pursed his lips, then looked up at John. “What do you think?”

John shook his head. “Don’t you think it would draw some undue attention to the church and to...everyone else? I think that’s probably not the best idea in this situation.”

“Would it be the best idea in another situation?” There was a charge in Melody’s voice hot enough to ignite.

Before John could defend himself, Maizie chimed, “Pastor John, I think it would be so great! Think about it. Inside water is like toilet water. Ew, maybe not that bad. Ok, sink water. Yeah, water from the sink. In the river, only God’s in charge of it! It’s wild God-water! It’s what we’re supposed to be baptized in!”

Her eyes were melting honey. Her parents looked across the room at John, Donte’s surrendering, Melody’s expectant.

He sighed. “Well I guess it is. I’ll start preparing my sermon.”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the...” Maizie’s voice trilled up and down as she tossed pebble after pebble into the Chihoowa. Today she wore overalls her mother didn’t mind her getting muddy, she had told John as soon as she arrived at Fishing Bend Park. Setting up the service and picnic here was the natural choice. The park had enough room for everyone to sit and enough parking, too. At this spot, the river bent in such a way that it became perfect for fishing. John had printed out and laminated signs on the church copy machine: “Area Reserved: No Fishing Until the Service is

Over.” The service was during regular church hours, so he doubted anyone would be out there anyway.

“She’s something else.” Junior hoisted a card table upright before wiping his forehead on the sleeve of his gray t-shirt. Donte, who was setting up the folding chairs in neat rows facing the water, looked up and smiled at the two preachers across from him.

“She’s our little squirrel, that’s for sure.”

“You good to finish up with these tables, Junior? I’m gonna go talk to her,” John said.

He moved through the lines of chairs, past Isaac who sat in the front makeshift pew, fingers twiddling over his phone. Even then he looked brooding. John thought of speaking to him, but felt a kick of intimidation and moved past him swiftly. Isaac didn’t look up.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” Maizie sang and chucked a pebble across the water. Her arms, thin enough to wrap a palm around, had enough force to pitch the pebble full across the river, no less than ten yards across at this point.

“You’ve got a good arm, Maizie. And you know your Beatitudes pretty well, too.” John lowered himself onto a rock next to her and wiped his dusty hands on his jeans.

“I just memorized them.” She didn’t look up from the river mud from which she was harvesting her stones. “I think they sound like a song. You know, with all the repetition and stuff.” She cocked back her arm to toss another pebble. “Blessed are the peacers, for they will be children of God.”

“Peacemakers,” John said.

Maizie hesitated, lowered her arm, and looked at him. “You know your Bible stuff pretty well, too, Mr. John the Preacher.” Her words were not meant to taunt, but sounded eerily similar

to the teases he'd received in the middle school lunchroom back when. "Do you baptize people a lot or am I special?"

He smiled. "I've done baptisms before, of course, but you sure are special. I've never done one in the river." John and Maizie looked at the gorgeously flowing water before them. The current pulled the water through the center of the river like a plow behind a tractor down a field of raw soil. The wind, however, had another plan. It pushed the water on top of the stream towards the bank they sat on. The water rippled in resistance, circling back, beneath, around its undercurrent in a graceful tussle. It looked like it was running in place.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow?" He wasn't sure if he was asking Maizie or himself.

She giggled. "No, of course not! This is gonna be the best day of my life!" She looked over her shoulder to where her brother, father, and Junior were, then lowered her voice and leaned in closer to John. "You know, I've seen Jesus before."

John didn't say a word but looked at her, trying to deter the patronizing look he felt rising to his brows.

"When we were driving from the east side of town where we live over to the west side just a coupla weeks ago. We were crossing over that bridge—" she pointed vaguely downstream, "—and I was buckled up in the backseat and there he was just buckled in right next to me."

"How did you know it was him?"

She smiled. "Well just about anybody coulda told it was him. It's funny, though. He didn't look like those stained glass windows you got. He looked a little more like me. You know, dark and pretty and all."

John grinned. "Did you tell anybody you saw him?"

She shook her head no. “I don’t think Mama or Daddy woulda believed me. I don’t wanna get them in trouble with a preacher because they love God a lot I think...but it’s just different. Like I don’t know if they’ve ever actually seeeeen Jesus before. In real life and all.”

John scratched the back of his neck. “Yeah, I think most people probably haven’t seen Jesus in person, but they feel Him in their hearts.”

“But us special people have seen Jesus before, right? Because you’re a preacher. I think I’m gonna be a preacher when I grow up just like you. I’d give a heck of a sermon.”

“Hey, John!” Junior called from a few yards upriver. John and Maizie both turned to look. “The ground’s a little uneven for this pulpit can you come give me a hand?”

An odd relief washed over John as he stood up. “I gotta go, but I’m glad you’re so excited about tomorrow.”

He walked towards Junior, but heard Maizie quietly singing, “Blessed are the *peacemakers*, for they will be children of God.”

The muted T.V. flashed colors across the dark living room. John sat with his beautifully double-spaced sermon in his lap. He fidgeted the corner of the computer paper between his thumb and forefinger. The loudest sound in the room was the splash of rain against the windowpane.

He read aloud: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free—”

His stomach lurched. Why the hell had he written that? He picked up the blue pen from the table and scratched through the Times New Roman font four times, scribbling in different directions in case someone ever found this draft half-decomposed in a trash can fifty years down

the road. “Damn.” He reached for the dog-eared leather Bible on the end table by a picture of his parents. This used to be their house and when he felt overwhelmed like this, he liked to look at the picture and remember what it was like living in the back bedroom with nothing to worry about but not kicking the dog at the end of the bed in his sleep.

It made him nervous enough to preach in a normal pulpit on a normal Sunday to a normal congregation. Why he had agreed to do it in a river and bring undue evangelical attention to the one black family in his church he had no idea. He thought he had an out when he realized he needed to fill out paperwork for the city to approve the gathering. Maizie and Junior had been so eager and helpful, however, that the paperwork got approved within a business day. There had been a snafu with the transportation and set-up of the lunch, but John smoothed it out begrudgingly, Maizie’s eager, pleading eyes in his mind the whole time.

He reached down for his phone and scrolled through his contacts to Pete’s name.

Pete answered after two rings. “Hey, man. What’s up?”

“Hey. I need some advice.”

John heard whispering and rustling of fabric through the phone. “Alright, I just paused my movie. Hit me.”

“I’m sure you heard about our picnic tomorrow,” John breathed waiting for the ridicule.

“The Bible Baptist healing crusade to save lost, black souls? Yeah I heard about it.”

“Not now, Pete.”

“Sorry.”

“Am I doing the right thing?”

Pete let out a deep sigh. “In all honesty, John, I think it’s smoke and mirrors. It’s silly and for attention. But I think a lot of what churches do is smoke and mirrors and sometimes that’s

what it takes and it's what people need." He paused. "If you think it's what your congregation needs, I think you're doing the right thing."

John breathed. "Thanks, Pete."

"Praying for you, buddy."

John hung up. He closed his eyes and leaned back into the couch, listening to the soft rumble of thunder outside.

There was a bigger crowd than he expected. If he squinted his eyes against the sun he could actually imagine there were five thousand people lining the riverbank of the Chihoowa like sunning seals at a zoo, pinned in by folding tables sporting baskets of chicken and side dishes to feed an entire zip code. John had made his sermon brief to appease the people standing at the periphery of the folding chairs and his nervous stomach.

He'd begun by referencing the "we're not worthy scene" from *Wayne's World* and had gotten a few chuckles from the younger members of the audience. He thought he tied it in nicely to the message. "John the Baptist felt unworthy to baptize Jesus. Matthew 3:14-15 says, 'John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"' But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.' Sometimes God calls us to higher things—things that we are truly not worthy of doing. We are all human and we're all sinners, yet God has a plan for us, and like John the Baptist, we need to consent and follow Jesus. Today, it is God's higher plan for Maizie Abelson to be baptized. Like the other John—" there were more chuckles, "—I am not worthy of this high calling. Yet here we are gathered to all fulfill God's plan together and fulfill all righteousness."

He finished up his sermon then called Maizie forward.

“You ready?” The white robe she wore gleamed against her dark skin and she beamed wide and bright as a sun rising.

“Absolutely.”

The cold water seeped around John’s waders that squished awkwardly through the ankle-deep mud. John could feel the beating of the water against his legs as he edged as far as he dared in water this fast. He knew just about how far he had to walk in to get nearly waist deep, although he got there a little quicker than he expected. Maizie grabbed onto his sleeve to maintain balance as the water pushed hard against her.

He was twelve years old the last time he’d stepped into this river to fish with his grandpa Jack. He remembered the thrill of the water against his skin when he had fallen in. He’d been small for his age, and the vigorous tug on the line had caught him off guard, propelling him into the ice-cold river. Grandpa Jack had jumped in to get him, wrapping his arms around John’s skinny neck and dragging him out onto the bank, even though John was a perfectly competent swimmer and hadn’t thought he’d needed saving. If Grandpa Jack could see him now.

“Maizie Abelson is ten years old and has decided that she wants to accept Jesus as her Lord and Savior.”

The crowd blinked back at him approvingly. Miss Fields and Miss Blanton sat next to one another, lengthening their necks inquisitively over Todd and Julie Masters’ shoulders. Miss Mary Jordan Lee sat in the second row in a bright yellow hat, wide awake. Mrs. Abelson wiped the corner of her eye as Mr. Abelson put his arm around her. Even Isaac was glowing as he sat on the front row where he had been the afternoon before, yet this time his hands were motionless in his lap.

“Maizie.” He looked down as her amber eyes sparkled. The light of the morning bounced off the water, reflecting into her face and hair. “Who is Jesus?”

There was a pause. John shivered as the cold water rushed between his legs and his foot shifted in the deepening mud.

The little girl beamed back up at him and then looked the crowd full on. “Jesus is my Lord.”

The water was higher up on her body than he expected, but he reached his arm behind her and lowered her down into the cold water, shifting his feet to better support her at this angle. The undercurrent pounded against his shivering leg and his ankle twisted under the weight into the cold, squishy mud. He tumbled forward and before he could catch his balance, Maizie slipped from his grasp.

The inside of his nose burned cold as if pressed hard to a hot stove. He flailed his arms but the water continued to pound his body in waves. He knocked his head on something. Was it the ground? Icy water filled his mouth and ears as his legs thrashed, trying to find steady earth to regain balance. Finally, he pushed his head above water and searched for the shore. The water drove him until he was lying muddy on the bank a few yards downriver from the makeshift pulpit and the folding chairs.

Shouts resounded, entering John’s consciousness through the puddles gathering in his ears. He rolled over to face the horde of people moving towards him. They were coming as a mass with Donte Abelson leading the charge. He ran past John and into the river, sweeping his hands through the muddy water in wide motions. Melody stood a few feet back, terror on her face.

“Dad!” Isaac stood inches away from John’s head but didn’t look down at him. He was pointing to something caught in a downed tree limb some yards down the river. John strained his eyes to see.

A green headband bobbed vigorously against the current.

The church office was dark. He hadn’t bothered to flip on the light switch as he had slunk in. His body was folded at the waist and hunched at the shoulders, his head resting on his crossed arms on the desk. The fan overhead moved slowly, clicking intermittently and because he couldn’t tune it out, John syncopated his breathing with it. Focusing his attention on something else—anything else.

“John?” Pete’s voice sounded distant from the hallway. John didn’t answer.

The door creaked open and Pete poked his head through. The florescent light behind him illuminated the misplaced wisps of gray hair around his head, giving him an aura like a medieval painting of St. Peter guarding the impassable gates to heaven. John put his head back down.

“John.” Pete moved through the doorframe slowly. “How are you feeling?”

The fan continued to whistle.

“Guess that’s a bad question.” Pete inched forward as if approaching an open casket.

“Have you talked to the Abelsons?”

John’s head felt too heavy to try to lift.

“Junior told me they’re making their funeral arrangements at Burnwell’s Funeral Home. I guess it makes sense they didn’t want to do it here.”

John breathed with each click of the fan.

“Look, I just came to see if you needed anything. Junior said he hadn’t been able to get in touch with you after the meeting with the lawyer and I just wanted to make sure you were alright.” Pete lowered himself into the olive armchair.

“No!” John’s voice shattered the dusty silence and Pete shot upwards like a burnt piece of bread from the toaster. “Don’t sit there.”

“Is something wrong with it?” Pete looked down to examine the green cushion. It seemed clean and the legs appeared sturdy beneath it.

“She sat there.”

Pete looked from the seat to John. The skin around his eyes sagged and wrinkles dug deep into his forehead. He hadn’t been sleeping.

“Let’s go get a bite to eat. Or want to go get a six-pack at Piggly Wiggly and sit out on my porch? Tanya’s at Bunko and the girls are at dance class.”

“I think I need to stay here for a while,” John mumbled. “Thanks, though.”

“You can’t just be alone in here forever, John. Come over and let me sit with you for a while. We don’t even have to talk, we can just watch the grass grow in the yard.”

“Not now, Pete.”

Pete reached over to pat him on the shoulder. “You know that sometimes we can’t explain why God does things. Mourn—it’s good and only right to mourn. But don’t blame yourself. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. It’s no one’s fault.”

“I’ve been to seminary. I know what to tell people.” His tone dulled the words from a cleaver to a butter knife.

“Alright, John. When you’re ready to be a minister again, go see the Abelsons. They need God now more than ever.”

Pete turned and walked into the hallway, leaving the light off and closing the door behind him.

He waited for a moment with his head up, staring at the darkened doorframe until the footsteps had died out down the hallway.

Then John wept.

John felt every bump in the road as he drove his F150 across the bridge. It was so sunny that he could see dust particles floating through the still air of the car. He tried to keep his eyes on the road and not look at the muddy water calmly flowing beneath the wrought iron.

The funeral was tomorrow.

When the tires hit the solid ground of the other bank, he felt the bu-bump of the car over the railroad tracks. Shotgun houses with peeling porch paint stood to greet him, lining the road on both sides. Some were tidied up while others had toys and tools spilling over across the little yards. He took his hand off the steering wheel and placed it on the lock button on the door, but thought better of it. He passed by the high school. Students trickled out the doors and into the parking lot. John drove past.

The Abelsons lived on a side street near the high school, which was quiet any time there wasn't a football game going on. Their house was wide, brick, and one-story with a neat little row of pansies lining the front concrete walk. John parked his truck in the driveway behind two sedans and composed himself before getting out. He wasn't nervous—the emotion had dripped out of him at some point. He didn't have it in him to feel anything else.

The front path was long and John took it slowly. He stood on the front porch for a long moment, staring at their cross-shaped doorknocker. Finally, he lifted it.

An old black woman answered. John would've bet her weight and her age were nearly equal. "Can I help you?" Her voice was scratchy.

"Yes...yes ma'am. I'm here to see Donte and Melody."

"They're resting now, son. They've had visitors all week. You can see them at the visitation tomorrow morning." He opened his mouth to say more, but the door slammed before he could conjure anything.

John stood on the Abelson's front stoop numb as ever, staring at the gold cross on the black door. It was like one of those optical illusions where if you stare at a computer screen for long enough then look away, your mind projects images onto a wall. He could only see the image of Maizie. He heard a snivel from the other side of the door that he imagined it to be Melody's. Perhaps it was Donte's. He wasn't sure which was worse. He felt his chest collapse as if his heart and lungs and ribs were no longer there to hold his shape.

He slowly turned and walked down the path towards his car, staring down at the multicolored pansies lining the walk.

"She really wanted to be baptized."

John was shaken by Isaac's voice. He looked up to find the boy standing in the path, his book bag slung across his shoulder.

"Jesus." John breathed. The boy's eyes were dark and stoic. "You scared me."

The boy stepped forward and cocked his hand, holding it high in the air as if taking an oath. John flinched and lowered his eyes, catching sight of the pansies once more.

"I'm not Jesus," Isaac said, a sad smirk in his voice. His hand landed soft on John's shoulder as he moved past him towards the front door.

Some Glad Morning

The rental car smelled like cheese. Not the good kind like the aged wheels in the window of *La Petite Fromagerie* in SoHo that wafted into the streets when June walked by on the way to the office every morning. This was moldy and deep, as if bleu cheese crumbles were festering underneath the driver's seat.

June rolled the windows down the second she pulled off the interstate and gave a dramatic gasp as if she had been holding her breath since leaving Hertz at Hartsfield-Jackson. It helped a little with the stench, but also invited the gentle bite of the August early morning and the putrid whiffs of gasoline from the Gas & Grub truck stop which June was sure had been prosperous at some point in the past, but its bathroom stalls now likely attracted more flies than truckers.

Past the truck stop was nothing but fields. The sun was beginning to burn off the fog of early morning, revealing the white cotton blooms. She hated to admit how aesthetically appealing it looked arranged in vague rows blurred by blossoms. Still mundane, but it did have a rustic beauty she couldn't deny. It would make a great postcard for tourists to send home to loved ones—if a tourist ever came to Penuel County, which they certainly did not, unless you counted the snowbirds on Lake Chihoowa. Why anyone in her ever-loving mind would leave somewhere like New York or Boston to move down here she couldn't fathom. She never trusted those people and did all she could to avoid them whenever she and her friends back in high school would go out on the Elmwood's MasterCraft for the day.

She had to roll up her window when she passed the dairy farm.

The old Antioch Church building on the right side of the road was in shambles, like it always had been. The paint was peeling and a few shingles were misplaced on the roof. The only

thing that ever changed was the roadside sign. “Antioch Evangelical Church” it read above crooked letters that today spelled out: GIVE SATAN AN INCH AND HE WILL BE YOUR RULER.

Suddenly the soft morning light flickered dark as if God were flipping a light switch on and off rapidly and a large gray shadow swooped into June’s peripheral vision. She screamed and hit the brakes, but the falling object was too quick. It collided with the grill of her rental car with a dense and powerful thud. June closed her eyes tight as the car veered off the road straight into Antioch’s sign. Her cell phone flew from the console to the floorboards.

Slowly, June peeled her eyes open. A few of the letters had been shaken catawampus and slipped down the face of the sign. It looked like an evangelical round of *Wheel of Fortune*. Vanna, she thought, can I buy a vowel? Her knuckles ached from clenching the steering wheel. She took a deep breath to make sure she could.

“Oo girl! You got feathers on your headlights!” A high-pitched voice called from outside. She looked up to see a woman standing beside her own parked car a few feet away, her head cocked to examine the damage. She must’ve seen June’s wreck and pulled over. Her jeans were ripped at the knee and she wore a bright orange t-shirt June quickly recognized to be from Chevy’s Barbeque over in Eatonton, but it had all the charm of a GDOC uniform.

She opened the door and stepped out. The morning was warming up quick.

“I ain’t never seen anybody hit a bird before. He musta been sick or suicidal. I think it’s a hawk. Or at least, was a hawk. Jesus bless his soul.” She guffawed at her joke.

June walked around to the front of the car where the woman stood. Her long, perfectly curled hair was so blonde it could’ve only come from Rite Aid. The bird—if you could still call

it that—lay on the cement, bloodied feathers and guts strewn out under the dangling “S” from the word “Satan.”

