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### The Perishing

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Matthew Randall Brock entitled "The Perishing." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Margaret Lazarus Dean, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Christopher Hebert, William Hardwig, Mark Hulsether, Micheal Knight

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

The Perishing

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Matthew Randall Brock

May 2017

## Abstract

*The Perishing* is a novel set in 1980s-2000s southern Appalachia that explores the relationships between religious faith, family, trauma, and opiate addiction. It chronicles nearly thirty years in the life of the Brass family through family members' narratives in order to present an overall picture of the family's struggles through time. Central to the novel is the question: How do the things that go unsaid in a family—the secrets, the unsayable—affect the family dynamic?

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## Introduction

I imagine most all creative writing students have heard mentioned in workshops the T.S. Eliot quote: “Good writers borrow, great writers steal.” For a long time, I considered the act of “stealing” as a writer to mean doing so unintentionally through the osmotic process of reading great literature, and I never consciously stole from a writer or anyone else for my own material, that is, until I wrote my novel, *The Perishing*.

It is likely no secret to anyone who has read Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* that my own novel is structured identically. Faulkner divides his novel into four sections that encompass three decades, the first three sections narrated by members of the Compson family and the fourth section told through a third person narrator who closely follows Dilsey’s point of view. When asked in *The Paris Review* interview why he made this choice, Faulkner said that after beginning with a “mental picture . . . of the muddy seat of a little girl’s drawers in a pear tree,” he tried to tell her story through the family members who surrounded her:

I had already begun to tell the story through the eyes of the idiot child, since I felt that it would be more effective as told by someone capable only of knowing what happened but not why. I saw that I had not told the story that time. I tried to tell it again, the same story through the eyes of another brother. That was still not it. I told it for the third time through the eyes of the third brother. That was still not it. I tried to gather the pieces together and fill in the gaps by making myself the spokesman. It was still not complete, not until fifteen years after the book was published, when I wrote as an appendix to another book the final effort to get the story told and off my mind, so that I myself could have some peace from it. It’s the book I feel tenderest toward. I couldn’t leave it alone, and I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again, though I’d probably fail again.

Though the impetus of my novel is not located in a single symbolic image, I had known for a number of years that I wanted to write about the Brass family. I tried to write this novel when I was an undergraduate, writing fiction for the first time in my life. However, I could never quite figure out how to structure the novel in order to tell the overall story of this family, nor

could I find the “silver bullet” as Barry Hannah called it, the central conflict that propels a narrative forward. It wasn’t until I read *The Sound and the Fury* that I fully understood that the “silver bullet” could be a character him or herself. Similar to Caddy in Faulkner’s novel, James in my novel is at the root of his family’s despair. Also similar to Caddy, the role he plays in his family’s dysfunction is not entirely his fault. Unlike Faulkner, I did not structure my novel like his necessarily in order to tell James’ story. What I was interested in are the effects traumatic events such as the sexual abuse of a family member can have on an entire family, even if the other members of the family are unaware of the event.

If there is an image similar to Faulkner’s “muddy seat of a little girl’s drawers” in my novel, it is of a small airplane landing at an airstrip in rural East Tennessee behind a gas station blue-collar workers frequent each morning for gas and each evening for food and beer. I began my novel with this image, and though I did not realize it at the time, the opening paragraph is somewhat similar to Faulkner’s, in which Benjy “could see them hitting” (3); James “can see it coming.” He is, however, nothing like Benjy, whom Faulkner described as an “animal” incapable of feeling. When asked in the interview if he felt any emotion for Benjy, Faulkner replied, “The only thing I can feel about him personally is concern as to whether he is believable as I created him.” Though I readily admit that Faulkner has influenced my own writing and that I stole from him in terms of his narrative structure, this statement is where my thoughts about my character James and literary characters in general, and perhaps the creative act as a whole, diverge from Faulkner’s. I cannot, however, proceed to address this issue until I first confess to another theft on my part. This time I did not steal from a writer. I stole from a family member, my Uncle Firman.

It happened in the summer of 2012 when my father, Elmo, my cousin, Jeff, and Uncle Firman met for lunch at a Fuddruckers off the interstate. I was set to begin the Ph.D. program in English and Creative Writing at the University of Tennessee that August. In the interim, I was working, along with Jeff, for my father and Uncle Jim, Jeff's father, who own a house painting company in Knoxville. Uncle Firman was in his late sixties at the time and retired from his job at the Oak Ridge Y12 facility. On Fridays, in order to spend time with his brothers and nephews, he would drive into Knoxville and buy us lunch. Every time he met us, he told stories of his and his brothers'—my father's and uncle's—childhood, but it wasn't until the time we met him for lunch at Fuddruckers that I recorded him telling a story.

It was my first time at Fuddruckers, and it was obviously nothing spectacular in terms of the venue. You order the food you want and wait at a table until a staff member calls your name over a loudspeaker. I had ordered first that day and was the first one at a table. I knew what lunch would entail, Uncle Firman the center of attention like always as he told his stories, so I decided on a whim, truthfully, I would turn on my phone's recorder and leave it on the table during lunch. I don't know exactly why I chose to record his story that day, so I cannot claim that I had some profound reason, but I'm glad I did.

I had heard Uncle Firman's stories my entire life. At holiday gatherings, at family reunions, anytime he was in the company of my father and/or Uncle Jim, also good storytellers but not quite as skilled as Uncle Firman, which they would readily admit. Uncle Firman was a tall, big man with curly hair. My father and Uncle Jim described him humorously and often to his face as looking "sickly" throughout most of his youth. He was the oldest brother, my father the second oldest, Uncle Jim the third and their sister, Aunt Paula, the youngest. The four of them grew up in East Tennessee, twenty miles from Knoxville in a place called Bull Run Valley.



The farmhouse they lived in, “the house on the creek” as they called it, stood in a hollow, or “holler” as I would call it around them, beside a stream, overlooking the valley of pastureland and bottomland below.

Their childhoods were difficult, to say the least. Their father, a man named Randy, had psychological issues. He was never diagnosed by a professional, but whatever specifically ailed him was regularly expressed in anger, violence, and emotional and physical abuse toward his children and wife, which is probably why my father never allowed me to spend any time with my grandfather. Though I have never asked him, I’m sure my father wanted to protect me from the man who had abused him.

What I do know about my grandfather, I have learned through the stories Uncle Firman and his brothers told. Randy Brock was a handsome man when he was younger. He was also a large, strong man with an intimidating presence. He had been a good wrestler and boxer when he was younger, and he carried that tendency toward violence with him throughout his life. Sometimes he painted houses for a living. Most of the time he sold his sons out to local farmers to haul their hay and cut their tobacco. He had a small hog farm at one time. He was mean, he was lazy, and he felt entitled, for what I do not know.

My description of my grandfather, a man who is no longer around to defend himself (he died in the 1980s) may seem somewhat harsh. However, if you were there at his funeral and saw his children, my father and uncles, smiling and laughing around the casket (they all cried at their mother’s funeral); if you were there at those Thanksgiving dinners and family reunions and Friday lunches; if you were able to see the anguish in Uncle Firman’s eyes as he told his stories again and again through his forties and fifties and sixties and before I knew him—all of his adult life, really—I think you would agree with my assessment of the man. Regardless of what made

him the way he was, it is fair to say that his actions toward his wife and children, his abuse and its effects, were real and had lasting consequences on his family.

If I could take you back, say fifteen years, to a Brock Thanksgiving dinner at my parents' house after everyone had eaten, you'd see in the living room six or seven people, my cousins and their boyfriends or spouses, some of them with children of their own, sitting in the living room while a football game played on the television. Our parents would be in the kitchen, drinking coffee, cleaning the dishes. You'd hear over the television and the children playing and the cousins talking, Uncle Firman's loud voice as he told a story from the kitchen. You'd hear his unique sound effects, the way he raised and lowered his voice, and you'd hear the various voices he used for the people who spoke in his stories, particularly his father and mother. You'd also hear at intervals eruptions of laughter, and if you didn't know, if you weren't quite able to discern what he was saying and understand the subject matter of the stories, you might think, based on all the laughter including his own, that he was telling funny stories.

His stories were funny—they were hilarious—but they were not happy in the least. They were dark and dealt with the abuse he and his mother and siblings suffered. I said my grandfather was mean and lazy. Here are some of the things he did, all of which I learned through the stories, that show just how mean and lazy he was. He forced his sons to miss school to haul hay and cut tobacco, never giving them any of the pay they earned. He once punched my father in the nose and then cursed him for not having his own handkerchief to stop the blood. He never bought them Christmas or birthday gifts. He always told them how worthless they were. I could go on and on, but suffice it to say if he were a father to children today, the state would have taken custody of his children and he would likely be in jail.

These are just a few of the examples of his abuse I have learned about through Uncle Firman's stories. At those Thanksgiving gatherings while my cousins were in the other room, I would be sitting at the kitchen table, listening to his stories. From a young age, I craved hearing his stories, and when I was older I always looked forward to them. Anybody would, despite the subject matter, due to the way Uncle Firman told them, the way he altered his voice, the way his body grew animated as he put his entire being into the story. He could have done well as a professional storyteller.

That day at Fuddruckers, while sitting at the table with my cousin and dad and Uncle Firman, I had no idea what story he would tell—there were so many. On this particular day, he told a story I had never heard him tell. Although there is no way to completely render the story in his own voice, no way to describe his facial expressions and movements, and no way to completely capture the moment in words, I have included the transcript below. Imagine as you read it my cousin, my father, and me in clothes covered in paint. Imagine the three of us listening to Uncle Firman intently. Imagine the murmur of voices from other diners, the sounds of silverware clinking plates, children laughing or yelling every so often, and a voice coming over the loudspeaker periodically to call customers' last names.

**Firman:** Somewhere out Broadway there the old radiator or water pump or something went to leaking on him. So, when we got there, the thing started steaming and everything. Well, he borrowed a coffee can to go down to the creek and get some water and pour it in the old trap. Like I said, I knowed better. I could smell all that food them Hansards were talking about.

**Elmo:** It was our first trip to McDonald's ever, wasn't it?

**Firman:** Ahhh, probably. Probably

**Elmo:** Yeah, it was.

**Firman:** I'd never heard of it actually.

**Elmo:** It was the only one they had then. In Knoxville.

**Firman:** You know, you remember, it had the arch and everything.

**Elmo:** Yeah.

**Firman:** Well, anyway, I got to fishing around in my pocket. I don't know how I had a fifty-cent piece that he didn't extort from me. It had to be a oversight because if he would've knowed I had that fifty cent piece, he would've grabbed it. Well, anyway, I looked on the sign. A milkshake was thirty-nine cents. I thought, man, if nothing else I'd like to have me a strawberry milkshake. So I go up there and I get me a strawberry milkshake and go back to the car, and I'm sitting there—

**Elmo:** Couldn't you of got an extra couple of cups?

**Firman:** I'm sitting there. I'm sitting there. The old man done poured the water in the old trap. And he was standing outside the car there, looking in the winder at me. "Are you hungry, Firman?"

Why no, I wasn't hungry. I just wanted a milkshake. Oh it killed him dead. What really killed him dead was Chin rode over there with him. Chin decided I don't wanna be sitting out there on Broadway in a broke down trap with him, so he made up the excuse, "Uh (Kyle and Cathy or somebody followed us out there), I'll have to ride back with this over here, I'll have to sit over here and straighten them out."

No, he just didn't wanna be sitting in a trap out on Broadway with a car broke down.

Well, that killed Pappy because his date didn't ride back home with him. So, the whole thing was falling apart. Well—

**Elmo:** Did we go back home or did we go back by their house?

**Firman:** No, no. We went home. Duck. Duck. She was brave as hell. Sitting over there with Blonde Baby in her car. "Firman, you want something you just get it now. *Bloo, bloo, bloo, bloo, bloo, bloo.*"

Well, when they swapped cars—

**Elmo:** How was you supposed to get it?

**Firman:** Yeah, how was you supposed to get it?

**Elmo:** Now let's see, that milkshake was thirty-five cents.

**Firman:** Thirty-nine cents.

**Elmo:** Fries, I think, was fifteen.

**Firman:** Fifteen or twenty, something like that, yeah. Yeah, you could get the whole meal for a dollar and a quarter. Well, anyway, so she just—

**Elmo:** Is that all the money you had on you?

**Firman:** Oh, that was it. I don't even know how I had that. I was just fishing around in my pocket and I just happened to pull that fifty-cent piece out. I was thinking, How did he not extort that from me? If he knew I had it, he'd of got it before we got over there. I guarantee it. 'Cause that was a pack and a half of cigarettes.

**Elmo:** I believe he asked Duck if we wanted anything.

**Firman:** *Shit.*

**Elmo:** We said no.

**Firman:** Of course not. Starving to death.

**Elmo:** I'd like to have a milkshake.

**Firman:** Yeah and anyway, Duck she's just arrogant as hell and everything. Well, then her and Chin swap cars to ride back home. So she's in there with old Craze. She didn't say a damn word the rest of the way home. Not a word. Things changed didn't they?

I'm sitting back there in the back seat and I'm thinking by God one of these days I'm gonna get any damn thing I want to eat and it ain't gonna be none of your business because I'll have the money to buy it myself. And you ain't gonna open your damn mouth about it. Yeah, we'd just eat what, a potato and a piece of cornbread maybe? I don't know what we had. It wasn't nothing.

**Elmo:** Did me and Jim jumped you when you got home?

**Firman:** (Laughing) No, no

**Elmo:** Cause you didn't get us any?

**Firman:** Jim may have got some.

**Elmo:** I believe Jim got some.

**Firman:** I think he got some because he was sitting with Kyle and

Harold.

**Elmo:** You could have at least let us have the empty cup to suck on like we was actually getting something..

**Firman:** Well, you—

**(Over the loudspeaker:** Brock your order is ready.)

You was happy. You was sitting there with Margie.

**Elmo:** No I wasn't. No I wasn't.

**(Over two minutes pass while the four of us get our food.)**

**Elmo:** What'd you get there?

**Me:** Caesar salad.

**Elmo:** Is it good?

**Me:** Yeah, it's pretty good. You got the fish?

**Elmo:** I got a fish sandwich.

**Me:** I bet that's good.

**Elmo:** Normally they're pretty good.

**Me:** You've eaten here before?

**Elmo:** Yeah, with Firman.

**Me:** I've never eaten here before.

**Elmo:** I always get the fish sandwich. It's good.

**Jeff:** What'd you get?

**Me:** A salad.

**Jeff:** I didn't even see that. That looks pretty good, doesn't it?

**Me:** I think it's all right. I can hardly taste it. My nose is all messed up from allergies.

**Firman:** Now, I ask you. Was that a sick and diseased wacko or what?

**Elmo:** I don't know. I can't put my finger on it.

**Firman:** You remember the incident?

**Elmo:** Uh-huh.

**Firman:** Yeah. Sick and diseased. Mind was diseased. See, that's what was killing him, too. That fifty cents as far as he was concerned was supposed to be in his pocket.

**Elmo:** Did he ask you where you got it?

**Firman:** No. I think I'd mowed Raymond's yard or something. I should've told Cuz. He's asking me about that when we was over there roofing Paul's house. I should've told Cuz, "He gets every damn penny you give me. Go over there and whip his ass Cuz."

**Elmo:** It ain't like Cuz didn't know it.

**Firman:** Huh?

**Elmo:** It ain't like he didn't already know.

**Firman:** Well or heard or something. See one day, when I was working at Babley's I bought something—I don't know what it was—and he said something about it. You know, money I got out of the Babley check. I said, "Pap—"

What? You see a miniskirt or something?

**Elmo:** I'm trying to read that sign over there. I'm listening.

**Firman:** I said, "Pap, whose pocket did that money come out of to start with?" You know what he said? "Uh, it kept from going in my pocket." Figure that out. He was a sick and diseased moron.

**Elmo:** You don't need that potato.

**Firman:** Huh? Yeah I do. It's good. Yeah, sick and diseased.

**Elmo:** Well, you ever get him all analyzed?

**Firman:** No. It's over my head. It's like Hoover. J. Edgar Hoover told one of his agents. They's a guy was gonna commit suicide. And that agent said, "Let me talk to him. I think I can understand him." Old Hoover said, "If you can understand

him, we're gonna have to worry about you." Yeah, if you could understand Pappy there'd be something wrong with us except he was sick and diseased.

**Me:** Why?

**Firman:** I don't know why. None of his brothers and sisters acted like him.

**Elmo:** As far as we know.

**Firman:** Far as we know. Yeah, You'd go down there to visit him. "You ain't been down here in three weeks. You—" All he had to do in life was sit there and count the days since somebody had been there. I went down there one day—

**Elmo:** I thought you was supposed to create an environment where people want to come see you.

**Firman:** Yeah, I went down there one day. Oh, he was playing the victim to the hilt.

**Elmo:** Oh I know.

**Firman:** Christy was a year or two old I guess. I went down there to visit. Him and Aunt Audrey was sitting there in the living room. Down there at Opal's. We'd kind of got there about the same time or something. So I just walked in the living room. Hadn't done nothing else. Just walked in the living room and Audrey walks in. "How you doing today RJ?"

"Ain't doing no good. Just ain't felt good, *bluh, bluh.*"

She said, "Well, what's wrong with you?"

"It's Firman's fault. It's Firman's fault. He ain't been down here in two weeks. *Reer, reer, reer.* It's firman's fault."

I thought, You need—

**Elmo:** I must have been in the army.

**Firman:** Yeah, you may have been. I thought, You need to be in Lakeshore.

**Elmo:** When was Christy born?

**Firman:** No, Christy was born in seventy-five.

**Elmo:** I was out of the army.



**Firman:** You wasn't down there. You just wasn't down there. "It's Firman's fault."

**Elmo:** How long had it been since I'd been there.

**Firman:** I don't know. He'd try to put somebody on a guilt trip because he didn't feel good. In other words, he couldn't control us no other way at that time. That's the reason he cussed me like a dog when Rio stopped down there and wanted to see if anybody wanted to help him haul hay.

**Elmo:** What difference did it make to him if we wanted to help or not?

**Firman:** Because he couldn't control us. When we was in school, he wouldn't have asked us nothing. "You boys go help Rio." Wouldn't have said nothing, you know. But in this case he had absolutely no control and that killed him dead.

**Elmo:** But even if he did, what difference would it make to him whether you worked or not?

**Firman:** He couldn't control us.

**Elmo:** Even if he could've why would it have made any difference to him?

**Firman:** I said something about when Rio left. I said, "Me haul hay?" What I was talking about, the last two or three times I hauled hay, I got sick. That old crap blowing down my nose and everything. You know how it was.

**Elmo:** Yeah.

**Firman:** I didn't want to fool with it. I said, "Me haul hay?" I said, "No I don't have to do that anymore."

"No, you're too goddamn big. You work at Oak Ridge. *Reer, reer, reer, reer, reer.*"

I thought, yeah, If your sorry, lazy, worthless ass had worked at Oak Ridge, we wouldn't had to done none of the stuff we done.

**Elmo:** And he wouldn't be up shit creek right now.

**Firman:** No and mama wouldn't be.

**Elmo:** That's what you should've told him.

**Firman:** You wouldn't be fixing to get kicked off this place. I asked Mama, when they got kicked off down there, why didn't he do something different thirty years

ago. “He just didn't care I reckon.” No he didn't, by god. No, he had it in his mind he was gonna charm somebody so much. “Well, Randy you're a good feller. I'm just gonna give you this farm. You're such a good feller Randy.”

**Elmo:** He thought they actually cared about him.

**Firman:** Yeah. Who was gonna give him one? Opal. Roxy—?

(Server comes to table.)

**Server:** You guys enjoying everything okay?

**Elmo:** Yeah.

**Server:** You need any refills or anything?

**Elmo:** Not at the moment. Thank you.

**Server:** All right. Let me know if you need anything.

(Server leaves.)

**Elmo:** Hey, Buck. I'm a nicer feller than he was—

**Firman:** Yeah.

**Elmo:** And I don't believe anything like that. Do you?

**Firman:** Nope. I went down there a time or two when Opal was visiting. I'd like to had a video of it. Oh, he just run around and around the table. “Here, Opal, you want another bologna sandwich? Here, you want some coffee? Here, you want me to warm your coffee? Come here, here, Opal. *Bluh bluh bluh*.” Yeah, Mama—

**Me:** Who was Opal?

**Firman:** She owned that place down there on the creek.

**Elmo:** Lived in Kingsport.

**Firman:** He ran around, “Here opal you want some coffee warmed up? You want some pie?” See now, Mama, he wouldn't get up off his dead ass out of that chair to do nothing for her if she was a dying. But opal, he just run around and around the table. “Here, Opal, let me warm your coffee. Here, Opal . . . *reer, reer, reer, reer, reer*.”

**Elmo:** If I'd been sitting there I'd say, “Why here, Pappy, fill me up.”

**Firman:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Get mine while you're at it since you're wanting to be such a good waitress today.

**Me:** What was he doing, just sucking up to her so—?

**Firman:** Yeah, exactly.

**Me:** So she'd—

**Firman:** So she'd give him the farm. Yeah. You know how he used to sit down there and brag? "Believe I can deal with Opal. Believe I can deal with Opal." I was down there one day. Opal was getting sick and uh . . . "Believe I might need to take me a little trip up about Kingsport." I thought, Well you know I'm off Tuesday and Wednesday. I'd be glad to run you up there. 'Cause he couldn't drive himself, hell . . . Anyway. Yeah. "*Hahaha*, you'd like to hear the deal, wouldn't you?"

I thought, Yeah by god, I would like to hear the deal, uh-huh. Especially since she'd already gave it to Jimmy years ago. He was always living in a fantasy world.

**Elmo:** Yeah he was.

**Firman:** It was like that time, two or three weeks you know, Gail and Judy stayed down there. He was so sick and twisted there was several days Judy stayed there and watched Paula while they all went to paint. Well, in his damn sick, twisted mind, he thought Gail was gonna want to do that from now on. All Gail was waiting on was for the damn sheet metal place to call.

**Elmo:** It's amazing.

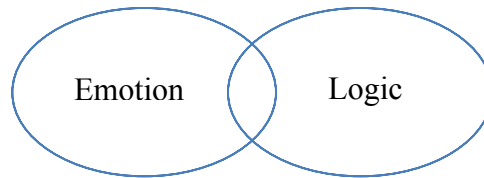
**Firman:** What in the hell did he think he had to offer somebody? He couldn't even take care of himself, much less, you know? Then the union called for Gail to go back and that was about the time they set his trailer up there. No electricity water or nothing. He went up there. He acted like they wronged him or something. He tried to threaten me one evening. Yeah. I'd started working at Oak Ridge I think. I went down there one evening. It was right in the middle when Gail and Judy were staying there, you know. And, "Well, Firman, I guesss uh, it comes time for a feller to divide up stuff. He'll have to just uh divide it up for somebody that's been good to him." Talking about Gail and Judy. Right before he died, we ourghta said, "Pap, it's time to decide this dividing up business now. I should give Gail my part of the funeral bill. Is that what you was talking about?" He'd sit there in his diseased mind talking like he had a 200 acre farm, shit he was gonna have to divide up with somebody you know. He didn't have a damn thing.

**Elmo:** I'm gonna go over here and get me a cookie or something.

**Firman:** Uh-huh.

**Elmo:** I'll be right back.

I once had a therapist who drew a Venn diagram on a piece of paper that looked like this:



That middle spot, of course, is the “Wise Brain,” one that operates with a balance of emotion and logic. I don’t dispute that it is the best way to operate in most any situation, but for the majority of my life I have operated from the emotional side, which has not served me well at times in dealing with career and interpersonal stress and relationships. Uncle Firman appeared to live closer to the center, in that “Wise Brain” area, except when telling stories. What drove his stories were the deep emotions, the unreconciled feelings, the inability to understand his father’s treatment of his family, and the attempt to do so through narrative.

I could make a case that Uncle Firman taught me about the craft of telling a story long before I even thought about writing, long before I attended college and was able to name literary elements and techniques. When I began writing stories as a young college student, when I began trying to write about the Brass family, there is no doubt that he was an influence on my writing. However, what he taught me the most how to tell a story. The stories and novels, the narratives, that I find most compelling are the ones that take personal risks, and by “personal risks” I mean just that, an author putting him or herself onto the page. Someone like Uncle Firman, risking his or her heart, his or her reputation, his or her own life in certain ways to tell a story to an audience. That is, after all, what makes literature meaningful whether a writer borrows or steals.

“Art is not a handicraft,” wrote Tolstoy, “it is the transmission of feeling the artist has experienced” (207).

Faulkner would probably disagree with Tolstoy, at least publicly. *The Paris Review* interviewer asked him, “How much of your writing is based on personal experience?” After mentioning what he considered the three necessary tools for a writer (“...experience, observation, and imagination—any two of which, at times any one of which—can supply the lack of the others”), Faulkner said, “A writer is trying to create believable people in credible moving situations in the most moving way he can.” For Tolstoy, emotion seemed to be foundational to the creative act. For Faulkner, the act of writing seemed, on the surface, more like building a house or what Tolstoy would call “handiwork.” However, if we read between the lines, I think we can make the case that although Faulkner would not directly admit it to the interviewer, what drove his best writing also came from his feelings. His entire reason for writing *The Sound and the Fury*, after all, is rooted in his feelings for Caddy. About Dilsey, he said, “Dilsey is one of my own favorite characters, because she is brave, courageous, generous, gentle, and honest. She’s much more brave and honest and generous than me.”

We cannot know for sure exactly how much of himself Faulkner put onto the page. He never said, like Flaubert, “Quentin, c'est moi.” It is impossible to measure the personal risks an artist takes when the artist is missing from the conversation. Since I am the one creating this conversation, however, I can talk about the personal risks I took in my own novel.

*The Perishing* is autobiographical though not entirely. I based my novel on my experiences growing up outside of Knoxville, Tennessee, but the mother and father, the sister and brother, and the other characters in the novel are mostly fictitious. Unlike James, for example, I have never been addicted to pain pills, nor have I ever been arrested or spent time in

jail. I do know something about addiction. I do know people who have been addicted to narcotics and have spent time in jail, and I know their parents. I also know something about sexual abuse, or at least I think I do.

Though my memories are blurry, and I've made the decision not to investigate them in order to learn the truth if the truth is even accessible, I believe I was sexually abused as a boy. I do not know by whom except that it was not a family member, nor do I know where the abuse occurred. It's not only this vague memory but other things as well, that emotional side of me, the anxiety I've struggled with my entire life, my inability to operate from the "Wise Brain." In short, I've displayed symptoms of adults who were sexually abused in their childhood, and in my childhood I displayed symptoms of children who are sexually abused. There was a period in my life when I wanted to know the truth, but I don't anymore. The primary reason is due to writing my novel.

Before I wrote the novel, especially James' section, I was terrified of the nighttime. I would double-check the locks on my house's doors over and over. I would never sleep with a window open out of fear of who or what might come inside. I would wake at the smallest noise and think someone or something was coming to harm me. I was a grown man afraid of the dark. It was very difficult to write James' section. I went through five drafts over a two-year period, and I was drained emotionally every time I got up from my writing desk. I felt depressed. I felt tremendous anxiety. When I finished his section, though, I gradually changed. I did not realize the change for a while until I noticed one morning I had left my doors unlocked and the windows opened. All the while I was also going through a difficult separation and divorce with my wife at the time, but somehow I felt better and emotionally healthier—despite being a graduate student

and instructor with financial difficulties, despite the state of my marriage—than I ever had. I attribute it all to the act of writing, the act of feeling as I wrote.

Though writing my novel was helpful for me, and though telling trauma narratives is a well-established component of cognitive behavioral therapy for victims of trauma caused by physical and sexual abuse, I hesitate to call James' story my "trauma narrative" for the same reason I hesitate to call Uncle Firman's story a trauma narrative. Doing so runs the risk of reducing such narratives. As Caruth states,

The difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike. (vii)

I would, of course, add "writers writing" to her list, and I think the way a writer can avoid turning his or her own narratives that deal with extreme trauma into clichés is through the type of characterization that comes from having a deep connection to a particular character, essentially the same way any literature is made new. I was driven by emotion when I wrote James' story, but his story is not entirely my own, nor are the other characters' stories in my novel, all of whom also suffer various degrees of trauma. As I wrote, I tried to imagine them as individuals with internal conflict specific to them while at the same time writing from my own experience, my own feelings, and that is how I was able to, I hope, avoid cliché. The characters in *The Sound and the Fury* also experience trauma, and although it is impossible to know which two of the three "tools" Faulkner employs at any given time, it is quite apparent that he was familiar with trauma himself, specifically post-traumatic stress disorder, not even a diagnostic term during his life, since Quentin, like James, is a case study for the disorder.

Faulkner once called Quentin an "educated half madman" and located his madness in his love for "some concept of Compson honor precariously and . . . only temporarily supported by

the minute fragile membrane of [Caddy's] maidenhead" (qtd. In Carter 100). The majority of critics have followed suit and pinpoint Quentin's motivation for suicide in the matrix of the old south's dying genteel customs, particularly those related to southern chivalry and Caddy's failure to embody what was socially expected of women. Quentin is troubled and perhaps mad; he does, after all, commit suicide. Though the specific traumatic event is debatable, it lies in his experience with Caddy which he attempts to repress but cannot due to the deep psychological wound the event caused him, which is triggered by the smell of honeysuckle.

Bauer, for instance, locates the cause of Quentin's trauma in this repressed memory by demonstrating that until Bland knocks him unconscious, Quentin's recollection of the suicide/incest scene with Caddy at the branch has been "completely repressed" (77). Although mentioned numerous times in his section, it is not until Quentin recalls this scene that the reader learns the significance of the honeysuckle. While conscious, he is able to resist letting his thoughts fully return him to his traumatic event, but, as Polk argues, "Quentin cannot control the chaos of his amoebalike memory and he finally succumbs to it" (Polk 149).

Polk demonstrates how Quentin's attempt to "censor" his thoughts are revealed in his syntax, grammar and punctuation:

The more in control he is, the more intricate and sophisticated the structure of his sentences . . . the less lucid his mind, the less formal or 'normal' the representation of his language on paper becomes. One can trace Quentin's psychic disintegration, his movements into and out of lucidity, in the degree of normality of his language's representation . . . especially in two scenes close to the end of his section that abandon punctuation and paragraph indentation, and in the penultimate paragraph of his section in which he finally yields up the capital 'I,' the orthographical symbol of the fragile ego he has managed to cling to, to the lower case 'i,' which represents graphemically his disintegrated self. (150)

Though Quentin still uses the capital "I" during the unwilling recollection of his repressed memory, the structure of his thoughts is strikingly different from the preceding sections. The



shift in form, and his consciousness, can be seen clearly in the beginning of the section, formatted similarly to the following:

I could smell the honeysuckle on the water gap the air seemed to drizzle  
with honeysuckle and with the rasping of crickets a substance you could feel  
on the flesh  
is Benjy still crying (Faulkner 151-2)

Apparent in the structure of this passage is the way the honeysuckle triggers his trauma and thus signals the repressed memory of his traumatic event that threatens his psychically controlled self or.

When looking at the transcripts of Uncle Firman's story, one can see changes in his syntax as well, not necessarily related to a trauma trigger or a single traumatic event but alterations that suggest certain memories were more impactful and more difficult for to render through language than others. For instance, when he recounts direct interactions with his father, his sentence structure changes and he often shifts directly into his father's point of view. It may not be clear on the page, but in person when he told a story, during these moments it was as if his father briefly inhabited him. His body would swell. His face would grow red. His eyes would bulge. He would almost yell the things his father said, as if his father still lived somewhere inside him.

While I hope I took emotional risks in my novel, in the same way Faulkner must have and in the same way Uncle Firman did when he told his stories whether intentional or not, there is a narrative I cannot claim as my own. It is the story Uncle Firman told that day at Fuddruckers. After I transcribed the recording, I revised it and included it in Kalemars section of my novel to read:

I looked at the boys in the smoking Buick, the one getting back into his car and the other trying to push it, that pill bottle in my pocket feeling like the 50 cent piece I found in my pocket all them years ago and I was right back there in one

beat of my heart, right back there in one snap of my mind, right back there thirty years ago, out on Broadway when the radiator went to leaking on the old trap Pappy drove.

By the time he pulled over at McDonald's the engine was spewing steam. I got to fishing around in my pocket and found a 50 cent piece he hadn't extorted from me. It had to of been an oversight on his part because if he knowed I had that 50 cent piece he would of grabbed it before we left the house. That was a pack and a half of Pall Malls in them days.

Pappy and his buddy Chin popped the hood. I thought if nothing else I'd like to have me a strawberry milkshake. I go inside McDonald's and get me a strawberry milkshake for 39 cents. I'm sitting in the back of the old trap drinking it after Pappy and Chin pour water into the radiator.

He was standing outside and looking through the window at me. "What? Are you hungry, Kalemar? Don't I feed you enough."

"I just wanted a strawberry milkshake."

It killed him dead that I had the money to get my own milkshake but he wasn't about to say nothing around Chin. What really killed him dead was that Chin rode over there with us and the old trap was acting up. Chin decided he didn't want to be sitting in a broke down trap out on Broadway so he made up an excuse.

Duck and Chin's wife, Blonde Baby, had pulled up about that time. They was following us somewhere in Blonde Baby's car. "I'll have to ride with them over here," said Chin. "I'm gonna have to sit over here and straighten them out."

That killed Pappy dead because the whole thing was just falling apart. His date didn't want to ride with him anymore.

Duck was brave as hell while she was in Blonde Baby's car. "Kalemar," she said, "now if you want something else you get it. *Blu-blu-blu-blu-blu*."

We both knowed she didn't have no money because Pappy wouldn't let her and I wouldn't of asked Pappy for a dime if I was about to starve. Chin decided he'd just switch cars with Duck. So once the old trap was running again she was in there with me and Old Craze. She didn't say a word the rest of the drive. Not a word.

He said, "Got him a milkshake, huh? Ain't even gonna share it with his poor Pappy."

I said, "Pap, whose pocket did that money come out of to start with?"

"It don't matter. What matters is it kept from going in my pocket."

I'm sitting in the back seat and I'm thinking, One of these days I'm gonna get any damn thing I want to eat. It ain't gonna be none of your business because I'll have the money to buy it for myself. You ain't gonna open your damn mouth about it.

I should of told Uncle Adna. He was asking me about it when I was over there helping him cut some brush off his property. I should of said, "Damn right. He gets every damn penny you give me unless I hide it. Go over there and whip his ass, Unc."

But it ain't like he didn't already know.

I went down there to the house on the creek one day before James was born. Pappy was playing the victim to the hilt. I went down there to visit him and Duck. His sister Audrey showed up about the same time I did. I walked in the living room a little ahead of her. Aunt Audrey walks in and says, "How you doing today, R.J.?"

"I aint doing no good," Pappy says. "Just ain't felt good."

"What's wrong with you?"

"It's Kalemar's fault," he said. "It's Kalemar's fault. He ain't been down here in two weeks. *Reer reer reer reer reer*."

I thought, Old man you need to be in Lakeshore Mental Hospital.

"It's Kalemar's fault."

He'd try to put somebody on a guilt trip because he didn't feel good. He couldn't control me no other way at that time. That's the reason he cussed me like a dog when Rio stopped down there to see if anybody wanted to help him haul hay. When we was in school he wouldn't of asked us nothing. He would of pulled over the school bus or if it was a Saturday he would say, "You boys go help Rio and I'll be down there directly." But in this case he had absolutely no control over me anymore. That killed him dead. (103-7)

When Rio left I said, "Me haul hay?" The last two or three times I hauled hay I got sick from that crap blowing down my nose and throat. I said, "No, I don't do that anymore."

Pappy said, "You're too goddamn proud."

I wanted to say, If your sorry old ass had worked half as much as I was for my family we wouldn't of had to do none of the stuff we did. And he wouldn't of been up shit creek at the time and Mama wouldn't of been either. They wouldn't of been getting ready to get kicked off the place.

I asked Mama when they got kicked off down there and had to move into the little trailer up the pike, "Why didn't he do something different 30 years ago?"

"He just didn't care I don't reckon."

He didn't by God. He had it in his mind he was gonna charm Opal so much she'd say, "Well, Randy, you're such a good feller I'm gonna give you this house." He thought she actually cared about him. I was a nicer feller than he was and I never believed anything like that. Nobody's gonna give you anything.

I went on down there a time or two for a visit. I'd like to of had a video of it. Oh, he just ran around and around the table. "Here, Opal, you want another bologna sandwich? Here, Opal, you want some coffee? Here, Opal, you want some pie?"

For Mama he wouldn't get his ass out of that chair to do nothing for her if she was dying. But for Opal he just ran around and around the table. "Here, Opal."

I wanted to say, Pappy, get mine while you're at it since you want to be such a good waitress today.

He used to sit there and brag. "Believe I can deal with Opal. Believe I can deal with Opal."

I was down there one day when Opal was sick up in Kingsport and about to die. “Believe I might need to take me a little trip up about Kingsport,” he said. “Ha ha ha. You’d like to hear the deal, wouldn’t you?”

I thought, Yeah by God I’d like to hear the deal especially since she’s already willed the house and land to her son and everybody knows it. Pappy was always living in a fantasy world. What the hell did he think he had to offer somebody? Not long before he died, he started talking about dividing his stuff up, like he had a 200-acre farm or something and wasn’t renting a trailer off the pike. The only thing me and Grease had to divide up after he kicked off was the funeral bill and here I was thinking about how I’m gonna have to pay for another one soon, that of my boy, with no cross for Leda to stand beneath, only the dark idol he’d built to ruin.

I’ve spoken to my father about using Uncle Firman’s story in my novel. He is certain Uncle Firman would not mind. In fact, he thinks if Uncle Firman were still alive, he’d want me to include more of his stories. Though the story comes directly from the transcript and Uncle Firman, I did make some changes such as a few deletions and some additions, mainly concerning temporal transitions. I share the transcript and my version of it in order to make confessions: one that I did, in fact, use his story and two, that it is better than anything I could have contrived because it came from him. From a craft perspective, I was simply unable to resist using his story. I hope, in the same way Faulkner portrays Quentin’s psyche on the page, my choice to have Kalemar shift to backstory in this instance and others in the novel show the lack of control he has over the painful memories of his past, the deep wounds his father caused. I also hope, in some ways, my choice is an homage to Uncle Firman, the best storyteller I knew and one of my influences.

He died less than a year after we met at Fuddruckers. It was unexpected. His family misses him terribly. My father will say, “If only he’d taken better care of himself.” By care, he is mostly referring to Uncle Firman’s diet. In the transcript you can see my father telling him, “You don’t need that potato.” The potato was more than a baked potato; it was covered with butter and bacon and sour cream. I can’t help but want to make connections to that story he told, about the

way his father would not let him eat, about the way he “starved” as a child and looked “sickly” all the time, to his eating habits as an adult, the consequences an early death. His father who tormented him as a child still tormenting him long after he’d died. More than anything, though, I wish I could tell Uncle Firman how much his stories meant to me, how he taught me about telling stories long before I ever put pen to paper. I never thanked him.

As you can see from the transcript and my novel, nicknames are a bit of an eccentricity shared on my dad’s side of the family. I think they got it from their own father, perhaps another one of the symptoms of his psychological issues. Uncle Firman called me “Scuddle Head” my entire life, due to my curly hair, I guess. When I became an adult and started college, he began calling me “Smart Scuddle,” which he called me every time he greeted me on those Friday lunches. It was a compliment. I hope Uncle Firman would still call me that, “Smart,” but I also hope when I write fiction I am not smart at all.

The Perishing

a novel

June Tenth, 1989.

I see it coming. Wheels down the plane teeters in the sky of wet pink paint. All colors of paint are on our clothes, the white paint our hands. The truck smells like paint and mineral spirits and corn dogs. Daddy holds the stick in his mouth and sucks the burnt part. I have half of my corn dog left. The woman's panties are in my pocket.

Don't tell your mama. She'll get onto us for ruining our supper.

I won't.

His hair is thick and black and his whiskers look like a black mask. He used to blow his cheeks up big with air and let me pat it out of them and he made propeller noises.

The propeller spins and flashes in the sun. The plane comes teetering and lowering in the pink sky. The tires squeak on the pavement and make curls of smoke.

I finish mine and hand him the stick. He wads his and mine in a bag and shakes the ice in his Coke cup and sips it. He opens the truck door and takes the bag to the trash can and shoves it inside.

Starlings sit high on the Smoky Mountain Market sign. They are the only birds I will be allowed to shoot when he pays me enough money for my pellet gun. He says they are Russian and carry diseases. He calls them Commie birds.

Other trucks loaded with ladders and buckets drive in and out under the Smoky Mountain Market sign. Men dirty and sweaty like us are buying food and beer. Mama hates beer because of her own daddy that was mean and died because of drinking.

The plane circles into a hangar. The propellor gets slower and stops. Two doors open and a man and a woman hop out and stand around it. Daddy puts a chew of Beechnut in his jaw and starts the truck. The ladders and buckets in the bed bang and rattle.

Tell me, Bubs, if you could climb in that plane right now and fly somewhere, where would you go?

I don't know. I've never been nowhere.

Why, you have too. You've been to Myrtle Beach and up to Maryland to visit Uncle Adna and Aunt Rachel. Don't forget Pickett State Park. You and Bug had a good time there.

I'd probably just fly around and look down at everything.

And sightsee?

I guess.

I flew a few times back when I was in the Army.

What did everything look like?

The same as from here, just smaller or bigger depending on how you think about it. Someday you'll be able to fly anywhere you want. You'll have it better than I do.

He drives the truck toward home. Men on the radio talk about UT football and the Cobb-Webb running game. Granddaddy Longlegs don't make webs. They sit on the fence gate most of the time and they crawl on your hands when you open it. He says they are smart enough to count the number of cows in the pasture and that is why I should never kill one.

Two more months, Bubs, two more months and football season starts. No more working these Saturdays. You'll find me plopped right there on the couch in front of the TV.

He played football in high school. He showed us a film of him on a field with a mountain in the background. He was running around the field in a red and white uniform and slinging the ball and getting tackled over and over. He said if he only had more time to practice instead of working all the time he could have played in college. Mama said she was in the stands but the camera never showed her. She said he was the best football player she ever saw.



He tried to get me to play baseball once but I did not like all those people watching me and he got mad because I could not swing the bat.

He changes the channel. Merle Haggard is singing about a blue bayou and a bamboo cane. Daddy turns it up and sings along. He squints his eyes with certain words and adds whine to his voice and spits his tobacco juice down the straw into the Coke cup.

The warm summer air smells sweet like his tobacco. I hang my arm out the window and follow the shape of the land with my hand. The humps of the thick green ridges. The flat pastures high with chigger weed and sage grass. The honeysuckle and kudzu in mounds on the fencerows. Tiger lilies lick out like sore tongues.

Sis Pup is at the garage wagging her tail and eating from her bowl. He gets out and grabs the bucket of paint brushes in mineral spirits and a rusty wire brush from the truck bed. I tell him about the two ticks on Sis Pup's back.

