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# Women of the South: A Creative exploration of the Identity of Women in the Southeastern U.S.

Catherine Sharp

*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*, [csharp19@vols.utk.edu](mailto:csharp19@vols.utk.edu)

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Women of the South:

A Creative Exploration of the Identity of Women in the Southeastern U.S.

Catherine Sharp

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Undergraduate English Honors Thesis

## Introduction

In the realm of fiction writing, there are numerous difficult problems that can arise. There are certain basic aspects that are expected in any story—a cohesive plot, a readable narrative, realistic dialogue, character development, an intriguing focus or topic. However, despite the necessity of these things, and the need for them to all work together in order to form a story, they are by no means simple or easy. Flannery O’Connor, a master of the short story format, offered differing opinions on this topic throughout her life. In the book *Mystery and Manners* O’Connor says the following, “I have heard people say that the short story was one of the most difficult literary forms, and I’ve always tried to decide why people feel this way about what seems to me to be one of the most natural and fundamental ways of human expression” (*Mystery and Manners* 87). This opinion does not necessarily lend to admiration for O’Connor from beginner short story writers. It may instead lend to a sense of hopelessness for those who admire her and look to her work for inspiration or guidance. However, in the footnotes of the same page, a longer quote is provided where O’Connor claims that, “the more stories [she] write[s], the more mysterious [she] find[s] the process and the less [she] finds [her]self capable of analyzing it.” She goes on to say that, “nothing produces silence like experience,” meaning in this instance that the more one writes, the more difficult it is to speak on the subject.

As I am rather early on in my writing experience, I have to say that I cannot fully relate to either of these views offered up by O’Connor. Rather, my experience has been more along the lines of stumbling through first, second, and third drafts with only a vague idea of what I want to accomplish. The process of completing this thesis project however

has lent both a bit more of the experience that O'Connor speaks of, and a bit more clarity in my craft than I previously held.

Throughout this project, my thought process shifted back and forth on what aspect of my stories I wanted to focus on the most. Though I was conscious of the different elements needed in my stories to make them work, my overall focus was more on the general process of developing a story and how one might change from start to finish. I had a specific goal in mind and that was to explore the idea of what it means to be a woman in the South. I had no idea going into my project just how difficult that might be.

Being a southern woman does not mean one specific thing, just as being a woman of any other background does not. In the past, the roles of southern woman have been relegated to different things. They have the expectation of being prim, proper, dainty, obedient, marriageable, impregnable, etc. If you were to ask a person not native to the Southern United States what it means to be Southern, you might receive many different responses. There are images of Southern women as sweet Southern Belles, Georgia Peaches. However, there are also images of Southern women as firecrackers-quick-witted, quick-tempered.

All of these are true and yet none of them are. Southern women can be many of these things or none of them. There is no one requirement to be a southern woman, nor even a list of them—save claiming the Southern United States as your birthplace or home. To begin an exploration on what it means to be Southern—to be a Southern woman—was in many ways doomed from the beginning. I believe that this is because Southern identity can be difficult to grasp. Many Southerners still identify with certain things that are no longer considered appropriate by the outside world. So if even Southern identity can be

called into question, what then of Southern literature? Flannery O'Connor said on the subject:

The present state of the South is one wherein nothing can be take for granted, one in which our identity is obscured and in doubt. In the past the things that have seemed to many to make us ourselves have been very obvious things, but now no amount of nostalgia can make us believe they will characterize us much longer. Prophets have already been heard to say that in twenty years there'll be no such thing as a Southern literature. (*Mystery and Manners* 57)

Though Southern literature has not disappeared completely since these statements were made, there is a noticeable lack of representation in the genre. Many of the more famous Southern writers studied today are from the past.

Furthermore, while stereotypes and expectations of Southerners abound outside of the South, they are often met just as equally with those placed by Southerners themselves. A Southerner who abandons their history, their culture, their beliefs and ideals, is often seen as a betrayer and can be ostracized or forced out by others. Or in some cases, forced to remain and conform to a way of life that is not meant for them. In many ways, this is the focus of each of my stories. This is the case in two of my three stories, "Coming Home" and "Heat Wave." In "Coming Home," Holly has been living in California for years and has only just come home to introduce her fiancé to her family. There are certain members of her family who don't approve of the way Holly has been living her life with Wyatt and who retaliate against them in anger. In "Heat Wave," young Georgia is overcome with guilt after engaging in sexual activity with her neighbor, Jackson. She only begins to feel this guilt though, after she comes into contact with a visiting Reverend

who preaches on sexual immorality and after she contemplates what her parents will think of her if they find out what she has done.

Each of my three stories is set in the South and feature characters ranging in age from a childhood to an adult in her mid-twenties and come from somewhat different backgrounds. One character, a young girl named Laney, has grown up in the south, but after her parents divorce moves to a region in the Deep South with her mother. Another character, this time a girl in her teens named Georgia, lives in a small Southern town where religion and propriety reign. My third story revolves around Holly, a woman in her mid-twenties who has just come home to Southern-Appalachia with her Californian fiancé in tow after having lived out west for almost eight years.

When I was first brainstorming ideas for my thesis, these three characters were all one and the same, combined under the current name of one of my final characters—Georgia—whose story I planned to tell through first-person narrative. Every point of view that can be employed for fiction writing comes inherent with its own difficulties, and some have certain advantages that others lack. For example, many believe that in first person narration a writer will be able to make their narrator more relatable to readers.

A third-person narrative also has its advantages and difficulties. With this form of narrative, a narrator can either be omniscient or limited. Though omniscient is in many ways the freest form of narration, in that it allows a glimpse into many characters, both internally and externally, objectively and subjectively, I did not desire that amount of freedom in my stories. An omniscient narrator can reveal or withhold whatever they want, and can even provide their own opinion at times, perhaps reflecting the views of the author. I didn't want to employ an omniscient narrator for my stories, as my focus was

only on the three main protagonists and their thoughts and emotions and not those of any secondary characters. Furthermore, I wanted my own emotions and beliefs to be as far removed from these characters as they could be, without being too detached from my own writing, so that they were not simply carbon copies of myself. This is also one reason why in the end I did not choose the first-person point of view.

I very briefly explored an early version of the first story written in first-person, in an attempt to branch out from my usual third-person narration. Though first-person narration is very common now, the tone was not what I had been hoping for. It had a very conversational feel to it, that though could have been enjoyable, was not the style I wanted to emulate. When I started my research for this project, by examining works from authors such as Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Amy Greene, I quickly noticed that many Southern writers choose to employ the third-person narrative. I don't believe that I am naturally inclined to Southern writing, but wanted to use these authors as inspiration.

Perhaps one of the most difficult parts of third-person narration for myself were the different voices that were required. With third-person p.o.v, a writer has to adjust the "style and vocabulary to the age mentality, and social situation of the [...] character" (Madden 68). Even though I said I attempted to remain somewhat removed from my characters while writing, being closer in age to the two older characters, Georgia and Holly, allowed me to maintain the reality of their voices better. I struggled the most with Laney, the young girl in my first story. It was difficult for me to find the write tone for such young characters, but truthfully, I think that in this sense third-person was the best

option for this story in particular. Had I employed first-person, I believe that finding the right tone for a child would have been even more difficult.

One argument of a drawback of third-person p.o.v. is that it makes a character feel removed from the action. As they are only relating events to the readers, and not immediately engaging in activity, they may feel somewhat passive. I do believe this is somewhat true, depending on the writer and the story. However, this simply requires the author to be even more careful and observant of their descriptions and exposition. Flannery O'Connor seems to have solely used third-person in her different stories, such as "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and "The River."

I frequently read through O'Connor's stories, searching for the different ways that they benefited from all the different stylistic choices she made when writing them. Though, if her statement from earlier is to be believed, perhaps O'Connor simply wrote whatever came to her, without making too much of a conscious decision on the matter. One aspect common in her work, though, is straightforward, to the point sentences. O'Connor does not wax on eloquently with long sentences of detailed description.

Another aspect relating to point of view that I mentioned briefly above is the character's voice. Just as it is important for each character to have their own voice and individuality, it is also important to make sure that voice is true to life. One way that I wanted to express this was through colloquial Southern speech. Going into this project, I was aware that writing Southern dialogue can be difficult, and if not done correctly, can become heavy-handed, overdone, and even insulting. Each of the books and stories that I read in my research contains some aspect of Southern speech. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston employs perhaps the most extreme colloquial language.

