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OTHER PEOPLE'S LIVES

by

Susan Lynn Agee

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

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Other People's Lives is a collection of stories about people who love each other going through changes in life, and about how they react to these changes and each other. The changes are geographical, relational and spiritual. The settings are important in that they create mood. I've been affected by watching people go through certain stages of life, and I've attempted to show what I've learned about crossing those thresholds in these stories.

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Other People's Lives

Etta loved to watch **48 Hours**. When she started this habit, she was skeptical of her own time spent watching the show, but it sucked her in, the drama and the narrators' voice sucked her into this vortex of bad things that happen to other people that she shouldn't have allowed herself to dwell upon, but she did.

The narrator's voice rose and fell with inflections that made whatever had happened in the broadcast sound like a cartoonish radio show from the 1930's. This occurred to Etta's husband Bob as he was in the kitchen making himself a sandwich. Etta was on the couch, holding the remote limply in her hand and staring at the tv. She was motionless, almost catatonic. Bob looked at her and he shuddered. He felt both revulsion and pity. What had happened to his wife?

Whatever was happening on the television was alive. It threw light and shadows onto the opposite wall, the only wall Bob could see from his angle. As he listened to the narration, it occurred to him that the voice was so inflected as to not fit in with the time they were living in. The press called this The Information Age, and everything was about scientific studies and statistics. Bob stood in the kitchen with his sandwich in his hand, watching the shadows on the opposite wall. He listened, spellbound, to a story whose pictures he couldn't even see.

He shook himself. "Etta," he said. She didn't respond, but her chest rose in shallow breaths, so he knew she was still alive.

Sharla was Etta's co-worker in her office. "What is up with you, girl?" she asked. "You're sure wearing a path to that bathroom here lately."

Etta raised her coffee mug. "Well stop filling it back up!" said Sharla. "You're making me nervous and I gave up caffeine."

"Did you see 48 Hours last night?" Etta asked.

"I do not watch that stuff," said Sharla.

"They never figured out what happened to those people," said Etta.

"What people?"

"The Ellingtons. They just disappeared and never came back. Or were never brought back."

"Aliens?" Sharla asked. She smirked as she spoke, but Etta couldn't see her behind the partition.

"No," Etta said disdainfully. "You don't believe in that stuff, do you? These abductors were just your regular old run of the mill human kind."

"There's nothing regular about that," said Sharla.

"You know what I mean," said Etta. And she would continue, and tell Sharla in extreme detail about how the case unfolded. Sharla would be sorry she asked.

This became a daily occurrence and Sharla asked to be moved to another part of the building.

It was Sunday night. Etta waited for this all week long. The handsome silver-haired host of this show led viewers through a story each week that detailed the mysterious death or disappearance of some seemingly happy soul. Or were they happy? There was always an ugly underbelly to everyone's story, thought Etta.

On Wednesday night, Bob and Etta got the call that there was a house on fire two blocks over.

"I'm surprised we didn't smell the smoke," said Bob, putting on his shoes. He and Etta had been working as volunteer first responders for the last few months. They'd gone to three months of training and had since then worked about three cases. He wondered sometimes if this was what had set Etta off to watching the 48 hours show. He didn't recall her watching it before their involvement with the emergency department, but he couldn't be for sure about that. Sometimes Bob nodded off in his chair before 9 pm rolled around. Bob had worked as a bookkeeper at a small business for over twenty years. He kept making plans to bite the bullet and sit for his accountant exam (he'd finished all the coursework), but then his self-imposed deadline would roll around and he would put it off again. It didn't seem to matter to Etta; they lived well enough, and she was not a woman who lusted after sparkly things. He was grateful for that.

They headed out into the dark in their truck. They lived in a rural area that had no streetlights, and so nighttime was inky black. It was still summer,

so the air still felt heavy and damp, even at this hour. Bob looked at the clock on his dash. Two a.m.

Etta chattered all the way to the scene. Anyone else would be amazed that she could talk as much as she did after having just waked up. But he was used to it and he just tuned her out when necessary.

“There it is,” said Etta, and she pointed with her finger perilously close to his face. He pulled back as much as he could. “I see it,” he said. A ranch-style house was on fire. There were a few trucks out in front of it, other responders Bob supposed. He pulled in beside them.

They learned from one of the other responders that the fire department was on the way. Most of the family had made it out of the house okay, but a five-year-old girl was still inside. “She was mad at me at bedtime, and she went into the closet to sulk and fell asleep!!” The girl’s mother had rushed at Bob and Etta when they walked over and Bob could see that she was grasping at whoever would listen. “It’s my fault! It’s my fault!” she cried. Bob tried to reassure her, but when he turned to ask for Etta’s help, she was gone. He saw the back of her white jacket. It looked as though it were flying towards the house and the flames. “ETTA!” he shouted. He turned from the panicked mother and took to running after his wife. He saw her go down on her knees and crawl into the house by a side door. “ETTA!” Bob felt two arms grab him from behind. “Don’t!” someone said, and another firefighter ran past him.

The firefighter who was holding Bob walked him over to a place where he could sit down. By the time Bob had his wits about him again, he saw Etta being led from the house by the other firefighter. She was coughing hard and her eyes were half closed. They sat her down next to Bob. "I had to pull her out by her feet," he heard the firefighter say.

Someone drove them home. Bob got into the bed and listened while Etta cried in the bathroom. She came out finally and lay down next to him. He switched off the lamp. He didn't sleep much that night and he didn't think Etta did at all. The phone rang at 5 am and it was the firefighter who'd driven them home. Tell Etta that the girl is safe, he said. Bob did, and when he came out of the shower, she was asleep.

The next week Etta came in the back door with a box. The look on her face told Bob it was heavy and so he helped her place it on the kitchen table. When that was done she had the energy to smile.

"What is it?" said Bob.

"A police scanner."

Bob's stomach lurched. "Why did you buy that?" he asked. He watched as she opened the box and lifted out the scanner. She looked at the scanner like it was a new puppy brought into the house.

"I got it secondhand," she said. "If they won't let me be there, I'm at least going to listen." She didn't apologize for not having discussed the purchase with him. She hardly seemed to notice him being in the room at all, so Bob picked up his stack of Oreos and his glass of milk and walked out.

He didn't know what to do. He sat in his recliner and watched the tv without really watching it. He slid a whole Oreo into his mouth and took great pleasure in biting through the whole thing at once. The problem was that it was too much for even his mouth to manage and he sucked crumbs into his throat. This threw him into a coughing fit. He was able to save himself, which was just as well because Etta was absorbed in whatever was coming across on the police scanner. Bob could hear the voices popping on and off and the static, but he couldn't make out what they were saying.

"Well, she isn't talking about *48 Hours* no more because she's too caught up in what's going on right here in our city." Sharla's friend Deborah stood at her desk giving Sharla the latest on Etta's adventures. She'd taken Sharla's old desk across from Etta and now she got to hear about every crime committed in the city of Memphis.

"I told you not to take that desk," said Sharla.

"Like I want to know all the bad stuff going on," said Deborah. "I get enough of that in my own neighborhood."

"Don't come over here and whine. I told you."

Bob grew accustomed to his mornings starting with a new sound: the static and distorted voices of the scanner. He walked into the kitchen to find Etta sitting at the table with a cup of coffee. She was listening to the scanner, but she was also watching it, like she was waiting on a hand to reach through the front of it and pull her in.

“Have you been up all night listening to that thing?” Bob asked. Etta looked at him scornfully. “No,” she said. He poured himself a cup of coffee and tried to remember when he felt her get into the bed, but he couldn’t. He turned around and leaned against the kitchen counter and took a sip out of his mug.

“Well, are you going to work?” he asked. This time the look she gave him is just pure dislike, and she got up from the table and went back into the bedroom. “What do you think?” he heard in a minute.

After she left, he fiddled with the thing for a while. He sat in front of it just like she did, but he didn’t get the fascination. All that squawking, clicking on and off and static made him nervous. He turned it off and leaned back in the chair. He wondered how much of this he should put up with, but if he said that out loud, he was pretty sure Etta would call him selfish and insensitive. Her over-involvement with the lives of strangers was becoming a joke with their friends. The last time they were at the Millers’ for dinner, Bob saw Laura and David Miller exchange a look when Etta started talking about what she’d heard on the scanner the previous night. The first few times she’d told people about it, they were actually interested and their morbid curiosities got the best of them when she went into detail. But unfortunately she didn’t notice when they stopped being interested. She’d bring stories each time there was a get together and if there were a larger crowd than just four, most of the people would end up leaving the room and the one poor soul who’d asked was stuck

with Etta. Her eyes would still be shining at the end of the tale, but her audience would be more than ready to move on.

Deborah was at Sharla's desk again. Sharla knew it, but she just didn't want to look up and acknowledge it. "You know, you're getting as bad as her," she said.

"You better stop that!" said Deborah. She stayed put and took a long drink from her cup of coffee. "Don't you want to know the latest?" she said finally.

"Oh, all right." Sharla looked up from her computer screen. When she saw the expression on Deborah's face, she recognized with a start that that had been her. She had liked hearing Etta's stories. Up to a point, she thought to herself. She had moved to get away from it, but she couldn't say that she didn't sometimes welcome Deborah's updates. She just didn't like admitting it to herself and therefore she wasn't going to act like it either. "Come on, tell me and get it over with," she said.

"The fire department told her she couldn't come to the fires anymore because she was less of a calming influence. She was kind of like throwing gas onto the fire instead," said Deborah. Sharla shook head. "So now she's got this police scanner at her house and she's listening to all these calls going out and it's about to drive Bob crazy."

"I can only imagine," said Sharla.

"What do you think is wrong with her?" asked Deborah.

"You got me," said Sharla.

Deborah stood there at the corner of Sharla's desk and took a few more sips of coffee. She looked off over the partitions and she could see the top of Etta's dark head at her desk. "I just needed to take a break from it all," she said to Sharla.

"I understand," said Sharla.

Etta looked out the window of their trailer and thought how desolate everything looked right now. Had she ever seen a pretty December since they'd lived here? When they married, she and Bob moved out here to be near her parents, but her parents had since passed away. That was inevitable she knew, but she didn't expect to feel so hollow at this point in her life. She opened the small window; it was one that you pumped outward with a handle and it only opened about a third of the way and at an angle. She didn't know where Bob had found these windows or why he had decided to use them on their house. How were you going to get out one of these if the house caught fire? It was something she needed to discuss with him when he woke up. She shut the window and walked back into the bedroom where Bob lay in the bed, the covers pulled up round his neck. His large form looked funny all tucked in, like the offspring of a giant. She walked through to the kitchen where she sat down in front of the scanner. It was turned on at a low volume, but even so its activity had a crackling, otherworldly quality to it. Voices would suddenly come across as if out of nowhere. Etta listened. She could listen to it all night and sometimes did.

“What brought all of this on, do you think?” Deborah asked Sharla.

She was standing at her spot again, leaning on the corner of Sharla’s desk.

“Her parents died,” said Sharla.

“But wasn’t that three years ago?”

“Yeah it was. But to go together like that, in a car wreck. Most folks expect their elderly parents to go one at a time of old age.”

“How old were they?”

“Her mother was seventy-nine and her daddy was ninety.”

“Damn. He robbed the cradle,” said Deborah. She took a sip of coffee.

“Who was driving?” she asked finally.

Now Etta took to staying in the house all day while Bob was gone. It was too cold outside to do anything, and she felt bad, so she called in to work day after day, until someone from HR called. The caller wanted a doctor’s note to justify Etta’s long absence and Etta told him she’d get one and hung up the phone. Then she sat at the window again and waited for Bob to come home.

When Bob got home on a Friday, the scanner was gone from the kitchen table. Etta was gone, too. Good, he thought, she’s decided to get out and do something. He thought she might be able to return to work the next week. He noted that he felt a sense of relief at the scanner’s absence. He went over and opened the window that was over the kitchen sink. We need some fresh air in here, even if it is cold, he thought.

They lived in a sort of flat and light brown dirt covered place. The trailer was what she referred to as her house, only it's not so much a house as she liked to think. The day she realized that was the day she turned inward. But Etta didn't stay in long and soon she's gone out in to the woods to look at things to connect with things. She would normally scoff at 'connect with nature' as that is something that only college educated people talk about. She wasn't college educated, she was just a worker, but she had common sense some of those people never heard about. She wanted to study the plants that could heal you and she knew there were some out here behind the house. She'd been thoughtful, though, she'd put the scanner up for Bob in the closet so he wouldn't have to look at it any longer. He'd asked her to do that and in return he'd bring her home a new Christmas tree. She'd asked for one of those pre-lit ones from Walmart a month ago and he'd never really answered her, but today he thought it would be a nice surprise.

Etta wasn't far along the path behind the house before she saw the white flower of the mayapple. Mama called it mandrake, she could remember that. She could remember most of what her mother had taught her about the kitchen, about plants, about doing things that some women didn't do, like building houses and reupholstering couches. Her mama was a unique woman in Etta's mind, and it had taken her aback when her co-worker Sharla referred to Mama as "country." Now Etta knew they were country and that was nothing to be ashamed of, but to hear someone else say it like that made her feel ashamed for some reason. She'd never been ashamed about it before and

still felt proud of some of the stuff she knew how to do that women like Sharla didn't, but since Sharla had said that Etta felt set apart from the other workers in the office. She had worked in that office for eight years. She started back to work after their third child left home and Etta knew she wouldn't be able to stand staying out there on that land by herself all day. If Mama was still alive, she thought, we'd be having so much fun. Etta walked some more and looked around her for the lemongrass that Mama had once planted out here when this was the site of Uncle Teddy's house. Uncle Teddy, she thought. It'd been too long since Uncle Teddy lived here. There had been a huge parcel of land in the family at one time and it had been divided up between Mama and all of her siblings after their parents were gone. Uncle Teddy's house had been the closest to Etta's family while they were growing up. She had enjoyed having a "second daddy," as she called him.

It was a relief to be out of the office. The color scheme there seemed to not have changed in ten years. Everything was mauve and navy, or fuschia and grey. Whoever thought up these color combinations, wondered Etta. Whatever happened to green and yellow and blue? Just call it what it is. She was walking back towards the house now and she was picturing how it looked out here in the summer when everything still was green. It was all brown now, but it crackled under your feet and that was like the earth letting you know that it was still there all around you. And it would come back, she thought.

Bob was back at the trailer wondering just where Etta had gone and when she would be back. He hadn't been worried at first, but now the light in

the sky was starting to dim. He grabbed his jacket off the peg next to the door, and as was starting to dim. He grabbed his jacket off the peg next to the door, and as he walked outside, he heard a car pulling into the drive. He recognized the woman behind the wheel but he couldn't recall from where. When she got closer and he saw the parking sticker on her windshield, he realized she was someone from Etta's office. He looked at her face and it took no time for him to discern what was going on. His father had always told him that after you've been married twenty years, you start to know what your spouse is thinking. You start to need only one shift in the wind regarding that person you share your bed with and you know that something has changed or that some decision has been made.

He took Sharla inside the trailer and they talked. It was clear her thoughts about Etta had been on the same track as his when she told him of moving to the other side of the office to avoid her stories.

"But when she didn't show up for work for the last week, I wondered if something had really happened," said Sharla. She looked down. "I have to admit," she said, "that with Etta sometimes I take what she says with a grain of salt. It's like she filters everything through some calamitous lens. You learn after a while that about a third of it is not exactly how it is."

Bob took a slow drink of coffee and Sharla felt for a moment that she may have offended him. But I don't care, she thought. I'm just telling the truth of how it is. He should know that, if anybody does.

“I should have got rid of the tv a long time ago,” he said finally. He stared at a point on the wall behind Sharla’s head.

“It’s not that, Bob, it’s something in her! All of us have tvs and we don’t do what she does- you know, get so wrapped up in everything.” Sharla was frustrated. Maybe I was wrong to come here, she thought. Maybe I just wanted to see some drama myself. She looked at Bob and she didn’t see a man who was going to confront his wife about this situation. But then maybe he was happy with the way things were. Maybe he was happy that Etta was so distracted by something else and didn’t spend her time hovering over him.

“She’s always been sensitive,” Bob said. Then he stood up from his chair. He looked out the window at the sky. “I need to look for her.”

They went outside, and the sky had grown darker. They could still see; there was enough light from the shift change from the sun to the moon to just let them see their way to the back part of Bob and Etta’s land. “Her car is still here, so I know she’s on foot,” said Bob. He stood looking at Sharla like he was waiting for her to say her goodbyes and leave. She pointed her key fob at her car and locked the door. “I’ll help you,” she said.

Etta had worked her way back to the place where she’d entered the wooded area behind their trailer, and she stopped when she saw Sharla and Bob talking in the gravel driveway. They started walking toward the woods. Etta starting moving back and to her left, in the opposite direction of where they were walking. She came to a tall, old tree. She couldn’t remember what kind it was, but it had some low branches that she took hold of and hoisted

herself onto. She just went about a fourth of the way up the trunk of the tree and found that she could watch Bob and Sharla from where she sat. She settled onto a branch. Their voices started drifting up to her, and she heard her name being spoken. She heard the worry in Bob's voice. Soon he started calling her name, and then Sharla joined him. Sharla, who Etta knew didn't like her and had made fun of her for watching the tv shows that she did. It's just the people, Etta thought, I have to find out what happens to the people. The Ellingtons, that family that was never found, and others like them. Etta thought something must be wrong with Sharla for not showing any more emotion about it than she did. Bob never said the cutting things that some people did, but he didn't do anything else either. Bob was just Bob; he just walked steadily through each day.

Etta watched as the two walked farther and farther away from her. She felt comfortable up in her little perch, and she liked the chill that was in the air. It was a bit cold, but she thought that later she could wrap up in a blanket and Bob would make her a cup of hot chocolate. She watched his red jacket get smaller as he walked farther away. There's only so far they can go before they reach the open field again, she thought, and then they will have to turn back. That was okay; she could wait.

The Carrier

The neighborhood I delivered mail in was high dollar. There were houses that filled half a block, what you could honestly call a “spread”. Of course, I only saw the front half of these showplaces, just far enough up to reach the mailbox, but every now and then I’d sneak a peek into someone’s back forty as I delivered mail to their neighbor and maneuvered my truck just so. I’d drive past these houses in my rattletrap mail truck and wonder what those people did for a living. When I began seeing how the other half lived, I thought ‘if they can, then why can’t I?’

Looking at all of those houses with their winding driveways and who knows what behind their fences, I began to contemplate something serious. I’d find myself driving along in an almost meditative state, shoving envelopes into boxes without checking to be sure it was the right stuff. Then I’d come to when a dog ran across my path and I’d think, damn, get with it, man! My surroundings had me thinking in a new direction, but that was no reason to cause a disaster. Hitting someone’s pet would be one kind of disaster; dealing with my wife Sadie if I lost this job would be another.

I’d taken the job as a relief mail carrier to supplement my income. I was a musician, and while I was getting gigs almost every weekend, the money I spent on gas usually ate up most of my pay. The mail job was also a way of appeasing Sadie. She’d been complaining that I wasn’t helping enough with paying the bills, even though she’d agreed to let me work on the CD for a

while. The record was almost finished, but she insisted I get something on the side, so here I was in a truck where the interior temperature registered at about one hundred ten degrees on an August afternoon. No air conditioning either, just a piddly little fan that felt like I had someone sitting in the next seat fanning me with a magazine. Which, I can tell you, I tried myself on a number of occasions. The post office had a lot of rules about the “sanctity of the mail”, but from what I had seen in my training, those rules were made to be broken and tossed aside once you became a seasoned carrier. The employees who led the training classes warned us more than once that we would be watched during our ninety-day probation, but the carrier who trained you on the road dispensed with those warnings fairly quickly. I needed the job, but telling me that I would be watched and not knowing exactly when was like handing me a book of matches for one hand and a can of gasoline for the other. I like a challenge.

I’d never committed a real crime in my whole life. There were a few speeding tickets, and a near-miss with weed possession that had been taken care of by the drummer in my band of the time. He also happened to be a policeman’s son. But like I said, nothing serious. What I was contemplating here, trying to level the playing field a little with some of these richer folk, was serious. I knew I had to have help.

But not everyone is a risk taker. First, I called Paul Blaine. Paulie, we called him. He was a decade younger than me, but something of a guitar prodigy in the seventies when my band’s fame was at its height. The poor kid

was never much with the girls other than the strung-out groupies who camped out beside the stage door. Paul was unnaturally short, and his hairline had begun receding at fourteen. Poor kid. What was inside his head was above average, but young girls who've had too much to drink don't care about that. At any rate, here it was twenty-five years later and I find that while I am toiling for the post office, Paulie is scrambling for dollars too, just trying to meet his every day needs. So he should've been ripe for the suggestion I was about to make.

"I can scope out the house when I'm on my route," I said. "See if anybody's there during the day, you know."

"I don't know, man," he said. I could hear a tv in the background.

"What are you watching?" I asked him.

"What? Uh...Judge Judy."

"Now see, would you rather be watching Judge Judy in your falling-down-around-your-ears duplex, or securing your future compliments of some doctor who probably has more than he needs anyway?"

Paul was quiet on the other end of the line. Finally, he said, "Tank, there's something wrong with you, man," and he hung up the phone.

I was pretty sure I could convince him otherwise, so I went on with my plan. The next day I worked, I looked around for the right place. All of them looked to have a lot of stuff to spare; what else would they put in those

monstrosities they called houses? But I was particularly intrigued by the houses that had driveways that wound all the way around to the backyard. In most cases my curiosity was stopped short by a tall fence with a locked gate. But then I was on Walnut Hill Drive and I pulled up to the mailbox at 546. Something about this house spoke to me; it's like it was welcoming me to come closer. I pride myself on following my gut, so I pulled into the driveway and found a gate that was wide open. I drove through it and found that the driveway wound around to the back of the house where there was a wooden deck with slats for a roof. There were flowers, too, everywhere there should have been a yard, flowers and rocks, especially those big, flat kind you get at Home Depot or Lowe's. Somewhere amongst all of those flowers and rocks I saw a face – no, two faces. The first one belonged to a gray and white cat, her body all hunkered down in the flowers like she was getting ready to spring. And just above her was a human face, kind of gray itself. After a minute, I made out that the face belonged to an old man. He was looking right at me, so I was caught.

“Hello!” I called out. I cut off the ignition in the truck. The old man squinted at me for a minute and then worked on standing up.

“You need some help?” I asked as I climbed out of the truck.

“No, just some time,” he said, and I didn't get exactly what he meant until I watched him and took note of exactly how long it took him to stand.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

I thought fast. "I think I have a package for you," I said. I climbed back into the truck and went into the very back where the packages were stacked. It was hot back there, but I lingered a while, pretending I was looking for the right box.

"Well, you know what," I said, speaking as I stepped down out of the truck, "I was wrong. This package is for 546 Deer Creek." The old man had moved closer in, and he leaned toward me and squinted at the small box I held out. "Well, that's never happened before," he said. "We sometimes get mail for the people over on Walnut Tree with the same number, but not Deer Creek. That's odd."

"What can I say?" I said. "It's been a long day and I'm no spring chicken." He laughed an abrupt, hoarse laugh. "Besides that," I said, "it's hard to see when you've got sweat dripping into your eyes."

He laughed again and then looked up abruptly. "Well, do you want to come in for a glass of iced tea? I can't do much in the kitchen, but I can do that."

This took me by surprise. The smooth demeanor I thought I was maintaining slid a bit. But then I took control of it again. "We're really not supposed to do that, but what the hell. I'll take some iced tea. But I'll take it out here where I won't mess up your inside with my sweaty dirty self." My thinking had caught up with the situation and I'd decided that to hang around a little longer would allow me the chance to observe all the entrances to the

house. I wouldn't have thought I could do that with the owner around, but hey, he gave me an invitation. I took a seat in one of the black wrought iron chairs on the patio, and my new friend made his very slow way back into his house. This gave me plenty of time to make mental notes. I looked around the yard and let my eyes wander up the deck to check out the locations of doors and windows. Since I figured he would be slow getting the drinks, I got up and walked around to both sides of the house, just to check for all the entrances. There was one that was almost hidden by a giant hydrangea bush. I made note of it and went back to my chair just in time.

“This is a beautiful yard,” I told the man when he returned with our teas. “I'm glad I got the address wrong or I might not have known that all this was back here.”

The old man smiled and showed tobacco-stained teeth. “Well, thank you. I enjoy it.”