“My dad’s gonna kill me,” June muttered.

The girl’s head shot up, sending her curls bouncing. “June Tiller?”

June squinted and lifted a hand to screen her eyes from the sun.

“It’s Twila Fox! Girl, I haven’t seen you in ages! You’re living in New York now, right? Or should I call it New Yank?” She laughed. “What are you back in this backwater for?”

June tried to keep her eyes from bugging and forced a smile. They’d gone to Penuel County Elementary and Middle together until eighth grade when June transferred to Penuel Christian. They’d both been Mystics in rec basketball and had been at some of the same parties in high school. They’d been on the same birthday party route when they were kids, until Twila’s dad left her mom—was it for a younger woman or for a man? June couldn’t remember anymore—and Mrs. Fox went off the deep end. After that, the Fox’s weren’t seen much in the Penuel County social circuit. That escalated when June’s then-best friend’s ninth grade boyfriend had broken up with her and was seen in the parking lot of the Dairy Queen not a week later with Twila—henceforth referred to as White Trash Twila or WTT, which could’ve meant a number of things if you used your imagination. She’d gained a little bit of weight since then, June thought, but all in all she was still pretty. Trashy, though, bless her heart.

“Oh, wow. I didn’t recognize you.” June ran her fingers through her hair. “I’m in town for Mary V.’s engagement party. You remember Mary V. right? She’s getting married.” Probably knocked up, June wanted to add. “How have you been?”

“Oh, you know, same as ever. Are you headed to your parents’ house? I’m actually fixing to head over there right now. I can give you a lift.” She pointed to the front right wheel of the rental car. “Your tire’s flat as Mama’s hair in the morning.”

June looked and groaned. Sure enough the tire had popped on the curb. “Why are you going to my house?”

“Oh, I’ve started cleaning a couple houses around town a few days a week to help my mama out. Twila’s Touch, I call it. I’m looking into making business cards. Since your grandma’s getting up there and your mama’s so busy and all, they’ve hired me to come every other week and do dusting and mopping and stuff. Funny I ran into you on the way! Like they say, ‘birds of a feather...’”

So funny, June thought. She grabbed her things and transferred them over to Twila’s car, which had been a Jeep Cherokee at some point in its life, but now you could hardly tell it from the rusting Allis-Chalmers Mama had been asking Daddy to move from the back barn for years.

“When’s the last time I saw you? You didn’t come home this summer at all, did you? I’ve been jumping around jobs a lot lately so I’ve been pretty busy. You could’ve come back and I flat out missed it.” June tuned out Twila’s voice. That girl’s accent was thicker than her midsection. She clicked her home button on her phone to check for texts. Four unread messages from Katrina.

“Coffee?”

“Meeting in 10.”

“Shit. Forgot ur out of town.”

“Need those copies by Monday 8 AM tho. Sooner if u can. Urgent.”

June felt a wave of nausea roll through her and turned the phone over in her lap. She could get through this. All she had to do was go home, be with the family for a few hours, hit the party, go to sleep, wake up the next morning, muddle through church and Sunday dinner and then get on the 7 p.m. flight to New York. That would put her home by ten—although the subway on Sundays was a nightmare. Still, plenty of time still to get the paperwork in. She took a deep breath to relieve the knot in her innards.

The elementary school secretary! The one with purple lipstick and eyes green as guacamole. That's who Twila's dad had an affair with when they were in third grade. What drama. June smirked and looked back up at the road.

Twila pulled the car up to the big white farmhouse off Lazy Dog Run, which ran along the periphery of the city limits. It had been in the Tiller family for generations, but luckily Mama had renovated it right before June was born. June's ancestors on her father's side had been farmers forever until one day they weren't. Now they were doctors and above the scruff, which June had always had the sense to thank the Lord for when she said her nightly prayers as a child. Her grandfather, BeeBee, who'd been the first doctor in the family, had kept the farmhouse and sold off the surrounding land. Now it was a modernized family homestead: picturesque and appealing from the outside but still packed, loud, and hot, just as she imagined hell would be.

Before June and Twila were halfway up the walk, they heard Mama and Big Mama squawking through the screen door. You could hear every creak and squeak this house or its residents made, especially from the kitchen, which was off to the side of the main room. June lived upstairs but even that was loud. In high school, she'd bought tapestries from the antique mall downtown and ordered some off Amazon and hung them across the walls of her bedroom in

an attempt to soundproof it. They were pretty ineffective, blocking out the light but not the snores, spats, or giggling going on in the halls beyond. She had only kept them up because her mother hated them.

“June doesn’t like that much cheese on her breakfast casserole,” she heard Big Mama’s voice scratch. “And she likes her grits saltier.”

“I know how my own daughter likes her breakfast, Big Mama.”

June smiled sheepishly at Twila, although she could feel lumps growing in her chest. She raised her hand to open the screen door when Twila called out into the hollow front room, “Morning, Mrs. Tiller! And Mrs. Tiller.” She giggled. “Look at the stray I picked up on the road!”

Not how she wanted to be introduced in her own home but she sucked in a smile.

Mama and Big Mama hushed and came running. Mama’s legs were a lot longer, so she got there first.

“Ohh my June Bug’s back!” Mama squeezed June tight around the waist. Every muscle in June’s body tightened but soon relaxed, her mother’s embrace as calming as a straitjacket. Her mother’s skin was cool side of the pillowcase soft and smelled kind of like it, too. “Oh look at you.” She released her hold on June and pushed her back to arm’s length. “I can’t believe you’re home I’m so excited we can do all your favorite things we can go shopping at the antique mall or the farmers market or go for a drive and tonight after the party we can stargaze and catch lighting bugs or just watch a movie whatever you want baby girl.” She took a breath finally. June watched her wide-eyed. “But first let’s go plant you down in the living room and hear all about the Big Bad Apple.”

“Oh no you don’t.” Big Mama came up beside Mama and grabbed June by the arm. “Don’t you take my girl away before I get a chance to squeeze her.” She shot a look at Mama then gave June a hug.

Big Mama wasn’t big at all. In fact, she was rather tiny. She’d always been petite, but with age her arms and waist had grown thinner and her height and memory had shrunk. Her personality was the only thing that seemed to be growing every day.

“Hey Big Mama,” June said. “Where’s BeeBee?”

“Sleepin’ in like always. The older he gets the more he sleeps.” June glanced up at the clock above the door, but it was broken, stuck at 11:21, the second hand quivering over the nine. “If you ask me he’s trying to sleep the rest of his life away. Meanwhile I’m down here cooking and cleaning with nobody’s help. Lord help me.”

Mama rolled her eyes so June could see and Twila giggled from the corner by the door. June had forgotten she was there.

“Good morning Twila.” Mama smiled at her. “There’s some breakfast in the kitchen you can help yourself to.” It was as good as a dismissal and Twila obediently slipped down the hall.

“So tell us all about New York, Junie.” Mama, holding June tight by the elbow, sat her down on the couch in the living room.

“Everything’s still fabulous.” Her voice came out as a yawn “Is Dad working?”

“Daddy had an emergency appointment this morning. Mr. Jessie cut his hand sawing something before the sun came up and so your dad went over to the office to stitch him up real quick. Should be back soon.”

“There’s really no such thing as doctor-patient confidentiality in this town is there?”

Mama shrugged.

“You still working at that fluff and puff magazine, right? Does it have a lot of that sex stuff in it still? Sounds *sinful* to me.” Big Mama fell onto the settee with more weight than she had. That thing was such an antique Big Mama was the only person it could support.

“Yes ma’am I’m still working at *Mod Magazine* and yes there is a section on sexual health. You’d hear if I got a new job.”

Big Mama turned up her nose. “We never hear from you. Too busy being a little devil’s helper up there.”

“You know, sloth’s a sin, too, Big Mama.”

“Be nice. Big Mama is anything but lazy.” Mama winked. “And June calls us as much as she can. She’s a busy working girl, changing the world and all. Big Mama, you know *Mod Magazine* is very progressive and feminist these days. She’s doing a bunch of good up there in that big scary city and we are so proud of her.” She squeezed June’s leg and June smiled uncomfortably. Changing the world might be a stretch.

“*Feminism* is another of the devil’s words if you ask me,” Big Mama snorted.

June crossed her arms and let her face fall into a complacent grimace.

The front door opened. “Well that was a mess. Tom Jessie has been using that workshop for fifty some-odd years he should know where all the loose floorboards are. June Bug—”

Her father nearly skipped across the room to give her a hug. “I didn’t know you were here. That’s not your rental car out front is it? Seems too beat up for Hertz.”

“Oh, it’s Twila Fox’s. She drove me over here because I hit a hawk on Hog Hollow. I left my car in that church parking lot with the silly signs that change every day.” June’s face remained in a grimace as she said it.

“You hit a hawk?” Her father’s face turned white. “Are you okay? Is the car okay? Why didn’t you call me?”

Big Mama whooped. “You must be talented, June Bug. Who would’ve thought! I couldn’t hit a hawk with an army tank if I tried.”

“That’s gotta be bad luck or something,” a soft, deep voice said from the stairs. Everyone turned to look as BeeBee, handrail gripped tight, eased down the steps slowly like a bear emerging from its cave after a long winter. His grin was close-mouthed and a little lopsided. He passed Big Mama on the settee, and gave her a dry peck on the head before lumbering over to June to do the same. He lowered himself into the rocker in the corner. June expected he’d say about ten more words the rest of the day.

Twila had made her way into the living room and stood on the periphery, punishing the bookshelves with a feather duster.

“Whose wedding are you in town for again?” Daddy asked. He seemed to have gotten over the hawk and the car, which June was grateful for.

June groaned. “Not a wedding, Daddy. Just Mary V.’s engagement party. Honestly I don’t know why I came all this way for it.”

Mama cocked her head. “What are you saying? Mary V. was your best friend in high school. And you’re a bridesmaid, of course you’re here!”

June rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I just don’t know why she’s getting married right now unless she’s pregnant. Barely twenty-two.”

Mama’s eyes reprimanded her daughter. “Mary V. went to Auburn. All the girls there get married early. War Eagle, right?”

“BeeBee and I got married the week I turned eighteen,” Big Mama huffed. “Can’t imagine you being mature enough for that, seeing as you can’t even keep yourself a boyfriend. I see that Hootie Hamill around town all the time. Ooh-wee I bet you wish you hadn’t broken up with that one. Fine-looking piece of—”

June closed her eyes. She did not want to think about Hootie. An idea struck her and she opened her eyes and smiled.

“Since you seem so keen on knowing, Big Mama, I am seeing someone currently.”

Mama’s eyes lit up and Daddy involuntarily scooted forward in his seat.

“His name is Jace. He’s from New Jersey and works in investment banking. We met through a friend of a friend.”

“What kind of name is Jace?” Big Mama wrinkled her nose. “Sounds European to me.”

“Well, he’s *ethnic* if that’s what you mean.”

Someone let out a gasp—Twila in the corner? June repositioned herself in her seat and smiled a closed-mouth grin.

“No grandbaby of mine—” Before Big Mama could get the sentence out, Mama sprung from her seat and clapped.

“We’ve got breakfast in the kitchen, everybody! June, why don’t you go in there and fix up a plate?”

June stood up with a smirk and walked past her grandmother. With her dust rag and Endust can in hand, Twila slunk through the door behind her.

“Are you really dating a black boy?”

June looked up from the plates of food counter. Grits, casserole, biscuits, and fruit. Mama had really outdone herself. Twila’s eyes were wide as the greasy pans on the stovetop. If June

was being honest, she'd have to tell Twila that she'd met up with Jace at a bar a few weeks ago to get drinks. It had lasted an hour and he hadn't texted her again, so dating might be too strong of a word. June just shrugged. "He's mixed."

Twila leaned against the counter and took a deep breath, as if she were absorbing the news. A spotlight of admiration glowed from her onto June, who stood a little taller under its gleam. "Oo-wee my mama'd like to kill me if I dated a black—er mixed boy. Honestly, though." Her voice lowered a bit and she glanced back over her shoulder. "There's a guy who works over in Ready Freddie's—you know, the auto parts place. And he's black and every time I go in there he's so nice to me. He's cute, too. Ugh, New York is so progressive."

June scooped a heaping of breakfast casserole onto her plate. "Mmm-hmm."

"I'm surprised your granddaddy didn't have anything to say about that. Mine would've been fired up as a hornets nest."

"BeeBee doesn't talk much unless it's completely necessary." June took a bite of her breakfast casserole. It did have a little too much cheese on it, but she would never tell Big Mama she'd been right. "He's always been quiet apparently, but he was a doctor in Vietnam and since then, they say, he's just been a man of few words."

Twila nodded. "I like him. He seems like a stand up kinda man."

June didn't feel the need to respond.

"Well I'm really glad you're happy with Jace. I'm dating somebody, too. And it's getting really serious too, I think."

June reached for the salt and pepper. She wondered if Twila would ever stop talking. "Oh?"

"Yeah. You remember Caleb Culpepper from school?"

June nearly choked on her bite of casserole. Caleb had been in class with them growing up and gentle as Mr. Jessie's baby calves. She'd developed the biggest crush on him after their sixth grade field trip to the Tubman Museum of African American history and whatnot in Macon. That day she'd worn a bright yellow dress that Mama had bought for her. June had thought it was the prettiest dress in the world and it made her happy just to look at it. Mary V. and Parker thought otherwise, though, and teased her to no end. They told her that with her red hair she looked like Ronald McDonald and they just couldn't be seen hanging out with a life-size-burger-clown in public. They'd turned half the class against her, but not Caleb Culpepper. He caught her crying in line at the water fountain and let her sit with him and his friends on the bus ride back. June still remembered him asking her all about her cousin, Thomas, whom he had gone to camp with for a few summers, to get her mind off her humiliation. Her adolescent feelings had never materialized into anything—he wasn't as popular as the boys she'd ended up dating in high school—but every time she saw him she felt a warm patch in her chest.

"Mama thinks he's going to propose soon, but I don't really think so." Twila helped herself to a plate of grits. "Caleb puts a lot of thought into everything. He's...calculated. That's a good word for it."

"But your mom wants you to get married right now?" She imagined Caleb down on one knee in the parking lot of Gerty's Chicken Shack.

"Yeah, but I think we're gonna wait a good little while."

"Huh, I mean, I guess why not get married right now? What else are you gonna do?" June realized the bite in her words as they came out of her mouth, but all she could think of was Caleb Culpepper's green eyes looking deep at her by the water fountain. She drove forward. "When you're done with that plate I think those pans need scrubbing."

Twila opened her mouth but June was already out the door.

Mary V. Elmwood lived in a big, white, antebellum home on Tecumseh Street. It was stately with white Corinthian columns on the front and a driveway of crushed clay that got all over the bottom of June's wedges as she hiked up it. The whole family had been invited, but Daddy and BeeBee had graciously declined, because while it may have been a by-week for the Dawgs—something the Elmwood's had purposefully taken note of when planning the event—there were still plenty of games on that couldn't be missed.

Tecumseh Street was strides nicer than any other street in the county, its sidewalks covered beak to butt with crepe myrtles. Its wide stretches of grand estates began at the courthouse in the square and snaked south towards the lake. Legend had it that when Sherman came through the area during the War, he saw the pretty houses on the street—then named Stephens Street—and claimed it was too pretty to burn down, so long as they named it after him. June doubted any of this was true. In fact, she wasn't even sure she believed Sherman had come anywhere near Penuel County, but she went along with it like the rest of them. Whatever made them feel special. Still, she smiled whenever BeeBee referred to it as Jackass Avenue.

Mrs. Elmwood was a hostess to the core of her, having surely perfected her craft in previous lives. She was president of the esteemed and long-running city garden club—not to be confused with the Penuel County club, which only formed in 2009. She ran every Parent Committee fundraising event that Penuel Christian put on, and on top of that, she held a Christmas black tie ball in her home every year. Although June had been best friends with Mary V. her whole life and had spent countless Friday afternoons lounging at the Elmwood home, she

couldn't imagine Mrs. Elmwood without pearls around her neck and a tray of sandwiches in her hands.

"Welcome!" A young black woman in a white collared shirt opened the door before June could knock. She used to not think twice about how the majority of the hired help at all of Mrs. Elmwood's parties was black. It suddenly disgusted her. This wouldn't fly in New York. If this poor girl only knew what she was missing, June thought. "The party is in the backyard. You can put gifts on that table over there, and please help yourself to any refreshments."

"You got that memorized good, Michaela." Big Mama laughed as she read off the girl's nametag and moved through into the entry hall. "Thank you so much."

The woman smiled. "Yes ma'am. Y'all have a good time."

The Elmwood's backyard was packed. Women in pastel sundresses and men in polo shirts and button downs spilled off the porch and into the garden, sipping dainty, sparkly drinks out of plastic glasses made to look like crystal. She recognized almost everyone in the crowd: Pastor Pete from the Methodist church and his wife, Tanya, Mrs. Thompson, her cranky fifth grade teacher, and she even spotted Gus McNeese sitting on the grass at the periphery of the crowd, his radio headset on and "press pass" around his neck as he reached out for the lightening bugs that were emerging into the falling night. A band set up in the corner of the yard tossed intonations of blue grass music into the horde. June scanned the scene for the bar.

"June Tiller! Look at you!" a shrill voice called from a few feet away. June spun straight into Mrs. Elmwood's grip. She was surrounded by a flock of women garbed in Lilly Pulitzer. "Looks like that big old city has been treating you well."

June clenched her teeth together in a smile as she pulled out of Mrs. Elmwood's chokehold. "Yes ma'am. I'm really loving it, actually. I've got a great group of friends and

there's always something to do." She imagined her friends at that very moment, filling a plastic cup with boxed wine from the fridge before walking back to their individual rooms to watch Netflix. "The city that never sleeps, you know. And I love my job."

"I've been telling them all about it, June Bug. Everyone's so proud of you and all the work you're doing." Mrs. Tiller squeezed June's shoulder and nudged her forward into the circle of ladies.

"At garden club last week, your mama said you're now assistant to the director or something like that?" Mrs. Elmwood beamed with curiosity.

June examined the audience's eager faces. "Yes ma'am, that's it." *Assistant to the assistant to the director, actually.* "In ad sales."

"I thought you were going to be a writer," Mrs. Porter, another one of her mother's friends, nearly sang.

"She sold out." Big Mama had just reached the conversation in time to inject her negativity. The women laughed pleasantly, not realizing it wasn't a joke.

June scratched the back of her neck and ignored her grandmother. "Well, there's a lot of creativity in ad sales, and it often ends up as a fast track to editorial."

"What's a typical day for June Tiller like? Fabulous?"

