

The Wharton Place:

A Novel

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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May 2013

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DEDICATION

To my husband and my parents.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Margaret Dean, Michael Knight, and Allen Wier for their work with me, not just on this final thesis, but during my six years of study at the University of Tennessee. Thank you also to my fellow creative writers who read portions of this novel in our Fall 2012 fiction workshop. It is a better document because of their help. And finally, thank you to my husband, who worked late with me on many nights, just so I could have the company.

ABSTRACT

The Wharton Place is a novel told from the first-person retrospective point of view of Kate Wharton, an eight year old girl from Kentucky. When Kate's estranged grandfather dies, Kate's family unexpectedly inherits a piece of property in rural Tennessee. Faced with mounting financial trouble and his own concerns about his legacy, Kate's father moves the family to the farm, even though he has no experience working the land. The novel will cover Kate's adjustment to her new life as well as her maturation into a young woman.

The critical introduction to this piece analyzes two classic novels, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Jane Eyre*, to better understand the advantages and workings of the child retrospective narrator. The essay discusses the narrative arc of retrospective novels, how later trauma affects the narration, and how the narrative distance between child and adult shapes the novel.

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CHAPTER I CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Looking Back: The Retrospective Child Narrator

There are thousands of books about children, but there are far fewer novels that give children control of the narrative. First person child narrators have the least narrative distance between the character and the reader, and they tend to fall into two categories. The first category includes narrators like Huckleberry Finn and Holden Caulfield, characters who narrate their novels from the immediate or recent past. These narrators are fully absorbed by the child's viewpoint, narrating and commenting on the world with a child's limited experience. In many ways, this full immersion in the child's point of view creates very rich moments. Though Huck Finn cannot offer monologues on the politics of slavery, his declaration that saving Jim is worth going to hell (Twain 282) sums up Huck's views with beautiful simplicity. But the unfiltered view of a child can offer a limited view of the world. Self-absorbed seventeen-year-old Holden Caulfield doesn't have the maturity to realize he is one of the phonies he rambles on about, and much of the humor in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is derived from Huck's innocent misunderstanding of the world.

A second kind of child narrator offers an alternative to the inexperience of the child's point of view narrator. Retrospective narrators like Scout Finch and Jane Eyre recall their childhoods from an adult perspective. The innocence/ignorance of the child's voice is tempered with the worldliness of the

adult, and the contrast between the reasoning of those two stages of life is heightened. Adults who are far removed from their childhoods also have the advantage of framing the stories they tell, and frames can impose meaning onto the story. But this straddling of child and adult can present its own problems and challenges. How intrusive will the adult narrator be? How can an adult be faithful to a child's perspective? Is a retrospective narrator just a cop out, a way to get at the child's point of view without having to struggle with creating a "realistic" child narrator?

When writing the beginning of my novel, one of the most important decisions that I made related to the narrative voice. A child who has lived within driving distance of the movies and played in half-acre empty lots suddenly moves to two hundred acres far from any large city. I wanted to maintain the sense of wonder the narrator might have in such a sudden transition. Trees are larger and older than ever before, the air is quieter, and the stars are more abundant but so are the mosquitoes. I wanted the opportunity to see this world through Kate's eyes, and in initial drafts, Kate's eight-year-old voice was unfiltered, narrating in the immediate past. But there were other themes I wanted to touch on that Kate felt unqualified to fully explore. The ambitions of Kate's father and his family history in particular struggled to come through young Kate's voice. I wanted the family's expectations for the future to be tempered with a voice who already knew what was going to happen. I wanted the book to be colored by someone who knew, or thought she knew, what the events meant. At that point, I changed Kate's voice from an eight-year-old girl to an adult who already knew what that

move to rural Tennessee would bring for the family. In this current stage, I like older Kate's voice, though there is still a lot of room for improvement. How often should Kate intrude on her younger self? When is Kate's commentary unnecessary? My goal for this introduction is not just to explain my thoughts on the retrospective child narrator. I will also be studying texts that handle the retrospective well and teasing out what makes those novels successful.

This introduction will focus on two classic novels, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte and *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee. At first, there seems to be little in common between the two novels, one written in the mid-19th Century in England, the other written in the mid 20th Century in the Deep South. But there are a number of characteristics in the two narrators that are useful to my own work. Both *Jane Eyre* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* feature young female narrators close in age to Kate Wharton (Jane Eyre is ten when the book begins; Scout is six). Both narrators are telling their stories retrospectively from some point in their adulthood. And both novels are interested in the narrator's transition from innocence to experience as well as the injustices in the societies that generated the texts (classism in Bronte and racism and classism in Lee).

But beyond the simpler similarities, both novels handle the retrospective narration in ways that I admire and aspire to emulate. While reading *Jane Eyre*, it is easy to forget that the narrator is actually Jane Rochester. The famous line "Reader, I married him" (Bronte 382) reminds readers that they are being told the story years after Jane and Rochester's marriage. In a similar fashion, *To Kill a Mockingbird* balances a child's fear of Boo Radley with the adult understanding

that a black man cannot be found innocent by an all white jury. This harmony between the child of the past and the adult of the present is what makes these two novels so successful. Their subtlety and balance when handling the two sides of the narrator is something I strive for in my own work. By looking at how retrospective narration is handled in these two novels, I hope to identify the patterns of narrative distance, character motivation, and plot structure that can be found in stories with retrospective child narrators.

Exploring and Restraining the Child

On a quiet, foggy night, a child lies awake in bed, straining in the darkness to make out the corners of her room. Outside, a branch brushes the window; there is a creak on the stair. Even for very rational children, a ghost can become a reasonable explanation. A child's perspective offers writers the chance to explore a world with more options because a child's "rules" of reality are still forming. Retrospective narrators, who are both adult and child, can explore the thoughts of a child but also comment on the past. Retrospection assures us that the ghost is really just the shifting of an old house.

Jane Eyre opens when the narrator is ten years old. She has spent her whole life in the care of Mrs. Reed, her maternal aunt. But Mrs. Reed has always favored her spoiled children over quiet Jane, and whenever there is a problem in the house, Jane immediately gets the blame. After being locked up in a bedroom as punishment for a crime she didn't commit, Jane fumes over her ill treatment. "Unjust, unjust," Jane repeats to herself (Bronte 12). She thinks of a dozen ways

to escape her situation and punish her aunt such as “running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die” (Bronte 12). Young Jane believes her threats are severe, and because the scene is rendered in a child’s point of view, the audience feels the rawness of Jane’s hurt. Narrowing the narrative distance between the adult and child allows the reader to understand the childhood concerns that an adult might find petty. For an older narrator, young Jane’s hurt is not as immediate, and when Jane the adult controls the scene, she establishes her distance from the incident: “in what darkness, what dense ignorance, was the mental battle fought! I could not answer the ceaseless inward question--WHY I thus suffered; now, at the distance of--I will not say how many years, I see it clearly” (Bronte 12). Although for most of the novel adult Jane is a silent retrospective narrator, the first sixty pages, Jane’s early development, have more retrospective interruptions than any other section. Jane takes the time to explain her childish thoughts but quickly follows those emotions with adult reasoning. From an adult perspective, Jane claims *she* was part of the problem in her aunt’s home:

I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children, or her chosen vassalage. If they did not love me, in fact, as little did I love them. They were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathise with one amongst them. (Bronte 12)

If this section had been narrated by ten-year-old Jane, readers would only know Jane’s hatred for Mrs. Reed. Instead, Jane the adult knows that that in the future

Mrs. Reed dies alone, shamed by her favorite child John, who racked up debts and committed suicide (Bronte 190). "Poor, suffering woman" (Bronte 204) is how Jane Rochester addresses her aunt, and she extends this tenderness into her childhood recollections, tempering young Jane's hatred. *Jane Eyre* follows the traditional pattern of an early Victorian novel, not only tracing Jane's fulfillment of proper family roles (wife, mother) but also her transition from petulance to the control of her emotions. When there is more narrative distance between Jane and her younger self, the audience clearly sees that Jane has mastered her emotions and adopted the praised value of Christian charity. Young Jane Eyre is not just a chance for Jane to recall her childhood but also a measure of progress for her older self and the audience.

Compared to *Jane Eyre*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has less narrative distance between the adult and child and, overall, adult Scout's intrusions into the story are very few. This allows more space for the narrator to explore her childhood persona without intrusion from the adult perspective. When Scout wanders by the Radley place and finds two sticks of gum, her first impulse is "to get it into [her] mouth as quickly as possible" (Lee 40). But Scout takes the cautious route, "[examining] her loot" before "[cramming]" it into her mouth (Lee 40). "Loot" and "crammed" is diction of seven-year-old Scout, not the adult narrator. Because the adult narrator stays distant, the reader has the chance to spend more time in Scout's perspective. Scout's concerns and language are mostly focused on the present moment and the problems of her own life, but as a seven-year-old, those concerns are often as small as "Should I eat this stick of gum?" By sticking close

to the child's point of view, the audience feels the value young Scout places on these conflicts, and the novel creates a mood of childish innocence. This is particularly true in Part 1, before Scout must confront the racism inherent in her community during the Tom Robinson trial. By narrowing the narrative distance between Scout the child and the audience, the novel allows the reader to experience Scout's journey from innocence to experience just as a child experiences it.

Even adult Scout's few interruptions are usually just to clarify a situation rather than correct her younger self. Shortly before the Tom Robinson trial, Atticus and his brother, Jack, are discussing the upcoming difficulties of the situation when Scout sneaks down to listen. Atticus tells Jack that "Scout's got to learn to keep her head" (Lee 96), especially if the town begins to turn on the family. Then, in the middle of the conversation, Atticus stops: "Jean Louise . . . Go to bed" (Lee 97). The adult narrator comments that "it was not until many years later that I realized he wanted me to hear every word he said" (Lee 97). The adult Scout steps in to clarify Atticus's motives, to show that her father is in control of the upcoming situation. This approach, clarification rather than outright judgment, fits with the narrator's hands-off approach and preserves the dominance of Scout's younger voice.

But why does Scout use this approach while Jane does not? The adult narrator's role in the telling of the story is necessarily related to the role of childhood in the novel. For Jane, writing in the 19th Century, the novel of development begins with imperfection, the unruliness of a stubborn child who

does not know how to behave. Jane Eyre is interested in using childhood as a measure of progress, which is why the novel quickly jumps to Jane's adulthood. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, though, never leaves childhood; Scout begins the novel at six and ends around age nine. Rather than using childhood as a launching pad, Scout the adult is interested in re-experiencing her childhood, using language and childhood logic to recreate the setting of her youth. Creating this innocent mood brings the later evil of the book into stark contrast. In a way, both novels use the child narrator to make a later transformation clearer: Jane compares the misbehaved child to the mature adult, and Scout compares the innocence of childhood to the evils of the adult world.

Trauma and the Retrospective Narrator

Author Adam Johnson has often discussed the importance of "trauma" in fiction. Why does a narrator tell a story? Johnson claims that for a story to exist, there has to be a kind of haunting, something about the story that draws even the narrator back to its telling. "Trauma" describes an event, spiritual, emotional, or physical, that the narrator of the story cannot get past. Telling his/her story becomes not just a way to share the narrator's experiences, but for the narrator to process and perhaps understand what has happened to him/her (Johnson).

In the case of retrospective narrators recounting their childhoods, trauma is central. Few novels start at the narrator's birth like *David Copperfield*; most choose a point of entry into their story. And retrospective narrators have an advantage that the reader does not: they know all of the events that are about to

transpire. So why does an adult narrator return to their childhood and, more importantly, to a specific moment in his or her childhood? Many times, that moment of entry is actually related to a later trauma in the novel.

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte opens, like almost all novels, at a point of change. For years, Jane has been abused by her cousins and cold, distant Aunt Reed. But at the opening of the novel, Jane rebels for the first time, striking out at her cousin John when he attacks her in the library (Bronte 9). As punishment, Jane, who is only ten, is locked in the upper room of the house, the red-room. And as Jane's indignant rage settles, her anger grows into a childlike fear of the darkened room.

On a very literal level, the red-room seems to be haunted. It is never heated and rarely visited. It has remained a small shrine to Mr. Reed, Jane's maternal uncle, who died in the room nine years earlier (Bronte 11). As the daylight fades, Jane's thoughts turn to ghosts:

I began to recall what I had heard of dead men, troubled in their graves by the violation of their last wishes, revisiting the earth to punish the perjured and avenge the oppressed; and I thought Mr. Reed's spirit, harassed by the wrongs of his sister's child, might quit its abode. (Bronte 13)

But for young Jane, looking at the situation as an imaginative child, ghosts are too real to wish for their appearance. "I . . . hushed my sobs, fearful lest any sign of violent grief might waken a preternatural voice to comfort me or elicit from the gloom some haloed face, bending over me with strange pity" (Bronte 13). With Jane's mind and heart racing, a streak of light appears in the room, and Jane

screams, begging the servants and her aunt to release her from the haunted bedroom (Bronte 14).

Certainly for a young child, seeing a ghost is traumatic enough to remember forever. But Jane, the adult, explains away the ghost as “in all likelihood, a gleam of a lantern carried by someone across the lawn” (Bronte 13). If Jane is not convinced she saw her uncle’s ghost, then why does she choose to begin her story at this moment? Jane begins in the red-room because that moment evokes a trauma that is still with Jane Rochester, the adult: the imprisonment of Bertha Mason, Edward Rochester’s first wife. Bertha Mason, the Creole lunatic who Rochester locks in the attic for fifteen years, is one of the most fascinating and troubling characters in the 19th Century Novel. It is clear from the beginning of *Jane Eyre* that Bertha’s presence and history is still traumatic for Jane, even after her happy ending with Rochester.

As the novel begins in the red-room, Jane assures the reader that her escape is nearly impossible. “No jail was ever more secure,” Jane insists (Bronte 11), and the longer Jane stays in Mr. Reed’s bedroom, the more frantic she becomes. Jane says she was “oppressed, suffocated” (Bronte 14). It is hard not to parallel Jane’s claustrophobia with Bertha’s possible feelings after being locked in “a room without a window” behind a “low, black door” (Bronte 250). Jane herself makes the parallel even clearer. A few nights before Jane and Rochester’s wedding, a ghastly visitor comes into Jane’s room and rips her wedding veil in half (Bronte 242). Jane tells the strange event to Rochester, who dismisses it as a dream. But Jane insists that the visitation was real and says

that in her fright “for the second time in [her] life—only the second time—[she] became insensible from terror” (Bronte 242). Jane’s experience in the red-room at age ten, where she faints from fear, is the other event to which Jane refers. That detail, only mentioned in passing, would be easy to leave out, but Jane consciously draws a parallel between the red-room and Bertha.

But why does Jane Rochester, the beloved second wife, relate herself to Bertha, the mad, Creole first wife? Why does Jane begin *her* story of development with a parallel to Bertha’s imprisonment? This narrative decision relates back to the idea of trauma, why Jane is telling her story. Bertha is the only obstacle to Jane and Rochester’s marriage (Bronte 247). Jane’s position as second wife depends on Bertha’s fiery demise when Thornfield is destroyed (Bronte 365). Rochester’s unhappy marriage makes him into the brooding anti-hero that Jane loves and finally into the crippled husband that Jane cares for. That is why Jane returns to Bertha at the beginning of her story. Without Bertha’s life and death, Jane Rochester cannot exist, and the knowledge that Bertha has to die for Jane to come into her own haunts the text from the very beginning.

To Kill a Mockingbird also begins with reference to a later trauma in the novel. The very first line, “When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow” (Lee 9) actually references the ending of the book. Atticus is called to defend Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping Mayella Ewells, a white woman from a poor family. When Mayella and her father Bob are on the stand, Atticus casts doubt on the family’s story by showing that Bob is left-handed and the likely perpetrator of the bruises on the right side of

Mayella's face. He also accuses Mayella of not being honest on the stand and begs her to tell the truth. Even though Robinson is convicted, the Ewells are humiliated and vow revenge. At the end of the book, Bob Ewell assaults Scout and Jem on their way home on Halloween. Ewell manages to break Jem's arm and knock him unconscious before Boo Radley saves the children. This experience is certainly traumatic enough for Scout to remember. But Ewell and that night represent much more than just Scout's brush with death. "When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to his accident. I maintain that Ewells started it all, but Jem, who was four years my senior, said it started long before that" (Lee 9). Jem is not just talking about that one Halloween; Jem is speaking about the origin of racism and injustice that existed long before the Ewells did. The attempted murder of the two children and the appearance of the mysterious Boo Radley represent the climax of the book but also the end of Scout's journey to from innocence to experience. In Bob Ewell, she sees the culmination of true evil: a man who would beat his daughter, frame an innocent man, and then attempt to kill the children of the defense lawyer. But in Boo Radley, Scout realizes that those evils can be overcome; even though Boo's proud family has been cruel and locked him up for fifteen years (Lee 17), Boo chooses to do good by protecting the Finch children. The discovery of evil in her community is Scout's great trauma in the novel, but just as important is Scout's realization that evil can be overcome. The confrontation with Bob Ewell is the event that best illustrates this lesson, which is why Scout frames her narrative with this event. She reminds

herself when she retells the horror of Tom Robinson's trial and eventual death, that evil will be overcome, that the story she is about to tell does not have to end in hopelessness. This frame device gives Scout the courage to tell the rest of her tale. Clearly, in both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Jane Eyre*, the retrospective narrator returns to moments of trauma, not just to relive them but also to move past them.

