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# Highway 11

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Devon Koren Asdell entitled "Highway 11." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Wier, Allison Ensor

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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

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Allison Ensor

Accepted for the Council:

Linda Painter  
Interim Dean of Graduate Studies

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

# Highway 11

A Thesis Presented for  
the Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Devon Koren Asdell  
December 2006

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

for Alestar --

who never stopped believing I was a hero;

who never stopped being my hero.

## **ABSTRACT**

Created in 1926, US Route 11 runs from the Canadian border at Rouses Point, New York, to just shy of New Orleans at an intersection with US-90. In Bristol, Virginia, the highway splits in two -- 11-E and 11-W -- and then reunites in Knoxville, Tennessee. This highway serves as the main thoroughfare for many small towns and cities, and it is known by many names -- Lee Highway, Andrew Johnson Highway, and Kingston Pike, to name a few. As many of the residents of these small towns might attest, it is easy to take a highway for granted when it becomes such an integral part of daily life.

In "Highway 11," a Creative Writing Graduate Thesis for the University of Tennessee, Devon Koren Asdell has collected a series of interconnected short stories which take place along the route of US-11. In particular, the stories in this collection draw from the rich Appalachian heritage of the region that surrounds the heart of the highway in the mountains of Virginia and East Tennessee. "Highway 11" is infused with tales of love, hope, fear, regret, loss, taboo, stagnation, and exploration. These are themes indicative not only to Appalachian culture, but to the modern American spirit, as well.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Sitting down at a balcony tabletop in Aachen, Germany, preparing to type out the first draft of the introductory essay of my creative thesis on an ancient Toshiba T3400CT laptop, I busted my lip open on a bottle of mineral water, and was then promptly recruited by my seven year old daughter to fix the computer game she had been occupying herself with. Momentary excuses, of course, but they are indicative of a long series of delays and setbacks that have plagued the production of my thesis since my arrival at the University of Tennessee over two years ago. I have spent seventeen percent of my time here convinced that my thesis is irrevocably cursed, thirty-three percent concerned that I have no real talent as a writer, and forty-seven utterly bemused that I ever made it to graduate school in the first place. This prominent attitude has had an intensely negative impact on the work I have produced at the University of Tennessee, particularly on my ability to focus on material long enough to meet deadlines. As such, I am incredibly indebted to Michael Knight, Allen Wier, and Alison Ensor for their incredible patience, understanding, and support.

Despite these intermittent periods of self-doubt, I have always identified myself as a writer, and I have always been surrounded by writers. As a child, I would steal my mother's half-finished notebooks, filling the remaining blank pages with my own stories told at first in pictures and later in words; today, I take delight when my own daughter steals my notebooks, filling the empty leaves with her own characters and dramatizations. I never considered writing a hobby, or

something I did with my spare time. Rather, it was intrinsic to my personality, an action in which I had little conscious choice. In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Harper Lee comments on the ability to read: “one does not love breathing.” I prescribe this same mentality to my own ability to write.

Even when I do not have specific ideas to flesh out, I will often scribble nonsense in the margins of my books, make lists, write down song lyrics, road signs, or church marquees. I am compelled by the physical act of putting pen to paper, or to whatever surface is present. When I lived in the small trailer next door to my grandparents’ house, I wrote all over the walls of my bedroom. I later compiled these fragments in the hypertext work “hypergraphia,” which can be found at <http://devon.trigmafall.com/hypergraphia/>. I discovered the term “hypergraphia” -- which is used to describe the overwhelming urge to write -- by reading Alice Weaver Flaherty’s *The Midnight Disease*. I often think of my own writing process as rather hypergraphic by nature, which helps to explain my tendency to “over-write,” my reluctance to edit, and my reoccurring pattern of writer’s block, as all three of these traits are indicative of the condition of hypergraphia.

In addition to the hypergraphic nature of my writing process, I also tend to blur genres, and, often, I create work within a multimedia paradigm. Even before I had command over alphanumeric characters, I filled notebooks with stories told in pictures -- almost in comic-book format -- with elaborate characters and fantastical universes. Often, I acted out these stories, begging childhood neighbors to play the parts with me. Later, the illustrations wrapped around

poems, song lyrics, screenplays, and stories, illuminating whatever defied words. When I learned a few guitar chords, I started recording my songs on cassettes. At eleven, I plugged my computer and stereo to the input connectors in the back of my VCR, created music videos with the animation program on my Apple IIc and recorded them to VHS. Even as a child, I was creating text in multi-media format, though I didn't realize it yet. In addition, it is difficult for me to compose work in a linear fashion, which is why I find the concept of hypertext -- where a work has no set beginning or end, and a reader creates his/her own path through the text -- an incredibly attractive option.

My greatest influence has been that of Laurie Anderson, the multi-media artist, musician, and writer who blends poetry, prose, and performance to deliver various messages or themes. Discovering her work served as both a confirmation of and inspiration to my own -- here was someone who blends songs, stories, poems, music, images, and performance in similar ways that I had experimented with, and she is highly regarded as a postmodern writer and artist. In addition, her work also contains political elements. *The End of the Moon* and *Home of the Brave* both combined personal stories, philosophical thought, and cultural critique of current events -- a combination I found especially compelling. When I discovered Laurie Anderson, I had been learning HTML code and how to create web pages. I began to compose in hypertext, linking together sections of text in a nonlinear fashion with various multimedia elements to be displayed in a public Internet setting.

Other multi-media influences on my work have included those of comic book writers and graphic novelists. Neil Gaiman has worked primarily with fantasy novels, children's books, and screenplays in recent years, but he initially created a graphic series known as *The Sandman*, which was especially influential on my adolescent work. *The Sandman* offered a blend of mythology, archetype, and storytelling, which invoked themes from the childhood fairy tales and folklore that I loved. I continued to read and be influenced by other graphic novels, such as *Promethea* by Alan Moore and *Kabuki* by David Mack, but Lynda Barry has been especially influential in recent years. Her stories are usually quasi-autobiographical works of fantasy, illustrated by her own hand. In these books, she blends creative nonfiction with graphic illustration, adding the artistic highlights and emphases common to the graphic novel. In addition to the graphic novel, I have been influenced by various films (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, *Waking Life*, *The Seven Faces of Dr. Lao*, and many Tim Burton productions, such as *Edward Scissorhands*), songwriters (Al Stewart, Donovan, Bob Dylan, Janis Ian), and pop culture in general.

Outside of these pop cultural sources, I have also been greatly influenced by many playful or experimental writers. Peter Handke -- the German writer of poetry, plays, novels, and works that defy genre, such as *The Weight of the World* -- has greatly influenced my work. He captures simple moments, everyday people, and inner dialogue as if each was holy and valuable within itself. Thomas Wolfe has also been a great influence, in particular, *Look Homeward, Angel*. His ability to create stories from the people and places of his past with such

elaborate description and attention to detail is inspiring and has helped inform my process of drawing from my own personal history to create some of the people and events in the Highway 11 narrative. The elaborate characters and playful descriptions of Tom Robbins have also been a great influence on my work, as well as the magical realism of Haruki Murakami and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I have always loved the revolutionary works of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and I give a special nod to Walt Whitman, who tried to encapsulate the spirit of America by creating a new standard of American poetry, and William Blake, whose elaborate nonlinear, interconnected mythology of words and images strikes me as a late 18th century model for modern hypertext fiction. As a rule, I am drawn to experimental literary works that blur genre, play with language, and confront boundaries.

One of the greatest challenges of writing a collection of short stories has been this struggle against some of the basic tendencies inherent to my natural writing process, as well as the incongruities between my greatest literary and creative influences and those I have pursued in the process of creating this text. The Highway 11 concept germinated while I was working towards my Appalachian Studies minor at East Tennessee State University. In the process of studying local history and learning how to perform field research, I took notice of various landmarks and place names that had always existed as part of the everyday background of my childhood in the small community of Mosheim, Tennessee. Old churches in the neighborhood had served as emergency hospitals in the Civil War, schools were developed by German Lutherans,

bridges a few miles down the road were constructed by the same family who had previously owned the farmhouse I grew up in. When I went to visit friends and family in Morristown, Knoxville, Loudon, Lenoir City, Athens, and Chattanooga, I noticed the reoccurrence of the number eleven on the white shields lining the sides of the road. One afternoon, I pulled out my road atlas and traced, in bright yellow highlighter, the route of Highway 11 from the New York/Canadian border, breaking into 11-E and 11-W in Bristol and rejoining in Knoxville, to just shy of New Orleans. I had lived my entire life along this highway, completely taking for granted its service as the major street of these towns. It was then I decided I wanted to write a book of interconnected short stories that took place along the route of US-11.

While I was attending East Tennessee State University, I was also introduced to Appalachian literature, which served as great initial influence for the Highway 11 project. The works of Jo Carson -- in particular, *Stories I Ain't Told Nobody Yet* -- helped me understand the importance of the everyday tales of struggle, love, fear, disappointment, and triumph that happen in the mundane world of neighbors and strangers. I was also intrigued by the storytelling quality of Carson's work. I had previously taken a class in storytelling, and I felt as if her work evoked a certain oral quality that felt native to the region of which she wrote. She also demonstrated incredible skill at capturing character through dialogue, something I desperately wanted to learn. While attending ETSU, I had the opportunity to listen to Jo Carson perform some of her stories, and I was intrigued by the fact that, even though she projected her stories in fine oral form,

she continued to read her stories from the script in front of her. Despite the fact that these words rang of the oral tradition, they were still pieces of writing and belonged primarily to paper. This gave me hope that perhaps I, too, might find a way to evoke the oral construction of Appalachian speech in my own work.

Reading Mildred Haun's *The Hawk's Done Gone*, I first understood how a collection of short stories might connect to tell a much larger story. She accomplished this through the interconnection of family ties, but her stories existed as separate entities from each other, as well. This, I felt, would be an excellent format to record the lives that exist along a common highway. The short story often exists as a window, or a snapshot -- the reader is permitted to peek in on the lives and adventures of the characters for a short while, understanding that there exists a much larger narrative that the reader simply does not have access to. This is similar to looking out of a car window while driving down the highway -- a woman pins her laundry to a clothesline; a teenager sits at a bus stop with headphones stuck in his ears; a man and a woman stand by a broken car with their hands on their hips, facing each other, and scowling. I wanted my stories to be linked in such a manner; I wanted my reader to get the impression of traveling down the highway as he or she peeks into the lives of my characters.

Other Appalachian writers were also instrumental influences, as well. Jim Wayne Miller created modern Appalachian archetypes in his poetry which expressed the gradual cultural changes of the region. From the poetry of Fred Chappell, I learned how to integrate local myth and folklore with literary and cultural allusions and archetypes within descriptions of objects and landscapes.

The Stories of Breece D'J Panacke were also extremely informative, both in their simplistic, despondent subjects, as well as the sparse style with the occasional vivid metaphor or elaborate description. Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* helped me to understand how the Appalachian landscape could be used as a fitting backdrop for more taboo and controversial subjects. As such, I suppose that Highway 11 is, first and foremost, an Appalachian tale, though I hope that it will also reflect a larger story of American culture, as well.

I wanted to write Highway 11 as a series of interconnected short stories because I felt the format would best reflect the theme I was hoping to invoke. Books of interconnected short stories are pieces, scenes, and tales that share a common through-line, whether that commonality is a place, a family, or an object. In this manner, a book of interconnected short stories reflects the physicality of a common highway with various places, people, and events that can be found along its route. I've already mentioned Mildred Haun's *The Hawk's Done Gone*, but other linked collections which have helped me understand the form include Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Rosina Lippi's *Homestead*. Both collections intertwine stories with commonalities of character, family, and place. Anderson's work takes place in a small town in Ohio, and every story involves characters that live in the town, with George Willard as a focal point. Lippi's collection takes place in a small Austrian village, and follows the drama of the village's main families across many decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From both works, I learned how to experiment with style in order to ensure that the Highway 11 stories were capable of existing as separate entities. Conversely, the tight

interconnection between “Signal Mountain,” “Trenton, Georgia,” and “Gadsden Highway” was directly influenced by Anderson and Lippi’s strong, obvious connections within their collections. Despite the difficulty of maintaining a strong through-line in every piece, the linked short-story form provides a unique opportunity to simulate the action of transit along the highway, an effect which is well worth the challenge.

Highways in American literature have often been synonymous with the myth of the frontier, the idea of setting out to explore unknown territory in the process of leaving one’s problems behind. This sort of expedition is often depicted as being parallel to a journey of self-realization, or a life-changing catalyst. In *The Territory Ahead*, Wright Morris hypothesizes that all American literature has been dominated by this myth, and demonstrates how this theme is present in many major works -- Henry David Thoreau went to the woods, Mark Twain sent his characters out on the river, and Herman Melville looked to the high seas. Even before Jack Kerouac wrote of his cross-country travels with Neal Cassady, Walt Whitman had already mentioned the importance of traveling “the open road” in *Leaves of Grass*. Even after the frontier had closed, the highway remained a symbol of self-exploration. For example, in *Blue Highways*, William Least Heat-Moon takes to the less-traveled, unknown roads in reaction to his termination of employment and a failed romantic relationship, describing the open road as “a beckoning, a strangeness, a place where a man can lose himself.”

The concept of Highway 11, and the myth I hope to cultivate with my collection of short stories, is a progression of this concept of exploration, frontier, and identity. In the past, highways have represented journeys, catalysts, quests, places that lead you away from yourself, from the life that you lead, to something different and exciting that promises change. The historical lines of American transit can be found in the old highway system, as best illustrated by the cultural significance of Route 66. The old routes have not been abandoned, exactly -- they have simply become subsumed by the small towns they helped create. They once represented the journey, but now they represent the destination, the routine of daily life. In a nation landlocked by its own coasts, with nothing left to explore or discover, the highway has become like a domesticated bachelor, abandoning the nostalgic myth of the past in order to tend the garden, to pay off the mortgage. As such, the highway has become a much more utilitarian symbol in modern times. The curves and stretches that make up the old routes no longer serve as vehicles of exploration; instead, they are representative of the mundane trials of everyday life.

The progression of stories within the Highway 11 collection helps demonstrate the cultural progression from highway as symbol of exploration to highway as the overlooked backdrop to everyday life. We begin with Michael and Scott in "Natural Bridge," who rekindle some of the frontier symbolism in their haphazard road trip which culminates in an unlikely love affair. Despite their intentional pursuit of the frontier myth, their adventures are confined and domesticated -- they are not even capable of fully viewing the professed amazing

natural landmark they are searching for. Highway 11 then carries us to the free-spirited Alison, who is actively confined by the restaurant along the route, and is only able to escape by pursuing a new frontier off-ground. The stories become progressively more domesticated, and the final "Aisle Eleven" reduces the archetypal Machiavelli to a custodian in a grocery store. It is this gradual, bittersweet domestication of the highway that I want to convey in this collection, in addition to the subtle realization of the highway as a singular line of connection.

I consider the Highway 11 collection a work still very much in progress. Many of these stories could use further development, and there are some awkward transitions --between "Battle at Blue Springs" and "Signal Mountain," "Gadsden Highway" and "Aisle Eleven" -- which may be best addressed by additional stories. My immediate plans for the manuscript include further revision and expansion in preparation for submission to the Tartt First Fiction Award by December 31, 2006. I have also considered the possibility of converting the work to a hypertextual, multimedia format for online publication, which would allow me to integrate Highway 11 themed poetry and photographs, as well. The Highway 11 collection is far from final completion, but I do feel as if the thesis composition and revision process has allowed me to create a solid, firm foundation of stories based on this theme.

As I sit here, in my new house, drinking coffee from my late grandfather's favorite cup, and finishing up the revisions on this manuscript, I begin to realize what it is I have gained from my two plus years of graduate school experience. I

tend to convey a rather negative attitude about the entire ordeal, and it is true that I have discovered that academia is not my niche. However, graduate school has also been full of many benefits that I tend to take for granted. I have been made to understand the process of writing as an art form -- as honest, hard work. I've learned to appreciate the importance of revision -- some of the stories in this collection, in particular "Natural Bridge," "Battle at Blue Springs," and "Signal Mountain," have been revised well over ten times. I have developed a comfort for my personal routine of writing, which has infused more purposeful intent in my identity as a writer -- in other words, writing is no longer something I happen to do; it is something towards which I actively work. I have shed my need for external affirmation -- I trust my own instincts, and have actually learned to delight in aspects of my writing that are often considered "flawed" by outside parties. I have learned that, even if I never publish a single work, even if no other person is privy to the words I put on paper, that fact makes me no less a writer, and that fact is not at all indicative of my worth or value as a writer. Graduate school has, through trial by fire, completely reconstructed my artistic identity as a self-affirmed, self-established entity. For that, and for this collection of stories about Highway 11, I am grateful to the University of Tennessee.

## 2. NATURAL BRIDGE

"We're driving into the sunset. How's that for a happy ending?" Michael often found he was talking to himself, saying things aloud completely out of context. Often, quotes from movies, plays, books -- silence made him nervous. He squinted against the crimson light flooding his '87 Chevy Nova, his palm resting at the knob of the gearshift. The sunlight reflected off the telephone poles on either side of the highway like warning lights lining an airstrip, deepened the shock of red in the passenger seat, where Scott dozed in a Detroit Red Wings Jersey, his face pressed to the window.

Michael had known Scott for approximately three hours and seventeen minutes. He had discovered him on the side of the road in Tully, New York, like an unexpected find in a scavenger hunt. Scott, standing next to his duffel bag in the middle of a thunderstorm, didn't even stick out his thumb as Michael coasted past. Michael was not usually one to offer up his car to hitch-hikers, but even in the rear-view mirror, he could tell the kid was shivering. Scott had mumbled his name about three or four times before passing out.

