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Depending on Where You Come From

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Jessica Kastner

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The Straw Queen

Back when I was in the third grade, Mama took me to see my first Strawberry Festival Pageant. She made sure we got there early, so we could find seats near the front. We sat in the third row of the center section and thumbed through our programs. Unlike most people who were there to root for a family member or a friend, we were there to see Mama's handiwork. For the past six months, she'd spent her days at J. C. Penney hemming pants and her evenings sewing sequins on the cape for the Strawberry Queen's coronation.

"Look, it's Suzanne Ribando from church," she said, pointing to her picture. "Wouldn't that be neat if she won?"

"Sure would," I said. "Most of these girls aren't even from Ponchatoula."

"I guess it's open to the whole parish," Mama said.

"That doesn't seem fair," I said.

“Honey, haven’t you learned by now that life’s not fair?”

Like usual, she had a good point. Since Daddy left us the year before, we had to cut back on a few things, like my ballet lessons and new clothes. That’s why Mama had to start making costumes for extra money, and why we shopped at the salvage grocery store. Mama said we wouldn’t accept handouts unless we were starving on the streets, which was too scary to think about.

“I think Miss Suzanne will win anyway,” I said.

“Me too,” Mama said, and she smiled like she was proud of me.

When the program finally began and Miss Suzanne sashayed across the stage in a red sequin dress, she looked just like a movie star. I knew then that Mama’s cape was meant for her. Every time Miss Suzanne walked on stage, we clapped and cheered until she made it to the final three. During the interviews, the announcer asked about Miss Suzanne’s plans for the future.

“After I graduate from LSU, I plan to start teaching and marry my fiancé, Nate Russo, who is in the audience right there.” She pointed and waved at him. “Hi, Nate.”

A spotlight found her fiancé, and the crowd clapped. There were a few hoots and hollers, and Mama shook her head. Those were Nate’s friends from the LSU baseball team, she whispered.

“I’ve always dreamed of being a mother and bringing my kids up right here in Ponchatoula,” Miss Suzanne said.

The crowd went wild with applause. If the judges were on the fence about a winner before the interview portion of the program, they were sold after this answer. They loved it when their queens were loyal to the town. So many before her had moved away and forgotten all about

the little town and its little festival, but this one was different. Suzanne Ribando was the real deal, and she didn't even realize it.

Miss Suzanne was totally surprised when they announced she was the winner. Her jaw dropped. All ten of her red shimmering nails shot up like she was trying to block a bug from flying inside her mouth. Then the announcer handed Miss Suzanne a wand and placed a crown that was a foot tall on her head. The crown was decorated with three rhinestone strawberries, and there was another rhinestone strawberry at the end of the wand. Some of the people around us left, but Mama and I were on the edges of our seats when three women brought out the cape and placed it around Miss Suzanne's shoulders. Even though I was only eight, I should of known better than to believe in invincible capes, but at that moment, I believed Miss Suzanne was a super hero.

When we got home from the pageant, I took a tiara off one of my dolls and made myself a sash out of a pillowcase with a bleach stain. Mama would of had a fit if I used a good one. With red and green markers, I drew a vine with leaves and strawberries over the stain. After writing the word "STRAW" in large letters down the front of the sash, I ran out of room. I had to write "berry" in really tiny letters that you could barely see when I was wearing the thing. I wrote the word "QUEEN" on the backside, and strutted around the trailer trying not to topple over in Mama's Sunday dress heels.

"Well, well, Miss Straw Queen. That's quite an ensemble you've put together for yourself," Mama said.

"All I'm missing is a cape," I said grinning from ear to ear.

"Maybe if you make your own cape, you'll win an award for originality."

I told Mama I didn't want an award for originality. I was going to be the festival queen just like Miss Suzanne when I got older, and then she'd have to make me a cape. At eight, you have all sorts of fantasies you believe will come true one day. But like Santa Clause and Jesus, at some point, you stop believing in all of it.

If you would of told me that day that I was never going to be festival queen because I was going to get knocked up when I was sixteen, I would of asked if you were smoking something. Just like if you would of told Suzanne Ribando right after she was crowned queen that she was going to be divorced before she turned thirty, she never would of believed you either. It's funny how one person's life can turn upside-down overnight like mine did, and another's person's life slowly goes down the toilet over a few years, like Miss Suzanne's did.

The next year, when I was in fourth grade, everybody in church was invited to Miss Suzanne's wedding, but Mama wouldn't let us go because she said the Ribandos were just being polite. Families like that were friends with everyone in town, and they didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings by leaving somebody out, so they just put out an announcement inviting everyone in the church bulletin. Mama said that if the Ribandos really wanted us to come, they would of sent us a proper invitation. Mama's kind of old fashioned like that. She said the Ribandos didn't expect our kind to show up. Our kind don't exactly mix with their kind except at church, and even then we have different pews.

Even though we didn't get to go to the ceremony at the church, me and my cousin, Mollibelle, walked down the old railroad tracks by the highway to see the reception at the

Ribando place. We could hear a jazz band playing from nearly a mile away. As we got close enough to see the canopy of oak trees leading to huge white tents, we began to smell fried catfish. If I wouldn't of been in cut-offs and flip-flops, I might of walked right up to the buffet and made myself a plate.

Exhausted from walking nearly a mile in the sweltering heat, I plopped down on the railroad tracks and jumped up faster than a frog on a sinking lily pad. Mollibelle told me it looked like I had a sunburn streak across the back of my thighs, and it hurt worse than the time Mama belted me for walking to town by myself after dark. I wanted to go home, but Mollibelle found us a spot where the weeds weren't too tall or too thorny, and she convinced me to stay for a while.

For the next couple of hours, we watched the bride and groom move from table to table and tent to tent just like we were at an outdoor theater. Inside one tent people were dancing on a wooden floor or standing at cocktail tables by the band. We could see Miss Suzanne's white gown sparkling as she rocked from side to side in her father's arms. At the end of the dance, Miss Suzanne kissed her father on the cheek and then took her husband's hand. It was obvious the couple had been taking dance lessons by the way they were twirling around the dance floor just like the couples that compete on television. Soon, the wedding party joined them, and Miss Suzanne's white gown was swept away in the sea of red bridesmaid's gowns. Every now and then, Mollibelle and I'd get a glimpse of a white flutter before our queen disappeared amongst her guests again.

"Look at all those gifts," Mollibelle said.

Back behind the crowded buffet tables in the corner, a long table was overflowing with more presents than I have ever gotten in my whole entire life.

“She has it made,” I said.

“Did you hear her parents are building her a house right over there?” Mollibelle pointed at a field to the left of the Ribando’s farmhouse.

I shook my head.

“You know how she sings in the choir with my aunt? Well the choir director announced it at their last meeting. Everyone’s just so proud of our little ole Strawberry Queen,” Mollibelle said.

“I bet she’s going to be the best teacher. I hope I get her.”

“Me too. Teachers are always nice when they’re new,” Mollibelle said.

For hours, we watched Miss Suzanne’s dress float from table to table and from tent to tent until we had to go home for dinner.

The whole rest of that spring and summer, I couldn’t wait until I got the letter in the mail with my teacher’s name. My hands were shaking when I opened the envelope. After discovering that I was assigned to the oldest and meanest teacher in school, Miss Marla Hornsby, I ripped the letter into tiny pieces and threw them into the air. As it turned out, Mollibelle ended up with Miss Suzanne. That whole next year, I had to listen to her go on and on about how much fun she had doing this or that in Miss Suzanne’s class.

It wasn’t until two years later, when I was in the sixth grade, that I finally got Miss Suzanne as a teacher, my Sunday school teacher. Even though she was all grown up and married, we all still called her Miss Suzanne, and she didn’t seem to mind. She was as nice to me as she was to the kids that were from her own circle. She called on me to read and answer questions, told me I looked pretty on Christmas and Easter when Mama made me new dresses, and said that she always kept my family in her prayers.

One Sunday after Miss Suzanne gave a lesson on following God's will for your life, all the other kids rushed away to the fellowship hall to get juice and cookies before the big service. I stayed behind but was unsure how to ask her what I wanted to know, so I just sat coloring while she gathered up her things.

"You don't want any snacks this morning?" Miss Suzanne asked. I could feel her watching me color.

"I'm not hungry," I said as I colored Jesus' robe royal blue.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked. I switched my blue crayon for a brown one. My hand kept moving back and forth in tiny movements trying to keep inside the cross.

"Sure, Hayley, but I can't promise that I know the answer."

"Everybody always talks about finding God's will for your life, but how do you know what that is if you've never heard His voice?"

"That's why we read the Bible and pray," she said.

"But you said that he has a special plan for everybody. How am I supposed to know what mine is?"

I looked up into her eyes, noticing for the first time that they were green.

"Some people say that when God talks to them, they can actually hear His voice. It doesn't happen like that for me though. I just feel something, something bigger than my own thoughts. Sometimes it's not something I want to do, but I feel my heart tugging at me to do it," she said batting her long lashes.

"Is that why you became a teacher?"

"I don't think anyone goes into teaching who doesn't feel a calling."

I colored the light around Jesus a bright yellow.

“God called you?”

“Yes, I believe He put the desire to teach in my heart.”

“How old were you when you knew God wanted you to be a teacher?”

“Oh, I guess I must have been in high school, much older than you. You’ve got all the time in the world ahead of you, Hayley. Don’t worry about it now. God will speak to you when He’s ready. Sometimes it might be through a Bible verse or through someone else. It doesn’t always have to be a voice you hear out loud. Right now, just keep on trying to do what’s right and praying that He’ll show you His plan.”

I signed my name on the coloring sheet and handed it to Miss Suzanne.

“Are you sure you don’t want to give that to your mom, Hayley?”

“Mama’s got so many of these on our fridge, she says it looks like wall paper.”

“Okay then. I would be happy to hang this lovely picture in my house. Thank you, Hayley.”

All during big service, I kept thinking about our conversation, how nice, pretty and smart Miss Suzanne was, and how God had blessed her with a handsome husband, a nice house, a job she loves, and a good life all because she was following His will for her life. I thought about how she said God could talk to you through another person and wondered if he was talking to me through her. In the car on the way home from church, I told Mama that I thought God wanted me to be a teacher too.

After that, there were times I thought I felt God tugging at my heart, telling me I should share my lunch with a girl at school who never had one of her own, or telling me to help Mama out more around the house, or telling me not to cheat on a test. But every now and then, doing the right thing was as murky as swamp water.

When I was in the ninth grade, someone in my Mama's prayer circle heard from her cousin who is in Miss Suzanne's circle that Miss Suzanne had asked her circle to ask God, if it was in His will, of course, to bless her with a child. I know that kind of sounds like gossip, but Mama says it isn't when it involves sharing prayer requests.

A few months later, the people in her circle group were asked to pray for Miss Suzanne because she was having surgery to fix something wrong with her baby-making parts. Mama said it was so hard on poor Miss Suzanne that her husband had to quit his job as principal to take care of her.

Not too long after that, the pastor announced in big service that Mister Nate and Miss Suzanne were going to adopt a baby from China, so I guess that surgery didn't work. But leave it to Miss Suzanne to make lemonade out of lemons. Even though we'd heard of movie stars adopting babies from other countries, no one around here did that kind of thing in real life. I don't think we even had any Chinese people in our town, and here was our very own Strawberry Queen adopting a baby from another country. That was all the talk for a few months anyway.

Mama says it takes a couple of years for international adoptions to go through. That must of been too long for Mister Nate to wait because not even a year passed before he stopped going to church. We didn't really think much about it the first time he missed. People are allowed to miss every now and then without everybody making a fuss. By about the third Sunday in a row, rumors started flying that Mister Nate had left our beauty queen.

Mama says when somebody quits coming to church, it means one of three things: 1) they joined another church, 2) they moved away, or 3) they gave up on God. As it turns out, Mister Nate did two out of the three. He left his wife, which is the same thing as leaving God in the Baptist Church, and he moved to Baton Rouge. We never heard whether he made his way back to another church. Lord knows, he needs all the forgiving he can get for leaving Miss Suzanne like that, after all they'd been through.

After he left, Miss Suzanne started sitting next to her parents in church. It was sweet the way her daddy always put his arm around her during the sermon. I wish my daddy would of been around to comfort me when things were rough. Miss Suzanne put on her best smile and was polite to everyone who hugged her neck and said they were praying for her, but I guess she could only take so much of everyone making such a fuss. After a few months, she quit going to church too.

When the one person who you looked up to most in the world stops believing, you start to question everything too. And when you can't figure out the answers, that's when you start trying to escape from the questions. People have different ways of trying to escape. Some get depressed and try to hide from the world. They wrap up in a blanket, binge on boxes of candy, and watch romance movies like I imagine Miss Suzanne did. Some people throw themselves into their work like Mama did with her sewing projects. Me, I started drinking and flirting and trying not to fall in love.

The beginning of my sophomore year, my friend Debbie, had a birthday party out at her family's hunting camp. There was no way Mama would let me go to an un-chaperoned party out in the woods, so I told her I was spending the night at Debbie's house like I had done a million times before. Debbie told her mama we were having a girls-only camping trip, and she dropped a carload of us off with our sleeping bags, tents, and overnight bags.

This place was so far in the sticks, Debbie's mama never imagined high school students would drive out there for a party. Little did she know, all the best parties were out at somebody's hunting camp. Mollibelle, who was a senior then, had thought of everything. After Debbie's mama left, Mollibelle pulled out a bag of neon balloons. They would show up better in the dark, she said.

After we blew up the balloons, we walked down the dirt driveway until we got to the highway. We used string to tie a cluster of balloons around a pine tree, so everyone would know where to turn. Before we even made it back down to our camp by the creek, a black truck pulled up behind us and honked the horn. A blonde-haired, brown-eyed cutie from the football team rolled the window down and asked us if he'd found the party. That's how I met Smalls for the first time. Everybody called him Smalls because he had the same name as his father, but I liked to call him by his real name, Russell William, because it feels funny calling the boy you like Smalls, if you know what I mean. He handed Debbie a thermos and said it was a birthday present. We jumped in the back of his truck and rode the rest of the way to the camp with our legs dangling off the back of the tailgate and taking sips of orange juice and vodka.

Russell William had three of his friends in the cab with him. They were all football players, juniors and seniors who usually never gave underclassmen the time of day, but here they were flirting their heads off with us. I guess it was on account of Mollibelle that they accepted

Debbie and me. Everyone loved Mollibelle. She was one of the most popular girls in her class, but she never acted like she was too good for anyone.

More cars started showing up, and some of the guys built a fire. Things got kind of hazy after that. The night came back to me in flashes the next morning. Frequent trips into the dark, scary woods with a flashlight. Squatting in the woods to pee. Singing, lots of off key singing. Kissing Russell William in the bed of his truck. The inside of the tent, and more kissing. Moving his hand away when he tried to unzip my jeans. Him calling me a tease. Waking up next to Debbie and Mollibelle in the tent. Feeling like I had the stomach flu for the next twelve hours.

Russell William wouldn't even look in my direction back at school, and Mollibelle told me there was a rumor that we went all the way.

“Oh my God, what a liar!” I said.

“I know,” Mollibelle said. “That’s what I’ve been telling everyone.”

After I heard the rumors, I didn't call him by his real name anymore. Somehow Smalls seemed more fitting. I wished awful things would happen to him that whole year until something finally did. It was the craziest thing. His father was arrested for murdering a stripper and her boyfriend. It was all over the news, and not just the local paper. The girl worked down on Bourbon Street, so it was on every New Orleans news channel and all over social media.