“I'll bet you do,” I said. We carried on like that for about fifteen minutes. By the time I'd left there, I'd steered the conversation in the direction of home construction. I had the old man convinced that I'd once worked for a builder. “Had to retire from that,” I said. “Fifty-two is too old to still be climbing scaffolds.”

I felt like I'd connected with the old man. People tell me I'm a good talker. I found out that his last name was Howard, that he was a widower, and lived in the big house alone, save for the cat. He was a little hard of hearing,

too, because I had to repeat some of my questions. He was mostly the listening type anyway. He didn't say a lot, just nodded his head.

Sadie and I had met in a bar where I was playing in 1991. She was all about the color black—black hair, black clothes, and it all looked nice against her pale skin. She and I connected, and that was something I needed, something to counter the shallowness of the girls who hung out at the stage door after the shows.

I'd had a good start on a musical career when Sadie and I married. You always think "what if" about the other path, but I never regretted marrying. Sadie went on the road with the band and we had a blast. A little too much of a blast, probably. Sadie's made me stop telling our son Nick about it. I say, it'll keep him from making the same mistakes, but she says I'm giving the boy the wrong things to think about. He —Nicky—came along a year and a half after we'd been married. Our priorities changed, as they should, and Sadie stopped going on tours. I'd moved from The Bites to Analog by then. The Bites' lead singer Richard Star was a control freak and wasn't willing to let anyone else share the upfront duties. I said fine, if you want to burn out. He was obsessed with his name connection anyway. He always said it was fate that his name was almost the exact same as one of the Beatles. I agreed, but only to the fact that like Ringo Starr, Richard Star wasn't much of a singer.

The post office gives its carriers thirty minutes for lunch. Most of the regulars just pull over somewhere and gulp down a sandwich. You're always trying to beat the clock, they say. Get the first class mail out and the pick-up mail back to the P.O. by early afternoon. Not long after meeting Mr. Howard, I started doing lunch on his back deck once or twice a week. The iced tea invite turned into an iced tea and fried baloney sandwich invite one day and it just went from there. I think he just wanted someone to talk to. Sometimes these lunches stretched into an hour, but I found that I didn't have the heart to cut his stories short. I parked the mail truck on the intersecting side street so I could see it from his backyard. That was me thumbing my nose to the postal spies. I was pretty sure I had been followed a few times. I kept noticing a blue car in my rear view mirror for a few consecutive days. It wasn't a marked vehicle, at least not by an official USPS logo. I wondered if they ever washed their vehicles. But after a few days of this, I guess I passed the test, because the car disappeared.

Mr. Howard asked about my family.

"My son Nick is fifteen years old," I said. "Sadie, my angry wife, is very happy these days about my being employed with the post office. She works for an insurance company, has been there for fourteen years. Great benefits." I thought Mr. Howard hadn't heard me, so I looked over at him and saw that he was still working on chewing his sandwich. Thoughtfully.

“My wife Eunice made pies,” he said finally. “In fact, I met her at a pie supper. Do you know what a pie supper is?” It sounded like a lard fest to me, but I didn’t say so.

“Can’t say that I do.”

Mr. Howard’s sandwich finally disappeared and he wiped his mouth with a rough-looking paper napkin. “That’s where a roomful of young ladies bake pies and a roomful of young fellows bid on them. When you win a pie, you win a date with the girl who baked it.”

“And I take it you won Eunice’s pie?” I said.

Mr. Howard smiled that toothy yellow smile. “I won Eunice,” he said. He’d had a daughter too, but no grandchildren because his daughter Carol died at twenty-two with cancer. “She’d been sick with it for a while, so there wasn’t even a chance for her to have a real life.” He thought a minute, then turned to me. “Worst thing I ever did, only having one child. Make sure you have at least one more.” When he told me things like that, Mr. Howard rarely waited for any comment from me. He just wrapped it up and went inside, as if the stopping point had been agreed upon by both of us.

Sadie and I talked about having another baby, but all it ever came to was talk. I guess she didn’t want it bad enough, because she never felt like it was the right time to go off the Pill. Up until that conversation with Mr. Howard, I had left the decision up to her, but now I found the idea running through my mind more frequently. I didn’t say anything to her yet, but I

started planning in my head what I might say if the conversation was to come up again. In fact, the idea of having another baby and the completion of my CD took up so much of my thinking time that I sometimes had to remind myself that I still needed to find a partner for my big heist. I referred to it as a heist in my head, but I never said it out loud.

Anyway, not long after Nick was born, I got my big break. Rounder, the southern rock band that started southern rock bands, invited me to join them as a guitarist, songwriter and sometimes vocalist. It was a fluke that I got the gig. I'd been working sound on various tours after my time with Analog was up (directional differences), and Rounder's founding members Jed Black and Rake Storey asked to hear some of my stuff. We were all just sitting around one early morning after a show and I mentioned that my song "Leilani" had often been compared (by friends) to Clapton's "Layla." I said I hoped that wouldn't cause me any problems. Of course, then they wanted to hear it, so Storey handed me his prized Martin and I played a little piece of it. He said I should start working more on writing, playing and singing rather than wiring up other people's shows. I couldn't have agreed more. It wasn't long after that they lost guitarist Ronny Highwall and I stepped into his spot. Sadie was as thrilled as I was. That was back in the day when my music mattered to her. I try not to dwell on it now – how she's not supporting me anymore, because I know it would produce a fruitless discussion. I just go about my business, the business of making music, and she goes about hers. I've got this record

project about done and I like to keep her updated, but I don't get a lot of feedback anymore.

It seemed to me that Mr. Howard was talking less as our friendship progressed. It was lucky for me that he was such a good listener since Sadie wasn't much good in that department anymore. When he did talk, he liked to talk a lot about Eunice, and he asked questions about Sadie. We talked so much about the women in our lives that I found myself thinking more about Sadie as I drove my route. That was something I liked about the solitary nature of delivering the mail – I could reflect. Or I could listen to my iPod, which I kept hidden in my backpack. That was against post office rules, but as I've said, I'm a risk taker. Once I was out of sight of the post office, I'd set it up on the dash of the truck with some of those mini speakers. I finally had to duct tape the things to the dash, as they kept falling off when I'd make a sharp turn, like a U turn at the end of a street, which was also against the rules. The few times when I thought the blue car was following me, I devised a way of ripping that duct tape off the dash and stuffing the speakers into my backpack which was conveniently placed at the front of the truck. Having my backpack where I did was probably against the rules too, but hey, you have to choose your battles.

I hadn't forgotten about original plan to lift some of Mr. Howard's possessions when he wasn't around, but so far he was always around. I did finally go inside the house with him at his insistence, and it was a good thing; I made mental notes about what possessions were in what rooms and what

looked expensive. I found that one of the drawbacks of my having chosen the home of an elderly person to rob was that he didn't own many electronics. Never mind, I told myself. There were plenty of expensive looking lamps and rugs, and I was sure he had some of Eunice's jewelry hidden somewhere.

I had a gig in Birmingham about a month into my talks with Mr. Howard. After the show (not a sellout crowd, but there was severe weather that night), I was having a beer with some of the real folk of the town when I ran into a guy who told me he was friends with Paul Blaine. He said his name was Itchy, named for his particular style of playing the guitar. I remember thinking that neither the name nor the face rang a bell. I was pretty sure I'd never heard Paulie mention him. I hadn't even talked to Paulie in a while, even though he'd left me a message or two over the last couple of weeks. No details, just that he needed to talk. I hadn't returned the calls yet, and I started feeling kind of bad about that, but then what Itchy was saying interrupted my thoughts.

"Paulie says you two of been talking about a deal to make some extra cash," he said. He dipped his head down a little and said, "I've got experience in that field, and I wouldn't mind making some extra money myself." Now I knew what Paulie had been calling me about, and why he wouldn't leave any details on the phone. "I'm not sure if that deal is still going to happen," I said. "Sorry."

Itchy wrinkled his brow. “No, man, that’s not what Paulie said. He said it was your deal and you’d asked him to come along. That you had it all planned.”

“That was a month ago,” I said. “Things have changed.” And I realized, as I said it, that things had changed. Even though I had been making mental notes about Mr. Howard’s house, I realized now that there was a reason why I’d never taken the time to write them down. Itchy didn’t look very happy with me, so I said I needed to go practice and left the bar. As I was walking out I could hear his voice over all the others, announcing to the room that he just couldn’t respect somebody that didn’t follow through and he wanted to know what they thought about it. The sufficiently lubricated crowd voiced their agreement and it sounded kind of like the crowd did when we were up on stage.

If I haven’t already mentioned it, a post office in the morning is a noisy place. Carriers are chunking mail into slots all at the same time, but there’s no harmony to it; it’s not in unison. It’s just racket if you stop long enough to listen to it. There are voices coming from everywhere; the carriers talk to each other from across the room to break the boredom and to keep pace with each other. There’s always a race to see who will be out the door first. You load up your mail in big, bulky carts, and the wheels on those things make a noise that is hard to get out of your head. It’s an ominous sound, hundreds of rolling cart wheels echoing in that hollow sounding building. Besides that, they move

like the wheels on a bad grocery cart, always going in the opposite direction of where you're pushing.

The bright side of it (and I always try to look at the bright side of things) is that all that noise, harmonious or not, can make a good backdrop for some deep thought. If you tune out the actual words coming from the other carriers and try not to get too involved in a conversation, the repetitive movement of your hands putting the mail into slots can facilitate some awesome problem solving.

That was my conclusion on the Tuesday before they fired me from the postal gig. I'd lain the junk mail aside and was concentrating on sorting the first class stamped stuff, the way they'd told me. I didn't feel eyes in the back of my head from my supervisor Mr. Branch the way I had on other recent mornings, so I knew I was doing a good job. I really knew it when I was rolling out the door before one o'clock. I got in my truck and cranked it up, put on my iPod and rolled out of the post office driveway.

I was about finished with my route when I saw the blue car again. Only this time it was coming towards me instead of following me. When it passed me, I was surprised to see Paulie sitting in the passenger seat. What? He must have seen me, but he didn't meet my eyes. When did he get on with the post office, I thought. And how did he jump straight to postal police?

I decided to finish my route and then give him a call when I got home. I'd never returned his calls from before anyway, not after I'd found out what it

was he wanted from that Itchy guy. I just didn't feel like explaining myself to anyone. After finishing a few blocks, I came up to Mr. Howard's street. I looked at my watch and saw that I was running way ahead of my usual time. I would have to cut our visit short today so I could get back early and have something to brag to Sadie about. I was sure Mr. Howard would approve.

I pulled around to the back of his house and surprise, there was no Mr. Howard on the deck. No Slinky the cat, either. I thought, man, I'm running earlier than I thought. Could I be doing that much better?

My wife says that women have a sixth sense about things. She says God gave it to them for raising children and protecting themselves. I think some of that sense must have rubbed off on me for that one day, because I had a feeling that things just weren't right at Mr. Howard's house. One thing we learned in carrier training was that our job included the responsibility of looking in on our elderly and shut-in customers. Checking the situation out when things didn't look right. That was one postal rule I was willing to follow.

I tried all the doors and windows, first knocking and then attempting to open. I tried to remember the list I'd made when I'd been about to start life as a burglar, but I forgot one door. I always forgot that door, so I wouldn't have been a good thief anyway. But I finally remembered it that day, or that sixth sense remembered it for me, and I walked around to that side of the house where we never sat. This was the side that faced the intersecting street where I parked my mail truck during those lengthy lunches. You wouldn't think that a

facing street would be a good place to put an oft forgotten door – *somebody* would remember it – but this one was the one almost camouflaged by the giant hydrangea bush. The bushes were in full bloom and the blooms were the same pinkish-white as the chipped paint on the door. The brick on the house was pinkish-beige. Mr. Howard couldn't have planned a better camouflage.

I tried this door and it opened easily. Inside, I walked from room to room. I called out a couple of times, but didn't hear anything in response. Besides that, I was busy noticing the disarray. Mr. Howard was ex-military; he kept everything like he was expecting inspection. On this day, it was obvious that he had not been the last person to visit these rooms. Drawers were pulled out and contents were thrown on the floor. Anything valuable, meaning all the things I'd noticed on walks through the house with him, was gone.

I went to the master bedroom, and it was empty of anything notable. Then I walked down the hall toward the room where Mr. Howard had moved after his wife died. I remembered that the décor was bare bones; there was just a bed and a dresser. There were no pictures on the wall; Mr. Howard had said all he needed was the window that looked out on the garden.

I heard him before I reached the room. The door was locked from the outside, but the goober twins Paulie and Itchy had forgotten to take the key out of the lock. I turned it and opened the door. Mr. Howard was sitting on the

bed and saying something as he looked out the window. I walked over and put my hand on his shoulder.

As it turned out, he was okay physically. Mentally and emotionally, he was stunned and a little scared. But believe it or not, that eighty-one year old man bounced back with flying colors. I can't say as much for myself.

Sadie left me that same week. She said she didn't think it should take fifteen years to get a career off the ground and didn't I think fifty-three was too old to be a rock star?

So now I was penniless and wifeless and had no one to tell it to. Yeah, I could tell it to Mr. Howard, he is still there, but it's hard to look him in the eye when I know that it was my mind that started the process of what happened to him. I've never told him that, of course, and he doesn't get out enough to know that one of his burglars and I go way back. But it's just as well that I'm no longer employed by the post office, and it's just as well that I don't have to see him again. I can just drive through the neighborhood sometimes and listen to the steady beat of my own tires on the road. It helps me think. Who knows, I might just come up with a song.

Secure

Ellen was a security guard at a library. That they even needed security guards at libraries was appalling to her, but she needed a job so she took it. She'd graduated from college earlier in the year and this was the only job she could find.

She wore a uniform, black pants and a white blouse. They wouldn't let her carry a gun, which was just as well in her mind. So she walked quietly up and down the aisles of books and watched people. It really wasn't such a bad job.

Ellen took an odd sort of comfort from the presence of all of those books stacked in neat rows together. They were like a fortress, and this place had multiple fortresses and the aisles could be used to hide, to calm, to provide a quick doorway into someone else's world. There were a lot of worlds contained in one row of books in the library. The trouble was she didn't have time to stop and peruse the books herself. But the way she did spend her time – pacing and watching people read – could be like slow torture.

There were statues in the library that always threw Ellen off. She'd come around the corner and one would be staring her in the face. Or she would see one out of the corner of her eye and think it was a real person. She wasn't sure who they were supposed to be, but she felt foolish every time one of them made her jump because she saw them every day. After the first week, Ellen began to wish for a mind reading device so she could listen to the

inner monologues going on in this otherwise quiet place. Then she decided to choose one person each day and try to figure out exactly what he or she was reading, researching or studying without ever saying a word to them. The first day she chose a young boy named Artie Fall because she had to reprimand him first thing that morning. He seems to have fallen within my path, so I choose him, she thought. The reprimand was really just a reminder, because she noticed that Artie had a habit of reading out loud. That day it was the e-mails he was writing to his friend Bully.

Artie: U need to come here. Free comp/internet.

Bully: I ain't coming to no dang library. Too quiet.

Artie: You don't have talk to be on the computer.

Bully: That's what I mean. I have to talk. Besides I'm watching The Price is Right.

Artie: You are wrong. U r missing out.

Bully: Zzzz...

Artie: Wake up, dude!!

Bully: Zzzz...

Ellen laid a hand on his shoulder and he jumped up and knocked over his chair. Ellen jumped back to avoid getting hit. Once he'd recovered his composure, Artie put the chair upright. He apologized to the lady sitting next to him, and to the man across from him. The man nodded at Artie while the lady scowled and shushed him.

“I was just going to tell you to stop talking out loud,” said Ellen. ‘I didn’t mean to startle you.” She almost laughed at the poor boy’s face. He looked like he’d just waked up from a long sleep. Total surprise. She patted his shoulder and smiled at him.

“Yes, m’am,” he said.

Ellen noticed that Artie stayed at the library from the time it opened until the time it closed. She made a mental note to watch and see how he actually got there.

On Saturday night Ellen had her third date with Neal. He was older by several years and this was a subject of conflict with her mom. Ellen couldn’t completely disagree; she had a sense that something wasn’t quite right, but she didn’t let on to her mom about that. She just paid attention to things, except during the times when she didn’t want to pay attention. And this was to be one of those times. She would turn off the red flag radar.

The ten minutes before his arrival time were nerve-wracking. Ellen checked herself in the mirror once and decided that she wasn’t going to do that again, that she would just push herself past the bathroom when going down the hall. She considered putting sheets over the mirrors like they used to do when people died just so she wouldn’t be tempted to constantly second-guess what she had chosen to wear. So she switched to checking for dust bunnies under the entertainment center. When she’d replaced her carpet with Pergo, she’d enjoyed the clean look and feel until she noticed that with the windows open, the sun illuminated every piece of dust that skittered across

the floor. She was down on her hands and knees wiping up dust when the doorbell rang.

She opened the door. When he entered the house, he immediately reached over and lifted her up off the ground in a hug. She drew in a breath and then laughed and looked into his face as he set her down. "What was that all about?" she asked.

"That was hello," he said. He gave her a quick peck on the lips before moving past her in search of a corkscrew. Ellen didn't have one. She wasn't practiced in the art of drinking wine and so wasn't prepared. Not to worry, he said, and he went back out to his car and returned with corkscrew in hand.

"You keep one in your car?"

"Be prepared," he said. "The boy scout motto." He grinned at her.

Later, when he was leaving, he made a confession. "I was never a boy scout," he said. This did not come as a surprise to Ellen.

The next week at the library, Artie Fall brought his friend Bully. Ellen smiled to herself and thought oh good, he convinced him to come. She'd decided to like Bully just because he'd agreed to come, but then he opened his mouth. She had to shush him over and over again, until she was forced to make him wait outside for Artie. "You can check out a book, so you will have something to do," she said. He did that, but he also gave her a hard look over his shoulder as he left. The automated doors opened up, swallowed him and then shut again. Ellen let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. She was glad he was gone. When she turned back to face the interior of the

library, she caught Artie looking at her from behind his computer. He looked back to what he was doing as soon as their eyes met.

Tonight while she waited with Artie, the sky was in the moment between bright white summer and the quiet dimming that anticipates fall. "Let's wait outside," she told him.

There were stone benches outside of the same sturdiness as the sculptures of people inside the library. They sat. Ellen searched her mind for a way to start the conversation. It was odd to her that she saw children all day at the library and yet still had a hard time knowing what to say to one.

"My mama died," Artie said. Startled, Ellen turned to him and said, "I'm sorry. Was it recently?"

"No it was four years ago," he said. His voice was more casual now.

"I'm sorry," Ellen said again.

"It's okay," Artie said. "I'm kind of used to it now. But my dad isn't."

Ellen didn't know what else to say to this, so instead, she asked him about Bully. How was it they were friends? What was Bully's family like? Artie said that he and Bully had been friends since the first grade, and that Bully had always been a good kid until the last few years. Then he started acting like he knew more than Artie, and that he was wasting his time doing any of the things Artie wanted to do. But he still wanted to hang out with Artie. He just wanted to always be the one to say what they did.

“Is that how he got the name Bully?” asked Ellen. No, said Artie. That came from his little sister not being able to say Billy. William was his name. So it’s just a coincidence that his name fits his demeanor, thought Ellen.

After a few weeks of Ellen waiting with Artie for his ride, she found she looked forward to their talks. He was an intelligent boy, and he seemed to enjoy their talks as well. Ellen didn’t consider herself of any more than average intelligence, so she found that she was flattered by the boy so enjoying his talks with her. He was one of those naturally brainy kids, and he’d obviously had enough discipline at home to not let those brains go to waste. She didn’t tell him that she enjoyed reading romance novels; they talked mostly about British mysteries, science and computers. The British mysteries were his concession to her; the science was her concession to him. She hoped she was learning as much about the heavens as he was about Sherlock Holmes.

One night their conversation took an unexpected turn.

“Do you think you could marry my dad?” asked Artie. Ellen was too surprised to speak at first, but she looked at Artie’s face (though it was getting darker by 6 o’clock now, and she had to lean out of the building’s shadow and into the beam of the outside light to see him), and knew that he was serious. She spoke quickly then, so he wouldn’t think she had taken offense at what he said. “Well, I don’t know. Does he want to get married?”

“I know he does,” said Artie. “He’s lonely.”

“I imagine he misses your mother. Do you think he’s ready to have a new wife?”

“Yes,” said Artie. He left no opening for Ellen to argue the point. And what could she say anyway? She didn’t know his father.

Arthur Fall, Sr. was a big man, but one who knew his size and contained his impulses in order to keep it in check. He wasn’t always successful, or at least he thought this. Probably anyone else, particularly a woman, would see him as a sweet bear of a man who never had anything but a kind word for everyone. He managed to get from day to day and to function relatively well for Artie’s sake, but inside his mind he was constantly going through a list of reasons why. When he thought about it and acknowledged it consciously, Arthur realized that he titled this list “Reasons Why My Wife Deanna Died”. Then he reprimanded himself. It was this type of whirlpool thinking that he would feel himself getting caught up in once his days were over and he actually *could* think. But from the way the thoughts bounded in on his consciousness, he knew that they were circling his mind all day long, even when he thought he was doing something else entirely. The human mind is an excellent multi-tasker, he thought to himself.

One thing he was happy about was that it looked as though his son had made a friend at the library. Every evening when Arthur arrived at the library to pick up the boy, he would be sitting outside on the stone bench with the security guard. The two were usually talking at a steady pace; some nights it looked like a solemn conversation and on others, Arthur was glad to

see them smiling and laughing. He was grateful to this woman for taking an interest in his child. He always smiled at her as Artie ran toward the car. She would wave and head back into the library. It wasn't until the first week with a little chill in the air that they finally spoke.

"Miss!" Arthur stood with his car door open and called to the woman. She turned and saw him and headed in his direction with a brisk walk. "Yes, sir," she said. "What can I do for you?" She was all business now. He wanted to laugh; when he'd driven up, she and Artie had been doing some serious cutting up. As she came closer, he noticed that she wasn't quite as young as what he'd thought. From his conversations with Artie, he'd learned that she was a recent college graduate. He'd just assumed that she was the age of a traditional college student. He was struck by how pretty she was: she had the coloring of Snow White. Her hair was black and her skin was creamy white. Arthur couldn't remember if Snow White had green eyes, but this young lady did; they were mottled emerald when she turned toward the light and mixed with bronze when she was in the shadows. There were some lines around her eyes, and not quite as much fullness to her face as he had guessed from a distance. He guessed that she was in her early thirties. What was her story, he wondered.

"I just wanted to thank you for spending time with my son," he said when she'd reached him.

She looked surprised. "Oh, it's no problem at all," she said. "We have a good time," she said, and she looked past him to grin at Artie.

“Still,” he said, “it makes a big difference with his mother gone.” He was surprised to hear himself say this. It was the first time since Deanna died that he’d spoken of her to another woman while simultaneously entertaining the thought of asking that woman out. The security guard looked as surprised as he felt that those words had come out of his mouth.

They just looked at each other for a long second, and then she said again, “It’s no problem, really.” Ellen turned and walked back to the library’s entrance. When the doors slid open and swallowed her up, she found that the librarians had turned down the lights in preparation of closing. Ellen walked through the huge, dark room slowly, making her way to the back room. She thought, this time, to keep an eye out for the ominous statues.

Ellen had another date with Neal that weekend. She was always eager to see him; she found herself excited at the prospect of his coming. But the little voice at the back of her mind wondered what it was that she found to like in this man. He tried to be smooth, but didn’t always succeed at it in conversation. As long as they kept things on the surface, he was fine. He was pleasant enough, and he was “the whole package”, as another woman friend at a party had told her. Ellen had the feeling that if she and Neal weren’t together that this woman would be nipping at his heels in no time. She had big blonde hair, and she gave the illusion of being voluptuous, but really was just of normal size. It had to be the hair, thought Ellen.

They arrived at the restaurant in East Memphis. It was on a corner and they had to walk along the cracked sidewalk, perilously close to the main drag

traffic. They had walked several steps before Neal thought to move around to the street side of the walk and let Ellen walk on the inside. His delayed response made her laugh. He was human. But if he did sweet things like that, she thought, it must mean he likes me. Right?

Their dinner was a pleasant enough one. Ellen found herself wondering at what people thought about them as a couple. He's too old for you, her mother kept saying. His love of the outdoors made him look older than he was; all that time spent in the sun and the water had worn lines in his face. It was still a handsome face, but occasionally Ellen noticed just how many lines there were and wondered if she had noticed that before. He saw a recently met acquaintance once they entered the restaurant, and Ellen wondered if the man thought she was Neal's daughter.

