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In each of these stories characters who are outsiders in their fictional north Louisiana towns search for truth and authenticity despite and because of the rigid social structures of their communities. In the first story, “On the Far Edge of Paradise,” a twenty-one year old named Jonas leaves the isolated farm where his parents homeschooled him and tries to define himself apart from the insularity and strict religious values of his childhood. “I Passed Before Your Door” is the story of Carol, an eleven year old girl in the 1950’s who feels she is neither an adult nor a child. Carol’s desire to understand the grown-up world leads to disillusionment with her father and a new perspective on her mother. In “One Body” a Christian beauty pageant becomes a vehicle that allows a newly recovering addict to accept herself and alter another character’s understanding of her life.

ON THE FAR EDGE OF PARADISE:
THREE SHORT STORIES

by

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ON THE FAR EDGE OF PARADISE

The beef business had lagged for several years. There was no competing with the big feedlots in Texas and the Midwest, and the Millets—George, Banty, and their twenty-one-year-old son Jonas—had whittled their herd of black angus down to less than half of what it had once been. They didn't require much money to live on; they lived simply in keeping with the Word. But they needed some. George lost his part-time construction work after an untreated bone infection in his leg left him nearly lame, and they had to start saving for Banty's disc surgery. So the Millets began selling the cattle off, buying time to wait for a new calling.

Jonas received the calling. For no reason he understood, Jonas always had a big-minded certainty that he would do something great and unexpected with his life. As a teenager he liked the word entrepreneur and made some cash of his own selling luna moth cocoons and Liberty coins at the Millets' stall in the Ouachita Parish Farmer's Cooperative. He performed card tricks for passersby at the market, too, until Banty consulted with Brother Levins, the minister, who told her card tricks might smack of the other, evil kind of magic.

The calling came on a Thursday night after the three cleared the dinner dishes from the big pine table that had once seated Jonas's two older brothers as well. George, Banty, and Jonas found their regular places in the living room— Banty and Jonas together on the sunken green and yellow floral couch and George sitting upright on the

rocker— and they began their evening prayer worship. Jonas’s mind wandered easily and often, and that Thursday night, when it wandered to the unknown future of the farm, he looked up, first at the gold-framed painting of Jesus Christ laying hands on the paralytic at Capernaum. The painting hung just above a bookshelf full of family photographs and a collection of framed pictures the boys had cut out of *The Evangelist* magazine back when Banty homeschooled them.

She would let them choose photographs from the magazine to put in tree bark frames they made one June when hurricane winds felled heavy branches and whole trees all over the farm. The boys switched out the pictures for a couple of years, trading a mother hugging her small child for a boy running beside his dog or a boy and his dad playing catch, but there was one picture, the largest, that Banty had put in a proper frame with a glass and kept up there all this time. When he was seven, Jonas cut out the picture of a strange bird from the In the Field missionary section of *The Evangelist* and gave it to his mother in a pine bark frame with one gaping hole where a piece of bark had fallen off.

Nowdays the picture sat enclosed in the glass of a pretty, white wooden frame. The colors of the bird had faded some, but the contrast between the blood-drenched crimson of the bird's delicate head and the cottony white feathers of its body caught Jonas unexpected and heavy in the throat. He had looked at the picture plenty of times, but today he studied it closely, the stilt-legged body, the arched neck, and the bird's long, green beak splayed open and pointed up to the sky, calling out in a voice Jonas couldn't fathom. The night he'd given the cut-out to his mother, Banty had teared-up over the picture and held it at dinner, saying to Jonas, his brothers, and George, "There's your

proof of God. Right there," as she touched the bird's head. At the time, Jonas didn't care about the strange bird as much as he loved the effect it had on Banty. He had provided that.

George sat forward in his La-Z-Boy and read from the Bible. Jonas watched the orange eyes of the bird and pushed his tongue hard against the roof of his mouth as the beginning of an idea shaped itself. The bird picture on that shelf all those years had been staring out at them, defying their plain lives. A new idea—one of living among, raising, exotic animals from all over the world as matter-of-factly as cows or horses or chickens—aroused in Jonas a welcome feeling of power and excitement. A calling. What else could it be? He waited until after their last prayer to tell his parents what had come to him, or, actually, overcome him.

Jonas leaned forward on his elbows and said, "I'd like to share a leading. About the farm."

George and Banty looked up, and he began.

"What if we start a kind of petting zoo, but with exotics, like foreign birds and those deer with corkscrew horns? Maybe some ostriches and llamas."

George sat rock-still in his chair, listening, his forehead wrinkled and doubtful.

Jonas continued, "People could drive through the zoo and get up close, like they do on African safaris." He fixed his attention on Banty with only quick glances to check George's face. Banty scooted to the edge of the couch and looked as though she were trying to hold back a pleased smile. She was interested, maybe even excited.

Jonas went on— "We can start slow. We sell the rest of the herd, and I'll pick up a little work somewhere to pay for the animals, a few at a time, while we reconfigure the pastures. That wouldn't take much work at all, I imagine."

George got up, walked behind the couch, and took a toothpick from the little Vicksburg Battlefield holder in the center of the dining table. The bone infection left him with a dragging limp that made the sound of softly tearing fabric when he walked on carpet. George told Jonas, "It's an odd idea, son. Sounds too dreamy. And risky, too." He dug the toothpick in and out of his teeth, and Jonas hoped his father was working over the idea in his mind.

Banty looked at Jonas, smiled, and stood up to see George. "It is a little bit out there and we'd have to really look into it, but we've talked about finding a ministry all these years. We raised the boys apart from sin and turmoil, the way we set out to, and here we are still holed up away from the world we're called to serve." She rubbed two fingers across her lips, "This might well be the calling. Think of how many school children would come."

She began to straighten the magazines and other books on the table as though getting preparing for company already, and then told the other two, "We ought to pray."

The next week Jonas went to Gulley's Feed and Seed in Lotty to ask about part-time work. Part-time would allow him to continue helping George and Banty with the remaining cattle and begin preparing for the new animals. Mr. Gulley told Jonas he'd

seen enough of him in the store over the years to know he would be an honest and good worker. He might as well start the next day.

When Jonas came to the kitchen the next morning with his hair slicked down and a button-up work-shirt, George nodded and said, "You look good. It's good you have some work away from the farm. Good experience for the future," without mentioning the exotic zoo idea.

Jonas and his parents didn't normally talk about his future even though his brothers had left years ago. The oldest one, Gabe, went to seminary in Oklahoma, where he married a quiet, half-Indian woman named Elmira and became a reservation preacher, and Enoch, whom Banty said had become the most worldly of the three (it wasn't a compliment), majored in accounting at Tech and married a girl named Lauren. Banty disapproved of Lauren's lukewarm Presbyterian upbringing and her expensive tastes. Enoch and Lauren lived in a development called Steeplechase, and even though their house was less than an hour from Lotty, the young couple didn't visit much.

The silence between Jonas and his parents on the subject of his future came from a mutual fear of a time when, for some unforeseeable reason, the arrangement would have to end. Banty had coddled Jonas—wouldn't stop nursing him until he was three—despite George's pressure. She would often stand over help the older boys helping them with their homeschool work while Jonas, who was small for his age, clutched onto her like a primate. He clung and sucked, only stopping to pull his mother's face to his or grab at a brother's papers or scissors or cup of milk. Nor would Banty trim his looping brown hair long after he'd grown from toddler to boy. Jonas's long girlish curls made him

look both mischievous and soft. In kind, Jonas had held tight to Banty and to home all those years.

He had a small and wiry build. *All muscle*, he'd heard people say at the farmer's market, even when he was a young boy. Lifting feed and fertilizer sacks at Gulley's came easy, and Jonas thought interacting with the customers, as he had years ago at the market, would be interesting.

He felt uneasy, though, when Gulley introduced him to the two other boys who would work alongside him at the store. Both wore nice ropers, new jeans, and kept little black combs in their back pockets. Jonas wondered what they must think of him in his hand-sewn shirts and patched-up jeans. In a fleeting thought he considered how the new job might allow him to buy a decent pair of jeans if he worked some extra hours here and there, and then he felt ashamed for being at Gulley's not one day and already coveting worldly goods.

On that first day, one of the boys—his name was Kenny—said he recognized Jonas from the store, and told him, "It don't take long at all to figure out things around here." Kenny motioned to the other boy, who looked a little younger and had a sparse black mustache that reminded Jonas of faint tally marks on a page. Kenny said, "Rem and I'll look after you."

When Gulley sent Kenny and Jonas to the storeroom to stack a new load of feed, Kenny asked, "Y'all did school at home out there?"

Jonas stacked the sacks as Kenny passed them over from a wooden pallet. He answered, "Yep," hoping it sounded easy going.

Kenny kept on, "Did y'all ever go to school-school? I mean regular school?"

"Nope." Jonas caught a sack slipping from his pile and set it back on top.

"Ever want to?"

"Nope. Well, sometimes, I guess, maybe to see what it was like. Just to know."

The truth was that Jonas *had* wanted to go to school at times, most of all when he was fourteen. A tall girl named Macey with braces, a wide, easy smile, and a long, chestnut ponytail like a horse's tail began lingering at the Millets' Saturday morning market stall. She'd look over his luna moth cocoons, touching each one and sometimes teasing Jonas that the Liberty coins he was trying to trade with her weren't real, that he'd gotten them from Canada or somewhere. Jonas's face and ears burned red the first few minutes they talked, but then his blood and his breathing sank back into their regular rhythm, and if his parents were elsewhere, he bantered with Macey or showed her card tricks and tried to smile the way he'd seen other boys smile at girls, a smile that meant more than what they were talking about. For nearly a year, Macey became the sweet secret that continually hummed in the back of Jonas's mind and loosed him into sinful territory late at night when he lay, underwear pushed halfway down his thighs, rubbing himself into a mad oblivion that would shame him to no end when his mind floated back down to his soft, wet bed.

And then one week Macey brought a pinched-nosed friend to the Saturday morning market. Jonas saw something cruel in the slight downturn at the corner of her lips. He tried to believe it wasn't there until she asked if he was Amish and turned to Macey for a shared smile. Jonas didn't know what Amish meant, but instead of asking

Banty or George, he waited until he got home and looked up the word in the American Heritage encyclopedia set Banty had centered on the large shelf in the living room, the one made for a television. He took the "A" volume to his room, closed the door, and felt a shameful sting when he found the photos of Amish girls in bonnets and men driving horse carriages.

Macey didn't smile back at her friend. She looked down at the cement floor before the girl pulled her to a table covered with pastries. But she didn't come to the Millets' stall again.

Jonas didn't blame Macey or even the other girl. He resented his parents for making their family into misfits. For a few months, he begged Banty and George to send him to Lotty High School without telling them he wanted to learn the world apart from their farm, and, more importantly, see Macey again.

"Maybe a Christian School, if we had that kind of money," Banty explained, "but no, not such a Godless place. And not you, Jonas." When they told him no, he walked outside the house and slammed his shoulder into the aluminum side of the barn leaving a crater-shaped dent. Along with the aching throb in his shoulder, Jonas felt a small relief that he wouldn't have to suffer being an oddball at the high school.

Nonetheless, for years, he looked for Macey at Safeway or Deeter's Pharmacy and made a desperate game of searching for her face in the cars he passed in town. When Macey got older, he began to see her in other boys' cars, which made him feel cold and a little queasy.

He made good money at Gulley's working four hours every weekday afternoon. When he cashed his paycheck, he set aside one pile for Banty's disc surgery and one for the safari petting zoo. When he wasn't at the feed store or looking after the cows, Jonas dug out small oases around the farm and planted a few tropical trees to give the place the right feel. George didn't comment or help, but Jonas took his silence as reluctant approval. Banty collected library books on exotic animals and made lists of the most feasible ones—alpaca, llamas, peacocks, muntjac deer, and emus. Ostriches, too. Maybe one of those South American anteaters.

At the store, Kenny and Rem continually peppered Jonas with questions, as though they couldn't find some missing piece of information.

How'd your mama know if you passed a grade level? Are y'all allowed to drink alcohol or smoke? How do you meet girls out there? Do you want to meet girls? Are you going to bring up your children set apart like that? Do y'all believe all the rest of us are going to hell then?

Jonas didn't know how to answer most of their questions, hadn't considered drinking or smoking since it was never around, and didn't believe he could say who was going to hell or not. He'd worried about the girl question himself, though. Didn't see how things could turn out right in that arena if his life continued the way it was. He liked to listen in on Kenny and Rem when they thought he was out of earshot. Kenny told Rem about his live-in girlfriend, Renee, but they lowered their voices too much for Jonas to hear when the talk went—and it usually happened quickly—to sex.

The two, especially Kenny, seemed to like Jonas for no reason he understood. Kenny stood well over six feet to Jonas's five eight and had a thick body, wide nose and an open, smiling face that didn't look capable of harboring a mean thought. Kenny watched Jonas calculate purchase totals and tax in his head rather than using the calculator, and once said, "Jeez, you're some kind of Einstein cowboy. That's what you are." Ever since, he and Rem called Jonas that when they wanted to get a friendly little rise out of him.

