

ABSTRACT

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This is the first half of a novel that takes place in Hazard, Kentucky. Each chapter is told by a different first-person narrator.

A THOUSAND DAYS

By

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	ii
Chapter 1: A Thousand Days	1
Chapter 2: Emily Strabnow's Freckles.....	25
Chapter 3: Captain Bluebeard's Enforcer.....	54
Chapter 4: Calamity Jane.....	73
Chapter 5: Why Don't You Pray?.....	104
Chapter 6: Retrace Your Steps.....	132

Chapter 1: A Thousand Days—*Ryan Abbot*

On a clear day, I can walk into the kitchen, swipe away the dust I stir up from the countertop, stick my head out the window, and peer three front yards down the street at the never-mown knoll at the bottom of the hill where the children play. There have been many clear days and many children. Three fat ones and two skinny ones. That's normally how it is, but maybe that's just how they look from my house. It must be that, because even when the children change, and they always change, it still looks like three fat ones and two skinny ones playing football in autumn, baseball in spring, throwing snowballs every winter and smearing fireflies across the sidewalk every dry summer night. Sometimes I'd stop looking long enough to pour a bourbon or rub my eyes, and when I looked again the scene had changed. The fat ones looked skinny and the skinny suddenly strong. Sometimes there are more kids than I thought, sometimes fewer. With a little effort, I could make believe that I was not looking at time passing, but at a conjurer's trick that made the children and seasons roll into and over one another.

The first year, the children never so much as set foot across my property line. It wasn't as though they were forbidden, but they aped the way their parents kept stiff-necked when they walked down my block for fear they'd lock eyes with me. That meant the first fall, when the fat boys walked on the edge of the street with one leg stiff like a cripple, kicking up the neighbors' freshly raked leaves, mine was the only yard left alone. When winter came, my snow stayed pat and white until the sun melted its evenness in the early afternoon.

It wasn't until the next spring when Cora Jessup bought her droop-faced beagle that it started to change for me. Actually, it didn't change for me so much as it did for my house. Once that beagle—Annabel was what Cora called her, but the neighborhood kids named her Belly—started sniffing the anthills and snake-holes in my yard, the kids shook off their parents' fears, and the invisible fence around my property disappeared. From my living room, I began hearing baseballs smacking against gloves, and I'd wake up mornings to see the lit ends of fireflies smeared on my driveway.

I was grateful to Cora for letting her dog root around in my yard and took to leaving a bowlful of leftover steak fat and gristle on my porch for Annabel. Cora and I nodded when we passed each other in the grocery store, and from that, we started exchanging a few friendly words. That fall, when Auggie Holloway and his youngest boy, Soup, began coming by her house most afternoons, I'd watch her prepare for the two of them. From my house across the street, I couldn't actually see her prepare, but I was close enough to imagine it. Whenever I saw her sitting on her porch swing, crossing and uncrossing her legs, sipping on an icy orange drink and fingering the chain on her necklace, I'd picture her scurrying around her shotgun house, rouging her cheeks, dabbing green on her eye-creases, half-making the bed, and pouring just enough gin in her lemonade to keep bold and smiling. She favored pale green dresses or flower print skirts, and I thought of her fidgeting with them in front of the mirror, tugging back and forth on the sleeves until they hung just right off her shoulders. They were at least a size too big—hand-me-downs, obviously—but they mattered to her, at least as much as her jewelry did.

Auggie was one of my few friends who kept friendly with me, but even he didn't talk to me on those afternoons. Part of it was practical. When he had Soup with him, he didn't want to linger. More than anything, he was embarrassed. When we met at The Devil Moon, we'd raise a glass together, and he could lay out his sins one by one without coming up for air. But he was confessing then, telling me what he wanted to tell, whereas those afternoons I could see it for myself and come up with my own details—the way her hyena-sounding nervous giggle shot through the house at just the wrong time, for example, or how his jagged, chewed up fingernails accidentally tickled her when he tried to pry her bra-strap off her shoulder. After his wife left the next spring, he became much less guarded, but he also developed a sadness so strong that it turned into bitterness and sometimes swagger, which made him harder to understand. She took his oldest son, his wife did, leaving him with Soup and a half-empty home. Obviously, he wanted both boys as close to him as possible, but to split them up like she did, so even at his happiest, he could never imagine them together, scrapping and hair-tugging and swapping dirty jokes and card tricks the way brothers are meant to, it made him weak with righteous anger. Some of that I had to guess at or pick up from other people's side-stories. I reached out to him, but he didn't speak about himself with anyone but Cora.

The next summer was the saddest season yet. It started with the singer Ronnie Collier—I briefly fell in love with his mother at fifteen, and in her memory refuse to call him his godforsaken stage name—running over Annabel with his jeep. It was tough to see her go, but I admit that Ronnie did right by Cora. He rang her bell and apologized, even offered to dig Annabel a hole and hire Reverend Coon to say a few

words. A few weeks later, he showed up at her door with a one-eyed terrier named Ajax to give her, which was a decent thought, but to me it showed what was wrong with the world. Everything worthwhile gets replaced, usually by something meaner and uglier.

In August, the city cut down the hundred-fifty year old oak at the bottom of our hill. With it gone, I could see clear down to Main Street, which was exciting at first, but it got to bothering me. I missed the shade and privacy from the oak, and I didn't know how to take in all that new scenery at once. I'm not sure that's the only reason, but I found myself staying inside more, not even getting out of bed until I was too hungry not to eat.

The next year felt like a constant countdown. If I'd owned a calendar, I'd have X'd out the days as they passed like TV prisoners. I barely began noticing the changes: the way the fat kids kept getting fatter or how in spring they played a new baseball game that looked like pickle, but that they called something else. I didn't like missing the small changes, but it wasn't so bad. At least I could see them as they happened, not like poor Abby. In the three weeks leading up to her release, I kept wondering whether she'd see a million little changes and a missing oak tree or no changes at all. Of course, all that wondering did me no good because on the very day I was meant to see her again, the big changes and little changes starting happening at once, and by sunset the town had turned to a stranger on us.

I'd forgotten to shave that morning just like I had every morning that month, but for the first time in a thousand days it mattered. Abby Grundel was to be sprung from prison, and I was the one who'd travel the two hours to Lexington to pick her up

and drag her home. Obviously, I wanted to natty up, not just so she could see me at my spiffiest—three years had taken about a dog’s-bite-sized chunk off my hairline, and I figured an ironed shirt and unwrinkled pants could give her an eyeful of something other than my forehead—but also to cover a lie. In my letters, I told her I’d been working construction on Hazard’s new water park, and after construction was done I stayed on to work as a ticket taker. All her family was dead, so nobody could tell her that no water park existed, but even still it didn’t work. For one, it was now mid-October so that meant even if I had worked at the water park, they’d have probably let me go at the first cold snap in September. Abby wasn’t getting released until three, so I had until nearly noon to find some semi-gainful employment to diffuse the coming water park fight.

Unfortunately, my absent mind beat out my noble intentions, and I strolled out the door unshaven, looking as dapper as a Rabbi. When that overgrown rodent Ajax yipped at me, and I brought my hand up to my chin and felt all those whiskers, I halfway wanted to rip my beard clean off. I considered about-facing and razoring myself, but the sun was already up, and I didn’t have time. Anyway, everybody who had jobs to give already knew me and remembered what I looked like without a beard.

“Ryan, you know I like you,” said Todd Little, who owns the multiplex and knows I know no such thing. “But we’re all filled up. I’m barely clearing enough to keep off relief right now.”

“You got some spotty-faced kid making popcorn for you,” I said. “I know as much about popcorn as him. He’s probably just working for meth money. You thought about that?”

“Ben?” he said. “He’s nineteen, and his mom’s sick. He’s the only one in his family who works.”

It sounded like the sort of story someone who’s working for drug money would tell, but Todd didn’t see it as such, and I couldn’t convince him. Sulking while you’re sober never helps anything, so I nodded my head and made my way to some other corner of the city.

Phil Lunsford, the owner of Devil Moon Saloon, wouldn’t even take the chain off his door. “Bad enough you close out my bar, now you come to my home. What if my wife was here?”

It took me a second to realize that he wanted an answer to that, and another second to realize I didn’t understand the question. So instead I explain how and why I need a job, and with the money I pour into his place, he’d really just be paying himself.

“Not happening,” he says. Then he slams the door so hard that it bounces back open, and he’s left staring at me, looking a little embarrassed. At first he kind of smiled and nodded his head, and then he ran his tongue across the bottom of his moustache. “Sorry,” he finally stammers out. “This door is tricky.”

The stores were opening up around Main Street, so I went to try my luck with Sheila Rose Robbins who owns the flower shop. She’s a florist and her middle

name's Rose; this, apparently, is an irony that'd already been pointed out to her before I got the chance.

"I'll shave," I told her. I put both hands on her counter, almost pleading. "I won't show up to work hung over. I'll tuck in my shirt and keep my nails trimmed."

"Oh Ryan," she says. At least I think she does. She's got one of those soft, watery faces that changes every time you look into it, so sometimes you think you hear her say things that she only hinted at with a tilted eyelid or a widening of her lower lip. "I want to say yes, but I got my business to think of." This I hear for sure, and we both know what it means. For a second, it hurts so bad that I unfocus my eyes so I don't have to look at her, but then I feel her palm patting my knuckles. "It's okay," she said. "I'm talking about the town. It's not what I think."

I nod my head, not sure if she sees me or not. "You know she's getting out today?"

"I heard," she said. "Tell me about it. Again, I mean."

So I tell her again, knowing she doesn't want to hear it and that I'd rather spend my morning looking for work than twisting my mind into those same familiar pictures it still hurts to see. I tell her anyway because it's easier to speak the words than hold them back.

I've told this story so many times that I know it's not right. For one, I can hear it in my tone, never mind what I say. It comes out different now than it did at first. Steadier in a way, but also wilder because when it first happened I was careful not to get anything wrong. Now I want people to understand. Understand the fear, I mean. It's like telling your best friend your worst nightmare. Everyone every time

everywhere starts off by saying, “It felt so real,” and all the while we know whoever we’re talking to won’t understand.

“First off, you got to understand, this was an event. We were there to celebrate something. You don’t understand that, the rest doesn’t make sense.”

“What were you celebrating?”

“Anniversary.” I gnawed off a fleck of dead skin from my lips. “Well, eight month anniversary, which I know shouldn’t really count, but she had this OCD thing about even numbers, so eight months meant a lot to her.” That wasn’t true, the OCD part, but I said it because otherwise eight months sounds too small. And anyway it did mean a lot, to her and me both.

“We were in Lexington celebrating, and all day the mood is really strange. Not like we’re fighting really, but we’re mostly just quiet, like we’re bored with each other. Maybe not bored exactly, because I was rarely bored with her, but, like, I don’t know.” I was signaling for her to help me find the right words, but that never worked with Sheila Rose. She had more patience with stories and storytellers than anyone I knew—even when the storyteller has only one story and only one way of repeating it. It was just as well she didn’t help me because I already knew how I wanted to finish the sentence. “Like we’d already said everything we could think to say to each other.”

She nodded and leaned forward squinting her eyes at me. For a half-instant, her gaze wondered up to my hairline before flicking back down to my eyes. This wasn’t working, I thought.

“So it’s kind of tense, but not really. Or at least with no good reason, if that makes sense. We wind up getting drinks some sawdusty place on Nicholasville Road—you know Nicholasville Road, right?—and it gets a little easier. You know how, worse comes to worst, you can always make conversation about your surroundings? I start cracking jokes about the way they play Jimmy Buffet every third song on the jukebox and how there’s some college Hawaii party going on around us, so there’re grown men wearing those pink flower necklaces. Lays, they’re called.”

She wore hoop earrings, and when we danced in the early part of the night she jittered and jerked outside of any rhythm I could hear. I stopped telling that part after the first year, because nobody cares about it, and I suppose it doesn’t matter, but I remember it and am positive it was true. She looked slightly scared shaking and strutting like that. Not scared of me, but all the time checking her watch and scratching at her hair-part like she was frightened of keeping still. Maybe scared’s not right. Call it some unholy case of nerves. I remember it because even during her fragile and almost trembling dance, I was happy in ways I haven’t been since.

It got better, and then it got worse. This is the part of the night I don’t understand, and can’t retell the story any way that’ll make me understand. An hour and a half—maybe two—of nursed beers and easy conversation, and then our patience ran out. We stopped speaking, but it was colder than the silence that came before. I wish to God I could concoct a reason, but nothing I can imagine makes more sense than no reason at all. So I’m left with no recourse but to tell it straight.

“It got better and then it got worse,” I said. “And because it’d been better, I hated that we all the sudden couldn’t talk. Something about her looking at the table all depressed for nothing, it just really sticks in my ass, and I just get outright furious at her. I remember thinking that I at least knew one way of getting her to talk. So I stomped up to the bar, bummed a cigarette from this ape-faced redhead, and go on back to the table. I start puffing on it—and keep in mind, I’d stopped smoking a year before, so I’m wanting to spit this fucking thing straight out my mouth. But even though it hurts me, I know it hurts her more, so I swallow the smoke, grin all wide and say, ‘You know Leo Thayer’s got a grandkid on the way?’”

Three years later it seems harmless, but I didn’t mean it to be harmless, and she didn’t take it that way. I didn’t have to explain that to Sheila Rose or anyone else in Hazard. Not everyone in town loved Abigail, but they all knew her story. Years ago, before I’d even so much as angled my hat at Abby Grundel, I knew that as a teenager she’d gotten knocked up by her fiancée, and the strain on her nerves led her to heavy smoking. “I was always a weekend smoker,” she told me later. “But that kid in there. I could feel it.” She paused then and scratched her nose with her thumb. “I liked feeling it, but I could feel it all the time, you know?” Whenever she described it, all these years later, she still cupped her hand and put in front of her stomach like she was palming her womb.

I don’t know what smoking meant to her, but I’ve seen her since then eating finger food, shoveling sausage circles or carrot sticks in her mouth one right after the other, and if someone walked in behind her and surprised her with a question before she put her guard up, she looked as speechless and scared as a slapped child. If I had

to guess, I bet she smoked those cigarettes the same way, like she was hungry for them all the time. But you can't gorge yourself on cigarette smoke no matter how much you swallow.

Everybody who lives long enough probably gets stuck with at least one kid they're not ready for, but we remember Abby's because she smoked it out. Seven months of sucking tar in place of air had turned her gray and stringy-headed. I saw a picture of her pregnant once, with an unfiltered Camel sticking out from between her middle and ring finger, and she looked straight into the camera with the most ghoulish smile I've seen this side of those Christmas cards with the sobbing infants on the department store Santas. If I'd known her then, I'd have doubted she was pregnant at all and instead think she had some sort of tummy cyst that was sapping the life from her. That's probably not true, but it's easier thinking that than thinking on what really happened.

She got sick and they opened her to try and save the kid. A boy. She wanted it to be a surprise, but she found out when they took it from her. For a while, they thought they could save the kid. It'd grow up slow, talking like it was forever chewing on peanut butter, but it'd grow up anyway, and that's all she wanted. I read some folks in that situation switch themselves off from feeling—they don't want to love something that may slip from them—but that's not her nature. She's more the type that'd love it twice as much knowing it'd die. She never got to hug it. The doctor took it from her as soon as they cut the cord and left her with the nurses. They did give her hourly reports, all of them good. A chunk-cheeked Asian stuck her head

in the door and told her the boy was getting color. “Funny how they put it,” Abby told me. “Like he was a Polaroid developing under a light bulb.”

She didn’t buy it. She knew it was dying, but knowing didn’t help when they told her. “When the nurse came in, I knew what’s coming,” Abby said. “Because I see in her face, she’s not trying to fake it anymore. So I start crying, but not making any noise, you know? I was shaking, but if you’re blind you wouldn’t have known a thing was wrong about me.”

It got decent press throughout the state. A lawyer or two wanted her to sue Camel or the company that makes their filters, but nothing came of it. They even showed her on the news with one of those blurry faces that they give rape victims. About a month after I met her, I was cleaning out my mother’s attic, and quite by accident, saw an old video that showed Abby on the news. I stayed up there for almost an hour, inches from the TV with the VCR paused, trying to see if I could pick out Abby’s face from all those pixels. No matter how hard I looked, I couldn’t recognize her, either from how well they blurred it, how much she’s aged, or my own blind spots.

“What’s it take to smoke a cigarette?” I ask Sheila Rose. “Five minutes, going slow as you can, maybe six? All this while, I’m saying, ‘You know Leo Thayer, right? Forty-five and a granddad. Goddamn.’ I’m laughing best I can, but every giggle busts out my mouth like a cough, popping out these little smoke bubbles in the air. All I can really see’s Abby sucking on the thin part of her lip.”

Sheila Rose smiled when I said that, like it was meant to be a joke. It meant I was getting loose with this story again, telling it all wrong. I tried to refocus and start again.

“You know, when you get angry,” I said, “no matter what for, there’s always a space when you feel foolish, like you over-struck a pose? For me, it comes when I see a shiver run by her shoulders, and I get it that she’s not mad at me at all, just trying to keep her tears inside. I want to say sorry, but my talking momentum keeps carrying my voice. Best I can do is talk about Leo Thayer’s grandkid a little softer, and then I just suck on that cigarette and hold the smoke in my cheeks. So, of course, she gets up and walks out.”

I normally say, “Stormed out,” but as I recited it to Sheila Rose that time, I know she didn’t storm out at all, but sauntered, like she was trying to keep whatever grace she had left in her ankles.

“Now I figure she’s just in the parking lot crying, but when I finally jammed the cigarette butt on the tabletop and made it outside, I saw she’s in the car. That’s trouble, I know, because when we drink, it takes both of us to drive. We talk each other through it, the passenger talking to the driver, keeping the other one calm. I ran up to flag her down, but when she saw me, she sped up. For a while, I ran after her, but I’m full of bourbon, and I can’t keep pace on a car.”

She never told me so, but I bet she was looking in the rearview mirror when it happened. Situation like that, where I’m chasing after her, she’s got to have at least one eye looking behind her even though she knew I’m miles behind. Maybe, maybe not. All I know for sure is that the police said she didn’t even slow down when she

hit the guy. A plumber, they told us later, coming home from picking up his wife's prescription. By the time she stopped, her back tires were on him.

Drunk driving and vehicular manslaughter. I told the cops that it was my fault—that she wasn't very drunk and she was only driving because I was too drunk to stop her. Her lawyer said that didn't help much, but he did all right anyhow. Three years sounds like a lot, but when you've convinced yourself she's never seeing daylight again then you can grit your teeth and rough it through a thousand days.

"A couple hours, and it'll all be over," Sheila Rose says. Both of us knew that wasn't true, and she looked embarrassed for saying it. "Not over, of course, but behind you. In the past."

Except that's barely true either. For about eight months, I tried blaming myself, and it didn't do any good, so I stopped. Instead, I ran as far from guilt as I could stand. But everyone in Hazard still blames me, and they'd have blamed me with or without that cigarette. To them, Abigail Grundel is forever the wronged child without a child of her own. They don't love her, and they only like her as much as they like a sunny afternoon, but they have at least that one memory to cry over. They need it. So, sure, it's in the past for Abby. She already has a past big enough to swallow up some throwaway car wreck. Not me. That night in Lexington sticks with me like the smell of grease sticks between a mechanic's fingers. It dirties up every joke I crack, every hand I shake, every lie I tell.

"What time's she getting out?" Rose asked me. She walked to the back corner of the store and picked up a dozen of the white flowers with the yellow middles.

“There’ll be paper work, of course,” she said. “I don’t know how it works—whether you have to fill it out yourself, or if they have lawyers or whatnot.”

“I’ll work on commission,” I said. “Nothing up front. Just give me a basket and a few dozen roses, and I won’t say it comes from you.”

She stopped moving and shook her head. For a second, her mouth twitched, and I thought she was going to say “I’m sorry.” Instead, she just stood there with the same, sad smile she always lapses into when I’m around. Some of me wanted to wait for a noise of some kind, but I knew better. There’s nothing left for either of us to say, and nothing even left for us to hold back from saying, so I scratched my beard, turned around, and went outside without a proper goodbye.

I walked back out in the cold sun onto Main Street. The fresh air helped me remember myself, and I wished I’d spared myself Sheila Rose’s flower shop that morning. I hadn’t told that story so badly, so carelessly, since just after it happened. Hearing it in my own voice rattled me, but now outside, it made the day seem fresher. All the day’s little realities I’d been keeping at elbow’s length seemed somehow more manageable.

No one’s hiring me, I thought. Not to spatula a squished raccoon off Highway Fifteen, they won’t hire me. It came to me so clearly, that, for a moment, I thought I’d spoken aloud. Oh well, I thought. I’ll stay here and stare down the city and breathe all the fresh mountain air that’d been denied Abby for the last couple years.

I walked past two kids flipping cards into a top-hat for quarters. For a second, I paused and watched as one threw the Jack of Clubs into what looked like it was going to be dead in the center of the hat, but at the last second an oversized

rectangular shadow swept over us on the sidewalk, and from the angle I stood at, it looked like the shadow threw the card off course and onto the hat brim. I looked up, more to see what had ruined the boy's card shot than to see what was causing the noise, and that's when I saw the bus.

It wasn't a very good bus—you could tell that just from the sputter and clunk noises it made as it barreled down the street—but it was still impressive. Oversized, almost cubical, like God had cross-pollinated a townhouse and a Yugo. Then there was the paint job. Bright red, with cream colored clowns and shit-brown monkeys holding hands so they looked like letters spelling out “Malachy Fitch's Rodeo Circus.” I didn't even realize such things as rodeo circuses existed, and I imagined it to be midgets and Lion Tamers lassoing each other.

The music wasn't playing, which surprised me. You expect a circus bus to be like an ice cream man, with that same jingle playing all the time, but even though there were speakers coming out the top, it stayed silent.

Something else was off, in the same way a dream seems off the split-second before waking. If I squeeze the memory hard enough, I sometimes imagine it glowing, radiating out from the rest of the street, as it barreled down the block, but I know that's not right. But I do know that, while it wasn't speeding exactly, it seemed to be moving too fast for the street, like it had as much faith in its front end as a bowling ball. Since that night with Abby, I look at every passing vehicle with fear, like I'm expecting it to veer off course, so maybe I saw it before it really happened. Still, when it started to curve toward the far sidewalk I wasn't so much surprised as vindicated, like I could imagine a car wreck into happening. If I could have picked

my thoughts I'd have chosen different, especially knowing about Chuck and Soup and everything that followed, but being honest as I can be, I remember thinking some strained version of I Told You So right until the point of impact.

When the bus plowed into the row of cars parked on the side of the street, I gasped. It sounded like ten car alarms went blazing at once. Something about getting plucked out of daydreaming by seeing how unromantic one car bashing another was shocked me even worse than it did most of the folks who saw it.

For about a second and a half, nobody knew what to do. Then like a starter's horn, I hear the circus music come blasting out of the speakers. For just an instant, I thought it was a fire engine, as loud as it was, but then I heard that tune.

The bus went up on two wheels, then back on all four, then two the other direction, like a wobbly drunk trying to right himself. The black smoke came pouring out the exhaust, and it was making sounds like it was getting ready to explode. Then just as I thought it was going to keep its tires on the ground, it tipped over slowly, like it obeyed gravity in slow motion. When it smacked the ground, I heard what sounded like four windows shattering at once. The music sounded quieter then, like it came from down the street.

Next thing I know, I'm running. Off the sidewalk and out into the street where anything can get at me. I didn't even understand that I was running toward the wreck and not away from it, and even then I didn't know why. All I knew for certain was that I wanted to get there fast, before anyone else. Looking back, it seemed natural—brave a little, even—but if you'd tapped my thoughts just then, I couldn't tell you if I was meaning to help those people or just stare down at them. After all,

I've never seen a heap of broken sideshow acts before, and seeing something new is worth ten rescue missions.

They told me later that I was the last one to see Soup that morning, but I don't remember it. I didn't even notice Chuck's feet under the van, although I'm not altogether sure how I missed them. All I remember is jumping onto the side of the bus—which, with the bus capsized was the top—and looking down through one of those smashed out windows. I put my hands through the shards, not a hundred percent sure of what I was reaching for. Below me, all I could see was this shaved-headed guy with a moustache. He wasn't moving, but he wasn't bleeding either, so I figured he's knocked cold.

Right then, I felt a sharp tug on my wrist. It yanked my arm into the window shards, but I didn't flinch. Whoever was grabbing me was pulling like they needed me, and anyway, the hands felt soft like a woman or child's, so I didn't want to let on that it hurt. I yanked my arm away from the glass, pulling whoever was holding on under the window and into the light. It was a woman, plump and apple-cheeked and dark as a white woman gets. My first thought was that she was pretty, but that may only been because she was gazing up at me like I could raise the dead. Worship, even wrongheaded worship, tends to sand away the rough spots.

“What's going on?” she said.

I didn't know. A lot was going on, and I couldn't say the answers to any of it. I looked down to where the glass shards cut my arm and said, “I think I'm bleeding.” That's probably the only chance at a hero's line I'm ever going to get, and I blew it, but I remember getting panicked that I'd sliced up a vein.

I helped steady that woman, and when she stood her head poked out of the window. She held her arms up toward me, and I put my hands under her armpits. On the count of the three, she jumped and I tried to lift her, struggling against her weight. Without realizing it, she was fighting me, and although she wasn't heavy, I was too high above her to help her very much along. Finally, she managed to put her elbows on either side of the bus window, but otherwise kept still. That allowed me to wrestle her out the window and onto the top of the van. Then both of us, even before looking at each other, jumped down to the street.

