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MINDSET PERFECT

by

Jeremy Eugene Sullivan

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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Major: Creative Writing

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Abstract

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Mindset Perfect is a short story collection about the residents who live in the fictional city of Lincoln, Mississippi. Centering mostly on the Moore family, this collection of stories explores themes like religion, gossip, death, and marriage. This collection gives readers an insight into what it is like to live in a small Southern town, where everyone tends to know everyone. Beginning with “Mr. Tansey’s Daughter,” a story about a prodigal child returning to her hometown after a long absence, and ending with “The Redemption of Donald McCoy,” which features a life long resident of Lincoln finally leaving his hometown for good, these stories are intended to explore the human condition. In the spirit of *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Dubliners*, this collection shows the different types of people who live in the American South.

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Mr. Tansey's Daughter

"I don't think of all the misery, but of the beauty that still remains." -Anne Frank

In the years that led up to Frank Tansey's suicide, there were whispers in the streets of Lincoln, Mississippi that the old man was starting to lose it. Mrs. McCann said that she drove by his house at one in the morning and saw him standing outside in his front yard watering his flower bed in a floral print nightgown that everyone knew didn't belong to his wife, Bernadette, because none of her clothes would be able to fit around his corpulent frame. Mrs. McCann had a knack for embellishing the truth, and the McCanns and the Tanseys did not get along. Several folks mentioned that they saw him walking up and down Baker Street, where he lived, loudly talking to himself. His words were mostly nonsensical, but even if no one understood them, they did understand why he was doing it. Whatever was happening to Frank had something to do with his daughter, Hope.

Frank had served in Vietnam. When he returned to Lincoln, Mississippi, he didn't seem to be suffering the trauma that others who had served were experiencing. He met Bernadette in Saigon. She was born Nguyễn Thị Dung, but started to go by Bernadette once she moved to Lincoln. She saw Bernadette Peters on a Bing Crosby Christmas special and liked her and her name. Frank once said that the word *dung* meant beauty in Vietnamese, and Lincoln's men, who only knew the word to mean something else, felt that if *beauty* truly was the meaning of the word, then it was a fitting name for her. Miss Bernadette was a petite woman with long black hair that shined like a blackbird's feathers in the sun, but it was her eyes that most people were hung up on. There weren't many

people of Asian descent in Lincoln, so when she first arrived, her exotic looks made Frank the envy of every man in town. When they were first married, Frank was a tall, slim man, with neatly trimmed brown hair. He was clean shaven with a square jaw normally reserved for superheroes. As he got older, he put on weight, and grew a long beard that caused many of the children in town to mistake him for Santa Claus.

The Tanseys had owned Tansey Cleaners, a business that they started in 1978, two years after they were married and about a year after their first son, Frank Jr., was born. Hope was the youngest of their children and also their only daughter. She had another brother, Carter. Frank Jr. and Carter had done all right for themselves. Frank Jr. had a profitable law practice in Chicago, while Carter worked as a tattoo artist in Denver. The elder Frank had a Sailor Jerry style heart tattooed on his arm with “Bernadette” written in the middle of it that Carter had done for him when the Tanseys visited him. Hope was different from Frank’s other children, and while I can’t really say it was Frank’s fault the way she turned out, he took full responsibility.

* * *

Until my momma, Helen Moore, started to come of age, many argued that Miss Bernadette was the most beautiful woman in Lincoln. I never really understood where my mother got her looks. Grandpa and Memaw were the lightest shade of pale available, yet my mother’s skin had an olive complexion that made me wonder whether or not Memaw took an Italian lover while Grandpa was working the cotton farm. Momma’s brother, Ray, and even me and my baby sister Nadine, inherited the pasty skin of Memaw

and Grandpa. Nadine did get Momma's thick, curly brown hair, and as Nadine has grown into an adult, she took to straightening her hair, so that she looks less like Momma.

I talk about Momma, because she was the last person to talk to Frank on the night he took his life. Frank liked my momma, and my momma liked Frank, but there was nothing unsavory about their friendship. Tansey Cleaners had originally been off of Tupelo Avenue, just down the street from Dale's Auto Repairs, before the Tanseys closed up shop in 1991. They said they were moving to Florida, but that never came to pass. When it became apparent that they would be staying in Lincoln a little longer, they reopened on Central in the strip mall next to the Jitney Jungle.

Seeing the old Tansey Cleaners building vacant, Miss Angie Stone decided it was time for Lincoln, Mississippi to have a drink. She opened the town's first bar in 1992, and she called it The Beaver's Tail. A year after it opened, my momma started working for her. Miss Stone said she didn't care how awful my momma's drinks might taste or how slow she might be behind the bar. She needed a woman that looked like Helen Moore working the place. Mississippi summers can get pretty hot, and Momma always dressed for the weather which didn't hurt her money none. She would wear cut off blue jean shorts and tank tops that would show her cleavage. Momma was a classic beauty with a curvy body like Marilyn Monroe or a young Liz Taylor. Lincoln, Mississippi had been a town of cotton farmers, and men who worked in the town had no use for a frail woman. I guess they thought a frail woman might bring on weak offspring. While I understood why all the men ogled Momma, it didn't make it easy for me as a child. I'd

hear taunts from my classmates. They'd all tell me they were gonna be my step-daddy, and that made me angry.

Momma didn't really drink. She would have the occasional glass of red wine with dinner or maybe a beer at a cookout, but her choice beverage was coffee. Momma wasn't a prude, but she was a good Baptist. After my daddy, Stephen Moore, died in Desert Storm, she never took a lover to my knowledge. She worked mornings at McCoy's Grocery on Main Street, and her boss's son, Donald McCoy, was always calling around our house. Donald was a good man, but she'd never give him the time of day.

Momma hated the idea of spending her evenings in a bar, until Miss Stone told her that her bartenders were making close to \$150.00 a night. We were living with Memaw. Grandpa had already passed at this point, and while Memaw certainly helped Momma out both financially and with looking out for me and Nadine, we needed more money. Momma doubled what Miss Stone promised in her second week of working at The Beaver's Tail.

Momma quit as a Sunday school teacher at Harmony Baptist when she got the job at The Beaver's Tail. She didn't think she had any businesses teaching people about God, when she made her living serving them the Devil. Frank Tansey decided that he liked what Miss Stone had done with his old building, so he became a regular. That's how Frank and my momma became friends.

I'm not sure the Tanseys cleaned the floors much when they had their dry cleaning business going, and all Miss Stone did was put in carpet in the dining area that looked like it had been purchased from a secondhand store. You could see white tiles

peeking up from beneath the carpet with years of black dust caked to them. The pool tables, the booths, the chairs, and even the bar she put into the building were all previously used, which made the bar look well worn on opening day. By the first week in business, a permanent cloud of cigarette smoke seemed to float in the air. You couldn't really tell at night, but during the day, it looked like a ghost was floating in the bar.

Momma liked Frank because he was the only man who frequented the bar, besides Uncle Ray, that didn't feel the need to put his hands all over her. When Frank first started going to The Beaver's Tail, he usually just had a beer and maybe ordered a cheeseburger or some mozzarella sticks. I'm convinced that it was the food at The Beaver's Tail that caused him to put on all his weight. He wasn't really a drunk back then, he just liked the social atmosphere of the bar. He didn't take to drinking until Hope started losing it.

* * *

I'm not sure how hereditary mental illness is, but maybe Hope got it from Mr. Frank. Honestly, I think that if you love the person who is mentally ill, that their mental illness could wear off on you. I'm no psychologist, but I think that was what happened to Frank. Frank loved all of his kids, but Hope was a bit of a daddy's girl. He certainly tended to be a bit more protective of her than he was Frank Jr. and Carter.

I grew up with Hope Tansey, and while I don't admit this all that often, she was my first crush. We'd gone to school together until the tenth grade when Hope left Lincoln. Even before that, we'd been babies in Sunday school at Harmony Baptist. My

momma taught one of the Sunday school classes Hope and I was in, and Momma always enjoyed Hope's company as well.

One of the most vivid memories I have of elementary school was in the fourth grade. Mrs. Stephens was teaching us about multiplication, and Hope, who was sitting in the desk next to me, could barely keep her eyes open. I remember that Mr. Frank had come in and told Mrs. Stephens that Hope had an earache and hadn't slept all night. He didn't want to keep her home, but he asked her to go easy on Hope if she fell asleep in class. Well, Hope passed out and knocked her Trapper Keeper to the floor. It made a loud noise and everyone in the classroom started laughing. She looked so embarrassed, and I couldn't help but feel bad for her. I leaned down to pick her Trapper Keeper up, and that was when I saw it, plain as day. On the back of her Trapper Keeper, she had written, "I ♥ William Moore."

Back when I was younger, I was shy around girls, so they didn't pay too much attention to me. When I saw that she had written that, I just knew in my fourth grade head that one day me and Hope were going to get married. We went steady for about a month after I saw that. I'm not sure what about us showed that we were going steady. We never held hands, hugged, or kissed, but she told people that I was her boyfriend, and I proudly told everyone she was my girlfriend. Then she left me for Mark Osbourne, and I swear that me and Mark never said a word to one another again until the seventh grade, even though Hope dumped him before fifth grade was over.

In seventh grade, Hope dated Jack McCann. I was surprised that I took that as hard as I did. One of the biggest reasons that I started talking to Mark again was because

I realized that my relationship with Hope was minor at best. I guess I still had some sort of crush on Hope. It didn't help that Jack was one of my closest friends. Still, I made it a point to play nice with everyone.

Jack is good with secrets, and he always has been. Many are surprised by this, because his mother is Lincoln's busiest body. When it came to Jack's relationship with Hope, he was mostly tight lipped. We were able to figure out some things just by their body language. We all assumed that Jack and Hope went all the way. When I saw the way that Jack and Hope smiled at each other, I was able to let go of my own misgivings. They looked so happy that I had removed myself as Hope's groom in my fantasy and was now standing behind Jack as his best man.

* * *

It was in the eighth grade that Hope tried to kill herself for the first time. She got a hold of some pills, took the entire bottle, and went to sleep. No one knew what kind of pills they were or how many she took except for Frank and Bernadette, and they weren't really up for sharing the experience with everybody. Jack didn't know either. Frank and Bernadette thought that Jack had something to do with Hope trying to take her life, so they made sure that he wasn't able to come over and see her. Jack swore he had nothing to do with it.

I took to stealing cigarettes from my momma around that time, and Jack and I found a spot behind the gymnasium at Lincoln Middle School where all these discarded cigarette butts were all over the ground. We figured it was a safe spot that some of our classmates found to smoke, so we took to skipping classes there.

“I knew something wasn’t right with her,” Jack told me as we puffed on Momma’s Lucky Strikes. Jack always looked so confident, and this was the first time that I ever saw him look worried. “I don’t know what to do, William.”

Hope had gone to Baptist Memorial in Oxford which was a good forty miles west from Lincoln. We heard that they took Hope there to get her stomach pumped. She was out of school for close to two weeks, and Jack didn’t hear from her at all during that time. He tried calling her house, but Frank and Bernadette wouldn’t let him talk to her nor was he sure that she was even there. When she finally came back to school, Jack was excited to see her, but she just walked right past him and didn’t even acknowledge him. When we were leaving school that day, he followed Hope as she walked home.

“You ain’t gonna say nothin’ to me?” he asked.

“Dad said we can’t see each other anymore,” Hope said. “He thinks you’re bad for me.” She just walked past him after that. The next day at school, Jack had his own cigarettes and spent the entire day behind the gymnasium. I really don’t know what all he was doing back there, but I think he just didn’t feel like being stuck in the same room as Hope. It turned out that me and Jack’s secret smoking spot was where Mr. Auckerman, the principle of our school, went to smoke after he ate lunch. The discarded cigarette butts belonged to him rather than our fellow students. Mr. Auckerman caught Jack with a cigarette in his hand and suspended him for a week. Word spread pretty quickly about Jack’s suspension, and while I don’t know what Hope thought about all of it, I saw her in the cafeteria smiling with her arm around Jay Peterson. For a moment, I really hated her. As far as I was concerned, she had no business to be smiling or happy. I wanted to walk

up to her, knock her arm off of Jay Peterson, and tell her what I thought of her, but I just knew if I got into trouble, Momma would kill me. I guess in the same way that Hope was a daddy's girl, I was a bit of a momma's boy, and I didn't want to let her down.

* * *

When I got home from school the day that Jack got suspended, Momma was waiting on me in the living room. She was already dressed for her shift at The Beaver's Tail. It was a chillier spring day, so she was showing less skin, but her blue jeans were tight, and her sweater was cut low enough to tease a man at the bar out of an extra dollar or two. Normally, Momma was so meticulous with her makeup, and I noticed that she wasn't wearing any. Normally, she was already at work when I got home from school if she had evening shifts, so I knew that she had stuck around the house to talk to me.

"I heard Jack McCann got suspended today," she said.

"Yes ma'am," I said.

"I heard he was suspended for smoking."

I nodded, though I wasn't quite sure what she was getting at.

"My cigarettes seem to be going pretty fast lately," she said while holding an almost empty pack of her Lucky Strikes. "You boys ain't taking them, are you?" I stared at Momma for a second not sure how I was to properly respond. While I hated lying to her, I hated getting in trouble more. I knew I had a couple of her cigarettes in my backpack, and I was almost certain that even if I told her that I had not taken her cigarettes, that she would still know that I was lying. She raised her eyebrows at me, but

I just continued to stare back at her, not saying a word. My thought was that if I didn't say anything, I wouldn't be lying.

“Mr. Frank thinks that Jack is the reason Hope tried to kill herself,” I said. “I don't think that's true. He won't let Jack and Hope see each other, and Jack was upset. He didn't want to be in the classroom with Hope, so he decided to spend all day smoking behind the gym.”

I wasn't sure why I was telling Momma all of this, but it seemed to work in my favor at first. Momma's face turned from stern to sympathetic. She knew that Hope tried to kill herself, and I guess she thought I must have been pretty traumatized that someone my own age, who I had grown up with, had tried to do something like that. She was right. While I might not have been as close to the situation as Jack, it did make me realize my own mortality to find out someone from my class had almost died. Momma always liked Jack as well, and I'm sure her heart went out to him.

“Well, you and I know that Jack is a good soul. I'm sure he had nothing to do with why Hope did that or at least not on purpose.” When Momma said that, it rubbed me the wrong way. The problem was I couldn't actually prove that Jack didn't have anything to do with it. He never told me anything about his relationship with Hope. How could I defend him?

“You see Mr. Frank every day at work,” I said. “Can't you say something to him. Let him know that Jack isn't bad?”

“Honey,” Momma said, and she got down on her knees and looked me in the eyes. “If I tell him that Jack isn't bad, then what am I telling him about Hope?”

“You don’t think he should know that she ain’t acting right?” I asked.

“Who are you to say she ain’t acting right?” Momma said back to me. “Maybe she’s sad. Maybe Jack didn’t treat her that well. I’ve learned the hard way that people will just say whatever they goddamn please about you in this town. I brought you up better than to judge her like that. And as Nadine gets bigger, you better punch the lights out of anyone who talks about her the way people are talking about Hope. Besides, I bet she’s not stealing cigarettes from Miss Bernadette.” Momma stood up and grabbed her purse.

At that moment, I was furious with Momma. While I was worried about Jack, I didn’t want anything to happen to Hope neither. It seemed all the grown ups just felt like she and Jack were bad for each other, and that separating the two of them would fix everything. Besides, I figured that if Miss Bernadette had the option, she would much prefer her biggest problem to be Hope stealing cigarettes. Before walking out the front door, Momma stopped to look at me.

“Y’all are all too young to be worrying over stuff like this anyways,” she said.

Momma rustled my hair and then walked out the front door. The thing was, I was genuinely worried about Jack and Hope. All I could think about was Hope smiling with her arm around Jay Peterson. It seemed like she was celebrating Jack’s suspension, and it just tore me up. In a strange way, I was still very worried about her.

* * *

The time came for our junior high prom. The dance was in our gym, and Jack showed up stag. He sat in the bleachers, drank punch and watched everyone else dance.

I'd brought Glenda Williams, but I hated seeing Jack like that. In between songs, I would excuse myself and go sit next to him. He didn't say a word, but I could tell that he was waiting for Hope to barge through the doors. What we didn't know then, was that Hope was taking to cutting herself.

During freshman year of high school, it started to become obvious. Hope would wear sleeveless shirts to school, and you could see the scratches all over the tops of her arms. They crisscrossed in patterns that almost looked like the designs on the blankets my Memaw would knit. I wanted to touch her scars. I just knew that I would be able to feel them protruding from the rest of her skin. The thing was, she didn't speak much to me anymore or Mark Osbourne because we were both so close to Jack. Hope was still one of the prettiest girls in our class, but she didn't really have any friends, male or female. If anyone tried to be friendly to her, she would just push them away. Then in the tenth grade, she made an attempt at her life that was pretty close to successful, and she never came back to school.

We never knew where she went. Some people said that she was in Memphis at Lakeside. I'd also heard that she had gone off to live with her aunt and uncle in New Orleans. She finished high school there, and after that the stories about her stopped. I never knew if she went on to college or what she was doing. Truthfully, I don't even know where the rumors about where she went began, as Frank and Bernadette took to not talking about their daughter. If someone asked them about Frank Jr. or Carter, you couldn't get them to quiet down, but if Hope was brought up, they didn't say a word. We all knew that they definitely still had contact with their daughter. Walter Preston, the mail

carrier on their street, said he saw postcards going to the Tansey house about once a month, and that they came from all over. He saw one from St. Louis, one from Boston, one from New York City, and even one from London, England.

* * *

The night Frank Tansey killed himself in October 2001, he'd gone to see my Momma at The Beaver's Tail. She said that it seemed like he had been drinking before he came in, but she had always known Frank to be the sort of man to hold his liquor well, so she served him anyways. As a former vet, Frank had taken September 11th pretty hard, and Momma said he had been drinking more than his usual amount. He was just ordering shots of Jack Daniels, but Momma said that he wasn't shooting them. He was sipping on them. Frank never really smoked cigarettes, but that night, Momma said he had a pack of Marlboro Reds, and that he was chain smoking.

During this time, I wasn't living in Lincoln. This was about a year after I graduated from high school, and after hearing that Reverend Thomas was looking to retire as minister of Harmony Baptist Church, I moved a hundred miles north to Memphis and enrolled at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. I was hoping that once Reverend Thomas stepped down, the congregation of Harmony would call me to be their next minister. I had started dating Anna Lee Henderson by then, who is now my wife, so I would still come home on the weekends to spend time with her, and see my momma and Nadine.

On that night, someone had jammed the jukebox full of dollars and put Charlie Daniel's "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" on repeat. The song had played for more

than an hour, and while Momma had learned the art of tuning out the sounds in the bar, most of the other patrons got annoyed and left. Frank was one of three other patrons who stuck around while the song played. Momma said he just sat there, nodding his head and listening. He only spoke when he need another drink. Once the song finally ended for the last time, Frank looked at Momma for awhile.

“You know I saw him once,” he said, finally breaking the silence in the nearly empty bar.

“Who’d you see Frank? Charlie Daniels?”

“Nope,” he said shaking his head. “I saw the Devil. He had Hope’s soul, but I beat him.”

“How’d you beat him, Frank?”

Frank always told my momma stories when he was in the bar. Usually, they had to do with his time in Vietnam. He would tell her about the first time he laid eyes on Miss Bernadette in Saigon, or about the monkey they named Lucky who followed his infantry around. The boys in his infantry taught Lucky how to smoke grass, and she became quite sweet on them. They kept her around as a pet, and he wondered what became of her.

“I beat him in an omelette cookin’ contest,” Frank said. Momma waited to see if Frank was about to start laughing. He always had a great sense of humor, but she wanted to keep a straight face. She was worried for him that night and didn’t want to upset him.

“You beat the Devil in an omelette cookin’ contest?” a man in the back of the bar called out. Momma said she tried to shush the man, but he was about as drunk as Frank.

“What was your secret? Did you do a western omelette?” The man apparently guffawed loudly and slapped Frank on the back. Momma said that there was a look in Frank’s eyes that made her worried that he was going to hit the man. Instead Frank just shook his head.

“Nope,” Frank said. “Caramelized onions. Satan hadn’t had them before. Pushed my omelette over the edge. I didn’t want to have to break out the caramelized onions, but he had Hope’s soul.”

Frank threw his head into his hands and started crying. Apparently, the other man, who seemed to be quite the joker himself, got a little scared. He shuffled back over to the pool tables, leaving Frank alone with my mother.

“Did you drive tonight?” my mother asked.

“Of course, I did.” Frank said. “I’m always driving.”

“I’m gonna call someone to come get you,” she said. We didn’t have taxis in Lincoln, so she got Uncle Ray on the phone. Uncle Ray was watching Nadine for her, but she made it clear that Ray was to leave Nadine at home by herself. Nadine was eleven at this point, but Momma thought she’d be better off home alone for a little while. She said that she didn’t want Nadine to see a man like this.

Ray came and got Frank, and he said that Frank was silent for the entire ride home. He did have Ray pull the car over once so he could vomit, and Ray got out of the car and patted him on the back. Ray said it was all liquid, and there were splotches of brown from the vomit all on Frank’s beard. It looked like Frank hadn’t had much to eat

that day. He lost his keys somewhere, so Ray knocked on the door until Miss Bernadette answered. He said she didn't look very happy.

"Where's he been?" she asked, and Ray said he felt like she was accusing him of something.

"The Beaver's Tail," Ray said. "Helen didn't think he should be driving." Ray helped Miss Bernadette get Frank in the house. He said they left him on the sofa in the living room. Miss Bernadette put a blanket over him and even fixed him a glass of water that she put on the coffee table. Ray said that when he left, Frank was sprawled out on the couch like a boxer who had been knocked out.

* * *

At some point in the night, Miss Bernadette woke up to Frank standing over her with the barrel of a .44 Magnum pressed against her head. Though I wasn't there, I always imagined that he was crying. Miss Bernadette was probably crying too. I bet she asked him why he was doing this. He turned the gun on himself eventually and pulled the trigger. That's really all we know. Mr. Frank killed himself. His daughter tried, but he succeeded.

When Momma heard about it, she quit The Beaver's Tail. I think she felt guilty. Sometimes, I wonder if she thinks that none of that would have happened if she had not served him that night. My uncle Ray went to Frank's funeral, but he was the only member of my family present. While Frank Jr. and Carter came to town for it, Hope was a no show. Rather than going to the funeral, Momma yanked Nadine out of school and headed to Memphis to search for jobs and apartments. For close to a week, she would

leave Lincoln early in the morning for Memphis. When everyone asked why she was moving, she lied and would tell them that it was either to be closer to me or that she had a met a man on the Internet that seemed promising. During the time I spent in Memphis with her and Nadine, I can tell you there certainly wasn't a man.

Mark Osbourne told me that Miss Bernadette was looking for Momma. I don't know if she was angry and felt like Momma killed Frank, or if she just wanted to know what Frank was like on that last night. Momma told me the story of that night over and over, but I never had the heart to mention it to Miss Bernadette. I would see her a lot when I came back on the weekends. Once at church, Miss Bernadette grabbed me in this long hug, and I could feel my shirt getting wet from her tears as she buried her head in my chest. All I could do was put my arms around her and hug her back.

I finished seminary and got married. In 2005, Reverend Thomas retired and I took over Harmony Baptist Church. Anna Lee moved to Lincoln from Jackson when we were in the eleventh grade. She never met Hope, but she knew about her and was around when Mr. Frank died. It was Anna Lee who took the phone call on that July morning in 2008 from Miss Bernadette saying that Hope was coming back to Lincoln to live with her for a bit, and that she wanted me to talk to her.

* * *

The morning of Hope's return, Anna Lee stood outside the bathroom door listening as I brushed my teeth and shaved. She was pregnant with our first born then. My plan was to leave the house before Anna Lee woke up. She was pretty insistent that I go to the Tansey house and talk to Hope and Miss Bernadette.

“What am I gonna say to them?” I called to her from inside the bathroom.

“You’re the one who went to seminary. Not me,” she said back. “Ain’t there some standard piece of scripture they teach you to read. Maybe you could talk about the prodigal son?”

“I don’t think Miss Bernadette wants me there because I’m a pastor,” I said. “I think she wants me there because I was Hope’s friend once.”

“I think she wants you there because you’re the pastor and you were Hope’s friend once.” I opened the bathroom door, passed Anna Lee, and walked into our bedroom. She followed me as I dug in the closet picking out a shirt to wear.

“You are gonna go see her right?” Sometimes I took the same course of action with Anna Lee that I did with my momma. If I don’t answer, then I’m not lying. It didn’t really work with either of them.

“I just don’t understand what the problem is, William. Does it have to do with your momma and Mr. Frank? I can’t imagine you won’t go talk to that girl over how she acted when she was fifteen. Are you still the same as you was when you were fifteen?”

Anna Lee stared at me as I put on a pair of blue jeans and a white oxford shirt. When I walked over to the dresser to grab a pair of socks, I could hear her breathing heavily.

“I need some sort of answer out of you, William,” she said.

“No, I’m not the same as I was when I was fifteen.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said. “Are you going to go see Hope?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied, and Anna Lee nodded as if she felt that was a fair answer.

“Someone else in the church might get sad and try to kill themselves too. You’re going to have to counsel family members during funerals and divorces. If you can’t be a spiritual leader then maybe you should go see if Mr. McCoy will hire you to bag groceries.”

She was right, but I still couldn’t find it in myself to admit that to her. I put on my shoes and walked up to her. The way she was staring at me, I knew I was in trouble. She was still wearing her nightgown, a pink one that Momma had bought her from Victoria’s Secret for Christmas, and I could see her round belly protruding forward. All I was really think about was whether or not little Eli could hear his momma and daddy arguing from inside the womb. I put my arms around her to give her a hug, and she put her arms around me, but her grip was so loose, I could tell she didn’t want me hugging her. Still, I tried to kiss her on the lips, but she turned her head away from me. As I left the house, I knew that I was going to have to go see Hope if I wanted Anna Lee to talk to me again.

* * *

When Reverend Thomas retired, we never made him leave the parish house on the Harmony Baptist Church property. Anna Lee and I had bought the house I grew up in on Tudor Road, and I liked having my old mentor close by. His wife, Mildred, answered the door and told me that he was out for the day visiting a friend in Ecu. For some reason, I wondered if he had anticipated me not wanting to deal with Hope’s return and left just to

make me have to deal with it. I walked around the cemetery behind the church and looked at Memaw and Grandpa's graves and Daddy's memorial. If they were still alive, I think they would have told me that I needed to go see Hope as well.

When I went inside the church, I sat in my office for a bit. I needed to pay the power bill and work on my sermon for Sunday, but I could not keep my head focused. Whenever my head is cloudy, I like to take a drive and talk to God. Anna Lee told me that a lot of folks have mentioned to her that they see me driving around, talking to myself. As I took this drive, I kept my mouth shut. I couldn't think of the right words to say to God, and as more time passed, I began to realize how silly I was acting. I couldn't bring myself to go to the Tansey house. When I passed McCoy's Grocery on Main Street, I noticed that underneath the sign outside the store where they advertised their daily specials, they had written, "Welcome Home Hope." Part of me wondered how she might feel when she saw the sign. I think I'd have been embarrassed.

I went north on Main Street, crossing the railroad tracks through the residential neighborhoods and on to to Tupelo Avenue. When I passed The Beaver's Tail, I noticed Jack McCann's black pickup truck in the parking lot. When Jack turned eighteen, he decided that church really wasn't his thing anymore. He spent a lot of time trying to move away from Lincoln, but it seemed that every time he moved, he ran out of money and came back to live with his mother. Since I felt more comfortable talking to Jack than I did Hope, I decided to pop in and see him.

It had been a while since I had been to The Beaver's Tail. The summer after I graduated high school, my momma got me a job there as a bar back. I quit working there

when I decided that God was calling me into the ministry. The layer of smoke in the bar had thickened since my last visit. Behind the bar, there was a picture of my mother holding a pitcher of beer. She was posing next to it like Vanna White does on *Wheel of Fortune*. She looked really pretty in that picture, but I felt strange looking at it. She was wearing shorts that were so short you could see the bottom of her ass cheeks peeking out. The picture was hard for me to look at. I figured many a drunk probably stared at her and that picture, and I guess you just don't want to think about men fantasizing about your momma like that. Underneath that picture was one of Mr. Frank. He wore a pair of overalls with a white t-shirt, which is what I always remember him wearing, and he had a pint of beer in front of him. If you looked at that picture, you would have never known him to be troubled. He just looked so happy. A young man emerged from the kitchen and smiled when he saw me enter the bar.

“Reverend Moore,” he called out. He sounded so welcoming. “You can park your car out back and come in through the kitchen if you don't want anyone to know you're here.” There were only about four people in the bar other than Jack, and all of them started laughing. Jack was sitting by himself at the bar.

“Leave him alone, Lawrence,” Jack said. “He and his momma worked in this place while you were still on the playground. He ain't gotta take this shit from you.”

I smiled, pulled up a seat next to Jack, and ordered a Coke. The bartender seemed humbled by Jack, and he didn't make any more jokes. Jack looked at my Coke and smiled.

“I got a flask of whiskey in my jacket if you wanna spike it,” Jack whispered to me so the bartender couldn’t hear.

“I didn’t come to drink, Jack, “ I said. “I just saw your truck outside, and thought I’d come in and see how you were doing.” Jack was still wearing his hair in a pompadour like he had in high school, but he was beginning to gray at the temples. His facial hair was unkempt, and he looked as if he might be trying to grow a beard.

“You ain’t checking on me because Hope is in town, are you?” Jack raised his eyebrow at me. “We’re almost thirty, William. You think I’m still pining over some girl from middle school?”

I wasn’t sure what to say to him. Hope had been on my brain, and I assumed Jack would be bothered by her return as well. I took a sip from my Coke and it tasted flat. Part of me was tempted to see if Jack was serious about the whiskey.

“Miss Bernadette wants me to come see her,” I said.

“That’s what you signed up for when you decided to be the preacher, ain’t it?” Jack said. When he looked at me, I couldn’t help but feel ashamed. “You’re the shepherd. Go get your sheep and let the rest of us be.”

“You sound like Anne Lee,” I said.

“And how is Anna Lee?” Jack asked. “Does she know her husband is enjoying a drink with the low lives at The Beaver’s Tail while she’s sitting at home pregnant?”

As I stared at Jack, I couldn’t help but be reminded of our junior high prom. He sat on that barstool the same way he sat in the bleachers that evening. It was like he was counting on Hope to walk through the doors of The Beaver’s Tail and come take his

hand. As much as I wanted to agree with Jack that it was ridiculous for him to be harboring some feelings from middle school, there was so much of me that felt like he was. It was completely unreasonable for him to still be in love with Hope, but as I watched him, I swore tears were forming in his eyes.

“You can come with me,” I said. “She might like to see you.”

Jack just shook his head and took a sip of his beer.

“I don’t think Miss Bernadette would appreciate me being there.”

“You still love her,” I said.

“We was in eighth grade, William,” Jack said. “What the hell did I know about love then? I don’t know shit about it now.”

At that point, I knew tears were coming out of Jack’s eyes. I tried to put my hand on his shoulder, but he just knocked it off.

“You don’t think you should go talk to her?” I asked. Jack pounded his fist on the bar. The other folks in the bar were hanging around the pool table, and they were being loud and having a good time. That’s what a bar is for, I suppose. Looking at Jack, I felt like he was at The Beaver’s Tail for the same reason Mr. Frank came in every night. There was some other world he wanted to escape. I finished my Coke and put three dollars down on the counter for the bartender. As I got up off of my stool, I felt Jack’s hand grab my arm.

“I don’t really hang out here during the day,” Jack said. “I was grabbing a bite to eat at the Sonic, and I saw Miss Bernadette’s car drive by. Hope was sitting next to her. All the other people there stopped and watched the car, and I even saw a few folks pull

their phones out and take pictures. You would have thought Angelina Jolie was in the car. I guess that's what you have to do to get recognized in this town. If only I had tried to kill myself and failed. Y'all would all be taking pictures of me and putting my name up on signs. Your daddy died in a war. He didn't even get that kind of recognition. I guess it just makes me sick." He started shaking his head, and I leaned in to give him a hug. He pushed me away.

"You headed to see her?" Jack asked.

I nodded.

"My number is still the same. Call me if you need anything," I said.

"If I want your advice, I'll get out of bed on Sunday mornings and come get it from you on a voluntary basis," Jack said. "Do give Hope my regards. I really do want for her to be doing good." Jack smiled at me, and it felt good. We shook hands, and as I turned around to look at the bar one last time before I left, I noticed that he had grabbed the rest of my Coke and was pouring his whiskey into it.

* * *

Miss Bernadette fixed me a cup of tea and left me alone in the living room while she went upstairs to get Hope. It was green tea, and she had sweetened it with honey. She had made a cup of coffee for herself, and there was so much milk that the coffee was barely brown. The last time I had been in the Tansey house was elementary school. Miss Bernadette had remained an active member of Harmony Baptist since I took the church over, and I started to feel guilty for never having come by and see how she was doing.

She left me sitting on the sofa across from the coffee table, and I wondered if it was the same sofa that my uncle left Frank on that evening, or if Miss Bernadette had refurnished the place. On the mantle above the fireplace, there were several family portraits. I remembered Hope's class picture from the second grade at Lincoln Elementary that sat next to a family picture with all five members of the Tanseys. Miss Bernadette stood in front of Frank, who wore a paisley tie with a navy blue sport coat. It was rare to not see Frank in a t-shirt and overalls, so I fixated on that picture. His arm was around Frank Jr., and he had this big smile on his face. Miss Bernadette came down stairs and saw me looking at the family photos.

"He was always so full of life," she said. "He was so gentle. I miss him so much." Her voice sounded composed, as if she had rehearsed that line. The way Momma always described Frank, I didn't really see him as a man who was full of life. I suppose I also had problems thinking of him as gentle when he had held a gun to Miss Bernadette's head, but I really didn't think any of that would be appropriate to bring up in conversation. She walked over to the gray recliner that was sitting next to the couch and sat down. I'm not sure why, but I felt embarrassed over getting caught looking at her family photos. Miss Bernadette took a loud sip from her coffee. It sounded as if she was slurping it. Her eyes looked around the room as if she was looking for something in the living room to talk about.

"Hope will be down in a minute," she finally said. I nodded and sat back down on the couch. Even in old age, she was still a stunning woman. Miss Bernadette had kept Tansey Cleaners running even after Mr. Frank died. She dressed like a professional

woman wearing a black business suit. I heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and I turned around and began to feel a bit anxious. It was like I was a teenage boy about to go on a date waiting in the living room with the girl's parents. Hope was looking at the floor as she walked down the steps, but she looked up briefly to smile at me. She wore a pair of tight blue jeans and a brown sleeveless top. The scars that I remembered from high school were still on her arms, but she looked beautiful. Her hair had been cut into a bob, and she wasn't wearing any makeup. She walked up to me and gave me a hug. She smelt of patchouli.