Kenny often invited Jonas to his house to play cards with Rem after work, and Jonas always said no. Rem and Kenny both persisted though, and Kenny told Jonas, "You've got that numbers mind. You ought to come out and play a couple of hands with us, just once at least. Don't you think so, Rem?"

"Yes, he should," Rem answered in a mock formal voice. "I'd like to see our man work a card table."

One morning, as Jonas was lifting stones into a wheelbarrow for one of the safari habitats, George stopped on his way to the barn, and watched Jonas load a few. He said, "Son, I have a worry your garden of Eden idea could turn out to be some kind of foolish paradise that does us in." Jonas didn't stop moving the stones. George made to leave and then stopped to add, "Anyway, you ought to be with some that's your own age. Get out some."

Jonas felt the heat rise up inside and pushed it back down. He'd like to have thrown a punch at his father for talking to him like he was a kid trying to build a go-cart

out of tape and scrap pieces of wood, but a couple of days later, he said yes when Kenny mentioned the card game at his house.

The old house, which Kenny began renting from his grandmother after she moved into Live Oak Village, smelled like dried roses, mothballs, and a third fermenting smell Jonas later understood to be the beer-stained carpet. The four small rooms of the house had peeling wallpaper at the corners and antique furniture dotted with white ringed stains on the surfaces. Kenny said Renee made some *queso* for the tortilla chips and left the place to them for the night.

Kenny and Rem set up penny ante poker—not card games—and Rem brought out a metal bucket filled with ice cubes and beer so they wouldn't have to get up each time they needed one. When Rem offered him a Miller Light, Jonas said, "No thanks," and took a Pepsi Kenny brought out from the kitchen instead.

Jonas stayed, telling himself it was the polite thing to do and knowing it had nothing to do with politeness. He wanted to be there, playing cards and acting like a regular twenty-one year old this once. There was no sin in that.

After losing the first few rounds of Texas Hold 'Em, Jonas caught on and began to win. A few beers later Rem told Kenny, over and over, "I called it, didn't I! I told you he'd be a g—" he stopped himself—"Damn genius at cards, too, didn't I!"

Jonas stacked load after load of pennies into neat columns in front of him and grew woozy from his success and from the admiration of the other two. Time was

marked by the growing pile of beer cans on the floor beside the table and the rising stacks of pennies in front of Jonas. The three played poker until one-thirty that morning.

As he backed out of Kenny's drive, Jonas turned on the radio, which was still set on the Christian AM station out of Monroe. The day before, he had driven Banty to her chiropractor, and they had listened to a radio preacher whose voice had a forceful and reliable rhythm like the Millets' minister at Grace Free Evangelical, a rhythm meant to put the right amount of fear into a body—just enough to really feel God's power. After a while, though, the steady beat of the radio preacher's voice always made Jonas irrepressibly sleepy. He knew he ought to feel guilty for that. He could never admit to his mother or father or anyone for that matter, that other things, like numbers, for example, which had come easy for him back when Banty was homeschooling the boys, had always held more mystery and perfection for him than what the preacher had to say.

When Jonas pulled up to his house, the porch light was still on. Through the filmy yellow curtains of his parents' bedroom he could see Banty's bedside lamp click off.

The next morning she was quiet, even pouty with Jonas and didn't speak to him. When Banty left the kitchen to pull some ground chuck out of the back freezer, George asked, "Have fun?"

Jonas, not sure how to respond, answered, "Yes— or no, sir. I guess I don't know."

George put on his hat and walked out to the barn to sand the pirogue he had begun a year ago when the big walnut tree fell and he'd decided to make it into a boat. When he

started on the boat, George told Jonas and Banty he wanted to make one just like the one he'd used to explore the bayou paths deep in the national forest when he was a boy in Breaux Bridge.

Jonas went back to play Texas Hold 'Em at Kenny's on most Thursdays, thinking each time ought to be his last and not wanting it to be. The third time he said yes to a Miller Light. Rem raised his eyebrows and smiled at Jonas and then at Kenny. Jonas asked for God's forgiveness even as he brought the can to his mouth, but it wasn't the falling away from God that stirred him as much as the thought of his parents—Banty, really—somehow seeing him at that moment. He let the cold and sour taste of the beer wash over his tongue and down his dry throat anyway. There would be time to calculate the damage later. Towards the end of the beer, the world began to feel like an easier, lighter place than Jonas had believed it could be.

One night Rem and Kenny surprised Jonas and gave him two hundred dollars cash, telling him they wanted him to go to a real casino. They'd like to go, too, except they were still underage.

Kenny said, "You could walk out of there with a thousand, two thousand bucks. After you blow the rest of 'em to smithereens, you can give us back the two hundred plus a little piece of your winnings. A thank you present for your tutors."

Jonas looked at Kenny, unbelieving, and asked, "Have you lost your mind?"

He tried to give the money back, but both boys refused it. Jonas kept it and, when he got home, put it in an old Bible box at the back of his closet. The money bound him to

the other boys and the outside world in a way he liked. Not evil. Not that, he told himself. Just something of his own, something his parents couldn't know.

One night the boys played longer than usual. Rem and Kenny emptied more than a dozen beer cans, and Rem began to slur his sentences into one long word. He also forgot to censor himself in front of Jonas. He started telling the other two who was having sex with whom around town, and then he told them about getting together with the girl with the ponytail all the way down to her ass.

“I know you’ve seen her, Kenny. Maceysomething. I’ll think of her last name in a minute.” Rem burped. “Maybe.”

Jonas’s face flushed cold and when his elbow lost traction on the table, his hand knocked over the last third of his beer.

Rem held his thumb and finger in front with half an inch of space between. His eyes rolled lazily from Kenny to Jonas to make sure they were ready to hear what he wanted to tell them.

“I got this close to fucking her, her hair all over the place and everywhere.”

Kenny cuffed Rem on the ear. “Easy, Rem. Too much too soon for our boy here. You’re gonna scare him away talking like that.”

Jonas’s heart was pounded frantically while he tried to save the cards and wipe up the beer. Rem was still thinking about Macey. He shook his head at his beer can.

“Damn fucking damn,” and then he looked up at Jonas.

Jonas used the spill as an excuse to check his watch and leave.

Rem called out to him from Kenny's front porch, but Jonas couldn't hear what he said.

He drove with the windows down and hoped some deep breaths of the night air could get his chest to slow down. Things hadn't come out right. He realized that all these years he'd never let go of his faith that God would make the formula come out good in the end. He'd foolishly believed he and Macey would be together. But it was looking bad. She'd become an older, worldly version of the girl who visited him at the market stall, and he really hadn't become anything else, hadn't even grown another inch taller for that matter.

On the Saturday after Easter, Jonas set out for an exotic breeder's farm in East Texas. He had told Banty and George the enclosure for the birds and deer was ready and that he'd saved up the six hundred dollars he needed to buy four emu and two of those corkscrew deer, the ones Banty liked. It was a four-hour drive on I-20 from Lott in north Louisiana to the farm outside of Carthage, and Jonas looked forward to having some time on the road to think. He also considered that he'd be driving past the Shreveport-Bossier riverboat casinos Rem and Kenny kept pushing him to visit, so he took the two hundred out of the Bible box and slid it into his wallet before walking out to his car, still not sure if he would do it.

Standing by the truck, Banty looked Jonas over as though she were seeing him new after a long absence and said, "You look nice."

Jonas had smoothed his curly hair down flat, except for the ends, which turned up no matter what. He had on the one pair of jeans without faded spots or a patch, a brightly colored bead belt George and Elmira sent from the Indian reservation for his birthday in February, and a denim button-down Banty had sewn for one of the boys years ago. She touched the seam along the row of buttons as though she were thinking how well the material had held up all this time. Then she hugged Jonas goodbye. She had dark sweat spots under her arms and down the center of her Battle of Vicksburg t-shirt, and she smelled like the cucumber cream she rubbed on her legs at night to help with the swelling.

“I put an extra sandwich in your cooler,” she told Jonas as she passed it to him. “It’s a long drive alone. You know I’d come if I could.”

“I know,” Jonas answered as his hand intercepted a tear of sweat winding down his forehead towards his eye. Banty’s sciatica had worsened in the last couple of years, and she couldn’t sit for more than half an hour at a time.

Jonas climbed in while George looked over the trailer and hitch. George slapped the metal door under Jonas’s elbow on the open window and said, "Looks good-to-go then." He waited to catch Banty’s eye and told her, "I'll be working on the pirogue then."

The engine turned over and started up, and on the other side, Banty stood rubbing the small of her back while reciting to herself as much as Jonas, “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.” Jonas bowed his head. Over the engine, he couldn’t hear Banty well, but he watched from the edges of his lowered eyes until the pinched expression on her face released and her lips stopped moving. The

two said a soft *Amen* together, and the truck lurched as Jonas released the clutch too fast. Jonas said an unheard *Sorry* to Banty out of embarrassment that he must still and always be a younger boy worth worrying over in her eyes.

When he got to the edge of town and merged onto I-20, he checked his back pocket for his wallet and felt the odd thickness from the cash the boys at Gulley's had given him. There it was pressing on the one side, unreasonably heavy and warm against his body.

After two hours tunneling through the unchanging pine tree lined highway, Jonas saw the outline of the Bossier City horse racetrack, wide and low on a flat clearing to the right. The ring of the track and the parking lot were deserted, but the neon orange and blue racehorses on the Louisiana Downs billboard lit the dulling mid-afternoon sky that was growing more and more crowded with a front of gray clouds.

Jonas read the brightly colored billboards above mobile home and tractor sales lots along the highway. They announced one casino after another. *Louisiana's Best Bet! Lady Luck Lives Here!* Near Shreveport, the highway lifted into a series of bridges and overpasses, and then the tall casino hotels emerged into view, their silver and gold tinted windows flashing in the last of the afternoon light. He tried to picture himself in one of those glittering towers while the wallet burned underneath him.

Jonas pulled into a pack-a-sack to fill up. He studied the young, sleepy-eyed woman ringing him up, not as a regular person, but as a woman—the swell of her chest in a faded shirt that tapered down into the curve of her waist and the way her too-tight belt

cinched her just before the push of her hips below. He'd spent too much time lately thinking of Kenny and his girlfriend Renee in that rental house. Their bathroom smelled of both perfume and the faint odor of man clothes waiting to be washed. And now there was Rem and Macey, and Jonas didn't want to think about them at all.

He straightened his spine and looked into the cashier's eyes for a like recognition of his status as a man, for the possibility that they, two adults in the world, could in other circumstances fit their bodies together. When she half-smiled, one gold tooth glinting with spittle, and then tightened at the jaw, he thought he saw what he'd searched for.

At the pump, Jonas watched the clicking numbers tick upwards, blinking like eyes, and he wondered what it was that had coaxed his brothers into their wholly separate lives. He felt a sting of separation, as though he'd already done the thing that would wrench him from home, and he felt the loss and Banty's grieving in the hollow of his gut, nearly the same as he'd felt it as a boy when he misbehaved.

Back on the road and still thinking of his parents and brothers, Jonas remembered the evening prayers they prayed—used to be all five of them—each night after dinner. They would start with a prayer for each person at the table and work outward to the people at the end of the road, and beyond that, in a widening radius, until they covered the world. When Jonas was small, he pictured their prayers like the Sherwin Williams ads on the sides of Mack trucks. A bucket of prayer poured over the surface of the earth.

Jonas prayed for the people in the Home Depot he could see just off the road, for the people in the Shell station he passed, and the ones in the houses along the highway, asking God to send his light down on each one today. He prayed for his parents, too,

who seemed smaller, even fragile in his imaginings this far from home. When he finished his prayers, he fell into wondering what it was each person was actually doing in the homes he passed; and when his thoughts veered away from God and to sleepy, soft wives in gauzy nightgowns waking up beside their waiting husbands, he let himself linger there, could almost smell her—like the strawberry and vanilla smell of the cashier at the gas station—could climb on her and make himself at home. But he didn't want the stir and ache that pressed against his jeans, not now, so he tugged the fabric on each thigh away from his crotch and put an AM church station back on. A raspy gospel preacher out of Carthage sang "Old Rugged Cross," and Jonas prayed to God that he could have both one day—the faith he ought to have and a wife like Macey who would love him and sanctify the runaway feelings that shamed him as much now as they did when he was thirteen. He didn't anymore trust that God would deliver, though.

He turned the radio off and began to calculate the stakes. If he didn't go to a casino, he would have to face Kenny and Rem and risk losing their growing respect for him. He couldn't lie to them because they knew about casinos even though not a one was old enough to have stepped a foot inside. To think of their slapped-happy faces when he pulled out the winnings!

He didn't have to tell his parents anything. Shouldn't have to. He was twenty-one after all. Banty was loosening her hold on him. Jonas could feel it, and he understood that she feared he might move off the farm if she didn't. As for God, Jonas decided that a small veer into a casino on one day of his life shouldn't alter the deep ruts

of the life He had already set into motion. God's grace was redemptive if nothing else.

How can a person have faith without something to measure it by?

Jonas took the next exit and headed back to the casinos. He pulled into the first, Pirate's Cove, not allowing himself time to change his mind.