When I first read this book, there were times when I struggled to understand the dialogue and had to re-read the words to try and make sense of them. In others, such as O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and Eudora Welty's "Petrified Man," the usage is much more subtle, but still present enough to be obvious. For example, the two women both employed the common habit some Southerners have of adding "a" to different words, such as "aloose" (*A Good Man is Hard to Find* 1) or in replacing the word *of*, as in, "I'd'a' felt something" (Welty, 27).

I wanted each of the stories to have somewhat different voices and tones, and therefore varied the usage of Southern dialogue in both amount and extremity. In the first two stories, which are set in more of the general small-town South, I used basic Southern dialogue. For example, I shortened certain words by dropping the "g" on "-ing" words and combined other words to make the shortened versions that are common in the South. Such as, "oughta" instead of "ought to", or "hafta" instead of "have to." These basic examples run more in line with the works of O'Connor and Welty. For my last story, though, I wanted to make the characters even more Southern than the others. This story is closer to the dialogue used in Hurston's novel, but is still not nearly as intricate. In Hurston's dialogue, nearly every word is some sort of variation of the actual word. I did not want to make my dialogue so overtly Southern that it was difficult to read, and so opted for a more subtle version of Hurston's. The only characters in this story that don't regularly use Southern speech are Wyatt, a born and raised Californian, and Holly the main character who has tried to break away from her Southern heritage.

In Amy Greene's *Bloodroot* the dialogue is a combination of regular speech and colloquial Southern speech. For example, one character says, "Somebody's going to have

to learn the girl to cook, if she's fixing to be my wife" (Greene 56). Though this dialogue doesn't drop off the "g" in the "-ing" words, there are still two clear examples of Southern speech in the sentence. The first is the usage of *to learn* in place of *to teach*, and the second is the phrase "fixing to," a very common Southern saying used in place of "getting ready to" or "going to."

Perhaps because of Flannery O'Connor's influence, I at times found myself unconsciously trying to make my stories more grotesque. For example, the second story of my project, entitled "Heat Wave" at one point ended with a macabre re-purification ceremony where two young teens were nearly disfigured in the name of righteousness and purity. And in "Coming Home" the original ending ended with a much more bloody and somewhat mournful confrontation than the simple fight that occurs in the final version. Though the grotesque is a quasi-inherent aspect of Southern writing according to O'Connor, I do not tend to seek such things out. Perhaps it is the romantic in me, but I enjoy a happy ending—something O'Connor seems to have a difficult time writing.

Typically when writing, I have to force myself to examine whether a happy ending fits with the story. In fact, I often have to very hard to not simply force a happy ending on a story that does not necessarily call for one. For example, in the original ending of "Heat Wave," Georgia stood up to the Reverend and called him out for his abusive teachings and didn't suffer any immediately seen repercussions from those who witnessed the event, which would be unlikely to happen in a small Southern town. I believe that this ending was my way of trying to make Georgia an outspoken rebel who stands up for what she believes is right, when in reality she is a very passive rebel who

worries greatly, not so much about the consequences of her actions, but about the way they will make her appear to her family.

In the end, I did not at first choose the point of view based on advice and examples, but rather because it felt right for my writing. The inspiration from other writers and other stories came after, as I was questioning all the decisions I had made. Furthermore, the stories that I wrote do not strictly follow any guidelines on Southern literature, if there even are any. The themes are there, the dialogue, voice, and setting are there, but if there is one specific thing that makes a piece of writing Southern, perhaps my work does not have it. Perhaps the style of Southern writing has in fact begun to fade, and my writing will not be distinguishable from that of “a writer from Hollywood, California” (*Mystery and Manners* 57). Or maybe, there is not one thing that makes a piece of writing Southern, just as there is not one specific thing that make a person Southern, other than claiming the South as your home. I have labeled my stories as Southern writing, and perhaps that is all that is required for it to be so.

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## Playground Rules

As Laney stood in front of her new classmates at her new school being introduced by her new teacher, she wished she could be anywhere else in the world. Or rather, she wished she was back home in Tennessee. Where everything was familiar and comfortable and nothing was new.

The tag of her new uniform shirt scratched against the back of her neck and her plain, white sneakers squeaked against the cracked tiles of the floor. They weren't nearly as pretty as the bright blue pair she'd wanted to wear. The saving grace of the uniform was the pleated black skort she wore. The soft fabric was a balm to her nerves, despite its unfamiliarity. She tried her best not to fidget, but twisted the fabric of her skort in her sweaty hands as she stood in front of her new classmates.

“Class, I'd like you to meet Laney Caruthers. She just moved here all the way from Nashville!” Ms. Franklin, a thin, bespectacled woman in her thirties, said. “You might recognize her name. Laney's grandparents were the owners of the toy store downtown before it closed down.”

The toy store had closed down a few years ago when her Granddaddy passed away and her Mammaw could no longer take care of it. Then when Mammaw had passed away right after her parents divorce, Laney and her Momma had moved into their old house rather than sell it. A fresh start. The thought of her grandparents made Laney sad and she felt a lump form in her throat as she blinked furiously to stop any tears from forming.

Apparently the mention of the story meant something to the other children as all at once, the dazed looks turned to curiosity and all the previously bored faces turned to

Laney. Where before only a few students had been actively listening, Laney now had the attention of the entire class. Aware of their eyes, she froze, the fabric still clenched tight in her hands.

“Laney, would you like to tell everyone a little bit about yourself?” Ms. Franklin asked, smiling down at her. When Laney looked back at her with wide eyes and shook her head softly, laughter spread across the room. A flame of embarrassment began to cover her entire face, until the color on her cheeks matched that of a Red Delicious apple and she stared down at her shoes, the tears threatening to fall. Laney began to twist her skirt again. The smile disappeared from Ms. Franklin’s face.

“Laney, please tell the class a little bit about yourself,” she said, her voice so stern that Laney immediately burst into tears.

Through the flood of tears, Laney could see Ms. Franklin staring at her, bewildered. As her tears continued, she was aware of the terrible silence from the other students. Laney looked out at all the faces that now watched her with wide, rapt eyes, their mouths hanging open.

Her sobs slowly began to ebb as she stared at them, but when someone began to laugh quietly Ms. Franklin bent down and whispered to Laney that she could take her seat, pointing to a spot in the back corner.

Laney realized she would have to walk through the middle of all the desks, as the eyes of every student followed her. She thought her heart might leap up out of her throat with how fast it was pounding. As she began to make her way towards her desk, tears still leaking from her eyes, she looked up and met eyes with one of the girls in the second row. She wasn't laughing like some of the other students, but watched Laney with a

curious frown on her face. Like Laney was a puzzle that she couldn't figure out. When she realized Laney was looking at her, she smiled. Laney thought she had a pretty smile, and pretty hair, too. It was short, dark and curly, and Laney liked the way it sprang up from her head in every direction, bouncing back and forth with even the slightest movement. It was very different than her own dull blond mane fixed in a clumsy braid by her mother that morning before they rushed out the door.

Laney looked away and hurried past the girl, head down. It was only once she reached her seat that she realized the girl was the only black student in the class and that her's was the only friendly face Laney had seen among all the students.

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After their morning lessons were through, Ms. Franklin dismissed them to recess. As the odd new student, Laney was relegated to last pick of the toys. Maybe if she hadn't cried so bad she might have been able to make some friends. Maybe one of the other students might have let her play with one of the brightly colored hula-hoops or even a piece of the sidewalk chalk.

Once it was her turn the only things left were a worn jump rope with only one handle and an old cracked Frisbee. She supposed she could of made do, but she didn't particularly want to. Unhappy with her selection, Laney moved to the swings to wait for a turn. As she waited, she thought about how she would tell her mother what had happened. Maybe the school would call her, and she wouldn't even have to. That didn't mean they'd call Daddy, though. And Momma probably wouldn't tell him either. Which meant that Laney would have to tell him when he called later to talk to her. After a moment, she became aware of the other girls' loud whispers

"There's that new girl," one said. "What's she doin' just standing over there?"

Another laughed. "I don't know. Waitin' for the swings I guess."

"You think she'll start crying again, Lizzie Grace?" the first girl asked the second.

"Probably," Lizzie Grace said. "I bet she's just a big cry-baby who cries all the time."

"She looks like she's 'bout to cry right now!" another girl chimed in. They all stared at Laney throughout this exchange, not bothering to hide their delighted smiles at the crestfallen look on her face.