Most of Smalls' friends dropped him the same way he'd dropped me. Even after he'd been so horrible to me, I felt kind of sorry for him, sitting by himself in the lunchroom, looking all pathetic. Then something happened that nobody expected. Jamal and Christian, two juniors on the football team, sat down at Smalls' table. Most of the whites and blacks were friendly with one another at our school, but when it came to who you ate lunch with and who you hung out with on the weekend, that was a different story. I imagine Dr. King would have rolled over in his

grave if he could of seen our cafeteria. Here we were fifty years after his march and even though our school was integrated by law, it was self-segregated. Blacks on one side, and whites on the other. Mama says people are creatures of habits and are afraid of trying new things, but these boys weren't afraid. Even though I was mad at Smalls for what he did to me, Dr. King would have been proud of Jamal and Christian that day, showing the rest of the guys on the football team that real friends stick by you no matter what.

The first day of school my junior year, Smalls sat at my table in art class. I almost didn't recognize him because he had a faux-hawk and he was taller.

"Hi, Hayley," he said.

"Now you're speaking to me?" I asked.

"We never had classes together before."

"Oh, that's why you never bothered to talk to me."

"A lot of things have changed, and I could really use a friend."

"I'm still not going to sleep with you."

"No strings attached. I promise."

I wanted to believe he had learned his lesson, and it seemed like he had. He just wanted a normal life, without all the cameramen camped out at his house, without all the stares.

I told him about how one day Mama and I got back from making groceries when I was little, and Daddy was gone. Just like that, without even leaving a note. Mama said something about how he'd checked out long before he left the hotel. I didn't quite understand what she

meant, but suspected it had to do with the way Daddy was always out in the garage tinkering with old cars or watching race cars go round and round on TV. Smalls said his father had checked out a long time ago too. His father worked off shore and was hardly ever around when he was growing up.

I'm not sure if it was the allure of the forbidden fruit, or if I thought I could change Smalls, but I was head over heels for the guy by the time he asked me to the Homecoming Dance. He picked me up in his black pick-up truck and brought me a rose corsage that matched my red sequin dress. Mama took pictures and told me I looked just like a Strawberry Queen. Ever since I started high school, I had forgotten about wanting to win that silly pageant. I must have realized that winning a beauty contest didn't guarantee your life would be perfect, but the mind is a powerful thing. It can make you do all kinds of things for reasons you don't fully understand, like buying that dress that resembled Miss Suzanne's. I didn't even realize it until Mama pointed it out.

Smalls was a perfect gentleman, opening the door for me and telling me how beautiful I was. It felt just like a fairy tale. He made reservations at some place the next town over that I'd never even heard of. He said he'd picked it for three reasons. First, location. It was fifteen minutes from Ponchatoula, depending on where you come from, so the chances were better that we'd run into fewer students from our school. He said it'd be nice to have some alone time before we had to deal with everyone and their brother at the dance. Second, he said they had the best steaks in the parish. Third, he said it had a romantic atmosphere, which turned out to be true.

The place was dimly lit with candles on all the tables and a fireplace that gave it a cozy feel. The menu had fancy names for ordinary dishes that cost a fortune. There were two forks on the table, and I didn't know which one I was supposed to use, but the waiter told us to use the

forks on the outside for our salads. For my main entrée, I ordered the barbecued shrimp and smoked Gouda grits. Smalls insisted that we share a molten lava cake with vanilla bean ice cream for dessert, and boy was it heavenly. After dinner, Smalls parked in a lot by the railroad tracks in the center of downtown Hammond. We watched people coming and going to restaurants and bars and drank Jack and Coke out of his thermos.

By the time we reached the dance, I had a good buzz and didn't care about all the stares. We danced to a couple of slow songs and left early to go to Christian's after-party. That's when things got hazy again. A couple of girls from my English class taught me how to do some sort of dance. I remember them chanting, "Go Hayley, go Hayley." Smalls was grinding into me and kissing on my neck, and I felt so free.

I woke up in my bed unsure of how I got home. One of the straps of my red sequin dress was broken. My head was pounding, and everything was spinning. After emptying the contents of my stomach into the toilet, I laid on the cold linoleum floor until I could somewhat see straight again. I turned the shower on, unzipped my dress, and let it fall to the floor. I stared at my naked body in horror. My underwear was gone.

All these years after Miss Suzanne's wedding, I'm standing on the railroad tracks, seventeen with my baby in a sling, and still on the outside looking in. I'll never be Strawberry Queen or live in a big brick house like Miss Suzanne's. I don't understand why God would give me a child when I barely have anything to give.

The pastor said that babies are a gift from God and I should be thankful. I asked him why God would reward me for sinning and punish Miss Suzanne when everything she does is perfect. Do you know what he said? Sometimes it takes time to fully understand the purpose of God's gifts. I told him that sounded like a bunch of hogwash.

When I got home, I asked Mama, "How do you know whether God is trying to tell you something, or if it's your gut trying to tell you something?"

She told me to trust my gut, and I told her that my gut didn't want to go to church anymore, but she keeps dragging me every week anyways. Everybody at church goes gaga over Janelle. The church has been nicer to me than the kids at school, but I guess for some people like Miss Suzanne, it takes more than friendliness to restore your faith once you've lost it. You begin to wonder if it was all just something you convinced yourself you believed just because you were supposed to, because that's what everybody wants you to believe.

I imagine that's why she quit going to church after her divorce. She was just too nice to deserve all that God threw her way. Everybody said Mister Nate left her for a younger woman. I told Mama that's crazy because Miss Suzanne is the prettiest lady in town and she still looks the same as she did in college, but Mama said her husband wanted a woman who could bear children. Imagine that, her husband left her because she couldn't have children, and my boyfriend, if you could call him that, wouldn't even talk to me after I told him I was having his baby. Sometimes the world just doesn't make any kind of sense.

I can almost picture Miss Suzanne behind those red brick walls sitting alone on her sofa wishing she had a family, while I'm out here wondering how in the world I'm going to graduate from high school with a baby to take care of. I look at Janelle's precious little face. Maybe she

wasn't supposed to be my gift to keep, but my gift to give. My heart feels like it's going to explode. I wonder if this is what it feels like to have God tugging at your heart.

“If that's you God, you don't have to tug so hard,” I say. The clouds are thick, but I don't think it's going to rain. They're the swirling white and gray ones. The kind that keep the air moving. The kind that make me feel like everything will work out the way it's supposed to.

Blackberry vines scratch my legs as I make my way down the incline of the train tracks. Janelle begins to cry, and I pat her back as I walk up Miss Suzanne's gravel driveway all lined with pink azalea bushes. I climb up the brick steps, swing the shiny, gold knocker three times, and wait.

Ceremony

Nate Russo walked down the dark hallways of the high school carrying a flashlight, a plastic grocery bag full of clothes, and a Dopp kit. Even though it was after eight, Nate was worried one of his teachers might still be around grading papers. The last thing he needed was for the faculty to find out his marriage was on the rocks. He tiptoed past one classroom after another. This is nonsense, he mumbled to himself. He was the principal after all, so if anyone were still at school, he would be the one to ask all the questions. He relaxed his legs and walked as usual with his dress shoes clicking against the hard floor.

Once Nate was inside the locker room, he turned on the lights, dead bolted the door, and took off his clothes. As he dug through his grocery bag, he realized he had forgotten to pack flip-flops and a towel, but at least he remembered the soap. The shower knob was sensitive,

switching from ice cold to scalding hot when he barely moved it. No wonder students never showered at school.

Nate dashed under the cold droplets long enough to get wet, lather up, and rinse off. He used the shirt he had been wearing to pat dry and pulled a comb out of his Dopp kit. It was nice to have some privacy for once. He stood naked in front of the mirror, combing his hair. For nearly a decade, he had been watching his hair recede like the Louisiana coastline. Once, he had watched a documentary about the rising tides in the lower part of the state. The way Nate examined the curvature of his hairline reminded him of that ecologist examining the shore. Everything in the world is finite. A simple fact his wife, Suzanne, could not seem to comprehend.

A few nights ago, he went into their study to look over their banking statement on the Internet. He noticed a payment to an online adoption website for several thousands dollars. Nate searched for the website online, and found his and Suzanne's photo in a box of featured couples. He clicked on their image and was directed to their profile. Photos, blog entries, intimate details about how they met, how he proposed, how they struggled to get pregnant, everything. God knows who had seen this. He printed page after page and stormed through the house looking for Suzanne.

She was in the master bath, soaking in the garden tub. Her head was leaning back on a bath pillow and was surrounded by a cloud of bubbles. Her eyes were closed. The hum of the jets appeared to have lulled his wife to sleep, so Nate left the room and stomped his feet when he returned. Suzanne opened her eyes and gave her husband a glare. She had asked him a million times to tread lightly across the tiles.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked.

“I’ll tell you what’s the matter. My wife did this,” he said, throwing the papers into the bath. They rested on the bubbles, slowly sinking.

“What?” She pulled her arms out from under the foam, dried them on a towel next to the tub, and fished out the blob of paper. All the images were one big blur of dripping ink. She laid the wad over the edge of the tub and stared at it, as if the pictures were developing.

“Do you know how easy it would be for someone to steal our identities with this?” he asked.

“Baby, we’ve been working with this fertility doctor for ages,” she said. “Maybe it’s time to explore some other options.”

“So what, you signed up to join a baby exchange website? Is this even legal?”

“It’s perfectly legal, just a place for people to meet. That’s all. You talk, get to know one another, and if the mother decides to give you her child, you get a lawyer to draw up the paperwork.” She flipped the level for the drain, and the water gurgled.

“The whole thing sounds shady, Suzanne. What’s to stop women who aren’t even pregnant from sending you photos and asking you to send them money?” Nate grabbed her towel from the rack and handed it to her.

“We aren’t giving them one cent until we have a legal contract,” she said, standing up. She used the “we” business again. She does that to turn everything around, to make it them against the world. She has a habit of doing this, and he usually falls for it.

“Exactly how much were you planning on paying for someone’s baby?” he asked as he watched his wife towel dry.

“We’d figure that part out together. I was going to tell you once I found a match, I just didn’t want to get your hopes up in case it doesn’t work out.”

“You don’t seem to get it. Even if this thing did work out, we don’t have the money, and we’re not borrowing any more money from your parents.”

“They don’t care if we pay them back, honey,” she said in the voice she used to talk to her elementary students.

“We’re going to pay them back if it takes us the rest of our lives.”

“Don’t be silly, Mama and Daddy can’t wait to be grandparents, so this is an investment for them too. Mama says family is the best investment there is.” She stepped out of the tub and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“It’s more than about whether your Daddy minds. For him it’s just transferring money from one account to another. For me, it’s the principle. A man should be able to pay his own bills without borrowing from his father-in-law.” Nate’s father, if he were still living, would be ashamed of how much they had borrowed, enough to buy luxury car. “And another principle is my right to privacy. I don’t want our information out there like that,” he said. “You entered all of our information, even our credit card number, on a questionable site without even thinking to check with me first.”

That’s when Suzanne began to cry. He was surprised she had made it that long without an outburst, the hormones made her so emotional. She had been on them so long; he had gotten in the habit of hugging her every time she cried. It was easier to deal with her that way, but Nate was tired of dealing with her. He wasn’t sure if his wife had just become crazy, or if it was the fertility drugs. She was like a child now, in so many ways. Perhaps that’s why he had acted as a child when he stomped out of the bathroom and packed his bags that night.

As Nate stood naked combing his hair in the boy's locker room, he stomped his feet loudly against the tile floor just as he had done several nights earlier. It felt good to stomp his feet. He had tip toed around his own house for ten years.

Nate took his clothes out of the grocery bag. He put one leg into his boxer briefs and then the other. As he was pulling up his gym shorts, he heard knocking at the door. Nate remained motionless for a moment, hoping whoever it was would go away. There was more knocking. It was soft knocking like a mother at the bathroom door checking on a child. Definitely a woman. Nate put on his athletic shorts and a T-shirt, and smoothed back his hair with the comb.

“I know someone's in there. I heard noises.”

It was Ariana, his new assistant principal. The school board finally created a new position after the new enrollment records were released. Ariana had been a junior high teacher and just finished her doctorate degree in education. She was a petite woman, barely five foot. Nate couldn't imagine her taking on an intruder alone. He had heard some of the seniors had given her a hard time, pretending they didn't see her in the hall. He's sure they didn't mean any harm. That's the way most of the boys flirt with a pretty girl, teasing like that. Nate pulled them aside and told them he would call their parents if it happened again.

“If you don't come out, I am going to suspect you of vandalism, and I'll call the police,” she said.

He was relieved she didn't plan to unlock the door all by herself. Maybe she didn't know which key to use. “No need to call 911. It's just me,” Nate said, opening the door.

“Good gracious, you gave me a scare. I thought you'd gone home. I thought some kids were up to no good down here.”

“I'm sorry. I thought everyone had gone home. Why are you still here?” he asked.

“Report cards go out Friday, and some of our teachers still haven’t turned in their grades yet.”

“Who?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve made a list, and I’ll call them each into my office tomorrow.”

Nate Russo was impressed by the commitment of his new assistant principal, but he was also aggravated by her lack of caution.

“It’s not safe for you to be up here this late,” he said.

“Is it safe for you?” she asked, looking past him inside the locker room where his toiletries were still scattered on the sink counter and his work clothes were on the floor. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone about your little secret.”

“Secret?” he asked.

“That you like to shower at school,” she said and smiled.

Nate chuckled. “Thanks. I wouldn’t want anyone to know about that.”

“Anytime, boss,” she said. “See you tomorrow.”

“Drive safely,” he said.

“You too,” Ariana said and turned to walk away. She looked back at Nate, said, “You should wear your hair like that more often,” and left. Her black shoes had little heels that clacked against the tile. It was a refined sound, the sound of a woman on a mission. Nate ran his hands through his slicked back hair and listened to the clack, clack, clacking as it echoed in the hall.

Before the sun rose the next morning, Nate woke up on his office couch with a crick in his neck. He couldn't go on sleeping at school and waiting for his wife to apologize. After he was dressed and made coffee, Nate called Suzanne. When she didn't answer, he left a message that he was looking for an apartment.

At lunchtime, there was an announcement over the loud speaker that everyone should report outside for the Changing of the Colors Ceremony, a humiliating but necessary event. A few years ago, it was the best solution the principals could come up with to stop the prank wars between schools after several unsolved vandalisms. Nate's baseball team had lost against their rivals, so the school would have to take down their green flag and fly Hammond High's purple flag for a week. At the ceremony, Nate was supposed to be the one to accept the flag from the opposing school. He would be the one to run it up the pole, and then each principal would have a turn to make a speech.

As Nate was going over what he planned to say to boost the morale of the students, Suzanne appeared in his open doorway with takeout. "I don't have long," he said. There were hundreds of students outside of his window waiting for the ceremony to begin. He shut the door, closed the blinds and took a seat behind his desk.

"I'm sorry," Suzanne said. "I know I haven't been thinking things through lately. I just want a baby so badly." She began sobbing again. He pulled a tissue out of the box on his desk and held it out.

"I don't mind looking into other options if we do it together, but no baby exchange websites, and you've got to stop taking the hormones."

"I know they're making me crazy. You're right, you're right." She buried her face into the tissue. Nate walked over and caressed his wife. The band began playing outside.

“We’ve just got to do this together.”

“We are. We are,” she said and kissed him on the cheek. “Go ahead. I know you’ve got to go.”

Nate rushed outside in time to see the purple flag being raised by Ariana. The white tornado in the center of the flag moved back and forth as it was tossed around by the wind. The students pointed their thumbs down and booed.

“Students. Students,” Ariana called. “Don’t let this discourage you. This is no reason to get down. You may be wondering why I am wearing a purple sweatshirt today. Most of you don’t know this, but I was a Hammond High Tor.”

