

University of Nevada, Reno

Harrowville

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

by

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Abstract

I started my creative writing career and developed it through the writing of thrillers and young adult stories. These stories were in my comfort zone of writing and I have a passion for writing them. Upon entering the writing program at UNR, I was challenged to step outside of my comfort zone to explore more literary fiction in my short stories. I began writing in third person and even some second person, though I was most comfortable writing in first person. I began telling stories from male perspectives instead of only female perspectives. In addition, I began exploring with third person limited perspectives with multiple character view points, and using subtlety, in addition to writing a story from the end backward. *Harrowville* is a collection of these stories that encompass loss, grief and trauma and look at how characters deal with these situations which create fear, establish hope, and above all change these characters for at least a portion of their lives, if not forever.

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When the Gust Comes

Amelia stood atop a cliff overlooking the Irish Sea and marveled at the view. The wind blew at her back; she steadied herself with a firm plant of her feet. She held her backpack over her right shoulder, and as the rain began to drizzle, she remembered what she had been told about umbrellas and cliffs. She even remembered the video of the elderly couple standing on the cliffs: their first trip to Ireland, the wife shooting the video, and her husband opening his umbrella and a gust of wind sweeping him off the side. So Amelia's purple umbrella lay dry in her back pack—but still she wondered if the warning was true. Her hands were too full for her to care about the mist of rain or the umbrella.

At the moment, she held tightly to the shiny black box in her arms as if her life would be ripped away, should she drop it. Or perhaps her life already had, and she was trying to put it back together. The tiny pink skull painted on the top of the box made Amelia smile, despite the mix of rain and tears rolling down her cheeks. She had made promises, and she intended to keep those promises, whether they'd been spoken or simply a given. The very nature of their relationship was that the unspoken and the spoken were promises, kept at all cost: financial, physical or emotional. This one had cost all three.

The airplane ride had been the longest of her life—Reno to Salt Lake to New York to Dublin, Ireland: 18 hours and 35 minutes. At least she spent the time in first class. She had never ridden first class before; for the long trip this was supposed to be an extra treat. The flight attendants gave her complimentary wine and warmed nuts. They

even provided heated towels for her to wipe her hands, and the food tasted satisfactory. Amelia wasn't exactly hungry, but as part of the promise she ate. She used her full capacity to enjoy the trip. The pillows were big and the blankets were warm.

The two first class tickets to Dublin had cost over \$12,000. Amelia wished she had the money to take more first class trips—but then she immediately withdrew the wish and looked at her sister in the seat next to her.

The attendants were friendly and attentive to detail, after the initial preflight confrontation. Since then, they had all cast glances at Amelia. When she boarded the plane, she put her backpack under the seat in front of her and the large black box in the seat next to the window. She even buckled it in. She preferred window seats herself—she and her sister had always used to fight over who acquired the coveted seat. On Southwest Airlines, whomever had the earlier number won the window; on other flights, they took turns.

Before takeoff, the flight attendant had instructed her to place all her carry-ons in the overhead bin or under the seat. Amelia told her she had. The flight attendant looked at the box strapped into the window seat. She tried again, this time with a gentle “Miss.” Amelia remained calm and, once again, said she had.

When the flight attendant pointed to the box, Amelia simply stated: “That is my sister. She has her own ticket. That’s her chair.” Amelia produced the ticket and a photo I.D. of her sister and one of herself. “She doesn’t look like that anymore,” Amelia said. The flight attendant didn’t know what to do. After several conversations with the cockpit

crew, they decided in Amelia's favor—the parameters of the box sat snug enough to push against the armrests and fit securely into the seat with the belt. Heather could remain in her seat, possibly because Amelia made a point of telling them she paid six thousand dollars to fly her sister to Dublin, and she was going to be comfortable. Perhaps the attendants also recognized grief or pitied her, or maybe they even thought she was crazy, regardless, Heather remained safely buckled in her seat.

The Delta ticket agent at the Reno airport, along with airport security, had made the first few hours of the trip almost unbearable. Amelia checked her luggage; she knew they would consider Heather a “carry-on.” At the security checkpoint, Amelia took off her shoes and her coat and dropped them in a bin. She emptied her pockets and slung her backpack on the counter. She pushed these items through first. Then she stood at the conveyer belt, holding the box. She started to set it down, her hands shaking furiously, and she pulled it back. She took a deep breath and tried again, hands still shaking. Once more, and this time she was able to set it down to be scanned while she hustled through the metal detector herself. She could barely breathe until the box came out the other side of the scanner, and she could grasp it again.

The TSA agents already appeared curious about her behavior; after the box ran through she was pulled to the side and searched, and asked about the box's contents. Amelia kept saying, “It's my sister.” Their mouths gaped open and their brows furrowed, but ashes weren't against regulations. Heather wasn't hazardous material. Even given the box's large size, it could fit into an overhead bin, though Amelia had no intention of

putting her there. She considered the situation similar to bringing an animal on board—only this life form consisted of merely ash and bone, and no breath. But still a soul, Amelia thought. Possibly, still a soul.

Once through security, back in her shoes and coat, Amelia waited by the gate. The Wheel of Fortune slot machine chimed every few seconds with the automated sounds of coins being dropped—though there were no actual coins, only pieces of paper. Normally, Amelia always brought a twenty and played the slots at the airport. She had won \$120 on her last trip. But today, she sat in her seat, backpack on the floor, staring at the box in her lap.

When her time to board was announced, she presented the attendant with the two tickets. When the attendant asked where the other passenger was, Amelia lifted up the box. She explained it was her sister. The attendant said a person had to be present for each ticket, which Amelia knew not to be true. Amelia replied her sister was a person, a soul inside a box, and she had paid \$12,000 for two tickets to Dublin, and she was going to get her two seats—together in first class—that she had paid for. The attendant called her manager over and Amelia stepped to the side while other passengers boarded. People stared back at Amelia as she spoke to the manager, in her most calm and collected voice. Once again she explained the situation. The manager finally let her board.

Several hundred people attended Heather's service. The funeral was held at Huffaker Park, where Heather had loved to walk her dogs. A church was out of the question. Amelia set up a podium and attached a microphone and a table filled with

pictures of Heather. She had little pamphlets made with more pictures of Heather and some of her favorite sayings. She placed a fake urn on the table in the center. She even played Metallica at the service—her mother thought this was tacky, but Heather would have loved the music. She served Jell-O shots and Patron, and cookies, brownies, and cheesecakes Amelia had stayed up all night baking: Heather’s favorites. Amelia allowed anyone who wanted to say their piece about Heather, but she barely remembered their words. After the last person spoke, Amelia stepped to the podium.

She thanked everyone for coming, and for being such integral parts of Heather’s lives. She spoke about how important they all were to Heather and how important Heather had been to her. She told them Heather was her soul mate, and—before she could break down—she wished them all a good evening and a farewell, and headed straight from the podium to her car, where she muttered the final words to her speech: “It should have been me.” Then, she drove to a hotel and checked in to avoid the family and friends awaiting her at home.

At the mortuary where the body was to be cremated, the manager asked if Amelia would like an urn for her sister’s ashes, and showed her a nice assortment. But Amelia wanted a box. Amelia refused to look at their choices—none of them were Heather—and asked how big the box needed to be and if the ashes would be in some type of plastic bag inside it. The manager said they would, and gave her dimensions. Amelia told them she would make the box herself and asked when her sister’s ashes would be ready for pick-

up. She picked a black urn and asked to purchase it, but under no circumstances did she want her sister's ashes to be placed in it, so she took it with her.

She went to a hardware store and found the wooden box she was looking for: large, rectangular, with latches, and plenty of room for what Amelia needed. It had to be as special as Heather herself. Amelia was not sure she could even come close to making it that special, but she was going to try. Amelia started with a coat of black paint that held tiny flecks of silver shimmer, which matched identically to the color of the chest she had made her sister when Heather had gone through her Wicca phase, which only lasted about a year, as most of Heather's ventures did. She sprayed a second coat two hours later. Then, at three in the morning, she sprayed it again with finish and a quick dry spray. By seven in the morning, the box was still a little sticky, but was able to be carried. She turned the box over and on the bottom wrote a note to her sister in a silver pen: "Always and forever together. I love you." Amelia signed her name below. She opened the box and placed black velvet cloth on the bottom. She added all her favorite pictures of the two of them, filling the sides. She sprayed a little of Heather's favorite perfume inside as well, and pushed the cloth to the sides, making room for the ashes in the middle. The she picked out her sister's favorite color of pink, and painted a four-inch skull across the lid. Amelia smiled. Her sister had owned many clothes, which had skulls on them: hats, jackets, shirts, even down to her socks. She even wore fake skull tattoos because of her fear of needles; she was way too impermanent to get the real thing. This urn was definitely Heather. Amelia held her breath and willed the tears not to fill her eyes. She

returned to the mortuary and claimed the ashes, which fit perfectly into the middle of the box, just as the manager said they would. She wrote him a check and left.

Amelia transferred all of her money from her savings and a large portion from her 401K into her checking account, and wrote checks for all the funeral arrangements. She had called the life insurance company. The policy was a quarter of a million dollars, but the money took time. Amelia was the first beneficiary; then, if Amelia was not alive, their mother. She didn't have time to wait for the check. She booked her flight with her own money.

Heather's friends in Reno already knew what happened. Amelia called her brother, Steven, first. She called him because he lived next door to her mother in Virginia, and Amelia wanted him to walk over, to be there for her mother when Amelia called. She had to call him seventeen times before he answered. She hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours, and she was still numb, but numbness did not keep her from being annoyed.

"Heather's dead," Amelia said as soon as he answered. "Pick up the phone when I call you, jackass."

"What?"

She told him again. Heather was dead, and he needed to walk over to Mom's because she was going to call, and he needed to be there when Mom fell apart. He said he would leave right away. Amelia told him she loved him and hung up the phone.

Amelia counted slowly to ten. Then she called her mother, who instantly asked what was wrong. When Amelia heard Steven come in the room, she told her mother about Heather. Nothing but silence came from the other end of the line. Amelia knew what was happening—the same emotions she was still *not* feeling: surreal, heartbroken, shocked. So she waited. Steven picked up the phone.

“She’s okay, I think,” he said, “but in shock.” Amelia asked him to stay with her and then tell the rest of the family. Amelia said her mother could call her back later, if she wanted more details. They were having the service in Reno. Heather had been teaching there for seven years and had lived there for over ten. She rarely went back to Virginia to see the family. They could come to her for the funeral. Amelia refused to negotiate; the decision was hers to make, and she had decided. That pissed off her mother, but Amelia could not find any room left in her to care.

Heather and Amelia were sitting at a coffee shop, working. Amelia was writing and Heather was grading papers. They were discussing their classes: why they loved to teach and what they were going to do for their 35th birthday the following week. Heather mentioned her boyfriend—he was thinking about moving in with her soon. Amelia joked about the seriousness of the relationship. Heather gave a nonchalant “We’ll see,” in response.

“Did my failed marriage warn you off of relationships?” Amelia asked. She smiled.

“Your mistakes don’t influence me in the least,” Heather said.

Amelia left to use the restroom. As she was washing her hands, she heard two gunshots. Her body shook with pain and nausea overwhelmed her. She ran back to the restaurant and saw Heather lying on the floor with a pile of blood pouring from her chest. No gunman was in sight. She grabbed her sister's body in her arms, trying to put pressure on the bleeding, but couldn't tell where it was coming from. She screamed Heather's name. No breath, no heartbeat, no movement. The ambulance and police arrived, but Heather was already dead.

Amelia would not let go of her sister's body. The emergency response team had to pull her off as she continued to scream for her sister. The body was transported to the hospital with Amelia in tow, holding Heather's hand the entire time. Amelia's screams had lowered to a slow repetition of Heather's name, over and over. The official time of death was called. Amelia sat holding her sister on the slab of metal in the hospital morgue until she began to grow as cold as the steel, and she forced herself to let go.

The police had already apprehended the suspect based on several eye-witness accounts. The suspect had called Heather Ms. Akers—which was not Heather's name, but Amelia's. The man called her the name twice before she looked up. Then he shot her twice in the chest. Someone had even caught video of the shooting on a cell phone. The suspect was a former student of Amelia's who she had failed in freshmen English five years ago for plagiarizing two papers. She barely recognized him at first. Five years ago.

Amelia sat with her back against the arm of the couch, her legs outstretched before her. Heather lay at the other end, their feet tangled in the middle beneath a blanket. The television blared in the background; showing *Jason Takes Manhattan*.

Heather kicked Amelia.

“We took today off work to have a *Friday the 13th* marathon. You aren’t supposed to be working.”

“I’m not working,” Amelia said. She didn’t look up from the screen. “And this is my least favorite one.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“I’m writing my will. I downloaded a program.”

“Morbid much?” Heather asked. “You don’t even own anything.”

“I have my P.O.S. truck. And Corky.”

“A junky trunk and a crazy dog. Who’s getting those great prizes?”

“It’s all you, babe,” Amelia said. “You already know about the life insurance. You’ll know what to do with all my stuff.”

“Great,” Heather said. “So your final gift to me is to clean out your apartment?”

“It could be a house by then, you never know. I might have awesome stuff, plus my life insurance money.”

“How much is it?” Heather asked. “I’ve been running a little tight right now?”

“Bring it on.”

“Maybe later,” Heather said. “I’m pretty comfy.”

“It has information about my funeral arrangements, too,” Amelia said.

“You still want a mausoleum, above ground?”

“Yeah, maybe with a marble bust of me on the top of it.”

“Well, your bust is one of your best features.”

Amelia smiled broadly. “No, go with cremation. It’s cheaper. Spread my ashes somewhere I would enjoy, you pick. But I want to have a service at Grandma and Granny’s church in Virginia.”

Heather rolled her eyes. “Virginia, really?”

“They died when I was so young. It’s all I have of them. I just want it to be there. It doesn’t matter if it’s just you. I want to be where they were.”

“Okay,” Heather said. “But don’t you dare do that to me if I go first.”

“I already know what you want.”

“I’m giving you a chance to go to Europe on my dime and see amazing things, like I did.”

“I may have been twelve times by then.”

“Maybe. But if not, you’re going love it the way I did. I just know it.” Heather’s eyes brightened.

“I’m sure I will.”

“But don’t open your umbrella on the cliffs,” said Heather. “The tour guides made a point to tell us. And try out all the little taverns you can find. And don’t complain about the beer being warm, it’s supposed to be like that. And make sure if you make out with a hot guy he has decent teeth.”

“Yeah,” Amelia said, “that’s what I am going to be worried about: umbrellas, warm beer, and bad teeth.” Amelia shut her laptop. “Enough morbid talk. I think some girl is running really fast away from Jason, and he’s going to catch her with his slow-ass walk.”

Heather smiled. “That’s how it always happens.”

Amelia smiled. She sank down into the couch, closer to her sister.

* * *

On the cliffs, Amelia has unkept promises to keep—not just to Heather, but to herself as well. Amelia had made other promises: to protect her sister, to be by her side when Heather needed her. The first promise she had failed. Now, she steps closer to the edge and debates about which promises to keep.

She sets the box down and opens its latches, then the bag inside, so the ashes are ready to take flight into the sea below. Pictures begin to fly out of the box, circling in the air, falling to the ground, and blowing out to the water. Heather’s smiling face is all around her: their life together soaring through the air. Amelia lifts the box back into her arms. The wind picks up, and the drizzle turns to rain. The waves crash against the rocks below and Amelia sees the beauty her sister had told her about, so many years ago. She inhales deeply. She sees the beauty of it all, but she still can’t feel. She opens her backpack and pulls out her purple umbrella. She stands at the edge of the cliff, clutching the box in her right arm, the purple umbrella in her left hand, her thumb resting on the button to release.

Recollection

What I remember most vividly is the sound it made. I can honestly say that I had never, not even once, wondered what it would sound like for my face to be smashed into a stucco wall. Now, I never have to wonder. I also remember never wanting to be a victim.

On that particular Thursday, I was coming home from dinner with friends. We had gone out after class for a girl's night, and it was pushing about nine. I remember going to my truck from the restaurant and gazing up at the sky. A dusky purple hue still lit the night. Clouds filled much of the night sky, but the moon hung uncovered by them, and was, nearly, but not totally, full. The brightness of the moon gave the clouds a dark gray lining. Gray is now my least favorite of all colors. That night I was amused because the clouds suggested rain and, in Reno, it rarely rains. I do not recall the drive home, or parking my truck. I do remember the apartment lights outshining the dusky sky. I remember climbing the stairs to the second floor apartments, and not noticing anything out of the ordinary. I later told the police officers that very statement on several occasions, as well as my friends, and my family. I did not notice anything out of the ordinary. Obviously, my noticing anything and someone actually being there were two distinct things.

At my apartment door, I was pulling my keys from my oversized purse when I felt someone behind me. When I say felt, I do not mean in the physical sense; I mean that I sensed someone was there. I was not sure why I sensed him. I don't remember hearing a

noise, but everyone makes some kind of noise, loud or soft, still noise. It was enough to make me pull my key back from the door and start to turn. I had barely begun to move when a hand grabbed the back of my head, behind my right ear, and slammed the left side of my face into the dark yellow stucco wall of the apartment exterior. I remember clearly the sound that my cheekbone—the zygomatic bone, I was later informed—made as it broke: a loud pop that resonated through my head. My left eye hit the metal door plate protruding from the wall—labeled 17 for my apartment—and the plate made a separate singular clinking noise a fraction of a second before the cheekbone broke. I remember there were two separate noises I heard both the clink of metal, and the pop of the bone, but the pain erupted in me simultaneously. An intense, stabbing pain took over the entire left side of my face pulsing with each beat of my heart. My left eye burned. My eyesight grew darker and darker. Sight in that eye was fleeting. Lips quivering, I began to panic when I realized blood was filling up my eye, blood was running down my face.

The blows left me in an unconscious state, or near unconscious, because I only remember a buzzing sound ringing in my ears, the green haloed blur of the back of my eyelids, almost blacking out, while fighting to gauge my bearings, being supported by this unknown man and the wall. My keys clattered as he moved through them, trying to find the correct door key. I had three on the chain. His hand was rough and callused against my arm. He was muttering something under his breath, which smelled of cigarettes and beer, and the thought occurred to me, as I came more to my senses, that he was trying to get me back into my apartment. He did not just want my purse, which remained with my overstuffed school bag, full of items my friends made fun of me for

buying, still slung over my right shoulder. I thought it would have fallen off, but I guess he'd caught me, pinning me to the wall before I actually hit the ground, leaving my items still intact. To an outside viewer, it might appear as if he was someone I knew, supporting me against the wall, possibly because I had been drinking. He wasn't wearing a mask, but I was having trouble focusing on his face with my one good eye.

It was at that moment, as I was trying to sharpen my vision, that the urge to scream hit me. I wasn't sure why I had not thought about doing so before, probably because I was barely conscious, in pain, and in shock. I opened my mouth, my cheek adding a burning sting as the split muscle tore even more, salty copper blood trickling into my mouth, and started to scream, but a hand covered my mouth and two deep gray eyes like a stormy ocean night were fixed on my face. I tried to swallow, tried to make a sound, tried to move, but the force with which he was holding me, one hand over my mouth, the other pinning my shoulder against the door, was too strong.

I had always wondered what kind of person I would be in a crisis. Fight or flight? As a ten-year-old child I had pulled my younger brother from under a flipped ATV, brought him to consciousness and went for help. As a teenager I had stood in a doorway holding tightly to a child I was babysitting and my small dog as the house shook around us, mirrors and pictures falling off the wall. At twenty-one I performed the Heimlich on my one-year-old niece when she had started to turn blue from the potato chip blocking her airway. Those were small crises, and I'd handled them. Of course, there was a fight that I had reasoned my way out of in high school, not really out of fear, but more out of not wanting to be in a fight.

I remember the force of those gray eyes, focusing keenly on me, threatening my very existence. I felt the intended hatred. I felt the intended fear. I know he said something to me about not making a sound, but I cannot recall the exact words. It was not too clichéd: “Shut up.” I got the message. He redirected his attention to the keys.

My mind raced. A part of me did not want to move at all. I was in pain, blood dripped down my clothes. My brown hair was sticky and matted to the side of my face. None of my neighbors had come out of their apartments. I rarely ever saw my neighbors. As a matter of fact, my neighbor across the hall had moved out two weeks ago. Lightning bolts fired through my mind. The man had come from the empty apartment. He had been waiting on me. He had planned this.

My hand, shaking violently, fumbled through my open school bag, as quietly as possible, the sound of rustling papers hitting my ears like waves crashing. My heart rate quickened, my one good eye shifted nervously over his still-blurry face as the click of the correct house key slid into the lock. I brought my left elbow around and caught him in the nose. It was not by any means a powerful blow, but my right hand was busy in my bag, and under no circumstances did I want to go into my apartment with him. The hit was enough to loosen his grip on my shoulder and I took a step back. The step wasn't in time to prevent the back of his left hand strike the left side of my already damaged face. Blood poured out of the gash on my face, and the pain worsened. I had not thought it could get any worse than it already was. I was wrong.

People always ask me how it felt. They never ask how it sounded, I would never have wondered how it sounded either, but I remember the sound the most. Pain is one of

those things I have a hard time describing to people. In my manner or fashion of answering the question as polite as possible, I simply state, ‘it was an intense shooting pain.’ I remember being laid up in a gas station bathroom with kidney stones. I had no idea at the time what they were. I curled up on the sticky dirt-filled floor of a disgusting two-stall bathroom with dingy beige-that-used-to-be-white broken tiles with no cell phone service, on a trip to meet some friends. I had no idea where I was or what was going on with me at the time, except the horrific pain shooting through my abdomen. I remember thinking, ‘If this is what labor is like, I’m not sure I can do it,’ and I had always wanted to have children. After the kidney stones, I could not remember the severity of the pain. I knew it hurt, but I could not remember exactly what it felt like. Your mind could remember the pain, but it also will not let your body experience it again for no reason. You cannot think about pain, and presto, you are in that pain. I could remember it was intense, horrible. I felt like someone had wrenched a knife into my gut and was holding it there to keep the pressure strong and the pain shooting in short tidal waves. People always want to know. ‘How did it feel?’

‘Well, it fucking hurt, are you kidding me?’ I wanted to say that, but I never do. It wouldn’t be lady-like of me. I was raised in small town southern Virginia, I was always taught to mind my manners. As I was a tomboy most of my young life, I had only recently begun caring about being lady-like. In fact, up until three years ago you would not have seen me in anything other than jeans, shorts, t-shirts, and tennis shoes. If my hair had been fixed in any other fashion than a pony-tail, it was a fluke. Over the last three years

my tastes had changed. I traded in the oversized t-shirts for fitted clothes. I traded up the jeans to more fashionable jeans. I traded in the tennis shoes for sandals.

The blow caused me to stumble backwards, losing my footing along with one metallic blue flip-flop. In that instant I no longer cared about the fashionable style of the shoes, because practicality would have been better. There was no way I could run in them like I could in tennis shoes. The man approached me, grabbed my arm and pulled me up off the ground. I kicked the other flip-flop off my foot. Barefoot was better. The man was talking. I could make out some details of his face: it was red, right eye twitching slightly, and his teeth clenched together. I had bloodied his nose, though it was nothing in comparison to the condition of my face. His grip on my left arm was incredibly tight, unyielding. I could feel the bruises form as he dug his thick fingers into a deeper hold. I brought my knee up swiftly into his groin. He bent over, a low deep growl escaping his lips, but did not let go of my arm. I was stuck, unable to move. My right hand was still fumbling in my bag when our eyes locked again. Those eyes seared into me. I swallowed hard.