Laney stared at her feet, as tears gathered in her eyes. She didn't want them to know how true their words were. She did cry a lot now, ever since she and her Momma had moved here. She merely stood and waited, her hands once again twisting the fabric of her skort continuously.

She was startled when a hand tapped roughly on her shoulder and turned to find the girl with the wide smile behind her, only she wasn't smiling. Laney realized after a moment though that the girl wasn't upset with her, but the other girls.

"Are you wantin' to swing?" she asked. When Laney nodded meekly the girl turned to the girls.

"It's our turn now," she said.

"Oh yeah? Says who?" one asked. Laney thought she might be the group's leader

"Me," Laney's friend said. "Now get off before I hafta tell Ms. Franklin that y'all ain't sharing." The girl's tone offered no room for argument and Laney wondered if she actually would tell on them. Laney never would be able to. The leader stared at her for a moment, an angry look on her face.

After a tense moment, she huffed out a sullen, “whatever,” and hopped off the swing. As she walked by the two girls she stomped in a small puddle next to their feet, splashing mud all over Laney’s new shoes, and smirked at her before walking away, her friends following dutifully after her.

Once they were gone, Laney turned to the girl to thank her, and found her staring after the group with a frown. Then turning back to Laney, the two watched each other for a moment before she turned and chose a swing. Laney followed her lead and chose the swing next to hers.

They sat for a moment, swinging in silence. Laney stared at her white sneakers. They were no longer white, but covered in splashes of mud. She hoped they would clean easily and that her momma wouldn't be too angry. Finally the girl spoke.

“Don't mind Lizzie Grace. She's mean as a snake, but its just 'cause she don't know no better.” Laney couldn't help but laugh. “I'm Jemima,” she said, examining Laney with her head tilted. “You know you really oughta speak up next time. Otherwise they'll just keep laughin' at you.” Laney stared at her in bewilderment.

When Jemima looked at Laney expectantly, she merely shook her head.

“I'm Laney,” she said, smiling slightly.

“I know who you are, silly,” Jemima said. When she laughed Laney knew she was only teasing. This was good, Laney thought, friends teased each other like this didn't they? She smiled at Jemima.

“Thank you,” she said. “For helpin' me.”

“You're welcome,” she paused, her face growing contemplative again. “Why were you cryin' anyhow?”

Laney looked back down at her shoes. “I don't know...was just nervous I guess.”

“I don't believe that,” Jemima said. Laney looked up at her but didn't say anything.

“All that cryin' just 'cause you were nervous?” she continued. “You sure that's all it was?”

When she remained silent, Jemima shook her head.

“You sure are weird, new girl,” she said before getting up from the swing, “Anyway, we're friends now, so I'll make sure those girls aren't too mean to you. If we stick up for each other, we'll be alright.” With that, she turned away, still swinging back and forth.

Laney followed her lead and began to kick her legs, slowly gaining momentum. As she kicked and swung through the air, she closed her eyes. The air whooshing by her was loud in her ears and for a moment, she felt like she was way out in the open sky, dangling below an airplane as it sped through the clouds. The illusion shattered when she opened her eyes and looked up at the blue sky and white clouds far above her. She wondered dimly why Jemima might need Laney to stick up for her. Someone as outspoken as she was surely didn't need the help of a crybaby. Laney wanted to ask her, wished she could find the right words, but found that she was unable to. It seemed that wishing was all she ever did now.

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At the end of the day as everyone waited outside to be picked up by parents, older siblings, or grandparents, Laney stood away from the rest of the students waiting for her mother. When she finally heard her name being called, she rushed forward, ready to go home.

Before she could climb into the car though, she heard another voice call her name. She turned to find Jemima waving at her.

“See you tomorrow, Laney.”

Laney managed a small smile and waved back. She was pleased to see that Jemima smiled too.

When she had climbed into the car and buckled herself in, her momma began to drive away.

“Who was that?” she asked. “A new friend?” Laney looked out the window and saw Jemima watching their car. She smiled again to herself.

“I hope so,” she said, looking forward to the next day a bit more with the prospect of a new friend.

“That’s good sweetie!” her mother said. “See? I told you you’d be able to make friends. How did the rest of the day go?”

Laney shrugged before remembering her momma couldn't see her. “It wasn't too bad, I guess. After this morning, anyway.”

“What happened this morning?” her mother asked, glancing at her in the mirror, frowning slightly. Laney didn't want to tell her, but when she didn't respond her mother said her name in a tone that meant she better answer if she didn't want to get punished.

“The teacher wanted me to introduce myself and I couldn't,” Laney said. “I cried. Didn't they tell you?”

“No. They didn't.” Laney couldn't see her momma’s face, but she could tell from the sound of her voice that she was angry.

“It’s ok, Momma. I’m sure they just forgot. Besides it was only for a minute and I didn't get in trouble or anything. Ms. Franklin just told me to sit down. And I didn't get called on for anything the rest of the day!” Laney tried to reassure her mother. If she was still angry by the time they got home, she might not let Laney talk to her daddy today.

“Well Ms. Franklin should’ve known better sweetheart. I should’ve been notified immediately.” Laney’s heart continued to sink. If Daddy called today, and Momma was still upset, they would end up arguing and would forget all about Laney until they hung up. It had been that way ever since their separation three months ago. That's what Daddy called it any way. Momma just called it a divorce.

“It’s really okay Momma. She probably makes all the new kids introduce themselves. It’s not her fault I cried.” Secretly, Laney thought it was her fault. At least a little bit, anyway. She wouldn’t’ve cried if the teacher hadn’t pushed her so.

“It doesn't matter who’s fault it is, honey. They still should’ve told me. What with it being your first day and all. I told them about the divorce. They should’ve known to be sensitive.” She paused for a moment, shaking her head. “I just can’t believe they wouldn't tell me.”

“I’m sorry, Momma.”

“Oh, baby, it’s not your fault. Don't you worry about it anymore,” she said as they pulled into the driveway of her grandparent’s house. “Oh, I almost forgot, your daddy called earlier. Said he had a meeting, but that he’d try to call you later.”

“Oh,” Laney said, unbuckling her seat belt and climbing out of the car. “Ok.” She shuffled into the house behind her mother, her heart settling at the bottom of her stomach.

For the rest of the night, she sat next to the old landline her grandparents had never gotten rid of, waiting for her daddy to call. She settled into the worn floral couch with her homework, then her dinner eaten on a TV tray, and then a new book she'd just borrowed from the library. And he still didn't call.

When her momma finally told her it was time for bed, Laney went to her room, changed into her p.j.'s and crawled under her covers, curled into a ball around her favorite stuffed, a ragged brown dog, worn down from years of love. She tried not to cry, but was unable to stop a few tears that leaked from her eyes. Perhaps tomorrow she would be able to talk to her daddy. And she would be able to see Jemima again as well.

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Her momma walked in with her the next day, straight to the principal's office. Laney didn't know what she'd said, but it must've done some good because Ms. Franklin didn't call on her once the whole day, but she still didn't feel much better than she had the day before. Her momma had braided her hair with a red bow in a crown around her head to try and cheer her up, and had even made her pancakes for breakfast, but she was still upset over her daddy not even calling to tell her goodnight. Her day was made worse by the fact that whenever Ms. Franklin wasn't looking, Lizzie Grace and her friends rubbed their eyes and made their lips all pouty, like they were crying.

As she in their classroom, watching the clock ticking closer and closer to 8 o'clock, she grew more anxious as Jemima didn't walk through the door. Laney hoped she was just running late.

When it got to 8:30 though and she still hadn't arrived, Laney accepted that today would be no better than yesterday. Would probably be worse without the comforting presence of a friendly face.

At recess, rather than argue over swings or fight for one of the good toys, Laney explored the playground for a place to wait out the hour and eventually settled on the lone tree that stood on the far side of the fenced in playground. There were twigs and leaves scattered on the ground and after sitting down, Laney gathered some of them to her. She began to bend, break, and tear the different pieces, arranging them in various shapes in the dirt.

She had just finished a small boat, with a tiny leaf as a sail, when a shadow passed over her. When she looked up and saw Lizzie Grace and her friends she froze.

“What are you doing, weirdo? Playing with sticks? Don't you want to play with a baby toy instead? You know, since you're a baby,” said Lizzie Grace, stomping on Laney's boat and crushing it into the ground.

When Laney stayed silent, Lizzie laughed at her.