The effort left me winded, and we stood on the ground—her shivering softly and me bent over with my hands on my thighs. I could barely think to talk until I remembered my arm. The blood had run down onto my sleeve. “This shirt’s ruined,” I said.

“Not bad,” she said, putting her palm on her forehead like she was testing herself for a fever. “I hit my head, but nothing’s broken.”

I didn't know if she misheard, or if that was how she answered questions. It made as much sense as anything else did just then. I didn't know what to tell her, and I didn't like her staring at me all cross-eyed, like the wreck had banged the sense from her. She had twitchy cheeks like she was always going to sneeze, but aside from that she could pass for an actress in a B movie. It felt wrong somehow, like the bastard child of a dream come true. Like every boy, the first fantasy I could never kill was to somehow rescue a beautiful woman. She wasn't beautiful, but almost pretty, and as far as I could tell, I hadn't saved her from anything.

Folks were gathering around to look at the crash, but they stayed on the sidewalk, on the edges. They must've assumed I had some sort of special authority. Then I thought maybe they're mad at me, figuring here I was in the middle of another wreck.

The woman smiled, or grimaced, or winced—I couldn't tell which just then—and I saw a line of blood between her lower front two teeth. She must've bit her tongue.

“Your mouth,” I said. “Some blood's got there.”

She cupped her hand behind her ear and leaned into me.

“Bleeding.” I pointed to my own mouth, and tapped my front teeth with my finger.

She looked first to me, and then to the onlookers staring at us, standing on their hind-legs waiting for a cue. Just then, she made some strange sucking noise, stuck her thumb in her mouth, and pulled out her entire top set of teeth. Two parallel pink strands of spit ran from her dentures to either side of her lips. She didn't change expressions when it happened, but I imagine it had to at least hurt worse than pulling off a band-aid.

I didn't want to see her mouth, so I turned away, but then I was looking at the van again. Almost like it was the momentum from swinging my head that took me, I started running back that way. Maybe a few others needed pulling out, I figured. That baldheaded one was down there at least. For the life of me, I don't remember hearing that circus music just then, but it must've still been blasting. I would've heard it if it stopped.

I hopped onto the side of the bus where I'd been before. That baldheaded one was just where I'd left him; he hadn't even so much as rolled over. I poked my head through the crashed window to get a closer look because I figure he must've hit his head something awful to be as still as that. "Wake up, Chief," I called to him. "Let's get you on out of here." He didn't stir, but I heard some clunking in the back. I turned to see where it came from, and as I did, I lost my balance and fell face-first into the bus. My hand hit a speckle of glass but it didn't break the skin. Altogether, I wasn't so much injured as confused.

Before I could get my balance or even sit up all the way, I saw a tall man with a bumpy, pink face try to stand, but his head hits the top of the bus. Even with that opening clumsy gesture, he looked so skinny and light on his feet, it wouldn't have wholly surprised me if he floated out the window. "Are you the one that took her?" he asked.

I steadied myself and tried lifting myself up by the bus seat. Once I found my feet, I turned around and saw the driver in a lump under the steering wheel. "I think your buddy's in trouble."

"Trouble?" He had a sharp, high voice, one made for questions. "What'd she do now?"

I looked at the driver again, but I didn't understand. I didn't want to understand anymore. "Come on," I said. "Let's get outside."

I thought he was the only other one, so I almost jumped when the second man rolled out from behind the seat and began lumbering toward me. He was smaller, sturdier than his friend, and he had a head shaped liked an oversized egg, small and

pointy on the top and bottom, but fat at the ears. His hair was mostly gone and what remained stayed matted to the side of his head above his ears with sweat, and his belly jutted out in front of him, more like a pregnant woman than a fat man. As he came closer, puffing for air from the side of his mouth, I saw his teeth were gray and jagged. Any of these on their own could've made him ugly, but together they made him look, if not attractive, compelling, as though he had supreme confidence in how he looked. At first, I wanted to say something to him, but he moved with such single-minded determination that I didn't want to distract him. He was dragging one leg, but it looked like he always walked that way. He got to me before the skinny one did, and I realized I didn't know how I planned on helping him. I sort of just stood there, but when he reached me, without saying a word, he put his forearms onto each side of my shoulder blades and I knew I was meant to act as a sort of stepladder for him, lifting him up by the bottom of his feet, while he climbed out the window.

As I held his foot, the skinny one walked over and put a hand on his back to steady him. We both caught each others eyes, and he thought it was better to talk than keep quiet. "We were headed to Bristol, Tennessee. Supposed to do a show there Tuesday."

I didn't want to even nod to let him know I heard him. His friend had his head and arms out of the bus, but his feet are squirming around in my palms like a pair of cod flopping around on dry land. When I looked up, I saw his the round-headed man hanging onto the outside world by the strength in his arms, trying to wriggle his way out of the bus, and I realized that I didn't want to answer him because I didn't want to speak. Speaking would make it seem more real, and as long

as it seemed like half-a-dream I could make believe it would all work out. Except then, his friend finally makes it outside, and there's nothing left to do except talk to him or ignore him. "So, what're you guys," I said. "Carnies?"

"Clowns," he says. "I do the juggling."

I looked around and thought that maybe they were working on some reverse clown trick—having a big car and only putting a few clowns in it—but I didn't want to say anything for fear of his getting offended. Anyway, explanations weren't clarifying much at that point. If this was half-a-dream, I thought, then I'd take it that way and just watch as it spread around me and try not to wake.

Except that right then I remembered the mustached man at the steering wheel. He still hadn't moved. I walked to him and put my hand on his shaved head. He felt cold. That might've just been my supposing it because at that point I pretty much knew. The other guy must've known too, but neither of us wanted to say.

Underneath him, the floor of the bus had crumpled up into little metal waves. Seeing the waves, even more than seeing the man sprawled out under the steering wheel, made me understand why I'd run up to the wreck in the first place. Part of me had kept forever curious about Abby's car wreck ever since that night. Her car hadn't crinkled the same way, but the smell of panic-sweat, gas, smoke, and blood must've been the same. She must've felt the same dull, throbbing, screaming in her head. God knows I'd pitied Abby for being locked up all that time, but I think I also envied her a little, if only because she knew what it was like to be there.

"Get his feet," the thin man said. "I'll get his arms."

We lifted the mustached man up, but then I started to think how this was going to work. If he was in as bad a shape as we both suspected then tossing him out the window would seem downright black-hearted, but neither of us could climb out with him on our backs.

The thin man must've been thinking it too, because he yells out, "Olivia," as loud as he can. "Livia, get on top of the bus."

Again, I don't know what that means, but I hear some clamoring and struggling, and then that toothless woman was standing right above the window. We lifted the body up and out the window while that woman kept him steady. Then I helped lift the thin man out of the bus. He was as skinny as a shadow and could've probably climbed out on his own, so I barely felt him in my hands. Then there's no one left but me.

I was panting, and I wanted to sit down, but, of course, the seats were all sideways. My arm was still bleeding, and I'd given up even trying to save my shirt. It felt safe and still in the bus, a mile away from what was sure to be screaming and sirens outside. Right then, I heard my watch beep. Ten o'clock. There was still a day ahead of me, and it'd keep coming no matter what happened in the morning.

I looked up at the square of gray sunlight pouring through the broken window. The woman stood on top of the bus like a giant twice my size, and I couldn't be sure, but I thought she was crying. A pair of arms shot down into the window. The thin man's. Oh well, I thought. No real use waiting. Then I took a running start, jumped as high as I could, grabbed on to whatever grabbed me back, and struggled with all my strength until I finally tumbled into the daylight.

Chapter 2: Emily Strabnow's Freckles—*Andre Foster*

My wife was an army brat, a perky, square-faced girl as pale as a week-old corpse. Her cheekbones and chinbone stuck out so far and her skin seemed so thin, almost translucent over it that I sometimes thought I could see her veins pumping the blood in and out of her face. She was vaguely attractive in the white and willowy sense, but I was only drawn to her strangeness. When I first saw her, she looked so odd that I wanted to look at her more. By the time she began looking familiar, I'd gotten so used to looking at her that other women looked disproportioned.

Like all Colonels' daughters, she spent childhood bouncing from base to base, never settling on a home until after high school. Her first choice was Portland, Oregon because she thought it'd stay cool even in the summertime. Not only was she wrong about that, she was wrong about everything in Portland. She didn't understand it: the shoe factory, the shattered syringe glass on the sidewalk, that giant slab of water. Worst were the runaways. Blue-haired, snarling junkie children, who'd cried off most of their eyeliner from the night before. Every night must've started with at least a little hope, at least as a reference to the first hope they had when they ran away, but seeing them in the morning, with the sun bouncing off their splotchy red cheeks, it was hard to believe they felt anything but a desire for shelter.

Wanting to leave but nervous about turning into a runaway herself, she said she'd take one more stab at relocation, and wherever she planted her flag she was going to call home for at least the next ten years. That was Berkeley. I met her before she'd completely unpacked, and when she told me her plans, they sounded all

right to me. I'd moved around quite a bit myself, and I'd just completed a Masters in math and buried the one parent I knew. Making myself at home didn't sound like such a horrible way to kill a couple years. Our daughter Emily came one year later, two months after the wedding.

Today, she's called Emily Strabnow, as if the egg fertilized itself, but when she was still toddling, bowl-cutted Emily Foster, I could stare at her for hours at a time, trying to guess which ways she'd grow in my image. When she was still in the cradle, I couldn't see it at all. She was spared my nose and ears and cursed with her mother's thin lips. Even more than that, the infant's awkwardness, the oversized, round head and squat dwarf's body, reminded me of her mother's strangeness, and I felt drawn to her in the same way. It was only as she grew thin, and milky-eyed that I saw my face marked onto hers. I saw it in her freckles most of all, the light orange dots on her nose and cheeks and shoulders and neck. Even now, I think of the strip of freckles that runs down both biceps so thick and mashed together that it looked like someone had drawn a smear on her arms with an orange magic marker. They were light freckles, my freckles. On me they've turned to splotches, but on her they were—and maybe still are—a series of individual dots. If it was possible, her mother would pull every one of those freckles off her face just like she's pulled off my last name. But she can't deny me those freckles, and she can't stop me from imagining them, darkening in August or blending into her skin around Christmastime.

When Emily turned eight, I began taking her to the circus every weekend. After a couple of months, Emily grew tired of the circus, and I went alone. I never intended to join the troupe; but I wanted to understand them, to understand that sort of

life. A tightrope walker on stage was just a balancing act, but to see her afterward, leaning back on her trailer, gnawing on a banana with her bare feet planted in the mud was something else entirely.

The third time they saw me hanging out afterward, one of them—Gunter the Strongman, I learned later—approached me, smiling but leaning back like he was waiting for me to attack. “Excuse me, but none of us seem to recognize you.” He probably didn’t realize it, but he had his hands in front of his waist, curled into loose fists. “Can we help you in some way?”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just kind of shrugged and said, “I’m a juggler.”

Gunter put his hand behind his ear. “Smuggler?” Knowing what I know now, he must’ve thought I was the world’s dumbest undercover cop.

“I juggle things,” I said, trying to muster a little more confidence. “Balls and beanbags and fruit. Stuff like that. Balls mostly.”

Gunter smiled and looked from side to side. “All right, so what’s that mean? You want to meet a juggler?”

It was then that The Bearded Lady took off her beard. Right beside me so I could smell the airplane glue. She paused halfway though, took her hand away from her face with the ratty brown piece of hair, swinging from her cheek. “I think he wants to try out,” she said. She removed her beard slowly, the high-octane glue tugging at her skin. The first time I saw it, just then, it was like seeing her naked, making love in the changing tent, right down to how she pressed her tongue against the back of her teeth. The second I saw her ripping the hair from her chin, I knew I was about as close to home as I could ever be again.

You run away to join the circus. That's all anybody knows about it, and it's true. The circus *is* running away. But you also run away to join the army or to go to graduate school or to start a family. Except in America, where we don't cop to running, we call that "getting on with your life."

Besides, I was good at it. I'd spent the summers during high school away at Clown Camp, and I never got nervous around kids. Maybe I wasn't much on a unicycle, but I could juggle better than anyone. Most people work up a rhythm so they can ignore the balls, making it look as easy as possible. I went the other way, throwing myself off balance, pretending I had no system and almost letting the balls drop in front of me. At first the crowd pities me, but as the act winds on, they gasp and scream, barely able to believe I hadn't dropped one yet. I could probably juggle on most big name tours, much less a ma and pa circus like this one.

When they interviewed me, I was dumb enough to ask when I'd meet Malachy Fitch. They still tease me about that. "Malachy and Fitch are just the two dumbest names we can think of," said Tub Stevenson, a round-bellied clown with a face like a Doberman. Even now, he teases me when I'm throwing beanbags in the air for practice, and he's sitting on an overturned drum, swilling some godawful Polish vodka that looks green in the bottle, and makes his breath stink like rotten potatoes when we perform together. "You keep practicing, Berkeley," he says, his real grin as wide, red, and menacing as his makeup. "If Mr. Fitch catches you dropping a ball, he'll send you back to California with your wife." I never liked Tub, but I admit he knows just where to stick the knife and which direction to turn it.

They let me in as a Juggler and Tumbler, which was the official name they gave clowns. My wife didn't protest, but she stayed up all night crying beside me, while I, asleep but reciting my movements from muscle memory, put a hand on her back for comfort. It took a few weeks before I couldn't help myself with The Bearded Lady and a few weeks after that for her to find out, but the picture had already been painted. As far as my wife was concerned, I left her for the circus, not another woman.

Maybe she was halfway right because I would've left her for the circus. The highway, the make-up, the crowds—kids and adults both who kept waiting for me to drop my first beanbag, slightly thrilled and slightly disappointed when I kept them in the air—that shone a lot brighter than anything coming from my wife's glassy-eyed stare. In the beginning, I even liked the shagginess of our particular circus. One night in Bakersfield, we heard that a bigger circus was in town and to get more attention, Tub repainted our van to say "Rodeo Circus." It upped our attendance because obviously a Rodeo Circus is better than a regular circus, and by the time they found out there weren't horses, the carnies had closed up the cashbox.

I knew people stole. The carnies skimmed a little more than their fair share off the attendance fee, and we'd occasionally get paid in jewelry or kitchen appliances. It kept us moving. Sometimes we'd be gone from home for as long as three weeks at a time, never knowing on Friday night where we'd be on Saturday morning.

In the beginning, The Bearded Lady and I—Olivia and I, I must remember—shared a trailer by the lions, which always made her tremble just a little. Not when

they roared, but when they purred, and it sounded as loud as motorcycle idling. “They’re resting,” she whispered to me, barely able to slip the words past her lips. “This is how it is when they’re calmest.”

I felt the meat of her arms shaking between my fingertips. It was a nervous energy, like the shivering from cold. I’m feeling her living, I’d think in a voice I hadn’t heard from myself in years.

When the smell of the lions got to us, we could move to one of the other trailers or in the woods outside the circus grounds where the cotton candy makers and the caramel apple sellers went to get high. There we felt free to do what we needed, but the walk back always reddened my cheeks. “You’re such a little boy,” she’d whisper to me when she saw me blush.

It didn’t bother her, the little sideways smirks and murmured giggles from the other clowns. They weren’t meant for her, but me, to let me know that they’d been with The Bearded Lady, and they’d always be laughing at me. “Hey, Berkeley,” Tub Stevenson called out to me through cupped hands while I was practicing. “I think something’s wrong with Olivia’s beard. You sure all those hairs around her mouth are hers?”

At that point I could shrug it off. She opened up to me in a way she didn’t with the other clowns. At least that’s what I believed then, and having cradled that belief for sustenance for so long, I believe it now out of habit. Most nights, we’d lay on the grass, her head resting on my thigh, staring up at the place in the sky where the moon should be, and she’d tell me about her family with the same nervous urgency that children use to tell secrets. Her grandparents were circus folks from Russia.

Acrobats, mostly. She'd never talked to anyone else on tour about them, but she could tell stories that'd make me think Russia was unfolding for her across the night sky. At every twist and loop in the story, there'd be a hitch in her voice, and she sounded surprised, nervous, as if she wasn't yet convinced of their survival and her creation. She told me about how the Soviets closed down the independent circuses, and they had to go underground for a while. Whenever they went to a new town, they let off tiny firecrackers that they called snakechasers in the town square to let people know that there'd be a show that night. They played for the displaced sons and daughters of the aristocracy. She always called it The Soviet Union, not Russia, which surprised me. "That's how I heard it from my grandparents," she said. "Soviet Union. I don't think they had hope it'd turn back again. They just changed with it."

Although her grandparents and parents had pawned off most of the memorabilia for clothes and booze, she still had a necklace with an uneven green emerald in the middle. Her grandmother had swallowed fire one night, and the former archduke of some province I hadn't heard of took her aside and gave her the necklace. "You, my dear," he said, "are as beautiful as the wind." I've not seen a picture of her grandmother and from that description I can only imagine her as stern, elusive, ever-changing. The night I first saw the necklace, she took me within an inch of her face so she could breathe out a whisper, saying, "I've never shown this to anyone before." The necklace itself looked beaten, a little dusty, which is only to say that it couldn't match her story about it. As much as she'd talked of the necklace, I expected it to look alive in some way, as if it could understand me and second-guess me like a demon-child.

She put on the necklace briefly, so that I could better picture her grandmother. “Think my chin, but a rounder face. Bigger, too almost chubby.” The precision of her description threw me, and it made me realize that I wouldn’t be able to make people map out my parents on my face. I could also tell that she’d said this before, maybe in the mirror, pleading with her face to sphere itself into her grandmother. “My eye-shape, but darker. A muddy green, a speck of shade from brown.”

It didn’t work, and we both knew it. I said it changed her look, and she gave me a faint, wet flicker of a smile, big enough to show the red of her gums where her top teeth should be, but we both knew it was untrue. She took it off in a hurry, mumbling some excuse along the lines of she didn’t want to damage it, and she left it on the nightstand. For the first few minutes after she’d removed it, I could feel the clammy circle of skin on her chest where the jewel had been pressed. Once that indentation was lost, I kept an eye on the necklace, lying beside us—all the while, I was trying and failing to imagine what it meant for her to have her little stab at alchemy fail so completely. It must feel more like pain than shame, I thought, because if she was embarrassed, she’d have put it in its box and under her bed. As it was, she could still reach for it, and hope it would hurt less this time, or at least hurt differently.

I didn’t believe it all, but I believed some of it. The Russian grandparents sounded like it was stolen from some creaky black and white movie, but I could buy that they were circus people, or at least that they traveled. Olivia took to the road differently than the rest of us, and I could only understand her as someone who came

from a long line of people who always believed their home was elsewhere. Christians of a sort, I suppose, of the “I’m just a-travelin’ through’ variety.

I didn’t know what to make of the necklace. I’d wager my soul it didn’t come from any archduke, but whatever it was, it meant something to her. She handled it gently, which, in the circus where your belongings are nightly stuffed into duffel bags, meant a lot. The night after she showed me the necklace, I noticed a slight change in her face whenever she looked in the direction of the box she kept it in. The change was small, a slight downturn at the corner of her eyes like a concerned parent, but it was consistent. She hadn’t told me the real story yet, but I had faith that there was a story to tell, a real mystery to unravel.

The other clowns kept not liking me. Everything I was going through with Olivia, they’d gone through before with more grace. For a long time, I pretended those faraway giggles were just a symptom of something they never understood, that I barely understood. Eventually, they got tired of waiting for me to figure it out.

Goggles, the Canadian clown with no eyebrows and a slight stutter, was the first to bring it up to me directly. “Watch yourself around Olivia,” he said, struggling to get past the initial W. “Bighearted woman and all, but got a way of telling stories that’s not quite how it is.” His catching voice and twitching cheeks made it easier to dismiss him.

The first time I took it seriously was with Gunter the Strong Man, and that wasn’t until my wife had already signed the papers. Gunter was always good to me, better than

the others at least. I don't know if he liked me or not, but he treated me like an equal, not like I was a scientist hanging around a circus to do experiments. Oftentimes, after the others disappeared, we'd stay up late and play cards; not gamble, just play Draw or Pinochle or two man Spades for fun. "What you got to remember is we grew up in this." He puffed on one of his endless stream of cigars. "You, I know you're good, but you don't really get it. The Bearded Lady—Olivia, I mean—given all that girl's seen, she's not really talking to you in a way you can understand yet."

"About the circus, you mean?" I said. "Touring? I know there's stuff I don't know, but I accept that."

He sucked his lower lip in what I now know was a look of sympathy. "Just take it easy's all I'm saying."

It was Tub Stevenson, God bless his gentle soul, who told it to me straight. He looked excited as a kid at 5 a.m. Christmas morning at the thought of hurting me. "Hey Berkeley," he whispered to me, as we were working on a tumble routine. He had his arms around my sides and we were both breathing heavily. "She tell you about Russia yet? All the trapezers and lion tamers in her family? They were uncles and aunts with me, but Gunter said she made them cousins when she told him. I don't know what you got." I stepped in his hands, stood up at my full height, then tumbled over his shoulder on to the small of my back. He waved his arms, pretending to try and keep his balance before falling backward on top of me. "She show you the necklace yet?" he whispered once our heads were next to each other. "That one took me damn near three months to get, but the way you been eyeing her lately, I bet she showed you too."

I began following Tub after the show, staying back a hundred feet but always keeping him in view. I wanted some secret of his, or at least, I wanted to know how he stole the secrets from others. Anyway, I'd seen the way he scurried past the trailers after we were done saying goodnight to the crowds. It's not that he moved quickly, but he kept his arms locked at his sides like he couldn't let himself relax until he got out of sight, the way men with secrets walked.

I lost him the first night, but that was the only time. The second night I saw him rendezvous with Clay, the cotton candy man, and they got in Clay's Escalade and were gone half the night. Every night that week it was the same routine, except that sometimes there were others that went with them. One night it was Goggles and Gunter and one night it was Fat Jerry, the ticket taker. Each night, I began waiting longer and longer to see if I could catch them coming back. That Saturday night, after the show had gone late, I fell asleep in the bushes waiting for them and didn't climb into the trailer until four in the morning. Olivia asked where I'd been, and I stared at her until she flipped off the light.

The next morning, when I stepped out of our trailer, I saw that the clowns had set up their lawn chairs in a circle not ten feet from my front door. At first glance, it looked to be the normal routine: Tub swilling from his Polish vodka bottle in a paper bag while the others nursed the canned beers in the grass by their feet. They each had a fan of cards in front of their face and were tossing spare cards onto a footstool in the middle of their circle. "Berkeley," Tub said. He didn't raise his head, but eyed me between a gap in his cards. "Olivia told me to tell you she's going into town for some

bacon and grits and stuff. They got grits in Berkeley?” He nodded to an empty chair across the circle. “Come play a hand with us.”

I normally only played when Gunter was with them because I barely understood the rules, and Gunter made sure no one cheated me.

“Play for me,” Goggles said, shoving his cards to me. As soon as his hands were free, he reached into his pocket and took out his carving knife. He had a hobby of whittling blocks of wood into miniature Biblical characters, and whenever he wasn’t carving or performing, he incessantly rubbed WD 40 onto his knife with a dirty bandana. The characters only looked like disciples in the way that clouds look like the shapes people see in them, and I don’t think he even knew what WD 40 did, but I envied his passion. From the moment he started greasing his knife, he barely lifted his head until he finished.

I sat down and fanned the cards in front of my face. “What’re you guys playing?”

“You okay?” Tub said. “You look a little under the weather. Are you getting enough sleep?” He cut the deck and began shuffling. “Olivia’s worried about you. I can tell.”

I started separating my cards into suits.

“You know we could see you, right?” Tub said. “Every time, hanging out behind us.” He took another swig of his vodka and grinned. “I know you think we’re stupid, but we can turn around when we hear someone clomping around.”

I put my cards on my right knee and cocked my eyebrow at him. “What’re you talking about?”

“Maybe you don’t know,” said the clown we called Dino because, although he’d lost a hundred pounds over the past year, he still had the frame and shoulders of a dinosaur. “But it was someone who sure looked like you that we walked past asleep yesterday. Had your clothes and everything.”

“So Berkeley,” Tub said, leaning forward, and putting his hand on his chin. “Next time you get curious as to what’s going on after the show, you’re welcome to ride along.” He sat up straight and balanced the vodka bottle in his palm, not gripping it, but steadying it, anticipating its direction. “Or, you see the guy that looks like you,” he said, his gaze still fixed on the bottle, “you tell him what I told you.”

The following night, after they turned off the lights in the Big Top, I followed Tub and Gunter out to a deserted parking lot where we all piled into the back of Clay’s idling Escalade. We were someplace in southern Minnesota then, but I don’t remember where. From inside the car, it looked like any other circus town: abandoned after dark, save for a few glue-sniffers who skateboard on the steps of the town banks and always seem to be laughing too hard at whatever happens in front of them. The farther we drove, the quieter it became. There were more broken windows, less light, and the most you could hope to hear was a squeal of a hungry cat.

“This is a pretty easy job,” Gunter said. He was the only one talking to me. “About a dozen crates of scotch. Clay knows a guy who gave us the address. Place is abandoned after eleven.”