The students booed again. What was she thinking? Nate tried to make his way through the crowd up to the flagpole. Ariana unzipped her sweatshirt and took it off revealing a green PHS T-shirt. The students clapped and cheered.

“Students, I have just one more thing to say before I dismiss you. You may have lost one little game to Hammond High School, but you’ve gained me, and I’ll still be here after that flag comes down in one week.”

A kid jabbed Nate in the elbow. “Mr. Russo, why aren’t you clapping?” Nate smiled and clapped his hands. Ariana was just full of surprises.

* * *

Later that night, Nate arrived home to a dark house. Suzanna had forgotten to leave the porch light on again, and Nate fumbled around in the dark trying to find the right key. It was her way of protesting his long hours. He dropped his keys and cursed under his breath.

When he knelt down on the ground to feel around for his keys, his chest began to constrict, and he gasped for air. He couldn't feel the air reaching his lungs. He slumped down against the door and took several deep breaths. Things went out of focus, then black. When Nate came to, he saw flashing red lights and Suzanne was holding a wet cloth on his face. Two paramedics loaded him onto a gurney, and he was lifted into the ambulance.

After dozens of tests, doctors assured the Russos that Nate's heart was fine. He was given a clean bill of health, some little blue pills, and a therapist's card.

When they arrived home, all the lights were on.

Nate looked at his watch. It was 3:16 a.m. So much time had been lost.

"Maybe I should take the day off tomorrow," he said.

"You never take a day off," she said. "Maybe I should, too."

"That would be nice," he said.

Suzanne helped Nate to the bed. He was glad when his wife slid under the covers next to him and rested her head on his chest.

The next morning, Suzanne brought Nate a breakfast tray with cheese grits and coffee and they watched the news in bed while they ate breakfast. When the program was over, they sat on the patio, still in their pajamas, and looked for legitimate adoption agencies on the web.

When Nate returned to work the next day, he noticed a shadow of baby fine hairs above Ariana's lip. He hadn't remembered seeing those before.

By the time prom rolled around a few months later, Nate felt like a new man. He stopped taking the little blue pills, and he and Suzanne had been making a lot of progress in counseling. After the students had left the dance and the decorations had been taken down, several of the coaches asked Nate if he wanted to join them for a drink. Since Nate had become principal, he missed the camaraderie he once shared with these men when he coached with them. He hardly saw them anymore except when there was a dilemma with student or a parent, and they needed his advice.

The guys picked a bar that was right down the street in town. Nate had passed the bar a million times and never thought twice about it. It was downtown in a strip with a restaurant he and his wife frequented. The sign for the place was small and there was only one small window for the place. A pool table and darts were in the front and there was a dance floor in the back. A couple of men wearing holey jeans and printed T-shirts raised their eyebrows at the coaches wearing suits. One of the younger coaches bought Nate a beer.

Through the haze of smoke, Nate saw Ariana dancing with some of the other female teachers in the back. He didn't realize the women were invited. Ariana was wearing a green wrap-around dress that fit her in all the right places. He realized his tie was the same color, and he felt his face flush. He didn't know why that should embarrass him. Green was, after all, the school color. Arianna's skirt flared out, and Nate loosened his tie and took a swig of his drink. He bought the guys a round of shots, and they played darts for a while.

When the bartender announced last call, Nate was singing a country song with the coaches. They closed their tabs and stumbled with their arms around one another toward the door. When one of the guys fell down and took Nate with him, the bartender would not allow either of them to drive home.

Nate wasn't sure how he ended up in Ariana's Lexus, but there he was in the passenger seat. Thinking fresh air might help him sober up, Nate rolled down the window. A gust picked up the edge of Ariana's dress, and she tucked it under her leg, her beautifully toned leg. Nate looked out the window.

"You sure you're alright?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm fine," he said. "I could've driven myself home, but I didn't want to make any more of a scene than we'd already made." Nate tried to focus on Ariana's mustache, but it was gone. Even though Ariana had probably waxed her lip, Nate had a hard time imagining the tiny dark hairs were ever there. Frightened by her flawlessness, he stared out the window at the empty highway.

"Better safe than sorry," she said, "with you being the principal and all." The corners of her mouth were slightly turned up.

"My wife won't be happy about driving me to get the truck tomorrow."

"If you need a ride—"

"She would hate that even more."

They rode in silence, with only the sound of his tie flapping in the wind. At a stoplight, Ariana tried to smooth down her wispy hair.

"I must look a wreck," she said.

"No, no. You just look . . . carefree."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment."

Her eyes were gleaming.

"Trust me, it's a good thing." His wife used to look that way when they had first met.

Ariana gave Nate another smile before stepping on the gas.

When she pulled into his driveway, the house was dark.

“Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime, boss.”

“And Ariana, thanks for everything you’ve done this year. I’m—we’re really lucky to have you.”

Ariana leaned over to give him a kiss. On the cheek? The mouth? He wasn’t sure. It all happened so fast. Their lips locked, and he kissed her long and hard, the way he once kissed his wife. He’d almost forgotten how it felt to feel passion like that. When he finally broke free from their embrace, the porch light was on, and Suzanne was standing in the doorway in her robe.

“Jealous wife?” she asked.

“I have a feeling she will be now,” he said. “Listen, there’s no reason anyone at school needs to know about this, right?”

“Mum’s the word.”

“Thanks for the ride,” he said getting out of Ariana’s car. He walked up the driveway with his head down. He didn’t want to look into his Suzanne’s eyes. What would he tell her? Nate needed to sober up before he had that talk with her. He walked past his wife and into the house. She followed him inside and shut the door.

“You have nothing to say to me? No hello, no how was your day?” she asked.

Nate hung his suit coat on a hook behind the door and took his shoes off. “It’s late. We’re all tired. Let’s just talk about it in the morning.” He started tiptoeing up the stairs, using the black walnut bannister Suzanne had special ordered from California. He couldn’t hear her footsteps, but he didn’t want to turn to see if she was following behind. He walked through their bedroom

straight to the bathroom, the one with the most beautiful granite Suzanne had ever seen, the one she bought in Birmingham and had shipped here for the counter tops. He slammed the door.

“I think I deserve some answers, like how long it’s been going on,” she yelled through the door.

Nate washed his face in the sink. He would just tell her the truth, the part he wanted her to know. He opened the door. “Listen honey, I was drunk, that was the only time it ever happened.”

“I saw the way you looked at her at the flag ceremony,” Suzanne said following behind.

“She was giving a motivational speech. How was I supposed to look at her, like I was bored?”

“No, but you looked like a little schoolboy with a crush.” She crossed her arms and walked over to the bed.

“And what were you still doing there, spying on me?” Nate asked, leaning in the doorway of the bathroom.

“I thought you were giving the speech, so I stayed to watch.”

What could Nate say after that? Suzanne had been trying to make it work for a few months now, and things between them had been better. Suzanne was the one he had promised to cherish; the one’s whose family had taken him in as their own. They would be devastated if he betrayed Suzanne.

“Honey, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“She works at your side all day. How can you promise me that?” she asked.

As Nate was packing up the last of the photographs and books from the shelves in his office, his secretary brought him the paper. Nate looked at the grinning image of himself on the cover of the *Daily Star* and sat down in his office chair. He skimmed over the article and was pleased that it painted him in a positive light. His decision to put his family over his career was highlighted. The reporter even referred to him as a true hero.

Nate tossed the paper in a cardboard box and walked down the hall for his last event as principal. As was customary at faculty luncheons, the library tables had been covered with white tablecloths and decorated with small vases of yellow and orange day lilies, courtesy of the PTSA. Before entering the room, Nate could have closed his eyes and imagined everything just like this. The buffet of home cooked food, the laughter from the faculty, the summer excitement bubbling through the air.

Nate made his way through the receiving line of Southern delicacies: Coach Hank's chocolate covered bacon, Mister David's pastalaya, and Miss Rita's blueberry bread pudding. He nodded his head and chit chatted with teachers while he piled his plate up a little heavier than usual. Nate would miss the faculty luncheons.

Perhaps it was the security of these things that he longed for the most in life. It was difficult to imagine the life ahead of him, working for Suzanne's dad at the RV business. He had no inclination to be a salesman, but now the whole family was depending on him.

Nate found a seat at the coaches' table, and the superintendent began giving a speech about all of Nate's accomplishments, and then she introduced the interim principal. People applauded, and Ariana took the stage. Nate's cheeks felt warm.

“I still can’t believe he’s leaving us,” she said and a few people clapped. “What I’ve learned from Nate Russo over the past couple months would have taken me a decade to learn on my own. I just wish I had more time to learn from such a top-notch school leader.” More clapping. “But I understand his decision to leave. It’s difficult to be an effective principal and balance your personal life. You have to make sacrifices, and it’s hard to make the one’s you love happy. I think I speak for everyone when I say, we all just want you to be happy, Nate. You’ve had a great legacy at PHS, one that will never be forgotten, and we all wish you the best of luck carrying the torch for the Ribando’s family business. Without further ado, the yearbook has put together a slide show.”

One picture after another faded in and out on the large screen. Nate kissing a pig, falling in a dunking booth, walking a catwalk in drag. Mostly things the students asked him to do for fundraisers. The crowd was laughing hysterically. A few women dabbed their eyes. These would always be his glory days.

As the slideshow continued, his wife brought out a cake bearing an image of his face, and the words “Wishing You the Best!” written across the bottom. He had never cared much for face cakes. The idea of eating the person you were celebrating was odd to him, but at least his wife had selected a flattering photograph. It was one from their vacation in Orange Beach, and he had a nice tan. She had cropped off his body from the neck down, which was a good thing because he had been in a bathing suit, but a bad thing because his face had been enlarged. It was twice the size of his real head.

“You shouldn’t have,” he said and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Nate watched his wife cut the cake into pieces and place them on paper plates. An eye, an ear, his chin, the tip of his nose, his thinning hairline. Suzanne handed Nate a piece with the corner of his smiling lips. Bite after bite, the picture of the principal disappeared.

The Rye Plot

I. Smalls

When I turned sixteen, Paps woke me up before the sun rose. Ever since I was big enough to hold a pole, my father always took me fishing on my birthday. That morning, Paps walked over to the window and pulled back the curtains. The moonlight made him glow a cool blue, almost see-through, or at least that's how I remember it. I rubbed my eyes and sat up in bed.

“We going to the river?” I asked.

“Not today, Smalls. I needs your help, today,” he said. Everyone in my family goes by a nickname. People call my father Willie, but I call him Paps. Since I was named after my father, he calls me Smalls.

“What happened?” I asked and made my way over to him.

He lifted his shirt showing me a gash about two inches long under his ribs, but I couldn't tell how deep it was.

"Some crazy man came after me is what happened. I need you to bandage me up," he asked putting his shirt back down.

"You sure you don't need a doctor?" I asked.

Paps took a grocery bag that was dangling around his wrist and tossed it to me. "We've got everything I need right here. Listen, your mom doesn't need to know about this okay."

I wrapped gauze all the way around his rib cage that night and kept my mouth shut for so long I wasn't sure if it was a memory or a dream. A couple of times, when my Mama went out of town to visit her sister, Paps would let me play video games all weekend, even though Mama only let me play for an hour a day. Once I was taking out enemy fighter jets, I barely even noticed when he came and went or if he had a woman with him. He always said what happened when Mama was away was our secret.

A few weeks after I helped bandage him up, he came into my room before the sun rose again. "I still owe you a birthday present," he said. This time he was holding a paper airplane.

"You made me a plane?" I asked.

"Nope. Guess again?"

"A fishing pole?"

"Nope. I'll give you a clue. It has nothing to do with fishing, but something close to fishing."

"It's too early, Paps. Just tell me already."

"I'll give you a hint." Paps sailed a paper airplane to me. I was still too groggy for my brain to work right. The plane came crashing right into my forehead.

“A girl could have caught that,” he said.

I smoothed out the crumpled tip. It was a hand-drawn picture of a miniature house on stilts.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A deer stand.”

“Well, where is it?”

“In the back of my truck,” he said, smiling a little.

I threw on a pair shorts and ran outside. When I saw the back of my father’s pick-up, I sighed.

“All I see is a pile of wood,” I said.

Paps just stood in the doorway loading tobacco in his lip. “Well, you ready to get started?” he asked and then spit over the step railing into the dirt.

“You’re gonna make me build my own birthday present?” I asked.

“You can show me those skills you’ve been learning from all those shop classes you’ve been taking.”

“You couldn’t just buy me another video game?” I asked.

“You know how much the wood costs? And I got a discount from a guy I went to school with. You want me to take it back?” Paps turned his head and spit.

“Depends. How long you think it’ll take to build?” I asked looking at the pile of wood.

“We should have it ready for deer season. You’ll thank me when we’re looking down the barrel at a ten-point buck. ”

After I got dressed and ate breakfast, we rode in Paps’s truck down the path into the woods. Paps stopped the truck by the creek, and we unloaded the wood, some tools, and a couple

of ladders. Then Paps sent me back to the house with an arm full of extensions cords. After I got them all plugged in, I walked back down the path towards my father.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“Hold the wood while I cut,” he said.

“Am I just going to be your assistant the whole time?” I asked.

“Go get a damn board, and bring it over here.”

We were an assembly line of two. He did the measuring and I did the cutting. By the end of Sunday night, we had put the floor down and built the walls. Paps had to go back to the rig on Monday morning, and Mama wouldn't let me use the power tools out in the woods by myself. She said if I got hurt, no one would be able to help me, so I had to wait for Paps to work on it.

The Saturday he was supposed to come home, I got up early to set everything up. I brought all of the tools I thought we would need out to the deer stand and ran the extension cords down the path. I ate lunch with Mama, and then I waited all afternoon for the sound of his truck. If he got off late or is really tired, sometimes he stayed down in New Orleans for the night to catch up on his sleep before he drives home. We tried to call him, but he didn't answer. Mama said it was possible that he had to work an extra shift, and that would explain why we hadn't heard from him yet, on account of there was no cell phone service on the water.

I was too young back then to know that Mama never saw any extra money on Paps's paychecks when he claimed to work extra shifts. I guess it's easier to believe someone you love has good intentions than to question details that don't quite add up. So when Paps finally showed up Sunday night with the smell of sour liquor on his breath, we didn't ask any questions. We were just happy to have him home again. Mama warmed up leftover spaghetti, and sure enough, he told us a couple of guys didn't show up for their shift so he stayed on to help out.

After Mama sent me to bed, I heard her tell him about how I had gotten up early yesterday and hauled all the tools out into the woods. I heard the deep rumble of my father's voice, but I couldn't make out the words. He was probably saying that it wasn't his fault, and somebody had to put food on our table, or something like that.

Even though he argued with my mother about it, he must have felt guilty about what he had done because Monday afternoon, he was waiting for me at the bus stop. We worked on weekends and every day after school for the next couple of weeks. Sometimes I'd come home to find Paps working on it by himself too.

One day when it was starting to cool down, I found Paps finishing up the window frames. He planned to put in glass windows once he saved up a little more money. Until then, burlap sacks would keep the bugs out, even though they didn't keep out much else.

To lure the deer, Paps planted rye grass by the creek. I told him that seemed unfair, but he just said, "Life is unfair. You'll thank me when we're eating deer sausage for breakfast. We're part of the food chain. If we didn't kill them, there would be too many of them."

For the final touch, we installed a trap door with a deadbolt to keep out anyone who didn't know our secret knock. Women weren't allowed. So you can see why I was surprised to hear my Paps up there with a woman a few days later. The woman sounded like she was moaning, and I was old enough to know sometimes women moaned in a good way when they were having sex. I had heard Mama making strange noises in her bedroom late at night on occasion. The walls were paper-thin. I put it all together when I saw sex for the first time on television. But the closer I got to the deer stand, the more the noises sounded like muffled cries than sounds of a woman enjoying herself.