“What's the matter? Gonna cry again?” Lizzie and her friends all laughed at her impersonation of Laney.

At that moment, with the sound of their laughter ringing in her ears, Laney wished she could do what Jemima said, wished she could be brave like her and speak up. But she couldn't find the will to even try, could barely even breathe. It was like their laughter was a heavy weight, closing off her throat, keeping both her words and her lungs from functioning.

Finally, after another long moment, Lizzie Grace stepped up right in front of Laney, who was forced to lean back to peer up at the girl.

“Bet you wish that stupid black girl was here, don't you?” Laney had in fact been wishing that, but she didn't want to admit as much to Lizzie. “Well don't get too attached.

She's so dumb she'll prolly get kicked out. Its 'cause her parents is poor, ya know. Plus people like her's always dumb."

Laney wasn't sure what Lizzie meant. Was she saying that because Jemima was black, she was dumb? As if it was automatic because of the color of skin? Where before Laney had merely been embarrassed and a little nervous with the posse of girls surrounding her, this though made her grow angry.

Laney jumped up from the ground and got right in Lizzie's face, breathing hard through her nose.

"You take that back," she said fiercely, hands clenched into fists at her sides. At first Lizzie merely seemed surprised that Laney had actually spoken. After she recovered though, she smirked.

"Who's gonna make me?" Lizzie sneered. "You?" All of a sudden, she reached up and pushed Laney so hard that she fell backward, landing hard on a protruding root. And before Laney could process what had happened, the girls were already running away.

Though her backside was now hurting fiercely, all she could think was that it hadn't worked. She'd tried to speak up, had tried to defend Jemima, but it hadn't done anything. All she'd gotten was a sore behind and her own personal enemies and now all she could do was sit beneath her tree and cry, just like they expected.

When she got home after school that day she decided not to tell her mother about the events from earlier. She didn't quite know why, but she was embarrassed that she had cried again today and worried that momma would only make it worse. And she wouldn't be able to tell daddy either, because he had another meeting and once again wouldn't be

able to call.

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The next day, Laney had trouble sitting still, though she made every effort not to squirm in her seat. Somehow, no one had seen the incident the day before, and she hadn't wanted to tell on Lizzie, not to Ms. Franklin or her momma. She thought it would only make it worse. The only person who seemed to notice her discomfort was Jemima, who was back after missing the day before for a doctor's appointment.

At recess when the two were sitting at the top of the slide, they were finally able to talk. Though Laney was embarrassed to tell her, Jemima was eventually able to coax what happened out of her. When Laney explained that she'd done what Jemima suggested in order to stand up for her and had gotten hurt, Jemima got a sour look on her face.

"Lizzie's always been mean. My momma says she must be full of sour things to be so spiteful. I'm used to her by now, though. It'll just take some time, then you will be, too. You should've at least told on her, though."

Laney wasn't so sure and was about to say so, when Lizzie Grace climbed onto the platform, her friends trailing behind her.

"You're in my way," she said, staring directly at Laney, hands perched on her hips. Laney stared at Lizzie for a moment, before looking pointedly at the three feet between where she sat and the entrance to the slide.

"There's plenty a room for you to slide, Lizzie," Jemima said. Lizzie ignored her.

"I said you're in my way, Laney," she said, once again mocking her.

Jemima sighed loudly and said, "C'mon, Lizzie leave her alone. Y'all can go 'round her."

Laney finally turned to look at her. "I wasn't talking to you," she said and then paused before adding a word that made all the girls gasp. Even her friends seemed shocked.

"You shouldn't say that Lizzie Grace," one said timidly.

"Shut up," Lizzie looked back and said to her.

Jemima still hadn't said a word and Laney looked back and forth between the two. She could see the anger on Jemima's face, in her pursed lips and pinched eyes. There was something else, though, that Laney thought might be a hint of sadness. She knew if she had picked up on it, the other girl was bound to notice soon as well.

She needed to do something before then, something to distract Laney and the others long enough for them to not care anymore about how their words had made Jemima feel. She scrambled for an idea for a moment before realizing that Lizzie now stood between her and the slide. Laney could see that there was a rather large puddle of mud at the bottom that would be hard to avoid if you weren't paying attention. And Lizzie Grace wasn't. Laney knew she knew was bound to end with her getting in trouble, as Laney was sure to tell.

But even knowing this she didn't hesitate as she reached out and gave a rough push against Lizzie's shoulders, causing her to stumble and slip on the edge of the slide. She teetered there for a moment, and Laney thought she might regain her balance, but in the next instant she fell and landed roughly on her back, before careening down the slide, screaming the entire way.

The other girls stared at her openmouthed for a moment, before Lizzie's friends went chasing after her, one following her down the slide and the others scrambling down

the steps. Lizzie's scream and fall had attracted enough attention that one or two teachers were now hurrying toward them. Lizzie continued to scream from the muddy puddle.

Laney was glad to see that she didn't look injured, but was surprised that she didn't feel guiltier. She turned back toward Jemima, who now had that same wide smile on her face once more. Laney returned her smile and sat back down, waiting for whichever teacher would be sent to punish her. She was surprised to find that she had no desire to cry at all.

### Heat Wave

The summer that Georgia Lee Williams became a sinner was unusually hot. Of course she'd always been a sinner, since before birth, and the summers in Zion's Hill, Tennessee were always hot. But she'd never thought about any of her previous sins beforehand, was never even conscious of them really, and she didn't think the summer had ever been quite so terrible before. At least, not in her 17 years.

She didn't like to think of her self as a sinner, didn't want the guilt and shame that came with it, but she just couldn't help it. The problem was her neighbor, Jackson Walker. She'd begun to notice that the scrawny, long-limbed boy she'd grown up with was gone. In his place was a tall, strong young man, with eyes as blue as cornflowers, a bright beautiful smile, and a head full of curly dark brown, almost black, hair.

Georgia knew that Jackson was the reason behind her desire to sin, but she had to wonder if the extreme oppressive heat of the summer sun or her sinful nature could also be to blame for her actions. She knew what her preacher would say-that it was her nature as a sinful creature, but that she could overcome it with the power of God. Georgia was more inclined to think it was the heat.

The day Georgia committed her sin was especially hot. It happened during the middle of the worst heat wave of June and was a wet, muggy sort of heat that seeped into the clothes and made tendrils of hair stick to the skin of the neck. Georgia knew that not even the shade of the magnolia tree in her front yard could cool her down. The only thing that would work was the blissful cool of the small pond at the back of her family's 100-acre farm.

Her parents knew she frequently disappeared to the pond on the hottest days of the year but trusted her enough to not care. If they knew she planned on inviting Jackson to join her, they might be inclined to think differently.

Right now though, she was stuck in the sweltering heat of the air condition-less building of Promised Land Baptist Church with no escape. She sat waiting impatiently in the hard wooden pew fanning herself vigorously with the church bulletin and lifted her long, softly curling, brown hair off her neck, trying to stave off the worst of the heat.

*Sweatin' like a sinner in church* she thought to herself, laughing at how well the phrase fit her now.

The heat was only made worse by the press of bodies all around her. A large woman sat to her left and her parents sat to her right. Georgia was so engrossed in the heat and her own thoughts that she missed most of Preacher Calvin's sermon. He was a soft-spoken sort, with a kind heart and wise words, but Georgia frequently daydreamed during his sermons. She couldn't help herself. Especially not when it was hot as it was that day.

At the end of the service, when Georgia's dress was so heavy with her sweat she thought she could squeeze out an entire other Mississippi from the drenched fabric, Preacher Calvin called a large man from the congregation up to the pulpit. Georgia had seen the man before the service. It was easy to spot guests in their small church, but he had stood out even more because of his size. Georgia thought he might be almost as wide around as he was tall. Preacher Calvin introduced the man as Reverend Joseph Campbell of Alabama.

"Friends, I hope you will join me in welcoming Reverend Campbell to our church. He'll be visiting with us for the next week to lead a spiritual revival right here," he said. "The Reverend hasn't told me his plans for the revival, but I'm sure it's bound to be enriching for us all."

As the congregation clapped to welcome the Reverend, he gave a solemn nod. When his jowls jiggled from the slight movement, Georgia let out a quiet snort that she quickly tried to cover with a cough. She thought she'd succeeded, until the man looked right at her, a frown curving over his squished face. When he moved to the podium,

Georgia thought for a brief, panicked moment that he meant to call her out. She breathed a sigh of relief when he turned and addressed their preacher instead, an odd sort of smile on his face.