As Gunter explained it, Clay always knew a guy. Whoever it was booking our shows knew Clay and trusted him. He gave Clay a local contact that could provide

him with a job or an address. Sometimes it was nothing more than taking stuff that had already been stolen so we could fence it on the road. The carnies set it up, and the clowns did the heavy lifting. Sometimes we had to do the stealing ourselves, but even that was fairly safe. If it was a bigger job, they used Goggles, who did time for joyriding, to pick up another car, but that was about as risky as it got. The seemingly haphazard way we darted from one state to the next—the one romantic aspect of the circus that hadn't been sullied for me—was done to suit the needs of someone who only talked to Clay the Cotton Candy man.

On the job I went on, the scotch job, we were stealing, but it was about as easy as stealing got. It was from a small warehouse with only one security guard who was in on it. Because we were only taking a little, the numbers could get fudged and the mistake wouldn't be noticed for another few weeks.

“Clay drives,” Gunter told me when we were getting out of the car.

“Lookout's easiest, but you probably don't want it because you've got to hold a gun.”

In the end, Tub was lookout, while Gunter and I carried out the crates. As we loaded them in the car, it hardly felt like it was worth the effort, let alone the risk. The bottles themselves looked unimpressive, and I couldn't imagine we'd turn much profit selling them, but Gunter reassured me. “Twelve year old scotch,” he said, in a voice that showed no strain from nerves or the lugging of the crates. “People go wild for this stuff. Sometimes Tub rebottles them and passes it off as exotic foreign liquor.”

I felt a splinter get caught in my left ring finger, but tried not to flinch as I set the box in the trunk.

“Also, small town kids,” Gunter said. “Most of them don’t have IDs, so they’ll pay full price.”

Tub rejoined us, and Clay sped off. The whole process took us less than fifteen minutes. We stopped off at a well-lit park and passed around one of the bottles. No one felt as tense anymore, and they even began talking to me, explaining how it works.

“It can be simple as selling a dime bag with the candy,” Clay said. “It can be hard as remembering alarm codes.” He licked the scotch off the dead skin on his lips. “Neither one you need a Masters Degree for.”

They all laughed at that, and I did too.

Tub took the bottle and swirled it in circles in front of his face. “Just no cowboy stuff,” he said. “Only reason no one brought you along earlier was we worried you might go cowboy on us.”

“Cowboy?” I said. “What, like spin the gun?”

They laughed, and I realized that I unwittingly had made a joke. “No, *cowboy*,” Tub said. “A showoff. A Billy Badass. Get us all locked up.”

This astounded me, not only because they considered inviting me along beforehand, but because it was such a wild misjudgment of my character. Tub acted so smart around me, like he’d already read through me a hundred times over, that I’d begun to believe him. “I’m no cowboy,” I said. “That wouldn’t even cross my mind.”

Tub passed me the bottle. “Probably,” he said. “It’s just I know how you perform. I’m on stage with you.”

Some people call stealing a thrill, but I didn't feel that exactly. The only real advantage I saw was that I wasn't quite the foreign exchange student that I had been amongst the other clowns. I wasn't Tub, and I didn't care to be, but I didn't have to constantly remember myself all the time, thinking and rethinking through the minutest actions.

After that night, when the others teased me, it was about the little things: how seriously I took my juggling or my naivety about circus life. Not The Bearded Lady anymore and not my wife. Tub always cracked a joke or two about how I nursed my booze, but these always fell flat, even with the other clowns. We'd each kept a bottle of scotch from the job. They'd drunk theirs dry, and we'd already sold the rest before I cracked the seal on mine. I don't much care for the taste of scotch, and anyway, the bottle meant more to me unopened, to look at and remember, than it did to drink. Eventually, I took a few sips, but that just helped bring back the memory of the park afterwards, with the tension draining out of our fingers.

"Berkeley education at work," Tub said whenever the subject arose. "Guy's too smart to sell twelve year old scotch, so he's got to wait until it turns fifteen." He never meant it to hurt, and that might have been why it never worked as a joke.

Looking back, I can see it was around then that The Bearded Lady started to pull away from me. At the time, I didn't notice the tiny sighs she gave whenever I put my hand on her side or rested my head on her chest when we were both lying down after a show. I didn't feel the tension in her skin when I touched her on the arms. With my wife, it all happened out in the open, like I was watching a present-tense movie, but with The Bearded Lady, I can only see it in memories.

We stopped talking. It wasn't as if we were cold-shouldering each other; our conversations just slowly wound down to the point where we rarely spoke unless we had something to say. We slept next to each other, never touching. The belief that the world today is like it was yesterday is always the last belief to go.

Things began missing from our trailer. Small stuff mostly—small enough for me to convince myself I just misplaced it or left it behind on the bus. We traveled so much that we always lost shirts or trinkets or anything that we bothered taking out of our suitcase. I came home from a job one night to find that one—only one—of my red juggling practice beanbags was gone. I pretended not to notice, and I could've gone on pretending, but then the scotch disappeared. I was careful with that bottle.

The next morning I walked out to see Tub Stevenson hunched forward on his lawn chair, playing solitaire and drinking my scotch. "Morning, Berkeley," he said when he saw me. "Want a sip?"

I let the door close behind me. "Is that mine?" It wasn't even a question really; just a physical reaction like squinting after taking in an eyeful of the sun.

"What, this?" he said, swinging the bottle by the neck. "Come on. It's not like you were using it."

I didn't know all that it meant right then. Obviously, none of us could've guessed where we'd wind up or how badly it would end, especially for Gunter. I did, however, know that Tub had reverted back to form, that he'd gotten over trying to like me. Worse, I could tell somehow that he was taking his cue from The Bearded Lady. After all, the lock wasn't busted and the windows weren't smashed, so someone must've been letting him inside.

Throughout all that happened next, Tub and I still performed together. We never grumbled to each other during the show, never let our hands slip while doing tumble support in hopes the other one would sprain an ankle. In fact, we were probably more professional after we openly hated each other than when we kept it all bottled in. More cordial, too. Every third morning or so, I still played cards with the other clowns outside my trailer. He didn't crack as many jokes my way, and even though Gunter had stopped playing with us, I suspected he cheated me less. The only difference was that almost every night, when the other one was away, we'd steal from each other.

I did it first. Tub was a thief, I reasoned, and all thieves understand is loss and gain. The only way to hurt him was not just for him to lose, but to see his loss, to have it all disappear in front of him. He never locked his trailer door, and the time he spent on his jobs gave me worlds of opportunity to slip in and out of his room. It started small. Just as he'd only taken a few pocket stuffers from me, I began by only taking what could fit into my fists. Two or three of Goggles' wooden Jesuses, a prism he kept hanging in his window, a few scribbled notes and drawings that he'd left by his bedside. Nothing he couldn't live without, but all things he'd miss. He'd notice their absence, and it would gnaw at him.

Of course, he didn't stop stealing from me either. Soon after he noticed his things were gone, he began pressing me, trying to outdo me. One night, I came home to see that he'd dragged my suitcase to the middle of the room and dumped it on the ground. I stood over it, put my foot on top of the pile, and turned to Olivia. "You do this?"

“Do what?” She lit a cigarette and collapsed heavily on the bedspread.

“Was Tub here?”

She blew a smoke ring up to our dented ceiling. “Not that I recall,” she said.

“Is something going on between you two?”

I took his power drill, and he took my diary. The next morning, as he dealt the cards to me and the other clowns, he turned to Dino and said, “You know what the worst part about being a parent is?”

Dino shrugged, and I leaned forward.

“Buying clothes for your daughter,” he said. “I assume that’s what it’d be. I don’t have kids, but can you imagine how it’d feel buying pink overalls, little backpacks, trying to keep up with fashions you know nothing about? I mean, you’d feel lost within your own family.”

I hadn’t written in that diary in a year, but I still read it. Right around the time I stopped writing was after I complained about buying clothes for Emily. I’d even used that goddamned phrase, “lost within my own family.”

“I mean, if I was out shopping with my little girl,” Tub went on, “and she wanted me to buy her one of those half-shirts or something, I’d say ‘Emily’—if her name happened to be Emily—‘get whatever you want, but don’t ask me.’ I talked to Olivia about it, and she agrees.”

That night, after the show, I snuck into his trailer and poured out every bottle of his Polish potato vodka onto his bed. There must’ve been close to a dozen bottles, no doubt taken from some badly-guarded warehouse during the graveyard shift, but deemed too precious to part with. After they were emptied, I repositioned the bottles

exactly as they had been, and walked away, thinking that I'd upped the ante to a point he couldn't reach.

Turns out, I underestimated Tub Stevenson's wicked imagination. Maybe I didn't have anything worth stealing, but he worked around that. When I opened the trailer door, I saw the Polaroid of my wife and daughter that I'd hidden in a locked lunchbox taped to headboard of my bed.

I don't even think I hid my shock. For a while, I just stood gape-mouthed, peering at the headboard, barely able to squeak out a sound.

Olivia waddled out of the bathroom and put her hand on the small of my back. "Whatever's going on," she said, "you boys really need to settle it."

I don't have Tub's imagination, so my next move was as obvious as a heart attack. He locked his door the next night, and I showed up without a plan. Not knowing what else to do, I picked up a stray cinderblock and tossed it through his window. Once I heard that glass shatter into a million unmendable pieces, I knew the only option I had left. I forced my way into his trailer and smashed every bit of glass he had: all of those empty bottles, none of which he'd thrown away, his dirty cups and plates, even his unused picture frames. I didn't hear how much noise I was making until there was no more glass, and I heard the silence. At first, I didn't know how nobody had caught me, but of course, they just didn't care. This was a two man shitstorm, and so long as no bystanders were hurt, they wouldn't get in our way.

I fully expected to come home the next night to see my belongings busted into little bits, maybe painted over. But, of course, Tub knew just how to just how to get at me, and it didn't take theatrics. After practice, the next afternoon, I went back to

the trailer and saw Tub sleeping in my bed shirtless. From behind me, I heard the toilet flush. I turned around to see Olivia stepping out of the bathroom, halfheartedly trying to put her bra back on.

“Hey,” I said. “Have you seen Tub around?”

She shook out a small giggle. “Look,” she said, “you’re not going to be weird about this, are you?”

I looked over at Tub and then back at her again. “Can I still sleep here?”

She yanked her shirt down over her breasts and worked it down onto her midsection. “Of course.” She looked at the back of her left hand and, unsure what to do with it, began to chew on her hangnails. “I’ve never told you one way or the other where you can or can’t stay.”

I could smell Tub Stevenson’s sweat in the trailer—tart, like a combination of Old Spice and tangerines. It struck me that there was nothing appropriate I could either say or do, and so all I hoped for was to remember the moment. Maybe, I thought, if I could recreate it in my mind indefinitely then I could eventually stake some revenge. But as I left the trailer and felt the first breezes of fall on my cheeks, I knew that I was done taking revenge on Tub Stevenson. He was better at it than me—smarter and more ruthless. Anyway, my target had been wrong. Tub wasn’t the problem.

It took almost a week of mulling. I kept going back and forth, never sure if I should just let it rest. Finally, one morning while Olivia dozed with her face buried beneath the bend in her elbow, I rolled out of bed, tiptoed to the other side of the trailer and stole her family necklace. We’d done a show in Indiana the night before—

a small town about forty-five minutes outside of Indianapolis—and we had the day off. Only when we had the days off did she sleep in. It never really made sense to me. When we did have a show, she always awoke early and stayed bright-eyed all day. She didn't practice—she didn't have much to practice—but she was always awake and alert. When she slept in, however, she slept in long, and the slammed shut doors or flushed toilets didn't even make her roll over or start whispering her dreams.

I didn't trust myself to hold onto it her necklace in my pocket. There was no privacy for any of the clowns, but especially me, with Tub and whoever else helping themselves to whatever they wanted. Even so, I couldn't see dropping it in a dumpster. I knew I'd lost my better instincts, but still I couldn't bear to think of it rotting away with all the half eaten fried dough and rain-soaked cigarette butts. Instead, I traveled through town until I found a pawn shop so rickety and maggot ridden that I felt like it was going to collapse on top of me.

As I was handing it to the proprietor, a wispy man with greasy eyelashes so thick that they must have been painted on, I felt a small indentation on the back. I held it up to the light and saw, carved into the metal, "Made in Taiwan."

"Come on, buddy, you want me evaluating the fucking thing or not?" the proprietor said. Not knowing what to tell him, I dropped it on his table and let it clatter. "You're obviously a man accustomed to handling fine things," he said. But I knew at that point it didn't matter. I knew what he was going to say before he did. After staring at it for about half a minute through what looked like an overblown monocle, he clicked his tongue and said, "What you got here is a Wal-Mart. I don't know what they told you, but I can't even melt the band."

Because we didn't have a show that night, I didn't go back to the circus. Instead I wandered around the town, bouncing from bar to bar like a cue ball bounced against a bumper. I think I talked to people—men mostly—but I don't know what I said or what they said to me. Occasionally, for fun, I'd mull the idea that Tub Stevenson stole her necklace and replaced it without her knowing, but of course that was ridiculous. She looked at that necklace every day; she knew its scuffs and the small shadows where the dents would eventually be. No replacement would've fooled her. She'd taken a piece of painted tin and crammed a history into it. There was no greater story to unravel, no lower level to discover. It wasn't that she was lying—it was the lies were so simple and unnourishing. Anyway, what right did I have to be surprised that a woman I called The Bearded Lady wasn't what she seemed to be? She makes her living by makeup, fur, and airplane glue.

The next morning I showed up at the campgrounds, and there was a semi-circle of carnies and clowns outside my trailer. They weren't playing cards or even talking, and it looked like they were waiting for me. "Hey Berkeley," Tub said. "Where you been?"

I didn't look at him, but instead pushed past the crowd and up into our trailer. It'd been torn up and turned over, top to bottom, and at first I thought Tub had struck again. But it was only The Bearded Lady, and when she heard the door close, she came running out of the bathroom. "Where is it?" she said.

"Where's what?"

"Please," she said. Her nose was runny from the crying, but her voice sounded steady. "Don't do this. Where?"

“I said already.” I looked over at the bed and then back at her. “Look, I got to get some sleep if I’m supposed to go out there tonight. Whatever you’re doing here, could you just try to keep quiet?”

“Please don’t be like this,” she said, her voice starting to quaver. “Just tell me what happened, and it’ll be okay.” The sobs came then, so suddenly and strongly that I had to turn and doublecheck if they were real. Her face was contorting, souring and then widening, looking almost childlike. These were real tears, I thought. Maybe not for grief at her dime-store jewelry, but they were real. Tears of rage, of absolute, grim, useless fury. She ran outside, and as soon as the door slammed, I lay down and fell asleep.

During the show that night, I spent most of my time staring blankly up at the big lights. The glare threw my timing off, and I found myself at least a half-step behind on all our routines. During the juggling, the audience expected me to drop balls, and this time I did. Once, as Tub and I were tumbling, I somersaulted my back shoulder onto a rock. Tub sprang up and acknowledged the crowd, but I stayed down, throwing the show off. It felt good to lie down, and anyway, the crowd didn’t notice. They laughed and cheered just as they had every time I bolted up and kept my balance on tiptoes. It was everything I needed to know about the circus. The crowd didn’t care about skill: they just wanted to see effort. Failure was probably more exciting to them than success because our failing reminded them it was real, the same way the smell of the big animals reminded them they weren’t safe at home anymore. We traveled to their town to steal, and they paid money to watch us fall down.

I needed to get away from the circus lights, maybe not forever but at least for the night. People looked simple in the swirl of green and red lights that swung around the Big Top after the show: not demonic or even skewed, but flat and easy to read. It was getting to where I couldn't see beyond those surfaces anymore, beyond the most basic versions of what people were and weren't.

Only one remedy, I thought. I'd run away from the circus just like I'd run to it. The breeze picked up and blew the smell of confectioned sugar and half-turned cream into the back of my throat. It didn't have to be leaving the circus forever—I just wanted to see a town with fresh eyes before our show turned them and us into parasites.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gunter take a quick puff on a joint by the big van. I scampered up to him and grabbed the back of his shirttail. "Hey," I said. "Where're we tomorrow, Virginia?"

He paused for a moment and exhaled. "Tomorrow?" he said, wheezing to get his breath back. "Bristol, Tennessee. On the Virginia border."

"Let's go now," I said. "Like right this minute, I mean."

"Now?" He gave a small laugh that turned into a cough before he could get it out of his chest. "It's dark out. I got a lot of stuff to pack up." He took another toke and offered me a puff.

"The carnies will get it," I said. "Please, just please let's go." I stepped around him and smacked the van. "You've got keys to this, right?"

He stared down at me, and for a second I could've sworn he looked scared. Now, thinking back, I know it was me who looked scared, and Gunter, empathetic to the end, made his face a mirror of mine.

"Hey," someone called out. I turned and saw Tub Stevenson charging up to me, with The Bearded Lady two steps behind him. "What'd you take her necklace for? What's she got to do with anything?"

I could tell from his voice that his heart wasn't in it. He didn't care one way or the other, but was carrying out her orders.

"Listen," Gunter said, stepping into Tub's path. "Can't it wait? We're about to head out, so why don't we take it back up in Tennessee?"

"Bullshit," Tub said. "You guys are going, we're going with you." As soon as he said that, his cheeks flushed pink, and it was clear he regretted it. Still, Olivia nodded her approval before he could rescind his offer.

I liked seeing Tub nervous and unsure of himself, and I didn't want to let him wriggle out of it. "Come with us then," I said. "But I don't know what you mean about a necklace." I stepped up onto the bus, and heard heavy steps behind me. Without turning around, I knew it was The Bearded Lady stomping up the stairs. I walked to the back of the van listening to the other two walk gingerly up the stairs and pick their individual sides to sit on. When I sat down, I saw Gunter put the keys into the engine and start the van. None of us knew what to do, what to say. We'd all been daring one another for so long, one-upping each other for so long, that now that we were equals again, we didn't remember how to act.

We got very lost. Driving in the dark, to a strange section of the country, with a driver who was high and getting higher, there was no way to not get lost. We didn't have a map, and Gunter just figured if he pointed the van south and east then we'd hit The Smokey Mountains eventually. He drove slowly, both because of the drugs and because the oversized van couldn't push much past sixty without rattling.

I could tell The Bearded Lady was losing her grip on Tub. He had a trouble with silences, and when he didn't know what to say to her, he'd turn me. "Thanks for this, Berkeley," he said. "This is much better than a good night's sleep." It never got friendly exactly, but he kept talking to me.

Around sunrise, we stopped for gas someplace in Kentucky and talked to somebody who pointed us toward the Tennessee line. When Gunter got in the car back then, I saw he was shaking, but I didn't want to bother him. We all sat in different places, Tub, Olivia, and I. The van was huge, and we stayed civil by staying away from each other.

I didn't sleep much, but instead sat still with my eyes half-shut, wondering what would happen if the others forgot to bring our stuff with them. There were backup clown outfits and even spare beards, so we could still perform if we wanted. But if they left our personal belongings behind, who would it damage? Tub and I had long lost anything worth keeping, and the only thing The Bearded Lady cared about was in the bottom of my pocket. I wondered it then and I wonder it still: How can three people hurt each other so completely in so many different ways and not talk about it?

Gunter looked sick. Aside from a two hour stint where I'd taken over the driving, he hadn't slept at all. By this time it was midmorning, and we were lost again. We'd pulled off the highway into that town to ask directions, and maybe pick up some breakfast. Hazard, Kentucky, I know now.

When it happened, I was thinking of Emily's voice, wondering whether it'd gotten high or hard in my absence, or whether by the time she reached thirteen, she'd keep any trace of my accent. I was thinking of her, but I was staring at Olivia. That's how I knew she saw it first. Her face crinkled like it did whenever she took off her beard, and I followed her gaze to the front of the van to see Gunter, collapsed on the floor by his driver's seat. Heart attack, I thought, and as soon as the words flashed across my mind, the van crashed against a parked car, and we all flew forward.

I must've hit my head because I lost memory then. The next thing I knew, I'm standing although the van was overturned, talking to some wild-eyed stranger with a misshapen red beard. The Barnum and Bailey music we used was pounding throughout the van, and I couldn't hear what the man said. It didn't matter. We were both staring at Gunter, hanging on to a sliver of hope that he'd twitch or tremble or throw up. When that didn't happen, we each grabbed him and helped push him out of a broken window over our head. When I climbed out of the window, and got back on the sidewalk, I tried looking around me, taking in whatever blocks of color I could see. The sun shone down, but it was cold in a way I hadn't expected, even for October. When I looked up, I saw Olivia and Tub standing in front of me. Both looked to be near tears, which made me realize that I probably was as well. I thought

we were each waiting for the other to break the news about Gunter, but then I noticed the small crowd at the head of the van.

“We hit somebody,” Tub said. He had to scream through cupped hands to be heard over the music. “Just some guy walking. He’s dead.”

Olivia broke down then, bawling and weeping, not even bothering to wipe away the tears. I couldn’t hear her with the music blaring, but I could see it, her mouth opening and closing, her cheeks trembling, nothing in her face staying still. I’d already seen it before when I’d taken her necklace, and I could still hear it in my mind.

I knew I couldn’t comfort her. All I could do to help at this point was watch and remember, remember everything I’d done and how I’d gotten to this point: shivering in a strange town, my only friend fresh dead, no wife, no family, no possessions, nothing I can claim as my own except the pale orange spots swooping around my daughter’s eyes, from her temples to the bridge of her nose, which disappear every winter and darken to bring out her cheekbones every May and June.

Chapter 3: Captain Bluebeard's Enforcer—*Campbell Holloway*

On the day the clowns and pirates came, I put the thermometer up on the lightbulb and told Dad I couldn't go to school. We weren't learning nothing except the color wheel and state capitals, and I knew most of that anyways.

"Jesus, Soup," he says to me. Soup's not my real name, but it's what he calls me, so it's what I go by. "You been sick about as much as you been well." He shakes the thermometer and sticks it back in my mouth. "You faking?"

I shook my head so hard the thermometer slipped out my mouth and smashed on the floor.

Dad laughed at that and then put his wrist on my forehead to feel for heat. "All right, Fleabag," he said. "You get yourself cured. Just be sure to get rested enough so I can take you out this afternoon."

He knew I wasn't sick, but he didn't care. Ever since my mom left, he didn't care about much anything. When he caught me eating Pralines and Cream for breakfast, he didn't say to stop. I'd even taken to drawing boobs and dicks on my bedroom window, and all he did was yell a little. Once, he let me taste beer. All he really wanted was for me to be up and ready by four, so he could take me to his friend Cora's house.

A few hours after he left for work, I got bored. The TV was broke to where it only had one channel working, and even that had stripes on it. When I fake sick, I try to stay in so no one sees me, but I figured I'd be safe at the park. Grown ups don't play there, and when they do, there are monkey bars and see-saws to hide behind.

Before I went, I stuffed my jacket pocket full of Pringles. I knew from before that climbing up the stairs to the big slide makes me hungry, and if I go down on my hip, I can keep from crunching the chips. Also if there were any cats or dogs I figured maybe I could use the chips to call them over and get them to play with me. Ever since Ronnie Cottonpants, who is a faggot, killed Cora's dog I wanted to catch her a new one. She had a new one, but I could get her a better one for certain.

I was downtown, walking to the park and eating on those Pringles when I saw Uncle Chuck. Uncle Chuck was my dad's brother so I knew it'd get back to him that I wasn't home. I almost turned and run off, but it was right then that the clown car came and knocked him over. I never seen a car crash before, and I wanted to see the clowns too, and also I knew Uncle Chuck was hurt, so I went up to it.

Right as I was stepping into the street I see dad's friend Ryan Abbot come running up to me. He grabs me by the shirt and lifts me back to the sidewalk.

"Sidewalk, Soup, sidewalk," he says. Then he jumps up to the car window that's busted and climbs in.

I didn't mean for him to see me, so I make to run off back home when I see Uncle Chuck. He's hurt bad. His legs are bloody and one of them's twisted back around, and he's laid flat. I didn't know what to do with him, so I took off fast as I could go. This time though I didn't run home but the other way. People were coming from all over now, but they was all looking at the clowns so nobody tried stopping me.

Last person I saw who saw me back was Reverend Coon. That wasn't until I'd turned off Main Street and started running toward Walkertown, so I know

Reverend Coon didn't know what happened yet. I didn't want to have to tell him because he knew my Uncle Chuck some, and they talked about Jesus together. "Hold up, Soup," he said, as I ran past him. He stuck out his hand and tried to grab me on the shoulder, but he barely got a finger on my shirt. It didn't even slow me down. He turned around and said, "Buddy, what happened? Talk to me a minute."

But I didn't stop. Reverend Coon acts nice, but my older brother Myron said look out for him. He's got greasy fingers, and when he grabs you by the side of your neck, you can feel the chicken fat lining his hands. Myron said Reverend Coon spends all day in the back of his church nibbling his nails and sucking on his own stubby knuckles. He'll eat anything, Myron said, even once ate a roadkilled cat, and most of the older boys figured he was fixing to boil the skin off a dog next. He's friendly enough, but Myron said to stay out of his grabbing distance, and I do as I'm told.

I kept running and running, and pretty soon I didn't know where I was. The houses looked small and shitty, and I thought maybe I was getting close to Cora's house. I liked going over to Cora's. Dad took me there most every day after school, and it was why my mom moved out. She said she'd come back for me one day, but she couldn't yet. She was still mad at me because she said I knew and I didn't tell her about it. Anyway, I didn't want to live with her now. With Myron gone, I could sleep in his room, which was bigger and still had his posters on the wall. Also, after we'd spend the day at Cora's, Dad took me out for Chili Dogs at Sonic. He'd put his hand on the top of my head and shake up my hair and say, "One day this boy's going to either run this city or burn it to ashes."