Fear had driven me before to escape, to get away from this person. He furrowed his brow, fixing his eyes deep into me, which produced a new panic. Something I had never experienced before, terror, the highest peak of fear, buried deep inside me. A level of emotion that I did not know even existed in me. It was a fear that, even at my best, I was not going to get out of this. A fear of defeat.

I remember hearing the rustling of gravel below. Someone was walking past the complex. The man turned. It gave me the opportunity I needed. An opportunity that I had

just found in my school bag. An asp. Two feet of metal baton contracted down to an eight inch rod. A weapon my friends had made fun of me for buying. I flipped it out, as I had done so many times before. But those times, I'd been toying with it, checking it out, seeing how it felt in my hand. Metal rapidly sliding out until it clicked into a locked position. Hearing the sound, the man turned back to me. The people below stopped walking. I heard one of them speak as I brought the asp around, connecting with the man's temple. He staggered back.

I do not remember the ride to the hospital. My left eye is sewn up with twenty-nine stitches. My cheek bone has to heal on its own for six weeks. The gash across my face takes another dozen stitches. The doctor says I will heal well. The l-shaped scar on my brow will easily be covered by eyebrows and make-up. The scar on my cheek will be small, it is surprisingly straight, and ran down my cheekbone, almost as if it's a natural shading line, and can be covered with make-up as well. My eyesight is fine, 20/15, the same as it had been before. I will have minimal scarring. At least minimal scarring that other people can see. I decide to stay at my apartment. People ask me why I stay. I tell them, 'Because he never got into my apartment. It's still safe. It's still my home.'

I learned how to use a gun when its long barrel over-shadowed my tiny arms and legs. I bought my first pistol, a black 9mm Beretta, when I turned 18. I kept it in my night stand. I took karate classes until I got tired of being told what to do. I took a self-defense class. I kept my asp in my school bag. I kept my Taser gun in my truck. I remember

thinking that I never wanted to be a victim, that I wanted to be a 'fight' person. People said I was lucky. I'm not so sure I would wholeheartedly agree. I was not the victim of what he had planned, what was waiting in the apartment. I was not raped. I did not die. Hell, I wasn't even robbed.

I heard the people below me quit walking. I swung my asp directly at the man's head in. Vision in my right eye returned to normal in time to see the shock spread across the man's face. A certain blankness entered those deep gray eyes. The fierce ocean silenced. He fell backwards, in slow motion. His body went down, hitting the stair railing first, ping ponging between the wall and cobblestone steps until the only thing left to hit was the finality of concrete below. I watched blood pour from his head. I watched him lie there limp, succumbing to a stillness I had never witnessed before. I fought an urge inside of me to check and see if he was all right, although I was not sure why I had this urge. I could see the people below who had stopped walking. They were two men. They moved towards us. One ran up the stairs to me. I was at the same spot, asp gripped in my right hand, staring down at the pool of blood below. He started asking me questions that I did not hear. The other was checking the man at the bottom of the stairs for a pulse. He did not have to say it. I already knew the man was dead. I had killed him. I had killed a human being, someone's son, possibly someone's husband or even father. I had survived at his expense, because I was a fight person. My head throbbed, but thoughts still bolted through my mind. If I had waited another moment, would the men have noticed what was going on? Would my face ever look the same again? I need to sit down. Would they have

come up the stairs? Would they have stopped it? Would the man still be alive? Is this real? This is real. What do I do next? I need to sit down.

I remember the blood stain on the concrete. The apartment complex washed it away as soon as they were allowed by the police. It lingered on for me. I could always see it, even after it was gone. I took the stairs on the other side of the building to avoid the spot.

It was him or me. That was my reasoning. Him or me. Why did I feel guilt? Why did my stomach lurch at the thought of it, every single time? Why could I not get that image out of my head? If it had been me instead of him, would it haunt him the same way?

The man. The man with stormy gray eyes. The man who had attacked me, had instilled fear in me, who I thought was going to defeat me. The man who, after all was said and done, contributed to me being the victim after all, the victim of my own actions as a fight person. I had spent so much time trying to make sure I was never a victim, I never realized that sometimes, you have no choice. I am a victim of my actions. Because I am a fight person, I killed a man, a man with stormy ocean night eyes. He had no other face, he had only eyes. He was charcoal eyes and a crimson blood-stained concrete walk. He was the clinking of metal and brow, the echoing pop of a cheekbone breaking against a stucco wall, the copper taste of blood. Sounds, sights, and tastes that were never going to leave my mind.

I remember taking a picture before the ambulance got there; my camera was always in my purse. I did not have a mirror and I wanted to see my face. But it was not

my face in the photograph, not even a resemblance of my face. It was death. Or almost death. Or fear. Or anxiety. Or pain. Or possibly a combination of all those feelings, all of those feelings covered in matted brown hair and thick dark blood.

It was the face of a fighter.

Purple Sands

At thirty-one my biological clock stopped ticking, then went ahead and blew itself the hell up over the course of a single night. That was seven years ago. Since then, I've replaced it with an hourglass with purple sands that trickle down the middle. At this point, it's hard to say how much time is left and how much has wasted away, but the sand is more relaxing to watch. And it's quiet as it sits there, waiting for me to check it, not the other way around.

I named my children when I was thirteen, because between then and age thirty-one, I knew that I was, if nothing else, destined to be a mother. I even picked out secondary names, in case I had twins. I didn't go as far as naming triplets—that would just be a little too much to think about.

I had helped to raise my three younger brothers, all of whom went on to give my parents grandchildren. I never questioned my choices with them; it was as if I knew inherently what to do. Even with the surplus of young children around, I was still asked about my life choices. When was I going to have that daughter I had always talked about? The topic always elicited a change in subject from me, because, having no answer, I would rather talk about anything else.

I haven't been able to explain to people what happened seven years ago and how it has affected me so. Not that I didn't think that others would understand—some would, but most wouldn't. Especially my best friend, to whom I had barely been able to tell the story to so many years ago, and I could tell she was upset that it upset me, but no more

than that. But what could I expect of people who didn't love animals as they loved their children?

I should have known better. That was the single reoccurring thought at the time, and most moments after it. I guess it is that way with most mistakes or mishaps in our lives. We think of all the things we should have done differently, could have done differently, that could have—we believe *would* have—made a difference. But the truth is that this is how we make ourselves feel worse. It's a way to put the blame where the blame should lie, and still try to find a way not to feel the pain, the loss. But as with many emotions in life, they have to be felt.

I had two dogs at the time: Mushy and Mayhem. Those weren't, of course, their real names, but the nicknames they had become so accustomed to, that they thought those were their real names. Mushy was the sweetest little Shih Tzu you had ever seen. She had a multi-tone gray face and light and dark patches, bordering on black, all over her body. She would pancake to the floor when anyone approached her, wagging her fluffy tail in the air. She wasn't the smartest dog—she didn't pick up on any tricks I tried to teach her—but she loved to play, and was lively and energetic.

Mayhem, a solid white Maltese, truly was a bitch. She was the alpha, and she let every dog, including Mushy, know it. She liked to eat and lay around all day, and she wanted all the attention, pushing Mushy out of the way to get it. She was six then; Mushy was two.

My friends used to joke that every time I wanted to have a baby, I bought a dog. The only reason I stopped adopting more was because of my apartment's regulations. They were partly right. When I did have those maternal urges, I found myself, more often than not, at the puppy store, playing with the puppies, then going home and babying mine. Though, like children, they grow out of the babying phase pretty fast.

Mayhem always slept against my rib cage at night, curled into a little ball. She would wake me in the morning by crawling up on my chest, waiting for me to open my eyes, then assaulting me with licks to the nose and face. After I adopted Mushy, Mayhem had started putting on weight, and, regardless of my efforts, she became too big. Because of her breed, she had a joint disorder that made her knees pop in and out at random. By age four she was waddling around like a grandma. The doctors could do nothing to help her, unless the condition worsened, or so they said. She just needed to lose the weight. But special dog food and exercise, and even medication, weren't working for her. I worried about losing her early due to the complications of her weight. I was intent on keeping her healthy.

I didn't get Mushy spayed at six months like I had intended. The vet kept sending me reminders to do so, until I finally scheduled the appointment. By this time, Mushy had taken her place on the bed, though she didn't like to cuddle up as Mayhem did when she was younger. Mayhem now slept under the bed (I think it was cooler) until the early hours of the morning. Sometimes, when her limping was bad, she wouldn't get up on the bed at all, despite the dog steps I had put in.

I had already been through the spaying process with Mayhem, who was lethargic at first and back to her normal self within a day. Mushy I assumed would be no different. She wasn't supposed to jump on things or play, or mess with her stitches, which were under glue. She didn't require a cone unless I noticed her having problems. After the surgery, she slept in the passenger seat on the way home, then jumped onto the couch before I could stop her and fell asleep again.

That night, I lay her on the bed so she didn't try to jump up herself, and stroked her soft fur. She had just been groomed the week before. I kept both dogs' coats cut short in a puppy cut, instead of long like most pictures would show the breeds. I dozed off with my hand still on her. Sometime in the night she moved, and I heard her cry, her little doggy cries that she has when she has nightmares. I found her in the bed with my hand, and stroked her back. Her cries eventually softened and I fell back asleep.

In the morning, I woke to Mayhem on the bed, curled up next to Mushy. A singular sight for me, because, though they did on occasion curl up together, it was a rarity. Then I noticed the brownish-color on Mayhem's coat. I reached down to pet them both, and saw the blood. Mushy was cold and unmoving. Her stitches had ripped open, whether from the jumping or her own messing with them. Her cries for my help were unanswered—I'd thought I was soothing her from a nightmare. I was actually wasting away what was left of her life.

I picked Mushy up in my arms, rocking her back and forth, and cried. How could I not know the difference in her cries? When she'd needed me, I just stroked her hair as if to say, 'It's okay to die.' And so she did. Mayhem curled up next to me on the bed for the

first time in a long time. She knew. I don't think she judged me the way I judged myself, but she knew.

I later had to call the vet, who was shocked. It was such a rare occurrence now with the glue and the multiple layers of stitching that take place with the surgery. I brought her in to be cremated. They gave her back to me in a little box with a sympathy card. I couldn't work for a week.

I bought a new sheet set, then a new bed, though it didn't really help. I could still see the spot. It was less blood than I had remembered at the time. Maybe because it had soaked in. Maybe because she was so small. I couldn't bring myself to go to the puppy store anymore. Even walking by the baby section in department stores choked me up.

Mayhem turns thirteen today. The vet says it's wonderful that she has made it this far with her weight and joint issues. He says she is a resilient little dog. She has trouble getting around, but I take care of her as best as I can—meds and vet visits monthly. Little walks when she can. I make sure to love her every night. I pick her up and put her on the bed with me. When she cries, I turn on the light and check her to make sure she is okay. Most nights, I don't go back to sleep after that. I just listen to the sound of her snoring. I watch her big belly on her little body move up and down.

I think if I turn out the light, she might stop moving. I'm not sure I could live with that again. I've heard so many different things about unconditional love: that it doesn't exist, that only God loves unconditionally, that parents have it. In all I've witnessed in my life, I think all these things are false. If God's love was unconditional, then why are

there conditions as to how you can behave to receive it? I've seen parents who abused their children and couldn't care less about their futures. But I've also seen dogs love their owners without purpose or reason. Mayhem knows when I hurt, and stays close to me. She is excited every day when I get home. Lately, she never leaves my side. Dogs are the ones I have seen capable of unconditional love, and I try to give as much of that back to her as I can, even though I am not sure that it is enough.

I look at my hourglass, and watch the purple sands. Do they run for her, or me? I cannot tell anymore. Would she live longer with a new sister? Did she suffer the loss of her sister as I did? Sometimes I wonder if I'm the only reason she holds on to life.

She hobbles up to my pillow on the bed, curls in a ball, and lies down again. Her soft breaths fill the air. I stroke her head and back. Our sands are draining. More is in the bottom than the top. I wish I knew when the last grains will fall, and if I will be buried by them, or liberated.

Rural Retreat

The voice of Darth Vader comes out of my Tom Tom, followed by his mechanical breath.

“You have arrived at your destination. *Whooo-perrrr.*”

I hit the brakes of my black Chevrolet Aveo: my rental—economy class. Not that anyone here could tell the difference between a Chevy Aveo and a Gemballa Avalanche. To my left a row of evergreens leads up to a forest, followed by lush knee-high grass that stretches up a hillside; but no driveway, not for at least fifty yards. On my right, a broken down barn sits at the top of another hill. What paint hasn't peeled off is beige. White wooden crossbars lay across the front door. (I wonder if they know the barn should be red, for the true confederate effect). Please don't let that be the place.

Surely, this isn't what constitutes a church out here now. Though you can't hardly throw a stone and not hit a church here in southern Virginia—Rural Retreat, population not much and not changing. Stagnant. Once southwest Virginia has its talons in you, it's an act of God to get it to let you out again. Since Virginia's the third notch on the Bible belt, we have all the God-fearing, God-loving, God-blessing folks you could ever want, all so infused with the Word that they're intolerant of anyone not exactly the same. But even *they* have standards for a church.

I pull forward.

“*Whooo-perrrr.* Turn around when possible,” the Tom Tom says. “I find your lack of faith disturbing. *Whooo-perrrr.*” I regret downloading this new voice. Darth has

definitely never been near the likes of this place. I drive another half mile, shaking my head. A gravel driveway off to my left leads up to a small trailer and I'm pretty sure it's just residential. The barn is looking better and better by the second. I turn Darth off. He's really annoying me. The road curves to the right and a brick building comes into view up ahead that just may be the church I'm looking for. As I drive closer, the small stained glass windows become more prominent; on the side of the building white bricks make up a cross. The small sign in the yard is now visible: Church of God.

A very large man in a ball cap, wife beater and bib overalls is mowing the grass around the church with a push mower. The grass runs uphill and all around the edges of the parking lot. It's a hot day; a sweat-saturated man doesn't add good detail to a wedding photo.

I have arrived before all the other guests to shoot some pictures of the outside of the building. I pull into the parking lot and drive in behind the church. I pull my camera equipment out of the car and strap it around my neck. No one is nearby, but I still lock the doors on the rental. My camera bag is still in there; it's of enough value to me that I would miss it if it were gone. My wallet's in my back pocket. I click the lock again. It's a habit from living in Phoenix and I don't feel comfortable enough to break it now.

I walk back out into the road. So far I haven't seen another car pass. I shoot some pictures, trying to exclude the mowing man from the shots. The church has no steeple, and other than the small white brick cross, the building could be a house. The stained glass windows are so small that from a distance they look as if they have been darkened in. I shoot the pictures anyway. I am nothing if not thorough when shooting a wedding—

even one I am shooting for free. I will keep it simple, though. I asked the bride—my niece—what she wanted and she didn't have much to say. I found that odd in and of itself, but it's not my wedding. Thank God.

A small house sits in behind the church that I assume to be the pastor's. A woman comes out of the house and walks up to me. She's in her late forties and is carrying a set of keys in her hand.

“Are you here for the wedding?”

“Yes,” I say. “I'm Joseph.” I extend my hand to her.

She shakes it and smiles at me.

“I just was going to take some shots before everyone arrived,” I say.

“Would you like in?”

“That would be great.” I smile and glance back at my car. It's still safely parked in the lot.

The inside of the church is small and the lighting is very poor. It has not been decorated beyond a few beige bows tied onto the ends of the aisles. The guest book sits on a table near the entrance, with a single unlit candle beside it. With the church's dark stained glass windows and low lamp lighting, I will have to rely on my flash and manual camera settings. Not really a big deal, but some natural lighting would be great. I may be able to talk the couple into shooting the bridal party shots outside. There is greenery out there. Plus a beautiful blue sky today. Not high class, but neither is the wedding. We'll see how it goes.

After I shoot pictures inside and out, I go back to the air conditioner in the car. It is late summer and the humidity is high today. I don't have to wait long before people begin to arrive. They appear to be in the bridal party. Most of them I have never met—I've lived out of state for six years now. Moving was a progressive thing, from age eighteen on—my back-wood-country claustrophobia. First I moved thirty minutes away. Then an hour. Two. Then a new state; then finally six states and a thirty-six hour drive away. Works well; most of the family is afraid to get on an airplane.

More people pull into the lot. I take a deep breath and exit the car. I can do this.

My brother Andy arrives and I greet him and his wife Meg with a cursory hello. His daughter Kelly is the bride. Andy's fingers fidget endlessly in his hand; beads of sweat drip down his face and onto the tux that looks out of place on his body—he hates events like this. Plus, I heard Kelly asked him not to drink until after the wedding and two days dry is probably weighing on him.

Andy and I are at different ends of the spectrum—he's the oldest of five children; I'm the youngest. Fifteen years separate us, so by the time I was old enough to remember, he was already out of the house. My mother finally learned after me and had her tubes tied. We all have different fathers, but a few of us have the same last name. So it goes in a town where most people are related and ninety percent of the population is an Arnold, Dutton, or Smith. Andy was followed by two more boys; then along came Amy, the only girl in the bunch. She survived, though. She's about the only one I keep in touch with.

Kelly arrives and scurries to the back room. I knock to make sure that everyone is decent before I go in. The bride is mostly made up already, but her mother is curling a

few last strands of her hair. Her long brown hair hangs in curls. She is wearing light shades of beige and brown make-up on top of her brown eyes. A few pieces of baby's breath rest at the top of her head. She is a beautiful girl and the simplicity suits her.

I take some shots of them and of the flowers, and even the dress shoes on the table. The rooms in the church are small and the halls are narrow. Other family members have already started to arrive, even though it's an hour early. Milling around the halls, they make it hard to pass through. The men are already dressed, so I don't have the traditional pictures of the mother putting on the boutonniere. I decide to fake it and ask the mother to pretend like she is putting on the flower again. They won't remember much of the day anyway.

My mother is waiting at the back of the church to be ushered in to the grandparent section. I was raised by my grandmother, and rarely saw my mother when I was young; she was busy with her boyfriends.

Mom's alone now; she calls me every once in a while, wanting to know when I am coming to visit. She didn't care that much to see me when I was growing up, but now, now she has time. Can't really hold it against her though: some people just can't handle being alone.

Amy and my brother Eric are already seated with their families. I give them a nod.

By the time the wedding starts, I have some shots of the mother of the bride zipping up her daughter's dress and looking lovingly at her daughter. The church is dark and I have to continually adjust the setting on manual. It's like technology was never

invented here. But I take all the standard shots: bridesmaids walking down the aisle, bride with father walking down the aisle, groom anticipating the bride, the couple standing together in front of the minister, lighting the candle, the first kiss.

After the wedding, the bridal party goes outside to say hello to all the guests. I shoot some candid shots and wait for the party to be ready for posed pictures. My cousin Derek comes up and punches me in the arm. I give him a nod hello.

“You know, only virgins are supposed to wear white to weddings,” he says, eyeing my white polo.

I don’t bother to tell him that photographers are supposed to wear white to the weddings because the light bounces off of it and back onto the bride. What would be the point?

“I didn’t know that,” I say.

His brother Jared walks up and joins in the conversation.

“Hey cous,” he says and punches the same arm.

“Hi.” The bride is in deep conversation with her mother and two other women I don’t know. I try to catch her eye, to no avail.

“So,” Jared says. “How’s your imaginary girlfriend? What’s her name again?”

“Elizabeth,” I say. “Elizabeth Ann Gardner. She’s fine.”

“Sure would be nice if we could meet her sometime,” Derek says.

“She’s not much of a country person,” I say. Even if she did exist, I would never bring her here.

“How long have ya’ll been dating?”

“Six years.”

“Going to get married?”

“Why ruin a good thing?” I say. “Excuse me.” I walk over to Kelly and finally catch her eye. Amy is with her now and I smile and hug my sister. I hold up my camera and she understands that I’m ready to shoot the group shots. “Would you like to take the pictures out here?” She thinks this is a good idea and we find a nice spot in the back by the trees. It’s early in the afternoon, but the trees are so tall that we find perfect shading. Natural light makes the best photos by far.

I set them up in groups, working my way down to the bride and groom so the rest of the party can go ahead to the reception. It’s at the community center and there is no alcohol permitted. My niece is excited that she acquired such a great location and I don’t have the heart to tell her that in comparison to what she could have had—even the Holiday Inn—it’s not much. Maybe to her it is, I guess. I realize this fact, but still cannot push the other thoughts out of my head.

I tell Amy and my mother that I will see them later as we finish with the bride’s side of the family. Everyone is filtering off except for Andy and Eric. Since Andy and Eric are only about a year and half apart, they are very close. I only saw them during special occasions, but it didn’t stop them from always having their nose in my business as I grew up. Daniel, on the other hand, is only seven years older, and he put me through hell. He’s in jail at the moment, for distribution of methamphetamines. Thank God for small favors.

Eric walks up to me as I shoot a few different poses of the bride and groom.

“Hey Joey,” he says. I hate to be called that. “I was thinking, maybe you could do the distance shot of them, from a different angle, kind of like them holding hands in the sunset.”

It’s three in the afternoon. There is no sunset.

“You know, like up on the hill a little ways, shot from the back.”

“Sure,” I say. Not sure why he feels that he knows how to do this better than me. Not that it’s a bad suggestion, but it still annoys me.

After I take the shots he has two more suggestions that he wants me to try. Andy and Meg walk over to join us.

“We are heading out to the community center,” he says.

“Can you take him with you?” I nod my head toward Eric.

“Sure,” Andy says. Eric gets the message and leaves, but not before a final remark about not forgetting to take pictures of the wedding sign.

This is my thirty-eighth wedding. But it’s usual for my brothers to suppose they know more than me about everything. I try not to let that bother me. But it does.

We finish the shoot and leave for the community center. I take a picture of the wedding sign on my way out.

I shoot more candid shots at the reception: the first dance, the cake cutting, the alcohol-free toast. I can see that Andy is ready for a drink. After the father and daughter dance, he and Eric make a trip out to the parking lot. I’m sure there is a case of Budweiser in a cooler in the trunk of Eric’s car.

I finally sit, with my mother and Amy. Mom talks about how much she enjoyed the wedding and how beautiful my niece looks. I agree.

“How’s Elizabeth?” she asks.

“She’s good.” I say.

“I sure would like to meet her,” she says. She says this most of the times she talks to me. Amy never makes that comment. Perhaps she knows the truth. She has always known me best.

“I know, Mom. She’s really busy with work.”

“You should move back here. Get married and have me some grandchildren.”

“You already have grandchildren, Mom. Besides, I like my job. I like where I live. We’re happy out there.”

“You can be happy anywhere. It’s all in your state of mind.”

I wonder how many times she has ignored her own advice on the subject, but don’t ask. Amy reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. I see the understanding in her eyes. Maybe there is something else there as well. A secret desire to leave this place? Jealousy that I have made it out? Something else I just can’t place?

Another country song plays, but no one is dancing on the concrete floor.

