To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Christopher Gale Morelock entitled "Hammers and Strings." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Dr. Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Vice Chancellor and
Dean of Graduate Studies

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HAMMERS AND STRINGS

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
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Christopher Gale Morelock
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a novel that explores the estranged relationship between a father and son. The protagonist, Benny Headley, has followed his musical dreams to Nashville, but after ten years has returned home to the small town of Morristown, Tennessee to care for his ailing father, Ben Headley, who is in the latter stages of Alzheimer's.

The style is simple and straightforward and does not call attention to itself so that characterization is better served. The plot is chronological with flashbacks incorporated to reveal important information.

I will continue to revise this manuscript towards the goal of publication.

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Introduction

Hammers and Strings

The Creative Process

The creative process begins in the abstract. It brings to light that which is lost in the darkness. At times inspiration whispers. Sometimes it shouts. The writer has two primary responsibilities. The first is listening. The second is delivering.

One of the most important challenges for the writer is to locate his playground, the place where his imagination is let loose. This place is not the same for all writers. For some it is a busy location surrounded by noise and activity. While for others it is secluded and quiet. Some writers' have to change their surroundings to become inspired, by moving to a new city or going on a weekend getaway. While others' imaginations come alive within their daily routine and casual interactions. Although many writers create an artificial setting to aid in the creative process, there is no set formula to entice inspiration's voice. The job of the writer is to listen and remain faithful to the idea that first captured its attention.

If inspiration were the only aspect of creating that the writer needed, then the writing process would be simple. The second stage proves difficult for most writers. Delivering is the writing technique that includes not only the first draft, but the process of revision.

In his book, *On Writing*, Stephen King states that he writes ten pages every morning and doesn't stop writing until his ten pages are finished. He says that this may take him three hours or eight, but the point is that he has discovered and implements a writing discipline that works for him. I have modeled my first draft writing schedule after Stephen King's, except, I limit my work week to five days. Without setting a certain number of pages goal, finishing the first draft would prove difficult.

The revision process is where elements of plot, characterization, setting, consistency of voice, imagery, and the overall writing style is judged with a critical eye. In revising, I become the editor, and the real work begins.

The creative writing instructors at the University of Tennessee have assisted me the most with revising. Inspiration cannot be taught, but the elements of story and various writing techniques can. Coming into the creative writing program at the University of Tennessee, I knew that language was my weakness. While writing a first draft I never considered if an expression or detail was clichéd, or if I violated the point of view. In revision these considerations are vital to the maturation of the novel and the writer. I have discovered that I have a habit of over-explaining and that I have to watch out for point of view shifts in the narrative. Overall, this program has helped me become a more concise writer and has given me an assortment of editing tools.

Marketing a novel does not come naturally for me. But this is a vital aspect of the writer's process that cannot be ignored, unless the writer enjoys keeping a closet filled with unread manuscripts. Stories are meant to be shared. If the writer crafts tales only for himself, he has gained nothing. I have to become not only more disciplined in revision, but in seeking publication so that my stories can be read.

I have a passion for writing for children and young adults. It is in writing for this age group that I experience the most creative freedom. I am interested in all types of genres for this group. When writing for children there are no limits to imagination. They are an audience willing to suspend its beliefs and travel any where a fantastic story leads.

Literary Influences

Among the several writers whose work has influenced mine, Mark Twain and Charles Dickens stand out. Charles Dickens was an inspired writer who crafted distinct characters and placed them in outrageous circumstances. Many modern readers find his characters somewhat cartoon-like, but in the mid-nineteenth century when his serial novels first found their audience, his characters seemed authentic. Regardless of how a modern reader judges the realism of Dickens' characterizations, it cannot be denied that his characters are unique and memorable. Dickens had a flare for bringing to life a seemingly unimportant character and keeping him alive in the reader's imagination without ever encountering him again. Dickens breathed life into each member of his cast by giving each of them a distinct voice.

I want each character I write to be distinct like Dickens'. In *Hammers and Strings*, I have focused on each character's dialogue. I have tried creating specific speech patterns for each. Word usage is one technique I used. For example, Marcy is the only character who says, "Oh heck."

Dialogue also distinguishes a character through pace and rhythm. For example, Outlaw Richard talks in long run-on sentences. Yet Ben Headley rarely speaks.

The novel that has influenced me the most has been *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In this story Twain makes not only a rebellious youth lovable, but a Negro slave sympathetic to a readership consisting at first of mainly whites. There is a combination of elements that contributes to this, but one that cannot be denied is Twain's use of dialogue.

Both Twain and Dickens excel in the ability to craft unique characters through dialogue, but they also incorporate coincidence in their plots. For example in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, after Huck runs away, it is coincidental that he finds Jim. However, their reunion is essential for the progress of the story, which consists mainly of their adventures riding down a raft on the Mississippi river. Or in *Great Expectations*, it seems like coincidence when Pip discovers that his financial backer is not Miss Havisham but none other than the convict that he helped escape in the beginning of the story. Some readers reject the use of coincidence. Other's hardly take notice and accept these ironic events as credible. To these readers it cannot be denied that life is full of coincidences. However, for the writer the incorporation of coincidence into plot is difficult to achieve. Twain and Dickens make these unbelievable moments acceptable. I am striving to be a novelist who follows their example. I am not yet certain how to mold coincidental moments into a narrative so that they are acceptable to most readers, but I will continue to explore.

On Writing Hammers and Strings

This story came from an idea I had a few years ago for a stage play. Originally, I wanted to write a two man play set in Ben Headley's living room. The story would have

been written in two acts with a total of four scenes and an overall time span of three months. Since the story deals with Alzheimer's, the time shifted from present to memory throughout. I didn't write it as a play because I wanted to expand the setting to encompass the entire town of Morristown and not just Ben Headley's living room. Also, I believed more characters were needed to fully develop the story. For example, Outlaw was necessary because it is out of loyalty to him that Benny comes home. And the love story of Benny and Miriam needed to be told, and could not exist within the confines of a two person cast. Therefore, I crafted the story into a novel so that a more fully realized narrative would evolve.

The novel's structure and storytelling style are traditional. I wanted to write a simple, straightforward story dealing with a father's and son's strained relationship. I have always been fascinated with the father-son dynamic, especially ones with broken relationships. In this story, Benny and his father struggle with pride. Each believes he is right and that the other should see life through his perspective. Ben is a practical man who owns and manages the same hardware store that his father and his father owned and managed before him. Ben wants Benny to have something solid in his life and wants to pass the store on to him.

Benny, however, is a dreamer. He is a musician who traded his baseball bat for his grandfather's guitar. He believes that music built out of the imagination is as solid as a building constructed of wood, and he desires to become a famous singer/songwriter in Nashville. After ten years of struggling, playing at clubs and cafés, Benny never gets the necessary break he needs.

Benny feels like his dad has never understood him. He resents Ben for not supporting his dreams and has spent the last ten years trying to forget his father. But every time Benny plays his guitar, the tightening of his fingers, reminds him of the night of his graduation, the last time he saw his parents. The night Benny told him that he didn't want to work his life away at the hardware store, and that he was going to play guitar, instead. That night Ben grabbed the guitar and swung it into the wall, accidentally breaking Benny's hand.

Benny gets a letter from Outlaw, a long time friend of the family and the only employee at the hardware store, explaining that Ben has Alzheimer's and needs care. Out of loyalty to Outlaw and the fact that he's broke, Benny goes home.

The novel is set in Morristown, Tennessee. Setting is a major element in this story. The town is filled with buildings and people that spark Benny's memory. The story could take place in any small town in the south. I chose Morristown because I grew up there and could describe the town and the people living in it accurately.

I set *Hammers and Strings* in the south because of the responsibility family members feel for one another and the power of music. The south has always been associated with family and heritage and many great novels like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Sound and the Fury* have been shaped around the family. It is crucial to the narrative in *Hammers and Strings* that Benny feels obligated to care for his dad. This father and son relationship is the core of the novel.

Music was also an element that needed to be distinctively southern. Musicians who long to be successful guitarists come to Nashville to make their mark. It was necessary that Benny be there at the beginning of the novel. Because of his aspirations, it

is even more difficult for Benny to return home to the small town built on the backs of furniture factories. Benny struggles to keep his dream of music alive inside a culturally deprived home and town. *Hammers and Strings* is the story of a son's conflict with his father and with the town in which he grew up.

One of the challenges writing this story was showing a believable progression of Alzheimer's, while keeping the story within a plausible time span for the budding relationship between Benny and Miriam. I organized the novel in three parts, similar to a three act play. Book One is set during the first weekend Benny arrives home. Book Two takes place a month later, and Book Three encompasses a few days following. This span of time works with the Alzhemer's since the disease is in its latter stages. However, to realistically dramatize Ben's condition, I suggest in Book Three that he also has a brain tumor, which is the cause of his trances.

I am revising this novel. There are a number of changes that I plan on incorporating. For example, as written the narration in the beginning is full of exposition. An effective storyteller shows instead of tells. In the revision, the novel will begin with Benny playing one of his songs at the Boardwalk Café in Nashville. It is an open mic night that he frequently attends in the hope that someone from the music industry will hear him. In this opening scene, I will show how Benny has had to sell his guitar to pay his last month's rent. Also, Benny will remember the night of the breaking of the guitar while he plays at the open mic night at the beginning in the novel instead of reliving it with his father at the end. Benny has already received Outlaw's letters and has a bus ticket home for the next day. During the bus ride, Benny will read over Outlaw's letters and will remember important information like not being able to attend his mother's

funeral. Originally, I thought withholding this information would heighten the reader's interest by creating a certain mystery. But I realize that the tension between Benny and his father would become heightened if the reader knew this information at the beginning.

At the end of the novel, I will include a scene where Benny and Miriam continue their relationship. In its current version, the ending is vague, giving only a hint as to what the outcome of Benny and Miriam's love will be. The reader knows that Benny is going to continue to pursue Miriam, but doesn't know what her response will be. Therefore, a more straightforward resolution is needed.

I will analyze closely the novel's overall style and will incorporate more music imagery when appropriate with hardware images.

I will give the love story special attention. At present it is somewhat bland and predictable. I want the love story to be memorable. In my beginning thoughts about this narrative, a love story wasn't present. It evolved as I wrote the novel.

There are a number of coincidences in this version of the novel. One example is when Benny meets Nettie again on the bus going to Nashville. Some readers will find this too coincidental and writer-manipulated. However, my goal is to show that coincidences can happen and be believable. The trick is to earn this credibility. I am not certain how to do this yet, but I will explore while revising. If I cannot make this chance meeting credible then instead of Benny actually running into Nettie, I may have him simply remember her and Ed and the love they shared as he sits alone on the bus waiting for the passengers. This may be enough to motivate him to continue to pursue Miriam. Since there are many flashbacks in the story, this may be believable to the reader without seeming forced.

Another coincidence is Ben's trance in Book Three lasting long enough for Benny to get him to the doctor without a commotion. The original idea was to have him in the trance all week after the ball game on Labor Day. I may keep this the same but have Ben wake up in the doctor's office. That way he could hear about his possible brain tumor from the doctor, and the reader could witness his response and later interaction with Benny.

Since I am accustomed to writing for children, *Hammers and Strings* was challenging. This process has been extremely valuable to me as a developing writer. I will take what I have learned and apply the stylistic elements towards improving the middle reader and young adult novels I write.

BOOK ONE: OLD BETHEL ROAD

CHAPTER ONE:

When Benny Headley was eighteen, he told himself that he'd never, upon any circumstance, return to that old farmhouse on the outskirts of Morristown, TN; the place he used to call home. "I have no home now!" he screamed at his dad, the stubborn old man he was named after, on that supposed last day. Benny even told himself as he drove off in his black Firebird that even God himself wasn't big enough to bring him back to the eastern hills of Tennessee. For ten years Benny tried everything to escape his heritage, but no matter where he went his mom always had a way of finding him. She never phoned, but on unspecific occasions a letter would appear, telling Benny about the family and her friends at Bethel Baptist Church. She'd always end the letter with "your room's the way you left it."

Whenever one of her letters came, Benny would wait a day or so before opening it. He felt guilty, for a part of him wanted to see his mom, he missed her, and her letters always stung him with an unintended reproach, telling him that he was a bad son. But there was a reason, a good one in fact, that he left, and it had nothing to do with his mom. And although he longed to see her and sit down at the table to one of her delicious cube steak and gravy dinners, he just couldn't, no matter how many letters she sent or how desperately he wanted to, because there was no way to see just her; he'd have to encounter his dad too, and that was something he promised he'd never do.

However, Benny would write, telling her how much he missed her and always promising that he'd be home as soon as he could, although he never had any intention of keeping that promise. Benny had a good idea that she never knew the real reason why he left before the night of high school graduation, the night he was supposed to play guitar for the ceremony, an honor that both he and his mom were proud of. And although she'd ask, Benny would never respond. He didn't know why he couldn't tell her the truth. He didn't feel that what happened was his fault. In the end, he figured that some truths were just too ugly to repeat and he wanted to spare her from that. He comforted himself by reasoning that his absence was the best thing for her because if he came home then all that ugliness would show its unwanted face. And he wanted to protect her from that. But no matter how many times he tried to convince himself that his stubbornness and pride was really mercy, his conscience had a way of reminding him of the truth.

Although he despised himself for doing it, Benny would lie to his mom, writing that his life was great and that the reason he couldn't visit was because he was traveling playing guitar for a country band in Nashville. Now the truth was that he did live in Nashville, but that was about the extent of the reality of his tales. Benny had always dreamed of being a famous country star and if not that, at least a well respected studio player. And Benny believed he could have made his goal had his dad not prevented it. But Benny couldn't tell his mom the truth, that he wasn't successful, that he tried to play guitar, but it was as if his talent left him the day he left home. He couldn't tell her that he had hopped from job to job, barely paying is rent in a slummy area off Second Avenue on the eastside. He couldn't tell her that he weighed less now than he did before he left

because his diet consisted of Roma noodles and potted meat, and that the only delicacy in his life was the sugary goodness of a Mountain Dew.

He needed for her to believe that he was a desired artist among the big shots in the music city. He thought that if she believed it, then maybe somehow it might be somewhat true. And through her belief maybe his one room apartment he shared with a family of roaches and an occasional mouse guest would transform itself into a ten thousand square foot mansion on Franklin Road. And perhaps her belief would make his job as a short order cook at Ihop a little more bearable, and would fill him with a sense of pride because he was now one of the privileged few who rode the Metro bus everyday instead of having the hassle of owning his own car. But no matter how much he wished her belief to change his perspective, it never did. And every day he resented his job a little more, and every day he hated himself for not being able to pay his insurance before his Firebird was stolen by some kids who wanted a joyride, torching it under a bridge. The truth of Benny's life was that he was miserable and alone. But he couldn't tell his mom the realities that he didn't want to believe himself. And no matter how unbearable his life would get, he had to believe that it was better than being near his dad. His mom would ask him about his love life and if he'd found the one yet. Benny would reply that he was still looking, but that he'd frequently go out on dates with various women. But this was a fabrication, a dream of what could have been if he weren't a short order cook who rode the metro bus. Because how could he date if be couldn't even pick the woman up?

But that was only part of his problem. The real root of his dating dysfunction was because he was shy. In fact, Benny was terribly shy when it came to the opposite sex. He didn't know why but for some reason when an attractive woman approached him, he'd

become silent, as if he lost his ability to speak. And the strange part was that Benny was considered handsome by most women's standards. He was five foot ten inches and well built at 160 pounds. He looked as if he exercised regularly although he didn't, and his dark, wavy hair appeared well managed even when he just rolled out of bed and tossed it quickly with his fingers.

The only women Benny could talk intelligently to, sharing some of his personality with, were women he didn't find attractive. But even these friendships were short lived because these women would get the wrong impression of his interest and believing his interaction to be more than just friends, would become offended and disgusted with him when he either wouldn't take the relationship to a more intimate level, or would reject them when they took the initiative.

For seven years Benny continued life on the eastside of Nashville as usual, communicating with his mom through letters, until one long March month he noticed that no letter arrived. A couple of weeks into April, he considered sending her a letter, even if it meant breaking his tradition of only replying. However, before he did, he received a letter addressed to him in an unfamiliar handwriting from his parents' address. Benny opened this letter immediately. He feared not to. He knew something had to be wrong. Since he had left, no one except his mom had written him. He knew by the handwriting and the brevity of the letter that it hadn't been written by his mom. He quickly gazed at the signature at the bottom, Outlaw Richard.

Outlaw had been Benny's dad's sidekick at the hardware store as long as Benny could remember. He was a few years older than Old Ben, and had been his faithful employee and friend since before his dad had inherited Headley's Hardware from his

father. Benny had always liked Outlaw, mainly because he was simple and straightforward. If Outlaw said it then it was more or less the truth and there wasn't any getting around that. Another characteristic of Outlaw that Benny admired was that he was a dreamer. His imagination could out distance the best storytellers around, even if after Outlaw confessed that it was all tomfoolery,

As Benny read the letter it didn't take him long to realize Outlaw's tone was not its usual optimistic one, but was grave and serious.

Dear Benny,

I ain't one to write letters and I ain't particularly one to give news of this kind. It's been a long time since you've been home and I know you and your dad don't talk. I didn't know how to reach you, but luckily when we were looking through your mom's bible found the letters you sent. Now I don't know if you knew your mom's been sick or not, but she has had cancer for the pest two years. She put up a good fight. You should've seen her hold on for every dear day. I think she was holding out for you to come home. Now I know you're busy with that band and all and I know had you known beforehand that you would've been back. I would've told you sooner, but like I said didn't know your whereabouts until now.

Your mom passed away, peacefully in her sleep two nights ago. The funeral is tomorrow morning at ten o'clock at the cemetery next to your mom's church. I told your dad to write this to you, but you know how he can be.

Outlaw Richard

Outlaw had dated the letter the eleventh of April, which meant the funeral was on the twelfth. Benny's life was so uneventful that he didn't keep up with which day of the week it was let alone the date. He didn't have a calendar, so he ran outside to find a newspaper. He didn't want to run to the convenient store down the street, so he went to the laundromat, which was on the first floor, and found yesterday's paper lying on the floor underneath a chair in the corner. It was dated the fourteenth.

Benny felt sick as he went back to his apartment. In fact, he felt ill the rest the week. He couldn't believe he'd missed his mom's funeral. At first he blamed himself, that he should've cared more about her and less about himself. Benny loved his mom. She was the only person he had that understood him, that supported him. It was at this moment that he realized his true condition. For so long he had made up an existence to her that even he at tines believed it. But now that he didn't have anyone to tell his false life to, Benny's real life fell upon him. All of the dreams his mother believed for him were now buried in a plot of earth at the Bethesda Cemetary.

Benny tried to remember his mom, but couldn't picture her. The more he strained to recreate the likeness of her face, the more blurry her features became. Benny wanted to lash out at someone and for once he wished he could see his dad for a moment, long enough to blame him for her death and crucify him, hammering his feet and hands with the nails of his cruelty and neglect. Benny believed that if it hadn't been for his dad that his life would've been different and he would've been there for his mom. He could imagine his dad just watching her waste away without consoling her in her pain, and then would continue to expect her to wait on him, fixing his meals and tidying up his house.

After all their years together, Benny knew his dad only saw her as his possession, a slave to the almighty will of Ben Headley and his tough as a two by four stubbornness. The more Benny thought of his mom, the more his hatred for his dad grew. "The old Bastard couldn't even tell me she died." he fumed.

Benny took Outlaw's letter and turned it over to the blank side and wrote his declaration; My home is where I am. He folded the letter and kept it in his wallet where it would travel with him no matter where he went. It served both as a monument to his mother's death and as a passport, allowing him not to be bond by any place and tie his identity to any location.

* * *

For three more years, Benny lived life as if he were an orphan. He changed jobs as many times as he did apartments. He existed as a man who lived through necessity. His life was a mere shadow of breathing and eating. He didn't talk to no one and no one talked to him. Benny Headley was alone, and he grew accustomed to it, even convinced himself that he preferred isolation. Benny became one of those men people were afraid to approach. He was a wanderer, a hermit whose only joy in life was in forgetting. He had built a room of solitude with walls so high and thick that no one could get through, and had constructed no doors so he could escape either. He was trapped, believing self protection was strength and vulnerability weakness. But little did Benny realize that he'd left a crack in one of his walls unattended and big enough for an unsuspected envelope to pass through. Another one addressed to him from Outlaw Richard.

Dear Benny,

I meant to write to you sooner than this, but as you know I'm not one for letters. It's been awhile since I last wrote. I wasn't sure where you was, so I hope this letter reaches you. The post office is usually pretty good at finding people, so I'm putting my faith in them to get this message to you. It's no secret to me that you and your dad don't get along so well, and I out of everybody know how hard he can be to like at times, but he's a good man and I reckon that even you could admit that if you looked hard enough.

Your dad's not doing so well. He isn't sick like your mom was, I mean he still gets around better than me and I'm a mess of years his senior. It's because of his mind that I'm writing. He's right forgetful and can't run the store like he used to. This may not sound like too much, but I'm concerned for him. He needs someone at home with him. I've offered but he won't have none of that, says he's fine and that he remembers what he needs to. Anyway, I know it's been a long time since you've been here and I realize that you're busy with playing your guitar and all, but it would be right helpful if you could come home for a visit. Maybe talk some sense into your dad. He needs a nurse or somebody home with him and I figured since you was all the kin he had left that I should let you know the situation.

Outlaw Richard

P.S. If your dad ever asks, I never wrote you no letters concerning this.

At first Benny didn't know how to respond. He considered throwing away the letter and pretending that he'd never read it. But he knew he couldn't do that. He thought

about writing Outlaw a letter. But what would he write? He could lie and tell him that his touring schedule was so busy that there was no time for him to come home. In fact, Outlaw gave him that "out" in the letter. Yet, if Benny were that successful then wouldn't he at least send money or hire a nurse to care for his dad? All of a sudden, Benny didn't know why be cared what people in Morristown thought of him. Anyone that knew him knew he didn't have any love for his dad. Why would they care if he responded? Everyone knew what kind of bastard Old Ben was. But that wasn't entirely true. Benny did care about one person's opinion of him, someone who always saw the best in him, Outlaw. Other than his mother, Outlaw was the only person to encourage him when he took up guitar.

No one else could understand why Benny did this. Most people in the town resented him, thought he threw away a God given talent. And no wonder, when he lived in a small town where baseball was practiced as religion and boys began swinging bats before kindergarten because dads wanted to relive faded moments of supposed glory. When the doctrine of baseball was so ingrained in a community, it was impossible for anyone to understand why Benny at sixteen, the best ball player Hamblen County had seen in two decades, quit the sport and picked up a guitar.

But Outlaw was different, probably because he grew up in Jasper, Mississippi, and was not brought up in the baseball faith. Also, Outlaw wasn't much for socializing. He had a plot of land in the county, far away from neighbors, and lived in a little house isolated from the town by surrounding trees. Outlaw used to tell Benny that he preferred animals to people, and birds above all, because they were the most free of any other animal. He believed they were the true gypsies, living off the land and making homes

wherever they landed for a time. Benny always thought that if it were possible for Outlaw to be any happier, because the man smiled all the time and spoke nothing but positives about anyone or anything, then he would grow wings and live with the birds. Outlaw had a joy inside him that showed through whatever he did, and Benny respected his inability to see the bad in others. For this was something Benny had no problem seeing in people, especially his dad.

The only reason Benny was ever considering his dad's well being was because Outlaw asked him to. And as much as Benny wanted to let his dad suffer the consequences of his hateful life alone, he didn't want to disappoint Outlaw. Benny reasoned that Outlaw still contacted him, even though he had no idea as to why Benny didn't show up for his mom's funeral, an action that Benny still felt the pains of regret. Yet in usual Outlaw fashion, he saw the good in Benny, just like he had always done.

The last thing Benny had ever wanted to do was return home, and the thought of seeing his dad again welled an anxiety up in him greater than anything he'd experienced. But what other choice did he have? It wasn't like he had a job to go to. He'd been unemployed for the last six weeks. And actually Outlaw's letter couldn't have come at a better time since he was a month overdo on his rent and was probably going to be evicted soon. It wasn't like moving was going to be an issue since Benny had been living out of a duffel bag for the past year. His main challenge was to get the two hundred plus miles home. He couldn't afford a plane ticket and he doubted he had enough money for bus fare. So he resolved that he would let Providence decide for him; that if it was destined for him to go home then a way would be presented since he didn't have means to himself. By allowing God, whom Benny abandoned when he left home, because he couldn't

understand how a loving Creator could give him a dad so despised, the opportunity to make a way for him to get home; Benny removed all responsibility from himself, placing the decision in a power he wasn't sure if he believed in anymore. Therefore, if no way was presented, then Benny wouldn't have to feel guilty for letting Outlaw down, because it was in God's hands now, and if the big man wanted Benny home then it was up to him to do it If Benny had remembered that it was the end of March then he probably wouldn't have made this "in Gods hands" bargain, for within two days Benny got an envelope addressed from the national treasury with a check for seven hundred and fifty eight dollars and eighty seven cents. He had forgotten that he'd mailed his income tax return three weeks prior. If the people of Hamblen County had heard news of this they would have sworn upon an open Bible that God ordained Benny to get that money when he did, but Benny figured that he'd just struck out, because his lapse of memory swung at an obvious ball and lost that round at bat.

Not having any excuses left, Benny picked up his belongings, threw his duffel bag over his shoulder and walked to the Greyhound bus terminal downtown. He was able to cash his income tax check at the convenient store down his street and bought a few Mountain Dews and Little Debbie's for the ride. Benny figured that the bus terminal would be crowded since it was a Friday afternoon, and was surprised to find it relatively empty. Therefore, he had no problem getting a ticket and only had to wait an hour and fifteen minutes before loading the bus.

Benny was the first to get on and was the first passenger who got to experience the stale and intoxicating aromas of feet, mildew, and exhaust. As he walked to the rear of the bus, his movement swirled the aromas together, mixing them into a mildly

unpleasant corn chip smell. Normally Benny liked the smell of corn chips, especially when opening a fresh bag. But without the visual aid of the bag and the appetite to go along with it, this smell didn't produce the same desired effect.

Benny sat next to the window three rows up from the back and put his bag in the seat beside him. About ten minutes passed before Benny wondered why no one else had gotten on, not even the driver. He contemplated if he had stepped on the wrong bus and was about to get off when a monstrously large black man walked in and slid into the driver's seat. His blue uniform was stretched tight and Benny envisioned that had he shrugged his shoulders his shirt would've ripped. The driver began writing on a notepad while h checked various gauges on the instrument cluster. Benny considered asking if he was on the bus going to Morristown, but stayed in his seat as an older couple boarded, who asked the dries if the last stop was Asheville. The driver nodded an unenthusiastic yes without removing his attention from his pre-drive duties.

The couple wandered from seat to seat as the older gentleman pressed the backs of the seats with his hands. The lady waited patiently behind him and as they got close to the back of the bus, noticed Benny watching him curiously,

"Ed's, gotta have a firm back. Can't be soft or his arthritis gets a grip on him and won't let go for weeks," she explained, smiling the entire time she spoke.

Benny nodded and grinned, figuring that the couple had to be in their seventies. Fed had a small, well groomed, silver mustache that was no thicker than a pen stroke and outlined his upper lips. The white hair he had left was trimmed close to his head. In his youth, he probably soared over six and half feet tall, but now slumped to maybe six foot. He wore tan, tailored trousers that were neatly pressed and a lightweight peach colored

sweater. Benny imagined him as the echo of an aging Clark Gable, a living memory to an era that had passed. her head. She had on a light blue jump suit and tennis shoes, and carried not only her luggage sized purse, but both hers and Ed's carry on luggage. The couple tested the seat in front of Benny, across, and behind him without satisfaction.

Finally, the man leaned his curved frame towards Benny and asked, "Do you mind?" and started feeling the back of his duffel bag's seat. "Oh, now this one is fine, Nettie," he said rather loudly. "I say, this one is fine."

Nettie stepped beside her husband and inquired, "I'm sorry, but would you care to move to another seat. This one is the only one that will be agreeable to my Ed."

At first Benny thought this was some kind of a senior citizens prank, a little joke to test the humor of the younger generation. Before replying, Benny glanced around the empty bus. Out of all the seats, what were the chances of two strangers wanting to occupy the same seat out of a hundred? Benny couldn't help but smirk at the absurdity of the situation. The old man politely cleared his throat, obviously wanting to get Benny's attention.

"We don't mean to impose, but you'd really be doing us a service," Nettie said.

Benny nodded. "Sure." He figured he'd be damned for life if he didn't oblige the old couple, even if they were inconveniencing him in the process. He grabbed his bag and moved a few rows towards the front.

"This feels nice," Ed told Nettie, loud enough for the entire bus to overhear.

A handful of additional travelers boarded over the next twenty minutes, none of them being as memorable to Benny as Ed and Nettie. The bus ended up being a little over a quarter full when the driver started the engine and closed the doors. No one else

requested that Benny change seats again, so he tried to relax and settle in for a pleasant ride. But Benny wasn't concerned with the comforts of his journey, and his thoughts traveled across the miles of interstate to his destination, a white farmhouse on Old Bethel Rd. He couldn't escape a sense of dread as he imagined his first encounter with his dad. There wasn't a word that properly captured exactly how uncomfortable their reunion would be. Benny wasn't sure how his dad would respond. He didn't know if he'd act like nothing ever happened between them and ignore the fact that Benny left home without saying goodbye and hadn't spoken to him in ten years. Or if he would slam the door in his face and tell him that he wasn't welcome and wasn't no son of his since a decent son would show up for his own mother's funeral. Benny highly doubted the third scenario where like the return of the prodigal son, his dad would see him walking up the road, run out to meet him, and embrace him in a long awaited hug, sobbing while he exclaimed, "My son's home. My Benny was lost but now he's found!"

The fact that Benny couldn't at any time remember his dad hugging him, made this last scenario even more far fetched. Actually, if his dad were to embrace him with open arms, Benny wouldn't know how to respond because finding himself in an alien situation with his family would be much move uncomfortable than one that was aggressive but familiar.

About an hour and a half into the drive, the bus stopped at a depot is Cookeville. Benny stayed in his seat as people got off to stretch and buy snacks while new travelers got on. Benny pulled out one of his Mountain Dews from his bag and started to drink when a hand grabbed his, preventing his sip.

"Those things will kill you," Nettie said, standing in the aisle.

"So I hear." Benny tried to take another sip after she removed her hand.

"And they'll make your thingy shrink," she said, pointing to his lap.

That remark caught him by surprise and he almost coughed up his drink. Benny was speechless. He didn't know how to respond to that. Should he defend his manhood and tell her that it hadn't hurt him like that yet? Or would it be better to agree with her and say that there's nothing wrong with being small. Luckily, Benny didn't have time to respond.

"I'm getting Ed some antacids. Would you like some?"

"No, Thanks. I'm good at the moment," Benny replied.

"I could get you a honey bun or something sweet."

"You look like you could use something sweet to eat," she said, " You're all thin."

"I'm not a big eater."

"Are you an anorexic?"

Benny wanted to laugh, but suppressed it.

"Nettie, leave the boy alone," Ed said, walking down the aisle.

"I'm just making conversation."

"He doesn't need any conversation. I'm either right or I'm right. Ain't I boy?"

"Well, I don't see what's so wrong about being polite and meeting new people," she defended herself before saying privately to Benny. "He gets so jealous when I approach other men. Don't you Ed?"

"What? What did you say?"

"I said this young man wants to take me away from you. Says you're nothing but an old brute."

"Oh, stop your drama." Ed waved her away with disgust.

"Now don't you get all ugly with me or I might be forced to sit the rest of the way with..." Nettie hesitated. "What's your name?"

"Benny."

"With Benny here. What's that?" Nettie leaned close to Benny as if he were telling her something confidential and then laughed. "Now stop that!" she teased. "I'm a married lady after all, and my husband may take offense to being called names such as that."

"What was that?" Ed said.

"I said... he's calling your names," she replied.

"You tell him that it's not wise to upset me. I might be getting older, but I've got experience on my side. You tell him that!" Ed said.

"I don't have to tell him. I think he can hear you."

"Is he making fun of me cause I'm hard of hearing?" Ed stood.

"Now sit down...I was only playing with you."

"No, Nettie!" Ed confronted Benny. "I want the little shit to tell me why he thinks he's so tough as to pick on the handicapped."

By this time, the passengers left on the bus turned around to watch the commotion. "Now, Ed. You know I hate it when you fight."

"Fight?" Benny finally spoke up. "There's not going to be any fight."

"Don't worry, you cute thing. His glory days as a street fighter are over. Just watch his left side, that's where all his strength is left," she said.

"Now I've got to get those antacids before we leave. Sit down, Ed."

"Don't you tell me what to do! I'll sit when I want to sit."

"You're being silly, you know that?"

"I'm being honorable. I'm not going to let some skinny pup disrespect me."

"Well, don't hurt him too bad. He's a cutie. And don't get too excited. You can't afford another stroke?" Nettie started to leave.

Benny stood. "Excuse me, Mrs...."

"Savage, dear," she said.

"Mrs. Savage, I don't know what's going on."

"Of course you don't. Just don't let him reach into his back pocket. You don't want him getting to his knife."

"His what?"

"Oh, you'll be fine," she said sweetly and left. "You better tell me those names you've been calling me, or you'd best be apologizing." Ed stepped next to Benny's seat, blocking him in.

"Mr. Ed. I mean Savage."

"So you're calling me a horse?"

"I'm not calling you anything."

"What did you say?"

Benny was confused.

"So now you don't have the decency to oblige an old man? Do you have no respect for anything?"

"No, Mr. Savage. I don't...."

"That's right," Ed interrupted, "you don't,"

"Know what's going on here."

"Well, I'm about to show you what's going on here," Ed said as he reached into his back pocket.

Remembering Nettie's warning and before he knew what he was doing, Benny grabbed Ed, holding his arms, preventing him from reaching his pocket.

"Help! Help!" Ed hollered. "This young fool is assaulting me."

Suddenly Benny felt two strong hands grab his arms at the elbows and pull him away from Ed.

"Now, I won't have none of this. You out of here," the driver said.

"He was going after a knife." Benny said.

"Now why would he have a knife, except to protect himself against people like you," the driver replied.

"I was just protecting myself. Look for yourself."

"All right." The driver let Benny go. "But you best be gathering up your stuff if he doesn't."

"Fine." Benny stepped back. "It's in his back pocket."

"Sir, would you show me the contents of your pockets?"

"I will not under any circumstance," Ed said. "This is a violation of my civil rights."

"Sir, I'm afraid I'll be forced to remove both of you if you refuse."

"You can't do that."

"I can and I will if I suspect any passenger is a threat to the safety of everybody else."

"This is absurd."

"You're right about that," Benny said, not believing what was happening. His only hope was that maybe this was Providence telling him not to go home, that it wasn't his responsibility to care for his dad.

"I will write a formal complaint to your superiors regarding this injustice," Ed said as he removed an item from his back pocket and handed it to the driver.

Benny couldn't see what the item was until the driver opened his hand and examined a black, plastic comb.

"This doesn't look like a knife to me!" he said to Benny.

Resolved to the reality that his trip was over and feeling a sense at relief come over him, Benny picked up his bag so he could be escorted off the bus. Then something more unexpected than Benny's initial conflict with the older man and his wife happened. Ed started laughing. His laugh was infectious as his delight swept through the entire bus. Benny didn't know if Ed was crazy or if he was enjoying his victory over an unsuspecting youth.

"Here's your comb back, sir." the driver said. "I'm sorry for any misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding!" A broad smile spread across Ed's face.

"Look," the driver told Benny," I'm going to have to ask you to get off the bus. Your ticket will still be valid, but you'll have to wait here for the next bus."

"Wait, "Ed said, trying to control his hysterics, "wait...please let the boy stay. I'm sure he won't behave so badly anymore!"

"Sir, don't you think it would be better if he waited for the next bus?"

"No, no… let the boy stay. After all, he was a good sport about it all."

"All right... if that's what you want."

"It would be a shame any other way," Ed said.

"All right," the driver said and turned to Benny. "But any more goings on then you're off. Your hear me?"

Benny nodded and sat, the driver resumed his seat up front while Ed continued chuckling. Finally, he sat behind Benny and said, "I'm sorry... what's your name again? Benny is it?"

Benny didn't respond. He figured Ed was close to senile and that the best way to stay on the bus was to ignore him.

"Listen, Benny, You have every right to be upset. I didn't mean for it to go that far. I sometimes have a habit of taking a pretend too far."

Benny's anger rose after realizing that the old man was playing with him the whole time and nearly got him thrown off the bus because of his joke.

"When I was your age, it fact throughout my life I had this friend. His name was Roger. He and I grew up together. We did everything together. One of our favorite activities was these acting competitions. We always wanted to outdo one another by pretending. When we got around your age, in our twenties, we started betting on who could convince other people of a situation better than the other. Whoever managed to make someone else believe in the reality of the performance the most would win. Now we weren't playing for high stakes or anything. It was always for a dollar."

Although Benny was still upset about being the object of the old man's sport, he became more interested in Ed's story as he told it.

"I think both of us always wanted to be famous actors, but back in my day, the stars were Cary Grant and Clark Gable. Anyway, as fate would have it we got married and had to think about more sensible opportunities. The only way we could keep our dreams of acting stardom was to believe in the illusion of our performance game, and whoever won that round received payment, so it was like we were professional performers who were acting for money, even if it was just an insignificant dollar on occasion. Anyway, I wanted to thank you for being a good sport and for believing in the illusion one last time," Ed said and placed a dollar in Benny's hand.

"One year ago Roger died. He got prostrate career. My father used to tell me that a man was considered lucky if he had one friend that lasted throughout his lifetime. I didn't believe him when I was your age because then I thought I had lots of friends. But he was right, so I consider myself blessed."

At that point, Nettie got on the bus. "You'll have to forgive my wife. She didn't want to play, but she did it for me because I wanted to pretend just one more time."

"Is everything patched up?" Nettie said, handing Benny a cold Mountain Dew. "I noticed yours was warm."

"Thanks," Benny said.

"How about it, Benny?" Ed said, extending his hand. Benny took it without hesitation. "Do you have a woman?"

Benny shook his head.

"Let me give your some advice. When you find her. Hold on to her and don't let go. And better yet, look for one that will help you dream, because then you'll be able to dream big."

Ed slipped back to his seat with Nettie, and the two played and giggled like newlyweds until Benny said his goodbyes and got off the bus in Morristown.

CHAPTER TWO:

It was a little after nine when Benny arrived. The greyhound station was located on 1st North Street which was only a block north of downtown. Benny walked to the corner of 1st North and Henry St. and gazed down at the relatively unchanged buildings. Although he hadn't been here in a decade, everything appeared about the way he had left it. The only noticeable difference was a parking lot where the old police station once had been. The bus pulled away, taking Ed and Nettie along with the rest of the passengers to Asheville, Benny forgot to ask if the old couple were going home to Asheville or taking a romantic getaway for the weekend. Before he boarded the bus, Benny dreaded getting on, but now that he was standing on the street corner of his hometown, he wished he stayed on with the Savages.

Since Morristown is a community without public transportation and Benny didn't have a car and wasn't about to call his dad to get him, he decided to go downtown, find a payphone, and call a taxi. As far as he could remember there was a cab service called Yellow Cab. Although he had never used their service before, he knew of their existence because one of his high school buddies, Ralph, his dad would have the taxi drive to Kentucky and transport prostitutes over the state line. Ralph's dad was a lawyer and was at one time a well respected circuit court judge, Ralph had made Benny promise not to tell anybody about his dad's illegal weekend runs one night when he had too much to drink and spilled too many secrets. Benny never was a big drinker, he didn't like the taste

of alcohol. The flavor of spoiled fruit juice didn't 'excite his senses, so he was often the designated driver in high school.

Benny hadn't spoken to anyone from high school since he left, and often wondered about Ralph and how he turned out. He doubted he was still in town. Ralph had always been counting the days until he could leave. He was from Knoxville and always thought Morristown was a hick place, and that he was too cultured for it, listening to his Duran Duran and driving his Saab.

Downtown was a lot brighter than it had been, mostly because of the new street lamps connected to the overhead walkway. Morristown's downtown was unique because it was one of only two downtowns in the world with overhead sidewalks. Before Benny left there had been talk of tearing them down because the city officials thought they ruined the historic value of the storefronts. But Benny was glad that they were still present. It was the only aspect of Morristown that he thought had some artistic merit. He was just sorry the overhead structure was unappreciated and seemed to have no practical use to the people of Morristown. The sidewalks were built in the 1960' and were advertised as "the skywalk", a proposed shopping experience for the future. Instead of shops having multiple floors, each store was a single level with an additional store above, its entrance on the skywalk. Benny always thought the idea was ingenious after he ran across a newspaper advertisement when he was researching in the library for a term paper. Morristown's downtown was the forerunner to the mall that was built later in the 1980's. But ever since the arrival of the College Park Mall and various plaza strips erected throughout the area, Morristown's downtown lost many of its reputable merchants

and became forgotten to the citizens. Now the only stores with any lasting presence were small gift shops and large antique stores.

As Benny walked around, he was surprised by the sounds of live music coming from one of the old Myers buildings that had long been abandoned. Apparently someone resurrected the decaying three story building and transformed it into a restaurant and night club called, The Higher Grounds. Benny stood outside and listened as an unknown band played a Guns and Roses cover, *Paradise City*. Benny chuckled at the irony of the song's lyrics in relation to the circumstances of his life. Here he was back in a town he believed to be a dead end kind of place, standing practically homeless with his life's possessions over his shoulder, listening to words like, "Take me down to paradise city. Where the grass is green and the girl's are pretty." Benny laughed and thought that if this was paradise city then he'd rather be back in the slums of east Nashville.

The doors opened as three women walked out, laughing and holding on to one another. Benny noticed that they were in their early twenties and stepped out of their way so that they wouldn't collide into him. One of the girls, an attractive brunette with freckles, kept staring at him. The girls walked past him and started up the street when the brunette turned around and stopped. She looked familiar, but Benny couldn't remember how, when, of if he knew her.

"Hey!" she called to him. "Yeah." she pointed at him while the two other girls kept on walking, supporting each other's weight. "Don't I know you?" she stumbled a few steps towards him. "I'm sure I do. What's your name? No, wait a minute. Don't tell me." She held up her hand, motioning for him not to speak and looked up as if trying to

remember. “B...B...B..." she thought aloud. "B... Billy! That's it! You're Billy!" she congratulated herself. "You're supposed to be famous."

Hearing that, the other two women turned around.

"Who's that, Marcy?" the blonde said.

"You're that musician guy, aren't you?" she stepped towards him, nearly stumbling into him. "I hear you're famous."

"Who's your new friend?" the third girl said, who was shorter than the rest, but tried to make up the height difference by teasing her permed hair high.

"This is Billy. Remember he's like the only person who became something from here." Marcy said.

The blonde looked Benny over carefully and said, "I don't remember him."

"Oh, I do. You're that musician guy whose dad owns the hardware store," the shorter woman said. "But isn't your name Benny?"

"Oh, heck! You're right!" Marcy said. "I'm so sorry... and I've been calling you Billy this whole time." She placed her hand on his shoulder.

"That's all right," Benny said, feeling uncomfortable that these women thought he was a celebrity. He didn't understand why anyone would think this, unless his mom had told people after she had read his letters. "You must think we're just crazy, don't you?"

"I've had one to many beers tonight and I'm afraid I can't shut my mouth when it gets going." Marcy said.

"You're fine," Benny replied.

"Ain't he just the sweetest?" Marcy said to her friends.

The short girl blushed, while the blonde said, "And cute."

"Now what would Shay think if he heard you right now?" Marcy asked.

"I don't care what he thinks. I'm not like him, I tell the truth about what I think," the blonde replied. "And don't you be telling him anything either," she said to the short one.

"I don't tell him nothing. Why would I be telling Shay Kirk anything?"

Shay Kirk was someone Benny had not thought about for a long time. In middle school Shay and Benny became friends for a while, but became enemies longer. Benny realized Shay was a bully when they first met in seventh grade when he'd push around smaller boys after school. At that time, everyone thought Shay was cool. And Benny was relieved that Shay liked him instead of being one of his objects of torment. Shay was one of those boys who enjoyed living life on the edge. He'd do anything he could that would be considered breaking the rules, but needed others to go along with him. No matter how much he tried to coerce him, Benny, however, wouldn't do what Shay wanted. Benny knew that if he got into trouble that his dad would place a righteous beating on him, and in the end, Benny feared his dad's retribution far more than Shay's.

Benny could tell that Shay was getting irritated by him for not participating in his rebellious whims by his occasional under the breath comments he'd make and knew that the day was fast approaching when Shay would turn his frustration on him. But little did Benny know that that day was going to reveal itself between third and fourth period when Shay intimidated a smaller kid, Michael Jarnigan, to pick a fight with Benny in the boy's bathroom. Benny noticed after Michael pushed him into the wall that Shay had gathered a group of boys. Shay started cheering Benny on, challenging him to beat the shit out of Michael. Benny saw the betrayed expressive on Michael's face after he heard Shay

rooting for him, and that's when Benny told Michael that he didn't want to fight him. Benny offered Michael his hand and realized that Michael didn't want to fight any more than he did and that he was bullied into it by Shay, just like he was trying to do to Benny. But Shay continued to taunt Michael, telling him that if he didn't stand up to Benny that everyone would know he was a coward and would gang up on him whenever possible. This produced a fear in Michael that made him lash out at Benny, throwing punches and crying at the same time. Benny managed to hold Michael off for the most part because he didn't want to give Shay the satisfaction of manipulating the fight. But then Michael managed to clip Benny's jaw and with a burst of anger Benny shoved Michael into the bathroom stall where Michael fell into the door which swung open and landed, his left side slamming hard against the toilet.