The inside of the casino, which was also a hotel, looked like a palace. It was a vast and yawning space filled on the edges with gold trimmed walls, a couple of wide-windowed gift shops, and a restaurant called Gang Plank with a real parrot in a cage out front that squawked *Arr* and *Matey*. The whole place was decorated as though it was all outside and the swirling bright carpet was the sidewalk. Instead of weather, there was rock music and the smell of fried shrimp, cologne, and cigarette smoke. A place you go with someone, not alone.

Near a fishpond in the lobby a group of men in cowboy boots, jeans, and Sunday shirts sat on a cluster of sofas, talking and sipping their drinks. One of the men stood up to meet a good-looking woman—not young, not old—in a sundress and heels. They kissed, he raised a wave good-bye to other men, and the man led the woman down one of the wide-carpeted hallways marked *Casino*. He wrapped his arm around the woman's waist, and his hand held the top of her hip, pulling her closer as they walked. The hem of her dress tugged up her thigh on that side. They moved easily together in one smooth-timed unit. Jonas thought of the word *sexy*. Especially the woman in the breezy dress, but it wasn't just her. It was the two of them, swaying to the beat coming out of the

speakers that were mounted in the chandelier ceilings. He followed them down the corridor.

Some old phrases from church floated through Jonas's mind unbidden and in Brother Levins's voice— *The sin of lust. The sin of wanting. The sin of idleness. The sin of greed. The sin of liquor. The sin of music.* But the tone was mocking, almost funny. Jonas had immersed himself in a sin-ridden place, and yet the place hadn't turned to salt and neither had he. So he walked toward the casino security guards feeling, for a moment, fearless and alive.

The security guards smiled at Jonas like he was a foreigner as they directed him through the sensor gate. A dozen rows of loud and blinking silver slot machines filled the big room on the other side of the security stand. A few scattered people, their eyes fixed hard on the numbers and pictures scrolling through the small windows, put their coins in, pulled the silver lever, and waited, allowing themselves a quick puff of a cigarette, a sip of a drink or both while they watched for the right symbols to line up. The couple stopped at a slot machine. The woman passed her drink to the cowboy, kissed him—more than a thank you for holding the drink—and put two quarters in the slot. When the pictures didn't line up right for her, she laughed and dug in her purse for more quarters.

Jonas stopped at the slot machine closest to the roped-off area for poker tables and watched the gamblers playing cards. It took only a few minutes and a little coaxing from the friendly poker room host in a parrot vest for Jonas to try a round. He tried to trade a twenty-dollar bill for some chips, but the host smiled and told him less than forty might

not get him through two hands. He gave the man another twenty, picked up his tray of poker chips, and sat down at the Texas Hold ‘Em table. His heartbeat battered against his ribs. A waitress with a little parrot sewn on the heart of her black polo shirt leaned into to Jonas and asked, “What’ll you have?”

One of the men at the table answered, “You serving under-aged now, Shawnie?” He was a bony old player sitting across from Jonas in Bermuda shorts and a Boomtown Casino t-shirt.

Shawnie hiked one hip out and smiled at the old man. “Well, if he got past the guys out front, he can have anything he wants, Marty.”

Jonas said, “Thank you, ma’am. I don’t need anything.”

She nodded and added, “Just let me know if you change your mind,” and walked away.

Marty’s eyes were still on Jonas. He asked, “Where the hell did you come from, boy? This your first time?”

Before Jonas could answer, Marty said, “We’ll go easy on you.”

Jonas arranged his meager chips in front of him as though he were setting up for penny ante at Kenny’s kitchen table. He watched the others finish out their round and then joined the next hand. He played carefully, not betting much and folding early.

Marty ran commentary for Jonas in a low voice. When Jonas looked at the cards in his hand and rested it in his lap, the man made a low hiss and said, “Keep your cards on the table. It’s the rules.”

Jonas corrected himself quickly and nodded to the man.

In the eighth hand Jonas hit a straight. He had the straight early, but he knew betting too many chips would give it away. A pretty lady who was ample (a word Banty used for herself) and had a beautiful dimpled smile that didn't seem like it belonged at a poker table at all built the pot up more each time the bet came to her. Jonas raised her a little but not enough to scare her away. When everyone else had folded, the old man said, "It's down to the tenderfoot and the movie star."

The woman gave the old man a flirty smile and made a quick but kind cut of her eyes to Jonas, as though he were the only one worth taking seriously. When the dealer turned the last card, Jonas began to sweat a little, thinking she must have something better, but then the woman flipped her cards and showed a pair of kings. Jonas felt a rush of triumph.

He showed his straight and pulled the chips in. Marty let out a surprised whistle, and everyone at the table, even the pretty lady whose thin dress had begun to gape a little at her breasts, smiled at Jonas. Her breasts made him think of the generosity of ice cream stacked on a cone.

Another player said, "Kid's a hustler, ain't he!"

Jonas didn't know it would be so easy. He wished for a drink, something to lift to his lips for a celebration swig, but he wouldn't spend Kenny and Rem's money that way. He would do right by them. He made a quick count of the pile in front of him. Eighty dollars in chips and a hundred-and-sixty still in his wallet.

One of Marty's cronies, a fat man who smoked a cigar and wore a turquoise ring, said, "Lyle, you better stop giving that boy pointers," and he coughed and laughed all at once.

Jonas bet a little more now and, after a while, he won another hand, this time with a pair of tens and a pair of queens. His mind was quick with numbers and could guess his odds of winning—never a low pair, almost always two pairs (especially if one was high), and always three of a kind or better. It was the business of bluffing that gave Jonas trouble. He couldn't read the expressions on the faces of the handful of middle-aged and old people and of the attractive woman who seemed so comfortable at the table. And he wasn't sure how well he was hiding his.

Jonas played conservatively—folding early with iffy cards and raking in a good pile of chips every tenth or fifteenth hand. He had patience with cards, if nothing else. The others shook their heads and laughed, but Jonas sensed a growing irritation at the table, in the way one woman, a grandmother with a voice like gravel, kept shaking the ice in her glass and how the others grew quiet. By the time one dealer left and another took her place, Jonas had tripled the forty he'd started with. A burley old man in camouflaged overalls sitting next to Jonas packed his remaining poker chips into a plastic sorting case, swigged the last melted bit of the brown drink in front of him, and left the table.

Marty called to him, "Catch you later, Jimmy. Be good."

Jimmy waved his friend off and nodded to the rest of the table.

The pretty woman slid into Jimmy's old seat.

She pulled her long hair up into a bun and Jonas's eyes traced the elegant line from her smooth neck down to the soft rise of her breasts. She slid her glass of wine and her chips in front of her and pushed a white one into the pot for the next hand.

When she won the hand with a pair of aces, she slapped the back of her wrist against Jonas's thigh, as though they had won together.

She had to be at least ten years older. He would go with it, soaking in the soft, warm scent of her next to him and pretending they were longtime, easy friends, like being with an older cousin. She wasn't made-up like some of the women in the casino, except for the black lines drawn around her eyes, which he thought lessened her beauty. She looked out of place among the dull-faced and wrinkled smokers who sat at most of the tables in the room. There were a few younger men, but they looked hard, too, in a way this woman didn't.

"Jonas, right? I heard you tell Marty over there."

Jonas flushed and answered, "Yes ma'am."

She hit his bicep lightly and said, "I'm not ma'am. That's for teachers and old people. I don't look that old, do I?"

"No." Jonas held his lips pressed to keep the *Ma'am* from slipping out.

She told him her name was Rory and fastened a stray piece of blond hair behind her ear. Her eyes bugged out just little, making her look more child-like than her other features allowed.

Both Jonas and Rory liked to fold early when they got trash, and they began to talk a little while the others finished out a hand. Rory said she'd never seen him here

before and asked why he'd come. Jonas didn't tell her about Rem and Kenny, only about his plans for an exotic safari and that he was on his way to pick up the first animals.

Rory offered him her wine. The smoky air had dried out his throat, so he took a few sips. He liked the taste of her lipstick—her lips—on the glass. Rory told Jonas she, too, had grown up on a farm, a poultry farm on a few acres outside of Little Rock. Most of her friends had horses and cattle they showed at the fair, so she made a little rope halter for her favorite chicken and walked it around the yard like a dog or a horse.

The wine tasted good, and Jonas decided to order one beer. He had profits now.

Then he kept a pair of eights too long and lost forty dollars to Marty's three of a kind. As he watched Marty rake his winnings in, Jonas felt an unexpected, irrational twinge of relief.

He righted himself, though, and sat up taller in his chair. Losing a big hand could be a good strategy. The other poker players wouldn't worry about him so much now. He would work up to the big hand, the one he would walk away with. No rush, though. He would tell his parents he'd stopped off at Kenny's on the way home, and if they questioned that they wouldn't say so.

Rory began to let her shoulders and legs lean into Jonas as though they were a couple, and he felt uncomfortable. Not enough to stop her. The space around the table was full and tight with the heft of several people who overflowed the small chairs. When Rory shifted her crossed legs so that her top thigh rested on Jonas's leg he believed her to be a little tipsy and unaware of the intrusion. He liked it, though, and took a deep swig of beer.

A lucky straight brought him another big pot. A hundred-and-forty plus the one-sixty he still had in his wallet.

He finished the beer off and relaxed a notch.

After a while, though, a second and third beer altered his thinking from clear to murky, not to mention Rory's fingers touching his ear as she reached a tip to the waiter and then touching his lip to wipe away a spot of beer foam. She swiped her hand across his thigh a couple of times as though it were just part of her careless excitement over winning a hand.

Another hour and then two passed. Despite a couple of sharp-eyed looks that passed between Marty and Rory, Jonas let himself believe in this world made of easy cash, a beautiful woman, and the contented ease of a grown-up man after a few beers. He dipped into the one-sixty in his wallet and then the six hundred dollars for the animals. He could see Marty and Rory's stacks growing taller with black twenty-five dollar chips, and he understood that he had let the beer and Rory wrest him away from his original purpose. And now this sweet and horrifying freedom.

Jonas's attention veered toward the possibility of something lighting with Rory, despite—or maybe because of—her other intentions, and he wished he knew the way to make it happen. Where they would go, he couldn't fathom. Maybe she would know.

When got up to take a leak in the bathroom down the hall, the ground below him felt loose and changing, and Jonas wondered if the soft dust of the moon had felt this way under the astronauts' nearly weightless boots.

Rory was standing in front of him when he walked out of the bathroom. Her hands reached for his face. They felt cool and smooth on his cheeks. She pulled his head to hers and pushed her warm mouth against his lips. Her tongue flicked softly against his. The alcohol in Jonas's body split the kiss into two parts—the part his body could feel and the part his mind could understand, but the two were disconnected, which muted the pleasure.

Rory pulled away and held Jonas's face in front of her, as though she were studying a scientific discovery, a marvel of some sort.

She said, "I'm going to come visit you at that drive-thru safari when I'm an old woman. If I don't have grandkids to bring, I'll come by myself. I swear it. You won't remember me by then, but I'll remember you."

Rory smoothed a hand down the side of Jonas's cheek in a soft gesture, and then reached for his fingers and led him down the main corridor towards the entrance hall. Jonas realized they were walking, arms wrapped around each other much like the couple he had watched earlier. In this case, though, Rory was steadying Jonas as much as embracing him. He thought to ask her something but couldn't form the question in his mind.

Instead, he asked, "Where are we going?"

Rory squeezed his waist and said, "How about outside? I can't breathe in here anymore."

They passed through the sliding glass doors and stopped to survey the lot from underneath the purple awning. The rain front had come and gone and the sun had set.

The parking lot lights revealed the saturated black of the wet asphalt and sparkling droplets of rain dotted the roofs of cars. The air had cooled and felt good on Jonas's face.

Rory scanned the lot and said, "Which one is your truck?"

Jonas tried to point, but it was too far away for either of them to see. Rory said, "Show me."

He understood that he was pointing drunkenly in one direction and then another and swerving through parked cars. Rory reached for his hand and pulled him back as a Cadillac passed.

They kept moving, wandering through row after row of vehicles looking for his truck and trailer before spotting them near a big rig at the back corner of the next lot.

Jonas's eyes and hands couldn't coordinate to make the car key work in the door. Rory said, "It's okay," and took his keys.

She led him around to the livestock trailer and opened the back gate. He lay down on the cool floor. Tomorrow morning he would do the math and buy at least a couple of animals for the safari. No reason to think he had blown it. But for now he had Rory. She could lie beside him here, hidden in their little room of a trailer, and he would find out how it happens between a man and woman.

She wasn't there, though. She was closing the trailer gate from the outside and latching it.

Rory saw him watching her and said, "I'm hiding your keys under the toolbox in the bed of your truck, big guy. We best keep you off the roads tonight."

He dropped his head back onto the metal floor. It thudded hard, and the metal rang in soft echoes. Jonas understood what he hadn't wanted to believe half an hour ago at the poker table, and when he looked up again, he saw that she was gone.