Cora was good to me too. Everyday, she'd set me up with a grilled cheese and a glass of milk and let me watch whatever I wanted on TV while she stayed with Dad in her room. I even got to liking the way she smelled, which was like the candles we kept in our bathroom. Since Mom left, Cora had taken to kissing me on the cheeks and forehead and calling me handsome because she said it'd be good for me in a couple years to know what I was doing. I liked that part too because she was trying to turn me into a coozehound, and that's what I mean to be.

I didn't see her house, but I knew I'd run to her neighborhood. All the white houses had gray spots on them, and the grass on the ground was long and yellow except for patches where it was just dirt. Cora lived up a mountain, so I began walking off the road a ways and hoped I could see her porch out the side of my eyes. I could move slow again because no one was chasing me, so I hunched down and walked with my belly low to the ground like I was sneaking up on the mountaintop.

All the sudden, I heard a barking and I turned around. There was a fluffy white dog with no collar on staring at me with its head all sideways. Once it saw me looking, it stopped barking like it'd been waiting on me. Right away, I know I want to call it Colonel if it's a boy and Snowflake if it's a girl because that's what it looks like to me. Most strays get mean and hissing, but this one didn't cry or nothing, just stood there like it wanted to be patted. I knew if I caught this one, I could give it to Cora, and she'd hug me and say, Thank you, thank you, thank you, honey, and she'd hug me all close to where I could smell her hair and the back of her neck.

I took the Pringles out of my pocket and dropped them at my feet. The dog trotted up to the chips with its head bouncing as it walked and then poked it's snout

on the ground to sniff. Just then I jumped on it and locked its neck up in my arms. It barked loud, right at my ear. Because it didn't have a collar on, I couldn't grip it by anything other than its neck hair, so it slipped out of my hands and took off running up the mountain.

I tried chasing after it, thinking maybe it'd slow down and realize that I still had more Pringles if it wanted some. For a while, I kept it in sight, but just barely. It looked like a little white cloud zigzagging through the trees. Then it was gone, and there was nothing left for me to do except sit down and think on it.

I was cold and getting hungry and I think I felt one of the dog's ticks crawling behind my earlobe. That'd mean another peroxide bath if Dad ever found out. Thinking about Dad got me thinking on Uncle Chuck, and that made me cry. I liked Uncle Chuck, and I knew he was hurt bad. He bought me blue and white sneakers every Christmas, and when Dad dropped me off at his house for the night, and I'd cry thinking about my mom and Myron, he'd let me stay up late and tell me stories about pirates and vampires and cowboys and aliens.

I didn't know what time it was, and I figured I ought to head back home. Except as soon as I started walking, I realized I'm so turned around that I forget which way I ran in. There were no houses or roads out here, so I had to go by which trees I recognized. There was a fat oak that looked familiar, so I walked that direction until the woods got thicker and I couldn't look up without seeing more leaves than sky. I turned around and when I saw the oak tree again, I pretended it was my enemy. For leading me wrong, I hid behind a couple poplars and threw rocks at the upper

branches of the oak, trying to take down a bird's nest. I missed and missed until I ran out of rocks. That got me crying again even though I was sick of crying by myself.

I started asking myself questions, like what'd happen if I was out here all night? Uncle Chuck told me stories about wolves and witches and gypsies that come through the mountains and eat the liver of little boys, but I didn't know what to make of them. I didn't like thinking about that stuff, but I thought it still. It was right then that I was captured by the henchmen of Captain Bluebeard, stuffed into a potato sack, and taken as a prisoner on the high seas. I knew they worked for Captain Bluebeard because they had a double B tattooed on their left hand, and I knew that was Bluebeard's sign because Uncle Chuck told me. They must've docked very close to the mountain because it couldn't have been twenty minutes later that they cut open the sack and dumped me onto the floor of their pirate ship.

The sun was pouring in my eyes and it took a little while before I could make out the shapes in front of me. Then a sunk-faced looking man with a long pointy yellow-white beard leans down and sticks a hooked knife in front of my chin. "Well," he says, growling at me. "Who's this we've got?"

I crawled away from the man on my elbows, and when I got my neck far enough away to where he couldn't nick me with that blade, I stood up and dusted myself off. My plan was to be polite as possible. I'd heard about pirates, and I knew they were bad news. They were always poking people in the eyes with swords, and covering up the sockets with patches. Right away, I knew that no matter what happened, I didn't want to lose an eye, even if it meant covering it up with a patch to

fool them into thinking they'd already stabbed me there. "Please to meet you," I said, taking a quick bow. "My name is Soup Holloway."

The man put his knife in his belt, reached out and grabbed me by the hair. "What do you say, boys?" he called out to his crewmates. "Do we keep this one or the other one?"

Everyone roared, and before I knew why, I saw two other pirates walk out from the cabin carrying a shirtless boy with a black pillowcase over his head. The boy was two heads taller than me, and he bucked and squirmed against the pirates who held him. They brought him in front of me and ripped off his pillowcase. It was Glen Hodges, the neighbor's boy, with his head bent to the side, staring at me. They must've snatched him at the same time they took me.

I never much liked Glen. At recess, he stood around the edge of the playground and gave the finger to passing cars. Because he was so much taller than everyone else in first grade, he swiped our books and held them above his head where we couldn't reach him. Once, he'd called me a fatass, and when I tried to kick him in the balls, he shoved my face into a mud-puddle.

"This'll be a fight to the death," said a baldheaded pirate with twisted gold teeth. "Winner gets to meet our captain, but the loser has to walk the plank."

"Isn't this something, Glen?" I said. "Looks like one of us isn't going to make it out of here alive."

He gave me the finger.

We were each given a golden-handled sword and told to have at it. I could barely lift mine. There was no way I'd win a fair fight, but I didn't want to walk the plank. "Hey, good luck, Glen," I said, and offered to shake his hand.

When he brought his hand out to mine, I chopped it off at the elbow.

"I'm right handed," Glen said. "Now he has to fight with his left hand to be fair."

No one listened to him. I put my sword at his back, and marched him off the plank while the other pirates cheered. Glen plopped into the water and bobbed up again. A shark circled by, and he gave it the finger with his one good hand before it snapped him in two with its jaws.

The pirates hoisted me up on their shoulders, and hip-hip-hoorayed. "What did you say your name was, kid?" said the baldheaded one, who was steadying my head.

Soup Holloway wasn't a pirate name, so I tried thinking of a better one.

"Hagar the Horrible," I said.

Right as the pirates were going to holler their approval, an older man walked down from the mast, and the crowd got quiet. The pirates put me down on the middle of the deck and spread out so the old man could see me. "What's all this noise?" he yelled.

"Oh no," I said. "It's Graybeard."

"We still call him Bluebeard," the baldheaded one whispered to me.

"Yeah, but..." I stroked my cheeks where my whiskers should be.

"We don't talk about it."

“Who’s that?” Bluebeard yelled, looking my way. “Is this the one?”

“Yes sir,” the baldheaded pirate said. He bent down to his knees. “He’s about the meanest killer we could find.”

“Kind of fat, no?” Bluebeard said. He walked down to the deck in front of me and jammed the tip of his sword into the deck. “All right, he’ll do. Does he do any tricks?”

“Yes sir,” I said. Then I performed a trick Uncle Chuck taught me where I pretended I was taking my thumb off my hand.

“Do you know why I’ve got you here?” Bluebeard said. He walked a full circle around me and squatted down to my eye level. “I’m looking for an heir.”

Turns out, he’d grown sick of pirating. He told me that even when he was raping the wives of soldiers and drinking the tears of children, he’d have to stop himself from yawning. There was no fun in cutting throats anymore, even the throats of Turks.

This reminded me of a good joke I’d heard at school yesterday. “What’s the best way to serve turkey?” I said. “Join the Turkish army.” He looked at me like he didn’t get it, and I realized that he might not like jokes.

He took a rusty dagger from the back of his waistband. “The last time I met a member of the Turkish army, I sliced the lips off of his mouth with this blade.”

No, he didn’t like jokes. I figured I shouldn’t say anything else, or I’d wind up in the same shark tummy as Glen Hodges.

He took out his broadsword and stuck it in my face so that the edge of the blade tipped the inside of my nose. He screamed out, “You are to be my enforcer.”

It was quite a job he'd carved out for me. Apparently, Bluebeard always wanted a wife, but he'd never had time to settle down. Now he was taking a final pirate tour of the ocean, and when he came back to his castle in France, he wanted a family living there. His men would capture him a wife, and it fell to me to make sure she was up to snuff. That meant she had to be gorgeous, funny, sweet, not a bitch, loving, not too fat, and obedient. Obedience was the most important to him. "If any woman breaks any rules," he said, "then you know what you must do."

I already knew what happens when you break rules. "I'll hit them. Right in the face, I'll hit them until they cry."

Bluebeard laughed, which signaled the other pirates to start laughing. "Your heart's in the right place, son, but pirates don't hit their women. We chop their heads off."

Tell you the truth, I'd never cut off anyone's head before, but I knew I could do it. After all, the pirates must've chosen me for some reason. Anyway, I thought it might be fun, swinging that sword around like a baseball bat and screaming out my own name. I'd seen women scared before, but never of me.

Every room in Bluebeard's palace looked different. One was made entirely of diamonds, another of rubies, and another of chocolate. This last one was put in for me because he'd heard kids liked chocolate. When I told him I was allergic to chocolate, he tried to convert it into a grilled cheese room, but after a month, it smelled so bad that everyone stayed out of that wing of the house.

The pirates kept returning to Hazard to pick out a wife, but they weren't having much luck. Holly Lunsford, who works at The Devil Moon and is a cunt, kept

talking about how she already had a husband. I knew that sort of talk would bore Captain Bluebeard, so I cut her head off. Sheila Rose Robbins, who sells flowers and is nice, kept asking me about being a pirate. No matter what I said, she clapped her hands together and said, “Well, isn’t that fun?” in this little squeaky voice. I’d heard her talk to grown-ups, and she never does that with them, so I knew she probably wouldn’t do it to Captain Bluebeard. Still, it wasn’t a risk I was willing to take. Because she was nice, I didn’t cut her head off, but poisoned her food instead.

My main job was to keep the wives out of the corpse room, a regular empty closet in the back filled with cobwebs and smelled like your clothes after you get splashed by a puddle. I didn’t figure the women would want to look at the corpse room because it was so plain, but as soon as I told them to stay out they swiped the key from my pocket and took a gander. Four wives died that way in the first three weeks. Some of the women were quite nice, and I couldn’t stand telling them what I had to do, so I killed them in their sleep.

I talked over the problem with Osirus, my assistant. Osirus was a black guy with a shiny bald head and a mean, twisted smile. He’d been with Bluebeard since the beginning, even when Bluebeard was so poor that he had to live on his own boat and work a second job as a commercial fisherman. I figured he’d know how to stop women from being so curious. “What if we changed the name of The Corpse Room to something less interesting?” I said.

Osirus stroked his chin. “Like, ‘The Cadaver Room?’”

“I was thinking ‘The Nothing Room,’ or ‘The Dust Room,’ or ‘The Library.’”

“Forgive me for saying so, sir” Osirus said. “But those are not proper descriptions of the room.”

He was right, and that was another problem. On Bluebeard’s orders, we stuffed the bodies of the rejected women in the corpse room. Maybe—*maybe*—two corpses could be packed away in the corner unnoticed, but after a couple months, the women were seeing the bodies as soon as the door flung open. I tried hiring live women to lie on top of the dead bodies, in hopes of tricking the wives into thinking that it was just a slumber party where some of the women had fallen asleep, but it didn’t work. Nothing worked, and soon I had to cut the bodies into bits, just so they wouldn’t spill out into the hallway. At one point, it got so bad that I had to pretend it was the grilled cheese room they were supposed to ignore, but they began looking there as well. I wanted to give them a pass for that, but Osirus reminded me they still were acting disobedient.

The pirates brought back my brother’s ex-girlfriend, Jeanie Halpern, who is pimply and is a whore. I took her head before she even had a chance to look in The Corpse Room. Once, after my brother spent an hour with her under the bridge, he let me smell his fingers, and it was disgusting. Captain Bluebeard wouldn’t want a wife like that whether she was obedient or not.

Then came Ms. Henderson, who was blonde-headed and taught second grade. Sometimes at night, I prayed I’d get sent to her class next year because she was pretty and sweet and I heard that her ass jiggled when she wrote on the board. I wanted Ms. Henderson to be Bluebeard’s wife so badly that I cheated. I told her what was in The Corpse Room so she wouldn’t be curious anymore. Except when I said it, it scared

her so bad that she dropped dead of a heart attack. I shoved my sword down her throat and told Osirus I'd killed her because she'd called Captain Bluebeard a queer, but still I felt bad.

The next morning it got worse still. I came downstairs to fill my goblet up with milk, and I see a woman with high bouncy red hair standing in front of the refrigerator. "Mom?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "Do I know you?"

She stepped under the light bulb, and I looked again. It wasn't my mom, but it sure looked like her. Her skin was white and red in just the same way, like a pile of ketchup squirted onto a plate. Even her upper lip was crooked over the place where my mother's bad tooth juts out. I didn't know what to do. Captain Bluebeard wouldn't be happy with someone like my mom. She screamed and cried and sometimes went whole days sleeping on the couch. Still, it wasn't really my mom, just some woman who looked like her.

I explained the rules. "Look, whoever you are, you can go wherever you want in the house, but you can't go into the corpse room. And don't get curious just because I said don't go into the corpse room. If you do, you'll be sorry. And don't get curious as to what I mean by 'you'll be sorry' because I mean I'll kill you. I don't care whether you look like my mom or not."

I didn't want her in the house. For the first time since the pirates took me, I couldn't do what I wanted. I felt bad about tracking mud on the rug or running with my sword. I figured she'd look in the corpse room one day and I could kill her, but just seeing her in the kitchen every morning spoiled my fun. Day after day after day

after day went by without her so much as walking down the hall that leads to The Corpse Room.

Then finally it happened. One morning I woke up and heard her howling like a wolf. I raced down to find her with her hand on the knob of the corpse room. “You looked,” I said. “After I warned you, you went and looked anyway.”

“I didn’t,” she said. “I just was cleaning the hallway.”

“Liar,” I said. “You screamed. You saw what was there and you screamed. Now you’re going to die.”

She tried saying something, but was shaking too hard to make any noise. I raised up my sword above her neck. Just as I was about to cut her, she ran off. That caught me off guard. None of them ran before.

I chased after her. It was hard balancing myself with the sword, so I kept falling over. I ran into an end table and smashed a lamp. She took off into the kitchen, and I ran behind her except when I turned I smashed into a stack of dirty dishes. They all crashed around me, and I fell on my face. I grabbed a piece of a coffee cup next to me and threw it at her head, but she ducked and it busted out a window instead.

We went around like that for quite awhile, making a mess of the castle. I thought if I ever caught her, I ought to make her clean up before she died, but then I cornered her in the Ruby Room, and I knew I couldn’t wait any longer. She was crying so much that she couldn’t say any words. I lifted my sword again, but right as I was about to bring it down on her neck, I waited for a half-second. “Sweetie,” she said. “Sweetie, please.”

It was my mom. That was the name she called me when she wasn't angry, and hearing her say it when she cried, it sounded right. All I could think to do was just stand there with my sword pointed up the ceiling. I didn't want to kill my mom, but I was a pirate now. Anyway, she probably looked in the room. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and brought the blade down. I was aiming for her neck, but because my eyes were closed I got her in the soft spot of her skull. It was the messiest one yet.

Just then I turned around to see Captain Bluebeard and his men standing behind me with their mouths wide open. "Oh hi," I said. "Did you just get back now?"

"You just killed your mother," Bluebeard said. "For no reason, you killed her."

"That's sick," one of his men said.

"I did not," I said. "She just looked like Mom is all. I wouldn't kill my mom."

"You make me ashamed to be alive," Bluebeard said. He pointed his long crooked finger at me. "You're out of the palace."

"But you said." I started crying then, but it didn't do any good. His men swarmed me. I was worried that they'd take me apart one toe at a time, or even go after my eyes, but they just lifted me above their shoulders, and took me outside. Their muddy fingers smelled like salt and day old fish, and I was scared that I'd accidentally let one get in my mouth.

They took me out to their deck overlooking the ocean. “On three,” one of them yelled. They counted and lobbed me into the water. It didn’t hurt when my face smacked the skin of the ocean. Even sinking and then drowning wasn’t as bad as I feared. It all looked very blue, bluer even than it looked from the outside, and no matter how far I sank, I still saw the sun lighting the surface. In the distance, I saw a muddy green shape that I worried might be an alligator. I rubbed my eyes to get a better view, but when I looked again, I wasn’t in the water anymore.

I was back in the woods on the mountain, but a different part of the woods. It was nighttime now, but I could hear people far away. Bluebeard, in his wisdom, must’ve given me a second chance.

I sat down then and cried. It was good to be not drowned, but I wasn’t a pirate anymore, and I’d killed my mom. Plus Uncle Chuck was still hurt bad, so I couldn’t tell him about Bluebeard. He’d have wanted to hear too.

I still didn’t know where I was. It was dark, and I couldn’t tell if I recognized the trees or not. Out away from me, I could see red lights and yellow lights up in the sky. They weren’t flashing the way police cars do, just spinning around each other until they got all swirled together. Out toward the lights, but not as far away, I heard people yelling my name.

It made sense that they’d be looking for me. Either the police wanted me for killing my mom or they didn’t know I’d done it, and they just wanted to tell me about her. If they didn’t know, I’d never say no matter what they threatened me with. I didn’t have my sword anymore, and no one saw who wasn’t already a pirate.

Bluebeard had forgave me once already, and he wouldn't do that just to have me sit in jail.

I was still crying then, but not as bad. It was cold outside, and when my cheeks were wet it got colder yet. Right as I'm trying to decide whether to go to the voices or away from them, I hear someone call my name.

"That you, Soup?" he says. "Where you been, buddy?"

It was Myron, standing there with some boy I never seen before. Seeing him got me crying hard again.

"It's all right, kid." He came up to hug me. "You about scared the dogpiss out of us. Whole town's out looking for you."

"They mad?" I said.

"Mad?" He sort of laughed, but not really. "Jesus, kid, no. Just worried's all."

The other boy walked out away from us a few steps and pointed up to the lights in the sky. "That's from the clowns," he said in this high, tiny voice. "I saw them unloading this big machine from the back of their car, and I think it shoots light."

"You hear that, fatso?" Myron said. He shoved me a little and then brought me back close. "The clowns are putting on a show. What say we go down and take a look at them?"

I was still crying to where I couldn't talk, but I could face him again. It sounded like fun to see clowns. I wiped the snot off my lip with my sleeve and

nodded. Then he took my hand, and I followed him and the other boy down off the mountain and back into town.

Chapter 4: Calamity Jane—*Sheila Rose Robbins*

When the men from the hospital pulled Chuck Holloway out from under the tires, they covered him up too quick for me to see. Someone said they were taking him to the hospital, but that was just to clean him. The circle around the body was already three men deep by the time I ran out of the flower shop, so I stayed back. I'm small, and I have to stay careful. Men in crowds only care about what they see, and they'll push and prod whatever they can overpower. They held up the ambulance for a few minutes after they loaded in Chuck, which I didn't understand at first. But then they lifted one of the strangers up on the gurney. They didn't even bother putting a sheet over him the way they did with Chuck. He lay crooked on the stretcher, and they didn't try to straighten him out and make him flat. He didn't look asleep exactly—one eye was cracked open, and I could see the tip of his tongue slipped out of his lips—but it looked like a good death. I hated to see it because it made me think of Chuck, the death they wouldn't show us.

It was Ryan Abbot they said, our red-eyed messiah, who'd saved the day this time, but no one seemed quite sure what he'd done. One man said he'd jumped into the circus van to put out a fire and stopped all those strangers from exploding. Another said all he'd done was help them carry out their dead man. Either way, most people sounded ready to hoist him up on their shoulders and chant his name like he'd just took the Wildcats to the Final Four. Of course, no one stayed alive on Ryan Abbot's account. He was just the first one to run up to the mess. But why point that out when they could feel proud of someone again, even someone they never liked? Christ, why point it out at all when no one could even find him? People were wanting

to shake his hand and slip back into his good graces, but he was gone. He was the first one we noticed missing.

Part of why everybody wanted to talk about Ryan was so we wouldn't have to talk about Chuck. That would change soon enough; people would start in on where they were when they heard Chuck died, the angle from which they saw his body, the last thing he said to them. Except no one could even say his name with his corpse under the circus van's wheels, or even when he was gone but his blood was still red on the street. Maybe by nighttime, when the dark could make us think it was just another oil stain, they could talk about it, but not now. Even after the first wave of confusion and shock passed, people stayed away from where his body had been. With too deep a breath, you could still smell him.

I was different. I could talk about Ryan or Chuck or any other man in Hazard, and I didn't have to wait. They all came to me with their problems, treating me like their diary. Wherever I go and whoever I meet, it's all the same: men tell me I listen, but I don't. I'll look them in the eyes and nod when they stop talking, but that's as much effort as I put into it. Sometimes I can hear the lies in their voice, and I want to stop them or at least smile big enough to show them that I know I'm hearing an invention. But they misread my smiles every time, and I can't change how I listen.

The women I know don't expect me to listen the same way. My sister details me half to tears, telling me everything from her grocery list to the type of toys her cat plays with, but it's different. She doesn't need me to listen, and she knows I'm not supposed to care.

My own daughter, Jane, the only person in the world who tells me too little, won't talk to me about anything except basketball. When she was fourteen and fifteen, all she cared about was the form on her jump shot, the locker room gossip, and the possibility of taking the Hazard Bulldogs downstate to the championship. When she turned sixteen, the conversation stayed the same, but her voice changed. There was more to her life than basketball now, but it wasn't for me to know.

The men in Hazard each had their own way of entering their stories: a little tic or twitch that set them remembering again. Ryan Abbot would stare down at the back of his knuckles and click his teeth together before launching into that same sob story about his maniac girlfriend killing the plumber. For the life of me, I don't know how one man can get the most important story of his life so wrong every time. He thinks the town hates him because of that one night, when in reality people don't like him because he's a wastrel. I don't think he wants to be liked, but pitied like a kicked puppy. All he ever wanted to do was to drink away his life, and that night gave him an excuse. After three years, I'm the only one who'll listen, and so he tells me and tells me and tells me until the words have lost their shape, and it's only the strength of habit that's keeping his mouth moving.

Gus Conway, our mountain man of the cloth, fingers the petals of a long stem rose before launching into the story of how he found Christ in the Mississippi River. I keep the long-stem roses on a vase by the counter so there's always one for him to pick up and run his fingernails across like he was a blind man feeling the flower for the first time. It's really a rather pretty story, and so I don't bother to tell him it's ridiculous, and he makes a fool of himself every time he tells it. He exaggerates his

accent when he talks about his time spent in the Delta working for SNCC, and for a time I thought that was why people called him Reverend Coon—the overblown blackness for his white audience, what they used to call “playing the coon”—but it might be simpler and uglier than that. Either way, he did himself no favors by telling that redemption story to everyone in earshot. Most folks around here are godly in one way or the other, but they don’t trust anyone else’s path to the light. As for me, I don’t know Christ, and I don’t believe in anyone who’s found him, but I was the only one who’d listen without laughing. So yes, Reverend Conway, please tell me about the way, the path, the light. He was just talking about himself anyway. That’s what prayer is as far as I can tell—a divinized way of talking about yourself.

As it happened, it was Reverend Conway who was getting pushed back and forth in the middle of the crowd, hollering against the public, trying to marshal all of us onlookers into some sort of order. It was almost funny watching his face now, speaking to a city instead of speaking only to me. He was frightened really, and even though I couldn’t hear him, I imagine the panic made that country fried lawd-above drawl slide straight off his voice.

Seeing him flail his oversized puffy arms around and scream silently brought it home for me. No one in Hazard had anything to say about what just happened. We’d all seen the same thing at the same time, and there was nothing we could say that could make it feel any different. There was a car crash and two men died, one from here and one from somewhere else. Later, we’d make it all mean something, but now we wanted to yell about it.

I untangled myself from the back line and began walking to the flower shop. There was no point in working, but I thought that maybe some straggler would wander into the store and start telling me what happened. That was probably more useful than just watching it happen in front of me. But as soon as I put my hand on the glass of my door, I turned to see the three strangers, a hundred yards away from the mess, talking to the police. If anyone could tell me something new, it'd be one of them.

Just then, the cops were talking to a stocky one with thinned-out hair and eyes like two chunks of concrete. He'd have looked plain mean if it wasn't for his mouth, which curled up into a smirk every time he stopped talking like there was nothing the world could throw at him he couldn't laugh away. The other, the woman, was dark around the face with maybe Italian skin and a drop of Persian blood to shape her eyes. She was the type of woman other women find pretty but no two men can agree about. I wanted to talk to her straightaway, but she was crying too hard, hugging her arms around the crick of the heavy man's elbow, and I knew she couldn't tell me much right now. The third man—tall, thin, and fragile—stood apart from the others, on the street corner, looking at his laces. The police must've already spoken to him because he wasn't nervous.

I walked over to him and fished a Merit out of my purse. "Women's cigarettes," I said. "Sorry I don't have anything stronger."

He looked at me, squinting like I was a spotlight. "Are we still in Kentucky?" He took my cigarette and held it between his thumb and middle finger. "We were supposed to go someplace in Tennessee. Bristol, I think."