"Fabulous," June conjured an even bigger smile than the one she was already faking. "Brainstorming, writing, team meetings, looking at design proofs..." *Spilling coffee down my shirt, making copies, getting yelled at by Katrina, getting yelled at by Maya, pouring a bowl of Special K, dinner for one at eleven p.m.*

"Aw don't listen to her," Big Mama croaked. "She don't get to do anything she set out to do. If you ask me she could do better writing right here where she is. Too big for her britches is

what I—” Mama nudged her silent and the women giggled again. June shot a warning glare, but Big Mama met it full on. June looked away.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Mrs. Chickley leaned forward. “How much money do you make? I know New York is very expensive and I was just curious what an entry-level job is like. Ron and I went up there for our anniversary a couple years ago and let me tell you dinners were not cheap.”

“Christa, that’s so rude!” Mrs. Porter chided, but leaned forward as well.

“Oh, not a terribly large amount, but enough, for sure. It fits well in my pockets,” she laughed. “But you know what they always say: you’ve either gotta be really rich or really young to love New York.”

“It’s not much, but she’s working her way up. Soon she’ll be running the magazine and the whole city with it!” Pride beamed from Mama’s pores that hurt June to look at. She turned to scan the crowd and spotted Mary V. across the party among a cluster of people by the band.

“I’m gonna go congratulate Mary V. I’ll see y’all around I’m sure. Thanks so much for having me, Mrs. Elmwood.”

Skirting the crowds and passing the bar to pick up a pre-poured glass of prosecco, June walked over to her friend.

“Da-dum-duh-dum.” She hummed the wedding march as she approached Mary V., slipping her free arm around her waist.

“June!” Mary V. squealed, causing a few heads to turn in their direction.

“Aren’t you a beautiful bride?” June smiled, looking her old friend up and down. She wore a white sundress that covered her shoulders and flowed loosely to her knees. The ring on her left hand shimmered as it moved, accentuating its size and definition. She held a glass in her

other hand that looked liked champagne, but could have been sparkling grape juice. June had to hand it to her: if she was pregnant she was hiding it well. Everything about Mary V. seemed to glimmer.

“I’m so happy you’re home! How’s everything going up north? Is it cold yet?”

“It’s August, Mary V. It’s just as hot there as it is here. Don’t know what’s hotter, here, there, or hell. But it’s still wonderful. You know, everything I’ve ever wanted and all that jazz.” June smiled again, pressing her lips together tightly. “This isn’t about me, though. Let’s talk about you! I haven’t talked to you since the engagement.”

“June, you just wouldn’t believe how happy we are. I wake up every morning smiling and I just can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with him.”

June tried to make her smile genuine, but her insides were nearly bursting with patronization. Mary V. hadn’t changed a bit.

“I know you probably think I’m too young.” June’s smile fell and her eyebrows knitted. “I know you’re so strong and independent and living up in some big northern city on your own. And don’t think I don’t know what you think about Penuel County.” Her tone was playful but pierced June in the gut. “I’m so proud of you for chasing your dreams, but I’m proud of where I am, too. I’d like you to be, too.” Mary V. looked plainly into June’s eyes for a moment, but the glimmer of candor was gone as quickly as it appeared. “Ugh, June, I’m attackin you and you didn’t even say anything. I’m sorry.” She had a sparkle in her eye like the drink in her glass that was reflecting the late-sinking sun. “Oh shit.”

“What?” June followed Mary V.’s gaze and the contents of her stomach lurched when she saw Hootie standing by the bar. His dark hair was trimmed shorter than it used to be and he

had a little bit of dark scruff along his jawline. He looked so grown up it made June sick. She turned away. “You invited Hootie?!”

“Ah June, I invited his parents and Mama must’ve added him to the list, too. You know he’s in town working for his daddy until he gets into law school.” Mary V. kept her eyes on him as she spoke. “You can avoid him, though if you just stay over in that quadrant of the yard.” She nodded right. “Although maybe you should talk to him.”

“Nope. No thank you. I’ll take my chances hiding.”

“Alright, well, you go over there and talk to Parker and them. I gotta keep meetin and greetin. And, seriously, I didn’t mean what I said. I know you’re happy for me. I’ll find you later.” Mary V. squeezed June’s hand then turned to walk away. “Ah Mr. Bishop! War Eagle! I’m so glad you could make it!”

June glanced back in Hootie’s direction but he was gone.

“Surprise! Bet you didn’t think you’d see me twice in one day,” a familiar voice squealed.

June turned back around to see Twila in a white collared shirt holding a tray of champagne flutes.

“Mrs. Feldman—you know that funny lady who owns the catering business? She called me last minute just after I was leaving your house this afternoon and told me she needed someone to fill in on her wait staff so ta-da!” She smiled brightly. Her hair was pulled up in a messy ponytail that left bleached ringlets falling over her ears and onto her shoulders.

“You sure do have a lot of jobs, Twila,” June said craning her neck around and trying to appear casual as she searched the throng of people.

“I’m an all-purpose labor-addict. Just love the way I’m building definition in my biceps.” She giggled as she pumped the champagne up and down like a weight, keeping all the flutes perfectly balanced. “And besides, if I ever get tired of cleaning toilets and serving fancy food to rich people I might just go to school. Gotta save up, you know.” June stopped searching and looked down at Twila’s outfit. Her khaki pants were ill fitting on her frame—although it could have been the uniform and not necessarily Twila’s fault.

“College?”

Twila smiled. She wasn’t embarrassed easily. “Yeah, I really wanna go. I wanna be a teacher.”

June looked up from her outfit and into her in the eyes. She hadn’t realized how blue they were. “What kind of teacher?”

“English.” Twila grinned. “I love writing. I mean, obviously I’m not as good as you. I don’t think they’d let me write for big magazines in New York or anything, but I’ve gotten a few opinion pieces in the Penuel Post. It’s bi-weekly, and I’m not sure anybody reads it, but still Mama puts it on the fridge whenever they put me in it. If teaching doesn’t work out, maybe I can just work for the paper. It doesn’t pay great, but—”

“What kind of opinion pieces?” June watched of her face, now. Her eyes were so expressive.

“Oh a lot of things. Once I wrote about the poverty over in Taliaferro County—you think it’s bad here, you should see it there. Oh and another was on Mayor Judd’s campaign. He wasn’t too fond of that one.” She laughed. “You know how that is. I know none of that is the big kind of stuff you get to cover in New York, but it’s kinda important to me cause it’s about here. You know, I read something recently somewhere that ‘a place belongs forever to whoever claims it

hardest.' I think it was that Joan Didion who said it. You know her. I just feel like this is my place. Oh, I'm boring you aren't I? You ain't listening to a word I'm saying. Is there something on my face?"

"Oh, I..." June hadn't realized she'd been staring. She shook out of it. "Yeah, you got a big hunk of something in your teeth."

"Oh that's embarrassing. You're such a good friend." Twila jimmied one of her manicured fingernails between her faultless front teeth. "I'll go run to the bathroom and check on that. I gotta get back to work, anyway. I'll see you around though. At this rate I'll probably be serving your breakfast tomorrow morning." She giggled and curtsied. "See ya."

She and the champagne tray disappeared into the crowd.

One Christmas when June was fourteen and still happy to dream of things the way they were, she had strung up Christmas lights above her bed. She liked the way they twinkled so softly in her dark room that she had never taken them down. Her mother had turned them on before she arrived, like she always did when June returned home, trying to resurrect some piece of her baby eight years gone.

When June got home that night, she stood in the doorway of her bedroom, leaning against the frame. The lights were so small, just specks of gold against the dark tapestry-covered wall. She squinted and the specks grew wide and fuzzy like drops of yellow food coloring exploding in water or perhaps golden angels against a dark sky. She felt like she was on the fire escape out her apartment window, looking out into the night above the city. She'd often go out there and stare until all the colors and noises and shapes grew together in front of her. She focused her eyes and the string of twinkle lights shrunk back to size. There was glory in their littleness, too.

She stepped out of her shoes without touching them, placing them gently in her closet as she wriggled to unzip the back of her dress. Her fingers hesitated over the suitcase on the floor. Perhaps it was the wine, but she felt an odd aversion to her silk pajama set. Moving over to her old dresser, she fumbled through the second drawer for her mother's faded UGA sweatshirt she wore in college and a pair of oversized boxer shorts that had long ago belonged to Hootie. The sweatshirt had thinned softly and had a few holes at the bottom hem. She melted into it, feeling it press against her body loosely like the heat from a fireplace, and crawled into bed.

Click.

June sat up and looked around the room. All was quiet except for the soft billowing of one of her wall tapestries from a floor vent. She eased back into the pillows and snuggled into her big comforter.

Click.

Annoyed, she opened her eyes once more.

Click-cli-click.

She kicked the covers off and scrambled to the window to peer out. Hootie stood outside, one story below looking up at her with a handful of gravel in his left hand. His right hand was poised behind his head to throw another handful, but he lowered it when he saw her face in the window. He smiled and beckoned for her to come down.

June scowled at him, shook her head no, but he just grinned and threw another rock. Begrudgingly, she reached for her slippers and scampered out the door. Although she tiptoed down the stairs, each floorboard creaked under her weight. It felt like a year before she reached the bottom of the steps.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” She snarled as she gingerly shut the front door behind her. She could feel that last glass of wine even more in the open night air and she crossed her arms around her body to steady herself.

“I saw you at Mary V.’s party and you didn’t even say hello to me.” He was smiling. Although she’d tried to block it out of her memory, Hootie’s smirk often crept into her sleep-doped thoughts as she lay in bed some nights. It looked the same.

“Do you not remember when you cracked my window with that gravel? My daddy nearly wrung your neck. Besides, you know everybody can hear everything in that damned house. Were you trying to wake up Big Mama? You don’t wanna know how that would end.” The words were boiling angrily out of her. “Why the hell are you here, anyway?”

“Hey, you’re wearing my boxers.” He leaned up against the rental car—Daddy had fixed the front tire and driven it home from the church parking lot sometime that afternoon. Hootie looked at June, his grin wide and maddening. She couldn’t tell if he was drunk or not. “I knew you’d come around.”

“Come around to what?” She hissed.

His opened arms said everything. “I just missed you, June,” he said after a few moments of silence. “You didn’t tell me you were coming home.”

“Well we haven’t really spoken in three years, I didn’t think it was necessary.” June squeezed her arms tighter.

“Hey, don’t be so mean to me. I’m not tryin anything.”

She scowled at him. Her head was fuzzy with drunkenness and she couldn’t think of much to say besides telling him she loved him, which in the light of day couldn’t be farther from

the truth. She thought it best to keep her mouth shut until an intelligent thought bobbed to the surface.

“Look, I’m sure you’re doing well in New York, but I bet you we’re doing better here.”

“What?”

“I know you hate it there. You hate your job and I bet you you don’t like your friends. You just can’t admit it cause you still think you’re too good for this town.”

June frowned. “You knew after high school I was not about to follow you to Georgia. I said from the beginning I was gonna get as far away from this Podunk town as I could and I did.”

“And what did getting away get you? You hate New York and you want to come back here. You owe me that and you know it.” His voice was mean.

“That’s not fair! I—”

She didn’t know how it happened, but before she could say another word he was kissing her. His body pressed against hers and his hands clutched tightly around her head like he was holding the earth in his hands.

He’s got the whooooo world in his hands. The Sunday school song bounced like a drunken buoy on her thoughts. He pulled away from her as quickly as he’d grabbed her and the chill of the night replaced his body heat.

“You think you don’t have a choice, but you do. You’ve always had a choice and if you ask me, New York isn’t it. You know it, I know it, the whole world damned well knows it. You’re drawn to this place like you’re drawn to me. Don’t fight it so damn hard.”

June opened her eyes slowly. His figure was as hazy as her bedroom lights. She focused in on the lone lightening bug circling the tip of his boot. *He’s got the whooooo flash world flash in his hands* flash. She looked at Hootie’s face until it focused.

“I am better than this, though.” June said quietly.

Hootie chuckled and nodded. He spun on the heel of his boot and got in his truck. June wrapped her arms around her chest tighter, feeling an urgency to call after him, but she said nothing. He rolled down his window as he backed out.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” He smirked, nodded, and then was gone. His taillights disappeared down the driveway, gravel dust popping behind him.

“I haven’t seen that boy around here in years,” BeeBee said from the front porch.

June gasped. “BeeBee, how long have you been standing there! You scared the livin—you scared me.”

“Long enough,” he said. “You know this house.”

June looked over her shoulder, but Hootie’s truck was long gone. She turned back to BeeBee who was staring into the yard.

“You can’t let anything rule you but yourself, June Bug.” His voice was so soft that June could do nothing but look down at her slippered feet in silence. She felt like the letter “S” on the sign back at Antioch, dangling precariously over the dead hawk. She didn’t know who was ruling what anymore. The two were quiet for a long time.

June’s legs were cold, and she should’ve gone inside, but BeeBee had placed some spell over the air that she dared not break by moving. There was something in the silence of the night, and the full moon illuminated things to almost bright as day. She sunk down into a squat and pulled her mother’s ratty sweatshirt over her knees. A sense of heavenly calm engulfed her, stronger than the heat of the sweatshirt, and tugged her deeper towards the ground. She felt completely entranced by its spell. BeeBee didn’t say anything. He was still looking off into the field beyond the driveway.

“Did you notice there aren’t as many lightning bugs as there used to be?”

“What?” She followed his gaze. “What does that have to do with anything?”

He shrugged and smiled at her. “I just know you used to love to catch ’em and watch ’em twinkle. Figured you’d be interested to know they’re dying out.” He reached out and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “Let’s get you back to bed. You’re gonna have a lot of explaining to do in the morning when Big Mama asks what all that racket was.”

That night she dreamed she was a half-dead hawk who could only fly in circles, gobbling up all the fireflies in her path. She had bloodied, broken wings and feathers falling over her eyes. She woke up tired and nauseous at five a.m., the bed and blankets caving to fit her body, but she didn’t care. She threw her clothes into her suitcase and spilled down the stairs. She could call Delta on the drive to the airport to see if they had any earlier flights. It was all right to leave, she thought. The lightning bugs already had.

Radio Man

“D.J. Gus here with WJJD, the only AM station left on the dial.” Gus McNeese cupped his hands around the headset microphone that grazed his crumb-coated lips, muffling out the early morning noises of Sweet T.’s diner so only his voice carried through strong to the radio waves. The dings of the cash register and the sleepy chatter of people ordering their morning coffee added some charm to the background noise, but as he’d learned from years of experience, too much would drown him out. In the twenty some-odd years he’d been in the radio business—well, eighteen this coming October, he figured quickly in his head—he’d mastered the art of radio broadcasting. He knew how to project his voice strongly and how to enunciate clearly so no one could confuse the football score with the forecast. He had figured out where to go at what time to get the ripest news and he knew exactly who would talk when they shouldn’t. He’d been in the business so long, actually, that he knew practically everything about everyone in Penuel County. That was his favorite part of the job, he planned to say someday if he ever got interviewed himself.

A few years back, he’d discovered that Sweet T.’s right north of town was the best place to go this early on a Saturday morning to get the news. The McDonald’s up by the interstate, although equally lively at this time of day, was filled with truckers on their way to South Carolina or Atlanta, so none of the news he gathered there would be local. Back in the nineties, the place to go had been Daye’s Steak and Eats but they shut that up—general economic downturn and one subpar health inspection, he’d reported at the time. You could still see the sun soaked spots where the lettering had been, although they’d tried to cover it up with the sign for Muchacho Gordo, which also shut down a few years back for similar reasons. Now, every Saturday morning he’d come to Sweet T.’s, sit at the counter by the register and order a black

coffee, two eggs over easy, and a side of hash browns slathered in peppers, chili, and a dash of hot sauce for good measure.

When he was finished with his meal, he'd amble back towards town, radio equipment in hand, headed to the farmer's market in the square if it was the summer. In the fall, he'd go back home to watch the Dawgs play between the hedges—or elsewhere—on the edge of the couch with his mother, his equipment spread out on the coffee table so he could live broadcast the game. In winter or spring he'd move from home to home, establishment to establishment, stopping everyone from pastors going out for morning visits to drunks coming home from last night. News was everywhere.

"I just feel so bad for him," Julie Masters whispered through barred teeth to her husband as she waved and nodded to Gus from across the room. He looked as if he was about to approach them until the head football coach for the Penuel Panthers passed by his barstool.

Todd Masters lifted his coffee mug to his lips and shrugged. "Feel worse for the people he talks to."

They could hear his booming voice even from this distance: "D.J. Gus here with WJJD, the only AM station left on the dial. How are you feeling about last night's win against Fairview? You played it a little tighter than expected. Is that because y'all aren't accustomed to defending against a spread option offense? Tripped you up for the first half, lemme tell you. Do you have big plans for next week's game?" The words rolled out one on top of the other, bumping over chatter as it crossed the room to the Masters' booth.

Julie tried not to giggle as she looked at her husband.

"It's not funny, Julie," he said sternly, still watching the way the large man's babbling body heaved like an ancient locomotive spewing steam. "Honestly, it's kinda scary."

“Scary?” Julie laughed once more. “He’s harmless—maybe even helpful. Remember when he alerted everybody about the courthouse fire two years ago?”

“People would’ve figured it out eventually. He just happened to be there at the time it started. Seems to me he shouldn’t have been walking around alone that late at night. Lord knows what he was doing. Remember that time he found the Houston’s lost dog and fed it an entire chocolate cake? That thing liked to die if somebody hadn’t stepped in. He was tryin to kill it if you ask me. And when he wrecked that car...”

“Oh, not everyone knows chocolate’s poisonous to dogs. Honest mistake.”

Todd grunted.

“Some people say he’s a local town hero.” She was trying to get his goat, but he wouldn’t give it.

“Well I say he’s dangerous.” Todd shrugged. “Let Coach Lindley be on the radio but I want nothing to do with it.”

Jackson Greer sat at the kitchen table and twirled his spoon through his cereal bowl thoughtfully. The lines of cinnamon sugar fell off each piece and melted into the surrounding milk. It looked a little like smoke at a campfire, he thought as he continued to dip his spoon in and out in haphazard semicircles.

“Jackson, stop playing with your food and eat it,” his mother said with a loving pat on his head as she passed by on her way to the sink. “You can’t play with your iPad until you eat all your breakfast.”

Jackson complied without looking up from his bowl. The spoonful he got was a little too soggy.

“I got to run over to the farmer’s market a little later, do you want to come with me?” His mother called from across the room. “We can get you some of Mrs. Jacob’s cookies if you want.”

Jackson shrugged his bony shoulders up to his earlobes and let them fall back down.

“You’re gonna have to say something, Jackson.” His mom looked at him across the kitchen. “Do you want a cookie or not?”

Jackson’s breath was deep with exasperation. “Shhhhhure.” His lips froze in a pucker and his eyes squeezed shut as he expelled the sounds from his mouth. Jill Greer smiled uneasily and turned back towards the sink to wash out her bowl. When he was younger she couldn’t get him to shut up. He would sputter and babble about nothing at all, and she’d waited patiently with a mother’s smile like every good mother would, of course. When he’d sung his nonsensical Barney songs, she’d smiled and sung along. When he’d explained to her for the eighteenth and nineteenth times that he was the red power ranger not the blue one, she’d agreed, “uh huh, of course you are.” She’d been waiting for him to grow up and have intelligent things to say, and lo and behold the second he turned eight he developed what she often referred to in her mind as The Goddamn Stutter. She would quickly recover from this judgment lapse when she looked into his deep brown eyes, sad, shaking, struggling to speak, and a wave of pity would wash over her once more. Ever since the kids began to badger him on the playground—heartless taunts she lost sleep over—Jackson’s voice had dried up completely. Getting him to speak was harder than getting him to brush his teeth, God love him.