He puts down the bucket and digs his fingers into her fur and pinches out one tick and the other. He drops them in the gravel and goes to the side of the garage near the place he cleans paintbrushes. The ticks try to crawl. They are blue and fat and keep falling on their sides. Sis Pup crunches her food and wags her tail. He comes back with two bricks and squats and picks up one of the ticks and sets it on the brick. He takes the other brick and slaps it down with a crack that sounds like a rifle. He pulls it away and laughs at the dark red spot. Don't have to worry about that one sucking no more blood, Bubs.

He does the same with the other tick and swipes a hand across Sis Pup's side and pats her head and tells her she's a good girl. Go on in and get warshed up, Bubs.

He carries the bucket to the side of the garage. There are two other buckets filled with kerosene and a circle of dirt on the ground. I pet Sis Pup and watch him douse the brushes in the

kerosene and brush them and wring them out and beat them dry against the toe of his boot like he is mad at the paintbrushes.

The house smells like sausage and biscuits and gravy. The wooden spoon rings the sides of the black skillet. Mama stands at the stove in a yellow shirt and jeans with white flour handprints on the legs. There is a big bowl of wineberries on the table. Her fingers are stained red and she has smears of red on her shirt. It looks like blood but I know it is wineberries that grow beside the fence in the back of the pasture.

My fingers are pink and raw from sanding. I feel the dust in my nose and throat. The paint smells and food smells are making me sick to my stomach. She smiles at me. You look a little peaked, honey. Daddy didn't work you too hard did he?

I shrug my shoulders.

I'll make sure he gives you a day off soon. A twelve-year-old don't need to work all summer. We'll go to the Museum of Energy. We'll touch the metal ball and make our hair stand up.

When?

As soon as we pay some bills. Go ahead and get a bath. Supper's about ready.

I take off my tennis shoes and leave them in the living room at the green stove. In the winter he wakes before us and shovels coal into it and gets the house warm. I can lay in my covers and hear his shovel scrape at the coal and hear the coal bang inside the stove and it feels good. When it's real cold he lets Sis Pup come inside and sleep by the stove. You can smell the coal even in the summers and see its black stains around the pipe on the ceiling. We do not have a chimney but just a silver pipe that runs out of the side of the house and is held from the gutter with wire. Mama used to say Santa Clause could make himself tiny and sneak in through the

keyhole. When they came over to visit that Christmas I stood near the stove and felt its heat and listened to the metal tick. Pastor Walland and his wife and \_\_\_\_\_ all wore red and green Christmas sweaters that squeezed their throats. \_\_\_\_\_ wore a metal and leather brace on his leg. They sat around the living room and drank egg nog and played Rook on TV trays with him and her. I did the bad thing when \_\_\_\_\_ kept peeking at me over his cards and I let it roll down through my corduroy britches and land in the coal dust on the hearth. It was a brown turd.

Oh no, she said. I'm so sorry. We're having some issues.

And him near twelve, he said.

The others looked at it and looked back at their cards. Her face got red. She went for the broom and dustpan and Lysol. He made me go in my bedroom and change my underwear and britches. He told me not to come out until company left. It wasn't very long. He let Sis Pup in later that night and she slept where the turd had been.

Bug is in the bathroom leaning over the sink to comb her wet brown hair. She wears sweatpants and one of his white t-shirts with paint all over it. The shirt has a company name on it and says Painters Are Nice People. It is as big as a dress on Bug. She has a band aid on her thumb. She jabs it at my face. I got a briar in the wineberry patch.

I don't care.

I took it out myself. With tweezers.

Get out of here.

You stink.

I been working.

Daddy's gonna take me sometime.

You're a girl.

So.

Get out of here.

Mama. Mama.

Her footsteps come down the hallway. She is pointing her spatula at Bug. Let him get a bath. He worked all day.

Tell him I get to go. Daddy said.

I need you to help me around the house this summer. Come on.

I stick my tongue out. Bug sticks her pointy tongue out. It is bright red from the wineberries. She stomps down the hall and combs her hair and snaps her hips. One time she tried to be like me behind the house and peed from her little pink thing that looked like a folded sock. She made a mess in the floor. Mama told her boys and girls were different. Bug said it was not fair. I said girl cows can pee standing up. Mama said to quit talking about cows.

I lock the door and turn on the bath faucets. The water rattles the pipes in the wall and comes out rusty at first. I take the panties from my pocket. They are white and shiny and soft. They smell like a different kind of clean laundry. I lay them on the sink and take off my clothes and step in the tub and look out the window. The white and black cows are in the pasture swinging their tails and shaking their backs and pooping and peeing and eating grass. Mama does not like the way I draw the cows.

I lay against the cold tub and let the hot water go over my toes. The woman is tall with curly yellow hair. Her shoes go pop against the floor when she walks through her house. You can hear her come in through the garage and up the steps. Before she came in the bathroom we were painting he spit his tobacco into a Coke bottle and rested his paintbrush on the bucket and got a gulp of water from the sink and swished it around and checked his teeth in the mirror. She wore a

tight black skirt that went past her knees and a white shirt that buttoned at her wrists. She talked through sharp lips and when he talked to her he tried to make his sharp too. Her perfume stayed in my nose for a long time after she left.

I stick my head under the faucet and use the bar of soap on my face and arms and rinse off. I put on a towel and bundle my dirty clothes and hide the panties inside and carry them through the house. Bug is in the living room combing one of her purple ponies' hair. I close my door and come out of the towel and put on shorts and a shirt. I fold the shiny panties and put them in my closet inside a crayon box with most of the colors missing and shut the door. The window blinds are open. The ridges look like paint buckets for the dripping pink sky. Shadows are long dark fingers in the pasture. The cows have gone back through the woods to Lewis' barn.

I hurry to shut the blinds but the feeling comes inside me. My chest clamps tight and my eyes see a night with spinning stars and I feel like I'm lifting outside of myself into the night and getting stuck where I can't lift out or stay in or say anything or move. It feels like I am trapped inside and outside of my body and being squeezed and every breath is harder and harder. Bug isn't in the living room and I can't hear them. I run toward the kitchen afraid they won't be there and I will disappear into the night in my mind.

They are sitting around the table.

I sit down. He is still in his work clothes and smells like kerosene. His hands are stained white and a deeper white is around his fingernails. I hide mine under the table so they won't see them shaking. Mama asks Bug to say the prayer.

Bug folds her hands and squeezes her eyes shut. Dear, God, thank you for our food. Thank you for Mama and Daddy and Brubber James. Pooshie, pooshie, pooshie. Amen.

Daddy grins. Good job, darling.

Mama uncovers the red dishtowel from the biscuits. She fills Bug's plate. I fill mine and he fills his with sausage and scrambled eggs and biscuits and gravy. Mama only puts a biscuit and a little egg on her plate. Her hair hangs at her ears. When she chews it is a little ball in her left cheek and she looks up at the ceiling like she is thinking about something.

Daddy stuffs his jaws with the food like he cannot get enough in there and he chomps it like a cow and makes cow eating noises. Breakfast for supper. My favorite, honey.

Daddy, didn't you say I could come to work with you?

Some day, but I want you to help your mama around the house for now.

We picked a bunch of berries today.

I see that.

She's a good picker. She can get in there where I can't. We're lucky the birds didn't find them yet. I'll make a pie tomorrow.

I got a splinter. I took it out myself. With tweezers.

She was a big girl.

James is a good little sander. I let him paint some too.

I can tell. James, did you warsh at all?

There is still white paint on my hands.

He'll need to use some kerosene.

I don't guess that woman went ahead and paid you.

He laughs and almost spits out his food. He takes a drink of Coke. I reckon she'll hold onto her money as long as she can while we bust our butts.

Kale.

If I could've talked Grease into working today we might've finished this week. He don't believe in working on Saturdays. It's more money for me though and work's a little slow right now so I'll take it.

I think about my pellet gun and how it will make me not scared anymore. What about my money?

I'm gonna pay you, boy. What kind of daddy do you think I am?

He'll pay you, baby. Don't you worry. I'm surprised Grease didn't work with you, with all them kids.

Doll works.

Some women would rather raise their children. They think other things are more important than money.

I didn't mean nothing.

Lewis called again today about rent.

Lewis wouldn't have a house to rent if it wasn't for me. Tell me, how much work have I done around here?

Kale. He gives us a good deal.

Tore out the kitchen floor and put on half a roof. Crawled under the house with the spiders and mouse crap and mold and put in a new water line. He don't think about none of that.

He was nice about it.

I'm sure he was but a man sitting on all that land and farm equipment and heads of cattle which he never had to work for, you'd think he'd relax a little and quit worrying so much about his precious rent.

Kale. Money don't buy happiness.

No but it buys the things that make you happy.

The Lord has blessed us.

I ain't saying he hasn't.

Bug watches Daddy. He does not look up from his plate. Mama leans back and crosses her legs and looks at the ceiling and chews. Oh, I forgot to tell you.

His eyes open a little wider.

The washing machine broke again. I went to wash some church clothes and it wouldn't fill.

He looks at his plate and sops up some gravy with a biscuit. I'll take a look at it.

After supper he helps her clean up. I hear the plates clinging in the sink and smell the dish detergent bubbles. They talk too soft for me to hear. Bug is in her room listening to New Kids on the Block on her tape player and brushing her ponies' hair. I get the panties from the crayon box and there are crayon colors of red and black and purple on them. I feel them for a second and put them back before I get caught.

I hear the front door open and go into the living room. It is dark outside. Moths fly around the porch light. Their tiny bodies make big shadows on the brick sidewalk. Sis Pup is barking at something in the pasture and the cicadas are starting up in the cow manure night. I sit on the couch and watch the door and worry he won't come back and something else will sneak inside. Before the feeling comes again I see his shadow over the moths' shadows and he is standing at the door holding his toolbox. Bubs, it never ends.

He shuts the door and carries the toolbox through the house to the back.

I sit on the couch and draw in my notebook with a pencil. I draw the cows in the pasture swinging their tails and pooping and peeing. Mama comes in wearing her bathrobe. Flour is in



her hair and it makes her look like an old woman for a second. She looks down at the notebook. I can see she is not happy.

She turns on the TV and works the antenna until it's not as fuzzy. She sits on the sofa beside the stove and crosses her legs and tucks the robe to the side and works on her cross stitch. Bug comes in and stands in front of the TV and combs her pony's hair and dances and sings. Don't go girl. Don't go girl. Mama, what's he doing?

A man in a white shirt and black pants is standing in front of four camouflaged tanks with red stars on the sides. When the tanks try to go past him he blocks their way and they stop.

Mama gets up and goes to the TV and turns it off. Y'all don't need to watch that.

She sits back down in the chair with her cross stitch.

Bug whines. But he was about to get runned over.

He didn't get ran over. He was protesting the government. He wanted freedom.

What's freedom.

It's when you can make your own choices.

Bug combs her pony's hair and thinks for a minute. Like God?

God gives us freedom.

I thought he just told us what to do.

He speaks to us because he has a plan for each and every one of us and we get freedom by living through him and trusting in his word.

Bug jumps on the couch and makes me mess up one of my cows' tails. I push her away and erase it. Mama, James is drawing the cows pooping again.

She looks at me. Why don't you draw something else?

I don't want to.

There's other things besides cows.

Bug wiggles around on the couch. Don't go girl. Don't go girl. She leans over to see what I'm drawing now. Who's that?

You.

Mama, James is drawing a cow pooping on my head.

She gets up. That's enough. She reaches for my notebook. I give it to her because she'll take it anyway.

I think you two better get ready for bed. We have church in the morning.

She tucks Bug in first in her room. I can hear her in there praying pooshie, pooshie, pooshie. Daddy told me not to tell her she was saying my prayer wrong or we would never get to hear her say it again and that would be a shame because it's so cute to him.

Mama comes into my room. She opens my closet and moves clothes on the hangers. I am afraid she will find them in the crayon box. You can wear that Easter outfit tomorrow.

She closes the closet door and kneels beside the bed and pulls her robe closed at her chest asks if I want her to pray with me. I tell her I'll do it by myself. She leans over me and pulls the covers to my chin. She sticks her nose in my hair. Why don't I smell shampoo?

I forgot.

You didn't forget your other parts, did you? The important ones?

No.

Are you sure?

Yes.

Remember what the doctor said. You need to keep clean, honey, or it will never get better.

I will.

She tells me night night and goes out and leaves the door cracked to where I can see light from the kitchen. She pours a glass of water and goes to the back porch and tells him night night. I hear her mattress squeak and his tools banging inside the washing machine. Later I hear him get a bath and rinse the tobacco out of his mouth and gargle and their mattress squeak again.

The house gets quiet and I think of my closet and I feel her in there. She is not my mama or any teacher or my mama's friends or any mama of girls or boys I know. I cannot see her but I know she is and is not there. When I try to see her I hear the him outside my window and see the him putting his long yellow nails to the screen. I hear the him breathing on the glass and I have to do it with my skin to stop the feeling. I have to pull it apart and hold back my noises. I do it until the him is gone and I am burning and I feel the white stuff come.

I breathe in the quiet darkness. I used to pray that God would put a shield around our house and I could sleep. That does not work anymore. I have to pretend we are back at Pickett State Park. We stayed there one week and the him could not find my window. It was just moonlight and crickets and the soft moss outside the cabin window. Crickets singing and soft green moss that smelled soft and sweet and the still lake in the rocks. Mama liked to lay in the moss after supper. She and him laid out there talking in the night and I could sleep.

In a little boat one day we rowed around the lake. The cliffs were tall and jagged and white above the cold blue water. Bug leaned over the side of the boat and watched the water make S's behind his paddle. I laid my head in Mama's lap and smelled the sugary lake air and watched the trees and cliffs pass above us. She rubbed my head and we got closer to the turn where the stone made a bridge over the lake and he would take a picture. I always fall asleep before the stone makes a bridge over the lake and he takes the picture.

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I am on the sidewalk under the hanging green branches of the elm. Where is \_\_\_\_\_?

Raley is on the steps in a pair of overalls over a white shirt. He is looking out across the parking lot through little squares of black plastic hooked to his glasses. I still have white paint on my hands. Daddy said he didn't want to stink up the sanctuary with kerosene.

A redheaded boy named Eric runs out of the basement. Why weren't you in Sunday school?

My daddy had to fix the washing machine.

Wanna play hide and seek?

I shake my head. I can see into the basement where the coal room is. Where is \_\_\_\_\_?

James Russell.

Raley leans over the black wrought iron. The blue and white stained glass windows catch the sunlight and it runs along the edges of the shapes of colors and lights them gold. Commere, boy.

I climb the steps. Red wasps fly around the steeple cross. He waits at the big wooden doors. Two other boys run out of the basement and chase each other through the green grass around the Pedigo Baptist sign.

Raley reaches into his overalls pocket and pulls out a handful of peppermints. I take some. Where is \_\_\_\_\_?

The new woman is getting out of her car. It has splatters of mud on the doors and missing hubcaps. She wears a faded blue dress that is sideways on her body. She is throwing off a cigarette and coughing and walking across the parking lot and pulling at her dress to make it not sideways.

Do me a favor, James Russell. Follow her. See if she takes anything.

I go down the front steps and wait for her to walk into the new part of the church at the back. Then I go in and stand at the bottom of the stairs and look down into the basement. I can hear their shoes slapping against the floor. Some are probably hiding in the coal room where \_\_\_\_\_ is.

When the woman makes it up the steps I go up and poke my head around the corner and watch her. She walks down the red carpet in the hallway and past the wooden board shaped like a tombstone that says the number of church members present and the offering amount from last Sunday. She is pulling at her dress and holding her coughs. She stops at the nursery door and peeks in and goes inside.

I follow her and stop at the door and watch her go around the room. She takes a glass angel from the windowsill and sticks it in her purse. She looks into the cribs and opens the door to the bathroom that has the tiny kids' toilet. She grabs a roll of toilet paper and puts it in her purse. Then she sees me.

She closes her purse. Her hands are shaking. I didn't know you were there. I was looking for the ladies' room.

I point out the door.

Down there? Thank you.

I smell her cigarette smoke. She looks at me. What's your name?

James.

How old are you?

Twelve.

Lord, Lord. My boy. They took him. He's your age.

She reaches for my face and coughs and puts her hand on her chest. Her face is tired and wrinkled and strangled. She starts to talk and coughs again. Something comes up in her mouth. She holds her fist to her lips and goes down the hall and into the ladies' room.

Psssst.

Raley is at the end of the hallway. The squares of black plastic are flipped up and I can see his eyes.

Did she take anything?

I shake my head.

Was she snooping?

I don't know.

I got something for that bitch.

He pulls the wooden handle of a little pistol out of his pocket. Specially if she thinks she's gonna get her worthless brothers to come down here and hold up the church.

Pastor Walland's belly comes around the corner. He is wearing a black suit and a black tie that has a golden cross and a golden crown of thorns dripping blood on it. His gray hair looks like a storm cloud on his head. He is humming and carrying his Bible.

Raley leans toward him. Can we talk a minute in your office, Preacher?

They go into his office. I go into the sanctuary. It smells like songbooks and candy and men and women and babies. Blue light shines in through the windows and dust is floating and sparkly. Mama is playing the piano. She is in her yellow dress and sits with her back straight on the bench and hits the keys with her fingers. I can feel some keys in my teeth and some ones in my feet. She sees me out of the corner of her eye and smiles. Every Christmas Daddy says he is going to save enough money to buy her her own piano next year. He says we will put it in the

living room across from the stove. Mama wants to get me braces for my teeth first. He says they can do both but they never can.

He is at the back of the sanctuary shaking the hands of a man and woman with a little boy climbing up her shoulder. The man has big teeth like me except his teeth are brown at the tips because he probably doesn't brush them good like I don't always want to wash good. The woman has a mustache you can see when the sun hits it. Mama told me not to say anything about his teeth or her mustache. One Sunday they went before the church and both of them were crying. They said God was calling them to be missionaries. Part of the offering is going to help them raise enough money to get to another country.

Other people are scattered around the pews. Women in dresses and men in suits and overalls talk and shake hands. Mama plays the piano. I find her purse and Bible in a pew on the left side of the sanctuary. Leda Brass is written in gold cursive on the bottom corner. I sit down. The new woman comes in pulling at her dress and sits by herself beside a window. The blue light is bright and makes her body dark. Every now and then she gets stiff and puts a fist to her mouth and holds back a cough. I hope nobody catches her with the angel and toilet paper.

The older boys and girls come in and sit in the back. Where is \_\_\_\_? Bug is wearing her white dress with lace sleeves and carrying a water color picture of three brown crosses on orange construction paper. She sits next to me. I hold out a peppermint. She reaches for it and I jerk it away. She gives me a mean look and slides down the pew. Daddy comes over smiling. The whiskers are gone and his face is shiny and slick. He pushes Mama's purse and Bible to the side and sits beside me and slaps my knee.

Hey, Bubs.

He reaches out his arm and puts it around Bug and pulls her to him.

James won't give me no candy.

I bet Raley's got plenty of it.

He is coming out of the back with Pastor Walland. Pastor Walland takes his big chair on the altar. Raley goes to a pew on the other side of the church. He leans down and says something into his wife's ear. He looks at the woman holding back a cough and walks through the sanctuary and toward the big wooden doors. Daddy hollers at him. He doesn't hear. I hold out a peppermint. Here.

Bug grabs it. What do you say, Bug?

He wouldn't give me one when I asked first.

It don't matter. He gave you one now.

She shows me her mean look again. Thanks.

He nudges me with his elbow. You be nice to your little sister. She's the only one you got.

Mama starts a new song. She plays it louder to let everyone know the service is about to start. The choir director and choir members come in through the back doors and take seats around the altar. Behind them is the baptistry. There is a tub inside the wall and a picture of weeping willows along a river in the place Jesus lived. When Pastor Walland baptizes you you have to bring a change of clothes and then there is a big casserole dinner in the fellowship hall and everyone shakes your hand and you eat with wet hair.

The bell in the steeple rings. \_\_\_\_\_ walks in behind the redheaded boy. He doesn't wear the brace anymore but he still walks funny because something is wrong with his nerves that makes it look like he is trying to skip with one leg and trying to pedal a bicycle with the other.



He has his hand on the boy's shoulder and I want to tell the boy to run, not to listen to what \_\_\_\_\_ says or take one of his suckers. I want to say he does not know anything about God.

Mama ends the song. People's shoes bump the backs of pews and the woman holds in her coughs. Pastor Walland rises from his big chair and stands behind the wooden pulpit and looks out at us and smiles and bows his head in prayer.

\_\_\_\_\_ bows his head. I can see his pointy ears and the fur sticking up off his neck in the light. I can remember the smell of his breath. It smelled like the rusty hinges on the pasture Do you like suckers the coal had been there Here you could smell the rusty hinges on the pasture Cherry The walls were still black with Suck on it gate Yeah, like this. Ooops, I didn't mean to grab you there. Coal I was trying to pat your leg. That's okay, though. No don't leave. Here, you can touch me on accident. See mine's bigger. Yours will be like that someday when you keep on growing the milkweed in the pasture grows It'll grow like you and see you can feel it higher than me Don't be afraid we're in God's house I hide in it and smell the leaves God won't let nothing happen in his house he don't like, his hand will reach down inside I wait until the birds start singing again Feel it and burst out It's hard screaming and hot and cut them down yours will do it too except and they bleed littler white and sticky and warm God loves us he loves us here doing this and worshipping him and fellowshiping and appreciating ourselves and each other Coal You're a good boy Metal You're a good boy Stink You're a good boy Stink But he don't want us telling nobody about Stink our special time, nobody, see here, see here, see here \_\_\_\_\_ does not know anything about \_\_\_\_\_ and I do not either.

The choir director gives us the page number of “Brethren, We Have Met to Worship.” It is one of Daddy’s favorite songs. I can tell by the way he squints his eyes and twangs his voice like when he sings Merle Haggard songs. He shares his hymnal with Bug and she sings with him.

See our fathers and our mothers,

and our children sinking down.

Brethren, pray and holy manda

will be showered all around.

I want to tell her it’s manna but Daddy smiles when she gets the words wrong like with my prayer.

When we finish two songs the ushers start taking the offering. The woman with the little boy and blonde mustache comes up front. She stands in her long dress with her hands at her stomach and tells the congregation about their progress getting to somewhere called the Philippines. She thanks everyone for the support and talks about how people over there are poor and suffering and living in shacks. She says they need food and water and hygiene products. Most of all they need God’s word in their lives. People say Amen. She says God is their only hope. People say, Amen. The woman starts to cry and has to go back to her seat.

When the ushers are two pews behind us Daddy pulls a folded blue check out of his shirt pocket that says Kalemar Brass and Leda Brass at the top and has our address on it and hands it to Bug. The usher passes the offering plate to me. A few dollars and other checks and some change cover the red bottom of the bowl. I pass it to him and he passes it to Bug and she drops in the check. Daddy said when I get paid for working for him I have to put in a tithe too but I get to keep the rest for my gun.

After their song the choir members walk out into the pews. Mama closes her songbook on the piano and comes and sits with us. I am between her and Daddy. Bug is on his side. He has his legs crossed and his ankle is showing. The elastic is hanging out of his dress sock. He puts one arm around Bug and the other around me and Mama. I can smell her perfume he gets her for Christmas every year and his Brut aftershave like the way my hands used to smell when I patted the air out of his cheeks.

Pastor Walland says he is changing the message. He says God laid a new one on his heart just this morning. He says he has a very important question that is relevant to our day and time and even our little church in Pedigo Holler.

What happens when we steal from the Lord God almighty?

People start whispering and moving in the pews.

Turn with me now to Acts chapter five and let's consider Ananias and Sapphira, a man and woman Paul tells us did just that.

I take a pen out of my Bible and start drawing a cow on the back of a church bulletin. Mama reaches down and puts her hand around my hand. Her fingers are the same size as mine. Her ring has pink roses in the gold and a little diamond. I look up at her. Her blue eyeshadow makes her eyes more white and green. She whispers to pay attention. She opens my Bible to the right spot.

Pastor Walland gets madder and madder like when he talks about how bad things have got since he was a boy and our sinful nature. He loosens his tie and takes off his jacket and puts it in his chair and stomps around the altar and raises his fist and yells about stealing from God or his house. His face gets sweaty like his storm cloud is raining. He keeps wiping his forehead with a handkerchief and swinging his arm and saying, Tempt the spirit of the Lord and the Lord

will strike you down. He ends by asking the Lord to please don't strike those down that lied to the Holy Ghost just yet. Please don't send them to the Lake of Fire. Please, dear Lord, please allow them a chance to confess and ask for forgiveness. For we know thou art merciful, Father.

When he says the last part he stares right at the new woman. She holds back a cough. Pastor Walland puts his jacket back on and stands beside the pulpit. Let us sing. Let us ask God's forgiveness for our sins. Let us leave here today cleansed because, sisters and brothers, as much as it probably scares some of you for me to say it, some of us here today might not make it back here tonight. For we don't know when the hour will come of our deaths. But if we're saved and have our hearts right with him we can rejoice in knowing we're going to heaven. If your heart ain't right with God and if you ain't been saved or even if you feel like you ain't quite been living the life God wants you to and need to rededicate your heart to him, then please don't wait. Now is the best time and for some of us it might be the last chance.

Mama and the choir director go up for the invitation. The song is "Rescue the Perishing." She does not get halfway through it when I hear the music stop and look up from the cow I am drawing. I see her going up to the altar. She kneels in front of the Remembrance table and Pastor Walland crouches over her with his tie hanging between his knees and puts his hand on her small back. The congregation keeps singing without the music, "Care for the dying." The coughing woman gets up and everyone looks at her and sings a little quieter, "Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save." She does not go to the altar but to the back and through the big wooden doors. Before they swing shut I see Raley out there talking to her and trying to grab her purse and her shaking her head and her face scared and her running down the steps.

\_\_\_\_\_ is standing beside his mama with his fur on his neck and his pointy ears and his bad legs that make him lean over in the pew. More women go up to the altar. Pastor Walland

grabs a box of tissues from the Remembrance table. He goes to the women and crouches down with his bloody tie between his knees and talks in their ears and prays with them and gives them a tissue. Daddy and the other men keep singing without the music. They start the song over as the women go to the altar to pray and cry and only the men and the kids are left in the pews like nobody but the women and Pastor Walland belong there today.

Pastor Walland prays with the last woman. They all stand up and are sniffing and wiping their noses with tissues. The choir director leads the last verse and closes his hymn. Pastor Walland stands at the center of the group. He raises both of his arms. He looks like he's been crying too.

I want to thank each and every one of you for coming to God's house today. Don't be discouraged. God is working. Continue to pray for her. Kalemar Brass, will you please lead us in our closing prayer?

Daddy bows his head. I sit on the pew and look up at him. He has a dimple in his chin. His eyes are closed tight.

Our heavenly father, we thank you for the opportunity to meet in your house this morning and worship.

Pastor Walland walks down the aisle. He goes to the doors and swings them open. I can feel the afternoon heat and smell grass being cut somewhere.

We thank you for your many blessings and ask that you be with us and our families as we leave from here and that you bring us back safe tonight. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

Amens go around the church. People lift their heads and open their eyes. There is more sniffing and the voices begin and get louder until the sanctuary is filled with a rush of people talking.

The women are going back to the pews and getting their purses and Bibles. People line up at the doors to shake Pastor Walland's hand and leave into the sunlight. I am watching Mama go to the piano and shut it and slide the bench underneath and wipe at the corner of her eyes and never see \_\_\_\_\_ until he is standing at the pew in front of me.

Hey, James. How are you, buddy?

He reaches out his hand and I see the long nails. I do not look at his face. I feel it coming and back away and bump into Daddy. He is talking to somebody in the pew behind ours. He turns around. He takes the hand away and covers it in his big hand and shakes.

Good morning, David.

Devil Devoid

Morning, Kale.

I squeeze behind him.

Your daddy sure preached a good one today.

\_\_\_\_\_ is trying to look behind him to see me. Quit looking at me, Devil, Devoid. Quit, Quit, Quit. Kill him please, Daddy. Kill him into nothing so I can be nothing like I was before.

I run down the outer aisle beside the stained glass windows.

Slow down, boy.

I do not listen to Daddy. I am already at the doors and going past Pastor Walland shaking hands with someone. I make it into the sunlight and run down to our car. If I have to I can keep running all the way through the field and into the woods and come out on the road and keep running until I am home or up in the woods behind the pasture where my secret spot is and nobody can find me.

I am breathing hard and looking up at the steps. Daddy and some other men are walking down with Raley. They stop under the elm tree and talk. I do not see \_\_\_\_\_.

Our car is a maroon station wagon with a CB radio. You can hear truckers talking on it. Daddy won't let me get on the radio because they say dirty stuff about women and state troopers.

Bug walks up with her water color crosses. What's wrong with you?

Nothing.

She opens her hand and shows me four peppermints. Raley gave them to me and you can't have any.

I don't want any.

So.

So.

More women and men come out. The women are holding wadded tissues. Daddy walks over carrying his Bible and Mama's Bible and her purse. He is whistling and waving at some people pulling out of the parking lot.

He opens the driver's side and gets in and starts the car and rolls down the windows to let out the heat. Me and Bug get in the back. Tell me you'll stay. Never go away. I love you. I love you.

Stop singing that stupid song.

It ain't stupid is it, Daddy?

Well, darling, it ain't necessarily my favorite but that's all right.

I take the bulletin from my Bible and work on my cows.

James, I don't want to see you running through the sanctuary anymore. You're too old for that.

Quit running around the church, James.

Bug, it ain't your place to tell your brother what to do.

I stick my tongue out at her. She sticks hers out at me and there is a peppermint on it.

Mama opens the passenger side door and gets in. She is sniffing and wiping her nose with the tissue.

You ready?

She nods.

He drives out of the parking lot. Raley and some men are still under the elm. He is passing around his pistol for them to look at it. If I had my gun I would hide in the elm tree and shoot the him.

Daddy heads for the freeway instead of down Brushy Valley Road toward home.

Kalemar, Where are you going?

He looks over at her and winks. I can see a grin on his cheek. Baby, I don't want you to worry about cooking today. Let's head on up to Golden Girls.

Do we have enough cash?

Me and James didn't work all day yesterday not to be able to enjoy life a little. Did we, Bubs?

I see his eye winking in the rearview mirror. I shake my head.

Bug is sitting in the seat beside me and holding her picture of the crosses. Mama is still sniffing and wiping her nose with the tissue. She is not crying anymore. Bug leans up against her seatbelt and puts a hand on the dress strap on her shoulder. Mama puts her hand on Bug's hand. I'm okay, honey.



The car is having a hard time like always. The engine misses and putters and leaves a trail of smoke in the road.

Hey, Bubs.

I see his eye in the rearview.

Did I ever tell you about that old Ford Custom I had when I was in the Army?

I shake my head.

It had a 428 police Interceptor engine and, son, it roared.

Bug says, What's a Intersexter?

They are quiet for a second and then they both start laughing. I know they are laughing because of sex. The boys at school said sex is sticking your thing in a girl. I have never had sex but I did do the thing in the basement with the him.

Mama snuffles and wipes her nose. Oh, honey. I needed that. He said Inter-cep-tor. It's a car. The kind police officers drive.

Anyway, Bubs, I . . . are you listening?

Mama looks back. Her eyes are puffy and the blue makeup around them is smeared. She sees the cows I am drawing as fast as I can and reaches back and snatches away the bulletin. For goodness sakes, James, you've drew enough cows.

She holds it up and he looks at it and takes a breath and lets it out and looks back at the road. She folds it and puts it in her purse. We are winding up a hill. The trees are thick on both sides of the road. He is holding the steering wheel with his hands and taking the curves tight like we are going faster. I can tell he is remembering the Interceptor. He is making his own better engine noises. She reaches her hand over and puts it on his leg. Her ring is shiny in the light flashing down through the trees.

You remember that old car, don't you? He talks quieter. I could make it down from Fort Knox in six hours.

That was too fast. I always worried about you.

I couldn't get to my sweetheart soon enough.

It wouldn't have done you any good to have a sweetheart if you'd wrecked.

He laughs. You liked that car.

It was pretty.

Remember the time Uncle Adna passed us parked out on the bridge and told Pappy and Duck?

She leans her forehead against her hand and smiles and sniffles. What did they call us?

Pappy called us a two-headed monster.

Oh, my.

Daddy makes his voice different, like the words are coming from a deeper place and he has to squeeze them out: Uh, son, uh, I heared you and your girl there were parked down on the creek all squeezed up next to each other and carrying on like dang a two-headed monster, bluh, bluh, bluh, bluh, bluh, bluuuuuh.

Mama laughs.

He raises his voice higher like he's trying to talk like a girl. Duck said, Uh, Kalemar, why do you go and do a thing like that? Because it feels good, Mama. Can you believe she'd ask me that question?

He is laughing and looking at Mama laughing more than the road. Around a curve the front tire gets off in the ditch.

Kale!

He jerks the wheel and we bump back onto the road.

Pay attention.

Sorry. I just got to thinking about all that two-headed monster stuff. Maybe we should take a nap today if you know what I mean.

Mama pats his leg and brings her hand away and puts it on her lap.

Bug leans up between their seats. Daddy, why do you call Mamaw Duck?

For the same reason we call you Bug. Get back there and buckle up.

We make it to the stop sign at the end of the freeway and he takes a left onto the highway. We pass the Norris Dam sign and then the Museum of Appalachia. He slows the car and looks at the old cabins and barns. There are tractors and herds of goats and sheep and peacocks opening their feathers behind the wooden fences.

Awful tidy and clean. Them tourists should've come down to where we lived and snapped a picture if they wanted the truth.

Mama has the mirror down on her side and she's fixing the makeup around her eyes. You gotta let it go, Kale.

I know. I know.

At Golden Girls, a man takes us into a room with a fireplace that is out and pictures of famous people on the log cabin walls. There is one of Andy Griffith and one of the Oak Ridge Boys. We sit in a booth by the window. It is me and Daddy on one side and Mama and Bug on the other. A girl that looks like she's in high school waits on us. Daddy orders the special of fried chicken livers and Mama and me order regular fried chicken and Bug orders a hot dog. We all get sweet tea. When the girl comes back with the tea, I wonder what panties she is wearing and think they must be like the woman's in my closet.

Daddy takes a sip and makes a face and then pours sugar into his. I ain't seen Walland get that fiery in a while.

The way that woman's been stealing things, I don't think he had a choice. We've been trying to figure out what to do about her in the WMU meetings. She won't talk to any of us.

Raley brought a pistol with him. I ran into him before church. He's scared to death she's gonna get her brothers to come hold us up.

They do live down there in Stillhouse Holler.

Raley's just paranoid. It's rough folks but they can't hold a candle next to the man I grew up under.

I hope she listened to the message. The poor thing. We've been praying for her. It's so sad.

She keeps it up and Raley's liable to shoot somebody or even himself. I could just see him shooting his own foot.

That would be terrible.

It'd be kind of funny too. Daddy points at the Andy Griffith picture. I'm gonna start calling him Barney Fife.

He sips his tea. Bug is trying to build something out of napkins but it keeps falling over. Mama looks out the window. Her eyes look better now but without makeup and she looks different in a way that makes me think I don't hardly know her. More and more cars are pulling into the parking lot. Men and women and kids in dress clothes from other churches walk by and come in the front door. The bell keeps ringing. Babies keep crying.

Kalemar Brass.

Daddy turns around. A man is coming over. He is bald and fat and has a cigar in plastic sticking out of his pink shirt pocket.

Hey, Peanut.

Leda.

Peanut.

How's work, Kale?

Covered up with it.

That's good. I was gonna say, I'd be happy to recommend you to some folks if you needed the work.

I'm afraid I got about all I can handle at the moment.

I know what you mean. I can't keep two-by-fours or sheetrock stocked.

A lot of building going on.

Yeah, about everywhere except out in Raccoon Valley. There ain't no sewage or cable run there yet.

Ain't none in Brushy Valley neither. Probably won't never be. Too much creek bottom for building. They don't care about us poor folks. We don't have enough money for them to steal.

You ever get back out to Raccoon Valley?

I try not to. I don't want to be reminded of all the tobacco and hay I cut when I was a boy.

Why, I don't remember you out there in the fields. You was my age, too little.

Yep. I was. But that didn't stop Pappy from putting me and Grease to work.

The man named Peanut squints his eyes for a second and looks around like he's trying to remember something. You sure about that?

Daddy laughs a little but I can tell he does not like something. He is twisting up his straw wrapper and nodding with his mouth in a frown. They do not talk for a minute.

Well, it was good seeing y'all. Take care.

You too.

Mama waves. Bye, Peanut.

Daddy pulls the straw wrapper tight until it breaks then leans over the table. I never seen you out there. He don't know what he's talking about.

It's okay, honey.

I never seen you out there. His daddy's the one that hired us out while Peanut was at school. Didn't want his own son slaving in the fields but he didn't care to see somebody else's kids doing it. I never seen you out there. Folks just remember things the way they want to.

The high school girl brings us our plates of food on a big tray and leans down over the table to hand them to us and I think she is pretty and it makes me feel scared that she wears panties and has had the real kind of sex until she asks us if we have everything we need and goes away.

Daddy unfolds his napkin and puts it on his lap. I never seen you out there.

Honey.

Bug squeezes ketchup on her hot dog. What's wrong, Daddy?

He sticks a fork into one of his livers. Oh nothing, Bug. I'll be fine. He looks at Mama and grins. I'll tell you what I need.

I don't think I feel like a nap today.

I need to go fishing.

Bug almost jumps out of the booth and squirts ketchup on the table. Can we go?

Mama reaches over with a napkin. Easy, honey.

Hmmm. I don't reckon y'all know how to fish.

She don't know how to fish.

Yes I do. I can put my own worm on the hook too. Daddy showed me

He's just kidding with you two.

I have to get them out of the box and feel them. I feel them and think about her shoes popping through the garage and up the steps. They are soft and cool and shiny and smell like a different clean laundry. Daddy says she is a big lawyer downtown. There is a little pocket in the center for her devoid to ride. When he talks to her he tries to sound like somebody else. Uncle Grease rolls his eyes until she leaves and then he tells Daddy he's a pitiful around pretty women.

My older cousin Wayne showed me pictures of women in the kind of magazine Pastor Walland says comes straight out of Satan's printing press. It was on lunch break one day when I was working with Daddy and Uncle Grease again. Wayne pointed to one woman's devoid and said he'd like to get inside there. Until the boys at school said what sex was I though maybe Wayne meant to crawl inside there and I thought the devoid would be the place. The woman was on her hands and knees and looking back at you. Her devoid looked like a cow's. She could have had grass in her mouth.

Bug's devoid looks like a little wrinkle between her legs and not like a cow's. One night I looked into their bedroom. I saw Daddy in the floor beside the bed like he was checking Mama's devoid like the doctor did mine when I had to lay on the bed of paper and he pulled at the skin so

the infection could come out. Daddy was real close between her legs and it sounded like a cow chewing grass. She had her legs falling across his shoulders and she was breathing fast and making noises like she was humming a song and could not remember how it went but my mama knew all the songs she sang and I couldn't know why she couldn't remember this one and I got mad at Daddy for making her not remember like he was hurting her but it was too dark for me to see what her devoid looked like and what Daddy was doing and then Daddy heard me bump a kitchen chair and he got up and wiped his mouth and closed the door and I saw his big devoid hanging there before he closed the door.

Mama came out to ask me why I was awake. She was wearing her bathrobe so I could not see but I think her devoid looks like a cow's too like the women in the magazine and the girl's at Golden Girls probably does.

It is sunny and hot and the shadows are straight down under the trees and fences. Daddy is sitting on the bumper of the truck with his boots kicked out. He has Bug's little fishing rod between his knees. He is pulling the line and checking it with his thumb. She is dancing in the gravel. I love you. I love you. Don't ever go away.

Bubs, I got a feeling they'll be biting today. Why don't you go dig us up some night crawlers.

A cow is sticking its neck over the fence to get to the taller weeds behind the garage. Its eyes are deep and black and friendly. Its nose is pink and wet and it is munching the weeds and making the noises like Daddy was making over Mama.

Bubs. Good Lord. You and these cows.

He stands up and claps his hands. Get on out of here.



The cow runs. I can feel it hitting the ground in my feet when they run and I can see its devoid under its flopping tail. He grabs a bucket from the truck with black and white paint dried inside and hands it to me.

I go behind the house to the spot where he digs for night crawlers. The ground stays soft and cool next to the concrete. I dig in the dirt and bring up paint chips that fell from the house when it was a different color and Daddy scraped it off and dirt. I see the end of one squirming in the dirt. I pinch him out and drop him in the bucket. I keep digging with my fingers until I get another one. Then I am almost under my bedroom window and I feel something pointy and hard in the dirt. I know it is not a rock but the him's finger and the dirt is where the him hides in the day and not in the dark briar patch in the woods like I thought. The him is reaching up and trying to pull me down. I can hear the him growling in the dirt and I can feel the him's long finger trying to hook mine. The shell starts around me. If the him pulls me down I will be gone and they won't know where to look and even if they do I will just be a worm in the him's mouth. I drop the bucket and run back to the truck.

Bug is there with her hair in a ponytail. She is hopping on her toes and wanting Daddy to give her her fishing rod.

Wait a second. I'm trying to teach you how to cast a little better.

He looks at me. What's wrong, Bubs?

Nothing.

Where's the worms?

I point to the back of the house.

Did you see a snake or something?

I nod.

My devoid is a worm. The him's is a snake. Raley's gun could kill someone. My gun can't.

What kind?

I don't know.

He goes into the garage and gets a shovel and comes out. Y'all stay around here.

He takes the shovel to the back of the house.

I ain't scared of a old snake, Bug says.

Shut up.

Daddy says the fish are biting.

He don't know.

Yes he does.

No he don't. He don't know nothing.

You're being mean.

Shut up.

She lowers her head and pulls the line on her little rod and starts to cry. I feel like I am about to cry. I pick up a rock and throw it against the garage so it will go away. Sis Pup runs out of the garage and goes up to the porch. I scared her from the cool shade where she was sleeping and didn't mean to.

Daddy comes back with the shovel and bucket. A clod of dirt is sticking out of the bucket. I didn't see no snake, but I found a whole mess of nightcrawlers. Some fat ones in here.

He sees Bug crying and his face changes to worry and he squats beside her. What's wrong?

James said mean things.

She said mean things.

I did not.

I throw another rock against the garage. He comes over and grabs my shoulder. Quit that. Lewis'll have me buying new siding. You apologize to your sister or you can stay home while me and her go fishing without you.

Sorry.

Say it like you mean it.

I'm sorry.

Now can you two get along the rest of the day?

I ride in the back of the truck and hold onto the ladders and let the manure wind blow on my face. Bug rides up front. We go past the neighbor's house. The house is brick and has black bars on the windows. If we had black bars on our windows it would not stop the him because the him is and the him isn't and we only are.