"Paps?" I called up.

I heard mumbling voices. One was my father's, but one was definitely a woman's whispering.

"Don't come up here!" Paps said.

"Who's with you? I heard—"

"Go on back to the house. You hear me? And don't come snooping around here for a while. I'm working on something," he said. "A surprise."

"Why can't I help?"

"What kind of surprise would it be if you helped me? Now get the hell out of here or forget about the whole thing."

"Yes, sir," I said. As I walked away, I looked back over my shoulders. I could swear I saw a beautiful girl who didn't look much older than me, nineteen or twenty maybe. It was hard to be sure though because the burlap closed a second later.

After my mom went to go get her hair done, my father said he needed to go to the hardware store. I watched a trail of dust follow him down the gravel driveway, and then I walked down the trail into the woods. I climbed each rung of the ladder and found a pad lock on the door. I pulled on it, but it didn't budge. I banged on the door, but it was silent.

"Hello," I said. "Is anyone in there?"

Except for the a few chirping birds in the distance, everything was quiet. Why would my father put a pad lock on the outside, when there was a slide lock on the inside? The thought occurred to me that it was me he was locking out. Deep down, I must have known that he had always locked a part of himself away.

I ran back down the path and found Paps's telescoping ladder in the shed. Moving that beast had always been a two-person job, but it was the only thing tall and sturdy enough to get

me through a window. When I finally made it to the deer stand, I dropped that ladder like it was a water moccasin I'd picked up by mistake. It landed on the ground with a loud thud and leaves began to rustle.

I crouched down and waited for a few seconds. Two squirrels ran up a tree, and then it was quiet for a while. I picked up the ladder and extended it up to one of the windows. As I climbed up each step, my stomach felt like I was on the downhill slope of a roller coaster. Once I made it to the windowsill, I inched open the burlap curtain. There were clothes, blankets, water bottles, and tin cans all over the floor. Someone had been living in there, someone who wore a red bra. Whoever she was, I had a feeling she would be back for her stuff.

I put the ladder back, retreated to my room, and used my mother's bird watching binoculars to watch the deer stand from my window. Nothing happened all afternoon. When my Mama came home a few hours later, she made me bring in the groceries while she started dinner. I tried to sneak off after I put the groceries up, but she made me work on my English essay at the kitchen table. I had to write 500 words arguing whether or not our country should use capital punishment. I've always had trouble focusing when it comes to writing essays, and it didn't help that I kept wondering what was going on in our backyard. I thought about telling Mama what I saw, but I could practically hear her response, "That imagination of yours is not going to get you out of your homework." I ended up writing something about how the only ones who deserved the death penalty were serial killers, people who you know will do it again if they have the chance.

Paps still wasn't back yet when Mama made me go to bed at ten. I was awakened by the sound of his raggedy muffler and the gravel driveway crunching under his tires. The noises trailed off in the direction of the woods. I ran to the window and saw the red glow of his taillights disappearing into the woods. Then a yellow glow appeared up in the trees.

Without even thinking about what might happen if I went out there, I put on my clothes and went outside. Then I started walking towards the rye plot. Halfway there, I heard a gunshot and ducked into the bushes.

The next morning, I woke up in the bushes and figured I must have been sleep walking. My mother was making breakfast in the kitchen when I came in.

“What you doing up so early for?” she asked.

“Just went for a walk. Did you hear any loud noises last night?” I asked.

“You know I’m a heavy sleeper. I wouldn’t wake up if a train plowed through our living room,” she said while flipping over bacon with tongs. Grease from the skillet was popping in the air, and she turned down the gas.

“It sounded like gunshots,” I said.

“That’s just the bacon, honey. I had the heat up too high.”

“No, I mean last night.”

“Oh, it was probably just hunters,” she said.

“It’s not deer season.”

“Since when do people follow the hunting laws around here?” Mama asked without looking at me. She stirred the grits and flipped the bacon again. Mama was good at being too busy to notice what she didn’t want to know about.

“Sounds like you’ve been watching too many scary movies,” Paps said, as he came out of the bathroom. He rubbed his knuckles on my head a couple of times as he walked toward the coffee pot. He said this so confidently that I knew he had to be right.

“I think we all need to get out of here for the day. Let’s spend the day down in the French Quarter.”

After Mama’s big breakfast, we all piled in her station wagon and drove down to New Orleans for the day. We ate beignets, po-boys, and hot fudge. Mama said she had seen and eaten more than she cared to, so Paps told her we would meet her at the van after we got one more thing. We strolled down a crowded street with iron balconies. Paps bought us a couple of beers and some hot dogs, and he told me not to go back in the woods for a while, until his surprise was finished.

The next few weeks, I did what I could to steer clear of the woods, which involved playing video games and lifting weights, by then I was pretty girl crazy. Every now and then, I looked out of the windows and wondered what Paps was up to. Fear kept me from finding out.

When he blindfolded me a few weeks later, I got a sick feeling in my stomach. I tried to tell him I had homework to do, but he wouldn’t listen. He practically pushed me out the door and guided me down the path with one hand on my shoulder. He was in a good mood, the best mood I’d seen him in months, telling jokes and laughing his head off. When he untied the cloth, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Paps had installed glass windows, shingled the roof, and stained the wood a deep mahogany.

II. Willie

I'm all for the legalization of pot, weed, marijuana, or whatever else you want to call it. When I'm high, I get shit done. I built my son a deer stand with a little help from my green friend, and I must say, it might just be my finest accomplishment.

It's the drinking that's always gotten me into trouble. It leads me into places a married man has no business going. That's how I met Misty Landon, in a strip club down in the French Quarter. I can assure you, it wasn't my idea. I was perfectly content drinking two-dollar long necks in the bar across the street from my motel. That's where I usually stayed the night after two weeks out on the rig. I always needed a day or two to unwind before going home to my wife's honey do list. That damn thing is a mile long. I get that it must have been hard on her with me being gone half the time, but Jesus, she drove me away with her damn lists. So when some of the guys suggested going to a strip club, I didn't put up much of a fuss. I thought I would see some tits, hand out a few dollars, and get a taxi back to the motel. No harm done. Hell, it had been a long time since I'd seen any action.

When I woke up next to a beautiful young lady, I just about shit my pants. The whole night had been a blur after my boss started buying shots. I lost count after four. Don't get me wrong, I know I had a good time, I just wish I could remember what all happened. I suppose that was the reason I stayed another night. And the reason, I kept going back to Stiletto's after every two-week shift. And why I started leaving home a day or two before my next shift started. I told my wife I was working overtime, and she never asked any questions as long as I kept putting food on the table and paying the bills.

The less I was home, the easier life seemed to be. No responsibilities. Just a beautiful young girl who made me feel alive again. And once I remembered what it felt like, can you blame me for wanting to feel that way all of the time?

It was all fun and games until I started noticing Misty's bruises. She wouldn't tell me how she got them, but I had my suspicions. When she couldn't work for a week because of a broken arm, I straight up asked her to tell me what was going on. I didn't care that she had a boyfriend, but I'd be damned if I was going to let another man hurt her.

When Misty finally left her boyfriend, Christ, she was a mess. She hadn't had a fix in four days, and she was sick as a dog. I ended up giving her some pot to help with the nausea, and she kept asking me to stay another night at the hotel with her. I knew she didn't have anywhere else to go, but I'd get hell from my wife if I didn't come home. I paid for the motel room for the rest of the week, and Misty said that would be enough time for her to find another place to stay.

Two days later, I was mowing the lawn when I got a text message from her. She was at the gas station a mile away from my house and said it was an emergency. I met her behind the store by the garbage bins. She was wearing sunglasses, but I could tell she had a black eye and a bruise on her jaw.

"He found me at the motel," she said.

"How did he know you were there?" I asked.

"I guess someone told him. People run their mouths in the city just as much as they do in small towns."

I nodded. "So where are you going?"

"I don't know. I didn't have time to get my money. It was locked in the motel safe. My ex had me pinned down on the bed. I kicked him in the nuts, grabbed my purse, and ran."

“How the hell did you find me?”

“I remembered you said you lived in Ponchatoula. I just stopped at the first gas station I saw here.”

“I don’t have any more money to give you. My wife is going to be pissed about the two hundred dollar withdrawal I made last week. We’ve got bills to pay.”

“Don’t you have a friend I could stay with?”

I shook my head, and she started balling. Something about the sound of crying grates on my nerves. I would have said and done anything to just make her stop, even offering her the deer stand to sleep in. After all she’d been through, I didn’t have the heart to turn her away.

It was just supposed to be for a few days until she could find somewhere else to go. We parked her car behind an old abandoned house, and she rode under a blanket in the back seat of my pick-up. I waited until Jana left to get her hair done, and I drove the truck down to the deer stand. As soon as I got Misty safely inside, she started tearing up again, and just when I was getting her to quiet down, I heard my son.

I don’t exactly remember what I said to the boy, but he scampered off with his tail between his legs. It was the saddest damn thing I ever saw. And then Misty started bawling again. It wasn’t my finest moment.

The next night, that ex-boyfriend of Misty’s followed her signal right up to the deer stand. She texted me in the middle of the night when she heard him trying to get in. I grabbed my pistol and rushed down the path in my flip-flops. I heard Misty wailing when I was halfway down the path. God, that woman had some lungs on her. When I opened the trap door, I saw Misty’s ex holding her at gunpoint. I pulled my gun thinking I could shoot him in the arm and he would drop the gun, but I guess my aim was a little off. I nicked him in the shoulder, and he held

her tighter. He pulled the trigger, and I watched Misty's head explode. Her boyfriend turned the gun towards me, and I fired again.

III. Smalls

Paps took some time off work once the deer stand was finished. He told his boss he had the flu, but really I think he wanted to stock up the fridge with deer meat. On weekends, we drank beer and waited for moving targets in "the best damn deer stand South of the Mason Dixie," or "the gift I made for my one and only son." Sometimes, depending on how much pot he had smoked, Paps got all sentimental on me. He was really nice when he was high, told me he was sorry for not being a better father, asked me lots of questions, that kind of stuff.

A few months later, the police showed up just after breakfast on Saturday. I was helping my mother with the dishes, and Paps had gone out to buy a belt for the lawnmower. They must have caught up with him at the hardware store because we never saw him set foot in our house again. Even though my Mama tried her hardest to protect me from hearing the news, that's damn near impossible when it involves murder in a small town.

Sunday afternoon, some of the ladies from Mama's old Bible study class stopped by, even though none of us had been to church in years. "We just wanted to let you know, we were thinking of you during this time of hardship," one of them said.

"We're here for you if you want to talk, or pray about it," said another.

You could tell it was something they dreaded, but felt was some sort of religious obligation like serving food to the homeless. They must have been relieved when the police turned down our drive.

“We’ll be praying for you,” they said as they hurried back to their car.

While two policemen questioned my mother, a few others began tapping off the woods behind our house and headed down the path with K-9 dogs. Mama made me pack my bags. She said we would go stay with my grandparents until this blew over, which turned out to be the whole summer. Except when we came back, it had far from blown over.

On the first day of my senior year, I was called the Strangler’s Son. Kids made gestures like they wanted to wring my neck. Idiots. If they listened to the news, they’d know those people weren’t even strangled. They were shot.

At lunch, I was bombarded with questions like, “Did you have any idea your father was a killer?” Or, even worse, “You poor thing. Did your dad ever beat you?” I got up without saying a word and sat by myself. A couple of guys I played with on the football team sat down next to me and told me not to worry about what people said. Jamal’s father was a musician living in Lafayette who drank away his pay and never called or visited. Christian’s father had been to prison a few years back for drug possession, so he said he could relate. I had to give them credit for sticking by me after Paps went to prison.

Paps called me every now and then, but he never mentioned anything about his arrest or the charges. He mainly talked about how much he missed us and how he was studying the law, building a case for an appeal, that sort of thing. He said the prison used to be a slave plantation and that people there still worked the field like slaves.

“So are you saying the prisoners don’t deserve to be there?” I asked him over the phone one day.

There was a silence over the line. I could hear men cursing and yelling in the background, and I tried to imagine my father in an orange jumpsuit holding the phone up to his ear. I wondered if he knew what I was really trying to ask him.

“Nah, most of them deserve to be here. But that don’t mean they deserve to be treated like vermin.”

“How many you believe are innocent?”

“Less than the number who claim they’re innocent. Listen, Smalls. This is no place you want to be. Don’t get mixed up in anything shady and get yourself in jail like me.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t,” I said before hanging up the phone. I wanted to ask him how he’d gotten himself mixed up with something shady, but my Paps wasn’t the only one with secrets. The truth was, I had already started following in his footsteps. I had stumbled upon his pot stash when I was looking for rat poison out in his shed. It was double bagged inside a rusty old coffee can. It took me nearly an hour to roll my first joint, but it was the first time since Paps had been arrested that I felt happy. I was a chip off the old block and the life of the party with my Paps’s stash. By the time it ran out, I knew the right people to find more.

Things were fun and games until this girl Hayley, who I took to Prom, claimed I had gotten her pregnant. I wasn’t entirely sure if I believed her because she told me the night of my birthday after she caught me making out with another girl. I’m pretty sure she just made that up to be vindictive. Even if she was pregnant, there was no way the baby was mine. I had found condoms in the glove box of Paps’s truck. My father may not have realized it, but he had left me everything a teenage boy needs.

The next morning, I woke up with an awful hangover, but I was officially seventeen. Mama must have been sound asleep when I stumbled in at 3:00 a. m. She didn’t say a word

about it at breakfast. When I let out a deep belch, Mama looked all put out. The smell of Wild Turkey mixed with coffee and eggs was so strong it made me gag. I thought for sure she smelled it too, but she just said, *Say excuse me.*

She was ignoring my late night drinking binges just like she ignored my father's. She gave me a birthday card from Paps with two tickets to the Angola Prison Rodeo. He wrote, "Happy birthday, son. Hope to see you next Saturday. Love, Paps."

Mama had never taken me to go see him, there was no way she'd let me go by myself. I had asked her once about it, and she said prison wasn't a place for teenage boys.

"You're old enough to decide if you want to see him now," she said.

"I don't understand. Really?"

She nodded her head. "You can take your father's old pick-up."

"Wait, aren't you coming with me?" I asked, wondering if Mama and Paps had ever talked about the murder. To my knowledge, she had never talked to him on the phone or written him a letter.

"Because honey, there are two sides to your father, and even though I never saw that dark part, I know it's there. It's between your father and God now. I've made my peace with it, and I want to remember the good part of him. You've got to figure it out for yourself. I see you wrestling with it, just like I saw your Paps wrestling with the devil when he was itching for a drink."

"He says he goes to church now."

"That doesn't mean the devil's off his back."

"I just want to understand why he did it, you know, understand if he feels bad about it now."

“I know you do, honey, but be prepared. He may not give you the answers you’re looking for. The best thing to do is just pray. Pray God protects you when you go, and that He’ll help you make sense of things once you’re there. Lord knows, that’s what I’ll be praying for.”

I hadn’t heard my Mama talk about God or church in a long time, so I thought she had stopped believing. I guess you don’t have to belong to a church to be a believer.

Looking at the state map in Paps’s glove box, I estimated it would take over two hours to get to Angola Prison from Ponchatoula. It was the first time I’d ever driven out of the city limits by myself, and I was surprised Mama was letting me go. She really wanted me to take a friend, but I told her none of my friends’ parents would let them go. I actually never asked anyone.

As I passed a mansion some oil tycoon built as a tax write-off, I thought about how I was never going to live like that. I would be graduating in a few weeks, and I needed to figure out what I was going to do with my life. Even though my grades weren’t terrible, they weren’t good enough for a scholarship. Besides, the deadlines had all passed months ago. I could work for my uncle in construction or I could work off shore like my Paps.