“Mom!” he blurted out suddenly, spit flying across the breakfast table.

Mrs. Greer jolted her head in his direction, her eyes wide with anticipation.

“...mmmmister Gus.” He pointed.

Mrs. Greer turned her head again to look out the kitchen window. Gus McNeese was trotting pleasantly down the opposite sidewalk, one hand in his pocket, the other holding the miniature black control box he always had with him. The headset rested around the collar of his dingy green polo.

“Can I go pplay with him?”

Mrs. Greer had always thought there was something fishy about that man, although no one talked about what it was. They just said he was odd, as if saying explicitly why would shatter their veneers of propriety. There had been something about a car accident, a dog dying, maybe a fire, although now she couldn't quite remember what. His daddy had never been in the picture, drugs and mental illness, they said. Although daddies not being in the picture was no reason to judge, she thought as a slight flush rose to her cheeks.

“Pplease, Mom.”

She watched him through the window as he stopped in front of the Thompson's house across the street. He bent over slowly, presumably to look at something on the front fence. When he squatted down like that, Mrs. Greer couldn't help but think that his body looked like a barrel that would roll down the slight incline towards town with one little kick. She stifled a chuckle at the thought. He was as harmless as a child. “Sure hon, if it's okay with him.”

Jackson dropped his spoon into his bowl, splashing cinnamon soaked milk into puddles across the table. Mrs. Greer followed him out the door.

“Mr. McNeese!” She called from her front step as Jackson spurted past, pausing only briefly to look both ways before crossing over N. Davis Street. Gus turned around sharply in her direction, a huge smile of recognition passing over his heavyset features.

“Call me Gus, Mrs. Greer,” he yelled back jovially as he struggled to rise from his kneeling position.

Mrs. Greer clenched her bathrobe tighter to her breast. “Are you headed to the farmer’s market in the square?”

“Aw Mrs. Greer, I haven’t missed a farmer’s market in my thirty-three years. It’s where all the news is!” His smile was large and dopey, consuming all of his features until they melted into his face like the rolls of fat beneath his chin.

“Is it okay if Jackson walks that way with you? I’m gonna be there in an hour or so and I can take him back from you then.”

“Of course!” Gus grinned so hard his eyes squinted shut. “I always need help with my radio show! That would make me happy as an oyster.”

Mrs. Greer nodded and waved, her thick smile falling slightly into a grimace as she pulled the door to and peeked back at the mismatched duo through the crystalized window.

“The fence is broke. Look right there.”

“It kinda l-l-looks like somebody...kicked it. Or something.” Jackson’s face was a portrait of apology, but Gus didn’t notice.

“That’s what I can’t figure out. Was an animal trying to get in or is it intentional vandalism? Should we ask if the Thompson’s know anything?”

Jackson poised his lips to respond, thought better of it, and nodded vigorously. The two lumbered up the path to the front door, Jackson trailing like a shadow.

Gus pulled open the screen door and knocked loudly. “Radio Man!” He yelled. It took a few knocks for Mrs. Thompson to answer, fully dressed for the day in slacks and a sweater, but curlers rolled tightly into her gray hair. She grimaced at them through the screen.

“Gus McNeese here with WJJD, the only AM station left on the dial. Good morning, Mrs. Thompson. We had a few questions about your broken fence out front.” He pointed over Jackson’s head towards the crime scene.

Mrs. Thompson’s scrutinizing eyes landed on Jackson. “Does your mama know you’re out here with him?”

Jackson froze, but Gus smiled. “Why yes ma’am. He’s my radio apprentice. I couldn’t do my show today without him!”

Jackson nodded in agreement.

“Well,” Mrs. Thompson huffed. She’d have to talk to Jill about that later.

A high-pitched alarm shrilled from Mrs. Thompson’s pocket and she released a sharp squeal, nearly indistinguishable from the alarm itself. “Damn Amber Alerts,” she grumbled when she composed herself, struggling to pull the phone from her pocket. “It’s why kids shouldn’t talk to strangers.” She pointed accusingly with her cell phone as she spoke.

The two were unmoved. “So do you know what happened to your fence, Mrs. Thompson?”

Margaret Thompson slipped the phone back into her pocket and opened the screen door farther to look down her front walk to the fence. Sure enough, she could see one of her pickets broken in two as if it had been kicked in from the sidewalk. She returned her gaze to the visitors on her porch. Her eyebrows tightened.

“Are you here to tell me you two did that to my fence? You know I’m gonna call both of your mothers and have you come back and fix it.”

Gus’s eyes widened. “Aw, Mrs. Thompson, we didn’t break your fence!” His voice became small as he wiped a sweaty hand down the front of his slacks.

“I don’t see why you’d come up here to tell me about it if you two weren’t the ones to break it.” As she crossed her arms across her wide chest, Jackson noticed how her veiny skin sagged from the bone. His eyes followed her arms up to her pointed shoulders, the loose folds of skin on her neck like the wattle of a chicken, the soft line of hair above her lip, the way the curlers in her hair pulled at the skin of her temples making her expression meaner and more harrowing than usual. Jackson felt a little sick.

Gus swallowed hard. “We just wanted to know if you’d seen the vandals so I could report it for my show. The people need to know about any public nuisances, ma’am.” He could feel his voice becoming rounder and more vulnerable.

Mrs. Thompson grunted and cleared her throat simultaneously. “Talk about a public nuisance. You sure his mama knows where he is? Don’t trust you one bit.”

Gus tried to calm himself so he could respond.

“We didn’t break your fence!” Jackson yelled with surprising precision. Mrs. Thompson and Gus both looked down at him but he shrunk back under their gazes.

“We didn’t break it, Mrs. Thompson,” Gus chimed. “But we’ll be sure to find out who did.”

Jackson reached for Gus’s shaky hand and the two eased back down the front path. Gus looked around sheepishly for a moment, waiting for Mrs. Thompson to close the door.

“She can be a mean old woman sometimes. You know, I’ve heard her children only came to visit one time last year. My mama’s always said that unhappy people lash out sometimes.” Jackson nodded as Gus spoke. “I bet it’ll cheer her up like all get out if we report her broken fence on the show, whaddya say?”

He stopped on the sidewalk a few feet away from the Thompson’s fence and spun some of the dials on the little box he had neatly tucked beneath one arm. No mean woman could get him down; he was the Radio Man once more.

“What’s that d-do?”

“Sometimes,” Gus said slowly, “if I can adjust the knobs just right, I won’t have to ride the fader when I’m talking. You see, the signal to noise ratio has to be juust right. This is my portable station. This one records, then I take it home to edit it, and then I broadcast it out. The big set I bring when I’m broadcasting an event live is at home. You should see that puppy. It’s down in my basement and is about as big as the pinball machine Mama bought me for my birthday last year. You’re welcome to come over anytime to see it.”

Jackson reached for a dangling cord that fell from the box. “What’s this?”

“Oh that’s just my feed. You always need a clean feed while broadcasting. It’s tricky because I do everything remotely, but I still have to have a power source, you know?”

Jackson didn’t know, but he nodded and let go of the cord. Gus tucked the loose end neatly into his pocket. The two began to shuffle along the road again slowly as Gus pulled the headset from its resting position around the back of his neck to the top of his head and spoke into the microphone.

“DJ Gus here...”

Jackson looked up at the man beside him as he projected his voice into the headset mic. When he talked, he had one hand around the control box in front of his belly and another against his ear. Although he was walking slowly, he stood a little taller as he spoke. His solid olive green polo shirt tucked into his pants and stretched taut against his round stomach. Jackson had never seen a man with a stomach so round that he didn't even need a belt to hold up his church pants. What Jackson fixated on most as he looked up at him, though, were the words he was speaking.

"It's a hefty slab of wood about as wide as brick and as long as a wiener dog..." Gus spoke. No, he guessed it wasn't the words exactly that drew him in. It was the way Gus spoke. His lips never froze over a syllable and his vocal chords never seemed to skip over the words his brain wanted him to say. It wasn't like most people's voices that ran too quickly or sounded like they were being nice when you knew they actually weren't. He couldn't quite explain it, but Gus's voice reminded him of rolling down a hill, or the part just afterwards when you just lay there face down in the warm grass and let all the summer smells sink into you and you feel like you're getting a great big hug from the earth. It was soothing and strong and it said that everything was going to be okay.

"We are all very lucky that no one was walking by when these vandals let loose. If you have any information about the Thompson's broken fence," Gus concluded, "please call local law enforcement or WJJD's hotline. We'll be accepting calls throughout the day. Do your part to keep Penuel County safe." He turned the dial down and flicked the off switch on the box beneath his arm.

"There. That'll do it." He looked down at his prodigy who was staring up at him, his lips pursed and his eyes open. "So what do you want to know about the radio business, Jackson?"

Jackson paused for a moment before settling on a question. "Why ddo you ddo it?"

“Why do I do it? Well, where to begin? I started out in this business in high school and I worked for the school radio show...back then Penuel High had its own radio show. Now with all the state budget cuts we can barely afford anything but the football team. Don’t get me started on the art program. So needless to say, the radio station’s long gone. Then, when I graduated my mama gave me this set and ever since then I’ve had my own show! Going on—oh what did I figure earlier—twenty-three years now? Wow that’s a long time. I’m one of the most veteran radio announcers in the state of Georgia, I’d say!”

He paused and looked at Jackson with a mild concern suddenly appearing on his features. He lowered his voice a bit. “Jackson, don’t take this the wrong way, but are you funny?”

“I know some...jokes. I’m not g-great at telling them, though.”

“Aw I bet you are. Tell me one.”

Jackson thought hard. “W-why did the golfer...wear ttwo pairs of socks?”

“In case there were holes in them, everyone knows that one.” Gus laughed. “That’s a good one though. To be in radio, you gotta be funny. You’re well on your way.”

They started ambling again down the sidewalk. “The other key to radio, Jackson, is that you gotta know your subject and you gotta know your audience. I’m lucky cause I have the best gosh darn subjects and the best blessin audience in the world!” He spread his arms wide as if he was hugging the whole neighborhood. “You see, you also have to be astute and able to read all people and all situations. It’s not so easy, but you get real good at it after a while.”

“Mr. Gus,” Jackson said quietly. “If you can read everybody, why are pppeole mean to you? Why ddon’t you fight back?” Jackson wished more than anything that he could fight back. Gus had the voice to, but he still let people treat him like a mute.

Gus stopped and looked down at him. “I just always try to do the right thing, I guess. I try to tell the truth and I tell it straight and some people don’t like that. I’ve been trying my whole life to do the right thing, but I mess up sometimes and people can be mean to me for that. I just want to make people happy, though, so I don’t need to fight them.”

“I just wish you wouldn’t l-let pppeople treat you like this. Us...like this. You can’t let them ignore you.”

Gus scrunched his face up as he thought about it then merely nodded. For once he had nothing to say.

They began walking in silence past the southernmost houses on N. Davis Street, all with faded green yards, some with dogs, others overgrown by weeds and one with a Barbie Jeep overturned in a bush. People were finally beginning to wake up, open their blinds, get their mail, and move along with their days—it was already nine fifteen, after all. Gus waved to Al Fortson, the minister of music over at the Methodist Church, who was plodding down his driveway to pick up the paper. Gus spoke to Jackson out of the side of his mouth, “People like to sleep in here, Jackson. It’s something I learned early on. And you know why that is, Jackson?”

Jackson shook his head no.

“It’s because they’re all lazy, that’s why. They sleep in every morning—especially Mr. Fortson, you know, the Methodist music minister? He’s usually been drinkin the night before. You heard me right. I hear Pastor Al likes few beers before bed. He’s not near as bad as Todd Masters, though, let me tell you.” He lowered his voice in tone alone, the volume remaining the same. Jackson’s eyes darted back to Mr. Fortson’s yard, but the man with his paper tucked beneath his arm had luckily just stepped inside the house. “Nobody listens to me when I say it’s a bad idea to have a drinkin’ pastor, but I think it is. Something just don’t seem right about

mixing bourbon and the Bible. I've been investigating it a little bit, but no one really cares." He sighed. "They don't really even care about the news anymore at all, Jackson. The people over in Atlanta have a lot of news—much worse than ours, all robberies and killings and black people getting shot at gas stations, and whatnot—but even so people listen to that kind of stuff more than small town news. Here, they sleep in and miss the going-on's of the world. The world's turnin and they don't even care."

Gus liked his words and rolled them over again on his tongue. "It's turnin and they don't even care."

The square itself, situated in the middle of spokelike streets, was surrounded on all sides by brick buildings. There was the post office on the corner and the courthouse that was in the middle of renovations after the fire from two summers ago—boy had that been a big story, too bad it was only faulty electric work and not arson. Gus had been the first one to see the flames when he'd been taking a walk late on a Tuesday night, he told Jackson. Couldn't sleep. Reported it on his show and then called up the fire department. Along the square there was also Tiffany's Glitz and Glam Formal Wear (For All Your Weddings, Pageants, and Proms), How Do You 'Do Hair Salon and its slightly less dazzling counterpart Donnie's Barbershop which hosted a swath of old men on the front porch in rocking chairs with solo cup in hand for dip spit (you'd think it was Mayberry in the fifties if one of them wasn't black), Everett & Everett law firm owned by Jay and his son, Jay Jr., which was not to be confused with Jim Everett who owned the bank next door. The rest of the storefronts were abandoned. Gus loved the square always, but especially on Saturdays in the summer when it felt like the epicenter of the world.

“Mornin’, Officer Riley.” If Gus had been wearing a hat he would’ve tipped it. Officer Tom Riley sat in his police car in one of the parallel spots outside the post office on the outer perimeter of the square, the crook of his elbow dangling over the open window. He sipped coffee out of a paper cup.

“Mornin-Gus-I-am-very-busy-today.” His sentence came out as a single breathless word. He perfunctorily glanced sidelong at the approaching man, but double took when he saw Jackson trailing along in his wake. “Jackson Greer, does your mama know you’re out here with Mr. McNeese?”

Jackson tried to speak but no words came out. He lowered his head and stamped his foot gingerly on the pavement.

Officer Riley took another sip of his coffee. “Spit it out, son.”

“...Yes!” He finally managed to blurt, although it came out much louder than he’d intended. Officer Riley raised his eyebrows.

“His mama wanted him to learn all there is to know about the radio business, so she, of course, wanted him to hang out with me for the morning!” Gus explained.

Officer Riley looked back and forth from Gus to the child beside him. “You’re not taking him anywhere in a car are you Gus? Just talking radio?”

Gus groaned. “Yes just radio. That was a long time ago I learned my lesson about cars. You got to get over that.” Officer Riley nodded, but continued to look at the two skeptically. “Speaking of radio, I just announced—you’ll hear about it as soon as I get home to edit the audio—about Mrs. Thompson’s broken fence post. I’m sure you’ve heard about it on the blotter, already. It’s a verifiable crime scene and I urge you to seek out the culprits immediately.”

Officer Riley closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I must have missed it, Gus. But I'll be sure to go check that out as soon as the farmer's market is over with. I have to keep the peace and oversee parking."

Gus nodded happily. "Well, can you tell me anything about the news? Anyone in jail I should know about?" Gus leaned up against the rear door of the squad car and crossed his arms.

"That's classified information, Gus. Now I really am busy this morning." He began to roll up the window.

"An arrest record is public information, Officer Riley. You know that." Gus stumbled forward as the car slowly inched up.

"Sorry, bud, can't help you!" Officer Riley called through the half open window and drove to the other end of the block.

"Huh, wonder who spit in his coffee this morning." Gus shrugged. "You know, Jackson, when law enforcement officers are too busy to speak with its citizens, you know they have too much on their plates. I have the utmost respect for the law enforcement in Penuel County, Jackson. Hard working as a wasp's nest. Brave, too. You gotta admire that."

"M-mean as a wasp nest too, though. Someday I'm gonna tell him that." Jackson's eyes narrowed as he glared at the butt of the police car on the other end of the square. He looked up at Gus. "You should tell him, too." With arms crossed defiantly, Jackson stood in the middle of the street looking small but more powerful than Gus felt he ever would be.

The grassy part in the middle of the square where the booths and tables splayed about in arbitrary rows was small. Four thin, cracked sidewalks dissected the square into pieces like a dried up creek bed, leading to a granite Confederate monument honoring the Penuel County men

who had fought and died in the Civil War. It had been a big hoopla when the monument had been built, although now no one living was quite old enough to remember it. When the county could afford it, they hauled the best granite they could find all the way down from Elberton. Every year on Confederate Memorial Day, Gus would live broadcast the morning celebration, which lately was more of a trickle of old white folks gathering, saluting, and singing Dixie. Not quite a spectacle anymore, but town history nonetheless.

Today people milled about on the periphery of the monument. Mr. Jessie, a dairy farmer who lived about three miles east of town, was standing at a booth selling the fresh eggs he and his granddaughter harvested from his backyard chicken coop. Mrs. Carolina Thumb stood behind a booth of fresh flowers from Loblolly Flowers and Gifts. People sold crafts and cheese, bread, fruit, and vegetables, all of which Gus felt were the colors and shapes and smells of the world.

Gus and Jackson walked across the street and into the square. “Radio Man!” Gus called as he approached one of the booths selling homemade pies. “Got any news for me, Miss Hudson?”

“Not today, Gus. Just trying to sell my pies.” The elderly woman looked down, pushing a latticed apple pie in front of a chocolate one then sliding it back to where it started.

“I can put out an advertisement for you if you’d like, Miss Hudson. We could do an interview and everything so everyone would learn how great your pies are! They call that sponsored content. Bet you’d sell all your pies in the next half hour.”

Miss Hudson’s eyes softened and she smiled. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m alright.” For a moment her wary eyes traveled between the boy and the man before her. “Jackson Greer, what are you doing with Mr. Gus? Does your mother know?”

“Yes ma’am,” Jackson said softly.

The concern remained embedded on Miss Hudson's brows, but she turned slightly away from Gus to skim the crowd.

"I don't mind running you an ad, I promise. In fact I'm happy to—"

"Oh look, Jackson," Miss Hudson interrupted, pointing to three boys standing around the statue in the middle of the square. "Those boys are in your Sunday school class aren't they! Why don't you go play with them?" She nodded at Jackson to go on, then turned to speak to Miss Carolina whose booth sat perpendicular to hers.

"Adults. Just so busy, you know?" He looked in the direction Miss Hudson had pointed, searching across the expanse of tables for the three boys sidled up to the memorial in the center. "I haven't met your friends before...and maybe they want to learn about the radio business too! You know, there's a lot I could teach them."

