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Rhythm of Silence

Mary P. Wohler

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RHYTHM OF SILENCE

Mary P. Wohler

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Lindenwood University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Communications

2003

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on a fictional depiction of life in the small town of Marion, Illinois in the 1930s and 40s. Each summer throughout my childhood, I spent several weeks visiting my Grandmother, Bertha Kelsey, and Aunt, Dorothy Odum, who live in Marion, Illinois. Spending the balance of the year living in the suburbs of St. Louis, I found Marion a very different world from the one I knew.

This story, in large part, was inspired by my memories of Marion as well as the memories my mother, Rosemary Doerner, has shared with me about growing up in Marion. Any similarity between the characters and incidents in the story and actual people and events is strictly coincidental. The following is a general outline for the story:

Setting: Marion, Illinois 1930s through mid 40s.

Sense of Place: A small southern Illinois town. Grammaw Kelsey and Aunt Dot were both very involved in the Marion, Illinois community. Through them, I met many of the residents.

Plot: I wanted to tell about real people, some tragic, some strong, all with a mix of personality traits, both good and bad (my humble way of trying to imitate Shakespeare).

Main Characters: Anise and her mother represent the poverty stricken people my grandmother and mother encountered as they worked for President Franklin

Roosevelt's Social Reform Program during the Great Depression. I wanted someone to rise above the sadness and neglect, thus came the main character, Robert Forester. Grammaw Netty is my Grammaw Kelsey and Aunt Dot combined. Doctor Forester, Robert's father, is a complex man who remains somewhat of a mystery throughout the story.

Point of View: Third person.

Voice: Mine, trying to depict the richness of life, the humor, the sadness and the strength and determination of these fictional people of Marion.

Writing mainstream literature, or stories about everyday people and everyday events, has always been a challenge for me. The genres: mystery, romance, science fiction and horror seemed to be more assured of holding the readers' interest. But for this culminating project I decided to put away the crutches of genre and rely solely on the diversity in human nature to carry the story. I've enjoyed the challenge and am surprised by the wide range of topics everyday life presents.

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Professor Michael Castro
Chairperson and Advisor

Adjunct Professor Harry Jackson

Adjunct Professor Glenn Irwin

To Grandmaw Kelsey and to Aunt Dot
They made the world a happy place to be.

The flexibility Lindenwood University and Professor Michael Castro allowed me with this Degree and this Culminating Project made the experience not only educationally enriching but also exciting and enjoyable. Doctor Castro's quiet guidance and support and Adjunct Professor Glenn Irwin's insistence that I had valuable things to say as a writer have made my studies at Lindenwood truly special. My gratitude to them and to my husband, Bob Wohler, and good friend, Tom Burkemper, who both gave very generously of their time to help with this writing project.

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INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on what in my life has contributed to my interest in learning to write creatively, I realize that my quiet, somewhat introverted nature has been an important factor. Standing back and watching people has given me the opportunity to observe the subtle human behavior that tells so much: the nervous twitch, the guilty grimace, the aggressive glint, the ebullient sigh. It is the little things about people that make them interesting and set them apart from the crowd. The fun comes in trying to create stories with characters displaying subtle behaviors of their own.

Being a close observer of people has also given me a love and appreciation for the work of writers who are able to capture particularly memorable, lifelike qualities in their characters. Margaret Mitchell's Rhett Butler, Mammy, Scarlett O'Hara and Ashley Wilkes in *Gone With The Wind* captivated me so completely that I read a 1058 page printing of the novel three times during the summer after my freshman year in high school. Soon after that I laid hands on John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. With the heart-rending realness of the characters: Tom Joad's crusty belligerence, Grandma's pitiful frailness and Ma's fierce devotion to family, Steinbeck caught my imagination and has held it throughout my life. It was my fascination with *Grapes of Wrath* that was largely

responsible for setting me on the path to writing stories about the people I had observed.

In an effort to improve my literary skills and become a better writer, I returned to college and completed an undergraduate degree in English. I enjoyed studying the wide range of poetry and prose covered with the degree, but nothing tweaked my interest as much as the creative writing courses. Then, near the completion of the degree requirements, I took a course covering the work of John Milton.

I admit to having frequently nodded off as we struggled through Milton's long-winded prose and as we studied his sonnets. However, during the second half of the course we read Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The memories of that long, extremely complex work of poetry have stayed with me more vividly than anything else I learned through those college years.

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan was so terrible and yet so pitiable. Michael the Archangel came alive in the story. God was not perfectly depicted, and Eve's subservience was difficult for many of the students to tolerate, but to my mind the world of richness and beautiful artistry of the writing made up for any other shortcomings in the work. One passage in particular has sent me back to our bookshelf to reread the same dog-eared page in my used, college text over and over again. It is the scene in which Eve begs for Adam's forgiveness for her

having tempted him to eat the apple of knowledge:

Forsake me not thus, Adam, witness heaven
 What love sincere, and reverence in my heart
 I bear thee, and unweeting have offended,
 Unhappily deceived; thus suppliant
 I beg, and clasp thy knees; bereave me not,
 Whereon I live, thy gentle looks, thy aid,
 Thy counsel in this uttermost distress,
 My only strength and stay: forlorn of thee,
 Whither shall I betake me, where subsist?
 While yet we live, scarce one short hour perhaps,
 Between us two let there be peace, both joining,
 As joined in injuries, one enmity
 Against a foe by doom express assigned us,
 That cruel serpent: on me exercise not
 Thy hatred for this misery befallen ...

Book X, lines 914-928

Margaret Mitchell, John Steinbeck and John Milton seem a peculiarly random trio of writers to group together. Looking back, I ponder what it was the three shared that so captured my interest and imagination. Remembering Mitchell's romantic adventure of southern belles and old world pride, Steinbeck's earthy, sad tale of poverty and helplessness, and Milton's long epic journey through evil and lost innocence, I think it is the realistic humanness of their characters that I love so much. Looking through their characters' eyes, feeling their pain and sharing their passion and disappointment drew me into their make-believe worlds.

What I attempted to do with my story *Rhythm of Silence* is to draw the reader in and let them look into my created world through the eyes and hearts of my characters and to enjoy a reading experience I hope they will remember.

Rhythm of Silence is a fictional scenario based on my own childhood memories of Marion, Illinois, as well as the experiences my mother, Rosemary Doerner, has shared with me about growing up in Marion during the depression. She was one of nine children. Her mother, Bertha Kelsey, supported the family after my grandfather, Alec Kelsey, became bedridden when he was in his mid forties. Grandmaw had a third-grade education.

Grandmaw worked at the Brokerage, a clothing outlet store, for 50 cents a day. She worked as a matron at the Marion Prison and then for President Roosevelt's Social Reform Program. With the program, she traveled to the homes of the poor and disabled and evaluated their need for government assistance. Mom served as Grandmaw's driver and secretary. Mom remembers the abject poverty they encountered and the numerous incidents of incest. She tells of the time they came to a home to find newborn twin girls lying on a filthy mattress. She remembers vividly the pathetic helplessness of the babies' sick, abandoned mother and the flies crawling all over the babies' faces. These children were the result of an incestuous relationship between their mother and her father.

Mom said she and her siblings weren't much worse off than most of the kids in Marion. She tells of doing without things and how hard she worked to help can the food they grew in their garden so they could feed the family through

the winter. She tells about fighting the rats that were constantly chewing their way through the floor and about never getting enough meat to eat because her five brothers always gobbled it up while she was helping serve the meals. Mom remembers little of crime or violence in Marion. Most of her personal memories deal with the friendships she had and the fun times when her brothers drove her to White City Park to dance to the music of the Big Bands that came and played.

I have always had a soft spot in my heart for Marion. Each summer while my four siblings and I were growing up, we spent part of our summer vacation in Marion as guests of Grandmaw Kelsey and her youngest daughter, Aunt Dot Odum. Aunt Dot is one of the most outgoing, fun-loving human beings I have ever met. She made every day an exciting, happy experience for us. Walking to Simpson's corner grocery store and buying a popsicle with Aunt Dot was as much fun as anything I can remember in my childhood.

Grandmaw Kelsey was an outgoing person and was considered a matriarch of Marion. She was always looking out for those less fortunate than she was. I doubt that she ever thought of herself as poor. She was very involved in the community and in politics. She strongly supported whichever Democratic candidate she thought most qualified. One of the highlights of her life was when she was invited to President John F. Kennedy's inaugural ball. Of all Grandmaw's many attributes, the one I remember best was her wonderful way of making me and my siblings feel so welcome when we visited. I've tried to recreate her special traits in my story through Grandma Netty.

RESULTS

Rhythm of Silence

Robert Forester lay in bed his leg covered from thigh to toe in a thick plaster cast and strung up on a gaff attached to the end of the bed.

“Do you need the flyswatter?” four-year-old Evelyn climbed up on the bed beside him bringing the flyswatter with her. Robert continued squinting straight ahead as if he was looking at something off in the distance. Deep furrows fingered out from the corners of his eyes rising up in ridges telling of more years than the 23 he had lived.

“You tell me when,” Evelyn said quietly when he did not answer. She turned the swatter upside down and slowly slipped its white wire handle down inside his cast. “Does that feel good?” she asked, rubbing his leg beneath the cast very gently with the up and down motion of the handle.

“That’s far enough,” he told her, as she pushed the handle farther down inside the cast. A wisp of her pale brown hair touched his neck as she worked carefully at her task.

“I think she’s coming back today,” the little girl said.

“No Evy.”

“She might though.”

“No,” he said, not too firmly, but with the pain of acceptance.

“The old doctor spit up again,” the little girl said. “He spit up the soup.” Robert listened to the labored breathing of the tiny crust of a being knotted up tightly on the small bed across the room from him.

“Ouch!” Robert winced as the swatter handle came too near the gaping wound at his knee. “That’s good now Evy,” he reached for the swatter. “Go next door now and see if Fussy can come over and get us turned around again.” The little girl slipped down off the bed and Robert watched her small shoulders and backside disappear through the doorway. He threw his covers back and pulled himself up at the shoulders and bent down as close to the cast as he could manage. He sniffed. He sniffed again. The doctor said he would know if gangrene had set in. The leg would stink. He lay back down and covered himself again. No stink, not yet anyway – nothing more than the antiseptic stench of the plaster.

A tiny nasal whistling noise set up from the old man across the room. Robert lay watching the dingy white pull shade at the window work with the wind. The center of the shade sucked out noisily with the breeze and fell limp again each time the breeze laid down. Robert lay watching the shade strain and relax rhythmically. For a short time, the faint whistle of the old man synchronized with the rhythm of the shade. Robert counted the beats remembering the music.

Anise Mathews was born of an incestuous relationship between her retarded mother, Helen Mathews, and Helen's father, Eli Mathews. Eli was 83 at the time of Anise's birth. A widower, his daughter Helen his only child, Eli made his living as a barrel maker. He and Helen lived in a small clapboard house at the edge of town in Marion, Illinois. The back porch was Eli's workshop. He died when Anise was three years old. A traveling social worker with President Roosevelt's Federal Emergency Relief Program called on Helen Mathews one afternoon in late August, two months after Eli's death.

Helen stood at the open front door of her house. Ragged and filthy, the dried blood of her menses caked on the insides of her legs, Helen's pathetic state was no worse than scores of others the relief worker saw in that time of the Great Depression. Three-year-old Anise hurried to her mother's side and stood ready to fend off any affronts as she had grown used to doing. The social worker looked down at the child and stood staring into her face as others did. Anise's nose was enormous; her thick-lipped mouth seemed to cover the entire lower portion of her face. Her widely set, gray-blue eyes completely covered the portion of her face above her nose. It was as if the large-featured face of a full-grown adult woman had been set upon the shoulders of tiny little girl. In Anise's eyes, the woman noted a suspicious reserve that was unsettling for one so young. The woman was overwhelmed with pity for both the mother and her child whom fate had marked so gruesomely.

Left head of the household at three, Anise quickly learned to take over Eli Mathew's role as best she could. By the time she was four, she could lay on her

belly with Eli's BB gun, as he had done, and shoot the rats that chewed their way in through the kitchen floor. At four she had also learned to read which was her mother's one pastime. How much Helen Mathews understood of what she read was uncertain, but she read out loud the text of anything she laid her hands on and Anise learned quickly.

A diligent truant officer carted Anise off to school the fall she turned six. Anise told the teacher she already knew everything and went home. The next morning the truant officer, Lloyd Burns, was back. Burns became a persistent part of the Mathews' lives for several months until Anise finally accepted the fact that she would go to school.

Robert Forester lay watching the shade suck in and out with the breeze remembering that year when Mr. Burns brought Anise Mathews to school. Robert was four years older than Anise. The other children gawked and made fun of her "ugly" face. It was the first time in her life she knew she was ugly. She kicked and clawed her way through the insults, and kept the hurt inside.

"Fussy can't come right now," Evelyn came back into the bedroom. "She said as soon as her bread comes out of the oven, she'll be over." Evelyn crawled back up on Robert's bed. He opened an arm out to her and she laid her head down on his shoulder. She lay quietly a few minutes. He glanced from the corner

of his eye into her sleeping face and then turned back to watch the scraping rhythm of the blind.

It was Fair Day. The sign read – Deluxe Remington Rifle, 5 Cents a Chance – The chrome-plated rifle in its lilac velvet lined case sat open for all to see at the other side of the counter just out of reach. Every man with a nickel had tried to win the rifle. Eleven-year-old Robert Forester was as good a shot as most of the men, but he hadn't come close. When seven-year-old Anise Mathews worked her way past the men and laid a nickel down, the barker ignored her. Anise picked up the nickel and tapped it loudly on the wooden counter.

“Scat!” the barker hissed down at her. Anise eyed the Remington and tapped louder with her nickel. The barker, his fat face flushed and wet with the August heat, rolled his already-rolled-up sleeves up another turn and went on barking his titillating challenge to the men. Anise watched him for a minute or two and then laid her nickel down, picked up the 22-gauge rifle lying on the counter and before the barker or anyone else had time to say anything about it, she fired the rifle across the twenty feet to the bull's-eye and riveted it dead center. The challenge required the pea-sized bull's eye to be hit five times and with the first explosion still ringing in everyone's ears, Anise fired a second, third, fourth and fifth shot, all inside the bull's-eye.

At first, the barker was too stunned to speak. Then slowly he walked to the bull's-eye and looked at it closely. A second later, all of the men had crowded around the bull's-eye. The barker quickly found his tongue.

"What would a little girl like you want with a rifle?" he said smoothly as he walked back to Anise.

"She won it fair and square," one of the men spoke up.

"Fair and square," another chimed in.

"I know, I know," the fat faced barker agreed. "It's just that a gun's nothing for a little girl to have. I'll give her thirty dollars instead. Thirty brand new one dollar bills," he repeated leaning down close into Anise's face. She looked up at the Remington. She had no idea how much the gun was worth, but she knew what little money her grandfather had put away was almost gone and that thirty dollars would keep her and her mother in food for a long, long time. Anise eyed the barker suspiciously. She eyed the Remington.

"Here it is honey," the barker counted out thirty crisp new one-dollar bills and laid them on the counter. Anise stared down at the money, and up at the barker.

"Don't do it Anise," Robert Forester said as he stepped forward. The barker looked down at the boy with a killing glance. "The guns worth \$100 dollars. I heard the men say so. Make him give you the gun," Robert told Anise. She looked into Robert's eyes suspiciously. She remembered him from school. He'd never talked to her before. She hesitated looking around at the watchful faces of the men standing behind her. She trusted none of them.

"You buy the gun from me," she said to one.

"Not me," he put up his hands. "That's three months wages for me," he said.

"You!" she said to another. He too declined.

"You. You. You." She looked from man to man. All declined.

"I'll buy the gun for thirty dollars," the barker piped up. Anise turned to Robert with an unreadable look in her eyes. She picked up the thirty dollars and put it in her pocket.

Robert's father was one of two doctors in town. Robert's beautiful mother, Colleen Chatsworth Forester, was 19 years younger than her husband. She shopped for expensive clothes, attended social functions and complained a lot. Robert was an only child. Like the other boys at school, he loved to hunt and fish. The first day after each school year ended, his parents packed him into the car and drove him out to stay the summer at his Grandmother Netty's farm.

During the school year, Robert's father insisted that he help in his office some hours during the week. Robert hated the smell of ether and was embarrassed when women came in to be examined. Escaping to the farm for the summer was as close to paradise as anything he could imagine. He learned the land and developed a love for it.

Robert was accustomed to receiving very little attention from his parents. Because he was so unspoiled, his grandma loved doing things to please him. She counted the days until he would come stay with her. He relished his months with

her and was closer to her than to his parents. She died unexpectedly just after Christmas when he was twelve. He was devastated.

His teacher announced in morning assembly that Robert Forester's grandmother, Netty Forester, had died and asked for everyone's prayers. Anise Mathews was sitting near Robert that morning and saw his tears. She looked over at him secretively. Boys were a complete puzzlement to Anise. They were tricky and cruel. She had learned never to trust them. When she saw Robert cry, she felt she had discovered something about him she should not know.

The years passed and the girls in Anise's class grew taller. They became gawky and their behinds got flabby. They got pimples and their noses got big. Anise was accustomed to being homely and paid little attention to the changes taking place in her.

Robert awoke with a start and the bedroom was completely dark. The old man across the room had quieted his whistling. Robert had an urgent impulse to pee and felt for his bedpan. He worked it under his hips and held himself as he relieved his bladder into it. He braced himself on his good leg and slid the bedpan back out from under him and lowered it carefully until the bottom touched the rim of the metal bucket beside the bed. He tipped the bedpan up and the urine spilled into the bucket. Through it all, Evelyn slept quietly on his shoulder.

He laid awake wishing he had a cigarette, but that was too difficult to manage in the dark without help. He listened for the breeze at the window, but it was still. He felt for his blanket and it had been pulled up over him. Fussy had come in while he was asleep and had shut the window and covered him. Evelyn's soft breath was warm on his neck. He listened for her shallow breaths and began silently counting them to help fill the void of time and move forward through it.

When Robert was sixteen, his mother died of ovarian cancer, and in a freak hunting accident, his best friend, Bill Wallace, shot himself under his arm with his shotgun. The blast ripped open Bill's chest and mangled the underside of his upper arm. Robert's father was the doctor to treat Bill immediately after the accident occurred. Bill then spent three months in the hospital as the surgeons worked to put his chest and arm back together. The scars were horrible and Bill's upper arm was left atrophied and misshapen.

Immediately after the accident, Dr. Forester forbade Robert any further use of guns and enrolled him in a college preparatory school in St. Louis with the understanding that Robert would eventually study medicine.

All Robert had ever dreamed of doing was to live on his Grandmother Netty's 150 acres of bottomland. The thought of following in his father's footsteps was abhorrent to him.

The morning came when Robert was to leave for school. New clothes had been bought for him. His father drove him to the train station. Robert and Doctor Forester shook hands and Robert said goodbye to Bill and boarded the train. Once he was on board, he rode the train to the first stop in Heron, got off and bought passage back in the opposite direction to Marine Barracks New River, North Carolina. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor the year before and the United States was at war. At 17, Robert was one year away from being of legal age to enlist, but he had heard of other boys lying about their ages and enlisting. His plan was to put as much distance between himself and his father as he could. He knew guns and hunting. He planned to join the infantry. Bill was the one person on earth with whom he would keep in contact.

At New River Barracks, he managed to lie his way into the Marines with less effort than he had expected. He was inducted into the service in North Carolina and sent to the Marine Rifle Range, La Jolla, in San Diego, for weapons training, and four weeks later he was deployed to action in the Pacific.

Thirteen months later, one of the letters he had written Bill made it through the channels and reached Bill in Marion. The Robert that came across in the letter was a different human being than Bill had known a year earlier. Robert confided in Bill about the friend he had lost the day before.