It is shady and cool through the holler where Bull Run Creek runs. On one side of the road there are thick woods of pine and on the other is a green hill with dirt cow trails cutting it in circles. Daddy stops at the fence and I hop out of the truck. I go and unhook the barbed wire from the gap in the fence. I keep it tight like he showed me so the wire does not coil up and shock my leg. It feels like a nest of bees have flown through you if you touch the fence when it is on.

He drives through and I close the gap and climb in the truck. We go down past the gardens of corn and tomato plants and teepees of green beans. Pie tins hang from string on posts and they turn and bang and flash in the wind. Rock music is playing in the middle of the garden. Daddy said Lewis keeps the radio in there because he cannot stop the raccoons from climbing

down his corn. Daddy wants the raccoons to win. I can tell by the way he thinks it is funny how Lewis loses his corn just before it's ripe every year. When Lewis brings us a bag of tomatoes and beans Daddy tells him he would love some corn just so Lewis will have to tell him the coons got it. When Lewis leaves Daddy laughs and laughs and Mama shakes her head and says, Kalemar Brass.

His tractor is parked under the crabapple tree and the big doors on the barn are open and bars of light shine through the boards inside. Daddy stops the truck and honks the horn. The engine goes whomp-whomp-whomp against the barn. Dust hangs in the air all the way back to the road.

Lewis comes out of the barn. He is wearing a pair of overalls and no shirt on underneath. His skin is sweaty and he has a long neck with a little ball inside that moves up and down when he talks. What do you say, Kalemar?

Oh, just taking the kids fishing. He leans across Bug so he can look up into the barn. How many bales you got in there?

Why, you want to buy some?

Speaking of money, I know we're running late this month. I'll get you next week if that's okay. I'm on a big job and the woman won't pay until it's finished.

Lewis tells us to go on with his arm and then he walks back into the barn. Daddy drives down through the field. He follows the hard and bumpy tractor ruts under the huge, high TVA power lines that reach from ridge to ridge and always buzz in the sky. He is going faster than usual and the buckets and ladders are rattling. I have to hold onto the ladders tight to keep from falling. There is dark green grass and light green grass and brown broom straw grass and yellow

flowers bursting out of the green and brown. Little black butterflies drink from the rainbow manure puddles.

Daddy stops the truck beside the trees at the creek and turns off the engine. I climb down with my fishing rod and my tackle box. The high grass tickles at my knees. Bug gets out with the night crawler bucket. Daddy comes around the back of the truck. He grabs Bug's rod and his tackle box. Buy some. Buy some. I cut more hay than that man ever seen. He's gonna get his ox in the ditch, working on a Sunday.

I am the first one down the path beside the mulberry tree on the bank. Daddy makes Bug hold his hand when they come down. Her knees shake and she keeps the bucket of worms out in front of her. The gravel bar is shady. Birds have been eating the mulberries. Their purple and white poop is on the brown gravel. Bug is spitting. She says a bug flew in her mouth. Daddy tells her it won't kill her. She's a bug too.

He picks up a forked stick from the bank and breaks it and uses his pocketknife to whittle the end into a point. James, do you know what the white stuff is in bird poop?

No.

It's bird poop.

He laughs and Bug laughs.

He jabs the stick into the gravel and takes the hook from Bug's rod and holds it for her to put on a nightcrawler. She squints her left eye and bites the side of her lip like she does when she writes her homework. The worm wiggles around her fingers. She gets the hook through and the worm keeps wiggling. I think of the him in his hiding place in the dirt and the way the worms wiggle around the him and come out of the him's mouth and ears and nose and how the him wants me to be a worm so the him can swallow me.

Daddy helps Bug get the hook through two more times so the worm will stay on. He hands her the rod. That one was real ticklish. He's kind of like you, Bug. He pretends that he is going to tickle her and she giggles and jumps away.

She holds her fishing rod. She is making her writing face and thinking about how to lift it back and forward and push the little button to make the line go out. She pushes the button too late and her hook and sinker land in the gravel at her feet. Daddy picks up the line and rehooks the worm.

A little sooner this time.

She casts again and the line goes straight up into the mulberry tree.

A little too soon.

Daddy reaches up and pulls down a branch and dust and leaves fall in Bug's face. She blinks and spits and coughs.

You okay?

She nods up at him.

He snaps the branch off and he snaps it again and her line comes loose from the leaves. He checks the hook and worm.

You should just cast for her.

She gives me her mean look. No.

She's gonna get it this time.

She sticks out her tongue. I stick out my tongue.

I warned you two.

Bug holds her rod. Daddy kneels beside her. Don't think about it. Just imagine your line hitting right over yonder in that hole where the water's swirling up against the bank.

She closes her eyes. She casts. The hook and sinker plop in the water.

That was perfect, honey.

She hands him the rod and looks at me and sticks out her tongue. I stick out my tongue. He reels in her slack and rests her rod on the forked branch. I go to the other side of the gravel bar to the place I can catch redeye bass. Daddy says before we were born they were so thick in the creek you could about walk across their backs to the other side. But TVA came and cut all the trees for the power lines and made a lot of them die.

I do not fish with worms anymore. My favorite thing is a little lure that is supposed to look like a crawdead that Mama bought me so I would do better at washing myself. The water is slower and deeper on this side. The sun comes through the trees and makes a maze of shadows. The water moves but the maze of shadows stays the same. The redeye hide in the white sycamore roots that reach down into the water and make their homes.

The water is cold when it comes into my tennis shoes. I like to walk out until it gets up to my knees and feel the water push my legs. I do not worry when something like a stick hits me. I know nothing in the water can hurt me. Copperheads do not swim and snapping turtles are afraid of people.

The best place is the biggest sycamore. It is on the other bank where there is another barn of a man we do not know. I walk and feel the water and I feel the maze of shadows and I cast at the biggest sycamore's roots. It is too short. I can hear Bug asking Daddy why Mama was crying at church. He is telling her it is because she was filled with the joy of the Lord and not because she was sad. I can see the redeye I want to catch. I cannot really see her and I can really see her like God and like the him. She is joyous in her home of sycamore roots. Her fins are moving to hold her still and she is opening his mouth and closing it and watching for my crawdead to come

swimming by with her red eyes because she has baby redeyes swimming in her own belly and that makes her hungry and fat. I am about close enough to put it right in front of her when I step and there is no bottom for my foot. I fall and stand up and the splashes make the maze on the water wobble.

Daddy is there. One hand is yanking me back and the other is around my stomach. James, I've told you not to go out that far. There's barbed wire and all kinds of junk in here that can drown you. He pulls me back to the gravel bar and lifts one of his feet and lets the water run out of his boot. Now my dang boots are soaked.

I didn't mean to.

Let's just stay out of the water today. Okay?

He walks back to Bug with his boots squishing and leaving wet footprints on the gravel. My clothes are wet and heavy like the day I was baptized. I do not want to fish from out of the water. I would fuss with him but a burning starts where I pull the skin and make the white stuff come. It burns all the way to my belly button. I feel like there is a piece of hot coal in my devoid and I know the him put it there. I was wrong about the briar patch and the water. The him followed us through the ground and got in it. The him made me fall. I can see where the him's claws scraped my ankle.

Bug starts squealing. Her rod is bent over and she grabs it from the forked branch. Daddy tells her to reel, reel, reel. My devoid keeps burning. I look at the water and see the him's face in the maze. The him has pointy ears and sharp teeth at the sides of the mouth. The him is grinning because the him got me with the coal. I drop my rod and pick up a handful of gravel and throw it at the him. I throw another one and another one until the maze is wobbly again and the him has crawled back through the ground.



I go up the bank behind the mulberry tree and unzip my wet shorts and try to pee out the burn. I can't pee and it won't stop burning.

Bug gets the fish in and it is nothing but a little bluegill but she is bouncing on her toes like she caught my mama redeye. It flops in the gravel. Daddy reaches down and picks it up in one hand. He looks in its mouth. I can tell by the way the line goes in deep that it swallowed the hook. He reaches into his tackle box and gets out the red hook puller and slides it into the bluegill's mouth and down its throat and twists and turns. The hook will not come out and he twists and turns harder. I can hear the scraping sound the plastic makes inside the fish's throat. Its eyes looks like they are about to bust out. It makes me burn more in my devoid and I cannot pee it out. He gets the hook loose. Blood is coming from the little fish's gills. I know it will die and I will die and Daddy will die and Mama will die and Bug will die. He throws it way down the creek so Bug will not know it will die.

He washes the blood off his hands in the creek.

Bug is making a crybaby face. I wanted to hold it.

We needed to get him back in the water.

Will he be okay?

He'll be just fine. You'll catch him again someday.

He looks at me standing beside the tree. For goodness sakes, James. Don't take a leak right here where we're fishing. Go on up in the field.

I zip my shorts.

What's wrong with you?

My stomach hurts.

Can you stick it out for a little longer?

Bug is squatting and looking at some of the blood that fell in the gravel. I don't want to fish anymore.

Why not?

I don't know.

Daddy lets out a breath. He looks around at the creek and trees and me and his boots. I should've just left you two at the house.

We can stay. I can fish more.

Nope. Come on.

I'm sorry, Daddy.

You didn't do nothing. It's okay. The fish ain't biting too good anyway and your brother's looking paler than a graveyard haint.

I burn all the way back up through the field and past the barn and to the gap. Daddy stops and waits on me to get out. I do not want to. It burns too bad and I know the him is in the ground. The him is following the whomp-whomp-whomp of the truck. Daddy knocks on the window and puts his hands up and I shake my head. He gets out and opens the gap and gets back in and pulls the truck through and gets out again and closes it. I can tell by the way he stomps the dirt and slams his door that he is not happy. Pastor Walland says you can stomp on the devil and he hops up and down on the altar and his storm cloud comes loose and the whole church shakes. You cannot stomp on \_\_\_\_\_ because he is and he isn't the him.

At home, they get out. Bug goes inside hollering for Mama and he comes to the back of the truck and gets the rods and tackle boxes and puts them in the garage. I stay sitting on a bucket. You gonna come inside, let your mama take a look at you?

It burns more when I get up because my wet underwear is pulling at it. I reach out for him to help me down from the truck.

He grabs me and I put my arms around his neck and he goes to put me down on the ground and I hold on. I do not want to touch the ground but he puts me down anyway and pulls my arms away from his neck.

Boy, now I'm all wet. You gotta toughen up. Act your age.

The grass is hard under my feet and I know it has become the him's fur and the trees are the him's teeth and the blue paint sky is the him's mouth and the cows have gone back through the woods. I feel like I am going to cry but I act my age until I see Mama in the living room.

Bug is holding out her hands and telling her how big the fish was. It was bleeding but Daddy said it will be just fine.

Mama has just got up from a nap in her church dress. Her face is sleepy and there is a wrinkle on her cheek from the pillow. She looks at me in my eyes and I cannot hold back from crying anymore.

Good Lord. Daddy goes into the kitchen with his shirt wet from me and his boots still squishing.

Mama comes over and leans down to me. What's wrong, James? Did you fall in, honey?

I nod.

Bug is smelling her wormy fingers. He almost got caught on barbed wire and drowned.

No I didn't.

His tummy hurts.

What does it feel like?

It burns.

That fried chicken must not have agreed with you. Come on. You need to get out of them clothes and rest. I'll get you some ginger ale.

I go in my room and take off my wet shorts and throw them in the corner. It keeps burning like the coal won't go out. I put on dry underwear and they are cold for a second and I think they will help but the burn comes back and it spreads up to my chest like my body is the green coal stove a fire has started inside me and my chest is a chimney that won't let out the smoke.

Mama comes in my room. I am sitting on my bed and burning. She wipes my forehead. She puts her lips to it. You don't feel warm.

I hear the front door open and slam and Daddy's boots squishing outside and the truck start up.

She puts her arm around my shoulders and hugs me and kisses the top of my head. Daddy's gonna run to the store and get some ginger ale. Why don't you try to lay down until he gets back. I'll be in the kitchen. Just holler if you need me, honey.

I burn on top of my covers. I hear Bug in the bathroom. Don't go, girl. Don't go.

Mama is running her blender. All I can think about is how bad it burns and how the him is laughing with worms in the mouth and how if the him can become the grass and trees and sky and if the him can go through the ground and water what if the him knows how to get tiny like Santa Clause and can keep putting hot coals inside me and I can never see the him.

The truck whomps back into the driveway. The screen door opens and shuts and Daddy comes through the living room and into the kitchen. Can I finally get out of these wet clothes and boots?

Yes. Thank you.

Ice drops into a cup and the ginger ale fizzes. She comes into my bedroom. Drink this.  
It'll calm your tummy.

I lean up and drink. The ginger ale is cold but it cannot get into the place that burns.

Do you need to go to the bathroom? Do you feel like you need to throw up?

I shake my head and drink more ginger ale.

I'm gonna stay home from church with you tonight. If you don't get to feeling better by the morning, I'll take you to the doctor.

I do not want to go to the doctor because I know what he will do. He will have to look at my devoid and he will ask her to turn away and he will pull at the skin and bring out the infection and make the burn worse and then put on medicine that adds sting to the burn.

Mama makes me a bed on the couch out of my pillow and a quilt. Bug and Daddy get ready for church. He comes into the living room in his church clothes from the morning service and smelling like his Brut. He reaches down and rubs my head. I hope you get to feeling better, Bubs. Me and Uncle Grease need you tomorrow.

Bug comes out of her bedroom in her dress. I wanna stay home.

Nope.

James don't have to go to church.

He's not feeling good. Come on.

Daddy and Bug leave in the car and Mama finishes making a pie and puts it in the oven. She comes and sits on the couch beside me and works on her cross stitch. It is for a woman at church. The woman had a baby girl named Emily. So far Mama has the E and the M. Before I was born Mama made one for me. She made one for Bug too. It says her name and has a little

girl holding a daisy. Mine says James and has a little boy wearing a straw hat and holding a fishing rod.

Calves come out of cows' devoids. Babies come out of women's devoids. If I could go back inside I wouldn't have the burn.

Instead of the pillow I lay my head on Mama's lap and smell the pie cooking. She does not turn on the TV to the man and the tanks. She rubs my back every now and then and pushes the needle into the cloth and pulls the thread through. The difference between my and Bug's cross stitch is mine says, Baptized June 23, 1985. Bug has not been saved or baptized yet. When she is Mama will probably go back and finish hers too.

James, are you sure it's just your tummy and not something else hurting?

Yeah.

Would you tell me if it was?

Uh huh.

You can tell me anything.

I want to tell her I want to get inside and not feel the burn. No, it's just my tummy.

Are you sure it's not the other thing?

Uh-huh.

She keeps working on her cross stitch and I burn and watch the colors of the sky change on the stove. When it gets dark and there is no color on the stove and Sis Pup is barking in the manure night and it is quiet in our house and Mama is pushing the needle in the cloth and pulling the thread through I do not even have to think about Pickett State Park or them talking together in the moss or the little boat and Bug watching the S's in the water behind his paddle or the stone that makes a bridge over the lake where he takes the picture.

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The fog when it lays in the valley and makes my window white. It covers the pasture and the cows move through it and I can just see their eyes and the mud on their legs and they are there and then they are not there but I know they are still there. And the way it rises up out of the streams and sits in the trees and over the houses. It makes the whomp-whomp-whomp of the truck go quieter down the road.

Uncle Grease is standing in it in his white paint britches and shirt white like it. He is petting his Rottweiler chained to a tree in the yard. Daddy pulls into the driveway and the truck's lights shine on the trailer. Paint buckets are stacked up on the porch and there are scratches on the door where the dog has been trying to get in. I can see the pink and purple stickers on my little cousin's window and the Marines flag over my older cousin's window. His gray TransAm is parked in the yard beside my aunt Doll's car.

Uncle Grease gets into the truck. I slide over in the middle. All our legs are touching. He slaps my knee like Daddy does in church. Hey, Scuddle Head.

Daddy makes his voice like when he talks like his own daddy. Ole Grease.

Kaleboski. Uncle Grease lets out air like he just took a long drink.

Daddy backs up the truck and pulls into the road. Wayne working today?

I just got him out of bed. He's gonna come on in directly.

Good. We need him. You must be feeling a little spry today.

What do you mean?

Wearing them new paint clothes. You trying to impress somebody?

I ain't got nobody to impress but Doll and I impressed her real good last night.

Daddy drives out of the trailer park. What did y'all do this weekend besides all that impressing?

Well, I got some beer and potato salad—

Daddy makes his voice high. Get some byeeeer and tater salad—

Get her some byeeeeer and potater salad and take her out there in them woods—

Get a little byeeeeeeer and tater salad and taker out there in them woods—

They both start laughing. Daddy slaps my other knee and turns off the defrost. That's Uncle Adna.

Uncle Adna was a fat man with a bald head that didn't want to go to the harbor with us when we visited. We saw old boats and some birds in a glass building. They were all colors of red and green and purple and blue and I would not shoot them because they are not starlings.

Uncle Grease looks over at me. His advice about women. You need some advice about women, Scuddle Head?

I shake my head and worry he knows what I did with the panties.

If you ever do, you just come to me. I'm full of it.

Talk about somebody that's full of it. I took Flipper and the kids to Golden Girls after church. Peanut Eelie had to come over and start asking me about work.

He still running his daddy's store?

Exactly. His daddy's. That boy never did a thing on his own.

What'd Peanut say to get you upset?

Oh, he was telling me how good business is, asking me if I wanted him to recommend us for some paint jobs.

You told him yes, I hope.



I ain't taking no work from him.

It ain't like we're covered up. We could use it.

I'd rather stay home and eat beans as to get work from him. That's what I told Flipper too. She's worried about money like always. Told me it might not be a bad idea to take what we can get if people want to help us. She don't understand. Peanut would want a finder's fee and then he'd lord it over us, how he helped us out so much and all, like his daddy used to.

Peanut's not that bad.

He said he didn't remember me out there cutting hay and tobacco.

Uncle Grease laughs. Now I'm getting the picture.

He said I was too little.

We know the truth. That's all that matters.

I ain't taking handouts from no Peanut Eelie.

Uncle Grease makes his voice deep and growly. Jesus wants us forgive, boy.

You're one to talk. When's the last time you went to a church?

Don't remember.

You need to quit spending your time in them bars.

There's more good people in them bars than all the churches combined.

I don't know about that.

I don't go to drink. I go to sing karaoke.

You need to use your voice for the Lord.

Who's to say I don't? When I sing about them honky tonk angels, it gets them women thinking about heaven.

I know what you want to get them thinking about and it ain't got nothing to do with heaven.

Daddy pulls into the Smoky Mountain Market parking lot. The fog is hiding the sign where the starlings sit. Other trucks are parked at the gas pumps. There are carpenters and roofers and gutter men. Everyone is heading to the side of town where people have money. Daddy and Uncle Grease say it is a good thing they have money since they do not even know how to swing a hammer.

Uncle Grease holds the door for me. The woman behind the counter has long black hair. She is opening a carton of cigarettes. Morning, honey. How you doing?

Uncle Grease leans against the counter. Better now that I laid my eyes on you.

You're a big talker. She looks down at me. Ain't he a big talker? How do you put up with him, honey?

Uncle Grease rubs my head. I ever introduce you to my nephew?

I don't reckon you have.

This here's Scuddle Head.

That ain't his name.

It should be. Look at all them curls.

What's your real name, honey?

James.

You're a handsome feller.

Takes after his uncle.

I'm thinking he takes after his Daddy.

He comes over with his Coke and banana and newspaper and puts them on the counter. That's right he does. He grabs two corn dogs from under the orange lamp and looks down at me. You not want anything?

I go past the aisle of potato chips and pork rinds. I look over at the magazines in the case. The dirty ones in plastic hide behind the car magazines at the top. You can only see the women's heads. They are like Wayne's magazine. They are full of women showing their devoids to get inside.

I grab a Coke from the cooler and take it to the counter. Two men in a booth by the window are eating and talking and watching the men at the pumps put gas in their trucks and drop bags of ice onto the pavement to break it. One of the men lights a cigarette and hollers, What you up to, Grease?

Uncle Grease turns around. About five nine.

You got any jokes for us this morning.

He goes over to their booth. Hmm. He rubs his chin. I ain't got no jokes but I heard a story about Roger there the other day.

The other man quits chewing his biscuit and points at his chest. Me?

The man smoking his cigarette grins. Let's hear it.

Well, they was these three midgets that went down to the Guinness Book of World Records office...

I go back outside and get in the truck. The sun is shining across the ridges through the fog over the runway and hangar. I see the plane where it parked. In the sky would be the place. But I do not burn anymore. But when Mama asked me about my tummy, I told her it was but better so

I did not have to go to the doctor. But then I thought of something to make the burn quit and it but did.

They get in the truck and Daddy puts his bag on my lap. He starts the truck and pulls out under the sign and onto the highway. How about getting me one of those dip dogs, Bubs?

I reach into the bag and get him one. He takes it out of the paper and bites off the end of it and chews. Uncle Grease starts laughing. You and them dip dogs.

What about them?

Always makes me think of that day with Pappy.

It don't me.

Scuddle Head, your daddy ever tell you about why he likes dip dogs so much?

Daddy takes another bite. James don't need to hear it.

I think he does. It'll help him see how much better he has it than we did.

All right then.

We was about your age, Scuddle Head, working with your grandpaw and grandmaw, painting a house out off Clinton Highway. There was a little drive-in diner close by, the kind where you pull up and tell your order into the microphone.

It was the Freezo.

The Freezo. Well, at lunchtime we loaded up in Pappy's van and he drove us over there. Your Daddy could've just made things easy. He could've ordered a cheeseburger like the rest of us.

The rest of you didn't order a cheeseburger. That's the whole thing.

At least we ordered hamburgers. Your grandpaw pulled up and the woman on the microphone asked him what we wanted. Your grandmaw wanted a hamburger with something

like mayo and extra ketchup and no cheese or lettuce or onions. I wanted mine with cheese and no ketchup and only lettuce. We all wanted something a little different, you see, and that might've been okay with Pappy if he was a normal man and it wasn't for your daddy having to get something entirely different. He wanted two dip dogs and that just put your grandpaw over the edge. Soon as it got to your daddy and he said he wanted them two dip dogs, Pappy was so mad, here he goes. By God, you cain't just make it easy and order the same—

Bluh, bluh, bluh, bluh, bluuuuuuuuuh.

He goes to hitting the steering wheel and throwing a cuss fit. All over a couple dip dogs.

He was gone.

Crazed.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

So that's why your daddy likes dip dogs, Scuddle Head, because he didn't get him one that day. He got a hamburger like the rest of us. I think he needs to go to a head doctor. What do you think?

I don't need no head doctor telling me what a dip dog symbolizes. And I'll get me one whenever I feel like it. Ain't nobody gonna stop me.

I wouldn't dare try.

You better not or I'll jack that jaw like I used to.

Shi-he-he-he-he.

Papaw was bald and wore clothes with paint on them all the time even though he did not paint anymore and was in a wheelchair. He had to be because one of his feet got bad from diabetes and the doctor had to cut it off. He always kept a boot unzipped on one foot and his pant pants hanging over the missing one. Mamaw had short curly hair like mine and wore glasses that

made her eyes look tiny. Her chocolate pies tasted like the cigarettes she smoked but nobody minded. At his funeral Daddy and Uncle Grease were laughing with other men around the casket. At hers a bluegrass band played songs on the altar about mamas and heaven. I saw Daddy crying. It was the first time. The second one was when we were at his old high school watching a football game and a girl sang the National Anthem.

Was Mamaw mean like him?

He starts chewing his dip dog slower. Uncle Grease looks out the window. Daddy starts to slap my knee but he pats it instead. No, Bubs, no she wasn't. They just wasn't anything she could do.

He drives off the interstate and toward the woman's neighborhood. There are no cows or barns. The yards are thick and green and mowed in checkerboards and there are no high weeds or bald spots of dirt or pastures or cows. The homes are made of brick and stone and some have roofs of thin stone that shines in the sunlight. You cannot see any cracked windows or rotten wood or peeling paint. Daddy says their cars cost more than him and Uncle Grease make in a year. Uncle Grease says they cost more than his house. The woman's house is in the back of the neighborhood. You have to go past the waterwheel and through the lanterns on stone walls that burn all the time. Then you drive left and right and keep going until the road ends and it is her driveway going into the trees.

Daddy turns into the neighborhood. The truck whomp-whomp-whomps against the stone walls. We pull into the driveway. It goes through a pine thicket and up a hill. The house is in an open space in the woods where it would be a good place for cows. The roof comes to a tall point and the front of the house is big beams of wood and high windows. There is gray stone stacked at the bottom and a porch goes around the whole house. In the back there are two more porches and

a big flat stone in the yard. The woman leaves a key for us under a little statue of a bald man in a robe in the flowers at the garage. We have to make sure our shoes are not muddy when we go inside. We are not supposed to step on the rugs or touch the vases and pottery or any of the paintings on the walls. Before we paint a room Daddy has to let her know so she can take the paintings down herself since they are worth so much money. She comes to check on us during her lunch break and her shoes pop up the steps.

A fancy silver car is parked in the driveway. The garage door is open and a man wearing a black suit and red tie is inside. He is walking back and forth. Daddy finishes his corn dog and throws the stick on the floor. Uncle Grease straightens up in his seat. Who's that?

Her husband, I reckon.

Daddy stops the truck and turns it off. The man is already at his window with a worried look on his face. Mr. Brass?

Just call me Kale. Daddy holds his hand out the window and the man shakes it.

George Turner. There's something I need to talk to you about.

Daddy gets out of the truck and follows the man over to the garage. Uncle Grease watches them in the door mirror. Wonder what this is all about, Scuddle Head. Damn rich people always worrying about something when they got it better than any of us.

The man starts talking. Daddy's smile goes away and he looks sad and then mad and then both at the same time. He is shaking his head and looking down at his boots and saying he is sorry over and over.

Oh hell. I'd better go find out about this.

Uncle Grease gets out of the truck and walks over to them. The man is putting his hands out and it looks like he is saying he is sorry and please to both of them. He goes inside the garage

and Daddy stands there and shakes his head the same way he did when I wouldn't swing the baseball bat. Then he looks at the truck. He is only mad. Uncle Grease looks like he is asking Daddy, Why? Daddy talks to Uncle Grease. He looks at the truck. He does not understand something. Wayne pulls up in his Trans-Am with loud music playing. Uncle Grease yells for him to turn it down. Wayne shuts off the car and gets out. He is skinny and has a ponytail. I was hoping he would show me women's devoids at lunchtime but I would not tell him what I did with the panties. Uncle Grease tells him to come on inside and the three of them head toward the garage. I slide over and start to get out of the truck. When I open the door Daddy points a finger at me. You stay right there, boy.

I watch them carry the drop cloths and buckets and ladders and paint brushes out of the garage. They are not talking or laughing and Daddy throws the buckets hard into the truck and bangs the ladders onto the racks. They get done and Daddy tells Uncle Grease he will give him a call. He gets into the Trans Am with Wayne. Daddy gets into the truck with me and shuts the door and starts the engine.

The man in the suit comes out of the garage and the door starts down and closes. He is wearing sunglasses and holding his car keys. He tips back the statue of the bald man in a robe and takes the key out out of the dirt and puts it into his pocket. He does not look at us before he gets in his fancy silver car.

Daddy follows Wayne back down the driveway. The man follows us. When we get to the neighborhood Daddy pulls over and lets the man pass. Daddy looks at me. His face is red and tight. His jaws are clamped down when he talks. What were you thinking getting into that woman's drawers?

I don't say anything.



Boy, I'm gonna give you a few minutes to think about this. I already know the truth. The next time I ask, you best tell it.

He hits the gas and I am pushed back in the seat. He takes deep breaths like maybe his chest is the coal stove like mine. He drives back through the neighborhood with the big houses that have thick green lawns mowed in checkerboards. I am scared to tell him about the woman's panties. I am scared he will make me stand against the wall in my bedroom and spank me with his belt that is speckled with paint.

When we go through the lanterns he drives a different way. We pass other neighborhoods of big houses on hills that have three or four porches and fences around swimming pools. Then there is a lake and a parking lot with picnic tables in the grass. He pulls into the parking lot and stops the truck and turns it off. Get out.

He goes ahead of me down to the lake. His body is stiff and his hands are fists. He is walking fast. He waits on me at the water. I stand beside him in the grass and duck feathers and duck poop.

He points. Look out there.

The lake is wide and shining yellow waves. Where he is pointing is the shore a long way off. Big white boats with sails are lined in a row.

What do you see?

Boats.

Them ain't just boats, boy. They're yachts. Do you think I'll ever make enough money to have something like that?

Yes.

Boy, are you crazy? The answer was no, is no and will always be no. But there's something I've spent my life building. This little company that ain't even really a company at all. Do you know why?

No.

For you and your sister so you two could have it better than me. What you did might have ruind it all. Do you know why that is?

I shake my head.

Talk to me damn it.

No.

No what?

I don't know why.

My reputation. That's the only thing keeping these rich folks hiring me and the only thing keeping me and your mama and little Bug in that house with food on the table. Do you know how you might've ruined it?

I nod.

Huh?

Yes.

How?

By getting into that woman's drawers.

What were you thinking?

I don't know.

They're gonna be kind enough to pay us for the work we've done as soon as I figure up what they owe, but they don't have to. You know why they don't have to?

No.

Because they're rich and it'd cost more for me to hire a lawyer than we'd even get paid.

That's how it works in the world when you ain't got no money. Your reputation is all you have.

I don't look at him but I can feel his mad face.

What were you thinking?

I don't know.

The only good thing is your fingerprint of paint on the drawer was too small to be mine or Grease's. That would've made us look like a couple of perverts. She knowed it was yours. Do you know how much this embarrasses me?

No.

What were you doing in her drawers? Did you steal anything?

No.

James, if I find out you're lying I'm gonna set your little ass on fire.

Yes.

What'd you take?

You think she's pretty.

Boy, no I don't. What. . . . What. . . . What did you take?

Her panties.

Where are they?

I look down.

I said where are they?

I look down.

He grabs my arm and shakes me. You think I think that rich bitch is pretty? Tell me damn it.

I'm wearing them.

They God Almighty you little—

and he's tearing at my paint britches until he gets them down past the top of the panties and he pulls and yanks at them and it hurts and then he is spanking me over and over with his big hard hand and I'm falling and he's pulling me back up and the sky is blue and the lake is shining yellow waves and they are in the other's place and the boats are tipping and I'm crying and a woman is there saying, Mister, Mister, If you don't quit beating that boy I'm calling the police, and he tells her to mind your own business and then he is dragging me to the truck by my arm and opening the door and picking me up and pushing me inside and he gets in and starts it up and floors the gas back onto the road.

I lay down in the seat and cry. I want Mama but I do not want her because I will have to tell her about the panties and the burn and I will have to show her where I pull the skin and make the white stuff come and I can't get inside her. He gets his other dip dog from the crinkly bag and turns on the radio louder than I can cry. The men talk about the quarterback position and I hate the houses and trees and roads and people in their cars and the birds and I hate him and I hate everybody and me.

But I act like I am but okay when we are on the interstate and the big rigs pass us and shake the truck and when we go past the Smoky Mountain Market and there is the plane and on the roads to home. I but sit up and quit crying and drink my Coke to but fool him and when he pulls into the driveway I but jump out and run through the yard and down to the gate and swing it

open and I go out into the pasture and clap my hands to send the cows running and they but chew grass and look at me and pee and poop.

I go through the dead milkweed stalks I have cut down and the ones that have grown back up green and into the woods where it is but quiet and shady and there is my secret place of a cedar tree and a little rock I like to lay behind and sometimes I make a fire with matches and a pile of leaves when it is cold.

One time it snowed. We walked through the pasture. The snow crunched under our shoes and it was all you could hear. Bug was so bundled up in her pink coat she walked like she was made of sticks. The snow covered the cow manure and grass. It was piled on the fence posts and on the barbed wire and so heavy in the trees it made them lean to the ground. Everything was white except for the green of the cedar trees and the orange broom straw grass sticking up out of it like little fires in the snow. He was wearing his Army jacket and the hat with the ear flaps. He was running around in front of us and making snowballs and throwing them at Mama but not as hard as he could. She was calling him a rat. Get him for me, James! Get him!

I made a snowball and threw it as hard as I could and it hit him right in the devoid. He leaned over and Mama laughed and covered her mouth. Bug squinted out of the hood of her coat. He groaned for a while. James, boy, you better watch it.

But he did not spank me with his paint belt.

We got farther down to where snow made a white tunnel through the woods to Lewis' barn. That is when we met a sparrow. It was standing on the snow and you could see its little footprints that made a circle. It did not fly when we got close.

Daddy stood there looking at it with the snow still between his legs where I hit him. Must be something wrong with it.

Mama crouched down. Why, it's shivering.

Bug stood behind Mama like she was scared. Poor little thing.

I knew it was only looking for food. It's hungry.

I took off my gloves and pulled a blade of the broom straw grass from the snow and opened it and let the seeds fall into my hand. I reached my hand to the bird. It backed away a little and then it looked at the seeds and it looked at me and it pecked them away with a little tickle on my palm.

It flew away. Daddy laughed. That was something else, son.

Bug watched it fly down the tunnel of white. I wanted to pet it.

Mama put her hand on my shoulder. You've got a good heart.

She calls my name. I look over the rock and see her out in the pasture. She is dodging the manure piles and keeping an eye on the cows. She pushes the milkweed out of her way. She stops and looks up at the ridge. I hide my head behind the rock.

James, you up there?

No.

Come on down, sweetie.

No.

I hear her feet crunching the dry leaves and the branches of the trees swishing when she grabs a hold of them. Then I see her face and green eyes looking down at me and the blue sky through the green treetops but not the same green as her eyes. She sits on the rock and puts a hand on my leg. Daddy told me what happened.

I hate him.

Don't say that. He works hard for us. You know he loves you.

No he don't.

He did the right thing by spanking you. I understand a boy your age is probably getting curious about girls. But you can't steal, James. You've gotta resist the devil's temptation. Can you see what kind of trouble it causes?

No.

You're a smart boy. I think you can.

No I can't.

Now you can't get your gun and we can't go to the Museum of Energy.

I put my head down and start crying again. I feel her soft hand on my back rubbing it in circles. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I'm not sure about the gun we'll go to the museum, honey. Can you tell me why you decided to wear the panties? Did you just want to know what they felt like?

No.

Please.

She grabs me in her arms and rubs my head and back and pulls my face to her chest and it brings out the words: It hurts is all.

What hurts, honey?

Down there.

Your?

I nod.

You haven't been washing it, have you?

I shake my head.

You're gonna have to let me take a look at it.

No.

Honey, I have to see it. I need to know how bad it is. Come on. Get up.

She stands and leans down and pulls at my arm and I cannot fight her like I could fight him. She squats down in front of me with her devoid in her jeans and I cannot escape this life. Go ahead. We'll make it quick.

I wipe my eyes and look down the ridge and see the cows through the leaves. They are eating in the sunshine. A muddy white calf is off by itself bucking around. It's just me and you. Nobody else can see. I'm your mama.

I unbutton my britches and then unzip them. I hope the panties are not still there but they are. I push my britches down to my knees. I take down the panties and I can feel the air all over my devoid. The look on her face tries to change but she keeps it the same.

Oh, honey. Go ahead and pull up your pants. Why do you do that to yourself?

I was scared.

What of?

The him.

Your daddy?

The man at my window.

What man?

He comes when everybody goes asleep. He claws my window. He tries to get inside and hurt me. I cannot get away if he did.

She blinks and blinks her eyes and looks down at the leaves. Do you still say your prayers before bed?

No.



Why not?

It don't work.

Her eyes look around the woods. She puts them on me again and they are wet and sparkly and I feel like I know her again. She reaches out and grabs my hands between hers. I'm gonna get you a doctor's appointment for in the morning.

No, Mama.

Yes. And today I'll see if Pastor Walland can meet us at church and talk with us about this man you're imagining.

I yank my hands out of hers. I'm not going to him or him.

You don't have a choice, James.

She stands up and wipes the leaves from her blue jeans. Come on.

I shake my head.

You can come with me now or I'll send your daddy up here to get you.

I hate him.

Don't start that again. We don't hate anybody, especially your daddy.

He eats corn dogs all the time and says not to tell you.

I know what he does. She reaches out her hand. Come on.

No.

Listen to me. I'm sure it hurts down there and it must be real scary to think a bad man is trying to come in your window. That would scare me too. We have to get you fixed so you don't hurt anymore and you're not scared. Wouldn't that be nice? Listen, honey, the doctor can fix your body and Pastor Walland can help you fix your soul. Then you don't have to hurt anymore and you don't have to be afraid. Can I tell you something?

Yes.

When I was about your age I used to be afraid a man was going to get me too and do you know what made me not be afraid anymore? Jesus Christ. Let's go talk to Pastor Walland. Then we can have fun this summer and be happy. We'll go to the museum of energy and touch that ball and—

But when?

Just as soon as we get you better, honey.

Him's storm cloud of hair when he pulls in in his car. It blows on his head when he gets out and waves at us. Mama opens the door. Let's go, honey.

The elm branches hang and stir in the warm wind and the stained-glass windows at the curved doors below the steeple they are dark. Pastor Walland opens the door to the new part of the church and waits on us. I'm sorry I'm late, Leda.

We haven't been here long.

I got another phone call as I was about to leave the house. Our visitor? She passed away this afternoon.

Mama breathes in and puts her hand on her chest. Oh no.

Raley heard the sirens. He followed the ambulance down through the holler and saw them bringing her out in a body bag.

The glass angel and toilet paper. Lord, lord. They took him . . . it all is spinning in my mind and my words of the coal room and \_\_\_\_\_ dive into the back of my neck and cannot be found.

She should've listened to your sermon.

She should've listened to the Lord.

Lord, lord he's your age.

I do not see \_\_\_\_\_ until he is up the sidewalk doing his broken bicycle walk and looking at me. Pastor Walland puts his big hand on my shoulder. You know, Leda, I was thinking David could be a good role model for James since he's older. I was thinking the two of them could get to know each other a little better.

I pull away from his hand. No.

\_\_\_\_\_ gets closer and closer with that big step and that small one and the hair on his neck and his pointy ears and teeth poking out of his smile. Mama pats my back. Don't tell the pastor no, James.

Daddy would not kill him so he would be nothing. Devil, devoid. I will kill him. I run at him like the muddy bucking calf and I jump into him and knock him down and start hitting him in the face until two hands pull me off and I'm standing on the sidewalk and Mama is holding me back. James! What is wrong with you?

Pastor Walland is leaning over him and helping him up with his bloody face and his bad legs. He is crying and spitting blood and saying he didn't do nothing and it is not fair because he has a disease. Walland is looking him all over to make sure his bones are not broken. He looks at me and mama with a red face and his storm cloud. Go ahead and get him up to my office.

We wait beside the tombstone on the wall. Mama is breathing hard. Why did you do that?

I hate him.

How many times do I have to tell you. We don't hate anybody, James.

Walland comes up the steps with his storm cloud blowing. I'm so sorry, Pastor. Is he okay?

It's just a busted lip, but his feelings are hurt more than anything.

James, tell him you're sorry.

I'm sorry.

Son, I'm not the one you need to apologize to.

He opens the door. Jesus with the light on his shiny brown hair looks down at us. She sits behind me. He puts his elbows on the desk. His storm cloud stops blowing. Your mama tells me you've been having some problems, young man. You took something that wasn't yours? You've been imagining a bad man at your window? And now you've attacked my son when he can't fight back on his own and all he wanted to do was help you.

His storm cloud.

I'll be honest with you, young man, because I love you not because I'm mad at you or want to scare you. Do you understand?

Lord, lord.

God don't like people that attack the ones in his flock, but first and foremost he don't like thieves. In fact, the eighth commandment tells us Thou shalt not steal. These words came straight from God's mouth when he gave them to Moses on Mount Sinai. I was just telling your mama about what can happen when we sin. God punishes us. Do you know what that means?

His storm cloud.

It means that when we take things that aren't ours, we are sinning. Jesus tells us that the wages of sin is death. I don't know if you knew her or not, but that woman who was visiting, she was stealing from the church, from God himself. Did you just hear what happened to her?

Toilet paper and a glass angel. Body bag. Lord, lord. He would've. His storm cloud. The panties are soft on my skin. He would've.

Mama's chair squeaks. Pastor, it's not the stealing that worries me the most. It was just something small really. He didn't steal from God's house or anything. It's this man he's imagining I told you about over the phone.

His storm cloud. Her panties. Lord, lord.

You've been saved, young man. I remember baptizing you a few summers ago during Vacation Bible School. When Jesus comes into our heart he changes us. We don't have to fear any man. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Did you feel a change when you asked him to come into your heart?

His storm cloud. Lord, lord.

You were pretty young. How old was he?

Eight.

Sometimes I get to worrying that children think they're hearing the call too soon, before the Holy Ghost truly lays it on their heart. Do you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you were saved?

I shake my head.

Then it's no wonder you're feeling afraid, young man. When Jesus saves us we know we've been saved. There's no doubting it. It changes us and we are new people. We have the

spirit of the Lord in our heart. So I think we've got a case here of a young man that wasn't really being called to be saved, that hadn't yet reached the age of accountability, but now he has and that's why he's feeling afraid. The Holy Ghost is speaking to him. Does that make sense, Leda?

Yes, Pastor.

James, son, do you get nervous in church? Do you feel afraid, like you can't sit still? Does your stomach get all up in knots? Do you feel like something is moving inside you?

Uh-huh.

That's the Holy Ghost speaking to you, young man. I feel God speaking to me this minute and I know what he wants us to do. Will you pray with me, James?

Lord, lord. They . . .

Answer him, James.

Uh-huh.

Will you say the same words as me and let Jesus come into your heart and save you? You don't have to say them out loud if you don't want to. Jesus can hear our silent prayers, but you have to say what I say and you have to mean it. Do you understand?

Lord, lord. Uh-huh.

He bows his storm cloud.

Outside I hear the hard step and the soft step and I know he is waiting for me with his long yellow nails and his teeth. I pray my thoughts but I do not pray for Jesus Christ like him. I know he is just a picture on the high wall and he is not and he is and he died and God is \_\_\_\_.

I pray for the pasture cows to come into my life and save me, to come in a herd of thunder and beat the him under the ground and to eat the him and poop and pee the him out so the him will grow into milkweed that I will cut and make the white stuff come, that I will chop

down into little seeds for sparrows to eat when they have no seeds and I will never shoot them with my gun. For Cow so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Cow that whoever believeth in Cow should not perish but have everlasting Cow.

It gets quiet. I open my eyes. Pastor Walland is leaning over his desk smiling at me with his big hand out. It is warm and wet when I shake it. Welcome to God's family. You have nothing to worry about now except doing what the Lord asks of you. He has a plan for each and every one of us.

Mama comes up behind me and hugs me. She kisses my cheek. Pastor Walland walks over to her and puts an arm around her. We'll get James to come up during the altar call on Sunday and I'll announce this wonderful news. Then we'll schedule the baptism.