Neal hadn't kissed her until the third date, and that kiss confirmed everything she'd felt in her gut when she first met him. They met in her front yard. He was from the roofing company and was making notes on his clipboard about what he could see and how many shingles had fallen into the yard. She had been around back and missed his push of the doorbell, but she'd heard his truck pull in the drive. "Here I am," she said, coming around to the front. He glanced up from his board and they had a moment. What do people call that? Chemistry? She'd had it with a few people over the years but it had never led to anything other than a smelly explosion. But the magic (or maybe the science?) of it was that never mind the outcome of the last one, the next one always felt just as toxic. In a good way. It felt beyond her control

really, she never knew what combination would set off the next explosion. So that day under the tree, she could have categorized this experience with Neal as just another science experiment. She knew she probably wasn't going to, but at least the thought did occur to her; at least she had the presence of mind to consider it. But then Sissy came around the house and Neal's reaction to her changed everything for Ellen. "Well, hello sweetheart," he said. The little tuxedo cat meowed a response, but moved to stand behind Ellen.

"I have three at home," said Neal. And thus began their relationship.

Because of the chemistry, Ellen stayed interested. Because of the lack of a "soul connection," she held back a little. Or was it that she went into it because she knew it wouldn't last?

Before their next date, she decided to ask him what his intentions were. She knew that the question sounded kind of corny, but she couldn't think of any other way to put it without sounding like an angry woman. She wasn't an angry woman, but something told her she was supposed to be one by now. But before she could even get the words out of her mouth, she sensed a difference in Neal's mood. They were sitting in a booth at a little diner not far from her house. She liked the place and had been there many times with friends, but she felt that this particular visit was going to change the timbre of the place for her forever. Neal kept making negative comments about the framed photographs on the wall. One in particular bothered him – a black and white shot of five children sitting on what looked to be part of a scaffold like builders would use. They were suspended there at a height that

would be dizzying for most people. Was the photo taken in New York City? Was it taken during the 1930's? Was it even real or a staged photo? Ellen thought these things while Neal went on about the irresponsibility of any parent who would let his or her child do that. The waitress came and Neal transferred his animosity to her, questioning her about the prices and portion sizes of different items on the menu. Ellen started feeling angry. What was his problem tonight?

“I'll have the grilled chicken,” Ellen said. She felt the need to jump in and place her order as a way of cooling things down. The waitress was a young woman, and she had taken on an expression of half puzzlement and half defensiveness since Neal opened his mouth. “I like your earrings,” Ellen added for good measure. The young woman touched her left earring, smiled and thanked Ellen. Then they both turned their attention to Neal, who placed his order and otherwise kept his mouth shut.

On the way back to her house, Neal talked about general things, and at some point in his monologue, he again made the statement that he had never been a boy scout. “You keep saying that,” said Ellen. “What exactly are you trying to tell me?” She knew when she said it that she'd probably gone a bit too far. It wouldn't have been too far with some men, but it was too far with Neal. He didn't show any immediate resistance to her question, just smiled and laughed like it was some kind of joke. But Ellen truly believed that what came out of your mouth was indicative of what was in your heart. She reached across the console in the front seat of the car and took Neal's hand.

He allowed it, and held her hand until they reached the house, but Ellen would always think back on that as the exact moment when she knew things weren't going to work out.

When she was back at work, Ellen looked at herself in the library's bathroom mirror. She looked so capable in her uniform. And sometimes she even felt that way.

But this day had a different feeling about it. The weather was changing, too. It seemed like overnight, the temperatures had gone from chilly to downright cold, and Ellen found herself wishing she'd grabbed a coat as she ran from her car to the back entrance to the library.

She was in the break room when one of the librarians gave her some news. "That tall, good-looking man was in here asking about you the other night," she said. This was Ophelia Stone. She wasn't the head librarian, but she had the demeanor of being the head something. She spoke with the authority of a no-nonsense mother of five or more children. Ellen had been afraid of her for the first two weeks she worked at the library, but now she felt Ophelia had accepted her into the fold, and therefore she looked out for Ellen like she did one of her own children.

"Tall, good-looking man?" Ellen asked. She knew exactly who Ophelia was talking about, but for some reason she wanted to play coy.

"You know who I mean," Ophelia said, eyeing Ellen sternly. "Artie Fall's daddy."

“Why was he looking for me?” Ellen said. “He usually doesn’t even get out of the car.” There was an edge in Ellen’s voice that surprised Ophelia and surprised Ellen, too. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded,” she said.

“I know you can’t mean anything against Mr. Fall, since he is in here every night that you’re not waiting outside with Artie,” said Ophelia. Ellen looked up at her with surprise. “That’s right,” said Ophelia. “You’re not going to put him into that deadbeat father box. Not with me around.”

“I didn’t mean that,” said Ellen. “I’m just in a bad mood. He is a nice man.”

Ophelia was cutting bananas into chunks at the small counter in the room. There was a half-sized refrigerator and a microwave oven there, along with a basket filled with all of the snack cakes that Ellen remembered as having been her reason for joining Weight Watchers during her first stint in college. She silently blasted Neal and averted her eyes from the basket. When she turned back in Ophelia’s direction, her new friend’s face had softened and she was holding out a chunk of banana to Ellen. “Anyway, he asked about you. I just wanted to pass that along.”

“Thank you,” said Ellen. The news that someone asked about her when she wasn’t expecting it did divert her attention from the meltdown with Neal for a few minutes. It had been a silent meltdown – she’d not heard from him for two weeks and then when she called him to ask why, he acted like he was happy to hear from her. She railed him a little about not having been in touch, something she’d been remiss in doing with men in the past. But then

she wound down the conversation with her assurance to him that it was okay, that he just needed to tell her things that were on his mind. He agreed he'd handled things badly. They hung up, all smiles. She didn't hear from him again.

Now she walked into the library, which was starting to hum. Someone had turned the heat on and she could feel the cooler air being crowded out by the warmth. She watched as the children's librarian set small wooden chairs in a semi-circle and then sat on the nubby blue sofa to choose which book she would read to the children today. Ellen moved to the front of the room where Denise, the true head librarian, was unlocking the front doors. Outside, the sun was shining now, even though the air was still chilly. "I hope it warms up a little later," said Denise. Ellen nodded her agreement and went outside to meet Arthur Falls' car. She leaned down to speak to him as Artie got out of the car. He talked more than the last time they spoke, and something in his eyes told her that Ophelia must be right. Arthur Fall was interested.

"I haven't ever dated a black man, have you?" she asked her friend Nina later that day. Nina looked at her solemnly. "No," she said. "And if you did, how do you think that would go over with your family?"

"It might be a lot less of an event than you think," Ellen said. She thought about the resignation she'd seen in her father's face lately. "I think they would be happy if I was just with somebody. Anybody." She thought again of Arthur Fall's words to her last night, and his concern over Artie. "But he deserves better than that," she said.

“Still no word from Neal?” said Nina. Ellen shook her head. “Are you over him?” asked Nina. Ellen thought about this. “No, I’m not,” she said. And this made her feel better than she thought it would.

First Love

My name is Miranda. When I was almost nineteen, I was engaged to a young man named Emmet Ivey. My parents had asked us to wait six months before getting married, just so we could be sure, but within that time frame, Emmet disappeared. He never reappeared. So I never got to tell him what I had been thinking about those last few weeks we were together, that maybe this wasn't right after all, and maybe we should reconsider.

When he first disappeared, all I wanted to do was talk about Emmet; then I would go through a period when I couldn't tolerate mention of him at all. Now I feel like I'm going back through that range of emotions over and over again, with the impact lessening a little each time. It's like when a person dies. It's the same grieving process. We are assuming that Emmet is dead now. They've put a marker for him in the graveyard, though we've had no service. And there's no one resting underneath that marker, and no way of knowing if Emmet was at rest, wherever he is. I think that's what bothers me the most.

I was still living at home with my mother when Emmet disappeared. But I found myself wandering a lot in the area where Emmet and I had planned on living. There was a store there, Hicks Grocery. The owner Mole Hicks was nice enough, but he had a knack for saying things that set me off in the wrong direction.

I was standing still, staring at the front door. The sun was setting and its receding light was thrown across the glass, making the door look like the gateway to heaven. I turned around. "What? Might as well say it."

"I think I saw Emmet the other day."

I only hesitated a second before I spoke. It was part of my "cover" to not break down, to respond to people like I was past it. "Now, Mole, " I said, "you know that's a bunch of bull."

"I'm telling you, I saw him," Mole said again. "I was over at the Thomases's farm, and me and Geepaw Thomas were standing by the chicken pen talking when I saw someone walking in the woods." Mole met my gaze and held it.

"Someone?" I said.

"He had on a red plaid flannel shirt like that one you gave Emmet for Christmas that year."

"A lot of people have red plaid flannel shirts," I said. But not with their name badly embroidered on the inside of the collar, I thought to myself.

Mole shrugged. "Okay, I'm just telling you. Maybe I shouldn't have." He turned back to his work like he was finished talking. "Okay," I said, instead of 'thank you.' I didn't know what to say, really. I made my way to the door and went back home.

At home, I went to my room and started going through drawers, and then through boxes in the closet. A voice from the bedroom doorway startled me. "What on earth are you looking for?" It was Mama. I considered lying.

“Do you remember that red flannel shirt I gave Emmet for Christmas last year? The one I embroidered his name in the collar?”

“I remember it.”

“Well, I can’t find it,” I said. “Have you seen it?” Mama shook her head. “It’s not here with the rest of his stuff?” she asked. I shook my head and looked back into the closet. My clothes were closer to the door. I’d moved Emmet’s toward the back where you had to squeeze into the closet after he’d been gone for a while. That was a big step for me, an acknowledgement that he was really gone. The boxes in the closet floor held his folding clothes.

“What are you wanting with that shirt? Maybe he was wearing it when he took off out of here or did whatever it was he did,” Mama said.

“I don’t think so,” I said, “I don’t remember seeing...well, it doesn’t matter.” I sighed and sat down on the bed.

“What’s the matter?” Mama asked. “What’s got you looking for his stuff all of a sudden?” I looked up at her. “I’ve never stopped looking for him, Mama. I never will.” She looked back at me with that unflinching gaze of hers. “I know that,” she said. Then she went back into the kitchen.

I closed my eyes before Mama was out of the room, and I could see Emmet’s face. I didn’t will it there, it just was. Some things just are what they are, and some people will always be with you. I could see him standing

several yards away from where I was -- I knew his stance. I knew the way he walked, too; I could've picked him out from a good distance as long as I could watch how he moved.

The aromas coming from Mama's cooking were trying to interrupt my reverie. I let them stay as a backdrop to what I was seeing, because they comforted me. The house was quiet; Mama wasn't one to leave the radio or tv on while she cooked. Occasionally I would hear her humming some song, usually one that I'd played on my stereo over and over again. I wonder if she even knew what she was singing. Now I closed my eyes again and there he was. Outside some kid was pitching a fit about something. It was the boy from the new family across the street.

The neighborhood we lived in was a new subdivision. There were only a few other houses besides ours that were occupied. The quiet and the lack of green life in the yards gave the place the look and feel of a ghost town that had been scrubbed clean. It was downright eerie sometimes. I expected to see a tumbleweed bumping its way down the street.

In my mind's eye, I conjured up the house that Emmet and I had wanted to live in. It was on the outskirts of the outskirts of the next big town; a place undeveloped by planners and totally unlike the neighborhood where we'd grown up. The yard was just a yard and not a lawn. You were just as likely to find gravel as grass under your feet. There was an old rusty swing set in the backyard where we'd sneak out and play on our visits there. The

porch was a wraparound of light blue wood that was rotting in places. My footsteps sounded hollow when i walked across it.

That store I'd visited earlier in the day - Hicks Grocery - was a remnant of the past like the blue house was. Most likely both would be razed before long to make more ghost towns houses like our own.

I'd grown up in an older neighborhood that was in the city. There was life there, and death. The homeowners were old and older; Mama had inherited our house from her mother. She still owned the house but rented it out to a young family. She wanted my brother Tad and I out in the suburbs where the schools were less crowded and the streets were safer.

She hadn't counted on Emmet.

dance with me

Miranda was spending her Saturday watching him and her brother work on cars. She'd just come along for the ride, to get out of the house and out from under Mama's feet. Now she wished she'd brought a book or something. She wished she'd taken up needle arts at some point in her life. She'd do it she thought, when she had the time and the patience. Now all she had was the time.

"You could've stayed home with Mama and helped her with that cooking all that she had to do. You should've stayed home with Mama." This

was her brother Tad speaking. He was a faceless voice; the upper half of him was stretched out underneath the car. She didn't answer him as he knew why she hadn't stayed - because as much as Mama said she wanted help or wanted to show Miranda things, she didn't like anyone in her kitchen while she tried to cook. It was her quiet time. Daddy stayed out of there, too. He was usually in the den watching the tv or in the garage piddling like they were now. "I should've brought a book," Miranda said aloud. But she knew she wouldn't have read it today; she was here because of Emmet.

Music floated up from the other side of the car to where Miranda sat on the concrete step leading into the storage room. Emmet raised his head up over the hood of the car and grinned at her. "I have a radio over here," he said. "Let's see what's on." He turned the channel until he found Donna Summer singing *Dim All the Lights*. "There," Emmet said. "That's enough to get some blood flowing without jarring anything that's jacked up over Tad's head." That's made Miranda laugh, so when he stuck out his hand, she took it and he whirled her as best he could do in the tiny space they were in. The song started slowly, with Summer's smooth voice easing them into motion, but the tempo picked up quickly and Miranda was grateful. If the song had remained slow, she would be feeling Emmet's face so close to hers. As it was, she could hear his breath in her ear whenever they did pull in close for a beat, and it produced a feeling that she wanted to hold on to and run from at the same time. But then she was pushed back away from him again, and free from the burden of having to decide. Thank God for disco, she thought.

“I hear you frowning under there, Tad,” Miranda said. “I’ll give him back in a minute.”

“I ain’t nothing,” Tad said. “Have your fun.” Miranda had just been trying to make conversation, but now was she thought about her own words of “I’ll give him back,” like he was hers to give back, even if it were a temporary ownership. This was a leap she’d not anticipated making when she’d decided to come out here and “hang out with the boys.” Tad hadn’t said anything when she’d announced her intentions, but she knew from his expression that he was fully aware of what was going through her mind. To his credit, he didn’t tease her or interrogate her about her interest in Emmet, but she noticed that he did stay under the car for the bulk of the time she was with them.

The garage space they were dancing in was so narrow it limited their movement and Miranda fantasized that with a bigger space she could get away from him just a little bit. She could get away from the feel of his breath in her ear and what it was doing to the butterflies in her stomach. He’d not said another word since they’d started dancing - Emmet who was usually so glib and so full of fun. He was silent now and she supposed he was just listening to the music so as not to make a misstep. It felt like he knew exactly what he was doing, that he had no missteps where this or anything else was concerned.

When they pulled apart another song had started but there were no more words between them. They looked at each other briefly as if wondering

whether they should let go or not. Then he turned and went back to his car and she went back to her stoop and things went back to the way they were or so it appeared.

He'd come over in his gray work coveralls and ask for Tad or their father, but somehow he'd always find time to talk to her. Their routine became that she would wait somewhere alone, like at the dining room table with a book or on the driveway if it was summer and the mosquitoes weren't too bad. She would wait and he would make his compulsory visit with Tad brief, and then he'd join her wherever she was and they would talk. She was surprised at how much he talked. Miranda and her friend Martha had always joked about men answering in grunts only, so Emmet was different in that regard. He did listen to her as well, and that's something else she liked. Sometimes the book Miranda was reading would instigate their talks, but eventually it became a game for him to come up with interesting questions.

What or who are you most attached to, he would ask. Why? Or, is every day pretty much the same to you? Why? He always asked why after these questions. He always made her think about what she felt and why she felt that way.

She was surprised to learn that every day might be the same to him as she thought she was the only one who sometimes had that problem. This would prove to be their starting point and their common ground.

One night there was a loose streetlight. It blinked on and off over the car where Miranda and Emmet sat, and he had her convinced that it was a

UFO. She even felt a combination of true fear and excitement, believing that something otherworldly was about to happen. He laughed hard when it finally clicked on for good, and she realized it had been the streetlight all along. She'd never fallen for such a lame trick in her whole life. But she realized later that it was because in the moment, she felt like he could do it, he could do something amazing. Yet it wasn't something he did or even manipulated. Whoever it was that said that love was blind forgot to include that it was also stupid, or at least willing to suspend all intelligence in favor of the thing that might make all that is rose-colored stay that way.

They cruised McDonald's in his truck. Miranda was in the middle of the bench seat, pushed up against him. They were in their third month of dating.

Miranda could feel a certain discontent coming off of Emmet this night. He was someone who was normally so up that any shift downward in mood was noticed immediately.

She held his right hand while his left one steered the truck, twirling it one way and then another with the grace that comes with familiarity with something. The turns were frequent as they circled McDonald's. The parking lot was full. People were leaning in car windows or reaching out of them, and they were all speaking in low tones, so much so that it created a hum in the air. No distinct words could be made out. Whenever they passed a group, eyes would follow them until they had been identified. If the identification was a positive one, a hand would go up in a silent wave. But none of Emmet's friends would come over to the car and talk when she was with him. It's like

they had an unspoken agreement and interfering with a date was something you just didn't do. Or -- and she knew this from having talked to the other girls -- the silence would mean they were aware of trouble and were staying away until it had passed.

She breathed a sigh of relief when they pulled out of the parking lot and back onto the highway. Her breathing became even deeper when they reached the turnoff for Summerville. Now the hum in the air came from slumbering bugs rather than teenagers on the prowl. Miranda rolled her window down until it was completely open.

Inside his house, he fixed drinks, Coke that meandered its way around the ice cubes that filled the glasses. They snuck the drinks into the formal dining room that no one ever used. His parents watched the tv in the room behind them. The furniture in this room still smelled new - the fabric scents still eclipsed the mixed scent of human sweat, food, and wet dogs.

She turned the lamps on in the living room and he followed behind her and turned them off. He pointed to the window and Miranda saw that what he said was true; they could see well enough from the moonlight coming in through the picture window. There were sheer curtains closed across it, but whitish-yellow light (from the moon, or streetlights or the lights of passing cars) did filter in enough for them to see each other's faces. That's all they needed, Emmet told her.

"I can feel my way around to find the rest," he said. She reminded him that his parents were in the next room.

“They can’t hear us with the tv turned up so loud,” he said. He turned toward her on the couch and looked at her hard. “You know, you’re eighteen now. You can make your own decisions.”

“I am making a decision,” she said. “It’s just not the one you want to hear.”

He had his arms around her and squeezed a little tighter. “Don’t you want to know what it feels like?” he said. He’d told her that he had his first sex when he was a high school sophomore. His friends had set him up with an older woman of nineteen. As he talked, Miranda watched his face. He’d never pressured her before, but she could tell he was serious tonight.

“This would make us closer,” he said. She half-believed him, but her gut was still telling her no. She didn’t know exactly why she was saying no, except that she didn’t have the faith he did that the noise from the tv would lend them cover.

Emmet had been sliding them into a horizontal position with him leaning on her as he talked. Now she pushed to straighten herself, and out of necessity he had to straighten, too. When she was sitting upright and had pulled the creases from her shirt, she looked away from him and said, “Maybe you should take me home.”

After a silent moment that felt like forever, he answered her. “Maybe I should,” he said.

He didn't look at her again as they left. Otherwise, his manners were intact; he held the door open for her as they went outside. Before shutting the door, he called out "back in a minute!" to his parents.

The drive to her house was silent. He pulled into the driveway. Then he sat still, making no move to walk her to the door and offering no excuse as to why he wouldn't. When she sat still and waited on him, he shifted the car from park to reverse.

She got out of the car and walked up the driveway. As she stood on the dark porch digging in her purse for her keys, she heard his tires squeal as he drove away.

Miranda, 1981

I am looking outside and see the very edge of my garden. There's one lone zinnia remains from last year. I didn't think zinnias were perennials; maybe this tall pink and orange bloom is just a tough one, a survivor, a rebel against the laws of gardening. I can just see a corner view of the yellow lantana, the fuschia petunias and the collapsed green blades of the gladiolas.

It's mid-summer and there is a lot that is still vibrant and living, but some things are starting to die out, to turn just a little brown. I can't help thinking about Emmet at these times. Where is he? Is he alive? If he's not, can he haunt me here? If he did, would it make me happy or scared?

Mama said I was starting to close down again and maybe I am. I moved out here to this little where Emmet intended us to live. His family was all gone already, so the house was his, but now he's gone and I feel that

makes it mine although the lawyer doesn't see it that way. I would think that they would be happy to have some part of Emmet's estate settled. But he isn't dead yet, or we can't prove it, so I shouldn't even talk that way. I moved in here with the intent of seeing him walk through the door one day. Martha says I'm crazy, but I am holding out hope.

Martha is my friend at the department store where I work. She's my best friend. My mom and I moved to West Tennessee from Georgia and it was just the two of us, so meeting Martha has been a blessing for me. I still believe in blessings, although so much bad stuff has happened to me lately. I understand that from God's perspective, physical death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. We'll be reunited with Him then, which was His purpose in the first place. But Martha doesn't believe that so I try to skirt that issue in our friendship. I tell her everything else though, and like I said, she's a good listener. I think she disapproved when I moved out on Momma, but I was going to move anyway, once Emmet and I were married. That's my argument. Martha just thinks that I should stay with Momma and take care of her.

The wind is waving that one tall zinnia around. I'm glad there is a breeze today. The heat is sometimes next to unbearable here, and this cottage has only a window unit air conditioner.

This reporter Johnny Haase came to see me again yesterday. I just watched him from inside the house. I pretended I wasn't home. He left a card on the door and I just threw it in the garbage after he left.

August 1980

Miranda felt as though the room was spinning around so she sat down on the couch. After she heard Martha say “shotgun” and yet she still didn’t cry. Martha’s voice was fading and Miranda wanted to say speak up, I can’t hear you! But she couldn’t make herself speak. Or did she? She couldn’t tell. She became aware of her hands shaking. Just the slightest tremor, but it started from deep inside.

She hung up the phone and waited. Martha was coming to pick her up and drive her to the morgue. “You know you’re not really his family so they may not let you see him,” she’d said. She’d been crying and her face was swollen. Miranda didn’t respond to her statement, but she thought, see him? See his body? The “him” wasn’t there anymore. Did she want to see him?

They arrived at the morgue and saw an unfamiliar truck in the parking lot. Miranda felt a twinge of recognition when she saw it, but she couldn’t say from where. Once they inside she found that Martha was correct and the police wouldn’t let her anywhere near the remains. She talked Martha into waiting, so they sat in Martha’s car and waited to see who would leave in the red truck. Miranda turned to Martha then - “you said he wasn’t alone,” she said. Her eyes looked like they were just registering this bit of news. “What did you mean? Was the person who shot him...”

“It was a woman,” Martha said. “A young woman.” Miranda stared at her. “How could that be?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” said Martha. “Was he seeing anyone else?” Miranda choked back a sob and opened the car door. “Don’t get out!” Martha said. “Miranda, come back!” But Miranda paid no attention to Martha. She kept walking and made her way around to the other side of the building. She heard the engine of Martha’s car start up, but it never came around. After a while she stopped waiting for Martha to appear, stopped walking and leaned her back against the building. She let herself slide to the ground and sit. The tears were coming now. She let them roll down her face and down her neck and inside the collar of her shirt. It was like warm rain falling on her.

Why was she crying now and not when Martha first called her? She’d known - somehow she’d known that Emmet was gone. Did she anticipate his death? If she did, why hadn’t she paid attention and warned him away from where he was going that day? Would it have mattered?

These thoughts brought a fresh flood of tears, ones that were hotter than the first batch. She couldn’t even think of it without feeling like someone was kicking her in the stomach. Emmet had been acting strange lately. Was this why? Was there someone else all along? She and Emmet were so close, so connected that she had a hard time believing that he could have been with anyone else without her knowing. i should have known even if he didn’t say anything. Why would he have built this house if it were so? He’d said it was just for them, just for her. Why would he have gone to all that trouble if he didn’t love her?

He had been distant lately and she'd been unable to get him to talk about it. In fact, the last time she'd seen him they'd argued about it - her right to know what he was thinking and his right to keep some things to himself.