Plotting the Child's Development

Jane Eyre and *To Kill a Mockingbird* represent a very specific kind of retrospective narrator: the narrator of a bildungsroman. Both novels begin with a narrator who is under the age of twelve. While *Jane Eyre* traces the narrator into adulthood, a traditional structure for a coming of age story, *To Kill a Mockingbird* ends around Scout's ninth birthday. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is less concerned with traditional markers of adulthood and is instead tracing Scout's development from ignorance to understanding. But starting in a child's perspective presents an interesting challenge when you look at the conflict of a novel. *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Jane Eyre* have main conflicts connected to the big issues in their society: racism in Lee and classism in Bronte. Although children are sensitive to inequalities, those big issues might not be forefront in the mind of a narrator who is ten, like Jane, or six, like Scout (though Scout's race and social status also have an impact on how she is affected by inequality). A novel cannot wait six chapters for a child narrator to become aware of larger societal

injustices, *but* children have their own concerns that can create tension early in the novel.

Jane Eyre and *To Kill a Mockingbird* have very distinct narrative arcs. The first part of the book, the early childhood, deals with conflicts unique to childhood. As the narrator matures, the world opens a bit more, and Jane and Scout are able to see the larger issues that are affecting their lives. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's first conflict and concern is escaping her family. Then once she reaches Lowood School and meets Helen Burns, an older student, Jane's second conflict becomes internal. After escaping Mrs. Reed, Jane believes that "when we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should – so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again" (Bronte 48). Helen Burns disagrees: "It is not violence that best overcomes hate—nor vengeance that most certainly heals injury" (Bronte 49). These conflicts, learning to get along and adjusting to a new place, are very present to Jane's childhood self, and they are the main tensions that drive the early part of the novel.

To Kill a Mockingbird has a similar structure, beginning with conflicts in a child's world before moving into the systematic issues that the community faces. Chapter 1 begins Scout's obsession with Boo Radley. "Dill gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out" (Lee 14), and for the rest of the chapter, Dill challenges Jem to just touch the house. Later, Scout and Jem find strange gifts left for them in the Radley oaks. Radley is almost a ghost in Maycomb, responsible for everything from frozen azaleas to murdered pets (Lee 15).

Scout's fear of Boo Radley and the tension surrounding his possible appearance is the first conflict introduced in the book, a child's fear of the unknown. Even during the school year, when Dill is gone, Scout has other issues to worry about: the beginning of first grade (Lee 21). School brings its own conflicts to the story. Eager to please her teacher, Miss Caroline, Scout instead starts "off on the wrong foot in every way" (Lee 28), first by being able to read and second by explaining to Miss Caroline that Walter Cunningham is too poor to afford lunch. Ghosts and school troubles are conflicts common to many childhoods, and by beginning with these tensions, Lee allows Scout to grow into the issues of racism and even classism that appear later in the novel.

But both novels do introduce the larger themes of the book early on, though they do it very differently. Classism permeates the beginning of *Jane Eyre*. Jane's tantrum is framed in classist terms, as the orphaned little girl is expected to be respectful towards her upper-class cousin, John.

'For shame! For shame!' cried the lady's maid. 'What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress's son! Your young master.'

'Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?'

'No; you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep.' (Bronte 9)

This small exchange, as well as Jane's treatment at the hands of her relatives, introduces the issues of class that will haunt the rest of the book. Even Jane's exchange with Helen serves a purpose beyond Christian goodness. Helen is

teaching Jane how to navigate a world where she is of a lower class, where she will routinely be disrespected and poorly treated for no other reason than her birth.

However, Scout takes great pains to minimize the presence of the dark parts of Maycomb while in the perspective of her six-year old self. She describes the town as dusty, slow-paced, and mostly poor (Lee 11), benign details that could match many Southern towns during the Great Depression. In that description, there is little hint of the ugliness that is shown during the Robinson trial where people freely declare that “it’s time somebody taught [Blacks] a lesson” (Lee 260). One of the few hints of future trouble in the town appears with Burris Ewell, who calls his first grade teacher a “snot-nosed slut” (Lee 34). Burris’s behavior foreshadows the meanness of the Ewell clan later on, and in the beginning, the Ewells seem to be the only source of conflict in the polite, Southern town. But Scout does carefully reveal that not everything is what it seems, that surface level politeness hides a lot of evil in Maycomb. Comments like “that’s nigger-talk” (Lee 44) and Miss Maudie’s claim that rumors are spread by “colored-folks” (Lee 52) suggest the racial tensions that will only spill over in Part 2 of the novel.

The difference between Scout’s and Jane’s discussion of race and class can be explained in another way as well. As a white child of a respected lawyer, Scout does not face much injustice in her daily life and therefore does not notice the inequality in the town until her father chooses sides in the Tom Robinson conflict. Jane, however, is a penniless orphan, and throughout her life, she must

contend with slurs about her class, her upbringing, and her education. This is another element of the novels that may explain why class appears so boldly in the beginning of *Jane Eyre*, but race is barely mentioned in the beginning of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Tracing a narrator from childhood to adulthood is difficult, but by beginning with childhood tensions before moving into the conflicts of the adult world, adult narrators are able to balance adult and child perspectives while keeping the novel tight with tension.

Conclusion

In his essay “How Books are Chosen,” Richard Marek lists voice as the most important element in a novel (88). That is certainly true for novels narrated in the retrospective point of view, especially when the retrospective narrator is reflecting on her childhood. Essentially, a retrospective narrator has two voices, the child and the adult. *Jane Eyre* and *Scout Finch* may approach their novels in different ways and with different purposes, but both books depend on the voices of their narrators to guide the reader from ignorance to understanding, from childhood to growing adulthood.

Reviewing the more skilled examples of Harper Lee and Charlotte Bronte has given me inspiration for techniques I would like to use in my own work. Ultimately, my retrospective novel will begin by referencing the narrator’s future trauma, the reason the narrator is telling the story. The reference can be either overt (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) or subtle (*Jane Eyre*). Additionally, because my

narrator is so young, her concerns will initially be about her own life: fitting in, growing up, having adventures with friends. The young narrator will probably not understand the larger structures at work in her life (her father's ambition, the social structures of the new town) until later in the novel, though these issues will probably surface in the early sections. Finally, the narrative distance between the child and the adult is one of the most important elements in a novel with a retrospective child narrator. The difference between the child's point of view and the adult's brings the contrasts of the novel into greater focus. The older narrator's commentary on her younger self shapes how the audience feels about the child narrator so it is important to determine the mood of the novel early on.

Retrospective child narrators offer the opportunity to see the world twice: from two perspectives, from two time periods. I am looking forward to working more on my novel, *The Wharton Place*, and experimenting with the advantages of this unique point of view.

CHAPTER II THE WHARTON PLACE: A NOVEL

Chapter 1

Jenna Naples had gone over her time limit by three minutes. Backstage, Mrs. Harrison pointed to her watch, waved, whispered, pleaded, but my classmate just stared blindly forward, mechanically reciting her speech as Betsy Ross. The third grade history fair had been arranged alphabetically, leaving Nathan Young and me to round out the end of the alphabet. I picked at the construction paper Star of David pinned to my white cardigan, my fingers trembling. I couldn't tell if I was hungry or nauseous.

On stage, Jenna placed her hand over her heart and began to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, the sign that her presentation was almost over. Mrs. Harrison bent down to my level.

"Remember, Kate," she said. "Five minutes." I nodded.

"Under God, invisible, with liberty and justice for all." Jenna finally finished her ten minute performance, curtsied and exited stage right. The audience laughed then broke into applause.

I clutched my father's moleskin notebook, where I had written my entire speech just in case. It was a blank address book, with spaces for names and phone numbers, but it was the only old fashioned book we had. In the "A" section ("A" for Anne Frank), I had written the speech in my neatest cursive, looping in-between the address entries. Dad said I could borrow the book only if I took very

good care of it, and so before leaving for school, I had wrapped it in cellophane. The back cover was still coated in the plastic, but there was no time to fix it. As Jenna stepped off, I walked to an X marked with masking tape in the middle of the stage. The audience politely clapped, but none of their faces were visible beyond the stage lights. Two or three red lights blinked in the crowd, and now and then a camera flashed from the aisle to my left. I cleared my throat and looked to Mrs. Harrison for my cue. She gave me a thumbs-up.

“We read diaries,” I said, my words echoing across the elementary school auditorium. “So we know how ordinary people lived.” My mother came up with that line as she curled my hair in hot rollers, trying to recreate Anne Frank’s hairstyle. Our speech had to explain why our assigned historical figure was important, what she contributed to world history. In my first draft of the speech, I had written, “Anne Frank didn’t really contribute much to history. She was killed by the Nazis, which was sad, but so were lots of other people.” My father was so horrified when I read my speech to him that we sat down and rewrote the entire thing together. The wording was my own, but every time I practiced, I could hear Dad or Mom’s voice influencing the words.

“Without Anne Frank’s bravery, we wouldn’t understand anything about how Jews suffered under the Nazis.”

Maybe the formality of the official performance made everything feel more important, or maybe it was having an audience that couldn’t talk back, couldn’t correct me, that gave me some sense of responsibility. I really wasn’t sure, but as sweat began to dampen my perfect 1940’s hairstyle, I wondered what Anne

Frank would have thought of my speech, my thrift store cardigan. Would she have liked it? No, I remember thinking. She would have found the whole thing very weird. Weird but necessary, I reminded myself, defending my month long project, because without all this fuss over the diary, without the diary itself, I would be dressed up as someone else.

The thought made me pause in my speech, my mouth dry, one hand clutching the moleskin notebook, the other clutching the Star of David on my chest. I heard Mrs. Harrison shuffling through papers, trying to find a copy of my speech to feed me the lines. That was the moment I decided that I would record everything, every thought, everything I saw, every tiny detail of the world I lived in so that I wouldn't be lost. As the audience shifted in their seats, I saw another young girl dressed in a replica of my favorite shirt standing on stage in a future auditorium. It was strange to think of. "We read diaries so we know how ordinary people lived," she said to a crowd of strangers. "Kate Wharton was born in--"

And then I remembered where I was. The lights of the stage seemed to grow brighter and hotter in an instant. My stomach growled, and I couldn't remember any of the words.

Mrs. Harrison knelt down and whispered. "Anne Frank was born--"

"Anne Frank was born in 1929," I cried out into the audience, and the rest of the speech came back with a rush.

Mom and Dad stayed just long enough to congratulate me. They had found subs for their 6th period classes at the high school, but the show had run over, and they had just minutes to rush back before the bell.

“You did wonderfully,” Dad said and kissed the top of my head. To a child everyone seems old, but even I knew my father looked young, though he was nearly forty. I peeled the plastic wrap off his moleskin notebook.

“I kept it safe for you,” I said. He smiled and flipped through a couple of pages.

“Your notes take up more room than mine.” That comment made me prouder than the standing ovation I received for my speech. Mom took the book from him.

“Except that we can actually read Kate’s hand writing.” She looked at the first couple of pages. “Your poor students.” Mom was the same age as my father, but I always thought of her as older, both in appearance and temperament. I expected her to say something about my speech, one good comment and one comment for improvement, but that day she just handed the book back to me. “Why don’t you take care of it until after school?” And that was it. She had either loved the performance or was thinking of a way to delicately break my faults to me. I couldn’t tell which.

“Just make sure you give it back,” Dad added. “I’ve been meaning to move my contacts into it.”

“I promise,” I said.

“Mrs. Harrison’s class,” my teacher called. “Line up.”

“We’ll make you something special for supper.” Mom straightened my sweater, and Dad gave me one last hug. I remember how they looked as they left, Mom in slacks and heels, Dad in a suit with his American flag tie, nearly touching as they walked together. They were probably laughing at my fudged line. Parents love those moments that make kids sweat, a misspoken swear word or a forgotten line, anything to stir up the monotony of the school performances.

That afternoon, I walked home from school behind Emma and her fifth grade friends. The curls in my hair were beginning to flatten, and I’d lost my cutout star, but I had bigger things on my mind. The moleskin notebook was wrapped in my cardigan sweater in the largest section of my backpack.

Our house was just a ten minute walk from school in the suburbs of Louisville. All the houses had been built at the same time, different only by the color of the paint. While Emma fished for the spare key in the spider webs under the porch, I climbed over the chain link fence into the backyard. Barry, our lab mix, barked, but I dodged his welcome jump and crawled through the doggie door, dragging my backpack through after me. Emma was too big to use “Barry’s Door,” and by the time Emma made it into the kitchen, I had already taken the best seat, facing the sliding glass door. Emma hit my shoulder as she walked past then spread the mail out on the kitchen table. There were no cards or even interesting magazines, just a stack of machine-sealed envelopes. We never knew who they were from, but we understood that there was a scale. Envelopes with the blue logo made Mom sigh when she flipped through the mail. Letters with no logo, just a neat return address, meant that Mom and Dad cooked dinner

together, talking about “minimum monthly payments” or “refinancing” while stirring vegetables or hand-drying dishes. But worst of all was the completely blank envelope, no return address, no visible stamp, just Mr. Aaron Wharton and Mrs. Ellen Wharton peeking through a clear plastic window. When one of those came, dinner would be mac and cheese from the microwave. Emma and I would watch TV alone while Mom and Dad went to their bedroom and closed the door. Even if Emma and I turned down the volume, we could never decipher their whispers.

“Anything?” I asked my sister.

Emma shook her head. “Not today.” She smiled. “Dinner at the table tonight.” She seemed so cheerful that I hoped she would forget her stolen seat. Emma pulled out her homework binders and books. When she saw the moleskin notebook, she looked disgusted.

“In fifth grade you won’t be able to fool around like this. You’ll actually have to do some work.”

“I did my history project. That’s plenty.” I flicked a pen cap at her face, but it missed and sailed behind the dishwasher. Emma crumbled up a spelling list. Her aim was better than mine, and after hitting my face, the paper rolled beneath the kitchen table. I looked underneath the tablecloth to find it. Barry was curled up down there, gnawing on a wooden ruler.

“Barry’s eating Dad’s stuff,” I said. My sister peeked under.

“Dad has a thousand of those. He won’t even notice.” And then we both stroked the lab’s head until he seemed to smile.

While Emma settled into her spelling, I kept to my corner of the table, examining my new project. The front and back covers of the notebook were perfect, a polished dark brown, smooth to the touch, like something from an ancient library. But it was still an address book, pages filled with slots for data, the paper separated by alphabetical dividers. There would be no room to fantasize about the royal families of Europe or write my “fears and triumphs,” more of my mom’s wording from the Anne Frank speech. At first I was disappointed that it wasn’t like Anne’s book, but then I realized how easy my writing would be. Each entry would be brief, to the point, not rambling like Anne’s work. I could fill the book in weeks, maybe even days if I was diligent enough. Then I would get a new book: Volume 2. I dreamed of myself as an old woman, though I still looked remarkably the same, only taller and with gray hair, surrounded by volumes and volumes of my writing. It was a news special, of course, “Kate Wharton Celebrates Her 100 Birthday,” though I couldn’t quite imagine what the newscaster would ask me. What does a person who is one-hundred receive for their birthday anyway? Pots and pans? Sensible things? I reminded myself that I still had work to do.

On the inside cover, in my neatest, straightest cursive, I wrote “The Life and Times of Katherine Marie Wharton: Volume 1.” When I drew a misshapen flourish below, Emma laughed.

“What are you even going to say? ‘I get up, I go to school, I come home, I eat.’ How boring.”

“Shut up,” I said and hid the book. But she had a point. I hadn’t entirely worked out what I would write yet. There were no Nazis to pursue me, no royal duties to fulfill, no military adventures to brag about. I was eight, living in Kentucky, with a dog. No one wrote books about people like that.