"Would you like some tea or coffee?" Miss Bernadette asked her as she sat down on the couch next to me.

"Coffee would be nice." Her voice was raspy, as if she had smoked too many cigarettes the night before. Miss Bernadette got up and went into the kitchen, and Hope watched her as she exited the room.

"Is there anywhere to get espresso in Lincoln?" she asked me. I'm not sure why, but I was offended by the question. It seemed to have this big city sneer to it.

"There's a Starbucks in Tupelo," I said. "There might be a coffee shop in Pontotoc. Honestly, I don't know." She nodded her head, but she looked dissatisfied with my answer. She walked across the room and grabbed an ashtray and her purse. She sat the ashtray down in front of us and offered me a cigarette. I declined.

"That's right," she said. "You're a preacher now. No smoking for you." She lit the cigarette and blew the smoke in my face. "Momma probably wanted you to come over, because I told her I was an atheist. I hope you don't have any intentions on trying

to save me, because it ain't gonna work." As she said the word *ain't*, I heard a faint trace of her old southern accent seep back out.

"Honestly, I didn't come here to save you," I said. "I really don't know why I came here."

"If you don't want to be here, you can go," she said. "I assure you, I will not be offended." She put her hand on my leg when she said that, and it made me feel uncomfortable. No one other than Anna Lee had touched my leg in so long. I scooted away from her on the couch, and she laughed when I did that.

"I'm not trying to pick you up, William," she said.

"I know," I said to her, though I really didn't know that. Miss Bernadette came back into the living room holding a cup of coffee that was almost white. Hope looked inside the mug, and she looked disgusted.

"I drink my coffee black, Mom," she said.

"I'll fix you another cup," Miss Bernadette said, before retreating back into the kitchen. As Miss Bernadette exited the room, I wanted to call for her to stay. Hope knew she was making me uncomfortable, and I could tell she was getting some kind of pleasure out of it.

"I'm not trying to be mean, William," Hope said. "I imagine I feel as uncomfortable as you do. Maybe more. When we pulled into town, everyone was stopping to watch Mom's car. It was so humiliating. I feel like everyone in this town knows everything about me, but I don't know the first thing about any of them." She grabbed a tissue and dabbed at her eyes with it, but I didn't notice any tears. I just felt

obliged to comfort her and show her compassion. I stood up and put my hand on her back. Even though I knew that she was genuinely hurting, I still felt uncomfortable touching her or embracing her. It felt as if I was cheating on Anna Lee. She took my other hand and held it tightly into hers. Miss Bernadette came back into the living room with another cup of coffee and, noticing our embrace, set the cup down and walked over to hug her daughter.

“I didn’t even come back for daddy’s funeral,” she said. “I just couldn’t do it. I felt like I was the one who killed him.” When she said that, I just wished that Momma was with me. She was probably the only person in the world who knew exactly how Hope felt.

Once Hope began to calm down, we chatted for a while about the old days, and the people we had gone to school with. I told her about how Leighton Parker was in prison. Mark Osbourne was living in Oxford, but I wasn’t sure what he was doing these days, though my sister Nadine was close with his younger brother, and I could always ask her.

“How is Jack?” she asked, and I felt relieved. It really didn’t feel proper for me to bring him up.

“I saw him earlier today,” I said. “He sends his regards, and he hopes you’re doing okay.” She smiled when I said this, but Miss Bernadette looked a little angry.

“His mother is a liar,” Miss Bernadette said. “She said she saw Frank in the front yard watering the plants in a dress. That never happened. They all just wanted to make Frank seem crazy.”

“Give him my regards as well,” Hope said.

“Would you like to talk to him?” I asked. She stared at me for a moment, and I could hear Miss Bernadette begin to breathe heavily.

“I don’t want that boy anywhere near her,” Miss Bernadette said, and Hope looked disappointed. “All the things his mother said about Frank. I don’t want a McCann near this house.”

“You see her every Sunday at church, Miss Bernadette,” I said. “Besides, Jack is not his mother.” Miss Bernadette came raging towards me, and Hope stood in between us. She didn’t say a word, but I could tell that she and her mother were communicating with their eyes.

“I don’t know that I want to hear from him,” Hope said. “Tell Jack what you want, William, but I’m not sure I want to speak to him.”

“He didn’t do anything wrong, Hope,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hope said. “Some wounds don’t heal.” She pointed at the scars on her arms and then walked Miss Bernadette back to the gray recliner. Miss Bernadette was shaking with anger. I knew that she didn’t care much for the McCann family, but I still felt like she was overreacting. Miss Bernadette picked up her cup of coffee and the porcelain mug was shaking in her hands. Her skin was red, and as she looked up at me, I swore she could read my thoughts.

“You have a baby coming, Reverend Moore,” she said. “Maybe then, you’ll understand.” Hope stood behind her mother, running one of her hand’s across Miss Bernadette’s back, trying to calm her.

“Maybe you should leave, William,” Hope said, and Miss Bernadette nodded. I waved at both of them and let myself out of their house. When I had walked down the driveway and gotten into my car, Hope ran across the front yard to my car. I rolled down my window, and she peeked her head into the car.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said. “Come see Mom. She’s lonely, and she needs the company.” Hope kissed me on the cheek and then turned around and walked back into the house without saying goodbye. I felt guilty and wondered if Miss Bernadette told Hope that I had never been by to see her. Reverend Thomas was still pastor when Mr. Frank killed himself, but I thought that his death might be one of those scars that didn’t heal. Suddenly, I felt unequipped to be a pastor.

When I got home Anna Lee was relieved to hear that I had visited Hope, and she kissed me on the cheek in the same spot Hope had. She didn’t feel like cooking, so I called in an order for cheeseburgers and fries at The Beaver’s Tail. It wasn’t really what I felt like eating, but I was hoping Jack might still be there. I really wanted to talk to him. He had left, and I grabbed our food and went back home. Lawrence was still bartending, but he gave me the same respect that he gave when Jack was sitting next to me earlier in the afternoon.

* * *

The following Sunday, I did my sermon on the prodigal son. When I got to the pulpit and saw Hope sitting next to her Momma, I got a little nervous. I guess I was concerned that Hope might be offended by my choice. She looked bored the whole time but made it a point to smile at me whenever I made eye contact. When church was over,

she walked over and introduced herself to Anna Lee. When she saw Anna Lee's belly, Hope screamed and gave Anna Lee a tight hug. It was almost like Anna Lee and Hope were old friends.

As I walked to the door to shake hands with everyone as they were leaving, I noticed Jack McCann in the parking lot standing next to his truck. I'm not sure how he heard that Hope was at church, but I knew she was the reason he had come. When Hope walked out the front door and saw him, she just ran to him and threw her arms around him. Miss Bernadette turned the same shade of red she had turned when I brought up Jack's name at her house the previous day.

"He's not his momma," I said again to her, but that hardly seemed to matter. She just scowled at her daughter. Hope and Jack were both smiling like they did in junior high. For a moment, that was how I saw them again. The scars on Hope's arms vanished, and the gray in Jack's hair disappeared. They seemed innocent again. Anna Lee came up and grabbed my arm.

"They look good together," she said.

I wished that Momma had been there, and I thought once more about the day that Jack was suspended from school. Momma told me we were too young to be worrying about romance back then, which was funny coming from a woman who was still not too worried about it. When I watched Jack and Hope in that moment on the Harmony Baptist lot, I understood Jack. He knew she was his wife, even in the eighth grade. Mrs. McCann walked to the front door, and she looked just as disgusted as Miss Bernadette did. I thought it was nice to see them agree on something for once.

“Y’all might just be in laws one day,” I said to them, and Mrs. McCann stormed off into the parking lot. She yelled something at her son, as he hugged Hope tightly. Jack was either ignoring her or just lost in the moment. Miss Bernadette giggled a little when she saw Jack ignore his momma. She still didn’t look happy about it all, but she seemed more accepting than Mrs. McCann. It had been so long since I had seen Jack smile, and I thought back to the days when I used to imagine being the best man in Jack’s wedding. I hoped now that he would let me officiate. The rest of the congregation gathered around, and we watched Jack and Hope. They smiled and it looked like the weight of the world had been lifted from them. They looked like two teenagers.

The Man From Memphis

“Maybe ever ’body in the whole damn world is scared of each other.” -John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men

Monday afternoon, early September 1992. The leaves on the sweetgum trees that lined Tupelo Avenue were still green, but the autumnal wind was finally beginning to show, breaking the heat from summer. Rydell Washington sat on a bench outside of Dale’s Auto Repairs, staring at the empty street. It was his senior year of high school, and he worked at Dale’s part time. Since he began his shift at three that afternoon, there had been no customers, and there was no backlog of work to be done. It was now five in the evening, and he wished that his boss, Otis Dale, would send him home.

Otis locked himself inside his office, which was surrounded by windows, so that he could see out and Rydell could see in. Otis received his new issue of *Playboy* that day, which he had sent to the shop, because his wife, Virginia, would not allow the magazines into her home. Virginia Dale was Lincoln, Mississippi’s only hairstylist, and she ran her own salon out of the garage of their home on Baker Street. She told Otis that she did not want to go into the living room and see the teenage children of her clients looking at his magazines. Otis was the sort of person who claimed he read *Playboy* for the articles. While Rydell wanted to believe that was the case, he noticed that every time he saw Otis with an issue of *Playboy*, the page always seemed to be turned to a picture of a naked woman. Rydell thought that Otis looked comical with the magazine in his hand. Otis hooted and hollered at the pages while exaggerating his body’s movements like a silent film star. Otis moved his lips when he read, and while he was certainly saying things,

Rydell knew that he was not reading. Beads of sweat formed on Otis's bald head, and Rydell laughed when Otis retrieved a yellowed handkerchief from his back pocket to wipe the sweat away.

Rydell wore his red and white letterman's jacket to work that day. He didn't like to draw attention to the fact that he was an athlete, but with the closeness that all of Lincoln's residents paid to high school basketball, it wasn't exactly like Rydell could keep it a secret anyways. Rydell was the point guard for the Lincoln High Eagles. Coach Stone referred to Rydell as his secret weapon, though Rydell felt that as a weapon, he was not that secretive. He was one of three black students at Lincoln High, and once he showed a proficiency at sports, Coach Stone had no issues with using his skills. It was Rydell who sunk the three point shot with five seconds left on the clock that gave Lincoln High the one point edge during the previous year's playoffs against the Pontotoc High Warriors. That game sent the Eagles to the state championships. As the buzzer went off, Rydell remembered the embrace given to him by Bobby Wilkinson, the Eagles's power forward. That was the same kid in third grade who told Rydell that his father said not to let a nigger touch his G.I. Joe.

Basketball had not been bad to Rydell. News of his successful season during his junior year had travelled to Memphis, and Coach Larry Finch had come to watch him play. An athletic scholarship was discussed, but Rydell wanted to go to college because of his intellect rather than his athletic skills. His mother was a professor of anthropology at the University of Mississippi, and his father was an ophthalmologist. Rydell's parents had split when he was in the ninth grade, and his father moved to Chicago.

When news spread in Lincoln that Rydell might play for the Memphis State Tigers, people began to show him respect. Mr. Dale stopped referring to him as *nigger* and now occasionally called him by his proper name or, at worst, *colored*. Had Rydell not been the town's breakout star, he wasn't sure he would even have his job at Dale's Auto Repair. Mr. Dale wasn't the easiest man to get along with, but he provided a paycheck, and Rydell enjoyed having his own money. Also, from the camaraderie made on the court, Rydell found a true friend in Jimmy MacArthur, the Eagles' shooting guard.

Rydell's shift ended at six, so by the time the unfamiliar gray Corvette with Tennessee plates pulled into the Dale's Auto Repair parking lot at five-thirty, Rydell was disappointed that he was going to have to do some work. As Rydell stood from the bench to greet the customer, he noticed that the back passenger side tire was replaced with a donut. The car was a newer model Corvette. Rydell thought it was a 1990 at the oldest. While Rydell preferred classic Corvettes, he could not help but admire how nice the car looked. It was a convertible, and Rydell often dreamed of taking Highway 15 out of Mississippi with the top down in a convertible. It would feel like freedom, he thought. He imagined the wind hitting his face as he headed anywhere else, either further north or west. Rydell looked back at Otis, who was still locked in his office, lost in a fantasy world of beautiful women who would walk right past him if they were to see him in real life. The woman on the cover of the current *Playboy* was black, which made Rydell laugh.

"He wouldn't know what to do with a sister if he got one," Rydell said to himself. The Corvette's driver got out of his car and walked around to the trunk. He opened it and

pulled out a flat tire. He was a tall, older, white man with gray hair that was longer in the back but receding up front. An older hippie, Rydell thought. His clothes were nice. He wore a white dress shirt that had grease stains on it, possibly from the tire change, and he wore a pair of black dress pants that Rydell thought might have been tailor made. He was pudgy, with most of his weight centered on his stomach. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of Ray-bans, which Rydell thought was odd, considering it wasn't that bright outside. The man approached holding the tire, and Rydell noticed that grease stains also lined the man's arms. Rydell thought it was funny that the customer had more grease on him than either of the mechanics. Rydell noticed a bumper sticker on the back of the man's car for Clinton and Gore.

“You work here?” the man asked.

Rydell nodded.

“How much to plug a flat?”

“Ten dollars,” Rydell said. The man noticed Otis in his office reading the *Playboy*, and Rydell was immediately embarrassed.

“That's the boss man,” Rydell said, while rolling the tire into the shop. “You know where the leak is?” The man followed Rydell and the tire into the garage.

“There's a nail in it,” he said, and he looked at the tire, trying to help Rydell find it. He smelled of cologne. Rydell did not know much about colognes, but he imagined that the type the man was wearing was expensive. The man pointed at a speck of silver wedged into the tire's tread. Rydell nodded and got to work. As Rydell prepared the patch, he noticed the man surveying the empty garage.

“Y’all must do good work here,” he said. “Not a broken car in town.” Business had been slow, and Rydell wondered how Otis could afford to pay him.

Lincoln had been a cotton farming town, and while it seemed that few still practiced their family’s original profession, most of the town’s residents had some working knowledge of automobile repairs based on their knowledge of tractors. Otis Dale’s services were a luxury not a necessity, and if the people of Lincoln could fix their cars themselves, then they usually didn’t bother handing over their hard earned money to Otis. The man walked around the empty garage, stopping at a Snap On tools calendar hanging on the wall that featured a blonde haired woman in a bikini holding a wrench.

“I see your boss has a certain aesthetic he’s going for,” the man said, while gazing at the photo from the calendar. He rubbed his chin, and then focused his attention back to Rydell, who was now putting air into the tire.

“Letterman’s jacket, huh?” the man said. “What do you play?”

“Basketball,” Rydell replied.

“Is that right?” the man said. “I used to play basketball back in high school. I’m tall, but I wasn’t very good. I mostly just warmed the bench.” Rydell wasn’t sure why, but the man made him feel uneasy. His attempts at small talk were not helping Rydell’s nerves. “You any good?”

“I can keep a bench pretty warm myself,” Rydell said. Rydell wiped his brow. He understood that by wearing a letterman’s jacket, he was inviting a conversation about sports, but he still hated talking about his own role within the game. It was all anyone wanted to talk to him about. Just once, he would like a conversation about the Chicago

Bulls or his preferred team, the New York Knicks. New York City fascinated Rydell, and he hoped that someday, he might be able to go there.

Rydell glanced over at Otis's office and noticed him throw the *Playboy* under his desk. Otis straightened his clothes in a mirror before coming out to the garage to greet the customer. Otis's clothes were noticeably clean from the slow business day. He wore a brown uniform shirt with a name patch sewn above the pocket on the right side and a matching pair of brown pants.

"Rydell takin' good care of you?" Otis asked, approaching the man. He held his hand out, which was clean and well manicured for a mechanic. The man nodded and continued to watch Rydell.

"Flat tire, huh?" Otis said. Rydell knew that Otis was doing math in his head, trying to figure out how ten dollars could account for their entire day of business.

"When's the last time you had an oil change?"

"I just need the tire patched up," the man said. "I think your boy here has got me taken care of."

"What do you mean by *boy*?" Rydell asked. In the back of his head, Rydell knew that the man wasn't racist, and Rydell felt guilty for snapping at him.

"Not that," the man said. "I believe your *man* here has got me taken care of." He smiled, seeming pleased with his correction. Rydell rolled the tire back over to the Corvette.

"Okay," Otis said. "That'll be twenty dollars."

"He said it was ten," the man said, pointing at Rydell.

“He’s new,” Otis said. “He forgets stuff sometimes.”

“I’m not new,” Rydell said. “I’ve worked here a whole year.” Rydell peeked inside the car and noticed the man had a CD player and a car phone.

“See how well spoken he is?” Otis said. “You don’t see that very often with colored folk.” The man looked disgusted. Rydell was wheeling the jack back into the garage, having already replaced the donut with the actual tire, and checked the air pressure of the other three. The man pulled out his wallet and handed Otis a ten dollar bill.

“I like his price better,” he said. Otis looked offended but slid the ten dollar bill into his shirt pocket anyway.

“Did Rydell tell you that he is a local basketball star?” Otis asked. “Larry Finch came down to watch him play. He’s gonna be a Tiger.” Otis beamed with pride when he said this, but Rydell was embarrassed. “We can get you a photo with him and his autograph now for a discounted price. It just might be worth something when he starts playing for the NBA.” Rydell froze with embarrassment. No way would he let this poor man pay money for his autograph, and he hoped that the man would not take Otis up on the offer. He seemed to be from a big city. Surely, he would not fall for such a scam.

“He told me he was just a bench warmer,” the man said while looking in Rydell’s direction.

“Benchwarmer, my foot,” Otis said. “If the rest of his team were as good as he is, they’d have been the state champions last year!”

“You gonna play for Memphis?” the man asked.

“I ain’t decided yet,” Rydell said.

The man walked over to shake his hand, and Rydell felt paper between their grasp. When the man pulled his hand away, there was Andrew Jackson’s face staring back at Rydell. He sneaked the twenty dollar bill into his pocket before Otis could notice it.

“I live in Memphis,” the man said to Rydell, before getting in his car. “If you decide on Memphis State, I look forward to watching you play.” The man handed Rydell a business card.

Percival DuChamp, DDS

Periodontist

“Percival the periodontist,” Rydell said and laughed.

“Actually it’s Perry the periodontist,” Perry said. He waved at Rydell and Otis as he got into his car. He drove north down Tupelo Avenue, back towards Highway 15. Rydell watched as his car disappeared.

“Big city dirt,” Otis said, shaking his head.

* * *

Rydell continued to think about Perry as he sat by himself at the lunch counter of MacArthur Pharmacy, eating a cheeseburger with a bag of plain potato chips. What sort of man has twenty dollar bills to give out to some strange kid he has never met? He felt unnerved by Perry.

The soda fountain at MacArthur Pharmacy was a popular place for teenagers to gather during the 50’s, but these days the lunch counter mostly remained vacant except

for in the early mornings when Lincoln's retirees gathered for coffee and toast. Jimmy MacArthur's grandfather owned the pharmacy and hired his grandson to work the counter two days a week for extra money. The tiles of the pharmacy floor had worn down to the point that concrete was revealing itself. No matter how many times a mop might have hit the floor, dirt had become a permanent fixture. Behind the counter, underneath a Coca-cola clock, was a picture of Jimmy's grandfather shaking hands with Lyndon B. Johnson. Rydell knew that he would have rather been shaking hands with Nixon.

"A cheeseburger rather than a grilled cheese?" Jimmy said. "Did Otis give you a raise?" Jimmy laughed when he said this, but Rydell did not respond. Rydell had missed lunch, so he continued to eat the cheeseburger. Finished with his supper, he poked at the remaining bits of beef stuck between his teeth with his tongue.

"Nope," Rydell said. Rydell's backpack sat at the foot of his stool. He looked over his shoulder before reaching into it. He pulled out three older issues of *Playboy* and handed them to Jimmy. Jimmy's eyes widened, and he snatched the magazines up, staring at the covers of each one, before putting them into his own backpack.

"I reckon I'll pay for your cheeseburger today," Jimmy said smiling. "The old man doesn't notice when you take these?"

"He probably does," Rydell said. "His back issues of *Playboy* are about the only damn thing in that shop that's organized." Both boys laughed.

"Helen Moore was in here earlier," Jimmy said. "I bet she could be in *Playboy*." Rydell rolled his eyes. He got so tired of hearing Jimmy talk about Helen Moore. She was at least ten years older than both of them and had two kids: a son who was in

elementary school and a two year old daughter. Her husband had been in the Army and lost his life in the Persian Gulf. Rydell saw the way that the men of Lincoln reacted to Helen, and he didn't care for it. Even the married men made passes at her when their wives weren't around. Rydell thought these men acted like animals, and it disgusted him. Despite it all, Helen never seemed to pay any of the men much mind. Her focus seemed to be on her children, which Rydell found admirable.

“She has two kids, Jimmy,” Rydell said. “What makes you think you got a shot?”

“All I need is one shot,” Jimmy said, smiling. Rydell shook his head. He wondered if men hit on his mother like they did Helen Moore.

“You coming to practice tomorrow?” Jimmy asked. “Coach is starting to get worried.”

“I only missed one practice,” Rydell said.

“I know, but you know how coach gets. Our first game is against Heritage High, and he wants to make sure his star player is there and ready.”

Heritage High was the other high school in Lincoln, and it was also the one that Rydell wished he went to. While the schools were officially desegregated, school districts ensured that Lincoln High remained predominately white, while Heritage High was predominately black. Rydell swished Coca-cola around in his mouth while thinking.

“So he wants to make sure his nigger is there to play the other niggers,” Rydell said.

“It ain’t like that,” Jimmy said. “Heritage High beat Pontotoc by twenty points last year. We only beat them by one. They’re a tough team. We don’t want to lose our first home game.”

Rydell shook his head and didn’t respond. Jimmy’s grandfather walked from the back of the pharmacy over to the lunch counter and smiled as he saw Rydell.

“Lookit there!” the elder MacArthur said. “The dynamic duo together in my pharmacy. The next Michael Jordan and Larry Bird.”

“Papaw, I’m paying for Rydell’s lunch today. I owe him a favor.” Jimmy winked at Rydell. “Could you just dock it from my pay?”

“No you ain’t paying for his lunch neither,” the elder MacArthur said. “I’m paying for it. I have to keep the star point guard and the star shooting guard well fed, don’t I?” The elder MacArthur looked at his watch. “Why don’t you fix yourself something to eat, Jimmy? It’s about time for us to close up.” Jimmy slapped another hamburger patty onto the griddle.

“Did you get enough to eat, Rydell?” the elder MacArthur asked. “You want something else. We got fresh strawberries for a milkshake. They came straight from my brother-in-law’s farm in Gainesville. Juiciest strawberries you’ll ever eat.”

“I’m fine, sir, but thank you,” Rydell said. Jimmy’s grandfather nodded. He walked behind the counter, poured himself a cup of coffee, and went to the back to continue filling prescriptions.

“Some guy from Memphis came in to Otis’s shop today,” Rydell said.

“Another scout from Memphis State?” Jimmy asked.

“No. He was just passing through town. Gave me a twenty dollar tip though. You think you can borrow your mom’s car tonight, and we can go to that Mapco in Tupelo and see if Bo is working? He always sells beer to me.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jimmy said while flipping his burger. Rydell listened to the pop and hisses of the grease on the grill as Jimmy cooked. The aroma of the burger began to fill the pharmacy. “You sure you don’t want another burger? Sounds like Papaw is payin’.”

“I’m fine,” Rydell said. “I could go for a refill on my Coke though.” Jimmy nodded and refilled Rydell’s drink.

“You want cherry or vanilla in it?” Jimmy asked.

“No, I’ll take it plain. I need to get going,” Rydell said. “My mom should be home soon, and I’d like to see her.”

“All right,” Jimmy said, handing the cup back to Rydell filled with soda. “You want me to call you about Tupelo tonight?”

“Sounds good,” Rydell said. He took the Coke and left the pharmacy. It was almost eight in the evening, and dusk was setting in. Across the street was the Sonic. Rydell recognized several of the cars at Sonic from the Lincoln High School parking lot.

It was the Sonic that had taken over as the hangout for teenagers since it had moved across the street from MacArthur Pharmacy during the 80’s. It was only the students from Lincoln High rather than Heritage that hung out there. Rydell hated walking by the Sonic parking lot. In his younger days, no one would have ever called him over to hang out, but now he was suddenly invited to everything. In many ways,

Rydell forgave his classmates for how they treated him when he was younger. His problem was forgetting. He waited at the crosswalk on the corner of Magnolia and Central, watching the speeding cars go by. When the light changed, he ran across the street, and that was when he noticed another familiar car in the Sonic parking lot: a gray Corvette convertible.

* * *

He wasn't sure why he was walking to Perry's car. While something about Perry made him uncomfortable, he still felt the need to thank him for the tip from earlier. Had Otis noticed the money changing hands, he would have demanded Rydell split it with him. He passed a blue Ford Probe where Clyde Davis was necking with Donna Henry. Billy Ray Cyrus boomed from Clyde Davis's stereo system. Rydell hated "Achy Breaky Heart." In the car next to them, a group of boys who Rydell recognized from Lincoln High but didn't know watched Clyde and Donna. Noticing Rydell, they shifted their attention to him.

"Rydell," a red headed boy called. "What are you up to? We're about to go down to Phillips Park and play some basketball. You want in?"

Rydell waved his hand at them and kept walking towards Perry's car. While he was nervous, he felt there was no reason for Perry to make him uncomfortable. He was a periodontist. Rydell's grandfather visited a periodontist frequently in Tupelo. That was how he got dentures. Perry seemed a nice enough man.

Rydell leaned down and knocked on the window of Perry's car. He sat in his car by himself eating a cheeseburger, and he looked startled at first, nearly dropping his food.

Perry seemed relieved when he realized it was Rydell. He rolled his window down.

Perry was no longer wearing his grease stained dress shirt. He was wearing a plain black t-shirt, and he looked way more casual. He had washed up somewhere and cleaned the grease off of his arms.

“Rydell, right?” Perry said, extending his hand. Rydell took it and was not sure if he was disappointed or relieved that there wasn’t also money in this handshake.

“I wanted to say thank you for the tip earlier,” Rydell said. “I couldn’t really say anything at the shop.”

“Figured as much,” Perry said. There was mustard and ketchup smeared under his lip. “That fella seemed like a snake oil salesman. You eaten yet?”

“I just ate across the street,” Rydell said, pointing at MacArthur Pharmacy. “They got a better burger.” Noticing that all of the people from Lincoln High School were staring at him and the strange Corvette, Rydell still walked around to the passenger’s side and got in the car. The car smelt like fried food. The seats were comfortable, and Perry had a jazz CD playing softly on his stereo.

“Miles Davis,” Perry said. “You ever heard of him?”

“My dad was a Miles Davis fan,” Rydell said. “I’m not too familiar with him, though.”

“He *was* a Miles Davis fan?” Perry asked. “Is he not with us anymore?”

“He’s in Chicago,” Rydell said. “He hated Lincoln. Said he needed to be somewhere with some culture. My mom didn’t wanna go.”

“Why not?” Perry asked.

“She teaches at Ole Miss and couldn’t find a job in Chicago like the one she had here. Mom can’t just be a housewife. She needs more. My dad is an ophthalmologist.” Rydell had never really mentioned anything about his parent’s divorce before, and no one, not even Jimmy MacArthur, ever asked him about his father or what his mother did.

“What’s your momma teach?” Perry asked.

“She teaches anthropology,” Rydell said, and he suddenly felt uncomfortable talking to a man about his single mother. Perry seemed to sense his discomfort.

“You need a ride home?”

“I just live down the street,” Rydell said. “I can walk.”

“No, I insist,” Perry said, starting his car. “Which way am I going?” Perry backed out of his parking space, and Rydell began to feel nervous. He wondered if Perry was going to kidnap him or try to meet his mother.

“If you leave this parking lot and get onto Magnolia, take a left on Central.”

Perry followed his instructions which relieved Rydell a bit. Looking out the rearview mirror, Rydell noticed that the people from his school who were in the Sonic parking lot were all watching Perry’s car leave. They all saw Rydell get in and had watched the car as he and Perry talked. Perry restarted a track on his Miles Davis CD.

“This is ‘Bitches Brew,’” Perry said. “You like it?” Rydell nodded, but the spare horns, piano, and drums sounded menacing to him. Rydell thought it sounded like the sort of song you would play while killing someone. “I was a teenager when this came out. I grew up on this stuff. My daddy saw him play on Beale Street back in the fifties. I never got the chance to see him. You know, he just died.” Perry looked somber when he

said that, as if he had personally known Miles Davis. Rydell began to ease up as the intro to the song ended. The music still seemed chaotic, but as more instruments began to fill the track, Rydell found the song calming and almost appropriate for passing the businesses on Central. He watched as patrons, black and white, pushed shopping carts out of the Jitney Jungle. When Jitney moved to town, they installed a pharmacy that nearly put Jimmy's grandfather out of business. The McCoy family, who owned McCoy's Grocery on Main Street, had done okay but found it difficult to compete with Jitney's prices. Jimmy told Rydell all of this, but Rydell had a difficult time really caring about the local business owners. Rydell watched the people in the Jitney Jungle parking lot. An overweight black woman lifted her child from the seat of a shopping cart and placed him into the car.

"Get in the right lane and take a right at Collins Street," Rydell said. Perry followed his instructions and turned onto Collins. Mrs. McCann, who lived across the street from Rydell, sat on her front porch sipping on a cup of coffee. She stood up to watch as Perry's car drove slowly down her street.

"You can let me out here," Rydell said, not wanting Perry to know which house was his. The driveway to his house was empty, and Rydell felt relieved that there was no way that Perry could meet his mother.

"Before you go, Rydell," Perry said. "I was just wondering something." Rydell had already opened the passenger's side door but had not gotten out of the car. "Do you know a woman here in town named Helen Moore?"

“Not too well,” Rydell said. “I know she lost her husband last year. He was in the Army. Really nice man. My buddy Jimmy has a big crush on her.”

“You know where I could find her?” Perry asked.

“Not really,” Rydell said, though he actually knew a good bit about Helen Moore. He knew that she lived on Tudor Road with her mother and her children. He also knew she worked as a cashier at McCoy’s Grocery. Even if Perry was harmless, he didn’t feel right giving him information about her. “She’s just about town a whole lot. Does the normal stuff.”

“She work anywhere?” Perry asked.

“I don’t know,” Rydell said. Perry just shook his head.

“Well, thank you kindly,” Perry said. Rydell got out of the car and stood on the sidewalk, waiting for Perry to leave. As Perry’s car drove away, Rydell waved at Mrs. McCann before walking up his driveway and into his house.

* * *

Rydell and Jimmy sat on the hood of Jimmy’s car in the Phillips Park parking lot, sipping Milwaukee’s Best from white styrofoam cups that Jimmy took from his grandfather’s pharmacy. Both boys wore their letterman’s jackets and sat silently as the wind rustled the leaves of the trees, and the crickets sang. Rydell wished that he had put on a sweater underneath his jacket.

“Everything all right, Rydell?” Jimmy asked. “You ain’t said much since I picked you up.”

“I just got a lot on my mind,” Rydell said.

“Is it basketball?”

“Not quite.”

“I heard from Blake Johnson that you left the Sonic earlier with some guy that had plates from Tennessee,” Jimmy said. “Was it a scout from Memphis again?” Jimmy was jealous, and it made Rydell feel guilty. “When they come down, could you mention me to them?”

“I don’t think it works like that, Jimmy,” Rydell said. “Besides, that wasn’t no scout from Memphis State. He was the guy from Otis’s shop earlier. I noticed his car in the Sonic and went to thank him for the tip. He gave me a ride home. He asked me about your woman.”

“What woman?” Jimmy asked.

“Helen Moore,” Rydell said. Jimmy looked at Rydell when he said this.

“What’s he want with her?”

“He was just asking some questions. Wanted to know where she lived and where she worked.”

“Did you tell him?”

“Hell no,” Rydell said. “Something didn’t feel right about it.” Jimmy nodded, and the two boys opened another beer.

* * *

When Rydell woke up the next morning, he heard some sort of commotion going on in his living room. Though he and Jimmy only had three beers each, Rydell’s head was throbbing. He rubbed his eyes and looked at his alarm clock. It was only six in the

morning. He heard the voices of two other women in the living room talking to his mother, and he wondered why she would be entertaining company so early on a Tuesday morning. He got out of bed, slid back into the blue jeans he wore the previous day, and grabbed a clean t-shirt from his dresser. He also put on a pair of socks, because he felt self-conscious about his feet and did not want for his mother's company to see them.

He quietly sneaked out of his bedroom and into the bathroom with hopes that his mother did not hear him. She was asleep when Jimmy had dropped him off at home the previous evening, and he wanted to brush his teeth in case his breath still smelt of beer. From the bathroom, he heard his mother and the other two women still talking. He recognized one of the voices as Mrs. McCann.

"It was a real fancy car," he heard Mrs. McCann say. "A convertible, but he had the top up, I guess because it was a little chilly yesterday." The women stopped talking when they heard the bathroom sink turn on. Even with the bathroom door closed, Rydell felt like they were looking in his direction. He lingered for a moment, taking some hand soap and lathering it to wash his face. They were talking about Perry, and Rydell began to worry. He opened the bathroom door and slowly walked down the hall. As he turned into the living room, he saw his mother and Mrs. McCann sitting on the couch. His mother was already dressed for work, wearing the gray pant suit his grandfather had gotten her for Christmas. Mrs. McCann was wearing a pink flannel night gown. She had on a pair of house shoes. When he stepped fully into the living room, he saw that the other woman sitting on their recliner was Helen Moore.

Her skin had an olive tint that seemed to shine from the sunlight that peeked through the window in the living room. Her curly brown hair had been tied back into a ponytail, and she wore no makeup. Even when she wasn't fixed up, she seemed miles ahead of the rest of the women in Lincoln. She wore a baggy flannel shirt with a pair of blue jeans and gripped tightly to a ceramic mug filled with coffee. Though she was white, something about her felt very black to Rydell. It was like she was a kindred spirit. Rydell watched as her hands, with their long pink fingernails, held tightly to the green ceramic cup. He envied the cup, and wished that her hands were on his back instead. As she pursed her lips to take a sip of the coffee, he wished that the mug were his neck. Helen looked at him, and he began to fear that she could read his thoughts, so he looked away.

"Jimmy MacArthur called Helen last night," his mother said. "He told her that some man from Memphis told you he was looking for her. Is that true?"

Rydell nodded, too embarrassed to speak in Helen's presence.

"Any idea why he is looking for me?" Helen asked. She seemed calm, but her voice shook a little.

"No ma'am," Rydell said. He reached into his back pocket and handed Helen the business card that Perry gave him at Otis Dale's shop. "This is his card," he said. Helen took the card from Rydell's hand. She looked the card up and down, and Rydell thought she seemed confused.

"He knew my first and last name?" Helen asked.

"Yes ma'am," Rydell said.

“Did you tell him anything about me?”