I passed an old yellowed trailer with several plywood additions. The wood hadn’t been sealed with a finish, and now it was dark from the sun and the rain. A handful of kids were running around a rusted out car and an old tub in the yard. It looked like they were trying to catch a chicken, probably their dinner. I knew I would never live like that either. My father worked hard to provide us with a nice life. How could that same man be a killer?

At the prison rodeo, there were rows and rows of wooden rocking chairs, coffee tables, hope chests, and dollhouses all made by prisoners. My father once told me the warden liked to keep everyone busy with classes and give them activities to look forward to. Only the ones with good behavior were allowed to sell their crafts or participate in the rodeo. It was mind-blowing to think the same hands that murdered someone could produce these works of art.

The inmates were all wearing light denim colored shirts with the words *Prison Worker* printed on the back. I wandered into a covered area where the vendors were around the perimeter of a huge cage. Their crafts were displayed on tables in front of them, but separated by the fence. They haggled with customers over handcrafted cutting boards, frames, and puzzle boxes.

There had to be several thousand people there. Paps told me I could find him next to the tallest guy there. He says his buddy, Tree, is seven foot one. After roaming around for nearly an hour without any luck, I stumbled upon a painting of our deer stand when it still had the corrugated roof and burlap sacks. And there, peeking out from the burlap curtains, was a little boy with a jacked up face. I couldn't imagine anyone would pay very much for that.

“Hey, you Willie’s kid? Smalls?”

The tallest man I’ve ever seen was clinging to the fence. “Yeah, you must be Tree,” I said.

“What gave it away?” he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Where’s my dad?” I asked.

“He’s competing,” Tree said.

“He’s what? He doesn’t know how to ride a bull.”

The man grabbed the fence with both hands. Each finger had a tattoo of a letter. *GAME OVER*. I wondered what that meant. His life of crime was over? His life was over? If he punched you, the game was over? I wasn't going to ask.

"You don't need to know how to ride a bull for what he's doing. All your old man has to do is get the poker chip that's attached to the bull's head and run!"

"What?"

"It's called, 'No Guts, No Glory.'"

"I don't get it," I said.

"They attach the poker chip with Velcro," Tree said.

"No, I don't get why he would do that."

"For a chance to win five hundred bucks. He's giving the money to you for college or whatever, but don't tell him I told you."

"Thanks," I said. It was hard to imagine Paps in a painting class. As I started to walk off, Tree stopped me. "Hey kid, look for the guy wearing a red bandana."

Making my way through the crowded arts and crafts area, I could feel the eyes of hardened criminals watching me. Did they envy my freedom, or did they think I would end up just like them?

I found my seat number way up in the nosebleed section and watched a couple of events. As the announcer introduced, "No Guts, No Glory," several dozen men wearing black and white striped shirts and jeans entered the arena. Some wore colored hats and do-rags, but only one had a red handkerchief rolled up and tied around his head.

The gate opened and a golden brown beast with massive horns entered the ring. My father and three or four of the other men started easing their way closer to the bull. Just as Paps

got pretty close, a guy wearing a black cowboy hat lunged toward the creature's head. The bull tilted its head down, drove its horns into the black and white stripes, and flipped the man up in the air.

“Ohhhhhh!” the crowd gasped as the man hit the ground, his hat landing yards away. Two rodeo clowns ran in and dragged the fallen prisoner behind a gate, and the paramedics hauled him off on a gurney.

All this commotion made the bull mad as hell. Its nostrils began to flare. It jerked its head from one side to the other, surveying the men who were circling in. As they grew closer, it began to charge. All of the men darted out of its path except Paps. He squatted down right where he was and covered his face with his arms.

No longer perceiving my father as a threat, the bull focused on another striped target still moving nearby. As it ran by the spot where my father was crouched, Paps lunged up toward the beast's head, grabbing a horn with one hand and the poker chip with the other. The beast swung its head back and forth with great force, tossing my father face down in the dirt. He scrambled to his feet to run away, but the beast gored him, knocking him down for a second time. Several rodeo clowns ran into the ring toward the beast. He flared his nostrils one last time before charging after one of the clowns. My father held up his arm with the red poker chip, and the crowd went wild.

IV. Willie

My adrenalin must have kept me from feeling how much damage the bull had done. I thought it was just a scratch, but the gash was deep and two of my ribs were showing. When they lifted me

onto the gurney, I heard Smalls' voice. I couldn't believe he had seen me battle the bull. All I ever wanted was to do right by my boy. I opened my hand and looked at the red poker chip. Everything I ever did was for the boy.

"Let me through. Let me through. That's my Paps," he said. The way he said my name sounded so proud.

"Wait, wait," I said. "Wait for my son." They strapped me down and put a respirator over my mouth.

"How bad is it?" I heard the warden ask.

"It's pretty bad. He's lost a lot of blood and a broken rib punctured his lung. We've got to take him to the hospital now, but it looks like he's going to live."

"Alright, that's great. Did you hear that? Our rodeo winner is going to live," the warden announced. "Oh, and let's let the boy ride with him," he said.

"There's only room for one guard."

"This prisoner's got critical injuries. He's not going anywhere. Let the boy go with him, and you can follow the ambulance."

"Paps, Paps, I'm here. I made it," Smalls said.

He put his hand on top of my hand and I slipped him the poker chip before they loaded me into the ambulance. I felt his hand grab mine again once we were inside. I squeezed it three times like I did when he was little. My boy was a grown man now. I pulled the respirator off over my head.

"You know son, this whole thing was a misunderstanding. You know it was an accident that I killed those people?" I asked.

Smalls nodded his head and looked down. “Hush, Paps. All that doesn’t matter now. You need to save your energy.”

“You know I would never kill somebody unless they were going to hurt me or my family. I could never let anyone hurt my family,” he said. “That man was threatening our family. He was the one who shot the girl. I was just trying to help this girl escape from him. You believe me, don’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, Paps. I believe you.” He put the respirator back over my head and squeezed my hand. I knew my boy would understand.

V. Smalls

It was after midnight when I got home. The cool blue of the crescent moon filtered through the pine trees on our gravel drive. The trailer was dark except for the porch light. I could tell the shed light was still on behind the house, and I wondered what my Mama had been doing back there and hoped she hadn’t found the coffee tin.

When I got out of the truck, I felt a chill. It was the first cool spell we’d had in over six months. I walked out to the shed and was relieved to find my stash undisturbed in Paps’s old hiding place. I pulled out the little baggie and took a sniff. The fresh green smell made me feel like everything would be okay.

The path to the deer stand seemed shorter than I had remembered. I climbed the rungs and sat inside for hours, smoking and looking through the window. If only I could go back and freeze time, I’d go back to those months when we built the deer stand and hung out inside. Things had been good then. I lay down, closed my eyes, and heard the shuffling of squirrels’ feet

on the roof. The last sounds the woman must have heard. I never saw her, except on the news, but I had heard her voice, her cries for help. I had heard them arguing up there, Paps and the girl. She said, "Please, don't." That was the last thing she said, before the gunshot.

I took a hit and pushed away all the noises from that night, men arguing, the second gunshot, everything. I kept taking hits until the only thing I could hear was the squirrels rustling in the trees.

Outside of the window, a huge buck was drinking water out of our creek. I could have cursed for not bringing a rifle with me. He had to be a ten-pointer. I looked at him through an imaginary barrel, pulled the trigger, and fired. It was time to plant the rye grass. Winter would be here soon.

Holyhead

Suzanne stood on the top deck of the ferry watching the Dublin terminal shrink until it was nothing more than a tiny brushstroke on the horizon. Once she was in London, she would spend at least one day visiting art galleries, something her soon to be ex-husband, Nate, would have liked about as much as she liked spending the day in a deer stand. As she bent over to find the brochures in her suitcase, a girl bumped into her as she ran by.

“Sorry,” the girl said looking over her shoulder. She appeared to be around seven or eight. Suzanne had taught kids that age for the last five years. They were still sweet then and still wanted to please adults. The girl’s strawberry blonde ringlets bounced in the air like copper springs. A boy around four, most likely her younger brother, zipped by. He was sure to catch a cold with his yellow raincoat unbuttoned and flapping like a sheet on the line before a storm. At

his age, he still needs a mother to watch over him more closely. Suzanne did not see any parents with the children.

It was starting to drizzle, and Suzanne was worried the children might slip on the deck. “Be careful,” Suzanne called out to them. Something instinctive told her to go after them, but she reminded herself she was not on duty anymore. School was out for the summer and she had turned in her notice. The only one Suzanne was responsible for was herself.

The boy was running carelessly, watching the sea gulls soaring above. When his sister stopped abruptly, he ran right into her. “Watch what you’re doing, Steven,” the girl said.

“You’re the one who stopped, Tammy,” he said.

“Look,” she said pointing to the window. She was watching a man reading the newspaper inside. As he reached to turn the page, a diamond in his watch sparkled. The girl whispered something to her brother. They both looked in Suzanne’s direction and scurried away through the doors to the inside.

A gust of wind blew Suzanne’s hair straight up in the air like the time she touched an electrified ball on a field trip to the science museum. Her third graders had laughed so hard, it had been worth it to have that hairdo immortalized in the yearbook. The next day, her students sat at full attention as she explained what it felt like to be a conductor of electricity. The kids went home and told their parents what they had learned, while Suzanne misted her orchids, made dinner, and waited for Nate. She had spent so many nights falling asleep in front of the television alone, why did she even care that he was gone for good?

Suzanne pulled the hood of her navy windbreaker over her head, tucked all of her hair inside, and gathered her bags. Navigating the ferry made her anxious. The captain had said over the loud speaker earlier that it was the largest ferry in the world, and she believed him. People

were everywhere, and there were so many babies. It was more congested than the Chicago airport.

Suzanne missed the uncrowded spaces of her small town. There was so much room to roll her cart down the aisle of the grocery store, not like rolling her massive luggage around the boat. People kept bumping into her and knocking her bag over. No one ever bumped into you in a small town, and if they did, they said, "Excuse me."

She looked all over for a quiet little spot away from the crying babies. For years, she and Nate had tried to conceive. Now, the sight of them reminded her of all the failure.

She spotted what looked like a pub at the rear of the ship. She ordered a hot toddy and settled into a cushioned booth. The heat from the glass mug began to burn her hands. Suzanne set the drink down and leaned over to breathe in the whiskey and herbs. The bartender had placed a clove in each spoke of the lemon wheel. Knowing how much she would enjoy her first sip, Suzanne savored the feeling of anticipation, a simple pleasure she had almost forgotten how to savor.

Suzanne took her camera and laptop out of her tote bag and began downloading images. Her camera's memory was full, and she didn't want to delete anything. This was the first trip she had ever taken to Europe, and the first trip she had ever taken alone. She heard the children's voices again, chattering and laughing. She gazed up from her computer and realized the children were coming her way, just when she thought she had found a place to escape. Apparently, in Europe, children are allowed in bars.

"Father, father," they said and began to run to a man at the bar. He was dressed in black, all except for his collar, which was white.

The children hugged the priest, then they moved to a booth next to Suzanne. The priest, who was in his late forties and a little bit chubby, brought his pint glass with him. His Irish accent was so heavy, his words sounded fuzzy, like he was speaking in another language, maybe Gaelic. Then what he was saying seemed to come in focus, like he switched to English as he sat down. "Where is it you've been off to?" he asked the children. "You were supposed to find dinner."

"This is all we could find, father," the girl said, holding out a chocolate bar and a pink sparkling soda. "And we're still starving."

"Can we have more money for sandwiches?" the boy said and then took the last bite of his chocolate bar.

"Fine, fine, Steven, but make sure you come back with sandwiches this time because this is all I have to give you," The priest handed them a wad of euros, and the children scurried away just as quickly as they came.

"I hope it's not rude of me to ask. But are the children orphans?" Suzanne asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I've come to pick them up and bring them back to the orphanage in Wales. They stayed with their grandmother for a while, but she couldn't keep up with them because she had a bad back. She called us to come take them back," the priest said. "Sad story, really. They all have such sad stories; it would break your heart if I told you all of it. So what about you, love? Are you from the States?"

"I guess my accent gave it away."

"And what brings you all the way here?"

"I just left a religious retreat," she said, "and now I'm sightseeing."

“You found the answers you were looking for?” the priest asked then lifted his pint glass to his lips. His cheeks and nose were rosy, and Suzanne wondered how often he drank. Pastors in her church were not allowed to drink at all. No one was. It’s not that anyone would tar and feather you, but they would look down on you for it, like it was a sin. Suzanne didn’t feel like having a drink was a sin. Jesus turned water into wine in the Bible. Jesus drank wine. She never did understand that rule. Maybe she should become a Catholic.

“Not exactly. Let’s just say my views on theology were different than theirs. I left much earlier than I had planned.”

“Maybe you went to the wrong priest,” he said. “If you don’t mind my asking, what is that’s troubling you? Maybe, I can be of service.”

Maybe the priest could give her better advice than ask for God’s forgiveness, like a counselor had told her at the retreat. He kept trying to make her admit to all the ways she failed in the marriage, like the divorce was her fault. All she wanted to do was to move on, and she just needed someone to tell her how to do it.

“My husband left me, for another woman,” she said.

“Oh dear, I’m so sorry,” the priest asked and moved over to Suzanne in her booth. He placed one of his rough hands on top of hers. “It’s hard to believe any man would leave a woman like you. Tell me, do you have children together?”

“No, no children,” she said.

“It makes it easier when children aren’t involved. It’s so hard on them.”

“We couldn’t have them. We were trying to adopt before he left,” she said.

“Still thinking of adopting?” the priest asked.

“No. Since he left, my whole world has turned upside down. It’s like I don’t know which way is up, and which way is down,” she said.

“Just give it some time,” he said.

“I had wanted a baby for so long. The whole town knew I wanted a baby. After Nate left, I just couldn’t take their pity anymore. Everyone was always trying to fix me up with a cousin or a nephew or a brother. This young mother from my church even tried to give me her baby, said God wanted me to have the child.”

“What did you tell the girl?” he asked. He was leaning in toward Suzanne. She smelled the beer when he exhaled.

“Something that might be true, that it was a test, and she had passed. Since she loved the baby enough to give her away, she loved her enough to be a mother. I told her that God sent me to be her guide, that I would help pay for day care while she went back to college. I felt guilty about lying, but I couldn’t tell the girl the truth. Do you think what I did was wrong?”

“Ah, nonsense. Have you ever thought maybe you were meant to be her guide? God could’ve used you and you didn’t even know it. Maybe it’s time to stop searching for the answers, and just trust your instinct,” he said.

She like that idea, to trust her instincts. She had been so worried about figuring out what’s next, but maybe she should just keep on living her life, day to day, trusting her instincts. Maybe God could use her without her even knowing. Suzanne placed her hands around the glass mug. It was finally cool enough to drink, so she lifted it to her mouth and took a sip. Her throat had been sore from crying, and the hot whiskey and honey mixture was soothing, almost heavenly. She didn’t want to talk about her problems anymore.

“Thank you, father. I feel a little bit better,” she said yawning. “Excuse me, this drink is making me sleepy. I haven’t slept much since I’ve been here.”

“If you want to get some sleep, I’ll wake you up when we get to the port,” he said.

“That would be nice.”

“Where are you headed after Holyhead?” he asked.

“I’m going to Bath to see the Roman ruins, then down to London to see art.”

“Sounds lovely. We’ll be taking the same train, the one to Bath. If you’d like, we can show you the way to the station.”

“Yes, you’re so kind to be my guide,” she said.

Hours later, Suzanne awakened to find the little girl with copper ringlets tugging at her coat.

“Excuse me, excuse me,” Tammy said.

