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THE TULIPS AS WITNESS

by

Haley Lynn Quinton

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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An earlier version of “Ash Wednesday” was published under the title “The Soul of a Spider” in *Good Words Review*, January 2019.

Abstract

The Tulips as Witness is 42000-word multigenerational short story collection that focuses on an eccentric southern family, the Ashworths. The collection spans not only generations, but also perspectives. Each story is told by a different family member, from the precocious, perceptive, and preternatural child Georgia, to Georgia's free-spirited and utterly irresponsible mother, Candace, to Georgia's self-sacrificing grandmother, Ida May. Added to the mix are Georgia's cousins, Cole and Wyatt, as well as Cole's stepmother, Margot. The use of multiple perspectives shows the breakdown in communication and understanding between people; the characters have secret parts of themselves that are hidden from even their closest family members.

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DOES GOD CHEW TOBACCO?

Ida Lee Ashworth was already awake when the thunder cracked so loudly that the windows rattled. In Kentucky, these springtime storms were always the fiercest. When she was a little girl, Ida had learned to measure how far away the storm was by counting the seconds between the flash of lightning and the peal of thunder. The sound of concurrent lightning and thunder meant the storm was right on top of her. Now that she was old, she knew to count the seconds between the crack of thunder and the patter of her grandsons' footsteps coming into her bedroom.

Two-year-old Wyatt was first. He stumbled in, rubbing his eyes and trailing his baby blanket behind him, letting out a long, low cry.

Ida sat up, her back cracking as she did. Now that she was sixty-one, her joints didn't work like they used to. Her husband, Frank, snored beside her.

"Grammy, I'm scared," Wyatt said, pronouncing his "r"s like "w"s. He stopped next to the bed, and Ida scooped him up, her back protesting mildly, and put him in the bed beside her. Wyatt crawled under the quilt and huddled against Ida's side.

"It's okay," Ida said. "Nothing to be scared of."

She lay back again, listening to the soothing sound of the heavy rain lashing against the windowpane. Her eyes began to grow heavy. But the next burst of thunder brought a second set of footsteps.

“Hi Grammy,” four-year-old Cole said. “Can I come up?”

“Come on up, Cole.”

Cole burrowed in between Wyatt and Frank. Thunder rolled again. Wyatt gasped and curled up under the covers.

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” Ida said. “The thunder is just God telling the storm to go away. And the lightning is just God blinking his eyes.”

“Oh, and then the rain is just God spitting!” Cole said.

Ida frowned. “No, Cole, God doesn’t spit.”

Wyatt popped back up from under the covers. “God spit! God spit!”

“Shh, you’ll wake up Granddaddy,” Ida said. But it was a lost cause. Wyatt collapsed back onto the pillow with giggles.

“God spit!” Wyatt said again.

Frank’s eyes opened for a second, but he rolled over and resumed snoring.

“Ooh, I bet God chews tobacco!” Cole said. “That’s why there’s so much spit. Does God chew tobacco, Grammy?”

“No, he doesn’t,” Ida said.

“How do you know?” Cole asked.

“I just do.”

“God spit,” Wyatt was whispering to himself on repeat.

“All right, all right,” Ida said. “Enough of that. Hush, now. Close your eyes. Go to sleep.”

Wyatt was not Ida and Frank’s biological grandchild. They’d had two children, identical twin girls. Ida had been thirty-five back in 1971 when the twins were born; they’d long since given up on the idea of children. But the twins were her little miracles. They named the girls Candace and Heather. When they were babies, Ida pondered their perfectly duplicate noses, their

tiny fingers, their toes, the way their small faces screwed up as if in concentration, and softened when they fell asleep. Their skin was clear and translucent, their eyes a bright blue that later clouded to a haunting gray, and they had tiny swathes of pale hair that Ida would stroke gently. They were so identical that Ida tied a piece of bright red yarn from her knitting around Candace's wrist so that she could tell them apart.

They grew into long-limbed children with long, streaming hair. They possessed from an early age what was almost a preternatural intelligence. Ida had to be careful what she discussed in front of them, because they picked up on things other children wouldn't have noticed. Their intelligence and empathy made them incredibly sweet; Ida often wondered what she'd done to have such gracious girls.

They were a little strange, though, often preferring to keep to themselves. Ida chalked that up to their uncanny intelligence, and the fact that they came with a built-in playmate. At around fourteen, though, they started bringing a few friends home on occasion, most often Henry, a boy from school who seemed smitten with Heather.

But when they were sixteen, something changed. Henry stopped coming around. In fact, they stopped bringing anyone home with them. Instead, though, they began going out more to parties. Ida and Frank were supportive at first; it was nice to see their little recluses being social. Ida couldn't remember exactly when she realized something was truly wrong with the girls. It was a slow fade, an increase of going out to parties, sometimes staying out all night, then a slow decline of grades until all of a sudden, they were failing their classes.

Ida and Frank didn't know what to do. They hardly spoke about it. Ida regretted that now that they were old; she and Frank had been able to talk about anything, always. But back then, they could only sometimes speak in whispers. Are the girls home? No, I don't think so. Well, I'm sure they'll be home soon. Sure, of course. Soon. Besides, the girls didn't act different to Ida

and Frank. They were as sweet as ever, helping with chores without being asked, asking about their parents' days, listening with sympathy when Frank told him about work woes.

Finally, after a second failed report card, Ida had to sit the girls down for a chat. She could still remember it. They'd sat down at the kitchen table, Ida May on one side, the twins on the other. The girls looked at her with faint smiles on their faces, just a slight upturn of the corners of their mouths, and their eyes bright and clear.

"Girls," Ida began awkwardly. She didn't know how to do this, how to discipline them. "Your grades are pretty bad here. Can you tell me what's going on? You're so smart."

The twins had looked at each other, then back at Ida. Candace shrugged. "It's just, our grades don't really matter for anything."

"Yeah," Heather said. "What's the point?"

Ida's mouth dropped open as she searched for an answer. "Well, they matter a lot if you want to get into a good college. Get a job. Support yourselves."

Heather and Candace cackled as though Ida had made a joke.

"We're not going to college," Candace said.

"All right, well, if you go straight to work somewhere, then your grades still matter, They can still help you get a job."

"We aren't getting a job, either," Heather said, calmly. Coldly.

"We're going to be free," Candace said. "Forever."

"No school. No jobs," Heather said.

"How do you expect to get money?" Ida asked.

"We don't need money where we're going," Candace said.

"What are you talking about?" Ida said. She was growing more hysterical, but the girls were only growing more calm. They looked at each other, an understanding seeming to pass

between them without speaking. They'd done this kind of thing before, but for the first time, Ida felt fear.

"Never mind," said Candace.

"You're right," said Heather. "We'll get our grades back up."

"Yeah," Candace said. "It's important."

Ida let their little meeting end then. The girls had, as promised, gotten their grades up again. They went back to making As, and didn't go out to as many parties. Ida and Frank breathed a sigh of relief.

But the day they turned eighteen, a month after graduation, Candace and Heather left in the night, leaving only a note on Candace's twin bed in their shared room. We love you. We're safe, and we're going to be free and happy. Love, Candace and Heather.

Ida tried to report them to the police as missing persons, but the sergeant had only shrugged and waved her away. The girls were eighteen; old enough to make their own decisions. Old enough to move out of Ida's house.

Ida and Frank had gotten phone calls from the girls sporadically, always from pay phones. They were usually together, until suddenly, they weren't. They showed up at Ida's house sometimes, sporadically and separately. They sometimes showed up with random men, and other times, they acted so strangely that Ida realized they were into drugs. Ida oscillated rapidly between broken-heartedness and bewilderment until the only emotion she could manage was sort of a helpless indifference.

Then, when Heather was twenty-two, she'd seemingly settled down. She'd married Henry, the boy from childhood. They'd had baby Cole, and all seemed well. Frank had been elated, but Ida didn't trust the stability to last. She couldn't, but she'd already sworn to herself, God, and Cole that she would always be there for him, partially to atone for whatever

deficiencies she'd had in raising Candace and Heather.

And, sure enough, Heather had run off and left Henry and Cole when Cole was a year old. Ida and Frank stayed in Cole's life, though. Henry didn't have much of a support system, and was grateful that Ida and Frank babysat Cole every day while he worked as an electrician. Henry remarried, and he and his new wife had Wyatt. Ida didn't feel that Wyatt was any less her grandson than Cole was. Henry lived in a house just down the street from them, which he'd bought with Heather when they married. Ida babysat the boys every day, and they often spent weekends with them, coming over Friday and staying until Sunday afternoon.

Ida saw Heather sporadically, when Heather wanted to see her son, but she hadn't seen Candace in years. The best she had from Candace was the occasional phone call.

Ida's mind wandered to the verge of sleep. There was a sound, a strange sound. Just thunder. No, not thunder.

Ida sat up.

"Frank?" she whispered. "Frank!"

"Hm," he said, but Ida could tell he wasn't fully awake.

"Wake up."

"M'awake."

"No, you aren't. Sit up."

Frank groaned, but he sat up. "What?"

"Do you hear that?"

"What?"

"It sounds like knocking."

"It's thunder."

"No, it's not even thundering anymore."

“Probably rain, then.”

“It’s not rain, Frank. Be quiet and listen.”

She heard it again, beneath the rain, which was starting to slack.

“Oh,” said Frank. “Sounds like knocking.”

“It’s almost one-thirty,” Ida said, looking at the old analog alarm clock on the bedside table.

“Well,” Frank said. “I guess we’d best answer it.”

“Do you think it’s safe?”

“I think someone must really need something if they come all the way out here in the middle of the night, and in a storm,” Frank said. “Besides, if they were going to rob us, they surely wouldn’t knock first.”

“Guess you’re right,” Ida said.

“Stay here with the boys,” Frank said.

“Not a chance,” Ida said.

She extracted herself from Wyatt, who in turn sought out his brother’s warmth. Ida snatched her robe off the back of the door and shuffled after Frank. She closed the bedroom door. Putting even that small barrier between their late-night visitor and the boys was comforting.

Ida pulled back the thick curtains by the front window to try to see who it was as Frank turned the deadbolt. The porch light was out, though, and she could barely make out that anyone was there at all. The figure stood in shadow.

Frank opened the door. Ida stood behind him, half-hiding, and half-ready to bolt to protect Cole and Wyatt. Icy wind and cold moisture rushed in through the open door. It had been hot all day, but the storm had made the temperatures plummet. It smelled of rain and mud and

distant, blooming flowers. The trees rustled and shook. The figure on their front porch was female and backlit only by the distant streetlight. Ida squinted.

“Heather? That you?” Ida said. Ida’s temper flickered, then flared. “You know you can’t see Cole. Henry talked to you about this. You have to call first. No one wants to stop you from seeing your kid, but you can’t just show up unannounced.”

“No,” she said. “It’s me.”

“Candace?” said Frank.

The twins had always been difficult to tell apart, even for their parents. There were subtle differences in their personality, and even subtler differences in their facial structures. But Ida hadn’t seen the two of them together in at least six years.

“It’s me,” said Candace.

There was a pause. The rain was picking up again. Ida could hear it bouncing off the tin roof of the shed beside the house. Candace stood under the awning, protected.

“Aren’t you going to let us in?” Candace asked.

“Us?” Ida asked.

Candace gestured beside her, and Ida saw the small figure hanging onto Candace’s left hand.

Ida looked at Frank, who was looking back at her.

“Come in,” Frank said at last.

Candace stepped over the threshold, and so did the small figure. Ida reached over to turn on the lamp.

The small figure turned out to be a small girl, dressed in a pink overall dress and sandals. Her hair was dark with water and plastered to her head. She was shivering. She looked stunningly like Cole...and like Candace and Heather had as children. They had the same heart-

shaped face, the same shade of gray-blue eyes, the same rosebud lips. The child cocked her head to one side, her eyes narrowing slightly, like she was sizing Ida up. It was the same look she'd seen Cole give strangers. Ida had the strange and inexplicable feeling that the girl knew something Ida didn't, like she was reading her mind.

"This is my daughter," Candace said.

Ida turned her attention to Candace again. Candace's jeans and t-shirt were soaked through. Her mascara was running, mostly beneath her left eye. Ida leaned closer, and her stomach plummeted. It wasn't mascara; it was a black eye, half-covered with concealer that now ran down Candace's face. There were a few wrinkles around her eyes, but Candace's aging wasn't a stunning difference.

"I was hoping we could spend the night," said Candace. "I was just...passing through. I thought you might want to meet your granddaughter."

Frank was already kneeling on the floor in front of the child.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" he said.

The little girl looked at him, then looked up at Candace, and then back at Frank.

"Georgia," the girl said.

"Hi, Georgia," said Frank. "I'm your granddaddy. How old are you?"

"Four," she said.

"Four?" Ida said. "The child is four years old, and you're just now bringing her here? I talked to you on the phone less than a year ago. You didn't mention her."

"I'm sorry," said Candace, shrugging.

"That's all you have to say? You're sorry?"

Candace shrugged again. "We've been traveling," she said, as though that were a perfectly reasonable explanation for neglecting to tell them about her child for four years.

Ida opened her mouth to argue, to yell, maybe, she wasn't sure....But then she looked down at Frank. He sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the little girl. His face was alight with joy. Ida pursed her lips. There would be time for explanations later. Now, there was a shivering little girl on her threshold.

"How about I run a bath for the little one?" Ida said instead. "She's freezing."

"Sure, okay," said Candace.

"Are y'all hungry?" asked Frank. "I can warm up something for you."

"Yeah, starving," said Candace.

Frank shuffled off to the kitchen, and Ida held her hand out to the girl.

"Do you want to take a hot bath and warm up some?" Ida asked.

The child took her hand after only a moment's hesitation. Ida took her to the bathroom. She turned on the water until it got hot, then put the plug in the bottom of the tub.

"Do you need help getting your dress off?" Ida asked.

The girl shook her head and began to undress. Soon, the tub was full of steaming water. Ida felt it to make sure it wasn't too hot, then held her hands out. The girl allowed herself to be picked up and lowered into the tub. She kicked her legs experimentally, watching the waves of water cascade through the tub.

"Do you like baths, sweetie?"

"My name is Georgia."

"All right, Georgia. Do you like baths?"

The girl bit her lip, deliberating, then nodded. Ida helped her wash her hair and body, then wrapped her in a towel when she was clean.

"Let's see," said Ida. "Does your mama have other clothes for you?"

Georgia shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, how about we go ask her?”

Georgia trailed after her, wrapped in the towel. Candace sat at the kitchen table, eating a pimento cheese sandwich. There was another sandwich on the plate beside her.

“Candace, do you have a change of clothes for her?”

“No,” said Candace. “We...left in a hurry this morning.”

“Okay,” said Ida. “Well, I have some things here for when I’m watching Cole. You know...Heather’s son.” “Yeah, I know,” said Candace.

“He’s here, sleeping,” said Ida.

“Can I see him?” asked Candace.

“In the morning,” said Ida. “He’s asleep.”

Georgia dropped her towel and climbed up naked onto the kitchen chair. She tore into the pimento cheese sandwich.

“I’ll get her some clothes,” said Ida. She went into her bedroom, where Cole and Wyatt were still sleeping. She grabbed a pair of Cole’s train pajamas out of the drawer. She went back into the dining room.

“You want to put some clothes on?” she asked the girl.

Georgia shook her head. “Too hungry,” she said, her mouth full.

“Georgia, get dressed,” said Candace. Exhaustion hindered her voice. Georgia swallowed and stood up. Ida helped her get the pajamas on, and Georgia went back to devouring her sandwich.

“Did she eat today?” asked Ida.

Candace looked at her, refusing to answer.

“Do you have a car?” asked Ida.

“No,” said Candace.

“How did you get here?”

Candace shrugged.

“Candace,” said Ida. “How did you get here?”

“Hitchhiked,” Candace said at last.

“You hitchhiked with this child?” Ida said.

“Ida Lee,” said Frank, shaking his head gently. Ida glanced at Georgia, who had flinched when Ida raised her voice.

Ida sighed.

“Her name’s Georgia Harrison Ashworth,” said Candace.

“Ashworth? She doesn’t have her daddy’s name?” asked Ida.

“She doesn’t have a daddy,” said Candace. “At least not one that matters.”

“Harrison?” asked Frank.

“She’s name after George Harrison,” said Candace. “You know, the Beatle?”

Ida stared at her. “You named our granddaughter after a Beatle?”

Candace shrugged. “Why not?”

“Oh, Lord,” said Ida. “Why not.”

Ida laughed a little and shook her head. What did that matter, anyway? Out of everything, was the part about the baby girl being named after a Beatle really significant?

Georgia Harrison Ashwood herself had finished her sandwich and put her head down on the table, pillowed on her hands. She was asleep.

“She needs to go to bed,” said Ida. “Why don’t I put her in with Wyatt and Cole? The boys are sleeping in our bed anyway. Frank and I will take their beds in their room. Candace, you can take the couch.”

Candace opened her mouth to argue, then seemed to think better of it. Good, thought Ida.

“Ready, little girl?” asked Frank. He scooped her up out of the chair and put her on his hip. Georgia wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her face into his shoulder. Ida and Candace followed.

“No,” said Ida. “Cole is going to think you’re his mom. And then he’ll never get back to sleep.”

“But—”

“No,” Ida said again.

She followed Frank into the bedroom, closing the door firmly behind her. The rain had let up outside, a corner of the full moon peeking through the clouds. It cast a pale light over the sleeping boys. Cole had his arm around Wyatt, who rested his head on Cole’s chest. Frank placed Georgia down on the bed next to Cole. She opened her eyes sleepily and looked around.

“Where am I?” she asked.

“Our bed,” said Frank. “You’re safe here. Go to sleep.”

Cole opened his eyes at the sound. He rolled over to look at the newcomer. Wyatt grumbled in his sleep over the loss of his pillow.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Georgia,” she said. “Who are you?”

“Cole,” he said. His eyes closed again. Frank lifted the quilt and put it over Georgia. She wriggled in closer to Cole, seeking out warmth. Ida looked over her three grandchildren.

Ida and Frank tiptoed away, shutting the door gently behind them. Candace was already asleep on the couch, wet clothes and all.

The exhaustion hit Ida all at once. She went to the bedroom they’d set aside for the boys and collapsed into one of the twin beds there. Frank turned out the light and took the other bed.

“She has a black eye, Frank,” said Ida.

“Hmm?” said Frank.

“Candace,” said Ida.

“I know,” said Frank.

“We’ll talk to her in the morning,” said Ida.

“Yes,” said Frank.

Ida fell asleep hard and fast.

As the gentle dawn light streamed through the window, Ida wondered for a second where she was and why she wasn’t in her bed. Then, she remembered. Candace, sporting a black eye and a shivering little girl. The image of Georgia, Cole, and Wyatt snuggled together in Ida and Frank’s bed like puppies. Candace asleep in her clothes on the couch.

Ida sat up. There was coffee and breakfast to be made. Now, she’d have to make two extra plates. A warmth towards Candace she’d been unable to feel the previous night settled low into her stomach. Her child was home again.

Ida crept quietly to the kitchen, filled the kettle up with enough water for three. She cracked several eggs into the cast iron, buttered some bread for toast. She hoped Georgia liked toast and eggs. If not, she had some cereal in the pantry. Ida went to peek in at Candace, hoping to see something she recognized in her daughter’s sleeping face. The couch was empty.

Ida went to the bedroom. There was Wyatt, and there was Cole. And there was an empty spot in the silhouette of regret.

A LINE IN THE SAND

Georgia stood on a small bluff overlooking the beach area of Kentucky Lake. It was June, and the hottest day of summer so far. The sun beat down on her scalp through her hair, and a sheen of sweat tickled her upper lip. The sand stretched out in front of her, ending in the murky, green-brown lake water. The beach was littered with people, and the air smelled like fish and boat exhaust. The beach was small, roped off from the wider expanse of the lake by a floating yellow buoy.

“Georgia, get back here and put on your sunscreen,” Grammy said. She was standing back by the car with Georgia’s cousins, Cole and Wyatt. Grammy had Wyatt, who was redheaded, fair, and freckled, by the arm, and was rubbing large amounts of sunscreen on his white chest. “Wyatt, your mama’ll have my hide if you get burned again.”

“I don’t need sunscreen,” Georgia said. She held her arms out and began walking the log, balanced like a gymnast on a balance beam. In summer, her skin only tanned to beige, unlike Wyatt, who turned into a bubbly lobster.

“Yes, you do,” Grammy said. “Get back over here.”

Georgia sighed, but she’d learned in the three years of living with Grammy that once

Grammy told you to do something, she wouldn't let up until you did it. She hopped off the log.

Cole, who was seven like Georgia, stripped off his t-shirt. Georgia did the same. Each of their swimsuits from the year before were too small.

"Georgia, aren't you getting a little old to go shirtless?" Grammy asked.

"No," Georgia said. "Why? Cole and Wyatt can do it."

"But they're boys."

"So? I look the same on top as them."

Grammy shrugged. "Well, I guess it's okay, this one time. We'll just get you another swimsuit soon. Here, just take your shirt down there with you. Just in case."

"In case of what?"

But Grammy didn't answer.

The lake excursion wasn't planned. Two of the three window units in Grammy and Granddaddy's house had gone out overnight. Granddaddy spent the morning tinkering, and Grammy, Georgia, Cole and Wyatt spent the morning sweltering before Grammy decided to load them all up in the car and drive them to the lake. Weekdays in the summer, Grammy and Granddaddy would babysit Cole while their parents were at work.

"All right, Wyatt. Let's get your water wings on," Grammy said.

Georgia snatched up the sunscreen and rubbed some on her chest and legs. "Done! Let's go, Cole!"

"Wait for Wyatt," said Grammy, between breaths of blowing up four-year-old Wyatt's water wings. "You guys will need to watch out for Wyatt. Make sure you keep your water wings on, Wyatt."

"All right, all right, let's go," Georgia said. She trotted barefoot across the hot asphalt of the parking lot, then landed in the course sand. Her feet sunk in, and she picked her way through

the scattering of sunbathers on towels, children building sandcastles, and toddling babies.

She tossed her t-shirt in the sand and dipped her feet in when they reached the waterfront. The coolness felt good on hot skin. She lifted her face to the sun for a second, closing her eyes against its white-hot brightness, letting the slight breeze play about her face and hair. In this pause, she felt a thankfulness arises from inside her—an appreciation of the sun, of the water. And in the brief pause, her usual impatience and restlessness left her. A seagull cried somewhere above her. And then, she stepped into the cool water.

She waded in until the water reached her chest, then took a gulping breath and plunged under. She floated beneath for a while. She opened her eyes. It stung a little, and everything was a green-brown haze, with weak sunlight filtering through. When she needed air, she put her feet on the silty lake bottom and shoved up, shooting through the surface.

Georgia swam a few strokes deeper and flipped over onto her back. The sky was a deep blue, with a few fluffy puffs of clouds. With her ears underwater, the splashing and screaming grew dimmer. She could hear the rush of her own blood in her head, the pulse of her own heart coursing through her ears.

Georgia paddled back to where Cole and Wyatt sat on the strip of wet sand, the boundary between beach and water.

“Let’s race to the buoy,” Georgia said to Cole.

“I want to build a sandcastle,” Wyatt said.

“We don’t have a bucket,” Cole said.

“Cole, let’s race. One, two, three, go.”

Georgia ran into the water until the resistance against her legs was too much, and then she dove under. The water was cool against her skin. She paddled full-force with her arms and kicked her legs hard.

She reached the buoy a few seconds before Cole. She heaved herself onto the buoy, her long hair streaming down her bare back. She imagined she was a mermaid, sunning herself on a rock.

“I won,” she shouted.

“No fair. You started before me.”

Georgia pulled her feet up to crouch on top of the buoy. She stood up and balanced for a few seconds before toppling back into the water. Cole scurried up beside her, and they took turns jumping off the buoy into the water. When they got tired of that, they hooked their legs over the buoy and floated face-up in the water, letting their arms drift beneath them.

“We’re supposed to be watching Wyatt,” Cole said.

“So? He’s fine.”

“Maybe we should go help him build that sandcastle.”

“You go,” Georgia said. “He’s your brother.”

But as soon as Cole had swum away, Georgia paddled off after him. Wyatt had acquired a bucket and was filling it with dry sand.

“You have to use wet sand,” Georgia told him. “Here, give it to me.”

“No, I want to do it.”

Georgia pried the bucket from Wyatt’s grip. Wyatt whined and tried to grab it back.

“Just let me show you,” she said.

Georgia scooped up handfuls of wet sand into the bucket, then carried it over to the dry, flat ground next to Wyatt. She dumped it, and the form held.

“See?” she said.

“My turn,” Wyatt said.

“Fine, take it.”

After Wyatt made a row of bucket-shaped sand piles, Georgia took the bucket back from him.

“Cole and me will add the second layer,” Georgia said. “It’s too hard for you.”

Georgia had noticed for some time that two women next to them were staring at her and whispering to each other. Maybe they’d seen how fast she was swimming earlier and were impressed. She grinned at them, but they looked embarrassed and turned away.

Georgia filled the bucket with sand again. “Why don’t y’all go get some shells.”

“What do we need those for?” Cole asked.

“To decorate the castle with.”

“Excuse me,” said a female voice from behind Georgia. She turned around. One of the ladies from earlier waved her over. She wore a big sunhat and a coverup that looked like a dress.

“Can you come over here, honey?”

“Me?” Georgia asked.

“Yeah. Come here.”

Georgia turned to look at Cole and Wyatt, but they weren’t paying any attention. She walked over to the lady.

“How old are you, honey?” she asked.

“Seven,” said Georgia.

“You’re a girl, right?”

“Yeah,” said Georgia.

“Don’t you think you’re too old to be shirtless?”