Amy stands up from the table and steps to my side. “Dance with me.” She holds out her hand. I set the camera on the table and walk a few feet out onto the floor.

“You look great,” I say, as I place my hand on her back. She cups her palm around my other hand.

“So do you,” she says. She glances over my shoulder in the direction where Mom is sitting. I hope she doesn’t expect me to dance with Mom as well. Then she returns her focus to me. “How are you *really* doing?”

“I’m good,” I say. “Couldn’t be better.”

I know she wants more. I feel like she wants to say something, but doesn’t know how. That’s for the best. We dance in silence for a few moments. She stops moving and holds my gaze. “You know I love you, for who you are. Who you’ve always been.”

My stomach tightens. My throat feels dry and hard to swallow. Is that really true? What does she think she knows about me? How could she know an answer that I don’t even know? But if she did, maybe it would be worth hearing.

I clear my throat and my thoughts. I tilt my head to the left and smile—what Amy calls my cocky grin. “This *is* who I’ve always been.”

Amy nods silently. That look is there again. Deep in her eyes. Understanding? Knowing? I have to turn away.

The walls are beige and match the tablecloths almost to the tee, but nothing matches the metal fold-out chairs in three different colors that are seated around the tables. A small line of people are waiting for cake. As I look around the room, I know what is missing. All the men in the room are either pale white or tanned from too much construction work. They are all sitting with their women who look much the same. The same shaped faces and eyes. The same color hair and skin. White men with their women. There is no deviation from this.

I can feel the talon's grip on me again. I curl up my toes inside my loafers. I tug at my collar, even though it is already loose. The door is only twenty feet away. I resist the urge to run.

The Price of Feathers

I hit a peacock on my way to work this morning, a rather unique occurrence, as peacocks are not indigenous to Reno, Nevada—an even more unique sight when it hit the grill of my SUV, it flipped awkwardly up onto my windshield, where the brilliant blue skin on its neck darkened as it died and was soon enveloped in murky, rusty-colored blood.

I had wondered why the man walking up the street had motioned me to slow down as he was across the street walking in the opposite direction, and I was barely going the speed limit. I had, nonetheless, pulled my foot from the gas as I rounded the corner and saw the bird, strolling across the street at its leisure, oblivious to the navy SUV, which must have seemed a metal giant to the bird, if he had seen it. I hit my brakes, and without so much as the smallest effort on the bird's part to save itself, we collided.

For a moment I could not move—my wife Elizabeth calls it my 'stasis state.' I checked to see if anyone had borne witness to my treacherous act, but the man was around the bend from me and no other cars passed. I wondered if it was more like breaking a mirror or stabbing a unicorn, killing this bird of beauty. Though it did not look the part at the moment.

I left my house every morning at five-thirty AM to visit my mistress Becca. At first, I was actually going into my accounting job early to work on new projects I had acquired, but those were soon caught up, and in the process I had met her. Though I'd

never before considered that I would be a man to cheat, I was now six years into a marriage, and four months into an affair. Becca lived only two subdivisions and five minutes from my house, and this route, off a side street at the south end of town, brought me directly from her house to the main road to go to work. In all the mornings, this was my first encounter with the peacock.

I exited my vehicle to assess the damage, more so to the bird. As it had flown through the air its tail feathers had begun to extend; some were now lying in the road, and others were lodged in the grill and lying on my hood, and patches were missing from its body like a badly torn oriental fan. I debated about leaving it along the side of the road. No one had come screaming from a house to claim it, as I surely would have, had it been my dog that were hit. Was it a pet, or someone's livestock? Where did one even draw the distinction?

After much deliberation, I took a blanket from my trunk and wrapped it around the bird, scooping it up along with some of the blood from the windshield. I tossed it in the trunk and collected all the feathers I could. I did not touch the bird with my bare hands, as it was, in fact, still a bird and even though beautiful, it still might carry a disease I did not want to have—a lesson I learned from a sorority girl during my freshman year of college.

I called work as I turned to go back home—knowing that by now Elizabeth would be on her way, if not already at her job—telling my boss I had had a minor accident and would try to be in as soon as the issue resolved. I tried to clean my windshield with spray, but it merely smeared the blood. So I drove back home, looking like the murderer I was. I

pulled into my garage and shut the door. I decided to clean the windshield first. The bird wasn't going anywhere and I couldn't stand the sight of the brownish blood any longer.

Afterward, I removed the bird and feathers from my truck. I pulled on a pair of work gloves and unrolled the blanket to look at the creature, which no longer had the elegance and grace that it once held in my mind. Though a couple of tail feathers were bent, most were in great condition. I admired the loose feathers, aside from the blood at the bottom, with great detail. The brilliant blue-green sheen at the tops reminded me of Becca's eyes. They really were magnificent—the feathers and the eyes. I reached down to pluck another feather from the bird. It proved to be harder than I had thought. Though I had grown up near a farm, and had once plucked chickens, that was only after they had been dipped in boiling water. This was like yanking hair from someone's head while they were still alive.

I decided to approach the feather removal differently. I pulled a pair of pliers from my tool kit, latched firmly on the lowest point I could find, and pulled. The bird twitched with each removal, making me both uncomfortable but also reassured that the bird was truly dead. After I had removed all the tail feathers, I laid them out like a fan on the garage floor. They were long, and most were pristine. Magnificent. And I had removed this beauty from the view of the rest of the world.

The creature now in my garage looked more like an elongated blue pigeon, covered in blood, than the exquisite fan-tailed bird of grace it had once been.

I could not merely throw the bird in a trash bag and toss it to the side, now that I had plucked it dry and seen the exquisiteness of its life fanned before me. I decided to

bury the bird in the backyard, which was mostly dirt, but surrounded by a high fence so my neighbors could not see in. We had a small fenced in area that was meant to be for a flower garden, though with my black thumb, I had been unable to grow anything in the seven years we had lived at the house. Not even grass. My wife rarely complained about the condition, especially since she had as much trouble growing plants as I did. I decided to dig the grave in the fenced-off area in order to keep the dogs from trying to retrieve it later.

Even with the warmth of the summer, the ground was hard, and I had never realized how difficult it was to dig a grave, even one as small as this. My dogs ran around in the dirt, barking at me occasionally, questioning what I was doing. I dug as close to the fence as I could, and it took me more than an hour to dig a two-by-two-foot hole, three feet into the ground. I returned to the house and called work—a job that I had rarely missed a day of in nine years except for annual vacation. I explained the accident was taking longer to clean up than I anticipated and took the day off.

I then took the bird outside, wrapped in the blanket so none of my neighbors could see, and slid it out and into the hole, quickly covering it with dirt, which left a small mound that showed that dirt had been moved around. I tried to flatten out the mound, but the grave was obvious.

I could not, for some reason, justify this accident to anyone, including my wife. Elizabeth would have been disgusted at the sight of a dead animal, appalled that I had killed it, though this would never have stopped her from shoving forkfuls of meat into her mouth. I wondered what peacock tasted like. Chicken? Quail?

I went to Home Depot and bought a large rose bush to plant beside it. I chose pink—my wife's favorite color. We had a few rosebushes in the front yard that had managed to live despite my efforts to keep them alive. So I thought this bush stood a real chance. Plus, it would be a good reason to keep the dogs out of that area.

Again, I set forth digging the hole, planting the rose bush, and watering it. Though the mound was still slightly visible, the bush masked it a great deal. I just hoped it would live long enough to keep up the job.

My next task was the removal of blood from the feathers. I poured some hydrogen peroxide into a glass and stuck the feathers in. To my surprise, it started to work. I had seen my wife use that trick on laundry before, but I had never had reason to try it. After a bit, the blood faded and I rinsed the bottom of the feathers in water and again stuck them in the glass, until the tips were almost clear.

Now I had a large assortment of these feathers, and I was not a hundred percent sure what I was going to do with them. I searched through the house, garage, and attic, finding at last a very large vase into which my wife usually put ornaments, lights and pine ropes in at Christmas time. I placed the feathers in the vase. Though the vase was large, the feathers still poured out over the top and were almost too numerous to fit. I arranged them as best I could, having not much experience in the home décor department. When I stepped back and looked at them on the table, they were very eye-catching.

I took a shower and changed into my afternoon clothes. Since I had not worked today, I decided to do a few chores to surprise my wife. I would rather have gotten in a

quick round of golf, but I did not want to leave the feathers unattended; they would require explanation, I was sure.

After I finished the chores, I settled onto the couch with my back to the feathers on the table, feeling like a hundred eyes—Becca’s eyes—watching me, though not all the tail feathers had eyes on them. I considered then, that I had not once worried what Becca would have thought of this act. Perhaps I did not know her well enough to know. More likely, I did not care. Still, I kept my back to them.

When my wife came home, she marveled at the work I had done, at her new rose bush with pink roses blooming, and most specifically the vase filled with brilliant peacock feathers.

“Jay,” she said as she ran her fingers gently over the tops of the feathers, “these are beautiful. They must have cost you a fortune.”

“Not really,” I said, though I felt the statement would turn out to be a lie. “I just picked them up on my way back home.”

Missing: 1952

June 1983

Two months after Jackson's mother Aleene died on the table during a quadruple bypass surgery her doctor was not authorized to perform, he found the letters. They began eleven months before he was born and stopped three months after his seventh birthday. Now, thirty-two years later, he found the only glimpse of his father that he had ever had. In the box with the letters was a small piece of paper that listed his father's name and an address in Maryland, about five hours from Cripple Creek, Virginia, where his mother had lived. There was no phone number.

His mother had never been a person to tell more than was necessary, and on occasion she would just ignore questions altogether, especially if they were personal or about his father. Soon, he learned not to ask. She had tried her best to take care of him, to make sure he had all the things he needed in life. He had school supplies, was given free rein to bike ride with his friends, and always had his homework checked before he could go to bed. She was a woman of few words, even fewer than his grandmother, with whom they lived. She never showed affection, and his only way of knowing affection came from the few times she hugged him or patted him on the head. She had never once told him she loved him. He didn't realize that was uncommon—he knew she loved him; why was it required to be said? Once he had children the fact was affirmed to him that she loved him, because he knew he loved his children the minute he held them in his arms.

His current wife, Milly, wanted to sue the hospital. They probably should have. But he just didn't have the heart to do it. He didn't have the heart to do much those days. His mother's heart was in bad shape, they had known that before the surgery. He didn't have the worldly knowledge or the medical knowledge that his wife had. Of course, he was unaware that he lacked this knowledge as well. Jackson just flatly refused to and went on with the funeral arrangements. Then, when enough time had passed and he thought he could handle it, he went through Mom's belongings. When he found the letters, Milly asked if he wanted her there as he read them, but this was an endeavor he wanted to do on his own.

He had tried to find his father on several occasions before; the only lead he ever found was an ex-wife of one of his father's brothers whose contribution ranged from unfriendly to downright rude. He called her after he found the address—before he read the letters—to see if he still lived there. She cut right to the chase, telling him that his father had died last year, in a causal tone, as if he should have known and it meant nothing to her, as it probably did.

He left the “if only's” out of my thoughts for the moment. These letters were all he had to gather a glimpse of this man that he had never known. A man he thought had abandoned him and his mother.

The first was dated June 29, 1951. It began “Dearest Sweetheart.” His father wrote in cursive, his words spelled correctly, about how he missed her already, and how he only had six years left in the army. He asked her to remember her promise to marry him once he was home. He wrote about how much fun he'd had the weekend before

returning to camp, and how about he ended up in the brig for returning late because he didn't want to leave her. This was a habit that would land him in the brig and the stockade several times in his military career, according to the letters, as well as AWOL on one occasion where he tried to escape to be with her.

None of these things had Jackson ever heard from his mother. In fact, she didn't speak of Jackson's father at all—at least not until a month after Jackson was married. She phoned him to tell him that she and his father were never married, even though she and he bore his last name. He didn't know what to say. He never asked her why. That was their way. The fact bothered his ex-wife tremendously that he was a *bastard* child, but her life growing up was so very different than his. She had only met her father five years before he died. At least she had that chance; it was more than he'd been given.

May 1983

Before Aleene went into surgery to have two valves replaced, she was not thinking about how simple life had been years before, how her life had been like in her youth, or how the loss of her first love had affected her. She had thought of these matters before, at random times. Like when she had called her son to tell him that she had never actually married his father. Since her son did not ask questions, she did not provide any other details. On that day, she had thought about how much simpler life had been in the fifties. But in the few hours before her surgery—having already had it once before and recovered quite well—she thought about the Holly Hobby quilt she and her mother had

been working on before she left for the hospital, and about which pieces she wanted to add. She thought it needed a few greens to offset the other colors. Though the trim was a deep blue with white dots, a few more greens would add to the richness of the quilt. She would tell her mother this tomorrow, she thought, once the surgery was behind her.

January 1952

Aleene rubbed her abdomen gently with her right hand as she steered her Buick with her left. She had another two hours to go before Douglas, Arizona, where she would meet Johnny. She hadn't seen him in over four months and longed to be near him. His letters always made her smile. She had sent him the large photo he had requested; the one she had made at Sal's Photo Spot in Wytheville, Virginia. She sent him the large size and a wallet to keep with him. He had stopped asking about her doctor visit and how she was feeling because she had stopped talking about the subject. To her, it was not a subject you told a man in a letter, this was something that had to be done in person. She would never have made the twenty-nine hour drive by herself otherwise. But she needed to see him; he wouldn't be receiving a leave long enough to accommodate a visit for a few more months.

She pulled her hand away from her stomach. She would have to be careful not to do this until the time was right. She wanted a night with Johnny before she told him the news. A little dinner, a few beers, a dark hotel room. He would be none the wiser until the morning. At least she hoped that was the case. No one at home had noticed a

change in her, except her mother, who only shook her head and told her to do right by the man. Her mother had always been a woman of few words. Even when Dad chased her through the garden with the pitchfork, claiming he didn't know who she was, and she had to have him locked up, she didn't have much to say.

Mom didn't say much about that, and she didn't say much about this either. She reckoned the situation would work out the way it was meant to be. Aleene wasn't so sure. She had passed El Paso a few hours back and now the roads were practically deserted. She had never seen so much desert in her life. The darker browns cascaded into deep, rich lighter browns. Tans, golds, and beiges painted the landscape. Even the green held tinges of brown. Aleene had never thought of brown as a pretty color before, but here on the road, she could see a certain elegance in the color she had missed for so many years. Brown was not the shade of dying grass, but the color of rich desert life. And in the middle of that life was Johnny.

They met at the Country Inn, which wasn't in the country and was more of a motel. He was waiting outside for her when she arrived, not having the money to rent the room without her. She felt certain the military paid him something for his services, but he assured her the money was needed to help his mother and sister back home. Since she understood life without a father to provide, she took this as sound logic and didn't mind to sending him money on occasion or even spotting their hotel bill for the weekend. After all, she was twenty-two and still lived at home. She helped with a few bills, but their rent at the old house was not much and her mother made enough at the shirt factory to suffice.

Aleene knew she made more at the stocking factory in the next town over, but she did not tell her mother this, because her mother never asked.

Johnny walked to open her door as she pulled into a parking stall, a wide grin already spread across his face. Aleene threw her arms around him, connecting her lips to his the moment their bodies collided. He lifted her off the ground and kissed her as he spun her around. His brown hair was cut military short and his blue eyes sparkled as he set her down and she couldn't help but smile. A smile that betrayed how much she cared about him and how excited she was to see him, but, for once, she did not care. She had arrived.

After she paid for the room, room fifteen—her birth date, how lucky—she freshened up for dinner. Johnny ran his hand down her back and whispered gently into her ear, calling her sweetheart and darling as he often did in his letters, and she felt sure they would not make dinner that night. But he told her a diner was down the street that was sure to be open. They could go by and pick up the order to take back to the hotel. They walked to the shop. They passed only a few small businesses, which had all closed for the evening. The town was quite larger than her hometown, but it was still small in the scale of cities she had read about. The courthouse was up the street, and was the largest building in the town. The diner was the only place lit up other than the motel and the street lamps.

When they arrived Johnny decided he was hungrier than he had thought, so they stayed at the diner and had burgers, fries and split a milkshake. It wasn't the romantic

night that she had hoped for, but they talked until their food arrived and held hands over the table. Johnny called her his girl twice.

After the food they walked back to the inn in silence, holding hands, while Johnny whistled softly under his breath. Even without words, the soft tone of his voice soothed and comforted her.

Once in the room, he unzipped the back of her dress for her. She turned out the lamp before sliding it off and folding it gently in the chair. She sat on the edge of the bed and removed her stockings as Johnny kissed the back of her neck and shoulders. Then she climbed into bed with him, and made love as they had before.

When they were finished, she lay curled up, her back against his chest. His arm was wrapped around her, and he slowly stroked her skin, forming a line from her neck to her navel and back again. She let out a small sigh. She would have to tell him now.

As Johnny stroked her stomach he noticed that it was more distended than before. At first he thought he was imagining it, but as he ran his hand along her body, he remembered her curves. He'd so often thought about them, at night in his bunk. After lights out, when he couldn't sleep, he would close his eyes and picture his hand running across her body until he could practically feel her beside him. Each visit with her, he had studied these curves and contours until he had made a map of them in his mind. But this was new. They had spoken in letters about her trip to the doctor and mentioned pregnancy in passing, but she had dropped the subject. If that was the case, why hadn't

she told him before? The bump was small, but why hadn't he noticed when he first saw her?

His hand stopped tracing her entire front and focused now on the small bump in her lower abdomen. He waited for her to speak. It didn't take long.

"Johnny," she said. He continued to stroke the bump in silence. He tried to prepare for the next words, but he couldn't. His mind would not believe them until they were delivered from her lips.

"I went to the doctor," she continued. "I'm pregnant."

There it was. He wanted to react, but he had gone numb. He was not sure where to begin. Was she sure it was his? How could he ask her such a thing? She was the first woman he had loved so deeply, but not the only woman he had been with—not even since he had met her. He had promised to marry her after his stint in the army. But that was six years away. A lot could happen in six years. He knew it. She knew it. That had given him time, but now that time was up.

"Johnny?"

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I didn't want to tell you in a letter. I wanted to tell you in person. That's why I made the trip. You said it would be a while before you had another long leave. I couldn't chance it."

"I just need a minute." As he continued to stroke her stomach, he remembered the day he'd met Aleene. It was last June, a week after his nineteenth birthday. He was hitchhiking home from base in South Carolina. She had picked him up on route eleven

and taken him to Rural Retreat to visit his sister. He had agreed to take her to the town fair that night, and after a ride on the Ferris wheel they had their first kiss. He was smitten with her from the get go, even though she was three years his senior, and had been dating a local boy at the time.

“If he’s a boy, can we name him Johnny?”

“Sure we can. What if it’s a girl?”

“Well, we could name him after my mother, or your mother. We could figure out a good name for her, I’m sure.”

Johnny brought his hand up and touched Aleene’s face. He could feel her smile.

“Should we get married?” Johnny asked.

“When?”

“How ‘bout now? We could go to the courthouse on Monday and get a license, and see when they could do it. Or check with the local Lutheran Church, I’m sure they could phone your pastor, find out you are a member in good standing.”

“Aren’t you due back on base Monday?”

“It’ll be okay. We’ll get married first, and then I’ll go back. It’s not like I haven’t ever been late for leave before.”

“They’ll stick you in the brig again.”

“It’ll be worth it.” Johnny smiled and ran his hand along the bump one more time.

“Little Johnny.”

“When will you be able to come in again?” Aleene asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to talk to my commanding officer. Maybe if I explain the situation I can get transferred closer to you, maybe back to South Carolina or Tennessee.”

“It’s going to be so wonderful.” Aleene’s body relaxed against him.

On Sunday they picked up food from the small grocery store that was only open for a few hours. None of the other businesses in town were open for the day. They spent most of the day in bed, planning the wedding in case they were able to book the church, or if they were to be married at the courthouse. Aleene wanted to pick up flowers for a small bouquet at the floral shop a few blocks over. She’d brought a beige-and-blue dress with her that she would wear, which she refused to show Johnny. She wanted to have her hair done as well.

Johnny sat back and listened to Aleene talk. He wanted her to be happy. He also wanted to marry her and make it back on base as soon as possible to reduce his time in the brig.

On Monday, they went to the courthouse first thing and bought their marriage license. The clerk gave them a discount since Johnny was in the Army. The court performed marriages at eleven and one on Tuesday and Thursday. They went to the local Lutheran church, but found the pastor was on holiday to visit family in Utah. They would have to wait until Tuesday to marry at the courthouse. Aleene found a hair salon a floral shop where she picked out a small bouquet that they said would be ready first thing in the morning. That night, they ate at the diner again. Aleene paid.

On Tuesday morning, when Johnny woke up, Aleene was gone. Her suitcase was no longer by the chair and her toiletries were no longer in the bathroom. Johnny’s heart

rate sped up as he scanned the room. Then he spotted the note on the night stand. "See you at the courthouse at 11." He read the words and sighed; she wanted the dress to be a surprise. Next to the note was a couple dollars for breakfast. Outside, her car was already gone, probably to the hair salon. Johnny showered and dressed in his uniform, then walked to the diner for breakfast. In his uniform, the diner picked up the tab. He stashed the dollars for later. He read the paper and waited until it was time for him to be at the courthouse. At ten till eleven Johnny stood on the courthouse steps.

Aleene was not in the parking lot. Inside the courthouse, the judge sat in the front of the room, the stenographer and a bailiff at his side. It was a slow day. He told them he was there for a wedding, but had to wait on his bride. He took a seat at the back and waited.

The courthouse closed from noon to one. Aleene had still not arrived. At a quarter to one, while Johnny sat on the courthouse steps, two MPs showed up to escort him back to the base. He'd been AWOL for over twenty-four hours now. He tried to explain his situation, to no avail. They were given strict orders and they were to follow them. They put him in handcuffs and walked him away. He looked around for Aleene one last time. The MPs pointed out that it looked like he'd been stood up anyway. They took him back to base where he was placed in the brig. Again.

Aleene finished having her hair done and stopped by the floral shop to pick up her bouquet. Then she stopped at the department store to buy a present for Johnny. She wouldn't have much time with him after the marriage. She bought him a leather wallet.

He had spoken of one in a few of his letters. She had it gift-wrapped at the store. She bit her lower lip. She pulled into the parking lot of the courthouse at precisely one o'clock. She had wanted to arrive a few minutes early, but things had taken longer than she expected. The courthouse was just being opened.

Johnny was not on the steps. The parking lot was almost empty. She entered the room, bouquet in hand, wallet wrapped up and in her purse. The judge sat at the head of the room. She gave him a copy of their wedding license and told him she was waiting on her groom. They asked if he was in the army, and when she told them yes and described him, they told her he had been there earlier, but was now gone. They did not know where, it had been during their lunch hour. Aleene waited until the courthouse closed, but Johnny did not arrive.

She went back to the hotel, but it was empty as well, and his things were no longer there. She picked up her note from the table. "See you at the courthouse at 1!" He had been there, why had he left? She waited until nightfall, and began the drive home. She had no way to reach her mother; the phone lines were just being installed around town and they had yet to buy a phone. So she drove, alone. Because she had stayed extra days, she did not have the money for the hotel rooms on the ride home.