Jackson stood behind Gus, unable to make a sound but shaking his head vigorously. Before he could reach out to stop him, Gus was already three long strides ahead of him, headed towards the boys.

"Radio Man!" he called as he approached. The boys stopped talking and looked in his direction. The tallest one had red hair that dipped down over his eyes and freckles that covered his face and arms. His coloring reminded Gus of the tip of a candle flame, pale orange and thin. The child whispered something to the boy beside him and they both erupted into laughter.

"How're all y'all this morning?" Gus placed the control box and headset at his feet and smiled down at them. They merely looked up and giggled through their gap-toothed grins. "What are y'all doing?"

Jackson approached the odd assembly cautiously, but stayed a few feet behind Gus and watched the boys nervously. One shifted his weight back and forth from the concrete to the base of the granite monument. No one responded.

“I’m Gus, which you probably know already if you listen to my show. Do y’all listen to the radio? You know it’s very fun and informative—much more fun than school. You know what they say, don’t let education get in the way of your schooling...something like that.” He chuckled.

“Jackson on the radio!” one boy said to the others, as if Gus and Jackson were not there. “Who’d ever listen to that?”

“Let’s...g-go.” Jackson tugged on the back of Gus’s shirt, unloosing it from his pants.

“Did you hear him?” the red headed boy screeched. “L-l-let’s what? I c-c-c-couldn’t understand y-y-you.”

“Shhhhhut up.” The nerves made Jackson’s voice shakier than usual. The boys shrieked.

“S-s-s-say it again, J-J-J-Jackson!” Another hooted through his laughter.

Jackson looked up at Gus, his eyes pleading with angry tears.

“Hey, now,” Gus spoke firmly.

“You know, Mr. Gus,” one of the boys said, taking a deep breath to try to still his laughter. “We learned, in Sunday school, that Moses couldn’t talk either.” He broke back out into uncontrollable fits, doubling over and howling into his knees.

“M-Moses was—” Jackson tried to raise his small voice over the laughter.

“I-I-I’m J-J-Jackson M-M-Moses G-Greer at duh-duh-WXYZ and I-I don’t know h-h-how to t-talk!” The red headed boy beamed as the other two flanking him crumpled beneath the weight of their mirth. “Hey Jackson, can you hear us?”

“Gus!” Jackson’s wail pierced the air with a vicious clarity.

Suddenly, Gus lunged forward. The palms of his burly hands collided with the red headed boy’s bony chest with the power of a semi barreling down I-20. “Jackson can talk!” The boy’s foot caught on the step but his upper body kept moving, falling until his head careened into the corner of the granite column.

Someone nearby screamed. The boy lay motionless on the ground, the bright red blood almost indistinguishable from his deep orange hair. Gus’s eyes widened and he stepped towards the boy, but Mr. Jessie who had been watching the scene from nearby moved quicker, pushing Gus out of the way and grabbing the child in his arms.

A rush of heat and color overcame Gus. He stumbled. Mrs. Greer—he hadn’t seen her in the corner of the square by the cookie stand—rushed towards them, scooping Jackson up from the ground and cradling him in her arms as if he were an infant. “Did he hurt you?” Gus could hear her say, although her voice sounded muffled and distant against the blood pounding in his ears.

“What did you do!” Officer Riley appeared from nowhere and grabbed Gus by the collar, flinging him about-face.

“Those...those boys were hurting Jackson. They...they said he could never have a radio show,” Gus muttered as fat tears leaked down his cheeks. “I was fighting back.”

“Radio show?!” Rage built up behind Officer Riley’s face and shone through as splotches of red across his cheeks and neck. “Your radio show the whole town listens to? My God, Gus.” Officer Riley released his hold on Gus’s collar and let his limp body collapse in a deadweight pile on the sidewalk.

Through teary eyes, he watched the women gather around as Mr. Jessie pressed his handkerchief to the crown of the injured boy's head. He could faintly hear the child whimpering. Gus watched as Tanya Holcomb stood at the periphery of the scene muttering to Angela and Twila Fox, their heads shaking and their mouths gaped with interest. Most women were holding their phones up to their ears or whispering noisily to one another. Mrs. Thompson stood at a nearby booth with her shriveled hand shielding her eyes so she could get a better look. She didn't look at all surprised.

Gus slowly reached out for his control box and his headset, turning the dial slowly and placing the microphone to his lips. "D.J. Gus here...WJJD: the only...station left..." he whispered as he choked through tears and snot. "D.J. Gus here." He began to sob. "D.J. Gus here."

The Best We Can

They lived on a fault line, although no one could remember there ever having been an earthquake in Penuel County. A tornado once nipped the southern corner of the county, destroying the snowbird nests on Lake Chihooowa. Storms blew over power lines, which were left down longer on the east side of town than the west, inadvertently of course, they had said. Then there was the massive fire that sacked the courthouse last summer, not to mention the fire of '76 that took nearly half of Godfrey Street. All that but never an earthquake.

Nevertheless, no one dared disturb the earth between Miss Virginia and Miss Carolina Thumb's houses. Children no longer played in the yards like the youngsters of the past, although the bushes were ripe for hiding spots. Instead, they'd learned to hold their breaths as they walked past the little pastel houses like they were walking past a graveyard. They feared that if they breathed just a little too sharply, the dirt would split under that ugly white fence and suck the whole neighborhood down with it.

From behind Hugh's windshield, the morning looked cold as Georgia mornings in December when little boys wished for snow to go along with the Christmas music on the radio, although they knew deep down it wouldn't come. But today was August and the air was hot and thick as sod scooped on top of a casket.

"I thought she told you she'd be ready at 5:30," Miss Virginia said, her voice as cold as the evening looked. Hugh glanced down at the clock on the dashboard.

"It's only 5:33."

"Don't know why she thinks she got a right to see Mama anyway," Miss Virginia huffed and leaned back in her seat at the waist, her posture remaining cane straight in a brown turtleneck nearly the color of her skin. A dainty gold cross hung over the edge of her collar, bouncing

gently against her chest as she leaned around Hugh to watch the house. Two minutes and fourteen painful seconds passed in which Hugh glanced at the dashboard seven times.

“Oh God.” Virginia sighed. Hugh glanced up. Miss Carolina looked like a fast food bag caught in the wind as she sprang from her door, spilling over the unkempt hydrangea bushes that heaped themselves along the lining of her porch and bubbled over into the front walk. She was a bumblebee caught in a dance somewhere between stumbling and flying over the flowers in her yellow muumuu, cinched around the waist with a blue leather belt that accentuated her healthy plumpness. She threw open the door and fell into the backseat of Hugh’s sedan.

“Well good afternoon my beautiful nephew.” Carolina’s mighty voice shook the thickness out of the car.

“Great nephew,” Virginia mumbled.

Carolina looked at Hugh’s reflection in the rearview mirror. “Looking more and more like your mama every day. Look at those pretty green eyes. Can’t believe she up and moved to Savannah with that new husband. Lordy. Lookin’ at you’s like she’s here, though. Don’t look like your grandmama one bit, no.” She tsked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and shook her head briskly before resuming her round speech. Carolina needed less air than most people. “Looks like the bottom’s fixing fall out of the sky any second, don’t it? We best get on with it.” Carolina leaned back against the seat and crossed her arms. Hugh moved his big hand to the gearshift, but Virginia stopped him with a soft touch of her reedy fingers.

“You shouldn’t drive until she apologizes for being late,” Virginia said to Hugh, her voice quiet but filling the whole car with its librarian severity. Hugh’s eyes widened as he looked at his great aunt, so thin she should’ve been in a child’s car seat.

“Aunt Virginia—”

“Hugh, you tell *Miss Virginia* that I will not apologize for her obsessive compulsive need for everyone to be doing what she wants when she wants it.”

“Hugh, will you please tell my sister that obsessive and compulsive are synonyms and should not be used together unless describing the disorder with which I am not diagnosed.”

“Hugh, will you tell my sister that she should go see a doctor to get diagnosed and while she’s there he can help her take out that stick stuck way up where the light—?”

“Lord a mercy.” Hugh rubbed his forehead with his full hand then threw the car into drive, spitting the hand-me-down Honda forward. Carolina grinned and wiggled back farther into her seat.

Carolina and Virginia stared out their windows at Godfrey Street. Despite the gray light from the thicket of clouds, Godfrey was still the most colorful street in town and Miss Virginia liked her house the best out of all of them. She had painted it pale blue when she had it built in 1976 and had decorated the windows with clean white shutters. It made her think of a sailboat, although she hadn’t seen a sailboat since her Mama had taken her, Carolina, and their little sister Alabama to the beach when they were children. She wondered if sailboats still looked like they used to.

Never to be outdone by her sister, Carolina had painted her house bright yellow the very next day. Tacky, Virginia thought, but Carolina was so pleased with herself she had sat out in the front yard amidst all the burnt weeds the whole afternoon staring at it. Besides the color, the two houses were identical. Both were tall and thin with skinny front porches, squeezed onto one lot and separated by a picket fence. Carolina had since filled every inch of her yard aside from the crackling front walkway with hydrangea bushes that bloomed blue in the summertime how she imagined a hot air balloon would take to the sky. Virginia thought it looked about as unkempt as

her sister's closet, but Carolina would nearly burst with pride whenever someone complimented it, which they did often when they saw her in her flower shop across town. Virginia, on the other hand, covered her little yard with grass as closely cut as the top of a soldier's head and tender daffodils that were pushed up in made beds against the porch.

The sisters would never tell one another, but each somewhat fancied the way the color of her neighbor's flowers coordinated with her own house. In fact, if you squinted your eyes, the flowers and houses melted into one big blur of color that lacked any spatial clarity. If you squinted them just a little more, you could even lose track of the colors altogether, and they'd run over one another like they were seeping into a sort of time that swam along, mostly forward, but sometimes backwards or sideways with kicks and wiggles and if you didn't do it just right water would go up your nose and you couldn't do or see or feel nothing at all but the pain. Time was like that, at least on Godfrey street.

Not many people thought Godfrey Street was beautiful, but the Thumb sisters did. The beauty, they had agreed as children, was in the color, however faded. Things had changed since they were growing up, but somehow the colors had stayed put. The Delaney house across the street was their second favorite besides their own, not for the house itself but for the two huge magnolia trees so dark green and massive, touching in so many places it seemed almost like one beautiful monstrosity. The rest of the trees on the street were only fledglings that had been replanted after the fire. Down the street, big green bushes of ivy and kudzu spilled out of yellowing yards and through cracks of gray parking lot cement. Mr. Avett had painted a mural of a panther, its coat black and purple and its eyes glowing blue-green, on the side wall of A&J's grocery, a stout little building with its windows barred up. Mr. Avett decided the ragged little convenience store needed more Peniel County High School pride—although it already gave a

10% discount to all in-season football players and their families. Next door, Tal Whitaker had waxed and washed PCFD Station No. 3's sole fire truck until it gleamed a bright red. Carolina thought it looked like the apples she sold at the store in the fall, fresh all the way from the mountains. By regulation the truck was supposed to be shut up inside the garage of the station, but Tal liked to show it off so much its nose stuck out of the garage door like Rudolph's from Santa's barn.

Vanity of vanities, Virginia thought. If the red truck was an apple to Carolina, to Virginia it was Eve's. To her the gleaming metal looked like her mama's red book when it shone under faint beams of hallway light, hidden at the top of the closet where they couldn't—and dared not try—reach even after they were full-grown. It hurt her to think about even now. All those beautiful secrets stolen from her by the flames. She wriggled in her seat to look forward.

Hugh turned onto King Plow Road behind A&J's. A few shotgun houses lined the skinny street, right on top of each other for a mile or two before they began to grow apart slowly, becoming fainter and lonelier like the heartbeats of a dying man. Each was a snapshot on an old camera that was so fuzzy that it might as well have been memory. John Beard's front yard was empty save his aboveground pool, stained like a stump with rust rings. They'd have to drain that thing shortly when fall blew in. Hugh drove faster. The next house looked abandoned but for twelve stray dogs sprawled out in the weakening light, sniffing at anthills and licking their backsides. The little Honda was going so fast it might as well have been sinking into the cracks in the pavement, the asphalt and the tires melting together entirely. Mickey Harrison sat in a plastic chair in his front yard, a cigarette in hand and the grill blazing beside him. Billy Faircloth stood behind him with a razor to the back of his head. A naked baby toddled around the legs of the chair, just a blur of black as they drove past.

“Lord bless that baby being raised by Billy Faircloth.” Carolina chuckled to herself.

Virginia cleared her throat. “Hugh, you best live in the city limits your whole life if you know what’s good for you,” she said, the gravity in her little voice never faltering. “Better city trash than country trash.”

“Oh Hugh you’ll be fine. It’s all better than white trash.” Carolina guffawed at her own joke. Hugh chuckled but stopped after a side-glance from Virginia. “You been raised right,” Carolina continued to talk, thoughts rising out of her like water from a spring. “Just like we was. Bless Mama’s perfect soul. God loving, God-fearing, that woman. I wish you’d a known her.”

They drove on. Fields had grown where the houses stopped, although you could tell some houses had been there long ago by the pattern of the grass and the lone chimney that stood erect in a field. Colorful cemeteries splayed out from solitary churches.

Solitary, that’s a good word for out here, Carolina thought.

Miss Virginia groaned a bit. “Hugh, it’s damned hot in this car how do I roll a window down?”

“Hugh, don’t tell her how to do it make her do it herself. Teachin old dogs new tricks is mighty important for mental actuality.” Carolina’s dark face glowed with self-satisfaction.

“Hugh, tell her it’s mental *acuity*,” Virginia nearly growled. She took a deep breath to calm herself. “Oh now she’s gonna cry like she always does. Seventy-five years old, my foot.”

Carolina’s voice sniveled. “Hugh, tell her I don’t give a damn bout what she has to say, I—”

“For the love of God.” Hugh slammed on the breaks and suddenly the tires were no longer sunk into the asphalt. They jumped instead, skidding with a great force off the road into the tall weeds and wildflowers that coated the shoulder, screeching to a stop just inches in front

of an oak tree. All three fell forward in their seats, but Hugh's head slammed into the steering wheel in front of him. His nose bloomed with blood.

"Lord!" Carolina screeched from the backseat.

"I'm sorry." Hugh's sputtering was muffled by the shirtsleeve pressed beneath his nostrils. "Are y'all okay?" They nodded that they were. They sat in silence for a moment until he composed himself.

"That's where reckless driving will get you," Virginia said quietly but with all intentions of being heard.

"Your bickering's what did this," he snapped. The blood had stopped flowing and now congregated in dried clots along the thin line of hair above his lip, a crime scene in miniature.

"Aunt Virginia, Aunt Carolina, I am doing you a favor. You best speak straight to each other if you want me to keep doing it."

"Well actually I asked you to drive just me," Virginia said sternly, not afraid of Hugh's latent anger.

"And Carolina asked me to drive just her so here I am driving the both of you out twenty minutes from town on a Friday evening to visit your mama's grave—something you have in common so please dear Lord speak to each other."

"Don't know why Carolina even cares about seeing Mama today, she never did care when she was sick," Virginia mumbled as Carolina said, "Bout the only thing we got in common."

"I will leave you here."

"Don't think I've talked to her since I was talking to Alabama, too," Carolina mumbled.

“Seems to me Alabama was the magic charm for you two. Once she died y’all fell apart like this?”

The two were quiet for a moment.

“Carolina,” Virginia finally said. “Say something to me so we can get on with it.”

Carolina weighed the options. “Alright, Virginia, let’s get going.”

Hugh nodded and backed the car into the empty street.

They passed another cemetery dotted with fake flowers, although this one stretched on both sides of the road. Carolina wondered if there was anybody buried beneath the asphalt.

“So,” Hugh coaxed. “Why do you both wanna go see Grandma Georgia today? Is it her birthday?” The two were silent. “Or the day she died?”

“Don’t even know your own great grandma’s birthday.” Virginia clucked and shook her head.

Hugh sighed deeply, agitation rising in his voice. “I’d know these things if you two would damn well talk about ‘em.”

“It’s been forty years since the fire,” Carolina said, her voice somber.

Virginia shot Carolina a glare mean enough to kill a man. It was the first time she’d looked Carolina in the eyes since she could remember. Although silent, Carolina heard what her sister’s eyes were threatening: “Do not say a word or I will tell.”

As she looked at her, Virginia noted that Carolina’s eyes were the same warm brown they’d always been, wet from the tears that somehow always perched on the edge of her lids, threatening to tumble over the side. Virginia had seen that look so many times before. Mama would see this look and pull out the little book, red as coals in the dark closet. It would splay out to a blank page and they’d gather around to make things better like magic, Alabama butting her

head up to get her eyes over the table ledge. Alabama. Virginia felt an agonizing twist in her bony chest. She pursed her lips to stop the pain.

“The fire that burnt down half of Godfrey Street?” Hugh asked, looking across the console at his aunt. “Grandma Georgia didn’t die in the fire, did she? I heard somebody say it jumped off the cross. White folks so mad about integration and the likes.”

“No, hon. Ask your mama bout it,” Virginia said softly.

“She won’t talk about it either. I asked her about grandma once a couple years back and she went into a tizzy that didn’t stop for an hour. My grandma’s been dead so long, though, don’t see why any of it matters.” As he spoke, his voice grew louder and his foot fell heavier on the accelerator, propelling the Honda faster and faster over the light gray specks of asphalt and gravel.

Virginia felt the pain welling inside her. Alabama hadn’t been much older than Hugh when she’d gotten pregnant with Jade. Virginia loved that baby, raised her like her own, but she did always have a little bit of Alabama’s crazy. It was frightening. Little Alabama, skinny and pigeon-toed, following her and Carolina around with her dopey gap-toothed smile. She swallowed down the growing lump in her throat.

“How long’s it been since you two have spoken to each other?” Hugh broke the silence.

Carolina shrugged. “Near on thirty years, I’d say.”

Hugh shook his head. “You know you’re next door neighbors, don’t you?”

“Mind your elders, son,” Carolina snapped.

Virginia turned once more to look at her sister in the backseat. “Well since we’re talking, Carolina, can you at least tell me good gossip from the flower shop?”

“It’s *called* Loblolly Orchard and Gifts and we don’t just sell flowers mind you,”

Carolina retorted from the backseat.

“Call it what you will, you’re a florist and florists know everything. Don’t nobody talk in the library.”

“You’d whoop ‘em if they did,” Hugh muttered.

“Mmm-hmm. I’d know the town if it were inside out and lookin at you funny.” Carolina beamed. “Hmm let’s see, well, you know bout that poor girl drowned in the Chihoowa last week—Lord the flowers we sold, bless her soul.” she patted the printed flower stamped on her dress at the center of her wide chest. Virginia touched her cross.

“That ain’t gossip but God’s plan in the works. We just do the best we can to deal with it.” She glimpsed Carolina’s eyes but looked down at her lap quickly, wishing she could swallow her words back down. “Give me something the whole town ain’t talking about yet.” Carolina noted but dared not comment that her sister’s voice was slipping back into the way she used to speak when they were little girls. It reminded her of when sweet little Virgy used to boss her and Alabama around in the front yard, telling them not to step on the flowers, not to cross the street to get to the big magnolias in the Delaney’s yard unless Mama knew where they were.