"A man's got to have some room to himself," he'd said. She winced now when she thought of her reply. "I think that's just your way of saying you're pulling away from me," she said.

"I'm not, I promise I'm not," he'd said. Miranda had believed him - his earnest face, his honest blue eyes - that was what she'd told him. But she knew now that somewhere deep inside of her there was unbelief. She hadn't totally trusted what he'd said to her. She didn't know why.

The preacher at her church said we couldn't count on people the way we could count on God. Not one hundred percent. Yet he encouraged a faithfulness between members of a family, both marital family and church family. Sometimes what she learned at church didn't make immediate sense to her. How did this day make any sense?

Sometimes you have to wait until later to see where all the pieces fit, someone said. Miranda had stopped crying. She felt the ground beneath her with her hand. It was solid, pebbly concrete. She looked up and saw Martha's car finally. It was parked at the other end of the building from where she sat. Martha was standing at the drivers' side and talking to someone, a uniformed policeman.

But Miranda knew she'd heard a voice. Somewhere close. She looked around at her immediate surroundings and saw no one. Putting a hand flat on

the ground, she pushed herself up and stood on shaky legs. Martha saw her and waved. She moved towards her car and was still speaking to the cop, but Miranda felt the urgency, her relief at seeing that Miranda was okay. Miranda started trying to walk in her direction. Both her legs felt as though they were brand new and not used to walking. All the muscular memory had been lost in one thirty minute span of emotional trauma. Then her thoughts veered left again and tears streamed from her eyes again. Martha pulled up beside her. When she saw Miranda's face, she put her car in gear, jumped out and ran over to her. "Get in the car." she said, taking Miranda's arm to guide her.

"I can't see a damn thing," said Miranda.

"I know! So get in the car," said Martha.

Once they were in, Miranda let Martha take over and only fumbled to help her with the seat belt - "I don't want you flopping out," Martha said - and then she settled into driving and they were quiet.

"What did that policeman say? What did you ask him?" Miranda said finally.

"He said you have to get permission from Emmet's family before you can see the body," Martha said. She drove on without speaking and they watched as a few giant raindrops on the windshield. Martha turned on the wipers; they scraped loudly and missed the few more drops that fell. She turned them back off.

"What did he say about the woman?" Miranda said. "Who was she?"

"They don't know yet," said Martha.

Miranda's room was small and it was done in yellow and white and clutter. There was a single bed and a stereo cabinet and maybe about two feet width of space in between these two. The one window was aesthetically placed in between the two pieces of furniture, and the floor between all these points was covered in photographs. Miranda had covered almost every inch of the floor with pictures of Emmet.

She went to work because she had to, but it seemed unfair to her that the world should keep going as usual. She'd stood up on the break table the day before and shouted "don't you all know that everything is different now? Can't you see the big hole?" She hardly remembered doing it, but Martha would never forget it.

"Get down, get down from there," she said. "Normally, the next word out of my mouth would be 'have you lost your mind?', but the answer to that is obvious..." Martha said this in a low voice in Miranda's ear as she pulled her down from the table. She had hold of Miranda's arm and she had to reclaim her grasp in order not to lose her.

The other examples in the room were staring at them, some with expressions of pity and some of alarm. Martha pulled Miranda into a chair on the other side of the room.

"Now, just get it together," she said. She brushed the hair back from Miranda's face. "Take a deep breath," she said.

"I know what you're talking about," said Miranda. "I just can't do it."

“What am I talking about?” said Martha. “Tell me.” Miranda stared straight ahead, thinking. Her breaths became deeper, slower. “I don’t know...about living without him, about moving on...” She started panting fast again.

“Slow down, calm down.”

“I can’t. Not if I think about it.”

“Well, then don’t think about it.”

“I have to.”

“Why?”

“To remember. I can’t forget.”

“You won’t forget. You’ll never forget.”

“I will.” She burst into tears. The other employees had been leaving the break room a few at a time. Now Miranda and Martha were alone.

“There you go, clearing a room again,” said Martha. Miranda almost choked on a laugh, and then dissolved into tears again. “I hate it,” she said.

“I know,” said Martha.

“No,” said Miranda. “I hate it that there’s nothing else I can do when the only thing I can feel or think about is what else can I do? What can I do to make it all go away? To start everything over? I get mad at other people for not thinking about it.”

Martha didn’t say anything this time. She just put an arm around Miranda and listened to her sobs as they grew quieter, then louder again. Miranda’s body would stop quaking, it would wind down, and then it would

start up again, like an eruption. She heard a faucet dripping somewhere in the room. She raised her head and looked for it, but she couldn't focus on any one thing. The room's walls were a dingy white and they were all she could see. The room was empty, devoid of life.

"Why does it always rain on the day of a funeral?" Martha may as well have been talking to herself, as Miranda was nowhere near her mentally or emotionally. "I can stay with you as long as you like, you know," Martha continued, "and you know that's a big thing for me to live out there in those boonies you call home." She saw a faint smile on Miranda's lips.

"But I draw the line at milking the cow or feeding the chickens, or whatever it is you do out there," Martha said. Miranda smiled again, just for a minute. Her expression turned solemn again when they pulled into the funeral home parking lot. "I can't believe this happened," she said. "I still can't believe it." Martha reached over and touched Miranda's hand. "Nobody can," she said.

They walked in and sat a few rows behind Emmet's mother. She turned and saw them and motioned for them to come up front.

"You go," Martha said. "I'm not family."

"You're my family," said Miranda, and she pulled Martha with her as she moved. When they arrived at the front, Emmet's mother reached over and took two purses out of the seats nearest her. She nodded. Miranda sat down tentatively. "How are you?" she asked Mrs. Ivey. The answer she received was muffled with tissue.

“I don’t know. I’m still in shock.”

During the service, the pastor spoke the anecdotes that Mrs. Ivey had given him. Miranda was aware of the older woman’s body shaking in the seat next to her. Miranda’s own tears were stalled, but her stomach was in knots.

It was no better when they were outside. The fresh air helped some, but Miranda just kept feeling the urge to run. People were sobbing all around her. They were under a tent to protect them from the rain. I don’t want to see that coffin lowered into the ground, she thought. Emmet can’t be in there. “I don’t want to see it lowered,” she whispered to martha. “I can’t...” Martha nodded and held on to her arm, and put her eyes forward to where the musicians were playing music that Miranda recognized, but couldn’t name. Was it still raining? Is that why her vision was blurry? She kept feeling that Martha was looking at her until finally leaned over and whispered, “There you go, girl.” Miranda thought that was a weird thing to say to someone at a funeral. Then she realized she was crying.

She put her left hand, the one not holding on to Martha, up to her eyes and felt the tears. Then she held it there and felt able to close herself off from what was happening. She felt her breathing becoming deeper.

“Do you want to say goodbye?” Martha was pulling at her gently. “Open your eyes so you can walk anyway. I can’t carry you.” Miranda lowered her hand in just enough time to brush it across the coffin as she walked past it. She couldn’t see his dark hair or his blue eyes. It was unfathomable to her that she would never see them again.

The Interview

John Haase, 2010

Johnny Haase liked driving, and this road trip back to Somerville was good thinking time. It ranked right up there with painting walls and cutting grass. Any repetitive motion like that just sets your brain free, he thought. The process allows you to unravel things that sitting and ruminating on them will never come close to. He wondered why he'd never taken to science as a boy. Now, as an adult, he loved to figure things out. He could be making the big bucks in a lab rather than just above poverty level wages at the newspaper. But writing was solving problems too.

The problem he was trying to solve now was one that had haunted him for thirty years. Or, to be honest, it had haunted him for the first three years after it happened. He'd pretty much ignored his conscience for the last twenty-seven. It was the question of whether he'd done enough investigation in the article that had turned his career in a new direction. Had he done enough, or had he left questions unanswered in his hurry to move on to a better job?

The first few years of his career as a reporter had taken place in this landscape. He looked out the window. The scenes passing him were not picture postcard material. They were plain, devoid of any signs of life. They were more like the neutral background for something else, some colorful focal

point that had never arrived. Or else they were scenes of disturbance; someone was disturbing the ground here by plowing it up, cutting down trees and plotting out spaces for houses that sat maybe two feet away from each other. When he lived in Somerville thirty years ago, there were houses here then too, but they were placed at random, usually fronting a field of beans and corn or cotton. At that time he frequented a store called Hicks Grocery. It was a general store; you could buy sundry items there and get a sandwich and drink for lunch. Johnny slowed down, pulled off the road and came to a stop. This is where it stood, he thought. There were no signs of subdivision development on this plot of land. It stood out in sharp contrast to most of the acreage around it. But the store is gone, he thought, and more than likely, so is Mole Hicks. He let his eyes run further over the land until they stopped at a tree about a third of the way from where the store used to be. Everything else is gone except that damn tree, he thought. "And you're probably a hundred years older than all of us," he said out loud. He shut the car door and walked. When he got close to the tree, Johnny put his hand out and touched the rough bark. Who else touched this same spot a hundred years ago today?

His thoughts were interrupted by an obnoxious noise. He looked up and saw something in the distance coming near him. It was a kid on a motorcycle. The bike bumped up and over clumps of grown up weeds. Johnny thought the driver would pop off the bike a few times, but it didn't happen. Instead it slowed as it neared the tree and Johnny, and it came to a full stop just inches from his feet. The driver turned off the engine.

“Hey,” he said. Johnny thought the boy looked to be about fourteen or fifteen. “Hey yourself,” Johnny replied. The boy shifted his weight on the bike. “You shouldn’t be out here in that suit,” the he said. He was wearing rubber overalls over a long-sleeved tee shirt. He was covered in splatters of mud and looked like an oddly marked wild animal. The spots of mud were dried already like the boy had been out riding for hours and the sun had baked the splatters into his clothes.

Johnny looked down at his own clothes. “No damage done yet,” he said. “And I’m not planning on riding.”

“Ain’t much else to do out here,” said the boy.

“I came out here to see if this old tree was still alive. And it is,” said Johnny. He patted the tree with the hand that was still resting there.

The boy nodded slowly. “Did you used to live out here or something?” he asked.

“I didn’t live here,” said Johnny, ‘but I visited a lot.” He told the boy about Thaddeus “Mole” Hicks, and about his store that used to stand to the north of where they stood now. He told him about the tree and how it was hundreds of years old, and how that fact fascinated him when he was a boy. Who else touched this spot a hundred years ago today? That was the question he liked to ask so he could start imagining who might have lived there and what they might have done. But that was before Emmet Ivey disappeared. He didn’t tell the boy that and he didn’t tell him that because of

Emmet, Johnny avoided asking that question for a very long time. It was only now that he was able to consider it again. He didn't go into all that.

"I'll bet this tree could tell some stories," he said. The boy looked at the tree and nodded.

"You don't know anything about what happened to Mole Hicks, do you?" Johnny asked. "I'm looking for him."

"No, never heard of him. My dad might know."

Johnny rummaged in his coat pocket for a pen and handed it to the boy along with an old receipt. "Write your dad's name and number on the back of that," he said. "I might not need it, but you never know," he said. The boy took the pen and paper but was shaking his head as he wrote. "I don't know his number," he said, "not by heart." Johnny took the paper anyway and figured he could find the number if he needed it if he just had the name. He pocketed the information, not knowing if he'd need it or even if he'd want to use it. He breathed in deep and then smiled at the boy, asking him about his bike. The boy answered with more fervor than Johnny seen in him yet. He went on about it and Johnny went on nodding, but his mind was only half on the conversation. Finally the boy drove off in a cloud of dust and mud spatters and Johnny went back to his car.

Who else touched this spot a hundred years ago? Fifty years ago? Twenty years ago? He let his mind fly free with the possibilities now. He got back in his car and back on the road. As the flat, dull landscape flew past him, another question started running through his mind.

“Do you know something?”

“I’m afraid I don’t,”

“Then why are you here?” she said. “I don’t know any more than what everyone else does.”

That conversation had never left Johnny’s mind. He managed to tuck it somewhere way back so he didn’t have to look at it or think about it, but it was always there and he knew it. It’s just now that he was acknowledging it and dealing with it. Just thinking about it made the road a little blurry in front of him.

He’d gone to interview Miranda Ivey not long after her fiancé, Emmet, had disappeared. They were a young couple. She had been only nineteen, and once Emmet was gone, she’d insisted on staying in the tiny house he’d bought for them. Her first reason for staying was faith that he would be back; her second reason was pure stubbornness, even in the face of putting herself at risk. Johnny had been at the Summerville paper for only six months, and he walked fast up the gravel path to the Ivey house, thinking this would be the story that got him noticed. This was a front page headline and it had fallen right into his lap.

That was the article that made his career. He had written and rewritten it so many times that he’d had it memorized. That was almost thirty years ago, but he surprised himself when he found the clipping in preparation for this trip. He’d pulled it out of the file and begun reading the first line. “Police have concluded that ...” He didn’t even have to continue reading the physical

page. It was still there, the whole piece, even after all these years. Line after line came flowing back to him like some dam in his brain had been knocked loose.

He'd included everything he knew in the article. Everything he knew as fact at least. There were other things, speculations about what exactly might have happened, but he didn't refer to those because he didn't want to court libel charges. He told himself that he wanted this piece to be good for his career, not stop it before it got started. He had achieved that and more. When the piece ran, it was picked up by two major wire services. The attention he received over the next few months was something he'd hoped for but never really expected. The Daily News in Byrne, Mississippi offered him a job with a salary way out of Summerville's range and Johnny took it. But when he left, he left a lot of hard feelings behind from those who felt like he didn't do enough to find out the truth.

Now after a good twenty-five minutes of driving, Johnny pulled onto a residential street in a fairly new subdivision. He double-checked the address on the slip of paper he held, and when he was sure of his destination pulled into the curve of a cove in front of 212 Long Dock.

Johnny saw Mole before he even finished walking up the driveway. Born Thaddeus Hicks, Mole had acquired his nickname sometime in his young adulthood. Someone clever had decided that he had the face of a rodent; beady eyes and long nose included, and the name stuck. Time hadn't changed him much and he hadn't had plastic surgery, Johnny thought, as he

noted those same features pointed at him through the front window of the house.

By the time Johnny reached the front door, Mole had it open. He stood waiting and then opened it a little wider for Johnny to step through.

1980

The day that Johnny Haase was set to do his interview with Miranda Scott, he saw her at Hicks Grocery. He'd come to the store to talk to the owner Mole Hicks about Emmet Ivey, but having Miranda show up was a bonus. But he didn't want her to know that he was the person who'd called and pressed her for an interview. So when she came through the front door, ringing the bell that let mole know he had a customer, Johnny hovered near the back of the store. He heard her talking and moving from aisle to aisle, and he moved when she did, trying to avoid her. When he finally had nowhere else to go, he picked up a newspaper off the rack and held it open in front of his face. After a few minutes, he folded a corner of the paper down and peeked at her. She was a pretty girl, nothing special, but pretty. It was a shame what had happened. Now she'd forever be remembered as the girl whose boyfriend disappeared. She'd probably end up the subject of a country song. Or maybe not, he thought. Maybe she'd just fade into obscurity after being mentioned in a few news stories. She'd marry some other hometown boy and have a few kids, maybe take a few college classes when they were grown and start a crafts business on the side. Johnny took one more look at

Miranda - dirty dishwater blonde hair, gunmetal gray eyes - and he flipped the corner of the paper back up.

He liked coming here to Hicks Store because it was the last of a dying breed. These little family owned groceries wouldn't be around for long, he predicted. And this one felt like it was still grounded in nineteen forty something rather than 1979. He liked the atmosphere though sometimes he had a hard time putting up with Mole Hicks himself. The man was a buttinsky. Johnny appreciated that skill when it was being used for a good purpose - like his gathering information on a story - but it raised his ire whenever Mole tried to turn the radar on Johnny himself.

He'd grown up here, too, but his path hadn't before crossed with those of Miranda and Mole. Johnny's home had been in a richer section of Memphis and he'd been educated at private school that had been supported by the area well-to-do for many years. He didn't think of himself as a snob by any means, but the differences between his life and the ones that had been lived in rural Lette County became apparent as he came to know the people. They were interesting to him. Most of them spoke with a serious mid-southern drawl, which was different from the one you heard in places like Atlanta, Georgia. There was no "Gone with the Wind" refinement about these people. Some of them just seemed a little tired from the record-breaking humidity. He figured a lot of the young adults like Miranda saw a future of doing pretty much what their parents had done. He liked it here but he also liked knowing he didn't have to stay if he didn't want to.

His thoughts were broken by Miranda and Mole saying their goodbyes, and he lowered the corner of the paper once more to take a look at her as she left. She looked back at him with an expression of both curiosity and contempt. He'd been caught. He feared the latter of those emotions would win out later when he stopped by her house to interview her.

Miranda was lying on the bed looking at the ceiling.

Someone was at the door.

She'd picked out an old-fashioned looking door knocker - one of those with the lion's head on it and the knocker part coming out of his mouth. She always greeted him when she arrived home. "Hi Leo," she said. She'd wanted to get a kitten after she and Emmet married. She didn't get one now because she didn't think she could afford to feed a cat and herself too. Working at the department store didn't pay much. So Leo was her cat for now.

Right now, someone was giving Leo's mouth a workout.

Miranda pulled herself up off the bed and made her way into the living room. She'd kept the lights low in there to discourage unannounced visitors, but someone was being persistent. She unlocked and pulled open the heavy front door. The late afternoon sun was shining through the glass and temporarily blinded her, but when she could see again she saw the young man she'd seen at the store earlier. He appeared to be thinking hard about something, but pulled himself back to the present when she opened the door.

“Miss Scott?” he said. “I’m John Haase from the Somerville Chronicle. I wanted to ask you a few questions about Mr. Ivey.”

Miranda opened the storm door and motioned him inside. She flicked on the overhead light, which gave a glow to the pale golden yellow living room walls. John sat on the couch and Miranda sat down in the chair across from him. He opened his notebook and stared at the notes he’d made. “So that was you at the store earlier,” she said. “Why didn’t you just say something?” He looked at her and answered honestly. “I don’t know,” he said. He let that hang in the air for a moment, and then plunged forward.

“I wanted you to tell me about Emmet himself...about his habits. Maybe it could shed more light on things and help to find him,” he said finally. Miranda thought about this. When she spoke again, her voice had softened.

“Emmet was a country boy at heart; he fixed up this cottage with his daddy before Mr. Ivey died.” She smiled. “Oh, he was as crazy as some of his friends in a lot of ways; they liked to drag race out in the fields and play their music real loud. But he had a quiet side to him. When he and his daddy were working on this house, he was happier than I’d ever seen him.” She looked around the room. “That’s why I had to move out here anyway. When he comes back, he’s sure to come here and I’ll be waiting.” John watched her face and when she finally looked directly back at him, he looked back down at his notes. Is this what he’d come here to learn? He cleared his throat before speaking again.

“What about -- and I hate to ask you this -- did he have any enemies that you know of?” She furrowed her brow as she looked back at him.

“No.”

“It’s just something I have to ask,” he said. “It could be germane to the case.”

“You think somebody’s killed him?”

“I’m just covering all the possibilities.”

“I don’t know of any enemies he had. We spent almost all our time together and I never saw anything.”

“Okay.” John flipped his notebook shut and stood up. “I may need to call you again,” he said. She didn’t answer this but followed him to the door.

“Did you talk to the police?” she said as he was leaving. “Do they talk to you?” He turned towards her and was shaking his head and about to speak, but she continued. “Because they don’t tell me anything, not a darned thing...” His stomach lurched a little. She thinks I know something, he thought. “Maybe they only want to tell you what they’re sure of,” he said. She let the door fall closed between them. When she didn’t speak again he continued down the porch steps and out to his car. When he was pulling out she stood there behind the screen door, and the tiny squares made by woven screen wire made a wavy frame around her when the light hit them.

The One That Got Away

He looked at her sometimes now (she had seen it once tonight) when she was quiet and she could almost hear the thing he wouldn't say: that they had changed places in their devotion, the real kind that sets in after the chase and the catch has transpired.

So now, here, tonight, Emmet was going to ask her to marry him. She knew he was. And this was the thing that she'd feared. In the beginning, she would have jumped at the chance to spend the rest of her life with him, but now the proposition held the same amount of fear as it did anticipation. Some days one emotion was greater than the other, and that determined a lot of things in Miranda's life.

She rode alongside him now. She considered opening the truck door and jumping out. But just to move away from being pressed against him would bring a major change in the climate. (Years later, Miranda would revel in the invention of bucket seats.) How different things were from how they had been. Miranda remembered the scent of his jacket when it got wet from the rain. The night they had first kissed, he held her a long while after and her face was pressed into the jacket. They were standing in her garage and the door was open to the rain that had started falling. They'd just made it out of the truck and under cover when the bottom dropped out. And then he had to run back out in it to get her purse that she had forgotten. He got wet, but it

was just a sprinkling, he pointed out. He handed her the purse, took off his jacket and shook it before putting it back on. It was a letterman jacket from his third year in high school, the one he didn't finish. He'd lettered in football and basketball, but more than the games, he'd enjoyed the running required for the practices. Emmet was occasionally a solitary soul.

In their two years of dating they'd only broken up once. There had been a party at a friend's house, and it was understood that they weren't going to go. There was no big reason; no one was going out of town or having to work, but the idea of it – their going – had been passed over so quickly in conversation that it was assumed there was no interest on either part.

But she had gone. Miranda had gone with a girlfriend and the party was in full swing when they got there. It had been dark and cold outside, the kind of cold that hurts. They had gone into the friend's house and moved among the small clumps of people. Miranda was tucked into a corner talking to Rita when she saw Emmet come in. He was wearing his letterman jacket and the freezing rain that had started falling since Miranda had arrived made the jacket damp enough to give off that same scent as the night Miranda had her face pressed into it.

She looked up. He was coming in smiling, talking and with another girl in front of him. Always the gentleman, Emmet was letting her enter first, but his hand was gripped at her waist.

Miranda's eyes became as blurry as the cold, wet night outside looked from the window. She stumbled away from Rita and tried to find her way amongst the people to some other place. She needed to go to another room maybe, or outside. She needed to be somewhere else. She was vaguely aware of Rita following her and calling her name, but she couldn't be sure of what she heard in all the talking and music.

She looked over at him now, wondering what he was thinking. What had brought him to this place from that place: from someone not ready to let go of his freedom to someone so willing to commit to her? Neither one of them was saying very much, but she could see he still had a trace of a smile even though now he was looking straight ahead instead of at her. She looked out ahead at the road. There were no street lights out here and dark was really dark. The lights from the truck illuminated their path in a way that suggested an alien landing like lights from some otherworldly place invading this lonely old road. The road itself looked like it had no end. She could only see as far as the beam from the headlights allowed, and that gave the impression that anything beyond that beam was a steep drop off into some place she didn't recognize.

Then they came to the traffic light, the one where Miranda always knew she could take the time to put on her lipstick in the rear view mirror. The light was so long in changing here that she often wondered what it was other people were doing when they should have been watching. Maybe the young man across the street was counting the loose change he'd dropped in his ash

tray. Maybe the woman to her right was putting in another tape. Miranda decided that today, she would open the door.

She did, and before Emmet could realize and fully accept what had happened, she'd run to the corner and was walking fast to the Walgreens. He couldn't do anything but drive when the light changed (which it did just split seconds after Miranda got out), and he narrowly missed hitting another car because he was trying to watch Miranda and the road at the same time.

Emmet would be the first to admit that he hadn't done too many things right in his life. He'd messed up school, though he did go back and fix it later. But the point seemed to be now that he hadn't graduated when he was supposed to have. The point changed depending on whose opinion about him mattered at the time. He hadn't graduated with his class, his friends. He didn't think that he could really call many of them friends. There were always those in and out groups and he hadn't been in either of them for any long term. He had always felt more comfortable being off by himself or with his dad's horses.

Miranda Scott was different from the other girls he had dated. Emmet thought now that maybe he should've stuck to his own kind of people. Things had been going so well with her that he didn't consider that it might end. But inside of him there was something that said you know you seen this coming. He'd seen it in her eyes. He couldn't say for how long he had been seeing it, but his subconscious had made note of it. Otherwise her running off would

have been a complete surprise. After Miranda leapt from his car like a wild animal, Emmet tried to turn back and follow her. But he'd lost her. He went into the store where he thought she had gone, but he must have been too late because there wasn't any sign of her. The traffic had held him back. He had to drive halfway down the next street and turn around.