I started to erase my title “the life and” until the front page of my address book read “Times of Katherine Marie Wharton: Volume 1.” I felt a sudden wave of relief. No, I wouldn’t write about my thoughts, which might sound dumb, just record what I saw, useful things, things that would matter in a hundred years when my book was the definitive historical source of the early 21st Century. I rewrote the title so it read “The Times of Katherine Marie Wharton: Volume 1.” I erased the scroll and redrew it straight.

By four o’clock, I had filled up the book with almost everything in my kitchen, in addition to the pages already covered in my Anne Frank speech. I kept my entries short, getting a small boost from each completed section. “Homework- Schoolwork they make you take home.” “Cabinet- Where you keep breakfast.” “Refrigerator-Where you store lunch and dinner.” “Crisper drawer- I don’t know what this does.”

Then the front door clicked. I jumped. High school was out; Mom and Dad were home. I looked at Dad’s beautiful notebook, and suddenly my neat cursive writing, appeared lopsided and smudged. He would want it back, first thing, I was sure, and I had promised to take care of it. I quickly tried to erase an entry, just to see, but the eraser was old and rather than reducing the pencil marks, it streaked my words across the page. Dad was going to kill me. Compared to the dog-eared

paperbacks that lined our living room shelf, this was the nicest book we owned. I slammed the notebook shut, startling Emma from her spelling, and I managed to get it into my lap, just as Mom walked in with the first load of groceries. I tried to look like I was day dreaming, just staring out the window, but I made the mistake of trying to whistle off-key like the cartoon characters. Mom's eyes went straight to my spot at the table. Emma snickered.

"What are you working on, Kate?" Mom asked as she set down her bags. One arm was in my lap, covering my notebook.

"Nothing."

"She was writing in a book," Emma said.

"Shut up," I said.

"What is it?" Mom came closer, and I scooted back.

"It's not finished yet." I knew that would keep her at bay, some complex pedagogical reason to not rush children or not threaten their creative space. Mom backed up.

"You can show me later then." She glanced over the stack of mail, nodded, and unloaded some groceries.

I had just a moment of relief before Dad came in with the rest of the food. I stuffed the notebook between my thighs. He had told me to give it back to him, not write in it, and nothing I had written was as good as my speech so I couldn't even count on impressing him to get out of trouble. Dad patted Emma's head and praised her for starting her homework early. Then he ruffled my hair, but my spine was so rigid it was more like shaking my skull. Dad didn't seem to notice.

“Who’s cooking?” Mom asked.

Dad held up a folder of history essays like a shield. “Revolutionary War essays. I promised them I’d get them back by tomorrow.”

“That’s why I never tell my students when their grades will be done. They’ll hold you to it.”

Dad settled into the chair between me and Emma, spreading his essays out around him. I waited, my stomach churning, the notebook growing sweaty between my legs, but Dad didn’t ask about the notebook. It was almost like he had forgotten all about it. While he was focused on his essays, I slipped the book out from beneath my legs, laid it on my lap. I watched Dad for movement.

Nothing. I clicked my pen open, a sound that felt like thunder in the quiet kitchen. Not even a glance. Secure in my success I began to write, glancing up now and then to make sure I wasn’t being watched.

Mom boiled water on the stove then leaned up against the counter and stared out the window. Not sad or angry, just blank. While pasta cooked, the four of us sat together in almost silence. We did this every day. Conversation began when food was served, when we had all spent time with ourselves and were ready to greet each other for real. But that day around 4:55, the telephone rang, breaking the quiet. While my dad was distracted, I scribbled under “T” ‘We use the TELEPHONE to communicate with people who aren’t there.’”

Mom answered the phone with oven mitts. Steam rose from the sink where a colander of pasta was waiting for sauce.

Under “O”- ‘Oven mitts are oversized mittens used for cooking.’ Under “P”- “Pasta- Can be long or short. Best with red sauce. The most delicious food in the world.

“Will,” Mom said. “What a surprise.”

Dad looked up from grading papers, a red pen poised over the title of a student’s essay. Emma and I followed his eyes.

“No, no I hadn’t heard that.” Mom balanced the phone between her ear and shoulder as she unscrewed a jar of spaghetti sauce. Emma wrote a word on her spelling sheet and passed it to me. “Uncle Will.” I nodded. Uncle Will lived in Charlottesville, Virginia. He was Dad’s younger brother. To Emma and me though, he, my aunt, and my two cousins were mostly just a signed Christmas card and a five dollar bill every birthday. Mom stirred the sauce into the pot, nodding, stirring, nodding, stirring.

“You know, I think you’d better speak to Aaron.” Mom waved to my Dad. “No really, I think he needs to hear--”

Dad shook his head, and Mom waved harder. She was mouthing words that I couldn’t understand.

“Will, I--” Then she put a hand over her mouth, a sign that she was about to say too much. I wrote on Emma’s spelling sheet, “What’s wrong?” but before Emma could finish writing a response, Mom spoke again. “Yes, of course we will come. No, that stuff doesn’t matter anymore, you’re right.” Dad pushed his seat back like he was planning to get up. “Will, hold on just a second, I think I hear Aaron coming home.” She put her hand over the receiver. We must have been a

strange sight to my mom, her family gathered at a table piled high with papers, no proper place settings, every person staring at her. But Mom, with a presence of mind neither Emma nor I truly inherited, looked my dad square in the eye, no tears, not even a strained voice.

“Your father is very ill, Aaron. Will says he’s going to die soon.” The air was sucked out of my lungs. Grandpa Wharton was like Uncle Will, a mythological figure, nothing but a name on a card. But unlike Uncle Will, Grandpa Wharton was generous with his giving. Every year under the tree, the largest gifts were always his, sent in monstrous shipping boxes, play castles, felt rocking horses, globes on shiny stands. But the presents always came with instructions: “To help you girls in school,” “Don’t let this sit outside,” “Think of me when you play with this.” It would have been easier to think of Grandpa if I’d ever seen him. We didn’t even have a picture in the house. “Why don’t we go to see Grandpa?” I asked almost every year after the presents were opened. “Another time, Kate,” Mom always said as Dad left the room.

Emma was the first person to break the stunned silence. “Grandpa’s sick?”

Mom nodded. “Very sick.” Mom was talking to Dad, not us. “Pneumonia.” She held up the phone, her hand still cupped over the receiver. “What do you want me to say?”

Dad looked like a student who had been suddenly called on in class. He stared at my mom, opened his mouth, closed it. I wanted my father to respond

with the grief he should have felt, but his response was less than acceptable, more confused than grief-stricken.

“Is Jeff going?”

“I assume so.”

“We’re going right?” I said.

Dad ignored me. “There’s no reason Jeff would go.”

“I’m sure he’s going,” Mom said. “Aaron, Will is still on the phone. What do you want me to say?”

“Can he hear us?”

“No.” She held the muffled receiver out to my dad. He pushed it away.

“We can’t go,” Dad whispered. I couldn’t believe it.

“Do you want me to tell your brother that?”

“We have to go,” Emma said.

“Will says it’ll be any day,” Mom pressed.

“Will says that every time.” Dad’s voice was quiet but still frightening, like he was restraining something much larger than himself. From outside, Barry barked and pressed his nose against the glass. Dad fumbled with his essays, stacking and restacking the piles of notebook paper, though no order emerged from his efforts. I looked at Emma, but my sister was working on her spelling, a bright blush covering her nose. Grandpa was the first person who had been near death in my lifetime, but I had seen enough movies to know that Dad wasn’t acting right, wasn’t following the script. Only Mom kept eye contact with my father, as his cheeks reddened to the same color as Emma’s.

Dad's voice was lower. "Every time that my father gets ill, it's an emergency. I drive to Charlottesville, he recovers, we argue, I come home."

I couldn't remember what Dad was talking about. Had he gone to see Grandpa often? Had he gone without me? Mom held him to his words. "That only happened once, Aaron. Five years ago."

"It was more than once."

"Your father is an old man now."

"I won't do it again."

"Think of--"

"What? The money?"

I didn't know what Dad was talking about, but it was enough to make my mother silent and pale. Dad stood up. "We aren't going. Not again. Besides, we all have school this week, and we've already asked off for today, and--"

I knew that was the beginning of the justification, the slow cycle in which my dad listed reasons why something might be impossible, thinking of new reasons as he went along, becoming bolder and bolder with each justification, until he was finally convinced by his own echo. I wasn't going to let him do it.

"We have to go," I said. "We have to see him." If family histories are portrayed as trees, my tree had a section of white, empty branches labeled only Grandpa and Grandma Wharton. It was a sickness that I felt down at my roots. "I haven't ever seen Grandpa, and he's dying."

Dad groaned and rubbed his eyes. "Don't be dramatic, Kate."

My father's dismissal hurt me then made me angry. "No really, I haven't." I had no image to put with his presents or the "Thank You" notes my mom made us send each January. Despite my questions, polite or pleading, Dad had kept the top part of that tree empty for me and ensured now that it would stay empty. I almost wanted to show him his notebook out of spite. 'Here's what I think of your notebook,' I would say, scribbling a page then ripping it out. But there were other motives beneath the surface of that righteous anger, motives I wasn't entirely aware of: a deep curiosity about my grandfather and about the money so briefly mentioned then tucked away.

"She's met my father before." Dad was talking to my mother, looking for confirmation. Mom shook her head.

"No, I don't think she ever has."

Dad smoothed back his hair, tapped his pen, then looked at me.

"Never?"

I shook my head.

"But *you* have, Emma."

Emma hesitated. "I think. Yeah, I'm pretty sure, I think."

"You think?" Dad looked at the phone cupped between my mother's palms. "Never seen your grandfather." For years it had been "my dad" or "my father." That moment was the first time I could remember Dad giving Grandpa to Emma and me, "your grandfather."

A muffled voice came from the phone.

"Aaron, what do I need to tell Will?"

My dad shuffled through his papers, lost his pen again, then found it again next to the chewed up ruler on the floor.

“Just give it here,” he said, holding out his hand for the phone. Mom passed it to him.

“Girls, why don’t we take a walk before dinner?” It wasn’t a suggestion. Mom led Emma and I into the backyard without our coats. I left my notebook in the kitchen chair, but again, Dad didn’t notice.

“Will, it’s me,” I heard my dad say just as the back door shut. “Start from the beginning.”

Whatever Uncle Will said to my father was the last nudge he needed. When we were let back in, noses pink and goosebumps thick on our arms, Dad was in the bedroom putting clothes in suitcases. Years later, Mom told me that my plea had been the most convincing. I didn’t think of it that way at the time. I was just glad we were going, for multiple reasons. Seeing Grandpa was important but so was missing school and going to a new place with new people. I dumped out my school binders and started to pack my backpack with clothes. Dad’s moleskin notebook was zipped into the front pocket, a pouch of honor and too small for anything really useful. When I finished, I had filled up all four sections of my backpack, and it was still light enough to carry, a rare accomplishment. Maybe I was finally growing up, packing light.

“Be sure to pack a nice dress,” Mom said from the doorway.

“I’ve packed all my nice things,” I said. Mom sifted through my chosen outfits: my fake fur-lined winter coat, bright purple socks, a dress with butterflies in a field.

“No, something more formal. Pack the green dress you wore for Easter this year.”

“Why?”

“Just in case.” I knew what she meant, but I dismissed it as overly cautious, not a prophecy of things to come. I packed the green dress, like Mom said to, but I also stripped off my Anne Frank outfit and placed it on top. I imagined reciting my speech, a new, straighter yellow star pinned to my shirt, and Grandpa, who looked like my father but with wrinkles, smiling, applauding from his hospital bed. “Amsterdam.” I imagined pointing to the city on the globe Grandpa once gave us. “See? I did use it for school.”

Our family was never known for our efficiency, but we managed to leave the house with plenty of daylight left. It was seven hours from Louisville to Grandpa’s house, most of the drive through the western mountains of Virginia. As we got farther into Virginia though, the land flattened and was dotted with horses and whitewashed fences. My grandpa lived in a beautiful place. I wrote under “V”- ‘Virginia is filled with white fences. Even though it is an entire state, it looks like just one neighborhood.’ When I saw a rusted-out trailer or ordinary ranch house, I ignored it because I’d already written my definition in ink. As the sun set, I turned on the backseat light and worked on a pair of “Get Well” cards that Emma suggested we make. The cover of my card was, I thought, beautifully

decorated with hand drawn flowers and a cat with glued google eyes. I peeked over at Emma's card. She had cut out a scene from National Geographic, a waterfall somewhere in Africa. She had done only enough marker work to make a neat boarder around the picture and write "Grandpa" in cursive at the top. I looked at my childish, kitty card and was immediately embarrassed. I wouldn't be outdone again.

"What did you say?" I asked Emma, who had the benefit of a fifth grade education. "I don't know what to say."

She read her card to me. "Dear Grandpa, I hope you get better soon. I am so excited to see you. Love, Emma."

It was perfect! From the front, I heard Dad turn down the car radio.

"Can I write the same thing?"

"Don't copy me."

"I won't." But I did. I wanted to tell Grandpa all about my life, but I wanted to do it in person. The card was just supposed to be a reminder of me, when I wasn't there.

Eventually, the markers dried up, and we ran out of paper, but we had seven cards between us. Emma passed the cards to Mom in the passenger seat.

"He'll love them," was all she said before she turned off the backseat light. Emma turned on her CD player and closed her eyes. I was not so easily silenced. Dad had not said a word since we got into the car. Every time I had brought the subject up before, I had been dismissed or ignored, but I sensed that

if I was ever going to get an answer, it was going to be by the light of our car's clock radio on that long drive to Charlottesville. I chose my words carefully.

"Dad, did Grandpa say something that made you mad? A long time ago?" I gave my father the perfect out, his chance to place the blame for the missing Christmases squarely on my grandfather's shoulders. It's to Dad credit that he didn't.

"It wasn't that simple," Dad said. "There were lots of things that were said. That's why we're going to see him." He gave no more details, and I didn't press him, though I had already written down a dozen questions in the margins of my notebook. Dad never did give me the complete version of things, a strange omission for a man who usually thought aloud. I had to wait until many years later to learn the details, and even then, the story of the Wharton feud was told to me by Uncle Will.

My grandfather, Daniel Wharton, had three sons: Jeffery, Aaron, and William. Grandpa made a series of good investments, became wealthy young, and decided that, because of his success, there was no reason why one of his son's shouldn't be governor. It was just an expression he used, Uncle Will assured me. Grandpa didn't really expect any of his sons to be governor, though he did expect them to "move up." But Uncle Jeff married his pregnant high school sweetheart, and my dad, after six meandering years in an expensive private college, decided to double major in history and dead languages.

"Our dad should have just let it go," Uncle Will admitted. But Grandpa couldn't. There wasn't just one fight, but dozens spread out over months and

years and always at the same place, a piece of hunting acreage far south of us, away from Grandma's mediating influence. Once a year, every year, Grandpa and his sons went down to that property and shivered together in deer blinds. Grandpa talked about each hunt as a chance to start over, but it wasn't. Nothing was ever forgiven on that piece of property; each hurt was only deepened, year after year, until everyone was so covered in scars that they couldn't stay warm in each other's company.

My dad was the first to skip out. Uncle Will said they waited a full day before they realized that Aaron wasn't coming. The next year Jeff didn't show; then finally Will had other things to do, and the property was abandoned but not sold. No one knew why Grandpa kept the place for so long. Eventually, Jeff moved to Tennessee, and Dad moved with my mom to Louisville, to be closer to the Benidetto side of the family. Grandpa feared he'd spoiled his sons, blamed himself, blamed my grandmother, blamed Jeff, and Aaron, and even Will, who stayed behind, took up Grandpa's business, carried on the family's good name in Charlottesville, but didn't "move up." Now and then, Will said, there would be a withered olive branch, Grandma's insistence on a family reunion. But in my family, women are the tendons that keep the family together, and when Grandma died three years before I was born, all efforts at large scale reconciliation stopped. Aunt Lisa, Jeff's wife, inherited her husband's distrust of Grandpa Wharton and severed the ties. Mom made more of an effort, but covertly, calling Uncle Will for updates, sending Christmas cards with my dad's name signed in her handwriting, careful never to let my father know. Grandpa, for his part, tried

to always remember his grandchildren, exerting what little influence he had through lavish presents twice a year. Uncle Will was never sure of the motives for those gifts. "Perhaps to embarrass your father? To encourage you to move up? Who knows?" "Perhaps because he loved us," I suggested. "Perhaps. Or at least loved the idea of you." Again Uncle Will shrugged. "Who knows?" Vague, as a good business man always is.