“No,” said Georgia. She pointed at Cole and Wyatt. “My cousins are shirtless. Cole’s the same age as me.”

“But they’re boys, dear,” said the lady.

“So? We look the same on top.”

“Boys and girls are different,” said the lady.

“Me and Cole aren’t so different,” Georgia said. “*Cole*. Come back over here!”

She went over and grabbed Cole’s arm and dragged him back over to the two women to show them their matching tan skin, dirty blond hair, and gray eyes. She flung her arm around him.

“We look like twins, don’t we?” said Georgia.

“Yes, but you’re still different,” said the woman.

Wyatt wandered over.

“Hi,” he said to the women.

“Wyatt doesn’t look like us,” said Georgia. “That’s because my mom and Cole’s mom are identical twins. Wyatt has a different mom, and he looks like her.”

“Honey, don’t you have a shirt you can put on?” asked the other lady. She wore a beige swimsuit.

“No,” said Georgia.

“Yeah, you do,” said Wyatt. He skipped over to their sandcastle and unearthed Georgia’s shirt from beneath a pile of sand.

“I’m not putting it on,” said Georgia.

“Are you here with your mama and daddy?” asked the lady in the hat.

“No,” said Georgia.

“Does your daddy let you go out without a shirt?”

Georgia looked her square in the eye and lifted her chin.

“I don’t have a daddy,” she said. “Well, I guess I do, but I’ve never met him.”

“What about your mama, then? What would she say?”

Georgia shrugged.

Georgia used to live with her mother, long ago when Georgia was very young. But Grammy said that Georgia's mother had something wrong with her. She was sick in her head sometimes. She couldn't take care of Georgia.

"Is your mama here, honey?"

"No."

"Who are you here with, then?"

"Grammy and Granddaddy."

"And where are they?"

Georgia turned around and walked away from the woman. She flopped down in the sand again. She picked up the shells to stick in the sandcastle.

"Come help me, guys," she called back to Cole and Wyatt.

The boys joined her. Georgia felt a tap on her back. She looked up to see the woman in the hat standing over her.

"Where are your grandparents?" the lady asked her.

"I don't know," said Georgia. Her face was turning red, and it wasn't from the sun. Why would the lady leave her alone? It wasn't any of her business what Georgia wore, or didn't wear.

"What's your name? Cole?" she asked Cole.

Cole nodded.

"Cole, where are your grandparents?"

Cole looked at Georgia, then back at the woman.

"I don't know," he said.

"You, what's your name?"

"Wyatt."

“Wyatt, where are your grandparents?”

“Don’t tell them, Wyatt,” said Georgia.

Wyatt chewed his lip. Wyatt was the most honest kid Georgia had ever met. It was as though the truth gnawed at him from the inside out, and burst out whenever it was least convenient.

“Just tell me where they are,” said the lady. “I just want to talk to them.”

The woman looked at Wyatt, sensing the weakest, most honest link.

“Wyatt, don’t,” said Georgia.

“Um,” said Wyatt.

“Wyatt, hush,” said Cole.

Wyatt pursed his lips and pressed them together. He bounced down on his knees in the sand.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Georgia sighed, relieved. The woman knelt down in the sand beside her.

“I want to tell you something,” the woman said. She knelt beside Georgia, and talked quietly where Cole and Wyatt couldn’t hear. “It’s kind of private. Like a secret about being a girl. Does your mama talk to you about being a girl?”

“No,” said Georgia. “I don’t see her anymore.”

“You live with your grandparents?”

Georgia nodded.

“Do they talk to you about being a girl?”

“No,” said Georgia.

“Well, I’m going to tell you why you can’t run around without a shirt on. Because when you get older, you’ll get breasts.”

“I know that.”

“Well, breasts are something special. They’re a gift. Do you get gifts for your birthday and for Christmas?”

“Yeah.”

“And you know how the gifts are wrapped up? Well, that’s what your body should be. Wrapped up, like a gift.”

“A gift for who? For me?”

“No,” she said. “For your future husband.”

Georgia made a face. “I don’t want a husband.”

“Well, you will someday,” she said. “And you should keep your gift special and wrapped up for him, okay? See all these men around here? They’re taking a gift that’s supposed to belong to someone else.”

Georgia looked around. There were a lot of men here, but none of them seemed to be paying close attention to her. Georgia turned away from the woman in the hat.

“Cole, let’s go swimming again,” Georgia said.

“No,” Wyatt said. “Stay and help me build the sandcastle.”

Georgia ignored both of them and began swimming back out to the buoy. When she got there, she saw that Cole hadn’t followed her.

“Oh, well,” she whispered to herself. She heaved herself up on the buoy again. She faced away from the beach this time and watched the boats go by in the main channel. She thought again about what the woman had said about her body being a gift. She sunk back into the water so that it covered her chest. She rested her arms on the buoy and her chin on her arms. A jet-ski skipped by. Its rider was wearing a life jacket.

Georgia remembered back when she lived with her mother. They’d been staying at a

hotel, like they usually were; this time, one with a pool. Late one night, long after the pool had closed, they'd sneaked down to swim on a sultry summer night. They'd stripped off their clothes and flung themselves into the pool. Georgia hadn't known how to swim yet, and she remembered her mother's steady hands floating her aloft. She remembered laying her head on her mother's bare breasts.

Georgia swam slowly back to the shore. The two women were gone. She sat down beside the castle, which Wyatt had discarded. He and Cole were now digging a hole in the sand several feet away. Georgia leaned back on her elbows and watched the people swimming in the water. A man walked by in front of her, then crossed in front again. He smiled at her. Georgia remembered again what the woman had said about her body. Her shirt lay in a heap next to the sandcastle. It was brown and encrusted with sand. Georgia picked it up and pulled it over her head. It felt like the sand had become part of her skin.

GRANTS AND GRACE

Margot's arm jerked, and crimson dripped from her paintbrush onto the canvas. "Damn it," she hissed through her teeth. This was the second day in a row Margot was startled by the cries from the next room. Now that Cole was two-and-a-half, his naps grew shorter. Margot put her paints away, trying to ignore Cole's escalating shouts.

When Margot was in college, she thought she'd be living in Paris by the age of twenty-five. She'd live in a studio apartment, with a little bed tucked in a corner and the rest of the space reserved for painting. She'd spend her mornings painting, and her afternoons browsing art galleries for inspiration. Her evenings would consist of gallery openings, and she'd spend her weekends taking trips to the seaside, sipping wine at beachside bistros.

Instead, Margot's studio was in a spare room of a small house in Clay Lick, Kentucky, where Margot lived with her husband, Henry. She worked part-time as a receptionist in Clay Lick's only art gallery—which had few patrons, and was only able to scrape by with grants and grace. She had another part-time job working as a receptionist at a dental clinic, and Henry worked as an electrician. They'd talked about the possibility of Margot going back to school to become a dental hygienist—Dr. Benson at the clinic had hinted that he'd reserve a hygienist

position for her, should she want to get her license.

Margot felt her art had been steadily declining since coming to Clay Lick. She had to share her spare-room studio with a full-size guest bed, seasonal clothing that overflowed the closet, and other odds-and-ends. She needed bare white walls and a sparse environment to allow the paintings in her mind to bloom. The spare room's walls were a greenish color that resembled something she'd once found in Cole's diaper.

Cole was something else that hadn't figured into her plans. Cole was Henry's son. Margot had never thought of herself as a mother, but Cole's biological mother, Heather, drifted in and out of their lives on her whims. Sometimes, Heather would want to see Cole every day. Other times, she'd go a month without even trying.

Margot opened the door to Cole's room. Before her eyes adjusted to the dimness, she felt the room's warm dampness, and smelled baby powder with a hint of unpleasantness beneath.

"Mah!" Cole said, reaching for her. He still couldn't say "Margot," and "Mommy" was reserved for Heather. Margot didn't want to be called "Mommy," but "Mah" made her feel like Laura Ingalls's mother.

Cole had gotten sweaty in his sleep. His thin hair clung wetly to his scalp. He wore only a t-shirt and a diaper that sagged. He grinned as Margot came closer, scooping him out of the crib. She smiled back at him, tamping down the revulsion she felt at Cole's sleep-sour breath. She put him on her hip and felt a wetness seep through her shorts.

"Oh, Cole," she said, sighing. "Let's get you changed."

After Cole was clean, she put his shorts back on him and took him to the kitchen. She glanced at the clock. He'd napped for less than an hour. Hopefully, he'd sleep well tonight. But that hardly mattered to Margot's half-finished painting in the guest room.

"Ready for your snack, Cole?"

“Snack!”

“All right. Let’s get you in your high chair.”

Margot sat down at the kitchen chair once she’d gotten him all strapped in, dropped a few Goldfish crackers on his tray, and given him his sippy cup. Cole stuffed some crackers into his mouth and grinned at her, soggy bits of cracker dropping out of his mouth and clinging his shirt. Margot smiled weakly back at him. She glanced at the clock.

“Your daddy should be home soon.”

“Daddy? Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!”

Margot pretended she wasn’t counting down the hours before Henry walked through the door. She hated the visceral longing for him, the tingling in her fingertips, the ache in her body. She missed him. She told herself it was simply a longing for adult conversation after being cooped up with Cole all day. Or maybe she wanted backup, someone to watch the baby. But she worked two jobs through the week, while Cole’s grandparents watched him, and she longed for Henry at the end of a workday just as much as she did on a Saturday.

Margot had never been a person who obsessed over love and romance. In high school and college, while her friends giggled about boys and swapped stories of their ideal engagements, Margot had rolled her eyes. She was focused on her work, her art. Then again, her art hadn’t exactly panned out. After graduating from college, she’d applied to ten different graduate programs, and hadn’t been accepted into any. Her grandfather, who lived in Clay Lick, had told her about the art gallery, and Margot had moved in with him to work at the gallery. Just temporarily, she’d told herself back then. She’d stay for a year, work at the gallery, work on her art, and then reapply to graduate programs.

But then she’d met Henry at the gallery, where he was installing new lighting. She’d thought he was cute, with his mop of curls and his wry grin. He was nothing like the other artists

she'd had flings with in college. Henry was strong and burly, with warm, callused hands. They'd flirted a bit while Henry was installing the lighting, and Henry took to eating his sandwich beside her receptionists desk at lunch. Margot was attracted to him, and besides, she was bored in Clay Lick, so when he asked for her number on his last day at the gallery, she'd happily given it to him.

She'd found out about Cole on their first date (bowling), so Margot never expected it to go much further. She didn't want to be a step-mother. As she got to know Henry better, Margot found out more about Henry's ex-wife. They'd gotten married because Heather was pregnant with Cole. Heather had only lasted six months or so before she left. Margot found herself growing more attached to Henry, and then her grandfather had had a sudden stroke. Henry dropped everything to come to the hospital with Margot, and when Margot's grandfather died a few weeks later, Henry was with Margot every step of the way. Margot found herself loving him helplessly.

But Margot couldn't ignore the timing. She'd met Henry soon after her graduate school dreams were crushed; maybe she'd simply transferred her passion from art to the first attractive person she had met. And then, of course, the whole thing with her grandfather. Was this even genuine? She feared what would happen if her affection faded, but part of her wanted the desperation to fade. She wanted to feel like herself again, and wondered if attraction were merely a distraction from a desolate heart.

"I want more!" Cole said.

Margot glanced over at him. He'd eaten all his goldfish.

"No more for you, little piggy. It'll be dinner time soon," said Margot. She used a baby wipe to clean his hands and face, then set him down on the floor. "Do you want to pick out a book to read?"

Cole grew bored after they'd read both *Goodnight Moon* and *Corduroy*. Margot glanced at the clock again. It really was getting close to dinnertime. Her stomach growled. Henry should be home by now. He didn't usually work on Saturdays, but he was rewiring an old mansion for a client, and he was already behind schedule.

"I'm hungry," Cole said.

"We'll eat when your daddy gets home."

"When he be home?"

"Soon. Why don't we play with your trucks?"

Margot tried to keep him entertained and distracted until Henry got home, but Cole kept complaining about his hunger.

"All right," she said, giving up. "I'll start heating up dinner."

"Yay! Nuggets!" Cole said.

"Okay, you keep playing with your trucks," Margot said. She took some chicken nuggets and fries out of the freezer.

Margot was finishing her last chicken nugget when she heard the key in the lock.

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!" Cole shouted, bouncing in his high chair. Margot glanced at the tray on the stove; the remaining chicken had grown cold, and the fries looked soggy.

"Sorry," Margot said. "We should've waited."

Margot heard the sound of Henry taking off his work boots, then his soft socked footsteps gliding across the linoleum floor.

"That's all right," Henry said as he came into the kitchen. His face was covered in soot, and it clung to his curls.

Cole and Henry looked nothing alike—Henry was tall and broad, with dark hair and eyes that crinkled when he smiled. Cole was small and thin for his age, with almost-blond hair the

color of sand and pale gray eyes. He looked exactly like his mother.

“There’s my boy,” Henry said, kissing the top of Cole’s head.

“Up,” Cole said, reaching up for Henry.

“I’m all dirty, buddy,” Henry said. “Wait until I’ve had a shower.”

Margot reached for Henry.

“You too,” Henry said. “You don’t want to hug me right now.”

“I don’t mind,” Margot said. “I haven’t showered yet, either.”

She held up her arm, showing Henry a smear of paint. She put her arms around him, breathing in the smell of dirt and sweat on cotton. Henry kissed the top of her head.

After Henry showered, Margot sat with him at the table while he ate the reheated chicken nuggets, which Margot had warmed up in the microwave. She was sure they were soggy and awful, but Henry didn’t complain. Margot had made a cup of herbal tea for herself, and Cole played with one of his trains on the floor by their feet.

“Heather called today,” Henry said. “On the office phone. Left a message for me.”

Margot took a long drink of tea; it was too hot for such a big gulp, but she needed the time to think. *Chew it over with Twix*, she thought, trying to lighten her own mood.

“Heather wants to see Cole,” Henry said.

“Okay,” Margot said, placing her mug on the table. “When is she going to come by?”

“I told her she could come see him tomorrow afternoon,” Henry said.

Margot nodded. Her fingers tightened on the cup.

Is that wise? she wanted to say. *Is that good for Cole, to have her flitting in and out of his life on whims like this? Surely it’s bad for his stability?*

But she didn’t say it—not because it wasn’t true, but because Cole wasn’t her real

motivation, or at least, not her primary motivation. True, she didn't want Heather to see Cole—but she didn't want Heather to see Henry, either. And for that matter, Margot had no desire to see Heather.

Logically, Margot knew she had no reason to be jealous of Heather. After all, Margot was at least mentally and emotionally stable, unlike Heather, apparently. Henry had never really told Margot the full story, but she'd put together details that suggested Heather wasn't a fully-functioning adult. She'd met Heather several times when Heather visited Cole. The instability wasn't something Margot could pick up on at first. Heather was always well-dressed, and usually relatively clean for someone who had no permanent home address. But there was often a vacant look in her gray eyes, like she couldn't see them—or she was looking past them, or through them. It was like she wasn't really present at times.

But at the end of the day, Heather was Cole's mother. Even at Margot's most irrational and impetuous moments, she didn't want to keep Cole from his mother.

“What time?” Margot asked, trying to force her voice to be steady.

“Hmm?”

“What time is Heather coming tomorrow?”

“Oh, well, she said the afternoon.” Henry shrugged. “But it's possible she won't show up at all.”

Margot nodded. She stood up and put her now-empty mug in the sink, turning on the hot water. As she waited for it to warm up, she looked out the window onto the dark street in front of the house. Now, they'd have to spend the whole day tomorrow with the possible visit from Heather hanging over their heads. Margot wished Henry could get a firm answer from Heather instead of this “tomorrow afternoon, maybe” nonsense, or else tell her not to come at all. Henry, always so willing to put up with Heather's bullshit—and that was why Margot was jealous. This

underlying patience and understanding Henry had for Margot, who walked out on her husband and infant son.

“I’m taking a shower,” Margot said as soon as she’d finished washing the cup. “And I’m really tired, so I’m probably just going to go to bed. You okay doing bedtime on your own tonight?”

Henry nodded. “Sure, no problem.”

“Okay,” Margot said. “Good night.”

The room was dark when Margot woke up, her hand still curled around the paperback she’d fallen asleep reading. Henry must have turned off the bedside lamp when he’d come to bed. She often felt a sense of clarity in these liminal moments between sleeping and waking, as though being asleep had erased some of her biases. She felt a surge of affection and appreciation for Henry. He was trying to balance a difficult situation. It was natural that he should have a soft spot for his son’s mother. And of course he was willing to make sacrifices so she could see Cole. And Margot would have to make sacrifices, too. She knew that when she married someone with a child.

But as some of the sleepiness faded and Margot’s frustrations from the day crept back in, she wondered how long she’d be able to put up with feeling shunted aside at the slightest hint of Heather. It wasn’t healthy for her, or for Cole or Henry.

Margot scooted over in the bed, wanting to feel Henry’s warmth—wanting to feel his body beneath hers until she couldn’t think about anything else. But the other side of the bed was cold.

Margot turned on the lamp. The blankets were pulled back, and Henry’s pillow was ruffled. Cole must’ve been crying; Henry was always more attuned to Cole than she was.

But then Margot heard the soft voices coming from the living room. She heard Henry's deep murmur, then a desperate whisper, Margot crept to the door and placed her ear against the cool wood, listening.

"I just want to see him," the woman whispered. Heather.

"It's the middle of the night, Heather. He's sleeping."

"I'm his mother. He's my son. Why are you keeping him from me?"

"I'm not keeping you from him. I said you could see him tomorrow."

"It is tomorrow."

"It's one a.m. That doesn't count. You can come see him in the daytime."

"Why can't I just wait here for him to wake up?"

"Because I have to go back to bed, Heather. You need to leave. Now."

"I came all the way here to see my son."

"And you can come back tomorrow."

The couch creaked as someone abruptly stood.

"Heather!"

Margot cracked open the bedroom door and stepped into the hallway. Faint light emanated from the living room. Unable to stop herself, she crept towards the light.

Heather stood by the window, her back to Margot. Her long hair was greasy and stringy, like Heather hadn't been taking regular showers these days. Her long dress, too, was dirty and crumpled. It looked like she'd been wearing it for days. The previous times Margot had seen Heather, Heather was fairly well-dressed and put-together. Not tonight.

Heather turned to face Henry, who was seated on the couch. The wane light from the lamp fell across her face. Heather always looked so young—no older than a teenager, even though she was the same age as Margot. Heather was always thin, but today she was unhealthily

so. Margot's breath staggered at the sight of Heather's wild, desperate eyes. She looked like a cornered wolf. It was startling in contrast to her childlike face.

"I want to see my son," Heather said, her voice desperate. Her body grew tight with tension, her fingers hooking into claws at her sides. For a second, Margot feared Heather would attack Henry.

But then the tension left her body, and she crumpled—then collapsed onto the floor in a heap.

"Heather..." Henry said. He paused beside her, then swooped down and enveloped Heather's frail body. Margot felt hot all over. There was a sudden, metallic twang in the back of her throat. Heather sobbed.

Margot turned and walked back down the hallway. Her palm smoothed over the cool metal of Cole's doorknob, and she wrenched it open.

Cole was sleeping on his back, his favorite stuffed monkey tucked into his side. He wore his footie pajamas with the trains, which Henry must have put on him after Margot had fallen asleep. Margot stood over his crib, listening to the soft sounds of his breathing. She ached. There was hatred here. This tiny, helpless person. This thing that bound her husband to the past he couldn't let go. Cole's tiny hands clutched his stuffed monkey. Margot reached down and slid a finger along the smooth, delicate skin. Then she moved her hand to his face. She felt the warm mounds of his cheeks, the swatch of hair, the parted lips, the translucent eyelids. Her finger traced the curve of his jaw and settled onto his neck. His gentle pulse, his breathing. Fragility.

He stirred under her touch, beginning to fuss. She shushed him and picked him up. He was light in her arms, this pawn in the games that grown-ups played. He nestled himself closer to her, laying his cheek to her bosom. His breath was warm on her neck. She sat down with him in the rocking chair, and cradled him like he was a much younger baby. What if she'd known him

back then? What if he were hers and Henry's? How would she feel about him then? Entirely differently, she supposed. That wasn't fair to him. But Cole took no notice of Margot's deliberations. He was already asleep.

DRY BONES

Georgia smelled the dump before she saw it, the odor seeping through the late-morning humidity. Every time Granddaddy's van hit a bump, the lap belt dug into her hips in time with the junk clanking around in the back. Sitting in the middle seat felt a little like riding in a washing machine. Georgia dug her fingers into the fake leather seat, trying to stay in place. Cole and Wyatt, her cousins, were sharing the passenger seat, the single seatbelt strapped across both of them. They used to all three comfortably share the passenger seat, but now that they were bigger—Georgia and Cole were ten and Wyatt was seven—Georgia was booted to the sandwich spot. She held her Nancy Drew book in her lap: *The Mystery of the Old Clock*. Georgia had started reading about Nancy at the beginning of the summer, when Grammy took her to the library and let her pick out any five books she wanted. This was the last book of the stack, and Georgia was trying to savor it. Ever since she started the books, she had an itch to find a mystery to solve.

Granddaddy cut the wheel, sending Georgia sliding along the seat and bumping arms with Wyatt. The gravel road that led to the dump was even bumpier. Sweat collected where Georgia's arm touched Wyatt's.

“Scoot over,” Georgia said, jabbing the sharp part of her elbow into Wyatt’s ribs.

“Ow!” said Wyatt. “I can’t. There’s no room. Cole’s taking up the whole seat.”

“Scoot over, Cole,” said Georgia.

“I’m all the way over.”

Georgia peered up over the top of Wyatt’s head; there was plenty of space between Cole and the door.

“No, you’re not!”

“If y’all don’t stop bickering, I’m leaving one of you at home next time,” said Granddaddy. “Or all of you.”

“She started it,” said Wyatt.

Granddaddy cranked down the window, letting in a blast of hot, humid, garbage-soaked air. He slowed down as they approached the scale, rolling the van forward onto it. The numbers went up and up. On the other side, Granddaddy took the little slip of paper out of the machine.

“Here, Georgia,” said Granddaddy. “Put that up there on the dash.”

Granddaddy drove around to the other side of the dump and stopped the van. Georgia unsnapped her lap belt.

“Hurry up, Cole,” said Georgia, pushing Wyatt so that he bumped against Cole.

“Ow!” said Wyatt.

“Hold your horses,” said Cole. “I’m working on it. Wyatt, unbuckle us.”

Wyatt struggled with the seatbelt until Georgia pushed his hand away and unbuckled it herself.

“Y’all know the drill,” said Granddaddy as they piled out of the van. “Whoever finds the heaviest thing gets an extra Coke.”

Granddaddy opened the back of the mustard yellow van and began unloading the junk

they'd taken out of the Beasley house. Granddaddy liked to do jobs for extra cash, and one of those jobs was clearing out old houses after their owners passed away. The Beasley house had had a lot of nice stuff to sell in Granddaddy's backyard antique store, but it had also had a lot of c-r-a-p. Georgia knew, because she'd helped Granddaddy sort through some of it last week after school.

"Let's eat lunch first," said Cole. "I'm starving."

Georgia sniffed. They usually waited a while longer before eating since it took about ten minutes or so to get used to the smell. She was hungry, too, though.

"Okay, but someone has to carry the lunch bag. *Not it!*" Georgia shouted.

"Not it!" said Cole.

"No fair. I'm the littlest," said Wyatt.

"Too bad," said Georgia.

Wyatt whined as he reached into the front seat and pulled out the paper Aldi bag.

"Hold it from the bottom," said Georgia. "It'll rip if you don't."

They set out around the edge of the dump. Wyatt lagged behind, the bag crinkling as he struggled to get a good grip on it.

"Tire," Georgia said, pointing to an old tractor tire half-buried in some piles of newspaper. Georgia and Cole cleared it off.

"Here," said Georgia, picking up a piece of plywood. "Table."

She laid the plywood down across the center of the tire, which was big enough so that there was space to sit in the crack between the plywood and the tire's edge. She and Cole sat down on one side, and Wyatt sat across from them.

Georgia unloaded the Aldi bag. She spread open one of the sandwiches.

"Pickle loaf and mayonnaise for me," she said, sitting it down in front of her. She opened

the next one. “Pickle loaf and mayonnaise for Cole. And pimento cheese for Wyatt.” She unloaded the chips and the cokes. Well, they weren’t *actually* Coca-Cola; Granddaddy only bought Big K sodas, the off-brand from Kroger, root beer for Cole and Georgia and Citrus Drop for Wyatt.

Georgia liked it that she and Cole both liked the same foods, even though Cole and Wyatt were brothers and Georgia was only the cousin. Other people often thought Cole and Georgia were the siblings, though. They looked alike, both with hair like sand and skin that browned in the summer. “*Y’all are brown as biscuits,*” Grammy would say. Redheaded Wyatt had only two shades: palest white with sharp freckles, and something that resembled blended beets. But Wyatt was only Cole’s half-brother. They had the same dad, but different moms. Georgia and Cole’s mothers were identical twins. Georgia liked to think that made them especially related.

“I’m going to get the extra Coke,” Georgia announced. “I’m going to find the heaviest thing.”

“Nuh-uh,” said Wyatt, sticking his tongue out at her.

“Am too.”

“Cole won last time,” said Wyatt. “I think Cole is going to win again.”

“Nope,” said Georgia.

At the dump, they’d weigh the van before unloading all the trash, and then they’d weigh it again on the way out. You had to pay according to how much lighter your car was, since that meant you unloaded whatever had been in there. When they loaded the van down with heavy objects, they wouldn’t have to pay as much. You couldn’t grab just any heavy thing, though. It had to either be small or useful. Cement blocks were always a good choice because they were little, but they weighed a lot. Sometimes, they found stuff for Granddaddy to sell in the antique store. That wasn’t always heavy, but they could use it. They’d learned that there were two ways

of having money—to save money, or to make money.