The next morning he woke to the sun piercing through the metal slats of the trailer and covering him with warm light. His bladder burned with fullness, and his stomach felt bloated and nauseated from the beer and the sharp and lingering old manure smell in the trailer, something he hadn't noticed the night before. He could hear a man and a woman nearby. They were walking across the parking lot, his boots scraping the asphalt almost in time with the hard taps of her heels. The woman was telling the man that there was a new macaw at the casino because someone taught the old one to say *Shitheads* to people going by. Jonas thought of having to tell Rem and Kenny he'd lost their money and, much worse, having to explain the lost hundreds to his parents. A tugboat horn blew on the river, and over the loud bellow he lost what the couple was saying. When it finished, he heard the click of the lady's heels on the asphalt coming closer and closer. Little gusts of wind made the orange glow of the sun blink light and shadow at him through the trailer slats in the same thumping rhythm of his heart.

The couple stopped, and the trailer rattled. One set of squinting eyes and then another appeared in one of the slats.

The man laughed and said, "It's something in here, alright."

The woman called, "Hey—" to Jonas. She put a hand over her eyes to block a glare from the metal and asked, "You okay? You trapped inside there, fella?"

I PASSED BEFORE YOUR DOOR

On Saturday mornings in foal season, her daddy got up before daylight and drove out to their farm in the country to check the horses. The night before, Carol would fall asleep willing herself to wake up to the small shuffling taps of his boots on the wooden floor in the hallway outside her room so she could go with him. When she woke to the sound of him, she slid out of bed to pull on the first shirt and skirt she could find in the dark. One time she clicked on her bedside lamp and either the sound or the ribbon of light traveled across the hall and woke Foster Junior. He cried and howled to go with them, but their father said no—the boy was too young— and sent him to their mother’s bed. Carol, who was almost eleven, felt bad for her little brother and, at the same time, giddy that her daddy just wanted her. She ran a brush through her hair without checking the mirror, knowing she was loosening the curls her mother had so carefully rolled the day before.

Downstairs she found her daddy in the kitchen pouring the coffee Say Say had left set-up before going home the night before. He held a gold-rimmed coffee cup in one hand and a cigarette in the other while he sorted through the medicine bottles and vials he had spread across the kitchen table. The medicine was for the people, his patients, in the neighborhoods and side roads on the way, or not on the way, out of town. Sometimes he and Carol made stops to check the patients who couldn’t go all weekend without a look—

a first-time mother with a newborn going yellow or a surgery patient just released from the hospital.

He poured another cup of coffee and went to the mudroom off the kitchen. Carol listened to the rattle of metal as he unlocked and opened the white medicine cabinet where he kept extra supplies. He came back holding five or six pill bottles in one hand and a thick roll of gauze, a vial of liquid for injections, and a syringe in the other. He never set down his cigarette, so a white line trailed him like smoke behind a stunt plane, looping as he bent down to grab a bottle he dropped on the floor. Balancing the cigarette between his lips, he set the new supplies into his medicine bag. The black leather was wrinkled; there were cracks at the creases and she could see the white fabric liner underneath. He'd kept it since medical school. Her mother said it looked more like a witch doctor's bag than a proper medical bag, but he'd said there was no point in quitting something that worked just fine. He was superstitious, not Creole superstitious like Say Say, but just not for doing anything that might change his luck.

Carol didn't eat much in the early morning before they left for the farm. Her daddy would say, "Get you one of Say Say's boiled eggs from the ice box or at least get a piece of bread." She would take a slice of bread and eat small bits on the way, but she never felt hungry those mornings.

Outside, the air was cool and damp and the two-story houses were silhouettes. It was too dark to see her daddy's face as they walked across the lawn to his car. He was a silhouette, too—Say Say starched his lab coat so stiff it made his body look like a box,

his wild, loopy hair spilling over at the top and the cigarette smoke rising up white against the dark.

In the car she sat in her mother's place beside him, and he sometimes spoke to her like she was grown. He talked about the horses, the Tennessee walkers—their conformation and four-beated gaits—while she watched out the window and nodded her head, uncrossing and crossing her legs the way her mother did.

They drove past the columned houses and big oaks along Fairfield Avenue. On the streets leading out of town, the houses stood lower to the ground. Clumps of tall pine trees in backyards looked down on one-stories with small lawns and odd-shaped islands of pine straw and flowers. Most of the kids at school lived on streets like that. Their mothers were teachers and telephone operators, and when the kids and their mothers met back at home in the early afternoon, the kids roamed from one house to another playing in all the backyards as though there was no distinction among the houses or families. Her mother said it was uncouth to treat another person's house as your own, coming over uninvited and asking for a glass of milk when you felt like it, but she would sometimes let Carol go down there if a school friend asked.

A couple of houses had a light on, just one small light coming from a kitchen or back room. The first pink and grey morning tints had begun to push out the night and, at one house, Ladette Conway sat on her front stoop smoking a cigarette and looking down the street in their direction. She was usually there when they passed by on those early Saturday mornings. She was one of the few people they saw on their way out to the farm, other than—farther out of town—men on slow-moving tractors.

Mrs. Conway's hair was always smoothed down in the morning—no rollers or headscarf— and her posture straight and alert, as though she'd been up for hours. Today she had on a blue housecoat.

She was a nurse's assistant at the hospital, and her daughter, Petty, was in first grade with Foster Junior. When Petty saw Carol at a little kid birthday party or downtown at a store, she would move away from her mother to ask Carol, with that flat voice that wasn't childlike at all, if she wanted to play. Petty never smiled. If she saw Carol sitting at the soda counter in the hardware store downtown, which was owned by Carol's Uncle Clem, she would climb her chunky legs onto the stool beside her and order exactly what Carol had—cherry lemonade and the same number of lemon drops. Carol understood that it was cute when little kids mimicked things, so she smiled and told Petty how big she looked in whatever faded dress and bow she wore that day. Petty would say, "Thank you, Carol," hardly moving her lips.

Her daddy slowed the car to lift a wave to Mrs. Conway. Carol waved, too. Mrs. Conway stretched her legs out in front of her, almost looking like a high school girl waiting for the bus. She took a long puff of her cigarette and then pulled her arms and legs in close as though she were chilly. After they passed, her father flicked the stub of his cigarette out of the window and reached down to turn on the radio.

Outside of town, he turned down an unfamiliar dirt road, and said, "Just the one stop today. A quick one I hope."

The rocks kicked up against the car, and Carol and her father rolled up their windows to keep the orange dust out. Dogs met them halfway up the drive and barked at

the car, chasing it to the house. It was a small, unpainted wooden one held up on cinderblocks. The dogs didn't stop their barking, and no one came outside.

Her daddy said, "You stay put."

She said okay and watched him open the door and take the medicine bag from between them. He walked up the steps, dogs following and sniffing, opened the screen door, and knocked. A fat woman in a man's robe opened the door, and then her daddy stepped in and closed the door behind him. The dogs left the porch and tried to work up another round of barking at Carol but gave up and lay down on a big bare spot of dirt between the house and the car.

She hated waiting for him outside of strangers' houses. He'd told her before that she couldn't go in even if people offered because it wasn't right taking a child inside a house with sickness and strangers. She didn't see herself a child anymore, at least not like Foster Junior. She wasn't a grown-up either.

A tight little rooster made a loud hoarse call, like something was wrong with him, too, and then circled a rusted tricycle lying in the yard. The dogs looked up at him and then laid their heads back across their front legs.

Carol tried to pass the time by singing in a whisper, in case someone she couldn't see might be listening. It was pieces of Say Say's songs she liked to sing.

J'ai passé devant ta porte . . .

Oh yé yaille, mon coeur fait mal

* * *

He was taking too long, and so she opened the car door slowly with the half-eaten piece of bread in her hand. The dogs stood up wagging and took bits she tore off for them. She walked to the side of the house by the old tricycle and eased herself onto the edge of a cinderblock. Through a dusty little window that looked like it had been cut out with a pocket knife, she could see him stooped over the bed of the patient— a fleshy, hairy man with no shirt on and the sheet pulled up to his waist, except there was no waist, just a belly as swollen as a pregnant lady's with black splotchy hair covering it.

Her daddy pressed a stethoscope to the man's stomach and told him, "It ought to be coming down in day or two, but not if you don't lay off the liquor."

The man half-laughed and then groaned.

Her daddy lifted the sheet and looked over the rest of the him. Carol saw his thing poking out of a bushy mound of hair, and she thought of the nest of hairless baby voles hidden in a hay bale that their farmhand, Tooby, had shown her last spring. She startled when one of the dogs' nudged her hand with a wet nose and then licked it. The dog stood on two legs with its front paws on the corner of the cinder block. She stepped off the block and walked back to the car with both dogs licking and nuzzling her hands for more bread.

Her daddy stepped out just as she was opening the car door. He ignored her though, put his medicine bag back in its place on the front seat, and nodded to the old lady on the porch.

He started the car and looked out the front window, "You're likely to get rabies, tetanus—or worse—wondering around strangers' yards."

Carol's cheeks burned.

“You best never do that again or I won't be bringing you out with me anymore. Understand?”

She hated her daddy for being upset with her. He went after Foster Junior and Mother, too, but almost never her.

“Yes, sir.”

The dogs didn't get up as the car drove away.

He lit a cigarette, and the smoke clouded up inside the car until they reach the paved road. He rolled down his window. She rolled down her window, too, and rested her head back on her seat. Her daddy sped up as they passed through the Ouachita National Forest. Miles of dense pine trees lined the road. Morning sunlight flashed in between the tree trunks. The farm was just on the other side of the forest, and the bright, open pasture always surprised her after several miles of thick trees.

Tooby had already set the horses out to pasture and stood waiting for them near the front gate. His hands were shoved down into his pants pockets, and when he saw the Buick, he walked along the fence to meet it at the gate.

Her daddy stopped the car in front of the wooden gate and Tooby pulled it open to let them through. Tooby was tall and gangly, maybe still a teenager even. Carol couldn't tell the ages of kids so much older. His face was thin and pockmarked, and he walked with his head down at the ground, like he was studying the way the dirt kicked up around his shoes. Past years, even last summer, Tooby would wait for Carol to get out of the car

and grab hold of the crisscross bars of the gate. She rode it while Tooby swung it open and then she'd hold onto it tighter until he reached around her waist to pull her off. One day at the end of the summer, Daddy put his arm in front of her just before she was about to step out of the car and said, "You'd better quit that now, Carol. You're not that little anymore."

Now they both stayed in the car and watched Tooby open the gate for them.

Her daddy leaned out of his window and asked, "How's Betty Jack?"

Tooby had started snuff not long ago, so he always had a fat lip and spit dark juice on the ground before speaking. "Doctor Wright, I hadn't found her yet this morning. Actually—" he said axly for actually—"she's been gone since yesterday afternoon. You know how she likes to wander off. I thought nothing about it 'til this morning when she didn't show for feed."

Her daddy's face tightened. He didn't say anything to Tooby, just punched the accelerator with his foot making the car tear up dirt where Tooby stood. Carol watched Tooby in her side mirror. He was wiping dust out of his eyes and jogging down the road towards their car and the barn. Her daddy's face was red and sweating.

One time when he lit into her mother, chasing her upstairs with a rolled up newspaper, slapping it on the walls and his hand, making sounds like the house would come crashing in on all of them, Say Say told Carol, who was crying, "He's no bad man. He's just got too much heat boiling up inside all the time. It's got ta come out somehow."

He had left his shoes sitting on the dining room table, and Carol's mother had said something about him still being countrified. He'd called her a blue blood bitch and told her she'd do the same thing if she'd gotten her first pair of shoes when she was ten instead of a fur coat. Say Say took Foster Junior and Carol out of the house and down to Uncle Clem's store for a lemonade. When they got back from Clem's her daddy had gone up to the hospital to check some patients and her mother had closed herself in the bedroom. Carol went in to her. She had laid herself out across her lounge and was flipping through a magazine. Without a word or even much a sound, Carol lay down beside her mother and wrapped an arm around her waist. She knew if she spoke and especially if she asked anything, her mother would send her out.

He cut the engine and turned to Carol without really seeing her. Sweat had plastered black curls up against his red forehead. Carol could see that he was thinking about what to do and maybe wishing she were somebody who could help. He turned back towards the front of the car and started it up again. Just as Tooby had almost caught up to them, her daddy put the car in reverse. At first it looked like he wanted to run Tooby down. Tooby stepped off the road when the car came roaring backwards towards him, but it stopped and her daddy yelled for Tooby to get in. Carol crawled in the backseat so he could sit up front. Tooby was breathing hard and smelled good, like rain and sweet hay. Carol didn't mind the sharp mentholatum smell of his snuff either.

Her daddy lit into him. "Damn it to hell, Tooby. It's one thing to lose a horse overnight, but not a mare first time due to foal and soon."

He drove off the road into the pasture. The Buick bounced and thumped over the uneven ground below, knocking all three around in their seats. Two mares that had been pulling up spring grass and swishing flies with their tails turned away from the car and trotted over to a far fence.

He kept on, a little calmer, “You can’t hardly let them out of your sight. They’ll jump a fence to hide in some thicket where you’ll never get to ‘em. I can guarantee you she’s hidden herself God knows where.”