At midnight, we arrived at Grandpa's home, a three story Victorian house. From Grandpa's presents I had expected a castle, or Daddy Warbucks' home in *Annie*, filled with servants and plush gardens. None of that, just a quiet house on a quiet street with a tree every ten feet, perfect order. Everyone was staying there, except for Uncle Will, who still had a smaller home near the university, Dad said. When we walked inside, my Uncle Jeff was asleep in a recliner while Uncle Will dozed on the couch. It was the first time I had ever seen Dad's youngest brother; I had always imagined him as a very young man, dozens of years apart from my dad, but Uncle Will was only three or four years younger, and the age difference wasn't obvious. They had the same color hair. Other than that, I would never have known they were related. Dad's face was sharp, all angles and high cheekbones. My uncle's face was rounder but not fat, marked with acne scars.

"Will?" Dad said.

Will rubbed his eyes, showing the stains on the cuffs of his sleeves. He looked like he had just come from work, though it must have been midnight.

"Aaron. Glad you made it." He approached my father. They shook hands and then he looked down at Emma and me. I looked away with feigned shyness.

“You girls have grown so beautiful. Now this is Emma.” Then he pointed at me. “And you must be Katie.”

“Just Kate,” my mom said.

“Just Kate, then.” Uncle Will then shook my hand, too. His palm was warm from sleep. “Need any help with the bags?”

Dad held up two suitcases. “We travel light.”

Will laughed. “Better than my family.” He looked to Emma and me. “Probably should head to bed. Emma, you’ll be sleeping with Marissa and Hannah on the second floor. Kate.” He put special emphasis on the one syllable. I blushed and wished my mother hadn’t said anything. “You’ll be sleeping with Peter on the top floor. Your Uncle Jeff said you would want it that way, right Jeff?” Will shook the recliner. Jeff snored, coughed, and opened his eyes.

“Hello Jeff.” Mom said. Jeff yawned and nodded. “Where do Aaron and I sleep?”

“No rush.” Will laughed again, a sound that was becoming more and more grating. “Stay a while. Talk.”

“We’re pretty tired,” Dad said.

“Oh, I won’t keep you long. Just a little catch up.” He put a hand on Dad’s shoulder. I saw my dad stiffen, but Will didn’t back down.

“Stay, Aaron,” Jeff spoke for the first time, his throat hoarse. “It’ll be worth your time.” Children know as well as adults when there is about to be an important conversation. Mom unzipped a suitcase in the middle of the foyer,

pulled out two nightgowns and two toothbrushes. “Goodnight girls.” She handed us our tooth brushes and pointed to the stairs.

Emma and I didn’t argue. “Will you walk me to the top?” I whispered, fearful of what might live on the upper levels of the house. Emma nodded and followed me up the winding central staircase, from one dark landing to another and then another. The outside of the house suggested the rooms should be filled with strange antiques, chests, taxidermied animal heads, but Grandpa’s house was surprisingly empty, like he had never really lived there. There were no paintings and very little furniture besides a few arm chairs and TV tables. When Emma and I finally reached the third floor, there were only two doors. One was locked, but the other creaked open.

“Who’s there?” someone said from inside. I turned on the light. My cousin Peter was in one of two twin beds, holding a flashlight keychain. He was ten, the same age as Emma, though he didn’t get along with Emma as well as he got along with me. “When did you get here?”

“Just now.” I set my toothbrush on top of my dresser. Emma shut the door, and I ducked into the closet to change. Peter was the only boy among his siblings and the only male cousin I knew well. Will had two sons, apparently, but I had never met them.

After I set my notebook on the side table and turned off the lamp, I heard Peter roll over.

“Hey, Katie,” he whispered, because he had never called me anything but that. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“We’re going to be rich.”

“You are?”

“No, we are.”

I didn’t understand.

“Grandpa left a will,” Peter said. “That’s why everyone is here.”

I was hurt at the suggestion. “We’re here to see Grandpa.”

“Right, before he dies.”

“He might not die.”

“My dad said he’s going to die.”

I didn’t want to hear it. At that moment, I wished Uncle Will had put me with anyone else, anyone besides Peter.

“Stop talking like that. It’s bad luck.”

“It’s not bad luck. It’s not bad at all.” Peter moved his flashlight over the walls. “But if you don’t believe me, I’m not going to tell you.”

“Fine,” I said. But I thought back to the money Dad had mentioned too briefly in our kitchen. Now two people who had no reason to lie had mentioned it, which meant there must be some truth to it. But asking about it felt like wishing someone good luck in a school play: it wasn’t the right way to say things, and there would be consequences, maybe from God himself. I said a quick prayer, asking God to keep my Grandpa healthy and make him feel better. But just seconds after my Amen, my mind wandered back to Peter’s words. I had come to see my grandpa, truly I had, but the longer I lay awake, the less I thought about

practicing my Anne Frank speech and the more I thought about what kind of money Peter was talking about. Did that make me a bad person? No, I reasoned. Just curious. And if Peter hadn't brought it up, I wouldn't be curious. That was a sin, thankfully, on my cousin's head. Confident that there would be no divine retribution in my asking, I rolled over towards Peter's side of the room.

"Peter," I whispered. "How much money did your Dad say?" The flashlight shining against the wall held steady. Peter was asleep, probably for real.

But Peter had been right, on every count. When I came downstairs the next morning, my Aunt Lisa was making pancakes. My mom, my dad, and my two uncles were gone.

"Where is everyone?" I asked. Emma glanced up from breakfast, but before she or Aunt Lisa could speak, Hannah, one of my younger cousins interrupted.

"Grandpa died last night. Didn't you hear?" Emma immediately hushed her. It was a question to make me feel stupid. Obviously, I couldn't have heard, and the news hit me in the pit of my stomach. Grandpa was the first person in my family to die. I tried to think of a movie or book where something like this had happened, but the screaming and wailing I imagined seemed out of place in the sunny kitchen where my cousins were, almost cheerfully, eating their chocolate chip pancakes. Peter had just taken a large syrupy bite, and I couldn't tell if he was smiling or just chewing. Aunt Lisa turned down the stove.

“They are getting the funeral arrangements ready this afternoon. The service will be tomorrow.” Aunt Lisa had never liked Grandpa, but she did like children, and when she came to me, spatula in hand, she hugged me.

“Your mama said how much you wanted to see him. I’m sorry. Don’t be too sad.”

I did feel sad, for Grandpa and then for myself. I thought about my Anne Frank outfit that I had folded so carefully in my backpack.

After breakfast, while Emma took the younger girls out back to play, I went to the front deck. I hadn’t been on the porch more than two minutes before the screen door whined then shut again. Peter climbed on the swinging bench beside me, waiting. He knew I would ask, but I wanted to delay his satisfaction for as long as possible. Three or four birds perched on an empty bird feeder in the front yard. They pecked each other, fighting from one rung to the next. One would fly away, then come back for an aerial attack. I wondered if Grandpa liked birds.

“Why would he leave us money?” I finally said.

“Why wouldn’t he?” Peter said. “We’re his blood.”

It was a phrase that didn’t sound right in Peter’s mouth, a set of borrowed words. But I believed him because, even if he had been unkind the night before, Peter didn’t play tricks.

“How much money?”

Peter kicked the ground, and the swing soared backwards, almost knocking into the house. “Lots, I think. Probably 5 million.” I had no reason to think he was exaggerating. If he had said millions I would have been suspicious,

but 5 million was too specific. "I wasn't lying. It's true," Peter said, and this time I absorbed what he meant: diner at restaurants where you had to leave a tip, being shuffled between horseback riding, and softball, and ballet all in the same year.

"We're rich," I repeated. But it didn't sound as nice coming from my mouth. I didn't know the first thing about being rich. If Grandpa were alive, I was sure he would teach me about these things, which fork to use, how to go the bathroom with a big dress on, but he was dead. And because he was dead, I was rich. It all felt a little unfair once I reasoned it out.

"Do you think Grandpa would have been happy about all this?" I said.

"I think so," Peter said. "Grandpa probably wanted to finally make things right."

"With our dads you mean?"

"It sounds like he was a jerk for a long time." It seemed unkind to speak badly of Grandpa since he was gone, but it seemed especially ungrateful since we were now millionaires because of him.

"My dad said that maybe it was a little bit of everyone's fault." I was speaking to Grandpa, not Peter, hoping he could hear me, hoping he would know I was grateful.

"That's not what my dad said." Peter shrugged. "It doesn't matter anymore I guess."

"Yeah," I said, but I felt like I needed to say more. The swing was slowly winding to a stop. Peter had longer legs than I did, and he kicked off again. We sailed over the porch, the chains rattling with the force of our momentum.

Down the road, a car turned onto our street. Jeff's mini-van slowed then pulled into the driveway. Everyone got out, but I was watching my father in particular. Jeff and Will talked together, but Dad hung back, walking slower behind them. My father didn't show the signs of grief, tear stained cheeks, red eyes, easy markers. I was ashamed that my father didn't make up for Peter's indifference; someone in our family should have felt something. I didn't realize until much later that my father spoke very little that weekend, and when he did speak, he spoke too loudly, too quickly, laughed too enthusiastically. I didn't notice, but my mother did, and when they walked in together, she was in step beside him until the front doorway, when she let him take the lead. I only noticed these things when I reviewed my memories many years later. At the time, I was just angry.

As everyone else gathered downstairs for the next meal, I climbed the three stories up to my bedroom. In my notebook, I wrote "Grandpa" under "G," but I didn't want to write that definition. I should have, and I felt guilty, but I didn't. Instead, I added another entry at the very back section labeled "Notes." "5 million," I wrote, but I couldn't figure how to divide it all up. Four in my family, four in Uncle Will's, seven in Peter's. I wrote fifteen underneath five million, but that was as far as I got. I studied the two numbers over and over again, then finally grew tired, gave up. I scratched out all of my reasoning so no one would ever see it.

The next day after lunch, the entire family, all fifteen of us, dressed and drove to the funeral. I met my youngest cousins for the first time, Will's sons Hunter and Eli. Hunter was four, and Eli wasn't even one. I categorized them as children and decided they weren't worth knowing until they grew up a bit and stopped picking their noses. Even though I had brought my green dress, Mom made Emma and I wear matching navy dresses.

"These are just a little nicer," she insisted. They were nicer because we never wore them. Emma and I hated those dresses, but mostly we hated looking like each other.

At the church, all of us, children and adults, stood in the receiving line. Dozens of people came by and embraced Will and his wife, Gayle, called them by their first names. I heard them at the front of the line, telling old stories, repeating "that's just the way he was." Then the guests moved on to us.

"And you must be Daniel's . . . second son?" They always asked my father.

"Yes, I'm Aaron."

"So good to meet you. So sorry for your loss." Then they moved on and repeated the message to Uncle Jeff.

At just before four, the sanctuary organ started to play music. Uncle Jeff lined us up according to family and age, and marched us in. I couldn't see above Emma's shoulder, and when I tried to peek around her, Uncle Will stepped on the backs of my shoes. The sanctuary was almost completely full, but I couldn't see my grandpa's casket. The only funeral I knew about was on the news once,

someone important who had died, and they had speeches in a packed stadium with a long dark casket at the front. You could ever see the dead man's face. I didn't think Grandpa's funeral would be any different. I anticipated climbing the steps to look in and see him lying there, but when the tallest people in front of me finally turned into the second pew, I saw the alter. There was no casket. Just one black and white photograph of a young man, a single red rose, and an urn. I knew that I had lost my one chance to ever see my grandfather. The upper branches of my family tree would always be blank. I wanted to cry, felt I should have, but I couldn't. Grandpa was the same to me as he ever was. Placed around the urn were the seven cards Emma and I had made for him. My cat with the google eyes was at the very front while cards that read "Get Well Soon" were pushed farther back. It was a sweet arrangement, but ultimately just another lie.

Uncle Will, Aunt Gayle, Hunter, and Eli all sat in the first pew. With only four people, there was plenty of space, but our family and Uncle Jeff's family sat behind them, seven kids and four adults crammed onto one bench. Peter passed me a program. The front read "The Celebration of the Life of Daniel Joseph Wharton." I tucked the pamphlet under "G" in my notebook.

Through the pastor's sermon, I learned my grandfather was a good man, a child of God, that he was no doubt happily in Heaven with his beloved wife and Jesus. Mostly though I heard what I had already been taught, death comes to us all, a natural consequence of our sin that has been defeated by Christ Jesus. Grandpa's life was more of a springboard, rather than a talking point. Yet again, the one thing I wanted to hear, Grandpa's character, was not discussed. After the

sermon, we sang the first verse of “Blessed Assurance” and bowed our heads to pray. Beneath the preacher’s words, I said my own prayer and thanked my good, kind, Christian grandpa for all he had ever done for me.

The guests shuffled out, talking, sniffing, moving like cows into the great hall for the reception.

“Come on, Katie,” Peter said, grabbing my arm. “Let’s go to the playground.”

“Sure.” I started to follow him then noticed my father hanging behind. He was at the altar, hands in his pockets, looking at the picture of my grandfather. I was still a little angry at my dad for saying he wouldn’t come, but I saw him reach out to the photograph, tilt it in the light. I was eight, and Dad could only be the bad guy for so long. I waved Peter on and went to stand beside my father. Dad put an arm around me, stroked my hair. He held the picture down for me to see.

I had always imagined my grandfather like Santa Clause, round and bearded, but the black and white photograph Will had chosen for the altar looked nothing like my image. My grandfather wasn’t handsome, even in the picture of him as a young man. He smiled crooked, and under his army hat, I could tell he was going bald. My disappointment must have been obvious.

“That’s not a good picture of him,” Dad said then he opened his mouth as if he was going to tell me something. I waited for more, but that was all I was going to get for a very long time. I left my dad sitting in the first pew of the church, flipping through an old hymnal like he skimmed his histories of the world.

Peter had worked quickly through our crowd of cousins so by the time I joined them on the church playground, every child over the age of six knew we'd struck it rich. Everyone stood together on the top level of the Noah's Ark themed playhouse.

"Do you think we'll get a new house? Like a castle?" Marissa, who was nine, asked. We had been feeding off each other all morning, affirming and expanding our fantasies.

"Maybe." Peter shook his head. "It's whatever Mom and Dad want to do with it, I guess. It goes to them, and then it goes to us."

"I want to have a pool with dolphins." Hannah was sitting at the top of the slide, waiting for the conversation to trail off so she could get back to playing. She was only six and probably thought our discussion was just another game.

"Not so loud," Emma said. She looked at our youngest cousin. Hunter was climbing up a rope ladder towards us. We'd only known him five hours, but he had already been declared a tagalong, and we were determined to keep him out of our business.

"Do you think he gets some?" Marissa said.

"He's blood too." That word again. For some reason, I hated the sound of it. When Hunter reached the top, Hannah was the only one who helped him up, but she didn't tell him about our good fortune. Hunter didn't seem interested anyway.

"Do you watch Power Rangers?" he asked. "I like the red one. I can show you."

Thankfully for the older cousins, Hannah did watch Power Rangers and would much rather discuss which ranger she liked best than play our imaginary millionaire game. Hunter and Hannah slid down the slide and wandered off. Emma finished her cherry juice box with a loud slurp.

“I’m going to get more,” Emma said.

“Get more chips too,” Peter said.

“Are they giving out cake yet?” Marissa asked. “I want a piece.”

“I only have two hands,” Emma said.

“Then take Katie.”

“Fine.” Emma looked at me. I started to whine, but she grabbed my leg and pulled me down the slide after her. Emma managed to land on her feet, but I rolled into a pile of pine chips at the bottom

“Jerk.”

“I can’t carry it all by myself,” Emma said.

Inside, the party was still lively, but we dodged the main room full of strangers and darted back into the kitchen. The kitchen was much bigger than our church’s, where I hung out with my mom before Sunday school, sneaking doughnut holes, enjoying the smell of coffee brewed too strong. Grandpa’s church had nicer counters, floors that were white and seemed to stay white, but the essentials were the same: half-full coffee pot, trays of food assembled by the super market, silverware that came from the cupboards of dozens of old ladies. Aunt Lisa, Aunt Gayle, and Mom were grouped near the pantry. Gayle and Lisa

were nursing babies beneath their shirts. Occasionally a distant relative or church lady ducked in, grabbed a cheese tray, and ducked out.

I caught the tail end of Mom's conversation with Aunt Gayle. "Please don't apologize. We had no expectations coming here. We came to see Daniel off, that's all."

I stopped to listen, but when they saw me, the women went silent. Aunt Gayle readjusted my youngest boy cousin in her arms. She smiled.