Emmet pushed on the door to Hutch's Hardware. The bell dinged. As Emmet stepped through the door, he caught sight of someone standing at the counter. He felt himself tense up. Orrin Hutch stood behind the counter and when he saw Emmet his face changed. This tipped off the man standing with his back to Emmet. The man turned around. "Well, there he is," the man said.

"And there he is," replied Emmet. But he kept walking towards the back aisle that was his goal.

"Has the Mole Man got you running his errands for him?" said the man. Emmet didn't answer and Orrin Hutch said "Judd." Judd Ivey waved his hand as if to dismiss Emmet and turned back to the counter. Emmet stayed on the tool aisle, listening to his father and Orrin Hutch talk. He had seen the caution in Hutch's eyes when Judd chided Emmet, but Emmet knew Hutch would never take sides. Emmet listened to them talking, but stayed on the tool aisle, listening to his father and Orrin Hutch talk. He had seen the caution in Hutch's eyes when Judd chided Emmet, but Emmet knew Hutch would never take sides. Emmet listened to them talking but could only hear sounds, not words. He heard his fathers' full-bodied laugh. When he heard his father say

goodbye and bang the bell on the door on his way out, Emmet resumed the search for what he'd come looking for. In a few minutes, he headed to the front of the store. He laid his purchases on the counter and was silent as Hutch rang it up.

“Avoiding him probably won't do you any good,” Hutch said finally. He shook open a paper bag.

“You're suggesting I talk to him the way he talks to me?” said Emmet.

“Might do him some good.” Hutch handed the bag to Emmet. “How old are you now? Twenty-one?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Well there you go. You're not under his thumb anymore, are you?”

Emmet didn't answer. He took his bag and headed for the door. When he was gripping the handle, he turned and faced Hutch again. “If Mama had died while they were married, and if he'd give a damn about her, I might understand him,” said Emmet. “But none of that's true. He didn't love her. She died after they divorced and it was probably his mouth that killed her. He ain't wounded and bitter. He's just a mean old cuss.” Hutch shook his head and threw up his hands in a gesture of resignation. Emmet opened the door and muttered a ‘goodbye Orrin’ as he walked out into the sunlight.

“You'll just know is what I hear,” Billy said. He took the bottle back from Miranda and managed to get it open. Billy Gregory was a friend from school.

He'd always told Miranda that he was available for talk or whatever. Tonight she needed talk. She wasn't sure about the whatever. "Everybody I know who's married," he said, "just knew when they'd met the right person. Whether or not they are happy now isn't really relevant."

"How can it not be relevant?" said Miranda. "Isn't that the point of marriage?" Billy shook his head. "I'm not sure it is." "Then what is the point?" said Miranda. "You're really just confusing me more."

"You just need to look around a little more," Billy said. "How long have I been telling you that?" Billy poured some wine into two glasses and raised his as in a toast. Miranda picked her glass up and waited. "To the future," he said. "To the future," she repeated. They took a drink and then another. Billy set his glass down and looked at her. "Now what?" he said. "We could dance," she said. Billy nodded and rose from the couch to search through the music stashed in the entertainment center across the room. When he'd put some music on, he crossed back and held out his hand to Miranda. She took it and he swung her around until she ended up facing him. She laughed and relaxed against him. They swung, and free-styled and whatever else fit the currently playing disc that Billy had lined up. Then a slow dance came on. Miranda's mind stopped whirring around. It settled and was able to comprehend what was going on. "This is the last dance," she said.

"Why?" said Billy. "Getting too close for you?"

"No, I'm just realizing that I don't need to be here. Doing this."

“Oh.” Billy stopped and pulled away from her. “I guess you’d better go then,” he said.

“Billy...”

“You don’t have to explain. Just go,” he said.

She was glad she had driven herself. Outside the sky was inky black. There were a few stars showing a pale yellow glow, and Miranda wondered if there would be more later on. She looked at her watch. It was a little after nine. As she got in the car to drive home, she looked back up at the window. Billy wasn’t there.

Miranda felt sometimes that Lila Hoster was the only person who really understood her. She didn’t know why she felt this way, since based on their pasts, they had nothing in common. Lila was a woman of about Miranda’s mom’s age. She and Miranda’s mom weren’t really friends, but they were acquainted with one another. It was really odd for them not to be friends, given the small size of their community, but there had always been a sticking point between the two women and Miranda had never figured out what it was. Regardless, right now she preferred Lila’s advice to that of her mother.

Miranda had always thought Lila was a beautiful name, but this Lila was not a beautiful woman. Not in the traditional sense of beautiful anyway. At 55, she looked at least ten years older. Some would say she looked like she’d been “rode hard and put up wet.” She didn’t seem to care one way or the other what people thought. Miranda liked going to her house even if Lila

wasn't available for talking or listening. There was usually a group of women around who were drinking coffee, playing cards or just sharing gossip. They called it "news." When the ladies were there, Miranda was hard-pressed to get a word in edgewise, but sometimes she liked that. Sometimes just the din of their voices was enough to make her relax and remember what it was like to just *be*. Then she would realize that she wasn't aware until that moment that she'd lost that particular skill. But having revelations was not allowed when you were within Lila's circle. So Miranda would shift back into listening mode and that took her back to where she needed to be. Rarely did she hear anything that altered her peaceful mood. Consequently she could leave Lila's house in a subdued, serene mindset.

But today it was just the two of them, and Lila was giving her a hard look that reminded Miranda that Lila had a built-in BS detector.

"I knew he was going to ask me," Miranda said. Lila looked at her hard and then shifted herself in the rocking chair.

"And that's a problem because why?"

"I knew you wouldn't understand," said Miranda.

"Now, wait a minute. Hold on a minute," Lila said. "Don't put me in a box. Tell me why you don't want to marry this boy. This boy that you pined over for how long?"

Miranda looked at Lila straight on. "I know. I know what it sounds like," she said. "But there have been incidents."

Lila narrowed her eyes. "What kind of incidents?"

Miranda shook her head vigorously. "No, no," she said. "He's not beating me or anything like that." She paused. "It's more like- he senses my growing reluctance and he threatens me with other women. Not exactly like that, I mean he doesn't say it. But you know, he touches this one's hand in a certain way, and he squeezes that one's shoulder."

"I never did trust this one and that one," said Lila. "So where is this happening?"

"At church. At school things - ball games and such."

"Well, I married very young," said Lila "My folks practically sold me to the man. I was only fifteen and just barely that. I got married two days after my fifteenth birthday." She emphasized the word *two*. "There was no wedding to speak of, just us standing before the justice of the peace. My daddy served as witness and I'll never forget the look on his face. Stoic. He wouldn't even look at me. And after it was over, he raced out of there like he had so much to do." She put a cigarette out in the ashtray beside her.

"So?" said Miranda. "Did it last?"

Lila looked surprised. "Oh yeah honey, it lasted," she said. "I was married to Leo Hoster for twenty-one years, until he died."

“That was *him*? You stayed married to a man who bought you like a slave?”

“I had nowhere else to go, Miranda. At the time it didn’t seem like such a bad deal.”

Miranda shook her head. “Never.”

Lila’s house had one of those back doors that slammed unmercifully when turned loose. The two women heard it slam now. Lila got up and walked toward the back of the house. “Stevie?” She called out the name of Steve Baker, a teenager that sometimes did errands for her. But it wasn’t Stevie that came around the corner. It was Mole Hicks. Lila was at first taken aback, but she recovered herself quickly.

“You could’ve given us warning,” she said. Mole followed her back into the living room where Miranda waited. “I hope y’all haven’t been in here all day,” he said. “It was beautiful out earlier, but it looks like the sun’s called it a day now.” He walked across the room and peered out the window up to the sky. The blinds closed with a “clack” when he let go of them. Neither Lila nor Miranda answered him.

The tornado struck later that day. It was late afternoon or early evening, whichever you want to call it. But it doesn’t much matter when the clouds move into formation like they did; lining up, moving across the sky. What had been a sunny yellow day turned down to white, then gray, then darker. All of this happened within the span of an hour or less.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Miranda said to Mole. “I think she is too.” She indicated Lila with her eyes, but spoke in a low voice. She and Mole were standing next to the door of a closet under the stairway in Lila’s house. Lila was rummaging in a kitchen drawer looking for matches. Lila’s dog and cat stood with Mole and Miranda, waiting.

“Lila, you’d better come,” Mole said. His voice had an edge to it that Miranda hadn’t heard before. She watched him as he stood nervously with his hands in his pockets. Then he pulled them out and went to look and see where Lila was. “That storm will be here and gone before you find those matches.” Miranda watched Mole disappear around the corner as his voice drifted back to her. In a minute he returned with Lila behind him.

“Are we all going to fit in this closet?” asked Miranda. No one answered her; they just stood near the door and Mole had his face turned toward the front window where he could monitor what was happening outside. The dog and cat paced in front of the closet opening. The cat went inside the closet, sat down and looked at them and then came back out. The dog sat at Lila’s feet and looked up at her and when she didn’t respond, he moved to her other side. The radio in the kitchen was on and turned up as loud as it would go.

Miranda watched Lila watching Mole. Miranda knew that they had a history, but she didn’t know the details; she hadn’t yet wrangled the story out of Lila. But she knew what Lila was thinking now: get the heck away from that

window, man. What are you some kind of idiot? But she didn't say those words.

Miranda positioned herself to the side of the closet and slid down the wall until she sat. Pearl the cat crawled up onto her and stood with paws on Miranda's knees, starting into her eyes. As she listened to the wind roar outside, Miranda wondered where Emmet might be.

Lila tried to think about him as little as possible. The man she referred to as "the one who got away" plagued her from time to time. She'd spent all those years married to Leo, and when he died, she had a brief affair with Mole Hicks. For her it was like starting over at 37. She felt like a teenager first falling in love with those things she was feeling. She was having all those feelings for the first time; just the numbers were wrong.

"I don't envy you that you'll have to get back out there," he'd said to her. That had only reinforced for her the notion she had that he had it all together and she was trying to play catch up. And at that time, she'd been naked in his bed. Why did men have such bad timing? He fell back in the bed and laughed. "I dated this one woman who..." Lila had heard quite a few of these stories in the last few months. But she felt as though she was treading on an icy top of a body of water; she didn't want to upset anything about this moment by saying the wrong thing. The moment? In his room; it was bright daylight outside, but they were in the bed with the lights down and the

curtains drawn as if it were night. Someone was mowing the grass next door; the lawn mower sounded so close it was almost as if the man mowing could see inside this room and knew exactly what was going on. And didn't care. Because this was normal; this was what everyone else did.

It's not like she was completely innocent, but Lila had been married to the same man since she was sixteen. She'd been a shy young woman and she guessed her parents felt she would never find anyone else on her own. Her grandmother's old face looked older during that time; she begged her son not to pressure Lila into marrying. And he had insisted that it was the best thing for her in the long run. Maybe he'd been right. She was well cared for. But she'd never known the passion that she heard so many people talk about. She had finished up school quickly after marrying; she was smart and was able to skip a grade. But she was around long enough to hear the other girls talk about their boyfriends or the boys they wished were their boyfriends, and she suddenly was ravenous for their stories, although before she'd been ambivalent, because her shyness had hindered her.

So she'd been curious. That curiosity did build her expectations somewhat towards her marriage to Leo. She even had hopes that things would turn out good for them. But the honeymoon night had been a disappointment. It was painful, but it was also over quickly, and soon she grew accustomed enough to Leo that she didn't flinch when he touched her. But neither could she caress his head as someone she cared for, someone she longed to be close to. She endured the beginnings of sex, she guiltily

enjoyed the rest of it, and she learned so well to say she loved him afterwards that eventually even she believed it. And she did love him eventually, but it wasn't like this overwhelming wave of feeling that took her when she looked at this man lying next to her now.

Lila didn't know how to advise Miranda about whether to get married or not. So far, since Leo's death she'd had periods of remembering him with fondness and then periods of remembering him with wrath. Each period or spell seemed to last a couple of years at a time.

She pushed out her cigarette. When did she pick up such a dirty habit? She couldn't remember now, sometimes amongst the years of living. This was something Mama did, not me, thought Lila. Her mother had died long ago but if she were here now she'd reprimand Lila herself, all the while with a lit cigarette in the hand she was trying to hide behind her back.

Lila watched from her window as a boy walked down the street. Lord, she thought and she had a flash of old Mrs. Carson, her next door neighbor when Lila was twelve. Mrs. Carson would sit at the window every day and watch everything she could see from her perch. Then she'd probably make up the rest, thought Lila. She turned from the window quickly, went to the phone and dialed the first number that came to mind. "Hey. You want to come over?" she said. "Good. Okay. See you in fifteen minutes." Lila hung up the phone. When she was walking towards the living room, she passed a mirror that hung on the wall of the hallway. She stopped and looked at herself. "You can

run, but you can't hide," she told herself. She brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes, heaved a sigh and moved on.

Verona

This was James and Della's "easing into retirement" trip. It wasn't that easy getting ready for it. James had to renew his passport. He hadn't used the thing in twenty years. He associated it with war and the cramped military planes he had flown in. That was reason enough to stick it in a drawer and forget about it when he got home.

But now Della wanted to go to Europe, and she wanted to do it slowly, one country at a time. James would rather have done one of those "Ten Countries in Twelve Days" trips, just to get it over with, but she'd been firm about it. "No! I want to remember what I see. I want to soak up the atmosphere." James replied that he was sure it would rain for the bulk of the time they were there, so she could soak up all she wanted to. Della rolled her eyes at him.

He let her take care of all the little details of planning for a trip, because that's what he detested most about traveling. Stopping the paper and the mail; asking a neighbor to water the plants; coordinating "watchers" to visit the house periodically.

He was concerned about all of this, but he got frustrated with having to write it all down and check each thing off as it was done. That was how Della handled it, and she wouldn't let him do it on his own without following behind him to make sure he did it right. He would've just taken a day and done it and called it good. "But you'll get distracted and forget something,"

she said. She was right about that, he had to admit. James liked to talk to whoever would listen. When he was working, he worked quietly and got his job done. But when work was over, James would sit out on his porch and strike up a conversation with whoever happened to walk by. "This isn't the country," Della told him, "you can't just talk to anyone here." Then why on earth did we move here, James thought to himself. He looked out on his well-manicured (by someone else) lawn, and he missed the five acres he used to work himself. He missed the feeling of satisfaction of getting it done and being that good kind of tired, the kind that hit you when you finally sat down.

So Della had booked the trip with the touring company. She'd signed them up to be on this bus for thirteen days with forty-eight other people (fifty including tour manager Nigel and Luigi the driver) that he didn't know from Adam's house cat. Now that they were here in Rome on day two, James had to admit that there was something to this bus tour thing, however confining it might seem. The other people on the tour were from all over; only two other couples were from the U.S. The most talkative ones were Irish, he'd noted. The Australians gave the Irish a run for their money in drinking wine, but the Irish still got the blue ribbon for the most chatter.

Della was jubilant about being in Italy. "She runs around like a little kid," James thought. Della had always liked shopping, she'd always been emotional to a degree, but she'd never been like other women in taking either of the two traits to excess. Now - well, James didn't quite know who this woman was. It's like he had boarded the plane in Memphis with one person,

and got off the plane in Rome with someone else. She had insisted on Italy for their first taste of Europe. Della had never insisted on anything in her life. But he had agreed. There was a part of him that wanted to disagree and insist on Germany or Switzerland or Russia, but all the rest of him just wanted to humor her and get this trip done with so life could get back to normal. “Buy what you want to,” he’d told her when they arrived. Della didn’t respond. She went on with her shopping as if she hadn’t heard him, and as if it wasn’t necessary to listen. He was going to bring this up (get it settled now, at the beginning of the trip), but before he could open his mouth, she’d grabbed him by the arm and said, Isn’t this beautiful? Look at all the colors! Whispered it in his ear close, like she would a girlfriend or a first date.

James walked from table to table, trying to see what she saw. There were spices piled on one table, in little bags or loose. They were in all earth tone colors, and James recognized the names from some of Della’s little bottles in the kitchen cabinet at home. This was Campo di Fiori Square, they’d been told. It was supposed to be a famous marketplace, a frequently visited spot for tourists to Italy. There were lots of colors, as Della had pointed out. Spices, fruit and flowers were piled high on another stand.

Colorful scarves were blowing in the breeze, suspended from a rack behind which a swarthy young man sat and smoked a cigarette. “I don’t see anything I’d pay good money for,” James said out loud, “except maybe a banana.” He bought one and found a seat over by a fountain. The concrete was warm from the sun and it felt good on his legs. It was only ten AM and

they'd already been walking for a couple of hours. Walk, eat and shop, that's all they'd done since they got here.

James had heard that Italian people were very friendly. He'd hoped this was true, as it was his angle on making the best of this trip. He'd make fourteen new friends, one for each day they'd be here. He watched as an Italian woman behind a table piled with scarves tried to engage his wife in conversation. Della had made a concentrated effort to learn Italian before they left home, and she enjoyed the opportunity to practice. It looked like she was doing pretty well; both women were chattering away. James couldn't hear them. Not that he would understand; his efforts at learning other languages had been futile. He'd hoped that someone here would speak English, but so far, the average citizens on the streets of Rome had responded to his questions with blank stares. James straightened himself up from where he was sitting and walked over to where Della was still looking. "I'm going for a walk," he said to her.

"I thought you were tired of walking," Della said.

"Well, I got two choices; sitting here watching you spend my money, or walking around and trying to forget about it. So I'm walking." The Italian woman helping Della laughed and rattled off something unintelligible as he walked away.

Once James left the open marketplace, he had to choose which winding, cobble-stoned street he wanted to tackle first. They all looked alike to him. Della knew them by which shops were located on each one, but he had no

idea. "I'll just start at the far left and work my way back here," he told himself. A woman and her little boy passed him and glanced his way. "I guess Italians don't think out loud to themselves," he said in a deliberately loud voice. The woman pushed her little boy along, and a few other people turned to look at James.

He took care as he walked. He wouldn't have let on to anyone else, but he'd really listened when their tour director warned them to watch their steps on the unevenly paved streets. The cobblestones gave the city a certain character, but they also could give you a "hard tumble," he'd said. The boy (this was how James thought of the tour manager; he couldn't have been over twenty-five or twenty-six), was British and said things in a way that made Della sigh from time to time. The first time she'd done it, James asked if she was feeling bad. She'd looked a little sheepish and said no, but shushed him when he started to ask then why was she blowing like that. She'd pointed to Nigel, who'd picked up his microphone again and was telling them the history of their next stop.

James didn't know what had happened to Della. Ever since they'd come on this trip, she'd been downright pushy. She was generally fairly compliant, but suddenly she was piping up like a five-year-old when someone asked "do you want ..." or "do you want to...?" All of a sudden, out of the blue, she always had an answer. It baffled him. First, it made him mad, because she wasn't giving him the chance to put in his two cents, but after a while he just stood back and watched her and wondered at the difference.

It was clear to him after a few days that Della had a crush on this Nigel character. Character - the boy wasn't even that, he hadn't lived long enough to build any! But James decided this was just part of the package, the new Della, and he had to figure out a way to deal with it. He did. There were forty-six other people on this bus, and Nigel had them rotate seats every other day. This was so each of them would have a chance to talk to as many different people as they could. It was a system tailor-made for James's gift for chatter, and he'd already scoped out a beautiful young Chinese woman that he wanted to chat up just for Della's benefit. As for Della, she made polite talk and traded tips with the other travelers, but most of her attention was focused on Nigel. The trouble was, James and Della hadn't progressed far enough to be across from Julia -that was the Chinese woman's English name - yet, and time was a-wasting. So James made an executive decision. He skipped up a few seats before it was really his time. He scrunched down into the aisle and spoke to the man two seats ahead of him. "Would you mind changing seats with me for a half hour? I want to see if any of these other seats fit my back different. I have terrible back problems." The man stared at James, and James started to wonder if he understood English. Then the man smiled suddenly, as if he'd been struck by lightning and all was clear.

"Oh, right! Certainly, mate. I didn't quite get what you were saying for a moment." He maneuvered away from his seat and stood aside while James moved into it. The man held out his hand. "I'm Steven," he said. "James," said James, shaking Steven's hand. "And I thank you." "Not a problem," said

Steven, as he went back to James's seat. While James watched him, he noticed Della looking at him with a perplexed expression on her face. "I'll be back in just a minute," James called to her. "Just trying an experiment," he said. He turned to face forward again and found Nigel glaring at him from the front of the bus. James's intended target, Julia, looked at him from across the aisle. But it wasn't the open and interested look he'd been hoping for. She looked at him like he was a bug that needed squashing.

Nigel was beside him now. "Is there a problem with your seat?" he asked. "I can help you if you need it. We don't want to get out of rotation." "I was just trying it," said James. "There's no problem." Nigel went away then, and James glanced across the aisle to gauge how much damage had been done. Julia was still reading her book. He thought he'd give her a few minutes. He turned to his seat companion, or rather Steven's seat companion. "Hello, I'm James," he said. The woman turned to him. "I'm Estelle," she said. "I heard that your back is bothering you. Do you think changing seats will help?" she said. "I have some Tylenol if you need it." "Oh, I try not to take many pills," said James. "I just thought I'd try a different seat. You never know," he said. "No you don't," said Estelle. She was about to continue speaking, but James had turned to look across the aisle.

"Hello, my name is James," he said to Julia. She raised her head and turned toward him, smiling. "Hello." That was all she said, and she turned back to the book. James looked at her a minute and then faced forward

again. “Well, is it working?” Estelle said from beside him. Then she shook her head and looked down at her magazine.

The next stop was Florence, “the heart of the Renaissance movement,” Nigel told them. Both James and Della let out a heavy sigh, but not for the same reason.

Before Florence, Luigi pulled into what Nigel called an “autogrill.” Once inside, James found that this turned out to be an odd combination of an American gas station and cafeteria -style restaurant. The food didn’t look half bad, to be honest; the obstacles to surmount here were the incessant din of unintelligible chatter and the brusque behavior of the employees. Nigel had already warned them that the people manning the food-line cash registers were very short with people, and got impatient if you didn’t have the correct amount of money ready to hand over. That meant they were impatient with anyone who didn’t speak fluent Italian or have quick enough recognition of their currency. So James was pretty much set up when he reached the cash register. He wanted to wait on Della to pay for her meal and tried to explain this to the woman at the register. She answered with a question that he didn’t understand, and he tried to clarify his words by pointing to Della in the back of the line. He’d already tried to get Della to move up beside him and she wouldn’t do it. She’d pretty much ignored him since he’d changed seats with no explanation, and when they had come off the bus, he was in front of her in line. This didn’t help matters. He tried to catch her

eye now so she might wave and help his case with the autogrill woman, but she just ignored him.

When Della didn't respond, the Italian woman motioned for James to move out of the line. Though he didn't understand all her words, by now he pretty much knew what she was saying, but he tried one more time to explain his situation. Her response was louder this time. She repeated the same run together Italian words over and over, and James had no more literal knowledge of what they were than before, but he knew very well what she was saying. She then reached for the next person's money and James felt a firm hand on his arm. He turned and found Nigel frowning at him. "Vada all'estremita' means go to the back of the line," Nigel said. James frowned back at him and said, "Unhand me, boy." Nigel released James's arm, but it was clear that he wasn't intimidated. He walked away with an attitude of washing his hands of James, and James had no choice but to go to the very back of the line. He tried to get Della's attention by calling her name in a fierce whisper. "Della. Della!" he said. Finally, she turned around and motioned for him to come up to where she was. Some of the other people in line glared at him as he passed. "You're embarrassing me," Della said when he reached her. "Why on earth did you move to that other seat on the bus?" Their fellow travelers on either side in the line didn't even try to turn away politely at this point.

"You were blowing and fawning all over that youngster, and I wanted to give you a taste of your own medicine," James said. "What?" Della's eyes

were round as she stared at him. "That boy!" said James and he nodded towards Nigel, who was leaning against a counter, deep in conversation with a man who looked like Al Pacino.