The fat Reverend thanked Preacher Campbell before turning to face the congregation. “And I’d also like to thank all of y’all for having me here,” he said, in a thick, slow, old-southern accent that surprised Georgia. The image of the short, round man on the stage didn't fit with what sounded like the voice of Rhett Butler.

“I hope that the words I have prepared will bring comfort and guidance to the people of this town. We are in dark times, my friends, dark times indeed. The corruption of our society worsens every day. We must remain strong. If not for us, then for our children. It is our duty to guide them and keep them from the evils of the world.”

With these words, his gaze landed on Georgia. Though a smile remained on his face, his beady, piercing eyes seemed to stare right through her, as if they knew every single one of her sinful thoughts. A prickle of discomfort made her shiver. She didn't like that look in his eyes. She didn't know if it was disapproval or if it might be some kind of perverse attraction. But there was something in them that both threatened and promised retribution.

Even after Preacher Calvin prayed to end the service and everyone stood to mix and mingle on their way out, Georgia couldn't get the Reverend's cold stare out of her mind. She followed behind her parents as they moved to greet Preacher Calvin and the Reverend who waited at the door. Not wanting to go anywhere near the Reverend, Georgia began to search for an escape when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to find Jackson smiling down at her.

“Hey there, Georgia Lee,” he said.

“Jackson. Hi,” she said, her voice high with panicked surprise. She had been hoping to find him, if just to say hi, but her thoughts grew fuzzy and faded for a moment as she stared up at him.

She couldn't believe it, but despite the thick heat of the church, and the slight sheen of sweat she was on his neck, somehow he still looked good. It wasn't fair that men could look so good with a little bit of shine. If she even got the least bit hot she looked like a drowned rat. But not Jackson. He was perfect, with his hair neatly combed, collar ironed, tie straight, teeth gleaming. Not fair at all, she thought to herself.

When he cleared his throat, Georgia realized she had merely been staring up at him, a dazed look on her face.

Her face grew warm as she shook herself from her daze. “Sorry,” she said. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he said with a slight laugh. “How are you?”

“I'm ok.”

“Sure is hot today.”

“Yeah, it is.” They grew silent for a moment, an awkward tension filling the space between them. Georgia berated herself. She needed to do something different, needed to be more coy. Her mind scrambled as she searched for something to say.

Jackson cleared his throat then and asked, “So...you got any plans for today?”

Georgia couldn't believe it. He was asking her if she had plans. It was the perfect opportunity. She drew a deep breath cocked her head to the side, and put on a small smile

“Maybe,” she replied, her voice sweetened with flirtation. She could do this. She was a Southern woman after all. Being flirty and coy was in her blood. Jackson returned her smile with a bold one of his own.

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“I might be going for a swim in our pond.”

“Is that so?” he asked, raising a hand to scratch along his jaw. “All by yourself?”

“That was the idea,” she paused briefly, “but you could come along if you’d like.”

His smile grew and he cocked his head to match hers.

“Well, if you wouldn't mind the company...”

“I wouldn't,” she said. “I'll let you know when I head over?” When he nodded, Georgia said goodbye and turned to find her parents waiting for her at the door. Reverend Campbell stood next to them and was watching as she walked away from Jackson. Had he been watching the whole time? She slowly made her way over to them, hoping the Reverend would be gone by the time she reached the door.

She had no such luck, though, as when her daddy saw her walking towards them he called out, “There you are, Georgia. Come meet the Reverend. Reverend Campbell this is our daughter, Georgia.”

The Reverend turned to Georgia and took her hand in his. He shook it too slowly and the cool, clamminess of his palm made Georgia's skin crawl. She quickly extricated her hand from his grip and clasped it in her other one behind her back-as far out of his reach as possible.

“Pleasure to meet you, dear.” His thin smile was on his face once again, but Georgia still detected the slight foreboding in his eyes from before. When he looked over

her, she knew that the threat she'd seen in him earlier was not from attraction. She still didn't know what it was, but she was relieved it wasn't that.

“Pleased to meet you too, Reverend,” she replied, the lie flowing readily from her lips.

“Tell me, do you plan on attending the Revival with your parents?” he asked her. There was an odd note in his voice that set Georgia further on edge. He had also angled himself towards her more, so that he was slightly too close for comfort.

She took a step back, shuffling her feet to make it appear like she merely meant to readjust her footing. She didn't think her parents detected the evasion, but the calculating gleam in the Reverend's eye told her that he did.

“Yes sir, I will be,” she paused and caught her mother's eye. She nodded for her to say more. She turned back to the Reverend and added, “I look forward to hearing your message. I'm sure it'll be...enlightening.”

Though her parents looked pleased, the Reverend's eyes were shrewd. After a moment, his thin lips curved to one side as he inclined his head towards her and then her parents.

“Thank you,” he said. “I'm eager for it to begin, so that the Lord might speak to us all. If you'll excuse me.” He inclined his head again, giving Georgia one last look before walking away. She didn't think she'd ever been so glad to see the back of someone.

•••

After getting home and rushing through her lunch, despite the admonishments from both her parents to slow down, Georgia rushed up to her room. She typed out a text to Jackson to let him know she was headed that way.

As her thumb hovered over the send button, she couldn't believe that she was about to do this. Not only was she brimming with excitement for, but she also felt oddly at ease about the sin she was about to commit. The only emotions flowing through her were excitement and nervousness. She knew she should feel some guilt, but couldn't find it in herself to.

Resolved, she pressed send. Not even a minute later she received a response that he was headed that way, too.

She couldn't stop herself from grinning as she put on her favorite swimsuit, a simple black bikini, and bounded down the stairs, calling out a goodbye. Before anyone could question her, she was out the door and heading toward the farm truck.

When she climbed into the cab she looked up and saw her daddy waving at her from the porch. Sighing, Georgia rolled down the driver's side window waited for him to reach her. When he reached the truck, he leaned on the door, arms folded and resting on the open window.

"You in a hurry to get somewhere?" he asked. His tone was curious and hinted at him digging for information.

"I'm going to the pond," she said, hoping he wouldn't question her further.

"You want some company?" His question was too similar to the same she'd received from Jackson earlier and she glared at him.

"Actually, I'd rather go alone, thanks."

"You sure?" he pushed. His eyes appraised her from underneath his raised brows. Georgia figured he must know something for him to be so curious.

"I'm sure," she insisted. He sighed and shook his head.

“Just be careful, Georgia. Don't do anything you might regret.” His tone was both hard and cautioning at once, and Georgia felt a brief flash of annoyance followed closely by her previously absent guilt. She knew her daddy was just trying to protect her, but there was no way he actually knew what she had planned. If he did, he wouldn't've let her out of her room.

“I will be, Daddy.” He merely shook his head again before stepping away from the truck. “See you later,” Georgia said, before rolling up the window and driving away.

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Georgia drove faster than she knew was safe along the dirt road that led to the pond. She was just too excited to see Jackson.

When she finally reached the pond, Jackson was waiting for her. His hair was already wet and dripping onto his bare shoulders.

“You couldn't've waited for me?” she teased as she joined him on the small dock.

“You were takin' too long,” he said with a shrug. “I had to cool off. But now that you're here...” Before Georgia could react, Jackson grabbed her by the waist and jumped with her into the pond. When she came up sputtering and saw him grinning madly at her, she reached up and pushed his head back under the water before swimming away and laughing.

They kept swimming, horsing around, and flirting for a while before Georgia grew tired and swam to the dock, where she settled onto a towel to dry off. She lay on her stomach facing the water and continued to watch Jackson as he swam.

When Jackson rose from the pond, the water dripping off him slowly, Georgia knew the heat was definitely getting to her. The more she watched Jackson, the more flustered she grew. These feelings weren't altogether new, but the way they affected her

sure was. When Jackson glanced over at her for what felt like the millionth time and smiled, a deep flush spread through her. From her vantage point on the dock, she could see the lines of his stomach clearly defined in the sunlight, the smattering of freckles that covered his chest, shoulders and back, the lone dimple at the base of his spine as his body twisted around.

Georgia couldn't wait any longer. She stood up and moved over to where Jackson stood at the edge of the water. Reaching up to place her hands on his shoulders, she pulled him down into kiss. It was soft and sweet at first, but slowly grew harder and more desperate. Before she knew what had happened, she was laying on the old patchwork quilt with Jackson braced over her. She had a brief moment of panic, but quickly pushed it aside.