Everyone laughed as Michael sat holding his ribs. Benny saw the tears streaming down Michael's face and hated himself for allowing Shay to manipulate him. Benny later apologized to Michael and they became good friends, while Shay and Benny took opposing sides, and often at a distance Benny would overhear a hateful comment directed his way by Shay. Benny decided that nothing Shay could ever do would make him again lash out at anyone, and opted to take the so called high road and ignore Shay's taunts and his existence.

"So you remember Shay?" Marcy said.

"I hadn't until now," Benny replied.

"He and Victoria are getting pretty serious."

"And he doesn't do that with anyone," the short one said.

"Yeah, and he doesn't even know she's pregnant," Marcy said and quickly covered her mouth. "Oh, heck, Victoria? I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that."

"You just can't keep your mouth shut, can you?" Victoria was fuming.

"I'm sorry. I can't believe I said that."

"It's not funny, Marcy!" Victoria said.

"I know it's not." Marcy tried to suppress her laughter, but the more she tried to keep her face expressionless, the more she smiled. "I don't know why I'm like this. I don't think it's funny at all."

"You're a terrible drunk." Victoria walked away.

"Now Victoria, don't be like that!" Marcy said.

"I'll go after her," the other girl said.

"I'm really embarrassed by all of that," Marcy said. "I'm usually more restrained. I'm like a great secret keeper well...usually. "

"I'll keep that in mind," Benny said.

"Now you think bad of me. Tell me the truth. I can tell you do."

"No..." Benny said.

"You do too. I can see it."

"I don't know you good enough for that."

"Would you like to?" She leaned in close.

"Sure." Benny felt awkward. It had been a long time since a girl had flirted with him so obviously. He wasn't sure how to respond. Marcy was attractive. Benny was always attracted to brunettes with long hair, and the fact that she was slender was a plus. Marcy definitely could audition for this part had Benny been a director testing for the role

of his ideal looking girlfriend. But dating right now wasn't a priority, and all Benny could think about was his reunion with his dad

"Great!" Marcy said. "There's this other pretty new place…the Metro up the street. I think you'd like it. They play music and I'll even buy you a beer cause that's all you can get here."

"It's still a dry county?"

"Yeah, but that'll hopefully change soon. The town's putting it up for a vote again. And I know a lot of people who are voting for liquor by the drink." She put her arm around him as if he were a gentleman escorting her and started walking up the street.

After a block Benny said, "You know...would you care if we did this another night?"

"What's wrong? Don't you want me to buy you a drink?"

"It's not that. It's just I just got into town and I need to get home."

"That's okay, You don't have to make up excuses."

"I'm not."

"No... no" She pulled away and looked down sheepishly. "You probably have some model girlfriend or something. I'm sorry. I'm usually not this forward. Ask anybody."

"Hey... don't misunderstand… you're really…cute."

"I know... but you're not into just cute."

Benny could tell he had hurt her feelings, probably insulted her. He didn't know why he told her she was cute. It would have only been worse had he said that she was nice. Descriptions like cute and nice have never won the hearts of women. While he was

saying inappropriate attempts at compliments, he should have told her that she was average and sweet. But Benny wasn't a success with dating, after he left Morristown he couldn't seem to ever say the right words, and, although he found Marcy attractive, he was communicating to her that he didn't.

Therefore, he decided to make another attempt, "I'm sorry, Marcy."

"No, I understand."

"No, wait. You see, it's me... not you," he explained, but then she got a strange "all knowing" look in her eye.

"Oh, heck!" she blurted out. "I'm so sorry! Why didn't I see that before."

Benny was confused.

"I should've seen it. Oh, heck! I'm so embarrassed."

"What?" Benny asked, not sure if he wanted to know what she was concluding.

"No wonder. I'm usually not so stupid. I am a terrible drunk, you know. I hope I didn't offend you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Listen, I know how small towns can be, so I won't tell anybody if you don't want. I really can keep secrets. It's all right. You know most people see something wrong with it, but I don't. So don't think I'm judging you or thinking anything, cause I'm not."

"Marcy, I don't understand what..."

She leaned close, standing on her tip toes to whisper in his ear. "I'm actually relieved. I thought you were rejecting me, but how could you since..."

"Since what?"

"Well, since... you know." She backed away and resumed her normal volume. "Oh, heck! You ain't going to make me say it, are you?"

All of a sudden her intention became clear to Benny and he couldn't help but laugh. "Marcy... look.... I'm not...you thought I was..."

"You mean you're not?" her "all knowing" look of self confidence began to crumble.

"No, of course not."

"Oh... heck. I'm never drinking again. Do you hear that?" She shouted to the overhead sidewalk. "I'm never drinking again!"

"It's all right," Benny tried to calm her.

"I'm so embarrassed. I thought since I was throwing myself on you and you weren't responding... and then the fact that you're artistic and good looking and...well... that you're being...you know... seemed to be...Oh, I'm so embarrassed." she said and hid her face in her hands.

"It's me, Marcy," he said. "I don't do this very well. Sometimes what I think doesn't come out...especially around someone that's...well... you know..." Marcy looked up and Benny noticed for the first time the depth of her brown eyes, "You know..." Marcy shook her head and stared at him eagerly. "You know what I'm trying to say.... right?"

Benny wanted to tell her simply that he found her attractive, but no matter how many times he tried to form the words, he couldn't.

Finally, Marcy eased his turmoil by saying, "Oh, heck. I get you."

"Do you?" Benny felt relieved.

"Oh, yeah." She grinned. "I know how hard it must be for a handsome heterosexual and let me add famous man to say what he feels."

Benny was glad that this misunderstanding was finally understood.

"But it'll be hard to find what you're looking for here in this town." Benny was confused again, but Marcy continued. "Big old booty black gals are hard to come by." Benny didn't realize his face was contorted into an expression of disgust until Marcy laughed uncontrollably. "I'm just messing!" she said between breaths. "You should see your face! Oh, heck!"

Benny found her laughter contagious and couldn't help but chuckle with her. Marcy was a constant surprise to him, just when he thought he had her figured out, she said something unpredictable. Benny gazed at her as she tried to reign in her amusement by looking away and bending over, trying to stabilize her breath. For the first time in many years, he saw a freshness in life. Marcy had an energy that he longed to have, an innocence that he had long lost, but desperately wanted again. And if he could never have it, he might, at least, for a moment enjoy it through her.

'I'm not crazy. I promise." Marcy managed to regain her composure.

Benny wanted to tell her that she was great, the only light he'd seen in a dark world since he left, but only managed to say, "You're fine."

"Are you sure I can't buy you a drink? Even if I promise to only drink a diet coke or something equally as sobering."

"Could we do it another time?"

"If you're lucky enough for it."

"Well, I'd better not count on it then. I'm not that lucky."

"Maybe your luck's beginning to change, Benny Headley," she said and squeezed his elbow.

"Hope so," he said, wishing he could stay with her and not go home to an unpleasant reunion with his dad.

"Well, I'd better try to find my girls," Marcy said.

"Will you be able to?"

"Probably not, but that's their misfortune cause I..." She stalled as she searched inside her purse. "Oh, heck! I forgot. I didn't drive. I think Bell did."

"How will you get home?"

"I'll find somebody. I think Shay's still around. He'll drive me if I have a problem."

"Listen. I was going to call a cab anyway. We can share it."

"I didn't know we had cabs here."

Benny didn't want to tell her the story of how he knew about the services and said, "Yeah... I hope it's still in business. It's been awhile since I've been here."

She looked at the clock on her cell phone." Normally I don't go home this early, but I guess tonight I can make an exception, but only because I'm enamored by your celebrity."

"I wouldn't get too blinded by it," Benny said. "You might end up disappointed."

"I'm rarely disappointed."

Benny borrowed her phone and was glad to find that the Yellow Cab was still in business, although they'd changed their name to the Checkered Taxi. Benny was thankful that Marcy didn't ask him why he didn't drive. The last thing he wanted to do was lie to a

girl he'd just met and didn't consider his lack of discrediting her notions of his fame and correcting her misconception as a falsehood. After all, he didn't tell her he was famous. She just assumed he was. And it wouldn't have mattered had he told her, she was too drunk to remember anyway.

Benny told the cab driver where his dad's house was while Marcy instructed that they drop him off first since her house was further away. Benny insisted that he see her home safely, but she told him to save his money since the cab would end up backtracking to take him home. Although he tried to convince her otherwise, Marcy wouldn't hear of it and refused to tell the driver where she lived until after Benny was home.

It only took about ten minutes for the cab to reach Old Bethel Rd, and Benny wished the ride was longer. As they pulled into the long, gravel drive, Benny regretted not taking Marcy up or her previous invitation. After all it had been ten years since he'd been to the house on Old Bethel Rd., so why did he feel the need to hurry and get there now that he was in town. Maybe it was the dread rising in him that wanted to be relieved, where it was better to get an unpleasantness over with than delay its inevitability. This dread of seeing his dad had never threatened him before because Benny never had any intention of ever coming home. But now that he heard the gravels crunching underneath the tires and could see the dark silhouette of the A frame, white farmhouse with the black shutters coming into view, he knew he was back.

"Sure is dark out here," the driver said.

"Doesn't your dad know you're coming home tonight?" Marcy said. "He could've left a light on for you?"

"He's probably asleep," Benny said. "He always went to bed early."

"Do you want to pay now or later?" the driver said. "If you want to pay now then it's six seventy five."

Benny looked at Marcy. "How far away are you?"

"I can get mine."

"Let me," Benny said.

"I'll make you a deal. I'll let you pay if you'll go out with me tomorrow night."

Benny hesitated. He wanted nothing more than to spend more time with Marcy, but he felt uncomfortable because he didn't have a car.

"I don't know where you live."

"I'll pick you up about eight!" she said. "And I don't normally take no for an answer."

Benny gave the driver fifteen and told him that any change was to insure that she got home safely.

"Not a problem," the driver said and pushed a button under the dash, releasing the trunk.

Benny waved goodbye to Marcy, lifted his bag out of the trunk, and watched the red glow of the tail lights disappear behind the dust of the road as it swirled, massing together into an angry looking thunder cloud.

CHAPTER THREE:

Benny watched the house for what seemed like hours, afraid to approach it. There were plenty of reasons for his hesitation, reasons that had been dormant for the last ten years, dormant but never silent. The farmhouse on Old Bethel Rd was dark, framed by a dim silhouette of light from the half moon fighting to be seen against a thin spray of stubborn clouds.

Looking over this familiar scene brought up a mixed nostalgia of dread and longing, and Benny wasn't sure if he should go back to town or follow through with his plans. It was obvious that his dad was asleep since there wasn't a light on in the place, and figured that this was probably his best time to proceed since he had always been a light sleeper. Yet if he was quiet enough then he could enter undetected. Benny figured that would definitely be for the best since it would postpone their reunion at least for the night.

Benny's dad, Ben Headley, owned a local hardware store off of Cumberland St, a side road adjoining the Main St. of downtown Morristown. His three story building had been around longer than most and since it was nestled on a street perpendicular to downtown was spared the addition of the overhead sidewalks and didn't become a casualty of unnecessary change, at least, that is what Benny remembered his dad always saying. In his dad's usual stubbornness his store remained, refusing to leave, even after all the other merchants had either closed their doors or moved to a location more

favorably populated. Old Ben Headley didn't believe in change, just wanted things to remain the same.

Benny looked at his watch and was astonished that only a few minutes had passed instead of hours since he watched Marcy speed away in the cab. Realizing that he couldn't stand in the driveway all night, Benny initiated his trek to the house, choosing stealth by walking on the freshly cut grass instead of the loud, gravel drive.

He eased his way onto the front porch, allowing the darkness of the cover to conceal him. The same metal two-seater slider, painted a fresh coat of greenhouse green, rested unmoving between the front door and living room window. Everything looked the same as it did a decade ago to Benny, not taking into account a new coat of paint here and there. The front door was locked as expected and the spare key Benny hoped was still under the loose board on the left side of the porch was no longer there. He considered sleeping on the porch, but the August night was so humid he thought it best to see if a window was unlatched. The two porch windows were locked, but luckily one of the side windows leading into the kitchen wasn't. Since he had never broken into a house, his entrance wasn't as unnoticeable as he'd hoped, and as he climbed through, his duffel bag over his shoulder got caught in the window and he became lodged with one leg inside, foot resting in a sink, while the other leg dangled outside.

Clumsily Benny retreated and nearly crashed into a bush next to the house. He laid the duffel bag on the kitchen counter, and without the added bulk, managed to crawl inside. He shut the window, careful not to make any more noise so that he wouldn't wake his dad. He picked up the duffel bag from the counter and, as he turned towards the

center of the room, was startled by two wild eyes and a wooden bat swinging dangerously close to his head.

He ducked as the baseball bat flew unabashedly overhead. Ben Headley was quick and positioned his defense for another offensive.

"Whoa! Hold on now!" Benny stumbled back towards the counter. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Ooh!!!" his dad swung again.

Benny rolled quickly to his right as the bat slammed into the cabinets.

"Hold on!" Benny's voice was high pitched like a terrified girl.

"You got half a second to get out of my house or I promise you drug dealin' son of the morning that my third swing will not be a strike!" Ben said, raising the bat for his homerun swing.

"Now hold on you old fool!" Benny said. "Is that anyway to welcome me home?"

"Ain't no home here but the one I made." His dad stood his ground but then his shoulders slumped and his head inched towards him. "Who are you? And what cause you got sneaking into my house?"

"It's me," Benny said, slowly standing.

"Benny?" Ben lowered the bat.

"Yeah, Benny. Don't tell me that you don't recognize me?"

His dad turned on the kitchen light and looked his son over good and hard before saying, "I see you still got that sissy long hair."

"I see you haven't changed much either. Still bald and belligerent."

"So what do you want, anyhow?" his dad asked, eyeing him suspiciously. "You in some kind of trouble?"

"I thought I could hang out for a little while," Benny said. "Thought you might like some company."

"Company?" He grunted in disgust. "What good's that? All they bring a body is distraction."

"Well, don't worry yourself none over me. I'll be sure to stay out of your way while I'm here. You won't even know I'm around."

"Humph, just like I didn't knows you was here when I busted you breaking in my house?" he shook his heed, laughing to himself as he crossed to the cabinet, got himself a glass and filled it half full from the faucet.

"Yeah, about like that," Benny replied, regretting the fact he was now standing inside the house with a man he'd sworn he'd never see again.

"And why you coming in here so late at night?"

"It's only ten after ten."

"When you know hard working folks have to get up early and put in a long day's wage."

A long day's wage was a motto that was branded with Benny's dad's hot iron self righteous poker in his consciousness since he was twelve.

"I forgot you went to bed before sundown." Benny didn't try to hide his sarcasm.

"Nothing good happens after its dark." His dad repeated another one of his mottos that he hoped he'd never hear again.

"For once Dad I just might have to agree with you. But I don't think whether the sun's up or down has nothing to do with it."

"Well, you can stay if that's what you're asking," his dad said as if Benny were asking him for the laminated dollar hanging behind the cash register at the store, the first dollar his father had ever made when he first opened Headley's Hardware. "Your room's still where you left it. I haven't touched anything. Wanted to turn it into a storage room, but Mable wouldn't let me. Always said you'd come home one day."

He didn't look at his son when he said her name. And Benny was shocked he even mentioned her at all, shocked and uncomfortable.

"Thanks." Benny watched his dad nod his head as he walked away, and shut his bedroom door while the isolation of their separation, the wall that had been firmly built high over the years by both men, came over him.

Benny walked to his bedroom and threw his bag at the foot of his bed. The moonlight presented a faint and foreboding glow, making his room seem like a picture only found in a dream, one that moved and writhed, coming in and out of focus. Benny didn't want to turn on the light, in part because he didn't want the light to keep his dad up, but also because he just wasn't prepared to witness his past, the boyhood reminders that were perfectly preserved in this room. Although his pulse was still running high from the encounter with his dad, Benny lay down on top of the covers of his bed and closed his eyes, trying his best to clear his mind and not allow any childhood familiarities to infiltrate. But he senses betrayed him as the softness of the mattress lulled him to the memory of many nights here. Benny didn't want to remember anything. He just wanted to do what he could to maintain Outlaw's good opinion of him and get moving. And he

didn't care where, as long as it wasn't Morristown, and especially the farmhouse on Old Bethel Rd. If he had any money he would stay at a hotel or any place but where he was, and Benny hated the fact that he was such a failure, that he had no other choice but to stay in his dad's house.

To keep his thoughts from his past, Benny focused on Marcy and the brief time they spent together. He imagined what their date would be like tomorrow night, and continued to focus on ideals of a better future as his imaginings slipped into a dreamscape.

The next morning Benny awoke to a recreation of his past, a precise reflection of his boyhood surroundings. His bedroom was exactly as he had left it. Benny thought it was amusing that although he had lived in many places, had seen many room variations, that this room, his boyhood one, no matter how many times he tried to forget it, was the only room he could ever remember in perfect detail. He rubbed his finger against the smooth top of the cherry dresser, making a line through the sleeping dust drift. His dad hadn't been exaggerating, and he wondered as to how many years his room had been undisturbed, shut up and forgotten.

On top of the matching set of drawers sat various boyhood treasures, baseball trophies unified by an intricate layering of cobwebs. At one time they were like prophesy scrolls to Benny, pointing his way towards dreams of athletic glory. Now they were like miniature tombstones marking the record of undiscovered attempts and an unrealized future.

Positioned in a perfectly leveled horizontal over the trophies on the antique white wall was his first bat, the strongest reminder of a unity his dad and he had once shared. He took the bat down from its adorned height, his hands gripping and twisting the black electrical tape still clinging to its handle, the tape his dad wrapped around it when he was teaching Benny to hold on to the bat. Benny was only eight at the time of this important lesson, a lesson that he had never forgotten when his dad removed him during a little league game after he had thrown the bat while swinging at a pitch. Ben took his son behind the dugout, but in front of all the parents and told Benny that if he didn't want to fail him then he would learn to hold on to that bat. And towards that end, he pulled a roll of electrical tape out of his front shirt pocket and wrapped the handle of Benny's first bat with it. He gave the bat back and asked Benny if he were ready to win. Benny nodded yes, trying to sound confident, but all the time feeling embarrassed and scared. Benny was not unlike other seven year olds, he hadn't had time to build his wall of resentment against his dad, all he wanted was to please him, but little did Benny know at this time that he would never get his desire; and that no matter how hard he tried, Ben Headley's approval would always seem unattainable.

In some ways Ben Headley would have made a great preacher. Whenever he talked to someone, he would command their attention with a booming baritone voice and a gift for persuasion. He could incorporate stories or appropriate illustrations whenever he talked and could convince a customer in his store that they needed a certain type of galvanized pipe when they didn't even have running water. But the full prowess of Ben's lecturing fell on Benny and on that particular day he received his first of many more to come life lessons regarding the game of baseball.

You feel this bat, son. It's hard. It's made out of the bread you eat of because it comes from them trees. The same trees that give us the lumber we sell at the store. The same trees that my daddy and his daddy before him used to make a living for themselves and their family. This bat is more than a stick of wood, it's your heritage. You gotta take it and hold on to it. Because if you don't then I promise someone else will. This bat is your future. It's hard. It's something you can put your hands around. Something solid you can feel. I put this tape around it because it'll absorb your fear. You get scared, your hands sweat and you can't hold on to what's solid. But this tape will help you hold on. Believe in it and you won't let go. Hold on to that bat as tight as you can and when that ball comes your way you swing with all you have and don't for anything, let go of that bat. It's your life. Your heritage. And it'll connect you to whatever is thrown at you. And when you hit that ball and don't let go of your heritage, you'll feel alive for the first time. That's all I want for you, son. To feel alive. Now you go out there and hold on.

Benny laid the bat on the floor and opened the closet doors. An assortment of too small shirts and a few slacks still hung where they had been abandoned while moths had taken up a permanent residence inside a couple of wool sport coats.

Ben walked to the kitchen and noticed that the inside of the refrigerator was immaculate, sanitized throughout with its sparse contents neatly organized: condiments on the second door shelf, butter and eggs on the first. Accompanied by prune juice located on the top shelf was whole milk in the yellow container. His dad believed that light spoiled the flavor; therefore, he only bought it in the yellow container since it protected the milk from the harsh rays of the sun. He'd even pour milk into a black coffee

mug and drink it in one successful shot so that less exposure would occur. In the crisper were twelve cans of Spam. Benny counted because it looked like an exaggerated amount. He wondered if his dad had won a years supply of the stuff? Other than a loaf of bread on the bottom shelf, the refrigerator wasn't very inviting.

He hoped there'd be a Mountain Dew lying around, but figured this was a vain one. He would've settled for any variety of soda, but was denied. He did procure some instant coffee, but unfortunately he had an aversion to the stuff.

Benny wasn't surprised to find the kitchen so well organized. Growing up, cleanliness was always a point of contention between him and his dad, whose motto was "A place for everything and everything in its place." No amount of years away could erase his dad's favorite rule from Benny's memory, for it had been branded on him by his dad's self righteous poker. It wasn't that Benny was a messy kid, who'd leave dirty clothes strewn throughout the house and used tissues on the floor. He wasn't dirty either. It was just he never was organized enough for his dad's approval. And Benny couldn't recall anyone who'd risen to the task, nor his dad ever mentioning one person who exceeded, even passed, his test of an ordered life.

Benny searched the cabinets and was surprised to find his favorite glass, a plastic, boot shaped souvenir from the Dixie Stampede. Benny was fond of the cup because it was one of the few times he recalled his family going anywhere resembling a vacation. All through elementary school Benny would ask why they didn't go on trips like all of his other friends' families in the summer months. His dad would always say," Because we don't," and that would be the end of the discussion. Benny had always wanted to go to Disney World or simply any place his family would have to drive to and spend the night.

But Ben Headley didn't have time to entertain idleness, or at least that's what he would say.

In the Headley home Benny realized at an early age that if it didn't involve work then the chances of his dad going along with it were slim to impossible. The only exception to this rule was baseball. For some reason Ben saw in this form of recreation something of value, and when Benny was fifteen, he even closed Headley Hardware early and encouraged his customers to come to the game, the state championship that set his son's name in Morristown fame and destined him to become one of the baseball greats one day.

Benny turned on the faucet and filled his plastic boot, allowing the liquid to flood over the arid valley of his mouth and wash away his morning breath. He didn't normally eat breakfast, but today he was hungry. So he searched the cabinets for anything that resembled breakfast food. All he managed to find was a box of Grits and Saltine crackers. Normally a Mountain Dew was all he needed to get his morning going, a yellow dye number five concoction of caffeine and sugar. The substance every growing body needed to start the day off right. But Benny figured that today and every one that followed while he was home would never start off in that good light, and that he'd better prepare himself for the harsh reality of his situation. Regardless of how benevolent and serious his coming home seemed, the truth was that helping his old man was not the determining factor, and had Benny not within the week going to be homeless, Old Better Rd. wouldn't have been his destination. But no one had to know this. What was it to them? What harm did it do if in the town's estimation he was regarded as the famous and dutiful son. He couldn't control what others assumed to be true. It wasn't as if he were the one walking

around with a banner that read "World's Best Son" on it. He figured that it was nobody's business as to his real reasons for being home or what he did while he was away. His life was his own, and if he wanted to hide the past ten years away like a secret placed safely in a shoebox hid under his bed, a ritual he did as a boy, then that was his American right to do it. Although he never actually read the Constitution or the Bill of Rights, Benny knew there was something about the freedom of privacy, and it was on this right that he would stand during his temporary stay in Morristown.

Benny sat in his dad's favorite blue recliner, the only new item of furniture his dad ever bought. Although the armrests were a bit worn, the recliner was in good shape, considering it was half Benny's age, and was the only chair his dad sat in, his throne, so to speak, where he would lounge and survey all of the riches of his rural kingdom.

For the must part, Morristown was a factory town, producing anything from chairs to fuel pumps for Chrysler Magnums to the aluminum foil like lining inside Frito Lays' potatoes chip bags. In the beginnings of its industrial growth, Morristown profited mainly from furniture, making Berkline the nations largest producing recliner center. A Berkline recliner was the center piece of every blue collar man's living room, and was a symbol that any man if he worked hard enough could have the best. A man didn't have to be affluent to afford a recliner from Berkline, but he did have to manage his funds accordingly and save for enough time to earn the privilege of ownership.

Benny pulled the wooden handle back and reclined the chair. Pushing his weight back, he extended the recliner to its full laid back position, and rested in the comfort of Morristown's finest. The living room was much like Benny remembered, the yellow couch with the embroidered pansies was still against the curtainless window. Benny

never understood why his family didn't have curtains or blinds on any of the windows. There was even a small window inside the shower in the only bathroom in the house that his parents refused to cover. They always told him that it was put there for a purpose, for ventilation, and that-it would defeat its purpose by not leaving it exposed. Although they were surrounded by trees and the nearest neighbor was three quarters of a mile away, exposed was precisely the way Benny felt every time he stepped indeed inside the shower.

The one oddity in regards to the normality of the living room was that the television was turned with its screen facing the wall. It sat on a television cart with wheels, so Benny got out of the recliner and rotated the TV in its appropriate position for viewing. He figured that maybe the reason it was facing the wall was because it was now broken, but after he turned it on and a children's program where Asians in over-exaggerated colored costumes were battling appeared clearly, he couldn't understand why the TV had been placed as it had. Benny found the remote lying on the oak coffee table in front of the sofa and flipped through the four channels available. Benny's dad had never been much of a television connoisseur, so he didn't see the need in spending money for additional channel when the four free networks of NBC, ABC, CBS, and PBS would suffice.

Benny noticed that it was close to ten o'clock from the sun shaped clock on the wall, and decided that while showering he'd figured out what to do today. After he dressed, he felt antsy and wanted to get out of the house and go into town, maybe even stop by his dad's store and catch up with Outlaw a little. But the obstacle of how he would get there remained, and he wasn't necessarily feeling up to the seven mile hike into

town. He wondered if his dad kept his mom's car or not, a white Mercury Sable that was in his dad's normal fashion bought second hand in the late eighties.

Although it was used, his mom adored that car and kept it pampered inside the barn. Benny knew if his father still had it and if he could find the keys that this would solve his mobility problem, at least as long as he was home. To his good fortune, the car was where he thought, protected by a car cover which was blanketed in dust. Benny uncovered it and tried to neatly fold the cover without much success. It ended up looking as if he wadded it into a jumbled mass, placing in the front stall.

The car was unlocked and Benny was glad to find a spare set of keys under the driver's seat as expected, the location where his dad normally left one. The engine started immediately and Benny noticed that the interior had been recently detailed while the dash gleamed from a layered application of Armour All. Sitting in the driver's seat felt strange, but was a welcomed change from the seat he had grown accustomed to on the bus. He gripped the grey steering wheel, left hand placed at ten o'clock and right at two, he remembered his mom telling him when he first learned to drive, chauffeuring her around with his permit at fifteen. Although the car now smelled musty, its familiarity permeated all of his other senses. His back remembered the arch the seat created in his spine. His legs recalled the give of the tenderness of the cushion under them. His knee extended as his right foot reached out to touch the brake, and feeling its solidity pushed it. His hand embraced the steering column, pulling down, feeling the popping in place of each gear; reverse, neutral, drive, overdrive. He set the transmission in reverse, adjusted the rear view mirror, and gently pressed the gas pedal. At first it wouldn't move, so Benny pushed harder. The pedal released suddenly, forfeiting its stresses against his weight as the car

lunged back. Benny let off the pedal as the car continued to roll in reverse, narrowly missing the barn doors on either side. He tried pressing the gas pedal again to test it; but apparently the sticking problem was a one timer. His foot leaned against the brake as he pulled the gear shift down, watching the illuminated red square slide over to the OD letters underneath the speedometer on the console cluster. He scanned the gauges and saw that the gas meter indicated half a tank.

It was a warm, humid morning, and Benny could tell by the near cloudless sky that it was going to be a hot one. The humidity was high and quickly after he pulled the car outside of the shade of the barn, its interior started heating up. Benny checked the air condition to see if it worked, and his face was refreshed by the cool air blowing against it. To conserve gas Benny turned off the air and rolled down the windows. Unlike his Firebird which contained the luxury of do it yourself locks and windows, his mom's Sable was all electric, and Benny thought he could get spoiled by the pressing of buttons, and the fact that he didn't have to sprawl across the width of the car while at a complete stop to roll down the passenger side window.

He maneuvered the vehicle down the long, gravel drive until he reached the green mailbox with the silver eighty eights that could barely be seen because of an overgrowth of a gooseberry bush competing for dominance. He then turned left on Old Bethel Rd. and after a mile turned left on highway 160, enjoying the wind as it tossed his shoulder length hair down the six miles of faded blacktop into town.

Benny saw the Sonic on his right that he used to cruise around in high school as he drove down South Cumberland in an area known as Radio Center. He never knew why it was called this, unless it had to do with the fact that WCRK, Morristown's local AM

radio station, was there. And he also remembered a selection of stereo and television repair stores sporadically placed, but it now appeared that those locations were replaced with Mexican grocery stores and used car lots. Benny noticed a lot of Spanish signs that he couldn't read even though his eyes were attracted to their multi-colored lettering and hand painted design. The C and C video store was currently a used car lot and the plaza that used to contain an Auto Zone and a Subway was gone, apparently from the result of a fire by the black scars on the back, concrete retainer wall still standing. Benny's need for familiarity was relieved to find that the post office and the Trade Center, a business that combined a pawn shop with a musical instrument store, one that offered private instrument instruction in addition, had been unchanged. As usual, there wasn't much traffic, which was refreshing after living in a bigger city.

He had the green light through Morris Blvd. and noticed the old Firestone building on his right and Morristown's only fountain, located across the street on the corner. This fountain was another curiosity to Benny. Not only because it never was turned on, but because of its position. Normally a fountain's purpose was to serve as a center piece, having some architectural merit, but this fountain looked as if it were randomly placed without any clear purpose or design.

Instead of driving straight to his dad's store because their were only a few parking spaces in front of the street and he didn't want to parallel park since it had been a while since he had had need to do it, Benny parked in the lot behind downtown and walked up Main Street on his way to Headley Hardware.

Downtown looked a lot different during the daylight hours, and was not as illuminated as it was at night with the street lights blazing below and above the raised

sidewalks. It looked less inviting and somewhat forlorn as the sidewalks cast a looming shadow over the facades of the street level buildings. Also, the unreadable signatures of spray painted graffiti that bled into various walls and the sides of on the concrete ramps rebelled more loudly against the integrity of the long established structures that had survived for over a century against rain and nature. Benny hated graffiti. He believed only base and uninspired creatures could deface something in such a short period of time which took a team of men months or even years to build. But graffiti was the last of his concerns as he rounded the corner of the abandoned Parks Belk building and walked north, approaching Headley Hardware. Although he had already encountered his dad, Benny was still apprehensive about seeing him again. Dread mounted inside him, quickening his pulse and shortening his breaths. If only Benny could go back to the music city and live out the hope of his life that he once dreamed, but he had buried that dream long ago, and had only existed since, being dressed through days to years numb as if time refused to give up on him, even though he had given up on himself. He stood momentarily in front of the three story red bricked building and noticed the bubbled and flaking black rectangle painted above the first story twelve foot windows contrasted against the white cursive letters spelling Headley Hardware, and beside it in a smaller, plainer script, est. 1903.

Benny opened the front pine door as its hinges complained against the disturbance and entered, noticing the familiar ringing of the silver bells banging against the top of the door. His father was in the back, looking over a parts catalog, sitting on a stool behind the cash resister on a counter that his grandfather had made from trees on the land where their farmhouse stood. The store hadn't changed much since the last time Benny was

there. On each side of its long length were shelves that lined the walls from the front to the back. Various types of tools; hammers, nail guns, saws, levels, electric and battery operated drills and any handheld product a contractor or home improvement enthusiast would need, was there. On both walls was a ladder attached with a sliding mount into a track system, allowing the ladders to move from front to back, gaining the customer access to any of the tools or fastening products like nails, slews, bolts, washers, that were on the higher shelves out of reach.

Benny knew his dad had to have noticed him come in because he used to not allow a customer's foot to break the store's threshold without greeting them. As Benny strolled towards him, Ben never glanced up from his catalog, acting is if the wind blew the door open and nothing else. Although Benny wanted to get out of that store and away from his dad as quickly as he could, he didn't and greeted him back with silence. Even though his dad had to realize his son was standing a few feet in front of him, he didn't look up from his reading.

Benny heard the whine of metal against metal as the freight elevator in the rear of the store settled on the first floor. Between the rattling of the metal accordion gate being folded and the hiss of the elevator's brakes, Benny heard a voice from inside the shaft say," Benny Boy?"

Benny recognized the rasp of that light southern voice anywhere, "Outlaw Richard." His dad still hadn't stopped reading.

"Benny Boy?" Outlaw appeared out of the elevator, his false teeth shining behind a nest of gray beard. He limped toward Benny, his weight favoring his left leg, refusing to trust the knee of his right. An injury Outlaw had sustained in a traitor accident when

he was young. "Look at you. Just look at you. Your hair's getting longer than mine," he said, untying the rubber band under his chin ad letting his beard fall to his chest. He held out his arms. "Now you ain't too famous to give old Outlaw a good one?"

Benny felt strange as he hugged Outlaw, a man that was like a second father to him, and realized as his skin shivered from the touch that he hadn't been touched by anyone for many years. Other than the random brush of a stranger in a crowd, Benny had been isolated from human contact, and had to remind his arms how to respond, where to touch, and how firm to hold on.

"So how are you? How you been?" Outlaw asked, releasing his embrace.

"Good." Benny politely lied.

"Are you going to tell me?" Outlaw grinned.

"What?"

"Now hold on before you get started up," he limped over to a skid and sat on the bags of tile grout piled on top of it. "All righty now, go ahead."

Benny laughed and shook his heed. "I don't know what you're wanting?"

"I'm wanting the dirt. Never mind all the details and boring parts. Give me the good stuff."

"What good stuff?"

"Now don't you be like that with old Outlaw. Ain't I the one who taught you how to plant flowers? Ain't I? And didn't that do you some good with that girl you used to care about back a ways? That neighbor of yours. You remember her, don't you?"

Benny nodded. How could he forget Miriam, the girl he took to prom, the first girl he kissed? How could he forget that fall night in his parent's hay loft, her warm body

lying next to his, his arm around her shoulders as they gazed silently out of the loft's opening at a star packed sky: his heart racing wildly like a frog trying to pound from his chest. He thought its rhythm would reverberate throughout the barn and shake it down. She smelled like lilacs and fresh cut grass. He felt goose bumps on her arm as his fingers gently brushed her. He saw starlight reflected in her hazel eyes, the mirrored color of his, as if God had swirled the depths of one another's from the same hues and painted them to match.

She leaned in first, her eyes locked on his. Benny was encouraged by her initiative and inched towards her, breaking their gaze and hesitating a moment by looking at her lips to try to gain assurance that he was reading the occasion correctly. He noticed she moistened her lips by rolling them into her mouth as her tongue barely peeked through. Benny moved closer and closed his eyes, feeling her lips for the first time against his, delicate and warm like a flower reaching towards the light.

"If it weren't for them flowers she watched you care for... then you'd never known that. Am I right or am I right?" Outlaw said. "So, since I introduced you to that kind of beauty... then I'm ready for you to return the favor."

"You want me to find you a girl?"

"And here I thought you was a musician. And all in all, you come back in here and prove my ignorance. Here you was a comedian this whole time." He laughed. "No really, I want you to tell me something I know nothing about."

"That could be a lot of stuff. Where should I start?"

"Would you listen to your son, Ben? Coming in here and acting like a blessed funny man." Outlaw said. "You might as well grab you a seat some where cause I ain't

letting you out of my sight until I get at least one satisfying story out of you. Cause you know I know nothing about being famous nor do I know a person who is, except you now parading yourself in here."

"Parading?"

"That's right, Benny Boy," Outlaw said." You heard me... parading." He stood, held out his arms like he was inviting an imaginary crowd to observe his greatness as he turned from side to side.

"You'd better sit. You might throw out your back with all that dancing."

"Would you listen to your boy, Ben?" Outlaw said, sitting back down. "I tell you what…you're getting right ornery in your old age. You about thirty now, right?"

"Don't get me there too quick. I've got a few more years left before I get all decrepit on you and not worth anything."

"How'd you get here?" his dad finally spoke, acknowledging him.

"I drove," Benny said.

"Drove what? You didn't bring no car with you last night."

"Had his limo driver bring him, didn't you?" Outlaw said.

"I took the Sable," Benny said.

Ben remained silent, but Benny could tell he was brooding about something.

"The keys were under the seat where you used to leave them," Benny said.

"That car's still in good shape, ain't she? I don't know why you never drive it," he said to Ben. "I tell him that all the time, but he refuses to drive around in nothing but that push and go truck of his."

"You mean the Silverado?" Benny said.

"Well, what's left of it. The bed's pretty much rusted out. A body can't haul nothing in it."

"You don't throw something away cause its old," Ben said.

"I'm right glad for that. If that were the case then you and I'd be gone a long time ago," Outlaw said, chuckling to himself.

"I like my truck. And I ain't going to get rid of it!" Ben was sounding agitated.

"Now settle down, Ben. Nobody said nothing about getting rid of your truck." Outlaw said.

"Well... I ain't. And ain't no one can make me!"

Outlaw waved at Ben as if he were swatting at a fly. "We all just having some fun. That's all. But if you don't settle down, I'll be forced to call the ornery police to come get you."

Ben shook his head in disgust and resumed reading over the catalog.

"Anything new in this old place," Benny said.

"Well, why don't I give you the grand tour. It's been a while since you've been in here." Outlaw eased himself off the bags of grout. "My bottom dollar was getting right worn anyhow."

Outlaw led Benny to the elevator and closed the metal gate, securing them inside. As a boy, Benny loved this elevator and would ride it anytime Outlaw or his dad used it. The carriage was constructed of wood planks that weren't fitted together evenly. Some places in the floor had gaps between the planks and that same fear of falling though the space that he had as a child resurfaced mildly as he examined the wood beneath him.

"She sure is ugly ain't she, like she's been through some rough years," Outlaw said. "But she's a reliable old gal, never complains."

He pressed the middle button, the one that used to contain a two on it, but had beer worn away over the years, and the elevator shook and dropped a short step before smoothly going up. The second floor was exactly how Ben remembered it; rows and rows of neatly stacked two by fours, one by fours, quarter and three quarter inch plywood, four by eight foot sheets of peg board, mortar board, and a new gray material Benny wasn't familiar with.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Now that's some strong board. They call it wonder board."

Benny grazed his hand over it. The texture was smooth and soft. Benny thought it would be delicate, but when he lifted a corner of it, found it to be heavy and sturdy.

"What do you use it for?" he asked.

"Sub flooring. Mainly underneath tile for kitchen and baths. It does good on counter tops to. A lot cleaner to cut and faster than the old concrete board. We still carry that mess, but this stuff is what you'd want. But you're going to pay more for the convenience of it."

"What about the top floor?" Benny asked.

"Still close to the same, but I'll show you. I bet you're anxious to see it all."

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about your letter."

Benny figured this was as good a time as any to talk about his dad's condition.

"Sure, I'll show you the top," Outlaw said loudly and motioned for Benny to keep quiet. Once they reached the third floor Outlaw explained, "I didn't want your dad

hearing us. The building ain't as tight all around as it used to be. There's a lot of room for sound to carry!"

Benny walked towards the front windows, inspecting various types of doors, frames, and moldings. "Have you noticed the difference in him?" Outlaw asked.

"Not so much, no," Benny said, "but we've barely talked."

"Remember how he used to be. How he could convince a wall into falling down? Well.... he don't do that no more. I don't know so much if that's his sickness or because he all of a sudden clammed up after your mom passed away. He took that real hard you know."

"Yeah, about that. I wanted to explain why..."

"No need," Outlaw interrupted, shaking his head. "You don't have to explain anything to me."

"Yeah, I do."

"Shush," Outlaw turned away as if by not looking at him he wouldn't be able to hear him. "You're a good one. Now it ain't no secret I'm fond of you. You're like a nephew...you are... like a son to me."

"I would've been here," Benny said, following Outlaw as he limped away, "but I didn't get your letter until after the funeral."

"Now...now, I know you would've been here if you could. Your mama loved you very much and I know you loved her to." He stopped and turned to Benny. "It was a right nice funeral. A lot of people came out. She was never a stranger to anyone, and no one was a stranger to her."

"Was she in much pain?"

"A little, but I think God was gracious to her and didn't allow to feel what others feel. Yeah... he remembered her meekness and let her go to Him in her sleep... and in her own room. Your dad was real particular on that. Wouldn't think of her in a nursing home. Cared for her himself. I was somewhat shocked by it all."

Benny couldn't imagine the portrait of his dad as the attentive care giver that Outlaw was painting. A part of him wanted to believe in the goodness of his dad, but he couldn't accept character traits that he had never seen. As he listened, Benny felt as if Outlaw were speaking of someone else, a man that Benny had never known or even momentarily met.

The light was shining through the dusty window panes, creating the impression of a dirt inspired stained glass. Benny looked out the window, down the street to the corner where the First United Methodist Church was, its bell tower erect, making a futile attempt to touch heaven. He noticed a new, more modern set of traffic lights supported by large metal arms like giant hangman trees he used to scribble as a boy on pew envelopes during the pastor's sermon.

"After she died, something happened to your dad. It's like his whole person changed."

"Is that why you sent the letter? Do you think I can help with that?"

"I don't pretend to be a doctor, but I know to listen real good when they tell me," Outlaw said, sitting on top of the wonder board. "Expensive stuff, but not much for comfort." He shifted his weight to his right. "I didn't think much of it when your dad stopped talking, figured he was just grieving and that was his way. But it was when he started forgetting that I took notice. And then about a month ago he started talking to me

like I was somebody else. Like he done forgot that I was Outlaw. And then after that he went into this daze, like he was sleeping with his eyes open. Well, I took him to the emergency room and they ran all these tests, asking me if he'd had a blow to the head recently. I told them that I didn't think so, but that I only worked for him and wasn't around him all the time. While we was there, your dad came out of his stupor and started making a fuss about me taking him to the doctor and the expense of it all. And threw such a fuss that I took him home."

"So what's wrong with him?"

"Well... your dad, he wouldn't go back to the doctor, but I did about a week later after the tests came back and they told me that your dad had something about synapses or something like that going on in his brain. They told me all this medical talk that I didn't know what was what, until I heard them mention Alzheimer's."

"He's got Alzheimer's?"

"Yeah, early stages from what I gathered."

"So…" Benny was shocked. "What can they do for him?"

"Nothing, I reckon. That's why I asked you to come. They told me that his condition will keep getting worse. I asked them all kinds of particulars and they said that the disease affects everyone differently, that they could project his symptoms but that was about it. All they told me for sure was just that he would get worse."

"How much time does he have?"

"He could forget everything by next month or ten years from now. Or he could stay like he is and have random episodes, reliving a memory now and again. All they told me for sure was that he needed someone to watch over him."

"You mean a nurse?"

"Well, it could be one day. But right now he needs a body at home with him, you know, to make sure he doesn't run through the woods naked and crazy like."

Benny sat is if his body were exhausted by the weight of the news being dumped on him.

"It'll be all right. I know you're busy and all that, and I'm not asking you to do this by yourself. I'll help out. I mean I'm here at the store with him every day but Sunday, and I don't care to help out at the house. But I can't live out there with him. I got my birds to take care of and little Beatrice would go off and mourn herself to death if I left her alone anymore than I did," he explained. "I just thought it best that you see for yourself. And, anyway, your dad wouldn't like me as a roommate. I'm a little bit messy, and I l know he can't abide that none. I'm afraid I'd just help him lose the mind he's got left."

"I don't know if my being around wouldn't do the same. If you haven't noticed, Dad and I aren't on the best of terms."

"I know that, but you're all he's got," Outlaw said.

"Now I don't know what happened between the two of you, and frankly I don't care none. It ain't my business. But I reckon you've been away long enough and that I'd never have forgiven myself had I not told you this."

Benny stood up quickly and started pacing the aisle between the doors and the plywood. "What am I supposed to do?" he asked, frustrated by the responsibility placed on him. If he were to stay and care for his dad, then there was no telling how long he'd be stuck here. If he only had money then he could hire a nurse and eventually put him in a nursing home. "You don't expect me to stay here forever do you?"

"It ain't up to me to tell you what to do. I just thought you needed to know."

"Doesn't he have insurance?"

"As for as I know, but he doesn't tell me about that stuff. I've known your dad since before you was born and he's always been secretive, tells you what you need to know about himself and that's about it. Expects you to answer your own questions about him if it concerns you enough. And he never asks me anything. You know more about me than he does, but that's because you got a little of your mom in you. Both of you were always good listeners."

Benny stopped pacing and looked out the window. "I guess I don't have any other choice." He felt trapped. Even if he could, it wasn't like he had any place to go. He was broke and couldn't afford to leave. "I'll stay as long as I can."

"I'm glad to hear it." Outlaw stood and limped towards him, laying his hand on Benny's shoulder. "I for one have missed you, Benny Boy."

Benny smiled uncomfortably. "Yeah, me too."

Benny left the store without saying anything else to his dad. He wasn't ignoring him, but felt numb and didn't have anything to say. He walked fast to his mom's car in a daze, not noticing his surroundings. Once in the driver's seat, he didn't move, just sat there as his mind tried to workout his options. The last thing he wanted to do was provide in home care for his dad, and figured he deserved to fade away in a nursing home, where he would be alone and forgotten. But how could he do that? After all, this was the only family he had left, and even though he couldn't stand him, he couldn't abandon his responsibility. Yet how long would he have to stay in Morristown, be trapped here with no friends and no future?

His stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten anything. Benny started the engine and looked at the clock. It was after twelve, so he decided to grab something fast through a drive-thru and take it home. Stopping at the Sonic, he ordered a brown bag special, which consisted of a burger, tater tots, and a cherry limeade. He parked the car inside the barn and stretched the cover over it, trying to put it back exactly the way he found it. It was such a pleasant day. Benny ate his lunch inside his old tree house on the big elm in the back. Benny had always called the tree, Ellie, and was surprised to find the tree house still useable. His dad had built it big enough for two adults to lie comfortably in. It was like a palace to Benny growing up, his place of refuge whenever he needed to get away.

The burger and tots tasted great as Benny barely paused to breathe between bites, eating hurriedly as if a pack of dogs were salivating around him. The cherry limeade was sweet enough to be his dessert, so after finishing, Benny lay back against the plywood floor and fell sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Wheels crunching gravel awoke him, and Benny looked out a peephole he had made as a kid in the wall of the tree house about the circumference of a peach core to see his dad's black Silverado coming up the driveway. Feeling a sense at urgency to get inside the house, a latent warning that he shouldn't let his dad catch him being idle, that he should be working on some project or cleaning the house. Benny jumped to the ground and met his dad on the porch.

"You close up early?" Benny asked, trying to initiate polite conversation.

"It's after five." Ben mumbled, searching for the door key in his collection. "Always close at five."

"Didn't realize it was so late."

Ben found the key, put it in the lock, but turned the knob without it. "Didn't you look the door?"

"I thought I did," Benny said.

"Well, from now one, while you're here, lock the door."

"Sorry, but I don't have a key."

"Don't need one. You seem to have become right good at crawling through windows and stealing cars."

"I didn't..." Benny was becoming frustrated. "The car's exactly where you put it. Go ahead and check if you don't believe me."

Ben didn't bother replying, and shuffled inside. Benny remained outside, needing to grab a breather before entering the next round with the reigning champion of old Bethel Rd, Ben "the Bull" Headley. He decided to walk one of the worn paths through the woods and eliminate any time he'd have to spend with his dad before his date, which was the only aspect of being home that he was anticipating enjoying.

The trees were a dulled green and the leaves felt brittle. Benny knew that it had been a hot summer in Nashville, but didn't realize how dry it had been in the valley. It was a good ten degrees cooler under the shade of the trees, and Benny breathed in the crispness of the silence, relaxing in the absence of transportation noise. He listened to the different species of birds as they chattered to one another in rapid tweaks and melodious whistles.

Benny came to the edge of the woods and stepped into a clearing, a rolling field of maturing wheat. In the distance, he could see the outline of another house, a gray painted two-story farmhouse with a covered porch wrapping around from the front to the side. Benny's heart began to flutter faster as his stomach felt light and uncertain, for this was a house he remembered distinctly and wondered about whatever happened to the girl he never could forget, Miriam.

Benny's best friend, Wiley Wilson, used to live in the grey farmhouse next to his. Wiley had hair the color of a closet with its doors closed in the middle of the night, and contrasted against this was his pale skin which was resilient against the sun like the glare of snow on a bright day. Although Wiley was small framed and looked delicate, he wasn't, and was revered as the toughest kid, not only in the neighborhood, which consisted of only Wiley, his sister, Amy, and Benny; but throughout the Hamblen County

school district. He could throw down and pin to the ground any boy that dared, even older and stronger boys. And Benny was glad they were best friends and enjoyed the safety of the protection his friendship with Wiley provided.

Throughout elementary school and into middle school, Wiley and Benny were inseparable. They even played on the same baseball teams together; first the Wildcats, then the Bears, and the All Stars. Baseball was the one thing Benny did better than Wiley, but Wiley was not competitive and supported Benny's talents

Amy Wilson looked like Wiley, but was prettier, and could play basketball better than any girl her age. Benny loved watching Amy play point because she could dribble without effort and appeared as if she were ice skating gracefully around the court. She was small like Wiley, but that allowed her to be quicker than the other girls, and would weave herself though any pattern the defense had to offer. Benny always wondered what would have developed between them had he known he longer. Other than his mom, she was the first girl he admired, and the first that he sometimes blushed around. Amy had inherited that same inner strength as her brother. Benny thought she was fearless. There was nothing she wouldn't try if Wiley dared her into it.

Her scariest moment involved a time after Wiley's dad let them watch an old Tarzan movie. There was a creek behind their house that cut through the back field of the Headley's farm. On each bank of the creek were trees that had grown tall from the constant nourishment of the water.

There were vines a little thicker than a bungee cord tie down hanging from various trees aligning the creek. Being inspired by the jungle acrobatics of Tarzan, who

Wiley would try to imitate the Lord of the Jungle's signature yell, the three of them decided to see who could swing the longest, grabbing vine to vine. The winner would gain the title "All Powerful Jungle Lord" while the other two would have to address them by that name for the rest of the week. Along with that, Wiley encouraged an additional private competition with his sister where the loser would have to do the other's chores. Never wanting her brother to outdo her, Amy accepted his challenge.

Wiley chose an area where three vines hung close together and climbed a quarter of the way up to a large branch that could support his weight. He pounded his chest and yelled or rather yodeled. Amy teased him, telling him that it wasn't a yodeling competition. Wiley never could ignore her taunts and touched his forefinger to his thumb, creating a circle space inside them. Amy looked at his hand and Wiley yelled, "Boom!"

He grabbed the vine with both hands, pulled down on it, testing its strength, and jumped. He looked terrified as he swung towards the second vine, and clung on to the vine like a child holding on to their favorite uncle's leg, refusing to let go, as he tries to leave. The vine returned to the branch, but Wiley still held on. Benny hollered at him to read out for the vine. As Wiley swung back towards it, he stretched for it, but barely missed it as the vine swung back. Wiley tried for a third time, but was unable to grab the vine and ended up climbing down the third vine in defeat.

Benny competed in the jungle swing next, but only managed to imitate the example set before him and gave up after the momentum of the first vine wasn't fast enough to reach the second vine or the branch, barely swinging between them.

Benny knew Amy had to be scared as she reached for the first vine. Although she looked confident, Benny figured she had to be just as frightened as he was. Had he not

been terrified, he would've reached the second vine easily. Benny knew for Amy to win that she would have to get to the second vine on the first swing, and if she hesitated then wouldn't reach it, and no one would gain the jungle swinging champion title.

Amy jumped up and held on as the vine arched gracefully. She crossed her legs around the vine gaining an added hold which Benny and Wiley didn't, using only the strength of their upper body. Because of this she was able to extend her arm straight out, giving her hand that extra distance it needed to grab hold of the second vine. Amy released the first wine and pulled herself onto the second, her body wrapped snuggly around it. She tried to make it to the third vine, but wasn't able to get the second vine to swing. She jerked forward and back, trying to create a good movement, but was only successful in properly shaking the vine and the top of the tree it was attached to.

Giving up her goal, but winning the competition, she made her way to the ground and stood before the boys wearing a proud smile. Benny congratulated her while Wiley only muttered, "lucky" several times and shook his head. She told Benny that he could still call her by her real name, but that her brother could begin addressing her as "All Powerful Jungle Lord" immediately. Benny could tell Wiley was upset because his face wasn't its usual shade of paleness as a light pink rose to his cheeks and forehead, Wiley didn't say much as they walked through the field towards their house. Amy skipped ahead of them.

She was the happiest Benny had remembered seeing her as she turned and smiled victoriously to her brother, gloating over her achievement over him. Wiley hated to lose. And many times Benny wouldn't do his best when competing against. Wiley because

Wiley took defeat so personally that Benny wanted to spare him from that unnecessary pain. And Benny normally didn't care if he won or not, he just enjoyed the fun involved.

Benny noticed Amy's skip was getting slower as if her engine had run out of gas and she was coasting on fumes. And before he could react, she collapsed, her small frame suddenly disappearing behind a wall of golden wheat. At first, Wiley thought she was fooling and warned that it wasn't going to be his fault if he accidentally stepped on her. But the closer they got, the longer Amy stayed on the ground, and the more Benny started to worry.

Benny picked up his pace and ran towards her as Wiley told him that he was a faggot if he believed her game. Benny didn't listen to Wiley and ran faster. When he reached her, Amy was lying on her side, hitting her left thigh with her fist. Her eyes were wide and Benny saw the depths of he terror. He asked her what was wrong, but she kept hitting her leg and shaking her head. Wiley told her to get up and stop fooling. But Amy didn't respond and hit her legs harder and harder. Finally, Benny grabbed her arm, preventing her from striking herself and told Wiley to get his mom. Wiley refused, said she was only fooling around, trying to put one on them. For the first time, Benny got angry at Wiley and snapped at him to stay with her and ran to their house.

He found Mrs. Wilson inside canning cherries she had picked from the tree out back. Benny told her that she had to come, that something was wrong and led her to Amy, finding Wiley kneeling beside her crying. It was the only time Benny saw him cry.

The Wilson's transported Amy from doctor to doctor, trying to learn why their daughter was paralyzed from the waist down. Benny didn't see Amy for several weeks, the only information he received was from his mom through phone conversations with

Mrs. Wilson. They had taken Amy to hospitals in Knoxville, the Tri-cities, and all the way to Memphis, always finding another doctor referral at the end of a series of tests and examinations. Finally, a doctor in Atlanta diagnosed Amy with Guillian Barrett's disease, a neurological disorder that normally affects young children, but like Amy had been diagnosed in older cases. They said that Amy was born with the disease and was fortunate to have operated for this long without paralysis. Benny could tell his mom didn't want to tell him any more, but he pleaded with her to tell him. He had to know. Through quiet sobs she told him that her condition would only get worse, that there was little hope for recovery.

A week later the Wilson family came home and Benny went over to visit. Amy refused to see him and locked herself in her room. Wiley tried to act normal around him, but Benny could tell he was paler than usual. The inside of the house was hot so the two of them went outside and walked through the field. Wiley eventually explained that they were moving, going to someplace in Ohio where Amy could get better care. Apparently, there was a doctor who was hopeful that with certain treatments and physical conditioning that the disease could either stop progressing or could go into remission; and since Amy was one of the oldest cases known that there was a chance that she might be able to walk again.

The Wilsons moved a few weeks later. Benny never saw Wiley or Amy again. Their house was sold to the Thomas', a family that consisted of Mable, who everyone called Grammy, her daughter Mable Jr. who was called either Miss Thomas or Mable, and her daughter, Miriam. At first, Benny disliked this new family who invaded his best friend's home and acted like it was their own. Benny noticed every change they made to

the house from the flowery curtains that now blocked the front porch windows that the Wilsons always left uncovered to the assortment of odd cats that patrolled the property.

Some days Benny would stand at the edge of the woods and watch the gray farmhouse, half expecting Wiley and Amy to throw open the screen door, to see and hear it bang against the frame as they raced each other through the wheat to see who could be the first to him. But the door remained closed and no matter how long and how often he would wait, hoping, his friends never came. Benny had no desire to meet his next door invaders, although his mom had already described to him many times as to how nice the women were and commented on how cute the daughter was. But Benny would ignore his mom's urgings for him to meet them and would stay hidden in his tree house when the Thomas women came to visit.

Around three weeks after they arrived, a few days before he entered eighth grade, Benny was sitting at the edge of the clearing, staring at the gray farmhouse when he felt something hit his shoulder. He looked behind him into the woods but didn't see anything. A moment later, he felt something small collide into the back of his head. This impact stung so he got up quickly and turned around moodily. He searched the woods slowly, waiting for someone to move out from behind the cover of one of the trees. Still, he saw no one. It wasn't until he noticed a small object coming down from the top of his vision and felt a sudden sting against his cheek that he squinted into the rays of the fading sunlight in the west at a girl giggling, sitting on a low branch.

Although Benny knew who it probably was he asked anyway, holding his cheek, as if he could force the pain somewhere inside his mouth so he could chew it and

swallow it away. He heard a breathy voice say, "It's about time you say hello to me, Benny Headley."

The sun had disappeared behind the woods, shining a dull orange through the spaces between the trees and casting a shadowy mosaic against the farmhouse. Benny didn't have a watch to look at to know how long he had been standing there and hustled back to the house to get ready for his date.

His dad was sitting in his recliner with his eyes closed, while Wheel of Fortune was on the television still facing the wall. Benny went to the kitchen and poured a glass of water, noticing that the time was already twenty two minutes past seven. He could hear his dad mumbling to himself, so he stepped back into the living room.

"The...er...they... the...er... they," he repeated to himself.

"Is there a B?" a female contestant asked.

"Yes," the host said, "there is one B."

"The. B... er... they.... the... er... they," his dad repeated.

"All right... that bell means our time is about up," the host, Pat Something or another, Benny never could remember his name, said. "I'll give the wheel a final spin. Vowels are worth nothing, consonants worth six hundred dollars. Let's add a thousand to that. Consonants worth sixteen hundred dollars."

"F," a man said.

"Yes, there is an F. You'll have five seconds," Pat said.

"The... er... they... fall," Ben said, sitting up suddenly and pointing at the television. "The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

"H," a woman said.

"There is one H," Pat said. "Five seconds."

"What are you doing?" Benny asked his dad.

"The bigger they are the harder they fall," the woman answered the puzzle correctly as bells chimed and theme music played.

"Were you playing Wheel of Fortune?" Benny asked, not understanding how someone could play the game without seeing the puzzle.

"What else would I be doing?" Ben said flatly.

"Wouldn't it be easier to play with the TV facing you?"

"What's the challenge in that?" he got up and walked past Benny to the kitchen.

"Do you normally do this?"

"Do what?"

"Stare at the back of the TV?"

"Picture hurts my eyes...too bright," Ben explained. "Ain't much need in watching. Didn't use to have things to watch when I was young, everybody gathered around the radio. Understood much more about what was going on that way. Them fast pictures just confuse a body."

"Well, I don't see how you solved that puzzle without seeing it?"

"That's because you don't listen."

"Wheel of Fortune is a visual game, listening has nothing to do with it."

"Maybe so, but only for those who don't know how to listen."

"So you're saying that I and the majority of the millions who watch this show can't hear?"

Ben opened the refrigerator and poured a glass of milk.

"It's all in the mind. People today don't like to think, don't want the responsibility. Want everyone else to do it for them. That's why you have so many people on welfare that can't keep a job. Cause they ain't got no attention left above the span of a commercial."

"Well, if the only benefit is being able to play Wheel of Fortune without watching it then..."

"People don't know how to organize. It's all in the organization. There are twenty six letters. So many letters in a puzzle. So many arrangements that those letters and multiples of them can fit. A man that can listen and organize the possibilities, can solve the problem."

"Sounds like an interesting theory," Benny said, turning his glass upside down. laying it in the sink. "I've got to get ready to head out." He started towards his bedroom.

"So you're leaving tonight?" Ben asked. Benny couldn't read the intention of his dad's question.

"No, I'm going out with this girl I met," he replied.

"Well... don't wake me up if you come in late. There's a key in the freezer under the ice tray. Don't want you sneaking through the window again, making me think a burglar's breaking in."

Benny went to his bedroom and put on his favorite pair of blue jeans which over the years had realigned themselves to his shape and fit comfortably. He was lucky that the "worn out" or "vintage" look was in fashion, allowing him to appear style conscious and not beggarly. He grabbed an olive colored t-shirt which snuggled against his

shoulders and chest, revealing their muscular definition although Benny rarely exercised. He ran his fingers through his hair, just to get the tangles out, and rubbed on some deodorant for safe measure. He checked his appearance in the oval mirror attached to his dresser and noticed his face was a little pink from his afternoon outside. He could hear a car pulling up the driveway and the whining of brakes as it stopped. Benny left his bedroom and headed to the front door to intercept Marcy, so she wouldn't have the unpleasant experience of meeting his dad. Remembering to get the key, Benny hurried to the freezer, and while he unwrapped it out of the freezer bag tied around it with a rubber band, Mary knocked. Ben got up to get the door. Benny told him that he would get it, but Ben wasn't a man who took orders in his own house and answered the door.

"Hello, Mr. Headley," Marcy said. "Is Benny home?"

"Yeah, come on in. We don't want to keep the door open and let the flies out," Ben opened the door wide, allowing Marcy to enter, and shut it behind her.

"I bet you're glad to have your son home," she said. "I can't imagine how proud you are of him."

"Hey," Benny interrupted, afraid of his dad's reply, betting on a high chance of him expressing something degrading, and Benny wanted to enjoy his evening, not begin it with his dad ruining Marcy's, so far, good impression of him.

"I hope you haven't eaten. I'm starving," Benny said.

"That's good cause that's about all there's to do here, except go bowling," she replied.

"Well, let's get going." Benny hurried her outside.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Headley." Marcy turned as Benny shut the door.

"Sorry," he said.

"Where do you want to go." She opened he door and slid into the driver's seat.

Benny stared at Marcy's white Prelude before getting in as a sudden recollection emerged. He knew that this couldn't be the same car that he had driven night after night in high school. The same car that Miriam worked year long serving chocolate dipped soft-serve cones at Dairy Queen to save up a down payment for. As he sat inside, he noticed the same blue, cloth interior and the same type of Pioneer CD player he bought for her as a Christmas present their senior year. But he reasoned that this couldn't be that car. What would be the chances of that? Of course, it was possible that Miriam eventually sold her Prelude and that Miriam wound up with it. After all, the car was over a decade old, and not many people kept cars over that duration of time.

"Is something wrong?" Marcy asked, watching him. "You look like you're about to be sick."

"Oh, no. I'm good... I used to know someone who had a car like this..it was just bringing back some memories."

"Not such good ones by the way you look."

"No... No...they were... well... they were a long time ago!"

"Hopefully, we'll make some better ones tonight." She put her hand lightly on his. Benny almost jumped, but didn't, allowing her to momentarily rub her hand against his.

She removed her hand to put the manual stick in reverse and turning around, guided the shifter into the first position and headed toward Old Bethel Rd. Benny glanced overhead, looking for a X shaped cut in the ceiling fabric, still wondering if this was the same Prelude.

"Can't get over it, can you?" Marcy asked, interrupting his search.

"What?"

"The car looks that familiar to you."

"Yeah... so how long have you had it?"

"I've just been driving it for the last few years, but it's been in my family as long as I can remember."

"Anyone else ever owned it?"

"I don't think so. I'm pretty sure we bought it new."

"What is it? A 94 model?" Benny said.

"I believe so," she said. "I'll let you drive if you want...seeing that you're so interested in her."

"In who?"

"The car." She grinned at him, turning onto highway 160, heading towards town.

"You seem to know where you're going, so I'll just enjoy the ride."

"I wouldn't get too comfortable," she said, the moonlight dancing in her eyes. "I might go too fast for you."

Benny laughed awkwardly, not sure if she was referring to something other than her actual driving. In the short time he had known her, Benny could tell that Marcy was a woman who liked feeling in charge, and was more aggressive than his past dating experiences.

"Any place you wanted to go?" she asked, but Benny figured she already had a destination chosen.

"Hey, it's your town. As long as they've got something to eat, I'll be content."

"I thought about taking you to this new place called Hoovy's. Unless you don't like locally owned places. I find that they have more character and the crowd there is usually more fun. I used to go out to the Fifth Quarter because they had karaoke. Do you like karaoke?"

"It's all right."

"I love it. Now I know I can't sing anything worth listening to, but I think it's so much fun. Like singing in the shower. Do you do that?"

"Sing in the shower? Yeah... I guess."

"I'd like to see that," Marcy said. There was an uncomfortable silence before she added. "Not is the shower, silly!" She elbowed his arm, resting on the middle console. "Although I bet you're something to see all right. But hear you sing. Would you do that for me some time?"

"Well, I'm not much of a singer."

"Now, I don't believe that. A famous musician like yourself. I bet you have a pretty voice."

"I usually let others do the singing."

"But you'd make an exception for me right?"

Benny shrugged.

"Now I won't let you off that easy. You'll see that I'm one of those girls who gets what she wants when I set my mind to wanting something."

"I'll remember that."

"And I don't forget either."

Benny understood all to well the reality of not being able to forget, and had been trying to remember to forget for many years, but no matter how hard he tried, the past was always present, refusing to be left behind. Marcy explained that the only other options for late night activities were either O'Charley's or Applebees. She said that the crowd at O'Charey's was decent, while the Applebee people were more rednecks commuting from Sneedville and Rogersville. She mentioned that the long established Angelo's was still around, but that was more for the yuppie and professional elite. She explained that she didn't like the Angelo crowd partly because you had to pay a fee, a so called membership to enter the bar, which basically gave you the right to order liquor. She thought this was shady and hypocritical, and looked forward to the day when any place could serve liquor. But she also didn't like it because more fights broke out there than any when else.

"Hoovy's sounds great," Benny said. "I like trying new things."

"Glad to hear it." She turned a quick right into a parking lot.

The first thing Benny noticed about Hoovy's was the enormous pig holding a frothy beer mug painted on the exterior side of the old two story brick building. "Did this used to be a pawn shop?" Benny asked, visualizing a boom box he once wanted in fourth grade, sitting in the window. Of course, the boom box was long gone and the window presently displayed various neon beer signs.

"I'm not sure. I've only lived here for a few years," Marcy said.

"Where are you from originally?" Benny asked, opening the door for her.

"Don't get that kind of treatment around here." She acknowledged his mannerly gesture and walked inside.

"Guys around here just don't know any better," Benny replied.

A waitress in a tight fitting tank top asked them how many. Benny noticed her nipples raising the Camaro blue fabric. He reminded himself to look away, to stare at anything but her chest. So that Marcy wouldn't think he was like every other horny guy in Morristown, but didn't overt his gaze quick enough as he noticed Marcy grinning and nodding.

"Take us upstairs, Van," Marcy told the waitress, who led them up a steep and narrow set of stairs in the middle of the room. The second floor was crowded not only with people occupying almost every table, but with old toys and games attached to the walls and hanging from the ceiling. Benny almost bumped into a model of the space shuttle Columbia. The waitress placed two zeroxed paper menus on the table in the front right corner and whispered something to Marcy before putting her hand on the shoulder of a bald headed guy at the table next to them, kneeling down to talk to him. It looked more like to Benny that she was not as much conversing than introducing her two friends as they bobbed up and down near his face.

"That's Vanessa," Marcy said, sitting down. "She works at Maule with me."

"You like working there?" Benny was having a difficult time seeing Marcy because of the cigarette smoke clouding the room.

"She says you're cute."

"What?" Benny also was having a hard time hearing for the roar of chatter around him.

"She said you were cute!" Marcy leaned over the table, breaking through the smog barrier. Benny blushed. "Look at you... turning all red. I didn't figure you to be the shy type. You're not what I expected."

"Sorry to disappoint." Benny picked up the menu.

"No... no..." Marcy's hand touched his. "It's refreshing. I thought you'd be obnoxious."

"Why?"

"Well... you know... being famous and all."

"Not my way."

"Cause most of the guys here are obnoxious and they've never done nothing. Most of them who were popular in high school, just get drunk talking about some tackle they made during some game no one but them remembers."

"What can I get you to drink?" a waitress with her brown hair tied up into two pig tails asked.

"I'll take a Miller Lite and a glass," Marcy said.

"You got Mountain Dew?" Benny said.

"We got most of anything you want, honey."

"I'll take that then."

"All right... Oh... my name's Ozzy if you need me. Just wave though cause I won't hear you over this racket," the waitress said and walked through a door in the back wall.

"Never seen her before," Marcy said. "She must be new."

"So what's good here?" Benny glanced over the menu.

"Anything with barbeque. That's what they're known for. I usually get the chicken."

"So…" Benny lowered his menu. "Where did you say you were from originally?"

"We moved around a lot. My dad and I and Sheila. She was Dad's second wife."

"Doesn't sound like you liked her much."

"Sheila? Eh... she's all right I guess. We just didn't have much in common. You know... even if she was closer to my age than his. Maybe that was the problem. She felt more like my sister than my step mom. I guess we were living near Cherokee when I left. So to answer your question... I guess I came from Cherokee...but I don't have any Indian in me if that's why you're looking at me funny."

Benny hadn't realized that his face had portrayed his confusion. "I'm sorry I was just curious how this all works out. How old were you when you left?"

"I was sixteen. I moved here when..."

"Have you two decided?" the waitress interrupted, placing the drinks on the table.

"I want the chicken platter," Marcy said. "With baked beans and fries instead of slaw." Ozzy didn't write anything, just nodded when Marcy finished and looked impatiently at Benny.

"Uh... uh.... let me try this pork over cornbread special."

"What side do you want with that?"

"Let me do the." Benny quickly reviewed the list of sides. "The french fries will be fine."

"Be back when it's ready," Ozzy said and hustled away as if she were in a speed walking race with the senior citizens before the shopping hours at the College Square Mall.

"So you were saying about your moving here." Benny tried to resume their previous conversation but Marcy's attention was somewhere behind him.

"Damn," she blurted out.

"What is it?" Benny started to look around.

"No, don't." Marcy reached over the table and squeezed his forearm. "Maybe he won't see us."

"Who?"

"Damn it! Here he comes." Marcy released her grip, slumping in her seat.

"Hey, Marcy," a high pitched throaty voice said behind Benny. Marcy didn't say anything and acted like she didn't hear him." Whose your friend?" the guy stepped beside Benny, extending his hand.

The stranger was a little shorter than Benny and twice as thick. He wore round wine colored glasses and parted his oily, black hair to the side as if it were still wet from the shower.

"This is Benny," Marcy said.

"Benny... Benny..." The stranger repeated to himself. "That's it. That's it. You're Mr. Headley's son. I remember you from high school. You wouldn't know me cause I was a freshman your senior year. Man, you haven't changed much have you? You're lucky, I'm telling you. I started getting a spare spot on the top of my head my junior year. Been doing the comb over ever since. So what happened to you? Haven't seen you around."

"Benny's a musician," Marcy said before Benny could respond.

"Wow. That's it, buddy. That's the way to go. Beats what I do slaving away at Evans Office Supply repairing copiers. It takes all my attention at the end of the day to get all the ink from those cartridges off my hands. You'd think I'd been finger painting if you were to see me. But it's a job and I'm thankful for that. A lot of people I know have been laid off lately on account of our no good economy right now. But it'll pick up... that's what I think. I've been told that I'm one of those positive thinker types."

"Like the grass is greener where the other guy lives," Benny said.

"No, I like to think of it as... if a man works hard enough and doesn't give up then he can achieve anything."

"And that's why you still repair Zerox machines right, Samuel? Cause that's your ambition," Marcy said.

Benny was surprised at her sharp tone. He would admit that Samuel was a little annoying, and would predict that a little of him lasts a long time, but he seemed to be a nice enough kind of guy, and found Marcy's remark to be rude, making him wonder if she were quick tempered.

"Or course not. One day I hope to own my own business. I just don't know what kind it will be yet. "

Benny was going to encourage him to keep working towards it, but Marcy ended their conversation with, "Well... I guess we'll being seeing you later, Samuel."

Samuel took the hint, or at least decided to go to the bar in the back and sit on a stool, immediately starting up a conversation with a man leaning against the bar top.

"I'm sorry about that," Marcy said. "He just can't leave me alone?"

"He seems like a nice enough guy."

"Oh, yeah... Samuel's great. Just the kind of guy a girl wants stalking her."

"Really? He stalks you?" Benny figured she was exaggerating.

"He's just persistent. I try to give him hints that I'm not interested, but he just doesn't stop."

"Maybe he's the kind of guy that gets what he wants when he wants it."

"He couldn't get what he wanted if he tripped over it."

If she did, Marcy didn't show that she caught on to Benny's referral to her previous statement in the car.

"Let's not talk any more about him. Tell me something pleasant. Tell me about all the famous people you know."

Benny didn't want to lie, but he couldn't tell her that the only famous person he ever saw was the Judd mother behind a runway of tickets as he flipped pancakes over the hot grill at Ihop.

"I don't like to talk about work that much," Benny replied.

"I can understand that. I could bore you with stories about working in the office, answering phones at Maule. But I'd rather bring Samuel back to entertain you than put you through a day in the life of my job."

"So why did you move here?"

"Here you go." The waitress sat down two plates in front of them. "You've got extra barbeque sauce on the table. You need anything else?"

"I'll need another." Marcy emptied the rest of her Miller Lite into her glass.

Ozzy picked up the bottle and darted away.

Benny was starving, so he quickly ate a bite. "This stuff is good," he said. He noticed Marcy hesitated before eating.

"I'm sorry, but I normally say grace before a meal. Would you mind doing it?"

Benny felt ridiculous. He must have looked like a big heathen to her, but based on her behavior the few times he had been around, he had no idea, no warning, that she was religious. It had been a long time since he prayed out loud, and every second that elapsed with him silent as he tried to think of words to say, made him feel even more awkward and even more like a pagan.

"I'm just messing with you," Marcy tapped the side of his foot with hers." You were sweating on that one weren't you?"

Until his relief came, Benny hadn't realized be had been holding his breath.

"Did I get you?" She giggled.

"That you did."

"Did anyone ever tell you that you were gullible?" she asked.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you have a pretty smile?"

"I've heard it a few times before," she said. "But then again you noticed and haven't been drinking."

Benny was so hungry he practically ate his plate of barbeque in three bites. Marcy was a more delicate eater and would take small bites and would chew long enough for the food to reduce to the size of a grain of sand before swallowing. But Benny didn't mind, he actually enjoyed watching her eat, even when she used a folk to pick up her fries.

"I don't like grease. Don't like the feel of it," she said, dipping a fry with her fork into a mound of ketchup on the edge of her plate.

"I can't blame you there," Benny said, feeling as if it were his responsibility to keep the conversation going since he was finished eating and she wasn't." Back in the day, my parents had this garden. I don't think my dad much cared for it, but my mom grew up on a farm and enjoyed growing vegetables. So Dad would plow up a pretty large section of the field in the back with his tractor and Mom would do most of the rest."

"You two doing all right?" Ozzy asked, carrying a tray of beers. "Need anything?"

"We're good," Marcy said. Ozzy left, disappearing into the smoke.

"Any way, the tractor was old, one of those John Deeres made in the 40's and would tear up all the time. So when I was in middle school Dad made me help him work on it. I don't know if you know anything about tractors, but there's grease it seems in every part of them. I guarantee that everything you repair you're going to find a good amount of grease. But grease didn't seem to bother Dad. I used to think he would bathe in the stuff. But I didn't care for it. Anyway, the point of all that is that I'm like you when it comes to grease."

"Yeah, I couldn't fool with that stuff. I can't even touch cooking grease."

"You wouldn't have wanted to live on a farm then."

"No. I guess not. Living with my dad wasn't much better. He's a mechanic. And I don't know if he just didn't care so he didn't try to wash it off, or it that black grease just got tattooed under his finger nails," she said, squinting her face in disgust. "But every time he'd put his hand on me for whatever reason, I'd imagine his hand covered in grease and getting that blackness all over me. I never meant to cringe and move away from him, but I know I did sometimes." She placed her fork down, wiped the corners of her mouth,

and laid the paper napkin over her plate as if she were covering her food with a blanket for the night. "Did you like everything?"

"Yeah, it tasted good."

The whine of a microphone being turned on sliced through the noise of voices, cutting them into complaints and protests against the intrusion of hurtful sound.

"Karaoke time." Marcy sat up taller in her chair. "This is my favorite. Benny wanted to ask for the check and leave before the embarrassment contest began. Never before had he enjoyed karaoke, neither as a participant or a listener.

"You should go up there," Marcy said. "I bet you'd blow everybody away."

Benny shook his head. "I'm not a singer really, remember?"

"I thought you were just being silly."

Ozzy placed the check in the middle of the table and picked up their plates. "Unless you two want something else then I'll just leave that with you."

"I'm good," Benny picked up the check, was amazed at how much they charged for beer and handed the waitress two twenties.

"I'll be back with your change," Ozzy said and headed to the back of the restaurant.

"All right... all right... test... test... test it out." A man's voice reverberated in the room. "Can ya'll hear me?"

"Unfortunately," some guy at a table shrouded by smoke said.

"That's funny, Burt," the middle aged man with the red beard said into the microphone. "Maybe after our little contest... you can give a little comedy act to help us get ready for sleep tonight."

Various chuckles traveled across the room as if the joke were whispered from person to person as each responded after hearing.

Ozzy laid down Benny's change on the table as the announcer said, "All right... let's get to it. Anybody who doesn't know what to do then just watch a few and you'll get it. Everybody else remember that you have to sing the whole song to qualify to win. The winner is based on audience response, so those of you who brought all your friends and some of your family, you might have an advantage and could win something tonight."

"What's the prize?" a man near the stage asked.

"The same as always. A fine dining experience for two at your favorite local eating establishment," the announcer said.

"That ain't no prize. We get coupons for McDonald's in the Sunday paper, "a woman said.

"That may be true." The announcer laughed. "But you didn't get to publicly humiliate yourself for them though."

"Get on out of the spotlight, Fred!" A bleached blonde woman with hair teased out like she was going to a Montley Crue concert jumped on the small stage. "I'm ready to sing for my supper tonight."

The announcer handed her the microphone, stepped off the stage and sat down behind a computer screen. She leaned over, whispered to Fred, who immediately started pushing buttons, and announced, "This one is for my main man, who God love him couldn't be here tonight cause he's busy at home with his two kids from that bitch of an ex-wife of his."

Benny gritted his teeth as he listened to the worst rendition of Motley Crue's "Every Rose Has It's Thorns." He didn't know what got under his musical skin the worst; the fact that the woman was a whole step flat off pitch, or the cheesy accompaniment of synthesized piano sounds where electric guitars should have been. Either way, it sounded horrible, and Benny was more than ready to leave.

"She really sucks doesn't she?" Marcy yelled, the biggest smile spreading across her face. "You should see yourself. You look like you're in pain."

"I am."

"You're hating this aren't you?"

Benny didn't want to spoil her fun by telling her the truth, but he was having a hard time trying to lessen his scowl with each wrong note sung.

"I'll make you a deal. If the next person sucks then we leave, but if they don't then we have to stay till the end," Marcy said.

Benny agreed, hoping that the next wannabe singer would tank so he could get out of the sensory challenged place. Not only, were his ears ringing from the noise, but his head was throbbing from inhaling everybody else's smoke. The lady longing for a return of the 1980's finished singing and almost fell off the stage as she bowed low, losing her balance. She received mild applause and seemed please, looking around the audience, nodding in approval as she returned to her seat.

Benny tried to imagine who would take the stage next, but was shocked when Marcy darted up there, barely beating another man. Benny knew the bet was rigged and that he'd been set up. Regardless of how bad she was, Benny couldn't win the bet and tell her she sucked, especially since this was their first date. As he watched her wrap her

freckled hands around the microphone, preparing to sing, he resolved that he was going to have to endure the rest of the evening of painful listening.

The synthesized melody of a song hung somewhere down one of the rows on Benny's memory clothesline began. Marcy gripped the microphone tighter and closed her eyes as she sang, "It's been sixteen hours and fifteen days." A quick flash of a bald woman singing came to Benny as he remembered Sinead O'Connor performing her one hit wonder on the Tonight Show. Benny had to admit to himself that Marcy wasn't a good singer. She wasn't as bad as the eighties woman, that was a positive he could truthfully say. But she wasn't going to be asked to sing at a friend's wedding either. Benny tried not to cringe when one of her many sustained notes would veer down a flatter path than intended, but he was unsuccessful. He was just thankful that she kept her eyes closed the whole time. As she finished the last phrase, singing, "Nothing compares to you," she opened her eyes and smiled sweetly to the crowd, who accepted her performance with more enthusiastic applause.

Marcy returned to her seat. "Okay, who won?"

Benny paused, trying to force out the words, "You were great," trying to spare his real opinion so he wouldn't hurt her feelings.

"That good, huh?" Marcy said and then playfully brushed her foot against his.

"I accept defeat," Benny said.

"You're a shit of a liar. You know that?"

Normally Benny didn't have a problem, convincing people of a lie when needed, but when it came to matters of artistic merit, he couldn't hide his opinion, and felt as if he were blaspheming against God when he tried.

"It's all right," she said. "It wasn't fair of me doing that to you. But I knew you wanted to leave and I wanted to make sure you won the bet. Cause I'll tell you a little secret." She stood, walked over to him, and sat on his lap, whispering in his ear, "Everybody knows I can't sing."

Benny could feel her breath warming his ear as an unsuspected tingle traveled down his back, reminding him of sensations he hadn't known since Miriam.

"You weren't that bad."

"You're sweet," Marcy whispered, her lips barely brushing the side of his ear.

The tingling went down to his loins and remained there, warming a part of him that had been hibernating.

"Let's get out of here," she said and slowly eased herself off of him.

Benny finished the remainder of his Mountain Dew and stood ready to leave before the next karaoke casualty wandered onstage. Marcy slid her hand into his and led him through the maze of tables, toward the stairs. Before they could go down, a couple came up, blocking their exit.

"Marcy!" Victoria approached, Benny recognized her from the previous night, "Are you just getting here? Why don't we sit together."

"We were leaving," Marcy told her.

"Don't go. We're just getting here. Have we missed anything?"

"Not really," Marcy said.

"I wanted to get here earlier, but Shay had to finish watching some game."

Benny recognized Shay Kirk before Victoria mentioned him. Although it had been several years since he'd seen him, Shay looked like Benny remembered; tan, bony,

and with short blonde hair. It was the bony aspect of his body that made him such a good fighter when they were younger, the fact that his bones protruded from underneath his skin and when they made contact, the victim's body would feel their sharpness.

"Damn me to hell," Shay acknowledged Benny. "Vicky told me you were in town, but I thought she was talking out her ass. Damn it... Benny Headley."

"How are you, Shay?" Benny tried to be polite.

"I'm good. Real good. Hell... where have you been?"

"Around... well, Nashville mostly." Benny was already tired of talking to Shay, and was more ready to leave now than be had been before.

"You don't have to go do you?" Victoria asked Marcy.

"Why don't you have a few drinks with us and the two boys can catch up. Is that all right, Benny?"

Benny looked at Marcy and couldn't tell if she wanted to go or stay, so he mumbled "sure", faked a smile, and led the unwanted entourage back to their previous table as a guy started singing "If I Was Invisible", the Clay Aiken song that Benny thought sounded like something a stalker would write. As he heard the lyrics of the chorus, Benny wished that he could become invisible and walk out of this unpleasant situation. If he had known that he would've had to endure a night of Shay Kirk and karaoke then he would've opted for an evening with his dad, eating Spam and listening to Wheel of Fortune as he watched the back of the TV.

"So you're like the big professional now," Shay said, sitting across the table from Benny.

"What do you do?"

"Hell...I work for Coca Cola. I drive one of the trucks, delivering that shit."

"So you're a truck driver?" Benny said.

"Not really. I make any local stops and sometimes drive the forklift at the warehouse."

"Shay goes wherever they want him. He's invaluable to them," Victoria said, fluffing the back of Shay's hair.

Shay jerked his head away." Stop squirreling up my head. She knows I hate that shit."

"How long you guys been together?" Benny said.

"How long have we been?" Shay asked Victoria.

"Four years and three months."

"That's a long time, ain't it?" Shay said. "And it feels like it to."

"Now you don't mean that," Marcy said.

"Hell... like I don't. Four years is a long time to be saddled to someone."

Victoria tried to laugh his remarks off and playfully punched Shay's shoulder, but Benny could tell his comment wounded her by the way she diverted her attention to adjusting her blouse.

"You're lucky to have her and you know it," Marcy said. "If you didn't have her, you'd be alone, getting drunk at home, watching ESPN."

"Now that's a good idea," Shay said.

"He's just showing off." Victoria scooted her chair close to his. "He doesn't mean it."

The audience applauded the tribute to Clay Aiken as Ozzy towered above Benny. "You guys decide to stick around?" She glanced down unfavorably at Shay. "Couldn't find any better company to keep?"

"Bring us a round of Buds. And Ozzy tell Harriet to hurry," Shay said.

Benny acted as if he didn't hear Shay's attempt at humor so he wouldn't feel obliged to fake a courtesy laugh. Ozzy moved off without responding.

"Why are you being an ass?" Marcy asked.

"What? That girl is trash. I can't stand to even look at her ugly ass," Shay said.

"Do you guys know each other?" Benny said.

"Yeah, sort of," Shay said.

"Didn't you used to date her mom?" Marcy said.

"Like I knew she was that old," Shay replied.

"How could you not... with her having a daughter in high school?" Marcy said.

"In my defense," he said to Benny, "the mom was hot." Victoria pulled her arm away from his. "Oh, come on, don't be like that. You're going to get upset because I said she was hot? You told me that yourself once."

"But I don't talk about it to everybody else," Victoria replied.

"You're too damn secretive. Like it matters, like anybody in this whole damn place gives a crapping terd about who I use to date. And it's not like we're talking to a couple of strangers here."

"I'm sorry, Victoria. I didn't mean to start up anything," Marcy said.

"It's okay. It's not your fault," Victoria replied.

"You hear that, Benny? When a woman says that what she really is saying that it is your fault. You see... and you remember this... don't ever tell your girlfriend about other girls you dated... because then you're damned because they never forget and constantly bring it up."

"I didn't bring her up," Victoria protested.

"My fault there," Marcy added.

"And you better watch out for that one," Shay pointed at Marcy.

Marcy presented Shay with a declaration of her middle finger as Ozzy placed four beers in the middle of the table. Shay picked up the bottle closest to him and took a long drink. The girls followed his example, while Benny listened to some girl trying to sing some old Motown ballad.

"Go on," Shay shoved the beer to Benny. "I don't like to drink alone."

"Thanks," Victoria sounded insulted.

"I'm good," Benny replied.

"Come on, man. It's my welcome home present to you."

"Thanks, but I'm the designated driver tonight."

"Oh, don't give me that... screw that shit. Nobody in this town will do anything to you, not when you're a local celebrity and all."

"Don't want to take a chance on it," Benny said.

"Oh... yeah...now I remember. Are you still all straight laced and shit like you were back then?" Shay asked in such a tone that showed his condemnation.

Benny was getting irritated, remembering how Shay used to pressure and manipulate him into doing things he didn't want to do like fight Michael Jarnigan in the

eighth grade. But Benny was determined not to bend to Shay's will, and no matter what was said, would not give him the satisfaction of doing what he wanted him to do.

"Just drop it, Shay. Quit being an ass," Marcy said.

"Was I talking to you?" Shay said, before taking another long drink, finishing off his beer.

"Look, Shay, I appreciate the offer, but I don't want anything tonight." Benny tried to be diplomatic, although a part of him wanted to crack the bottle against Shay's head.

"So you still don't drink, is that it?" Shay said. "You still too pious for all that?"

"Let's drop it. I told you why and that should be enough."

"Don't give me that shit. You think you're too good to drink with me don't you? Because you're so called famous and all that you can't have a drink with an old school buddy because he ain't good enough."

"Shay, you're being ridiculous," Marcy said.

"The hell I am. And who in this damn place asked you anyway...you stupid..."

"Hold on now. There ain't no need in this," Benny said.

"Hell... you're right, Benny. There ain't no need in this. There ain't no need for any of this crapping shit. Hell... I just wanted to come out and have a good time."

"That's right, man," Benny said, relieved to see Shay calming down. The last thing he wanted to deal with was a needless confrontation with Shay.

"So why you back... anyway? Our ten year reunion was last month." Shay said. "And I know you didn't come back just to go out with her. I'm sure you got better looking girls in Nashville."

"Why are you being so mean?" Victoria asked.

"Hell, it's true." Shay replied. "If he wanted a piece he didn't have to come all the way here for it, even though everybody knows that Marcy ain't ashamed of sharing her tail with anybody. I just thought my good buddy, Benny, ought to know the company he keeps since he has a good reputation to protect."

"You're an asshole." Marcy stood and disappeared behind the smoke.

"She'll be back," Shay told Victoria, who was frowning at him.

"You haven't changed much Shay." Benny stood. "Goodnight Victoria."

"Have one for the road." Shay slid the beer across the table towards Benny, practically throwing it at him as the bottle flew off the table, slamming into the back of the chair, slinging beer on Benny's jeans.

"Oh, shit, Benny." Shay laughed hard. "Hell...man!"

Benny took a napkin and tried to dry the soaking wetness from his jeans but it was of little use, his jeans had already absorbed most of the beer splattered on them. Benny's tempered flared up, and he wanted nothing more than to grab Shay by the throat, drag him through the crowd as they cheered him on, and throw him down the stairs. But instead Benny retrieved the bottle from the floor, set it on the table, and retreated quietly, compartmentalizing his anger and storing it in the long closed Shay file.

Benny found Marcy standing outside next to the front door with her arms crossing her chest as if she were shivering on a cold night.

"Are you all right?" Benny asked.

"I don't know why Victoria stays with him."

"Forget about him. I never liked him anyway."

"I'd be worried if you did," she put her arm around his. They started walking back to the car.

"It's not like he ruined our dinner or anything. We were leaving when they came." Benny said, trying to get her mind off of the whore comment Shay directed towards her. But as much as Benny didn't want to believe Shay's opinion of Marcy, he couldn't resist wondering whether or not some of it were true. He couldn't ignore that she was flirtatious and somewhat aggressive. After all, she was the one who asked him on a date within the first ten minutes after she met him. And she wasn't afraid to initiate touch, where more conservative girls would wait for the guy to do.

If Benny had been on the prowl for an evening of quick intimacy, sex without attachments, then he would've been encouraged by Shay's words, but he wasn't and found himself questioning why he was going out with Marcy in the first place. Was he using her interest in him so that he didn't have to spend uncomfortable hours with his dad? Did he want to sunbathe for a while in the glory of his presumed fame that she showered him with? A glory that he had forgotten he had pursued when he left Morristown ten years ago, a story that he had never known. Or was there something about Marcy that intrigued him? Some personality trait he found endearing? Or some physical one he was entranced by? Or was it because he hadn't been on a date since he moved to Nashville, since his last afternoon with Miriam, calling the field between their houses, silently imagining their future together?