George Lackey and Robert met while in weapons training in San Diego. They were both part of A Company that was sent to the fight in the Solomon Islands in the Pacific. George was two years older than Robert, but Robert's quiet manner gave him maturity beyond his years. Robert and George had both stood

by silently through the caustic aggression of their drill sergeant, Stanley Ruther, at Camp La Jolla. When Ruther and his recruits were shipped out together to the Solomons, Robert and George became friends. Their first shared memory after landing on Tulagi Island was to see Sergeant Ruther fall flat on his face in terror as the first explosion of rocket fire sounded after they had landed on the beach in the northeast section of Tulagi. George and Robert silently hurried past Ruther and headed for cover putting Ruther's cowardliness behind them.

That same afternoon, Robert and his company were briefed by the commanding officer of A Company, Lieutenant Richard Young. The next morning A Company was sent into battle. After beating their way through heavy jungle territory, the young recruits came under heavy fire from cliff-side dugout caves in which the Japanese were held up. It fell to A Company to clean out the cave dugouts. Robert and the others in his company scaled the steep cliffs under heavy fire from below and hung outside the caves as they thrust charges of dynamite down inside them. Once the dynamite had exploded, they climbed into the narrow caves and cleaned out the Japanese with submachine gun fire.

Two out of three of the young marines were killed by sniper fire as they scaled the cliffs to get to the caves. From that moment on Robert accepted the reality that he would die in battle. He set his hopes of survival aside and focused on accomplishing what was expected of him during the time between the moment at hand and the moment he would no longer draw breath. George accepted the same reality. After the first day on the battlefield, the two exchanged names and

addresses of whom to contact in the event that one outlived the other. Robert gave Bill's name and address to George telling him that Bill was his brother.

After the first week of heavy fighting on Tulagi, A Company had been reduced by half. Each time George and Robert became separated in battle, they half expected never to see each other again. A month passed and both remained sound. Their friendship grew. Robert confided in George the truth, that he was seventeen and that no one but his friend Bill knew his whereabouts. Two more months passed. A Company was moved to Florida Island where the fighting had escalated. He and George dug in and fought with the same intensity they had become accustomed to. Lieutenant Young was shot and killed and a replacement was put in charge of A Company.

Five months passed and all but five of the forty recruits George and Robert had gone through boot camp with had been killed. To the amazement of George and Robert, the two of them were still alive and in relatively good health.

Winter came to the Pacific. The weather was milder and living out in the open was no longer the misery it had been during the rainy season. After nine months in country, George and Robert were eligible for liberty. They were flown to Hawaii. The two stretched out on the beach by day and relished the opportunity to eat good food at night. They drank beer and laughed about their childhood days.

George had grown up on a farm in Iowa, the only son of aging parents. He understood Robert's love for the open spaces and for his Grandma Netty. For the first time since arriving on Tulagi Island, the two allowed themselves to

imagine what they might do if they got to go home. George knew he would go back to farming. Robert thought of his father and the turmoil going home would certainly bring. George invited him to come to Iowa and settle down. Robert thanked him but remained noncommittal. When the two boarded the transport ship back to the Solomons, the reality of their tenuous futures returned and they both withdrew into themselves and made the trip in silence.

A landing boat met their transport ship and carried them to the beach of Tarawa Island to which A Company had been moved. As they hurried along the beach to reach their platoon, a mortar shell exploded off to George's right. Robert glanced over at him and it was as if the power had been cut to a close-up film clip of George. His expression froze, showing neither fear nor surprise, and an instant later his upper torso clunked to the ground, the lower two-thirds of him had been blown to nothing. Robert looked down at his friend as George's head and shoulders sat upright for an instant as a gruesomely sculpted bust of him might have. Then his head drooped forward, resting on his nose and right cheek in the wet sand. Robert did not have so much as a scratch on him from the blast. George had taken it all.

Robert jerked awake in the darkened room. Evelyn moved in her sleep on his shoulder. He touched her arm gently and she nestled back down in the crook of his neck. Robert looked over at the window. The shade was still dark with the night. He touched his tongue to his dry lips and carefully felt for his water glass

on the side table. He lifted the glass. There was little weight to it. He brought it to his lips. He tipped it up to drink, but it was empty. He set it back down quietly. He shifted his shoulder under Evelyn, trying not to disturb her. After so long in one position, his arm had gone to sleep. He flexed his fingers, working away the tingling sensation.

~

Bill Wallace read Robert's letter with the account of George's death. That Robert had freely elected to join the Marines and put himself in harm's way rode heavy on Bill. Bill was five months older than Robert and was still a senior in high school. The war would more than likely be over before he was called by the draft. Robert had been to hell and back and Bill was debating who to ask to the senior prom. A lingering sense of guilt mixed with concern for his good friend remained with him.

It was five weeks later when Bill's return letter finally made its way to Robert. Robert was exhausted after a week of heavy fighting on Tarawa. He lay in a mosquito infested jungle dugout with two other men. Just enough daylight remained for him to make out Bill's writing. He looked at the address, relishing the first moments of feeling reconnected with his good friend. The other men in the bunker looked with interest at the letter. Robert had received far less mail than any of the other men, and he silently turned away to read his letter in private.

Bill greeted his friend with warm regards. He told him about their friends and of those who had enlisted. He wrote that this year's crops had been good and

his father had been able to pay the bank back most of the loan he had made after the drought the summer before. He told Robert about the scare everyone had had when the Orpheum Movie Theatre had caught fire. He told how everyone missed going to the movies, especially seeing the film clips of the war. He remarked how sad it was that Tommy Dorsey had disappeared while flying over the English Channel to arrange a Christmas performance in France for the Troops.

Robert read Bill's newsy letter eagerly. News of all the people Robert had grown up with was a much welcome respite from the endless depression of war and mangled bodies.

Bill's letter drew to an end. In the last paragraph he sympathized with Robert for losing his good friend George and said he wished he could have known George. In the next line, Bill wrote that Robert's father was in good health. That he was still working at his office every day, and, that a month earlier he had remarried. Remarried? Robert reread the word in surprise. His father had married again? Who did he marry? Robert plunged into the next line. "Your father married Anise Mathews," Bill wrote.

Robert reread the line. Bill must certainly have Anise confused with someone else. He read the line again. How old was his father, 70, at least. Anise, she was four years behind Robert in school. That would make her 15. Good God! He imagined his reserved, fastidious father lying on top of Anise, poking his cold wick into her. The thought was so repulsive it sickened him. What was his father thinking? Surely there was some mistake. Robert suddenly became

greatly agitated and reared up in the dugout urgently wanting to be done with the endless restraints of war and find out what was going on at home.

“Forester!” his lieutenant barked from nearby. “Keep your damned fool head down.” Robert ducked back down and tried to remember what he could of Anise. Mostly he remembered how odd she was. He remembered the fair when she won the gun. How he had tried to convince her to insist on the gun, and she had taken the money instead. She needed the money. That’s why she married an old man. She must have been desperate. Robert cringed at the pity of it all. He was overcome with disgust for his father for taking advantage of her.

The war finally drew to a close and Robert was shipped back to San Diego. When he arrived, the anticipation he had felt for getting back home seemed to dissipate. The thought of his father rebuking him for his disobedience was off putting. And there was the business with Anise. How awkward it would be. How awkward it must be between the two of them and to have to be there to witness it. The idea made Robert uncomfortable just to think of it. When he arrived at the train station to buy a ticket to Illinois, he changed his mind at the last minute and instead bought a ticket to Iowa, the only other place he felt an affinity for. He would pass on what comfort he could to George’s parents.

Frank and Sarah Lackey and their daughter Penny, lived in a comfortable, two-story farmhouse near Vinton in central Iowa. Frank was seventy-two and Sarah five years younger. Their daughter Penny was eighteen and had just graduated from high school. Penny was sitting on the front steps of her house when Robert came walking through the field from town. He’d traveled by bus to

Vinton and decided to walk the four and a half miles to the Lackey farm. One look at Penny and he knew he had found the Lackeys.

Penny had George's mahogany-brown hair, his freckles and the same calm deep-blue eyes George had had. Robert approached her as she sat on the stairs and it was like looking into George's face again.

"Hi Penny," Robert said quietly. She looked at him curiously her expression pleasant but not quite a smile. Robert knew that expression so well. "I'm Robert Forester," he said. He could see the instant recognition in her eyes.

"Hello Robert," she said just above a whisper. Then she surprised him completely and came up off the steps, walked to him and put her arms around him and hugged him. As she pulled back, Robert could see how hard she was fighting to smile rather than cry. Before he could say anything more, she reached out and took him by the hand and started up the steps. The smell of freshly baked bread seeped through the screen door and permeated the air.

"Mom," Penny called in quietly through the screen door. "She'll need a few minutes," Penny said quietly to Robert. "Mom," Penny called again as she opened the door and went inside taking Robert with her. Sarah Lackey had been asleep on the couch. The newspaper she had been reading was laid open over her and her shoes were off. "It's Robert," Penny said. "It's Robert Forester."

Robert had been concerned how the Lackeys would react to him coming back home when George never would. Those concerns returned as Sarah Lackey laid looking up at him as the reality of what Penny was saying set in. Sarah's hair

was pale gray and she wore it back in a bun. Everything else about her told Robert from which side of the family George had gotten his physical traits.

“Robert,” Sarah finally found her voice. She came up off the couch in slow increments as Robert remembered his father doing. “Robert Forester,” Sarah said as she got to her feet and came toward him. “We know you as if you were our own,” she said and put her arms around him and hugged him tightly. “Go get your dad,” she told Penny.

Frank Lackey had not had the same good fortune with his crop that summer that Bill Wallace had reported his father having. The rain came early to Iowa and kept the ground too wet for timely planting. Once the ground was dry enough to work and plant, the rain stopped completely and dried and stunted the crops. Frank Lackey came from the fields as frustrated as he had been all spring and summer long. Penny introduced him to Robert. George’s father had a reserve about him that George and his mother and sister did not have. Despite his reserve, he invited Robert to stay as long as he liked.

“George’s friends are family,” Frank told Robert. Sarah and Penny hustled around the kitchen and put dinner on the table. Frank was exhausted and went to bed right after they finished eating. Sarah soon followed him and Penny and Robert sat out on the front porch, and Robert answered her questions about George as honestly as his compassion for her loss would let him.

Robert stayed with the Lackeys a week. Frank refused to let him help in the fields.

“In truth, there’s little anyone could do except the Almighty,” Frank told him more than once. Every time Robert thought of going back to Marion, a sense of dread passed through him. The two things that did beckon him back were Bill’s friendship and the memories of his summers on the farm with his grandma. Early Monday morning, he said his goodbyes to the Lackeys and promised to write them. The night before, he had given Penny George’s dog tags and his wallet. Inside was the picture of a dark-haired girl with dark eyes.

“It’s Evelyn,” Penny had said with surprise in her voice.

Robert kept George’s small leather-bound journal. George had mentioned to him that he would not want his parents to read his accounts of war that he had written about in the journal. Robert had not been able to bring himself to intrude on George’s privacy by reading the journal. He felt that one-day he might read it, but not now while the memory of George was still so close and the memory of his death so painful.

The bus ride back to Marion took most of the day. The bus stopped at half a dozen small towns along the way and let the passengers stretch their legs. Robert sat next to a thin, ragged, middle-aged man who talked to himself the whole way. Robert had the window seat.

At the Lackeys, some of the tension that had built up inside Robert had begun to subside. It had begun to sink into his brain that he was finally safe from the threat of the ever-present danger that had hung over him for so long. Compared to what he had been through, the nonsensical ramblings of the man sitting next to him were little distraction. Mile after mile, Robert watched the

mesmerizing sway of the fields of pale golden wheat blowing in the breeze and counted off the hours as he came closer and closer to home.

The bus pulled into the Marion Town Square at 5:30 that afternoon.

Robert looked out as the bus passed the Marion Bank with its wide glass doors. As the bus rounded the corner of the square, the large red letters spelling out the Woolworth's 5 and 10 cents Store came into view. Robert couldn't look at the huge letters without remembering the Zagnut candy bar he had bought there when he was about 10 years old. He had left the store and stood outside and opened it to find most of the chocolate eaten away and the pale yellow center squirming with weevils. Zagnut had been a favorite of his, but after that incident he had never been able to bring himself to eat another one. The bus slowed and nosed into the curb at the northeast corner of the square where the charred front of the Orpheum Theatre stood. The theatre was a pie-wedge of a building, narrow at the front and wide at the back. Alleyways ran between the sides of the theatre and the buildings it sat between. The bus depot was down the alley a short distance to the left of the theatre. The small depot was not much more than a ticket counter and a row of six chairs where passengers could sit and wait to be called to board their buses.

Robert climbed down out of the bus and waited for the driver to open the luggage compartment. The driver handed him his duffle bag and Robert stepped out of the alleyway and onto the sidewalk and stood looking across at the century-old, red brick Marion City Hall that sat in the center of the square. The city hall was accented with crisp white wooden pillars and clock tower. Robert glanced up

at the large clock dial near the top of the tower and down at his wristwatch. The huge old clock was three minutes slow, just as it had been for as long as Robert could remember.

He stood soaking in the sights and the sounds of Marion Square. Immediately to his left, a large, poorly drawn sign on the window at the Brokerage dry goods store advertised men's denim overalls for \$2.50. Robert looked in through the window at two women picking through a table heaped high with women's under things. One of the women was gray haired and stout and the other was equally as stout but with dark brown hair. The younger woman turned and shouted at a little boy who was climbing out from a rack of women's housedresses. Robert watched as the lightweight rack teetered forward and fell, and the little boy tumbled onto the crumpled heap of dresses. The younger woman grabbed the little boy's arm with one hand and laid into his backside with her other. Robert could hear him cry out with each whack. His mother finally let go of him and turned back to the table of underwear. As she turned, Robert recognized her as one of the girl's he had gone to school with. Everything about her had changed except her pug nose and dimples. He didn't want her to see him staring at her so he turned away and walked on.

He needed to call Bill to come pick him up. Red Burtrum's barbershop was across the street from the brokerage. He headed for Burtrum's. Red welcomed him to use the telephone.

Robert sat in the barbershop waiting for Bill. Red glanced over at him several times as he worked.

“Doc. Forester’s boy,” Red finally connected the face with the name. “Home from the war. Welcome home!” Red said as he stopped what he was doing and crossed to Robert and shook his hand.

Twenty minutes later, Robert stood looking out of the barbershop window as Bill drove up. Robert hurried outside and the two fell together in a friendly embrace. Passersby looked at the two, the tall dark-haired young soldier in his short-sleeved khaki uniform and the short, thick chested farm boy in his jeans and plaid western shirt.

“I’ve been antsy as a rabbit all week waiting to hear from you,” Bill said.

“I stopped in Iowa to see some friends.”

“You’ve grown a foot!” Bill said looking up into Robert’s dark eyes. The eyes were different, Robert was part someone else now.

“You haven’t changed one bit,” Robert said. “God it’s good to see you,” he hugged Bill again. Minutes later, the two sat in Bennies Restaurant with a mound of hot tamales between them.

“Keep ‘em comin’ Bennie!” Bill laughed as the congenial Mexican sat down another plate of tamales in front of the two. As they sat talking and laughing in the nostalgic familiarity of Bennies, the last thing Robert wanted to talk about was the war. Each time the conversation got anywhere close to it, he changed the subject. Bill knew Robert well enough to sense what was happening and avoided the subject. They had always trusted each other with everything. Bill felt the hurt of now being distanced from his friend.

The two stuffed themselves with tamales and downed a third pitcher of Coca Cola. They covered one subject of conversation after another, both carefully avoiding any reference to war or to Robert's father. As they waited for Bennie to bring the check, both fell silent.

"Is Anise living at home with Dad?" Robert asked quietly. Bill looked across at him and hesitated.

"Nobody knows," Bill answered honestly. "Your dad keeps working at his office, but nobody ever sees her."

"How does Dad seem?" Robert asked.

"Older. Slower."

"Has he ever asked you about me?" Bill took his time answering.

"No he hasn't," he said.

"Come on now Miss Evy," Fussy Dobbs leaned down slipping an arm under the sleeping child. Evelyn wore nothing but white cotton underpants and white sandals and still her flesh was moist with the mid-July humidity. She roused slowly, not wanting to give up her comfortable haven on Robert's shoulder. "Is Old Doctor Woodside been a bother to you?" Fussy asked Robert who had been awake since long before dawn.

"He's no bother at all," Robert said.

"Young Doctor Woodside be comin' ta see bout you today," Fussy said.

"Come on now honey," she said lifting Evelyn to a sitting position. A thin tangle

of the little girl's pale brown hair stuck to her cheek from lying on Robert's shoulder. Fussy brushed the hair loose with her fingertips and helped Evelyn slip to the ground. Fussy rounded the bed and filled Robert's water glass from a clear glass pitcher setting on the table next to him. "I'll bring fresh," she said taking the pitcher with her. She reached down with her other hand, taking the metal handle of the bucket that was a quarter full with Robert's pee. "I'll take care this too," she said as the sharp fumes of the urine rose up as it sloshed against the sides of the bucket.

"Is there any word?" Robert asked as Fussy started for the door with the bucket.

"Nothin' at all," she said and sat the bucket down. "Need air in this room," she said, and went to the window, reached behind the shade and pulled the window up. Evelyn leaned against the door sleepily, waiting for Fussy. "Come on now," Fussy coaxed her.

The window shade hung limp at the breezeless window. Old Doctor Woodside slept away the hours without sound or movement. Robert lay captive in the room of no sounds. A tan dot of a ladybug crawled on the ceiling overhead. Now and then it flared its wings as if it would take flight, but then it would close them again and continue its slow progress in no particular direction.

The stench of Robert's urine hung heavy in the air for a time after Fussy left with it. The smell lingered until he began to wonder if it might be more than urine. He jerked the cover from over his bandaged leg and rose up, sniffing. The same medicinal stench of his cast mixed with the sour smell of his crotch was all

he could discern. He lay back down and then reached over and pulled out the drawer to his side table, taking out his watch, checking the time. He pulled out the stem and wound the watch until it tightened against his touch. He laid it on the table. In the still silence, he could hear the ticking of the watch. He listened to the methodical ticking. It reminded him of the beat of music. He laid thinking back to the music and began keeping count with the ticking beat.

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After returning home, Robert knew there was no sense in putting off the inevitable confrontation with his father. He and Bill talked and drove around town for a while and as night came, Bill drove to Robert's house to drop him off.

"See if he's here," Bill told him. "Come home with me if he's gone."

"The light's on in the kitchen," Robert assured him. "I'll stay here."

Before Robert had left to fight in the war, Bill would have insisted that he let him wait. But now things were different. Robert knew his own mind, and Bill's influence no longer weighed importantly in his decisions. Bill felt another pang of something lost in his life.

The back door to the house was open, as it had always been. Robert's father was not in his office. No patients were asleep in the sick room off of the office. Robert checked the rest of the house and knocked at his father's bedroom door. His father was not at home. Robert expected he was out on sick call. He went to his own room and turned on the light. He stood looking around the room.

It felt wonderful to be in his own world again. He crossed to the dresser and looked at the small-framed photograph of his mother. She was already sick at the time the photograph was taken. She was sitting out in the back yard. Her maid, Marie, had taken the photograph with Colleen Forester's Brownie camera. Marie had put it in a frame and given it to Robert for Christmas the year before his mother died.

Robert opened his dresser drawers and looked inside. His clothes were neatly folded and arranged just as they had been before he left. He took off his shirt and shoes and lay down on the bed. He lay for several hours listening for his father to return, but Louis Forester did not come back that night. The next morning, Robert got up and took clothes from his dresser drawers to wear. The shirts were so tight across the shoulders that he could not reach his arms forward. The pants were three inches above his ankles. He put his khaki uniform back on and roamed around the house, remembering growing up there. He took an apple out of the fruit bowl in the refrigerator and went out the back door. Just as he rounded the side of the house, his father drove up in the driveway in front of him. Robert stood silently waiting for his father to stop and put on the emergency brake.