“You’re about three hours away.” I tried lighting his cigarette for him, but he didn’t inhale when the flame was lit. He wasn’t used to smoking. “You all work in the circus, or you just like the way it looks on your van?”

“I’m a clown,” he said. “Juggler and Tumbler’s what they put on my union card, but it’s really just a clown.”

I pointed back to where the policeman was scribbling the other’s statements onto a clipboard. “And your friends? Jugglers and Tumblers as well?”

“Them?” He tried smoking but mostly just let the smoke rise in front of his face. “He’s a thief, and she’s a whore. But again, we’re really just clowns.”

I was shocked, not at the strong language but the flatness in his voice. He didn’t speak with anger or spite, and I couldn’t tell how he meant me to take it. Then he coughed out a little laugh from behind the smoke, and I saw that it was just a bad joke. So this is his tic, I thought. He needed to feel the embarrassment of a poorly told joke to open up and tell his story. A lot of men were like that. Talking humiliates them, and they need to feel a slight sting of shame to know they can survive it. He just needed one more prompt.

“And the other one?” I said. “The man they took away. He a tumbler too?”

“Gunter?” He seemed genuinely surprised by the question and had to squeak out his reply, his voice still struggling with the smoke. Finally, he shook his head.

“No, Gunter was our strongman.”

The thin clown’s name was Andre Foster, and he joined the circus from out in California. He said he had a Masters Degree in math, but he’d always wanted to be a clown because it was his family business. His grandparents were acrobats in the

Soviet Union, and to him it seemed like an exotic way to make a living, even maybe a means to understanding his past. He also mentioned a wife and daughter, but he got off that topic quickly, either because he couldn't stand to think about them, or because they didn't exist, and he wanted to keep his story straight.

Much of it was a lie and a half-hearted lie at that. He kept confusing his details: sometimes his grandparents played for a former duke, sometimes an earl. Still, some of it rang true. I didn't know about the family, but California sounded right. He had that dopey wanderling's look about him, and I could believe him as the type that would set off for the west coast all dreamy-eyed, looking for someplace sunny and a million miles from home. When he saw me nod and smile, he grew bolder and the lies became less believable. He told me he planned to move to Bristol and start a juggling school, or maybe just leave the circus altogether. When he looked away from my nodding and back to the van, then his voice grew thin and patchy again, and I'd have to ask him some harmless question to set him back to being comfortable.

I tried to do what I normally do when men tell me about themselves: I meet their gaze and imagine them turning younger. With this one, I could picture the wrinkles around his eyes smoothing, the red on his cheeks receding, and the fold of skin drooped just over the corner of his left eye stiffening and raising. He wasn't a bad looking boy, but he hadn't aged well. It's not the sort of look you can keep unaltered for three decades. It was easier to see him as a child than it was somebody like Ryan Abbot, who I'd actually grown up with. Certain qualities—the drunkard's

popped veined nose, the faded yellow rubbery skin—were almost impossible to set right again.

I'd almost imagined him back to a schoolboy with his hair parted at the side and a fountain pen jutting out of his shirt pocket when the new thoughts came. All the sudden, I started thinking about Chuck, and my imagination wouldn't work anymore. There was no use pretending—Chuck was dead, and there was a growing part of me that couldn't muster tears.

I'd recruited Chuck Holloway to teach my daughter Jane everything he knew about basketball, from the pick-and-roll to the baby jump-hook. I'd played when I was her age, but the women's game has changed so much that it'd become almost like the men's. I was only a few years removed from the time when women played two sets of half court and stood as still as chess pieces passing the ball around. In terms of strategy, I didn't know anything more complicated than setting a screen, but Chuck could help her. I still remember him in those too-high blue and gold shorts flitting from hoop to hoop. He was one of the few boy players who came to our games, and we still talked about that well into our adult lives. Off the court, he always kept a shaggy sort of sweetness about him, and it was amazing to watch him run the point, screaming at his teammates and then disappearing into a blur. Truth be told, the game may have passed him as well—he'd certainly lost a few steps—but I knew he still had a quick cross-over and strong court vision. If he could teach Jane any of that then I knew she could be a starter, maybe even a county-wide star. That meant that there was chance—not a guarantee, but a chance—that she could go off to a college someplace far away.

At first, I thought it was working. Her jump-shot improved so much that Chuck nicknamed her Calamity Jane because she hit everything she shot. Chuck never gave out compliments he didn't mean (about basketball, anyway), so that nickname carried a lot of weight. More than that, she dedicated herself to it in a way I'd never seen before. She always read basketball and talked basketball, but she began playing like she had a purpose. Every night when I came home from the shop, she'd be standing in that same spot just behind the flowerpots, about twenty-five feet from the basket, shooting ball after ball, and she'd keep it up until I called her in for supper. It was as steady as a drumbeat, that ball banging against the backboard nailed to the side of our house. Sometimes I'd work that rhythm into my life and start chopping the peppers or scrubbing the saucepan to that same *thump-thump-thump* tune. If she caught me watching her shoot, she'd stop and dribble between her legs or drive in for a lay-up, but when she didn't know I was watching, she stood still and shot over and over. She was always a strong shooter, but as the weeks went on she became astoundingly good and it wasn't uncommon to see her hit as many as ten in a row, her form so tight that the ball would bounce back to where she stood.

Every Saturday morning, I took her to the blue courts by the river where she met up with Chuck. He said it was bad form to get over-accustomed to any one rim, and if she became too machine-like then she'd wind up getting lost when the first few didn't drop for her. Every week we'd get there right at ten and see Chuck standing under the hoop, bouncing the ball against the corner of the red square on the backboard. "Rebound practice," he said. "Amazing. You just do this fifteen, twenty times a day, and you find yourself knowing just where the ball will bounce."

Frankly, I was surprised that he never showed up late. His clothes smelled like yesterday's sweat and he was always unshaven, but he was there regardless. Maybe that's why I felt more at ease listening to Chuck than I did with someone like Ryan Abbot. No matter how hung over he was—and sometimes it looked like he could barely lift the ball over his head—he showed up on time.

I wasn't sure if Jane suspected that Chuck was hung over and not just tired those mornings. She drank a little, but it was the normal stuff for girls her age: an occasional bottle of strawberry Boone's Farm with her friends. If she'd had the taste for it, she'd have moved on to something stronger. She certainly didn't drink enough to feel hung over in any real way, so even if she noticed Chuck's shaky morning state, she didn't understand it. It's a slowly learned lesson, one I didn't come across until years too late. I still remember my stupid surprise when I learned that whiskey was a drink and not just a scent on men's breath.

I began hearing stories about Chuck: that he was at the Devil Moon every night, drinking gin by the truckload. On the nights when I could slip out, I'd go to the bar and see for myself. Holly Lunsford, who pours the drinks at night after her husband passes out, caught me looking at him and whispered to me, "Every night." When she works, she always puts both of her elbows on the bar and leans forward to talk, so it makes whatever she says sound like gossip. She went back to filing her nails and flashing me a sly, dirty glance whenever he ordered another round. The Devil Moon's not a comfortable place. The stools, even when they'd just been cleaned, feel faintly sticky, the same seven songs play over and over on the jukebox, and whenever someone walks in or out of the men's room the whole place smells like

a urinal cake. Chuck wasn't here for the atmosphere. He wanted gin but was scared of drinking alone.

I assumed I'd hear about whatever was on his mind. He was a man after all, and he liked to talk to someone who'd almost listen. But he never talked, and that was as surprising as the drinking. In the bar all he'd ever say was hello, and then he was back to holding his dram glass in front of his face and staring at it like it was the Rosetta Stone. Even when his worthless brother stopped by for a beer, he would only say a few clipped sentences. Outside of the bar, he didn't talk much either. Like always, he showed up at the flower shop, and like always he unloaded a story or two on me, but they were old stories, stories of his childhood, nothing about what was hurting him now. It didn't boil over at first. He still kept his job, he still kept his friends, and all the while I could still hear that same thump, thump, thump on the side of my house. He was teaching her well.

Then he stopped talking completely. He showed up in the shop in the mid-afternoon but didn't want to say a word. At first, I thought he was drunk in the daylight, which worried me, but it wasn't that. Whatever booze I smelled was from last night, and it stayed unwashed, almost untraceable, on his clothes, hair, and stubble. "Look," I said, finally, "You can stay around here as long as you want, but you got to be straight with me. Tell me what's going on."

He picked up a pink tulip, stared at it, and then dropped it back on the counter. The sun came through the window, making him squint, and he looked more comfortable squinting, like he wasn't meant to see what was in front of him. He

needed one more prompt, and I tried to make out what it was. “I saw Auggie’s boy, Campbell,” I said. “Running around downtown.”

“Soup’s what we call him”

I thought I might be touching on something, so I went on. “For all that boy’s seen, being young as he is, I hope he makes it out all right.”

He laughed silently and then shook his head. “Christ almighty,” he said, and then he blew me a kiss and walked out into the street.

After that, I worried whether it was smart to keep taking Jane to meet Chuck every weekend. Sadness spreads faster than any other disease, and I had to keep both eyes fixed on Jane to see if she lost any friends or spent more time in her room than normal, crying without reason. But she stayed steady as ever: her grades stayed middling, she still smiled easily even as she pulled away, and she could still hit seven out of ten shots when she thought she was alone. Whatever else happened, if she kept her elbow straight, her shoulders square, and that jump-shot sharp, then maybe she could wind up someplace away from here, in a city somewhere I couldn’t send her on my own. So I kept up the routine, even as it hurt me to see Chuck dwindle away layer by layer.

Then late one Thursday night I was between my third and fourth glass of Cabernet, watching the local news with the sound turned low, when I heard the ball beating against the backboard. It surprised me at first because Jane was at a friend’s house, and I hadn’t planned on her getting back until late. The more I listened, the more I got curious because it wasn’t Jane’s shot pattern. It wasn’t bang-bang-bang at steady intervals, but just an occasional irregular thunk. I went to the kitchen to rinse

out my glass and looked out the window. Chuck Holloway was hunched down, without his jacket, dribbling the ball between his legs, from his left to right to left hand. No matter how fast he dribbled, his arms never moved above the elbow, and he looked up at the rim instead of at the ball. He started the dribble slowly, but picked up speed every time the ball ricocheted off his hand until it was no more than a blur. When he couldn't go any faster, he'd let the ball bounce up about waist high and then catch it on the upswing, moving into an ugly, twisting shot. From my angle, I couldn't see whether the shots were going in or not, but I knew it didn't matter. For him, all that mattered was the dribble: the exactness of the bounce, the downhill speed, the faith that he could guess where his hands should be without looking. When we were both young, he told me that the secret to being a good point guard was to never let the ball touch my palms. Instead, use my fingertips, let them rock back with the bounce before I dribbled. More control, he said. I couldn't know if that was what he was doing in my driveway, but I saw that his control now, as a middle aged man reeling from sorrow and probably blind-drunk was as good as it'd ever been.

I went outside and called out to him. "Chuck," I said. "Chucky. What are you doing here?"

He looked at me, gave a toothy grin, and then leaned back, tossing the ball one foot to the left of the basket. He didn't speak, but when I saw the breath come out of his mouth, I remembered it was September. For whatever reason, seeing his steam rise made me remember myself, no-sleeved, flailing about, trying to grab the attention of the one man in Hazard who ignored me. "Look," I said, "I can't be out here like this. You can come in if you want, but if not, go home."

I turned around and walked up my side-stairs, and I heard the ball bounce against the concrete again, hard at first but then softening until soon it was drowned out by his heavy, stumble-drunk footsteps behind me.

When we got inside, I turned around and saw him standing in the doorway just like he had done in my shop. I wasn't on the clock now, and I didn't have to accept silence. "All right, what is it?" I said. "What're you doing to yourself this time? I know you want to talk so talk."

He closed his eyes and put his right palm flat onto my walls. There's no way he could've known he was doing it, but with his index finger we was tracing a perfect circle around the petals of my wallpaper flowers. He was trying to talk, at least trying to pry his mouth open. Finally, I decided I'd throw him out a prompt even though I hated to do it. In a small city, you take what job people give you, and I was the listener. "Is it about Jane?"

"She's not going to college." He spoke with such finality and force that I thought for a moment that it was me, not him who had been unable to speak a moment before. "At least not for basketball, she's not."

I took a step back but didn't speak. I felt defiant, but I knew if I tried talking, my voice would crack.

"She's got a good shot," he said. "A real strong shot in a lot of ways, really. But she's one-dimensional." He stood up straight and walked behind me toward the kitchen. "Calamity Jane can hit what she wants if she can stand still and square her shoulders. College game's faster. Here, even when they run someone at her she can shoot over the girl. She's got her father's height, which is great, but it slows her off

the dribble. In college, all those sequoias lunging after your girl, while she's trying to get her shoulders set. It's rough," he said, "and in a lot of ways it's an impossible shot to carry into college because they can block it there." He pushed against the wall to straighten himself up. "Plus, she's what, a junior? If she was going to hear anything, she'd probably already have heard it, wouldn't she?"

I didn't realize that I'd started welling up, but I saw it in his face. Immediately, he looked shocked and ashamed, like he'd smacked me in anger. I shrunk away from him, and then I felt it on myself, that familiar first twitch in the cheeks that went beyond my control, almost like a sneeze. Then I felt the tears. Worse, I knew what was coming next, and I couldn't take it: the apology. But I didn't know how to stop it, and I couldn't wave my hands or shake my head fast enough to let him know that it wouldn't help, so it came anyway.

"Wait," he said. He put his hands up in front of his shoulders, so he looked like he couldn't decide whether he wanted to hug me or box me. "I didn't mean it like that. A shot like that could take the Bulldogs downstate. Then you figure junior colleges got to take note." He took another step toward me, with his arms looked stiff in that awkward, half-loving position. "Look at Derek Anderson. Two years of Junior College, winds up at UK. Then it was, what, something like ten years in the NBA?"

I waved my hands in what he must've thought I meant as a dismissive gesture, but really was just something I always did when I cried. It was a way to regain control of the muscles I could manage and hope that control shot up through my arms to my face until I could stop crying. But still he kept talking. I couldn't hear him

anymore, but I knew he was there, talking to save us from silence. But god help me, sometimes I can't listen. I took a step toward him, thinking maybe I could put my hand over his mouth. Maybe that's what I thought anyway. Either way, when he saw me step in he softened his expression, opened his arms to hug me. In spite of myself, out of sheer stupid instinct, I kept moving forward until the side of my face grazed the side of his. My wet face glided against his stubble, and I remember the prickle of his beard clearer than the smell of sweat on the back of his neck or the whiskey from when he breathed out of his mouth.

He pulled back to look at me all at once, and I knew I couldn't hide it from him. When I cry I look like Jane. My eyes pull together, my face puckers, and the wrinkles around my eyes looks as though they come not from age, but from everyday grief. More than that, I look frail again, just like her. Her face is mostly blank except for a soft pleading look like she's always just has a small hope squashed. It isn't an overpowering effect—it's only a little wish she's been refused, so she's not heartbroken—but I've noticed boys around her apologizing for no reason, mistaking her blankness for pain. One day those boys will love her for it when they get older and learn how much they need that in a woman, how much they want to save her. She's had that look since she was very young, maybe four or five. Prior to that, she may have felt the same disappointment, but didn't know enough to recognize disappointment as a negative emotion. In Jane, it's paired up with a desire to please. Whenever someone tells a joke, her first instinct is to laugh no matter who tells it or at whose expense. If she doesn't get it or doesn't find it funny, she's genuinely hurt, not out of sympathy for the joker, but because she recognizes that something's gone

wrong, and she's powerless to fix it. Sometimes what she doesn't understand overwhelms her, and she cries, but because she always looks to be teetering on the verge of tears, none of us who love her see it as any cause for concern. Because I've grown so used to studying her face, I know that my daughter doesn't resemble me, but rather, when I cry I look like her. When he pulled back and looked at me all at once, Chuck Holloway saw that, and then he kissed me.

I didn't speak until it was over, or at least I tried not to. It would've done neither of us any good to ruin his illusion. Maybe I said, "Be quick," but perhaps I just heard the words so loud in my head that I fooled myself into thinking I'd spoken them. Either way, it didn't matter. He was gentle and quick, as embarrassed by his desires as I was at diverting them. I'm not sure when I stopped crying, but we'd already lain down by then, and he had clasped his hands around mine. When I turned and noticed how neatly our hands folded together, like those of a frightened child in prayer, I knew I wasn't crying anymore. I couldn't have noticed such a thing if I was still in tears.

It'd been a while for him, I could tell, at least being with someone new. He'd gone back to the teenage boy's assumption that women were breakable. After a long time away, they lose confidence in their hands and compensate by softening their grip as if with every move they'll snap us in two. That was how Chuck was at first, fumbling deliberately with each of the buttons on my shirt, half-expecting me to change my mind and send him home. His touch was so light that when he ran his fingertips up my neck and cheeks, for a second I didn't know if he was actually grazing me or if I only smelled the dirt under his nails and assumed that anything that

close had to be making contact with the skin. Finally, when he tried yanking my jeans down past my hips and I didn't help him by raising myself up, he kept shooting me these miserable, lost-dog glances. All the while, I didn't move, leaving him to start, sputter, and start again. It might have been worth laughing about except I could hardly stand to smile just then. My last best hope at sending Jane into school and out of the mountains hadn't worked, and now there was my brand new mistake hovering over me, tugging at my clothes.

When he took his shirt off and tossed it in the corner, I saw he had a slight paunch and that his muscles had gone slack. Even the hairs on his arm had turned gray, which made me realize that the dark brown on his head must've been dyed or at least touched up on the top. He wasn't the razor-thin point guard I used to sometimes watch practice in the school gym, trying to wipe the sweat off his forehead with his drenched jersey. It disappointed me, not because he wasn't as pretty as I remembered, but just because he'd changed so much. Feeling his bare stomach nestled against mine made me realize just how much I'd changed as well.

It wasn't until I felt his fingers fitted next to mine, squeezing hard, that I felt him coming out of his relearning jitters. He would start sweating soon from his chest, and from the direction he was angled, the drops would fall on my collarbone. I was glad I wasn't crying anymore because I knew that soon we'd have to face each other, and if he didn't look like a boy anymore then I didn't want to look like Jane. We were just stand-ins anyway: he wanted to be with someone else, and I wanted to be alone, but this was probably better for the both of us. At least for a little while. Anyway, so long as he knew he could come and spend his strength on me then he'd

leave my daughter alone. I was the circle around the bull's-eye for him, close enough to keep him happy. Whatever else I couldn't do for Jane, I could still protect her. Maybe I couldn't stop him from wanting her, but there's no real harm in that. Anyway, I can't even control what I want, so how am I supposed to change someone else's mind?

And then it was done, and he lay heavily beside me, trying to cover up his short choppy breaths. At that point, I felt like it wouldn't have surprised me if he started bawling, or punched me in the jaw, or got on one knee and showed me a ring. But we just sat silent for a little longer, barely looking at each other.

Finally, I sat up, with my back to him and scooped my shirt off the ground. "Jane will be home soon."

"Right," he said. "I'll go." He stood up just then, but turned to the side, almost modestly. I've never been close enough to any man that the sight of him naked and standing up didn't strike me as either funny or sad. With Chuck, it was funny, him drooping down, unbalanced and red-cheeked, moving around the room with these tiny embarrassed steps: a walking apology.

It wasn't until later that night, when I heard Jane slowly crack open the door and sneak upstairs that I started to get angry. I'd been tossing back and forth on top of my bedspread since he shuffled out of the room, almost but never quite asleep. I could still hear him in the room with every crow's caw outside my window or each time the breeze blew strong enough to take up my chimes. Even with my eyes open, I imagined his fingertips were back stroking up and down my cheekbones again, so softly I'd only think I felt them.

Had I even said yes? I'd been trying so hard to keep silent so as not to break him from his illusion that I don't think I did. Obviously, I assented in some way—I remember feeling the back of his scalp through his hair, guiding him closer to me, and once, when he clasped my hand, I hooked my calf around the back of his legs—but I never said, Yes, please. When I was Jane's age, I thought Yes, please was what it'd take to get me to consent. Please, so I'd know I wanted it. It didn't take too long to figure out that women didn't say please because no matter how they mean it, men took it as begging. I couldn't bear them getting me so wrong.

Maybe I never said a word to Chuck, but all he gave me aside from that handhold and those little boy grins was a dry peck on the cheek once he'd gotten his shirt tucked in. Maybe he thought I was protecting him and not my daughter by saving him from his own desires. All the sudden, his fantasies didn't seem harmless anymore. They could be misdirected, but they couldn't be killed. That meant there'd be more nights when he'd come pounding on the side of my house with a basketball. There'd be no end to it because as soon as I locked the door, I'd picture him seeking out Jane. It could even start with an accident, him just stumbling upon her when he was overcome with booze or hard luck. She's so empathetic, and all he needed from me was a soft touch on the back of the neck. Did that mean I had to take care of him every time the world overwhelmed him? How many nights would it take? Christ, I'd do it a hundred times over if I thought it was a cure. If someone could promise me that one day I'd kill that hope inside of him, then he could set a tent up at the foot of my bed. But until then, I had no choice but to delay it little by little and worry when one or the other of them wasn't in my sight.

I laid awake the better part of the night, with my head stuffed under my pillow, half-dreaming that I could hear the basketball banging against the backboard, steady as rainfall.

The following Saturday, I tossed Jane the keys to my car and told her to drive herself to the court. “Be back by 12:30, the very latest.” I couldn’t stand seeing Chuck just then, welcoming Jane to her lesson. Anyway, I’ve always maintained faith in daylight, and I didn’t believe anything could happen in the late morning with the sun shining on them for everyone to see. When she came back, I felt a tremendous relief, like she was safe again. After that relief faded, as all reliefs will for a mother, I began devising ways to keep her in the house. I invented fake chores for her to do after school, or I slipped her twenty dollars and told her to go shopping. She’d come back with a new blouse, and I’d have the proof that she was where she said she’d be. So long as she’s not just wandering, she’ll be safe, I thought. When people are just out there, not knowing where they’re going, that’s when they get in trouble. I knew that wasn’t true, even as I repeated it to myself, stretched out and meaningless, like a mantra, and whispered so low that I didn’t even unclench my teeth as I breathed it. “So long as she not just wandering, she’ll be safe.”

The next Saturday and the Saturday after, I dropped her off at the blue courts for her session with Chuck, and she always came home on time. School was *fine*, her basketball was *fine*, and she gave me no reason to doubt her. Except she was withdrawing. Something was on her mind, and it wasn’t Chuck—rightly or wrongly, I felt I would recognize that in her, as I could still feel it in myself. The tighter I kept

my hand on her collar the grayer she became to me, and all I knew to do was to keep holding on.

Basketball season was coming up. Once it started, I couldn't keep control over Jane's schedule anymore. They'd be having long practices and team dinners, and I'd keep seeing her less.

The panic muted after three weeks and no news. I could remember those fifteen minutes under Chuck more fully now. Not that I'd ever forgotten it, but right after it happened I could only remember it in pieces: his weight on my chest, me staring up at the uneven spot in the corner of my room where the wallpaper doesn't quite rise to meet the ceiling, how with every breath I didn't know if I'd be smelling him or the air freshener I'd sprayed on my pillowcases that afternoon. Now with a little distance, I could remember it all at once. It wasn't a pleasant or unpleasant memory, but a memory nonetheless, divorced from the present. Anyway, I realized that all my fear for Jane had turned back on me. I was the one not leaving the house except to go to work or the store. When I finally realized what a shut-in I'd become, I opened all the windows on the first floor and began breathing in the early autumn breeze. It was the warmest day of a cool week, and I could feel the warmth rush into the house. It tickled my nose, and I wanted to sneeze but it died in my throat. I walked out onto the front porch where I could feel more of it at once. Outside, with a ripple of wind bringing the neighbor's yards to me, I could smell the azaleas and gladiolas and the wishing flowers and DDT swirling around one another and grazing the edge of my porch. For a moment, I thought I caught a breath of honeysuckle but I knew it wouldn't have survived this long. Next week would be the middle of

October, and these flowers were one chill away from dead. Standing on the porch, taking them in for the last time until spring, I knew that this was the last warm night of the year. I slept on the living room couch that night with all the windows open.

Then two days later Jane didn't come home. Looking back it seems so small—it was a Friday, and almost everybody in town was gone from home—but at the time I thought it was a direct result of me unclenching my muscles and taking my eye off Jane.

For the first few hours I just stared at the minute hand of the clock over my oven, with my ear cocked, listening for any lost clicks that I could mistake for the scraping of her keys across the lock. The sun pouring in my kitchen turned orange, then copper, then bruise pink, and then turned into moonlight. All the while I tried to trick my mind into thinking of something else, but the picture that kept rising to the top was that new full memory of mine. Except instead of me breathing in his sweat, feeling the hairs on his arms with the inside of my wrist, it was Jane.

Finally, I went out looking for her. At least that's what I told myself, but really I was looking for him. If I was to step outside the house and see him passed out on our front hedges, then I wouldn't worry about Jane anymore. Anyway, he was easier to find. So even though I pretended I was going to wander through town looking for anyone who'd have a hint of her, I made a beeline to The Devil Moon.

It was dark and crowded inside, which panicked me at first. I'd been living so far inside my head that the shock of hearing other people talking, laughing, glasses clinking or shattering stunned me. I weaved in and out of the crowd until I got a clean view of Chuck's usual seat. Instead of Chuck, there was a young, hopelessly

innocent-looking black girl with chunky cheeks and slightly smeared pink lipstick. That sealed it as far as I was concerned. If Chuck wasn't here then all I could imagine was him with Jane.