“Hmm, that little Elmwood girl is gettin’ married. A big hoopla. Lots of people comin back in town. Lemme see, oh Pam Dorsey is fat again.”

“I ain’t surprised.”

“Mike and Linda Rodgers might be getting back together. He bought her a bouquet of peonies, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him that wouldn’t make up for the cheatin. Oh Desiree Harwood told the funniest story about how when she was prayin’ in church last Sunday, she felt the holy spirit all over her, but when she opened her eyes it wasn’t the holy spirit but that little

Philips boy grabbing her from behind!” Carolina burst, her deep laugh popping like the crack of a shotgun. Virginia’s face swarmed hot as she shot her sister a disapproving look. “Oh, you prude,” Carolina grumbled.

Hugh slowed the car down finally when the Bethabara AME Church appeared on the horizon. “This is it, right?”

“Course it is don’t you remember visiting before?” Carolina shot, her arms still crossed across her chest like an angry child, mad someone didn’t like her joke. Virginia choked down a grin.

“I ain’t been here since I’s a kid,” Hugh crooned as he pulled into the empty parking lot.

The soil in the cemetery was dusty. It felt almost like South Georgia soil, although of course it was the same fertile soil everywhere else in the county. This dirt always felt thinner, getting in your shoes and sticking to the backs of your calves with a grimy vigor. Maybe it had just been turned over more than other soil, what with the shovels digging and the church shoes shuffling through. People were always dying and you couldn’t stop it one bit. They walked through the dust without complaining.

The Thumb family marker was at the far end of the cemetery, facing west to the Chihoowa and the fields beyond the river. They hadn’t been to Bethabara since Lord knows when, but they walked straight to the marker indicating: “Georgia Thumb February 13, 1916 - May 21, 1976” as if they’d put her in the ground this morning.

“Mama’s got a pretty view, don’t she,” Virginia said quietly, but Carolina didn’t say anything. Now that Hugh was out of earshot she was back to ignoring her.

Bethabara cemetery was nearly full with graves pushing all the way to the wire fence on three sides. “Ain’t gonna be room for us when we go,” Carolina muttered, but now Virginia was

ignoring her, too. The sun was beginning to fall just a little in the sky, peeking out from behind the gray clouds with light shining down in patches as if God were spying on them. She gazed down King Plow Road, which curved slightly west over a bridge that crossed a thin part of the Chihoowa. There was another small country church, white and fading, right across the river that also had a cemetery bleeding into the open fields around it. Even from where she stood Carolina could see specks of color—fake flowers and wreaths, stuffed animals whose fur had matted in the rain. So many cemeteries, Carolina thought. People gonna keep dying and dying til the whole world's a cemetery.

The two sisters now stood side by side looking down at their mama's bare grave. At least Mama's marker was readable, Virginia thought, looking across some other headstones that crumbled into the ashy ground. Carolina reached into the bag that dangled from her forearm and unearthed a single hydrangea blossom.

"Cut it from my yard this morning. They were her favorite, you know," she muttered as she laid it on the grass under which she assumed her mother's head lay. Virginia stood back coldly, her arms crossed across the front of her small body.

They were silent for a few moments.

"Remember her little red book?" Carolina tried again.

"Course I do," Virginia shot quickly. She pursed her lips and steadied her breathing. Little flames in a kitchen pot grew and grew across her mind's eye, engulfing the house and the cemetery and the wide world with it. "Sorry, Lina," she whispered.

Carolina looked at her sister. "Mama wouldn't want this would she?"

Virginia began to speak, then breathed deeply. "Some things can't be fixed. You know what she said, about doing the best we can."

“But are we even doing the best—?”

“Hey, where’s my grandma?” Hugh’s voice sprang across the row of stones. He looked like a little boy in the fading light, hunched over the gravestones with his hands crossed behind his back. He walked up and down the row of Thumbs, looking at each marker carefully.

“She was cremated,” Virginia called over her shoulder quickly, at the same moment Carolina yelled, “Thataway!”

Virginia turned to Carolina sharply. Hugh looked at them quickly as well, although no one dared look back at him. He walked over to where they stood by their mother’s grave.

“You don’t know where your little sister is buried?”

Carolina began to whimper, the precarious tears tipping over the edge of her eyes and down her ample cheeks.

“Hush, Lina,” Virginia said quietly. “You know we’ve never been close, Hugh.”

Carolina let out a singular wail, but reeled it back in with a sputter.

Hugh narrowed his eyes.

“If we knew, sweetheart...” Virginia began but was cut off by Carolina’s mournful cry once more. This time she could not keep it in but howled louder than an infant’s first breath, sharp with pain. “For the love of God. I will tell them what you did!” Virginia wheeled around and slapped Carolina, the palm of her hand stinging her sister square across the jaw. The sound rang sharply, reverberating off the tombstones and into the silence of the air, just as it had the last time Virginia had slapped her sister forty years ago today. The two women locked eyes and knew what the other was remembering.

Carolina whimpered. “He deserves to know Alabama ain’t dead.”

Carolina was weepy in the back seat of the car. She slumped forward, her hand on her jaw, although the pain had subsided. “Oh don’t be dramatic,” Virginia shooed from the front seat. Carolina choked a little as she gulped down a sob.

They sat in the car in the deserted parking lot. The sun was dipping down slowly, reflecting the steeple of Bethabara across the gravel. “It started with Mama’s little red book,” Virginia said. “Well, it was more of a journal really. She called it her book of beautiful bits and that’s really what it was.”

Hugh’s brows remained furrowed but he listened.

“When we were sad or hurt, we’d write it down in the book, tear out the page, and burn that page with a match in a big old kitchen pot. Then you’d write how you were gonna make it better on the next page. We do the best we can, Mama would say.”

“Like one time,” Carolina mumbled softly, her voice still weary from crying. “One time we were little, and Carrie Ann Gilmore wouldn’t talk to us anymore even though we’d always played as children when Mama would clean their house. She just up and wouldn’t speak to us just cause we’s black. It was the state of the world back then.” She nodded and her voice droned off in thought, sucked back into time like it’s prone to do.

“So we burned up how Carrie Ann wouldn’t talk to us, but we wrote on the next page that we were still gonna love her. So after a while, the book was just good things and just us doing the best we can. Just beautiful bits. And little Alabama loved that blessed book. Lordy, her eyes would light up when she saw it. We found her flipping through it when Mama wasn’t home and Lord how we chewed her out.”

“We were always doing that,” Carolina added. “Scolding her. We probably shouldn’t of but Mama did keep secrets in that book she didn’t want us to know nothing about. Even when

she let us write our beautiful bits, she never let us turn the pages. She'd have melted into nothing if she knew Alabama looked through it."

"Well, to make the long story short, we all grew up just about as happy as we could be with who we was. Then, when Al was bout your age, she got pregnant with your mama Jade." Virginia touched the cross around her neck.

"Men always loved her," Carolina added. "And she never fought them off, no. Just gave herself up like a regular Bathsheba. *Sex*, you know, ain't right for a girl her age." She bit down hard on the word.

"That was right about the time Mama got sick, and Alabama was just so happy with the baby she didn't really care at all. Then Mama died and I'm not even sure she went to the funeral."

"That ain't fair, Virgy, she was there," Carolina said quietly. They were silent for a moment.

"Then we had to split up the estate and Alabama just lost her mind. Weren't nothing we could do."

Virginia wanted to tell him how she'd slapped Carolina the day of the fire, but the sting on her palm was too fresh.

"They never found out it was arson," Carolina said. "We didn't let them." She twisted her hands in her lap in silence for a moment then looked up. The tears in her eyes were fatter than usual, although she was holding them back with the might of Jacob in the wrestling match. She remembered the arson investigator. He'd been a young white man, with skinny and impatient limbs that tapped on whatever was near—his pen to the clipboard, his foot to the scorched earth, his finger against the leg of his suit. She'd prepared her story—they all had—but she was too

intimidated to tell it to him until she'd glanced the paper on his clipboard when he wasn't looking. *Arson Investigation Guidelines*, it read. "They asked me where she was that night and I said with me. She wasn't, but I told them she was. Virginia confirmed it. We..." she paused as she looked at Virginia, "well, I burned the kerosene can. Hid evidence, lied. That investigatory man didn't really care about a fire in the black neighborhood. He traced it to the stove and let it be."

"We just found her watching the fire from the magnolia trees across the street. All she could say was 'Look at Mama, Look at Mama' just staring and pointing at the smoke. That's when we knew she'd gone plum mad. No foam in her mouth or anything, but her eyes had gone wild. We had to send her to Milledgeville to keep her from doing something like that again," Virginia added. "For her own good."

"My grandma set that fire? Didn't it kill people?" Hugh's hands gripped the steering wheel as if he was holding himself upright.

"Just one," Virginia said. "An old woman who was bound to die soon anyway. The funny thing, the people at Central State Hospital said she wasn't crazy. No signs of it at all. They did tests and interviews, kept her in there for a few weeks. Said she was as normal as the rest of us."

"She wanted to come back, but we all decided it wasn't the right thing," Carolina mumbled. "It just became so much."

"So you couldn't even talk to each other anymore?"

Virginia nodded. "We raised your mama up just like our own little baby, though. Well, I did at least. I love that girl more'n the world."

“Don’t you dare say that,” Carolina snapped. “She’s as much mine as yours. Don’t you remember crawling into my bed crying like you was the baby yourself. No matter what she never be your real baby.”

Now Virginia released tears, although hers were soft and silent as mist. “I’m sorry.”

For what? Carolina didn’t even think to ask, she just cried, too. They both cried and cried until Carolina mumbled, “Me too.”

“Is she still there?” Hugh interjected. “In Milledgeville?”

“I suppose.”

“Well, we’re already half way there now.” Hugh searched his aunts’ faces for reassurance, but the two were looking at one another, a bitter mingling of fear and hope dangling between them. Hugh put the car into drive and eased forward out of the parking lot onto King Plow Road, driving slowly this time.

Virginia turned forward to watch the sun fall over the river and Carolina curled into a ball in the backseat, her eyes wet and open.

“This is it.” Hugh looked up from the iPhone in his hand to the little brick house on the corner of the street.

Alabama’s house was small. It would have been a regular neighborhood dwelling if it weren’t for the ill-fitting shutters with peeling paint and misplaced shingles on the steep roof. The lawn was larger than the house and looked as harrowing as Gethsemane, if no one weeded it since Jesus’s last prayer there. A dull light shone through the windows. The three sat in awe of it for moments as the sky grew into night. The sun was nearly dipping out of sight, leaving an aura

of gold at the edges of the sky that dripped down into sticky pools in the grass. Soon it would all be black.

“I don’t know.” Carolina shook her head as she stared at the house, although she wasn’t sure at all what she meant. Events, memories, colors swarmed around in Carolina’s head: Alabama’s little face lit up as she read the Beautiful Bits, the frightening glow in her eyes as she watched the fire from the magnolia trees, the gratitude in them when Carolina told the investigators Alabama had been with her the whole night. What did Alabama look like now? She didn’t know if she wanted to go in.

Virginia didn’t know anything either. All she knew was that she felt cold despite the growing warmth and thickness of the new night. How had she won that fight over the baby all those long years past? She tightened her arms cross her thin belly. Lord, that sweet baby with the pretty green eyes who clung tight to her breast when her mama was gone. Guilt roiled in her stomach.

“Well.” Hugh sighed. “We came this far.”

The three made their way slowly up the walk through the vast front yard. Grass reached over onto the stones like long-dead and shriveled hands reaching up through the ground. They got to the front door and stopped.

“I think you should let me do the talking,” Virginia said quietly, her fist hovering inches from the door. “I think she’d respond better to that.”

“Respond better to the woman who stole her baby from her than the one who rescued her from incarceration?” Carolina’s large body wheeled around in a wild motion, nearly knocking Hugh over. “What world do you live in?”

“You can’t hold this over me forever.” Virginia’s voice rose. “I was the one—”

“Like you holding over me how I lied? What I said? Your delusional mind thinks Mama loved you more, which is the root of our problems.”

“The root of our problems?”

The front door swung open swiftly and the two sisters stood with their mouths ajar, their words sniped dead on their lips by the light flowing out into the darkness.

The face looking back at them was not one they would have easily recognized in any other setting. By the looks of her, Alabama might as well have been dead all these years. The skin on her face was tanned thick but wilted into heavy bags below her eyes and chin. Her hands shook like virgin daffodils in a blackberry winter wind as she lifted them to her face, something dawning in her expression like a match igniting paper, slow at first then spreading char.

“Lina... Virgy? I didn’t think...”

The three sisters stood on the front porch and let the night sink in between them. Nothing felt right, not speaking or moving or even breathing. They stood in an oblong triangle, staring at one another stupidly like little girls on the edge of adulthood but not quite there, brimming with sin and longing. After all, what does one do in the presence of a ghost? Hugh was the first to shift his weight and the three women turned to him in relief.

“I’m Hugh, ma’am.” He stuck his hand out awkwardly towards his grandmother, but she merely met it with her eyes.

“This is your grandson,” Virginia muttered after a few moments. There was a hint of dried blood on his lip, still. “Jade’s son.”

“Oh.” She paused, staring at him. She reached out tentatively for his hand. “I...I’m so glad to meet you. Is Jade here?”

“No, ma’am. She moved to Savannah just last spring. I reckon she’ll be back for Thanksgiving, though. She got married again.” He paused now, too, and scratched the back of his head. He didn’t quite know where to begin.

Alabama nodded. “I’ve been rude, I s’pose. Y’all should come in.” She moved back from the doorway and beckoned them in, as if there were any precedent of etiquette for a situation like this.

Light rose around them as they walked through the front door, transforming the withering house into an intimate art museum. Although the walls were light gray, she’d tacked up pictures and posters of all kinds, covering every inch with color. There was a Matisse paper cut out beside a huge poster of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. She liked the impressionist work the best by the way she had those clustered in the focal point of the room, over the couch and around the windows. It looked like she’d pin up just about anything she could find. Construction paper with a child’s scribbled trees, houses, and flowers were lined up in a row near the light switch. What children she was spending time with they couldn’t begin to guess. Postcards and magazine pages filled up empty space. In the corner behind the sofa, a large black poster of a skull hung daintily beside something that looked psychedelically surreal. There was a cozy fire burning in the fireplace.

“Not nearly enough light in these rooms,” Alabama explained when she saw Carolina looking at it. “I like light. And color.”

Hugh and Alabama sat down in two colorful armchairs by the fireplace leaving Virginia and Carolina to the settee.

“We,” Virginia began and then paused. The word tasted bitter on her tongue. “We’ve been thinking about you today. You know, since it’s been so long since everything’s happened, we figured...it’s time to make peace? It’s been forty years since the fire. Forty years today.”

Carolina nodded. She could feel the tears coming.

“Has it been that long?” Alabama’s voice was weak. “I guess I’d forgot.”

Carolina and Virginia gawked. “You...forgot?”

“Of course,” she said it slowly, but her eyes were illuminated with a kind of joy Carolina and Virginia couldn’t identify. “I got peace the second I saw the ashes, so I guess I just kind of let it go.”

“Why’d you burn everything?” Hugh’s voice sounded like a child’s in the corner. Alabama looked at him for a long time with a hauntingly expressionless face.

“Oh honey, they had turned Mama into a ghost. They kept her memory so tight but forgot her love. Fighting and arguing over who got what. Virginia took care of her when she was sick, Carolina talked to her more and knew all her stories, who really cared for her more I don’t know and Lord knows it didn’t matter. Still don’t matter. They were keeping Mama out of heaven the way they argued. Lord. That black smoke rising out of the ashes was Mama finally free.” She paused for a long moment. “I am sorry Mrs. Clancy died, though.”

Carolina recoiled. “Do you realize what you did to us? I *lied* for you. It’s been a blister on my soul, Alabama. Ever since.”

“I am so grateful you did, Lina, but I didn’t ask you to.”

“I did that for you, though. I stood by you just like a sister. Just like one! Don’t tell me it was for nothing.” Carolina was bawling heavy tears now.

“Alabama, you can’t just be over this.” Virginia shifted forward in her seat. “You have to take ownership for this. You have to apologize. Make things right.”

“We ain’t children no more, Virgy. And I don’t think I have anything to apologize for. Mama would’ve wanted it.”

“Nothing to apologize for?” Virginia’s voice pulled an octave and a decibel higher than it had gone in years. “You took everything we had to remember her by. All her things. Her books, her paintings.” She reached her arms out and motioned to the full walls and bookshelves and tables of collected baubles. “What if everything you loved burned to the ground?”

“If your life and home and family and baby was all taken from you?” She said it softly without a quiver of spite. Her eyes rose to meet her sister’s. “You’d just have to do the best you can, then, wouldn’t you?” Virginia’s face flashed hot with shame, but Alabama did not relinquish her stare. Virginia had no doubt that her little sister knew everything.

Carolina’s tears were dried, now. She thought of the flames, the smoke, the black bare bones standing for weeks until they knocked it down and rebuilt two skinny houses on the lot. Those damn flames that swallowed everything, although now she couldn’t quite remember how the house had looked. Her voice was small and shaky when it broke the unsteady silence. “Remember watching the flames go up into the sky? From the crest of the roof up to a little spire. Looked like the devil pointing up to heaven.”

“Looked like a steeple to me,” Alabama said.

Virginia whimpered slightly. “Al, you burned the Beautiful Bits. I feel like I lost her for good when we lost that.”

Earnest pity washed over Alabama’s features. She stood up and floated across the room to rummage through one of the many bookshelves lining the walls. When she turned around, an

object had appeared in her hands as if by magic. It was a thick, red, leather journal with buckling pages, ripped and burnt black.

“I grabbed it before it burned.”

She passed it to her sisters and stepped back towards Hugh, placing her hand atop his without looking at him. She was surprised to feel his fingers tighten around hers.

Between the scraps of each ripped page lay a clean one, blank save for one line of their mother’s tight black script at the top.

I am strong enough to do this on my own.

God wants us to love Carrie Lee anyway, so we will and maybe she’ll love us again, too.

Virginia looked up at Carolina, a teary smile appearing. “Remember...” she began, but Carolina stopped her with a glazed look of horror and pointed to the line on the next page.

A curse upon her.

Virginia choked on her air and reached instinctively for the cross that hung limp against her chest. She flipped the page quickly.

All three of my babies fell asleep in my bed last night while I was reading to them. The world is alright.

Damn him to hell.

My sweet babies.

I can’t do this.

Dear Lord, help me.

Virginia and Carolina looked at one another in bewilderment, the picture of their mother quivering inside them. Alabama let go of Hugh’s hand and walked towards them, lifting the book from their laps and moving with it like a specter back across the room.

Alabama placed the book in the fireplace delicately. “Time you started your own book.”

Carolina and Virginia both squeaked in horror but made no move to resurrect it.