"Are you girls enjoying Virginia?"

"We're enjoying it very much, thank you," Emma said in her perfect-child voice.

"And how is your school going?"

"School is going very well. We both enjoy it a lot." Mom and Aunt Lisa exchanged a smile that Emma didn't see.

"What about you, Kate? How's school?" Aunt Gayle asked.

"It's okay."

The women laughed.

"Kate's usually more of a talker than this," Mom said.

"She'll be more comfortable soon enough. Now that things are settled, everything will be better."

Mom smiled and said nothing, a strange sort of silence even for her. Aunt Lisa waved her hand. "You girls have fun now. Emma, be sure you and Peter keep watch over the other kids."

“We will.” Emma and I left the kitchen with a ten pack of juice boxes and a bag of Cheez-Itz. Emma and I wandered back towards the playground, taking turns grabbing a handful of crackers and wiping the orange dust on our nice dresses. I wanted to do an entry about Cheez-Itz in my notebook, but it seemed like something only a little kid would do. I figured that if I wasted all my sections on silly things, no one would take me seriously or study me in school. Maybe “church” or “funeral?” The definitions started to form themselves in my mind. I unclipped my pen from my collar and reached into my coat pocket. My notebook was gone. I frantically turned all four of my jacket pockets inside out, coins and candy wrappers falling to the floor.

“What are you doing?” Emma said.

“I can’t find my notebook.”

“Where did you last have it?”

I was too nervous to think about Emma’s question. Three days worth of work was completely wasted. I would have to remember all the definitions I had been so proud of.

“Calm down, jeez.” Emma pulled me to the side as my tears started to sting. “Just retrace your steps, like Mom says.”

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine myself running in reverse, first the kitchen, then the playground, then the sanctuary where I folded up the program—“The sanctuary,” I said, and before Emma could grab me, I darted off, my heeled shoes clattering on the tile. The long carpet leading to the sanctuary doors finally silenced my steps. I started to pull the handle, but Emma held it shut.

“Wait. Listen.”

But I didn’t want to wait. “I have to get my notebook,” I said and slipped in the door that led to the altar. The lights were turned off, but the windows were large enough to fill the room with dim light and illuminated dust particles. From the back, I heard voices, Uncle Jeff and Dad.

“You got a raw deal,” Jeff said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Even though he’s cold in the ground, he’s still trying to get to us.”

“Jeff, he’s getting to you, not me.”

“He left you that place on purpose, to remind you.”

“Maybe,” Dad said. “But he still left it to me. He left me something.”

“It isn’t even near anything. No interstate, no town really. You’ll make pennies when you sell.”

They were talking about our inheritance. If I stood up, called their names, I knew they would clam up, usher me out, change the subject like they had been doing since Will called us. I wouldn’t let them do it again. I ducked down and crawled under the first pew to the second row.

“At least I own it.” Dad’s voice echoed into the rafters above.

“You’re not really going to keep it?”

“It’s an investment property.”

“It’s a hunting retreat, all brambles and steep hills. You’ve been there. You’ve seen it.”

“A long time ago.”

“Not that long ago.”

“It’s better than having the bank on your back every month.”

“Small consolation.”

Dust and hair clung to my dress as I crawled towards the prize. My notebook was stacked neatly on a pile of hymnals, my Grandpa’s program still sticking out. I quickly reached for the book, forgetting how close my head was to the wooden seat of the altar. My skull struck the underside of the pew, a deep echo ringing up to the ceiling. Tears welled in my eyes, and the world swam, but I had enough sense to know I was in trouble. Dad and Jeff had stopped talking.

I scrambled out from under the pew and bolted into the hallway, hoping I would be moving too quickly for them to recognize me, though my navy dress, identical to Emma’s, would have easily given me away. Emma was already gone so I ran as fast as I could in the direction of the reception. My head throbbed, and real tears fell for the first time that day. All that for a secret that wasn’t even any good, I thought. So we had some land in addition to our money. So what? Land and wealth were different enough. I never suspected that five-million dollars might have been an exaggeration, that maybe Grandpa had done well, but not that well.

There was a folding chair in a nook of the hallway, and Uncle Will found me there a couple of minutes later, still sniffing my pain away. He didn’t ask if I was crying about Grandpa. “How about some cake?” he said. I nodded, and we walked together back into the noisy reception.

Even an hour later, most of the guests were still there. Uncle Will eased among the crowd, moving from group to group, smiling, then frowning, then laughing loudly, then wiping his eye. I didn't see Uncle Jeff, or Dad, or anyone else I knew. Someone had printed a cake with a picture of my Grandpa's face on it, the same face, I was disappointed to see, that had been sitting on the altar. I still couldn't tell how tall he was or how fat, but I could see that same crooked smile, in a brighter light, looked almost handsome.

"How about a big chunk?" Uncle Will said, cutting into the cake. When I received my piece, I got a slice of Grandpa's ear.

Chapter 2

Our family and Peter's family both left the day after the funeral. Uncle Jeff, Uncle Will, and my father all shook hands.

"Don't be stranger," Uncle Will said.

"Same to you," Dad said. "And remember Thanksgiving."

"We will definitely think about it."

Peter and I waved to each other from the backseats of our separate cars. Uncle Will and Aunt Gayle, holding the baby, waved. As we drove away, I saw Hunter tug on his father's pants and ask a question, but Uncle Will just laughed.

Once we got outside the city limits, Emma turned down the volume on her CD player, and I turned off my Gameboy. We had agreed the night before, as we whispered on one of the landings, that this was the moment Mom and Dad would reveal our good fortune.

“Once everyone’s gone, and we’re on the road. They’ll want to tell us privately,” Emma said, smoothing her pajamas.

I told Emma about the land Uncle Jeff and Dad had been whispering about.

“Grandpa must have really loved Dad to give him something extra.”

“Don’t be silly,” Emma said “If Dad got the land, who do you think got Grandpa’s house? Grandpa divided everything up even-steven.” But before she went back to her bedroom on the second floor she said, “That is pretty cool about the land.” I smiled, knowing my secret had impressed her.

But as the minutes on our car’s digital clock ticked by, Mom and Dad chatted about other things.

“Shame we didn’t have time to go to Monticello,” Dad said. “Monroe’s farm is right there too, and Montpelier isn’t far.”

“I think the girls are a bit young to appreciate those places.”

“There is plenty of stuff for kids there.” Dad turned towards the backseat. Emma and I exchanged an excited glance. “Next time we visit Uncle Will, how would you girls like to see Thomas Jefferson’s house?”

“Oh,” I said. “I don’t know.” Emma was quicker on her feet than I was.

“Is it a big house?”

“Very big, especially for the period.”

I kicked Emma. If she got Dad started on the Founding Fathers, Dad would hold us captive for the rest of the trip. If your dad is a doctor, you get instant prescriptions; if your dad is a lawyer, you have a get-out-of-jail-free card;

but if your dad is a high school history teacher, all you get is trivia about the age gap between James and Dolley Madison. The answer is 17 years. I still know this because even if Emma and I explained that we already knew about Madison, Dad would tell us again, for good measure.

“Jefferson was really, really wealthy, wasn’t he?” Emma said, and I finally understood what she was doing.

“Oh yes, but not in the way we think of wealth. His money was all tied up in land and slaves. He didn’t have a whole lot of cash.”

“And did he inherit his wealth?”

I stared at Dad, raising my eyebrows and leaning forward, my best interested face. I could see my Dad was surprised, and Mom even looked in the rearview mirror as she drove. But while my mom may have been suspicious, Dad seemed to take our enthusiasm as a sign that we were finally ready to understand his passion for early American history.

“Yes some of it was, but Jefferson also made some of his wealth. He had hoped to have enough to free his slaves at the end of it all, but he was in too much debt to leave much of anything. Playing the gentleman is expensive, you know.” Dad opened the glove compartment, grabbed the car manual, and began to write. “If you girls are really interested in Jefferson, I have a whole bunch of books we can look through together when we get home.”

He was getting off topic, and Emma’s hint had failed to steer him towards what we were really interested in.

“How rich do you think Jefferson was?” I asked. “Like in numbers?”

“Well, to understand that, you really have to understand how trade has evolved since the Revolutionary period.” It was too late. We had lost him, and for the next hour or so, my dad talked about how early consumerism led to the American Revolution and an American identity. When he turned to my mother, Emma slipped her headphones on, and since my dad’s back was turned, I pulled out my notebook. “Thomas Jefferson- A founding father, wealthy but not wealthy enough to leave something behind.” I wanted to add a few new definitions, but as we drove along, the horse fences and water towers began to look familiar, and I realized I had already recorded this section of the road.

At a gas station outside of Roanoke, Mom let Emma and I browse the convenience store for snacks. I was starting to become secure in my wealth. I picked out three candy bars, a bag of chips, and three packages of dried fruit thinking Mom would overlook the junk food if I spread a few healthy things throughout my selection. Emma picked out as many things as I did, and when we approached our mother near the coffee machine, our arms were full of treats. Mom paused while pouring a second cream packet into her coffee.

“What’s all this?”

“Just a few snacks.”

“Yes, a few. Go put all but one of those back.” She sipped her coffee to make sure the taste was right then added another sugar.

Emma pouted but started to go back to the shelves. I stood my ground.

“Why?” I said. Emma turned.

“Because it’s all junk,” Mom said it calmly, but I could tell she was surprised and a little irritated that I didn’t do what she asked. “Besides, we’re not paying gas station prices for a shopping cart worth of food.” That was the part that irritated me the most, the money excuse. I would have accepted it just a few days earlier. A few days earlier, I wouldn’t have even dared to pick out so much food for fear of tipping my family’s delicate financial position into true *Oliver Twist* style poverty. But after scheming and planning and whispering with my cousins at the funeral, I thought I knew better. I thought I had finally caught my parents in a lie.

“So? It’s not like we can’t afford it.” We had finally found a way to get beyond those days of eating out on the first of every month and then scrounging by on meatless pasta every 30th. My parents used euphemisms to talk about bills so Emma and I wouldn’t worry, though we had cracked their code years ago. After all that, we finally had an out, and Mom just wanted to keep us running in place. Spending that new money on empty calories seemed a perfectly reasonable request.

I could see my mom’s eyes darken and narrow. Emma dumped all of her items in a basket of Moonpies and ducked out of the store, the bell on the door jingling as she went back to the car.

“What are you talking about?” Mom said.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” but my bravery was beginning to dwindle. I realized how tall my mother looked, how tightly she clutched the empty creamer cups, and I remember the sound of her voice when she yelled,

not screeching like my teacher's voice on the playground. She yelled like I imagined a singer would, not from the throat but from the bottom of her lungs. But I was still angry, and when I dumped my stuff on top of Emma's abandoned snacks, I made sure to set the potato chip bag down hard enough to crunch it. I hoped I looked confident, but inside, I could hear the blood pounding in my ears. I moved as fast as I could without breaking into a full run.

Mom managed to snatch the hood of my coat as I slipped through the door. With a firm hold, she grabbed my shoulder and steered me out by the pay phone.

"What did you hear?" Mom said, her fingers gripping the sleeve of my coat.

Tears blurred my vision. I was too scared of punishment to speak, but I was also relieved that I had managed to cry. Maybe Mom would take pity.

"Kate, tell me what you're talking about," Mom said.

I tried to speak, but when I opened my mouth, I gasped and sobbed.

"Oh for God's sake." Mom pulled a crinkled but clean tissue from her coat pocket and roughly wiped my nose. Not wanting to look like a kid in front of the other customers, I snatched the tissue from her and began to wipe my own face. When Mom spoke again, her voice was calmer but still stern.

"Who told you we had money? Did someone say Grandpa left us some money?" The fact that she immediately jumped to that conclusion gave me some hope. I nodded and wiped my nose but not my eyes.

“Peter did. Peter said Grandpa left us a bunch of money,” and to assure my mom that I knew what I was talking about, I added, “At least five million dollars.”

Mom groaned. “Of course. Only Jeff’s kids would come up with something like that.” It was the first time I realized that our family’s tension ran deeper than the clearly established teams: Jeff and Dad vs. Will and Grandpa. But Mom said nothing else before she pulled me across the parking lot back to where my father was closing the gas cap.

Mom put me in the car and shut the door behind me. Emma had her headphones on, but I could tell she wasn’t listening to any music. Behind the car, Mom was speaking to Dad. I craned my head to see them. Their mouths were moving, well, Mom’s mouth was moving. Dad was frowning, then nodding, then shaking his head. Then, almost like a game, it was his turn, and he spoke, and Mom listened, but I still couldn’t hear the words.

I wiped my nose and wrote “selfish” and “stingy” under “S.” I wanted to write more, but I couldn’t think of any more nasty words that started with the same letter. By that time, Mom and Dad got back into the car. This time Mom took the passenger seat, and Dad got in to drive. He pushed the seat back, adjusted his mirror, checked the turn signals, all the while my Mom stared straight ahead. Eventually, my Dad ran out of things to do.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” Dad said. Emma took off her head phones completely. “Grandpa didn’t leave us any money. Not five million dollars, not one thousand dollars, none of that.”

“But--,” Emma said. Mom shushed her.

“Grandpa did leave us a piece a land of in Tennessee, a place where your uncles and I used to hunt. And your grandpa too, of course.” That was what Dad and Jeff had been talking about in the sanctuary. I thought back on Jeff’s words, “raw deal,” and I was embarrassed that I hadn’t guessed sooner. I had always prided myself on being difficult to fool, seeing through the fifth graders’ tricks, sabotaging Emma and her friends’ pranks, but I hadn’t expected that Peter would be wrong. I blamed him for my embarrassment more than I should have.

“Is it near Uncle Jeff’s house in Chattanooga?” Emma asked.

“No, much farther north, not near Uncle Jeff.”

“Not near anything really,” Mom said.

“Ellen, I can tell it.”

“Is it a lot of land?” I said.

“Yes, almost two hundred acres.”

I tried to picture an amount of land so vast, but all I could envision was an image from *Little House on the Prairie*, which came on at 6:30 while Emma and I dressed for school. I saw a vast stretch of grassland so flat you could almost see the curve of the earth. That was the biggest piece of land I had ever seen, and 200 acres was the largest amount of land I had ever heard of, so I put the two images together. I imaged my family standing in the very middle of that prairie, owning everything we could see.

“Are we going to live there?” I said.

“Absolutely not,” Mom said.

Dad turned to my mother. "Actually, we're still discussing that." I had never heard him use that tone with Mom before, a clipped correction usually reserved for students. Mom was probably more surprised than us, but she had already spoken too much about Uncle Jeff, and I'm sure she wanted to be careful about saying anything else in front of Emma and me.

"Don't worry about all that," Mom said. "The important thing is that you know the facts about Grandpa's will. We are not rich, despite what Peter and the others may have said. Nothing has changed. Nothing." She said the last word as though she was trying to convince herself.

"Your mother's right," Dad said. "You don't have to worry about anything." Then he put the car in gear and drove back onto the freeway.

I spent the next few weeks adjusting to the reality of things. I had only suspected our wealth for two days, but it took almost a month to give up on that dream. Every time I saw a commercial for a new toy, I was reminded I couldn't have it. When we ate dinner, I knew that instant mashed potatoes were the best I would ever afford. When I stumbled upon an old Christmas present from my Grandpa, I was reminded that he was like Thomas Jefferson, with nothing to give his descendents. My disappointment became so strong that for two weeks I stopped watching TV, stopped accompanying my parents to the grocery store. Instead, I wrote, sometimes filling pages of my notebook in a day and not just with things I physically saw like before. "Frustration- when you have had all you can take." "Loyalty-sticking to it even when the idea seems stupid."

Then, on the first truly cold day of October, I sat in my backyard, my cursive warbled from writing with mittens. I realized then that I hadn't yet written the definition for "family" under "F." How weird, I thought, even back then. "Family- Mom, Dad, Emma, Peter--" But I realized that no one from the future would understand who those people were so I scratched it out and tried again. "Family- the people who you have to love, even when they hurt your feelings." And I thought of Dad and Grandpa and the feud I didn't entirely understand yet, and I immediately felt sad. I closed my notebook, but for the first time since the funeral, I was grateful for Grandpa and grateful we had the farm.

Emma came around a little earlier than I did. On our first night back in Louisville, I tried to share my disappointment with her, but she refused to discuss it.