"Son," Dr. Forester called out a casual greeting as he climbed out of the car. He looked older, slower, just as Bill had described. "I have a patient due in a few minutes," Louis Forester said. "We can talk when I'm through." He turned toward the house without another word. Robert stood watching him walk away. Robert knew better than to interrupt his father when he was working.

Robert walked the five miles to his Grandma Netty's farm. He opened the gate and walked up the pathway toward the small white-frame farmhouse. Nothing had changed except for the cobwebs that now stretched across the porch light beside the front door. The door was locked. He went to the back of the house and climbed the back porch steps. He reached up and slid his fingers along the top of the doorframe and found the key. He opened the door and stepped inside the dark, silent kitchen. Memories of his grandma reached back through the years and filled the room with her warmth and love. He slid the kitchen window up and the fresh morning air fed his memories. He sat down at the kitchen table and looked out at the large leaves of the catalpa tree nearby fanning softly with the breeze. The bare dirt around the base of the tree had been his favorite place to play when he was a little boy. Playing beneath the tree, he could hear his grandma working in the kitchen. She would come to the window and tell him the cookies were about done or ask him if he was ready for a Popsicle. She was soft-spoken and always considerate of his feelings. She had always seemed so excited when he came to see her.

He left the house and walked the fields and woods. The July day grew hot. He wiped the sweat from his face and walked on. He walked toward the southwest edge of the farm. In the distance, he could see the backside of the house Anise Mathews grew up in. He stood looking across the open, weed-covered fields of bottomland to the spot of white he knew to be her house. It was a quarter of a mile away at least. He stood debating whether to cross the field and

talk to Anise. Instead he turned back and started the long walk back to town to talk to his father.

"I see you made it through alive," his father remarked as Robert came in through the back door into the kitchen.

"Yes, I made it," Robert said. His father sat at the kitchen table eating something from a small bowl. He did not get up or slow his eating.

"Well, was it worth it?" Louis Forester asked him.

"Was what worth it?" Robert stood ill at ease, halfway between the door and the table.

"Risking your fool neck when you should have been in school."

"I can't say," Robert shifted uncomfortably. "I guess not."

"What are you planning to do now, more foolishness?"

"I want to farm Grandma Netty's land," Robert said without hesitation.

"Farm! Waste more time on nothing?" his father dropped his spoon in his bowl and pushed it away from him.

"You haven't sold it, the farm, have you?" Robert came closer.

"No. I haven't given it enough thought to do anything with it."

"I'd like to live there and farm it," Robert said.

"Anise said you would want the land," Doctor Forester said.

"How would she know anything about me?"

"Damned if I know. She's my wife now."

"I heard," Robert shifted again, looking down at the floor. "Is she here?"

"Hell no!" his father looked up at him as if he had spoken the unthinkable. "She won't be coddled or made to do other than her own will. I go out there to treat her mother. She's much worse now," he said as if that was explanation enough. "Anise is your step mother now. You keep your distance."

"Anise is sixteen years old!" Robert looked at him in utter confusion.

"She's old beyond her years," his father said. He got up from the table and crossed the room, setting his bowl in the sink and headed for his office without another word.

Robert looked around the room and suddenly wanted nothing but to get as far away from his father's house as he could. He went to his room and got his duffle bag and headed back to his grandma's farm. He stopped in the IGA store and bought a bagful of groceries.

It was late afternoon by the time he reached the farm again. The electricity had been turned off. He took a candle from where his grandma had kept them in a drawer and lit it. He sat down and started making plans.

He had \$1,500 back pay from the Marines. He would have the electricity and the telephone turned on and he would look around for a second hand car. It was too late in the season to plant much in the fields. Instead, he would do what he could to get his grandfather's old farm equipment running again.

The morning of his second day on the farm he went out to the barn to look over the old farm equipment. Over in the corner sat his grandfather's 1916 Model T Ford. He walked over to the car and swiped away the inch-thick layer of dust from the hood. His grandfather had always been a stickler for taking care of his

equipment. The car was practically an antique compared to modern automobiles, but under the dust it still shined as black as a blister beetle. Robert unlatched one side of the hood and folded it back. He'd taken shop in high school and picked up the basics of mechanics. He looked at the old engine and made up his mind to get it running again. Bill took him into town to buy what new parts he needed including new tires. The car had spoke wheels and a canvas top that folded back. A week after Robert arrived at the farm he drove the car out onto the road with a sputter and clatter. He was so tall he had to crouch to sit in the car with the top up, so he left it down. He drove out to show Bill the fruits of his week's labor.

Robert made no further effort to contact his father, nor did Doctor Forester make any effort to contact him. During the day, Robert worked fixing up the farm and the equipment and in the early morning and evening he roamed the fields. He drank in the peace and quiet and felt as if he could never have enough of it. Bill called frequently to ask him to get away from the farm and have some fun. Robert was happy to stay home and enjoy the solitude.

Each time he walked to the southwest edge of the farm he stood looking out at the back of the Mathews' house in the distance, debating whether to go see about Anise. One evening five weeks after he had been living on the farm, he stayed out later than usual and found himself looking out at the Mathews' home as night settled over the fields. He stood looking at the house until it disappeared in the dark. It came to him that no lights shone in the windows. He waited, looking in the direction of the house for some time. Was it possible that Anise and her mother lived with no electricity? Surely his father would have seen to

that. After some time standing there, Robert decided to work his way close enough to the house to see if lights were on anywhere inside. He stayed a good distance away as he approached the back of the house and walked around the side to the front. The house was dark as pitch. As he turned and started back to the farm, he made up his mind to return the next day and find out once and for all what was going on between Anise and his father.

Midmorning the next day, he walked the distance back to the southwest acreage and continued on toward the Mathews. He progressed slowly, staying out in the open, not wanting to surprise or alarm either Anise or her mother. As he approached the back of the house he slowed even more and staying in full view, worked his way around the side of the house to the front and slowly climbed the front stairs.

“Anise,” he called out quietly. All was silent. He called a second and a third time. When no answer came he looked in through the screen door. He could see across the kitchen to a second doorway leading to the next room. For an instant he thought he saw a flicker of someone’s eyes peek out and then quickly disappear behind the second doorway. He stood peering in, waiting to see the eyes again when suddenly a low, mournful squall sounded from inside the house. It was barely audible at first, but it grew louder and more piercing with each second that past until it rose to a ear-piercing shriek of a cry that rang out in one continuous long wail.

“What do you want!” a hoarse shout came from inside the house. Robert stood straining to see inside, waiting for someone to appear.

“Anise?” Robert called out. “It’s Robert Forester,” he too had to shout to be heard over the shrieking cry.

“What do you want?” the hoarse voice came back just as loudly.

“I want to talk to you!”

“Go away!” the voice came back venomously.

“Are you all right here Anise?” he persisted.

“Get out of here!” came a warning shout. The shrieking wail continued.

Robert debated whether to go on in and find out what he could about the situation but then decided he had caused enough upset already and turned and left.

Just after midnight, three nights later, a fierce pounding on the back screen door jolted Robert awake. He bounded out of bed, through the house and into the kitchen.

“My mother needs help!” a girl’s voice screamed through the screen door the instant Robert came into sight. Still half asleep, he peered through the screen at the dark form silhouetted by the moonlight. “Hurry! It’s bad! Hurry!” the girl shouted.

“Anise?” Robert blinked to clear his head and opened the door to her.

“My mother is real bad!” she said again as she pushed her way into the kitchen. “Can you take us in your car?” she panted.

“Did you call dad?” Robert’s brain started to process the situation.

“No telephone!” she answered cryptically.

“I’ll call him from here,” he started for the phone. “He can tell us what to do for her until he gets here.”

"It's night. He won't come in the night," she told him.

"He will if it's serious."

"No. Not in the night!"

"You're his wife Anise. He'll come if you need him."

"Not at night!" she said with growing agitation. "He may be out anyway. You could take us in your car. If he's gone, the other doctor might be home."

Ten minutes later, Robert and Anise sat crammed in the front seat of the Model T Ford with Helen Mathews squeezed between them. Robert had seen enough of dying to know Helen Mathews was slipping fast. He pushed the old Ford as fast as it would go, but wide open it could only manage 45 miles per hour. Anise silently held onto her mother as Helen slipped into a coma. Robert plunged the car forward taking every shortcut as he chewed furiously on his father's thoughtless disregard for people.

"What in the hell are you doing?" Doctor Forester shouted as Robert kicked the kitchen door open and hurried inside carrying Helen Mathews in his arms as Anise pushed him from behind. Without a word, Robert brushed his father aside and carried Helen into the examining room and laid her down. Louis Forester turned on the light and looked down into Helen's face and immediately went to work on her.

“Are you still here!” Louis Forester barked at Robert several hours later.

Robert sat at the kitchen table alone.

“How is she?” he ignored his father’s angry tone.

“She’s comatose, probably will remain that way. Go on now! You’re not needed here.”

“Why doesn’t Anise have a telephone?” Robert turned and looked directly at his father.

“That’s none of your business!”

“Why don’t they have electricity in their house?”

“You get on out of here,” the old man growled.

“Why in the hell wouldn’t you come to take care of your own wife’s mother when she’s this bad off, regardless of time of day or night?” Robert growled back.

“You get out of here,” his father repeated in a threatening tone. Behind him, Anise came to stand in the doorway to the kitchen. It was the first clear view of her Robert had had since she had come pounding on his door. He looked past his father and sat staring at her. She was long legged and very thin. Her face was exactly the same face he remembered from years before, but now it was as if the rest of her had grown into proportion with her abnormally large facial features. The wide, blue-gray eyes held the same sulky suspicion he remembered, but all in all she had metamorphosed into a striking exoticism that was remarkable.

“Are you staying here Anise?” Robert asked her, embarrassed for having stared so long at her.

“Of course she’s staying,” his father answered for her. Robert looked to see her reaction to his father’s domineering tone, but Louis Forester stepped between them blocking Robert’s view of her

“I can bring you your things,” Robert looked around him at her.

“Mind you own business!” his father sputtered.

Helen Mathews remained in a coma but held her own. Robert went to work on his grandfather’s 1926 Allis Chalmers tractor. The heat of August mellowed and the first cool early morning breezes of September came. The Allis Chalmers was so old Robert could not find replacement parts for it. He had to take the old tractor apart and soak all the parts clean. He worked on with the project with no news from his father or any sign of Anise or her mother returning home. Then one day in late August he went out to the grocery store, and as he was driving home, he passed Anise walking up the road toward her house.

“I can give you a ride the rest of the way,” he called out, slowing the old car. She glanced at him from the corner of her eye, hunched forward, burying her chin against her chest and hurried on.

“Anise, it’s me Robert,” he called again. She kept her head down and hurried faster. He let her pass and pulled the car over, turned off the engine and got out, hurrying to catch up with her.

“Wait a minute Anise,” he reached out to touch her arm. She shrank from his touch and hurried so fast that she stumbled forward but regained her balance.

"Can I just talk to you for a minute?" he caught up with her again and leaned forward looking into her face. She glanced up and he saw the fear in her eyes.

"I just wanted to ask how your mother is," he tried to reassure her that he meant her no harm. "How is she Anise?" he asked quietly, making every effort to avoid intimidating her.

"She's dead," she mumbled, as she raced ahead.

"I didn't know," he said, keeping pace with her. "I'm sorry. Just let me know if you need anything," he said, determined to make every effort to do what he could to help her.

"I need that land you're sitting on," she said with words as brittle as a smack in the face.

"What did you say?" he looked down at her dumbfounded.

"Your father's making me his heir. Your on my land," she said, her voice strained but cutting.

"Is that why you married him Anise, for his money?"

"You shouldn't have kicked dirt in his face like you did," her words fell out in nervous jabs.

"You don't know a thing about that," he stared at her in amazement. She hunched forward and hurried on.

Robert went home feeling like he had had the breath kicked out of him. He wandered around the house in a daze trying to make some sense of what had

happened. Why hadn't his father told him the truth about the farm? Was he honestly planning to make Anise his heir? What he did with everything else made no difference at all to Robert, but the farm, Grandma Netty's farm, that was different. It wasn't property, it was part of Robert, all he had really, the farm and the few friends he had left. He thought of George and the sadness rose up in his chest choking him. He went into the bedroom and dug down into the bottom of his duffle bag and came up with George's journal. Somehow just holding it gave him comfort. Bill was still here for him, but Bill was still a child. George and Robert had become old men after what they had seen in the war. They had become old men in boys' bodies. Robert suddenly could think of nothing left in life he cared about. He cared about the farm. Anise had been through so much. She wanted the farm. He remembered the look in her eyes. They showed hatred. What was it she hated: him, his father, his grandparents, or just life in general? He thought back to the way the other kids had made fun of her in school, taunting her. They were cruel. She had reason to hate. Would giving the farm up to her make up for that? He couldn't give up the farm. The idea welled up in him again and he felt he couldn't get his breath. He had nowhere else to go. He needed his grandma close, at least for now.

He looked down at George's journal and rubbed his thumb across the front cover. He opened it and glanced down at George's signature across the top of the first page and the date, June 4, 1942. He quickly closed the cover. George was inside the journal, his easy way, his laugh, his honesty, the good heartedness of him. Things George had seen that had made him old were inside the journal. It

was precious poison Robert told himself. He wondered if he was strong enough yet to sort through the poison to spend time close to George again. He brushed his fingers across the cover again but could not read it, not yet.

“It’s still just too soon to tell,” Young Doctor Woodside said peering down at Robert’s badly swollen leg. The large ragged wound at the knee looked like raw red meat at the center. A puss-yellow scum fingered out over the areas that had begun to scab over. A thick, blackish-purple ridge rose up at the edges where the skin was fighting to heal.

Taking the cast off had been a torment of pain, but there was nothing else to do, Doctor Woodside assured Robert. The soft tissue would heal much faster if the cast could be left off, he told him, but the bones were badly damaged and needed the restraint of the cast. As the leg continued to swell, the cast would have to be replaced with a larger one. Robert drew in a deep breath.

“How long?” he sighed.

“Might be two months, maybe longer before you can get out of this bed.”

“Has my grandfather been giving you any trouble?” he asked with a pleasant smile.

“Not a bit,” Robert said. “He rarely makes a sound.”

“He’ll be 98 next month,” Alvin Woodside said. He crossed the room and squatted down next to his grandfather. “Granddad,” he spoke quietly.

“Granddad.”

"I haven't seen him open his eyes since I got here," Robert told him.

"He's a fighter though," his grandson patted his shoulder. "Are you ready to get that leg back in a cast," he asked as he came back to stand over Robert?

Robert looked up into the doctor's quiet gray eyes.

"I'm as ready as I'll get," he told him.

When the cast was finished, the doctor made a sling for it and gently attached the sling to the gaff that rose up at the end of the bed.

"Fussy treating you well?" the young doctor asked.

"She's wonderful. Evelyn has laid claim to her," Robert said, happy to be distracted from the throbbing pain in his leg. Robert looked up at the muscular, 6 feet 5 inch doctor. "How old are you Alvin?" he asked.

"I'm 34."

"Have you been in practice long?"

"Two years."

"Are you happy doing this?" Robert asked.

"I've worked so hard getting to this point, I haven't had time to think very much about that," Alvin Woodside told him honestly. "You take care now," he touched Robert's arm. "I'm leaving a pain killer for you, but try not to take any more of it than you have to," he said. "If you suspect anything different with your leg, send Fussy for me right away."

The doctor left, and Robert was alone again with his thoughts. Outside near the street, a waterline had broken. The arms of a thick-bearded workman

shook violently as he worked the jackhammer, breaking up the sidewalk to get to the break. The racket finally stopped and Robert was grateful for the quiet.

"Fussy said to bring these to you," Evelyn came through the door carrying a dish of fresh strawberries. She handed the bowl to Robert and went to get the straight-backed chair she used to climb up on the bed. Doctor Woodside had set the chair aside during his visit. Evelyn crawled up on the chair and then onto the bed. "It smells stinky," she wrinkled her nose.

"It's my new cast," Robert said.

"Can I write my name on it again?"

"Yes, but eat some of these first," he took one of the strawberries for himself and held them out to her.

"No, they're for you," she said, folding her legs up under her.

"Did you already have some?" he asked.

"No. They have those little prickly things. I don't like them."

"Those are little seeds. Just try one," he told her.

"No thank you," she said and pulled herself into a tight little ball and laid down on his shoulder.

"Do you like Fussy?" she asked, wanting to change the subject.

"She's very nice," Robert answered, taking a second strawberry. "These are very good," he said.

"What makes her skin black?" Evelyn asked, hoping to get past the subject of the strawberries.

"Her mother and father had black skin. She inherited it."

“And I have white skin because you do?” she asked. He slowly ate a third strawberry in silence.

The next morning after his conversation with Anise about the farm, Robert drove to his father's house to try and get to the truth. Louis Forester was out on a call. Robert waited. The day and evening passed, and there was no word from his father. Robert drove home. He walked around the farm in the dark of night for hours. When he came to the southwest edge of the property he looked across at the Mathews' house. There were lights on. What did that mean? Had there been electricity all along?

He started walking in the direction of the house. He tripped over a thick growth of thistle and stumbled. He walked on with the lights guiding him. He approached the back of the house and rounded the side keeping his distance. The window to the kitchen came into view. Through it he could see the profiles of people sitting across the kitchen table from one another. He moved closer. The window was open. It was Anise and his father sitting across from each other. The collar of his father's white, long-sleeved shirt was slightly open and his necktie loosened in the early September heat. Louis Forester combed his fingers through his thinning gray hair and pushed his wire-rimmed glasses tighter against his face with his fingertips. Robert could hear a mumble of conversation but not clearly enough to hear what they were saying. He watched the rapport between the two with curiosity. His father was angry. Anise sat with her shoulders

hunched forward and her arms wrapped tightly around her. She said something. Her voice was barely audible. Robert's father shifted forward lowering his head and responded forcefully. Robert stepped closer. Anise's long, light auburn hair was tied up at the back of her head. Her expression was serious.

"You grew up on the farm, didn't you," Robert heard her say.

"What's that got to do with anything!" his father shifted in his chair.

"I just thought you would have known your neighbors," Anise said.

"Well I didn't," Louis Forester replied. "You just mind your own business," he said and pushed away from the table. "I'll see to everything," he turned to the door. Robert moved back into the trees at the edge of the yard. He heard the porch door slam and then saw his father's short, bent form hurrying toward his car parked in front of the house. His father started the car engine and gravel chattered loudly and flew out from under the tires as he tromped on the accelerator.

Robert hung back in the trees watching Anise. She sat at the table for some moments staring at the door her husband had just left through. She seemed very intense and introspective for a girl of sixteen. Suddenly she got up from the table and crossed to the very window Robert was looking in through. He pushed back deeper into the trees and watched her grasp the bottom edge of the window and lower it, leaving it open an inch or two. Her complexion was very fair, her movements deliberate. He strained to see her face better. Her eyes were two large somber shadows that gave nothing away. She turned from the window and a moment later, the lights flicked off. Robert started for home.

Early the next morning he drove to his father's home again to confront him.

"Just tell me, have you promised the farm to Anise?"

"I haven't made up my mind about that yet," Louis Forester talked as he sat in his office opening his mail.

"But she is under the impression that she will be you heir to everything."

"Well let her think what she will," his father replied nonchalantly.

"If that's the case, I want to buy the farm from you," Robert persisted.

"With what?" his father looked up at him with an impatient smirk on his face.

"I'll farm the land. I'm working on the equipment now. I'll have granddad's tractor going in a few days. I'll pay you with my profits."

"Don't be ridiculous," Doctor Forester said.

"What's ridiculous about that?" Robert asked.

"I said I haven't made up my mind what I'm going to do about all that. I don't want to discuss it any further."

"But I don't want to hurt Anise over it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" his father laid down the letter in his hand and gave Robert his full attention.