They were going too fast for the bumps in the pasture, banging towards the back reaches of the farm. Her daddy bent down to find his lighter on the floorboard, and they swerved. He straightened the car and lit a cigarette.

A drip of sweat rolled down the back of Tooby’s neck into his shirt. His shirt was so worn Carol couldn’t think of a name for its color. He had brown hair except for the almost invisible white hairs on the back of his neck that looked like the sun had bleached them. His head moved back and forth, searching out the front window and then the side window but never looking out her daddy’s side of the car. Tooby stammered about how he just knew the mare would come walking up anytime. Her daddy puffed at his cigarette. He didn’t slow down when they reached a dry creek bed. The car dipped and jolted through the bottom. Stones flew up and dinged the sides. It was thrilling and frightening the way he could squeeze life down to one small, furious point.

They stopped at the back ten acres, where the pasture slopped down into a wide muddy bottom called Flat Lick Bayou. It was the border between their pasture and the national forest. Two summers ago Carol and her daddy rode horses back there and

stopped to watch an egret nosing down into the mud for something to eat. He dismounted to get up closer, and then stopped short and leaned down to pick up a shiny rock. It was a deep brown, almost red. “It’s a spearhead, probably Caddo tribe,” he told Carol, reaching it up to her on the horse, “could have lived and hunted right here just fifty years ago.”

She touched the sharp ridges where the maker had shaped it into a broad point. A jealous kind of loneliness rode over her. This spearhead had belonged to someone. Their farm—this creek bottom, the knotty cypress knees, and the two oak trees in the center of the back pasture, grown together in the middle of their trunks and then spreading out into two separate trees at the top—wasn’t really hers the way she had imagined. She tried to tuck the spearhead into a cutout in the saddle. It was too big, so she threw it into the bayou. The egret startled and flew away low over the water. Carol’s daddy asked why the hell she’d done that. She’d forgotten about the bird, but he must have thought she’d wanted to scare it. She told him she didn’t know why.

At the end of the summer, when the bottom was nearly dry, Carol begged her daddy to let her play in the creek, and she searched until she found the spearhead buried a few inches under the silt right where she had thrown it. She took it home and kept it on her bookshelf behind a wind-up ballerina.

Tooby went south along the bottom, and she walked north beside her daddy without talking. Their fingers brushed each other for a second; they hadn’t held hands for more than a year. Small birds shot up out of the brush as they passed.

It took only a couple of minutes before they saw the mare. At first it was just the rise of her swollen belly, an unexpected curve of soft brown in the wet bog below. And then, as they crossed through some overgrowth on the edge of the bayou, Carol saw her body laid out on a dry patch of earth along the other side of the water. Her belly rose and fell in a slow rhythm, and her eyes blinked lazily. Finding her huge body, alive but not moving, sent a shiver up Carol's back.

Her daddy stopped at the edge of the water and said, "Christ."

The water was still and the same dull red-brown as the mud. They were overdue for a rain. He looked for a place to cross and told Carol to get Tooby and the medicine bag. "Tell him it's likely a broken leg. The front left is angled wrong."

Tooby was coming her way already. Carol hollered that they'd found Betty Jack, and he began running in his slow, angular gait towards her. As they passed, she pointed back down the bayou and told him about Betty Jack's leg. She couldn't see the mare's body from there, just a flicker of her daddy's white lab coat down low to the ground. Her heartbeat pounded in her head; she wanted to believe it was the running and the horror of the Betty Jack's injury, but was also the crisis thrilling her.

When she opened the car door, the smell of something inside the medicine bag burned her nose. She took the bag and tried to run back with it, but it was too heavy. When she got back, her daddy and Tooby were standing over Betty Jack, and her daddy was gesturing wide about something he wanted Tooby to do with her. Tooby was nodding yes but looking down at the ground more than at him. Carol saw for the first

time how small and squat a man her daddy looked—even with his arms flying out in all directions—next to Tooby.

Carol stepped through the underbrush down to the water, ignoring the scrape of thorny vines across her legs. Tooby's long body made it easy for him to step out to a stranded log in the middle of the bayou and reach across to Carol for the medicine bag. One of her feet slipped down into the mud. She lifted it out slowly. It was heavy and caked over with red mud.

She called out to her daddy, "Is she OK?"

He had his back to her. He turned his head, trying to angle his eyes in her direction, but looked out towards a low crooked tree near her instead. "It's a tough one we got here, Carol. How 'bout you—" He stopped and Carol knew he had changed his mind. He wasn't going to make her wait in the car. "We won't be long."

He looked up at Tooby and took the medicine bag. Betty Jack lay on her side with her tail splayed across the ground. Her long black tail and its flecks of chestnut reminded Carol of one of her mother's Chinese fans.

Carol's daddy pulled out a shot and a vial of yellow medicine. He told Tooby, "I have enough Demerol to knock her out. It'll take just a couple of minutes before we can cut."

Tooby's eyes hooked into his.

He told Tooby, "What the hell else can we do? We've gotta get it out while it has some kind a heartbeat." A pair of dragonflies buzzed around Carol's face and landed on a fat stick nearby.

Her daddy pushed the needle into the vial and filled the syringe. When he injected the medicine into the mare's neck, her head flinched up and then settled back down. He filled the shot a second time and injected it into her neck again. Her head hardly twitched this time. Then two more quick shots of medicine from a different vial, one in her belly and the other in her broken leg. Tooby squatted beside Daddy and rested his hands on the rise of the mare for balance.

Carol's mind wandered to the naked man. She had seen his thing, his penis. And he had surely used it to have sex with the fat woman and she must have had babies, too, ones that had to come out of her body like this foal that wasn't coming out of Betty Jack's. And her mother and daddy, too. How did shameful, dangerous business add up to the foal? Foster Junior and her?

Her daddy stood and lit a cigarette before reaching back into his bag for a knife.

Tooby shifted on his legs and looked out towards the pasture. His eyes stopped on Carol, and she stared back pretending she understood whatever it was he was thinking.

Her daddy told Tooby, "Go on and lift that leg up like I showed you. It'll get heavy real fast."

Tooby said, "Yes, sir," grabbed hold of Betty Jack's back leg with both hands, and pointed it straight up.

Carol's daddy drew his knife down the mare's center. She could only see his hunched-over concentration and the movement of his arm. She was afraid to move to a better angle.

When he shifted, she saw the rough opening in Betty Jack's gut. A yellow seam tinged with blood. A layer of red muscle shone out from the gap. She looked away for a few seconds to get her bearings. The trees and every living thing hiding in them seemed to have quieted except for some far off birds cawing.

Her daddy wiped his forehead in the crook of his arm, swiped the knife across the bottom of his lab coat, leaving a smear of blood, and then leaned in to cut down through the red. Tooby readjusted his legs and spit brown into the water. The next cut was delicate. Her daddy's body was still except for the small flicks of his arm. A dark wet leg shot out of the birth sack. Her daddy let out a low breath, like a hum, set down the scalpel, and held onto the foal's hoof while working his other hand into the opening he had created. Nearly smiling, he called up to Tooby, "I got both hooves now," and pulled the foal onto the ground.

Its body was so slick, she couldn't make out a color.

Her daddy told Tooby, "You can put her leg down," and cleared the foal's nose with his fingers.

He cut and tied the cord attaching the foal to Betty Jack, and then blew right into the foal's nose. It gurgled and wheezed out a breath. Both men rubbed its slick back and chest until her daddy said, "She's got a steady breath going now. We're good."

One dark ear popped up from where it was flattened against her head. It twitched, and then the other popped up and twitched, too.

Her daddy stood up. His lab coat was splotted in grim shades of yellow, brown, and red. He moved over to Betty Jack's head and smoothed his hand down her neck.

“OK, girl.”

Her eyes were closed. Her head was a rich chestnut color with black lines around her eyes, like ladies wore, and her black mane stood out elegantly against her light coat. The open and bloodied belly, partly hidden behind the foal, didn't look real to Carol. If she connected that part of the mare to her beautiful face, she would be sick, was already starting to feel it coming on. She rested her forehead on her raised knees and watched the ground under her.

Tooby asked her father, “You need me to get my pistol?” cleaning his hands on his pants. “It's in my truck. Up at the barn.”

Carol sat up. “What for, Daddy? Don't you sew her up now?”

He looked up at her. She could see he'd forgotten she was there.

“There's no fixing Betty Jack, Baby. She won't walk again.”

He took off his lab coat, folding the stains out of sight and then turned to Tooby. “No. That's alright. I got something else in my bag. Keep it on hand, even though I don't like to say so.”

He looked at Carol. “Come over her and pet her for me, Baby.”

Carol did. She squatted between the mare and her foal and ran a hand down the mare's neck and along her jaw. Her coat was hot and the air smelled like salt and blood. The foal lifted its head and flicked its ears, and Carol reached her other hand to its wet head.

The last injection didn't look any different from the others.

Her father stood and said, "Go get the goddam car, would you," as he passed his keys over to Tooby. He put away the empty vials, the syringes, and the knife he'd piled on a dry patch near Betty Jack's head.

"Go on, Carol. Go with Tooby."

She didn't want to but stood up and went anyway.

Tooby was walking in long strides, and she had to half run to keep up. Her one shoe was heavy with caked-on mud.

She asked him, "You ever done that before?"

"Never," he spit his dark snuff juice out to the side. The buzz of cicadas surrounded them. "Your Daddy's half crazy . . . but I can't say."

Sitting there in the car with Tooby and the muggy air built up inside, Carol thought of Betty Jack cut open and dead and the wet foal with no mother to lick her clean. Tooby reached an arm around her shoulder and put his lips on her eyebrow, something more and less than a kiss.

He drove down to the bayou, and Carol put her head out the window to let the air whip across her face.

Her daddy met them at the car and took another lab coat from the trunk to lay across the backseat. He said, "We'd best take the foal home. I want to watch it close for a few days. Help me load it in, Tooby."

The foal filled the backseat. Tooby had to fold and tuck her legs to make them fit.

She was darker brown than her mother, and her mane and tail were the same russet—a color name Carol’s mother had taught her—as her body. One small circle of white between her eyes flowed from a trickle to a broad white and pink lake around her nose.

Tooby said he’d walk back to the barn and get the tractor for Betty Jack’s body.

There was no room in back with the foal, so Carol sat beside her father. She twisted and reached to pet it.

Her daddy patted her leg, “Don’t fall in love, Carol.”

She was confused at first, wondering if he thought she loved Tooby. Then she wondered if she did. If Tooby might—ever. Their love would have nothing to do with baby voles and poor dead Betty Jack.

She understood when her father said, “You’ll regret it. She’s born too early and likely weak.” But the other idea had come now.

“I know.” Mother wouldn’t let Foster Junior and Carol say “I know” in place of “Yes, sir” or “Yes, ma’am,” but her daddy didn’t correct things like that.

His teeth ground down on his cigarette before he lit it.

Carol named her Apple without telling him. Apple’s eyes were closed and her ears curled oddly at the top and twitched.

Tooby was waiting in front of the barn when the car passed. He waved. When Carol looked out the back window, she could hardly make out his shape behind the cloud of orange dust.

As they drove through town, Carol was still turned around and she saw the Conway house out the back window. Mrs. Conway was never on the porch after lunch. Sometimes Petty was but not today. Since this morning, she'd brought a little wagon around and left it in the front yard. It was filled with twigs and bigger sticks, even a log or two. A half-dressed baby doll lay across the top of the pile, and Carol wondered if Petty was planning to build a little house for her doll or make a pretend campfire.

The dogwoods and bright pink azalea bushes in front of her own house looked to Carol like children playing under the watchful eye of the red brick walls and stern columns. She and Foster Junior didn't play in the front yard. Her mother said Fairfield Avenue was too public for that.

When they pulled up, her daddy said, "Carol, honey, go get Say Say and tell her I need some help out here with the foal."

Carol found Say Say in the kitchen pulling feathers out of ducks. Her mouth watered to think of Say Say's south Louisiana style fricassee duck. Foster Junior ran in the kitchen with little Petty Conway close behind. She had on a red polka-dotted dress that reminded Carol of one she wore when she was a little kid. Her red bow hung loose and low by her ear, pulling a few black curls down tight and straight.

Foster Junior ignored Carol standing there and asked Say Say, "Are our feathers ready yet?"

"Not yet. Y'all get out to the backyard for a while," she told them, giving them an imaginary push with her hand.

Carol told Say Say Daddy needed help with a foal in the car. Say Say let out a cry and reached out to God. Carol liked how she stretched her hands up to God. It made more sense than looking down and folding up your hands like you were either ashamed of yourself or trying to catch a cricket.

On the way out Carol asked, “Why’s Petty here?”

Say Say looked at Carol. “I don’t know, Baby. Her mother set her out of the car and drove away like she used do a while back, right after Mr. Conway left.” Carol had forgotten about that. “And your mama didn’t do a thing. I didn’t know Petty was here for a long time, not ‘til they came running through the house chasing after each other.”

Carol’s mother was standing by the Buick. She had on her white pedal pushers and a soft pink blouse that seemed to float in the breeze. Her hair was swooped up pretty, and Carol thought how she could have loved her mother just for that, for how beautiful she was. When Carol came closer, she could see hard lines on her mother’s face and thought they were from worry over the foal.