"Let it go, Kate. We're not rich. That's that." I thought she might have been hiding her grief, like I did, but the next morning, Emma was singing in the shower and jumping into piles of leaves like the mix-up had never happened. Perhaps it was because she had never believed we would be rich, a concept so radically different than the life we'd known. Our discussions on the playground for Emma had been no different than playing princess, a pretty thought but not a realistic career path for a 10 year old girl from Kentucky. But the farm was different, and once Emma and I had grieved for our lost wealth, the idea of owning a farm moved to the front of our minds. Other than what I saw from the interstate, I had no idea what a real farm looked like.

“Remember the books in kindergarten?” I was sitting on top of Dad’s car in the driveway, trying to nail the winning shot in a game of HORSE. “It probably has a red painted barn, a cow, a chicken, a pig, a horse, a dog, and a cat.” There were never suburbs in those books, just the city and the country, which always made me a little sad, like I lived in a place that wasn’t worth writing about.

“Real farms don’t look like that,” Emma said. “Real farms specialize and have lots of one thing. It might be cow farm or a chicken farm, but not all kinds of farms at once.” It was hard to dispute her. She had gone on the fourth grade dairy field trip earlier that year and returned with seemingly infinite knowledge and an infuriating attitude. “If you drink milk, you’re stealing from baby cows,” she had announced to me at breakfast one morning. I just kept eating my cereal. I saw no hungry baby cows, just a milk carton with a happy cow grazing in the field. It didn’t matter much anyway. Emma’s milk protest lasted only a week, when we ran out of toast, and she had to eat cereal.

“If it was our farm, what do you think we’d specialize in?” I asked. I tossed the basketball and missed. Emma caught it before it rolled into the street. “It would be fun to have cows and horses. They’re similar enough where you could probably have both.”

“No use thinking about that,” Emma said, then turned around backwards and studied the hoop from her position. “We’re just going to sell it. What would we do with a farm anyway?” And despite my visions of *Little House on the Prairie*, I had to agree with her. Grandpa’s will had taught me to be cautious with

my expectations. I flipped to “H” in my notebook. “HORSE- a basketball game you play after school. Whoever spells the word ‘HORSE’ first, loses.”

“Don’t be stupid, Kate,” Emma said. “Future people will know what HORSE is.” And with seemingly no effort, Emma tossed the ball into the net and won the game.

Mom and Dad’s views were more difficult to pin down. Their discussion in the car had been the last public debate on the issue, but I could tell they were still talking about it. One morning when I got up, I found a large map of Tennessee spread over the kitchen table, a section in the northeast circled with a red pen. Around it were smaller maps printed on computer paper. Some were satellite views, but others were just property maps with geometric shapes and a few named roads. It was not at all like what I expected. The maps showed a section of land shaped like the coffee stain in our carpet, fat at the top before narrowing into a tiny tail. The satellite view showed a dense forest, then two patches of yellow, one at the bottom of the hills and one at the top. In the center of the bottom field was a perfect square, like a fairytale cottage.

“Is this the farm, Mom?” I asked while she poured cereal.

“Yes, but don’t worry about. Dad is just reading up on a few things before we sell it.” She threw away the printer paper maps, but when she went to dump the large road map, she hesitated. She folded the map neatly along the edges and set it at my dad’s place at the table.

“Is it nice?” I said, trying to chew my cereal as quietly as possible. Mom sighed and checked her watch.

“I don’t know, Kate. Your father seems to think it is.” When Mom looked away, I slipped one of the farm pictures out of the trash, one that showed the trees and the fields. Something else fell out with it. I glanced at my mom, but she had already left the kitchen. I spread the paper open with my foot. Another map? No. A white envelope with a plastic window. No return address. No stamp.

And it wasn’t the last one. For the next two weeks, a blank white envelope arrived every other day, always addressed to Mr. Allen Wharton and Mrs. Ellen Wharton. Then they started arriving every day, then two envelopes a day. I would accompany Emma to the mailbox, and we would pull them out, test the edges to see if there was a tear we could easily exploit. There never was. Even if there had been, I don’t think we would have been brave enough to open it.

“Should we hide them?” I said one day as we stared at the envelopes on the kitchen table.

“That will only make things worse,” Emma said. And so each night, we sat in front of the TV while Mom and Dad took their white envelopes into a back room and ate alone.

Then one evening, close to Thanksgiving, Emma crept into my bedroom and shook me awake. “Something is happening,” Emma whispered.

I sat up. “Now?” I assumed it was a fire. I tried to remember the escape routes that I had planned for myself after fire-safety day.

“No.” Emma shook her head. “But soon.” Emma pointed to the crack under my door, which was still lit. I looked at my teddy bear alarm clock. 1 AM. “Mom and Dad haven’t gone to sleep yet.”

“Where are they?”

“The office.”

“What are they saying?” I said, knowing that if my sister was worth anything she would have listened in.

“They’ll take everything, even the land.”

I clutched my pillow. “What does that mean? Who is ‘they’?”

Emma lay down next to me. “I don’t know. It’s just what Mom said.”

“And Dad? What did he say?”

“He said, ‘No, I think the house is still worth enough.’”

“The house is still worth enough?”

Emma nodded. “I told you something was happening.”

“With our house?”

“With everything,” Emma said. I knew that somehow the white envelopes had brought all this. Whoever sent them wanted to do more than scare us; they wanted to destroy us.

“Maybe they’ll go to bed soon,” I said, though I knew that wouldn’t be true. Mom and Dad were in bed by eleven every night, no excuses. I handed Emma my second pillow, and she lay down on her belly, watching the line of light. We kept vigil for almost two hours, never taking our eyes from the light, not speaking in case we missed a footfall. When the clock read 3 AM, it was officially the latest I had ever stayed up. I wasn’t strong enough to make it until sunrise.

When we woke up the next morning, the light was still on, and Mom and Dad were still awake. Emma was curled up at the end of the bed, wrapped in her

Louisville Cardinals nightshirt. Dad knocked on our door an hour before the usual time.

“Time for school, girls.” I don’t know how he knew that Emma was in my room.

That morning we ate breakfast at the table, not separately or in the car. Pancakes and eggs, a Saturday breakfast, except it was a Friday. I barely touched my eggs, and when I did eat, I felt ill. Emma and I watched my parents. Mom would take a few sips of her coffee, then get up to pour more, even though the cup couldn’t be empty. Then she’d get up to wash one pan, then back down, then up again to get a napkin for a coffee ring. Dad sat hunched over a large map. His mug and plate were empty, and now and then, he would draw a line or circle something. His entire body was stiff, like he’d been in the same position for hours, but he did not have Mom’s panicked click in his step. No, he had something different. Now and then, when mom wasn’t looking, he would even circle something and smile, not his usual smile, but something harder, like he could see something in that map that not even I could see.

“Girls,” Dad said at last. “You’re going to go stay with Grandma tomorrow after school.” Grandma Benidetto was our maternal grandmother, and Mom was her only living child. It meant a mixed sort of weekend for Emma and me. On the one hand, we got to spend time with Grandma, who fussed over us, fixed us whatever we wanted, never disciplined us with anything more than a “now girls.” On the other hand, Grandma’s house had no cable and a yard filled with fire ants, even in the early winter, though the ants came out of their volcanoes much

slower in the cold. Grandma didn't even have a car, which meant we were trapped with whatever Grandma had stored up to entertain us.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"We're going down to Tennessee."

"To the farm?"

"Yes."

"Can we come?" Emma asked.

Dad looked to my mom. "How about if they--" Mom's frown stopped him from going further. "No, no you need to stay with your grandmother." Mom's look assured me that the topic had been discussed then settled all before it had reached the dinner table. We didn't argue any more.

As Dad was gathering up the last of his papers for class that day, I approached him by the coat closet, his moleskin notebook clutched in my arms. I had kept it too long. Perhaps my dad needed it back more than ever, to keep things organized. I thought about all of my definitions, my anticipated life's work, and I hesitated, but I knew there was no other choice.

"I'm sorry I took it," I said, holding the book out, weeks of work clasped in my hands. Dad adjusted his coat and looked at my offering.

"I'd forgotten about that," he said. He took his briefcase and ruffled my hair as he passed. "Why don't you just keep it?" He didn't look at me, as though he had larger things on his mind. I smoothed the cover of the journal, but I couldn't tell if I was pleased or hurt that he had left the book behind.

After school, Emma and I walked in the opposite direction from our house, spending twenty minutes wandering in the freezing November rain. Although I still thought about Mom and Dad's all nighter, my school day had been busy. I had a pilgrim hat and a bag of candy corn in my backpack, and the chaos of a classroom full of third graders had been enough to chase away most of my apprehensions. Mom and Dad would take care of things; they always did. By the time we reached Grandma's house, our noses and fingers were red, our lips were chapped almost to the point of bleeding, but Grandma had already drawn a warm bath.

"Just hop in girls,"

"We're going to bathe together?" Emma said and made a face like she'd eaten something sour. But I was already throwing off my cold, wet clothes.

"Emma doesn't want one. I'll take it." I kicked off my underwear and raced through the hallway into the steaming tub. My toes and fingers stung for the first few minutes, but eventually they numbed, and I breathed in the smells of hot steam and old linoleum. In that moment, I was actually glad Mom and Dad had left us behind. I imagined them standing in the center of the satellite map, freezing and wet.

When Emma and I changed into clean pajamas, Grandma took us into the living room to watch an old VHS tape, something black and white but not famous. She braided Emma's hair while I ate the freshest kernels of popcorn. Then at the intermission that sometimes appears in those old films, Emma climbed on the

floor to nibble on the last soggy pieces of popcorn, and I sat on a stool in front of Grandma's recliner, while Grandma teased knots out of my limp brown locks.

"Your hair is getting darker," she said, bobby pins in her mouth. "It'll be black by the time you're a woman."

"Really?" I hoped so. Mom's black hair was her most beautiful feature, something that stood out. At eight, I felt like nothing about me stood out. I had an average nose, average brown eyes, average teeth, even average mousy brown hair. Emma was far more striking than I was, a more even distribution of Mom and Dad's best traits. But at eight, I didn't yet hold that against my sister.

Grandma's bony fingers scratched my scalp, parted my hair to the side, then to the middle, then to the other side. She would spend hours bobby pinning, braiding, then re-braiding until my hair was completely smoothed and smelled like Grandma's lavender hand lotion. It seemed like an activity too tedious to hold the attention of young girls, but Emma and I loved it. We weren't too young either, to realize that Grandma's hands were growing more unsteady, and the bobby pins would prick our heads more often than before.

What neither Emma nor I realized, and what Mom and Dad were only just beginning to suspect, was that Grandma's deterioration went beyond a slight unsteadiness. For years, she had managed to hide the slow decay of her mind from us, surrounding herself with familiar objects, familiar pieces of furniture. She fooled my parents into thinking that her mind was still very sharp. But it was an act, much like her tempered emotions, which she had passed on to my militantly polite mother. My grandma never spoke a foul word about anyone, leading others

to assume that she always thought the best of people. But those two things, speaking kindly and thinking kindly, are not the same at all. As Grandma began to slowly slip out of herself, the barriers between what she said and what she had secretly thought for years began to break down.

Grandma brushed a few fly-aways from my face and secured my bangs.

“Your father is a fool for thinking this will work.” My muscles tightened, all the way back to the tendon behind my ears. Emma stopped crunching on the uncooked kernels, but Grandma kept going as though she was touching some other girl’s hair.

“Your mother has always wanted such sensible things. That’s why she moved back here after college. Good schools, good jobs, good neighborhoods, the right way to do things.” She pulled my hair back so tightly I winced. “Your father was always on board too, especially when you girls came along. Such a good man, I was so proud when Ellen married him. Work hard, move up slowly, yes, like it’s always been done. The man just has to be patient until things work out.” She forced a knot from my hair, pulled the tangled strands out of my scalp. I felt her divide my hair into three sections, weave them tightly together, cinching each part of the braid as she moved down my hair. “But that’s not good enough anymore. Too many books about dead presidents. You father will certainly never be president or anything like it so he needs to stop trying. This whole farm business is a mistake. He needs to sell it, pay off his debts, not drag you girls so far away from everything. Selfishness.” Her voice broke. “Such selfishness.” She started to cry, but she didn’t stop weaving my hair until the braid was finished.

Emma and I stayed silent, paralyzed to see adult weakness. It was more than that though. Grandma spoke about the farm like my parents, even my mother, never had: as my father's mistake.

I patted my Grandma's knee, handed her a tissue, all the futile things children try to do. She took both of these comforts, breathed deep. The music in the movie swelled. Grandma straightened up in her recliner and hugged me.

"Girls, I'm so sorry for that. Grandma just isn't feeling well tonight." Then, as though she was afraid to add it, "Don't tell your parents about this." It was a strange request, but Emma and I were relieved to not think about it anymore. We spent the rest of the night playing board games, baking cookies, and watching Grandma's mood for the slightest change. She didn't cry again, not even when she tucked us into the guest bed and kissed us wetly on our cheeks.

Our hair was still neatly braided, but the tight pins and bands began to give us headaches after Grandma turned out the lights. As my temples throbbed, I thought about the farm picture tucked inside my notebook. The rolling prairies of my daydreams had been replaced with dark tangles of thorns. To dream of the farm was fine, but to go there? I trusted that Grandma's fear was sincere, that there was something terrible waiting for us out there.

"What about our real house?" It was Emma who asked the question. "Are we really going to live at the farm?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'm afraid to go there." What was I afraid of? The fear was pulled from every corner of my childhood: wolves, bats, witches, cold, hunger, embarrassment, and failure, my own as well as my fathers'.

The next evening, when Mom and Dad pulled into the driveway, Emma and I watched from the window. Dad got out of the driver's seat and took the porch steps two at a time, smiling. He was miles away from where he'd been the day before, like he had slugged off a heavy backpack. Mom followed behind him, carrying her purse with papers sticking out. I pressed my face against the glass to see her eyes. She brushed her hair behind her ears, rubbed her face. She didn't look angry or sad; she looked like she did in December and June each year, just before final grades. She was a person with too much left to do.

I knew right then that everything was going to change, and not in the way things had changed five years ago, when we moved across the city to be closer to Grandma. Things were about to change in such a way that I could no longer imagine my future, not in Louisville, not anywhere. I pulled out the picture I had saved, those two fields and the dark trees, and I was afraid of what I saw. But underneath my fear was something else: too much of my father in me, the thrill of the unknown.

But things were far from settled, nor did there seem to be a clear plan other than my father's statement "to get out there as soon as possible."

"But when?" Emma asked, as we were riding home in the dark, streetlights swimming across the backseats. "And why are we leaving at all?"

"There's a lot to be done before we can confirm we're moving," Mom said. "Don't worry about it yet."

But neither Emma, nor I, nor Dad, listened. When we got home, Mom went to bed early, but Dad gathered Emma and me around the table, pushing a stack of blank white envelopes onto the floor. Under the kitchen lights, he pulled out his maps, freshly printed. With a dark marker, he drew a slow, careful circle. I ran my fingers over a topographic map, tracing the ridges and wondering if I was touching one of our mountain tops.

“The upper fields need a lot of work, but there’s a trail that goes up through the grass and into the woods. Girls, you’ve never seen trees like this.” He put an X on the map. “Huge, these things must have seen the Civil War.”

I couldn’t shake Grandma’s warning, the dark trees towering high enough to block the sky. I imagined my father small against them, and me, even smaller. At the same time though, those trees were real; I saw them hovering in storybooks, in fairy tale films. Where was my chain link fence, my suburban house in *Hansel and Gretel* or *Cinderella*? I knew the stories weren’t real, but when you see how something is supposed to be for long enough, you begin to wonder what is wrong with what you have.

“What about the house?” Emma pointed to a plain square in the corner of the map. “What’s the house like?”

Dad shrugged. “We didn’t have a key, and the windows had been covered over with boards, but it had a tenant just a couple of years ago, and the chimney is in good shape. It has a garden and a doghouse for Barry.”

“Will we live there?”

“Unless you want to live in the barn.” Dad began to look for another map. “I can’t wait for you girls to see our place.” Something about that word again, “our,” spurred me on. I knew what my Dad was looking for: the satellite map, the one that let you see the colors of the farm. I ran to my suitcase still lying in the hallway and flipped to the section of my notebook where I had kept the stolen map. I ran back and handed it to my father.

Dad turned it over in his hands. “Where did you get this?”

“I saved it from the table one morning. I just wanted to see what it looked like.”

I had said the right thing. Even though I was eight, and a little chunky for my age, Dad pulled me onto his knee. It was uncomfortable, for both of us probably. He pulled Emma onto the other knee, the three of us balanced precariously on a single kitchen chair. But it wasn’t about comfort or even the maps really. Emma and I hovered over Dad’s head as he traced a dark line running through the yellow areas. “This takes you back into the woods.” I saw the tiny line disappear into the mass of dark green trees that covered the majority of the maps.