She stopped in Jackson, Mississippi, pulled into a motel lot, and slept for a few hours. When she awoke the next morning, she noticed the Lutheran Church across the street. The sign outside it read: There is always hope. She nodded at the sign as if it was meant directly for her. She tried to keep her eyes dry. Though, whether it was hormones from the pregnancy, or the unmet expectations of the trip, she couldn't; she cried during

the entire trip until she pulled into the driveway at her home. Then she wiped her face clean, and held her head up as she entered the house.

In May she had her son. She would not name him Johnny. Instead she named him Jackson, in honor of the church sign that had given her a small amount of hope on her drive home. The trip had not gone as she had hoped, but it had made her realize that she what she was capable of. So she named him Jackson John, and gave him his father's last name.

In October she ran into Johnny at the Laundromat. He had come home to visit his sister. The baby was home with Aleene's mother. They didn't talk about that day. It wasn't her way. When he tried, she interceded with a remark about his lack of letters or how he never loved her, which only seemed to anger him.

He demanded to see the baby, but she did not want to grant him that request. She knew deep in her heart it might not be right, but she was colder, harder now, than that day eight months ago. So she refused with an air to her that she had never before let Johnny see. She was no longer the fun-loving naive girl with whom he had fallen in love. She was a woman, assertive and assured of herself. A mother. But as she had changed, Johnny had as well. He was more insistent, even angry, which she had never seen in him.

Johnny slammed his fist onto the washer and Aleene's shoulders jerked involuntarily. She had never seen Johnny angry, but then again, she had only known him for a few weeks and a few weekends. She had a son to think about now, and the thought of a future with a man she barely knew flat-out frightened her. She wondered if this was

who he really was. He had had another birthday, but he was still only twenty, not yet the man he would grow into. She wasn't sure what kind of parent he would be and she didn't want Jackson to know the pain of abandonment as she had. Johnny still had five more years in the army. What kind of life would that be for Jackson? Johnny was not mature enough to be a father; he couldn't control his temper or keep his word. He couldn't even keep out of the brig in the military. He was destined to cause her son pain. She couldn't bear to think of the baby that she rocked at night feeling pain, any pain at all.

She told him no once more, glaring into his eyes, making sure that he knew she was serious. She gathered her laundry and left him standing there, fist still balled up at his sides.

That night, she heard a scratch at the back door. Jackson lay in his bassinet beside her. She walked through the house and peeked out of the window in the living room. Someone was trying to come through the back door. Her mother walked into the room. "I think it's that boy of yours," she said. Aleene called the police. Johnny made it into the house and the living room where he was confronted by the two women.

"I want to see my son," he said. "My sister told me it was a boy. Did you name him Johnny like we talked about?"

His eyes pleaded with her, and for a moment, she remembered the last time they made love in Arizona, wrapped in the sheets, talking about baby names and how they had planned their life to be. But that plan had failed.

"No," Aleene said. "His name is Jackson and you haven't earned the right to see him. How dare you break into our home?"

“You didn’t leave me much of a choice.”

He shoved past the women and into the Aleene’s room, staring down into the bassinet at his son. The baby was so small. He loved him and he hadn’t even held him yet. How could he make this right? Before he could reach down to touch him, the police arrived and escorted him from the house. “You can’t keep me away from my boy,” he shouted as he was being tucked into the police car.

The next day, Aleene went to the bank, closed her account, and reopened it with a different last name: Johnny’s last name. Johnny couldn’t be the father she wanted, but his name would provide her son a better life, even if it was a lie.

Most people assumed they were married. She even told a few this lie. Her son would not be a bastard. She would provide the best life as a single mother that she could. Johnny would not be a part of it. He had another five years in the military. He would find someone new and move on. Jackson was Aleene’s son.

She didn’t hear from Johnny again until January, when she received another in a long string of letters, apologizing for his behavior. But if Aleene had one trait that she admired more than others, it was her stubbornness.

Jackson finished the final letter to his mother. It was from a prison in Maryland. He did not know why his father was in prison, but it seemed normal for him with all his time spent over the years, in the brig or stockade. His father still wanted his mother, or at least told her as much, and asked her to send money if she could. He apologized for the

way things were and promised to try to come see them when he got out. He made no mention of his current wife or other children. In all his previous letters after Jackson's birth he had called him Johnny—possibly in hopes that his mother would call him that as well. She never once did. But in his final letter to Jackson's mother, he addressed to her and his son. At the end of the letter he wrote “tell Jackson I love him and will try to see him soon.”

Jackson only had one half of the stories—he had none of her letters that she had sent to his father. Perhaps he had kept them, and they were hidden away somewhere, but Jackson would never know. What happened in the year without letters was a mystery to him. He had asked his aunts, but they only said that his mother had gone to Douglas to tell Johnny about him. That was all they knew. His mother had never said anything else about it. Though, he felt like he knew his father better than he ever had, and would, for another twenty years, when he finally met his half-brother and sisters, the letters still left big holes in his life.

Why had she never married him, like he asked so many times in the letters? Why had she kept him away from Jackson? The more Jackson learned about his father, the less he felt he knew the woman who had raised him all his life. Even now, as a father, he could not justify her decisions, though he knew he did not know all the parameters of the situation. He did not know what incident his father had apologized for, or why his father called him Johnny for so long. The only thing that he was certain of, was that he was not abandoned by his father. And he was definitely not a child who lacked for loved.

The Predictability of It

Samantha liked routine. So much of her life was unpredictable, no matter how much she planned. She couldn't control the customer's reactions at the clothing store she managed, the distribution center's mistakes, the employees calling in sick. But at home, she had control. She could walk her dog, Mr. Darcy, around her apartment complex, and enjoy the nice fall air. She could say hi to her neighbors as she got her mail. She knew what she would have for dinner, and what time she would go to bed.

Her personal life hadn't even come close to a semblance of a routine in over two years. She had just broken up with Eddie a few weeks before, and he had already made two surprise appearances at her apartment, and sent her some drunken emails—some wanting her back, some telling her why she wasn't worth wanting back. Work, relationships, those were things that could not always be controlled, but home, home could be the safe zone where she knew what to expect.

What Patrick liked about Samantha's routine was the predictability of it.

Patrick watches Samantha from across the parking lot. He walks toward the clubhouse, as though he is a resident at the apartment complex. The place is not huge, but with twelve buildings, hosting eight to sixteen apartments each, blending in is easy. He can see why Samantha wants to live here. Reno is ten minutes away, a short drive to work. But the community is small, slightly secluded, and off the main roads. It is walled in for privacy, and at night the city, which can be seen from many of the balconies, lights

up like a Christmas decoration. The other tenants look upon a beautiful mountain that already has a slight snowcap. Yes, this is a great place to live. It is also a great place to blend in. The people are friendly and Patrick is friendly back. He knows the truth. No one is going to remember what he looks like; he is as forgettable as last month's bills.

He first saw Samantha four months ago at the organic grocery store. She had her soft brown hair pulled into a pony-tail with curls that bounced as she walked, and her long bangs lay across her face. Her cheekbones were prominent, and had a natural blush to them. He had not been able to see what color her eyes were, but they seemed to be darker—possibly a dark green or brown. He followed her as she went down the cereal aisle, picking up boxes, reading the labels, and putting them back on the shelves. He stood for a while at the end-cap looking at the cookies in front of him. They made him invisible: a shopper blending in with the background. He didn't dare talk to her though. She didn't even look up or notice him once. He followed her to the produce section, watching her make her selections. She had a slight smile on her face. She seemed happy. Warm, affectionate. He could see her pulling a pot roast out of the oven, setting it on the table in front of her family, consoling a tired child at the table.

He checked out and went to his car: an unremarkable blue sedan. Samantha came out of the store twenty minutes later and loaded her groceries into the back of a dark blue SUV. He wrote down the license plate number and followed her home. He stayed back behind her, and when she pulled into her apartment complex he drove on by, doing a U-turn down the road and then returning to the lot. It was walled in, but had no security gate. He pulled in and saw her vehicle at the fourth building. He found a covered space

across from it. The covered spaces had assigned drivers, and he had to hope the assigned driver didn't come home while he was there. He watched in his rearview mirror as she walked out of the bottom floor apartment and retrieved the rest of her groceries. Once she was inside the apartment, he stepped out of the car and walked by her door. Apartment forty-one. He wrote it down and went back to his car, then drove home.

On his fourth visit to the apartment complex, he had feigned interest in renting a new place and asked for a tour of some of the apartments. He hadn't decided what size apartment he wanted, so the apartment manager showed him three different models. They were all almost exactly the same. The layouts were all similar, with less footage in some, or an additional bathroom. The building Samantha lived in housed eight apartments, which meant it was a two-bedroom. When he finished the tour, he took the layouts they had given him and circled the two layouts that could be hers. They were almost identical; one of them lacked a master bath, and was about 200 square feet smaller. Both had the second room, and it was in the same location.

Patrick watched Samantha for four straight days. She would arrive home from work between five and six, and then she would take her dog for a twenty minute walk around the apartment complex. She took different routes, almost as if letting the dog navigate them. She had her keys in hand and would check her mail. She only locked her door on occasion. Most of the time she would leave it unlocked as she walked around the complex.

On the fifth day, Patrick parked on to the opposite side of her apartment building and waited for Samantha to arrive. She went in to her apartment. He got out of his car and

walked toward the building. He stepped out of sight just a little and bent over to appear like he was tying his shoe.

Samantha entered her apartment. The alarm squealed at a high pitch ring until she could punch in the four-digit alarm code. Mr. Darcy's birth date. He was already jumping at her feet, ready to go out. She pulled out his leash and hooked it onto him. She grabbed a doggie bag and walked toward the door. She put her mailbox key in her pants pocket and glanced at the alarm, then walked out the door. Once it closed behind her, she glanced at the lock. Her apartment complex was still well lit from the day. She looked around. Why bother with the lock, she wouldn't be gone for very long. She paused outside the door; a chill swept over her. Odd, because there wasn't much wind today. She glanced behind her: nothing. She shrugged. "Come on Mr. Darcy." She walked off with the dog close beside her.

He heard her come out of her apartment, talking to her dog. The door shut behind her. He counted to ten, then rounded the corner. She was out of sight.

He walked over and turned the handle of the doorknob. It slid open with ease. He walked into the apartment. There was an alarm panel beside her door, there was in every apartment. He wasn't sure if she used it or not—if she had it hooked up with a local company, or if it just went off in her room like the other ones. The apartment opened into her living room. He looked at her coffee table, which had a few magazines on it. He picked one up and read the label: Samantha Walker. What a beautiful name.

He laid it back down, and walked through the apartment. He needed to memorize the layout. The oven was on in the kitchen; she must be warming it up for dinner. As he walked in to the spare room he heard the door opening. Damn. She had come back early. He shut the door as quietly as possible. He crossed the room, opened the closet door and stepped inside. It was a walk-in full of suitcases and clothes. He shut the door and slid into the back corner, behind the clothes, trying to conceal himself as best as he could.

Samantha closed the door, flipped the deadbolt, and punched in her alarm code. She was in for the night. She unhooked Mr. Darcy, but before she could give him his treat, he ran down the hall. He stopped outside the spare bedroom door and sniffed. He barked at the door and looked up for Samantha. He barked again. Samantha came down the hall and looked at him.

“What are you doing?” she asked. She looked at the spare room door, and back down the hall. Her eyebrows furrowed. Everything looked the same.

He pushed his nose to the ground and barked again. Samantha opened the door and the dog ran into the room, sniffing around the floor. Samantha followed him in, checking the room. The closet door was closed, just as she had left it. The blinds were drawn; they always were. The thought of looking out them and seeing someone staring back in terrified her; even as unrealistic as the notion was. The room was quiet per usual. In the middle of the floor lay one of Mr. Darcy’s squeaky toys. She picked it up and squeaked it.

“Is this what you want?”

The dog sniffed towards the closet. Samantha squeaked the toy again and he came running to her. He was acting a little weird tonight. Maybe he was just in a mood. She shut the door on her way out and tossed the toy down the hall. He ran happily after it. She smiled broadly. He was such a great dog.

She went into her kitchen and poured some oil into a skillet on the stove. She was going to make fried squash and baked chicken for dinner. She had prepared it last night and could almost taste the squash's warm, crispy, cornbread crust. She opened the oven and put her chicken breast inside. She set the timer and went into the living room to turn on the television. She set the channel to a rerun of a sitcom and returned to the kitchen. She sliced the squash thinly, dipped the slices in egg, then batter, and dropped them into the sizzling oil.

Patrick closed his eyes. He pictured Samantha in her kitchen, making her dinner. What he had seen of the apartment, was impeccably clean and organized. There wasn't a lot of clutter, and her living room was open and spacious. A half wall separated the kitchen from the living room, so she could see into the living room while she cooked. It made the room appear more open than it already was. He wasn't sure what she was making, but as he stared at the picture in his mind, he could smell the flavors sifting through the rooms. He was sitting at the kitchen table with her. She was serving him some mashed potatoes to go with his steak. She sat down across from him, holding his hand, and looking into his eyes. He could see her want and desire there.

Samantha glanced at the unused dining room table, and walked into the living room with her plate of food. Tonight was one of the occasions she missed having someone else to cook for, to sit at the table and enjoy a nice meal with. Eddie loved her food and they had some great conversation, when he wasn't drinking. She sat down and enveloped herself in the television show.

A little before eleven the television cut off, and he heard the distinct sound of the alarm being set. He couldn't leave through the front door. It would go off. Even if the alarm wasn't on, waking up to an unlocked door would freak her out, make her more cautious. He would wait it out.

He sat through the night, awake. He didn't move. The dog would hear him and wake her up. She always took her dog—Mr. Darcy, if he heard the name right—out in the morning. He would wait until then. He longed to watch her sleep, to run his fingers through her hair and listen to her slow, shallow breaths. He wondered if she wore the same flannel pajamas every night that he had seen her wear one evening, when it was late, and her dog needed to go out. Maybe she only wore them over her other clothes. She could be wearing a silky red camisole with black lace trim. No, she wasn't that kind of girl. She would be wearing a cotton tank top, probably gray, comfortable; she'd have no idea how sexy she actually looked in it.

In the morning, just after five, footsteps moved across the master bedroom. Patrick moved closer to the wall, leaning his right ear to the side. The dog jumped off the bed and ran to the door. Ten minutes later the bedroom door opened.

Samantha walked Mr. Darcy down the hall. He stopped again and sniffed the spare room door. Samantha paused at the door, reached for the handle, then shook her head. The dog was being crazy lately. She reached the kitchen and pulled his leash and a doggie bag out of the drawer. Then she turned off her alarm and walked out into the brisk morning air.

Then the front door closed. Patrick moved quickly out of the closet, out of the spare room, and out of the apartment. He had just made it to his car when he turned back to glance at her apartment. She was entering it. Gray sweats. She was wearing gray sweats. She was beautiful even in the morning. He wanted to tell her.

Another time, he told himself. There were things that needed to be done.

It has been three weeks since he had first seen Samantha. He knows she works as a manager in a clothing store at the strip mall. She likes chicken and shrimp, but wasn't that big a fan of beef. She loves her dog, which was very loud at times. She likes to watch television and read in the evenings. She rarely has company—in fact, only once in the last three weeks; one of her colleagues from work had stopped by to watch a movie. She is very organized and she likes her routine. He knows she is beautiful. She is special. And she never, ever, wavers from her routine.

Patrick now parks in a space that is currently vacant. No one is living in the apartment, and the spaces are not numbered to match the apartments. He knows this

information from watching, as much as he knows the neighbors here don't really pay much attention to those little things. The space is very close to Samantha's apartment. He can see her parking space clearly, separated only by a cement landing with rocks and two small bushes. He can see her door. He watches her pull into the parking lot, drive slowly over the speed bump, and park perfectly parallel to the lines.

Samantha exits the car, a grocery bag in her hand, shuts the door, and walks to her apartment. She turns the key, and walks inside, through the buzzing alarm. She enters the code and sets her groceries down on the table. Mr. Darcy barks excitedly. She takes the leash out of the kitchen cabinet, and hooks it on to him. She smiles as his excitement to see her. She walks him outside and over to the clubhouse to pick up her mail. She notices a blue sedan parked in one of the previously vacant spots, possibly a new neighbor. A man sits in the front seat, she can't see his face. She wonders if she should say hello. Maybe another time, she wasn't in a particularly social mood.

Patrick steps out of the car and walks directly into the apartment. Samantha had looked at him. She wanted him. His desire was returned. He stops at the dog's dish and pours a powdered sedative over the food. He crushes one of the dog's treats over the food. He walks back to the spare bedroom, grabs a toy on the way. He shuts the door and sets the toy a foot in front of it. He settles in the closet and closes the door. He pulls a bottle, a wash cloth, and a syringe out of his pocket. He sets them on the top of a suitcase that is about waist-high next to him. He waits.

Samantha takes Mr. Darcy on his long afternoon jog around the apartment complex; first by the clubhouse and mailboxes, then in a loop around the buildings. The parking stalls across from hers are more full lately. The man in the blue sedan is gone. She wonders what building he is in. She hasn't noticed anyone moving in, but they could have moved in during the day. No one new has moved into her building, she would have noticed that. Oh well. She will meet the new neighbors soon enough.

Samantha returns from her walk and tosses a treat to Mr. Darcy. She cuts some veggies and steams some fish. She eats dinner in front of the television. She puts on her flannel pajamas and reads from her book for a while. Mr. Darcy chomps hungrily at his food in the kitchen. Then he walks back to the bedroom and lays down on the floor.

After an hour passes, Samantha misses his lively attention and walks to her bedroom to find him. He is lying on the floor sound asleep. She picks him up, and places him on the bed, his normal sleeping spot. To her surprise, he doesn't wake up. She strokes his soft fur; his small stomach moves slowly up and down. She turns out the light and goes back to the living room to watch some television.

After a few hours Samantha turns the television off and stands up from the couch, stretching her long, stiff legs. Her day at the store had been long and trying. She loves Mr. Darcy, but is glad he is tired tonight, because she is exhausted. He is great company, but sometimes she would like someone to converse with. But Mr. Darcy loves her unconditionally, and she has never found that in a person. He has never let her down, or gotten drunk and missed a date. Samantha lets out a small sigh.

It is still early, not even ten, but she is ready for bed. She sets her front door alarm, picks up her cell phone from the table and turns out the light. She opens her phone and shines the blue light in front of her to light her path down the hall.

Patrick hears the television go off. He places the capped syringe in his right pocket. He pours the chloroform onto the cloth and opens the door quietly. He waits until the lights go out. He sees the glow of her phone coming toward him.

Samantha uses the small amount of light to work her way to her room. The blue glow provides only a foot of light in front of her, but she knows her apartment well. She moves the phone a little to the left and sees a face illuminated in blue. Sharp features, a scruffy mustache and beard, and eyes focused on her—shining in a blue light that makes it seem surreal. He is at least six feet tall and stocky. He is wearing a baseball cap. A wide smile is spread across his face.

She is alone in this apartment with him in front of her. Darkness behind her, where the only exit she can think of resides.

Patrick grabs the phone from her hand and pushes her against the wall, one hand over her mouth. “Give me the alarm code,” he demands.

Samantha shakes uncontrollably and looks back toward the living room, though she can’t see anything in the darkness. The smell of sweat and dirt seep off of the man’s hand, entering her nose, along with a strange bleach-like smell. She cannot get around him. She struggles to scream; which comes out as a muffled whine.

He rattles her into the wall once more. “Give me the code so I can get out of here, or I will kill your dog.” He moves his hand down slightly so he can hear her.

Four digits between what she knows and the vastness of what awaits outside the door. She can’t give in so easily. Mr. Darcy is her life, but that life requires her to live. She should fight, but how? His grip tightens. “F, f, four.” Her lips quiver as she tries to produce the words. “F four. Six. Seven.”

He grabs the cloth with his free hand and puts it to her mouth.

An unfamiliar sweet smell passes through Samantha’s nose: a faint odor of cleanser, possibly alcohol. Chloroform. Her mind turns fuzzy. She can no longer focus on anything, her words are lost, her vision is a distorted, foggy blackness.

Patrick pulls the syringe from his pocket, supporting her unsteady body with his own. He uncaps it and pushes it into her arm.

Samantha feels a slight pinch on her arm, so far away that it can’t possibly be attached to her body any longer.

Patrick carries her limp body to the couch and lays her down. It is just past ten o’clock. He cannot move her until later. He strokes her brown hair. It is every bit as soft as he imaged it would be. He brushes her bangs back off her face. She is truly beautiful. He strokes her hair once more, then stands up and looks down at her body. He sighs deeply.

He goes to her bedroom. He has not gotten to examine it in detail yet. The dog is sleeping on the bed. Should he kill it? No. It will be out for a while. There is a letter folded on her nightstand: a love letter from her previous boyfriend. He glances over it and

tosses it back in its place. He opens her dresser and looks through the drawers. In the pajama drawer he pulls out a purple silk camisole. Perhaps she *is* that kind of girl. He takes a duffle bag out of her closet and packs some of her clothes in it. He knows what she likes. Moreover, he knows what he likes.

He comes back to the living room and watches her as she sleeps on the couch. She is almost angelic. Her breath is barely audible. Her chest moves in a slow steady pattern. He sits beside her and waits.

It is almost two in the morning. Eddie left the bar an hour ago and ends up at Samantha's apartment after driving aimlessly around. He looks at her apartment window. Her living room light is still on. Why is she still up? Should he knock on the door to say hello? Would she accept him, invite him in? Would she turn him away? She ended the relationship. He still loves her. What is she still doing up? Maybe she couldn't sleep. He decides not to bother her. She has made it quite clear that she doesn't want to be with him. The living room light goes out. He has missed his chance.

Patrick picks up the duffle bag and throws it over his shoulder. It is after two a.m. The apartment complex looked quiet when he scanned over it moments before. He unlocks the door and punches in the alarm code. It beeps but the red light stays on. He punches in the numbers again. Same response. She gave him the wrong code. How could she? His face reddens and his mind fills with anger. He doesn't have the supplies to wait another full day and night. He has to do this tonight and is going to have to do this in one

motion. The alarm will only go to her room, but after a while, it will arouse some suspicion. Why had she given him the wrong code? She is ruining everything. He should kill the dog for spite. But she isn't going to see the dog ever again anyway. He will tell her that he did. He needs to go. He walks to the window. Scans the parking lot. Sees no one. Clicks the doors of his sedan unlocked.

Eddie starts to turn over his ignition when he sees the sedan in front of him flash its lights. That is odd. He looks around the parking lot, but it is empty.

Patrick picks Samantha up off the couch. The duffle bag is hanging off his right shoulder. The door is unlocked and waiting to be opened. He takes a deep breath and opens the door. A piercing sound comes out of the back bedroom.

Eddie sees Samantha's door open. He steps out of his car. This is his chance.

Once outside, with the apartment door shut, the alarm doesn't sound that loud. Maybe it will take longer to be noticed. Patrick turns toward his car and sees a man walking in his direction. Where did he come from? He didn't see him before. Patrick starts in the direction of his car.

Eddie doesn't believe what he sees. Another man carrying Samantha out of her apartment. Already? It has only been a few weeks. Okay, maybe a little longer. Why is the man carrying her? Eddie makes his way toward him.