After they'd finished their sandwiches and desserts (Nutty Bars), Georgia wiped her hands on her shorts and stood up.

“Okay, let's go,” she said. They set out, their hiking boots crunching as they went. Georgia trotted ahead, scanning for cement blocks or even, as they'd once found, a discarded set of barbells. Instead, she found something even better: a three-foot-tall clown statue. Its face was chalk white with a splash of a red mouth and deep, dark eyes. Georgia grinned.

“Hey, Wyatt,” she shouted, a taunting cadence sliding into her voice.

“What?”

Georgia turned. Cole was a few steps behind her, and Wyatt lagged even further.

“I have a dare for you,” said Georgia.

“What?”

Georgia turned back and waited until Wyatt's footsteps indicated that he was behind her.

“I dare you to touch that.”

“Touch what?”

Georgia turned so that she could see his face and pointed. Wyatt paled under his freckles. He had been terrified of clowns ever since he was five, when he mistook a late-night showing of *IT* for a children's movie.

“That's stupid,” said Wyatt. “I'm seven years old. I'm not afraid of clowns anymore.”

“Prove it,” said Georgia. “Just go up to it and touch it. Right on the nose.”

“I'm not scared,” said Wyatt.

“Then prove it.”

Wyatt sighed and took a step towards the clown, then another. He went faster the closer he got, finally stopping right in front, snaking out his hand, and touching the clown's red nose.

Wyatt screamed.

“What?” Cole shouted, but Wyatt just kept screaming. Cole pushed past Georgia, and she followed him. Then she froze. Behind the clown figurine was a pile of bones.

They were long and thin and streaked with dirt, gleaming ivory in the sun.

Cole had grabbed Wyatt by the shoulders and was shaking him, which wasn't doing anything to calm him down. Georgia walked around them and dropped to her knees beside the pile. She reached out her hand and traced a finger along one of the them, shuddering as the pad of her finger made contact. The bone was smooth and warm from the hot sun.

The bones were big. She was sure they didn't belong to an animal, at least not a small one. This wasn't a dog or a cat. She tried to think of an animal big enough. A gorilla, maybe. But why would there be gorilla bones?

“I think they're human,” Georgia said. No one answered her, so she looked up. Wyatt crouched on the ground, breathing deeply with tears streaming down his face, while Cole rubbed his shoulder.

“Wyatt, calm down,” said Georgia. “Hey, look at me.”

She stood up and crossed to where Wyatt sat on the ground. She tipped his chin up, making him look her in the eye.

“Wyatt, it's okay,” she said.

His gasping breaths began to subside.

“They're probably animal bones,” said Cole.

“No, they're not,” said Georgia. “Look at them.”

“They are pretty big,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Georgia.

Wyatt began taking the gasping breaths again.

“Wyatt, stop,” said Georgia. “Hush.”

“Maybe they’re fake,” said Cole.

“They don’t feel fake,” said Georgia.

“You *touched* them?”

“Yeah,” said Georgia. “It’s no big deal. Touch one.”

“No way.”

“Fine,” Georgia said, sitting back down on the ground, cross-legged. “Look really close at them, then.”

Cole leaned forward until his face was just inches from the pile.

“They do look real,” said Cole. “What should we do?”

Georgia bit her lip. She thought back to the Nancy Drew book she’d been reading. Maybe this was just the thing she was looking for. She’d solve the murder, and then her picture would be in the newspaper. *Local child detective solves murder*, the headline would say. Other people would hire her to solve their mysteries, and then maybe she could get a powder blue Mustang just like Nancy. Between saving money and making money, saving money was always the most fun.

“I want to solve the murder on my own,” said Georgia. “Well, you guys can help me. Even Nancy gets help from her friends.”

“Shouldn’t we tell Granddaddy?” said Wyatt.

“We will,” said Georgia. “After we’ve solved the mystery. Don’t you want your picture to be in the newspaper. It’ll be like Scooby-Doo.”

Wyatt’s frown slipped away. He bit his lip.

“Come on,” said Cole. “You can be Fred.”

“Okay, but Georgia has to be Velma, not Daphne,” said Wyatt. “Do you remember the

Bible story we learned at church a few weeks ago? About Ezekiel, and the bones in the desert?”

Georgia resisted the urge to roll her eyes at him. Wyatt had an eidetic memory for everything they learned in church. But Georgia did remember the story about how Ezekiel told the bones to get up and live again, and they did. She imagined the rattling as the bones joined themselves together, and wondered what they’d look like walking around. She liked those spooky Bible stories best.

Wyatt climbed onto an old refrigerator for a makeshift pulpit. “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Come to life!”

For a few seconds, they watched the bones. Georgia found herself half-expecting the bones to come to life. Her shoulders slumped a little when she saw that they were still and silent. But now there was all the more chance to solve the mystery.

“First, we need to look for the murder weapon,” said Georgia. “It could be anything. A gun or a knife or poison. Or he could’ve been strangled.”

“What’s the murder weapon?”

“Well, it could be a gun or a knife or poison,” said Georgia.

“How do we know which it is?” asked Wyatt.

“We need to look at the body,” said Cole. “Maybe his head got bashed in by a hammer. Where’s the skull?”

Georgia grabbed a nearby stick and sifted through the bones.

“I don’t see a skull,” she said. “Okay. Maybe he got shot in the heart. Do you think there would be a hole or something?”

“Probably,” said Cole.

The bones clicked together as Georgia tapped at them with the stick.

“Wait, do you see this?” she said, pointing to a hole in one of them.

“Yeah!” said Cole. “Do you think it’s a gun shot?”

“Maybe,” said Georgia. “Or a stabbing. So we need to look for a knife or a gun, okay?”

“Where would it be?” asked Wyatt.

Georgia thought about it. If someone threw the body in the trash, they probably would have thrown the weapon away in the same dumpster, right?

“Probably around here somewhere,” said Georgia. “We should split up. But wait! Don’t touch it if you find it because then you’ll get your fingerprints on it.”

She stood up again. “Okay, Wyatt, you go over there. And Cole, you go over here. I’ll look here.”

She hoped she’d find the weapon instead of Cole or Wyatt. She began to dig through the garbage. At first, she used the stick so that she didn’t have to touch it with her hands, but it was easier to just dig in. What would her next case be after this one? Murders were pretty exciting, but she wanted to try other things, too. Maybe a jewel thief.

“I found it!” shouted Wyatt.

Dang it. Oh, well. She’d probably still get the credit for solving the case, even though Wyatt had found the bones and now the weapon.

“Don’t touch it,” Georgia shouted.

“I’m not.”

Georgia walked over to him. He pointed at the silver glint of a knife that was sticking out of a pile of old insulation.

“Okay,” said Georgia. “We don’t want to get our fingerprints on it, but we need to make sure it’s actually the murder weapon. Cole, do you have a handkerchief?”

Cole reached into his pocket and handed his handkerchief to Georgia. She usually made fun of him for being the only ten-year-old who carried a handkerchief, but for once it came in

handy.

Georgia put it over her hand and grasped the knife, sliding it out of the insulation. It was a butter knife, and the blade was coated in a brown substance.

“Is that *blood*?” said Wyatt.

Cole and Georgia stared at each other. There was a funny feeling in Georgia’s stomach. Actually seeing the blood made this feel not so fun anymore. The bones were different; they were just in a pile, and they didn’t look like a person. But *blood*—Georgia felt sick. She didn’t think she’d like to have many more murder cases. Maybe she’d stick to jewel thieves.

Cole narrowed his eyes at the knife.

“Is that sharp enough to kill someone?” he whispered.

“Yes,” said Georgia. “It has to be it, right? It has blood on it!”

“I don’t know,” said Cole. “Maybe it’s just a knife. Maybe it has nothing to do with it. Maybe that’s not even blood.”

Georgia clenched her teeth. It *was* the murder weapon. It had to be. She had to have her picture in the newspaper.

“Shut up, Cole. It is blood, and it is the knife! Someone took this knife and they stabbed a man right through the heart with it, and blood came spurting out and the man died! There was probably blood everywhere,” Georgia said.

“Wyatt, are you all right?” said Cole, turning to Wyatt. Wyatt’s face had paled again.

“I don’t like blood,” Wyatt said. “I don’t like dead people. I want Granddaddy.”

“Wait,” said Georgia. “We have the murder weapon, but we still don’t know who did it.”

“How are we supposed to figure out who did it?” asked Cole.

“We take fingerprints,” said Georgia. “And then we compare the fingerprints to real-life criminals, and then we solve the mystery. We just need powder. Grammy has some baby powder

in the cabinet. All we have to do is take the knife home with us and use it. Then we can take the fingerprints to the police station. I'm sure they have all the criminals' fingerprints there somewhere."

"Are you sure we shouldn't tell Granddaddy?" Wyatt asked. "What if we get in trouble?"

"We can't," said Georgia. "We have to solve the mystery ourselves. Don't you want to be in the newspaper?"

"I think Wyatt is right, Georgia," said Cole. "We can't keep it a secret. What if the murderer gets away and it's our fault?"

Georgia clenched her fists. "Why are you taking Wyatt's side, Cole?"

"Because he's my brother," said Wyatt.

"He's only your half-brother," said Georgia.

"Maybe," said Wyatt, "but a half-brother is still better than a whole cousin!"

Georgia's fist came up, and then she was punching Wyatt right in the arm. Wyatt howled, then shoved her stomach. It was hard enough for pain to race through Georgia's midsection, and she knelt on the ground, clutching her stomach. She leapt to her feet again and grabbed Wyatt by the shoulders. She reached for his hands and bound them behind him.

"Don't ever do that to me again," she said into his ear. She was so angry that spittle flew from her mouth.

"Let me go!" Wyatt screamed.

"Georgia, let him go," Cole said, trying to pry her hands from Wyatt's wrists. But Georgia kept her hold on him. Wyatt screamed louder, and then suddenly, the figure of Granddaddy loomed over them.

Georgia dropped Wyatt's hands and stepped away from him. "We were just playing," she said.

“No, we weren’t,” Wyatt said. “She hurt me.”

Granddaddy opened his mouth to speak, but Georgia cut in, desperate to divert Granddaddy’s scrutiny to something else. “Granddaddy, we found bones.

“What? What kind of bones?”

“People bones,” Cole said.

“I wanted to show them to you,” Wyatt said. “Georgia didn’t.”

“They’re over here,” Georgia said. She climbed a mound of garbage and pointed down at the glinting bones. Granddaddy’s eyebrows creased into a frown. He knelt down beside the pile, his knees cracking. Then he turned to look at up them.

“Georgia,” he said. “Cole, Wyatt. This is plastic.”

“No, they’re not,” said Georgia. “They’re real.”

“They’re not,” said Granddaddy.

“But the knife!” Georgia said, holding it out where it was still wrapped in the handkerchief. “There’s blood on it.”

“Georgia, that’s rust,” said Granddaddy.

Georgia felt a flush of embarrassment. How had she thought they were real? “Well, Cole and Wyatt thought they were real, too.”

“Well, Cole thought the bones were real, too,” said Georgia. “So did Wyatt.”

Cole shrugged. “Well, I didn’t touch them, at least. You should’ve been able to tell the difference between real bones and plastic!”

Georgia knelt down beside Granddaddy. The bones looked innocuous now. She stretched her hand out towards the bone again.

“No!” Granddaddy said, his hand snatching her wrist before she could touch it. He grabbed her hard, his fingers biting into her skin.

“But why? You said they’re fake,” said Georgia.

“It’s just best not to touch them, that’s all,” he said.

“Why?” Georgia said again, narrowing her eyes and looking into his face. There was something in his eyes, something that seemed to be asking her to keep quiet. Wyatt sniffled behind her.

“Because they’re dirty. Now, come on. Y’all wasted all this time playing with a plastic skeleton. Let’s go find some cement blocks.”

Cole and Wyatt followed him, but Georgia stayed where she was, looking at the bones where they lay in the dirt.

“Georgia, now,” said Granddaddy. Finally, she followed.

HYPERSPACE

Cole closed his eyes and dreamed of space travel. The old car's engine thunked and whined and sounded just like a spaceship. He was wrapped in his mama's raincoat, but he was still cold; the heater emitted a death rattle and little else. But he was a space explorer, and sometimes, outer space was cold. Besides, this was an adventure. Mama had told him so when she picked him up from school that day. He thought about the planets he'd learned about in school. Mercury was too hot, and Venus didn't have enough oxygen to breathe. Mars, then. They'd go to Mars. The only problem with his little game was the radio. Mama had turned it to some country music station, and Cole wasn't sure they had country music in space.

Cole opened his eyes and glanced at Mama. The dashboard lights made her face glow green. He looked at her hands clutching the steering wheel, her fingernails sort of yellow. His stepmother, Margot, always painted her nails bright red, and Cole thought red was prettier than yellow. He wouldn't tell Mama that, though. It'd hurt her feelings.

Cole's stomach growled. It was eight o'clock, so he'd have already eaten supper if he'd been at home with Daddy and Margot and Wyatt.

"Mama?" Cole said, and talking felt funny to his throat because he'd been quiet for

several hours.

“What, baby?”

“I’m hungry.”

“We’ll stop somewhere,” she said.

“When?”

“Soon, baby.”

“Okay.”

The sky was black now, so Cole could see his reflection in the car window. He could see the moon, too. It was a sliver, glowing bright and white. Cole imagined curling up in the sliver to sleep.

It was yellow behind his eyelids when Cole woke up. They weren’t moving, and he smelled gasoline. He opened his eyes. Mama wasn’t in the car. The yellow glow was from the light above the gas pump, and it was still dark outside the island of the gas station. The car was off and the clock black, so he didn’t know what time it was. He was even colder now that the heater wasn’t spitting out anything. He sat up and peered through the window. Mama was probably inside. He couldn’t see another person, and the cold had soaked through his skin all the way inside of him. He put his hand on the car handle and tried it. It opened; Mama had left it unlocked.

Cole stepped out of the car, pulling the coat up around him to try to keep it from dragging on the ground. He was too small, though, and it made a slithering sound as it trailed along behind him. He pushed open the door, and a bell tinkled. He smelled old smoke and something musty. His stomach growled as he looked at the rows of Little Debbie cakes and beef jerky by the front counter. He didn’t see anyone in here, not even Mama.

He walked up and down the aisles, past the motor oil and browning flowers and tins of

soup and bags of sunflower seeds. Along the back wall was the giant refrigerator full of drinks. Suddenly, the raw thirst opened in Cole's throat and he traipsed closer, his tennis shoes shuffling on the dirty tile floor.

He glanced around the store again. No one. He walked past the fridge full of grown-up drinks that Daddy and Margot sometimes had after dinner. Then there were Cokes and Dr. Peppers and, his favorite, root beer. He put his hand to the handle and pulled. A blast of icy air washed over him. He snatched the root beer bottle out and let the door slam shut with a thud. He had a quarter in his pocket; he wondered if that would be enough to pay for the root beer. He walked back up to the front of the store. By the counter was an opened box of Moon Pies. Before he even knew what he was doing, he reached into the box and snagged one, feeling the plastic crinkle against his skin. The Moon Pie was big and yellow, the perfect food for a space explorer.

Cole placed the quarter on the counter and sat down criss cross applesauce on the floor. He twisted open the root beer cap, listening to it hiss. The foam rushed up to the top of the bottle, spilling out onto the floor. He took a sip, then a gulp. It tickled his nose and burned his throat since he was drinking it too fast, but he was so thirsty, he couldn't stop. Finally, he set the bottle down and wiped his mouth. The fizz felt like it was rising up in his stomach, and he burped. Now that he was no longer thirsty, he felt even hungrier. The Moon Pie wrapper was slippery in his hands, but he finally gripped it enough to open it.

It tasted even better than he had imagined, and it was gone before he'd even realized how fast he was eating. He took another drink of root beer and pulled another Moon Pie from the box. He was halfway through it when he heard the footsteps.

"Hey!" said a man's voice. "The fuck you think you're doing?"

Cole froze as the man appeared. Cole was sitting on the ground, and the man looked huge, looming over him. His hair was long and greasy, and his beard grew in patches. He

reached down and snatched the half-eaten Moon Pie out of Cole's fist. The hand closed around his wrist, and Cole felt himself being yanked to his feet.

"Where did you come from, boy?"

"Hey, leave him alone. That's my son." Cole heard Mama's voice.

"Your son?"

"Yeah, yeah, he was in the car."

"I'm sorry, Mama, I was hungry," said Cole.

"Boy should know better than to steal food."

"He's only six," said Mama. "He didn't know better."

"I'm five."

"The Moon Pie'll cost you extra," said the man.

"I paid for it with a quarter," said Cole.

"Please, Mike, we need to get on the road. I'll make it up to you when I come back through this way."

"I did pay for it," said Cole. "There's a quarter on the counter, see."

"You better make up for it good next time," said Mike.

"I will," said Mama. "I will."

Mike kissed Mama on the lips. Cole wrinkled his nose, then Mama extracted herself with a smacking sound.

"I'll be back through, Mike," she said. "I'll make it up then. Please, we have to go. We have to get on the road."

"I paid for it," said Cole.

Mama grabbed his hand and pulled him from the store. The bell tinkled again.

"I paid for it," Cole said.

“Baby, why didn’t you stay in the car?”

“I was cold and I didn’t know where you were.”

“Don’t you know better than to steal, Cole?”

“I paid for it with a quarter.”

She was walking too fast for him to keep up, half dragging him.

“Don’t do that again.”

“But I was hungry and you didn’t get me anything to eat!” Cole was whining, he knew, but he couldn’t help it. He was still hungry, but he felt kind of sick, too.

“Get in the car, Cole.”

Mama opened his door, and Cole climbed inside. Mama stuck the key in the ignition and turned. The motor made a funny noise, then went quiet.

“Shit!” said Mama.

She turned it again, and then again.

“What’s wrong with the car?” Cole asked.

“I don’t know, Cole. Hush.” Mama sounded mad at him, so he hushed.

Finally, the car started, and Mama slammed her foot down on the gas pedal. The car lurched forward, and Cole felt himself being thrown back against the seat. He peered out the window again. The yellow light of the gas station receded, and they pulled out onto the road. The streetlights whizzed by them. The sick feeling was still there in his stomach. He pretended like the streetlights were stars, and they were whizzing by them in their spaceship. Up ahead, a green light turned yellow, then red.

“Shit,” Mama said again, slamming her foot down on the brake. The seatbelt dug into Cole’s chest.

“Mama?” he asked.

“What, baby?” she said, and she didn’t sound so mad at him anymore.

“Where were you in the gas station? I looked for you.”

“The bathroom, baby,” she said.

“You were in there for a long time,” he said. “I looked for you.”

“It wasn’t that long, baby.”

“Mama?” he said.

“*What, Cole?*”

“I’m still hungry,” he said.

“We can’t stop now.”

“Why not?”

“I thought you wanted to go on an adventure.”

“I do want to.”

“Well, then, hush.”

Cole hushed. The light turned green, and Mama slammed her foot down on the gas pedal again. The streetlights began whizzing by again. They passed another car, another spaceship, the first other spaceship Cole had seen for a long time. The vomit feeling was rising in Cole’s stomach again. Mama was driving fast, faster than Daddy or Margot ever did. Mama flicked on the radio. Country music twanged.

Cole shivered. He was cold, but his forehead was starting to sweat. So were his palms. The vomit-feeling was stronger now. He saw his reflection in the car window again, and now his own skin looked green. He imagined all of space whizzing by. They were going to Mars. No, they should have passed Mars already. He had just learned all the names of the planets at school, and he began to recite them in his head.

Mercury, Venus, Earth...

Cole looked at the clock on the dash board; it was three o'clock in the morning. He wasn't sure he'd ever been awake at this time before. If he'd been at home, he'd have been sleeping. It was Friday, and Georgia was probably spending the night. He and Wyatt would probably have slept in their tent on the floor. He'd be sleeping beside Wyatt, and he'd be warm and listening to Wyatt breathing in the dark.

Mars, Jupiter, Saturn....

Cole was hungry, but still had the vomit feeling. He remembered the Moon Pie and root beer and how good they had tasted, but now thinking about it made him feel sicker. Wyatt was probably sleeping in the tent. Cole shared a room with Wyatt, and last week, Daddy had decorated their ceiling with glow-in-the-dark stars. If Cole had crawled out of the tent, he'd be able to see the stars glowing on the ceiling. He could count them if he wanted.

Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto.

Cole thought of the Moon Pie, but now the vomit feeling was stronger than ever and the streetlights were whizzing by, and they were going so fast that the lights became straight lines, like when they went into hyperspace on *Star Wars* and then it felt like they were going even faster, and Cole's hands were shaking, and—

“Mama?” Cole said.

“What, baby?”

“Can you stop the car?”

“No, baby, no. We have to go.”

“Go where?”

“On an adventure, baby, I told you.”

“Please, Mama, I feel sick, I need to stop.”

“Maybe we'll stop tomorrow, okay?”

Cole looked at the streetlights and he thought about the glow-in-the-dark stars.

Mercury—

The vomit feeling rose, and then there was a taste of sweet and sour and bitter, and then the vomit was out of his mouth and splattering all over the floor mat.

“Shit, Cole....”

The car was stopping and swerving onto the side of the road, and Cole flung the door open and he threw up again and again onto the side of the road. His forehead was really sweaty now, and his hands shook. Then he felt his mama’s cool fingers on his forehead, pushing his hair back.

“I’m sorry, baby,” she was whispering. *“I’m so sorry.”*

He was finished now, and the cold air from outside felt good, and Mama’s fingers felt good in his hair. He leaned back into Mama’s arms.

“I’m sorry, baby, you told me to stop. I didn’t realize, baby, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Mama,” Cole whispered, and his throat was raspy and burned. *“It’s okay, Mama.”*

“Are you okay now?” she said.

“Yes, Mama.”

Mama opened the glove compartment and dropped some napkins onto the floorboard, onto the pile of vomit. Then she picked them up and threw them out the car door. Cole took some deep breaths of the cold outside air. He looked up at the stars, thinking of the glow-in-dark stars on his ceiling. These were bigger, brighter, better.

“We’ll stop somewhere for breakfast when we get to a town, okay? And I’ll get you some water so you can wash your mouth out, okay?”

“Yes, Mama,” said Cole.

Cole closed the door, and Mama began to drive again. She drove more slowly this time. Cole closed his eyes and thought of Wyatt in the tent, and the glow-in-the-dark stars. He could hear the radio in his dreams. He thought he heard his own name once, *Cole Hensley*, but the radio wouldn't be talking about him, and so he slept, thinking of space.

THE SCARLET STRING

Side-by-side, the twins waited for the school bus at the end of their driveway. They dressed in identical plaid jumpers with red collared shirts, red socks, and saddle shoes. The bus rolled to a stop, and the twins climbed inside.

The bus smelled of sweat and old leather, and the chatter of the other kids was overwhelming. The twins took their usual seat at the back of the bus. One twin felt the side of her head be pelted with a wad of paper. Jimmy Nelson stuck his tongue out at her from across the bus. She ignored him. Unbeknownst to them, this would be the twins' first foray into learning that the boys that hurt you would also be the boys that love you.

"Which one are you? Let me see your wrist," Jimmy said.

Both twins instinctively kept their palms clasped over their left wrists, the single tell-tale sign of which was which. Everyone in school knew that Candace wore the red piece of yard on her wrist, and Heather's wrist was bare. But their identities didn't matter, not yet, not until they reached school and headed to their separate fourth grade classrooms. They wanted to remain a single entity, absorbed in one another.

Candace was known as the athletic twin, whereas Heather was the smart twin. They both

got decent grades, but Heather's were always a few points above Candace. Candace, though, was always picked before Heather at sports. She was simply faster and more agile.

In the bus, in that liminal space, they were free from those identities, expectations, and faded into one another. They wanted it to be so that no one could tell where one ended and the next began.

The bus arrived at school, and the twins immersed themselves in the crowd. They slipped into the bathroom. One girl peeked underneath the stalls. Finding them empty, she turned to her twin.

“I want to be Candace today.”

The twins rarely decided which role to take on which day until they got to school, unless there was something special happening that one of them wanted to do.

The other twin untied the thread from her wrist and handed it to her sister. She would be Heather today.

Candace couldn't wait for recess. As soon as their teacher let them go, she took off straight for the monkey bars. Jimmy Nelson and Henry Hancock had made up a game the week before. They split up into two teams, and, one at a time, would face a player from the opposite team and try to knock the other person off the monkey bars. The game was the main reason she'd wanted to be Candace today. She wanted to be picked first, and, besides, she'd be more intimidating to the other team if she was Candace. She'd noticed that whenever she wore the red thread, she more often succeeded in wrestling the other person off the monkey bars. There was something satisfying about winning, about the feeling of her body against another body, about the sound the other person made when they hit the ground. Her sister was in the group of players, too, but she didn't seem to care as much for the game.

Jimmy and Henry were always the team captains. That was part of the rules. She was glad when Henry picked her, because it gave her a chance to knock stupid Jimmy Nelson to the ground. Her sister was on the other team. Candace waved at her. She waved back.

Candace's first opponent wasn't Jimmy, but Susan Pierce.

"I don't want to go against Candace," Susan whined.

"Don't be a baby," Jimmy said.

Candace gripped the bars hard and swung out. She met Susan in the middle. Gripping tightly, the girls grappled to wrap their legs around one another. It only took a few seconds for Candace to lock her legs around Susan's body. Candace pulled downwards, and Susan lost her grip and landed on the ground with a thud. Candace's team cheered. Susan was out.

After the first round, Henry's team was left with six players, and Jimmy's with five. On Candace's next turn, she realized she'd be facing Jimmy. Her palms tingled.