Sara Collier's boy, Ronnie, was playing guitar in the corner. He had no amp and no microphone and with the noise I could only hear him when he strummed full chords and then only faintly. For all his eccentricities, I always liked Ronnie Collier. When he started carrying around that guitar, singing on every street corner or every bar that'd have him, he probably popped a fuse in that mind of his. He played under the name of Ronnie Cottonpants, and I'd heard that he wouldn't respond if someone called him Collier. He went back and forth from singing reverent covers of the hillbilly standards that everyone up here has coming out of their ears since they're out of diapers to songs he wrote himself, every one of which was hopelessly dirty and designed to offend as many people as he could. Whatever else he was, he was talented, and when I get sad sometimes the only thing that can set me right again is someone else's music. I started walking up closer to the stage hoping to get to where I could hear him better, but I hadn't taken ten steps before I felt someone's finger touch me just below my shirt collar, between my shoulder blades.

It was Chuck, with the same hollow-faced look he always got when he was too drunk to hide it. He gave me a giant joyless smile. "How you been?"

I couldn't find words for a second, and instead pointed to his usual seat. "I didn't think you were here."

"Oh yeah." He jerked his thumb to Ronnie. "I was hoping to hear some Cottonpants." Then he turned back to his drink: a whiskey glass full of a clear liquid,

vodka or gin. By his side was a bowl of green olives that the bartender had left out just for him. This was his dinner.

“Have you seen Jane?”

He cupped his hand around his ear and leaned forward.

“Jane,” I said. “She didn’t come home from school.”

He stuck his hand on the olive bowl and scooped out a large one missing the pimento. He popped it into his mouth, scraped the meat off the pit with his teeth and then spit the pit into an ashtray.

“Listen,” I said, “I’m worried.”

“I know.” He looked up to Ronnie and then back to me. “Don’t let it scare you too much.” He tossed another olive in his mouth and tried to grin. “Look,” he said, “I’m sorry. About all this, I mean.”

About all what? I started to ask, but stopped. I couldn’t remember the last time someone owed me more than one apology at once.

“Wherever she is, I’m sure she’s safe. She’s a smart girl.” He said it in the same way that he’d told me that maybe, just maybe, she could end up like Derek Anderson playing in the NBA. I had to bite my lip to keep from crying.

Ronnie Collier ended his song—the tune sounded like “Arkansas Traveler,” but from what I could hear in the lyrics, it sounded like he was talking about punching Jesus in the face—and took a bow, seemingly unaware that no one was cheering. This meant the next song would be a folk song, something we could all recognize, whether we liked it or not.

“Hey Cottonpants,” Chuck called to him through cupped hands. ““Pretty Saro.””

Ronnie winked at Chuck and began plucking a few high notes.

“You know this song?” he asked me.

Of course I did. That song was to hillbilly bars what the national anthem is to wars. ‘When I first came to this country in 18 and 49’ it begins, ‘I saw many true lovers, but I never saw mine.’ It tells the story of a man in love with a woman who doesn’t love him back, which, all things considered, isn’t so unusual. He’s an immigrant—‘Me, a poor stranger, and a long way from home’—and he wanders around the mountains looking for some sign of Saro.

Holly Lunsford refilled Chuck’s glass with gin. He swirled it around, held it in front of his face and took a gulp. “You know she’s got a boyfriend?”

“Jane?” I took his glass from him and took a small sip. “She does not. Who?”

He put two olives in his mouth at once and held them between his gum and cheek without chewing.

“Did she tell you that?” I always get more frustrated with silence than with rudeness. “Is it serious?”

“I don’t know.” He turned and signaled at Holly, who then brought over a second dram glass of gin. “For you,” he said.

“Listen,” I said, trying to get more out of him and knowing I wouldn’t. “You mentioned Junior College before. Is that still possible?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “This part breaks me up. The last verse.”

“I’m talking to you, Chucky,” I said. “Talk back to me.”

“The one about the bird,” he said. He ducked his head and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. I knew I wasn’t hearing anything about Jane until the song was done, so I bit my lip and listened to the lyrics.

I wish I was a turtledove,
Had wings and could fly,
Far away from this loving country
Tonight I’d fly nigh.
There in her lily white arms,
I’d lay there all night,
And watch through the window
For the dawning of day.

I watched him as the words rang throughout the bar. He wasn’t crying; it looked much sadder than that. He stared down at the fist around his glass, his big red knuckles jutting out. Just then, if only for an instant, I understood him. Maybe he’d rather be another species, staring at my daughter through the rest of his days, until that unresolved rhyme ended his song. In a way, he was harmless. He’d never touch Jane, but no matter what I did for him or to him I could never stop that desire, that looking through the window, that imagining. So long as she lived in Hazard, I’d have to know of his wishing, and I’d have to know of all the ways I couldn’t stop it.

“Junior college,” I said again. “Even in west Kentucky. Somewhere. Talk to me, Chucky.”

He looked at me, almost surprised I was still there. “Junior College?” he said, one eyebrow arched up. “Maybe. Got a good jump-shot at least. Parts of a jump-shot can’t be taught.”

I remembered all of that as I stood in front of this underfed circus clown, watching him wave his arms and lie to me. All the sudden, I couldn’t take it. Chuck Holloway was flat on his back, riding his way to the morgue. He was shaking and bumping as he went over the lumps in the road, and that was about the last movement he’d ever make. That long, low look—the greedy, sad look he’d shown me that night at the bar—that would follow my daughter all her life was no more.

“Please,” I said to the clown. “Stop talking.”

He looked stunned, slightly embarrassed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “There’s a problem?”

I shook my head. “It’s just I can’t hear you talking to me anymore.”

Right away, he’d thought he’d offended me, so he put up his hands to apologize.

“Please,” I said. “Just don’t.” I was almost happy, or at least I’d have thought so, but I felt one hot teardrop curl onto my cheekbone.

It was right then that Reverend Conway and Cora Jessup came up to us in the crowd, both of them waving their hands like they were on fire. Soup Holloway, Chuck’s nephew, was missing.

Then it was just too much. I didn’t know Soup much, but I knew that Chuck bought him sneakers and basketballs every Christmas and dedicated a fake one hundred dollars to the United Way for each of his birthdays. Whenever I saw Soup

scampering through the street, his hands balled up and his arms pumping for more speed, I would close-lip pray for that kid every afternoon that he'd make it home, never mind having him grow up unscarred.

I took Reverend Conway aside. His hands trembled, but I knew I could talk to him more easily than I could talk to Cora, who was bawling into both her palms. Before I could ask a question he spoke.

"I saw him," he said, and there was a tremor in his voice. "Running away from us all." I'd never heard him nervous before. "We're going to go look for him."

I looked to Cora, shaking so hard she was barely able to stand. "Keep her calm," I said. "Can I help?"

He fingered his chin, and smacked his lips. "I don't know," he said. "People are going to ask a lot of questions. Maybe just try to keep them happy."

Of course, I thought. Try to keep them happy. As I watched them walk off, him with his big black arm around her shaking shoulders, I realized I didn't know how to do that. I didn't answer questions; I pretended to listen to men's stories and imagined them growing younger as they spoke. I didn't have answers, and if I did, I wouldn't give them away.

A few people were approaching me. They'd seen me talking to the crying pair, and they assumed I had information. For the life of me, I couldn't understand the clamor for information. They were helpless to do anything about it, whether they knew why or not, but still they wanted to know.

Then it struck me. Ryan Abbot, another man in my ear, could perform some meaningless dunderheaded act, and so maybe I could as well. I dropped my purse,

and ran back to my flower-shop. No one was there, so I grabbed dozens of roses, gladiolas, snapdragons, and tulips.

When the crowd saw me with my chest full of flowers, people stopped talking for a second. Maybe they expected me to use the flowers as some sort of memorial, but I couldn't offer that. People cleared a path for me as if I was holding a homemade bomb, and I walked through it, unsure exactly why.

I'd heard all their stories. Almost everything in town that was said and forgotten had filtered through my store at one time or another, even if the stories only passed through a friend of a friend of a friend. Finally, someone—the big-eyed woman from the circus—plucked one of the gladiolas from the top of my pile. “Do you mean these to be for us?” she asked.

“Please.” I nodded my head. “They're for everybody.” I tried taking a lily from the top to give away, but when I moved my hand to grasp it, about half the flowers spilled from my arms and onto the street. That didn't matter. I began frantically handing out the flowers to the people beside me. I was moving so fast that I could barely register their faces. When my hands were empty, I bent down and began grabbing the spilled flowers on the ground and flinging them at people's chest. All the sudden, people were talking again. Some were yelling, some still crying, but they'd gotten over waiting to find out more. It was just as chaotic as before.

I kept throwing the flowers in the air and watched as the men jumped up to grab them, just like they had as boys. There were always more flowers, I thought. I could empty out my entire store and open up tomorrow with nothing but stems, petals, and pine needles, and that'd be okay. I'd have no money tomorrow, and I

have almost none today. I thought of my daughter, twenty years from now, mirroring my movements in the same town, listening to the same five folk songs, doing what she can to rearrange men's affections. Maybe someone could tell her the story of the time her mother lost her mind and started tossing flowers in the air like those odd God-lovers in the airports, and how afterward no one, not even her, could explain it, and maybe all the time the man's talking, she can be thinking of the petals on the flowers in his hand reclosing, the stem shrinking and shrinking until it sinks itself in the dirt, and then the sprout becoming resealed into its bud.

Chapter 5: Why Don't You Pray?—*Gus Conway*

As we rolled through town, never breaking twenty miles even on the down-slopes—at times, moving so slow, I couldn't have laid even money we weren't standing still, while the rest of the town crept past our window—Cora Jessup kept her gaze fixed on the lines around my knuckles. At first, I thought she was staring at the road with her jaws clenched, trying to will us into staying alive. This didn't seem like wasted energy. Given that the morning took Chucky Holloway, the bald-headed circus man, and now Soup, I didn't fully trust that stomping on the on the brake would stop the car. I come by my collar honestly, and, yes, I understand it's vital to have faith in the unseen. It's just that I've long-since outgrown the notion that God treats his worshipers more kindly than the rest of His flock.

On the right side of the street, I saw a blur of what I thought was a boy sprinting behind a house. When I turned my head, I saw that it was only a stray Doberman chasing a squirrel. But I also saw that Cora's head never moved. It stayed welded onto the back of my hands. I tapped the brake and rolled down the window. "I'll get my side, you get yours."

"Right," she said, not moving her head.

"You know where your side is? It's out your window."

"I know." She started to roll down her window, but stopped. "It's just your hands. They're all spidery on the back."

"What do you mean, spidery?"

“Spidery. Veiny, maybe. They got white lines on them and stuff. I never noticed it before.”

“You mean ashy?” I chuckled. One of the only reasons I can survive as a Reverend is because I don’t need to be amused to laugh. People trust gentle, inessential laughter, and if my life’s skill is anything worth mentioning, it’s gaining trust. “Well, I suppose that’s so. Now we got that settled, what do you say we find this kid?”

She closed her eyes and took a long, measured breath. “I’m sorry.” Her voice cracked, and it was clear that I’d hurt her. “You don’t understand.”

“I do so understand.” As soon as I spoke, I heard the whine in my voice, the childish, pleading phrasing, and I resented it: resented her for reducing me to it. I tried plumping my voice with humor again, but I could hear the strain. “You come to me, what, once a month, trust me to tell you the word of God, and you think I don’t understand?”

“Not about this.” Her voice had been wavering, and I could hear the tremor even when she didn’t speak, if only by the sound of her deep breaths. “It’s just, I can’t stand the thought of looking out the window and seeing him not there. Having him still lost, I mean.”

“That’s our job, though,” I said. “You know that, right?”

“Did you ever have any kids?”

I shook my head. “Last year I got a few girls pregnant, but I made them abort after like a week or two, so I don’t think that counts.”

“Last year?” she said, almost barking. “That Lindy Henderson from the canned goods drive?”

“I’m kidding,” I said. “What do you think I do for a living?”

She smiled, but it was hollow. “We ought to try the park,” she said. “He told me once he liked to try to run up the slide.”

We did try the park, and after that we tried the space behind the Methodist Church where it’s mostly just concrete and a torn down chain-link fence, but where there’s also a swing set and a painted hop-scotch course in the parking lot. Never mind that I’d seen him running clear in the other direction. That was over a half-hour ago, and I figured no child runs the same direction for more than ten minutes at a time.

After an hour, we began knocking on the doors of his friends and schoolmates, but no one was home. The kids were still at school, and most of the parents were either at work or downtown watching the men from the government try to pry apart the cars. Those that were home were only home because they hadn’t heard what was going on, but as soon as we told them, they called a friend and headed downtown. Great, I thought. If the circus didn’t have an audience before, they were getting one now. Sometimes I think the only difference between Hazard and a sewing circle is yarn.

Not everybody whose bell we rang knew of Soup, even the ones who knew the Holloways. Part of it was because the family’s so fractured that knowing the mother didn’t mean knowing the son, but part of it cut deeper. When I first asked Cora if Soup had any friends around the area, she paused, stammered, and finally spit

out a few names, all of whose parents she knew. Some of the kids were three years older than Soup and some were barely out of diapers. Soup didn't have any friends, I thought, at least none good enough to talk to outside of school. To him, Cora must've been a buddy, or at least what he thought an ally should look like. She wasn't mother to him—at least not much, not yet—only a long, scrawny friend that he and his father shared.

As we walked back to my sedan, I put my hand on the handle and said, "It's a shame he saw me last instead of you."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just that if he'd seen you, he'd have probably stopped. Me he ran away from."

That set her off, first with a small sheen of tears, but then, by the time we'd both resettled in the car, with convulsive weeps. "What's wrong?" I said, starting the engine.

She shook her head and fanned herself off spasmodically with her fingers. "You're right," she said. "If I'd have been there, he wouldn't be lost like this."

"I didn't mean it like that. No one's saying it's your fault."

She swallowed, but it took an effort. "But you said."

When someone is hurt, no matter what the situation, my first instinct is always to apologize. It's an obnoxious habit that most people mistake for a virtuous one. When I heard her choked swallow, I opened my mouth to say I'm sorry, but stopped. It wasn't that I thought an apology would be wrong—or at least any wronger than usual—it was just that the instinct wasn't there this time. Instead I wanted to yell at

her, to kick her out of the car and make her hitchhike home. I sympathized but beyond that I felt this growing, pulsing rage toward her grief. “Look,” I said, putting the car in drive, “it’s lunchtime. Past it. Let’s get you something to eat.” She still couldn’t speak, so I just drove down the road. “A half hour we’ll be back on the street. He’ll have probably turned up by then. You know he’ll be fine.”

She wiped her nose with her wrist. “But what if he isn’t?”

“That’s how children talk.” I didn’t mean to say that, but when I heard it, I was glad that I did.

Her mouth, always thin, turned into a wisp, and she dried up. “He was scared, Gus. Running full speed like that. He was so scared.”

“He saw his uncle die.” I didn’t know just what I meant by that, but I knew it was at the pit of my stomach. Goddamn her, I thought, and all her useless bawling. Here she was, weeping tears by the bucketful when the world would be better served by her looking out the window. She was crying over having no control, over not being able to grab his shoulders and kiss the fear away. But Christ above, if the morning taught us nothing else, it should at least show how little having control helps. You can lose loved ones whether you’re watching them disappear or not. But part of that anger was much simpler than that. I didn’t miss Chucky Holloway yet, but I would, and having the patience to wait for sorrow to come is almost as exhausting as the suffering itself.

“Let me ask you something,” I said to Cora, over our sandwiches, hers an anemic looking BLT, mine a chicken patty that tasted like it’d been fried twice. “You ever call me Reverend Coon?”

“Reverend what?” she said. “Why would people call you that?” She picked a piece of lettuce from between her teeth. “I don’t know. Maybe once or twice before I knew you.” She squeezed her sandwich between her fingers. “It’s not a racial thing.”

“Of course not,” I said. “It’s because my father was part raccoon.”

“Okay, so it’s a racial thing, but that’s not how I said it.” She put down her sandwich and began fingering a pearl on her necklace. Everybody has their own habits when they confess sins. “Soup’s grown up thinking it’s your real name.”

“You know who told me about it?” I took another bite. “Chucky Holloway. I knew, but he was the only person to ever actually tell me to my face.”

“A lot of people around here are actually named Koon with a K, so—.”

I put my hand up to stop her. “No one’s accusing anyone. It doesn’t bother me.” It did bother me, of course, even though I knew part of what she said was true. I’ve done work in Minneapolis, Boston, Phoenix, not to mention Jackson, Mississippi during the worst of times, and I’ve never seen more black-white interaction, not to mention interracial dating, than I’ve seen here. But still there’s always something there to remind me that they notice. Sometimes I think it’d be different if I was born here, that the real difference is my voice, not my color, but then again no one called the circus folk coons. But I didn’t bring it up to talk about the name.

“You know Chucky at all?”

“I know that you’re about the only one who calls him Chucky,” she said, accidentally spitting a crumb at me. “We all called him Chucky in high school, but now call him Chuck.” She winced slightly on the word “now.”

“He introduced himself as Chucky.” I squeezed the bun on my sandwich and saw the honey-mustard eke onto my thumb. “Whatever somebody calls himself when I first meet them, I wind up calling them for life.”

“That’ll be bad news for Soup when he gets older,” she said. “It’ll keep him out of church.”

“How many services has Ronnie Cottonpants been to?”

I don’t know why he introduced himself as Chucky, but I remember it clearly. It was a weekday afternoon and he was swaying when he walked into my office. Drunk or at least half-drunk, I realized later, but I’m unusually slow at identifying vice. Chucky Holloway, he said, but he was shy about shaking my hand. Some people get like that when meeting men of the cloth. They think it’s my job to judge them on behalf of the lord, and so they don’t feel they should start on equal ground.

I got something to tell you, he said. What’s the protocol?

No protocol, I said, pointing to the chair in front of my desk. You want to talk to me, sit down and talk.

No, I mean do I have to kneel and say Forgive me Father for I have sinned, because it’s not technically something I did.

That’s Catholicism, I said. I’m AME.

Ayame, he said. What’s that, Spanish?

Episcopalian, I said. No need for Forgive me fathers.

He looked at me like he didn’t know Christianity had ever split. Then he sat in the chair, tentatively, like he’d still be more comfortable kneeling, and told me all about the nickname Reverend Coon. Back then, five years ago, with me still fairly

new in town, they called me both Reverend Coon and Father Spook. I told him I was glad they settled on Reverend Coon because at least that was the proper denomination.

“I only knew him a little,” Cora said, meaning Chuck. “Auggie talked about him all the time, but Chuck barely even said hi to me. I got the feeling he disapproved of us.”

“Sort of,” I said. “He liked you pretty well, but he worried about the family. All the fighting, and then Soup staying home, and Myron going with what’s-her-name, the mother.”

She looked down and scooped a chunk of ice from her sweet tea. “It’s sad,” she said, popping the ice cube into her mouth.

Interesting, I thought. This had been going on for over a year, and she still couldn’t say the mother’s name. I wished Chucky had said something nice about Cora, so I could tell it to her now. A woman like that always needs praise, but she can’t trust anyone who gives it. I’d bet my steeple that Auggie is only nice when he wants something or else is too drunk to be mean. Maybe that’s what Soup meant for her, and why she couldn’t even stand to say the mother’s name. A year’s a long time for Soup and probably for her too, but not me, not anymore.

“So I know I’m not there every week,” she said, “but I never saw Chuck Holloway in church. How’d you wind up knowing so much about him?”

“He talked to me.” I’d finished my chicken patty, but there were still shreds of bun on the side of my plate doused in catsup. “During the weeks he’d come in. He saw me, I think, as sort of a counselor.”

Most towns have a Chucky Holloway or two. He'd come in smirking—always smirking, even at his bluest—and try to rile me up, asking questions he thought I'd never heard before. Most of the time, he'd couch it in some way as to pretend as though he was genuinely curious about his faith, reaching out for some kind of understanding, but mostly he was just joking. Also, especially those months when he was out of work, I think he just needed company.

He always started off our appointments the same way: All right, so answer me this and don't say Mysterious Ways. Then it was always some ridiculous trick question. The Israelis and Palestinians are killing each other. Who's God rooting for, and why isn't he doing more to help his side win? Or, If God's all powerful then why'd he need to rest on Sunday? I'm not saying he didn't deserve a rest, but think of some of the cool shit we could've got if he just worked that one extra day?

He annoyed me at first, but, like I said, I've dealt with Chuck Holloways in every congregation I've had. Plus, there was a desperation to his questions that I never got from the others. He was joking, but he wanted answers. Either he wanted me to convince him to faith or he wanted to logic me into disbelief. He didn't want to stay where he was, so full of doubts that he couldn't even take comfort in skepticism. Then, slowly, through all my measured chuckles and frozen smiles, I began to like him. Maybe not like him exactly, but expect him—I waited for his arrival in my office, worked him into my own internal schedule, and regarded him as a necessary part of the town—and then I began to enjoy him. Even when he showed up hung over and sunburned from passing out on his front lawn, he kept track of our conversations, memorizing my answers as though they mattered. In the end though,

he still believed that everything had reasons, purposes, logic. Most people assume it's the believers who need reasons and the cynics who embrace chaos, but I've never found that to be the case. They believe that science holds answers, and I believe there are no answers: we're subject to the will of a being we cannot understand.

I called for the check. "You think we should call somebody before we go back out there," I said. "See if he's turned up."

"Tommy Salyer's at the house with Auggie. He knows to call." She folded her napkin and dropped it back on her empty plate. "You mind me asking you something?" The tears had almost gone from her voice. "Was Chuck all right recently? I know he drank a little, but Auggie said lately he can't barely talk to him. He's worried he might be on meth. Pills maybe, or God forbid, Oxycontin. If you can't answer, I understand."

She's still using the wrong tense, I thought, still thinking of him like he retained the ability to harm himself. That won't survive the week. "We just spoke as friends," I said. "Nothing confidential." The waitress came over and I handed her the money. "He became, I don't know, enamored with a woman who, for various reasons, didn't or couldn't return his affections."

She let out a high, girlish giggle and tilted her head forward. The fake ruby earring in her right ear jangled against her chin, and she steadied it with her bony middle finger. "A woman in town?"

"Even as friends," I said, "there's some stuff that's best left unknown. Just say that he got himself torn up over it. All in all just very unhealthy all around."

She took one last sip of her now watery ice tea. “I remember when he was in high school, and I was in, I don’t know, third grade, fourth grade. Wouldn’t have had that problem then, I guarantee. Used to go to his games, and you could just hear the women titter whenever he touched the ball.”

High school. She’s righter than she knew. I told him he remembered too well. This is how you get old and stay old, I said at least ten times. Learn to forget. Youth’s a TV show that happened to someone else. But people like Chucky won’t leave the past be. His memory’s been wrapped so tight around his skin that it bored in through the pores and had taken on a second life. It stays in front of him, much realer than the future, which by all rights is invisible, or the present, which he measured only by what it lacked.

He told me about Calamity Jane before it was a crush. I still call it a crush even though he started saying love. At first, it was just a way to teach somebody the one skill he knew he possessed. She improved under him—not much, but steadily and he could see it each Saturday morning. Her instincts started to improve, and that marked the change in him. It was one thing to hear her use some of his throwaway language—miming his actions—but to get into her mind to where even before she thought, she was acting the way he taught her, so she shaped some stretch of her mind around him, it shattered whatever token resistance he could offer.

My guess is he’d overcorrect, telling her how to change her form when it’d have been easier to stand behind her with his hands on her forearms and show her. Basketball’s a physical sport, and the first time she tried backing in on him, and he

played defense from a foot away, she would know. Jane was a smart girl, or at least that's what people told me, and she could read faces and gestures as well as anyone.

She began showing up to their Saturday practices stoned or hung over, testing him. It didn't effect her speed much, and it actually helped her defense because she didn't bite on the first pump fake. When she visined her eyes, the only way he could tell most times was that her headband was crooked or she left more free yellow strands than normal when she tied back her hair.

He liked watching her sweat. It had a strange effect on her, he said, and not just the extra shine it gave the sunken parts of her cheeks. It changed her mood, which always changed the expression on her mouth. She was a very serious girl, much more intense than he'd ever been, and when she played ball, she grew seriouser yet, with a frown wrapped around the top of her chin so tight that it looked like she was grinding her teeth. Only when they were both overheated, and they left the game for their lukewarm bottles of water and they sat on the edge of the court listening to the softening bounce of the ball die out did she smile. Her smile broke the illusion of her sweat. Then they could laugh and talk and soak up the morning, but when they were playing, he almost convinced himself that it was her expression that made her sweat.

Cora was crying again by the time we got back on the road. "I know," I said, "it's sad, but we got a job to do."

She nodded and put her hands up to her face. "Maybe we ought to try the pool? He'd talk about that sometimes."

“In October?” I shook my head, a wasted move considering she was looking out the window. “Is anyone at your house now? It’s a place he knows, so it’s not inconceivable.”

She lives up the side of a mountain in the filthier part of town. That was how the woman who sold me my house described the poor side of town, and I can’t help but remember it. Filthy fits in a way that poor never could. Some of the people there have money—not much but they wouldn’t be mistaken for poor—but there’s still a sandstorm of dust in that neighborhood that never goes away, and there’s always the faint tang of baked beans in Vienna sausages lingering whenever the wind doesn’t blow. Of course, that’s just my imagination dirtying it up in the same way I can see a pew, an altar, and waxed floors and think God.