“I told him about your husband. That’s it. He wanted to know where you lived and worked, but I didn’t tell him none of that.” Rydell was pleased with his response, but Helen Moore was still worried. Mrs. McCann shook her head.

“If you and the kids and your momma want to stay with us to hide out, you’re more than welcome to,” Mrs. McCann said. “We have plenty of room, and Jack would just love having other kids in the house.”

Plenty of room? Rydell thought. The McCanns lived in a two bedroom house. Besides, with the way Mrs. McCann kept a secret, folks as far as Jackson would know Helen Moore was staying there by the end of the day. Rydell hoped his mother would extend the same offer to Helen. He imagined accidentally walking into the house as Helen finished showering, and her towel wrapped around her, accidentally falling to the ground. In his imagination, Helen’s body would have none of the imperfections that come from childbirth. Instead, she would be perfect like the women in Otis’s magazines.

“What are you smiling about, Rydell?” his mother asked, and Rydell’s head was instantly cleared.

“Should I call Sheriff Fineman?” Helen asked.

“Maybe,” Rydell’s mother said. “But we could be over reacting. Are you sure you don’t know this man?”

“I have never met a Percival DuChamp in my life,” Helen said.

“He goes by Perry,” Rydell said.

“I ain’t ever met a Perry neither.”

* * *

When Rydell arrived at school, there were whispers in the class during homeroom. Those who had seen Rydell get into Perry's car at Sonic already let their imaginations run away with them. No one actually came to Rydell directly to ask him about the rumors. All he heard were faint traces of the story that involved a secret meeting in a gray Corvette with a scout from Memphis State. In between English Literature and Biology, Coach Stone passed Rydell in the hallway. He didn't say anything to Rydell but just slapped him on the back proudly.

At practice, Rydell knew that Coach Stone wanted to ask him about the strange man from Memphis, but he never seemed to find a way. Instead, Rydell felt as if Coach was putting him through a much more vigorous practice than the rest of the team. Rydell did more laps around the court than the rest of the Eagles and was forced to practice free throws longer.

"Heritage High fouls a lot," Coach Stone said. "We have to get you ready. If all else fails, we have to let them know how good you are."

"Who do we have to show me off to?" Rydell asked, but Coach Stone never answered. Jimmy had not really spoken to Rydell during school and could not even make eye contact with him during practice.

"Is everything okay, Jimmy?" Rydell asked.

"I'm fine," Jimmy responded. Rydell wasn't sure whether or not Jimmy was jealous of the attention that he was receiving or if he felt bad for calling Helen Moore the previous night.

* * *

At Otis's insistence, Rydell never worked on the days that he had practice or a game, but Tuesdays were payday, so Rydell went to Dale's Auto Repairs to get his check.

When he arrived, several of the men in town were at the shop gathered around the desk in Otis's office. Each of them had a can of Miller Light in their hands, and they were all talking.

"His name is Perry," Rydell heard Otis telling the other men. "It's short for Perrance. He says he's a periodontist."

"What the hell kind of name is Perrance?" Ray Smith asked. Ray was Helen Moore's brother, and his presence in the shop made Rydell nervous. "And what's he want from my baby sister?"

"It's not short for Perrance," Rydell said, walking into the office. "It's Percival." The men quieted down when Rydell walked in.

"Well, Percival came looking for you today," Otis said. As Rydell came into the office, he noticed one of the men sitting at the table was Dr. MacArthur, Jimmy's grandfather. Rydell waved at him, but the old man, who was so welcoming to him the previous evening, pretended as if he didn't see Rydell and looked forward, sipping on his beer. "He left something for you," Otis said. Otis handed a small package that was wrapped as if it were a birthday present to him. Rydell tossed the package into his backpack.

"Can I have my paycheck?" Rydell asked.

“You ain’t even gonna open it and see what it is?” Frank Tansey asked. Frank owned Tansey Cleaners. “I mean, we’ve been kind of speculatin’ about what it is all day.” Rydell reached into his backpack and pulled the tiny package out. He unwrapped it, revealing the spine of a cassette tape. It was Miles Davis’s *Bitches Brew*. He held the cassette up, so that all of the men could see it, and they seemed disappointed. Otis walked to the office file cabinet, where he kept Rydell’s paycheck and opened it. Rydell’s heart sank, when rather than pulling out the paycheck, he pulled three copies of *Playboy* instead and handed them to Rydell. Immediately, Rydell recognized them as the issues he had given to Jimmy the previous day.

“Jimmy’s momma found these in his backpack while he was in the shower last night,” Otis said. “When she asked him where he got ‘em, he said you gave them to him. Told her you stole them from me.” Rydell looked at the floor. “He also told her about Perry and Helen Moore. Was you gonna say anything about it? Her brother is worried sick.”

Rydell shook his head. He watched as Ray Smith sipped on his beer and thought that Ray seemed undisturbed.

“We’re just hopin’ this man don’t mean Helen no harm,” Otis continued. “That family has done been through enough. I got his tags and the sheriff’s out lookin’ for him now. Course, none of that explains why you’d steal from me.”

“Don’t be too hard on him, Otis,” Dr. MacArthur said. “Boys will be boys. You tellin’ me you wouldn’t take a magazine full of nekkid women if you were his age and they was just sittin’ there?”

Otis ignored Dr. MacArthur and continued to stare at Rydell.

“I guess I’m not getting my last paycheck?” Rydell asked. Otis pulled another envelope from his file cabinet and handed it to Rydell.

“I was thinkin’ of keepin’ it, but I want to be fair,” Otis said. “You’re a hard worker, but if you’re gonna steal my magazines from me, I ain’t got no reason to believe you wouldn’t take money from me neither.” Otis sucked at his teeth.

* * *

The next morning, Rydell’s mother stood over her son’s bed with her hand pressed against his forehead.

“It doesn’t feel like you have a fever,” she said.

“I just don’t feel good, Momma,” Rydell said. She always had a knack for knowing when he was lying to her. As a child, he never got away with anything. He wondered if she heard that Mr. Dale fired him, and he also wondered if she heard why. Her brown eyes looked down at him and showed neither sympathy or anger.

“Don’t you have a game tonight?” his mother asked.

“They’ll be okay without me.” Rydell tried to create the sound of sickness in his voice, but he didn’t think he was pulling it off well. His mother was dressed for work and checked her watch. His father bought the watch for her, years before they split, and Rydell wondered if she thought about him whenever she looked at it. The watch was a Cartier and it was gold. His father had not bought the watch for her as a birthday, Valentine’s, or anniversary present. He called it a “just because” gift. Dr. Washington

frequently did things like that for his wife when they were still happy, and Rydell wondered if the watch reminded his mother of those times.

“If I don’t get going soon I’m going to be late for my first class,” his mother said. “I’ll call you around lunch time to check on you.” She kissed him on the cheek, and she smelt of shea butter. Rydell listened to the clack of her high heels as she left his bedroom and went through the living room, out the front door. When he heard her car start, he got out of bed and went to the kitchen to pour himself a bowl of cereal. He wondered what happened to Perry DuChamp. Had Sheriff Fineman found him and taken him in for questioning? Had Perry really done anything so wrong that intervention from the law was needed? Rydell tried to imagine what reasonable explanation Perry might have for being in town, and why he might know about Helen Moore. Maybe he was an old friend of her husband’s. Stephen Moore had not grown up in Lincoln. Maybe Perry was a childhood friend or an old Army buddy.

There was no local television in Lincoln, so Rydell alternated between the Tupelo and Oxford news, trying to see if either station was reporting on the arrest of a strange man from Memphis. The news broadcasts stayed more focused on the upcoming presidential election. Polls were showing that Bill Clinton would more than likely emerge victorious against President Bush in November. Rydell remembered the Clinton and Gore bumper sticker on Perry’s car and wondered what he would think of this news. He never talked politics with Perry, but everyone in Lincoln seemed to be voting for Bush and Quayle.

Rydell spent the day on the couch, lying under a yellow and red afghan his grandmother made, watching television. Occasionally, the telephone would ring, but he never got up to answer it. He assumed it was just his mother checking on him, so he decided to let the answering machine get it. Most of the calls were his mother, with the exception of one from Jimmy MacArthur.

“Hey, Rydell,” the message said. “It’s Jimmy. Call me when you get this.”

Rydell was disgusted with Jimmy. Why did he sell him out? Why didn’t he just tell his mother there was a gas station in Tupelo that sold him the magazines? Jimmy had cost Rydell his job. Coach Stone also called a couple of times, and Rydell assumed that he asked Jimmy to call him from the school phone. By pretending to be sick, Rydell would get his revenge. None of them truly cared for him. All that concerned them was his skill on the basketball court. If the ebony players at Heritage High beat Lincoln, then Rydell considered that a victory for himself. No one at Heritage would have cost him his job.

Around noon, Rydell heard his next door neighbor’s labrador retriever begin to bark uncontrollably. He got up from the couch to peek out of his living room window and saw Perry’s Corvette parked in his driveway. Mrs. McCann was on her front porch watching, and Perry waved at her. He checked a piece of paper that he held in his hand before walking towards Rydell’s front door. He still wore the black t-shirt that he had worn at Sonic on Monday but had changed into a pair of blue jeans. A leather jacket covered Perry’s bulky frame. Rydell heard the knock on his front door. He opened it, slid out to the front porch, and closed the door behind him. Mrs. McCann went back

inside her home but reemerged on her front porch holding a pair of binoculars. Perry noticed her and laughed.

“There’s not a whole lot going on in this town is there?” he asked. Subtlety had never been one of Mrs. McCann’s strengths.

“Can we talk inside?” he asked. Rydell just shook his head and stared at him. “I guess everyone in town thinks I’m some kind of boogeyman?” Rydell didn’t answer. He just stared at him, waiting for an explanation.

“Look,” Perry said. “I talked to the sheriff. I’m about to be leaving town. I just wanted to let you know, I didn’t mean no harm to anyone. I saw Helen Moore in that pharmacy across from the Sonic, and I just thought she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I asked the kid behind the counter about her, and he was the one that told me her name. The reason I asked you about her was because I just couldn’t get out of my head how pretty she was. I’m turning forty next year, I ain’t never married, and I’m just lonely. You know what that’s like?”

Rydell did not know what it was like to be forty and unmarried, but he understood loneliness. He felt sympathy towards Perry and a bit more relaxed. Rydell wondered if Jimmy was the kid from the pharmacy who told Perry about Helen, and he got angrier at his good friend.

“I gathered this was one of those towns where everyone sort of knows everyone,” Perry continued. “I’m not an unreasonable man. I see how weird I might come across to all of y’all who live here, but I swear I wasn’t planning anything funny. I was just gonna

try to ask her out. If she rejected me, I was just gonna keep moving. She was pretty, and I just wanted to take a shot, that's all."

"Why'd you wanna know where she lived?" Rydell asked.

"I'm not any good at this stuff," Perry said. "Hell, if I were, I wouldn't still be on the market." Perry laughed when he said this. "I just ain't ever been too good with people. You seem like a good kid, and I wanted to apologize if I had you scared or something. Did you get that tape I dropped off for you at your work?"

Rydell nodded.

"Sheriff Fineman seems like a good man," Perry continued. "He said I had some of you right worried. I just wanted to apologize for that. Let you know I'm harmless. I'm heading back to Memphis, before I get in anymore trouble here. If you end up playing for Memphis State, I do hope you'll come by and see me." Perry turned around and started to walk off the front porch.

"Did you ever get a chance to talk to Helen Moore?" Rydell asked.

"I figured it would be best if I didn't, what with the sheriff getting involved and everything," Perry said. "Besides, I wouldn't know where to find her if I wanted to anyways."

"She works as a cashier at McCoy's Grocery," Rydell said. Perry smiled and then got into his car. He waved at Rydell as he backed out of the driveway. Once he was properly in the middle of the street, he honked his horn and waved at Mrs. McCann who still had her binoculars out.

* * *

Rydell shoved his letterman's jacket, the Miles Davis cassette, and his Walkman into his backpack and sneaked into the gymnasium at Lincoln High School at four that afternoon. The game was supposed to start at six. Coach Stone's office was next to the concession stand, and he always left his door unlocked. Rydell peeked around the front entrance to the gym, hiding behind a column to make sure no one saw him, and then went into the office, closing the door behind him. He stared at the phone on Coach Stone's desk. His thoughts all day had been of leaving Lincoln, Mississippi. While he loved his mother, if she had to stay in Lincoln, then he could no longer live with her. He wanted to call his father. He couldn't make his mother pay the long distance charges for the phone call, but he had no problem sticking that bill to Lincoln High School. They used him, so he had no problem using them. He picked up the phone and dialed.

"This is Dr. Cordell Washington," the answering machine message said. "I'm not available to take your call at the moment, but leave your name, phone number, and a detailed message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

Rydell listened to his father's voice and wasn't sure how he felt. His father worked every Christmas and Thanksgiving, and Rydell was lucky if he got a five minute phone call on his birthday. The machine beeped, and Rydell sat with the phone receiver to his ear, silent for a moment, thinking about what he would say. He wasn't sure if his father would even try to call him back, but he had to try.

"Daddy, it's Rydell," he said. "I hate it here. I want to come live with you." He stayed on the line for a moment before hanging the phone up. He sat in Coach Stone's chair, looking at the brown, pressed wood that lined the walls of his office. There were

no photographs or posters or even framed college degrees on his walls. They were spare, and something about that seemed sad to Rydell.

He began to open the drawers of Coach Stone's desk, but they were empty, with the exception of a green grade book that he used for his P.E. classes and a few ink pens. The office door opened, and Rydell froze. It was Jimmy MacArthur, and he seemed shocked to see Rydell sitting in Coach Stone's chair.

"Coach sent me here," Jimmy said, his blue eyes looking to the floor. "I was just about to call you. He wanted to know where you were."

"I'm not playing tonight," Rydell said. "Don't know if I'm going to play anymore this season."

"I figured as much," Jimmy said. "At least about tonight. What are you doing here?"

Rydell didn't really have an answer for Jimmy.

"Why did you tell on me?" Rydell asked.

"Have you ever had your mom catch you with porn?" Jimmy asked. "It isn't really an easy time to think on your feet."

"Why'd you tell her about Helen?"

"I wasn't sure what to do," Jimmy said. "What if that man meant trouble? What if he killed her? Wouldn't that be our fault somehow?" Rydell thought for a moment. He imagined how embarrassed he would feel if his mother had found those magazines in his bag. He smiled at Jimmy who still looked worried.

“Could you help sneak me under the bleachers?” Rydell asked. “I want to watch the game tonight.” Jimmy seemed reluctant but nodded his head. He opened the door to Coach Stone’s office and peeked outside it. He waved his hand, motioning for Rydell to come forward. Rydell grabbed his backpack and then walked over to the door that led under the bleachers. Jimmy opened it and shoved Rydell inside. Rydell peeked through and saw Jimmy run towards Coach Stone.

“He didn’t answer,” Jimmy said, and Coach Stone threw his hands into the air. He seemed worried.

* * *

By halftime, Heritage High was leading 46-21. Lincoln High was getting slaughtered, and Rydell wasn’t really sure that his presence on the court would have helped anything. He had sat under the bleachers, watching the game with a pair of headphones, listening to *Bitches Brew*. At one point during the first period, he saw Coach Stone screaming at the referee, when one of Heritage High’s players had fouled Bobby Wilkinson. Rydell smiled. He hated that he was taking such pleasure in his team’s loss. As the players converged on the bench during half time, he saw his mother run down on the court and approach Coach Stone. She looked worried. He wondered if his father had called her. Coach Stone put his hands to his face, and Rydell wondered if Coach was truly worried about him and not the game.

The door that led under the bleachers opened. Clyde Davis and Donna Henry entered, not noticing Rydell in the darkness, and began to kiss. Rydell quietly walked past them and opened the door, making his way out. Students from Heritage High

crowded around the concession stand. He made his way into the group of black students, mixing with the crowd. He walked past his homeroom teacher, Mr. Thompson, who was taking the money for the game at the door. Mr. Thompson recognized him, but Rydell kept moving out of the front doors of the gymnasium, running with hopes that no one would catch up to him. Maybe his mother told Mr. Thompson that he was missing. He ran for the school parking lot and saw Perry getting into his car.

“Perry!” he called. Perry stopped and looked around, trying to find whoever was calling his name. He was still dressed in the same clothes he wore earlier in the day.

“Rydell!” Perry said. “I came to watch the game. Thought you might still play.”

“Did you talk to Helen?” Rydell asked.

“No,” Perry said. “Thought about it, but I didn’t think it would be best.”

“Rydell!” both men heard a voice call from the distance. Rydell knew it was his mother, and looked up to see her followed by Coach Stone, Mr. Thompson, and Jimmy MacArthur.

“I should probably get going,” Perry said, opening the door to his car. He held his hand out, and Rydell took it. “I was serious about you looking me up if you ever come to Memphis,” Perry said as he got into his car. By this point, Rydell’s mother, Mr. Thompson, Coach Stone, and Jimmy MacArthur were right behind him. His mother grabbed him and embraced him as Perry pulled away. Tomorrow, Rydell knew that all of them, with the exception of Jimmy MacArthur, would be angry with him, but right now his mother, teacher, and coach all just seemed relieved to see that he was okay.

“I’m sorry, Momma,” he said, kissing her on the cheek. “I didn’t meant to worry you.” Bobby Wilkinson ran into the parking lot, finding the group, huddled together.

“Coach,” Bobby said. “Halftime is over. They need you back in.”

“Come on,” Coach Stone said to everyone. “Let’s go back inside. Why don’t you watch the rest of the game from the bleachers,” he said to Rydell. They all walked back towards the gym, and Rydell had his arm around his mother. The others walked back inside the gym, while Rydell and his mother remained outside.

“Did Dad call you?” Rydell asked her. She nodded, and tears were in her eyes. She dabbed at her tears with her fingers, and it hurt Rydell to watch her cry. He could not abandon her like his father had.

“I’ll stay here,” he said. “I’ll go to Ole Miss.” His mother released her grip from him and stepped back to look at Rydell’s face.

“You need to do what makes you happy,” she said and put her hand on his cheek. Rydell smiled. When he looked at his mother, he felt loved. She was beautiful, he thought. Prettier than Helen Moore and stronger than any of those women that Otis spent his days gazing at.

“I want to go home,” he said, and his mother nodded, reaching her hands into her purse and pulling out her keys. They walked back to the parking lot together and got into the car.

“Hold on,” Rydell said, getting out of the car and grabbing his backpack. He opened it, pulled out his letterman’s jacket and tossed it in the dumpster.

The Hussy

“The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order: the continuous thread of revelation.” -Eudora Welty

As snow fell from the sky, Nadine Moore watched from the back seat of her mother’s car, fascinated as each flake glided like a miniature white parachute touching down on the thicker layer of white that covered the ground, trees, buildings, and cars on Main Street in Lincoln, Mississippi. Snow was a rare sight, and this was the first time that Nadine had seen snow of this magnitude in her eight years of life. Though only two inches covered the ground, it might as well have been a blizzard to her. It was three days before Christmas 1998, and with the decorations of wreaths and lights that were fashioned to look like stars, Christmas trees, Santa Claus, and mangers hanging on every light pole, the holiday season looked for once as she had seen it look on television.

Her mother, Helen, made her wear her turquoise dress that Memaw bought for her at the J.C. Penney’s in Tupelo a year and a half earlier. Nadine had not really grown much since the dress was purchased, but she noticed that her knees now seemed to peek out from the bottom of the gown. Since the climate was typically hot in Lincoln, Nadine did not have much in the way of winter clothes. Her mother made her put on a pair of black tights underneath the dress to keep her warm, but Nadine still felt exposed. She pulled at the lace frills that lined the bottom of the dress, trying to make it cover her knees. At least she had a heavy coat to cover her arms. Helen looked into the rear view mirror and noticed her daughter fidgeting with her clothes.

“Baby, leave your dress alone. You look fine,” Helen called from the front seat. She reached into her purse, retrieved a pack of Lucky Strikes and gazed into the pack.

In the front seat, Nadine’s brother, William, also stared at the snow. William was seventeen, and though he had seen it before, he seemed just as fascinated as his younger sister. The only person in the car who seemed disturbed by the weather was Helen. She drove slowly down Main Street, as if she believed that by increasing the speed of the car by one mile per hour, she might lose control and send her family to a violent death. Death loomed on the minds of all of the car’s passengers.

“Funny,” she said while eyeing her son. “I could’ve sworn I had more cigarettes left than this.” William ignored his mother and continued to look out the window at the snow. Helen pulled her Zippo from her purse and lit the cigarette. She cracked her window a little bit to allow the smoke to escape, but the smell of the cigarette filled the car, causing Nadine to cough. She never really liked the smell of cigarettes.

Just four days earlier, the car that Helen was driving belonged to Nadine’s grandmother, Eunice Smith. Nadine and William called her *Memaw*. Everyday after school, Nadine would look for this car, a gray 1989 Buick LeSabre. Memaw always had a package of red rope licorice waiting for Nadine in the glove compartment. Even after Memaw had gotten sick, she would give Helen the money to purchase the candy and have her place it in the glove box for Nadine to find. Now that Memaw was gone, there was no candy.

Her mother had wanted to sell the car, but Nadine's uncle, Ray, had insisted that they keep both it and the house that they had shared with Memaw on Tudor Road. Today, they were on their way to the Browning Funeral Home for Memaw's visitation.

Many of the businesses that lined Main Street, like The Magnolia Cafe, Barton's Jewelers, and A-1 Hardware, had closed, which confused Nadine. The only place that had remained open besides the Browning Funeral Home was McCoy's Grocery where Helen worked part time during the day. Helen worked two jobs, spending her evenings bartending at the Beaver's Tail, Lincoln's only bar. As they passed McCoy's Grocery, Helen slowed the car down, and all three passengers looked at the grocery store; its tiny parking lot, just off to the side of the building, was filled with cars.

"Momma," Nadine said. "Is everything closed because of Memaw?"

"No," Helen said with the cigarette dangling from her mouth. "Everything is closed because no one wants to work in this weather. I bet they'll all be piled in at the funeral home. They'll all have cabin fever."

Nadine didn't know what cabin fever meant, but she hoped it wasn't serious. For the last year, she was bombarded with words that she did not understand like *malignant* and *terminal*. All that she really understood was that Memaw got sick, and she was no longer with them. Memaw's illness frustrated Nadine. Nadine had gotten sick before, but she got better. She did not understand why these same rules did not apply to Memaw, nor why Memaw had to die before the snow fell. Nadine knew that going to Memaw's visitation was important, but she felt slighted. This was the first chance she might ever have to build a snowman or have a snowball fight. She hoped she wouldn't have to wait

eight more years for this opportunity again. Smoke continued to fill the car, and Nadine began to cough.

“Momma, what’s a hussy?” Nadine asked. Helen slammed on the breaks, and the car began to skid down Main Street before coming to a complete stop. Nadine could see her mother taking deep breaths before she turned around to face Nadine, who had now diverted her attention to her lap. People in Lincoln claimed that Nadine was the spitting image of Helen. Both had curly brown hair and green eyes, but outside of that Nadine did not seem to notice the similarities. Nadine’s skin was pale and white, like her brother’s, while her mother had a more olive complexion. As Helen looked at her daughter from the backseat, Nadine noticed that her mother’s skin was turning the same shade of red that Memaw’s did whenever she saw a woman smoking a cigarette.

“Hussies,” Memaw would say. “They wish they was men.” Nadine was never sure what about the cigarette made the woman a hussy, but Memaw made it clear that it was not ladylike for a woman to smoke. Despite this, Helen never seemed to hide the fact that she smoked from Memaw, and even made it a point to light a cigarette whenever Eunice began her argument. Women dipped. Hussies smoked. Yet as Nadine watched her grandmother take that pinch of tobacco and place it between her gums, something seemed so much more undignified about it than cigarettes.

Nadine would not have even been curious about the word *hussy* had it not been for the previous evening she had spent at Otis and Virginia Dale’s house. Otis was watching the news. President Clinton was on the television, and Otis seemed to be celebrating. The news briefly showed a photograph of a woman who was not the

president's wife. She was a heavier set woman, but she wasn't fat. She had big brown hair, that seemed to swoop over her skull, and pale, milky skin like Nadine's. She was wearing a pearl necklace with a black dress and had a big smile.

"They finally gonna get that sonuva bitch," Otis said.

"Otis, change the channel," Virginia screamed from the kitchen. "Nadine is here, and I don't want her watching them talk about the president and that hussy." Nadine wasn't sure why Virginia Dale was calling this woman a hussy. She didn't see a cigarette anywhere in the picture. As her mother stared at her, she wanted to tell her about the woman she saw on television, and what she heard at the Dale's house.

"A hussy is a woman who does the same shit men do," her mother said, while still staring at her. "Someone been talkin' to you about me?"

Nadine didn't answer and continued to stare at her lap. She wanted to cry but held back her tears. She didn't understand why she was in trouble.

"Well," Helen said. "I'm waiting." Nadine was surprised when her deliverance came in the form of her brother's laughter. William, who had been silent all morning, let out a laugh from deep within his belly, and he began to hold his sides as if he were in pain.

"What the hell is so funny, boy?" Helen asked.

"No one's been talking about you, Momma," William said. "She's talking about that thing Memaw used to say. You know, about how women who smoked were hussies." Nadine looked up at her mother. Helen's skin flushed back to its natural complexion, and she too began laughing. Nadine watched her mother and William, confused. Since

Memaw had gotten sick, Nadine rarely saw her mother smile, much less laugh.

Memaw's illness took a toll on Helen, and it felt good to see her mother smile again.

* * *

Nadine entered the funeral home with her hand grasped tightly to her mother's. There were already a lot of people there, which made Nadine anxious. She was a shy child, and she did not recognize a lot of the people who came to pay their respects to her grandmother. Her uncle, Ray, was standing in the front entrance waiting for them. Even at church, Ray typically wore a western shirt with blue jeans, so Nadine was shocked to see him wearing a black suit and tie. He looked handsome, she thought. He got down on his knees and held his arms out to Nadine, who ran to her uncle. She always enjoyed Ray's company. His coarse brown hair was slicked back, and it seemed that every hair was in place. He smelt of cologne, and as he embraced his young niece, she felt safe. He put his hand on her cheek and smiled at her.

"You holdin' up okay, sport?" he asked. Nadine hated it when Ray called her *sport*. It made her feel like she was a boy. She pulled away from her uncle's embrace, nodding her head. Ray looked up at her mother and brother.

"What about you, William?" he asked. "How you holdin' up?"

William nodded. After their father died, Memaw had been the one to raise William since Helen worked a lot. He kept hoping that Memaw might pull through. Ray stood up and walked towards his sister and embraced her as tightly as he embraced Nadine. Helen put great detail into her makeup that morning, and Ray was careful to not press her face against him. Still, Helen began to cry, and Nadine could see mascara begin

to run down her mother's face. Nadine saw this thing on television about how some painters would use the same canvas over and over, covering the work they did that left them unsatisfied. Sometimes, she wondered if the painting underneath was more beautiful than the one the artists chose to present to the world. It made her think of her mother. She thought Helen was so much prettier without makeup.

"I don't know how I'm going to do it," Helen said. "I'm gonna have to quit my job at the Beaver's Tail, and that's where I make most of my money."

"No you're not neither," Ray said. "Nadine is always welcome to stay with me if you have a late shift. William ain't no baby no more neither. I think he can lend a helping hand in watching his sister." Ray looked at William when he said this, and Nadine understood from the look on her uncle's face that he was giving William an order and not just suggesting something. William winked at his uncle. Nadine was excited about evenings alone with her brother. Since William started driving, he seemed to have less time for her. Helen pulled away from Ray and reached into her purse, pulling out a compact.

"My makeup has done gone to shit," she said. She grabbed Nadine's hand and dragged her into the women's restroom, leaving William and Ray behind. The restroom had been cleaned recently and smelt like bleach. It reminded Nadine of the hospital where Memaw had passed.

"Do you need to potty?" Helen asked while digging through her purse for her makeup. Nadine shook her head and leaned against the sink, watching as Helen lined up her lipstick, blush, and mascara. Nadine hated it when her mother used words like *potty*

when talking to her. She felt that sometimes, Helen forgot that she was not a baby anymore.

“Why do you wear makeup, Momma?” Nadine asked.

“So that I can look pretty,” Helen said.

“But you’re already pretty.” Helen seemed confused as to what to say back to her daughter. She just smiled and began to apply mascara to her long eyelashes.

“Is Memaw with Grandpa and Daddy now?”

“I hope they’re all there,” Helen said. Nadine really didn’t know much about her father or her grandfather. Grandpa passed three years before she was born, and her father died in Kuwait during Desert Storm. He was a Staff Sergeant in the Army. He was in an airplane that had been shot down, and his body was never recovered. Nadine would often look at a picture that her mother kept of him next to her bed. In the photo, he was sitting in the brown leather easy chair that was still in the living room of their home on Tudor Road. He was holding Nadine, who was an infant then. His hair, though cut short, seemed to be the same shade of blond as William’s, but his face looked different. Despite everyone telling Nadine that she looked like her mother in the face, she thought that she strongly resembled her dad. Behind Harmony Baptist Church, an empty grave stood to memorialize him. It was next to the plot where her granddaddy was, and where Memaw would soon be.

The bathroom door opened and it startled Nadine. Madeline Jackson came inside and smiled when she saw Nadine and Helen. Miss Jackson had been Nadine’s kindergarten teacher, and Nadine never really liked her. Miss Jackson was in her early

fifties and had never married. Some people in town claimed that it was because no man could handle her, but Nadine thought it was because Miss Jackson was overweight.

“Helen!” Miss Jackson called. Helen put down her compact as Miss Jackson approached and wrapped her arms around her. The skin from Miss Jackson’s arms reached down to Helen’s shoulder blades, and Nadine looked away from her former teacher, disgusted. Miss Jackson smelled like stale sweat and despite the fact that it was snowing outside, her skin was glistening as if it were June.

“Oh Helen,” Miss Jackson said, “I’m so sorry. I made you an eggplant casserole that I’m going to bring by your house later tonight. You are just skin and bones,” she said while grabbing Helen’s arms.

“Oh Maddie, you’re too kind.” Helen pulled away from Miss Jackson’s embrace.

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,” Miss Jackson said. “How’re the little ones?” She looked down at Nadine and smiled. A thick glaze of yellow lined Miss Jackson’s teeth. Nadine ran her tongue across her own teeth, hoping that her’s were not the same shade of yellow.

“I think they’re handling it the best they can,” Helen said. Miss Jackson smiled and excused herself to a stall.

“You still workin’ at The Beaver’s Tail?” Miss Jackson asked, and Helen and Nadine could hear Miss Jackson’s private business happening. Helen rolled her eyes which made Nadine giggle.

“I’m still there, Maddie,” Helen said. “Nothing’s changed.”

“So you’re still working at McCoy’s in the morning too?” Miss Jackson asked.

“Yes ma’am,” Helen said. They heard the toilet flush, and Miss Jackson came to the sink next to Helen and washed her hands.

“Well, I heard you been serving more than drinks to Donald McCoy,” Miss Jackson said. Helen stopped putting on her makeup and slammed her compact on the sink, startling Nadine.

“Nadine,” Helen said. “Why don’t you go out in the lobby and find your brother and Uncle Ray.”

“But Momma,” Nadine said.

“Now!” Helen said, pointing at the door. Donald McCoy was Henry McCoy’s son. Donald was sweet on Helen, and William and Nadine liked Donald. He would come by their home everyday with two candy bars, a Baby Ruth for William and a Snickers for Nadine. He knew those were their favorites. Nadine thought that her mother enjoyed Donald’s company, but she did not seem to like him the same way that he liked her. Nadine watched as Miss Jackson slowly began to walk backwards against the wall of the bathroom. She looked afraid.

“What did I say, Helen?” Miss Jackson asked, and her chin moved in a way that reminded Nadine of a turkey’s waddle. Nadine opened the door peeking into the lobby, while trying to keep an eye on her mother. William was standing close to the front door, talking to two of his friends from school. Nadine recognized them. They were Jack McCann and Mark Osbourne. Mark’s younger brother, Timmy, was in Nadine’s class at Lincoln Elementary School. Timmy Osbourne was Nadine’s friend.

“William,” she called, and while her brother turned his head and looked at her, he immediately focused his attention back on his friends, ignoring his younger sister.

Nadine heard a slap from inside the bathroom. Miss Jackson managed to get on the other side of Helen, but there was a red mark on her face. Helen grabbed Miss Jackson by her hair, pulling her back towards her.

“You all just have so much to say about me, don’t you?” Nadine heard her mother say. Miss Jackson turned to face Helen and pushed her. While the push did not seem to have that much force, it startled Helen, giving Miss Jackson a chance to run. She headed for the door to the bathroom, and Nadine moved back into the lobby in order to avoid getting trampled. Miss Jackson ran into the lobby, stopping close to the women’s restroom door to catch her breath. Nadine could hear her wheezing. Helen came out of the bathroom and grabbed Miss Jackson’s dress.

“This is just a misunderstanding, Helen,” Miss Jackson said.

“Oh, I understood everything you meant quite well, Maddie,” Helen said. Nadine saw Otis and Virginia Dale approach Miss Jackson and her mother with Dr. MacArthur, the local pharmacist, following close behind. Miss Jackson’s face was flushed, except for the spot of red where Helen had slapped her.

“What happened?” Virginia Dale asked. The crowd in the funeral home turned to face Helen, who was still standing in front of the bathroom door with her eyes fixed on Miss Jackson. Nadine felt a finger tap on her shoulder.

“Hi, Nadine,” a voice said, and she turned around to see Timmy Osbourne standing behind her. Timmy was wearing a gray heavy coat that had been handed down

to him by one of his older brothers. Beneath the coat was a red and white striped t-shirt that was too small for him, and his white belly poked out just above his belt line. There were rips in the knees of his blue jeans, revealing the white thermal underwear beneath them. His auburn brown hair was mussed as if he had just rolled out of bed, and his skin seemed to be flushed from the cold outside. Nadine was annoyed that Timmy picked this time to greet her. As everyone in the lobby watched her mother and Miss Jackson, Nadine began to pull at the bottom of her dress. Timmy just looked at her with a wide, toothy smile. Nadine watched her brother. William looked as if he was trying to figure out the best way to stop the fight.

“You look nice,” Timmy said to Nadine. He looked up at Helen and then at Miss Jackson. “I hope your momma hits her,” he whispered. Timmy was actually a year older than Nadine, but Miss Jackson had held him back in kindergarten. Miss Jackson turned around to face Helen. Ray made his way through the crowd and stood between Miss Jackson and Helen.

“I swear, I think so highly of your family,” Miss Jackson said, holding her hands in the air as if Helen was pointing a gun at her. “I would never have a harsh word to say about a Smith or a Moore.” Nadine heard her uncle mutter something under his breath. While she could not make out the words, she knew that whatever it was he said was in stark disagreement with Miss Jackson. William ran to his mother’s side. Nadine thought that William looked heroic in his suit. He paused for a moment to stare at his mother. Helen noticed him but kept her eyes fixed on Miss Jackson.