"I could beat you with my eyes closed, and one hand tied behind my back!" Jimmy taunted her as they climbed to the middle of the monkey bars.

"Shut up and play," Candace said.

Jimmy wrapped his legs around her quickly, but she was agile enough to swing away. Jimmy's face was inches from hers. His teeth clinched.

Candace smiled her sweetest smile. Candace locked onto Jimmy next, but his grip strength was too much, and he pulled backward, pulling her with him. One of her hands slid from the bars. She felt like she was holding on with one fingertip, but she managed to stay on.

Jimmy's mouth twisted into a snarl.

"Everyone, watch me win!" he said.

He swung forward again, this time locking on harder than before. Suddenly, his hand was on hers, prying at her fingers. She was so shocked by the breach of rules that she let go and

dropped to the ground.

Something snapped as she landed. She wanted to scream. She wanted to kill Jimmy Nelson. But she couldn't do either, because she couldn't even get a breath. She'd landed on her arm somehow, and something broke close to her shoulder. It felt like cast iron splintering her collarbone. Blackness swam at the corner of her eyes. She gasped.

Heather knew something was wrong almost before Candace hit the ground. Then there was the sickening crunch, and the horrible sounds of her sister trying to breathe. Heather shoved past the other kids and threw herself to the ground beside her sister. Candace clutched her arm and stared blankly at the sky.

"Sister, sister," Heather whispered. She wanted to throw her arms around her sister, but that would only hurt her more.

"What happened? What's wrong with her?"

Heather looked up and was suddenly aware of the crowd of other kids that had surrounded them. She made eye contact with Henry. "Go get the teacher!"

The next several minutes were a whirl of chattering kids and slightly panicking teachers.

"Back away," one teacher said to Heather. "Give her room and let her breathe."

"She doesn't need room," Heather said. "She needs me."

Heather kept her place beside Candace. Candace was more aware of what was going on around her now. The pain was black inside her, but her sister was here.

Candace suddenly felt herself being picked up by the gym teacher. This time, she did scream at the pain. Her sister trailed behind them. Candace was taken to the nurse's office, and no one stopped Heather from following. They sat side-by-side on the cot while the teachers and the nurse buzzed around them, barking questions at them that neither could answer.

Heather, who was unhurt, clutched her arm in the exact same way Candace did.

Somehow, her arm hurt in the same place. It shouldn't hurt, but it did. Someone was dialing for help on the nurse's phone. There was a kaleidoscope of activity. And then, like an island of wall, there was their mother.

Their mother took Heather's hand and helped her step off the cot.

"What happened?" she asked Heather.

"Jimmy Nelson knocked Candace off the monkey bars," Heather said. "She's hurt bad."

They were loaded up into the car, and then they were in the emergency room. It wasn't much different from the school; there were only different kinds of people bustling around asking questions. And always, there was the black, consuming pain.

After a while, the nurse called her back to a room. Mom was allowed in with her, but Heather wasn't. Heather tried crying, but the nurses wouldn't budge. She stomped all the way back to the waiting room. Once there, she ripped up the pages in one of the hospital's magazines.

Candace sat on the little table in the hospital room. She wished her sister was there. The table was hardly padded and uncomfortable, and it was freezing. The machines around her were scary, and she hated the sharp, anesthetic smell. Needles, she sensed, were imminent.

The doctor came in. He spoke first to her mother, then he turned to her with a smile. She smiled back at him. He was handsome with his dark hair and eyes. Candace fluttered her lashes. A nondescript nurse gave her a pill to swallow for the pain. It felt like bitter chalk on her tongue. She choked it down with the little paper cup of water they'd given her. Even the water tasted bland and sterile. Then she was being wheeled away to another room for x-rays.

In the lobby, Heather started shredding the second magazine. She kept expecting someone to stop her, but no one was paying her any attention. If she closed her eyes, she thought maybe she could see out her sister's eyes, feel what her sister's skin felt like right now. She thought she could feel little tremors of pain in her shoulder. Was her sister as cold as she was?

In the x-ray room, Candace was instructed to sit perfectly still. Her mother wasn't in here with her this time. The pain medicine was starting to kick in. Her head felt funny, all fuzzy and light, like she was floating. The pain was still in her shoulder, but the sharpness had dulled now to an ache. In fact, her whole body felt light. She couldn't feel her clothing anymore.

The doctor was talking to her again, but it sounded like his voice was coming through water. She blinked at him. Then she realized, he was asking her name. Surely, he already knew her name!

"Heather," she said, her mouth feeling funny. Her words slurred, like her tongue was swollen to fill her whole mouth. "Heather Ashwood."

Too late, with a pang, she realized her mistake. She wasn't Heather. She was Candace today. She looked down at her wrist. Sure enough, there was the thread. But in this state, she couldn't feel it. That was why she said Heather.

Or was she Heather? She couldn't remember. It didn't even matter, but she didn't know. She forced a smile. "Just kidding, I'm Candace. My name is Candace."

But what if it did matter here? What if they gave her a special shot that was meant for Candace, but she was Heather? Would it kill her? *Was* she Heather? She couldn't even think; she couldn't know. Her vision swam. For the first time, she wondered if the game of switching, this game of convenience, was really only a game of lying.

The next time she was conscious of where she was, she was in the back seat of her mother's car. Her sister was in the front. Her arm was in a sling. She tried to talk, wanted to say something, but before she could form the words, she was sleeping again.

Their father met them at the house, and Heather watched as he carried her sleeping sister to their room. She was limp, and looked like a corpse. While her sister slept, Heather paced. It didn't matter how many times her parents assured her that Candace would be fine. She wouldn't

believe them until her sister was awake and talking.

They'd said she'd broken her collarbone. She'd have to wear a sling for months until it healed. She'd have to be gentle and careful not to jostle it. She wouldn't be able to play rough on the playground until it was better. Heather thought she might kill that Jimmy Nelson.

Heather paced the living room, the hallway, the kitchen and dining room. Finally, her mother turned her out of the house to play outside, so Heather continued her pacing there. She walked around and around the house, her saddle shoes scuffing and staining on the rocks and grass. Then she started running, wanting to chase the anxious nausea right out of her. But it wouldn't stop.

Finally, Heather's mother called her back inside. Her sister was awake. Heather walked into the room they shared. They each had a twin bed, a dresser, and desk. Her sister was in the bed on the left, Candace's bed. She was sitting up now, her sandy hair tousled.

Heather sat down on the bed beside her. "Hi, sister."

"Hi, sister."

They looked at each other, looking into the other's identical gray eyes. Heather reached her hand across and clutched her sister's cold hand.

"I'm going to kill that Jimmy Nelson," Candace said.

Heather couldn't help but smile. "Me, too."

Later, their mother came into their room bearing a large stack of envelopes.

"Candace, sweetheart, your teacher just dropped by. I told her you weren't up for company, but she wanted to bring these by."

The envelopes were held together with a rubber band. It landed with a satisfying plop on the end of Candace's bed.

"Letters?" Heather asked.

“From your classmates,” said their mother.

Candace ran her finger across the stack. She twanged the rubber band, then slid it off.

Dear Candace,

I hope you feel better soon. I can't wait for you to get better so you can be on my team again. Except we have to pick a new game, because Mrs. Carruthers says we can't push each other off the monkey bars anymore, and break our clavicles. We'll teach you that word when you get back. But I guess you probably already know what it means.

Your friend,

Henry Hancock

There were letters from everyone, it seemed. Henry, Susan, Mary Margarite, even Jimmy Nelson. But they threw that one away without reading it.

As Candace read through the letters, a smile began creeping onto her face. The cards were so nice. Sammy Elmore drew a picture of her on the monkey bars. Ellen Ashby stuck a half-eaten chocolate bar in her envelope.

Candace felt her smile fade. These letters were addressed to Candace. Was she Candace? Or was her sister Candace? It had never seemed to matter before, but now she ached to be the person the letters were addressed to. She wanted to be Candace, always.

“I think we should camp out in the tent tonight,” Candace said to her sister.

That was something the girls did frequently when it was warm out. They'd drag out their sleeping bags and put them in the tent. Most of the time, they ended up sleeping out in the open, under the stars, with the hard ground beneath them. That connection to the earth was only rivaled by their connection to each other.

“Do you think Mom and Dad will let you?” Heather asked.

“Don’t you think we can talk them into it?”

Sure enough, after pleading and cajoling and Heather promising to come get them if anything went wrong, they had permission.

As the sun began to set, Heather put the tent together by herself, and dragged out their sleeping bags. She laid them out under the stars. Candace carefully placed herself so that she didn’t jostle her arm. Heather flopped down next to her on the other sleeping bag. As the sky darkened, the nighttime crickets and frogs began their symphonic cacophony. It was May, so the weather wasn’t yet sweltering. The night deepened until it was dark and clear. Lightning bugs flashed all around them. A cool breeze swept over them and played with their hair. The stars began to pop out, first one-by-one, and then in bunches.

Finally, there was a whisper from one of the girls, the one with her arm in a sling,

“Do you know which one you are?”

Her sister paused. She picked a blade of grass and gently tore it in two pieces, then began to braid the two pieces back together. This was a subject they didn’t usually broach. Each day, they’d decide who was going to be who, and that was that. So far, it hadn’t mattered which one was born Candace, and which was born Heather.

“I think I’m Candace,” she said at last, the girl without the sling.

The pause was long again. They watched two bats wheel around jerkily in the night. It was funny how they looked almost like birds, but they moved in such a strange way.

“Are you sure?” asked the girl with the sling.

“I think so. What do you think?”

The other girl chewed her lip until it hurt. “I guess I must be Heather.”

But the yarn chafing against her wrist said otherwise.

“We won’t be able to switch now,” her sister said. “Not for a long time. Not until your collarbone heals.”

A new breeze stirred up, bigger than the one before. The girls felt goosebumps rise up on their arms. Soon it would be time to burrow into their sleeping bags.

“I guess I’ll have to be Candace every day for a long time.”

“You don’t even need the thread anymore,” the other girl.

She felt it now, pressing into her wrist. “Will you take it off me?”

“Well, I guess you don’t need it now, anyway. For now.” She slid the thread off her sister’s wrist, once again. She held the piece of yarn curled in her palm.

“Maybe we shouldn’t switch anymore.”

“What, really? You’ll go back to being Heather forever, and I’ll be Candace?”

“I want to be Candace forever,” she said.

The girl without the sling stared at her. “But...I’m Candace.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think so.”

It was impossible to forget. She thought she was Candace, yet she couldn’t be sure. She looked down at the cord in her palm. Their mother had gotten the idea from the Bible story of Tamar, who was pregnant with twin boys. One twin stuck his hand out first, so the midwife tied a crimson cord around his wrist. But then, the other brother was born first. There were so many layers of meaning in this little piece of yarn. It both bound the twins together, and differentiated them. It kept them together, and apart.

She dropped the yarn like it was a snake. She had a sudden sense that this thread, and all it represented, would one day be the thing to separate her from her twin.

“Why does it matter so much?” she whispered to her twin, and to the sky.

“Why does what matter?”

“Which is which,” she said. “It shouldn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t,” her sister said. “You’re right.”

Silently, the twin with the thread stood up and tied it to the top part of the tent. She wanted to get it as far away from them as possible, as though by getting it far away, they could delay the inevitable. She sat down again beside her sister. She watched the little string play in the wind.

AN UNFAMILIAR WARMTH

In a rest stop parking lot, Georgia turned the median into a balance beam. She thrust her arms straight out beside her as she put one foot in front of the other. Once she got to the end of this one, she leapt forward and landed on the next. Georgia was five years old, and she'd spent an unusual amount of time at rest stops and gas stations. She knew all the little games to keep herself occupied. In addition to the median balance beam, Georgia liked to climb on picnic tables and jump off, swipe change from the ground around the vending machines, and collect glossy printed brochures of area attractions. She didn't know how to read, but she liked to look at the pictures. Some rest stops had playgrounds, although this one did not. She especially liked the playgrounds because she sometimes met other children. She didn't really know other children because she and her mother never stayed in one place. They drove and drove and sometimes stayed in hotels, but often slept in the car.

Georgia was happy they had a car now, though. For a long time, they didn't, which meant they had to hitchhike. Georgia liked having a car because it was like having her own little room in the back seat. She even had two teddy bears and a doll. She liked her teddy bears better because the doll was missing huge chunks of hair, and also one of her eyes.

Georgia twirled on the parking barrier with her arms up in the air, then set off back across the parking lot after one last pirouette. A car pulled into one of the spots. A man wearing a visor and a fanny pack stepped out, and then a woman got out of the front with a dog on a leash.

Georgia skipped over.

“Hi,” Georgia said. “I want to pet your dog.”

“Well, sure,” said the woman, but she craned her neck and peered around the rest stop.

“Is your mother around?”

“Yeah, she’s around,” said Georgia. She dropped to her knees beside the dog, who was black and white and fluffy. “Hi, puppy.” She stuck her hands into his soft fur. “What’s its name?”

“His name is Felix,” said the woman.

“Hi, Felix,” said Georgia. “He’s cute.”

“Are you sure your mother is around?”

“Yep,” said Georgia. “She’s using the bathroom. She’ll be out in a minute.”

Georgia’s mother wasn’t using the bathroom, but she’d always told Georgia to tell people that if they asked any questions.

“Does she know you’re playing in the parking lot? You shouldn’t be playing in the parking lot alone.”

“Okay,” said Georgia. “I won’t anymore. Thanks for letting me pet your dog.”

Georgia stood and ran to the picnic table. She climbed up on it and lay down on her back. She closed her eyes and imagined what it would be like to have a dog of her own.

Her mother had told her it was October now, which meant it was fall. Georgia liked it out here because it wasn’t as hot as usual. She was hardly even sweating now, and she’d had to wear a sweater over her overalls this morning.

The sun was red on the backs of Georgia’s eyelids. She covered her eyes with one of her

arms. They'd slept in the car last night, Georgia curled up in the back seat between her teddy bears, her mother in the front with the seat reclined all the way back. Georgia was sleepy now, and without meaning to, she fell asleep.

It was darker when Georgia awoke. She bolted upright on the picnic table. The sky had darkened, and it was colder now. Georgia shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. She hopped down from the picnic table. Yawning, she walked back toward the parking lot. Her stomach rumbled. Her mother had left her with a pack of peanut butter crackers, but she'd eaten those long ago. She wished her mother would hurry back.

As if by magic, the old car was sitting in the parking lot. Georgia's mother wasn't inside, but Georgia climbed in the back seat and put on her sweater, which was stained with coffee on the floor. Before long, Georgia's mother came out of the bathroom and sat down in the driver's seat.

"Hi, Mommy," said Georgia.

"There you are," said her mother. "I got you a present."

Georgia smiled. "What is it?"

Georgia's mother reached into her canvas backpack and pulled out a children's book. It had a rabbit on the cover.

Georgia grinned. "Will you read it to me?"

"Later, I promise," said her mother. She handed the book back to Georgia. "For now, why don't you look at the pictures? We have a long drive tonight. We're going somewhere special."

"Where?" Georgia asked. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

Georgia kicked her feet and bounced up and down on the seat. "Is it a hotel? One with a swimming pool?"

“You’ll see. Now, read your book and let Mommy drive, okay?”

“I’m hungry,” said Georgia.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot,” said her mother. “Here.”

She passed a paper bag back to Georgia. Georgia recognized the yellow arches and smiled. Her cheeseburger and fries were piping hot, but Mommy had forgotten the ketchup.

Georgia ate the food too quickly—she burnt her tongue on the first few fries. She was thirsty when she finished. She drank from her water bottle, which was on the car floor, and then she opened her new book and looked through the pages. The pictures were full of colorful animals wearing clothing and walking on their hind legs. Georgia liked the bunny from the cover best. She wore a dress and had bows on her long ears. When it got too dark to see the pictures, Georgia put her book in her backpack and lay down across the back of the seat. She wasn’t sleepy anymore since she’d slept for so long on the picnic table, but she closed her eyes, anyway.

She didn’t really sleep, but her daydreams slid in and out of actual dreams, and then the car came to a stop. Georgia sat up. It was pitch dark outside, and quiet. She couldn’t hear any other cars around her. They were stopped on the side of the road. Georgia peered out the window to see houses. Most of the houses had bars over the windows and in front of the doors. The yards were scruffy and the grass was long.

“Where are we?” Georgia asked.

“The house,” said her mom. “Our house.”

“We have a house?” Georgia had always wanted a house, one with a yard that had a tire swing like she saw in the movies on hotel televisions.

“Sure,” said her mom. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Her mother opened the back door. Georgia picked up her teddy bears and her little backpack that held all her things: a few changes of clothes, a toothbrush, another pair of shoes.

She followed her mother up the driveway. The grass was so tall that it reached Georgia's thigh. She tripped over a broken part of the driveway. A dog barked in the distance.

When they arrived at the front door, Georgia's mother did not go in.

"Wait here and I'll let you in, okay?"

Georgia nodded. Her mother walked around the side of the house. Georgia craned her neck to see her mother slipping through a basement window. She waited until she heard her mother's footsteps, and then the door swung open.

The inside smelled damp and musty, and there was no furniture. There was carpet that had large patches missing. Georgia couldn't see anything else until her mother pulled a flashlight out of her bag.

"We're not going to have any lights yet," she said. "We'll use flashlights. It'll be like a game."

Her mother handed the flashlight over to Georgia and took another one out of her bag.

Georgia shined her flashlight on the wall. It was painted white, and there was green streaked across it. Georgia got closer and saw that it was something growing. She scraped at it with her fingernail, and bits of plaster and mold flaked off. Georgia turned to shine the flashlight all around. The room was bare except for the damp carpet.

"Let's wait until tomorrow to explore the rest of the house," said her mother. "I'm exhausted. Are you tired? Help me get some blankets out of the car."

Georgia followed her mother back to the car, and they loaded up with blankets from the trunk. They piled them up in a corner of the living room. Georgia's mother stretched them out across the carpet to make a pallet for them to sleep on.

"I should brush my teeth before I go to sleep," Georgia said.

"It's okay," said her mother. "You don't have to tonight. Let's get some sleep."

“Will you read to me first? From my new book?” Georgia asked.

Her mother sighed. “Okay,” she said. “Come here.”

Georgia’s mother leaned her back against the wall, and Georgia sat down in her lap. It had been a long time since they sat like this. Georgia liked the feeling of her mother’s warm body against hers.

“Little Bunny’s First Day of School,” her mother read. “Little Bunny was very nervous....”

The book was over too quickly. Georgia didn’t want to get up.

“Okay, Georgia,” her mother said. “I have to get some sleep, okay?”

Georgia rolled off and wrapped herself in a blanket. Once her mother got settled, Georgia snuggled up against her.

“Georgia, honey, get off of Mommy, okay? I can’t sleep with you right up against me like that.”

Georgia scooted over until there was so much space between them that she couldn’t even reach out to touch her mother. She tucked her teddy bear in the crook of her arm and closed her eyes.

Georgia woke up to the sound of the doorknob turning. She sat up, her heart racing.

“Mommy!” Georgia unwrapped from her blanket and crawled over to her mother.

“Mommy, someone’s here.”

Her mother sat up. “Shh, it’s okay.”

“No, Mommy, someone’s here!”

“I know. It’s okay.”

The front door swung open. She could see two dark silhouettes, one tall and one small,

like her. Her mother stood up and crossed the room quickly. She embraced the taller black shape. Georgia picked up her flashlight and shined it at the figures. Her mother shielded her eyes.

“Georgia, get that out of our eyes.”

Georgia lowered the flashlight and stared. It was her mother, but there were two of them. She knew it was her mother who wore the red sweatshirt because that’s what she was wearing earlier, but it looked like her mother wearing a flannel shirt.

Georgia looked back and forth between them. The pair of mothers laughed. Georgia’s mother knelt down in front of Georgia.

“Georgia,” said her mother. “This is my twin. Your aunt Heather.”

Georgia knew what twins were from the Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen movies she’d seen on television in hotels. Twins were sisters who were born at the same time and looked exactly the same. Her mother had never told her she had a twin, but this woman looked exactly the same.

“And this is your cousin, Cole,” said Heather. It was strange to hear her mother’s voice come out of someone else.

Georgia looked at the small figure behind the women. He was her height, wearing a sweatshirt and shorts. He yawned and blinked. Georgia had a memory when she saw him. A long time ago, after Georgia and her mother had left Georgia’s father in that hotel room, they had hitchhiked to Georgia’s grandparents’ house. Georgia remembered a hot bath when she’d felt like she was frozen to her very bones, and a cheese sandwich, and then being tucked into a real bed in a real house by her real grandmother. It was the first bed she could remember being in that wasn’t in a hotel. There’d been two boys in the bed, and Georgia had pressed up close to them and had never felt so warm. This boy in front of her was the same boy.

“Hi,” said Georgia. “Do you remember me?”

The boy stared at her. “No.”

“This is your cousin, baby,” said Heather.

“I met you once,” said Georgia. “You were sleeping. Do you remember?”

The boy continued to stare at her, his head cocked to the side. “Oh, yeah,” he said at last. “I thought you were a dream.”

“I’m exhausted,” said Heather. “I can’t stay awake any longer.”

Heather dropped her bag on the floor and shed off her jacket. Georgia’s mother went back to the pallet.

“Is this where we’re sleeping?” Cole asked, staring at the pile of blankets on the floor.

“Yeah,” Georgia said. “I have an extra teddy bear you can use if you want him.”

“Thanks,” said Cole. He sat down on the pile of blankets, and Georgia flopped down next to him.

“It’s pretty warm in here,” Georgia said.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “I miss my bed.”

“I don’t have my own bed,” Georgia said. “I sleep in the car, or hotels, or that one time, when I slept in a bed with you.”

“Georgia, hush up and go to sleep,” said a voice. Georgia couldn’t tell if it was her mother or her aunt, and she closed her eyes. She slid closer to Cole until she was pressed against him, just like that night in their grandmother’s bed. And Georgia slept, real sleep.

Georgia awoke with the pale light that crept into the house. She sat up. Her mother and her mother’s sister slept tucked into the corner, and Cole still slept beside her. She was able to look at Cole better now that it was daytime. It was almost like looking into a mirror, but the reflection had shorter hair. There were dark circles under his eyes. He was curled up on his side, one arm wrapped around the bear Georgia had given him.

Georgia poked Cole's side. He stirred, and then quieted. She poked him again, harder this time. He groaned and opened his eyes. Georgia put a finger to her lips and pointed to their sleeping mothers. Then she stood and gestured for him to follow. He hesitated, and then stood. Georgia tip-toed to the front door and unlocked it. She slowly turned the doorknob, then slid open the door. It creaked a little, and she looked back at her mother. She was still sleeping, so Georgia opened the door the rest of the way.

Georgia stepped onto the sunshine of the porch. Cole followed her.

"Close the door," Georgia said. "Quietly."

The door shut, and Cole joined Georgia on the top step of the porch. Georgia could see everything better now in the daytime. The porch was made of concrete, and there was a rotting mat in front of the door. The lawn was overgrown and full of trash and wet newspapers, old toys, shredded phone books, and a rusted tricycle with no wheels. Far away down the street, Georgia could see another house, but she couldn't make out much about it. Maybe later, she and Cole could walk over there and look for other people to play with.

Georgia saw a soccer ball, only partially deflated. She stepped into the grass, feeling like a jungle explorer as she made her way to the ball.

"Won't you get in trouble for going outside?"

"No," said Georgia. "Mommy doesn't care as long as I don't wake her up."

"Oh," Cole said. "I'm not allowed to go outside unless I ask permission."

Georgia unearthed the soccer ball. "Let's play."

They went over to the driveway, which was full of cracks and broken concrete. Georgia examined the house. It was single story and made of brick. Shingles were sliding off the roof, and the shutters hung crooked.

Georgia put the ball on the ground and kicked it toward Cole. Her foot sunk into the side,

but the ball skidded to Cole's foot. Cole kicked it back. Georgia grinned. She'd played ball before with a little boy at one of the hotels where she was staying, but of course, they'd separated and she'd never seen the boy again. But now there was this boy playing with her. It was a friend all of her own. No, better than a friend. A cousin. And a boy who looked like her—a boy, just for her.

They kicked the ball around for a while, and then they went to explore the rest of the yard. Cole followed her through the weeds and around to the back yard. There was a rotting fence around it, and a gate with a rusted padlock. Georgia followed the rotting fence line until she found a small hole in the bottom of two boards.

Georgia called to Cole, who was still standing next to the padlocked gate.

"Can we fit?" Cole asked.

Georgia got down on her hands and knees and crawled. It was a tight squeeze, and the wood scraped her back a little, but she made it through. She stuck her head back through the hole.

"Come on, Cole!"

He crawled in after her. His head and shoulders emerged from the hole, and then he stopped. "I'm stuck!"

"No, you're not," Georgia said. "Just keep crawling."

Cole struggled a bit, but managed to wiggle the rest of the way through.

"See?" Georgia said. "I told you. It was easy. It's always easy when you listen to me."

The pair turned and surveyed the back yard. It was overgrown in parts like the front lawn, but there were also large, bare spaces of dirt. There was an old kiddy pool full of muddy water. And there were several trees.

Georgia went to inspect the pool. The water was covered in scum, and it smelled fetid

and rotten.

“We should go swimming,” she said.

Cole joined her and wrinkled his nose. “Ew, no.”

Georgia tried to lift one side of the pool, but it was too heavy. “Help me dump it out.”

Together, they tried to lift it. It was too heavy. Slimy water sloshed onto their feet, soaking their shoes in muck.

“Gross,” Cole said.