As he drove, Michael noticed billboards advertising ski resorts, small brown signs pointing out campgrounds. All the same, he couldn't help but feel that the mountains were more or less foothills, here -- not like the towering, majestic overhangs of the West, with their rocky avenues and evergreen forests. He noticed, too, the abandoned general stores, rusty soda machines in patches of tall grass wearing faded logos from his childhood, railroad tracks snaking

parallel to the highway. He scratched the back of his head, still itchy from where he'd buzzed it with his cousin's electric razor while she asked him how the audition went, how he had to confess he'd failed miserably, watching the straight, brown locks fall like feathers into the wastebasket beneath him. He shifted his hips, withdrew further into his ratted pullover, the sleeves cupped over his hands. The hushed drone of the radio spat out scientific terminologies amidst the static monotone and Scott's soft snores.

The sudden, shrill whistle of a fast-approaching train jolted Michael from his reverie. His knuckles tightened around the wheel as rickety boxcars overtook his peripheral vision. He noticed the stall in Scott's snoring; he watched as Scott stretched, his fingers clawing the dashboard like an indecisive kitten. Scott made a soft whimpering sound, rubbing his eyes.

"Why is it so cold in here, man?" Scott said.

"The heat'll kick on any minute now," Michael said, fiddling with the thermostat beneath the cool breeze of the open vents.

"You keep saying that. Not sure I believe you." Scott twisted to the left until his back popped; Michael winced. "How long was I out?"

"A couple of hours." Michael glanced at Scott -- mussed black hair, intense blue eyes, prominent cheekbones. Thin and pale, like something out of a Dickens novel.

"This evening on Nature Sounds," said the public radio commentator, "we will journey into the wild terrain of South Africa to take a look at the elaborate strata of its species of insects."

Scott stared at Michael, blinked. "You're not serious."

Michael shrugged. "It's educational."

"The South African Tapping Beetle devotes its entire life to following vibrations, hoping to find others of its kind. This beetle is so rare that many of them live entire lifetimes without finding another of their species."

"Dude. Beetles." Scott's teeth were still chattering.

"There should be an extra pullover in the back, if you want to look," Michael said.

The back seat was crammed with junk, beneath Scott's damp duffel bag -- a ratted paperback copy of Becket's *Waiting for Godot* with Estragon's lines highlighted in bright yellow, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in Spanish. There were numerous oversized sweatshirts; Scott selected a thick green one and pulled it on over his hockey jersey. There were a few pairs of shoes -- Doc Martins with scuffed up heels, white Adidas running shoes with blue stripes flaring from one side to the other, flip-flops with sand still stuck to the sole.

"Hey, where you from, man?"

"California, actually. Santa Rosa."

"Long way from home." Scott dug out some of the sand in the crevices with his fingernail. "Miss the beach much?"

"Sometimes."

He hadn't meant for it to sound so melancholy. A simple fact, that Michael missed the beach sometimes, but when the words reached his lips, too much in their suggestion of longing. He wondered if they shared that in common, at least -

- and if such shared hunger might explain their frantic call to migration. He studied the road -- open, full of promises, sure to break each one; threatening to change names, erase histories, submerge their small stories within the great tide of Everyman. Consumed with such thoughts, Michael vaguely noticed Scott's cold blue eyes fixed on him; he shifted uncomfortably beneath their gaze.

"How old are you, Michael?"

"I'll be thirty the end of the month."

"Thirty. You, uh. Don't look that old."

"Thirty's not old."

A lie, of course. Thirty was a lot older than Michael had ever imagined he'd be.

"Hey Michael."

"Uh huh."

"Can you buy me some beer?"

They stopped at North End Liquor Store in Cortland, New York. Michael, with sweaty palms and against his better judgment, purchased a couple of six-packs of Mike's Hard Lemonade. He stopped the car outside the baseball field at Suggett Park, where Scott paced along the bleachers, rubbing his arms to keep warm.

"Why are you avoiding the interstate?" Scott asked.

"Excuse me?"

"You said you were traveling to New Orleans to help with the clean-up? Why not take I-81? Higher speed limit, no traffic lights. We keep crossing over the interstate every few miles as is."

Michael opened a bottle, handed it to Scott. "My tags are expired," he said. Another half-truth; he was, by nature, a very superstitious person. Once, a street corner gypsy had warned him it was bad luck to exit from a different door than the one entered. Michael had no idea if there was any truth to this idea, but he had followed it religiously, applying it to all possible modes of transportation. Michael had no desire to deviate from the highway he started on. Better, perhaps, to change the subject. "Look, is there anyone I should call? A friend? Your parents?"

"Dude, I'm nineteen," Scott said. "Not as young as I look. And, no. Thanks."

Michael was silent for a moment, his eyes focusing on the pulse of a radio tower at the horizon, listening to the rush of blood through his veins.

"The end of the month, huh." Scott said.

"What?"

"Your birthday. The big three-o."

"Oh. That." Michael took another drink.

"Means you're a Libra."

"Huh?"

"Y'know. Sun sign. Astrological thing."

Michael smirked. "You gonna predict my future? Tell me I'll be rich and famous?" Forty-seven failed auditions, eighty-nine letters of rejection. "It's a little late for that."

Scott ran his finger along the lip of the bottle he was nursing, creating a hollow, high-pitched note that hung in the air between them. "Libra's a good sign. Air sign. Creative, artsy people. Spend a lot of time in your head."

Not entirely inaccurate. "Great. Not only are you an underage runaway, but you're a gypsy too. My night couldn't get any better."

"I'm not..." Scott shook his head. "Any of those things. I just."

Michael watched Scott as he slumped over his bottle, as he wiped his nose on his sleeve. Michael had this incredible capacity for being an asshole sometimes. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean."

"It's alright, man. Don't worry about it."

"I do, though. I mean, artsy. And spend time in my head."

Scott shuffled his feet. Michael coughed, started peeling at the label of his bottle. "I wish I had a cigarette," he said.

"You smoke?"

"Nah; I just need something to do with my hands."

Scott took a swig of his lemonade, reached out for Michael's hand, took it in his own, palm extended upwards. Scott's greasy hair brushed Michael's face; he smelled of sweat and exhaust, faintly of incense and marijuana.

"What, you read palms, too?"

"Not really." Scott traced the lines of Michael's hand with his own delicate fingertips. "You a musician?"

Michael cleared his throat, snatched his hand away. "A little." He thought of the money wasted on studio time, the returned demo cassettes. "Never really could get off the ground with it."

"Hey, man. Don't worry about it. It's all manufactured anyway. Plastic. None of it's real, not in that scene."

"Yeah." Michael bobbed his head in affirmation, felt the heavy clap of Scott's drunken hand against his shoulder.

"You're all right, man," Scott said. Michael grimaced, took another drink, leaned his head back against the steel seats, let the stars swallow him whole.

In the morning, they woke, cramped and folded, with frost on the windshield and hangovers the gravity of cliffs. They poured themselves into a gritty diner and ordered sugar with their coffee and their eggs over-medium. Michael fingered through a local newspaper, but the letters were fused together in the wake of his headache, so he surrendered it to Scott who peeled away the comic strips and spontaneously giggled out loud whenever the punch line involved cats or Vikings. Scott bought a small compass in a general store with adhesive on one side and stuck it fast to Michael's dashboard. Michael raised an eyebrow.

"Don't sweat it, man." Scott grinned, his eyes light, purplish bruises. "That just increased the value of this piece of shit you're driving."

Michael laughed. After all, he was quite the collector of oddities. The floorboard was littered with CDs -- the Flaming Lips, Radiohead, the Crash Test Dummies -- all totally useless, as the car sported no CD player. There were also cassettes, most of them unlabeled mix tapes, which Scott would finger through and stick in the stereo from time to time, complaining when he didn't recognize the tunes, which was often. Most of the music was from Michael's early college years, things he picked up at the used music shops in the East Village. It was as if time had stopped inside his car, and all of the history which led from that point to this was, at best, nothing but meaningless filler and, at worst, a colossal waste of time.

From beneath the grate of second-hand speakers, Michael recognized an all-too-familiar tune employing the sound of a cough as a percussion instrument. He kept his eyes fixed to the road as the slide-whistle carried the acoustic piece through the rugged, whispering lyrics.

"This song's got a beat." Scott's head was cocked to one side, his eyes focused on the dim glow between the two radio knobs. "I like it."

"Really?" Michael noticed his own voice sounded too eager; what had his psychiatrist told him about the unhealthy need for affirmation? "I mean. Thanks."

"This. This is you?"

Michael nodded.

"Get out of here," Scott squealed. "This totally rocks, man. Something about that slide-whistle just hooks me in and reels me up."

"Really, it's nothing. It was."

"Shhh. I want to hear the rest of this."

Michael pressed a fist to his mouth, his lips at the knuckles of his forefinger and thumb. He didn't want his smile to be too obvious. When the song finished, Scott clapped, and Michael could feel his ears going red.

"I'm surprised you never went anywhere with his," Scott said.

"Yeah. Well." Michael could feel the expression of pride melting into his five o'clock shadow. "Maybe I just didn't have enough motivation."

"Well, you should keep at it." Scott reached down to tie a shoelace and excavated an old postcard of New York City, with two towers flashing unyielding against the sky. Michael recognized the recovered artifact instantly, had memorized each flamboyant loop of his former roommate's handwriting: *New York is experiencing a sudden shortage of attractive young men; all of Greenwich Village is petitioning your return.* His mother had been less than amused.

"I ate in that restaurant, once, with my folks." Scott said, studying the photograph. "It was so stupid; people jumping out of buildings, buried alive in rubble, all I could think about was that dumb restaurant."

The world had been full of heroes, then, for just a short moment. Then, just as suddenly, the world was full of victims. Michael had just wanted to escape. He tapped the accelerator harder.

Scott reached in the back and shuffled through his bag. He brought forth a small, red yo-yo, passed it from hand to hand, occasionally looping the string around his fingers.

"Can you do any tricks with that?" Michael asked.

"Not really. I read a book once, but it never worked for me." He extended a hand in front of him, his palm facing the floorboard, his fingers spread out at four, definite angles like peacock feathers. "I think my thumbs are too big."

The corner of Michael's mouth twitched upward, and he found himself studying his own thumbs against his will. They were clumsy, calloused, the nails discolored and chewed past the cuticles.

"Your thumbs are fine," he said, and he tapped his own against the steering wheel. "There's just a trick to it." He looked at Scott, smiled. "I'll show you."

The radiator gave out somewhere across the border of Virginia in an explosion of water and mist. Michael put the car in neutral, pushed through the open door, one hand on the wheel; Scott pushed from behind. They guided the car to a nearby automotive shop, left the keys with the mechanic. There was a small hotel within walking distance; the rooms were arranged in a semi-rectangle around a courtyard full of rusty patio tables with missing umbrellas and a moldy, concrete pit which must have been a swimming pool at one time. There was only one room available, with a single, queen-sized bed.

"At least we have clean towels," Scott said.

Michael opened the bathroom door; roaches scurried and disappeared in the corners. The floor was a large slab of concrete with a drain in the middle; a naked showerhead hung on one wall, a rusty toilet pushed against the other. He turned on the faucet, gritted his teeth when cold water drizzled against his bare

chest. Scrubbing down his shoulders and underarm hair with cheap hotel soap, he wondered how many men had showered in this exact spot, beneath this same leaky showerhead. The hotel itself had to be at least fifty years old; did men come here with their families, wives, mistresses? Had they come from a weekend of camping in the mountains, were they going to find construction work in the big city? Did they stop to pick up hitch-hikers along the way? Michael could hear the muffled drone of the television from the other room.

With a towel wrapped around his waist, Michael stumbled out of the bathroom. "It's all yours, man," he said, then stopped. Scott, shirtless and nestled among the pillows on the hotel bed, lit a candle, grinned, and unfastened the first button of his jeans. He tugged at the pendant about his throat, staring at Michael as a vague scent of sulfur and lilac filled the room. He turned off the television, tapped his fingers lightly against the side-table, and waited.

In the late afternoon, Michael woke up to the loud slam of the hotel door -- the blankets heaped at the foot of the bed, the sheets askew, the stained mattress bare beneath him. Scott stood in the doorway, his hair tousled and standing on end, dressed in Michael's clothes, with a small sack of groceries in his arms.

"You snore," he said.

"And I don't think I've ever seen hair do that before," Michael said.

"And your neck looks like it was stung by a nest of hornets."

Michael sat up, glanced in the mirror above the television set. His entire neck from ear to shoulder was covered in swollen lovebites.

"Damn teenagers and your hickies."

They studied each other for a long sober moment, and then broke out in laughter -- a loose, unhinged sort of laughter which made Michael's lungs ache -- slapping thighs, leaking tears. Giggles choked back and sucked in, making a mad dash for the nasal passages, resulting in embellished snorts. Honesty in this laughter, and surrender -- the sort of trust that pirates and firemen forge, forced to battle the elements together. With flushed cheeks and hoarse voices, they made a meal out of Ramen Noodles and water, charged their automobile repairs on one of Michael's emergency credit cards, and left the hotel with the bed unmade.

By the end of the day, they were driving through the heart of Virginia, with the stereo turned up and the windows rolled down, even though the wind was icy and their teeth chattered. Michael draped his arm across the steering wheel, relaxed -- his hand only steady enough to smooth the car's alignment. He fished in the side-pocket for a pack of candy cigarettes, and offered one of thin, powdery sticks to Scott, who hungrily accepted.

"I need a light, though," he said.

"Here," Michael said, his cigarette dangling precariously from his lip.

"Shotgun."

They laughed as the ends of their candy-sticks touched, and the wheels of the Nova clipped the shoulder.

"See, you need to stay over *there*," Michael said. "You're just too damn distracting."

"It's in the job description. See? Sidekick." Scott fished out *Don Quixote* and opened the book to a random page. "*Muy peligrosas*," he read. "What's that? Many *pelicans*?"

"*Very dangerous*," Michael translated. "Which is, I should add, exactly what you're making my driving right now."

"Whatever; your driving's always dangerous."

As they passed through mountains and farmland, Michael watched one sleepy town pass into another, each small wooden house resemble one passed by half an hour ago. Each landmark was full of unexpected commonality, and Michael swapped his stories of childhood choir practice for Scott's high school drama club performances.

"What did you want to be when you were little, Scott?"

"A carpenter. I wanted to build things; make stuff happen."

Michael nodded. "I dig. I wanted to be an architect."

"Dude!" Scott started drumming the dashboard with his palms. "That so rocks! We're going to have to go into business together, when all this is over."

*When all this is over.* Michael mulled the phrase around his head like an oyster trying to give a grain of sand a pearlescent coat.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Scott jumped suddenly, thrust his arm out in front of Michael, pointing at a billboard. Michael swerved into the oncoming lane, was met with a flourish of honks and obscene gestures. "There's a Natural Bridge on this road!"

"They've been advertising it for miles already. Where've you been?"

"Sleeping. Hey, it's only seven miles away!"

"Holy hell," Michael said. "They have a Natural Bridge Zoo?!"

"Look." Scott pointed. "It's a wax museum!"

"*Enchanted Castle*." Michael read the sign slowly, letting the words roll off of his tongue.

"Oh, wow -- Superman!"

"Is that a flying hippopotamus," Michael said, squinting, "or have I simply been awake too long?"

Michael blinked. "Was that it?"

"Surely not." Scott glanced over his shoulder. "Just keep driving."

"I don't see any more signs, Scott. I think that was it."

Scott craned his neck around; the Natural Bridge billboard slowly collapsed and became a small dot on the road behind them. Michael started laughing.

"My god!" he said. "That was it! Okay, wait. We have to turn around and drive back over it, just to make sure." He pulled the little Nova into the closest driveway and headed back towards the dim light of tourist attractions. Michael slowed down after passing the sign proclaiming the Natural Bridge to be an

unmatched wonder, and they inspected the high wooden planks along either side of the guard rails. Scott pressed his lips together firmly, but eventually succumbed to laughter as Michael crossed the bridge a third time.

"Well so much for visiting national landmarks in the dark," Michael said, and tentatively placed a hand on Scott's shoulder. "I'm sure it's much more impressive if you pay the ten bucks to walk under it."

Scott nodded, and lightly brushed Michael's hand with the fingertips of his own. "We'll come back."

The dark concrete beneath Michael's wheels bridged the interstate as the highway wove above and beneath its parallel route. Scott was sleeping again, his breathing coming in waves, sometimes stringing snores along with the tides, at others a faint pulsation beneath the surface. Michael silenced the radio, and he smiled. The inside of his car had begun to smell like Scott. The moon settled itself in a persistent lunar wink within his rearview mirror. He thought of the road, the trail, the hundreds and thousands of pioneers making their way across the mountains, with their log cabins, patchwork, Elizabethan brogue, distilling this very moonlight in mason jars. It was a legacy, and Michael couldn't help but think there must be some magic in it.

Old downtown buildings began to flank the highway. Michael recognized the Barter Theatre immediately, with its red brick exterior decorated with small flags, and his heart skipped. Having passed through this stretch of Abingdon,

Michael drove until he saw the flickering "vacancy" of a hotel, and "Alison's Restaurant" half a mile down the road.

At the pay phone, Michael dug the yo-yo out of Scott's bag.

"Have you ever been in love, Michael?" Scott said, fingering quarters and nickels.

"I don't know." Michael twirled the yo-yo around his head, Around-the-World, then palmed it again. "Sometimes I think I'm too much of a magician to fall in love."

"What do you mean?"

"So much of love is done with smoke and mirrors, sleight-of-hand, tricks of the eye." Michael spun the yo-yo out diagonally as it barely touched the ground and started slowly creeping back towards him, Walk-the-Dog. "Illusions. I tend to see through them, and it ruins the magic."

Scott nodded, fed quarters into the machine - two, three, four - and cleared his throat.

"Hello, Mom? Hi. It's Scott. I'm all right. Everything's fine."

Michael dropped the yo-yo. It slid out of his grasp, hit the pavement with a loud thud, and slowly rolled away from the car, past Scott's feet. He could see Scott's mouth moving against the receiver in the fading light, and Michael stuck his hands in his pockets awkwardly. Caught in the act.