“Momma! What are you doing?” William said. It seemed that he didn’t really expect an answer from his mother. He ran next to her, throwing his arms around her to restrain her. “What would Memaw think of you gettin’ like this at her visitation?”

“Where do you think I learned to act this way from?” Helen replied, before breaking from her son’s grasp. She walked slowly towards Miss Jackson, removing her earrings as she approached. Nadine looked away. Her mother’s face frightened her. Uncle Ray was still standing in between Helen and Miss Jackson, and Nadine moved towards him. Timmy followed her. She wasn’t sure if it was actually possible to hear a smile, but she swore that was the noise coming from Timmy’s face. He clapped his hands in delight as Helen inched closer to Miss Jackson.

“Momma,” William said. “Jesus told us to....”

“Shut up, boy,” Helen said. “I’m ready to do more than turn her cheeks.”

Ray approached Miss Jackson and took her hand.

“Maddie,” he said. “While we appreciate you being here for us, it seems you have somehow upset my sister. I think it’d be best if you just went on home.”

Miss Jackson turned to make her way to the exit. Helen tried to run towards her when she turned around, but William and Jack McCann stepped forward to restrain her. Nadine noticed the disappointed look on Timmy’s face. He really wanted to see Helen hurt Miss Jackson.

“Oh, Maddie,” Helen called, with William and Jack still restraining her arms. Miss Jackson stopped by a bench near the front door where she had left her coat. She turned around to face Helen, and by the look on her face, Nadine thought that Miss

Jackson knew she was about to get more abuse. “You said something in the bathroom about an eggplant casserole. We should be home at about 7:30 if you’d like to leave it on the porch.” Miss Jackson nodded and exited the funeral home without putting her coat on. The crowd remained silent for a moment and stared at Helen.

“Go on,” Helen said. “I ain’t trying to ruin no one’s good time.” William and Jack let go of Helen, and Ray walked up to her. The crowd still watched her.

“Who’d she say was in Hell?” Ray asked. “Momma, daddy, or Stephen.”

“I didn’t even let her get that far,” Helen said. “Donald McCoy has been coming up to The Beaver’s Tail to see me when he gets finished at McCoy’s Grocery. She’s sweet on him, but he’s sweet on me. She was trying to make a hussy comment at me.” Nadine heard a couple of people laugh, but she was struck again by that word. *Hussy*. Men fought, and if hussies did the same thing men did, then maybe her mother was a hussy. Jack McCann whispered something to William, and then the two of them mixed back into the crowd. The conversations started again, and Helen went back into the bathroom and came back out immediately with her purse.

“At least my makeup didn’t get messed up from all of this,” she said, looking into her compact’s mirror. She straightened her dress and then looked at her brother. “Should we go find Reverend Thomas?” Ray nodded, and they began to make their way to the crowd. Nadine and Timmy began to follow them. Helen stopped and got down on her knees so that she was eye level with Nadine.

“We’re going to go have grown up talk with Reverend Thomas,” Helen said.

“You go find William and stick close to him. I better be able to find the both of you when

it's time." Nadine nodded and watched as her mother and uncle walked to the back of the funeral home. Nadine saw William and Jack going out the front door, and she ran to them. Noticing his sister and Timmy following them, William stopped.

"Me and Jack are just going outside for a minute," he said. "If you follow us, you might get sick, and Momma would have my hide." He looked over at the bench by the window where Miss Jackson's coat had been. "How about you and Timmy go sit over there, and when me and Jack come back inside, I'll come get you." Nadine was disappointed, but she obeyed her brother. She walked over to the bench and sat down, and Timmy sat next to her. As Timmy glanced over at her, she began to feel self-conscious again about her dress and pulled at it to cover her knees.

"Why're you pulling on your dress?" Timmy asked. "You look really pretty." He looked at the floor after he said this, and he seemed embarrassed. She forgot about her dress and grabbed his hand, holding it tightly. Timmy's hand went limp, as if he had no idea what to do, but he did not try to get his hand out of Nadine's nor did he look up to face her.

"My Momma was real sad about your Memaw," Timmy said. "Miss Eunice was always so nice to Momma. She'd come and visit and sit with her. She'd bring us food."

"Is your momma here?" Nadine asked. Nadine had only seen Timmy's mother once, but she never met her. Hazel Parrish had been the Lincoln High School homecoming queen in 1965. She married Timmy's father, Lou Osbourne, shortly after she graduated. Timmy had five older brothers. Mark was the closest to his age and was supposed to be the last child. Timmy was a surprise. Nadine really didn't know much

about Timmy's father either, but she would often see him driving around town in a beat up Ford pick up truck. Nadine's mother knew him because he drank at The Beaver's Tail. Usually there were old washers and dryers and sheets of metal in the back of the truck. No one, including Timmy, was sure how Lou Osbourne made his money. He worked for a little while doing repairs for Victory Baptist Church, but after their new pastor let him go, he had not had a formal job. All that Nadine really knew about Timmy's family life was from the whispers she heard from the pews of her own church, Harmony Baptist. His older brother, Mark, was protective of Timmy.

Timmy's mother rarely left the house. Nadine did not know where Timmy lived, but most of the other people in Lincoln did. Nadine remembered hearing Memaw once remark that the Osbournes lived in filth. As Nadine thought about this, she looked once again at Timmy's clothes. His coat was ragged, his t-shirt too small, and his blue jeans ripped. She felt pity for him and pulled him close to her, hugging him tightly. Timmy's body went as limp as his hand had gone when Nadine had attempted to hold it. He seemed uncomfortable with affection. She kissed Timmy on the top of his head like her Uncle Ray kissed her whenever she was sad. She could not quite explain how she was feeling for Timmy, but she was overcome with some sort of emotion. When she released Timmy from her embrace, he quickly scooted away from her, moving to the other side of the bench.

"I'm sorry," she said. She did not know what she was apologizing for, but she felt the need to do it. Timmy just stared at her. She wasn't sure how to read the emotions on his face. It didn't seem like love or hate. Mostly, she just seemed to read confusion.

Nadine stood up on the bench and wiped her hand across the window to remove the mist so that she could see outside.

“Let’s see if we can find my brother,” she said. She was beginning to feel uncomfortable because of the way Timmy was acting. Timmy stood up as well and wiped mist from a different part of the window. William and Jack were both smoking cigarettes and though standing almost directly in front of the funeral home, they seemed like they were trying to hide this. Nadine thought again about the word *hussy*. William and Jack were both smoking. Hussies did the same thing men do, but men did not get called hussies.

William and Jack were both shivering from the cold. Nadine began to focus her attention on Jack rather than her brother. While she had not taken the opportunity to give Jack more than a glance when he was restraining Helen, there were some things about him that she was beginning to notice. His black hair was slicked back into a pompadour like Elvis. He wore a black leather jacket, and his face was freshly shaven. He was much taller than her brother. His body was slim and fit. There was something about that way he looked that treaded the line between angelic and dangerous. It was while watching Jack that she noticed Timmy was smiling. He lightly slapped Nadine on the arm to get her attention.

“Look,” he whispered while pointing to a car parked a few spaces away from the front of the funeral home. Timmy’s brother Mark and another boy were hiding behind the car. The other boy was skinny, and Nadine could see red hair poking out from beneath the blue knitted skull cap he wore. She recognized the boy as Leighton Parker.

Leighton was often seen around William and his friends, but Nadine knew that her brother didn't care for him. Leighton was rolling a snowball into his hand, and he handed it to Mark before rolling another for himself. Once Leighton and Mark were both properly armed, they lunged the snowballs at William and Jack. It was Mark's snowball that hit Jack, landing on his chest and splattering against his leather jacket. Leighton had better aim and hit William square in the face.

"Let's go!" Nadine said, grabbing Timmy by the hand and dragging him outside. As they exited the front door of the funeral home, Nadine saw both William and Jack drop their cigarettes and duck behind the car closest to them. Jack began to smile and reached his hands into the snow, rolling a ball of his own. William rubbed his face and seemed confused.

"What the hell was that?" he asked. From the distance, Nadine could hear Mark and Leighton laughing. Timmy grabbed Nadine by the hand, pulling her towards the side of the Browning Funeral Home. From the corner of her eye, she noticed her brother and Jack, now both holding snowballs in their hands, ducking behind her mother's car, while peeking over the hood to identify their attackers.

"Where are we going?" Nadine asked Timmy.

"To get some ammo of our own," Timmy replied. On the side of the Browning Funeral Home was a water faucet. Timmy turned the water faucet on and began to roll snowballs. After rolling the snowballs, he held them under the stream of water until they became blocks of ice. "My brother taught me this," he said. He pulled his coat off and laid it on the ground. He placed the snowballs on top of his coat, and then carried them

back to the fight the older boys were having. Jack, William, Leighton, and Mark were no longer ducking behind cars. They were now standing in full view of one another, throwing snowballs. William was on the ground, trying to roll more snowballs, as Leighton continually pelted him with the supply he already built up. Frustrated, William gave up on rolling snowballs and lunged towards Leighton, pushing him to the ground. He lifted his fist, but before he could make impact on Leighton's face, Mark had grabbed his arm, and Jack had grabbed William by the waist, lifting him off of Leighton. Leighton scooted away from the other three boys, before standing up and dusting the snow off of his clothes. Watching William fight, Nadine thought again of the word *hussy*.

“What the hell, William?” Leighton said. He ran towards William, who was still restrained by Jack and Mark. Jack let go of William and moved forward to block Leighton, pushing him to the ground.

“Stop this, now!” Jack said. Nadine could not take her eyes off of Jack. She began to pull at the bottom of her dress again. Leighton was still sitting in the snow. His nose was running, and he wiped it with the sleeve of his shirt.

“What was that all about, William?” Leighton asked. Mark let go of William, who immediately lunged towards Leighton again before Jack grabbed him. Nadine noticed the door to the funeral home open, and she saw Uncle Ray approach the four boys. She grabbed Timmy's hand and ran back to the side of the funeral home where they had found the water faucet. Timmy dropped his coat, leaving their ammunition on the ground in front of the funeral home.

“Uncle Ray will kill me if he sees me out here,” she said to Timmy. The t-shirt that Timmy had worn under his coat was short sleeved, and she could see Timmy shaking from the cold. She wrapped her arms around him and ran her hands up and down his arms to keep him warm.

“William Stephen Moore! What the hell are you doing out here?” she heard Ray scream from the entrance of the funeral home. Nadine and Timmy peeked around the funeral home. Leighton was still on the ground, and Mark stepped forward once again to help Jack restrain William. Both boys let go of William, who straightened his clothes and knocked some of the snow off from Leighton’s snowball attack.

“Nothing, Uncle Ray,” William called back.

“It don’t look like nothing to me,” Ray said as he stepped closer to the four boys. “Why is the Parker boy on the ground?” Ray extended his hand to Leighton, helping him get back to his feet. Leighton brushed the snow off of the back of his pants.

“Y’all smell like cigarette smoke,” Ray said, as he inspected each of them. He stopped at William and looked him up and down. “Your clothes are all wet from the snow. Your mother ain’t gonna like this.” Ray looked around the parking lot for a moment, and Nadine dashed back to the side of the building, dragging Timmy with her.

“Have you seen your sister?” she heard Ray ask William.

“No sir,” William said. “She ain’t been out here.”

“Well get inside and help us find her,” Ray said. “Reverend Thomas is ready for us.” It was silent for a moment, then Nadine heard the funeral home door open and then slam shut. She walked back over to get a glimpse of Leighton, Jack, and Mark.

“What the fuck is wrong with that family?” Leighton asked. “First his momma goes pickin’ a fight with Miss Jackson. Then he starts in on me.”

“Calm down, Leighton,” Jack said. “They’re upset about Miss Eunice is all. How would you feel if it was your Memaw?”

“I’d be thankful that there were people gathered around me that cared,” Leighton said. “I hear their momma sluts it up with anyone who walks into the Beaver’s Tail when she’s working. William’s picking fights. I don’t even want to see how that little sister of his turns out.” Nadine did not know what it meant to *slut it up*, but she knew that Leighton was not saying nice things about her mother. She walked over to the pile of icy snowballs that were still lying on the ground.

“What are you doing?” she heard Timmy say from behind her. She grabbed one of the balls of ice and threw it. The snowball made a loud thump as it hit Leighton’s face, and he let out a scream.

Leighton looked over and saw Nadine, who had already picked up another snowball and thrown it. This one hit him in the chest. As Leighton ran towards her, Timmy came from behind, grabbing Nadine’s hand while picking his coat up off the ground. They were running. Though Timmy was overweight, he could run fast, and Nadine could barely keep up with him.

“Timmy!” she heard Mark call. “What are you doing out here with your coat off?” Jack and Mark were running behind Leighton as well. Leighton reached Nadine and Timmy first. He pushed Timmy away from Nadine, sending him sliding across the snow covered sidewalk.

“Keep your damn hands off my brother!” Nadine heard Mark yell. Leighton picked Nadine up by her throat, raising her so that their eyes met. His breath smelt like smoke and his teeth were crooked. As he stared at her, he did not seem human, Nadine thought. He was like an animal.

“What the hell is wrong with your family?” Leighton asked as he tightened his grip on her throat. She could see the spot on Leighton’s face where the snowball had hit him begin to swell. He looked like he was smiling as he was hurting her, and Nadine was scared. She thought that he might kill her. As her feet dangled from the ground, she attempted to kick Leighton in the chest, and though she made some contact, she could not seem to hurt him. He just tightened his grip on her throat. As she gasped for air, she felt another arm wrap around her waist. From the corner of her eye, she noticed a fist barreling towards Leighton’s face. Leighton let go of her throat, and Nadine fell to the ground. When she looked up, she saw Jack McCann, who was now a nose’s distance from Leighton.

Leighton and Jack stood face to face, and Nadine was frightened. Leighton lifted his arm into the air as if he was about to hit Jack, and that was when another snowball fell from the sky and hit Leighton in the back of the head. Nadine looked in the direction the snowball came from and saw Timmy standing there with another one in his hand, ready to throw. Leighton turned to face Timmy, but as he turned to move in the young boy’s direction, Mark grabbed him from behind.

“Don’t you even think about it,” Mark said. Nadine got up from the ground and began to run back towards the funeral home. She felt cowardly running. She knew that

neither her mother nor William would have run from this fight. Entering the funeral home, she mixed her way into the crowded lobby, looking up at the faces of the adults to see if there was anyone she recognized.

“Nadine,” she heard her brother’s voice call.

“William,” she called back, and the crowd of people began to part leaving a space for her brother to approach her. William took her hand and began to drag her in the same way that she had drug Timmy since the snowball fight had begun.

“Where have you been?” he asked. “Me, Momma, and Uncle Ray have been looking for you.” Nadine didn’t answer and struggled to keep up with her brother.

William guided her to a room in the back of the funeral home, where a black casket sat in the middle. Mildred Thomas, the pastor’s wife, had her arm around Helen, who started crying again. She stroked Helen’s hair, and Helen rested her head on Mrs. Thomas’ shoulder. John Thomas, the pastor of Harmony Baptist Church, stood behind them next to Ray. Pastor Thomas was a frail man with a receding hairline. His skin always seemed to be dry. Helen was holding a lace handkerchief in her hand that belonged to Memaw, and she began to dab at her face with it. Nadine again thought about the paintings and watched as her mother’s natural, beautiful face began to emerge from behind the makeup. Nadine walked up to her mother and touched her arm. Helen got down on her knees and put her arm around her daughter. William, not wanting to be left out, got on the other side of his mother. The room was lined with floral arrangements: irises, daisies, sunflowers, and carnations in bright colors like purple,

yellow, and red. A bouquet of white roses sat across Memaw's stomach. The room smelled like spring time.

Nadine wondered whether or not Memaw was really dead. She was always a sound sleeper and never snored. She looked no different than she had whenever she took a nap on the couch in the living room. Nadine had heard stories of graves being equipped with bells, so that the person inside could ring them if they were still alive. She wondered if Memaw's grave would have this. Memaw looked healthier and stronger now than she had in the last three months.

"Momma, are we sure Memaw is dead?" Nadine asked. Her mother held her closer but did not answer. She began to run her hands through Nadine's hair, and Nadine hoped that her mother did not notice it had been mussed from the attack that Leighton made on her earlier. "Baby, why are your clothes wet?" her mother asked, as she ran her hands across the fabric where the snow had touched it. Nadine did not answer her.

"Miss Eunice is in a better place now," Mildred Thomas said, as she placed her hand on Nadine's cheek. "She's with our Lord." Mildred looked to the sky and smiled as she said this. Nadine hated Mrs. Thomas in that moment. Memaw was dead, and the pastor's wife had no business smiling. Nadine thought again about the word *hussy*. Mildred Thomas certainly wasn't one, but there was something about her that seemed so much more boring than her mother. Helen dabbed at her eyes, and then looked at the pastor and his wife.

“I know the good Lord has taken a lot from your family in recent years,” the pastor said, “but He works in mysterious ways.”

“You said that at my husband and my father’s funeral as well, Reverend Thomas,” Helen said. “If I wanted mystery, I’d read Agatha Christie.” Nadine turned around and noticed Jack sitting on a bench just outside the doorway. She immediately looked away but noticed William go outside to greet him. Jack whispered something into her brother’s ear. William frowned and balled his hands up into fists. He patted Jack on the back and walked past Nadine straight to their mother.

“Momma,” William said. “Apparently Mrs. McCann has a casserole for us. I’m going with Jack out to their car to get it.”

“That’s fine,” Helen said. “I better not find you out there smoking my cigarettes.”

“Yes ma’am,” William said, as he walked out of the room. Nadine started to follow him, but her mother grabbed her by the lace that lined the collar of her dress.

“Where do you think you’re going young lady?” she asked.

“Timmy Osbourne was here. I just want to see if he still is and say bye to him,” Nadine said. The hearts of the adults in Lincoln went out to Timmy Osbourne, and Nadine knew this when she said it to her mother. Helen smiled and patted her daughter on the shoulder.

“If he don’t have a ride home, tell him we can give him one,” Helen said. “Ray, will you go with Nadine so we don’t lose her again?”

“I’m not gonna run off,” Nadine said to her uncle.

“It don’t matter,” Ray said. While Nadine did not want her uncle to follow her, she gripped his hand tightly, careful not to lose him, as they made their way back into the lobby. Those who had come to the funeral home were acting more like they were at a Christmas party than a visitation. People were smiling, shaking hands, and hugging one another. She passed Otis Dale and Dr. MacArthur who were in the middle of a heated discussion.

“They ain’t gonna impeach him for messing around with that girl,” Dr. MacArthur said.

“Oh, they already impeached him,” Otis said back.

“Momma passed away, and all they can talk about is the president,” Nadine heard Ray say under her breath. The front door to the funeral home opened, and Timmy and Mark walked in with Donald McCoy. Donald was a tall slender man with brown hair, and his eyes sunk into his skull in a way that made Nadine wonder if he ate enough. Donald was still wearing his white apron from the grocery store. When he spotted Ray and Nadine, he waved and approached them. Nadine wished that her mother liked Donald the way that he liked her. He wasn’t the handsomest man, but he was always so kind.

“I brought you something, Nadine,” Donald said. He reached into the pocket of his apron and pulled out a package of red rope licorice. “Your grandmother used to come in and buy this from me in bulk. She said you loved it.” He patted Nadine on the head, before looking back up at Ray. “How is Helen doing?”

“About as well as can be expected,” Ray said.

“I talked to my father,” Donald said. “If she needs a few days off from work, we’ll let her have them. Dad even said he would still pay her. He always liked Miss Eunice.”

Nadine opened the package of red rope licorice, pulled out the first string of candy, and handed it to Timmy.

“Thank you for hitting Leighton with that snowball,” she whispered into his ear. Timmy blushed and put the candy into the pocket of his coat, which Nadine thought was odd. She didn’t understand why he didn’t eat it. She kissed Timmy on the cheek. He smelled rugged, like an adult, and Nadine wondered what kissing him on the lips might be like. Nadine began to notice people congregating around the front windows of the funeral home. Some of the men in town began to run outside, and when Mark peeked out the window, he followed them. Nadine pushed her way through the crowd and looked outside. Leighton was lying on his back in the snow, and William was on top of him, repeatedly hitting him in the face. Jack stood behind William and smoked a cigarette, watching.

“That’s my son he’s beating up!” a woman screamed, and Nadine turned around to see Mary Parker, Leighton’s mother, standing behind her. When she looked at the terror on Mrs. Parker’s face, Nadine began to feel guilty. Donald McCoy followed some of the other men into the funeral home parking lot, and as some of the older men in town began to file out the front door, Jack dropped his cigarette to the ground and started to run.

“Go get your mother,” Ray said, before joining the other men to help remove his nephew from Leighton Parker. Nadine started to run to the back of the funeral home where she had last seen her mom, but word seemed to have already reached Helen, who was running from the back hallway towards the front door. Nadine looked back out the window and saw Otis Dale and Donald McCoy grab William, but her brother broke free and pounced back on Leighton. Mary Parker stepped in front of Helen as she was on her way out the front door.

“Get that boy of yours off of my son,” she said. Helen didn’t respond. Several men were now restraining William, and Ray was standing between him and Leighton. He was talking to William, but Nadine could not hear what he was saying. William was still trying to break free. He was looking over his uncle’s shoulder, trying to look at Leighton who remained on the ground, dazed from the attack. Nadine followed her mother outside. She wondered why Mary Parker had not gone outside to break up the attack. Why was this left to her mother?

“William Moore!” Helen screamed, and at the sound of his mother’s voice, William snapped out of it. His body went limp, and Ray grabbed him and forcefully pulled him away from Leighton. Donald McCoy reached his hand out to Leighton, and with the help of Otis Dale got him off the ground. The two men took Leighton by each of his arms and walked him back towards his mother, who was now standing outside. His faced was bruised and his nose was bleeding a little bit, but considering how wild William looked on top of him, he got out fairly easy. Mary Parker took her son into her arms. Leighton collapsed into his mother, as she gripped him tightly.

“Why was your son beating on my boy?” she asked. Helen did not answer. She looked at William, and William looked back at her. He seemed defiant in that moment.

“Momma,” William said. “I know I was stopping you from fighting earlier with Miss Jackson, but she just used words.

“What did Leighton do?” Helen asked, and she began to tighten her fists as if she were prepared to hit her son.

“He beat up on Nadine,” William said. “Jack McCann saw the whole thing.” He turned around to find Jack, hoping that his friend would back up his story. William looked deflated when he noticed that Jack was not behind him.

“Is this true, Leighton?” Mrs. Parker asked. “Did you beat up on that little girl?” Leighton just stared at his mother as if he did not understand the words she was saying.

“It’s true Mrs. Parker,” Mark said. “I was there. In Leighton’s defense, she did throw an iceball at him. He and William were fighting earlier.”

“So this ain’t all Leighton’s fault?” Mrs. Parker asked, and she seemed satisfied with herself.

“How old are you, boy?” Helen asked Leighton. Leighton still did not respond and looked at Helen as if he was trying to translate her words.

“He’s sixteen,” Mrs. Parker said.

“Is it appropriate for a sixteen year old boy to be beating up on an eight year old girl?” Helen asked. “Iceball or not.” Mrs. Parker looked angry, but she did not respond. Nadine and William stood silently behind their mother.

“Get in the car,” Helen said to them. Nadine and William didn’t argue and both ran to the Buick. Helen looked at Donald McCoy and smiled. “Will you go in and get my purse?” she asked. Donald nodded and ran into the funeral home. Otis Dale and Mark Osbourne helped Mary Parker get Leighton into her car. Helen watched for a moment and then walked to the Buick. She knocked on the passenger’s side window where William was sitting. William jumped, and he looked startled as he opened the door to see what his mother wanted.

“If you are holding some of my cigarettes, I highly suggest you give me one now,” she said. William reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a bent Lucky Strike and a blue Bic lighter from his pocket. He lit the cigarette for his mother. She leaned down to meet the flame, inhaling deeply, and then blew smoke rings in the air. Donald McCoy came running out of the funeral home with Helen’s purse in his hands. He gave the purse to Helen, and she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek as she accepted it.

“Thank you for coming today, Donald,” she said. Seeing her mother kiss Donald McCoy on the cheek reminded Nadine of Timmy. She looked out the window for him, and once she spotted him, she waved. Timmy was standing next to his brother, who was talking to Mary Parker. His back was turned to Nadine, and he didn’t notice her. She tried to knock on the window with hopes that Timmy might see her, but he did not.

* * *

The car ride home was mostly silent. The snow had stopped, and their mother chain smoked cigarettes the entire ride back to their home on Tudor Road.

“Momma, what’s wrong with Donald McCoy?” Nadine asked.

“I’m not sure I understand you, baby,” Helen said.

“I think he likes you,” Nadine said. “And he was so nice to me. He brought me candy.” She held up the bag of red rope licorice that was still in her hand. “Why don’t you like him back?”

“There are a lot of reasons I ain’t gonna be with Donald McCoy,” her mother said. “I suppose the biggest is that I still love your daddy, and I just can’t give anyone else my heart yet.” Nadine thought her mother might be crying, so she did not ask anymore questions. When they finally arrived at their home, they could see a green dish sitting on their porch swing.

“I guess Miss Jackson came through with that casserole,” Helen said. She kept the engine of the car running, and the entire family sat inside the car for a moment, looking at their house. Nadine kept hoping that Memaw would open the front door and greet them, and she wondered if her mother and William were thinking the same thing. Helen turned the car off and looked at her son.

“Well William, I guess you’re off the hook,” she said. “I only have one problem with what you did.”

“What’s that, Momma?” William asked, turning to face his mother.

“Next time something like that happens, you kill the bastard. You understand me?”

“Yes ma’am,” William said. Neither William nor Helen smiled. Helen opened her door to get out of the car, and William and Nadine followed. Nadine wasn’t sure how

she felt about Leighton Parker, or whether or not any of it was fair to him, but she was proud of her mother and William. Helen flicked her cigarette into the yard and picked up the dish that Miss Jackson had left on the porch. She opened the top of the dish and dumped the eggplant casserole in her front yard.

“I put a chicken in the refrigerator to thaw,” Helen said. “We’ll have that for dinner. You two go inside and wash up.”

Nadine stayed on the front porch as Helen and William walked inside. She put her red rope licorice on the swing where the casserole had been and walked down the front porch stairs into the front yard. She stared first at the casserole and then the cigarette that her mother had abandoned. The cigarette was wet from the snow and no longer lit, but she still picked it up and placed it to her lips, trying to take a drag. Hussies smoked like William and her mother, and she wanted to be a hussy. The cigarette broke in Nadine’s mouth, and she could taste little pieces of tobacco. It tasted awful, but Nadine kept it between her lips as best she could. She knew that she was responsible for at least one of the bruises on Leighton Parker’s face, and though she wasn’t sure if attacking him had been right, she still felt proud. She stood up for herself, the way her mother had with Miss Jackson. She took one more imaginative drag on the cigarette, before throwing it back to the ground. When she walked through the front door, she could hear grease frying on the stove top as her mother prepared the chicken. William was sprawled out on the couch with a Batman comic book, and he didn’t seem to notice that she had come inside. For the first time, she felt as strong as her mother and William.

The Coward

“A coward is incapable of exhibiting love; it is the prerogative of the brave.” -Mahatma Ghandi

When Roscoe Jenkins first moved to Lincoln, Mississippi shortly after Christmas of 2002, we were pretty suspicious of him. He came from Johnson City, Tennessee to spend New Year’s Eve with Mabel Henderson. The thing was, nobody in town wanted to be with Mabel Henderson. She was a sweet enough girl, but she was about thirty pounds overweight and had facial hair that made every teenage boy in town jealous. She was eighteen back then, but still a senior in high school. Roscoe met her in a dating chat room on the Internet. He was twenty-three then, and if he had shown up to town to be with Mabel’s older sister, Anna Lee, when she was still in high school, you can bet your ass that Momma Henderson would have been on the phone with Sheriff Fineman faster than you could say *statutory rape*, eighteen years old or not. The thing was, Momma Henderson knew her daughter was lonely, and with Mabel’s senior prom coming up, she just couldn’t bear to see her daughter go stag to that one like she did her junior prom.

The real thing that got us about him was his name. Now if you’ve watched any television, you probably think that Roscoe is as common a name in the South as Christopher or Peter or Paul, but I’ll tell you right now, we ain’t ever met anyone who’s given name was Roscoe. He was christened William Henry Jenkins III. Mabel’s older sister, Anna Lee, was engaged to William Moore, so that’s why he chose not to go by William. He chose not to go by Henry because his first job in town was working as the overnight stock boy at McCoy’s Grocery, which was owned by Henry McCoy. We ain’t

sure what was wrong with Will or Willie or Bill or Hank, but he insisted on being known as Roscoe. Mrs. McCann, who was often found in the middle of any of Lincoln's juiciest gossip, thought that Roscoe must have been a yankee posing as a southern boy, but Henry McCoy assured us that his driver's license was from Johnson City, Tennessee. Somehow, that did make it better for a lot of us.

It didn't take us long to get over our initial fears when it came to Roscoe. He was a natural underdog. If you saw him standing next to Mabel, she looked almost petite. Hair rose from the back of his neck and lined the collar of his shirt. Roscoe and Mabel were not the most attractive couple, but if you saw the way the two of them looked next to one another, you couldn't help but smile. Both of them just seemed so content and happy to have found one another, and we couldn't help but be happy for them ourselves. Roscoe beamed with pride every time he talked about Mabel Henderson.

"There weren't no good women to pick from back home," Roscoe said. "So I had to come all the way to Lincoln to find me one." Henry McCoy hired Roscoe shortly after New Year's Day 2003, and Roscoe kept his job at McCoy's Grocery up until about April when Henry finally had to let him go. We don't know what kind of work he did in Johnson City, but Roscoe didn't have a fine eye for detail. He put Corn Flakes where the Shake 'N' Bake was supposed to go. Canned peas were where the canned pineapples were supposed to be. Folks started complaining to Mr. McCoy that they couldn't find anything, or they'd pick up a box of Fruit Loops that were stocked where the \$1.55 boxes of rice were supposed to be and expect to get the three dollar cereal for the price of the rice. Henry didn't like having to fire Roscoe, but he was starting to lose longtime

customers to the Jitney Jungle. He tried to make it work for four months, but fearing that Roscoe was putting his business and the jobs of his other employees in jeopardy, he had to let him go. It took Henry and his boy Donald nearly two weeks of staying overnight in the grocery store trying to get all the products back in the right places.

It was shortly after the McCoys let Roscoe go that Leighton Parker came back to Lincoln. That was mighty confusing for all of us as well. Leighton had been in the Army since he had graduated from high school three years earlier. Not even a full month before Leighton's return, President Bush had sent our Armed Forces to Iraq, and now Leighton was suddenly hanging around town, looking for work.

"I bet it was the goddamn French," Otis Dale said around the poker table in the office of Dale's Auto Repairs. "He found his way to some Frenchmen, and they were more than happy to put him on a plane and ship him back home. Anything to defy our president." Otis hired Roscoe to be his assistant at his shop. Normally, Otis hired high school kids for that job, but Roscoe was willing to work for minimum wage, so Otis brought him in. He thought that since Roscoe was older than his usual hires, he might be more responsible and a better hand to have around the shop. Every Friday night, Otis held a poker game.

Roscoe would hang around, but he never joined the game. He usually spent the evening detail cleaning the garage, while everyone played Texas Holdem. Roscoe was so quiet, and we thought he was intimidated by being in a new town.

“You just mark my words,” Otis said as beads of sweat formed on the top of his bald head. “Any day now, there are gonna be men with suits and sun glasses, holding a picture of Leighton in their hands, asking all of us if we’ve seen him.”

“You been watching too many movies, Otis. Maybe he got discharged,” Dr. MacArthur said while eyeing his cards. Dr. MacArthur was tickled because there was an ace of hearts and a king of hearts on the table, and he had the remaining makings of a royal flush in his hand. Dr. MacArthur slid all of his chips to the middle, and everyone folded but Otis who was still eyeing his cards.

“Bullshit!” Otis said. “Ain’t nobody getting an honorable discharge right before war. Even if they could get an honorable discharge, you know Leighton Parker ain’t gonna be the one. And if he got a dishonorable discharge, I’m sure there would be some sort of legal mumbo jumbo that would still have him holed up. I don’t believe none of it. The French helped him escape and put him on a plane straight from Paris to Tupelo.”

“Can you even get a straight flight from Paris to Tupelo?” Ray Smith asked, and everyone just started laughing. The laughter sure riled up Otis Dale. He threw his cards down, slamming his hands on the table so hard that all the glasses of whiskey spilled a little bit. He stormed from the table and went out into the parking lot by himself to cool down.

“Does this mean he’s folding?” Dr. MacArthur asked.

* * *

Leighton heard almost immediately that there was an opening for an overnight stock boy at McCoy’s Grocery, so that was his first stop when he went looking for a job.

Now, we don't really know what theories Henry McCoy had regarding Leighton's sudden return to Lincoln, but we knew that Henry was probably going to be one of the least sympathetic ears that Leighton could peddle his story to. First off, Henry lost his oldest son, Henry Jr., to the Vietnam War. He got blown up by a land mine just outside of Saigon. Henry loved our troops, and the last thing he was gonna do was help support someone who deserted during a time of war. As for the other reason, Leighton's mother, Mary, was a Hatfield before she married into the Parker family. Not everyone in Lincoln is still tied up on nineteenth century feuds, but Henry grew up hearing his great-grandmother talk about the days that the Hatfields and McCoy's had been at one another's throats. Henry McCoy's great grandmother came from Kentucky, and while no one really knows whether or not Mary Parker's Hatfields were part of the same group that had come from West Virginia, it hardly mattered to Henry. He took pride in his family. All he needed was to hear the last name Hatfield, and they was as good as dead to him. No one knows if Mary's family ever completely understood why Henry McCoy was so cold to them, but it was certainly noticed that before the Jitney Jungle came to Lincoln, Mississippi, the Hatfields would drive twenty minutes north to the Piggly Wiggly in Pontotoc rather than just driving the five minutes around the block from their house to McCoy's for their groceries.

Henry let Leighton know that he did not have an open position for him. Shortly after that, Otis let Roscoe go from Dale's Auto Repairs. Otis never gave a good reason for why he let Roscoe go. Maybe Roscoe brought the same set of problems to Dale's Auto Repairs that he brought to McCoy's Grocery, or maybe Roscoe took some of his

nudie magazines. Otis was always firing his help, and the reasons he did it never seemed to be all that good. Most of us figured Otis probably couldn't really afford to keep help around his shop, but as soon as word got out that Roscoe had been let go, Leighton came around there sniffing for a job as well. Roscoe soon got hired at The Magnolia Cafe, then Sonic, then at Ruthie's Diner. Maybe it was his appearance, but Roscoe couldn't seem to hold on to any of those food service jobs. Honestly, we sort of thought that an unsuspecting patron found hairs from Roscoe's neck in their food. Roscoe made it about a week at each job before they sent him packing, and before Roscoe was completely out the door, it seemed Leighton was walking in wearing his best suit, inquiring about employment. Roscoe became Leighton's personal help wanted ad, but these places that took a chance on Roscoe didn't seem willing to do the same for Leighton.