I can't thank you enough, pastor.

Thank God. Praise God for his power and his grace. He loves us more than we can ever know. And I love you Leda. And you James.

We love you.

\_\_\_\_\_ is gone when we leave the office. I do not look to see if he is in Pastor Walland's car when we drive out of the parking lot because I know the prayer has worked and the him is in the mouths of the cows.

On the way home, the sun is high and bright. The woods are thick and green and the sky is blue. Mama drives slow but she is squirming in her seat like she can't sit still on her devoid. Honey, I'm so proud of you. I just can't wait to tell everybody about my son! I want to tell the whole world!

She looks at the CB radio. How do you work that thing?

I click the nob to on and the static crackles. She picks up the part that goes to your mouth and puts it to her lips. She winks at me and laughs a little and then she gets serious. My name is Leda Brass and I have a son named James. My son is beautiful and brave. My son is a Christian. When God put him in my belly, when he was just a tiny glow of life, I knew God had great plans for him. I know he will do amazing things. I am more blessed than I ever imagined. God is Good.

She looks at me with her green and sparkly eyes and we wait. The radio is quiet.

My name is Leda Brass and I have a son named James.

A man's voice comes through the speakers. It is deep and growly. Your son sounds like quite a guy, Leda Brass.

She looks at me and holds back a laugh. He is.

I'd love to meet the mom of such a cool cat.

It's not me. I didn't do anything. God—

But your voice is so fucking sexy.

Mama makes a surprised noise in her throat and drops the receiver. Silly men. Silly men. You won't be one of those. No, not my one and only James. Not ever.

Leda Brass, comes the voice again. You out there, you sexy little beaver?

Turn that thing off.

When we get home, Daddy is push-mowing the front yard. Bug is on the front porch braiding one of her ponies' hair. Mama gets out of the car and runs around to my side. She throws open the door and holds her hands out to me. I grab them and she pulls me into the yard and she hops and spins me and it feels good to hop and spin with her in my panties.



Daddy lets the lawnmower roll to a stop and gives us a funny look. Bug quits braiding her pony's hair. Then he is grinning and she is grinning and Mama and me are grinning and the cows, they are in the pasture.

April twenty-second, 1997.

Before Uncle Adna left the valley he sat right there in the house on the creek, the house Pappy and Duck fooled around with and lost, and he told Pappy a man wasn't willing to work for his wife and children he didn't deserve to have none. Pappy and Duck sucked their Pall Malls as if they couldn't breathe otherwise and nodded like they agreed, like Uncle Adna was talking about anybody else but Pappy, some deadbeat down the road.

As soon as he drove off Pappy came inside squaling, "I reckon some people believe that, I reckon you all believe that, I reckon I ain't done nothing worth a damn for you, I bluh bluh bluh bluh bluh bluuuuuuuhh."

If I wasn't a kid and scared to death of the man I would have said, "I do believe it," but I knew what would come if I did, the fists of a raging lunatic that had a foot and a hundred pounds on me and that used to box Golden Gloves.

I never forgot what Uncle Adna said and I thought about it all them years while I slung paint on the homes of rich folks that paid me for a day what they made in an hour or less in their heated and air-conditioned offices and me in the burning sun and freezing cold or inside with their fancy furniture and bookcases and rugs you can't wipe your feet on.

A few times I thought about leaving Leda and the kids and letting her find a man that could do more, letting her and them call me worthless the rest of their lives while they lived good because of me and didn't know it. But that was me being what Pappy told me I was my whole life and it would have broke my heart. A man has a family he needs to provide for them, not turn them into his mules and punching bags and not abandon them.

A man isn't bound to his children once they reach a certain age either. I say teach them about the Good Lord and feed them and protect them and make them go to school. When they're

adults it isn't on you anymore to provide. If you decide not to give them a dime it's not your burden. It's hard to live by such a philosophy when you care about them.

That day I stepped out of the truck and onto the pavement stained with motor oil and spilled things and cigarette butts and tobacco spit and I looked up at the Smoky Mountain Market sign standing against the blue sky like it always had except rustier than the year before and the year before that one and you don't notice rust until it's done covered up everything.

I'd finished a paint job early and it was the calm time of a warm afternoon when I liked to be off work the best and feel like I had something over on the rest of the world. I'd soon learn there'd be no enjoying it.

Peanut Eelie was leaning against the ice cooler gnawing on his cigar. He was wearing a pair of bright red suspenders that were probably new because his belly outgrewed the old ones. "I was hoping to see you," he said.

I figured he finally wanted me to do some painting for him so I was already thinking about how much extra I'd hide in his bill when I said, "Hidy, Peanut."

He plucked the cigar from his jaw. "Your boy was down here earlier."

I tried not to act surprised or embarrassed. "What was that little twerp up to?"

"Asking folks for money. I gave him a few bucks. I was afraid somebody'd call the law."

"I'll tell you what, next time you save your money and call the law. How much do I owe you?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I'm gonna worry about it."

"I give him six or seven dollars."

"I'll be back directly."

I went inside the market. The cowbell rang and LaVerne looked over the top of her National Enquirer. "Got them reservations yet?" she said.

At first I was thinking too hard about James to remember what we'd been carrying on about this time, that I was supposed to take her to some resort in the Caribbean with white sand and blue water and sailboats she'd showed me in a magazine. "I'm still waiting on them to come in the mail," I said. "I guess the honeymoon suite takes longer."

"You're gonna lead me on till the day I die, Kalemar Brass."

"I wouldn't dare."

I poured a Coke at the fountain machine. Leda got a call from the therapist at New Hope over a week ago. James didn't make curfew one night nor roll call the next morning. He was "missing." That was Leda and the counselor's word. I preferred "decaying."

I got a dip dog from under the lamp at the counter. LaVerne closed the National Enquirer. On the cover was a headline about Donald Trump's mistress trying to commit suicide. "Them rich idiots," she said. "I guess it's true money don't bring no happiness."

"That's just what us poor folks say to feel better," I said. "Did you happen to see my boy down here today?"

"I don't think so."

"At least one of mine turned out good."

"That's bettern I can say."

I opened my wallet and found the check just handed to me from a man I was painting a dining room for. "Oh, honey," said LaVerne, "we cain't cash checks no more. I'd get fired."

She pointed toward the cigarette cases behind her. Ten or twelve checks were taped to the wall. "I can guarantee you this one won't bounce," I said. "You ought to see this guy's china. It's so expensive they don't even eat off it."

"I always wanted a nice set of china."

"It don't do any better than our own dishes."

I paid her with the last of my cash and told her to keep her bikini packed in her suitcase and I went outside. Peanut was standing by my truck and looking toward the little airport where me and James used to watch the planes take off and land and talk about the places he would go which turned out to be nowhere.

The hangars had been bulldozed down and hauled away over the winter and spring weeds were growing through cracks in the runway. A big commercial SOLD sign stood by the road. Leda was excited about the Wal-Mart going in. She'd been talking about how she wouldn't have to drive all the way across town anymore to get the things she needed for the shoeboxes she sent to Africa.

"Goddamn corporations," said Peanut. "I thought Clinton would stop them. That's the last time I vote for a Democrat. There ain't a difference between the two when it comes to your money. One breaks in through the front door and takes it and the other one just sneaks in around back."

I thought, Once the Wal-Mart runs your hardware store out of business you'll get to see how the rest of us live and why we don't give a damn who's the President. I said, "LaVerne can't cash my check. I'll have to get you back next time."

"Don't worry about it." He took another look at the airport and shook his head and started to walk off.

“Did you happen to notice which way my boy went?”

“He was running with Franky Paul in a little purple truck.”

He was about the biggest thief around and everybody knew it. “Any idea where he’s staying?”

“Probably down in Pillhouse Holler with the rest of his kin.”

“That’s what folks are calling it?”

“Yeah but it sure ain’t confined to that holler. Seems like everybody’s on something these days.”

“You ain’t got to tell me.”

I drove toward home in the spring afternoon even more disgusted with my boy which I hadn’t imagined was possible. The Bible says children are an heritage of God. James had been nothing but an heritage of trouble.

I thought about him and me and what I’d had to do and what I’d made sure he hadn’t had to do. All the hay I hauled and the tobacco fields I cut from the time I could walk and some of them Peanut Eelie’s daddy’s. Following those hay wagons under the summer sun and the men on the tractors always driving faster than Grease’s or my legs could keep up with and our fingers black and blue and blistered and our knuckles bleeding. Or the two of us in a row of tobacco and puking on the toes of our boots from the heat and nicotine and no way to escape except get a beating from Pappy or finish—slice, pitch and down the row— while Pappy leaned against a tree trunk in the shade with the pay Peanut’s daddy or the others gave him for us folded in his pocket for us never to see.

We didn’t get on drugs. We didn’t turn into bums.

I slowed down beside a crow pecking a white paper bag in the ditch. I threw him my dip dog and thought, You enjoy it, buddy, because I sure can't.

When I got home Leda was in the front yard spray-painting her shoeboxes gold. She had her long gray hair in a ponytail and was wearing some old jeans that used to fit her tight and a Vacation Bible school T-shirt. On the back was a picture of a parrot grinning from a tree branch.

The theme for that year was something about a jungle safari. I helped Leda decorate a Sunday school room in the basement for the 5 and 6 year olds. We cut tropical leaves out of construction paper and hung them from the ceiling. She bought stuffed jungle animals and used them to tell the kids Bible verses. She wore a safari hat all week while she took the kids on scavenger hunts around the church and blew bubbles with them in the parking lot and taught them songs under the elm tree.

Watching the way the kids brought out her mother side made me think maybe we should've had more children. Now I was glad we hadn't. I don't think I could've stood it if they ended up anything like James.

I parked next to Leda's car with the vacuum cleaner across the back seat and a wet mop head hanging from the window. I went and stood next to her while she squatted over a box and sprayed on the gold. She smiled at me with the sunlight on her face looking older after everything she'd gone through. I couldn't remember the last time I saw a true Leda smile. I didn't want to tell her about James but I had to. She was my wife and his mother. "I heard some news on our son today."

She quit spraying the box and her face changed into its constant reality, that of a heartbroken mama's. "Peanut Eelie saw him down at the market," I said before she could get a

worse idea and worry even more. “He was running with a known thief and bumming money. Peanut gave him some. Now I owe Peanut.”

“Where’s he been staying all this time?” she said.

“Probably down in Stillhouse Holler, what folks are calling Pillhouse Holler.”

“We can’t let him get sent back to jail.”

“Maybe that’s where he belongs.”

“Not my son.”

That’s what she’d been saying since after James was arrested for having a bottle of stolen pain pills on his person. She’d wanted to pay his bail but there was no way we could and I didn’t want to anyway considering how much I’d already paid for him his whole life. At his sentencing hearing I expected my own boy to stand out among the lowlives. From the moment the officer led him shuffling into the courtroom chained to the other prisoners he looked exactly like he belonged. That’s when I quit saying, “Not my son.”

Leda was squeezing my hand to death the whole time the other prisoners’ lawyers talked back and forth to the judge propped up there with his fat red face, likely wanting a drink of wine. When the judge called James’ name his public defender came through the little gate carrying a stack of papers and looking like he’d never so much as hammered a nail into a piece of wood. The judge read the charges, “Possession of a controlled substance without a prescription.”

He asked the lawyer how his defendant plead. The lawyer looked at James standing with his wrists handcuffed and leaning over on account of the chains. He said, “Guilty, your uh, your uh,” he had to think for a minute, “Honor, bluh bluh bluh bluh bluh.” It was embarrassing.

Leda didn’t sleep. She laid on her back during the nights with her eyes opened and her little chest going up and down. When I tried to hold her she was like a scared rabbit in my arms.



I couldn't get her to eat much. She worried all the time and got thinner and older right there in front of me.

After a few weeks she got a call from James while I was at work. His lawyer made a deal with the judge and James was being released under the condition he check in to a drug rehabilitation center. It was a place called New Hope in a county south of ours. The patients worked at a thrift store to pay their way. They attended Bible studies and counseling. Leda drove him down there that day before I got home. Neither of us had complete hope, I don't believe, but we liked the name of the place and I've always thought there was hope in not knowing for sure, in the question of it, before you can get an answer like I was about to get that day.

Leda looked at her hands and tried to rub off the gold paint she'd got all over them. "I'll get you some kerosene," I said.

"We have to take him back to New Hope before he's arrested again," she said. "The judge won't give him a second chance."

"It don't seem to be helping him."

"The therapist said they were making progress."

"Since when did you start believing in shrinks anyway? You never used to when James was a kid and jerking himself raw into his sheets every night and the doctor said he might need one."

She grumbled something and headed toward the front porch. I hated when she said things that way so I'd have to ask her what it was and then we'd get into it even more. I couldn't stop myself. "What was that?" I said.

She turned around with her gold finger pointed at me. "Maybe it's not his fault."

“How could him getting hooked on drugs when all we did was try to give him every opportunity in the world not be his fault?”

“You wanted to leave him in jail.”

“What was I supposed to do, go rob a bank? We’re broke and that ain’t nothing new.”

“I told you for years to get a normal job.”

“You mean one like yours where you make about a hundred dollars a week cleaning people’s houses? How could we pay the mortgage? I don’t tell you to get a normal job.”

“Some women would rather stay at home and raise their children.”

“While I about killed myself so you could.”

She went inside the house and slammed the door. I stood there in the yard and I thought, You don’t have a clue what it is to be me in this world. I looked at the little old house I’d worked so hard to finally own and keep up all those years and I thought, Vanity of vanities.

I’d always tried to save money but most of it went to the kids. James’ braces, for instance, and Laura’s first car, which she wrecked into a man’s hedgerow and cost me even more money in insurance. Most of the money went to bills and tithing. The Bible says the Lord will bless a cheerful giver.

Every month since we’d been married we gave ten percent of my earnings to Pedigo Baptist Church. I knew it was what the scripture says is right but there were times when it didn’t make sense to have to put diapers or groceries or car tires or antibiotics on a credit card and then pay on it for the rest of our lives. I told Leda a few times that God would understand our needs. She told me God would provide for our needs if we remained faithful. I figured after 25 years we’d tithed about three years worth of my earnings, not to mention the time there was a leak in the sanctuary ceiling and everybody was too lazy to fix it but me and I even bought the paint and

materials. That money would've been nice to have in the bank at my age but it had gone to a good cause. It kept the lights on at the church for instance and kept the rafters from rotting and helped pay the preachers.

Maybe that's why God kept blessing me with the ability to work unlike my brother Grease that threw his back out and was drawing disability. Maybe that's why I hadn't fell off a ladder and killed myself. I reckon you're supposed to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's.

Once the kids moved out I was able to put back a little money. Except the months when I had to pay to have the truck worked on or when it was hard to find jobs in the wintertime and we had to live on it. It took me almost five years to save around \$7,000 and I could see how God had blessed me as a cheerful giver.

I got dressed in my church clothes one morning and went down to the First Tennessee Bank and met with a financial planner. He was a slick young guy with spiked hair and what they called frosted tips like those stupid movie stars. I couldn't understand why a man would work so hard on his hair just to look like a clown. I went ahead and told him I wanted to put all the money in my savings account into the stock market. He asked me what my current portfolio looked like. I told him I didn't have one nor did I know about the whole thing. If it was hauling hay or cutting tobacco or painting a house it'd be the other way around. But since he was the expert on money I figured I trusted him to tell me what to do.

He pulled a brochure from his desk and went over the choices I had for investment. I didn't understand them so I told him whichever one looked best to him. I left feeling good to finally have some money invested like all them rich folks I worked for.

I watched it grow a little on the statements the bank mailed me. I could just smell retirement. I already had the RV I planned to buy picked out for instance. I'd mapped out mine and Leda's trip to the Grand Canyon. I thought that little pretty boy really knew what he was doing. Then I got a statement showing all my money had been lost except for a few hundred bucks.

I went back down to the bank to ask him how it could happen but he wasn't in. A teller said he was in Italy. "How'd he manage to go to Italy?" I said and wanted to add: "when here I sit with all my savings gone."

She pointed to the wall where the little pencilneck's portrait hung. Him in his suit with his frosted tips and a grin from ear to ear. A plaque above the portrait read "Employee of the Month."

Two weeks later I went back down to the bank. He had a tan probably from laying around on some beach and paying for drinks with my money. I told him I wanted an explanation for how I lost all my savings. I had to remind him of my name.

He pulled up my account on his computer screen. "It's been a bad quarter," he said. "A lot of people took a hit, myself included. Some analysts think we're headed for a crash."

"You were supposed to know."

"I can only make predictions based on my knowledge of the market. If you want, we can put your money in a safer investment, an IRA or—"

"Don't you see what I'm telling you, boy?" I said. "I'm broke now while you sit there in your suit and take trips all over the world."

I said it too loud. The tellers and people in line looked my way. The security guard started coming over.

I left as fast as I could and so embarrassed my face was red as a drunkard's. I almost backed my work truck into a car pulling in trying to get out of there. I couldn't hit a lick the rest of the day and so I lost even more money. Nobody remembers what the poor man says.

I started to go inside and apologize to Leda when she came out the front door carrying her purse and car keys. "Where are you going?" I said.

"To get my son."

I cupped her gold hands in mine and she let me hold them even though she didn't like it and wanted to pull away. "I'm sorry," I said. "Please don't go driving back in there by yourself. The police don't hardly even go in that holler."

"I'm not afraid."

That struck a note with me. "Do you think I am?" I said. "Have you forgot the man I grew up under? That lunatic? Baby, since him I ain't ever been afraid of another man."

She pulled her hands from mine. "I never was."

We stared at each other. Leda chewed the side of her lip like always when her mind was set and there was no changing it. I said, "Let's at least take my truck."

Stillhouse Holler, Pillhouse Holler, whatever somebody wanted to call it wasn't far from our home. I turned down into that dark place, past a Dead End sign that had been shot up. We drove through a jungle of kudzu. It hung like green curtains from the powerlines and trees and blocked the sun and killed everything underneath it like it does. Then the holler opened up to sunlight shining on ugly shacks perched on steep land of scrub and rock. Old tarps were draped over roofs. People had used scrap tin and plastic to patch repairs in siding. Parked in the rutted and washed out driveways were muddy traps. Others were on blocks with the hoods up puking wires and belts. Everywhere was junk and litter. Leda and I should have been driving through

some pink desert a thousand miles from there on our way to the Grand Canyon, not in my work truck going through that hellhole.

She looked out the window and tapped her foot and chewed her lip. I remembered a time when James was in middle school and came home with a black eye. A new boy was picking on him and calling him Bucky Face because of his teeth. I told James the solution was simple. Hit the boy back and maybe even bite him with them teeth God gave him.

He came home the next day with the other eye black and looked about like a raccoon. I asked him if he hit the new boy back and he shook his head. I couldn't understand how a boy could be so unsure of himself. When I was in school and another boy gave me lip I showed him real quick how strong I was by twisting his arm behind his back. If he hit me or even tried I just flailed hell on him until a teacher pulled me off.

The next day after James came home with the other black eye Leda showed up at school without me knowing and searched out the boy before his class and told him if he ever laid another hand on her son she'd be the one he'd have to deal with. I didn't find out about it until the principal called the house that evening after I'd been climbing ladders and slinging paint all day to lecture me about adults threatening minors on school premises. I wanted to reach through the phone and slap that pencilneck but I just said, "Yes sir," because that's what you have to do.

I thought playing a sport might give him confidence and make him popular like football did me and cause him to quit being afraid all the time. I made him sign up for community baseball. We practiced out in the yard and that boy could hit the ball way into the pasture. But when he got up to bat during his first game one evening he froze. He stood there in his helmet and baggy uniform and let the pitches go by. James wouldn't swing the bat for some reason. I'd clap and say, "Come on, Bubs, knock it over the fence."

Leda would clap and say, “Good job, honey.”

But pitch after pitch flew by and that boy of mine stood there with his bat cocked behind him and the coach encouraging him to swing at the next one and the other parents in the stands in their nice clothes and me covered in paint and smelling of kerosene and he struck out every time without swinging. I went over to the backstop the next time he was at bat. “James, boy,” I told him, “if you don’t swing I’m gonna bust your ass.”

I was probably being a too hard on him but it was embarrassing. He swung, sure enough, at three pitches in a row and struck out like always. We didn’t make him play baseball anymore after that game. I wanted him to stick it out. Leda rubbed his little head and told him he didn’t have to if he didn’t want to. I wasn’t going to argue with her. If the two of them would’ve just listened to me he might not have turned out the way he did but it was always her that had the final say-so with him.

I didn’t know what to expect of Leda now. It wasn’t the time nor the place to go acting like a mama bear. “What if he won’t come with us?” I said.

“That’s not an option.”

“He might not even be down here,” I said and hoped that was the case. I hoped he wasn’t somewhere worse either, if there could be such a thing other than hell.

The holler got narrower. I had to slow down under tree branches hanging over the road and brushing the top of my truck and scraping the ladders and covering the windshield with pollen. I sprayed washer fluid and when the wipers cleaned away the yellow grime I saw a car parked up ahead in a little pull off where people dumped trash.

It was a dusty black Buick that looked like it had been in a demolition derby. I drove by slow and saw two men with shaved heads inside. They looked like children of the same parents

or the same lifestyle or both with that aged appearance that comes from hard living. They were probably what James was aspiring to be, professional drug addicts.

“Stop,” said Leda.

I did even though I thought it a bad idea. Bass was thumping on the radio and smoke from their cigarettes blew out the windows. “I’m looking for my son,” said Leda. “James Brass.”

Her words were so honest they hurt me. The two idiots just stared at her and I could tell they had no love in their hearts and were on the road to hell. The driver flicked his cigarette toward the truck and punched the button to roll up his window.

I wanted to yank him out and slam his bald head against the road for treating a woman more pure than they would ever be that way but I drove on.

I thought about not telling Leda about the little purple truck Peanut mentioned and just turning around at the dead end if we didn’t see James and then heading home but I knew that wouldn’t satisfy her and she’d go back down there herself and start knocking on doors and probably get in trouble with them folks and maybe get beat up and raped and then I’d be put in prison because I would’ve killed a man and burn his house up along with anything he owned that ever harmed her.

“Peanut said he was in a little purple truck.”

Eventually there it was, parked in front of another shack that was painted some color once and was now black with mildew. I’d seen sturdier dog houses.

Leda pointed. I pulled into the driveway and stopped behind the truck. She opened the door. “Wait,” I said. “Why don’t you let me talk to them alone?”

I followed that woman through the yard of leaves strewn with rusty car parts all probably stolen and stopped on the porch behind her as she knocked on the door. I figured Franky Paul



would be some mean young punk all full of himself and maybe I'd have to whip him. I was ready to tell him about me, how all I'd ever done was bust my ass working and how it made me strong and tough and how it made me a man.

The door opened to the opposite of what I thought. He was a skinny slouched boy in a holey tanktop and a pair of shorts hanging past his boxers. "Wha?" he said in a kind of sad girly voice and talking like his tongue was too big for his mouth.

I'd heard that big-tongue talk from James a hundred times. It was how I figured out he was high on pills and it was the reason I fired him before he could fall off a ladder and break his neck. I told him he could come back to work for me when he was ready to take a piss test and prove he was clean which he never did, which didn't surprise me.

The boy stared me up and down with his glassy and half-shut eyes. I thought, You're probably drawing a check while I work my ass off and get taxed to hell so it can go to you. "I'm James' Brass' daddy," I said. "This is his mama. We're not here to start any trouble. We'd like to talk to him."

"I don't know him," he said again in that girly voice.

I about wanted to ask him if he was gay. "That's not true," I said. "Some folks saw you together down at the Smoky Mountain Market."

"They didn't see me."

"Are you Franky Paul?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then you're a liar."

He looked at Leda like he was about to cry. "I ain't a liar, miss lady."

I took a step toward him. “Don’t hurt me,” he said and leaned back like I was about to jack his jaw, which I wanted to do. “I’m already wounded.”

Leda put her hand on my arm. She said, “What’s wrong, honey?”

I thought, Good Lord, woman.

“It’s right here.” Franky Paul lifted up his tanktop. He was skinny as those pictures of Jews in the Nazi prison camps. On the right side of his chest was a green cursive F. On the other side was a P. I knew what the F and P stood for but I had two other words I would’ve liked to put in their place. He had a square bandage stained with blood and pus on his ribcage. “I been down at Saint Mary’s,” he said in that sissy voice. “I died. This crazy bitch, I’m sorry, miss lady, this old girlfriend’s sister stabbed me for stepping on her chihuahua. I didn’t mean to, miss lady. We ain’t even dating no more.”

“I know you didn’t, honey,” said Leda.

I thought, What in God’s name is happening right now?

“They telled me I died for a half hour. They was gonna give up on me till my heart beated again. I got to go back down there in two days so they can blow up my lung just like a balloon or I’ll die again and this time I won’t wake up no more.” He almost fell over pulling his shirt back down. “Do you have a cigarette, miss lady?”

I could barely believe this was the Franky Paul I’d heard about, that he had the balls to steal anything from anyone but I didn’t reckon you had to be brave to be a thief. My son sure wasn’t. “Where’s James?” I said.

“I don’t like your man, miss lady. He scares me. Do you have a cigarette?”

“Where’s James?” I said.

“I knew your mother,” said Leda.

I didn't think it was possible for such a drugged up fool to show emotion. Whether it was sadness or shock his eyes got clear. He held his side and leaned over and groaned. Leda grabbed him to keep him from falling on his face. "You need to sit down," she said. "Let's get you inside."

I followed them into that rat's nest. There was empty junk food wrappers and coke and beer bottles everywhere. It smelled like rotting food and diarrhea so bad it burned my nose and the smell went down in my throat and to where I could almost taste it and thought I would throw up. It wasn't a place anyone could call a home. The only thing you could do to fix it was tear it down or burn it.

Leda helped Franky Paul to the dirty couch. In the floor along with all the trash was a bowl overflowing with cigarette butts and a hospital bracelet. I poked my head into the kitchen and saw flies swarming above the sink and dishes caked with maggots crawling through scraps of goo and bones. There was a table covered with empty pill bottles and mail I figured was stolen and black specks of mouse shit everywhere. I didn't see any signs of James except the pill bottles could have been his.

Leda sat beside Franky Paul on that nasty couch and I thought, We're gonna get a disease just breathing this air.

Franky Paul groaned a little more and reached down into the pile of cigarette butts and found one that wasn't smoked all the way. He took a lighter from his pocket and lit it and coughed and pulled up his shirt and looked at the pus leaking through the bandage and then he leaned back and blew smoke. "My mama was the awfulest bitch, miss lady. I'm sorry, miss lady."

I stood there about to get sick waiting to see what Leda would say. I couldn't figure out how she would know Franky Paul's mama. We didn't associate with people like them.

"We're all born with good in our hearts," she said and put her gold hands on her chest. "Sometimes we just lose our way and do things we regret."

I thought, What have you done that you regret?

"Your mama came to our church a few times many years ago. We were all so sorry to hear about her passing. I remember seeing you at the funeral."

I realized Leda was talking about the woman from the holler, when folks were still calling it Stillhouse. She'd attended Pedigo Baptist looking on the verge of death and got caught stealing things from the church. The preacher warned her about stealing from God in a sermon but she wouldn't repent and God punished her. She died a few days after the sermon.

Seeing God's wrath even when you had faith and tried to live the right way was enough to make you want to be more careful to not be lukewarm since she was surely cold and God took her life. I didn't go to her funeral but I remember the women at church got together and went. They were all torn up about her.

I thought, The apple don't fall too far from the tree.

"You saw me, miss lady?" said Franky Paul.

"You were just little," said Leda. "You reminded me of my own son. James."

Franky Paul's cigarette quit burning but he kept sucking on it anyway. "I was with my case manager. I don't remember it much, miss lady, except I cried a lot and didn't understand why I had to go away."

"I prayed for you," said Leda.

"You did, miss lady?"

Leda took his gross hands in hers. "I did. And I'll pray for you now."

"I died, miss lady. I'm so wounded."

"You have to take better care of yourself."

"I know, miss lady."

"The Lord kept you alive for a reason." She squeezed his hands. "That's why you have to help me find James. God has plans for him too and I want to help him. He's my son and I love him."

"He ain't here, miss lady."

"Where is he?"

"He done runned out the back door when he saw y'all coming."

I went through that pigsty of a kitchen and opened the back door and jumped down the steps hoping James would be there so I could snatch him by the neck like a baby hog that might give you trouble. It was just a steep ridge coming down and thick woods and old sunk in trash bags in the leaves. I thought he might be up in the trees looking down at me from some hiding spot like he used to when he was a kid and got in trouble and wouldn't answer when I hollered for him. I wasn't going to give him the pleasure.

Leda came outside and started calling for him. "James, honey, if you can hear me please say something. We're here to help you. We want to get you back to New Hope. We only love you."

There was a big crash in the kitchen. I looked through the open door and Franky Paul had fell against the table and knocked all the envelopes and pill bottles off and was laying in the trash in the floor groaning. "Will you please help him?" said Leda.

I went inside while she kept calling for James in her sweet voice he didn't deserve. I grabbed Franky Paul by the back of his shorts and yanked him up and stood him against the nasty sink. He was about as light as a five-foot stepladder. "You little piece of shit," I said low enough so Leda wouldn't hear. "If I ever hear of you and James running together again I'll put you back down in Saint Mary's and you'll wish you was dead."

"Miss lady," he screamed. "Miss lady."

Leda came inside and pushed me away from him. I don't think she'd ever pushed me before except when we were younger and flirting around. "Kalemar," she said, "don't be so mean. He's hurt."

She helped Franky Paul back to the couch while he whined like a sissy. I went out the front door and waited on her and I thought, Mean? You don't even know what mean is, woman.

She came outside breathing hard and wouldn't look at me. She took off toward the work truck and I stood there about as wounded as Franky Paul to feel her turning against me. But I had it in me to keep going like I'd done my whole life.

I got inside the truck with her chewing her lip and looking away from me like some woman I barely knew. I thought, How on earth did we end up here? James was how. The labor alone about killed Leda. Eighteen hours before he came to be red-faced and crying and perfect in the world. Then his whole life he caused us nothing but pain and worry. Twenty years worth of it. I thought, What things collided against the plan God had set before him? and I had no answer.

"What do you regret?" I said.

"Not now," said Leda.

"You told that little weirdo you regretted something. What is it?"

"My only concern is finding James."

“Do you regret marrying me?”

“Stop it, Kalemar.”

“Do you regret having a family?”

“Stop it.”

“What do you regret?”

“I regret being afraid,” she yelled. “How’s that? Does that make you happy?”

She started crying and it all about killed me dead. I tried to reach over and put my hand on her leg and she pushed me away. “What on earth do you have to be afraid of? I’ve always tried to protect you. I’ve always—”

“Just drive,” she said.

I headed back out of the holler about to cry myself and all because of James wasting everything we ever did for him. I didn’t know why Leda would be afraid.

I drove slow and watched for my boy scurrying down into some ditch or trying to hide behind a tree and I prayed that the Lord would help us even though I couldn’t see what any help would be except a miracle. James had already set his decay in motion toward the end. We had nothing but more days ahead of us with constant worry and then when they found him dead it would kill us both and we’d never be able to recover. We were already broken in two.

I was about to turn out of the holler toward home when I looked in the other direction and saw that Buick beat to hell in the distance with its engine smoking and two people pushing it down the road. “Look,” I said.

“Is that him?” said Leda.

“We’ll find out by God.”

I drove in their direction while Leda leaned forward in her seat and wiped her eyes with her gold hands. We hadn't gone far before we both knew one of them pushing the car was James. He was wearing a dingy ball cap and ragged baggy clothes. We could only see his backside but you can tell your own blood and firstborn from any angle.

They didn't notice the truck until we were right behind them going about a mile per hour. James jerked his wobbly head over his shoulder and looked straight at me. He was in La-la land with his eyes all squinty and glazed. He looked even worse since I'd last saw him. His face was thin and bony with an unhealthy paleness to his skin. I thought, All the food I've provided to nourish your body, all the religion I worked so hard to show you, all the doctor visits, even your teeth were better than my own because of me working overtime to pay for your braces and this is what it came to. What a waste. I about wanted to knock him down with the bumper of my truck.

He looked back at the car and tried harder to push. It was almost funny watching them two, like they could get away from me. They were so stoned they looked like they were moving in slow motion. Their bodies were about to give up on them with them panting and their hands slipping off the trunk. I honked the horn and the driver poked his bald head out the window and glanced back at us and then kept steering. "James," Leda hollered out the window.

The second he saw her he dropped his hands and stood in the road and I had to stop the truck quick. The other idiot pushing said something to him but James didn't respond. The driver steered the car onto the shoulder and hit the brakes. James stood there with his head down and his eyes covered by the bill of the cap. He was a grown man but he looked like a slouching little kid again.

Leda got out and went to him and hugged him in the road. James didn't even move his arms to hug her back but let them hang there. She spoke to him and cried and kissed his dingy



cap. The other guys watched and I thought, You better stay out of this if you don't want me to show you the strength of a man, if you don't want me to unleash it all on you. They must have known what I would do because they didn't make a move when Leda tried to nudge James toward the truck and he just stood there. "Come on home," she said.

He wouldn't move. Leda grabbed his hand in hers and he pulled away from her and stumbled a little. I thought, No, no, no, boy. You're not gonna stand there in the middle of the road and make the woman that gave you life beg you for anything, you twerp.

I was out of the truck and stomping toward them. When the other guys saw me they straightened up like they might get a little spry with me so I hollered, "You two stay out of it. This is family."

Then I grabbed James by his arm to where he couldn't get loose and I yanked him past Leda to the side of the truck. "You're going with us whether you like it or not," I said.

"Be easy," said Leda.

That's when James reached into his pocket and I heard the rattle. I lost it right then and there. I pushed him up against the truck. I started feeling inside his pocket and he said, "Stop it," and tried to push my hand away.

I showed him the strength of a man, what a man that worked his ass off all his life to provide could do, how those muscles stayed strong. I grabbed the back of his neck and nearly headbutted him I was so mad. "Be easy, Kalemara," said Leda.

James quit trying to push me away because it was a losing battle for him. I felt the bottle and pulled it out and saw the blue and white pills inside. I looked for the label thinking they were some poor old woman's but it had been torn off.

I knocked the bill of his hat up with the bottle so I could see his sorry eyes and he could see mine. "Where did you get these?" I said.

He wouldn't answer me. "That's enough," said Leda and I stepped back and put the pills in my pocket and let her get in between us.

She patted James' shoulder while he leaned away from her like she repulsed him and I almost wanted to slap him. I kept calm and said, "We're going home."

"I don't want to stay with you," said James in that big-tongue talk.

"It'll just be for a night," said Leda, "and then I'll drive you to New Hope. Dr. Ray said you could come back this time with no punishment."

"I don't like that place."

"Is it better than jail?" I said. "Is it? Because that's the only other option. The police are gonna be looking for you. I'll call them myself if I have to."

Even stoned and mad he knew I'd beat him again. He let out a little grumble and shook his head and got into the truck. I climbed in and it was the three of us sitting with our knees touching. The life God had brought into the world with our blood between us. It didn't feel like a family anymore. My son was no prodigal.

"We need to get some food in you," said Leda. "I'll cook whatever you want."

I thought, Good Lord, he don't even deserve a can of sardines.

I looked at the boys in the smoking Buick, the one getting back into his car and the other trying to push it, that pill bottle in my pocket feeling like the 50 cent piece I found in my pocket all them years ago and I was right back there in one beat of my heart, right back there in one snap of my mind, right back there thirty years ago, out on Broadway when the radiator went to leaking on the old trap Pappy drove.

By the time he pulled over at McDonald's the engine was spewing steam. I got to fishing around in my pocket and found a 50 cent piece he hadn't extorted from me. It had to of been an oversight on his part because if he knowed I had that 50 cent piece he would of grabbed it before we left the house. That was a pack and a half of Pall Malls in them days.

Pappy and his buddy Chin popped the hood. I thought if nothing else I'd like to have me a strawberry milkshake. I go inside McDonald's and get me a strawberry milkshake for 39 cents. I'm sitting in the back of the old trap drinking it after Pappy and Chin pour water into the radiator.

He was standing outside and looking through the window at me. "What? Are you hungry, Kalemar? Don't I feed you enough."

"I just wanted a strawberry milkshake."

It killed him dead that I had the money to get my own milkshake but he wasn't about to say nothing around Chin. What really killed him dead was that Chin rode over there with us and the old trap was acting up. Chin decided he didn't want to be sitting in a broke down trap out on Broadway so he made up an excuse.

Duck and Chin's wife, Blonde Baby, had pulled up about that time. They was following us somewhere in Blonde Baby's car. "I'll have to ride with them over here," said Chin. "I'm gonna have to sit over here and straighten them out."

That killed Pappy dead because the whole thing was just falling apart. His date didn't want to ride with him anymore.

Duck was brave as hell while she was in Blonde Baby's car. "Kalemar," she said, "now if you want something else you get it. Blu-blu-blu-blu-blu."

We both knowed she didn't have no money because Pappy wouldn't let her and I wouldn't of asked Pappy for a dime if I was about to starve. Chin decided he'd just switch cars with Duck. So once the old trap was running again she was in there with me and Old Craze. She didn't say a word the rest of the drive. Not a word.

He said, "Got him a milkshake, huh? Ain't even gonna share it with his poor Pappy."

I said, "Pap, whose pocket did that money come out of to start with?"

"It don't matter. What matters is it kept from going in my pocket."

I'm sitting in the back seat and I'm thinking, One of these days I'm gonna get any damn thing I want to eat. It ain't gonna be none of your business because I'll have the money to buy it for myself. You ain't gonna open your damn mouth about it.

I should of told Uncle Adna. He was asking me about it when I was over there helping him cut some brush off his property. I should of said, "Damn right. He gets every damn penny you give me unless I hide it. Go over there and whip his ass, Unc."

But it ain't like he didn't already know.

I went down there to the house on the creek one day before James was born. Pappy was playing the victim to the hilt. I went down there to visit him and Duck. His sister Audrey showed up about the same time I did. I walked in the living room a little ahead of her. Aunt Audrey walks in and says, "How you doing today, R.J.?"

"I aint doing no good," Pappy says. "Just ain't felt good."

"What's wrong with you?"

"It's Kalemar's fault," he said. "It's Kalemar's fault. He ain't been down here in two weeks. Reer reer reer reer reer."

I thought, Old man you need to be in Lakeshore Mental Hospital.

“It’s Kalemar’s fault.”

He’d try to put somebody on a guilt trip because he didn’t feel good. He couldn’t control me no other way at that time. That’s the reason he cussed me like a dog when Rio stopped down there to see if anybody wanted to help him haul hay. When we was in school he wouldn’t of asked us nothing. He would of pulled over the school bus or if it was a Saturday he would say, “You boys go help Rio and I’ll be down there directly.” But in this case he had absolutely no control over me anymore. That killed him dead.

When Rio left I said, “Me haul hay?” The last two or three times I hauled hay I got sick from that crap blowing down my nose and throat. I said, “No, I don’t do that anymore.”

Pappy said, “You’re too goddamn proud.”

I wanted to say, If your sorry old ass had worked half as much as I was for my family we wouldn’t of had to do none of the stuff we did. And he wouldn’t of been up shit creek at the time and Mama wouldn’t of been either. They wouldn’t of been getting ready to get kicked off the place.

I asked Mama when they got kicked off down there and had to move into the little trailer up the pike, “Why didn’t he do something different 30 years ago?”

“He just didn’t care I don’t reckon.”

He didn’t by God. He had it in his mind he was gonna charm Opal so much she’d say, “Well, Randy, you’re such a good feller I’m gonna give you this house.” He thought she actually cared about him. I was a nicer feller than he was and I never believed anything like that. Nobody’s gonna give you anything.

I went on down there a time or two for a visit. I'd like to of had a video of it. Oh, he just ran around and around the table. "Here, Opal, you want another bologna sandwich? Here, Opal, you want some coffee? Here, Opal, you want some pie?"

For Mama he wouldn't get his ass out of that chair to do nothing for her if she was dying. But for Opal he just ran around and around the table. "Here, Opal."

I wanted to say, Pappy, get mine while you're at it since you want to be such a good waitress today.

He used to sit there and brag. "Believe I can deal with Opal. Believe I can deal with Opal."

I was down there one day when Opal was sick up in Kingsport and about to die. "Believe I might need to take me a little trip up about Kingsport," he said. "Ha ha ha. You'd like to hear the deal, wouldn't you?"

I thought, Yeah by God I'd like to hear the deal especially since she's already willed the house and land to her son and everybody knows it. Pappy was always living in a fantasy world. What the hell did he think he had to offer somebody? Not long before he died, he started talking about dividing his stuff up, like he had a 200 acre farm or something and wasn't renting a trailer off the pike. The only thing me and Grease had to divide up after he kicked off was the funeral bill and here I was thinking about how I'm gonna have to pay for another one soon, that of my boy, with no cross for Leda to stand beneath, only the dark idol he'd built to ruin.

On the way home me and Leda sat there worn out with James stoned out of his mind and his head bobbing like he was about to fall asleep. "What are you doing running with that trash?" I said.

"Who?" he said in that big-tongue voice.

“Them two idiots in the car and that Franky Paul boy.”

“They ain’t trash.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Kalemar,” said Leda.

“Who in the hell gets stabbed over a damned chihuahua?”

“Kalemar.”

“Is that what you want, to end up in a coffin like your buddy Franky Paul and us standing over you saying he was stabbed by some piece of trash over a damned chihuahua?”

“Kalemar. That’s enough.”

“He didn’t get stabbed,” said James. “He had pneumonia.”

“Good Lord,” I said, “What a liar.”

James laughed a little but Leda was getting upset so I didn’t say anything else.

I pulled into the driveway. Leda’s gold boxes were shining in the sun. She got out of the truck and James stumbled down on her side and I watched them walk toward the house slow as mourners at a funeral. It was one of those times when everything about comes clear like you can feel an answer on the way to let you know how to defeat what you’re up against. Before you can get a hold on it it goes away. I thought, If anything’s died, it’s this family.

They went into the house I hadn’t fooled around with and lost even though it didn’t matter. It was the house I owned but I knew that was false. We’d lived in it for over twenty years and the truth was it wasn’t ours. It was just a box of boards and nails and glass Wells Fargo allowed us to stay in as long as we paid the mortgage. The county let us live there as long as we paid the land taxes.

When Lewis died and his kids took down the pasture fences and divided his land and put it up for sell all I wanted was to get a mortgage and finally own. The mortgage was pretty easy to get. They just moved some numbers around until you qualified. I was proud I was no longer a renter but the first homeowner in my family. It wasn't until the bills started coming in that I realized owning a house was no different than renting one. Either way you're paying somebody to have a roof over your head and when you're gone it will just go to somebody else or to the bank or county or be torn down. I thought, What do I own and the answer was Nothing.