“Yes,” Suzanne said, rubbing her eyes. The girl’s face slowly came into focus.

“You’re very pretty. Are you on the tele?” Tammy asked.

“No, no, I’m not,” she said, sitting up. No one was in the bar except the two of them.

“Where are the priest and your brother?” Suzanne asked.

“They went to the toilet. My brother was afraid to go by himself,” she said. “Father told me to wait here with you until they come back.”

Suzanne put her feet on the ground, slipped on her shoes, and walked over to the window. She could see the ferry terminal in the distance. They would be docking soon.

“Are you from the States?” the girl asked.

“Yes, I am,” Suzanne said. “How long ago did they leave?”

The girl shrugged her shoulders. “Which state are you from?”

“Louisiana.”

“Is that close to New York City?” the girl asked.

“No, they’re on opposite ends of the country,” Suzanne said. She took out the leather spiritual journal her mother had given her for the trip. The whole retreat had been her mother’s idea, and the journal’s pages were still blank.

Suzanne began to draw an outline of the United States. She labeled it USA. Then she drew a squiggly L shaped state and labeled it LA. She placed a dot on the map a little above where she thought New Orleans should be and pointed to it.

“This is where I live.”

“LA?” Tammy asked. “Does that stand for Los Angeles?”

“I guess you haven’t studied American geography yet,” Suzanne said, and the girl shook her head. Suzanne drew the state of California and the state of New York, added two more dots, and explained the difference between all three cities: Ponchatoula, Los Angeles, and New York.

“Attention all passengers. We will be docking soon. Drivers, please return to your vehicles and prepare to disembark.”

“And where are we right now?” the girl asked. Suzanne drew the Atlantic Ocean, Ireland, the Irish Sea and finally Europe. She placed a dot on the Northeast edge of Wales and labeled it Holyhead. “We are almost here,” she said pointing to the dot.

“Why did you leave home all by yourself?” Tammy asked.

“Sometimes grown ups need alone time.”

“What’s your home like? Can I see pictures?” Tammy asked. Now, she was getting a little personal, but she might never have an opportunity to meet an American like this again. In just a few moments, she might spark an interest in geography or traveling in the girl that could last a lifetime. Suzanne took out her phone and pulled up some pictures of her family and her home.

“Attention passengers, we have arrived in Holyhead. Car passengers should return to their vehicles immediately to disembark. All other passengers should descend to the lower deck to the exit ramp.”

As much fun as it was to teach a child with such curiosity, Suzanne began to worry about what had happened to the priest and Tammy’s little brother. They had been gone nearly half an hour. Tammy sat down next to her. “Can I see more pictures?” she asked, and Suzanne gave her the phone. The girl slid her fingers across the screen, leaving a sticky residue on the glass.

“What’s on your hands?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Tammy said.

Suzanne dug in her bag and took out a wet wipe. She cleaned the girl’s hands and the phone, and then gave the phone back to the child.

“Where’s the last place you saw the priest and your brother?” Suzanne asked.

“Over there,” Tammy said, pointing to the booth where the family had been sitting earlier on the trip. The bartender had already gone, so Suzanne held Tammy’s hand and they left to search for someone who could help them. In the next waiting area, they found an old man mopping the floor asked him to check the men’s room.

“This is the last call for disembarking,” a voice said over the loudspeaker. “If you have not already began your descent to the lower level ramp, please do so at this time.”

When the custodian came back, he shook his head. “You two are the only ones left on this boat. Maybe your friends are waiting in the ferry terminal.”

“Are you sure you can’t call for them over the loudspeaker?” Suzanne asked. “This girl has been separated from her brother and her guardian.”

“Look miss, everyone’s gotten off the boat except the two of you. I’m sure your family is in the terminal waiting for you. Now I’ve got to get the floors cleaned before they begin boarding for the next trip,” he said, and he walked back toward the waiting area where they had found him.

A horn blasted several times, and Tammy began to sob. Suzanne embraced the child and patted her back. “There, there, honey. It’s going to be okay.”

“What if we can’t find them?” Tammy asked. “Could I go live with you?”

What a strange thing to ask, Suzanne thought. “Don’t worry. We’ll find them.”

“But what if, something happened to them, and we never found them again? Could I go live with you in Louisiana?” Tammy asked.

“Probably not. I’m not sure your government officials would let you leave the country with me.”

The girl let out a deep sigh. “Well, if I can’t go live with you, I guess we’d better go look for father. Promise not to leave me until we find them?”

“No, I won’t leave you,” Suzanne said, and she held out her hand. Tammy placed her clean hand into Suzanne’s, and they walked toward the stairwell to the lower deck. There they would take the ramp into the ferry terminal and, hopefully, find Tammy’s brother and the priest smiling and waving. Then she could get on with the rest of her trip.

Suzanne pushed open the heavy metal door and held it open for Tammy. The girl wiped her eyes. “Can I see your phone again?”

“Now’s not the time to play,” Suzanne said. Someone needed to teach the girl she couldn’t have things whenever she wanted them. Maybe the priest had been spoiling her to make up for the trauma.

“I want to call father,” she said.

“Why didn’t you tell me you could call him before?” Suzanne asked. The girl shrugged her shoulders, and Suzanne dug around in her tote bag for her phone.

The girl’s eyes lit up when Suzanne handed it over. Tammy pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket, dialed the number, and put the phone to her ear. “Father, it’s me. Where are you?” she asked and paused for a second. “I’m with the American lady. We’re in the stairwell coming to find you.” She paused again and looked at Suzanne. “Okay, I’ll tell her. See you soon.” Tammy hung up the phone. “He said, ‘Don’t move. Stay right there.’” Tammy shrugged her shoulders. “I guess they’re on their way. Can I play with your phone?”

Suzanne didn’t understand what was going on with Tammy. She didn’t seem to be excited about her reunification with her brother. The child’s only concern was Suzanne’s phone. She was fixated on playing games. She must have learned that behavior from another adult. She had so many bad behaviors that needed to be broken. “My phone battery is almost dead, so I need to save what’s left for an emergency.”

“But I want to play the candy game again, and I’m tired of waiting. Father said, I could play phone games if I was good.”

“When the father gets here, ask him if you can play with his phone?” Suzanne asked.

“But I want to play with your phone,” Tammy said, and she began to sob again.

“Shhhhh. You don’t know any better. You’re just tired and scared, but it’s going to be okay now, honey,” Suzanne said, putting her arm around Tammy. “Do you know what it means to ask for something politely?”

“No, but that’s why father says I need a mother. To teach me how to be a polite young lady. Can you be my new mother?” she asked.

“I don’t think that would work out. I have to go home in a few days.”

“You can’t go home. Father won’t let you.”

“Now that’s silly, Tammy,” Suzanne said, a bit puzzled by why the girl would say such a thing. Tammy’s sobs echoed in the metal stairwell, then a door opened from the deck below, and Suzanne heard footsteps.

“Father, father,” Tammy called out, and she began running down the steps. She met them on the next landing. Something kept Suzanne from going down to them. She wasn’t sure what. She stayed where she was, ten stairs above the priest and the two children, and watched them below.

The priest picked up Tammy, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and set her back down. “I’ve missed you, you little rascal. Did you give the little misses a scare?” he asked.

“I did, father,” Tammy said. “Just like you said, but it gave me a scare too. Do I get my reward now?”

“Yes, yes. Let’s go collect your reward,” the priest said. The two began walking up to the landing where Suzanne was waiting. The boy lagged behind, clutching a tablet. His eyes were fixated on the screen. He looked up every now and then to watch his step. Any minute, he would fall.

“So kind of you to look after her, miss. Thank you so very much. There’s just one more thing, before we go.” When the priest reached Suzanne’s landing, he took out a pocketknife and began to clean the dirt out from under his nails. A sparkle from the man’s wrist caught Suzanne’s eye. “We’ll be needing a donation for the orphanage.”

“What kind of donation?” Suzanne asked.

“You’ve got lots of things our children will love. They could use that computer to do their homework. That camera would be nice for all of our travels. We try to take the children on outings as much as possible. Money, is always nice, so we can feed them and clothe them. Kids are expensive. And your phone. Little Tammy, here, sure loves that phone,” the priest said, never looking up while he cleaned his nails.

“I thought you were a man of God,” Suzanne said clutching her bag.

“Everyone’s of God. Even the devil himself,” the priest said, holding the knife out towards her. Then his expression softened and he folded the blade down. He placed it in his back pocket, and motioned for Suzanne to sit down on the steps. She lowered herself and put her bag in her lap.

“We were having such a nice conversation earlier, Suzanne,” he said, sitting next to her on the stairs. His arms were right against hers. Her heart was racing. He picked up one of her hands and examined it.

“My father used to tell me, everyone’s got to use their God given talents to get by. God gave me a talent for convincing people what’s in their best interest. Your gift is taking care of little ones. I could tell right away when I met you.” He held out his hand and inspected his nails.

“I don’t understand what you want, father,” Suzanne said.

“You’re a smart woman. I thought you would’ve figured it out by now,” he said. He

placed his index finger inside the collar and pulled it away from his neck. “You still don’t think I’m a priest, do you?”

“What do you tell the children?” Suzanne asked.

“It’s a fun game we play when we travel. I pretend to be a priest, and we see how many people we can fool. We had you fooled, didn’t we? But they wanted a mother, so we couldn’t let you get away.” He pat Suzanne’s knee several times and stood up. “But it’s your choice. I’m just your guide. I’ll explain to your options, and you can decide your own hell.”

“What?”

“If you choose to stay here, you can make a charitable donation of all your things, and then we’ll tie you up and hide you in a broom closet. Eventually someone will find you. Once you land in Ireland, you’ll be taken to customs. You’re likely to wait in jail while they get your paperwork straightened out with the U. S. Embassy. I hear it can take months to get a new passport. Maybe this wait won’t be so bad, if you can live with the guilt of what happened to these two innocent little children. You’ll always wonder how I ended up with them and if they belong to someone else. If maybe they’d have a shot in life if you had saved them. Pretty soon, little Tammy here will be coming of age. If you come with us, you can protect her. You’ll fill in the role of my wife. You can raise these kids the right way. Maybe we could even find a place to settle down and send them to school,” he said.

“What?” Suzanne said. “Is this some kind of sick joke?”

“The kids need a mother,” their father said. “You need a family.”

“No, I don’t. You misunderstood me,” she said.

“No need to resist,” the father said, holding out his hand. “You’ll find it will be much easier if you just play nice.” Suzanne grabbed the rail and stood up.

“Shall we carry your bags?” he asked. Suzanne handed him her tote bag, and Tammy grabbed her suitcase. They began walking down the stairs together. She thought of her orchids, the petals turning brown and floating down through the air.

Solving for X

Stanley stared at the old, white house that wasn't really white anymore. The asbestos siding was blotched with green and pink algae. As he climbed up the steps to Miss Ettie Fay's door, he held on to the railing so he wouldn't slip on the slimy coating that was still wet with dew.

Stanley's Mama needed a ride to the health clinic because she was having stomach problems. His mama was always complaining about her digestion, but this time she had been doubled over on the couch all day. He didn't like to ask for favors from anybody. His pops, who lived down in New Orleans, would have died of a heart attack before he asked for a ride to the hospital from a rich person. But his mama was not ashamed to ask for help from anybody. So there Stanley was, knocking on Miss Ettie Fay's door and sweating in the muggy May heat.

Stanley stood there looking up at the small windowpanes in the door. The face of the old woman appeared, and Stanley heard the metal chain slide out of the lock.

“What can I help you with, young man?” she asked.

“I’m Stanley, Miss Sheila’s son.”

“I know who you are, child. I used to work with your mama at school before the cutbacks. What happened was just terrible. And Jamal’s your older brother, right?”

“How you know Jamal?” he asked.

“I taught him math in the seventh grade. That boy never could solve for x, but he did break my record for the most office referrals,” she said with a kind smile.

Stanley looked down at the scuffmarks on his yellow sneakers that had once been Jamal’s. Ever since Stanley could remember, he had inherited Jamal’s old hand me downs, including the wrath of all Jamal’s teachers. He hoped if he had her for a teacher that she wouldn’t hold his brother’s record against him.

“I’m sure you’re not here to talk about your brother, so what’s it you’re selling?” she asked.

“I’m not selling anything. My mama’s sick. Wants to know if you can drive her down to the clinic.”

“What’s the matter with her?”

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s not something serious, is it?”

Miss Ettie Fay placed her glasses on top of her head and studied Stanley. Stanley looked up into the wrinkly old face of the woman. He had never been that close to Miss Ettie Fay. He took a step backwards and lost his balance. He caught himself on the railing. It’s like she could see right through him. That’s when he noticed the lady’s eyes were the same color as his own, and his gaze dropped back down to the brown scuffmarks on his shoes.

“Wait here while I get my purse,” she said, “and I should leave a note for my husband.”

As Stanley stood there waiting for Miss Ettie Fay, he wished he still lived in New Orleans with his pops. He felt badly for his mama and all, but in the city, he never would’ve had to ask a rich lady for a ride because there weren’t any rich people where his pops stayed. There was no one there standing on the top steps feeling sorry for you cause you’re poor. Besides, you could take the bus or the streetcar just about anywhere you wanted to go. Stanley hated living in the country, hated the whole podunk paper mill town that smelled like a ripe port-a-potty. Bogalusa. Bug-a-loser.

Miss Ettie Fay returned with her purse and locked the door. The two got into her old silver Towncar and headed down the road past the junkyard and over the railroad tracks. Miss Ettie Fay slowed down when she approached the dirt road that led to a trailer park.

“Which one?” she asked.

“Over there,” Stanley said, pointing to faded blue one with rusty windows. “You can wait in the car. I’ll be right back,” he said.

Stanley found his mama still wearing her housedress right where he had left her on the sofa. His six-year-old sister, Sierra, was cleaning up the vomit that hadn’t made it in the trashcan. He got a wet washcloth from the bathroom and wiped his mother’s face.

“We’ve got to go now. Your ride’s here,” he said.

“Praise Jesus,” she said in a soft whisper.

Stanley slid her legs off of the sofa and slipped her house shoes on her feet.

“You’re a good boy, son.”

“You’ve got to get up now, Mama.”

She began breathing very heavily. Stanley held the trashcan while his mama heaved. He was relieved nothing came up. He folded the rag over to a clean side and wiped a few tears from her eyes. He slid his arms around his mama's thick frame and tried to get her to stand up.

"I'm too weak," she said.

Stanley wasn't strong enough to pick her up. She had to weigh over two-fifty, but his older brother Jamal always said carrying dead weight was twice as heavy. Now he knew what that meant. He wished Jamal was there to help, but he hadn't come home last night. He'd have to ask the old lady if she could help.

Somehow Miss Ettie Fay and Stanley managed to get his mama to her feet, down the steps, and into the front seat of the car. Stanley gave his mother a plastic grocery bag in case she got sick again. When he pulled the lever to recline the chair, Stanley noticed his little sister sitting in the back seat. He thought about telling her to go back inside, but there was nobody home to watch her.

"Put on your seatbelt," he told her, and he climbed in the seat beside her.

"How long has she been like this?" Miss Ettie Fay asked.

"I don't know. Her stomach always bothers her, but she hasn't left the couch for three or four days," Stanley said.

"She's dehydrated. She needs to go to the hospital, not the clinic, son" Miss Ettie Fay said.

"We can't afford no hospital bills," Stanley said.

"Lord no," Sheila said.

"I'll take you down to Charity. They'll only charge you what you can pay," Miss Ettie Fay said.

“Once they see my income, it should be free,” Sheila said.

“It’ll take an hour just to get down there,” Stanley said.

“You have somewhere better to be?” Miss Ettie Fay asked, and she cranked up the car.