"Everything's just fine," Scott said.

### 3. ALISON'S RESTAURANT

Alison filled the coffee cups of the two gentlemen sitting in the booth beneath the large, plastic-framed poster of the cat dangling from a tree limb by its front paws, "Hang In There" blazoned in orange-red words.

"Is this your restaurant?" The man with the buzzed head and a neck covered in hickies motioned to the faded yellow sign out the window, while the younger one in the red hockey jersey grinned and sipped his coffee. In her decade of waiting tables at this establishment, Alison had heard the question so often that she no longer felt the need to wince.

"Afraid not," she said. "Different Alison."

In the late afternoons, before the supper rush overran the dining area, Alison would lean against the doorway of the kitchen, staring out the window and across the highway at the biplanes taking off from the Virginia Highlands Airport. The propellers at full spin, the tilt of wings reflecting the dying light of the sun, the planes often looped over the restaurant. The engines would softly shake the plastic lamps dangling over the tables; their shadows would hover in the parking lot. Alison would run one hand through her frizzy hair, drape the dishtowel over her shoulders like a scarf, and pirouette through the empty aisles, her arms outstretched.

The floor of the small studio apartment she rented in Abingdon was littered with half-completed college applications, brochures for aerospace programs,

recruitment materials from the Air Force. Late in the evening, beside the smoldering ashtray and empty cans of PBR, she straddled Jeremy, her hands resting at his naked stomach, her hips still. Jeremy, breathless, bucked beneath her, his eyes on the models of De Havilland Gipsy Moths and Beechcraft Staggerwings dangling from the rafters above.

"You already flyin', girl," he said. "I feel it."

Alison rolled off his sweaty body, grimacing at the loud suction as her thighs released his. She padded in sock feet to the kitchenette, lit a cigarette off the stove, her fingers gingerly spinning the wheel of the E6B hanging from the side of the fridge. She took a long drag, spun around on her heels to face Jeremy.

"Out," she said.

Alison had started work at the restaurant when she was fifteen. She'd walk from the bus stop directly after school, wrap the pink apron around her waist, begin bussing tables. When her shift ended, she'd crouch beneath the tomato sacks in the kitchen to work on algebra problems; if the cooks minded, they never said anything. Alison had never been a spectacularly pretty girl, but with her dark hair and pale face there was something striking about her, almost otherworldly in her features, and this commanded respect. She was incredibly patient and had no fear of hard work -- a trait her managers were particularly grateful for.

At seventeen, Alison lost her virginity in the supply closet after hours to a part-time Latino cook six years her elder. He was incredibly gentle, stopping every few minutes to ask in his thick accent, "Okay? Is this okay?" She would nod, biting her lip, looking down at his long dark eyelashes and her skinny, trembling legs. When the Department of Immigration raided the restaurant three months later, she had already forgotten his name.

The restaurant was closed on Sundays. In the parking lot, Alison sat on a blanket in the bed of Peter's old pick-up truck, the one he'd driven down from Chicago for a Baptist retreat and never left with. They'd finished the roast beef sandwiches and potato salad; Peter struggled to slice up the watermelon with a dull knife swiped from the kitchen. Alison pinched a few moonshine-soaked cherries from the Mason jar, dropped them into her coke. Across the highway, a vintage Warbird was preparing for take-off.

"You could get your GED," he said, juice dribbling from where the knife stuck fast into the melon. "Southwest Virginia Community College accepts applications for non-traditional students all the time."

"Don't they teach you nothing in that city of yours? Here." Alison reached for the knife, took the melon between her legs, pushed against the handle with both hands. She sliced through the heart, offered one half to Peter, began picking the seeds out of her own.

"You've got ten years of customer service experience, you could get a better job."

"Listen." The engine sputtered to life across the highway, and the airplane taxied across the open field, past the fluttering orange windsocks. It gained speed across the runway, the wind lifting its wings, its wheels leaving the ground.

"You never tell me you love me," Peter said.

Alison took a bite of her watermelon, reached out towards the retracting wheels as the Warbird glided overhead.

The restaurant had long since changed hands from its original namesake. Alison had never known the original Alison, though there was an old, blurry, black-and-white photo above the cash register of the plump, aging woman with wisps of frizzy hair framing her face. The waitresses and night cooks debated the various legends about her -- she'd opened up the restaurant in the 1960s to raise money for her sons for college, the restaurant had originally been part of a brothel where Alison provided company for road-weary travelers during the Depression, Alison had actually worked as a secret agent for the United States government and had been murdered in the staff restroom by a communist spy. Alison liked to dream that the woman was actually Amelia Earhart gone into hiding.

Alison had seen the restaurant go through eight owners and thirteen managers; she had known at least nine of them biblically. She had waited tables longer than anyone else working there, and had developed the reputation of welcoming the new managers to the restaurant -- showing them the vegetable bin, pointing out observations made by previous health inspectors, acting as

intercessor between the crew and the new face of authority. The face this time belonged to Blake, a Pennsylvania native with a penchant for tucking his jeans into his cowboy boots.

"Why don't you ever try for these positions?" Blake asked, his naked body curved around Alison's, his fingers at her ankles. The Discovery Channel documentary on Earhart's last flight washed the apartment in a dim television glow. "You've been at this restaurant forever, you're a natural."

Alison propped herself up on her elbows to catch a glimpse of the wind-swept Amelia waving at the crowd, the cameras. "You can only be a natural at one thing," she said.

Alison's periods had always been like clockwork, every 28 days without fail; she could chart the moon by them, memorize flight schedules. Recently, however, it seemed as if she bled all the time -- every other week she'd walk down the street and purchase a box of tampons and a carton of cigarettes from the Stop-and-Go, carry them back to her apartment in a paper sack, spend the evening at her bathroom sink trying to get the stains out of her underwear with a bar of soap and cold water.

Jonathan, the new bus boy, snored softly on the futon; Alison woke with her head pounding. She got to her feet, and blood dribbled down the insides of her thighs, pooled in a trail of dark droplets as she stumbled for the toilet. Emptying her bladder, she felt an unfamiliar pressure, an aching knot just beneath the navel. She mopped up the floor with a hand towel, tossed it in the

hamper, stood in front of the bathroom mirror, gripping the rim of the sink. Her eyes seemed darker, hollower than she usually pictured them, underscored by the purplish shadows beneath. Over her shoulder, Amy Johnson leaned against a De Havilland Puss Moth in the poster on the door.

"Everything okay, baby?" Jonathan was rubbing his eyes.

Alison shook her head. "I think I might be broken."

Alison had only been in a plane once. She was thirteen, riding county roads in the back of her uncle's pick-up truck, when they spotted a sign: "Plane Rides, \$10." Her uncle, keen to acquiesce to the desires of his late brother's daughter, drove down the dirt path between the cornfields, handed two crumpled fives to a middle-aged pilot with a red face and a rather bulbous nose.

"You be careful," her uncle said to the pilot. "Precious cargo."

The pilot winked at Alison, strapped her in the cockpit. The belt was tight against her stomach, but she didn't complain. Her eyes were on the dials, measurements she didn't recognize, switches and knobs -- all foreign. His hands flew over them gracefully, intuitively.

"You're not frightened," the pilot said. The engine came to life, and the small plane nosed across the open field.

"I've never flown before," Alison said. She'd wanted to ask what the switches did, what the levers were for. She wanted to know how it was possible, for such a heavy thing to be lifted up into the sky.

"There's really nothing like it."

She could feel the vibration of the engine throughout her entire body and the immediate calm as they left the ground. Below her, she could see her uncle leaning against the truck, shielding his eyes with his hands. She could see the barnyard, stables, springhouse, silo -- the highway lengthening as it came into view. Her stomach lurched, and she kept opening her mouth as if to speak. When the pilot asked if she wanted to try a loop-the-loop, she could only nod. She smiled as the ground became sky and the clouds opened up beneath her. "You can scream if you want to," the pilot said, but Alison just whispered, "Beautiful."

Back in the ground, shotgun to her uncle, she watched the plane take off with another customer, dip down to skim the highway with its wheels.

"I know what I want to do when I grow up," she said.

The waiting room of the Washington County Health Clinic was swarming with young mothers corralling their children through the plastic orange seats. Alison watched a red-haired woman a few years younger than herself spit on her fingers to rub chocolate from her daughter's chin, winced as an older woman swatted the backs of her grandson's legs as encouragement to sit still. Alison slowly paced around the room, reading the various signs and pamphlets tacked to the bulletin boards, advocating folic acid for pregnant women, listing the ages for needed vaccinations, explaining the dangers of the incubation period of the HIV virus. She was in the middle of comparing the Spanish and English

translations of an explanation of the clinic's policy on health insurance when the nurse came to the door and called her name.

Temperature, blood pressure, and weight were penciled in on the small clipboard and hung on the door of the examination room where Alison undressed and draped the paper gown over her body. Leaning her head back on the examination table, she noticed a chart on the wall to her left demonstrating the number of people an individual is exposed to if their sexual partners have an equivalent number of sexual partners. The women and men were represented by the traditional silhouettes in angled skirts and square pants, placed in manufactured rows, shrinking towards the bottom of the chart as the numbers stretched into the thousands. Alison felt a wave of nausea tumble over her.

Alison's Restaurant had seen its fair share of customers, often tourists coming in to Abington for a night at the famous Barter Theatre or conscientious shoppers looking for bargains at Dixie Pottery a few miles down the road. Many of the pilots from the airport across the street were regulars, and Alison often brought them free coffee to go in Styrofoam cups with plastic lids with their breakfast meals. Usually, the customers were kind, sweet-faced folk with thick, syrupy accents; they tended to call Alison "honey" and leave large tips. All the same, the occasional curmudgeon would plant himself at one of the tables and proceed to thoroughly inspect each morsel of food for stray hairs, evidence of undercooking. Instead of calling for help from the managers, the other servers would always recruit Alison to deal with these customers.

"I'm Alison," she would say, and the customers would always assume the sign meant her. "What seems to be the trouble?" And whatever the problem -- whether the customer had asked for no onions, or the steak was entirely too tough to chew, or the world-famous baked potato soup was not all it was cracked up to be -- she would whisk away the offending plate, make peace-offerings of discounted food and free coupons, and engage in small talk about hometown politics and struggling economies as the order was fixed.

The walls of the restaurant were plastered with posters advertising various life-affirming messages; a small one just above the order-up counter preached, "Some people make the world more special just by being in it," lined with faded purple tulips. "Those some people ain't me," Alison would sometimes say as she snatched the plates of burgers and fries en route to their respective tables.

The doctor furrowed her brow as she lifted up pages from the clipboard record of Alison's medical history. Fully clothed, Alison felt much more vulnerable than she did sitting on the same table just a week earlier.

"You're really quite lucky," the doctor said. "Chlamydia is generally asymptomatic in women."

Alison couldn't make eye contact. She stared at the black and white checkered tiles of the floor, noticed where her muddy hiking shoes had tracked in dirt.

"Left untreated, there is a strong possibility it may have caused irrevocable damage to your reproductive system. You will want to avoid intercourse with your

partner for ten days to avoid re-infection. I would like to retest you in a month to make sure it has cleared up."

The doctor wrote out a prescription for antibiotics; Alison stared at her illegible writing on the small slip of white paper. "Take these once a day until the bottle is empty. You will also want to make sure your partner gets treatment, as well."

Alison stared at the replicated silhouettes on the sexual exposure chart, men and women lined up side by side, an endless desperate train.

It was a Friday, and the restaurant was crowded with faces. A group of pilots had pushed three of the long tables end to end, ordering enormous amounts of food and swapping tales at boisterous volumes. Alison moved deftly from table to table, taking an order here, refilling a drink there, clearing the dishes and quickly sticking the tips in her apron pocket whenever a table was vacated. The group of pilots had left their tables in total disarray, with torn sugar packets, used napkins, spilled drinks, and pieces of pulled pork everywhere. She cleared the dishes, mopped the surface with a wet towel, and collected trash, pulling the tables apart and taking everything back to the kitchen. They had tipped her well; Alison knew this was because she had learned very early on in her career to avoid the subject of airplanes and her interest in flight altogether – these men were not interested in hearing some woman speak the language of such an exclusive profession. When Alison began clearing the last table, however, she noticed that one of the pilots had left behind a set of keys. She glanced around

the restaurant – the pilots were long gone. Alison quietly pocketed the keys, swept the remaining dishes back to the kitchen.

Teresa, who was new to the restaurant and kept making mistakes, walked up to Alison, breathless. “That man with the weird fingernails in section seven wants a side of tomatoes with his soup,” she said. Alison glanced over at the referenced table, saw the man with fire-orange hair and fingernails so long that they had started to curl in spirals. He smiled at her. “Can you get those for him?” Teresa said.

When Alison reached the vegetable bin, she realized that the tomatoes had gone rotten. It wasn't unheard of, especially during the rainy seasons. The restaurant was very old and often failed at keeping moisture from the food. Their vegetables came from an eccentric man who owned a greenhouse in Grainger County, and Alison -- because she had worked there the longest -- was usually in charge of any last-minute reordering.

She leaned against the doorframe of the supply closet, her eyes on the space between each shelf lined with tin cans and cleaning solutions, her nostrils filled with the reek of tomatoes from the vegetable bin. She could still see the small indentation in the wall from her knee during some past encounter. Opening the vegetable bin, Allison could see that the tomatoes had gone fast, busted open, a mess of seeds and pulp. She could feel the pressure, still, at her cervix, and she clutched at her stomach absently. As she reached for one of the putrid tomatoes, she wrinkled her nose, thinking of the rancid blood and tissue

collecting on the small maxi pad between her thighs. "Natural," she said, scooping the tomatoes into a large plastic bag.

From the dumpster in the parking lot, she studied the silhouette of the restaurant against the backdrop of the airplanes. This old brick building decorated with its tourist trappings, humming a dull neon in preparation for the approaching night, and the airport beyond the highway, the shiny, vintage biplanes polished, tuned, facing her with their various propellers. She watched the pilots buffing down the noses, wiping the windows, cleaning the planes of all evidence from their previous flights. All stains, dust, grime removed, and the primary colors of their paint jobs radiating the last light of the sun.

Allison took out the order pad and pen from her apron, scribbled down the number of Mr. Goodenough's Greenhouse, walked back in to the restaurant and handed the slip of paper to Teresa, who stared at her dumbly.

"The tomatoes are gone," Alison said. "You'll need to order more."

Alison walked out of the restaurant, took the keys from her apron, and crossed the wet pavement of the highway, walking toward the rows of biplanes standing sentinel between the landing lights. She tried half a dozen locks before she found the airplane to which the keys belonged. Alison climbed inside the cockpit, started the engine.

Twenty minutes later, Teresa stood in the parking lot on her cigarette break, watching as a 1944 Boeing Stearman ambled across the sky.

#### 4. GRAINGER COUNTY TOMATOES

There wasn't just one wastebasket in Sherwood Goodenough's home. There were four, exactly the same size and style, but each one a different color, and labeled meticulously in neat, printed handwriting: "paper," "plastic," "compost," "other." The paper container was red, half-full of computer print-outs crossed out and revised in red ink. The plastic container was yellow, full of empty bottles of natural spring water. The compost container was green, with banana peels, coffee grounds, celery tops. The wastebasket labeled "other" was full of empty tin cans of vegetarian chili, plastic wrap marked "organic mixed vegetables," seed packages. Everything in Mr. Goodenough's home was thus labeled and neatly arranged, mounted with index cards and packaging tape. He fell asleep each night between white cotton sheets stiff with starch.

Sherwood Goodenough was famous for his tomatoes. Every fresh market and natural foods restaurant in East Tennessee and North Carolina had his landline on speed dial. He grew them in carefully controlled, purely organic conditions inside specially designed greenhouses. The shops and restaurants would send their trucks and messengers down the long five mile driveway to his house, past the "no trespassing" signs and "private property" notices. By the time they reached his front door, the tomatoes were neatly packaged and crated, waiting on the front porch to be picked up and carted away. Every once in a while, a delivery boy might catch a glance of Mr. Goodenough at the window, his short blond hair graying at the temples, his intense green eyes narrowing

between the Venetian blinds. But he would never come out, never say a word. The few who had actually spoken to him on the phone rumored that he stuttered.

In addition to gardening, Sherwood Goodenough had an intense love of jigsaw puzzles. He'd sit at the hard-backed chair in front of his computer, browsing the web for especially complicated pictures -- the more pieces, the better. He'd have them delivered to his house, staring out the window at the young men and women in their brown uniforms leaving the small parcels on the front porch, watching as they skipped down the stairs to their large mail vans and pulled out of the driveway out towards the main highway. He'd watch their hats, the socks at their ankles, the level of self-assuredness with which they did everything. Once he could no longer hear the sound of wheels on gravel, he'd slowly open the door, bring the package in, gingerly unwrap it and spend the longest time staring at the picture on the front box. Then he would sit down in front of the glass coffee table in his living room, take out the pieces one by one, arrange them by size, shape, and color in rows along its clear surface.

There was an unspoken agreement with Sherwood Goodenough and the townsfolk -- he was both man and island, and the waters surrounding his home were to be traversed only for the purpose of business, and only indirectly. Most of the people who had contact with him respected these implied boundaries, but Marcus Hinkle, a boy of fourteen years working for his grandfather's grocery store while visiting over summer vacation, had never been one to respect boundaries. Knocking at the door one mid-morning, setting a sack of organic milk and cage-free eggs on the front porch, he glanced through an open space in the

Venetian blinds of the front window and noticed a carefully labeled daily schedule tacked to the refrigerator with plain, black square magnets. He also noticed that, according to this schedule, Mr. Goodenough was out tending to his tomatoes in the greenhouses from three to six every afternoon.