Leda came outside with her head down and started gathering the boxes. I got a rag and a can of mineral spirits from the back of the truck and went to her. I grabbed the boxes from her arms and set them on the porch. I dabbed mineral spirits onto the rag and smelled its sting and she gave me her gold hands that always looked so small against mine. I was gentle as I started wiping away the gold and she stood there in her Vacation Bible School t-shirt and jeans and looked out at the yard with the green growing in and the gold outlines of her boxes. I could feel her sadness and she was still so beautiful to me. The Homecoming Queen I'd fell in love with now a woman with graying hair and golden hands.

She started to take off her wedding ring to keep the mineral spirits off it and I helped her. I put my fingers on her fingers and the ring and I slid it off and held it in my hand and looked at it. I'd worked so hard to buy that ring, even going back into the tobacco and hay fields for a few months until I could save enough money.

I'd always thought I'd get her another ring some day, one with a bigger diamond that shined like all them rich women's I worked for but Leda never seemed to feel like hers was any less. All the years of our marriage she'd cleaned it every month in a little blue jar of jewelry cleaner she kept in the bathroom like it was her proudest possession.



I put the ring in my pocket with the bottle of pills and then I switched it to the other pocket because those two things didn't belong side by side. I kept wiping away the gold. For a second I was back there at the altar of the church the day I put the ring on her finger all them years ago before God and Pappy in his wheelchair in the corner. I felt that same love and desire grow inside me and I wanted to pull her to me and kiss her and kiss her and make love to her and hold her but I knew we'd become something other than husband and wife now but we'd never leave each other and I didn't know if it would ever be possible to get back to the way we once were for all the weight you haul around with you. I didn't want that woman to be afraid but she was and it didn't seem like there was a thing I could do to change it.

I gave her the ring and she twisted it down on her finger. I set the rag and can on the porch and picked up the stack of gold boxes. She held the door open for me. "What's he doing?" I said.

"He's in his bedroom. I'm gonna give him a little time. Can you please be patient with him? I don't want him to run."

"That boy couldn't outrun a lame dog, much less me."

"Please, Kalemar. He needs to eat. I might make him a meatloaf. Will you go to the store and get some ground beef?"

"Why not," I said and Leda gave me a look but let it go.

I carried the boxes inside and put them on the table beside the bags from Wal-Mart she'd spent her week's pay on. She went into the bathroom and shut the door. I sat down at the table and looked at the old tongue and groove oak all nicked and scratched. It was smoothed down on the edges from years of our arms and elbows. I thought about how many meals we'd had in that spot as a family and how they all came from God's blessings and my and Leda's hard work to be

good parents. I thought about the many prayers we'd said there. Little Bug always messing it up with Pooshie, Pooshie, Pooshie just trying to imitate the brother she looked up to, the brother that once whispered for God to put a shield around him. James tore down that shield and himself on his own. Only a worm would be low enough to look up to him now.

In the Wal-Mart bags were the gifts Leda put inside the boxes. Pencils and notebooks, candy, small copies of the New Testament, feminine hygiene products. You could give that same box to American girls and they wouldn't think it was a decent birthday present. I thought about how them poor African girls were living in a place worse than Pillhouse Holler without running water or much food. Except for the heat it didn't seem all that different than my childhood. We didn't get electricity or running water until me and Grease was well into our teens. We used lanterns and the outhouse and Pappy was too lazy to chop enough firewood to keep the house warm in the wintertime. We slept with ice on our bedroom walls. You could lay there and watch it grow in the lantern light. We ate possums that Pappy would blind in his headlights and then beat to death with a tire iron.

I guessed one difference was the world of opportunities was closer to us than it was for them African girls. It was just beyond the ridges. A man could can start out poor as dirt in this country and become a doctor or astronaut or President, so they say. I thought it was a little harder to make the climb up the ladder than people wanted to admit. There were just too many people trying to get there. Some folks had to stay at the bottom. That alone meant the American dream couldn't be for everybody. I wasn't for people like me and Grease, for instance, but it could be for your kids.

That's what I'd always thought. I worked hard and made sure James and Laura Bug never went hungry or had to eat possum. I made them go to school and put them in a position to have

options. I might not have been able to make it further than a dirty old house painter but they could. Bug took the opportunities laid before her. James wasted his.

I reckoned I could have been more myself if I'd been born to different parents, any two that gave a mite of a damn about my future. I made terrible grades and got kicked off the football team because I could only go to school about two-thirds of the year since Pappy would pull over the school bus to put me and Grease to work in the tobacco and hay. Somehow my best subject was English. I liked to read and I guessed I could identify with those sad characters of literature. One of my English teachers was an old woman that would rap your knuckles with a ruler if you acted up. She sent a research paper I wrote to some county contest. It was about Jude the Obscure. I forgot exactly what I said about the book, probably something about how a man can never escape his upbringing. It didn't win anyhow.

She wanted me to go to college. When I told Pappy he said, "They God almighty. Trying to take you away from me ain't they. Bluh bluh bluh bluh bluuuuuh."

Duck said, "Why we don't know nobody that ever went to college."

College might as well have been Africa to them hicks. How was I supposed go without their help? I was feeling like Jude the Obscure himself.

It wasn't until the army that I knew I could've done it on my own. Folks talk about basic training being so hard. It was the best I ever had it in my life up until that point. Not one of them drill sergeants had anything on Pappy. We just had to exercise and fake fight and shoot while some man yelled in our ears but didn't really mean it. We got fed three meals a day.

The same way I was smart enough to go ahead and sign up before I got drafted for Vietnam like my cousin that was killed over there, I was smart enough to take desk work after basic. I got sent to Fort Knox. That was back when a computer took up a whole room. You heard

it vibrating the walls behind you. I just filled out forms and answered the phone. One of my superiors wanted me to go to West Point. I didn't care nothing about becoming an officer and getting sent to Nam where bullets were killing officers the same as grunts. I had it just fine where I was. All I had on my mind was getting home to my Leda and starting a family.

She came out of the bathroom drying her hands on her jeans and leaned down on my shoulder. I held her and looked out the window. A beautiful spring afternoon. The white buds on the dogwood starting to open. To be on the road in an RV heading out west. To just go fishing. To sit in a lawn chair in the breeze and drink a sweet tea beside my wife and both of us feel peace. To lay in bed and dream together. To make love. I'd done about forgot what it was like.

"He looks so sad," she said.

"He's had all the opportunity in the world."

"It's not too late."

"I hope not. I'll go to the store for some ground beef directly."

"Thank you."

"You're a good mother."

She kissed my head and went into our bedroom and I heard her knees hit the floor. I grabbed one of the little Bibles from a bag and opened it to see where it would land, if God would give me something in that moment. He gave me Paul:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ;  
that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

I went to James' room and looked in through the cracked door but didn't see him. It was just the bed made as it had been for months with the old green comforter and the bare walls

dotted with tack holes from his heavy metal posters I'd hated. He'd took his clothes and belongings with him two years earlier when he moved into an apartment after high school. There was no telling where those things were now, probably done pawned the day he left my house.

The closet door to the attic was open and I heard him up there stumbling around. I figured he was looking for something else he could pawn. There wasn't anything except my Army trophies for marksmanship and boxes of pictures and an old bowling bag. Nobody'd give a dime for those but he'd probably try to take them anyway if I didn't watch him.

Sunlight shined through the window that looked toward the pastures where Lewis' cows used to grazed. They were fields of briars and scrub now and the window was still screwed shut from when James was a kid and afraid some monster or ghost was going to snatch him up during the middle of the night. I'd let him help me screw in the screws so he could see nothing could get in.

I stood in his room and waited before I went up into the attic. I wished I could just stop time for a while until I could figure out things but you can't ever escape being in time. You're moving even when you're standing still and sometimes everything else moves so fast you don't know if what you've done was the right thing. Twenty years had gone by and it seemed like only a second.

There was a little crib we bought from a church couple when Leda was pregnant. It was scratched up and dull so I sanded it down and put a nice new coat of lacquer on it. Leda sewed sheets and pillows out of fabric with little cartoon animals. We put the crib where James' bed was now and I remembered standing there with her just a few nights before her water broke with my arms wrapped around her stomach and her hands on mine and James in her belly kicking.

Those cold mornings before I went to work I'd make sure there was plenty of coal in the stove and then I'd look in on her while she sat in a rocking chair beside the crib with one of her breasts over the neck of her nightgown and him feeding. Any morning I dreaded the day of slinging paint on houses worth five or times more than mine seeing that picture wiped it away.

When he grew a little he'd stand at the crib bars in the morning and reach out his chubby arms and I'd pick him up and hold him for a while before waking Leda to feed him. Before I knew it he was walking one day when I got home from work and it was that same day Leda told me she was pregnant again. We hadn't planned on another one just yet and I remember thinking even working twice as much wouldn't be enough to support two children.

As good as a baby as James was Bug was the opposite. He never cried much. She cried from the moment she was delivered and didn't quit crying for about two years. If I'd had to wager on how they'd turn out back then I would've thought we'd have the most trouble with Laura but she was easy once she made it to a toddler. She hardly ever got in trouble as a kid or teenager. She made good grades. She went to church and didn't even care much about dating. She went to college to be a nurse and met her future husband, a rich boy named Greg. He looked about like a crow and had hands as soft as a woman's but he treated her good and his family paid for the wedding.

James made terrible grades on the other hand. He wouldn't go to church. All he cared about was girls, nasty fat ones mostly. I couldn't get him interested in a sport. He didn't try to go to college. I looked at his bed and remembered all them Sunday mornings when I tried to force him to go to church. He'd lay there and refuse to go and I was left with the decision to either drag him out of bed by the leg or leave him be. I grounded him over and over. I took his video games and television and boombox and heavy metal CDs and books and even his bedframe and

mattress until there wasn't anything left to take. He was apparently content sitting in there in his room with nothing but the comforter on the floor and a pillow and his long hair until I made him cut it.

He'd lay out of school every chance he got. One day I came home early and found him on the floor with a girl he brought home. She was about as big as a water buffalo and James was crawling all over her kissing her neck until I hollered at him to stop it. I let her come out and leave without talking to her and I couldn't understand why he'd just choose any old girl. It probably didn't help the way he was dressing in all black and letting his hair get shaggy. I was just glad he never got one pregnant. It was hell at times but somehow we'd managed to make it. At least that's what I used to think.

I didn't want to go into the attic and have to fight with him anymore but I wasn't gonna ask Leda to do it. She was better off in our room praying. I figured God favored her over me anyway on account of her kinder and more honest heart. I went up the stairs. The air was dusty and one bulb hanging from a ceiling joist shined on the roofing plywood with shingle nails piercing through all over. I'd always thought about making the attic into an upstairs room but it would've cost a fortune and there was no need.

James was sitting in the floor beneath the light still swaying to keep upright like he was on a raft in a choppy river. There were boxes of photo albums and pictures in the floor. I went and stood behind him while he looked through a stack of polaroids. They were of James and Bug when they were little and out the yard carrying Easter egg baskets. They were both laughing with their mama's smile. I couldn't remember the day, what we'd done or said to each other, except in a blurry way. Leda boiling eggs at the stove and the vinegar and dye waiting on the table. She kept the kids inside while I went out and hid the eggs but where and what did we even say to

each other that day? That night? Why can't you capture everything about an entire day, a week, a month a year and all of them in your memory?

James put that set of pictures back into an envelope and opened another one. I thought, This is exactly what he needs, to remind himself of how good he had it because of everything we did for him and that he had a family that loved him. This set was of Bug and James in their pajamas in the living room. Bug was playing with her ponies and James was on the couch drawing in his notebook. He put those away and opened another envelope. "What are you looking for?" I said.

"That time we went to the park."

We'd gone to the Smoky Mountains a few times and up to Gatlinburg but there was one year when me and Leda saved up enough to go to a park a few hours away in the middle of the state. It was called Pickett State Park. We stayed in a cabin for a week. There was a lake that held trout. We rented rowboats and paddled the kids around. We took them swimming. We got them good and worn out and then made love about every night.

"Pickett?" I said and he nodded with his wobbly head. "It's been years since I've seen those pictures. I don't even remember what all they were of."

"You took one of a stone bridge."

"I did?"

"Dr. Ray wants me bring it."

"Is that all he's doing? Having you look at pictures? Your mama said you were making progress. Progress on what?"

He didn't answer me. "You'd be better off bringing a Bible. What are they teaching you about the Lord up there anyway? We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. That's



straight from Paul. We're punished in this life and judged in the next. Me and your mama are worried about you. What are you sowing, son? What are you reaping? That's what you and your doctor should be talking about."

"Quit trying to push religion down my throat. I done has been. Trust me."

"If you keep on this path you're gonna pay. We're all gonna pay. "

"That's one reason I'm on this path. I didn't ask to be born."

"God gave you life and it's a precious gift."

"You and mama gave me life."

"Through God."

"You two just wanted to get laid."

That made me take a step back. "You were God's plan."

"I wasn't nobody's plan. I was just fine without being born."

"You wasn't anything before you were born."

"I was at peace."

"You can't be at peace when you aren't even are."

"Maybe I didn't want to be."

"Those pills have really screwed up your mind."

"You screwed up my mind because you didn't know what you were doing. Did you ever try to learn how to raise a kid? Did you read a book or talk to a professional? Wasn't I important enough for you to learn since your own daddy never taught you?"

"Who are you to question my parenting? Can you tell me what it's like to see your child born? Do you know how it feels to love someone else so much you worry all the time about how you're gonna take care of them? Can you tell me how it feels when your own flesh and blood

breaks your heart, takes everything you've done for him and throws it away? What was the point of all my work and worry when you sit here destroying yourself?"

"You destroyed me by bringing me into this world."

"You're crazy."

"I hate you."

He stared at me about like some possum in the headlights, about to be beat to death with a tire iron, not my flesh and blood. There ain't much you can do when you get to feeling the way I was feeling right then except to leave. Get out before you find a chair or a baseball bat or one of those old trophies or the stove shovel and just start swinging, just start smashing it all and make everything worse for you and your wife or before you start to cry. It hurt more than anything I'd ever been told by Pappy or by them drill sergeants or by anyone. What made it hurt even more was I was feeling the same way, that I regretted bringing my own son into the world and I hated him and him telling me the same just confirmed it. I could feel my regret and hatred for him swelling all over me. I thought it might be the last time we ever looked each other in the eyes again and it was a shame considering his were so stoned and uncaring, not the bright little eyes I remembered when he was a baby standing in his crib.

I heard Leda start up the stairs. I went down and met her. "What's wrong?" she said.

I just shook my head and bit my tongue and squeezed past her. "Kalemar," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"To the store for your ground beef," I said and got out of there as fast as I could.

I drove through the spring evening and down them old roads I'd drove so many times, everything a new green that makes the evening time when the sun goes down glow the green and the world is a big smile but you can't form one yourself. You hear the birds calling and children

laughing always from somewhere and the lawnmowers chug that smell of cut grass. Everything is starting up again and everyone is extra happy as if the spring might not of come and we got lucky one more time, our lives and deaths not in line with the seasons but limited to a certain number nonetheless. There would be work, church functions. We would have good days. Bug and Greg would surely be having children someday soon.

I could look forward to none of it. Something in me shattered and my life was laid bare before me and I thought with the tightness in my chest and the huge beating of my heart that I might be about to die. For I saw my whole life and I saw that no matter how long I lived it was short. We're not here in this world long enough to even see it because we only have time to work ourselves to death before the soul departs to that place above time.

I could see Pappy and Duck smiling and young like I'd never seen them. They were a young man and a young woman together and probably they thought they loved each other and maybe they did and out of that came I am here for a little while on this earth and newness and newness comes and it gets old quick but we just think so we're only here for a little my mama my heart beat with yours and i was springtime in your womb i want to know what you thought of me and what you hoped of me you never said it except i gave you a scary time with the snow and ice and no doctor for miles and you thinking we'd both die before you could have me what was i to you when i was springtime in your womb and now when i am the autumn of your body what was i but a thing you let him push around what was i if you loved me and if you did like Leda loves her children more than i can because she nourished them like water through root and tree to leaves in the springtime she will not never love them i think there's something she has that you missed that you didn't love me at all because you let him hurt us if it could of been just the three of us but i don't hate you like him i don't hate you maybe that's what sons have always hated

their fathers maybe that's what God planned it this way to show his love for his son and his son's love for us and what is impossible for a man is God's and Jesus' and a mother's love and something no men or their sons can live up to on this earth.

I went down to Grease's. He was burning trash behind his trailer and a cloud of black smoke rose into the blue sky. He stood there holding a beer and working the fire with a piece of rebar. He had his shirt off and his belly hanging over a pair of unbuttoned work pants covered in paint. I usually would've made a joke about him needing a pair of pants three or four sizes bigger, but I wasn't in the mood.

"What's happening?" he said when he saw me coming across the yard.

I stood beside him and watched a bleach bottle burn and felt the fire's heat in the warm spring air while he drank from his beer. "James is happening," I said. "We spent all afternoon tracking him down and finally found him in Stillhouse Holler, what folks are calling Pillhouse Holler these days. He was running with a bunch of drugged up trash. They belong in your fire."

"At least he's alive," said Grease.

"He keeps it up and he won't be. He told me he wished he was never born."

"Kids say all kinds of stupid things."

"He's a grown man."

"Only by age."

"You got that right."

"How's Flipper?"

“She’s sad as always. I’m sure he’ll just run again. Hell, I’m about to run myself. Go on a drive out west and never come back.”

Grease threw his empty can into the fire and grabbed another one from the case in the grass. “Stop that shit,” he said.

I knew my brother couldn’t work anymore with his bad back and even if I offered to pay him to do what he could he wouldn’t take it because that would cost me money. I knew his wife wasn’t ever coming back. She’d left him for a Buddy’s Bar-B-Q manager and told Grease what first attracted her to him was his smooth hands reaching across the counter to touch hers which about killed Grease dead since his hands were calloused from working to provide all them years. I knew he’d be lucky to see his son anytime soon since he’d practically run the boy off years ago with all his nosing and pressuring. I knew his daughter that was living with a deadbeat on foodstamps and would never be what he imagined when she was his precious little girl. I guessed I was blessed despite James and I felt bad for complaining to a man that had lost about everything.

“I did some work for Bill Wilkinson today,” I said. “He was asking about you.”

“Where’s he living now?”

“Same place.”

“I thought he was moving.”

“Nope.”

“Remember about a year ago before I tore up my back when we was painting his swimming pool fence and he was talking about putting his house up for sale and asked me if I wanted to buy it? ‘Why, sure, if I had as much money as you,’ I told him. ‘I’m living on a fixed

income,' he said. 'Looks like it's fixed pretty damn good,' I told him. Like I even had a chance of buying that house. Why would he do that except to throw it in our face?"

I looked at the colors of paint on Grease's pants and tried to place the jobs each one was from. Some of the colors were the same as the ones on my pants. A swipe of dark green or speckles of some cedar color deck stain. I couldn't remember the houses or the years nor the time of month or days nor what we'd said to each other while slapping on paint. It was all a big jumble of a memory in my mind that I couldn't hardly sort out. I didn't remember what Grease was talking about. "I told him you'd retired," I said, "and were living the good life like him. Old Grease is sitting on a beach somewhere as we speak. He's drinking from little umbrella cups."

Grease laughed and poked the fire. "Good," he said. "I never liked that asshole."

"He asked me when I was gonna retire. I told I didn't ever want to retire since I loved what I did so much. He couldn't tell if I was joking or not."

"Them damn idiots don't understand how it is."

"No, a man like him gets his daddy's business give to him and then acts like he's earned it all."

"We was cursed from day one."

"Do you hate Pappy?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Do you think he ever loved us?"

"That's a retarded question."

I once had a pet rabbit. I got her from a woman down the road. I named her Jumper and kept her in a cage I made of scrap tin and wood. One winter afternoon when there was snow on

the ground I went outside to feed her carrots from a spoiled jar Mama had kept out of the stew she was cooking. The boards on her cage were moved and Jumper was gone from her bed of hay.

I couldn't find tracks in the snow except Pappy's boot prints. I went inside and asked him if he knew what happened to my rabbit. He said he was wondering the same since he'd done gone out there to pet her that morning and she was missing. I'd never seen him pet that rabbit but I liked to get her in my arms and pet her and feel her breathe and watch her little whiskered nose dart around so I thought anybody would've liked to pet a rabbit. He said maybe a redtailed hawk flew in and got her in its claws and carried her away since it was hard for anything to find food in the winter, even us. So I believed him.

That night we ate the stew Mama made in the old cast iron oven over the fire. She said it was groundhog but it tasted better than groundhog and they were hard to find in the winter anyway since they stayed burrowed up.

A day or two later with no thaw I noticed Pappy's tracks still in the snow. I followed them from Jumper's cage alongside the house and back into the woods. It was a cold day. The trees were black and bare. There were no birds to be seen. I followed the tracks for a long way until they stopped behind a tree. There was blood in the snow around a tiny pile of frozen guts I knew had to be Jumper's.

Grease's trash fire was about burned out. He got another beer and popped it open and the suds ran down the can. "Remember my rabbit," I said, "Jumper? Pappy took her a mile back into the woods and tried to hide what he did. Why would he do that if he didn't have some concern for me?"

Grease drank from his beer and thought about it for a second. "He probly just didn't want to hear you whine."

“Probably.”

I patted him on the back. “You take care of yourself,” I said.

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.”

“You better not do anything you’ll regret.”

“Like what?”

“Drive out west, at least not without me.”

“I couldn’t afford it even if I wanted to.”

“I know.”

I got back in my truck with the smell of burning plastic in my nose and I thought, Where now? It was a time when the big world seemed small but only because I’d made it so from working my ass off and because I didn’t have the money to make it any bigger. From an airplane the world I was confined to probably looked about like them pictures of brains they showed us in a high school science class with all the ridges and valleys. In the map of my brain my world was fixed at the house in Brushy Valley. From there it stretched over into other valleys and down the interstate to the homes of rich folks where I spent all my days painting. In the brain map those places didn’t look no different but in real life it was another world of wealth. Then my world stretched in the opposite direction to the little church tucked in the holler we’d spent our lives attending. There were times we’d gone clear off the map in my mind to Myrtle Beach or Pickett State Park or when I was in the Army and went to Georgia and Kentucky. The Grand Canyon was three or four other maps away I didn’t know anything about and probably didn’t look like brains anymore. I had no idea how to picture a place like Africa from the sky. The valley where I grew up was a dark tunnel close to home that I’d closed off. I’d never hardly been any damn



where in the big world and why not? Because of my birth and my past and my present. I just wanted to be a good man.

I drove and tried to remember it good. The clean and fresh painted farmhouses in tidy yards on one side of the road shaded by big oaks and maples. The barns and grids of taut and cleared fencerows on the other and the land sloping down to acres and acres of wide and fertile creek bottom at the foot of the steep ridgeline. The cattle's constant lowing and the tractors going in the fields. The smell of manure and hay and diesel, the sweet rot of turned up earth and the possibility of finding an arrowhead. The little branch running alongside the house in the springtime filled with minnows and salamanders we chased with our fingers and the bullfrogs croaking loud in the night below our bedroom window. The woods where me and Grease and the other boys played war with sticks. The girls hopscotching on courses scraped out in the dirt road. The slow Sundays when I sat out back and read the only books in the house, *My Life with Animals*. The football games in the pasture. The harmless fights between us boys and the times the girls would let you get them alone behind a barn or outbuilding and kiss their necks and feel their growing bodies a little. But you can't remember it the way it wasn't I told myself. You must remember it truly when you open your brain. You must remember the good times were brief under Pappy and you never knew when he was going to explode on you or your brother or the beaten down mother of you. You must remember the winters and the cold. You must remember the work and the pain. You must remember a childhood of fear and cold and pain. You must remember the true awfulness of it.

The valley didn't look a thing like it used to and that made it easier to not remember it wrong. The old farmhouses were peeling paint and rotting wood. The fencerows were sagging and choked by vines. The pastures and fields were overgrown with bitterweed and briar, some

with full stands of trees right where we used to cut tobacco. The barns we hung it in to dry looked like old men gone in their backs. Even the ridges looked worn down and the wide bottom land sunken like everything in the valley was being pushed into the ground.

People just coming in from work or with no work at all sat on cluttered porches. They smoked cigarettes and watched the road for something, not even giving me a wave when I went by. An old woman hung her underwear on a line to dry. Kids ran up a dirt driveway. There were goats here and there tied up to a tree or what used to be the foundation of a house. An old muscle car set off to the side of a house with saplings growing up around it. An American flag hanging from a gable was blown to tatters. Two beagles ran a scent through the ditch. I passed Rio's old place and saw one of his hay rakes rusting down in the pasture to never be used again. I passed the Eelie place and saw that it looked no better than the rest of the homes anymore. I didn't know who even lived in the valley now or if they were offspring of the folks that once did or if they were strangers buying up old property and places that weren't worth anything. It wasn't a bad place. Not everybody on drugs and running in some gang and trying to kill folks like in some stupid book. Most people just sitting there and waiting for something. Probably good people that would shake your hand and their life just didn't turn out the way they wanted and they had no option but to sit and wait, about like most of the folks in the world inside and outside my brain map. In the valley, nobody could make it farming those days.

At the house on the creek I pulled into what used to be the driveway but was now high grass with tire tracks through it. I got out and couldn't imagine someone living there. The old clapboard siding was sunbleached bare without a spot of paint left except a speck or two of green on the rusty tin roof with pieces warping away from the eaves. I remembered when Pappy put the three of us out in the yard with rollers and brushes and five gallon of white lead paint and we

spent about a week painting the house. It was all gone now and I knew the same would happen to all the work I'd ever done. The paint would chip and fall and decay or be covered up by another man's paint the same way the hay and tobacco fields were covered up and no trace of me would be left. The windows above the front porch that led to the bedrooms were dark and dusty the same as the ones on the porch. A warped and torn screen door hung off the front door.

I thought, How would anybody know what happened here? Where is the story of our life recorded on this earth? Is it only in heaven that we finally get to see it played out before us and then we're able to make sense of it and see how it all added up to our purpose? Were the memories of our lives somehow caught in the old wood and glass that witnessed them? Did the trees growing by the creek remember seeing us come and go and the things we said? Did the ground still feel our footsteps? Did it still feel me lying there on my back with my nose bleeding and breathing against it?

Chin had got a promotion at the JFG factory in Knoxville. It killed Pappy dead. He'd been talking about it all week. "You can smell old Chin coming from a mile away, all that brown on his nose. I don't guess Blonde Baby minds the smell of it as long as he's keeping her tab open down at Sears. He, he, he, bluh, bluh, bluh, bluh, *bluuuuuuuh*."

Our older cousin Bruce gave me and Grease a pair of boxing gloves when he got drafted and was sent to Vietnam only to die from friendly fire. Me and Grease was out in the yard with the gloves when Chin and Blonde Baby pulled up in their brand new red Bel Air. It must of been a Sunday for us not to be in tobacco or hay. Pappy would of gladly worked us but most folks in the valley went to church at Bethany Baptist and didn't want their oxes in a ditch.

Blonde Baby was wearing a blue dress with a yellow bow around the waist. Chin had on white pants and dark leather suspenders and a little straw hat. They barely got out of the car

before Pappy ran out of the house in his old overalls. He was grinning with his hair uncombed.

“Been down at the Sears, I see,” he said. “Been down at the Sears.”

Duck was right behind him with her hands going that way she always rubbed her thumbs across her fingertips.

“Nope,” said Chin, “The Motor Mile. Ain’t she pretty?”

“They God almighty,” said Pappy. “You’ll be too good to come down here in the valley soon enough.”

“Naw,” said Chin.

“It’s beautiful,” said Duck.

“But how much did it cost you?” said Pappy.

“We got a fair price,” said Chin.

That Buick was parked right behind Pappy’s old trap and it made the trap look even worse. Chin popped the hood and him and Pappy looked at the motor. Duck was touching Blonde Baby’s bow and going on about how nice her dress was. I thought, I might as well enjoy the day while I can because when they leave all hell will break loose.

I was letting Grease use the right glove since he was smaller. I’m getting in some good shots on him but I’m not hitting him as hard as I can. We’re just having fun and dancing around there in the grass as brothers. I didn’t see them coming through the yard until they were a few feet from us. We stopped and stood there while they stared at us. Chin and Blonde Baby and Duck rubbing her hands and Pappy. He leaned back and stuck out his chest. “What do you say, Roger. You wanna go a round with me?”

“Naw,” said Chin.

“Well why not?”

“I reckon you’d probably whup me.”

That was the answer Pappy wanted. He walked over and nudged Blonde Baby a little.

“He, he, he. I reckon you boys think you know a little something about boxing.”

“We’re just playing,” I said.

“No,” said Pappy, “I reckon you think you know a little something about boxing. Don’t they think they know a little something, Roger?”

Chin smiled and nodded his head but didn’t say anything. “Here, Gordan,” Pappy said to Grease, “Give me that there glove and let me teach your brother a little something about boxing. I reckon he thinks he knows it all.”

Grease took off his glove and gave it to Pappy. “23 and 1 with 18 KOs” said Pappy, squeezing his big hand into the glove, “and the one was due to a dumb judge. They called me The Bull.”

That was when I realized we’d made a grave mistake. We should of knowed better than to keep on boxing after Chin had pulled up in his new car. I started to unlace my glove.

“Stop,” said Pappy. “I reckon you want to learn a little something about boxing like he wants.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“I reckon you do.”

“Why, Randy,” said Duck, “let the boys play.”

“I’m just gonna try to learn him a little something about boxing.”

I thought, Old Man, if I was a foot taller and five years older I’d beat the living hell out of you right here in front of everyone and tell you to leave and never come back unless you wanted me to kill you.

Pappy held his left arm behind his back and his right one at his side. "You gonna shuffle on up here and learn you a little something?"

"We need to head on down the road," said Chin.

"Oh just stay for a minute or two," said Pappy. "I'm about to learn Kalemar a little something about boxing. Then we'll play some Rook."

"I don't want to box," I said and took off the glove and threw it down.

I tried to walk past him and he pushed me back a little with his glove. "Are you afraid of your old man? I just want to learn you a little something."

I tried to walk past him again and he pushed me harder this time. The others were just watching. "We got to get on down the road," said Chin.

"My mama's waiting on us," said Blonde Baby.

"You ain't scared are you?" said Pappy looking straight into my eyes with his old gray ones.

I swung high at his face and he dodged it and tapped me on the head. "There we go," he said. "See? Didn't I learn you something?"

I swung again and missed and he boxed my ear and it stung. I stood there holding it while he laughed. "You ain't gonna cry are you?"

"We better get on down the road," said Chin.

"Stay a while," said Pappy. "I thought we might play some Rook."

"We have to stop by my mama's," said Blonde Baby.

"Well it was good having you," said Duck. "That car sure is pretty and so is your dress. I wish I had one like it."

"Why, you got two or three dresses," said Pappy.

The three of them started off toward the driveway together and Pappy watched them. I could see his plan falling apart and he was mad at what Mama said about the dress. He just stood there in his big body like he was stunned and didn't know what to do. My plan was to run and jump and hit him in the jaw when he wasn't looking. I took off toward him and jumped but before I could even punch him he looked my way and hit me in the nose. It sent my head backward and my legs out from under me.

I fell on my back and the ground knocked the air out of me. I laid there in the grass with my nose bleeding and trying to breathe and he looked down at me and said, "You dumb little shit. You ruined everthing."

I laid in the grass until Chin and Blonde Baby drove away and Pappy went inside and him and Duck started yelling and Grease came over and asked me if I was all right and I told him to leave me alone or I'd break his nose.

After that day I always thought there would be a time when I could take him, when I would beat him and make him sorry for treating me that way. It stewed in me every time I touched my nose and it was sore and even weeks later when my nose didn't hurt anymore but I still hated him.

He had us out in Rio's tobacco field. He was sick from a cold and stood in the shade of the barn coughing and blowing his nose into a handkerchief. All day in between the noise of cutting the tobacco I heard him over there hacking and it made me madder and madder just to hear him and think back to him boxing my nose. As I cut the stalks with the hawkbill knife and Grease came along and speared it and we sweated and coughed ourselves from the dust and nicotine, I kept telling him, "I'm gonna kill that son of a bitch."

About dinner time we came on over to the barn where he had the sandwiches Duck made for us in some paper bags in the grass. Before we made it to the barn he had a sneezing fit. He sneezed and sneezed into his handkerchief while he leaned against the barn all hunched over in his overalls to about my size. I saw the sun hitting the back of his neck and I thought, That's my spot.

I took off running with the hawkbill knife in my hand ready to kill him. I was gonna slice him right in that shiny spot on his neck and I wasn't gonna stop the same way he didn't stop when he killed jumper or the time he got an old hog from somebody and didn't have no bullets for his rifle and was too lazy to find a knife to kill it the right way and hacked at its neck with a dull maul until it finally quit squealing. But that's about the time his sneezes stopped and he saw me coming out of the corner of his eye and threw his elbow right into my nose before I could raise the knife.

I fell back again and this time I didn't lose my breath but my nose was broke. I laid in the grass shaking my head and feeling the blood gush down my face and over my lips and tasting it and when I could finally see again he was standing over me telling me to put my handkerchief on it. "I ain't got one," I told him.

"Why you dumb little shit," he said and threw me his all covered in snot.

After I'd stopped the bleeding he cussed me again for ruining his handkerchief. I had to work the rest of the day with a broken nose I couldn't breathe out of and blood going down my throat.

That was the last time I tried to hurt him and by the time I could've whipped him he was near dead from diabetes and smoking so I'd won anyway. Sons should win in the end, I say. That's what any father should want. I couldn't see James ever winning and I didn't know if I



wanted him to anymore and that was a terrible thing for a father to think but maybe that's what fathers motivate their sons.

I heard a car turn into the driveway and looked to see a county cruiser pulling in behind my van. There was a young officer with a shaved head sitting behind the steering wheel on his radio. I walked toward him and he got out in a hurry with his hand on his pistol. "Sir, stop. Put your hands over your head and turn around."

I did what the little punk said and I felt him come up behind me and pat my paint shirt and then my pants and find the pill bottle and pull them out. He brought one hand down to my back and then the other and I felt the cuffs slide on each wrist and heard them lock. He spun me toward him and I wanted to ask him who he thought he was. I wanted to show him my strength and go kicking at him and then take my cuffed hands and pound his head, but I knowed that would have just put me in jail.

He was holding up the pill bottle and trying to read the label. He said a number into his walky talky. "I ain't done nothing wrong," I said. "I grew up here. I was just looking at the place."

"You're in possession of narcotics," he said.

"Those ain't mine."

"Whose are they?"

I thought, by God, there's no getting out of this one but I'll try. "I found them on the side of the road and didn't want no kids to come a long and get into them. I was going to turn them into the police."

He looked at me, shaking his head. "You know how much bullshit I hear on a daily basis?"

“Probably about as much as me.”

“Do you have ID?”

“It’s in my van.”

“Do you care if I look inside?”

“I ain’t got nothing to hide.”

He grabbed me by the shoulder and pushed me over to the van and put me against the hood. “Don’t try to go nowhere.”

I thought, Boy if you’d just take off these handcuffs and get rid of your gun, we’d go around right here in this yard. You ain’t half as tough as my Daddy was. “Yes, sir,” I said.

He reached into the van and found my wallet and took out my license and looked at it. “Mr. Brass,” he said, “you’re going to jail.”

“Why?”

He held out the bottle of pills and rattled them together. “These.”

“They ain’t mine, sir.”

“Well, unless you tell me whose they are, and don’t give me a bullshit story, then they’re yours as far as the law is concerned.”

I thought, What am I supposed to do? Tell him they’re my son’s and then show him where I live and then let him arrest James and this time he would go away for a long time and then Leda would probably die of worry?

“Fine then,” I said.

“So they’re yours?”

“If that’s what the law says.”

“It does.”

He put me in the back of the car and I sat there in my paint clothes with the handcuffs cutting into my wrists and looking at the back of that little punk's shaved head wishing I could just go through the cage and show him the man I was, but I was just a nobody going to jail like the rest of them and then having to spend more money to get out. Maybe Leda would understand. Maybe James would be thankful. I doubted it.

The officer backed out of the driveway and I watched the house until it was gone, my van parked there in front of it, and then we were heading down them old roads again, the roads of my home that felt like anything but a home, and I thought back to them days when I barreled down the interstate at 90 mile an hour in my Ford Custom with the engine wide open and feeling full freedom and speed, thinking the whole time about getting Leda somewhere and tearing off her clothes and like when we parked at the bridge over the creek while bats made switchblades against the blue night and Leda giving me that same look and getting me inside her and kissing her and gripping her all over while she made her little noises in the back seat of my car that made me want to go harder at her and she at me with her grinding hips until her noises became big and the smell of her which I loved made me crazy and the explosion of feeling like I never felt in my life doing anything else and then came James and I knowed. I knowed my boy—the thief, the bum, the drug addict—I knowed, I knowed, I knowed. I knowed Pappy—The Bull, the worthless father and husband and brother and neighbor and man. I knowed I—the housepainter and husband and father. I knowed Leda—my wife and mother of our children. I knowed that young punk with his badge and shaved head. I knowed we all hated ourselves.

Please tell me this: Can you hate a man and love him too?

November ninth, 2005.

There are some things you can't tell a soul. Not your best friends or your parents or your pastor or a patient who is dying in the hospital bed. You could tell God, but he already knows if you believe he exists, and it's always hard to know when he is listening or talking back anyway. You'll have to carry those things inside you like a tumor that grows until the day you die. That is if you want to be looked at as a good person when it's all said and done, or unless the tumor grows so big you can't hide it anymore and it kills you.

It was a bad flu season, and the ER was overcrowded. Many of the people were poor minorities, mothers and fathers dressed in ragged winter clothing they got from charity after the hurricane down south. They sat with their coughing and crying children and babies, those without seats in the floor beside backpacks and baby bags. One woman sat beneath a bronze crucifix on the wall, breastfeeding her baby under a pink blanket. On the muted TV above her, explosions rattled the picture as another ancient building exploded in Iraq.

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, how . . .

An ER receptionist pointed toward the entrance. "He's out there, ma'am," she said over the noise.

It was pouring rain in the orange glow of the parking lot lights. Two paramedics in coats and toboggans talked beside an ambulance, their breaths blowing in the wind. James stood on the opposite side of the breezeway. He was smoking a cigarette and scratching at his arms and neck. I recognized him even though his back was to me and he could have been anyone. There's just something familiar about your own blood.

I stepped through the sliding doors and cinched my scrub jacket to my neck. It was cold, mid-thirties, with snow in the forecast. James wore filthy tennis shoes and jeans soaked to the

knees, a flannel coat that was dirty and torn. He turned toward me, his reaction time delayed, from a high or from the damage he'd already done to his nervous system. The damage he'd done to his face, the wrinkles and lines on his face, made him look ten years older if not more. "I guess you finally got to needing money from Mama," I said.

When are you going to give me a grandbaby to spoil?

"Hey, Buuuug," he said in a voice that sounded like bricks were sewn to his jaws, "she said you could get me a little something something. To help me."

"That's what I told her, but I can't write prescriptions. You'd have to pay a doctor four hundred bucks a month for methadone and prove you're clean, which you obviously aren't."

James took a step back and pointed his burned out cigarette toward the crowded waiting room. "I ain't going in there."

He looked so frail and unhealthy I didn't think it would be hard to force him into the hospital myself if I'd wanted to, but that wasn't my plan. "I'm not trying to admit you," I said.

"Then what do you want, Buuuug?"

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, how . . .

For somebody else to do everything for our family.

"I don't know anymore."

"What?" he said. "Huh?"

"I said I don't know."

"Mama said . . . Mama said . . .

When are you going to give me a grandbaby to spoil?

I came a long way, maaaaan. I owe him now. I have to . . . I got to go, Buuuug."

"Who do you owe?"

James glanced toward a ratty car idling at the side of the building. A dark figure was inside, watching us. “Him.”

Oh Brubber, Oh Brubber, how . . .

“Why do you owe him?”

James looked down at his soaked jeans. “For the ride.”

He took a draw of his cigarette butt and threw it away and turned to go. I grabbed his arm, unable to feel anything beneath the fabric of his coat except bone, like his muscles were as atrophied as one of my patient’s. “Let me go,” he said, trying to pull away but too weak.

One of the paramedics started walking toward us. “It’s okay,” I said, holding James’ arm. “He’s my brother. I work in ICU.”

“Let me go,” said James.

“Do you want to get arrested again?”

“No.”

“Then come with me.”

$2x-73=_$

James in the doorway, holding a towel around his waist and his wet hair dripping. Get out of here, James! I’m trying to do my homework. I’m going to wake up Daddy. Stop it. You’re getting my poster wet. I’m going to wake up Daddy. His name is not Duke. I bought it with my own allowance.

I led him under the breezeway and through the rain to a cafeteria door that required my ID badge to open it. The cafeteria was empty, the lights dim, the smell of food and bleach lingering.

The trees smell like bleach, don’t they?

No, Chicky, they smell like come.

What is that?

You know, Chicky.

But what's it really like?

I can't tell you right here in algebra class, Chicky.

We took an elevator upstairs to ICU, James scratching his neck and arms and watching the floors blink by. We sneaked past the break room, where the third shift was gathered for a meeting, the charge nurse reminding his nurses about fall risks.

And the serpent said unto the woman . . .

I pushed one of my nurse's medication carts from the storage room to the end of the hallway.

"Be quiet, James," I said. "Tiptoe so your shoes don't squeak."

"What are we doing?"

"Shhhh."

Ye shall not surely die.

I opened the door to a room. The patient was a man in his eighties suffering from skin cancer which had metastasized. He had lesions of rotting flesh all over his body and was under comfort care measures, a morphine drip, oxycodone to be administered as needed.

Please just let me die.

I stopped the cart beside the bed. The man laid on his back with his eyes closed, in an unresponsive state. His chest rose and fell in the green light of the monitors. I unfastened the bandage on his head and opened it. "Look, James," I said.

Pleasant for the eyes and a tree to be desired . . .

They're not bleach trees, Chicky. They're come trees.

A shocked glimpse of his youth showed through the damage he'd done to his face. He gagged. "God, Buuuug, I'm going to puke."

"It's his skull. We all have one."

Golgotha, the place of the . . .

"Why are you showing me that?"

Get out of the floor, James! James!

His penis erect and red.

James, I can see your thing!

A tree to be desired. Pleasant for the eyes.

Oh, I'm sorry, Bug. I didn't know the towel was open. Hehehehe.

"Sometimes we need to know what's beneath our skin."

"It stinks."

"That's rotting flesh."

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, how . . .

His penis erect and red.

She took of the fruit thereof.

"God, Buuuug."

I refastened the bandage. "Grab his wrist," I said.

"I can't."

"He's in LaLa Land. Don't you want to go back to LaLa Land?"

The land of milk and honey.

The milkweed in the pasture. White sap oozing.

Come trees, Chicky.



James' penis between his legs. Red and veiny.