"She's had a hard life," Robert said. "She's been through a lot. I don't want to hurt her. Give her everything else if you want to, but I want the farm. It's important to me."

“You haven’t been over there sniffing around her have you?” his father asked.

“I’ve been home fixing up the farm and the equipment. That’s all. That’s all I care about. I have no intention of making any trouble for you or Anise. Why would you think that? You’re totally wrong.”

“Well, I haven’t any more time to waste,” his father huffed. “I have to be in Carbondale in an hour,” he got up and brushed past Robert. “You mind your own business,” he called back over his shoulder.

“I’ll be at the farm. That’s all the business I care about.” The back door slammed and Robert stood alone in the silent house.

Curtis Forester’s 1923 Allis Chalmers gas-powered tractor had been state of the art when he bought it. It had been his pride and joy in his old age. Robert had looked at new tractors and had seen all of the amazing advancements that had taken place in tractors since his grandfather had purchased his. Robert had also looked at the price of the new machines and knew he would have to be content with the old one until he made some money.

After telling his father of his plans to work the farm, he dug in with everything he had to get the old tractor going. A week after his confrontation with his father, Robert closed the hood over the restored tractor engine and bent down taking a firm grasp on the crank. He took a deep breath, braced himself and jerked the crank up, over and around one full revolution. The engine burped and

fell silent. Robert gave the crank another try and another and another. The engine finally turned over once and then twice and then died.

“Son of a bitch!” He shouted and gave the crank a smack. He went back to tinkering and fiddling with the engine tightening down everything he could think to tighten. He tried to start the engine over and over again throughout the afternoon until he was too disgusted to try again.

Early the next morning, he came out of the house and went to the barn. He stood eyeing the old tractor in frustration. Through the night he had thought over various things he might try to get the engine started. Before resuming his tinkering, he decided to try cranking it one more time. He reached down, took hold of the crank and gave it a turn. The old engine turned over instantly and kept running.

“Whewee!” he shouted to the open air, threw the gear into reverse and backed out of the barn. He had his grandfather’s plow all cleaned and oiled and ready to attach to the tractor. Twenty minutes later, he drove away from the barn and headed for the open fields.

Through the years, trees had grown up in the fields along with a thick stand of weeds. Robert had already chopped down several dozen trees. The smaller ones he left for the plow to break loose. The old plow raked through the soil, roughing up the growth. Robert knew he had his work cut out for him getting a crop of winter wheat in and clearing the rest of the acreage for early spring planting.

He rode high on the tractor enjoying the September wind in his face and the smell of fresh earth all around him. Each morning that followed, he headed out to the fields taking a sack of food with him so he wouldn't have to waste time coming back to eat. When his hunger told him it was time, he pulled the tractor up close to a swale of trees and found a peaceful place to sit and eat. It was while he was eating his noon meal one afternoon a week after he had begun working the fields that he spied a pillar of smoke rising up from the south. He estimated the distance and was certain the smoke had to be coming from his land.

Anise Mathews decided to start in the walnut grove. The grove had been unattended for over twenty years and was badly grown over with huge rambling vines and tall weeds tangled around various species of trees that had made their way into the grove by way of bird droppings. Buried under the weeds were a multitude of young walnut saplings. Many were small enough to be transplanted out where there was room for them to prosper.

Anise had worked all afternoon and evening the day before hacking at the weeds and clearing away what she could. Judging by her progress, she expected it would take all fall to clear the weeds and other unwanted growth from the grove and to transplant the young walnut saplings out where they would have room to grow.

As she cleared the brush and brambles, she stacked them together and by the second day, she had a tremendous pile that reached high over her head. She decided to burn it as she went rather than letting it accumulate.

Robert left the tractor and walked the distance to the grove using the curling cloud of smoke above the trees as his guide. He slowly entered the grove. The branches of the walnut trees made a quiet canopy overhead. He pushed his way through the brush and bramble and then saw off to the left the area Anise had begun clearing. The ground surrounding a dozen or so walnut trees was clear and open. Robert slowed, seeing what a difference the cleaning out of the grove had made. He continued on following the scent of smoke, then out in a strip of open swale he spotted Anise bent forward whacking at the trunk of a Chinese elm tree with a hatchet. She was intent on her task and didn't hear him approach. He slowed and watched her, trying to make up his mind what to do next. Her hair was worked into a thick braid down the center of her back. She wore faded, pale-blue denim overalls that were too small and cupped up tightly under her rounded buttocks. The cuffs of the long sleeves of her red plaid flannel shirt were unbuttoned and flapping freely as she worked. She wore dark brown cotton work gloves that were too large for her. As Robert stood watching, she jerked off the gloves and tossed them aside.

"What are you doing Anise?" he called out to her. She startled at the sound of his voice and glanced around at him.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he said coming closer. She watched him warily and then turned back and began swinging the hatchet again. "I saw the smoke. What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"Just cleaning up my land," she said, swinging the hatchet more forcefully. He hesitated, watching her work. She worked fiercely, obviously no

stranger to hard labor. She had the trunk of the tree that measured about four inches in diameter cut nearly through. She gave it two more sturdy whacks with her hatchet and the tree snapped and pitched to the side.

“This is hard work,” he said, not knowing what else say. She made no reply. She whacked through the narrow strip of bark holding the tree trunk together and grabbed for the tree to carry it to the pile.

“We need to talk,” he said as he hurried forward and caught hold of the tree and tried to take it from her.

“Nothing to talk about,” she said, refusing to let go of the tree.

“Does my father know you’re over here?” he asked as they dragged the tree between them to the pile. She said nothing.

“We need to settle this about the land,” he said. She went back to where the elm tree had stood and leaned down picking up a curve-bladed hand sickle and started slashing at the weeds and tall brush that had grown up around the elm tree. He stood watching her, not knowing what to do.

“I brought out more food than I can eat if you’re hungry,” he called out to her.

“I have my own,” she said. He stood there a short time longer and then turned and started back to the tractor. She looked from the corner of her eye watching him go as he stretched out his long legs and strode away. His dark brown corduroy jacket was the same color as his hair. The jacket stretched tightly across his wide shoulders and was too short in the arms. She remembered overhearing three girls in her class gossiping about him being the best looking

boy in school. One of them had turned and seen Anise standing there and had accused her of eavesdropping. The girls told Anise to get away.

Robert went back to clearing the fields in a quandary over what to do about Anise. Every now and then he looked to the south. The smoke curled high and black against the graying sky. He reflected back on seeing her. She worked like a man. She was no more than a thin wisp of a girl, but he had felt her strength as they dragged the heavy tree between them. He remembered her ragged clothes. He couldn't let her go on working his land like that. Maybe she would get tired of it after a few days.

Early the following morning she was back burning brush again. Robert set out on the tractor again and continued to clear and plow the fields. The day passed and the smoke from the south continued to rise. A week passed and she was still at it. He lay awake at night thinking what he should do. He had to do something. The next day he worked until mid afternoon and then drove the tractor to the walnut grove to talk to her. The fire smoldered, but she wasn't in sight. He walked around listening for the sound of her hatchet. Then he spotted her down on her knees, her back to him, her head bent forward. Her long hair was fanned out across her back and around her shoulders blocking his view of what she was doing.

"Anise," he called out quietly as he approached, not wanting to startle her again.

"Go away!" she shouted.

"I just want to talk to you," he said and continued toward her.

"I said go away!" she cried out, hearing his footsteps coming closer. By then he was at her side.

"What happened!" he exclaimed, dropping to one knee in front of her. Her head was bent forward and she held the tail of her cotton undershirt to her forehead. Her hands dripped with blood, the undershirt were soaked red with blood. He reached out and forced her hands away long enough to see the inch and a half long gash above her left eyebrow. Bright red blood gushed from the wound, the left side of her face and neck were wet with blood.

"Jesus Anise, what happened!" he gasped as he ripped his jacket off and jerked his own undershirt off over his head.

"Damned locust switch sprang back and one of the thorns got me," she said. He wadded his undershirt up and pushing her hands away, pressed it tightly against the gushing flow of blood.

"Hold this," he told her. She did as he said and he reached his arms around her to lift her.

"What are you doing!" she pushed away from him.

"I'm taking you to town. That has to be stitched up right away."

"You get your hands off of me!" she shrugged free of him. "I'll stitch it myself," she said. His dark eyes showed his astonishment at the idea. "It looks worse than it is," she said.

"Keep that tight on there," he pressed his wadded undershirt tighter to the wound, ignoring her protest. He pulled his jacket back on, scooped her up and pulled to his feet taking her with him.

"You put me down!" she stiffened and kicked her legs. He held onto her and rushed toward the house amazed at the strength of resistance from someone who weighed little more than an armful of dried twigs.

He hurried across the fields as fast as he could run. She lay stiffly in his arms and told him repeatedly to put her down. He went directly to the barn and lifted her into the front seat of his grandfather's Model T.

"I don't need a doctor!" she shouted and tried to get back out. He held her down with one hand and pulled the canvas roof forward and fastened it in place. He raced around to the other side and climbed behind the wheel before she could manage to work the other door latch open and get out.

The car sputtered and clattered as they drove away, Robert with his head tucked down to fit beneath the canvas top and Anise holding his undershirt to her head, blood continuing to seep from the wound. Her hair at the side was dark red and stiff with it, her hands and shirt drenched red.

"Just let me out at my house," she insisted. He ignored her and drove out onto the road.

A note was tacked to the doorframe of his father's front door. The note read: The doctor is away until Monday. For emergencies, call Doctor Woodside. Doctor Woodside had been retired for years. When Robert came banging on his door with blood covered Anise in his arms, the old man greeted him calmly and directed him into his examining room. Robert watched as the ancient doctor slowly cleaned and debrided the wound and set to work stitching it up. Anise lay quietly through the procedure.

“Will she need blood?” Robert asked. Anise looked at Robert uneasily.

“No, I don’t think so,” Doctor Woodside said kindly as he took the last stitch and tied off the thread. “She’ll need to take it easy a day or two,” he said. “You stay away from those locust spines,” he smiled down at Anise, his voice wavering with the frailty of his age. “Pretty little girls like you should leave that mean work to the likes of him,” he gestured toward Robert. Doctor Woodside bandaged the wound. Robert paid him before leaving his office concerned that the old doctor would bill his father and trouble would result. “You come by in about ten days and I’ll remove the stitches,” Doctor Woodside told Anise.

“I can take them out,” she said.

Anise insisted that she be taken home. Robert ignored her and drove her to the farm, and deaf to her protests, carried her into the house and laid her down in his grandparent’s bed that he had occupied since moving out to the farm. She tried to get up, but he pushed her back down.

“Why are you doing this?” she looked up at him, her suspicious reserve sounding in her voice.

“You need help. That’s all. You’d do the same if it was me hurt, wouldn’t you.”

“No,” she answered flatly. He looked into the cool blue-gray eyes and could think of no response. He stood looking down at her. She glanced slowly around the room. For the first time all afternoon she seemed to let down her suspicious guard.

“Was this your grandma’s bed?” she asked quietly.

“Yes, hers and granddad’s.”

“She was nice to me once when I was little,” she said. The words cut into Robert’s heart like a knife. Once someone was nice to Anise Mathews when she was a little girl. Anise rolled to her side and pulled the quilt up around her face. Moments later she was fast asleep.

The next morning Robert made coffee and looked in on Anise. She was still sleeping. He worked at burning out two tree stumps in a field close to the house. Every couple of hours he checked on her again, finding her still asleep. At noon he returned to the house and fired up the gas burner on the stove and set to frying hamburgers. The smell of the hot greasy fat filled the house. When the burgers were almost finished, Anise appeared at the kitchen door. She hung back silently, her arms locked tightly around her. She looked across at Robert as he worked at the stove. His tall stature dwarfed the tiny sun-filled kitchen.

“I’m going home,” she said timidly.

“Not until you’ve eaten one of Robert’s famous burgers,” he said, sliding one cooked brown patty onto a hamburger bun and then a second onto another.

“I can’t eat,” she said, watching him set the burgers on the table.

“You can sit down and try to at least,” he insisted. “There’s a young pup of a spotted dog that wanders by here at meal time. He’ll help you with what you can’t finish.” She stood in the doorway, keeping her distance. “You’re not afraid of me are you Anise,” he said finally. He knew from her reaction that it was the wrong thing to say.

"I'm not afraid," she said overwhelmed with self-consciousness. She made her way to the table, pulled out the chair and sat down on the edge of it. He sat down across from her and picked up his burger and took a bite. She slowly fingered hers and lifted it to her lips. She took a small bite and set it back down. She kept her eyes down as she chewed it. He looked across at her. Dried blood was caked on her face and her hair was stiff and dark on one side.

"You can take a bath when you're finished, and I'll get you a clean shirt," he said. She looked across at him.

"That's all I can eat," she pushed back from the table. "I'm going home now," she said. Only at his insistence, she agreed to let him drive her home.

After the accident, he drove the tractor to the southwest edge of the property several times a day and walked the distance to Anise's house to check on her. Each time she saw his dark eyes and suntanned face looking through the screen door at her she grew apprehensive and uncomfortable. Gradually she accepted the fact that, like it or not, he would come. She never invited him into the house. The two stood and exchanged a few words through the screen. Through it all, Louis Forester knew nothing of her injury or the part Robert had played in her recovery.

One afternoon a week and a half after Anise's accident, Robert was at work in the fields and saw smoke curling up from the walnut grove. He could hardly believe his eyes. He slammed the brakes on the tractor, turned it off, slid to the ground and headed for the walnut grove. He entered the grove and hurried

to the site of the fire. Judging by the tremendous pile of brush ablaze, he realized Anise must have been working for some time. He looked around, but she was nowhere in sight. Then he spotted her off in a small clearing up under the trees. She lay stretched out on her belly, her feet up in the air. She was reading a book.

“Anise?” he called out to her. She spun around as if she had been caught in some greatly compromising act.

“Do you always have to sneak up on people!” she said, grabbing up the book. Robert made out the title, *The Iliad*, around her fingers.

“I didn’t think anyone really read that thing,” he said.

“Why not?” she looked up at him defensively. “It’s as good as stories come.”

“I’m just surprised to see you reading something like that,” he said. Her eyes grew cool.

“You think I’m simple, like my mother!” she spit the words out bitterly.

“No. That isn’t it at all,” he came close and sat down in front of her. She drew back, keeping distance between them. He leaned closer examining the thin pink scar above her eyebrow.

“It’s healing fast. Won’t be much of a scar at all,” he said and then looked into her eyes. “What are you doing out here Anise? You can have every damned walnut that grows on these trees, but I don’t want you getting hurt again.”

“I hate walnuts,” was all the reply he got. She turned away and laid the book down and reached for her sickle. He sat watching her as she walked to a

thick growth of brush and went back to work. She'd given up wearing the cumbersome brown cotton gloves and worked barehanded.

The next day Robert came to the grove carrying with him a pair of small leather gloves his grandmother had worn when she worked in her garden. He offered them to Anise. She refused them.

"I'll just leave them here," he laid them on the ground. "If you don't want them, just put them in the trash."

The following morning when he went out the back door, he looked down to see a paper sack setting on the steps. He opened it to find it full of huge, shelled walnut halves. He was so stunned that he stood staring down into the sack for some moments and then quickly glanced up and around, all was quiet.

The next morning, Anise found a bushel basket of apples on her front porch.

Two days later, three large jars of applesauce awaited Robert on his back steps. He put the jars away and made no further effort to reciprocate. Anise had made her point. She did not accept charity.

The days continued with Robert clearing the fields and Anise clearing the walnut grove. Each day the area in which she transplanted the small saplings grew wider. It stretched out far enough that Robert could see it as he worked in the fields to the south. One afternoon he drove by to see Anise at work planting saplings. He waved to her in a friendly gesture. She looked at him watchfully but did not wave back.

A pickup truck backfired out in the street and Robert sat straight up in his sleep. The searing pain in his injured leg was so intense that he cried out in agony. He dropped back down onto the pillow and lay trembling with the intensity of the pain. He fumbled for the hypodermic needle Fussy had left ready on the nightstand, and taking it in his fingers, he jabbed the needle into his healthy thigh. It took several minutes for the morphine to take affect. Then slowly the warming ease crept over him.

Indian Summer came and the weather turned sunny and mild again. Robert got the crop of winter wheat in and worked harder than ever to clear the fields for spring planting. As time passed, his memories of the horror of war gradually grew less painful. One evening as he sat alone on the back porch watching the moon come up, he knew it was time to start reading George's journal.

At first the entries were very hard to read. George's life-like imagery put Robert right there next to his friend and to what he was seeing and feeling. George was very open and honest with his accounts just as he had always been open and honest in life.

The graphic depictions of the battles were as overwhelming in their brutality as the battles themselves had been. George wrote of his grief when

Keith Patterson had lost his legs. He lost heart when Mark Donovan, thrilled at the find of a pearl handled 45 laying unclaimed in a bog, picked it up and was blown to pieces by the booby trapped weapon. George was kind in his assessment of those who were less gifted in leadership skills. He was a bulldog against enlisted men being treated like inferiors. Robert read the journal little by little. Some nights he could not bring himself to open it. Others, he could not put it down, especially when it came to George's reflections on the happy times. Robert laughed out loud when he read George's account of the curvaceous brunette who strutted up out of the ocean topless after losing her bikini top in the surf.

George's personal reflections were in the journal. He had talked so openly with Robert about his life that there was little to surprise Robert. One thing George had not mentioned to Robert was his relationship with a girl name Evelyn. Early in the journal, soon after surviving the cliff-side battle at Tulagi, George wrote that he prayed he would live to get back home to Evelyn.

November came and Thanksgiving approached. Robert called his father and invited him to Thanksgiving dinner. Louis Forester said he was too busy to think about what he was going to eat on a given day and declined. Bill Wallace called and invited Robert to eat with his family. Robert accepted. Thanksgiving evening he stood at Anise's door with a tremendous platter full of food Mrs. Wallace had made up for her. The look on Anise's face when she saw him standing there with the food was one Robert wouldn't forget. For the first time,

she opened the door to him and he carried the food inside and set it on the kitchen counter.

"I'll never eat all that," she eyed the platter as he pulled the sack from over it. It was piled high with turkey, mashed potatoes and dressing, green beans, broccoli cheese casserole and creamed corn. The rich smells of the feast of food filled the shadowy kitchen.

"The cranberries and the gravy are in here," he tapped the small sack he had set down by the platter. The room suddenly grew quiet. Anise stood awkwardly looking down at the floor. Robert sensed her discomfort with him being in the house. He moved to the door.

"I'm not going to find a plucked turkey carcass on my steps tomorrow morning am I," he smiled back at her. She gave him a puzzled look. "That's supposed to be a joke," he said. "Thanks for the walnuts Anise, and the applesauce."

December came and the red and white candy canes were hung on the lampposts around Marion Square. Robert asked the Wallaces what they would think of him bringing Anise to their house on Christmas Day. They were all for her coming.

The first time he suggested the idea to her she looked at him stupefied.

"Dad's going to Matoon to see his sister," he told her. "It would just be for a little while. They'll have all that good food again."

"No," she replied unequivocally and went back to swinging her sickle.

"If you don't want to ride over there with me, Mrs. Wallace said she would be more than happy to come out and pick you up."

"No."

"Well what will you do Christmas Day?" he persisted.

"Same as always," she said, matter of factly.

When Robert told Mrs. Wallace that he knew Anise would spend the day alone if she didn't come, Mrs. Wallace took things in hand and sent Anise a personal invitation to Christmas dinner. Anise held her kitchen door half open to Robert as he handed her the invitation. She grew silent as she opened the flap and pulled the invitation decorated on the front with a glittering red and white Santa Claus. Robert watched her as she opened it and read the message. She looked up at him. He was certain it was the first invitation she had ever received.

"They really want you to come," he said

"Why?"

"Because it's Christmas and now with your mom gone . . ."