Which was true. Sherwood Goodenough had three large greenhouses behind his house on the few dozen acres of land he inherited from his late father's investments in the tobacco industry, and every afternoon he would spend exactly one hour in each one, walking slowly through the rows of the tall, spindly plants, in his soft, leather sneakers with built-in arch support, tenderly touching each fuzzy leaf as he misted the tomatoes with bottled spring water. Sometimes, he would sing -- or rather, hum, just under his breath; at others, he would murmur quietly as if to the tomato plants themselves. Always, he would gather the ripe, red fruits in green baskets, wash them carefully, and place them in large crates with large manila envelopes of order forms tied with twine for the delivery trucks to pick up in the morning and carry away. And now, Marcus was aware that Sherwood Goodenough left his house completely unattended for three hours out of every afternoon.

The first time Marcus broke into Mr. Goodenough's house, it was more out of curiosity than anything. He had spent his summer vacations learning the folklore of the small town from his neighboring playmates. Sherwood Goodenough had lived on the land for over twenty years. He was himself a man in his early fifties, and had no friends, no known kin. He never left his house, not even to go to church. And all the kids had stories about the Goodenough home --

Mr. Goodenough was a millionaire gone crazy by his money, Mr. Goodenough was really a ghost, Mr. Goodenough sacrificed live goats on his front lawn every third Sunday at midnight. Marcus figured there had to be something queer about the man, and reckoned if the bit about money were true, he might be able to pocket something of value while he took a look about the house. So he jimmied the lock of the front door with an unbent paperclip the way his old man had once shown him a few weeks before he'd been sent to the Washington County Correction Facility, and took a step inside.

The house was stark, bare, and an almost unbearable antiseptic white. Marcus had never seen anything so clean in all his life -- not even Doc Wiley's examination room held a candle to the sort of cleanliness he bore witness to here. He slid out of his shoes, afraid to leave muddy tracks on the floor and thereby giving away his intrusion. No television, no entertainment center, but a desk with a computer and office chair on one end of the room, and a table with a single chair at the other. Against the back wall, a very simple couch, and a glass coffee table centered in front of it. The floor was not carpeted, nor were there rugs or anything to soften the harsh checkered linoleum that crept from the living room and invaded the kitchen. The schedule, as he had seen it the day before, was still tacked on the refrigerator, and a small list of Mr. Goodenough's regular customers in the same neat handwriting hung from the other side of the fridge. A hallway led to an obvious bathroom and sleeping quarters, but the house on the whole was small and unremarkable. Marcus felt somewhat disappointed at not finding bloody goat carcasses or piles of cash lying about.

Walking back into the living room in sock feet, Marcus noticed the jigsaw puzzle on the glass surface of the coffee table. The closed box was stuck beneath the table, and advertised the five thousand pieces needed to complete the picture of a waterfall spilling over a mountain ridge with two unicorns frolicking beneath. All of the pieces had been removed from the box, but none had been linked together -- instead, they were all in neat, color-coordinated rows on the surface of the table. Without thinking, Marcus pocketed one of the lighter white pieces -- it might have contained a unicorn's eye -- slipped back into his shoes, and locked the front door behind him before he raced the length of the driveway to where he'd stashed his bicycle in the woods by the highway. The puzzle piece dug into his thigh as he pumped the pedals back towards his grandfather's grocery store.

Opening the back door, Sherwood immediately sensed something amiss in his house. He closed and opened the front and back doors three times, locking and unlocking them six. He flushed the toilets three times each, walked five laps around the inside perimeter of the house, spraying disinfectant in his wake. He switched every light in every room on and off, tied and retied his custom-made shoes. The unexpected need for this emergency house check made him forty-five minutes late starting his dinner, in which the doors of the microwave were shut and re-shut, the stove was turned on and off, the dishes were washed and re-washed by hand. Exhausted, and two hours late, he briefly sat down to his puzzle, connecting together two edges of the outer border before retiring to his bedroom for a restless night of sleep.

When Sherwood walked through his greenhouses the next day, he was too tired to whisper stories to his tomatoes, too distracted to hum soothing tunes. He touched the vines gingerly, and watered them carefully, but he felt his heart in his throat, which made it difficult to swallow, or breathe -- a latent panic simmering beneath the surface.

When Marcus broke into Mr. Goodenough's home a second time, he was sure he'd find something more valuable to steal than a small, jagged piece of cardboard. While he knew he could not carry an entire computer system on the handlebars of his bicycle, he figured the ownership of such a machine suggested a relative level of comfortable living, which surely meant he could find something more portable to steal. He walked through the hallway into the bedroom, the comforter on the bed immaculately smooth and straight. He peeked into the drawers of the plain wooden dressing table -- white undershirts, white socks, white briefs, all folded, pressed, and symmetrical. There was no decoration on the walls, no knick-knacks, no framed black-and-white pictures of ancestors and unknown relatives that Marcus was accustomed to seeing at his grandfather's house during these summers. He opened the closet door, saw the custom-made sneakers lined up in a row, the stiff blue slacks, the light button-up shirts. And boxes upon boxes of jigsaw puzzles.

Not wanting to leave empty-handed, Marcus picked up another piece from the puzzle on the table, this time with something blue and white that looked like it might be water. It took Sherwood twice as long as the night before to get through

his routine; at four in the morning, he finally passed out beneath the stiff sheets, falling into murky dreams.

Summer was drawing to a close, and school would be starting back soon. Marcus decided he wanted one more crack at Mr. Goodenough's house before being shipped back to Mosheim, where his mother was waiting for him. At the very least, he thought to himself, a man known for his tomatoes should have an interesting supply of food to pilfer from. He'd check the kitchen this time; perhaps he'd find some sort of exotic salad dressing, or European chocolates.

There was little in Mr. Goodenough's refrigerator -- a half gallon of milk, some margarine from Marcus's grandfather's store. The freezer was packed with various frozen organic meals. The cabinets were stocked with cans upon cans of vegetarian chili. Marcus kicked the refrigerator hard, sending a soft rattle throughout its interior. He pocketed a final puzzle piece -- this time, some part of the greenery -- before leaving the Goodenough house for good.

Sherwood Goodenough was exhausted as he watered his tomatoes. He moped along the vines, refusing to touch them, refusing to talk, just absently showering water at them. If they drooped a little more than the day before, if there were brown spots on the leaves and the fruits didn't seem as plump, Sherwood was hardly awake enough to notice. After he'd finished taking care of the tomatoes, he began what had become the tedious process of going through his nightly routine.

It was midnight before he got to his puzzle. His dark, hollow eyes scanned the pieces and placed them inside the firm border according to color. His fingers

shook slightly as they fluttered over the fragments, his breathing heavy and forced. If he could just get everything back in its right place, he knew it would all be fine. If he could just get this puzzle finished, life would settle back to normal. He could start sleeping again.

There was a dim light in the sky when Sherwood snapped the last remaining piece in place. In horror, he saw the glass of the coffee table glare up at him from three empty sockets -- the unicorn's eye, the waterfall behind him, the surrounding forest. Sherwood's palms sweat, his hands felt heavy. He looked beneath the table, beneath the couch, anywhere stray pieces might have fallen -- empty, all empty. Sherwood sat and stared at the puzzle, beautiful and perfect and serene, except for the three empty spaces that blighted the landscape. He focused on the three holes until little white lights danced across his field of vision.

A deep, guttural noise escaped Sherwood's throat, and he swept the puzzle to the floor with one movement of his arm, picked up the table and threw it to the other side of the room, the glass shattering from the impact with the linoleum. Sherwood lay on the couch, drew himself up in a fetal ball, and didn't move, even as the room became light with the early morning sun and the alarm clock in his bedroom droned.

Three hours later, Marcus sat in the bed of his grandfather's rusty pick-up truck with his brother, chewing tobacco. As they passed the opening of Mr. Goodenough's driveway, Marcus nodded in the direction of the house and spat.

"That old man ain't got nothing of value," he said to his brother. "Ain't got nothing at all."

## 5. BATTLE OF BLUE SPRINGS

Such tiny hands. She's got such tiny hands with fingers no longer than a small child's, and warts. Invasions of cauliflower just beneath the skin. Her small hands covered in warts, pinned behind her back by the sweaty fists of Scottie Hinkle. Marcus, his brother, standing in front of her, his fingertips at the corner of his lip, and the blood there, where Jack punched him.

“Twenty bucks says she's a natural redhead.”

“Twenty bucks says she *ain't*.”

Gym class. The other girls were making slow laps around the track, chatting, gossiping, soft gestures with their perfectly manicured fingernails. The coach was on the other side of the field, advising a small group of students on football techniques. Nobody had seen the Hinkle brothers pull Jack beneath the bleachers.

“Well, there's one sure way to tell a natural redhead. Ain't there, Scottie?”

Marcus and Scottie, with their brown rooster hair stuck up around their red faces. Scottie laughed; Marcus slipped a sweaty hand beneath the elastic of Jack's gym shorts.

With a swift movement, Jack kicked Marcus square in the crotch. She narrowed her eyes as his face turned purple, smirked at the aluminum way he crumpled into a tight, writhing ball.

Suddenly, applause. Jack glanced over her shoulder, spied the broad, six-foot frame of her cousin, Eric Shelton. Faint scar across the bridge of his nose, cigarette in his mouth, clapping.

“Well, Marcus,” he said. “Looks like you finally messed around with something that bites back.”

Scottie let go of Jack's wrists, and she stumbled into the concrete bricks behind them. Eric took a few steps forward, chuckling, flicking his cigarette into the grass beside Marcus's head.

“I guess livestock just don't do it for you two anymore.”

“Watch it, Shelton,” said Scottie. But Marcus, still doubled over in pain, simply cast a dark look to his brother, and slowly shook his head.

Eric laughed. He turned to Jack, offered a hand, helped her to her feet.

“Don't tell Papaw,” Jack said, as she and Eric made their way along the emergency lane of the Andrew Johnson Highway, keeping close to the guard rail. “He don't... I'd rather not worry him.”

Eric nodded, handed Jack a Mountain Dew. Jack shook her mane of frizzy red braids, her freckled face already burnt from the early September sun. Still shaking, this twisted adrenaline knot in her stomach, like a seed. Watermelon seeds, like the ones her grandfather always warned her against swallowing. Swallow the seeds, you'll grow a watermelon in your belly. The Mountain Dew tasted metallic. Her wrists were sore.

Anything else. Just not to think about it. Just turn it off, to cowboy up to it.

“I ain't seen you in ages, Eric. Why don't you come around no more?”

“Daddy's still pissed with Papaw for letting the girls go.”

Two years ago, the sisters – Eliza Shelton and Judith Wilhoit – escaped the position as Papaw’s only living children shortly after their mother died. Ran off to New York City to become actresses, or so the rumors went. Eric's father stood out in the front yard of Papaw's house for a full hour, his fists clenched, staring at the road. Eric and Jack had spent that hour sitting on the porch, lighting matches and letting them fall.

Jack and Eric passed the lumber company, took a shortcut through some high grass, disturbing grasshoppers and sending fluffy white seeds to flight. When they came to the open road, the laces of Jack's combat boots were covered in cockleburbs.

“You ever hear from her? Your mom?”

“She calls sometimes,” said Jack. “You?”

“Postcards.”

They were keeping the train tracks to their left, crossed over Little Chuckey Creek on a small concrete bridge that opened onto a gravel road. Curved down into a valley, two decent-sized foothills shadowing a fishpond, and an old two-story farmhouse in the distance.

“Are you okay?” Eric stopped, gently touched Jack's elbow. She opened her mouth to answer, but he said, “I mean here. With him.”

Jack twisted her pink, freckled lips. Just not to think about it, just to push it away. Ducking under overhanging limbs, she spotted something fuzzy on a leaf.

“Woolly worm,” she said, cupping her hands over the furry caterpillar, petting it gently with a finger. Mostly black, with dark brown stripes, and a dash of red in the center. “Hard winter ahead.”

They walked past the house, through a large network of sidewalks and crossways, smooth river-rock in cement. Past the raised flowerbeds lined with the same intricate rock work, the storage buildings, over a wooden bridge, all crafted by the calloused hands of their Papaw. They walked out into the garden, past rows of carrots, onions, squash, eggplant, corn. They walked along an old cow-path through the field and up along the side of one of the hills, up towards the fishpond. Their grandfather stood with an old coffee tin in his hand, full of tiny fish-food pellets from the DAUBER.

Their grandfather was a smallish man in a plain white undershirt and a blue baseball cap, his gray pants belted across his non-existent hips, his face care-worn and sun-bitten, rough as scales. In some ways, Jack favored her grandfather – her lanky frame, the lack of hips, skinny and stick-like – and the large ears sticking out from beneath her frizzy braids. The Wilhoit ears, they were called, which complimented the Wilhoit eyes, as ice-blue as the ones their grandfather used to survey the pond beneath him. With a semi-circular sweep of his arm, he cast the fish pellets out onto the surface of the water. Jack scuttled down into the bowl of the fishpond, knocking dirt loose with her clunky heels and setting it skidding into the water.

“Leave off that,” their grandfather said. “You’ll scare the fish.”

He looked up, saw the hulking frame of Eric emerge from the ridge of the pond. They stared at each other in silence for a long minute.

“Where's your daddy?”

“Out driving trucks, sir.” Eric shifted beneath his grandfather's gaze.

“Well.” Their grandfather exhaled deeply, a faint whistle at his lips. “I reckon you ought to stay for dinner.”

Their grandfather motioned towards the pond. Dark shapes slithered back and forth just beneath the surface, sending ripples dancing against the setting light. Dark-grey whiskers broke through, siphoned the water, sank beneath the surface again. Catfish. Jack caught a flash of white belly, the flick of a fin, secretly awed by the size of the creatures, and their gracefulness in spite of that.

Suddenly, their grandfather's lungs exploded in a fit of coughing. The mucous rattled in his chest as he worked the guttural muscles of his throat, pushing the air outward. He brought a stained white handkerchief to his mouth, into which he hacked up a large wad of yellow phlegm. He wiped the spittle from his lips, sunken-in from the lack of teeth to support them, and stuffed the kerchief into his back pocket. He cleared his throat.

“I suppose we'd best get supper on,” he said.

Passing through the garden, their grandfather stopped at the row of green beans.

“Those warts still troubling you, Jack?”

“Seems I can't get rid of them no matter what I do, Papaw.”

Their grandfather smiled, plucking a few of the leaves from the nearest plant. "Here. Let's give this a try." He took her hands, rubbed the leaves over the scratchy mounds. He buried the medicine beneath a rock at the foot of the row. "Six weeks," he said.

"Six weeks," mused Jack, studying the strange, seedy circles within her fingers. She looked up at Eric, and smiled.

During World War II, Jack and Eric's grandfather had been a cook in the Army. As such, his meals were legendary in the family, particularly in the arena of quantity; he had never quite managed to find the correct ratio for a recipe that once fed hundreds of men to accurately serve a mere three. The table was heavily laden with sliced ham, pickled beets, hominy, pinto beans, and boiled potatoes; Jack shoveled a large portion of each of these onto a round, chipped plate with a rooster engraved in the center. Her grandfather pulled warm cornbread from the oven, crumbled it up into a tall glass of milk. Eric sat beside the far wall, picking at his beets.

"Your daddy's a Shelton, right?" their grandfather said.

Eric nodded, took a bite of his pinto beans, and tried to discreetly spit them back out into his napkin.

"Shelton," their grandfather mused, clicking his tongue against the roof of his toothless mouth. "Bootleggers and thieves and preachers, the lot of them. Especially those from the Carolina side of the mountain."

“My daddy ain't a thief,” Eric said, quietly balling his left hand into a fist beneath the table, lowering his eyes. “He just ain't around much, is all.”

Their grandfather nodded, shoveled a bit of cornbread into his mouth, the milk dribbling from his chin. “Worked a still with a Carolina Shelton once. Must've been eleven or twelve – not much younger than you, Jack. I was a pretty good shot, and knew the woods right well enough – was always bringing him rabbits I killed, or setting traps – so Old Man Shelton hired me as a lookout. Now, I was the lookout, but I'd also go tend to the still when no one was around, tasting the moonshine, stirring the mash. Except one evening I decided I was going to drink me some of that mash. And, I tell you, I don't think I've ever been so sick in all my life.”

“That had to be one hell of a headache the next day,” Eric smirked.

“And Old Man Shelton had to explain to my Ma why I was so sick I couldn't get out of bed for church.”

“Did she let you stay home?” Jack asked.

“Lord, no. She made me sit in the front pew to make an example of me.”

Whenever their grandfather laughed, he did so quietly. His lips would wrap up around his gums, and a short, raspy sound would escape his throat. His shoulders would shake softly – that's how Jack could always tell.

“Can't say I ever took much to religion anyways,” their grandfather said. “I guess my Ma knowed it, her reasoning for keeping me in church as long as she could. Way I figured it, you want to get close to God, just go outside with a bottle

of whiskey and sit with your back against an old oak tree. Ain't gonna get no closer to God than that.”

Jack murmured in agreement, her mouth full of potatoes and beets, the red juice escaping from the corners of her mouth. The three sat in silence for the rest of the meal, punctuated by the music of cutlery scraping against the rooster-emblazoned flatware.

After supper, Jack gathered the dishes in the sink to soak, and the three made their way to the front porch. The sun had set, and twilight had descended upon the old farmhouse. Their grandfather took out his pipe, stuffed the hold full of tobacco, and lit it, while they watched the last of the summer's fireflies weave in and out of the surrounding cedars.

“I hear you were in the service?” Eric tentatively brought out his pack of Marlboros, watched carefully for his grandfather's subtle nod before lighting a cigarette.

“Army during World War II, Air Force during Korea. Never could get very far with it. Every time they'd give me a promotion, I'd do something so they'd have to demote me.”

Jack knelt at the foot of the two rocking chairs, studying the creation of a mud dauber's nest on the porch railings. She loved to listen to her grandfather's stories, even the ones she'd heard a hundred times. She felt warmed by the tobacco, by the soft pad of feet on the porch, by the creak of the rocker.