White milk.

White oozing . . .

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, how . . .

I pulled a white pill stamped with a number from a drawer on the medication cart.

Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast.

James looked at it in my palm as if it were a precious jewel. Another glimpse of his youth, a glimpse of his disease, showed through the damage he'd done.

Please just let me die.

Ye shall not surely die.

He grabbed the man's veiny hand, one of the few areas of his body not covered in bandages.

But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.

I held the scanner to the barcode on his bracelet until it beeped. I scanned the barcode for the medication and inputted two items into the computer. I took another pill from the drawer and slid them both into the pocket of my scrub pants.

The patient stirred and mumbled, deep wordless sounds filled with pain.

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, how . . .

Ye shall die in your sins.

James stood there holding his hand. "Let him go," I said.

"Can I get more than two?"

"Do you want to get me fired?"

We left the room before the third shift's meeting had ended. I pushed the medication cart back into the storage room. I clocked out and led James down six flights of stairs to the service bay where the funeral home attendants came to pick up the dead bodies.

The tongue has the power of life and death.

Mama, how do babies get made?

You pray and God puts one in your belly.

When are you going to give me a grandbaby to spoil?

The rain had turned to sleet and fell like bomb sparks in the orange lights of the parking lot, stinging my skin and sticking in my hair to melt. I didn't want whoever it was in that ratty car, the person James owed, to see us. I took James around the opposite side of the building. He stumbled behind me. "When do I get them, Buuuug?"

"When I say."

I stopped at the corner of the building and looked toward the ER entrance. Another ambulance had pulled beneath the breezeway. More mothers and fathers were unloading their sick children. The commotion would shield us from view.

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, how . . .

And the fruit of the womb is his reward.

We made it to my car and got in, James panting as if that short jog had been a mile run. "Can I have them now?" he said.

"Not until we get to my place."

"Can he follow us?"

"No."

"He will."

“There’s no way he could have seen us.”

He knoweth all things.

“But, Buuuug—”

“Do you want them or not?”

“Okay.”

James in a pair of shorts and his hair wet from the shower, bouncing a rubber ball with glitter stars inside.

He telleth the number of stars . . .

$3x-14=_$

Calculate the number.

I told you to leave me alone, James. I’ll wake up Daddy. Give me that ball. Stop bouncing it on my math book. Give it to me.

Get it then.

It’s in your shorts.

Get it.

Will you stop if I get it?

Uh-huh.

He calleth them all by their names.

His penis erect and red. His smooth . . .

Ye shall die in your sins

James!

You did it, Bug.

No I didn’t.

Yes you did.

I'm going to tell Daddy.

Here. You can have it.

The stars are not pure in . . .

Come, Chicky.

I drove as the sleet swept through the headlights and James panted and coughed and scratched at his neck and arms. It was late, past midnight. Restaurants and businesses were closed, and there was no traffic on the streets or in the neighborhood. I kept an eye in the rearview until I turned into the neighborhood.

Most of the homes, folk Victorians like the one I rented, were dark, a few windows glowing with lamplight. I parked in my driveway and got out and ran through the sleet to the cover of the old porch and waited on James as he stumbled up the walk, looking over his shoulder, down the street. "Nobody followed us," I said.

"You don't know him."

And he said, I know not.

"I think I can see with my own eyes."

The ball in my pajama bottoms. His forearm pressing against my sore growing breasts. His hand inside my underwear, finger pushing inside . . .

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, How . . .

Be still and know . . .

I opened the door and turned on the lights. James leaned against the couch and coughed and looked around the living room. The walls were bare, moving boxes stacked in the floor. In

the light he looked even worse, the skin around his eyes tinged yellow. If he lay in a casket at that very moment, nobody would have been surprised he was dead.

Can you try to talk to him, Laura? Educate him a little? You might as well be a doctor, you know. Your mama, she worries so much.

I'm not a doctor, Daddy.

You might as well be.

Not really.

Can you talk to him?

"Will what's his name care if I'm here?" he said.

"We're separated. I've filed divorce papers."

Greg crying deep wailing sobs while the ribs he'd spent all day cooking grew cold on the dining room table and the neighborhood kids set off firecrackers and bottle rockets in the dusk falling over the subdivision.

One of his ribs . . .

What happened to the Laura I fell in love with?

She never existed.

Of the dust.

"What happened?"

She never existed.

"It's a long story, James."

I walked past him and into the kitchen, taking off my jacket and throwing it on the table along with my badge and stethoscope.

My sore growing breasts.

I will greatly multiply thy sorrow.

I took a bottle of wine from the refrigerator and poured it in the sink. James stood slumped in the doorway in his filthy clothes, watching me. “Don’t even bitch about it,” I said, putting the wine bottle in the trash.

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, how . . .

Thy sorrow.

“I don’t like to drink anyway,” he said.

“I figured you liked anything that could get you high.”

“Can I have them now?”

“No.”

“Buuuug, you said when we got to your place?”

He looked at me and looked around the room until his eyes found the phone jack on the wall. “Don’t you have a phone?” he said.

“Just my cell.”

“Can I use it?”

“To call him? No.”

“Maaaan, Buuuug. Why are you treating me like this?”

For this cause shall a man leave father and mother . . .

I screamed. His fingers were bloody.

. . . as unto the weaker

Did I hurt you?

. . . vessel

I’m on my period.

He gagged.

Daddy yawning as the starry rubber ball rolled across the floor,  
paint colors on his white clothes.

He calleth them . . .

She doesn't exist.

What are you two doing in here?

We were just playing, Daddy.

You'd better do your homework.

I know.

"Like what? Bringing you into my home where it's warm. Rescuing you from some  
person you owe for God knows what?"

The Lord knoweth the days . . .

"He gave me a ride."

"And you owe him drugs for it?"

"There was no other way for me to get there. I owe him something."

"Fine then. Go out into the cold and find him, but you're not using my phone."

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, How . . .

We have to have faith, baby.

Ask, seek, knock.

Hello? Hello?

James stood there looking like a sulking child trapped in an adult body that belonged to a  
man trying to destroy himself. There was in his bloodshot eyes. "Later, Buuuug," he said.

I followed him to the front door. "Wait, James. I'll give them to you."

He stopped and faced me.

“You will?”

“Yes, if you’ll take a shower.”

The water ran in the bathroom while he washed his hands and gagged.

Golgatha, the place of . . .

The churches

The hospitals

The pastors

The dying

The dead

Little boys pull the church bell rope.

Little girls sit with their legs crossed.

I will spew thee out.

“But I don’t have any other clothes.”

“I’ll find you some. Doesn’t a hot shower sound good? Wouldn’t you like to clean up a little?”

“Okay,” he said.

I went into my bedroom, my scrubs and underwear thrown all over the floor.

Laura, clean your room.

I done did, Mama.

You call this clean?

And if the woman be not defiled, but be clean; then she shall be free, and shall conceive seed.



You two are making me sad with all this fussing when all I want to do after a day of slinging paint is come home to my girls.

The seed of the righteous.

I pulled one of the moving boxes from the closet and found James the T-shirt and sweatpants of Greg's I used to sleep in.

Smoke hovering above the subdivision streets.

Brimstone shall be scattered . . .

It is not a mansion, Daddy.

Why it is, too, Bug.

He's just a CPA. I'm just a nurse.

The pencilneck.

Daddy.

He's an okay boy, I reckon.

In my house there are many mansions. If it were not so...

Bug, your mama is just worried about you. Neither one of us want you to get a divorce, but if you say that's what you need, then I'll support you the best I can. Just remember sometimes we go through stages in a marriage. Sometimes you get to thinking you don't love them as much. You've got to be careful not to make a mistake you can't ever fix.

I already made my mistake by believing what I was taught in church all those years.

Oh, Bug.

I took them to the hallway where James waited. “Here,” I said, giving him the clothes. “You can change in the bathroom. Leave your clothes outside the door and I’ll put them in the washer.”

“But, Buuuug, when can I have them?”

“After you get a shower.”

I’d never washed clothes so dirty. The filth of weeks absorbed into the cotton of his jeans and coat and undershirt, his boxers and socks smelling as bad as the homeless patients’ found near death on the streets and brought to the hospital.

Sweat, piss, shit, bile.

Iniquity.

You wipe them down with chlorhexidine before the family views them.

Clean on the outside, dead on the inside.

The body without the spirit is dead.

We are all as an unclean thing.

Bloody washcloths go down the laundry chute.

I looked through his pockets and found nothing. If he were to die on the streets nobody would know who he was.

The Lord knoweth . . .

I set the dial to Heavy Soil, Hot cycle. I used extra detergent. Meadow Breeze.

Sisters and Brothers, Jesus Christ will wash you clean as snow.

Oh, Brubber. Oh, Brubber.

And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

What is the darkness inside of you?

I went into the bedroom and took an old college nursing dictionary from another moving box and sat on the bed while James showered, flipping through entries. Structure of deoxyribonucleic acid. Fire ant sting. Loop colostomy. Psoriasis. Umbilical hernia.

Unexplained Infertility.

You mean there is no cause?

Hence the term.

(You bitch.) You mean there is no chance?

I highly recommend adoption for you two.

We have to have faith, baby.

Whoever says to this mountain . . .

She never existed.

Fuck you and your faith.

You didn't used to—

Shut the fuck up, Greg.

God hates me.

For God is . . .

The shower quit running and I heard James' bare feet in the hallway. "I'm in here," I said.

He stood in the doorway, Greg's clothes too big for him by two sizes.

Bottle rockets screaming. Fireworks and the wild laughter of families in love. The cries of a no-longer-husband.

Out of their mouths issued fire and smoke . . .

Paint and mineral spirits.

Get thee behind me . . .

Kalemar, you give him another chance.

Golgotha, the place of the . . .

He's lucky he didn't fall off a ladder and break his neck. So stoned out of his mind.

The little boys pull the ropes.

The little girls sit on their . . .

Kalemar.

He thinks the world owes him a living. I'm done busting my ass to help him.

Kalemar.

Daddy, Mama says this dress costs too much.

Rubbing her temples at the kitchen table. Rubbing her temples and chewing at her jaw. Mother, wife. Pretty. A bright spring evening, blooming dogwoods blowing in the wind. Brain going and going. Worried mother, wife, woman.

Why, it should only take you a couple Saturdays' slinging paint to make that much, Bug.

Daddy.

I'm just kidding, darling. Why don't you just go ahead and order it and I'll write you a check. I'd do

anything for my Bug as long as she keeps making me  
proud.

That prom dress was too  
expensive and shows too much cleavage.

You be careful.

I will, Mama. (I'll sit on it all  
night like you good churchwomen).

"I took a shower," he said.

And no creature is hidden.

"I can see."

"Can I have them now?"

I closed the dictionary and got up from the bed. I grabbed his hand and lifted up his thin  
arm. "What are you going to do," he said, "check to see if I warshed good?"

yet is not washed from their filthiness . . .

I could see the small red needle track on his arm.

Just stick it in me, Greg. Right here, in my stomach.

Upon thy belly shalt thy go.

I've never given anybody a shot before.

It's okay. Do it fast, like the doctor said.

Let there be . . .

Ouch.

I'm sorry.

It's okay. Come on. We have to make . . .

I am nothing.

Love.

Divine.

“Are you using needles now?” I said. “These will turn into infected sores. Your veins will collapse.”

“I don’t all the time.”

I let him go. “Lay down on the bed,” I said.

And the woman was very beautiful to look upon.

He was a leper.

Leave me alone . . .

“Are you going to examine me?”

Do you come here today and stand before your loved ones and God and pronounce that you will love and serve one another as husband and wife in the same manner as Christ loves and serves us?

We do.

What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. I now pronounce you . . .

She never existed.

I pulled the pills from the pocket of my scrubs. “Do you want them or not?”

He walked through the room, stepping over my dirty clothes and scratching beneath the loose collar of the shirt. He laid on the bed and I handed him the heavy dictionary. “What do you want me to do with this?” he said.

What is decaying inside you?

Psssst.

The boy and the girl standing before the tree wrapped in lights and popcorn tinsel in their sweaters, sharing a picture Bible.

And they were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Psssst.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying . . .

Do you have an extra tampon?

And they came without haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

I just started.

Oh Christmas tree, Oh Christmas tree, How . . .

I can't stand your sister. She's always saying how people without children just don't understand what it's like.

They gave us that nice bottle of wine. Let's get inside and—

They don't even go to church.

We have to have faith, baby.

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, You are good for nothing.

Laura!

Well, it isn't.

You think I don't want to have a baby just as much as you?

Laura! That wine must have cost—

Shards of green glass in the frosty grass beneath the wall, the stone  
stained as if from blood.

The blood of Christ....

“I want you to read something.”

“You’re acting weird, Buuuug.”

“How would you know? You don’t know anything about me. We haven’t talked since we  
were kids. You didn’t even come to my wedding. Not that it matters now.”

And they shall spread the cloth before the elders of the city . . .

Many things can cause a girl’s hymen to rupture other than sex.

I was riding a horse when I was little. It happens to girls all the  
time.

For I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present  
you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

It doesn’t mean I’m not a virgin.

James opened the book. “What do I have to read?”

“Do you know what jaundice is?”

“No, Buuuug. I’m not a doctor.”

You are not gold.

Adulterous woman.

“Look it up.”

James flipped through the pages with his trembling fingers. “These pictures,” he said,  
“are gross.”

He looked at the blood on his fingers and gagged.



“They’re disorders and diseases. They’re what’s inside of you.”

Unexplained . . .

“I found it.”

“Read what it says.”

“A yellow discoloration of the skin, mucous membranes, and sk . . sk . .”

“Sclerae.”

Dear Lord, thank you for blessing us with this food for the nourishment of our bodies on this Thanksgiving. We thank you, Lord, for everyone here today and we ask that you be with those that are sick.

We ask that you be with James.

We ask that you be with James. Amen.

Do you think we should just wait on him little bit longer?

All this food you cooked will get cold, Leda.

Just a little bit longer.

He didn’t even call to see what time we were eating. That boy thinks the world—

We can wait, Daddy. We don’t care, do we, Greg?

All they do is tell the same stories, and your mother just acts like she’s never heard them before.

Maybe they need to, Greg.

Why?

You wouldn’t understand.

Pencilneck.

As he read, I walked around the room, rubbing the two pills together in my pocket.

His penis erect and red. Smooth . . .

“Sclerae of the eyes, caused by greater than normal amounts of bilirubin in the blood.”

“Now look up liver,” I said.

“I know what a liver is.”

My liver is poured upon the earth.

I think I’m about to bleed to death.

God, Laura.

It was a joke, Greg. My flow is just heavy this . . .

“Do you, James?”

“Yes, Buuuug.”

“Look it up.”

James flipped through the pages. I took the pills out my pocket and held them in my palm, feeling their smoothness.

The boy and the girl . . .

A little rubber ball.

Greg? Greg?

Where have you been?

Why are you crying?

I hate them.

Who?

All the women.

The noise of the crying . . .

The babies in neonatal convulsing and crying in  
their cribs, withdrawing while crucifixes hung on the walls  
above them.

Unexplained.

You're a woman.

I'll kill myself if I ever have to go to another baby shower.

Laura.

Ma'am, ma'am, I'm sorry if you're having a  
bad day, but you'll have to buy it now I'm afraid.'

Huh?

Your makeup.

My mascara on a onesie.

Flow.

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, how . . .

Chlorhexidine. Throw it  
down the chute with the bloody rags.

Old rotten rags of  
righteousness.

"The largest gland of the body," he read, "and one of its most complex organs. It is  
located in the upper crania, right part of the abdominal cavity."

Luke Perry and Leonardo DiCaprio.

His stomach. His happy trail.

Oh, Laura.

The security light over the playground equipment.

Oh, Laura.

Moths and gnats fumbling against the bulb.

Swarms of flies.

Oh, Laura.

My prom dress over the side of the truck bed.

Oh, Laura.

His penis erect and veiny. Salty.

The light went black.

I will spew thee out . . .

I can't.

I waited all month.

Get away from me.

But—

Get away.

No movie star. Just an eighteen-year-old boy who worked at Hardees,  
driving me home early while I cried.

Why are you crying, Laura?

I don't want to talk, Mama.

Were you careful?

Shut up, Mama.

When are you going to give me a grandbaby to spoil?

And if she be not defiled . . .

James stopped reading and looked at my hand. “Look up cirrhosis,” I said.

I held the pills between my fingers and aimed them at James’ head, wanting to throw them at him, as he searched for the word.

I told you to leave me alone, James. I’ll wake up Daddy. Give me that ball. Stop bouncing it

“A chronic degen . . .degen . . .”

“Degenerative.”

the degenerate plant of a strange . . .

God

“Disease of the liver in which the lobes are covered with fibrous tissue, the—”

By the great force of my disease . . .

“Just look at the picture, James.”

Are you coming to church, Laura?

Leave me alone. I’m trying to sleep.

This is the third Sunday in a row.

Please forgive me, God. I will wait until I am married. I promise. I promise.

Leave me alone.

His dress shoes through the hallway and kitchen into the garage. His car starting up.

Baby sleeping next to me. Baby powder. Little puffs of breaths before it wakes, oh, oh, oh, crying. Here, baby, here, are my breasts. Shhhh.

It’s just a pillow, you insane no-woman, and your breasts are dry.

Oh Lord, what wilt thou give?

“Why are you making me do this?”

“I want you to know what’s inside of you, what’s inside of us, the damage you’re doing.”

We just don’t understand, Laura.

Who is we?

Me and the other girls.

You told them?

You haven’t been to Sunday school in weeks. Everybody can tell something’s wrong. Greg looks so sad.

I only told you about Evan because I thought you’d understand since you did the same thing.

Fuck me, Evan. Fuck me hard. Come in me hard. Fuck me Evan.

Fuck me.

Pleasant for the eyes and a tree . . .

I can’t get pregnant.

What do you mean, you can’t?

I won’t. Okay? Quit talking and fuck me.

to be desired

That was years ago. I’m a new woman now, a sinner saved by the grace of God.

You know what, tell everybody you’re the reason I don’t come to church anymore. You’re a damn hypocrite.

I can’t be what you want, Mama. I’ll fix him for you and then you’ll love me.

“Can I have them?”

I put the pills back in my pocket. “No. You don’t get it.”

“What?”

“What I’m trying to show you.”

James closed the book and dropped it to the floor with a thump and sat on the bed and rubbed his face with his hands and scratched at his arms and neck, his breaths coming quicker. I thought he would scream. “I’m leaving, Buuuug,” he said

“You’ll freeze to death.”

“Where are my clothes?”

“In the washing machine. Wet.”

“God, Buuuug. Can I at least smoke one?”

“Sure, James. Sure.”

On the back porch, he took a crumpled pack of cigarettes and a lighter from the pocket of Greg’s pants. The sleet rattled against the holly bushes and rooftops louder than the interstate above. Traffic was stalled, blue and red lights flashing over the barricade, no stars in the dark, black sky.

He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names.

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus. How lovely...

We have to have faith, baby.

God loves me.

We have to have faith, baby.

God hates me.

We have to have faith, baby.

God?

James paced and smoked and scratched himself and spat into the frozen yard and leaned over the railing and looked toward the front of the house as if hoping someone would come rescue him.

Please let me die.

Rescue my soul.

His eyes were desperate and despite the cold he'd begun sweating. "What do you owe him?"

How much owes thou . . .

"Who?"

"That guy you're so worried about."

"Pills. Money."

"What else?"

"Whatever."

"Do you owe him sex?"

"I ain't queer, Buuuug."

"What are you?"

"Straight."

"That's not what I mean. What are you?"

A monster, like some monster, his breathing, like some monster's. My throat like sewn together. Skin like sewn to the mattress. Bones like sewn to the dust. You ran your finger from my little knee up along my thigh and thrust it inside. Like some monster. Awake and screaming, searching my panties for wounds, for blood.



Brimstone shall be scattered . . .

Yes, young lady, the stress of being a college student can cause insomnia. For now, I'm going to prescribe sleeping medication, but that shouldn't be thought of as a permanent fix. Let's schedule another appointment for after the semester.

James stopped and stood in the cold holding himself with one thin arm and smoking with the other. He looked at the interstate and the porch railing and the sleet falling, his eyes as desperate as a trapped animal's. He put out his cigarette on the wet railing before he was finished with it. "I'm feeling sick, Buuuug. I have to sit down."

I took him inside, to the living room. He looked through the front blinds out at the night. "Can I please use your phone?"

"No," I said.

He sat on the couch. I turned on the television, past footage of flooded streets and the dead marked on buildings in spray-painted x's, to Conan O'Brien telling jokes about the President. The dozen roses in the vase on the coffee table were wilting, a note folded amongst the thorns.

A crown of . . .

To Laura. I hope these roses make you think you of warmer places. Love, Evan."

Evan in his suit and tie. "You know, Laura, I've been getting you sleep aids for quite some time now on the down low. And I couldn't help but notice you aren't wearing a ring anymore. I've been wanting to ask you to dinner forever."

"I don't need them anymore. Wine works even better."

“Well.”

“I’ll still go to dinner with you.”

We all are addicted to . . .

Flowers in warmth. The greening earth. The billions of women in warm places. The birds. A mother cardinal sitting on her eggs outside the window while I bled.

No, Greg, there is not a special name for them. Just pads. Just fucking pads.

You didn’t used to cuss so much.

I’m bleeding out of my vagina.

I’m sorry.

Ask the damn woman for pads. Tell her I just had a laparoscopy if you have to. She’ll know.

Men. Man. The billions of babies.

Unexplained . . .

James leaned over, sweating and holding his stomach with both hands, rocking forward and backward and beginning to shake with small convulsions. “I don’t understand why you’re doing this to me?”

“Giving you a warm place to stay? Letting you take a shower? Washing your clothes?”

“I want to dry my clothes so I can leave.”

“For just one night of your life can’t you spend some time with your sister?”

“You said you’d give them to me.”

“I will.”

He stopped rocking and looked at me.

The vase of wilting roses in rancid water.

Absorptive. Adoptive. Invasive. An invasive, outpatient procedure.

The laparoscope, the crucifix, flesh. All made of atoms.

Atoms all made of God.

There is no god.

“But when?”

“After you eat something.”

“But, Buuuug.”

“You need to eat.”

James followed me into the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator. There wasn't much inside, mainly yogurt and prepackaged salads.

Watch me, women.

“I can fry you an egg and toast some bread.”

“Okay.”

He stood behind me at the counter while I heated oil in a pan. “When was the last time you ate?” I said.

“At Mama's today. She made me some meatloaf.”

I cracked two eggs and dropped them into the oil and added salt and pepper.

When ovulating, your discharge will be the consistency of . . .

This is your brain on drugs.

These are your ovaries on God.

“Was Daddy there?”

“He was at work or I wouldn’t have gone by.”

I put two slices of bread in the toaster.

“What did you and Mama talk about?”

God has a plan for you, honey.

You pray and God put a baby in your belly. You pray and God puts a baby in your belly. Why did you ever tell me anything about God? I prayed and prayed, Mama. I begged him. He won’t speak to me. He never has.

I speak to him every day.

You’re kidding yourself.

Laura! I can’t believe you’d say such a thing after the way we raised you.

Children, obey . . .

Oh, I’m sorry, Mama. I’m sorry.

It’s not me you need to apologize to. It’s God.

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

“She told me you could get me the kind of medicine that would help me. That’s why I came.”

I flipped the eggs.

When are you going to give me a grandbaby to spoil?

I will help him and you will love me.

“The smell of eggs always makes me think of Mama’s breakfast for dinners. Do you remember how I used to pray, ‘Pooshie, Pooshie, Pooshie.’”

Dear Lord, Please put a shield around the house. Please put a shield around Sis  
Pup. Please put a shield around Mama and Daddy. Please put a shield around Bug. Please  
put a shield around . . .

“No.”

“You don’t?”

“I don’t remember a lot of things.”

This is your brain on . . .

These are your ovaries . . .

“Why do you think that is?”

“I’ve tried to forget them.”

I turned off the stove and made James’ plate and handed it to him. We went back into the  
living room and he sat down on the couch. On the television, Suzanne Summers squeezed a  
ThighMaster between her knees. James watched TV and ate, egg yolk running down his chin.

When ovulating . . .

“James,

Do you remember that night in my bedroom when I was twelve years old?  
what do you remember?”

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“About what?”

It’s quick and easy!

“The two of us, when we were kids.”

Watch me, women.

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“Not much, Buuuug.”

It’s quick and easy!

“Do you remember

what you did to me that night?

how we used to go to the creek with Daddy after church on Sundays?”

No, bug, the hooks don’t hurt the worms. It just tickles them.

Daddy’s truck with the smell of paint and the country music over the radio on road through the green ridges, smiling and spitting his tobacco out the window, big brother in back with our fishing rods and our worms. Big brother opening the gap to Lewis’ barn .

Big brother opening the gap to your . . .

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“Yeah.” He nodded and wiped the yolk on his plate with his toast.

It’s the secret to shapely thighs!

“When

did you become so evil?

was the last time you went fishing?”

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“Probably then.”

I’m on my period!

It’s the secret to shapely thighs!

“Not since we were little?”

James gagging.

Squeeze, Squeeze . . .

“I don’t reckon.”

Like some monster . . .

You ran your finger.

In just minutes a day!

“You used to love fishing.”

Do you think it’s premature menopause?

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“Can I have them, Buuuug?”

Oh, no, you’re much too young.

In just minutes a day!

“What do you love now, besides pills?”

Could it be from the exercise?

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“I don’t think about love.”

Perhaps. You could make an appointment with your OBGYN. I’d suggest taking a pregnancy test first.

But doctor, I was diagnosed with Unexplained Infertility.

Strengthens and tones!

“Answer the question and I’ll give them to you.”

Watch me, women. Watch me strut through CVS with my tight glutes in my yoga pants and put the test on the counter. Get jealous.

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“I can’t think of anything.”

Sitting on the toilet, yoga pants around my ankles, the stick beneath me.

Hahahahaha. Ridiculous.

Strengthens and tones!

“What about people? What about your family? Do you love that guy you owe?”

And if the woman be not defiled, but be clean; then she shall be free, and shall  
conceive seed.

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“No, Buuuug.”

Two red lines.

For rock hard inner thighs!

“Do you love Mama and Daddy?”

and me?

Thank you, Father!

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“Uh-huh.”

No, no. No thank you, Father. No, I didn’t mean to say . . .

For rock hard inner thighs!

“Why don’t you act like it then.”

Hello?

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“I don’t hurt nobody.”

Evan standing at the door holding a vase of roses.



Trims your outer thighs and tones!

“You do, James. You’ve hurt Mama and Daddy for years.”

and me.

You have to get an abortion.

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“Mama wants me to go back to rehab, but she don’t understand I can’t. Daddy, I couldn’t ever be good enough for him no matter what I did.”

I’d never do that.

Trims your outer thighs and tones!

“He cares about you as much as Mama. He just doesn’t show it the same way.”

When are you going to give me a grandbaby to spoil?

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“He don’t show it at all.”

You have to get an abortion.

Your solution to firmer thighs!

“Don’t you remember

what you did to me?

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

him coming to look for you every time you went up in the woods to hide? Don’t you remember

how you hurt me?

Your solution to firmer thighs!

how he came to find you when you went missing or were in jail?”

“That’s just so he could yell at me about how bad I was.”

Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee.

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“He went to jail for you, James. Would you do the same, if you had a son?”

Never, Evan.

100 percent satisfaction guaranteed!

“I don’t want to have any kids.”

We can make this work.

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“Why not, James?”

I don’t want to make it work with you.

100 percent satisfaction guaranteed!

“Because I don’t want to mess them up like me.”

Why not?

Squeeze, squeeze . . .

“What happened to you?”

Because you’re not even divorced. Because you’re crazy.

We may not have been born with great thighs . . .

James pointed at the television. “I was born.”

Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter  
into the kingdom of God. For God so loved the world that he gave his only

begotten son that whoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

“So was I.”

“Mama and Daddy think you’re perfect, Buuuug.”

Fuck me, Evan. Fuck me.

Children, obey . . .

Such is the way of an adulterous woman.

I got up and turned off the television. “What happened to you to make you the way you are?”

James was sweating and scratching and breathing hard. He stood up and dropped his plate to the couch. He did yell this time: “He happened to me. He happened to me, okay?”

“Who, that guy you owe?” I said.

“No.”

“Who?”

He stood there, scratching and sweating and panting in Greg’s clothes. “David Walland,” he said.

Pastor Walland kneeling beside me, the taste of Jason still in my mouth. His hand on my back. I love you, sister. Dear God, I promise, I promise . . .

“Mama and Daddy’s preacher?”

He nodded and sank to the couch and put his face in his hands.

“He’s crippled and in a wheelchair. What does he have to do with anything?”

“Nothing, Buuuug. I’m just fucked up.” He looked up at me, tears in his eyes now, of sorrow. “I have to go. You said you’d give them to me.”

He stood and went to the door and opened it. "You'll get hypothermia, James."

"I don't care if I die."

He slammed the door. I sat there for a second, about to let him leave after everything.

No Laura, you know what you did, too. You know you reached inside and gave him . . .

It's come, Chicky.

Twelve years old and my hair wet. An evening rainbow over the ridges after we ate in the fellowship hall, Mama and Daddy and the entire congregation, stepping out of the church and into the lingering rain with stomachs full of casseroles, only to stand silent and in awe. It's for your, Laura. God is happy with your decision. Amen, amen, amen, amen a . . .

I went after him.

The sleet had turned to snow, and James had made it a few yards down the sidewalk, his tennis shoes leaving tracks in the fresh snow.

He will wash you clean as . . .

"James," I said, "please don't go."

He stopped and squinted toward me through the snow. "What did you say?"

"Don't go, James. Please don't go."

I caught up to him. He was sniffing and crying and in that moment he looked like the brother I remembered. I took the pills out of my pocket and held them out to him. "You can have them."

He looked at the pills and at me and he fell against me, sobbing. We stood there as the snow fell, crying and hugging each other for the first time I could ever remember, since we were

children, both of us unable to tell one another what we needed to say, but both of us knowing how we felt about each other without hearing the words.

Inside, he spent some time in the bathroom. When he came out, his eyes were glassy slits and his posture and appearance though frail seemed more relaxed. He was in that place of bliss, with no loneliness or longing, no need for another human being.

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus . . .

I made him a bed on the couch and he lay down. "I'm worn out, Buuuug."

"I am too."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too."

He closed his eyes and mumbled, "Don't go. I love you, girl."

"I love you," I said, but by then he had passed out.

I put his clothes in the dryer and went to bed. Some time in the early morning, I woke and saw that my cellphone was missing from my bedside table. I went into the living room. James was not on the couch and my phone was on the coffee table beside the wilted roses.

I looked out the front window. The snow had stopped and it was a clear night with a full, round moon casting blue on all snow. Across the street, beyond the interstate lights where the old homes leaned atop the hills, on one of the roofs the moonlight had made a perfect blue cross against the snow. I felt in that moment Jesus moving through the cold, blue night, walking in his robe and sandals, that bearded son of man, beautiful as the night coming to me, his face that of my savior, his eyes deep with compassion, and I felt him reach toward me and enter me and fill me with his peace and suddenly all of my pain was lifted.

Amen, amen, amen, a . . .

Then I noticed that ratty car parked across the street, a dark figure behind the steering wheel, but no James. I started to grab my phone and look at the number James had dialed. I started to march out in the snow and demand the person tell me where my brother was. That's when I saw another figure in the car appear, rising up from the other's lap, wiping his mouth and I knew it was James.

Pleasant for the eyes and a tree to be desired . . .

White oozing milkweed.

I ain't . . .

The car drove away, leaving tracks in the snow, and I stood there watching the night of nothing but shadows, of nothing but lies.

I woke that morning with sickness and aching breasts. Through my bedroom windows the morning was dim and gray. I puked in the toilet

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, how lovely

What are you growing inside me?

Salvation?

Death?

He telleth the number of . . .

and stepped onto the front porch. It was frigid. The traffic rushed above on the interstate. The neighborhood streets were quiet and empty, cars dusted with snow. James' tennis shoe prints led

down the front porch steps to the sidewalk and stopped near the road where the tire tracks had been pressed into the snow, where he had given what he owed.

Please don't go.

I puked again and went back to bed and dozed, the nausea waking me every few minutes as the day brightened. My thoughts were hidden behind swirling broken mirrors in my mind, reflecting my own image in fragments back at me.

The doctor with her blonde hair in a ponytail.

Abraham, David, Rahab

Unexplained . . .

I don't understand, doctor.

There's a chance you did something very minor to change your body's chemistry.

What about sleeping pills?

I don't see anything in your chart about—

I didn't tell anybody.

Who changed the truth . . .

When are you going to give me a grandbaby to  
spoil?

Where is the Laura . . .

She never existed.

My cellphone rang. I went to answer it, but saw that it was a hospital number. I let the call go to voice mail and then checked the message. "Hello, Laura. This is Dr. Treadwell. I need to speak with you in my office ASAP today. It's very important that we meet before your shift this afternoon."

Look, James.

Golgotha, the place of . . .

We all have one.

rotting flesh

Grab . . .

his penis erect and red

Do you want to get me fired?

Hurry.

If you steal any medication from the hospital, even  
a basic antibiotic, you will lose your nursing license.

I'm sorry, God.

I hate you, God.

Hello?

Hello?

I hate you, James. It's all your fault.

Laura never existed.

I made it to the hospital that afternoon and didn't bother to wear scrubs for my shift. I'd brought my badge to hand over to Dr. Treadwell. His door on the top floor was open. He was a bald man who wore glasses, the CNO of the hospital. He was typing on his computer, the window behind him giving a view of the snowy landscape, the ridges and interstate. A crucifix hung on the wall.

Golgotha, the place of . . .

For God so loved the world . . .



Atoms.

There is no . . .

“Laura,” he said, when I entered his office, “thank you for coming. Please have a seat.”

I sat across from him.

A summer day outside. My arms sunburned from a weekend at the lake.

Greg and I swimming and making . . .

You’re hired. We want you to work in the ICU.

Greg, Greg! I got the job.

That’s great, baby. I’m so proud of . . .

I can’t wait to start a family together.

You pray and . . .

“You’ve always done excellent work here,” he said. “Your reviews have been top notch.

There has never been a reason to suspect you of doing anything other than stellar work, much less anything unethical.”

Thou shalt not . . .

You will lose your nursing license.

“I don’t need a lecture, Doctor.”

Greg! Greg!

Do you want to get me fired?

Hehehehehe.

For a second, he looked confused. Then he smiled. “I get it. Enough with the accolade.”

He cleared his throat.

My Bug the doctor.

I'm not a doctor, Daddy.

You might as well be.

"I asked to you to meet with me today," he said. "because

You will not be able to get a license anywhere. You will no longer be able to work in the medical field.

I will help him and make you proud so you will love . . .

Grandbabies to spoil?

I want to promote you to nurse manager."

"What are you talking about?"

"The position you applied for months ago. I have your application right here."

If I get it, Greg, I'll make more money. We can do in vitro . . .

"I'm sorry," I said. "I totally forgot about it."

"Well, do you still want the job?"

The cost of having a . . .

The cost of having an . . .

Such is the way of an . . .

Oh Uterus, Oh Uterus, how . . .

"Yes, of course. Thank you."

We stood and shook hands. "You had me worried for a moment there," he said. "I've already scheduled for you to take the next week off. You've worked very hard for us and I think you could use a break. I'll contact you about the paperwork, and you'll have to meet with the admin. committee, but it won't be a job interview."

"Thank you, Doctor."

“Thank you, Laura. You’ve always been one of our very best.”

Adulterous woman.

I took the elevator downstairs to the ER. It was empty, that afternoon. The television was turned off, the wars and floods of the world unseen. A janitor mopped beneath the crucifix on the wall.

Blessed are . . .

I looked out at the snow falling melting in the parking lot

Calculate the number . . .

$$2x-73=_$$

$$3x-14=_$$

Not in algebra class, Chicky.

$$a+b=c$$

$$a=\text{James}$$

$$b=\text{night in my room}$$

$$c=\text{nightmares}$$

$$c+d=e$$

$$d=\text{sleeping medication}$$

$$e=\text{unexplained infertility}$$

$$a(f)+b=c-a$$

$$f=\text{God}$$

$$a(f+g)+b=c-a-f$$

$$g=\text{Jesus}$$

$$a+b+c+d=e$$

$$e+h=i$$

$h$ =religion

$i$ =divorce

$$h+i=j$$

$j$ =Evan

$$j+k+e=l$$

$k$ =adulterous woman

$l$ =pregnancy

$$m=n$$

$m$ :theft

$n$ : consequences

$$k+m = o$$

$o$ =promotion

$$l(i)+k-(a+b) + f(d+e) + h(c)-g(j+1) (m-n) o = k=p$$

$p$ =victim

$$a=p$$

$$f=p$$

$$j=p$$

$$k \neq p$$

$$k + p + e = l$$

You pray and . . .

God will judge . . .

and I had no answers.

On Thanksgiving, I made the drive to the valley. The interstate exit was packed with traffic pouring by the strip malls and fast food restaurants, closed for the holiday. I sat in traffic, meeting the eyes of strangers. I drove past subdivisions of big brick homes, cars parked in the driveways and lined up in the roads. I turned down into the valley, the trees on the ridges raw and black against the bright afternoon sky. There were old barns falling down, others repaired with new planks of unweathered wood. The hayfields were mowed. I drove past homes of people I knew and those I didn't. I pulled into the driveway of my parents' little house and parked beside Daddy's work van. I stepped out into the sunshine and stood in the cold sunshine, looking at the yard and old pastureland, before going inside the house.

Daddy had a fire going in the wood burning stove. The living room was hot. The family photos hung on the wall on each side of the stove pipe running into the ceiling. I smelled Mama's food. I heard Daddy and Uncle Grease laughing. I stopped in the kitchen doorway. Mama stood at the stove, wearing faded corduroy slacks and a turtleneck sweater, her flower print apron tied around her thin waist. She was dipping a wooden spoon into a pan of dressing and bringing it to her lips to blow on it and taste it.

Daddy and Uncle Grease sat at the kitchen table. Daddy wore his reading glasses and a red flannel shirt, light shining on his bald spot. Uncle Grease wore a sweatshirt advertising a local car dealership and a pair of black jeans. He had his legs kicked out to the side, ankles

crossed and balanced on the heel of one of his cowboy boots. He folded his hands across his big belly as he chuckled.

They did not notice I had entered the room. “There wasn’t no such thing as Thanksgiving,” Uncle Grease was saying.

“Just like there wasn’t no such thing as our birthdays,” said Daddy. “It was like any other day.”

Mama stood at the stove with her back to them, listening and nodding.

“Most Thanksgivings we was out in the drafty hallway of some barn,” said Daddy, “stringing tobacco and about to freeze to death while Pappy sat out in the old trap with the heater running.”

“Didn’t y’all have coats or jackets?” said Mama.

“They wasn’t worth nothing,” said Uncle Grease.

“Not when it was about twenty degrees all winter,” said Daddy.

“You poor fellers,” said Mama. “He shouldn’t have treated y’all that way.”

She slid on oven mitts and opened the oven and took out a steaming turkey and put it on the stove next to the pan of dressing. Uncle Grease saw me standing in the doorway. “Why, there’s little Bug,” he said. “She done snuck in on us.”

Daddy turned in his chair, smiled and reached out his arms. I leaned down and hugged him, felt his warmth and smelled his cologne. Mama hugged me, patting me on the back with her oven mitts. “How are you, honey?” she said.

“A little tired. It’s been a long week at work.”

“We sure are glad to see you.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t bring anything.”

“Having you here is plenty enough.”

She pulled out a chair. “Why, take off your coat.”

I slipped out of my coat and handed it to her. She carried it into the living room. I sat down beside Daddy. Uncle Grease grinned at me. “Do you remember when you was only a little old thing?” he said.

“You wouldn’t go nowhere without that pacifier. I’d put it in your mouth upside down and you’d turn it around the right way in half a second. Remember how I used to hold it over your head and make you jump for it?”

“She was scared of you,” said Mama, coming back into the kitchen.

“That was back when you had a big old beard,” said Daddy.

Uncle Grease laughed and rubbed his stubble. “People used to tell me I looked like John Travolta. What do you think, Bug? Do I still got it?”

“You’ll never lose it,” I said.

“That’s my niece. My niece the doctor. Doctor Bug.”

“Pappy sure liked to play the part of doctor,” said Daddy.

“You’d get a toothache and go around for weeks with it throbbing in your head just to keep him from getting out them pair of rusty pliers.”

“Why didn’t he take y’all to the dentist?” said Mama. “Even I got to go to the dentist.”

“Maybe it was because you was just alone with your mama and didn’t have some big bully around,” said Daddy.

“He was sick,” said Uncle Grease.

“Crazed,” said Daddy.

“And there wasn’t nothing Duck could do about it either. You remember that time I was about twelve or thirteen and we were topping tobacco and I cut my arm with that hawk bill knife?”

“A few more inches and it would’ve been your throat.”

“If Duck hadn’t been there I probably would’ve bled to death.”

“He would’ve let you for sure if he thought it could make him an extra dime.”

“Pappy told me to cut off some of my shirt and wrap it around the cut to stop the bleeding. He wanted keep me in the field, see, so I could keep making him money.”

“You were bleeding like a stuck hog.”

“I know. It was the only time I can remember when Duck actually went against him. She took me up to Doc McNeely’s and he put eight stitches in my arm. I still got the scar.”

“Then she brought you right back out there so you could finish working. She told Pappy how much the visit to Doc McNeely’s cost and he went to squaling. I reckon ole Doc just wants to take every thing I earn. I reckon he wants to take my house and home right out from under me. I reckon, bluh, bluh, bluh, bluh, bluh. It probably cost him a pack of cigarettes and here he was taking the money we were making while he sat in the shade anyway.”

“He said next time he’d just put them stitches in himself and by God, I believed him. I made sure not to cut myself again.”

“He was crazy.”

“Old Craze.”

Daddy trimmed the turkey while I tried to answer Uncle Grease’s questions about his blood pressure medication. When all the food was on the table and we were seated, Mama asked Daddy to say the prayer. We bowed our heads. “Our Heavenly Father,” Daddy prayed, “We



thank you for your many blessings, for watching over our family and for providing this food to nourish our bodies.”

I looked up as he prayed, Mama and Daddy and Uncle Grease, all with their eyes closed tightly, as if they were trying to conjure up a memory or imagine something.

“In Jesus name we pray,” said Daddy, “Amen.”

We ate, Uncle Grease and Daddy bragging about Mama’s cooking the entire meal and her thanking them over and over. When dinner was over, Daddy and Uncle Grease’s plates cleaned twice, I helped Mama do the dishes while Daddy and Uncle Grease sat in the living room and watched football.

I stood next to her, drying the plates and silverware when she rinsed them and handed them to me.

“I saw James,” I said.

She stopped washing a bowl and looked at me, her eyes hopeful. “When?”

“Last week.”