"Oh, for pity's sake," said Della. She shook her head at him. "Well, you were, weren't you?" James asked. He lowered his voice a little this time and spoke right into her ear. As he did this, he was hit with a wave of nostalgia. Della's tiny little ears had been something James had teased her about when they first started dating. 'How do you hear anything with those tiny little ears,' he'd say. 'You must miss a lot.' What he'd really wanted to say was that he loved her ears, that he loved her. But he hadn't wanted to frighten her away. They'd just been dating a few months. He had a habit of frightening women away with his enthusiasm. So with Della, he limited his professions of love to her ears. They were small (not like his big flappers), and pink and curvy, like little sea shells. The fact that they could serve a purpose other than to just look beautiful was a miracle of God and a delight to James. 'Wear your hair tied back,' he'd plead with her. "It's a shame to cover up those lovely ears." Now as he spoke into her right ear (the same size as it had been, though some of the rest of her had spread out), he remembered those days and immediately he wished he could take back his dark, accusing words. Then in the next minute, he didn't. He'd seen the way she was looking at Nigel. It may have taken him a minute or two to catch on, but once he did, he knew what was going on.

James was baffled. Thwarted. Did all of these changes start happening when he took retirement, or had Della been this way for years and he just hadn't noticed because he was too busy working? James thought that he was glad they hadn't ever had a swimming pool. Della would probably have gone after the pool boy, he thought.

The Italians call Florence "Firenze." They have to have a different name for everything, thought James. They have to say things in a way that makes women swoon, even women of a certain age like Della. They don't discriminate in this country. This is the city that Della has been most anticipating visiting. She says it's the center for the world of the arts, something she thinks James knows nothing about. Just because she's taken up writing bad poetry for the last few years, he thinks, she assumes that I know nothing of the world of the arts. Does she forget that I played guitar in a rockabilly band in the fifties? Did she forget going to see me and saying that our rockabilly was more like hillbilly, but that was all right with her? Does she forget all that, James wondered.

They go through a lot of museums here and Della buys some papers she says are made by a company called Valentina. The print is pretty - a dense pattern of flowers and curlicues on a background of cream. Something that all the girls back home will oo and ah over. James supposes that she'll find the same thing at Target within two months of going home. But he doesn't say it this time. He holds his tongue. His "wry observations on life" (Della's words), take all the joy out of a situation sometimes, she tells him. He

thinks of her comment now as the urge to say something passes through his brain and over his lips. But what comes out is just air. He practices self-restraint. He has to get to the bottom of this creature that is the new Della. Maybe he should start by listening to what she says.

Since James is holding his tongue, he also doesn't share with Della what he is thinking as they go through the museums. He doesn't share that he is finding this interesting; there is something to these paintings, to the way the face made of oils by the hand of some artist type actually reflects something James can understand. He feels like he's looking at Della's face when they've just had an argument and he's said his piece, and she's said hers, and then the light comes on for him just as her eyes are starting to tear up. If she sees his light come on, (if she can before her vision is too blurred), she tries to stop herself from losing it too bad; tries to stop the tears from flowing. She doesn't always succeed, but James recognizes and appreciates the effort. Then he can just pull her to him and hold her and communicate what he needs to without having to see that the tears fall anyway. Maybe even more so once he reaches out to her. God did a smart thing when He designed opposite facing embraces, James thinks.

They arrive in Verona. Nigel tells them that this will be a short visit, so to hurry and see the most famous attraction - Juliet's balcony. Della is excited about this and when James tells her has to find an ATM first, she becomes angry. "You don't have money left? Why didn't you get any when we were back in Florence? Nigel says we haven't got much time."

“Nigel says, Nigel says,” muttered James as he walks away from her. He headed in the direction of the money machine. “You wait here,” he told Della. “I’ll be right back.” He pointed to his watch. “I’m watching the time.” He would rush on over to the bank, swing back by the bus for Della, and then make it to the balcony with a full ten minutes left for Della to read the amorous graffiti to her heart’s content. “I only have to get a little cash and then we’ll see your balcony,” said James. “Juliet’s balcony,” Della corrected him, but James was already out of earshot.

As James tried to move quickly through the people on the streets, he observed something. You hear about the Italians being so warm and friendly, he thought, but nobody ever talks about how outright rude they can be when maneuvering through the streets. He’s had more than one person break in line in front of him (especially in Rome; there were a lot of lines in Rome), and they say nothing when he tried to solicit an apology by saying “scusi.” This was in direct contrast to how they were with you in a one-on-one situation, like in their home or a restaurant. He was reminded of this as he made his way to the train station. That was the one place that he knew there was an ATM, and he was following the signs to reach it.

He arrived at the train station and the scene was chaotic. A train had just come in and people were spilling from it like water from a pitcher. They filed through the station on either side of him and hindered his view as he searched for the money machine. The air smelled like cigarette smoke and it struck him that he was not enjoying the scent. He’d stopped smoking two

years earlier, and the miraculous had happened. He no longer wanted a cigarette; in fact he felt the urge to get away from the smoke as soon as possible.

When he finally found the ATM, he had to wait while a young woman coached an older woman in how to use it. The older woman (her hair was deep silver, as opposed to the younger woman's dark beautiful locks), didn't seem to be catching on. There was a moment when the two women laughed, and James thought they were about to leave. He readied himself to move into position, but they became sober and continued on with their lesson. James knew the younger woman was saying the same things over again, even though he didn't understand Italian, because he recognized the sounds coming out of her mouth.

"What took you so long?" Della demanded when he returned. "I was about to leave without you. I should have left without you." "Maybe you should have," James said. He wasn't all that interested in Romeo and Juliet anyway.

But they moved on. It was starting to sprinkle, and Della brought her red umbrella out of her tote bag.

Juliet's balcony was on Via Cappello. They were on Via Mazzini. James started pulling out his map, but Della grabbed his hand and pulled him. "Come on," she said. "We don't have time for that. Nigel gave us directions." She pulled him along and darned if she didn't lead them straight to the balcony, James thought. They were just one of many couples gathered in the

courtyard, and cameras flashed as some posed on the balcony. Others read graffiti left on the stone wall. Teenagers leaned on each other and signed their own names and messages to the wall. While Della wandered, James noticed a scattered sort of line of people leading to a bronze statue of Juliet. When he saw what the people were doing, he thought, surely not.

“If you rub Juliet’s breast, you’ll have good luck in love.” James turned to find Nigel standing next to him. “You don’t say,” James replied.

“My guess is that that promise is about as authentic as the site itself,” Nigel said, smiling at James. “But,” he continued, “from the look of things, I’d say your giving it a try could only work in your favor.” James followed Nigel’s gaze to where Della was reading the historical plaque posted on the wall. Nigel looked at his watch. “The bus leaves in seven minutes,” he said. “Don’t be late.” He walked away and James approached the line to the statue. Kill two birds with one stone, he told himself. He called out to Della, and she turned around, as did several other people standing in the courtyard. Della’s expression went from a frown to burgeoning smile as James pointed to indicate that he was getting in line to meet the lovely Juliet.

The Birches and the Elders

Out of desperation, Joe had consented to going to computer classes at the old folk's home. His kids had moved him out here to California a few years ago so they could take care of him, and then they decided they couldn't take care of him after all and put him in this place where he didn't know a soul. Then he got a letter from Silas Johnson back home and Silas said that his boy had bought him a laptop computer. He had Silas hooked up to where he could do something called instant messaging. And if Joe got a computer out there too, then they could talk just like they were sitting right next to each other.

So Joe joined the computer class and suffered through the sessions. He managed to not break anything while trying to learn the stuff, and when the class was over, he tried to make it down to the computer room a couple of times a week to talk to Silas. Here's how their conversations went:

Silas: Hey, what does that place look like?

Joe: Like a hospital. All white and the nurses wear those things that look like cotton pajamas. Scrubs, they call them. I don't know; it's clean. Not much color though, and there's always a bunch of sick people around me, which I don't like. What's it look like there?

Silas: It looks like it always did, just older. The birch and the elder trees have grown taller and reach probably all the way up to heaven.

Joe: Well, then you could just climb up one of them and get there early. If they'd let you in. Ha!

Silas: We'll see when that time comes who will get in and who won't. (Pause). I saw a man out there the other day.

Joe: Out where?

Silas: Out there in the birch and elder trees. Of course I can't see near like I used to so it could've been anybody, but it didn't look like anyone I recognized as being from around here.

Joe: Hadn't everyone we knew died off already?

Silas: Well, could be. But I think there's still Ludie Hafford. And Hollowell Gem. But I haven't seen either one of them up here on the mountain in a long time. I don't reckon they get up here unless one of the grandchildren bring them.

Joe: And you know that ain't going to happen. So, who was it?

Silas: I don't know, that's why I'm telling you. It's a mystery. He was just standing there looking at me like he was waiting for something. It made me want to look around and see who else was standing behind me, because I couldn't figure on what he'd be waiting for from me.

Joe: And there wasn't nobody there?

Silas: No, there wasn't. Just me.

Joe: So what happened to him?

Silas: He went away. Just walked off into the bushes. Never said anything like hey, I need to see you or whatever. Just walked off real quiet.

Joe: Well, that's peculiar.

Silas: Yeah.

Joe: If he was a vagrant or a robber, I guess he decided you didn't have anything he wanted. He probably could tell that just from looking at the state of your house.

Silas: Hmph. (Pause). You ever had anything like that happen?

Joe: Nope. Of course, there's no birch or elder trees out here.

Silas: Oh yeah? What have you got?

Joe: Just some palm trees. To tell the truth, I don't even know if they're real.

Silas: Did you ever touch them to find out?

Joe: No I haven't.

Silas: Well, you need to do that. Find out for sure.

Joe: I suppose. (Pause). It gives me something to think about while I'm sitting around here. I might not want to solve the problem just yet.

Silas: What do you mean?

Joe: I mean, I might just want to wait until I think it's closer to time when I'll be going. Otherwise I'll be sitting here with nothing for my brain to chew on.

Silas: Maybe so.

It was the first time Joe could remember Silas not making a wise acre remark in response to some comment of his own. Joe wasn't even sure himself why he said what he did or what it meant, but it really didn't matter, he

guessed. If he was as bad as some of the geezers around him then he was probably saying all kinds of nonsensical stuff.

He was getting tired of the routine around this place. That was one thought that he could remember and track as having every day. He missed being able to just pick up and go in the car when he wanted to. Here's my version of that now, he thought, and he turned the wheels of his wheelchair until he reached the big plate glass window that looked out on the residence's gardens.

Sometimes he went into the residence's projection room not because he wanted to see the movie but because it was the closest he could come to the escape of sleep without actually losing consciousness.

Joe: Well, I suppose life is pretty much the same for you as it always was having stayed where you've always been.

Silas: Can't say that, no.

Joe: How so?

Silas: Well, everything changes, even when it doesn't go anywhere different.

Joe: That don't make no sense.

Silas: It would if you were still here. How long you been gone now?

Joe: It'll be three years in January.

Silas: A lot can change in three years.

Silas thought that same phrase to himself every day. "A lot can change in three years." Joe had left Tennessee the same year that Silas's wife

Margrette died. That was a double whammy for Silas. Sometimes men don't like to admit to missing anyone but their wives, but Silas had come to the place where he could say it to himself out loud: "I miss that old son of a gun."

Joe hadn't said anything in response to Silas's last statement, so Silas leaned back in his chair and rested his eyes. Around him, the rooms of his house were decorated in the same way they'd been when Margrette was alive. He hadn't made a move to change anything. His children would come visit him once a month, and had only recently stopped arguing with him about leaving these woods for life in some place more civilized. The thing was, this place used to be more civilized if you count more population as making a place more civilized. With the general exodus from this place the little store had shut down and some of the cleared off land where people had their houses had grown over again.

Silas had recently made another leap in his personal growth in addition to admitting that he missed his friend Joe. He'd also admitted to himself that were times when he felt afraid, being out here so alone. But they were few and they were fleeting. And he never told anyone else and never would. No point in adding fuel to the fire that his children were trying to build.

He opened his eyes. He looked down at the laptop screen and saw that Joe still hadn't said anything, so he closed down. Joe must have fallen asleep at the keyboard, he thought to himself. The mental image made him chuckle.

Silas gripped both arms of his chair and pushed himself up and out of it. Time to walk around a little, he thought. He opened the front door and walked out into the yard. He still kept his yard a yard - kept the brush cleared away and things looking neat and tidy. It wasn't a "lawn" and he was sure no homeowners association would approve of it, but he found it quite pleasant. He did have help in the summer when everything green tended to grow faster and thicker. His son Jeremy set him up with a friend to bring some tools and muscle to help Silas.

It was the little things like that - him having to slowly relinquish control of things he needed in his daily life that gave Silas a sense of impending helplessness. That wasn't anywhere he wanted to go. But for now, the heavy yard work was all that he'd had to hire help for, so that wasn't too bad.

He looked at the land just surrounding his house. He liked his little clearing. He had a vegetable garden and Margrette had kept flowers as well. He felt a little guilt at having let them go, but he was sure she'd understand. Margrette was the one who'd liked things pretty and who'd liked a change now and then. She'd often taken short trips into town to see his mother and her sisters when they were younger. She said sometimes she just needed to look at a different four walls. Silas, on the other hand, had always been content to stay here all the time. This was a fact that sometimes bothered Margrette.

But he felt lately like he was starting to understand her. It wasn't the walls he had a problem with - he'd never been much of an inside person. But

it seemed lately that even the 'walls' of his clearing were closing in on him. No matter how many times his yard helper Aubrey had come out and trimmed back the "wild" as he called it, Silas would look out and swear that it had grown back double overnight. It was as if the tangles of the brush and the birches and the elders were ready to take back the land and they wouldn't be restrained.

"Have you ever felt like you were being pushed out of your home?"

Silas typed this question to Joe during their next "conversation."

Joe: Ha! Are you trying to be funny or something? Because it's not working.

Silas: You weren't pushed. You were pulled.

Joe: I thought you said your kids had given up on getting you out of the woods.

Silas: As I said, I feel like I'm being pushed, not pulled.

Joe was quiet.

Joe: You're going to have to explain that. I'd say you meant Margrette but she's gone already.

Silas was quiet.

Joe: Oh, now that's what you mean? You think Margrette's ghost is pushing you out of the house? Like she wants you to hurry up and join her?

Silas: No. I told you about the man I saw, right? Out in the trees?

Joe: Right .In the birches and elders.

Silas: That's the one. Well...

Silence.

Joe: Well, what? Don't hold out, Silas!

Silas: I saw him again. And the trees. I think they're multiplying. And moving in closer.

Joe: Silas, I think you've gone bat crackers.

Silas: I ain't crazy. Watch your mouth.

Joe: Un huh.

One of the things Silas liked best about communicating on the computer was that you could end the conversation with one click. This is what he did now. Afterwards he sat looking out at the trees. He didn't really see them; they were more of just a focal point while he thought. He could feel himself hardening on the inside. He didn't want to cut off his relationship with Joe, but if he had to he would. He couldn't tolerate anyone questioning his sanity.

Then he saw the man again.

Silas was staring into the clump of birches and elders that stood at the foremost section just beyond his clearing. He was so focused and so involved in his thought that he almost didn't see the dark-haired young man step out from behind the trees. But then he did. Then Silas's brain registered something that made his eye look to the right and there was the same man that he'd seen a few days before. Silas jumped up out of his chair and made it over to the door. I have to get out there before he leaves, Silas thought. I have to find out who he is.

When he was out the door Silas was relieved to see that the man was still there. Silas started across the clearing. "Hey!" he called out. He thought the young man smiled and maybe he even said something, but Silas couldn't hear any distinct words. So he waved at him again. "Wait up," he said. It felt as though he were walking through mud or jello or something. It's never taken me this long to get across the clearing, he thought. He kept looking up and checking and each time the man was still there. He thought he saw the man's lips moving again and Silas wanted to say 'stop talking until I get there! I can't hear you!' Finally his slow motion limbs picked up speed and Silas was there at the edge of the clearing. He looked up, facing the trees and saw the man slip behind one. Silas walked as quickly as an old man could to where the other man had been, but there was no sign of him. He looked where he thought the man had gone, but he wasn't there, and he wasn't five steps along the path behind the elders either. Silas felt his ire rising.

"Damn!" he said. "Now what the hell is that about?" But he didn't know who he was asking. He didn't know who he was talking to though he looked around wildly for a few minutes in an effort to find just such a person. Someone. But there was no one and Silas felt his body slowing down again, enough so that he realized he was cold. He had on a gray and green plaid flannel shirt over his undershirt, but it wasn't enough for out here. He knew that. He'd known that for fifty years because he knew the dirt and the wind and all the old, wild growth of this place. His rational mind returned and he knew he had to go in. But he stood for a minute and just looked around. He

turned in a slow circle and looked at his land as if he were looking at it as a prospective buyer. He appreciated it. But then a wind with a chilly edge whipped around him and he put his arms up around himself like an old woman would when she was without her shawl. He derided himself for doing so, for acting like an old woman. But he moved while he was doing it and made his way back to the house. Just before he stepped inside, he turned again and looked out where the young man had been. "You didn't have to run off!" he said. But there was nothing, no voice calling in response. He went in and shut the door.

When the door slammed shut it was with a gust of cold wind behind it. The slam echoed and Silas was facing the inside of his house. It seemed so empty now even though there were reminders of Margrette everywhere he looked. He walked over to the window and looked out again. No sign of the young dark-haired man.

Joe woke up in his room and was surprised to see where he was. For a minute he didn't recognize the room and its furnishings. Then he remembered. But he preferred where he had just been. He'd been dreaming about the time when he and Silas were both twenty-one and they'd taken Old Man Morris's car for a joy ride. Joe's father had borrowed the car and he'd sent Joe and Silas to take it back. It was a Saturday morning and they had decided they could take their time since Mr. Morris didn't expect the car until later. They drove to the next county and cruised the main street of the town of Polk. Silas had his eye on a girl who lived there and he thought if he showed

up in a nice car she would give him the green light to ask her out. They had the windows down and Joe would have kept driving just to feel the wind rush through his window and out Silas's, but Silas wanted to stop.

The girl's name was Sharon Moss. She had red hair, the kind that let you spot her from a way far off and that's what they did. Silas nearly stomped Joe's foot in an effort to get him to brake. "Silas!" Joe yelled, but Silas was already halfway out of the car. "Let me get the darned car parked," Joe said. He scouted around for a place while Silas was keeping his eye on Sharon so he wouldn't lose her. Joe remembered the whole scene so vividly it was as if he were there again. It *had* felt like he was there. The blue and white of the sky and the clouds had been bright, so much so that they almost blinded him as much as the sun. The air smelled the way fresh-cut grass used to smell. What happened to that smell? Joe thought and he made a mental note to go outside the next time the old folks home lawn was being cut. Sharon's dress was new and the cotton fabric was crisp. That material would be worn now and someone would be trying to sell it on eBay under "vintage clothing." But I touched it, thought Joe. Just now.

Joe sat all the way up in the bed then because he remembered. He remembered what had happened that day.

"Mr. Guthrie." A bleached-blond nurse came in the room. "I heard someone call out in here. Are you okay?" She said all of this while she was moving around the room adjusting things, smoothing his bedclothes and looking into the paper cup on his nightstand to make sure he still had water.

But she never really looked at Joe. He was groping around mentally, still trying to determine what was real and what was dream, and trying to meet her eyes. "It was that day," he said. And then he repeated it in his head but not aloud to her because he knew if he did that she'd think he was a crazy old geezer. I ain't that far gone, he thought. He watched some more from where he was and then admitted to himself that yes, he had been away. The nurse looked in his direction then, at his face. She checked all around the periphery of him for signs of whatever it was she was looking to avoid, and he wanted to touch her arm and say, I know, it's okay.

Joe: Do you ever feel like people are avoiding you because you're old?

Silas: I wouldn't know since I am avoiding them by being a half-crazed recluse out in the woods.

Joe didn't react to this because his mind was still on the question and on the event from his and Silas's shared past that he had recently recalled.

Joe: I had a dream the other night.

Pause.

Silas: I'm waiting.

Silas was thinking about his own living dreams. He hadn't yet seen the stranger today, but he was sitting at the window and watching. On the other end of the line, Joe was contemplating how much to say to Silas. He wondered at what point Silas would catch on and remember and start filling in details of his own as Joe recounted his dreams. Joe's analysis (which had

been going on for several days) of all the possible outcomes had served to make him something akin to timid and it was starting to irritate Silas.

Silas: What is it? Are you having plumbing problems today? You aren't acting like yourself.

Joe: Sharon Moss.

Silas felt something ding in his head at the name but he couldn't match it with a face. He stared out his front window at the empty clearing and wondered if the stranger had anything to do with this Sharon Moss person.

Silas: Don't think I know her.

Joe could have dropped the phone at that moment. He was stunned, but he came to himself and found he was gripping the phone firmly. This reception to his revelation had not gone in the way he expected. The surprise came so out of left field that he forgot to feel relief.

Joe: Red hair. Bright like a hot fire.

Now that it was out there, Joe felt the need to give Silas every help in remembering this wrong that Joe had done him.

Silas: No. Still ain't ringing a bell.

Silas had moved closer to the window, so close that he was almost sitting on the window sill. He was staring out at those trees waiting to see the first difference in the landscape he'd memorized. There was no way for him to hear when Joe sighed heavily. Joe was almost angry that Silas didn't remember, and he was angry that he'd worked himself into such a state of anxiety and anticipation about the confrontation. Later he laid in his bed and

stared up at the ceiling and fumed. The nurse kept checking on him because she said she could hear him talking to himself. He wasn't aware of whether he had or had not spoken aloud, but he didn't tell her that. He just told her she was wrong and then told her to leave him alone so he could sleep. But he didn't sleep, and his demeanor wasn't any better the next day. He awoke to a doctor standing over him. "What the hell..."

"Good morning, Mr. Guthrie. The nurses have been a little concerned about you. Are you feeling okay?"

"He hasn't been himself," said the petite auburn-haired nurse standing beside him. The tall blonde from last night was gone.

"I'm sure I'd feel better if I didn't wake up to find a committee examining me and deciding my fate," Joe said. The doctor and nurse looked at each other. "I think he's okay," said the doctor. "But we've got our eye on you, Mr. Guthrie," he said and he pointed a finger playfully at Joe.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Joe said under his breath. The nurse asked him what was that? But he just shook his head and dismissed her with a wave of his speckled old hand.

The nurse left and Joe got out of bed and got himself ready for the day. He grumbled to himself the whole time but he only heard it as processing what had just happened to him and how living in this place was like living with that guy Big Brother. Finally he sat down at the fake walnut desk and took out a pad and pen. He didn't want to forget the dream. He hadn't yet, which kind of surprised him, but maybe it was because it was really a long-term memory

recycled as a short-term memory. He would have to ask someone about that. Or maybe he wouldn't.

Later in the day, he walked down to the computer room. "Mr. Guthrie," said the room geek, "where is your wheelchair?" "I don't need that thing all the time," Joe said, and the young man saluted Joe and went on with his business. After Joe had been sitting at the computer for a little while, he looked over at the geek and decided to venture out. "Mr. Smart Man," he said. The boy smiled and corrected him. "Geek," he said. Joe nodded and said, "What I want to know is are those trees out there real?" He pointed to the window. The geek looked out and looked back at Joe. "You mean those palms?" he said. "Sure they're real." Joe stared at them for a while longer. "Well, they don't look real," he said finally.

Silas wasn't online that day and Joe had to settle for sending an e-mail. "Have you thought any more about what I asked you? Don't you remember the girl with the red hair and going to the Polk Theater? It was the day we run off with Old Man Morris's car."

After that, Joe stood up from the computer slowly, feeling like he'd been there for a month. As he walked in the hallway he hoped his legs wouldn't give out from under him.

Jamey. It was Jamey, Silas thought. He had sat at the window for two days without seeing the dark-haired stranger and went to bed on the second night wondering where the boy could be. The question of why he wasn't where he usually was had overshadowed the question of who he was for the

past twenty-four hours. Silas laid on his bed amongst a mess of old newspapers and finally, when he pulled back from all his reading and studying and looking out the window, he remembered. The stranger was Jamey, his second son who had died at the age of eighteen. Not even a real man yet, thought Silas. Jamey had never known the hardships of supporting a family. He'd never known the excitement of finding that one girl whose very being made him want to push himself through those hardships. It was just as well, thought Silas. It was just as well that Jamey had not had someone waiting on him to come home safely, because that isn't what had happened.