It fell under the flames, wedging two logs apart like the splitting of earth. As the pages melted into nothing, black smoke rose. “This one’s all burnt up.”

The End of Things

Bear Florence sat on Donnie's Barbershop porch vaguely watching the square in front of him buzz with old church ladies directing younger men to fold up the tables from the farmer's market and load them into the vans by the courthouse. The morning had been sunny, but clouds were beginning to roll in with the August afternoon and with it, the chill. It wasn't a fall chill yet that laid its hands on your cheeks and neck and got you just a little agitated, or the winter kind that sopped into your core and banged around in there until spring—no, those would be coming. It was a warm chill that Bear dared not say a thing about because he felt he might be the only one in the world who could feel it. He tensed a little under its touch and gazed out at the tops of pine trees behind the other end of the square. He focused in hard on the far-off needles until they blurred, dark green against the graying sky. Pretty, but not quite as pretty as his crop, he knew his daddy would say. He let out a great breath, as he thought of that phone call with the forester from earlier that day. He'd wanted this his whole life, so the kick of apprehension in his stomach puzzled him.

"You doin' okay?" Donnie asked slowly as he ran a damp rag through the stubby spaces between his fingers and massaged it into his wrinkled palms, rubbing off any excess soap or shaving cream that had soaked into his skin from his last appointment. Bear didn't seem to hear him, though. He just kept rocking slowly in his chair in a motion that mimicked breathing.

"Bear," Bo said now, a little louder. "You alright?"

"Oh." His eyes focused sharply on the two men down the porch from him. He remembered the pocketknife and stick in his hands and continued to whittle aimless designs, averting their looks of concern. "I'm fine. Don't look at me like that. Your eyes are as big as Goodyears it ain't natural."

“You just seemed worried is all.” Donnie leaned forward a bit, but Bear’s expression had smoothed itself calm. “Shoulda known. You never worry.”

That was something everyone in Penuel County had come to know about Bear Florence. He was a crisis man: the one Missy Simpson would call when her cows got out, the one who saved the day when the little stuttering Greer kid got lost that Halloween, the one they ran screaming for when Gloria Hunter nearly had a heart attack when the Panthers upset the Wolverines in the state playoffs two years ago. He had been a policeman his whole life, so it had been his job, but there was something deeper. He was calm when Liz, his only daughter, had been born. Lora had been panting, sweating, biting her lip to hold in her screams. He’d remained steady in the panic, although of course he felt sharp pangs in his heart seeing Lora bent over in agony. But you wouldn’t know it. He was her rock, steady as God’s green ground, she’d always said about him after that. Nobody could recall him crying even at her funeral. He hadn’t cried at Roy’s funeral either, for that matter.

Bear looked back at Donnie across Roy’s empty rocking chair. “Anyway,” Donnie was saying. “Sarah won’t tell me what she’s naming my grandson. Said it’s a boy and that’s all I get to know til he’s born.”

“Any name’s better than Bear.” Bo raised his solo cup to his lips. Little splashes of black residue were dribbled across the rim where he spit.

“Ain’t that right. I don’t want no grandbaby named after Alabama Football,” Donnie chuckled and leaned back against the doorframe.

Bear nodded and jiggled his pocketknife against the wooden rod in his hand. “My daddy said that, too.”

They fell back into their chatter. Bear always thought his name made him sound like a football star. Perhaps that was just because of Bear Bryant, although Bryant hadn't started coaching at Alabama until Bear was nearly twenty. Gray Florence had hated Alabama football more than chigger bites in the summer, though. He was a Wally Butts fan himself—the Saturday Evening Post scandal in 1962 between Butts and Bryant nearly killed him. For a few years he refused to call his son anything but Robert, which to be fair, was his given name. When Bear had been a baby, though, his older brother had declared that the child crawled like a bear with little tufts of brown fur on his head, so Bear he was. It wasn't too hard for his daddy to get over it, though, because he was never any good at football anyhow.

“Well I don't reckon Sarah'll be askin' for my advice on this. Every time she calls, Leigh Ann talks so goddamn long and don't ever pass me the phone.” Donnie smirked preemptively. “You know what I always say about Leigh Ann: She's the best I could do with the car I had at the time.”

“Maybe she should name the baby Roy,” Bo said.

The three men looked at the empty chair between them.

“Aw Bo don't bring that up again,” Bear mumbled. He'd succeeded so far in pushing Roy out of his mind. Roy had been dead for a week and a half now. The funeral had come and gone, his kids and grandkids were already back home in Jacksonville. Bear couldn't help but think of the visitation, Roy's body in the casket looking as dead as anybody he'd ever seen. “I don't wanna think on it today.”

“Hey Bear,” Donnie said. “When are you gonna call the consulting forester about your trees? You know Elroy Forks just moved down to Tifton couple months ago, you got a new guy? You might have to call those corporate scoundrels. The trees are as big as they're gonna get, and

if you take a lesson from Roy, I'd say reap the benefits sooner rather than later. Sorry, poor taste."

"Hey yeah! I nearly forgot about that." Bo laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair approvingly. "I can't imagine how you're feeling after all these years?"

"Yessir," Bear mumbled without looking at them.

"Damn." Bo scratched the back of his head. "After all this time, they're finally ripe and ready. I can just imagine the look on your daddy's face up in heaven. This day's gotta be better than when he watched the Dawgs win the national championship. What does Liz think about it? No more pulpwood for the Florence family, no sir. That's the end of that. You're gonna have yourself sawtimber fit for telephone poles." He had a dopey smile, too wide and dreamy for his skinny, dark face.

"Hey," Bear shot, his voice sharper than he intended.

Bo raised an eyebrow and Donnie coughed uncomfortably. "I don't think he meant anything by..." Donnie began.

"I know what he meant. I'm gonna sell my trees when I'm good and ready not when somebody tells me to." Bear stood up as quickly as he could, although his bones ached and cracked as he did it, a sharp pain shooting from his bad hip. "I'm not feeling great, I think I'm gonna head on home now before the rain starts."

As he walked away, he reached for the back pocket of his jeans. He only felt the bulk of the cell phone Liz had given him, insisting he take it everywhere with him in case of emergency. His heart leapt until he reached into his other pocket. The little business card was still there.

When he turned his truck onto Florence Circle, he could see The Acres across the road. It's what his daddy had always called his trees, although back then there couldn't have been

more than forty acres in all. Gray Florence had been so proud of it because it was the only extra land he'd ever owned. He was never a farmer, just worked his way up the tire company until he had enough money to buy the land. He'd always been a saver, a doer, a smart and practical man, although Bear had to admit he wasn't cut out to be a farmer. But boy howdy, did he love those damn trees.

They were loblolly pines, one of the finest and biggest types of pine in the nation, grown often in abandoned agriculture fields throughout the Southeast. They were the fastest growing pines, too, although that only meant they grew about two feet per year—still taking about thirty years to get full grown if you can afford to wait it out. When Bear was a child, he remembered being awed by this. If he could grow two feet a year he'd be bigger than Dan in no time.

Bear remembered being jolted awake out of the comfort of his warm cotton sheets early one morning. Sleepy-eyed, bed-headed, and all of eight years old, he had sprung up at the sound of his father's voice, which was rough but energized as he'd only heard it a few times before.

"Pick me up like a sack of potatoes!" Bear had hollered and reached up for his father but his father shook his head no. He was a man, now, and was going to help cruise the timber. His older brother Dan had always gotten to inventory the timber with their father and now it was Bear's turn, too. As the three walked out across the cold fields into The Acres to meet the forester, Bear remembered noticing the position of the sun over the horizon, barely peeking its head through the gaps in the farthest pines. Dan was fifteen and self-admittedly too old for the running, so he offered to measure some of the trees around, accounting for inconsistencies like rot and butt swells. Bear stifled a giggle when they said butt swell. Gray Florence, bent down attached the surveyor's chain to his son's back belt loop and turned his shoulders in the direction of the sun. "You just run that way. When you get to the end of things, you stop."

Bear's heart pounded steadily, faster and faster as he set out for the horizon. He dodged low limbs and ill-placed trunks. It got dark for a second where the trees were spaced a little closer to each other and for a moment he felt that warm chill. He looked down at the clay and pine needles and thought he saw a copperhead slither over a root. He didn't stop to double take, but kept running faster and faster, ignoring the heavy tug of the chain on his belt loop. The wide world was in these trees—all the big and the small of it, the light and dark and cold and hot. The overwhelming smell of dirt and pine might as well have been the smell of birth and death and everything in between. He understood it all. He was running as if he was going to touch the sun, kiss it, grasp its warmth between his skinny fingers right over the edge of the pines at the end of the world. Just like his daddy told him to do, though, he stopped when he got to the end of things.

Bear put his truck in park and let out another great sigh, sinking deep into the seat as if he were a boot slipping into mud. He couldn't remember a day he'd felt so worn. He looked out across The Acres that stretched deep into the distance, unable to shake the feeling that something there was waiting for him.

His mama and daddy hadn't seen it coming. Fifty thousand people died in the Korean War, but they didn't think Dan could've been one of them. Mrs. Florence lay in bed crying for weeks. Mr. Florence just walked along The Acres as quiet and resigned as a prayer.

Bear didn't understand when his father decided to cut them down to sell them for pulp before they got to be big enough for sawtimber. Sawtimber had always been his dream. They had to pay for Dan's funeral somehow, though. He announced it matter-of-factly at the supper table one night, setting down his fork with a loud clank against the plate. He didn't say another word

on the subject, but even at twelve years old, Bear could tell he winced a little as the words came out as if there were a dull knife spinning in his stomach.

After a few more weeks of quiet, he walked up to Bear who lay sprawled out on his stomach across the front porch reading *The Peanuts* cartoons. They weren't so funny, but sometimes Snoopy would bite Charlie Brown in the pants, little bit of bulldawg in that pup. It would always cheer Bear up, until his fingers inevitably mused along the edge of the newspaper feeling the pulp and he'd gaze back up at the Acres that lay in front of him, now flat as the Tiller cotton fields down the road. "You know what, Bear," his father had said, looking his son in the eyes for the first time in weeks. "We're just gonna have to plant again."

He dropped the keys to his truck on the kitchen table on top of the bagged newspapers and unopened mail—none of it was important. Projects in various stages of incompleteness were scattered throughout the room: One mantel clock with intricate designs he just couldn't bring to a tick, one coffee table that needed a good shining, a park bench sans the park, a gorgeous bookshelf with shelves propped up against the side of it, and four little birdhouses that needed a sanding and a paintjob. He shuffled straight to the bottle of Advil by the sink and popped a few in his mouth, not counting or caring as he swallowed them dry. The real clock on the kitchen wall ticked too loudly—was it louder than usual? For the first time in years he wished he had a drink in the house. Walking back out to the front porch, he sat slowly in the swing he'd built for Lora the year they'd gotten married. He had known how much Lora hated living in this old house with him and Daddy—Mama was long gone by then and they just couldn't leave Daddy alone. He had wanted to do anything to make it home for her. This porch was perfect for a swing, Bear remembered her saying, leaning on his shoulder with two hands and whispering into his ear. The

memory of her giggle sounded around him now, echoing through the trees, gliding over the pine needles on the ground and bouncing off the storm clouds that still hadn't let go of the rain. He fell asleep to its perfection.

It was dark suddenly, and he was in church—Antioch, the backwoods church he'd grown up in. He'd know it anywhere. The inside of the church was off, though, like a pebble had been thrown in a pond to skew the reflection just so. The center aisle he stood on was blood red, surrounded by stained glass in every window, dark but illuminating some kind of exterior light onto the back of each downturned head around him. A giant wooden crucifix hung behind the altar—nothing the Methodists who should've occupied this church would've hung up. To make it worse, the Jesus was unlike any he'd seen before. Slashes of blood highlighted his famished body. His ribs could be counted. His hollowed out cheeks sunk deep and his eyes popped bright yellow against the black of his skin. Bear made his way down the aisle drawn towards Jesus. No one in the wooden pews watched him as he walked, because they were all praying—good Christians, he thought, and kept moving down the aisle towards Jesus's black face. Lora slipped her soft hand into Bear's suddenly, startling him a little because he didn't know she was there. It felt warm, although somehow he realized it shouldn't be. They got to the front of the church, and a plain pinewood box had materialized on the wooden altar. "My trees built this church," Bear tried to say but no sound came out of his mouth.

Roy lay inside the plain coffin, his hands crossed over his body.

"I miss you Roy," Bear said. Roy didn't say anything back, but just blinked and smiled.

"I miss him too," a voice from behind Bear called.

Dad.

“He was a great guy. A true friend like that don’t come often in a lifetime.” He lifted a glass bottle to his lips and Bear reached for his hand to stop him. *Not in church.*

“It’s just holy water.” Dan appeared behind him, placing his hand on his father’s shoulder. “You should try it.”

Bear looked out at the congregation, and suddenly every eye was on him like raccoons in the woods. Bo was there, Donnie and Leigh Ann, too. They looked as dead as the rest of them. Mrs. Florence was in the front pew in her nicest pale blue dress, but she looked like she didn’t know Bear at all. Suddenly, a spark flew from behind him (was it out of Jesus’s yellow eyes?) and lit the blood red aisle into flames, engulfing the wood of the pews and floor and altar with it. Bear screamed, but his daddy looked him in the face and laughed. “You gotta burn the trees to make ‘em stronger, Bear.” He smiled, and handed Bear the business card. “Let’s go. I don’t wanna miss the Dawgs whip some Gator tail.”

The ringing startled him awake. He instinctively leaned forward and reached into his pocket to make sure the card was still in place, pressed neatly against the denim. He hadn’t remembered falling asleep. The land was just as he’d left it, cool in the shadows of the rainclouds. His trees stood tall and dark against the dimming light. He got up slowly, still feeling a dull ache in his hip and walked to the phone mounted to the kitchen wall.

“Hey, Daddy.” Liz’s voice was cool as a creek on the other end of the line.

“It’s not Sunday,” he said as he wiped his eyes groggily. “What do I owe the pleasure of this call to?”

“We’re going to the beach tomorrow before the kids start school and Jason has to go back to work.” Bear imagined her standing in her kitchen, her hip pressed up against the new marble

countertop with the phone held tight to her ear. She'd made such a fuss about putting in the new cabinets that he hoped she was getting good use out of them.

"That's nice, get out of the Atlanta traffic for a while."

"Mm-hmm, should be fun."

"I just had the weirdest dream," he said without thinking. "Bout Roy Jasper. You heard he passed away last week, didn't you?"

"Yeah I heard," she breathed. "I'm real sorry, Daddy. I know how much you loved him. Are you sleeping alright?"

"I'm sleeping fine. Things like this happen. Donnie's daughter is having her first baby. She just found out it's a boy."

"Aw I knew she was pregnant but I hadn't heard it was a boy. I'll have to give her a call. She's still living in Charlotte, right?"

They fell silent. He felt a gnawing in his stomach to say something about the trees. About cutting them down soon. About cutting them down thirty years ago. I-never-asked-you-to-cut-them-down-to-pay-for-my-college, he imagined her saying. He wanted to talk about that less than he wanted to talk about Roy. He leaned back against the wall. Every joint screamed at him to sit down.

"I'm thinking about driving down in a couple of weeks to see you. I figured we can put out flowers on Mama's grave for her birthday. I also wanna see those trees of yours. That's a big daggum deal they're almost ready. No more selling for pulp, Daddy. I'm so proud of you." Bear could hear the smile in her voice. "When you cut em, you should save one or two and start up a big project. Bet you could build a whole backyard log cabin they're so big."

He guessed he should tell her about the card in his pocket or the rest of his dream. Maybe he'd just wait for all that. Hell, maybe he'd leave those trees there forever. "Thanks, Liz. I can't wait to see you."

"What are you gonna do with all that money, Daddy? Take yourself a nice trip?"

"It ain't about the money anymore." The sharp ache returned to his hip. "Look, I can't stand up talking much longer. Maybe when you come you can help me get one of those wireless house phones so I can sit in my chair when I talk to you?"

Liz's laugh sounded just like her Mama's. "If you'd figure out how to use that cell phone I got you..."

"I know how to work it, I just don't like it."

Liz sighed. "Take care of yourself, Daddy. I love you."

"I love you too," he said quietly, placing the phone back carefully in its holster.

He stood at the back doorway for a minute looking out at the land. He could tell the sun was setting in all its splendor and glory somewhere far behind the storm clouds that still loomed. The rain hadn't come yet. Something pulled him towards the woods. The turning in his stomach that had been churning all day stopped as he surveyed the land.

He saw children, looking up at the high branches with awe in their eyes, their yellow school bus parked at the edge of the road. He saw Liz running through the trees, dancing and chasing her imaginary friends. He saw his mama walking through the pines, patting the littler ones for good luck and speedy growth—a superstition she'd undoubtedly invented herself but clung to nonetheless. He saw his father, weary from work at the tire company but making rounds each night after supper anyway. Those trees put a spark in his eyes.

The lighting was peculiar with the sun peeking through in patches, making the clouds look even darker in places than they had looked before, casting an emberlike light along the pine needles on the ground.

Bear remembered when he'd found Daddy out here near the end of it all, setting a brushfire to clear out undergrowth and strengthen the wood. It was always his daddy's favorite part of growing the trees. Baptism by fire, he called it. Regeneration. Only this time, he had set the fire and stayed out in it, wandering in and out of the trees slowly, staring and contemplating with a bottle of whiskey in his hands.

Bear found him standing in front of one of the biggest trees, although it wasn't near big enough for timber yet and his daddy knew it. The flames weren't more than ten yards away from him and spreading quickly. "This is it," he said when he saw his son. "It's the one."

"Are you crazy?" Bear asked him, snatching the whiskey bottle out of his hand. "The one for what? You're gonna catch fire!"

"My coffin." His voice was small and certain. "It's the only thing I've made that's good. My whole life. It's the only thing I can keep when I go."

Barely sixty years old, Gray Florence was already shriveled up like the oldest man Bear had ever seen. He reached for his father's shoulder, but the old man grabbed his arm and held it with as much strength as he could muster, shoving off Bear with his free arm in a last move of resistance. They stood for a moment, arms locked and bodies poised as if they were about to begin a wrestling match. Gray Florence then fell forward into Bear's arms and wept. Bear picked him up over his shoulders like a sack of potatoes and carried him back home.

“Where’s your Mama and brother?” Daddy asked through a hiccup, then he seemed to remember. “Don’t make me cut down those trees again.” Bear held back a tear as he laid him down on the couch and tucked a blanket up to his chin.

Bear didn’t like that memory much, but it’s all he could think of as he walked through the darkening light the sky cast onto his trees. He’d had to cut down those trees shortly afterwards to pay to send his daddy to a home. He never told his father how they’d paid for it, although he supposed he knew.

He ended up dying just a few years later in 1979, just a couple of months before the Dawgs won the national championship.

Hell-bent on it like his daddy, Bear had replanted, but cut them down when they had to pay for Liz to go to college. Lora didn’t say a word when he told her he was going to replant in the fall.