"Why don't you let me drive?" Benny said as Marcy unlocked the driver's side door.

"I'm fine. I only had a beer," she replied.

"Actually, you had three."

"I did?" She wrinkled her brow.

"You're probably okay to drive, but I like to be safe. And if we were to get pulled over for anything, I wouldn't be arrested for too much caffeine in my system."

"Are you always so chivalrous?"

Benny almost told her that he was being careful and was really looking after his own safety, but he just agreed with her, accepted the keys when she handed them to him, and escorted her to the passenger side, opening the door for her. After he got in the car, he noticed from the clock in the radio that it was almost eleven. He figured that Marcy was a late nighter and wouldn't want to conclude their evening until some early hour in the morning, but Benny was already tired and was hoping she'd be up for an early retiring.

They didn't discuss their destination, so Benny retraced their route, and headed towards home. As they left the lights of Radio Center behind, Marcy asked if there was any place else Benny wanted to go. Benny told her that he was tired from the bus ride home and all the activities of the day. When he noticed her look of disappointment, he further explained that he didn't need to get home too late on account of his dad being a light sleeper and didn't want to wake him. That excuse seemed to relieve some at her disappointment, and Benny found the relaxed silence they shared the rest of the way to his house to be the best part of the date.

Benny turned off the headlights as he drove close to his dad's house and circled around in the yard so that Marcy wouldn't have to back up to turn around when she left. Benny turned off the engine and was about to thank Marcy for a fun evening, when she

leaned across the middle console and pressed her lips firmly against his. Although it had been a long time since he had kissed anyone, Benny's instincts took control as his lips responded to her soft, moist touch. Benny opened his mouth, following Marcy's lead as their tongues met and courted one another. Benny tasted the soured flavor of alcohol that had absorbed in her mouth, but didn't care, even though he hated the taste of it. The thrill of kissing ignited parts of him that he'd forgotten, memories that he thought were dead. At first their kisses were timid and tender, but after a few seconds had grown into a passionate tumult of primal aggression. Mary grabbed the back of his neck and held on tightly, pressing her face deeply into his, thrusting her tongue further inside as it rolled and played with his.

Benny reached behind her and felt the small of her back. Marcy leaned close as her shirt rode up her spine and Benny could feel her velvet skin. His hand worked a massaging motion against her lower back and Marcy let out a slight moan, which encouraged him on. Benny felt Marcy's free hand run its long, slender fingers down the side of his cheek, to his chin, and down his neck. Benny's mind wandered from the car to the barn and the first night he kissed Miriam laying on their stomachs, watching the fullness of the red moon through the hayloft doors.

His hand resting on the small of her back, feeling goose bumps through the peach colored cotton of her blouse. Their eyes meeting, mixing the hues of the moon's orange glow with the reflection of his hazel eyes in hers, that soft look she gave him. Their lips joining in a fluid caress. The shiver of sensation in his feet when their first expression of intimacy was complete.

Benny's eyes opened, returning him to the car, as Marcy struggled to climb over the console without interrupting their consuming passion. Benny felt the whole of her weight rest on his lap as her legs straddled his, her knees pressing indentions into the seat. Marcy tightened her hold with both hands on the back of his head and took control of the momentum of their make out. Benny slid his hands slowly up her back, raising her spaghetti strapped t-shirt with them. Her skin was soft like the top level of cream from fresh milk. Benny felt the tight elastic of her bra strap pressing securely against her back. His finger explored under it as he heard a louder moan ensue from her as she inhaled for a quick breath before opening her mouth wide and diving deeper into him. Benny worked the two clasps holding the strap together and unfastened them, amazed that he could still do it with one hand. The bra snapped as the elastic relaxed from its constraining hold, and Benny moved his hands up and down the whole of her back freely.

Marcy released her hold on him and lifted her arms above her head as Benny raised her shirt to the roof, tossing it in the back seat. Marcy let her arms fall as both shoulder straps slid down her slender arms, allowing gravity to pull her bra into Benny's lap. Marcy took Benny's hands and pressed them firmly on her breasts, screaming out a sigh of ecstasy as he cupped them in his hands. Benny felt a growing tightness is his pants as he caressed Marcy's breasts, the tips of his forefingers circling the tops of her nipples.

Benny's kisses departed from her lips and journeyed from her cheek to her neck and down to her chest. Marcy elongated her body, stretching her chin to the ceiling, her moans filling the car as Benny kissed her breast. As his mouth took hold and began massaging her, Benny imagined the pink softness of Miriam's lips and her quiet gasps as

he gently kissed her. But this wasn't Miriam and Benny reminded himself to stop thinking about her. Even though he barely knew Marcy, he felt guilty for envisioning his first love as if she were currently in his arms. Benny opened his eyes to view the subtle mounds he was caressing, to be able to have a picture of Marcy's form to imagine instead. Marcy's tan drew a painted line where her bikini top had been and her naked breasts laid firm and powdery, a sharp contrast against the deep brown of the rest of her freckled skin. Her nipples were large and brown.

Benny moved his attention to her other breast, where his lips had yet to touch, and felt Marcy shiver with anticipation as he left a trail of breath across her skin. Before he could embrace the undiscovered part of her, something moved out of the corner of his eye and caught his attention. Benny glanced outside the driver's side window and was startled when he saw his dad, standing in his checked pajamas, staring at him, only a few feet away from the car.

"What's he doing?" Benny whispered.

"Who?" Marcy looked at Benny whose head was straining at the window.

"My dad. He's right there," he said, nudging his head, indicating outside.

"Can he see us?" she asked, sounding alarmed.

"I think so."

Marcy frantically searched for her shirt while she covered her exposed chest with one arm. "What's wrong with him?" she retrieved her shirt from the back seat and put it on as she maneuvered past the shifter to the passenger seat. "Is he still there?"

"He ain't moving."

"What's wrong with him? Is he sleep walking? I've known people to do that?"

"I don't know!" Benny said, knowing that he had to get out of the car and find out, but waiting until the expanse in his jeans settled down and wasn't so noticeable. But if his dad had been watching for any amount of time then he had a pretty good idea as to his son's vehicle recreation.

Benny was embarrassed that he had been caught and felt like be was in high school and was discovered disobeying his parents, for both his dad and mom frowned on premarital relations of any degree of sexual intimacy. His mom had always been the more vocal against it, but Benny knew his dad disapproved also, even though he never said anything. But Benny was an adult now and had lived alone, outside of his parents' rules and convictions for many years, and he had to remind himself of that.

"I guess I should go see what's going on."

"All right, "she replied.

"Well... thanks for taking me out."

"Hey...although it's pretty awkward right now...one day we'll look back on this night and laugh." Marcy sounded hopeful.

"Yeah...well... goodnight...then." Benny grinned and opened the door.

"Can we do this again some night? But without the audience?" she asked.

"You know where I am," Benny replied and stepped into the humidity.

Ben didn't move, his stare transfixed on the car as Benny approached him.

"Dad, you all right?" Benny asked, stepping in front of him, blocking his view from Marcy driving slowly away.

Ben didn't respond.

"Hey, Dad?" Benny spoke louder." What are you doing out here?" Benny felt like he was talking to the big tree behind the house. "Are you asleep?" he figured that maybe he was sleep walking like Marcy had suggested. Benny heard his dad sniff and looked close, noticing a stream of tears running down his face. Benny didn't know what to do. If he should escort him back in the house or let him find his own way inside. Benny stepped back and watched as his dad slumped, giving into the weight of whatever was consuming his thoughts. He heard him let out a muffled sob before calling out Benny's mom's name.

"Nellie," Ben cried, "Nellie." Without acknowledging his son, Ben turned and walked slowly back to the porch and sat on the rusted, metal glider. Benny followed and stood in the corner of the porch, shrouded in darkness, and watched his dad relive the loneliness of his loss. And for those moments, Benny felt compassion for him, imagining his mom sitting beside his dad, gliding inches above the porch with her arm around his.

BOOK TWO: LABOR DAYS

CHAPTER FIVE:

The Saturday sun reflected off the front windows and blinded Benny as he stepped inside Headley Hardware.

"You're late." Ben pointed to the clock behind him as he sat at the counter organizing nuts and bolts into various display containers.

"Now don't be too hard on him." Outlaw climbed down the ladder with a tool belt in his hand. "A musician ain't used to getting up this early."

"If he's going to work for me then he's going to have to get here on time, "his dad said, continuing to sort out various fasteners.

"Well, I think Benny's doing a right good job. He's only been working a few days and has already gotten his old feel for the place."

"He's been hanging around for a month. It's due time I got a little work out of him for all the free room and board he's getting."

"It's not like he's paying me to help out," Benny whispered to Outlaw.

"I'm with you there." Outlaw handed Benny the tool belt. "Could you give this to the old mizer?"

Ben looked up at Outlaw.

"That's right. You heard me. I called you an old mizer," Outlaw said.

Benny laid the tool belt on the counter.

"Is this the oldest looking one we got?" Ben said.

"They're all new. That one had a few scuffs on it," Outlaw replied.

Ben pushed the belt towards Benny. "Put it on. Outlaw, show him where the store's toolbox is."

"I remember," Benny said,

"Then get you a hammer and some roofing nails. We got extra boxes on the third floor in the back."

"What am I doing?"

"There's a weak spot in the roof, you and I are going to fix," Outlaw said.

Benny was glad Outlaw was helping him because he had never repaired a roof before and he didn't want to let his dad learn that fact. For the most part, they had been getting along tolerably for the past few weeks and Benny wanted to keep his current living situation as far from conflict as possible. So when his dad started complaining about Benny eating all his Spam and not contributing, Benny offered to work a few days a week at the store. His dad's first response was that he didn't need any help, that Outlaw and he could handle everything fine. When Benny asked if business was slow, Ben evaded the question and told Benny that he could work, but he couldn't pay him much, especially if he were expecting to live at home for free. Benny agreed to work for enough spending money for the weekends. The fact was that Benny was getting so bored at the house that the idea of returning to a job he was forced to do as a teenager, didn't seem as bad as he remembered.

Benny and Outlaw rode the freight elevator to the third floor while the temperature inside increased as they ascended. The elevator shook to a stop and Benny stepped into the stifling heat of the third floor.

"I'm going to open some windows," Benny said, taking off his t-shirt, heading to the front of the building. He unlocked the rotating clasp and pushed hard, straining against the closed, stubborn window. A cool breeze blew against his stomach, refreshing the ringlets of sweat surrounding his navel. One of the windows was stuck, but he managed to let in a circulating breeze by opening the other two. The temperature in the back of the room where they were repairing the roof remained hot, but the breeze provided a welcomed freshness, diminishing the stale smell in the air.

Outlaw unfolded a ladder and set it below a sag in the ceiling tile where a brown water stain had formed. "We'll have to remove the tile and see what kind of damage we've got." He handed Benny a hammer. "Don't worry about damaging it. We've gotta replace those pieces anyway."

Benny climbed the ladder and hit the damaged tile with the top of the hammer. It punctured the tile and he pulled as the ceiling tile broke into flaking pieces like large clumps of snow falling to the ground. Outlaw stepped out of the way as Benny demolished the decaying area of ceiling. Outlaw shined a flashlight in the hole, and Benny was relieved to see that the wooden support beams were still in good shape. A few rays of sunlight broke through the roof like lasers from the sky.

"How's it looking?" Outlaw said.

"Well... the supports look good. No damage there. The roof has some holes in it though."

"That ain't so bad then," Outlaw said, turning off the flashlight. He instructed Benny to help him haul a piece of roll roofing onto the roof which was difficult since the only way to the roof was by climbing a ladder connected to the back wall, leading to a

hatch in the roof. Benny suggested he follow Outlaw up and carry the sheet of roll roofing. The challenge was that the roll weighed eighty pounds and was three feet long. Benny struggled up most of the way until he climbed high enough for Outlaw to reach through the hatch and assist him. Benny was ready for a fifteen minute break by the time he crawled onto the roof.

Outlaw breathed hard and sat down on the roof. "It's been a long time since I've been up here. You can see most of the town."

Benny shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun reflected off the asphalt roof and gazed out. A few blocks west, a Greyhound bus was resting at the station, preparing to take various travelers to their destinations along the way to its final stop... Memphis, indicated by the sign in the window. Benny wondered if the Savages were on their way back from Asheville, if they had prolonged their romantic getaway. In the distance, the competing steeples of the First Baptist and First Presbyterian churches strained towards heaven, each fighting to rise taller than the other. Benny asked Outlaw if he knew which one was the tallest. From where he was standing, it appeared that the Presbyterians still had the title. But Outlaw explained that the Baptists' steeple was a few inches higher since the congregation paid thousands more to have it jacked up after it was installed.

The gray, colonial style courthouse was across the street, and Rose Center, Morristown's first high school, stood behind it.

"So they still do that mountain festival at Rose Center?" Benny said.

"Mountain Makin's? Every year in October."

"I used to love to go. Mom would always buy me a funnel cake and a frozen lemonade."

"I ain't one for no funnel cake now," Outlaw said. "Not after that time my stomach swelled up and nearly exploded."

"You're not serious are you?"

"Haven't I told you my adventure with the funnel cake and the honey man?"

"Not that I remember."

"Well, you'd best listen up, cause this one's a keeper."

It had been a long time since Benny had heard one of Outlaw's stories. They were more like tall tales. Although he tried to believe them, he never could. Benny's favorite was the one where a blue bird lived with Outlaw and could imitate any song it heard. In the end, the bird won a contest, imitating some blues guitar player and got enough money to pay a few years of unpaid taxes and save Outlaw's family's farm.

"What was the name of that bird who could sing?" Benny asked.

"Oh, you talking about Blue. Have I ever told you that story?"

"Several times."

"I miss that little fella." Outlaw shook his head. "He and I had a few good adventures."

"Have you ever thought about writing your stories down?"

"Now why would I do that? They're meant to be told. Why else you think I've been telling you all these years? Cause I expect you to keep telling them to your children when I'm gone."

"Children? I hope you're not holding out for that. If that's the case then you'd better write them down or find you a better audience."

"Don't you want any kids?"

"Well... I'm not opposed to the idea or anything. I just have to have an occasion."

"You will one day. I can taste it."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. And I know it." Outlaw nodded. "I got that taste of ginger in my gums, and when I taste that it means only one thing. You going to have children one day."

"Well... as long as one day ain't today."

"Oh, you can believe you will. You can trust me on that. That flavor in my gums is never wrong."

"Can your gums taste who I'll marry?"

"Now don't you play with old Outlaw like that. You know good and well that I don't taste them flavors."

"I remember."

"You remember when you asked me abut that pretty little girl when you was in high school? You wanted to know if you should marry her, and you remember what I told you... that I..."

"Didn't have a flavor for that. Yeah, I remember. But that's when I was young and impressionable."

"You still young. I don't know about the impressionable part, but you have plenty of years left."

"Man, it's hot out here." Benny wished his hair wasn't so long. "Can you tell me your funnel cake story as we do the roof?"

"We have to unroll the roof first and then spread the roof cement over the area to be covered."

"Where's the cement?"

"It's the quart can downstairs next to the ladder."

Benny hurried and retrieved the canister, prying open the lid with his claw hammer. Outlaw handed him a paint brush and Benny painted on the black tar, being careful not to get any of it on himself.

Outlaw unrolled the roofing and said, "I was a kid, probably about nine when this carnival came to town. It set up in this field off of the highway that Mr. Wizzlemound owned. Mr. Wizzlemound was a beekeeper and had all these hives he got honey out of. Now everybody from Jasper and the surrounding counties would come to buy jars of Mr. Wizzlemound's honey. My uncle Bobert would swear that that honey cured him of the gout and told me that a lot of doctors and spiritual healers across the nation bought Mr. Wizzlemound's honey by the cases. My uncle even told me that Mr. Wizzlemound had a chest of money buried somewhere on his property, that he was the richest man in all of Jasper.

I always wanted to go over to the bee farm, but mom never would let me, said the devil was there and that was why Mr Wizzlemound could care or those bees and why he was so wealthy. Now I didn't believe that he was the devil's hired help, any more than I believed his honey healed Uncle Bobert's gout. But I was an obedient boy and never went against mom's wishes."

Benny had applied an even spread of cement. "Is this enough?"

"That looks right good," Outlaw said and with Benny's help began rolling the roofing over the cement. "But when the carnival came to town and opened for business on Mr. Wizzlemound's land, my Uncle Bobert and I went. Now this was the first time I ever got close enough to see him cause he had a booth set up where he was selling jars of his honey."

They finished placing the roll roof, so Benny asked, "What's next?"

"We should hammer them roof tacks every four or so inches apart around the fresh piece and a few in the middle for safe measure."

Benny told Outlaw to take a seat and finish his story since he didn't have a hammer.

"That honey man wasn't anything like I'd expected. I don't know what I really figured, but based on what mom said, I was half expecting a set of horns on his brow. But he looked nothing near the sort and had a head full of curly, black hair and a cleanly shaved face. Mr.Wizzlemound's eyes were bright like there was electricity pumping through them and he practically danced behind his counter when he talked. Uncle Bobert introduced me to him and said I was his favorite nephew. I always liked it when he said this even if I was his only nephew. Mr. Wizzlemound bowed low to me and then jerked up quickly and asked, 'You like?' waving his hand over the top of his honey jars. He told me to pick any jar and that I could have it since I was a favorite nephew. I took my time, examining each neatly arranged row. Each jar had a honeycomb, a part of the hive, inside. Some folks ate the comb like a candy bar. But I knew I'd never be able to do that cause I kept imagining someone eating my house and how I'd feel about it. So I picked the jar with the smallest honeycomb inside and thanked Mr. Wizzlemound."

Benny finished nailing the tacks and sat next to Outlaw.

"My uncle and I rode some rides and, before we left, he bought me a funnel cake. I had never had anything so delicious in my mouth before. As we walked home, I kept staring at the honey jar, rotating it so I could see all of it from every side. It had been a hot day and the jar felt cool, so I held it against my head. I rolled it across my face and when it got close to my ear I heard a buzzing. I could barely hear it, and every time I put the jar against my ear, I heard that buzzing. Uncle Bobert said my head was buzzing from all the excitement.

When I got home, I hid the honey in my top dresser drawer cause I was afraid that Mom would throw it away if she knew where I got it. That evening my stomach felt real full, so much that I wasn't hungry for Mom's cooked cabbage, which was my favorite dinner. My stomach started hurting, felt like it was about to explode, and my belly began to expand, getting larger and larger. Have you ever seen pictures of those starving kids in Ethiopia? And how their bellies stick way out there?"

Benny nodded.

"Well... that was a mere sight in comparison to the size mine got. Now I was in some terrible pain. So I moaned and groaned until mom took notice of my suffering. Once she caught sight of my belly ballooning out there, she screamed something deafening and called my uncle. Not knowing what the fuss was, he made it over quick and after seeing me was about to fetch the doctor. But she wouldn't let him leave the room, and kept screaming, 'What did you do to him? What did you do?'

He told her about our day, and nothing he said seemed to phase her until he mentioned Mr. Wizzlemound's honey. Well, that confirmed it. Mom demanded where the

honey was, and though I was reluctant to hand it over to her, I pointed to my dresser. It took Mom no time to find the jar and she was about to throw it out my window when Uncle Bobert stopped her, grabbed the bottle and said that I hadn't eaten any of it. Mom didn't believe him, so he unscrewed the lid to show her that the jar was full. As soon as he twisted off the lid, a bee flew lazily between them and Mom smacked Uncle Bobert in the face, trying to kill the bee. The bee flew unfazed by their attempts to kill him and wandered around the room until it casually rested on my belly that now was as big as one of them exercise balls the women use on them fitness commercials. My stomach felt so bad that I didn't even notice when the bee stung me, except that the pain lessened in my stomach.

Mom searched the room frantically for the bee, calling it the devil's pest, but didn't see it resting on top of my belly. By the time she saw it, my stomach had gone down over half of its bloated size. She was about to smack it off of me when Uncle Bobert realized what was happening and stopped her, holding her back in a smothering hug. She wrestled to free herself as he repeated for her to look and wait. The smaller I got, the bigger the bee swelled. It was as if the bee were sucking all of my pain away. When my stomach was back to its normal size, the bee waddled off me. It was now four times its original size. It tried to fly, but was unable to lift its heavy body off the bed.

Mom stared at me and the bee in disbelief for a long time. I hopped out of the bed, feeling better than ever, while the bee rested where I'd been. Mom was so thankful to Mr. Wizzlemound's bee that she made it its own bed in one of my shoeboxes and laid it near the front window so it would be close to her flowers. Mom stayed up all night and watched over the bee. When I awoke the next morning, she was all excited and told me

that the bee got better and flew outside towards the bee farm. After that she allowed me to visit Mr. Wizzlemound's place any time I wanted, and kept a ready supply of his honey year round."

When Outlaw had finished, Benny sat silent, no longer thinking about the heat, but sliding back into a comfortable place In his memory, a time when he was a boy who could totally believe in Outlaw's outrageous tales, a time that was better than now. And for a brief spot, while Outlaw spun his words of wonder for an audience of one, Benny got caught up in the imagination of it all, and forgot his life and everything around him.

"But I reckon you don't believe in any of Outlaw's old nonsense any more?" he asked, leaning against his arm, allowing it to support his weight as be tried to stand.

Benny jumped up and helped him to his feet.

"Thank you kindly," Outlaw said. "My get up and go is wearing out. Can't do the things I once could."

"You do all right. I'm waging that you'll outlast me."

"Oh, I hope not. I'm seventy three years old and there's only so many more miles left in this model."

"I hope you have enough gas to get off this roof. I'm ready to get out of this sun. My back feels toasted."

Benny climbed down the ladder first so he could help Outlaw. Once he was safely on the third floor, Benny started closing the windows. He didn't know if he would be back up here later and didn't want to forget and leave the windows open over the weekend. As he locked the last window, he saw a familiar looking girl on the sidewalk below. He held his breath. His skin tingled and his stomach felt like it was dancing. He

pressed his face against the window. She had the same brown hair, the same rejuvenating bounce in her stride like innocence skipping though life. Although her back was to him and he couldn't see her face, Benny knew she was... Miriam. He ran down the stairs, leaving Outlaw behind on the elevator. His dad didn't look up from a catalog of parts as Benny ran past. Before he made it outside, the front door opened and Marcy intercepted him.

"Oh, heck. If people knew you ran around half dressed, you'd have plenty a customers in here," she said as she surveyed Benny's bare chest.

Benny felt suddenly naked and exposed, not because he had left his shirt upstairs, but because he had been caught chasing after another woman. Benny reminded himself that she didn't know that and, furthermore, that there was no reason for him feeling guilty. For one, he hadn't done anything. There was nothing wrong with wanting to catch up to an old friend. And the fact was, he had only gone out a few times with Marcy, and it wasn't like they were committed to one another. She had no more claim on him than he did her. A sudden softness hit the back of his head. Reaching back Benny felt his shirt.

"This is a hardware store, not a strip club," Outlaw joked from behind him.

Benny put on his shirt as Marcy said, "So what have you strapping, fine men been up to today?"

"Fixing the roof," Benny said as he arranged his shirt, straightening his sleeves.

"That doesn't sound like much fun," Marcy said.

"Not unless you do it with Outlaw."

"So that makes a difference does it?" She walked over to Outlaw who had grabbed a broom and was sweeping the center aisle. "If you're so much fun, what am I doing hanging around this guy?"

"Now don't believe everything you hear, especially if Benny Boy's a telling it," he said.

"Oh, I don't know. I've got my own eyes and I can tell a good man when I see him."

"If you keep that up, you going to tire old Outlaw out and make me fit for nothing the rest of the day."

"Well, I'm sure Mr. Headley wouldn't want that, would you?" Ben finally glanced up from his catalog. He looked at her, puzzled. Marcy left Outlaw and stepped towards Ben. "I said you don't want to have to pay your employees for doing nothing all day."

"That's right," he said.

"And I bet you can barely get a speck of work out of Benny."

"Now Benny Boy does all right," Outlaw said, "And I should know. I'm the one who lets him do my share."

"And he should. You boys shouldn't be easy on him just because he's got half your experience."

Benny never was certain to whom Marcy's flirtations were directed. Most of the time it seemed she flirted indiscriminately with every man she encountered. In some ways, her behavior didn't settle right with him and made her affections towards him feel common like a waitress who calls every customer "honey."

"Benny never was much for working," Ben told her.

"Maybe you just got to give him a little more time to get used to hard labor again," Marcy said.

"Time? Time?" Ben scoffed. "The boy don't know nothing about that. In fact, I can't right recall a day when he wasn't late."

"That ain't true, now. Benny was here this past Thursday before I was," Outlaw said.

"That's cause he rode with me, and I made him get up," Ben said.

Benny was only half listening, although his eyes were fixed on the trio as if he we paying attention. He kept wondering if he had indeed seen Miriam or not. And no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get rid of the image of her skimming breezily down the sidewalk. He envisioned, recreating every detail, to the camel color of her pants to the draping of the soft fabric of her blouse over her slim shoulders.

"Benny, you haven't forgotten about me, have you?" Marcy approached him, stopping only a spider's breath away.

"How could I forget you?" Benny said.

"Good. Cause I want us to get out of this town tonight. How does Knoxville sound?"

"That'll be... yeah... good."

"Don't get too excited about it." Benny couldn't tell if her hurt expression was sincere or not. "Be ready around seven. I'll pick you up then." She kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"I don't care to drive. I've been using mom's car over the past few weeks. Why don't I get you for a change?"

"That's all right. I'll see you at seven." She rushed towards the door. "You boys try not to work too hard."

"Ain't no cause to worry about that none." Outlaw waved goodbye while Ben scanned the parts catalogue.

As he watched her leave, Benny wondered why she never would let him pick her up. After several dates he still didn't know where she lived. He'd never thought about it much until now, hadn't realized it was such a mystery. But there had to be a reason why she kept her home a secret. Maybe she was embarrassed. Maybe she was married. Benny doubted that simply because Morristown was too small to hide something like that. He decided that he would confront her about it at some point and reasoned that she was probably feeling embarrassed because she perceived him to live some fabulously exotic lifestyle in Nashville and that her house would fail in comparison. If only she knew the truth that Benny had no home, then she wouldn't feel this way. But Benny had no desire to pull her into his failure, and figured she wouldn't stay around long if she knew the truth. Marcy was a fun, loving life kind of girl and didn't seem to have the constitution for the harsher realities of the day to day. He assumed she still lived with a relative of some sort since she didn't have a job. This was something else he didn't understand because she always had money and wore nice clothes. He could've understood it better if she were in college and living off scholarships or loans, but she had never taken a college course and didn't have any desire to. She had told him that her dad had remarried and lived in Greeneville, but that was all he knew about her family. She never mentioned her mom or if she had siblings, so Benny figured that she was an only child and that her mom had

probably died. After a month, Benny realized that he knew no more about Marcy than he did after their first date.

The door bell rang as a middle aged man wearing a UT orange sweatshirt entered. He acknowledged Benny with a nod and proceeded briskly to the counter.

"Good afternoon. I'm Gale Moreson. I called and ordered some fittings for my air compressor earlier this week."

Ben stared at the customer as if he were confused.

"It was connector fittings for my spray guns," the customer continued. "Are you Mr. Headley?"

Ben nodded. "Outlaw, go back and see if...." he paused, "see if we got in some parts for Mr. Moreson."

Outlaw squinted as he carefully observed Ben like a doctor hovering over a patient's bed. "I'll look, but I don't remember the supply truck here this week."

Ben pulled out the notepad he used to write down orders out of the top drawer of his desk and asked Gale, "About when did you place the order?"

"I'm petty sure it was Tuesday," Gale thought aloud. "Yeah, it was Tuesday because it rained all afternoon and I was going to paint my car."

"Are you restoring one?" Benny asked.

"Uh, yeah...well, trying to. I've been working for the past year on a 74 Z28."

"That's cool. I'd love to do that one day. I've always been a little more partial to Firebirds, although I've always liked Camaros." Benny replied. "I'd like to have a 69 Firebird. But there hard to locate, especially the convertibles."

"Yeah, those are nice cars. I restored a 67 convertible. But my son took that one over. Won't part with it for nothing. We've had plenty of offers, but he won't sell it. I, on the other hand, would sell anything if I were offered enough."

"Well... I can't blame him there. If I'd restored something like that... I'd have a hard time letting it go."

"He didn't restore it. I did. He just claimed it."

"Still... it's a pretty car to let go of."

Outlaw came out of the back room empty handed. "I didn't see anything."

Ben flipped through the notebook. "I know I wrote it down here somewhere."

In all the years he had seen his dad work, this was the first time he saw him flustered in front of a customer.

"I know I wrote it down," he repeated.

"So it hasn't come in yet?" Gale said.

"It ain't in the back where we keep special orders," Outlaw replied.

"I'm sorry," Ben said in defeat. "The truck doesn't come but every Thursday. The earliest I can have it is then. I'll call our supplier on Monday."

"Monday is Labor day," Benny reminded him.

"Then Tuesday then. I'll make sure it's here by Thursday."

"Yeah... well... I'll tell you what. I was really wanting to paint over the weekend cause it's going to be pretty and a long one. Is there any other place in town that might carry that part?"

"Did you try that new Home Depot?" Benny asked, before noticing the warning look Outlaw sent him.

"Yeah... I tried there and Lowe's first, but they don't carry what I need."

"We can have it for you by Thursday, but that's the best we can do," Ben said shortly.

"Well... I tell you what. I'm going to see what I can find today, but I may be giving you a call on Tuesday if I still need those connectors. I may just have to make me something that will work."

"Let us know," Ben said in his usual gruff tone, not using his customer friendly voice.

"Is there any thing else we can help you with?" Benny asked, trying to restore a sense of professionalism.

"No, that was all I was needing," Gale replied and shuffled out, glancing casually, at their stock of tools on the walls as he left. Ben didn't say anything, just kept flipping through the notebook, refusing to give up until he found the order he thought he had recorded. Benny washed the inside panes of the front windows as Outlaw continued sweeping. When Benny had about finished, he noticed his dad slam the notebook back into the drawer and stalk off to the back storage room.

"This isn't the first time this has happened," Outlaw spoke softly, sweeping his collection of dirt into the dust pan.

"What do you mean?" Benny said.

"Your dad. Sometimes he forgets to write down orders. Or if he does write them down, forgets to order them."

"How long has this been happening?"

"For a while. Several months before you got here. It's bad enough that he can't remember. I've been double checking before I leave every night and make sure he called in the orders. But when he doesn't write them down, I don't know about them... so..."

"Why did you give me that look earlier when I was trying to help Mr. Moreson?"

"Ever since Home Depot opened we've lost a lot of customers. Your dad has taken it personally. He's always told me that he wasn't expecting new people coming in, but I guess he thought his old customers would be loyal to him since he served then for so long."

"Business has dropped that much?"

"Haven't you noticed it this week? There are days when we have maybe two customers...top."

"I guess I just didn't realize it was that bad. Has Dad mentioned closing down...the two of you retiring?"

"Probably should've done that before now. But you know your dad. He ain't never going to sell. He's too stubborn to close this place. It's been in your family for over a hundred years, so I can understand why he doesn't want to be the one to let it go. It's really all he's got to hold on to."

"It's not like it's his fault that nobody is coming in. It's the location. No parking."

"That and people are used to their Wal-Marts and these supercenters now."

"I'm surprised this place has lasted as long as it has."

"Had anybody but your dad owned it, it would have. And it still would. He'd keep this store open till the day he died and lose everything in the process if he could, but that's just it, he can't. And I'm sure you know what I'm talking about."

Benny didn't want to admit to himself that Outlaw was right. He didn't want to fully recognize the deterioration of his dad's mind. And the possible care he would need if the Alzheimer's got worse. But he knew that the disease would eventually consume him, and that he was the only one Ben had. Benny had witnessed over the past month several episodes. His dad's loss of memory was one kind of casualty, but it was during his catatonic trance like states when he would become unresponsive that upset Benny the most. And the worst part was that Ben didn't know he had retreated somewhere far back inside his subconscious. Benny didn't even know if his dad knew he had a problem.

"Yeah, I know what you're saying," Benny said.

"The other day when he drove me to work, he treated me like I was a teenager. Came in my room, turned on the light and left. When I didn't get up, he grabbed my arm and tried to jerk me out of the bed like he used to do back then. At first I didn't give it much thought, but when he told me to hurry up cause my breakfast was getting cold and that mom didn't cook at six in the morning for the smell of it, I realized his mind was in the past."

Benny had gone to the library and researched a little about his dad's condition. In some cases the individual lived for many years, their mental state slowly regressing though the years. While others' conditions worsened rapidly, leaving them completely unresponsive, and others coming in and out of reality, their consciousness struggling to wake from the time leaps of their Alzheimer's dream.

In the time he'd spent with his dad, Ben's condition had grown worse, and Benny realized why Outlaw contacted him when he did.

Ben entered the room and sat behind the counter, shaking his head. Outlaw left Benny to finish up the windows and emptied the plastic contents of the dustpan into the garbage can in the storage room.

Ben picked up the phone and started dialing. He pushed a few buttons then slammed the receiver down. "Outlaw! Outlaw!" Outlaw appeared in the doorway. "What's the number of our supplier?"

"Ain't they closed today?" Outlaw said.

"They're not closed on Fridays," Ben said.

"That's right. But today ain't Friday. It's Saturday, remember?"

Ben's stern expression softened. "That's right. Well... on Monday I'm going to call them and give them a reckoning. I'm tired of them slacking and not delivering items when they promise. It makes me look bad to my customers. If I tell them I'll have something on a certain day, then I better have it. And if I can't rely on my supplier to ship me orders then how good is my word to my customer?"

Benny knew this wasn't a question meant to be answered so he remained silent.

"I'm sure it was just an oversight," Outlaw said.

"Well... I'm getting tired of their oversights costing me customers."

Benny wanted to ask him if he wrote down the order, but he didn't want to start an argument, so he suggested, "Why don't you let me handle the orders from now on?"

"Now that's an idea, Ben," Outlaw said. "Why don't you let Benny do that?"

"He hadn't never done no ordering before. And I want to keep the customers I have, not lose them."

"You don't think I can handle calling in orders?" Benny felt insulted.

"I don't need you to. I've managed to place orders for the last fifty years without your help, and I'll keep doing it!" Ben glared at his son as if he were daring him to a challenge.

"Ben, I think you ought to start giving Benny some more responsibility around here. I've never been much help with nothing that don't involve my hands, but Benny's a smart one," Outlaw said.

"He's not been working but a week. It ain't like he's going to stick around here," Ben replied. "It would be a waste of time."

Benny had to agree with his dad on this. He didn't have any plans on staying in Morristown, replanting his roots in this simple soil. Everyday he was here was like sitting in a traffic jam on the interstate unable to see the cause of the delay when every minute feels like a month as you sit with your motor idling, wanting nothing more than to move forward and get to your destination. But Benny was trying to make the best of his time, even though he was working in a store he'd sworn he'd never enter again, and taking orders from a man he thought he'd never obey.

"Well... I think you're fooling yourself if you think you can do everything you did twenty years ago," Outlaw said

"There ain't nothing the matter with me. That door's still open, ain't it?" Ben pointed to the store's entrance. "And it's going to stay open as long as I'm living."

Outlaw didn't say anything else, just shook his head and walked away. Ben returned to his parts catalogue as before and Benny went to the roof to check his patch job. It was still holding together, so he replaced the damaged ceiling tile with new ones

and swept up the debris of crumbled ceiling scattered across the aged pine floor. The remainder of the day went by quickly enough. Benny kept himself busy stocking shelves and cleaning anything that looked dusty. His dad hadn't spoken to either him or Outlaw the rest of the afternoon, just busied himself with catalogues. Benny wasn't surprised when no other customer came. He figured most people were enjoying their holiday instead of doing home improvements.

Ben locked the door at five o'clock and stayed behind to arrange receipts and count the cash register as Benny and Outlaw walked out to the United Methodist's parking lot across the street.

"Resist it," Outlaw said before getting inside the cab of his seventies model GMC truck.

"Resist what?" Benny frowned.

"That stubbornness. Your dad is like a brother to me. An older one." Outlaw grinned. "He and I have seen a lot of years together. And to this day he still holds the trophy high for the most stubborn man I've known. So resist it, cause even if you had the size of a pea of it in you and you come from a fertile field of it, then your... well, you know what it's like."

"I'm not like him, Outlaw. That's why I left."

Outlaw chuckled. "You're more like him than you care to admit."

The veteran green door creaked until its frame slammed against the cab. Benny and Outlaw drove in opposite directions. Outlaw towards Russellville, taking Hwy 11E to the east and Benny headed south on Cumberland St. After he got home, Benny made himself a ham and cheese sandwich, not wanting to overeat in case he and Marcy were

going out to eat later. He turned the TV around, facing him, and sat on the couch, flipping through the programs the four channels the antenna received. He still hadn't won the battle of the television yet, as every day he'd rotate the screen towards him while his dad would turn it to the wall. If Benny had been a spectator, he would have found the scene comic, but because it was his daily routine, he found the struggle somewhat annoying.

The television wasn't the only point of contention in the house. At first, Ben would complain that Benny was eating all his food, but this was easily remedied because Benny had no problem getting his own sources, especially since a diet of Spam and milk wasn't one he wanted to commit to. The main issue centered around the fact that Benny was not as clean and tidy as Ben wanted him to be. Therefore, Ben was constantly cleaning up after his son, and complaining about it, loudly so Benny could hear, as he wiped off the counter tops, washed a dirty glass Benny left in the sink, organized the items in the refrigerator, or tossed Benny's used underwear he forgot on the bathroom floor into the hamper. Benny tried to be respectful of his dad's space and the tidiness of his home, but found his constant cleaning irritating because it was a constant reminder that after living alone for ten years he still couldn't do anything that pleased his dad.

There wasn't anything worth watching, not that Benny didn't enjoy a good cooking show from time to time, so Benny turned off the TV and sat in silence as he finished his sandwich. He heard his dad's pickup coming up the driveway, so he put his plate in the sink and closed the door behind him, shutting himself up in his bedroom. He pushed the top sheet, which was wadded in the middle of the bed to the wall and lay on his back, closing his eyes and breathing deeply, trying to relax. He heard his dad walking

around in the kitchen, closing the refrigerator door, while the sounds of plates and silverware dancing filled his mind, recreating an image of his mom preparing dinner the last night he saw her as he rested before dinner, calming his nerves before he played his guitar, a song he'd written for his graduating class that night in front of all of East High school and their relatives and supporters from the town.

This was Benny's first performance in front of an audience of this size. His choir teacher, Ms. Peel, told him that there would be over two thousand in attendance, filling the basketball auditorium to capacity. The school was expecting a big turnout since four hundred and eighteen were receiving diplomas, the biggest gradating class to date. Ms. Peel didn't help ease his anxiety by telling him that he was the only soloist asked to perform is a graduation ceremony in all of the twenty three years she had taught there. Not only had Benny been given this honor, but he was also voted as the most talented senior and the most likely to succeed. It was a rule that a person could have only one senior superlative, so the senior class president asked Benny which he preferred. He chose the most talented.

The song he'd written was a ballad with a simple but haunting melody. It was one of those songs that stuck with a listener immediately, replaying itself over and over, refusing to be forgotten. Benny relaxed more and more, his lower back sinking into the mattress like it was a pat of butter melting on a fluff of mashed potatoes. The more he relaxed, the clearer that distant melody became, fighting its way back to the forefront of his memory, demanding to be heard after such a prolonged silence.

Remember the road well traveled,

Remember the ones you love.

For our time is close for parting,

Our new lives have begun.

Remember the scars you carry,

and the battles that you've won.

For our days are not retiring

in this valley of the sun.

Dream for tomorrow,

Hope for tomorrow,

Run for tomorrow,

cause the race isn't done.

Fight for tomorrow,

Love for tomorrow,

Know your tomorrow,

cause it will come,

It will come.

Images of his mom, wearing the yellow apron with the Smoky Mountains airbrushed on it, a gift he'd bought her in Pigeon Forge one summer when he was in seventh grade, a present she always forgot to take off when they ate dinner, surfaced in his mind. She had been happy that entire day, even had Benny play his song countless times, all afternoon while his dad was at work. She loved the fact that Benny could play the guitar, a talent her father had. And she told Benny repeatedly that it was so good to see her father's guitar being used again, that it would've made him proud if he could've lived long enough to see how well Benny played. She told him that he played even better

than his papaw had, that his fingers not only danced over the strings, but breathed through them, allowed his emotions to touch any soul listening.

When he quit baseball and started playing the old, black Gibson his papaw gave him, Ben was furious. He told Benny that those strings only softened a man, and if he kept fooling with that guitar then he'd turn out just like his papaw, alone and broke. Told him that guitar took up most of his time, time where he could've been working, scraping out a living for himself, something solid. Benny would argue over how playing guitar was any different than playing a baseball game, and that at least with music he was creating something. Something that would last. Ben would argue that the game of baseball would remain longer than the memory of some song somebody heard once. He would tell him that a bat was real, something you could touch, hold in your hands, but a song wasn't. You couldn't touch it or see it. Benny would always reply that he didn't want to touch the song or try to hold on to it, and that that was the difference between hammers and strings.

On the night of his graduation his mom had put a new table cloth over the round chrome kitchen table, and had prepared his favorite cube steak and gravy meal. Although his dad seemed irritable while they ate, his mom kept the conversation cheerful by asking Benny about Miriam and what her plans were after school. Benny explained that Miriam had been accepted to UT in Knoxville, but was waiting to see if she received financial aid. If not, she'd have to try again the next year. His mom asked about Miriam's dad and if he'd be willing to help, but Benny said "no" and reminded her that Miriam hadn't seen him since the divorce.

Ben finally spoke up, telling Benny that he needed him at the store early the next morning. His mom replied that Ben should give Benny the weekend off since he was graduating. Ben replied with "what better reason to start working, especially since the business would be his one day."

In his dream, Benny watched himself abut to speak, knew the words he was about to say, and wished he didn't have to watch this miserable scene again. He listened to himself tell Ben that he wasn't sure if he wanted to take over the family business, thought he might take a chance with his music, see if he could play guitar for a living.

Ben stared at his plate, his eyes fixed on the half eaten mashed potatoes as Benny shared his plans. Finally, he stood up, marched to Benny's room, and brought out his guitar, gripping it tightly around its neck, as if he were trying to strangle it. His voice tense with anger as he demanded to know if this was how he wanted to throw his life away. And then ranted about how he had worked his whole life, how his dad and his dad before him, laid a foundation, a staple is this community, and how that was his, that men's lives, his grandfathers' lives had been spent so he could have this inheritance. Holding the guitar out towards him, he questioned Benny if it was for this that he was willing to throw all of his inheritance away.

Benny replied that he didn't see it like that and told Ben to give him his guitar back. Ben refused and walked outside. Benny caught up to him on the porch, both of their tempers flaring. Benny screamed and woke up.

He was breathing hard and was sweaty. He sat up and noticed it was seven minutes before seven. He had slept longer than he'd intended and shot out of bed. He pulled on his typical date jeans and a faded red short sleeved shirt. Marcy was normally a

few minutes late, so he assumed he had plenty of time to get ready. Benny left his room and noticed his dad had turned the TV back towards the wall and had it on, listening to the nightly news. "You going out?" Ben asked as Benny opened a Mountain Dew from the refrigerator.

"Yeah."

"Tell Miriam I looked at her car, but couldn't find anything. I can't work on these newer, foreign engines."

"You mean Marcy right? When did you look at her car?" Benny was confused.

"Today, when you took her to school," Ben said.

"Dad, I'm not in school any more."

"What are you talking about? Just tell her that I'll take it up to Virgil's in the morning, see if he can fix it."

"If I see her." Benny figured his dad was having another episode, reliving a past that Benny had forgotten.

"What the devil's wrong with you? If you can't tell her that then bring her inside and I'll tell her." Ben frowned, shaking his head as if Benny had no mind left.

"No, I'll tell her," Benny played along. He felt uncomfortable. This was the first time he had to participate in one his dad's stops down memory lane. Not wanting Marcy to get caught up in a scene involving his old girl friend, Benny waited outside, sitting on the glider on the front porch. He finished his Mountain Dew as an unfamiliar black Chevy Trailblazer raced up the drive. The windows were tinted, concealing the occupants inside. Benny stood and walked to the steps of the porch as the passenger door opened and Marcy slid out.

"Hey! What you doing outside already? Couldn't wait to see me?" She opened her arms and swayed from side to side. "What do you think?"

Benny assumed from to pose that she was referring to her light weight, spaghetti strapped dress.

"It's this year's green. It's more of a lime really," she said.

"It's pretty," Benny said.

"I know and I got it on sale since summer's about gone and all."

Benny was about to ask who was with her when the passenger window rolled down and Benny saw Victoria, and heard Shay shouting to them from the driver's seat.

"Are we going some time tonight? Or are we going to hang out on the porch?"

"I didn't know they were going," Benny whispered as they walked to the SUV.

"Victoria called me last minute."

Benny didn't know how to interpret her comment. Was she saying that he was boring and that she needed others with them to have fun? Or did it have to do with their plans tonight and the more people involved, the better it would be?

The gray leather seats were warm and Benny had to inhale shallow breaths to acclimate himself to the toxic atmosphere of cigarettes and perfume.

"Hold on to your holes, asses," Shay said, punching the gas hard as the back tires spun, slinging gravel into the yard. Benny couldn't believe he willingly entered Shay's vehicle, willingly submitted himself to this uncomfortable situation and figured by comparison that staying home with his dad wouldn't had been as bad. But he was stuck.