While Cole tried to clean the sludge from his shoes, Georgia moved on to look at a tall oak tree with some low-hanging branches. She reached out a hand to feel the rough bark. Then she heaved herself onto one of the lower branches. It was sturdy beneath her, so she climbed onto the next one, and the next. She sat and dangled her feet, kicking them back and forth, feeling the pull of gravity on her shoes. She closed her eyes. The wind was stronger up here, and felt cool against her skin. Her hands gently gripped the bark beneath her palms. She could feel her body relax and sway a bit. It was enough to trick her body into thinking she was falling; she enjoyed the surge of adrenaline that started somewhere in the middle of her and raced, tingling, to her fingers and toes.

“I’m not allowed to climb trees,” Cole called from the bottom of the tree. Georgia opened her eyes again. Cole looked small all the way down there, his hands propped against the trunk, and his open face peering up at her. “How come you and your mama don’t live in a house?”

“I don’t know,” Georgia said. “We just don’t.”

“I want to come up there.”

“Come up, then.”

She leaned over to watch Cole scramble onto the lowest branch. It was awkward going; Cole was clumsy and didn’t know where to put his hands and feet to shift his weight upward.

Pride in Georgia's own abilities brought a smile to her face and to her esteem.

Cole stopped on the second-lowest branch.

"That as high as you can go?"

"I miss my dad," Cole said. "And Grammy and Granddaddy. And my brother."

Georgia frowned. Vaguely, she did remember someone else in that bed with them. "You have a brother?"

"His name's Wyatt."

She felt her face go warm. She didn't want Cole to have a brother. She wanted him to herself; she wanted him to be all hers.

"I'm a better climber than you," Georgia said.

"I'm just not very good at trees. Since I'm not allowed. I'm really good at the jungle gym at school."

Georgia's heart plummeted. "You go to school?"

She'd always wanted to go to school, like the kids on television. Then, she could have friends, and maybe even a best friend. And she'd have a teacher who would teach her to read, and then she wouldn't have to pester Mommy to read to her.

"Bet I can spit further than you," Georgia said. She gathered all the saliva in her mouth to the tip of her tongue behind her lips, then let it fly. It glistened and shifted in the wind, then disappeared into the grass. Then she stretched her arms over her head and began her descent to the ground. She jumped from the bottom branch and landed with a jolt. "Let's go back inside."

They tried to go in through the back door, but it was locked. They crawled back under the fence and around to the front of the house. Georgia went inside first and poked her head in. The two women were awake, sitting cross-legged and talking in low voices. But Georgia couldn't tell which one was her mom. They had both changed clothes. There were clouds of sweet, heavy

smoke filling the room that almost obscured the figures.

“Hi, Mommy,” she said, pretending like she could tell which was her mother.

“Hey, Georgia,” said the figure closest to Georgia. She was the one wearing a blue t-shirt. As she spoke, clouds of the sweet smoke poured from her mouth.

“We’re hungry,” Georgia said. Cole came in after her.

“Cole shouldn’t be outside,” said Heather. “Cole, baby, don’t go outside.”

“Mommy, I’m hungry,” Georgia said. “Can we go to McDonald’s?”

“Your aunt brought some food with her, so that’s what we’re going to eat,” her mother said. “Don’t you like being here with your aunt and your cousin? We’re all together, just like we should be.”

Georgia went over to investigate the bag of food, and Cole followed. The bag was full of fried pies, honey buns, beef jerky, a bag of white bread and a jar of peanut butter, and a few apples and bananas. The bananas were speckled with brown. Georgia pulled out a honey bun. She pulled two out, one for her and one for Cole.

“I want to go back outside after breakfast,” Georgia said.

“Cole can’t go,” said her mother. “So why don’t you stay inside?”

“I don’t want to,” Georgia said. But really, she’d rather stay inside with Cole than go outside without him. She led Cole to the moldy hallway, further away from their mothers. Georgia sat down and opened her honey bun. She bit into it, savoring the gooey sweetness, her mouth soon sticky with sugary glaze. Cole devoured his, too.

After they were finished, the sugar started to rush in her veins. She had to go outside, and she needed Cole to come with her. Now that she had a playmate, she didn’t want to spend a second without him. After a whispered argument, Cole followed her to the back door. Georgia unlocked the door. She turned her head over her shoulder, but all she could see from the living

room were the clouds of smoke. She slipped outside, and Cole followed.

Georgia had to run to get out some of the energy that burned within her. She took off for the back fence. The back portion was chain link rather than rotten wood. There was another house on the other side of the fence. The yard was better-tended; the house was small, but there was nothing falling off of it. Georgia hooked her hands on top of the fence and hopped up to stick her feet through the chain links. Cole stopped behind her.

“Cole, look! A doggy!”

The big, black dog was lying on a concrete slab next to the other house, soaking up the sun.

“Aww, I see him,” Cole said.

“Maybe it’s a her. Come here, doggy!”

The dog raised its head and regarded Georgia lazily.

“Come here, doggy!” Georgia said again. The old dog ambled to his feet, then trotted slowly over to the fence. Georgia leaned over to top of the fence.

“Georgia, what if he bites you?”

The dog came within her reach, and she scratched its forehead. Its mouth fell open in a grin. “Aww. I’m climbing over.”

Georgia began to climb the fence, but Cole’s hand grabbed at the back of her shirt.

“There’s someone over there,” he whispered.

Georgia squinted, and saw a person coming out of the back door of the house.

“Hi!” Georgia shouted. “We’re petting your dog!”

Georgia saw it was an older lady. She walked back towards them with a slight limp.

“Hello,” the lady said. She sounded friendly, but she was frowning back towards the house where their mothers were. “How did you get in there?”

“We live in that house,” Georgia said. “We just moved in.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yep. There’s no electricity yet.”

“Oh, really?”

Georgia kept petting the dog as the lady asked more and more questions. Then, she got bored, and jumped down.

“Let’s race,” she told Cole, and took off at a sprint. She was out of breath when she reached the back door. It was starting to get hot now, and Georgia was thirsty. She slipped back into the house. She pulled up the bottom of her dress and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

Georgia went and got her backpack, pulling out her notebook and crayons. “Let’s draw.”

They spread the paper out on the floor. Georgia grabbed a black crayon and started to draw the dog they’d seen.

Cole was inspecting one of the crayons. “Sky blue,” he read.

Georgia dropped her crayon and stared at him.

“You can read?”

Cole frowned at her. “Yes. I learned how in school. Can’t you?”

“No,” Georgia said. “I don’t go to school, remember? My mommy gave me a book. Will you read it to me?”

She grabbed the book from her backpack and thrust it at Cole. Maybe she couldn’t read, but having someone else read to her was the next-best thing.

“L-l-l-little B-Bunny’s F-f-i— I can’t read that word—Day of S-c-hool,” Cole read.

“You’re not very good at that,” Georgia said.

“Better than you. You can’t read at all.”

Georgia frowned. She wanted to go back outside and climb trees some more. It was more

fun to do things that she was better at than Cole.

Georgia sat back against the wall. She traced her fingernail across it, making a mark in the mold. She heard a siren sound, somewhere far away. Maybe she would ask Mommy to teach her how to read. She'd taught her the alphabet, at least. Well, she'd played a cassette tape in the car of the alphabet song, so that's how Georgia learned it. It was how she'd learned to count to twenty, too.

"I can say my ABCs," Georgia said.

"Of course. Even babies can do that."

The siren was getting closer. Georgia imagined Cole at school, running around on the playground, learning to do all the things Georgia didn't know how to do, being around lots of other kids to play with. She stood up and kicked the wall.

There was a crash. Georgia looked up, wide-eyed, wondering if she'd somehow knocked the whole wall down, and then she heard screaming.

Stay on the floor, hands on your head, Do. Not. Move.

Georgia's heart raced. She grabbed Cole's hand and clutched it to her and pulled him close. She heard her mommy scream, or maybe it was Cole's mommy. It sounded like there were a thousand footsteps

"Let's hide," she whispered.

She ran into the kitchen, pulling Cole by the hand behind her. She could see the shapes of more people out the back door, standing towards the house. Something was pointed at the house. Guns, Georgia realized. She knew all about guns from television. She'd been watching a show with Mommy when someone shot a man with a gun. Georgia remembered the pool of red that spread beneath the man, the gaping hole in his chest.

There were rotting cabinets beneath the sink. Georgia threw them open. She climbed

inside, and Cole climbed in after her. They shut the doors behind him.

Georgia wrapped her arms around Cole, and he tucked his head into her shoulder.

Georgia hardly noticed the putrid stink of rot. Then there was another smell—Cole had peed.

“Sorry,” he whispered. He was crying.

“It’s okay,” Georgia whispered back.

Georgia lost track of the time in the fear. The screaming seemed to have stopped, but the cabinets muffled some of the sound. Then there was a sound that made a scream want to build up in her own throat. There were footsteps in the kitchen.

Georgia felt a sudden warmth, and then she realized she’d peed, too.

“Cole? Cole Ashworth? Cole? Are you in here? There’s a lot of people worried about you. Your daddy and stepmom and your brother, and your grandparents?”

Cole whimpered.

“Shh!” Georgia said.

But it was too late. The footsteps got closer, and there was a sudden blaze of light as the cabinets were flung open.

Georgia and Cole both screamed, clutching each other tighter.

“Shh, hey, it’s okay,” said the person.

Georgia squinted in the sudden light. She could see his dark uniform. It was a police officer. It didn’t make Georgia feel any better. Mommy had told her never to talk to police officers.

“Oh, there’s two of you,” he said. “I’m Officer Brown. Hi, Cole. Want to come on out? I’m a police officer. I’ll keep you safe and take you to your daddy.”

Cole released Georgia and reached his hands towards the police officer.

“No!” Georgia said, clutching him. “Don’t leave me.”

The man picked up Cole, who huddled against his chest.

“Hey, it’s okay. We’ll take you back home.”

Tears started flowing. Cole was happily going back to his family and friends and school. He was leaving her already. She thought she’d gotten a special boy, a special friend, just for her. And now men with guns were going to take him away. Now she understood why Mommy didn’t want her to talk to police officers. The officer looked at Georgia now, and she tried to make herself small.

“Hey, Manny? There’s another kid in here.”

Suddenly, hands grabbed Georgia. She started to scream and kick, but then all the fight left her. She hung limply as the man lifted her up and cradled her across his arms.

“Hey, hey, little girl,” he said. “My name is Manny. You can call me Manny, okay?”

Georgia didn’t answer. She closed her eyes and stayed limp. She felt herself being carried out, carried through the house and then out the front door. She didn’t move or open her eyes when she was loaded into the back of a car. Georgia realized the paradox—life was somehow better scared and stuffed into a cabinet with her friend than saved to the nothingness of a friendless freedom.

“Is she okay?” the other policeman asked.

“I don’t know. She went limp on me.”

“Little girl? Where’s your family?”

“Was your mommy in there?”

“That’s my cousin,” she could hear Cole say. He was in the car, too. That made her feel better, but that meant they were both going away. Mommy used to tell her that the police might come and take her away if she wasn’t good, and now it was happening.

“Your cousin?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I met her once before, but then I met her again last night.”

Georgia felt a blanket being draped over her.

Georgia finally opened her eyes when they got to the police station. She and Cole were both wrapped in blankets in the back of the car. They were lifted and carried inside, and there was a flurry of activity. Women and men fussed over them, and a lady put black stuff on Georgia’s fingertips and pressed them to paper. Cole was chattering away to everyone who would listen, but Georgia refused to speak. They were taken to a room with some toys.

“Legos!” Cole said happily, but Georgia sat down and curled up.

“Here are some clothes for you to put on,” a lady said. “They’re going to be too big for you, but you need to get out of these clothes.”

Georgia suddenly remembered with shame that both of them were soaked in urine. Cole put on the blue t-shirt, but Georgia ignored everyone.

“Georgia, want to play?” Cole said.

Georgia shook her head.

“I’m going to see my Daddy soon,” he said.

Georgia wanted to cry again.

“Don’t you want to get dressed in these clean clothes, honey?”

Georgia wrapped herself tighter in the blanket. She closed her eyes and stayed that way for hours. She wasn’t sleeping, but she wasn’t awake, either. Then she heard voices and opened her eyes again. A man and a woman were crying and hugging Cole. There was a small, redheaded boy holding the hand of an old woman. Georgia looked closer at the old woman. She remembered her. This was her grandmother. Grammy, who had given her that hot bath. And Granddaddy, who’d sat with her while she ate a sandwich.

Granddaddy made eye contact with her. He grabbed Grammy's arm.

"Ida!" Granddaddy shouted. Then Granddaddy ran to her. He scooped her up in his arms, and Georgia buried her face in his neck. He smelled like something minty and spicy.

"You have Georgia, too?" Grammy said.

"You know this girl?" a woman asked. "She's, uh, dirty."

"Yes, this is my granddaughter," Grammy said.

Georgia wrapped her arms and legs around Granddaddy and unearched her face from his neck.

"I have two daughters," Grammy said. "Heather's the one that kidnapped Cole. Candace is Georgia's mom. We haven't been able to find her for a long time."

"Both children were found in the same house," said the woman. "There were two women in the house."

"They're identical twins," Grammy said. "I can't even really tell them apart. They were together? As far as we knew, they hadn't even seen each other for years."

"We're taking Georgia home with us," Granddaddy said.

"Well, yes, of course," Grammy said.

"You can't take her tonight," said the woman. Georgia gripped Granddaddy's neck harder. She didn't want to be taken away again. She'd been taken away too much.

"Well, we were going to put her in foster care, at least temporarily," said the woman. Georgia didn't know what that meant. She couldn't really think straight. All she wanted to do was sleep.

"No, we're taking her," said Granddaddy.

"She needs to go to someone in Mississippi," the woman said. "You can't take her across state lines."

“We’ll get a hotel, then,” Granddaddy said.

“I don’t think—”

“Excuse me,” Grammy said. “Do you want to be the one to explain to the public that you took a traumatized child away from her only natural family to put her in with strangers?”

It got quiet, and Georgia opened her eyes again. The woman was staring at her, her mouth opening and closing.

“No,” she said. “Of course not. Take her. But please at least stay in Mississippi for the night.”

The rest of the day was a blur of people—police officers, people in suits, cameras and lots of flashing. Georgia didn’t let go of Granddaddy’s hand. Someone had put the large t-shirt over her head. It hung past her knees like a dress. She caught glimpses of Cole, who was being carried by his daddy. She wanted to hold Cole’s hand, too.

Georgia was put into a car, and they drove to a hotel. Granddaddy carried her inside. Other people followed from another car: Cole’s parents, Cole, and the little redheaded boy. In the room, the woman, Cole’s stepmother, came over to Georgia.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said, crouching down next to her. She was pretty, with long, auburn hair and green eyes. Her fingernails were painted fire engine red. Georgia smiled at her. “My name is Margot. I’m your Aunt Margot.”

Georgia nodded.

Margot smiled back.

“We’re going to take Cole back home, and you’re going to go stay here with your grandparents.”

Georgia shook her head.

“What? Your grandparents love you very much, and they’re going to take care of you.”

She walked over to Cole, who was still holding hands with the small boy. Georgia threw her arms around him.

“I want Cole,” she said, the only words she’d said for hours.

“Sweetheart, you’ll see Cole again,” Granddaddy said. “They live just one street away from us.”

She didn’t know whether or not to believe it, but suddenly she felt too tired and too small to argue for herself anymore. She climbed up onto the bed and curled up. Grammy pulled the covers back.

“Okay, sweetheart. You just go right to sleep. Soon, we’ll take you home with us to our house.”

Granddaddy leaned over her and kissed her forehead. “We’re going to sleep over here in this other bed, okay?”

“No,” Georgia said. “Sleep here. With me.”

She closed her eyes before she could even see if they would. But when she awoke a few hours later, she felt warmth all around her. She opened her eyes. Grammy was on one side, and Granddaddy was on the other. She closed her eyes again, and fell into a safe and dreamless sleep.

Years later, Georgia would realize that kitchen cabinet and that bed would be the best church she ever had. One hour of unquestioned friendship was better than ten years of questionable religion.

TRANSFIGURED

Wyatt sat on the hard mahogany pew between his brother, Cole, and his cousin, Georgia. Grammy sat behind them. This allowed her to flick the grandchildren on the ear if they grew restless and squirmy. Georgia got flicked on the ear a lot, but not as much as she used to, not since Grammy started making Wyatt sit between Georgia and Cole to separate them. Wyatt was ten and Georgia and Cole were both thirteen, but being teenagers didn't mean they could handle sitting still in church. They couldn't sit next to each other without causing a ruckus, poking and elbowing one another, whispering, giggling. Sometimes, Georgia still reached over Wyatt to pinch Cole on the thigh. The church was small enough that everyone could hear when Georgia and Cole got too loud, their voices only amplified by bouncing off the dusty wood paneling.

Wyatt sat up straight in the pew, even when the wood cut hard into his back, his eyes fixed on the preacher, Richard Cooley. Brother Richard was a little on the short side and not quite fat, but there was a softness to his body beneath suits that were always a little too big for him. His round blue eyes seemed profoundly gentle to Wyatt. Brother Richard rarely raised his voice from the pulpit, speaking with the same even tone. He only betrayed his fervor by lightly rapping his knuckles on the pulpit for emphasis. Wyatt liked to watch Brother Richard's lips

form the words.

“Brothers and sisters,” Brother Richard began, then paused. He looked around the church, his eyes seeking every face. Wyatt knew what the preacher was doing—taking note of who was absent. Wyatt was conscious of the fact that his mother was among the missing. She told Wyatt she believed in God, and sometimes said bedtime prayers with him. But lately, Wyatt had started to wonder if his mother believed in the prayers herself, or if she only wanted Wyatt to believe in them. If she really believed them, then why didn’t she come to church with them?

Brother Richard held up his Bible, his finger between the pages to mark his place, the worn leather cover facing the congregation so that they could make out the faded gold leaf “Holy Bible” imprinted onto it.

“The Bible makes it clear,” he said, then paused, building suspense.

He set the Bible back down on the pulpit, opened it to whichever page his finger was marking. The microphone picked up the rustle of the pages; Wyatt loved that sound. “The Bible is clear, brothers. Leviticus 18, verse twenty-two: ‘Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.’ Abomination, brothers and sisters. And you know what it goes on to say? ‘For whosoever shall commit any of these abominations, even the soul that commit them shall be cut off from among their people. I am the Lord your God.’”

Brother Richard rapped his knuckles every time he said the word “abomination.” Wyatt repeated the word, whispering it under his breath. When Brother Richard said it, he emphasized the second and fourth syllables, drawing them out. A-BOM-i-NA-tion. Wyatt whispered it to himself, feeling his own tongue and lips make the word. He tried to memorize as much of Brother Richard’s sermon as possible so that he could practice later in front of the mirror in his bedroom. He wanted to sound exactly like Brother Richard and make the same gestures.

“I want everyone in here to hear this,” Brother Richard said. “Brothers and sisters,

homosexuality is a sin. Homosexuality *is not*”—here Brother Richard rapped his knuckles—“a valid alternative lifestyle. God says it’s an abomination. But this sin is not unforgivable. ‘For all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God. Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.’ Brothers, did you hear that? *All* have sinned, but we have grace through Jesus Christ to save us. I have known of people who have struggled with the sin of homosexuality. They were dead in their transgressions, but through the *saving power* of Jesus Christ, they were able to overcome their sin. You may have heard the lie the world tells us that being a homosexual isn’t a choice. There is *always* a choice. You just have to make the right choice. Jesus heals, brothers and sisters. Jesus *redeems*. You just have to *pray* and *believe* in the healing power of Jesus Christ.”

Wyatt repeated the words in his head.

“If anyone wants to ask for prayers or to be baptized, come forward as we stand and sing all six verses of ‘Just As I Am.’”

The song leader stood and began the song. Wyatt thumbed through the hymn book. Just as he reached the right page, Georgia’s hand snaked over and knocked the hymnal to the floor.

“*Ouch,*” she yelped as Grammy’s finger made contact with her ear.

After the closing prayer, Wyatt followed Cole out of the pew. Georgia pushed past him to thump Cole on the head. Brother Richard waited at the back of the little church to shake everyone’s hands and greet the few visitors. Brother Richard held out his hand to shake Wyatt’s. It was warm and soft.

“That was a wonderful sermon, Brother Richard,” said Grammy. She said that to him every week, but Wyatt had figured out a long time ago that Grammy didn’t actually listen to much of the sermon. She was never able to answer Wyatt’s questions.

“Thank you as always, Ida,” said Brother Richard, kissing Grammy’s cheek.

“Did you know, Brother Richard, that my grandson Wyatt here wants to be a preacher when he grows up?” said Grammy.

Brother Richard fixed his blue eyes on Wyatt. Wyatt felt his face grow warm.

“Is that right?” said Brother Richard.

Wyatt nodded, his mouth dry.

“There’s not a lot of money in preaching, you know that, right?”

Wyatt shrugged. Brother Richard laughed, and Wyatt liked the sound.

“You know I’m just teasing you, right?”

Wyatt nodded again, although he hadn’t really known Brother Richard was teasing.

“Hey, listen, maybe you could come up and do the scripture reading sometime for me. Would you like that?”

Wyatt nodded, the corners of his mouth turning up in an involuntary smile.

“Good deal,” said Brother Richard, and he put his warm hand on Wyatt’s shoulder. Wyatt wished he’d keep it there a little while longer, but Brother Richard was already reaching to shake someone else’s hand.

Cole snagged the front seat in the car, so Wyatt piled in next to Georgia.

“I hate these shoes,” Georgia said, flinging them off. “They give me blisters, and they make my feet smell awful. Want to sniff, Wyatt?”

Georgia’s foot sailed towards Wyatt’s face.

“No!” Wyatt said, yanking his shirt up over his nose.

“Stop it back there,” said Grammy.

Wyatt began to recite Brother Richard’s sermon under his breath.

“A-BOM-i-NA-tion,” he said, trying to get the rhythm right.

“I think Brother Richard is wrong,” Georgia said.

Wyatt frowned. “Everything Brother Richard says is right.”

“I don’t think gay people go to hell,” Georgia said.

Wyatt sat back in his seat. Was that what *abomination* meant? That you were going to hell? Wyatt tried never to think about hell. Sometimes, at night, when he couldn’t sleep, thoughts of hell would creep into his mind unbidden. The eternal flames, the unquenchable fire. Wyatt shivered.

“Do you even know what gay means?” Georgia asked.

Wyatt did know. It was when men married other men, or women married other women.

“You know Blake Johnson at school?” Georgia said. “People say he’s gay.”

“Oh,” said Wyatt. Blake was Cole and Georgia’s age, and he’d come to Cole’s birthday party. He’d taught Wyatt how to do a flip on the trampoline. Wyatt had always thought that *being gay* was only for grown-ups, for married people. But Blake was just a kid, like Wyatt.

Wyatt looked out the window, thinking about what it meant to be gay, what it meant to be an abomination. He knew even less what it meant to be an abomination than to be gay. Did being an abomination mean you were going to hell? He didn’t want to think about Blake going to hell, but Brother Richard had said it, and Brother Richard was never wrong.

That night, Wyatt stood in front of the mirror in his bedroom, the Bible splayed in the palm of his hands open to the book of Leviticus.

“Brothers and sisters,” Wyatt said, “the Bible says—” *no, that wasn’t right*, “the Bible makes it clear. Leviticus eighteen verse two.”

Wyatt looked down at the page. “Leviticus eighteen verse two. “Thou shalt not lie with

mankind as with womankind: it is abomination.' A-BOM-i-NA-tion."

Wyatt set the Bible on his dresser. *Lie with*. That must be about sex. His parents had told him about that, but it hadn't seemed like something he wanted to do with anybody, boy or girl.

Was being gay wanting to kiss another boy? Did Blake kiss other boys? On the playground, Wyatt's friends, Andrew and Molly, had kissed behind the big tree. Wyatt had never kissed any girls, and he'd never really wanted to, either. What would happen to him if he kissed another boy? Would he be an abomination then?

"Brothers and sisters," Wyatt began again, "the Bible makes it clear...."

But he couldn't do it. He could hear Brother Richard's voice in his head, but Wyatt didn't want to say the words. He wondered why, for the first time, he couldn't preach this sermon in the mirror—something inside that prevented him from preaching a truth that didn't seem true. That night, he dreamt about Brother Richard's soft hands rapping on the pulpit.

At school, the children had been unable to go out for recess all last week because of the unseasonably cold temperatures for a Kentucky February. Their teacher, tired of the restlessness that playing in the gym couldn't quench, finally relented and let them go outside as long as they all promised to keep their coats buttoned all the way to the top. There was a desperation to their play. As they raced out to the playground, there was a restlessness in antsy limbs and muscles that yearned for use. Wyatt met his friends Molly and Andrew by their usual big tree.

"Hey, Molly?" he said. "Will you kiss me like you kissed Andrew?"

"She can't kiss you," said Andrew. "She's my girlfriend."

"No, I'm not," said Molly. "I could kiss you, but why do you want me to?"

"I just want to know what it's like," said Wyatt.

Molly shrugged. "Okay, then, I guess."

Wyatt puckered his lips.

“Wait,” said Molly. “Don’t let Mrs. McDermott see us.”

“Okay,” said Wyatt, positioning himself so that the tree was between them and the teachers.

“Close your eyes,” said Molly.

“Why?”

“It’s how you’re supposed to do it,” said Molly. “Haven’t you ever seen a movie?”

Wyatt closed his eyes and waited. After a few moments, he opened them again. Molly’s face loomed closer.

“Wyatt’s eyes are open,” said Andrew, who was frowning at him.

“Sorry,” said Wyatt, closing his eyes again. He waited longer this time, then felt Molly’s breath on his face. Her lips touched his, then pressed harder. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to feel. Both of their lips were chapped from the cold weather, and the pressure stung. Molly stayed there for several seconds, and then she pulled away.