“Where does it go from there?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t get that far.”

Emma smiled. “Not true. You were gone for two whole days. You saw it.”

“No, we spent all afternoon wandering, and we never saw the end of it.”

The white letters kept coming as we passed from Thanksgiving through Christmas, but they had lost their power. Dad would open them, glance over them, then file them away. We had dinner at the table again.

Meanwhile, as I wandered through my house in warm winter socks, I stopped jumping over the cracks, stopped organizing my stuffed animals in a perfect pyramid, biggest to smallest. I was still writing, but my definitions were incomplete: "Silo," "Wilderness," "Farm Chores." Those were the words and things I thought of, but I had no experience to create an accurate definition. I was pulling away from my house, my room, not to make the transition easier, but because while parents want stability for their children, I wanted excitement for myself. No good children's book is about living in the same place for eighteen years.

January passed, then February, then in March, there was a phone call. I don't remember it, but that's what I've been told. All I could remember was lying in my bed with the lights off. Underneath my blanket, a chill crept up my legs, but I didn't want to move, afraid of halting my parents' conversation in the next room.

This time there was no grand announcement or car ride discussion that signaled the change. It came quietly while Mom and Dad sat together on our couch, Dad volunteering to take the saggy cushion while Mom sat beside him running her nails down the ridges of his corduroy pants. They said goodnight to me, but the TV wasn't on so when I turned off my light and lay still, they started talking.

"Vice-Principle is better than I ever expected."

“That double Masters finally paid off, I guess.”

“Well, the pay’s identical, but cost of living is cheaper so it’s the same as a raise really.” Dad paused.

“And my job?”

“Not yet, but you know how things work in secondary. Someone will retire or have a baby, and there will be a sudden opening. Think of it as a sabbatical, a chance to set up house.”

“We haven’t really seen the house, yet.”

“I’ve seen it.”

“Fifteen years ago. Who knows if the ceiling has collapsed or if the floor has decayed?”

“If it’s fallen in, we’ll fix it. It’s not like we have a choice now.”

“No, not now we don’t. A month ago maybe, but not now.”

“Selling it wouldn’t have changed anything. We would have caught up on payments, maybe, but we would be back where we started in another year. We bit off more than we could chew. After five years, we both know that.”

“And what about our credit now? We can’t just move away from that.”

“We own a home. We own a farm. What does it matter?” He waited, but Mom didn’t speak. “I want this, Ellen. I want this more than anything.”

“I know.”

“We have done it your way for a long time, from the beginning even.”

“My way? You never told me you wanted it any different.”

“Because I didn’t know there was anything different out there. Get a low-paying job, mortgage a house we can’t afford.” Dad paused. “This is our out. I’ve given it a good shot here. Truly, I have.”

“All right, I get it. Don’t grovel.”

“I just want us to understand each other.”

“We’re going. What’s not to understand?”

“I just want things, especially with your mother--”

“We agreed. Ten years we’ve been here with her. We need to think of ourselves, the girls too.”

“But you were hesitant--”

“Because grown children usually move back, not move away. You don’t get that.”

“If things had been different with--”

“Don’t start. I’m sorry. You’re right. It’s time.” I could hear Mom sigh. “What do we tell the girls?”

“They already know we’re leaving. What’s to tell?”

“About losing the house, Aaron.”

“We’ll tell them when they’re ready, when they’re a little older.”

“No, we won’t, Aaron. You’ll be too proud.”

My father didn’t disagree.

“Are you okay with all this?” he finally said. “I mean in the end, after we get settled, do you think you’ll be happy?”

“No one knows what they’ll end up regretting in fifty years.”

My mom was a woman of plans, of proper procedures. She had no thorough research or polling data to tell her if she was making a wise decision by following my dad, by not negotiating with the bank. Who knows? Maybe secretly, she even wanted to see what life would be like without a plan. Maybe that was why she chose my father over my grandmother in the end.

The TV turned on. I could hear one of the late night shows that my parents didn't like me to watch. So it was settled, but my mother's hesitation left me unsettled. We were leaving, but not on our own terms. And for the first time, I thought of Grandma. I had been so caught up in thinking of the farm, thinking of our new life, that I had forgotten my old one. What would happen to Grandma when we were gone? My two aunts had died as children; there was only us. Would she come to stay with us at the farm? Would she live here, alone? By the time I turned nine, I would know better, but at eight, I still assumed my parents would make whatever decision was best for everyone. I believed that not all good things required sacrifices.

I had only moved once in my life, from an apartment complex into our house closer to Grandma. Mom had packed my clothes and favorite toys into a plastic bin, and we drove to the new place. A few days later, we had gone back and gotten the less valued toys, winter coats, the good serving dishes. It took nearly a month of strapping mattresses to the roof of our sedan and piling the back with boxes before we handed in our apartment key for good.

This move would be different. One moving truck, our family car, and what we couldn't fit, would get left behind. Once my dad had accepted his position at Dale County High School, we started packing.

"May 19th," my dad told us, smiling. "That's when we're leaving." Dad made it sound like a choice rather than a demand from the mortgage company. May 19th. I kept the date secret from almost everyone, even my classmates in third grade. I was afraid if I spoke the day aloud, the universe would work against me, and something would happen to stop everything. I wasn't sure if I wanted the farm, but Grandpa's inheritance had convinced me that I wanted something different.

In early May, Mom left one large moving box and three wine boxes in my bedroom. It may have seemed too early to pack, but Mom already had lists of things she was taking, and not taking, and needed to buy. "Whatever you can fit comes with you. Whatever can't has to go to Goodwill."

"But we're not moving for another month," I said.

"Yes, but see what fits now. We're not going to have any chaos on the day of."

All at once, my room, which I had always judged to be much smaller and less cluttered than my friends, looked impossibly large.

I looked out into the hall where Mom was unpacking the coat closet. She threw most of the things into a huge pile beside the door. "Clothes too?" I asked.

"Clothes too. Put them in the biggest box."

So really, I had just three small boxes. Across the hall, Emma sat on the ground sorting her books. She would open one up, flip through its pages, hover it over the box, then finally set it to the side.

I started with my clothes, shoving my fancy dresses, hangers and all, into the box then socks and underwear. That was the easiest part. From there, I looked around my room at everything I owned. Board games I had not even opened became invaluable possessions, and I suddenly remembered the names of the stuffed animals at the bottom of the pile.

But my most precious toys were a collection of animal figurines I had collected for my entire life it seemed. Every trip into the toy store, I got another one. They were mostly dogs, I had about a dozen that were black labs like Barry, but I had plenty of African animals, jungle animals, even a few pandas. On rainy days, I would pick my favorites and trek across the furniture, scaling the Back of the Couch Mountains or languishing in Deserts of the Hallway, with sands so high that the shag carpet would swallow the smallest members of the party. I knew which animals had leadership qualities (Elephants, Dogs, Horses) and which animals played the perfect villain (Cats, Crocodiles, Vultures). My only glass figurine, a black Labrador that I had begged my mother to buy, had lost three of its legs and played the war-victim during Civil War storylines.

I heard Emma sigh. When I looked over my shoulder, Emma had dumped her entire book case on the floor and pushed her books into a pile against the wall. All to Goodwill. She walked across the hall and handed me one of her boxes.

“I have an extra box if you want it.”

I looked back at the book pile.

“What about your things?”

“A lot of those are just baby books anyway. Take it.” But I didn’t want Emma to throw out her baby things just so I could keep mine.

“We’ll split it.” I handed the box back to her. Emma nodded. Together, we filled the bottom of the box with her favorite books. Then we picked out the best of my figurines to take. I kept the elephants, some of the horses, and all of the dogs. Crocodiles, cats, and vultures would be sent to the thrift store. I got rid of the oldest toys too, the ones that were looking worn, but I kept the glass black lab, because I felt like I owed him some kindness after breaking his legs.

Later that afternoon, Mom looked through Emma and my moving boxes.

“You’re sure these are the things you want to take?” Mom said.

No, I wasn’t, but that’s what I had been instructed to do, and I had done it.

“I know that wasn’t easy, but you did a nice job,” Mom said.

“It’s like I had to fit my whole life into three little boxes,” I said.

“Just be glad you’re young.” Mom said. I didn’t know what she meant until half-way through May when a huge pile of moving boxes still sat on our front porch.

“What are all those for?” Emma asked.

“Grandma needs those.”

“Why? Is Grandma coming with us?” No, but Grandma was moving. Our presence in Louisville, Mom and Dad’s willingness to drive Grandma to early

morning appointments, check on her once every few days after work, had meant that Grandma could stay in her home. But the shakiness and confusion that had occurred in November had gotten worse, and even Grandma realized that it was time.

A week before we left, I wandered around Grandma's new apartment while my dad hammered an old cuckoo clock into the wall. The hands were frozen at 7:15.

"You have a view, Grandma," Emma said, looking out the large picture window in the living room.

"It's beautiful," Dad said when he finished. "Edith, come look." Grandma walked over, using a cane for the first time ever. Mom walked behind her, a hand secretly held out behind Grandma's back. Grandma's apartment looked out over a kudzu covered hill next to the nursing home.

"Yes." Grandma nodded. "It is lovely." She put a hand on my head and smiled at Emma. "I'll get a bird feeder so when you girls visit, we can watch them together."

It sounded boring, but neither Emma nor I were willing to tell her that.

"We'll visit soon, Grandma," Emma said. "And we'll watch the birds." It was a strange switch, for a ten-year-old grandchild to be comforting her grandmother, but Emma had slid into the needed role so effortlessly. I couldn't force myself to pity my grandmother yet. When it was time to say goodbye, I stood behind my mother until I was the last one. Grandma leaned down as best she could and

hugged me tighter than I had ever been hugged. Her lavender lotion filled my lungs.

“Be good,” she said. That was all. Maybe she meant “I love you” or “I miss you,” but I took it literally, and I promised to myself that I would never do anything bad again.

My family took the elevator downstairs. It was 4:30 in the afternoon, but the residents were already lining up for dinner. Most looked decades older than Grandma. As we passed, a few of the older women waved, but most just stared ahead at the closed dining room door or slept with their heads on their chests. At the front desk, where we signed ourselves out, there was an air freshener that sprayed “Spring Mist” scented perfume every few seconds. In the time it took to check out, my nose adjusted, and under the perfume, I smelled bleach. We had traded one family legacy for another

On May 19, Dad pulled the moving truck into our driveway. Mom and Dad lifted the heaviest things using dollies and moving straps. I wanted to give them special instructions for moving the wine boxes that held my things, but when I went back to the bedroom to tell them, my room was already empty. I had seen it that way once before, when we had moved five years earlier, though I had been so young I could barely remember it. The only hints that time had passed were crayon marks that I had hidden with my stuffed animals and later a moving box. I hoped that Mom and Dad still hadn’t seen them, and I closed the door to ensure they never would.

It had been decided that Mom would drive our family car, and Dad would drive the van.

“You girls want to ride with me?” Dad was dressed in a pair of old jeans, and his face shone with sweat. He looked like a younger man. I wanted to ride up high with him.

“I’m ready,” I called out. But I was the only one to respond.

“I’ll ride with Mom,” Emma said, but this time my sister couldn’t make me feel guilty. Emma squeezed into the backseat of our green sedan; the luggage was piled so high that once Emma buckled up, I couldn’t see her. Barry whimpered from his cage underneath the suitcases.

I crawled into the passenger’s seat beside my dad. Our old house suddenly seemed very small, like a play fort where we had lived for five years. There was the release of air as the moving van rolled forward behind Mom’s car. I pulled out my notebook to add a new word, “moving” under the word “macaroons” from Christmas. But there was no room under “macaroons.” I had already filled that section to the very brim.

Chapter 3

In my memories, the drive to our new home lasted days, but Louisville is only four and a half hours from our farm. Even with the weighed down U-Haul, the trip couldn’t have lasted more than an afternoon. Dad retold me all the details

about the farm he could remember, then he sang classic rock songs on the radio, then without warning, he would turn down the radio and say to me.

“Hard to believe we’re actually doing it.”

Yes it was, especially when we turned off the interstate at an exit with no gas stations, no restaurants, nothing but a stop sign. I suddenly thought of the movie theaters and parks and toy stores I had left behind. At the stop sign, we turned right and drove for a long time, past ranch houses and occasionally a mansion sitting alone in a perfectly mowed lawn, the outlines of the hills behind it. For the first time, I realized that certain things, like houses bigger than ours, would follow us even past the end of the interstate.

Once you leave the interstate, the drive to the farm is less direct, winding off and on state highways and tiny connectors, through towns that have one Main Street and a closed down factory or maybe no factory at all. But there is always the same house in each place, a turn of the century home sitting on a hill just outside of town, sometimes meticulously maintained sometimes boarded up, but always there. I began to count them. You pass four of those towns with four of those houses before you turn off a state highway and onto a back road. Dad slowed the U-Haul to almost a crawl. In the rearview mirror, Emma and Mom had backed off the bumper, taking the road with the caution of people who have only ever driven in straight lines.

Gradually, the hills rose higher and became narrower, until it was just the road and the creek running together on the bottom of the valley. When the road narrowed to the width of one and half cars, I checked my seatbelt. If another car

met us head on, there was nowhere for us to go except up the embankment or down into the creek. But there was no evidence of other people, until many more turns. Then, at a place where two ridgelines sloped to the valley floor, there was a sudden gravel driveway. Dad eased the moving van around the bend, and as he did, I saw someone standing in the narrow lane. A boy not much younger than me was holding something in his hand, a stick or some kind of tool, but before I could get a good look at him, the main road veered off, and he was gone.

“Is he our neighbor?” I asked.

“Who?”

“The boy back there.”

“It’s hard to take your eyes off the road when you’re driving this thing.”

I tried to catch another glimpse in the mirror, but the mountains had grown up again, and all I could see were trees. Besides, neighbor seemed like a generous term. More and more turns separated us from the gravel driveway, until I began to wonder if I had ever seen it at all. Then, at the darkest and narrowest part of that valley, there was a sharp right turn in the road where the river bent. In that elbow of the river, a twisted cow gate blocked the stream. Water still flowed in between the bars, but pine needles and plastic bottles had created a dam and a small pond behind it. “This is where it starts,” Dad said. I began to count to see how many seconds were equal to two-hundred acres.

Around the corner, the valley widened, and for the first time since turning off the road, I saw the sun. A field sloped down to the creek and was surrounded by a rusted barbed wire fence in some places and a line of trees in others. In

between the trees, I saw the first glimpse of our fields, flashes of bright yellow behind the dark green cedars. Back then, our field, even the low spots, was covered in tall yellow grass; I was convinced it was wheat because that was only tall grass I knew of. But it wasn't just "wheat." Along the edge of the road, billows of thorny vines had massed up, absorbing large sections of the field. Pine saplings sprang up in clumps where the thorns had not yet reached, the beginnings of a forest. It was nothing like the neat fields I had seen in picture books, rows of corn, fields of wheat, tomato plants wrapped around wooden teepees.

The other side of the road was steep pine hills covered in a thorny underbrush; some of the vines had begun to wrap their way up the trunks, as though the forest were a single creature. The evergreen trees, mixed with a few skinny beeches and young oaks, kept the hillside dark. But now and then I glimpsed something strange in the trees, wood that grew too neatly or was the wrong color or shape, like a structure designed by the forest itself. I could never rest my eye on any of these. Each time I focused on one of the strange patterns, the road would shift, and all I saw were trees.

"Which side is our farm?" I said at last.

My dad smiled. "Both sides."

I had only ever owned one space of green: our backyard, with a small plot of grass and a flower garden where tulips bloomed in the spring. I had just been told I was the master, or maybe mistress, of more land than I could see. My

parents were landowners, and I was their daughter. It was like being given a new name.

So how many seconds equal two-hundred acres? The answer is eighty. Eighty seconds, but that first day when I saw the farm, I stopped counting at five.

At the far end of the field, we pulled up a short gravel driveway. Not far from the road was a tiny farm house, almost a third smaller than our old home in Louisville. It was strange to call the house we left just that morning “the old house,” but a lot of things had suddenly been made old by our move. My old school, my old city, my old life. The front half of our new house was in good repair, painted white with scalloped blue trim around the roof. I loved it immediately, a strange cross between the farmhouse of my picture books and a fairytale cottage. But as we parked at the back of the driveway, I saw an annex built with mismatched stone and held together with crumbling concrete. Then at the far back of the house, hidden from the driveway and the road, was the smallest section of whitewashed, worm-eaten wood. I hoped my bedroom was in the newer half.