Benny glanced at Marcy who looked temptingly erotic in her lingerie styled lime dress, the neck line low, revealing a hint of cleavage. As usual, Marcy must've forgotten

to wear a bra since her nipples were pushing against the silky fabric, declaring their independence. Marcy slid to the middle of the sit and sat close. Benny's leg tingled as Marcy's hand landed on his knee and slowly made its way up his inner thigh, resting directly below his crotch. Normally this level of physical intimacy would've excited him, but because of the crowd, was uncomfortable.

Shay turned on I40 and accelerated towards Knoxville.

"How have you been, Benny?" Victoria turned cheerfully around.

"Not bad," Benny said, hoping Victoria didn't notice the position of Marcy's hand.

"How long are you planning on staying?"

"Not sure yet," Benny shifted towards the door, trying to get some space between him and Marcy.

"He's not going anywhere," Shay said loudly. "He'll get sucked back in here like the rest of us."

"Why would he stay here?" Victoria said.

Shay frowned at her and Benny expected him to say, "Because he's a bum and I don't believe his lies." But he didn't and replied with "I'm just saying Morristown has a way of holding on to you... won't let you go. People get stuck here."

"Is there something wrong with being stuck here?" Victoria emphasized the word "stuck."

"Maybe for some people."

Victoria was silent for a minute, but Benny could tell by her tight lips that she was brooding over Shay's comment. Benny wondered if Shay felt trapped. If he dreamed of a life beyond the hills of Hamblen County.

"Are you one at them?" Victoria said.

"What?" Shay said.

"Is there some place you want to go?"

"You know where we're going."

"You know what I'm saying."

"Actually I don't and if you're going to get all emotional again for no reason, then we might as well turn around and forget about this."

"Is that what you want?"

"If it'll make you shut it."

"You could, couldn't you? You could just forget about all this... about us... couldn't you? Wouldn't bother you in the least." Victoria leaned over the console towards him, her seatbelt, the only thing preventing her from climbing on top of him.

"If you don't get your damn melons out of my face, I'll show you what I can do."

"All right, you two," Marcy said, scooting towards them, her hand finally off Benny's leg. "I thought we were going to have fun?"

"Hell. You can't have fun with her," Shay said.

Victoria stared ahead, her lips pressed even tighter together.

"You can't spend five minutes with her without her getting all psycho and shit." Shay shook his head.

"Why do you think that is?" Victoria blurted without looking at him.

Shay talked to Marcy as if Victoria wasn't there. "If you guys weren't here I'd take her ass home right now... and leave her miserable ass there for good."

"Now you don't mean that," Marcy said in a soft, comforting tone Benny hadn't heard her use before.

"The hell I don't. I'm getting worn out by her shit. I swear I've aged ten years in the one we've been together. She's like a damn leech sucking my life away."

Benny watched as Victoria retreated some place safe inside herself, some harbor where Shay's abuse couldn't reach her. And for the first time, Benny felt sorry for her, his thoughts moved momentary from his own misfortunes to Victoria's. He couldn't imagine the depth of emotions she was feeling, all of the uncertainties of her undesired pregnancy and her insecurities with Shay. From the way Shay talked, he'd have no problem abandoning her, forsaking her and the life he'd helped create.

"If you don't apologize, Victoria's going to think you mean all of this," Marcy said.

"Apologize? That's all I do. It doesn't do any good. A few minutes later she'll get upset about something else."

"You say some pretty mean things," Marcy said.

"Hell, I thought we were going to have some fun tonight," Shay said. "And so far the night's been shit. So Benny, how's your dad?"

Benny was glad someone changed the subject, even if it was by Shay and even if it did involve his dad.

"He's doing all right."

"My dad said he wasn't doing too good. That he had a stroke or something."

"No, he's doing all right. Just getting older. Normal stuff like that." Benny didn't know why he didn't tell Shay the truth. It wasn't that he was ashamed of his dad's illness.

He just didn't think it was anybody's business, especially someone he didn't trust. But that didn't explain why he'd never told Marcy, a girl he was somewhat dating, a girl he had spent time with every weekend he'd been home.

"So what have you been doing?" Shay said.

"Nothing much."

"He's been with me," Marcy said.

"Yeah... but what have you been doing for fun?" Shay laughed.

"You're not funny, so don't try," Marcy said.

"You'll have to forgive, Marcy. She doesn't have an appreciation for good humor," Shay told Benny.

"I've noticed." Benny winked at her.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Marcy appeared offended, but Benny knew she was pretending.

"You better watch out with her," Shay said. "She looks sweet, but she's all poison."

"Now that's not funny. I don't want you scaring Benny off," she said.

"So why are you back, anyhow? If I'd moved away, you wouldn't see my face around here."

"I just did," Benny said, not committing any information.

"Well, I hope it didn't have to do with her." He motioned to Marcy.

"I think Benny came home because we were supposed to meet," Marcy said, laying her hand on Benny's leg.

"I hope you don't believe that shit," Shay said as he decelerated the SUV. "Look to your right. You see that building behind the McDonald's? That's the new stadium for the Smokies."

"The what?" Benny said.

"Hell, man, don't you remember the Smokies? The only professional baseball team we got around here. Don't you keep up with the minor leagues anymore?"

"Not really."

"Hell, you used to be all up in that shit before."

"Benny's a musician now, Shay. Everybody around here knows that." Marcy said.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean he quit liking baseball does it? You still play any? You know for fun sake?"

"It's been a while. I probably couldn't remember how to play. "

"It's like sex. Doesn't matter how long it's been since you've had any, when you get some it all comes back."

"Well, maybe some day I'll play again."

"Have you mentioned Monday?" Shay asked Marcy.

"No, I was going to later."

"Well, mention it now," Shay said. "Hell, we're having a game on Labor Day out at Frank Lorino Park. It's pretty laid back and all. Just a bunch of guys get together and we play ball like the old days. So your dad hasn't said anything about it?"

"Why would he?" Benny said.

"Cause he always umpires for us. Has for the last seven years. I can't believe he didn't tell you."

"I guess he forgot."

"Marcy, you need to bring him. And just because she'll be there," Shay indicated Marcy, "doesn't mean it won't be fun."

"Shay, you gotta stop it before I pee all over your leather seat from laughing so hard, "Marcy said.

"Yeah, you do that and you'll be wiping it up with that slutty looking dress you got on."

"So, what time do you guys play?" Benny wasn't really interested, but wanted a change of conversation.

"Around five or six. It'll be like when you used to play."

"Except everyone nearly sucks now," Marcy said.

"You should know all about that," Shay said.

Victoria didn't speak the rest of the way to Knoxville. Shay made a few comments about her pouting and how irritating that was. Marcy defended her by explaining that she wouldn't have an occasion to pout if someone wasn't such a bastard. Benny was glad when Shay finally parked.

"Have you ever been here?" Marcy asked Benny who shook his head. "Oh, heck! You're kidding me?"

"No, I've never," Benny said.

"Damn, well... you're in for a treat," Shay said, walking alongside them, leaving Victoria lagging a few steps behind. "I swear I'll pay somebody to take her home, if she doesn't cheer up."

"I'll kick your ass to," Marcy said.

"I'd like to see that." Shay said. "Hell, if there's any girl that could do it, I'd say she could. You talk about a pitcher. I once saw this girl throw a guy down to the ground after punching him in the back of the head."

"Quit telling stories," Marcy said, pushing Shay away.

Suddenly Ben noticed Marcy lunge forward, missing a step and almost falling to the ground, as Shay laughed and guarded his sides close with his arms after shoving her.

"You asshole." Marcy ran after him, slapping him a few times in his arm as he danced around her, protecting himself, laughing.

"You see what I mean, Benny? It's a good thing I'm around so you can finally see what she's really like."

Marcy stopped her assault and adjusted her dress. "Don't believe his shit."

Normally, Benny wouldn't have given credit to anything Shay said, but seeing the force in which Marcy hit, the fury behind her attack, made Benny question his disbelief is Shay's warning. Benny and Marcy waited outside for Victoria to catch up while Shay went inside without them. The melody of some country song Benny hadn't heard before slipped outside the dance bar as they waited.

"I can't believe you've never been to Cotton Eyed Joe's before," Marcy said. "What's the name of that famous country line dance club in Nashville?"

"I'm not sure,"

"Yeah...you remember. The one that used to come on TV?"

"Can't think of it."

"You ever been there?"

Benny shook his head.

"Well, then it's high time you have some fun. You okay?" she asked Victoria, comforting her while she put her arm around her and escorted her inside.

The club was dark and smoky. Benny couldn't believe how spacious it was. In the center was a wooden dance floor splattered with multicolored lights hanging above. A crowd of fifty or more couples danced, moving in a current of bodies, traveling the perimeter of the dance floor in a counter clockwise circle, all of their feet preprogrammed with identical steps. Benny had never enjoyed line dancing, reminded him too much of being forced to learn square dancing in seventh grade P.E. class.

Benny paid the ten dollar cover for him and Marcy at the door and was relieved for Victoria's sake that Shay had paid for her on his way in. Shay was already at the bar motioning for them to join him. He had bought shots for them and was currently on his second.

"What is it?" Benny shouted to Marcy, trying to be heard over the blaring Shania Twain song about feeling like a woman.

Marcy sipped her drink. "Peach Schnapps, I think," she told him.

"You should try it," Marcy said, leaning in close, her hand on his chest.

Benny took a sip. The spoiled fruit taste sloshed in his mouth and burned as it flowed down his throat.

"That good, huh?" Marcy said.

"I'm not much of a drinker."

"I know." She smiled, taking the shot glass from him and drinking it herself. "Does it bother you that I am?"

"No," Benny lied, the truth was that he didn't care if she drank, he just didn't like dealing with her when she became intoxicated, reminded him of the bars in Nashville, all those people laughing and talking while he played his guitar.

Victoria hesitated before drinking hers. "I don't know if I should. The doctor ..." she said.

"The doctor isn't here," Shay said. "Now, come on. You don't like to dance unless you relax some. And you promised to dance tonight."

"I know," she said. "I just don't want to hurt the baby."

"A few shots ain't going to kill it," Shay said.

Benny figured they were going to have another argument, but then Victoria downed her shot and Shay led her to the dance floor.

"They're quite the couple," Benny yelled into Marcy's ear.

"They're terrible together. I wish she'd just get rid of him and raise the baby on her own."

"She'd probably be better off that way."

"Yeah, Shay's an ass. He'll never marry her. But Victoria won't listen to me. For some reason she thinks I'm jealous or something, like I want a baby night now."

Benny noticed Shay motioning for them to join them, but pretended not to see him. "Maybe she gets jealous when he flirts with you."

"Oh, heck. You're not serious?"

"What do I know?"

"You think Shay and I flirt?"

"No. But I think maybe Victoria thinks he does."

"Do you think we flirt?" Her tone was serious.

"No. Why would you?"

"Do you feel up to trying it?" she said. "The steps are easy. I can teach you as we do it."

"Maybe later."

"Oh, heck. Come on up here with me. You're not going to let me go up there by myself are you? Wouldn't want Shay to make his move in your absence?" She flirted.

"That would be unfortunate. I couldn't let that happen to Victoria, now could I?" Although be was dreading it, he followed her to the dance floor. He was glad to hear a ballad playing as she positioned them between Victoria and some guy wearing a cowboy hat that appeared as if it had been pinched in the middle and shrunk in a washing machine.

"I forget the name of this one, but it's easy." She grabbed his hand and placed it on the small of her back. "Hold me here and take my hand." She intertwined his fingers with hers. "Watch my feet and do what I do. First, you have to cross your right foot over your left and bend your knees as you do it." Benny imitated her. "That's good. Now move your left foot out and cross your right behind your left."

The movements were simple and Benny found followed her lead without tripping. They finished this dance and Marcy was about to teach Benny another one which was faster and involved him twirling her like a ballroom dancer, but Shay interrupted and convinced Marcy to go back with him to the bar.

Shay ordered another round of shots. He and Marcy swallowed theirs while Benny and Victoria left theirs on the bar top.

"Come on," Shay said. "It's only round two. You can't stop yet."

"I don't want any more," Victoria said like a child not wanting to eat her green beans.

"Yes, you do." Shay put the shot glass in her hand.

Victoria set it on the table. "So you just going to let it go to waste?" he said.

"I'm not going to hurt the baby. The doctor told me that..."

"The doctor ain't here," Shay said.

"Oh, heck, Shay! Leave her alone. She doesn't want anything," Marcy said.

"Nobody asked your opinion," Shay said and then turned to Benny, "Drink up, Benny Boy."

Benny shrugged. "Didn't like the last one."

"Are you pregnant too?"

Benny didn't respond and acted like the new dance routine had caught his attention. He disliked being around people who were drunk, especially Shay, who wasn't tolerable when he was sober. Shay slid one of the shots to Marcy and downed the other. Marcy held up her glass to him and emptied its contents in one swallow.

"Now that's how it's done." Shay ordered another round for him and Marcy.

Benny could tell that Victoria objected to Shay's drinking by her stiff posture and her arms crossed tightly over her chest, as if she were hugging herself. Benny, also, wasn't comfortable with Marcy's run at the bar and felt she should decline Shay's drink offering, especially since she hadn't eaten dinner and was currently on her fourth round.

"One more," Shay told the bartender who quickly distributed the liquor indiscriminately between the two glasses.

"That's enough, Shay.'" Victoria approached him, using a gentler, more persuasive tone. "You promised you wouldn't get drunk tonight."

"Damn it girl." Shay shrugged her off. He held the glass up to Marcy and saluted her before emptying his glass. "And you promised to have fun, so we're both liars."

Victoria walked away. Marcy slammed her empty glass down and said to Shay, "You're an ass!" and followed her.

"You're welcome for your refreshment," he said to Marcy's back. "Take, take, take! That's all them bitches do." Shay stepped close to Benny, yelling in his ear. "They're all whores, you know. Hell, Victoria acts like she's a damn porcelain doll now that she's knocked up. Acts all righteous and shit. I can't drink. Can't have any fun. Not any at any time cause it'll hurt the baby." Shay imitated her.

"She's right about alcohol hurting the baby," Benny said.

"What are you? Her damn doctor?"

"Are you still like one of them goody church boys and all that shit like you used to be? That why you won't drink with me? Or are you pregnant too?"

Benny didn't like where Shay was taking this conversation. It was hard enough to talk civilly to him when he was sober, but when he brought up past insults like "goody church boy" Benny couldn't predict how long his patience would last.

"Just don't want to drink, that's all," Benny said.

"Whatever." Shay retreated back to the bar and ordered another shot.

Benny could see where this night was headed, and he was ready to go home. He wished he'd driven.

"Have you banged her yet?" Shay asked, but to Benny it sounded more like a challenge. Benny acted like he didn't hear him. "Have you? Because if you have then you better pray you were safe. Marcy's a good lay. A great one. But she ain't particular if you hear me."

Benny didn't want to believe anything Shay said. He didn't trust him, but something true, a warning rose up in what he was saying that Benny couldn't ignore.

"What are you talking about?"

"Hell, you been away. Don't know how desperate these Morristown girls can get. Marcy's been trying to trap any guy she could. She and Victoria are just alike. Think they gotta be pregnant, trapping any dumb ass they can. That's free advice and I should know."

Benny didn't want to believe Shay but a part of him did. After all, he had led Marcy to believe that he had a better life than he possessed, that he was successful and living out a dream far away from Morristown. If this was the only reason Marcy was interested in him, then he couldn't blame her. Benny knew how it felt to want something more than what was offered. He could vaguely remember that boy he once was that dreamed of being a guitarist, of catching melodies from the sky and containing them in the space where his hands met the strings, and sharing them with any one who would listen.

Marcy and Victoria were sitting together on the far side of the club near the mechanical bull area. Shay announced that he had to piss and staggered to the restroom. Benny took this opportunity to excuse himself from his private hell and join the girls.

"Everything all right?" he asked, standing in front of them.

"We're good." Marcy said. "Just needed some girl time."

"You need me to leave?" Benny said, not wanting to intrude.

"No, I've taken her away from you long enough," Victoria said, standing. "I need some air. I'll be back in a minute."

"Need me to go with you?" Marcy asked.

"No, I'm just going outside. I don't think the baby likes all this noise," she said and left.

"She's too dramatic. I think Shay's an ass, but feel sorry for him sometimes. She's only two months pregnant. It's not like her baby's body has formed yet. Not like it's got ears to hear all this noise," Marcy said.

After going off and comforting her and defending her against Shay's attacks, Benny was surprised to hear Marcy talk bad about her best friend.

"This probably isn't the best place for her night now," he said.

"Yeah, but they're the ones that invited themselves to come. I'm really sorry. It was all last minute and I couldn't say no. I know how much you hate Shay and all. You must hate me for dragging you along."

"No, it's all right. I hope you know that I don't hate you. You don't really think that?" Benny felt the softness under her chin and encouraged her to raise her downcast head. Her eyes glistened from a reservoir of potential tears, waiting for the right moment when Benny touched her cheek to stream down her face. "You don't do you?"

Marcy shook her head as she looked away. Benny assumed she was embarrassed by the way she retreated and wiped the tears away. She returned his concerned gaze with a cheerful smile, masking the emotions within her. "So you don't hate me?"

"No," he said, before seeing Shay leave the bathroom and swagger towards him. "Well, maybe a little." He joked nodding towards Shay. "Just don't leave me alone with him again."

"I won't leave your side," she said, wrapping her arms protectively around his waist, squeezing him tight.

The rest of the night was one confrontation after another. First, Shay challenged Benny to a bull riding competition, but before Shay could ride, he got into a fight with a guy who told him to wait his turn. Shay pushed the stranger into the bull. After that, Benny found himself trying to break up the brawl, pulling Shay off of the guy. All of them were thrown out, which didn't bother Benny any since he was ready to leave anyway, and in the parking lot Benny found himself breaking up another round of hostility between Shay and Victoria.

A third confrontation occurred when Shay refused to let anyone else drive. Benny and the girls were not about to ride with him drunk and Shay almost drove off. Finally, he let Benny drive and warned him not to wreck since his truck was new. Benny and Marcy didn't talk much on the way home. They mainly listened to Shay and Victoria arguing loudly in the back seat. Benny offered to drive everyone home, but Victoria told him that she would get the rest of them back safely. Benny kissed Marcy lightly goodnight and sat on the metal glider, relieved to be alone. He half expected his dad to be wandering around, drawing him into some past event he was reliving before the night was through, but Benny was exhausted and didn't wait up for the possibility.

CHAPTER SIX:

Brightness disturbed his rest as Benny awakened to a recreation of his past.

"Get up or I'll pull you up," he heard his dad.

"What are you doing?" Benny pulled the sheet over his face to shield his eyes from the overhead glare.

"You know your mom's singing this morning, has to get to church early."

"What time is it?"

"Around eight thirty. We're leaving in thirty minutes."

Benny wasn't certain if he should stay in bed and not play along, or if he should get groomed and go to church. He didn't necessarily want his dad to drive and felt it would be better if he drove him since his dad was dead set on going. This was the first Sunday since he had been home that his dad had mentioned church and Benny assumed that he didn't go any more, but this morning was caught up in the memory of a hundred Sunday mornings Benny had forgotten.

Benny showered and put on his only pair of khaki pants and picked out one of his dad's button up shirts. He didn't own a pair of dress shoes, so he settled for the boots he typically wore, hoping their appearance wasn't too scuffed up for the service.

Ben was waiting impatiently by the front door, holding his keys. "Your mother went on already. Couldn't wait on you."

"Then what's the hurry?"

"Want to get a good seat near the front so I can hear good."

"The service doesn't start for over an hour. Why don't we wait a little."

"It won't hurt you any to sit in the Lord's house for a few minutes," Ben said and walked outside.

Ben stood in front of his truck, staring at his wife's Buick as if he were paralyzed. "Why's your mother's car still here?"

Benny had never experienced an episode where the past and present collided. "That's my car," he lied. "What are you talking about?"

"That's your mother's car. I think I should know what her car looks like since I just bought it."

"Come on, Dad. We don't want to be late," Benny opened the driver's door of the truck.

"You ain't of age yet." Ben motioned for him to slide over as he sat behind the wheel. "Why wouldn't she take her car?"

"Maybe she rode with Miriam's mom," Benny said, hoping his dad would return to the present.

"You sure are getting big for your age," Ben said as he backed the truck around and headed towards the Old Bethel road.

Benny didn't say much on the ride to Bethel Baptist Church. He was just glad that the Alzheimer's hadn't affected his dad's ability to drive. Ben had always been a good driver and Benny had never heard of him having a wreck, but figured there was always a first time.

Bethel Baptist was a small country church, averaging around sixty people in worship. Benny was glad that it was only a couple of miles down the highway because

although his dad was driving well at the moment, Benny wasn't certain he should be driving at all in his condition. He kept wondering over what the outcome would be if his mind reverted back to his early childhood before he learned to drive. Would a part of his mind instinctively recall and allow him to continue driving? Or would he suddenly forget, freeze up, and wreck?

The church was on the left, its white steeple fighting for dominance over the tops of the trees bordering the freshly mowed property. There was a cemetery beside the church, a small collection of marble tributes to patrons of the church. Benny's mother wasn't buried here, but was buried at the old Bethesda cemetery near Russelville. He still hadn't visited her grave. A part of him wanted to, needed to explain to her why he wasn't there for her, needed her forgiveness. But he was afraid that seeing her name carved in the stone would make her death more real, and he would feel the weight of her disappointment.

The day was bright and Benny felt the warmth of the sun shining directly down from the cloudless sky, the white gloss of the entrance of the church blinding him. An older man with a familiar voice welcomed Benny and Ben back after their long absence and repeated how good it was to have the both back again. Benny smelled the old spruce pews. Each row perfectly spaced in front of the other, reminding him of countless seasons inside this unchanged interior. The arch shaped windows, five on each side, were frosted yellow, not quite stained glass since the church couldn't afford them, cast a golden hue encompassing the auditorium.

Benny followed his dad to the front, sitting in the second pew back. The seats were hard like Benny remembered, still without cushions. His mom always told them that

the pastor preferred them to be uncomfortable so that no one would be tempted to sleep during his sermon. As a boy, Benny recalled plenty of mornings when even the hardest of the pew seats didn't deter him from napping and his dad would have to pinch his arm to wake him.

Thirty minutes before the service, Benny listened to the movements and conversations of others as they found their seats behind him. The same wooden attendance board hung on the wall between a door leading to Sunday school rooms in the back and downstairs and the choir loft. It had four columns that read.

Attendance last Sunday 72

Attendance last year 67

Offering last Sunday $548.25

Sunday school attendance 47

A younger pianist sat behind the brown upright than had been there ten years ago. This lady was probably in her early forties and wore thick, butterfly shaped glasses. She had replaced Ms. Marge, the woman who had led the children's choir when Benny was growing up, and the first lady who encouraged him with music. She always told Benny that he sang like a little angel, and even had him sing solos from time to time during worship. Benny had never considered himself to be a good singer, and always figured that Ms. Marge was slightly deaf. But she was one of the few he thought about favorably on occasion and was disappointed that she was no longer playing.

"Where is Ms. Marge?" Benny asked his dad who shrugged

The sounds of voices reverberated throughout the sanctuary and Benny figured that the service was about to begin. A young, dark-haired man, probably a few years

older than Benny entered through the door on the other side of the choir loft and sat in one of the two chairs behind either side of the pulpit. The pianist started playing a hymn Benny could remember but not name and stopped when the man sitting on the platform stood behind the pulpit, holding a hymnal.

"Isn't it just a beautiful morning to be in the Lord's house?" he said, gazing over the congregation like a fishermen searching the best area of water to cast out his net. "I am so thankful to be in the Lord's house today. There ain't no other house I want to be in."

A few people answered with an Amen and one deep voiced man bellowed out a yes like a ship's foghorn.

"Amen... would you turn with me to hymn number one twenty nine and sing all four stanzas of *It is Well*."

Benny retrieved the worn, white book with the words Baptist Hymnal written in faded gold letters on the cover. He sang through all four verses, softly joining with the assembly. It had been a long time since he had been inside a church.

It wasn't that Benny had given up on God, but felt that God had given up on him. So he didn't see the relevance of attending church if God no longer heard him, no longer seemed to acknowledge that Benny was created is His likeness. Benny had been wished is the blood of Jesus when he was seven, prayed the sinner's prayer at his bedside with his mom, accepting Christ as his Savior, received the Holy Spirit in his heart, and was baptized, all in one weekend. He was taught that no matter what he did he would always have the gift of God inside him, and that his inheritance in heaven was secure. But for months after he left home he prayed for God's help, prayed for Him to make a way with

his music, prayed for vindication against his dad, prayed that He would use his talents and bless them as an offering, his first fruits back to Him. But Benny's prayers went unanswered as if God wasn't accepting his calls, saw on His God sized caller I.D. Benny's name and didn't want to be bothered. Benny had prayed for belonging and God left him alone. He asked for opportunity and God had opened no doors. He pleaded that he would vindicate him to his dad, and God brought him back and made him his servant. His mom would always tell Benny that God's ways was not ours and that when things didn't make sense that we had to believe and trust in His goodness even more. But all Benny could see was God's lack of interest. Since the night he left Morristown, he had felt alone and as he finished singing the words *It is well with my soul*, Benny felt like a hypocrite and wanted to cy out that God had forgotten him, that he was weary and if God really cared then why wouldn't He answer.

But he didn't expect anything, and sat down with the rest of the congregation as the minister offered up a prayer, followed by a welcome, inviting any visitor to stand up so everyone could get a good look at them. Technically, Benny was still a member of the church and didn't feel the need to stand.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned around as a middle-aged woman holding back three squirming boys in the pew said, "I'm Irma Jean. Go on, don't be shy. It ain't every service we get visitors." She raised her hand, got the minister's attention and pointed towards Benny.

"Glory be praised," the minister said. "Stand up young man."

Benny hated this. The last thing he wanted to do was be singled out, and worse yet be recognized as that famous musician. The last place he wanted to lie was in church.

Benny hoped that no one would recognize him and figured that this was slightly probable at best since his hair was longer and it had been a decade since he'd been there. Unfortunately, sitting next to his dad offered a reference for recognition.

Benny slowly stood as the minister said, "Mr. Headley, is this your son?" Ben offered an unenthusiastic nod. "Turn around son so our good congregation can get a look at you," the minister said.

Benny rotated slightly and smiled weakly at the sea of faces before sitting, restoring his anonymity.

"We're glad to have you here today and I trust everyone will welcome this young man back as we stand and greet one another. I want everyone to tell your neighbor you're glad they're in the Lord's house."

The pianist began playing an upbeat, rousing melody as voices danced around. Irma Jean was the first to shake Benny's hand, repeated what the minister told her to say, before asking him his name. Benny told her and got the pleasure of a formal introduction to her sons; Joseph, John, and Jeremy. He should their small, unresponsive, like jelly hands and tried to return to his seat. He wasn't accustomed to meeting new people, and although he remembered and had grown accustomed to this "greet your neighbor" ritual in the church, he always felt the enthusiasm in which people greeted each other lacked authenticity and came across flat and meaningless, because every Sunday a person would shake the same hands, say the same phrase, and barely remember that person's name, let alone know anything real about them. He knew this was the case because this had been his experience. He was one of the many fake "getting to know you" hand shakers,

regurgitating the words dictated to him while never asking the person anything meaningful or memorable.

The minister in charge instructed the congregation to remain standing and turn to page two hundred twenty nine and led them through all the stanzas of "There's Power in the Blood."

During the final chorus, Benny closed the hymnal, singing from memory as a dark haired girl walked up from the opposite side of the auditorium. She stood to the right of the minister, waiting patiently, singing along. Benny immediately stopped singing as the words of the song fell away. All he could do was look at Miriam.

He had to remind himself to breathe. She was much like he remembered; her soft, porcelain skin, a light spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose, arching like a seagull's wings over her cheeks. Her dark hair was shorter now, styled close, providing an attractive but simple frame around her face.

The minister asked everyone to be seated. Miriam stood behind the pulpit, her head and the tops of her shoulders the only part of her visible. Benny focused on the hazel of her eyes. Not knowing whether he wanted her to recognize him or not. In one way, he wanted nothing more than to talk to her, experience her again, but in another way, he was afraid, nervous she would not approve of his failed life, would see beyond his successful pretense and witness his disappointment, his failings. She was the last person he ever wanted to lie to, wasn't sure he could if he tried.

They used to be so in tune with one another, a tight harmony in a world of chaotic soloists, screaming to be heard. Ever since he left Miriam, Benny's song had fallen flat, its notes lacking the energy needed to sustain them, lacking the interest created by the

notes she added. Benny realized that some songs never sounded as good without the harmony of another voice. And Benny's never sounded the same without her.

Miriam looked out, focusing some where in the space above the heads of the people, a trick Benny had taught her to help calm her nerves when she first started singing. Told her that was what he learned in baseball, how he settled his nerves before batting. He was glad to see his advice was still beneficial, even if she had probably forgotten who'd showed her.

A sorrowful yet tender melody flowed out of the piano, the tune imprinting itself in his memory. Benny leaned forward, anxious to hear the soft texture of her voice.

There's a river I have found,

where clear waters flow.

There's a peace that I know,

on that gentle shore.

There is writing in the sand,

that says you're alone no more.

There's a Savior who holds my hand,

on that gentle shore.

Her voice was beautiful, better than Benny had remembered. She sang simply, allowing the words to carry her along, lulling every ear to drift lazily down her singing stream, trusting the peaceful ride she was asking them to join her on. And for the first time, Benny entrusted his feelings freely not afraid that she would abuse them, and relishing inside this brief moment of vulnerability as Miriam's song touched a part of him he'd been trying to ignore.

The chorus was pitched high, but Miriam floated effortless up there like she was auditioning for angelic choir. Her voice soared like a child's whisper. Benny cried.

At the river I am found,

His love is evermore.

Cause Jesus wrote with His nail scarred hand,

My name on that gentle shore.

Miriam finished singing, lowered her head and returned to her seat. Everyone was quiet as if they didn't want to leave that peaceful place Miriam had transported them to.

The minister who led the singing was also the pastor and as he delivered his sermon, Benny held on to the image of the river Miriam described. But his river was smaller, resembled the creek bank he used to play in with Wiley and Amy, and later sharing those special moments with Miriam. Throughout high school, the creek became Benny's refuge, the one location that would transport him away from his arguments with his dad, a calming place he'd frequently run to. It was here that he first told Miriam that he wanted to move away.

"I want to play guitar. Maybe move to Nashville." Benny shared his dream for the first time with anyone.

Miriam was silent as she wrote her name with a stick.

"What do you think?" Benny asked.

Miriam shrugged. "If that's what you want."

"It's the only thing I've ever wanted."

Miriam didn't say anything, just continued spelling her name in the creek. The silence between them was awkward.

"Is something wrong?" he said.

She wouldn't look at him and knew he'd said something to upset her. He quickly reviewed their conversation and realized his error.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"It's okay."

"No, you don't understand. I'm not saying everything right," he said. "Miriam, would you look at me?"

She pulled the stick out of the water and turned her attention sheepishly at him. Benny was moved by her tears, was willing to share with her all of his thoughts and hopes.

"I love you. I've always wanted to tell you that. From the first time I saw you, even though you were throwing rocks at me."

Miriam smiled, the movement of her face releasing the dam of tears. "They weren't rocks. They were acorns."

Benny had jumped off his emotional cliff and was hoping that Miriam's return of affection would be the safety net that would hold him, keep him from crashing against the uncertain terrain below. His profession of love was something he had never done before, a feeling he had never experienced before Miriam, a feeling he believed he'd never experience without her again.

"You are my support. The better part of me."

"Then why do you want to go away?"

"Because there's nothing for me to do here. I don't want to work again for Dad."

"But he's looking forward to you having the store one day."

"I don't want it."

"Have you told him that?"

"I don't want to talk about him." Benny was irritated. "I want to talk about us."

"All right."

"I mean am I all alone here? Should I not be feeling these things?" Benny's insecurity that she didn't love him began to create a panic within him as the protection of his emotional safety net became uncertain.

"No," she said.

"You mean no I shouldn't feel these things? Or no I should?"

"You should feel what you feel."

Benny was freaking out over why she wouldn't tell him if she loved him or not, and wondered if he should confess the rest of his plans for them. It was Benny who was now staring at the water, afraid to look at Miriam, afraid to hear her say that she didn't have feelings for him like he did for her.

"I want you to go with me," he blurted out.

There was an unendurable silence before Miriam said, "What about Mom? You know I can't leave. She needs help with Granny."

"Why do you have to do that?" Benny was frustrated. He thought his fears were confirmed now that she was making up excuses.

"You know that Mom can't afford a nurse during week nights when she's at work. I'm all she's got."

"Don't you have a sister somewhere? Why can't she help out for a change?"

"Because she lives with Dad and we never see her. And even so, she's too young to handle Granny by herself."

"I don't see why it all falls on you." Benny stood up quickly and paced.

"I'm sorry. What else can I do?"

Benny couldn't look at her when he asked her, "Don't you want to go with me?"

"You know it's not that," Miriam stepped towards him. Benny looked into her eyes and felt them drawing him in, her pupils like too singularities not allowing him to leave. "Hey?" She put her hand on his cheek, "I love you." and kissed him.

* * *

The pastor ended his sermon by saying that there was always room at the cross and invited anyone who wanted to pray at the altar and ask Christ into their hearts to be their personal Lord and Savior should not hesitate during the invitational hymn. Benny looked around for Miriam but couldn't see her and wondered if she had noticed him. The piano repeated a couple of stanzas of "Only Trust Him" and the pastor dismissed the congestion after no one approached the platform.

Benny saw Miriam exit out of the first row on the opposite side of the auditorium and head towards the rear of the church. He wanted to run after her but Irma Jean grabbed his arm and said she wanted him to meet the rest of her family. After being introduced to her husband, Bill, her mother Irma Jo, and her six cousins whose names Benny didn't even hear, because his mind was elsewhere, outside trying to find Miriam.

Benny excused himself from Irma's family and told them that it was nice meeting them and that he had to find his dad since Ben had already disappeared into the brightness behind the open back doors. Once his eyes had adjusted to the light outside,

Benny watched the people walking to their cars and saw his dad getting into the truck. He tried to locate Miriam, but couldn't find her. He silently cursed Irma Jean for being so friendly and made his way to his dad's truck. Ben already had the engine running and the shifter in reverse when Benny climbed in. Not waiting for him to close the door, Ben backed into the road and headed towards home. Benny searched for Miriam as they drove past the church, seeing it she were talking to anybody in the parking lot, but she was no where to be found.

"I don't like that new preacher." Ben grumbled as they turned on Old Bethel Rd. "He ain't got no power in what he says. Not like your grandpa Headley or Reverend Barton who came after him. Now they gave some good preaching. Not this girly stuff this preacher gushes on about. They were solid. Heaven or Hell. This or that. You choose. Now that's solid. Something you can hold on to."

Benny couldn't argue with his dad on this topic, especially since he didn't hear a word the pastor said. After seeing Miriam again, Benny could think of nothing else and wondered if she still lived in the gray farmhouse across from the creek.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

The afternoon crept along and Benny tired of listening to a Braves game, staring at the back of a TV as his dad napped, was tempted to turn the screen towards them, but didn't want to hear his dad's retribution when the light woke him. He grabbed a Mountain Dew and went outside. He lay down in his tree house, but couldn't sleep because he kept thinking about Miriam. He wanted so much to talk to her, to find out about her life. He wondered if she was married. After she sang in church, he was glad to see that she didn't wear a wedding band. But that didn't rule out the possibility that she was divorced and had children. Although Benny knew Miriam would be a great mother, he didn't want to imagine her in that role. He had to consider the possibility that she was seriously involved with someone. Benny could accept this scenario better, but didn't want to think too much about it either. Instead he contemplated her being single and had been pining away for him to one day return. He realized that this was a far stretch that Miriam wouldn't have waited on him. Mostly because another guy would have been there to snatch her up immediately after he left. And why would she wait for the hope of his return? He didn't give her any reason to think he'd ever be back. He didn't even say goodbye, just left town, not even making it to his own graduation. He figured it was more plausible that he would receive a bitter reunion with her, that she had ever right to hate him for leaving her behind like he did.

He decided to walk to the creek as the lyrics of her song seized him. "There's writing in the sand that says you're not alone." The "not alone" repeated, striking a dissonant chord within him. And as Benny stood at the creek bank, he realized how lone be really was and how empty his life had become since he left. He felt the coolness of the water slide down his shoes and absorb into his socks as he crossed the creek.

The gray farmhouse stood like it hadn't changed since Wiley and Amy lived there. Benny wondered about what happened to Wiley, what he was doing now. Did he have a family? He hoped that Amy beat the disease and that somewhere she was climbing trees with her children and swinging from vines over a creek. Benny had always wanted to find them, but he never had. Partly because he was afraid to discover the worse, that Amy never walked again, or worse yet had died, finally giving into the disease that stole her joy that day and ended her skipping forever.

Walking through the field of golden blades, Benny saw a white Prelude parked in front. At first hoping to find Miriam, Benny wondered if Marcy had been living beside him this whole time. But if she had then why didn't she tell him? What was the big secret of where she lived?

The front door creaked open and Benny fell behind the wheat, suddenly not wanting to be seen. He peeked through the tall grass, and could see Marcy coming outside. He watched her as she opened her trunk and searched for something.

"I told you it's hot in here," she yelled at the house before slamming the trunk shut.

The front door creaked open again and Miriam stepped on to the porch. "Did it hurt you to look?" Benny could tell she was upset even though the tone of her voice never betrayed any irritation, always sounding sweet and concerned.

"It does when there's no need to look. I told you it wasn't in there!" Marcy said, walking back to the house.

"Well, maybe I misplaced it then. It's got to be around her somewhere," she said before entering the house.

Marcy sat on the swing, her eyes surveyed the field towards Benny's house. Benny couldn't move. He didn't want Marcy to know he was there, didn't want her to think he was spying. So he waited, his back sweating from the direct sunlight, hoping Marcy would go inside soon so he could make his retreat. It was another twenty minutes before she went back in the house. Benny waited another minute, making sure she didn't come back out, and realizing his escape was certain, ran to the creek.

He climbed into his tree house and thought over the scene he had witnessed. He determined that Miriam was there then there was a more than good chance that she still lived there. But what Benny couldn't figure out was why Marcy was there. He didn't know if she lived there or was a friend of Miriam's who was visiting. Benny couldn't imagine Miriam and Marcy being friends because they were so different. There was a chance that Marcy lived there, maybe rented a room from Miriam and her mom. But that wouldn't explain why Marcy wouldn't tell Benny where she lived. Why did she keep this such a secret?

Benny thought about the Prelude and determined that it was the same car Miriam used to drive that now apparently belonged to Marcy. But how did she end up with it?

Did Miriam sell it to her? There were too many questions that Benny couldn't answer. He would confront Marcy about it the next time he saw her, and wouldn't stop digging until she told him the truth.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Benny was inside the kitchen, fumbling through the refrigerator looking for something to eat when Marcy opened the front door. Benny was surprised to see her, and wondered if they had planned a date that he'd forgotten. Ben was sitting in his blue Berkline, listening to a Braves versus Marlins game. Upon hearing the door open, he started to get up.

"Don't mind me, Mr. Headley," Marcy said.

"I hope you boys haven't eaten yet?" She laid a bucket of Food City fried chicken on the table.

"What's this?" Benny asked.

"I told you I wasn't much of a cook, but I thought you might be hungry."

Benny wanted to ask her about Miriam and how she knew her and why she drove her car, but decided that interrogating her before dinner was unkind, especially since he was starving.

"Where are your plates?" she asked.

"I'll get them," Benny said, retrieving three plates and glasses from one of the top cabinets. "What do you like to drink? We don't have a great selection. Your choices are pretty much milk, Mountain Dew, or water."

"I'll take whatever you're having."

Benny set a Mountain Dew can in front of her on the table. "That stuff is addictive."

"I'll be all right. I'm pretty tough."

Benny poured his dad a glass of milk and hollered at him, "Hey, Dad! Marcy brought us some dinner."

"You've only got two chairs at the table. Do you want to sit in the living room?" she asked.

"What did you say?" Ben yelled back, watching the back of the TV.

"Are you hungry?" Benny said, starting to get irritated. He didn't know if his dad's hearing was getting worse, or if he wasn't listening, but Benny was growing weary of repeating himself.

"I'll get something later."

"Marcy brought us some chicken."

"Let's take him a plate and if he doesn't want it then he can heat it up later," Marcy suggested.

Benny agreed and put a breast and a side of baked beans and slaw on a plate. He handed it to his dad and said," Here you go."

"What's this?" Ben acted surprised.

"It's chicken." Benny hated repeating himself. "I already told you. Marcy brought us over dinner."

"Where is she?" Ben strained his head towards the front door. "Tell her to come over here."

Benny was concerned. This was the first time his dad had shown any interest in socializing. For the past month he rarely talked, even at the store, the few customers who

came in, never got greeted by him. He typically sat behind the counter and looked over parts catalogues. At home, he and Benny spoke few words to one another. Not that their lack of communication mattered much to Benny, it was the one aspect of their relationship that was tolerable. But the fact that he had suddenly taken an interest in Marcy was uncharacteristic of him, and Benny was uncertain as to where their interaction would lead.

Marcy had overheard Ben's request and was carrying her plate to the living room as she passed Benny on his way to the kitchen. "Let's just all eat together in there."

Benny was going to suggest, they eat on the porch, to get her away from his dad. He had a suspicion that Ben might be in a flashback mood, and didn't know if whatever past he was visiting would be better or worse for Marcy than his normal grumpiness.

When Benny returned to the living room, he was relieved to find Marcy laughing, sitting on the end of the sofa closest to Ben with her plate on her lap, her bare legs pressed together, providing a level surface.

"I didn't know you knew so much about women, Mr. Headley." Marcy flirted. Benny hated hearing her quick and light tone when it was directed at other men.

The fact that she flirted with about any guy cheapened the effect when she flirted with Benny, made him think her attentions weren't sincere.

Ben held the chicken breast in one hand and ripped into the top of it with his teeth. Benny knew Marcy had to be losing her appetite as grease dribbled down his dad's chin. Ben spoke a tangle of words, the fried batter crackling in his mouth. "I used to be good with the ladies."

"I bet you still are," Marcy said before scooping up a small serving of baked beans.

"Ain't no more," Ben said.

"Now I don't believe that."

"Can't tell you what ain't true. Ask Nellie. She'll tell you," Ben said, looking around the room. "Why ain't she in here eating? Benny, go and tell your mom to quit cooking and eat something."

Benny's fear was confirmed. His dad wasn't with them, and Marcy was being thrust into one of his fantasies without knowing it, like she was participating in a game she didn't know she was playing and wasn't explained the rules. As of yet, Benny hadn't confronted his dad during an episode, and he still didn't know if he should or not.

"Go on now." Ben waved his spoon at Benny as if he were a fly he was shooing away.

Reluctantly Benny walked to the kitchen and played along. "Come on, mom. Your dinner's setting cold." He then resumed his seat on the couch next to Marcy. He left his plate on the coffee table and pulled the table toward him.

"Aren't you the strong one?" Marcy said to him.

"Am I crowding you?" Benny asked since Marcy barely had room to move her legs.

"I don't mind you crowding me."

"Now why ain't your? Nellie," Ben said. "Nellie."

"She's eating in the kitchen," Benny lied, "said to tell you to not worry about her."

"I ain't worried," Ben said.

Marcy elbowed Benny's arm and presented him with a puzzled expression.

Benny whispered, "I'll tell you later."

"Just thought..." Ben resumed while pulling apart a piece of meat from the rib cage and stuffing it into his mouth. Benny noticed that grease had run past his chin and covered his neck with a shiny coating. He hoped Marcy hadn't seen it yet. Wishing his dad would wipe the grease away Benny handed him his napkin. "Just thought she might like to enjoy Miriam's company a little."

Benny wasn't certain, but he thought he heard his dad call Marcy, Miriam. He glanced at Marcy, trying to read her thoughts, wondering if she heard the same, but her face betrayed no emotion as she continued to daintily eat, separating the meat off the chicken leg with her fork.

"How's the chicken?" Marcy asked Ben.

"It's good. Not as good as Nellie normally cooks it, but not bad. The cole slaw is better though."

Benny ate his food rapidly, although his appetite was lacking, fearing at any moment that his dad would call Marcy, Miriam again, or say something equally inappropriate. Benny wanted Marcy to take his hint and finish eating, so they could go outside or move to another part of the house, but she didn't and continued dining at a leisurely pace.

"I'm not a big fan of cole slaw," Marcy said.

"I love it." Ben picked chicken out of his teeth. "I thought you told me just the other day that you liked it?"

"Not me." Marcy didn't know to play along. "You must be thinking of some other girl Benny has had here."

"Who's winning the game?" Benny tried to change the subject.

"You're the only one that can put up with him. I remember when you first got here and Benny wouldn't have anything to do with you. Nellie and I knew it was going to be only so long before you'd be coming over here eating dinner with us, keeping his mind off of work." Ben said.

"I didn't realize I had that effect on him," Marcy said. Benny didn't know if she were playing along or didn't understand his dad's references and believed he was talking about her.

"If he could keep you. If you stayed around then I'd be surprised."

"That's sweet." Marcy leaned forward and patted Ben's hand. "I just hope you boys want to keep me around."

"Wouldn't think of trading you," Ben said before adding the final word that made Benny shudder, "Miriam."

Marcy removed her hand and sat back quickly. Benny knew she had heard the name he called her this time.

"I'm stuffed," she said and stood. "I'll take your plate for you if you're finished?"