“So now you know what it’s like,” said Molly.

Wyatt sat down on a tree root. It hadn’t felt like anything special. He looked at Andrew. Would it feel special if he kissed Andrew instead?

Wyatt, Cole, and Georgia rode the bus to Grammy and Granddaddy’s house after school while their parents were at work. They worked on homework at the kitchen table until dinner. Wyatt was doing long division. He welcomed delving into the complicated problems that left his brain all twisted. It was a welcome distraction from what was churning inside him. He hardly thought about kissing Molly on the playground, and he almost forgot the word *abomination*.

At dinner, with the math out of his mind, the thoughts that had only been needling the

back of his brain came rushing back. His stomach churned, and he could hardly swallow his sandwich.

“Wyatt, I have good news for you,” said Grammy.

“What?” asked Wyatt, putting down his sandwich.

“Brother Richard called today,” she said. “He wants you to read scripture on Sunday.

Would you like that?”

Wyatt nodded. He couldn’t speak.

“Brother Richard wants you to come to church a little early on Sunday so that you can practice,” said Grammy.

“Okay,” said Wyatt, having finally swallowed the sandwich.

“I thought you’d be a lot more excited,” said Grammy.

“I am excited,” said Wyatt. He forced his face to smile.

“Hurry up,” said Georgia, as soon as they’d finished supper. “Ice skating is starting.”

Wyatt followed Cole into the living room. Georgia sat on the floor in front of the television, the remote in her hand. She turned it to NBC. The Winter Olympics logo blazed on the screen.

Wyatt and Cole sat down on the floor next to Georgia. Granddaddy eased into his recliner, and Grammy settled into the couch with her knitting.

The camera panned over the arena. The ice was smooth and untouched, like glass. The camera then zoomed in on the couple that now glided onto the ice. Their skates marred the previous smooth perfection. It was a man and a woman dressed in deep, navy blue fabric. The woman’s costume was short but flowing, spangles dripping off of tulle. The man was wearing a skin-tight bodysuit in the same color, also dotted with spangles that glistened like stars against

the dark fabric.

“Cole only likes watching this because of the pretty girls in short dresses,” Georgia said loudly.

“Shut up,” said Cole, shoving Georgia. “You only want to watch this because of the pretty boys.”

Georgia shoved him back. “No, I don’t.”

The couple began to skate now. They glided over the ice as though enchanted by some kind of magic. The boy held the girl by the arm, then the girl sailed into the air, spinning so quickly that her legs were a blur. The blades of her skates glinted silver, and then she landed. Then it was the boy’s turn to become airborne. He leapt, and seemed to hover weightless over the ice for a moment longer than was natural, then landed. His blades cut so sharply that flecks of ice flew into the air like the sparks of Granddaddy’s blowtorch.

“What about you, Wyatt?” Georgia said. “Do you like the pretty girls?”

Wyatt felt his face get warm.

“Ha, he’s getting red!” Georgia said. “He does like the pretty girls.”

“Stop that,” said Grammy. “He’s too young for all that.”

“No, he isn’t,” said Georgia. “I’d already kissed boys when I was Wyatt’s age.”

“Excuse me, what?” Grammy said.

“Never mind,” said Georgia.

“I’ve kissed a girl,” said Wyatt quietly.

Georgia stared at him. “What?”

Wyatt shrugged. He wished he hadn’t said anything, but it was kind of fun to say something to render Georgia completely speechless for once.

“Wyatt, you are too young for that,” said Grammy. “Don’t be doing that.”

“Who?” Georgia demanded. “Who did you kiss? And when?”

Wyatt shrugged. “A girl from my class.”

“Do I know her?”

Wyatt shrugged again. Georgia turned to Cole.

“Did you know about this?” She asked.

“No,” said Cole. He frowned. “Can’t believe you didn’t tell me, actually.”

“Because you would’ve told Georgia,” said Wyatt. “And because she’d make a big deal about it. Like she is right now.”

“I’m not making a big deal about it,” said Georgia.

“I wouldn’t have told her,” said Cole.

“Yes, you would have,” said Wyatt.

“You totally would have, Cole,” said Georgia.

Cole shook his head. “Not if you told me not to!”

“Come on,” Georgia said. “You would’ve told me.”

“I wouldn’t’ve,” Cole said.

“We can talk about this later,” said Georgia. “Now, Wyatt, who did you kiss?”

Wyatt sighed. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Who?”

Wyatt turned his attention back to the screen, back to the beautiful pair gliding on the ice.

“Who?” Georgia asked again.

“I’m not going to tell you,” Wyatt said. “Stop asking.”

“Fine, be that way,” Georgia said. “Is she cute? Is she your girlfriend now?”

“No,” said Wyatt.

“You’re all too young to be talking about this,” said Grammy. “You’re definitely too

young to be having boyfriends and girlfriends. Especially you, Wyatt.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Oh, it’s harmless,” said Granddaddy. “Don’t you remember being their age, Ida?”

“Oh, hush, Frank,” said Grammy.

On the television, the couple did a few fantastic spins and jumps, and then it was over. The music stopped, and the crowd went wild with applause. The boy put his arm around the girl, and they skated a lap around the rink. They waved, both beaming. The camera zoomed in on their faces. The boy pressed his hands to his lips, then flung it outwards, blowing the whole crowd a kiss.

“He’s a little funny, isn’t he?” said Granddaddy.

“Funny how?” asked Cole.

“You know, funny,” said Granddaddy.

“Frank, don’t talk about that stuff in front of them,” said Grammy.

“What stuff?” Asked Cole.

“You know,” said Granddaddy. “Funny.”

“He means gay,” said Georgia. “We know what gay means, Grammy.”

“Well, just because he’s a good skater doesn’t mean he’s gay,” said Grammy.

“No, of course not,” said Granddaddy. “But look at the way he’s acting.”

Wyatt didn’t think there was anything wrong or funny with the way the man on the television was acting. He looked happy, beaming over the crowd. People were tossing flowers onto the ice, and he picked one up a rose and held it above him. He looked free, weightless, like he didn’t belong tied down to the earth like the rest of humanity, like he was floating along on a higher plane. Like an angel. Wyatt was struck with the inexplicable sense that this man was closer to God than the rest of them. What would Brother Richard think? Would he find the boy

beautiful, too? Or would he agree with Granddaddy? Wyatt had a feeling he knew.

“I think he’s beautiful,” said Georgia.

“I just remember a time when men were men,” said Granddaddy.

Wyatt stood up. “I’m really tired. I think I’m going to go home.”

Wyatt’s parents lived just down the road within walking distance.

“Are you sick?” Grammy asked. “Come over here and let me feel your head. I’ll make you some ginger root tea.”

But Wyatt waved her off, remembering the last time he’d had to choke down her hot ginger root tea; he’d thrown it up, and now couldn’t taste ginger without thinking about all that vomiting.

“Well, why don’t you sleep here in the front room instead of walking home in the cold?” Grammy said.

That sounded like a good idea to Wyatt. He curled up under the covers. The pillow felt stiff and unfamiliar, but smelled of fresh detergent and Grammy’s peach hand lotion. Wyatt closed his eyes. Occasionally, the sounds of warm laughter drifted in from the living room. He could see the light from there under the crack of his door. He wanted to be in there with them; he wanted to remain separate. He just wanted to sleep, to be done with this day, but he wasn’t very tired yet. His mind raced, and soon, he was half-dreaming, half-daydreaming about the ice skater. The male skater danced alone in Wyatt’s mind. Brother Richard was there, and so was a pulpit, and Brother Richard was pounding his fist against it. The skater leapt up and up, until the roof parted and he floated through the sky towards the heavens. Everything was warm and white, and then there was a light, and then Wyatt heard, booming from the deep of a bright cloud, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Wyatt sat up. The voice still rumbled inside him. He’d been sleeping. The crack beneath

his door was dark now, and there was silence save the distant rumble of the furnace. Cole had probably gone home with the news that Wyatt was sick. Georgia, Grammy, and Granddaddy would be sleeping. Wyatt laid back against the pillow and closed his eyes. This time, energy raced through his body. His fingertips twitched. Wyatt knew he wouldn't be sleeping.

On Sunday, Wyatt dressed in his Goodwill suit, the one his mother had gotten him for his uncle's wedding two years before. It was a bit too small for him, the jacket sleeves too short so that the sleeve of his shirt underneath showed. It was too tight when he buttoned it, so he left it open. Brother Richard had told Grammy which verse he was supposed to read, and Wyatt had underlined it in his Bible. The night before, he'd spent an hour standing in front of the mirror reading it. He read it so many times, he pretty much had it memorized. Grammy had told the rest of the family that Wyatt was doing the scripture reading, so Granddaddy and his parents were coming along with them.

"Morning, Brother Wyatt," Brother Richard greeted him with a grin when they got to the church. Richard stuck out his hand for Wyatt to shake.

"Good morning," Wyatt said. Richard's presence made him feel calmer.

"I thought you could practice a few times with the microphone before church starts," said Richard.

"Okay," said Wyatt.

Brother Richard clapped his hand on Wyatt's shoulder and steered him down the aisle towards the stage. Wyatt climbed up the steps and stood behind the pulpit.

"Hmm, that's a bit too tall for you, isn't it?" said Richard. The edge of the pulpit reached Wyatt's nose, and the microphone towered above him.

"Wait there," said Richard. He returned a few minutes later with a milk crate. "Here you

go, buddy.”

Granddaddy called him “buddy” sometimes, but he liked the sound of it better when Brother Richard said it.

Richard held Wyatt’s hand as Wyatt stepped onto the milk crate, and put his hand on his back to steady him.

“You good?” asked Richard.

Wyatt nodded.

“Okay, now say, *testing, one, two, three.*”

Wyatt grinned. “Testing, one, two, three,” he repeated.

The microphone picked up his voice, throwing it throughout the small auditorium. Wyatt laughed, and the microphone picked that up, too.

“Ready to read your verse?” asked Richard.

Wyatt nodded and opened his Bible to where he’d placed his bookmark. He read the verses slowly and carefully, making sure to pronounce each word perfectly.

“Great reading,” said Brother Richard when Wyatt finished. “You’re going to make a really good preacher some day.”

Wyatt smiled again.

“Do you want to go over it one more time?”

“Sure,” said Wyatt, and he read the verses again.

In the pew, Wyatt felt his heart beating faster as he thought about reading the verse. Wyatt sat next to his mother, which was a welcome change from having to separate Georgia and Cole.

“Are you nervous?” his mother whispered.

Wyatt nodded. His mother patted his leg.

“You’ll be great,” she said.

Wyatt nodded again. They sang songs and had prayers. After they sang “When We All Get to Heaven,” it was Wyatt’s turn. He took easy, measured steps, his Bible clutched in his hand hanging down by his side.

“Now, brothers and sisters,” said Brother Richard. “We have a special guest to read our scripture this morning. Please welcome Brother Wyatt.”

Wyatt mounted the steps, then climbed onto his milk crate. He looked around at the church. The building was small, but it suddenly seemed like a lot of people there staring at him. His eyes found his brother. Cole gave him a thumbs up, and Georgia stuck his tongue out at him, but then grinned. Wyatt swallowed, his mouth dry. He opened the Bible to the marked place.

“This morning’s reading comes from Matthew chapter 17 verses one and two,” Wyatt said. ““After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shown like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.””

Wyatt stepped off the milk crate and walked back to his family. He realized he was out of breath as he sat down beside his mother.

“Great reading,” she said in his ear, hugging him to her.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Wasn’t that a wonderful job from Brother Wyatt?” Brother Richard said.

Wyatt couldn’t stop himself from smiling. For once, he could hardly listen to Brother Richard’s sermon, at least not well enough to memorize it. Brother Richard talked about the verse Wyatt had read, about how Jesus took his disciples on the mountain. Wyatt thought about that, about Jesus being transfigured. What would that look like, for Jesus’s face and clothes to shine with white light? Wyatt wanted that—he wanted to shine with pure, white light, too. He

would have to be more like Jesus, which was something Brother Richard said he should be doing anyway. Then Wyatt's mouth went dry. He was sure Jesus had never wondered what it would be like to kiss another boy.

Wyatt's stomach clenched, and he thought he might throw up. *Abomination.*

"I have to go to the bathroom," Wyatt told to his mother. He couldn't get down the aisle fast enough. When he got to the stall, he knelt down beside the toilet, but nothing in his stomach came up. He stood and washed his shaking hands at the sink. He put the cool water on his forehead.

What would happen if he didn't go back in there? What if he went outside and walked and walked? Could he walk far enough that he could walk away from himself, so that whatever remained could shine with pure white light? Wyatt crouched down on the bathroom floor, pulling his knees to his stomach. He closed his eyes and leaned his chin on his knees, sinking in to the coursing thoughts.

But he didn't want anyone to come looking for him. He knew his mother would have no qualms about coming to the men's room to find him. Wyatt stood up and dusted himself off. He stared at his reflection, which gazed back at him, same as always. Then he returned to the sanctuary and took his seat beside his mother.

Wyatt could tell that Sunday night would be another sleepless night. He hadn't slept well all week. They'd gone to lunch at his favorite pizza buffet, but he could hardly taste it, even his favorite greasy slice of bacon cheeseburger pizza.

Wyatt slid out of bed. He crept through the empty living room to the front door. He stood on the front porch for a minute. The world was cold and silent, and his breath rose up, misty white in front of him. The moon was full so that the trees and grass were illuminated with pale

glow. He stepped onto the front lawn and headed to the road towards the pond. His footsteps crunched in the frozen grass.

The pond looked different in the dark. The ice was bright in the moonlight. Wyatt thought of the smooth, white ice he'd seen on tv. This ice was different, with bumps and chunks of wood sticking out. But ice was ice, and just once, Wyatt wanted to feel what it felt like to be the boy on the ice, to be that free. But it wasn't tangible, this visceral yearning, this longing for—what? To be—to be *something*. The man on the ice had snapped a hard, hidden part inside of him, and something was escaping like a vapor that he could no longer contain, like when the seal on Grammy's tea kettle broke and soft white steam poured from the hole.

Wyatt stepped first with his right foot. The ice was slippery, but solid beneath his shoe. He stepped forward with his left. He went like that for a while, tiny step by tiny step, inching towards the pond's middle. He stopped, then swiveled his feet, testing the give of the ice and the slide of his shoes. He needed to glide, even fly towards heaven like he'd imagined the man on the ice had. He'd never ice skated before, so he mimicked what he'd seen, pushing onto one foot and then another. But his sneaker hit a bump in the ice, and down he tumbled. As his wrists landed hard on the ice, he thought of Brother Richard pounding the pulpit.

His knees hit the ice hard—it felt like rock, but colder. He stayed there, on his hands and knees, fallen, stricken—far from God? Then he saw a shape beneath the ice, and he used his sleeve to wipe away the layer of frost that had accumulated on top. The ice beneath was clear, like looking through glass.

A small, gray cat with bulging ice was trapped beneath the ice. Wyatt scraped at the ice with his fingernails, desperate to get to her, before he realized that, of course, she was dead. Wyatt knew this cat. He used to throw bits of string for her, and she'd fetch like a dog. And when she got tired, she'd curl up in his lap, and yawn, showing all her sharp, tiny teeth, and sleep.

Wyatt felt tears prick at the back of his eyes; this wild, beautiful little cat was gone. Freedom has consequences.

Wyatt stood up and looked over the pond once more. Its liquid pool was in the center. Wyatt turned from the center, turned from the cat, and shuffled back to solid ground.

PRINCESS GAMES

Cole wandered through the aisle of the Dollar General, which was full of colorful latex masks, bright wigs, face paint, witch's hats, cat ears, and rubber pumpkins. It was the Saturday before Halloween, and Cole was there to pick out his costume along with his younger half-brother, Wyatt, who was seven, and his cousin, Georgia, who was the same age as him—ten. Cole's stepmother, Margot, was waiting out in the car for them. She'd given them each five whole dollars to spend on costumes. They had a rule every year: they could buy some accessories at the Dollar General, but the main bulk of the costume had to be either made up of some of their own clothes, or else made by their grandmother.

Wyatt was on the other end of the aisle. He had a cowboy hat in his hands.

“Should I be a cowboy? Do you want to be a cowboy with me?”

Cole shook his head. “You can be a cowboy, but I don't want to be one, too.”

“Aww, I want to be the same thing as you.”

“We were the same thing last year, remember?”

“Yeah, but I want to be the same thing again.”

Georgia skipped over to them. In her arms, she held a witch's hat, a shiny crown, and a

pirate's hat.

"Which should I be? Witch, princess, or pirate?"

"You were a princess last year," Cole said.

"I know, but it was fun," Georgia said. "I got tons of candy."

"Hmm, you did," Cole said.

He remembered the previous Halloween well. He and Wyatt had been firefighters. They'd bought firefighter hats, and Grammy had made them fireman jackets. She'd put some of Granddaddy's neon yellow electric tape on all the right spots, and they'd worn their winter boots. Georgia had dressed up as a princess. Grammy had made her a pink dress out of shiny satin, and sewed on silver piping and sequins. Margot had braided Georgia's hair in an elaborate braid, then topped it off with a shining silver crown. Georgia pranced around the house beforehand, twirling and dancing around.

The three set out trick-or-treating just as it was getting dark. It was warm on Halloween last year, but the air had smelled like bonfires. They went on their planned route in their own neighborhood. On their way back, Georgia had taunted them gleefully about how much more candy she'd gotten. Cole thought she was just trying to be annoying, but when they got back and checked their stashes, Georgia'd had almost twice as much as Cole and Wyatt. And when Cole and Wyatt pulled out their shiny half dollars from the money house, Georgia pulled out a crisp two dollar bill.

Wyatt's mouth had hung open. "Whoa, I didn't know those were real."

"It's because everyone liked me better," Georgia said. "They all said what a pretty little girl I am."

She'd been nearly intolerable about it for weeks, refusing to wear anything but a dress. She'd started letting her hair grow out then, too. Now, Cole looked over at her. Her hair reached

her waist. Cole ran his hand through the silky, slightly sticky strands of a blond, nylon wig. He knew what he wanted to be for Halloween.

In the car, Georgia chattered excitedly to Margot.

“I decided I’m going to be a pirate and a princess. So a pirate princess.”

“Very creative,” Margot said.

“Will you do my hair and makeup again?”

“Of course.”

“I’m going to be a cowboy,” Wyatt said, rustling his Dollar General bag.

“Cole, what about you?” Margot asked.

“I’m going to be a princess.”

There was a beat of silence in the car. Wyatt turned to look at Cole with his mouth open.

“You can do that?” Wyatt said. “Boys are allowed to be princesses?”

“Of course boys are allowed to be princesses,” Margot said. “That’s a very nice costume, Cole.”

She was looking at him in the rearview mirror.

“That’s not fair,” Georgia said.

“Why not?” Cole asked.

“Because you’re a boy and you shouldn’t get to be a princess.”

“Now, Georgia, that’s not very nice,” Margot said. “Boys and girls don’t have to like certain things just because they’re boy things and girl things.”

Wyatt frowned. “That’s not what Granddaddy says.”

Margot sighed. “Your grandfather can be old fashioned, Wyatt, but it’s absolutely okay for Cole to want to...express himself in any way that he wants.”

“Oh,” Cole said. “I’m not really trying to express myself or anything.”

“It’s okay that you are, Cole,” Margot said.

“But I’m not,” he said. “I just want to get more candy.”

“What?”

“Last year, Georgia got a lot more candy than us because she was a little princess girl,” Cole said. “She even got more money than us! She got a two dollar bill, and we only got half dollars.”

“You still remember that after all this time?” Margot asked.

“Of course,” Cole said. “It’s always easier being a girl.”

“See? That’s why it’s not fair,” Georgia said. “You’re just trying to beat me. It’s cheating!”

“It is not,” Cole said.

“Is so!”

“Is not!”

“Enough,” Margot said.

“Boys get to do everything fun,” Georgia said. “That guy from the Boy Scouts came to talk to my class, and the boys get to go camping and fishing and build race cars. Annie’s in Girl Scouts, and all she gets to do is make crafts. The only good thing about being a girl is that I got to get more candy last year for Halloween, and now Cole is cheating me out of that, too! My *one* good day just went to *zero* good days.”

“Well, Georgia, I’ll take you camping any time you want to go,” Margot said.

“That’s not the point,” Georgia said. “The point is—”

“I understand the point, Georgia,” Margot said.

Cole tuned them out and started pondering his Halloween plan.

Halloween night finally arrived. Georgia would be over soon for Margot to do her hair and makeup. Grammy had made Wyatt a vest to go with his cowboy hat, and she'd found him an old stick horse. Wyatt ran around his and Cole's bedroom in his winter boots.

"Yeehaw!" Wyatt shouted, pointing finger guns at Cole. Margot had vetoed Wyatt's hopes of having a toy gun to carry around. "Bang, bang, bang! You're dead!"

Cole grabbed his throat and fell over in a dramatic fashion.

"I think someone has been breaking into the Halloween candy a little early," their father said, poking his head through the door.

"Hi, Daddy!" Wyatt shouted. "I'm a cowboy!"

"I see that," his father said. "Cole, Margot told me you wanted to be a princess."

"Yep," Cole said proudly. He went to his closet and yanked out Georgia's princess dress from the year before with a flourish. He'd had to be sneaky—Georgia never would have let him borrow it, not with how competitive she was being about the Halloween candy. They'd all been at Grammy and Granddaddy's house, where Georgia lived, and Cole had waited until Georgia was helping Grammy set the table before dinner. He'd crept into Georgia's bedroom and dug through her closet for the dress. He'd put it in his backpack, and Georgia hadn't noticed it was gone.

"That's...an interesting choice, buddy," said his father.

"And here's my wig," Cole said, pulling out the long, silvery wig. "And my crown."

"Very nice. Cole, do you, uh, you know, do you want to wear dresses other times, too? Like, to school?"

Cole made a face. "No, of course not. Why?"

"Well, I thought maybe if you wanted to be a princess for Halloween, you'd want to...dress that way more often."

“No way,” Cole said. “I tried on this dress already, and it’s itchy. There’s no way I’d ever want to wear it every day. Besides, I just want to get more candy. Last year, Georgia got more candy than us.”

“I’m here!” Georgia shouted, slamming the front door so hard the whole house vibrated. She skipped into Cole and Wyatt’s room, clutching a plastic bag and a dress on a hanger.

“Grammy made me the same kind of dress as last year, sort of, but it’s pirate colors.”

The dress in question indeed looked like the pink princess dress currently hanging in Cole’s closet, but was red with gold piping rather than silver. Georgia pulled on her black tights and the dress.

“Margot!” Georgia yelled as soon as she was done. “Can you do my hair now so that I can put on my pirate hat?”

“Why aren’t you dressed yet?” Wyatt asked.

“I’ll get dressed. Just a minute,” Cole said.

“Georgia, honey, if you want me to curl your hair, you’re going to have to come in my bathroom.”

When Georgia left the room, Cole ran to the closet and pulled out the princess dress. He put it on quickly, before he could change his mind. It was tight, and the silver trim was itchy on his chest. He surveyed himself in the mirror. He and Georgia were about the same size, but this dress was made for Georgia last year. It was a little tight, and reached to several inches above his knees. He either looked like a boy in a dress or a girl with really short hair; he wasn’t sure. He put the wig on his head. It, too, was itchy, the plastic material chafing his skull. He cocked his head to the side.

“Wyatt, do I look like a girl?”

“Wow,” Wyatt said. “You do. You look like Georgia.”

Cole looked back at himself in the mirror. He and Georgia already looked alike, since their mothers were identical twins. But now that he wore the wig and dress, they could be the same person. What would that be like, to be Georgia? There was a darker side to her, Cole knew. Georgia had lived with her mother when she was very young, but now she lived with Grammy and Granddaddy, and never saw her real mother. Also, she didn't have a daddy like Cole did. But then again, Georgia was always the loudest, always in charge, always the most—what if he became her, what if he took that on?

Cole grinned. He was sure to get at least as much candy as Georgia this year.

When Georgia came back into their bedroom, her usually-straight hair was curled into ringlets. Her eyes were lined with black, and her lips cherry-red. She froze when she saw Cole.

“That’s my dress.”

Cole grinned and nodded.

“That’s not fair,” Georgia said. “I didn’t say you could wear it.”

“We share stuff all the time,” Cole said.

Georgia frowned. “But not that dress.”

“You’re just mad because I’m going to get more candy than you.”

Georgia sighed. “Whatever.”

“Hmm,” Cole said. “Makeup. That’s a good idea.”

Cole went to Margot’s bathroom.

“Margot? Can you put makeup on me, too?”

“Sure,” Margot said. “Sit here.”

Cole hopped up on the closed toilet lid.

“Let’s do lots of sparkles for you, little princess,” Margot said.

“Sounds good to me!”

When Margot was finished, Cole looked at himself in the mirror. He laughed; he looked so different. There was some black around his eyes, and something pink and sparkly on his eyelids. His lips, too, were bright pink.

“Do I look pretty, Margot?”

Margot laughed. “Yes, Cole. You look very pretty.”

When it came time for them to leave, and Georgia was pulling on her black Mary Jane shoes over her tights, Cole realized he didn’t have any girls’ shoes to wear. He went to his closet, finally deciding on a pair of plain black sneakers.

“You’re going to be cold with your bare legs,” Margot said when she look a look at him.

“No, I’ll be fine,” Cole said.

Margot shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’m sure Georgia had a pair of tights you could’ve borrowed.”

“Last year, I wore tights with sparkles in them,” Georgia said. “I’m better at being a girl than you!”

Cole glanced down at his bare legs and black tennis shoes. “I’ll be fine.”

“Before you go out, I want to get your picture,” Margot said. She arranged them in front of the door, putting Wyatt in the middle of Cole and Georgia.