“I’ve been hoping he’d come by again. Did you get him the medicine?”

“I did.”

“Do you think it will help him?”

“Mama,” I said, “I don’t think there’s such thing as help for him.”

She looked back at the bowl in her hand and started to say something and then stopped herself.

Daddy drove Grease home and I sat with Mama on the couch while she drank coffee. She patted the spot beside her and I slid over. She put her arm around me and hugged me.

I leaned into her. “How are you doing?” she said.

“It’s hard,” I said.

She patted my leg. “I know, baby. It’s not too late to call off the divorce.”

“I think it is.”

“I don’t understand what happened between you two,” she said, “but I trust you. You’ve always been a lot smarter than me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve always done the right thing.”

I was about to cry. “No, I haven’t, Mama. You have.”

She choked a little on her coffee and laughed. “Oh, baby, if you only knew.”

“Knew what, Mama?”

“The mistakes I’ve made.”

We sat together without speaking, each of us likely feeling the weight of those past mistakes, staring at the television as commercials played and the wood burned in the stove and on the wall we looked out at ourselves from a different time to which we could never return.

When I left her and Daddy that evening, clouds had moved it and it was another gray, winter day. I drove to Pedigo Baptist Church. I sat in my car, looking at the steeple and stained glass windows and the elm tree with its branches hanging over the steps that led up to the sanctuary doors, the steps I’d climbed and descended hundreds of times, as a girl and a young woman and even before my birth, a baby in my mother’s womb, living inside her as she walked the red carpeted aisles, as she played the piano, as she knelt at the altar to pray for her family, for me, and the sanctuary where I sat with my family, my brother and mother and father, and where my mother played her beautiful music and I loved them all and I loved them all and I wished I could love them all and could go to that life and be happy in it and be happy being and being and

being forever in that life that means nothing but lying to yourself because that life brought me and my family, James and my mother and father, every single one of us to where we were today. We were always already in ruin.

I bowed my head before empty church and the dark windows and I prayed one last time as the birdless sky grew darker and I begged God to come and show Himself to me, to let me know I was not alone, but He did not come nor did anybody else.

On a rainy morning the following week, I took a bus to the clinic downtown, alone. I walked out two hours later in pain and more alone.

Almost Child,

You grew inside me. I nourished you for a short time without ever feeling your little nothing body forming. First your nothing and then your nothing and then your nothing before you were separated from me and taken back to your place as bright stardust nothing.

Peaceful.

I returned you there out of selfishness and nothingness and kindness.

I could not be your mother.

I hope I freed you, my little star, from the torment of living on this earth and left you at peace. Unknown and unexplained.

September seventh, 2013.

Two Saturday mornings a month during the spring, summer and fall, Leda Brass loaded her week's work into her old, blue Oldsmobile, which left a trail of black smoke through the valley despite her husband's constant tinkering under the hood, and she made the interstate drive to the Exit 421 Flea Market, where there amongst people just like her and the majority who had ever lived in this world—unique individuals facing circumstances they could not control, judgment from others and exploitation from yet others (such as coal company executives and the TVA, New York cartoonists, Hollywood directors and authors, some even local to the area)—and rows of red and white striped tents and tables set on the wide, gravel lot backdropped by the distant Appalachian Mountain range, correctly pronounced “LATCH-uh” and not “LAY-shuh,” looking on a clear day, when the region's pollution did not hide them from view, like blue watercolor stains on the blue sky, or simply the country's oldest mountains, she shared a table with Ms. Spalding, a widow in her early sixties, a few years older than Leda, who had a large goiter on her neck due to a thyroid problem which was genetic.

The women had met and struck up a friendship two years prior when each were newcomers to the flea market, and shortly after Ms. Spalding's husband had died from a massive heart attack while sitting on the commode like so many unfortunate others since the invention of indoor plumbing. The women had eventually agreed to consolidate their crafts to a single table in order to save money. They also valued each other's company.

Betty Spalding sold cornhusk dolls and angels with silver and golden pipe cleaner halos. Leda sold seasonal wreaths and wooden plaques with routed edges she bought from a chain craft store which were shipped there from a factory in China, where workers' hands who belonged to people Leda nor any of her customers would ever meet had shaped them, and on

which she painted encouraging verses of scripture in calligraphy, her bestseller the words of Joshua, genocidal killer of men, women and children by definition, and Godly man according to the scripture and its believers: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

In between greeting potential customers, Ms. Spalding, most often wearing a bright Mumu which she had sewn herself and sitting there largely with her wire-rimmed glasses tiny on her face and her goiter swollen and red and distracting on her neck, would update the much thinner Leda about her children. She had a son who worked as a manager at a textile plant in Greenville, South Carolina, which manufactured automobile upholstery that would not catch fire. Her daughter, the oldest, lived in Sevierville, in an apartment for which Betty had co-signed. Like Leda’s son, James, Betty’s daughter had struggled with opiate addiction for the entirety of her adult life. The two women bonded over having children who suffered from addiction and motherhood and womanhood in general, the latter two of which no man can fully understand.

Of late, the talk about their respective troubled children had been optimistic. Betty’s son was getting another promotion. Her daughter had managed to stay sober for seven months and was in the process of regaining custody of her own daughter from the state. Laura, Leda’s daughter, was a brief discussion since she was doing well as always. Leda’s son seemed sober. He had found a job at a Dollar General store beside a truck stop off the interstate, which profited most from EBT cards and meant, he had told her, he had job security. It wasn’t a wonderful job, but it was the first he’d held down for longer than a month since he’d turned thirty. He was no longer asking Leda for money, and her husband was no longer commenting about his worthlessness as a man and a son.

Leda and Betty rarely earned more than the cost of the vendor fees, but they did not meet on these mornings at the Exit 421 flea market for the money. They did it for the pride they felt,

as do all artists (which was what they considered themselves although they did not know the criteria by which the elite class made such judgments) when someone praised their work and appreciated it enough to purchase it.

Leda and Betty also simply enjoyed getting out of their homes and seeing the young families made of men, women and children arrive in their cars and minivans, many of whom lived in other states like Missouri and Florida, on their way to Pigeon Forge, where they'd stay in a motel on the main drag lined with flashing billboards and attractions such as a celebrity wax museum, the Titanic museum, go-cart tracks, putt-putt courses and hillbilly antique stores where one could purchase an "authentic hillbilly" backscratcher though there was no such instrument authentic to the people of the region since they also had wives and husbands and children who would scratch their backs like anybody else, and would spend their days visiting the attractions and shoe stores and overpriced themed dinner theaters where actors in cowboy and Indian costumes might ride on horseback as you ate fried chicken and watched a horse shit into the sawdust, and of course, Dollywood, Gatlinburg and the mountains, the mothers and fathers and children cheerful to share one another's company, to be in a new place, to eat all the pancakes and syrup and bacon they wanted, or to order an appetizer of calamari this far from any coast, to sink a putt, to be the fastest go-cart driver, all of which they found exotic enough to justify the use of Visa, Mastercard, Discover or a variety of credit which they would pay on the rest of their lives because for now they were away from their boring hometowns and places of work and school, wherever those were and whatever mundaneness and cheap wages they entailed, and it was worth going further into debt for a few days' happiness. They would most likely never, after all, be able to travel to Europe or any other foreign country unless they signed up for military service, which at that moment in world history like most others would put them into a war.

The two women recounted memories of their own family trips to beaches and distant relatives' homes and church and their children when they were young and innocent little darlings, biting their nipples raw, as well as their own husbands who had also sometimes bit their nipples like children and had tested their patience over the years but had not exhausted it. The patience of a woman is greater than a man's, they agreed as do we, but it has its limits. Watching the families walk through the market grounds allowed Leda and Betty to reminisce on their own sweet memories of raising families, which they also both agreed, and often reminded young mothers and fathers who were probably tired of old women saying as much, passed too quickly, so they'd better cherish the time while they could.

On this particular Saturday morning in early September, however, when the flea market was bustling due to the number of tourists visiting the mountains to view the splendid fall colors on the trees, and the one time Leda and Betty could make somewhat of a profit, Leda would not see her friend. In Brushy Valley, a small community thirty miles northwest of the flea market, where vendors were arriving in the fog and setting out their stores—homemade jam, shaker furniture, collections of vintage wrestling action figures, turquoise jewelry, paintings of black bears, antique clocks, no pit bull puppies as some writers have successfully written about and received laughs from pretentious audiences—the ridge line still blocked the totality of the sunrise, and in a small house there beneath a ridge known as “Flint” decades and decades earlier, before those in the valley forgot the name their descendants gave it, the ridge named something unpronounceable by white people before that because there was no alphabet for them to decipher, only sounds made by humans they considered savage, and at one time named nothing at all, stood a house.

In the driveway a blue Oldsmobile was parked beside a van anyone could discern belonged to a housepainter due to the ladders roped to the top and the spilled red paint on the rear bumper from one time when the lid on a gallon bucket of “Strawberry Sizzle” for a customer societal diction would label as “upper middle class” and those who were nowhere close to that class would call “rich” who’d hired the painter to paint his or her bathroom was not securely shut and the can fell over and spilled, the paint leaking out the back doors to leave a line in the road that looked like, anyone of any class would agree, a mile-long trail of blood.

The house beneath the ridges was a small home, and would have been labeled poor but not poor to the extent of extreme poverty and thus largely forgotten in the political discourse and literature of the time—it was nowhere nearly extravagant enough for the elitists’ fancy nor sensationally poor enough to garner the attention of a noir audience or the interest of politicians—the roof filled with mismatched shingles, and its own paint beginning to flake from the asbestos siding as ten years had passed since the last paint job, carpenters’ and painters’ homes always in most need of carpentry work and painting, undue to laziness but to the lack of low wages and time.

The garage to the side of the driveway was out of plumb and leaned toward what once was pastureland and now was a manure-rich field of milkweed and wineberry and ironweed and foxtail and golden rod and Johnson grass and others, many of which bloomed beautiful flowers in the warmer months. Beneath the overgrowth, cattle trails were still cut into the ground from the hoof traffic of hundreds of thousands of pounds of cows over the years, all eventually taken to slaughter for their meat (If you walked the fields, not knowing how to walk a field with your legs loose, you’d know by the way the hidden trails would sprain your ankle). Near the garage, where the lawn met field, were three five-gallon buckets sitting in a circle of dirt, the soil so



contaminated over the years from kerosene and spilled mineral spirits it would be many more years before grass would have a chance to grow there and yet the cattle trails would still be cut into the field.

Inside that small house, the morning shone dimly through the windows, and in the shone dimness you could see as you limped in on your sprained ankle after the first time you walked through old pastureland, in the living room, a couch facing a bulky outdated television which was turned off, a woodburning stove, the coals barely aglow through the sooty glass doors, and a potpourri kettle atop it releasing the faint the scent of cinnamon and apples. To your right, beside the front door, three cardboard boxes spilled wreaths and wooden plaques. On the couch, two shoeboxes were opened, their contents, envelopes and envelopes of photographs scattered across the cushions. All revealing details on this Saturday morning, but on the table beside the couch a more meaningful detail which would likely go unnoticed. A pair of fingernail clippers made in China.

In the kitchen were more details holding meaning. An unfinished wreath on the table, a pair of opened scissors, a spool of floral wire and fake pine cones and flowers, a mug of coffee on the counter where it had set for two days, the undrank coffee long cold. If you limped over to the refrigerator and opened it, you'd see packed inside dishes of casseroles—broccoli, chicken, green bean—some labeled with women's first and last names, the labels faded from their dishwashers, and in the butter tray on a white bread and butter plate with blue filigree, a half-eaten piece of cornbread.

Three steps from the refrigerator was the bedroom where Leda slept. It was a small room painted off-white with two windows covered by sheer yellow curtains through which the old pastureland behind the house could be seen sheerly and yellow in the early morning. At the foot

of the bed was a cedar chest that had been dented and scratched over the years. Facing the bed was an antique vanity dresser that had belonged to Leda since she was a girl and was in need of refinishing, something her husband said he would get around to for years but hadn't. The dresser consisted of six drawers, three of which held Leda's clothing, her underwear, bras and socks, the other three holding her husband's boxers, socks, and painters' pants. A rounded mirror spotted from age spanned the dresser, and atop the dresser sat the jewelry box Leda's husband had bought her many years earlier at a small shop in Louisville when he was in the service, the ballerina inside long bent forward on her spring as if falling. Beside the jewelry box set Leda's small bottle of Trésor, which he had given her for Christmas every year she could remember and which was three quarters of the way gone even though she only wore it when she went to church, as well as a Mason jar filled with pennies and quarters and nickels and dimes and some peppermints.

In the bed lay Leda, a small, still mound beneath the sheets and bedspread, a white one with daisy chain patterns she'd bought to try to match the curtains but had since grown to dislike. The alarm clock on the nightstand opposite her side of the bed read 6:13 a.m. and it was sounding, Reer, Reer, Reer, as it had been for almost thirty minutes. The small mound which was Leda stirred. In the daze of sleep, she said aloud, "Honey, your alarm," before opening her eyes and rolling over to see his spot in the bed empty. The sight of her new reality woke her completely. She jerked upright against the headboard, her hair tangled and her face sleepy, and stared at the room as if she'd woken in a strange building, not the home she'd lived in for over thirty years and knew intimately but not as intimately as he, before she slapped the alarm clock quiet with her small hand.

She sat there, her short breaths the only noises in the house aside from the occasional snap and creak of the old foundation settling, no footsteps, no spoon clinking a bowl of oatmeal, no radio turned low as morning sportscasters argued about a football season, no shower running or commode flushing, no coffee maker gurgling or eggs over easy sizzling on the stove. Except when she was a young mother and breastfeeding her children, he had always woken before her and she had not known until very recently that the sounds which had often annoyed her as she tried to gain a few more minutes of sleep were actually comforting. All she wanted to do in the terrifying silence of this morning was go back to sleep, but she had to get up. She had to face the terrible chore ahead.

The house was cold, the poor fire she'd built burned out hours earlier. In her T-shirt, his T-shirt, which was covered with paint smears and speckles and the logo of a corporate company that sold paint all over the world where paint was used and reached down to her knees, she walked into the kitchen, hugging herself for warmth. It did not smell like her kitchen, but the unfamiliar food church people had brought her, more than she would be able to eat before it spoiled. Leda was aware that to bring food was an act of kindness and compassion, something she'd done any number of times for someone she knew who had lost a loved one, but she now wondered why anyone thought someone in her position, her prison, would be able to eat anything at a time like this. Even the glass of water she poured at the sink while looking out the window at the fall day—the reddened dogwood leaves, the yellowed maples, the closely mowed grass browning and the blue sky, My God he'd mowed that grass and looked at that blue sky, My God he couldn't wait to watch this year's football team—tasted differently than it had days earlier, like rusted metal that made her gag.

In the bathroom, she removed the T-shirt and dropped it to the linoleum she had not swept all week and on which her stray gray hairs and some of his shorter gray ones had fallen, and she pulled off her panties and turned on the shower. She stood naked on the bathroom mat, rubbing her shoulders, goosebumps from her feet to her neck on her cold, purplish skin, while the water warmed through the shower head her husband had installed years earlier, before the kids left home, an exciting event for the Brass family since they would no longer have to take only baths but could shower like wealthier people, or “like everybody else in the whole country” according to their teenage daughter, prone to pessimism at the time. Behind her on the sink were his frayed toothbrush and deodorant, the mouthwash they shared, his bottle of cologne. The crossword puzzle page of the local newspaper from four days ago was folded on the toilet tank, three words filled in with his handwriting:

c  
a  
p  
e  
l  
forlorn  
i  
monolithic  
i

Leda stepped into the cast iron tub in which the family had cleaned their bodies for decades, gleaming as white as she could ever get it by scrubbing once a week but showing age and rust around the drain nonetheless, another thing he said he’d fix but for which she held no resentment since he worked so hard, and she let the warm water fall against her face and run down her breasts and stomach and legs, the raised bumps on her skin retreating. Washing her body took great effort. She was more tired than she could remember ever being in her life, even when her son and daughter were infants, even during her mother’s final moments. She’d barely

slept in three days, and her exhaustion had culminated the night before in a frantic search for memories to work through the grief although it was too soon and would take as long as the grass to grow around the buckets outside until she no longer grieved with every breath she took.

For hours the night before, once her daughter and a few church women had left, once she had cried with Ms. Spalding on the phone and her husband's brother had brought home the work van without coming to her door, a choice she understood since the men in his family were too afraid to let anyone see them cry, Leda had paced the house, grasping for anything his, of him. She found the two-day-old work shirt in the hamper and she stripped off her own shirt and bra and put it on, smelling his cologne and the scent of his sweat and paint, feeling the dried paint through the fabric against her skin, itchy and uncomfortable at any other time but comforting in this time since each speckle, swipe and drip of paint, though unorganized in any way linear or circular and thus indecipherable but rather a jumble of fragmented colors that told of movement and choices, like time itself, his time, his life. She reached into the refrigerator for the cornbread he'd left in the butter tray after his last dinner. She placed her teeth where his had been and it tasted like nothing but her recipe, the cornbread stale. She looked at the photos framed on the wall behind the stove, the most recent one of her and her husband taken at their daughter's wedding almost twenty-years earlier.

Even then in his late forties, standing in his black suit outside the huge Baptist church next to Leda in her yellow dress, his tie by that point in the day already removed and folded in Leda's purse after he'd complained about it choking him all morning, Kalemar looked so much younger than he had now. Through the years his hair had thinned and grayed like Leda's own, the skin on his cheeks and neck giving in to gravity, face wrinkled and spotted from years of working in the sun with no protection despite her constant reminders to use sunblock lotion, but

his smile though stained from tobacco a constant, the same as she'd first seen it that night when they were only children but did not realize it. And there was Laura and James, sitting together on a sled on a stage backdropped by a snowy winter scene at Olan Mills, each of them under ten years old.

Those choice photos were not enough to piece together their lives together, so that's when she went into the dusty attic and carried down three boxes of photographs. Kalemar and her standing outside of her mother's house in sweaters and bell bottom jeans on a fall night when they must have parked down by the creek. Kalemar in his military uniform, hugging Leda outside some diner somewhere. Kalemar in his paint clothes nestled beside baby James as he slept swaddled on the couch. Kalemar and little toddler James standing beside the gate to the pasture, both of them smiling and James barely past Kalemar's knees and the cows grazing behind them. James holding Laura in a hospital chair, somebody reaching in off camera to hold up her little head. Kalemar lying in the grass with Laura and the two of them blowing a dandelion.

Kalemar, Laura, James, Kalemar, Laura, Leda, Kalemar, James, Laura, Leda—there were too many spaces, too many days Leda could not recount, and yet it seemed to her that time was always circling, the past events of life still happening somewhere around her, somehow inside of her. And now, with the myriad thoughts and feelings rushing through her, everything that had happened in the most recent past too shocking to sort out in that moment, she was desperate to remember, to bring him back to her, to conjure to life if not his presence, his memory, their memories. She could hardly remember everything that had happened hours, days ago, much less what had happened over the course of thirty-seven years of marriage.

People were now able to capture themselves online, to nearly chronicle their entire lives, the boyfriends and girlfriends, the nights with friends, road trips, vacations, their dogs and cats and hobbies, their disgust with politics, their disgust with a particular celebrity or particular stranger at the grocery store on a particular day, their stomachaches and headaches, their need for prayer, their need for a day off, the food they ate, the movies they saw, their ruined friendships, their favorite songs, their loved ones' deaths, their pets' deaths, their new shoes, their homes and cars and boats and marriages and the births of their children—everything a human being could experience if they so chose to display it—and when their children grew into adults they would be able to go back, even long after their parents' deaths, and view the digital stories of their parents' lives and know that one day their mother was frustrated or tired or sad or sick or filled with complete joy from being a mother or all three even though they themselves had no recollection of that moment in time. At her daughter's encouragement and with her assistance, once the cable company finally ran lines through the valley and charged everybody too much so its executives could get rich and Kalemar purchased a used computer and put it on a small desk in their daughter's old bedroom, Leda had set up her own online account. "Leda Brass," it read. The only one in the world, according to her daughter. But Leda felt that it was too late for her. She'd never returned to the site, which was and remained a blank silhouette above her name and a page filled with three years of happy birthday wishes from her twelve online friends, most of them church members at Pedigo Baptist and a couple from high school. All the years she would have liked to capture in photos and posts were beyond her reach even though they still existed, continuously playing out in her mind as incomplete and inaccessible recollections, the 56 years of her life seeming now to have passed as a day.

When she gave birth to her son, she'd begun a baby diary, planning to chronicle her son's entire childhood, but after a few weeks, due to the demands of being a mother, she'd quit, and all that remained in the album were his tiny newborn footprints inked onto a hospital certificate dated 1978 along with a snip of his brown curls in a plastic bag, where she'd placed it after his first haircut. When her daughter was born, she'd added to the album her footprints and a snip of her hair, blonde at the time before it changed. She wished she had done more. She wished she had written down their days together. She couldn't even remember where she had taken her children to get their haircuts.

That night Leda had not gone in search of the album somewhere deep in the cedar chest along with her wedding dress and garter belt, his army uniform, the Bible the church had gifted her after her mother's death, a piece of negligee she had bought for their 10th anniversary and had not worn since because it made her feel like a woman she was not. She'd kept pacing until each step on the bending old hardwood of the home seemed uphill and rote and the night wore on weary and dark and silent, the fingernail clippers where he sat each evening with his beautiful hands the long, slender digits and hefty palms, the boughs of vein coursing over sinew and bone and scars, the nights he sat on the couch, cleaning the paint from beneath his fingernails while the television played some show or the news and his beautiful hands with the strings cinched around the first two knuckles, his arm bobbing as the kite pulled him through the waves where he stopped and stood in his swimming trunks, his wet strong body, gazing at her sitting on the beach while the children built a sandcastle beside her and sand glistened on her sunburnt ankles and she spread her legs a little to let him see what he would get later and lifted her sunglasses and winked, those beautiful hands on her body, they felt like . . . they felt like more meaningless,



things that could have belonged to anyone, her memories of their time together a blur behind the image of him lying in the hospital bed.

She once again opened the newspaper she'd left on the kitchen table and turned past articles about the war in Syria and the memorial service in New York City, a local shooting on some city street, high school sports and the classifieds of things to buy, to the top of the obituaries page where his photo was printed in black and white, one their daughter had taken on her phone some months ago when she along with her husband had told them the news at dinner in a restaurant downtown, the photo snapped before Kalemar could give her a full smile and his left eye behind his glasses a little shut and his face showing the toll his work and time had taken on him, but the most recent photo they had of him, unlike the other people on the newspaper pages, who had somehow, it seemed, kept perfect and professional photographs waiting for just such a need as their deaths.

The obituary read: Kalemar Brass, age 55, loving father and husband, went to be with the Lord on Wednesday, September 4. He was a member of Pedigo Baptist Church. Preceded in death by parents, Kalemar and Helen Brass. Survived by wife, Leda Brass, son James Brass, daughter Laura Leitten, and brother Gordan Brass. The family will receive friends at Minor Funeral Home from 1-3 p.m. on Saturday, September 7.

His was the shortest obituary in the newspaper. No grandchildren to mention. No foreign travels or accomplishments in the business world. The last public words of a man's life. There was so much more to a man, to his life and theirs. The words printed on the thin sheet of paper were inadequate. Husband. Father. Loving. He was those things but the same could be said for most any decent man. He was also faithful in their marriage, which was a rare feat for any man

or woman over the course of almost four decades. Why hadn't Leda said more when she had spoken to the obituary editor on the phone? Who was Kalemar Brass?

Leda wrote, trying to fill the pages of a notebook with better words about him, about them. She pressed the pen hard against the paper. It trembled in her fingers, each letter wobbly but something she could feel, something that was tangible, something that was theirs.

August 19, 1974. Daddy long gone. Central High School. A hot night. 1st football game. 16 years old. Leda watched from the bleachers with a group of sophomore girls in their checkered culottes and red blouses, fanning themselves with Red Devils programs. They all had boyfriends except for Leda. She could not see his face inside the helmet, but there was something about #12 that made him stand out amongst the other football players on the field.

The way he passed the ball at the last minute, laying out his body for the defenders' crushing abuse and then getting up unhurt to face them all over again. He was graceful, fearless, strong. She opened the program as the home band played "Cum on Feel the Noise," her friends and the other students in the stands on both sides dancing and clapping and singing the lyrics while Leda sat there in her shell as always, the stands vibrating against her body, and feeling like she could not breathe. She opened the football program and it went somehow straight to number twelve's photo in the lineup. Quarterback, Kalemar Brass, a young dimpled smile in black and white. Suddenly, she was calm and breathing normally until she realized it.

After the loss and in the hazy light of the parking lot, while walking back with her friends to one of their mother's cars, she saw him once more, alone and carrying his red and white helmet with the cartoon devil imprinted on it, his uniform grass-stained on the knees and thighs. She did not stop to think about what she should do. Before she knew it, she had left her group of friends and was almost to him, as if some force magnetic or Godly or simply the bravery women

possess young and old had brought her there. He saw her and stopped. His short hair was sweaty, the eye black smeared down his cheeks. When he saw her approaching, he smiled the same smile she had seen in the program.

“I’m Leda,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “I’ve seen you.”

“You’ve seen me?”

“Uh huh.”

Leda stood there looking up at him, so much bigger than she, especially in his football pads, and she knew something she could not explain at sixteen years old, that they were supposed to be together. A horn honked and he turned his attention toward an old gray Dodge station wagon idling in a parking space, ladders roped to the top and a man behind the steering wheel, smoking a cigarette and staring at them. Kalemar’s face grew red with embarrassment. “That’s my pappy,” he said. “I’m sorry. I better get going.”

“Wait,” said Leda, “can I give you my phone number?”

“I ain’t got nothing to write it down with.”

“It’s easy,” she said and told him the number.

He repeated it aloud.

The horn honked again.

“I think I can remember,” he said.

“Call me.”

“I will.”

That night after her friend’s mother dropped off Leda at the bottom of her driveway, she walked up the hill toward the little house where she lived with her mother, unafraid of the dark

and night, the stirrings in the woods not great monsters or men coming to hurt her but harmless rabbits and raccoons, and when she saw her mother sitting on the love seat, crying again, about something she would not reveal to Leda, but something Leda was certain had to do with her father and his alcoholism, the order of protection her mother had signed once he pawned all her jewelry, including the wedding ring she had removed, Leda did not feel the all-consuming anxiety she usually felt. It had been replaced with hope that Kalemar Brass would call her and another hope that her life would be somehow as she had always imagined.

She lay on her pink sheets that night in her small room, the walls decorated with Beach Boys and The Monkees posters, photos of her and her girlfriends on the dresser she would still be using forty years later as a married woman and as a widow, though she did not know it, movie ticket stubs and the Christmas chorus program tucked atop the mirror along with a pair of red and white pompoms. She waited for the phone in the kitchen to ring and thought of him. They had not even touched but his touch filled her thoughts and she lay there touching herself, an act that reduced her anxiety, but instead of looking at the posters and imagining one of those handsome musicians' fingers on her body, tonight her touch was Kalemar's, his own fingers, that hand she'd seen gripped around the football and throwing it so beautifully through the air.

The phone did not ring. As the time passed and the night became dangerous once more, every sound outside her window a potential monster or man or her own daddy who'd once said in a drunken rage he would come home one night when everyone was sleeping and kill them all and then himself, those thoughts returned to where they always went, to anxiety, fear, her mother, her father, her sad, hopeless life.

The next morning, the news had spread throughout the school before the first bell rang. Bruce Brass had been killed in Vietnam, by friendly fire, the first former student causality of the

high school but not the last, and Kalemar's cousin. She saw Bruce's girlfriend, a senior cheerleader, at the lunch table, surrounded by all her crying friends and almost the entire football team and Kalemar there, too, leaning against the table in his faded London Fog jacket, looking so young and strong to Leda that he could do anything as he cried.

A week later, once the body was flown home, she went to the funeral with a few friends even though she did not know the deceased or his family or his girlfriend. It was held at Minor Funeral Home, a small brick building on Broadway, behind a McDonald's. She wore a black dress of her mother's. The line into the funeral parlor stretched around the building, people she attended school with, adults she'd never seen, all standing there in the hot evening, sweating and somber, only whispering, the smells of perfume and cologne mixing with the car exhaust blowing in off Broadway as birds sang from the trees.

When she made it into the funeral parlor, she saw from the back of the line Kalemar, in black slacks and a gray button down, each of which was a little too big for him because, as she would come to understand later, all of his clothes were hand-me-downs from his cousins, the clothes he was wearing that night once belonging to the dead young man in the closed casket. He was standing by one of the front pews, talking with his little brother, a smaller, stockier version of himself.

Leda stood in line, watching him, thinking only that she'd missed a chance with him, that due to the tragedy that had happened thousands of miles away because of things she did not understand she would now no longer get this guy whom her heart told her she was meant for. And then she grew mad at herself for being so selfish as the line slowly progressed toward the casket draped with an American flag, and a small photo of the deceased's Army portrait on a golden stand near his mother and father and sister and girlfriend worn with sadness, shaking

hands and hugging the visitors, crying and wiping their eyes with tissues. When Leda made it to the casket she shook the family members' hands and awkwardly voiced her condolences, and as she turned to exit the parlor, she realized she would have to walk directly past Kalemar.

She kept her little head down, but when she passed the pew, she felt a hand on her bare shoulder, a gentle touch, and she looked up to see him looking at her, trying to smile through his sadness. "I'm sorry for your loss," she said.

"I'll call you," he said.

And he did, that night, neither of them knowing the hour long conversation, Kalemar sharing with her his grief over the loss of his cousin, was the beginning of the two being a part of each other's lives, being each other's lives, for the next three decades.

My God, all the time, the seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years that had passed. Like a ruined reel of film now, only incomplete flashes of them together in her mind. The nights after the football games, the two of them kissing behind a car in the parking lot before his father came honking for him. The shared sundaes at Freezo. The dates to the movies. The sock hop dance. He was such a terrible dancer, but he could sure move his hips in the back of his father's station wagon which smelled like paint fumes and mineral spirits, smells she hated that night but which she came to love because it was his scent. Kalemar leaving for basic training and Leda's heart breaking. Those months he wrote to her, telling her how much he missed her, her smell, her kisses, and she wrote back to him telling him how she loved him so much. Then the relief that he was not getting sent to war, but instead to Fort Knox, and all along, Leda, unafraid and no longer stuck inside her shell, no longer feeling as if she did not deserve the goodness of life, finally finding a confidence in herself she had never known. Nobody, after all, thought it was odd that shy Leda, the one who looked at herself in the mirror and thought she was uglier

than any girl who'd ever lived, the one who touched herself at night and felt sinful, the one who thought she was destined to a boring life alone, was dating the star quarterback.

It occurred to her that she had never noticed him before that night at the football game, had never known he was the star quarterback, so stuck inside her shell, and due to his absence, she began to realize she had lied to herself. Though she loved him, she could have loved herself all along and saved herself so much anxiety. Her other love was art class. She found joy in forming clay into pottery, sketching bowls of fruit and landscapes, making what the teacher called African masks out of plaster. She knew nothing of college or how to get there but she decided, with Kalemar states away, doing something similar, along with her newfound confidence in herself that she would go to college. Though she had never been outside of the state, she wanted to go to California where The Beach Boys sang of surfing and beautiful cars and she decided she would find a way to make it happen.

But he drove down from Kentucky monthly in the Ford Custom he was so proud of, the first car he'd ever owned, his military pay the only he'd ever been able to keep for himself without his father taking it. Those reunions when he was on leave, those few days they spent together, Leda now seventeen, about to turn eighteen, and feeling so good about herself combined with her mother, still strict with curfew, were filled with a frantic passion that made them mine the most out of each second they spent together before Kalemar had to drop her off at home and then spend the night at his parents' trailer on the pike, which he hated. She told him her plans to go to California and he said he'd always wanted to see the Pacific Ocean.

And then, during her senior year, after one of those nights in his car, parked beside a bridge over Bull Run Creek, the farthest thing from an ocean, she realized she was pregnant. There were no tests for her to purchase from the drugstore in those days, but as her body changed

it soon became apparent. She did not tell him in her letters or over the phone or when he drove down in his Ford Custom and they once again parked beside Bull Run Creek. She did not tell him because by then, since she was dating Kalemar, she was friends with some of the senior girls and there were rumors that Bruce Brass wasn't drafted into the Army at all but had chosen to go to war because his own girlfriend, who'd cried herself sick at his funeral, was pregnant and he wanted to avoid the responsibility of being a father. His girlfriend had given birth six months after his death.

Now Leda was caught once again in a place that made her feel dependent on Kalemar for her own security. If she told him, would he, too, sign up for deployment? The fear of being a father worse than going to war. And then what, Leda a single mother in 1974? She had no one to care for her. She had no chance at finding a good job.

She quit eating to hide the pregnancy. She wrote to him, changing her floating words of love and California to suggestions that she could not wait to be his bride, telling him how he had to save her from her own father, who threatened her, playing up the danger, since he was now long gone from their lives, living, last she heard in Alabama with some woman she would never meet, trying to make Kalemar feel alarmed enough to know she meant she wanted him to ask her to marry him.

He did one weekend in April. Though she knew what he had planned, she did not act like it when he took her to an expensive Italian restaurant and sweated the entire time and constantly checked the pocket of his blue and red checkered pants. Afterward, he drove her to Norris Dam and there on a night when the river ran out of the dam and the turbines churned to bring electricity to the valleys and the lake on the other side was still and the stars shined as brightly in the water as they did in the sky, he knelt and pulled out a small diamond ring she wore to this



day, which cost him his month's pay and working in the hayfields and was now barely worth the price of their monthly mortgage.

She did not gloat over her ring or find herself in class looking at it as she spun it around her finger. She felt disappointed in herself. Her imagined future as an artist which had been barely visible was now impossible, her only concern finding the right time to finally tell him she was pregnant and hoping the doctor would not be able to pinpoint exactly when the child was conceived—if her child were a girl, she would name her Laura; if he were a boy, she would name him James. Then she had a miscarriage. It was a Thursday afternoon while she sat in math class. She felt a pain in her lower abdomen. She went to the bathroom. Blood.

She told no one. She graduated high school. She and Kalemar married at her mother's church, Pedigo Baptist, the church she had attended since she was a child, and even before, when she was growing in her mother's womb. And then the years of scrambling to raise children, those flashes of moments together, aging through their mid-twenties, their thirties, the arguments and apologies, the worries but him a constant, and everything trying to fall apart as they held it together, imperfectly stitched but unbroken. So quickly it had all gone that Leda, no matter how hard she tried, could not grasp the particulars. She'd never told Kalemar about the first James, and as the raw throat of morning yawned over the ridges, Leda had written on the page only "Kale, I'm sorry," the rest of the paper splotted with her tears, and she'd thrown the notebook in the stove where it had burned, the same as she'd burned out of guilt the letters they'd written one another during his time in the service, telling him later, one Valentine's Day after they were married and he wanted to reminisce, that they had somehow disappeared.

Leda did not know how long she had stood in the shower, mindlessly washing herself though the soap had long since rinsed out of the cloth, standing there as the water ran over her,

until it became cold due to the small water heater he was constantly replacing, complaining each time about the way things were no longer made to last because companies wanted to get rich off poor folks, which they did and do. Usually, she would hurry with her showers on Sunday mornings, so as not to use all the hot water, though when she had he had never complained, just said something about the cold water and how it made him feel spry. She stepped out of the bathtub and dried off with an old towel she must have had since the kids still lived in the house, the color it once was long bleached away. She went into the bedroom, noticing again the glaring absence of him, his place not even disturbed, the alarm clock now reading 6:50 a.m.

She put on a bra and her underwear and stood before the mirror, brushing her hair, every wet tangle a seeming battle with her tired muscles. She did not contemplate her appearance at age 56 versus the way she looked when she was younger, when she was a bride to be, when she was newly married, when she was pregnant, when she was no longer pregnant, the changing of her body over the decades, but she did feel an overwhelming weight of time on her shoulders more realistically than ever before, like she finally understood the immense toll it took on the body, on the mind, on a life.

She would not put on makeup or perfume or jewelry. She would not dry her hair. Flattened and wet, parted in the middle in a way that had once made her look young to him, the top of her head where he had placed his big hand when they made love, his other cupping her back, his callouses against her skin, she opened the small cedar lined closet, the sweet scent of the wood long gone, and stood before her meager wardrobe almost unable to reach inside and pull out the black dress she only wore to occasions such as this and, surprisingly, one she never even contemplated wearing to her husband's funeral.

There was a deodorant stain on one sleeve and she did not care, did not think about whose funeral she wore the dress to last and that she must not have washed it. It smelled only like clothes that had hung in the closet too long. She laid it on the bed and looked at it. Somehow she had to get her body inside of the dress. Somehow she had to then put on shoes and somehow she had to then move her body where it had to go that day and somehow she had to speak to others who would come to see her while behind her he would lay dead but looking alive, the man healthy except for high blood pressure and a hemorrhoid he'd planned to get removed, too healthy to be lying there looking, except for that heaviness in the face and the lack of firmness around the nostrils, that he was sleeping. How had she not known that since the day she'd met him at his cousin's funeral all those years ago, she had been traveling to this moment?

She stood there for some time in her mournful paralysis when she heard the front door open and then slow footsteps, a woman's heels, the steps of a woman, the steps of a girl who knew full well how to run through a pasture and the pace of which Leda knew intimately, through the living room and into the kitchen, where they paused for a moment, before continuing toward her room. She did not turn to see who had arrived. Instead, when she felt the firm belly pressing into her back, when she felt her daughter's arms grasping her waist, and heard her difficult breathing against her back, smelled her soap and perfume, and reached down with her hands to hold those cold hands as her daughter said, "Oh, Mama," feeling suddenly now a reserve of strength coming to her like it can only from a mother, she said, "I know, honey. You just try to stay as calm as you can today. For the little one."

Leda turned and hugged her daughter as she leaned in against her shoulder and sniffled. Then she stepped back and looked at her, wearing a black dress and black shoes, some makeup to hide the acne the pregnancy had caused, and her beautiful round belly, where inside nestled a

great blessing, a great gift from God, from whom all blessings come, a baby 8 months along, the baby Kalemar had been so excited to meet, the proud grandfather, always talking about the coming years, how for so long he had wanted to be a grandfather who could spoil his grandbaby, how joyous he had seemed those months after Laura, that Sunday with her husband, had invited them out to lunch and there, while Kalemar was chewing his food told them, “Mama and Daddy, we’re pregnant!” Kalemar had nearly choked on his fried chicken and then Laura had snapped the photo after his eyes quit watering from the choking or the joy or both.

“Oh, Mama,” she said again, looking at Leda with her beautiful young eyes, eyes Leda recognized as her own.

She also recognized her daughter’s inability to say what was unable to say. “He’s in a better place,” she said and she believed what she’d said wholeheartedly though she could not bring herself to imagine what that place looked like nor what he was doing there except that he was there and according to the hundreds of sermons she’d heard and the dozens of funerals she’d attended and the scripture she’d read, he now knew a joy that she had no way of comprehending on this earth and regardless that he would miss what seemed like the greatest joys of living, he was experiencing the joyousness they all would experience some day and no matter how long it was before they met again the time on earth meant nothing compared to eternity. Yet even in her firm knowing, she could not help but wish he had been able to see his grandchild born, had been able to live on earth a while longer, even though, in the long run, the time here did not matter, according to the pastors, except to be good to other human beings.

Maybe it did not matter but it sure hurt.

Laura walked into the kitchen, dabbing the corners of her eyes with tissue she had carried into the house while Leda, now strong enough, got dressed. They did not speak as they exited the

house together, the sun risen above the ridges, shining down on the valley and the autumn leaves, the road on which twenty or thirty cars might pass before tomorrow, the birds flying, another day on earth that seemed anything like another day to Leda. But she found comfort in knowing, as she walked with her daughter to her and her husband's car, idling behind the work van and her blue Buick, that other people, thousands, perhaps millions, were also grieving on earth that day, miles down the road, in other states and countries, and throughout all of time women had taken the same steps she took that day, that being human and woman meant that you would have to grieve the losses of those you loved and she was no exception, nothing special because of it.

Laura slid into the passenger side beside Greg, who sat still with his hands on the steering wheel, and Leda climbed into the back. Nobody said anything as Greg drove out of the valley, toward Minor Funeral Home, the same building it had begun in all those years ago.

Everything, by then, had been planned. The presiding pastor. The music. The coffin. The burial spot, beside his parents in the cemetery in Raccoon Valley. All Leda had to do, she told herself, was stand there for an hour and shake hands. She could cry but she would not let herself break down, not as he lay there, not to dishonor him and not to upset her pregnant daughter who was at the age where a pregnancy could be risky. She would be strong and then she would sit through the sermon and then she would come home and then the next day they would bury him and then she could do the work of getting used to her new life with the hope of seeing him again someday, Kalemar Brass, the first person to greet her when she passed onto the next life. At least she could try to convince herself of those things. At the moment, she only felt his absence and could not, no matter how she tried, think of him as existing in any realm, worldly or heavenly. "These two days will be the longest of my life," said Laura.

"You just wait until you go into labor," said Leda, trying to give her daughter strength.

“Oh, Mama,” said Laura.

“I know, honey,” she said, despite the fact that she felt she knew less now than she’d ever known.

For Leda, the day that seemed the longest of her life had happened three days prior, when she received a phone call. She was at the kitchen counter, snipping wire with scissors and looking forward to seeing Betty in three days when the phone rang and a voice on the other end, a young woman’s she did not recognize, told her she was a nurse at the Methodist Hospital on the west side of town and her husband had had an accident and had been admitted. “Is he okay?” Leda had asked like anyone would.

“I don’t have all of the details, ma’am, but you should come to the hospital immediately.”

As she dropped what she was doing and made the drive to the hospital, she felt angry at him, certain that he had hurt himself at work, that he hadn’t listened to her all those years about getting a job that was easier on his body, Kalemar always telling her that he was tougher than most men half his age even though they both knew that was not true. Or maybe, she thought, it was somehow the hemorrhoid. Could they burst? Perhaps even a fender bender and neck pain and they had made him go to the hospital. She was not concerned that he had not called him herself. He hated having a cell phone.

She hadn’t called Laura since she did not want to alarm her in her condition, and she’d driven to the Methodist Hospital in her smoking blue Buick alone, praying to God that whatever injury her husband had suffered he would heal him and quickly. She worried most about the bills they’d be unable to pay if he could not work and, depending on his injury, she’d have to convince him to follow the doctor’s orders and listen to him whine for days or weeks until he could go back to work, the man never able to rest. When she arrived at the hospital and told one

of the ER receptionists her name and that she'd received a phone call, the woman told her to wait by the doors and someone would be with her. Leda stood there, holding her purse and scratching the dried glue off her thumb and watching through the glass as doctors and nurses passed in the hallway, imagining, once someone greeted her, finding Kalemarr in some room aggravated about missing work and having to try to calm him down.