Except for the sounds of Stanley’s mama’s heavy breathing and occasional groaning, everyone was silent for a while.

“Why are you helping us?” Stanly asked.

“Your mama’s sick, and she needs to get to a hospital,” she said. “I’d like to think she’d do the same for me. Besides, it’s good karma.”

“Karma?” Stanley’s little sister asked.

“The belief that whatever you put out into the world comes back to you. So if you’re nice to people, you put goodness into the world that will be returned,” Miss Ettie Fay said. “And if you put negativity into the world, that’ll come back you to. It’s like a boomerang.”

“So you expect us to give you something in return?” Stanley said.

“Oh, I don’t expect anything in return.”

“But you just said you do it to get something back.”

“Oh that’s just hypothetically speaking. I don’t expect anything now. I just want to put kindness into the world that will be out there waiting for me if I need it.”

“I get it. So now we owe you one,” he said.

“No, not like that. You don’t owe me anything. I don’t expect anything in return.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be good because the Bible says you should?” Sierra asked.

“If that what floats your boat, but you’ve got to find some reason to be good.”

This old lady was nuts, and Stanley didn’t want to listen to her crazy ideas anymore.

“Can you play some music or something?” he asked.

“Okay, but I get to pick the station,” Miss Ettie Fay said.

“As long as you don’t play country,” he said, “or Christian.”

After flipping through the stations for a minute, Miss Ettie Fay selected a jazz station that wasn’t half bad. Stanley had always wanted to play the trombone.

Blue and white lights flickered from a window where the old people were probably still up watching the late night news, and yellow lights flickered from the front seat where Stanley’s older brother and his friend took turns hitting the pipe. Smoke from the crack pipe entered Stanley’s nose, and he felt as if he were drifting up and looking back down on the rusty blue car. The air was thick with fog outside, and it seemed like they were in the clouds.

“We should go in through the back,” Jamal said.

“We shouldn’t be going through any door.” Stanley thought he was going with his brother and his brother’s friend, Smalls, to get a burger.

“Nobody asked you what you think,” Jamal said. He thought since he was nineteen, he was grown and that gave him the right to boss Stanley around.

When Miss Ettie Fay brought Mama to Charity a few months ago, she bought him and his sister their dinners in the cafeteria and waited with them until their aunt arrived. Later, when Mama had gotten better and was back at home, she told Stanley that Miss Ettie Fay had stayed with her all night. Miss Ettie Fay did more for them than most people. Mama said she would’ve died from an infection or dehydration if it wasn’t for Miss Ettie Fay.

“Why you want to rob Miss Ettie Fay? She’s the one who took Mama to the hospital,” Stanley said.

“What you think, *you* the boss now?” His brother reached over the armrest and popped Stanley on the left side of his head. “That lady’s the bitch who failed me, kept me back from the eighth grade. Shit, I’d still be in school right now if it wasn’t for her.”

“Her and all your other teachers,” Smalls said. He and Jamal used to play football together in high school, so he can get away with clowning on Jamal. Plus, his father’s in Angola for murder, so nobody messes with him.

“Shut up fool,” Jamal said, “it’s not like you’re using your high school diploma now.”

“Relax. I was just messing with you,” Smalls said.

“Man, stop playing around. It’s time to get real. Those old people are in the front with the TV going loud, so they ain’t going to hear us coming through the back,” Jamal said.

Stanley knew there was no talking any sense into Jamal, so he got out of the back seat, slammed the door, and started walking down the road. Jamal rolled down the window.

“Where you think you’re going, son?” Jamal asked.

“I don’t want no part of this,” Stanley said, turning to face his brother. He recognized the crazed look that meant Jamal wasn’t really his brother anymore, so Stanley began to run.

Jamal got out the car and ran after him. He pulled Stanley’s shirt back hard. Stanley fell back against his brother’s chest, and Jamal put Stanley in a headlock and placed a revolver in the temple of his head. “You do what I tell you to do. You heard me?”

Stanley nodded his head, and Jamal loosened his grip and shoved his little brother. Jamal grabbed a few of their mama’s pink pillowcases out of the back seat. He tossed them to Stanley.

“All you got to do is fill these sacks up. I’ll handle the old folks,” Jamal said.

“Should be like taking candy from a baby,” Smalls said as he got out of the car.

The boys pulled the bottom of their shirts up over their noses and put on ball caps. They ducked below the windows around to the back. Stanley tapped Jamal and pointed to the shed. One by one, the boys crowded in the small building that served as both a laundry room and storage shed.

“Look at all this stuff,” Stanley said, his voice muffled behind his blue shirt. He picked up a drill that was lying on the counter.

Smalls and Jamal began ransacking drawers, cabinets, toolboxes, grabbing hammers, wrenches, sanders, and throwing whatever they could fit into the floral pillowcases.

“What’s that?” Stanley asked pointing to a piece of equipment.

“A power washer. Their house’s so nasty, it must be broken,” Smalls said.

“We should leave it behind. It’s too big, anyway,” Stanley said.

“Nah, son. You gonna leave behind a Benjamin? Go put it out in the trunk,” Jamal said to Stanley.

“Then we leaving?” Stanley asked.

“We just getting started. Time to teach that old lady a lesson or two. Hurry up and get back here,” Jamal said, and he tossed Stanley the keys.

Stanley tried to wheel the thing out, but it would barely move.

“Tire’s flat,” Smalls said. “Here.” He handed Stanley his sack. “I’ll get it. You bring the rest of it.”

As Smalls was putting the washer in the trunk, Stanley noticed the lights in the front of the house go off. The old people must be going to bed. After Smalls and Stanley emptied the sacks, they went back to the shed, but Jamal wasn’t there. The fool had gone inside without

them. The back door was wide open, and they could see him pointing the gun at Miss Ettie Fay's husband, Don, his pasty arms were up in the air. Smalls walked in the house just as the old woman was entering the kitchen from the hall. He pulled his gun on her. Stanley was standing right behind Smalls. He could barely breathe. He could feel his heart beating, cool air from the kitchen on his bare stomach, and hot humid air on his back. He wanted to run.

"Oh, Lord," Miss Ettie Fay exclaimed. Half of her head was covered in little pink rollers, and she was wearing a purple bathrobe.

"Keep quiet, lady, and nobody gets hurt," Smalls said.

"You," Jamal said, still pointing a gun at Don. "Go over there with her."

Don did what he was told, and the barrel of Jamal's revolver followed him.

"Now, kneel down. Both of you," Jamal said. "Give me all your jewelry. Come on, hurry up, put it in here." He moved toward them and held out his pink pillowcase.

"I'm not wearing any jewelry. See," Miss Ettie Fay said holding out her hands.

"I know you got jewelry hidden somewhere in here," Jamal said. He pointed the gun at her face.

"Here, take my ring," Don said. He held his gold wedding band out. Jamal snatched it, and then hit the man in the head with the butt of his gun. Miss Ettie Fay watched as her husband's body fell to the ground, and Jamal kicked him in the stomach. Don curled up in a ball and placed his arms over his face.

"Stop, stop it," Miss Ettie Fay cried. She threw her arms over him.

"Man, that's enough," Smalls said and Jamal stopped. Stanley didn't know who his brother was anymore.

"Are you okay?" Miss Ettie Fay asked her husband.

“I’ll be okay, honey,” Don said.

“Why did you have to do that?” Miss Ettie Fay asked Jamal.

“Listen, bitch. You both need to learn to speak only when spoken to,” Jamal said. “Now ole lady, you gonna give me all the jewelry and cash you got, or else.” He stepped toward her and lifted the gun up as if he was going to hit her with the butt.

Stanley ran through the kitchen and placed himself between his brother and Miss Ettie Fay. “Be cool, be cool, she’s going to give us the stuff man. Just give her a minute,” he said to his brother, then turned to Miss Ettie Fay. “Listen, lady,” Stanley said. “You better do what he says. You don’t want to make him mad, please lady.”

Miss Ettie Fay sat up on her knees. Stanley put out his hand, but Miss Ettie Fay didn’t take it. She grabbed the cabinet handle behind her and pulled herself up.

“I have a few things in the bedroom on my dresser,” she said as she stood up.

“You,” Jamal said pointing to Stanley with his free hand, “go with her.” One of his rules was never to call each other by name.

“Hey lady, try anything funny and I’ll shoot him.” Jamal pointed the gun toward Don.

As Miss Ettie Fay walked through the living room, down the hall, and into her bedroom, Stanley followed behind her. Junk was everywhere, piles of books and papers on a desk, unfolded laundry on her bed, makeup and perfume bottles all over her dresser. She took a jewelry box out of the top drawer and handed it to Stanley.

“Mostly just costume jewelry in there, except my wedding ring. I haven’t been able to wear it anyway, since the arthritis,” she said.

“What about cash?” Stanley asked. He tossed the wedding ring in her dresser drawer and closed it.

“My purse is in the living room.”

“Let’s go,” he said.

After she gave him her wallet, he told her to sit down and keep quiet. She sat down in her easy chair and began singing a song. She rocked back and forth to the rhythm, and Stanley told her to be quiet.

Stanley walked back into the kitchen where Jamal was tying up Don.

“I got her jewelry box,” Stanley said, holding it out for his brother to see.

“Good, put that in the sack and go tie her up,” Jamal said. He tossed Stanley the rope.

While Stanley was tying up Miss Ettie Fay, Smalls and Jamal ran in and out of rooms, throwing things around, and filling up their sacks.

Smalls dug through Miss Ettie Fay’s purse and pulled out her keys.

“Ain’t no Lexus, but it’ll hold,” Smalls said.

“Pleasure doing business with you, teach,” Jamal said. He turned to Stanley, “Time to go.”

Smalls and Jamal left through the front door, and Stanley followed behind them.

“You still got the keys to Mama’s car?” Jamal asked Stanley.

“Yeah,” Stanley said. He pulled the keys out of his pocket.

“Hide this stuff in the junkyard, then go on home,” Jamal said.

“I can’t drive yet,” Stanley said.

“Too late to start following the rules now,” Smalls said as he unlocked Miss Ettie Fay’s Towncar. “It’s a straight shot home, man. Ain’t nothing to it.”

Smalls and Jamal got into the car and drove away. Stanley looked back at the algae stained house. He saw Miss Ettie Fay through the window, her hair still in pink rollers.

Stanley laid in his bed and stared at the glowing stars on his ceiling. He watched them fade until he could barely see their outlines. He heard a car on the dirt road and rolled out of bed to look through the blinds for his brother, but it was only the neighbor. When the first rays of light began to filter through the curtains, Stanley was still staring into the darkness above him. The phone rang in the kitchen, so he got up to answer it.

Just as Stanley was about to pick up the receiver, it stopped ringing. He picked it up anyway and listened in.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” Jamal said.

“Tell it to the judge,” Mama said.

“Can you come get me?” he asked.

“Baby, you’re grown now. I can’t come get you in the middle of the night anymore,” she said.

“Where am I supposed to get the money?” he asked.

“They got a bond place across the street,” she said.

Stanley carefully hung the phone up. He heard his mama sobbing in her bedroom and knocked on her door.

“Not now, Stanley” she said.

“You all right?”

“No, son,” she said and then blew her nose. “I just need to be left alone.”

Stanley knew his mama's heart was broken. If his brother ratted him out, he didn't know what she would do. He was supposed to be her good son.

"I'm going to ride my bike to the store, you need anything?" he asked.

"You can't buy what I need at the store."

The pedals on Stanley's bike seemed harder to push than usual, so Stanley stood up to get more leverage. He got off of his bike at the railroad tracks and noticed his back tire was flat. It served him right. It must be karma. Stanley needed to make things right with Miss Ettie Fay, even if it meant going to jail. As he pushed his bike over the tracks and down the road, he wondered if they would send him to juvie or real prison. They sent the worst ones to a place called The Farm. He had heard some older boys talk about what the men did to the boys there. The sun was right above him, burning his skin. No clouds to block its hot rays, and Stanley wondered if those things would happen to Jamal and Smalls, and if today would be the last day he'd see the sun for a while.

He ditched his bike at the junkyard and dug around in piles of car parts and abandoned appliances until he found a rusty wheelbarrow with a good tire. He popped the trunk of an old VW Bug where he had stashed the goods, and he loaded everything into the wheelbarrow. His arms burned as he pushed the heavy load down the highway and over Miss Ettie Fay's lawn to the back shed.

Stanley tried to put all the tools back on the hooks and in the drawers where they belonged. When he was finished, he rolled the wheelbarrow over the lawn and he looked at the windowpanes where he had last seen Miss Ettie Fay's frightened face. The steps were still covered in green algae. Those old people are going to bust their heads, he thought.

He tipped-toed up the stairs, knocked on the door, and hurried back down into the bushes. The house was silent. Maybe they were at the police station or the hospital. Jamal had hit that man pretty hard with the gun.

Stanley dragged the power washer back out of the shed and pulled the cord, but the engine wouldn't start. He pulled and pulled and pulled until the motor finally began to rattle. He picked up the wand, adjusted the nozzle, and moved the water back and forth across the steps, and wondered how many good things he would have to do to fix his karma. He didn't want to go to The Farm.

Spillway

The streets were bubbling over with pedestrians. Wade Whitty's messenger bag weighed heavily on his back, and he had fastened his helmet on too tightly. None of these things were really what was bothering him. Wade couldn't stop thinking about a story he'd just turned in to his editor. He wanted to leave out the particulars, but his editor said that if Wade didn't add them, someone else could. In this case, the details involved mutilations. He'd never wanted to be that kind of reporter.

Wade pedaled over the cracked sidewalks and dodged around a group of tourist who were huddled around a guide pointing up at the iron balconies. He turned the corner onto a side street and parked his bike in front of the bar. After he chained his bike to a streetlamp, Wade took off his helmet and placed it in his messenger bag.

Although Wade's new assignment was a double murder case, it had a few perks. One of his leads was a good-looking lady, and she happened to work in a bar. The place was small, and the ten people sitting at tables for two along the wall almost filled the joint up. Skylar chopped a lime in half and looked up at Wade. "I told you all I know," she said.

"I came for a drink," he said, sliding onto a stool.

"What'll it be?"

"Two shots of whiskey and the coldest draft you've got."

Skylar put the drinks down on the bar. Wade pushed one of the shots toward Skylar.

"Cheers," he said.

"No thanks."

"Okay. What's your drink of choice?" he asked.

"What is it that you want?"

"Misty lived with you. You know her better than anyone in the city. You know who she spent time with. It's very likely that she knew the person who killed her, which means you might know them too."

"I told the police everything I know," she said. "A lot of good that did. That'll be twelve dollars."

Wade took a shot, and then washed it down with a swig of beer. "Misty's killer is still out there walking free. Don't you want to help catch him?" he asked.

"Of course I do. But I'm not helping a renegade reporter," she said. She walked to end of the bar and started washing dishes, and Wade followed after her.

"The more publicity the case gets, the better. We'll get the police to pay more attention. Look, I won't run anything you say unless you approve it."

“What if I don’t want to be quoted at all?” she asked.

“Fine, everything you say will be off the record.”

“It’d better be a respectable piece.” Skylar poured a shot of vodka and slammed it.

“Something her mother wouldn’t be embarrassed to read,” she said, walking off to check on her tables.

Wade began to feel the whiskey warming his insides and decided to switch to beer for a while. One group of people came in after another until it was early morning. Wade didn’t mind waiting. He enjoyed watching Skylar work the bar. It was Saturday, and he could sleep in tomorrow.

Dim light from the streetlamps seeped through the blinds. Wade felt like hell. Skylar was asleep under a blue velvet comforter. There was a mirror with traces of coke on her nightstand. Huge black and white photographs hung on the walls. The Great Wall of China, the Roman baths, the Aztec pyramids. Wade found his boxers under the covers and walked over to examine the picture frames on her dresser. Skylar skydiving, Skylar scuba diving, Skylar and two other girls holding their snowboards at the top of a mountain. She had seen and done things he had only dreamed about. He wondered how a bartender could afford this lifestyle.