"What do I have to wear?" she asked.

"Wear anything you want."

"But it has to be a dress."

"It doesn't matter."

"It has to be a dress," she repeated and closed the door shutting him out.

Robert wasn't certain if Anise understood that an invitation could be declined or if she thought she was obligated to accept it. But the week before

Christmas, he found her at work in the walnut grove and asked her if she would be ready to go to the Wallaces by 1 o'clock.

"Yes," she said. He talked to the Wallaces about not rushing Anise with a lot of conversation.

"She's quick enough to tell you off if you do something to make her mad," he said, but she seems to have no idea how to respond to any show of consideration toward her. Maybe it's just me," he said. "She just doesn't want much to do with me," he said.

"Well I know half a dozen girls who would love to have plenty to do with you," Bill's fifteen-year-old sister Olivia piped up. Robert smiled. "Anise never would talk to anyone," Olivia added. "She always stayed to herself. Then she quit school to take care of her mother."

"Don't you worry about anything," Bill's mother, Edith said. "We'll just let her do whatever she wants to do. There's always so much going on around here at Christmas she won't have to say a word if she doesn't want to."

As Robert pulled up in front of Anise's house Christmas afternoon, she came out of the door and slammed it shut. She hurried down the stairs wrapped in the same old red and black mackinaw jacket she wore to work in when the weather was very cold. Robert guessed correctly that the jacket had belonged to her grandfather. Her long hair lifted with the cold wind as she tucked her face down into the neck of the jacket.

"I'm freezing to death," she stammered nervously as she climbed into the car. Robert looked down to see that her legs were bare. She wore high-heeled

shoes that had long been out of style, and were covered with a thick layer of chalky white shoe polish. He had the roof up on the Model T and had resurrected the isinglass windows and snapped them into place, but the wind whistled through the smoked up old curled plastic windows and the unheated car offered little warmth.

“Here you go,” he said and reached into the back seat and handed her the heavy navy blue wool blanket he used when it was really cold. She took it from him tentatively and spread it over her legs.

When Anise and Robert stepped into the Wallaces’ kitchen, the rich smells of cooking were pungent in the air. Mrs. Wallace and Bill’s two older sisters turned from their work and greeted the two warmly. Anise looked mortified at the attention. She crept back behind Robert and said nothing.

“You two go on in and make yourselves at home in the front room,” Bill’s mother told Robert. Then, as if it was an afterthought, she said: “Anise, I don’t suppose you would consider peeling the potatoes?” She knew she was risking making the girl feel even more uncomfortable, but wanted to treat her as if she belonged. Anise peeked out from behind Robert and smiled uncomfortably.

“Here you go then,” Mrs. Wallace took the smile for a yes and turned to Anise with a tremendous bowl of large brown potatoes. Anise reached for the bowl just as Bill and his father, Jim Wallace came into the kitchen.

“At least let her get her coat off Edith,” Jim smiled at Anise. She stood awkwardly holding the bowl. Robert turned and took it from her and held it as Anise unbuttoned her sagging jacket and slipped it off. The dress she wore was

very plain and too small, but one look at her in the pale blue dress with her long honey-red hair hanging down around her shoulders and everyone in the room stopped to stare at her.

“Hurry up now,” Mrs. Wallace said matter-of-factly seeing how painfully overwhelmed Anise was with the attention. “You help too Robert,” she said dropping two paring knives into the bowl of potatoes. “Here’s a bowl for the peelings.”

Bill’s mother was right. Bill and his three sisters and the Wallaces’ three young grandchildren kept so much nonsense going that Anise couldn’t have gotten a word in if she had tried. She sat silently peeling potatoes without looking up. Once they were peeled they were boiled and mashed and dinner was ready. Olivia had made name cards for the table with Santa faces on them. Anise found her place between Robert and Mrs. Wallace. Both were careful to let her silently feel her way through the rigors of passing food and filling her plate. The Wallace siblings kept up the happy banter and halfway through the meal, Robert was almost certain he heard Anise laugh.

When the meal was over, the family went into the front room. A fat, tinsel-covered pine tree sat at an angle in one corner of the room. The tree was covered with sparkling, brightly-colored glass ornaments. Red and yellow candle lights perched at the end of the branches and bubbled cheerfully. At the top, a gauzy-winged angel smiled down.

The chatting and teasing continued. Anise sat quietly through it all. When it was time to go, Robert got their coats and thanked the Wallaces warmly. Anise stood awkwardly as if she dreaded having to speak.

"It was nice," she finally managed. On her way out the door, Mrs. Wallace handed her a small, green and red wrapped package. Anise looked at her in astonishment.

"Merry Christmas Anise," Mrs. Wallace said easily. "You come back real soon."

When Anise got into the car, she sat the package on the seat and didn't touch it again. Robert found it there after he had dropped her off and drove home. He immediately returned with the package and left it on the porch in front of the door.

As the weather turned colder and the snow and ice came, Robert worked on the other farm equipment and stayed inside. Every now and then when his courage would let him, he read on further in George's journal. When he would be reading it and something particularly poignant would reach out from the words and strangle the breath out of him, he would put the journal away for a while. Several more times through the entries, George wrote of his concern for Evelyn and that he hoped he lived to get back to take care of her. Robert sensed that George must have been deeply in love with her.

In late January, Robert got a telephone call from his father telling him that since Robert no longer needed his bedroom, his father wanted to use the space to expand his storage space for medical files. Why his father would be concerned

about such things when he was close to retirement age Robert had no idea. He hadn't heard from his father since calling him at Thanksgiving. He agreed to come the next morning and move the furniture in his bedroom into the basement.

The furniture was large and cumbersome. Robert moved what he could on his own and called Bill to help him with the larger pieces. While carrying the dresser down, the basement stairs shifted slightly under the weight. The stairs had worked loose from where they were anchored, and close inspection revealed a termite infestation in the wooden stairs. Robert immediately set to work tearing out the old stairs and replacing them.

Doctor Forester came and went having little to say to his son. Throughout the week Robert was in the house, he saw no evidence of his father making any effort to contact Anise, or her him. Since first hearing of it, Robert had pondered his father's motive for marrying Anise. The week working in his father's house gave him no insight into their relationship.

As he worked, he began to think back from his adult's point of view to the relationship his parents had with one another. He could remember them rarely spending time together and when they had, they had both been so self-absorbed they had had very little to say to one another. He compared the relationship his father now had with Anise and realized that except for the greater disparity in their ages, it was somewhat similar to the relationship he had shared with Robert's mother. Both women were very attractive, not in the same way, but both pretty. Robert concluded that if his mother hadn't had the social standing she had had, his father might have kept her hermitted away where she wouldn't have been any

bother to him as he did Anise. Even more curious were Anise's reasons for marrying a man old enough to be her grandfather. Robert could only imagine that it was for financial security.

Robert finished the stairs, moved the rest of the bedroom furniture to the basement and painted the bedroom ceiling and walls. He finished the work on a Friday evening.

"That's it," he told his father. "The room is finished." Louis Forester looked up from his desk distractedly.

"Good," he said with a nod. Robert hesitated, waiting to see if there was something else that might need doing. His father went back to his work without another word. Robert left and drove back to the farm. He hadn't been back half an hour when the phone rang. It was George's sister, Penny.

"Something terrible has happened Robert," Penny dove into the conversation with little formal greeting. "George's good name is being questioned. My parents are sick with worry, and mom's recovering from a mild heart attack. She's not supposed to get upset." Penny hardly drew breath with the urgency of the situation. "Robert, I wondered if you might come to Vinton. I can't think of anyone else to turn to," she was close to tears. "Please, can you come right away?"

"Sure I'll come," Robert assured her without hesitation. "You've got me worried now Penny. Can you tell me more about what's going on?"

"No, not over the telephone. When do you think you could get here?"

"I'll take the train, it's faster," he said. "I'll call the depot as soon as we hang up. I'll be on the next train out."

"Thank goodness," Penny sighed. "There's nothing you can do really, but it would be such a help just to have you here. There's no one I can talk to."

"I'll be there tomorrow," Robert assured her. "Try to take it easy."

The earliest train left at 9:15 the following morning. Robert was at the depot by 7:30 to buy his ticket. Neely's drugstore was next door to the depot. Neely's opened at 8 a.m. Robert sat at the counter drinking coffee and waiting anxiously for the train.

Behind the counter a teenage girl with shoulder-length dark hair worked at making orange juice. She halved an orange and lifted one of the halves and placed the cut side of it down on the small rounded dome at the top of the juice machine. She flipped the juicer on and the dome began to spin and suddenly she lost her grip on the orange half and it went sailing through the air and splattered on the front window. A wooden panel in the wall behind the counter slid up and Francis Neely looked out.

"Everything all right Rosemary?" he peered up over the top rim of his glasses at her.

"I think so," Rosemary stammered. "I'm just having a little trouble with the juicer. I'll figure it out." Mr. Neely gave her a sour smile and slid the panel back down. Rosemary hurried out from behind the counter and picked up the orange half laying under the window and wiped the juice from the floor with a napkin.

"It's really tricky," she smiled nervously at Robert as she came back behind the counter. She picked up another orange half and slowly set it down onto the juicer.

"Smash down on it hard," Robert advised. She pushed down on the orange half with all her strength and timidly flipped the juicer on again. The engine whirred and the juice drained down around the dome and into the juice tank.

"Whew," Rosemary sighed and wiped the perspiration from her forehead with the back of her hand.

Robert stood on the platform looking down the tracks and listening for the train whistle to blow. The 9:15 was six minutes early. It rattled along the tracks and a great gush of steam whooshed loudly as it approached the depot. Robert waited with his half-full duffle bag over his shoulder and climbed up onto the train as soon as it pulled to a stop.

He sat by the window watching the miles and miles of dry brown winter fields pass by. A creeping sense of uneasiness grew stronger with each hour that passed. He sat chewing over every possible scenario that could be responsible for questioning George's character. George had been too respectable a person to be involved in anything sordid. Did this have something to do with Evelyn? Could he have left her pregnant? But that would have become known long ago. How long had he been away, over three years now. What could be so disastrous about that now? No, it had to be something else. Robert began to wish he had finished reading George's journal. Then again, he decided, it didn't really matter. George

was the best friend he had ever had. He would defend him to the death no matter what he was accused of.

Penny Lackey was waiting at the train depot when Robert arrived. He stepped down off the train, and she started running toward him.

"I'm so thankful you're here," she threw her arms around him.

"What's going on Penny?" he asked immediately. He had worked himself into an angry resentfulness over George being thought of as anything but totally honorable.

"It's so hard to talk about," Penny said as the two sat across from each other in a quiet corner of the Vinton Hotel Restaurant. "It's really bad" she looked over at Robert miserably.

"Just tell me," he kept his voice low. "You and I both know George well enough to know that whatever it is has to be a mistake," he said. She started to cry. He reached over and took her hand in his.

"Tell me Penny. I promise I'll make whoever started this wish they hadn't.

"She's dead Robert, Evelyn Sanders is dead. Her little girl is only two years old and now her mother is dead," Penny started to weep.

"Is she all right?" the curious waitress appeared beside the table.

"Can you leave us alone for a while," Robert asked pointedly.

"We can't talk about this at home," Penny wiped her eyes on her napkin.

"Mom and Dad can't stand much more."

“No one can hear us back here,” he said. “Tell me the rest Penny,” he leaned closer. She looked across at him.

“Evelyn said George was her little girl’s father,” Penny said. Robert listened attentively. That was why George had worried so much about getting home to her.

“And how did Evelyn die?” he asked.

“Evelyn’s husband Russell shot her with his shotgun.”

“Evelyn was married?” Robert looked at her in confusion. He hadn’t considered the possibility that George’s Evelyn was a married woman. “How long had she been married?” he asked, masking his surprise.

“Over five years,” Penny’s voice was ragged. “They got into a fight and Evelyn told Russell that George was her baby’s father and Russell got down his shotgun and shot her,” Penny blubbered. “Russell’s in the county jail waiting trial and their little girl has been sent to an orphanage in Cedar Falls. Mom and Dad won’t hear a word about George’s involvement in the whole thing, but there’s talk,” she said in a nervous rush. “People are saying it’s George’s fault that Evelyn is dead. It’s just terrible Robert,” she cried quietly.

Robert promised Penny that he would find out what he could. Over the next several days, he called some of George’s friends in Vinton. None of them knew of his relationship with Evelyn. Robert wasn’t surprised. He knew George well enough to know he would have done everything in his power to protect Evelyn. Robert went to the county jail and asked to speak to Russell Sanders.

"I was just too damned drunk," Russell admitted openly to him. "Why did she have to tell me that?" he buried his face in his hands. "I got so mad I just went crazy," he said.

The sheriff told Robert that Russell Sanders would be tried for murder.

"It might not have been premeditated," the sheriff told him. "But the man is an animal when he drinks. Regardless of what the circumstances were, he killed Evelyn Sanders in cold blood. He's going to prison for a good long time."

Nothing Robert could do could dam up the flow of gossip about George's involvement in the case. No one Robert talked to had a thing bad to say about Evelyn. Penny never did bring up the subject of Evelyn's picture being in George's wallet, and Robert wouldn't have mentioned it for the world. He said nothing of George's journal or the entries about Evelyn.

He did what he could to comfort George's parents. The truth was there was very little he could say other than George was one of the best men he had ever known and that George was his closest friend in the world. The Lackeys seemed greatly comforted by his presence. Robert stayed the week with them and, on Saturday morning, Penny drove him to the train station.

"No one can know the truth for certain one way or the other about the baby," Robert told her comfortingly. "The talk will die down. You just keep your chin up and keep believing in George," he said in parting. An hour later he stepped down off the train in Cedar Falls. One look at Evelyn's two-year-old daughter and Robert knew the truth about the baby's paternity.

"Take that away Fussy," Robert said when she placed another syringe of morphine on the bed table next to him.

"Doctor Woodside said you take it if you need it," she said.

"I'm not going to let it get a hold on me," he winced, held his eyes closed and then opened them again.

"The pain real bad again? Want me to call Doctor Woodside?" she leaned closer.

"No. It passes. I'm getting used to it."

"Might not hurt to take just a little more medicine," she said. Evelyn came running into the room and bounced against the bed to a stop.

"You go easy there Miss Evelyn!" Fussy scolded. "Daddy feelin' bad enough without you raisin' a fuss. The little girl furrowed her brows at Fussy and climbed up on the chair and sat down gently on the bed beside Robert. "You want me to take her Massr Robert?"

"It's fine Fussy. Just take that syringe away." Evelyn leaned back against the headboard. A fly buzzed past her nose and settle down on Robert's left arm. He shoed it away and it returned to the very same spot. An instant later the flyswatter slammed down on his arm making him jump.

"Evy!" he scolded. "That wasn't nice."

"I got him!" she smiled triumphantly at the squashed black spot on his arm. A child's voice sounded at the door in the next room and Evelyn scrambled down from the bed and hurried out. Robert reached back and folded his pillow

under elevating his head slightly. He flicked the dead fly from his arm and rubbed the spot absent-mindedly. Tires screeched out in the street and he braced anxiously.

“Evy’s right in here,” Fussy stuck her head into the room. “She goin’ over to my house a while.” Robert reached out and turned on the small oscillating fan sitting on the bed table. The metal fins of the old fan vibrated and the fan whirred slowly and then faster and faster until the sound smoothed out into a soothing hum. It took exactly five seconds for the fan to revolve from one side to the other. Robert counted off the five and then the return five waiting for the soft ruffle of air to return and cool the perspiration on his face and arms.

The phones rang off the hook in Marion the next morning after Robert returned home from Iowa. Tongues wagged tirelessly over the titillating morsel of Doctor Forester’s son Robert returning on the train with a two-year-old baby girl perched on his arm.

Robert had assured the director of the orphanage that he was accustomed to being around children and that his father was a family physician and could advise him on the baby’s care. The director wrote down his father’s name, address and telephone number. Robert had a tense moment when she picked up

the telephone and dialed Louis Forester's office number in Marion. There was no answer. The orphanage was so overcrowded that the babies were literally caged in cribs to keep them safe. The director took down the address and telephone number where Robert could be reached and handed baby Evelyn over to him.

Little Evelyn was head strong and refused any coddling. She and Robert weren't on the train 15 minutes before she wet her pants. He took out a dry pair and carried her into the bathroom and sat her down and slipped her wet pants off under her dress. Before he could stop her, she snatched the wet pair and the dry pair out of his hands and threw them both into the toilet. Then she stuck her head over the edge of the toilet set and bounced excitedly as she watched the train track pass by below. He picked her up, carried her back to their seat and put dry pants on her there where she had less space to get away from him. People watched curiously as he wrestled with the cantankerous baby.

Little Evelyn roamed the house all night the first night back at the farm. Robert repeatedly picked her up and put her back into the small bed he had slept in as a boy. He finally surrounded the bed with chairs trying to keep her in, but she worked her way out around them and came toddling back out of the room.

He took her into the front room and tried rocking her in his grandmother's rocking chair, but she bucked and kicked and squealed until he finally gave up. It was nearly dawn when she finally laid down and fell asleep on the rug in front of the couch. He covered her with a blanket and fell into his own bed in exhaustion. An hour later, she was back up and roaming the house again.

On the way home the evening before, Robert had picked up the items of food that the orphanage had recommended for Evelyn. She screamed and smacked his hands away when he tried to feed her a bowl of oatmeal. He cut up a banana in a small bowl and tried to feed it to her with a spoon. She pinched her mouth shut and knocked her head against the back of the chair. He tried to feed her milk from a cup and she knocked it out of his hand.

The director had mentioned that a child Evelyn's age sometime becomes withdrawn and hard to manage when they are separated from their mother. Robert had been so certain that after all the things he had been through, taking care of a two year old baby couldn't be all that difficult. As of nightfall her first full day at the farm, her entire intake since being handed over to him, was three white grapes.

She was so tired and irritable the second night, she crawled up on the couch and fell asleep of her own accord. Robert covered her and left her where she was. A little past 3 a.m. she was on the prowl again. He closed the bedroom doors and lay on the couch where he could keep track of her more easily. He had just fallen asleep when a loud clatter of metal sounded from the kitchen as she pulled a stack of pots and pans out from a bottom cabinet.

Early that morning, Robert's father telephoned and ordered Robert to come to his house. He gave no explanation except that he was to come immediately. Robert wrestled with Evelyn getting her washed and dressed and got her into the car.

A mother and her three children sat in Doctor Forester's small waiting room when Robert arrived. One of the children was a little girl near Evelyn's age.

He said hello to the woman and the children and sat Evelyn down onto her feet. She toddled over to where the two-year-old girl sat on the floor and reared back and smacked the other baby in the face. The baby wailed in protest.

"No no!" Robert reprimanded Evelyn and grabbed her back up. Louis Forester stuck his head out from the open door of his examining room to see what the commotion was about and saw Robert standing there with Evelyn in his arms. He glanced from Robert to the baby and then back to Robert, giving him a disgusted scowl. Then he went back to finish with his patient.

"Whose baby is that?" Robert's father demanded. He sat at his desk as Robert stood in front of him holding Evelyn.

"She's my baby now," Robert replied.

"This is my grandchild?" his father spit the words out with anything but grandfatherly interest.

"Not exactly. She needed a home and I'm giving her one."

"I got a call from the Cedar Falls Orphanage in Iowa," his father said. "I hung up on them certain it was some mix up, and now here you come bringing a baby. Have you lost your mind!" Louis Forester postured angrily. "You have no idea how to take care of a baby! You've truly lost your mind." It was at that very moment that Evelyn chose to wet her pants again. The trickle of warm pee dripped through Robert's fingers and down onto his pants and onto the floor. His

father looked at the wet spot spreading out on his son's khaki pants and shook his head in disgust.