She was talking to Daddy and didn’t see Carol. Her voice was quiet, which made the things she was saying even worse. “Well, Darling, this ain’t your Big Mamie’s house. You live in town now, Foster Baby, and we have some rules about things here. Is that gone be hard for you to understand?” She drew out some of the words the way the kids at school teased the ones who didn’t live in town.

Say Say stood by the Buick waiting to help Carol’s daddy carry Apple into the house. She wouldn’t stop rubbing her hands together like she was trying to work lotion into them.

Carol's mother's voice got sharper, "The horse can't come inside the house."

Foster Junior and Petty were howling like coyotes in the backyard.

Carol said, "Mother, it might die. Why would you want that?"

Mother started to cry, and Daddy's face was boiling red.

Say Say turned to Carol, "Baby, take them two down to Clem's, and y'all get some lemonade."

Carol didn't want to go to Uncle Clem's hardware store. She wanted to be with Apple, but she couldn't go against Say Say. She turned away from Say Say and her parents, so they wouldn't see how she wanted to cry, too.

When Carol went around back to tell the other two they were going to Clem's, Petty smiled and said, "Cowabunga," in her dull little voice, and Foster Junior asked, "What about our feathers?" But Petty pulled his hand, and he came anyway.

Usually Say Say walked to Clem's, and it was relaxing—taking time to greet people along the way and notice what was blooming in whose yard and, closer to downtown, what had been changed out in the store window displays. But now Carol couldn't see anything but the hot sidewalk in front of them.

At Clem's store, they passed through the usual congregation of old men standing out front smoking cigars and talking. Carol walked straight to the back while Foster Junior and Petty stopped to look at a rack of comics. Carol sat on one of the red stools at the new soda counter. Uncle Clem had just recently put in a big shiny chrome fountain with mirrors along the wall. Fancy as Dallas he'd told them before it came in. Carol loved it the first time they came, but today it looked too bright and childish.

Charlie was the soda jerk on Saturdays. He looked close to Tooby's age, maybe younger, and always called them Mr. Foster J. and Miss Carol. But it was somebody different today—somebody Carol didn't recognize.

The new soda jerk was skinny and wore a flat top like all the high school boys, but his face had creases that made him look older. The small, white paper hat looked like a joke on him. Foster Junior and Petty climbed up on the free stools beside Carol and ordered the biggest size lemonade with cherries and some hard candies to go with. Carol ordered a regular lemonade, not even wanting it. The other two started spinning on their stools while they waited.

The soda jerk shook Foster Junior's lemonade, set it in front of him with a handful of candies, and said, "There you have it, Little Man."

Foster Junior didn't like being called little anything. He gave the soda jerk a sour squint and said a near silent thank you after Carol reminded him. The soda jerk looked over at Petty, down the row at Carol, and then back again at Foster Junior.

"They twins?" he asked, looking at Carol and gesturing to the other two.

"Who?"

"Them two," he said pointing up close to Foster Junior and Petty.

Carol looked at them in the soda counter mirror. Both had curly black hair. Most mornings Mother tried to smooth Foster's down with tonic, but it still bent and curled, poking out everywhere. Carol watched Foster Junior lining up his candies in a row, and then she saw Petty studying her in the mirror. They had round overheated cheeks and pinched blue eyes. She saw it, but there was no sense in it. Carol stared back at her own

face in the mirror for a few seconds. It was long and angular like her mother's but not beautiful.

The soda jerk was still watching her. Carol said, "No. Same hair. Same age. I guess it looks that way to somebody doesn't know us."

He shook his head and said, "If that ain't something." He gave Petty her order, calling her "Little Lady."

When the three left Clem's, the soda jerk ran out to the sidewalk after them calling out, "You gotta pay, kids. We don't give out free sodas back here."

Carol turned back and said, "Clem's our uncle. He keeps an account." Without saying anything, the soda jerk turned around and walked back in, holding onto his paper hat so it wouldn't blow off. There was no charge account. They could have anything they wanted there, but that was the polite way to say it.

On the walk home, Carol tried to imagine Daddy and Mrs. Conway kissing each other on her front porch or maybe in the hospital, but she couldn't picture it. She'd hardly seen him kissing Mother. Why would he want Mrs. Conway? Where would they have sex? Not at their house. Not Mrs. Conway. And why would they want a baby? Why would he want Petty when he had her?

Foster Junior and Petty stopped to watch a caterpillar inch across the sidewalk. Carol waited for a couple of minutes and walked ahead until they came running to catch up.

* * *

Daddy and Say Say were in the kitchen with Apple, who looked like a swaddled baby in some old green medical blankets they had pulled out of the attic. Carol lay down on the floor with Apple and stroked the lines of her bony shoulders down to her hips. She could feel Apple's smooth breath followed by a wet rattle and then another smooth breath and its rattle, over and over.

Foster Junior and Petty walked in and plopped themselves down onto the cool floor beside Apple and Carol.

"You can pet her," Carol told them. "Her name is Apple."

Foster Junior was timid about touching her, but Petty reached out to the white spot between her eyes and then flinched at the warm, damp truth of her being alive on the kitchen floor. Carol looked at her daddy to see if he was watching Petty with the same soft gaze he sometimes had for Foster Junior and her. And Mother, too. He wasn't though. He was telling Say Say something funny, and she was answering with her hand over her mouth.

The doorbell rang. Her daddy said that must be the man with the colostrum, and he went to the door. When Carol heard Ladette Conway's voice, she jumped up. She wanted to see what they were like together. Her daddy wasn't at the door though. He was pulling out of the driveway.

"He's prob'ly gone to find that milk for the little thing," Say Say told Carol from behind.

And there was Mother, swollen faced and hair gone limp, smiling at Ladette Conway and saying, “Too bad they just got back from the hardware store, and Petty’s ready to go home. You’ll have to stay for a cup of coffee the next time.”

Up close Mrs. Conway had a sharp-edged face and a thin, bony build, but she was young—still wore a ponytail—and pretty in a way.

“I kin stay.” Her ponytail swished like a girl’s. She had Petty’s voice but deeper. “Petty’s got nowhere to be. Just going home to make more of her little stick piles. She kin do that here just as well as there.” Her laugh turned into a cough, and she pulled a cigarette from her pocket and asked, “You mind?”

“Of course not. Why don’t you come in and have a cup of coffee anyway?” Carol’s mother pushed a fallen lock of hair out of her eyes and led Mrs. Conway into the foyer. Mrs. Conway looked up and down the walls at the botanical prints and the children’s portraits. Carol glanced at her mother and saw her entire face—for one second or maybe even less—become grossly disfigured as though a horse had kicked it in on one side. She caught Carol’s eye and her smooth, pretty face returned as quickly as she had lost it.

Mrs. Conway said, “This is actually my first time in the house, as far as I can remember.” Her eyes lingered on a painting of a horse and jockey. “No, it definitely is.”

Carol went back into the kitchen. Foster Junior and Petty had left Apple already, and Say Say was starting up a pot of coffee. Carol lay beside Apple and rubbed the foal’s face, stopping to run her fingers back and forth across each nubby ridge where the hair

changed direction and on her forehead where the hair splayed out in a circle. Say Say stepped over Carol and Apple to get to the cabinet with the coffee cups.

Through the kitchen ceiling, Carol could hear Foster Junior and Petty giggling under his bed upstairs and Mrs. Conway in the living room telling her mother, “ You know my grandpappy worked on the crew that built your granddaddy’s store and all them houses, too. Put the elevator in pretty much by hisself.”

She stopped to take a cup of coffee from Say Say. The cups and spoons clinked, and then she went on, “They say he fell down that shaft and that’s why he never walked straight. It’s true, too. He always favored the one side. The right, it was. Or maybe it was the left. Things you think you’d never forget, you up and do. Don’t matter one way or another, though, does it?”

Carol rubbed Apple’s face, and the foal’s eyes closed like a baby being rocked to sleep despite Petty’s screeching out of pretend fear as she ran from Foster Junior. When she passed through the kitchen with the duck feathers stuck behind her ears, she stopped and said, “Aww . . .” but had to keep going when Foster Junior got there with a lasso.

She yelped, and Carol’s mother called out, “Foster, y’all quiet down.”

Carol felt the last weak rattle of Apple’s breath, and, not wanting to believe the foal had really died, lay still with her. She pulled part of Apple’s wool blanket onto herself and waited. Her tears pooled on the bridge of her nose and then spilled to the other eye, washing over it and finally tapping lightly onto the kitchen floor.

Mrs. Conway kept talking, “And your Foster, Connie, he’s been good to our family over the years, bringing—”

Her mother interrupted Mrs. Conway, "I'm sorry, Ladette, but—"

Carol stood up, wiped her eyes, and walked into the living room. She sat so close to her mother on the settee that their hips touched.

Mrs. Conway lost the thread of her conversation and started again, "You've got a pretty one there, Rebecca. Nearly a teenager, I imagine . . ."

ONE BODY

Reba Holman didn't drink coffee until rehab. Like smoking, it gives her hands and your mouth something else to do while they—and your whole body—beg for a fifth or a line or a fix. It had been cocaine for Reba, but she was already six weeks out of rehab and almost three months clean. She was starting to believe things would be different from here on.

She made a point of arriving fifteen minutes early every morning for her shift at the Bossier City IHOP so she could sit alone in a booth and drink a cup of coffee. She watched people—the young families with sticky toddlers in booster seats, the old people reading the paper alone, or married ones chewing in silence across the table from one another.

Reba took the waitressing job because IHOP was walking distance from her new apartment. In December she'd sold her car to help pay for the rehab program. That wasn't the only reason she applied to IHOP though. When she was a little girl, her Dad picked her up from her mother's house on Saturday mornings and took her to an IHOP for breakfast. She ordered the Funny Face Pancake, and he watched her eat it while he drank black coffee, every so often poking his finger into the whipped cream hair of her smiley-faced pancake for a taste. He would say, "Don't do that one day when you get invited to eat breakfast at the White House."

When he would drop her back at home after breakfast and say good-bye until the next week or maybe month, depending on his work schedule, Reba's stomach—plied full with pancakes, syrup, whipped cream and hot chocolate—always ached.

One icy afternoon in January, Reba stopped by her mailbox on her way up to her apartment and saw a flyer on the bulletin board beside the boxes. It said:

CHATEAU BOSSIER PAGEANT PARTY!
This Saturday night!
See the Miss America Pageant on the Big Screen!
Popcorn Free of Charge!
7:00 in the Special Events Room

Small pictures of American flags, each set off at a different angle, surrounded the words.

A suntanned college girl in workout sweats walked up to the mailboxes. She told Reba, "It's really just an unrented apartment the manager uses to show movies and have lame Christmas parties." The girl searched for the right key. "That's how he can advertise this place as an apartment *community* instead of the run-down place we know and love."

Reba smiled at her. Popcorn and a pageant sounded nice.

She came too early, so she found a place on one of the soft couches the manager had arranged in jumbled rows in front of the TV.

Alone on the couch, she crossed and uncrossed her legs and dug through her purse, not sure what she was after. Maybe a mint. It reminded her of being in eighth

grade. It was a simple and good kind of anxious until she felt the smooth burn in the back of her throat, that ache for a little bump of coke on the end of a credit card. Reba dabbed her nose and told herself all she had to do was *breath and just be with it*, as Artie the Lifehaven chaplain had taught her and her classmates in recovery.

The wheels of the popcorn machine squeaked as the manager rolled it in. He pushed the plug into the wall and started the machine before noticing Reba.

“Hey there!” he called to her over the sound of the motor. Reba smiled. He had on an American flag sweater and thinning, gelled hair that looked clumpy and wet.

Soon the room filled up with more than two dozen Chateau Bossier residents who took their jackets to the bedroom, which was jumbled with odds and ends equipment for the complex, and piled them onto a washing machine unit still in its cardboard box. Reba hadn’t seen most of the people before. They chatted and laughed as if they knew each other already. She got in line for popcorn just as the manager announced in a circus voice, “Get your popcorn now!”

Reba took her bag of popcorn to an empty couch in the center of the room and settled in for the pageant.

She smelled the fellow’s cologne—Polo—before she saw him. She heard him chatting with a cluster of people behind her, but she could tell by the way his voice was traveling that he was looking her way the whole time. Soon he slid in beside her on the couch and asked, “This spot taken?”

Reba smiled big enough for her one dimple to show and said, “I guess it is now.” A warm rush of embarrassment flooded her neck.

At first glance, she liked pretty much everything she saw—his broad, sexy chest and the way his jeans had worn a little around the lines of his thigh muscles. *Slow up.* One year was the rule they taught at rehab. No new romance for a year. *We have to learn to love ourselves before we can love someone else.* How many times had she heard that or read it framed on a wall at Lifehaven?

The group quieted down as the preliminary recap began but got rowdy during the swimsuit competition. A couple of Arkansans hooped and hollered at the screen every time Miss Arkansas appeared.