“I got in a lot of trouble gambling, you see,” their grandfather said. “I was a natural at it. Spent some time in Vegas with your Mamaw, learned all the dealers tricks with poker, blackjack. Had the knack of marking the cards so as no one could see how I was stacking the deck.”

“So that's how you always beat me,” Jack said. “No fair cheating your own kin.”

Her grandfather ignored her. “Well, I was stationed at Okinawa, and I won a huge wad of money – five hundred dollars, which was a lot of cash back then. Well, I had no use for that kind of money on the island, so I wired it back to the old woman, told her to put it down towards a car, ‘cause she'd been legging it around town up to that point. Well, I thought nothing else of it, tried to make it day by day on the island, got leave and headed back home for a while. That old woman, she'd been so determined to buy a completely new car, she demanded one with no miles on it, not even from the showroom. When they brought the car in from the manufacturer, she demanded to drive the damn thing off the truck.” Again, his silent laugh. “Lord, that woman.”

Jack hugged her knees. She knew how much he missed his wife, knew that he woke up raging against the cruel hand fate had dealt him, knew that the feeling of security he found from the women in his life had crumbled away, and there was little Jack could do to hold him up, to keep him together. The mud dauber crawled into its nest for a well-earned night of sleep.

Papaw invited Eric to stay the night. Jack took him back to her room with the bunk beds, the room she and her mother had shared before she went away. She'd covered the pink roses of the wallpaper with posters and postcards from musical groups Eric didn't recognize.

"Punk bands," Jack explained. "From New York, Seattle. Hard, angry music, calling for revolution and anarchy and stuff like that. Found them in 'zines my momma sent to me from the big city." She climbed up the wooden ladder to the top bunk. "I'll make you a tape."

In the darkness, the two were bundled beneath quilts their grandmother had made, warm and silent save for the frogs outside the window calling for the end of summer.

"I've got to piss like a racehorse," Eric said.

"Not a good idea, Eric. Ain't there any way you can hold it 'til morning?"

"Not unless you want to help me clean this mattress."

Jack sighed, kicked off her blankets, climbed down the ladder. "Why don't you use the trash can? That will be easy to clean up in the morning."

"I ain't gonna pee with a girl standing behind me."

Jack looked nervously to the door which led to the hallway.

"You got to be quiet," Jack said. "You got to be more quiet than you ever imagined in your life."

They opened the bedroom door slowly, silently. Jack watched Eric tiptoe down the length of the hallway. She gripped the doorframe at the sound of urine

streaming into the toilet bowl, bolted towards the bathroom when she heard him flush the commode.

Her grandfather reached him first, his blue eyes frosted over with sleep, a revolver in his right hand.

“What the hell you doing in my house?!”

“Papaw, please! It’s Eric, it’s just Eric.” Jack grabbed the arm with the revolver, tried to wrench it away, but he shook her loose, pushed her away from him. Her back connected with the wall in a resounding crack; picture frames fell from the wall and broke open.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Eric said, holding his arms in front of his face to ward off any blows. “I just had to pee.”

“Always coming to steal my stuff, to rob me blind. Just ‘cause I’m an old man, you think you can get away with it, ain’t that right.” Their grandfather pinned Eric against the wall with one strong, calloused hand. With the other, he raised the gun to Eric’s head.

“Please, Papaw. Don’t.” Jack tugged desperately at her grandfather’s arm. He clocked her across the face with the butt of his gun. She collapsed at his feet, crying, holding her jaw. “Don’t, don’t.”

There was a slight clearing in their grandfather’s eyes. He lowered the gun from Eric’s head, let go of him with his other hand. He coughed again, the spasm of his lungs as he brought his handkerchief to his mouth. He ambled toward his bedroom at the opposite end of the hallway without a word.

“Run, now,” Jack said. Eric and Jack scrambled back to her bedroom, shut the door tight behind them, pulled the lock. They collapsed in the bottom bunk together. Jack was shaking, but she laughed slightly. She could hear the hurried panic of Eric’s heartbeat.

“Hell of it is, he’ll forget it tomorrow,” she said. “He always forgets, or at least pretends to. It’s a funny thing, what a man will believe about himself.”

Eric was silent for a long while. Jack wondered what was going on in his head, what he was thinking of. Would he tell his daddy? Would he talk to the school counselor? Would they come to take her away from the farmhouse and the vegetables and the only home she’d ever known? She swallowed hard.

“He’s not a bad man,” Jack said.

“I know,” Eric reached out and touched her jaw, gently, where it had gone red from the impact of the gun. It would be bruised tomorrow, Jack was sure. She wrapped her hands in Eric’s flannel shirt, breathing in the soft, pine-cone scent of his fear. He smoothed the wrinkles from the ratted quilt, pulled it up to her chin.

“Do you think Papaw’d let me stay for a while?” he said.

Every afternoon at school, Eric asked Jack if he could walk her home. Every afternoon, Jack answered with the same, non-committal shrug. Always, the guard rail to their right, Andrew Johnson Highway to their left. Every afternoon, their grandfather invited him to stay for supper; every evening, Jack asked him to spend the night. On the front porch, their grandfather whittled slingshots with his pocketknife. When the weather was cold and damp, or when

their grandfather felt especially frail, they gathered around the kitchen table, playing poker, five card stud, blackjack. And their grandfather told stories -- stories of fights, of war, of lost youth. Stories of mischief and pranks.

Sometimes, late in the night, their grandfather woke up screaming. Jack and Eric braced the locked bedroom door as they felt their grandfather slam his full weight against it over and over. In the morning, there would be bruises that no one talked about.

One chilly night in early November, their grandfather stumbled out of his bedroom in a very different daze. He collapsed in the floor of the hallway, gasping for breath, his eyes on the picture frames above him.

“I can see their faces, Jack,” he said.

“He’s boiling,” Eric kept his hand on his forehead.

Jack dialed the phone; an ambulance, a howling banshee, a specter of red-and-white, came for their grandfather. It whisked him away and sped off so quickly that Jack hadn’t thought to ask if they might ride with him, or if someone could be sent to pick them up. She slammed the screen door, tossed a bundle of keys to Eric, and climbed into their grandfather’s rusty pick-up.

“Can you drive a stick?” she said.

The pick-up bucked and shuddered onto the Andrew Johnson Highway, stalling at all the lights. Eric cursed and struggled with the ignition; Jack was grateful that the streets were so empty at four in the morning.

The Veterans Hospital was in Johnson City, about fifty miles northeast of Mosheim. The wind nettled Jack's face, her braids whipped about, and she chewed absently at her lower lip. She watched the landscape pass by her -- the fluorescent lighting of the convenience stores, the flagpoles, the empty shopping centers. The moon, big-bellied and nearly full, was slowly sinking westward. To the east, the faint outlines of the mountains against the backdrop of stars, here and there littered with tiny lights, like glitter, and the blinking red of radio towers. The small towns of Greeneville, Limestone, Jonesborough so still, deserted, dead in the early morning hours. Just the hum of the occasional passing car, and the violent rush of wind from the open window.

At the hospital, a nurse whispered "quickly," "without pain," and "at peace." She led Jack and Eric into the small ICU unit, closing the door behind her, to give them some "time with the departed." Jack and Eric set their eyes on the body of their grandfather as he had left it -- calloused, care-worn, and sunken in.

Jack didn't say anything at first. Her heart was pounding in loud, tribal Morse-code against her ribcage. Her fingers dangled in the air in front of her; her tongue was swollen, and she was only slightly aware of the pressure of Eric's hand on her shoulder. Jack's eyes shifted to the liver-spotted hands crossed in a sick, peaceful calm over the relaxed chest, beneath the slack jaw.

"This man is dead," Jack said, the only coherent sentence that came bubbling to surface of her consciousness. "This is what it feels like, to be in a room, with a dead person." Jack kept staring at his chest, expecting a sharp

intake of air, expecting the rhythmic swell she had grown so accustomed to when he'd nap on the couch, his sock feet propped up on the sofa arm. Her eyes rested on the sliver of blue beneath the eyelid.

In her mind, she watched her grandfather crush her into a giant-bear hug, watched as he made his hand into buzzards that poked her ribs in a ticklish frenzy. She felt his hard calloused hands gripping her forearm as he showed her how an Indian squaw whips its young. He handed her a twisted buckeye, making her guess what sort of nut it was, and helped her write her name into the wet cement around the rocks he'd placed for the patio. She ducked from his fists and his guns, hid under the bed when he got through the bedroom door. She saw herself holding his hand as he hung his head in the late afternoons after her mother left. *Of course I love you*, she'd told him. *Of course I'll stay*.

"Perhaps, when you die, your life flashes in front of everybody else's eyes." Jack bit her lip harder, until she was consciously aware of pain, and blood. She didn't touch him.

"Matter cannot be created or destroyed," Eric said. "It can only be changed."

Jack felt something rip, as if stitches were coming undone somewhere inside her. She pushed her sleeve into her mouth, escaped to the bathroom, and vomited salt water and snot.

Jack and Eric sat in the textured orange hospital seats, waiting for an adult or a relative to show up and sign papers. Jack's cheekbones felt like quicksand,

her eyes raw and sucked under. In the middle of the waiting room, a child with curly blond hair spun around in circles, staring at the ceiling. The mother, sitting across from them, smiled.

“She’s talking to God,” the mother said.

Jack nodded, squeezed Eric’s hand. She wished she could talk to *someone*. She wondered where their mothers were, if they’d received the frantic messages left at hotel desks and the answering machines of friends. She wondered if they’d come home, come to the funeral, scoop their children up in their arms and promise that everything was going to be alright. Jack couldn’t even remember what her mother smelled like.

Eric’s father appeared in the doorway -- a large, hulking man with dark hair and haggard eyes. He looked as though he hadn’t slept in days, which -- Jack realized -- was probably true.

“C’mon, kids,” he said. “Let’s go.”

During the funeral, Jack shifted in her itchy dress, poked her fingers into a small hole in one of the plush parlor chairs.

“They took all the blood out of his body, Eric,” she said. “He smells like formaldehyde. Like he’s some sort of critter in a jar in Physical Science Class.”

Eric nodded. “I can’t imagine Papaw would’ve put up with a suit while he was living. Seems unnatural.”

“They even put fake teeth in. Papaw ain’t had teeth for as long as I remember.”

Jack refused to shake hands with the preacher as he made his rounds. She refused to bow her head during the prayers, and she chewed at the inside of her jaw as they sang hymns over the body. When the preacher told the congregation that their grandfather had his heart open to Jesus, she simply shook her head, *no*.

She wasn't reprimanded; the rest of the family was too busy fighting over the scraps Jack and Eric's grandfather had left behind. He left no will, so the estate automatically went to Jack's mother, Judith, the oldest. Eric's mother, Eliza, wanted a cut; Eric's father felt that some percentage of the estate should be left to him since he was stuck raising the grandson on a single parent salary. Judith, however, was steadfast in her decision to sell the farm, to use the money to secure a little place in New York, and to take Jack back with her. Jack was too weary from grief to protest.

Later that night, Jack tapped on Eric's bedroom window. He switched on the light, his walls full of charcoal sketches, twisted faces and shadowy bodies, words written everywhere. Jack had a small bag strapped over her shoulder, and a flask on a cord around her neck. Her eyes were vibrant and wild, shaking -- like the day Eric had applauded her face-off against the Hinkle brothers beneath the bleachers, her hands all knuckles and fists. She had pulled on her sweater inside-out.

"You got any shovels?" she asked.

They followed the railroad tracks to the graveyard, Jack aligning her boots against the steel rails beneath her, the wooden planks at half-foot intervals with the gravel erupting from within and pouring over either side of the railway round. The moon was full, and directly above them; their breath was foggy in the crisp autumn air. Jack was acutely aware of the boundaries, obsessed by each line of hedges, each fence, each wire, each small arch, each threshold. She took a swig from the flask at her neck, and offered it to Eric.

“Moonshine,” she said, coughing.

Off a dirt road, they ascended the hill of gravestones, shadows like ghosts dancing beneath trees and backlit by moonlight, flanked on all sides by the comforting arms of the Blue Ridge Mountains. They found the fresh, loose dirt of the new grave easy enough, the small temporary marker stuck at the head in anticipation of the delivery of cut marble. Jack read her grandfather’s name over and over, her eyes scanning from left to right, a continual dialogue in her head. *Jack Wilhoit*. She had been named after him.

Jack and Eric took their shovels, cut into the earth. The hole had been made by machines that broke through the Tennessee clay and limestone with precision, refilled by similar machines that dumped the mound back into the hole. As such, the dirt was loose and easily yielded to their instruments. It was the repetition of movement that Jack found taxing, that an hour of shoveling dirt to the side would result in a mere two feet of depth. In spite of the cold November air, Jack peeled off her sweater, her damp braids sticking to the back of her neck. She wore one of their grandfather’s sleeveless undershirts and no bra, drenched

to the skin in sweat, her tiny pink nipples hardened by the cold air and perfectly visible through the thin white material.

She looked to Eric, who was blatantly staring at her breasts. She took another long swig of moonshine, passed the flask to Eric, and crushed her open mouth to his lips. He stiffened for a moment, his eyes wide with what might have been confusion or fear, before yielding to Jack's kiss. She placed all her yearning in that kiss, all her sorrow and grief and need, her longing for comfort and stability, clinging to Eric's flannel shirt as if he were the only anchor in the world. His hands fluttered all over her body, hot and dangerous, expressing a much more primal need. She knew, instinctively, it would be like the bruises -- not acknowledged, never discussed. When she went back to her shovel, she said, "I'm going to miss you," and lifted the soft earth out of the grave.

With a crowbar, Jack and Eric pried at the coffin. They heard the lock break, felt the latch give, and swung open the top half of the heavy metallic lid. Their grandfather was frozen and doll-like beneath their flashlight and the dim moon sinking behind the mountains. Jack reached down, loosened his tie. From the small sack at her hip, she brought out his favorite blue baseball cap, fitted it loosely over his neatly combed hair, above the heavy makeup of his distorted face. She slipped a buckeye into the inner pocket of his coat, placed his deck of playing cards in the coffin at his hip, pushed his pocketknife into the stiff fingers of his right hand, resting across his chest. She took one last long swig of

moonshine, and then placed the half-full flask above his shoulder, beside his chin, on the soft satin pillow.

“A burial worthy of a pharaoh,” Eric said.

They found a rock to weight down the lid, tossed shovelfuls of dirt back onto the casket with dull thuds. The slight warmth of twilight crept over the mountains from the East. Jack tried to work through the blisters on her hands, the blisters on her palms. Thin red welts where the lifelines should be. Opening and closing her hand. Her small, blistered hand. Unblemished, perfect fingers.

“What is it?” Eric asked, anchoring his shovel in the thick earth. When he touched Jack’s shoulder, she spun around, her freckled cheeks glistening.

“Gone,” she mumbled, spreading her hands out in front of her, as if they were foreign objects, rubbing her thumb along the smooth patches of once-raised skin. “They’re gone.”

## 6. SIGNAL MOUNTAIN

Alestar wanted the world to be full of heroes almost as much as she herself wanted to be one.

Each morning at seven o'clock, Alestar smacked the snooze button of her alarm-clock-radio at least three times before dragging herself out of bed. The hot water ran out two minutes before she rinsed all of the shampoo from her hair, and she scavenged the khaki pants and collared shirt from the clothing scattered across the floor of her apartment, holding them up to her nose in order to judge their respective levels of rancidness. Todd and Zoe in the Morning informed her of injury-wrecks on I-40, highs in the mid 50s, hurricane damage on the Florida coast, James Wilhoit kicking a field goal from the 40 yard line. She pulled her green Doc Martins from beneath her bed, the comforters and quilts her grandmother made for her in a disheveled pile at the foot of the mattress. She shuffled through the paper plates, unwashed dishes, Justice League comics, Joss Whedon's Astonishing X-Men, looking for her car keys. Eight seventeen.

"Fuck."

Alestar still remembered how she came to the city on a rainy Thursday afternoon in the late summer, coasting along the gentle curves of Kingston Pike, with a trunk full of secondhand clothes, her life in itemized boxes stacked in the vacant seats. The city had made Alestar many promises, and if she didn't notice that the city had its finger crossed behind its back, she could hardly be at fault for it.

She lived upstairs in apartment L -- the door with the Superman sticker beneath the peephole. Sometimes, when she heard the keys rattle in the lock across from her, she'd stand on tiptoe to look out at Cheryl -- short red hair, eyebrow ring, hopelessly straight. Their conversations always took place in five-to-ten minute intervals in the parking lot, save for the one time she knocked on Alestar's door for a cup of sugar, and they talked about *Smallville* for a good forty-five minutes. Cheryl hadn't been around in a while -- she was shacking up with some music instructor who lived on Northshore. Inevitably unavailable, like all of the women in Alestar's life.

There had, of course, been one girl, because there is always at least one girl for the superhero, the love that never quite works out, the reporter or the teacher or the modelesque wife of the hero's best friend. For Alestar, it was Amy -- the short, stocky, wide-eyed performance artist who changed her hair color daily and chain-smoked nicotine stains into her fingerprints. Some mornings, Alestar would wake to the vivid memory of Amy in her bed, the familiar reek of tobacco and vodka, the curve of her white hip vanishing beneath the gathered quilts. Half-asleep, Alestar would slide her arm across the empty bed, her fists full of dirty sheets, until the slam of a door from the apartment foyer jolted her into consciousness.

Below her, in apartment J, this deaf girl and her husband were always fighting. Four in the morning, doors slamming, rattling the glasses in Alestar's cabinets, causing her figurines of Swamp Thing and Deadman to tip over. The girl beneath her screamed unintelligible syllables; her husband shouted: "Listen,

just listen!" Alestar couldn't help but think, *the one thing he asks of her is the one thing she can't ever do.*

Alestar took the stairs two at a time and raced to her car. Key in the ignition of her rust-colored 98 Nissan Sentra, turning over the engine and pulling out of the parking lot, out onto Kingston Pike, on to another eight hours of fingers pressed to keyboard, entering orders of overpriced gemstones for lonely widowed ladies onto the cold flickering light of the computer monitor.