When we got to her neighborhood, she said, “Let me check my house first. He knows I don’t lock the doors, so he might be there.”

I walked with her, holding onto the banister of her rickety wooden stairs, as if my grip could save me if the stairs collapsed. With every step, my hope died a little. I cocked my head forward, hoping to hear the muted sound of a TV set in her living room, but all I got was more of the wind whipping over dry leaves. She was three steps ahead of me, and I could tell from the way her neck was angled she was listening for the same thing. If I was losing hope with every step, I thought, then she must be three steps more disappointed.

“Let me just check inside real fast,” she said. “Sometimes he likes to hide.”

“From what?” I said, but she had already flung open the door and burst inside. I noticed for the first time since we left the crowd, she was in control of herself. Her

voice stayed strong, and she was sure of her movements. Maybe it was the familiar surroundings or maybe she had genuine hope. Then again, I was starting to feel a little rattled myself, more so as the day wore on, and so maybe her nerves had just started to feel more normal to me. I walked into the house, but stayed by the doorway.

“Soup,” she yelled, from her bedroom. “Soup.” The entire house couldn’t have been more than fifteen feet end to end, but still she yelled like she’d lost him at a football stadium.

“Where does he hide?” I still didn’t understand the game. There was very little in the house to hide under, and it seemed if this game was like hide and seek, he’d have to go outside. But she didn’t say hide and seek, only that he likes to hide. The thought of little Soup, scrunched up in the corner, his hands clenched into fists, covering his eyes seemed very real to me. Even without closing my eyes, I could see that little curly-headed kid covered in grime who was always a dirt-cloud away from being a doppelganger of Pigpen from the Peanuts cartoons. He’d be looking at me from the corner of his eye, with a sly smile, trying to signal me not to tell anyone. For the first time, I think I understood him. He doesn’t play hide and seek. He makes himself disappear. I felt a small trickle of sweat on the small of my back, making my shirt stick to my skin. The door was still open, and when the wind blew, it gave me a chill.

I turned and saw a picture propped up on her shelves. Auggie and Soup, forcing smiles at the camera. Soup, I could tell, had just puckered his mouth to say the ch in cheese, while his father was in the middle of the open-mouth ee. Cora was

taking the picture, and I could see that as plain as if she'd been on the other side of the camera. They were looking at her, uncoordinated and poorly posed, but happy again, for at least as long as a camera flash. She was standing about as far from them as I was then, probably saying cheese along with them, maybe waving her arm above her head, trying in vain to peel their eyes away from the front of the lens.

I also saw the resemblance, and I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed it before. The Holloway genes must be strong because Auggie and Chucky could pass for one another on a dark night. They had the same face folds, the same sloped, brown cat-eyes, even the same hint of a brow ridge bisecting their forehead. Auggie was older, and Chucky had more hair, maybe even just a couple curls more in the front. Even more than that, I could see how Soup would grow right into them. In that picture, he looked more like Chucky than his father, but that might just be his expression: his head feinted down just a tad, like he was shadowboxing, and his mouth crammed slightly off to the side, a mischievous look he cribbed after years of studying his uncle.

Maybe, I thought, the reason I never noticed how alike Chucky and Auggie looked was because of how different their personalities were, but almost immediately I realized that was wrong. Sure, they had different styles—Auggie was a little gruffer, quieter, and maybe more responsible than his brother, but I always liked Chucky more—but it rarely does good to lie to yourself. They both drank themselves stupid, worked outdoors, and got entangled in the sort of women problems with which me and most Reverends can't sympathize.

It's their voice, I thought, and that seemed right. Their voices were different, very different. Auggie was a chain-smoker, and he said he had been since thirteen. When he spoke, it came out low and rich, like he was speaking through a hollow log. The deepness almost made me not notice how harsh he sounded, even when he yelled. He also spoke in short, clipped sentences, preferring silence over speech unless he was sure of what he was going to say. Those who loved him loved that the most: that he was rarely wrong. He might go unnoticed, but he almost never told a bad joke or a boring story. It was a nice trick, but I always wondered how a man like that can be a parent. Kids don't have the patience to wait until you've thought of something interesting. I know he loves both his boys, but I imagine he presents himself very differently in his house than he does on the street.

Chucky's voice is high, almost like a woman's. The athlete he was in high school never let him smoke, even if that was the only vice he refused. Even though he phrased his sentences in the normal hillbilly way, his voice always kept a slight New England lilt that was maybe affected at one point, but is now just how he speaks. He never told me so, but I'd guess he started faking his voice in high school, imagining himself as a Boston Celtic, Larry Bird's running mate. Now he just can't shake it.

I stopped. I'd been doing the same thing, thinking of him in the present tense. I tried to make myself stop thinking completely, but I didn't know how. That voice was gone, and soon I wouldn't even be able to imagine it right. Even Soup, if he was safe, wouldn't speak with it. God willing, Soup will grow up to dream of his own exotic cities and fake his voice that way.

Cora had moved to her back porch and I wanted to follow her, but I suddenly felt if I moved at all or tried to speak, I'd start crying. Instead, while I still could, I decided to listen to his voice in my head. It was tough to get at first as I kept mixing his voice with my own, or catching his cadence but not his words. Then I tried remembering his old jokes. Forgive me father, he'd say to me over and over because he knew it irked me when people treated me Catholic, for I intend to sin.

I never knew exactly what to say to him about Jane Robins. He wasn't looking for spiritual guidance or even advice. The most I'd ever offer was when he'd fall silent, I'd shake my head and say, Sixteen, Chucky, sixteen. But he knew that, and he probably said it to himself until it became as steady and meaningless as a gong. Sixteen, Chucky, sixteen.

Jane began seeing Claude Salyer, a Swedish looking, spot-faced boy with big hands and an oversized chin, with an occasional face fidget. The kid had a reputation, not so much dangerous as shiftless and lazy. Whenever I saw him around the city, he'd be sitting in the shade of the gigantic oak tree by the cleaners at the edge of town, kneading the grass with his gigantic fingers. I think the kid got his mail sent under that oak tree. He was always smiling, but they looked to stem more from mockery than joy. It was fairly common knowledge that, like his brother before him, he was the dealer of choice at Hazard High and only the faculty's respect for his mousy mother the history teacher was saving him from expulsion. This killed Chucky, most of all because he wanted to like her boyfriend. He wanted to pass off his desire as nothing but late summer brain-fever, and he thought all that would take

was to see her happy and well-adjusted with a mediocre boy her own age. Claude Salyer he hated because he saw him as a rival, and not a worthwhile one at that.

It didn't worry me at first, Chucky and Jane, because I knew he was bewildered by it. It hurt him to keep it bottled up inside, but I knew on some level he looked at it like a joke. Not his joke, but God's joke on him, giving him desire with no place to put it. The only times I could win him over to the faith was when he believed in a bastard God who existed to ridicule him. But then he stopped talking about it. Instead, he began to ask more questions about things he didn't care about, just so he could be in another man's presence without having to hold up his end of the conversation. Then, finally, he stopped talking at all, and would just come in my office and stare at the plaster or the pictures of my mother I keep on my desk. I wanted to help him, but the only thing I could give him that would do him any good was a place to be quiet.

Listen, I said to him one day, after twenty solid minutes of dead air. You don't have to talk about this or not talk about this with me or anyone. But the one thing you can't do, no matter what, is to forget who you are, forget your age. Promise me that won't be a problem, all right?

He nodded his head, his face as rubbery and sunken as a year-old Halloween mask. I believed him, though. If he could've forgotten himself, he'd have done it a long time ago.

I don't want to give the impression my entire life revolved around Chucky Holloway or the little girls he rubbed up against at the top of the key. There were other souls to repent, and Chucky's transgression was simple covetousness—not even

the most original of original sins that season. I also don't want to imply that I put the gauze over my eyes or let my stick grow dull as far what was going on. Some people around here see the chuckling black man as a sounding board, a means by which they fix themselves. I'll play the role if it helps, but I never fooled myself into thinking it was anything more or less than an act. I enjoyed Chucky's company, was interested in his problems, and saw it as my vocation to help.

People around here think I have secrets; I do but they're boring. I tell them I can interpret the word of God, act as a conduit by which their souls become one with eternity, and invariably they say, Sure, but what else? The big miracles have long since lost their shine, and all that's left is the part of the mind we choose not to speak of. Not even sins but secrets. My only one worth admitting is this: when I listen to people's problems, their spiritual crises, I picture them as they happen. By the power invested in me, I recast their stories until their words are made flesh. So yes, I enjoy the sins I hear, and I try to imagine them into being the same as I do the Bible: either the unseen is real enough to have teeth or it isn't, but if we believe then we can't choose when to stop believing.

One Saturday, Chucky and Jane were practicing the proper way to defend against the pick-and-roll, when she stopped suddenly. Her eyes flashed up at the hoop, then out at the distance. She looked scared, he told me later, his own eyes darting from me to my window to the ground, trying to find something to rest upon. Instinctively, he backed away from her, and asked if she was all right. Didn't sprain anything, did you? he said, with his hands in front of him, palms up, blocking his body.

She didn't answer at first, but instead flicked her eyes back out to the distance and then tried to twist her lips into a smile. No problems, she said, But maybe we could knock off early today? If it's all right by you, I mean.

I already been as good as I'm going to get, he said, tossing a wild, left-handed set shot off the back of the rim. You need a ride home?

I'll walk, she said. Then she walked off, leaving him alone on the court, smacking the ball into the ground over and over, dribbling from hand to hand. He kept shooting, making first five free throws in a row, and then, after two misses, seven. Something spooked her, he thought. Even by the way she walked off the court, excited but frightened, he could tell something was wrong. She'd been acting so strangely that he couldn't guarantee she was free from danger. He let the ball drop to his side, and decided to walk after her, just to make sure she was all right.

He started walking in the direction she'd walked, moving slowly so as not to disturb her if nothing was amiss. It'd thunderstormed the night before, and the ground was still soggy under his sneakers. That also meant that he could see tiny indentations in the mud where she'd carelessly plopped her heels down. For such a graceful small forward, she had a heavy step off the court, like a toddler first learning to walk.

What was niggling at him as he inched his way closer and closer was the growing certainty that she was in trouble. In his mind, he replayed her last words to him, But maybe we could knock off early. It wasn't the words themselves that scared them, but the way she said them, with one eye on the horizon. She was hurried,

nervous, like she'd been spotted doing something wrong and had to run off and explain herself. Those conversations never end well.

He reached the top of a hill just above a clearing, and saw her below him in a semi-circle of sunlight passing a joint to Claude Salyer. It was dark where he was, and he could duck into the shadows of the leaves and keep a good view. She had her back toward him, and he couldn't hear her speak, he guessed from the way she flung her arms around her head, pointing and pushing the air, that she was telling a joke. Then she walked to grab the joint back from Claude Salyer, and she turned around so Chucky could see her face. She was laughing, smiling wide enough to show her teeth, far from danger. Then Claude reached out, grabbed her by the back of the neck, brought her close to him and kissed her.

Of course, Chucky thought. It was that simple. He'd been scared of his own desires for so long now that he could no longer tell the difference between fear and longing.

I guess it bears considering—God knows I forget to consider it enough—what did Jane think of all this? I don't know her well, or at all really, and I have to glean her personality from what I'm told from Chucky and her mother. My guess is that if she'd been horrified, Chucky couldn't have maintained that desire, but there's always a darkness that goes beyond our guesses.

He tried only seeing her in the day. Once the sun went down and he was more than likely at least half-drunk, he didn't trust himself around her. Moonlight made him lonely, and when he began staring at the grain in wood of the bar then he thought

he might be capable of anything to break that loneliness. That's why I never go over to her house, he told me with a wink, like he'd accomplished something.

Then came his final Saturday night. He began like normal, drinking a tallboy in his living room, and then meeting his brother at The Devil Moon. By the time Holly Lunsford swiped his credit card and showed him and the other stragglers out to the street, his legs had gone wobbly, and he didn't trust his knees to keep him upright. Still, he stumbled on, not feeling much this time except for a desire for sleep. The part of town where Chucky lives gets very dark at night because there are no streetlights and the tin-roofed houses are all spread out a hundred feet apart from each other. It's mostly old people in that neighborhood who sit out on their stoop in the day and then at night, they sleep. They hardly ever run the television and even seem reluctant to flip on a reading light. So on weekend nights, when he didn't have work in the morning and could plod his way home, he walked almost entirely in darkness. Once he got off the main roads, there even wasn't the hope of a pair of passing headlights to shine over him.

He stepped onto his front yard, walking through the unmowed grass and occasional leftover mangled plastic toy leftover from the last time he baby-sat Soup. Before he reached the porch, he heard a soft teetering sound, something between a snore and a whimper. He stopped, thinking it was maybe just a nesting bird trying to whistle through a beak full of worms, but then he heard it again. After a second to consider if he was scared, he walked up the porch stairs and found her asleep on the porch swing. Her back was to him, but he knew it was her. Some addled, booze-

ridden part of his brain had been thinking of this his entire stumble home, and he stood over her like she was his creation.

Now it just took strength, he thought. He could barely make sense in his thoughts, but that was okay. He didn't need sense, only strength. With a deep breath, he walked over and shook her awake by the shoulder. His touch was gentle, ineffective in rousing her, but he didn't dare squeeze harder or touch her anywhere other than the bony part of her shoulder.

When she woke up, she looked at him and began crying. It wasn't the sight of him that set off her crying, it was that she was no longer asleep. She'd gotten very dressed up for the evening, and something had gone wrong. Most of her mascara was now on the palms of her hands and though she wore no necklace, he could see the indentation of pearls around her collarbone. She must've slept on the necklace, he thought, then woken up in the middle of the night and put it in her purse.

He said what he thought he was supposed to say. Are you all right?

She pushed herself upright and put her hand in front of her face. I thought you'd be home, she said.

What was it, Claude? he said. Somebody do something to you?

I'm sorry, she said. I can't go home like this. Mom would kill me. Please, it's just that I can't go home.

It's all right, he said, But let's at least get you inside.

She didn't answer. He took a step closer and saw that she'd fallen back asleep, still sitting up with her eyes barely closed. Don't wake her, he thought to himself. Later, he told me that he didn't want to wake her because he thought it'd

lead to trouble, but I'd say he didn't want to wake her because in his state all he could think to do was to not make her cry. Still, he couldn't leave her alone outside. He moved in close and put one arm under her knees and the other around her back, so it looked like a blind man's hug. Then he held his breath and lifted her up. Once he regained his balance, he started walking her inside.

Still asleep, she reached out and hugged him. Does she know it's me? he thought. It the exact move a girl her age would do to a lover, but it was also what a girl her age would do to her father. Strength, he told himself. All it takes is strength.

When he kicked open his door, she woke up. This time, her first reaction wasn't tears, but a gentle smile and giggle. I can walk, she said.

I know you can, sugar, he told her. Walk tomorrow.

For a second, he thought she'd drifted off again, but then she said, Tomorrow. Can I talk to you about something tomorrow?

Anything, he said. What time you want to wake up?

She smiled again, but couldn't answer. Her eyelids were drooping again, and he knew she'd said her last words of the night. He laid her down on the couch and then went to fetch her a pillow. For now, he was content to let the morning settle itself. All he had to do was to get there.

He put a pillow under her head and sat down on the floor. Seeing Jane had made him forget how badly he needed sleep himself. He allowed himself one indulgence, and he swore it was harmless. For tonight, he'd sleep on the carpet, so he could drift into sleep looking at her. He lay down, clasped his hands across his

stomach and thought of the time when he could still run very fast and love anyone in town.

She looked pale just then, asleep but dreaming. He knew from the way she worked her mouth to the side, she was trying to talk. The act of speaking in dreams usually startled a body awake, but she was too drunk to stir. It was almost a tomboy expression she had on her face, like she was trying to blow the loose strands of hair back off her forehead. Slowly, he began to realize it was the same face she made when she sweated. Except this time, instead of looking hungry, she looked satisfied. It sunk his heart a little to see her content without him, but at the same time it gave him a certain peace: no matter what else happened he could always leave her to her dreams.

He woke up at ten in the morning, and she was gone, leaving only a note that said, *Thank you so, so much. I'm sorry to have bothered you. We'll talk later.*

He said he'd never see her again, that it hurt too much, but I knew he didn't mean it. As soon as he said it, he qualified it with, Except for the basketball lessons, of course. She needs to have the lessons.

But he didn't see her again. The story didn't end. I'll never know for certain whether he could maintain the strength he had that night, but I think so. Calamity Jane Robbins would've always stayed just out of reach, a walking reminder of everything that'd passed him.

It may be mildly comforting to think that the strain of his feelings for Jane Robbins had hollowed him out, reduced him to a nub. That way, the bus only broke the shell of Chucky Holloway, not the man at all. But that's not true. Most people

need to live a little of their life strung-out and lovesick and praying for the future to come. It validates the quiet moments. The low times don't reduce people, even when they want reduction. They're overloaded with the world, and they keep that with them, even when they return to the surface. For all I know, the last thing to go through his mind was the way Hazard in October swept around him, how the crispness of the breeze tickled in the thin spaces between his teeth, the way all his grinding heartache brought out the revving of the car engines on Main Street. Then again, part of me can't help but think he saw the front grill of the bus, careening off course, and he mistook it for the past, always in front of him where he could see. He knew he no longer fit in the world, and the world he created no longer fit inside his imagination. When he saw the bus, which in real time must've looked like something otherworldly, he saw an opportunity, and stepped in front of it, if for no other reason than to test if the body and soul were as intertwined and fragile as they seemed.

Of course, guessing dead man's thoughts is silly and romantic. The last thing that went through his head was probably, What's a rodeo circus? Even that's a stretch. The last thing that went through his mind was his forehead.

We searched the woods around Cora's house, yelling Soup's name through cupped hands. Mostly, we stayed within a few hundred yards of her house. The trees grew thick if you went much higher than that up the mountain, and Cora said that when Soup first started coming over to her house, he was scared of the parts of the mountain he couldn't see from her porch.

After an hour, my fingers were scratched up from swatting my way through thickets of thorns and overgrown vines, and I was hoarse from screaming. Cora was crying again, but I didn't feel mad at her anymore. At that point, I was determined to not resent anybody's sadness except my own. All I wanted to care about from here on was finding this kid and bringing him home.

We decided to head back downtown to see if someone had heard something, and then, if we were still in the dark, try the quieter streets around the school again. I slammed the car door shut and fished the keys out of my pocket. My hands must have been worse off than I assumed because they ached when I started the car. When we got back on the road, I saw she was still crying, but this time looking at the side of my face.

"Eyes on the sidewalk, Cora," I said. "Remember what we're here for."

"Can I ask you something dumb?"

"You just did."

She swallowed and fanned off her face. "Why don't you pray?" she said.

"It's just something I noticed, and being who you are I thought it's strange."

"What do you mean?" I said. "That's all I ever do is pray. I'm praying right now."

"You know what I mean," she said. "Out loud."

"Like blessing a meal? You want me to take my hands off the steering wheel so I can bow my head, close my eyes, and pray out loud?"

"Just asking." She'd stopped crying, and I felt bad I'd annoyed her.

“I shouldn’t joke,” I said. “Seriously, would you feel more comfortable if I prayed out loud? I could do a quick one right now.”

She shook her head and turned to look back out the window.

“Are you sure?” I said. “I’d be happy to.”

“No,” she said, and she sounded softer now, more at ease. “Just do it your way.”

I dug my nails back into the wheel, kept one eye on the road and the other on the sidewalk. She was right—I don’t pray. In fact, I don’t understand prayers, asking the creator to change His creation for our convenience. This wasn’t any newfound religious crisis, but the bricks and mortar of my faith. The God I worship is glorious but uncomplicated. He invented the world and confined us to it for some secret stretch of time. None of us molded in His image, or at least in His imagination—not even children—are protected from His grace or safe from His miracles.

Chapter 6: Retrace Your Steps—*Cora Jessup*

Anyone who speaks in my accent grew up primed for destructions. It comes as common to us as the knowledge to wince during pain, and so we try our best not to mourn. “It’s only the future come to pass,” was how my mother answered any hint of bad news, cooing it in my ear like I was a puppy shivering at a thunderclap. And as more future passed and more walls fell, I began to understand, or if not understand, at least believe her. Before long, the destructions started to mash together, so that the razing of an old home, the government plucking a windswept apple tree from the ground, or a pair of skyscrapers ground to dust all seemed to be all of a piece. Each of us got swaddled at the base of exploding, headless mountains—chopped down first for the highways, then for the coal, and now out of habit—and we knew backdrops were meant to change.

Except this was a new brand of loss and always would be. For one, it wasn’t destruction but a vanishing. If Soup fell ill, lost his little-boy-blubber, and turned into a skeleton in front of us, then we could grasp it. I can conceive change, not nonexistence. Even after he reappeared downtown, sniveling and shaking and squeezing his brother’s right hand like it was his own and he was lost in shell-shocked prayer, I didn’t feel safe. I knew after a day like that I couldn’t keep believing in what I had that morning, even if it spoke like me.

“He’s going to be fine,” Reverend Conway kept telling me all day, his head angled out the side window to where I doubted he could watch where the car went. It comforted me at first, because he spoke it so soft and even that it sounded like

something other than wild hopes. I know I bothered him after a while, when I answered each of his reassurances with more bawling, but I kept hoping he could point to some small proof of what he said. After all, it was him and not me in the business of selling faith.

As it happened, it was Colleen Salyer who called to let us know he'd been found, and that wasn't until after sunset. "He's cold," she said, over and over again. "Hungry maybe, a little scared, but he's fine. Just cold." After spending the day picturing wolves gobbling on his face, I smiled against myself at knowing that it was only the breeze that did him harm.

Soup never said where he was, but I knew. His mother, Monica Holloway, had taken him, planning to do God knows what. When we finally made it back to Main Street, and I saw Soup, shivering as he spoke, talking about how he'd run off to join a pirate's crew, with everyone around him wanting to touch his forehead to make certain he was all right, then I was sure. It wasn't too long ago that I was around his age, shivering and lying whenever I thought of my mother. "What's it profit a woman to steal her own boy?" I asked Reverend Conway. "It's like pickpocketing from your own pants."

In truth, I only knew Soup's mother as a name and voice, but as such, I knew her as well as I knew myself. "Monica," I'd make myself say every daybreak, just to hear it spoke aloud. "Mo-ni-ca. Mo-ni-ca," I'd say in the same way she said my name over the phone, stretched out slow so I could think on every syllable and get scared at how well she knows me. I'd do it in the early mornings before I'd hear her

on my answering machine so I could give her name form to make it stop bogey-manning itself in my mind.

Some days I heard nothing but her voice in my head. All day long, I'd toss around the bed, the sheets wetted with panic sweat and tears hearing her say all those words she imagines so dirty. "Cocksucking tramp," she'd say. "No-talented junkie who's about as useful to a man as a tube sock." Like a child she was, saying every foul phrase she thought would bring about the lightning bolts. It wasn't the words that got me, but the voice. It became so familiar that I'd catch myself thinking my thoughts in her smoker's rasp. That frightened me because my mind couldn't stay idle for long before turning to Soup, and I couldn't bear to have those thoughts pantomimed.

Still, it wasn't Monica's voice I heard in my head that day so much as my mother's. As a child, I was always losing things, and my mother would poke me with the salad tongs and say, "Retrace your steps" or "And where did you last have it?" It did no good to tell her that I didn't know because she'd say, "You don't know, or you can't remember? They're not the same thing." And like every child, I'd say, "I looked everywhere" and she'd smile and say, "Well, I guess you haven't." So I'd make a big show of walking backward in the exact route I'd walked in, retracing my steps. That was how we played together when I was young: small, dry jokes that gave her space.

I came to hate my absentmindedness because I never outgrew it. No matter what I did at school or with any of the girls in the neighborhood, I couldn't unlearn my nature of placing something worthwhile on the ground and walking away,

forgetting where I'd been as soon as the scene changed. As I grew older, it became about the only conversation my mother and I could have. "Think, Cora, where did you last have it? Forgetting's not the same as not knowing." She gave me my grandmother's wedding ring, and it was stolen by a skinny Mexican with a switchblade and breath full of sour mash. Even looking at the police report, my mother shook her head and said, "Start from the beginning. Retrace your steps." To her, nothing was lost, only squandered.

I been told from my friend Phyllis Caldwell, who's a nurse, that the doctors in town think I'm demented because I cackled when they told me my mother died. But I laughed because they said they'd lost her, and my first thought was, Well, where did you last have her?

When Soup ran off, I doubt I took a deep breath all day. I had trouble enough filling up my lungs between sobs, and even when I managed to dry up for a few minutes, I stayed too nervous to do much except pant. But I remember I did laugh once. Maybe more, but at least once that I know. It was just as the sun was starting to set and we'd gone back to searching parts of the city where we'd already looked. As we drove a second pass around the movie theater, Reverend Conway, the top of his belly grazing the steering wheel, turned to me and said, "We've looked everywhere."

I broke up at that, giggling until I'd bent over, my full weight pressed against the seatbelt. It fit the day somehow to think losing Soup was like losing my keys or a twenty dollar bill, like my mother had it right along. Of course, by the time I stopped laughing, I'd gone back to crying, but at the beginning, I meant to laugh.

Reverend Conway shifted his car into a lower gear and hummed softly to himself, a habit I'm not entirely sure he knows he has. "You want, I could drop you off at Auggie's. I mean, Soup's as likely to show up there as anywhere, and you got to figure he's going out of his head, what with Chucky and all."