We don't know why folks kept taking chances on Roscoe despite his poor work record since he had arrived in Lincoln, or why he had better chances at getting jobs than Leighton. Maybe it was because everyone in town knew Mabel and wanted her boyfriend to have a little extra money to spend on her. If we'd had to wager, we would have thought Mabel was going to end up alone like Miss Jackson, the kindergarten teacher. We liked seeing her so happy and smiling. Leighton on the other hand grew up in Lincoln and had been a pain in the ass since he was able to stray out of his momma and daddy's house. Leighton was always picking fights during his days at Lincoln Middle and Lincoln High School. When Leighton was sixteen, he choked William Moore's eight year old sister, Nadine, at their grandmother's visitation. Even if Leighton might have ended up being a model employee, he still seemed like too much trouble to have around.

With Roscoe, folks felt like maybe he hadn't found the right fit for him as a work environment.

Finally, Roscoe did find a job that wanted to hold onto him at the Flying J on Highway 15. This was one of those real fancy stations that serviced the truck drivers. They had a Subway, a McDonald's, coffee, and even a small video arcade where some of the high school kids would hang out during the summer when they didn't have much else to do. The general manager, Danny Phelps, was really close with the Henderson family, so he decided he would give Roscoe a shot. A bit worried by Roscoe's food service record, he put him in as a cashier. Thanks to bar codes, the job was mostly fool proof, and Roscoe ended up being surprisingly good with his cash handling. Roscoe was fitting in well with his co-workers, and Momma Henderson put in a special request that Roscoe work third shift. She claimed it was because third shift payed more, but we had a suspicion that it was really because she didn't want him sleeping next to her baby girl at night. Momma Henderson liked Roscoe, but as a parent she still had some limitation with what she was willing to accept for her unmarried daughter.

Roscoe's shift usually started at 10:00 in the evening. The McDonald's would close when Roscoe started working, but he and Mabel would come in an hour before his shift every night he worked and have dinner together. Around the time that Roscoe's shift began, Danny Phelps allowed The Survivors to come in, purchase tallboys, and sit at the tables in the McDonald's and drink. The Survivors were a group that consisted of four of Lincoln's older citizens who refused to drink at The Beaver's Tail, Lincoln's only bar. Originally, there had been ten of them, but it was with the passing of the other six, that

the remaining four became known as The Survivors. Drinking in a service station like it's a bar is illegal, but they had all been drinking at that service station since it had been a Sinclair's in the 50's. Lincoln didn't have a proper bar then, and Sheriff Fineman didn't feel it was his place to break up a tradition. Besides, it was Sarah Anne Calloway, the oldest of the group at 90, that drove them all there, and she was clean as a whistle. She would drink fountain Coke all night while her friends sipped on beer and malt liquor. The Survivors would show up Monday through Friday at 10:15 sharp. After Mabel finished her meal, she would sit at the table with them and keep them company until about 10:45. Momma Henderson gave her an 11:00 curfew.

By that point, the aging drunks were still on their first drink. Esther Rose was the one black person in the group and the second oldest at 86. She drank Colt 45, but only from a can. She claimed it tasted fresher and got colder in the can. Esther always kept a flask of Rebel Yell whiskey on her, and if the Flying J ran out of Colt 45 cans, she would just get a fountain Coke like Sarah Anne Calloway, but she would spike hers with the whiskey. Johnny Bradburry, who was 81, was a retired factory worker from Pontotoc. He drank Pabst Blue Ribbon and was tickled that his beer had apparently become fashionable with young people, until he saw his tallboy's prices raise to almost two dollars. That was when he became less tickled by it and switched to Miller High Life. Then Miller High Life started to also become popular with young folks, so he ultimately switched to Milwaukee's Best. He called it the Beast and would drink six cans of it before nodding off at the table. It was when Johnny fell asleep that Sarah Anne pulled the troops together and made them all leave. The youngest of the group was Murray

Stephenson, who was 80. Murray would drink Bud Light and was the quietest one in the group. He would frequently duck out to the parking lot by himself to chain smoke Marlboro Reds, only coming back when a non-Survivor tried to join him in the parking lot.

On Saturday, The Survivors did not come because Sarah Anne Calloway had to be up early the next morning to go to church, and they did not come on Sundays because it was illegal to sell beer on the Sabbath. Initially, Roscoe found the presence of The Survivors to be strange, but they grew on him. Soon he found himself asking Murray Stephenson about how his daughter who had been diagnosed with breast cancer in Memphis was faring, cooing over pictures of Sarah Anne Calloway and Johnny Bradburry's great-grandchildren, and exchanging dirty jokes with Esther Rose. He came to dread his weekend shifts when they weren't there and would sometimes find himself coming up to the Flying J on the evenings when he was off to spend time with them since he was used to being awake at night anyways, and Mabel had already gone to sleep.

About a month and a half into working at the Flying J, word had got out to Leighton Parker that Roscoe was there, so he started making his face seen around the station. If Danny Phelps had to let Roscoe go, Leighton wanted his name to be the first one in the hat to take Roscoe's place. The first few times Leighton showed up at night, he somehow managed to miss Roscoe, though we don't think that was accidental. Leighton was a coward, and we knew he didn't have the balls to walk right in and face the man whose job he was trying to steal. He would spend his afternoons in the Flying J video arcade with the high school students who were out for summer, claiming he was

waiting for Roscoe, but damn if he couldn't find him even though Roscoe worked full time. Leighton would poke around the Flying J parking lot at night, but if Roscoe was there he wouldn't go in. One night, when Roscoe was off of work and stayed home with Mabel, Leighton bought a tallboy of Coors and sat down for a drink with The Survivors. Initially, the four of them didn't take too kindly to his intrusion, but after he bought them all a drink, he was able to win over Esther and Johnny. Sarah Anne and Murray were still suspicious of his motives.

“How can you afford to buy us all a drink when you ain't got no job?” Esther Rose asked.

“I still get a little money from the government,” Leighton said. “I hurt my knee jumping out of a plane, so I get a little disability.”

“You don't walk like you have a hurt knee,” Murray said, and it was clear to all sitting at the table that Murray was trying to be combative.

“Settle down, Murray,” Johnny said. “The man did just buy us a drink.” Murray quieted down, but his demeanor towards Leighton didn't change. He retired to the parking lot to smoke and refused to go back inside until Leighton left. For once, he even engaged non-Survivors in conversation if anyone tried to talk to him.

Murray was right to be suspicious. Depending on who asked, Leighton always had a different excuse for why he was no longer serving our country. He claimed a gypsy stabbed him while he was on duty in Germany and also said he took a bullet to the buttocks in Afghanistan. He would offer to drop his pants and show off his bullet wound,

rightly predicting that whomever he was talking to would insist that he keep his belt buckled.

Sarah Anne Calloway didn't buy Leighton's story neither. She thought Leighton's return to Lincoln was pretty fishy, but she kept quiet while Leighton was present, only sharing her thoughts on his return in the one place Leighton wouldn't be caught dead: Harmony Baptist Church. It wasn't like she was spreading gossip though. Sarah Anne was better than that. Her reason for even mentioning her concerns regarding Leighton had to do with Leighton's sudden interest in Roscoe. Since Murray spent evenings that Leighton was present alone in the parking lot, she had no one there to back her up to quiet Esther and Johnny down when Leighton started asking about Roscoe.

Roscoe was always so kind to her. When Sarah Anne's grandson and great-grandson couldn't come to Lincoln from Memphis one week, Roscoe went over to her house with the Henderson family's lawnmower and cut her yard and even went and picked up her groceries for her, which she insisted she could do herself. What touched Sarah even more was that Roscoe worked the previous evening and hadn't actually been to sleep yet when he came over to help her. She tried to pay Roscoe, but he would not accept a dime from her. He was just happy to help. She worried that Leighton had something bad in store for him, but she didn't feel comfortable turning to Sheriff Fineman without any proof.

Sarah Anne thought the best person to turn to would be William Moore, since William was engaged to Mabel's older sister. During this time, William was spending his weeks 100 miles north in Memphis attending Mid-America Baptist Theological

Seminary. It was summer time, and while he was on break from classes, he still went back to Memphis during the week because he was renting an apartment. He came to Lincoln on the weekends to spend time with Anna Lee, and sometimes she'd go up to Memphis to see him. William was a hometown boy through and through, and he had no desire to be away from Lincoln for long. When Reverend Thomas told William he was thinking of retiring, William got everything together so that he could attend seminary with hopes that the congregation of Harmony Baptist might call him to be their leader.

"I'm worried about your brother-in-law?" Sarah Anne whispered to William from the pew behind him. William was confused. His only sibling, Nadine, was thirteen years old. His momma had moved herself and his sister to Memphis, partly because she wanted to escape Lincoln after the suicide of one of her friends, and partly so that they could still be close to William during the week when he was in school. When William came back to Lincoln for the weekends, he stayed with his uncle, Ray Smith. Anna Lee had her own apartment, but William said he didn't want to give anyone the impression that he and Anna Lee were sexually intimate. Now, William had just seen Nadine before he left Memphis on Friday afternoon, and she sure wasn't married. Anna Lee was sitting next to him in the pew, and he looked at her confused.

"Does she mean Roscoe?" Anna Lee asked.

"Of course I mean Roscoe! Who the hell else could I mean?" Sarah Anne yelled, and the murmurs in the church stopped as the entire congregation turned their heads to look at her. The older woman looked embarrassed, and William turned around and placed his hand on top of hers until the color returned to her face.

“What’s happening to Roscoe?” Anna Lee asked. Anna Lee was instantly accepting of Roscoe when he arrived to Lincoln. She knew he was a little strange, but so was her sister. She thought Roscoe and Mabel were a perfect fit together, and she wasn’t about to let anyone do anything to threaten her baby sister’s happiness.

“That Parker boy keeps hanging around the Flying J asking questions about him,” Sarah Anne said. “I think he’s gonna do something to him.” William was out of school for the summer, so when he went back to Memphis that following Monday, we were pretty shocked. Anna Lee didn’t seem too happy about it neither. She wanted him to stand up for Roscoe and do something about Leighton. Anna Lee didn’t even go back to her apartment that day. Sunday night and all day Monday, her car was seen parked in front of her momma’s house. Around 8:00 that night, Danny Phelps got a phone call from Momma Henderson saying that Roscoe was ill and wouldn’t be into work that night, but that they were nursing him back to health and would have him back behind the counter as quick as possible. Danny Phelps was mighty shocked to see Roscoe come waltzing into the Flying J anyways just before his shift was to begin and in uniform.

“I thought you was sick, boy?” Danny asked.

“No sir,” Roscoe replied. “Momma Henderson and Mabel was trying to get me to stay home for some reason. Anna Lee has been in the house all day raising a fuss, and I could barely get any sleep. I’m a little tired, but I ain’t sick.”

Normally, Danny might have done a little investigating to figure out why Momma Henderson was trying to keep Roscoe from going to work, but he was just relieved to see his employee come in because that meant he got to go home. One thing Roscoe did find

strange was that two of The Survivors were already there and early. Sarah Anne Calloway and Murray Stephenson were sitting at their usual table in the McDonald's. Sarah Anne was sipping on her Coke and Murray was pouring Bud Lights into one of the soda cups at Danny's request since it was earlier than their usual meeting time.

"Where's Esther and Johnny?" Roscoe asked.

"They couldn't join us tonight," Murray said, while looking at Sarah Anne.

Roscoe got to his normal chores for the evening, taking inventory of the cigarettes and restocking the packs behind the counter. This was the only stocking job Danny would let Roscoe do after hearing about Roscoe's time at McCoy's Grocery. Either Danny or one of his assistant managers would still recount the cigarettes when they got in first thing in the morning after Roscoe worked because his counts were usually wrong. While Roscoe was counting the packs of Marlboro Lights, the phone rang. Roscoe sat the cigarettes down and went over to answer it. He was surprised when he heard Esther Rose's voice on the other end of the receiver.

"Me and Johnny are at my house, and Sarah Anne ain't been by to pick us up," Esther said. "We can't get in touch with her or Murray, and we're starting to get worried."

"They're all right," Roscoe said. "They're already here. They said you all couldn't come tonight."

Esther was silent on the other end of the phone for a moment, and then Roscoe heard her whisper something to Johnny.

“Could you put Sarah Anne on the phone?” Esther finally asked. Roscoe walked the phone over to Sarah Anne and handed it to her.

“It’s Esther,” Roscoe said.

“Esther!” Sarah Anne said loudly into the receiver. “Neither me nor Murray could get you or Johnny on the phone earlier. We were starting to get worried.” Sarah Anne sat with the phone to her ear, not responding and then hung up. Roscoe didn’t know what Esther Rose was saying to her, but he could hear her voice coming from the receiver even when it was placed firmly on Sarah Anne’s ear. Esther Rose seemed to be really letting her have it, but Sarah Anne just sat there and calmly listened, interjecting with the occasional, “uh huh.”

“Well, all righty then. We’ll see you in a few minutes,” Sarah Anne said into the phone before hanging it up. She stared out the window of the Flying J, looking at the little bit of Highway 15 that the lights from the service station would reveal.

“Well, what’s going on?” Murray asked.

“They’re getting the Parker boy to bring them up here,” Sarah Anne said, and both she and Murray looked disappointed.

* * *

Monday evenings were typically slow at the Flying J. There were a few truck drivers stopping in to fill up their tanks, get a cup of coffee, and use the restroom, but for the most part Roscoe found Mondays to be relatively boring. Murray sat outside and smoked a cigarette, while Roscoe swept the parking lot. Up until this point, Roscoe and Leighton had still yet to meet face to face, though Roscoe heard a lot about Leighton.

Leighton had been trying to win over The Survivors. He probably thought that when the time came that Danny Phelps had to let Roscoe go, that The Survivors would just say something like, “Hey, Leighton Parker is looking for a job. Why don’t you hire him?” The Survivors were kind of a package deal though. If he couldn’t win over all four, they were useless to him. Leighton pulled into the parking lot at 11:00 in his momma’s little yellow Volkswagen bug. Esther Rose was in the front seat, and Johnny Bradburry and another younger passenger were riding in the back. As the four got out of the car, Roscoe was relieved to see that the fourth passenger was William Moore.

William immediately ran to Roscoe who had stopped sweeping the parking lot to stare at Leighton’s car. Leighton always had a very unfortunate look to him. He was a skinny ginger, covered in freckles. He had some dental work when he was in the Army to round out his teeth, but when he was a teenager, they had been crooked and pointy like fangs. Roscoe almost believed that the Army might have given Leighton a discharge because he didn’t look like he could do much against Al-Qaeda or the Iraqi army, if it came down to any sort of physical combat. William ran up to Roscoe and gave him a hug, which threw Roscoe off because Mabel was really the only person who was affectionate with him.

“Don’t worry,” William said. “I’m gonna take care of this.” He winked at Murray, and then went inside and took a seat next to Sarah Anne. Roscoe was confused, because he didn’t know there was anything that needed taking care of. Once they all got inside, Esther Rose introduced Roscoe to Leighton.

“Roscoe,” she said. “I want you to meet a good friend of mine. This is Leighton Parker. We’ve been trying to get him up here to meet you for weeks now.” Leighton just nodded at Roscoe, and Roscoe nodded back. Leighton barely stopped for the greeting. He was more concerned with getting to the beer cooler and grabbing himself and Johnny a Milwaukee's Best and Esther a Colt 45. Leighton sat the beers down on the counter in front of Roscoe and then looked back at William.

“You sure you don’t want anything?” he called from the register.

“I’m good,” William said. Sarah Anne Calloway smiled at him.

By this point, Murray had rejoined the table and sat down between Esther and Johnny. Leighton waited at the counter to pay for his drinks for a good while before Roscoe rang him up. He made Leighton pull out his driver’s license, and he checked it up and down before finally scanning the first beer.

“So I hear you was in the Army?” Roscoe asked.

“Yessir,” Leighton said.

“Well what brings you back?”

“I quit,” Leighton said. “Didn’t care much for the work, so I just turned in my resignation and they let me go. Sort of like how you quit your jobs at McCoy’s Grocery, Dale’s Auto Repairs, The Magnolia Cafe, Sonic, and Ruthie’s Diner. Did I miss one?” Leighton was trying to look all threatening when he said this, but Roscoe seemed unfazed.

“I thought you said you was out on disability,” Murray yelled. “You said you hurt your knee jumping out of a plane.”

“I quit because I hurt my knee,” Leighton called back, and it was at that point that a look of recognition crossed both Johnny and Esther’s face that Leighton just might be a liar. Leighton took his drinks back to the table, and Johnny and Esther barely touched theirs. They were starting to feel uneasy. Leighton seemed to pick up on Esther and Johnny’s uneasiness. Already being aware that Sarah Anne and Murray weren’t his biggest fans, he got strangely quiet too. Leighton just started pounding the drinks back. He was getting up from the table and buying beer after beer.

“You can take me and Johnny home tonight can’t you, Sarah Anne?” Esther asked, as she became uncomfortable with Leighton’s drunkenness.

“I brought y’all up here,” Leighton said. “I’ll take you home.”

Sarah Anne nodded at Esther to let her know that she would drive them, and they all watched as Leighton took bottles of beer down like they were shooters. They’d all been sitting there for about an hour when Sheriff Fineman pulled up in his own personal car, walked right past Roscoe, and up to the table where The Survivors were sitting with Leighton and William. He was in his own clothes, and he seemed embarrassed as he approached the table. He could barely look any of them in the eye.

“This is real embarrassing,” he said. “I know you all have been coming here a long time.” Then he was quiet for a moment, just staring off. “I’ve been receiving complaints all day from people saying that there was folks drinking up here like it was a bar every night. I tried to explain who you all were, but ain’t none of them were hearing it. They said some of the folks up here drinking weren’t elderly.”

“Was this your plan?” Murray asked William.

“I didn’t have nothing to do with this,” William said, and Sarah Anne seemed to be the only one who didn’t mind. She pulled her keys out from her purse and stood up.

“Well, c’mon y’all,” she said. “I guess we have to go.”

“Did you do this, Sarah Anne?” Esther Rose asked, and she stood up like she was about ready to start a brawl.

“I don’t know who made the complaints, and I couldn’t tell you if I did,” Sheriff Fineman said. “They was all anonymous, and they all came from different men.”

They weren’t different men, and Sheriff Fineman probably knew that. Leighton had been calling the sheriff’s office all morning. He sort of smiled as Sheriff Fineman made his announcement. Murray still thought it was William, but all of The Survivors stood up, walked out in a single file line, and piled into Sarah Anne’s Cadillac, not even saying goodbye to Roscoe. Leighton could barely stand up, and he reached into his blue jeans pocket and pulled out the keys to his momma’s bug.

“He ain’t driving is he?” Sheriff Fineman asked. William snatched Leighton’s keys from him.

“I’ll drive him,” he said. “I ain’t been drinking.”

“Thank you, William,” Sheriff Fineman said.

* * *

The next few evenings at work for Roscoe were kind of lonely. The Survivors had relocated to The Beaver’s Tail, and on his off nights, Roscoe would join them up there and sip on Cokes with Sarah Anne. Sarah Anne hated The Beaver’s Tail, because the bar was filled with smoke, and she had to wash her clothes extra hard to get the

cigarette smell out of them. The bar wasn't kept as clean as the Flying J. There was visible dirt that seemed to be stained on the bar's carpet, but what she really hated was seeing all of the young folks in Lincoln who she had taught Sunday school to, kissing on each other and drinking. The only thing she liked about The Beaver's Tail was that it closed at midnight, so The Survivors had to start drinking earlier and leave earlier.

That first week without The Survivors, Roscoe thought he was going to go crazy. The overnight shift worked by themselves since the station wasn't as busy, and Roscoe began to spend his days looking for new work. He was able to take a pay cut if he wanted to, because he finally saved up enough money to buy that engagement ring for Mabel that he was saving up for since he moved to Lincoln. All he had to do was come up with the ring portion, since he inherited a diamond from his grandmother. Barton's Jewelers on Main Street fixed him up real nice. He picked the ring up and didn't let it out of his sight all day, even carrying it to work with him, so that Mabel wouldn't accidentally find it and have the surprise spoiled.

That night, Roscoe was working, and he stopped for a moment to just stare at the ring. He drifted off into his own world and didn't hear the door ding or notice that someone was approaching him. He was shaken back into the real world by looking up and seeing a man wearing a ski mask pointing a gun at him. He quickly put the ring back in his pocket, hoping that the gunman didn't see it, and put his hands in the air.

"Open the cash register and give me all your money," the man said. Roscoe did as he was told and opened the register before quickly putting his hands back up in the air. The man opened his bag and started grabbing all the bills and change from the register.

They only kept about eighty dollars in the register overnight, and the man got real frustrated when he saw how little he pulled in.

“Give me all the money in your wallet as well,” the man said. Roscoe had given all the cash he had to Barton’s Jewelers earlier in the day. He pulled out his wallet and opened it for the robber, revealing that it was empty.

“Lay on the ground and put your hands behind your head,” the robber said. Roscoe once again did as he was told, and the robber walked around the counter and started to frisk him. He reached underneath Roscoe and pulled out the engagement ring from his front pocket.

“No,” Roscoe said, but the man put the cold steel from the gun against Roscoe’s head, so he thought better of it for a moment and quieted down. The Flying J policy was to just give the robber whatever they wanted, but now that the man had Mabel’s engagement ring in his hand, Roscoe decided there was something at stake for him. Roscoe was as gentle as a kitten but knowing that the man had what was rightfully Mabel’s just stirred a beast up inside of him. He grabbed the gun by the barrel and snatched it out of the robber’s hand and stood up.

“The joke’s on you,” the robber said. “That thing ain’t loaded.” The robber began to laugh, but Roscoe grabbed the gun by the barrel and pistol whipped the robber, sending him straight to the floor. Roscoe’s first instinct was to remove the robber’s mask, and he couldn’t really say that he was shocked to see that it was Leighton Parker.

Sheriff Fineman came up to take Leighton away, and it was soon discovered that Leighton had deserted his position in the army. He was out on rest and relaxation in

Seattle, and after having a bad feeling that he was gonna get shipped to Iraq, hitchhiked back to Lincoln. We don't really know what became of Leighton after that, other than he got picked up by the military police. Frankly, with Leighton gone, we were more focused on the good of the story. Reporters came out from Oxford, Memphis, and Tupelo to hear about how Roscoe stopped a robbery. Mabel stood there behind him while the television reporters interviewed him, and that was when he got down on one knee and proposed to her right there in the Flying J parking lot on live television. By the time Mabel and Roscoe got married, William was done with seminary, and though he didn't have his own church yet, he was able to perform Roscoe and Mabel's service at Harmony Baptist. William and Anna Lee had already been married at that point, and Anne Lee Moore was her sister's maid of honor. Sarah Anne Calloway and Esther Rose were bridesmaids, along with William's younger sister Nadine. Roscoe's brother came in from Johnson City to be his best man, and Johnny Bradbury, Murray Stephenson, and Danny Phelps all served as groomsmen.

It was a beautiful service. Sheriff Fineman gave Mabel away at the wedding, and during the reception, he told The Survivors that they could start drinking at the Flying J again as long as it was all right with Danny Phelps. Roscoe's daddy and momma hit it off real well with Momma Henderson. His daddy wanted Roscoe and Mabel to move to Johnson City. Turned out his daddy was high up in the Johnson City Fire Department, and he said he could get Roscoe a job if he wanted. After taking down Leighton Parker, Roscoe became a bit of a celebrity in Lincoln, and he was liking the attention, so he wanted to stay. Sheriff Fineman figured that if Roscoe was good enough for the Johnson

City Fire Department, he would be good for the Lincoln Fire Department as well. He put in a good word, and Roscoe was off the third shift at the Flying J.

We never heard much more out of Leighton Parker. There were rumors that he got out of prison and was living in Nashville. We even heard he got arrested there for trying to buy cocaine from an undercover cop. Mary Parker claimed she didn't know what happened to him after the military police came and got him, but we all knew she was lying because she was suddenly going out of town a whole lot. She's embarrassed, and we understand. We reckon one day he'll come back to Lincoln, and we'll all see him walking the streets again looking for work.

The Almost Mistress

“So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after, and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.” -Ernest Hemingway, Death In The Afternoon

The first time I ever met Milton Kind was in February of 1996, when he first visited The Beaver’s Tail. I worked there as a bartender. The bar life was never one I really wanted, but after my husband, Stephen, died in Desert Storm, I had two mouths to feed and the money was right. Milton was a bit nervous about coming inside because he was a black man, and not too many black folks in Lincoln, Mississippi tended to stop into The Beaver’s Tail for a drink. The bar’s owner, Angie Stone, once went and picked up Esther Rose, the only black member of Lincoln’s oldest drinking group, The Survivors, and bought all of her drinks one evening, hoping that in turn she might score The Survivors and some black patrons into her bar. Esther didn’t fall for it. She certainly took every drop of free alcohol that Angie bought her, but once she left that evening, she didn’t come back as a regular nor did The Survivors or any black patrons take to frequenting the bar.

Milton would later laugh about how he was nervous about coming in because he was black, and we certainly gave him a stare when he crossed those double doors. That was back when Angie had the pool tables right up front. Joe Joe Webber had just turned twenty-one, and his older brother, Camel, brought him in for his first legal drink. They

were shooting a game of pool, and Joe Joe looked up, saw Milton, and immediately started hitting Camel on the arm to get his attention. It was still the early evening, so the bar was mostly empty. Lou Osbourne was sitting in a booth by himself having a pint of Rolling Rock. I remember a yellow hardhat sitting on the table next to his pint glass, and I thought, “Who’s he fooling? He ain’t got no job.” He was wearing a black t-shirt with a rebel flag on it, so I know he probably shook Milton up a bit. There was a young couple in the bar by the jukebox picking out songs. I didn’t know them, but they was so lost in each other that they didn’t even notice Milton. The girl’s arms were tightly wrapped around the man’s waist as he was flipping through the CDs, and they looked really nice together. Years later, I still wonder what happened to that couple. I hope they got married and are happy.

One thing I ain’t mentioned yet is that Milton was the senior pastor of Victory Baptist Church. At that point, he had only been living in Lincoln for two months. Before he came here, he was the pastor of the First Missionary Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama. I imagine he was probably pretty well known as a community leader there, but I’m not sure he initially understood how small of a pond his big fish self had landed in when he first arrived in Lincoln. *The Lincoln Daily Journal* would run an article if you had family members coming to visit you from out of town, so when Milton first moved here around Christmas 1995, he was all over the paper.

A load of pint glasses finished in the dishwasher, so I was standing behind the bar, drying them off when Milton walked in. My back was turned, so I didn’t notice anything odd at first. The thing is, when you have two kids, you know to get concerned when

things get quiet. When I heard the clacking of the balls at the pool table stop, I decided maybe I should turn around and investigate. Lou Osbourne's reaction was the first I noticed. He was wide eyed like Garth Brooks had come in. It was a Saturday, but Milton had just left the church, and he was dressed nicer than anyone ever was when they came in The Beaver's Tail. My pastor, Reverend Thomas at Harmony Baptist, sneaked in every now and then for a beer as well when he was stressed out, but he always wore a baseball cap pulled over his face, and Angie Stone worked out a deal with him where he could come in through the back door and hide out in the kitchen and drink. Milton wore this beautiful light brown suit that he later told me a tailor who was a member of his congregation in Huntsville made for him. He also wore a Bailey fedora. I knew what it was, because my husband used to wear them, but you never saw men in Lincoln wearing hats like that anymore.

Three fifths of the bar was frozen, watching Milton as he cozied up to a barstool and grabbed a drink menu. The other two fifths still seemed unaware that a world was happening around them. It's been ten years since that day, and I still get jealous when I see young couples like that. What is it about getting old that it makes it so much harder for us to fall in love?

"You lost?" I asked, as I grabbed my notepad to take his order. I just wasn't thinking about what I was saying was all. No Baptist preacher I ever met would walk into a bar so unapologetic. Milton took my question as threatening and got up from his barstool and started to walk right back out of the door. "You ain't gotta go," I called to him. "We just don't see folks like you in here all that often is all." He stopped for a

moment, like he was thinking about something, then he turned around. There was this look of distress on his face, and I could tell it was something more than being the sole black man in a redneck bar.

“I think I’d feel more comfortable if you just told me where folks like me tend to go,” he said. His voice sounded kind. He wasn’t mad at me. It just seemed like he didn’t want to cause a fuss.

“Well the only other person like you in town that comes here, usually sneaks in through the back door and hides out in the kitchen.” By this point, I knew what the words coming out of my mouth sounded like. I thought a joke might lighten the mood. He froze in horror for a moment, and I could tell he was trying to figure out what it was he had to do to get back to Huntsville. “His name is Reverend John Thomas,” I said. Milton let out this laugh that came from so deep in his belly that tears started pouring out of his eyes. Harmony Baptist and Victory Baptist were sister churches, so I guess Milton already had some dealings with Reverend Thomas. His coat was already off and wrapped around the back of the barstool, and his fedora was resting on the bar, before he was able to compose himself enough to order a drink. The sound of Milton’s laughter seemed to calm the other patrons. Camel and Joe Joe resumed their pool game, and Lou had this big goofy grin on his face as he watched me and the reverend.

Now, I still remember the date. It was February 24, and I only know that because Milton’s birthday was February 25. He was turning forty-four the next day, and I thought maybe he wanted a quiet drink to celebrate. When I offered to buy his drink because it was his birthday, he seemed stunned that I knew that until I pulled out that day’s *Lincoln*

Daily Journal, and there was an article on the front page about it. “Victory Baptist Pastor Turns 44,” it read. It wasn’t the headline story. 1996 was an election year, and for the first time in twenty years, someone had decided to challenge Myron Fineman for the sheriff’s position. Sheriff Fineman won, but Aldous Watts, who was challenging Sheriff Fineman, called a press conference claiming that the sheriff and Bernadette Tansey had an affair going on. No one believed that Bernadette Tansey would cheat on her husband, Frank, but everyone loved the theater of it all except for Bernadette, her husband Frank, and Sheriff Fineman. They ran the story about Milton’s birthday because Victory Baptist was having a big celebration in honor of their pastor. Milton laughed when he saw the newspaper article. There was even a tiny photograph of him next to the article.

“Slow news day?” he asked.

“It’s always a slow news day here,” I said. “A couple years ago, this man rolled through town from Memphis. I hate to brag, but he got glimpse of me and fell in love. He asked a couple of high school boys about me, and they thought he was out to kill me. Sheriff Fineman took him in for questioning, and me and that poor man were all over the headlines of this rag for a week.” Milton smiled and nodded his head as I told the story.

“I understand why the man was taken by you,” he said and smiled. In that moment, I would be lying to you if I didn’t say I was starting to get a little crush on the reverend. He was a charming one, that’s for sure. He reached into his jacket, pulled out a cigar, and lit it. Normally, I’m bothered by cigar smoke, but I just let it go. Milton was probably the most fascinating character I had seen in the bar in a while. His cigar smelt sweet so it didn’t bother me as much as some smoke did.

“You gonna order a drink or did you just come in for dinner?” I asked. “We do have food too.”

“I came for a drink,” he said. “What’s the nicest whiskey you have?”

“Jack Daniels,” I said, and he twitched his mouth in disgust. “Sorry,” I said.

“This ain’t the big city of Hunstville.”

“Well, I guess Jack Daniels it is,” he replied. “But mix it with a little Coke if you would.” Right as I was turning around to mix Milton’s drink, the songs that the couple played on the jukebox began. It was Patsy Cline’s “Crazy.” I was inclined to wonder what people that young knew about Patsy Cline. Truthfully, I wouldn’t have known nothing about her either if my daddy hadn’t listened to her. He would sit in the living room with a beer and listen to her records after he had been out working on the farm all day. Daddy was a cotton farmer, and Patsy’s voice did for daddy what whiskey did for Milton. It calmed him. Milton would never have more than two drinks in one sitting. He said he liked the taste of the sour mash. It released endorphins in him that just made him feel good. Milton was insistent that it wasn’t drunkenness. He said it was the same as when you had a really good steak.

The young couple was slow dancing to Patsy in the middle of the bar, and Milton turned around in his chair to watch them. They was moving so slow but holding each other so tight. The look in the woman’s eye reminded me of how I used to be with Stephen before he passed. Sweet moments like that happened often at The Beaver’s Tail. Before working there, I would have just thought the bar was filled with rowdy drunks trying to cause some trouble and blow off steam. Never would I have thought that you

would see the good in people there. You'd see men whose wives had left them, getting beers bought for them by their friends. You'd watch these men hug their upset friend. We had bar fights too, but it was those sweet moments that made me glad I worked there. If I had been anywhere else, I wouldn't have gotten to see them.

Milton was visibly touched by the couple too. He was grinning with his cigar hanging out of his mouth as he watched them dance, and when the song came to an end, he clapped for the couple. The woman looked a little embarrassed, but she smiled at Milton and gave him a little curtsy. The man looked at Milton and winked, then the woman buried her head in the man's chest so that no one could see her face. Milton and I both got so engrossed in watching the couple that neither of us noticed that Lou Osbourne had gotten up out of his booth and was now sitting at the bar right next to Milton. It startled me, but I felt a little bit of relief when I noticed that he held an empty pint glass. I hoped that once I refilled his beer, he would go sit back down by himself since he left his hardhat at the table.

"You're Milton Kind, right?" I heard Lou ask him as I was refilling his beer.

"I am," Milton said. I was all the way across the bar by the draft beers, and I could smell Lou's body odor floating my way, so I can't imagine how poor Milton must have been feeling. I noticed that he was holding his drink up close to his face and sort of waving his cigar around strangely, and I wondered if it was so he could smell the drink and cigar rather than Lou.

"If I'd known you niggers were allowed to drink, I'd have switched over to Victory from Harmony years ago," Lou said. The look on Milton's face when Lou said

the *n* word just crushed me. There Milton was having an all right time, and leave it to Lou Osbourne to come and ruin it for him.

“Lou, if you use that word one more time in my bar, I’m gonna stop serving you,” I said. It took me a little time, but I learned that if I wanted to threaten someone, I had to tell them they weren’t getting anymore beer. If I told them I was going to kick them out, they would start to play the big man with me and try to push all my buttons, but if I threatened to take away their booze, then they would start to whimper like little children.

“They get to call each other that all the time,” Lou said. “Why can’t I say it?”

“I’ll tell you what, Lou,” I said. “If Reverend Kind starts saying it, I’ll cut him off too.” Milton smiled at me, and I put my hand on his and squeezed it after I said that. Lou just shook his head and stared at Milton.

“You can smoke a cigar and drink,” Lou said, and he was smiling. “What’s your church’s position on grass?”

“What you do is between you and the Lord,” Milton said. “Anytime you would like to visit my church, you would be more than welcome there.” Well, Lou smiled and started to sip on his beer. I could tell he was really warming up to the reverend in a way that he never would John Thomas.

“Don’t count on him coming to see you there,” I said. “I don’t know why he’s talking about switching over from Harmony. I ain’t seen Lou Osbourne in that church since I was a little girl. He drops his two youngest boys off and is then on his merry way.”