"Hey," Eddie says to the man. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah," Patrick responds. He is sweating, his hand is shaking slightly. He bites his lower lip looking in the direction of the car. Only a few more steps. "My friend is sick and I am taking her to the hospital."

Eddie looks at him. Patrick's hand shakes. He avoids looking Eddie in the eye. He needs to get past Eddie.

"What's wrong with her?" Eddie asks.

Think. Patrick sucks in his breath. "I think the flu. She has a fever and is weak."

"I'll go with you," Eddie says.

"No!" Patrick almost yells, then lowers his voice. "No. I need to get her there as soon as possible. Who the hell are you anyway?"

"How do you know Samantha?" Eddie asks, ignoring Patrick's question. This doesn't feel right, and Samantha appears to be unconscious.

"We're old friends."

"What's your name?"

Patrick debates about not saying anything. He wants to play this as coolly as possible. It is already going downhill fast. This is way too long to have contact with another person. The only way left is to avert his suspicions, but this guy is not letting up. He remembers a note that was on Samantha's night stand. "I'm Eddie, an old boyfriend."

“Wow. What a coincidence, because I’m Eddie, an old boyfriend, and I don’t remember her telling me about another Eddie.”

Damn it! Patrick sweats profusely. He just wants to put her in his car. Eddie is in the way. He can’t fight him, his hands are full. He can’t just give this one up. He looks at Samantha in his arms. She is so beautiful.

“It is a coincidence,” Patrick says, “but she is really sick, and if you are an old boyfriend, then you would want her to get help.” He tries to step toward his car again.

Eddie steps in front of him. “I’m calling the police.” Eddie pulls his phone from his pocket. Patrick’s alarm becomes full-fledged panic. He pushes Samantha into Eddie. Eddie grabs her before she can fall.

“Let me get my ID,” Patrick says, moving toward his car.

Eddie has already dialed the police station. The phone line rings.

Patrick throws the duffle bag in his car. He starts the engine. Backs up. Shifts gear. Mashes the gas pedal. Plunges forward.

Eddie stares at the car, squinting at the plate. He can’t even tell what kind of car it is. Blue, maybe black sedan. Eight, five, seven, N? The car is out of sight.

The police answer. He tells them what is going on. Four minutes later the police arrive, as well as an ambulance. Samantha is treated. Mr. Darcy is taken to a vet. He is healthy. Samantha’s apartment becomes a crime scene for a few days. She realizes the sedan she saw was the man who attacked her, but she can’t recall a thing about his car. She was unaware of his existence until he entered her apartment. Her routine no longer

feels safe. She moves to a gated community. She and Eddie become friends again. He checks in on her at least once a week.

Patrick packs up his belongings, there aren't a lot. He wants to stay. He wants Samantha. But she is lost. She ruined it for him. Eddie ruined it for him. Now she will be cautious. Now she will be more protected. He could come back for her at a later time, but they might be looking for him. He has to leave the state. Maybe a few states over, just for a few years. A few years wasn't long to wait for her. He leaves his neighborhood. His car is packed with his few belongings, and he leaves behind what does not fit. He pulls onto the highway and heads east. After two hours he crosses into the next state. He stares out the windshield at the seemingly endless road ahead of him. Soft rock plays on the radio as he strokes her purple silk camisole with his free hand.

You Can Never Go Back Home

Alexa pulled into the funeral home parking lot. It set atop the highest hill overlooking the town below. Thunder rolled through the sky behind dark clouds that poured their gray light onto the ground and watched it reflect back up, turning the town into a monochrome snapshot. Like an old movie scene, or maybe even a dream. Alexa pinched gently at her arm. No such luck.

Crandall, Georgia. Not a place Alexa had wanted to come back to any time soon.

She shut the door to her rental car. It was the cleanest car on the lot by far, and probably the newest by at least ten years. There were only 17 spaces in the lot, nowhere her car could just blend in. Neither could she. She turned, straightened out her black tailored suit, lifted her head up and walked through the front door.

She kept her eyes forward, unwavering. She would not look down, no matter what. And she would not shed one single tear. She had promised herself these two things, and she was going to keep those promises. The first room she passed was the office. The door was closed. The next room on her left was open with a few rows of seats. Her aunt Debra, and Debra's two sons Zach and Mike, were sitting together talking. They stopped as soon as they saw her. Alexa's lips curled involuntarily. She pinched her mouth shut to conceal the action. She moved on to the next room where her mother and grandmother were standing admiring some of the flowers. The casket was in the adjoining room. The partition had been rolled back to create more space. All the rooms were opened and connected this way. The corner of the casket came into view. Alexa walked toward the room across the hall from her mother. She passed her uncle James, his wife Annie, and

their daughter Denise in the center room. Underneath his eyes were so dark, it looked as if he were wearing makeup, and the whites of his eyes were indiscernible from the red. She started toward them. Stopped. Stared at the wall that was in between her and the casket, and turned back around. She entered the empty room to the right and took a seat. She could see into the room across the hall, and the right side of the center room, but no casket. No flowers. At the moment, no mourners. Her sister, April, was running late per usual. She hadn't even spoken to her mother yet. She would wait. There would be plenty of time.

She felt nauseated as soon as she passed the rooms. She turned and headed back to the bathroom for some water to splash on her face. Through the thin walls she could hear her aunt and cousins talking in the next room.

“What’s she doing here?” Dave asked.

“I don’t know,” Debra said. “Probably starting some more trouble. Telling some more lies.”

“She’s only here for James,” he said. “She don’t care about Maw.”

Alexa and April had always called their grandmother “Grandma,” until Zach came along and started calling her “Maw.” Then that was the only name she wanted to be called. Alexa hated it.

“You guys talking about Lexi?” Zach asked.

“Yeah,” said Mike.

Alexa felt as if she could see the emotions on their faces just from hearing their words: their scowls, their eyes rolling, their contempt.

“Whatever.” Zach said.

They all lived at her grandmother’s house: two adult men and their adult mother, all living with her grandmother and previously her grandfather. Freeloaders. Mike had never had a job or went to college, and Zach had just finished with his court case and was serving three years of probation for possession of methamphetamines. Of course, her grandmother said he was ‘set-up.’

“I just don’t get why that girl just can’t behave,” Debra said.

“She’s just causin’ problems, Mom,” said Mike.

“Nobody believes her anyway,” said Zach.

“She shouldn’t have come,” Debra said.

“Are we talking about my sister?” Alexa heard April voice through the wall and sighed with relief. She could see the look on April’s face just from her tone. Her eyebrows would be raised and would be wearing a fake sarcastic smile. “She is *such* a trouble maker,” April said, stretching out the word *such* into two syllables. “Nothing like the saints that you guys are, all still living with Grandma.”

None of them responded.

“So Zach, got framed for anything else lately?” she asked. Her tone harshened.

“How ‘bout you Mike, what are you, 21 now, no job, not in school, doing anything other than laying out drunk all night?”

“Don’t talk to my kids that way,” Debra said.

“So sorry,” said April.

Alexa exited the bathroom in time to catch the last of the scene. April brought her hand up and placed it across her chest. “How’s that engagement going? What has it been, seven years now? Still can’t get him out of his mom’s house either, huh?” April smiled, gave her arms a quick shrug, turned and walked off, leaving Debra standing there, mouth agape, face reddened. She strutted out the door and upon seeing Alexa, linked arms with her and walked down the hall.

“Hey sis,” she said. Alexa let out a sigh and smiled. The only one she would have all day.

“You’re late,” Alexa said.

“Sorry.” April shrugged. “Stuff to do.”

Voices raised across the hall. Alexa peered around April to see what was going on. April didn’t turn around. Debra was talking to Mom and Grandma. None of them looked happy.

“Why did you do that?” Alexa fixed on April.

“What? I just told the truth,” April said, acting guiltless, as she always did.

“It’s a funeral. Try to be nice.”

“I’m not letting them talk about you.”

“It doesn’t matter what they say.”

“It matters to me.” April looked over her shoulder. “It matters to Mom too.”

Mom’s face was flushed and her head was shaking back and forth.

“I didn’t see you come in, Lexi-babe,” Mom said. She always had nicknames for them. They changed quite often. Mom reached over and took hold of Alexa’s hand.

“I didn’t want to cause a scene,” Alexa said. “Apparently I was the only one who didn’t.” She shifted her eyes toward April.

“What?” April asked, holding her hands innocently up in the air.

“Is Grandma upset?” Alexa asked.

“A little,” Mom said, “You should go say hello to her.”

Alexa bit on her lower lip. Across the hall Grandma and Debra were still talking.

“Not right now.”

“You know, you didn’t have to come,” Mom said.

“I know.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

With that, Mom got up and walked back out of the room. Alexa was five when her real grandfather had died. That was over twenty years ago. She didn’t remember the funeral. She only had one memory of the man and it was fading so fast that she wondered if it were actually real, or just her imagination trying to put the pieces of her past together. Mom didn’t meet her own father until she was twenty-two, so she only had a few years with him as well. She had run away from home in her teens across three states to live with her aunt, who had raised her. Her mother and step-father followed a few years later. She was married by then to Alexa’s father. He died when Alexa was two. She had no memory of him at all.

“Lexi,” James said. He tried to smile. Annie and Denise wrapped their arms around her. This is why she had come.

“How are you doing?” Alexa asked.

“You know, all right.”

Alexa nodded.

“It means a lot that you came. You didn’t have to,” James said.

Alexa nodded again, swallowing hard against her throat.

“Are you staying in town long?” Annie asked.

“I’m leaving the day after tomorrow.”

“Maybe we can get together before then.”

“That sounds good,” Alexa said, giving a half smile.

Wind slammed into the side of the building making the shutters rattle. The front door swung open and banged into the side of the wall.

“Sorry,” came a voice from down the hall. Alexa checked her watch. It was time for the viewing to be opened to the public.

People moved up and down the hall, stopping and talking to different family members. The immediate family members were all close to the coffin. All except for Alexa. April continued to walk between Alexa and the center room: sitting for a moment, asking how Alexa was. Alexa said ‘fine’ so many times that it no longer sounded like a real word.

To have not been to the town in over five years, Alexa was surprised that she knew so many of the faces. People she had gone to school with, teachers, policemen, and of course, every construction worker in the county. A steady stream of people made their

way to the casket, to the family member they knew, then socialized with other visitors. For two hours the funeral home remained crowded.

As the crowd thinned, Alexa leaned her head toward the center room until she could see the corner of the casket. She held her breath, and moved in further, the casket filling out inch by inch. Then she sat back and let out her breath. She closed her eyes.

Alexa opened her eyes. The room was empty and silent. She stood up and walked around the corner. The casket lay open on at the other end of the room. Bouquets of flowers were lined up beside it and circling the floor around it. People whispered in the adjoining room. She inched closer. The floral scent filtered through her nose and she stopped. It was a happy scent, a vastness of happy memories in those smells. Would that change now? She could see the body in the casket. She took a deep breath and walked until she was standing beside it. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see people in the adjoining room, but she did not turn her head. She stared at the wax-like figure of the man in front of her, a man she hadn't seen in over ten years.

Alexa's heart raced. Her hands shook. Her jaw tightened. She curled her hands into fists to stop the shaking. She wished for a bottle of lighter fluid and a match. She would spray it on the body and strike it up. Watch it burn. Burn in hell where the devil belonged. The smell overwhelmed her, a sulfuric, thick, smoky fog. She could see the flames: yellow, into oranges and blues, burning hot and high, the body melting around the bone, then the casket, falling in pieces to the ground, the wallpaper peeling back and the people running in fear to escape, the building engulfed in flames, burning down around her, while she stood and waited for it to be done.

Then it was all gone. Her finger nails left marks in her hand from clinching them closed. The body was still there in its cheap suit and make-up with a solemn expression on its face. Almost smug. She turned to her left. Grandma and Debra stood in silence, watching Alexa's every move. Mike and Zach stood behind them. Alexa clinched her jaw, her mouth taut. Her heart beating faster and faster. Her breath heavier and heavier.

She turned and walked out.

There was a knock at the door. Alexa did not move. Someone opened the door to Alexa's old bedroom. Alexa was lying with her back to the door.

"Lexi, honey, are you awake?" Mom asked.

Alexa didn't make a sound. She counted the seconds in the silence. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Mom closed the door. Her eyes readjusted to the darkness. She rolled over and stared at the ceiling. For eighteen years she had wanted this to be over. This was the end of it. Why didn't it feel over? She clasped her hands together and prayed for the one thing she knew she needed more than anything else. Strength.

Alexa woke up and prepared herself for the funeral. She tried to dress down for the occasion, but nothing she owned would match the small town's appearance. She was the hexangular peg in a town full of simple shapes and closed minds. She picked up her red suit. She looked it up and down, then put it back in her suit case. She dressed in a dark grey suit instead. Mom and April left early to meet at Grandma's house. Alexa had not been there in ten years.

She pulled into the driveway. Everyone was on the porch. As she parked, their gazes all shifted to her. She exited the car, and stared back at them. They all broke eye contact and continued with what they were doing. Family. That is what others would call this group. But they really weren't Alexa's family, not most of them. Mom and April were her family. James, Annie and Denise were her family. But the rest of them were just people. Human. Flawed and imperfect.

She looked at the family members talking together on the porch. Just people. A twenty-one year old boy who was never taught to be responsible, so why would he? He never had to make the tough decision of a ten-year-old child to be a grown up. Is that why Alexa resented him so much? Or his older brother who had convinced his family that the entire police force was corrupt and against him, so he didn't look bad to them. The aunt who was in a relationship that she knew was never going to end in marriage, but she was too embarrassed to just say that she was content with that. Or the grandmother, who didn't want to acknowledge that the man she was married to was, by social standings, a monster.

She had thought this day would bring the closure she had needed for so long. The casket being nailed shut, a single rose lying on top, being lowered into the ground. A handful of dirt thrown on top and she would be free. But it wasn't going to be found there, no more than it would be found under six feet of freshly turned soil and a pristine headstone. No. Some things could not be buried, no matter how much dirt was thrown on them.

Alexa glanced at her reflection in the car window. She lowered her head. Her family were just people. She opened the car door and sat back down. She turned over the ignition. Tears began to form in her eyes. She did not look back at the family. She pulled out of the driveway and headed back to her mother's house. Her cell phone rang in the seat beside her. She turned it off.

The White Raccoon

It had been a long year. As I tossed another couple of logs on the fire, the ice-covered tree branch outside played with my window like a soft drummer unsure of his notes and volume. As the wind picked up, the branches thrashed against the window, some ice breaking, some clinging to the branches for dear life, making the sound of glass or wood almost harmonious. If it was trying to speak to me, I was not ready to listen. Instead, I stoked up the fire, and lay back on the small couch, with my feet up on the armrest at one end, because my body had long since outgrown the confines and comforts that this couch held for me as a small child.

My divorce had taken place in January, and now it was already December. Felicia hadn't been able to handle another miscarriage. She had had four in the last two years, the last happening at seven months and leading to a stillborn birth, which I think is what broke down her spirits. We both wanted children, and I was even open to other options, but she was not. She said she had failed me. And though I assured her in every way that I could that that was not true, she still had to walk away. I could have fought harder, but she was already in enough pain.

My father had owned this cabin before me, and his father before that. I think it has been in our family for years, maybe even centuries. It is on 100 acres of forest land part in Virginia and part in West Virginia along the Appalachian Mountains. We don't allow hunting on the land, and most of it is fenced off with warning signs, but it doesn't stop people. Pops wasn't a hunter, but he did love to fish and tell stories.

We came to the cabin a few times a year, just the two of us, from before I could remember until I went off to college, and even once after, before his heart attack. We would fish and score the mountain. He would tell me stories about the land, the animals that lived on it, and even the trees and plants that grew there. I wasn't as much interested in the plants when I was younger as I was the animals. But soon I began to realize how important knowing all this information was to him. So I listened.

His favorite story to tell was the morning of the white raccoon. It has become almost an urban legend, and every time we came here, we would look for it. Of course, we never had any luck. I was doubtful that it even existed, but Pops was sure that it had been there once, and he loved to tell the story and I loved to listen to it.

A month after my grandmother had died of breast cancer—Pops had been eight—he had been acting out at school and the teacher had a talk with my grandfather about it. He decided to take Pops to the cabin. They usually just fished, and walked the land. But this time, my grandfather had made sure to tell Pops about all the trees, plants and animals living in the forest. He identified them by name. He showed Pops tracks in the snow, and told him what had made them. Pops said later he realized that my grandfather had been trying to show him life in the face of dealing with death. But at the time, he was just too young to realize it.

One morning, Pops couldn't sleep, and he got up before five in the morning to go for a walk. Grandfather was still in bed, and Pops didn't want to wake him, so he went for the walk by himself. The sky was barely lit up from the morning sun, but Pops could see his way. He walked down by the river where they fished and followed it south for a

while, before cutting into the woods. He watched for animal prints, trying to identify them as his father had, but he couldn't remember which ones were which.

He began to follow a trail of prints through the woods, wondering what kind of animal he would find, if any at all. The prints led up a small hill and at the top of that small hill, between two large pines Pops saw the animal the tracks had come from. It was a large white raccoon. Solid white, he said, with the only other color the black surrounding his eyes. Pops stared at the raccoon and it in turn stared back at him. Neither daring to move forward or back. Pops wanted to touch it, to feel its white fur. He had never seen such a creature before. He stepped forward, crunching the ice covered snow under his feet, and the raccoon was gone. It was so fast, he had not even seen which direction it had gone. He raced to the top of the hill, but the prints had disappeared. He looked up the trees, but he only saw layers of snow covered branches.

He ran as fast as he could back to the cabin to tell my grandfather. My grandfather was just putting on his boots to go looking for Pops. Pops drug him back up to the hill but the footprints were covered by snow. My grandfather threatened to whip Pops for lying, because that was not allowed in the household, but Pops stood his ground. He searched the area, trying to find proof of his find, but he couldn't. He still refused to back down from his claim. For the first time ever, my grandfather did not follow through with his threat of whipping him.

Maybe it was because my grandfather knew it had been a rough month. Maybe it was because he felt bad for Pops. Maybe he was proud that Pops had an imagination. But

I think it was because it was the first time Pops had smiled since his mother had died, and my grandfather didn't want to take that away.

From then on, every time they came to the cabin, they searched for the white raccoon. They followed every raccoon trail they could, but never saw the white raccoon again. They even checked the local papers regularly, because this would have made the news. But no white raccoon.

Then, when I was old enough, Pops brought me to the cabin, and we resumed the search. For years, we tried to find the raccoon, and enjoyed the search. It became a tradition, and a legend in the family.

I once asked Pops why he wanted to find the raccoon so badly. He told me that it was because of the look in its black eyes. There was something there he couldn't explain, a knowing beyond that of an animal.

Then, in March, Pops died of a heart attack and I came to the cabin alone. Felicia came to the funeral and stood beside me, holding my hand. She knew how much I needed her and was there for me. When it was over, she was gone again and it took everything I had not to beg her to stay.

I had planned on taking my son to the cabin when he was old enough. I planned on telling him the story of the white raccoon, telling him about how we would search for it, follow the trails, and name the trees and plants as we went. I planned on following Pop's footsteps and keep the tradition alive.

Then the last miscarriage occurred—a boy—at seven months, and I had already started imagining the trips we would take, the stories I would tell, the tradition that would be carried on through generations of our family line. But then that image was over.

In July, Felicia had come to the house to pick up some furniture. We talked, had dinner, and some wine, and it was like old times again. We laughed, and every inch of me wanted to ask for her to come back, to try again, to make it work. But I couldn't. The night ended in my bedroom, and she left before the morning, sending her brother back the next day for the furniture.

Yesterday she called me. She's pregnant again, five months, with a boy. She said she wasn't sure if she should tell me. She wasn't sure what to do at all. I asked her to come back to the house and be with me. Though she said she loved me, she wanted time to decide what to do. She was afraid that this would be no different than last time, and she couldn't handle if that were the case. So I told her to take all the time she wanted. I would be here. Then I came to the cabin.

This was my thinking place. This was my sanctuary. Maybe my family tradition would be carried on after all. Maybe it would end the same. I hoped for Felicia's sake that this time would be different. But I still didn't know where that left us. Would she want me back in her life? I had no answers. I only had questions and the sound of snow and ice falling against the cabin roof and branching scratching at my window.

In the morning, I took a walk. I walked by the stream. It seemed to have grown smaller as I grew up, but I knew that I just saw it differently now. I imagined what it

would be like to have my son there by my side. I imagined telling him everything my Pops had told me.

I walked back through the snow, my mind heavy with the thoughts and the choices that were out of my hands. Though the forest was vast and snow covered, I could find my way to the cabin blind. I had walked these woods my entire life. Now, they were as beautiful as ever, but I was unable to absorb that beauty as I normally did. I did not think of names of trees or look for prints in the snow. My mind was already filled.

As I rounded the corner to the cabin, I saw him: the white raccoon. He stood up on his hind legs and stared at me. I knew then what my father had meant. There was something in his eyes beyond the animal, an understanding, like he knew me somehow. Why did it appear, after all these year? Then he turned and ran away.

I didn't try to follow him or chase him. I would do that in a few years, with my son.

Shelving Units

I appreciate three things in life: reading, writing, and woodworking. There once were others, but I cannot recall them.

Not just any writing, either: poetry. I am a poet and a craftsman. Many have laughed at the notion. I wonder if they think it too hard to believe that someone can have rough hands and an elegant mind. But I see the beauty in both as similar as any two creations can be. The precision of the lines, the fluidity of the piece, the way it captures the eye. The way it makes you feel. The way it can be timeless.

I live in a two bedroom house, which is small, but came with twelve acres of land, surrounded by forest, and a garage that has never housed a car, but makes a wonderful work station and storage room for boxes of books and a small, red wagon that used to belong.

I used to sell my wood pieces in town and stop for groceries and supplies. But I don't need much in the way of food. I have only myself to feed. I don't think it was always this way, but it is now.

My books are delivered a few times a week. Sometimes I want them sooner and I have to wait to begin the next one. Then I write or work. But when they arrive I halt to open the cover to the first crisp page and smell the paper. I could inhale it forever.

The books have begun to pile up, and now I need somewhere to put them. I need shelves. I might build the shelves in the second bedroom, but when I open the door with

the faded name on the front and stare at the blue walls, I can't. There used to be more in the room, maybe a twin bed, a dresser. But now, only blue walls. I can't build the shelves here. I close the door and start in the living room.

I build them directly onto the walls, cutting out spaces for the television that I rarely watch and the cable box that I am not sure why I still pay for. I build the shelves until they cover the entire back wall of the living room. Then I start on the side wall.

I fill each shelf I build with my books. They are not in order. I want to look through them and randomly stumble upon something that I had forgotten I had. Something that evokes excitement to read again. I fill the first set of shelves with my books, but there are more. Boxes of books. Books arriving every week. I need more shelves.

I open a new box. I pick up a book—*Where the Wild Things Are*—but do not want to read it. It belongs on a shelf, but not here. I need a better spot for these books. For now, they will remain in the box.

I finish the second wall. The third. All of the walls in the living room are now covered in shelving. It is not enough. I still need more shelves. I begin to build them down the hall. When I reach the door to the blue room, I think I hear a small, familiar voice inside calling me a name that no longer belongs to me. I open the door, but the room is vacant. I close the door and hammer in the first nail. Soon the door is covered with shelves, followed by the rest of its side of the hall.