"You're not done with that?" Ben motioned at her barely touched chicken thigh and remaining baked beans.

"I'm a small eater," she raid.

"Here... here..." He reached for her plate. "Leave it with me if that's all you're going to do."

She frowned as Ben took her plate and dumped its contents on his before handing the plate back to her. She accepted back the bean stained plate and rushed off to the kitchen.

"Can't be anywhere Miriam ain't?" Ben called after Benny as he left the living room, going after her.

"Are you all right?" Benny said.

Marcy dropped the plate into the sink, "Oh, heck. My hands are slippery."

"I'll clean up. You don't have to." Benny wanted her to turn her attention away from the sink. He wanted her to look at him, wanted to see her eyes.

"It's all right." She turned the faucets, water filling the sink.

Benny laid his plate into the sink, turned off the running water, and slid his hands into hers, pulling her towards him. "Must be all that grease."

"What?"

"Making your hands slick. Must've been the grease off the chicken."

"Yeah, don't like grease."

Marcy still wouldn't look Benny in the face, kept staring down at her hands intertwined in his.

"Are you all right?" Marcy didn't respond. "Why won't you look at me?"

"I am," she whispered.

"Come here for a second. I want to show you something."

Benny led her to his bedroom. "This is where I grew up. Where I stay now."

"Why are we in here?"

"Growing up, my room was my safe place. Whenever Dad and I argued I'd come in here and when I shut that door. It was like I'd entered someplace new. A place where Dad or anybody else couldn't get to me." Benny said as he pushed the wadded up sheet to the side of the bed next to the wall and sat down, smoothing out an area of wrinkled linen for her to join him. Marcy sat, staring towards his collection of baseball trophies on a shelf in the middle of the wall and on top of his dresser.

"I was going to ask you to come to the game tomorrow. I meant to mention it before, but Shay beat me to it. I didn't realize you were so good at it."

"I'm not anymore. Haven't played in years. But I can go if you still want me to."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"No reason," Benny said, but wanting to talk about his dad.

"Unless you'd rather go with someone else," she said. "Miriam maybe?"

"It's not what you think."

"Then what is it? I realize we're not exclusive or anything, but how am I suppose to... Your dad thought I was someone else. If that's who you want to be with then fine, I'll go the way I came in."

"It's not like that," Benny tried to explain.

"What's it then?" her voice was strained with the passion her body was finding hard to contain.

"My dad. Haven't you wondered why I'm home? It's because," Benny was interrupted by his door opening.

"I thought I heard voices in here," Ben said, standing in the doorway. He kept his attention on Marcy as his brow wrinkled. "Who's this?"

"It's Marcy, Dad," Benny said. "She brought us dinner tonight."

"Do you think I'm stupid, boy?" Ben said, his eyes wild. "Where's Miriam?"

"She's not here."

"What do you mean she's not here. She was here a while ago. And who did you say she was?"

"Dad." Benny stood, wanting to escort him out into the hall. "Can't we talk about this later?"

"The devil we can. I want to know what's going on in my house."

"You're confused, Dad. Marcy has been here this entire time."

"I think I should know who I've been talking to. And that little half covered tramp ain't Miriam."

Marcy rushed out of his bedroom without saying anything. Benny ran after her but she wouldn't stop no matter how many times he yelled her name. Gravels spun as she sped down the drive and made a quick right on Old Bethel Rd, racing in the direction of Miriam's house. Benny was furious. Angry at himself for not being able to handle the situation. Angry at Marcy for not giving him the chance to explain. And angry at his dad for colliding the past and present together and getting him stuck in the middle of the wreckage.

"I want to know who that slut was?" Ben said from behind the screened door.

The last thing Benny wanted to do was compound the situation and make it any worse, but he was so mad he could feel his toes sweating and knew if he were

antagonized any more that he would snap. He went into his bedroom and slammed the door, locking it, trying to recreate the calming effect his safe place used to provide. He could hear the door knob trying to be rotated, his dad trying to get inside.

"What have I told you about locking these doors?" Ben yelled. "Benny, by the count of three, you better have this door open. One. Two. Three."

Benny didn't unlock the door. There was silence.

"You wait, boy. Just wait till I find me a good sized switch. I'll show you that you ain't too big to be whipped. You just wait." Ben stomped down the hall.

For the first time his safe place didn't protect him and he realized he needed to get away from his dad before something unfortunate happened. Remembering the direction on Old Bethel Rd Marcy drove, Benny decided to go to the creek and see if she went to Miriam's house. If she were friends with Miriam and thought that Benny had been seeing her also, would explains her emotional torrent. This would especially be the case if they were roommates.

Opening his door, Benny hurried out of the house, trying to be quiet so Ben wouldn't discover his escape. As he went around the corner he bumped into his dad, leaning against the white washed wood, a look of amazement in his eyes, wild like a possum's transfixed by the fast approaching headlights. Ben acted as if he didn't notice Benny, staring off at some unknown in the woods. He held a small branch in his right hand, hanging loosely against his side. Benny didn't know what to expect, didn't know if his dad was back visiting the present or stuck somewhere else, a place where even he didn't know where he was anymore.

"Are you all right, Dad?" Ben didn't move, his countenance frozen as if it were trapped forever in a snapshot. "What are you looking at?" Benny asked, still not getting a reply. "Why don't we go back in the house. I think the Braves are still playing."

Benny led his dad inside and guided him to his favorite recliner. Ben didn't say anything, just sat, staring wide-eyed at the back of the TV. Benny sat on the couch, watching his dad as if he were a kid waiting for him to wake up. Ben didn't move, didn't react to anything Benny said or even the game as the sounds of a crowd cheering and an announcer's voice broke their silence.

"Bottom of the eighth. Two pitches to go. Braves down by one. Bases loaded."

"Bases loaded," Ben mumbled.

Benny was relieved that at least he was making noises. This had been the longest he'd seen him in his catatonic state, what Outlaw referred to Benny as the "no go." Benny had witnessed a handful of these "no go" moments, but the duration of this one concerned him, made him wonder if he was going to come out of it. If he didn't, if his mind got stuck in neutral, going neither forward or back, Benny didn't know what he would do. He still hadn't asked his dad about health insurance. In a way, he was afraid to, afraid he hadn't kept up with the payments and was no longer covered. If that was the case then Benny would have to care for him himself, and this was something he didn't know if he could do. After tonight's events, Benny realized that his dad was the cause behind him losing anything good in his life. Not that he was imagining a life together with Marcy, but she was a pleasant distraction and he did enjoy her company. But now that had probably all changed because why would a girl like her, pretty and free, want to have to deal with Ben Headley all the time? This was a question Benny couldn't answer.

Benny still wanted to see if Marcy's car was parked at Miriam's, but didn't feel he could leave his dad in his present condition. He could see this situation having good potential for the "crazy man naked" scenario Outlaw had described when he first arrived.

The hard crack of a ball colliding into a bat snapped Benny out of his thoughts as the cheering of the television crowd filled the living room.

"Swing, Benny, swing," Ben coached from his chair. "Swing, Benny. Swing that bat."

As he listened to his dad's support mixed with the cheering of the crowd, Benny remembered when he was fifteen and the last to bat for the Morristown All Stars. They had won so many regional championships that they were playing for the Little League National Championship against a team from New Mexico. The game was played at Yankee Stadium in New Jersey and it was in the eighth inning with Benny the last to bat. The All Stars had a player on first and third with two strikes remaining.

Benny remembered the roar of the crowd as he stood in front of the catcher, preparing himself for his next swing. He was terrified. He wanted to take off his gloves to dry the sweat from his palms to keep his hands from sliding against the soaked fabric as he gripped the bat. Benny's favorite position was playing short stop. Although he led the team in home runs, he hated batting and was always afraid the ball would hit him and crack his bones like the colliding noise of the ball with the bat. He couldn't remember one time after any pitch that he didn't want to run away, but he never did. He always hit the ball because he feared failing his dad more.

The pitcher released the second pitch. It screamed towards him. Benny closed his eyes and swung. Contact. The force shook his arm. Benny started to run, but noticed the ball leaning too close to the right and land outside of the playing line.

"Ball. Strike two." the Umpire called out.

Benny walked back to the plate and looked towards the dugout. All of his teammates were pressed against the fence. Benny knew that each of them were thinking the same thought he was, that if he struck out then their hope of the National Championship was lost. Never before in the history of Morristown had a team made it this far, accomplished so much, and now it all depended on one hit, one connection of the bat with the ball to keep their hope alive. Benny saw his dad standing beside Coach Bergman, staring intently at him.

He could hear him yelling, "Swing, Benny. Swing."

Benny stepped up to the plate and raised the bat. His heart pounded, building a rhythm, a calming cadence within him. The pitcher nodded, agreeing with the mystery pitch designated by the catcher. Benny prayed that he wouldn't fail his team, his town, and especially his dad.

The pitch was released. Benny gritted his teeth. The ball sped a straight line towards him. This was it. This was his moment. He could tell it was a strike worthy pitch and that it would be better to swing and miss than not swing at all. He kept his eyes open, commanding them not to flinch as he swung. The bat felt solid in his grip. He heard the wood arch through the air, breathing life through its movement. Suddenly Benny felt a jolt shake his arms and travel up his spine to the base of his neck.

The crowd cheered louder then before. Benny didn't even notice where the ball was going. He saw Terry, his teammate on third run towards home. Benny dropped the bat and ran to first base. He made it. He heard Coach Bergman yell, "Run, Benny."

And even though he didn't know were the ball had landed, he ran, making it to second. As it pushed himself to third, he noticed the other runner make it home. Benny didn't know if he should stay on third or if he could make it home for a homerun. The thrill of the crowd intoxicated him with the hope of glory, so Benny ran towards the place he began, the home plate where the winning hit was made. He was almost there when a streak of white rushed past him and landed in the safety of the catcher's glove. Benny slid head first, hoping, praying that he could somehow touch the base before the catcher touched him. He tackled the catcher and managed to touch the home plate. On the ground, spitting dirt out of his mouth he looked up at the Umpire who declared that he was out.

The crowd yelled their discontent, it was as if they were voicing the disappointment Benny was feeling. Coach Bergman told Benny that he did a great job, put them ahead by one, and not to be disappointed. As Benny approached his dad, he prepared himself for his disapproval. He knew his dad would criticize the fact that he got out. Anything Benny did that didn't end up as a perfect play, Ben always had a negative comment, a little comment that could make a winning game feel like a defeat. But this time Ben didn't say anything, just nodded his head approvingly and patted Benny on his shoulder as he passed by and sat down in the dugout.

Because of the one run lead Benny provided, the All Stars ended up winning the National Championship, managing to prevent the opponents from scoring another run.

When the boys got home the local newspaper celebrated the boys as heroes, and spotlighted Benny with his picture as the team's most valuable player.

Benny looked at his dad, still sitting in the recliner. He was no longer repeating, "Swing, Benny. Swing!", but was staring back at his son, a look of admiration in his eyes as he nodded his approval. Benny nodded back and walked, sharing again in the one moment when he knew he had earned his father's favor.

CHAPTER NINE:

"Your dad ain't one for closing," Outlaw said as Benny entered Headley Hardware the next morning.

"That's why they have holidays, so people can work more," Benny said, walking to the storage room to get a Mountains Dew out of the mini frig.

"Whatever happened to drinking orange juice for breakfast?" Outlaw said as Benny sat behind the counter.

"Not enough caffeine. Where's Dad?"

"He's looking for something back there in his office. Said he knew something had to be somewhere. Everything in its place."

"And a place for everything." Benny finished his dad's motto.

"Well, at least today's only half a day. And the only reason for that is because of that baseball game."

"I was wondering why Dad of all people was closing early, regardless of it being a holidays."

"Now he never misses this game. Ever since them boys who won that big deal championship back aways started getting together, well, the one's who are still around, playing an anniversary like game every Labor day, your dad hasn't missed one."

"Yeah... he was always into that stuff."

"I remember somebody else who use to be pretty decent at that stuff too. Somebody whose name is engraved in the big marble slab shaped like Tennessee," Outlaw said.

"Is that still standing?"

"Like anybody in this town's going to let it go any where. I think they hired a special yard man at the park to just to take care of that monument." Outlaw moved towards the front door. "Would you look at this?" He flipped the closed sign around so that the open side faced the street. "In all my years, I've never seen your dad forget to turn that sign."

"I've been meaning to tell you, but it's getting worse at the house. Those episodes he has, they're more frequent and last longer."

Outlaw leaned against the broom as if his strength were slowly leaving him. "I hate to hear that."

"Did the doctor say anything about what a person should do during these episodes? I mean I don't know if I should play along or correct him."

"I don't know. Them doctors don't tell you much, and I didn't know enough about nothing to ask them any specifics."

Benny heard movement coming from the back of the store and predicted his dad was about to enter, so he broke off his huddle with Outlaw and pretended to be arranging some screwdrivers hanging on the wall.

"You finally decide to get up?" Ben said, taking his sea behind the counter.

"He was here on time," Outlaw said. "You just wasn't here to see it."

"Benny, I need you to round up twenty eight foot two by fours and about six pieces of that crown molding, the long ones, and make sure the boards are straight. That heat upstairs sometimes warps then a little," Ben said.

"Who's it for?" Benny asked.

"Does it matter?" Ben said." The customer needs them by lunch."

"Are you sure? Cause I gathered that same order on Friday."

"Then do it again." Ben sounded frustrated.

Although Benny wanted to see the order and whose name was on it, he didn't push it. The chances were slight that a different customer had the exact same needs as Mr. Johnson did two days before. Benny figured his dad had made a mistake and that he was wasting his time gathering the material, but he did it anyway, taking his time in case his dad told him to repeat any more work he'd already done.

Benny wondered if Marcy would be at the game and how she would respond to him. He didn't know what he would say to her. He hadn't gotten the opportunity to explain his dad's behavior, and hoped that after she understood his condition would realize that he hadn't been seeing Miriam. Then maybe she would calm down and everything would turn back to the way it was. But after seeing Miriam at church and wanting to see her again, he didn't know if he really wanted everything to resume with Marcy to resume. If they did then she would probably want more of a commitment, and Benny wasn't sure if this was what he wanted. He enjoyed his time with her, but there was something not right, like the wood he was gathering, some pieces were warped and didn't fit in with the rest.

Benny couldn't help but picture Miriam singing, how lovely she looked, the radiance of her expression. She was the most sincere person he'd known. And he wondered if she'd still refused to do anything she didn't believe in. He had always admired her for her courage, her inability to compromise. And never understood why she loved him in the first place. Seeing her yesterday glowing like an angel dipped in sold, he realized how far he had fallen from her. How could he approach her now? He felt like a beggar at the gate of a queen.

Benny finished gathering the order and went back to the main floor waiting for noon to come. Mr. Johnson or whoever was suppose to retrieve the order never came and Benny didn't know if his dad even remembered telling him to gather up the order or not as he sat silent, flipping through the same parts catalogue that had been on the counter since Benny first arrived to town.

"Closing time," Outlaw said.

Ben looked at him confused.

"Now don't give me that look. Like you going to change your mind or something and make me stay on Labor Day."

Ben didn't say anything.

"Anyway, you got that ball game later. You don't wan't to miss that. I may even stop by if you're going," he said to Benny.

"I don't know, "Benny said, "I've thought about it."

"That ain't good enough. I ain't leaving Beatrice if that's all you can promise."

"I'll probably go."

"Well, then I'll probably be there." The front door clanged shut behind him.

Benny asked Ben if he needed his help, but he mumbled "no" and waved him off. Benny turned the open sign to closed and headed down Cumberland Street to Main. On the corner where an old building had once been was now a small garden resurrected from the bricks of the fallen building. Benny had never seen anyone using it and always thought about spending some time there, so he decided to order a sandwich from the Higher Grounds restaurant and eat lunch in the park.

The restaurant was located on the second floor of one of the old Myers buildings and was the only business having an entrance on the skywalk. The first thing Benny noticed was the spaciousness of the place. Round four tops were arranged sporadically throughout the warehouse open space. The owners had restored the wide planked pine floors and had left the brick of the joining building exposed, revealing a vintage painted advertisement for Orange Crush soda. The cash register was in the back beside the bar. The restaurant had many open tables and few customers. Benny headed to the bar, scanned through the tri folded paper menu and ordered the number nine turkey sandwich. The owner, a bald man with a seventies looking mustache, told him it would be ready in ten minutes and to sit where he liked. Benny chose a brown, plaid sofa placed underneath a gallery of a local artist's paintings. Benny wasn't much of an art admirer, but even he could tell that the angel paintings weren't inspired. The largest had a price tag of twelve hundred dollars attached to it, and Benny wondered as to how long the painting had been hanging on the wall. He predicted that it would stay there until the painter took it home.

Directly across from him on the opposite wall was a cooler with various slices of cheesecake and chocolate cake displayed. Benny contemplated getting some dessert but

lost his appetite when the door beside the display opened, and Miriam stepped inside. Benny couldn't breathe and his scalp tingled.

Miriam went directly to the counter and ordered without consulting the menu. She wore khaki pants that rested slightly above her ankle and a pink, short sleeved blouse. Her skin was pale, soft like the silk ends of Benny's childhood safety blanket. The owner must have told her to take a seat somewhere because she gazed sweetly across the room. Benny's heart increased it's tempo like a metronome being turned up as Miriam slowly looked his way. Her eyes fell on his. Benny almost looked away, feeling suddenly shy and bashful, but he didn't. He didn't want to miss their reunion although his ribs hurt from his heart's abuse.

Miriam paused, squinting as she stared at him. Benny waved. She walked slowly towards him, hesitating a second after every third step. Benny stood when she was only a few feet away. She smelled like lilacs and fresh cut grass, just like Benny remembered. He tried to speak, but no words came out. He just exhaled and grinned a lot

"Hi." Miriam was the first to speak.

"Hey." Benny wanted to say more, but couldn't. There was a silence that followed that would've been awkward for Benny if he hadn't been savoring every sweet breath of her.

"I can't believe you're here," she said. "How long have you been in town?"

"A few minutes." Benny wanted to kiss her soft, petal pink lips.

"You just got into town?"

"Oh, I thought you meant. About a month now."

"Are you just visiting?"

Benny noticed her looking at his hair. "I know... it's gotten long since the last time you..." he stopped, not wanting to start off their reunion with his quick departure ten years ago.

"It suits you."

Benny couldn't tell if she liked his hair or not. "How have you been?" he said, wanting to know all he could about her.

"I'm good."

"That's good." He noticed her ring finger was still barren. This confirmed discovery excited his nerves to tap dance a rhythm within him. "I heard you sing yesterday at church."

"You were at church?" Miriam looked puzzled. "I didn't see you."

"I was near the front. You sounded great."

"Oh, thank you." She blushed. "I'm sorry. I get so nervous when I'm up there...that I don't even look at the people."

"So looking over their heads helps?"

"Yeah... I didn't realize I was doing that. I guess it does."

"Well, you're welcome."

"For what? Oh...that's right. You taught me that."

"Are you waiting for someone?" He hoped she was eating alone.

"Me? Oh, not really."

"Me either." He felt foolish for offering information without being asked.

"How long are you in town for?"

Benny didn't know how to answer. "I'm not sure. It depends on a few things."

Miriam nodded like she understood, but Benny knew she was only being polite because he didn't tell her anything.

"Benny," the owner announced over an intercom and laid a white bag on the bar.

Benny wanted to act like he didn't hear him so he could stay a little longer with Miriam, but the intercom was loud and the owner pronounced his name clearly.

"That's me," he said, feeling awkward.

"It was good seeing you again," she said.

Benny didn't know if she seemed excited because she was glad to be getting rid of him or if she were pretending because she didn't want to show her disappointment that their time together was coming to an end. Benny retrieved his bag. The last thing he wanted to do was leave. There was so much he wanted to know about her, so much to be discovered. He walked slowly past her. Miriam sat down on the couch and didn't say anything. He hoped she'd request him to wait, to plead with him not to go, declare how much she had missed him. But neither of them said anything more, and as Benny opened the door, he stopped. He had hoped Miriam was looking at him longingly as he left, but noticed she was staring down at the coffee table in front of her. Benny couldn't let their chance meeting end this abruptly and convinced himself to go back to her. Miriam looked up at him surprises by his return.

"Hey, again. I was wondering." He didn't know what to say. "You know, if you? What are your plans for lunch? I was going to eat in that little park on the corner there and thought maybe if you wanted...then you could join me."

Benny knew if he could've listened to a recording of himself, that he'd feel dumber than he already did.

"Okay," Miriam said.

Benny relaxed and unlocked his knees. "Okay, then I'll just wait on you."

"Miriam," the owner didn't use the intercom and reached over the bar, holding out a bag to her as if he were presenting her a gift.

They didn't say much as they walked down the long ramp to the street. The corner park was narrow with a winding cobblestone walkway in the middle and on each side surrounded by colorful pansies and two miniature red plum trees. Benny remembered the types of flowers because of a crash course Outlaw gave him when he was growing up. They sat on a bench in the center of the park and watched the traffic pass by in front of them.

"I've never been in here," she said.

"I don't remember it being here."

"I guess it was built a few years ago. Yeah, that's right because for about a month this side of downtown was closed to traffic while they tore the building down that used to be here. It's nice."

"Yeah... this is." Benny kept his eyes on the plum tree, afraid to look at her, afraid that if he did he wouldn't be able to do anything else.

He opened his bag. The sandwich was cut in half, so he lay the other half on top of his bag and placed it on the bench beside him.

"Do you have enough room?" Miriam said.

"I could move over if?"

"No, I'm good," Benny blurted out. He didn't want her to move away any further than she already was.

Miriam closed her eyes and prayed before eating. This was a ritual they use to do together. Benny hoped she didn't notice him tearing into his lunch like a heathen. He tried to chew quietly, not wanting to disturb her prayer.

"How is it?" she said, opening her eyes. "I've always liked their sandwiches. I don't think I've had a bad one."

"It's good. What did you get?"

"A number nine. That's what I normally order. It's the lowest in fat."

"Like that matters to you."

"It does. I'm getting close to thirty. I don't know what will happen to my metabolism after that. They say everyone's changes in their thirties."

"Who are they?"

"Doctors I guess. You know, I don't really know. I've just heard that a lot."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about stuff like that until you need to,"

"But if you wait that long then it's too late. I'm just taking precautions to help prevent it."

Benny had already finished half of his sandwich. He wanted to spend as much time with her as he could, so he decided to take smaller bites and chew slower.

"So catch me up. Tell me everything about you that I've missed," Benny said.

"Everything, huh? Well... what if you've missed a lot?"

"Then I'll wait as long as it takes to catch me up."

"I would love to but I only have about ten more minutes."

"Are you working today?"

"Sort of. I'm not working my job. I'm actually off today."

"That all makes perfect sense." Benny gave her an exaggerated puzzled expression.

"Stop joking. If you'd give me time to explain then you'd understand." She shook her head and smiled.

"We don't have that much time, do we?"

"I know it may be hard, but if you could focus a little bit and listen."

Benny leaned in close to her.

"Are you ever serious?" she asked.

This question slammed into Benny. It had been a long time since he felt this feeling. He knew immediately what it was. Freedom. For so long, Benny had felt the weight of his disappointments, wrestled with the guilt of the life he abandoned, and stressed over the responsibility of his dad's care. Benny didn't realize until she asked that he was playful again, had a peace, at least for that moment, and it was all because of Miriam.

"So you work, but you don't? And you have the day off, but you're working," Benny said. "Does that about sum it up?"

"I work," she played along, speaking slowly, stretching out each word, as if she were instructing a small child, "at Morristown federal. It's a bank. I'm a teller...you know... one of those ladies who take your money."

"It's been a while, but I have a vague recollection of them."

"You probably got a manager or someone who takes care of stuff like that."

Benny didn't want to ruin this moment by discussing his life. "How long have you been doing that?"

"Only for the past couple at years. Up until then I took care of Mom after she got sick."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. Is she all right?"

Miriam paused. She took a couple of deep breaths and said, "She passed away." Miriam turned momentarily away from Benny and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry, it's been a little over two years, but I still do this."

"It's all right. It's good to cry," he said. "Need a napkin?"

"I never thought I'd hear you say that?"

"Although I'm partial to my napkin, I'd give it up if the occasion called for it."

"Do you really believe that?"

"About my napkin? No I was just being polite. I'm glad you didn't take it."

"I don't ever remember seeing you cry.'"

"They're few and far between. But we were talking about you, remember? Trying to solve the mystery of your working but not working situation."

Miriam's mood lightened as she explained how she volunteered at a non profit organization called Recovery for Hope. She described has she would sometimes get to counsel young women who were pregnant and were considering abortion into either keeping the baby, or giving the child up for adoption. Her eyes sparkled and her cheeks brightened pink as she described how the organization provided money for delivery expenses and relief with formula, diapers, and clothing. She said they found homes for single mothers and at times provided rent assistance. The more she talked, the more passionate she became.

Benny was amazed at how exceptionally Miriam turned out. And was relieved that she didn't go with him to Nashville, glad that she was able to find happiness, something meaningful that made her feel alive.

"I'm proud of you," he said after she finished.

"Thank you." She blushed. "So what about you? Your mom used to keep me up with all your success. I'd never seen her so happy as when she talked about you. So did you find everything you were looking for?"

Benny wanted to confess everything to her, that he was a liar and had only played his songs at open mic nights for free. Wanted to share his disappointments and frustrations with her. But moreso, wanted to confess that leaving her was the worst thing he'd done, that being near her for just these brief minutes was the first time since he left that he had fun, that his mind wasn't preoccupied with the fog of his failures, suffocating him, blinding him to a life worth living.

"Oh, no." She looked at her watch. "I'm late. I've got a session with a girl right now. I'm sorry. It doesn't look good if I'm not there when someone needs you. How long are you going to be in town?"

"For a little while," Benny said, disappointed that their time together was coming to an end.

"I do want to finish our talk. I hate that I have to leave."

"I understand."

"I still have my mom's house. She left it to me and my sister. Why don't you stop by some time. I don't go anywhere much. I'm usually home after six."

"Sister?"

Miriam put the half of her sandwich she didn't eat into the bag and neatly folded the top as she stood. "Don't you remember? I guess you never met her. She lived with my dad, but moved in with me after Mom died."

"Do you still have your Prelude?"

"My what? Oh, not really. I gave it to my sister. She drives it all over the place. You may see it around in town. I really have to go. Don't leave this time without saying goodbye."

Benny remained sitting on the bench, his senses numb as he watched Miriam walk down Main Street, eventually disappearing from view into one of the buildings on the farthest end from him.

CHAPTER TEN:

Benny couldn't believe that Marcy was Miriam's sister. As he drove to Frank Lorino Park, he tried to figure out why she didn't tell him who she was, especially when he asked her about her car. He didn't want to think that she was deliberately deceiving him. Maybe she didn't know about his past with her sister? Maybe she wasn't intentionally keeping information from him? She did tell him that the car had been in he family since it was bought new. She just didn't tell him that it specifically belonged to her sister. It wasn't like Benny asked her if the car used to be Miriam's.

He didn't know if he had a right being upset with Marcy, but he was. There was a good chance that she knew about his past with Miriam. That would explain why she wouldn't let him pick her up at the house. This would also explain why she became so upset after Ben called her Miriam and accused Benny of going out with her.

Frank Lorino Park was just like Benny remembered it as he dipped down the gravel drive and parked. The lazy sun hung slightly over the canopy of trees on the hill behind two rows of metal swing sets, nearly every set taken up by a screaming kid. On the right of the parking lot was a large field where a game of flag football was in play. Past the children's area to the left were two ball fields, one used mainly for softball and the other for baseball.

The afternoon was humid, but a cool breeze refreshed Benny as he headed towards the baseball diamond. In the shade at the base of the tree-covered hill there was a cluster of green bleaches stretched six rows high. About a third of it was already filled

with people clumped together in groups. Benny looked for Miriam, but couldn't see he if she was there yet. He did, however, notice Marcy standing next to the concession stand, her back towards him, talking to some man behind the counter.

She had her hair tied up in a ponytail and was wearing a light blue baseball cap. Her yellow shorts were tight and fit snug around her body. Benny was glad she didn't see him. He wasn't ready to confront her yet.

He entered through the gate in the chain link fence and stepped onto the field. This had been the All Stars practice field and it was exactly like Benny remembered, except for an addition to the Berkline sponsored scoreboard, a red strip attached to the length of the top that read, "All Stars National Champions."

"Benny Headley? You got to be kidding me?" a bald, angry looked man with a goatee said.

Benny recognized something familiar about the man's nose. He had known those two bumps like camel's humps before. And then his identity became clear. "Richie Goforth."

Richie gave Benny a hug. "I haven't seen you in like forever. How have you been? Where have you been?"

"Nashville, mostly."

"That's right. I'd heard that. You'll have to excuse me. My brain is like mush most of the time with work and the four boys and all."

"You've got four boys?" Benny couldn't believe it.

Richie had always been a kind of player when it came to dating. Benny figured he'd never settle down, or would finally when he was maybe sixty.

"Yeah, they're my little monsters. They're around here somewhere, probably close to destroying something."

"Who did you end up marrying?" Benny was curious who the girl was that slowed Richie down.

"Do you remember Candy Rheams?"

"Was she older than us?"

"By two years, but don't remind her of that. She turned thirty this year and you'd think her uterus dropped out of her body by the way she goes on about it."

"She was a cheerleader wasn't she?"

"Don't bring that up either. When anyone mentions that she thinks they're telling her that she's fat. Now don't get me wrong, I think she looks great, but after having four boys, her stomach stretched a little."

"I'm sure she's still as pretty as ever," Benny said. He actually remembered Candy as being a little heavy when she was a cheerleader and thought people used to call her Pib, meaning pig in blanket.

"Are you going to play with us?"

"I was thinking about it."

"That'll be awesome. With you we might actually win this year."

"I wouldn't get your hopes up. I haven't played in a few."

"Hey, we can use any help we can get," Richie said. "I may have an extra t-shirt you can have in case you don't have one. We've got about half an hour before the game starts. Let me reintroduce you to some of the guys. Most of them you'll recognize, while others, like me, will take you a second."

Benny wondered if Richie said this because he could tell Benny didn't recognize him at first. Richie didn't need to introduce Benny to anyone; most of the guys recognized him and seemed glad to see him again. Benny was thankful that most of them told their names, not expecting him to remember after thirteen years.

"Anyone ever tell you that you'd look like Jesus if you grew a beard?" Andy Whiting, a red haired guy who was a couple of years younger said. "You'd look just like the photo of Jesus my mother has in her kitchen."

"I hadn't heard that one before," Benny replied, wondering if Andy really meant Jesus' portrait instead of photo.

Benny sat down on the bench in the dugout and changed into the red shirt with All Stars written in white cursive lettering on the front. He now looked like all the rest of the guys crowded together in the dugout, with the exception that he was the only one with long hair.

"It's a good thing you came," Richie said. "I don't think Mitch can make it. Told me that he might have to go out of town with his wife's family. We would've been one short. Not that we would've forfeited or anything, but it's good to have nine players."

"So who are we playing?"

"Well, here's how that's been working. We play whatever team wins the most community league games. We used to play Vifan and Toyoda mostly, but the last couple of years one of Maule's teams have been winning. They're called the Razorbacks. And they're actually pretty good. Beat us the last two years."

"They suck." Phil Morris sat next to Richie. "Wouldn't win if they didn't cheat."

"Phil, you remember Benny right?" Richie said.

"Yeah, I remember you. Maybe with you around, we might win one."

Phil Morris had always reminded Benny of someone who walked around with a rains cloud over his head. He was always depressed, and Benny didn't want to ruin his one moment of optimism by telling him that he wouldn't be much help.

"Is there a position you'd like to play?" Richie said. "I'm sorta the elected coach and all that."

"Wherever you need me," Benny replied.

"Mitch usually takes second base. You want to do that?"

Although Benny used to play short stop, one of the more challenging positions, he didn't know because of his absence from the game if he was up to taking on the responsibility of second. He would have preferred to be in the outfield, but told Richie that second base would be fine.

Benny's dad strolled up to the All Star's dugout, wearing an umpire's uniform, and asked Richie to have someone do a coin toss. Richie told Benny that he wanted him to do the honor, so Benny followed his dad out to the pitcher's mound. Neither of them said anything as they waited for one of the Razorback's players to join them.

Benny hoped his dad wasn't experiencing one of his episodes because he treated him like a stranger. Shay Kirk approached him wearing a bright yellow jersey.

"What's up? Glad you could make it," Shay said.

"Defending title team calls toss," Ben said, flipping a silver dollar in the air.

"Heads," Shay called.

Ben caught the coin and opened his hand. "Heads wins. Razorbacks are first to bat."

Benny looked at the audience as he headed back to the dugout to get his glove. He caught Marcy looking at him, leaning against the gate, but as soon as he glanced her way she looked off like she wasn't watching him. Benny could see Outlaw waving at him sitting at the top of the bleachers, wearing a fishermen's hat with a blue jay feather safety pinned to the side.

Benny kept searching but still couldn't find Miriam. Richie threw Benny a loaner glove before he made it to the dugout, so he turned around and followed the rest of the All Stars to the playing field, taking his position at second base.

The glove felt stiff and foreign. Benny gripped his left hand several times inside it, trying to create some elasticity in the leather. Benny punched the palm of the glove with his throwing hand, imagining what it would feel like if a ball landed in it.

The sun cast an orange glow over the field as it hid behind the hill. A chorus of dancing bugs zipped back and forth in a dizzying swarm inches in front of his face. Benny swatted at them, but it was no use. It seemed like his aggression only encouraged them. Johnny Johnson threw a few balls to the catcher, a guy with a tattoo of a dragon eating a popsicle on his arm, a guy whose name Benny could never remember. Johnny had been the team's pitcher when they won the championship, and from what Benny could tell could still throw a fast curve ball. Benny had always liked Johnny and had thought that out of any of the team he would have gone professional. Although Benny hadn't spoken to him yet, it was obvious that for whatever reason Johnny stayed behind. Benny wondered if he regretted not leaving Morristown, if he felt that nagging uncertainty of the "what if."

One of the Razorbacks stepped up to the plate. He was a muscular guy who towered over Benny's dad behind him. Johnny pitched a strike safely into the catcher's mitt. The batter didn't swing. Johnny threw another ball slightly to the right of the plate. This time the batter took the bait and swung.

"Strike two," Ben said.

The batter kicked the plate. Johnny agreed to the type of pitch the catcher suggested with a nod and threw his signature curve. Benny knew this batter didn't have a chance and wasn't surprised when he was called out.

Another batter had come and gone and Benny started to relax, considering the possibility that he might not see much action if the rest of the Razorbacks performed as poorly as these first two players.

The third batter was a short, stubby-looking guy with spiked hair, and was wearing more gold necklaces than Benny could count. By the look of him Benny predicted another strike out and was caught by surprise when he hit a bouncing line drive on the first swing, straight towards second. Benny didn't have time to think. He lowered his glove to the ground, steadying it between his feet as he felt a sudden weight slide into it.

He pulled the glove up and was amazed to find the ball inside. Seeing the short guy running towards first, Benny threw the ball straight to his teammate. The batter never made it to the base and headed to the dugout as the All Stars prepared to bat and the Razorbacks took the field. Richie gave Benny the privilege of being the first to bat, an honor Benny wasn't very excited about.

There was a large gray bag in the corner next to the doorway. Benny reached inside and grabbed one of the many handles inside and pulled out a blue, aluminum one. The handle was soft and had a thin layer of foam covering it. Benny gripped it tightly, feeling the cushions squeeze between his fingers. The aluminum bat was lighter than the wooden Louisville Slugger Benny was used to swinging. He would've felt more comfortable with a wooden bat, preferring the weight of it, but Richie was practically pushing him out onto the field. Although Benny felt rushed and wasn't prepared to bat, he stepped up to the plate, tapped once in the dirt on each side of the base and raised the bat, steadying himself for the first pitch.

The pitcher was a black guy with long arms. The catcher must have been giving him signals because the pitcher would squint, leaning towards them, shaking his head. After what seemed like the longest moment he'd experienced waiting, the pitcher nodded, leaned back on one leg, his hand almost touching the dirt behind him, and threw.

Benny hesitated. He heard the ball slam into the catcher's mitt and his dad say "Strike One." Benny had been so nervous that he'd forgotten his dad was behind him until he heard him voicing his dissatisfaction in Benny's performance. He had to remind himself that he wasn't seeking his dad's approval, that he came out to have a good time, that it didn't matter how well he played or what Ben Headley thought about it.

Taking a deep breath, Benny tried to calm himself and focus on the second ball coming his way. It looked like the ball was veering off to the right, so Benny didn't swing.

"Ball," Ben said.

The fact that he read the pitch correctly encouraged him. The pitcher released the ball, and this time Benny was ready. He swung the bat and felt a sudden vibration snap through it. The tip of the bat had clipped the ball, sending it straight above his head. The catcher raised his glove to catch it, so Benny ran towards first base, forgetting to drop the bat, carrying it with him. He made it to first base and was greeted by Shay, protecting the base. Benny looked back and saw the catcher holding the ball high in the air.

"Congratulations," Shay said." You've made the first out."

Benny wanted to hit him with the bat. He was thankful that he at least hit the ball, but was disappointed that he didn't get a base hit. Richie patted Benny on the back as he entered the dugout. The rest of his teammates told him that he did good, that the Razorback pitcher was hard to hit against. Benny asked Johnny if he knew the pitcher and where he was from. Johnny said that his name was Marcus and he was a P.E. teacher for one of the middle schools. Benny asked how he could be on Maule's team if he didn't work there, and Johnny said that the community leagues rules were flexible, that typically if a team had enough players then they could play as long as they signed up for the season and showed up to the games.

Benny discovered that Johnny had gone to college at Carson Newman, played baseball there for four years, met his wife, moved back to Morristown and became an accountant. Benny considered asking why he didn't try out for the minors, but decided it was better not to ask. He figured if that was what Johnny had wanted to do then he would've done it. But the fact that he chose not to and remained in Morristown was probably a better choice than risking everything and ending up like Benny, nearing thirty, without anything.

The game moved along swiftly. Each time Benny took the field, standing beside second base, he'd search for Miriam in the stands. It wasn't until the seventh inning that he saw her climbing the rows and sitting beside Outlaw. Benny was so excited to see her that he didn't see the ball roll past him as the short stop ran out of his position to intercept, throwing it to first base after the batter for the Razorbacks made it safety there.

Rodney, the short stop, glared at Benny, obviously annoyed at him for missing such an easy catch, allowing the Razorbacks the advantage. It was hard for Benny to keep his attention on the game. Every moment he could steal a glance at Miriam, he did, and once was rewarded with a wave from both her and Outlaw. Because of his mistake, the Razorbacks managed to get their first run and took the lead with one to zero. Up to that point no team had been able to score on the other, a fact that Richie had expressed his pleasure in every time the All Stars were up to bat. He told Benny that he was going to wait for him to bat again, his strategy was to save him until the last, believing he could hit another victory run for the team like he did when they won the National Championship. Benny, however, had his doubts about this plan, as he was sure many of the other players did also.

Each team played as usual, without scoring on the other until the last inning when the last person in the park Benny wanted to see hit a homerun, did. Shay threw his batting helmet high into the air as he pranced slowly around the diamond, jumping and landing on each base with both feet as he paraded himself for the cheering spectators. Although Benny hated that Shay was the celebrity for the moment, he could understand why the crowd applauded with such enthusiasm. Mainly because it was the only exciting play in the entire game.

Most of the crowd was standing, even Marcy, who was beside Victoria, was proudly cheering the homerun. When she saw Benny looking at her, she applauded with more enthusiasm, yelling Shay's name. Benny realized that Marcy was just trying to make him jealous, but little did she know that he had someone else whose affection he was hoping for, and was encouraged when he saw Miriam still sitting with Outlaw, not celebrating with the rest of the crowd.

Shay did a ridiculous looking dance after he completed his courtesy lap. He watched Shay soak up his success, a guy who wasn't half the ball player Benny used to be, a guy who was never good enough to make the All Stars team. Until now, Benny didn't care who won the game, but in this last inning, after Shay's homerun, he decided he wanted to win.

Johnny struck out the next two batters and the All Stars returned to bat behind by two runs. Richie gave the guys a pep talk, telling them that this was their year to beat these hacks again. He said he wanted to follow the batting line up like they had the summer they beat New Mexico. He reminded them of the monument with each of their names engraved in it, forever at the entrance of the park, a monument that was there as a lasting tribute to their accomplishment. He reminded them that it was their names that were written in stone, not anyone of those guys who were beating them right now, and that they had beaten better players before, coming from behind, and that they could do it again, not for themselves, but for their families out there watching. He encouraged them to do it for them.

Benny didn't care to relive their past glory, he just wanted to beat Shay. Mitch would bat first, then Richie, then Benny. Richie didn't plan for anyone else because he figured history would be repeated and that they would win by one.

There was a nervous energy like static bouncing from one player to the next in the dugout. Benny watched as Mitch took the plate, waited for the pitch, and swung, hitting a line drive to the right field. The dugout exploded with cheers as Mitch made it safely to first base.

Richie looked confident as he steadied his bat high. Although his performance so far had not been stellar, he carried himself tall as if he alone had already guarantied their victory. Marcus threw a curve ball, and Richie swung.

"Strike One," Ben said.

"Keep them coming," Shay said to Marcus.

Benny wished he could see Miriam, but in the dugout, the stands were out of sight. Marcus threw another curve. This time Richie clipped it, sending it straight out of bounds.

"Strike two," Ben said.

Benny could tell Richie's confidence was fading, so he yelled, "Stick it, Richie. Stick it to them."

Richie gave the dugout a thumb's up and raised the bat, maintaining a circling rhythm with it as he waited for the next pitch. Benny held his breath as Marcus released the ball. Richie swung. Benny heard the clap of contact. The ball soared high over the Razorbacks' heads towards the back fence. Benny watched anxiously, hoping the ball would clear it. The outfielders ran backwards, their gloves towards the sky. The right

outfielder stopped a few feet from the fence and prepared himself for the catch. It looked like he was going to catch it. Richie hesitated after he passed first. Mitch was between second and third. Benny yelled for them to keep running, but it was as if they wanted to see if it were necessary, if their hope for another base hit had been in vain.

The ball landed in the outfielder's glove. Benny wanted to cuss. Mitch started running back to second, to stay in the game, while Richie just stopped between first and second. The outfielder meant to retrieve the ball from his glove and show the audience that he'd caught it, but when he brought the glove down before he could get his free hand around it, the ball rolled out from the glove and hit the ground.

Richie made it to second while Mitch stayed on third. The players were arranged exactly as they had been the day Benny brought them all home, just like Richie had envisioned it. Instead of taking another aluminum bat, Benny searched the bag for a wooden one. After he'd emptied the bag, dumping all of the hardware on the ground, Benny saw the one he needed, a scuffed up Louisville Slugger.

The automatic lights turned on, illuminating the field as Benny approached the home plate. Benny saw his dad staring at him, nodding his approval. Their eyes met. An understanding was made as they acknowledged the other. Benny felt like he was fifteen again, felt the energy of the moment, the anticipation of the crowd, his team, and his dad. And for the first time as an adult, he wanted to make his dad proud of him again, even if it was a game that didn't matter anything to him. All of a sudden, the thrill of beating Shay lost its meaning, and Benny realized that this was a chance for him not only to win, but to make it all the way home, something he didn't do before.

The lights hummed above him as their artificial glow enhanced the whiteness of each base. Benny swung the bat a couple of times, warning up before stepping up to the plate. He tapped each side of the base before preparing himself for the pitch. Marcus agreed to the pitch and threw without hesitation. Benny didn't swing, he could tell it was too far right.

"Ball," Ben said.

Marcus pitched again.

"Ball two."

Marcus deliberately threw another ball, the third in a row, and Benny realized that they were going to walk him, robbing him of the chance he desired. Benny knew Marcus would throw another ball, but he wanted his opportunity, wanted to feel one last time the contact of the ball against the bat, feel something real one more time.

As Marus prepared for his pitch, Benny thought he heard his dad say, "Swing, Benny. Swing."

Not caring whether he imagined it or not, those words encouraged Benny to step towards the pitch to the left of the plate and swing. The ball clipped the top of the bat and flew back, slamming against the fence behind them.

"Strike one," Ben said.

Benny didn't care. He was determined to hit anything Marcus threw at him, even if it meant striking out.

"Swing, Benny. Swing," he heard his dad say again.

The catcher stepped far to the left, announcing that another ball was to be thrown. Marcus threw and once again Benny stepped over the plate and swung, sending the ball out of bounds.

"Strike two."

"Just take the base," Richie said. "Let someone else bring us in."

Benny squeezed the handle tight as he raised the bat for his final swing. He knew Marcus was going to throw another ball, and figured that the Razorbacks assumed he wouldn't risk an out by swinging at another ball. But they didn't realize how stubbornly determined Benny was to make whatever pitch came his way to count for something.

Marcus shifted his weight and threw. The ball veered again to the left but Benny was ready. The bat felt like an extension of his arm as he swung and it splintered as it slammed into the ball. Benny heard the crack he was longing to hear and saw the ball soar towards the outfield. He could tell that it didn't have enough height to make it over the fence and started running hard towards first.

Benny smiled as he passed Shay on first. As he started for second, he felt something hard slam against his shin, sending him falling face first in the dirt. Benny got up quickly and tried to recover his loss of time, knowing that Shay had tripped him. Benny ran past second and saw Mitch had already made it home while Richie was halfway between third and home. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the right outfielder pickup the ball and lob it into the air. Benny made it to third and kept running, trying to make it all the way this time. He knew that it was going to be close, and that he probably should've played it safe, but he didn't. Richie and Mitch were standing to the right of home encouraging him on. He head the crowd cheering, louder than they had for Shay's

homerun as Benny neared his destination. He saw the catcher crouched low on the base, his mitt ready to receive the ball. Benny dove head first, once again slamming into the catcher as the ball fit snuggly into his glove.