Then, what Georgia had waited so long for was over in a matter of minutes, finished in a clash of teeth and a tangle of limbs so hectic that she didn't know the sky from the ground for a moment.

As they struggled to regain their breath, Jackson turned to her.

"I'm sorry that wasn't better for you," he said. "I just couldn't last. I promise it'll be better next time."

"Next time? What makes you think there'll be a next time," she teased. She could tell by the immediate crestfallen look on Jackson's face though, that he had not picked up on her joke.

"Well...won't there?" he asked

"I was teasing you silly," she said with a laugh. "There will be if that's what you want. And besides...it wasn't all bad." A smile immediately spread across his face and

Georgia's breath hitched. After what she'd just experienced, she couldn't believe that something as simple as his smile would make her heart feel this way, but it did all the same.

"Georgia," he said, cradling her face in both hands, "I'm not about to let you go that quick. Not when I just got you."

Her heart leaping into her throat, Georgia returned his smile and settled back down against him. The next time couldn't come soon enough.

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When Georgia got home later that afternoon, she was surprised to see an unfamiliar car parked in front of their house. It was a shiny black Mercedes that looked out of place on the gravel of their driveway. After parking the truck and climbing the steps of the porch, Georgia paused just outside the door and strained to hear any voices coming from inside. She didn't feel like socializing right then as she was covered in sweat and somehow had dirt on her legs, despite rinsing off in the pond. The front door was open behind the storm door and she could just make out the murmur of conversation, but couldn't tell who it was but thought it might be coming from the living room

The storm door screeched as she opened it, and the conversation in the other room stopped.

"That you, Georgia?" her mother called out.

"Yeah, Momma, it's me," she said, hanging her wet towel by the door as she kicked off her cheap flip-flops.

"Would you come in here for a minute?" her momma asked. Georgia followed her voice and found her seated in the living room with her daddy on the love couch and the

Reverend Campbell across from them on the loveseat. She stopped in the doorway and looked at her parents, trying to avoid the Reverend's eyes.

"Georgia, you remember the Reverend, of course," her daddy said. Georgia glanced at Reverend Campbell briefly, nodding in acknowledgement. He smiled politely at her and Georgia wondered for a moment if the feelings she'd had this morning had been uncalled for. "He stopped by for some coffee and was tellin' us about the Revival."

"Nice to see you," she said, smiling in a way that was more like a soft grimace.

"And you as well," he replied, staring at her so intently that Georgia began to grow wary again.

"How was the pond, sweetie?" her momma asked from her spot on the couch. Georgia turned to look at her.

"It was good," she said, thinking about Jackson, "Real nice and cool. I didn't want to leave."

"Do you often go swimming by yourself?" the Reverend asked.

Georgia shrugged, "Sometimes. Not always. Sometimes I go with friends."

The Reverend nodded. "That can be dangerous, you know. Swimming alone. No telling what might happen." From the tone in his voice and the glint that was back in his eyes, a mixture of fear and worry came over Georgia. It was as if the Reverend knew what she had done, especially when he went on to say, "It can also be unwise to allow young ladies to go unsupervised for so long. There are many dangers in our world."

He directed these last statements towards her parents, though she still stood in the doorway. Her father laughed good-naturedly.

“Well, Reverend, our Georgia’s pretty capable. We trust her to be careful and do what’s right.” Georgia unwillingly flushed at her daddy’s words and glanced at the Reverend who watched her, a calculating gleam in his eye. The guilt that had been absent before now added to her mix of emotions.

“That is good to hear, Mr. Williams. All a parent can hope for is an obedient and God-fearing child.”

Her parents quickly voiced their agreement with him, and the guilt grew in Georgia. Claiming exhaustion from the heat, Georgia excused herself and made a hasty exit to her bedroom.

As she lay in her bed, she thought over her newfound feelings and the events of the afternoon. The memory of the way Jackson had looked and then the way he had looked at her sent butterflies tumbling through her stomach. She felt like if she wasn’t careful, they would force their way out, up through her throat, threatening to explode from behind her teeth and into the air in a violent display of affection. But now, she also felt wrong, guilty. Like she actually had committed some sinful act. She couldn’t settle on why, though. Was it because she was supposed to be a Christian and had disobeyed God by being with Jackson? Or was it because she was worried more about the approval of her parents, and knew the disappointment they would feel if they found it.

If the Reverend truly did somehow know what she had done, she hoped he wouldn’t tell her parents. But even if he did, Georgia didn’t think he would be able to prove it. How could he, unless he’d witnessed it? The thought made Georgia shiver in disgust. She was somewhat reassured that there was no way he could know, but still she couldn’t stop the gnawing of worry and guilt as she drifted off to sleep that night.

•••

The next day, Reverend Campbell's rally began. The men all gathered together to set up a tent in the small lot behind the building. It was old and ratty and looked like it hadn't been used since the 70s, but was somehow still sturdy. The women printed fliers to pass out and staple all over town with the help of the children.

The first night, the tent was mostly filled with church members, and a few friends and neighbors. Georgia sat patiently and quietly between her parents, guilt continuing to grow and gnaw at her, as she listened to Reverend Campbell holler and yell about the sins of man. She wasn't surprised that all of the sins seemed to be sexual in nature. Sodom and Gomorrah, David and Bathsheba, Samson and Delilah. Somehow he managed to preach on all of these in the same sermon, and his words only made Georgia's guilt grow. When she saw Jackson at the end of the service, she quickly walked in the other direction, confusion mingling with her guilt, and didn't see Jackson's own confusion as he watched her hurry away.

On the second night though even more showed up. The tent was packed, with a handful of people relegated to the perimeter. Perhaps drawn by the loud booming voice of Reverend Campbell reverberating through the cheap speakers that crackled every few words. Or if you believed the Reverend it was, "Divine Providence," that brought the newcomers. Georgia thought it was most likely the scent of all the dozens of casseroles, fried chicken, mac and cheese, potatoes, and sickly sweet pies and cakes.

Georgia sat in the middle of the foldout chairs with her parents. She kept an eye out for Jackson, who hadn't yet arrived, while she looked at all the unfamiliar faces around her. Most seemed to be listening to the Reverend, nodding continuously and every so often uttering an, "Amen!" Georgia wanted to talk to Jackson, needed to. She'd

lain awake most of the night worrying mostly and praying some. She couldn't think of anyone else she could talk to about this besides Jackson. She needed him to reassure her. Of what, she wasn't sure.

“Our world is full of sin!” the Reverend shouted from the pulpit, one hand clenched tightly to its surface while the other swung a bible through the air.

Holly could see from her spot near the back of the room that his toupee had slid out of place from the combination of his harsh movements and the overabundance of sweat that shone on his face.

“It is rampant in our society. Glorified in our culture, in all our major cities. New York, Chicago, Nashville even! And let us not forget that revelrous den of sin in the west—Hollywood,” he sneered, gazing out over the congregation. “These people, these so called ‘celebrities’ revel in sin. Alcohol, drugs, cursing.” He paused, both hands now clutching the podium, “Sex. Fornication. Adultery. If we are not careful, these people will brainwash our children into the same path to sin.”

Though Georgia was in the middle of the crowd, surrounded by dozens of other faces on all sides, the Reverend’s eyes somehow found her at that exact instant and Georgia was once again filled with a feeling of discomfort. She couldn't help but feel that his words were meant for her. Somehow, he knew the sins she had committed.

“We must prevent this from happening,” he continued. “We must stop our children from becoming corrupt beings. From becoming abominations in the eyes of the Lord! For an abomination will not receive the same grace as a normal sin. We are told so in the Bible. God’s. Divine. Word. Who are we to question what the holy book commands?”

Georgia was acutely aware of the Reverend's words as she desperately searched the crowd, looking for Jackson again. She needed to see him, to know that what they had shared wasn't a sin, but was natural. Wasn't it? Right as she caught sight of him approaching the tent from the road, the Reverend's tone changed.

“Young men must guard their hearts and eyes from the treacheries and seductions of women. Young women must help them avoid temptation by remaining pure and dressing modestly. Teenage boys cannot help themselves, and will act when tempted. My young sisters in Christ, you must not tempt them so.”