“Looking for a picture of Misty? Or just snooping in general?” she asked.

“A world traveler and a thrill seeker.” He set the picture of the snowboarders back down on the dresser. “Did you take these?” Wade asked motioning toward the photographs.

“A little hobby I have. Just capturing the moment, like everyone else,” she said.

“These are really impressive. Have you ever tried to sell them?”

Skylar sat up holding the covers over her chest with one hand. Then she tucked the comforter under her arms to keep it in place.

“God no. I just take them for myself.” She finger-combed her hair and then braided it.

“Look at it this way, you have to do some kind of work to pay the bills, so why not do what you love?” he asked.

“I used to do what I love, but that didn’t work out. Now I just live in the moment. Anyway, bartending keeps me entertained.” She looked over at the clock on the nightstand. “I’ve got yoga in an hour. Could you put on a pot of coffee, while I shower?”

“Coffee would be wonderful,” he said.

“The kitchen’s that way,” Skylar said. “And close the door behind you.”

He saluted and did as she asked, wondering why she was suddenly modest, after the night that they’d spent together. After Wade fumbled around the kitchen for coffee filters and got the pot brewing, he spotted Skylar’s open laptop on the coffee table. He made his way over to the sofa, looked around to make sure he was alone, and clicked on each of the browsers: one for a tattoo shop and two Facebook tabs with two different user names. One for Skylar James and the other for Suzanne Ribando. Skylar barely had any posts on her page, and Suzanne’s page was cluttered with tragic messages like, “We miss you,” “Praying for you,” and, his personal favorite, “You’re in our hearts and prayers.” Most of them were a couple years old, but a few of them were recent. The odd thing was that the women looked the same except for their clothing style and the way they styled their hair. Suzanne had blonde highlights, and Skylar had violet hair.

The bedroom door slammed. Wade opened up a weather browser and looked up from the computer. Skylar was standing in the doorway, wearing a robe and a towel wrapped around her

head. Without the dark eyeliner and red lipstick, she looked even more like the blonde girl, Suzanne.

“Oh, hey. Just checking the weather forecast. Sixty percent chance of rain. Maybe I should take a cab and come back for my bike later,” Wade said.

Skylar walked across the kitchen, shut her laptop, and held it to her chest. “Just like a shady reporter to go snooping in my computer the minute I leave the room.”

“Honestly, I was just checking the weather.”

Skylar stormed back into her bedroom. “Get out right now,” she yelled, “I don’t care how you get there. Take a cab. Ride your bike. Just go.” She slammed the door.

“Can I at least get my clothes?” Wade asked.

The door opened and a wad of clothes landed on the floor.

“Sure you don’t want breakfast?” he asked. Wade put his jeans on and checked for his keys and wallet. Luckily, they were still there. He pulled his sweater over his head and knocked on Skylar’s bedroom door.

“I need my bag.”

“It’s not in here.”

“Stop playing around. It’s has my work computer. I’m screwed without it.”

“You’re screwed with it, you’re screwed without out it. Buddy, we’re all screwed no matter what we do.”

“Just give me back my bag,” he said, pounding on the door.

“I told you, I don’t have it. You might be surprised how nice it is to be free from that bag for a change.”

“I won’t have a job without that bag,” he said.

“Would that be the worst thing that happened to you?” she said.

“I just want my bag back, Skylar, please,” he said.

“Why don’t you check the bar? That’s the last place I remember it,” she said. “Can you lock the door on your way out?”

Skylar was seriously screwed if she stole his computer. Wade pedaled slowly through downtown attempting to retrace the path he had taken the night before. There had been two moons. Two perfectly aligned, deep orange, almost red and almost full moons. It was the Harvest moon and its reflection on the Mississippi. They must have taken the Riverwalk to her house.

Pieces of the night came back to him in flashes. He remembered sitting on Skylar’s gray futon, the mirror passed back and forth. Skylar was telling him Misty’s stepfather, Daniel, had molested her when she was younger, and her mom hadn’t believed her for years, not even after Misty got pregnant, not until the paternity test, by then it was too late. It was no wonder a girl with a life like that would end up stripping in the French Quarter and going home with strangers. He felt bad for her, the way her life was taken when she was so young.

Wade could kick himself for snooping in Skylar’s computer. Why the hell had she left her opened laptop on the counter? She was just starting to open up, and he had ruined the whole thing. It was true that he didn’t know how to give a girl any privacy, but she shouldn’t have left all those browsers opened.

The manager let Wade into the bar even though they hadn’t opened yet. Wade looked in the bathrooms and went through all the trash bins, but the bag was nowhere to be found.

The next Saturday, Wade headed over the spillway toward Ponchatoula. Burnt orange needles from cypress trees peeked out of the dense fog blanketing the swamps, about the only fall color in this part of the state. He missed the swamps and the countryside just out of the city. He grew up in a small town a few hours a way, and he spent a good part of his youth in his father's boat crabbing and fishing. Today, Wade was doing a different kind of fishing.

After Skylar failed to return his calls and had him thrown out of her bar, Wade came up with a way to get what he was looking for without getting Skylar arrested. It was also a way for him to get even with this mysterious kleptomaniac bartender. One of his friends on the police squad run a background check on both Skylar and Suzanne. There was no record of Skylar until her Facebook account popped up two years ago, a few months after Suzanne Ribando quit her job and moved away Ponchatoula.

Wade was going to Suzanne's hometown to figure it out. He turned down the driveway lined with hundred-year-old oaks. The house had white columns, a wrap-around-porch, the whole deal. Wade half expected a housekeeper to answer the door, so when Blair Ribando, Suzanne's mother, greeted him instead, Wade was surprised. She was wearing a purple dress and a purple scarf with gold footballs. Wade imagined she would be attending the football game in her box seats in a few hours. She offered him a drink, and he asked for water. He had enough to drink recently to last him till the holidays.

Blair ushered Wade through the grand hall into a sitting room, and she excused herself while she prepared the drinks. The credenza behind the sofa was full of family pictures. He assumed most of them were the Ribando's grandchildren. One picture in particular caught his eye. Suzanne was wearing a red sequined dress, white gloves, a tiara, and a sash. He couldn't make out what the sash said because she was carrying several dozen red roses.

Blair returned with the glasses of ice water.

“Homecoming queen?” he asked holding up the picture.

“Oh no, honey. That one’s from the day she won Strawberry Festival Queen.”

“Sounds like a picture perfect life,” Wade said.

“It was back then. But life can change on you before you have time to sneeze.”

“So what changed?” he asked.

“She was going through a rough patch with her husband,” she paused.

“So she left him?” he asked.

“No, honey. He left her. Living in the house they built together was too much of a reminder things didn’t work out. I think that’s why she left. Wouldn’t she have told you all of this?” Blair asked.

“She doesn’t like to talk about her past. It makes her depressed, but I thought it might cheer her up to help you two reconnect. When’s the last time you saw her?”

“I guess it was over a year ago. She came back for some of her stuff. She won’t tell us where she’s living or working, but she calls us every once in awhile.”

“Have you seen her since she’s changed her look?” He handed Blair’s mom a picture from Skylar’s profile.

“Oh my,” Blair said, “This can’t be her, can it?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.”

“Let me get my glasses.” Blair left the room and returned wearing the glasses. Her eyes were red, and Wade felt guilty that he had been the one to make her cry.

“Can I keep this?” she asked.

Later that night, Wade chained his bike to the lamppost and found his seat at the bar.

“Didn’t you get what you wanted?” Skylar asked.

“What I wanted was your help with a case,” he said. “What I got was a missing computer.”

“You never found it?” she said, her tone feigning innocence.

“No, but I had a nice little drive up to Ponchatoula. The swamps are beautiful this time of year. You ever been up there?” he asked.

“I don’t have time to chit chat.”

“I found out some interesting information from my good friend, Blair.”

Skylar glared.

“That’s right, maybe you know Blair’s daughter, Suzanne?”

Skylar started washing bar glasses.

“Doesn’t ring a bell?” Wade asked. “Well, Suzanne went missing a couple of years ago.”

“I don’t know what that has to do with me,” Skylar said.

Wade pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it. He smoothed the paper out and placed it in front of Skylar. It was a draft of an article Wade was writing with the title, “Beauty Queen Turned Master Mixologist.” Below the title were two pictures, one of the blonde haired, blued eyed Strawberry Queen and the other of the dark haired vixen behind the bar.

“Sorry, it’s all crinkled. I would have kept it nice and straight if I still had my bag.”

Skylar picked up the paper, scanned it, and then crumpled it into a ball. “Complete garbage.”

“That’s too bad you don’t like it. But lucky for me, this is the kind of stuff my editor loves. It’s just a rough draft now, but I was thinking about taking another trip up to Ponchatoula, so I could interview more people. That is, unless you’d be willing to make a trade,” Wade said.

“What you know about Misty’s life for my computer.”

“How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

“Because, you’re going to help me find a better story.”

“You want your computer *and* the Misty Landon story?”

“So you do have my computer.”

“Maybe.”

“You witch. I knew you took it.”

“You started it.”

“Can I make it up to you with a drink?” he asked.

“I think I’ll pass. That’s how this all started,” she said and poured Wade a cup of coffee.

After Skylar’s shift ended at midnight, she drove Wade to her apartment to get his computer, then she took him to a motel.

“Wouldn’t your apartment have been cheaper?” Wade asked. Skylar punched him in the arm. “Seriously though, how did you and Misty become friends?” he asked.

“Just like I met you. She started coming into the bar all the time. One night, we went out for drinks and she told me her boyfriend was beating her. She moved in with me a few months later. Turns out, there was another guy she was seeing on the side. He was married too, and they used to come to this motel together. I thought maybe somebody here might know something about him.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Not his real name. Misty called him Sugar because he bought her jewelry and lingerie,” she said.

“So what makes you think this guy is involved?” Wade asked.

“This is the best lead I’ve got. The police cleared her ex-boyfriend, and her stepfather’s been in jail since she was seventeen. This is the only other guy I ever heard her talk about. Either this guy did it, or it was a stranger.”

“Okay, let’s go check it out,” Wade said getting out of the car.

Skylar locked the car and the two started walking toward the hotel office.

“Good night for tips?” he asked, putting his arm around her shoulders.

“That’s none of your business,” she said, pushing him away.

“We might need it to bribe the guy at the front desk.”

He opened the glass door of the motel, and Skylar walked in first.

“By the hour or the night?” a balding man with dark bags under his eyes asked.

“Neither,” Skylar said.

“We’re here looking for someone. A guy you might have seen with this girl,” Wade said showing a picture of Misty to the guy behind the desk.

“You a cop or something? I talked to the cops already.”

“No, she’s our sister. We know she was seeing someone here. A guy she called Sugar. He worked offshore.”

“A lot of offshore men stay here between shifts. I give them a weekly rate.”

“Please, sir. We’re desperate to find answers,” Wade said.

“I remember her, very pretty, like you,” he said glancing at Skylar. He looked Wade up and down. “But the two of you don’t look much alike,” he said and handed the picture back to Wade.

“I was adopted,” Wade said, pulling out a few twenties and placing them on the counter.

“And what about you?” the clerk asked. “She was your best friend.”

Skylar put a wad of cash on the desk. “That’s all I’ve got.”

The clerk straightened out the bills and counted them. “I think you’re looking for a man named Willie.” He went over to the computer screen and typed in a few keys. “Willie Reynolds. He checked out a few days ago. Probably won’t be back for another week and a half. That’s how those off shore shifts works. On two, off two.”

“Can you give me a call when he gets back into town?” Wade asked.

“You’re going to need some more cash for that,” he said.

“You call me when you see him, and I’ll see what I can do.”

After they got back into Skylar’s car, she asked, “So what are you going to do?”

“See what I can find out about Willie Reynolds. Wait until he shows back up.”

“Then what? If the guy’s a murderer, what’s to stop him from killing you?” she asked.

“Good point.”

“You’re good at negotiating,” she said. “Why don’t you make a deal with your police buddy and let him handle it?”

“That’s not a bad idea, but I need something more concrete for the police to go on. They can’t just get a search warrant based on a name. While he’s out of town, I’ll dig around and see what I can find on him.”

Skylar started her engine. “Call me if you need backup.”

The next day after work, Wade got Willie's plate number and the name of the oil company he worked for from his buddy. Skylar picked Wade up from work in her Volkswagen, and they drove around four floors of the parking garage before they found Willie's old truck. Skylar kept watch while Wade jimmied the door. He looked around under the seats and in the center console. He found a garter belt and held it up for Skylar to see.

"This belong to Misty?" he asked.

"I couldn't be sure," she said.

Wade kept digging around and found a phone. He held it up, and Skylar shrugged her shoulders. Wade pulled up the mats in the backseat and found several large stains. It was dried blood.

"We've got a car," Skylar said, so Wade closed the trunk and started walking towards her. He put his arm around her, and they started walking back to her car. A security vehicle made the turn onto their level.

"You're such an idiot," Skylar said, and pushed Wade away from her. Wade held his arms up in confusion. "That bartender took your keys for a reason. I'm not giving you the spare. Now get in the car, and let's go home," she said.

The security vehicle was rolling by very slowly. A scrawny young guy in an oversized uniform was watching them. Wade stared at Skylar in shock, so she pushed him again.

“Baby, I’m really sorry. Let me make it up to you,” he said. They walked towards Skylar’s car and got in. Wade’s heart was racing, and he wanted to hug Skylar, to thank her for helping him, for saving him, but she started the car.

“We’ve done it,” she said. She was smiling, something Wade had never seen before.

Wade tried to avoid the potholes on the way to the bar. Skylar hadn’t returned his calls after the story was printed. Why would she? His name was the one in the byline under the title, “Stripper’s Affair Ends in Double Murder,” a sensationalized version of the story he had turned in to his editor. Wade stood up to his boss this time, he had written the story he wanted to write and wouldn’t change it, but his editor had rewritten the damn thing anyway. Under his arm, Wade had a copy of the article he wrote, “Man Leads Double Life, Drives Him to Murder.”

He had so much to tell Skylar. She had been right about his messenger bag. He felt light and airy without it, zipping around people in the street. He rolled up to the streetlight and locked up his bike. Wade could see from the doorway that a young man was behind the bar. This had always been Skylar’s shift. He’d planned to show her the article and tell her how he quit his job. Then she’d buy him a drink and help him figure out what to do next.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked.

“Skylar’s not around?” Wade asked.

“No man, she quit,” the bartender said.

“Did she say where she was going?” Wade asked.

“She said something crazy about how she’d rather live around people who hid the truth to protect her than around people who manipulated the truth for a living. Sounds like a woman who’s been burned a few times, man. Big red flag. Now can I get you a drink, or were you only here for the girl?”

“No thank you. I guess I was only here to find her,” he said and walked back to his bike. As he unlocked the chain and put on his helmet, he wondered if the damage could be undone. Ponchatoula had a little, daily paper, maybe they would run his article. In the morning, he’d take a drive over the spillway and start fishing again.

Vita

Jessica Kastner was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and was raised all over the South. She received a B. A. in Journalism from the University of West Florida and an M. A. in Teaching from Southeastern Louisiana University. During her six years as a high school English teacher, she has sponsored numerous clubs and organizations including Beta, Student Council, Yearbook, Creative Writing, and the Senior Class Officers. She's a two-time Teacher of the Year Award recipient and a member of SLU's chapter of the National Writing Project. Her work has been published in *Louisiana Literature* and *Louisiana in Words*. She currently resides in New Orleans with her husband and their two dogs.