Benny didn't know if he had made it or not, but guessed that because he saw the ball reach the catcher that he probably was out. He helped the catcher off the ground and they both turned and faced his dad, waiting for the call that would either decide the game or send them both into the dugout. The crowd was silent. All Benny could hear were the sounds of children screaming in the distance. Ben Headley had that blank look that Benny had grown accustomed to over the last month, and remained silent.

The catcher finally said, "What's the call?"

But Ben didn't reply, just stared past them into the distance.

"I caught the ball before he got here," the catcher said.

Benny didn't know what to do. He knew that there was no telling how long his dad would remain in his unresponsive state. As much as he wanted him to come out of it right then, he knew that it would take time, and he didn't want to explain this to everyone. Benny noticed Outlaw standing, looking anxiously towards them. Benny motioned for him to come over, hoping he would help him handle this difficult situation.

"What's the call, old man?" the catcher stood close to Ben.

"What's wrong with him?"

"What's going on?" Richie said.

"Hell if I know. He won't say anything," the catcher said.

"Is your dad all right, Benny?" Mitch said.

"That's your dad? Hell, that ain't fair. No wonder he ain't talking. He doesn't want to call his son out." The catcher yelled this last part to his teammates.

Shay ran to the catcher. "What the fuck did you say?"

"The umpire's this guy's dad," he said. "This game is rigged."

"Mr. Headley has called this game ever since we started playing. So show some respect," Richie said.

"That was fine when his son wasn't playing," the catcher said.

"What is this shit?" Shay said to Benny. "You and your dad. This is some shady shit."

"You want to talk about shady. Everyone saw you trip me out there," Benny said.

"Hell... you just fell. Don't blame your clutzy shit on me."

Benny suddenly felt confined, trapped, as he looked around. All he could see was a wall of bodies as both teams surrounded him.

"Mr. Headley? You okay?" Johnny asked. Ben didn't move. "My dad's a doctor," he told Benny. "Should I call him?"

Benny shook his head. "It'll be all right. Dad just has these moments where he... you know."

"Moments where he throws a game," Shay said.

"He didn't throw anything." Benny's temper rose.

"That don't mean shit coming from you. We all saw it. Benny didn't make it before Rob tagged him out."

"I don't think so," Mitch said.

"And that's why the old man ain't saying anything because he doesn't want to call his son out and call a fair game." Shay said.

"Like you guys know anything about that. You wouldn't win if you didn't cheat," one of the All Stars said.

"Spoken like a loser," a Razorback said.

"The only thing to do is replay the last hit," Richie tried to be diplomatic and keep the mountings tensions low.

"Like hell. This shit boy was out, we all saw it," Shay said. "And I want to hear the umpire call it. If we're playing a legit game."

The Razorbacks chorused their mumblings in agreement. Benny told Richie that he was sorry and to do whatever he wanted, but he was going to have to take his dad home. Outlaw eased his way through the crowd and stood beside Ben. Benny accompanied him and started to escort Ben out of the crowd when he suddenly felt a bony hand grab his shoulder, forcing him to stop.

"Where do you think you're headed?" Shay said.

"Leave it alone." Benny resumed his retreat. Shay ran in front, blocking them.

"You know this shit ain't right. It's bad enough you coming in here, acting all better then everybody else, but now you gotta ruin our game?" he said. "Nobody thinks you're shit anymore. I ain't never heard your music. Never heard nothing about your success except from your damn family. I don't believe you've done shit."

"I don't care what you believe." Benny wanted to shove him out of his way.

"You're no better than me. No better than any of the rest of us."

"Son, could you please move," Outlaw said.

'"You can go on. I'm not talking to you."

"I realize that, but you're in our way," Outlaw said.

"Just leave it alone, Shay," Richie said.

"To hell with you, missionary boys." Shay moved, leaving enough room for Outlaw to leave.

Benny tried to walk around him, but he kept moving in front of him.

"Shay, I'm really not in the mood," Benny said.

"Well...piss on that... I wasn't in the mood to be cheated out of our win in the last inning cause of you and your crazy old man."

Benny imagined himself punching Shay, hard in the mouth. Shay must've seen his anger.

"You want to do something. You going to protect your pop's good name? Hell... everyone knows he's crazy."

"Don't push me, Shay."

The last this Benny wanted to do was let Shay manipulate him, but there was little holding him back from knocking him down.

"Just like they know you're a damn liar. Spreading stories just like your damn mom did."

The last tendon of restraint he had snapped as Benny shoved Shay to the ground. Shay got up quickly and tackled Benny, slamming his sharp shoulder into his stomach, lifting him off the ground. They collided into someone behind, all falling in the dirt. Shay pinned Benny.

Although Shay looked like a walking ribcage, he weighed more than Benny, a fact which Benny realized as he struggled to free himself. Shay punched him in the face, his knuckle ridgeline hammering Benny's jaw. Shay hit him again as his right cheek went numb. Benny tasted iron on his tongue and swallowed a flowing warmth. Shay reared back for another round but was restrained by Richie and Johnny, pulling him off Benny. Remaining on the ground he could see Shay struggling against the interference as if he was a boxer who wanted to continue punching his opponent after he knocked him out. Benny swallowed blood as he looked to the darkening sky, past the circling cluster of contrasting shirt colors and faces. One star, directly above him, made its light visible while the sky was still gray and bold enough past the reigning artificiality of the glow.

Benny felt fingers like snakes sliding under his arm pits and then he was to pulled to his feet. He could hear Shay telling his captor's that he'd bust their shit if they didn't let him go, and tried not to think about what was worse; the fact that Shay just slapped him down like a little girl, or that Benny had let him manipulate him again.

Leaving the brightness of the baseball diamond, Benny headed towards his car. He retraced his steps that earlier filled him with expectations of new found glory, now feeling the heaviness of disappointment. He couldn't believe he let Shay get to him like that. In all the years he had to listen to his taunts in the hallways and in the school's parking lot, Benny had never let him push him so far that he was the one who lost control, started the fight.

Benny hoped that Miriam didn't see what happened, hoped the crowd of players prevented her from seeing the man he'd become. His dad's Silverado was still in the parking lot and Benny wondered if Outlaw had already taken him home. He couldn't

locate Outlaw's jalopy of a truck any where, and decided to go home and worry abut retrieving his dad's vehicle tomorrow. All Benny wanted to do was go home, drink a Mountain Dew, and go to bed, hoping that sleep word allow him to forget. He didn't bother looking for Miriam as he drove away, leaving Frank Lorino Park and possibly her behind. Outlaw was sitting on the glider beside Ben when Benny got home.

"How is he?" Benny said, sitting on the steps.

"Still hanging out in his special place." Outlaw said. "How are you?"

"Wishing I had a special place."

"You made a dandy of a play back there."

"Before or after I hit the ground?"

"You made it. I reckon you was safe. That is from the way I seen it."

"I know I touched the base before the catcher tagged me. I just wish it turned out."

"It turned out the way it was supposed to. You did what you was supposed to."

"I don't know." Benny exhaled is if he could expel in a single breath the consequences of his bad choices.

"Good thing you got old Outlaw around. Did you see him, Benny? Did you get a good look at him?"

Benny knew he was referring to Ben.

"Cause I did. From as far away as I was sitting you should've seen how proud he was of you."

"It was only because he was reliving the past...that's all."

"I ain't talking about your last hit."

"Which one? When I hit the ball or got hit in the face?"

"I know you don't want to hear this, but he was proud of you the whole time. Proud that you just showed up. I could see it... like he was really alive again."

"I just don't see it," Benny lied. He couldn't deny the moment they'd shard before his last bat, couldn't deny the pride in his tired eyes.

"It don't mean it ain't there...just cause you're not willing to see it."

There was a well earned silence in their communication, and all Benny could hear was the cadence of the cicada.

"You know he's getting worse, don't you?" Benny said.

"Wish I knew what it's like…that place he goes. He gets so still...quiet. Must be the most peaceful of places," Outlaw said.

Benny remembered the first night he'd experienced his dad like this, sitting on the porch, talking to Nellie.

"I think he visits her... mom." Benny felt his throat constrict when he mentioned her.

"Then there's no wonder he goes there so much now."

Benny was standing dangerously close to his emotional cliff. He almost cried, but swallowed down the tears. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt this way, but he wasn't going to give in tonight, not in front of Outlaw, and especially not in front of his dad.

"Do you think we should get him to that doctor again? Maybe this week some time?" Benny said.

"Probably wouldn't hurt. Better hope it can be scheduled when he's like this. He'll fight you otherwise."

"I'm used to it."

"Yeah." Outlaw chuckled. "You and me both. You and me both."

Headlights weaved a pattern in the yard as a care came up the driveway. As the car got close to the house, the driver turned off the lights and stopped behind the Sable. Benny couldn't tell what kind of car it was. It looked silver. It was hard to see it in the dark. He heard the door open and close.

"Looks like you got some company," Outlaw said, standing as Miriam approached.

Benny was surprised to see her.

"Hey," she said shyly, stopping in the yard.

"Hey," Benny replied, wanting to say something more to make her feel welcomed, but not knowing what to say.

"I hope you don't mind. I wanted to stop. I was on my way home. How's your dad?"

"He'll be all right. You remember Outlaw don't you?"

"This little girl and I are good friends." Outlaw gave her a hug.

Benny felt silly, remembering that he'd seen her sitting with Outlaw at the game.

"Well, it's late and I'm old. Past my bed time."

"Don't leave because of me," Miriam pleaded.

"I ain't. There's just so much company with these two that a body can take in one day. If you need anything give me a holler," he told Benny. "Tell your dad not to worry about his truck. I'll make sure it finds a way to the crusher tomorrow." Outlaw waved, dancing lightly back to his truck and left.

Benny was embarrassed. He was glad to see Miriam, thankful that she cared enough to stop by, but not knowing what to say. He didn't want to bring up the game, didn't want to discuss his dad, so he just looked at her, waiting for her to speak.

"This place hasn't changed," she said. "I hope you don't mind me coming by. I usually call before I... but I don't have your number... and well... since I am next door I thought..."

"I'm glad you're here."

Miriam smiled. Benny knew she felt uneasy about showing up uninvited, and he wanted her to feel comfortable, like she used to.

"How's your dad?"

"Are you thirsty? Want me to get you something?"

"No, thank you. I'm good!" she said. Benny stood. "You want to walk a little?"

"Will he be all right?" She motioned towards Ben.

"When he gets like this, he doesn't move much."

As they walked towards the back yard Benny put his hands in his pockets, not knowing what to do with the heavy appendages he was flopping around.

"I can't believe that's still around," Miriam looked up at the tree house.

"Yeah, I know. It's still rain proof if you can believe that."

Miriam stood under it, touching the scraps of wood nailed up the side of the tree.

"You wanna go up?" Benny said.

"Is it safe?" She hesitated before grabbing on to one of the boards and tested another with her foot, seeing if it would support her weight.

"It's solid. I've been in there about every day since I've been back. I'll show you if you want?"

But Miriam apparently trusted him enough to climb inside first. Benny followed and closed the trap door behind them, so they could sit comfortably inside.

"Not as tall as I remember," she said.

"That's the first thing I noticed, too."

"I always liked this. Coming up here. Made me feel safe."

"Me too."

"Look, I hope you don't mind me coming over. It's just Outlaw told me about your dad's Alzheimer's and after seeing my granny die with dementia, I just have an idea what you're going through."

Benny nodded. He wanted to pull her towards him, hold her in his arms and feel her petite hands against his back.

"I just wanted you to know that if you ever need anything, if there is anything I can do. Help out with your dad, whatever, you'd tell me right?"

Benny's forehead felt fuzzy as his eyes become damp. He hoped she didn't say anything else, for every kindness she showed him made him want to cry, and he wasn't ready for that.

"I know you're not one to ask for that little thing we like to call help." Benny could feel her looking at him with those big, tender eyes. "That's why I'm letting you know that I'm here for you."

Benny realized he didn't deserve her compassion. Out of every one he knew, she had reason to hate him the most. He had abandoned her without an explanation or a

goodbye. For ten years he had left her alone as she endured the loss of her grandmother and then her mother, left her alone in that gray farmhouse on the other side of the creek.

Benny turned away, willing his eyes to absorb the tears back inside as he tried to gulp down the wad of emotions choking him. And then she said something that he didn't know he had been longing to hear, something that shattered his glass mask as the tears flowed, staining the plywood floor with each drop.

"You're not alone."

Benny wept. Cried like a child in his mother's embrace after experiencing a first scrap of a knee. Miriam put her arm around him and held him as he let loose all of the frustration, the anger, the disappointments, and the guilt of his mistakes.

"I'm sorry." Benny dried his eyes with the bottom of his shirt. "Didn't know I could still do that." He exhaled a weak laugh. He could feel her scoot close, feel the warmth of her body beside his. "I don't deserve this," he said, focusing on his hands in his lap, afraid he would cry more if he looked at her. "I'm so sorry for what I did to you. I should've told you why I left, but I didn't. I should've said goodbye." Benny started to cry again. He couldn't help it. The more he told himself to stop, the longer he couldn't control it.

"It's all right," she said. "You don't have to explain. That was a long time ago."

As she held him, refusing to let go. Benny decided that he would make things right. He would stay as long as Miriam would have him, even if that meant admitting to her and everyone else that he was a fraud. Although his head pounded from the thrust of emotions and his nose was so clogged that he had to breathe through his mouth, he felt

like a new man, like he had been reborn, baptized through tears, and had finally come home.

BOOK THREE: BETHESDA

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

"Are you telling me you don't have it?" Harold McGuffin said.

"We've had a problem with our distributor lately," Benny lied to the contractor, not willing to tell him the truth that his dad didn't remember to order the copper pipes. For three days Benny had been caring for Ben, who since the ball game had yet to come out of his trance.

On Wednesday Benny made an appointment with a Dr. Mendez, a neuro-specialist someone from Miriam's church recommended, but the earliest he could see him was on Friday. Benny had hoped his dad would be normal again before that. Although the hardware store was open, Benny was having a difficult time running it, not so much because of the swarm of customers that were shopping at one of the larger home improvement stores that were not keeping him busy, but because of the loyal few that he had to listen to their complaints.

"My family's been one of your best customers since before I was born. And I gotta tell you, if my dad didn't still have anything to do with it, I'd move our business elsewhere," the young man said. "You're Ben's son, right? Is he around cause we need to get this taken care of."

Benny was getting tired of being polite. He had already explained four times that they couldn't get the materials he ordered until next Tuesday and that that was the earliest. And it wasn't that he couldn't understand the man's frustration...because he could. He was just getting tired of trying to hold everything together that was crumbling around him.

"He's not here, running some errands." Benny said. He wasn't about to tell the customer that he was really in the back room, staring at the refrigerator.

"I really needed those parts today." A cell phone rang. The customer clipped it off his belt, looked at the screen and said to Benny before answering, "You'll have it here on Tuesday?"

"It'll be here."

"Yeah?" He flipped open his phone and headed towards the front door. "What? You gotta be. Just don't do anything else."

Benny was glad the store was empty for the moment. Since they had opened, he had dealt with one complaint after the next, all because his dad hadn't ordered anything he'd promised, and Benny couldn't find where his dad had placed the order forms, if he'd filled any out at all.

It had been raining steady since Wednesday and Outlaw was upstairs replacing the four buckets collecting the pencil sized streams of water escaping from the ceiling. Outlaw figured that the whole roof needed to be redone, and although this was another problem Benny felt the pressure of fixing, he knew they had to wait for a dry day to prevent the store from flooding.

If he hadn't had Miriam to talk to this week, her soft voice and hopeful words providing comfort; Benny didn't know what he would have done. Since Monday night, he could think of nothing but Miriam, and if it wasn't for his dad's condition would have visited her. He had called her the last two nights, them talking for hours like they we dating long distance and the phone was their only life line to one another. Benny didn't know why he didn't invite her over to the house, especially since she lived next door. Maybe it was because he didn't want her to see his dad is his condition, afraid that it might bring up some painful memories of her grandmother. Or maybe it was because he was afraid Marcy would show up unannounced and then he would have to explain to both why he'd been seeing both of them. Benny reminded himself that he didn't do anything wrong, that it wasn't like he was dating both of them at the same time. It wasn't like he had known Marcy was Miriam's sister when they started going out. He didn't even know that Miriam was still in town until he saw her singing in church four days ago. Benny hated thinking about all of this. It wasn't like he was used to going out with two girls at the same time, let alone ones that were related.

He was relieved that he hadn't heard from Marcy this week. He realized that one day he'd have to see her. As long as he and Miriam spent time together, there would come the moment for the uncomfortable encounter, that uncomfortable situation where he'd have to explain to Miriam that he had dated her sister. The worst part was that Benny couldn't predict Miriam's reaction to all of this. For the first time sine he left Morristown, Benny's heart was full, and he didn't want to jeopardize his newly established connection with Miriam. But no matter how much he tried to hear the harmony of their possible lives

together, Marcy presented a counter melody, one that created a disdainful chord no matter which way the notes were arranged.

"That should hold them for the next hour or so," Outlaw said, appearing from the elevator. "It don't look like them clouds are ever going to let up. Good thing this here's a hardware store and we got plenty of buckets. Be bad if we were a couple of barbers and had to use our tip jars. Not that there'd be much use for us now a days. Them beauty shops are all a body can find now. Not that I don't prefer the soft touch of a woman's hands on me, but they ain't much for shaving."

"Is that why your beard's so long? Cause you can't find a barber around?" said Benny.

"Now I tried one of them beauty shops once. This little gal, must've still been is high school, put that black cape around me and laid me back in that chair. So quick I didn't know what was coming next. That little thing just talked and talked about her boyfriend and how wonderful he was and everything he did for her and all that while she washed my hair. Now the shampoo and all felt good, but I didn't ask for it. In fact, I didn't ask for anything, didn't get a word in. Just was strapped into that chair listening to her wonderful life. All I could see was her short, choppy blonde hair, looking like an electrified starfish against that bright light in the ceiling. She wasn't even done rinsing the shampoo out when I seen her hovering these large silver scissors near my face. Had she been an angel greeting me in heaven, I would've sworn I'd gone to hell. Before I knew it she started crying, exposing all her secrets, telling me that she'd been cheating on her boyfriend with a boy at school, that they'd had sex in some closet in the choir room. Said it was the best she'd ever had, even told me how loud she screamed, and that they

would've gotten caught had the sopranos not been in there practicing. By the time she got done explaining how that boy won't return her calls, and how bad she feels because she betrayed her boyfriend, the nicest boy in the school, I realized that she'd been cutting my beard that whole time. Now it wasn't as long then as it is now, but I wasn't in no mind to trim it that day. I just wanted the little hair left on top of me to get shaped up.

Well, that little girl lifted me up and swung me around to face that mirror. And I have to tell you, I don't know which one of us was more genuinely upset that day. When I saw how bald my chin was and what a patchy mess she made of me, I couldn't help but cry myself. That little girl never knew I wasn't a fan of her beard trimming skill, she just hugged me, telling me how sweet I was and what a good listener I was. I reckon she thought I was moved by her distinction.

She started to cut my hair, but I told her that she'd done enough and excused myself. I couldn't bear to see another hair slaughtered that day."

"So you haven't cut your beard since?" Benny finished Outlaw's story.

"Now that would've been a good ending," Outlaw said, leaning against the counter. "But that ain't the truth. As a matter of fact, I did go back to that place, hoping that maybe one of the other girls would do better work. Now it was a few years later| when I went back, took me some time to get my nerve up. Well, this right pretty, long haired brunette trimmed my top right clean looking and even asked me if I wanted my beard managed up a bit. I told her no... and that's about when I recognized her. She was that same little girl who butchered my face years ago. And I've been going back to her ever since."

"Did she recognize you?"

"You mean from that first time? I don't rightly know. I don't reckon she did, cause she ain't never mentioned it if she did."

The door bell clattered. All Benny could see was an orange and white umbrella in front of a pair of blue jeans. As the big orange colored shield slowly collapsed, Benny experienced a dread scratching his stomach for attention.

Marry carried the umbrella, trailing a steady stream like a freshly formed creek, winding from the front door to the register. Benny had just mopped the floor, and although he knew he would have to do it again, was irritated with Marcy for hastening the work.

"Hey," she said, her eyes glancing quickly up to his, before returning to the counter top.

"Well, hello there," Outlaw said.

Benny figured he picked up on the awkwardness of the moment, and was glad he helped out. Although Benny knew he needed to talk to Marcy, tell her that he knew she was Miriam's sister and ask her why she never told him; he wasn't prepared to talk about it, didn't think the store was private enough to confess that he didn't want to go out any more.

"Don't think we've met. I'm Outlaw."

"It's nice to meet you, Outlaw. Benny's told me a lot about you."

"It better all be good. Cause if it ain't you'd tell me?"

"Most all of it," she said.

"If that don't beat all. That boy always was one for listening to my stories, but I'd be surprised to learn he's telling a few of his own, and at my expense."

"Only the good ones," Benny said, realizing that he'd never told Outlaw about Marcy. "This is Marcy."

"Marcy, it's right nice to meet such a pretty face."

Marcy blushed. "Not one of my better days. It's raining something awful out there. You should see me when the sun's out."

"A flower's still a flower no matter how cloudy the day is." Outlaw said. "Now I need to run up and check my buckets. Nice to meet you." He bowed his head politely and took the stairs instead of his normal noisy ride.

"He seems nice," Marcy said.

"Outlaw's a good one. One of my favorites."

"What about me?" She stepped towards him, leaning over the counter. "Am I still one of your favorites?"

Benny didn't know how to respond. He didn't want to lead her on and say "yes," but he also didn't want to address the whole break up.

"You don't have to answer that. I shouldn't have said. It's just when I get nervous, I flirt. Veronica says I flirt all the time. That I can't be nervous as many times as that. I give off the wrong impression with most guys. Usually I'm not interested, and they think I am. I've tried not to do it, but it's hard, you know? Changing who you are." She reached for Benny's arm and pulled his hand into hers. At first he resisted, but finally allowed her embrace, not wanting to hurt her any more than he knew he was eventually going to. He knew he should get it over with, that he should tell her the truth that he was interested in Miriam, but he couldn't. He couldn't smack Marcy down as she was reaching out to him.

"I'm not good at this. It's just I got so upset the other night at your house. And when I get mad, I usually hit back, but I couldn't do anything. I didn't know what was going on. Why didn't you tell me that your dad was sick? I've just felt so stupid all week."

"I should've told you. It wasn't like I was trying to keep it from you," Benny said.

"Didn't you trust me?"

Benny paused. He'd never thought about whether or not his trust in Marcy had anything to do with not telling her.

"Oh, heck. That's it. You don't." She pulled her hand away.

Benny didn't reach out for her. "It's not like that. I'm sorry for not telling you. I should've warned you, let you know what you were walking into. I guess I just figured you had a hint that night, our first date together."

Benny didn't know why he brought that night up. The last image he wanted to think about was fondling Marcy's exposed breasts. Miriam's sister's breasts. He felt ashamed. He let go of her hand.

"I shouldn't have acted the way I did. I've wanted to talk to you all week. I've actually driven by the store. I can't tell your how many times," she said.

"It's all right."

"Is it? I mean this feels pretty weird, don't you think, like we're far away from each other."

Benny didn't want to confirm the obvious, especially on the dreariest looking day of the week in the middle of the hardware store, but he didn't want her to think that nothing was different either. He wanted to reassure her, keep her from becoming upset.

"We're all right," he said.

"Promise?"

Benny nodded.

"Then prove it." Her mood suddenly lightened as if Benny had just removed a hundred pound rain soaked coat off her back. "Take me out tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow?" Benny had forgotten what day of the week it was.

"Oh, heck. You've been in this store too long."

Benny had to agree with her about that.

"Friday night. Just you and me. And I promise Shay and Victoria won't be there,. It'll just be the two of us."

"That would be good."

"I'd rather not put you two together. I'd like to keep you around for a while. Does about nine sound okay?"

"That'll work."

"I'll pick you up then,"

"Why don't I come to your house? Pick you up for a change." Benny didn't want to risk Miriam seeing him with her sister, but he wanted to see if Marcy would tell him the truth.

"All right. You can pick me up. Just go past your house. I'm in the gray house next door."

Benny managed to say "all right" and watched, feeling as if a fastball had just slammed into his gut, knocking the wind out of him as Marcy opened her umbrella and strolled lightly into the downpour.

CHAPTER TWELVE:

The next morning, instead of driving his dad to the hardware store like he had all week, Benny went directly to Dr. Mendez's office. Although he hated seeing his dad in his unresponsive condition, he knew this was the best way he could get him to a doctor. Outlaw had explained to Benny that after his mother's death, Ben didn't trust doctors, said their medicine didn't save Nellie so why waste the time and money on himself. Outlaw had tried many times to get Ben back to a doctor, but Ben would have none of that, and even threatened to fire Outlaw if he brought it up again. Of course, Outlaw kept on suggesting, told Benny that he knew the old man was speaking nonsense; that he couldn't keep the store running without him.

Benny turned on Charlotte St, passing Lakeway Regional Hospital on his right, and noticed Dr. Mendez's name above the title 'neurologist' on an intricately carved wooden sign, sitting low in the middle of a neatly arranged landscape of river rocks, mulch, and short shrubs. At 9:30 the parking lot was nearly full, and Benny wondered how long they would have to wait, although their appointment was for 10:00.

Benny directed Ben up the sidewalk and through the mahogany double doors, leading him inside waiting area with cushioned folding chairs lined evenly against the walls. In the middle were four love seats, each placed on the outer layer of a square oriental rug. Most of the chairs against the walls were occupied with recreations of Benny and his dad, where an aging relative either sat peacefully or tossed about in an agitated state, being consoled by a loved one.

Benny sat Ben in one of the love seats and handed him a Motor Trend magazine, before going over to the reception area. The receptionist was behind a sliding glass window, her head sitting low beneath the opening. She had short plum colored hair and spoke with a slow drawl.

"May I help you?" Her tempo was slow like a ballad.

"I'm here with my dad, Ben Headley."

"Take the clipboard and fill out the information. When you get done, give it to me, and we'll get him in as soon as we can."

Benny sat next to Ben and scanned over the symphony of information to be recorded. He pulled out an over-exaggerated purple pen with the name of some drug he'd never heard of. He wrote in all the blank spaces he could answer, starting with the easy ones like name and address. He guessed Blue Cross for the insurance provider and filled in circles like he was taking the Act regarding known illnesses.

After getting through the questionnaire, Benny was amazed at how little he knew about his dad. He couldn't even remember his date of birth. One of the last questions asked was if the patient had been to Dr. Mendez before. Benny wrote "yes" and hoped that maybe Outlaw had included more information when he brought him in a few months ago.

The receptionist slid the window open as Benny handed her the clipboard. He noticed her name was Patricia by the gold name tag pinned on her blue blouse.

She quickly scanned the paper. "We need Mr. Headley's social security number."

"I don't know it. I was hoping you'd have that on file."

"Is this?" She paused. "No, I see he's been here before. Do you know about when that was? We file every six months because of our load. If you knew when he was last here, it would help us find his file."

"I'm pretty sure it was this spring."

"March or April? Because if it was in April, he's still in the cabinets, if it were in March then he was moved elsewhere."

"I'm really not sure," Benny said, becoming aggravated.

"Well, it would've been helpful if you had, but we'll find it." She closed the glass, ending their exchange.

Benny sat and watched as the room slowly emptied and refilled, new faces replacing the old, like a song being continuously replayed. After an hour and a half, a young brunette wearing light blue scrubs opened the door and looking down inside an opened manila folder, announced Ben's name as she looked throughout the room. Ben didn't move, so Benny stood and waved at the nurse as he helped his dad off the love seat. Benny was constantly surprised each time his dad allowed him to lead him like he had full trust in him, like he was Benny's unsuspecting child. Benny knew if he realized where he was then he would leave immediately without reservation.

The nurse led them down a hallway which contained various Norman Rockwell portraits protected inside matching oak frames. After he weighed in at 193 pounds and had his temperature checked, the nurse had him sit on top of the white, sterile paper of an examination table and told Benny that Dr. Mendez would be in to see them shortly. She bounced lightly out of the room, closing the door behind her.

The paper crunched, settling underneath his dad, supplying an unwelcomed edge to the sounds of a saxophone singing softly a rendition of "Always on my Mind." Placed on the mint flavored looking walls were diagrams of the brain, where sections were dissected and magnified, indicating their scientific names and a brief overview of their functions. Benny wondered if any patient ever became inspired while sitting in an examination room, and got so overwhelmed with emotion that they decided to become a doctor. More than likely, he figured their motivation came not from the examination room, but by sitting in the waiting area, full of paying customers. But Benny couldn't blame them for wanting to make money, to surround themselves with some sense of security in their lives. Had he been wiser, he would've considered an occupation with more certainties, instead of pursuing music, a field where no ground was solid and many pitfalls awaited.

Half way through Patrick Swayze singing "She's like the Wind", a short, balding man, whose dark complexion was contrasted against his bright, white jacket, entered the room. He kept his eyes buried in an open file as if he were eating crumbs of a cookie off a plate as he said, "I'm Dr. Mendez. It's good to see you've come back, Mr. Headley." He closed the door behind him and set the file down on a table beside a small sink. "We haven't met, have we?"

"I'm Benny." They shook hands.

"You must be his son," said the doctor, his lips curling up as if he were pleased with his conclusion. "It's not brain surgery. You look alike."

Benny hadn't thought about the possibility that he resembled his dad. It had never occurred to him that they shared anything in common, especially physical traits. Growing

up, Benny had always been told that he took after his mom, a fact that he'd been proud of. Actually this was the first time anyone had told him that he looked like Ben Headley, and yet when the doctor said it, the news wasn't as unsettling as Benny would've thought. The idea didn't fill him with a renewed pride, but it didn't insult him either.

The doctor shined a mini flashlight into Ben's eyes, testing the reaction of his pupils. "How long has he been like this?"

"Since Monday night."

"And he hasn't responded any?"

"Not that I've seen. I've been around him pretty much the whole time."

"It's good you brought him in. I was afraid I wouldn't see your dad again. He's not fond of doctors. Is he?"

"Sorta obvious, right?" Benny said.

"Have you been his primary care giver?"

"Yeah, I'm staying home with him."

"Your dad is doing fine. His blood pressure is normal and his pulse is good. Do you know what he was doing when he became unresponsive?"

Benny didn't want to tell him about the fight. It wasn't an event he was proud of. "He was umpiring a baseball game. He got a bit excited."

"It's hard to anticipate someone with Alzheimer's. We never know why the brain shuts down sections or retrieves memories. We've learned that certain medications help, but their effects differ from each patient."

"How long do you think he'll stay like this?"

"I can't say for certain. Your father could return to his normal behavior today or a month from now. Or he could live out the rest of his life like this. Now I'm not telling you this to upset you, but it is a possibility, even as slim as it may be." Dr. Mendez leaned against the edge of the sink and motioned for Benny to sit down in the chair behind him. "We did blood work on your dad last April and found some abnormalities in his white blood count. Now this could simply mean that his body was fighting off a cold that day, but I'd like to run some further tests, like a MRI to make sure."

"Make sure of what? I thought you already diagnosed him with Alzheimer's."

"That's the preliminary and most plausible suggestion. Your father does seem to be suffering from symptoms of the disease, but I'd like to look at a brain scan to rule out anything else."

Benny felt like he was not being given a straight answer, like the doctor was being reserved with his comments. "Listen, I need to know what I'm possibly dealing with here."

Dr. Mendez nodded as he looked over the contents in the file. "I've seen patients with brain cancer act similarly to your father. The fact that it's so early in his Alzheimer's doesn't account for his present condition. It's not the episode itself that concerns me, but the duration of it. This isn't to say that his condition is cancer related, because it could be the Alzheimers. It could've been affecting your father for longer than I suspect, but combining his present condition with the abnormal levels in his white cell count encourages further testing. Simply as a cautionary measure."

"Is that something we can do today?"

"I don't have the equipment here. It would have to be scheduled at the hospital. I'll have one of my secretaries call and see when the earliest appointment can be made."

Benny didn't know if he could get his dad to the hospital unless he remained like he was. "Is there any chance it could be today?"

"Not likely. It normally averages a few weeks at the most. It may not be the time to mention this, but I believe it's better to be prepared if one can be. Have you thought about the future care of your dad?"

Benny hadn't thought much about it. All he had considered was trying to keep the store running as long as possible. "You mean like a nursing home?"

"That or at home care. There are nursing services that provide around the clock home health care."

Benny felt as if the walls were closing in on him. "I've only been back in town a month. I really didn't think I'd be here this long."

"I can send you some brochures and refer you to some reputable services. I realize that you're young and have a life of your own, a lot of people try to provide healthcare for their family themselves, they feel guilty otherwise, as if they are betraying their loved ones any other way. I don't know your situation, but I'd recommend you start looking into future options."

"I'm not opposed to it. Actually, I'd rather dad have better care. I don't really know what I'm doing."

"You got him here didn't you? That's pretty good as far is I can remember."

Benny started thinking about the costs involved and how he couldn't afford a home nurse. He didn't know if his dad had saved money towards this eventuality, but he

had a strong feeling that based on the condition of the business that the chances of that were slim.

"I know this is a lot to throw at you, but it's better you start thinking about these things."

Benny didn't know if his expression betrayed his concern so obviously or not, but he was glad the doctor mentioned this.

"So are we all done then?" Benny said, standing.

"See the receptionist on your way out and she'll give you that information. Be sure to schedule the MRI." Dr. Mendez opened the door and started to leave.

"Is there any thing else I need to do right now?" Benny asked. Dr. Mendez stopped in the doorway.

"Just keep him comfortable. Make sure he eats."

Benny was left in the room, feeling alone, as he helped Ben off the examination table. He led him down the narrow hallway, past the weighing scales where the nurse who had taken Ben's blood pressure was now measuring the height of a little boy who appeared to be in such a hurry to grow up, his heels were off the ground. Benny approached the office area and waited for Patricia, the receptionist, to turn around and acknowledge him. She was busy pecking on a keyboard, staring into the blue glow of a flat panel to notice him, so he tapped on the slabs separating them.

She swiveled her chair towards him quickly and slid the glass open. "All done?"

Benny could tell it was a challenge for her to act polite, especially because at her forced smile that curved up at each corner of her mouth like the twisted mustache of the caped villain in the Dudley Dooright cartoons.

"Where's your file?" she said to no one in particular, as she scanned through various folders on the counter. "Let's see here, I believe. Yes, Mr. Headley." She opened the file and swung around to her computer, scrolling through various information.

Benny heard the sounds of a small fan as sheets of paper crinkled, rolling inside the printer. Patricia perused through the papers and handed them to Benny. The first was an itemized list of the checkup performed that day along with the doctor's information. Before Benny could look over the second sheet, Patricia placed a few brochures on top of the pages. One was a full color tri fold, containing pictures of happy seniors seated inside the shade of a gazebo surrounded by the flowers of spring. This was an assisted living facility called Meadowlark Assisted Life, while the other was a black and white bi-fold with names and contact information for home health nurses. Benny set the brochures aside and glanced over the second paper, this one had written across the top in all caps, INVOICE. Benny scrolled down the list of numbers and was shocked by the sum.

"Excuse me," he said to Patricia, "I'm not sure what this means. This number here." He showed her the page.

"That's what you owe."

"What about insurance? I know I don't know my dad's carrier, but he has to have one. And what are these?" Benny indicated expenses that he knew weren't done that day.

"Those are from Mr. Headley's last visit."

"Didn't his insurance cover those?"

"Let me pull up the policy we have." Patricia rotated back to her keyboard.

As she moved the mouse across some medicine advertised pad and clicked, Benny started to panic, thinking what if he were responsible to pay this bill? He didn't have $3600. And he doubted his dad had it anywhere either.

Patricia kept her eyes on the screen and said, "Your dad gave us a Blue Cross Blue Shield policy. Our records show that his claim was denied. We made a note that they responded that his policy was cancelled in February of last year. That's all I'm showing. Could Mr. Headley have another insurance carrier that you're not aware of?"

Benny hoped he did, but he doubted it. With the way his dad had been handling the hardware store, there was a greater than slims possibility that Ben had forgotten to pay his premium, and that would explain why his policy was cancelled.

"I'd have to check on it," Benny said, feeling a defeat worse than his first open mic experience at the Boardwalk in Nashville, when he waited over six hours to play one of his songs and at one thirty in the morning was the last to play for an audience of himself, the bartender, and the sound guy.

"We do have a monthly payment plan that helps. Just let us know what you need to do."

Benny felt somewhat relieved that he wasn't expected to pay the bill in full right then, but he still had no idea as to how he was going to pay for his dad's medical bills.

"Mr. Headley?" a soft voice eased its way behind him like a welcomed remembrance of a long forgotten song. She was a short, blonde haired nurse, whom Benny hadn't seen before. She handed him a white post it note with the name of a doctor scribbled on and a phone number. "Dr. Mendez told me to get you this. It's the number to schedule an MRI."

Benny thanked the polite nurse wearing the care bear scrub top and led Ben out of the doctor's office. It was a quarter after noon when they got back to the store. Outlaw was busy sweeping the center aisle.

"Ya'll back already?" He leaned against the broom. Benny sat his dad at his usual spot behind the counter and motioned for Outlaw to follow him into the storage room.

"What did they tell you?" Outlaw said, closing the door behind him.

"Better leave it cracked open a bit, in case someone comes in," Benny said. "I don't think Dad can hear us."

"Hadn't been anyone in all morning. Couldn't find much to do with myself."

The fact that they hadn't had any customers didn't reassure Benny. "I don't know what I'm going to do. We owe the doctor quite a bit, and they're saying Dad's insurance's been declined."

"Well, now that can't be. I gave them his card myself, when I took him there. Why didn't they mention something then?"

"I guess they didn't know then."

"How much is it? Maybe I could help a little."

"Thanks, but even if I pay this one, they'll still be more." Benny leaned against the brown, paneling walls, exhausted. "They mentioned that Dad could have insurance I'm not aware of. Do you know anything about that?"

Outlook thought for a moment and then shook his head. "Not to my knowledge. Ben could have. It's possible, you know. But he never tells me stuff like that. I only knew about the card I gave the doctor cause I checked his wallet, and it was in there."

There was a small, oak desk against the wall beside the door that Outlaw had opened and was looking out into the store. "Thought I heard something," he said.

"Anybody out there?" Benny said, searching through the drawers of the desk, looking for any insurance papers he could find.

"Only your dad, still sitting where you left him. Did they say anything about him just staring like he does?"

Benny explained what Dr. Mendez told him and handed him the brochures he had put in his back pocket as he surveyed every drawer in the desk, finding nothing but hardware invoices and purchase orders.

"So when it comes down to it, the doctors don't know much of nothing, except that you need to give them more money," said Outlaw.

Benny couldn't believe his dad had let his insurance expire. Benny had felt trapped before, in fact most of his life he'd felt like he was unable to move beyond the reach of Ben Headley. While growing up his dad pressured him, even forced him to do whatever he wanted him to do at whatever time he wanted him to do it, but now the pressure was different. It was heavier and weighed down Benny's conscience. Before when Benny would rebel, at least in his mind, against his dad, he'd feel a sense of guilt, but not so overwhelming that it felt like it surrounded him, suffocating him like the humidity of the third floor of the store on a hot August day. This was the pressure he felt and figured it had to do with the fact that he could leave, that he could walk away and not bear the responsibility of his dad's failing health and lack of foresight to prepare his finances accordingly.

After all, Benny wasn't the one who forgot to pay his insurance premiums. He wasn't the one responsible for losing long standing customers who'd remained loyal to him, even though larger and more accessible hardware stores had come into the area. He wasn't the one who kept losing money for who knows how many years because he was too stubborn to close the doors and accept the reality of the changing times, that no one remained loyal to any one, no one shopped at a particular store out of obligation to the store's owner, but out of their own necessity. Benny knew consumers went to stores with the best value, selection, and accessibility. Headley Hardware was on a side street of a decaying downtown where only relics of the past were sold, where people came to reminisce, not look towards the future. Benny knew the purpose of a hardware store was to provide materials for buildings, for growth, and that people shopped at more modern buildings in favorable locations when wanting to improve their current home or build for a better future. They didn't want to drive downtown and fight for one of the three parking spaces in front of a store. They didn't want to feel confined, walking down three and a half feet aisles and ride, slow outdated elevators. They desired open spaces, large single story warehouses where they can drive miniature forklifts and watch as workers in orange aprons cut two by fours and sheets of plywood to their specifications. Benny knew what people wanted, and he couldn't understand why his dad refused to see it, slowly destroying his business and retirement with every year Headley Hardware remained open. Benny couldn't help but blame him for not acknowledging his declining healthy, for being so stubborn that he allowed everything to happen. Now Benny was the one who had to straighten out the mess that his dad let pile around him. He was trapped by a

failing business, medial debts, and the constant care of his dad, a man he promised himself he would never see again.

But what else could he do but stay? What other choice did he have? What would Outlaw think if he left? How would Miriam feel about him after she sacrificed her twenties to care for her mom, if he walked away, leaving her behind once again?

"I know that look," Owtlaw said. "You trying to figure it all out?"

Benny's mind ached as if Shay Kirk and Michael Jarnagin had both been taking turns punching him in the head. He wanted to cry out, screams as loud as he could and shout away all of his frustration.

"Now don't you worry so much. It ain't as bad as it seems. It'll all work itself out. That's one thing I've come to know. And you better hear me to, cause I'm not blowing sunshine cause I want you to feel better. I know what I'm talking about cause I'm a few steps ahead of you in this life and I've seen it."

Benny appreciated Outlaw's encouragement, but it didn't help. He knew his intentions were good, but they didn't provide relief, answers for his symphony of questions.

"I'm telling you. You need to learn to trust old Outlaw. It's like that debate I had one time with the sassafras tree. You remember me telling you about that?"

Benny didn't respond, just wished Outlaw would stop talking and realize that he needed to think.

"Now I was about your age when me and that sassy old tree had it out. Now most people'll tell you that trees have no personality; that they just stand there. Some people

think they're all knowing, that they're the watchers of time, recording history like a record in the rings of their bark."

Benny wasn't in the mood for one of Outlaw's crazy tales. He just wanted him to shut up so he could figure out what to do. He assured he could start off by selling either the truck or his mom's car, probably the car because he could get at least fifteen hundred for it, while the truck would bring only...

"But that ain't true, or maybe just not for most trees. Not that I'm familiar with all their species or anything."

Benny tried to block Outlaw out of his mind, tried to focus his thoughts back on the truck. The truck would only bring at best five hundred, so it would be better to sell...

"But the sassafras was properly called, whoever had the understanding to name it, cause this here tree was the most unruly and stubbornness little whelp I'd ever come across."

Benny decided the car would be the better choice. So if he sold it; that would leave him with another twenty one hundred to come up with. He remembered that old John Deere tractor out behind the barn and wondered if someone would want it, and if so how much...

"Now I was in the woods on my family's farm and most of them trees were tall, that was most of them except this little stick of sassafras, standing about as tall as my chin here."

Benny kept telling himself to not listen to Outlaw, to focus on what he could sell to pay the doctor.

"So I'm walking down the path that I walked three or four trines a day when all of the sudden this little sass' root kicks up and snags my right foot, throwing me into the creek."

The tractor probably wouldn't bring much since it didn't run, but there were other things that could be sold... like tools. That was an option...he could have a yard sale.

"Into the creek, the creek! Now I was a sight to see if anyone was around. My front all wet. Hands and knees all covered in mud."

All Benny could visualize was Outlaw standing in a creek, wet and dirty. He tried to think about the farm equipment that could be sold in the barn, but his thoughts kept returning to Outlaw. He wanted him to stop talking, so he could figure out what to do. But every word Outlaw spoke distracted him, prevented him from finding a solution. The more Outlaw said; the more frustrated Benny got.

"Well, I marched myself, all caked in filth, up to that little sassafras, and I..."

"Outlaw, shut up." Benny had had enough. He couldn't believe he was verbalizing his frustration. "I can't think with you yapping away about some stupid tree that ain't real."

Outlaw stared at Benny like he was a stranger before saying, "How you know they ain't real if you never seen it?"

"Because talking sassafras trees, all star blue jays, life saving honey bees. They ain't real. They're great stories, but they don't help none."

"They could it you let them."

"I've got real problems. How am I going to pay my dad's bills? Can one of your tall tales answer that? Do you have a medical bill paying ladybug on your shoulder that

can fix my life? Or some beaver that can chew works of art out of wood that I could make some money off of?"

Outlaw didn't respond. As Benny noticed his wounded expression, a man who'd always seen the positive in all moments of his life, now looking like Benny had stolen the bas full of joy he always carried, and threw it away as if it were a soiled, worthless sack, he realized the impact of his words. Outlaw was the last person Benny wanted to attack. He was the only one Benny respected, and he felt worse for the hurt he put on his than all of his professional rejection he'd experienced. Before he could control his grief, a tear cooled his cheek. Benny crumbled to the floor and wept.

"It'll be all right, Benny." Outlaw sat beside him.

"I'm sorry." Benny couldn't look at him. He didn't want to see his compassion. Outlaw had every right to leave Benny in the storage room, leave him alone, and not show him any mercy.

"I'm sorry. I didn't have any right to say those things."

"You're tired. Outlaw understands. I felt that way before my ma died. When I came home from the war and I was all she had. So I know. I know."

"I don't know what to do."

"You ain't alone in this. You got old Outlaw to help you. You didn't think I was going to sit back and let you have all the fun with that old coot of a dad of yours did you?"