The hall is smaller now and harder to walk through, but now I am surrounded by the things I love. But what of my poetry? I cannot bring myself to read it. It speaks of loves I cannot recall. I build frames for each poem and mount each down the other side of the hall. I mount them in my room. I mount them in the bathroom and the kitchen.

But don't I still have so much more to say?

It seems the old words have gone. Perhaps they are trapped in the blue room. Perhaps they are in the last box of old books that I have not unpacked.

So I unpack it, placing them in front of the blue room door, across from the poetry that speaks to what I cannot recall. I know I will not ever read them. They are not mine. They are not for me. But they are part of my collection nonetheless. This is where they belong.

Then the words return to me, and I cannot stop the pen on the paper. I scratch out and rewrite. The words are darker now. Not me. They are not pristine and perfect on the page. The lines are crooked. All wrong.

More books arrive. I have nowhere to put them. More words come out, and I have nowhere to hang them.

They are trying to remind me of something. Something I cannot recall.

I build shelves across my front door. I place the books on the top and the bottom. I place the new words in the middle for the best view. I know they are speaking to me.

But the shelves are slanted, imperfect. How could I have created such flawed pieces? Flawed, like the new words in the middle.

They are not like the books in the hall or the words on that wall. They are not like the blue room.

Something is missing.

If I stare at it long enough, I just might recall.

Flight Plan

As he lifted up the sliding plastic window shade on the airplane window to let the light of the gray sky bleed onto the seats, Jared shivered. He knew exactly what Janette would be thinking when she heard the news of the crash, and later, of his death.

She would not be worried at first, because his gift provided him an unfair vantage in life—which he rarely misused, or could misuse. She would not think about that fact—only that, surely, he would be safe.

The water below had formed ice caps on top of the rivers or ponds, and specks of brown plants, trying to cling to the icy life they were given, were interspersed between them. He wrapped his wool coat tighter around himself, as if he could feel the cold and that tiny movement could keep him warm and safe.

The plane was in descent. It had had a stopover in Salt Lake before heading to Baltimore, and he had thought about de-boarding. Janette would assume he would have; she would later wonder why he didn't, even so far as to wonder if it was her fault. That was the one thing for which he felt the most guilt for. But this decision had nothing to do with her. He had had a second vision. He had never had two visions of the same event before. He inhaled deeply and sat back down in his seat.

The plane cut sharply to the left, and the icy water below became more apparent. Larger, swallowing up the entire view from the small window. In his head, Jared remembered the flight attendant's spiel about what to do in the event of an emergency water landing. He wished it was as simple as they had made it sound. But it never was.

* * *

Jared recalled, as a boy, seeing his golden retriever Trevor run out into the road after a ball and be hit by a large red truck with a blue Cowboys flag in the back window. Trevor lay in the road bleeding and unmoving. But when Jared moved toward the road, the dog was right beside him in his yard, with a ball in his mouth. Jared held tight to Trevor, but would not throw the ball even though Trevor kept dropping it at his feet. Then the large red truck barreled down the road, with the same Cowboys flag in the window. Jared knew then, though he thought it impossible. He knew then.

Jared pulled tighter on his seat belt and clinched his fist to the armrests. The plane hit a burst of turbulence, but nothing to worry the other passengers. He stared across the aisle at the little girl adjacent to him. She was maybe a year old, standing on her mother's lap, grinning her slobbery grin. Her hair was pinned back with a purple butterfly clip that was now twisted sideways in her tiny blond strands of hair. She looked over at him and smiled. He smiled too.

Janette was going to be furious, but eventually she would understand. He had seen their first date in his mind the second he met her, and in it she was laughing and looked so happy. They were at an Italian restaurant, eating spaghetti and ravioli and sipping red wine. He told a joke; she laughed and gently touched his hand across the table. That was the only thing that had given him courage to ask her out. She was the only one who knew of his gift.

He saw his father's first heart attack and made his father start an aspirin regimen, but it didn't stop the second one, in which Jared was helpless to do anything as the EMT operators tried to resuscitate his father. Jared had been a worthless bystander in something he did not know how to prevent.

A clank of metal echoed through the plane. Jared had already heard this sound once in his head. He was listening for it, waiting for it. It was followed by a jarring shift in the plane's direction. The flight attendants rushed to their seats or to radio the cockpit. Then came the announcement.

His gift had not come in handy with his mother, either. Though he stopped her from being in a car accident, which had saved her life that day, she was diagnosed with cancer a year later. Maybe the car crash would have been more merciful. Jared often wondered whether his was even a gift at all. He usually only saw death—the deaths of those close to him, in relation, or proximity. He would see visions of death of people he had never met, not even know where they were or how he could help them. On the rare occasion he could help, it never worked out. The images haunted him regardless most nights, and had caused his move to the country—a tiny town called Unionville, which Janette hated, but understood. Maybe now she could move back to the Charlotte, the city she loved. Maybe even find someone new. Though that saddened Jared more than he wanted to admit, because he truly wanted her to be happy, but to be with her as well. But that decision had already been made.

The aircraft was close to water and patches of land, but the rapid descent made water the primary target. Jared could feel the plane slowing down, though he had no idea how planes slowed down. He only knew that soon it would crash into to icy water below. Everyone buckled up, tucked tightly into their seats. The little girl was now gripped in her mother's arms, but was still smiling and happy and wanting her freedom from the constraints around her. Her mother pushed her further into the floor, holding her as tight as she could, creating a human shield around her.

What Jared did know from his vision was that the plane would make a safe water landing, and that the plane would actually float for a small amount of time. However, chaos was never that patient.

The landing caused several overhead bins to pop open and luggage came flying out at random aisles, hitting people mostly in the back and head. Jared was on the watch for these items as they slammed around from seat to passenger to floor. Since he was in the window seat, he avoided any major collisions, but passengers were already bleeding, screaming, and even crying from fear.

When the plane finally stopped, a moment engulfed the passengers so serene that the entire incident almost felt like a dream. People were motionless, in awe that they were still alive, stunned into silence over the pain of the injuries.

Then the quiet broke.

The flight attendants started emergency procedures, instructing everyone about the life vests under their seats before the doors equipped with life rafts were to be opened.

They try to manage orderly fashion as people slammed their heads against one another, frantically grabbing for the life vests under the seat, which were bulkier than Jared had imagined when he saw them in his mind.

Jared had not once won a game of roulette. Not even once. The odds of that were against him. Everyone wins on occasion. He had never won the lottery or keno, or foreseen anything that would improve his financial status. He led a marketing team, mostly via video conference, keeping him in the country as often as possible. Though he did have to drive into the city for occasional meetings, and attend seminars such as the ones he was traveling to now. He had never prevented a death of a stranger because he had trouble finding them or knowing what to do. Some days were quiet and it seemed to Jared that those were his happiest. He could never win at a game of chance or money, but he could have a city day free of death, full of people just living, not realizing how wonderful that was. The visionless days were worth more to him than winning all the money in the world.

Janette was in both of the visions he had seen that didn't have to do with death. That is why he loved her immediately. That first vision of her laugh. The simple touch of her hand on his. That was why he never treated her wrong. That was why he tried to give her the things he knew she wanted in life, and why he felt bad about moving to the country. He let her manage all his money. He bought her gifts. He listened when she talked, and she told him how she loved how much he listened to her and really

understood her. Then when he told her his secret, she told him that she understood that he was special, and why it perplexed him so. And she loved him back and kept his secret close to her heart.

The flight attendants were working on opening the exit doors to get to the rafts deployed. The airplane did not appear to be sinking, but because of damage to the lower compartment, Jared knew it would soon. People were screaming, throwing on life vests and deploying them, making movement hard and people more smashed in like paperclips in a metal tray. Attendants were yelling at the passengers to not deploy until after they exited the plane, but many did not listen. Passengers wanted to take their belongings, though they were told to leave them behind. Jared's briefcase was still pushed under the seat in front of him. He did not bother to touch it. He put on his life jacket, but did not inflate it.

Regardless of the efforts of the flight attendants and the co-pilot, who had left the cockpit, there was a rush of people to the front of the plane. The rafts were ready on the icy waters, the flight attendants calling to the passengers. Help was on the way.

The woman with the child was dazed with a head wound. Blood that had been pouring down her face was almost dried. She was partially obscured by other passengers who were shoving their way toward the exit. The little girl had slipped from her grasp and slid up under the seat in front of her, cutting her back, crying and trying to get back to her mother. Jared pushed through the passengers to the small child. He pulled the little girl up off the floor. He patted her head and told her that her mommy would be okay. He

secured his vest on the small child first, and pulled the other vest from under the seat and placed it on her mother, who thanked him, swaying as she tried to stand up and retake hold of her child. He reassured her that it was going to be fine, and told her to be patient and let the chaos settle.

A few minutes later, most of the passengers were off board and on the rafts. He helped the woman and child down the aisle, letting the flight attendant know he had no jacket. She frantically searched, but extra vests were not easy to get to and the tail of the plane had begun to sink. He told her he would be fine without one. Luggage, purses, computers, and electronics that were forced to be left behind littered the seats in first class.

A woman sat in the first row of the airplane clutched to her bag, refusing to give it up. Inside was a small dog. The attendants refused to let her take the bag onto the raft, because it could potentially puncture it. The woman—Rose, a flight attendant had called her—protested profusely and refused to leave the aircraft without her dog. The attendants told her they would make her leave by force if necessary, but they had to empty the plane and get as far away from it as possibly before it sank. Jared leaned down and whispered into Rose's ear to unzip the bag so the dog could get out—they were good swimmers—and then to exit the plane. At least the animal would have a chance. Rose, tears running down her face, discretely unzipped the bag and set it in the floor before being helped onto the raft.

Jared, the woman, and her child were helped onto the life raft, and the raft was now full, the plane emptied. They pushed off from the plane, moving away as it sank

deeper, waiting for emergency rescue to arrive. Jared watched the exit door as a small Pomeranian walked up to it and timidly looked out over the water. The plane sank lower and lower, until the dog jumped and began swimming toward the life raft. Rose cried out and the passengers turned to watch the efforts of this little dog trying to make it in the ice-cold water.

Pieces of brown weeds, growing out of what seemed to be nowhere, surrounded the raft. They had ice clinging to them, sparkling in the water, as the waves pushed them up and down. Jared was pretty sure this was the Patapsco River or possibly the Chesapeake Bay. The winter had been harsh, and the frozen pieces in the middle of the lake or river were more proof that the water would be colder than usual. The plane began sinking farther and faster into the water.

The rest of the passengers curled into their coats for warmth, huddling together, teeth already chattering. At the back of the raft, one passenger yelled at another to stop touching his wife and sounds of annoyance of his attitude in their situation. The attendants tried to diffuse it. But the man stood up and shoved the other man despite the attempts to subdue the situation. Rose was at the other end reaching for her puppy that had almost made it to the raft, while another flight attendant was telling her that there was no way that the dog was allowed onboard, followed by an uproar of passengers at the front of the raft to let the dog on. Jared could not worry about the dog. He was trying to keep close to the woman who was still woozy, and her child. He tried to block them from the commotion on the raft. But the raft hit a wave and the little girl went overboard.

This was not exactly as he had seen. Jared removed his wool coat. The woman was reaching for her child in the water, but unable to grasp her. She started to jump in but Jared pushed her back down in her seat.

"Trust me," he told her, and handed her his wool coat. "You're going to need this." Then he jumped.

Jared was a decent swimmer, but the cold water shocked him to the core. But this was his chance. He ignored the cold as best as he could and thought about the girl. She motivated him to move faster. He reached the girl and helped push her back into the raft. Her mother removed the life vest and wrapped her shivering daughter in the wool coat, clutching the girl to her chest. Before the crew could pull Jared back into the raft, another wave sent him farther from the boat.

He could no longer feel his fingers or toes, or even his legs. But he could still float in the icy water, even without the vest. He bobbed along, hoping that this part of his vision would not come true. But as the numbness took over, he gave up on that hope. Hypothermia wasn't even on his list of ways he didn't want to die. As morbid as that was, he had a list of his top five: burned, stabbed, eaten by animals, drowned, strangled. He had never even considered this one, or ever had a vision of this kind of death before.

Before the numbness took over his mind, he saw Janette. She walked into the living room wearing a red lace teddy—it was Valentine's Days and he had given her a diamond tennis bracelet he had known she wanted. She had lit candles and turned on

some slow jazz. As he closed his eyes and kissed her, he saw Janette with a tiny lump in her abdomen, rubbing it slowly with one hand, holding his hand with her other. They had never talked about having children, and always used protection. She looked so happy as she rubbed that small lump, but something seemed off to Jared. What if a child inherited his gift? What kind of life would that be? What if the vision meant she would lose the baby? He couldn't take those risks. When he removed his lips from hers, he feigned a horrible headache, and even though disappointed, Janette brought him a bottle of aspirin and a glass of water.

As he was hoisted out of the water, without any feeling left in his body, his slowing heart beat in time with Janette as she rubbed that small lump that had never come to be, that she would never know he had foreseen.

Virginian Gothic

Night One

A baby was crying. He was sure of it. At least, he thought he was sure of it as he woke from his sound sleep. He hadn't been sleeping well for a few weeks, and this was the first night that he had fallen into a deep sleep. At first he thought it was a dream, but it was no dream. He wasn't dreaming. Perhaps it was something else. Something similar to the sound of a baby crying. But what was similar? He could not think of a thing. The wind whipped the branches of the oak tree against the window on the south wall. They scratched up and back like fingernails down the pane and onto the sill. The shutters of the old farmhouse rattled against the wood, trying to come off the hinges, but still secure in their old age. The wind whistled through an open crack somewhere down the hall in the house and in the distance it made the door to the barn shake against itself. It hissed as it passed through a crevice. Could it make the sound of a baby crying? Was the wind in its scratching, rattling, shaking, whistling, hissing state capable of such noise? He tilted his head to the right, listened with his good ear, and closed his eyes. The house moaned as if weight were on the boards. But it was just settling in, as his father would say. Just settling in. He was alone in the house. He'd moved in alone. He lived alone. He stayed alone. There was no one here. No baby. No one but him and the wind and its menagerie of noises.

He would fix that tomorrow. He would go to the hardware store and pick up the equipment to seal the windows and cut the branches off the trees. Possibly check those

shutters to see if they needed another nail or two in them. He would take away the wind's toys, and his sleep would not be interrupted. He shut his eyes.

Then he heard it again. A baby crying: the kind of cry that longed for comfort of a familiar touch, for food, or warmth, a need, not just a fussy noise, but a true longing for care. The wind could not mask it. It was not in his mind. It was in his house. But no baby had ever come here with him. His baby had died after seventeen days. They were still in their apartment in town when it happened. They had just closed on the house and had not moved in. They never moved in. The baby was gone. Then his wife left. Then he moved into the house alone. There was no baby here.

He swung out of bed and sat, dangling his feet an inch over the floor. He stepped off and shivered at the cold wood beneath him. Down the hall was blackness and occasional soft moans on the floorboards. He walked to the door, stared into the darkness, and closed the door. He went back to bed. He flipped the pillow and lay his head on the cooler side. He squeezed his eyes shut blocking the noises as best he could. He concentrated on the nothingness, the emptiness inside him that could lead him to sleep, but could not sleep.

In the morning he drove out of the open farmland of Mouth of Wilson, Virginia, and into town to Fred's General Store. The store's seven aisles carried everything from hardware to office supplies to groceries. Ammunition was behind the counter, but no guns.

He bought some nails, sealant, and lining for the windows. He had a handsaw at home for the tree branches. Then he heard it again: a baby crying, the same needful cry.

Had he lost his mind? Did the sound follow him everywhere? Why now?

He turned the corner and saw a mother with a baby boy against her shoulder. She was rocking the baby back and forth as he cried. She was talking to another boy who was complaining about his lost pet. Which the mother replied was his fault for not keeping the cage closed. The boy held a stack of papers in his hand, possibly of the missing pet.

At least he knew he wasn't crazy. Here was an actual baby. At the house though, the sound had to be the wind, or something else. He tightened his grip on the supplies in his hands and went to the check-out counter.

At home he set to work first on the windows on the ground floor, and then the windows on the second floor. After they were sufficiently sealed, he began to work on the tree branch. Since the tree branch was much too high for his ladder, and he was not quite youthful or small enough to climb out onto the branch, he straddled the sill of the window, with his right leg securely inside, and his left leg and most of his body outside. He could reach several of the branches and snap them quite easily. One of the larger branches did not want to snap, and he began working on it with his saw. He heard the shift in the window before he saw it start to drop, but it only dropped an inch, and his hand was under it. It had steadied itself without his help. He turned back to the tree branch and continued to saw.

Then he heard, again; the baby crying. He stopped, leaning farther out the window—a twenty-to-thirty-foot drop below, listening in the distance to see if it was coming from outside. But he could not tell its direction of origin, and the wind still made the outside into its playground. Then the window began to slide again, and this time he

was not fast enough to stop it from sliding down and trapping his thigh. It was not too heavy, but it was uncomfortable, and caught him by such surprise that he dropped the handsaw. He leaned forward to try to grab it, toppling his upper body, and a clear picture of the ground—several feet below him—came into view. The lawn stretched out in a downward slope. The window was securing his body in the house. He leaned back up, grabbing with one hand the bottom of the windowpane and with the other the top, and hoisted it up and slid back into the house. He had cut the tree branches back some, but he knew it would only slightly lessen the sound of the scratching at the window. The tree was old, and had been there long before him. If the wind was particularly bad this winter, he would have to hire someone to take care of the rest of those branches. But he didn't want to get rid of the entire tree. Pieces of it reminded him of his youth.

The tree had an old-style swing hanging from it that had not been used in the seven years he had lived there, but perhaps by the people who lived here before, or even before that. It was a long knotted rope tied to one of the heavier top branches; at the bottom a large thick branch was tethered to the rope for sitting or swinging out over the hillside below. The only element that would make it more perfect in his eyes was a large pond to swing out into during the summer.

The darkness of the evening was approaching faster than he had anticipated, so he hurried outside with his ladder, and checked the shutters, securing the ones that were loose. He didn't have time to fool with the barn because he was losing light fast and didn't want to be outside with flashlights trying to fix a problem he wasn't even sure existed. The rest could wait until tomorrow.

He carried in firewood for the old woodstove that was on the first floor. Though a central heating and air conditioning unit had been installed in the house by the last owner, it was still an old house and the fire helped keep it warmer and the cost of electricity down. He set the thermostat at sixty degrees and let the woodstove heat it higher. He let the fire rage while he ate his cornbread and brown beans for dinner, then stoked up and closed the stove down for the night. The heat would carry slowly through the house and the fire would still be burning in the morning.

He went to his bedroom, changed clothes, and then followed his nightly routine of brushing his teeth and pouring a glass of water to set by the bed. Then he slid under the covers to the sound of the wind already beginning to pick up outside, and the soft pellets of rain hitting the tin roof above him.

Night Two

Though his eyes were shut, he had awakened and refused to open them. The rain was harder now, beating down like a little boy on a drum set. The wind still whistled, the branches still scratched, and he could tell no difference from the branches that he cut. And the baby still cried. He was not sure if it was inside the house or out, but he had heard it. Somewhere. He could not imagine that out in this storm, with this rain and wind that a baby would be outdoors. Neither could he imagine that a baby had somehow sneaked into this old house by itself and was sitting in a room crying. And that it only cried in periodic moments of time, not continuously. What soothed it in between the

cries? Why was there no sense to the pattern? And most importantly, he wondered, was there even a baby at all?

Yet with his eyes closed, listening intently to the sounds around him, he heard every drop hit the roof, every slash of branch against window, against wood, every whirl and whistle of the wind, every moan of the house, and once again, a baby's cry for comfort.

He opened his eyes and threw back the covers. He opened his dresser and put socks on to warm his feet on the wooden floors. He walked to the door and instead of shutting off the sounds of the house, he tried to embrace them, waiting for the cry again. After ten minutes of no crying, he began to search the upstairs of the house. He knew it couldn't be, but he felt compelled to make sure. He went room to room, looking in closets and under the bed in the guest room. He opened the drawers of the dresser, and caught a glimpse of the blanket. It had been his when he was a baby, made by his Nanny. It had belonged to his baby for those short few days. He lifted it and smelled it, but the smell of baby had been replaced by moth balls and musty air. He slammed the door shut and continued his search. He opened every door, looked behind every chair, even behind the shower doors in the bathroom and inside the bathroom cabinets themselves. But on the second floor of his house, there was no baby.

He commenced with searching the first floor in much the same manner: room by room as he came to them, behind every couch, chair, and movable surface, under the tables, in the cabinets in the kitchen. In every spot that a baby possibly could be, though he had no idea why it would be, he checked. Yet, there was no baby.

Then it cried again: the same needful cry. Was it *him* the baby needed? Who else could it be?

It sounded more distant this time. Perhaps, he thought, it *could* be outside. He opened the front door to the storm. The rain had mixed with ice and as he stepped outside onto the porch it gashed at his skin and soaked his socked feet within seconds. It was impossible to hear more than the rain and wind and all the dissonance the storm was causing around the farm. The feeling of the ice hitting him mixed with the sound against the roof played with his mind; it was as if each pelt on the roof was a gash to his body, each sharp sound, resonating in his ears on his skin, as if he felt everything he heard in synchronicity. He ran back inside and slammed the door.

He went to the stove and opened it up, throwing on a few more dry logs and waiting as it blazed. He took off his socks and pulled a chair closer to the fire, drying his feet and the rest of his body from the rain. He sat there for an hour, listening to the house and the storm, waiting for the cry. But this time, it did not come. Perhaps it had left him. Perhaps it did not exist at all. He went back to his room. Rain usually soothed him, but this storm left him unnerved. He twisted and turned, lay on his back and side, stared at the ceiling and the back of his eyelids, but sleep never came.

In the morning he poured a cup of coffee and drank it black. Then drank another one. Then, in the drizzle that was left of the storm, he went to work on the barn. He boarded it up, nice and tight, to keep from rattling. He never used it anyway. That was for a different dream, in a different time. Since he had paid no attention to the barn in the seven years of his residence, it required more work than he had anticipated to make it

secure and keep the wind from rattling its doors and loft windows. He hadn't realized how many points of entry the barn had until now, and how many stall doors, and openings needed to be secured. The wind could not be kept out, but he could keep the barn from moving inside and out. He could secure the doors and windows, the stalls and latches. He could stop one sound of the night.

That night, he was too tired to eat dinner. He could not even remember if he had eaten lunch. Maybe he had had a sandwich. Maybe that was yesterday. It did not matter. He did not want food. He wanted rest. He stoked his stove and turned it down for the night. He made sure his doors were locked, and then repeated his nightly routine, and slid once more under the comforter of his bed. He waited a moment, listening for the wind, which had already begun to blow.