"I want to keep looking." Auggie's house was probably full of decent-hearted people with casseroles, and while I wanted to help him, I knew neither of us were as good for each other when we couldn't be alone. He liked long silences, and I liked waiting on him to speak, him darting his eyes back and forth like a Calico and waiting for the moment to come to him. Even the bad jokes or unconsidered conversations between us felt well-earned through our time together. He was remarkably unskilled at forced interactions or rehearsed speeches, and I downright shuddered at the thought of him fending off sympathizers with some throwaway reply. Also, I thought there might be a chance Monica would come by to deliver Soup, and I couldn't take that. No matter what came before or after it, I knew I couldn't stand the sight of them walking to the porch, her arm on the back of his neck, guiding him to the door.

Reverend Conway must've gotten the wrong idea. "Things okay with Auggie?" He turned his head to look at me, and then he seemed to understand. "Look, if you're so sure she's got him, what're you doing out here with me?"

I couldn't answer that, not even with tears. All I could do was slump back in my seat with my arms folded and stare at the edge of the car window, pretending I was looking out at the street.

Five months ago, when Monica first moved in with her parents, she started leaving messages on my machine at least once a day. “You know you’re a whore, right?” she said the first week. “Nothing but a vessel.”

There was no way to stop her. Her brother was a junior officer at the police station, and when I complained, the officers just said, “Okay, can you describe the vessel?”

Morning after morning, I’d wake up to the same hard-cracked voice. “Miserable cocksucking troll. All the love you have is faked.”

When I played the messages for Auggie, he stroked his beard and raised his eyebrows. “That’s not even original,” he said. “When we got married, we wrote our own vows, and that’s what she wrote about me word for word.” He saw I was worried and put his arm around me. “She’ll tire herself out.”

“How many times has this happened?”

He held up two fingers. “First time was before we were married. This black hippie girl. Should’ve heard the stuff she said. Better thank God you’re not black.”

“What’d you marry her for then?”

“Throws up one morning,” he said. “I think she’s got food poisoning, she thinks she’s got a stomach virus. Turns out she’s right, and a couple months later we named that virus Myron.” He spun his wedding ring around on his finger and chuckled. “Neither of us wanted the kid to be a bastard, so we got ourselves engaged. But then with all the planning and fighting, we didn’t wind up getting married for another year and a half.” He reached out and put his hand on the back of my neck. It

felt unnatural but warm, and I needed that small warmth more than anything. “She’s not going to do anything. This is just her process.”

“How long did it take with the black one?”

He thought about it for a second and said, “Off and on for a few months, but then the girl left town.”

If those were the stakes, I knew I’d win. Even if I could never again catch more than a blink of sleep at a time, I wasn’t leaving. She could drain my brake fluid or drive a drill through my skull, but I’d fall down dead here. That and I’d never stop loving her son more than she did. Anything else she could have.

Sometimes I’d answer the phone, but it never ended well. She was better at this than me. “So when you were seventeen you got arrested for joyriding with meth in your purse. I hung your mug shot on my refrigerator.”

“I could get your brother fired for telling that.”

“In your picture, your front tooth’s missing. He know you got fake teeth or does he think it’s just fake tits?”

“What sort of mother separates her kids?”

“The sort who’s husband goes and fucks the town pump.” She hung up.

Her voice sounded just the same, but given how fast she got off the line, I suspected I’d wounded her. At the very least, it gave me enough confidence to pick up the phone the next morning.

“So the reason you’re so skinny’s because you’re stomach’s twisted,” she said. “Enjoy it now, because you know it’ll get lonely later. I’m thinking about how you can’t have kids no more.”

At first, I was too surprised that the police had obtained my medical records to even react.

“You don’t really think he loves you, do you?” She waited just long enough to hear me struggle through a response then spoke again. “I’m talking about Campbell, not Auggie. Auggie might one day.”

I took the phone away from my face, but not fast enough. She heard the first sob. After that morning, I unplugged my phone.

Auggie said he’d talk to her, but it was hard. For one, she wouldn’t open the door to him, and he refused to yell up at her window like she was some frizzy-headed Rapunzel. Second, her parents never left the room while they argued. They said nothing, but just sat in their easy chairs with their chins on their fists and looked at their daughter like she was a TV screen. Most of all, it was hard on him because whenever he saw things like Myron’s *Sports Illustrateds* or his report card taped to the refrigerator, it took more strength than he had to keep from bursting into tears of unchecked rage.

But finally he swallowed his pride, picked a time he knew Myron would be at school, and went to her house. As soon as he turned onto her street, he saw Myron’s bicycle lying tipped over in the front yard, and his cheeks turned red. Without even bothering to knock, he kicked the door off the chain, and they started screaming at each other. The father was already sitting in the living room but at the noise, the mother came in from the kitchen and sat on her chair. Neither was yelling louder than the other, so he picked up a lamp and smashed it on the ground. That shut her up, but he’d been yelling so much he forgot what he wanted to say. Instead, he

stuttered and stammered, and she took the moment to try and claw out his eyes. She missed, thank Christ, but took out a chunk of his right cheek. As he reached up to feel the blood, she started backing up, with her hands in front of her face, like he'd already started to swing. Instead, he turned around and began punching holes in the wall. It was an old house, and the plaster had already been bugfood for at least a year, and he put four dents in the wall before they even thought to tell him to stop. Then he heard her running toward him from the other side of the room, but he didn't turn around, just kept slugging away at the peach-colored plaster. He remembered hearing her steps grow louder and louder, and then he woke up in the hospital.

It was the father, the police said, who brained him with the back of his son's service revolver. Their son, her brother, had forgotten to take it to work today, and when the father saw it on the sofa cushion, he couldn't resist. When it struck the back of his head, the gun discharged, shooting a hole in the door. The doctors told him he had a concussion and a broken hand. "What'd she do to my hand?" he said before seeing the chips of paint on his knuckles. The police said Monica wasn't going to press charges, but one more stunt like that, and it'd get real ugly quick. "You come by the house again, and we'll take the one kid you got."

Monica could've had Soup on that fight alone, but she didn't want him. Maybe she loved him and maybe she didn't, but she was too angry at him for the afternoons he spent at my house. "All this time," she said the afternoon she left. "All this time, you knew and said nothing." Eventually, she'll forgive him, and maybe even welcome him back so she can cobble together some sort of family. But she'll never look at him and see anything other than a miniature Auggie, spitting and

cussing and plotting up ways to disappoint her. When he stays quiet, she'll think he's holding a secret. When he laughs, she'll need to know why. Part of the reason I love hugging and kissing Soup is because I know that was about the first time he felt any sort of sweetness from a woman. Better me than her who sticks in his head and muddies up his future. If it has to be a woman then at least I know what I'm doing.

After the dustup at Monica's, I decided it'd be healthier to get out of the house, so I began looking for work again. The only problem is that that meant I couldn't unplug my phone. The calls turned scary then. It started with her just saying my name over and over like dime-store bullies have done all throughout my life. "Co-ra, Co-ra," she'd say, coaxing out each second of sound.

I'd come home and there'd be minute long messages of her saying nothing but my address, or she'd describe the dents in my car. Occasionally, she'd say my license plate number, or start listing different places I'd been that day. Before long, I couldn't sleep. When I showed up for job interviews, I was lucky if I didn't nod off. There was no part of the night so quiet I couldn't hear a sound and turn it into a ghost. A mouse scuttling into his hole, yesterday's rain pushing past the leaves bunched up in my gutter—they all sounded like her.

She'd sent Auggie to the hospital once before. After a long night of sweating and screaming, she held a box-cutter to her own throat, and swore she'd slice her neck in front of him. He told her if she did then he wouldn't even pick her up, but instead leave her for the boys to find. When she heard that, she charged him, her weapon over her head, hollering like a cartoon Indian. He grabbed both her arms and got her to drop her blade, but she kicked him in the shin. When he didn't react to

that, she kicked him again in the same spot, and then again and again until the bone fractured. All night at the hospital, she sat by his bed bawling. For weeks, so long as she saw him hobbled, she'd burst out in real tears. He told her it was all right, to just focus on the future and how to help the boys. Then after he recovered, and she could start smiling again, he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her until her eyes went white.

After a while, even terror gets dull. She kept calling, Auggie's hand healed, Soup's right front tooth fell out, summer turned to fall, and fall turned cold. No one had a job to offer, and so I again accustomed myself to spending my days waiting for night. I was still scared, but most days I didn't notice it. Most of the town ran around half-mad with fear anyway. Instead of thinking about how sad it was to feel terrified, I began feeling thankful that I'd been spared terror for so long. Anyway, I still had the everyday pleasure of pouring myself a margarita, then sitting out on the porch to wave to the neighbors and wait for the Holloway men.

Reverend Conway was humming again. It was so soft and tuneless that it sounded more like a fat man's wheeze than a song, but then his voice shot up high and I knew he meant to make a melody. I didn't want to hear it, but I didn't want to ask him to stop, so I tried to get him talking. I meant to ask him something harmless, but I spoke before I thought. "Has she ever been to your service?" I asked. "Soup's mom, I'm talking about."

“I know who you mean.” He shot me a goofy smile big enough to show his purple gums. “Look, honey, I know you’re scared, but you can’t let this possess you.”

He was getting comfortable now, slipping into his pulpit voice—he wouldn’t have called me honey otherwise. I liked that I could help him, if only a little.

“You just got to promise me one thing,” he said. “Promise me this, I’ll believe you and never bring it up again.” All the while, he kept his head turned away from me, toward the street. “I just want to know you’ve got the proper stake in this.”

I scrunched up my face. “What’s that?”

“I mean, are you in this for Auggie, for the kid? It’s not just, I don’t know, some kind of twisted way of needling the mother, right?”

I swallowed and steadied myself. I heard that question before, in Auggie’s voice and my own, and I knew how I was meant to answer. “I know Soup better than anyone else in the world. And I know Auggie as good as I know anyone, save his child.”

“All right,” he said. “Good to hear.”

“I’m serious.” I knew he believed me well enough, but I needed him to understand, and all I could do was repeat it. “I know them both.”

“Right,” he said. “Makes sense.”

“No,” I said. I stopped and caught my breath. “It’s like, when he first started coming to my house, he was so scared.”

“Auggie?”

“Soup,” I said. “Scared of leaving his spot on the couch even for a second. Scared of cussing, like his mom would come out and smack him for it. Like he was living in a ghost house, I swear.”

A toy terrier ran across the street, and Reverend Conway stomped on the brakes. We lurched forward, and when he didn’t acknowledge the stop in momentum, I knew I was meant to keep talking.

“Now, he’s got a dirtier mouth than Auggie,” I said, as we started to move again. “His brother probably teaches him the words, but I made him comfortable. I tell him it’s okay to say it. Like, one time he hugs me, and he says my titties smell like Wal-Mart. Auggie can’t make heads or tails of that, but I know straightaway. He’s talking about where they spray the perfume at Wal-Mart. I put some on my chest before they come over.” Reverend Conway was looking at me, still smiling but this time without understanding. “I guess I mean, I don’t know. Soup’s what, fifteen years younger than me, and I’m almost that much younger than Auggie. Sometimes we all got to talk through each other a little.”

“Yeah, okay,” Reverend Conway said. “I was just making sure’s all.”

I could tell he wanted me to stop talking, so I did. I couldn’t make him understand, and anyway, I wasn’t being fully honest. When Auggie asked me if I wanted revenge, I had the same problem. All I could do was go back and start from the beginning.

The best part about courtship in a small town is that no one ever asks how you met. More than likely, you yourself wouldn’t know, at least in any way that matters. You’ve always known each other, just in a different capacity. When you fall into a

bed or stumble down an altar, it feels inevitable because in your rested mind you've probably paired off with every man of age in town. I don't remember a time when I didn't know Auggie Holloway, at least as a reputation, but I do remember the first time I began considering we'd pair off for a season or two.

He'd seen me painting in the park downtown. It surprises people to know I paint, even though I've done it since I was small. I don't claim skill at it, and I don't invest more money in it than what it costs to buy the eight oval watercolor set children use, but I do it as regular as most people bite their nails. When I can, I try not to keep the paintings after I'm done with them. I like watercolors when they're still wet, when they can still run and fade, but once they set into blobs of shape and color—not so different than the blobs of shape and colors I can see anywhere else in the world—I find them unpleasant. Usually, I try giving the painting away, but when people don't want it, I'll cut it into small bits, and throw them in different trash cans. Crumpled and dissected in the trash, under coffee grounds and eggshells, they become different sorts of pictures, usually as interesting as they were when they were whole and smooth.

I was sitting on a park bench trying to paint what was around me, and I saw Auggie and his children tossing a baseball back and forth. Soup was small and clumsy as ever, and I remember that all three of them laughed when he tried throwing the ball. He lunged forward, throwing his whole body into the pitch, and half the time got confused and threw with his gloved hand.

I don't remember what the painting looked like, but I imagine as ever, it was decent, not good, with the heads too blocky, and the hands hidden, because I can

never paint hands. When they stopped to take a break, I tore it off my pad and brought it to him. “It’s you,” I said. “All three of you.”

He looked at it and smiled. “Tell you what,” he said. “Why don’t you sit there and look at us, but paint yourself instead. That one I’ll keep.”

So I did exactly that, painting from memory and making guesses at my own face. I knew I probably smiled with the rest of them when Soup pitched the ball, and so I tried having my lips pointed up. The wind blew heavy that day, and so I made my clothes off-center and my hair across my face even though I didn’t feel it. I could see myself in the Holloways.

It was hard for Auggie to see Chuck fade out like he did at the end. He already lived on the verge of tears since Myron left, and having his brother turn into a stranger on him nearly sent him over the edge. It must’ve been strange for Soup to see him sad. No matter what he was with anyone else—and he ranged from cold silence to Christmas card sweetness to shaking his fist and hollering to weeping like a little boy—he was never anything but steady, warm, and patient with Soup. Then when Chuck got lovesick or hopped up or whatever the hell he got, Auggie began to change. He’d sit on the couch with his son, not speaking or looking at him.

Whenever Soup would say anything, even ask him a direct question, he’d just nod his head and say, “That so, buddy?”

I’d seen him like that with me occasionally, usually when he was still sweaty and breathless, and I’d slipped out from under him to go swipe one of his Marlboros. No matter what I said to him, he just stared out at the one of my paintings I keep above my chest of drawers. It’s a small, bright portrait of children playing on the

beach that I made at thirteen, and I only keep it because directly after finishing it, I took it as clear evidence of my genius, and I promised myself I wouldn't throw it away.

Whenever Auggie went quiet, he kept his eyes on that one painting like the water in the background was going to come alive and drown him. Part of why I liked him was because he didn't tell me much. Nothing kills love deader than finding out there's nothing left to say, and so I took great comfort in his broodings even when I couldn't guess his thoughts. Then one afternoon, when he was resting on his elbows, he pointed up at the picture and said, "You ever seen the ocean?"

I shook my head. "I was supposed to go to Florida once, but it fell through last minute."

He put his hands behind his head and leaned back on my pillows. "When I was a boy, we went every year. Virginia Beach." He looked out to the door. "Kid's never seen it neither."

I smiled and fussed with his Zippo before finally getting enough flame to drag in a mouthful of smoke. "Well, maybe we ought to go. Summer maybe, right after school's let out."

He smiled at that, but then his face slowly deflated, even as the smile stayed in place. Just then I caught his stare, and I saw his eyes were red. "You know," he said, "we were supposed to name him Chuck."

"Him?" I said, jerking my thumb toward the wall.

He shook his head. "Myron. I wanted to call him Chuck, but she said no. We named him after some math teacher she had in college because she didn't want him

named for my brother. But Jesus, the kid looks more like Chuck than he does me.” Then he did start to cry, not sobbing or even making noise, but with enough tears to wet his entire face. That was how he always cried—dead silent, but with his face so twisted and crinkled that you knew it hurt him. I’d seen him cry as many times as he’d seen me, and I always thought it liberating to be sad and helpless in front of someone you know can’t cure you. There are no expectations that way, no disappointment. I could hold him, keep him warm, and blow smoke in his face, but that wasn’t the problem. There were two people in a small town that shared his eyes, nose, and hairline, and he couldn’t help either of them.

Anyway, it wasn’t that I completely couldn’t relate. I was the fourth and final child in my mother’s womb, following my brother and two messy, illegal abortions. I sometimes wonder if I could sense my forerunners while I was holed up in my mother. Obviously, I couldn’t understand them, but I want to know if I could get the slightest hint of them, a smell maybe. Wombs don’t get washed after all. We were kicking the same stomach spots, eating food mashed up by the same tubes and juices. The sense that taught me to cry when I hit fresh air must’ve been with me some time before. Either way, I was a very unhealthy fetus, and I died briefly. The doctors pronounced me miscarried, and it wasn’t until twenty-four hours later that they heard a stifled, murmured heartbeat and pronounced me unborn again. Whatever I have to offer I terms of spiritual knowledge, heavenly grace, or the light or dark of the afterworld I learned then, and I don’t remember it.

I never reconsider when I can help it. There’s no sense in it, and anyway I don’t see that there’s much difference between regret and just regular everyday

remembering. Neither one takes much imagination. Still, I do have a brother, and seeing Auggie spitting out silent tears over his family's lot in life, I couldn't help but not forget him. At eighteen he joined the army, and then he moved to Richmond, Virginia, and hasn't been back since. I think of him because I barely know him now, and only recognize him by the sound of his voice from our twice a year calls. All these horrible unending years on my own, watching God whittle down my family, and now, with only one member left, I'd rather hear him than see him.

When Auggie took to crying like that, he'd try to talk about what scared him. It was the only thing he took comfort in because he could imagine himself being brave. He'd talk about Monica moving Myron away someplace where he couldn't track her, or he'd talk about the authorities taking Soup. Most of all, he talked about Chuck killing himself. Maybe he'd get overwhelmed or bored with the world and swallow a gun barrel or a bottle of valium. The easy way out, he called it. He thought it was a real possibility, but I didn't buy it. It wasn't as easy as people thought, and it takes an impulsiveness that Chuck Holloway never had. I did sometimes wonder if Auggie could feel as brave in his mind if Chuck just disfigured himself. If he lopped off an ear or shot off some small, unnecessary piece of brain, would it still calm Auggie to pretend he didn't hurt? I doubt he could even picture it, at least not yet. Mostly, when he talked this way, I tried thinking on my own brother and how I'd react.

My life wouldn't change. I'd miss the occasional stammered phone call and maybe the passing thought, but he's already absent. A ghost is a ghost whether they're dead or just elsewhere. For all I knew, he was as sick of the world as Chuck

Holloway or as dumb in love as me or Auggie or anyone else who survived childhood. He'd let me know if he got married or sick, and I'd do the same. Outside of that, we just talk about sports or politics or the workings of the world, the same world I can talk about with anyone. Maybe, I'm more like Soup than Auggie. We grew up losing things, and it's hard to scream and wail at watching the world stay the same.

Still, I know if I ever got that godforsaken call from a shaky-voiced stranger girlfriend who found the body or a diligent landlord who dug up his next-of-kin, I'd once again conjure my mother's voice and retrace my steps back to a time when the entire world was our room and backyard. It was always him on the top bunk, strumming his almost tuned guitar or reading to himself and me below him, either scrawling out features on uneven faces with a drawing pencil or crying myself to sleep.

He told me great lies then, and I always made sure to believe him even when I knew better. The first time I saw heat lightning and he told me it was an alien invasion from Jupiter, and we sat under the bedroom window listing off ways we'd prefer to die than at the hands of some slimy, hundred-tentacled Martian. "I'd rather be poison-appled," I said, thinking about Snow White. "Or maybe I want to be dropped on brambles."

"Brambles don't kill you, stupid," he said. "Not unless you get dropped on them out a plane. A snakebite's better anyway." He liked snakebites because he thought it could actually happen, although we both knew we weren't going to die.

Whenever our mother would yell at me, he'd sit on my bed and sing me songs until I was calm enough to sleep. They were all about our mother, those songs. He'd sing them as soon as he thought them up, and even when they made no sense, which was often, I was thrilled he could create something so fast and make me see myself in it.

He sang about our mother drowning in a river, pawing like mad at the water up above her head and only sinking faster, turning blue and then puffy and then dead as the pond scum. Although the songs changed from night to night, whenever he sang about the underwater, he always kept one part the same. Just before she died, there was a mackerel who swam by her face and began nibbling on her cheek. "It nibbles the skin/and the bone of the chin," he sang once, and it's all I can remember of any of his lyrics. Even though he couldn't always work it into the music, he explained later that she could barely feel the fish mouth at that point, but when she saw it angle over to her, she knew for certain she was going to drown. Our walls were so thin back then, she must've heard him sing, but she never stopped it. She loved him so much when he was young, and anyway, music is music and it's always welcomed.

He never stopped playing until I finished crying. Usually, I didn't feel any less sad then, but I understood the world more. There was no use weeping over my mother's yelling when any corner of the outdoors could come and gobble me up. When it was just my brother and me, I never felt safe, and I never felt alone. That's exactly the way I was meant to feel.

Now he's nowhere for me, not even as a memory. I could travel to Richmond and he could come home, but we won't. Those that remember him can't believe it's as simple as it seems. People disappear every day. It's the looking for them that's strange.

And Christ above, that's just everything I can't say to Auggie or the Reverend or anyone else who asks me if I want revenge on Monica. Of course I do, but we're talking about different things. They mean revenge by throwing salt in her garden, or kidnapping her cat and mailing it back to her paw by paw. I don't believe in that sort of revenge, and I don't suspect they do either. It's too simple, with the values of what's missing too easy to list. Anyway, what do I care if she grows flowers or loves pets? She can have her happy life if she wants it.

But I take my revenge every afternoon. If I succeed then one day Soup will look at her the way that I look at my brother now. She'll be a few faded pictures, a half-recognized face across town, and an awkward dinner every Christmas. Of course, he'll know her and love her as a mother, and probably he'll figure he used to worship her like the risen Christ, but that's all he'll know or care to find out. The rest would be blank space, as flat and gray and dull as concrete.

It was Myron who'd found Soup, but I wasn't sure where. To be honest, I wasn't sure of anything except relief. The day was almost over, I kept thinking to myself, the day was almost over. As we drove back downtown, Reverend Conway was talking, but I was crying so hard I couldn't concentrate on anything except the patterns of my choppy breaths. Finally, I was able to ask, "Was it her? Monica."

He shook his head no, but I could see on his face he was reconsidering. “No reason to think so. Kid says he just ran off.” He chewed the side of his lower lip. “Colleen asked about her, and he broke down. So maybe, but probably not.”

We sat downtown on the street for quite awhile, Auggie, Soup, and me. There was a circus going on around us, but I didn’t notice. I suppose hours passed, but maybe not. Eventually, I remember thinking that I should to leave them alone. I was crying for different reasons altogether than them—not for the loss of Chuck but out of plain, dumb relief. Jesus, not even relief, but joy. We, all of us gathered beside this smashed circus van, had been spared. As I heard Reverend Conway say on more than one Sunday, People, I bring you good news. But I felt like a hypocrite crying tears of good news while sitting next to a family in the middle of despair, so I kissed them both goodnight, and went home.

Then back at my house, I saw it. It shouldn’t have even been a surprise really, knowing what I know about her, but still, having it laid plain before me, at the tail-end of the most exhausting day of my adulthood, I couldn’t help but feel shocked. She’d wrecked my house. All my flowerpots had been smashed against the wall, and the windows were busted out. The dirt from the overturned flowers was smeared across my door in a sort of muddied checkmark. Was this a confession? I thought. Her way of saying she could swipe Soup from under me at any time? That I should never feel safe?

I heard myself laughing before I felt it. It sounded coyote-wild, but far-off, like it came from someone else. For a second, it spooked me, and I stayed scared even after I realized I was listening to my own deranged voice. The craziest woman

in town was determined to kill me, and she had reason. Nothing to be done at this point, but wait.

Well, what of it? I thought. What's so goddamned tough about waiting? She can take the rings off my fingers, the glass from my house, my skin and my chin. Maybe she won't be done until she takes the eyes out of my skull, but I'll wait for it just the same. It's either her or God who'll kill me, and I can't imagine either showing much mercy. This is the world my brother sang to me, where I'm never safe and never alone. It's how it's always been.

Suddenly, I felt a very strong urge to paint. It wasn't the painting itself that excited me, but I wanted to keep my hands busy while I waited to feel sleepy. If I couldn't find anyone to give the painting away to, I'd bury it in my front yard. I went inside and turned on all the lights.

The inside was still clean, just like we'd left it this afternoon. That felt comforting for some reason, even though I knew that the indoors would be what she took next. I sat on the couch and dipped my brush into a glass of water. My mind was too bone weary to paint from memory, so instead I painted what I saw. The light in the room looked different with the windows gone. There was no glass for it to reflect off of. At first I painted the familiar parts—the line by the window where the plaster had cracked, the portable CD player sitting on top of my mother's broken record player—but I began to use more black. The night seemed darker than normal, and even with every light bulb in my house buzzing, I could see parts the light couldn't reach. There were browns in the black, sharp little shards of brown stabbing into the black. Greens too, dull olive splotches. Even the light from the bulbs looked

dark when I stared at it long enough, like a shade of gray so pale it'd become translucent. Maybe tomorrow will be just the same, I thought. It was the scariest thought I could mold my mind around, but I thought it again. Maybe tomorrow will be just the same. It replayed in my head as steady as a metronome, while I sat stalk-still on the edge of my couch, braced for morning, and watched night pour in through the holes in my home.