“She’s spinning yarns, Reverend Kind,” Lou said. “I go every time there is a funeral or a wedding.”

“That’s just because you want to know where the free food is afterwards,” I said. That one might have hit Lou a little sore. When my momma died a couple years later, Lou didn’t come to her visitation or funeral. I never cared much for Lou, but I served him almost every day at The Beaver’s Tail, and I thought he might at least show up to see how I was doing. Milton ordered another drink, so I fixed it for him and then went back to drying my pint glasses. Milton and Lou kept talking for a bit, but the conversation switched to basketball, so I just tuned out. I heard them saying something about John Stockton and Michael Jordan. As I kept looking over at them, I saw Milton was looking at me as well. The young couple came up and settled their tab, and Milton wasn’t far behind them. Milton stood up from his barstool and pulled out his wallet.

“How much do I owe you?” he asked.

“I got your drinks tonight,” I said. “Happy birthday and feel free to visit us whenever you like.” He smiled at me and still put a twenty dollar bill down on the bar, before putting his coat back on. The cigar was still hanging out of his mouth as he put his fedora back on. More customers were starting to come into the bar, and he looked at me, then Lou, and smiled.

“If either of you ever want to visit Victory and see what we’re all about, you’ll be more than welcome with our church family,” he said.

* * *

Lou Osbourne's two boys were about the same age as my children. His son Mark was the same age as my oldest son, William, and his other son, Timmy, was a year older than my daughter, Nadine, but he was in the same grade in school as her because he got held back in kindergarten. Lou's wife, Hazel, was a bit touched in the head, and she didn't really care to leave the house much. Lou and Hazel had three other boys, but they was grown and all three of them left Lincoln as soon as they was of age. Mark and Timmy did the same thing once they turned eighteen. Before Mark turned fifteen, Lou would drop him and Timmy off at Harmony Baptist Church every Sunday morning, and usually someone else at the church would take them back home. After Mark turned fifteen that changed. Lou went ahead and let Mark drive himself and Timmy to church every Sunday using their second car that Hazel never bothered to drive. Lou said that it was because it was time for his boy to get comfortable behind the wheel of a car, but I knew that he only let Mark drive so that he could have longer to sleep off his hangover.

The morning after Milton's visit to The Beaver's Tail, I noticed that Mark was by himself at church. My little girl seemed relieved to see Mark flying solo. Eventually, Timmy and Nadine would become close friends. Nadine had just turned six, and Timmy was seven. This was during Timmy's second go at kindergarten, and the fact that he was repeating a grade caused the other children to give him a hard time. It didn't help that all of the Osbournes, except for Hazel, were big boned. Timmy was picked on for being fat and dumb, and Nadine hated to see people pick on him. Nadine would stand up for Timmy, which meant that Timmy took to sticking close to her.

William would sit in the back row of the church with Mark, and Mark would always make sure that Timmy was sitting right next to him. My momma and I would sit a bit closer to the pulpit, and Nadine would usually sit on her memaw's lap. As we'd all leave our Sunday school classes and get settled into the sanctuary, I would always make it a point to walk up and hug William in front of everyone. William was a teenager who hated getting hugs from his momma in public, and that's exactly why I went and did it every week. Usually, I'd sit and chat with Mark and Timmy for a minute too while Nadine tried to pull me away. I'd give them both hugs, because I reckoned that Lou and Hazel weren't too affectionate, and they certainly seemed to not mind it like William did. Mark was standing there without Timmy, and I was confused.

"Where's your little brother?" I asked him. When you have teenagers, you learn how to tell when one of them is lying. Mark looked down at the floor and started mumbling something. "You're gonna have to speak up, baby," I said. "I can't hear you."

"He wasn't feeling so good this morning," Mark said. "Momma made him stay home."

"That poor child," I said. "Well do y'all need anything?"

"No ma'am," Mark said, and he still wasn't looking me in the eye. His face started to flush, and I swore in that moment that I wasn't sure if he was lying or embarrassed about something. Now I can't tell you I wasn't curious, but the way I saw it, what the Osbournes did was really none of my business anyways.

Normally, Lou was in The Beaver's Tail six days a week, and I'm convinced he would have been in there seven if we were open on Sundays. Now, I was always off on

Mondays and Tuesdays, so when I went in on Wednesday, I was a bit shocked when Lou didn't come in the entire night. He didn't come in on Thursday, then late in the afternoon on Friday, he finally showed up with Milton Kind. Both of them sat down at the bar, and they looked like they had been laughing.

“We've missed you this week, Lou,” I said, as he and the reverend took a seat.

“It's good to see you again, Reverend Kind.”

“The reverend's done put me to work,” Lou said. “There were several leaks in the ceiling over at Victory, so I done patched some spots on the roof, I painted the sanctuary. It's been a busy week for me.”

“Lou, do you actually know how to do all that stuff?” I asked, and he got all quiet and looked real offended.

“Actually, he's done an excellent job,” Milton said. “The Lord sent him to us in a time of need.” Milton put his hand on Lou's shoulder and smiled. Lou looked really pleased by that. I'd never met Lou's daddy, but I reckon that was who he learned his parenting skills from. To have someone like Milton Kind show some pride in him did Lou wonders. Lou ordered a beer, and Milton reached into his pocket and pulled out a fifth of Knob Creek.

“I don't want no more of that Jack Daniels,” he said. “Consider this a gift to the bar. Serve it to other customers. Charge them what you will, but please fix me a glass of it neat.” Having gone a whole week without seeing Lou, I'd forgotten to ask about Timmy. I asked Nadine if he had been at school, and she said he had, so I didn't bother with it. Milton went out to his car for a moment, leaving Lou in the bar alone, and when

he came back in, he was holding a styrofoam plate with aluminum foil wrapped around it. He handed me the plate and smiled.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A piece of my birthday cake,” he said. “We saved one for you.” Milton only had one drink that evening before he left, but Lou stuck around until closing time, drinking pint after pint of Rolling Rock.

“Lou, shouldn’t you be spending this money on your kids?” I asked.

“It don’t matter,” Lou said to me. “Milton is paying me for the work I’m doing around the church. I ain’t unemployed anymore. I got a paycheck.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded up check from Victory Baptist for \$415.72. Lou looked like one of those lottery winners holding up an oversized check as he displayed it to me. “And he’s got more work for me next week!”

Neither Lou nor Milton came in on Saturday. Then on Sunday, Mark showed up to church, and he was still by his lonesome. Missing church for one week is excusable, but once Timmy missed two weeks of church, people started yapping to each other about where Mark’s baby brother was.

“He’s been at school all week, and he sure didn’t seem sick on Monday,” Miss Jackson, the kindergarten teacher, said.

“You know them Osbournes ain’t good for much no ways,” Otis Dale said. “I heard Lou has been hanging around with that nigger preacher.” It took all I had not let Otis have it. I’m not sure what it was, but I guess I felt like if I said something, it would

look like I knew something, and I just didn't want my two cents added to the debate. I did go up and talk to Mark after I hugged William though.

“Is your brother still sick?” I asked.

“It's a different thing this week,” Mark said. “But he is sick.” Mark could hear the other members of the church talking about his daddy and his baby brother, and I knew it was bothering him. They was even talking about Mark's older brothers, and saying that Mark was the only good Osbourne. I don't think that really cheered him up too much. He didn't want to hear them talking about his family, and I don't blame him one bit for it. That week, I hugged Mark just a little bit longer.

* * *

The next week, I didn't see either Milton or Lou in the bar. While I knew it was really none of my business, I took the long way to work on Saturday and passed by Victory Baptist where I noticed Lou's truck in the parking lot. Now I wanted to go park my car and investigate, but I thought the two of them might find it a bit strange to see me snooping around the church property. I was worried about Timmy. He stayed on my brain, and I wondered what was going on with him. Nadine said he'd been at school all week again, so I wanted to know what was happening with that child. St. Patrick's Day was on a Sunday that year, so we celebrated it at The Beaver's Tail on the Saturday before since we would be closed on the actual holiday. Lou loved St. Patrick's Day and New Year's Eve, because those were the drinking holidays. We were busy all night, but never once did I see Lou Osbourne in the bar.

When Sunday rolled around, Mark was at church and he had Timmy with him this time. The Sunday school classrooms lined the walls of the sanctuary, and when the classes let out, I noticed that Virginia Dale, who taught Timmy's Sunday school class, held the boy back to talk to him. I noticed that her face went white, and she held her hand across her chest as if Timmy had just said the most offensive thing possible to her. Timmy went walking out as if there was nothing wrong, but Virginia immediately ran to her husband, Otis, and whispered in his ear. Otis held his hand over his mouth, and he walked into the back of the church where Reverend Thomas sat before the sermon started. It was at that point that I heard Sarah Anne Calloway talking to Timmy.

"We've missed you, Timmy," she said. "You sure have been missing a lot of church."

"I ain't been missing church," Timmy said. Sarah Anne looked confused, and then several of the other adults started to gather around the young boy. I could see the blood rushing to Mark's face, and he excused himself to the bathroom, leaving his baby brother to fend for himself against all those adults.

"Now child," Sarah Anne Calloway said. "It ain't nice to lie to adults. We know you ain't been here, because we've been here."

"I know I ain't been here," Timmy said. "But I've been at church. Me and daddy have been going to Victory." Timmy didn't seem to think there was anything wrong with what he was saying, until he heard the collective gasps of all the adults who were circling him. "He let me come back here this week, because I told him I missed everyone. It was real nice there though. The first week we had a vanilla cake, because it was Reverend

Kind's birthday." When Timmy mentioned the cake, he looked at me, and I started to get real nervous. "Miss Moore knows," he said. "They saved a piece for her."

I began to wonder if Timmy knew Milton was coming up to The Beaver's Tail, and I sure didn't want him letting everyone know that. Nadine was sitting on my momma's lap in a pew closer to the front. When she heard the mention of cake, she got stuffy with me.

"You had cake, and you didn't share it with me?" Nadine asked. Otis Dale and Reverend Thomas were coming out of the back, and I was relieved to see that Reverend Thomas looked calm.

"If he got Lou Osbourne to go to church, then he's done one thing I ain't been able to do," Reverend Thomas said to Otis. Now, Otis didn't look happy in the least bit. I think he expected Reverend Thomas to get riled up like the rest of them. Hell, I expected Reverend Thomas to get riled up. He was calm and he walked up to Timmy, and put his hand on the young boy's cheek.

"Son, it don't matter where you worship," Reverend Thomas said. "All that matters is that you do it. We'd sure love to have you still come be with us at Harmony, but if you like Victory, there ain't nothing wrong with you going there." Timmy looked pleased, but the adults surrounding him got to speaking at the same time, and while you couldn't make out a word any of them were saying, you could tell by the tone of voice that they were angry. I thought a riot was about to break out in the middle of Harmony Baptist Church. My momma apparently had the same inclination. She was starting to get frail around that time, but she found the strength to pick Nadine up and carry her out the

front doors of the church, and I noticed some of the other adults with kids doing the same.

“Victory is our sister church,” Reverend Thomas said. “I meet with Reverend Kind for lunch at least once a week. He is a Godly man, and it ain’t going to hurt Timmy to worship with him.”

Well, everyone was still pretty upset, but they all quieted down and accepted what Reverend Thomas had to say. When Otis Dale started to feel any sort of emotion, be that feeling related to pain or pleasure, he would start sweating. Little bubbles condensed on his head, and he pulled his hankie from his back pocket and wiped the sweat. I didn’t know what all Timmy told Virginia in the Sunday school classroom, and I was really hoping that no one brought up The Beaver’s Tail. Otis opened his mouth, and that’s when I closed my eyes. It felt like I lost control of my body, and I was reacting to someone about to punch me.

“I didn’t get to tell you the whole thing, John,” Otis said. “Lou Osbourne met Reverend Kind at The Beaver’s Tail. They is drinkin’ buddies!” My eyes were still shut tight, but I heard another collective gasp from the congregation. When I opened them, everyone was staring at me.

“I don’t really care to talk about work while I’m at church,” I said. “But if you want a list of names of people who go to The Beaver’s Tail and what they do there, then I’ll start with the folks in this sanctuary.” That shut everyone up, and Reverend Thomas looked real anxious to change the subject as well.

“Here’s the thing, Otis,” he said. “I doubt even Lou Osbourne would take his son into a bar. Maybe the boy misunderstood how Milton and his daddy met.” Otis looked angry, but I think the argument was starting to exhaust him also. Candy Webber, who was Joe Joe and Camel’s momma, was the piano player at Harmony. She knew that her boys hung out at The Beaver’s Tail, and she didn’t want me to start talking either. She started playing “The Old Rugged Cross” on the piano, and everyone ended up going back to their seats, and Reverend Thomas began the service.

It looked like things were calming down, so I went outside to get my momma and Nadine. When William saw me walking outside, he followed me. The other families who walked out with their children went home. Momma looked worn out. She had a bad back, so it hurt her pretty bad to pick up a six year old and carry her outside. She was leaned up against her Buick, rubbing her back, and Nadine was standing next to her hollering.

“Can we go home now too?” Nadine asked. Part of me wanted to stick around for Mark and Timmy, but the rest of me sort of felt like leaving. I turned around and looked at William.

“Did you leave anything in the church?”

“No ma’am,” William said. I walked over to the car, and William followed me. Momma and Nadine hopped into the car and got buckled up, and we just went home.

“Momma, why was everyone mad at Timmy?” Nadine asked. My momma started to open her mouth, and that got me nervous. While I certainly loved and still love my momma dearly, she thought like a person from her generation, meaning she liked to refer

to black folks by that horrible *n* word. Before I could talk over her, she already had her thoughts out.

“They ain’t mad at him for no good reason, sweetheart,” she said. “That’s all you need to know.” Now I know I ain’t said too much about my momma, but you have to understand that she could be stubborn, so for her to say something like that was huge. I grabbed Momma’s hand and squeezed it tight, and she smiled at me.

* * *

The next week, I didn’t see Lou Osbourne in The Beaver’s Tail. That was disappointing, because I really wanted him to come in. I assumed that Timmy and Mark had gone home and told him everything, and I felt it was my duty to apologize to him on behalf of the members of Harmony Baptist Church. I even asked the other bartenders if they had seen him. Most of them looked at me funny. Sometimes Lou could be a problem customer, and I guess they thought it was a blessing that he wasn’t coming in.

We did see one new visitor that week. Reverend Thomas stopped by several times a day. He never came inside and bought anything. Everyone would just see the front doors open and then watch as Reverend Thomas poked his head through the door, looked around, and then left. That started getting bad for business. Members of Harmony Baptist drank at The Beaver’s Tail, so once they saw their pastor poke his head in and leave, they would immediately settle up and head on home. Courtney, who tended bar during the day before I got there, said that he was coming in and poking his head in during her shifts too.

“I’m not gonna have him shutting me down,” Angie Stone said. “I’m gonna call the church and threaten to take away his little secret drinks here if he keeps this up.”

“Let me talk to him first, Angie,” I said. “Maybe I can talk some sense into him.” She didn’t seem happy about it, but she let me have my chance. Later that evening, the doors flung open, and there was Reverend Thomas. He poked his head in as usual, and as he turned around to leave, I yelled at him.

“Hey!” I said, and ran from behind the bar to go catch him. He didn’t stop. He kept moving for his car, meanwhile the members of Harmony who were in the bar drinking, were standing their with dollar bills in their hands, ready to leave. He’d already gotten in his vehicle and started the engine, but I kept chasing him. He made a complete stop in the parking lot to turn onto Tupelo Avenue, so I got up next to him and knocked on his window. I noticed he was looking real angry as he rolled his window down. His eyes seemed to turn black like a demon had done got him.

“What is it, Helen?” he asked.

“You have got to stop doing this,” I said. “You are going to run us out of business. You’re scaring off the regulars.”

“They shouldn’t be in there anyways.”

“Well, you shouldn’t come up here neither, but you do,” I said. “And Miss Stone is talking about taking away your privilege of hiding out in the kitchen if you keep this up. I know Mildred ain’t going to let you drink at home.”

“Well, I’m sure Edna ain’t too crazy about him coming up here neither,” Reverend Thomas said. I realize I ain’t said nothing to you about Edna yet, and there is a reason for

that. At that point in time, Milton never said anything about Edna to me. I knew he was married, because I'd seen the big gold wedding ring on his hand, and the newspaper articles also mentioned her. To be honest, I felt sort of funny that Milton hadn't brought Edna up. As far as I was concerned, I hadn't seen enough of Milton Kind to get a crush on him, yet there I was, suddenly feeling all jealous like a middle school girl.

I guess the mention of Edna got me quiet for a long time, and it gave Reverend Thomas the chance to escape. He pulled on out of the parking lot and cruised down Tupelo Avenue back towards Dale's Auto Repairs, leaving me standing there dumbstruck. When I went back inside, everyone was still standing at the bar. There weren't that many people in the bar to begin with, and I wasn't looking forward to losing all my customers.

"If y'all sit back down, I'll buy you all a round," I said, and that must have just wiped everyone in the bar's shame clean away, because they cozied back up to a barstool or booth. The next day was a Friday, and while Reverend Thomas never peeked his head in, I did notice his car driving down Tupelo Avenue, really slow, while I was wiping a table down by the front window. I knew he was checking the cars out in the lot. I walked out the front door, stood in front of the bar and waved at him. When he saw me, he sped on off.

On Saturday, Milton came in. He was underdressed for his usual self. He wore a white and green ringer t-shirt and a pair of blue jeans but was still wearing that fedora that belonged to his daddy. Angie Stone was in the bar checking inventory, and she smiled and waved at Reverend Kind as well.

“I’ve been missing you, Reverend,” I said. “Honestly, I’ve been missing Lou too. Where have y’all been?”

“Lou accepted Jesus into his heart last Sunday,” Reverend Kind said. “He said that he felt like God didn’t want him drinking anymore. I wish you could see him though. He always has this smile on his face. It’s like a thousand burdens have been lifted. God is so good to us, and He works so many miracles. From what I’ve heard from some of the folks in town, getting Lou to accept Christ is on par with raising the dead.” Milton was just beaming with pride, and that pride was infectious, because I couldn’t stop smiling neither.

“I’m happy to hear Lou is turning his life around,” I said. “Good work, Reverend.”

“It wasn’t me,” Milton said. “It was all God. To Him be the glory!” Now, I know I ain’t said too much about what Milton looked like, other than that he was black, but the thing is, I noticed the most minute details about that man. His fingernails were always neatly trimmed, and I swear there was a layer of clear fingernail polish over them like he was getting manicures. He had a mustache that was graying around the corners of his mouth, and the spots of gray had yellowed a bit from his cigar smoking. His skin had a yellowish tone to it, as if there might have been a white man in his family at some point, and his eyes were a chocolate brown. The thing is, on that day all I seemed to notice was Milton’s wedding ring, and it started driving me crazy.

It’d been five years since Stephen died. They never found his body, but I was told he was in a plane that was shot down over Kuwait. We had a funeral for him, and there

was even an empty grave memorializing him in the graveyard at Harmony Baptist. I was going to be buried next to that empty plot of land. Part of me always expected to be sitting on my front porch one day and see a car pull up with Stephen inside it. He'd get out, tell me that the Army made a huge mistake. Maybe he was in a P.O.W. camp somewhere in the Middle East. I couldn't give up on that man. I'd been on a few dates, but every time my date tried to kiss me at the end of the night, I'd just back away and feel all dirty. It was like I was being unfaithful to Stephen. I worked the day shift at McCoy's Grocery, and I felt the worst about the owner's son, Donald McCoy. He had it bad for me, but I could not love him back. Milton awakened something in me, and I suddenly started to desire not only companionship but sex again.

Milton was starting his second drink, when the doors of The Beaver's Tail flung open. Reverend Thomas came walking in, and he looked angry. I set Milton's drink down in front of him, and he didn't even look up as his colleague came walking in.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Reverend Thomas asked.

"Sure, pull up a seat," Milton said, and he patted the barstool next to him.

"No, I mean can we go somewhere else to talk," Reverend Thomas said. There were about six other people in the bar, all of them members of Harmony Baptist. They all seemed confused. It looked like they all wanted to get up and settle their tabs, but they were also a little nervous about coming up to the bar and paying while standing next to Reverend Thomas.

"I just got a fresh drink," Milton said, holding up his glass. "I would prefer we talk here. I'll buy you a beer."

“I don’t drink,” Reverend Thomas said. Well, at this point Miss Stone came up from the back and was counting the liquor bottles behind the bar. She heard Reverend Thomas tell Milton he didn’t drink, and I noticed this little glint in her eye that made me nervous.

“Y’all can go back to the kitchen if that’ll make you more comfortable,” Miss Stone said. Really, I should have been horrified, but for some reason, I started laughing. When Milton heard me laugh, he started too, and then the other people in the bar started laughing except for Reverend Thomas. I’m not sure if they all heard what Miss Stone said, and even if they did, I’m not sure they would have known what it meant. It seemed easier to laugh in that situation.

“This isn’t funny, Milton,” Reverend Thomas said. “What kind of example are you setting for your congregation?”

“My people stopped sneaking into the backdoors of places in the sixties, Reverend Thomas,” Milton said. “I’m not about to start sneaking around now.”

“So if I call Edna, it ain’t gonna be no big deal? Because you ain’t sneaking around,” Reverend Thomas said.

“I’ll tell you what,” Milton said. “You can call Edna and have her come up here, provided you let me call Mildred, and we can all take your favorite spot in the kitchen.” Honestly, it didn’t make no sense to me how their wives couldn’t know that they sneaked some drinks in from time to time anyways. When me and Stephen got married, I felt like I got some superpowers, because I could suddenly, hear, smell, and see everything. I honestly believe that the good Lord gives us husbands so that we can train for the

upcoming children. Stephen was a good man, but if he even walked by a woman who was wearing too much perfume, I could smell it on his clothes.

By this point, Milton and Reverend Thomas seemed like they was in a staring contest. Eventually, Reverend Thomas just got up and left, and when he walked out that door, the whole bar started cheering like they was watching the Super Bowl or something. Miss Stone went up by the window and watched as Reverend Thomas pulled out of the parking lot and headed back home.

“When you see the good Reverend on Sunday,” Miss Stone said to me, “let him know that his kitchen privileges have been revoked.”

* * *

When we was getting ready for church the next morning, Nadine came into the bathroom while I was doing my makeup and sat down at the corner of the bathtub.

“Momma,” she said. “Can we go to Victory instead of Harmony this morning?”

I was shocked. This was before she was really considering Timmy a friend, so I wasn’t sure why she wanted to go there. I imagined that she probably didn’t want to go to Harmony after what happened the previous Sunday.

“I don’t think it’s going to be like last week, sweetie,” I said.

“It’s not because of that,” she said. “Timmy said his daddy is getting baptized. It seemed like he really wanted me to come see it.” At that point, I was intrigued. If Lou Osbourne was getting baptized, then I had to be there also, and Momma agreed with me. We went. William was shocked when we pulled up in Victory’s parking lot, but he took it like a champ.

I knew a lot of the congregation there, because some of them shopped at McCoy's Grocery. They were all giving me and Momma hugs and pinching Nadine on the cheek. The other teenage boys seemed a bit put off by William, but the men shook his hand and the women hugged him. I looked across the church to see who else was there, and that was when I noticed that Hazel Osbourne actually left the house to come see her husband get baptized. Momma hit me on the arm so hard when she noticed it that she left a bruise. Hazel didn't look at us or come over and say anything, but she was smiling. She'd put on makeup and was wearing this nice red dress. Before Hazel married Lou, she was the homecoming queen at Lincoln High, and I guess I just forgot how pretty she really was.

The baptism tank was behind the pulpit, and there was this beautiful stained glass window with Jesus kneeling at the cross behind it. I could see the water floating at the top, and it had taken on a blue tint. Milton came walking out into the tank wearing a white robe, and the organ player started playing "At Calvary."

"The gospel of John, chapter one, verse twelve," Milton said. "'Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.'" The congregation began to yell, and I heard a lot of people shouting, "Amen!" Milton waited for the yells to end, and then he cleared his throat. "Today, brother Lou Osbourne follows the good Lord in Christian baptism." Milton looked off to the side and motioned for Lou to come forward. Lou was wearing a white robe like Milton's, and the people in the church began to cheer and yell, "Hallelujah." Milton put one arm around Lou and raised the other in the air.

“Today, we will bury brother Lou’s old self, so that he might walk in a new body.” Milton took his hand that had been in the air and placed it on Lou’s nose and dunked him in the water three times. “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Walk again brother Lou. ‘Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.’” When Lou emerged from the water, his hair was down in his face, and you could see him gasping for air. Milton whispered something into his ear, and Lou walked off to the other side of the baptismal tank. “Let us pray,” Milton said.

William and Nadine shut their eyes and bowed their heads, but me and momma just sat there stunned. Our eyes were wide opened, and we couldn’t believe what we just saw. I looked over at Hazel, her head bowed, and Mark and Timmy were next to her. Mark’s head was bowed as well, but Timmy was looking over at our family, and he had a big smile on his face. He was happy we came. During the sermon, people were shouting and dancing. Momma and Nadine really enjoyed the service, but William looked uncomfortable.

“They done figured something out over here, because this sure as shit ain’t boring,” my momma said to me. “Reverend Thomas should come over here and see how it’s done.”

“Don’t cuss in church, Memaw,” Nadine said.

On the front row, I noticed one woman who didn’t seem very happy. She was an older black woman wearing a beautiful red flower topped hat and a pearl necklace. She wasn’t smiling as Milton preached. I looked over, and I noticed Lou Osbourne all dried

up in a suit and tie, and he sneaked into the pew between Hazel and Timmy. Hazel was smiling and put her hand on Lou's shoulder, and I wondered if she ever felt so proud of her husband before. At the end of the service, the congregation all circled around Lou. They were hugging him, and shaking his hand to congratulate him. We thought it would be good to go over and say something to Lou ourselves, so we made our way to his direction when the woman with the red hat stopped us.

"Y'all related to brother Lou?" she asked.

"No ma'am," I said. "We just know him. I'm Helen Moore." I held out my hand to her and she took it.

"I'm Edna Kind," she said. "I'm the preacher's wife. I've heard a little bit about you. I'm glad y'all decided to come visit us here." She walked off, and I don't know why, but I got worried. Milton was talking about me to her, and I wanted to know what he said. Milton stood by the door, greeting everyone as they left, and I gave him a big hug. He looked real happy to see me. He met momma, Nadine, and William, and greeted them all enthusiastically.

"I'm glad you all came," Milton said. "Hold on for a minute. I want you to meet my wife, Edna." He started looking around the church to see if he could find her.

"We met her already," I said and started to shuffle my children and momma out the door of the church. Milton looked disappointed in me. We didn't even get a chance to say anything to Lou or Hazel.

"Why are we leaving, Momma?" Nadine asked. "I haven't even said anything to Timmy yet."

“It’s time to go, child,” I said. I could say I didn’t know what was going on with me, but by that point, I did. When I saw Edna, I got jealous and had to get out of that church right then.

* * *

Milton was one of my first customers when I came into work the following Wednesday. He wasn’t saying much, and I could tell something was on his mind. I tried to ask him what was wrong, but he would just shrug and give me a different answer that would dismiss the subject. He was the only customer, so I fixed myself a cup of coffee and went around and sat next to him. I tried to put my hand on his back, but he sort of shriveled up at me, so I moved it.

“Do you and Edna not have any kids?” I asked.

“We had a little boy,” he said. “His name was Isaac. For the longest time, Edna just couldn’t get pregnant. We named Isaac after Abraham’s son. He was a miracle.” Since he was using past tense, I knew something happened to Isaac. “He truly was a blessing from God.”

“What happened to him?” I asked.

“Leukemia,” he said. “We took him to Memphis. When we thought he was going to make it, me and Edna were working good together. We were like a team. Since then, we have our good times, but things have been hard.” He took another sip of his drink, and I sat there staring at him. When Stephen died, I was definitely lost, but I can’t imagine what it must feel like to have your child go before you.

“How old was he?”

“Six,” he said. Well at that point, I just really don’t know what came over me. Isaac was the same age as Nadine when he died, and I started getting these horrible pictures in my head of me standing in front of a tiny casket. For a moment, I felt like I understood his pain. Well, I was so overwhelmed, I put my arms around Milton, turned his head towards me, and kissed him on the lips. His mustache was soft, and for a minute he was kissing me back before he pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, and he held his left hand up to me and pointed at his wedding ring. “I can tell y’all ain’t happy.”

“For better or for worse,” he said. “In sickness or in health. I am a man of my word.” He pulled out his wallet and laid a twenty dollar bill down on the bar. He didn’t say goodbye or anything, and I was just left there by myself until other customers started coming in. As the night progressed, I started feeling real guilty. If I had heard that some other woman kissed Stephen, I would have carried their head on a stick through the streets of Lincoln, Mississippi for a month just to show everyone what would happen if someone else tried it.

I began to think more about Edna than I did Milton. She didn’t deserve a man that good. It didn’t seem right to me that a woman that cold got to keep such a warm and caring man. She was holding him back, and I knew that I would make a much better first lady of Victory Baptist Church. A couple of times, I tried to call Milton at Victory, but his secretary told me he wasn’t in. When I was going to McCoy’s or The Beaver’s Tail, I would take a longer route to work, so that I would pass the church, but Milton’s car was never there. There wasn’t no one I could ask about Milton, but I started to get the

impression that he was doing more of his work from home. I got frustrated and angry. Ever since Stephen died, men threw themselves at me, and now that I found one I actually wanted, I couldn't have him.

One Monday afternoon in May 1996, I drove around the Humphreys's Heights neighborhood in Lincoln where most of the black folks lived. The kids were at school, and I didn't have to be at work at The Beaver's Tail, so it seemed like a good day to do it. I wasn't too terribly familiar with that part of town, but I ended up finding a street called Mockingbird Cove, and there was Milton's car in the driveway. I'd fixed myself up real nice that day, wearing a short pair of shorts and a low cut shirt. I was intent on showing everything. I got out of the car and knocked on the door, waiting for someone to answer. It took a while, but eventually the door opened and I was standing face to face with Edna.

She looked me up and down, and I could tell she disapproved of my clothes. I wondered if Milton told her about that afternoon in The Beaver's Tail, but even if he hadn't, I felt like she knew something. There was this hatred in her eyes as she looked at me. We stared at one another for a moment, and I could smell her sour breath.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"I'm a friend of Milton's," I said. "I ain't seen him in a while, and I was just wondering how he was doing."

"I know who you are," Edna said, and she sounded like she was trying to keep her voice calm, but it shook a little with anger. "Why are you at my home, dressed like that, coming to see my husband?" Her voice sounded strong, and the woman who I saw that

looked so frail in the front row of Victory Baptist Church suddenly disappeared. This was a woman willing to fight for her man.

“This is how I dress for work,” I said, and I was trying to sound calm. It wasn’t until seeing Edna that I suddenly began to truly understand I was wrong. “Nothing’s going on with me and your husband.”

“I trust him,” she said. “You on the other hand, I ain’t so sure about.” We stood on the front porch for a moment staring at one another. It became obvious to me that she was not going to close the door and walk away. She wanted to see what I was willing to do, and if it came to blows, she was prepared to deliver. If Nadine and William weren’t in the picture, I might have fought Edna, but instead I walked off her front porch and went back to my car. Edna followed me off the porch and stood in her front yard waiting for me to drive away. I could see her still watching my car as I pulled out of Mockingbird Cove. I doubt she went back into the house until she was sure I was far away.

When I went back to work at The Beaver’s Tail the following Wednesday, there was an envelope sitting behind the bar waiting for me. Inside there was a note that said, “Please leave us alone. I’m sorry.” I knew the note had come from Milton, and I was crushed.

* * *

In about the middle of July 1996, I noticed an article in the paper that said Victory Baptist was looking for a new pastor. It turned out that Edna’s daddy was a Baptist preacher in Selma, Alabama, and he had gotten real sick. Milton and Edna left Lincoln

for a church in Birmingham, just so they could be a little closer to him. It was a couple of weeks after the Kinds packed up and left Lincoln that Lou Osbourne returned to The Beaver's Tail to reclaim his old booth. Milton had hired Lou to work in the church, and one of the first things the interim pastor for Victory did was fire him. Mark and Timmy also found their way back to Harmony once Victory fired their daddy.

For years, I would lay awake at night and wonder about Milton. What did Edna know? Was I the reason the Kinds packed up and left town? I carried a huge amount of guilt for it, but mainly because of Lou. If you looked at Lou Osbourne during the time that Milton was in town, he was a changed man. I ran Milton Kind out of town and cost Lou Osbourne his job. It's easy to go back to old habits, but I just couldn't help but wonder how different things would have been for the Osbournes had Milton stayed in town.

* * *

When William took over as pastor of Harmony Baptist Church in 2005, Nadine and I were living in Memphis. We went down to Lincoln to stay with him and his wife, so we could be there to support him during his first sermon. I'd been gone from Lincoln for four years and while the town looked the same, the people seemed to change.

All the young folks I knew were grown ups now, and some of them had even left town. Mark Osbourne had moved off to Oxford, and Tim sat in the back row by himself. I tried to call him Timmy, but he didn't like that very much.

"It's Tim now, Mrs. Moore," he said. He and Nadine were getting close to graduating high school, and they had a lot of fun getting caught up with one another. I sat

down in the same pew where I used to sit with Nadine and my momma. Nadine and Tim sat next to me. As I scanned the church, I noticed a black couple sitting in the second row. Apparently, Milton and Reverend Thomas remained friends despite their little fight at The Beaver's Tail, and Reverend Thomas told him that William was going to be taking over. I noticed a little boy sitting in between him and Edna. I heard someone say that the boy's name was Joshua. His momma was Edna's niece who had gotten messed up with drugs. Milton and Edna decided to adopt the child and raise him. I wondered why they had come, and I tried to bury my face in a hymnbook so that they wouldn't notice me. I stood up to sneak off to the women's room, and that's when Edna saw me. She came up behind me and grabbed me tight. At first I was scared, until I realized she was just hugging me. I was forty-two then, and Edna must have been in her late fifties. The strength of her embrace made me happy that we had not gotten into a fistfight all those years ago.

"You must be so proud of your boy," she said to me, and I was. Never would I have bet that William would become a pastor. She was just so overwhelmingly happy, and she was nothing like the woman that I remembered. Milton looked happy too and something about that really hurt me. He had shaved his mustache and his hair was starting to gray, but he was still handsome.

"You still have whiskey from time to time?" I asked.

"No ma'am," he said. "The Lord sent me a message to quit drinking, and I read it loud and clear." I knew what he was talking about, and I suppose it should have hurt my

feelings, but it didn't. It was nice to see him happy and getting to be a father for more than his congregation, but my jealousy surfaced.

William did his sermon on Saul's conversion into Paul on the Road to Damascus. Milton and Edna shouted and hollered "Amen" and "Praise Jesus" during the sermon like they were at one of their own churches. William smiled while they did it, and I could tell he liked it. William's wife, Anna Lee, was sitting on the front row, and she was proud of the reaction her husband was getting from the Kinds. My Bible was on my lap, and I just looked down at it, trying not to pay too much attention to Edna and Milton.