I jumped down from the passenger seat of the truck. Behind us, Emma and Mom got out of the sedan, and for the first time, the four of us stood in front of our new home. From the truck of the sedan, I heard Barry’s muffled barking.

Dad jingled the keys. “Shall we?”

He unlocked the building, and we stepped into an empty living room. The air was hot and wet but smelled old, like a closet in Grandma’s house.

Grandma’s old house, I had to remind myself. Until my eyes adjusted from the

early summer sunlight, all I saw was darkness and shining partials of disturbed dust. I covered my mouth with my arm. One of my classmates had told me that dust was mostly human skin, which hadn't bothered me at the old house where I knew everyone, but this was the dust of previous residents. I didn't want their skin in my lungs. I took one step inside. The floor creaked, and I jumped back, certain I had just avoided falling through the floor.

"Are you sure this is safe?" I asked, my toes on the very edge of the threshold.

"Don't be ridiculous," my father said, waving from inside the darkness. "Just come in."

"Yeah, you're such a baby," Emma said, but she didn't enter either.

"It's fine, girls," Mom said and followed my father in to prove the point.

"Just needs a little light in here," Dad said, and one by one, he started to remove the plywood blocking the windows. Mom worked from the other side. The shades of darkness grew lighter until my parents stood in a well-lit sitting room. The hardwood floor looked dirty but not in bad shape. I entered but pressed myself against the wall, hoping that the floor was like an icy pond, thickest along the shallow edges.

The house was still for a moment, not even a creak from the walls as the valley darkened and cooled in the approaching evening. A wisp of cobweb floated past my face, then changed direction suddenly and tangled into my hair, but before I could shriek, my father suddenly laughed, a loud purposeful laugh, not at me or anything really. The alien sound in that quiet place finally opened the

house for good. I brushed the cobweb from my hair and wandered into the middle of our new living room. I kept my hands to myself though. Having grown up in a newer home with predictable features, I immediately noticed the dark corners where germs and mice could hide.

“Girls, come look at this,” Dad said, pointing to the seams of the house. “You can tell the original building was only one room with a hearth in the middle.” Dad ran his finger along the edges of the stone fireplace. “Then someone added the front two rooms, which moved the kitchen.” He wandered back into the belly of the house where the windows were still boarded. Mom followed him, which forced Emma and me to tag along. Dad flicked a light switch, and an old light bulb suspended above the linoleum floor flickered then buzzed until my ears adjusted to the sound. The kitchen was small but not too many years out of date. The only thing that seemed out of place was a large red stain in a corner of the room.

“Is that blood?” I asked.

Mom examined the stain, rubbing it between her fingers. “Just rust. Probably from an old refrigerator.” I wasn’t convinced.

“Over here.” Dad led us to the other side of the house. I was happy to follow him out of that room. “See, here is where the kitchen used to be, but another person tacked on the rooms on this side.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t just one person?” I asked, because the thought of so many people living in a house seemed impossible.

Dad reached up to touch the molding around the ceiling. “Different materials, and different ages of the materials. It has to be different people, at least three different visions, maybe more.” He stood in the doorframe of what would become the master bedroom, his face obscured in the unlit room. “There’s just so much history.” Which is all my father ever wanted.

As we moved in that afternoon, our things covered up the less attractive historical markers, burns on the floor, a tear in the wall that revealed four layers of wallpaper, nail holes. Mom and Dad had left most of our heavy furniture behind, including our ancient mattresses, but they couldn’t part with a pair of leather chairs from their early marriage. Those pieces of furniture sat alone in the living room as boxes and unplugged lamps filled the space around them. Dad wheeled a dolly piled high with moving boxes.

“Delivery,” he would call into every room before he set the box down. Ten minutes later, Mom told him to knock it off. I helped my mom carry mixing bowls and silverware into the kitchen, but I kept my eye on that stain until Mom finally covered it up with a box of dishes. On every trip she would try to wipe down a new surface until she stopped and sighed.

“Guess we’d better get used to this.” I don’t know if she meant “we” or “I.” She tied her hair back with a hair band on her wrist. “We can’t do anything in here until we clean up this mess.” And she went off to change, leaving me free of orders. I finally had found my chance to escape and explore. I slipped into the hallway. No one. Then I wandered into the living room, picking up a lamp to look busy while I walked the distance between the hallway and front door. But I

learned quickly that our new house was too small to be useful for hiding. Dad through the front door, wheeling three boxes labeled with my name in neat cursive writing.

“Come help me put away your things,” he said before I could sneak out the door. I had been so close. I followed Dad back into the bedroom that would be where Emma and I would sleep. We were sharing a room for the first time since I was a baby. I would have plenty of time to be upset about the arrangement later, but on that first night, I was relieved that I wouldn’t have to face the darkness alone.

Our back bedroom had two windows on opposite sides of the room, one overlooking the fields and the other facing the mountains. Emma was already unpacking her things on the eastern side, looking out over the sunny fields. As oldest, she had gotten asked first. I had been wronged by some freak biological order which insured that Emma’s window looked out over the sunlight while mine stared back at the dark, wet trees. The cruelty was enough to sting my eyes with tears.

“But I wanted that side,” I said, filled with injustice.

“Does it really matter? You can still see her window.” But it wasn’t about the view. By sleeping next to the woods, I was closest to whatever would come out of those woods. The creatures that crawled through my window would snatch me first, leaving Emma plenty of time to escape while I was eaten alive. While Dad wasn’t looking, Emma stuck out her tongue at me. My face grew hot with rage. I stomped my foot.

“Did you see that? She’s not even being nice about it.”

“Of course, I am,” Emma said. “Dad, did I say anything mean?”

“You’re thinking it though, which is just as bad.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Enough,” Mom shouted from the other room. She appeared in the hallway, her hair up in a bun, a style which I had never seen my mother wear. Her clothes were covered in dust, and she smelled like lemon cleaner. She wore an old but tight shirt that showed she was thinner than I imagined her to be.

“You look nice,” Dad said. Mom just rolled her eyes.

“Yeah right.” But she still smiled as she gave Emma and me our orders.

“You girls should take Barry for a walk. He’s been in the crate all day.”

“I will walk with him alone but not with Emma,” I said.

Mom handed Emma the leash. “You both better be in a good mood when you come back.” Emma and I glared at each other, but Mom glared harder, and so we both dropped our things and left. Stuffed into a corner of the deck, Barry’s crate rattled and whined. Emma unhooked the latch as I blocked the entrance. The dog burst out, tongue hanging, eyes focused forward, but I managed to grab his collar, and with practiced precision, Emma snapped the leash in place. For girls as small as we were, wrangling Barry was a two person job, always. Mom had known that when she sent us as a pair, and when we finally managed to make Barry calm enough to stop straining against the leash, we were on speaking terms again.

“Where should we go?” Emma asked. We let Barry sniff around the front yard and mark the one massive oak that overhung the roof. Pushed up against one of the dark hills, the house looked tiny, covered in shadow. The decaying back half of the house only magnified this feeling. I much preferred the cheerful new part, which over looked the bright and wild fields. I pointed out into the sunlight.

“There,” I said. Emma glanced back at the woods then pulled Barry towards the fields. Our house had a small yard, mostly crab grass and dandelions, with one overturned mossy birdbath and a flower bed filled with weeds. Then, like an ocean beach, the tall grasses began in a perfect row, nothing holding them back from our modest yard. There was a small animal trail that Barry immediately picked up on, and we followed our dog through the narrow opening and into what would become our lower fields.

On that first day, I was far from impressed with what I saw. No barn in sight, no metal silo, or rooster weather vane. Instead, crab apple trees dropped their fruit along the bank of our creek. The water was the color of chocolate milk and lazily dragged leaves and twigs past the shoreline. The wheat I thought I saw from the road was actually a new kind of grass that left triangular burs on my shorts and t-shirt. I was afraid to let my father know I was disappointed with it all.

Barry led us until the animal trail stopped. Then he sniffed the ground, barked and charged forward, dragging Emma with him. I was tall enough then to watch Emma fight our dog as he pulled her deeper into the grass, and I ran in

after the two of them, more for fear of being left behind than the desire to rescue my sister.

“Stop, Barry,” I heard Emma shout, like we’d been taught to say in the puppy obedience classes. But Barry was long past puppyhood, and he had learned somewhere along the way that words were only as good as the person holding the leash.

Pine saplings and blackberries bushes scratched my arms until my skin bled from a dozen shallow scars, but I managed to keep Emma and Barry in sight until I stumbled out of the grass and into a sudden clearing. There, Barry lay on his side, eyes wide and tongue panting. He was so tired he almost looked like he was smiling. Emma straddled him, clutching his leash and collar in a death grip.

“He tripped,” Emma said in between gasps. I nodded and sank down beside her. The tiny clearing was like our yard, an island in the grassy sea, but there was something odd about the place. It was not a perfect square, like our house, but it was still too neat to be an accident of nature. Then near one of the edges of the opening, I saw a large thorny bush, covered in sticks. No doubt it was meant to look natural, but just like the clearing, it was too orderly to be something grown out of the wild landscape.

“Emma, look,” I said. Emma looped Barry’s leash over her wrist. We pulled away the veil of sticks, pushed back the blackberries as best we could without scratching our palms. Hidden beneath the scrub was some kind of structure. There were two long boards that went back into the bush and then a few boards

built up into a triangular shape. Scattered around it were dozens of other boards. Some were still yellow, like they had just been bought, and some were older than the boards in our house, covered with moss and carpenter bee holes.

“What is it?” I asked. Emma pulled a plastic grocery bag from beneath one board. Inside, there were nails, screws, bolts, all kinds of metal fasteners, some shiny and some nearly rusted through. “Who do you think built it? Someone who lived here before?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t look like it’s been here long though.” She pointed to one of the newest looking boards. Someone else had been on our land. Goosebumps rose up on my arms. At that moment, even though it wasn’t yet six o’clock, the sun disappeared behind the mountain. The sunlit parts of our fields were finally covered in shadow and a chill settled over the ground.

“We should get back to the house,” I said. I was not afraid of the structure, but I was afraid of the darkness that suddenly settled over everything. And I was afraid of what the darkness might bring out. Emma helped me reset the sticks in their proper place until it looked like nothing had been touched.

Barry led us over the same trail back to the house, wearing the weeds down even thicker. Mom and Dad were waiting for us, already spread out on the porch, as hot and sweaty as we were.

“What did you think of it?” Dad asked. He had his arm around my mom. I didn’t want to ask where the barn and the silo were or say that I was covered in scratches from briars that a well-mowed, proper farm wouldn’t have. But I didn’t want to lie either.

“It’s so big,” I said.

Dad smiled. “It’s even bigger than you realize.” That wasn’t comforting to me.

The four of us ate a late dinner of warm ham sandwiches and crackers with canned cheese, nothing that would have spoiled in the heat. We let Barry wander through the house before putting him in an old garden plot out back.

After everything was moved in that first night, Emma and I lay awake on a lumpy makeshift bed of linens. The heat lay like an extra blanket, and I could feel the sweat pool in the crease between my shoulders. My mouth was dry, but I was too afraid to venture out by myself for a drink of water. The frogs were louder than I ever remembered them, as if they were right at the window. When I glanced up at the glass to see them, there was nothing but darkness.

“I bet the kitchen stain is blood,” Emma said.

“Stop.” I rolled over and covered my ears. She was teasing me, but there was no hint of a smile in her voice.

“No really, think about.”

“I don’t want to.”

“What if someone was murdered here?” I tried not to dwell on it, but the idea was too awful. Somehow it made our white house against the dark hills even more beautiful, like foxglove or some other poisonous plant. For all my cataloging and historical preservation, I was not immune to ghost stories. The house creaked, then the wind blew, and I closed my eyes until the corners watered.

“Are you still awake, Kate?”

I lay still as death, hoping my silence would keep Emma from talking, and in my determination to hear nothing, I feel asleep.

When I woke up alive the next morning, I grabbed my notebook and snuck out before Mom could assign me any chores. The sunlight gave me the bravery to go alone. I wanted to investigate myself, maybe sketch the structure like I'd seen movie detectives do. Emma would just make fun of me, and so without even consulting my sister, I retraced our trail from yesterday all the way back to the clearing. But the sticks that Emma and I had so neatly replaced were scattered around, and the wood that had been hidden was gone. I checked at the back of the bush, then around the small clearing, thinking maybe Dad had come out early and found them, but before I could begin my search in earnest, I heard rattling and metal squeaking from the road. I looked up the hill, where the street rose above our fields and saw the top of someone's head following the curves of the asphalt. I ran up the hill, pushing through briars and bushes until I was standing in the street.

In the middle of the road, a boy with a book under his arm was pulling a rusted red wagon, filled with my pieces of wood.

"Stop," I said. "You stop right there."

The boy looked over his shoulder then kept walking. I felt the anger down in my stomach.

"I said stop," And I ran until I was walking beside him. He looked about my age with pale skin that in May was already sunburned up to his elbows and

across his cheeks. It didn't occur to me that he was the first child I had seen besides Emma in days. "Just what do you think you're doing," I said.

"Taking my things," the boy said, but he didn't say it kindly.

"What were your things doing in our field?"

"No one has lived in the Sharp place for years so I took it over with adverse possession."

I didn't know quite what he was saying, but it irritated me, just like his sunburn.

"Well, I don't know who the Sharps are, but this is the Wharton place now," I said, and I imagined my father smiling.

"I said I was moving my stuff." The boy adjusted the book under his arm and gave his wagon a big tug. The strange structure was tied down with rope while the extra boards stuck out the end of the wagon. I wanted to run him off, but I was too curious and too lonely to let him get very far, even if I didn't like his attitude.

"Hey." I caught up to him. "Hey, what is all this stuff anyway?"

"None of your business."

"It's my business if it's on my dad's land."

"It's not on his land anymore."

"Well, it was, so I still have a right to know."

The boy looked back at me. He was taller than me, but not by much, and I was so used to wrestling with Emma that I was pretty sure I could take him if worse came to worse. But he didn't try to escape or even fight me. He looked up

where the road climbed out of the valley and said, "If you help me push this up there, I'll tell you."

I loved secrets, and I immediately agreed, but it was more work than I anticipated. The wagon weighed dozens of pounds, and the boy made me push from behind. Two boards stuck out of the back right at my eye level. If the wagon rolled backwards, I would be the first one crushed so I pushed with as much strength as I could summon. When we finally reached the top of the hill, the boy sat down in the road, his sunburn glowing brighter from exhaustion and sweat.

"What about the cars?" I asked him through my panting. He shook his head and swallowed dryly.

"No one ever comes this way." And he motioned for me to sit down.

For years, I had been told never to play in the street. If a ball rolled out of the driveway, it was considered lost unless Mom or Dad were home to capture it for us. But I was very tired, and the strange boy seemed confident enough to even lie back and close his eyes. I sat down beside him, holding a corner of the wagon to keep it steady.

"I'm Finnegan," the boy said.

"I'm Kate." I said, all the while listening for the wind of a distant car. "So, what are you building?"

Finnegan took his book from the front of the wagon, an old World Book Encyclopedia, Volume T. He flipped to a dog-eared page and held it up for me to see. One entry had been highlighted almost entirely in yellow, but even if I didn't recognize the word, I recognized the picture beside it.

“A catapult,” I said, and I couldn’t contain a smile. I had never known anyone who had tried to build something like that.

“It’s actually a trebuchet,” Finnegan said. “They used it in Medieval times.”

“But it’s a catapult basically.”

Finnegan frowned. “It’s a type of catapult, but it’s a lot different than other kinds.” He closed his book before I could get a better look. “Thanks for helping me by the way.” He stood up, stretched, and took up the handle of the wagon.

“When are you going to work on it again?” I said.

Finnegan shrugged. “I don’t know. My valley is too narrow to do a good test. I might cause a rockslide and crush my house, and I can’t work on your farm anymore.”

I quietly kicked myself for being so demanding earlier, but I managed to think of a way out of it. “I suppose it’s all right if you build it on our farm as long as I’m there with you.”

Finnegan thought about this and said, “Well, you can be there only if you help me build it.”

“You’re the one borrowing the land. You don’t get to make deals.”

“You’re the one playing with my trebuchet.” He had me there.

“Fine,” I said and stuck out my hand. Finnegan shook it, but his palm felt grimy and rough.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said, pulling his wagon down the road.

“What time?” I called.

“After breakfast,” he said. “Don’t be late.”

I watched him until he rounded one of the curves, but I could hear the squeak of the wagon tires long after he disappeared.

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