“Geez, you two look like twins,” Margot said. She snapped the picture.

“Okay, bye, Mommy,” Wyatt said.

“You know the drill,” said their father. “No leaving our neighborhood. And always, always, *always* watch out for Wyatt.”

“I know, Dad,” Cole said. “Bye.”

“Bye, Daddy!”

“Bye, Uncle Henry. Thanks for doing my hair and makeup, Margot!”

And they stepped out into the night. The sky was dark purple, sinking into black, and the air smelled of bonfires. Leaves crunched under Cole’s feet, and children in brightly-colored costumes zigzagged through the crowded sidewalks. Georgia led the way as they set off on the route they had perfected the previous year. They romped through the streets of their own neighborhood first, dutifully thanking their neighbors for the generic jellybeans and off-brand gummies that glued their mouths shut, the sticky generic butterscotch candies and jawbreakers so hard as to almost live up to the name.

“Time for the secret passageway,” Georgia said. There was a thick patch of woods that bordered their neighborhood, with a small creek running through the middle that they played in in the summertime. But there was another neighborhood on the other side, a neighborhood full of rich people in huge mansions. They gave out full-size Snickers and Kit Kats, and huge bags of real M&Ms and Reese’s Pieces, and one house even gave away real money. The candy was as big as the houses, only less pretentious. They weren’t allowed to trick-or-treat there, but they snuck there every year, anyway. Cole felt his mouth watering just thinking about it. And, this year, he’d learned the secret weapon to get even more candy.

“Let’s go,” Cole said.

Georgia led the way into the woods, and Cole stepped after her into the tall, rough grass. There were some brambles that kept catching on the skirt of Cole’s dress. It tore a little, and he hoped Georgia wouldn’t notice. They wound through the trees and to the creek bed. Luckily, it hadn’t rained much, so that water was fairly shallow.

“Here’s our spot,” Georgia said. They’d made a “bridge” of stepping stones earlier that summer, carrying the bigger rocks over and setting them in a line.

Georgia and Cole went first, followed by Wyatt.

“Don’t fall this time, Wyatt,” Georgia said. It was a lofty ambition; Wyatt had never made it across earlier in the summer without falling into the water.

“Come on, Wyatt, you can do it,” Cole said.

Wyatt, as always, missed the second-to-last stone and splashed straight into the water.

Georgia groaned.

“It’s all right,” Cole said. “Come on.”

Wyatt stepped out, soaked from the shins down.

“I’m cold,” he said.

“You’ll be fine,” Georgia said. “Let’s go”

“Mommy and Daddy are going to be mad at me.”

“You’ll dry. All right, come on.”

The candy from the rich neighborhood was everything Cole had dreamed.

“Oh, what pretty little girls! Are y’all twins?” “Jeffrey, come look at these little princesses.”

Cole learned to sway his hips a little bit, and tilt his head the the side, and put one hand on his hip while smiling up through his lashes. With every house, his bucket grew heavier. Georgia seemed to get over her grudge—people thinking they were twins was upping her candy haul, too.

“You’re both getting more than me,” Wyatt said, pouting.

“I’ll share with you later,” Cole said.

“Will you put some in my bucket now?” Wyatt asked.

Cole considered it. He looked in his own bucket, then in Georgia’s. He still wanted to beat her. “No, but I’ll share later. Promise.”

“This is the house with the money,” Georgia said. She knocked on the door.

“Trick or treat!”

Cole put everything he had learned into practice. He put his hand on his hip, fluttered his eyelashes a bit, and smiled broadly.

“Aww,” said the lady at the door. “Aren’t you two so sweet in your matching costumes?”

Cole giggled appropriately.

“I’m a pirate princess,” Georgia said.

“And I’m a princess princess,” Cole said.

“I’m a cowboy,” Wyatt piped up behind them.

“Oh, you’re cute, too, little guy,” the lady said. “Here, I have a really nice, shiny quarter for you! And, let’s see, what do I have for you two? Here, just some old scraps of paper so your little brother doesn’t get jealous.”

She winked, and handed over the bills.

“Thank you,” they chorused, and she shut the door.

Cole looked down at the bills clutched in his hand. He had two of them: a two dollar bill, plus another dollar bill.

“Hey, no fair,” Georgia said. “I only got a two dollar bill.”

Cole shifted his hip to the side. “Guess she thought I was prettier!”

Georgia stuffed the bill into her bucket.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Georgia was sullen for the rest of the route, and then it came time for them to head back. They went back to their secret passageway—Wyatt managed not to fall in the creek this time.

“Let’s count the candy when we get back,” Cole said.

“I don’t want to,” Georgia said.

“I’m going to eat my Snickers bar first, and then my M&Ms. And then my Reece’s

Pieces, and then the Almond Joys.”

“Enough, Wyatt,” Georgia said.

“Hey, little girls,” said a voice from the dark. “Aren’t you two cute?”

Cole looked up. There was a boy standing among the trees—an older teenager. Maybe he had candy, too. Maybe he could beat Georgia for sure now, since she was in such a bad mood that no one would want to give her candy.

“Hi!” Cole said, putting his moves into practice again. Georgia was frozen by his side.

“How old are you girls?”

“Ten,” Cole said, fluttering his lashes.

Georgia grabbed his arm. “Cole, don’t.”

The man’s eyes traveled up and down Cole’s body.

“What a pretty little dress,” he said.

“Thanks,” Cole said, cocking his hip to the side.

“Cole, stop it,” Georgia said. “Let’s go.”

“Do you have any candy for us?” Cole asked. The man stepped toward them, out of the shadows.

Georgia’s clawed Cole’s arm, hard.

“Ow,” he said. He turned to look at her. Her eyes were wide with a fear Cole wasn’t used to seeing in her.

“Let’s go. Now,” she said, continuing to pinch Cole’s arm as hard as she could. He tried to wrench out of her grip, but it was too strong.

“Fine,” he said. He didn’t like seeing Georgia this scared.

The man was laughing now.

Georgia held Cole’s hand the whole way home. Night had completely fallen, and the

streets were almost empty now. Around them, porch lights were winking off. When they reached Cole's front door, Georgia stopped him.

"Don't ever talk to men that look at you like that," Georgia said. Her voice had a serious edge that was as rare as her fear. She sounded much older than ten.

"What do you mean?"

"Ask Margot or Grammy if you don't understand," Georgia said. "They've both talked to me about it."

"About what? What am I supposed to understand?"

"About men like that, and being a girl," Georgia said. "It's not...always safe."

"But maybe he had more candy!"

"Forget it," Georgia said, spitting the words out angrily.

Cole's father and step-mother were waiting with hot apple cider. Cole grabbed a steaming mug, then dumped his bucket of candy out in the floor.

"Wow," his father said. "That's quite the haul."

"I'm going to count it," Cole said. "See, I knew it was a good idea to wear a dress!"

"Uncle Henry?" Georgia said. "Can I spend the night here? I don't want to walk back to Grammy and Granddaddy's."

"Sure," Cole's father said.

Cole began counting. Wyatt was already tearing into his bucket.

"It's going to be a nightmare getting you guys to go to sleep," said Cole's father.

"It's just one night of the year," Margot said.

While Cole counted, Margot looked at Georgia curled up on the couch.

"I'm fine," Georgia said. "Just tired."

"Well, that makes one of you," Cole's father said.

Margot sat down next to her. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Sure, I’m fine,” Georgia said. She scooted over until her head was in Margot’s lap, and Margot stroked her hair.

“Seventy-seven!” Cole said. “I have seventy-seven good pieces of candy! And...one hundred and twelve total. I bet I beat you, Georgia.”

Georgia only closed her eyes. For the first time since she’d met Cole, she felt like a knife had severed them apart. She always thought he was hers, he belonged to her, they belonged to each other, they were the same. But they weren’t the same, and there was something irreconcilable that Cole could never grasp. She wasn’t angry at him, not anymore. She opened her eyes again and watched her cousins. Wyatt was wearing the long wig now, and Cole had stripped off the dress. It was, like Georgia’s innocence, laying on the floor.

ASH WEDNESDAY

It was Wednesday—one of those rare Wednesdays that was either the best or the worst Wednesday, depending on your limb of the family tree. Georgia Ashworth peered out her grandmother’s bedroom window as the flames licked the old barn. The dry wood crackled and blazed as the fire climbed the structure. The roof collapsed with a crash, and smoke poured from the hole in thick, dark clouds. It smelled like burning leaves, but with more smoke. Georgia pressed her face against the window and could feel heat seep through the glass. Grammy would get onto her later for leaving a face smudge all over the clean window, but Georgia would worry about that when the time came. Now, there was a barn on fire.

Georgia was seven years old and fascinated with fire. When her grandfather burned trash in the burn pile in the yard, Georgia liked to go along. Georgia would stand close to the fire, feeling the heat of the flames on her face. She liked how the air shimmered from the rising heat, and the way little sparks would shoot up into the air. When Granddaddy turned his back, Georgia would find things to burn. Her favorite was styrofoam cups. When she dropped those in, they’d start to melt, then collapse in on themselves and shrivel to nothingness. Once, Granddaddy had caught her and told her to stop. He said burning styrofoam would release toxins into the air that

would hurt her to breathe in. Now, she waited until she was sure he wasn't looking, and tried not to breathe in too much.

Beside Georgia was her cousin, Cole, and beside Cole was Wyatt, Cole's younger half-brother. Wyatt was only four years old, and he had to stand on a Lincoln Logs box in order to see out the window. The barn was completely ablaze. Some of the dry grass near the barn had caught fire, beginning to smolder. There was a wail of sirens somewhere in the distance.

"The firetrucks are coming!" said Wyatt, bouncing on his box.

"Don't fall," Cole said.

Earlier that day, the kids had been playing in the living room when Grammy's neighbor, Lucille, had come to the door.

"Ida, you keep those kids away from the barn today," Lucille had said. "I donated it to the fire department. They're going to burn it today so the firemen can practice putting it out."

Their neighborhood used to be a farm, years and years ago, and the barn on Lucille's property was the only sign of that left. Everyone's yards were big enough so that Lucille's driveway was far from theirs, but their yards stretched right into each other, like they were one big field. That's where the old barn was.

"Will they bring their firetrucks?" Wyatt asked.

"Oh, Lord," said Grammy. "You shouldn't have said that where they could hear you."

Georgia watched the grass by the barn smolder. The firetrucks still weren't in sight. What would happen if the grass caught all the way on fire? The barn belonged to Lucille, but it still wasn't very far away from their house. If the flames spread, would the house look like the Styrofoam cup, melting and shriveling and finally collapsing to nothingness?

Once, Georgia had dropped a live wolf spider into Granddaddy's burn pile. Its body had

twisted in agony for a few seconds, then was consumed. Georgia had never told anyone she'd done this, and now thought back on it with some shame at having tortured and killed the creature; but she also remembered it with fascination. If the house caught on fire, would Georgia be like the spider? At church, Georgia's Sunday School teacher taught them that if they were good, their souls got to go to heaven when they died. But Georgia wasn't always good, like when she murdered the spider.

Did spiders have souls?

There was a flash of red light coming up the drive. The firetrucks were here.

"See the firetruck, Wyatt?" said Cole.

"I see it! I see it!" Wyatt said. He clapped his hands and toppled off his box. Cole helped him back up.

The firefighters piled out of the truck. They soon had their hose hooked up, and a long arc of water burst from it and landed on the barn. Another hose joined it. In no time at all, the fire was out, leaving only the black-charred wooden skeleton of the barn's frame. Georgia felt a stinging sense of disappointment with the fire gone, an emptiness inside, and a cold feeling where the fire's heat had been.

"That was awesome!" said Wyatt. "Did you see how fast they put it out? Did you see their red helmets? I want one of those helmets for Christmas. I wish I had my firetruck here. It's at my house."

"All right," said Grammy, coming into the room. "Show's over. It's lunchtime. Come on, now."

"I want to watch them drive away," said Wyatt. "Grammy, see their helmets? I want one of those for Christmas."

"You still have a ways to go before Christmas," said Grammy. "It's only July. Come on,

now. Time to eat.”

“I want to watch them drive away.”

“Okay, okay,” said Grammy. “Watch them drive away, and then it’s lunchtime.”

Grammy went back into the kitchen. Wyatt was watching the firetrucks, but Georgia looked at what used to be the barn.

“I want to play in it,” said Cole.

“Me, too,” said Georgia.

“Did you see how fast they put it out?”

“Yeah,” said Georgia, frowning. “I wish they’d taken a bit longer.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “The fire was kind of pretty.”

“Do you think there were any animals in there?” asked Cole. “You know, those old cats that used to hang around?”

“No,” said Georgia. “Well, I don’t think so. That guy that started the fire, he would’ve made sure there weren’t any there, right?”

“Yeah, probably,” said Cole.

The firetrucks were beginning to pull away.

“I want lunch,” said Georgia. “Let’s eat.”

“No,” said Wyatt. “I’m still watching.”

“Bye, then,” Georgia said.

She sat down at the table, where her bologna and cheese sandwich sat on a plate.

“Don’t you want to wait for your cousins?” asked Grammy.

“No,” said Georgia. “I’m hungry, and they’re taking forever.”

Georgia took a bite of her sandwich. She crunched down on a sour cream and onion

potato chip. In a few minutes, Cole and Wyatt joined her. They chattered to each other about the firetrucks and the fire fighters, but Georgia couldn't stop thinking about the way the barn looked when it was ablaze. It looked like life and death at the same time.

Georgia lay on a pile of blankets on the floor watching television when Cole crawled over on his hands and knees, stopping when his mouth was an inch from Georgia's ear.

"She's asleep," he whispered.

Georgia sat up and looked back. Sure enough, Grammy was sound asleep on the couch, her head tilted back and her mouth gaping.

"We can go see the barn," said Cole.

Georgia nodded. She turned to look back towards the bedroom, where Wyatt was playing.

"We shouldn't take Wyatt," she said. "We can't get him out of the house without him waking her up."

Cole shook his head. "He'll wake her up when he sees we're not here."

Georgia sighed. "True. He'll start hollering."

"I'll go get him," said Cole.

"Fine, but keep him quiet," said Georgia.

Cole crept back towards the bedroom, and Georgia stood up and eased towards the door. Cole came out of the bedroom with Wyatt's hand firmly in his. Georgia put her finger on her lips and directed her fiercest glare at Wyatt—the one that she'd learned from Grammy. She'd kill him if he woke Grammy.

They tiptoed through the house towards the barn. Once they'd crept halfway across the yard, they finally spoke.

"Race you to the barn!" said Georgia, taking off at a sprint.

“No fair!” said Wyatt, racing after her.

Georgia got there first and slammed her hand against the wood. It was still warm, and her fingers came away black. The smoke and ash smell was much stronger here. The framework of the barn still stood, but everything else was reduced to nothing but piles of ash.

“I won,” she said, panting.

Wyatt picked up a stick and pointed it toward the barn.

“Shh,” he said, mimicking the sound of running water. “I’m putting out the fire! This is my hose.”

Cole jumped up on a stump next to the barn. Georgia filled her palm with a pile of ash. She spit in it, mixing her saliva with the ash.

“Come here, Cole,” she said. When Cole came over, she dipped her finger into the mixture in her palm. She traced her finger along his cheekbones, leaving streaks. “War paint.”

“Me next!” said Wyatt, running up.

“I’m not done yet,” Georgia said.

“My turn, my turn, my turn,” said Wyatt.

“Fine, hold still,” Georgia said.

She didn’t do as good of a job with Wyatt, just giving him a few streaks on his cheeks.

“Cole, do me,” said Georgia.

“I want to,” Wyatt said.

“No, Cole has to. He’ll do a better job.”

Cole frowned in concentration as he dipped his finger in the ash.

“You have to spit in it,” Georgia said. “Or else it won’t stick.”

“Ew!” Wyatt said. “Your spit’s on my face?”

Cole spit in his palm and stepped closer to Georgia. She could see the lines of sweat on

his face drip and drop through the ashes, smearing them wetly. He traced his finger along her cheeks and forehead.

“Done!” said Cole, grinning.

“I wish I could see what it looks like,” said Georgia.

“We can look in the mirror when we get back,” said Cole.

Georgia put her whole hand in the ash, sifting it around. Clouds of it rose in the air in front of her like vapor. She clapped her hands, sending the puffs of ash off her skin. Cole whipped off his shirt.

“Draw something on my chest,” he said.

Georgia traced lines down Cole’s chest.

“Your turn,” he said.

Georgia paused. Ever since they’d gone to the lake, and an older lady got onto Georgia about not wearing a shirt, Georgia had felt funny at the sight of her own bare chest.

But the designs on Cole did look cool, and there was no one here to see her. She yanked her shirt off. The sun was strange on her bare skin. She was exposed. Cole’s finger traced along her chest, which felt funny. She shivered. His tongue poked out of the corner of his mouth in concentration.

“Done!” Cole announced.

Georgia felt a peculiar sense of shame from the way Cole was staring at the intricate triangles he’d traced on her chest. After a sudden thought, she looked towards Lucille’s house. No sign of her. Was her car still in the garage? Georgia couldn’t tell. What would Lucille tell Grammy if she saw Georgia shirtless? Georgia reached down and grabbed a handful of ash and plopped it on Wyatt’s head. It coated his red hair in gray dust.

“Hey!” said Wyatt. “No fair!”

He got his own handful of ash and smeared it on Georgia. She did the same to Cole.

“Ash fight!” said Georgia. “Whoever has less on them at the end wins!”

By the time they were finished, it was impossible for them to tell who had more ash on them, because they were all covered from head-to-toe in a fine layer of grit.

“Let’s go in the barn,” said Georgia.

“Do you think it’s safe?” asked Cole.

“Of course,” said Georgia. She wasn’t sure, but she wanted to see it anyway.

They stepped inside. They’d been in there lots of times, but it looked really different now. There had been a few stalls and small rooms, but the fire had consumed them, leaving only the outside walls standing. Georgia felt a pang of sadness, remembering all the times they’d played cowboys and Indians in here. What would it feel like to be in a fire? Georgia stood in the center of the barn and imagined the swirling flames engulfing her. Three years ago, when Georgia was only four years old, she’d seen the news right after the Oklahoma City bombing. A lot of kids had died. The last image she remembered seeing before the screen went black was a fireman carrying a small child with blood in her hair.

Georgia looked up at the corner of the barn, and she could see a tiny spider started to spin its web. Each of their footsteps sent up a cloud of ash. Georgia looked for the cats that used to hang around, hoping she didn’t find a burned-up corpse.

“Ow!” yelled Cole from behind her.

Georgia spun around. “What’s wrong?”

Cole was sitting on the ground by the barn, clutching his ankle.

“What happened?” Georgia asked, crouching down beside him.

“I stepped on something,” said Cole. “A nail, I think.”

The nail was lying beside them. Georgia picked it up. It was rusty. She swallowed. She

knew what happened with rusty nails.

“How bad is it?” she asked.

“Not that bad,” said Cole. “It didn’t go that deep, I don’t think.”

In February, the Catholic kids from their school would come back from lunch with ashes on their foreheads. Georgia had asked her friend Annie about them. Annie said it was Ash Wednesday, and the priest at her church would mark a cross on their heads. Georgia had asked why, and Annie said she didn’t know, but that it was just the right thing to do. Georgia had wondered back then if the ashes had any kind of magical powers. She wondered it again now. Maybe it was the right thing to do—was it always the right thing to do, to pick up the old ashes and give them new life?

“I want to try something,” Georgia said.

Georgia scooped up another handful of ash. This time, it was different, like the ash in her hands was sacred. She spit in the ash and mixed it with her finger. She felt very calm. She cleared a spot on Cole’s forehead, and, reverently, made a cross there.

“There,” she said.

Cole made eye contact with her, and it felt like something passed between them.

“All right. Let’s go,” said Georgia. “Can you walk?”

She helped Cole stand up. He took a few steps, but he couldn’t put much weight on that foot. She put her arm around his shoulders to let him lean on her. His bare skin was warm against hers.

“Wyatt, get our shirts,” said Georgia, conscious that no matter what happened, she didn’t want Grammy to see her shirtless outside.

They set out again across the yard, leaving a trail of ash behind them. Wyatt carried their t-shirts in a little bundle.

“Let’s go to the back door,” said Georgia. “We’ll have to leave our clothes outside.”

They stopped by the back door. Georgia stripped off her shorts, and shoes. Her socks and panties were also gray with ash, so she took those off, too. She looked at Wyatt and Cole, and then down at herself. The three of them stood there naked, their hair and skin coated in ash. Only the parts that were covered with their underwear was white, like tan lines after swimming.

“We’ll have to take a bath,” said Georgia. “I’ll go first. Be. Quiet.”

The back door opened to the pantry, which led to the kitchen and then to the hallway, where the bathroom was. Georgia stepped inside, tiptoeing to the kitchen. The door closed behind her, and she turned to glare at Wyatt, who had let it close too loudly. She put her fingers to her lips.

They crept through the kitchen, then to the hallway. Georgia closed the bathroom door behind them. Grammy and Granddaddy didn’t have a shower. Georgia put the stopper in the drain and filled the tub with warm water.

Cole helped Wyatt get in first, then Georgia and Cole climbed in. The tub was a bit too tight for the three of them. It had been about a year since they’d all taken a bath together, and they were bigger now. Their knees knocked, and water sloshed over the edge of the tub. They helped each other scrub up, and rinse the soap out of each others’ hair.

Georgia imagined the barn again, when it had blazed the brightest. And just like that, she had to see it. There was a small window in the bathroom that overlooked the yard. Georgia stood up and stepped up onto the ledge of the tub. The barn stood gray and ashy against the sky, and the surrounding grass was charred and blackened. Her fingertips tingled when she remembered what it had looked like. Now only settling ash came from the structure. Water dripped from her hair and onto the floor. She felt shame at letting Cole get hurt. It was almost the same feeling as when she’d killed the spider, and when she’d taken her shirt off. Just like that, she remembered

she was naked. Her hands flew to cover her chest, and she looked back at Cole and Wyatt. But they were only laughing and splashing one another.

There were footsteps outside the bathroom door. They froze, staring wide-eyed at one another. Georgia sank back into the tub, shoving aside whatever legs and arms were in the way.

“Kids? What are you doing in there?”

There was a long pause.

“Taking a bath, Grammy,” Georgia said.

“Why?”

“We wanted to,” she said. “We’re pretending like we’re at the pool.”

“Well, come on out of there. You’re too old for that. You’re too big to all fit in that tub. I’m sure you’re soaking the floor,” Grammy said.

“Okay,” said Georgia. “We’ll be out in a minute.”

They all sighed as Grammy’s retreating footsteps. Georgia stood up and turned around.

“Am I all clean?”

“Yeah,” said Cole.

“Stand up, I’ll check you,” said Georgia.

Water streamed off of Cole’s body, but she didn’t see any more ash. Wyatt was clean, too.

Georgia stepped out onto the floor. Grammy was right. It was soaked. She got some towels from the bathroom closet.

“Ow!” said Cole as his foot hit the floor. Georgia winced. She’d forgotten about the nail.

“Let me look at it,” she said. They sat down on the floor, and Cole put her foot in Georgia’s lap. There was a small, red hole where the nail had been. It hadn’t gone deep, but it was rusty. Georgia’s friend at school, William, had told Georgia about lock jaw, which could happen when you step on a rusty nail and your jaw would lock up and you could die because of

the bacteria from the nail. Georgia had to figure out how to help Cole while simultaneously avoiding trouble. She had a moral dilemma and realized fear and courage looked more like siblings than enemies.

A few weeks ago, Georgia had been playing with one of the stray cats. The cat had scratched her, and Grammy had poured hydrogen peroxide on the cut to clean it. The hydrogen peroxide was in the kitchen cabinet.

“I’m going to get something to clean it,” said Georgia. “But first, let’s get our clothes.”

They wrapped in their towels and crept out of the bathroom, then sprinted to the bedroom where they slept when they spent the night at Grammy and Granddaddy’s as fast as they could with Cole hopping. Their spare clothes were in the drawers.

“You two stay here,” said Georgia after they were dressed. “I’m going to get the hydrogen peroxide.”

Grammy was in the kitchen.

“Hi, Grammy,” said Georgia. “What are you doing?”

“I’m starting on your supper,” she said. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

Grammy was fixing meatloaf, her hands deep in a bowl of raw meat. Her hands glistened with the slimy egg.

“That looks good,” said Georgia. Seeing Grammy work on dinner made Georgia feel a little bit guilty.

But now was not the time for repentance, not with Cole sitting in the back room with a hole in his foot.

“Well, it will be good when it’s finished,” said Grammy.

Georgia nodded. The hydrogen peroxide was in the cabinet. She sidled over to it.

“What are you doing, Georgia?”

“Nothing,” said Georgia. The bacteria was invading Cole’s body through the wound on his foot at this very minute. She opened the cabinet. “Can I help you set the table, Grammy?”

Grammy frowned at her. “Sure you can, in an hour when it’s almost time to eat.”

“Why don’t I just go on and get the plates down?” said Georgia.

Grammy just shook her head. “You are a strange child sometimes, Georgie.”

Georgia started piling the plates on the counter. She glanced at Grammy through the side of her eye. Grammy was looking down at the meatloaf in the dish. Georgia put her hand on the bottle up there. She yanked it down.

“Okay, Grammy, I’ll set the table in an hour. Bye!”

She ran back to the bedroom, where Cole was sitting on the floor holding his foot.

“It’s hurting more now,” he said. “I think it’s swelling.”

Georgia sat down beside him. The wound was in the middle of his foot, and sure enough, it was looking a little bit puffy.

“This will help clean it,” said Georgia. She opened the cap and started to squirt it on Cole’s foot.

“Ow,” he said. “That burns. Ow! *Ow!*”

“Shh!” said Georgia. “Do you want us to get caught?”