The man beside her, who told her his name was Steve, leaned over and whispered in Reba's ear, "People from Arkansas need *something* to get excited about." His breath was warm on the top of her ear and sent a cool shiver down the right side of her neck. Reba laughed.

Miss Louisiana, of course, got the biggest noise. She was a long-legged crowd pleaser with wide brown eyes and chestnut hair. Someone called her a thoroughbred. Steve and Reba didn't join in. The space between them seemed to be quivering, and Reba didn't want to break it by talking. She wanted to feel it a little longer, just to see if it was real.

Some of the men got out of hand during the swimsuit competition, and one of the women came back with comments about liposuction and breast implants. No one knew for certain if that was pageant legal or not. After Miss Oklahoma took the crown, everyone sighed like it was good movie with a bad ending —minus the two Okies who

walked around the room puffed out, as if they had been acquitted of everything wrong with Oklahoma.

Steve and Reba stayed put while the others stood up. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He looked down at the popcorn-littered carpet and said, “You’re prettier than everyone of them girls. No question.” His hands were clasped together tight in front of him.

Reba waited for Steve to look up at her and then told him, “Now I’m starting to think you’re full of shit.” She smiled and stood up.

Steve stood, too, looked Reba right in the face and said, “I’m not. Really. The other girls would wilt like little wildflowers that hadn’t never seen a rose before.” His eyes looked the color of clover against his fleece vest, a freebee from a Houston oil company he told Reba he contracted for.

Reba flipped her hand in the air to tell him to stop all the crap and then walked away. She wasn’t that kind of pretty. Wasn’t sure she ever was. She knew how to make men hungry for her, but that was a different thing. She’d come to think of her looks as too thin and washed out after a year of using and not eating or sleeping enough. When she studied her face in the mirror she felt hollowed out by the silence, especially first thing in the morning or late at night after shutting off the TV, and she could see the thin lines and sharp edges of a woman up in her thirties, not the twenty-six year old she was.

The next week Steve showed up at IHOP during her shift and asked her out before his second cup of coffee.

She said yes, telling herself it was a way to pass the time until life came easier, to stave off the loneliness, and a hell of a lot better than using. Steve met Reba at her apartment door at 6:30, exactly as planned, and took her to the Olive Garden.

Over dinner, she told Steve pretty much everything—about starting work as a stripper at The Cat’s Meow last year, thinking she could save up and finish school, and then going from just stripping to taking a couple of customers on the side for the extra money. About snorting coke with her richest, best customer and eventually groveling for him to leave her with an 8-ball each time he went away. She’d become so comfortable with her story at rehab that she’d forgotten how shocking it was. Steve’s pasta cooled on his plate while he watched her and listened, and Reba wondered if he’d find an excuse to end their date before the waiter came asking for their dessert orders. But he didn’t. Steve confessed that he’d had his own trouble with a drinking and driving accident back in high school that nearly killed a child.

He said, “You don’t scare me, Reba Holman, if that’s what you’re trying for.”

She drank down some water to stop the burn of coming tears.

After dinner, they went to see Pirates of the Caribbean at the mall, but Reba couldn’t concentrate on the movie.

Steve became a regular at the IHOP, and the two went on a few more dates before she asked him to dinner at her place one Friday night. Reba had made her boundaries clear in those first couple of weeks, not even asking him inside her apartment to watch TV.

She couldn't remember ever being so nervous about a man coming to her place. Suddenly everything in her apartment looked too shabby and too floral.

After dinner, they walked down to the neighborhood park. From half a block away, the moonlight on the small playground looked like a dusting of snow. They sat on the swings, and Steve asked Reba about her name. She told Steve how her mom raised her on her own. And yes, her mother named her after Reba McIntyre. Reba used to listen to "Fancy" over and over until she believed it must be about herself. She didn't anymore. She told Steve, "I think I'm done buying into fate—good or bad. I count on faith now."

Steve motioned for her to come sit in his lap. He wrapped his arms around her and used his feet to rock the swing a little.

Maybe this was one of the rewards of being clean. A good man.

They walked back holding hands. Inside, Reba pushed Steve playfully onto her loveseat and kissed him hard. She'd forgotten what real desire felt like. A year ago she was doing lines off her compact before servicing one man or the other. After a while, she couldn't have sex without a bump.

Reba and Steve spent most of Saturday and Sunday in her wrought iron bed with a white puffy duvet that they alternately threw overboard and pulled back over themselves when they couldn't do anything but give over to sleep. Reba felt like a castaway in the best sense. On Sunday afternoon, Steve tried to talk about love and "from here on out." Reba got out of bed and cracked a joke about being taken hostage by a cowboy for the weekend.

The next week Steve pulled Reba from the booth where she was having her morning coffee and showed her a new poster taped to one of the windows at the IHOP entrance. The poster had a picture of Jesus Christ with his arms spread and a beauty pageant crown hovering a few inches above his head. “One Body in Christ Pageant 2003” was printed in hot pink across the top. He took Reba’s order pad out of her apron, wrote the phone number down, and tore the sheet out. As he slid the little paper in the back pocket of his jeans, he told her, “I’m gonna go ahead and let them know I found their Miss One Body in Christ. They can call off the search.”

Reba laughed and said, “You’ve lost your poor mind. Now I know for sure.”

That night Steve stopped by her place and told her he had really called. Her contestant application packet was already in the mail. She knew she ought to laugh it off or be pissed that Steve had called without asking, but the call was harmless. And it meant something that he saw her like that.

The next week it arrived. Postal machines had mangled the fuchsia envelope. Reba didn’t know what it was until she flipped it over and she saw, “The One Body in Christ Pageant, Loralee and Jerry Clinghart” in the return address corner. A picture of a tiny silver tiara hung lopsided on the “O” in *One*.

Reba switched on the TV and tossed the packet onto the little kitchen table. While she waited for her frozen dinner to defrost in the microwave, she pulled the forms from the envelope and thumbed through the pages in front of her— Contestant Information, Testimony, Minister’s Recommendation. Her N.A. meeting at the Methodist church down the street started in thirty minutes, but instead of going Reba

turned over the welcome letter and wrote out her testimony in pencil. When she had filled the paper, she began writing on the back of the envelope, never thinking she might really apply.

When the Book of Psalms tells me about the Shadow of the Valley of Death I don't have to Imagine what that looks like. My Mailing Address used to be in the Shadow of the Valley of Death. Out of His Grace I've started praying my letters up to God and I have Received my Response through His Word. There was a time I thought I was In Charge of my Life. Now I start each day by giving it over to God's will. I never want to walk Outside the Light again.

The handwriting was neat and careful. A cold shiver lit down Lorelee Clinghart's back. Imagining an array of traumatic possibilities for Reba Holman affected Lorelee maybe even more than if she had known exactly what happened.

As she sat reading One Body in Christ applications with Jerry in their small home office, an uninvited sadness curled into the corner of her mind. She had never really crashed in life, nothing beyond the ordinary. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were always right there at Serepta Baptist, where her people and their forefathers worshipped and knew—probably without a tiny quake of a doubt—their place in God's world. And Bossier Methodist had been a fine spiritual home for Jerry and her, but against her best self, Lorelee sometimes wished she had known other things, too.

At the Ouachita Parish Library, where she worked part time, she gravitated towards stories about the shadowy side of life, about different kinds of people, and about

the worst kinds of suffering, too. It caused trouble at book club. Most recently, she made the mistake of choosing *The Kite Runner* for the February selection. It caught her eye when it showed up on a *New York Times* bestsellers display. No one in the book club read it all the way through. They said they'd just had no free time to read that month and then, during her presentation, asked why Loralee hadn't chosen a book with a better outlook on life. And why not from this culture, something relatable? There are so many good books here in this country to read before we need to go searching elsewhere. Loralee wanted to spew out a tirade that would change everyone's view on the world, something like she had seen in inspiring movies, but she wouldn't know what to say. Plus that sort of thing wasn't realistic in a place like Kisatchie. You would have to keep living with all the people you just shouted down.

She thought to pray through what was now turning into anger, but instead she pulled Reba's eight-by-ten from the packet.

Jerry glanced at the photo. "She's got good lines. Must have been gorgeous ten, maybe even five years ago."

Loralee looked up at Jerry and said, "She's only twenty-six."

She saw what he meant, though, and wondered what else, other than a youthful sheen, Reba's valley of death had sapped from her. You could see it in the way the skin thinned near her eyes and mouth and in the slight dullness of her otherwise lovely brown eyes. And one eye looked smaller than the other. Loralee actually liked it—the one side doing what it was supposed to do and the other expressing something completely different.

Sassy. That's what Jerry called the girls with a little edge. But Lorelee wasn't sure that's what she saw in Reba. She looked at Jerry's hand resting carelessly on another contestant's eight-by-ten. Despite graduating college two decades ago, Jerry still wore his Tech ring. Lorelee thought the ring looked juvenile and out-of-place on his puffed-out and veiny hand.

When she was the age of these girls, she had seen nothing but Jerry's handsome goodness. When he led prayers at Sunday night meeting, she had swelled with love, with gratitude to God for this man she could feel falling in love with her, but she and Jerry had lost something without him even noticing.

Lorelee could trace it back to the miscarriages, one too early to know if it was a boy or girl and the second, a girl at 16 weeks. Her name was Sarah Joy. They baptized her and had a small ceremony at home. Afterwards, Jerry closed up on Lorelee and lost interest in sex, too. Lorelee understood, though, even as she grieved the loss. She marked Sarah Joy's age every day for more than a year and, after that, by the month and then the years. Seventeen.

She would rub Jerry's back at night and breath through her mouth to keep him from hearing the rattle of her cry. She didn't get pregnant again, and he started shutting her out and belittling her in small ways that stung. His kisses hello and good-bye seemed to come out of habit—when he remembered—and not love. Ant bites you don't feel until there's enough to send a signal to your brain.

And all the while, they'd been lifted up by the congregation at Bossier Methodist as mentors for engaged couples and leaders in the CCC, the Christian Couples Circle.

“Just say, ‘Yes, Honey.’” That was Jerry’s funny solution to marital happiness when younger fellows, hungry for the secret, would ask. But he hadn’t said that when she’d suggested they go for fertility counseling and when, years later, she’d brought home an information packet about fostering children. Loralee figured Jerry’s quiet was a kind of patient wisdom and tried to pray for some of her own patience with God’s plan.

Nor had he said *yes* when Loralee questioned his idea for a profitable beauty pageant ministry. She wondered out loud if there weren’t other, better ways to serve God. There were those house-building ministries and local kids’ programs with a Bible curriculum.

“Profitable,” Jerry had emphasized. “We can glorify God *and* earn a decent living.”

Jerry cut corners in their beauty pageant business, accepting money from churches and squirreling away some of it into their savings account. “You pay yourself first,” he had explained to her. “It’s the first rule of good money management. Everybody knows that.”

Jerry liked to say he was a rainmaker because he marketed the pageant to the papers and news stations and brought in big donations, more than the other local pageants—even the Miss America feeders.

At the library Loralee Googled a few things. Working there had certainly taught her how to find information, and when she ran a search for Arti Deloach, the man who wrote the minister’s letter for Reba Holman, Loralee learned that he was the chaplain at Lifehaven Drug Rehabilitation Center in Texas. She kept her discovery to herself.

* * *

Steve bought Reba her evening gown for the pageant. For her talent costume, she decided to repurpose an aquamarine leotard she found at a second hand store near the mall. The outfit reminded her of an exotic bird, maybe an ostrich, and she was coming to like it more and more as she worked on it. Most of all she hadn't wanted Steve to spend more money on the pageant. Reba's N.A. sponsor, a raspy voiced antiques dealer in her sixties named Maura, told her it was a mistake, and then, when Reba told her about the \$4000 scholarship and the chance to teach people about drugs and addiction, Maura said it could be healing if Reba could just stay grounded. Reba still didn't know what people really meant by grounded.

Steve took her to the preliminary interview and rehearsal the night before the pageant. On the way he kept turning to look at her.

"You're gorgeous, Baby. I feel sorry for the rest of them."

Reba chewed her lip. She wanted a cigarette, but didn't want to smell like a smoker for her interview. More than that, she wanted a bump—the tingling numbness on her face and then the smooth, rocket-launch feeling that she could handle anything. She didn't know if she could handle this, even with Steve. Why hadn't she gotten to an NA meeting this week? She would make herself go tomorrow morning. She prayed the Serenity prayer silently and tried to just *Be with it*.

Steve exited off the highway to the convention center, and reached a hand over to Reba's stockinged knee. "I love you, girl."

Reba put her hand on his. It didn't look like her hand, not with the French manicure she'd done last night. She said, "Thank you, Steve," and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "That means a lot."

She wasn't going to say something that wasn't true yet.

Loralee and Jerry Clinghart didn't sleep much the night before the dress rehearsal and interview. For starters, the centerpiece for the O.B.I.C. stage turned out to be a challenging installation. A Christian found-art sculptor had fitted two weathered steel poles together to make a crucifix and asked the Clingharts if they would like to use it for their pageant. Loralee and Jerry decided to put the cross in the center of the stage but had trouble keeping it standing, even with the creator's help. While the artist worked a buttress into place, the cross slipped from Jerry's hands and fell on the toes of his right foot.