Silas pulled one of the yellowed newspapers onto his chest. It rustled and he wouldn't be surprised if it fell apart right there. He'd never wanted to save them but Margrette had insisted. He'd come close to throwing them away now that she was gone. Today was the first day that he was glad he hadn't done so. He read the headline again. 'Bystanders Killed in Drug Warfare.' Jamey had been a bystander. Or had he? They'd never really been sure about why he was where he was that night, in the company of people he'd spent time with before. Of course, if Silas and Margrette didn't think twice about allowing Jamey to go out with them. None of them had been injured in the drive-by and they had all come by to express their sympathies at Jamey's funeral. They were polite and clean and well-dressed; Silas distinctly remembered that one of the girls smelled good as she made her way through the line. Was that her funerals cologne? Margrette had wondered aloud. But then she reprimanded herself and said that the girl probably had put too much

on and didn't realize it until it was too late. Well, she'd made an impression, Silas had said at the time. And he remembered it again now.

But what did it matter now, he asked himself. What did it matter that none of them were hurt and none of them had offered an explanation as to why they were where they were that night. The police had asked them, and they'd all supplied the same answer almost word for word, but not one of them had come forward since then and said a word about any of it to Silas or Margrette.

That was twenty-three years ago, thought Silas. He looked at the yellowed paper and shook his head. He saw the photo of Jamey, and even with the yellowing, the photo showed a fine-looking young man. He put the paper back down on the bed, covering another section of a quilt that was so worn that it was just slowly fading from its purpose in life. Silas shut his eyes, and he resolved to look for Jamey the next day.

Silas and Joe had always walked the paths in the deep woods, from the time they were little boys on up. But there was a time when they were in their late teens or early twenties that the walks took on a different tone. When they were little boys, they would hide and jump out at each other or keep a lookout for wild animals. But later, they walked more slowly, and not always with each other. Sometimes they'd just walk quietly within a few feet of each other, each lost in their own thoughts. They had a lot to think about then: what to do about work, whether to leave this small place and move to somewhere bigger. Silas stopped a minute to get his breath. He looked up. Why would

anyone think any place was bigger than this, he wondered. He stared at the clouds a minute. They were few and were almost obstructed from his view by the bright sun.

When he started again, his thoughts turned to Joe, stuck out in California. He'd said there were almost no trees out there, Silas thought, at least none that had big, ancient trunks and a whole world of leaves. Silas laughed out loud then as he remembered a time when he and Joe, both six years old, imagined who or what was living up in those wide, deep boughs of green. Some of the older trees had had layers of leaves so thick that a person could hide in there for days without a problem.

Silas stopped walking. A person could hide in those trees.

He turned and looked at the trees around him now. He walked over to one of them and stood below it looking up into its dark tangle of foliage. It's dark in the middle, he thought, even though the sun is bright today and seeping through the leaves at the very top and those sparser ones at the bottom. That boy could be in there, he thought. Silas leaned in as close as he could, supporting himself on the thick trunk. "Is anybody up there?" he finally said. He felt silly saying it, but then he heard a noise and his shame at being silly went away. What was that? Was it the wind through the leaves or was it Jamey? Might as well go for broke, he thought. "Jamey? Jamey? Is that you in there, son?"

Joe was outside at the old folk's home. He had talked Geek Boy from the computer room into wheeling him out, as "the powers that were" at this place wouldn't let him go out on his own legs or unattended. He liked Geek Boy. The young man seemed preoccupied enough with his own stuff to not notice when Joe did something he wasn't supposed to do. And that boy needed some outside time; he was as pale as death. It was a win-win situation for both of them.

Geek Boy pushed Joe's wheelchair over to the palm tree that stood outside the computer room window. "Closer," Joe said. The boy maneuvered as best he could to get Joe close enough to lay his hand on the rough bark. "Why is it you wanted to do this?" asked the boy. Joe appeared not to have heard him. "I don't care what they say, this isn't a real tree," Joe muttered to himself. The boy leaned down until he was next to Joe's ear. "Mr. Guthrie, why did you want to touch the tree?" Joe let his hand drop and looked up at the boy.

"Have you ever heard the story about the young couples and the birch tree?" he asked. The boy shook his head. "Well, here it is," said Joe. "If there's a girl you really like, you're supposed to decorate a birch tree and put it in her yard."

"Like a Christmas tree?" Geek Boy said.

"Kind of," said Joe. "Only you do it in the spring. In May. May 1st." Joe remembered as he spoke; he'd taken a small birch tree to Sharon Moss's house on the night of May 1st. He sat in the back of Gene Morris's daddy's

truck and held onto the tree for dear life while Gene drove the truck. They were going uphill, so Joe watched as some of his carefully placed decorations flew off into the dark. He heard some of them hit the ground with a soft clink or a rustle of paper. His efforts to catch them were fruitless; his hand reached off into the pitch dark that surrounded the safety of the truck bed and came back with nothing. Joe felt every rock and rut in the road that Gene drove over, but they didn't bother him so much as they got filed in some part of his brain as being part of the ride. His mind was on Sharon Moss and the delight he'd feel when he saw her react to his tree. His mind was also on Silas. There was no mental image in connection with his friend so much as there was an edgy anticipation of the confrontation to come. Sharon Moss had passed her phone number into Joe's hand under the table at Hart's Restaurant in Polk while Silas talked steadily to her over their dinner. His face was shining as he talked; he'd carried a torch for Sharon Moss for two months.

Two days after the dinner, Joe found the courage to call Sharon. He had planned to explain that Silas was the one she wanted, and then he would find a way to give Silas the number without letting on how he'd got it. But that didn't happen. Joe wasn't quite sure what did happen, but he had a date with Sharon the next Friday, and he lied to his best friend for the first time in their lives together. By May 1st, he'd had three dates with Sharon, and he'd convinced himself that this was right, this was meant to be. He occupied himself with this argument in his head all the time that he wasn't with Sharon, and even a part of the time that he was. But he made his decision. He'd tried

to tell Silas earlier in the day what was going on and why all Silas's subsequent efforts to get Sharon's attention had fallen flat. Silas was still convinced that she liked him based on the events of that one day in Polk. All he saw was what he wanted to see, thought Joe. The boy had tunnel vision and was going to suffer for it. Joe reiterated all these things in his mind while he rode in the dark. He flopped up with the bumps in the road, but he felt more like he was practicing flying. The happy butterflies in his stomach multiplied as they neared Sharon's house. He wondered at how you could feel both anticipation and dread at the same time.

"It nearly made me bat crackers," Joe said to Geek Boy. "What?" Geek Boy said. "What did? The birch tree?" "No," said Joe. "It wasn't that." He sat a minute and felt somewhat impatient with the boy. Didn't Joe just tell him the whole story? Didn't he just tell him how he almost betrayed his best friend but was saved by not getting the girl he wanted? "Turns out she didn't want either one of us," he said. "I wasted a birch tree when I should've taken her an elder." Geek Boy nodded and Joe was glad that he was sufficiently caught up. Joe didn't feel up to recounting the whole story again. That he had to do it once wore him out. No wonder I haven't thought about it for years, he thought. He pulled his blanket up around him and thought how odd that he would be cold in California. It must be the fault of these trees that don't cover anything, that don't have enough to them to provide anybody with shelter. "Tell me I'm wrong," he said out loud. "No sir, I will never do that," said Geek Boy. "Okay," said Joe, satisfied. "Let's go in."

Silas looked up into the big tree one more time. He didn't see anyone, and now he'd seen every side of the sun between the leaves and found nothing and no one. I'm not going to give up, he thought, and he sat down under the tree. From here he could see where he'd come from: the line of white birches, and the elder trees that kept coming back no matter how hard he tried to eliminate them. They were a stubborn plant, he thought to himself. Margrette had always worried that one of the children would get hold of a leaf or a stem and eat it. The berries were fine, but the rest of the plant was poisonous and Margrette wanted the "evil thing" out of sight. "Those berries attract the children," she'd said, "but they're like an invitation to trouble." There was nothing to worry about now, thought Silas. There's no one here but me, and if I decide to eat poison it won't be anybody's business. He laid his head back against the trunk and closed his eyes. They were tired from looking everywhere for that boy and having the sun shining in them for longer than they had since he was working in the fields. My neck could use a good stretch too, he thought, and he moved his head slowly forward and then back again. On the second time back up, he opened his eyes and he saw him. The boy, the man, the stranger; he wasn't sure how to think of him. The person who had to be Jamey. This time he was on the other side of the birch and elder trees. "Hey!" yelled Silas. "Are you playing a game with me?" He struggled to push himself up and cursed being old. The boy was smiling at him again and Silas saw his lips moving like he was talking. He didn't appear to be making an effort to speak loud enough to be heard, and he might have

even been talking to someone else, judging from the way his head turned slightly to the right. Silas moved his legs as fast as was possible and it wasn't nearly fast enough. I'll never catch up, he thought. But he kept going.

As Silas drew nearer, he saw more details in the boy's face. It was Jamey, he was sure of it. But did he even know he was here? Did he know the place at all? He just stood, with an air of ease about him, and talked soundlessly to someone nearby. He looked at Silas, but Silas grew more and more convinced that the boy didn't really see him. Something heavy, like the grief he'd felt when Jamey died, settled again inside of Silas's gut. It slowed his progress across the clearing, and tears started filling his eyes so that he couldn't see. But he was getting closer than he had ever been. So he can't see you, Silas told himself, buck up and get as close as you can to see him. He blinked hard a few times to clear his eyes, and he moved closer and closer until he could see Jamey's face very well. The boy looked right at Silas, whether he knew it or not, and smiled a smile that was untouched by anything dark that had happened during his life. Silas smiled, too. He reached out to try and touch Jamey, because he was close enough to do so, but he wasn't surprised when the boy disappeared before Silas's hand made contact. What would I have felt anyway, he thought, other than a mist that evaporates quickly and then rises up into something better.

Superhero

We followed Uncle Paul to his car. He knew what we wanted but he toyed with us, going to the driver side door and then to the passenger side, pretending not to notice us. He looked up and feigned surprise. “What are y’all standing at the trunk for?”

Finally, he gave in. He walked to the back of the car and put his key in the lock. The trunk lid lifted and we drew in closer. There was a stack of comic books with Dennis the Menace on top. Archie, Sad Sack, and Richie Rich were underneath. Uncle Paul lifted them out and handed them to Jon. “Don’t look at them yet, until we get to the house,” he said. Then he turned back to the open trunk and pulled out a plain brown paper bag that was crumpled from repeated handling. And it was heavy. “Do you think you can handle this?” he asked me. I nodded. I knew what was in there. I took the bag and Uncle Paul shut the trunk. The three of us filed into the road and started for the house.

The dirt and gravel road looked long to me then. And the house was huge, standing there in the distance. All around us, the mountains rose up and cupped us in, like berries in a bowl. The road from town came down the hill and over the rickety bridge that they would rebuild several times and finally stop using by the time I was grown. But back then, when I was eight, Daddy would say, “Hold your breath!” every time we crossed it. And he would

honk the horn when we pulled onto the mountain road, letting whoever was coming from the other direction know that we were there.

As we neared the house that day, I saw several of my cousins spill out onto the porch and then run back inside the house. They knew what we had. The twins, Rona and Dave, kept a close watch on us. I knew I'd have to stake my claim fast. We reached the porch, climbed the steps and crowded into the house. In Grandma's kitchen, I opened the bag and let the candy spill onto the table. Jon was already sitting on the floor, sorting and distributing the comic books.

In the house, my mother stood over to the side of the Formica table in the kitchen with the other aunts. She had her arms crossed and was watching us dig through the mound of candy on the table. She was never in complete approval of this candy binge, but by now she accepted that Uncle Paul was going to do it. He was the oldest sibling and she was the youngest, so there hadn't been a particularly close relationship there until that year, when my dad moved us to be near family while he was at war. Then Uncle Paul became our surrogate dad for a time, surprising us with little gifts like these and even getting a small Christmas tree for our cat when he went to chop down one for our house.

So Mama tolerated these things. "Don't eat too much at once," she said. "You'll get sick." My cousin Hank fake retched as an audio and visual aid to Mama's admonition. His mother, my Aunt Edie, gave him "the look" from

across the table. That would hold Hank in check for maybe five minutes, but he'd become his normal expressive self when we finished choosing our booty and headed back outside.

My mother gave us a three piece at a time limit. I always looked for the caramel and cream swirls, and I shoveled through the pile now with my hand to try and find two more. My brother Jon snatched one just out of my grasp for the sheer pleasure of hearing me whine, but I didn't linger there because I knew he would eventually give it to me. His real goal was the black rope licorice, and he had few rivals for that amongst the cousins. I'd finally tasted some on our last visit and discovered how good it was. Now I saw a strand under some Smarties. I looked at Jon. He was turned in the other direction talking to Hank. I grabbed the licorice and toyed with the temptation of sticking it in my shorts pocket. I settled for throwing it at him instead. It hit him on the shoulder and bounced onto the floor. There was a brief scuffle as Hank automatically jumped in at the prospect of something good. When he saw that it was black licorice, all the fire went out of him and he resumed his search on the table. Jon grabbed the licorice and sent the caramel he'd been holding flying, expertly landing it in my lap.

Jon and Hank pocketed their finds and ran to the back door, pushing it open and plunging out onto the porch with some sort of pre-adolescent battle cry. The door slammed shut in its frame. That was like the door slamming on all the chaos, because after they left, the room grew quiet, although three girl cousins remained at the table sorting through the candy. I was starting to tire

and was almost ready to settle for a tube of Smarties in place of a last caramel cream swirl. My cousins Kathy and Cheryl searched patiently through the remaining rubble. Kathy was separating hard candies by color, so I knew she was no longer hunting but just playing and eavesdropping on the aunts' conversation. Cheryl was patiently looking for Hershey's kisses for herself and the boy down the road. She'd had a crush on him for the past two summers. I knew she already had prepared an argument in her head for why she was taking more than her allotted three candies.

I sat back in my chair and started slowly unwrapping my first caramel. I could see through the back screen door that the light was starting to fade outside. My energy was following suit. It was time for a late afternoon recharge.

"Mama said Mrs. Ruby saw a copperhead up by the bridge yesterday." This was my mama talking in hushed tones. She and Aunt Edie glanced at us to make sure we weren't hearing. It occurred to me that they had been too long out of childhood to have forgotten that surveillance of a grown-up's conversation could be done with not so much as the flicker of an eye. I peeked at Cheryl and Kathy and knew immediately that they were listening the same as I was. My cheek bulged with candy and as my tongue found the cream woven through the caramel, I rattled the plastic wrapper by twisting it back and forth in my fingers. This was further camouflage for what I was really doing.

“Did they get it?” Aunt Edie asked. Her “hushed” tone was higher pitched than Mama’s, and I didn’t have to work so hard to hear.

“No,” said Mama, and then her voice dropped down even a notch more; so much so that I found it necessary to stop twisting the candy wrapper with my fingers. Mama almost looked my way when I stopped: was she aware of what I was doing? But no, then she kept talking and I pretended to direct my attention to the small, square bubblegum comic that someone had left unfolded on the table.

“Paul is keeping an eye out for it,” she said. “Don’t let those boys know it’s still out there, you know they will just go looking for it.” I looked up and out through the back door to see if Jon and Hank were still where I could see them. I heard them first, and then Jon dashed through my line of vision and Hank followed him. They were pelting each other with rotten apples from the apple tree again, and I felt smug with the knowledge of a mortal threat to us all that they didn’t know about.

I went out to the front porch. There was hardly anyone out there; I could still hear Jon, Hank and a few of the other cousins out back, but the sound was just the tips of their voices and served more as background noise than a nuisance. I was glad for some solitude. It was getting to be that hot part of the late afternoon when everything quiets down for a little while. You’d think all the adults were sleeping from the quiet inside the house, and my grandma probably was, sitting straight-backed on the couch with her hands

folded in front of her and her chin dropped to her chest. The rest of us were just dormant, awake but plugged into some quiet, cool space somewhere, letting the process of nature take over until it was time to get up and wander and be amongst each other again.

My own particular re-charging process involved the comic books. I had secured a few of my favorites – Archie’s Gang, Richie Rich – early on in the raid on Uncle Paul, but I’d also decided to venture out a little. I’d grabbed one of my brother’s favorites, The Adventures of Captain America just to see what all the fuss was about. I’d never before thought I’d like what I considered to be a “boy” comic, but I’d liked the black licorice so much that I decided it was time to give superheroes a try.

The swing, like the rest of the porch, had been a grayish-blue at one time, but the paint had both faded and peeled to a state of disrepair. I settled myself onto it with the care that you have to take with benches suspended by chains. The swing had a mind of its own, a life of its own. Once I was in it, that was it; I was in it for a while. It was too treacherous an endeavor to think of getting down with any quickness. I was thankful for the big pillows that cushioned my head. There were two large ones and I recognized the fabric from a bedspread that had covered me just last year. I dropped two of the comics onto the porch floor beneath me and opened the latest adventures of Captain America. I tried to concentrate, but a conversation drifted through the open window that the swing backed up to, and I felt compelled to listen. It was my brother and our older cousin Liz. She had always been the fearless

leader of all of us cousins: she started the first clubhouse meetings in the storage shed behind Grandma's house and she'd stood up for those of us "youngest children" when the other cousins didn't want to let us attend the meetings. But this summer I'd noticed a difference in her. I could tell that Jon had noticed it too. She was thirteen and he was almost twelve; they had always been close. But this year she'd seemed preoccupied, and while she was never mean, she didn't seem to have the time for us younger kids that she had in years past. Now she was telling Jon her new opinion about Grandma's house, this place that had always been the best place to be for all of us, with its combination of familiarity and mysterious nooks and crannies. "You can't sneak up on anyone in those rooms because those doors are raw wood and scrape across the floor," she said. "Why didn't granddaddy sand the doors so they wouldn't make that noise?" "To keep you from sneaking out at night and getting into trouble," said Jon. "There isn't any trouble to get into here," said Liz. Lizzie was always a bit wise for age and my dad would mean that as wise in the way of a wise mouth and how she suddenly turned on her mouth as she entered puberty. Her mother, my Aunt Charisa, was left in the family from having married and then been widowed by my Uncle Murray who had died in the Korean War. She and Lizzie were still part of the family but I know my grandma wondered what part of her Murray was in that girl sometimes. Lizzie had a headful of blonde flyaway hair just like her mother, who was thin and wispy and always seeming to be on the verge of a nervous collapse. But I knew my brother had always had a crush on Lizzie and I could

see it growing now into some area I wasn't a part of as she grew up and out in both literal and figurative ways. I saw Jon looking at her with a new respect which later (as it grew to be dusk) turned into something more complicated than I could discern. I realize now that Jon himself might not have been able to explain it to me even if he had had the inclination.

Their conversation was interrupted by hooting and hollering that turned out to be the venerable cousins Rona and Dave, masters of mischief. Whatever mood there might have been between Jon and Liz was broken. It was Lizzie's job as the oldest to herd the younger cousins into some sort of contained chaos. Keep them in line, but keep them out of trouble. The noise that interrupted her talk with Jon seemed to flip a switch in her that reminded her of her duties. She stood up from the couch and began corralling them, using her best little mama voice. They were to gather supplies for the bonfires; marshmallows and sticks. "I'll get the marshmallows with Cheryl and Kathy; you others go find some sticks before it gets too dark to see."

I still sat on the other side of that wall in the swing, listening to all this as if it were a radio show. I could hear the locusts on the right side of me as they sang out in the yard, and then inside, I could hear the sounds of the cousins moving down the hall and out the back door, leaving it to slam behind them. Then there was the surprise of Jon still just on the other side of the window. He sighed into the quiet that was now filling the room and he opened a plastic package (pulled with both hands until it sounded like a small explosion) of licorice. It was black. I could smell the strong aroma of it, and it

mixed with the cut grass smells and the dirt smells and the breaking of sticks sounds coming from the right of me. For a minute I felt like I was somewhere no one else could see me, just enjoying both worlds. I wondered, even then, even at eight, if I would always remember this moment. I wondered if anyone else ever felt stopped in time like that.

Jon finally got up from the couch and left. I lay on the swing and listened as his footsteps marked his exit from the house, and then I was back to my quiet time, closing my eyes and wondering when I would be found out and dragged into duty as a stick finder in the dark. Normally, that was a job that I didn't mind, but now I felt that my absence from the group was a penance Jon and Lizzie had to pay for leaving me out. Ever since we had arrived this year, the two of them had been having conversations that stopped abruptly when I approached them. Sometimes they would walk away, or sometimes just Lizzie would leave, but the effect was the same. This year was different, and it was their fault. I kept my eyes closed and I ruminated on this situation. I remembered that I still had Jon's Captain America comic book and I tightened my grip on it, even though my interest in actually reading it had waned. I'm pretty sure I had unwrapped caramel number two with every intention of popping it in my mouth, but somewhere within the events that followed, it got lost. When I opened my eyes again, I saw Captain America standing before me in his red, white and blue suit. ("Looks like something a girl would wear," I'd said to Jon. He ignored me and didn't answer; I was sure it was because he couldn't think of anything smart enough to counter it.)

But it wasn't Captain America. It was Uncle Paul. And I wasn't lying in the porch swing; I was lying on the road that went up the mountain, just where it turned at the crest on an incline. On one side of me, I could see the top where the highway met our almost unseen path, and on the other side I could see across the creek where the house sat. There were people there on the porch where I had been, standing where I had stood earlier, and sitting on the swing where I had lain. They were my cousins and my siblings and assorted other relatives, and they carried on as if nothing was wrong, even though now I, at eight years old, was lying up on the hill at the top of the road that ran from the end of our path, up the hill and over the creek to the highway. They couldn't see me, but I could see them. I heard a sound behind me. I turned towards Uncle Paul and followed his eyes to where the sound was coming from. There was a copperhead behind me, coiled around a pile of pastel-colored candy, and looking right at me as if asking me if I dared come closer. Now that I'd seen him, I couldn't turn away and look again at Uncle Paul (was he really wearing an outfit like Captain America? My Uncle Paul, in tights?), but I could hear him talking to me in his deep, calm voice, telling me what to do. "Don't make any fast moves," he said. "Just stay calm and he will stay calm." I wasn't sure I believed him now that I was here in the moment of truth, but that thought struck me as a heresy, to doubt Uncle Paul in the matter of snakes. If I'd been able to slap myself back into sense, I would've, but I had to do it only mentally as any movement on my part would agitate the snake. I wondered how he had got the candy and my mind settled on that pile of

goodies for an instant, just long enough to feel a jolt when I heard the sound of Uncle Paul's gun being cocked. I was back in reality then and I did my best to picture what was behind me - Uncle Paul with his shotgun held up to his eye, his finger slowly squeezing the trigger. There was an assurance in Uncle Paul here that was absent when we were all together. It's like in getting away from the crowd and surrounding himself with only the natural world, he came out of himself. Kind of like Clark Kent going into the phone booth and coming out as Superman. Only no one ever saw this side of Uncle Paul. We knew he was there, but we never got to see it in the flesh the way I was seeing it now. There was no sign here of the boy who'd been hit by a car at twelve and then laid up in the bed for months afterward. That was something they did back then, Momma said. The fear that was associated with an accident and especially an accident happening to a child was great. The unfamiliarity with cars at the time Uncle Paul was a boy was enough in itself to drape a shroud of fear over the likelihood of his recovery. The first born of the family had been injured by this machine that the men had so long awaited and that the women now felt fully justified in declaring it unnecessary and dangerous. It cost a lot of money and the men were all excited when it came. The women watched all the excitement from the doorway of the house with their arms crossed over their chests. Uncle Paul walked into this scene from the left, from the direction of the barn to the gravel road where the new car sat idling. Uncle Theo was sitting behind the wheel, smiling and talking to Grandpa as he tried out the new implement. There was still a level of dust up under the

gravel (it had been a dry summer and they'd just added more gravel to the drive in anticipation of the car), and it spun up into a funnel of rusty brown when Uncle Theo tried stepping on the gas. When the dirty cloud cleared, Uncle Paul was on the ground, all long legs and with a shock of black hair hanging over his eyes.

The women lost all fear then and ran toward him. Their alarmed faces and flailing arms were all a blur as two went to the car and tried to push it out of the way, while Grandma ran right to Uncle Paul. She was down on the ground in the dirt next to him, probably with the gravel pushing into her legs and belly through her cotton print dress. And she was near crying, but steeling herself, because she knew to look into his eyes and show him no fear.

The men were catching the other women in their arms, the women who were railing against the car. They were catching them in mid-air it seemed, and the skirts of the women's dresses whipped around both sets of legs at the abrupt stop of the catch. The women's faces showed confusion as to why they were being stopped, and agony as to why they couldn't tend to Uncle Paul. The men's faces were such that they recognized the war within themselves: do we protect the women or do we protect the new gadget? We've waited all this time, so now where do our loyalties lie?