When the service was over, I heard Milton ask Tim about Lou. Since I had left Lincoln, I hadn't heard too much about him, but Tim shook his head and looked at the floor. Lou's hard living caught up with him. His kidneys weren't so good because of his drinking. Milton put his arms around Tim. They both got down on their knees, and Milton led Tim in a quiet prayer. I couldn't hear what Milton was saying, but tears were just pouring down Tim's face.

"Will you come see him?" I heard Tim ask. Milton was the only pastor Lou ever really had, so he agreed. I wanted to go with them. In all the years that I served Lou, I felt like his health was my fault as well. I wasn't invited to come along and thought it would be rude to ask. Edna and Joshua left in a car together, and Milton got into Lou's old beat up pick up truck with Tim. Anna Lee grabbed me and Nadine by the arm and guided us out of the building.

"I'm afraid that chicken I put in the crock pot is going to overcook if we don't get moving," she said. I just stood there for a moment and watched as Milton and Tim

headed to the Osbourne home, and my heart ached. I hoped that Lou would be excited to see Milton, and I really hoped that he didn't feel betrayed by Milton leaving town. In a way, I kind of felt like me, Milton, and Lou all saved one another for just a little bit. Milton made me want to be a better person, and he did the same for Lou, but there's a part of me that truly believes we did the same thing for him.

War

“Man is not what he thinks he is. He is what he hides.” -André Malraux

The air conditioner in the Oxford motel room was too cold, and Tim’s snoring was too loud. Nadine put her clothes back on and threw the spare blanket in the room over her body for warmth, but nothing, not even wrapping a pillow around her head, could drown out the noise from Tim’s snores. She sat up in bed and watched him sleep. The last time she saw Tim was during the previous summer 2007, when she went back home to Lincoln, Mississippi to visit her brother. Nadine lived in Memphis with her mother, while Tim had stayed in their hometown.

Nadine had always been close to Tim, and they still talked on the phone and e-mailed one another frequently. She even saw recent pictures of him, and they did not do justice for how good he was now looking in real life. When she saw him the previous summer, Tim was beginning to shed his baby fat, but now he was slim and muscular and looked like the sort of man that didn’t normally pay Nadine much attention. It felt good to be in the same room as him again. She reached into her purse and grabbed a cigarette. They were in a no smoking room, but Nadine figured no one would know. She grabbed one of the cups for water and used it as an ashtray. Her phone went off, and she reached into her purse to see who was texting her. It was Clark.

“I love you. Hope you are having fun back home,” the text read. She told Clark that she was going to Lincoln to see her brother and his wife. The noise from her phone woke Tim from his slumber, and he sat up, rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock.

“Who’s texting you at one in the morning?” he asked.

“My friend Hannah back in Memphis got into it with her boyfriend again,” she said, throwing the phone back in her purse so that Tim wouldn’t see the text. She tried to sound as if she were annoyed and truthfully, she was a little annoyed that Clark was texting her.

She wanted Tim to wake up and talk to her. In three days, he would leave for boot camp at Fort Benning. Nadine’s father died during Desert Storm, and she knew that once Tim was done with boot camp, he would probably end up in Afghanistan or Iraq. She didn’t want Tim to end up like her father. Whenever she tried to address the issue, Tim would shush her and try to change the subject. Once, she tried to talk him out of it in an e-mail.

“It’s already a done deal,” he wrote back to her.

She moved closer to Tim and rubbed her hands on his bare back. He scooted his body closer to her, and she moved her hands to his stomach and then began to move them lower, grabbing him. He moved her hands away.

“I’m trying to sleep, baby,” he said.

* * *

It was early August, and soon Nadine would be starting college. Her mother moved her to Memphis when she was eleven, and while Nadine liked her new city much better than she had living in Lincoln, she really wanted to go west for school. She was thinking Colorado or Texas. Her mother was heartbroken when Nadine told her these plans, so she decided to attend the University of Memphis instead. Nadine met Clark at

her high school graduation party. Hannah's parents threw the party, and Clark was a friend of Hannah's older brother, Scott.

Clark had just graduated from art school in Savannah and was working at a coffee shop in Memphis called Otherlands. He got a job teaching art to middle school students for the fall. When Nadine met Clark, she really didn't care much for him. He carried himself just like every other art school student that she met. His hair was long and down to his back except for the sides, which he shaved to the skin. He dyed his hair black with a streak of purple down the middle of his head. His lips and nose were pierced, and his skin was pale, greasy, and covered in acne. He regularly skipped on showers, and he often wore t-shirts for bands that Nadine had never heard. Clark was loud and always demanded to be the center of attention. Nadine wondered what middle school principal he had tricked into hiring him.

In the car, he would play her music and tell her the whole history of the band, while she just looked out the window, wishing he would pull the car over and let her out. Clark had two redeeming qualities. The first was that he was twenty-one, so he could buy alcohol for her.

After a couple of drinks, Nadine did not mind the way Clark's hands felt as they stroked her hair, or how his lips felt as he kissed the back of her neck. She still knew that she could never love him, not even in drunkenness. All she really wanted was company, and she would submit to Clark to have that company. Men rarely seemed to notice Nadine. Clark's other redeeming quality was that he was a vegetarian, like her. They would get tofu at the lunch buffet at India Palace on Poplar, and then sneak off to

Murphy's where Clark knew one of the bartenders who would serve Nadine underage. She liked being taken out in public, and she liked the way that Clark doted over her when he was around other people. She knew that she would break his heart one day.

* * *

"I'm hungry," Nadine said to Tim, who was still sleeping. Tim sat up and looked at the clock. It was now three in the morning.

"Ain't nothing open right now, baby," he said. "I can go look in the vending machine. They might have some Pop Tarts or something."

"I want something hot," Nadine said. "Maybe Indian food?"

"I doubt you can get Indian food at three in the morning in Memphis," Tim said. "So I don't know where you think we're gonna find it in Oxford." Nadine sighed and lit another cigarette.

"Should I go, Tim?" Nadine asked. "Do you want me here?"

"I want you here," Tim said. "But I also want to sleep." He turned around and playfully patted the spot on the bed next to him. She put out her cigarette in the cup that was filled with butts and cuddled up to him. He draped his arm over her and went back to sleep, while she stared at the wall in the motel room. As Tim began to snore again, Nadine grabbed his arm and pulled it under her nose. He smelt like soap. Tim wasn't the type to wear cologne, but Nadine was just relieved that he bathed.

Nadine fell asleep but was woken up by Tim in the shower at seven in the morning. She got out of bed and put on a pot of coffee. While she waited for the coffee to brew, she heard Tim's phone ringing. He set it on the dresser, and she began to wonder

if Tim had a girl back in Lincoln the same way that she had a man back in Memphis. She peeked over at the phone. The caller identification said “Peter.” Nadine was relieved to see that it wasn’t another woman. She poured a cup of coffee and lit another cigarette. Tim was whistling when he got out of the shower. He was still naked when he came out of the bathroom, and he seemed surprised to see Nadine awake.

“I didn’t think you’d be up yet,” he said. “Still hungry?”

She nodded her head and sipped on her coffee. He walked over and poured a cup for himself as well. He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek as she inhaled deeply. He smelt nice.

“I don’t think we can find you Indian food this early,” he said. “But I noticed an IHOP on Jackson. We can get you some pancakes and some sausage.”

“I don’t eat meat, Tim,” she said. “Remember?” Tim smiled at her, and she was amazed at how handsome a man he had become. When the sides of Clark’s hair grew in, he cut the rest of it, so that he would have a more conservative look for teaching, but she still felt that he was unattractive.

“I’m sorry, Nadine. I forgot,” Tim said. “You can have some pancakes or hash browns. Whatever you want. I’m buying.”

“That’s fine,” Nadine said. “Someone called for you while you were in the shower. Your phone said it was Peter.” Tim had gone back into the bathroom and was brushing his teeth. He was silent when Nadine said Peter’s name. He spit out the toothpaste in his mouth and turned around to look at Nadine.

“Did you answer it?” he asked.

“No,” Nadine said. “I didn’t think it would be right for me to answer your phone.” Tim nodded and resumed brushing his teeth. He walked back into the bedroom and sat on the bed while grabbing his cup of coffee and taking a sip.

“How can you drink that after you just brushed your teeth?”

“How can you smoke as many cigarettes as you do?” Tim asked. “You must have smoked at least a whole pack judging from that cup over there.” He pointed at the cup she was using as an ashtray. Nadine got up and put out the cigarette that she was smoking in the cup before running towards the door of the motel room. Tim jumped up to stop her.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I don’t know why,” she said, “but I just don’t think you want me here.”

“Of course I want you here,” he said, while kissing the back of her neck. It felt good and it calmed Nadine down.

“Was I okay last night?” Nadine asked. “You didn’t seem that into it.”

“You were perfect,” he said, before turning her head towards him and kissing her on the lips. “Last night was perfect.” She turned around to fully embrace him, and he began to walk her back towards the bed. They made love one more time before going to breakfast.

* * *

They took separate cars to the IHOP. Nadine followed Tim who was driving a tiny red Toyota Corolla that he borrowed from his older brother Mark. She wondered if he told Mark why he needed to borrow the car. She pictured Tim’s older brother laughing

and slapping him on the back, and she started to feel a little disgusted by herself. Once breakfast was over, before she even made it back to Memphis, she knew that she would call Clark and end things with him.

Nadine and Tim were mostly silent at breakfast. Tim was busy on his phone, text messaging someone and not really paying attention to her. She just sipped on her cup of coffee, before finally putting her hand over his phone.

“Hey,” she said. “I’m still here.” Tim looked embarrassed and put his phone into his pocket.

“Is she prettier than me?” Nadine asked.

“I wasn’t texting another woman, Nadine,” Tim said, and he looked offended.

“Who were you texting then?” she asked. “Peter?”

“As a matter of fact, I was texting Peter,” he said. He held up his phone, and she saw a text to Peter that read, “I’ll be back before noon.”

“I’m sorry,” Nadine said. “Something just don’t feel right.” Tim took Nadine’s hands into his and smiled at her. Nadine started to feel that smiling was what Tim did to calm her down when she was upset or not feeling right about something. She was embarrassed to admit that it worked. Tim was handsome enough to pull it off, unlike Clark. The waitress came with their food. Nadine ordered hash browns, but Tim had ordered an omelette with bacon, sausage, hash browns, and pancakes.

“Is that going to be enough for you?” Tim asked Nadine as he began to chew on a piece of bacon. Nadine just poked at her hash browns with her fork. She suddenly wasn’t feeling very hungry, but she wasn’t sure why.

“You know the pig has some of the closest DNA to humans,” Nadine said. “We even use some of their organs for transplants. They think that in evolution, a pig might have been in our family at some point.”

“You telling me I’m eating my cousin?” Tim said, and he laughed at this, which angered Nadine.

“What’s so funny about that?” Nadine asked.

“Well for one,” Tim said, “the pastor of my church’s little sister is talking to me about evolution.” He began to laugh louder, and Nadine picked up some of the hash browns with her fork and flicked them at Tim.

“Is it funny that you were fucking the pastor of your church’s little sister last night?” she asked him. Tim stopped laughing and brushed the hash browns off of his pants.

“I’m sorry, Nadine,” he said. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just being silly.” Nadine started to eat her hash browns but didn’t look up at Tim.

“So who is Peter anyways?” she asked. “Is it Peter Franklin who we went to school with?”

“No,” Tim said. “It’s a different Peter. You don’t know him.”

“So new people are moving to Lincoln?” Nadine asked.

“A few,” Tim said. “Hope Tansey even moved back.”

“I heard,” Nadine said. “My brother told me.”

* * *

They stood in the parking lot and stared at each other. As she looked up and down at Tim, the only thing that she recognized were his hazel eyes. He was a different man than she remembered.

“It’s Friday,” she said. “You don’t go to boot camp until Monday. Why can’t we spend another day together.” Tim shook his head.

“I have to get back to Lincoln,” he said. “Mark doesn’t live there anymore, and I reckon he wants his car back.”

“Well can’t I come to Lincoln with you?” she asked. “I could have met you there to begin with. I could’ve seen William and Anna Lee. I wouldn’t have had to lie about where I was going.”

“I didn’t know you were lying about where you went,” Tim said. “You couldn’t have told your momma you were coming to see me?”

Nadine shook her head and started to walk to her car.

“You can’t give me a hug goodbye or anything?” Tim said. Nadine turned around and let Tim hug her. She squeezed him back, but she knew that something about the embrace did not feel genuine. He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. “I’m going to come back. Don’t worry about me,” he whispered in her ear. Nadine shook her head again, and she felt further annoyed that most of her communication with her old friend seemed to resort to head nods.

* * *

Nadine was on Interstate 78 headed back to Memphis when she heard her phone ring. Without even looking at her phone, she knew it was Clark. She remembered what

she had thought about on her way to breakfast with Tim, but she started to lose her nerve. When she got back to Memphis, she knew she would head to her mother's house and not to Clark's apartment. She reached into her purse and answered her phone.

"Where are you?"

"I'm on way back home," she said. "Calm down."

"Where have you been?" he asked. She hated the accusatory tone in his voice.

"I told you," she said. "I went to Lincoln to visit my brother." She heard Clark audibly sigh into the phone, and she knew at that point that he knew something.

"Your mother called me trying to find you," he said. "She said you weren't answering your phone. I told her that you went to Lincoln to visit William. When she called him, he said you weren't there." Nadine had not noticed any missed calls from her mother and began to wonder what Clark actually knew.

"Well, call her back and tell her I'm okay," Nadine said.

"Where have you been?" Clark asked again.

"I went to Oxford to visit my friend Angie," Nadine said. She didn't have a friend named Angie, but it was what she could come up with on the spot.

"So you didn't go see William?"

"I'm on my way to see him now," Nadine responded.

"So you aren't coming home today?" Clark asked, and he seemed disappointed.

"Nope," she said. "I'll be back Monday." She hung up the phone and got off on the exit for Holly Springs, so she could turn around and head instead to Lincoln.

* * *

When Nadine arrived at her brother's house, Anna Lee, her sister-in-law, was on her knees in the flower bed that lined the home, pulling up weeds. She stood up when she saw Nadine's car pull into the driveway, removed her gardening gloves, and knocked the dirt off of her shirt. Nadine and William grew up in the house that he now occupied with his wife. The home belonged to their grandmother, and once Nadine and William's father died, they moved into the house with their mother. The flower bed looked as it had when Nadine's grandmother was living. There were pink azaleas still in bloom, a couple of rose bushes, but what Nadine most liked was the magnolias. Her grandmother always planted magnolias in her garden because it was the Mississippi state flower, and it touched Nadine that Anna Lee was continuing that tradition.

Anna Lee was six months pregnant, and while there was a tiny bump on her stomach, Nadine was amazed at how little the rest of her sister-in-law's body was. Nadine got out of her car and Anna Lee ran towards her, throwing her arms around her.

"William is going to be so excited to see you!" Anna Lee said. She smelled like sweat and dirt, but Nadine didn't mind. Something about Anna Lee's smell seemed more genuine than Clark's. Anna Lee smelled of work, while Clark's smell came from laziness. Nadine watched as a mosquito landed on Anna Lee's arm. Her sister-in-law swatted the bug, and a little drop of blood remained.

"Get inside and fix you something to drink," Anna Lee said. "I have Coke and tea in the refrigerator. I'm gonna get cleaned up and come sit with you." Walking inside William's house was always strange to Nadine. When Nadine and her mother moved out, they took all of the furniture and appliances except for the stove and oven which William

and Anna Lee were still using. When William bought the house from his mother and uncle, their mother did give him their grandmother's old rocking chair that had sat in that living room since before their mother was even born. She felt that since the house was staying in the family, the rocking chair would be better suited there. William had placed it exactly where their grandmother left it, next to the window in the living room that looked out on Tudor Road. Their grandmother would sit in the rocking chair, knitting quilts, while looking out the window to watch the children on the street play.

Nadine still had one of her grandmother's quilts. It was a pieced quilt that she made from fabrics that she bought at Hancock's in Tupelo. She took Nadine with her that day to pick the fabrics out. Despite the fact that there was a new coffee table, couch, and recliner, it seemed that William had placed his new furniture exactly where he remembered the old furniture sitting. Nadine walked around the house and peeked into her old bedroom. Nadine and William were expecting a boy. They were going to name him Elijah. She looked in her old room and saw that the walls were painted baby blue, and there was a crib in the corner next to the window. She liked the idea that her nephew would be growing up in the same bedroom she grew up in. As she walked around the room, touching the walls of her old bedroom, Anna Lee entered.

"William has been working hard on that room," she said. "He's going to be such a good daddy."

"I'm glad that Eli is going to have a daddy around," Nadine said.

They went back into the living room, and Anna Lee fixed herself a glass of iced tea, while Nadine had a glass of water.

“Everything feels different in here,” Nadine said.

“We wish you would come visit more,” Anna Lee said. “We really want Aunt Nadine to be a part of Eli’s life. My sister is gonna make a great aunt as well, but he needs to see all his family.”

Nadine yawned. She hadn’t really slept much in the motel room with Tim, and William had converted their mother’s old bedroom into a guest room. Anna Lee insisted that Nadine go upstairs and take a nap, and that she would wake her when dinner was ready. Nadine wasn’t sure how long she slept, but when she woke up William was standing over the bed looking at her. He was wearing a collared blue button down dress shirt and pair of black dress pants. His stomach was poking out from the shirt, and Nadine wondered if that was the sympathy weight she had heard about men putting on when their wives were pregnant. She noticed that William’s hairline was beginning to recede, but he still kept the hair he had left neatly trimmed.

“I called Momma and told her you were here,” he said. “You really should have called her yourself.”

“I know,” Nadine said, while stretching. “How are you?”

“Busy,” William said. He had dark circles under his eyes and stubble was growing on his face. While William had been pastor of Harmony Baptist for three years, Nadine wondered if he had really known what he was getting into. “Anna Lee wanted me to tell you dinner is ready.” He turned around and exited the room without saying anything else, and Nadine began to wonder if he was angry at her.

When she came out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, William's demeanor seemed different with his wife than it was when he was in the bedroom talking to her. He was all smiles, and he was rubbing his wife's stomach.

"I hope you're hungry," Anna Lee said. In the middle of the table was a pork roast with potatoes and carrots, covered in a mushroom gravy. There was corn on the cob, green beans, black eyed peas, a fruit cocktail with peaches, pineapples, and maraschino cherries. There was a ding in the kitchen, and Anna Lee came back with a baked potato and a basket with wheat rolls that looked like they were made from scratch.

"I know you don't eat meat," Anna Lee said, "So I seasoned the peas and green beans with onions instead of bacon. This potato is for you, because I didn't think you'd eat the ones that cooked with the roast."

They sat down for dinner, and Nadine enjoyed the food. Anna Lee even made chow chow for the peas. Anna Lee's cooking reminded Nadine of her grandmother, and she suddenly seemed to understand the meaning of comfort food. She had seconds of everything, which made William laugh.

"I think we see why she's so skinny," William said while holding Nadine's arm. "No one in Memphis is feeding her." Anna Lee smiled, and there was a look of satisfaction on her face as Nadine enjoyed the food that she prepared. After dinner, Nadine went on the front porch for a cigarette, and William joined her outside.

"It's been nine years since I've had one of those, and I still want one every time someone lights up," he said. Nadine extended her pack to him, but William shook his head. "Anna Lee would kill me. I just like the smell of it sometimes."

“Really?” Nadine said. “The smell was what I always hated.”

“Momma says you have a boyfriend back home,” William said. “Is he good to you.”

“He’s good to me, but I don’t care too much for him,” Nadine said.

“But he’s gonna be a teacher,” William said. “It’s a good job.”

“Doesn’t make him a good person though,” Nadine said. She finished her cigarette and put it out on the front porch. She watched as William leaned down and picked the butt up, and she felt guilty.

“You excited about school in the fall?” he asked.

“I suppose,” she said.

“Well, what are you taking?” Nadine was growing tired of William’s questions, but she understood why he was asking them. They hadn’t seen one another in a while.

“Just introductory stuff,” she said. “Psychology, anthropology, English, and yoga.” She felt strange telling William that she would be taking yoga.

“Yoga?” William asked. “Isn’t that a Hindu thing?”

“It’s stretching, William,” she said. “That’s all.” She could tell William wanted to say something else to her. He had something on his mind and that’s where all of his small talk was leading. She braced herself, hoping that he might get to it soon.

“Why are you here, Nadine?” he asked, and she could tell by the look on his face that he felt strange about asking her that. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad you’re here, and Anna Lee and I would love to have you around more. I’m just not sure what brought you today.”

Nadine knew that William hoped that it was some sort of spiritual crisis that brought her to her brother. She told him that she wasn't sure she still believed in God the previous Thanksgiving, but he seemed to ignore the comment. She knew he had been on the phone with their mother as well, and that she had lied about where she had been the previous evening.

"I went to Oxford to see Tim," she said. "I figured since I was close by, I'd come visit you and Anna Lee as well."

"You know I still talk to his brother, Mark?" William asked. "He said that Tim hasn't been in a good way. He's joining the Army."

"I know," Nadine said. "That's why I came to visit him."

"He's been spending a lot of time drinking at The Beaver's Tail," William said. "I'm not sure I like you hanging out with him."

"What's he doing at The Beaver's Tail?" Nadine asked. "He ain't twenty-one."

"The Beaver's Tail will serve just about everyone," William said. "It's not like when Momma worked there."

* * *

Anna Lee went to bed around eight. William told Nadine that since Anna Lee had gotten pregnant, she tended to fall asleep early and then wake up in the middle of the night. William stayed up reading until about ten. When Nadine finally saw the lights in the living room go out, she sneaked to the nursery. Whenever she wanted to sneak out of that house growing up, she would always open her bedroom window and jump out. Usually, she would sneak out of the house to meet Tim, and she felt a rush of excitement

that she had not experienced since childhood. She walked back around to the driveway and started her car, but she left the lights off until she pulled out of the driveway.

As she headed west down Tudor Road, in the direction of The Beaver's Tail, she thought that her bones might just jump out of her skin. There was something fun about getting to sneak out of the house she grew up in again. When she arrived at the bar, she saw the car that Tim borrowed from his brother in the parking lot. While it didn't necessarily mean that Tim was there, it seemed like a start. She parked her car and went inside. As she entered the bar, she felt like everyone inside stopped to look at her. Lawrence Hawk, who had been a grade above her in school, was working behind the bar.

"Oh no," Lawrence said. "You have to go. I don't even want to think about the shit storm that will brew if your brother finds out I let you drink here." Nadine kept walking into the bar, scanning the tables and booths for Tim. "I'm serious," Lawrence said. "Sheriff Fineman has been kind enough to turn a blind eye to me serving underage people, but if your brother gets his panties in a wad about this, I'm gonna get fined and be unemployed."

"It's okay, Lawrence," Nadine heard a voice say from one of the booths. She looked over and saw Tim. "She came here to meet me. We'll take care of her. There won't be any trouble." Lawrence didn't look pleased with Tim's intervention.

"Are you gonna find me another job, Tim?" Lawrence asked.

"You're not going to lose your job," Tim said. "She came to see me before I went to bootcamp. You ain't gonna send her away are you?" Lawrence seemed to think on

this for a second. Tim was dressed nice, Nadine thought. He was wearing a plaid western shirt and a pair of blue jeans that Nadine thought were flattering.

“She can stay, I guess,” Lawrence said. “But she can’t drink.”

“That’s fine,” Tim said, and he walked over and grabbed Nadine’s arm and led her to his booth.

“What are you doing here?” Tim asked. “I thought you were going back to Memphis.”

“I decided I wanted to go see my brother,” Nadine said.

“Does he know you’re at The Beaver’s Tail?”

“No,” Nadine said. “I waited for him and Anna Lee to go to bed, and I snuck out of my old bedroom window like I used to when we were kids.”

At the booth, she saw Tim’s older brother, Mark, and another man sitting at the table. She seated herself next to Mark, and Tim sat down across from her. The other man had short, red hair, and was dressed similar to Tim in a Western shirt and blue jeans. He smiled at Nadine when she sat down and extended his hand to her.

“I’m Peter,” he said. His hand was soft and he looked Nadine in the eye as he shook her hand. His eyes were the same shade of blue as the nursery at William’s house. “You must be Nadine,” he said. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Tim’s brother reached into his pocket, pulled out a flask, and handed it to Nadine.

“Sorry Lawrence is being such a hard ass,” Mark said. Nadine took the flask and looked around to make sure that Lawrence wasn’t watching her. She took a swig from the flask. It was whiskey, and it burnt as it went down her throat. Peter was sociable, but

he didn't really say that much. He just listened as Tim told him stories about his and Nadine's childhood. Peter tried to buy a round of drinks for the whole table, but Lawrence would only let him have three, to make sure that Nadine wasn't drinking. Mark continued to sneak Nadine his flask. At one in the morning, Peter looked at his watch.

"I have to get out of here," he said. "I have to be at work in the morning."

"What do you mean you have to be at work in the morning?" Tim said.

"Tomorrow's Saturday."

"What do you do?" Nadine asked.

"He took over MacArthur Pharmacy when Dr. MacArthur retired," Tim said, and Peter looked annoyed that Tim was answering for him.

"I did," Peter said. "And prescriptions don't stop coming in on the weekends."

Tim got up to let Peter out of the booth, and then he looked at Nadine.

"I'm going to follow him out to his car and make sure he's okay to drive," Tim said. Nadine got up and moved to the other side of the booth, so that she was sitting across from Mark. She felt something tapping against her leg, and when she looked down, she saw Mark's hand with the flask. She looked around to make sure Lawrence wasn't watching and took a swig.

"It's Maker's," Mark said. "I don't normally buy whiskey that good, but since it's Timmy's last hurrah, I figured I shouldn't skimp."

"He still lets you call him Timmy?" Nadine said. "I've known him as long as I can remember, and he jumps down my throat if I trip up." She felt something on her leg

again, but it didn't feel like the flask. When she looked down, Mark was rubbing his hand over it. Nadine jumped out of the booth.

"I'm sorry, Nadine," he said. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"It's okay, Mark," she said, but she said it in a way to let Mark know that it really wasn't. "I'm just going to step outside and get some fresh air." Nadine's face was turning red and as she moved towards the front door, she tripped over a chair from one of the tables.

"She ain't been drinking has she?" Lawrence yelled from behind the bar.

"Fuck you, Lawrence!" Nadine said, while giving him the middle finger.

Lawrence held up his hands to show he didn't want any trouble and went back to helping customers. Once she got into the parking lot, she started to cry. She wasn't crying so much because Mark made a move on her. She didn't like that, but as the only available girl at the table, she would have been surprised if someone didn't take a chance at her. What bothered her most was that when Mark touched her, she felt the same way she did when Clark touched her.

She wondered what Tim had told his brother. Was Mark under the impression that she was some sort of whore to be passed around? She was disgusted with Mark, Tim, and Clark. The first thing that Nadine felt she had to do was call Clark and end things. She couldn't go back to Memphis and be with him. She leaned up against her car to dig through her purse to find her phone, and that's when she saw Tim. He was in a car with Peter sitting in the passenger's seat, and they were kissing. Tim was running one of his hands through Peter's hair while gently cradling the back of his head with the other hand.

Their eyes were closed, and it seemed that both were unaware that anyone was watching them.

Nadine was angry and felt used by Tim. She wondered why he had wasted her time that morning in Oxford. She wanted to go over to Peter's car and pull Tim out to let him have it, but she was worried that someone other than her might see him and Peter. In Lincoln, the two of them could get hurt if anyone found out, and she didn't want that to happen. She turned around to go to her car, and that was when she saw William standing behind her.

"What are you doing here, Nadine?" he asked.

"I just came to see some friends," she said. "I was about to head back to your house." She grabbed William by the arm to turn him around. She didn't want William to see Tim and Peter, but it was too late.

"Are those men?" William asked.

"Let's just go," Nadine said.

"Who is that?" William asked.

"Don't worry about it, William," Nadine said. "It isn't our business." They heard a car door open, and Tim got out of the car. His hair was mussed.

"I was just about to get back inside, Nadine," Tim said, before realizing William was standing behind her. "Pastor Moore," Tim said. "Look, Nadine ain't been drinking or nothing. She just came by to see me is all. We've been taking care of her."

“Who was that in the car with you?” William asked. Realizing that they had been spotted, Tim mouthed, “I’m sorry” to Nadine and just shook his head. Nadine didn’t want his apologies. She couldn’t look him in the eyes.

“Just a friend of mine,” Tim said.

“Who?” William asked.

“It ain’t important to you, Reverend,” Tim said. Peter was driving off, and William squinted to try to see who was driving the car. Nadine hoped that William didn’t know the car or Peter, and she started to cry.

“It’s not our business, William,” she said. “Let’s just go.” Nadine knew that Tim’s heart belonged to Peter. She did not know what she had actually expected from Tim, but she was disappointed.

“I think it is our business, Nadine,” William said, and he looked like he was ready to punch Tim.

“You’re supposed to be a man of God,” Tim said. “Are you gonna hit me?” Patrons started to exit the bar as it was closing and noticing the way that William and Tim were staring at one another gathered around the two of them, eager for a fight.

“Aww, shit,” one man yelled from the back of the crowd. “It’s been forever since we’ve seen Reverend Moore fight. This oughta be good.”

“What happened?” Nadine heard one woman say.

“Judging by the way Reverend Moore looks, I’d wager that the Osbourne boy slept with his sister or something,” another person answered.

The crowd parted and Mark and Lawrence emerged down the middle. Nadine moved behind her brother when she saw Mark, but Lawrence looked annoyed.

“This is why I didn’t want her in here,” Lawrence said while pointing at Nadine.

“Look,” Mark said to William. “I don’t know what you heard, but I didn’t know what Tim was going to do with your sister when I let him borrow the car.” Nadine was hurt that Tim had told Mark about the night they had spent together. William looked first at Nadine and then at Tim.

“What is he talking about?” he asked Nadine. “So is Tim bisexual or something?”

When William said this, several of the people watching started to laugh. Tim was just looking at the ground.

“Please,” Mark said. “Ever since Timmy here got in shape, my Momma’s been chasing girls away from her house at every hour.”

“I’m sorry, Nadine,” Tim said again.

“What are you sorry about, Timmy?” Mark said. “Did you make her think she was the only one?” Nadine heard enough and turned around to walk to her car. She pushed her way through the crowd, and that was when she heard a pop and the collective gasp of those gathered around her. When she turned around to look, William was standing there, still holding up his fist, while Mark was on his knees covering his nose. Nadine could see blood dripping between his fingers.

“All right, Reverend,” Lawrence said, taking William by the arm. “I think it’s time you got out of here.”

“I ain’t going anywhere,” William said.

“I think you are too,” Lawrence said. “You’ve been popping in here some during the early afternoon, and I’d hate for the old ladies at Harmony Baptist to hear about it. They sure do like to talk.”

“You know I ain’t been drinking, Lawrence,” William said.

“Well, I’d have to check my receipts,” Lawrence said. “But some times the elderly can be just like children. Their imaginations just run away with them.” William raised his fist at Lawrence, but the bartender seemed unconcerned. “Do you really want your congregation to hear about you attacking two people at The Beaver’s Tail at one in the morning?” William put his hands down and started to walk back to his car. Nadine watched as her brother pulled out of the parking lot and headed back home.

“I want you gone too,” Lawrence said to Nadine. “None of this would have happened if you hadn’t come up here.” Two men helped Mark back to his feet, and Nadine could see blood on the pavement of the parking lot.

“I think he broke my nose,” Mark said. Nadine walked up to Tim and just looked at him.

“I really am sorry,” Tim said to Nadine.

“Do you love him?” Nadine asked.

“I don’t know,” Tim said. “I like him more than any girls I’ve met.” Nadine put her hand on Tim’s arm, and Tim leaned in to hug her. It was a hug of friendship, and while Nadine felt safe in Tim’s arms, she also felt disappointed. She took in his smell for a moment and felt jealous that she had shared Tim with Peter. She turned around and walked back to her car.

“How much did you have to drink?” Tim asked. “Do you need me to drop you off at William’s?”

“I ain’t going there,” she said. “I’m going back to Memphis. I’ll be okay. You better go find an emergency room for your brother.” A group of people were gathered around Mark, looking at his nose as if they were doctors. Nadine waved goodbye to Tim, and got into her car. “Please be careful,” she said to him. “I don’t want nothing to happen to you or Peter.” Tim nodded and smiled at Nadine.

As Nadine got into her car, she knew that she was going to break up with Clark. It was getting close to two in the morning, so she decided she would handle that the next day. She grabbed a cup of coffee from the Flying J on Highway 15. Before starting her way back to Memphis, she made a phone call in the parking lot.

“Momma,” she said. “I’ll be home tonight, so don’t be scared if you hear someone coming into the house early in the morning.”

The Redemption of Donald McCoy

“My sun sets to rise again.” - Robert Browning

Thursday, June 14, 2007. Every Thursday at six in the morning, Donald McCoy met with his father, Henry, in the office of McCoy’s Grocery. The grocery store had been in the McCoy family since 1920, after Donald’s great-grandfather, Sheffield McCoy, read about about Clarence Saunders’s self service stores in Memphis and decided to bring a similar place to Lincoln, Mississippi. Sheffield McCoy passed the store down to his son, Clayton McCoy, who in turn passed it on to Henry. Henry had run the store the longest, taking over in 1970, one year after Donald’s older brother, Junior, died in Vietnam.

Donald was only four when Junior passed away. Thirteen years separated Donald from his elder brother, and he only had vague memories of Junior sitting in his bedroom, listening to The Rolling Stones’s *Aftermath*, and smoking cigarettes. Donald inherited Junior’s records after he passed, and while Donald preferred country, he treasured these records and kept them, as if they might give him some insight into the mind of his eldest brother. McCoy’s Grocery should have gone to Junior, and Donald often wondered if his father might have already retired if Donald had not been born.

Donald was forty-two years old. Henry was seventy-eight and moved slower with each year that passed. Donald looked forward to the Thursday meetings with his father. The elder McCoy referred to them as their “brainstorming sessions.” The other employees of McCoy’s typically arrived around seven in the morning to open the store, so Donald had a whole hour to himself with his father. Usually, they only talked business for half of the hour, and the rest of the time, Henry and Donald just talked.

The two had not spent much time together during Donald's childhood. When the Jitney Jungle came to Lincoln in 1974, Donald was in the third grade. It was around the time of the competition's arrival that Henry suddenly had less time to spend with him. He was never able to accompany Donald on camping trips with the Boy Scouts or make most of his elementary and high school basketball and baseball games like he had with Junior. When Donald was younger, he resented his father for this. Henry only had one child left, and Donald wondered why his father never made time for him. As an adult, Donald understood.