"Shit!" slipped Jerry's mouth. Loralee was stunned and had to hold back a smile from somewhere she didn't know. She wouldn't have thought Jerry was capable of such a word and wondered if he'd used it before. His face flushed, even the thinning spot at the top of his head was red underneath, and, for no reason at all, she wanted to do something bold—kiss him or tell him she loved him—but the sculptor was there looking stunned, too, and then asking if Jerry was alright.

At two AM, when the stage was perfect with the cross, the ferns, and the pink and white One Body in Christ banner, and they had finally made it back home, Loralee slid

into bed and reached for Jerry, but he pretended to sleep. She could tell by his too-quiet breathing.

She turned on her lamp and picked up the pageant program sitting on her bedside table. How well she knew each contestant and how much she loved them already. These were their contestants, even though she only knew two personally—the sleepy-eyed daughter of a regular library patron and the daughter of a girl Lorelee had grown up with in Serepta. Like her mother, the girl was one of those horse people. She had even posed with her horse for her glossy and listed *The Healing Power of Hippotherapy* as her platform. What would Sarah Joy have chosen? Where would she want her pageant photo taken, or would she be a tomboy and scorn the make-up and the sequin dresses?

On the evening of the rehearsal and interviews, Lorelee checked in the contestants at a folding table outside the main hall of the auditorium. Candace McRae, the broad-faced stocky wildlife rehabilitator from Coushatta, arrived first. Her mother, who looked uncomfortable in a Sunday dress and heels, led Candace to the table. Candace had written her personal statement about saving a nest of baby raccoons she found in an old fishing boat behind her parents' house. When Lorelee and Jerry read the essay, he'd said it lacked attention to faith. He also questioned the value of saving raccoons. Lorelee said, "I guess they're all God's creatures in the end."

Jerry said, "So's a nest of wasps, but I'm not going to go saving it, are you?"

Jerry seemed to be getting edgier as the pageant neared. In past month their profit margin had shrunk a little each week.

Loralee wanted to hug Candace—the first arrival—out of her own excitement and tender feelings for all the girls, but she maintained a professional air and gave the girl a reassuring smile as she passed her a welcome packet.

Reba Holman was smaller than Loralee had expected. Bird-like and pretty in a yellow dress with a fitted bodice, a thin belt circling her waist, and matching yellow heels that were more sexy than beautiful. Reba reached for a loose strand of black hair and tried to place it back into her swooping up-do, but the tall cowboy in jeans and black blazer who had come with her mouthed “stop” as he smiled at her. He had a hand on the small of her back as though he wanted to make sure other people knew he had brought her.

When the man turned for a drink at the water fountain, Loralee saw that Reba’s forehead was tight with worry lines, and she wondered if they had to do with the man or just regular pageant stress.

Loralee shook Reba’s hand and introduced herself. Her hand felt as cold and delicate as bird bones.

Before the next contestant approached the table, Loralee whispered, “I loved your essay.”

Reba looked at Loralee closely and said, “Thank you. Thank you so much, Mrs. Clinghart.”

Music started and one of the pageant judges, a former Miss Pure Louisiana who owned a dance studio in Shreveport, began working with the fourteen contestants on the group number. She had choreographed a Jars of Clay piece called “Flood” for them to

perform together at the beginning of the show. “Plenty of pizazz but simple enough to learn in one night,” she’d assured Lorelee. Jerry didn’t like the song. It sounded heavy metal and psychedelic to him, but Lorelee loved its fierceness when Miss Pure Louisiana ran it by them a few weeks back. She even went out and bought the album.

Miss Pure Louisiana handed out long blue scarves to each contestant and showed them how to make flood waves in the air without blocking out each other’s faces.

* * *

Reba was randomly chosen to be the first preliminary interviewee that night. She had ten minutes to touch up in the dressing room among the other contestants. Most had mothers and friends circling as they re-applied make-up and sprayed fallen sprigs of hair back into place. Steve stood up to kiss Reba on her way to the conference room where three judges waited, and she leaned into his chest, thinking how nice it would be to go home with him right now.

The judges shook hands and introduced themselves to Reba—Miss Pure Louisiana, Reverend Dixon from Bossier Methodist, and Alan Seeble, the Regional Director of Libbey Glass Company. Miss Pure Louisiana smiled at Alan Seeble as she told Reba that Libbey Glass had donated the scholarship fund to the pageant.

The judges sat around a mahogany conference table with pink and white O.B.I.C. clipboards at each place. Alan Seeble asked Reba to sit, and she did, imagining the grace of a first lady or royalty. Miss Pure Louisiana complimented Reba’s dance ability in the rehearsal, and Reverend Dixon, an older, slack-faced man whose tan suit had little faded

stains here and there, commented on how moved he was by Reba's essay. He leaned forward and asked, "Do you think you could elaborate on it for us, Miss Holman?"

Reba tried to side step, telling the panel she'd had challenges in her life, like "Each one of you, I'm sure. It's God we share, right? The Way and the Light."

Her hands trembled, and she didn't know what she was saying.

Miss Pure Louisiana scooted her chair closer to the table between them and said, "Your platform ministry is drug prevention. Often the best platforms come out of a contestant's personal experience. Is that the case for you, Reba?"

Goddamnit. If this is what they wanted . . . "Yes, it is."

"Okay." Miss Pure Louisiana continued, "How is that?"

"I'm a recovering addict. Five months and a day." Reba raised her fist to pump it but thought better and set it back in her lap. "Who is better at teaching kids about addiction than someone who knows firsthand? I can do that. I want to do that."

The Libbey Glass man didn't try to hide the sickened look on his face. "Is it alcohol? Or do you mean drugs?"

Reba sat up, "Technically alcohol is a drug." He didn't like that answer either. "But it was drugs. Cocaine."

The minister cleared his throat, apologized, and looked down at his clipboard.

Miss Pure Louisiana went on, "How can we know if you—and I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but we should ask this—how do we . . . do *you* know you won't have a relapse while you are the reigning Miss One Body in Christ?"

Reba's face flushed with anger. She wanted to say, "Fuck you, pure people," but she didn't. She smiled tightly and said, "We don't. We can't know what's going to happen. For none of us, right?"

She was crying before she made it halfway down the aisle towards the front of the auditorium where the others waited. Steve rushed to her before anyone else must have noticed, and they walked outside. The wet streaks on her face cooled in the night air. He tried to kiss the tears still streaming down her cheeks.

"What the hell did they say to you?" he asked.

"No. It's me. It's me," Reba told him. "Can you take me home?"

Steve offered to stay over, but Reba said *no*, she would go to NA first thing in the morning. She saw that he was hurt, that he wanted to be what she needed, and she kissed him lightly—like kissing a child—before telling him goodnight.

During Reba's interview, Lorelee visited the water fountain outside the conference room twice. If only she could be in there! Reba would see how much Lorelee sympathized with her, and loved her, too, the way a person can love someone she doesn't know. Lorelee imagined them friends despite the age difference. She would pick up Reba at the IHOP when she got off, and they would go to the book club together. The other members wouldn't like the red rose tattoo on Reba's ankle and the heavy eye make-up. Let them think what they want. If Sarah Joy had grown up to be like Reba, there would no shame in that.

The water fountain dribbled a low stream at first and then spurted into Lorelee's face. When Reba walked out of the conference room, Lorelee was dabbing her face with her sleeve. She tried to say *hello* as Reba passed. Her hand shielded her face, and she let out a quiet sob. Lorelee followed her into the auditorium but stopped when the tall man who had brought Reba came and wrapped his arms around her.

Lorelee stepped back into the hallway and went inside the bathroom. She closed herself in a stall and cried for Reba, for Sarah Joy, and for the kind of woman she— Lorelee Clinghart né Lorelee Lancet—should have been, the woman she had imagined when she was a little girl.

* * *

Over two hundred people came to the pageant. Jerry had the concession stand workers open thirty minutes before the show to catch anyone who might have missed dinner or just wanted Skittles or a cup of coffee. Behind the stage every bathroom and stand-alone mirror was congested with contestants smoothing and brushing and rubbing and dabbing and asking each other if that poof looked bad from the side and if it was going to be enough lipstick or blush or eyeliner considering the lighting. Even the Pentecostals with their long hair and untouched skin looked worried. Lorelee tried to reassure them all as best she could.

As she watched Jerry take the stage with the thirteen contestants and start the welcome prayer, Lorelee thought of him all those years ago. She could remember how she felt, could even see him, slim in his double-breasted suit and with a peach fuzz face, but, like that magic eye puzzle where you can see either a chalice or a couple kissing but

never both at the same time, it was impossible to see both this Jerry and that one all at once.

Reba joined the twelve other girls and Mr. Clinghart, the stout organizer who always seemed to be smiling, on stage for the opening prayer and contestant introductions. Beyond the haze of the spotlights she could make out only shapes of people in the crowd. She might have left right then if Candace, the animal rescue girl, hadn't latched a sweaty palm onto hers. Mr. Clinghart told the audience that before beginning the prayer, he wanted to share the leading that made this pageant a reality two years ago. He spoke of his mother and his wife and the work of God's ministry beyond the pulpit—the beautiful ministry of women through their work as mothers, as homemakers, as volunteers in the schools and elsewhere in the community and, yes, as beauty pageant winners. Ambassadors of God, that's who you're looking at up here!"

He turned to face the contestants lined up behind him, and the crowd broke into applause. A shiver ran up Reba's spine. Mr. Clinghart wiped the sweat from his forehead, turned back to the audience, and said, "Let us pray."

When it was time for her talent performance, Reba stepped out to the middle of the stage behind the closed curtain and positioned herself a few feet in front of the metal cross. She spread her arms to match its shape and said a prayer her sponsor Maura had given to her in a little silver frame that morning at NA. *Higher Power, help me bend with life's wind and glory in its passing. Free me from rigidity.*

The curtain opened as the first vibrations of the guitar in “Stairway to Heaven” began on the loud speakers on either side of Reba. She focused on the choreography, and her muscles warmed to the music. She relaxed into the slow falls, letting her body give way to the pull of the floor, letting it feel the cool of the wood holding her before she pushed back up and into pirouettes, leaps and spins she had known since she was a little girl in dance class. Her careful choreography slipped from her and she began to move with liquid ease. She leapt across the stage again and again, ascending and descending, feeling the freedom of leaving the ground. Like a child on a trampoline. Like the child she had been before. She could hear the clapping but it sounded like it was coming to her from another country. What was real was her body and the way it moved to the gritty vibrations of the guitar and then with the high aching reach of the violin. This feeling was all she needed in the world.

Reba collapsed and rose, spinning on her own axis and there it was again. Far away waves crashing against land. She reached for the cross, clasped a hand around the cool metal pole and held it. She stretched one leg up the pole into a standing split and thought it—she—could connect the heavens to the earth if only her foot could reach a little higher. And then the cries of the guitar died down and she folded herself to the ground, knees tucked under her body and arms stretched in front of her like pictures she had seen of Arabic people praying. She felt the floor vibrating underneath her or maybe it was her heartbeat.

* * *

Loralee stood on the hidden edge of the One Body in Christ stage while she watched Reba Holman dance. Reba's first fall at the beginning of the song loosened something in Loralee, and as she saw Reba fall down like a ruined and hopeless woman and then slowly rise up again to reach out for the invisible love of God, expressing the love and sorrow Loralee felt over Sarah Joy (and over Jerry, too, if she was honest with herself), she began to cry. Even the final move, strange as it was, spoke to something both hideous and true that Loralee felt she could almost grasp.

Jerry hadn't noticed. When the music stopped he leaned into her and whispered, "What in God's name just happened on that stage?"

Loralee sucked in a rattling breath and said, "I don't know."

Jerry went on about the wide-eyed look on Reba's face and what she did with the cross. "I guarantee we're getting flack over that move."

Loralee leaned in to Jerry and said, "Shhh!" He backed away from her, and she took everything in: the crowd's hesitation and then the small, uneasy round of applause like rain spitting down on a tin roof and the way Reba Holman, red-faced and the center of her leotard soaked through with sweat, walked off the other side of the stage as elegantly as if she were in fact Miss One Body in Christ.

Reba looked on from her X mark on the stage as Miss Pure Louisiana announced the winners in each category, and, finally, the runners up and the winner, a sweet-faced Church of Christ girl who loved hounds and had clogged to "Hallelujah in My Heart."

Reba understood that her own performance had crossed a line into . . . she didn't know what. Something too raw.

When she and Steve got back to her place after the pageant, he knelt in front of her and pulled a diamond engagement ring from his jacket pocket. Reba backed onto the couch behind her.

“Steve . . . Steve,” she didn't know what to say to him.

She took his free hand and saw in his drowning eyes that he understood already. *No, not now.* His hand trembled as he put the ring back in its box, shut it, and stood up. He looked down and then up again—a slow nod—and then walked out of Reba's apartment.

She stayed on the couch and listened. She never let silence into her apartment, but here it was and here she was. From outside the muted voices of a TV in the room above, a barking dog, and the metal hum of Steve's truck starting up floated to her, and Reba felt she wasn't hearing them so much as breathing it all in.