I'd heard "Paul had to shoot a copperhead the other day," so many times in my life that it no longer pricked my conscious mind, but I'd never been on this side of the scene. I'd watched Uncle Paul walk up the incline of our road with his gun in hand, but I'd never seen what happened once he

passed out of sight behind the bushes. I'd only heard the blast of the shotgun and then he'd come back, and everything was the same as it had been. Uncle Paul may have given a quiet chuckle and made a comment such as, "he's gone now," but it never amounted to more than that. It was something that happened sometimes, and it was taken care of, like unclogging the sink or putting out the trash. Usually the activity in and around the house – the mamas' talking and cooking, the cousins hooting and hollering in the yard – slowed to a quiet hum but not quite a dead stop, but then when Uncle Paul came in again and in his quiet way declared the coast clear, things started winding up again.

So here I was on the other side of the bushes and at the other end of the road. The low line of green just hid me in my prone position. The bushes also hid the copperhead as he slithered his slow way toward me. He knew he had time; he was in no hurry. I could swear he was smiling.

Then there was Uncle Paul, but he was himself in a way that I had never seen. It made me know that this had to be a dream; that I was still asleep on the porch, but the snake continued to slither toward me nonetheless. And I continued to be afraid. But Uncle Paul was there now, and he approached mine and the snake's point of intersection with a shotgun held in his hands. His posture wasn't like any I had ever seen him walk with before; the Uncle Paul I knew was slightly hunched, and his head was slightly square. This version of him stood straight and the gun laid in his arms like there were permanent grooves there from having taken that position on so

many occasions before. He moved with an ease I'd never seen. The sight of him stopped my mind from racing, and I'm sure it alarmed the snake as well, because when I looked back to see it, all I saw was a cartoon cloud with the words "I'm outta here" that quickly disintegrated and fell into the gravel on the road.

And then there was a shot.

I sat straight up in the swing and it rocked from end to end on its chains. My comic book fell onto the porch and my glass of ice and root beer turned over with a crash. The crash was followed by the fairy-like clink of the ice rattling against the glass and then I looked down to see watered-down root beer spilling out of the glass, rolling fast in a narrow trail across the knotty wood floor of the porch.

There was another shot.

The screen door behind me slammed then and between all the bangs I felt shell-shocked, like I'd been the one hit with a bullet.

"Pick up that glass before it rolls off the porch." This was my mama. She's come out onto the porch after my cousin Howie, who'd raced out at warp speed at the sound of the shotgun blast. He'd let the door slam and Mama had come out scolding him. Then they stood at the edge of the porch with their backs to me and Mama grew quiet as she waited and watched for some sign of whether Uncle Paul's mission had been accomplished. I can still

see the back of her head with her dark, slightly wavy hair. I don't even have to shut my eyes; it's just there.

"What's going on?" I finally managed to get the words out. No one answered me. Everyone was standing with their backs to me, staring up at the road. Then Howie started doing his dance - sort of a jig back and forth on his bony legs - and letting out whooping yells. Mama caught him by the collar and told him to settle down. He stood as still as he was able, but I could see the energy idling hard in him and he managed to twist around enough in Mama's grasp to look at me and roll his eyes up in a crazy fashion.

There was movement above us. Mama looked back at me and tightened her grip on Howie's shirt. Then she leaned out and over the porch railing and twisted her head around to look up. "Get down from there!" she said. I heard giggling and felt pushing and stomping going on above my head. It sounded like the whole top floor would come crashing down on us at any moment with me sitting there on the swing, only half-awake. There was more giggling and Mama went back into the house, pulling Howie beside her.

I heard him protesting about how she'd made him go in, but left me out on the porch. He thought that was preferential treatment and meant to tell his mama (Aunt Edie) so. I didn't hear my Mama respond and so I know she had let go of Howie and left him to his own devices. I got up and walked over to the railing where they had stood. There was another blast from up the road and I saw a flash of light. It was the first time I'd noticed that the sky was

getting dark enough for the light of the blasts to stand out against it. The light I'd seen was fast and reddish-yellow, just a small fire that was there and then gone.

Inside the house seemed chaotic compared to outside. Lights were turned on in every room and cousins were everywhere. I went back to the swing and sat there, still drowsy from my nap and still not sure if this was the real world or the cartoon one. I leaned back over onto the pillows and shut my eyes against all the noise. I saw Uncle Paul again, but this time he was in his regular clothes, brown cotton pants and a tea-colored shirt. I saw the other cousins standing down at the end of the road by the old bridge, watching and waiting as Uncle Paul made his slow way back down from where he'd killed the snake. I couldn't see Cousin Lizzie, but I could hear her telling the others, "Y'all watch for cars now!" Then I saw Betty and Veronica standing with the others waiting for Uncle Paul, and the part of me that was fighting to be awake struggled with this. Everything was back to normal now, wasn't it? Uncle Paul wasn't wearing tights, Lizzie was back in charge of things. Then Betty leaned over to whisper something to Veronica, and I discovered that Veronica was me! I heard the intake of Betty's breath as she started to speak, but it was my mama's voice that came out. And someone touched me on the shoulder and I woke up, stretched out on the swing. Mama talked to me the whole while I was sitting up, then standing up. Something about not being able to lie in that swing for a long time as she gently pushed me toward the door and up the stairs to get in bed. By the time I got up there I was

somewhat waked up, but she said just lie down, you'll go back to sleep.

Mama had to duck as she looked in after me; this floor was only a half story.

My cousin Sissy, the only one younger than me, was asleep in the bed. Mama pointed to her and made the 'shush' gesture at about the same time I turned and said "Mama!" because I'd just realized I didn't have Jon's superhero comics. She disappeared behind the door and I went over to the open window to look out and check if I could see the porch. I could, and there were the comic books on the swing and the floor, the Captain America one splayed on its side from where I dropped it when I fell asleep. A gentle nighttime wind rushed over me as I leaned out the tiny window. 'Daddy made those rooms for little people,' my Aunt Edie used to say. 'He didn't want us going in them; he just wanted us to fill them up with grandchildren.'

I did feel in this moment that I was in a world meant just for me. I looked down at the bigger kids still hanging out in the yard and talking about whatever it was they talked about and wouldn't let me hear. And it was all right for once. I watched the lightening bugs flicker on and off in the black expanse of the yard and I wondered if they could fly up as high as I was. I stuck my arm out the window with my palm open flat, just to see.

Giovanni's Father

When his wife was on her deathbed, Vito Schiavone promised his Anna that he would visit their son Giovanni in America. This was a tall order for Vito, because he was afraid of flying. *"You can do it, Vito," she'd said to him. "You are a strong man who has no need to fear anything!"* Vito wished that were true; he wished he'd been brave enough to board a plane while Anna was alive.

Vito was a man of average height: not short as the southern Italians were known to be, and not tall like the northerners who cross-bred with the Swiss. His hair had been dark but was now white, but there was still a lot of it and he was proud of that. Vito's son Giovanni had moved to America nine years earlier when he met an American woman and fell in love. He had followed her home and proposed within six months. Now he worked for a major American corporation.

Vito wanted to keep his promise to Anna. It had been six years since she'd died, and he had been trying to get up his courage to fly. He could thank his new granddaughter Annabeth for giving him the final push he needed. Vito carried a picture of her in his wallet next to his own Anna's photo. The baby's pudgy face was surrounded by dark curls, and the brown eyes that looked out at him were just like her grandmothers'. So Vito asked his brother Alfredo for help.

Vito and Alfredo stood in the middle of the main lobby at the Rome airport. There were people milling around them on both sides and it made Vito dizzy to look at them. His rural hometown moved at a pace slow enough for a person to stop and say hello to friends and strangers on the street. Vito watched the eyes of the people rushing by him here and he could see no friendliness. He was anxious about flying. He kept his eyes fixed on Alfredo. "You don't know where we are, do you?" asked Vito.

"Yes, I do!" said Alfredo. "I just have to remember...it's been a long time since I was last here..." He stood in one spot and looked around. Vito saw himself in his brother's face. They were fraternal twins. Vito was two minutes older than Alfredo, but for their whole life, Alfredo had been the one to lead. He had conceived their first driving lessons – self-taught – at seven, and he'd set up their first dates at fifteen. Vito looked at his brother now and thought: he's slipping; he's losing his touch. He set his suitcase down and then picked it up again for fear of someone taking it. It was an old suitcase, brown and battered. Vito realized too late that it would probably embarrass Giovanni when Vito stepped off of the plane carrying this old suitcase. But there was nothing he could do about it now. He was at the airport, and it had taken him so long to get here, he wasn't going to go back.

"Rome is a big, fast city," Alfredo had warned Vito. "You have to be careful and watch your belongings." Now Alfredo was oblivious to what the people around them were doing; he was too busy reading signs and trying to figure out where to go. A young policeman noticed them and walked over.

“May I help?” he asked. His voice was friendly, but his expression was stern. His policeman’s hat brim was pulled down to where it almost covered his eyes. This made his face look like all sharp lines, and made his voice seem to come out of nowhere.

“Yes,” said Alfredo. “This is my brother Vito and he is going to America to see his son. We don’t know where...” The police officer immediately understood and motioned for the two older men to follow him. Vito shot Alfredo a mean look. He was embarrassed that they had had to ask this young person for help. After all, they were two men of many years of experience at life. But he picked up his suitcase and followed the young man with Alfredo.

The police officer led them to a counter where a woman with pale hair sat. She smiled at him as the officer explained their situation. The officer touched the brim of his hat and was gone. Alfredo was in front of Vito so the woman spoke to him first. This incensed Vito and he pushed Alfredo out of the way. “You don’t know so much. I’ll handle this,” he said to Alfredo in Italian. The young woman tried to hide her smile. Alfredo’s reaction was to wave Vito off with his hand and stand looking in the other direction. When Vito finished with the woman, he pointed to a gate at the end of the airport and told Alfredo to follow him. Alfredo followed but argued with Vito the whole way. Anyone watching would have seen two men, almost but not quite identical, walking briskly side-by-side and speaking fiercely to each other.

“You don’t know so much,” said Vito.

“I know more than you,” said Alfredo. “I’ve been here many times. You just don’t take into account an old man’s memory...”

“Ha! I’m older than you,” said Vito.

“So I’m old and you’re ancient,” said Alfredo.

“Who are you calling ancient?”

“Well, I can still do one hundred push-ups – how about you?” said Alfredo.

“That’s your memory failing you again,” said Vito. “You must think it’s still 1969.”

“I’ll show you!” Alfredo dropped to the ground right there in the airport and began doing push-ups.

“Get up! Get up! What are you, crazy?” said Vito. People didn’t slow down their speed in walking, but they swerved out of the way when they saw Alfredo. Some stopped and watched; some were laughing and whispering to each other. Two young girls walked by and shouted, “Vai, vai! (Go, go!)” This only made Alfredo go faster and he winked at them as he sped up his pace.

“Get up, you crazy old man! You’re too old to be an Olympic athlete,” said Vito. Alfredo paid no attention to him and kept going. A crowd was gathering around them and they were clapping in time to Alfredo’s

movements. Vito knelt down so he was closer to Alfredo's ear. "Get up, Alfredo. I don't want you to have a heart attack right here in the airport." Alfredo made a "puh!" sound at Vito and kept going. Vito sighed and put down his suitcase. He'll come to his senses soon, he thought, and then we'll be on our way. A teenaged girl knelt down next to Alfredo and said, "My boyfriend can do one hundred and fifty push-ups. Think you can beat that?"

"Si, bella, si!" Alfredo went even faster; he seemed limitless in his energy. Vito rolled his eyes and tried to be patient. "Alfredo, you're going to make me miss my plane..." Alfredo's face was getting redder by the moment. Vito shook his head. Finally, he picked his suitcase back up and began pushing his way through the small crowd. "I'm going, Alfredo," he called. "I'll see you when I get back from America."

Vito walked to the gate and checked in at the desk. Then he sat down to wait. He looked around for a magazine or newspaper to read. He saw none that interested him. A woman two seats away caught his eye and moved closer. She had a small dog in a carrier that she moved also and set down at her feet. Vito saw a small face surrounded by brown and white fur raise up sleepily, look at him and then lower itself again.

"Do you speak English?" the woman asked. Vito shook his head.

"No, no inglese," he said. The woman looked disappointed, but smiled a polite smile and looked the other way. Vito was relieved and relaxed in his seat.

You lied to that woman; you shouldn't do that. Anna's voice was as clear to him as if she were sitting in the seat on the other side of him. He sighed. He spoke a little English, but didn't want to talk to anyone just now. But he knew Anna's voice would keep reverberating in his head. He turned to the woman again.

"Scusi. A little. A little inglese." He took out his wallet and opened to a picture of Giovanni and his family. "Giovanni. My son." The American woman brightened and complimented him on his beautiful family. Then she took a small book out of her purse and opened it to photos of her family.

Vito saw Alfredo approaching out of the corner of his eye.

"Vito! You left me! I did it, I did all one hundred push-ups," said Alfredo in a loud voice. The American woman's lips made a pink "o" of surprise and she held her photo book open to a page with photos of her grandchildren. Vito sighed. "My brother Alfredo," he said.

Alfredo stuck out his hand and the woman took it tentatively. "How are you," he said and he lifted her hand to his mouth to kiss it. Before the woman could close her mouth and then open it again to respond, Alfredo said to Vito, "And who is this lovely creature?" Vito's face went red as he realized he didn't even know the woman's name. "I'm sorry..." he began.

"Elaine," she said, and repeated it to Alfredo, "Elaine." There was a little hesitation in her voice, as if she meant to continue and give her last name too, but thought better of it.

“And these are your children?” Alfredo asked of the photo. Elaine blushed and laughed. “They’re my grandchildren,” she said. Vito’s cell phone rang at that moment, so he didn’t have to listen to the barrage of compliments that Alfredo would pay to Elaine. The caller ID read “Giovanni.”

“Ciao, Giovanni!” He was always happy to hear from his son, yet it had been so long since they’d seen each other that he sometimes felt like he was talking to a stranger.

“Papa, I’m calling to check on you. You’re not nervous about the flight, are you?”

“No, no. I’m fine,” Vito lied. He watched as Alfredo moved in closer to Elaine each time he spoke to her. Vito could see that she was uncomfortable; she arched herself back just a bit each time Alfredo advanced. Her dog sat up in the carrier.

“Did you try the pills Sharon told you to get?” asked Giovanni.

“No, I don’t need pills.”

“Papa...”

“I don’t need pills.”

Giovanni sighed. “Okay, Papa. Call me when you get to the Miami airport. And call me if you have any problems.”

“I won’t have any problems.”

“Ciao, Papa.”

“Ciao.”

It was when he clicked his cell phone shut that Vito heard the first bark. He turned and saw that Alfredo was still talking to Elaine, and her little dog had gone crazy.

“Tippy! Be quiet!” Elaine reprimanded the little dog and then picked up the carrier onto her lap so she could see her. “Tippy!” The dog continued to protest Alfredo’s close proximity, and now the barks were alternating with ferocious growls.

“Who’d have thought that such sounds could come out of such a little dog,” said Alfredo. He bent down to look into the carrier. “You’re like a little wind-up toy,” he said. Tippy lurched at Alfredo and the carrier tumbled from Elaine’s lap. Vito rushed over and managed to catch it before it hit the floor. Tippy was going crazy, and Elaine worried over her, making sure she was right side up.

“Alfredo, thank you for bringing me to the airport,” Vito said. “I’ll call you when I get to America.” Alfredo gave Vito a hurt look. “Okay,” he said. “Have a nice trip.” He backed away for a few steps, and then turned around and walked to the main lobby without looking back again. Vito watched Elaine as she spoke in high tones to Tippy. He sat down in the seat next to her. She looked up at him once, but then went back to comforting Tippy. “My brother means well,” said Vito, and then he silently wondered at the truth of this.

Elaine put the carrier back on the floor. Tippy settled into her blanket again. “You two are certainly very different,” said Elaine. Vito nodded. “The real irony is that we are twins,” he said.

Elaine’s blue eyes widened. “You’re not?”

“Yes. I am two minutes older,” said Vito. Elaine laughed. “Yes, I can see that,” she said.

Giovanni put the phone back in its cradle. On the table next to the phone was a framed photo of his parents. He picked it up and looked at it. Vito and Anna smiled back at him in black and white. They must have been in their early thirties – Vito had told him once, but he couldn’t remember the exact age. Giovanni arranged the frame back on the table.

When he had met his wife Sharon, Giovanni decided that he wanted everything to be out in the open. “I’m the product of an affair,” he told her. “My parents did marry each other, but their relationship – and my conception – broke up my father’s first marriage. “

Sharon was a tall blonde with green-gold eyes. She was lifting a forkful of steak to her mouth when Giovanni made his revelation. She stopped before the fork made its destination. “Why are you telling me this?” she asked. “Is this a warning that the same thing could happen to us?”

“No! I just wanted you to know in case it came up in conversation with my father.”

“Am I ever going to meet your father?” Sharon asked.

“I don’t know,” Giovanni admitted. “He has a fear of flying he has to work through.”

Now Giovanni looked around his living room. It was spectacular by his father’s standards, and Giovanni wondered how Vito would react to it. He envisioned his father standing in front of the huge picture window looking out on the swimming pool. He hadn’t seen Vito in a long time, but he knew from his aunts that his father’s head full of hair was now solid white. He imagined Vito’s waistline had expanded as well. Better an increase than having him waste away, thought Giovanni. He glanced at the black and white photo again and remembered how gaunt his mother had become before she died six years earlier. Sharon called him from the kitchen and he shook himself a bit to come back to the present.

A voice over the loudspeaker announced that flight number 4856 was boarding at the gate. Vito looked at his watch as he walked back from the restroom. Elaine was still sitting with Tippy at her feet, and Vito joined her.

“Now,” he said, “you were showing me pictures of your family.” Elaine smiled and took out her compact photo book again. The next picture in line was one of the whole family; Elaine, her daughter Amber, son-in-law David, and the grandchildren Emma and Drew. There was also a man in the picture who Vito assumed was Elaine’s husband.

“Your husband, he’s still with you?” he asked. Elaine’s expression changed. “my ex-husband,” she said. “I wanted to cut him out of the picture, but that would be too hard to explain to the grandchildren. So I’ve just trained myself to ignore him.” She paused a moment. “He cheated on me.”

Vito nodded sympathetically. They looked at some more pictures after that, and then they both checked their watches against the clock on the wall. They were quiet for a while then, expecting to be boarded soon. Vito fidgeted a little and Tippy raised her head to look at him.

“Elaine,” Vito said, turning to her, “you never found it in your heart to forgive your husband?” Elaine looked at him like this was the very last thing she expected to come out of his mouth. It took her a minute to formulate a response.

“I don’t really think that’s any of your business,” she said finally. The air grew heavy between them and Tippy shifted in her carrier, noting the difference.

Vito suddenly felt as though he were sitting too close to Elaine. He realized too late that he had said the wrong thing. He wanted to hear if Anna would advise him, but the only sounds he heard were the din of people’s voices and the rattling wheels of luggage dollies.

“You are right,” he said. He didn’t look at her and she kept her gaze on the magazine in her lap. Tippy watched them both, turning her head from side to side as if she were watching a tennis match. “Since I was impolite,” said

Vito, "I will tell you something of mine." He paused and took a breath before going on. "I was unfaithful to my wife – my first wife. But one time only."

Elaine didn't speak, but she stared at the same page in her magazine for some time. "She didn't forgive me," Vito continued, "and so we divorced. I married Anna, and Giovanni was born not long after."

Elaine looked up at him. The ticket agent at their gate pulled the microphone around and announced that their flight was boarding. Elaine didn't speak, but began gathering her belongings. Vito stood and moved away from the seats. He looked at his ticket and waited to hear his row announced. When it was called, he handed the agent his boarding pass and moved into the tunnel that led to the plane. He didn't look behind himself, but he assumed Elaine was somewhere back there in line. Probably as far away from me as she can get, he thought. He waited as people put their carry on bags in the overhead compartments, and he thought how this was a weird moment – people all standing so closely together, but no one was really looking at each other. He concluded that flying was to be a much longer version of being on an elevator. Then it dawned on Vito that he hadn't been afraid while boarding the plane. Ha! He'd been tricked into not feeling fear by feeling something for a woman he'd probably never see again. He was tempted to turn around and look for Elaine, but the line moved again before he could indulge his temptation and he talked himself out of it.

The blue-suited flight attendants directed the passengers to their seats. A woman attendant who was taller than Vito himself looked at his ticket and

directed him all the way to the back of the plane. There was only one seat behind his row; his was the last row of three seats. Vito double-checked his seat assignment and took the aisle seat. He sat with his carry-on bag in his lap and waited.

A woman and her young daughter came and looked at the seats next to him. The woman smiled at Vito and he got up so they could get to their seats. Once they were settled, Vito heard the young girl saying, "Don't worry, Mommy. It's fun to fly." Hearing this flipped a switch inside Vito and he started feeling the old fear coming back. It started in his stomach and moved upward, or at least that's the way it felt. Giovanni would tell him it all started in the mind, and Alfredo, Mr. Not Afraid of Anything, would tell him it was all in his bowels. Gird your loins, he would say, and Vito could see him raising his shoulders and bulking up his upper body like a cat ready for a fight. This should have made him laugh, but it didn't. He still had his bag in his lap and he was unbuckled. The flight attendants were starting down the line to check for unbuckled passengers, so he heaved himself up out of his seat with the intent of storing his luggage. He looked over the heads of the passengers in front of him and about four rows up, he saw Elaine. She was sitting next to the window, leaning her face on her hand. Her posture was so relaxed as she looked out that Vito felt a wave of admiration for her. She must be a seasoned flyer, he thought. While he was watching, Elaine suddenly jerked to the right and Vito heard Tippy's ferocious bark. "Tippy! Hush! Stop that!" Elaine said. Vito stood frozen with his bag in his hands still over his head, watching the

scene. A young auburn-haired woman who'd started to take the aisle seat on Elaine's row jumped back into the aisle, almost knocking over a flight attendant. "Whoa!" said the flight attendant. "What's the problem here?"

"I wasn't told there would be a dog on this row!" said the young woman. She held a small animal carrier of her own up high out of Tippy's reach, but the confrontation had already begun. Vito heard a low growl come from the carrier. It soon escalated into a yowling cry that could only come from an unhappy cat. The tall flight attendant, the one who had helped Vito, looked flustered as the noise from the animals reached a loud pitch. She put her hands on the cat owner's shoulders and gently pushed her to the left in the aisle, so that the young woman was facing Vito. By now, he'd abandoned his attempts to stow his luggage and was fully engaged in watching the scene. He looked over the seats again at Elaine and saw her distress. The flight attendant was speaking loud enough so that she hoped she could be heard over the animals, and trying to fix the situation. Vito caught the eye of the young woman with the cat and motioned her into his own seat. She sat down and mouthed a 'thank you' to Vito. He watched while she spoke to the cat. "What is her name?" he said. He bent down and peeked into the carrier from a safe distance. "Emmie," said the young woman. Vito saw multi-colored fur of brown and gray and rust, blown out into a puff, and two emerald green eyes staring out at him. The cat had settled down somewhat, and when he spoke to her in lilting Italian, she opened her pink mouth and let out a tired 'mew'.

Vito carried his bag and moved back up the aisle to where Elaine sat. He stood beside the row until she saw him and he took her smile as an invitation. He sat on the aisle seat and put his bag on the seat between them. "Is Tippy calm now?" he asked. Elaine smiled again and nodded her head. Tippy raised her head to look at him from her carrier, but then lowered it again and closed her eyes. She was still breathing a little heavily from all the excitement.

"Sir, put your bag over or under," a flight attendant said to Vito as she passed. Before he could do it, Elaine took his bag and put it under the seat between them. They both buckled their seatbelts and waited.

"Did you ever see her again? Your first wife?" asked Elaine.

"No," said Vito. "She moved away."

"And Anna? She passed away?"

"Yes. Six years ago," said Vito. The plane's engine revved up and Vito shut his eyes against the sound and the vibration of the plane beginning to move forward. "It's my first time to fly," he said. He kept his eyes shut when he said it, not wanting to see Elaine's reaction. Nothing happened for a moment, and then he felt her hand on his. She left it there only a moment. Vito listened for Anna's voice amongst the other sounds, but she was silent. Pretty soon the roar of the plane drowned out everything else.