Benny knew Outlaw was trying to cheer him up, but it made him feel worse. How could he let Outlaw help when he wasn't being honest with him? Or course, Outlaw didn't understand his frustration because Benny had let him believe a lie about his life, all of his

so- called success. He should've told him the truth. At any time he could've told him, but he didn't because he was afraid to shatter the illusion. Afraid that if Outlaw no longer believed in the tall tale of Benny Headley, that Benny would have to face the disappointment of all his failures. He'd have to take an honest look at himself and accept the fact that sassafras trees don't talk and that broken dreams stay broke.

"It'll be all right." Outlaw put his hand on Benny's shoulder. "You may think you're stuck, but life has a way of keeping us moving. Even an old body like myself."

"I don't know. I..."

"It's all right, I do."

But Outlaw didn't understand, and Benny needed him to. He couldn't carry the weight of his lies any longer.

"No, you don't. You can't, cause I haven't been honest with you, with anyone." Benny thought of the lies he told his mother, the falsehoods she proudly proclaimed to her friends, her family, and the church. How would she have felt if she had known the truth. Benny considered her disappointment and felt a surge of guilt choke the words in his throat. He took a deep breath, swallowing his pride, and continued. "I'm sorry, Outlaw. You've always believed in me. I reckon that's why I never said anything to you. But there's no excuse for it. I never wanted to come back. I don't want to take care of Dad. I only came back because of you. I didn't want you to think less of me."

"Now I hope you know I'd never do that."

"I know," Benny said automatically, not knowing if Outlaw's reassurance would remain true after he confessed everything. "The thing is though, I'm stuck. I'm broke. I got your letter shortly after I got an eviction notice at my apartment."

"We all fall off the wagon and bust our bum on the trail."

"But that's it, Outlaw. The truth is, I never made it. I barely made any money playing out. I tried after I left, for the first few years, playing at coffee houses, bookstores. I even played for a church orchestra, but nothing ever came of it. No one cared to listen if I played for nothing, if they didn't have to pay for it. But I couldn't live on that. I had all these dreams of being someone great, you know? Someone that Mom, that you could be proud of. I always thought you'd see me on TV, imagined you seeing my latest album at Wal-Mart. watching my video on CMT. But you know what? There wasn't any cameras filming me writing songs alone in my studio apartment. There wasn't any crowds lining up on a street corner to hear me play. No little girls with posters of me on their bedroom walls. The closest I got to that was employee of the month at Phonolux's used CD's and video store. It got so bad that Ihop even fired me."

"So everything your mom told me didn't happen?"

Benny wanted to know how Outlaw was reacting to his confession, but he couldn't look at his face. He was too ashamed. "I didn't want to lie to her. And I didn't think I was at first. She just assumed I was making it and I didn't want her to worry, so I let her believe all the excitement she was creating for me. After awhile, I even started believing it. When I'd read her letters, it was like I'd escaped into them. I liked the life she thought I had. In a sad way, it made mine more bearable." Benny thought of the wall behind his futon bed. The one with all of his mother's letters attached by staples, a wall of affirmation and belief suspended above him as he slept.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I don't know. I thought about it. But I couldn't."

"I wouldn't have told your dad."

"It wasn't that I didn't trust you. Man, you're one of the only people I do trust. I guess I, I just, it's hard asking for help. I'm just stubborn, I reckon."

"You think?" Outlaw grinned, slapping Benny on the back. "I can't imagine where you might get that from."

Benny laughed, but inside he felt exposed, vulnerable. He needed to know if Outlaw's opinion of him had changed. If he'd ruined their friendship. He waited for Outlaw to say something, particularly something like, "You know old Outlaw don't hold nothing against you." But he didn't. He sat on the floor next to him quiet.

Benny leaned against the wall and noticed a cricket entangled in a spider web underneath his dad's desk, a trap strategically connected from the floor to one of the desk's legs. He watched the cricket struggle to get free, but only managing to get more entangled with each move. Outlaw slid across the floor, grabbed a pencil off the desk and used it to break the web. He then gently laid the cricket in his palm and stood.

"We all get stuck sometimes, Benny. Sometimes there's a trap waiting for us and sometimes we make our own. But that don't matter once you find yourself caught. All that does, I guess, is how you going to get out."

Benny knew that money was the only way out of his situation, but he couldn't ask Outlaw for that. He knew Outlaw didn't have any money. After all, he'd worked for his dad most of his life, and Benny knew how generous his pay rate was.

"I appreciate you telling me what you did. I know that must've been tearing you up something terrible inside. But don't you worry none, the past is gone and there ain't no need thinking much about it none," Outlaw said as he carefully removed some of the web

from the cricket, freeing its legs. Outlaw smiled real big as the cricket jumped out of his hand and scrambled up his arm, resting on his shoulder. "Now you're welcome little fella. They ain't no need for all that now."

Benny watched as the cricket hopped close to Outlaw's ear, as if it were telling him a secret. Outlaw shook his head and conversed with the little insect, telling it that it was his pleasure and told it to watch out for any more webs. The cricket stayed still with its head raised towards Outlaw's ear. Benny was amazed by the sincerity of Outlaw's conversation and questioned if he was witnessing one of Outlaw's tall tales.

"Well, you tell your kin to quieten down a little at my house. It's not like I don't like your music, but some times even old Outlaw needs some sleep ever now and again." Outlaw paused, acting as if he were listening to the cricket. "You will, huh? Been wanting to move? Tired of living under the store. Well, I'd be right glad to take you with me. You just hop right up there on this here shelf and we'll relocate you."

It wasn't until that cricket jumped and sat on the exact shelf Outlaw directed him to that Benny realized that maybe Outlaw's tales of adventure were not as exaggerated as he had once believed. Then Outlaw said something that gave him a renewed hope.

"You know I'll help you any way I can, but have you checked Ben's safe at the house?"

Benny didn't know what he was talking about. He didn't know his dad had a safe.

"The one he keeps in his closet. He showed me it after your mom died. Told me to tell you about it if the time ever came for it. I think he was referring to when he died. I told him that he'd better tell someone else, that there was a good chance I'd be leaving him behind. Told him he was too stubborn to die."

"What's in it?"

"Don't know. Didn't show me. Only told me where it was. I guess this is as good a time to tell you about it. Just felt right, you know? Felt like the right time."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

Benny couldn't keep his thoughts from the safe, the hope of money or anything of value that could be sold to pay off medical debt. Since hardly any customers came in the rest of the afternoon, Benny closed the store an hour early, so he could get home and see about the contents in his dad's safe. He didn't want to get his hopes up in fear of being disappointed because there was a high possibility that nothing of monetary value would be inside. It could've been filled with pictures and birth certificates.

The September sun was low, starting its descent behind the hill's summit, behind the old farmhouse on Bethel Rd. Benny led his dad to his Berkline recliner and turned on the TV. He poured him a glass of milk and set it on the end table beside him.

"I'll make you some grilled Spam in a little while," Benny told him before heading to his dad's bedroom.

As he entered, he felt guilty as if he were doing something wrong, as if he were eight years old and trying to steal a sneak peak at his Christmas presents. He knew that he shouldn't feel this way and reminded himself that he was opening the safe for his dad's benefit. But that didn't ease his anxiety, so he took a long look down the hallway to see if Ben was coming. Being satisfied that he could proceed undetected, he turned the handle on the closet door. It was locked.

Benny tried turning the handle the other way, but it wouldn't move. He knew that it shouldn't surprise him that his dad would be so paranoid to keep his closet locked, but

it still did. Benny had no idea where the key was, and even what it looked like. Was it a small, skeleton type of key? Or a normal outside door sized one?

He started with the keys on his dad's key chain, only to discover that none at them unlocked the door. He then reasoned that his dad hid the key in his bedroom, possibly in one of the chest drawers. Benny rummaged through underwear, socks, shirts, and pants with no success. Beside the bed was a cherry nightstand, and he remembered his mom keeping things inside a small, secret compartment in its back. Benny turned the nightstand around and was excited to find two gold keys inside. He tried the first one and although it slid into the key hole, the lock didn't open. Since both keys were on the same key chain, Benny figured that they were identical, but tried the other one to be sure. Like the first, the key slid snugly into the lock, but unlike its predecessor, the key turned the lock. Benny's heart raced as he turned the gold plated handle and slowly opened the door. The inside of the closet was dark and its contents covered in its mystery. Benny reached blindly for the overhead light's pull cord when suddenly he felt someone standing behind him.

"What do you think you're doing?" Ben glared at him. "How did you open my closet? I keep it locked for a reason."

Benny was so surprised he didn't know what to say. Ben marched towards him and grabbed the keys from the lock.

"I'll have to find a better hiding place since you found these so easily," he said, closing the closet door.

"What day is it, Dad?"

"What are you talking about? You done gone lost your mind? Getting so idle around here that you don't know one day from another?" Ben put the keys in his pocket and walked down the narrow hall.

Benny followed. "Just answer me."

"Look at the calendar on the fridge if you need reminding. I ain't giving in to your foolishness." Ben opened a cabinet drawer, retrieved a can of Spam and set it on the counter top. "You hungry?"

"We need to talk about this."

"About what? You ain't making a bit of sense."

"You don't know what day it is, do you?"

"Of course I do. It's… it's time for Wheel of Fortune."

Benny heard the familiar there music coming from the living room. He watched Ben cut a couple of thick slices of the canned meat, place them between two pieces of white bread, and head without another word to the living room.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Benny sat on the couch.

"You breaking into my closet."

"Before that?"

"What's wrong with you? Can't you let me eat in peace?" Ben stood suddenly and crossed to the TV. "And how many times do I have to tell you to let my TV be?" He turned the screen back towards the wall. "Color hurts my eyes. Gives me a headache."

"It's not the TV that gives you those headaches. You have then quite a bit don't you?"

"No more than anyone else. You'd have a headache to if you had someone badgering you while you were trying to listen to your show."

"You remember going to the doctor this week?"

"I ain't going to no doctor again. They didn't help your mother none and they ain't going to help me. Just steal your hard earned money is all they do. Them doctors wouldn't know a hard days work without running a bunch of tests first."

"We saw Dr. Mendez today."

"So. Like I can remember every person who comes into the store. I used to know everybody by name who was a customer of mine, but I can't no more."

"That's the problem. You don't remember anything any more. You were at Dr Mendez' office today. I took you there."

"No. No." Ben shook his head. Although he was denying it, Benny could tell by his frustration that he was doubting himself. "I wouldn't let you take me back to that quack. Outlaw tried once, tricked me he did, and that was the last time he ever tried any more of that nonsense."

"Dr. Mendez wants to do an MRI on you."

"A what? Well, he can forget it. He ain't poking me with anything."

"It's a machine, You just have to lie in it."

Ben shook his head in disgust. "I don't care if you dance in it. I ain't doing it."

"Fine. Then you can take care of yourself when you slip again." Benny was frustrated. He couldn't talk reasonably to his dad. The man was stubborn, and no amount of convincing would persuade him.

"Slip? A haven't fallen yet. My bones are still strong, so you don't have to worry none about me breaking a hip. I can take care of myself."

"You don't even see it. You're not fine. You're sick, Dad. Why can't you admit that?" Benny didn't know why he kept talking. He knew that no matter what he said, it wouldn't do any good, that his dad wouldn't listen. But he couldn't stay quiet. He had to confront him. "The doctor thinks you have Alzheimer's. Do you know what that is?"

"I've already heard what he thinks. I don't care none neither. I may not remember everything that I used to, but I got enough sense left to get done the things I got to."

Benny knew there wasn't any easy way to tell him the reason for the MRI, and figured he should get it over with while he was still lucid. "You might have a tumor in your brain. That's probably why you have those headaches."

"It's those dad blame colors that hurt my eyes."

"That's why you need to get a MRI."

"Them doctors isn't bleeding me dry. They ain't taking everything I built just for some high dollar tests that don't help nothing."

"It can if they treat the problem early enough. Maybe if you took mom to the doctor earlier then."

Ben stood abruptly, clenching his shaking fists. "Don't you talk about stuff you weren't here to see. Don't you dare."

"Why not?" Benny said. "Why don't we talk about her?"

Ben pointed a warning finger at Benny, his eyes wide and threatening, "You have no right, you hear me. None!"

Ben walked away, slamming the front door behind him. Benny knew that he should just let it go, wait for his dad to have another episode, and then peacefully take him for his MRI. But he had more to say, things he'd never told his dad, confessions that Ben needed to hear.

Ben was sitting on the glider on the porch, staring straight ahead as he swung forward and back. Benny didn't think about what he would say. He just let the words flow organically like a melody that had to be sung.

"You know, I loved Mom. Loved her more than anything."

"Don't. Don't." Ben refused to look at him, kept staring at the wringing of his hands in his lap.

"It was because of you. I never came back because of you."

The glider stopped. Ben started to get up, but then hesitated.

"But that wouldn't have stopped me had I known she was sick. I would've been here had I known."

"You should've come home some any way. You killed your mother when you left. She wasn't the same after that."

"She wrote me letters, every week."

"I know. She'd read me some of yours you sent."

"Then why didn't your write me and tell me she was sick?"

"What for? You left. Abandoned us. You made your choice. I wasn't about to change your mind for you."

"You should've written me. I didn't know about her funeral until after she was buried. You could've told me. I didn't even get to say goodbye."

"You said that the night you left."

"What did I do to you, that you hate me so much? All I ever wanted to do was please you, but nothing was ever good enough."

Ben didn't move. He kept his eyes on his lap, never once looking at his son.

"You know what." Benny began but hesitated. He wanted to tell him that he abandoned him long before the night that he left. That he gave up on him when he chose music over baseball, his way instead of Ben's. He wanted to tell him that the only reason he came home was because he was broke and felt obligated to Outlaw, who felt more like a father to him than he ever had, felt more love from a hired hand than he did from his own dad. He wanted to scream that he hated him, that his whole life had felt like a trap because of him, his stubborn will, unnecessary control. As he watched him, still refusing to look at him, still after all these years, refusing to acknowledge his son, Benny wanted to lash out and tell him that a part of him, the unforgiving side that he inherited from him, wanted to leave him, let him die alone and confused inside an unfamiliar, sterile room with strangers.

But he didn't.

In that moment, Benny realized that he couldn't love someone who didn't want to be loved. And that no matter how hard he tried, he could never earn Ben Headley's respect. The night he left, ten years ago, whatever feelings his dad had for him he buried them and closed the door of his bedroom, sealing it away like a forgotten tomb. His dad never contacted him because his son was already dead to him, nothing more than a memory. No wonder Benny felt like a stranger in his parent's house. He was one. Benny was too exhausted to cry, too upset to speak.

A cool, autumn breeze lifted the hair off the back of his neck, providing a gentle caress. The phone rang. Benny walked to the kitchen, his head feeling numb as he answered the receiver.

"Hey." Miriam's voice was soft and welcoming, "Are you still up for going with me tonight?"

It wasn't as if Benny had forgotten or wasn't interested in spending time with Miriam, but the stress of the day had left his reply less than optimistic. "Uh, sure."

"Listen, I'll understand if you don't want to do it. I mean playing for a bunch of senior citizens isn't really the responsive crowd you're used to."

"No, it's not that. What time do you want to do it?"

"I usually try to be there around six. There's no set time or anything, but that's usually when they finish dinner."

Benny glanced at the sun clock in the living room. It was almost 5:30. "I can get you in fifteen minutes."

"Sounds good. And don't forget your guitar."

Benny hadn't even considered when he said he'd play for her that he didn't have a guitar. "I actually don't have one with me."

"Oh." Miriam sounded surprised. "That's all right. I still have that old one my mom used to play during her hippie years. I mean it's not the best, but I think it still plays. That is it you don't mind strumming on a hand me down."

"That'll be great. So, I'll see you in a few."

"All right. Oh, and Benny. Thanks."

"For what?"

"For being available," she said.

Benny replaced his brown t-shirt with a blue button up oxford. Being that he wasn't accustomed to wearing respectable looking clothing, his Sunday go to meeting options were limited. His dad was no longer on the front porch when Benny left. His truck was still there, so he knew he was somewhere around, probably inside the barn since the bay doors were open. As he walked to his mom's car, Benny heard tires rolling across gravel and noticed a white Prelude coming up the drive.

Marcy waved sheepishly behind the wheel before getting out. She left the car door open as she approached Benny, and apparently forgot to remove the keys from the ignitions as a warning repeatedly chimed.

"Hey," she said, stopping a few feet away.

"What are you up to?" Benny didn't know what to say. This was awkward. It wasn't like he could tell her that he had to go so he could go pick up her sister. Or maybe she already knew that and was cool with it.

"Are you going some where? It's a bad time isn't it?"

"Well, it's not. I mean, I was leaving."

"Oh, heck. I don't want to keep your from your busy night." Marcy retreated back to her car. "Sorry I bothered you."

Benny figured he should just let her leave, figured that she'd get over it one day. That it would take her no time to find another guy. But he didn't want to be rude to her. He had already had a bad enough day than to add this guilt on him.

"You're all right," he said, walking towards her. "What's up?"

"Nothing. I was just going to see if you wanted to get together later tonight, but I see that you've already got plans."

"Yeah, well, maybe we can get together some other time." Benny couldn't believe he just said that. He had no intention on encouraging her, but, unfortunately, he ignorantly had.

"Yeah, we should. Maybe I'll stop by tomorrow or something."

Benny knew he needed to tell her the truth, that he knew she and Miriam were sisters and that he was interested in Miriam. But he couldn't tell her this now. He needed time to explain everything. He thought if she understood then maybe there wouldn't be any hard feelings. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

"Sounds good. I'll be home after work," Benny said, waved politely goodbye and hoped that Marcy wasn't driving home. He sat in the car and watched her in the rear view mirror as Marcy drove down the driveway. He was relieved when she took a left on Old Bethel Rd, heading towards Highway 160.

Miriam was sitting on her porch swing as Benny pulled up. This was the first time he'd been this close to the house that once felt like a second home. Snatches of childhood real time played in his mind; water balloon fights with Amy and her brother, sitting beside Miriam on that same swing, the first time he held her hand. The wood creaked as he stepped onto the porch. Benny remembered his sophomore year when he tried to leave a gift at the front door undetected after everyone was asleep on a school night. The porch creaked, about at the same spot be was standing now, and Miriam's grandmother and mother came running out with a kitchen knife and a broom, thinking a burglar was sneaking around. Benny ran and hid behind the big elm tree at the side of the house. After

a brief search, the women retired inside, so Benny retrieved Miriam's present and decided to give it to her at school instead. He didn't want her mom to know that he was the culprit who scared them. He never told Miriam.

An old guitar case was sitting on the wooden planks beside Miriam.

"It's so peaceful out here, you know?" she said, motioning for him to sit next to her.

Peaceful was the last description Benny would've used for his day of torment. The swing jerked backwards as if it were recoiling from Benny's sudden weight.

"Sorry." Benny steadied the swing's movement with his feet against the floor.

"Are you all right? You look tired."

"Yeah, it's been a long day. That's all."

"If you don't feel up to going tonight, I'd understand."

"No, I want to go."

"I won't be upset if you don't."

"I'm sure it'll be, exciting."

Miriam poked his arm. "Now you're making fun of me."

Benny laughed. "Don't poke. Don't poke."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot how ticklish you are." She poked him lightly in the ribs, Benny tried to shield his side with his arms, but Miriam was quick and poked him several more times. "I'm disappointed." She retreated. "You've let your guard down."

"Well, you know, out of practice. Dad doesn't make such a great sparring partner."

Miriam's laughter was bright, genuine, and Benny relaxed in its authenticity, trusting the absence of pretense in her reactions. That was one of the many rare qualities of Miriam that separated her from most other women. She hid no aspect of herself to others, and remained content in her vulnerability. Although he never could exist on his own in Miriam's open field world, he enjoyed walking through it with her. She was the safest place he knew, his shelter.

"Are you ready to entertain some seniors?" Miriam stood and handed him the guitar case. "It's not the best, but it plays."

Benny opened the case. "Where'd you get this?" Inside was a vintage Vox acoustic. "I didn't even know they made an acoustic."

It's been upstairs in a closet. I found it after Granny died. Mom and I were looking through some of her stuff. Mom thought it might've belonged to Granny's first husband. She didn't remember my dad playing guitar. So I guess the answer to your question is, I'm not sure."

"This is a really nice guitar. And I'm pretty sure it's rare, probably worth some money." Benny held the guitar flat at eye level and examined the symmetry of the neck and body. "The neck is a little warped, but it could be straightened out pretty easily. The finish looks good for its age." Benny laid the guitar in his lap, its back pressed securely against his stomach, his left arm cradled around its body, his fingers caressing the cool metal of the strings. He laid his right hand near the top of the fret, his fingers automatically pressing down the strings to create a G chord, while his left hand brushed lightly across the strings hovering above the hollow, light brown body.

"I didn't know how to tune it," Miriam said.

Benny cringed at the mistuning, but he didn't care. It had been over a month since he felt the familiarity of the smooth wooden curves and the pressure of the strings against his fingertips.

"Will it work?" she said, kneeling in front of him. Her bright eyes staring hopefully up at him like the pearl inlays on the guitars neck.

Benny wanted to tell her how perfect the instrument was, how wonderful it felt in his embrace, how he never wanted to let it or her go again. In that precious reunion he could have filled the creek with his tears, but he didn't. All he could do was nod and grin weakly at her, hoping that she could hear what he couldn't say, understand his appreciation.

"We should probably get going. It's already almost six."

"Are we going to be late?"

"Not really. There isn't a set time or anything. I just usually show up around six or after. I try to sing for them, at least a few songs. It'll be great to actually have some music for a change."

"What do you mean?" Benny opened the passenger door for her.

"I usually sing acappella."

Benny shut her door and laid the guitar in the back seat.

"I don't really like singing by myself, but the ladies really like it. You wouldn't think it would mean so much to them, but it does. It's the little gestures, you know, that mean the most."

It took Benny ten minutes to reach the Community Assisted Life Center. The one story, ash colored brick building was on the west side of town, sandwiched between a K-

Mart and the West Elementary School. Across the street was Economy Cemetery and behind it was Morristown's oldest AM Radio Station, WCRK.

A rush of refrigerated air escaped outside, refreshing Benny as he stepped inside a narrow hallway; cramped with a low, drop ceiling and artificial flowers, decorating small tables placed sporadically against the mint green walls. He followed Marcy past the lobby down a hallway to their right and into a large cafeteria with round tables sitting six. The room smelled of meatloaf and cottage cheese with a hint of Ben Gay. There were only a handful of seniors in the room. The closest was a table of three spry looking women, waving excitedly to Miriam.

"Behind you there. That little area is what I use as a stage." Miriam pointed to an empty corner next to a picture of Salvador Dali's version of the Lord's Supper.

Benny didn't know much about art, but he'd seen enough paintings of melted clocks to be familiar with the Spanish artist, and was surprised to see that the bread and cup of wine wasn't melted in Jesus' hands.

Miriam chatted with the three ladies, while Benny tuned the guitar. The guitar was still solid and didn't take long to tune. He strummed a few chords, impressed with the guitar's rich tones and overall sound Benny had played several Vox electric guitars and had even once owned one of their amps, but this guitar was the first Vox acoustic he'd seen, let alone played. He wondered why the company didn't make many acoustics, especially since their electric guitars and amps were well respected and used world wide.

Although the audience was only fourteen adults, who probably couldn't hear what was going on, Benny was nervous. After all, it had been a few months since he'd played; and even longer since he'd played for an audience this large. Add on the pressure of not

knowing the songs Miriam wanted to sing, and the possibility that he wouldn't know them, increased his anxiety. It didn't matter so much to him the impression he left on the seniors, but he did want Miriam to think he played well. He needed her to still believe in his ability. While Miriam talked, his fingers found a melody, a song he'd forgotten he'd written, a song about longing and loss. His hands moved organically, his right hand sliding, creating chords against the fret, his left dancing a graceful rhythm with the strings above the slender body's opening.

Benny closed his eyes and got lost in the instrument's caress, the only embrace he could ever trust, fully be himself and free inside. He was like a child hiding under their covers only to find themselves waking up underneath a familiar softness the next morning. He didn't know how long he played, only that when he finally opened his eyes, every person is the cafeteria was watching him, none of them speaking, fully focused or him. Miriam was sitting at the table with the three ladies, wiping tears from her eyes.

Benny was embarrassed. He knew that he shouldn't be, that something special had just happened, that a part of him was not only given to those listening, but accepted, shared between them. He'd only experienced this once is his life, and that was every moment he spent with Miriam. Benny motioned for Miriam to come to the imaginary stage in the corner and join him. But she stayed is her seat, shook her head, and mouthed the words, "Keep playing."

A part of Benny was afraid to "keep playing", afraid that the moment had passed, that he couldn't recreate what he did. But a deeper part of him didn't share these reservations, it just wanted to be heard, needed to be expressed through the delicate

exchange between fingers and strings, wood and sound, a creation of the some times slippery intangible through the never failing sturdiness of the tangible.

Benny closed his eyes and played, his hands creating melodies that he'd never heard before, a new song that was born from that moment, a song that had its signature for that time and place. A song he played for Miriam, a moving expression of his love and respect for her. As he played, he imagined the two off them together, sharing their hopes and regrets, building a home that would never fail.

The song had found its conclusion and Benny opened his eyes and gazed upon the woman he loved, the only one he'd ever loved. There was no applause given as Benny packed the guitar in its worn out case. Benny liked it better that way. He felt that applause would have stolen from the moment, cheapened it, forcing him into the role of the entertainer. And he knew that what he experienced was more than that, for he had received far more the he'd given.

He and Miriam didn't talk much on the way home. He asked her if she were hungry or if she wanted to see a movie, but she said no on both accounts, said that the night was too perfect for anything else. Benny didn't say it, but he agreed.

The setting sun gave its last rays of the day to the woods, casting an entanglement of branch shadows on the gray farmhouse. Benny walked Miriam to the front porch. A crisp breeze rounded the house and swept past them, providing a flowing lift to the hem of Miriam's soft, flower patterned dress. She smiled as she pushed the rising side of cotton against her leg. Benny noticed her petite knees and delicate ankles. At moments she seemed almost fragile, like a porcelain doll that he was afraid to hold too tightly, afraid that he'd be careless and break it.

"You looked beautiful tonight," Benny said without thinking. Miriam blushed.

"That's the first time you've ever said that to me."

"It is?"

"Don't you remember in high school? Said you didn't like it when people used words like beautiful or brilliant, when they used it like a common description. You remember?"

He did remember, even still thought this way. But he couldn't believe that he'd never told her that she was beautiful. It was something he thought every time he looked at her. "Words like that can't be used lightly. Or it robs them of their meaning."

"I just never thought you'd use one on me."

"I see you, Miriam. Every day even when you're not there, I still see you." He was about to tell her that he'd missed her, that she was the one person that he could never remove from his mind, that even when he left, the thought of her never left him. He was going to tell her that he loved her, loved her more than anything he'd ever experienced and how he never wanted to let her go.

And just when he was about to say these things, a car door slammed behind him and Miriam said, "Oh, now you can meet my sister."

Benny froze. He had the unrealistic notion that if he didn't turn around, refused to look at Marcy, that maybe she wouldn't be there. He didn't know what he was going to say. He had no idea what Marcy's reaction would be. Maybe he should confront the uncomfortable situation and confess to Miriam that he'd gone out with her sister, but that it was over. But then he didn't want to hurt Marcy and embarrass her in front of Miriam.

"What are you doing here?" Marcy said to Benny.

Benny turned towards her." Why didn't you tell me we were neighbors?"

"Oh, you two already know each other?" Miriam said.

"I thought we weren't meeting until tomorrow?" Marcy said.

"I met Marcy when I first got back. Her and her friend Victoria." Benny thought if he included Victoria that his dates with Marcy wouldn't seem so exclusive to Miriam.

"Why didn't you tell me you knew my sister?" Miriam said.

Benny didn't know the best way to respond. The truth was he didn't know at first, not until he spied them together from the field, but he couldn't say that. He didn't want either of them to think he'd been in the habit of watching them from a distance, that he was a stalker. He didn't think Miriam would think this, but Marcy was somewhat unpredictable. It still amazed him that they were sisters, since they were basically the antithesis of one another.

"I didn't know, not really."

"I'm a little confused." Miriam stepped down the steps between them "You knew who Benny was. Why didn't you tell me you met him?"

"I didn't think I had to," Marcy said.

Benny understood Miriam's confusion and wanted to explain everything to her.

"Is there something going on that I should know about?" Miriam kept her attention on her sister.

"I should be asking him that," Marcy said, glaring at Benny.

Miriam faced Benny. Her expression was unsettled as if she had just heard herself sing a wrong note and the noise was too painful not to grimace. "I don't understand."

Benny was going to tell Miriam the whole story, but all he was able to get out was, "I'm sorry" before Marcy interrogated him.

"Oh, heck. Heck. I get it. You didn't come over to see me. How could you have? You didn't know where. It was with her, wasn't it? She's why you blew me off tonight."

"It didn't happen like that," Benny said, wanting Miriam to understand how everything led up to this uncomfortable situation.

"How did it happen then? Just thought you could have your fun with me and then. I can't believe this! You're going out behind my back with my own sister?" Marcy said.

"That's not what happened." Benny felt he'd better explain to Miriam before Marcy said anything else that would make the situation worse. "We went out a couple of times. That's all it was."

"Oh, heck. So that's how it is then. I thought you were different. I thought I could believe you. But you're just like every other guy in this town. Say whatever, get what you want and move on. You're nothing but a liar."

Miriam stepped towards Marcy. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"What do you care? You're just like him, only worse. Everybody thinks you're so great, so sweet, innocent The model Christian woman. But you're just like everybody else. When it comes down to it, you're just looking after yourself. And what really sucks is, you're too much of a prude to see it." Marcy walked hurriedly past them to the front door.

"Marcy wait." Miriam tried to stop her, but Marcy entered the house, slamming the door behind her.

"Miriam, it's not like that. It didn't happen that way," Benny said.

"You knew, didn't you? Tell me the truth. You knew we were sisters."

Benny didn't want to lie. He had no reason to. The confrontation he'd been dreading had been worse than he imagined. He had no idea what Miriam was thinking about him. If she were influenced by Marcy's estimation then he was as good as condemned. All he could do was plead his case and hope that Miriam believed him, hope that after all these years, even though he abandoned her, she still trusted him.

"Yeah, but not at first."

"What were you thinking?"

"When I met your sister I didn't know who she was. I didn't know you were sisters until last week."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me. Did you think you couldn't? Did you think I'd?"

"There wasn't anything to tell."

"She's my sister, Benny, She's my only sister."

"I was meeting with her tomorrow to tell her I couldn't see her anymore, that I wasn't interested."

"You should've told me." Miriam retreated into the growing darkness of the porch. "That's what hurts the most. You should've trusted me." Miriam walked inside, closing the door on Benny.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

The lights were on in the living room when Benny got home. The evening air was crisp, the humidity of the summer missing. Benny noticed Miriam's guitar resting in the back seat. He took the Vox out of its case and sat on the top step of the porch. The instrument felt comfortable, cradled next to him. Benny ran his hand down the curves of its body, feeling its smooth, glass like surface. The back of its neck had engraved "made in Italy." Benny could tell by the artistry of its shape, the eye to detail, that this guitar was hand made, sculpted in a time when men took pride in their craft, created an image of beauty and longevity.

Sitting on his parent's porch, holding this instrument, reminded him of his first guitar. A 1930's model Gibson. It was much smaller than the Vox and had a dark brown, almost black finish. It had been his grandfather's recreation, an inheritance passed down to Benny. Both he and his grandfather had cherished that guitar.

Benny didn't want to go inside, have to deal with his dad again tonight. All he wanted to do was escape and run alongside a rhythm of notes, inhale deeply the atmosphere of dancing sound and forget the worries of his life. His fingers caressed the strings, his heart embraced the music. A haunting melody emerged, lingered on the porch before slowly strolling towards the trees. Benny thought of Miriam, the disappointment in her parting gaze. And he played. He thought of all the things he never told her, all the beautiful and brilliant particulars of her. And he played.

He pictured his mother, how he never got to say goodbye, how she must've felt the night he left, abandoning her, never to return. And he played. He thought of Bethesda cemetery and how he still hadn't visited her grave. And he played.

He could feel the soreness of his fingertips, the ache of his hands, and he played. Benny kept playing, trying to pour out all of his frustration and sadness. And the more songs born from his anguish, the more sharp the pain. But he couldn't stop, he hid to keep playing. He had nothing else.

"Where you been?" his dad said behind him.

Benny continued to play.

"Didn't you hear me? Where you been?"

Benny couldn't deal with him right now. Too many collisions had happened today, too many conflicts. He wasn't prepared for another. All he wanted to do was get lost in the melodies.

"Didn't you remember your mom cooking for you tonight? She cooked herself to exhaustion, had to prepare your favorite dishes."

This was the last episode Benny could relive again with his dad, especially tonight. The dialogue was all too familiar. He had replayed it over and over, every exchange lodged in his memory like a crooked nail. It was the night of his high school graduation. The graduation he never attended. The ceremony he was supposed to play a song he'd written for his senior classmates, for Miriam, for his mom. A song he never played. It was the episode that caused him to leave his home, family, Miriam. It was because of this moment that he missed his mother's funeral; that he missed the last years of her life. This one moment changed his life, was the intro to his decade long opus of

failure and regret; the moment that sent him away broken instead of hopeful. This was the moment in time his dad was reliving and now he was once again forcing Benny into the nightmare.

"Boy, you'd better say something cause the foods all cold and done ruined. Now where were you?"

"Over at Miriam's. I forgot. I'll tell Mom I'm sorry." Benny remained sitting, clutching Miriam's guitar, promising himself that this time would turn out differently, that he was stronger and wouldn't let go.

"You'll go in there and eat. That's what you'll do. I don't care how cold the cube steak gravy is. You'll eat it with a smile on."

"I've already eaten. Miriam's mom cooked for us. I'm stuffed." Benny recited his lines, preparing himself, his body wrapped protectively around the guitar, for what was scripted next.

Ben grabbed the neck of Benny's shirt and pulled him up. "I don't know what's gotten into you. All you ever do is carry around that no account guitar. I wish your mother never gave it to you."

"This guitar is the best thing that's happened to me." Benny wasn't going to let go of it this time. He was prepared. He was stronger.

"That thing ain't nothing but idleness. Nothing but a waste of time."

"Grandpa thought it was something."

"Your Grandpa Rex was an idle fool. He died broke. Wasn't prepared. That old thing was all he had left. He wasn't even my kin and I was the one who paid for his foolishness. Is that how you want to end up?"

"At least he was happy."

"And why wouldn't he be? Had me, working hard, paying for him. And your'e my own son, turning out just like him, throwing away your God given talents, something that could've given you a future. Got you into colleges, even the majors."

"That was your dream, not mine." Benny said, reminding himself that this time would turn out differently, that this time he wouldn't let go, that he'd make his dad listen.

"You were good. Ask anybody who seen you play. Probably the best ballplayer for your age this town had ever seen, and you threw that away. For what? For that old guitar?"

"Mrs. Anderson, the music teacher, thinks I'm talented."

"Have her get you a job then."

"She thinks I could go professional, have what it takes to be a musician."

"Doing what? There ain't no money in it. How you going to live doing that? Cause I ain't paying your way like I did your grandpa."

"I'll find something to do."

"Not around here you won't."

"Then I'll leave. Go somewhere else, like Nashville. Some place where musicians are accepted."

"I'll tell you what you're going to do. You're going to learn how to run the store. You can play your music for fun, but you ain't leaving here. You know how many boys would love to be in your place? How many would love to have a profitable business handed over to them?"

"I don't want to sell hardware. I'm not you." Benny could feel himself slipping away. The dialogue he was reciting was taking over. He was losing control.

"I ain't listening to any more of this foolishness. Give me the guitar."

"No." Benny was ready for what was coming next. He would hold on this time.

"I said give it to me." Ben grabbed the neck of the guitar and tried to pull it away, but Benny had a firm grip and wasn't about to let go. Ben tried to out muscle Benny, but couldn't. They struggled against one another, neither admitting defeat. Benny was surprised at the strength left in his dad. Ben pulled hard, but Benny held on as they both collided into the glider.

The impact reminded Benny of the outcome ten years ago when he let go, his dad wrenching the Gibson from his hands as Benny fell back into the glider. The last words his dad said to him, gripping the neck of the guitar like a baseball bat as he held its body behind his shoulder, preparing to swing it into the side of the house. "This stops."

Benny saw himself running towards his dad, trying to stop him from smashing his guitar. Ben swung hard. Benny's left had raised to intercept. The guitar slammed against the home, while Benny's hand was underneath, the sounds of wood and bone splintering.

But this time the outcome would be different. This time Benny wouldn't let go. He couldn't. Ben yanked hard, but Benny was strong and held on. Benny could feel his dad's hold weakening, so he pulled back. Ben let go. Benny wasn't prepared for his victory and stumbled backwards. Miriam's guitar collided into the porch railing. Benny heard the instrument wail out a mournful chord.

There was a loud snap.

Benny knew immediately what had happened. He didn't need to look at the back of the Vox to know that it had cracked. Benny stared at his dad, wanting to throw the busted guitar at him. Wanting to tell him how much he hated him, blamed him for his broken life. No matter how hard Benny tried, nothing was good enough, not for his dad, and not for himself. He thought he could control the outcome, thought he could hold on and keep this guitar from being destroyed.

But no matter what he did, he couldn't change what happened. His grandpa's Gibson was gone and now Miriam's Vox was broken. As Benny looked at his dad who was staring without recognition at him, he decided that he couldn't play the part at dutiful son any more. That he was better off alone, where he didn't socialize with anyone because since he'd beer home, everyone he cared about, he hurt. It would be better if he went back to Nashville, resumed his lack luster life and live anonymous.

Benny picked up the guitar and laid it on his bed with a note to Miriam apologizing for the instrument's condition and promising to mail money for its repair. It didn't take him long to pack. Benny wasted no time in leaving his dad who was still sitting on the porch, his back against the bottom of the glider as he got in his mom's car. When he turned on the headlights, he saw his dad through the porch railing like a child sitting in a play pen. Benny would call Outlaw later that night, after he secured his ticket, and tell him to watch after his dad. He knew Outlaw would be disappointment, but he couldn't help that. He couldn't be any more disappointed then Benny was with himself already.

Benny left the way he arrived, took a left on Old Bethel Rd., another left on Hwy 160, a right into Radio Center on Cumberland St. past Headley Hardware, and turned the

corner to the bus station. Benny parked the car in one of the three spaces on the street in front of the hardware store. He figured that would be the easiest place for Outlaw to find it, and walked the two blocks to the bus station. He didn't want to leave the keys with the car and decided to mail the keys to Outlaw once he arrived in Nashville.

It was only a few minutes after eight when Benny stepped inside the station's small lobby. He wasn't surprised that other than the ticket agent he was the only one there. The old man behind the counter told him that he was in luck, that a bus to Nashville would be arriving in half an hour from Asheville. Benny bought the ticket and waited.

The bus arrived an hour later. Seven passengers got off, most of them gathering in a line for the station's single occupancy restroom. The bus driver stepped outside, looked around town, and stretched. Benny showed him his ticket and the driver motioned for him to board. As he stepped up the narrow, steep steps and walked down the aisle towards the back, he noticed a familiar looking bright white haired woman.

"Nettie?" Benny said.

"Well, hello again. Isn't this a nice surprise?" Nettie sounded cheerful and removed her purse from the seat beside her. "Why don't you sit here?"

"Maybe I shouldn't. I don't want to get kicked off the bus again."

"Oh, do sit beside me. This ride has been such an awful bore."

"Where's Ed?"

Nettie's sweet expression soured as she looked down at her lips. "My dear Ed, he's gone now. He passed going on nine days now."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you." Nettie patted Benny's knee. "Ed had been sick for a time now. He had colon cancer. Never would go to a doctor, no matter how hard I urged. He never would argue with me, just wouldn't discuss it. He was always a gentleman. That's one of the things that first attracted me to him. We were married for forty seven years. He was always a gentleman."

"Is there anyone traveling with you?" Benny couldn't understand why a woman at her age would be riding a bus alone.

"I've done this enough in my day. I've got the hang of it. Do I look like I need a chaperone?" She winked.

"Are you going back to Nashville?"

"We're from Jackson, TN actually. That's been our home since we retired. We have a daughter who lives in Asheville, that's why we went there. Ed wanted to spend some time with Kathleen, that's our granddaughter. She's fourteen. They asked me to stay with them, move to Asheville. Think I can't take care of myself, but I can. I, I'm sorry, I do this from time to time. I can't help it." Nettie cried.

Benny was shocked. He couldn't believe that only a month ago he watched Ed and Nettie flirting like newlyweds and now she was alone.

"Ed liked you, you know. Said you were a good sport. He'd been bugging me about playing along. I didn't want to, but I knew it meant so much to him. When you walked on the bus, he whispered to me, 'He's the one, Nettie, He's the one.' I hadn't seen him that excited in a long time. I'm really sorry about all that."

"That's all right. It broke up the monotony of the ride."

"I don't much like driving either, but these buses sure are dull. I'm surprised to see you again. Ed mentioned something about a girl. I hope everything is all right."

Benny didn't want to discuss Miriam and the mess he'd made of that, but felt obligated since Nettie had shared with him about her loss.

"That could've gone better. I just, it could've gone better."

"Does she live here?"

"Yeah, she lives next door to my dad."

"Oh." Nettie's eyes sparkled. "A childhood sweetie."

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Did you know Ed and I were like that. We met our junior year. Do you love her?"

This question took Benny by surprise. He knew he loved Miriam, but he'd never told anyone before.

"Is it that hard of a question?" Nettie asked.

"No. I mean, yeah."

"So if she's here then why are you leaving?"

"I let her down. I don't want to hurt her anymore."

"And you think you won't by leaving? How old are you?"

"I'm twenty eight." Benny didn't know where this conversation was headed.

"Then why don't you act it." Nettie said. "I'm an old woman and if there is one thing I know about living it's this; if you love somebody then no matter what, hold on. Cause your life ain't the same without them. I know. I know."

Nettie's words replayed like a stubborn song in his mind. Two words. Hold on. Hold on.

The driver sat in his seat while the passengers got on the bus. Benny didn't know what to do. He knew what he wanted to do, but didn't know if he should.

Hold on. Hold on. Miriam was the only person he'd loved. He knew there was nothing in his life that he wanted more. She was the dream he ran away to find. Could he risk losing her by running away again?

"What if she doesn't love me?" Benny asked.

"You ain't going to find out sitting on this bus with an old widow are you?" Nettie smiled. "I don't know what you're still doing here."

Benny took Nettie's hand and kissed the top of it as the driver closed the folding doors.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

Ben was asleep in his recliner when Benny arrived home. The TV illuminated the wall in successions of quick flashes while the monotone voice of a female newscaster read over the day's top stories. Benny carried his bag into his room and turned on the light. He leaned Miriam's wounded guitar on the floor against the wall and discarded the letter he'd written her. There was no need for it now. He was going to stay, tell her how he felt about her and hope for a mutual response.

Benny lay on his bed and immediately discovered how exhausted he was. He knew if he closed his eyes that he'd be asleep quickly, but he was thirsty and wanted a Mountain Dew before bed. Normally, the caffeine would give him a slight jolt of energy, but tonight he wasn't worried about it. He still had a twelve ounce can left and guzzled half of it before carrying it back to his room. He left the TV on, knowing the noise wouldn't keep him awake. His dad's bedroom door was open and the overhead light was uncharacteristically on. Although he didn't want a repeat episode at being caught in his room, he noticed the closet door was ajar and decided to investigate.

He double checked, making sure his dad was asleep, and then hurried into his bedroom. The closet door opened easily and the light from the room eased its way inside the closet, casting a warm glow on various shirts and slacks hanging. Benny noticed a cream colored security box on the floor, so he knelt down and pulled it into the light. It was locked.

Not feeling up to the challenge of searching for the key to unlock the safe's mysteries, Benny slid the box back inside. His eye caught the reflection of light from something in the left corner. He reached and felt something hard. His hand went up, feeling the curves of something familiar. There was a handle. Benny grabbed it and pulled out a guitar case.

Two of the fasteners were rusted, and the black leather covering was brittle and cracked like the mud floor of an evaporated lake bottom. A familiar tear was on the back near the middle. A casualty Benny experienced brushing the case against an exposed nail in the barn when he was seventeen. This was his grandpa's Gibson guitar case.

Benny couldn't understand why his dad kept it. He always assumed he threw it away. Why keep an empty guitar case? Ben never was the sentimental type. Unless his mom made him keep it. The case was heavy.

Slowly he unfastened the locks and opened the case. He wasn't prepared for what was inside. He couldn't believe it as he held his grandpa's Gibson again. His dad had not only kept it, but had it completely restored. It looked almost new. And Benny probably wouldn't have recognized it if some of the wood on the fret board hadn't been worn down from his grandpa's frequent use. Benny sat on the bed and held the old instrument close, not believing it was in his arms. There were new strings on it, and took no time to tune. Closing his eyes, Benny played. It was as if the guitar was an extension of him. Not just wood and strings, but life breathing through him. The old Gibson laughed a joyful melody, filling the house. It was the song Benny never got to play at graduation. A song of moving forward yet holding on to the past.

Vita

Christopher Gale Morelock was born in Morristown, TN on November 6, 1973. He was raised in Morristown, TN and attended Fairview Marguerite Elementary School and Meadowview Middle School. He graduated from Morristown Hamblen East High School in 1992. From there, he went to Carson Newman College in Jefferson City, TN and received a B.A. in Communication Arts with an emphasis in Theatre in 1996.

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