That morning, Evelyn had again refused any breakfast and some shadow of doubt had begun to creep into Robert's mind that he truly might not be able to take care of her. He had shaken off his self-doubt. He had come home from the war alive and safe and George had not. He would give George's baby the home her father could not. The last thing he wanted to hear was his father's denouncement of his ability to care for her. He turned and left the office without another word.

He stopped at the Sears and Roebuck Store and bought a highchair. In the next few days he discovered that if he put small pieces of food on the tray of the highchair, Evelyn would eat a few nibbles now and then. The vast majority of the food landed on the floor, but Robert was just relieved to get her to eat something.

He took her outside frequently and let her run around in the spring air. She ran helter-skelter keeping him busy running after her and taking out of her mouth the sticks and everything else she picked up. On the fifth day after bringing her to the farm, he climbed up onto the tractor, sat her in his lap and turned on the tractor. The look of fascination on her face at the churning burping sound of the old engine amused him. He shifted the tractor into gear and headed out to the fields. He had so much work to do to get the spring crops in, and he was getting behind taking care of Evelyn. He drove slowly back and forth raking the plow through the fields breaking up the soil readying it for planting.

For the most part, the baby seemed happy to ride on his lap as he drove the tractor. She leaned forward and put her hands on the steering wheel and then leaned back against Robert and watched the world go by and frequently napped briefly. When she got too restless to hold onto, he pulled to a stop and let her run for a while. Progress in the fields was slow, but it was better than no progress at all.

The second week with the baby, Robert saw a small card on the bulletin board at the IGA store: Babysitting – Annabelle Ricks – 50 cents a day, and the telephone number. He remembered Annabelle from when she had come to his father's office. She was friendly and clean. Her son, Jarrod, had been Robert's classmate at school.

Annabelle owned a small plot of ground down by the river and two shacks that sat side by side up on wooden piers to keep them above water when the river flooded.

"No need to come get me," Annabelle told Robert over the telephone later that afternoon. "My man can bring me," she said. The next morning a dilapidated black Model T pickup truck rattled up in front of the house. Robert looked out at the rumpled fenders and rusted out doors of the old truck. It listed forward and to the left, the right front tire being smaller than the one on the left. Behind the steering wheel sat a thin old man, his face hidden under the bill of a faded black baseball cap.

"Come here baby," Annabelle coaxed Evelyn as the baby toddled in and out of the room ignoring her completely. Annabelle sat on the couch, her purse

still on her arm. She hadn't changed a great deal since Robert had seen her years earlier. She had always been overweight. Pink plastic rollers with thin tufts of pale pink-orange hair wrapped around them protruded from under the purple-flowered scarf she had tied around her head. Her smile was pleasant and her manner relaxed and friendly.

"My husband Tom passed on three years ago," she told Robert. "Best years of my life were with Tom," she said. Robert smiled accommodatingly, anxious to get out in the fields. He sat watching her, determining whether she was up to taking care of the fast-moving baby. "He turned the tractor over on himself and that was that," Annabelle said. "I didn't realize what I had until he was gone," she lamented.

"Sorry to hear about your loss," Robert said. "Do you . . ."

"Jerrod remembered you from school," she cut him off. "He's living in my other house until he gets on his feet," she said.

"He's been sick?"

"No, just a little run of bad luck finding work. Something'll turn up soon."

"Mrs. Ricks my baby is fast on her feet," Robert cut in before she could speak again. "She gets into everything she can get her hands on. I hope she won't be too much for you."

"Now don't you worry about a thing," Annabelle leaned forward and slowly got to her feet. "Come here honey," she sang to Evelyn as Evelyn came scooting in and back out of the room again. "I've babysat for just about

everybody in town," Annabelle assured him. I can give you some names of people if you like."

"No, I think it'll be fine," Robert said with less reserve than he was feeling. He showed Annabelle around and told her what Evelyn might eat for lunch and welcomed Annabelle to help herself to what she wanted. He caught up with the baby and lifted her into his arms.

"No!" she shouted and pushed away. He gave her a resisted hug, thanked Annabelle for her help and left the house. He quickly readied the seed drill and hitched it to the tractor and was off. Having the freedom to work unencumbered was exhilarating. With the sun on his face and the wind blowing gently against him, he sowed wheat, row after row, for hours with out stopping. At noon he came back to check on Annabelle and Evelyn. The house was quiet. He called out and looked through the house and then went out in the yard and looked everywhere. They were gone. The first thing he thought of was the rusted out truck. Would Annabelle take off in that thing with the baby?

He quickly got out the Model T and drove to Annabelle's.

"Haven't seen her all day," Jerrod sat barefoot on the front steps of one of Annabelle's rundown shacks. "She'll likely be off with her man somewhere," he added. Robert drove the river road up and down looking for the truck. There was no sign of it. He headed into town, driving slowly hoping to catch site of it. He drove around the square and then out on each street veining off from the square. There was no sign of the truck.

It was almost five by the time he heard the truck groan to a stop in front of the house. He hurried outside and took Evelyn from Annabelle without a word. He had her 50 cents ready.

"Something wrong?" Annabelle asked innocently.

"I'll call if I need you again," he said stiffly.

The next morning he set off on the tractor with Evelyn in his lap again. She was restless and difficult to manage. By midmorning, he was ready to sow the fields to the south. When he neared the walnut grove, he decided to stop and check on Anise's progress. The burn pile was unlit but stacked high with branches and brush. He found Anise some distance from it working with her ax to remove a small maple tree.

"You're about finished here," he called out from some distance away. She slowed for an instant but kept at her work. He came closer and set the baby down onto her feet. She toddled up beside Anise and stood watching her work.

"You've done an amazing job," Robert said looking around. Evelyn got down under Anise and tried to take the ax from her.

"Get back baby," Anise said, pushing her away. Evelyn toppled backward and landed hard on her backside. She cried out, but Anise went on with her work ignoring her. Robert picked Evelyn back up and headed back to the tractor.

The days passed and the baby became less and less content with the confinement of riding on the tractor. Robert's progress with the planting slowed more and more. He realized that at the rate he was going he would be able to

plant only a small fraction of the crop that he had planned before the hot weather set in.

Soon after Robert had brought Evelyn to live in Marion, Bill's mother had called and, asking no questions about how he came to have the baby, she had invited him to bring Evelyn by for a visit when he was out their way. One afternoon after a particularly trying morning on the tractor, Robert put Evelyn in the car and headed for the Wallace's. He half-hoped that Mrs. Wallace would take to the baby and offer to watch her for him or at least be able to give him some advice. Evelyn wanted nothing to do with any of the family, especially with Bill's mother. Edith tried to befriend her and Evelyn flew into a temper tantrum and fell down on the floor kicking and screaming. Robert lifted her to her feet and for the first time, smacked her backside. Evelyn gave him a tragic look and cried all the harder. Feeling at the end of his patience, he picked her up, and she laid her face against his neck and was quiet.

"She's afraid you'll leave her," Bill's mother said.

"She fights everything I try to do for her," he replied, his pent up frustration sounding in his voice.

"You're doing just fine," Edith patted his arm.

Robert took a few days off from his planting and devoted the time to chasing after the troublesome baby and trying harder to get her cooperation. One evening he sat watching her from under the tree he had played beneath as a boy. She ran helter-skelter, poking and meddling into everything she could get to, screamed bloody murder when he took anything away from her and resisted any

efforts he made to be gentle and loving with her. It came to him that the baby's behavior and that of Anise Mathews were very much the same.

He thought about Anise. She was almost finished clearing the walnut grove. She had taken care of her mother from the time she was a little girl. He thought about the afternoon she had pushed Evelyn aside when the baby had gotten in her way. Anise's tone had been matter-of-fact, not angry. She would soon have time on her hands, and he needed help or the crops would not get in. He could barter with Anise, offer her part of the crop or something if she would help with Evelyn. She would be close enough that he could keep watch over the situation, especially until he knew that the baby was safe with her. He picked up Evelyn and started walking southwest.

Night was falling by the time he reached the back edge of the Mathew's property. He looked to find the lights of the house but could see nothing but the faint silhouette of the trees in the distance against the dark sky. He continued on toward the house wondering why Anise would choose to sit in the dark. He neared the house and circled around to the front porch. He called out to Anise before stepping onto the porch. He called again and when she did not answer, he climbed the stairs and knocked on the front door. He knocked louder. She did not answer. He waited and then tried the door. It was unlocked. He opened it and called inside. He called louder and still she did not answer. To his knowledge, Anise never went anywhere except to walk to the grocery store. It came to him that she might be sick or hurt. He reached in and switched on the light and called again. When no answer came, he went inside. He crossed the

kitchen and called into the front room. All was silent. Evelyn rode on his arm curiously looking around the house at what she could see. He continued on through the house and up the stairs to the bedrooms. Anise was not there. His father might have come and taken her somewhere, was all he could imagine. He went back downstairs and saw a telephone sitting on a small table in the front room. His father must have finally seen to it that Anise got a phone. Robert stood looking down at it. He sensed that something was wrong. He picked up the phone and dialed his father's house. He would see if Anise was with him. He would make up something about the baby to ask as his reason for calling.

"Yes," his father's irritated tone told Robert he had either been asleep or was in the middle of something.

"Dad, it's me Robert."

"Not now," his father cut him off. "I'm on my way out to deliver a baby," he hung up.

Robert went outside and sat down on the porch steps. He reasoned that Anise was on foot wherever she was and would probably be home soon. He leaned back against the porch rail and Evelyn settled down in his arms and fell asleep. The minutes ticked away. An hour passed and there was no sign of Anise. A mosquito buzzed near Robert's ear and he drew the baby closer, protecting her face with his chest. He watched the road and listened for footsteps. All was quiet. A half hour later, he heard a car some distance down the road. The sound grew louder and the car approached and rolled up in front of the house. Before it had completely stopped, the door flew open and Anise stumbled out. A few

syllables from a male voice came through the open door but were cut off as she slammed it behind her and broke into a run toward the house. Robert came to his feet, and hurried down the stairs. The car sped away before he could make out whose it was. Anise raced passed him wearing the same blue dress and shoes she had worn to the Wallace's at Christmas. She pounded up the stairs in the thick-heeled shoes and through the door open and careened inside with Robert fast on her heels.

"Anise," he called out.

"Get out of here!" she screamed out as she ran. He flicked on the kitchen light and continued in pursuit of her. He sat the awakened baby down on the couch and caught up with Anise just before she reached the stairs. She struggled to get free of him, but he held onto her and flicked on the light overhead. She tried to hide her face, but he caught her chin in his fingers. He looked into her eyes and then down at her lips. They were badly bruised, and had begun to swell. Her cheeks and chin were flame red and raw from a man's rough aggression. The shoulder of her dress was torn.

"Who was that?" his temper smoldered in a livid calm.

"Let me go," she tried to wrench free of him.

"Not until you tell me who that was in the car," he locked her in his iron-tight grasp. Her expression was closer to hysteria than fear. She choked back a sob, holding her breath. The baby fell off of the couch and let out a cry. Robert loosened his hold on Anise just enough for her to wiggle free and race up the stairs. He crossed to the crying baby and picked her up. The blood in his brain

coursed in a deafening roar as he sat the baby back on the couch and started after Anise again. Halfway up the stairs he slowed and took a deep breath remembering the look on her face. She was terrified enough without him making matters worse. He went back down the stairs and sat on the couch taking the crying baby in his lap. She rested back against him sleepily. Half an hour later, he locked Anise's front door and left through the back. Whoever was in the car had seen him. They wouldn't be back tonight.

The baby slept fitfully. Robert lay awake for hours wondering what to do. The last thing in the world he had expected was to find Anise out with someone. His father was such a pathetic excuse for a husband. Robert could hardly blame her for not being loyal to him, but Anise was so painfully introverted. How was it possible?

He awoke at dawn the next morning to the loud clatter of Evelyn pulling the pots and pans out of the kitchen cabinet again. He rolled out of bed and staggered sleepily toward the kitchen. As he crossed through the front room, Anise rose up on her elbows from where she lay on the couch. She was fully dressed, the old mackinaw wrapped tightly around her. She looked up at him through a sleepy fog.

"Anise?" He squinted trying to see her better in the dark room. He started toward her. She scrambled up from where she lay and backed away from him until she was pinned against the arm of the sofa. The quickness of her movement brought him fully awake. He slowed but continued toward her and dropped down to a squat in front of her.

“Are you all right Anise?” his concern sounded in his voice. She stared at him warily. “Anise, you know, there’s nothing in this world I would ever do to hurt you,” he said. Her eyes flickered from his face down to his bare chest and back. He glanced down at himself. All he wore was a pair of old fatigue pants cut off above the knee. “We need to talk,” he said as he pulled to his feet and turned and went back to his bedroom to dress.

As he dressed, the smell of bacon cooking began filling the house. When he came back into the kitchen, a skillet of eggs and a skillet of bacon sat on the table.

“Coffee?” he looked at Anise. Her lips were a mottled blue and badly swollen. Her cheeks and chin were skinned bright red with whisker burn. She nodded yes to the coffee, and he pulled out the coffee pot and emptied out the grounds from the day before. As the coffee brewed, he corralled Evelyn and sat her down in her highchair. He shoveled a small amount of eggs onto her tray. She slammed her hand down on the egg, squashed it in her fist and hurled it across the room. It slapped noiselessly against the refrigerator. Robert cut the bacon he had spooned onto his plate into small pieces and took a bit of egg and bacon on a spoon and held it to the baby’s mouth. She gritted her front teeth together and knocked the spoon away. Without a word, Anise got up from her chair, lifted the baby out of her highchair and sat her down in her lap locking an arm around her. Anise caught up a bit of egg between her fingers and leading with her thumb, forced the baby’s lips apart and inserted the egg. She held her fingers tightly against Evelyn’s lips until the baby had swallowed the egg. After

half dozen repeats of the process, Evelyn stopped fighting her and ate what was put into her mouth. Robert sat watching with fascination. Anise ate her breakfast in silence sharing it with the baby and then got up from the table and left the house through the kitchen door. Robert didn't see her again until the next morning when he awoke to find her on the couch again. He guessed correctly that she was afraid to stay in her house alone at night. Again she fed the baby breakfast and set off without a word.

That afternoon he came to the walnut grove hoping to talk to her about what had happened. He set Evelyn down onto her feet and she toddled over to Anise. Anise stopped what she was doing and carried the baby to a nearby tree. She picked up a length of rope she had laid there. She tied one end of the rope around the baby's middle and the other around the trunk of the tree. Beneath the tree, Anise had scratched up a pile of loose dirt. In the dirt lay an old metal measuring cup, a small pot with a broken handle and two large spoons. Evelyn sat down and went to work shoveling dirt into the pot with one of the spoons.

"Will you eat supper with us?" Robert asked.

"No," Anise replied and went back to work. He stood watching her work and watching the baby play contently and decided to let a little more time pass before he brought up the disturbing incident of two nights earlier. He left the baby and returned to the tractor and completed his first truly productive afternoon of work since he'd come back from Iowa with Evelyn. As evening fell, he drove to the walnut grove and collected the baby.

The weeks passed. Anise finished in the walnut grove and moved to the fruit orchard. Through the days, Evelyn was tethered to a tree close to where Anise worked and played with whatever hodge-podge of items Anise added to the baby's pile of playthings. Each morning Robert awakened to find Anise sleeping on his couch. She made breakfast, fed the baby and set off to work. Robert quickly adopted Anise's feeding method and soon had Evelyn eating on her own.

Each time Robert tried to approach Anise to find out what had happened the night she had come home bruised and terrified, she withdrew into an impenetrable silence. She seemed even more withdrawn and timid since the incident than she had been before. It ate at him that she was so frightened of whoever it was that had hurt her that she would not stay alone at night. How anyone could take advantage of a girl who was so unworldly and vulnerable was unfathomable to him.

The third week after the incident, he lay awake thinking through each detail of that night. The memory of the few deep-voiced syllables he had heard before Anise had slammed the car door shut had played over and over inside his head a hundred times. The voice had seemed somehow familiar. Suddenly it hit him like a lightning bolt. The reason he hadn't been able to connect the voice with the face was because it was the last person in the world he would have suspected. It was Bill Wallace inside the car with Anise that night.

“You haven’t been trying to get out of bed have you?” Alvin Woodside asked Robert. “This leg should have stopped swelling by now.” He had removed the cast again and stood gently feeling the bones of Robert’s injured leg while carefully avoiding the open wound.

“I moved in my sleep and wrenched it pretty bad,” Robert said.

“Well I guess I could tie you down,” the doctor said with the hint of a smile. “It’s healing Robert. I know it seems like it’s taking forever, but it looks clean.” He looked down at the ugly wound a moment longer and then set to work applying a new cast to the leg.

“Have you heard anything about my father?” Robert asked, his tone serious. Alvin Woodside took his time answering.

“He’s home on his own recognizance. He’s doing pretty good, considering.”

Robert and little Evelyn sped along toward the Wallaces. Anise was living in fear of being hurt again. Something had to be done. As Robert drove, he remembered over and over again the voice coming from the car Anise had returned home in the night she had been so badly bruised and terrified. He had heard only a few syllables of the voice, but there was that raspy undertone and the pitch, not high, not low, it was Bill Wallace’s voice.

It was impossible to think that Bill could have done anything to hurt Anise. There had to be another explanation. Maybe he gave her a ride home that night. He might know something about what had happened.

Evelyn climbed up and down from the seat to the floor. Robert had left the top of the old Ford up and the isinglass windows in place to help keep the baby confined. Taking her in the car was always an adventure. She stood up against the back of the seat looking out of the front window. She moved closer to Robert and leaned against his shoulder. She reached for the steering wheel.

"No, no," he said quietly. She straightened and continued leaning against him as they drove across town. They reached the turnoff to the Wallace's farm. Robert turned onto the gravel road. The old car bumped along and the white dust from the gravel billowed up behind it. A half-mile down the road the Wallace's lake came into view off to the right, and in the distance Robert could see a bright-green John Deere tractor slowly making its way across a wide expanse of red-brown field. He slowed the car and pulled over to the side of the road and stopped.

The sun was high in the sky, and it was hot inside the car. He turned to see Evelyn's blue eyes looking into his. Her cheeks were bright pink and tiny beads of sweat dotted the fine white down above her upper lip.

"Too hot!" he said as he opened the car door and let in a rush of fresh air. He moved to get out.

"Hot!" she mimicked him. He stopped and looked back over his shoulder at her. She had been slow to talk. Hot was her first truly clear word.

“Hot” he repeated, hoping she would say it again. She grinned silently. He got out of the car, and she followed close behind him and held her arms out for him to take her. He picked her up and walked around the car, stepped off into the soft spring grass and continued on in the direction of the tractor. He hadn’t gone far when Bill saw him on the hillside and waved. Bill slowed the tractor to a gradual stop and climbed down and started toward Robert. Robert walked on a short distance and then set Evelyn down on her feet and waited for Bill to reach them.

“Gosh it’s good to see you,” Bill came rushing up the hill. “How are you?” he sang out as he grabbed Robert’s outstretched hand and put his other arm around Robert’s shoulders giving him a hug and a smack on the back. “And who’s this?” Bill dropped down to a squat in front of Evelyn. She bent down and came up with a small fistful of grass and sprinkled it on the knee of Bill’s overalls. “Did ya hear the news?” Bill glanced up and smiled showing the separation between his front teeth. He reached out for Evelyn and brought her with him as he came back up.

“What news?” Robert smiled back.

“Donna and me got engaged last Saturday.”

“Donna?”

“Donna Doore. You remember her. She was two years behind us in school.” Bill reached up and took his baseball cap off and brushed the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his free arm. Robert looked into Bill’s wide-set

brown eyes. Seeing how happy he seemed made what Robert had to ask him all the harder. "Let's go up to the house and get a cold drink," Bill suggested.

"I can't stay," Robert said. "But I need to talk to you about something. It's about Anise. Anise Mathews. Robert watched Bill's reaction.

"What about Anise?" Bill asked casually.