After work each day, Alestar would slink into one of the pervasive coffee shop chains with her knapsack over her shoulder, watching the masses of teenagers huddled among the outdoor patio tables, sharing cigarettes. Alestar pressed her forehead into the heel of her hand, sighed, took another long sip of her white chocolate mocha. Oh, to smoke peppermint cloves. Oh, to be beautiful, or even interesting, among the wreckage of her minimum wage payroll. She watched the teenagers saunter indoors for refills, all dressed up like Hollywood starlets, too shiny and too full of glitter for the overcast Tennessee evening. She opened her blank notebook, picked up her black Zeb roller.

*You can't escape it, the grit of this town. It embeds itself in your skin, in the split ends of your hair, in the bits of dirt beneath your fingernails. That rusty pick-up truck, that five-o'clock shadow, the feathered mullet and the Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. It never leaves you. No matter how many European countries you photograph, no matter how many degrees you attach to the end of your name,*

*whenever you stop to straighten your shoelaces you'll find your boots caked with the bronze of Tennessee clay.*

Alestar used to be a writer -- *used to* being the operative phrase. Hovering in her gray wool coat at the end of November, her mind was a retrenchment of paragraphs and clichés that dropped from her pen in apathetic pellets.

*The men from California will poke fun at your hillbilly brogue, your chesnut-scarred bare feet will shift uncomfortably on stretches of wide open asphalt. You'll always be concerned about the plight of tobacco farmers even though you've never worked a patch in your life and you don't smoke. It's in your blood, these mountains.*

She was trying to write a story, but the dialogue seemed stilted and the characters only came alive for her when she was driving. Her narratives were threadbare and easily distracted from the through-line, bleeding into each other with no continuity. She just tried to keep her pen moving, a slight-of-hand to trick her mind to surrender the words. She scribbled down phrases

*I forget what the world or hello? I love you anyway. or simply dream* focusing on the handwriting, changing from cursive to print and illegible scribble. Perhaps the handwriting would change the tone. Perhaps the words were just waiting to be coaxed out of their dressing rooms with the promise of a new fashionable wardrobe. Bashful southern ladies, her words were, fastening elaborate gowns behind a thin screen, suffocated by tight-laced corsets.

To keep the hand moving, she jotted down lyrics from the Leonard Cohen song on the overhead speakers, stories of music flooding the evening streets of

far-off cities. Alestar had never lived in New York, had never been to Clinton Street. She spent her afternoons watching the college kids sketch hasty outlines of the swarming Kingston Pike traffic in oversized notebooks decoupage with stickers, magazine articles, and glitter glue. Oh, to be so young, to translate the words without prejudice. Alestar remembered when she never bothered to edit her work, when everything was written in lowercase, when even the typos were sacred.

*i keep forgetting how big the world is. all of this writing is making my hands hurt.*

Alestar's head dropped against the edge of the circular cafe table. She watched the women with short bobbed hair and green aprons slip full cups into their corrugated holders and hand them to customers with forced smiles.

Alestar's apathy was nourished by a deep root system, somewhere beneath the breastbone, someplace near the heart. In the evenings, she would lay on her bed staring up at her ceiling, her hands half open with the palms facing upward, the knuckles resting against the sheets, her knees relaxed. Corpse pose, it was called in yoga, and sometimes Alestar practiced not breathing to see what would happen. The crashes were sudden. It wasn't as if they were entirely unexpected; the intensely elevated highs always foretold their onset. And she hated it, how completely low and hollow she would feel, that gnawing hunger.

The phone rang, and it startled Alestar. She never expected the phone calls when they came, and when she sat and stared at the phone in the middle of her empty apartment, no one ever wanted to talk to her.

“There’s a party,” said Amy. Alestar was constantly amazed at the lengths to which her ex-girlfriend would go in order to maintain civility, though she was convinced there was something inherently sadistic about Amy’s continual desire for communication.

“Oh no,” said Alestar. “No, I remember what happened last time...”

“Hey, no one’s gonna be strapped to any electric chairs in this one.”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, c’mon. What the hell else you gonna do all night, Al?” In her mind’s eye, Alestar saw Amy with a pack of cigarettes in her left hand, admonishing Alestar with her lighter.

“Well...” she was prepared to argue, but Amy had a point. Alestar had an empty apartment full of dishes she wasn’t going to wash, clothes she refused to put away, and absolutely nothing to do for the rest of the evening. Except wait for her phone to ring, or stare at the blank pages in her leather-bound notebook. Or position herself in front of the computer, looking through the provocative poses on SuicideGirls.com, slipping her hands beneath the elastic of her underwear.

“Hey,” she said. “What the hell.”

The party was meant to be some hybrid celebration of Thanksgiving, Christmas, Solstice, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa, but Alestar couldn’t tell by looking

at the place. The room was smoky, and the furniture and walls were coated in layers of tinted Reynolds Wrap. There were people writhing underneath the glass coffee table in the living room, and Alestar made a point of turning down all beverages and refreshments, having no desire to spend the evening plucking invisible fish from the wallpaper.

Amy whisked by and kissed her lightly on the cheek. Alestar caught her scent, then, and with it the memory of reading Kerouac and Ginsberg hours after midnight, naked, of packing up their few belongings and heading out West the morning of September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001, in defiance of the fear and paralysis that had a chokehold on the rest of the nation. Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise embarking a season of adventure, punctuating their rest stops with a drunken rhapsody of limbs and amplified affection.

“It’s so good to see you, Al,” Amy said. “You don’t get out of the house nearly enough.” Alestar tried to say something in her own defense, but Amy promptly abandoned her for a group of women with sweet round faces and perfectly plucked eyebrows.

Alestar scanned the crowd of people at the party, with their polyurethane outfits and nylon-looking make-up. They seemed as if they’d been cookie-cut out of Andy Warhol’s living room. She untied and retied her boots a couple of times, but when a wide-eyed girl walked over to her with a bottle of champagne in one hand and a wad of crumpled newspaper on her head, loudly proclaiming herself to be the Statue of Liberty, Alestar exited the apartment for the roof access stairwell, holding tightly to the railings.

Staircases had always been sacred places to her, the labyrinth between floors, tiny uphill highways making it possible for families to live on top of families, for one man's floor to be another man's ceiling. When she reached the top, she opened the door to a smattering of dim stars, and the icy wind nettled her face.

Clutches of silhouettes she did not recognize littered the roof. She could see the lights of the Henley Street Bridge over the Tennessee River obscured by the thinnest layer of fog, could hear the lazy hum of the few cars meandering through downtown Knoxville like white noise in the back of her mind. Despite the cold, many of the women on the roof were dressed in short skirts, sleeveless tops. Alestar's apartment was heated by steam, and sometimes she wanted to wear shorts around her living room, but she was always so damn uncomfortable in them. She was too old, or too young -- there was always something wrong with her, and she felt lopsided and horrible in her skin. If she could mark all over it, tattoo every inch, or reshape it, like clay -- well, at least then she'd be *interesting* to look at, if nothing else. Besides, that's how it was done in the beginning -- shaped out of clay. *To dust we return*, she penciled in the margin.

Alestar's eyes darted to a girl on the rooftop sitting apart from the crowd, dressed in a simple, short, red velvet dress and wearing dark-rimmed glasses, black hair clasped at the nape of her neck. She sat beneath one of the rooftop lights, reading intently. Alestar could only make out the author's name in big bold letters on the spine: RIMBAUD. Everything else was a diffused blue from Alestar's vantage point. The girl looked up briefly and smiled; Alestar smiled back, then pretended to be preoccupied with her notebook.

She could have asked her why she wasn't inside with the rest of the hooligans. She could have made some comment about the few short poems of Rimbaud she'd actually read, and how she'd heard he was a great influence on the Beat movement. She could have told her she had pretty hair, or beautiful eyes, or that her shoes looked cool, and where did she get them?

Instead, Alestar walked the perimeter of the rooftop. There were rounded, plastic domes from the skylights belonging to the tenants on the top floor. Peering inside, Alestar could catch snapshots. Computer desks with lopsided books piled in the corners. College students asleep on couches with afghans thrown about their feet and textbooks open-faced against their chests. A man clumsily making love to his wife on the couch with his jeans at his ankles and his socks still on. The wife kept glancing over at the television, where Jimmy Stewart's bloody lip was pixilated in black and white on their television screen, his hands clasped together in desperate prayer -- *I want to live again... I want to live again.*

Alestar made notes in her leather-bound notebook, and the girl with the dark hair continued to read, until an hour went by, and the girl stood up, stretched, and moved to the door which led back downstairs. The girl shot Alestar a glance before she left, smiled again. Alestar tried to smile back, to say "hey," but it all got lost somewhere in her trachea, and the girl turned away, out the door. Alestar looked up, watched the clouds gather above her, blocking out the light from the stars. Fifteen minutes later, she closed her book, and followed.

Alestar took a quick walk around the party, but Amy was nowhere to be found, and the girl with the dark hair had vanished. In the hallway, Alestar shuffled her weight from one foot to the other, her keys in her hand. Amy always told her that she worried too much and acted too little -- at times like this, Alestar was certain she was right. Amy had also said that Alestar listened too much to what other people told her -- she couldn't help it. Her life was comic books and black-and-white photographs and action figures. *If only I had a revolving door...* but she forgot where she was going with that train of thought. Derailed. Again.

"Fuck it."

Alestar refused to spend her night like this, meandering around the hallway of a party she'd just as soon have never gone to at all. *Surely there's something else to do on Kingston Pike at one in the morning*, she thought to herself. *Surely this isn't all there is.*

A comedic dramatization loosely based on *A Christmas Carol* crackled from the NPR station on her car stereo. The snow started while she backed out of the parking lot. *It's just now December*, Alestar thought desperately, *I've not even set my calendar over yet.* But the sky spit damp flakes on her windshield all the same, and the Click and Clack brothers rattled off improvisational narration of Christmas spirits.

If the world makes more sense when you're in the car, then it seems imperative to just keep driving. Alestar drove on through the sleepy towns as dawn broke around her.

Alestar stood outside her Sentra and filled it up with gas. Two dollars, eighty-nine cents, and still climbing. With the advent of December, the temperature had dropped sharply, and Alestar shifted from foot to foot to get her circulation going. The heater wasn't working anymore; so many things seemed to be falling apart lately. She buried her ears beneath a blue and black striped toboggan and shoved her gloved hands into her pockets. Her nose felt raw from the wind, and her breath froze in the air in front of her.

A bulldozer made its way down the highway, gingerly carrying a young redbud sapling in its claws. Alestar wiped her nose against the back of her sleeve and studied the tree, wrapped up in a burlap sack, pretending to be spring, pretending as hard as it could. *It would make a good logo for the Arbor Day Foundation*, Alestar thought, wishing she had brought her camera. The gas pump clicked.

Alestar really wasn't sure where she was going, but she was coming to realize that it had been a long time since she had any real idea at all. She fidgeted with the maps from the glove compartment, tracing the red arrows with a forefinger, following the dark outlines with a highlighter. She pondered the wide spaces between the towns, the places where things and people simply didn't exist, simply weren't charted or recorded on paper. How obsessed the world was, with getting it all on paper. She thought of the eight years she'd spent at University, studying Victorian Literature first, then the history of the Industrial Revolution, before finally graduating with her degree in Photography. She could hear a train whistle in the distance, and suddenly she felt as if the tracks were

swallowing the valley whole, as if the voice of this small town had been smothered beneath the stench of coal and the earth-shattering clatter of wheel upon rail.

*The Land is without a King*, Alestar wrote as she walked slowly toward the cashier. The landscape was dry and cracked beneath her feet. *I didn't find my sword in any stone; I purchased it for seventy dollars at a Gatlinburg tourist trap, no prophecies attached. Merlin was nowhere to be found, locked inside some stone of Nimue, no doubt. The old goat always did have a way with women. I wish I had such a way. If I were trapped in a cave of carnal desire, at least I'd be doing something with my life. Or at least I'd be having fun.*

She bumped into the man with the green jacket because she had been looking down at her notebook. The man smiled, and chuckled a bit, straightening his baseball cap. "Sorry, there."

*Sorry - there.* The road was littered with the tabs off of aluminum cans and two-by-fours. The air was full of snow, and the cold made it difficult to breathe. Something was eating a hole in Alestar's pocket, and all of her loose change kept falling out. Quarters hitting the pavement with a high-pitched *ching*. She fumbled to retrieve them, and took stock of her resources. Ten toes, two forefingers. She rubbed her nose with the back of her hand and climbed into her car, bumping her head against the doorframe.

"Just drive," she whispered, pressing her lips to the steering wheel and putting the key into the ignition.

Alestar glanced in the rearview mirror and watched a foam of clouds crest over the horizon, as if the foothills of East Tennessee were being threatened by some phantom tsunami from an ocean everyone had conveniently forgotten. She remembered running away as a small child, packing all of her belongings inside a small blanket, leaving a note on the kitchen table bidding her family farewell, only to be found two hours later lost and crying in the woods. What was a family, anyway? Alestar didn't pretend to understand. Home had become a euphemism for the jacket she used as a pillow those evenings when she and Amy had hit the road, so many years ago. She could never comfortably apply the term to her small apartment.

The snow came down in thick, meaty flakes which betrayed exactly where it was they had come from -- the arctic north, stumbling drunkenly across Kentucky's border and whisked over the greater elevations of East Tennessee, creeping softly into the mountain trestles and landing with a quiet thud just outside of Chattanooga. By mid-morning, the landscape was blanketed, every echo muffled in that wet and sticky thickness of snow.

Alestar lost the highway somewhere near Chattanooga. The city was a network of divisions and detours, and Alestar felt as if the north wind were blowing her off course, running interference with the compass embedded in the metallic band of her broken watch. She weaved in and out of icy, residential roads, passed signs for Lookout Mountain, Signal Mountain. The sharp curves and steep inclines of these unknown routes made her nervous, and it was all

Alestar could do to keep the wheel steady, to avoid the ruts and potholes of the aged pavement. In the end, such a crater took hold of her right front tire, sent her skidding into the ditch. Fate suddenly packed up its things and left her alone -- somewhere in the mountains near Chattanooga. Far from the signs of civilization. In the middle of a snowstorm. With no spare.

If the world makes no sense and you've lost your ability to drive, then it seems imperative to just keep writing.

*What am I looking for? Trails of colored sand. Autumn tresses in a raging wind. A barefoot horoscope dangling fate by the ankles on the edge of a cliff. The Holy Grail? I hope not -- I've never been too good at finding things.*

Alestar sat in the car, her notebook open on her lap, pen pinched between gloved fingers. She wrote for well over an hour, waiting for another car to pass by, until she was shaking so violently that her handwriting was no longer legible, until her feet had gone numb with cold. *I could die out here -- I could honestly die out here.* No other car was willing to brave the treacherous road, and Alestar decided it would be safer for her to take the chance of reaching a residential neighborhood and start walking. Walking would get her blood moving, would help keep her warm. She climbed out of her car, locked it tight behind her.

It was an ascension. One foot in front of the other, in heavy boots, against those two streaks of yellow lines across the pavement. Her hands were contorted, because that's what the cold does to you, and she was silent as the cold December snow pelted her face and smeared her features. She shuffled

through her coat like a deck of cards, sizing up her situation. Her heart was hidden, her scars covered -- beneath her clothes, she was naked and raw. There was confusion on her breath. The afternoon tasted like iodine, just a tinge of zinc in the air. Perhaps one of the nameless chemicals secretly dumped into the river by the large corporations. Not so secret, since the fish were growing arms, since frogs were born with half a dozen eyes. No one ever really wanted to admit the truth of a matter.

And in the truth of the matter, Alestar was lost.

She fumbled for her maps, but the words seemed to creep off the pages. Nothing would hold itself still - the entire world was shaking. *An earthquake*, Alestar thought, and she reached for the cover of her car - but her car wasn't there anymore. The world had become a blinding flash. There was something inside of her teeth that began to shake, something vibrating her inner core, something off-balance, casual geothermal collisions inside her skull. Alestar could taste blood upon her lips.

Her hands were nothing; her legs had melted into the clouds. An acupuncturist had set to work on every single pressure point in her body, slowly drowning every pore, every molecule - injecting every square inch of Alestar with numbness that brought with it forgetting. The white folded over on itself, as if the horizon were made of origami. The entire world transmuted into a swan and all that was left was a dull throb of a pinhole sinking tighter into itself. And then nothing.

“Are you okay?” The woman appeared as an apparition, wrapped in a waste-length patchwork coat, tattered and worn, a cornucopia of color beneath a light dusting of snow. She took a few steps forward, paused, and crouched at Alestar’s feet, gingerly taking the toe of Alestar’s boot between her thumb and forefinger. It struck Alestar as oddly affectionate, without crossing the boundaries of intimacy. Alestar appreciated her distance. Her head was still swimming -- her hands felt like heavy lead things that weighed her sharply to the ground.

*Important, she thought, to let this woman know who I am, that I’m a hero in my own tale. Important that she knows I am somebody.*

“Alestar,” she said. “My name is Alestar.”

“You’ve gone misread me, honey. I said ‘how are you,’ not ‘who are you.’”

“Why are you -- in the mountains?” Alestar’s breath prickled against the raw walls of her lungs, and her words came in gasps.

The woman jerked her chin sharply over her shoulder. Alestar thought she could make out the faint silhouette of a large cage behind her.

“Snakes,” the woman said. “Catching them.”

“Catching snakes?” Alestar was sure she must be delirious.

“For church. We take up serpents, in my church. We follow the Signs.”

She reached out her hand towards Alestar, and paused. “Do you mind if I touch your forehead?”

Alestar swallowed hard, and nodded. Actual human contact was all she’d ever really wanted. The woman’s slender fingers felt like thin slivers of ice.