When Donald arrived at McCoy's for the weekly meeting with his father on that humid summer morning, he noticed that Henry's Volvo was still parked in the same spot that it had been when Donald left the store the previous afternoon at four. Donald liked to get to the store fifteen minutes before his father, so he could put on a pot of coffee. Donald was shocked when he discovered the front doors to the grocery store were unlocked and even more surprised to find his father in the store, staring out the front window at the mostly vacant parking lot that held only their vehicles.

His father was still in the same clothes he wore the previous day. Donald might not have noticed, if Henry hadn't been wearing the blue tie that he gave him for Father's Day the previous Sunday. Henry McCoy's scalp was bald, but the gray hair that lined the sides of his head was mussed, and he looked as if he had not slept.

"Is everything okay, Dad?" Donald asked, locking the door to the grocery store behind him. His father just shook his head and started to walk towards the office. Donald remembered when his parents used to fight when he was a child, and he

wondered if his father had gotten into an argument with his mother. Normally, Dorothy McCoy would only send her husband to the couch when they got in a fight, but there were some evenings during Donald's childhood that Henry slept in the McCoy's Grocery office. Henry still kept an alarm clock there for that very reason.

As Henry opened the door to the office, the cool air from the air conditioner rushed out, giving Donald goosebumps on his arms. The office was always colder than the rest of the store, and Donald had to keep a cardigan with him, even during the summer. The office smelled of coffee, and Henry pointed at the coffee pot before sitting behind his desk. Donald fixed himself a cup and took a seat in the chair across from his father's desk. Normally, Henry printed out the previous week's sales reports, and they would be sitting on the desk when they started their meeting. Donald was shocked to see employee files on the desk instead. Almost sixty manilla folders were stacked, and Donald knew what was happening even without asking.

"I ain't always told you how scary running a business can be," his father said after clearing his throat. "I reckon that since I've made you a partner, you've figured it out some. There's still a whole lot I ain't told you though. I've always done my best to not have to let anyone go, and the ones I have let go have been easy. They just weren't doing their job. I didn't like firing Roscoe Jenkins, but his wife works for us now, and they don't seem to be too mad. I've just never had to fire someone because we couldn't afford to have them."

"Is there anything else we can do, Daddy?" Donald asked, but even as the question left his mouth, he knew the answer. His father had seemed so distant during the

last week and now the reason was beginning to make sense to Donald. He knew that his father would look into all possible options before letting an employee go. Henry shook his head, and he looked as if he was just told that someone close to him had died.

“Who’s it going to be?” Donald asked. He assumed they were letting one of the high school students go.

“We’re going to have let five people go,” Henry said. “Two morning cashiers, two evening cashiers, and Camel Webber from produce. We might have to let more go later. I wanted to talk to you about this before I did it, because I know you and Camel have gotten close.”

* * *

Donald McCoy and Camel Webber became friends when basketball season started the previous fall. Donald did not frequently take to bars, but he began going to The Beaver’s Tail so that he didn’t have to watch the games by himself. Donald was a fan of the New Orleans Hornets, and he had followed the team since they had been in Charlotte. He felt like the Hornets were a true southern team. Donald didn’t really see Texas or Florida as true southern states, and despite the fact the he had no problems with Georgia as a whole, he didn’t like Atlanta. He felt that Atlanta wanted to be a northern city. Memphis’s team had relocated from Canada, and while Charlotte did have the Bobcats now, Donald still felt a strong allegiance to the Hornets.

Camel Webber liked the Cleveland Cavaliers because of Allen Iverson. In college sports, Camel liked Georgetown, and he followed Iverson’s career there. When Iverson went to the NBA, the Cavaliers became his team. While Donald didn’t care that much

for the Cavaliers, he found himself going to The Beaver's Tail on the nights they played because he knew that Camel would be there. Donald didn't drink. He would usually have a Coke or glass of water, and maybe order something to eat. Camel, on the other hand, drank a lot. He would usually have a cheap beer like Pabst or Old Style, and by the end of the night, his tab was still close to thirty dollars. Camel never seemed terribly drunk. He earned the nickname Camel because people said he could hold his drinks really well.

Donald didn't feel comfortable with Camel hitting the road after drinking, so he would often stick around until Camel settled his tab, and then give him a ride home. Camel and his mother took care of his nephew, Evan. Evan's father, Joe Joe, was in prison in Memphis. It was drug charges, but Camel wasn't really sure what his brother had been messing around with. It was Camel who took Evan from Joe Joe after he heard that his brother was driving the young child to Holly Springs every morning to use him as a prop for panhandling. Joe Joe made Evan sit in the car, and he told people he was out of gas and needed to get back to Lincoln.

"I ain't ever met his momma," Camel said. "But Joe Joe tells me that boy is half Jew." Camel laughed after he said that. Donald admired Camel for taking care of his nephew, and that was one of the reasons that Donald made it a point to give Camel rides home from the bar. He wanted to make sure Camel lived another day to be there for the young child.

Camel was a good surrogate father to Evan. Though Camel rarely went to church, he helped coach Harmony Baptist's tee-ball team, and everyday when Evan was in

kindergarten, Camel dropped him off at school. If he hadn't had to work to keep the child fed, then he would have been the one who also picked Evan up from school. Evan spent most of his time with his grandmother, but when Camel got off of work, he went directly home to spend the afternoons with Evan, helping him with his homework and playing catch with him at Phillip's Park. He never went to The Beaver's Tail until Evan had gone to bed. Camel seemed to take to fatherhood naturally, and Donald could tell that Camel loved his nephew. Camel worked in construction, and when jobs got thin, it was Donald who got him on at McCoy's Grocery.

"I can almost promise you we don't pay as well as the work you have been doing," Donald said.

"I've always found a way to manage," Camel said. "I just need to keep money coming in."

* * *

"Can't we let someone else go?" Donald asked his father. "Camel's raising his nephew and helping his momma out. People depend on his paychecks."

"I'd be willing to bet that some of these high school kids are helping their parents out with bills as well," Henry said. "Times are hard right now, and we don't know everyone here's home life. Camel is the lowest man on the totem pole. He ain't even worked here a whole year. We pay him almost twelve dollars an hour. We can't afford it no more." His father got up from behind his desk and walked out of the office, leaving Donald alone. Donald got up from his chair and followed him.

"When are you gonna do it, Daddy?" Donald asked.

“Camel has today off, so I’m gonna let him go tomorrow,” Henry said. “We’re gonna let the cashiers go today. When the morning group gets here, I’m firing Joan Watson and Sandy Gaines. They both got families to support too. At night, I’m letting Chuck McKaye and Emma Parrish go.” After Henry said the employee’s names aloud, he stopped to catch his breath. It was as if talking about them made them real, and it seemed to hurt Henry.

“I would like to sit in my office alone for a minute,” Henry said. “Stick around to unlock the store when the morning group arrives. I’ve already put out all of their cash registers and counted the safe, so there is no reason for you to need to come in the office to open the store. Tell Joan and Sandy to come see me when they get here.”

Henry walked back to the office by himself and closed the door behind him, leaving Donald alone in the empty grocery store. Donald checked his watch, and it was still another fifteen minutes before the other employees were to arrive. He walked the empty aisles that he hoped would soon be bustling with customers and worried about what might happen when word got out that McCoy’s was letting people go. Would some stop shopping there because their friend or relative lost their job? Would they have to let more people go because of that? Despite the problems Donald may have had with his father, he knew he was a kind man. Every year at Thanksgiving, Henry had Donald order extra turkeys that he gave to his employees to cook for their meals. He knew that cost his father and the store a lot of money, but it seemed a necessary gesture of goodwill.

Donald mostly thought about Camel. He wasn’t sure how Camel would take the news of losing his job. Donald hoped that he would be able to maintain his friendship

with him, but he completely understood if that wasn't possible. Bertha King, who worked in the deli, was the first employee to arrive. Donald let her in, and then stood by the front door as the rest of the employees arrived. Sandy Gaines arrived before Joan Watson, and Donald stopped her before she walked over to her usual cash register. Sandy was a woman in her late sixties who had worked as a hairdresser in Tupelo before coming back to Lincoln to retire. She saved money during her younger days, but she needed the income that she got from McCoy's.

"Can you wait here for a moment with me, Sandy?" Donald asked, while grabbing her arm. Sandy reminded Donald a lot of his own mother. Both women were already gray, but dyed their hair in the same strawberry blonde color.

"Am I in trouble, Mr. McCoy?" Sandy asked.

Donald opened his mouth to respond, but he wasn't sure what to say. She was in trouble, but not because she did anything wrong. Sandy stood next to him at the front door, and she seemed nervous. Donald watched her for a moment before focusing his attention back to the front door. Most of the employees were now settled in. From the back of the store, Donald could hear the squeaky wheels from the produce carts as Elmore Ford began restocking the tomatoes and could hear the opening and closing of the cash drawers as the other three cashiers signed in. They noticed Donald standing up front with Sandy, and they looked at them confused. Donald looked at his watch and realized that Joan was running late. He wondered if she knew that she was going to get let go and chose not to come in. The cashiers, who were supposed to be tidying up the magazine

rack on their aisles and restocking the candy bars, stood in place, staring at Donald and Sandy.

Donald was about to send Sandy in the office by herself, when he noticed Joan's car pull into the parking lot. She ran from her car to the front door, putting her earrings in as she moved. When she saw Donald and Sandy waiting up front, she immediately started to apologize.

"I'm sorry, I was late," Joan said. "My sister got to my house late to watch my son."

"It's okay," Donald said, and he hated himself for it. He knew it wasn't okay, and that Joan was about to lose her job. "My father wants to see the two of you in his office." Both women looked at one another confused and made their way to Henry's office while the other cashiers watched them. Joan attempted to open the office door, but it was locked. She knocked on the door, and Henry opened it and let both women in. Donald noticed the other cashiers looking at one another, and he could tell that they wanted to talk but didn't want him to hear anything. Donald worked as a cashier for McCoy's when he was in high school, and while the employees since that time had changed, he missed feeling like he was one of them. Back then, no one cared that Donald's father owned the store. They liked him, because he was just as likely to complain about Henry as they were. Normally, Donald felt like his employees liked him as a boss, but in this moment, the differences in their positions were evident. Donald stood next to the door of his father's office and put his hands into his head. At that moment, he was certain the other cashiers knew what was happening.

* * *

Joan and Sandy were in Henry's office for close to an hour. Customers began to arrive in the store when Henry's door finally opened. Joan came out first, and her mascara was running down her face. Sandy came out shortly after her, and while it seemed that she took the loss of her job better than Joan, Donald could tell that she was angry. He waited by the office door for Henry. Fifteen minutes after Joan and Sandy left, Henry came out of the office, locking the door behind him.

"Can you follow me to my car?" he asked Donald. Henry began talking as Donald started following him. "I'm going to go home for a little while and try to get a nap," he said. "I'll be back at 2:00 to talk to Chuck and Emma. I've already done all the orders for today. All I want for you to do is take the deposit to the bank and just be around the store until I get back. If I have to be the bad guy to everyone, then maybe you can be the good guy. They might not like working for Henry McCoy, but if Donald McCoy is still there, then they'll be okay. You understand?"

"Daddy," Donald said. "I think I should be the one to fire Camel." His father looked at him confused.

"Did I not just say that one of us needs to be the good guy?" his father said.

"He might take it easier from me since we're friends," Donald said.

"You're supposed to be off of work tomorrow," his father said.

"I'll make a special trip up here. If I'm gonna take this place over one day, then this is the sort of thing I need to learn how to do anyways." His father thought about it for a moment, and then nodded his head.

“All right,” he said. “But if you ain’t here tomorrow when Camel shows up, I’m gonna do it.”

* * *

Donald spent most of his day at work hiding in the office. Whenever he left to walk around the store, he noticed the employees huddled together, whispering to one another. When they noticed Donald, they would stop their discussion and stare at him. It didn’t matter to them which McCoy did the firings. Donald bore that now cursed last name. He was an enemy to those he employed. When he saw customers with children in the store, he thought only of Evan.

Donald never had children, but he was married once. Her name was Rachel Johnson, and she was Donald’s high school sweetheart. Donald and Rachel got married when they turned nineteen. Rachel wanted to leave Lincoln for a bigger city. She had dreams of going north, but Donald wanted to stay in Lincoln, so that he could inherit the family business when his father finally decided to retire. When Rachel left Donald, it was for a man who lived in Biloxi. Donald wasn’t sure how Rachel met this man, and he honestly didn’t want to know. All those evenings when she claimed she was at her mother’s house, she was somehow meeting him. His name was Homer Griffith, and after Donald and Rachel’s divorce was finalized, she never married Homer, but the two of them were still together. Rachel still used Donald’s last name, and Rachel and Homer had two boys, whose last names were also McCoy.

Donald dated some, but nothing seemed to work out for him. When Helen Moore worked for McCoy’s Grocery, he had an unrequited crush on her. He thought she might

be the closest person to understanding him. Her husband had died in Desert Storm, and Donald absolutely adored Helen's children, William and Nadine. Donald hoped that since he lost his spouse and lost his brother to war, that they might feel they had a lot in common. He asked her out, and they went on several dates. Helen couldn't fall in love with him.

Donald always wanted children. On Saturday mornings, he would wake up and watch cartoons, not because he enjoyed their story lines, but because he always imagined that at his age, he would have children watching them with him. Camel once told Donald that he never wanted the responsibility of a child, but knowing that Evan was of his blood, he felt the need to take care of him.

It was two days since Donald had seen Camel. They met at The Beaver's Tail to watch game three of the NBA Championships. Camel was excited because the Cavaliers made it to the end and were facing San Antonio. While San Antonio won the first three games, Camel was optimistic because the Cavalier only lost by three points in game three. Camel and Donald placed a friendly bet on the NBA Championship's outcome. They only wagered twenty dollars, but even before Donald knew that Camel was losing his job, he already decided that he wouldn't take Camel's money. Donald and Camel were supposed to meet that evening at The Beaver's Tail to watch game four together. If the Cavaliers lost, then it was over.

As Donald walked the aisles of McCoy's Grocery, he felt his phone vibrating in his pocket. It was Camel calling him, probably to confirm that they were still watching the game together. Donald worried that Camel had bumped into Sandy or Joan. What if

Donald asked him about the recent firings? How would he respond? Donald looked at his phone for a moment, before silencing the ringer and putting it back in his pocket. When Henry returned at 1:30 to fire the two evening cashiers, Donald went home. He couldn't watch it a second time.

* * *

Donald didn't meet Camel at The Beaver's Tail that evening for the Cavaliers and Spurs game, nor did he bother to call Camel to tell him that he wouldn't be meeting him. Camel tried to call him a couple more times, but Donald didn't answer and watched the game by himself at home. When the game was over, Donald felt guilty so he got in his car and decided to see if Camel was still at the bar. Donald bought a black Mercedes-Benz when his father made him a partner at McCoy's Grocery, and he now felt guilty for his flashy car. When he walked through the doors, he saw Camel sitting by himself, drinking a beer.

"Where've you been, Donald," Camel said to him. "I've been trying to call you." Despite the fact that his team lost, Camel seemed to be in good spirits. Donald sat down next to him, and Lawrence, the bartender, came over and sat a glass of water down.

"Can I have one of whatever Camel is drinking too?" Donald asked.

"You're ordering a beer?" Camel said. "Wow! You must be having a rough day. I heard your daddy was firing people." Donald didn't say anything back. Lawrence set the beer down in front of Donald and walked away. He took a sip and nearly coughed it back up. It tasted like water and sour hops. "I'm having a Pabst," Camel said. "I think you

might be a man with more expensive tastes. You might prefer a Guinness or something. Let me get you one on me.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Donald said. “This beer will be fine.”

“Are you sure?” Camel asked, while grabbing his wallet and pulling out a twenty dollar bill. “Let me give you this at least. I owe that to you since the Spurs won.”

“Keep your money,” Donald said. “Buy Evan a toy with it or something.” Camel seemed confused, but he didn’t argue with Donald about keeping the money and quickly slid the bill into his blue jeans pocket.

“So how’d you hear about Daddy firing people?” Donald asked.

“I saw Sandy Gaines at MacArthur Pharmacy,” Camel said. “She told me she and Joan got let go. She said Joan was crying, but she was just angry. I hope there ain’t no reason your daddy has to cross her anytime soon.” Camel laughed, and Donald took another sip of his beer. “Is he letting anyone else go?”

“He fired Chuck and Emma this afternoon as well,” Donald said.

“Is he just getting rid of cashiers?” Camel asked.

“No.”

“Well, who else?” Donald didn’t say anything, but the look on his face gave him away. “I’m losing my job, ain’t I?”

“I’m so sorry, Camel,” Donald said, and he thought he might burst into tears at any moment. “I tried, man. I really did.”

“Don’t you say another word to me you son of a bitch,” Camel said.

“How much have you had to drink, Camel?” Donald asked. “Do I need to give you a ride home?”

“I’ll manage just fine.” Camel looked like he was ready to get into a fight. His chest was puffed up, and he stared at Donald before laying two twenties down on the bar and walking out. Lawrence came over and picked up the money.

“That asshole stiffed me seven dollars,” Lawrence said, holding the two twenties in his hand.

“I’ll cover it,” Donald said. “Get me another beer.” Donald finished his second beer and ordered one more before settling his tab and the rest of Camel’s. While none of the other patrons in the bar were talking to him, it still felt good to be around people. Helen Moore worked nights in The Beaver’s Tail for several years, and there was a photograph of her behind the bar. He stared at it, wishing that Helen were still in Lincoln. Her son, William, was now the pastor of Harmony Baptist Church. Last he heard, Helen was living in Memphis, and he wondered if she settled down and found a man. Donald left Lawrence an additional twenty dollars for a tip. Donald always tipped well, but he wasn’t normally that generous. He wasn’t sure if anyone overheard his conversation with Camel, and he felt the need to be a good guy again. It was almost midnight when Donald left The Beaver’s Tail. He tried to call his father, but both of his parents were already sleeping, so he waited for the answering machine.

“I did it, Daddy,” he said. “I told Camel. I’ll see you Saturday morning.”

* * *

Friday, June 15, 2007. Donald was off work the next day, and he did not leave his house. Donald lived in the Walnut Bend neighborhood that was four miles east of Main Street, where McCoy's Grocery was. Walnut Bend was where Lincoln's wealthier citizens lived, though Lincoln's standards of wealthy were middle class in bigger cities. Donald almost wished that he was scheduled to work. If he were working, he would have something to take his mind off of Camel. He worried about his friend. His father called to check on him, but Donald did not answer. Though he was aware that he volunteered to fire Camel, he was now feeling resentment towards the elder McCoy for putting him in that spot.

Donald went to bed early, and when he woke up the next morning, he felt better. Sleep gave him perspective, and he felt optimistic that he and Camel would be friends again at some point. He put on a pot of coffee and went to his front yard to grab his newspaper. It was five in the morning, and the sun had not yet risen. Donald rubbed his eyes and walked to the end of his driveway barefooted when he noticed a sharp pain in his foot. As he lifted his foot to inspect it, he noticed blood and several shards of glass stuck. Someone broke out his windshield and all of the windows on his car.

* * *

Saturday, June 16, 2007. Sheriff Fineman circled Donald's car, taking pictures with an old Nikon camera and furiously scribbling notes in his notepad as Donald followed silently behind him. The summer humidity was beginning to set in, and Donald could feel his t-shirt sticking to his chest.

“Sheriff, I really don’t want us making a fuss over this,” Donald said. “I know a guy who has a shop in Oxford, and I have the money to take care of it, so let’s just leave it be.” Sheriff Fineman paused from his note taking for a moment, rubbed his whiskered chin, and then spit out a hunk of chewing tobacco on Donald’s lawn. Donald could still see brown juices from the tobacco on the sheriff’s teeth. Sheriff Fineman wasn’t in uniform. He was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a white t-shirt. He came to Donald’s house because Donald’s father called him. Henry McCoy and Sheriff Fineman had been friends for several years.

“Your daddy says y’all know who did this,” Sheriff Fineman said. “Y’all think it’s Camel Webber. You know them Webber boys ain’t no good. Sometimes, I think they is worse than the Parkers.”

“Joe Joe ain’t no good,” Donald said. “Camel is different.” Donald stared at the gelatinous glob of chewing tobacco that was now staining the green grass in his front lawn. He knew that once his neighbors noticed the broken windows on his Mercedes, they would come over to investigate and see the glob of chewing tobacco in his yard.

“Worst case scenario,” the sheriff said. “He might spend a night in jail. We just want to make him pay for this. You shouldn’t have to shell out your own hard earned money because someone else wanted to be a heathen about things. For the chances you and your daddy gave him, he should’ve come over with a thank you card.”

“Camel ain’t got the money to pay for this. I’m gonna let my buddy in Oxford handle it,” Donald said. “I’d really appreciate it if y’all didn’t give Camel a hard time.”

“Look, I can’t do nothing to him if you don’t press charges,” Sheriff Fineman said. “But if you change your mind, you know how to get in touch with me.” The sheriff stood in Donald’s front yard and stared at him for a moment as if he expected Donald to suddenly demand Camel Webber be arrested.

“Just do me a favor,” the sheriff said before turning around and getting in his car. “Get this cleaned up quick. Next year is an election year, and I don’t want Aldous Watts coming by and seeing it. I got at least one more term in me as sheriff, and I don’t need him running on some platform that crime has even extended to Walnut Bend on my watch.”

Sheriff Fineman got into his squad car and drove off. Donald went into his house to grab a broom and trash bag so that he could begin sweeping up the glass. After cleaning up the mess, he took a water hose to the sheriff’s tobacco and then called his friend in Oxford, who arranged for a tow truck to come get his vehicle.

Donald’s phone rang, and he saw that it was his father calling. Figuring his father had already talked to Sheriff Fineman, he was reluctant to pick up the phone. Donald answered, and was greeted to his father screaming at him.

“Sheriff Fineman said you ain’t gonna do nothing about this,” the elder McCoy said. “You just gonna let Camel Webber bully you like this?” His father sounded disgusted.

“I think Camel just needed to get it out of his system,” Donald said. “I don’t think he’s gonna be bugging me anymore.”

“You let him get away with this, he’ll keep doing other things,” Henry said. “All them families. Webbers, Parkers, and Osbournes. They ain’t people. They’re animals. They just wasn’t raised right. Their daddies didn’t punish them, and now you are just continuing the cycle. They ain’t ever gonna learn to do right.”

“Daddy,” Donald said. “I’m just trying to get everything with my car sorted out right now. We can talk about this later.” Donald hung up on his father and turned on the television. He couldn’t concentrate on the show, nor was he thinking about his car or the fact that he was missing work. He wondered what Camel was doing.

Donald’s friend in Oxford arranged for a tow truck in Lincoln to pick up his car. The truck arrived an hour after Sheriff Fineman left. Donald handed the key to his car over to the driver and watched as he loaded the car onto the truck and drove off. He thought of his brother. If Junior were still alive, he would be running McCoy’s, and none of this would be Donald’s problem. Dr. MacArthur, who had been the town’s pharmacist before he retired, lived next door to Donald. He was outside watering his lawn and watched the tow truck take Donald’s car away.

“What happened to your car?” the old man called from his yard.

“I think some teenagers just wanted to play a prank,” Donald said.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with them kids,” Dr. MacArthur said. “They just get worse every decade. Before I was retired, they was coming in with these fake prescriptions for Lortabs and Percocets. They was always trying to tell me the scrip was from some doctor in Pontotoc or Ecu who I ain’t heard of. They pull prayer out of schools and stop whipping them, and they go crazy.”

Donald remembered when Dr. MacArthur's grandson, Jimmy, was a teenager. Everyone who worked at McCoy's Grocery knew that if Jimmy MacArthur came in the store, that you had to stop everything and follow him around, or else you'd be short on sodas and candy bars.

"Your daddy gave you a Saturday off of work?" Dr. MacArthur asked.

"I'm about to go in and get ready now," Donald said. "He let me take the morning off to handle my car. I'll call him in a bit, and he's gonna come get me."

"Nonsense," Dr. MacArthur said. "You just let me know when you're ready, and I'll take you up there. You can save the old man some gas money."

* * *

When Donald walked through the front doors of McCoy's Grocery, Henry didn't even acknowledge him. He assumed that his father was still upset about him hanging up the phone earlier, so Donald went into the back office and fixed himself a cup of coffee. He heard the door to the office open, and Nicole Rogers came inside. Nicole was sixteen years old and a junior at Lincoln High School. She worked part time as a cashier. She was a pretty girl, Donald thought, though skinny to the point that she looked almost unhealthy. She was on Lincoln High School's cheerleading squad. Donald hadn't wanted to hire her, but Henry had insisted they give her a job. He said that girls like her behind the register were good for business. Nicole looked nervous as she entered the office, and she stood behind Donald silently until he turned around to acknowledge her.

"Your daddy wants to see you," she said. Nicole was shaking a little bit, and Donald thought that was odd because she normally carried herself with confidence.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. Nicole shook her head.

“I don’t know,” she said. “He got a phone call and now he seems really mad.”

He wondered if Nicole thought she might be the next to get fired. The door to the office faced the cash registers, and when Donald walked out of the office, all of the cashiers were looking at him. Mabel Jenkins, who was working register 6, was the only one who spoke. She pointed at the front door.

“He’s outside,” she said.

Donald went to the parking lot looking for his father and noticed him standing by his car on his cell phone. When Henry noticed Donald, he motioned for him to come over.

“I’ve already called Sheriff Fineman,” Henry said into his phone. “You just stay in the house. I’ll be home in a minute.” Henry hung up the phone and looked at his son. “Your Momma saw Camel Webber driving around our house. She thinks he’s gonna do something.”

“You don’t know that he’s gonna do something,” Donald said. “Maybe he’s out looking for a job. Lincoln ain’t a big city. There are several reasons he might have to pass by your house.”

“I’m gonna find out what them reasons are real quick,” Henry said. “Sheriff Fineman is out looking for him now. You done let him think he can get away with anything. I need you to watch the store, and I’ll call you when I know something.”

“No,” Donald said, and he walked over to the passenger’s side of his father’s car. “If you are starting something with Camel, then I’m going with you.”

The elder McCoy shook his head, but unlocked the door so that Donald could get in the car.

* * *

Sheriff Fineman was already at the McCoy's house on Cotton Road, when Henry and Donald arrived. Camel was standing outside of the sheriff's car, handcuffed, and Donald noticed Evan sitting in the front seat of the squad car. The child was crying. Donald couldn't even look Camel in the eyes as he got out of his father's car.

"I ain't done nothing, Sheriff," Camel said. "I ain't no criminal."

"There are some folks who might beg to differ," Sheriff Fineman said. "Did you bust the windows out of Donald McCoy's car?" Camel took a deep breath, and then started to shake his head.

"Look, can't you just take the boy back to my momma's house before we do all of this," Camel said. "I get it. Your old buddy's family don't care for me too much right now, so you are gonna take me in the right way or the wrong way, but Evan is only five. He don't need to see all of this."

"Daddy," Donald said. "Give me the keys to your car and let me take that boy home."

"You ain't gonna do no such thing," Camel said. "I don't want you near my boy. I'm afraid some of your cowardice might rub off on him."

"He said he only passed by your house once, Henry," Sheriff Fineman said. "He said he was just taking the boy to Philip's Park. I found a Louisville Slugger in the backseat."

“You also found a baseball and two gloves,” Camel yelled. “Wait till I get me a lawyer. You like what you’re doing, Sheriff? You’re teaching my boy to think the police is the bad guys.” Sheriff Fineman ignored Camel and kept talking to Henry.

“He ain’t admitted to busting up Donald’s car yet,” Sheriff Fineman said.

“So he ain’t done nothing then?” Donald asked.

“Yeah, I busted your car up,” Camel said. “I was pissed, and I will be for a while longer. Can you even lock me up for that, Sheriff? Take me to court and make me pay for the windows. I’ll do it once I got the money. You’re gonna get in a whole lot more trouble for this, Sheriff Fineman.”

“Sheriff, I didn’t press charges against him this morning,” Donald said. “You need to let them go.” Donald wanted Camel to hear him say that. He hoped that it might calm Camel down to hear that Donald was in his corner.

“If y’all ain’t gonna do nothing, then I’m gonna have to let him go,” Sheriff Fineman said.

“I’ll press charges against him for Donald’s car,” Henry said.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t,” the sheriff said. “Donald has to do that.”

“Can you uncuff him?” Donald asked. Sheriff Fineman reluctantly walked over to Camel with his keys in his hands and took off the handcuffs. Camel’s wrists were red, and he moved them around to knock out any soreness.

“Let Evan out of the car,” Camel said, and Sheriff Fineman opened the door. The young boy ran to his uncle, who took him in his arms. Camel hugged his nephew tightly. “If you don’t need me for anything else, I’m gonna get going.”

“Your car is three miles away,” Sheriff Fineman said. “I’ll give you a ride back.”

“That’s all right,” Camel said. “I’ve done enough riding in your car for one day.”

“Don’t be stupid, Camel,” Henry said. “It’s hot outside. Think about the boy.”

“It ain’t gonna kill him or me,” Camel said. “It’ll teach him how to be tough. I’m still strong. I can carry him if he gets tired.” Camel and Evan started to walk down the street. Camel was holding Evan’s hand, and the young child skipped a bit as he walked.

“Daddy,” Donald said as he watched Camel and Evan walk away. “If you weren’t paying me what you are, would those people have been able to keep their jobs.”

“That’s not important, Donald,” Henry said. “You are gonna take that place over one day.”

“But if you didn’t have to pay my salary,” Donald said. “Would you have had to fire them?”

Henry seemed annoyed with his son and walked over to shake hands with Sheriff Fineman.

“Well, thank you for all you done,” he said. “I hope this didn’t waste your time.”

“It’s always my pleasure to help an old friend, Henry,” Sheriff Fineman said, and he raised his hat at Donald and Henry as he got into his car and left. Henry and Donald got into their car, and they started to head back to the grocery store.

“Can you take me home?” Donald asked.

“No, I ain’t gonna take you home,” Henry said. “You’re supposed to close the store down. Who’s going to do it if you don’t?”

“I’m quitting,” Donald said. “Effective immediately. You can give everyone their jobs back.”

“It ain’t that easy, Donald,” Henry said. “Besides, what makes you think they want their jobs back anyways. They don’t like me much right now.”

“I bet Camel would take his job back,” Donald said. “He’s got Evan and his momma to think about. Joan probably would too. The morning we fired her, she was late because her sister didn’t show up on time to watch her little boy. She’s got another person to look out for also. I just have me. It would be selfish if I kept working there.”

“What are you gonna do if you quit?” Henry asked.

“I don’t know,” Donald said. “Maybe I can move. I could go work as a manager for one of those corporate grocery stores.”

“Those are the stores that are putting us out of business,” Henry said. “We wouldn’t have this problem if it weren’t for Jitney Jungle.”

“If it weren’t for Jitney Jungle, the people who worked there might not have jobs neither,” Donald said.

“I don’t accept your resignation.”

“It don’t matter if you accept it or not,” Donald said. “I’m leaving. I’m not doing any more work for you, and I ain’t cashing anymore paychecks.”

* * *

McCoy’s Grocery was closed on Sundays, but when Monday rolled around, Donald did not come in for his shift, nor any of his other shifts the rest of the week.

Whenever Henry tried to call him, he wouldn't pick up the phone. A week passed, and it wasn't until the following Saturday that Donald finally saw his father again.

"I've been trying to call you," he said. "You ain't been at home."

"I've been busy," Donald said.

"Busy doing what? You ain't been at work."

"I've been looking for jobs out of town. Management jobs at grocery stores."

"Have you found one yet?" Henry asked.

"No," Donald said. "But I got an interview on Monday in Jackson and one on Tuesday in Memphis."

* * *

Donald McCoy got a job as the produce manager at a Kroger in Jackson, Mississippi. He sold his house and signed a lease for an apartment in Jackson. His father offered to retire and let Donald take over McCoy's Grocery, but Donald refused.

The elder McCoy and Sheriff Fineman helped him move. Donald really didn't have any other friends to chip in. He gave most of the things in his house away since a lot of it wouldn't fit in his new apartment anyways, and he was able to fit all of the things he was keeping in one moving truck. When he came back to Lincoln to return the truck and get his car, he stopped by McCoy's Grocery one last time. He worked in that store since he was sixteen years old and spent almost his entire life there. Donald was surprised at how little sadness he felt when walking into the store for the last time. He was ready for change, and he mostly felt relieved. When he walked through the front door, he saw Sandy Gaines and Joan Watson behind their old registers. Sandy waved to

him, and Joan smiled. He walked up to both women and hugged them, and he could tell they were really pleased to see him.

He could hear the squeaky wheels from the produce cart, and when he turned around, he saw Camel Webber stocking heads of romaine lettuce. Camel didn't notice him, and he wondered if he should go over and talk to him.

"Is he still mad at me?" Donald asked Joan.

"You're gonna have to ask him that yourself," Joan said. Donald thought about leaving, but then he remembered how Camel mentioned his cowardice when they were on his parent's front lawn. He walked over and put his hand on Camel's shoulder. Camel turned around, and when he realized it was Donald behind him, he smiled and hugged Donald.

"I thought you'd moved," Camel said.

"I'm on my way out now," Donald replied.

"That's a shame. I was hoping you'd meet me at The Beaver's Tail later. I wanted another chance to buy you a beer. A good one this time."

"I'm gonna try to come home at Thanksgiving," Donald said. "Maybe then."

They stared at one another silently for a moment, and Donald knew that Camel wanted to bring up the damage he did to Donald's car.

"Don't worry about it," Donald said.

"You could at least give me your address so that I can mail you a check when I have the money."

“It’s already taken care of,” Donald said. “It’s in the past. Just use that money to buy Evan a really nice toy.” Donald smiled, and Camel held out his hand for him to shake. Camel had a strong grip, and Donald thought that Camel’s hands were so big they could have covered his several times over. Though Camel was six years younger than Donald, he felt like Camel was the big brother that God sent to him to replace Junior. When the handshake ended, Donald turned around and headed for the front door.

“Your daddy is in his office,” Camel said. “You ain’t gonna say bye to him?”

“I’ve got a long drive ahead of me, and he’s gonna treat this like it’s goodbye forever. Besides, I’ve spent a lot of time with him lately.”

Camel just laughed.

“You are coming back at Thanksgiving though?” Camel said.

“I hope so,” Donald replied. “But if it ain’t Thanksgiving, I’ll be back at some point.”

Donald waved goodbye to everyone, and the employees waved back at him.

Henry heard the commotion from his office and came outside to see what was happening.

“You ain’t hit the road yet, boy?” Henry asked.

“I’m on my way out now,” Donald replied. “I just wanted to come see this place one last time.”

“It’ll be here when you get back,” Henry said. “It’ll be waiting for you to take it over.” Donald gave his father a hug goodbye. His father was crying, and Donald just held him tighter.

“I ain’t dying, Daddy,” Donald said.

“I’m proud of you,” Henry said as he followed his son out to his car, and Donald choked up because that was the first time his father ever said that to him. Donald waved goodbye as he pulled out of the parking lot of McCoy’s Grocery and turned onto Main Street. He watched the streets that he had lived in his entire life pass by him as he turned onto Highway 6, headed for Jackson.