“It really hurts!” said Cole.

“Should we get Grammy?” Wyatt asked.

“No, do you want to get in trouble?”

“Just get Grammy,” Cole said. He was crying now. “It hurts too much.”

Cole was still holding his foot when Georgia returned with Grammy.

“Cole hurt his foot, but it’s okay because I helped,” said Georgia. “I just got the hydrogen peroxide from the kitchen. But it still hurts him.”

“Oh, *that’s* what you were doing,” said Grammy. “Cole, let me look.”

She grabbed Cole’s foot. She saw the bottle sitting beside him.

“Georgia, this isn’t hydrogen peroxide. It’s rubbing alcohol. No wonder it burns so much,” said Grammy.

“Oh,” said Georgia. “Sorry.”

“What happened, Cole?” asked Grammy. “Cole? How did this happen to your foot?”

“I stepped on a nail,” said Cole.

“Where? In the house?” Grammy asked.

No one answered.

“Where did you step on the nail?” she asked again.

Wyatt looked like he was about to burst. Georgia narrowed her eyes at him, willing him to keep quiet.

“We were playing outside,” said Georgia.

“Where outside?”

They didn’t answer.

“Where outside? If there are nails out there, I need to pick them up so that you don’t get hurt again. Plus, they could hurt the mower next time Granddaddy mows.”

The three looked at each other. No one spoke, not even Wyatt. Then, a light seemed to flicker in Grammy’s eyes.

“You were in that old barn, weren’t you?” she said. They didn’t answer, but it was all the confirmation she needed. “This is why I *told* you to stay out of there. Or it could’ve fallen and you could have *died*.”

Georgia stood up and walked over to the window, where the remaining burned skeleton of the barn still stood. One day, perhaps her hot shame would melt away everything on her

outsides, exposing her bones, which were just the same as the boys' bones.

FINDING RIVENDELL

Finding Rivendell, for Candace and Heather, felt like finding home. Tucked into the foothills of the East Tennessee mountains, Rivendell was a community of people like them. Some called it a commune. Others scoffed at the dirty hippies. Candace and Heather found a place of real beauty, because Rivendell was real. In Rivendell, there was freedom—freedom from expectations, occupation, and currency—those false idols that stood in the way of what was true. Meaningful work presented itself; work not for pay but for food and survival. Here, they tilled the soil with their own hands, reaped the fruits of their labor, shared a common table with the fifty-odd fellow residents of Rivendell. The population of Rivendell changed constantly. The core group was consistent, but pilgrims and transients and seekers used Rivendell as a pause in their journeys. Rivendell wove together a tapestry of colors, music, love, sex, and community.

The twins had left their Kentucky home as soon as they'd turned eighteen. It wasn't out of resentment for their parents, or their childhood—their values simply didn't align. They might dream of a world that reconciled their parents' place in everyday society and their yearning for what was free—but that world didn't exist. The world hadn't yet caught up to what they wanted. Maybe it never could. The security a structured society offered to their parents only stifled and

suffocated the girls.

After moving out, the sisters spent several years as pilgrims, as seekers. But *seek and ye shall find*, although a free love commune wasn't what their Sunday school teachers had in mind. But Rivendell felt closer to God than their stuffy little church ever had.

The twins arrived in late spring. That meant they had plenty of time before the cold came to build a house. With the help and skills of their fellow residents—their new family—they erected a modest home. Days were spent farming, hand-raising goats for milk, digging mushrooms from the fresh earth, planting, reaping. Nights were spent gathered around a fire, drum circles, dancing, starlight. Candace most enjoyed those wild nights, frenetic dancing to music, the feel of other bodies against hers, then sex right under the stars. Heather's favorite times were mornings in the rain, walking barefoot on the soaked earth, reading Whitman under the shelter of the magnolia tree. The rain made the most beautiful, musical patter on the leaves, and the earth smelled like baptism.

As their time wore on, the community began to buzz in anticipation of the summer solstice. The night of the solstice would be like their nightly starlight dances on steroids. The group expected visiting pilgrims that could possibly even number in the hundreds. The week leading up to the solstice was spent gathering wood for the enormous bonfire, breaking into their stores from last years' harvest to roast vegetables, bake fresh bread with homemade jam, spread honey from Rivendell's own hives.

Heather was charged with making the butter. Mornings, she milked the goats. She came to enjoy those intimate moments with her hands on the goats' velvety teat, filling pails with fresh milk. She left a bit in a dish for the calico cat and her six tiny, fluffy kittens. Heather then took the milk inside, blended it and scooped out the new piles of fresh butter.

Candace was tasked with helping Heather, but she couldn't settle down. The buzz of the

solstice filled her, and she spent the days roaming the commune. Heather could handle the butter on her own. The days had grown hot, and her skin browned, and callouses developed on her bare feet. It was in this time of restless roaming that Candace first caught sight of Sunshine. He was one of the pilgrims here for the solstice.

He stood behind the farm store, the main building at Rivendell. He cradled a rolled-up tent in one arm. His golden hair fell in ringlets to his shoulders, and he had a face like one of the felt angel cutouts Candace remembered from Sunday school.

Candace knew in that moment she had to have him, needed to possess him. The thought puzzled her, as she had never felt the need to possess another person. Previously, the men she slept with were able to come and go with no attachment, just happy times and a pervading sense of love.

This was different. And it was so intense that she had to turn away and return to her house. But that night at the bonfire, during the dancing, she wormed her way through the throng to dance next to him. Her body felt hot against his. It was then that he told her his name, Sunshine. She wanted to fuck him, but not there, under the stars and in the open like usual. She wanted to go somewhere private, secluded, where they could be alone. But the week leading up to the solstice was one of mandated celibacy, as well as abstinence from alcohol and other substances, to Rivendell dwellers.

Heather noticed the change in her sister the next morning. Candace was preoccupied, pacing around the house at breakfast, taking a single bite of bread before moving again, then sitting and staring out the window at the clear sky outside.

“I met a boy,” Candace told her at last.

“What?”

“A boy, a beautiful boy. His name is Sunshine.”

“The blond guy?”

“Yes, the angel boy.”

Heather wasn't used to this kind of talk from Candace. Boys came and went, and that was as it should be, for both of them. Something tinged in the back of her brain, something irritating, like flies on a hot day. Heather tried to swat it away.

The day of the solstice dawned bright and clear. Heather awoke early and went outside to walk the sunrise over the blue distant mountains. There was something in the air, something urgent. Heather didn't know what it meant yet.

The day was one of fasting until the community meal in the middle of the afternoon. Candace walked barefoot to the center of town. There, the long, hand-carved feast table was being prepared. Wildflowers were strung together in bunches, decorating the table. Angela and Hope skipped over to Candace, their arms laden with wildflowers. Angela and Hope were best friends, teenage runaways who sought refuge at Rivendell.

“We made flower crowns,” Hope said. “Want one?”

Candace chose one made of bold, scarlet flowers.

“And one for my sister?” Candace asked. For Heather, she chose one of alternating, tiny blue and white buds.

Back at their house, Heather was packing up the fresh butter. Candace floated in bearing the flowers. Each helped the other place the crowns on their heads, and arrange their long hair over their shoulders. Together, they carried the butter back to the town center, then began to prepare for the feast. They dressed in long, flowing dresses, fastened bracelets around their wrists, and splashed a concoction of water boiled with lavender and rose petals on their necks. Then, smelling of flowers and musk, they began their pilgrimage to the late afternoon feast.

The table was piled with fruit, roasted vegetables, fresh bread with jam and cream and

butter, cakes with homemade icing, and many mason jars of wine. Everything was interspersed with bursts of bright flowers and greenery.

As they took spots at the table, Candace was pulled as if by gravity towards Sunshine, and Heather was forced to trail along after her. But Heather's spirits rose as they began to eat and drink, and the table and Heather's heart became full of laughter. Her head was already fuzzy from the strong wine after the week of abstaining. They ate and then drank until the sun began to set. The sky was lit up with shades of pink that glowed on their skin. They watched the sun set over the mountains, then it was time to head to the bonfire. The soft pink of innocence gave way to the burnt, sharp, rusted colors of the night.

It was bigger than their other fires, and of course, crowded with the hundred or so pilgrims in addition to the usual community. A drum started up at the edge of the circle, and then others joined. A tambourine, then a mandolin, a guitar, something that sounded strangely like a harp, but surely couldn't be. Heather could hardly see people in the flashes of firelight. She began to dance. Her body felt alive, giddy. She rubbed against a man—she wasn't even sure who, but she drew his tongue into her mouth, wrapped her legs around his waist.

As Heather lost herself in the sensations, Candace was looking for Sunshine. Her body tingled. Her heart yearned. She found Sunshine by the outer circle. He had a drum in his hands, pounding to the rhythm. Candace stood in front of him, looked into his eyes as she began to dance. Sunshine's lips parted as Candace gyrated in front of him. Then, he set his drum down, and she grasped his hands, then slipped away into Sunshine's tent.

The bonfire lasted until the early hours of the morning. Heather slipped back into their home. She expected to find Candace there, since she was nowhere to be found at the bonfire. But for the first time, Candace wasn't there. Heather couldn't keep herself awake. But it was the first time in her twenty-five years of life that she had slept apart from Candace.

As the summer progressed, Sunshine stayed at the commune. Candace began spending more nights in his tent than in her house with Heather. Heather was filled with an ache, like phantom pains after losing a limb. She carried her sister's absence in her body. Heather kept it hidden, though. She felt ridiculous—she still saw her sister daily. But it festered. Heather tried to fill the void with sex. She thought that maybe if she kept trying, she could find someone to capture her attention, like Sunshine did Candace's. Then, Heather wouldn't need Candace by her side.

Two months later, the group held a full moon celebration. It was similar to the solstice bonfire, but was on a smaller scale, as many of the pilgrims had left. It was here that the black anger in Heather's heart came to fruition.

Heather wasn't sure where Candace was, but she found Sunshine on the outer edge of the bonfire. Heather took his hand. She led him to the house she used to share with Candace. Sunshine didn't protest. They stripped off their clothes, bodies humming. Was this lust close to what Candace felt for Sunshine? Suddenly, there was guilt, but she pushed it down. She pulled Sunshine's bare body tightly against hers, wrapped a leg around his waist.

"You know I'm Heather, right?" she whispered into his ear. It mattered that he knew. In childhood, the twins had switched places on whims. She wanted to make sure that wasn't what was happening now.

"Don't care," Sunshine muttered as he pushed inside her.

As soon as it was over, Heather told him to leave the house. They never spoke of it again.

A bitter month passed. Candace was pregnant, and Sunshine was gone. Candace seemed strangely fine after Sunshine had moved on. He hadn't even known she was pregnant. Candace moved back in with Heather, as though nothing had changed. Heather alone was aware of the

dark cloud that came between them. The anxiety wore on her. She began puking at the same time as Candace in the mornings. On her hands and knees in the grass outside, Heather would throw up acrid bile until there was nothing left. She thought it might be sympathy vomit. But then there was the missed period.

Candace was elated to find out that Heather was pregnant at the same time. But Heather wracked her brains, remembering everyone she'd slept with that summer. Sunshine was only one of many, so why did she have the feeling this kid was definitely his? She tried to remember if they'd used protection. She usually insisted on it—did she with Sunshine? And if she didn't, why not? Was it subconscious self-sabotage?

That whole day, Candace fluttered around their house, already moving furniture and planning for their new additions. She babbled on about their impending children. Until that moment, Heather had no idea Candace even wanted a child. Did Heather want her child?

By the evening, Heather had come to a decision. Candace was getting ready for bed in her bedroom, but Heather was in hers packing up her meager possessions.

"I'm leaving," she told Candace.

"What? The house?"

Candace was in her bed now, a hand resting on her still-flat belly.

"No. I'm leaving the commune," Heather said. "I can't raise this kid here. I'm leaving."

Candace stared at her, disbelieving. "Where will you go?"

Heather shrugged. "Back home."

"This is home," Candace said. "With me. Your home is with me."

"Didn't seem that way when you left me for Sunshine," Heather said. She hadn't planned to say it, but it was out now.

Candace's face darkened dangerously. "I didn't leave you. Besides, he's gone now."

“I can’t raise a kid here,” Heather said again.

“If you walk out that door, you realize you’re leaving me, right?”

“Looks like it,” Heather said.

“I want us to raise our children together.”

Heather shrugged. “I can’t.”

Heather asked Dev, one of the few people with a car, to drive her to the nearest town, where she could catch a bus back to Kentucky. Her betrayal pervaded every pore. But she’d betrayed her sister a month ago—she was just dealing with the consequences now. She thought about Henry, her middle school boyfriend. He’d been in love with her all through high school. She hadn’t seen him in years, but was there a chance he still carried a torch for her? She didn’t know, but she would find out. If not him, surely she could find a more respectable man to seduce—anyone but Sunshine. He’d never know the baby wasn’t his.

Heather had to wait all night at the bus station. The bus came at four a.m. As the bus pulled away, she looked through the window. It was dark outside, and light inside, so she could see her face reflected back at her, over the gray mountains in the distance. Her face was laid over the image of the mountains, like a double-exposed photograph. But it was her sister’s face that looked back at her with reproach. Heather’s new fantasy was to find someone to settle down to raise her child with. She would become that which they disdained.

THE FLEETING SEASON

Lucille Henson spent the hot March morning icing her tulips. She'd been preparing for this all week, ever since Neal Holt, the only weatherman she trusted on Channel 6 News, had predicted the unseasonable heat wave. She went down to the 7-11 on the corner, and filled her little car up with bags and bags of ice from the machine in front.

“You must be having some party, huh?” the acne-riddled teenager at the front counter had said.

Lucille carted the ice home and loaded the ice into her wheelbarrow, wheeling it out to her front garden. She tore a hole in the plastic and started pouring ice from the bag onto the soil, as though she were sowing frozen seeds. When she finished the first bag, she started on the second.

Thirteen-year-old Georgia was out in the yard by herself. It was one of those rare lonely Saturdays, when Cole and Wyatt were busy with their parents, leaving Georgia all alone at their grandparents' house. She spent the morning poking around Granddaddy's shed, which doubled as his antique shop. He didn't sell much of the old junk, but she loved helping him fix old

motorcycles, clean knick-knacks and wall ornaments, and, perhaps her favorite, flip through old books with their musty vanilla scent. But Granddaddy had to leave in the afternoon to go deliver a wooden baby crib he'd made for a young couple from their church, and Grammy was in the house, visiting with her old friend, Shirley, over a cup of coffee. Georgia knew they'd be talking about knitting and soap operas and other things Georgia hated. Georgia was left alone to wander around outside.

Spring had arrived at last, after a bitterly cold winter. Georgia decided to look for caterpillars or ladybugs or frogs—but she couldn't find any, no matter where she looked. It was still too early. She'd been cooped up all winter, though, and was restless for activity. She climbed one of the old oak trees and looked out over the neighborhood. In was in the tree that she looked over at their neighbor Lucille's house, and she saw the strangest sight she'd ever seen.

“What are you doing?” said a voice from behind Lucille. The hairs on the back of Lucille's neck rose. Lucille knew this voice. It was a voice that grated on her during the daylight hours, and haunted her dreams at night. Lucille turned to face the nuisance.

The little girl was by herself this time, her hair long and stringy. She was dressed in shorts, a tank top, and muddy galoshes. It wasn't raining. Most of the time, her insufferable brothers or cousins or whatever relations they were were at her side. This time, it was just the girl. But the girl was the worst of the bunch. The ringleader.

“Young lady, I've talked to your grandmother about this,” Lucille said. “My flowers are very fragile, and I don't want you playing in here.”

“I just wondered,” said the girl, fixing Lucille with a steely gaze that seemed beyond her years, “what you were doing.”

This neighbor girl and the two boys ran wild around the yard like stray cats. Lucille had

marched to their grandmother Ida's door countless times to complain, but it never did any good. More than once, they'd yanked the roses right off her rosebushes. When Lucille went to tell Ida a piece of her mind, she'd seen the roses sitting in a vase in Ida's living room. She'd pointed them out when Ida denied knowing anything about the flowers, but Ida had closed the door in her face—in the polite fashion that only a southern lady could manage.

“I'm putting ice on the tulips,” Lucille said. She hoped the answer would make the child go away.

“Why?” asked the girl.

The kid had a name, Lucille knew. Something silly, like a season or a month of the year. Autumn? April? Or maybe she was named after a state, or a city. Something ridiculous that she heard shouted through her yard too many times. Perhaps she only forgot because she never wanted to remember.

“Because,” Lucille said. “When it gets too hot, the tulips die.”

“Really?”

“Well, no,” said Lucille. “They don't die, but the blooms go away until next spring.”

She had been a middle school science teacher a thousand years ago, before she'd gotten married, and before.... Well, before. That teacher part of her hadn't gone away, apparently. Rather, like the tulips, it had just lain dormant somewhere inside her. She resented that a bit. Or, at least, she resented that it was coming out right now when all she wanted was for the girl to go away.

“Oh,” said the kid. “So the ice makes them last longer?”

“Yes.”

“Because it cools them down?”

“Obviously.”

Lucille went back to her work, pulling out handfuls of ice. Her hand started to feel achy and numb.

“Can I help?” asked the child.

“No,” said Lucille.

“Why not?”

“Because,” Lucille said. “Because you and your brothers trampled my violets last summer. And because you won’t stop picking the roses off my rosebush.”

“Oh,” said the girl. “They’re my cousins.”

“You and your cousins, then,” said Lucille.

“We didn’t mean to hurt your flowers,” said the girl, shrugging. “We were just playing.”

Lucille’s hand cramped up with the cold now. Arthritis. She might have to quit and cart the bags to her freezer before it all melted.

“Are you sure I can’t help?” asked the girl.

Lucille sighed. The girl probably wouldn’t hurt anything, and Lucille would watch her like a hawk to make sure she didn’t.

“Well, I suppose you can,” said Lucille. “If you really want to.”

Lucille showed the girl how to aim the ice for the roots so as not to crush the blooms.

“How long do these flowers usually last?” asked the girl.

“Oh, up to six weeks, if I’m lucky,” said Lucille.

“That’s all?” asked the girl.

“Well, yes,” she said.

“Seems like a lot of work for only six weeks of flowers,” said the girl.

Lucille frowned. It was a lot of work. But what did this child know of work? What did this little rat know about taking out a trowel and hoe, making a hole just large enough to slip the

bulb into, then gently tucking it into the soil? It was work, but without work, there was no joy. Without toil, she wouldn't see the green stems inch their way out of the ground, wouldn't be able to watch the bloom develop, fold, and unfold with the changing weather, wouldn't marvel at the tender flowers in cheery shades of fuchsia and white and red and yellow. The bloom would open to receive the sun, and close again to protect the pistil on rainy days. Daily, Lucille dragged out the hose and doused each tulip individually at the root. What did this child know of any of that?

"It must make you sad when they go away," said the child.

The child's question struck her. "Well, yes," said Lucille. "It is a little sad when they go away. But then the day lilies and the hydrangeas bloom in the summer, so it's not all bad."

"But wouldn't it be better if they all bloomed all the time?" asked the child. She grabbed another handful of ice and spread it to the soil. An errant ice cube landed in the open bulb of the tulip.

"Careful!" Lucille said, but the girl was already picking the cube out of the flower and placing it on the soil.

Lucille considered the question again.

"No," she said at last.

"What?" asked the girl.

"No, I don't think it would be better for them to bloom all the time. It wouldn't be as special. Things are even more beautiful when you only have a little while to enjoy them," said Lucille.

"Oh," said the girl. "So it's like Christmas? I used to think I wanted it to be Christmas all year round, but if every day is Christmas, well...." The girl shrugged.

Lucille's favorite season was spring. It was a fleeting season, one that came and went quickly so that you had to sit down and enjoy it while it was here. Spring with its tender and

fragile blooms, when pink and white dogwood petals sprayed from the trees like confetti on the breeze, when the sun warmed the earth but didn't yet scorch. Spring days after a long night's rain, when newborn leaves began to grow, when grass was fresh and new and as green as it would be all year. One day, she'd wake up, and spring would be gone. The sun would be newly relentless, the bulbs would wither, the blooms would blow away in a hot wind.

People who loved the spring were accustomed to loss. They had to be, or they'd take spring's yearly leave as a betrayal. The beauty of spring, though, was that it always came back. Every winter, Lucille wondered if she'd make it to spring. But so far, every winter, she did. Her tulips always welcomed her.

Maybe icing the tulips was the wrong thing to do. Maybe Lucille was trying too hard to hold onto something that was ready to go. If the beauty of spring came from its fleetingness, then should she really grasp onto it?

But she had to hold onto it while it was here, just like she had to hold onto her garden, even when the arthritis left her limping and gnarled her fingers into throbbing claws. Year after year, there was the garden. When she had nothing, there was her garden. She'd lost so much—everything—and what could she do but grasp onto these fragile blossoms?

“Why don't you like kids?” asked the girl.

“I do,” said Lucille without thinking. “Why did you say that?”

“Because you yell at us,” said the girl.

“I wouldn't yell at you if you'd stay out of my garden.”

“Why didn't you ever have kids, then?” the girl asked.

“I did,” said Lucille.

Colin had been the most beautiful boy. Pale, always—too pale—except for that splash of rose petals on his cheeks, and his eyes like violets.

“Oh,” said the girl. “Are your kids grown up now?”

“No,” said Lucille. “No, he didn’t get to grow up.”

“Hmm? Why not?” the girl asked. Then, “Oh.”

There was silence save the wind brushing through the trees. Lucille had done the unimaginable: rendered this child speechless.

But then, the girl said, “I was taken away from my mother when I was five.”

The girl pulled out another fistful of ice and placed it in the soil. Now Lucille was the speechless one.

“I’m twelve now,” the girl said. “But I don’t really see her anymore.”

“She doesn’t want to see you?”

“It’s not really that she doesn’t want to, I don’t think,” the girl said. “I think she forgets about things that aren’t right in front of her. And I’m not in front of her, not anymore.”

“I don’t think she’s forgotten you,” Lucille said. She didn’t see how anyone could forget their own child, nor did she see how anyone could forget one as loud and boisterous as this one.

“Maybe *forget* is the wrong word,” the girl said. “Maybe it’s more like, she doesn’t think about me all the time. People think she must have been a bad mom, but it isn’t true. My grandparents thought I would be better off living with them. And they’re right, I guess. But I miss my mom sometimes, and I wonder what it would be like if I was still with her. No one ever asked me, you know? They never asked me if I wanted to leave my mom or not. They don’t ask me now if I miss her. Everyone just thinks I’m better off.”

The girl placed the bag of ice on the ground and knelt beside a tulip. She ran a finger along its smooth petal, then pinched it between her fingers.

“Don’t, you’ll damage it,” Lucille said before she could stop herself. The girl dropped her hand.

“She still calls me sometimes,” the girl said. “You know, on the phone. When she can. When she thinks about it. When she thinks about—me.”

The girl stood up again. She had a scrape on one knee. She turned her gaze on Lucille. Again, it was steady and ancient, beyond the child’s years.

“I think I should go home now,” she said. “Back to my grandmother. Good-bye.”

The girl scampered away, and Lucille watched her slight figure recede until she was back in the house. Lucille felt shaken inside, unsteady. She leaned on her porch railing for support. Then, she picked up her bag of ice and began again.

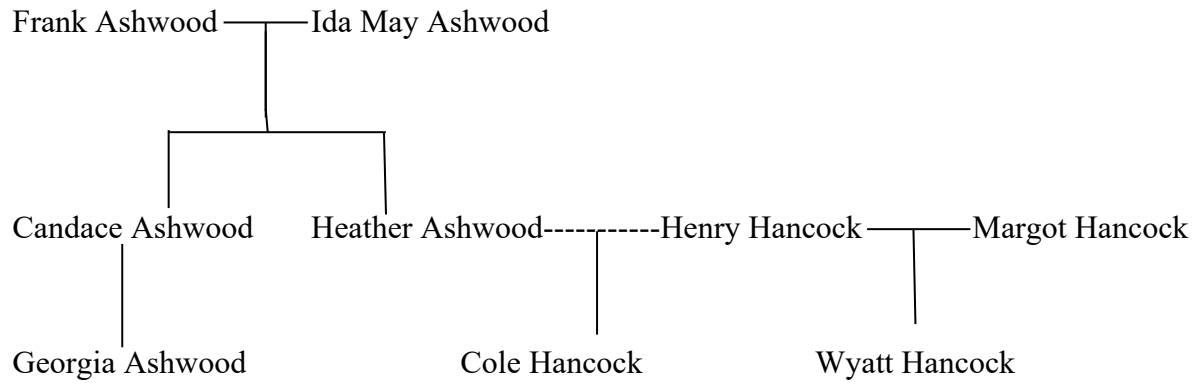
Georgia went straight to Granddaddy’s shed and tucked herself into one of the old couches. She curled up in a ball on her side, drawing her knees to her chest. The couch fabric was old and worn and scratchy against her cheek, and she breathed in its musty antique smell. She didn’t know why she’d told Lucille those things about her mother. She’d never told *anyone* those things. Not Grammy or Granddaddy or Cole.... Was this the first time she admitted her feelings, even to herself? Why had she told Lucille the truths that haunted her sleep?

Georgia thought again about Lucille’s garden. She loved playing there with Cole and Wyatt, running around the multicolored bursts of flowers, leaping through archways dripping with bright ivy, selecting only the most perfect roses to bring to their grandmother. It was the garden that had bonded her to Lucille. Even as she thought she despised the old woman—how could she hate someone who had created something of such great beauty?

Something inside Georgia trusted Lucille—Lucille, who had told Georgia the darkest secret in her heart. And Georgia had told her own dark secret right back, with only the tulips as witnesses.

APPENDIX

Family Tree



Timeline