“Honey, you got a fever a mile high. Do you mind if I pray over you?”

“Pray?”

“It’s my church. We believe God heals.”

*Grail maiden*, Alestar thought involuntarily. She could see the welcoming darkness of unconsciousness seeping in to her peripheral vision, and she fought against her heavy eyelids. She didn’t have the energy or coherence to explain she’d never had real faith in God, that Jesus was the one superhero to whose creed she did not subscribe, that if this woman was aware of the nature of Alestar’s sins she might very well want to leave her to freeze to death. Instead, she was silent as the woman clasped her hand firmly in her own, pressed her other hand to Alestar’s forehead, and began murmuring a prayer.

At first, the prayer sounded familiar to Alestar, or at least seemed to use familiar words: *Our Lord God* and *Sweet King Jesus*. She tried to conjure up images in her mind of Bible School, of a Jewish man in long robes and brown sandals, smiling at young children and touching them gently on the head. Instead, she could only see images of Superman, powerful artistic images with direct visual allusion to the crucifixion -- Superman with his arms bound, Superman tied up and unconscious, always breaking free at the last moment, rising from his apparent defeat, rising from the dead. As her mind wandered, the two images became fused -- Jesus wearing a red cape; Jesus in a suit with glasses at the Daily Planet. Mary Magdalene as the attractive, young news reporter always landing herself in trouble; Jesus standing in front of her protectively, baring the red J on his chest and telling Lex Luthor, *He who is without sin*.

Alestar suddenly noticed that the words of the prayer had changed, that the manner in which the woman delivered the words had intensified, and that Alestar no longer understood what she was saying. It was as if she were speaking a different language, the strange, repetitive, guttural syllables muffled by the snow and Alestar's weakening grasp on consciousness. The words were unfamiliar, but somehow the meaning was clear -- a desperate plea for help, for healing. A humble asking of any higher power who might be listening; Alestar wondered if Superman was anywhere nearby. She felt the gradual sensation of warmth at her temples, beneath the fingertips of the strange woman in the patchwork coat, and once again fell under a blanket of darkness.

While she was unconscious, Alestar had the following dream:

She was still lying in the snow where she had lost consciousness. When she opened her eyes, she stared up in to the hooked face of a large tortoise who was sitting on her chest. As she propped herself up on her elbows, the tortoise sauntered from his perch, began his slow trek to the side of the road. The woman in the patchwork jacket was in the ditch, lifting rocks.

"He touched you," the woman said. "He bore away what ails you."

"But I don't even believe in God," Alestar said. Her head was clear, and she felt warm, comfortable.

"Don't matter none; He does what He will, honey."

The woman lifted a thick, brownish snake from beneath the one of the rocks. It looked covered in a thin layer of ice, as if frozen solid.

“Why do you hunt for snakes in the winter?” Alestar said. “Isn’t it too cold? Aren’t they in hibernation?”

The woman shrugged. “I’m the only one I know who does it like this. Way I figure it, if the Lord means for me to take up the serpents, then he’ll lead me to them, even in the most unlikely set of circumstances. It’s how I know these ones is safe to handle. God leads me to them, and He knows what He’s doing.”

Alestar watched the small footprints of the turtle as it waded through the snow. It kept sinking through the surface layers, but would not be deterred.

“Do you believe in the Holy Grail?” Alestar said. It suddenly seemed like the most important question; the only question.

The woman nodded. “The Lord, he manifests himself in different ways to different people.” She placed the icy snake into the cage and closed the lid. She smiled at the tortoise, and walked over to Alestar, pressing her fingers to her cheek -- this time, without asking.

Alestar woke up in the back of a patrol car, damp with sweat and slightly delirious. They had found her only a few yards from her Sentra, the policemen explained. They were lucky they found her when they did, they insisted, because if she’d been there much longer, she might have fallen into the third stage of hypothermia, her organs might have started to shut down.

“There was a woman,” Alestar said. “In a patchwork coat. She said I had a fever.”

“Not likely, with hypothermia,” the policeman at the wheel said. “Your body temperature drops steadily. And there was no evidence of anyone else having been there.”

“She was hunting snakes,” Alestar said, more to herself than to the policemen. She was having difficulty differentiating between the events from her dream and the events that seemed to really have happened.

“In the middle of winter?” The policemen laughed. Prone to hallucinations under such conditions, they explained. They handed her a thermos of warm cider, instructed her to sip it carefully, slowly. She nestled into the back seat, watching the snow banks drift past the windows. She reached for the notebook in her pocket, wanting to write something down, but stopped when she noticed she was wrapped in a warm, fleece blanket. A fleece blanket with a large, green tortoise printed on one side.

## 7. TRENTON, GEORGIA

Even before the social worker arrived at the rotting baseboards and overgrown cinderblock steps leading up to the front stoop of the single-wide trailer, he knew it was going to be a tough case. A twenty year old girl with a three year old daughter, unemployed and living off the meager rations of her mother's factory wages. The case had come to their department's attention when the child's pediatrician had noticed evidence of severe developmental delays. In the official report, secured in the thick blue binder beneath the social worker's arm, the pediatrician claimed to have voiced his concern of these delays directly to the mother, who refused all offers of referrals, of treatment.

"There's nothing wrong with the child," the report quoted the young Katharine Jeffers. "She's just blessed by the Lord."

The pediatrician saw no sign of neglect or mistreatment. Other than the lack of speech, the lack of social interaction, the child was perfectly healthy. The official report suggested that the young mother might simply be struggling with denial and might benefit from a detailed explanation of the possibilities, of the importance and necessity of treatment. As per standard procedure, the official report authorized the physical removal of the child from the premises if it could be determined she might be in immediate danger. A routine check, like so many others the social worker had performed. He stood outside on the porch with mud on his shoes, and knocked.

A young woman came to the door with thin hips and long blond hair pulled in a loose bun at the nape of her neck.

“Ms. Jeffers? I’m with the Department of Children’s Services.”

“Please, call me Katharine,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron before extending one to the social worker. She smelled like dishwater and toothpaste. “Come on in.”

The trailer carried the scent of kool-aid, baby-wipes, chocolate chips, and grass. A small blond child was straddling a pink-and-glitter pushcar, pressing the buttons on a plastic yellow cellphone. She looked up at the ceiling with her intense blue eyes and spouted a flourish of gibberish. Katharine carefully picked her way through the labyrinth of toys strewn about the living room. Her feet were bare, and they produced a soft series of rhythmic thuds as she padded across the linoleum.

“You want any coffee?”

“No, thank you,” the social worker said, taking a seat on the old, scruffy couch.

Katherine folded her apron and it suddenly vanished. Motherhood makes a magician out of you, the social worker thought. Katherine looked radiant. The little single-wide trailer felt like a cookie -- warm, moist, sticky. Even the walls seemed big-bellied and full. Milk dribbled out of the corners of the child’s mouth. The social worker placed a handkerchief to the child’s face; she didn’t seem to notice.

“This here’s Adelle,” Katharine said, her fingers lightly touching the top of her daughter’s head. “She’s a blessed child.”

“I like to think all children are blessings, Ms. Jeffers.”

Katharine’s eyes brightened. “And how old are your youngins?”

“Oh, I don’t have any children, Ms. Jeffers,” the social worker said, aggravated that he suddenly felt embarrassed, inadequate. “I’ve never been married.”

“Neither have I, God forgive me. I was backslid for a while, you see. That’s went I met Dell’s Daddy. He was a sweet talker, that one. Looked just like Tom Petty, and Lord help me, but I loved me some Tom Petty. I don’t even remember his name, now. We went out drinking every night, slept it off in the mornings. One day I showed up at his hotel room, and he’d up and gone, no forwarding address, nothing. Three weeks later, I knew I was in trouble. That’s when I went back to my Momma. God love her, that woman took me back under her wing without even a hard word. That’s love right there, mister; that’s the forgiveness of Jesus himself.”

“Rather irresponsible behavior, Ms. Jeffers,” the social worker frowned, taking out his pen to make notes in his blue binder, *child product of one night stand, father unknown*. Still, he had to admit he was impressed by her honesty. Most families were usually more reserved with the less favorable details of their past encounters. Of course, maybe the girl was just too dim to understand how dangerous it was to tell him these things. “I trust that you no longer engage in such activities?”

“Oh no, sir. I’m back in the Church, now.” Katharine took a seat beside the social worker on the couch. Adelle began systematically gathering all of the blocks on the floor. “I haven’t been with a man since.”

“I see here that you’re not currently employed?”

“No, sir -- there ain’t nobody else to look after Dell during the day, so I stay home and care for her.”

“How do you make your living?”

“Well, sir, this is my Momma’s land, her trailer. She lets us live here; she’s in the old farmhouse next door. Well, not right now, of course -- she’s at work in the factory during the day. But she’s got a bit of land, we’ve got a nice piece of garden in the back, a little tobacco. I work it during the day; Dell’s out with me chasing the chickens around. It ain’t much, but it keeps food on the table. Besides that, my Momma helps, of course. And the people from the Church. We never go without nothing we need. God provides.”

The social worker watched Adelle, who was busily arranging her blocks in neat rows across the coffee table.

“Does she do that often?” he said.

“Yes,” said Katharine. “I don’t think she’s quite got the knack of figuring the use of toys just yet.”

“And she’s three?”

“Yes sir, she turned three this past August.”

The social worker made another note in his blue binder, *toys in rows*, and then closed the book, clasping it to his lap, leaning in towards Katharine.

Important to make eye contact, important to insure she understands the gravity of what is happening.

“Do you know why I am here, Ms. Jeffers?”

“Not entirely,” Katharine said. “I know that when I took Dell in to get her last set of shots, the doctor was rather put out that Dell wasn’t speaking real words yet, said he was going to send someone out to check up on her.”

“Exactly so,” the social worker said. “The pediatrician believes that your daughter is having difficulty with communication and social functioning. I am here to do some preliminary testing, to see where exactly Adelle might be having trouble.”

Katharine smiled, and her blue eyes flashed. “I can’t help but notice that ain’t a request.”

“It’s not, I’m afraid.”

“Then I suppose I ain’t got much of a choice.”

The social worker administered the series of tests in much the same manner he did everything -- methodically and with precision. Some of the tests demanded he work directly with Adelle, checking to see if she could turn the pages in a book, giving her a string to put beads on. Adelle seemed oblivious to his instruction, and it was only when her mother would get down on all fours beside her and demonstrate whatever it was the social worker wanted her to do, that Adelle would -- finally, and half-heartedly -- complete the required task. Other tests were made up of a long list of questions that the social worker had to

ask Katharine -- How many words does she speak? Is she potty-trained? When did she take her first steps? Katharine sat quietly, answering each question with seeming accuracy and detail. While she did this, Adelle spun around and around in the middle of the living room floor, never seeming to tire of the activity, never getting dizzy. The social worker recorded the results of the tests, tallied the scores. Severe delays in social, language, and cognitive spheres. This child was in desperate need of special services, of early intervention. Adelle would need a full psychiatric evaluation, but the social worker's initial impression was that the child probably had a severe case of autism.

At exactly four fifteen in the afternoon, Katharine stood up. "I got to start making dinner, now," she said. "Dell's happiest when she eats at exactly five o'clock. Would you like anything?"

"No, thank you," the social worker said, slightly unnerved that a woman with so little would so easily extend her hospitality, and to someone who was interrogating her no less. "You need to understand that your daughter has a severe developmental delay," the social worker said. "She needs extensive treatment, including speech therapy, occupational therapy." Katharine smiled at her daughter, gathered her in her arms, gently pressed her lips to her cheek; Adelle squirmed, and pulled away. "She needs a full psychological evaluation, Katharine. From her apparent symptoms, it is likely that she suffers from autism."

"I can't seem to make you understand, mister. My daughter don't *suffer* from nothing."

The social worker sighed, and placed his head in his hands. Under the active legislation, refusal of needed treatment for a child's well-being was considered neglect and could automatically be used as grounds enough for forced removal. He had hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Ms. Jeffers, a child at Adelle's age should already be speaking in simple sentences, should at the very least have a wide vocabulary of words to draw from. She should be interested in trying to initiate conversation. She should form attachments, begin displaying some differentiation between family and strangers. Your daughter is entirely nonverbal, Ms. Jeffers. She doesn't even respond to the sound of her name."

"I know it must be hard for you people to understand our way of life." Katharine smiled again, sweetly. "But Adelle has been chosen by God to do His work here on Earth."

The social worker wasn't entirely sure he understood her. "I'm sorry?"

"You're right when you say she ain't like other kids, it's true." Katharine's soft blue eyes followed her daughter's awkward steps around the room. "Way I figure it, it's like she's under constant Anointment by the Lord. She's always speaking His Word, you see -- it's why you can't understand it, why I can't understand it unless I'm in Church, and Anointed. And when we're there, in Church, it's God speaking through her, giving us His Word. We all understand her, it's incredible. She's just always got the Holy Ghost, is all."

. "Even if what you say is true," he said, choosing his words carefully, "you have to admit that Adelle would be much happier if she could learn to use

'normal' language, too. She could tell you what she wanted, what she needed. She could communicate with you about things... not necessarily connected to religion."

"The Lord made Dell the way she is, mister," Katharine said, shaking her head. "It is God's Will. I ain't going to interfere with that."

"You really believe God will take care of everything?"

"Yes, I sure do. Don't you?"

"No, Ms. Jeffers. No, I don't."

It struck him as arrogant, suddenly, the entire Southern Christian ideal, especially as spouted by this particular Holy Roller. If there were a God, why would he concern himself with the small, meaningless lives of a handful of poor families living at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains? Why should they get preferential treatment above all the other tragedies of the world? Self-centered, immature, underdeveloped people. The social worker was overcome by a sudden, intense desire to break her faith, to prove to her that no God would rescue her from trouble.

"Are you telling me you absolutely refuse any treatment and further testing for your daughter's developmental delay?" he said.

"There's no reason for it, mister," Katharine said. "There's nothing wrong with her."

"Then I'm afraid by the order of the Georgia State Government, I am forced to remove Adelle Jeffers from the premises."

"I don't understand."

“I’m taking Adelle into protective state custody, Ms. Jeffers. She will be leaving with me.”

Katharine’s eyes flashed, just for a brief moment, and her stare went cold. Still, however, she smiled. “If it is God’s Will,” she said.

“God has nothing to do with it, Ms. Jeffers,” the social worker said. “Now, you are more than welcome to fill out a petition for custody at the Dade County Courthouse, and perhaps some compromises can be reached. But as for the immediate future, this child requires specific needs and attention that you are apparently unwilling to provide. Now, if you would be so kind as to pack a few of her personal effects.”

It was a good speech, possibly the best he’d delivered in his entire four years of employment at the department. Usually, he had to scream over a collection of raised voices; sometimes, he had to physically pry the child away from its mother’s clutching arms. But Katharine just stood there, silently staring at him as he ran over those rehearsed words. When he was finished, she walked to Adelle’s bedroom, packed a few items of clothes in a small plastic bag, a couple of stuffed animals, various toys. She pulled on a tattered patchwork coat and some boots, slipped her daughter into a warm wool sweater. Katharine placed her daughter on her hip, and walked out in to the cold, January afternoon, with the social worker following close behind.

“The Lord will take care of you, Dell,” Katharine whispered, holding her daughter close to her breast. “Don’t worry. God will watch over you.” She kissed her daughter’s cheeks, her lips, her forehead, and placed her in the car seat in

the back of the social worker's black station wagon. She buckled her in, made sure the straps were secure, and pushed the blond curls from her daughter's face. "I love you," Katharine said, and closed the door.

Katharine handed the plastic bag full of toys and clothes to the social worker and just stood there, staring at him, not saying a word. The social worker, unsure how to respond, simply climbed into the driver's seat, and turned the keys in the ignition.

As the engine started to life and the car began to move, Adelle seemed suddenly aware that her mother wasn't coming with them, and started screaming. The social worker pulled away in his black station wagon, and Adelle wailed in her car seat, unintelligible sounds, guttural syllables. Her face was soon damp with tears, and her limbs flailed against the restraints, as she slammed her head over and over against the back of her seat. In his rearview mirror, the social worker could see Katharine's silhouette behind him, wearing that worn patchwork coat, standing directly in the center of the highway. He would have found more comfort if Katharine had collapsed, had given in to grief, remorse, hysterics, like any normal woman. Instead, Katharine stood in the middle of the road. There was something almost inhuman in her stance, as she stood perfectly and completely still. It was the stillness that unnerved the social worker, and her steadfastness, with her chin held high and her wide blue eyes fixed at his back, as she shrunk to the smallest vanishing point at the horizon, and disappeared behind him.

## 8. GADSDEN HIGHWAY

*It just hurts too much.* That's what the voice in her head said whenever she was driving, whenever she was making a right hand turn, whenever she'd been lulled into some semi-conscious state by the drone of the windshield wipers, and it was fucking annoying, that voice. So horribly adolescent. She could just see this wraith-like, pasty-faced silhouette in her head, much too reminiscent of her high school self, all draped in black velvet, carving designs into her arms with a razor blade, lamenting the torrid state of the world. It was a *my-dark-soul-weeps* sort of voice, a *feel-sorry-for-me* sort of voice, and it drove Lisa up the wall every time she caught herself thinking in it, every time her brain made an accidental swing in that direction.

Adelle was in the back seat, all bundled in a purple coat two sizes too big for her, the zipper pulled all the way up to her tiny little chin, and she sneezed, every once in a while. Her wild, tangled blond hair poked out in tufts about the edges of her hood, all matted and messy because the child never let Lisa do anything with it, shrieked in horror if she came within three feet of her with a brush in hand, immediately pulled out any and all ponytail holders and barrettes from her hair. A commercial for a local accountant chimed in with a bizarre little jingle on the radio, and Adelle immediately put her hands over her ears and started screaming.