Georgia had looked away from Jackson and stare at the Reverend, her guilt now consuming her. Had she caused Jackson to sin? Was it her fault? A tight clamp seemed to close around Georgia's throat and she struggled to draw in a breath. She was barely conscious of the people around her as jumped up from her seat and began to push her way out of the tent. Once she reached the edge, she could no longer stop herself and ran. She ran without knowing where she was going, feet pounding, throat still constricted, and desperate tears streaming down her face.

Finally when her feet couldn't take anymore all was silent around her, Georgia stopped. She hunched over, sucking in deep breaths as she sobbed. When she felt a hand press to her back, she jumped up with her arms swinging wildly. Strong hands easily stopped her own, and with her eyes blurred by tears, it took her a moment to realize that it was only Jackson and that they were at the pond. She didn't realize just how far she had run. Jackson stood in front of her, breathing just as heavily as she did.

“It’s just me, Georgia. It’s just me,” he said, letting go of her hands to reach up and wipe the tears from her face. Georgia stared at him for a moment before throwing her arms around him, burying her head into his chest, her sobs renewing.

“It’s alright Georgia Lee. Its gonna be alright,” he told her, hands running over back soothingly. Georgia felt the rumble of his words in his chest and slowly began to stem the flow of her tears. The guilt still ate at her, and the fear of what was to come did as well, but in that moment she felt safe from it all. They would get through this together.

They stood like that for some time, wrapped in each other’s arms, until the sky turned a soft pink, like the petals on a cherry blossom, and then when a deep purplish-black color began to creep into the sky. The world around them was still and silent, apart from the chirping of crickets and the flashing of the fireflies, and still they stood.

### Coming Home

As Holly Nichols and her fiancé drove into her small hometown, a feeling of nostalgia hit her, followed closely by an overwhelming panic.

When Wyatt had suggested they make the trip to inform her family of her engagement in person, she had been both surprised at his suggestion and secretly pleased. He’d never suggested such a trip before, and in fact hadn’t met any of her family apart from her parents, who had once made the trip from Tennessee to California via 35-hour car ride rather than plane.

Her momma had loved Wyatt almost immediately, her daddy had warmed by the end of the trip, and Wyatt had been pleased at how much he enjoyed getting to know

them. But her parents had made it no secret that they'd rather not make the trip again, and Wyatt had never expressed interest in visiting her home.

She wasn't worried about Wyatt getting along with her parents, or her Granny who she knew would love him too. She was more worried about the various members of her extended family. She didn't necessarily need nor care for their approval, as she'd never been particularly close with any of them, but she knew how they could get and she didn't want to know how they might react to Wyatt's Californian ways. He'd told her not to worry, but it seemed she couldn't help but do just that. She didn't know what might happen, didn't know what to expect, and that was the worst part of all.

Something must have alerted Wyatt to the change in her mood, as he glanced at her from his spot in the driver's seat and reached out to take her hand.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, turning his hand over in her own to trace the lines of his palm."

"Holly," he said in a tone that suggested he knew she was lying.

"Wyatt," she replied, mimicking his tone. He shook his head and chuckled. After a quiet moment, he gently squeezed her hand.

"It'll be ok, you know."

Holly watched out the window as they passed all the places she remembered from her childhood. The ice cream shop on the corner, the old courthouse in the town square, the small theatre that now housed no less than four churches of four different denominations. She pressed her forehead to cool surface of the window and sighed.

"I know." It would have to be.

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After passing through the town, they continued on the main road for a few miles before Holly directed Wyatt away from the traffic, through a maze of back roads, and towards her family's home. When they at last drove up the dirt and gravel path to her family's home, Holly gazed out at all the trees that grew all around. They gave a quiet calm to the air that they lacked out west. This she had missed—the quiet, the stillness. Nothing ever seemed to stay still for long in California.

As they finally broke through the trees and the small white house came into view, Holly couldn't help but feel like crying as a warm feeling spread through her. It was a feeling of homecoming and happiness. The house was old, but still lovingly cared for by her momma and daddy. Garden beds lined the yard just below the wide porch, and it looked like a fresh coat of paint had recently been applied to the exterior. There were two or three of her young cousins in the yard, running and squealing like the five or six fat pigs pinned off away from the house.

When their car pulled to a stop next to her dad's rusted out old Ford, the front door of the house swung open, screeching so loudly that they heard it though the closed windows of the car. Her Granny hobbled out followed closely by Holly's parents. While her mother rushed out to greet them, her father stayed by his mother-in-law's side, keeping one hand and both eyes on her as she walked. She turned to look at Wyatt, putting on a smile despite her trepidation.

“You ready?” Wyatt asked with a smile of encouragement.

“As I'll ever be,” she said.

As they climbed out of the car, Holly's eyes were immediately drawn to the dark splatters that covered the side of the rental car. She hoped that mud was all that covered

it, but from the smell that hit her almost immediately, she knew there had to be something extra mixed in. She decided a car wash would be there first stop after they left.

The young cousins paid them no mind as Holly and Wyatt began to walk towards the house.

“Is that my Holly?” Granny called out from her place at the top of the steps. Her voice was strong despite her feebleness, like the winds that blew through the mountains. Holly called back to her grandmother as her mother reached them, pulling Holly into a tight hug.

“It’s me, Granny,” she said with a slight laugh, returning her mother’s embrace. “I brought somebody to meet you.”

“You sure did,” her mother said, her voice high with excitement. She released Holly from her grip and turned to Wyatt. “Come here, you, and give me a hug.”

“Momma,” Holly said with a laugh, as she watched her mother pull Wyatt into a tight, rib-crushing hug. “You’re gonna squeeze him to death!” Wyatt laughed with her, returning her mother’s embrace.

“Don’t worry about me, you know I’m tougher than I look.” He looked down at Holly’s mother as he released her, “Isn’t that right Mrs. Nichols?”

“Now, listen here sugar. I done *told you* to call me June. And you,” she said, turning back to Holly and reaching out to take her left hand, “Don’t think for a second I didn’t see that ring on your finger.”

Holly opened her mouth to explain, but her mother hushed her with a wave of her hands.

“Don't go apologizin' now. 'T ain't nothing to be sorry for. But seeing as how you didn't see fit to tell us beforehand, I reckon I'll let you explain to your daddy just why he'll be the last to know.”

Though her tone was light and joking, Holly could see and hear the hurt in her mama's face. Holly pulled her in for another hug, whispering frantic apologies to her. Her mother pulled back from her after a moment, hands on her shoulders.

“What're yuns chatterin' about all the way over there? Y'all know I can't here a damn thing! Get on over here 'fore I hafta come all the way to y'all.” Holly couldn't help but laugh at her Granny's impatience. She knew Granny wasn't truly angry.

“Come on now. Best do what Granny says,” her mother said, leading them to the house. When they reached the front porch Holly moved ahead and gave quick hugs to her daddy and granny, whose wide smiles brought tears to Holly's eyes.

Holly quickly introduced Wyatt to her grandmother and was glad to see that she'd been right-Granny already loved him. She'd taken one look at his blond hair, blue eyes, and blinding smile and had dubbed him her “California boy.”

On their way inside Holly's mother called out to the kids still running about in the yard. “Y'all head on home, now, and we'll see yuns back here later.” Screeching like banshees, the group ran off down the road they'd driven up on. No doubt one or more of them would arrive home with a few bumps or bruises, Holly thought as she watched one throw a well-aimed pinecone at another's head.

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After they all settled into the living room, they finally told her father and grandmother that they were engaged. Without hesitation, Granny let out a loud whoop

and began firing off question after question about their plans. Holly had to laugh and assured her that the plans would be finalized later on.

Her father was at first upset that he hadn't been filled in before, but in the end had merely sighed and shook Wyatt's hand.

"No point in me complainin' now. Couldn't get you to change your mind even if I wanted to I reckon. Never been able to before."

"You'll have to tell the rest of the family tonight," her mother interjected. "They'll all be comin' over for dinner to see you."

"Oh, won't that be nice!" Holly said her voice laced with sarcasm, earning her a stern look from her mother.

"Now, they may not be as cultured or as open as you might like, but they're still family. It won't be as bad as all that. And besides, if you're Uncle Bill doesn't show up, we might not even have to worry. Now come on and help me finish this cookin' and let the men talk."

"I'd be glad to help to, Ms. June," Wyatt said, beginning to rise from his seat. "You don't need to do all that yourself."

Her mother turned to him, one hand on her hip, and Holly stared at him in surprise. He wasn't normally one to offer help with such things. Holly realized he was a lot like her own father that way. They were both good men, but left the cooking to the women. It had never bothered Holly much before, but now that she was back home, she realized she might not have changed as much as she'd thought.