Night Three

Before he could fall into that final place of darkness in his mind, just as his body was at ease and ready to enter, he heard it again. He shook his head. He covered his ears with his hands. It was not possible. It was not possible. It was not possible. He pulled the cover up higher, and wrapped the pillow around his head. But then, there it was. Twice now, in just a few minutes' time. But it was not real. He had checked. The wind had picked up now, and though there was no rain, the branches began to rattle and he cursed the noises of this house, the noises of nature, the noises that made no sense, the noises that had no explanation and the noises in plain sight. Then he lay there. Upon hearing the third cry, he once again examined every room of his house, every corner, every spot,

every hiding place. In the guest room, for an instant, he thought he saw someone sitting on the edge of the bed, the way she had, when she had fed the baby. He cut on the lights to see that it was a mere shadow of a lamp. The room was empty as always. The house was empty as always. Nothing.

He put on his coat and boots and opened the door. The wind still blew, but tonight, instead of the violent rain, thick white powdered snow fell from the sky, and fast. It was piling up on the fence posts, on top of his truck, even on the roof of the barn. It made the night much lighter and easier to see. But where would he start looking for a baby out here. And wouldn't it freeze to death in this weather? He went back in and grabbed a flashlight and headed for the barn. He had spent all day securing it, now he spent his time checking each corner and stall for anything that could possibly make that sound. But he found no animals, no babies. Nothing.

He walked around his house, shining the flashlight in every direction, looking for some point of contention that would lead him to the place he needed to go, the direction he needed to find, but it did not exist, and he knew it, at least he thought he did. There were no tracks in the fresh snow. He returned inside. He hung up his coat and put his boots in the closet. He filled the fire. He rubbed his eyes. He returned to bed.

Then he walked over and opened the curtains and watched the wind push the branches against the house, and watched the branches fill with snow and watched the snow light up the night and fall against the ground and remain silent in its movements, except for that of the wind.

Before he knew it, morning had arrived and he was still watching the snow fall. The sun hid and the snow was covering the ground at an alarming rate; now over two feet had fallen. The wind drew back, or possibly because of the weight of the branch, it now was more silent, only moving slightly back and forth in the daytime.

He made a pot of coffee and sat at his kitchen table waiting for it to brew. He opened the fire up, filled it with logs, and could not feel warm. Perhaps the lack of sleep affected him. He sat in front of the fire and drank cup after cup of coffee until the pot was finished and his clothes were warm from the flames, but his body was still cold.

He checked the thermostat. It read eighty-five degrees. To him, it felt more like twenty. He put on his coat and boots and retrieved his ladder and pushed it up against the tree. Then he brought out his chainsaw. He could just reach the thick branch that branched off again and again and led to the small branch that scratched his window every night. He sawed it off. It landed in the fresh snow with a loud thud, and he smiled at his victory over the wind; now it had one less noise to play in his mind and one less thing to keep him awake at night.

As he came down the ladder he saw a set of prints in the snow. Some form of animal. The prints were small, but the animal was on two legs, a raccoon perhaps, sliding in the snow. But they looked so similar to little baby shoes, that held little baby feet. Then he thought he must be losing his mind. There was no baby, no baby cries, no baby shoes, no baby feet. There was wind and wild animals. But yet, he could not help but see the similarity between the prints and little baby feet. Baby foot prints in the snow leading down the hill and away from the house. He squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them

again to see the same sight. He knew it was an animal yet his brain kept telling him how peculiar it was that the animal slid in a pattern that was the match of a baby's footprint.

He followed the footprints down the hill to the bottom and started up the hill on the other side where the prints were wiped away by a five-foot drift of snow. He tried to wade through it, knowing that he needed to see what was on the other side, and after several attempts made it through the drift only to find an untouched blanket of snow. He stomped back to the house, kicking his boots to remove as much snow as possible before entering. He sat again at the fire, trying to warm himself as snow fell from his clothes and formed puddles on the floor. He threw more logs on the fire and brewed another pot of coffee. He sat and drank and warmed his clothes until they were dry but could not understand why the heat would not penetrate through to his skin.

He finished the pot of coffee, filled the fire once more and proceeded to his bathroom to take a hot shower. The room filled with the steam and he could feel the heat of the water on his skin. He felt for a few moments the warmth that he had desired and was thankful that it was there. Thankful that he could feel the warmth, that his skin had not gone numb, that he was in his house, and the branch was on the ground.

Night four

He filled and closed the fire for the final time that night, and though his stomach growled he could not eat. He went to his room, shutting the door to the rest of the house, closed his curtains and went to bed without even changing clothes or following his nightly routine. His mind raced and he tried to shut it down. Then he thought of nothing.

But the nothing led to the same place his mind had raced to before. Awake. The baby cried. Needful. Needful for him.

He jerked up in bed. Where are you, he yelled at the house. There was no more wind. There was no more rain. The snow was silent as it fell. The pump in the house was quiet. The house did not even moan. The baby cried again—its need so prevalent.

He did his search through the house, in every room thinking that he saw something that was always nothing when he turned on the light. A baby shoe that was just a piece of blanket, a swaddled baby that was just a pillow crumpled on the bed. A pacifier that was just a knob that had fallen off the dresser. He even smelled baby powder in some of the rooms. But no baby.

Then he went outside, without even bothering to put on a coat or shoes. He tore through the barn looking for the animal that was making the noise. There was no animal. He paced around the barn and around the house. Then he followed where he thought the footsteps had led before, through the drift and to the other side, walking until he came to the forest and realized just how far from home he was. He kept walking. Out here he did not hear the baby cry.

He stumbled in the snow and fell against the bark of a pine tree. He stood up and leaned back against the tree. His eyes hurt and were heavy. The silence of the forest was relaxing. He heard no sound except for his own breath. There was no baby needing him to find it. There was no cry. He paused for a moment to enjoy the peace.

After the five-day blizzard was over the neighbors found his body, still leaned up against the tree. His eyes were frozen shut, his mouth almost in a smile. He was in a t-shirt and sweats and socks. His body was removed by the coroner's office. The police found his house with the front door unlocked, which was not uncommon for the area. They looked through his house to see if they could figure out why he was in the snow in so little clothes. Nothing seemed strange to them or out of place in the house. The guns were still in the gun cabinet. The man's wallet was still by his bed. They found no evidence of foul play in the house. The man's coat was still in the closet, his shoes beside the door. Everything seemed in order.

"It's a damn shame," said one of the officers. "He used to be such a good old fellow. Then when he lost his wife and child he just shut himself off from everyone. Stopped going to church, stopped even talking to people."

"I guess it didn't help none that the sewing factory closed last month and he was out of work, up here in this house all alone," the other officer said.

"Fred said he rarely came into town, and didn't even talk then. He just got his groceries and left."

"It's a damn shame."

"What do you reckon he was doing out in the woods without much of nothing on?"

"I don't know."

While they were searching, they heard the sound of a baby crying.

"I'll be damned," said the second officers. "That sounds like Murray."

They searched the house. Then pulled down the stairs to the attic, which had been bolted closed. In the attic was the parrot his son had let out of the cage. He and his wife had assumed that the boy had done it because the bird would only mock his baby brother's cries and not what he was trying to teach it. They had posted pictures up all over town. The bird must have flown into the attic and gotten stuck. With the rain storm and the blizzard, it had taken shelter there. The officer scooped up the bird. He would return it to his son.

The man's death was listed as a suicide.

Bequested

The clinic smelled like cigarettes and old people mixed with wet dog. Though Cheryl couldn't imagine what a dog or an old person would be doing in a place like this. Still, that was the smell infiltrating her nostrils and she held her hand up to her nose to try and block it out. She walked to the window and as it opened, the sterile smell of the inside flooded her. At least some part of this place was clean. The lady behind the window handed her a clipboard with forms and then slid the window back shut. Cheryl took a seat and started filling out the paperwork, only paying half-attention as she wrote.

Fact: Cheryl was 38 years old. Pregnancy in women over the age of 35 had a higher risk of genetic disorders in the child, higher rates of miscarriages and stillbirths, and high rates of developing diabetes and high blood pressure for the mother.

During week fifteen of her pregnancy Cheryl had gone through the genetic screening recommended for a woman her age, and had received a clean bill of health for herself and her daughter. Yes, daughter. The letter had informed her. Her immediate thoughts were of a light violet nursery with khaki and dark brown trim. A light wooden crib with a matching changing station, and a dark brown glider in the room. And a small bookshelf, of course, because her daughter would be a reader. Her daughter. She smiled. She had wanted a daughter for almost twenty years now. A little girl.

Then her smile faded as a repressed memory forced its way to the surface. Her knees buckled and she had to grab the corner of her couch and sit down. The smell of Aqua Velva, Vaseline, and roofing tar filled her nostrils. She closed her eyes only to see his face, and opened them again, but it was still there. Her stomach churned as the memories flooded back. The years of therapy, the coping, the moving on with her life, and it had stopped haunting her, until now. She ran to the bathroom and threw up.

Fact: Twenty-seven percent of females under the age of twelve are sexually assaulted or raped, 55% of the time it is by someone they know.

As a child Cheryl had been raped and molested by her uncle. Her mother and aunt had been molested by their father, her grandmother had been molested by her uncle. The maternal side of her family bred a high rate of pedophiles. That was four out of four of the women closest to her growing up. One hundred percent. How could she change those odds? What was she bringing her daughter into? She had moved 1500 miles away. She had little to no contact with her family. But she worked. She would have to trust her daughter to someone. Who could ever be trusted? Was this not the family legacy that had been passed on from generation to generation, sometimes repressed, sometimes unspoken, or sometimes taken to court and charges dropped for lack of sufficient evidence because of the time waited to tell?

Fact: Consequences of child sexual abuse range from chronic depression to low self-esteem to sexual dysfunction to multiple personalities. A fifth of all victims develop serious long-term psychological problems. Children who are abused or neglected are more likely to become criminal offenders as adults.

It had taken Cheryl years of therapy to work past her issues. She still suffered from general anxiety disorder and depression, and had to go off her medication because of her pregnancy. She had for years been uncomfortable around men, had night terrors that kept her up, weeping in her bed, so sure that they were real. Even in the end, she had decided to go an alternative route. Not because she was uncomfortable around men now, but her engagement hadn't worked out, and neither had any of her other relationships. Her time was running out and she wanted a child. But she never wanted her child to replay her life, or her mother's, her aunt's, her grandmother's.

Her mother had found her aunt in bed, eyes closed, arms outstretched, with a blue tint to her skin. She had taken a bottle of sleeping pills, chased with a bottle of vodka. Her mother hadn't been the same since. She seldom talked about the experience, but when she did, her face would grow ashen and her sentences would fade off midway through. Her mother suffered from chronic depression. Twice she had called her, talking about killing herself and what a horrible parent she had been for letting her daughter be abused. Her grandmother was the only one who seemed to be normal, and maybe that was because molestation and abuse was more shameful when her grandmother was young and she had

repressed it well. Cheryl, herself, was not a violent or criminal person, but the depression and anxiety from the abuse were there. Still. And she wasn't good at repressing things. They always came back.

Fact: Cheryl paid \$3254 for artificial insemination, to have the child that she wanted. She spent 23 hours and 17 minutes picking out the perfect donor. She thought about being inseminated for over a year before starting the process.

After all this, this is what she had come to, three weeks after the letter, notifying her of her great health and her daughter. This is where it led.

In those three weeks, images of her uncle had continually popped in and out of her mind: his workshop, the playboy pin-ups covering the walls, him unzipping his pants, his callused hands as they approached her. She wondered if her mother had the same problem, was haunted with images of her own.

Could she be the person who stopped the cycle? What if she couldn't? Could she live with that, with her daughter going through the same pain, passing on that heritage? Was that her gift? Those dark corners pitted in her daughter's mind that she would have to relive at the most inconvenient of times. If she passed this on, if she could not keep her daughter safe, how would she handle the pain?

She could give her daughter love, an education, a life. Her mother had tried to give her that, and had for the most part succeeded. After all, she was an educated woman who

made good money and could afford to have a child by artificial means. But hadn't she already decided against that? Wasn't that why she was here? She wasn't strong enough to take that chance. At least she didn't think she was. But what if she was and this was all wrong? Her hand shook violently. How would she ever know which was the right decision?

She felt butterflies moving around in her stomach, and then realized they were not butterflies at all. Her pregnancy was in its eighteenth week. Movement had been known to manifest early as sixteen weeks. Her daughter was moving inside her, and Cheryl's entire body began to shake.

Fact: There are 2 million female babies born in the United States each year. There are 1.3 million abortions performed in the United States each year.

Cheryl had never believed in abortion. She had never believed she would be in this waiting room, in this clinic. She had always wanted a daughter. She had survived her childhood. She had become a successful, independent woman. Could she be strong now? Which way would take the most courage? Ending a life that might lead to a cycle that had been inherent for generations, or beginning a life, where she had a chance to reset the cycle and start a brand new legacy all of their own, for her and her daughter.

A nurse opened the door in the room and called her name. She looked at the nurse, stood up and looked at the exit door. In that moment, right then, she knew exactly how this chapter of her life story would go.

Fact: History often repeats itself.

Fact: Sometimes. Sometimes. Time. Resets.

Harrowville

Time rolls through Harrowville like the occasional customer who stops at an overpriced, one-pump gas station with no restrooms. Everyone knows the little old station is there; it is ignored, neglected, but somehow stays alive. Some people think it is a piece of history, while others wish it would burn to the ground.

Paul wished the latter for Harrowville; then he wouldn't have to call it home.

Paul sits with the certified letter in his hand. He tears the corner, then all the way across. He pulls the folded paper out, and takes a deep breath. He can't unfold it yet. He closes his eyes, breathes. He thinks of what the letter must say, and worries about what it will.

The phone showed Amanda's name on the caller I.D. Paul opened his mouth slightly and reached for the button to answer it, then withdrew his finger. The phone rang again. He let out a sigh and pushed the button.

"Hello." For a moment only silence filled the other end of the phone.

"Amanda?"

"Paul?" Her voice shook.

"What's wrong?"

"Can you please come over?"

Paul had already made plans with his girlfriend, Tricia, for dinner and a movie tonight, but he hadn't talked to Amanda in almost a year. Before their falling out, they had been best friends since the first grade.

"Please." Her voice sounded hollow, desperate.

"I'll be there in a minute."

He hung up the phone and called Tricia.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Tricia asked. Paul pulled the phone back a little from his ear. "You're blowing off our date for your junkie ex-girlfriend?"

"She was never my girlfriend, and she got mixed up in the wrong crowd. She sounds really bad."

"Of course she does. She's a junkie."

Tricia was right, but he hated it when she said things about Amanda. Amanda had been around Paul far longer than Tricia, and their friendship was far deeper. Tricia had two major faults, in Paul's opinion: she wasn't very smart, and she didn't want to leave Harrowville.

"Look," Paul said. "I'll make it up to you tomorrow. We can go out then."

"So I have no say in the matter?" Tricia said. "I should have known that one day she would be more important to you than me."

"I think you're blowing this out of proportion. She's an old friend and needs my help."

Tricia huffed into the phone. "Fine." She hung up. Paul half-wished she would have dumped him then.

He slid into his letter jacket and walked two houses down to Amanda's. The houses all looked the same, since the suburban neighborhood had been built by the same company. They varied slightly, but not by much. Each had a small front yard and larger backyard that extended around the houses. They were all fenced off from one another. The first time he had met Amanda they were six and she was drawing on the sidewalk with chalk. She already had artistic talent then. He had asked if he could draw too, and she told him he could, for a dollar. When he said he didn't have a dollar, she handed him a piece of chalk and said "I guess you'll have to owe me then." She smiled. After that, they were practically inseparable until high school.

The wind made the twenty-degree temperature seem much colder, and as Paul knocked on Amanda's white wooden door, he noticed how dark the house was, even though it was painted light beige. The top story could barely be seen, and the dark brown shutters blended into the house. In fact, darkness—more so than usual—enveloped the entire block. He looked up and couldn't see a single star or even a trace of the moon. He knocked again.

The door opened into the house but he couldn't see Amanda; she was standing behind it. Paul walked in and tried not to look shocked. She had lost at least thirty pounds, and hadn't had that much to lose. Her eyes were sunken in and dark underneath. Her forehead was covered in sweat. Her long black hair—which had always been so beautiful—was tangled and scattered around her face. Her body shook, as if she were cold, though the house was warm and she was wearing sweats.

Paul closed the door and Amanda fell into him. He helped her down the hall to her bedroom and set her on her bed, but she clutched him, so he did not let her go. He hadn't seen her parent's cars outside, or any evidence that they were in the house.

He started to speak but decided to wait on her. After all, she had called him. Her room had changed since the last time he was in it. Her comforter set was now gray and blue, and all her posters had been taken off the walls which were now painted a soft blue. She had a new cherry bedroom. In fact, the only thing that looked the same was her vanity mirror, where pictures of her and her friends—including many of the two of them over the years—were still taped around it. The pictures covered so much of the mirror only a small spot of reflective surface remained. The sole spot had been blacked out with marker.

Amanda looked up at him and opened her mouth, her lips quivering, then burst into sobs and buried her head in his chest. He held her tight against him. He had never wanted to see her this way. A little over a year ago, Amanda had met some new friends who were into drugs—mainly marijuana and methamphetamines—and as much as Paul protested, Amanda had wanted to give them a try. She started out as a casual user, but once Paul started dating Tricia, Amanda seemed to change; every time he saw her she looked high. They had an argument about the drug use and hadn't spoken since. That seemed to please Tricia, but Paul had lost his best friend, and Amanda's drug use and his pride had kept them from reuniting. He waited for her sobs to soften.

“Did someone hurt you?” he asked her quietly.

She shook her head no. He let out a breath that he had been holding. It wouldn't look good for his scholarships if he were to get into a fight; the schools might even take them back, and that was his ticket out of here.

Finally Amanda said, "I'm clean," so low that he barely understood.

"What?"

"I'm clean, for almost ten days now."

"That's great news." In that instant Paul hoped that maybe he could now get the old Amanda back. But Amanda still looked sullen.

"So what's the problem?"

"I'm pregnant."

Paul had absolutely no idea how to respond. He was always extra careful when it came to sex. Tricia was on the pill and he always wore a condom. He didn't want anything to tether him to this town. Not that he didn't like children, but he wanted to go to college and see at least some of the rest of the United States before parenthood. Even more of Alabama would be nice.

"Who's the father?"

Amanda started crying again then gathered herself together. "His name is Vince Patterson. He's in jail right now for distribution. We were so messed up the night it happened that I doubt he remembers it. I barely do. He's not exactly father material, you know?"

"What are you going to do?"

“I don’t know. I just knew I needed you here, and then everything would be all right. I just wanted you to hold me and tell me that. Can you tell me that? Even if it’s a lie, can you tell me?”

“Everything is going to be all right,” Paul said.

He lay back on the bed with Amanda in his arms. She cried until she fell asleep, and he continued to hold her, thinking of all the fun they had as children, of the school dance they had gone to together in middle school, of the first kiss they had shared in eighth grade, even though they weren’t going out. She had said she needed practice for when she had a real boyfriend, and that he would need practice, too. She was always logical. She was smart and funny and could do so much better than here, and so much better than drugs. At least she was clean. That was good. But other than that, Paul had no answers. He couldn’t leave her though, not like this. So he stayed, holding her as she slept, closing his eyes and remembering her the way she used to be.

When they were fifteen, Amanda’s first boyfriend had dumped her right before the winter dance. Paul had come over to comfort her and they had spent the night watching slashing flicks. Every time a pretty girl would enter the scene, Amanda would comment on how she was going to die. And Paul would pitch in and agree, saying, “With those boobs, she doesn’t have a chance” or “with her I.Q. I’m surprised she’s made it this far.” They lay in Amanda’s bed, eating popcorn, and made fun of the movies until Amanda fell asleep. Paul covered her up and went home.

When they were eight, Amanda’s step father at the time had just been released from prison and had taken to beating on Amanda’s mom again. Amanda called Paul in

tears and he came over, using the spare key to let himself in. He snuck up to Amanda's room and held his hands over her ears as she laid against his body, until the fighting had stopped. On the third instance of this happening, Paul had called the cops before he came over, and her step-father was sent back to jail. Amanda's mother didn't pick him up this time when he was released, and she had moved on to a new guy who was nice to both her and Amanda.

Amanda had always been there for Paul too, cheering him on at little league and J.V. games, and into his varsity career. She had never missed a game that he had noticed, until she had fallen in with the drugs. Even then, he would sometimes catch her standing beside the bleachers watching him play, but she never stuck around to talk to him.

When his grandfather had passed away when he was twelve, Amanda had gone to the funeral with him and held his hand the entire time. She was allowed to sit with the family, and she did not move from Paul's side. His parents even let her stay over with Paul the night he found out and the night of the funeral. They had played video games and cards. Paul had told her stories of trips he and his grandfather had taken, and Amanda had let Paul do all the talking, only responding when he asked her a direct question. The night of the funeral, it was her turn to comfort him. She held him, and told him it was okay to cry. And even though he hadn't wanted to cry, with her arm around him, he felt like he could. So he did. He never once worried that she would tell anyone that he cried. And she never did.

He could share looks with Amanda and know exactly what she was thinking. They could finish each other's sentences like an old married couple. Even after the rift between them, he was as comfortable now as if it had never happened.

Paul had not slept much. Instead he watched Amanda. He had wanted so much more for her. She had wanted so much more for herself. He wondered what she was going to do. His cell phone had gone off a few times in the night and he had turned it to silent. It was Tricia. He should have answered but he didn't want to disturb Amanda.

Amanda woke up and looked up at Paul and smiled. It was the first time he had seen her smile in a long time. Then the smile faded and she sat up.

"Thank you for coming over."

"Of course," Paul said. "I still think of you as my best friend."

"Your junkie friend?"

"Nope, you're clean now." Paul sat up on the bed beside her. He rubbed her back.

"I can't have an abortion." Amanda looked Paul in the eyes. "You know I can't. My family would kill me. And I just don't think *I* could go through with it."

Paul nodded.

"But I can't have a baby with that man. I will never get away from the drugs. The kid will never have a chance, if I haven't messed it up already with what I've done in the last few weeks." Amanda rubbed her stomach, which was so thin it sunk beneath her chest cavity.

Paul put his hand over hers. “You are strong. You can do this. Just tell him he isn’t the father.”

Amanda bit her lip, her eyes wondered around the room. Then she focused back on Paul. She nodded.

Paul thought about his night, all the memories of their lives together, their plans, their friendship. “I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Why don’t you say I am the father?”

“What? I can’t do that.” She shook her head, with her brows furrowed. She looked confused and hopeful all at once.

“Sure you can. You just write my name on a piece of paper.”

Amanda stared at Paul, looking for a sign that he was kidding, or was going to change his mind. But Paul knew she could see that he was serious.

“Just on paper, then. You won’t have to do anything. I will just put your name on the paper at the hospital and Vince will leave me alone. I think I can do this on my own. I know I can do this. I just need to be the old me again.”

“Amanda. Everyone will find out and then they will think I knocked you up and abandoned you.”

“Anyone who knows you wouldn’t believe that.”

“Sure they would, it will be written on paper. Plus people will think I cheated on Tricia, and I am not a cheater.”

“Do you really care what people in this town think?”

Paul furrowed his brow. “No, I guess I really don’t. But I do care what happens to *you*.”

“I can’t ask you to do this.” She lay her head on his shoulder.

“You didn’t.”