Soon, she saw striding down the long corridor a tall serious man with a shaved head, carrying a clipboard and wearing a doctor's coat over his suit and purple tie. He pushed a button on the wall and the doors opened. "Mrs. Brass?" he said.

"Yes," said Leda.

He clutched the clipboard to his chest and bowed slightly. He told her his name and that he was a doctor and asked her to come with him. She followed the doctor down the hallway, past rooms with patients in beds, a little boy breathing mist through a device that looked like a pipe, a woman having her foot examined, others just lying there still and alone, staring at the white lights above. Once the doctor stepped into another hallway that seemed to Leda was not the same part of the hospital and once he stopped at a small room with a snack machine and one row of chairs and a Common English Bible on the table, and asked her to please have a seat and shut the door, Leda felt her heart race and all the muscles in her body on the verge of shaking if she did not hold them back to the point she would collapse, the feeling of knowing washing over her before her mind could make it into words.

He shut the door behind them and motioned to one of the chairs. She sat and trembled and hoped. He sat opposite of her and looked at her in a way that told her everything before he even spoke, his eyes focused on hers but the detachment of a man who'd experienced this very

scenario over and over again apparent to Leda, who had never been in this situation. “Your husband has died. I am very sorry.”

Leda gripped the arms of the chair and dug her fingernails into the fabric and she breathed and breathed until the breaths exploded into deep, wailing sobs and the doctor did not reach out to her or try to console her in any way. He let her cry for almost a minute in the silent room. Then she looked at him with her mouth hanging uncontrollably open and her lips trembling and the tears falling down her red face and snot on her nose and asked him as slobber and tears and snot stretched between her lips, what on earth had happened to her husband.

“He fell from a ladder,” said the doctor.

He gave her a moment to cry some more, Leda burying her face in her hands, and when she looked at him again, nearly heaving for breaths, he summarized to her, while looking at his clipboard, the sequence of events that had led to her Kalemar’s death:

Paramedics were called to a private residence shortly after noon. They found her husband unresponsive at the foot of a ladder. The owner of the property was in the process of trying to resuscitate him. The paramedics transported him to the hospital. They arrived at 12:24 p.m. on this date. The doctor pronounced her husband dead at 12:33 p.m. on this date. Only an autopsy, if she so chose to have one conducted, would reveal the exact cause of death. Based on the doctor’s knowledge and experience and his preliminary physical examination of the body, her husband’s impact with the ground had caused a cervical fracture or, in layman’s terms, “a broken neck.”

After relating the details, the doctor once again said he was very sorry. He stood and opened the door. An older man in a suit and glasses waited in the hallway. The doctor led him inside the room and introduced him as the hospital chaplain. The doctor asked Leda if she had any further questions for him before he resumed his duties, and all she could think about was



who had found her husband, who was the person who had tried to resuscitate him, the hands who had touched him during his last breaths, and she felt jealous toward that person for being able to touch him and she felt appreciation for that person for trying to help him. It was rare for Kalemari to ever tell her where he was working, but over the years she had come to remember some of his repeat customers' last names. Some, very few, sent him home with cookies and an extra hundred dollars for a bonus. "Where was he working," she said.

The doctor told her the hospital would provide her with all the information.

The chaplain sat down beside Leda as she sat there wiping her eyes and staring at the Bible on the table and feeling like this moment she was stuck inside was not real, that somehow she was not supposed to be in this hospital, receiving the news that her husband was dead. The chaplain leaned forward, his tie hanging between his knees, and put a hand on Leda's back. "I know this is a very difficult time," he said. "May I ask if you are a person of faith?"

"I'm a Christian," said Leda.

"May I pray?"

"Yes," she said.

The chaplain bowed his head and prayed. Leda did not close her eyes during the prayer. The entire time the chaplain spoke, she sat there staring at the floor but seeing nothing and thinking only about her son and daughter, and wondering how she was supposed to go about telling them their father had died. Laura was so excited about giving him a grandchild. James was finally stopping by the house from time to time to help him a little in the yard, the two of them beginning to rebuild their relationship but so much work left undone. When the chaplain had finished his prayer, Leda having heard not a word of it said, "Amen."

The chaplain asked Leda if she wished to view the body. She did and she didn't. She knew she had to, but she also knew that doing so would mean there was no way to avoid facing his death. For now, sitting in that small room, it felt as if there was almost a chance that he had not died, that if she just left the hospital and went home, pretending the events of the day had never transpired, in a few hours she would hear his work van crunching into the driveway, the engine shutting off, his door closing and the front door to the house opening, the smell of paint fumes and mineral spirits filling the kitchen as he walked in to hug her while she worked on her wreaths.

She slowly nodded and the two of them stood and the chaplain led her out of the room and down the hallway. They turned a corner and standing outside of a room was a young blonde haired nurse holding a small white bag. The chaplain stopped and motioned to the room and said to Leda, "He is in here."

The nurse said she was sorry for Leda's loss and handed her the bag. The chaplain opened the door. Leda saw what looked like a normal hospital room with a window giving view to the spring day outside where men walked the scaffolding of a building in the process of construction. A painting of Christ holding a child wrapped in a blanket hung on the wall. The medical equipment surrounding the bed was turned off, and on the bed, in the light shining in from the afternoon, lay Kalemar, covered to his bare chest with a white sheet. His eyes were closed and aside from the heaviness of death in his face, he looked like he was sleeping calmly although he could never sleep without snoring.

Leda took short steps toward the bed as if deliberately prolonging the moment but being pushed toward the body by unseen hands. She wanted to fall atop him and embrace him and she wanted to run as fast as he could out of the hospital. She paused by the bed and looked down at

him. Though he was the man she'd spent nearly all of her life with he now seemed somehow in death a stranger, someone she had never known but someone she had known better than anyone on earth. That is until she finally leaned down over him and put her hands on his shoulders and her face against his, the stubble scratching her cheek, and she searched his neck for his familiar smells, of cologne and paint and mineral spirits, but she could smell nothing but the chemical the nurses had used to clean his body. She felt nothing but overwhelming sadness. She wept in his unhearing ear and whispered to him in between her soft cries, "Oh, Kalemar, why?" to which she received no answer except a faint ticking she thought at first was coming from Kalemar's body, but then realized it was coming from the bag the nurse had handed her. She opened it and looked inside to see his wallet and wristwatch, the face covered in paint, obscuring the second hand as it ticked across the dial.

It was late afternoon by the time Leda finished speaking with a woman who was a hospital administrator and helped her sign papers and arrange for Kalemar's body to be picked up by the funeral home of her choice. Leda called Laura and asked her to come to the hospital and pick her up, telling Laura she had come to visit a friend from church and was having car trouble. She hated the lie as she stood outside the main hospital entrance, waiting for her daughter and watching people come and go in the warm day, some leaving with patients still dressed in hospital gowns, but she wanted Laura at a hospital when she told her the news because she knew how such a shock could potentially cause her to go into labor or hurt the baby.

When Laura arrived, walking up the sidewalk with her big belly pulling her forward, Leda did not have to explain anything. Laura knew, from the look on her mother's face, that something was terribly wrong. She suddenly stood upright and came running to her mother who

was about to collapse from her sadness and anxiety. Laura grabbed her and helped her stand. “Is it daddy?” she’d said.

“He’s gone, baby.”

Laura had not gone into labor as Leda had worried. Instead, she had marched into the hospital to the information desk with Leda following and demanded to speak to the administrator. When the woman met them in the lobby, Laura had first argued with her about something pertaining to hospital protocol, telling the woman she held a high position in a hospital herself, and then she had demanded to see her father’s body, a demand that was not granted due to the fact it had already been transported to the funeral home. It was all a blur to Leda, but she did not try to calm her daughter as she recognized her anger was what sustained her in this moment, keeping her from breaking, and it would eventually subside into anguish with which she could cope.

Now, as her son-in-law drove her toward the funeral home, Leda was not as concerned about Laura as she was with her son. When the two of them, after leaving the hospital, had driven to the Dollar General store where he worked and found him there in the personal hygiene aisle, stocking a shelf with 3 oz. travel size tubes of toothpaste and deodorant, he had looked at them and then looked away and asked them to please leave or he might get fired. Leda had not spoken to him in three days except to leave a message on his cellphone, telling him how much she loved him and the time and date of his father’s funeral.

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Minor Funeral Home was located on Broadway, the thoroughfare which connected the city to the outlying communities of blue collar neighborhoods and subdivisions, some old and grand and some newly built with prefabricated materials, as well as the rural areas in the surrounding foothills of the Appalachian Mountains that consisted of forest and creek and pastureland and homes and caving barns and trailer parks and gas stations and an abundance of churches and a few Wal-Marts and Dollar General stores. Now a highway, Broadway was first a path traversed by animals native to the region and the people who hunted them. Later it became a wagon trail when another people arrived to hunt the animals and the people who had first hunted the animals. Eventually, as is the history with most all of best paths in the industrialized world, it became paved with concrete.

Over the years, millions upon millions of people of which millions upon millions of those never had their names recorded in historical documents, had traversed the path on foot and horseback and carriage and in their automobiles progressing in technological features for various purposes ranging from the smallest of errands, such as to the drugstore for cold medicine, to the most tragic of life events which required them to arrive somewhere and face some horror, such as Minor Funeral home. Many people had also been killed on that stretch of pavement over the years due to any number of ways such as war—arrowheads and musket balls had been unearthed along the stretch of road for decades, until all the ground was paved over—and accidental car wrecks and premeditated murders and simply bad luck on a sunny day when a heart stopped beating.

Minor Funeral home, a brick single-story looking from above like an H, was one of the oldest buildings on the highway that still functioned according to its builders' original intent and since 1923 had been the setting of thousands upon thousands of embalmings and funerals. When

it was first built, the highway was small and lightly traversed and there were no other buildings blocking the view of the little creek shaded by weeping willows that wound through the landscape, a peaceful tableau for the funeral goers, one some commented looked like the River Jordan itself. Now, however, across the street was a McDonalds spewing grease fumes from its vents as it had been for decades through various renovations, and beyond, blocking view of the small stream, a strip mall that housed among others a store called Baby Boutique, a consignment shop for infants. Before that, the space had been home to a beauty salon and a check advance business and various other enterprises which had failed. Very few funeral goers ever commented on the irony of a funeral home overlooking a shop for babies and a McDonalds occupying the space in between, because they were so distraught to be there in the first place.

On this cloudless day in time, warm afternoon temperatures left funeral goers sweating before they reached the doors of the funeral home, men in suits both fine and cheap and women in dresses the same, others (mostly young people) underdressed for such an important occasion, and wearing jeans and collared shirts untucked, funerals were being held in two of the four funeral parlors. One was for a woman who had died at the age of 93. The other was for a man who had died at the age of 59.

The woman's name was Susan Cardwell, her picture and obituary just beneath the man's in that week's newspaper. Known as "Susie" to her friends, she had died "peacefully in her home, surrounded by her children and grandchildren," from an undisclosed illness. She had had a "long career as a school teacher" at a high school just miles from the funeral home, where she had "touched many lives," teaching a love she pursued after retirement as a volunteer at a homeless shelter, helping those seeking their GEDs study for the test. In lieu of flowers, the family asked that donations be made to the homeless shelter. It was likely because of her career,

the number of people with whom she had come in contact during her long life, as well as her large extended family that the parking lot of Minor Funeral home was especially crowded on that Tuesday, a line of people stretching from the doors to Parlor A, in which she lay interned, all the way around the building, past Parlor D and almost to the line of traffic waiting in the McDonald's drive-thru. The other doors, which led to Parlor B, and the parlor in which Kalemar Brass' body lay, had no line. Since the visitation had begun, primarily married couples, some old and some young, had arrived sporadically and entered the parlor, the men most often holding the door for their wives, an offer their wives did not decline.

Leda Brass and her daughter who was eight months pregnant had stood before the casket now for almost an hour, after her daughter had demanded to spend some time alone looking at her father's body, a demand to which Leda had acquiesced even as she stood outside the parlor doors, waiting for any sound that might signal Laura was going into labor. Laura needed from time to time to sit down beside her husband on the front pew and rest, holding her big belly with each hand, but when new visitors stepped through the doors at the rear of the parlor and made their way down the aisle, Laura would rise to stand beside her mother.

Leda had not left the casket adorned with the few bouquets of flowers friends and relatives had sent to the funeral home, and one basket of lilies, Leda would learn later, sent by the woman and her husband who owned the home Kalemar had last painted, since they arrived that morning and the funeral director, a tall man in his mid-forties who never seemed to blink, had made sure everything was to her liking. The coffin was the same "Knight silver" one with a white interior they had selected for just over \$1000 when the funeral director showed them a catalogue two days earlier at his desk. Kalemar's suit was the one Leda had brought to the funeral home on that same day after ironing it for much longer than necessary due to the fact that

she kept crying on it. The pastor had already arrived, offering his assistance with anything the family needed, and he now waited near the rear of the parlor in his wheelchair, quietly speaking to churchgoers once they had made their trip to the casket. The music was playing softly on the speakers, a CD with acoustic gospel hymns the funeral director had provided, and at this point in the day it had started over and was now playing, "In the Garden."

What Leda had been most concerned about, before she even saw Kalemar lying there with his hands folded across his chest and the look of death heavier on his face each day, was that all the paint had been cleaned from his hands and fingernails since he was always so careful to do so himself, never wanting a hint of paint on his skin when he went to church or was out in public when not working, as if he were somehow embarrassed by his trade although he never said as much. In fact, when she and her daughter had met with the funeral director, her husband's body lying in some room in the basement, too far along in the process of burial preparations to be viewed, she had told the unblinking funeral director more times than necessary that Kalemar would want the paint off of his hands and he usually used kerosene, to which the funeral director had assured her his undertaker had the proper cleaning agents to remove paint of any kind.

Now as she stood there in her black dress, exhausted and weak, having to sometimes lean against the casket, placing her hand on the cold metal where beneath lay his cold legs that had climbed ladder after ladder, that had chased his children around, that had danced with her and carried her over the threshold of the small house they rented, she only wanted the entire thing to be over, for everyone to leave, so she could spend some last moments with Kalemar, telling him something she needed to tell him, but even as his body lay behind her, she felt his absence more strongly, as if with each he second he traveled farther and father away to such a distance from



her she could in no way believe that he was anywhere despite her beliefs to the contrary and therefore could not hear what she might tell him anyway.

When other people she knew had died, friends, her mother even, she was able to imagine them smiling and happy and worshipping free of their sickness and pain in heaven with its streets of gold and golden mansions gleaming in the bright glory of God and Christ on his throne. With Kalemar, though, she could see him as nothing more than the corpse in the casket, no trace of his life left anywhere except inside her, and like the night before, she wished again to somehow grasp him, his spirit, his essence. Even her pregnant daughter standing there beside her, a combination of Kalemar and Leda, did nothing to help her feel Kalelmar's presence.

When she shook the hands and hugged the shoulders of the kind people who came to visit her, old friends of hers and Kalemar's, current church members and former church members, friends of her daughter and son-in-law's, she felt in some ways like a fraud. This moment, this ritual, seemed to her more like an act, Leda the main lead now that time had circled back to this setting, instead of the extra she was when she was a girl standing in this same funeral home in another room, there not to mourn but to gain something for herself, and now that she knew she was expected to gain something for herself she once again felt as selfish and hopeless as she had that day 40 years ago.

On top of that, she could not help but worry about James. Laura had called his phone three times since they'd arrived only to get his voicemail. What Leda worried about most was that Kalemar's death would set James back on his path to darkness, that he would begin using drugs again and die an early death as she'd always feared, and she would continue to blame herself for the miscarriage all those years ago and deep inside feel that James' life was God's instrument of punishment for her sins even though she knew she was supposed to forget those

things which were behind and reach unto those which were before, an act she had not been able to accomplish her entire life and certainly could not accomplish now. She prayed constantly that he would come to his Daddy's funeral.

Because of these things, Leda Brass could find no peace that day, which should come as no surprise, and though she appeared to the onlookers scattered about the pews, waiting for the funeral service, as the typical woman in mourning with her pallid skin and puffy eyes, her trembling hands fidgeting with a ball of tissue, and her inability to quite focus her eyes on any one face or any one spot in the room or to speak very well, there was much more beneath the surface of her outward appearance, much more than mourning on her mind, even though Leda herself could not have articulated exactly what that was.

Kalemar's brother, on the other hand, a man nicknamed Grease for so long it was the only name people called him even at this funeral, had sat on the front pew with his head bowed most of the day, wearing a new shirt and slacks he had purchased from JC Penny's, a plastic sticker on the slacks, which no one had noticed and which Kalemar, if he were able to see the proceedings of the day would have laughed about, telling the waist size (42) and length (29), thought of only one thing, which he had voiced over and over to Leda beginning when he first called her to give her more details about Kalemar's death and all morning, before the visitors began to arrive at the funeral home. When Leda had finally called him the day of Kalemar's death and told him, "I don't know how to say this except to say it, Grease: Kalemar had an accident. He died," and Grease had sat silently on the phone for some time until he could speak, he had asked for the address of the home where Kalemar had been working. Leda provided the address and that evening Grease had had a neighbor drive him to the residence in order to retrieve the work van and tools. The house, he had told Leda, was a large one overlooking a lake.

Kalemar had been on a thirty-foot ladder, painting a third-story window when he fell. There was no way to know how or why he fell. One of the homeowner's, a retired woman who happened to be home that day, had heard a loud thump and looked out to see him lying in the grass on his back. None of the details Grease gave Leda helped provide her a clearer picture of the events surrounding her husband's death. She could have imagined as much. But what that knowledge had done was make her brother-in-law feel an immense guilt for not being there with his brother. "I should've been the one up there on that ladder," he kept saying, and it was unclear if he meant he should have been the one who died or if he should have been the one on the ladder because he would not have fallen.

Sitting on the front pew, while this thought tormented him, he was also consumed with sadness. He and Kalemar were not only brothers but best friends, due in part to the abuse they suffered from their own father as children which nobody else could fully understand and also because they were brothers who had spent their entire lives confiding in one another about their worries and fears, the mistakes they had made. Without Kalemar, he would have nobody as his wife had left him long ago and his children were living in other states, none of them showing at the funeral although he had called them all to let them know his brother had passed, each phone call disappointingly quick and lacking in any kind of comfort Grease was seeking.

It wasn't until a man Leda knew as Peanut Eelie made his way into the parlor and down the purple carpeted aisle that Kalemar's brother rose from his seat and joined Leda and Laura at the casket. Standing there stiff and rigid with his chest puffed up, the sticker on his pants still unnoticed, and trying obviously to compensate for the immense emotion he felt, he was the last to shake Peanut's hand. "I'm sorry, Grease," said Peanut. "He was a good man."

“The best I ever knowed,” said Grease, tensing the muscles in his face to hide the fact that he might cry.

“He sure was a hard worker too,” said Peanut. “I remember seeing you and him out there in Daddy’s fields when y’all were just little. It’s a shame the way they worked us when we was kids.”

Grease jerked his head toward Kalemar, lying in his bed of white with his eyes sewn shut, as if involuntary, as if he wanted to gauge his brother’s reaction to Peanut’s comment before remembering that he was dead. One observing Grease’s demeanor would not be certain if he had grown suddenly mad or if he was about to laugh. The answer was both. “He, he, he,” said Grease.

That day in addition to Peanut Eelie’s signature, written as his birth name and not “Peanut,” thirty-three visitors signed their names in the guestbook, which Leda would place in the cedar chest at the foot of her bed and never again open. If she had, she would have seen the people’s names, all of whom she knew to some extent, but she would not have been able to recount the events of the day for they would exist in her mind like the paint on her husband’s work clothes, the sensations, the smells and sounds of their voices, the softness or hardness of their handshakes and hugs, never recorded in her mind so that her recollection of events would include a blur of faces and a collage of words that sounded, over the course of two hours, something like Oh, Leda, I’m so sorry We’re so sorry, Leda Thank y’all for the food It was the least we could do I’m sorry, Leda We sure will miss him We’ll be praying for you Thank y’all for coming and for the food I love you Aren’t you missing the flea market It wouldn’t feel right being there without you Honey, I’m so sorry If there’s anything I can do please don’t hesitate Thank you for your casserole I’ll make you all the casseroles you want You just call me if there’s

anything I can do Anything, sister We're here for you We both loved him so much Thank you and thank you for the casserole You're welcome I just live up the road, you know If there's anything I can do to help you, please let me know I will I didn't hardly recognize y'all I'm so sorry Thank you My condolences, Leda Thank you I'm so sorry, Leda Thank y'all for coming I remember when he was just a little old thing He's with his mama and daddy now I was a friend of Kalemar's. I do carpentry work I'm sorry for your loss, ma'am Thank you I'm sorry, Leda Thank you I'm sorry, Leda Thank you I'm sorry, Leda Where did you come from Drove down from Maryland Do you have a place to stay I got Lynn and me a hotel room I'm so sorry, Leda I ain't seen him since I was a boy but I remember when y'all came up to Maryland Those were good times They sure were I'm sorry, Leda Thank you I'm sorry, Leda Thank you Have you seen James, baby No I haven't Have you seen James, baby No I haven't Have you—No, Mama.

Though the scheduled visitation times for both of the deceased had come to an end, in Parlor A, where Ms. Cardwell lay, the line still stretched out the door and her closest family members, six in total, still stood at the casket welcoming visitors with a cheerfulness and exuberance that was not seen or felt in Parlor B. It was likely because the woman had died at an old age and expectantly, which most often makes it easier for us to cope with a death since that person has had the chance to live what we would deem a full life. But what nobody who attended Ms. Cardwell's funeral knew, including her closest kin, was that she herself, even at 92, had feared death as much as someone half her age. One may think that a man or woman of her age would have found peace in death, in the thought that he or she had been blessed with a long life, but as with all human beings at any age, Ms. Cardwell felt regret and guilt, stemming from the very thing that made her funeral seem grand—for her entire life she had immersed herself in her work and had not gone in search of love because the partner she desired was one she had been

told was sinful, a woman—and in her last hours, the pneumonia too much for her old body to fight, she had hated herself for having been too afraid to act on her desires and had yet still prayed silently to the god she believed in and asked that her life be spared, a prayer obviously unanswered.

In Parlor B, the pews were much less crowded. A few of the visitors had left, mostly Laura's friends, but around twenty remained, awaiting the service. At three o'clock, when the service was set to begin, the funeral director spoke to the preacher and the preacher wheeled his chair to the casket and put one of his crippled hands on Leda's shoulder and said, "I think it's time for me to start, Sister."

Laura rose once more from her pew and joined them at the casket, the aisle leading from the back doors empty. "I don't guess he's coming, Mama," said Laura. "I can't say I'm not glad."

"How are you, Laura?" the preacher said from his wheelchair.

"Pregnant," she said.

Leda said nothing. She turned and looked down at Kalemar in his casket, his clean hands folded across his chest and his face even heavier than it was only hours before, or at least it appeared so to her, as if with every passing second the corpse no longer looked like him and within days, if it were possible to view him, would look like someone she had never met, a stranger. Her daughter's arm around her back, she walked with her to the pew and sat down beside her.

The music was shut off toward the end of "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," at the spot where if the lyrics were included the singer would be singing, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it / Prone to leave the God I Love," and for a few moments, while the attendees waited for the

pastor to make his way to the altar, nothing could be heard in the parlor except the shuffling of feet and the occasional snuffle or cough.

The pastor's name was David Walland. He was 41 years old and had suffered from multiple sclerosis since he was a teenager. He had for all of his life, like many of those sitting in the audience, attended Pedigo Baptist Church. In his thirties when, after backsliding for some time and finding himself "caught up in a life sin" as he said in one of his testimonials, though he did not elaborate on the nature of that sin, had heard the call of God to follow in his father's footsteps and preach. When his father's dementia progressed to the stage that he could no longer remember an entire sermon without repeating himself over and over to the extent that he never finished his sermons and they would last until nearly one o' clock in the afternoon, his son had temporarily taken over pastoral duties for him and after a few months had impressed the congregation so much the deacons asked him to be the full time preacher. Once his ailment progressed to the point that he could no longer walk on his own and was forced into a wheelchair, the deacons built a ramp that led to the altar of the church and covered it with red carpet.

He wheeled his chair through a side door on the raised stage and stopped beside the podium overlooking the casket and began his funeral sermon:

*Friends, we gather together on this day to mourn the loss of a great man, Kalemar Brass. It is natural for us to mourn, but we must remember that it is truly a time of celebration because being absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. For those of us that were blessed enough to know Kalemar well, our lives here on earth will never be quite the same, but we can find comfort in knowing that he is now in a better place than any one of us here today. In 1st Corinthians, Paul asks, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"*

*The sting of death is definitely upon us as we weep and mourn, but as Paul told the church folks at Corinth, he tells us the same: Death is swallowed up in victory. The sting we feel today, brothers and sisters, is not eternal just like our bodies are not eternal but as perishable as these flowers that stand before us. We can rejoice, however, knowing that because of God's undeniable grace and love, because he sent his only begotten son to die for us, though our bodies are as perishable as a flower, our souls are imperishable. That, my friends, is why Death is not victorious for those of us that have accepted Jesus Christ into our hearts.*

*Kalemar Brass was a kind and gentle man that worked hard to provide for his family, but as we know, being kind and working hard ain't enough to bring us salvation. For there are many kind people that will die a second time. They will burn eternally in the Lake of Fire. It brings me tremendous joy today to say that Kalemar Brass ain't one of those. Kalemar Brass accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior. Kalemar Brass was a Christian.*

*For his whole life, he set the example of what a Christian man should be for his family. He faithfully attended Pedigo Baptist Church, he was always willing to do anything he could to help his brethren in need, and he sacrificed his own time and money to keep our little church in the holler looking worthy enough to call it "God's House."*

*I know we all have wonderful stories about Kalemar to share. I've had the pleasure of listening to a lot of those this morning. Although I could share many stories about Kalemar that would have us all laughing and crying, there's one in particular I'd like to share today that I think shows just the kind of man Kalemar Brass was.*

*A few years ago we had a water leak in the sanctuary of our church, as I'm sure a lot of y'all remember. Since the ceilings of the church are pretty high and the lights kind of blind you when you look up, nobody noticed the leak for a while (I like to think people are mainly looking*



*at me during my sermons, but I catch some of y'all dozing from time to time. Don't worry. I won't name no names.) Anyway, that leak started small but it just got bigger and bigger without anybody knowing it until one Sunday in March, just a few weeks before our Easter cantata. It'd rained and rained all week and the rain still hadn't stopped on that Sunday morning. I was just getting started with my sermon when Ms. Raley, who's since passed, let out a little scream that stopped me from preaching and made everybody in the sanctuary look at her.*

*Well, it turned out that leak in the roof had been letting water in for days and that water had built up behind the plaster on the ceiling until the plaster finally gave way. When we looked at Ms. Raley, we saw her hair all wet and covered with that old soggy ceiling plaster. At first we were all a little confused, but once we put things together, everybody, including Ms. Raley herself, got a good laugh. She went to the bathroom and cleaned up and somebody got a bucket from the basement and put it under the leak and we went on with the service while the rain dripped out of the ceiling.*

*After church when everybody'd left, I was down in the basement where I like to go to pray and be with the Lord, and I heard a truck pull up in the parking lot. I looked through the window and saw Kalemar Brass out in the rain wearing his work clothes and pulling a ladder off the truck. He'd done gone home and changed out of his church clothes and came back.*

*I'd parked around back that day and don't think he knew I was still at the church. I just watched in awe with tears of joy filling my eyes as he put that ladder up against the church and must have made three or four trips carrying up a tarp and rope and covering that leak so it wouldn't get any worse. All the while the rain kept falling.*

*He was soaking wet by the time he took the ladder down and put it back on his truck. I went outside just before he was about to leave. He looked a little surprised to see me there. I told*

*him he was going to catch cold if he didn't get dry and warm, and do you know what he said? Friends, he said, "Getting a little old cold is the least I could do for the Lord and His house."*

*And he didn't stop there. No, sirree. For the next two weeks, after he'd already worked his own job all day, he came to the church to work. After the rain stopped, he fixed the leak in the roof. Then he rented some scaffolding and set it up in the sanctuary and plastered the hole in the ceiling. When that was fixed, he painted the whole sanctuary ceiling, and because it looked so good, he went ahead and repainted the sanctuary, all by himself, not ever asking for help from nobody.*

*I have to tell you, sisters and brothers, on that Easter Sunday when I looked out at all the folks that'd came to worship and hear the Easter cantata, the church looked more beautiful and more worthy of God's spirit than I could ever think of. Three people were saved that Easter Sunday.*

*Now, some of you may not think that Kalemar fixing the roof and painting the sanctuary had anything to do with those folks being saved, but I do, and here's why. When Paul wrote to the Hebrews he said, "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name." That work, my friends, comes in many forms. Do y'all remember what happened when Jesus found them moneychangers and dove sellers? That's right. He threw over their tables and cast all them. But do you remember what he said? He said, "My house shall be called the house of prayer but ye have made it into a den of thieves."*

*I know without a shadow of a doubt that Kalemar, when he was up there on that scaffolding, when he was on that ladder in that storm, when he was painting God's sanctuary to make it so beautiful for the rest of us, that he was in prayer and as close to God as any person can be. And now, friends, that he is with God, I want to share with you one of the verses I've*

*always tried to live by and the verse that Kalemar Brass personifies: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.*

*Kalemar Brass gave his service for our little church in the holler and God blessed us all because of it by bringing three more souls into his kingdom.*

*Sisters and Brothers, it pains me to know that come next Sunday when I sit on the altar and look out over the beautiful sanctuary, made so by Kalemar's own hands, there will be a face missing and it will be his. But I find peace and joy in knowing that he has stepped on over that river, alone, like we must all do some day, and he is now rejoicing in heaven where he won't never have to pick up a paintbrush and toil in labor by the sweat of his brow. Though our days and lives might seem long, they are not. "For what is your life?" James, the brother of Jesus, asked of his people. His answer to them: "It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." We are blessed that Kalemar Brass touched our lives in his short time here on earth.*

*Please pray with me. "As the dust returns to the earth, the spirit returns to you that gave it to us, and it is with you, our heavenly father, that Kalemar Brass abides today. Lord, though we believe in your Word and know one day we'll all be reunited with those that are dearest to us and that have returned to your kingdom, we must ask for your help. Dear God, I ask you to be with Leda and Laura as they mourn the loss of Kalemar. I pray that you will provide them with strength and comfort in knowing that like all of us that have lost loved ones some day they too will be reunited with him whose body, like mine and everybody in here today and every human being that you've blessed with precious life is but a vessel for the soul, which will never perish but either spend eternity in your company or spend eternity in the Lake of Fire. And, Dear Lord,*

*I ask if there's anyone here that hasn't made his soul imperishable by believing in your son, Jesus Christ, that he will not wait a second longer to heed your calling and accept Jesus into his heart. Amen.*

Leda remembered the time when Kalemar fixed the leak and how much he had complained that none of the other men in the church had offered to help him. What most bothered her as she sat on the front pew, listening to the sermon and fighting the urge to look behind her for James, was the notion of “perishable” and “imperishable,” for lying there in his casket, his nose and forehead all that was visible over its edge, Leda could not believe that Kalemar’s soul was anywhere.

As the pastor prayed, she prayed to God to show her that Kalemar was imperishable and he did, in fact, abide with God. She asked for some sort of sign or knowing, and it was only a few seconds after the prayer the pastor gave aloud and the prayer Leda prayed silently, that footsteps came from the back of the parlor, what sounded like someone stomping down the aisle. Leda looked to see James in his Dollar General store uniform with the yellow nametag that read “James,” the name she had given him. His face was red and sweaty, his eyes glassy and his hair uncombed as he stumbled down the aisle toward the casket, hollering, “Forgive me, Father. Forgive me, Father,” and looking stoned.

It all happened quickly. James sidestepped the casket and knocked over the basket of lilies and slammed against the front of the raised altar to fall over. He pulled himself up as if he were a man who had been lost for months in the wilderness and at the altar waited rescue. Pastor Walland, having just opened his eyes from prayer, looked startled or afraid and wheeled himself backward as James crawled toward panting.

Suddenly, Laura let out a scream that made her husband stand and Leda look to see that her daughter's water had broke and spilled all over the pew and onto the carpet. On the altar, James clawed at the pastor's crippled legs cried and said, "Save me. Please save me."

He sobbed against the pastor's lap as the pastor petted his head and cried as well, a sight most in the congregation missed since they looked toward the front pew where Laura now stood with water dripping down her legs and Leda was telling her to sit, the body in the casket momentarily forgotten by everyone.

That night in room 14 of the maternity unit of Saint Mary's Hospital, a baby was born. After six hours of labor, with Leda and Greg there by her side, Laura gave birth to an eight pound and two-ounce boy she named Kalemar Gregory Lietten. James, tired though seemingly sober, drank coffee in the waiting room with Ms. Spalding, who had congratulated him on his choice to seek salvation. He pulled a photo out of his pocket and showed it to her.. It was of a naturally formed stone bridge that spanned blue water. "My Daddy took it when we were little and went to a state park," he told her. "I think it's the best picture ever took."

"It is, baby," said Ms. Spalding, though she had no idea of the photo's significance and thought perhaps, like her own daughter's, James' brain had been damaged from years of drug abuse. She sat there looking at the photo with him and trying as she had ever since the funeral not to cry for Leda and her family, not out of sadness but out of the unexpected joy and hope the day had brought her even though her own husband was long dead and nothing of the sort had come out of his dying.

When the two were allowed into the room, Laura holding the baby to her chest, her mother standing by the bed, biting her jaw, and Greg sitting in a chair with his blazer across the back and his shirt untucked and sweaty, Laura looked at James and said through her grogginess, “You scared me.”

And James said, “I’m okay now.”

And Laura said, “I know.”

She reached the swaddled baby toward him and James looked at his sister as if to say, Are you sure? Finally, he reached down and gently took the baby in his hands and pulled it to his chest and stood looking down into his red face and blinking eyes and working mouth until the baby began to cry and he handed him back to Laura.

Late that night, when James and Ms. Spalding had left and Greg was sleeping in a chair and Laura was breastfeeding her son for the first time with no instruction or awkwardness, her being and body made to do just that, Leda stepped out into the hallway.

It was quiet, the sounds of women in labor silenced for now, as if a lull had come to the floor, and she could feel all the women with their newborns nestled against them in their beds, the happy families and mothers and husbands, the contentment found after months of worry and trying, a goal reached, and even though she knew, from seeing some of the pregnant women and girls before Laura gave birth to her own son that not all of them were happy, that not all of them had a husband, that not all of the children would be born into happy lives and homes, and perhaps they would for the rest of their lives suffer, that it was all beautiful because it was part of God’s plan.

In that moment she was able to find peace and beauty in Kalemar’s death as it was also part of God’s plan. If Kalemar had not died, her son James would have been doomed to a life of

sorrow and an eternity in hell. She stood looking out the window at the city below, the cars on the highways, the lights in the buildings and the neighborhood houses, and she said a prayer to God. She thanked him for answering her prayer and begged his forgiveness for ever doubting him. She asked him to be with all those people in their cars and homes and everyone else in the world and to bless them as much as he had blessed her.

The next day, sunny yet colder than the day before, the services at Pedigo Baptist were cancelled and nine cars drove down the freeway, following a hearse from Minor Funeral Home. The travelers they met along the way stopped their own cars and pulled over on the littered shoulder to pay respects to the small caravan. James drove Leda's blue Oldsmobile, which left a cloud of smoke hovering over the other eight vehicles. This morning, he was dressed better, wearing slacks and a button down shirt and a pair of shoes he'd bought from his place of work with his own money. Leda still wore her dress from the day before, only taking the time at the hospital to wash her face and brush her hair and use Laura's perfume and deodorant, which Greg had gone to fetch once she arrived at the hospital and was stabilized. She could feel her grandbaby in her arms and smell his little breath.

James and Leda had ridden silently since James picked her up at the hospital, and as the hearse turned onto Raccoon Valley Road and James followed, there were no sounds in the car except the troubled engine. Leda watched the passing landscape. So much looked the same, but so much looked different since those days only thirty-five short years ago when young Kalemar would barrel down from Fort Knox and pick her up with a grin in his Ford Custom and drive

those roads, finding pull-offs on bridges over the creek and little logging roads, so the two of them could do like all couples in love down through the ages, simply spend time together and touch and kiss and smell and taste each other, to find the intimacy and love we all seek and that, until the time comes, makes us forget about the things of death and find hope in life and give life.

And even with her husband's body riding in the hearse before her as the driver took curves and slowed down hills, the little funeral flags blowing on both sides of the hood, Leda felt happiness in knowing she had been one of the fortunate ones to have found love and for all those years what she'd sometimes considered a sacrifice, marrying Kalemar and having children, giving up her own dreams, even the miscarriage, had all brought her to this moment with her son and last night's moment with her daughter and grandchild and there was no place she would rather be in time. She only hoped that her son could one day also find the good things, all the best things, and those were only one thing and that was love of God and love of family. Kalemar and God had brought her here.

They passed the old houses and pastureland and barns, and the small house Kalemar had grown up in with his parents and brother. In his place, a teenage boy was in the yard raking leaves from the grass. Life was short, but it had to be to make room for the other lives to come. Leda reached over and put her hand on her son's leg—the son who had caused her so much worry all his life, the son she once blamed as punishment from God—and she said, "I'm sorry."

James did not look away from the road. "For what, Mama?"

"For not always being the mother I could have been."

"I wasn't always the best son," said James.

"You were the best son two parents could ask for."



The cemetery was located across the street from a small clapboard church called Bethany Baptist that beneath the foot of the ridgeline. It was three acres bordered by pastureland that unlike most in the valley was still in use. Cows grazed as the hearse pulled into the cemetery and stopped a few yards from the freshly dug grave beside Kalemar's mother's and father's, graves Leda had stood over alongside Kalemar many years earlier, never considering that the spot of grass at her feet was where his own grave would lie someday.

James stopped the car and the two of them got out and began their walk toward the hearse. The pallbearers that day, James and two men from Pedigo Baptist Church and Grease, despite his bad back, gathered around the rear of the hearse as the funeral director opened the doors to the casket. David Walland arrived alone in his van and spent some time getting out and assembling his wheelchair before wheeling it through the tombstones to the grave where the others had already gathered. The mourners stood at the gravesite, the flowers around it in the red clay dirt, as the cows in the pasture grazed and let out an occasional low bleat, and crows flew over the changing leaves on the ridges and cars drove past on the road.

The pallbearers carried the casket to the grave and set it on the stand placed over the hole. And that day, they all stood quietly in the sunshine and looked toward the closed casket gleaming silver in the sunshine as David Walland in his wheelchair continued his talk of Kalemar crossing over that river. He let everyone know that he had not slept all night after James Brass had come to him to be saved, and he claimed, which everyone agreed with, that Kalemar might have stepped over that river by now, but yesterday his work on earth was not quite finished and his presence was felt and there was no doubt he had a hand in what had happened the day before, and James, who had never said much anything his entire life in public, said,

“Amen,” and reached over and interlocked his hand with the pastor’s crippled hand as everyone bowed their heads in prayer.

Twenty miles to the west on that sunny day in September stood a large house on a hill overlooking a lake that had once been the Tennessee River before TVA erected dams in the valley and drowned the small towns that once stood there. The water was wide and blue. In the distance was a marina where white yachts were docked. Closer, near the road that coursed through the valley, skirting the lake before disappearing into the distant foothills, was a small park with benches and tables, empty that day but for a flock of geese and one white duck gathered at the shoreline, pecking at the ground together.

To reach that house on the hill, you would have to follow directions to the address and wind through small backroads until you reached a wrought iron gate. If you drove through the gate and along the driveway stretching through a yard of dormant Bermuda grass, you’d eventually arrive at the three-story colonial, backdropped by the sunny blue sky and the lake below.

If you parked and got out, and took the steps to the grand entryway topped with a balustrade set on two columns and walked inside through the large mahogany doors and into the foyer, you would see a crystal chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. To one side, French pocket doors opened to a home office, floor to ceiling bookshelves encasing the room and filled with classic novels and philosophies, bright patterns on their spines, which had probably never been opened. Opposite the office was a formal dining room, the table set with autumn themed china and linens, which had probably never been used. A staircase led to the second floor, and on

the wall above hung a large impressionist painting that cost tens of thousands of dollars and looked like someone had slung paint all over it.

Continuing past the foyer, you would enter a kitchen of expansive cabinetry and quartz countertops. In the middle of the room stood a wide island complete with sink and gas burners over which a beautifully trimmed exhaust unit hung. In the adjacent living room, the walls extended beyond a balcony to the second-floor ceiling. A stacked-stone fireplace and chimney took up the entirety of one wall, the thick mantel crafted of rough-hewn wood. Fine furniture set atop a large Persian rug before the Cathedral style window facing the driveway and your car.

In the hallway was a door that led down a flight of stairs to the basement. Near the landing, two doors were swung open to the smell of cigars and a home theater, a large screen facing leather stadium seating. In an adjoining room stood yet another projection screen reaching from floor to ceiling above a square of green indoor carpet covered in golf balls.

In the basement garage an early model Porsche in pristine condition was parked and if you walked through the outer door you would step into the back yard of the estate, the lake and yachts and park and geese and white duck below. Above was a tall white deck on which stood a large grill and a hot tub. If you stepped into the side yard and looked up at the third-story window beneath the gable, you'd see that it was only halfway painted with a new glossy white, and if you had a ladder and could happen to look inside that window, you'd see on this morning, a bedroom, the four-post bed unmade and a door opened to a steamy bathroom where someone was showering and on the television hanging before the bed, a stone monument in New York City etched with thousands of names where in three days thousands of flowers would be placed.

But if you looked down at your feet, you'd see spilled white paint in the brown grass. Some might think its shape resembled a question mark while others might think it resembled a

scythe blade, but in all reality it was simply how the paint had spilled that day when the fifty-nine-year-old painter had slipped on a rung and fallen, thirty feet, to land on his head.

The paint in the grass was there throughout the autumn and winter, through frost and rain and snow and raccoons and rabbits. It was there while Laura sat awake during the long nights breastfeeding her newborn and sobbing. It was there when Leda drove to the Exit 421 flea market to sell her art and watch the families come and go. It was there while Grease drank beer and burned trash in his back yard and hoped only for a visit from his children. It was there while James stocked shelves at the Dollar Store and fought the urge to take one of the unattended children to the back and satisfy his desire. It was there as football teams won and lost games. It was there while the couple who owned the house put it up for sale and then moved away. It was there while the house sat empty and couples young and old all over the world found love and lost love as war was waged. It was there through deaths and births, while the quiet earth completed its rotation around the sun and began a new one. It was there until springtime when the grass began to grow again and a man came along on a lawnmower—a man with his own obstacles to face due to his skin color, due to his family losing everything they owned years ago when their city was flooded, due to nothing he'd done himself—and then the paint in the grass was gone forever.

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### Vita

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