He walked through the rows, looking up at the tallest pine trees he’d ever seen on this land. How round and how many logs high he didn’t know, and for once in his life he didn’t much care to know. These trees would make the highest quality sawtimber and he’d rake in a jackpot.

Thunder rumbled far away and finally the rain began to fall, so slowly he could hardly feel it through the pine needles. He looked up at the big tree before him, big enough for ten caskets. Maybe a cradle, too. Bear prayed that God would send enough rain to drown him right then and there.

He closed his eyes and sighed once more, breathing in the rain and pine needles like smoke. He pulled his cellphone out of his front pocket, then reached into his back pocket and extracted the business card. “GOODWOOD FOREST MANAGEMENT LLC,” it read. Bear dialed the number. It was a 1-800.

The rain kept coming, falling on his vision like tears until he could see nothing but the blur of the trees and the old light of the sunset behind the farthest of them, so soft he couldn't tell if the day was ending or if a new one was breaking.

Appendix: Writing my Thesis

The first spark for my thesis came when I read Eudora Welty's quote from her 1994 essay "Place in Fiction." Welty wrote, "One place comprehended helps us understand all places better." My place has always been the South and one of my passions has always been Southern literature and culture. I am from Athens, Georgia and have had a fascination with "Southernness" since I was little. Originally this fascination took the form of pride; I didn't know why, but I knew that other places were not like the South and that the people living here were misunderstood and subsequently special. Perhaps I got this notion from my history lessons on the Civil War in elementary school, the *American Girl* and Ann Rinaldi middle grade novels I consumed interminably, or the copious amounts of CMT music videos I watched in middle school. Either way, I prided myself on knowing the South.

There are many Souths, however. Each individual state, region, and even town and county, has a different identity and culture, so it is nearly impossible to have an understanding of the South as a whole. That is why I embarked on a research tour through the Southeast, stopping at literary, cultural, and historical monuments and museums in places like Montgomery, Monroeville, and Selma, Alabama, Jackson, Oxford, and Greenville, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee. I also visited sites near my home like Milledgeville and Eatonton, Georgia, and these were perhaps the most helpful in crafting Penuel County.

Despite loving the South and feeling at home there, I began to question it as I learned more about it. I started reading literature that held it up to the light, revealing the frays, cracks, and loose ends. I read *Absalom, Absalom!* my senior year of high school and grappled with the question of why I, like Quentin Compson, "don't hate it." I have to admit I became a little

obsessed with its problems, devouring the works of writers like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Harper Lee, and Eudora Welty.

Because of this fascination, I set my stories there. Penuel County, the fictional setting of my short stories, is situated in eastern middle Georgia, somewhere between Macon and Athens in the environs of Greensboro, Eatonton, or Sparta. The Chihoowa River, named after the Chickasaw Indian word for “God,” cuts through town and leads south to one of the manmade lakes prevalent throughout Georgia’s lake country. I-20, which heads east to Augusta, South Carolina, and the coast and west towards Atlanta and Alabama, is a few miles north of town. The county’s economy is based largely off of cotton production, which has recently been on an upswing after a long period of failure since the boll weevil epidemic in the early twentieth century. The hosiery mill, which employed much of the town, closed down when it moved to Montgomery about fifteen years ago and the economy is still reeling. The residential sections of town are segregated socially and economically. Most of the white people live in town near the square, and the wealthiest area is south of town on Tecumseh Street. Most of Penuel’s black citizens live across the river and the railroad tracks.¹

I can see it perfectly in my head. But can my readers?

One of my first challenges in writing my stories was pushing an authentic Southern voice. In an early meeting with Professor Smith, my thesis advisor, he asked me how he’s supposed to know the first story I wrote takes place in a southern setting, aside, that is, from my allusion to Georgia football. Where is the dialect? The food? The clothing? The religion? The racial tensions? Where are the clues that make it distinctly southern? I hadn’t even realized I had left all of that out.

¹ For more information on the fictional Penuel County, see the blog post, “Penuel County History, Economics, and Education.”

Nothing about the structure of “Radio Man,” the first story I wrote, was inherently Southern because the plot could occur in any small town in America. It focuses on a man with mild disabilities befriending a little boy to the chagrin of the rest of the community. It all takes place in the traditionally white parts of town. There are not many obvious traces of racism, religion, or reliance on land. Instead, it focuses on emotional displacement, another part of a community that people may not want to admit exists. Because this ostracism exists everywhere, I realized that the “Southernness,” needed to come out in the details of setting and character.

In an attempt to remedy this, I started a notebook entry that I filled up with observations of things I saw and words I heard, whether I realized them to be regional or not. I realized, however, that even when the plot does not concern race, religion, or history, those elements should still be present in the characters’ attitudes and behavior and in the setting descriptions because those elements are always haunting the South. Like Faulkner and O’Connor and the other great writers, I am writing about the grime and splendor of this one place and I learned quickly that “Southernness” is revealed in the details.

I used many literary models as I constructed my thesis, mostly focusing on great Southern short stories. Because Faulkner and O’Connor are two of my literary idols, I began to lean my own writing towards Southern Gothicism. Ironically, I tend to be unabashedly optimistic and cheerful. I wake up early every weekday morning to do work on my closed-in front porch with my favorite, bright yellow coffee mug in hand that reads: “You Are My Sunshine.” It’s interesting, therefore, that my favorite genre of literature is Southern Gothic, a genre known for its grotesque imagery and its emphasis on darkness, especially the darkness found within deeply flawed characters, ultimately revealing problems in southern society and the human consciousness.

At first, I hesitated to try to write a Gothic story. I don't tend to have neurotic tendencies or gothic fantasies, which puts me at a slight disadvantage. As I've written more and more stories, however, I've noticed gothic elements slipping in. In "The Best We Can," I decided to lean a bit more heavily on gothic themes and ideas. Some of these themes are confusion, darkness, figurative ghosts, and family secrets. In fact, the title and inspiration for the story came from a quote by Southern Gothic writer, Truman Capote.

Capote's early works are written in the Southern Gothic vein. In a 1973 interview with Andy Warhol that was published in *Rolling Stone*, Capote said, "For me, every act of art is the act of solving a mystery...You know what Henry James says...let me see...it was one of the short stories of his...It says, 'We live in the dark, we do the best we can, and the rest is the madness of art.' To me, that's always been my motto." This is a paraphrase of James' quote, but the essence of it lies in a kind of optimistic Gothicism—a kind of Gothicism that I believe O'Connor uses as well through her underlying themes of faith as a constant despite the darkness of the human heart. This is the kind of Gothicism I seek to employ in my own work.

I have encountered some problems with writing my own Southern Gothic stories. Perhaps the biggest roadblock I've run into is the great depth and breadth of things I want to say. Because I want "The Best We Can" to deal with concepts like dark family secrets, the pride and shame wrapped up in one's past, mental illness, and race, I became a little overwhelmed in telling it succinctly. What I intended to be a shorter story turned into an epic of sorts and the organization and execution proved difficult. I remedied this by taking a step back and looking at the concision of O'Connor's writing and plot development, rather than focusing on Faulkner's long-winded lyricism.

After introducing Gothicism in that story, I went back to my previous stories and added more gothic elements. I toyed with the idea of Gus McNeese, my protagonist in “Radio Man,” being a grotesque character. “John, the Baptist” has many gothic qualities as well that I intensified in revisions. In doing this, I wanted to show characters who are grotesque projections of themselves, deeply hurting and deeply flawed. Penueel, the setting of my stories’ namesake, after all, is the place in the Old Testament where Jacob wrestled with God. In the end, my characters wrestle miserably through their lives, but they do the best they can and leave the rest up to “the madness of art.”

In a similar way, as I crafted my stories, I looked to three primary literary examples to learn how to build suspense and tension, something I had struggled with in previous stories. In much of my earlier writing, I’ve sometimes built up tension and then released it too quickly, letting my characters explode at one another in outrage. After that, the rest of the story can become a calm, boring muddle of falling action. Other times, the opposite happens. Tension builds up and never gets released, leaving the reader unsatisfied and the story incomplete. The first great story I turned to for help with this problem was Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Was Almost a Man,” which employs Russian playwright and author Anton Chekhov’s long-standing advice. In an 1889 letter, Chekhov wrote: “One must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it.” This technique of introducing characters, ideas, and objects early in a story and bringing them to fruition later has since been known as “Chekhov’s Gun” and has been used by countless writers in order to build suspense. Of course “Chekhov’s Gun” is rarely a literal gun, although Wright’s short story is an exception. “The Man Who Was Almost a Man” is about a boy named Dave who is fed up with being a black adolescent in the South where no one appreciates him as a man. He begs his mother to let him buy a gun—something he believes will

make him feel and appear like a man. The presence of the gun throughout the story allows readers to know that something is about to happen and leaves them waiting on the edge of their seats until it does.

The beginning of the story is imperative in drawing a reader in and filling the reader with trepidation almost immediately. Dave is disgruntled by the way everyone treats him: "One of these days he was going to get a gun and practice shooting, then they couldn't talk to him as though he were a little boy." This glimpse of Dave's childishly vengeful attitude fills the reader with dread and builds suspense that lasts through to the climax of the story. Instantly, the reader knows that something is going to happen.

In addition, Wright chose the perfect perspective from which to tell the story. It is third person, but focalizes tightly from Dave's viewpoint. This way, the reader is clearly able to see that Dave is flawed, but understands him nonetheless. When the narrator peers into his thoughts, the dialect present throughout reappears, further casting the reader into Dave's character: "Lawd, ef Ah only had tha pretty one! He could almost feel the slickness of the weapon with his fingers. If he had a gun like that he would polish it and keep it shining so it would never rust. N Ah'd keep it loaded, by Gawd!" The narrative voice that Wright employs allows the reader to understand that Dave sees no danger approaching, although they can see it clear as day.

The climax of the story involves Dave accidentally shooting and killing a mule. It is a gory and gothic scene, but it is not nearly as bad as the reader anticipated. In fact, Wright writes, "That night Dave did not sleep. He was glad that he had gotten out of killing the mule so easily, but he was hurt." Killing the mule was not a big deal compared to the damage the reader expected: killing his mother or himself or someone else of serious consequence. Wright could

not have had this happen because it was too predictable. Instead, when the gun finally goes off—both literally and figuratively—and Dave gets let off the hook easily, the suspense seems to die.

The gun has been fired and the tension has dropped, but the story is not over. Once more, Dave will travel out into the field to find the gun and shoot it successfully into the darkness. Feeling like a man, he hops onto a train car headed for somewhere where he will be taken seriously. The reader knows, however, the empty gun is still there, symbolizing the fact that Dave is still only *almost* a man. It's not loaded anymore, but Dave is.

In many of my stories, I've attempted to introduce plot elements, objects, and characters that reappear later and have a significant impact on the story. For example, the presence of the framed picture of Jesus in "My Father's World," is used as a symbol and appears multiple times throughout the story, not fully gaining meaning for the reader or the narrator until its last appearance. I've strived to make every detail important. I've also attempted to emulate Wright in his use of tension. In "John, the Baptist," I want the reader to know that something is going to happen, but not know what.

Similar to Wright, Eudora Welty also plays with the reader's expectations in her stories. Welty uses humor in her short story "Why I Live at the P.O." to deny any building tension. This humor comes out through outrageously dysfunctional family behavior: a tap-dancing toddler named Shirley T., a middle-aged man in a kimono who sets firecrackers off in his niece's bedroom, and a woman who moves to the post office to get away from it all. The biggest strength in this story, in my opinion, is the incredible use of dialogue and voice. (I recommend you look up Welty reading it on YouTube. You won't be disappointed.)

The conflict is so covered with humor and voice that it is barely discernible at times. Welty has diffused it into the story expertly. Sister, Welty's protagonist and narrator, projects

harsh judgments on the rest of the family, expounding their flaws both out loud and in her head. Her sister, Stella-Rondo, takes the brunt of this judgmental assault because she began dating a man that Sister once had feelings for: “Told him I was one-sided. Bigger on one side than the other, which is a deliberate, calculated falsehood: I’m the same. Stella-Rondo is exactly twelve months to the day younger than I am and for that reason she’s spoiled.” This outlook governs the telling of the story.

Sister, however, is not a reliable narrator and this technique in itself provides some underlying tension. Who is she? Is what she’s saying really true? Why is she so sensitive? In the end, Sister is happy—or so she says—to move away to the P.O. and never see her family again. The tension that never gets mentioned, and therefore never gets resolved, gives this story a much deeper meaning and propels it from the merely comical to the literary.

I used this story as a basis for “Some Glad Morning,” a story with an unreliable protagonist and a quirky family. I have attempted to infuse humor and light-heartedness throughout the story in order to mask some of the tension that June, the protagonist, is facing in her life. Although it is third person, and therefore June cannot be as outrageous a storyteller as Sister, I wanted the conflict of the story to bubble under the surface as it does in Welty’s.

One of the biggest challenges I’ve faced throughout the writing of my thesis is dealing with race. Racial tension has governed the history of the region and is still incredibly prevalent today. Although I am white, I did not want the stories of Penuel County to be only of and concerning white people. In doing so, I tried to represent everything accurately and fairly, and avoid landing on any racial stereotypes.

In a collection of essays edited by Jay Watson on whiteness studies and William Faulkner’s approach to “whiteness,” Watson explains the root of racism by quoting Richard

Dyer, saying, “As long as race is something only applied to non-white people, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people... and there is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity” (viii).

Whiteness, however, is not the human norm on a global scale and it is not the human norm in Penuel County. Different races are present in Penuel County and I wanted them to be represented in my stories. I decided to comment on Watson and Dyer’s perception of whiteness in my story “John, the Baptist.” John does not think of himself as a racist. Race, however, makes him incredibly awkward. He and the other white people in his congregation have been the norm in this church for the entirety of its existence. They see the Abelson family as “other” and inherently raced because the rest of them are not. In actuality, however, the Abelsons, especially Maizie, are the most human and filled with the most grace. John ends up being the one on the outside.

Additionally, I wanted to tell a story with an African American protagonist. Ideally, diverse writers will write diverse characters, but I did not want my thesis to be a compilation of stories about white people only. Therefore I decided to make the Thumb family black in “The Best We Can.” I treat them like I would treat white characters, however, and try to let the audience know their race without using it in any character descriptions. I try to acknowledge their race the same way I would acknowledge white as a race. In this story, while race is mentioned, it is not the governing idea. I could not try to write a story about what it is like to be black in the modern day South because there is no way I would be able to understand it all without having lived it. Albeit small, these two stories, along with many other mentions of race in other stories, are an attempt to present race as it is seen in the South without misrepresenting

the cultures or my understanding of them. I merely tried to present the idea that whiteness is not the norm.

The most important thing to me in this collection is the presence of religion. I came up with the name of the setting of my short stories long before I had even decided that I wanted to write a senior thesis. In a “Bible as English Literature” class I took at the beginning of my freshman year, I remember being transfixed by the story of Jacob in Genesis. The image of his wrestling with God on the banks of the Jabbok is evocative, stirring, disturbing, and perplexing. Why would God come down—in the form of an angel or a man, depending on which translation you read—and wrestle with Jacob? Why wrestle? How did Jacob have the strength to wrestle until daybreak? Why’d God have to break his hip? Was there actually a wrestling match or is it all a metaphor? In spite of one’s beliefs, the story is fascinating.

Religion is the lifeblood of the South. It’s what people are raised on and it’s everywhere one looks. It makes the South pure but it also taints it irrevocably. Christianity pervades everything: what Southerners say, what they think, how they act. Even if they are not religious they are still surrounded by religion. The many controversial topics that are alight in Christian texts and beliefs are muted and hushed into the background. Race, sexuality, moral behavior, family dynamics, and a slew of other hot topics are covered in the Bible, but they’re only mentioned by followers if they fit in with one’s viewpoint. Flannery O’Connor perhaps saw this best. In her essay collection *Mystery and Manners*, O’Connor writes:

“...for almost anything you say about Southern belief can be denied in the next breath with equal propriety. But approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive.”

O'Connor uses this ideology in her writing. Nearly every story is Christ-haunted, although it's not always explicit. Faith is lurking in the shadows and behind bushes, watching the action with a close eye—and the characters know it too. Interestingly, O'Connor was a very devout Catholic, although Catholicism was certainly a minority in mid-twentieth century Georgia. She saw the world through her devout Catholic lens, and saw it all very clearly.

I was raised Baptist—nearly as theologically distant from O'Connor's religious inclinations as one can get in the seventy five miles from Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Milledgeville to First Baptist Athens. However, I have clung to O'Connor's writing, especially the elements of faith in her stories as a way to see hope in the darkness.

I'm no O'Connor, but I have attempted to center much of my thesis on religion. The name of the county and the subsequent name of the collection was my starting place and I've expanded from there. In "The End of the Things," Bear Florence has a gothic-esque dream in a church full of his dead loved ones, perhaps the closest I step to O'Connor's Catholic Gothicism. Images of light and dark and heaven and hell underlie June's visit home in "Some Glad Morning," the title of which came from the traditional hymn "I'll Fly Away." "My Father's World" is another overtly religious title, coming from another hymn. At the end of the story, the protagonist is left to wrestle with her perception of God, questioning Jesus's investment in her life. Religion lurks in the background but is ever-present in "The Best We Can." "John, The Baptist" is almost completely filled with religious themes as it follows a preacher and the elements of baptism and ends with a glimpse at redemption.

Throughout all of my stories, I have attempted to show each of my characters wrestling with God, their own faith, their place in the society in which they live, and with their existence as a whole in this place and beyond. Writing this thesis has been an incredibly rewarding

experience in which I have been able to study Southern literature and learn from the great masters of it. I am incredibly indebted to Professor Smith for being a constant source of criticism and feedback and for pushing me to improve my writing, Professor Gavalier for his help in developing my characters and plots, and my father for his emotional and intellectual investment throughout this process. I hope readers of this work will gain an appreciation for this flawed yet beautiful place and perhaps better understand wherever their own Penuel County may be.²

² *Note: This essay and along with other content was originally in the form of a series of blog posts, which can be made available upon request.

Reading List

- 1) *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson
- 2) "The Storm" by Kate Chopin
- 3) *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner
- 4) Selected stories from *Collected Stories* by William Faulkner
- 5) *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best* edited by Edward P. Jones
- 6) *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri
- 7) "Recitatif" by Toni Morrison
- 8) Selected Stories from *Allegheny Front* by Matthew Neill Null
- 9) *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (with special emphasis on old favorites like "Revelation," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "Displaced Person," and "Parker's Back")
- 10) "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" by Flannery O'Connor
- 11) *The History of Southern Literature* edited by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., focusing on the sections about Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Don Noble's chapter entitled "The Future of Southern Writing"
- 12) "Between the Lines" from *Cakewalk* by Lee Smith
- 13) *Faulkner and Whiteness* edited by Jay Watson
- 14) "A Visit from Charity" by Eudora Welty
- 15) "Place in Fiction" by Eudora Welty
- 16) "Why I Live at the P.O." by Eudora Welty
- 17) "The Man who was Almost a Man" by Richard Wright