Paul stared at the vanity mirror. Half of his life was on that mirror, with her. She was his best friend. Was she really strong enough to do this? Could she really stay off the drugs? Once, in tenth grade Paul and Amanda were watching college football one Saturday, lying across her bed. Every time a running back scored, Amanda would say, “That could be you.” They looked up the different colleges online and talked about what they could do in each town, and how different their lives would be after high school. She had always been supportive of him getting out of Harrowville and had wanted the same for herself. She understood him. She knew who he was and what he wanted. Even now, he thought, she would know what he was willing to do for her.

He loved the energy she had back then, the times they had spent together. He could imagine that energy in a child of hers. A child with her smile, her mind, her sense of humor. How could that not be right?

“Do you still want to get out of here?” Paul asked.

“More than anything. I don’t want to raise a child here.”

Paul squeezed his hands together. He took a deep breath. He knew the right thing to do, as crazy as it sounded. He took her hands in his. “Then let me be the father and we will do this together.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will be the father. I’ll help you. We can save up money and move away from here and raise the baby. And he or she will be able to go to a real school and we can have a life outside of this town.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.” Paul smiled.

“But what about college? You always said you were going to get a football scholarship and go away to college. And I heard you had some offers.”

Paul chewed on the inside of his cheek. His eyes circled the room, then the ceiling, then the floor and finally made their way back to Amanda. “I have three.”

“That’s amazing.”

Paul looked away again.

“But you can’t take them and be the father.” Amanda pulled his face back toward her. “I will find another way.”

“No,” Paul said. “This is the way. I can take them. I will talk to the coaches. I know there is a way to make this work. You can come with me to my school. I lost you once. I will not lose you again. And you are going to need the help.”

“But not if this takes away your dream.”

“It’s not taking away my dream, it’s helping *our* dreams. I know that it can still work out, and with the scholarship money we won’t have to worry about tuition, and you could even start school too. We will get out of here. I will go to college and so will you.” He smiled at her. “And so will our child.” He couldn’t believe that he had just said that, but he meant every word. He was going to be a father.

Amanda's eyes were welling up again. She asked, quietly, "What if you don't love the baby?"

"I love you; therefore, I will love the baby."

Amanda was crying again, but a smile was spread across her face. "Are you sure you want to do this? What about Tricia?"

"Tricia and I weren't going to make it anyway."

"I could have told you that." Amanda said. Paul heard a spark of the old Amanda again.

"There are no drugs in this house, are there?" Paul asked.

Amanda shook her head.

"If I do this, you can't hang out with any of those people any more. You can't be tempted. You can't go back to that life."

"I swear it."

Amanda hugged him, and even though his life had just been twisted around, he didn't feel like it was over or wrong. He felt at peace. This was the right thing for him right now. He knew he could still get out of this town, and now he could take Amanda with him and save her from her life that she was going to have. It was the right thing to do.

Harrowville was a back-woods town that still had dirt roads and streets that the government was just getting around to naming. Not creative names either—names like Duncan Road, because the Duncans' owned most of the land on the road—or after animals the town had never seen nor probably ever would: Gazelle Lane.

Paul had always planned on a football scholarship getting him out. He was the best running back in the history of the town, as well as the county and most of the state. His coaches all raved about his talent. In addition to being an athlete, Paul also maintained a 4.3 grade point average. He researched everything he could on scholarships and financial aid.

He wanted to say he respected his mother and father for living the small town life, for running the auto shop together—her managing it, and his father fixing cars and teaching Paul to fix them as well. They supported his career, making sure he went to camps and had the right equipment, and they never missed a game, even when they had to close up shop to drive to the state finals. But he always wondered why they were content with the lives they had; a life he could never imagine for himself.

The only major forms of employment in the town were farming, small businesses and the plastic factory that had opened his junior year of high school, where many of his friends were more than thrilled to apply to work when they turned eighteen. Paul had no such desire. He wanted to move away as soon as his degree was in his hand. He had been offered three football scholarships and had decided that he was going to take the one that was three states over. In three days he would turn eighteen and take the scholarship. His parents would be happy for him, he hoped.

Paul arrived home to find Tricia waiting for him in the living room. His parents were in the kitchen having breakfast.

Tricia didn't seem to care that they were not alone.

"I can't believe you spent the night with her," she said.

“Please try to calm down.” If she could not handle this, she was going to have a lot of trouble in the near future with what else he had to tell her.

“Of course. I’m your girlfriend and you spend the night with some junkie.”

“She’s clean,” Paul said. “She’s been clean for ten days now, and she is staying that way.”

Tricia rolled her eyes.

“We need to talk anyway,” Paul said. “Why don’t you sit down.” He had planned on breaking up with her later, but now seemed to be a better time. She was already angry; maybe this was the best time to do it.

Tricia reluctantly sat on the couch next to Paul. The living room was situated close to the kitchen and Paul knew his parents had heard most of the conversation so far. He lowered his voice.

“Tricia, you know I care a lot about you...”

“No,” she interrupted. “You aren’t going to do this. I can’t believe you are going to do this. Not now, not today. You can’t.”

“I just don’t think we have enough in common to stay together, and our goals are so different. I think it would be best for both of us.”

“No. Best for you maybe.” Tricia stood up and started pacing the floor. Her voice still raised. “Of course you would do this today. I called you all night.” She burst into tears.

“Tricia, please calm down. This isn’t the end of the world.”

Tricia scoffed at him. “You think you breaking up with me is why I am crying like this?”

“Is something else wrong?”

Tricia sobbed even harder. “I’m pregnant.” She choked out the words.

Paul heard a fork drop in the other room. Tricia’s face was now buried in her hands.

“Of course, if you had answered any of my calls or not spent the night with that whore, we could have talked about this last night.” Tricia was still crying, but her anger was evident.

“Please stop calling her a whore and sit back down.”

“That’s all you have to say?” Tricia rolled her eyes and huffed. “Perfect, just fucking perfect.”

That wasn’t all Paul had to say, but he had an audience and this was the second time in twenty-four hours that someone had told him that she was pregnant. Only this time, he knew less how to react. Paul stood up next to Tricia and lowered his voice.

“Is it mine?” Paul almost regretted asking, but not enough to not ask.

“Of course it’s yours. How can you ask me that?” She cried harder. Paul put his hand on her shoulder.

“But we always use protection,” Paul said. His voice was almost a whisper.

“Well, I guess accidents happen, don’t they?” Tricia was not going to lower her voice no matter who heard. In fact, it seemed that she wanted to do this in front of Paul’s

parents. Of course, Paul couldn't blame her for being upset. He had ignored her last night.

He heard the chairs in the kitchen move and footsteps on the stairs. They had gone to their bedroom. Paul was glad they couldn't hear the next words that came out of his mouth.

"Do you want to keep it?"

"Of course I want to keep it. What kind of question is that? Don't you?"

Everything he said appeared to upset Tricia more. Paul considered her question, and though he hadn't thought much about abortion before, the word screaming repeatedly in his head was no, no, no. He needed to handle this gently. Considering everything that had just happened with Amanda, this was going to be a disaster. Tricia wasn't the most level-headed person. He couldn't tell her about Amanda now, or the decision they had made.

"I think it's a lot of responsibility, and that maybe we should consider all the options. I have the money to pay for it, if that is what you are worried about."

"Oh. My. God. You're such a dick. I'm having this child, with or without you." Tricia's make-up was running down her face and she was shaking. She grabbed her coat off the hanger near the door. "And you will be paying for this child, whether you are with me or not, I guarantee it. I will not be in this alone. I have plans, too, you know."

Paul sat down on the couch with his face buried in his hands. This could not be happening. He had handled the entire situation all wrong. Should he call Tricia back, or let her calm down first? Maybe he would let her calm down.

With Amanda, the chance of freedom could happen, the chance of leaving this place was present. With Tricia, that chance didn't exist. She wouldn't allow him to leave. And now he had a child that was actually his by blood, and one that was his by the sheer love of a friendship, and he had no idea what to do.

Tricia finally answered the phone taking a day to calm down. He tried to talk to her about the football scholarships and the possibilities that they could bring them and their child. But every idea Paul pitched, Tricia shot down. He even mentioned the possibility of being drafted to the NFL; Tricia reminded him how small those chances were and how an injury could put him out of football permanently, and they would have nothing. She didn't want to risk her future on a chance.

Two days later, Paul turned eighteen and began working third shift at the plastic factory.

Three months later Paul came home to find his mother sitting on the couch. She motioned for him to sit next to her. He had made peace with Tricia, though they were not a couple. He had also told her and his parents about Amanda. Tricia had called him a liar and cheater, and at least one of those names was true, because he had told everyone that he was the father of Amanda's baby, like he had agreed to.

Paul sat down. His mother didn't look her forty-five years. Instead, she looked more like she was in her thirties, with long dark hair that hung down her back. She had

always taken care of herself, only her eyes hinted at her age, and not because of wrinkles, but because of the wisdom she held in the looks she gave him, like she knew what he was going through.

“Are you disappointed in me?” Paul asked before his mother could speak.

“Never,” she replied. “I just wanted to talk to you about something.”

Paul braced himself. His parents were never much on lectures, but what else could this be? He had two women pregnant and no real plan at the moment.

“You know that duplex that is beside the lot to the garage that your father and I own. Originally we had planned on fixing it up and renting it out, but after we fixed it up, there weren’t many renters in the area, but enough to make decent profit over the years. We planned on selling it when the market went back up. Anyway. The plan was to use the rent money to build a college fund for you.”

“What? I didn’t think you wanted me to go to college.”

“Of course we wanted you to go, you just didn’t seem to show a lot of interest, and the subject seemed to upset you when we talked about it, so we let it go and figured you would find your own way.”

Paul’s eyes filled up with tears and he shook his head. “I’m an idiot.”

“No one talks that way about my son,” his mother said. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“I applied to several colleges, even had scholarships to go. I turned them all down when I found out Amanda was pregnant.”

“I know,” said his mother. She smiled at him and reached over and took his hand. “Just because that dream is lost for now, doesn’t mean that it always has to be that way. College isn’t just for teenagers any more. Or so I hear.”

Paul couldn’t believe that he had been so wrong about his parents. “I thought you wanted me to stay here in this town and take over the shop. Dad’s been training me for years.”

“That’s just so you would have a skill to fall back on. Besides, it saves a lot of money to be able to fix your own car. Your father and I always knew you were too big for this town. We were just waiting on you to see it.”

“I always knew it too, but was too afraid to hurt your feelings.”

“Then I guess being idiots runs in the family.” His mother laughed. “We have thirty thousand dollars saved for your college tuition. It’s yours to do with as you please, as is the duplex.”

“Mom, I can’t take that. I’m not going to college yet.”

“Ahh, yet. That is the key word there. And yes you are. It is our gift to you and our two grandchildren. Though we never expected to have two at a time this early, we love them just the same. What you choose to do is up to you, but this is yours, and I know you will do big things in your life, and I also know that they aren’t going to be in this town, and neither will you forever.”

Paul hugged his mother through his tears, and she cried with him, holding him tightly.

“One more thing,” she said.

Paul pulled back and looked at her.

“You are doing a good thing with Amanda. She’s always been like a daughter to us, and we know how important she is to you. We don’t judge. We are just happy that she is safe and healthy again. You are a good man.”

Paul wondered if his mother knew the truth. But it didn’t matter. They were happy for him. They wanted a life for him outside of Harrowville.

In the middle of October the girls had settled into the duplex. Paul had moved in with Amanda, which Tricia was not too happy about. Though originally she wasn’t going to move in at all because she didn’t want to be next to “that girl,” she eventually conceded. Paul thought it was because she couldn’t handle living with her parents any more. Tricia was due any day now and Amanda had another month or so left. The nurseries were set up, and Amanda had been working at the local gas station, while Tricia said the pregnancy was too hard on her to work. Her parents were helping her out still.

Then Amanda went into labor, and because it was a little soon she told Paul she feared that it had to do with the drugs that she had taken. Though throughout her pregnancy she had read every book and followed all the guidelines, she had confided in Paul many times that she feared for the worst. He always reassured her, and hoped that he was right. He was with her every step of the way, but she made him promise to stay up near her head when the baby was born because she had some boundaries of privacy, and Paul laughed and agreed. After eighteen hours of labor, his daughter Emily was born. And she was his daughter. She was beautiful, and he loved her instantly.

“She looks just like you,” Paul said, handing her over to Amanda. Amanda was weak from the labor.

“Can you help me hold her?”

Paul helped her hold Emily in her arms.

“I think she has your eyes,” Amanda said. “They are sweet and kind.”

Paul smiled.

“Can you take her?”

Amanda was pale and looked exhausted.

“Sure. Why don’t you get some rest?” Paul kissed her on the forehead and handed the baby back over to the nurses.

In two days Emily was ready to come home from the hospital, but Amanda was not. The nurses had started Emily on formula because Amanda was unable to breastfeed. Amanda’s heart was weak; she had had some arrhythmias and a mini-stroke during labor, so the doctor’s wanted her to stay in the hospital for observation for a few more days. So Paul took Emily home. His parents were at the doorway when he arrived. Tricia was outside as well.

He showed off Emily, sleeping in her car seat to his parents.

“She’s the best gift I could ever ask for,” Paul said. He could feel himself smiling and couldn’t stop.

They went inside.

Two days later Amanda died in the hospital of a stroke. Paul didn’t know what to do. She had only had the chance to hold her daughter a few times. Now she was gone.

She was the part of his plan that had made sense. She had been the part of his plan that was the escape from Harrowville. Now, he had no plan, except that of the day to day life of raising his daughter.

He walked over to Tricia's house and told her about Amanda. He thought she almost smiled at the news, but told him how sorry she was. She tried to console him, and even asked if he wanted to move in with her. But he wanted to stay in the duplex Amanda had decorated and he had called home for the last few months.

On the day of Amanda's funeral, Tricia went into labor. Paul attended the funeral first, with his daughter, sound asleep, saying goodbye to a mother she would never know. Then his parents took Emily so he could go to the hospital.

Tricia's labor was shorter because her bones would not separate and the doctors had to do a C-section. Tricia started complaining immediately about the scar, but stopped when the next contraction kicked in and told them to do it. She had a little boy, whom she wanted to name Jordan, and Paul did not object. Two days later, he drove them home from the hospital.

Right before Emily turned three, Paul received his associates' degree in Business Management and had applied and been accepted to three bachelor's programs. He decided it was time to tell Tricia.

They were still living in the separate sides of the duplex, but Paul had cut a door from his room into Jordan's to help out and keep him sometimes at night. She had gone to cosmetology school like she had wanted, and had her license now.

He wanted to move away. He wanted to attend college. She could be a cosmetologist anywhere, and make more money than here in Harrowville. He had some savings, though he didn't tell her how much, and they could get a house together. As much as he didn't want to be with Tricia, he wanted to be with his son, and this, he knew, would be the only way.

Tricia refused to move. What was more, she refused to let him take Jordan away from the town. He offered her joint custody and told her the perks of Jordan going to a better school, having more experiences, learning more, and having a better shot at being successful, but she refused. She even refused weekend custody. Paul threatened to take her to court.

"I have every right to see Jordan and give him the life that he deserves," Paul said.

"No you don't," Tricia said. "Jordan's not yours."

Her response shocked Paul even more than her initial announcement of being pregnant three years ago had.

"Then whose is he?"

Tricia bit down on her lower lip and looked away. Paul grabbed her by the arm and forced her to look at him. He raised his voice. "Whose is he?"

"Jimmy Scooner's."

"Jimmy Scooner?"

"Yeah." She stared at him. "It was the only way of getting you to stay here with me. I had no idea you were going to knock up Amanda. I never figured you for the cheating kind."

Paul laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

He wasn’t about to tell her. “I want a paternity test.”

“Fine,” Tricia said. “It’s your dime.”

Paul stormed out and made the arrangements.

Now he unfolds the letter and looks at the writing. It takes a moment to sink in. No biological match. He isn’t Jordan’s father. Yet, he doesn’t know how to stop loving Jordan. How can he leave him behind? He’s been waiting on this envelope for days, so sure of his plan either way. Now he doesn’t know. What will be best for Jordan? What will be best for Emily? He has to do what he feels is right.

He knocks on Tricia’s door. He hands her a copy of the letter and then an eviction notice from his parents; unless she wants to pay the rent listed on the form, she has thirty days to find somewhere else to live.

“How can you do this to us?”

“You did it to yourself.”

“You selfish son-of-a-bitch.”

“I also called Jimmy Scooner for you. He was real interested to know that he had a kid. So was his dad. His uncle’s a lawyer. Bet you didn’t know that. You’ll be hearing from them soon. I hope it works out for you.” The sarcasm is rich in Paul’s voice, and for the first time, he actually wants to hurt Tricia.

Paul walks off. Tricia stands cussing on the lawn.

Paul enters Jordan's room where Jordan is taking a nap. He rubs Jordan's head and leans down and kisses it.

"Don't worry, little man," Paul says. "My parents are going to make sure that only good things happen for you. They will be like your fairy god parents."

He walks back to his room and locks the door. He will always love Jordan, but Jordan has another father that Paul thinks will love him too. This is Jordan's life. His parents both live in Harrowville. Jordan's place was here.

Paul and Emily are packed up in their SUV. Paul's parents say goodbye to Emily and then to Paul. He still hasn't told them, or anyone else, that Emily is not his. That would be a lie. She is his. She is all of Amanda that remains, other than the pictures from the vanity that Paul has packed in with their stuff to show his daughter as she grows. He has hundreds of stories to tell her about her mother, and she will hear them all.

They drive through town, past the dirt roads named after animals foreign to this place. Paul smiles. "Hey Emily, would you like to see a gazelle one day?" Emily smiles from her seat.

"What, daddy?" she asks. Then she begins one of her ramblings; Paul only understands part of what she is saying.

They head east. The sun is setting now, and in his rearview mirror Harrowville is almost out of sight, lit up by the bright orange of the sinking sun. Like it has finally

caught fire.

One Moment

She sipped her caramel latte and took this moment of privacy to open her book and read on the bookmarked page. The book was just arriving at the juicy part of the mystery. She heard the commotion behind her, and even someone speaking a name that sounded familiar, but her attention was so narrowed on the book that it wasn't until the voice screamed, "Hey bitch!" that she turned to see what was going on.

A young man in a hooded sweatshirt was pointing a gun at her. She then realized the name he had been saying. It was not hers. She stood up and glanced nervously behind her.

"Look at me," the man insisted.

She stepped to the side to block his view. His hand shook on the trigger of the gun. She swallowed hard. Her mouth was dry. She wanted to tell him to calm down, that they could work this out, but before she could speak, his index finger squeezed the trigger. She felt like someone had punched her in the gut and she fell backward onto the ground. She didn't feel the pain at first. Then she heard the sound of the gunshot. Then another.

Her body felt normal; then it filled with explosions of pain, from everywhere all at once. Her chest hurt, her stomach hurt, her head hurt, and her eyes burned like she was lit on fire. Then the pain was gone, and all she felt was an overwhelming need to sleep. She shut her eyes. She could no longer feel her body. Even with her eyes closed she could see light.

Then she was four again. She stood in the aisle of the department store arguing with her sister over which Barbie outfit to buy. They only had enough allowance to buy one and her sister wanted a tennis outfit and she wanted a dress. In the end, they decided on a jumpsuit that they both liked.

Then she was twenty and walking across the aisle with her first associate's degree and her sister was at the end snapping hundreds of photos of every second of her walking across, shaking hands, and ascending the stairs. Her sister made her a graduation album of the day. Her day, one of the first accomplishments or celebrations she hadn't shared with her sister, as the honoree of the party.

Then she was ten and she was rolling duct tape down the center of the room, telling her sister she had to stay on her own half. "Fine," her sister responded, "The TV's on my half." "Yeah, well, the door's on mine."

Then she was twenty-eight, and her sister came to her house with a quart of mint-chocolate-chip ice-cream and some slasher flicks to 'cheer' her up, but she told her sister that she was fine. Her sister insisted that she couldn't be fine after a break-up of three years, but she disagreed. Her sister hugged her and she pushed her off and told her she was fine. Her sister asked how she did it, how she was always able to move on so fast. She told her sister she built up walls, and they did not come down easy, if ever. Her sister said she didn't think she was able to do that. She agreed. Her phone rung, and her sister looked at the screen. It was her ex-boyfriend. She had already deleted his number so his name didn't even show up. She took the phone from her sister, looked at the number and hit ignore. Her sister had once shown up in tears after a break-up, and she had comforted

her with junk food and movies. But her sister was depressed for weeks, cried on occasion, and didn't want to leave her house. But she stowed away her own tears. They were behind the wall. She ate the ice cream her sister brought and watched the movies regardless.

Then she was six, and she and her sister were riding in circles on the concrete slab outside their house that was meant to be a half basketball court one day. They rode their bikes around in circles and up and down the driveway, racing and trying to see who would win, then down the hill to the cemetery. They stopped and picked wildflowers along the road and put them in their plastic baskets attached to their bikes and rode back home to put them in water.

Then she was fifteen going to her first dance with Robbie Erickson, who everyone had said liked her sister, but he had asked her to the dance. Her sister sat on the bleachers and pined away for Michael Bickers, who was a varsity basketball player. Her sister danced a few times with other guys, and finally had the courage to ask Michael to dance and he said no. She sat with her sister for a few minutes who blew it off. Later that night she wrapped her arms around her sister and said not to worry about Michael Bickers, he was idiot.

Then she was thirty and she was dancing with Eric at a swing dance class that her sister had paid for them to take. She wasn't a good dancer and neither was Eric, but somehow they muddled through the moves, and returned each of the six weeks to try one more, time, and each week the dance instructor would try to help them get the moves right and each week she would say, "I like your spirit."

Then she was sixteen fighting over the keys to the car she shared with her sister. They both had plans, and they couldn't decide who got the car. Finally, they had to double date which turned into a disaster of epic proportion when their dates got into a fist fight at the movies over a spilled drink, and they were all kicked out of the theater. After they dropped the guys off, they were silent all the way home. They both walked to the refrigerator and she pulled out a Diet Coke and her sister a Pepsi and looked at each other. Then they shook up the cans and sprayed each other until they were soaking wet and laughing so hard they had fallen to the floor. Their mother had come in, took one look at them, shook her head, and told them to clean up the mess. When they finished laughing, they did.

The she was twenty-five, and her sister was at her house, lying on her bed crying after she had just had a miscarriage at four months. Her sister had always wanted children. She lay in behind her sister and put her arm around her. Her sister sobbed for hours, curled up in the fetal position, and she stayed with her, arm wrapped tightly around her. "Why did this happen?" her sister asked through the sobs. "I don't know," she responded. "I wish I could take the pain away."

The room grew lighter than she remembered, and in the distance, she heard her sister calling her name. She held tightly to her arms. She couldn't reach the version of her sister that was far away. She only had this sister. She tightened her grasp. The light was so bright that she couldn't see, though her eyes were wide open. She could still feel her sister in her arms, hear her sobs, and the faint sound of her sister far away was almost gone. "I wish I could take the pain away."

She felt her sister grab her hand and hold it tighter. Somewhere outside of her mind she thought she could feel her sister's arms around her, and heard her say her name one last time. She held as tight as she could, but she felt her sister's body being pulled from her. She wouldn't let go without a fight. She squeezed the fading body. "I wish I could take your pain away."