"That's mighty sweet of you, Wyatt, and I appreciate the thought. However," she paused and arched one eyebrow, "this ain't California and though I realize all those

efforts for equality and whatnot have been mighty successful out there, this is my kitchen. And ain't no men allowed in here. I'd liketa let a wild hog loose in there fore I did one a y'all."

Wyatt raised his hands in defeat, and sat back down, laughing. "Well, you can't say I didn't try."

Holly followed her mother into the kitchen, still thinking about Wyatt's offer to help. She wondered if there were other things that were the same with them in California and she simply hadn't noticed them because it was all she'd ever known.

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As luck would have it, the first person to arrive that night, at precisely 5 o'clock, was Uncle Bill, his young wife and 5 screaming children in tow. Holly recognized two of them as part of the bunch from earlier and sure enough, one had a large scrape over his knee.

Uncle Bill was her momma's older brother and was a large man with a large personality and a loud, booming voice. In comparison, his wife Eileen was tiny and quiet. As soon as they walked into the house, Bill swooped Holly up in his arms and squeezed her in a bone-crushing hug, as if it was something they always did. He kept going on for several minutes about how skinny she was and how it was about time she came back.

"Well," she said, after extricating herself from his grip, "we do live in California, so it's not as easy as just driving here, you know."

"I still can't believe your daddy let you move out there," he said, shaking his head.

Wyatt, who stood next to Holly watching the exchange, let out a short bark of laughter. Uncle Bill turned to look at him, one eyebrow raised.

“Something funny?” he asked.

“Well, I don't really see how he could have stopped her. Holly can be pretty stubborn when she wants something.” Wyatt smiled down at her, squeezing one arm around her shoulders. Holly returned his smile before turning back to her uncle, whose face was scrunched up like he'd smelled something rotten.

“Who are you anyhow?” Bill asked, annoyance lacing his voice. Holly quickly interjected, hoping to stop any drama before it might happen. Wyatt was often argumentative, but Uncle Bill was a tried and true Southern man—slow to think and quick to anger.

“Uncle Bill, this is Wyatt. I'm sure Momma or Daddy must have mentioned him before.” Bill nodded, scratching a hand through his scraggly beard.

“They might've. Figures he'd be that pretty boy type. I'd get out now if I was you, Holly. Never know what that one might be a-hidin' from you.” Holly grew angry now at his insinuation. She should've known he'd suggest something like that.

“Actually, we're getting married,” she said. “That's one reason we came to visit. So we could tell Momma, Daddy, and Granny.” Bill turned to stare at Wyatt.

“You mean to tell me you didn't ask her daddy for his blessin' beforehand? Boy what's wrong with you? He ain't never gonna give it to yuns now. Not that I would either, mind.”

“Well,” Wyatt began, straightening up to his full height, “I don't think Holly needs her father's permission. She's an adult and this isn't the 1800s. Second, her parents are actually happy for us. So I suppose it's good she's not *your* daughter.” Holly cringed inwardly and could see her uncle bristle with anger.

“You better watch your tone with me, boy,” he said, pointing a finger in Wyatt’s face. Holly hadn’t thought Wyatt could get any angrier, but realized how wrong she’d been as she saw him start forward, his hands clench into fists at his sides. She quickly grabbed onto his arm to pull him back. She didn’t want to protect Uncle Bill from him, but she knew if they continued, it would only grow worse.

Before anyone could say anything else, Granny hobbled into the living room and said to her son, “Now Bobby, you hush up and let them be. Ain’t no business a yours what they’s doin’.”

Though it was clear Bill had no desire to simply “let them be,” he remained quiet and settled onto the couch with a scowl on his face.

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For the next little while, there were no problems. The rest of the family soon arrived. There were almost too many to count and the din of talk and laughter was equally matched by the shouts, squeals, and crying of all the children. Holly didn’t recognize all the faces, especially those of the younger children, but nearly everyone made their way over to her as soon as they arrived, hugging and kissing her. And then after everyone had arrived and she announced that she and Wyatt were engaged, the hugging and kissing started all over again. When it was finally time to eat, Holly whispered to Wyatt that she’d had enough physical contact to last her for the next month and that he would have to deal with all that entailed.

As they settled into their spots around one of the cluster of tables, Holly again began to hope that they night would perhaps not be a total disaster. But when Bill sat down directly across from them, she knew the calm wouldn’t last.

Somehow, during the dinner conversation they landed on the discussion of the cost of living in California.

Not thinking anything of it, Wyatt said, “Yeah, it’s not cheap, but it helps that we live together, so we don't have to pay two rents.” For a brief moment after his statement, those closest to him went silent, while he remained oblivious to their reactions and continued eating. Holly should have warned him not to talk about anything like that, not with how strict many of her relatives were.

“You mean to tell me, y’all been living together...out of wedlock?” he demanded from Wyatt, his voice filled with anger and a hint of disgust.

“Uh, yeah, we have,” Wyatt said. It grew silent again, no one speaking and everyone avoiding eye contact with them. The silence was shattered when Uncle Bill slammed his hands down on the table, drawing everyone’s attention to him.

“I can’t believe your parents let you do that,” he said to Holly. “Or have y’all been lyin’ to ‘em ‘bout that? I bet you ain’t even told ‘em. That's the only way I reckon you’d be able to get away with it.”

“Frankly, I don't see how it’s any of your business,” Wyatt said.

“Wyatt,” Holly started, trying to stop the confrontation before it go too deep, but it was too late. Her uncle had heard enough.

Bill rose from his seat, towering over them and reached across the table. Grabbing Wyatt by his shoulders, he raised one fist and slammed it into Wyatt’s face before anyone could stop him and everyone erupted into shouts. Wyatt jerked back then, clutching one hand to his face as blood poured and cursing. Her parents came rushing over to see what happened, her father going around to try and restrain Bill, who was still standing with

clenched fists while yelling at Wyatt. Holly tried to wipe away the blood that was still flowing from Wyatt's nose, but he pushed her aside and rose from his seat, glaring at Bill his hands clenched into fists at his side.

"Wyatt," Holly said again and finally he turned to look at her. "Please. C'mon, lets go." Wyatt turned back to her uncle and Holly worried that he would fight back anyway, despite her pleas. But she was able to breathe a sigh of relief when her merely turned and strode from the room, headed towards the bathroom. Holly quickly stood and followed after him.

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When they came out of the bathroom after cleaning Wyatt up, everyone but her parents, Granny, and Bill's wife were gone. The small woman rushed up to them, tears streaming down her face, as soon as they came into view, apologizing over and over again. When they assured her that it was fine though, she merely shook her head.

"He's always had a temper. I just never thought I'd see him take it out on someone," she said.

"It's really alright," Wyatt said, as the crying woman clasped his hand. "No permanent damage done. I promise you I'll be fine."

She nodded, still crying, as she apologized again and hugged them all before leaving. As Holly watched her leave, she realized that though she hadn't completely shed the Southern traits that had been taught to her since birth, she hopefully wouldn't ever have to deal with what that poor woman had. Though she realized she had often been the passive one in her relationship with Wyatt, she knew that there was hope for change.

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Later that night, after her father, Granny, and Wyatt had all gone to bed, Holly sat

on the floor of the living room, leaning back gently against her mother's legs. The tears had long since dried on her face, but she could still feel them. Could feel the harsh words that had caused them.

Momma's hands were softly brushing Holly's hair, lulling her into a sleepy state. She was near to falling asleep when Momma's voice broke the silence.

"What'd you come back for, Holly?" she asked. Holly readjusted herself on the floor and leaned her head back to look at her.

"What do you mean, Momma?" she asked.

"You know what I mean girl. Why did you come back? Y'all've got such a good life out there in California. And this ain't a good place for you to be no more. That's why I was real glad when you left home, even though I knew I'd miss you. If you hadn't left you woulda ended up stuck, just like poor Uncle Bill's wife."

Holly took her Momma's hand and they sat in silence. She couldn't seem to remember why she'd come back anymore. She supposed it was to tell her family that they were engaged, but she could've done that on the phone. She'd wanted Granny to meet Wyatt before she passed away, but she knew they would have been o.k. if he hadn't. She remembered reading somewhere once that even if you moved far away, you never forgot your home, that a part of you would always remember it and want to go back, and that eventually that part would win out. Coming home though, it seemed, wasn't for everyone.