"Something happened to her a few weeks ago. I'm not certain what, but she was badly bruised and her clothes ripped. It scared her to death. I thought you might have heard something about it."

"God no," Bill said, setting Evelyn back down on her feet. "Did she call the police?" Bill asked.

"No. You know how shy she is. It's a torture for her to have to say a few words to anybody. Can you imagine her being questioned by the police? I thought coming to your house at Christmas was the first time she'd ever been anywhere except to school, and then this happened. The thing is," Robert hesitated, looking away and then back. "Bill, one evening I went over to ask Anise if she might be interested in taking care of the baby while I did the planting. When she wasn't home it surprised me. I was a little worried about her and sat down on her porch to wait for her. After a while, a car pulled up down on the road in front of her house. It was too dark for me to see the car very well, but the door flew open and Anise jumped out, and I could have sworn I heard..." Robert looked into Bill's eyes. "Bill, if it wasn't your voice coming from inside that car, there is somebody else in Marion who sounds exactly like you." Bill stood

staring at Robert in silence. Robert watched the familiar nervous tick set up in Bill's left eye.

"Are you accusing me of what I think you're accusing me of?" Bill drew his words out. Robert heard the hurt in his tone. Robert relaxed his shoulders and let out a slow sigh.

"I thought you might have given her a ride Bill. I thought you might know something about what happened. She's scared to death that whoever it was might come after her again. Someone's got to help her." Bill's stance relaxed slightly.

"I hardly know Anise," he said. "This is the first I've heard of any of this," he said trying to blink away the tick. The two stood for several awkward moments not knowing what to do or say next. Robert looked around and spotted Evelyn some distance down the hill, running in the direction of the tractor. He started after her.

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"Evelyn!" Robert shouted through the threatening rumble of thunder. He pressed his body against the powerful wind, his soaking wet khaki uniform plastered against his body. "Evelyn!" he shouted and ran after the baby as she tumbled along in front of him just out of reach. He finally caught up with her and reached out, his fingers locking onto nothing but a weightless tangle of dry weeds. "I hated lying about it," Bill Wallace stood across from Robert in the barn. The wind caught the hay scattered across the floor and lifted it into the air, swirling it, letting it play as it floated. "Donna and I were having trouble then. I was afraid

I'd lose her if she found out I'd gone to White City without her. I'm sorry about Anise," he said. A fire-white charge of lightning illuminated the blackness outside the barn. The oscillating fan ticked softly somewhere close by. "Anise just wanted to hear the music," Bill said. "She sat there watching the band play and everybody dancing as if it was the most amazing thing on earth. It must have been the first time she'd ever been someplace like that. I couldn't believe it when she and your father came in that night," he said. "Doctor Forester came in first. I thought he was alone. I thought maybe someone had gotten sick and he was there to take care of them. Then I saw Anise following way behind him."

"Evelyn!" Robert shouted, looking around for her. The sky blinked white, the thunder exploded. He could hear Evelyn laughing somewhere outside the barn.

Robert awoke with a start. He looked around the dark shadows of the room, remembering where he was. He listened to a slight tick that had started in the oscillating fan. He reached for his watch lying on the table beside the bed. 10:40. Old Doctor Whiteside, lying in the bed across from him, slowly rolled onto his back. His head turned to one side as far as his tiny arthritic neck would allow. At the end of each of his shallow breaths came a dry, barely audible little snort. Robert reached over and turned off the small lamp sitting on table and the room went dark. He lay back down and closed his eyes. He lay listening to the odd-sounding little snorts made by the old man across from him.

A week had passed since the morning when Bill had first assured Robert that he knew nothing about Anise being attacked. Robert put Evelyn to bed and dropped down in his grandfather's old chair in the front room and flipped on the radio he had bought the week before. Static hissed and spit loudly from the shoebox sized, tan plastic radio. Robert jumped back up and quickly turned the volume down. He leaned close, slowly turning the tuning knob until finally a soft whine of a saxophone sounded. He turned the knob back and forth until the reception was clearest. Tiny Hill's big band was playing at White City Park and the Marion City Radio Station was broadcasting the music live. Robert turned the sound down and sat back down in the chair to listen to the music and to wait for the baby to fall asleep. Five minutes after he had sat down he was sound asleep.

Several hours had passed when he dreamed he heard someone cry out and he awoke with a start. An instant later he heard a heavy footstep touch down on the back porch steps and then another and another. He came up out of his chair and started toward the kitchen. He had no sooner reached the doorway than the back door crashed open and Anise came flying inside. Her feet barely touched the floor as she sailed across the kitchen and into Robert's arms. She was shaking so violently that he couldn't hold her still no matter how tightly he held her.

"The door! I heard the door!" was all she could manage. Then she broke down in breathless sobs.

"You stay here," his tone was malevolent. He moved with her in his arms, guiding her back to the chair he had just left. "This is the end of this," he said as he tried to sit her down in the chair.

"No!" she grabbed hold of him more tightly. "Don't leave!" she held on.

"I'll lock the doors Anise. No one would dare come after you here."

"No!" She was too frightened to think rationally and refused to let go of him. His own reason told him that whoever had been at her door wouldn't stay long once they had discovered her gone and that every second was of the essence. He had to fight back his angry resolve to catch whoever it was terrifying her as he held onto his gentle response to her need for protection and comfort.

"All right then," he said quietly. "I'm not leaving," he held her in his arms. "You're safe now," he assured her.

The next morning Anise jumped as Robert came into the kitchen. She immediately busied herself helping the baby with her breakfast. As he sat down across from her, he could see that her face was pale and her hands were shaking. He hadn't the heart to press her for information about what had happened the night before while she was still so upset. She quickly finished eating, picked up the baby and the small parcel of food she had made for their lunch and headed for the door.

"I'll make dinner," she said under her breath.

"You don't have to do that Anise," he said.

When he returned from the fields that evening Anise had dinner half cooked and was running in and out of the back door watching over Evelyn. Evelyn was having the time of her life splashing around in the big aluminum washtub under the tree next to the kitchen window. Anise had filled the tub with warm water, stripped Evelyn down and plunked her into the tub. Robert heard the baby's happy squeals as he walked from the barn.

"What are you up to," he called to Evelyn as he approached. She stood giving him a toothy grin and went crashing down into the water landing on her bare backside. The water splashed high out of the tub. Anise came outside and stood watching the two from the back porch.

"Is this bath?" Robert smiled up at her.

"She likes it," Anise said shyly.

"I can see that," Robert laughed. Evelyn got to her feet rubbing the water out of her eyes with her knuckles. As soon as her eyes were clear enough for her to see again, she crashed back down.

"How do you get these things so tender?" Robert poked his fork into one of the pork chops on his plate as he sat across from Anise at dinner. "Mine are always so tough I have to pick them up and tear off pieces with my teeth," he said.

"Cook them slower," she said, uncomfortable with the compliment. He went back to eating his pork chops, mashed potatoes and gravy and the cooked spinach that Anise had gathered from the garden.

She refused help with the dishes. Robert sat out in the back watching over the baby until it grew dark. Anise took her time in the kitchen, uncomfortable with the thought of the hours that would somehow need filling before Robert would go to bed. She kept as much distance from him as she could. Just the thought of what had happened the night before made her shrink with embarrassment.

Finally Evelyn's energy ran down and Robert carried her off to bed. Anise sat in the kitchen shelling walnuts when he came back in.

"We already have a peck of those shelled," he told her. "You've worked enough for one day," he said. She said nothing. He went into the front room and sat down. He switched on the radio. The music swelled softly into the room. Tiny Hill's band was playing a second night at White City Park. The tune was Sioux City Sue. You could hear the laughter and clapping as the people danced to the tune. Anise came in quietly and sat down across the room from Robert. "We might be able to pick up the ballgame from St. Louis if we try," he offered.

"I like the music," she said without hesitation. She so rarely offered an opinion, except in anger, that her spontaneity surprised him. He settled back and listened with her. He could see the music took her somewhere pleasant. He had often wondered if anything ever did.

"Do you like to dance," he risked the absurd, certain she would die of embarrassment at the question but willing to try anything to keep the conversation going. She hunched her shoulders and looked down at the floor. "Do you?" he persisted.

"I can't do that," she said, overwhelmed with self-consciousness.

"I bet you can," he teased.

"No," she said.

"I bet so," he teased further and started up out of his chair toward her. She looked up at him with a startled expression. He slowed, gentling his approach. The music had slowed to Sentimental Journey. He left a little space between them and squatted down in front of her. He slowly reached out for her hand. She shrank away from his touch. "Just try," he coaxed. "It's fun. You'll see." He touched her hand and to his utter amazement, she put her fingers in his. He slowly rose to his feet and brought her up out of her chair. There was a terribly awkward moment when she had to get close enough to him to dance in unison. He guided her left hand to his shoulder. Her touch was so light he could barely feel it. He put his right hand at the side of her waist. She stiffened at his touch. He quickly took her free hand in his before she had time to change her mind and moved slowly in time to the rhythm. "Who said you couldn't dance?" he praised. She kept her gaze down and concentrated on the steps he was taking.

Robert had assured his father over and over again that he had absolutely no interest in interfering in any way with his marriage to Anise. Now Anise was not only spending nights in the house with Robert, but they were also eating meals together, and dancing. Robert lay awake that night his thoughts a mix of vengeful determination to find out who it was that had attacked Anise and guilty self-recrimination for his disloyalty to his father.

The next morning he came into the kitchen to find nothing but the cooked breakfast food sitting on the table. He looked out the back window to see Anise some distance away carrying Evelyn on her hip as they headed through the fields in the direction of the fruit orchard. He ate quickly, cleared away the breakfast dishes and set out to talk to his father.

Abner Delano, who had suffered with extreme obesity from the time he was a little boy, had arrived at Doctor Forester's office ten minutes before Robert. Robert parked on the street directly behind the Delano's pickup truck. Abner's wife Irene, a thin little woman always drove the truck. Robert noted that even with no one in the truck, the passenger's side sagged so extremely that he thought at first that the truck had a flat tire.

When Robert rounded the corner of the house, Abner was just squeezing his tremendous girth through the door on his way into the office. Robert took the stairs in two bounds and stood on the porch behind the Delanos. His father looked up at him from over Abner's shoulder and then looked back to Abner.

"Stay to the left," Louis Forester instructed Abner. "I have some termite damage under the floor at the right. You could end up down in the basement and we'd have a time getting you back up."

Abner lumbered slowly into the examining room, his monstrous paunch sagging to his knees. Irene followed close behind him. Robert sat down in the waiting room. A few minutes later, the examination room door opened and Louis Forester looked out.

"Come in here," he motioned to Robert.

“This panis is going to rot your sex off if you don’t get rid of it,” Louis Forester said as he jabbed Abner’s tremendous gut with his knuckles as Abner lay stretched out on the examining table nude. “Higher Robert,” Doctor Forester instructed his son as Robert stood with his arms stretched around Abner’s great sag of stomach holding it up out of the way so that his father could examine the angry red infected skin covering Abner’s groin. Tiny Irene Delano stood at Robert’s elbow, Abner’s great tenting of shirt and pants draped over her arm. Robert tried not to think how embarrassing it must be for her to have to witness the grotesque manipulations required to make the examination possible.

As Robert stood holding up Abner’s belly, he forgot for the moment his own part in the disgusting task at hand and looked down at his father who seemed to be totally absorbed in the angry red flesh above Abner’s genitals. It suddenly came to Robert that his father had spent his entire lifetime examining fetid flesh, lancing boils, evacuating bronchial phlegm and giving enemas. For the first time Robert asked himself what incentive his father had had for devoting his life to his practice. Louis Forester had little interest in worldly gain. He’d lived in the same house since he first started his practice. He was oblivious to what he wore. When his car wore out, he called up the dealer and ordered another. He cared nothing for style or high performance, always ordering the most basic model available. Robert tried to remember his father ever showing any particular interest in wanting anything and could think of nothing, nothing except for Robert to go to medical school. The sense of guilt that Robert had lived with since running away to the Marines rose up inside him. Then he glanced down at the great white blob

of blue-veined flesh he held in his arms and his repugnance quickly overcame his guilt.

“You go right now and pick this up at Neely’s pharmacy,” Louis Forester instructed as his pencil scratched across a small pad of paper. “You could lose the entire genitalia if that infection doesn’t clear up soon,” he told Abner. “Work at that diet I gave you,” he said as Abner began his lumbering exit from the office. “Virginia Metsker is due here any minute,” Louis Forester told Robert as Abner slowly approached the doorway. “I’ve got to do something about that termite damage,” he said in the next breath. “There’s a hole the size of a dime in the floor over there.”

Virginia Metsker was waiting outside as Abner and Irene left. While Robert waited to talk to his father, he went down into the basement and looked up to see the flash of daylight showing through the small hole overhead. The wooden joist close to the hole was splintered and chewed to mere pulp. Robert examined the other joists for damage as he waited to hear Virginia’s footsteps as she left the office.

“How soon can you fix it?” Louis Forester asked as he stood waiting at the basement door as Robert came up the stairs.

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” Robert answered. “There’s a lot of damage.”

“Get some help if you have to,” his father said as he started back to his office.

"I have to talk to you Dad. It's about Anise," Robert followed him. Without slowing, Louis Forester rounded the side of his desk and sat down in his chair. "Anise has been attacked!" Robert said, describing the incident in the strongest terms possible to get his father's attention.

"Attacked!" Louis Forester looked up at him dumbfounded.

"Her face was all bruised and her clothes ripped," Robert said, relieved to see his father's concern. Louis Forester suddenly began rifling through the papers on his desk.

"Get out of here!" he shouted at Robert.

"Robert stood gaping down at him in confusion.

"Go on. Get out of here I said," his father growled dismissingly.

"But it's bad Dad. She needs help. You can't just close her out like that."

"Mind your own business!" his father glared up at him. "Get out of here!"

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"Your Dad and Anise sat down at a table across from each other," Bill said. A blast of wind caught the barn door. A shot rang out as the door slammed shut. "Evelyn!" Robert shouted for the baby. "Hot," her blue eyes were just inches from his. "Doctor Forester acted like he was bored to death," Bill said. "But you could see how amazed Anise was with everything. The guys must have thought Doctor Forester was her father. They just kept coming up to her and trying to get her to dance with them. I was sitting at the next table. She looked

mortified every time another one came over. A lot of the guys had their eye on her. They just wouldn't give up. Then the next thing I knew your father was screaming and cursing her. It was just terrible. Then he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her out.

Robert wasn't certain if he'd been asleep or not, but it seemed like hours since he had checked the time. He flicked on the light and looked at the watch again. 11:10. It was going to be a long night.

The spring days passed. Anise cooked dinner each night and Evelyn splashed happily in her tub under the tree by the kitchen. When the dishes were finished and Evelyn was asleep, Anise got out one of her well-worn books she had gotten from home and sat at the kitchen table reading. While Anise read in the kitchen, Robert sat in the front room reading George's journal. George wrote of Eric Stuart, a new recruit who had gone through basic training with him:

Eric had a peculiar sense of humor and was always playing pranks on the other men. One day he found a small green snake and put it in my duffle bag. I was looking for something in my bag that night and couldn't find it. I dumped the contents of the bag out onto my bunk. Eric sat down on the bunk next to mine waiting to see what would happen. After dumping out the contents, I flicked the bag to make sure it was empty. The

snake came flying out, bounced against Eric's chest and lashed out, biting him on the tip of his nose.

Anise stopped reading and listened as Robert laughed out loud at George's graphic description of the incident.

After learning of his father's heartless lack of concern for Anise's welfare, Robert stopped worrying about his feelings of disloyalty for taking her in. The urgency to find her attacker seemed less immediate as long as she was staying in the house with him.

Several weeks after Anise had started cooking dinner for Robert, a cardboard box sat on the back porch when he got home. In it were a few pieces of Anise's clothes. He picked up the box and carried it into the house and put it in the small bedroom in which Evelyn slept. That night Anise began sleeping in the other small bed in Evelyn's room.

Even though Anise and Robert shared the same bathroom, it rarely brought them into close proximity of one another. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of her long hair or the heel of one bare foot as she hurried into her bedroom or the bathroom. Other than that she managed to stay spirited away while they were in the house together, except for the time they spent sitting across from each other at the kitchen table.

The spring gradually melted into early summer. Robert finished planting the fields that he had been able to clear and the weather was perfect for growing. Evelyn began talking in full sentences and grew like a weed herself. Anise continued to clear the fruit orchard. She began to eat better and even began to put

on a little weight. She began to carry on brief conversations with Robert. She was always candid and direct.

“If you like to read so much, maybe you should go back and finish high school,” he suggested one warm summer evening as they sat across the kitchen table from each other. “I’ll bet Mr. Jeffers, the principal, would let you work on your own if you ask him.”

“Maybe,” she said noncommittally.

“You should do it Anise. You’re smart. It’s a shame you had to quit.”

“They were going to put my mother in an asylum,” she said. “They let her stay home because Doctor Forester agreed to come out every week and see to her medications.”

“Is that why you married him Anise?” Robert asked. She gave no reply. He looked across the table into her large, blue-gray eyes and at the light spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose. He thought back to all the lonely days he had sat at the table before she had come to stay.

As summer progressed, the vegetable garden began to bear. Anise worked late in the kitchen canning the produce, and Robert did his part. He found a multitude of jars stored away in boxes in his grandma’s cellar. His hands were too large to fit inside the jars to wash them so that task fell to Anise. The two peeled tomatoes and shelled peas. Robert found the hand-written recipe for pickles seasoned with mustard in his Grandma Netty’s recipe box. It had been one of his favorites when he was growing up. He and Anise put up jar after jar of them. The two stood in the kitchen side by side. Robert occasionally joked about

something. Anise was usually confused by the humor. It was obvious that levity had not been part of her growing up.

One night the two were working in the kitchen late and Robert looked over at Anise and saw how pale and tired she looked. He looked back at the clock on the wall.

"It's almost eleven o'clock," he said, surprised by the lateness. "That's enough for tonight."

"We have to finish these first," she said.

"I'll finish them," he told her as they stood tightening down the lids on several dozen jars of sweet peppers. "We'll never eat all this stuff anyway," he said.

"We can't waste it," she insisted.

"I'll take care of the rest. Go on to bed," he said.

The next afternoon he was working near the fruit orchard, and stopped to see what progress Anise was making. Evelyn was chattering away as she dug a hole in the dirt with her spoon. Anise was at work cutting away a thick vine of wild morning glory that had wrapped itself around a peach tree. The day was hot. The old overalls she worked in had become so worn at the knees that earlier that afternoon she had ripped the bottom half of the legs off. Beneath the overalls she wore a boy's undershirt with the sleeves rolled under forming ridges around the edges of her shoulders. As Robert approached, he took note that her long legs and arms were no longer as thin as they had been, and now her ragged old overalls not only cupped up beneath her buttocks but also fit snugly over her hips. Anise

turned as she heard him approach, and for the first time, he noticed the beginning swell of her belly.

That evening, he could find none of the jars in the cellar that had seemed to be in such endless supply before. He told Anise he would buy more when he could, but until then they could refrigerate what came out of the garden and let the rest go.

A storm blew in that night and a steady rain began to fall. The next day it continued to rain and murky puddles of mud dotted the yard here and there. When the lightening stopped, Anise let Evelyn wear nothing but her underpants and go splashing around in the puddles. Evelyn loved the muddy puddles even more than the washtub.

Robert sat quietly at the kitchen table watching the noisy spectacle. Anise could see there was something on his mind, but she took care not to intrude into his reflective mood. The rain continued for four days. Robert spent most of the time in the barn working on equipment and agonizing over what to do about Anise and the growing life inside her. When the sun shone gloriously on the fifth morning, he was no closer to a solution than he had been to begin with.

Henry Weeks, the librarian at the Marion Public Library had always guarded the science books against those who would use them "to feed their impure thought." Two years earlier, when Anise had first discovered bloody stains in her underpants, she had gone to the library to try and find out why women bled. She had always taken care of her mother and knew her mother bled monthly, but she had no other information on the subject. Henry had hovered

over her each time she had approached the science shelves and she had finally given up and gone home.