"Adelle, stop screaming, please," Lisa warned -- the first and only warning she got, a child of four has the ability to walk all over you if you give even an

inch. Adelle kept screaming -- Lisa's fingers twisted the volume knob louder. There were real tears in Adelle's eyes, but Lisa ignored that, too. "You have to talk to me, Adelle," she explained. "You have to use your words. I don't understand." But Adelle whined in her usual incoherent gibberish, and Lisa's knuckles whitened around the steering wheel.

It wasn't that Lisa ever really wanted to have a normal child -- it wasn't that she expected anything less complicated when she and her husband, David, were approached by their friend, Jacob, who was a social worker in Trenton, Georgia.

"I have a beautiful little girl who needs a home," he had said over the phone on Valentine's Day, a little over a year ago. "I rescued her from some crazy, religious zealots in the mountains. She has severe developmental delays, is going to need a great deal of love, care, and work. Nobody else will take her, Lisa. You and David would make such good parents. Besides, I'm desperate, I need you." Lisa ran the idea by her husband, who reluctantly agreed. Even then, she didn't realize just how severe their foster child's problems were going to be. She'd expected the child to at least speak the same language she did. She expected her to live in the same universe she was in, at least most of the time. She didn't expect to get stuck with a bizarre, little fluffy, owl-eyed alien of a child muttering gibberish, like a Furby doll.

David had always said they were too young to be doing this anyway, both of them just past twenty-five. He'd wanted her to finish grad school first, to spend a few years living in the same house together, as man and wife, to build something slightly more stable between them. Sometimes, Lisa thought he might

have been partially right, but she didn't regret her decision. She fell in love with the child immediately, all blond and bundled up in a large wool sweater with wide eyes that seemed so scared of the world. She was quite easily the most beautiful child Lisa had ever seen, and generally so pleasant-natured, as long as life was going according to routine. She immediately discussed the prospect of adoption with David, and gathered all the proper forms and applications from Jacob. The process was a little clunky and slow, considering they were working between two states -- Georgia and Alabama -- but come the middle of August, they were Adelle's legal guardians, and a good thing, too, since Lisa had already badgered the speech therapist to teach Adelle the words for mother and father.

They did alright. There was food on the table, a roof over their heads, and Lisa gave Adelle all the love she let her. She tickled and cuddled her and tried to play her bizarre little repetitive games. They dribbled a basketball around the kitchen. Adelle began to kick it with her foot. Lisa's facial expressions tried to keep pace with the overzealous octaves of her voice. "This is not soccer!" she shrieked, and Adelle broke out into peals of uncontrollable laughter, real laughter, the kind that came deep from her gut and made her scrunch up her little blue eyes in that tiny red face of hers. Again, and again. The girl never got tired of anything.

"Are you tired?" Lisa and David would sometimes ask her, and Adelle would cup those hands over her ears, and start screaming, "No no no no NO!!! NO!!!" as loud as she possibly could. The same went if they discussed putting new tires on the car, or talked about relatives of theirs who were retiring. If they

asked if she was sleepy, or if she was ready for bed, they would get a quiet, polite response. Adelle only found the syllable “tire” offensive, and no one could figure out why.

“Here, Dad -- here’s your phone!” Adelle said, handing David his tiny black cell phone. He palmed it, told her thank you, set it on the table. Five minutes later, Adelle was handing it to him again. “Here Dad, here’s your phone!”

The specialists said to follow her lead. They said to try to get Adelle to let Lisa and David into her world in hopes that she’d be encouraged to let them bring her into theirs. When she first moved into their house and was still not speaking, Lisa would sit next to her and watch her thread string in and out of her fingers. Then Lisa would take a string, and do the same. Close, but not too close. Watching, but not invading. Every once in a while, Adelle would notice that Lisa was there. Every once in a while, she’d even smile at her, for a minute.

The specialists didn’t really know what caused autism. They suspected it might be genetic, or perhaps it had something to do with mercury, or maybe it was all based on environmental factors. One night after one too many beers, Jacob confessed that Adelle’s birth mother had been convinced she was a messenger of God, that she was simply speaking in tongues, and thus refused to search out any treatment for her. Lisa always wondered if Adelle had simply been too isolated in the mountains; she had, after all, come so very far in this last year, had bolstered her vocabulary and could now speak in very simple sentences, though always with that sing-song, echolalic tone.

Still, Lisa could relate to her adopted daughter's inherent standoffishness. When they attended the yearly Thanksgiving party, Lisa play-acted at mingling with David's friends, a smile here, a curtsey there, and at every available opportunity she would duck out of the crowded room to go check on the kids, to run to the bathroom, to take a walk outside. The voices were too loud, the bodies pressed too close together, and Lisa felt too many eyes on her, watching what she would do next.

Upstairs, friends circled around the widescreen television in the den, propped up by couches, armchairs, and pillows, sharing war stories of embarrassing drunken nights. Lisa had heard every story at least three or four times over -- kind of sad, really, like old generals, these aging men, these has-been bachelors, as if they were saying: *I used to be something wild. I used to be something.* The stain on Second Avenue is still there, he said. Got to second base with a philosophy professor, he said. Lisa glanced over at David sitting beside her, with his cropped blond hair sticking out from beneath his baseball cap and his thin, pink lips twisted up into an impish smirk, and she wondered (as she often did) if he missed it at all, the carefree sort of lifestyle he led before Lisa crash-landed his life, before she brought Adelle in for the ride.

"Sometimes I feel like I can't be good enough for her," David admitted one night, having stumbled through the front door in the wee hours of a Thursday morning with too much tequila on his breath. "Sometimes I feel like I'm not good enough, like I'm still too selfish to do what's right by her." David was always painfully honest when he was drunk, so that's when Lisa hit him with the serious

questions. It's also when he was drunk that Lisa tried to hit him up for sex. On the good nights, he became devilishly playful with her, slamming her into things, pulling her hair, leaving deep bruises and bite-marks all over her body. Others, he was clumsy and hopeless like a teenage boy, his fingers aware of Lisa's clitoris and nothing else, his cock thrusting into her as if she were an anonymous sack of flesh. On sober nights, the sex didn't happen often enough. They were both too exhausted from their real, separate lives, and masturbation was quicker, anyway.

"I just... don't understand," David admitted, his heavy head rolling against Lisa's shoulder. "I just can't get into her world."

God knows, god knows. All Lisa knew was, it must have been really nice in there, wherever she was, in that head of hers.

The children were chasing each other in circles downstairs -- Lisa could catch an echo here and there of the shrill laughter, the jumbled words, Lisa's incoherent phrases in harsh contrast to Sarah's cohesive, complex sentences.

Sarah was Andy's daughter -- Andy, the man of the house, an old college buddy of David's. The football game was over, and *Spiderman* was playing silently on the widescreen behind them. Television always distracted Lisa, she saw it so rarely. All of those pretty colors and pretty people moving around in the pretty colors. When her awareness filtered back into the room, Andy was stuffing tiny leaves into a thin, metallic pipe, and others were taking drags off of tiny joints.

“Have you ever tried Salvia?” Lisa was not even aware that Andy was talking to her until all of the other eyes in the room waited for her to respond.

“Um. No,” Lisa said. “I haven’t, actually. I don’t normally do. Stuff. What is it?”

“A mild, legal hallucinogen,” Andy smiled, breaking apart a capsule. “You should try this, Lisa -- it’s amazing.”

“But the kids--”

“Donna is with them, don’t worry. And it only lasts fifteen minutes at the most.”

Lisa glanced over to Mark, who just smiled at her -- as if some part of her was asking him permission, and he consented.

“Go on,” he said. “You don’t have enough fun as it is.”

Andy held the lighter and bowl steady as her lips curled around the mouthpiece. She tried to hold the smoke in -- foreign entity, this smoke -- and her lungs tried to force it out, in sharp, stiff jolts. *You don’t belong here.* Cough. Somebody took the lighter and the pipe away, but Lisa didn’t see them. She was spinning.

The distance between mast and anchor. A centimeter was a mile away. Lisa couldn’t see their hands closing in. Just the small particles in the carpet below her. Her hands in the carpet. Her back against the armchair. Electrons exchanged, static intersections. The separate, meaty threads of fabric. Snowflakes. Diaspora. She could feel the world with her eyes. Everything a giant

Gaussian blur, except the center, the center. The place above the pupil. Tunnel vision.

This moment. Adelle pushed her way through the barricades, through the circle of people in the den. Her tiny, angelic body draped in pink and taffeta and glitter, spinning around barefoot, and on tiptoe. The ballerina at the center of a music box. A million tiny bells followed her around, strung on the ends of her aura, tinkling with every breath, with every swish of movement she made.

“Look, mommy! How about make a princess!”

Her tiny arms wrapped around Lisa -- soft, velvet, soft -- her tiny heartbeat a trembling hummingbird muffled by the cumbersome percussion of Lisa's own. Honey, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla -- the universe filled with the smell of Adelle and her breath against Lisa's face and that love -- so much love pouring out of that tiny body.

“Princess,” Lisa murmured, and the world tossed around the ocean of her inner ear. “Princess.”

Lisa never wanted to let her go. She gathered her up in her limbs, and crushed Adelle into her. The center of her universe, that tiny point of pink and taffeta where Lisa's fractal merged.

## 9. AISLE ELEVEN

The supermarket has twenty-one aisles. There are red signs outlined in brass with white lettering, labeling the vague contents of each. Thin, translucent wires connect to metallic beams among the crisscross of fluorescent warehouse lights, like the machinery of heaven in some Elizabethan playhouse. The linoleum is white with small, swallowed grey flecks in parallel streaks. The music is soft and wordless, and Machiavelli involuntarily sings along to half-familiar Beatles tunes from four decades ago, stripped of their original instrumentation, dressed in elevator clothes.

In aisle eleven, glass doors collect smoggy condensation and place barriers between the morning shoppers and endless rows of multicolored ice cream containers and pre-packaged meals. It's unbelievably bright. Machiavelli watches as she holds the door with one delicate, mocha hand, the other clutching a small, green box of frozen PictSweet spinach. He has been watching her for the past few minutes now. She studies the nutritional information carefully. The baby sitting in the cart in front of her swings its chubby, barefoot legs back and forth, and gnaws on one hand. The baby's fingers are varnished in a thin coat of saliva.

*Machiavelli, line two, please,* the intercom interrupts with a static hiccup.

*Machiavelli, line two.*

The woman furrows her brow and cocks her head to one side. She wrinkles up her nose, and instinctively crosses her arms. The periwinkle strap of a blouse creeps slightly to the right of a collarbone.

*Hola, Mach*, she says, and when she spins around on her heels to face him, he notices she is not smiling. Machiavelli stands, a few feet behind her, in a blue grocer smock, with a broom in one hand. His eyes dart guiltily upward from where they had been resting on the soft curvature of her hips.

*Emeria*. He smiles. *Fancy meeting you here*.

It has been years since he last saw her, ages since they last spoke. His face still burns from the memory of where her open hand connected with his left cheek; he's always marveled at how darkly her leave-taking had marked him.

Emeria's eyes reveal incoherencies, and she searches his face for a clue. *¿Qué? ¿Qué dijiste?*

*Hello. Hi*. Machiavelli dangles his fingers in a haphazard wave. *How are you?* He shrugs his shoulders and opens his arms, his palms facing upward in a questioning gesture.

*Muy bien*. Emeria mumbles, avoiding eye contact.

Machiavelli shakes his head, and grimaces. *I don't... I don't understand*.

*Muy bien*, Emeria repeats, and looks up at him, shivering. She clasps her elbows in her palms, and motions toward the baby, who is tracing the engraved letters on the handlebar. She smiles weakly, and hugs herself again. *Bien*.

*Gracias*.

*Good, good.* Machiavelli looks above them at the lacquered sign advertising frozen pizza and pineapple juice concentrate, and then glances down at his shoe. *You're good. You're both good. That's...* He kicks the ground with his toe. *That's good.*

When Machiavelli first met Emerica, he was still quite young. Emerica was many years his senior, and had known the company of many lovers, red-skinned men and women with long, dark hair and eyes of coal, artisans, hunters, and gardeners all. She had nurtured each one in their respective trade, and they had all been fruitful in their pursuits. It is true when Machiavelli stumbled upon their villages, he did not understand their language, he was addled by their customs. Still, Emerica had looked upon him, had smiled, had welcomed him into her bed with little introduction.

But now, Emerica isn't looking at him. She's watching the baby, who is picking at a loose corner of the appliquéd apple on the front of its blue denim jumper with chubby fingers. Machiavelli watches the child uneasily.

*The baby is beautiful, Emerica.* He moves his hand in a half-circle around his face, and extends the long, spiraled nail of his index finger in the direction of the child. *Beautiful.*

*Bellísima.* Emerica smiles. *Sí. Es muy bellísima.* She tucks a curl behind the child's ear. *Es muy inteligente, también.*

Machiavelli cocks an eyebrow, and sighs. He shakes his head, shrugs his shoulders, and lets it go. He has never understood her, not throughout their entire shared history. He explored the hidden caverns and crevices of her body,

he memorized the topography of her birthmarks, her moles, her creases, the dark areolas of her apple-sized breasts, the dark, soft moss between her legs. He was, always, too much younger than her, and much too eager. By charting her territories, Machiavelli felt as if he owned them. So fertile, so vast her potential resources. He wanted to cultivate her, to convert her. But Emeria was never so easy to tame.

Machiavelli suddenly becomes aware of the broom in his hand, and passes it uncomfortably from one to the other.

*I've... I miss you, Emeria. I never meant to hurt you.* He looks at her with a sloppy softened expression, the improvisation of a forgotten line. He clasps his hands over his chest, and brings them both toward her, his fingernails framing his fists in treacherous spirals. *I'm sorry.*

Emeria frowns and shakes her head. She takes a step backward. Dark smears of make-up crease lines into her face, and she suddenly appears ancient, she suddenly shows her age. *Una vez, te quise.* She sniffs, wipes her nose with the back of her hand. *Fui tonta.* She looks to the baby, who opens and closes its hands in tiny fists. *Pero no más.* She shakes her head, and once again, makes eye contact. *¿Entendiste?*

*No.* Machiavelli shakes his head, closes his eyes. *No, I don't understand.*

The child suddenly shrieks, and begins to cry, loudly, its voice soaring out against the monotone backdrop of supermarket muzak, bouncing off the linoleum floor, slamming itself again and again against barricades of Campbell's Soup cans and glass jars of imitation cheese. Emeria runs a hand across her face,

wiping the mascara and excess make-up off on her blue-jean shorts. Machiavelli picks up his broom, and walks away.

*I should build her a bridge, Machiavelli thinks to himself. I should plant her a tree.* It was this very highway, so many years ago, constructed out of crude footpaths and a network of mountain trails - constructed for her, to align her hemispheres, to ensure proper circulation to all extraneous areas. The main artery, linking the north and south, with capillaries seeking out the appendages to the east - to the west. *I built this for her.* His headlights crease two double yellow lines outlining the margin between left and right, front and center, black and white - the two sides to every story. *Has she forgotten?*

But she *has* forgotten the highway. There are, after all, the interstates now, full of speed, logic, practicality. They have bulldozed many old routes, and have stolen their pioneer magic. The journey is no longer about the exploration -- it is about the destination. Fast-moving. Quick. Throngs of white blood cells spending entire lifetimes deconstructing their protective walls. She has forgotten the full-bellied moon and the boundary disputes, the territorial wilderness and Franklin's own lost state. Her topography is alien to him now. He feels like a foreigner in his own coat. His fingernails are just long enough to graze the dashboard.

He sees the bridge ahead and considers speeding up, but a faint lump of dark green sets his foot to bear down on the brake with all the finesse of a five-year old with a tower of blocks. The orange needle of the speedometer quickly

recedes towards zero. He pushes in the button that sets the emergency lights to blink in a rhythmic, symmetrical drone. A metronome, to keep time with the ancient and forgotten tune Machiavelli is humming underneath his breath. He grins, with a flash of white, feral teeth, and the waters of Lake Pontchartrain in the distance reflect the faint golden rays of a setting sun.

*You know, Machiavelli's words curl in frozen vapor from his lips, you really ought to be a little more careful.*

The turtle says nothing, but looks up at Machiavelli sleepily, and slowly backs into his shell. Carefully, as if anticipating all the possible moves of an opposing team, he picks up the turtle, carries him to the opposite side of the road, and gently deposits him into a net of safety, a good twenty feet away.

*Yes, I know: odd, Machiavelli admits, but times are hard.*

The turtle slowly meanders into the towering weeds without looking back. Machiavelli mumbles something under his breath that sounds like the music of a broken harpsichord, waving his long, dangling fingernails in afterthought. He prepares to cross the street, eyeing the horizon for oncoming traffic. Machiavelli is caught in a flood of headlights, listens to the brakes squeal as the automobile slows beside him.

*You really ought to get that checked out.*

"Excuse me?"

*The brakes. Sounds like the pads are wearing down.*

"Oh." Michael wears his confusion like a decoration around his pupils.

Machiavelli tries not to laugh. "Do *you* need any help?"

No, Machiavelli smiles, and glances at Scott sleeping in the passenger seat over Michael's shoulder. *I was just helping a tortoise cross the road.*

"Yeah, I dig." Michael seems eager to roll up his window. "Well, take care."

Machiavelli stands in the center of US-11 and watches as the taillights of the little Nova disappear over the bridge across Lake Pontchartrain.

*So it begins,* he says.

## VITA

Devon Koren Asdell grew up barefoot in the Appalachian foothills of East Tennessee, where she spent many afternoons chasing chickens, climbing trees, and threading mimosa blossoms through her hair. In her spare time, she enjoys composing in hypertext, creating video podcasts, and playing her original Nintendo Entertainment System. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English at East Tennessee State University, and she attended the University of Tennessee in pursuit of her Master of Arts. Devon currently resides in Knoxville with her beautiful, blond-haired mystic of a daughter, and Erin, who keeps her in coffee and conversation.