One morning before daylight, she left Robert and Evelyn sleeping, and set off for the library. As she walked down the road, a truck driver drove by and looked out at the long-legged girl with the long honey-red hair and blasted his horn. Anise kept her head down and hurried on.

People were just waking up as she reached the outskirts of town. Anise's faded black skirt fell to well below her knees. She wore a patched blue sweater and beneath it an old white blouse that was gray with age. Her flat shoes were loose on her feet and run over at the heel.

"Put your eyes back in your head Harry," a stout, middle-aged woman elbowed her husband in the ribs as she stepped out onto their front porch and caught him staring at Anise.

"Isn't that the Mathews girl?" he said, as he continued to stare.

"Yes, *crazy* Helen Mathews – the girl probably has less sense than the mother," his wife scoffed as they stood watching Anise go by.

Anise came to Binder's bakery and smelled the fresh bread. She slowed and looked into the window. Joseph Binder had always sold bread to the school. He had a terrible temper and frequently had been heard shouting at someone in the school kitchen. Joseph's wife Margaret was behind the counter. Anise reached into her pocket and felt for the dime she had brought. She went inside.

"One of those," she told Mrs. Binder pointing to a large cinnamon roll dripping with white icing. "And one of the sugar cookies." She handed Mrs.

Binder her dime and held out her hand for her nickel change. Mrs. Binder put the roll and the cookie in a small brown sack and handed it to her.

Anise walked on toward the library. She had to stop and wait as a train rumbled by along the tracks blocking the street and sidewalk. She opened her sack, took out the sweet roll and folded up the sack with the cookie in it and put it in her pocket for Evelyn. Anise stood eating the sweet roll and watching the train pass by.

When Anise was halfway around the square, a car whizzed by. It was Louis Forester coming home from a middle of the night emergency call. He drove by without giving Anise so much as a glance.

Henry Weeks had to have a carbuncle lanced and had taken the day off from the library to have it done. Enid Cranston, a retired schoolteacher, was filling in for him. Mrs. Cranston had arthritic hips and couldn't climb the stairs to the upper level of the library where the science books were kept. Anise found herself alone upstairs with the freedom to look up anything she wanted. Two hours later, she came back down. She crept out of the library without a word to Enid.

Anise walked to her own house, went inside and locked the doors. She went upstairs, got in bed and put the covers over her head. The afternoon passed by and evening came. The room grew dark. Night came and blackness filled the room. Anise heard someone knocking on the door downstairs. She didn't care. She stayed where she was. She slept the night though and awoke the next morning to hear someone knocking on her door again. She stayed in bed. The

morning passed and the afternoon. As the sun began to set, she heard someone knocking on the door downstairs again. She ignored it. The hour grew late and she finally fell asleep again.

The night passed. Anise woke up feeling weak and dizzy. She stayed in bed wondering how long it would take for her to die. Late in the afternoon she awoke to hear a loud sound coming closer and closer. She opened her eyes to see a tall dark form in the doorway.

"Anise!" she heard Robert's voice close to her ear as she felt his arm slip under her shoulders. "Did you take pills?" he said. "Did you take pills!" he shook her and then slapped her cheek. She slowly shook her head no. Her mind was in a haze as she was being carried down the stairs and outside. She was half aware of being bumped along in Robert's old car. The next thing she knew, she was being shaken and her cheeks slapped again. She felt cold fill her mouth and she choked. Then she swallowed and swallowed again as Robert forced her to drink water. She felt warm in her mouth and she swallowed. It tasted of beef. Gradually her head began to clear. Repeatedly throughout the afternoon and evening, Robert alternated feeding her water and soup. By dark she was tired and wanted to sleep.

The birds had just begun to awaken the next morning. Anise listened to their sweet singing outside the window. She tried to move and felt as if a tremendous weight had flattened down on her. She touched the weight and felt it to be the warm firmness of Robert's upper arm laid across her. She looked around. She was in his bed. She glanced to the side. Robert's face was against

hers. His eyes were closed and he snored softly. Anise lay motionless, her mind racing as she put together the pieces of the last three days of her life.

“Don’t you ever scare me like that again,” Robert said close to her ear. She lay still as death. “No you don’t,” he said, rising up on one elbow. “Don’t you go closing yourself off from me like that again,” he said. He looked down into her face. “What did you think you were doing? Answer me,” he insisted. She looked up at him eyes wide. “Did you hear me pounding on your door? Did you!”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“And you let me go right on worrying. What would you say if it was Evelyn acting like that?” he asked. She looked into his eyes, not comprehending his meaning.

“Evelyn?” she repeated weakly.

“Yes Evelyn. You always know just what to do and say to her when she does something to scare the hell out of us. What would you say if she ran away for days and kept you worried sick about her? What were you doing in the library?” he said, giving her no time to answer. “Enid Cranston said you left there that first morning. You were reading the science books weren’t you. You found out about the baby.” Anise looked up at him in horror. “Yes I know about the baby. Is that any reason to go off and do what you did?” He saw the wet glistening in the outer corner of her eyes. “This wasn’t your fault Anise,” he caught the first tear on the back of his thumb. “None of this was your fault.” he wiped away the next and the next. “Don’t run away from me Anise,” he said.

The rain pelted against the side of the barn with such force that Robert had to strain to hear Bill. The wide separation between Bill's front teeth was all Robert could see as Bill talked over the noise of the storm. "Doctor Forester was so angry when he dragged Anise outside, that I got worried about what he might do to her and I went outside too," Bill said. The barn door crashed open again and Bill ran across the barn and caught hold of it, fighting against the wind pressing against it to close it. Robert stood watching him doing nothing to help. "Then I heard a woman's voice cry out from over in the field behind the parking lot," Bill said as he fastened the door closed again and turned back to Robert. "I ran over and there they were, lying in the grass. I didn't know an old man like that could do it," Bill's eyes shown with his excitement. "His pants were down around his ankles and he had Anise's legs spread wide and was grunting and groaning and pumping it into Anise like crazy!"

"Shut up!" Robert roared over a deafening clap of thunder.

"Sorry Robert," Bill said. "It was pretty bad. Anise was crying. Doctor Forester finally got off of her and she just laid there crying.

Old Doctor Whiteside gave out a loud snort and Robert came awake again. He laid there in the dark sickened by his dream. Time passed. He couldn't go back to sleep. He flicked on the light again. 2:25. The tick in the oscillating fan

had grown louder as it rocked back and forth. Old Doctor Forester snored softly. Robert lay listening for the moments when the ticks and the snoring synchronized.

Anise's waistline expanded quickly, but the loose-fitting clothing she wore helped to conceal it. She experienced no sickness and worked on in the fruit orchard.

When late summer came and it was time to harvest the crops, Robert hired a migrant worker, Miguel Riaz, to help him. Robert had found a used, wood-paneled truck for sale and bought it. He asked Anise if she would drive the grain to the elevator as he and Miguel, combined it. She had never driven a car.

She slowly climbed up behind the steering wheel and Robert got in the passenger seat.

"There's nothing to driving," he assured her. "You just keep your eyes on the road and steer straight ahead. He explained to her how to work the pedals and about shifting. "Try it," he said. She slowly pressed the choke pedal down, and then the brake pedal and held them down as she turned the key in the ignition. The old motor chugged sluggishly and finally turned over. She turned to Robert with a terrified look in her eyes. "All right now," he said, ignoring her jitters, "shift into reverse." She took hold of the gearshift as if it might be some sort of a detonating mechanism and slowly worked it into reverse. "Now push down on

the gas pedal and let up on the choke. Slowly!" he added too late. The transmission screamed and the old truck leaped backward and died.

An hour later Anise was driving up and down the gravel road in front of the house. Robert had watched her fear gradually change to curiosity and then excitement with the challenge of driving. "You learn fast," he praised. She looked at him with quiet reserve and smiled. "We'll go together until you're comfortable with it," he said. She nodded in agreement.

The men worked in the staggering Midwest heat. Sweat poured off their faces and dripped from their noses and chins. By evening, the smell of their bodies was so ripe that they soaped themselves down and took turns dunking headfirst into the barrel of water next to the barn and submerging themselves to their waists before they went into the house. Miguel looked to be half Robert's size, but his strength was immense. He kept to himself, eating on the back porch and sleeping in the barn.

Anise kept Evelyn with her as she drove back and forth to the grain elevator from early morning until the elevator closed at seven. She and Evelyn rode with the windows open and the hot air whipping through the cab of the old truck. One late afternoon after hours of driving back and forth, Anise passed Phip's Grocery Store. The parking lot was empty. She pulled the truck into the lot and took Evelyn inside and bought her an orange soda. On their way out of the store, they met Bill's sister, Olivia Wallace, coming inside.

"I heard you were driving," Olivia looked her up and down. Anise stood in her ragged overalls and faded pale blue T-shirt. She quickly picked Evelyn up to help conceal her condition.

"Put me down!" Evelyn demanded, eyeing the brightly colored gumballs in the machine at the side of the door.

"That's Robert Forester's baby isn't it," Olivia smiled enviously at Anise. "I heard you and Robert were spending time together," she said. Anise's heart raced, as she tried to think what to say. It was the first time she had stopped anywhere out of fear of seeing someone who might know her.

"I, I have to go," she stammered and hurried past Olivia and out the door. A short time later, Robert and Miguel looked up to see a cloud of dust billowing high into the air behind the truck as it came flying down the road at breakneck speed.

"She knows!" Anise panted as she paced back and forth in the kitchen.

"Who knows what?" Robert said as he came inside.

"Bill Wallace's sister. She saw me at the Grocery Store!"

"All right now," Robert said coming toward her. "Slow down and tell me what happened."

"I stopped to get Evelyn a soda. It was so hot," she looked at him defensively. "She was coming in the door," Anise started to cry. "She looked at me. I know she could tell."

"Stop it Anise," he came closer. "You had no say in any of this," he said. She looked away miserably and wiped at her tears. "All you've been through and

the son of a bitch who's responsible doesn't even know about it," he growled and started back out the door.

"Where are you going?" she called after him.

"I'm going to the police. If you can't tell them what happened, I'm going to."

"Don't do that!" Anise tore after him. "Don't" she pleaded. One look at the fear in her eyes, and he knew better than to upset her any further.

"Just tell me Anise. Tell me who it is," he said. She hung her head.

"I'm not sure," she whispered.

All the fury in Robert crumpled down into confused uncertainty at the revelation that Anise herself was not certain who had gotten her pregnant. He lay awake trying to imagine one scenario after another that might explain what had happened that night. Nothing he said could bring her to tell him the truth. She got so upset when he tried to press her about it that he finally gave up.

As Anise's time grew closer, Robert watched her increasingly encumbered gait. She was as industrious as ever and never complained. Her overall appearance was changing. She was beginning to take on a more womanly appearance. Her color grew more vibrant as her body stored away the healthy resources she would soon need.

One early fall evening the sun was just setting behind a backdrop of fire-red landscape. Anise came outside to tell Robert dinner was ready. She found him behind the barn stacking the timber he had just cut onto the woodpile. He

laid the last of the logs down as she rounded the corner of the barn. He straightened and watched her come toward him. As she approached she saw the strange look on his face and slowed.

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you are,” he heard himself say. He reach out for her and then stopped himself. “I’m sorry Anise. I know I have no right to say that to you,” he said and his arms dropped back down by his sides. She hesitated for an instant and then closed the few feet between them. He stood stone still as she gently slid her hands over his shoulders, reached up and lightly touched her lips to his.

“I want you to know the truth,” she said quietly.

The two sat on the couch together until long after midnight. By the time Anise was finished, Robert knew his life would never be the same again.

“You won’t do anything!” she blurted anxiously, seeing the growing anger smoldering silently behind his eyes.

“Don’t you worry,” he assured her. “Nothing’s going to happen. You just think about the baby.”

As Anise’s time grew closer, Robert called old Doctor Woodside’s office to make arrangements for him to deliver the baby. Doctor Woodside’s grandson, Alvin Woodside, had finished his medical residency and had taken over his grandfather’s practice.

“It would be best if you could take her to the hospital in Carbondale,” Alvin told him. “Call me before you leave and I’ll meet you there.”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention this to anyone,” Robert told him.

“This is no one’s business but Anise’s,” Alvin assured him. Robert asked him if he could recommend someone to take care of Evelyn when Anise’s time came. Alvin recommended his next-door neighbor, Fussy Dobbs.

One day in mid-September, Anise went into labor. The truck was rough riding but had more speed than the old Ford car. Anise leaned back against the seat as the truck bounced along the gravel road. Her face dripped sweat as she silently suffered through the misery of pain.

“Damned old road!” Robert cursed time and time again as the wheels hit the rough spots. “We’ll be on the main road in just a few minutes,” he assured Anise.

“It’s all right,” she said, as she held on. A few minutes later they reached the blacktop road. Robert turned onto it and tromped his foot down on the accelerator. Anise looked over at him. She had never before seen him so out of control of his emotions.

Anise’s 7 pound 11 ounce baby boy was born late the next morning. Robert waited until he was certain Anise and the baby were doing well and then he asked the nurse if she would make a call for him. He gave her Bill Wallace’s telephone number and asked her to ask for Bill and to say nothing more than that Anise Mathews’ baby had been born. Robert stood waiting to see if Bill was at home. He was. The nurse hung up and Robert picked up the receiver and called his father.

“There’s an emergency at the Wallace’s” Robert told him. “They need you right away.”

The sky was threatening as Robert drove toward the Wallace's farm. Halfway there a charge of electric white streaked across the sky in front of him and the earth quaked with a threatening rumble of thunder. By the time Robert reached the Wallace's turnoff, the heavy rain had already filled the low-lying dips in the gravel road. Robert splashed in and out of them at full speed. Halfway down the long gravel drive up to the house, the old truck slid off into a deep buildup of water and the engine died. Robert got out and continued on foot. The rain fell so hard that it was all he could do to see as he fought against the driving wind. As he neared the house, he saw Bill running across the back yard toward the barn. The barn door swung heavily in the wind and crashed open against the side of the barn. Robert turned directly into the wind and rain and followed Bill.

"Doctor Forester finally got off of Anise and she just laid there crying, her skin all bare and white," Bill continued answering Robert's questions as Robert stood in front of him his emotions raw.

"And then what," Robert started toward him.

"Nothing," Bill said. Your father took his time zipping up his pants and Anise just laid there crying. I finally knelt down beside her and asked if I could do anything to help. She looked up at me like she was scared to death and grabbed hold of me. I tried to talk soft to her. I never saw anyone as scared as she was.

"And then what?" Robert came closer. "What happened then?"

"Nothing," Bill inched back. "I just sat there holding her."

“You damned liar!” Robert’s dark eyes bore into him. he grabbed for Bill and sent him crashing back against the barn wall. “You saw her lying there, ripped open and bleeding, terrified, completely defenseless and you figured no one would know the difference if you...” Robert drew in a jagged breath.

“That’s not true,” Bill shouted defensively.

“Isn’t it!” Robert came after him. He reached back and sent a fist crashing into Bill’s jaw. “She’d never been touched before that night!” he shouted into Bill’s face as he reached back and landed a second blow to Bill’s middle. “She had no idea what was happening to her!” Robert’s voice was ragged with emotion. Bill doubled over gasping for breath. A second later his shoulder came crashing into Robert’s stomach. Robert fell backward and Bill landed on top of him. Bill brought his face to within inches of Robert’s.

“And when she got home you took up right where I left off,” he sneered hideously into Robert’s face. The words set something off in Robert that Bill had no defense for. Robert rolled him over and sat straddling his chest as he landed blow after blow into Bill’s face with such punishing force that Bill was soon near unconsciousness.

“That’s enough!” Jim Wallace’s deep voice thundered from somewhere near the barn entrance. Robert kept right on landing blow after blow until Bill lay unconscious. “I said that’s enough!” Jim Wallace roared as he grabbed Robert by the back of his jacket and lifted him off Bill. One look down into his son’s broken and bloodied face and Jim erupted into a wild fit of anger. Robert was helpless against the tremendous strength of the big farmer

“Get your hands off my son!” Robert heard his father shout just as Jim Wallace sent Robert flying across the barn and back against the stall rail. Robert’s head cracked against the rail and he fell to the ground with a stunned expression on his face.

Louis Forester started forward. Jim Wallace took another look down into Bill’s face, at the jaw broken and hanging slack, and charged at Robert again.

“Stay away from him Wallace!” Louis Forester shouted. Jim Wallace was too enraged to hear the warning click of the shotgun hammer as Robert’s father came toward him. Jim’s fist smashed into Robert’s face, breaking his nose. “Don’t touch him again!” Louis Forester said as he jammed the shotgun barrel against Jim Wallace’s back in warning. Jim ducked down and tried to knock the gun away, jamming Louis Forester’s finger back against the trigger. The gun exploded at close range. The force of impact to Robert’s right knee slammed him back against the upright beam of the stall as bits of bloody red-gray fragments of Jim Wallace’s skull and brain splattered across Robert’s shirt and face. Blood and gore hung from Robert’s lips and blurred his vision as Jim Wallace’s 245-pound frame collapsed on top of him. As the momentary shock lifted, Robert cried out with the excruciating pain in his knee as he blindly tried to push Jim Wallace’s body off him. Then Robert saw his father’s face leaning down over Jim. A moment later, Louis Forester began dragging Jim’s body off of Robert. As soon as there was space enough, Doctor Forester dropped down and went to work on Robert’s knee.

Robert lay staring up into the darkness. The ticking of the fan gradually grew faster and louder and then its insides jammed with a raucous clatter and it slowly ground to a halt. Robert lay listening to the quiet void its demise left in the room. After a few moments, he raised up and flicked on the light and glanced across the room. The soft whisper of old Doctor Woodside's breath was silent.

The turnout was very small at old Doctor Woodside's funeral. He'd outlived all of his contemporaries. His grandson Alvin, and Fussy Dobbs stood together at the gravesite as the old man's body was lowered to its final resting place.

The following week, Alvin removed the cast from Robert's leg. Robert was to stay in bed and off of the leg for several more weeks. He was happy just to be able to sit up. One afternoon, he sat leaning back against the headboard. Evelyn sat beside him resting her cheek against his upper arm.

"I like babies," she said. "Anise will come back when she hears we've got one."

"I don't think so," Robert said quietly. The day after her baby had been born, Anise had read in the newspaper about what had taken place the night before when Jim Wallace had been killed. She got so upset that Alvin Woodside was called and came to the hospital and gave her a sedative. The next morning her bed was empty. She disappeared without a trace.

As Robert and Evelyn sat together, Fussy came into the room carrying a tray with two bowls on it. She sat the tray down on the bed where old Doctor Whiteside had slept.

“Miz Anise Mathews come bringin’ all kinds of canned goods,” she said as she sat the tray down on the side of the bed.

“Anise!” Evelyn and Robert spoke as one.

“Where is she!” Evelyn jumped up and slid down off the bed.

“She gone. She gone now,” Fussy told her.

“When did she come Fussy?” Robert pulled himself up straighter.

“This mornin’ real early. She come driven up in dat rikity ole truck of yorn.” Fussy handed him a bowl of the canned peaches Anise had brought. “She seems a mite little to be drivin’ dat big truck, but she jes set up der like she knowd what she was doin’.” Fussy caught Evelyn under the arms and lifted her back up beside Robert and handed her a small bowl of the peaches. “Miz Anise say she too fraid to hold her baby jes yet. She look at him real long though. She touch his sweet little head.” Fussy turned and picked the tray back up and came to stand at the end of Robert’s bed. “People sayin’ it’s real sad bout her and the baby. Sayin’ nothin’ ever turns out right for her and her kin,” Fussy hesitated, looking from Robert to Evelyn. “But somehow, somehow I think things goin’ to turn out jes fine.”

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